



The Search for Salvation through T. S. Eliot's *The Waste Land*

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Abstract

T. S. Eliot's poem 'The Waste Land' delves into the theme of self-reflexivity, portraying the lives of individuals alienated and isolated due to World War I. Many suffered from paranoia, leading lives devoid of purpose. The poem paints a vivid picture of the social characteristics of people in London during this period. T. S. Eliot, influenced by Indian philosophy, drew references from Hindu texts, offering a glimmer of hope. It suggests persevering through life with compassion, extending charity, and mastering inner thoughts to attain inner peace. This philosophy is captured in the resonant word 'DA', symbolizing the sound of thunder. It echoes thrice, representing 'Datta' (charity), 'Dayadvata' (compassion towards others), and 'Damyata' (control over inner thoughts). Despite the fragmented psyche of humanity post World War I, Eliot held hope for positive transformations in the years to come, contingent on people's faith in God and the power of prayer.

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Introduction

T. S. Eliot's 'The Waste Land', written and published in 1922, had a profound impact upon its release. The poem is segmented into five parts and was dedicated to his fellow poet, Ezra Pound, who assisted in condensing the poem to half its original size. Eliot is celebrated as one of the most influential poets of the 20th century. In this work, he

paints a bleak picture of city dwellers who have become disillusioned, perceiving their environment as barren. From Eliot's perspective, all, including the River Thames, have lost their once-pure essence.

Eliot delves into the anxiety that permeated the modern world at the onset of the twentieth century. He explores the relationship between the common man and the world of his time. Many individuals, having returned from the war, found themselves grappling with their place in a world that had changed drastically. Drafted into battle, many of these soldiers faced combat reluctantly. Despite adversities like rain, they were thrust to the war front, adhering to strict schedules. Their experiences led them to question the very existence of a benevolent deity; as they witnessed the death of comrades, many lost hope and struggled to find meaning in a world forever altered by war.

The hot water at ten.

And if it rains, a closed car at four.

And we shall play a game of chess,

Pressing lidless eyes and waiting for a knock upon the door. (Lines 133-136)

In this poem, T. S. Eliot reveals the self-reflexivity of the mind, delving into an inner world riddled with contradictions and paradoxes. The modern world is depicted as one devoid of hope, where inner peace remains elusive. The profound disturbance to personal spiritual beliefs is evident in Eliot's poetry, particularly in his allusions to biblical characters. These characters, once revered, now seem out of place in the modern age. Eliot draws from figures of the past, attempting to bridge them with contemporary realities. He abstains from adhering to traditional poetic structures, mirroring the fragmented state of his own mind and the collective consciousness of Europe.

"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 home from sea." (Lines 216-219).

Objectives

The objective of the paper is to exhibit Eliot's revelation of reality in his work 'The Waste Land'. This paper also expresses the concept of the poem through which contemporary reality is implied.

T. S. Eliot held a glimmer of hope for salvation, a hope that the bleak conditions of war would transform. Throughout the poem, he employs a rich tapestry of symbols representing both death and the potential rebirth of the world. The poem is structured into five distinct sections: 'The Burial of the Dead,' 'A Game of Chess,' 'The Fire Sermon,' 'Death by Water,' and 'What the Thunder Said.' Eliot meticulously presented even the most minute details, using symbols like tarot card readings, which hint at the foretelling of the future, to mask his own anxieties about living in the contemporary world. His quest for salvation is evident in his turn to Hindu philosophy for inspiration:

DA

Damyata: The boat responded
Gaily, to the hand expert with sail and oar
The sea was calm, your heart would have responded
Gaily, when invited, beating obedient
To controlling hands (Lines 417-421)

The repetition of 'Shantih Shantih Shantih' from Hindu scripture and the incorporation of multiple languages in his poem underscores Eliot's intention to preserve the deep-seated meanings of the text. For instance,

Poi s'ascose nel foco che gli affina
Quando fiam uti chelidon—O swallow swallow
Le Prince d'Aquitaine à la tour abolie (Lines 426-428)

Literature Review

According to Fatima and Moayad (2015) *The Waste Land* has been almost consistently misinterpreted since its first publication. It is primarily regarded as a poem that symbolizes the chaotic life of both individuals and society in the twentieth century. It is thought to reflect the disillusionment and despair of the post-World War I generation. Many also see the poem as a reflection of Eliot's disillusionment with the moral decay of post-World War I Europe.

