

The Interrelationship between Eliot's "Objective Correlative," the Symbolist's "Symbol," and the Imagist's "Image"

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ABSTRACT: T.S. Eliot's concept of "objective correlative", the Symbolist's "Symbol", and the Imagist's "Image" are three important concepts in 20th-century modernist poetry theory. Although their essences differ, all three play significant roles in the expression of emotion, the construction of poetic form, and the innovation of modern poetic language. T.S. Eliot's theory of the "objective correlative" emphasizes expressing inner emotions through concrete objects. Symbolist poetry, on the other hand, explores the potential of language through symbols and metaphors to convey ambiguity and complex emotions. Imagist strives to convey the immediacy of emotions through simple, direct sensory images. While each of these concepts is distinctive, there are numerous similarities and connections among them, particularly in the context of modernist literature, where they collectively contributed to the innovation and development of poetry. This paper will focus on the similarities and differences among these three concepts, analyzing how they influence and merge with each other in terms of form and function.

Keywords: T.S. Eliot; Objective Correlative; Symbol; Image

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1 INTRODUCTION

In the creation and theory of modern poetry, T.S. Eliot's concept of the "objective correlative," the Symbolist's "Symbol", and the Imagist's "Image" occupy an extremely important position. These three literary concepts not only represent unique modes of expression in modern poetry but also reflect the profound transformation of literary thought in the early 20th century. Eliot's "objective correlative" emphasizes the indirect expression of inner emotions and psychological states through concrete external objects, challenging the traditional direct lyricism of poetry and promoting a more rational and detached form of emotional expression. At the same time, Symbolism, with its ambiguity and multiplicity of meaning in symbols, combined symbolic images with abstract ideas, expanding the expressive possibilities of poetic language and moving beyond direct expression into deeper emotional and philosophical realms. Imagism further simplified this approach by conveying emotions through concise, specific sensory impressions, emphasizing the immediacy and directness of poetry. Despite their distinct forms and functions, all three techniques contributed in different ways to the modernization of literary language, shaping the unique character of modern poetry. This paper will explore the similarities and differences between Eliot's "objective correlative", the Symbolist's "Symbol", and the Imagist's "Image", revealing their significant roles in modernist literature.

2 THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

2.1 Eliot's Objective Correlative

Eliot's first use of the concept "objective correlative" in his essay on Hamlet and His Problems. He thinks that "The only way of expressing emotion in the form of art is by finding an 'objective correlative'". That is to say, "a set of objects, a situation, a chain of events which shall be the formula of that particular emotion; such that when the external facts, which must terminate in sensory experience, are given, the emotion is immediately evoked." (1997)

While Eliot emphasizes the importance of the "objective correlative" as a method to evoke specific emotions through

external elements, he also clarifies that the poet's task is not to invent new emotions but to transform ordinary ones into art, thereby expressing deeper, more universal feelings that transcend the immediate.

Eliot believes that "The business of the poet is not to find new emotions, but to use the ordinary ones and, in working them up in poetry, to express feelings which are not in actual emotions at all." (1982) Thus, writer should pay attention to the use of objective correlative. The concept of the objective correlative refers to the use of specific external objects or images to convey complex emotions and psychological states. Eliot posits that poets should avoid the direct expression of emotions and instead evoke emotional responses through external images. These images are not selected arbitrarily. Instead, they are carefully chosen and arranged with the intention of allowing readers to experience the poet's internal emotional turmoil as they engage with these images. This indirect mode of expression transcends the traditional direct outpouring of emotions in poetry, emphasizing a rationalized and restrained presentation of feeling. As a result, it avoids excessive self-expression and underscores both the intellectual depth and emotional complexity of the poem.

