



# The Theme of ‘Waste Land’ and Modernity in Mu Dan’s Poetry: Compare to T.S Eliot’s

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**Abstract.** In this article, from the perspective of comparative vision, T S. Eliot’s ‘The Waste Land’ and Mu Dan’s poetry with the theme of the ‘waste land’ are intended to be the primary research objects. Based on the homology in the influence of the two schools and the multiple similarities in poetic images, styles and qualities, this paper contrasted the two texts. In order to have a more specific, detailed and solid grasp of Mu Dan’s writing from a specific perspective, the article estimates the modernity embodied in Eliot’s ‘The Wasteland’ from the perspective of theoretical positioning, classifies and exemplifies to summarize the characteristics of Mu Dan’s ‘waste land’ theme and poems with similar themes, comparing them with The Wasteland, pointing out their differences in the sense of modernity and tries to discuss the reasons for their formation. The article also makes a clear and brief comb of the definition and connotation of modernity and takes the aesthetic modernity in the modernity terminology group as the main concern object, pointing out its causes and core laws. Eliot and Mu Dan’s writing conforms to this law from different levels, which being divorced from the univocal style similarity in terms of ideological harmony.

**Keywords:** T S. Eliot · Mu Dan · waste land · modernity

## 1 Introduction

Mu Dan’s writing attracted great attention in the 1940s, a period when modern Chinese poetry in China matured. The realization of this process depends on the reflection and continuation of Chinese Modernist Poetry in the 1920s and 1930s, while the study and selection of Western modernist poets, including T.S Eliot. Yuan Kejia, one of the ‘Nine Leaf Poets’, once pointed out that the Nine Leaf Poets ‘strive to broaden their horizons, try to get closer to life, and strive to be faithful to their own emotions; enriched the expressive ability of the new poetry by building on some of the expressions techniques of later Symbolist and Modernist poets such as Rilke, Eliot and Auden [1].’

Mu Dan’s writing was greatly influenced by Eliot. At the beginning of his acceptance of English literature, he had sufficient reading and study of Eliot’s works. He has translated sorts of Eliot’s important works, including *The Waste Land*, and Brooks and Warren’s interpretations of *The Waste Land*. Tang Shi, who is also a ‘Nine Leaf Poet’, mentioned Eliot many times in his monograph on Mu Dan, ‘*The Fighter Mu Dan*’,

linking some of Mu Dan's poems with 'The Waste Land', pointing out their stylistic similarities [2]. From the aspect of text, Mu Dan's writing has both direct and indirect transplantation and references to Eliot in terms of vocabularies, sentence patterns, images, and theme. It is the result of learning and acceptance of techniques and poetic concepts from Eliot. At the spiritual level, Mu Dan purposefully inherited Eliot's Waste Land consciousness, which is a autotelic understanding of the changes in society, the destruction and 'alienation' of human nature caused by industrialization and modern civilization, fully demonstrating and criticized its ugliness with modernity attend and fierce critical spirit.

This paper will use the method of comparative research. Firstly, combined with the modernity theories of several theorists, the modernity of the 'waste land' will be examined from the historical dimension. The difference between its corresponding connotation and other modernity will be distinguished. Secondly, through the analysis of Eliot's 'The Waste Land', this study will point out the specific connotation of the 'waste land' in Eliot's writings, pointing out the disillusionment, helplessness and despair that Eliot showed in the face of cruel reality, as well as the time and space reconstruction, which is based on the pray in a religious sense. And then, focusing on the 'waste land' imagery in Mu Dan's poems, which investigates the images including 'waste land', 'wilderness', 'open country', and 'green wilderness', pointing out its absurd and tragic side and its confidence and sympathy. On the side of expectations, it will indicate that Mu Dan's attitude differs from that of Eliot. Finally, the paper will write the background of the two poets and Mu Dan's study of Eliot and analyze the historical and social reality that the two poets faced from the perspectives of social development, alienation of humanity and rational methods to reconstruct the ruins. Through similar words and images in writing, the two poets created different symbolic meanings, giving different emotions and responses. Comparing analysis of the 'waste land' imagery and modernity in the poems of the two poets, the study clarifies the scope and depth of Eliot's influence on Mu Dan and points out his advancement of modern Chinese poetry and accurate selection of the times.

