



## British Literature: A Study of Traditional and Cultural Founding in The Waste Land By T.S.Eliot

### KEYWORDS

British literature, Traditional and cultural founding

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**ABSTRACT** T.S.Eliot had been very influential in shaping Modernist Poetry. He was instrumental in bringing about a innovative change in the language and images of the 20th century poetry. His poetic shorthand became inspirational model for many 20th century poets across the World. Eliotian devices are use of concrete shocking images, ironic use of myth and far-reaching symbolism. These devices became the benchmark for the 20th century poetry. T.S.Eliot's *The Waste Land* is not only understood to be a metaphor of the cultural pessimism and sterility but also tries to depict a culture that is dying and carving for having rebirth. It is clearly evident in his poem that the legend of the Fisher King is entangled with other myths and legends of injury, barrenness, and rebirth. Eliot's vividness is to present this situation as a landscape, a landscape of drought and ruin, a mountain of stones. All these things throw light on the very iconography of broken and scattered belief systems in his poem.

This Paper is an attempt to study T.S.Eliot's *The Waste Land*. This Paper is also an attempt to trace the use of Traditional and Cultural founding in the T.S.Eliot's *The Waste Land*.

### INTRODUCTION:

T. S. Eliot's reformulation of the idea of literary tradition has been one of the key critical concepts of the twentieth century. Eliot as a modernist. Along with James Joyce and Virginia Woolf, Eliot is a key figure of literary modernism. Burton Rascoe in the "New York Tribune," characterizes THE WASTE LAND as, "A thing of bitterness and beauty, which is crystallization or a synthesis of all the poems Mr. Eliot has hitherto written." He goes still further, when he says, THE WASTE LAND, "Is, perhaps, the finest poem of this generation; at all events it is the most significant in that it gives voice to the universal despair or resignation arising from the spiritual and economic consequences of the war, the cross purposes of modern civilization, the cul-de-sac into which both science and philosophy seem to have got themselves and the break-down of all great directive purposes which give zest and joy to the business of living. It is an erudite despair: Mr. Eliot stems his poem from a recent anthropological study of primitive beliefs, as embodied in the Grail legend and other flaming quests which quickened men in other times; he quotes, or misquotes, lines from the "Satyricon of Petronius," "Tristan und Isolde," the sacred books of the Hindus, Dante, Baudelaire, Verlaine, nursery rhymes, the Old Testament and modern jazz songs. His method is highly elliptical, based on the curious formula of Tristan Corbiere, wherein reverential and blasphemous ideas are juxtaposed in amazing antitheses, and there are mingled all the shining verbal toys, impressions and catch lines of a poet who has read voraciously and who possesses an insatiable curiosity about life. It is analysis and realism, psychology and criticism, anguish, bitterness and disillusion, with passages of great lyrical beauty."

### OBJECTIVES:

- To analyze the traditional and cultural founding in the waste land.
- To examine the various cultural civilization of waste land.
- To explain the central spiritual or religious theme of the waste land.

- To discuss the socio-cultural scenario of post-war Europe.

The first section of *The Waste Land* takes its title from a line in the Anglican burial service. It is made up of four vignettes, each seemingly from the perspective of a different speaker. The first is an autobiographical snippet from the childhood of an aristocratic woman, in which she recalls sledding and claims that she is German, not Russian (this would be important if the woman is meant to be a member of the recently defeated Austrian imperial family). The woman mixes a meditation on the seasons with remarks on the barren state of her current existence ("I read, much of the night, and go south in the winter"). The second section is a prophetic, apocalyptic invitation to journey into a desert waste, where the speaker will show the reader "something different from either / Your shadow at morning striding behind you / Or your shadow at evening rising to meet you; / [He] will show you fear in a handful of dust" (Evelyn Waugh took the title for one of his best-known novels from these lines). The almost threatening prophetic tone is mixed with childhood reminiscences about a "hyacinth girl" and a nihilistic epiphany the speaker has after an encounter with her. These recollections are filtered through quotations from Wagner's operatic version of *Tristan und Isolde*, an Arthurian tale of adultery and loss. The third episode in this section describes an imaginative tarot reading, in which some of the cards Eliot includes in the reading are not part of an actual tarot deck. The final episode of the section is the most surreal. The speaker walks through a London populated by ghosts of the dead. He confronts a figure with whom he once fought in a battle that seems to conflate the clashes of World War I with the Punic Wars between Rome and Carthage (both futile and excessively destructive wars). The speaker asks the ghostly figure, Stetson, about the fate of a corpse planted in his garden. The episode concludes with a famous line from the preface to Baudelaire's *Fleurs du Mal* (an important collection of Symbolist poetry), accusing the reader of sharing in the poet's sins.

