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# Anticipation in Disillusionment and Despair Reading Eliot's *The Waste Land*

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# Abstract

This study analyses Eliot's The Waste Land from a humanistic perspective and after all search for the causes and consequences of despair, disillusionment, and frustration the study claims that the pessimistic flashbacks of the past and negative looks for the days to come are human enemies. Moral and ethical guidance are suggested to live peacefully in poetic anticipation. The Journey through The Waste Land Eliot in his poem seeks multiple ways of living and finally, it is nothing more than the poetic imagination and metaphor to escape from an alienated path. Eliot exposes the social disharmony through the chaos of dislocation, depression, and death of the Londoners and he paves the way for alternative methods to get alive with hope. The study is made on social and socio-cultural investigative methods to find out the social wrongs to which Richard Aldington, Wesley Brown, Nevill Coghill, and Francis Turner Palgrave's critiques are applied.

# Keywords

Anticipation, Disillusionment, Investigation, Alienation

# Introduction

Thomas Stearns Eliot, an eminent writer, poet, dramatist, and critic of the 20th century, writes about poverty, hunger, disillusionment, and despair. He raises the issues of social disharmony from which people turn to depression, yet he is optimistic as he believes in

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myth and mystery. *The Waste Land* begins with human cruelties that Eliot observed in April and develops the poetic demarcation of whether happiness is a capsule for living or a superficial emotional detail to be found in possessions. *The Waste Land* questions empty sexual encounters of an alcoholic stupor but the speaker suggests that no matter what one's history may be, there is no getting away from boredom in any part of the life. Poetic mythic and Eliot's characters all cry against the cruelties and carry an impressive remark to hate the social wrongs and deal positively with them to end the viruses that they inflict on the systematic ways of living.

In both the sections of the poem 'The Burial of the Dead' and 'A Game of Chess', Eliot narrates the events of human disillusionment and the rough games played among the communities' people. Eliot also brings references from mythic characters and middleclass couples who seem to be able to succeed at doing nothing better than getting on each other's nerves. Eliot suggests to all to live with hope. He trusts in birth even after death and his philosophy is that we can find everything in patience he starts his poem *The Waste Land* critiquing dishonesty, cruelty, and spiritual dryness whereas he concludes the poem with an appeal to keep silent. Eliot remembers the past, thinks about the future, and is hopeful of situational changes as he writes:

April is the cruelest month, breeding Lilacs out of the dead land, mixing Memory and desire, stirring Dull roots with spring rain. Winter kept us warm, covering Earth in forgetful snow, feeding A little life with dried tubers. Summer surprised us, coming over 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. ... Datta. Dayadhvam. Damyata. Shantih shantih shantih. (lines 1-11, 433-34)

The first part of *The Waste Land* is dedicated to Ezra Pound where Eliot memorises the cruelest event of April that is still reflective of the cruelty when Eliot lost his sources of

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inspiration in the difficult historical periods like First World War time.

'The Burial of the Dead' exposes the individual but selfish interests of the people, their purposes, and interlinks to history that is with many powerful references and beautiful language, not to mention powerful and moving sentiments and raises issues of his ancestors' Unitarian traditions with famous clairvoyants' views. Eliot discusses the differences between hangman and death by water. He makes his readers confused with the images of the unreal city and the activities that modern men do there in the 1920s.

'The Burial of the Dead,' particularly in terms of the tone and the mood sets questioning *The Waste Land*. The reader comes to feel that it is one because there has been no life-giving rain; there is no water in it; nothing of that sweet liquid that can that restore the dead land. The water is the source for life-giving and the water-based section celebrates countless myths from countless human cultures over countless ages, every one of which associates life with the supple and the quickened, and death with the dried out or desiccated and the dulled, the numbed.

