



T. S. Eliot's *The Waste Land*: A Critical Analysis

KEYWORDS

T. S. Eliot. War. Disenchantment. Disillusionment. Death. Elegy. Upanishad.

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ABSTRACT Thomas Stearns Eliot is a multifaceted literary personality of the twentieth century. He is a renowned poet, critic and playwright owing to whom Margaret Drabble describes him as a major figure in English literature since 1920s.¹ There are two important hints which are useful to understand what T.S. Eliot conveys through the depiction of the conflicts in his poetry and drama. The first is reflected in the middle statement in his announcement in 1928 that "He was a royalist in politics, an Anglo-Catholic in religion and a classicist in literature."² The second is explicitly expressed in the description of T.S. Eliot by Vernon Hall thus: "He is, in more than the theological sense of the word, dogmatic, and he declares in one place that the only people who can understand what he is talking about are those for whom the doctrine of original sin is very real and tremendous thing."³ *The Waste Land*, his ever-green poem is a best example to understand Eliot further as a poet with no binding boundaries. *The Waste Land* the aftermath of any war that might have taken place or that might take place in the near future. The following article attempts to critically analyze *The Waste Land* as poem with universal appeal.

Full length paper

The publication of the poem *The Waste Land*, in 1922 gained Eliot an international reputation as a poet of an astounding caliber. War is usually coupled with destruction, of life, of property and mainly the trust. But it is notable that War has also ever since brought after it a long period of peace and altered Man's thinking and perception making him appreciate beauty of nature and also value life. This ironical aspect of War becomes more perceptible particularly with regard to literature. Man has in the aftermath of Wars, produced some very supreme literature, definitive of his uniqueness amongst the animals of this land. T.S. Eliot's *The Wasteland*, Wilfred Owen's *War Requiem*, Siegfried Sasson's *The Complete Memoirs of George Sherston* and Rupert Brooke's *The Soldier* are a few examples of great poetry produced in the aftermath of a war. Correspondingly Indian English poetry emerged fairly at the end of the Second World War, when India was at the dawn of its sovereignty, after two hundred years of slavery and drudgery at the hands of British Empire. Indian English poetry, contrary to its counterparts in Africa and the Caribbean, was till late neglected due to its no direct reference to any significant National movement. Faced with stiff competition from regional and nationalistic demand of poetry in native languages of India, Indian English poets were bewildered at their losing ground in the society. The constant whine of critics and intellectuals that no Indian could ever write Poetry in English authentically, though educated in English, demanded the Indian English poets to write poetry at least on par in eminence to their British, American, Irish and Scottish counterparts. The anger and resentment as a result amongst the Nationalists and cultural radicals, who preferred literature in native languages on native culture, which they could relate to, forced the Indian poets to either give up writing or exile to western countries, which many of them did so on the pretext of furthering their education. This Hostility towards the Indian English poets by the Indian masses was mainly due to their antagonism against everything colonial, including language.

The great power with which *The Waste Land* expresses, the disenchantment, disillusionment, and disgust of the period after World War I, in a series of vignettes, loosely

linked by the legend of the search for the Grail, portrays a sterile world of panicky fears and barren lusts, and of human beings waiting for some sign or promise of emancipation. The highly complex, erudite, and allusive style of the poem is commendable, and the poet provides notes and references to explain the work's many quotations and allusions. The scholarly supplement, which distracted some of the readers and the critics from perceiving the true originality of the poem, lays rather in its rendering of the universal human predicament of man desiring salvation, in its manipulation of language, and in its range of literary references. In his earlier poems Eliot had shown himself to be a master of the poetic phrase. In *The Waste Land* he proves his mettle as a poet of great virtuosity, capable of astonishing modulations ranging from the sublime to the conversational poetic diction.

The Waste Land which consists of five sections proceeds to establish the principle of "rhetorical discontinuity" that reflects the fragmented 20th-century sensibility experienced by many of the so called great modern cities of the West. In *The Waste Land*, Eliot expresses the hopelessness and confusion of rationale of life in the secularized city, the decay of *urbs aeterna* (the "eternal city"). The ultimate theme of *The Waste Land*, concretized by the poem's constant rhetorical shifts and its juxtapositions of contrasting styles is what gets on the nerves of the reader, making him feel rhetoric of the utter chaos depicted by Eliot in *The Waste Land*. Apart from being a contrast of the heroic past with the degraded present; it is, rather, a timeless simultaneous awareness program of Eliot of making the reader aware of the moral grandeur and moral evil. The poem's original manuscript of about 800 lines was later cut down to 433. *The Waste Land* is Eliot's one of the most famous poems.

The Norton Anthology of English Literature states that *The Waste Land* appears to be about spiritual dryness, about the inability of individuals and nations to hold on to beliefs that provide meaning for their lives and vitality for growth and creativity. It seems to reflect the ultimate boredom of meaninglessness. This analysis explores the theme of boredom in *The Waste Land*.

