



## Indulgence in Hollowness and Pursuit of Redemption An In-depth Study of T. S. Eliot's *The Waste Land*

Mahbuba Nasrin

### Abstract

*T. S. Eliot's iconic poem, 'The Waste Land,' must have its enduring relevance after a century of its publication. It has stood the test of time as a profound exploration of the desolate human condition and the relentless pursuit of redemption. In the context of contemporary society's search for redemption amidst modern desolation, we hear the echo of T. S. Eliot. Eliot's pivotal work continues to captivate the attention of its wide range of readers with its haunting depiction of a fragmented and disillusioned world that is in severe need of peace and salvation.*

*This paper tries to shed light on the persistent relevance of 'The Waste Land' in a contemporary world marked by social fragmentation, ecological crises, spiritual drought, mental fatigue, and existential anxieties by exploring the themes of disillusionment, decay, and the desperate quest for redemption. This paper also seeks to venture into Eliot's vast masterpiece to know how it remains an inducing mirror to reflect our own social and personal struggles, disillusionment, identity crisis, and desolation.*

*Moreover, this study delves into the potential avenues of deliverance offered by Eliot's 'The Waste Land,' such as the exploration of spirituality, the power of collective memory, and the necessity of cultural renewal. At the end of the poem, T. S. Eliot comes to the conclusion that he must start the process of self-purification from himself. He decides to follow the three principles of spiritual rebirth; Datta, Dayatvam, and Damyata in his own life with the hope of salvation in an ever-changing world.*

**Mahbuba Nasrin**

Assistant Professor  
Department of English  
Government Brajalal College  
Khulna, Bangladesh  
e-mail : nasrinblcollege@gmail.com

## Keywords

Desolation, Redemption, Disillusionment, Identity crisis

## Introduction

T. S. Eliot's *The Waste Land*, first published in 1922, is arguably considered to be the most influential poem of the whole twentieth century. It deals with the diseases of contemporary society and evils lurking at core of the modern civilization. Through a bleak depiction of city dwellers, Eliot unveils the distorted psychological state of a war-torn generation. The city dwellers have become disillusioned, perceiving their surroundings as barren and futile. Perversity in love and sexual relationships delves into the spiritual distemper of the modern wastelanders. In Personal life, devoid of hope and aspiration, they undergo the experience of loss of identity.

The crowds flowing over London Bridge remain victims of a machine-ridden civilization, the slaves of a deadening routine, divorced from the vitality of living tradition. They seem to represent the experience of death in life. Tiresias, the mouthpiece of the poem, draws varied figures of the past to bridge the harsh realities of contemporary society.

Presenting a vast tapestry of paradoxes and symbols, Eliot reveals his self-concern for social and spiritual remedy, inevitable for solace and rejuvenation of the modern world.

## Objectives

- To investigate the themes of modern desolation, disillusionment, decay, and the desperate search for redemption portrayed in T. S. Eliot's poem *The Waste Land*.
- To explore the ways in which *The Waste Land* reflects and critiques the socio-cultural climate of early 20th-century Europe and its continued relevance in contemporary times.
- To uncover the potential possibilities of redemption presented by Eliot in *The Waste Land*, including spirituality, collective memory, culture, and religion.
- To encourage readers to meditate on their own quests for meaning and redemption challenging modern desolation, depicted in *The Waste Land*.

## Literature Review

In accordance with Qinyuan Zhang (2023) Eliot's *The Waste Land* is the most representative and Landmark poem. With the succor of many complex images, this long poem depicts a waste land that is full of psychic confusion, declining ideas and great material desires. According to Aishwarya Kumari (2022) T. S. Eliot, mainly a poet of war, portrays the waste land as no more than an earthquake that deconstructs the edifice of modernism. It then highlights the belief of Lord Buddha and Saint Augustine on the spiritual regeneration of the modern man, following aimless direction. P. S. Sri (2008) is of the view that through this poem Eliot reminds the reader of the annihilation of Jewish, Greek, and Egyptian Civilizations. It also apprises the Europeans, aggressively pursuing the same earmark. For salvation, Eliot was immensely influenced by Indian philosophy particularly Upanishadic perception. Navreet Sahi (2023) opines that the poem has been the focus of numerous scholars and critics. Eliot wrote the poem when he underwent a journey of mental fatigue, exhaustion, and depression. The fragments in the poem could be the result of his own fragmented self which he depicts in his work. The paper *Indulgence in Hollowness and Pursuit of Redemption: An In-depth Study of T. S. Eliot's The Waste Land* attempts to perceive the disillusionment of the post-war generation and look around for deliverance. Here lies the poem's relevance after a century.

