



# Modern Malaises: A study of T. S. Eliot's *The Waste Land*

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## Abstract

*This paper seeks to examine modern malaises like the emptiness of mind, sexual perversion, alienation and fragmentation, spiritual barrenness, estrangement, disillusionment, and industrialisation in the light of T. S. Eliot's 'The Waste Land'. The poem explores how people have become uprooted and hopeless in their life routines. The poem was written in 1922 but reveals the real picture of the near future. In today's world emotional and spiritual crises are the basic problems. Modern people do not have love, trust, hope, and morality. They are self-centered entrapped by the greed of money and power. T. S. Eliot suggests nourishing the dry roots of modern wasteland and regenerating a new and different world. An honest effort has been made to depict the real picture of today's society, to deconstruct the polluted discourse of the modern world, and to look for the remedy of love, trust, hope and good deeds suggested by T. S. Eliot in his greatest poem, 'The Waste Land'.*

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## Keywords

Modern world, Fragmentation, Alienation, Emptiness of minds, Frustration, Spiritual crisis, Love, Good deeds

## Introduction

The present paper is an effort to reveal the problems and concerns portrayed in the poem, 'The Waste Land' which reflects the present age connecting antiquity with

the present world's situations. Eliot traces the hidden realities of today's world. T. S. Eliot shows idleness and emptiness of mind, estranged and fragmented modern life very successfully through the mechanism of split up. Reconstructing the structure of modernism, Eliot portrays a real presentation of modern malaises and seeks a finer solution like a prophet.

The poem explains that modern man is busy in their daily routine work. The church is empty which is the symbol of emptiness of modern people who are limited to themselves. They do not want to participate in societal situations. They are constrained to themselves and think that all the problems of life can be handled alone. Frustration, alienation, fragmentation, moral decay, and sex perversion are the results of the modern way of life of modern people. They are facing social, mental, and emotional crises and being suffocated by the tension, and anxiety created by their own hollowness of mind and irresponsive activities.

The article shows how the poem which depicts the idleness of modern life is a true picture of the present world. A path of emancipation is suggested in the last section of the poem through mythological allusions and symbols from Eastern and Western philosophies, Hinduism, Buddhism, Christianity, scriptures, and books of many writers to rectify the society. The poem is a timeless journey of a person's daily routine activities where readers can relate to them and find a better solution.

## **Objectives**

The main objective of this article to bring attention to modern malaises that have made the lives of modern people quite artificial, mechanical, boring, and robotic. After World War 1st, people were in shock, in fear of attacks that resulted in anxiety, mental disturbance, frustration, and confusion. Love for power, lust, and money had disturbed their minds. The research shows how these modern malaises prevalent at the time after World War First are not different from the present problems and situations and problems and need to be solved. Finding the remedy to the problem is the main goal of the research paper as suggested in the poem 'The Waste Land'.

## Literature Review

Research papers and Critical studies on T. S. Eliot's *The Waste Land* have a number of aspects and perspectives. Chahal in his 'Revealing Ecological Concerns in T. S. Eliot's *The Waste Land* through Eco-Critical Lens' describes ecological concerns, the relationship between the ideas, images, and language of the poem and the larger ecological condition of the early 20th century, worries about the environment problem, effects of human activity on the environment, rapid industrialization, the value of Eco-criticism to promote environmental awareness.

Ketevan JMUKHADZE in his research paper, 'Mythopoeic Image of the City in T. S. Eliot's *The Waste Land*' has portrayed the landscape as a symbolic and suggestive artistic space. Multilayered structures, mythical methods, and prophets as central figures have been studied. Gwenda Koo discusses the fragmented consciousness of the alienated mind in his article named 'A Fragmented Poetic Consciousness in T. S. Eliot's *The Waste Land*'. The researcher has focused on multiple perspectives of the individual consciousness, burden of existence, and search for salvation.

Mr. Rabichandan Kumar in *The Waste Land* by T. S. Eliot' is modern epic of the wasteland as the magnum opus of T. S. Eliot. The researcher has shown a wide range of themes, the saga of suffering with epic grandeur and, the mental journey of Tiresias from beginning to last.

Sanjana Plawat in her research 'April is the Cruellest Month: A Philosophical Inquiry into Humanity during the Corona Pandemic through T. S. Eliot's *The Waste Land*' studied the deep-rooted challenges of humanity in the wake of a pandemic like Corona. She has focused on how we can fight in Coronavirus-like situations and challenges with patience and solidarity.

