



Nature Imagery in T. S. Eliot's *The Waste Land: An Ecocritical Approach*

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Abstract

The twentieth century is a modern era of drastic changes, a culmination of industrialization and commercialization leading to the birth of many sciences, neglecting spirituality and Faith and threatening and pushing humanity to the marginalized status. T.S. Eliot's poetry bears a true reflection of the existential dilemma in which modern man has most paradoxically got trapped. It reveals the deterioration and decadence of human civilization; religion and spirituality that shaped the unstructured and brute primitive men appear frail today because we have learnt how to wear a fair mask and hide the dilapidated face behind it. The Waste Land (1922), no doubt a classic of the modern era, has garnered admiration and appreciation internationally for locating the cracks and fissures on the glossy surface of civilization and urban culture. Apart from criticising the crude cityscape, growing materialism, and spiritual aridity, the poem is replete with natural imagery in all five parts supposedly hinting at the impending ecological crisis we are facing in the twenty-first century. The imagery like the river sweating oil and tar used in 'The Waste Land' suggests severe environmental crisis, pollution, and urban sprawl threatening the ecology of the earth. Beginning with spring and April and ending with water and thunder, The Waste Land uses natural imagery to portray the existential crisis and degeneration in the cityscape and can be interpreted from an eco-critical standpoint. Industrialization and materialism have not only brought disaster to human civilization but have also affected the ecosystem and climate. This paper aims to explore the natural imagery in 'The Waste Land', especially in Part 1 and Part 5, exposing the reality amidst the gloom and disaster and evaluating its relevance today from the eco-critical and environmental angle.

Keywords

Culture, Civilization, Commercialisation, Ecocriticism, Ecology, Imagery

Introduction

Definition of Ecocriticism

The term 'ecocriticism' is the study of literature from an ecological perspective showing a deep concern for the environmental crisis due to human intervention. It investigates that all plants, animals, and humans are closely interrelated to one another, and literature is part of a vastly complex global system where there is an interaction between matter, energy, and ideas. It is also called environmental criticism or green studies. It can also be called the subjugation of green culture and ethics by human culture and ethics. Ecocritics focuses on issues such as how nature is represented in a work of literature, the role of physical setting in the development of the plot of a novel or story, or the extent of ecological awareness of a play. They sensitize the reader helping them to consider nature as an equally important critical category along with considerations such as race, class, and gender. They also raise the issues of global environmental crisis. It is believed that literature can play a pivotal role in curbing this ecocrisis.

Nature writing refers to the authors' awareness of the major role that nature plays in this world portraying the intimate, realistic, and detailed description of natural settings and the geographical features of a region. Representation of the natural environment has been frequently done in many works of literature for many centuries. James Thomson's *The Seasons* (1726-30) conveys the 'nostalgic view of a return to unspoiled nature to restore a lost simplicity and concord' (Abrams 81). Gilbert White's *Natural History and Antiquities of Selbourne* (1789) is about the affectionate observations of wildlife. Rousseau's appeal and Wordsworth and other romantic poets find in Nature the ameliorating capacity to heal the inner trauma missing in the cityscape and impart aesthetics and ethics. Henry David Thoreau's *Walden or Life in the Woods* (1854) proves him a naturalist in the most vital sense, for he has 'named the birds without a gun.' In the twentieth century, two books that first drew our attention towards the environmental degradation and devastation of wildlife inflicted by newly developed chemical pesticides are Aldo Leopold's *A Sand County Almanac* (1949) and Rachel Carson's *Silent Spring* (1962). It began to be realized how urbanization, industrialization, and the development of chemical pesticides have caused great damage to the ecosystem.

The explosion of the human population has caused deforestation.

