



# From War to Contagion: An Exploration of the Philosophical Relevance of T. S. Eliot's *The Waste Land* during the Times of Pandemic

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## Abstract

*With death sprouting like fungi and its fear spreading like the mycelium, the contemporary pandemic times mirror the pathetic state of the inhabitants of a bizarre post-war and postmodern realm called 'The Waste Land.' This paper attempts to unveil the existential challenges of humanity to grapple with the ambiance of death's omnipresence during the Coronavirus catastrophe, concerning T. S. Eliot's magnum opus, 'The Waste Land.' It highlights the portrayal of the dead and the living as 'the walking dead' and relates to the pandemic's nature of overflowing graveyards that blur the boundaries between life and death. It also provides a philosophical inquiry into today's human reality that is replete with spiritual hollowness and absolute hopelessness and ensures to remind the forgotten masses of the true essence of human existence- true for all times ranging from war to contagion.*

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## Introduction

Renowned as the magnificent magnum opus of T. S. Eliot, 'The Waste Land' is simply a chaotic jumble of different voices put together at its first reading. Interestingly, the poem's original title was 'He Do the Police in Different Voices,' a Dickensian line from the novel 'Our Mutual Friend'. The fragmented yet finely threaded rhetorics of these

Different Voices create a façade of the journey that takes the man to the same destination from which he has headed. The journey that is 433 lines long begins and ends with the same yearning quest of man to know the truth of life and death. Irrespective of the title, the poem echoes several implications and themes relevant universally in humankind dwelling in the ‘wasteland,’ a generic abode of humans devoid of any humanity, home of the ‘Hollow men,’ as Eliot aptly coined.

The poem was written in the aftermath of World War I and is most popularly perceived as a reflection of the disillusionment, despair, cultural and spiritual fragmentation, and the consequent existential quest that characterized the zeitgeist of the war era. However, its relevance is ever more in our contemporary times post-pandemic, where man’s existence has become unbearable and daunting to his kind and self. ‘The Covid-19 pandemic has exacerbated the suicidal behavior’ (Pathirathna 2022). The suicidal rates during this recent global pandemic have been spiking up so steeply that contemporary men more often sound like the Sybil of Cumae wanting death:

[...] when the boys said, ‘Sybil, what do you want?’

She replied ‘I want to die.’ (Eliot: Epigraph *The Waste Land*)

Not to misunderstand, it should be noted that it is not Sybil’s voice of the wisdom echoing in their throats that is suggested in the noted semblance above, but the wasteland dwellers’ weak voice of disability to comprehend and face the truth of life which dauntingly manifests in the dark form of death. It is more severe during war or contagion due to the overwhelming omnipresence of death that blurs the boundaries between the living and the dead.

The poem is woven with an ambitious desire to deduce and decipher mankind’s most fundamental question of existence. Using different voices, multiple languages, varied cultures, religions, and innumerable literary references, Eliot endeavors to find some fathomable framework to comprehend and escape the phenomenon of death and the dread it causes. Like a mirror for all of us living through the horrors of the pandemic, this masterpiece of Eliot provides a spiritual consolation as we indulge in the incredible chaos of its countless layers and allusions, best illustrating the nature of human life.

## **Objectives**

The paper highlights significant themes from various parts of the poem and provides contemporary pandemic reinterpretation and relevance in its context. Following the poem's sequence, it begins with the 'myth of rebirth' elicited from part I and provides a naturalistic and eco-centric pandemic reinterpretation. It then includes larger themes of Isolation, its complicated and deadly nuances as experienced by the people during the pandemic, Spiritual Hollowness, and the Wheel of Question.

## **Literature Review**

During the COVID-19 pandemic, Eliot's 'The Waste Land' has caught much attention as many people felt related to some of the turbulence and the afflictions of those hollow human beings as described by T. S. Eliot in his work. Various scholarly works addressing the same idea have come up. Suresh Pattali's "Revisiting 'The Waste Land' by T. S. Eliot in the times of Covid", Shirsak Ghosh's "The Re-Appearance of T. S. Eliot's 'The Waste Land' in the times of the Covid-19 Pandemic" are a few. These works have primarily attempted to connect some of the poem's lines and themes with the COVID-19 pandemic. This paper draws inspiration from these latest studies and aspires to provide a novel pandemic narrative to certain parts of the poem.

