



A Voice Against Cultural And Moral Degeneration S. Eliot: The Wasteland

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Abstract

T.S. Eliot (1888-1965), an American of New England family was a poet, dramatist and literary critic. The first edition of his Published poems appeared in 1918 but it was *The Waste Land* (1922) that firmly established his reputation as a poet. He has dealt with a great variety of themes. The early phase of his poetry and the themes are urban and he has depicted the materialistic impact on the soul of the individual. In the later phase of his poetry, his religious bent of mind can be seen more vividly. Eliot was a spokesman of his age. It was an age where religion was losing its hold on the people's minds. It was an age that was changing rapidly as far as moral, religious and cultural values were concerned. People were becoming morally and spiritually impotent and degenerating day by day. It is in *The Wasteland* where the Eliot has very forcefully expressed the moral and cultural degeneration. The paper is an attempt to study the theme of 'A voice against moral and cultural degeneration in *The Waste Land*.

Keywords: Degeneration, Moral , Spiritual, Emptiness, Materialism.

Paper

Thomas Stearns Eliot is considered one of the most acknowledged representative figures of the twentieth century whose literary talent speaks of itself so boldly and vividly through his remarkable and distinguished poetry that has no match. He dominated the English literary scene with wide poetic authority and influence whose career in literature expands over a period of forty five years. He modified and enriched the English tradition for the benefit of the coming generations and left an impact on them that has been more effective and comprehensive than that of any other men of letters of his times. Eliot was a spokesman of his age. He expressed the dominant anxieties and feelings of his age. It was an age where religion was losing its hold on the people's minds very fast. It was an age that was changing rapidly as far as moral, religious and cultural values are concerned. People felt that they lacked the guiding faith that could provide them any solace and salvation. They were becoming morally and spiritually impotent. This, it is quite obvious that they were degenerating day by day and it is in *The Wasteland*, where Eliot has forcefully expressed the moral and cultural degradation.

The age in which T. S. Eliot started writing poetry was the age of depression and disillusionment. The end of the 19th century came with the beginning of rapid industrialization of England, and with it, an increasing urbanization. Result of this was prosperity that gave birth to evils and affected the very basic aspects of life deeply. The First World War worsened the situation i.e, the feeling of loneliness, despair, confusion and cynicism increased. It was the age in which feeling of doubt and uncertainty, and the erosion of human relationship was hastened and heightened by the new discoveries in the field of Psychology. Man was no longer seen a rational being as far as his behaviour was concerned. The assessment of the relative roles of man and woman changed. The younger generation and the older generation felt the gap between them widening, resulting in a change of relationship between parent and child.

Probably, the First World War brought the feeling of being unsettled, a feeling of disillusionment and a growing sense of the impermanence of everything. There was a sense of hurry and haste in all fields of activity. There was a demand for faster and more action - probably the result of the breakdown of tradition and established values which led man to be rootless. The very atmosphere was one that was inimical to the cultivation of literary pursuits. The hopes for a brave new world, so firmly dissipated in 1918 (because of the war), gave rise to the disillusionment and despair that found expression in *The Waste Land* and *The Hollow Men*. A new awareness of sociological factors enabled the writers of this period to perceive a disintegrating culture with no positive values to replace it. There was need for a New World, for a new outlook on life. Each writer found his own answer to the problem. Chaos cannot continue forever. The English writers showed a concern for a definition of their responsibility that would strike a balance between their desire for freedom of expression of personal values and the sense of obligation to a wider and stricter social pattern.

This sort of back ground of instability, uncertainty, confusion and breakdown of values altogether awakened the sensitive heart in T.S. Eliot. It was against this background that he began his work. It was an atmosphere in which things fell apart. It was an atmosphere in which culture was threatened; where there was desperate experimentation in all fields in a search for stability and new patterns. About the situation of the modern world, W.B. Yeats' words are quite appropriate when he says in *The Second Coming* :

Turning and turning into the widening gyre;

Falcon cannot hear the falconer

Things fall apart, the center cannot hold;

Here anarchy is loosed upon the world. (LL1-4)

T. S. Eliot echoes the thought:

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One of the unhappy necessities of
Human existence is that we have to
Find things out for ourselves (Eliot, 428)

It is an accepted fact that Eliot's *The Waste Land* is the epic of the modern age, which presents a vivid and transparent panorama of the anarchy prevailing in the so called contemporary civilization. About the problems of this age, Bertrand Russell says :

Brief and powerless is man's life; on
Him and his race the slow sure doom
Falls pitiless and dark. (Eddy, 180)

Similarly the world portrayed in Eliot's poetry poses a threat to man's existence because it is a world which is insignificant. It is Eliot's firm conviction that without faith in God, no scheme for social improvement can work. Preoccupation with the doctrine of progress and worldly pursuits makes us blind to the true significance of time. We are destined to external suffering because we are forgetting our moral and spiritual values as said by M.C Bradbrook:

It is a world devoid of any generally.
Accepted standards of belief (MC, 12)

The root cause of these problems is the absence of any spiritual driving force regulating human motivation and the worship of the material pursuits which have thrown man on a purely animal plane to existence. Man in this world fails to justify his existence when life does not appear to have any meaning except barrenness and hollowness. The meaninglessness of regulated life without any higher purpose has been depicted in *Ash Wednesday* (1930) also where there is an inner drama of the clash between flesh and spirit. The protagonist after rejecting the delusory world of false dreams of happiness is again and again tempted by them. He feels too weak to erase the past sensual memories of his life and overcome the temptations of the illusory attractions of pleasures. Yet he has a will to transcend the material world and get at the spiritual world. Therefore, it becomes a matter for exploration and self questioning, a search within and "a groping toward a religious affirmation" (Robison, 113).

