

## Clarion call for spiritual path in Eliot's "The Waste Land"

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### Abstract

Spiritually bankrupt modern man guided by positivist epistemology does not care the metaphysical world. He performs the Sisyphean routine job like a robot to address his Eros. He seems always be in haste for quenching his hedonistic desires. Consequently he lacks humane values and asceticism. His carnality for material prosperity brings him the instant mirage like ecstasy that derails from righteousness. Thus his moral perversion leads the world to the way of spiritual decadence and the breakdown of the sterling humane values. Eliot's "The Waste Land" reflects the spiritual sterility of the profit oriented capitalist world and finally alludes myths and legends to restore social, cultural, and spiritual values so that this world can resurrect from infertility. Largely Eliot focuses on assimilating Buddhist's, Hindu's and occidental legends to cure the hollowness of modern world so that there can be eternal peace globally. This path of righteousness brings back 'agape' in human world and greenery in the desert. The purpose of alluding philosophies is to show the pertinence of spiritual philosophy to cure the endemic of heartlessness. Reading symbols, imagery, and allusions in "The Waste Land" will lead the researcher to find out a panacea of pimping, hollowness and spiritual aridity of modern human being who craves debauchery.

**Keywords:** myths, allusions, symbols, wasteland, and materialism

### Introduction

Thomas Sterne Eliot (1888-1965) a literary giant in English literature who observed many ills spreading in the western society along with the advent of scientific breakthrough. "The Waste Land" (1922) by him replicates city life, its confusion, barrenness, hectic activities, sexual perversity. On the prima facie, it contents the shallow human relation, erosion of social order led by business motif, loss of faith, spiritual sterility, pollution both mental and environmental, and snobbery. This is how, he has graphically mirrored the ills of 1920s as the aftermaths of WWI. John Crowe Ransom also aptly maps it: "Mr. Eliot's performance is the apotheosis of modernity, and seems to bring to a head all the specifically modern errors, and to cry for critic's ink of a volume quite disproportionate to its merits as a poem" (176). He projects the errors of the age in Eliot's poem.

While recapitulating over the malaises of the time, he has largely alluded great writers and religious philosophy to bring the society on the track. The vivid imageries, allusions, and symbols force rationale public to brood over the wrong made over humanity while running after positivist epistemology led by science and hedonism, a byproduct of commercial world.

As a matter of fact spiritualism befalls in the realm of metaphysics that does not go with positivist or materialistic analysis of modern epistemology. Importantly spiritualism relies on godly existence and supernatural power that governs the world. As per *Encyclopedia Britannica* spiritualism is:

Spiritualism, in philosophy, a characteristic of any system of thought that affirms the existence of immaterial reality imperceptible to the senses. . . It applies to any philosophy accepting the notion of an infinite, personal God, the immortality of the soul, or the immateriality of the intellect and will. Less

obviously, it includes belief in such ideas as finite cosmic forces or a universal mind, provided that they transcend the limits of gross Materialistic interpretation. Spiritualism as such says nothing about matter, the nature of a supreme being or a universal force, or the precise nature of spiritual reality itself. (N.pag.)

Hence spiritualism is an intuition or an insight that transcends all materialistic barrier of analysis and develops the faith on supernatural power that governs the world. It further strongly believe in the immortality of soul and Supreme Being which is beyond the understanding of human senses.

Moreover it mainly focuses on faith and reverence to occult power that runs the world. Eliot in his epoch making poem has extensively used spiritualism to bring the fragmented world under order. "The Waste Land" consists of five sections, "The Burial of the Dead," this section deals with dire spiritual poverty and reversal of social order that leads the waste-landers to insignificant end.

