



Loss of Traditional Value and Spiritual Emptiness in *The Waste Land*

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Abstract

The Waste Land by T. S. Eliot came in an era of heightened anxiety. The loss of traditional values was the cause behind this spiritual emptiness. The industrial advancement and technological developments which were considered as the progress of the country, actually brought with it a spiritual uncertainty within the society. The poet depicts the diseased society after the First World War. One of the after-effects of this war upon European society was spiritual and moral chaos. The poet asks 'What are the roots that clutch, what branches grow Out of this stony rubbish?' (Eliot, *The Waste Land*, 1922) thus the poem reflects the disillusionment and the bareness of the post-war generation. The present paper aims to analyse the reason behind the loss of traditional values, and how spirituality can be restored in the 21st century.

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Introduction

Thomas Stearns Eliot was born on the 26th of September, 1888 in Saint Louis, Missouri. He was a brilliant student with a wide range of interests. He graduated from Harvard with a degree in philosophy in 1909 and went on to study at various universities in the US and Europe. He had some close relationships with the poet Ezra Pound, and in 1915 he married the Englishwoman Vivien Hough-Wood. Eliot settled in London and wrote

for literary magazines, worked at a bank called Lloyds, and taught at schools. He was unhappy in his marriage, which contributed to the gloomy atmosphere of his poetry in the 1910's and 1920's, his most famous poem, *The Waste Land* (1922), was a reflection of the despair that followed World War I

The Waste Land by T. S. Eliot is a 20th-century poem written during a period of disillusionment and cultural transformation in the wake of World War I. It portrays social decay, religious crisis, and disruption of traditional beliefs. It presents a society grappling with cultural shifts and a lack of religious faith through references to other cultures. At the same time, political instability and economic hardship heightened the atmosphere of uncertainty. As a seminal work of modernism, Eliot's work captures the complexity and disarray of the early 20th-century political and social environment.

Being a realist, Eliot depicted society in *The Waste Land* in a realistic manner. Eliot refers to April as the 'cruellest month' in *The Waste Land* because, in Sarah Coleridge's words, it 'brings the primrose sweet, scatters daises at our feet.' He declared that 'April is the cruellest month, breeding lilacs out of the dead land, mixing memory and desire, stirring dull route with spring rain' (Eliot, 1922). Unlike other poets, Eliot does not see daisies and primroses here. He just sees a barren landscape. The only thing that brightens the dull paths is the spring rain. The poem was written after World War I. It describes the social breakdown, the destruction, the death, and the desolation of society. It was a period of spiritual void and despair. The poem is a reflection of the generational pain caused by the war, both at home front and on the battlefield.

Impact of World War I

The World War I resulted in the rise of Adolf Hitler and the rise of the Soviet communist regime, the formation of nation-states, the promotion of independence movements in Europe's colonies, and the total destruction of empires. A lot of families lost their homes and had to move. Not many families had any losses at the end. A friend or a family member would have suffered a loss if all the families had made it home. It is conceivable that a small town lost the majority of its young men, and the grief was shared throughout the nation. The loss of traditional values resulted from the loss of religious belief among the war veterans, as the society had been based on these traditional values prior to the outbreak of the First World War. The poet's focus has been on the decay and dissolution of society, and the psychological and spiritual hardship endured by individuals during

the post-war period has resulted in a spiritual emptiness.

Contrast of Past and Present

The first section of the poem presents a comparison between past and present in the lines

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.
I read, much of the night, and go south in the winter. (Lines 15-18)

The post-war period, however, is different. Civilization is characterized by a general state of emotional emptiness. Post-war people are physically present but mentally inert, enduring the same activities on a daily basis. The following sentences reflect this emotional emptiness.

