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## DENIAL OF IMMORTALITY AND NEGATION OF HISTORY IN T.S. ELIOT'S "AUNT HELEN" AND "WHISPERS OF IMMORTALITY"

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### ABSTRACT

The zeal to become "modern" has invited distortion in the earlier established cultural tradition. To make something "new" and to wear the latest fashions have also resulted in the cultural disorientation. Modern individuals try hard to frame "model" cultural codes in the place of old ones. And they endeavor to make other people follow their "new" cultural set-up. In fact, they want to be immortal by essaying such experiments in the cultural space. Some of them spend their whole life to support as well as to promote their "invented" cultural fabric. They think they are creating a new history in this way. The poet T. S. Eliot, however, is critical and (it would not be wrong or an exaggeration to state) cynical about this way of achieving immortality or historical reputation. In this very paper I, therefore, would argue for the fact that such type of modern individual is actually doing things that are pregnant with existential "nothingness" as has been taken up and well portrayed by Eliot's two important poems, "Aunt Helen" and "Whispers of Immortality".

**Key words:** modern, culture, distortion, existential, nothingness, immortal, history etc.

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"I think we are in rats' alley Where the dead men lost their bones"—T. S. Eliot, *The Waste Land* (II, LL. 115-16)

Thomas Stearns Eliot (1888-1965), one of the most important and influential poets and critics of the Modern period, always, unlike many Romantics, and perhaps subscribing to the Arnoldian approach to poetic art, tries to feed his poetry on social soil. His poetry, in most cases, takes up burning aspects amounting to a blow upon the social fabric, and along with the depiction of those social maladies, it, quite often, prescribes certain solutions to them either. His one of the major poems, "Aunt Helen"

addresses a very relevant and prevalent practice of our age that eventually earns nothing. His "Whispers of Immortality" also exposes the deterioration of men in the hands of malignant modernity.

"Aunt Helen" typically captures the void and nothingness in human life and its existence in modern settlement where more than average people engage in thinking and doing things that do not correspond to men as rational being. The character in the poem under discussion, Miss Helen Slingsby, although a female figure, represents both the sexes, and the average people of the modern society. Her living "near" a fashionable square

speaks of the entire fashion-loving mass who, in the name of fashion and modernity, experiment activities at the expense of morality and established positive social norms, and these “deeds”, for quite obvious reasons, merit no permanent value as was done by the narrator’s maiden aunt. Miss. Helen Slingsby, throughout her life, cultivated a fashion of remaining unmarried until her last breath. And she advocated the fashion with self-imposed dignity and veneration. She despised physicality, and wanted her followers or, at least, her relatives should also ignore such claims of the flesh. For this fashion-practice she thought highly of herself and became very proud of it. She imagined her circle was very fond of and respectful of her. She cared none, but she thought that everyone cared her, while in actuality her friends, relatives and even her servants did not have any care for her. One day she died, and the narrator mockingly recalls “there was silence in heaven”. Her family, followers and her servants had her last rites performed with very grandeur and magnificence, going more beyond than that as the social protocol demanded—which is referred to as “parodic ritual burial” by Eloise Knapp Hay in his *T.S. Eliot’s Negative Way*. But one may wonder to note that after her death her self-created creeds also died with her. Her family and followers all soon forgot her and her long and wide propagated life-span maidenhood and celibacy. The servants and maidservants too became too much practical minded, and started doing things that are daringly different and opposite to the thinking and exercise of the deceased Helen — this proves the emptiness and void in the life of people of our era. They do nothing worth remembering; or, they, as here Miss. Helen, contribute to in such a field that has hardly any positive utility or impact. On the contrary, they generate troubling traditions which ultimately come to affect the followers and the society at large as Aunt Helen’s true follower the parrot died after imitating her in her death. Imitation is, therefore, accompanied by deadly consequences. But this is not all about. Another problem is yet to unfold. Modern people are so worldly and calculated that they do not want to remember a person who is no more, as their demands are not heard and entertained by a dead body. The reference to the

time metaphor contained in the line “The Dresden clock continued ticking on the mantelpiece” is a pointer to the non-stop and unbroken functioning of the wheel of life as well as to the time-bound mortality of the modern people. There is none to remember, and is none to be remembered. A person dies, and his or her each and every foot-step gets vanished immediately after his or her death. Moreover, not only physical shape or the fleshes of the body but the remaining bones are also lost, yawning emptiness in the limitless sky. The immortality is thus denied in every way. And if this continues there must be no history -none to write, and nothing worthy to be written on. “We are in rats’ alley” (*The Waste Land*) —in narrower lines— reaching only the narrower ends, consuming everything and contributing nothing. Thus, Miss Helen Slingsby’s death did not sound important or new to the undertaker, and in the long run she fails to occupy a page in the heart-history of her locals. And one day would come when there would be no history at all -the complete negation.

