

**A STUDY OF ECOLOGY AS A METAPHOR IN T.S.ELIOT'S  
*THE WASTE LAND***

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**ABSTRACT**

T.S.Eliot had been very influential in shaping Modernist Poetry. He was instrumental in bringing about a innovative change in the language and images of the 20<sup>th</sup> century poetry. His poetic shorthand became inspirational model for many 20<sup>th</sup> century poets across the World. Eliotian devices are use of concrete shocking images, ironic use of myth and far-reaching symbolism. These devices became the benchmark for the 20<sup>th</sup> century poetry.

T.S.Eliot's *The Waste Land* is not only understood to be a metaphor of the cultural pessimism and sterility but also tries to depict a culture that is dying and carving for having rebirth. It is clearly evident in his poem that the legend of the Fisher King is entangled with other myths and legends of injury, barrenness, and rebirth. Eliot's vividness is to present this situation as a landscape, a landscape of drought and ruin, a mountain of stones. All these things throw light on the very iconography of broken and scattered belief systems in his poem.

*The Waste Land* is an unremitting stature of the apparent disorder within the modern society and the barrenness of life emerges from a shrewdness of failure, which is not the failure of an individual, instead it is the failure of the whole society at large. T.S.Eliot uses Ecology as a metaphor in his poem *The Waste Land* to demonstrate how the society is crammed with emptiness and is in a state of decaying.

This Paper is an attempt to study T.S.Eliot's *The Waste Land*. This paper is also an attempt to trace the use of Ecology as a Metaphor in T.S.Eliot's *The Waste Land*.

Thomas Stearns Eliot was a playwright, literary critic, and was also considered as the most important English-language poet of the 20th century and was awarded the Nobel Prize in Literature in 1948. T.S.Eliot's poetry marks a complete break from 19<sup>th</sup> century tradition, both in its theme and setting, as well as in its technique. It is a new kind of poetry, the result in part of the poet's reaction to the decadent and devitalized Georgian poetry of the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, and in part of his desire to mirror the complexity and obscurity of modern life. The poem that won him fame was, *The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock*, which was started in 1910 and published in Chicago in 1915 and was regarded as a work of genius of the Modernist movement. Later followed were his poems which have become some of the best-known poems in the English language such as: *Gerontion* (1920), *The Waste Land* (1922), *The Hollow Men* (1925), *Ash Wednesday* (1930), and *Four Quartets* (1945). T.S.Eliot is also well-known for his seven plays and largely for *Murder in the Cathedral* (1935).

According to T.S.Eliot the modern life is predominantly urban, and so the setting and the themes of his poetry are Urban. 'He does not sing of "Rainbows, Cuckoos, Daffodils, and timid Hares", in the manner of his contemporaries, the decadent Georgian poetry. We do not get in him the romance of far-off lands or of a sentimentalized English countryside. Neither do we get from him the romance of Love. Love is never the central theme of his poetry'.<sup>1</sup> It is clearly visible that 'Love' in his poetry receives a tender ironic treatment and such lovers as there are in his poetry are disillusioned as their love becomes unsuccessful. Eliot points out Love degenerating into lust, and the distortion of the sexual function is shown to be the root cause of degeneration and decay in his poems. Eliot's sense of his own age is visible in the picture of an incapacitated and decayed civilization, which is presented by his poetry. It is rightly said, 'People are often governed by selfish and self-seeking motives: they and their institutions are equally corrupt and torpid. Money values prevails, there is gross materialism and spiritual sterility'.<sup>2</sup>

*The Waste Land* was published in 1922, had a tremendous impact on the entire literary world and is an intensely personal poem. It is regarded as the text with references to the T.S.Eliot's own anguish. It is a poem of about four hundred forty lines in five parts entitled as (1) The Burial of the Dead (2) A Game of Chess (3) The Fire Sermon (4) Death by Water, and (5) What the Thunder Said. In this poem, Eliot embodied an intense vision of the post-war disintegration of European civilization. *The Waste Land* is a wilderness of the spirit viewed mostly against the background of squalid London life. Through the heap of broken images, Eliot holds up the barrenness of life and also demonstrates how faith has fled for the life. The scattered vision, of spiritual disruption, opening with the moving lines taken from the *The Burial of the Dead*:

"April is the cruellest month, breeding  
Lilacs out of the dead land, mixing  
Memory and desire, stirring  
Dull roots with spring Rain".

T.S.Eliot's *The Waste Land* is not only understood to be a metaphor of the cultural distrust and barrenness but also tries to represent a civilization that is dying and carving for having reincarnation. It is clearly obvious in his poem that the legend of the Fisher King is entangled with other myths and legends of injury, barrenness, and rebirth. Eliot's vividness is to present this situation as a landscape, a landscape of dearth and ruin, a mountain of stones. All

these things throw light on the very iconography of broken and scattered belief systems in his poem.

*The Waste Land* is an unremitting stature of the apparent turmoil within the modern society and the barrenness of life emerges from a shrewdness of failure, which is not the failure of an individual, instead it is the failure of the society at large. T.S.Eliot uses Ecology as a metaphor to show how the society is filled with emptiness and is decaying, in his poem *The Waste Land*.

It is an extremely complicated and incomprehensible poem, yet it has an atmospheric unity. Certain parts of the poem consist of the undesirable beauty, which has its unity of contempt and deep empathy, of gleaming irony and humor with the most upsetting sentiment. The distortion of values is brought out recurrently by means of ironic contrasts. Eliot's use of irony is not always so simple; he not only uses the surface irony but also at times uses the deeper irony in his poem. A unique attribute of Eliot's imagery is his use of picture-images, which are images of people and objects caught in action, that add more to life to his poem.

