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Towards the Wasteness of *The Waste Land*

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Abstract

The Waste Land is a poem that is as much applicable to the present age, as it was in the year 1922, when it was first published. Embedded in the sense of meaninglessness and degeneration of the years following World War I, it projects this social and moral disintegration on various levels that are both individual and universal. To do this, the poet brings in various mythical and historical references that serve to illustrate the basic idea of futility and barrenness, and also serve to universalize the condition of waste-ness. The poem, however, does not end on a note of despair, but of hope and regeneration, and the ending is the most positive part of the poem, referring to ancient Indian texts for its philosophical basis.

Keywords: T.S. Eliot, *The Waste Land*, Tarot cards, the Fisher King, Tiresias, the Upanishads.

The Waste Land is a poem that is both embedded in the sense of despair and futility of the years following the First World War, and is universal in its projection of the barrenness and meaninglessness of modern life. Degeneration and disintegration of values is expressed on various levels of the poem – the subjective level of Eliot's own depression ("On Margate sands./ I can connect / Nothing with nothing" [*The Waste Land* 300-302]), the objective level of the war-ravaged condition of Europe; the sociological level and the political level; the intellectual level and the emotional level (witness the line "Well now that's done and I'm glad it's over" [*The Waste Land* 252]); the ethical and the moral levels; the past and the present. It is applicable as much to the present age, as it was a hundred years ago. The main instrument with which the poet does this is by making use

of myths and by expressing the theme through the "heap of broken images" [*The Waste Land* 22] of modern society.

An allegory of a world laid waste in the post-war era, *The Waste Land* teems with images of death from the very epigraph itself, where the Sibyl is asked "What do you want?", and she replies "I want to die". There is death in the titles of two of the five parts – "The Burial of the Dead" and "Death by Water", and death in the imagery is used throughout the poem. Even the crowds of people moving in the first part of the poem are like zombies – lifeless and ghoulish. However, the poem is not merely about death. It is also about resurrection, and new life that will emerge after the death of the king – an image dealt with in Frazer's *The Golden Bough*, and in the image of the Fisher King, taken from Jessie Weston's book *From Ritual to Romance*. There are also resurrection images in the death of the god, such as Osiris, and Christ himself. The basic method which Eliot uses is the mythical method, which consists of "manipulating a continuous parallel between contemporaneity and antiquity" [Eliot, *Ulysses, Order and Myth,* 483]. Through this method the poet uses ancient myths and legends in juxtaposition with contemporary life, thus bringing out a linkage between them. It is a method of "controlling, of ordering, of giving a shape and significance to the immense panorama of futility and anarchy, which is contemporary history" [Eliot, *Ulysses, Order and Myth* 483]. In a way, the mythical method is also connected with Eliot's famous theory of the objective correlative, which he defined as "a set of objects, a situation, a chain of events, which acts as a formula for some particular emotion of the poet, so that when the external facts are given, the emotion is immediately evoked" [Eliot, "Hamlet and his Problems" 100]. *The Waste Land* contains a series of impressions and emotions expressed through the objective correlatives of the mythical waste lands, both pagan and Christian. The ancient customs and rituals act as symbols for his emotions and ideas, and they also serve to universalize the feelings expressed. What is happening today is not peculiar to the present age; it is the result of a definite spiritual decay, which leads to the same results in whichever age it occurs. That is why the myths not only connect the past with the present; Eliot also connects them together, showing the concept of waste lands in fertility rites, in Greek myths, and in Christian myths, too. Myths also enable the poet to telescope within a

short framework the entire tragedy of contemporary society – the spiritual barrenness that is its essential characteristic. The miscellaneous, chaotic material is ordered into a complete whole, bounded by a single theme.

The spiritual death of man is expressed through a succession of images in the cinematic technique of "montage". For example, in the first part of the poem – "The Burial of the Dead" – there are a string of images pertaining to the barrenness of the land. The bare stones, the dead trees, the lack of water, the hot sun – all add up to the intense spiritual aridity of the time. The "broken images" are the wreck of ideals and values. Yet, all through this passage there is an undercurrent of Christian faith. Eliot himself draws the reader's attention to the Book of Job, where a man's roots are withering in the mire of sin – "So are the paths of all that forget God; and the hypocrite's hope shall perish" [OT, Job, viii, 13]. The Christian Church is referred to in the line – "Only / There is shadow under this red rock" (*The Waste Land* 24-25) – and the only hope of humanity lies in seeking its shelter. Christ himself is described as "the Spiritual Rock" in the Bible. There is also a reference to the Book of Ezekiel, where Ezekiel was taken up to the top of a mountain by an angel to survey the barren scene around. It is as if the modern man is also invited to survey the scene of desolation and futility around him.