The term, ecocriticism, was first coined by William Ruechert in his essay 'Literature and Ecology: An Experiment in Ecocriticism' (1978) who proposes 'the application of ecology and ecological concepts to the study of literature, because ecology (as a science, as a discipline, as the basis for the human vision) has the greatest relevance to the present and future of the world we all live in...' (Ruechert 107). Thereafter, in the 1980s the ecocritical approach has its inception to be used to study literature and to focus on the concerns for environmental crisis due to the discord brought to the ecosystem by human intervention. In 1985, Frederick O. Waage edited a book, *Teaching Environmental Literature: Material, Methods, Resources* foster 'a greater presence of environmental concern and awareness in literary disciplines.' (Waage viii) In 1991, Harold Fromm organized MLA special session entitled 'Ecocriticism: The Greening of Literary Studies' to explore further in this new area of study the relationship between literature and the physical environment, which requires looking at literary studies through a green lens. In 1992, the Association for the Study of Literature and Environment (ASLE) was formed in America seeking to inspire and promote intellectual work in environmental humanities and arts. The Association aims at promoting 'the exchange of ideas and information pertaining to literature that considers the relationship between human beings and the natural world.' (Quoted in Glotfelty viii) It also 'encourages new nature writing, traditional and innovative scholarly approaches to environmental literature, and interdisciplinary environmental research.' (Quoted in Glotfelty viii) Thus ecocriticism brought a new scope and hope to study literature from the ecocritical angle and develop a bridge between nature and literature because humans have no alternative to shifting to some other planet where they can hardly find a beautiful and eco-friendly biosphere.

Various Critical and Theoretical Approaches to *The Waste Land*

After heavy editing by Ezra Pound, Eliot's *The Waste Land* was published by the *Criterion* in October 1922 and by the *Dial* in December 2022. It has created a ripple in the silent stream of poetic current setting an important landmark in World English poetry. Due to its complex poetic structure, it got a mixed reception after its publication. Earlier the poem was criticised by Louis Untermeyer who called it 'a pompous parade of erudition, a lengthy extension of the earlier disillusion, a kaleidoscopic movement in

which the bright-coloured pieces fail to atone for the absence of an integrated design.’ (Untermeyer 453). The *Times Literary Supplement* commented, ‘It is parodying without taste or skill.’ Amy Lowell remarked, ‘It is a piece of trite.’ F.L. Lucas opines that the poem is ‘the parodies are cheap and the imitations are inferior’ (Quoted in Kenner 33). In an essay, ‘The Lyric Impulse in T.S. Eliot’s Poetry’, Alec H. Brown observes that the poem is ‘morbidly attracted for urban squalor’. (Quoted in Maxwell) Clive Bell wrongly criticised Eliot for lack of imaginative faculty of mind, ‘If you will read carefully Eliot’s three longer poems – ‘Prufrock’, ‘Gerontion’, and *The Waste Land* – I think you will see what I mean (even if you do not agree with me) in saying that he has been more or less repeating himself. And here we come at Eliot’s essential defect. He lacks imagination...’ (Bell 772)

Later, *The Waste Land* was increasingly appreciated for its truthful reflection of the trauma, vacuity, sterility, and inertia in the post-war urbanized and nature-deprived modern society where devastation conveys more meaning and sense than the vernal freshness of the sweet green land. I think the poem is a highly condensed epic of the modern age (maybe a true reflection of *Kalyug*). It contains the power of phrasing, scything irony, mythopoetic mechanics, intertextuality, the monologic tone of Tiresias functioning like heteroglossia, and a testament to a depleting sense of morality both towards man and nature. Helen McAfee observes that ‘To students of psychology, the method of procedure in *The Waste Land* must be highly significant. Impressions, fragments of experience, and memories of other men’s writings drift through the author’s consciousness at the bidding of the subconscious.’ (McAfee 227). I.A. Richards highly appreciated the poem compared to an epic, ‘Allusion in Mr Eliot’s hands is a technical device for compression. *The Waste Land* is the equivalent in content to an epic. Without this device, twelve books would have been needed... An original poem, as much as a new branch of mathematics, compels the mind which receives it to grow, and this takes time.’ (Richards) Richards provided a name for the technique Eliot used in the poem ‘Music of Ideas. The ideas are of all kinds: abstract and concrete, general and particular; like musician’s phrases, they are arranged, not that they may tell us something, but that their effects on us may combine into a coherent whole of feeling and attitude and produce a peculiar liberation of the will.’ (Quoted in Miller 157) These observations and critical appreciations establish T.S. Eliot as an iconic figure in the twentieth century and *The Waste Land* as a classic in modern poetry.

