

Life in the Modern City: What We May Learn from T. S. Eliot and Charles Baudelaire

Charles Baudelaire and T. S. Eliot are pioneers of the poetry of the metropolis and modern life. Although these poets were writing in different historical and cultural contexts, they both lived through times of enormous technological, urban and social transformation. In their poetry, both Charles Baudelaire and T. S. Eliot explore the disorientating experience of the individual in a rapidly changing urban environment, with all the socio-economic upheaval it entails. In a world where the majority of people now live in cities, and with urban populations continually on the rise, it is becoming increasingly important that we study and analyse our urban environments; for the city's history and design shape the lives of billions of people. This project explores how reading ground-breaking works of literary modernism can inform our understanding of issues facing contemporary readers in urban contexts.

1

Charles Baudelaire was the father of modern poetry about the city and coined the term 'modernity'. He was part of the first great wave of writers and thinkers about modernity and did more than anyone in the 19th century to make the men and women of the time think themselves as 'modern'. For Baudelaire, contemporary urban life was the ultimate inspiration for modern art and literature. *Les Fleurs du Mal* is Baudelaire's contentious first volume of poetry. In the section entitled 'Tableaux Parisien' (Parisian Scenes), we find Baudelaire's first-hand account of Paris amid enormous urban modernisation. The poems record the transformation from a medieval to a modern city, with almost all the poems spotlighting unfortunate individuals: the victims of the modern city. Each character adds something to Baudelaire's cutting criticism of modern Paris. *Le Spleen de Paris*, in contrast, is a posthumously published volume of short 'prose poems', a form of writing pioneered by Baudelaire. In the preface, he writes that they are inspired by the 'innumerable interactions' one experiences in the modern city. *Spleen* is testament to Baudelaire's fascination with modern life in the city, the poems recall 'the strain and exhilaration of metropolitan life'.*



2

The literary movement called Modernism came decades after Baudelaire's time; however, it is part of the legacy of his urban poetry and art criticism. T. S. Eliot is an important name amongst the Modernists: his poem *The Waste Land* is often viewed as the greatest work of modernist poetry. First published in 1922, it speaks volumes that almost one hundred years later, this is a poem we still consider as highly modern. *The Waste Land* is a famously incomprehensible poem. Its structural complexity, abrupt changes of location, speakers, time and languages, make it difficult to follow, particularly because there is no coherent narrative anyway. This is a fragmented epic, with many voices but few identified characters. However, it is set almost entirely within London's financial district, where Eliot worked as a bank clerk during and in the years following the First World War. *The Waste Land* consists of five parts, each of which involves shifting voices that delve into themes of war, trauma and disillusionment, reflecting darkly upon human affairs. The poem forms a bleak image of contemporary Europe that attests to the emotional and physical devastation of the post-war landscape.*

3

Paris had remained a medieval city in design until the 1850s. The city that we know today is relatively new, but its construction marked the birth of the modern city as we know it. In 1852, the elected president of France, Louis-Napoléon – the nephew of Napoléon I – embarked upon an architectural ambitious project to redesign the French capital. Baron Haussmann was the chosen architect to carry out the laborious new urban plans. What ensued involved mass demolition of the city's medieval streets and dwellings, mass social displacement and a period of intense reconstruction that lasted until 1870. This process is known as Haussmannisation, when the city was transformed from labyrinthine, narrow streets to wide open, tree-lined boulevards, bordered with 'mansions, cafés, theatres, concert halls, public monuments and public buildings'.* This historic moment marked the end of the short-lived Second Republic and the start of the Second Empire. In the aftermath of the 1848 Revolution, in which Baudelaire took part, the city of Paris was redesigned in anticipation of more. The wide streets facilitated the ease of movement for the army, as well as preventing the construction of barricades. An estimated 350,000 Parisians were displaced and shunted to the outskirts of the city – 'les banlieues' – which has had a lasting effect. Haussmannisation required strict authoritarian rule, the likes of which was unprecedented in Europe.

