



A Flight from Personal to Universal T. S. Eliot's *The Waste Land*

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Abstract

T. S. Eliot's 'The Waste Land', a multifaceted piece of art has five parts comprising 433 lines which not only throws light on the mechanical, immoral, and untraditional life of the wastelanders but also suggests the way to salvation. Eliot started spewing quotes like a mentally disturbed person and created a very lengthy work. This original draft was edited by Ezra Pound who has cut almost half the portion of this social document. It is worthwhile to search how Eliot presents the real picture of modern society through these personal sufferings. Interestingly, Eliot with the help of Ezra Pound universalizes his pains and agonies through references, allusions, and quotes from the past. In reality, the first three sections of this long poem spotlight human miseries due to a lack of moral and spiritual values. Surprisingly, these tribulations are still prevalent in society even after 100 years of the publication of this masterpiece of Eliot. At the same time, the valuable suggestions from the last two parts especially the last are relevant in the present scenario also. It is worth mentioning that even today after a century, Eliot's views of self-purification and self-discipline are noticeable as they can lead to a good moral society if each individual purifies and disciplines himself. In other words, the present paper is an attempt to draw that the study of the past can derive a solution for a better future for the whole world including every individual.

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Introduction

T. S. Eliot's poem *The Waste Land* mentions four world-famous wastelands. Amongst these wastelands, Eliot's wasteland is new, known as the modern wasteland while the other three wastelands are old. Eliot refers to all three wastelands— two mythical wastelands and one Biblical wasteland. The Biblical wasteland as mentioned in the Old Testament warns the people against idolatry worshipping. The lands of King Oedipus and King Fisher have to endure pain and suffering due to the sins of their respective rulers. King Oedipus's country suffered as the king had sex with his mother. Likewise, the people of King Fisher's country had to face famine as the soldiers of King Fisher ravished the nuns of the Chapel Perilous which contained the Holy Grail. As a result, the king became impotent and the people suffered from extreme hunger.

Eliot was well acquainted with these wastelands as he had been a keen reader since his childhood. According to Wikipedia sources, he suffered from a 'congenital double inguinal hernia' during his childhood. That is why he could neither 'participate in many physical activities' nor 'socialize with his peers'. In his isolation and loneliness, his infatuation with language and literature was developed. He studied different languages, Latin, German, French, ancient Greek, and Sanskrit. It developed his taste for comparative literature. He even spent time reading about Indian philosophy, Buddhism, Hinduism etc.

Famous philosopher Bertrand Russell was greatly impressed with Eliot's outstanding knowledge of literature, language, and philosophy. In this regard, Garrick Davis quotes the following excerpt from one of Russell's letters in his article 'What to Make of T. S. Eliot?'

'My pupil Eliot was there- the only one who is civilized, and he is ultra civilized knows his classics very well, is familiar with all French literature from Villon to Vildrach, and is all altogether impeccable in his taste but has no vigour or life- or enthusiasm...'
(Davis Garsick Vol-37)

Therefore, some scholars have opined that Russell had an affair with Eliot's wife Vivienne. Undoubtedly, the married life of Eliot was not good. His wife was a clinical patient suffering from insomnia and anxiety. In reality, both Eliots often complained

about their physical and mental health. They could not get rid of it despite their efforts as Eliot used to drink a lot and his wife was a drug addict.

In a personal letter, Eliot confesses: ‘To her, the marriage brought no happiness. To me, it brought the state of mind out of which came *The Waste Land*.’

Truly, as Eliot was unhealthy mentally, he started spewing quotes. According to ts.com, Eliot started ‘amassing a ragbag of fragments’ as since 1914 he has been planning to communicate his personal experiences and emotions along with the global distress. Finally, he finished his writing in a sanatorium in Switzerland. On this account, Jed Esty, Vartan Gregorian Professor of English, calls this poem a ‘PTSD poem’ which means post-traumatic stress disorder poem. Later on, Eliot comments while speaking of *The Waste Land* as recorded in Dolly Delightly’s book blog:

To me it was only a relief of a personal and wholly insignificant grouse against life; it is just a piece of rhythmical grumbling.

