

T. S. Eliot's Theory of Objective Correlative

Dr. Poonam Sinha, Ph.D. (English)

PG Diploma Mass Communication, IIMC, New Delhi

An objective correlative is a literary term referring to a symbolic article used to provide explicit, rather than implicit, access to such traditionally inexplicable concepts as emotion or colour. Popularised by T.S. Eliot in his essay, *Hamlet and His Problems*¹ (1919), its subsequent vogue in literary criticism, Eliot has confessed, astonished its inventor.

The term "objective correlative" was first used by Washington Allston, a poet and painter who was singularly influential in the Romantic movement of American landscape painting, around 1840 in the "Introductory Discourse" of his *Lectures on Art*²:

"Will any one assert that the surrounding inorganic elements of air, earth, heat, and water produce its peculiar form? Though some, or all, of these may be essential to its development, they are so only as its predetermined correlatives, without which its existence could not be manifested; and in like manner must the peculiar form of the vegetable preexist in its life, – in its idea, – in order to evolve these assimilants its own proper organism.

"No possible modification in the degrees or proportion of these elements can change the specific form of a plant, – for instance, a cabbage into a cauliflower; it must ever remain a cabbage, *smaller or large, good or bad*. So, too, is the external world to the mind; which needs, also, as the condition of its manifestations, its objective correlative. Hence, the presence of some outward object, predetermined to correspond to the preexisting idea in its living power, is essential to the evolution of its proper end, – the pleasurable emotion."

Eliot used this term to explain how emotion is best expressed in poetry. It cannot be simply transmitted from the mind of the poet to the mind of the reader. It has to turn itself into something concrete – a picture of a person, place, or thing suggestive of it – to evoke the same emotion in the reader. The object in which emotion is thus bodied forth is its external equivalent or objective correlative.

The doctrine of objective correlative is a kind of summation of what Eliot, along with Hulme and Pound, derived from the theory and practice of the French symbolists. The symbolists

had argued that poetry cannot express emotion directly; emotions can only be evoked. And their studies had canvassed the various means by which this can be done. Baudelaire maintained that every colour, sound, odour, conceptualized emotion, and every visual image has its correspondence in each of the other fields. Mallarme, insisting that “poetry was made, not of ideas, but of words”, devoted himself to exploring the potentialities of words conceived as gesture or as modes of emotive suggestion, and treated the interplay of words as a kind of ballet or a kind of musical organisation.

T. S. Eliot’s thoughts about an impersonal art arrived at their most celebrated formulation in an essay entitled *Hamlet and His Problems* (1919). Eliot suggests that there is a unique experience to which the language of the poem corresponds: the poem means just what it says, but it is the "objective correlative" in experience that makes the intellectual and emotional value of the poem intelligible. In this essay Eliot wrote, “The only way of expressing emotion in the form of art is by finding an objective correlative. In other words, 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.”³ It is obvious that in this description of the expression of emotion in work of art, Eliot means to emphasize the work of art as a structure. Since the poet cannot transfer his emotion over his idea from his own mind directly to his readers, there must be some kind of mediation “a set of objects, a situation, a chain of events.” It is through these that the transaction between author and reader necessarily takes place. This is where “what the author has to say is objectified, and it is with the shape and character of this object that the critic is properly concerned.” For this object is the primary source of the reader’s response and it is also the primary basis for whatever inferences may be drawn about what it is that the author wanted to say.

Eliot used the phrase "objective correlative" in the context of his own impersonal theory of poetry; it thus had an immense influence towards correcting the vagueness of late Victorian rhetoric by insisting on a correspondence of word and object. Two other essays, first published the year after *The Sacred Wood*, almost complete the Eliot critical canon: *The Metaphysical Poets* and *Andrew Marvell*, published in *Selected Essays, 1917-32* (1932). In these essays he effects a new historical perspective on the hierarchy of English poetry, putting at the top Donne and other Metaphysical poets of the 17th century and lowering poets of the 18th and 19th centuries. Eliot's second famous phrase appears here – "dissociation of sensibility," invented to explain the change that came over English poetry after Donne and Andrew Marvell. This change seems to him to consist in a loss of the union of thought and feeling. The phrase has been attacked, yet the historical fact that gave rise to it cannot be denied, and with the poetry of Eliot and Pound it had a strong influence in reviving interest in certain 17th-century poets.

Having established that the objective correlative is the only way for art to show emotion, Eliot goes so far as to conclude that *Hamlet* is an artistic failure because Hamlet's emotions are out of proportion with the events of the play. These strong statements have garnered criticism regarding how "objective" an author and reader can be and caused Eliot's original idea to seem like a dated product of Modernism.