## **2 Category Definition and the Appearance of 'The Waste Land'**

First of all, the text of this paper is mainly based on Eliot's long poem 'The Waste Land' and all modern poetic works on the theme of the 'waste land' by Mu Dan, supplemented by the two authors' own poetic theories and relevant materials. The word 'poetics' comes from Aristotle's Poetics. In the period when the distinction between artistic types is not clear, this article mainly talks about drama, especially tragedy, marginally mentions poetry and other artistic types. In the history of western literary theory, although the specific connotation of 'poetics' varies in different periods and schools, plenty of them followed Aristotle's tradition and understood poetics as the study of literature in a broad sense, including poetry, fiction, prose, drama and so on. The concept of 'poetics' used in this paper, although the text mentioned is mainly poetry, the object of study is defined in a wider concept of 'literary theory' and even 'poetic aesthetic' meaning of existence, paying attention to the theoretical and ideological discussion and mining behind the text.

## 2.1 The Definition of Modernity

Modernity is a vocabulary full of contradictions and tension. From the perspective of time, the development of the word 'modernity' has experienced a long historical period. Each stage has received different fields and degrees of attention, having different limits and connotations in scholars' theories. The root 'modernity' in English can be traced back to the Latin word 'modo' (means at the moment, or recently, just now), and the closer 'modernus' first appeared in the fifth century AD [3, 4]. It can be seen that the emergence of the modern concept, which is directly related to modernity, is firstborn from the connection and comparison with ancient times, manifesting the ideological attempt to separate the present from the past, showing a distinct sense of time and era, and changing with the corresponding 'ancient' tradition. The background of modernity theory in this article is also given. For Eliot and 'The Waste Land', it is the western world in the early 1920s. For Mu Dan, it is China in the 1930s and 1940s.

From the perspective of different dimensions within the history and synchrony of modernity, this paper's starting point and focus are aesthetic criticism in the category of literature and art. However, it cannot be separated from the value rationality level. In 'Five Faces of Modernity' by Matei Călinescu, modernity is divided into two kinds, the enlightenment modernity and the cultural modernity. The cultural modernity includes the aesthetic modernity, originating in the late 19th century when Baudelaire expounds on the concept of modernity and related art practice, a symbol of the irrational, personality, chaos and freedom, to people's emotional strength against reason. This kind of aesthetic modernity is the product of enlightenment modernity, but turns to the postures of resistance later. In this regard, Weber put forward the theory of the Enlightenment modernity paradox, believing that it is the result of the confrontation between value rationality and instrumental rationality. Instead of the function of religion, aesthetics became an essential part of value rationality, which criticise the increasingly banal and rigid daily life caused by instrumental rationality.

## 2.2 Background of 'The Waste Land'

'The Waste Land' was published in 1922, shortly after the end of the First World War. In the 20th century, during the enlightenment modernity of western society including rationalization, capitalization, industrialization and urbanization, all kinds of bad results emerged and reached to a climax in the First World War; the title of the poem 'The Waste Land' is a highly generalized metaphor for the social situation at that time. In modern society, with the divine authority has been disenchanted and people's blindness to the freedom of subjectivity presupposed by modernization, they faced death and the despair of the modern ethical situation. Moreover, Baudelaire, in the 19th century, compared urbanism with aesthetic position in threats and the focus of modern subjectivity-free living circumstances. However, the former claims to symbolize the chaos and free modernism art practice against reason, the latter in the form of modernist aesthetic critique of instrumental rationality at the same time; it increased the tendency to return to the tradition of poetics and classical humanism. This reflection on the crisis of modernity is stripped of the innocence of the last century and is also full of complexity and internal tension.

