"The Children in the Apple-Tree": The Meaning of Fruits in T.S. Eliot's Poetry

Monica MANOLACHI*

Abstract
Since J. Alfred Prufrock asked the question "Do I dare to eat the peach?", T.S. Eliot's poems, essays and plays have provided food for thought for generations over the past century. Literary critics, historians and scholars of cultural modernity have occasionally noted the poet's interest in depicting and commenting on how modern individuals perceive sources of nourishment, their transformative power and the consequences of their absence. This paper draws on previous studies of his work to explore and highlight the representation of fruits, fruition and fruitlessness in several of his poems. It also reconsiders earlier interpretations, shedding light on missing aspects and bringing attention to new insights into poems from his earliest to his last collections. The analysis employs several interpretive techniques, including symbolic analysis to uncover how fruit imagery in Eliot's work reflects themes of existential questioning, spiritual emptiness and societal critique. It situates this symbolism within the broader modernist exploration of alienation and renewal. Additionally, the study assesses Eliot's literary influences, such as European satire and French symbolism, and their impact on his thematic concerns. An ecocritical perspective is also used to examine how Eliot's portrayal of food and nature engages with early 20th-century ecological and cultural issues, reconsidering materialism and spirituality.

Keywords: *modernist poetry, T. S. Eliot, food studies, ecocriticism, close reading*

Introduction

In his 1913 essay "Inconsistencies in Bergson's Idealism," T.S. Eliot (2014) reflects on the nature of time, writing that "nothing essentially new can ever happen; the absolute, as Bradley says, bears buds and flowers and fruit at once" (81). This metaphor, which challenges the linear progression of time, offers a vision where beginnings, processes, and outcomes are inextricably linked, reflecting a holistic understanding of life and reality. This interconnectedness, often found in Eliot's work, invites a closer examination of recurring motifs, such as fruit, which subtly yet significantly contribute to the thematic depth of his poetry.

Despite the growing body of research on T. S. Eliot's use of food imagery, there remains a noticeable gap in the literature specifically addressing the symbolic role of fruit in his poetry. While scholars like Etienne Terblanche

* University of Bucharest, monica.manolachi@lls.unibuc.ro

(2016) and Jeremy Diaper (2023, 2018) have provided valuable insights into Eliot's ecological concerns and culinary references, the nuanced symbolism of fruit has been largely overlooked. The collection *Gastro-modernism* (2019), edited by Derek Gladwin, features only two articles discussing food in Eliot's poetry. Even Nicola Humble's comprehensive study, *The Literature of Food* (2020), which covers the thematic implications of food in modernist literature, only briefly touches upon fruit imagery in Eliot's work. Regarding Eliot's poetry, Humble emphasises the associations of fruit with "self-denial, internationalism, and religion" (146) and notes that in his "increasingly austere later poetry fruit imagery is more and more dried up, purged of its juices" (147), though such observations seem somewhat hasty.

This paper aims to fill this gap by offering a focused analysis of the representations of fruit in nine of Eliot's poems, spanning his entire career. Through close reading and cultural interpretation, informed by recent advances in food studies, this analysis will challenge existing interpretations and reveal overlooked dimensions of Eliot's fruit imagery. By doing so, the paper will demonstrate that, although not a central theme, fruit plays a surprisingly significant role in his poetry, particularly in relation to other food-related themes. The selected poems, which reference fruit explicitly, include three from his debut collection, two satires from his 1920 collection, *The Waste Land*, *The Hollow Men*, *Ash-Wednesday* and *Four Quartets*.

Fruits, fruition and fruitlessness

Collected in his 1917 debut volume, "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock" (1915) is a dramatic monologue in which T. S. Eliot explores a prevalent modernist theme: the struggles that occur when innate human desires for connection are obstructed by rigid social norms. He accomplishes this by feeding on literary techniques coming from different cultures – French symbolism, Dante's poetry, Ancient Greek satire etc. – to critique his own Anglophone culture, originally the Bostonian society, as he seeks to find his place in the world.