4

By 1825, London's population had grown to 1.3 million, making it the world's largest city, a position it held until the 1920s. It was arguably the first capitalist megacity, a centre of world finance, trade and administrative networks that drew from vast numbers of immigrants from all around the world: many of today's megacities are its successors.* The 1920s, also called 'The Roaring Twenties', was a decade of peace and prosperity for those who profited off the war. There was excitement about progress and technological development: change was happening more rapidly than ever. Writers of the time were responding to that idea of modernity.* In the years following the First World War, T. S. Eliot gathered material to write the modernist poem of the century. But the destruction and death during the war left cultural despair in its wake. The public had witnessed the havoc of a four-year long conflict: most European countries had lost a generation of their young men.* Society was fractured after the war, leaving behind social fragmentation and the breakdown of community.

5

Before the war, Georg Simmel discussed the effects of individualism and the impersonality of the modern city upon the individual subjectivity.* Indifference, distrust and loneliness, he argues, are the effect of the metropolis and its structures of the highest impersonality. The intensified socio-economic life of modern cities threatens to weaken the traditional communal bonds of religious influence and family ties. The dominance of money and increased division of labour in the urban economy 'fosters difference and individuality, while also paradoxically increasing standardisation and maximising brutal economic conflict'.* Simmel's view is that these complexities of urban society led to new forms of mental and emotional experience. The world had become a much more bewildering place and this sense of disorientation was recreated in art and its experimentation with literary form.



6

'Tableaux Parisiens' constitute Baudelaire's most caustic poetry about modern Paris. The section, added to the second edition of *Les Fleurs du Mal* in 1861, consists of eighteen poems written during the period of Haussmannisation. Baudelaire is critical of the strictly uniform composure of the city's new streets and buildings, which wiped out centuries of historic architecture and medieval dwellings. The poems communicate feelings of estrangement and alienation from an unrecognisably modernised space. In 'Le Cygne' (The Swan), Baudelaire sensitively communicates modern anxiety and a modern sense of displacement. He records his thoughts as he walks through an old working class neighbourhood, which used to be filled with the homes of the poor; now, it is situated between a Napoleonic triumphal arc and the palace of the Louvre. He laments on what is lost, 'Le vieux Paris n'est plus (la forme d'une ville/ Change plus vite, hélas! que le coeur d'un mortel)', (Old Paris is no more (Alas, a city changes more quickly than a mortal heart)). It is often read as a pointed protest against Haussmann's renovation of Paris.

The prose poems of *Le Spleen de Paris* are parables of 'poverty, aspiration to beauty, tense urban psychology and misdirected violence'.* In his poem 'Le Mauvais Vitrier' (The Bad Glazier), a disturbingly violent interaction occurs between a Parisian, living in the attic of a Haussmannian apartment in a poor neighbourhood, and a glazier selling his wares. The extreme violence here is an example of urban 'anomie', (the breakdown of moral values). The poem is part of an 'immense historical process of urbanisation and globalisation involving oppression and provoking sometimes violent responses'.*

Although many of these poems focus on the experience of the poor, marginal man in the big city, Baudelaire's poetry also addresses the problem of the failure of representation; the impossibility of conveying their experience. Despite coming from a wealthy background, Baudelaire spent much of his adult life living in near-poverty, due to his extravagant behaviour, expensive tastes and opioid addiction; he squandered away his mother's money. In his prose poem, 'Les Yeux des Pauvres' (The Eyes of the Poor), Baudelaire reveals some of the deepest ironies and contradictions about modern life. It is a love story, where a young couple lovingly walk the boulevards and relax in the new cafés. As the lovers gaze into each other's eyes, they are suddenly confronted with some very different eyes – a poor family dressed in rags, staring in amazement at the new buildings around them. While he is touched by the family's eyes, and slightly ashamed of his own luxury, she is disgusted and calls for someone to take them away. The miss-match in their ideology is enough to destroy the relationship. Baudelaire celebrates the city but also dramatises its sometimes unbearable strains.*