## **Analysis**

### **The Mass Burial of the Dead**

Eliot reserves the poem's first part to describe the human world's fundamental issue and titles it 'The Burial of the Dead.' It is primarily about the metaphysical question of how to cope with death and the phenomenon of the burial of the dead, particularly during the age and in a place in which there are no possible myths of rebirth. The importance of the myth of rebirth is needless to mention for humankind to find meaning and sustain all the existential crises of life and the daunting fear of death. Be it war or a contagion, the problem escalates as it is not merely about the burial of the dead but the mass burial of the dead. It becomes incredibly challenging to find a way of coping with this catastrophe. The sight of mass burial itself is an uncanny experience that our memory would not lose its hold anytime soon in one's lifetime. It is a shock to the consciousness and the conscience within every breathing man to see the heap of bodies buried or burnt together. Eliot borrows Dante's astonishment to express his sight of finding people

crowding in swarms like worms into the ledges of hell:

Unreal City,

[...] I had not thought death had undone so many. (Line 63)

The poem eventually unfolds the bizarre myths of rebirth that Eliot crazily constructs to find some meaning for life. Among them, there is a naturalistic and eco-centric one, holding substantial relevance to not merely our times but for all to come. It is suggested in the lines:

That corpse you planted last year in your garden,  
Has it begun to sprout? Will it bloom this year? (Line 72)

During the pandemic, it is observed that nature has flourished to its fullest due to the lack of human intervention. But, the above verse suggests otherwise that it is, in a way, the human intervention through the mass burial that potentially supplied abundant nutrients for nature to flourish exponentially in the wild. Thereby substantiating one of Eliot's myths of rebirth, considering its naturalistic and eco-centric form of manifestation, hinting at the practice of 'Natural Burial', which emerged in the UK around 1993 as a form of symbolic and environmental regeneration. (Clayden 2015).

The phenomenon of the mass burial, heaps of carcasses fed to the earth at once, results in the blossoming of woods. This is the return of the dead in some fashion. Although it is not quite satisfactory, it will have to do as there is no real metanarrative of the resurrection of the dead possible in the wasteland- of war and pandemic.

Besides this naturalistic point of view, the burial of the dead is a theme so massively dreadful. The fear of death has always haunted mankind since eternity. The traumatic impact of the mass burial of the dead during the war over, Eliot is evident in the poem as the figure of the dead is prominent and frequent throughout the poem. It substitutes for any kind of love interest in the poem, suggesting an image of a skeleton replacing a fleshy, desirous lover:

But at my back in a cold blast, I hear  
The rattles of bones and chuckle spread ear to ear. (Lines 185-186)

Also, the line '[...] white bodies naked on the low damp ground' brings back the motif of the burial of the dead, mainly referring to the massive slaughter of people during World War I. It echoes the horrendous situation during the pandemic, except with a

change in the death machine from war to contagion. This leads to the motif of isolation as an incurable suffering in mankind, a prominent theme in the poem.

### **Motif of Isolation**

The motif of isolation is a direct consequence of the mass burial of the dead or the mass death in general. Whether war or a pandemic, it works alike, giving rise to the most painful suffering of isolation. Eliot highlights this theme in various parts of the poem. In part I, it appears as 'Fog' (Eliot 208), in which the embodiment of Holloman, Eliot's Prufrock, stares by the window instead of attending people at the party. This is the isolation of one sort, where one feels lonely even amidst people. Another situation where it is prominent is in the lines:

Sighs, short and infrequent, were exhaled,  
And each man fixed his eyes before his feet. (Line 65)

It expresses the experience of people being crowded together in the great metropolises of 20th-century London, but never had they been more isolated from each other spiritually. The isolation of the typist after her lover leaves her alone is another example of the same, where she turns on the gramophone and has music to fill her spiritual void. This suggests the power of art to rescue an individual from isolation.

There are various aspects of isolation during the World War. People in those regions directly affected by the war experienced physical isolation from the outside world due to military blockades. Many people were evacuated from their homes and relocated from their hometowns and communities, leading to a sense of isolation. The war has brought social and emotional isolation for many individuals and families. Soldiers were separated from their loved ones for extended periods, and civilians often had to endure the absence of family members serving in the military. The stress and trauma of living in such isolation certainly had a psychological toll on mankind.

In the context of the COVID-19 pandemic, the motif of isolation is very obvious, appearing in different layers. Due to the contagion, the concept of 'lockdown' was implemented, affecting people in various ways. Similar to Dante's ledges of hell, there are different layers of isolation in people's experience. Firstly, isolation from community and society, as lockdown means to lock oneself in one's house. Human species are known as social beings, and restriction in their communion leads to their isolation. Secondly, people

experienced isolation within their own house from their family members, especially spouses. This is due to the deteriorating relationship between the two sexes that Eliot also describes quite elaborately. Contemporary times are notorious for loosening bonds between partners. Divorce rates have spiked during lockdown. The final and most dreadful form of isolation is with self. When people were isolated in quarantine, most patients fell to depression due to the isolation from their selves.