In the twenty-first century, T. S. Eliot's *The Waste Land* began to be observed as an ecocritical text. The poem appeals to many critics and scholars about how detachment from nature and attachment to materialism caused an ecological crisis. In *The Nature of Modernism* (2017), Elizabeth Black observes that *The Waste Land* is an important subject of ecocriticism because it introduces new ways of writing about environmental change that rejuvenates the poetry of place and reasserts the continued importance of nature to modern poetry. To her, the poem is a disturbing vision of society 'estranged from nature and on the brink of environmental collapse' strongly substantiating the idea of environmental catastrophe. (Black 2017) In his essay, 'The Waste Land as Ecocritique' published in *The Cambridge Companion to The Waste Land* (2015), Gabrielle McIntire analyses the poem from an ecocritical perspective. In 'Ecomythic Reading of T. S. Eliot's *The Waste Land*', Geoffrey Berry considers it a visionary poem and extends his view, 'T. S. Eliot's yearning to retain faith in transcendental regenerative forces leads him to seek his Grail in the dissolution of forms. This is the place where the luminal mysteries of ritual revivify, such that we regain some sense of relationship with the rest of nature beyond the civilized and alienating habits of mastery, consumption, and profit.' (Berry 12) Berry focuses on how civilized people have alienated themselves from nature forgetting its role to persist humans on earth. Another essay that also points out the ecological concern is Shibaji Mridha's 'The Water Ethics: An Elemental-Ecocritical Reading of T. S. Eliot's *The Waste Land*'. Mridha attempts to explore the water ethics in the poem and develops her notion of revenge for the thing. To her, *The Waste Land* is 'a carrier of environmental ethic that can remind us to show respect to nature and disown extreme human hubris.' (Mridha 109) These eco/critical observations explore more possibilities to rediscover and rethink T. S. Eliot's *The Waste Land* in a new setting with all its relevance to the current affairs and concerns about the environmental and ecological crisis we are facing in the twenty-first century.

Nature Imagery in *The Waste Land*: An Ecocritical Approach

It would be odd to refer to T. S. Eliot as a nature poet, an ecocritical poet, or a poet having a leaning toward environmental crisis. He has never shown his concern for the ecological or environmental crisis. His appears purely to be city poetry creating the cityscape with perverted imagery of nature. He has consistently focused on the deterioration of moral values and the degeneration of humanity. This deterioration

began when, after the Renaissance in Europe, man became more eager to explore new realms of experience, new lands, and new ways to make life more beautiful and more comfortable. This intent of exploration and the need to redefine human needs laid the foundation of industrialization, trade and commerce, and scientific inventions. We drifted away from nature despite the symbolic warning issued by Rousseau and the Romanticists. Our reasoning and arid thinking hardly make any way back to have any concern for nature or the ecosystem except few scholars and authors who have been mentioned at the beginning of this paper.

The phrase, *The Waste Land* proposes a grim and gloomy depiction of the post-war setting. Contrary to the green and healthy vision that soothes and lulls our senses and helps us to escape to the Lake Isle of Innisfree, the poem, *The Waste Land*, creates an alienated imagery of nature lacking in Romanticized notion and aesthetic excellence. The scenes of devastation and a parade of parodies and allusions observed and correlated by the mythical character, Tiresias, in the modern world reiterate how we lack coherence, order, and balance everywhere because ‘the dead tree gives no shelter, the cricket no relief, / And the dry stone no sound of water.’ (Eliot 53) The surface examination of the poem helps us reflect on the spiritual vacuity, the failure of religion to curb the growing desire-bound needs of man, and the dearth of morality in the modern world. But, the poem is replete with nature imagery though perverted and dull, symbolically rich and futuristic. Beginning with the April Spring shower and ending with the thunder and water, *The Waste Land* appears to contribute to the history of nature writing and revealing concern for the disconnectedness between man and nature. Throughout the five parts, ‘The Burial of the Dead’, ‘The Game of Chess’, ‘The Fire Sermon’, ‘Death by Water’ and ‘What the Thunder Said’, the poet unromantically and mechanically uses nature imagery to portray the grim reality in a surreal urban setting where the mythical character Tiresias, symbolizing the stream of human consciousness, visits the modern wasteland, and begins to recollect and correlate the natural disasters when the doomed fates of King Oedipus and Fisher King converted their kingdoms into the wastelands. Denial of ethical values led to doom and disaster, and so happens today when humans neglect ecological ethics and green culture. We learn the essence of charity (*data*), self-restraint (*damyata*), and compassion (*dayadhvam*) from our scriptures, but do not practise them toward our ecosystem.

