

Significance of the title *The Waste Land*

Tulika Anand

Dept. of English, Jaipur National University

Jaipur, Rajasthan, India

Email : tulikaanand10@gmail.com

Abstract: Thomas Stearn Eliot was born on 26th September, 1888 at St. Louis Missouri, U.S.A. It is the famous imagist poet, Ezra Pound who encouraged Eliot to compose the poem and Eliot dedicates the poem, “The Waste Land”, to Ezra Pound. The Waste Land draws on a wide range of cultural reference to depict a modern world which is in ruin yet somehow beautiful and deeply meaningful. Eliot uses techniques pastiche and juxtaposition to make his point without having argued them explicitly. As Ezra Pound said, “**Eliot truly did modernize himself.**”

The Waste Land Eliot’s masterpiece is a long and complex poem about the psychological and cultural crisis that came with a loss of moral and cultural identity after world war I. When the poem was first published it was radically experimented. Eliot presents a sordid image of popular culture with erudite allusions to classical and ancient literature and myths. The title itself indicates Eliot’s attitude towards his contemporary society, as he uses the idea of a dry and sterile wasteland as a metaphor for Europe devastated by war and desperate for spiritual replenishment.

Keywords: The Damaged Psyche of Humanity, Changing nature of gender roles, Sexual degradation, Spiritual Awakening.

Introduction:

In the poem, T.S. Eliot describes the mood of deep disillusionment stemming from both the experience of the First World War and from his personal painful experiences. Eliot wanted his poetry to express the fragile psychological state of humanity in the twentieth century.

“The Waste Land” is the most significant and representative poem of the twentieth century, iconic poem. The poem was written in autumn in 1921 and was published in 1922. It exposes the very soul of modern generation with all its horror, moral spiritual and intellectual

bankruptcy, disillusionment and waste. It particularly exposes the horror of war and the waste and rigidity that accompany and follow the modern welfare.

The poem begins with the most famous lines of Chaucer's "The Canterbury Tales", "**April is the cruellest month**", as Chaucer's poem expresses hope for the April month, yet Eliot twists Chaucer quote, and creates a dark tone to be carried on throughout the poem. Eliot repeatedly uses quotes from the tragedy Tristan and Isolde, to contrast the darkness in the poem.

The main theme of the poem is life-in-death. It suggests the living death of inhabitants of the Waste Land. Throughout the poem, the poet shows the fragile psychological state of mind of the people, his faith in God and religion and the decay of faith has resulted in the loss of vitality, both spiritual and emotional.

THE DAMAGED PSYCHE OF HUMANITY: Like many modernist writers, Eliot wanted his poetry to express the fragile psychological state of humanity in the 20th century. The passing of Victorian ideals and the trauma of World War I, challenged cultural notions of masculine identity, causing artists to question the romantic literary ideal of a visionary- poet capable of changing the world through verse. Eliot saw society as paralysed and wounded and he imagined that culture was crumbling and dissolving. It led to moral, spiritual and humanity's depravation. As Eliot gives many of his references in his poems: In the second part of his poem; "The Game of Chess", he explores the failure of sex relationship in the modern wasteland. Sex had become a matter of intrigue and counter moves between men and women and has lost its spiritual significance. "The Game of Chess", reminds one of the game of chess of Middleton's play, "Women Beware Women", where a game of chess is played to hide a seduction. Here, the poet brings a deep contrast and compares the bedroom and the dressing table with that of a brothel, instead of a lady's bedroom. As he wants to show the fashionable society of women. There are few lines, where the poet brings reference from The Rape of the Lock and Shakespeare's description of Imogen's bedroom in Cyberline. The poet also gives a gyst of the change of Philomel and the barbarous king Terus and also about the way his sister was sexually harassed and later they three were transformed in three kinds of birds. "The change of Philomel, by the barbarous king so rudely forced: yet there the nightingale."