In “Whispers of Immortality” too the quest for immortality is met with no effective result. John Webster (1580-1634), as the above poem portrays, was preoccupied with the idea of death, and so was forced to ignore the fleshy enjoyment, for he “saw the skull beneath the skin” and “knew that thought clings round dead limbs /Tightening its lusts and luxuries”. To quote Ronald Schuchard:

Webster, and particularly Donne, fear not death but the all-encompassing fear of that fear —a spiritual terror brought on and intensified by the compulsion of the flesh. Webster cannot help seeing, beneath the desirous breasts and lips, the dry-ribbed skeleton, reclining in a mocking pose of seduction and grinning at the surrender of mind and body to lust. (196)

However, he was trying hard to reach and embrace immortality through the means of writing as he learnt youth is ephemeral as it

... on the ashes of his youth doth lie,  
As the death-bed, whereon it must expire,  
Consumed with that which it was nourish’d  
by.(W. Shakespeare, *Sonnet No. 73*, LL. 10-12)

But writings can survive the onslaught of time. John Donne (1572-1631) also overlooked physicality, and had commitment to ferry himself from the clutch of mortal dust to the solid world of immortality because he could hear the whispering “anguish of the marrow” and “By experience he knew that thought embraces physical death while intensifying its lusts” (Williamson 96).

Webster and Donne are, however, something positive in their attempt to be immortal, though not successful enough. But in modern juncture this scenario is completely different and disappointing. Unlike the Elizabethans, modern Grishkin dreams of achieving immortality through sexual entertainment. In lieu of giving herself to positive and fruitful thoughts she rather tries hard to orchestrate herself —“...her Russian eye /Is underlined” for the optimal enhancement of her physical beauty in order to attract immortality! Tony Pinkney feels that “in her rankness Grishkin has expropriated Nature of its most coarse and luxuriant energies; and ...[she] is no longer a mere a (wo)man [sic] of straw but a compelling force that subjugates even the “Abstract Entities” to her centripetal fascination” (84). Her attitude towards it is oppositely modernized, leading only to a complete failure to reach it. Like Aunt Helen Slingsby, Grishkin is also a representative of the collective modern human consciousness which is drunkenly and illogically consumerist in nature. Eliot’s recurrent reference to animal imagery in the poem under operation such as “The Couched Brazilian Jaguar”, “cat”, and reference to the line – “Distil so rank a feline smell” breathe a polluted climate in the poem that perfectly reflects the spirit of modern culture and life-style: “Alien, overwhelming, animal, and rank, the flesh now dominates man” ( Pinkney 96). Eliot is shamelessly confident when he writes about Grishkin’s physical appearance:

"Grishkin is nice...  
... ..  
Uncorseted, her friendly bust  
Gives promise of pneumatic bliss."  
(LL. 17-20)

And this does have a strong bearing upon the theme of sex as is always fore grounded in Eliot’s poetry, for, like Shakespeare he maintains the view that

illicit sex is the fountain of all evils; and this sort of physicality comes to characterize and reflect the essence of modern individuals. Extreme and mechanical enjoyment of sex is a floor feature of modern life, and this burns everything positive. The Elizabethans or the people of the past devoted themselves to thought and sense, and at least could hear the whispers of immortality. On the contrary, we try to invite immortality by spreading the red carpet of physicality —this is studiously impossible because physicality and immortality do not go together.

Modern Grishkin is, therefore, a great failure as “Beauty cannot keep her lustrous eye” (Keats, “Ode to a Nightingale”) and again we are not the Phoenix to give birth immortality out of the ashes of critical consumption of lust and luxuries that can “lead but to the grave” (Thomas Gray, “Elegy Written in a Country Churchyard”) not to the world beyond the grave.