The main personage, Prufrock, is a timid, indecisive young man, who asks himself both metaphysical and mundane questions, demonstrating a subjectivity at odds with the surrounding reality: "Do I dare / Disturb the universe?" (6), "Then how should I begin / To spit out all the butt-ends of my days and ways?" (7). He feels uncomfortable and insecure in a normative society and his self-interrogations express the tensions of the time. These are reflected in Eliot's literary technique: the skilful combination of the most serious themes with everyday details. One such matter-of-fact aspect is the reference to food, a topic usually neglected in the literary studies of the past.

Prufrock enters "sawdust restaurants with oyster shells" (5), where he sees "hands / That lift and drop a question on your plate" (6). Events,

important or not, occur "before the taking of a toast and tea" (6) or "after the novels, after the teacups, after the skirts that trail along the floor" (8). When he describes himself as taking the temporal dimension into account, he admits that: "I have measured out my life with coffee spoons" (6) and "I have bitten off the matter with a smile" (8). The only fruit mentioned in the poem is a peach:

> I grow old . . . I grow old.
> I shall wear the bottoms of my trousers rolled.
> Shall I part my hair behind? Do I dare to eat a peach?
> I shall wear white flannel trousers, and walk upon the beach.
> I have heard the mermaids singing, each to each. (9)

The question about the peach has been interpreted in many ways over the decades: trivialisation of great dilemmas (Gish, 1981: 17), "puritanical or valetudinarian fears" (Pinion, 1986: 77), "self-paralysing indecisiveness" and inability to ask meaningful questions (Swarbrick, 1988: 21), dramatic self-awareness verging on pathos (Sigg, 1989: 105), nervousness about what is correct (Raine, 2006: 69), "fear of making the wrong choices" (Bloom, 2011: 97), repression of desire (Perloff, 2011: 259), or "a kind of endless sensitivity, a neurosis" or "political correctness" in an ecological framework (Terblanche, 2016: 30). Such diverse interpretations of the peach – spanning moral, psychological, and natural concerns – demonstrate the universal power of poetry to illuminate essential issues. As literary historians and critics often highlight, Prufrock, named after a furniture business in St. Louis, is not Eliot, but a literary artefact that illustrates an overly cautious personality, self-conscious and concerned with appearances, mirroring the rise of psychology as a scientific discipline. According to British writer Wyndham Lewis (1967), Eliot was:

> A sleek, tall, attractive transatlantic apparition—with a sort of Gioconda smile. […] a Prufrock to whom the mermaids would decidedly have sung, one would have said, at the tops of their voice—a Prufrock who had no need to "wear the bottom of his trousers rolled" just yet; a Prufrock who would "dare" all right "to eat a peach"—provided he was quite sure that he possessed the correct European table-technique for that ticklish operation. (282-283)

Apart from these considerations, the poem sets the peach in contrast with "the marmalade" (8), which subtly illustrates the difference between nature and culture. Critic Lee M. Jenkins (2019) cogently demonstrates that Eliot aligned himself with the party of culture, like Wallace Stevens and unlike D.H. Lawrence, who aligned himself with the party of nature. According to him: "Modernist poetry's polarised representation of and relationship to food anticipates Claude Lévi-Strauss's anthropological binary of 'the raw' and 'the

cooked'." (183) The critic concludes that Modernist poets' interest in how food is consumed reflects their intense focus on the connection between art, ritual, and reality. While marmalade in English is typically linked to citrus fruits, its history and usage reveal that it can also be made of other fruits. The presence of peach and marmalade in the same poem hints at the emergence of peach marmalade as a popular product in the 19th and 20th centuries, thanks to the rise of home canning. Historian C. Anne Wilson (2000) cites a recipe from as early as 1587 and an 1884 price list that features it. While peach marmalade became widely popular more recently, it has been enjoyed for centuries.

