

Social Criticism in T.S. Eliot's *The Wasteland*

M. Sangeetha, M.A., M.Phil. and Christy Peter, M.A., M.Phil.
Adhiyaman Arts and Science College, Uthangarai

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Abstract

The Wasteland addresses modernity and the lost connection to high culture and refined life. It explores the interplay between emotional sufferings, portrayal of madness in pleasure, contemporary psychiatry and offers solutions from the Indian Upanishad. Words such as *Datta*, *Dayavadham*, and *Damyatta* proffer a wonderful solution to break free from the madness of sensual and materialistic life. The poem is an outlet for Eliot's anxieties around the loss of cultural and moral identity in the modern world, a world that "lacks traditional structures of authority and belief" thus only containing "soil that may not be conducive to new growth" (Lewis). The theme of the poem is relative and meaningful and also is prophetic of the modern times.

Keywords: T.S. Eliot, *The Wasteland*, social criticism, contemporary psychiatry, moral identity

Social Criticism

The term *social criticism* often refers to a mode of criticism that locates the reasons for malicious conditions prevalent in a society considered to be in a flawed social structure. It examines the literature in the cultural, economic and social context in which the literary pieces written or received. Social commentary is the act of using rhetorical means to provide commentary on issues in a society. This is often done with the idea of implementing or promoting change by informing the general populace of the crisis in the society. The theme of the poem is the spiritual and emotional sterility of the modern world. Man has lost his passion. His has lost his faith in God and religion.

Man Forgot Spirituality, Humanity and Morality

In the title “The Waste Land” the poet feels about the life of the 20th century British people. Their life is barren and outdated. In the words of Cleanth Brooks, the living death of the English is described in the lines of “The Waste Land”. People were spiritually dead and but highly materialistic. Man forgot spirituality, humanity and morality. He focused on the pleasures of the world and lusted after money and cheap desires. Their life was turning into an insignificant one according to T.S. Eliot. He feels the degradation of the human race and the dilapidation of human values will eventually affect the humanity. He feels disheartened by the turn of events in the early part of the twentieth century. This dispirited sense is evident in “The Wasteland”.

Olden Days

In the first section of “The waste land”, he describes the behavior of the people. In the olden days, at the final stroke of nine, people stood for fraction of second as a mark of spirituality. However, during the twentieth century, the attitude and behavior of the people had changed considerably as they didn’t revere the sound of the church bell. The indifferent attitude of the modern people is highly apathetic. The crucifixion of Christ or the symbol of the cross did not have the same resemblance. The first section deals with the social degradation as is seen in the barren and bleak nature of the four seasons. The seasons are dry, or there is no land or there is no water and every season is a caricature of all that is dead and lifeless.

The description of the lady about her land tells about the strife that the poet experienced during post-war days. The moral degradation is clearly foreseen by the poet and he visualizes the total squalor of the future generations. In the reading of the tarot he prophesies the dilapidation of the human mind and the disintegration of the society as a whole. He uses the fragmented forms deliberately to convince the reader about the utopian conditions foretold by the modernists and pioneers of the industrial revolution. He uses the reading of the tarot by Madame Sosostris as a metaphor to show the destruction of morality and religious values.

Manipulation of the Society

In the second section, “A Game of Chess” he implies the manipulation of the society and the dictates of the level of the society. From the description of the sexual encounters he illustrates

the way in which the norms of the society and the life style of the people have taken a great change or make over. He emphasizes the crumbling social hierarchy and the high standards of life. The disillusionment of the perverted mind is candidly expressed in his lines. The low life of the people as is evident in the way they had sexual encounters in all the public places categories the period. It is the genesis of a new era where the mind, body and soul are assumed to be free and liberal but the poet sees a certain kind of setback for the modern age. The sensual pleasures and the immoral activities reach a high during the twentieth century. T.S. Eliot acts as the messiah and forewarns them of the impending disaster. He fears that too much of all this pandemonium will lead to the end of the world. He requests the reader to repent and this he says through the characters Lil, Mrs. Equitone, Phlebas, a drowned Phoenician sailor indicating natural disaster as an indictment for the sins of man. T.S. Eliot had his source from various texts and he was influenced by the Bible in writing about the holocaust kind of end to this world if mankind does not be penitent.

Harbinger of Worse News?

As in “Animal Farm”, T.S. Eliot is the harbinger of the worse news to the new world. The changing political scenario, the altercation of the mind and the soul and the desire to accept everything and anything shows the desperation of the times. T.S. Eliot brings in the chaos and the eerie feeling to highlight the pathos of the future world. The development of science and the after effects of the war were influential in the people questioning the existence of God. Charles Darwin’s “Origin of Species” puzzled and perplexed human beings. Science started proving everything it claimed whereas religion was based on assumptions and beliefs. This disillusionment angered the poet who could not shy away from religious or moral principles. He felt that the supreme power had to intervene and remove them away. The spiritualist called “O! Lord thou pluckest me out” as they could not be in a world full of desires and pleasure. The materialistic and high-handed life was actually seen as a deterioration of the simple and moral life of the people.

