

The Apocalyptic Image of the World in T. S. Eliot's "The Waste Land"

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Thomas Stearn Eliot is one of the outstanding figures of the twentieth Century English literature. He wrote poetry that has been described as apocalyptic in the present history. The purpose of this paper is to discuss the apocalyptic theme in Eliot's celebrated poem "The Waste Land". It depicts an image of a divinely and rationally lost faithfulness and an apocalyptic barrenness of our modern world. The poem is not merely a reflection of personal hopelessness and depression, but a view of the total spiritual exhaustion that has overwhelmed the modern world. This total spiritual exhaustion is emphasized through a range of parallels and contrasts of the imagery in the poem; imagery that is stemmed from Eliot's wide knowledge of European culture, world religions and mythology. According to Eliot, impending apocalypse is a cause of world's civilization's decadence. Further, he discovers the eventual responsibility that humanity owns is for its own desolation and salvation.

Key words: *T. S. Eliot, The Waste Land, Apocalyptic Barrenness, Imagery, spiritual exhaustion, Mythology, Decadence of Civilization, Moral Deprivation.*

Introduction

As the core of apocalyptic literature, the term "apocalyptic", which means "to disclose", came from the Greek word "apocalypse", and "apocalypse" is the title given to the New Testament's last book which is the St John. Revelation. Moreover, the literature related to apocalypse comprises of the quasi-prophetic and prophetic writings that are inclined to exhibit the world's pessimistic visions as well as melancholy & frightening prophecies of the destiny of mankind. Further, the millenarian movements that occurred in Europe's later middle ages, induced greater no. of harangues relevant to the humanity wickedness and nearness of the world's end. However, the literature of Sermon prospers in the apocalyptic visualizations (Cuddon 48). Thus, the apocalyptic writings are typically relevant to the world's coming end which is perceived in form of history's visionary scheme. It has been

stated in New Testament that the apocalypse is the instance of complete disaster in the entire world. In this all things is thrown in huge devastation in order to prepare the pathway for the Christ's 2nd coming. Therefore, the generalization of the word "apocalyptic" denotes to an excessive catastrophe that violently overthrew the thing's older order and substitute it with something novel (Smith 102). Frank Kermode's book *The Sense of an Ending* is the most remarkable of concerning with apocalyptic literature, he writes "I begin by discussing fictions of the End, about ways in which, under varying existential pressures, we have imagined the ends of the world ... So we begin with Apocalypse, which ends, transforms, and is concordant" (5). Kermode contends that the literature of apocalypse is a "radical instance" of fictions, and it relies on the imaginatively recorded past' concord, however, imaginatively predicted future is attained on our behalf (Ibid:8). Kermode argues regarding T. S. Eliot as a modernist apocalypse poet, he writes "if one wanted to understand the apocalypse of early modernism in its true complexity it would be Eliot ... He was ready to rewrite the history of all that interested him in order to have past and present conform; he was a poet of apocalypse" (Ibid:111-12). And the poem "The Waste Land" reveals the very truth. Eliot's revolutionary achievement, his poem "The Waste Land" (1922) reveals an artist who has experienced profoundly, and contemplated prudently upon the collapse of religious faith and loss of spiritual orientation in the twentieth-century world. "The Waste Land" is really considered as the defining articulation in modernist literature of that apocalyptic collapse and loss of a civilization (Hughes 36).

Discussion

Being modernists, Joyce, Pound and Eliot were already occupied with this notion that literary artists can generate their literary work in any sort of novel, medium, poetry and theatrical piece which will disrupt all rules. This will glide in face of traditions and conventional wisdom to create the literature's work which was accomplished greater than merely a remark on the experience of human "that, instead, could effectively mirror its most obscure psychological and spiritual sources and dimensions. Other motives and issues compelled these younger artists as well, of course". The radical change over the entire world, between 1800 and 1900, was an age of revolutionary change in all fields of human endeavor and human concerns. Eliot, like other modernists, "saw nothing but anarchy and chaos, nihilism and irreverence, tastelessness and arrogance, in those who were practicing modernist techniques and utilizing modernist ways of thinking that eschewed authoritarianism and absolutes and advocated in their place relativistic ways of thinking and perceiving reality" (Murphy 424-5). Until the middle of 1920s, Eliot's poetry is mostly related to the features of cultural deterioration in the modern western world. Due to his approval to Anglican Christianity, a note of repentance in most of his verses, looking for spiritual peace along with the significant suggestion to the mystical, liturgical and biblical religious literature (Greenblatt and Abrams 2288). Eliot takes on an enormous variety of the religious and

mythological substances, took from the both eastern and Western culture in order to give a symbolic picture of modern Waste Land and for renewal requirement. Thus, he apocalyptically exhibits the emptiness and horror of such dried life, "The mass death and social collapse of World War I inform the poem's vision of a Waste Land strewn with corpses, wreckage, and ruin" (Ibid: 2295). Eliot's "The Waste Land" is a work that is a honor to the past, present, European literature and culture, to the human imagination and its capacity to make order out of the chaotic and random (Murphy 426). Eliot's "The Waste Land" is considered as a flawless reflection for modern day postwar Europe's scene in earlier 1920's.