He further states that of the intractability there can be no doubt. So, far from being Shakespeare's masterpiece, the play is most certainly an artistic failure. He finds some serious lapses in the plot and construction of the play. In several ways the play is puzzling and disquieting as is none of the others. Of all the plays it is the longest and is possibly the one on which Shakespeare spent most pains; and yet he has left in it superfluous and inconsistent scenes which even hasty revision should have noticed. The versification is variable. Lines like

*Look, the morn, in russet mantle clad,
Walks o'er the dew of yon high eastern hill,*
are of the Shakespeare of *Romeo and Juliet*. The lines in Act V. Sc. II.,

*Sir, in my heart there was a kind of fighting
That would not let me sleep...
Up from my cabin,
My sea-gown scarf'd about me, in the dark
Grop'd I to find out them: had my desire;
Finger'd their packet;*

are of his quite mature. Both workmanship and thought are in an unstable condition. We are surely justified in attributing the play, with that other profoundly interesting play of "intractable" material and astonishing versification, *Measure for Measure*, to a period of crisis, after which follow the tragic successes which culminate in *Coriolanus*. *Coriolanus* may be not as "interesting" as *Hamlet*, but it is, with *Antony and Cleopatra*, Shakespeare's most assured artistic success. And probably more people have thought *Hamlet* a work of art because they found it interesting, than have found it interesting because it is a work of art. It is the "Mona Lisa" of literature.

The grounds of *Hamlet's* failure are not immediately obvious. Mr. Robertson is undoubtedly correct in concluding that the essential emotion of the play is the feeling of a son towards a guilty mother:

[Hamlet's] tone is that of one who has suffered tortures on the score of his mother's degradation.... The guilt of a mother is an almost intolerable motive for drama, but it had

to be maintained and emphasized to supply a psychological solution, or rather a hint of one.

This, however, is by no means the whole story. It is not merely the "guilt of a mother" that cannot be handled as Shakespeare handled the suspicion of Othello, the infatuation of Antony, or the pride of Coriolanus. The subject might conceivably have expanded into a tragedy like these, intelligible, self-complete, in the sunlight. *Hamlet*, like the sonnets, is full of some stuff that the writer could not drag to light, contemplate, or manipulate into art. And when we search for this feeling, we find it, as in the sonnets, very difficult to localize. You cannot point to it in the speeches; indeed, if you examine the two famous soliloquies you see the versification of Shakespeare, but a content which might be claimed by another, perhaps by the author of the *Revenge of Bussy d' Ambois*, Act V. Sc. I. We find Shakespeare's *Hamlet* not in the action, not in any quotations that we might select, so much as in an unmistakable tone which is unmistakably not in the earlier play.

If you examine any of Shakespeare's more successful tragedies, you will find this exact equivalence; you will find that the state of mind of Lady Macbeth walking in her sleep has been communicated to you by a skilful accumulation of imagined sensory impressions; the words of Macbeth on hearing of his wife's death strike us as if, given the sequence of events, these words were automatically released by the last event in the series. The artistic "inevitability" lies in this complete adequacy of the external to the emotion; and this is precisely what is deficient in *Hamlet*. Hamlet (the man) is dominated by an emotion which is inexpressible, because it is in *excess* of the facts as they appear. And the supposed identity of Hamlet with his author is genuine to this point: that Hamlet's bafflement at the absence of objective equivalent to his feelings is a prolongation of the bafflement of his creator in the face of his artistic problem. Hamlet is up against the difficulty that his disgust is occasioned by his mother, but that his mother is not an adequate equivalent for it; his disgust envelops and exceeds her. It is thus a feeling which he cannot understand; he cannot objectify it, and it therefore remains to poison life and obstruct action. None of the possible actions can satisfy it; and nothing that Shakespeare can do with the plot can express Hamlet for him. And it must be noticed that the very nature of the *données* of the problem precludes objective equivalence. To have heightened the criminality of Gertrude would have been to provide the formula for a totally different emotion in Hamlet; it is just *because* her character is so negative and insignificant that she arouses in Hamlet the feeling which she is incapable of representing.

The "madness" of Hamlet lay to Shakespeare's hand; in the earlier play a simple ruse, and to the end, we may presume, understood as a ruse by the audience. For Shakespeare it is less than madness and more than feigned. The levity of Hamlet, his repetition of phrase, his puns, are not part of a deliberate plan of dissimulation, but a form of emotional relief. In the character Hamlet,

it is the buffoonery of an emotion which can find no outlet in action; in the dramatist it is the buffoonery of an emotion which he cannot express in art. The intense feeling, ecstatic or terrible, without an object or exceeding its object, is something which every person of sensibility has known; it is doubtless a study to pathologists. It often occurs in adolescence: the ordinary person puts these feelings to sleep, or trims down his feeling to fit the business world; the artist keeps it alive by his ability to intensify the world to his emotions. The Hamlet of Laforgue is an adolescent; the Hamlet of Shakespeare is not, he has not that explanation and excuse. We must simply admit that here Shakespeare tackled a problem which proved too much for him. Why he attempted it at all is an insoluble puzzle; under compulsion of what experience he attempted to express the inexpressibly horrible, we cannot ever know. We need a great many facts in his biography; and we should like to know whether, and when, and after or at the same time as what personal experience, he read Montaigne, II. xii., *Apologie de Raimond Sebond*. We should have, finally, to know something which is by hypothesis unknowable, for we assume it to be an experience which, in the manner indicated, exceeded the facts. We should have to understand things which Shakespeare did not understand himself.