## Methodology

This study delves into the exploration of hollowness and the quest for redemption through a qualitative method. Utilizing 'The Waste Land' as the primary source, this paper draws upon a range of secondary data from published books, scholarly journals, and web pages. This paper is also enriched by employing the following methods:

### In-depth Textual Analysis, Reading, and Re-reading Process

A very in-depth close textual analysis of *The Waste Land* to identify and examine key themes, literary techniques, historical allusions, and cultural references employed by Eliot. This re-reading process seeks to uncover the multi-layered meanings embedded within the text and correlate how they contribute to its relevance in modern times.

## **Synthesis and Conclusion**

Synthesizing the findings from the literature review, and thorough textual analysis of T. S. Eliot's masterpiece, this paper seeks to draw meaningful conclusions about the relevance of *The Waste Land* after a century. The research paper endeavors to provide a comprehensive understanding of the poem's theme of modern desolation, the search for salvation, and their resonance in contemporary society, contributing to the existing scholarly discourse.

## **Alienation and Isolation in the Modern World**

T. S. Eliot's *The Waste Land* is poignantly marked by the malady of modern wastelanders.

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. (Lines 35-39)

In the very first section of 'The Burial of the Dead' of 'The Waste Land', a young beautiful lady recalls a time when someone sent her hyacinth flowers (Shmpoo, 2008), and that moment was assumed to be a pretty great time in her life. But a year later, with a heart, full of anguish, she understood that she failed to feel the warmth of that ecstatic love. She lost all her bliss and just went numb. She remained unable to establish communication and indulged in utter loss, feeling like a zombie. She felt out of breath neither living nor dead. In 'The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock', confining himself within his own boundaries, Prufrock declares his complete isolation and says, 'I should have been a pair of ragged claws/ Scuttling across the floors of silent seas' (Line 73-74). As mentioned in Francis O' Gorman (2012), the hero of Charles Dickens 'David Copperfield' (1966), tells Agnes, 'I get so miserable and worried, and am so unsteady and irresolute'. Virginia Woolf in 'To the Lighthouse' (2004), explored the inner life of the worrier, Mr. Ramsay, a man restless about his reputation and individual attainment.

## **Loss of Traditional Values and Spiritual Emptiness**

In the first part of the poem 'The Burial of the Dead' A Modern man, delineated by Eliot is physically alive to the need for idealistic regeneration, yet he does not seem to make any endeavour. He kept himself quite contentment with his own condition which may be called 'death-in-life.' In the first line of the poem *The Waste Land*, the poet describes the changing seasons. In contrast to the romantic poets, he portrays spring as cruel and disturbing.

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)

Chaucer in 'The Prologue to the Canterbury Tales' refers to April 'with sweet showers' (Line 01). This is in sharp contrast with the opening line of 'The Waste Land'. While Chaucer regarded April as the season of rebirth and new life, urging men to spiritual salvation, Eliot harps on the negative spirit of spring as modern man is afraid of spiritual rebirth.

A heap of broken images, where the sun beats,  
And the dead tree gives no shelter, the cricket no relief. (Line: 22-23)

The mentioned lines stand for the loss of spirituality in a world of absurdity. The appearance of a German princess in this context provides a touching exponent of modern psychology. She recalls several excited memories of her childhood days and adulthood, spent in relaxation during the rain.

## **Deviation from Spiritual Faith**

Theological deviation ushers irreparable havoc to the natural courses of life, obligatory for sustaining social solidity.

Flowed up the hill and down King William Street,  
To where Saint Mary Woolnoth kept the hours  
With a dead sound on the final stroke of nine. (Lines 65-68)

In the first section 'The Burial of the Dead' Eliot regrets that the London Crowd

comprises people, superficially generous but bereft of faith in spirituality. While the crowd proceeds towards King William Street, striking nine, the church clock alarmed the office goers. This was the time for the commencement of official duty and launching industrial activities, during the composing of the masterpiece *The Waste Land*. The death of Christ occurred in the ninth hour of the day. The reference is that when commercial life begins, Christ is no more. In the blatant modernity, the world of business is exclusively alienated from the spiritual world. Overindulgence in business is a denial of Christ and a complete negation of spiritual values. As mentioned in P. S. Sri (2008), being a spectator, Tiresias empathizes with fellow beings that are bound on the wheel like the character Lama in the novel 'Kim'. He is also sensitive to the sufferings of the dwellers of unreal cities of the world. He utters,

What is that sound high in the air  
Murmur of maternal lamentation (Lines 367-68)

LeCarner & Thomas Micahel (2009) also say the Scheming Madame Sosostriis, who sees 'crowds of people walking round in a ring' (Line 56), offers an image of an ever-present riddle in a circular pattern, referring to 'the wheel'.