"The Waste Land" was initially written over a period of time in fragments, the initial dating from 1914 to 1915. Therefore, all these fragments were placed together and modified with significant assistance of Ezra Pound, into the last version that we recognize now a days (Scofield 108). "The Waste Land" initial publication in *The Dial* (New York, November 1922) and *The Criterion* (London, October 1922). Thus, a poem comprises of 434 lines, which is more controversial in comparison to any other 20th century poem. Most of its insinuations stem from the primitive vegetative ritual digest *The Golden Bough* by Sir James Frazer. However, the poem, which might seem like a random assembly, consists of five distinctive sections in a precise arrangement. Moreover, it seeks a mythical structure in comparison to other type of "narrative method" (Roberts 381).

"The Waste Land" is a poem of five parts, each titled. Part I, "The Burial of the Dead", introduces themes of the Holy Grail, sexuality, religious guilt, and the First World War's effects. Thus, the title of "The Burial of the Dead" is obtained from the funeral service of the Anglican. This is a congeries' section of prominent varied voices telling of the living dead's fear. We are exhibited with a zombies' series searching the voice along with a desiccated landscape's images "stony rubbish . . . A heap of broken images . . . fear in a handful of dust" (Ibid: 383). The last part of this section depicts the state of the dwellers of modern London; they are like the opportunists who flowing like dead men towards their numbing jobs while listening to the dead sound of bells:

A crowd flowed over London Bridge, so many,
I had not thought death had undone so many.
Sighs, short and infrequent, were exhaled,
And each man fixed his eyes before his feet.
Flowed up the hill and down King William Street,
To where Saint Mary Woolnoth kept the hours
With a dead sound on the final stroke of nine. (62-68)

The short infrequent sighs emanated by Eliot's figures convey the rhythm of their steps and, more remarkably, their gait suggests a resemblance to marionettes. Here Eliot draws an image of a fallen wasted urban society, inhabited by schizophrenic, alienated people who act like marionettes. It is a society immersed into filth and disintegration (Douglass 70).

Part II, "A Game of Chess", includes destructive satirical descriptions of women and of marriages. Eliot refers to his own marriage, Shakespeare, Ovid, and even overheard conversations at a pub. It seems to be thematically centered on a sterile vision of modern life (Moody 129). In this part, Eliot recalls the essence of his relation with his wife. The original title of this part is "In the Cage". All the characters seem imprisoned from inside. In the first half of this part, a conversation happens between the poet and his wife, but without communication. Eliot unveils both his disillusionment with social life and scornfulness toward the failures of the established order. The wife's voice dominates throughout with a kind of nervous manner; the only answers she receives are the silent contemplations of her husband. She asks: "Do you know nothing? Do you see nothing? Do you remember / Nothing?" (Bloom 66). This bleak scene outlines a shared life of man and woman. This indicates that there is no substance for life, woman fights frantically to create an association amongst herself & her silent partner: Are you alive or not? Is there nothing in your head? Yet again, man declines or is incapable to response, however, we perceive this in his head that he transmits the tune of "nothing" in his head (Chinitz 162). Thus, the Part II's second half shows that the scene of two women in pub transfers to the social order's lower level and exposes the similar hollowness of the relations amongst the sexes that does not remarkably vary. Both upper and lower classes live a meaningless life of despair and hopelessness. Everywhere the poet turns, he sees a reflection of his own agonized state, his own imprisonment. The poet in delicate psychic balance, making an ironic comment on a scene overheard, a scene that he has translated into the language of his own personal anguish: "Good night, ladies, good night, sweet ladies, good night, good night" (Bloom 66). Thus, In "A Game of Chess", the grand lady's picture in an extravagant classical or revitalization setting, thus, the couple of lines of modern upper-middleclass and the dialogues among the two ladies of working-class in pub have a mutual despair theme and disappointment of sexual love as well as the environment of varied kind of claustrophobia. Amongst these, the three portions present a greater human suffering view across the historical periods and social classes (Scofield 113).

Part III, "The Fire Sermon", illustrates connections between sexuality and moral deprivation. Eliot's feelings of regret reach a climax. "The Fire Sermon" is the most explicit about the vagaries of human desire, especially and explicitly sexual desire (Murphy 439). This part of the poem is entitled "The Fire Sermon" after Buddha's well-known "Fire Sermon", a teaching text from The Buddha about freeing oneself from desire (Chinitz 160). The Buddha's Fire Sermon emphasizes a spiritual lesson that the entire material universe is on fire and the

created world of time and space is nothing but an illusion. This world is illusory for the simple reason that it is always changing. Hence, nothing in it endures, whereas the soul does (Murphy 457). "The Fire Sermon" opens with a rivers' image. It calls to mind a vision of dead vegetation and a world after apocalypse which has been deserted by all life. There is no life but rats and corpses are moored at the bank of the Thames (Pietrzak 263). The speaker sits on the banks and ponders on the lamentable state of the world:

A rat crept softly through the vegetation
Dragging its slimy belly on the bank
While I was fishing in the dull canal
On a winter evening round behind the gashouse
Musing upon the king my brother's wreck
And on the king my father's death before him.
White bodies naked on the low damp ground
And bones cast in a little low dry garret,
Rattled by the rat's foot only, year to year. (187-195)

As a reference to the decayed social life, a shameful story occupies the heart of "The Fire Sermon". The narrator sees an emotionless assignation of a man who is young yet "carbuncular" who hops into the lonely female typist's bed, just to violently make love to her and after that leaving her without any hesitation (Chinitz 159). The typist shows no regrets for what she did:

I Tiresias, old man with wrinkled dugs
Perceived the scene, and foretold the rest—
I too awaited the expected guest.
He, the young man carbuncular, arrives,
A small house agent's clerk, with one bold stare,
One of the low on whom assurance sits
As a silk hat on a Bradford millionaire.
The time is now propitious, as he guesses,
The meal is ended, she is bored and tired,
Endeavours to engage her in caresses
Which still are unreproved, if undesired.
Flushed and decided, he assaults at once;
Exploring hands encounter no defence;
His vanity requires no response,
And makes a welcome of indifference. (228-242)



The "The Fire Sermon" ends with allusions to both St. Augustine and the Buddha. The invocation of Buddha and St. Augustine shows that the speaker seeks to be purified of sexual desire and of craving of all earthly things as Buddha inveighs against all fleshly occupations and recommends detachment from "impressions based on the eye":

Burning burning burning burning
O Lord Thou pluckest me out
O Lord Thou pluckest
Burning (308-311) (Qtd. in Pietrzak 265)

The medley of spiritual corruption scenes and a debased sexuality in "The Fire Sermon" connects directly with the poet's own particular spiritual malaise (Bloom 66).

Part IV, "Death By Water", describes the terrible fate of The drowned Phoenician sailor Phlebas. It implies an appropriate reference to the pursuits of worldly concerns which afflict the spiritually impotent human and an image that connote both the shortness of a human life and the demands of commerce and other material enterprises (Murphy 70). Eliot utilizes the death of the Phoenician sailor to remind us of death: "O you who turn the wheel and look windward, / Consider Phlebas, who was once handsome and tall as you". As a warning for those who suffer the deteriorated life, Death is the remedy to such situation. Therefore, death itself is the assistance for carrying forward the acknowledgement of the life's blessedness that might not be exploited in an infertile land & worthless pursuit as Eliot has designated (Bloom 46).

Part V, "What the Thunder Said", is the concluding part of the poem. Eliot indicated that one of the themes of "What the Thunder Said" is the present decay of Eastern Europe. this has helped to lead more than one generation of readers to perceive the poem as a statement of cultural despair (Longenbach 233). The following lines reveal the very truth:

Cracks and reforms and bursts in the violet air
Falling towers
Jerusalem Athens Alexandria
Vienna London
Unreal (372-376)

These cities, are used here as symbols of a barren world because the people of these cities are devoid of ethical values.

"London Bridge" in this part of the poem portrays and affirms the theme of disintegration of the world "London Bridge is falling down falling down falling down". The three words,



"Datta. Dayadhvam. Damyata", here, Damayata (Control), Dayadhvam (sympathize) and Datta (give) are the keys to a novel life for such "waste land".

They are the antithesis of modern problems. If people learn to give, sex will gain new meaning as an expression of emotion and it will no longer be debased. If they sympathize with each other, they will be able to communicate their true feelings and listen to those of others. Finally, if they develop self-control, their faith will revive and they will no longer fear life or death. (Mozumder 74)

At the conclusion of this portion, the aspiration for order & compliance to the chaotic wishes of life persists in a conflict. The speaker sits down by sea whirling his back on the deserts' "arid plain" (Moody 131). The quest of speaker is either he will set his lands minimally in order or not specifies the continuance of a necessity for meaning and order:

I sat upon the shore
Fishing, with the arid plain behind me
Shall I at least set my lands in order? (423-425)

Conclusion

Eliot looks at the chaos of the world as a direct consequence of humankind's lack of connection with God. The poem "the waste land" reveals that Eliot is a man in torture, confused about his national identity, his humanity & the world's apocalyptic state. Moreover, "The Waste Land" implies to the both society and individual's chaotic life in the 20th century; it further reveals the disenchantment and despair of the generation of post-World War I. Eliot, in "The Waste Land", portrays an image of a divinely and rationally lost faith of the world. The poem is not just a reflection of individual despair and desolation, rather an outlook of overall spiritual tiredness that has gone pass the modern world. The apocalyptic barrenness of the modern world is emphasized through a range of parallels and contrasts of the imagery in the poem; imagery that is stemmed from Eliot's wide knowledge of European culture and world religions.



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