April is indeed the cruelest month, then, not because the ghost of Chaucer or his particular sentiments on the same ageless topic haunt those opening lines of Eliot's, but because it is that month in which the struggle between the forces of death and the forces of life are there for all to see as most obviously in conflict. Reference to the Starnbergersee is particularly appropriate at this juncture. It is at that lake that the so-called crazy King Ludwig of Bavaria, the royal patron who underwrote much of Richard Wagner's operatic efforts, including his Parsifal, which recounted the Grail legend for 19th-century Germans, not only built his renowned storybook castle that imitates the Grail castle but subsequently drowned himself, a suicide.

Another section of the poem 'A Game of Chess,' is the game of intellectuality but it turns here to be a meaningless match based on the myth-making of two frustrated couples encountering confused connubial love and sexual coupling. Eliot writes:

Above the antique mantel was displayed As though a window gave upon the sylvan scene The change of Philomel, by the barbarous king So rudely forced; yet there the nightingale Filled all the desert with inviolable voice And still she cried, and still the world pursues, Jug, Jug to dirty eyes. (Lines 97-103)

These lines refer to the myth-making of Eden's glance at Satan and Philomel's change to a bird. People cross the alley where they can see the bones of dead people.

'The Fire Sermon,' begins with an allusion and Tiresias myth making. The speaker confesses as the river Thames' speed is broken down; it decreases Ganga's speed which symbolises the broken love with being confused 'in love' role. As Eliot writes, 'The nymphs are departed/ the sweet Thames run softly till I end my song' (lines 175-76). Without a doubt, this theme of love's betrayal, like the spring's arrival permeates the entire Eliot's poem, and the speaker and reader come to learn about a betrayal that is fomented by unreasonable expectations and desires as well as by self-deceptions and self-serving machinations. The unwillingness of the poetic persona unravels the material universe to set its clocks by an individual needs. In the same way, love is all too often the name given to the irresistible desire to scratch a bodily itch by abusing an individual's trust and confidence.

'Death by Water' references to a sailor's death. Phlebas the Phoenician sailor was found dead in a deep sea and whose images of handsomeness are now turned to the bones. Here the speaker tries to anticipate the human processes. Furthermore, Madame Sosostris reads the Tarot, the earliest form of the modern deck of playing cards, whose suits-the cup, the lance, the sword, and the dish-are derived from the Grail legend as well, according to Weston. As comical as the madame's turn is, then, it ties together two of the major dynamics of the poem: The individual's desire to seek the fulfillment that the future represents (that is, the quest) is matched only by his or her fear to know what that future may be. This attraction-repulsion relationship with the future, embodied in the alternating promise and nagging insistence of spring, will shortly be embodied in the fear of the resurrection of the wrong dead, that is, the infamous 'sprouting' of the corpse that Stetson 'planted last year in [his] garden.' But, like the future, that moment in The Waste Land is yet to come. For now, and for the speaker, there is the 'future' that Madame Sosostris, reading the cards, has to tell him. That it is nonsense is made clear by the fact that she tells the speaker, who is lost in a wasteland where there is not even the sound of water, to fear death by drowning. Inadvertently on Madame Sosostris's part, here again, nevertheless, is another foreshadowing, in this case of Phlebas, the

drowned Phoenician sailor of the fourth part of The Waste Land, 'Death by Water.'

The last part of the poem 'What the Thunder Said' anticipates human disillusionment and despair with the Godly saying to keep silent. As Eliot writes:

After the torchlight red on sweaty faces After the frosty silence in the gardens After the agony in stony places The shouting and the crying Prison and places and reverberation Of thunder of spring over distant mountains He who was living is now dead We who were living are now dying With a little patience. (Lines 322-330)

The thunder has a special hope for life and the living expectation as the earth is round and everything goes on rotation. What we expect and observe in this world are all elusive and reality might be disclosed in waiting. *The Waste Land* is that same mysterious figure, 'the third who walks always beside you'—the presence that is both unreal and real, threatening and familiar, companionable and distant. Eliot seems to be implying that every human story is a remarkable story of survival in the face of incredible odds, as Christ's Resurrection is meant to attest.