The simplicity of Prufrock's question opens the door to possible other readings. From an economic point of view, the poet's Hamletian concern with (not) eating the peach prefigures the contemporary mass production of fruits, the role of food chains in making them available to urban consumers and all the associated ecological issues. By documenting Eliot's engagement with the organicist movement [1] in Britain, Jeremy Diaper (2018) demonstrates the poet's agricultural sensibility, based on the conception of culture and agriculture as mutually independent. In plus, from a historical standpoint, eating a peach symbolises an understanding of the Orient. Originating in Eastern China, extensively grown in Persia and later introduced to Europe before being brought to the Americas in the 16th century, the peach has a rich transnational trade history, an alternative to the bellicose history of the First World War when the poem was published and when issues like nutritional health and food shortages, rationing and logistics gained prominence in the public sphere.

In "Rhapsody of a Windy Night" (1917), an early urban nocturne inspired by French symbolism and included in his debut collection, the protagonist tramps the streets, aimless and fearful, imagining that the street lamps can talk. A Prufrock of sorts, the speaker is intent solely on making himself utterly miserable, reminding us of George Orwell's first book, *Down and Out in Paris and London* (1933). Bleak and melodic, not enthusiastic as a rhapsody should be, the poem portrays a world filled with loneliness and alienation, tinged with regret and bitterness, and marked by an underlying sense of vice and cruelty. In reaction to this urban nightmare, the poet crafted a new tone, replacing the excesses of romantic sentimentality with a blend of understated bitterness and resignation, creating an unexpectedly celebratory aesthetic.

The reader's senses are assaulted by the speaker highlighting images, sounds, tastes, smells and touches. Images: "Midnight shakes the memory / As a madman shakes a dead geanium." (18), "A broken spring in a factory yard" or "A washed-out smallpox cracks her face, / Her hand twists a paper rose" (19). Sounds: "Every street lamp that I pass / Beats like a fatalistic drum"

(18). Taste: the cat that "devours a morsel of rancid butter" (19). A blend of several mingling smells:

> Smells of chestnuts in the streets,
> And female smells in shuttered rooms,
> And cigarettes in corridors
> And cocktail smells in bars. (20)

The poem ends with allusions to crime, bringing a sense of order to the darker aspects of reality that otherwise gnaw at the edges of consciousness, unsettling the individual without offering clarity: "The last twist of the knife." (ibid) These sensations are not meant to be pleasant. However, the careful crafting of the language transforms what might seem like stark ugliness into genuinely beautiful art. The frugality of enjoying roasted chestnuts is there to complement the performance.

Can fruit be used to express dissatisfaction? Which one is the most suitable? The satirical poem "Mr. Apollinax" (1916), present in Eliot's debut collection, employs a technique that alienates readers while simultaneously making them accomplices to an inside joke. The Greek nickname, the use of "Mr." and the fact that he visited the United States, not America, are all hints that the personage may be a celebrity. The Ancient Greek epigraph from the satirist Lucian of Samosata suggests Mr. Apollinax might be a man of letters or a scholar in the humanities.

According to literary historians, the poem may have been written as a caricature of Bertrand Russell, whom Eliot met at Harvard in 1914, when the analytic philosopher was a visiting professor. The reason was that his former teacher and Eliot's first wife had an affair at the time when the young couple struggled financially and worried about their future. "His laughter tinkled among the teacups" (25) is a line that describes the culprit in a catering context, as the carefree master of his stifling social circle. The poet's irritation at being cuckold produces radical language, suggestive of an imaginary decapitation: "I looked for the head of Mr. Apollinax rolling under a chair" (ibid). The atmosphere of socialising and eating out is described in culinary terms: "Of dowager Mrs. Phlacuss, and Professor and Mrs. Cheetah, / I remember a slice of lemon, and a bitten macaroon" (ibid). While name-dropping is a common social tactic, cooking up ludicrous names reduces its typical impact and shifts the critique toward the persons being nicknamed. Since someone who proves to be disappointing can be informally called a lemon in the English language, the poem, along with others from the same first collection, is part of the poet's battle to resist psychological distress and rotten social conventions.

