



THE WASTE LAND AS FERTILE LAND FOR ENGLISH LITERATURE

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ABSTRACT

Encompassing the period of Modernist movement, Eliot's The Wasteland Land is perhaps a prime example of realistic study of the world and its society brimming with complex subject matters and experimentation in poetic technique. One of the longest poems, written with 434 lines and five sections, the poem serves as a great inspiration to many modernist as well as post-modernist writers. The fragmentary nature of time, the hollowness and meaninglessness of lives, ravages caused by the world war, violation of sex through the degeneration of love into lust are responsible for the spiritual drought in the modern wasteland. The beauty of the work lies in the fact that the poem effortlessly blends the past and the present; the East and the West. This study examines how the ideas manifested in the The Wasteland are relevant in the present world.

Key Words: *Modernist, World War, Degeneration, Hollowness, Sex, Post-Modern and Realistic.*

AIMS AND OBJECTIVES

This paper is a study of Eliot's *The Wasteland* as a bitter criticism of life: the hollow and rootless modern civilization. The present world is living under the constant terror of unprecedented wars and attacks. The fear of war has resulted into disillusionment,

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disintegration, disorder, agony and frustration. The essence of true love is diminished to a baser form of emotion resulting into sterile burning of lust through violation of sex. The two world wars had spawned a new wave of literary output. *The Wasteland* is indestructible in its themes and poetic technique. It will be very ironic to claim that a poem dealing with the infertile world which yields nothing but only horror and boredom beneath human existence has become one of the most fertile lands for English Literature.

LITERATURE REVIEW

To quote Harold Bloom, *The Wasteland* can be read as "a testament to the disillusionment of a generation, an exposition of the manifested despair and spiritual bankruptcy of the years after World War I" (Bloom). The havoc of the war was such that people lost their spiritual connect with the god which resulted into disillusionment, pessimism and disintegration of the modern society. It is evident that the poem "is an expression of negation, futility, and despair over the emptiness of life after World War 1" (Cuddy).

TEXTUAL STUDY

American by birth and Englishman by adoption, T.S. Eliot completed *The Wasteland* in the Autumn of 1921 and showed the draft to Ezra Pound who gave him some suggestion regarding the structure of the poem which include to remove *Gerontion* as a prelude to *The Wasteland* to retain the section *Death by Water* and to delete almost one half of the lines. Eliot adhered to the suggestions of Ezra Pound and that is the cause of the fragmentariness and obscurities of the poem. Eliot was influenced by the symbolist movement, Imagism, works of Dante, Oriental philosophy and he preached Buddhist renunciation in Christian disguise.

According to the impersonal theory of poetry, Eliot says that a man and a poet are two independent entities. For a certain chemical reaction to take place it requires a catalyst, similarly a poet's mind is like a catalyst, it advances the poetic composition but doesn't interfere with it. The poem has its own personality and it should derive its inspiration from the literature of the past as it should not be the product of the poet's creativity alone. To quote Eliot himself, "poetry is not a turning loose of emotion, but an escape from emotion; it is not the expression of personality, but an escape from personality". To analyse *The Wasteland* on this theory is of paramount importance so as to ascertain that T.S.Eliot was a classicist. We find a fine blend of Greek mythology and Indian mythology in this piece of work.

The Wasteland is one of the longest poems sectioned in 5 parts namely: The Burial of the Dead, The Game of Chess, The Fire Sermon, Death by Water and What the Thunder Said. *The Wasteland* can be studied as a criticism of life where Eliot highlights the disintegration

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and hollowness of the modern world and offers redemption and idea of growth through a savior, a messiah figure as a mode of solution with a positive hope of the prospect of rebirth. The disillusionment caused by the havocs of war have turned the sweetest month of April into the cruelest month. The Unreal City as per Eliot is experiencing spiritual disintegration:

*What are the roots that clutch, what branches grow
Out of this stony rubbish? Son of man,
You cannot say, or guess, for you know only
A heap of broken images, where the sun beats,
And the dead tree gives no shelter, the cricket no relief,
And the dry stone no sound of water. (Eliot)*

Eliot was a spiritualist, he identifies the problem of spiritual disconnection from God and vaguely hints at the possibility of rebirth through assurance of redemption.

*There is shadow under this red rock,
(Come in under the shadow of this red rock), (Eliot).*

As a Modernist text, *The Waste Land* addresses the predicament of how to rehabilitate the delusional world after the horrors of the First World War. This is highlighted in the famous opening to the poem in Part I, *The Burial of the Dead*: “April is the cruelest month, breeding...”, Eliot makes it apparent that the efforts will be ineffectual because the month which marks the arrival of spring is rendered the cruelest. Eliot perhaps wants to point that the society has degraded to a limit that even April which represents fertility has no influence over it. Levenson argues that *The Wasteland* is a bitter criticism of the postwar London society. He says:

What the poem both dreads and desires is the annihilation of the society as apparatus, what Eliot calls 'the postwar machinery of life' with its 'horrible waste,' the city as the relentless wheel. (Levenson)

Literature, as a work of art, becomes a powerful medium to understand the world and acts as a mirror image of the trends prominent in the society and in connotation to the latter statement that *The Wasteland* stands timeless. The 'unreal world' of Eliot and the present age of 21st century are not different from each other. The feeling of existential crisis comprising emotional exhaustion, voidness, inner turmoil etc of the present world perfectly overlaps with the world created in *The Wasteland*. *The Waste Land*, disjointed in its very construction of five linked sections, scatters its narration across landscapes and timescapes. The scope of the poem is expansive in nature and hence, the text beautifully corresponds to the contemporary issues. *The Wasteland* highlights the emotional barrenness of the marital relationship where

the underlying current of conversation is subjected to nothingness, a loss of communion with no prospect of understanding each other. In the second part, A Game of Chess depicts the eternal monotony and a sense of detachment in the upper class and the middle class relationships.