## Eliot's Journey on The Waste Land

Eliot and his first wife, Vivienne Haigh-Wood Eliot travelled to the coastal resort of Margate Kent for a period of convalescence. While travelling there, Eliot worked on the poem *The Waste Land* and possibly showed an early version to his close friend Ezra Pound travelling to Paris in November 1921. He returned from Lausanne in early January 1922 and Pound gave him editorial comments and significant cuts to the manuscript to which Eliot later dedicated the poem to Pound. Letters written by both Vivienne and Eliot give some insight into the creation and completion of the poem *The Waste Land*.

*The Waste Land* is an argumentative poem based on the philosophy of myth and mystery narratologies that seeks possibility within impossibility and the last straw what Eliot's insights is patience. Eliot's philosophy is guided by the modernist movement,

argumentative narratives, and serious literature, and his poetry in particular points out the social and socio-cultural representations. *The Waste Land* opens the eyes against the cruelties and concludes with messages for wait and see. Eliot mixes the best and worst of the past and present European culture, literature, and tradition in particular human imagination and its capacity to make order out of chaos and randomness. *The Waste Land* inwards a shining example of blending into the periphery of World War I with a reflection of the European dominance that created horror, terror, and suffering for the people. The war caused a terrific situation that imposed negative effects painting dreadful pictures of the withering of humanity.

European notion of war had indeed produced a question on their civilization as they murdered innocent people exposing their cruelty with ferocity on humanity in the first place. Their destructiveness and futility of the war inevitably give rise to the disillusionment that the catastrophe of the war ultimately endangers the women, children, and senior citizens. disillusionment that the literature of the 1920s, *The Waste Land* a notable example in this regard, would reflect. The title suggests dread, despair, and complexities of the life that people face mirror the social realities and portray our emptiness. Bitter irony implied in the text is a bloodbath achieved by demolishing the myth of European greatness. 'The Burial of the Dead' sections of the poem show missing opportunities, hopelessness, emptiness, and despair in the place of that previous self-confident arrogance. As much as an irony that not even art could successfully engage without seeming to distort itself as well.

# Eliot's Literary Career and Critique on The Waste Land

Eliot's struggle in life, literary status, and overall progress concerns his relationship with Ezra Pound. About Eliot and Pound's relationship, A.K. Sinha writes, 'In 1922, appeared his poem *The Waste Land*, dedicated to Ezra Pound, and published in volume from next year' (*English Poetry* 109). Eliot is not only the friend of Pound but they take each other as mentors and Eliot shares everything with Pound in every moment whereas Pound inspires and encourages Eliot to write poems. Dr. Radhey L. Varshney's observation in regards to Eliot and Pound's relationship and about the poem *The Waste Land* is:

*The Waste Land* owes its present form to the severe editing by Pound. The spectacle of Europe committing suicide was made clearer to Eliot by his association with Pound.

Even though it would be exaggerated to say that Ezra Pound was responsible for the making of Eliot the poet, certainly he caused a variety of transformations, technical and otherwise. By the thirties; however, Eliot and others with their more humane works swung away from Pound who was left to follow his political and poetical blind alley to the bitter end. (*Cocktail Party* 6)

Varshney critiques not only Eliot's poem but observes also the political suicidal games and rescues the European community and their transformation practices.

Eliot tells about the myth and mystery of the Fisher King's death after he was wounded in the sexual organ. He writes about the legendary myth of the Holy Grail and the philosophy of Christianity as writes Francis Turner Palgrave, '...unattainable even by predecessors of not inferior individual genius' (The Golden Treasury 450). Eliot gives priority to an individual genius in his essay, 'Tradition and the Individual Talent' and writes, 'awareness and affirmation of his literary and cultural heritage is one of the most prominent features' (British And American Poetry 622). He brings the historical references from Sybil's responses in Chaucer's Prologue as mentioned in The Canterbury Tales and a myth-making of Madam Sosostris, a pseudo-Egyptian name assumed by a fortune teller in Aldous Huxley's novel Chrome Yellow 1921 concerned with psychological disorder and cultural phenomena. His imagination of the past makes him remember to assassination of Archduke Franz-Ferdinand in 1914 by Serbian nationalists. The assassination of the heir to the throne of the Austro-Hungarian Empire and his wife Sophia in Sarajevo, the capital of Serbia is a painful memory to Eliot who connects history with mythmaking. The event brings doomed barrenness in The Waste Land territory.