### 3 The 'Waste Land' and Modernity in T.S Eliot's Poetry

#### 3.1 The Appearance of the 'Waste Land' Image as Aesthetic Compensation

The first section of the long poem 'The Waste Land' mentions two German sites, named 'Starnbergersee' and 'Hofgarten', and thus connects a Europe of the past era that the German people have told since Lithuania. In this narrative, 'sunlight' appeared for the first time. The person represented by the first person and his partner walked in the sun, drank coffee and skied with their families, living a typical European upper-class life as well as a part of daily life. Later in this section, the author also mentioned figures from European histories, such as the 'Madame Sosostris' with cards, reflecting more profound cultural traditions. However, this prosperity did not last long. As the word 'cruellest' is mentioned at the beginning of the poem, it is a 'dead land', while the beautiful life described by the author is just a short memory and the appearance of desire decorated by beauty. From the second paragraph, the author's focus on the 'Son of man' is already in 'this stone ruby'.

In the second paragraph of the first section of 'The Waste land', the person wakes up from the dream before the war and starts to describe the actual situation; 'You cannot say, or guess, for you know only', 'I was helpless/Living nor dead, and I know nothing,/Looking into the heart of light, the silence' [5]. In the following lines, more historical and cultural allusions are mentioned and finally point out the 'Unreal City', which is also the most crucial space scene in this poem, a 'London' without substantial description. In the last two paragraphs, the crowd poured over London Bridge under the brown fog in winter, and time and space unfolded and gathered simultaneously. These people came from different countries, cultures, regions and times in Europe, but they came together at such an ingressive moment of death. Then they passed through various landmarks in London and reached a painful, solemn and stirring second close to the sacred time.

To sum up, the writing of Eliot's *The Waste Land* appeared after the First World War. The world war gave a significant blow to human society and destroyed the human body as well as spirit at the same time. In the ruins of modern society, poets are also faced with the double dilemma of using poetry to express the ruins and find a way out of the ruins. Eliot's creation of 'The Waste Land' is a response to this, and its core comes down in one continuous line with Max Weber's theory; that is, it criticizes the instrumental rationality of modernity and its severe consequences from the background of the times and social reality. In Eliot's writing, modern society is extravagant, vain and absurd, while post-war society is violent, lost and painful. In the face of these double blanks of entity and meaning, he introduced the image of 'waste land' as an aesthetic compensation, gathered many realistic objective images, constructed effective writing of the post-war landscape, and made individual and collective emotions find a specific expression path in modern cities.

#### 3.2 Reconstruction of Space-Time Order

As shown in 'The Waste Land', Eliot believes that tradition combines synchrony and diachrony, and the past forms the present. 'Time present and time past/Are both personalities present in time future/And time future contained in time past./If all time is

eternally present/All time is unredeemable' [5]. Therefore, in 'The Waste Land', it is not so much that various myths, legends, allusions or historical events introduced time and space into London, but rather that the modern city itself is a world full of classical memories and traditional consciousness.

In the first part of *The Waste Land*, the time has returned to the present from April, winter, summer, and a year ago, interspersed with many historical figures. At the end of the second part, the poet repeated 'HURRY UP PLACE ITS TIME' and 'Goodnight' in the form of quotation, focusing on the sense of the moment and timeliness in the time dimension [5]. At the end of the fifth section, 'London Bridge is falling down, falling down, falling down' comes from nursery rhymes, and all these images and sounds come from various time and space dimensions. As the author said, 'These fragments, I have saved against my runs' [6], hoping to be saved in the future. These words interspersed between the past, the present and the future enable historical figures in books and legends to express their views and feelings of modern people simultaneously and let history shine into reality, constantly shifting and replaying in the current time and space.