THE INFLUENCE OF LITERARY HISTORY: Eliot maintained great reverence for myth and the western literary cannon and he packed his work full of allusions and quotations. The Wasteland juxtaposes fragments of various elements of literary and mythic traditions with scenes and sounds from modern life. The effect of its poetic collage is both reinterpretation of canonical texts and a historical context for the examination of the society and humanity. The sequence is quiet abrupt but it has a circular narrator.

When it is talked about myth, the first and the foremost character that comes in the mind is Madam Sosostriis, the famous fortune teller, with the pack of seventy eight tarot cards. The Tarot pack was earlier used in ancient Egypt to forecast the rise and fall of the river Nile, the

source of life and fertility. But in the contemporary world, the function of the card has so much degenerated as it is used for trite and forbidden fortune telling. As she says; “One must be careful these days” as she is in constant fear of police because fortune telling was illegal at that time. As the card presents different personages; The drown Phoenician sailor, symbolizes fertility God, Belladonna, as the lady of situation, then comes the man with three slaves, is the kingfisher himself, symbol of degenerate humanity then it comes the wheel which symbolizes the efforts of degenerate humanity then we have one eye merchant, the Smyrna merchant, next the card shows, the hanged man as Christ Crucified and the last, The crowds of people who represents the London crowd. People used to believe that drowning is a process of transformation and so his eyes have been transfigured into pearls. The line, “**These are pearls, that were his eyes**”, is reminiscent of Aerial’s song in The Tempest.

SEXUAL DEGENERATION: The Wasteland is a sexual caricature among the middle class people. It is seen the mechanical relationship of the typist and the clerk. The typist gives herself to the clerk with a sense of total indifference and apathy. There is neither any repulsion nor any pleasure. It is just animal like copulation. As soon as her beloved kissed her and departed, the typist rearranged her hair and got busy with her gramophone. Here, the poet wants to show two very different aspects: - First he wants to show the degradation of sexuality and love. Sex is being treated in a mechanical manner and the second thing that he shows the parallel movement of past and present. The poet has brought a deep contrast with the typist, as he brings the lovely women with the song in Goldsmith “The Vicar of Wakefield”, where the lady was betrayed by his beloved and committed suicide and the typist after the sexual intercourse is as fresh and busy with her work as earlier and puts a record on gramophone and says: “well now that’s done: and I’m glad it’s over.”

THE CHANGING NATURE OF GENDER ROLES: Over the course of Eliot’s life, gender roles and sexuality became increasingly flexible and Eliot reflected those changes in his work. Modernists’ writers created gay and lesbian characters and reimagined masculinity and femininity as characteristics that people could assume. As the changing of gender role reminds us about the character Mr. Eugenides, the Smyrna merchant, the one eyed man of the tarot pack. Now his function has degenerated. He has only one eye. This symbolises the loss of religious functions. The degeneration of his function is further brought out by inviting Tiresias at the hotel which were the hot bed for corruption and homosexuality during war. Thus, he represents sex relationship which is essentially sterile.

The latter portrays rape, prostitution, a conversion about abortion and other incidence of non-reproductive sexuality.

Rape: On a visit to river Thames, Tiresias meets with the three daughters of river Thames; who one by one shares how brutally they were violated. They share their reality by singing song. As the first daughter sings “Trams and dusty trees..... Richmond and knew undid me... narrow cannon”, where she states how she was violated in a flat narrow boat. As she does not like Highbury with its trams and dusty trees, symbolising the ugliness of modern civilization. Her second daughter feels extreme humiliation after the loss of her virginity and says; “My feet are at Moorgate..... What should I resent?” She expresses her extreme dejection,

frustration and sense of helplessness and here comes the third daughter; “On Margate sands..... nothing.” She is utterly frustrated with her life as she compares her life equal to nothing and compares with a broken finger, where she says, “a broken fingernail of dirty hands.”