A work inspired by French poet Théophile Gautier´s "L'Hippopotame", the satirical poem "The Hippopotamus" (1917), published in his 1920 volume, suggests an intrinsic distrust in modern religion by placing values like hope

and humility, faith and community in a humorous and surprising framework. Its polemical and unapologetic stance suggests its main concern is not salvation, but being in the world and understanding its complexity. The tight rhymes of each quatrain and the unusual transitions and juxtapositions illustrate how novelty and zest can sprout within the confines of conventional religious discourse.

An African animal, the hippopotamus "is merely flesh and blood", "susceptible to nervous shock", while the Church "can never fail / For it is based upon a rock" and "need never stir / To gather in its dividents" (43), which sets the figure of the animal and the religious institution in opposition, with the former much weaker than the latter. What they have in common is human characteristics, a mix of anxiety and a capital-oriented attitude. The poetic juxtapositions suggest that, whereas the individual cannot really enjoy the bounty of life, the institution apparently can, as the following stanza explains:

> The 'potamus can never reach
> The mango on the mango-tree;
> But fruits of pomegranate and peach
> Refresh the Church from over sea. (ibid)

Approaching the poem from a new materialist and ecocritical standpoint and focusing on the idea of immersion, Etienne Terblanche (2016) posits that Eliot's view on the problem of the church is "its misappropriation of matter" and that "Eliot's God is ecological, not patriarchal" (95). The above stanza suggests that reaching for fruit, traditionally viewed as a sinful act in Christian doctrine, is actually a natural and essential part of earthly existence. Eliot's interpretation of Christianity contrasts sharply with conventional views, proposing that acknowledging and engaging with earthly desires and instincts, like a hungry creature reaching for fruit, is more meaningful than denying them. The metaphor of reaching the fruit, while not literal, emphasises the value of earthly engagement over spiritual detachment.

The individual's helplessness and needs are further set in contrast to the power of the faith-based community, in the context of hunger:

> The hippopotamus's day
> Is passed in sleep, at night he hunts,
> God works in a mysterious way –
> The Church can sleep and feed at once. (43)

Both the individual and the community need rest and food, which suggests their essential interdependence despite the contradiction reflected in the simultaneity of ritualistic sleep and eating. The humanisation of animal life and

the animalisation of human life through poetic discourse question the effects of human intervention in nature and in communities from elsewhere (via evangelism, humanitarian work, trade, etc.) and situate the non-human kingdom in a new transcendental light.

Included in his second volume, "Sweeney Among the Nightingales" (1918) is set in a restaurant and evokes a cosmopolitan paranoid world. A focus on the culinary vocabulary reveals uneasy relationships between people and threatening conspiratorial gamesmanship:

> The silent man in mocha brown
> Sprawls at the window-sill and gapes;
> The waiter brings in oranges
> Bananas figs and hothouse grapes;
>
> The silent vertebrate in brown
> Contracts and concentrates, withdraws;
> Rachel *née* Rabinovitch
> Tears at the grapes with murderous paws; (51)

Animalised as a "silent vertebrate", Sweeney is a persona Eliot invented to refer to a prototype of the modern savage, instinctual and mind-numbing. He is served exotic fruits like oranges and bananas, and grapes grown in artificial conditions, which expresses the awareness that they are produced far away and shipped to England, or they need to be planted in greenhouses before being acclimatised to colder conditions. Dwelling still on fruit imagery, the next stanza exposes two opposing forms of consumption, low versus excessive: while the man is reserved and introspective, the woman's reaction is filled with strong emotions. From a formal point of view, the tension between the mechanicism of food production and people's animality is captured in galloping prosody.