Over time, many opinions have been formed about Shakespeare's *Hamlet*. Through the quagmire of confusion, Eliot has come up with explicit ideas about Hamlet's problems. Eliot sees Hamlet as somewhat of an artistic failure due to its confusion between the main plot and the main character. He identifies Hamlet as the "Mona Lisa" of Literature and the reason for this is that Mona Lisa is liked for no reason; same is the case with Hamlet.

John Safer, in his essay, "Hamlet Inconsistent" explains that Eliot categorizes Hamlet as an artistic failure on the basis of only one scene and that is the "closet scene", when Hamlet confronts Queen Gertrude, his mother, in her bed chamber.⁴

In his analysis, Eliot recalls the work of other authors who have talked on the subject of Hamlet. He states that many authors connect with Hamlet and do not come to realize their own to think of the drama as a classic and therefore, see it as an extension of their own artistic ability. creative potential. Authors like Coleridge and Goethe have a creative mind and not critical. They come

Eliot depicts that *Hamlet's* matter is adapted from Thomas Kyd's play, *Spanish Tragedy*. In *Spanish Tragedy*, there was a revenge motive, with the assassination of monarchy surrounded by guards and feigned madness in order to escape suspicion. Shakespeare incorporated another motive other than revenge provided with unexplained delay and also the madness in spite of escaping from King's suspicion resulted in arousing it. Eliot criticizes that whatever is included by Shakespeare remains unexplained and not understandable as Shakespeare is unable to express himself like Hamlet. Shakespeare as well as Hamlet wanted to express something but failed.

Eliot reinforces that internal feelings must have some external stimuli and that is “deficient in Hamlet”. Hamlet is unable to objectify his emotions and puts everything on his mother’s guilt. Feelings of Hamlet are in excess to the incidents that have happened. According to Eliot, Shakespeare himself is unable to handle the problem of the play and calls Hamlet Shakespeare’s mouthpiece.

Eliot identifies Hamlet’s problem and that is his mother’s guilt, which Shakespeare is unable to impose successfully upon Kyd’s play. According to Martin Lings, Gertrude is the fallen humanity and Hamlet is the bearer of that fallen humanity and is one who keeps talking about the guilt.

According to Eliot’s famous principle of “objective correlative”, emotions should be linked to facts in a way that they look important and by this way, one’s emotions can be expressed in the form of art. According to the essay, “Eliot and the Traditions of Criticism”, objective correlative is the use of an object, which acts in parallel to an otherwise unexpressed emotion, the internal emotions.

Criticisms

However, the concept is still used by advertisers looking for a measure of how well their message is getting across, and many writers are familiar with it. In writing as in advertising, it is often associated with a psychological approach, because its insistence on objectivity arguably implies the existence of an ingrained human nature.

Eliot himself used the objective correlative, and similar earlier doctrines, in his own poetry, filling it with outward imagery which was meant to convey the mood of the narrator. He believed that concrete, immediate imagery was necessary to create the objective correlative, which caused Peter Barry to liken Eliot's rubric to Plato's idea of mimesis and diegesis. That is, the objective correlative for Eliot might be as simply expressed as the old writer's advice of "show, don't tell."

Implications

Both the idea of the objective correlative and literary mimesis, whether or not one takes them as the same, are open to epistemological scrutiny: how sure can a writer be that external details can create the same state of mind in the reader, and is diegesis – or the narrative, confessional mode – more subjective? Is objectivity an attainable goal, and is objectivity mean a work is more effective, on the whole? (In philosophical terms, the debate is between internalism and externalism.)

The objective correlative therefore seems in direct opposition to the fashionable confessional mode. In fact, the poet Nuala Ni Dhomhnaill has suggested that Irish poets' use of the objective correlative as a "distancing lens" has given it a staying power that confessional American poetry does not have. Conversely, Cynthia Ozick has said that Eliot's method was only a shield from the "raw shame of confession," though in her opinion this meant Eliot's poetry was in fact quite confessional underneath.

The debate in this critique which writers would do well to consider is how much the events depicted in mimesis are to be taken at face value and how much they are references or symbols for something else, what has been called the "subjective correlative."

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Dr. Poonam Sinha
Ph.D., PGD Mass Communication
D2/ 106 Top Floor
New Gautam Nursing Home
Jeevan Park
New Delhi-110059
Mobile: 7318069392
poonam_sinha@rediffmail.com

Language in India www.languageinindia.com ISSN 1930-2940 20:10 October 2020

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