According to Mohammad Ataullah Nuri (2013) The single most prominent aspect of both the form and content of *The Waste Land* is fragmentation. Eliot used fragmentation in his poetry both to demonstrate the chaotic state of modern existence and to juxtapose literary texts against one another.

History in *The Waste Land*

T. S. Eliot also references historical events, notably the assassination of Archduke Ferdinand of Austria, which played a significant role in precipitating World War I. The poem adopts the form of a dramatic monologue, weaving through various speakers, places, and timeframes. Eliot introduces the character Marie Louise Larisch, who reminisces about her hometown of Munich and her time spent sledding and adventuring with her cousin, Archduke Ferdinand. However, the nostalgic recollection is disrupted by the grim reality of the Archduke's assassination, an event that irrevocably altered the course of history, leading to the deaths of millions. The poem reflects on the ambitions of European nations to assert their dominance, against a backdrop of widespread political instability.

Summer surprised us, coming over to the Starnbergersee
With a shower of rain; we stopped in the colonnade,
And went on in sunlight, into the Hofgarten,
And drank coffee, and talked for an hour.
Bin gar keine Russin, stamm' aus Litauen, echt deutsch.
And when we were children, staying at the archduke's,
My cousin's, he took me out on a sled,
And I was frightened. He said, Marie,
Marie, hold on tight. And down we went.
In the mountains, there you feel free. (Lines 8-17)

World War I precipitated a profound sense of confusion and disillusionment. Several kingdoms disintegrated, and numerous nations collapsed under political upheaval. The aftermath was a landscape dotted with ruined structures and individuals left bereft, struggling with personal turmoil, and unable to find solace for the losses they endured. Eliot's 'The Waste Land' poignantly portrays life in post-war Great Britain, depicting a barren land devoid of life and vitality. The degradation of the River Thames, once majestic, mirrors this desolation; it is no longer pure, littered with the refuse of human existence and reflecting the loss of human innocence and chastity.

The river's tent is broken: the last fingers of leaf
Clutch and sink into the wet bank. The wind
Crosses the brown land, unheard. The nymphs are departed.

Sweet Thames, run softly, till I end my song.
The river bears no empty bottles, sandwich papers,
Silk handkerchiefs, cardboard boxes, cigarette ends
Or other testimony of summer nights. The nymphs are departed.

(Lines 171-178)

Cultural Changes in Europe

The aftermath of World War I saw a significant migration of people to cities, primarily in search of employment opportunities, as many lost their livelihoods in the countryside with the decline of aristocracy. The early 20th century witnessed profound cultural shifts. The music transitioned from symphonies to pop music, a shift highlighted by the poet's irked reference to 'o o o o that Shakespearean rag'. This line encapsulates the distortion and disintegration of traditional values in modern society, suggesting how World War I catalyzed the degradation of longstanding beliefs.

T. S. Eliot's personal struggles resonate within the poem. His feelings of alienation and isolation were palpable, exacerbated by his divorce and the subsequent mental health treatment he sought to cope with inner and external traumas. His fragmented mindset is mirrored in the poem's structure, characterized by a myriad of different voices recounting memories of a bygone era. While Eliot sought to interweave biblical figures into the narrative, the sense of a world once grounded in certainties being upended is unmistakable. It seems as though there was no divine intervention to salvage the despairing minds of the people.

'The Waste Land' is a testament to the disillusionment and despondency that pervaded post-World War I society. There's an overwhelming sense of emptiness, with faith in both religion and monarchies dwindling. Eliot's deviation from traditional poetic forms and rhyme schemes further emphasizes this sense of disillusionment. Such nonconformity is emblematic of the era's loss of hope in longstanding traditions and beliefs.

Elizabeth and Leicester
Beating oars
The stern was formed
A gilded shell
Red and gold

The brisk swell
Rippled both shores
Southwest wind
Carried downstream
The peal of bells
White towers (Lines 277-287)

This poem weaves together various literary sources, mythological and religious references, and incorporates several languages. Its tapestry is a reflection of the European diaspora that arose post-World War I—people migrating from their homelands, having lost their jobs and properties.