In *The Wasteland* (1922), the scarcity of fruit imagery encapsulates the central themes of the poem: the spiritual barrenness and fragmentation of modern society, yearning for renewal and redemption. The following lines from "The Fire Sermon" introduce Mr Eugenides:

> Under the brown fog of a winter noon
> Mr Eugenides, the Smyrna merchant
> Unshaven, with a pocket full of currants
> C.i f. London: documents at sight,
> Asked me in demotic French
> To luncheon at the Cannon Street Hotel
> Followed by a weekend at the Metropole. (63)

With Eliot's note to the poem ("c.i.f. London" indicating "cost, insurance, and freight to London"), the currants can be interpreted as the goods Mr. Eugenides is trading. Given Mr Eugenides's proposition to the unnamed narrator to have lunch together and spend a weekend in Brighton, they can also be understood as a metaphor for conviviality in cosmopolitan circumstances. Smyrna, known today as the Turkish city of Izmir, was an Ancient Greek city, which has been historically associated with ethnic diversity, religious heterogeneity and international trade. This episode may be part of the recurring theme of sterility and unfulfilled desire, such as Lil's abortions, the typist's encounter with the young man and the withered vitality of the Fisher King, the protagonist of the poem, whose helplessness has brought desolation to the wasteland. However, the "pocket full of currants" also suggests small yet plentiful resources gathered from distant, fertile lands. From a gastronomic point of view, currants are both a nutritious snack and a versatile ingredient in cooking and baking.

Eliot's concern with decay and rebirth draws on his interest in works like *The Golden Bough* (1890) by James G. Frazer and *From Ritual to Romance* (1920) by Jessie L. Weston, which he mentions in his notes to *The Wasteland*. For example, the section "The Burial of the Dead" ends with dilemmas about the meaning of death rituals, when there is no certainty of resurrection:

> 'That corpse you planted last year in your garden,
> 'Has it begun to sprout? Will it bloom this year?
> 'Or has the sudden frost disturbed its bed? (57)

Set against the postwar historical context, these lines question whether large-scale conflict is essential for transformation and encourage readers to consider alternative paths to renewal. The poem's imagery of burial reflects the Grail and Christian myths, both rooted in ancient vegetation and scapegoating rituals. Furthermore, the poem's focus on material fruitlessness—rather than abundance and consumption—highlights modern issues such as resource scarcity, mass distribution, and waste.

In the five sections of "The Hollow Men" (1925), Eliot explores themes of spiritual desolation, emptiness and the failure of modern society to find meaning or redemption. The poem portrays a group of "stuffed men", trapped in a liminal state between life and death, unable to act decisively or achieve spiritual fulfilment. The imagery and tone of the poem convey a sense of despair since the personages are depicted as disconnected from both the divine and the human.

The last section of the poem begins and ends with a distorted version of a nursery rhyme. In the first stanza, the usual "mulberry bush" is replaced with the "prickly pear", creating an effect of defamiliarisation:

> Here we go round the prickly pear

> Prickly pear prickly pear
> Here we go round the prickly pear
> At five o'clock in the morning. (83)

The dance round the prickly pear has been understood as "phantasmagoric" (Simpson 1975, 165), "disillusionment with the world" (Pinion 1986, 171), "a purposeless absurdity" (Swarbrick 1988, 48), "behaviour that is enigmatically empty" (Raine 2006: 20), the "degradation of essential ritual" (Crawford 1987, 154) etc. All these views may have been based on the presupposition that, unlike mulberries, the prickly pear is inedible, disturbing and menacing. And going round and round in circles means engaging in a repetitive or futile activity that leads to no progress or resolution, to no fruition.

Nevertheless, prickly pear is indeed a real fruit, a cactus known as opuntia, with edible varieties found in hot climates. Its small spines must be carefully removed by peeling. The contrast between the fruit's perceived inedibility and its actual use in various cultures encourages a deeper understanding of the poem's themes. From one angle, cyclical patterns can be found globally, even in regions where prickly pears grow. From another angle, it might critique aimless pursuits, highlighting the relation between rootedness and rootlessness.