Cyrena N. Pondrom in the paper 'T.S. Eliot: The Performativity of Gender in *The Waste Land*' has described the performance of gender through three crucial emotional scenes; the hyacinth girl episode, the first conversation in a Game of Chess and the silent confession to the friend in what the thunder said showing gender ambiguity.

Gaurab Sen Gupta in his study, 'Echoes of the Past: Revisiting Myths in T. S. Eliot's

*The Waste Land* shows the connection between the past and the present to convey some didactic purpose and the future of modern man. Walid Ali Ziater in 'Reality and Mythology, Convention and Novelty in T. S. Eliot's *The Waste Land*' discusses Eliot's use of myth, allegory, and symbols to connect the past with the present. The researcher depicts that Eliot's use of classic literature was to show the present conditions and reality.

The present study discusses some particular modern malaises that relate to the present scenario and human problems with the suggestions to overcome evils and difficult situations through the great work of T. S. Eliot's *The Waste Land*.

### **Research Methodology**

The research is descriptive and analytical. The primary and secondary sources have been used to conduct this research paper and an honest attempt has been made to make the study qualitative.

### **Representation of Modern Malaises**

The way of living life of modern people, depicted in *The Waste Land*, quite changed. Traditional values disappeared due to social and technical change. The assumptions of self, divine, and community became quite different from traditional ways of structuring. The main problems and concerns of mankind remain always the same. The vacuity of the modern world perfectly overlaps with the word created in *The Waste Land*.

The first section of *The Waste Land* is about numbness, death, unproductively laziness, and fleshy pleasure. Its opening line 'April is the cruelest month resembles the line used in 'The Canterbury Tales' but the difference is that Chaucer is optimistic while Eliot cries for the darkness of the modern age. Normally April is the month of fertility but the modern world has become dull and numb to such an extent that there is no hope of growing something even at the reach of the month, of April. Madam Sosostri is a fortune teller who tells the fortune with her Tarot Cards. When she says that she does not know the hanged man, it means that she does not believe in life beyond this world. This reveals the ignorance, backwardness, and insecurity of modern people who do not have any moral and religious guidance. Modern people are disconnecting from

others and feel alienated. When a person feels alone, he becomes suffocated resulting in self-criticism, sadness, irritation, and confusion. In ‘A Game of Chess’ suffering from neurotic disorder the lady speaks in confusion:

“My nerves are bad tonight. Yes bad. Stay with me  
Speak to me. Why do you never speak? Speak” (Lines 111-112)

These lines suggest that expression of thoughts and interaction is most necessary in life. People might cure many mental diseases by sharing their views and expressing their internal feelings. At the end of the section, the speaker asks Stetson:

That corpse you planted last year in your garden  
Has it begun to sprout?  
Oh keep the dog far thence. (Lines 73-75)

The corpse under the earth is the symbol of hidden conscience and wisdom. People are in a rats’ race having no peace and comfort. But the lines also suggest the idea of rebirth and resurrection with the help of morality and Christianity.

Loveless sex and desire for money portrayed in the poem are similar to modern men’s condition having no hope and trust. The section ‘A Game of Chess’ shows lustful love and destructive desires. The pathetic condition of a lady because of the irresponsible behavior of her husband, the working-class Lil who is treated as a mere object of sex and advised to be ready to entertain her husband coming home after four years, reveals the loveless expectations of relationship and burdened sex. Lil has lost all her charm and glow because of continuous childbirth and responsibilities. In ‘The Fire Sermon’ lustful nymphs come over Thames and depart after satisfying. The river vanishes all the signs of their misdeeds that pollute the nature and environment as Eliot writes:

The river bears no empty bottle, sandwich papers  
Silk handkerchiefs, cardboard boxes, cigarette ends. (Lines 177-178)

The stories of two lovers, Tristan and Isolde, and a hyacinth girl depict the sensuous and guilty love. The poem explains how sex has become a robotic routine need without any moral and faithful commitment. It seems that modern people indulge in illegal relationships to find relief from routine life problems and concerns. Here it would be

fine to take the example of today's TV serials which boldly show these types of loveless relationships and sex perversion. The Disney hot star love story 'Dear Ishq' presents a metropolitan city, with people running after money, and fame. The famous character, the writer, Mr. Abhimanyu, shown as a fragmented character, seeks satisfaction through illicit love affairs and egoistic behavior. Modern people follow these things in the name of modernity in spite of learning a lesson. They are restricted to their own experiments, rules, desires, and own rights. They consider themselves free to do anything leaving their foundational values like honesty, loyalty, faithfulness, love, and trust. Eliot presents the reference of Antony and Cleopatra who became the reason for the destruction of their Empire because of their sensuous love.