According to Spears Brooker, Eliot reflects the zeitgeist as "characterized by a collapse of faith in human innate goodness and in the inevitability of progress."<sup>3</sup> It is Faith and Belief which has always played a major element in T.S. Eliot's benchmark. According to Hugh Kenner in *The Waste Land*, the issues of faith and belief are inextricably correlated with that other depiction of European decay Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* (1994), and it is identical in the following lines:

"It had for an epitaph a phrase from Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* ("The horror! The horror!"); embedded in the text were a glimpse, borrowed from Conrad's opening page, of the red sails of barges drifting in the Thames Estuary, and a contrasting reference to the "the heart of light"<sup>4</sup>

It is alluring to see Eliot's portrayal of faith and belief in *The Waste Land* as merely a critique of Twentieth Century post-war Europe, perhaps only another articulation of the kinds of Modernist socio-spiritual pessimism. In many ways the issues of faith and belief in *The Waste Land* are represented through their absence in the poem. Eliot's poem also throws light on the steady decay of Judeo-Christian European society from the inside. It is evident from the use of imagery in the opening lines of *The Waste Land*, which altogether contributes to the overall sense of rotteness. There is neither the relevance of the past glory and nor any capability to uphold life:

"What are the roots that clutch, what branches grow  
Out of the stony rubbish? Son of man,  
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"

As Ackroyd rightly says "It was Eliot's belief that if Christianity disappeared our civilization would disappear with it"<sup>5</sup> and *The Waste Land* represents a world where exactly that has happened, where the heart of society is revealed as being not so much dark as empty or missing altogether; for Eliot an infinitely more terrifying prospect.

In the whole of "The Waste Land", we will come across many broken images, which are unrelated pictures, but are put together to give a coherent whole of meaning. Eliot also uses the ironies of the Modern life along with spiritual deterioration, etc. The Waste Land is not about the

complexity of a life lived under the shadows of obscurity, but it is the obscurity that emanates a sense of confused existence where life dwindles to a heap of broken images where the sense of boredom and horror pervade the imagination of the time. Throughout the first section of the poem, Eliot tries to present the reader with image of brokenness, image of aridness, triviality and nothingness. We see the “dry stone no sound of water”, the “handful of dust” and the “Unreal City/ under the brown fog of a winter dawn” all of which point to a dry landscape devoid of a spiritual centre.

Eliot uses varied cultural references in this poem. It is the matter of great concern for him is faith in general rather than the explicit failure of Judeo-Christian faith. He visits and revisits all approach of belief systems such as Buddhism, Christianity in ‘*The Fire Sermon*’ and in ‘*What the Thunder Said*’. It is identical through his use of metaphor in the references to ‘the Rock’, which is an image he was to take up later on in his life after his conversion. We can later see Eliot using the Greek pantheism in his poem, which is a pagan ceremony and finds none of them able to give life or meaning to post-War Europe.

According to Maxwell, ‘*The Waste Land*, both in its imagery and its structure, depicts a society not so much devoid of *faiths*, as religions systems of belief, but of *faith* as a teleological process, providing both a sense of history and progression’.<sup>6</sup> In ‘*The Burial of the Dead*’, this tragic loss is recommended in the use of metaphor in the rootless of a tree, or in the buried corpse, it is clearly identical in the upcoming lines taken from the poem:

“That corpse you planted last year in your garden,  
Has it begun to sprout? Will it bloom this year?  
Or has the sudden frost disturbed its bed?”

Further we see Eliot revisiting the theme of a dead and bare Nature. He tries to concretise it by the use of metaphor for spirituality in early Twentieth Century Europe, which is made clear by the upcoming lines taken from the poem ‘*The Burial of the Dead*’:

“The river’s tent is broken; the last fingers of leaf  
Clutch and sink into the wet bank. The wind  
Crosses the brown land, unheard”

In ‘*The Fire Sermon*’ Eliot introduces the figure of Tiresias, the blind prophet/seer of Sophocles. According to Bernard F. Dick, ‘Tiresias represents a figure of unheeded proclamation and is symbolic of traditional faith and experience; as in *Oedipus Rex*, the old man “with wrinkled female breasts” is ignored by the residents of the city’.<sup>7</sup> They only know the everyday and the rootless sense of a present without a past or a future. I

It is also worth making a note of the *Heart of Darkness* which not only tries to represent the horrors of the decline of the Western Enlightenment but also tries to represent the horrors of the emptiness that arises when faith is no longer capable of providing the basis for survival in life in *The Waste Land*. Eliot suggests by his poem the people of Twentieth Century Europe, who are really sightless, blind to their own fate and lack of faith. The structure of the poem itself is an indication of this unfaithful society which is assorted and broken.

### Notes

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2. Ibid.
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4. Kenner, Hugu. *The Invisible Poet: T.S. Eliot*, London: Methuen, 1965.
5. Ackroyd, P. *T.S. Eliot*, London: Abacus, 1984, p.249.
6. Maxwell, D. *The Poetry of T.S. Eliot*, London: Routledge and Kegan Paul. 1960, p.90.
7. Dick, B, "The Waste Land and the Descensus ad Inferos", published in Bloom, H (ed), T.S. Faber, 1986, pp.59-80.  
(All other the Citations are taken from Eliot, T.S. *The Waste Land*, London: Chelsea, 1989. pp. 67-81 and Eliot, T.S. *The Waste Land*, published in *The Complete Poems and Plays*, London: Faber and and Faber, 1989, pp.59-80.)

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16. English Literature Essays - T S Eliots The Waste Land - How are issues of faith ... loss is suggested in the metaphor of the rootless tree, or in the buried corpse: ... www.ukessays.com > Essays > English Literature.