The poem ends with another distorted stanza, in which the usual lines "This is the way we wash our face / comb our hair / brush our teeth etc." are changed into "This is the way the world ends" (84). Such a transformation subverts the original purpose of the children's song, intended to teach proper behaviour in the modern world. By doing so, the poem questions how fundamental knowledge about life—and death—is transmitted across generations and advocates for radical creativity in navigating cultural differences.

The main message of *Ash Wednesday* (1930), a poem reflecting Eliot's conversion to Anglicanism in June 1927, is the spiritual struggle of renouncing earthly desires and bodily temptations to seek divine grace and renewal. Fruits, therefore, are of a metaphysical nature. The second section reflects the poet's memory of spiritual rebirth, not as an emergence of a new self, but as a dissolution. The poet, who believes in "the Garden / Where all loves end" (90), remarks almost joyfully:

> And I who am here dissembled
> Proffer my deeds to oblivion, and my love
> To the posterity of the desert and the fruit of the gourd. (89)

In the Biblical story, after Jonah reluctantly delivers God's message to Nineveh, he sits outside the city, awaiting its fate. God provides a gourd plant to give him shade but then causes it to wither overnight. Jonah laments the death of

the plant, and God uses this to teach him about compassion and the value of life. Therefore, in Eliot's view, "the fruit of the gourd" is the leap of faith required when one has reached their breaking point, or everything seems to fall apart.

The fifth section concludes with an interrogation left without a question mark, invoking a figure capable to forgive and pray for others regardless of circumstances:

> Will the veiled sister between the slender
> Yew trees pray for those who offend her
> And are terrified and cannot surrender
> And affirm before the world and deny between the rocks
> In the last desert between the last blue rocks
> The desert in the garden the garden in the desert
> Of drouth, spitting from the mouth the withered apple-seed. (95)

"The desert in the garden the garden in the desert" is more than clichéd mystical wordplay. It signifies that, as the fall of man was present in Eden, so too can salvation be found in the most barren places. The fall of humanity, symbolized by "the withered apple-seed", is said by some theologians to have led to the confusion of languages. Eliot appears to share this view. In his depiction of corrupted language, there is no dominant authority, only a multitude of conflicting individual voices. Thus, spitting out the withered apple-seed represents speaking a fallen, distorted language. What is the role of "the veiled sister" in this context? Replacing the question mark with a full stop implies that the answer lies within the question itself: a leap of faith. Moreover, since poetic language allows for interpretation, "the veiled sister" could represent any woman or the feminine aspect within everyone—the other self that might lie hidden behind the mask of personality. The line "spitting from the mouth the withered apple-seed" conveys a sense of profound emptiness that someone might feel and the rejection of convictions that have lost their potential for regeneration. It underscores the desolate and arid spiritual state depicted in the poem, where even potential growth, symbolized by the apple-seed, is rendered futile.

The third section of *Four Quartets*, "The Dry Salvages" (1941) begins with a striking image of the brown river-god Mississippi, evoking Eliot's childhood in the industrial city of St. Louis:

> I do not know much about gods; but I think that the river
> Is a strong brown god—sullen, untamed and intractable,
> Patient to some degree, at first recognised as a frontier,
> Useful, untrustworthy, as a conveyor of commerce; […]
> His rhythm was present in the nursery bedroom,
> In the rank ailanthus of the April dooryard,

> In the smell of grapes on the autumn table,
> And the evening circle in the winter gaslight. (193)

The analogy of the river to a deity was not new: in the 1830s, Alexis de Tocqueville (2010) wrote that the Mississippi was "like a god" (35). What was new was Eliot's poems about his nostalgia for the time spent with his family. In a letter to his mother, on 14 October 1917, Eliot (1988) wrote: "I always think of a return to St. Louis as meaning Concord grapes on the table in the blue fruit basket." (304) In a letter to his friend, John D. Hayward, on 27 December 1939, Eliot wrote: "One of my strongest associations is that of the smell of grapes and of the charwoman (an old family retainer) who always greeted me on returning in the autumn to our house in St. Louis." (Eliot, 2015: 965) Thus, "the smell of grapes on the autumn table", invigorated by the river's influence and other aspects of urban life, functions similarly to Proust's madeleine, evoking voluntary memories of youth.

