

## THE FUNCTION OF ANIMALS IN T. S. ELIOT'S *THE WASTE LAND*

MAJD ALKAYID

The University of Jordan, Amman, Jordan

### ABSTRACT

The study discusses the function of the animals mentioned in T.S. Eliot's *The Waste Land*. The study analyzes these different animals relying on four different and interconnected perspectives. The first one discusses briefly how these animals illustrate the shift from traditional, or previous, poetry to modern poetry. The second part discusses the absence of large animals and the presence of small animals from an ecocritical perspective. The third one discusses the symbolism of these animals and how they are related to the environment and people in the poem. Moreover, it discusses the imagery of these animals whether the imagery is visual (seeing), auditory (hearing), tactile (touching), or kinesthetic (moving and doing). The last idea discusses briefly intertextuality in the poem and how Eliot uses animals from other writers to form his poem.

**KEYWORDS:** Animals, Ecocriticism, Modern Poetry, Symbolism, T.S Eliot

### INTRODUCTION

"Animals are [not only] transparent rhetorical devices, nor ... furnishings of the human world. Animals confront us, hold us to account, place us under an obligation." (Bolongaro, 110)

Literature in general and poetry in specific, from the simplest fables to the greatest epics and novels, employ various kinds of animals to convey specific messages and meanings of the author. Most modern poets use nonhuman creatures as a major element in their poems. In the modern *The Waste Land*, T. S. Eliot uses many animals that include "the cricket" (line 23), "the Dog" (line 74), "rats" (lines 115, 187, 195), "gulls" (line 313), "the cicada" (line 354), "the hermit thrush" (line 357), "bats" (line 380), "a cock" (line 392), and the "spider" (line 408). In order to discuss the function of these animals, this paper is divided into four parts. The first one discusses briefly how these animals illustrate the shift from traditional, or previous, poetry to modern poetry. The second part discusses the absence of large animals and the presence of small animals from an ecocritical perspective. The third part discusses the symbolism of these animals and how they are related to the environment and people in the poem. Moreover, it discusses the imagery of these animals whether the imagery is visual (seeing), auditory (hearing), tactile (touching), or kinesthetic (moving and doing). The last part discusses briefly intertextuality in the poem and how Eliot uses animals from other writers to form his poem.

Except for the dog, Eliot uses very small animals in the poem. This signifies the shift from old poetry that usually employs large animals, like lions, horses, dragons, wolves, tigers and many others, (for example, in *Beowulf*, the poet uses horses and dragons) to modern poetry that usually portrays smaller and weaker animals, like insects and bats. Moreover, this shift parallels the shift of themes and perspectives because previous poetry is concerned with heroic people or people from high ranks, like kings and lords, whereas modern poetry is concerned with the ordinary man.

The second idea of this argument is studying these animals from the point of view of ecocriticism. First of all,

literature is a field that is connected to other fields of knowledge like history, religion, science and many others. This paper argues that Eliot's *The Waste Land* sheds light on ecological issues and problems in the world. Accordingly, literature is also connected to the environment, ecology and biology and this branch of knowledge that combines all of these concepts with literature is called "ecocriticism." According to the ecocritic Cheryll Glotfelty, and many other ecocritics, "ecocriticism is the study of the relationship between literature and the physical environment. Just as feminist criticism examines language and literature from a gender-conscious perspective, and Marxist criticism brings an awareness of modes of production and economic class to its reading of texts, ecocriticism takes an earth-centered approach to literary studies." (Glotfelty, 1) Moreover, it focuses on "the interconnections between nature and culture, specifically the cultural artifacts language and literature." (Glotfelty, 1)

Literature and ecology "are combined in order to restore the Earth's health, which was lost owing to man's wrongdoing." (Tošić 45) Moreover, ecocritics are worried about "the consequences of human actions [that] are damaging the planet's basic life support systems. This awareness sparks a sincere desire to contribute to environmental restoration." (Glotfelty, 1) Accordingly, ecocriticism analyzes environmental issues and problems mentioned in certain literary works. Having discussed the perspective of ecocriticism, the paper continues to apply this study on Eliot's *The Waste Land*.

*The Waste Land* is a landscape that is void of large animals because it is destroyed by the actions of man. The landscape in the poem is not a suitable habitat for many animals. Therefore, large animals like mammals leave the land, and the only animals that live there are scavengers and insects that can cope with the harshest atmosphere. Animal habitats decrease because of the increase of man's construction of buildings, factories and houses. This leads to make "human dwelling be more crowded and weather be stifling hot." (Yulianto 47) In the poem, the weather is extremely hot and "the sun beats" (line 22). It is also very dry as "the dry stone, no sound of water." (line 24). This land lacks water literally as well as metaphorically (people lack morality and spirituality). Factories pollute the air and make it filled with "the brown fog." (line 61) The polluted "dusty trees" (line 292) will die. Rivers are also polluted as the Thames "sweats/ Oil and tar." (lines 266-267) There are "Drifting logs" (line 274) and this means that forests are cut down. In addition, being written in 1921, after the First World War, *The Waste Land* portrays a land that is destroyed by wars that kill most animals and force other ones to leave for other places. As a result, most animals are eradicated and others become in danger of extinction which is "accelerated because of man's activities." (Tošić 47)