Under the brown fog of a winter dawn,  
A crowd flowed over London Bridge, so many,  
I had not thought death had undone so many. (Line 61-63)

The above-mentioned lines are references to Dante's *Inferno*, suggesting that Hell is made up of circles and the crowd is in limbo, in which the people are neither alive nor dead. In the third section 'The Fire Sermon' the demonstration of London as 'Unreal City' intensifies the insipidity and moral sterility of modern life. There is no sense of community life and it lacks the inevitable spiritual component of growth. Its setting apart, the procedure of life-leading and materialism turn London into a 'stagnant fen.' Eliot's use of 'Unreal City' reminds us of Wordsworth's noted sonnet 'London 1802' in which he criticizes the degeneration and impiety of the people of his time and seeks national survivors.

## **Breakdown of Communication and Sexual Perversion**

The Second section of the poem 'A Game of Chess' is an expedient used by Middleton in the play entitled 'Women Beware Women' and this section begins with a detailed account of a woman's gorgeous drawing room including the furniture, light, sound, show-pieces as well as strange 'synthetic perfumes'. Preoccupations with minor objects and events mark the frustration and spiritual decay of modern life. Similarly, sex, too becomes a matter of anxiety and despair. This particular section deals with sex maneuvers and sex perversion.

'Lady of Situation', the fashionable society woman who is bored with her own life, undergoing severe psychic disorder. Her lover, too, suffers from the same sort of enfeeblement. He says,

I think we are in rat's alley  
Where the dead men lost their bones (Lines 115-16)

Similarly, Lil, the wife of Albert, lost her interest in conjugal life. Going through the experience of abortion she lacks the physical vitality to gratify her husband, expecting more and more of a physical connection.

In the third section 'The fire sermon' Eliot gives another instance of mechanical corporeal attachment. The girl typist seems to be a human machine like a 'throbbing taxi'. Tiresias visualizes the scene in the girl's room as she waits for her lover. The sordid lover approaches but the girl is bored and tired. The girl has no emotional involvement. She is indifferent and takes the love game as she would take an antidote to get over tension or a headache. After the mechanical game the boyfriend departs, leaving her all alone. The lines below are manifestations of her ignoble love relationship.

She smooths her hair with an automatic hand,  
And puts a record on the gramophone. (Lines 255-256)

In 'Portrait of a Lady', the line, 'Why we have not developed into friends' (Line 99), depicts an image of the illicit and unequal love relationship between an old woman and a young guy.

## **Neurotic Distortion of Commercially Modern Man**

The title of section three 'The Fire Sermon' refers to the spiritual paralysis of the civilized man. Here fire suggests the universal flame of lust. The daughters of the Thames lament the loss of their chastity one after another. The first girl tells the story of her sex experience with a reveler on the floor of the boat. The second girl conveys a similar story. After the physical assault, the mind of the third girl awakened. She compares herself to 'broken fingernails of dirty hands' (Line 303), signifying the meaninglessness of the seduced girl's life. The story of the Thame's daughter reminds us of the mythical story of Philomela, in Ovid's metamorphosis. She was seduced by King Tereus, the husband of her sister Procne. The heart-rending lamentation of Philomela in the form of a nightingale acts as an instance of helplessness of the female folk of the society. The unreal city of London, burning in the fire of lust is compared to Carthage, a cauldron of sensuality by St. Augustine.

To Carthage then I came  
Burning burning burning burning  
O Lord Thou Pluckest me out  
O Lord Thou Pluckest (Lines 307-310)

There is a rich merchant, Mr. Eugenides a representative of the commercial section and upper strata of society, full of lust and fond of perversity of sex. The actual 'Fire sermon' of the Buddha uses the symbol of fire to throw light on the destructive force of desire.

## **An Outgrowth of Post-war Generation**

The aftermath of World War I witnessed a devastating impact on the generation leading to a profound change in social, economic, political, and cultural thinking. People migrate to cities, fundamentally in search of working opportunities. This migration collapses the deep-rooted class structure of the society. *The Waste Land* stands as a landmark in presenting the cultural shift in twentieth-century literature. It reveals the disillusionment caused by the First World War. It also highlights the cultural, and moral decay of cities, on account of the commercialization of life where everything is for sale. Even in the matter of love, there is a question of profit and loss.



