



## Chromatic Symbolism in T. S. Eliot's *The Waste Land*

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### Abstract

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*T. S. Eliot (1888-1965) employs colors to depict various shades of emotions of the post-World War I in Europe in his 'The Waste Land' (1922). On the one hand, the poetic treatment of colors indicates the plight of the world; on the other, the colors embody the myths of the ancient world and help deepen the meaning of the text. The poetic genius employs Tiresias as the persona who can travel through time and space bringing together different hues of the world into a single collage. Eliot's choice of color reveals to the modern audience the deeper schema that he builds to represent the devastated state of Europe after World War I. Having lived the life of both a woman and a man, the protagonist has been blessed with the power to foresee things despite his blindness. The seer weaves a garland of colors in 'The Waste Land' to represent the damage the War had in the soul of the people, in the value system of the society, and in the changing socio-political reality of the time. In this paper, I contend that Eliot uses color symbolism in the poem to enforce the modernist ethos of the fragmented world where the lynchpins are missing. Through close reading of the text, I analyse the language to arrive at the conclusion that Eliot's use of colors reveals a whole, new spectrum of meanings.*

### Keywords

Chromatic symbolism, Modernism, Fragmentation, Poetics of colors

## Introduction

### Review of Related Literature

T. S. Eliot's *The Waste Land* (1922) has stood as a masterpiece in English poetry and drawn the critical attention of many critics over the period of a century. The critics have read and interpreted the text from multiple viewpoints. Approaching him from the historical point of view, Matthew Hart explores the historical significance of the text and the poet. He writes: "Eliot's 'once there was a culture here,' should remind us that *The Waste Land's* tragedy of unreconciled voices is not just a phenomenological problem: it is a metic's political reaction to the post-1918 crisis in European national cultures, involving the sense that the home of homes is burning down the house" (184). For Hart, the poem refers to the reflection of a wise man on the changing historical circumstances. Like Hart, Olga Soboleva and Angus Wrenn also argue that the text was composed amid the changing circumstances in Europe. World War I was a huge force bringing about an impact of such magnitude. Soboleva and Wrenn state: 'Eliot's poem reflects European political events which were unfolding even as he drafted it' (285). The discussion on European modernism centers on the fragmentation of human society and explores similar themes in the poetry written in the age. In the modernist discourse, the poem occupies the celebrated position.

Also, other critics have discussed the themes of the journey of the hero and the quest for knowledge to overcome the problems that the people undergo in post-war Europe. The people suffer in the world, while the persona runs after the remedy of their suffering. Juan A. Suarez explores how Eliot sifts through the literary and intellectual archives of the West in search of a remedy. Suarez writes: 'As it runs through the length of the spectrum, the dial picks us some voices and frequencies while it skips others; the resulting collage is transcribed onto the page' (757). The allusions from the Bible, the Greek myths, and the Bhagvat indicate how desperate the poet is regarding the cure. Harry Levin explores the significance of the myth of the quest for the Holy Grail in the text in order to regain the lost Christian values in the poem as he notes, 'In that least heroic and most fragmentary of epics, he exorcized the blight of contemporaneous London by tracing through it the outline of a quest for the Holy Grail' (624). Such critics take *The Waste Land* as an attempt by the erudite poet to overcome the issues, resulting from the fragmentation of the modern world.

The past and its resources have lost their place in the life of the individual. The ahistoricity that rules the world has gnawed the creative potential of the people. As Brain Crews argues, 'This denies the individual's independence the past and past actions, although in *The Waste Land* rather than the individual we can think more in terms of a collective memory which holds everything together' (19). The collective memory of the people has stopped helping them. Therefore, Eliot alludes to the contemporary artists as much as the writers from the past. R. Galand reads Baudelaire's impact in his writings (32). Similarly, the contemplation of the long history of violence also gets its due place in Eliot's poetry as Sarah Cole argues, 'What a reading of *The Waste Land* shows, in part, is that literary modernism was fully entangled... but also with a long history of violence, that its works were grouped and polarized around the question of whether violence can stand as the bedrock of a culture's artistic accomplishments' (1633). Eliot captures the tension between historicity and ahistoricity in his masterpiece in order to explore the novel possibility of emancipation as such.