Loveless love and fake relationships create alienation and fragmentation in modern people. Their emotions are scattered. Eliot uses the technique of split up to show the fragmented and disillusioned life of modern people. After World War I people, broken from their hearts, and finding no help in society, became selfish and egoistic to fulfill at first their needs rather than desires. They were the victims of the situation. But slowly and gradually greed has taken the place of sorrowful situations. Irregularity of lines, stanzas, rhyme, voices taken from many societal situations and personal life, disconnected speeches and passages, and complicated meanings symbolize the disconnected and complicated modern life which is also the same in the present world.

Fragmentation leads to alienation and alienation leads to irritation, and disconnection from others and that leads to spiritual barrenness. Spiritual barrenness upholds the main theme of the poem. The first section of the poem 'Burial of the Dead' shows unproductive land growing no plants because waste lenders do not want to make any effort to make it fertile. They are spiritually dead and not interested in awakening their souls who are sleeping in the warm season of winter. They love their daily routine and boring life. Madame Sosostris tells the future to superstitious people but she herself does not believe in the life hereafter. This shows modern people's insecurity and also reveals the suggestion that they should be inspired by great Eastern and Western preachings and Christianity not from fortune-telling tarot cards having no base and certainty. The section 'The Fire Sermon' shows the reference to good and pure nymphs who leave

their purity and make the river polluted. It symbolizes the modern people who ignore old and traditional values and prefer even the wrong paths to fulfill their wishes, dreams, and ambitions. They do not hesitate to do wrong deeds and frauds. Tricks and intrigues attract them to become successful.

Eliot highlights the spiritual numbness in people who have become so materialistic that they do not have time to connect with their creator, God, and nature. A modern man considers that science is the solution to every problem. He can handle everything with scientific knowledge but the biggest irony is that he is not happy keeping everything within his reach.

With the use of scientific experiments, he also mistreats the environment. The poem portrays that the modern man, insensitive towards purity and freshness of the air, doing rich business to earn money and fulfill his big dreams, takes high risks which spoils his future too. The use of oil and tar, the garbage like empty bottles, handkerchiefs, and cigarette ends contaminate the water, earth, and air. Modern industrial technologies also infect the environment.

The environment is also infected due to increased capitalism. Emotionally and spiritually dead modern people follow the robotic and mechanical routine. The present system is global economic. People want to have their private businesses and property. Madame Sosostris' business of Tarot cards, the nymphs' business at night on the Thames River, and Phlebus' death for business purposes show that people are totally blind to earning money. In such an economic system all want to gain profit and want private ownership. The red rock is the symbol of Christianity. The capitalist economy polluted the brains of modern men and created chaos, anarchy, and uprootedness. Lil's friend advises her to use cosmetic products to enhance her fake beauty for her husband. Piresius meets a German princess who is fond of physical pleasure and follows uprooted modern culture, and illegal relationships and is an example of faithlessness and guilty Love. Lil and Albert's loveless relationship, the seduction of the typist girl, Philomela's rape by the king, Tereus, the contamination of Thames River, and sexual abuse between lover and beloved portray venality and disloyalty. When Lil is unable to get her glow by cosmetics, it suggests that true love is the thing that is enough to enhance the beauty of

any relationship and to heal the emptiness and mental illness of modern man.

### **Seeking the Solution by the Use of Illusions and Symbols**

The poem, 'The Waste Land' examines some modern malaises looking for regeneration and regaining what was lost in modern life. Eliot uses the technique of myth, and allusions to present religious darkness and disillusionment. The main purpose of using the mythological technique is to connect the past with the present. Using the mythical references, he seems to suggest if the regain of conscience and rebirth of dead life was possible in the past time with the help of Christianity and moral preaching of scriptures, it is quite possible to awaken the dead soul of modern man by learning traditional values and beliefs.

### **Myth**

Myth is a traditional story that connects history to nature explaining social phenomena. Myth may be my created story. It may or may not be true. Supernatural beings or events are included in the myth. Eliot uses myths, allusions from all periods, and spheres as objective correlative.

### **Tiresias**

Tiresias, a mythical hero, speaks about the shocking and ill condition after World War first. According to a mythical story, he saw two serpents copulating. Cursed by them he was transformed into a woman. Then he became blind by the Curse of the goddess Hera. He became blind having the prophetic vision. He experienced both sexes male and female. He also advised the king Oedipus for penance to find regeneration. As a connection between the past and the present, he preaches for the awakening of conscience to remove sins.