Nothing again nothing.

“Do“ You know nothing? Do you see nothing?

Do you remember “Nothing?” (Eliot)

In the second section, it seems apparent that Eliot is speaking to a product of Darwinian thought of naturalism that men and women operate on sexual desires. The feminist poetics, A Game of Chess and The Fire Sermon depict the horrors of rape and trauma suffered by the women who are caught in the relentless cycle of patriarchy and capitalism. The seduction in Thomas Middleton's play *Women Beware Women* is parallel to the game of chess. The Fire Sermon contains significant parallels to A Game of Chess. The allusion to Philomela connotes to the sexual politics in *The Wasteland*. The rape of Philomela by the barbarous king Tereus is followed by chopping off the tongue of Philomela in order to avoid her from revealing the truth. The cries of Philomela "jug jug to dirty ears" corresponds to the patriarchal capitalism which has defiled the ears of the listeners and the cries of help has no meaning. The typist in The Fire Sermon is robbed of her own individuality as she is given no name. She is too raped by her own husband. The vanity and narcissisms of her husband in raping his own wife against her wish makes her an object. When the husband has left her in darkness she thinks, "Well now that's done: and I'm glad it's over." (Eliot). It seems as if sexuality has now become a burden, a thing to be endured and she seeks a tragic escape from the aftermath of destructive and brutal sex through music as expressed in the lines:

*She smoothes her hair with automatic hand,
And puts a record on the gramophone. (Eliot).*

Eliot, a sort of surrealist and a classicist appreciated multiplicity of cultures. The gothic and grotesque descriptions shows the bleakness of the modern world. The demonized setting of the poem i.e. "the dead land" or the "unreal city" with its "heap of broken images" where the dead man walking aimlessly fixing "his eyes before his feet"; the concept of death spiritually, physically and emotionally; meaninglessness and the worthlessness of the human life are shown through the fear "in handful of dust". The gothic literature emphasizes on sublime and supernatural. It depicts medieval style of architecture of abbeys and castles suggesting a barbarous world with an eerie atmosphere. The heroines are sensitive in character and are painfully distressed. The gothic imagery is further exemplified the Section V of the poem.

*A woman drew her long black hair out tight
And fiddled whisper music on those strings*

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*And bats with baby faces in the violet light
Whistled, and beat their wings
And crawled head downward down a blackened wall
And upside down in air were towers
Tolling reminiscent bells, that kept the hours
And voices singing out of empty cisterns and exhausted wells. (Eliot)*

Eliot has given the message of spiritual rebirth through the concept of Datta (give), Dayadhvam (Sympathize) and Damyata (Control) and ends the poem in the form of an Upanishad: Shantih Shantih Shantih, which is a sacred chant. In her elegant analysis of the end of the poem, Kearns observes:

As mantra, shantih conveys ... the peace inherent in its inner sound....As a closing prayer, shantih makes of what comes before it a communal as well as a private utterance....And as the "formal ending of an Upanishad" it revises the whole poem from a statement of modern malaise into a sacred and prophetic discourse. (Booth)

A 21st century work similar to the themes of *The Wasteland*, *Dead Toad Scrolls* is a series of meditative personal essays where the author deals with philosophical issues of spiritual rebirth through scrupulous introspection and accepts all of the permutations of life without fear, anguish, or regret. The author Kilroy J. Oldster writes:

The powerful questions of life produce a dynamic dualism, which interplay creates the operatic structure that we must operate. Can the flesh and spirit coexist? Can inner despair and renewed optimism reside under the same roof? Can we harness humankind's wretchedness in order to broker its salvation? Should all people seek out perfection or work to accept their fallibility? Should I eschew pain or embrace suffering? Do I cave into the meaninglessness of my life or actively rebel against the patent absurdity of human existence? (goodreads).

CONCLUSION

The present world is in war against the unprecedented pandemic and the havoc it has brought to the present world stands in co-relation to the havoc brought by the world wars. If we analyse the text of *The Wasteland*, its major themes and ideas such as the emotional and spiritual barrenness, pervasive sense of disillusionment, cultural wars etc stand relevant to the present world and the society. Today's world is no different than the world of the Eliot's wasteland dealing with the horrors of the biological war against the deadly corona virus. The

Wasteland is one of the most celebrated poems in the history of English poetry of 20th century due to its universality in the literary traditions, structure and themes. Many critics, such as Jay Martin, have argued that Eliot's modernist poem *The Waste Land* correspondingly seeks to order the chaotic modern world; in particular with its substantial use of historical and literal references, the mythical method offers Eliot a satirical lens to perceive and give new meaning to the present (Martin).

By and large, *The Waste Land* is undoubtedly relevant in the modern perspective and continues to inspire the readers, writers and common man with its sublime and varied theme to fulfill their future endeavors in life and literature.

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