A non-linear time narrative is a very modern view of time. Under this writing attempt, time no longer has progressive significance, and history is not the past time. In the sense of space, poetry also switches its vision to London, which has no specific image, through the transformation of multiple regions and directions, implying the fragmentation, confusion and chaos of modern urban space, as well as the lack of faith in people living in it. By breaking and rearranging time and space, Eliot established a new order of time and space on the ruins, in which emotions were smoothly expressed, reflecting the poet's observation and thinking of the post-war world and the urgent spiritual reconstruction and individual consciousness and impulse to save themselves. 'By taking this form, they either beg for the natural image in memory or resort to the modern urban image in a synchronic state to obtain possible self-salvation, to realize the purpose of taking the artistic techniques of modernism as aesthetic compensation [7].'

## 4 The Wasteland and Modernity in Mu Dan's Poems

### 4.1 Influence Research

After the publication of Eliot's poem 'The Waste Land', it has dramatically impacted the world, including modern Chinese poetry. In terms of poetic theory and form, Chinese modernist poets consciously learned and integrated Eliot's method. As for the theme of poetry, the warning and criticism of the desertification of modern social spirit created by *The Waste Land* have become an essential theme of modern Chinese poetry, which is different from that of Eliot. In particular, the maturity of new poetry in the 1930s and 1940s represented the 'Nine Leaves Poetic School'. Many scholars have talked about this. Yuan Kejia, the theorist from 'Nine Leaves', clearly stated that 'the requirements for the modernization of new poetry are completely based on the psychological understanding of the largest number of modern people's states of consciousness, and accept the influence of modern Western poetry with Eliot as the core [8].' Liu Yan, a contemporary scholar, said in 'T.S. Eliot Tradition in Mu Dan's Poetry' that 'it is under the inspiration and guidance of the modernist poetry dominated by the Eliot Tradition 'that Chinese modernist poetry has gradually developed [9].'

This influence is undeniable from the perspective of schools, and it is no exception in personal terms, such as Mu Dan and his new poetry writing. In 1935, Mu Dan entered the Department of Foreign Languages of Tsinghua University, where he naturally interacted with English poetry. In October 1939, as a member of the school protection team, he moved south with Tsinghua University and studied at Changsha University, which was temporarily composed of Peking University, Tsinghua University and Nankai University. At that time, Yan Bosun, a British lecturer and one of the 19 professors in the School of Arts, began to teach Contemporary English Poetry. In the spring of 1939, the three schools established the Southwest United University and moved to Kunming. Mu Dan studied in the Foreign Languages Department of the United Nations University and began to systematically and comprehensively contact British and American modernist poetry. Wang Zuoliang recalled: 'All this originated from Yan Bosun. We (Mu Dan and his classmates) all like Eliot - except for poems such as 'The Waste Land', his literary theory and his quarterly edition of 'Standard' also had an impact on us [10].' Under the influence of Eliot's writing and the urging of Empson's teaching, Mu Dan's writing has shown a new look, which is entirely different from Xu Zhimo, the Crescent School represented by Xu Zhimo and Wen Yiduo, and the early symbolism of Li Jinfa and Dai Wangshu, as well as the early modernism represented by Bian Zhilin and Feng Zhi in the past 30 years. Zhou Yuliang said, '(Mu Dan) has many works obviously influenced by Eliot. At the end of the 1940s, he translated several of his poems into English. When an American poet saw them, he said that some of them were like Eliot, 'which shows that he introduced a new style to our new poetry' [11].

#### 4.2 Waste Land, Wilderness and Green Wilderness: Image Group and Different Symbolic Meanings

In specific writing, Mu Dan's 'waste land' is different from Eliot's, and the 'waste land' image group in his writing also constitutes differences, repetition and tension. From the perspective of image types, it can be divided into two categories: the desolate wilderness, which is very similar to the wilderness in the sense of Eliot. This kind of writing has appeared frequently since the 1930s. The second is the field full of vitality, which is also essential in writing. It replaced the 'wilderness' as the main object in Mu Dan's later writing.