Therefore, it should be noted that the intensity and nature of the isolation that people of wasteland- both war and pandemic, experience is irreparable as it is not merely about the feeling of isolation from outside and others but from within, the very spirit of one's own, due to the spiritual hollowness. This is another motif that Eliot pursues throughout the poem, seeking all the possible cultures, philosophies, and practices, ranging from Western to Eastern.

### **Search for Truth and Salvation**

One of the most prominent voices in the poem is that of Tiresias, the speaker of all philosophic, meditative, and melancholic passages. This voice weaves in and out of other voices, making judgments and, in general, deploring the condition of spiritual decrepitude of the wasteland of post-war and post-pandemic times. Realizing the gravity of spiritual hollowness, which denied man any solace in life, Eliot seeks the sacred Vedas of Hinduism and the contributions of Buddha. He devotes the entire part III, titled 'The Fire Sermon,' which borrows from Buddhism. It is what Buddha preaches to his followers who were searching for the truth of life, like Eliot himself. It suggests Eliot's ardent pursuit of wisdom and enlightenment to resolve the riddle of life.

In his quest to comprehend the root cause of mankind's perennial sufferings, Buddha identified and concluded that the fundamental source of suffering in the world is any form of desire. His final formulation in The Fire Sermon explains that the only way an individual can cope with suffering and find an acceptable life, a sense of peace in one's spirit, is by achieving a state of absolute 'desirelessness.' This is the essence of Buddhist philosophy and worship. Eliot absorbed this notion of Buddhist ethic so profoundly that he began the poem suggesting the daunting effects of desire- particularly sexual desire on its victims of wasteland. Eliot devotes a significant part of the poem to conveying what Buddha had said about how to put off the fire of desire within oneself. The first step is the suppression of the five senses.

Upon learning the harmful power of desire, one conceives an aversion for the five senses and becomes divested of passion, and in its absence, he becomes free; at this point, he also realizes that there is no requirement of rebirth as it is exhausted for him who is no more of this world. Reaching this threshold where one can escape the wheel of rebirth is the fundamental notion that gives purpose to Hindus and Buddhists, engaging them in pursuit of achieving desirelessness and thereby evading from the clutches of worldly pain, suffering, sorrow, passion, and most cruel desire.

Interestingly, even after such an extensive contemplation and consultation of all the possible religions, philosophies, and texts, Eliot, at the end of the poem, resigns himself to the same metaphysical question about the truth of life with which he had begun this endeavor.

This completes his paradoxical journey, whose destination meets with the point of its beginning.

### **The Wheel of the Quest**

The ambition with which Eliot began constructing this poem lasts for 433 lines and completes its full circle at the end, merging in essence with its beginning. Consulting various cultures, practicing different religions, understanding multiple perspectives, and so on, Eliot reached the same question even after his lengthy pursuit for answers to those questions of life that have no answers in real, for it is the wheel of the quest that pushes our being to yearn, to know the unknown. However, a spiritual quest is not a journey meant to reach a destination, for there is no destination as such. It is the journey that makes all the difference. It certainly did to Eliot as he reached the end of his composition, and it very well does to every reader of 'The Waste Land,' which is no less than a meditative pilgrimage around the Wheel of Spiritual Quest.

### **Discussion**

It can be inferred that T. S. Eliot's 'The Waste Land' is a universal poem whose relevance never perishes until the human does. It is a profoundly philosophic composition that attempts all the possibilities to help mankind find a way out of its fundamental crises of existence. It helps all of us belonging to an era that is replete with spiritual degeneration.

Living through the pandemic, most of us suffered multiple deaths in the same families and friend circles witnessed the uncanny sight of mass burial of COVID-19 patients

whose bodies were hardly allowed to even look from a distance before their burial due to the fear of the contagion not of virus alone but death as well. It instilled in many of us some numbness toward life and death. People have lost the will to live, for they find no meaning in mortal existence. In this state, Eliot's 'The Waste Land' offers some meditative and philosophic solace, some realm where our deepest quest to know the truth echoes, if not revealed, the absolute truth of life if there is one at all.

## Conclusion

The paper provides a pandemic reinterpretation of Eliot's 'The Waste Land' and proves its relevance in the contemporary post-pandemic realm. It demystifies the 'myth of rebirth' by suggesting a naturalistic and eco-centric paradigm as elucidated in the idea titled the 'The Burial of the Dead.' It establishes the poem as a source of philosophic and meditative experience, which has the potential to mirror man's deepest quest to grapple with the existential crises that the pandemic has revived in the world.

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