

The Theme of Decay and Destruction in Eliot's

THE WASTE LAND

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T.S. Eliot has been acclaimed as the most influential and dominant literary personality of the modern age. He is the initiator of a new tradition in various ways. *The Waste Land* bears a testimony to his rich spiritual resources and vast range of his scholarship from which he has taken various allusions to enrich the thematic canvas of the poem. This is a true representative poem of the post-war modern age. T.S. Eliot, ever since wrote of the poem in 1922, came in a broader way on literary scene. Like his some of the earlier poems as “*The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock*” *The Preludes*” and “*Gerontion*”, T.S. Eliot seems to be completely preoccupied by with the modern critical situation of death, dearth, squalor, spiritual and mental sterility as well as vacuity *The Waste Land* has been variously interpreted. F.R. Leavis writes that the poem expresses “The disillusionments of a generation” the post-war generation in Europe and that it merely presents “a vision of desolation and spiritual draught”. Others have said that the poem is merely a “diagnosis of the spiritual distemper of the age”², it offers no solution and that its message is one of despair and pessimism. The theme that lies at the root of this poem is the moral decay and spiritual bankruptcy of the modern world. According to Cleanth Brooks, its theme is life-in-death, the living death of the modern Wastelanders³. The life in the modern wasteland is a life-in-death, a living death, like that of the sibyl at cumae.

The Waste Land evokes the vast panorama of futility that characterizes the modern world. But, while the poet evokes the prevailing chaos of the modern age, an impregnable sense of order underlying the past at once comes into relief. It is this dynamic interaction of order and

disorder, past and present, tradition and individual talent that constitutes the crux of this poem.

A poem as profound, as meaningful and suggestive as *The Waste Land* is bound to have several levels and layers of meaning and implication. In the first place, it is generally observed that the waste land is a poem of despair and not of hope, because it presents to us the horrific and nightmarish state of the contemporary human civilization and culture. Secondly, it is tried to be pointed out that the theme of *The waste land* is one of quest or search for salvation. In this connection, it is further stated that since man has been groping in darkness in the modern times, what he seeks or aspires for is nothing but salvation. Thirdly, it is said that *The Waste Land* is merely a series of grim and nerve-shattering pictures, because what Eliot does through this poem is to report to us the real spiritual state or condition of the contemporary humanity. Fourthly, it is observed with due degree of emphasis that *The Waste Land* is not a poem of negation or rejection, that, in fact it is a Christian or religious poem, and that since it deals with man's final redemption, it is a poem of hope or optimism. And lastly, it is sought to be impressed upon us that the theme of *The waste land* is based principally on a contrast between two kinds of life and two kinds of death, and that as such it deals with what we may call death-in-life and life-in-death. It is only through a close and careful reading of this poem, sectionwise, that we may find ourselves in a position to get at the heart of the matter.

The five parts of *The Waste land* Symbolically correspond to five elements whose balanced conjunction leads to creation and imbalance among the elements leads to destruction. What has engulfed the modern age seems to be the result of some kind of imbalance among the elements which have come to be blackened in the course of the centuries of continuous corruption. The fertility myth that has been employed in this poem to suggest the richness of the past in contrast with the spiritual destitution of the present life reflects the barrenness of earth and metaphorically, the barrenness of the modern civilization.

“The Burial of the Dead”, the first part of the poem points to the corruption seeping into earth as consequence of which it has lost its verve. Modern man is shown to be fidgeting in the midst of broken images, while the dead tree gives us no shelter, and the cricket no relief.

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April is the cruellest month for the denizens of the modern waste land, for it signifies re-birth, and they prefer 'winter' or spiritual death, for re-birth implies some effort on their part and any spiritual effort is hateful to them. "They dislike to be roused from their death-in-life"⁴, (Cleaht Brooks). T.S. Eliot expresses his utter surprise and astonishment over the plight of modern man in the lines.

*"A crowd flowed over London Bridge, so many,
I had not thought death had undone so many"*

The comment of Elizabeth Drew on the passage beginning with the "Unreal City" is interesting. She points out that "The unreal city is Eliot's London, Baudelaire's Paris and Dante's Limbo. It appears that Eliot is presenting a vision of contemporary life, but so strange that it contains all centuries and all ages"⁵ The picture of the unreal city drives home to the reader's mind the lawlessness, lifelessness and the restlessness that have become the conspicuous feature of the city in the modern age. The planting of corpse to sprout forth ironically suggests the psychic imbalance in which the modern man is writhing. The best explanation, however, seems to be that of D.E.S. Maxwell. According to his view, the corpse is the 'spiritual failure' of Stetson or modern humanity, the dog is the conscience which will like to awaken humanity to its spiritual failure but this the spiritually dead humanity does not like, and so wants the dog to be kept away. This is clearly seen in the fact that Tiresias calls Stetson his double, his brother⁶. It sums up, thus, an attitude of negation that has vitiated and undermined the sensibility of the modern man. Eliot has sought to suggest implicitly that the modern man is passing through a phase of death-in-life, and in consequence thereof, he remains completely unaware of what there should be and what there is.