The first part, 'The Burial of the Dead', opens with an allusion to Chaucer's *General Prologue* reflecting a sharp contrast between the fourteenth and the twentieth century. Tiresias, the ubiquitous narrative voice, may also symbolize the ecocritical consciousness. He can read the mind, look into our unconscious realm of thought, and correlate the gap between the past and the present. The rich lush greenery of Chaucer's time is missing today. Modern man has forgotten to appreciate the beauty of nature. April blessed with spring rain, blossoms of lilacs, and harbinger of youthful summer is superlatively referred to as 'the cruellest month' because the spring rain tends to stir 'dull roots'. This negligence and denial of the laws of nature and the entire ecosystem can also be seen in the twenty-first century where we are losing the forest areas, the clean potable water, and the pristine green culture devoid of desire-bound human intervention. Though Eliot employs this natural imagery to expose the void and vacuity of human ethics and metaphysics, he indirectly hints at the disconnectedness and separateness between man and nature. There is also the scene of the snow-covered mountain not offering scenic beauty, but rather providing an apposite setting for illicit love relation between cousins, 'Marie, hold on tight. And down we went. In the mountains, there you feel free.' (Eliot 53)

The scene of utter disaster and ecological crisis is reflected in the following lines, 'What are the roots that clutch, what branches grow / Out of this stony rubbish?', 'the dead tree gives no shelter, the cricket no relief, / And the dry stone no sound of water.' (Eliot 53) Our growing needs and blind material pursuit have created an ironic situation. If we recall Thomas Gray's 'An Elegy' which is also set in the burial of the dead in the remote rural background, we feel emotionally distracted with the philosophical truth of life. The idyllic background of the poem conveys to us the nurture of man by nature. But, in the modern era, the current of water and green shelter are rare scenes, and our pseudo-ethical values aggravate our earth's environmental crisis. This part also refers to Wagner's opera, *Tristan and Isolde*, which tells a medieval romance of the ill-fated love affair between the knight Tristan and the lady Isolde. When Tristan was escorting the captured Isolde, the lines 'Fresh blows the wind/ For home; / My Irish child, / Where do you tarry?' (Eliot 54) through natural imagery stimulate the soothing effect of nostalgia which the metropolitan imagery can hardly convey. The opera also narrates the secret love relation between the two which has purity, renunciation, and eternity. But, the modern wastelanders make physical contact out of no true love. Guilt and

shame characterise modern man's predicament of living in emotional crisis through the imagery of the hyacinth girl. Directly or indirectly the first part proposes an anarchic ecological situation where the earth will suffer for want of love and hope, nature will be exhibited as some great, well-adorned parks, and man will be in queue to ride to some sanctuary where the wild animals shall be on display as we see in the African Safari.

The famous clairvoyant, Madam Sosotris, has a close affinity with the twenty-first century high-profile astrologers enjoying celebrity status. They are the perverted humans creating personal myths out of the ancient mythologies and scriptures and claim their pseudo-knowledge most truthful and fruitful. Even they claim their knowledge beyond the universal and ecological system. Madam Sosotris is an anti-nature and anti-ecological figure, her approach to making prophecy and fortune-telling deprives man of being environmentalist and nature-loving. The phrase 'Unreal City', borrowed from Charles Baudelaire's 1857 poem, 'The Seven Old Men', refers to London, a city marred by commercialism and materialism. Due to the lack of green vegetation and green culture, monotony, and moribund habits reign supreme there. To an ecocritic, this place would be a laboratory where he/she can investigate how estrangement from nature and the ecosystem can transform a fertile land into the burial of the dead. Thus we can apprehend that the section, 'The Burial of the Dead' has nature imagery but it is perverted to suit Eliot's vision of waste land which also predicts the impending environmental crisis in the near future.