Eliot is worried also about the death of Phlebas, the drowned Phoenician sailor that he connects in his philosophical writings, especially in the poems and drama. Eliot tries to create hope even in a hopeless situation. In this regard, Nevill Coghill writes, '...begins in a sad, liberal agnosticism and steadily strengthens into the positive grief-in joy and joy-in grief of Christianity' (*Murder in the Cathedral* 10). Worrying about several painful events that he studied and observed in in-between 1914 and 1921 are the sources of his philosophical writings. Eliot's literary developments and philosophical genuineness mismatch his hope with dreams, desires, and despair turning to a mental disorder and loss of literary confidence. Eliot laments in loss of those great literary

figures in the war and the turnover of other historical periods.

Painful experiences of the First World War in the demise of literary figures brought a mental disbalance in the experimental and innovative activities of Eliot. His philosophical views on *The Waste Land* are impressive and he appeals to save humanity fresh as he claims, 'dead tree gives no shelter' (The Burial of the Dead 23). *The Waste Land* typifies dismantled parts of the modernism in English language and literature as Coghill writes:

In *The Waste Land*, the poet's desolation is not caused by a sense of fog-bound intellectualist voices in which he feels himself drowning, but by the deeper desolation of a world declining into materialism. His great question is harder than before to ask: yet a kind of answer from some further region is faintly hinted... explores trudging through a dangerous waste of snow. (*Murder in the Cathedral* 12).

Eliot's lines intend to recall Christ's walking unrecognized ejecting the despair and darkness of this world. His involvement in many of those modern activities, particularly among the young, to these very real shifts are quite against cataclysmic events.

He writes about the dismantled human condition and their paradoxical situation who suffer from anarchy and chaos-nihilism. Richard Aldington in his poems analyses this world and writes, 'World is filled with cruelty' (*The Complete Poems of Richard Aldington* 57). According to Wesley, Aldington honors Eliot, exposes his relationships with Pound, and writes, 'a year or so before Eliot read him the manuscript draft of *The Waste Land* in London' (*Darkness Strutters* 75). Eliot visited Aldington in the country and they developed their friendship about which Aldington quotes Wesley, 'I was surprised to find that Eliot admired something so popular, and then went on to say that if a contemporary poet, conscious of his limitations as Gray was, would concentrate all his gifts on one such poem he might achieve a similar success' (*Tragic Magic* 77). After having a mental diagnosis of Eliot's health problem, the psychiatrist Doctor Roger Vittoz recommended him rest for the time being. He applied for three months' leave from the bank where he was employed causing for nervous breakdown.

Withering humanity's perspective and purpose is endangered in those who survived it, particularly those of a more creative genius like Eliot's philosophy. Eliot's *The Waste Land* sounds like Paul Fussell's 'The Great War and Modern Memory'. Both of

them make extremely convincing cases of cultural catastrophe that invites war which John Osborne says, is 'sensational events' (*Look Back in Anger* 10). Eliot ironizes the European wars and in which the public perceived its purpose and results. Eliot's mental and emotional condition at the time of *The Waste Land*'s composition denies the horrors and fears generated by four years of unceasing warfare found in the texture of the poetry of *The Waste Land*'s effects. The poem creates confusion on Eliot's life condition, health issues, and works that were either undergoing treatment for or having a mental breakdown at a psychiatric clinic in Lausanne, Switzerland, in the fall of 1921, during the period that he was writing *The Waste Land*. The fact about his literary genius is that the poem was hardly composed in one sitting or even several times though he was suffering from ill health. It combines as many if not more bits and pieces from earlier, often discarded poetic treatments by Eliot himself, written at scattered times in his life.