Accordingly, the air, the land and water of the waste land are polluted or destroyed and most animals cannot live in this land. The only animals that can live there are rats, bats, dogs, cicadas, spiders and crickets. *The Waste Land* as a contemporary poem is an "example of the work that remarkably captures the sight and vision of the poets about problems related to the conservation of wildlife in their respective habitats." (Yulianto 47) Literature is concerned with ecological issues and "will be able to nourish readers' ecological knowledge so that they will take a more caring attitude towards their environment." (Yulianto 48) Ecocritics stress that people have to change their "attitudes into biocentric attitudes which are centered round any life on Earth." (Tošić 46) This change starts when people change their "way of life and thinking." (Tošić 46) The action and change that are suggested by Eliot's poem include improving the life of people as well as that of animals. The Thunder's words "*Datta. Dayathvam.Damyata*" (line 433) that mean (give, be compassionate and control) (Eliot's note, p. 2382), are the solutions to overcome ecological problems. People should give animals things they need, and they should be compassionate to them.

The next part of the argument of this paper is discussing animal imagery and symbolism. The first animal

mentioned in the poem is the cricket. Eliot portrays it in visual and auditory images. The land that is described in the second stanza is calm, but the sound of the cricket interrupts this calmness and gives people "no relief." (line 23) The cricket lives in a desert where there is "the dead tree" (line 23) and where "the sun beats" (line 23) and "the dry stone no sound of water." (line 24) readers can visualize this cricket and the dead tree in their minds. This image is also connected to a tactile imagery, as Eliot connects the cricket with the hot weather and the beating sun. The cricket is a symbol of unfulfilled desire, because it "calls and calls, knowing that the secret to the fulfillment of his desire is to ask and keep asking." (*Universe of Symbolism Website*) Like the cricket, the speaker in the poem keeps asking literally for water and metaphorically for salvation. However, these desires are not fulfilled.

The dog is the second animal that is mentioned in the poem. (The paper does not include the nightingale nor the dolphin as they are paintings, not living creatures.) Dogs are always considered to be symbols of loyalty. However, in Greek mythology and "in many ancient cultures and myths, dogs had ties to death ... with the ability to warn of invisible dangers." (*Like a Cat Jewelry and Crafts Website*) Eliot connects the dog with the image of death and the image of the "corpse you planted last year in your garden," (line 71) that the dog "with his nails he'll dig it up again." (line 75) This kinesthetic and visual image of the dog digging up a corpse and personifying it with the pronoun "his" instead of "it" and the word "nails" instead of "claws" indicate that the poet himself is the "dog" that will "dig up" the poetry of the past in order to use it to form his own poetry. This image can have another interpretation that the dog is the reader who tries to uncover the hidden messages and meanings under the surface of the poem. After talking about the dog and in the following line, the speaker addresses the reader of the poem saying, "You! Hypocrite lecteur!-monsemlable- mon frère!" (line 76) that is translated as (hypocrite reader! My likeness- my brother!) (Eliot's note) Accordingly, the poet invites the reader to participate in interpreting the poem.

Rats are the third kind of animals mentioned in the poem. The speaker expresses his despair and frustration saying, "I think we are in rats' alley/ Where the dead men lost their bones." (lines 115-116) Rats are scavengers which live in poor and dirty places. This literal sterility of the land symbolizes the spiritual sterility of people. The rat is also "a symbol of greed and oppression." (Hims worth, Abstract) By using this symbol, the speaker complains and regrets that he lives in a community that is dominated by greedy people who have no mercy for others. The world is materialistic and lacks morality. Like rats that cause deadly diseases, such greedy people cause social and economic "diseases" that affect the poor. Moreover, the kinesthetic and visual image of "A rat crept softly through the vegetation/ Dragging its slimy belly on the bank" (lines 186-187) signifies the poverty and hunger of people and creatures in this waste land. Everyone and everything are suffering. In addition, the rat is also connected with "the king" in the following three lines. This may signify that Eliot is criticizing the people of the government who, like scavengers and rats that live as parasites, live depending on ordinary people.

Gulls are the fourth creatures portrayed in the poem. The gulls are personified by the word "cry" in "Phlebas the Phoenician, a fortnight dead,/ Forgot the cry of gulls, and the deep sea swell/ And the profit and loss." (lines 312-314) In this visual and auditory image, these gulls are connected to the Phoenician merchant and sailor who forgets gulls and dies. These birds are usually understood by sailors to be a sign of approaching the beach, they are a symbol of direction. However, Phlebas cannot remember the "cry" of the seagulls. He loses direction and drowns in the sea. Moreover, seagulls "represent personal freedom." (seagullchekhov Website) Ironically, Phlebas forgets the cry of the gulls and this signifies that he is not like these creatures that are free. His drowning in the sea can be literal and metaphorical at the same time.