TIRESIAS; AS A UNIFYING LINK: Another unifying link in *The Waste Land* is Tiresias, the old blind prophet of king Oedipus of Thebes and the protagonist or the central figure in the poem. He is the unifying symbol and the substance of the poem and is made up of what he sees and hears. He is all knowing one, gifted not only with immortality but also with the prophetic vision. He is bisexual. He has had most varied experiences and so symbolizes human consciousness. He is the connecting link between the past and the present. He is a prophet and a detached spectator, who frequently comments on the persona that passes before his eyes. He is also a fellow –sufferer in the agonist drama of human life. Tiresias is the voice of sensitive humanity, deploring its spiritual degeneration in the modern world. It is Tiresias who exposes by his comments the triviality, the monotony, the aimlessness of the contemporary civilization. Tiresias is a unifying symbol without whom *The Wasteland* would be a series of disconnected scenes and meaningless talks, incoherent and confused.

INFLUENCE OF RELIGION AND MYTH: Eliot has filled his poem with references to both the obscure and the well-known. In *The Wasteland*, Eliot explains the crucial role played by religious myths. He drew heavily from ancient fertility rituals, in which the fertility of land was linked to the health of the Fisher king, a wounded figure who could be healed through the sacrifices of an effigy. The Fisher king is linked to the Holy Grail Legends, in which a knight quest to find the grail, the only object capable of healing the land. Eliot also presents the alternative religious possibilities, including Hindu Chants, Buddhists speeches and pagan ceremonies and Eliot also takes images exclusively from Christianity such as the echoes for the Lord’s Prayer in “Hollow men”.

In “*The Wasteland* various characters are sexually frustrated, and are unable to cope up with either productive or non-productive sexuality (according to myth, his importance cause the land to wither and dry up). Tiresias represents confused or ambiguous sexuality and the women chattering in “*The Game of Chess*” represents out of control sexuality.

Mrs Porter is the best example of infidelity. In Eliot’s poem, water symbolizes both life and death. As the character, Knights wait for water to quench their thirst, cry for rain to quench the dry earth. Traditionally, water can imply baptism, Christianity and the figure of Jesus Christ. As water provide solace and cleanse but Eliot, on the other hand shows, how the contemporary world has degenerated. He gives an example of Mrs Porter: where she washes her feet in soda water, not to their spiritual purification but to make their flesh fairer to attract more males.

SPIRITUAL AWAKENING: A RAY OF HOPE: - At the end Eliot shows the spiritual rebirth and wisdom of India. As the knights reach the Perilous Chapel facing thousands of difficulties and their comes an end of their spiritual dryness; as the thunder God spoke, Da, Da, Da.

Da Datta: - “To Give”. We must give ourselves over to some noble cause. Such giving is possible only in moments of great emotional excitement when the human hearts throb with passion. It is only by such dedication, by such giving itself over to some noble cause, that humanity has progressed. Such martyrs are now rare, for they are not honoured on the modern wasteland.

Da Dayadharm: - It means to sympathise. Modern humanity is self-centered, each of us living within a limited world of his or her own, in complete spiritual isolation from others. “Sympathy” means going over to others or spiritual harmony with others and this is essential for spiritual salvation. We must come out of the prison of self, symbolized by the turning key and realise our oneness with other.

Da Damyata: - It means “self-control” and discipline. Discipline does not mean loss of freedom; rather it makes the journey of life easier and smoother. A disciplined heart is like a boat that sails easily and smoothly under expert guidance on a calm sea. Spiritual discipline implies control over sensuous desires and then life becomes a gay adventure.

The poem ends on a hopeful note “Shantih, Shantih, Shantih. The poet strikes a personal note and tells the spiritually dead humanity that how he hopes to achieve spiritual salvation. The falling of London Bridge, symbolizes spiritual and social disintegration in the Wasteland. In the end, he reminds humanity of the teachings of the Upanishads. It is in this way alone that absolute peace- “the peace which passeth understanding”- can be achieved.

The sections thus end not on a note of despair, but with a message of hope for the inhabitants of the modern desolate land.

References

<https://en.m.wikipedia.org/wiki/>