

REJUVENATION IN T.S. ELIOT'S *THE WASTE LAND*

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Abstract

Most of T.S. Eliot's critics and readers see *The Wasteland* a poem about the crisis of modern culture, and the breakup of civilization. The poem has been discussed and analyzed according to this view. It is thought that the theme of the poem is that of the drifting barrenness in a world incapable of self-sacrificing devotion and no longer held by the bonds of love and faith. It is also thought that in the opening lines of the poem, spring and the promise of life are meant ironically. The study is an attempt to analyze the first part of the poem, "The Burial of the Dead" by which it becomes conspicuous that the poem is not totally about desperation and death. It could also be interpreted as a real promise of life and hope of resurrection. T. S. Eliot seems to be saying that out of death and winter come spring and new life. The opening of his poem portrays this concept clearly while the rest of the poem seems to briefly brush upon that notion, and the poem ends with an appeal for regeneration.

Keywords: Eliot, Wasteland, Burial, resurrection, regeneration, desperation

Introduction

In *The Waste Land* T. S. Eliot expresses his fear and terror about the fate of humanity and culture, the fear and terror which prevail in his early poems before *The Wasteland*. The world described in those poems is that of isolation and skepticism. It is expressionless, aggressive, and full of escapist resentment. The same world is shown in *The Waste Land* which is about the crisis of modern culture and the breakup of civilization. Yet the poem ends with an appeal for regeneration. Here T. S. Eliot seems to be saying that out of death and winter come spring and new life. In order for there to be healing and happiness, a pain must occur first. The opening of his poem portrays this

concept clearly while the rest of the poem seems to briefly brush upon that notion.

At the time the poem was written, World War I had just ended placing the world in an era of depression, loss, and ultimately death looming over everyone. Eliot's own life was going through a dry spell where he was not receiving any inspirations or new ideas to write about. The world was a wasteland, and his life was a wasteland too, but there still seemed to be a hope in the midst of it all. In order for things to improve, this feeling of pain and desolation had to be dealt with and pushed aside. Once that was accomplished healing and new beginnings could occur.

The Waste Land revolves around Eliot's reading of two contemporary extraordinarily influential cultural/anthropological texts, Jessie Weston's *From Ritual to Romance* (1920), and Sir James Frazer's *The Golden Bough* (1890). Of particular interest to both authors is the story of the Fisher King, who has been wounded in the genitals. This injury affects the king's fertility, and his lack of potency is the cause of his country becoming a dried out "waste land." The legend says that the land will regain its fertility when the Fisher King is healed. In order for the land to be restored, a hero must complete several tasks, or trials. Eliot picks up on the figure of the Fisher King legend's wasteland as an appropriate description of the state of modern society. Eliot says he drew heavily on this myth for his poem, and critics have noted that many of the poem's references refer to this idea.

***The Waste Land* Criticism**

The Waste Land has been almost consistently misinterpreted since its first publication. It is primarily regarded as a poem that symbolizes the chaotic life of both individuals and society in the twentieth century. It is thought to reflect the disillusionment and despair of the post-World War I generation. Many also see the poem as a reflection of Eliot's disillusionment with the moral decay of post-World War I Europe. The world that Eliot portrays in his poem is supposed to be one in which faith in divinely ordered events and a rationally organized universe has been totally lost. It is not just a reflection of individual hopelessness and despair, but a panoramic view of the total spiritual downfall that has overtaken the modern world. The sterile, modern-day human society waits in dire distress for a revival or regeneration that may never come.

Even a critic as acute as Edmund Wilson has seen the poem as essentially a statement of despair and disillusionment, and his account sums up the stock interpretation of the poem. Indeed, the phrase, "the poetry of drouth," has become a cliché of left-wing criticism (Brooks, 1939, para. 8). It is such a misrepresentation of *The Waste Land* as this which allows Eda Lou Walton to entitle an essay on contemporary poetry, "Death in the Desert"; or

which causes Waldo Frank to misconceive of Eliot's whole position and personality. (Brooks, 1939, para. 9).

The critic I. A. Richards influentially praised Eliot for describing the shared post-war as suffering from a "sense of desolation, of uncertainty, of futility, of the groundlessness of aspirations, of the vanity of endeavor, and a thirst for life-giving water which seems suddenly to have failed." Eliot later complained that "approving critics" like Richards "said that I had expressed 'the disillusionment of a generation,' which is nonsense. I may have expressed for them their own illusion of being disillusioned, but that did not form part of my intention." (Lewis, 2007, pp.129-51).