This merchant is drowning because what he cares about in his life is "profit and loss." Unlike the free gulls, he is imprisoned in his selfishness and obsession with material interests.

The cicada (the grasshopper) is the second insect that the poem represents. This insect symbolizes fertility and rebirth. Ironically, the cicada is singing in a dry place where there is "no water but only rock." (line 331) The speaker wishes to hear the sound of water "If there were water/ And no rock... If there were the sound of water only/ Not the cicada/ And dry grass singing." (Lines 353-355) The speaker insists on asking for water, but the only thing that he can hear is the singing of the cicada and the dry grass. The poet then shifts from this auditory image of the cicada to that of the thrush which "sings in the pine trees." (line 357) The singing of these animals does not bring water. The land cannot be revived by singing or by the words and poetry of writers. The speaker indirectly affirms that the land needs actions, not words, in order to be revived. Singing or complaining about the waste land are useless if people do not take actions. Talking about problems is not enough to bring water or salvation.

Eliot personifies bats when he says, "Bats with baby faces in the violet light." (line 380) Bats usually live in caves and deserted places far away from people. By personification, the poet gives animals human traits. He is "humanizing" animals, and "animalizing" humans. The speaker suggests that the poor and innocent people are like bats because they both live in dark (violet light) and ugly places. Their poverty or class prevents them from seeing the light. They are rejected by rich people or people from the upper class who only care about themselves. It is also a criticism of the government that neglects poor people. Eliot moves on to present another visual and auditory image of the cock that "stood on the roof-tree" and crows "Co corico co corico." (lines 392-393) According to Eliot's note, "the crowing of the cock signals the departure of ghosts and evil spirits." (Eliot 2382) Therefore, there is a glimpse of hope that is clear when "In a flash of lightning. Then a damp gust/ Bringing rain." (Lines 394-395) The cock is a symbol of hope, beginning and rebirth. Cocks usually crow in the early morning announcing the beginning of the day, and therefore the beginning of work. The poet uses the cock as a sign that work is the most important thing that will bring rebirth and salvation to the land.

The last animal mentioned in the poem is the spider. In *The Waste Land*, This insect is linked with the vivid image of "memories draped by the beneficent spider/ Or under seals broken by the lean solicitor." (Line 408-409) By linking the spider with memories, the speaker asserts that going back to the past is as weak as the spider's web. He assumes that "the awful daring of a moment's surrender . . . By this, and this only, we have existed." (Lines 404, 407) Accordingly, taking a challenge and refusing to surrender are the only ways by which people exist. Here again, the poet affirms the necessity of taking an action to change the miserable situation of the land. The speaker continues to link the spider with lawyers saying, "under seals broken by the lean solicitor." In so doing, the poet indirectly criticizes lawyers who build their cases on arguments that are as weak as the spider's web. He criticizes dishonesty and cheating that become professions in this land.

Eliot ends up the poem with the image of the speaker who "sat upon the shore/ Fishing, with the arid plain behind me/ Shall I at least set my lands in order." ( Lines 424-426) Fishing is related to the fertility myth of the Fisher King who, like the speaker in the poem, seeks rebirth and salvation to the land. Moreover, fishing may signify the poet's attempts to "fish" and "hunt" from the "sea" of previous literature. The poem is a collection of literary works from the past. He "fishes" them and puts them in the "basket" or the poem. He collects other animals from other literary works in his "farm" or poem and tries to "set my lands in order." (line 426) The poem is a recreation of other works. For example, according to Eliot's note, the cricket is mentioned in the Bible in Ecclesiastes 12.5. In addition, Eliot's dog is similar to Thomas Hardy's dog in "Are You Digging on my Grave?", and John Webster's wolf in *The White Devil*. He uses Hardy's thrush from

"The Darkling Thrush" and Shakespeare's Cock from *Hamlet*. (Eliot's notes, p.2382) The spider is also taken from Webster's *The White Devil*. (Eliot's notes, p. 2382) Eliot uses the myth of the Fisher King from V. Weston's *From Ritual to Romance*. (Eliot's note, p. 2383)

To conclude, the absence of many animals in *The Waste Land* sheds light on the ecological problems that destroy animals' habitats. These man-made problems include deforestation, pollution, building houses and factories, global warming and wars. All of these problems affect the lives of people as well as the lives of animals. Moreover, the presence of certain animals gives the poem multiple interpretations that add to the richness of the poem. Eliot uses multiple animals from different landscapes and environments to stress that the waste land is not a local phenomenon, but it is a universal one that affects the whole world. He uses rural and urban animals, desert animals, like spiders and crickets, sea birds like the seagulls, domestic animals like the cock, animals that live in the dark like bats, birds like the thrush, and insects that live in different environments like spiders. Animal symbolism and imagery leads the reader to constant attempts to decipher the poem and dig deep into its layers.

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