### **Methodology**

The paper basically builds on the data derived through the close reading of the texts. Following the structural mode of linguistic interpretation of the texts, the paper attempts to dig deeper into the cultural landscape to seek out specific patterns of history in which the use of colors in the texts has been reflected in the post-war context. Also, I have taken references from similar kinds of studies done on fairy tales. For instance, Francisco Vaz da Silva's 2007 study works as a model in that he comparatively looks at European fairy tales to examine tricolor symbolism in them. Da Silva also argues that the use of color is culturally shaped as it reveals the mode of perceiving the social reality (250). Also, this study seeks the association between the color and specific allusions present in the poem.

### **Textual Analysis**

T. S. Eliot's *The Waste Land* (1922) is fused with chromatic symbolism and the blind seer, Tiresias in order to balance two opposing poles of the post-war world. World War I brought about devastation in Europe as it was a war basically fought in Europe. The social institutions had ground into dust; the binding values were torn asunder into pieces, leaving the society without any lynchpin; and the foundation of the society was well shaken with the War. Eliot captures the ethos of his time by employing Tiresias as

the mouthpiece of the time as the poet was searching for a wholistic voice. The Greek mythical character turns into the voice of the modernist time; furthermore, the blind seer's observation of the modern world becomes even more intense when Eliot makes use of color to weave a narrative of the modern world. In absence of the light, both color and scenes do not make sense. The blind man relates to the world through colors right from the beginning of the poem. On the surface, it represents the larger contradiction of the modern world in which the absence of light and colors simultaneously move together. On a deeper level, the spiritual quest and revival of hope realize their potential in the use of colors in the tale that the blind man tells the world.

The poem begins with a host of colors immediately after the epigraph alluding to Sybil. Eliot uses Sybil as a recurring reference to refer to her need for death. 'A handful of dust' (30) implies the color of dryness and death: Sybil gets eternal life from the sun god, Apollo. She does not die, resulting in perpetual aging. This is the problem of the people in the modern world: death has become a luxury, while life offers only terror. So, Tiresias warns us: 'I will show you fear in a handful of dust' (30). Eliot's use of 'brown' remarkably alludes to the idea of death: 'the dead land' (2), 'Dull roots' (4), and 'dried tubers' (7) appear in the opening stanza to reinforce the idea of death since 'April is the cruellest month, breeding' (1) in the wasteland. Even though 'snow' (6) is white, the qualifier 'forgetful' (6) takes it to the same direction of death and decay as the common attribute of the land. As Vincent B. Leitch explains, Eliot treats the quest of Christ as the way of regeneration in his poetry (37). Tiresias's world is filled with brown and red as the opposite end of the same spectrum. The dead world has first turned brown, meaning the grayish shades continue to grow in it.

In search of the lost values of self-sacrifice, compassion, and control, Tiresias sees a vision in which they search for the holy grail. The seekers set out on a hard journey to a forlorn chapel to find the trace of Jesus Christ in the form of the drop of blood. When the society loses the classical virtues of sacrifice, the people have no solace, shelter, and shadow of protection. Tiresias directly addresses the people as 'Son of man' (20) since they are forlorn in the world. Now, the color 'red' gains momentum to refer to the trace of Christ. Eliot writes:

There is shadow under this red rock,  
(Come in under the shadow of this red rock),  
And I will show you something different from either  
Your shadow at morning striding behind you  
Or your shadow at evening rising to meet you;  
I will show you fear in a handful of dust. (25-30)

Tiresias synthesises both brown and red in the quoted lines as the 'red' implies the only way to overcome the situation of the world in which the people are living their life of misery. As David Chinitz explores, the problem of cultural dissociation surfaces repeatedly in the poem (243). On the one hand, Eliot's use of 'red' indicates the loss of Christian values that previously functioned as an impetus in the Western society; on the other hand, the prominence of 'brown' as implied in various instances point out the existing situation of the society where people have lost the binding principles.

Tiresias makes use of 'purple' as the color of spiritual awakening and royalty in the text. 'Lilacs' (2) can be purple in the world of death, trying to show their presence in 'the dead land' (2). The heavy presence of death does not allow them to rise and make a meaning on their own. The spiritual significance of 'hyacinth' fails in the dead world. Tiresias sings thus:

"You gave me hyacinths first a year ago:  
"They called me the hyacinth girl."  
—Yet when we came back, late, from the Hyacinth garden,  
Your arms full, and your hair wet, I could not  
Speak, and my eyes failed, I was neither  
Living nor dead., and I knew nothing,  
Looking into the heart of light, the silence. (35-41)

The girl and the boy cannot control themselves in the garden. The decay of the society is finely portrayed through the image where the purple and blue signify neither spirituality nor the royal values. Menand Louis rightly argues: 'The images of social and cultural decadence that saturate the poetry of *The Waste Land* are often connected to images of women and of Jews...' (566). The girl loses her honor after coming from the garden as everybody begins to call her by the name of the flower: she turns into yet another form of Sybil who is neither living nor dead. She lives the life in silence.