Another fruit mentioned in "The Dry Salvages" is the apple as a symbol of sin and the fruit of knowledge. The second part addresses not only the themes of time and timelessness but also explores the theme of death, serving as a reminder of the Second World War, encompassing the death of the body, psyche and spirit. What remains relevant with the passing of time is rather abstract:

> The moments of happiness – not the sense of well-being,
> Fruiton, fulfilment, security or affection,
> Or even a very good dinner, but the sudden illumination – (196)

Despite the inevitability of death, this section fosters hope in what endures beyond it. In the conclusion of the second part, "the bitter apple and the bite in the apple" symbolise human errors and the awareness of them, while time is depicted as a force that both annihilates and safeguards:

> Time the destroyer is time the preserver,
> Like the river with its cargo of dead negroes, cows and chicken coops,
> The bitter apple and the bite in the apple.
> And the ragged rock in the restless waters,
> Waves wash over it, fogs conceal it;
> On a halcyon day it is merely a monument,
> In navigable weather it is always a seamark
> To lay a course by: but in the sombre season
> Or the sudden fury, is what it always was. (196-197)

The fragment reflects T. S. Eliot's life in the United States, with the Mississippi River flooding the valley where his hometown of St. Louis is located, and the rocky coastal area known as the Dry Salvages, where the poet spent his

summers, and which inspired the title of the section. The second line evokes the history of racism in the United States, recalling the time when African-Americans were treated as property. At the same time, the river imagery evokes Huckleberry Finn and Jim's friendship from Mark Twain's classic novel, and it also reminds us that Langston Hughes, a contemporary of Eliot, was born in the same state.

The third part of "The Dry Salvages" contains a passage referring to fruition that strongly leans toward conceptual exploration. The use of the verb "to fructify" and of the collocation "fruit of action" questions ideas like fertility and growing:

> At the moment which is not of action or inaction
> You can receive this: "on whatever sphere of being
> The mind of a man may be intent
> At the time of death" – that is the one action
> (And the time of death is every moment)
> Which shall fructify in the lives of others:
> And do not think of the fruit of action.
> Fare forward. (198)

This passage emphasises the concept of living with mindful awareness, where each moment has the potential for transformation and influence on others, and encourages focusing on the journey rather than its outcomes. Different forms of death—real or imaginary—thus become opportunities to grasp transcendence and envision possible rebirth.

The fourth and final section of *Four Quartets*, "Little Gidding" (1942), also published during World War II, opens with a hopeful line that suggests new beginnings amid the cold: "Midwinter spring is its own season." (201) Despite contradictions, hope still exists: "Between melting and freezing / The soul's sap quivers." (idem) The second part of the section is an encounter with "a familiar compound ghost" (204). This has been interpreted as an alter ego of the poet or a composite spirit of poets and other significant figures, who inspired Eliot's work. The two have a dialogue about the role of language in a changing world, in which the metaphor of the fruit is used to convey meanings:

> Last season's fruit is eaten
> And the fullfed beast shall kick the empty pail.
> For last year's words belong to last year's language
> And next year's words await another voice. (204)

> First, the cold friction of expiring sense
> Without enchantment, offering no promise
> But bitter tastelessness of shadow fruit
> As body and soul begin to fall asunder. (205)

The final reference to fruit in *Four Quartets* is an apple tree. "Little Gidding" concludes with a meditation on the cyclical nature of life, knowledge, and spiritual rediscovery. It suggests that, after searching far and wide, we return to our starting point, but with newfound understanding. The place where we began is now seen with fresh eyes, as if for the first time, symbolized by "the children in the apple-tree" (209)—a representation of innocence and truth, unnoticed because they are not directly sought. Their presence is felt in moments of quiet reflection, like the calm between waves—a metaphor for the pauses in life where deeper understanding can emerge. While the world has changed, Little Gidding has largely remained the same.