*The Waste Land* opens with people visiting one of those European health resorts or spas frequented by members of the leisure class further underscoring what his time in Lausanne must have seemed like for him. In resorting in this way to biographical information to clarify poetic detail, it is important to remember that the issue is not whether biography and current events can shape poetic output but whether they do anything more than that, thereby giving the poetry all its purpose and meaning. It questions where life and its attendant experiences leave off and the poetry, which is what must matter, begins. Eliot seems aware of this conundrum just about the same time that the aftermath of the war was sinking in on both public life and private mentalities that we can read in his essay 'Tradition and the Individual Talent,' in which he argues forcefully for the necessary separation between an individual and the society. Indeed, *The Waste Land* is a complex text written in irregular stanza patterns and line lengths.

Eliot uses different languages like German, French, and Spanish, too in addition to English. Anyone who follows Eliot's poetry would have been particularly struck by his methodology. Eliot follows Virgil's great epic the *Aeneid* and Homer's *Iliad* and *Odyssey* with complicated surface details. Eliot's trick is that he lets his readers know that he is doing this so that along with him, or at least along with the poem's unnamed and unintroduced protagonist; Eliot's readers share the quest that portrays and embodies appropriately enough for meaning-making on a stormy sea of signifiers. Eliot's intellectual philosophy is applied in *The Waste Land* and the imagination

of the readers to make it connected to a society that cannot otherwise be easily destitute. Eliot's weapon used to represent the society is consistent use of allusions. Throughout his critical career, Eliot maintained that nothing should be regarded as a substitute for engaging the poem, as poetry, in its terms.

The commentators and readers of poetry in general and of Eliot's poetry, in particular, seem adamant in insisting that his poetry is little more than valued autobiographer who may not be missing the critical point. The dangerous power that Eliot applied is in imagining the society and identifying a source in *The Waste Land*. A better understanding of society and social representation is an understanding of the verse/verses or the philosophical poems like *The Waste Land* as they appear in the contents and reflect in the form. It would be wise to recall Eliot's justification, from his essay 'Tradition and the Individual Talent,' for having an awareness of voices of the past. It is in the voices of the present that the past speaks most clearly and that to the only audience that ever can matter the living. Anything more is guesswork and anything less is severely restricted by the endless possibilities for other interpretations that offer themselves even as one meaning or interpretation is emerging.

The Waste Land ends with symbolic markers of forward progress with allusions to Dante. Rain-bringing thunder has no further vacillation and he is free to make his way past the modern hell in which the poetry of *The Waste Land* has embroiled till now. Eliot uses allusions not to show off his learning but to underscore his poem's meaning, such as it is, it should mainly serve as a demonstration of the delightfully rewarding complexities of structure and insinuation of those same allusions. The final allusion to Dante is spoken regarding Arnaut Daniel, who has just greeted Dante after Guido Guinizzelli had called Daniel to Dante's attention as the 'miglior fabbro'---the better maker or craftsperson. The separation between the poet and the identity of the speaker in The Waste Land is paradoxical. Indeed, some will argue that The Waste Land has no speaker or at least one who is consistent from part to part, stanza to stanza. Unlike Eliot's 'The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock,' where the speaker is easily identified as Prufrock, or, for the sake of contrast, 'Whispers of Immortality,' where the speaker is the poet, The Waste Land is poetry more in keeping with 'Portrait of a Lady' or 'La Figlia che Piange,' in which it is difficult to discern if the 'I' is the poet or a fictive projection that he simply has not taken the trouble to introduce and identify by name and function.

*The Waste Land* depicts excruciatingly nightmarish detail and guides for seeking for better part of the human identification in his opening dedication, that is Eliot's way of confirming for his readers that they, too, have now successfully made their way out of the hellishness that *The Waste Land* is intended to portray and, like him and his speaker, stand near the peak of Dante's purgatorial mountain. *The Waste Land* takes its readers on a hellish journey for the sake of bringing them, like Dante, to some point of positive recognition that the hell of self can be mastered and left behind. With the achievement of that aim in mind, such a reader will find useful the following characterization of the approach to the text of *The Waste Land* that is about to ensue. New methods and philosophical approaches applied in the poem expose a wilderness of words and word images, allusions, and literary excavations that question nonsense speaking of the then-London society.