The spiritual hollowness manifests through the use of two colors: brown and black. The spiritually bleak situation arises in the city space in Eliot's *The Waste Land*. The city is unreal 'Under the brown fog of a winter dawn' (61). The brown fog can also be interpreted as the symbol for the industrial London. Also, it refers to the spiritual dearth in Europe. As Leitch argues, 'In his poem of desolation, Eliot dramatizes experiences of spiritual darkness, confusion of soul, and separation of self from God' (43). Though Cleopatra's world is presented with a variation in the shades of gold, green, orange, and copper, this refers to the history. Tiresias weeps in the world that has lost such colors of life: 'And other withered stumps of time/Were told upon the walls; staring forms/ Leaned out, leaning, hushing the room enclosed' (105-107). The decay has occurred everywhere as the old rules of the social behavior have been supplanted with the new ones. The use of 'withered' appears more sensibly when it is read along with R. J. Owens. He writes:

'The dead' are at the same time inhabitants of the modern metropolis which for Eliot has become the epitome of the desolation of the time. The sterility in men's relations one to another is perceived not least in the life of love which is one of the dominating themes of the poem. When, in one of the central scenes, the seduction of a typist by a book-keeper is sketched, the act of love is apathetic: and we see the same type of relation in the series of feminine silhouettes which Eliot calls the daughters of Thames. (5)

The loss of control and spiritual meaning in life have caused the greatest of the trouble in the modern world. The purity in white becomes a nostalgic thing as Eliot writes, 'I remember/Those are pearls that were his eyes' (124-125). The daughters of Thames keep repeating the scenes under the brown fog and on the brown sand. The correlation further reinforces the idea of sterility in the land.

Eliot treats violet as the color of shift from one phase to the other. For instance, he directly refers to the evening by using 'violet' as he writes: 'At the violet hour, when the eyes and back/Turn upward from the desk' (215-216). The color indicates the shift from light to darkness. However, Eliot reverses the whole situation when he brings into the play the real identity of persona in the poem as he further narrates:

I Tiresias, though blind, throbbing between two lives,  
Old man with wrinkled female breasts, can see

At the violet hour, the evening hour that strives  
Homeward, and brings the sailor from sea... (218-221).

Evening refers to the transition from light to darkness, while the presence of Tiresias presents the case of movement from absence of light to light: he is a blind seer who has lived both lives of man and woman. Also, as Hart argues, "In the repetition of 'violet,' the stooped and reified frame of the English commuter -citizen of the empire of finance capital -becomes an objective correlative for the collapse of Europe's imperial towers: a litany that ends with London itself" (186). Like purple, Eliot treats 'violet' to refer to transition from ignorance to knowledge and knowledge to ignorance. Tiresias represents the journey to knowledge, while the typist and the clerk enact the machine like state of modern life in which compassion is utterly absent.

Like in the quest of Christian values or the Holy Grail, 'red' becomes a tool to critique the ways people treat Thames in the modern world. Eliot shows 'red sails' (270) in the river that runs swiftly. 'White towers' (290) and the 'dusty trees' (293) embody the ethos of the contemporary world that believes in the power of machine: the stark forces of rationalization are manifest in the modern world through towers and trams. White towers no longer symbolize purity and the dusty trees cannot represent the life that the modern world is looking for. The lynchpin of spirituality has got lost in the material quest of the world. Modern world saw the dissociation with the past in its obsession for the material transformation in quest of human happiness. Also, as Crews states, 'Many modernist writers suggests that there has been some kind of rupture with the past and their works attempt to reestablish a link with it in the belief that this can overcome the sense of loss in contemporary society' (18). Eliot satirically treats the emblems of civilization through the use of 'white tower' and then 'dusty trees.' If the former is the cause, the latter necessarily follows from it.