The Waste Land is itself a symbol of condition where there are no spiritual values and action is mechanical and meaningless. The characters in the poem amply serve to bring home to us all the symptoms of the psychic malady which had taken hold of postwar Europe. In *The Waste Land*, we meet with boredom, hopelessness depression, mental disintegration, nervous, exhaustion and pathetic efforts to find the fragments of shattered faith. *The Waste*

Land is crowded by characters who have lost the ability to live life fully- Madame Sosotris, the fortune teller knows nothing of the mysteries of life ; lil at thirty one, looks too old; the typist and her seducer have sexual intercourse in a mechanical and emotionally indifferent manner, the demobbed Albert and the loitering heirs of city directors want to have 'a good time' not knowing what it is about the condition of the Wastelanders, Dewey aptly remarks:

The chief intellectual characteristics of the present

Age is its' despair of any constructive philosophy. (P.180)

Eliot in *The Waste Land* presents a criticism of the modern, materialistic Western civilization and a commentary on the loss of ultimate values in today's world. He was deeply moved by the cultured malaise of both Europe and America, so he analyzed in his poetry our moral degeneration caused by the lack of belief in the elementary values of life and paved the way for spiritual exploration of these values. Eliot reveals the way in which he himself possesses a sense of his own age in the conclusion of *The Burial of the Dead*. In this regards F.R. Leavis also remarks, "The poem is primarily a study in later day disintegration and deals with the incessant and rapid change, the breach in continuity and the uprooting of life which characterise the machine age" (Leavis, 90). Eliot sees suffering as inseparable from man's life always. His religious sense makes him ascribe human sufferings to human sinfulness. Since human nature is radically sinful, man is subjected to pain and suffering at all times. Thus, Original Sin and Sufferings are related. In the poem, Eliot conceives of original sin, after the manner of St. Augustine, as concupiscence of lust. Thus, indirectly lust surrenders to sex, passion and 'Love of created beings' are at the bottom of human sufferings. Just as man cannot completely get rid of his sexual appetites, so he cannot completely eradicate evil and suffering. This explains the sexual symbolism of *The Waste Land*.

The second and third section entitled *A Game of Chess* and *The Fire Sermon* respectively have as their principal themes, sex and sexuality. What is common to them is the apprehension of some undefined danger, the premonition of the knock upon the door. This 'Knock upon the door' is death which is vaguely anticipated also in the refrain. The modern scene is infested with sex but the meaning, the human as well as mythical significance behind the 'fertility' is totally lacking. Marriage and love relationships are sterile recalling the importance of *Re Fisher King*. *The Game of Chess* deals with this aspect of artificiality in the contemporary world. Sterility and the loveless sex of the modern men and women is signified through the seduction scene and the violation of the Thames maidens. Through a protagonist named, Tiresias, Eliot gives his impressions about the modern people. Tiresias has come across a German princess who is fond of travel. She is an example of a rootless modern person who has become culturally degenerated as she has no connection with her family, community and nation. She is a kind of international globe - trotter, fond of physical

comforts of life. As they go through Munich, they are overtaken by a shower of rain. They do not realize the purifying power of rain but rather seek shelter from it.

Summer surprised us, coming over the
Starn bergessee with a shower of rain;
We stopped in the Colonnade and went'
On in sunlight; into the Hofgarden
And drank Coffee, and talked for an hour(Eliot, 8-11)

Thus, we see for a modern degenerated man any sign of resurrection is painful and horrible. Eliot also gives an example of emotionally and intellectually degenerated man, who cannot express what he is thinking. He finds himself in a dilemmic situation. He seems to be intellectually and emotionally bankrupt and by remaining in such a condition he not only troubles himself but also the people associated to him. In the poem, in the lonely chamber of Belladonna comes her husband, she tells him that she is feeling nervous and requests him to stay with her, perhaps she fears he will go elsewhere. He does not speak to her - his silence gnaws at her heart and she wants to know what has been occupying his mind. She cries in a bewildered tone:

Speak to me -Why do you never speak.
Speak "What are you thinking of?
What thinking ? "What?" I never
know what you are thinking (Eliot, 114).

In the second part, , we are introduced to Lil, aged 31, another "Wastelander" who has prematurely grown old and lost her physical charm due to poverty and childbearing. Why is she looked down upon by her own man who has ruined her youth and beauty for his pleasure? Thus, we see that Lil is a tragedy of perverse sex-relation without love. James Truslow Adam says about the situation of modern man who is wandering aimlessly, "We are floundering in a morass "(Eddy, 18). Such is the condition of a man, who has buried all his cultural values, norms, systems and beliefs. We do not have the courage to take any drastic action because we lack in any positive value and have no conviction.

What will be the outcome of our efforts to build a society unless our actions are guided by belief in spiritual values? If we have forsaken God, we cannot make our civic life happy merely with the help of administrative machinery. Humanists provide homes to the homeless and find charitable institutions for the poor but they cannot improve their spiritual

condition. We live together but instead of loving our neighbours, we exploit them for our selfish purposes. Eliot puts a series of questions:

Do you all huddle together

Because you love each other?

What will you answer be?

We all dwelt together or

This is a community (Eliot,179)

We withdraw ourselves from the ways of God and bank upon the grandeur of our mind and the glory of our action, upon the schemes of human greatness and the usefulness of science and technology with whose help we have tamed nature. We are engaged in making our life comfortable in devising the perfect technology and developing a rational morality that is devoid of spiritualism. In this way, we evade the basic issue of life, the question of morality and endeavour to better the lot of humanity without any awareness of ultimate goal of life.

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