There are many specific and direct examples of the description of 'waste land' in many of Mu Dan's poems. For example, in the 'Story of Roses' (1937), 'the first night we were in the vast wilderness,/we found a house beside the road, which was desolate and dilapidated', and 'how can I sleep, that terrible empty night!' [12]. 'Chorus Chapter 2' (1939), 'Let me sing about Pamirs' wilderness and use its quiet voice at the top' [12]. 'From Emptiness to Fullness' (1939), 'the flood has crossed the silent field,/has overflowed the mountain corner, cut and hit violently;/has unfolded, with a huge black outline/and terror, and our lost self.' [12]. In his poetry, similar parts can be found in more than ten places, which frequently occurred in the 1930s and 1940s. The writing of these 'wasteland' images has three main characteristics. Firstly, the surface appearance of the wilderness is desolate, empty and desolate, which is not suitable for human survival and makes people feel confused, sad, painful and even desperate, symbolizing a specific negative situation for human beings. For example, in 'I' (1940), 'I' was locked

in the 'wilderness' after birth, forever separated from my mother, dreams and groups, symbolizing the spiritual crisis of individuals in the face of the 'perfect' broken. Secondly, the image of 'waste land' often appears simultaneously with historical elements or other stylistic elements, reflecting the precise modernist characteristics of anti-linear time writing, which is very similar to that of Eliot. For example, the mountains and rivers in China, as well as ancient civilization sites such as Egypt, Athens and Rome, are sung in Chorus 2. However, compared with Eliot's 'waste land', the emphasis on the image of 'present' and 'motherland' is not very obvious. Thirdly, the concepts of the state and modern society are mentioned at the same time. For example, In 'The Wilderness' (1940), 'In the wilderness, I recall and dream alone:/Pure electron in the free sky' [12], which introduces the words 'electron' and 'combination' with modern scientific colour. These words point to the dark side of modern society and represent part of a better ideal. In Mu Dan's writing, the 'waste land' people face today is mainly caused by war, plunder, killing, desire, numbness and broader human evil, but these characteristics have been magnified in modern society.

The second type of 'wilderness' is different from the 'wilderness' in Eliot's sense, such as *Walking on the Wilderness* (1940), *The War between the Gods and the Demons* (1941), *Dedication* (1945), *Cloud* (1945), and *Autumn* (1976), which lasted from the 1940s to the later period of writing. This 'wilderness' symbolizes sweetness, freedom, harvest and hope. Some poems symbolize a unique spirit of revolutionary optimism, which should be distinguished from the theme of 'wilderness'.

### 4.3 Aesthetic Significance and Reconstruction Value

From the source, 'aesthetic modernity' appeared later than 'modernity'. It is a member of a massive family of nouns related to 'modernity'. Its core point of view is the rebellion against modernity as a path. 'Aesthetic modernity is not consistent with modernity, but the opposite of modernity' [13]. From the perspective of aesthetic ideographic practice, the scholar Zhou Xian summarized several vital aspects of aesthetic modernity in the context of social and cultural modernity, namely, secular 'salvation', 'rejection of mediocrity', tolerance of ambiguity and aesthetic reflection. These factors show the opposition and tension between cultural or aesthetic perspectives and social reality. In Mu Dan's 'wasteland' writing, reflective confrontations can also be seen everywhere, including the writing that does not directly mention 'wasteland' but belongs to a similar situation of 'wasteland' symbolizing tradition. For example, the scholar Wang Youxin's late work 'Winter' (1976), which was emphatically analyzed, coincides with Eliot's 'wasteland consciousness' [14]. In terms of writing techniques, although there are specific differences between Mu Dan and Eliot in aesthetic tendencies, expressions and rhetorical devices, the above analysis generally inherits the reflective context in the dimension of aesthetic modernity. Sun Yushi once said, 'The so-called 'wasteland' consciousness is the modern care for the tragic fate of the whole human race and the critical consciousness of the social reality full of absurdity and darkness that is generated in the minds of some modernist poets under the influence of Eliot's *The Wasteland* [15].' It is also an essential theme of Mu Dan's poetry.