7

The Waste Land 'must be read as a singular London text, if not the urban text par excellence of literary modernism'.* As a site, London is marked by discontinuity and paradox. Eliot's poem is concerned with both literal waste lands and cultural and moral waste lands.* Literal waste lands such as the sterile places where the poem is set, like the desert; but also other forms of waste land in immoral urban phenomena: sharp economic inequality, the worship of money, the breakdown of community in the face of individualism, sexual and spiritual depravity. He reminds us that London is 'governed by vast differences between the rich and the poor, the upper and working classes'.* This gulf is most noticeable between the two women from 'A Game of Chess'. The wealthy, upper-class woman is compared to Cleopatra, while Lil, who sits in the pub having a gossip, 'represents the downtrodden working classes'. Although they have in common unhappy marriages to men who both served in the war, their economic backgrounds set them distinctly apart. Whereas the rich woman's room has an 'antique mantel', Lil just looks 'antique', although she is only thirty-one.* The experience of the city is a question of financial income.

Eliot had a particularly dark outlook on modern life, his 'strong personal sense of deepening historical catastrophe' finds its way into the poem.* In April 1921, he wrote to a friend that 'Having only contempt for every existing political party, and profound hatred for democracy, I feel the blackest gloom' and he foresaw nothing but 'internecine fighting...people killing each other in the streets'.* In the words of Frank Leavis, this is a poem that articulates 'the troubles of the present age'.*

Conclusion

These poems are important documents of urban design that caused huge upheavals in how people related to where they lived as the modern world took shape. Baudelaire and Eliot depict an urban experience of disorientation and the search for patterns of meaning in the face of it. In their urban landscapes, we witness the breakdown of social bonds between the individual and the community, as traditional moral values disintegrate. In many ways, the poems show that modernisation destroyed the communities of London and Paris. Cultural degradation threatens the inhabitants of the city in the form of loneliness, oppression and despair. Although these ailments are not unique to the modern city, they certainly seem to thrive best there. The shock of these poems are in their contemporary relevance, they are pertinent to how we conceptualise the city today. On the other hand, there are still celebrations of modernity within the poems. Baudelaire for one relishes the excitement that flows from the crowd and the pace of city life; Eliot in contemporary music, he interrupts the poem with a verse of ragtime: 'O O O O, that shakesperian rag/ it's so elegant so intelligent'. Both poets express an urge to re-establish the community, to socialise and relate to others. An important idea to take from their poetry is this desire to unite people. Despite their cynicism and rather disparaging view of life in the modern city, the very beauty of their poetry speaks for something that modernity has achieved. Art and creativity flourishes and offers relief in the face of hardship and this is worth celebrating.

References

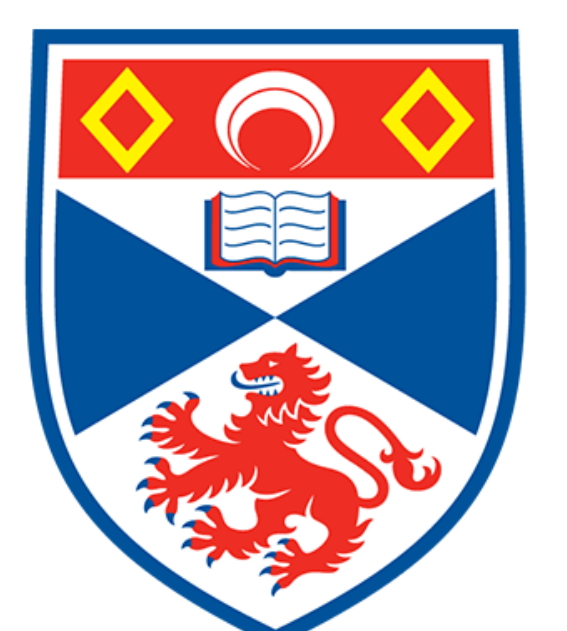
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Figures

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