The second episode contains a troubled religious proposition. The speaker describes a true wasteland of "stony rubbish"; in it, he says, man can recognize only "[a] heap of broken images." Yet the scene seems to offer salvation: shade and a vision of something new and different the third episode explores Eliot's fascination with transformation. The tarot reader Madame Sosostris conducts the most outrageous form of "reading" possible, transforming a series of vague symbols into predictions, many of which will come true in succeeding sections of the poem. Eliot transforms the traditional tarot pack to serve his purposes. The drowned sailor makes reference to the ultimate work of magic and transformation in English literature, Shakespeare's *The Tempest* ("Those are pearls that were his eyes" is a quote from one of Ariel's songs). Transformation in *The Tempest*, though, is the result of the highest art of humankind. Here, transformation is associated with fraud, vulgarity, and cheap mysticism. That Madame Sosostris will prove to be right in her predictions of death and transformation is a direct commentary on the failed religious mysticism and prophecy of the preceding desert section.

The final episode of the first section allows Eliot finally to establish the true wasteland of the poem, the modern city. Eliot's London references Baudelaire's Paris ("Unreal City"), Dickens's London ("the brown fog of a winter dawn") and Dante's hell ("the flow crowd. The city is desolate and depopulated, inhabited only by ghosts from the past. Stetson, the apparition the speaker recognizes, is a fallen war comrade. The speaker pesters him with a series of ghoulish questions about a corpse buried in his garden: again, with the garden, we return to the theme of regeneration and fertility. This encounter can be read as a quest for a meaning behind the tremendous slaughter of the First World War; however, it can also be read as an exercise in ultimate futility: as we see in Stetson's failure to respond to the speaker's inquiries, the dead offer few answers. The great respective weights of history, tradition, and the poet's dead predecessors combine to create an oppressive burden.

#### T.S. Eliot: Culture:

T.S. Eliot was one of the most intellectually adroit of poets, a fine mind with a breadth of cultural and other knowledge that few writers since can equal or even attempt to emulate. He often felt humbled by the weight of all that had come before him; much of what he says in his essay *Tradition and the Individual Talent* is attractively modest in the limited programme it proposes for poetry – not to explore ever finer and newer and more original emotion, but to find, through technique, a coldly rational way of honing language for its own sake "not the expression of personality but an escape from personality ... Only those who have personality and emotions can know what it means to want to escape from those things". Like Stravinsky setting aside the rhythmic invention and freedom of *Le Sacre du Printemps* for the chill neo-classical beauty of Orpheus or Apollo Musagete, Eliot wanted in the later 1920s and early 30s a poetry of concentration and meditation rather than the brilliant insightful dangerous randomness of *The Waste Land*. His conversion to high Anglican Christianity, and the growing dominance of his work by devotional and religious themes, made this programme inevitable – he could not allow himself to stray again into the dangerous irrational territory of Sweeney Agonistes. Indeed, in his 1933 lectures *After Strange Gods*, he specifically calls the irrationalist neo-primitivist strain in modernism diabolical, especially in the case of D.H. Lawrence, whom he admires but sees as a source of spiritual danger to anyone less versed in the

true meaning of orthodoxy than Eliot himself.