Eliot's red refers to sacrifice, while brown symbolizes the state between life and death. The possibility of red also indicates at hope. Eliot fuses flashbacks and parallels in his poem. Harry Levin argues, 'In that least heroic and most fragmentary of epics, he exorcized the blight of contemporaneous London by tracing through it the outline of a quest for the Holy Grail' (624). The people searching for Christ end up in most unfavorable situation. Eliot writes:

Here one can neither stand nor lie nor sit  
There is not even silence in the mountains  
But dry sterile thunder without rain  
There is not even solitude in the mountains  
But red sullen faces sneer and snarl  
From doors of mudcracked houses (340-345)

The seekers assume the color of the object they are searching for right from the beginning. The tired people do not take any rest till they revive themselves in the land. Tiresias looks ‘ahead up the white road’ (363) in the ‘violet air’ (373). The transition that the poet assumes at the point signals at the transformation after the War. The road and the air gradually set the mood in the read to prepare themselves for hopeful end.

The last section depicts the victory of hope over the dark forces of the world. Very paradoxically, Eliot uses ‘black clouds’ (396) over the Himavanta in a very positive note as they regenerate ‘the limp leaves’ (395). The synthesis of brown and black helps regain purity and regeneration. The lost values of sacrifice, compassion, and control give way to reassertion of the world full of peace and order in the end. Now, Tiresias grows more confident with the bloom of purple flowers within as he says, ‘I sat upon the shore/ Fishing, with the arid plains behind me/ Shall I at least set my lands in order?’ (424-426). When Eliot wrote the poem, he was responding to the crises brought about by World War I. As Hart argues, “Eliot’s ‘once there was a culture here,’ should remind us that *The Waste Land*’s tragedy of unreconciled voices is not just a phenomenological problem: it is a metic’s political reaction to the post-1918 crisis in European national cultures, involving the sense that the home of homes is burning down the house” (184). The worries are well settled in the end as Tiresias realizes that sacrifice, compassion, and control can help attain the peace and order in the world.

Eliot’s use of colors helps understand the plight of modern world in *The Waste Land* (1922). By yoking together blindness of the persona and the world of colors, Eliot achieves the masterstroke in his poetic contemplation about the contemporary world in which white as a symbol of purity loses its value and then regains its previous meaning towards the end. Brown dangles between life and death, with loyalty towards the latter.



Red refers to sacrifice, Christ, and the Holy Grail. Purple appears to revive the spiritual ethos, fails, and then turns to violet as the shift from the 'light to darkness' as implied in 'the evening' and from the 'darkness to light' as symbolized through the perilous life of Tiresias.

## Conclusion

T. S. Eliot's *The Waste Land* treats colors as a way of relating to both the physical and the spiritual world in the lives of the people after World War I. Eliot takes his persona through the spectrum of the colors in quest of spiritual regeneration and order after the chaotic atmosphere of World War I in Europe. The prominence of brown color reveals the fear of Sybil in a handful of dust, the daughters of Thames on the sand at the beach, and the limp leaves waiting for the rain from the black clouds in the end. The Christian values and their search are realized by the use of red. The red stains on the rock can heal problem of the waste land.

Blue, purple, and violet appear to show transition from the light to darkness and vice-versa. The world is on the path to trouble; yet, the visionary Tiresias who has travelled to light from darkness pushes the world ahead to regain order and spiritual regeneration through the thunder and showers in the Subcontinent. Most importantly, Tiresias sees that human world has come across the similar sort of problem many times in past and overcome it. From the West, he moves towards the East for the spiritual healing. The waste land witnesses purple flowers which cannot spiritually awaken the people in the beginning. The thunder gathers at the black clouds over the Himavant and repeats 'Da' thrice, meaning *Datta*, *Damatya*, and *Dayadhvam*. Tiresias gets his matra through the black cloud. The color of the cloud refers to power to give life back to its original self.

Eliot's chromatic symbolism adds an especial effect in *The Waste Land*, synthesizing the blind protagonist and the colorful world. Critically observing the contemporary reality after World War II, Eliot poetically responds to crises in European society. The use of color reveals the other side of modernist claims that present the poem as poetic reflection on the fragmentation of the world and loss of classical human values. Sacrifice, compassion, and control had functioned as the lynchpin of the society, resulting in coherence and order. The post-war Europe was a world without the binding principles.

Eliot's use of colors record the dismal picture that grows into a distressing landscape and then giving different hues of hope to restore the order lost in the beginning.

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