However, the poem was published after much revision and re-revision by Eliot as suggested by his wife and famous literary figure Ezra Pound. Interestingly, he deleted some parts of the original draft acting upon the advice of his first wife. Such as the following excerpt from one of his letters reveals what is maintained by Mark Ford in his article ‘Ezra Pound and the Drafts of *The Waste Land*’:

‘I have done a rough draft of part III, but do not know whether it will do, must wait for Vivien’s opinion as to whether it is printable.’ (Ford Mark 2016)

She suggested him to remove some lines that seemed to be her personal. Still, in the final version of the poem, in the section titled A Game of Chess, mentally ill husband and wife resemble Eliots. Their following conversation throws light on the married life of Eliots:

“My nerves are bad tonight. Yes, bad. Stay with me.”

“I think we are in rats’ alley

Where the dead men lost their bones.” (Lines 111-114)

After reading these lines Vivien commented “Wonderful, wonderful, wonderful”

Similarly, Ezra Pound played a pivotal role in the editing of the original manuscript of *The Waste Land*. In reality, Eliot showed his sprawling text to him. He vigorously edited and cut almost half the length of the poem. Ford records the images of original manuscripts of *The Waste Land*, with Ezra Pound's annotations. He put on record how Pound writes 'OK' for appreciation 'STET' for 'Let it stand'. His notations included 'Too easy', and 'Perhaps be damned'. He extensively annotated in the margins of the sex scene between the typist and the young man. Ford points out that after much wheeling and scheming by both Eliot and Pound, the poem was published with the new title *The Waste Land* instead of the initial title *He Do The Police In Different Voices*.

Finally, the poem *The Waste Land* consisting of 433 lines divided into five sections appeared. All five sections portray the urban life of a city like London which is called 'The Unreal City'. *The Waste Landers* lead an immoral, mechanical, and untraditional life. For instance, 'April is the cruelest month' for them. They have a mechanical life as the following lines suggest:

The hot water at ten.

And if it rains, a closed car at four.

And we shall play a game of chess, (Lines 135-138)

The second part titled A Game Of Chess is highly autobiographical as it is largely based on the personal trauma faced by Eliot. Esty remarks:

Eliot was undergoing a breakdown in his moral compass, his emotions, in his intimate life. He found the poetic form that somehow manages to communicate to us intense personal distress and intense global distress...

So, it is also worth noticeable that how the private and public anguish of Eliot has been disseminated. Eliot divulges it through an innovative technique using allusions, quotations, references, myths symbols, etc. To support his idea of universalization of his intimate chaos through the poem, he borrowed the names of characters like Sosostrius from Aldous Huxley's novel *Crome Yellow*; the title of the section A Game of Chess from Middleton's play *Women Beware Women*, the expression A broken Coriolanus from Shakespeare's play *Coriolanus*. He has inserted quotations from outstanding authors to

highlight the sameness of problems. The quotation from Wagner's Opera on the love of Tristan and Isolde fits into the scene of the hyacinth girl and her lover. Sometimes he even modifies the words of the quotation to suit the context. For instance, the words of the dirge in Webster's *The White Devil* have been changed. The original 'wolf' has been replaced by the 'dog' as 'dog' represents watchfulness and can rouse man to a sense of his spiritual tragedy. His unusual and original symbols have comprehensive importance such as the falling of the London Bridge does not merely refer to an incident but symbolizes the political and spiritual decay of modern Europe. The recurrent mythical symbols like winter stand for death, spring for rebirth, draught for spiritual barrenness, and rain for spiritual rebirth and productivity make the poem comprehensible.