Adding to the spiritual barrenness of the modern world is the theme of guilty love that emerges several times in the poem. In the first part of the poem, Eliot quotes four lines from the sailor's opening song in Wagner's famous opera *Tristan and Isolde*, a tale of guilty love, where Tristan loves the wife of another. The other extract from this opera ("Desolate and empty the sea" [*The Waste Land* 42]) is placed at the end of the second episode, signifying the commonness of the theme between them. This episode seems to be the recollection of an intense, passionate, almost mystical moment of romantic love. At the same time, however, there is also a sense of guilt and failure implied by the word "yet". Eliot himself suggests that all the women represented in all the books of *The Waste Land*, including the German Countess and the Hyacinth Girl, merge into one another, evoking the feeling that their condition is at bottom the same. Love, being guilty, brings a sense of boredom and futility, rather than fulfilment, even though it does have its moments of ecstasy – "I was neither / Living

nor dead" [*The Waste Land* 39-40]. It is the same in the second section, "A Game of Chess". The aristocratic lady referred to in the opening passages may be equated with the Lady of the Rocks in the Tarot pack of cards and the entire passage is intended to bring out the artificiality and superficial glamour of her life. In the very first line of this section, the phrase "the Chair she sat in" reminds one of Cleopatra in her barge, and the description of her dressing table, cosmetics, etc., reminds one of Belinda's dressing-table in Pope's *The Rape of the Lock*. There are also hints of Imogen's bedchamber in *Cymbeline*, and the festal hall of Dido in Virgil's *Aeneid*. But this lady has nothing in common with Dido and Cleopatra, except their guilt, and their greatness and intensity of passion is contrasted with her pettiness and triviality in love. These ideas are reinforced by the use of the Philomela story, too. Over the fireplace is carved the story of Philomela, and of how she was transformed into a nightingale with the golden voice. But to the "dirty ears" of the modern man, the melodious song is only a meaningless "Jug, Jug" [*The Waste Land* 103]. The people of the waste land fail to understand the real significance behind Philomela's story – purification and transformation through suffering. Philomela, indeed, is mentioned in the third section and the final section, as well, therefore serving as a unifying myth in the poem. John Crowe Ransom has pointed out that the violation of sex has always led to spiritual degeneration, both in the past and in the present. Similarly, the other figures carved on the wall also lose all meaning, and become mere decorations, useless relics of the past – "withered stumps of time" [*The Waste Land* 104].

And then footsteps are heard on the stairs – the lover for whom the lady has been waiting, has finally arrived. However, the fragments of conversation recorded by the poet are meaningless and incoherent, a measure of their mental vacuity. Victims of boredom and ennui, they cannot even keep up small conversation. Even death is devoid of significance –

> "I think we are in rats' alley
> Where dead men lost their bones"
>
> [*The Waste Land* 115-116]

The very life of these people is a living death to them, and as such, death carries no hope of transformation. The repetition of the line "Those are pearls that were his eyes" [*The Waste Land* 126] is

significant here. The line suggests the regeneration of the body through drowning – the idea behind the concept of the drowned Phoenician sailor or the Fisher King; but in the waste land there is no such regeneration, only an empty knowledge of the pearls without really understanding their meaning. The line, being taken from Shakespeare's *Tempest*, also reminds us that the chess game alluded to is played not only in Middleton's *Women Beware Women*, but in *The Tempest*, too, by Ferdinand and Miranda. But there is an ironic contrast here, for in the poem it suggests trickery and hypocrisy, whereas between Ferdinand and Miranda it suggests love and harmony.