In 'The Fire Sermon' the term 'O City city' stands for the important city of Europe. The towers of Alexandria, Vienna, and London are falling. In ancient-time the source of inspiration for life and achievement was faith. People really believed in religious values. Tradition increases the importance of moral conduct. Today the values have changed. There is a gulf between profession and practice. Hypocrisy is at its zenith. Flattery is considered more effective than merit. The ultimate consequence is that religious faith and compassion no longer exist in society. This has resulted in a general deterioration of the standard of life.

### **Quest for Salvation**

Eliot's concern for salvation is evident in 'The Cocktail Party'. Here Edward and Lavinia, agree to remain as a couple and to work out their salvation in ordinary life. 'Ash Wednesday', expresses Eliot's repentance for his past sins and determination to pave the path towards spirituality.

The last and final section 'What the Thunder Said' contains the substance of Eliot's thought of salvation. Firstly he makes mention of the mythical journey of the knight to Chapel Perilous in the time of Fisher King. The second is the Biblical Journey of Christ's disciples to Emmaus when they were accompanied by Christ in disguise to illustrate how faith can lead to success. Ultimately Eliot draws an ancient Indian history when northern India suffered from a great juncture of drought and famine. The distressed people prayed to God for divine intervention. The god answered their prayer and uttered three words 'Da' 'Da' 'Da' from thunder, indicating the three-fold way of man's spiritual rebirth and salvation. The first 'Da' means Datta i.e. to give. It means to surrender to spiritual life or succumb to a higher purpose so that humanism can thrive. The second 'Da' Dayadhvam means to sympathize. It inspires an emotional bond of union between individuals or between the individual and society. The third 'Da' is Damyata, meaning self-control and discipline.

### **Shantih shantih shantih**

In the concluding lines, Eliot strikes a personal note and wishes to find a remedy for the reform of a spiritually decadent society. With the repeated prediction of Sanskrit words from Upanishads suggesting peace and, eliminator of all odds, *The Waste Land* ends

with an image of possible redemption despite all its darkness and depravity.

## **Conclusion**

In the light of the aforesaid deliberation, it must be clearly understood that *The Waste Land* a social document of the twentieth century, covers the history of mankind and scrutinizes the similarities between different epochs. The poem exhibits certain features, relevant for today's South Asian modern life. In Olden times in this sub-continent, there was the joint family system but today nuclear families emerge as an inevitable urgency. Certain loyal attitudes towards community and nation have been ebbed away from the society. Losing the intrinsic value of procreation, love has become a game of futility. The signs that resulted from the perversion and loss of war-torn Europe are still reiterated in different parts of the world. Such degeneration acts as a chain that links different periods, separated by regional distance and in point of time and sequence.

A person, fallen between cracks, must ask for direction. T. S. Eliot an unmediated witness of hollowness and sterility quests for direction. The spiritual wisdom and lesson, derived from ancient myth, Bible, Chaucer, Dante, Spenser, Shakespeare, and Hindu Scripture, Upanishad furnishes a clue to the survival of modern civilization. In fine, he offers a comprehensive solution to the problem of the modern age by combining the wisdom of the East and the West.

## **Works Cited**

Charles Dickens, *David Copperfield* (Harmondsworth : Penguin, 1966), P. 631

Eliot, Thomas S. 'The Waste Land. Ed. Michael North.' *New York: Norton* 175 (2001): 58.

Kumari, Aishwarya. 'Revival of the Modern World: A Study through Eliot's The Waste Land.' *Contemporary Literary Review India* 9.4 (2022): 1-10.

LeCarner, Thomas Michael. 'TS Eliot, Dharma Bum: Buddhist Lessons in The Waste Land.' *Philosophy and Literature* 33.2 (2009): 402-416.

Navreet Sahi, *Journeying in th 'Mental Wasteland' : A Psychopathological reading of*

T. S. Eliot's *The Waste Land*. Issue DOI. 10. 21659/mejo24.v8n3.

O'Gorman, Francis. 'Modernism, TS Eliot, and the 'age of worry'.' *Textual Practice* 26.6 (2012): 1001-1019.

Shmoop Editorial Team. 'The Waste Land Isolation.' *Shmoop*, Shmoop University, 11 Nov. 2008, [www.shmoop.com/study-guides/poetry/the-waste-land/themes/isolation](http://www.shmoop.com/study-guides/poetry/the-waste-land/themes/isolation).

Sri, P. S. 'Upanishadic perceptions in T S Eliot's poetry and drama.' *Rocky Mountain Review* (2008): 34-49.

Woolf, Virginia. *To the Lighthouse*. Vintage Classics, 2004.

Zhang, Qinyuan. 'The Modernity of T. S. Eliot's *The Waste Land* from the Perspective of Image'. *Communications in Humanities Research*, 2023. DOI:10.54254/2753-7064/3/2022659