From the same vein, "A Game of Chess," whereby sex has been regarded as a merrymaking game indicating sexual perversion embedded in society. Likewise, "The Fire Sermon," imbibes Buddha's famous sermon, that suggests the fire of lust, hatred, lamentation, misery, grief and despair is engulfing and paralyzing humanity it is a must to come out of such self-annihilating fire. Further, "Death by Water", water is an archetypal symbol of life which brings the death for waste-landers. It does not ensure fertility to perverted impotent people. Finally, the allusion drawn from "What the Thunder Said", digs out the panacea to drive away barrenness and sterility of waste-landers or modern man.

The modus operandi of the article is to simplify and explicate the pertinent imageries, symbols and references used in "The Waste Land." While doing so the close

explicative analysis of the text seems appropriate to unbutton the solution of the malaise of the spiritually bankrupt world lost in fetish culture. Moreover it digs out the causes of derailment of waste landers who have forgot their sterling tradition. Scientific positivist knowledge led them to barren themselves as well as earth nevertheless, if people started believing in metaphysical knowledge, the loss can be restored. Conversely if the humble appeal is ignored the pervasive endemic of sterility is sure to end human civilization. To unbutton such riddles, this research adequately makes explicative reading which certainly befits to resolve the queries.

Eliot's epoch making poem has magnetized many readers and critics. Hary Trosman, a psychiatrist has read it from psychopathological perspective in "T. S. Eliot and The Waste Land Psychopathological Antecedents and Transformations." He expounds:

T. S. Eliot's *The Waste Land*, is considered a profound expression for the sense of alienation and meaninglessness that many have found characteristic of the spirit of the modern era. The poem was written by Eliot after a series of personal crises that eventuated in exhaustion and depression and a brief period of psychotherapy. His illness can be characterized as a transitory narcissistic regression with partial fragmentation and loss of ego dominance. (709)

What Trosman refers that the cause of reflecting the meaninglessness of the world, is the byproduct of the personal crises that Eliot underwent shortly after WWI. In fact his personal crisis juxtaposes with the crises of the time. While seeking the solution of the world wide malaise in Eliot's poem Cleanthes Brooks Jr. remarks:

The shift in meaning from physical to spiritual sterility is easily made, and was, as a matter of fact, made in certain of the legends. A knowledge of this symbolism is, as Eliot has already pointed out, essential for an understanding of the poem....The contrast is between two kinds of life and two kinds of death. Life devoid of meaning is death; sacrifice, even the sacrificial death, may be life-giving, an awaking to life. The poem occupies itself to a great extent with this paradox, and with a number of variations on it. (186)

Brooks' reading of "The Waste Land" is the critique of myth in the poem that urges readers go into the depth of meaning of human life associated with death. Likewise, John Xiros Cooper also reads Eliot's text as the spirit of the age. He expounds:

Indeed, Eliot's struggles to give his materials the appropriate order to capture both a sense of time and place and his own personal dilemmas –intellectual, emotional, and spiritual – proved it to be very elusive. Firstly, one ought to acknowledge that *The Waste Land* is a text of the First World War and its aftermath. But it is a work that not only reflects the spirit of the times, it is a very personal document as well. (63)

Cooper's analysis goes with the dilemma of the age in the early 1920s along with his personal documents. The perplexities of the age has been mirrored in the poem.

Having mentioned some prominent critiques, the researcher enjoys ease to analyse imagery, symbols, and allusions exclusively used here.

### Humanism Needs to be Resurrected

After the breakthrough of industrial Revolution in late 19<sup>th</sup> century the mores and values, related to spiritualism, gradually started eroding. Because people started to follow positivist philosophy that forbids spiritualism. In its absence there was the scarcity of humanism and humane values. Consequently there was erosion of morality and degeneration of human civilization yet there was material prosperity. From this plain, Eliot's highly read and analyzed poem, "The Waste Land" mirrors many wastelands. First it alludes the causes of spiritual and physical aridity via the impotency of Fisher King due to his severe maiming that also stopped the fertility rites and projection of the blighted land by a curse (footnote referring Miss Jessie Watson's *From Ritual to Romance* and James Frazer's *The Golden Bough*). The basic symbol used, that of the waste land, is taken, of course, from Miss Jessie Weston's *From Ritual to Romance*. She explains:

(a) There is a general consensus of evidence to the effect that the main object of the Quest is the restoration to health and vigour of a King suffering from infirmity caused by wounds, sickness, or old age; (b) and whose infirmity, for some mysterious and unexplained reason, reacts disastrously upon his kingdom, either by depriving it of vegetation, or exposing it to the ravages of war. (c) In two cases it is definitely stated that the King will be restored to youthful vigour and beauty. (36)

In classical time King the representative of God to guard people must have been sound health. Both his sacrifice and illness or wrong doings could affect the welfare of the nation/state. Here the waste land is the aftermath of the ills of Fisher King.

The second waste land is of Oedipus' illicit relationship with his mother whereby there is carnal perversion: "Enacted on this same divan bed;/ I who have sat by Thebes below the wall" (244-45), reiterated also in Ovid's in *Metamorphosis* dealing with Tereus King who misused his sexuality: "The change of Philomel, by the barbarous king/ So rudely forced; yet there the nightingale" (99-100).

Ostensibly, the third waste land boards on the Biblical waste land depicting the sufferings of people who worship Gods: Gliding wrapped in a brown mantle hooded/I do not know whether a man or a woman" (364-5). The last or modern waste land is shown by Eliot graphically dramatizes the sins and fire of debauchery, greed, arrogance, lust for fetish materialism, and hedonistic life which have driven away human values and widen nature human relation in modern society: I too waited the expected guest/He, the young man carbuncular, arrives' (230-31). Well at the end of every waste land the narrator anticipates a solution and penance of rebirth or regeneration. Finally, T. S. Eliot also ends the poem with a ray of hope bringing references from *Brihadaranyaka Upanishad*; here he gives us a message that the three "DA's", Datta, Dayadhvam and Damyata are the solutions to save the modern civilization from looming ruin and healing of Fisher King and removal of curse of Waste Land. Not only this, he performs a duty of the writer:

“Shall I at least set my lands in order” (426)? Appreciating it Michael Grant notes: “The poem was not a romantic idealisation of the past, but the recognition of an imaginative life whose loss it had been Eliot’s peculiar genius to present and explore” (15).

On the prima facie, I prefer to dig out referential meanings of “The Waste Land” to answer the dilemma of modern men and preferences of sensuous as well as sensual life. It starts with the burial of the dead that reminds the ancient cycle of death and birth of Anglican Christianity to decry it the narrator comes with April that stands for spring. In archetypal reading spring refers the resurrection, the vegetation cycle and Easter festival consolidate the proof. Similarly winter connotes death. In ancient Greece and Egypt the seasonal changes go with the death, birth and rebirth of ‘vegetation deities.’ Here unlike the conventional meaning for waste landers “April is the cruelest month”(1) as there is the reversal of natural order. Hence the earth has turned into waste land in which there is no germination of seeds even in spring. “dead land” (2), and “stony rubbish” (20) mirror the deadly visual imageries of the waste land. Moreover, the dreadful visual imageries of “A heap of broken images” (22), “dead tree”(23), and “dry stone no sound of water” (24) symbolize the dead and arid ambience. Notably the allusion of “son of man” (20) goes with Ezekiel whom the God has entrusted the fertility rites. The refrain of “red rock” (25 and 26) expounds Isaiah prophesy of Messiah who could suffice water and shadow in the blighted land that conversely go opposite to the repetition of “Hyacinth” (35,36, and 37) because this plant is a symbol of sensuous love. Female traditionally regarded as center of creation has mentioned here as the “Belladonna...lady of situations” (50) borrowing reference from Vinci’s *Virgin Marry* makes subtle irony on the misuses of sexuality which is reiterated in hedonist and lavish Cupidon life lady lived derailing the conventional use of sexuality in *A Game of Chess* which also reminds, an allusion from Ovid’s *Metamorphosis*, the ruin of blissful human life due to Tereus’s rape to his sister-in-law. Eliot alludes:

The change of Philomela, by the barbarous king  
So rudely forced; yet there the nightingale  
Filled all the desert with inviolable voice  
And still she cried, and the world persuades. (99-102)

Further, “one-eyed merchant” (52) symbolizes the modern man who have been led by commerce eye that has contaminated and overruled his religious and spiritual conscience. “The Hanged Man” (55) again foregrounds Ezekiel who has been brutally murdered so that the blight is spreading in the earth. highlights In line 60 Baudlaire’s dealing of “Unreal City” (62) symbolizes London city that replicates Paris in which crowd of spiritually blind people rush in the ring of profession for livelihood which reminds the crowd of Purgatory as mentioned by Dante in *Inferno*. Definitely these people are confused to choose material or spiritual way to live by. That is why with them there is: “Sighs, short and infrequent, were exhaled” (64), an allusion from Dante’s *Inferno* which cites the lives in limbo completely stuck in purgatory.

“With a dead sound on the final stroke of nine” (68) is an allusion towards the boring Sisyphus like mechanical life of waste landers and “final stroke of nine” signals the death toll of Christ that connotes the death of the Saviour who had the

caliber to undo the blight fallen upon King and the land . Admittedly the roving crowd on London Bridge amid the ‘brown fog’ sharply penetrates into the heart of degeneration who seem hypocrite and hollow like the fortuneteller “Madam Sosostri” (43) from Aldous Huxley’s *Chrome yellow*. The reference of Punic war (260 BC) as a parody: “that corpse you planted... bloom this year” (71-2) in modern time does not go with the ritual cycle of death and rebirth rather the use of “Dog” (74) signals the animalism and hypocrisy as per Baudelaire.

Shocking and luring description of “the chair, she sat in, like burnished throne/glowed on the marble, where the glass”(77-8) entails the craze of modern people for sophisticated life whereby the Holy Grail turns to be a juice glass which ultimately decries inflation of traditional mores. Arguably, while hankering after pimping and sophisticated life, modern people nurtured the carnal craze and started misusing sexuality. Ironically Eliot puts on the fore:

The glitter of her jewels rose to meet it,  
From satin case poured in rich profusions  
In vials of ivory and coloured glass...perfumes,  
.... And drowned the sense in odours. (84-89)

These poetic lines imbibed from Thomas Middleton’s *A Game of Chess and Women beware of Women* attune with the life of modern people how they are seduced by materialism and ‘Eros.’

Moreover, seductive onomatopoeic songs “jug jug” (103), “Weialala leia” (290) and “the record on the gramophone” (256) symbolize the Jazz Music, derailed from psalm that do not entail the classical human value. In fact such songs are the vitamins for the urban dwellers who Slive for the moment with their myopic vision.

Further Lil’s use of pills to abort the fetus: “It’s them pills I took, to bring it off” (159), signals the sexuality not for procreation but for carnal whim that outcasts the fertility rites of the ancient past. Sherlyn Abdoo’s reading of female characters as the metonymic use of Holy Grail and fertility rites strengthens it. She illustrates:

...in The Waste Land, where the feminine—partly, to be sure, veiled in the Fisher King/ Grail legend as metonymy and symbol (moon, flowing waters, the earth)—is explicitly and repetitively incarnated (in order of appearance) as Marie, Isolde, Belladonna, Mrs. Esquitone, Saint Mary Woolnoth, Cleopatra, Philomel, Lil, May, the nymphs, Mrs. Porter and her daughter, the typist, Elizabeth I, Dido and the woman who “drew her long black hair out tight”<sup>2</sup> (V, 378). Behind these images, moreover, the feminine broods in the intertextual—i.e., in the magical landscapes of the antecedent myths. Further analogues and sources for the feminine in Eliot’s poem appear in the Fisher King legends’ major figures, in the legendary enigma of the waste land itself, in the question posed to the quester, and as the very object of the quest—the Grail. (48-9)

The enigmatic citation of female characters above enumerates the misuses of sexuality who never abide by the law of Diana, reference from Ovid’s *Metamorphosis*, whereby Actaeon is killed by his hound because of his unwittingly attempt to rape Diana. Conclusively, their misuse of sexuality led the land to barrenness.