In "A game of Chess", the second part of the poem, the poet speaks of sexual perversions and of the pettiness and triviality of love in the contemporary world. He focuses on the vacuity into which the modern man has sunk under the stress of adverse circumstances. The evocative grandeur of the setting in which the lady, with her glittering Jewel and richly profuse fragrance stands is in sharp contrast with the dark motive of the attempted rape of her. The "Philomel" symbol suggests the barbarity of the sexual endeavour that is being pursued while the game of chess is being played to keep her mother-in-law engaged. In the

mythical story, 'Philomel' was transformed into a nightingale. Nightingale sang to fill" All the desert with inviolable voice" while modern man utters 'Jug-Jug' to dirty ears. As Edmund Wilson points out, the words 'Jug, Jug' carry the association of the vulgar and the coarse. The wastelanders fail to understand the real significance of philomela's story-purification and transformation through suffering⁷ This part of the poem is full of interrogations, which suggests the intellectual confusion gripping the mind of the modern man. The repeated use of the word 'nothing' in the context of knowing, thinking and resembling implicitly points to the nullification of affirmative which is the Sign of the sound intellectual health. Mind of man is supposedly as limitless as the sky and Eliot has sought to focus our attention on the darkening of another element of creation sky, through the metaphorical device which abundantly serves its purpose.

The third section of *The Waste Land* is 'The fire Sermon' which reflects upon the third constituent element of creation fire. Fire is source of warmth and hence of life itself. It is a common knowledge that too much of fire consumes life away and through the devastating dimensions of fire, the poet tries to describe the present day world as a world that is burning in the fire of lust and evil passion. It is in this connection that he gives us the symbol of the polluted river and the images of naked bodies and dry bones in this section. References to Spenser's *Prothalamion* and Marvell's *To His Coy Mistress* flash back upon the scenery of the past when love was not reduced to the game of the exchange of sensations. The mating of typist girl with the young man, 'Carbuncular' is merely mechanical, indifferent, symbolizing the physical sex-relationship in the waste land. In the modern age, love has lost its invigorating force, and metaphorically, fire has been equated with the sterile burning of lust causing inner dislocation which the repetition of the word 'burning' suggests.

In the fourth section of the poem entitled "Death by Water", the poet refers to the commercial nature of the present day world, and hints at the fact that water which is the symbol of fertility and regeneration has become the symbol of decay and death in the contemporary human society. Even the sea, the vast sheets of water under which many drowned objects are transformed into corals in the course of time, has been reduced to the status of being the means of trade activity involving material transactions only. The typical modern man is incapable of looking beyond the horizons of profit and loss.

The last section of *The Waste Land* entitled "What the Thudner Said" only pinpoints the corruption that escaped into the fifth element of creation, air, but it also charts out the way beyond this corruption. The scenery of thunderous reverberations which cause the crumbling of towers and the sinking of the Ganga has been evoked with the consummate skill to suggest that he who was living is now dead and further that we who were living are now dying. The poet has shown tremendous mental balance in reflecting the scene of Death-in-life, which has been suggested through the image of 'rock without water'. The phrase 'Feet are in the sand', is reminiscent of the 'Sandy deserts' of Yeats'. "The Second Coming" which also deals with the similar theme of spiritual vacuity of modern man. Normally, the thunder is heard as a prelude to the rainfall but here, we have dry, sterile thudner without prospect of rain. Here, in '*The Waste Land*' the tantalizing sound of water is heard over a rock, where the hermit sings on the pine trees, but ultimately there is no water to stir the manifold life of modern man. This situation finally gives way to the murder of maternal lamentation leading to the collapse of all the massive structure of our civilization. It is after this terrifying decay and destruction that the thunder gains the spiritual dimensions to deliver the momentous message of redemption through 'Datta', 'Dayadhavam' and 'Damyata' - give, sympathise and control. Only the recourse to long cherished value of oriental mysticism can help the modern man to redeem himself out of his predicament. The poem, thus, ends on a note of 'Shantih'. The poet reminds humanity of the teachings of the Upanishads. It is in this way alone that absolute peace - 'the peace which passeth udnerstadning'-can be achieved. Thus, it can be concluded that in *The Waste Land*, T.S. Eliot has gone into the very depths of problem with which the modern man is confronted and his ultimate discovery is that the malady is much deeper than what it is generally supposed to be. He commends the spiritual anchorage to the values of oriental mysticism as the only means to salvation.

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