2.2 Symbolist's Symbol

Symbolism, as a literary movement, originated in the late 19th century in France as a rebellion against realism and naturalism. The theoretical foundation of symbolism can be traced back to the poetry of Charles Baudelaire, particularly his collection *Les Fleurs du mal* (1857). Baudelaire proposed the theory of "Correspondences," which posits a hidden connection between the natural world and human emotions, a connection that can be expressed through symbols.

According to Jessica in her paper, "Symbolist poets, as wanderers and singers of the earth, reflect upon themselves by the water, discovering the mutual communication, resonance, and harmony between humans and nature, and uncovering the existence of a world beyond the phenomenal world." As observers, poets aim to perceive the essence of the ontological world through the perceptible phenomena of the world. Symbolism uses specific objects, images, or symbols to suggest abstract ideas, emotions, or deeper meanings, characterized by ambiguity and multiplicity, stimulating the reader's associations and thoughts rather than pointing directly to a singular meaning. For example, in Baudelaire's poetry, the "forest" might symbolize the complexity of the soul, while the "sea" may symbolize the unknown fate. The function of the symbol lies in expressing abstract emotions and thoughts, making the unspeakable tangible through concrete imagery. At the same time, its ambiguity enhances the depth and mystery of the poem, inspiring readers to explore deeper truths.

2.3 Imagist's Image

Imagism was a literary movement that emerged in the early 20th century in English poetry, emphasizing the expression of the poet's emotions and thoughts through concrete, vivid sensory images. Advocated by figures such as Ezra Pound and T.E. Hulme, it was a reaction against the excessive rhetoric and abstract expression characteristic of Victorian poetry. Unlike the abstraction of symbolism, imagism sought to make emotions more tangible and specific, avoiding lengthy and vague descriptions. It emphasized the direct presentation of visual or sensory "images" through precise and concrete language, that is, a clear and vivid representation or scene used to convey emotion or thought.

Pound defined an "image" as "that which presents an intellectual and emotional complex in an instant of time," stressing its immediacy and temporality, while rejecting lengthy descriptions and abstract preachings. The function of imagism lies in its use of succinct, condensed language to capture fleeting emotions or experiences, thereby giving poetry a powerful visual and sensory impact. For instance, in Pound's *In a Station of the Metro*, the lines "The apparition of these faces in the crowd; Petals on a wet, black bough" (Pound, 1913) capture the poet's instantaneous feeling when encountering faces in a crowded Paris subway station. Through the juxtaposition of two distinct images, Pound conveys the sense of alienation and transient beauty in modern urban life, reflecting imagism's pursuit of precision, directness, and visual expression.

Additionally, imagism aimed to break the traditional rhetorical constraints of poetry through precise language and concrete imagery, advancing the innovation of poetic language and making it more aligned with the rhythms and experiences of modern life. In summary, the Imagist's "Image" not only provided modern poetry with a new mode of expression but also, through its directness, simplicity, and visual characteristics, profoundly influenced the aesthetic pursuits and creative practices of modern poetry.

3 COMPREHENSIVE DISCUSSION OF THE RELATIONSHIP AMONG THE THREE CONCEPTS

3.1 The Differences Among the Three Concepts

Although Eliot's "objective correlative," Symbolist's "Symbol," and the Imagist's "Image" share many similarities in form and function, they exhibit significant differences in terms of their functions and purposes, modes of expression, and so on.

3.1.1 Functions and Purposes

The core of the "objective correlative" lies in conveying emotion through objects, emphasizing indirectness and rationalization. Eliot believed that poetry should stimulate the reader's emotions through concrete objects, but this emotion is not directly expressed. It is instead achieved through the objects themselves. Therefore, Eliot's aim was to evoke deep emotions through objects, rather than directly conveying personal emotional experiences.

In contrast, the goal of symbolism is to convey abstract thoughts and emotions that transcend the sensory realm through symbolic signs. The essence of symbolic poetry lies in revealing the deeper meanings of things and conveying the poet's unique perspective and emotions about the world through philosophical and polyvalent symbols. In symbolic poetry, emotions and ideas are often presented through ambiguous symbols, requiring readers to decode them in order to grasp the poem's deeper significance.