You cannot say, or guess, for you know only
A heap of broken images, where the sun beats,
And the dead tree gives no shelter, the cricket no relief,
And the dry stone no sound of water. (Lines 21-24)

This poem is all about the psychological damage caused by the war. The people and the country are dead and this dead culture has lost all the things that would keep it going. The stuff the characters do in the poem is so boring and boring. Even when it comes to romantic stuff, it's all about love and passion. For instance, the romantic encounter described in the poem is without emotion 'Endeavours to engage her in caresses, Which still are unreprieved, if undesired.' (Eliot, 1922), these lines throw light upon the sexual relation between the post-war men and women. For them, the encounter was an ordinary affair as he says,

She turns and looks a moment in the glass,
Hardly aware of her departed lover;
Her brain allows one half-formed thought to pass:
'Well now that's done: and I'm glad it's over. (Lines 250-253)

Materialism : A Cause of Spiritual Barrenness

Materialism is another factor that contributes to the spiritual emptiness of society after the war. The poet mocks at the modern society. 'A heap of broken images' is actually the image of a shattered society. Dead tree does not give him shade and the cricket gives him no relief. The poet wants to say that the materialistic man has distanced himself from Mother Nature and therefore cannot get peace anywhere.

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.
Sighs, short and infrequent, were exhaled,
And each man fixed his eyes before his feet. (Lines 61-65)

In the above lines, Tiresias is depicting London city which is under fog. 'Fog' here symbolises materialism. 'It shows how materialistic forces control all aspects of society. Materialism has frozen the minds of people.' (Philip 2021)

'Sigh' here symbolises the inner emptiness which resulted due to the excessive materialistic attitude of people.

The Chair she sat in, like a burnished throne,
Glowed on the marble, where the glass
Held up by standards wrought with fruited vines
From which a golden Cupidon peeped out
(Another hid his eyes behind his wing)
Doubled the flames of seven-branched candelabra
Reflecting light upon the table as
The glitter of her jewels rose to meet it, (Lines 77-84)

The poet here gives the message that these materialistic people search for happiness in luxurious things. They do not know that it is taking away their peace of mind. The poet highlights the fact that in spite of such a luxurious life, the modern man is devoid of true happiness and life has become dull and monotonous. The poem talks about the emptiness of those who value luxury and surround themselves with material possessions. 'The futility of materialistic life is among the common topics addressed by Eliot in his writings, which often serves to highlight the spiritual degeneration of people

and communities.’ (Abbas 2016)

It is clear from the writings of T. S. Eliot that as human society becomes more and more focused on worldly activities, it begins to drift further and further away from the realm of spirituality. These spiritually barren individuals seek satisfaction in worldly material possessions and fail to recognize that this desire only leads to sadness. Therefore, if one desires to be free of suffering, they must give up their desires.

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 135-139)

The above-mentioned lines clearly conclude that materialism leads to spiritual barrenness.

Loss of Faith and Moral Values

Church attendance has also become a normal part of life after the First World War, materialistic society has pretty much lost any sense of morality or faith. Society has deteriorated because of this loss of morality and faith.

One of the most remarkable aspects of Eliot’s examination of the decline of religious belief in *The Waste Land* is the overwhelming feeling of spiritual emptiness. This dichotomy of spring’s rebirth with a sense of cruelty and death serves as the poem’s springboard for exploring the spiritual aridity of the modern world. Eliot claims that conventional religious beliefs and morality have been compromised by the atrocities of war and the moral decay of civilization.

And upside down in the air were towers

Tolling reminiscent bells, that kept the hours

And voices singing out of empty cisterns and exhausted wells. (Lines 382-384)

These materialistic individuals lack empathy or a sense of compassion; they only think of their own benefits. They are trapped in the prisons they constructed for themselves, and their ability to escape is becoming increasingly difficult. Eliot also contemplates the deterioration of social trust and human development. He paints a bleak picture of a society inhabited by dissident individuals who are unable to connect with one another

and find meaning in their lives. References to the golden age of the past are juxtaposed against the barrenness of the present, conveying a sense of decay and frustration.