Eliot says in the Notes to *The Waste Land* – "What Tiresias *sees*, in fact, is the substance of the poem" [*The Waste Land*, Notes p.28]. It is the figure of Tiresias that permeates the poem, for, though he is not really a character, his is the consciousness, neither male nor female, through which the poem is filtered. We see Tiresias in person for the first time in the third section, "The Fire Sermon". Eliot himself emphasizes Tiresias's bisexuality, quoting specifically from the Latin text of Ovid's *Metamorphosis*, where he is shown to have lived successively in the shapes of both man and woman. Apart from this, he is given prophetic powers at the same time that he is struck blind for having seen Athena bathing, and is blessed with longevity, connecting him with the Sibyl of the epigraph. Also, the staff that he carries in his hand connects him with "the man with the three staves" [*The Waste Land*, Notes, p.26] in the Tarot pack. He is also sterile – "Old man with wrinkled female breasts" [*The Waste Land* 219] – and this links him symbolically with the Fisher King. Tiresias, moreover, is also connected with the idea of a waste and barren land, for he is the blind, withered prophet who had prophesied that Oedipus would kill his father and marry his mother. When his prophecy was fulfilled, the kingdom of Thebes became a waste land with the onset of a terrible plague, and not until Oedipus was made to atone for the terrible sin, was this condition rectified. Tiresias, therefore, apart from being the consciousness behind the poem, is also symbolically linked with all its themes and central ideas.

Tiresias is shown in connection with several scenes of waste and desolation in the third section of the poem. "The Fire Sermon" section begins with Tiresias surveying the Thames scene in autumn. The

river is deserted now, after the summer months, when ladies and gentlemen went there in search of momentary pleasure. The river is now strewn with empty bottles, cigarette ends, and other pieces of garbage as reminders of their activities. Though water is a source of purification and regeneration, the degenerate modern man never ceases to defile it. The pollution of the river, therefore symbolizes spiritual degeneration. Tiresias is shown "fishing in the dull canal" [*The Waste Land* 189], where he laments this pollution, and sees the slimy rats creeping by, the naked dead bodies floating on the river, and bones scattered around – all testimony to this degenerate age. Memories from all ages crowd round him, for he has seen it all – Bonnivard in the prison of Chillon, or the captive Jews weeping by the rivers of Babylon. He identifies himself with the Fisher King, fishing for the regeneration of his brother, and with Ferdinand, mourning for the death of his father. Tiresias is also taken to fashionable hotels by the degenerate Mr. Eugenides, the Smyrna merchant (who can be identified with the one-eyed merchant of the Tarot pack). These hotels were the hotbeds of corruption and homosexuality during the War and its following years. Tiresias also moves in the quarters of the poor of London, who are impure not merely from sexual perversion, but from poverty as well. Here we have the songs of the three daughters of the Thames – the poor girls living on the banks of the river. They first sing together of the polluting of the river water – the oozing out of oil and tar, showing that modern civilisation is as dirty and impure as its morals. They also sing of the illicit love-affair of Queen Elizabeth, through which they tell of the impurity of the ruling class. They then sing separately of the loss of purity and virginity because of the brutality of man.

All these associations of water – regeneration and degeneration – are brought together in the fourth section, "Death by Water", the smallest section of the poem. However, the theme of death and resurrection is becoming more and more important as the poem draws to its close. The fourth section brings together all the motifs of death by drowning – the drowned god of fertility cults, Alonso's supposed shipwreck in *The Tempest*, Ophelia's death by drowning in *Hamlet*, the Fisher King, etc. There is also, perhaps, a parallel here with Frazer's and Jessie Weston's description of the cult of Adonis (or Thammuz), the Greek deity of Phoenician origin. In Alexandria each

year, an effigy of the head of the god was, like a ritual mourning, thrown into the sea, and was borne within seven days by a current to Byblos, where it was welcomed with rejoicing. This ceremony enacted the death and resurrection of the god. "Death by Water", however, emphasizes death, not resurrection, for Phlebas dies, but cannot be revived because of the moral degradation of humanity, of which he is a part. Phlebas, in fact, parodies the resurrection of the fertility god, as instead of moving forward into a new life, he goes back in time through the stages of age and youth. Eliot here uses the device of *memento mori* as a reminder of human mortality

The final section of the poem, "What the Thunder Said", winds up all the themes and symbols used in the poem and bring it to a satisfactory close, with the theme of resurrection being emphasised. In his note to this section, Eliot stated that in the first part of this section, he has used three themes – the journey to Emmaus, the approach to the Chapel Perilous, and the present decay of Eastern Europe.

The story of the journey to Emmaus is told in the Gospel of St. Luke. Two disciples were journeying to Emmaus on the day of Christ's resurrection, when the risen Christ joins them as a hooded figure, and explains the scriptures to them. However, the disciples do not recognize him until he blesses them and disappears. The fifth section, however, begins with Christ's crucifixion – his agony, arrest, and finally, death. The colour red denotes violence and terror and Christ's death. The death of all that is good and beautiful and restrained means also the death of humanity – its spiritual and moral death –

> "He who is living is now dead
> We who were living are now dying".
> [*The Waste Land* 328-329]

But Christ rises again, and this resurrection is obliquely evoked in the passage in which the two men found one more among them. Eliot in his notes refers the readers to an Arctic expedition undertaken by Sir Ernest Shackleton in 1919, when the explorers reported a peculiar hallucination that there was always one more member among them than could be actually counted. Eliot also tells us that he always equated this hooded figure of Christ on the journey

to Emmaus with the Hanged Man of the Tarot pack – which is a way of equating him with the fertility rites on the death and resurrection of the god. Thus, Christian and Pagan significations are brought together here.