Solution for the Maladies

The poet offers solution for the maladies of the world. He feels a course on the Indian Upanishad, may hold a permanent solution to all the problems of the world. He assures that people need self-control, self-realization and self-introspection. To have *shanthi* or peace one can follow

the ways of Yoga and mediate for inner peace. He wants peace and quiet in England. He feels that the people are not worried about their future. He wants a nation without corruption. He likes to see a spiritualistic world without any corruption and maintain the dignity of culture and tradition.

Lament over Man's Fallen Nature

The Waste Land goes beyond a mere diagnosis of the spiritual distemper of the age. It is a lament over man's fallen nature, a prophecy and a promise. Mrs. Equitone, an imaginary character is a modern vulgarized version of the Egyptian diviners and practices magic. The forecast of the rise and fall of the waters of the Nile through the Tarot cards is symbolic of the period. In the "Fire Sermon" there is a world of loveless loving, the myth emerges with the figure of the fisherman and the modern world begins to be merge with the other worlds. The figures of Tiresias and the coiling serpents are superimposed upon the typist and her young man. The characters Elizabeth and Leicester and the girl in her canoe and her sisters are not sung as the rivers have gone dry.

There is no assurance of redemption or there seems to be no hope. It indicates the anxiety, despair, neurosis, boredom and mental vacuity of the modern age. Lack of the spiritual arises from degeneration of values, vulgarization of the coitus and commercialization of all basic values. In this poem, the poet describes "London bridge is falling down", "Unreal city" to reveal the ruin of London and its people. It suggests as a transition and the different behavior of the people when they hear the song of the nightingale that they mention, "Jug, Jug to dirty ears. And other withered stumps of time, were told upon the walls; staring forms"

A Philosopher, Statesmen, Prophet, and Seer

The poet acts as a philosopher, statesmen, prophet, and seer. He explicates the futuristic views to change the modern society. Due to the growing tide of materialism and a mechanical life of the people, disintegration of family, relationship and authority has set in. Non- ethic, culture and realism were long forgotten. Service to society was a thing of the past. Destroying and degrading of the self was in vogue. Even middle class people like the typist and the clerk in the "Fire sermon" were moving towards a society that offered them sexual and cheap pleasures of the

world. Tarot packs are symbolic of the infertility of the land. They reveal the inability of the generation to accept the pitfalls of the social and moral distortion.

The poem functions as an outlet for Eliot's anxieties around the loss of cultural and moral identity in the modern society. The text is truly supercilious. The poet uses this technique in the literary canon to symbolize the downfall of culture and tradition in the materialistic world. People give importance to their pleasure, and are highly egoistical, self-centered and are morally corrupt. "The handful of Dust" is symbolic of death.

A Game of Chess

"A Game of Chess" -- in this the poet employs the Philomel myth in order to show the sufferings of women from the ancient time to modern time. The people have become barren in thought, mind and soul due to the lacunae in spirituality. Spirituality is a tool to reach God and attain a fearless life in the earthly world. The poet feels that the people have to be aware of poverty, suffering of another human being and practice humanity. He advocates that quality of life is achieved through such acts instead of anger, unnecessary emotions and meaningless sex particularly mono-sex.

He mentions in his poetic lines "CIF" word,
"Mr. Eugenides, the Smyrna merchant
Unshaven, with a pocket full of currants
CIF London, documents at sight
Asked me in demotic French.

CIF means "C" for cost, "I" for Insurance, "F" for freight in London. The merchant already has paid the currency and has received permission to trade in the country. He has come there to corrupt the culture. In the word itself he suggests that "Demotic means vulgar". Whether in England or France people were living dead according to the poet due to the low moral standards.

The World War had eroded the richness of culture, hope and tradition. In all the five parts of Waste land, the theme is exemplified. The dissolution of life and the lament of fertility are attributed to the waste of the land and reveal the lifelessness of the period.

An Allegorical Application

The Waste Land is an allegorical application of modern society and religion. Our civilization will be the Waste Land. We can obtain youth and life only by journeying far, questioning our condition and learning a hard lesson. The theme of redemption and rebirth is quite clear in Eliot's poems and the possibility of spiritual rebirth. Basically, it is not different from the Christian conception of sin, atonement, redemption and spiritual resurrection. It is equally applied to the rationalistic idea of science that nothing material is subject to utter destruction. Everything undergoes a transformation under the influence of time.

The Waste Land is a voice of the twentieth century, heralding the destruction of life if mankind does not repent. It is a criticism of the vile of the society and the denigration of moral values. Even now the prophetic words of T.S. Eliot hold true for generations. Human beings have been wayward and corruption and death has been accepted as a normal life. He reveals pessimism and undergoes psychiatric disturbances due to the total dishevel of the world. He ropes in the mantle of cleansing. He wants the society purged and free of sin, corruption and enmity. He needed the quiet and calm of a peaceful living.

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M. Sangeetha
Assistant Professor



Christy Peter
Assistant Professor
Adhiyaman Arts and Science College
Uthangarai635207
Krishnagiri District
Tamil Nadu
India
chrisantben07@gmail.com

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