When Eliot finds people sensually involved in libidinal desires, for their redemption and bringing back the cult of fertility to reset the arid and derailed and polluted civilization he humbly cites Buddhist "Fire Sermon":

Burning, burning, burning, burning  
O Lord Thou pluckest me out  
O Lord Thou pluckest  
Burning. (308-11)

These poetic lines expounds St. Augustine's *Confessions* as well as Buddha's Sermon to his disciples to have the victory over five senses and mind for the betterment of humanity. How fire of aversion, passion, and delusion which has indeed become the core of 'eros' which is destabilizing moral values through mundane 'maya'. People must be disenchanted from it so that 'agape' can be obtained. Undoubtedly, people are fond of spring breaking and are perennially ignoring the purpose of coming to this land which is to seek the way of salvation. Proven fact is, this one is the burning solution to resurrect the dead land and derailed humanism.

Continuing this spiritual resonance in *Death by Water*, Eliot narrates the death of Phlebas, Phoenician sailor who remained misguided while pursuing commercial world. He forgets to calculate the phenomenal world while absorbing in the whirlpool of commerce before he drowns. Eliot recounts his tragedy: "Phlebas... fortnight dead. /Forgot the cry of gulls, and the deep sea swell" (312-13). This refers the genuine fact of the detachment of human beings from natural phenomena and its tragic aftermath. The narrator reminds modern people the hunger of fetish life of Phlebas that led him to tragic end: "Consider Phlebas, who was once handsome and tall as you" (321). Truly it is the warning to the derailed people from asceticism. Destiny of Phlebas is a striking episode to hit on the head of modern people who have lost spiritual wisdom.

Citations from Hindu legends especially the Ganga myth and God Prajapati from *Brihadaranyaka Upanishad* are didactic. As per Hindu Ganga myth, Ganga, sacred river descends to the earth from heaven for the salvation of the sixty thousands sons of King Sagar and fertility of the arid land. Similarly the teaching to God, Man and Demon, three disciples of Prajapati Brahma from the monosyllabic sound "Da" is the great spiritual teaching of keeping law and order. Devas do not possess enough control over their senses; humans are possessive and, the asuras (demons) are cruel by nature as *Puranas* project. Lessons Datta (charity) to Man who is greedy, Damyata (control) to God who has infinite power, and Dayadhvam (compassion) to Demon who is cruel, also resonate in the Fire Sermon of Buddhism to control senses and mind and preach mercy or forgiveness. The value of charity knows no boundary. Recalling these oriental Hindu and Buddhist legends, indeed which are the panacea for western ills, Eliot hopes to restore humane values in the highly robotic world running after self-appeasement not for the welfare of larger community, 'agape.'

To our great surprise, finally Eliot again heavily relies on Hinduism: "Datta. Dayadhvam. Damyata./ Shantih Shantih shantih" (433-34) to end the Tower of Babel like disorder by peace and ascetic way of oriental spiritual philosophy. In this way Eliot finds nostrum in the mythic legends that flourish 'agape' to enliven the spiritually dead human

civilization. The classical cultures both oriental and occidental strongly focus on the faith which modern people lost being fed by positivist epistemology.

Finally, Eliot's concern seems to find the spiritual nostrum of mental malaise of modern people who transgressed the natural law as well as culture. The craze for material things and excess misuse of sexuality (libido) leading to momentary pleasure invited the catastrophe upon humanity so that the ascetic life is a solution as advised in *Brihadarnyaka Upanishads* and the *Tripitak*. In a nutshell the modern episteme that centers on an individual's hubris, is the cause of degeneration and modern conundrum. This downfall can be checked if one follows spiritual path or austerity.

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