Conclusions

As both a poet and philosopher, T.S. Eliot used fruit imagery as a powerful symbolic tool that reflects the complex interplay of existential, spiritual and societal themes central to his modernist vision. The peach, for example, symbolises internal struggle against societal norms, reflecting broader psychological and cultural issues. Vivid sensory imagery turns urban alienation into a dissonant yet harmonious aesthetic, while fruits like the lemon are used satirically to critique conformism and express personal disappointments. Eliot juxtaposes material and spiritual elements to comment on modern religion, and exotic fruits emphasise global commerce and modern savagery. Fruits like currants and prickly pears represent spiritual barrenness or existential despair, particularly in the context of cultural differences. In his later works, Eliot delves deeper into themes of memory, time, and spiritual renewal, highlighting the cyclical nature of existence and the potential for rebirth amidst conflict and oblivion.

Notes

[1] Organicism is an agricultural and philosophical movement emphasising the interdependence of soil fertility, crop health, and human well-being, advocating for natural farming methods and coexisting harmoniously with nature's laws.

References

Bloom, Harold. (2011) *T. S. Eliot*. New York: Infobase Publishing.

Crawford, Robert. (1987) *The Savage and the City in the Work of T. S. Eliot*. Oxford: Clarendon.

de Tocqueville, Alexis. (2010) *Democracy in America*. Ed. by Eduardo Nolla. Trans. by James T. Schleifer. Indianapolis: Liberty Fund.

Eliot, T. S. (1988) *The Letters of T. S. Eliot, Volume I: 1898-1922*, ed. by Valerie Eliot and Hugh Haughton. London: Faber and Faber.

Eliot, T. S. (2014) *The Complete Prose of T. S. Eliot: The Critical Edition, Volume 1: Apprentice Years, 1905-1918*, edited by Jewel Spears Brooker and Ronald Schuchard. The Johns Hopkins UP and Faber & Faber.

Eliot, T. S. (2015) *The Poems of T. S. Eliot*, vol. 1, ed. by Christopher Ricks and Jim McCue. London: Faber and Faber.

Gish, Nancy K. (1981) *Time in the Poetry of T. S. Eliot*. London: Macmillan Press.

Jenkins, Lee M. (2019) "'The Raw and the Cooked': Food and Modernist Poetry". In Gladwin, D. (ed.) *Gastro-modernism: Food, Literature, Culture*. Clemson: Clemson UP, 183-192.

Lewis, Wyndham. (1967) *Blasting and Bombardiering*. City: Publisher, 285-86.

Humble, Nicola. (2020) *The Literature of Food: An Introduction from 1830 to Present.* London: Bloomsbury.

Perloff, Marjorie. (2011) "The Avant-Garde". *T. S. Eliot in Context*, ed. by Jason Harding. Cambridge: CUP, 252-261.

Pinion, F. B. (1986) *A T. S. Eliot Companion: Life and Works.* New York: Palgrave Macmillan.

Raine, Craig. (2006) *T. S. Eliot*, Oxford: OUP.

Sigg, Eric W. (1989) *The American T. S. Eliot: a study of the early writings.* Cambridge: CUP.

Simpson, Louis. (1975) *Three on the Tower: The Lives and Works of Ezra Pound, T. S. Eliot and Williams Carlos Williams.* New York: William Morrow.

Swarbrick, Andrew. (1988) *Selected Poems of T. S. Eliot*. London: Macmillan.

Terblanche, Etienne. (2016) *T. S. Eliot, Poetry, and Earth: The Name of the Lotos Rose.* Lanham: Lexington Books.

Wilson, C. Anne. (2010) *The Book of Marmalade*, third edition. Totnes: Prospect Books.