### **Fisher King**

T. S. Eliot alludes to Fisher King from Arthurian legend result whose Kingdom became Barren and dull because of the sin done by his soldiers. His soldiers raped the nuns of Chapel. The land of Fisher's king became cursed and barren. Fisher King, guarding the Holy Grail hopes that any noble person would come one day and save them from the



curse and the land would be fertile again. This suggests that the loss of culture, trust, and faith can be regained by purification and spirituality.

### **Vegetation and Fertility Myth**

Vegetation God, buried beneath the soil, sprouts again as grain indicating the rebirth of modern life. The reference to Jesus Christ suggests the need for penance and sacrifice of evil things for the rebirth of all humanity. It also suggests if the sufferings of Jesus Christ could revive humanity in the past time then the sacrifice of desires and ill wishes can also purify modern life.

### **Biblical Wasteland**

The land of Emmaus became unfertile because of the misdeeds of the land dwellers. Prophet Ezekiel advised them to find God's grace which resembles the idea of following the great preaching of great persons and books like Buddha, Christ, and Hindu scriptures.

### **Allusions to Dante's Divine Comedy**

Eliot shows the crowd over London Bridge which is similar to the crowd in the section 'Inferno' of Divine Comedy. The sighs taken by people remind the sound made by pagans for god's grace. This allusion symbolizes wandering modern people aimlessly. Here the suggestion is to find God's grace by doing good deeds that can save humanity.

The title 'A Game of Chess' has been taken from Thomas Middleton's 'Women Beware Women'. It presents the seduction of a girl by the duke which presents the lustful desire of modern life. The allusion of Antony and Cleopatra is the symbol of sensuous love that became the reason for the destruction of the whole empire.

The title 'The Fire Sermon' is taken from Buddha's sermon to his disciples. He advises them to follow the path of truth and honesty to save them from the lustful desires of the modern world. This desire is similar to the hellfire with which the present world is burning.

The mythical allusion of the Phoenix bird symbolizes the idea of rejuvenation and regeneration. The reference to two lovers from Wagner Opera, Tristan, and Isolde also overlaps the modern lustful desires Philomela, taken from Greek mythology, raped by

her brother-in-law, King Tereus, transformed into a nightingale is the symbol of the illegal, forced relationship of modern society:

The change of Philomel by the barbarous king  
So rudely forced... (Lines 99-100)

The section 'Death by water' has an allusion to a drowning sailor from the 'Tempest' that indicates the moral and spiritual decay and the need for upliftment. Sibyl, a mythological character, was granted eternity but she was fed up with the destruction and loss of time and hopes for resurrection after death. This suggests the cycle of life and death. Nobody can be saved from this. Buddhist philosophy in the section, 'What the Thunder Said', the speaker requests to God:

Burning burning burning burning  
O Lord thou pluckest me out (Lines 308-309)

Here Eliot is crying to see the horrible state of his countrymen. Like a prophet, he requests God to save his humanity from the fire of sin, lust, and money. The situation of the present world is also similar to the burning man in 'The Waste Land'. He suggests that only God and the path of Christianity, and morality can save modern man from this fire.

Thus myth, allusions, and symbols used by the poet, unifying the antiquity with the present, guide the wandering humanity and present solutions to the problems to which all human beings can relate because the basic problems remain always the same. It becomes quite possible to fertile the wasteland through the proper guidance and the formula of three DA, Datta, Dayadhavam, and Damyata suggested by T S Eliot to find peace and real happiness.

In four sections of the poem, the poet presents modern malaises which are relevant to the present situation. But in the second section 'What the thunder said' he presents a Vedantic philosophy. The cleansing rain is the symbol of cleaning all the sins. It is the symbol of enlightenment and awakening of sleeping humanity for so long-time revelation of truth and awakening time. The time of awakening and realization of truth is suggested by the crawling of Cock. A new beginning, a new morning without

darkness of mind is indicated as a remedy for problems. He advises to follow the 3 DA formula, Datta to give, Dayadhavam to sympathize, Damyata to self-control, and the path of Shantih.

## Conclusion

*The Waste Land* is a true presentation of modern disintegration, frustration, corruption, sin, and sexual perversion and with the help of mythical allusions suggests a path of truth and regeneration alluding to Hinduism, Christianity, Upanishad and prosperous preachings of ancient preachers like Buddha, Christ, Tiresias. He tries to save his humanity from the fire of modern malaises.

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