Truly the poet refers to the past to find a parallel for the present as human nature is constant throughout the ages. He has mirrored human experiences beginning from pre-historic times, through Egyptian and Greek civilization to the modern 20th century. For example, sex perversions in modern and medieval ages are the same tragedy for guilty love portrayed in the story of Tristan and Isolde and the hyacinth girl of today. Still, there is a noticeable contrast between the girl of the 18th century and the modern typist girl. The girl who lost her virtue in Goldsmith's *The Vicar of Wakefield* committed suicide; the modern girl after the sex feels no remorse; she merely takes it as a matter of routine and puts a record on the gramophone with automatic hand'.

In reality, the hectic activities of modern urban life rampant in modern society have been condensed by using myths, allusions, references, quotations, and symbols. The whole saga of human life has been telescoped from ancient times to the 20th century. He evaluates the present scenario from a historical perspective. In the past, fairies walked on the banks of river Thames, today prostitutes and call girls wander on the bank in search of sex. Earlier, the fairies washed their feet in the river water. But now in the modern wasteland, Mrs. Porter and her daughter 'wash their feet in soda water'.

In other words, Eliot again moves further flighting from personal to universal by connecting the modern wasteland with different wastelands of the past. Baudelaire's unreal city is not Paris but London. It spotlights the similarities between the past and present. It makes him understand that human experiences are more or less similar.

He feels that present discontents both personal and public can be apprehended by concatenating ancient and modern. Consequently, he finds that present problems can be solved with the methods of the past.

Therefore, he refers to one of the Hindu Upanishads where in a period of doubt and confusion men, angels and demons prayed to the creator. The almighty God replied through a divine thunder which uttered 'Da' thrice. Each group of men, angels, and demons interpreted it in their ways. Men said 'Da' means 'Datta' i.e. 'give' Demons uttered 'Da' which means 'Dayadhvam' which means 'sympathize'. Further, 'Da' for angels was 'Damyanta' meaning 'control'.

Then, Eliot realizes that a person can not reform the whole society. He derives another remedy from Dante i.e. self-purification. He feels that the society can be reformed with the effort of each individual. One must begin with oneself. To put it differently, the whole world can be rebuilt by the reformation of each person in the universe. Self-purification and self-discipline of each individual is the path to salvation for humanity.

The above-mentioned solution of self-reformation for man's salvation is relevant in the present world. The significance of *The Waste Land* for the present generation even after a century of its publication in 1922 can not be ignored. In the words of Esty:

It's very contemporary in terms of the world of sex and gender politics...Even more strikingly contemporary is the fact that this story is narrated from a transgender or intergender point of view. Eliot assumes the perspective of Tiresias, a famous mythological figure who transits back and forth between the position of man and woman. Eliot uses Tiresias' viewpoint to try to embed the intimate skirmishes of his tacky present into a whole civilization struggle over sex, going back to Ovid and Greek mythology.

It manifests that Eliot has universalized his trauma through the collage method using Tiresias as a mouthpiece. Tiresias is an all-knowing universal person who belongs to the past as well as the present. He is a link between the wasteland of modern civilization and the wasteland of ancient civilization. Moreover, it reveals that human anguish and suffering are universal. Human virtues and vices are almost the same in every

age. Hence the insights of earlier generations can help in drawing solutions as there is sameness of the problems despite distance in time and space. In other words, errors and mistakes of the past generation can guide the present generation.

Conclusion

The Waste Land by T. S. Eliot, an epic of human suffering is a fine instance of universalization of personal distress through the collage method spotlighting self-purification, self-control, and self-discipline as a panacea for individual human suffering drawn from the linkage between past and present. It is mandatory for the salvation of the whole humanity even in the present time in the 21st century, after a hundred years of the publication of *The Waste Land*, self-purification and self-discipline of each individual will lead to a better world. In a nutshell, it can be concluded that Eliot's flight from personal to universal makes us understand that the concatenation of antiquity and contemporaneity can be relevant to derive a solution to the present problems for a bright future for the whole universe including every individual. Certainly, Eliot is guided by ancient authors and the present world can be guided through Eliot's solution as he flights from personal to universal.

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