Through the poem, T. S. Eliot seeks to foreground the traditions of Great Britain—a country that held sway over vast territories for centuries. A nation that prided itself on its rich literary legacy, epitomized by the likes of Shakespeare. Eliot’s insertion of lines from *Hamlet* and *Much Ado About Nothing* is a homage to this tradition:

April is the cruelest month breeding
Lilacs out of the dead land, mixing
Memory and desire, stirring
Dull roots with spring rain. (Lines 1-4)

The initial lines allude to ‘The Tempest’, and he also borrows from ‘Antony and Cleopatra’, especially the reference to the tragic demise of Pompey:

Those are pearls that were his eyes.
Are you alive, or not? Is there nothing in your head? (Lines 124 -125)

Eliot’s melancholy stems from his perception of the erosion of these treasured traditions in contemporary society—a society grappling with widespread depression. The poem’s epigraph is a pointed commentary on the moral decay pervading the modern world. The evident breakdown of societal norms and values is palpable. His second section, ‘A Game of Chess,’ metaphorically portrays individuals as mere pawns, manipulated in the grand chessboard of war:

And we shall play a game of chess,
Pressing lidless eyes and waiting for a knock upon the door. (Lines 135-136)

Unveiling Modern Desolation

T. S. Eliot masterfully unravels a portrait of modern desolation, weaving together a rich tapestry of characters, images, and themes. Employing the stream-of-consciousness technique, Eliot creates a pervasive atmosphere of isolation and alienation through the poem's fragmented structure. The tone is ever-shifting, presenting a non-linear narrative that mirrors society's disintegration.

Many of the characters within the poem are painted as disillusioned, having lost their faith in purity. The elite of the city, for example, come across as disingenuous:

And their friends, the loitering heirs of City directors;
Departed, have left no addresses. (Lines 178 - 179)

These lines shed light on the superficiality of societal interactions, where people gather in public spaces only to discuss the lives of others, gossiping about matters as intimate as another woman's fidelity, all to distract from their own financial hardships.

The section 'A Game of Chess' unveils further degradation. It introduces us to Lil, a woman attempting to seduce a disinterested man. Her advances starkly contrast with the classical tale of Philomela, a mythological figure who was brutally raped and silenced. The juxtaposition hints at the cultural decline and moral decay of the contemporary world.

In 'The Fire Sermon', Eliot paints a vivid picture of the once-pure River Thames, now polluted with refuse and contraceptives. It's a stark commentary on society's disrespect for nature and a broader critique of the moral degradation witnessed in human behaviors. Eliot seems to advocate for renunciation of such base desires, referencing Buddhism, which teaches detachment from worldly temptations. Concurrently, he introduces Tiresias, the blind prophet from Greek mythology. Tiresias, having lived as both a man and a woman, symbolizes the complexity of human nature:

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 home from sea. (Lines 216 - 219)

With 'The Waste Land', Eliot creates a kaleidoscope of references and emotions, underscoring the fragmented psyche of post-war society. Through his deft narrative and potent imagery, he offers readers a profound insight into the disillusionment of the modern age.

Search for Salvation in 'What the Thunder Said'

In the final section of T. S. Eliot's monumental work, 'The Waste Land,' titled 'What the Thunder Said,' the poet's quest for salvation and redemption is acutely evident. This section is replete with references to various religious, mythological, and historical elements that signify a world in dire need of rejuvenation.

Choosing Hindu philosophy as a possible avenue for spiritual restoration is significant. Hindu philosophy, with its rich tapestry of ideas that span over centuries, emphasizes compassion, self-restraint, and the control of one's inner passions. These principles are encapsulated in the words 'Datta,' 'Dayadhvam,' and 'Damyata,' derived from the Upanishads, which mean 'give,' 'compassionate,' and 'control' respectively.

The landscape of 'The Waste Land' is barren and sterile, representing a spiritual wasteland. The Fisher King, a symbol of impotence and infertility, is waiting for the rejuvenating rain:

I sat upon the shore
Fishing, with the arid plain behind me
Shall I at least set my lands in order? (Lines 422 - 424)

The thunder, often a symbol of divine intervention, promises rain and, metaphorically, spiritual replenishment. Eliot's repetition of "Shantih" three times in the end is an invocation of peace, a peace that the fragmented post-war world desperately needs.