Other sections of *The Waste Land* have also multiple images drawn from the natural world. 'The Game of Chess' is marked for total dearth of nature imagery, the scene is set in a rich lady's bed chamber and then in a restaurant. Humans are like 'dull roots' enjoying their aridity, dryness, and dullness. 'The Fire Sermon' is an eco critique of debris of pollution and litter often left by city dwellers. They lack a sense of protecting nature and water bodies. The scene of the Thames River whose banks are often littered with 'empty bottles, sandwich papers,/ Silk handkerchiefs, cardboard boxes, cigarette ends' creates a horrendous situation of ecological crisis. Today, the report says that India generates about 62 million tonnes of waste each year. The great Pacific Garbage Patch is a collection of marine debris in the North Pacific Ocean which is litter that ends up in oceans, seas, and other large bodies of water. This is how we have created havoc out of an approach to industrialization, urbanization, and technological advancement.

Very soon, our world will also be thwarted by the e-waste and digital data waste that contributes to carbon emissions around the world.

The final section, 'What the Thunder Said', glances at the message, which was proclaimed in the voice of thunder, for the deliverance of society from the grip of spiritual sterility. The main symbol of the movement is the journey undertaken for the realization of a moral or spiritual goal. This section also contains nature imagery, such as 'reverberation / Of thunder of spring over distant mountains', 'no water but only rock', 'mountains of rock without water', 'Dead mountain mouth of carious teeth', 'dry sterile thunder without rain', 'dry grass singing' and 'Ganga was sunken, and the limp leaves / Waited for rain, while the black clouds / Gathered far distant, over Himavant.' (Eliot 66-68). Eliot here refers to the crucifixion of Christ, the Arthurian legend, and the Upanishadic philosophy of life to develop the concept of the essence of good life, the significance of deliverance, and the eternity of spiritual and moral values. However, the ecocritical reading of the poem suggests that the ecological dilemma and dearth of water are primarily caused due to the decline in our ethical values. Apart from the concept of sterile spirituality of modern wasteland, the water crisis has become a severe problem today. UNICEF reports that four billion people (almost two-thirds of the world's population, experience severe scarcity of water at least one month each year. Over two billion people live in countries where water supply is inadequate. Half of the world's population could be living in areas facing water scarcity by as early as 2025. By 2040, roughly 1 in 4 children worldwide will be living in areas of extremely high water stress. The images, 'no water but only rock' (Eliot-332) and 'mountains of rock without water,' (Eliot-335) connote the environmental crisis that T. S. Eliot might have unknowingly prophesied. His phrases appear to be highly ecocritical and issue a warning for a future with scarcity of water. Once rivers which had caused many civilizations to sprout on their banks are now suffering from a dearth of water because of human intervention, building of dams, commercialization of water, growing urbanization, and over-consumption of ground water.

Conclusion

To sum up, *The Waste Land* is a modern testament to the spiritual wasteland where the imagery drawn from nature focuses our attention on the ecological crisis due to population explosion, deforestation, sprawling urban boundaries, decreasing wildlife

and forest areas, and the encroachment of forest lands. The depleting forest areas and giant mechanical anti-green development have heinously affected the ecosystem, and the balance between nature and the physical world has been lost. Literature can play a vital role in instilling into us awareness and reawakening through poetic idioms and phrases, to learn the new boundary of human understanding, to penetrate our soul deeper and deeper to protect and preserve this biosphere. We have only this earth and we have no alternative to go beyond it. We know that one day this earth will be extinct, but we should not be the cause of its extinction. I believe that ecocriticism has done a tremendous job of preparing an academic platform where we at least hold a discourse for a sound relationship between man, nature, and literature. Nature can fulfill our needs, but not our greed. And we should never forget 'Nature never did betray / The heart that loved her...' (Wordsworth 54-55), but our life's irony is that 'Little we see in nature that is ours' (Wordsworth 120). This is an environmental message that is relevant to us of all ages.

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