We think of the key, each in his prison
Thinking of the key, each confirms a prison
Only at nightfall, aethereal rumours
Revive for a moment a broken Coriolanus. (Lines 412-415)

In order to illustrate the spiritual divide, Eliot uses mythology, religious texts, and literary references. He refers to the biblical story of the Fisher King whose ruined land is a metaphor for a society that suffers from spiritual decay. The figures of Tiresias and Madam Sosostri in the poem also represent a society that has lost its sense of spirituality and no longer adheres to traditional beliefs.

The era also saw a lot of materialism and selfishness, where people got caught up in their own little lives and got caught up in getting things done quickly and at the cost of their moral and spiritual well-being. In the famous words, 'I'll show you fear with a dust-coated hand', Eliot talks about how empty life can be when there's no moral value in it, and how pointless it all is.

DA DA DA

The final part of *What The Thunder Said* argues that only a revival of religious faith can revive civilization. The story of two travellers serves as a metaphor for how religion can catalyse human advancement. The three words *DA DA DA* open the door to spiritual renewal in modern society.

First *DA* means *Datta*, which suggests that people must dedicate themselves to the welfare of mankind. The second *DA* means *Dayadhavam* (to sympathize) which means that people must sympathize with others. The third *DA* means *Damyata*, which means control over one's desires, which leads to satisfaction and spiritual bliss.

Eliot here makes allusions to the *Upanishads*, sacred texts for Hinduism and Buddhism. When Brhma was asked how to achieve inner peace, he answered with a mantra 'DA DA DA'. T. S. Eliot uses the teachings of *the Upanishads* for the welfare of mankind. He raises the hope of revival of the society with the weapon of unselfishness. When people work for the interest of others a selfless society will take birth and when people

will learn to sympathize with one another and this newly born society will become more peaceful. The third mantra, Damyata teaches us to control our senses. When a man controls his arrogance, his lust, and his desires his faith will be revived in God and he will be able to take full control of his life. Thus with the key of 'DA DA DA', modern man can get freedom from the self-created prison of isolation

Conclusion

The Waste Land is a modernist poem by T. S. Eliot that documents the decline of traditional values in the post-war period. It portrays a world in moral decay through fragmentary narratives and cultural references. The poem portrays a society in which traditional values have been shattered, leaving individuals spiritually bereft. It emphasizes the disintegration of social conventions and expresses a sense of sorrow and frustration. This poem serves as a powerful reminder of the need to find meaning and redemption in a fractured and perplexed society, particularly in the face of contemporary cultural and moral crises.

The poem also explores the spiritual emptiness of a fractured society in the aftermath of World War I. It portrays a world that has lost its traditional values and sense of connection through various voices and cultural references. The themes of depravity, dissatisfaction, and the pursuit of spiritual renewal allude to the emptiness of the soul. The poem's themes of spiritual despair are reflected in figures such as the Fisher King, as well as metaphorical settings such as the barren plain. This poem is a powerful reflection of the spiritual emptiness of the twentieth century, as it invites readers to contemplate the emptiness of modern life and the quest for spiritual fulfillment in an environment that is becoming increasingly distant and unpredictable.

The most famous poet of the 20th century depicted the devastation brought on by the First World War in his masterwork *The Waste Land*, as well as the means by which this loss and the materialistic society may be restored. 'The Waste Land is a highly condensed epic of the modern age' (Brooks 1937). The first three parts explain why we've lost our traditional values and spirituality. We've lost our faith in morality, we've been sexually abused, we've had bad relationships, we've been selfish, and we've been driven by our need to make money. The last part tells us how we'll get back to our way of life. Eliot says that if we want to restore our confidence in our traditional values, we

need to be disciplined. Self-discipline is the only way to get our civilisation back on track. He says we need to start disciplining ourselves. Purifying ourselves is a great way to bring spirituality back into our lives.

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