The lines:

What is the city over the mountains
Cracks and reforms and bursts in the violet air
Falling towers
Jerusalem Athens Alexandria
Vienna London
Unreal (Lines 370 - 375)

draw upon the ruins of once great civilizations, hinting at the cyclical nature of history, where even the mightiest cities and empires crumble.

Methodology

The annotated text serves as a guide, illuminating key themes and references in the poem. Annotations help decode Eliot's myriad references, giving readers deeper insights into the poem's layered meanings.

Echoes of *The Waste Land* in the 21st Century

T.S. Eliot's 'The Waste Land', penned in the disillusioned aftermath of World War I, provides a vivid tapestry of a world in decline, marred by disillusionment, despair, and societal decay. Its haunting portrayal of a fractured society seems eerily prescient when viewed against the contemporary backdrop of the COVID-19 pandemic.

A World Alienated

Much as Eliot's verses conveyed the sense of alienation and estrangement that pervaded post-war Europe, the pandemic has cast a similar pall of isolation globally. The once thriving and bustling epicenters of culture, commerce, and social interaction have been rendered desolate, with humans cut off not just from each other but also from their previous routines and realities.

Economic Strains and the Marginalized

Eliot's bleak portrayal finds an uncanny resonance in today's times, where many families, especially those in the lower economic strata, grapple with financial hardships. Just as the poet's world seemed devoid of hope and opportunities, the pandemic has ensnared many in a web of economic despair. Children, the hope of tomorrow, have been thrust into roles as wage earners, their educational aspirations buried under the weight of immediate survival needs.

The Digital Divide and Education

The forced transition to online learning, necessitated by the pandemic, has starkly highlighted the disparities in access to technology. Much like the spiritual and emotional desolation portrayed in 'The Waste Land,' students without the means to connect online have found themselves stranded in an educational void.

The Omnipresent Threat

Eliot's poem speaks of existential threats and the overshadowing dread of the unknown. The pervasive fear and uncertainty of the COVID-19 pandemic mirror this sentiment. The indiscriminate nature of the virus, affecting newborns and elders alike, paints a grim picture of vulnerability, reminiscent of the lurking dangers in Eliot's verses.

Economic Stagnation and Desolation

Eliot's world, with its symbols of stagnation and decay, finds a parallel in today's halted economies. Companies closed, farmers unable to sell their produce, and a looming economic depression reflect the decay and stagnation Eliot depicted in his fragmented narrative.

Conclusion

The cyclical nature of societal degradation and rebirth as depicted in T. S. Eliot's *The Waste Land* manifests itself once again in our current predicament. As Eliot drew inspiration and connections from diverse sources – from Biblical characters to Greek mythologies and the Hindu Upanishads – to highlight the fragmented state of post-World War I Europe, similar echoes can be drawn to the contemporary world devastated by the COVID-19 pandemic.

Eliot's deep concern for the moral and spiritual degradation of society, highlighted by the metaphorical pollution of the River Thames, finds its contemporary counterpart in the myriad challenges faced by societies globally, from environmental crises to socio-political upheavals and, most recently, the pandemic. The world, much like the Thames, is filled with pollutants – both tangible and intangible.

The tangible pollutants, such as the virus, have brought death and despair, quite akin to the loss of lives in World War I. The intangible pollutants, however, range from fear, mistrust, and misinformation to economic instability and disillusionment. The global lockdowns, reminiscent of war-torn desolation, have further exacerbated feelings of isolation, mirroring the alienation Eliot observed in the 20th century.

Furthermore, Eliot's observations about the loss of faith and the search for meaning resonate even more today. With religious institutions closed and people confined to their homes, many grappled with existential questions about purpose and salvation. The mass

migrations, driven by the quest for sustenance and safety, mirror the quest for salvation in a barren land, as depicted in Eliot's masterpiece.

In conclusion, T. S. Eliot's *The Waste Land* offers more than just a historical reflection on a society reeling from war; it provides a lens through which the cyclical nature of human challenges can be viewed. Whether a result of man-made wars or natural pandemics, societies are continuously tested, but it is through these tests that resilience, rebirth, and, hopefully, enlightenment emerge.

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