Imagism, on the other hand, emphasizes the direct presentation of emotion through concrete sensory images, avoiding excessive ornamentation and symbolism. Imagist poetry seeks simplicity, directness, and immediacy, with the aim of evoking the reader's sensory responses through specific images, thereby making the emotional expression more vivid and direct.

3.1.2 Modes of Expression

Modes of expression is a key distinction between Eliot's "objective correlative," the Symbolist's "Symbol," and the Imagist's "Image". The modes of expression in Eliot's "objective correlative" involve conveying complex emotions through carefully selected objects and scenes. This concept emphasizes that "emotions should be conveyed through concrete things," rather than through direct emotional expression. The objects Eliot chooses are often ordinary and mundane, but through their specific arrangement and combination, they are imbued with new meanings. These objects are not simple symbols. They are considered the external manifestations of emotions and the "objective" correlatives of internal emotional experiences. For example, in *The Waste Land*, Eliot indirectly expresses reflections on the decay of modern society and spiritual emptiness through objects like the ruins of cities, the scenes of war, and the withering of nature.

In contrast, the mode of expression in symbolism focuses on conveying deeper thoughts through the subtlety and multiplicity of symbols. Symbolist poetry does not directly present emotions or events but instead uses symbols to convey more profound meanings. These symbols are not singular. They are multi-faced and often present different aspects in varying contexts, requiring readers' interpretation to evoke emotions. For example, in Baudelaire's *Les Fleurs du mal*, the "evil" symbol carries not only the implication of human degeneration but also a reflection on civilization, with a rich and layered symbolic meaning.

Imagism, on the other hand, directly presents emotions through vivid, clear sensory images. Imagists reject vague language and obscure symbolism, aiming to make poetry a medium that immediately stimulates sensory and emotional responses through concise, concrete images. For instance, in Ezra Pound's poetry, he uses one image to convey emotion allows for immediacy and directness in emotional expression.

3.2 The Similarities Among the Three Concepts

Although these three concepts differ in terms of their modes of expression and artistic pursuits, they also exhibit commonalities in several key aspects, particularly in their shared goals within modernist literature.

3.2.1 The Combination of Specificity and Abstraction

All three concepts emphasize the combination of abstract emotions with concrete objects or images to achieve

multidimensional and profound emotional expression. In Eliot's "objective correlative," specific objects serve to express abstract emotions, yet these objects do not directly point to the emotions themselves. Instead, they convey emotions through their symbolic meanings and their intrinsic connection to emotions. Symbolism, on the other hand, uses vague symbolic signs that, although seemingly concrete, often carry abstract philosophical or spiritual connotations behind them. This concept requires the reader to integrate abstract ideas while interpreting the symbols. Imagism also emphasizes concreteness, but it presents emotional states through specific images that both possess intuitive sensory qualities and evoke abstract emotions and intellectual responses. Therefore, all three concepts, on different levels, achieve the integration of concreteness and abstraction, making the transmission of emotions more rich and diverse.

3.2.2 Avoidance of Direct Expression of Emotion

One of the common characteristics of these three concepts is their avoidance of direct sentiment expression in poetry. T.S. Eliot's "objective correlative" emphasizes the indirect transmission of emotions through the careful selection and arrangement of external objects. These objects are not mere emotional symbols but specific things with symbolic significance, allowing the poet to project inner emotions onto the external world. In perceiving these objects, readers sense the emotional fluctuations of the poet. By employing this indirect method of emotional expression, Eliot strives to avoid the blunt revelation of emotions, making the presentation of emotions more subtle and profound, thus encouraging the reader to actively engage and contemplate at a deeper level.