The most significant difference between Mu Dan's wilderness writing and Eliot's wilderness writing lies in the way and angle of value reconstruction. Connecting with



the break of time and space, Mu Dan's wasteland also has the proposition and trace of space-time reconstruction, but its meaning and object differ from those of Eliot. For example, from the perspective of the historical images mentioned, Eliot's 'The Waste Land' quotes more fables, myths, religions and other unrealistic elements. At the same time, Mu Dan's writing is closer to nature and reality. In *Dedication* (1945), the author described the image of a revolutionary who gave his life for peace and ideals, 'his body fell on the green field,/all the troubles were lowered at the same time', 'however, he gave back his life/which was more glorious than what the Lord had given' [12]. After death, different from the burial of the crazy corpses described by Eliot, the revolutionaries gained a new definition of their own lives; Among them, the image of wilderness has also changed from 'wilderness' to 'green wilderness', representing peace and hope, giving a completely different aesthetic value orientation. From the religious point of view, although Mudan was affected and could use relevant vocabulary, he was not as devout as Eliot, nor did he have as profound religious experience and writing as Eliot. In terms of style, Mu Dan is not as obscure as Eliot, but he also gets rid of the realism writing method that was popular in the Chinese poetry world at that time from his study of modernism, 'However, Mu Dan is so different. As far as the trend of describing and imitating poems realistically and realistically, which has reached its peak since the 1930s and 1940s, is concerned, Mu Dan has his detachment and freedom' [16].

In *Winter* (1976), when the poet's life reached the harsh winter when his former friends fell into a tragic situation, he was powerless. When he joined the Anti-Japanese Expeditionary Force because of his patriotic enthusiasm, he was beaten into a 'historical anti-revolutionary'. These capable people and patriots went all their lives but did not get the peace and honour they deserved. Although most of his friends are hard to meet again for political reasons, He still wrote, 'The joy of life is also in the harsh winter', 'I love to surround the warm fire in the winter evening/chat with two or three former friends/listen to the north wind blowing doors and windows rustling/and we recall the happy and carefree past years' [12]. The poet stopped using ambiguous and paradoxical modern techniques, but strives to be plain and true. However, the 'wilderness' consciousness still exists in this poem. He compares life to a desolate winter, a vision throughout his life. This awareness and vigilance of the tension between reality and ideal, body and reality, and the deep concern and anxiety about oneself and the whole human situation are good manifestations of aesthetic modernity's reflective nature. Behind it are a powerful illustration of the irreplaceable nature of art and the best interpretation of a poet's independent aesthetic direction, artistic character and personality.

## 5 Conclusion

From the perspective of the image of 'waste land', Mu Dan's writing not only directly presents 'waste land' or similar words, which are not found in traditional Chinese literature but also actively learned and used by poets following the 30s trend of western modern poetry learning. At the same time, the poet transformed and upgraded this image, linked it with his social reality, learned to use the emerging poetic theory and writing skills, created his own unique and mature modernism writing style, and summarized, reflected and transformed these writing and images in writing under the influence of



different writing periods and different life experiences. The writings of the two poets are closely related to the nuclear war in modern society. The time of creation is only about ten years. Eliot's 'The Waste land' describes the dual dilemma of the body and mind of Europeans after the First World War. In Mu Dan's 'waste land' theme writing, 'waste land' not only symbolizes the ruins of modern society but also focuses on the extinction of human nature and spiritual desolation in the war. It has an important milestone position in the history of Chinese poetry and is also a noteworthy existence in the vision of world poetry.

From the perspective of aesthetic modernity, the consciousness of 'waste land' or the tradition of 'waste land' can be seen as a special position of poets in examining social reality in a special period. This position combines with the writing of non-linear time in modernism and the multi-dimensional reconstruction of time and space, forming a tradition of reflection. In this traditional practice, Eliot was more inclined to pessimism and religious salvation. Mu Dan chose to transform the 'waste land' into a 'green waste land', and gave his own understanding and solutions to the 'waste land' from an atheistic standpoint, showing the aesthetic values of harmony but difference.

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