The approach to the Castle Perilous, as referred to by Eliot, is a part of the Grail legend, which acts as a unifying motif throughout the poem, and which is the primary subject of Jessie Weston's book, *From Ritual to Romance*, which influenced him so greatly in the conception of the poem. The episode of the Castle Perilous occurs in the final stage of the Grail quest. The knight and his followers reach the mountain on top of which is the Castle Perilous, in which is kept the Holy Grail. There have been no rains for a long time, and the scene is of desolate barrenness. The rocks have cracked, and the dryness has affected even the silence, for there is the unpleasant noise of the wind passing over dry grass, the sound of desert insects, and the clap of thunder without rain. The inhabitants here live in mud cracked houses, and their faces, red with heat and dryness, snarl and peep out at these strangers. Such is the experience of all those who have set out in search of truth and spiritual salvation. The repeated cry of "water", "water", brings out verbally the intensity of the thirst felt by the waste land.

The two journeys referred to here – the journeys to Emmais and the Castle Perilous – were originally journeys with a definite purpose, and ended in success after trial. In the modern waste land, the journey of humanity is merely aimless wandering.

The third theme – the present decay of Eastern Europe – also remains unresolved. It is perhaps a reference to the Russian Revolution of 1917, which had broken up the existing political structure and social fabric, but had not built something better. The picture drawn by Eliot is terrible, cataclysmic. "The hooded hordes" [*The Waste Land* 369] symbolize modern humanity, "the murmur of maternal lamentation" [*The Waste Land* 368] may be the mourning of Europe herself over the pitiable plight of its people. Society is breaking up, civilisation is uprooted, and as far as the eye can see, there is nothing but barren plain and cracked earth. Eastern Europe seems to have gone mad. Such is the modern waste land. The loss of faith is indicated by both pagan and Christian imagery.

The poem, however, does not end with despair, but on a "mantra" of regeneration, which can be the key to a new life, if followed. Eliot recommends the wisdom of India for the spiritual salvation of modern humanity. He refers the reader to the Fable of Thunder in the *Brihadaranyaka Upanishad*. The three-fold offspring of the Creator Prajapati – gods, men, and demons – approach him for instruction after completing their formal education. To each group he utters the syllable "*Da*". Each group interprets this reply differently – the gods as *Damyata* (control yourselves), the men as *Datta* (give), and the demons as *Dayadhvam* (be compassionate). Prajapati responds with "Om", meaning that they have understood. The fable, in fact, exhorts man to practise all the three injunctions, for it is suggested that there are no gods or demons other than men – a basic tenet of Indian philosophy. Eliot, too, sees them as pertaining to the human condition.

In the final section Eliot refers the reader back to the theme of the Fisher King in Jessie Weston's book, and the reference to the nursery rhyme on London Bridge falling down indicates the disintegration of civilisation and the self. The poet turns his back on the waste land, and sits fishing on the shore of the river – that is, he makes efforts for spiritual regeneration. He refers to some lines of Dante's *Purgatorio* and *PervigiliumVeneris*, which teach him that suffering results in self-purification. He cries – "Oh Swallow, Swallow!" [*The Waste Land* 429], referring again to the myth of Philomela, where Tereus's wife Procne, is turned into a swallow. It shows a great yearning for release and transformation. *The Waste Land* does not end on a note of despair; it ends on hope. That is why Eliot reminds the reader of "Da, da, da" – the teachings of the Upanishads, which show the way in which regeneration might come out of death and decay. "The Peace that passeth all understanding" [*The Waste Land*, Notes, p.31] is Eliot's translation of the Sanskrit word *Shantih*, and it shows the ideal to which the new world of regeneration might aspire.

In the modern world of the waste land, it is this *Shantih* that remains an aspiration, a quest. After *The Waste Land* was published, the world was overwhelmed by another, even more destructive World War, and innumerable man-made instances of death and destruction have shaken humanity since then. Time and again the world has come to brink of yet another nuclear war and universal