The great cities of Western history—Jerusalem, Athens, Alexandria, Vienna, London are named in quick succession, reminding the reader of all the doomed souls already encountered among them. *The Waste Land* messages to create hope removing social commentary of absolute despair. The Buddha or Augustine, Tiresias or Lil, even Jesus Christ, and certainly Phlebas the Phoenician. And yet our hero, perhaps unlike anyone who has ever lived before, has been brought up to believe that he and his age are anything but typical, and are the inheritors of the ages, the modern world fulfilled at last in the system, thought, and institution, gramophone and taxi cab. Liberating disillusionment is his solution now to learn how to be human, not smug and European and upper middle class, but holistically human. Then, through sympathy self-discipline, and service, he finds the beginning of the springs of an inner peace that will culminate in a genuine self-acceptance, a story, at least Sophocles' Tiresias would agree, as old as Oedipus of Thebes.

*The Waste Land* is a critique of neither the myth nor the urban apocalypse but it is the first work of Western secular literature to recognize and, more importantly, to illustrate, that no human value system is central to the needs of the entire human race, and yet 'regarded as an experience which appears in a soul, the whole world for each is peculiar and private to that soul.' That is Eliot's citation from F. H. Bradley's *Appearance and Reality,* which the poet of *The Waste Land* quotes in his note to line 412. As much as it is also an expression of the theme of the poem, the myopia of the poem's contemporary

responses confirms that theme's validity.

*The Waste Land* may be meaningful only as a commentary on the severe limitations on our ability to arrive at universally acceptable meanings, and it achieves that 'meaning' of its own by disassociating itself from the techniques of meaningful literature, a goal it further achieves by bringing to bear, for examination and consideration, fragments of that very kind of literature as it has developed, in the West, through several millennia. It is not, however, the thematic substance of the poetry's literary fragments, or their sources, for that matter, that constitute the poem's meaning, which is instead arrived at as its readers undergo the same processes of self-discovery as the speaker undergoes. We are the product of this wasteland while the land lasts, and then it is gone. Eliot continually confirms meaning by continually denying its possibility by just as constantly echoing its myriad formulations in the past. The reader who studies each particular fragment fails to realize that it is a whole, not a partial vision, that matters. Thus this 'theme' of *The Waste Land*, though it is assuredly the heart of the poem's poetic experience, is developed by example, never stated, for the simple reason that to even hint at it as a theme would be to undermine its validity.

The Holy Grail with the mechanical lovemaking of the typist, the clerk, and Tiresias languages pointing toward the ineffable; *Shantih shantih shantih*. If the Sanskrit word is generally translated to mean the peace that surpasses understanding, then that is another way of identifying that point at which words fail but life goes, happily, on. Such an ending to such a word-intensive poem is a self-evident mockery of the efficacy of words to do anything more than confuse readers out of the very peace they seek to find through and in them. That is one reason that it is fair to see *The Waste Land*, for all its bookish erudition, as a cautionary against trusting anything too much, particularly literature. If the poem can be summed up in the words, 'Physician, heal thyself,' then the poem would be giving itself the lie to end by implying that it is the answer. It presents itself only as a way to find an answer.

## Conclusion

*The Waste Land* after all search for the causes and consequences of despair, disillusionment, and frustration is the hope that enables us to become optimistic. Among the five different sections of the poem, the opening parts of the poem deal with the fight, wars, and cruelties in different kinds of games that Londoners experienced and the last

part suggests to be silent with the words of thunder's sayings. Waste dreams and desires are particularly symbolized in *The Waste Land* when that experience does not offer a way far safer, specific, and objective. Moral and ethical guidance to live peacefully is poetic anticipation. The journey through the wasteland that Eliot depicts in his poem seeks multiple ways of living and finally, it is nothing more than the poetic imagination and metaphor, perhaps among the various practices devised, of each individual's journey through the confusing notion of life itself. Eliot exposes the social disharmony through the chaos of disharmony, depression, and death of the Londoners as data shows.

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