Symbolism further breaks the limitations of direct emotional expression through the use of symbolic signs. For instance, Symbolist poets use the symbol of "night" not only to depict the darkness of the external environment but also to symbolize inner loneliness, repression, or an unknown fate. The use of symbolic techniques makes the meaning of the poem no longer singular, but open and multidimensional, requiring the reader to go beyond the literal meaning and interpret deeper emotional and intellectual insights hidden behind the symbols.

Imagism, though more directly relying on sensory imagery, also avoids the direct expression of emotion. Through precise and concise sensory images, Imagist poetry highlights the immediate emotional experience. For example, in Pound's *In a Station of the Metro*, the brief depiction of the faces in the Paris subway not only captures the immediate visual impression but also conveys the sense of alienation in modern urban life. These specific images, while directly presenting sensory experience, contain emotions that are implicit, relying on the reader's interpretation and reflection.

In conclusion, all three approaches avoid direct emotional expression in different ways, opting instead for indirect, symbolic, or concrete methods to convey emotion. This strategy of avoiding overt sentiment not only enhances the subtlety and depth of the poetry but also opens up new expressive spaces, allowing the poem to better stimulate the reader's thoughts and emotional resonance.

3.2.3 Reader's Participation

In the expressive modes of these three concepts, the participation of the reader is undeniably crucial. Eliot's "objective correlative" allows for significant interpretive space for the reader. The careful selection and arrangement of objects within the poem encourage the reader to actively seek the emotional undercurrents behind these images, thus necessitating interaction with the poem to fully grasp the poet's intended emotion. Similarly, in Symbolism, the use of ambiguous symbols and metaphors requires the reader to decode these symbols and extract meaning. The symbolic representations in Symbolist poetry are often multilayered, with the interpretation varying according to the reader's background, culture, and personal perspective. In Imagism, the reader's involvement is also essential. While it emphasizes concrete images and sensory experiences, these images often evoke deeper emotional or intellectual responses. Beyond the immediate sensory perception, the reader is able to sense the emotional fluctuations embedded within the images. Therefore, all three poetic approaches necessitate active interpretation and participation from the reader, establishing an interactive relationship between the poem and its audience.

3.2.4 Common Pursuit in Modernist Literature

Eliot's "objective correlative," the Symbolist's "Symbol," and the Imagist's "Image" all reflect Modernist literature's breakthrough and rebellion against traditional poetry. Within the context of Modernism, poetry transcends its role as merely a tool for expressing the poet's inner emotions. It begins to assume more complex cultural and philosophical

significance. These three concepts each pursue innovative paths and new techniques in expressing emotion, emphasizing the complexity and multiplicity of meanings in poetry. They focus not only on the linguistic craftsmanship of poetry but also on its capacity to reflect societal, historical, and individual spiritual concerns. In the context of Modernism, these concepts inject fresh vitality into modern poetry, catalyzing innovation in language and form alike.

4 CONCLUSION

T.S. Eliot's concept of the "objective correlative", the symbolist's "symbol," and the Imagist's "image" are three core concepts in modern poetry theory. Each of these concepts has its own unique theoretical implications, and they are intricately intertwined, collectively contributing to the innovation of modern poetic language and the deepening of emotional expression.

Eliot's "objective correlative" emphasizes expressing emotion through concrete external things, situations, or events, making the expression of emotion objective and perceptible. The symbolist's symbol focuses on suggesting deeper meanings through symbols or images, characterized by multiplicity and ambiguity. In contrast, the Imagist's image stresses the direct presentation of specific things, seeking precision in language and a visual effect. Although these three approaches differ in their modes of expression, they all attempt to convey abstract emotions and ideas through concrete forms, opposing direct emotional expression and advocating for the transmission of emotion and meaning through artistic techniques.

In conclusion, these three concepts are not only vital components of modern poetry theory but also crucial driving forces behind the innovation of modernist literature. By studying them in comparison, we can gain a deeper understanding of the aesthetic pursuits and creative practices of modern poetry, opening up new possibilities for future poetic research and creation.

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