Thus, both the poems depict modern people’s wrong doings, self-deception, futility and utter meaninglessness in life. While Aunt Helen or Miss Helen Slingsby represents worthless .existence and triviality of life, Grishkin stands for the physical feast or the fleshy enjoyment of life which ultimately comes round the circle of disappointment and emptiness of human aspiration. Both Helen and Grishkin engage in trivial undertaking that pays back nothing and here the problem figures when modern men “can connect/Nothing with nothing” (*The Waste Land*). And this failure to connect spells fragmentation, loneliness and alienation, despair and man’s “dissatisfaction with brokenness” (Brooker 39) and moreover, “This inability to connect, in fact, is precisely what guarantees the barrenness of the waste land.” (Brooker 40). Thus failing to contact, people become self-centered, turning deaf ear to others’ suffering as has been taken up and described in W. H. Auden’s “Musee des Beaux Arts”:

In Brueghel’s *Icarus*, for instance: how everything turns away Quite leisurely from the disaster, the ploughman may Have heard the splash, the forsaken cry But for him it was not important failure: the sun shone As it had to on the white legs

disappearing into the green Water;  
And the expensive delicate ships that must  
have seen Something amazing, a boy falling  
out of the sky, Had somewhere to get to  
and sailed calmly on. (LL. 14-21)

Again, for this breakdown of communication people die unwept; none is prepared to remember any one, pushing everything into bottomless oblivion because efforts, psychological of course, are needed to remember a person or a thing. Again to write history is a noble task, and it requires labour. But we are the "Lotus Eaters", we do not want to exercise any enterprise; we do rather want to forget anything with an end in view to "enjoying" life under the "forgetful snow" (*The Waste Land*) as Aunt Helen's servants begin to enjoy moments of life feeling no sense of loss or sorrow at their mistress' death. The narrator records—

...the foot man sat upon the dining-table  
Holding the second housemaid on  
his knees—Who had always been so careful  
while her mistress lived. (LL. 12-14)

The problem is they are all "modern". Servants lack warmth of humanitarian feeling, and their mistress backed a undesirable culture. Eliot here writes "The dogs are handsomely provided for" just to lament over the loss of religious hold and culture which can never be compensated or substituted by such doggy culture. Cleanth Brooks advocates support for Eliot's concern over the culture which is religion to him. He writes while reviewing Eliot's *Notes towards the Definition of Culture*:

First, both books [...] see a very close relation between a people's religion and its culture. Indeed, in a very meaningful sense the culture is an extension and expression of a people's Ultimate values -something that neither Eliot nor the Agrarians hesitate to call by its true name: religion [...] It cannot be ignored, and if it is destroyed the possibility of developing a genuine culture may well be destroyed with it. (Brooks 60)

The similarity to what Brooks here points out is well expressed in this poem "Aunt Helen" through the person of Miss Helen who substitutes culture or religion with negative "fashion" that cannot compete with Time. So, her misdeeds are also

responsible for silencing her for ever after her death. She could not become worthy to be remembered tomorrow. Thus, the remembrance is also buried under dust, and would not begin "to sprout" into immortality any more —the complete "burial of the dead". Modern people still do not contemplate because they do not want change or rebirth, the problem being they tune "Winter kept us warm" (*The Waste Land*) or we the modern people take it as our lot as Grishkin does not do positive hard work, but wants to fetch immortality by the force of her physical charm, and so "our lot crawls between dry ribs". But history cannot be made out of this walking into the dry skeleton the bones of which are to be lost. History is to be made out of travelling into that field of work that suits man as a logical being. But Aunt's living near fashionable square, Grishkin's in a maisonnette —all in "Unreal City", their life-style away from the pulpit, and only to "worship dusty deeds" (W.B. Yeats, "The Song of the Happy Shepherd"), the servants' enjoying or rather being devoured by mechanical sex, Grishkin's passion and desire for the flesh -all present an opposite scenario that would, we might think, be painted in history. But that is not to be because these all present "a heap of broken images" that cannot frame history. So, the wheel of history is choked and halted —halted only to be ended not to be resumed. The passage to immortality is too closed, for such animality cannot heal "the fever of the bone". Thus, even the whispering voice of immortality is silenced, and history is negated.

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