#### Tradition:

Often hailed as the successor to poet-critics such as John Dryden, Samuel Taylor Coleridge, and Matthew Arnold, T.S. Eliot's literary criticism informs his poetry just as his experiences as a poet shape his critical work. Though famous for insisting on "objectivity" in art, Eliot's essays actually map a highly personal set of preoccupations, responses and ideas about specific authors and works of art, as well as formulate more general theories on the connections between poetry, culture and society. Perhaps his best-known essay, "Tradition and the Individual Talent" was first published in 1919 and soon after included in *The Sacred Wood: Essays on Poetry and Criticism* (1920). Eliot attempts to do two things in this essay: he first re-defines "tradition" by emphasizing the importance of history to writing and understanding poetry, and he then argues that poetry should be essentially "impersonal," that is separate and distinct from the personality of its writer. Eliot's idea of tradition is complex and unusual, involving something he describes as "the historical sense" which is a perception of "the pastness of the past" but also of its "presence." For Eliot, past works of art form an order or "tradition"; however, that order is always being altered by a new work which modifies the "tradition" to make room for itself. This view, in which "the past should be altered by the present as much as the present is directed by the past," requires that a poet be familiar with almost all literary history—not just the immediate past but the distant past and not just the literature of his or her own country but the whole "mind of Europe."

Eliot's second point is one of his most famous and contentious. A poet, Eliot maintains, must "self-sacrifice" to this special awareness of the past; once this awareness is achieved, it will erase any trace of personality from the poetry because the poet has become a mere medium for expression. Using the analogy of a chemical reaction, Eliot explains that a "mature" poet's mind works by being a passive "receptacle" of images, phrases and feelings which are combined, under immense concentration, into a new "art emotion." For Eliot, true art has nothing to do with the personal life of the artist but is merely the result of a greater ability to synthesize and combine, an ability which comes from deep study and comprehensive knowledge. Though Eliot's belief that "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" sprang from what he viewed as the excesses of Romanticism, many scholars have noted how continuous Eliot's thought—and the whole of Modernism—is with that of the Romantics; his "impersonal poet" even has links with John Keats, who proposed a similar figure in "the chameleon poet." But Eliot's belief that critical study should be "diverted" from the poet to the poetry shaped the study of poetry for half a century, and while "Tradition and the Individual Talent" has had many detractors, especially those who question Eliot's insistence on canonical works as standards of greatness, it is difficult to overemphasize the essay's influence. It has shaped generations of poets, critics and theorists and is a key text in modern literary criticism.

*The Waste Land*, T. S. Eliot's masterpiece, is a long, complex poem about the psychological and cultural crisis that came with the loss of moral and cultural identity after World War I. When it was first published, the poem was considered radically experimental. Eliot dispenses with traditional verse forms and instead juxtaposes sordid im-

ages of popular culture with erudite allusions to classical and ancient literature and myths. The title is indicative of Eliot's attitude toward his contemporary society, as he uses the idea of a dry and sterile wasteland as a metaphor for a Europe devastated by war and desperate for spiritual replenishment but depleted of the cultural tools necessary for renewal.

The poem is deliberately obscure and fragmentary, incorporating variant voices, multiple points of view, and abrupt shifts in dramatic context. The motif of moral degeneration, however, is prevalent throughout the poem, the premise being that contemporary Europe, obsessed with novelty, trends, materialism, and instant gratification, lacks the faith and substance to reaffirm its cultural heritage, to reestablish the sense of order and stability that historical continuity once provided. In an attempt to counter the cultural deficit of the present with the rich cultural heritage of the past, Eliot combines images from pagan rituals and religious texts with ancient fertility rituals and allusions to legends of the Grail. These images of ceremony and tradition are set against bleak images of modern life, where spiritual death breeds cultural death, and the ashen landscape reflects a barren world void of transcendental value.

#### Conclusion:

The poem begins with a section entitled "The Burial of the Dead." In it, the narrator -- perhaps a representation of Eliot himself -- describes the seasons. Spring brings "memory and desire," and so the narrator's memory drifts back to times in Munich, to childhood sled rides, and to a possible romance with a "hyacinth girl." The memories only go so far, however. The narrator is now surrounded by a desolate land full of "stony rubbish."

He remembers a fortune-teller named Madame Sosostris who said he was "the drowned Phoenician Sailor" and that he should "fear death by water." Next he finds himself on London Bridge, surrounded by a crowd of people. He spots a friend of his from wartime, and calls out to him.

The next section, "A Game of Chess," transports the reader abruptly from the streets of London to a gilded drawing room, in which sits a rich, jewel-bedecked lady who complains about her nerves and wonders what to do. The poem drifts again, this time to a pub at closing time in which two Cockney women gossip. Within a few stanzas, we have moved from the upper crust of society to London's low-life.

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