In Eliot's *The Waste Land*, the modern city is depicted as dark and hopeless, lacking any passion and characterized by lifelessness. Through his bleak description of the modern day man, Eliot is able to express his feelings of disgust towards the modern world. He feels alienated from this world in which the living dead roam, communication has been butchered, gender identity has been lost, and the carnal human has come to rule. The modern world, he believes, is corrupt to the point of no hope. Through his use of allusion and descriptive diction Eliot creates for the reader this wretched and lifeless modern world through the looking glass of his own perceptions and emotions.

Eliot believes that the modern world is in a state of Purgatory in which all humanity has been lost. He relates London to Dante's Inferno. In the Inferno, Virgil guides Dante into the center of the earth where he finds the devil. In the devil's mouth are Brutus, Cassius, and Judas, three great betrayers who will forever reside in the infernal world. With this allusion, Eliot is suggesting that Londoners are betrayers against the good of society; against what is right. According to Eliot, the modern man is like a dehumanized drone wandering the wasteland in cyclical toil. Man walks around seemingly dead; however, not only are the people damned, but the modern city as a whole is damned. The description of the human body in the above instances serves to describe the lifeless and depressing modern world.

The Waste Land is structured into five parts. It offers prophecy and shifts constantly between speaker and time. It is elegiac and includes an exploration of various cultures and literatures. With this in mind, the first section of the poem is about death. Eliot references Chaucer's work to add seasonal aspects of his poem. Particularly, Eliot discusses the natural cycle and its relationship to death. As he writes about this subject, he continues to include references to other popular authors by adding lines from their famous works. In the second section, he transitions from death to sex. He uses figures from Greek mythology to include references about rape, procreation, and sexual desire. The third section also addresses the role of sex, but in relation to the lustful tendencies. The rest of *The Waste Land* returns to the subject of death and ends on the subject of sterility. *The Waste Land* though has become infamous for its ostensible linguistic impenetrability and thematic elusiveness, the difficulty of the text can be seen as a calculated stylistic choice made by Eliot in order to develop the poem's central theme of chaos and disorder in the modern world. In his notes to the text (which are highly allusive and sometimes misleading), Eliot suggests the voice of the sage Tiresias, who first appears in the third section of the poem, "although a mere spectator and not indeed a 'character,' is yet the most important personage in the poem . . . what Tiresias sees, in fact, is the substance of the poem" (*Waste Land*, 23). There are multiple problems that emerge, however, when we seek to read Tiresias as the singular voice of the poem, and many

critics have emphasized the specificity and individuality of each of the voices of the poem. The question of the voice behind *The Waste Land* can be answered in one way by the poem's curious epigraph, taken from Petronius' *Satyricon*, which is obscure in both its language and its direct implications to Eliot's work. Here the Cumean Sibyl, an ancient oracle and prophetess, begs for death after not having the insight to recognize the foolishness of requesting eternal life without eternal youth. Eliot's poem makes much of this theme, turning thwarted, incomplete, or inaccurate prophecy into an emblem of the futile structures and systems that seek to find coherence within the chaos of the world. As a consequence, the text gives us no specific reason to accept the validity of the sage Tiresias or his visions. While the overarching theme of *The Waste Land* deals with the rigors and perhaps impossibility of the interpretation of poems, "What the Thunder Said" is the poem's thematic climax. After riding down a mountain with Marie in "The Burial of the Dead" in order to enter the world of the wasteland, the poem follows the delirious movement of the speaker back up a mountain and away from the danger and death in the valley between. After a series of hallucinatory images that recount a treacherous movement up from the ocean in search of fresh water, the speaker is at the top of the sacred mountain Ganga to receive a message from God, which ultimately comes in the form of the thunder's simple statement: "DA" (V.400). This is a meaningless, onomatopoeic phrase—a poetic estimation of the sound of thunder, such as the treatment of bird calls in "The Fire Sermon" and in lines 356–357. Much of the meaning can be attributed to this word and to its sound only through a process of interpretation. Eliot adapts the subsequent attempts at interpreting the voice of the thunder from the *Brihadaranyaka Upanishad*, a sacred Hindu text in which three divine interpreters are made to explain this mysterious, meaningless syllable. They each suggest that it is the first part of an incomplete word: *datta*, or "give"; *dayadhvam*, or "sympathize"; *damyata*, or "control." Although giving, sympathizing, and controlling are critical aspects in the thematic architecture of *The Waste Land*, this section emphasizes the value and role of interpretation. Like the mysterious syllable from the thunder, the text of *The Waste Land* provides only a structure for interpretation. Eliot's poem holds simultaneous meanings—it is present and past, general and specific, personal and private—that can be appreciated simultaneously and in varying combinations. Like the voice of the thunder, Eliot has provided hints, codes, and beginnings that invite and enable the reader, along with the three religious men on the mountain, to recognize meaning within the apparently meaningless.

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