Other critics also see the poem as one that describes the desolation of modern world and the disintegration of contemporary culture. Hay (1982), for instance, looks at the poem as "Eliot's first long philosophical poem, can now be read ... as a poem of radical doubt and negation, urging that every human desire be stilled except the desire for self-surrender, for restraint, and for peace. Compared with the longing expressed in later poems for the "eyes" and the "birth," the "coming" and "the Lady" (in "The Hollow Men," the Ariel poems, and "Ash-Wednesday"), the hope held out in *The Waste Land* is a negative one." (para. 1)

Similarly, Cooper (1987) states in his study of the *The Waste Land* that the poem does not only echo the collapse of a historical, social, and cultural order assaulted by vicious forces working under the label of modernity. For Eliot the adversity that described modernity

was not an overturning, but the unavoidable, and ironic, culmination of that very order so lovingly celebrated in Victoria's last decade on the throne. Unlike the older generation, who saw in events like the Great War the passing of a golden age, Eliot saw only that the golden age was itself a heap of absurd sociopolitical axioms and perverse misreading of the cultural past that had proved in the last instance to be made of the meanest alloy. (para. 1)

In her analysis of the poem, Kennedy (n.d.) assumes that *The Waste Land* is a depressing poem about women, memories, nature, and the seasons. There are many allusions to death, deterioration, and deceased things in this poem: "[E]verything in this poem is sad and dead. The people miss things that have passed or ended. They are also indifferent to what happens to them. The images and seasons are dark, cruel, and desolate" (para. 3).

The first section of the poem, "The Burial of the Dead," as the section title indicates, is thought to be about death. The dead that are being buried in this section are all the soldiers and other casualties who died during World War I. The section begins with the words "April is the cruelest month," which is perhaps one of the most remarked upon and most important references in the poem. Those familiar with Chaucer's poem *The Canterbury*

Tales will recognize that Eliot is taking Chaucer's introductory line from the prologue—which is optimistic about the month of April and the regenerative, life-giving season of spring—and turning it on its head. Just as Chaucer's line sets the tone for *The Canterbury Tales*, Eliot's dark words suggest that his poem will be dark and gloomy.

However, with such criticism the meaning of the poem seems to be at stake. Brooks (1939) suggests that if *The Waste Land* is not a world-weary cry of despair or a sighing after the vanished glories of the past, then the popular interpretation of the poem will have to be altered. For that reason, the present research paper attempts at finding a new meaning of Eliot's poem by re-exploring the first section of the poem, i.e. "The Burial of the Dead," to demonstrate that *The Waste Land* is actually about life and rejuvenation, as well as the hope associated with rebirth, rather than despair, decay and death (para. 3).

The Burial of the Dead: Predictions of Rejuvenation

The first section of *The Waste Land* takes its title from a line of the burial service in the Anglican *Book of Common Prayer*. Eliot has been careful to lay out his central theme before the first stanza has even begun: death and life are easily blurred; from death can spring life, and life in turn necessitates death. Brooks Jr. (1990) in "*The Waste Land*": *An Analysis*, sees the poem's engine as a paradox: "Life devoid of meaning is death; sacrifice, even the sacrificial death, may be life-giving, an awaking to life" (para. 7).

The opening lines of this part suggest the promise of life in spring. The world would be capable of savoring the happy times after having gone through such terrible times as those of the war. Here Eliot compares this era of new beginnings to spring, since spring generally is symbolic of new life. This reminds of Chaucer's *Prologue* to *The Canterbury Tales* where spring is a time of regeneration and the sweet showers of April "fall / And pierce the drought of March to the root" (ll.1-2). However, unlike Chaucer, Eliot does not imply that spring is necessarily a happy time, or that beginnings are happy. He simply says that spring is a necessity when dealing with pain that will enable things to become fully alive again. Eliot says that "April is the cruelest month" which mixes "memory and desire" (ll. 1-3). Mixing memory and desire can be interpreted in many ways. Often for something new, living, and less painful to happen there needs to be a desire for life. The desire is there because the memories of life in the past prevail. From this thicket of disorder, the narrator clings to memories that would seem to suggest life in all its vitality and wonder: summer rain in Munich, coffee in a German park, a girl wearing flowers.

Jay (1986) says in his article "Discovering the Corpus" that memories can also block the past, but April and a season of new life comes. As it

arrives the life awakens passion pulling out the coldness. Jay calls this an "ode of dejection" that shows a form of hurt and feeling coming after the initial pain. Therefore, in his essay he argues that Eliot has taken Chaucer's celebration of life, and turned it into an ode of dejection (p.133). Another way of looking at Eliot's "ode of dejection" is that this "celebration of life" was written realistically to reflect Eliot's time. Eliot wrote *The Waste Land* during the modernist movement in the early twentieth century. An element of the modern philosophy led to poems being written about or with a sense of loneliness, dejection, and despair. This sense of dejection reflects his time, which was quite different from the medieval ideas implied by Chaucer in *The Canterbury Tales*.

Most writers choose to write about issues that are of great concern to them at the moment. For example, Europe was in shambles at the time Eliot was writing. Many had died in the war, so life was not being celebrated (Smith, 1983, p.138). The poem may have been about dejection or celebration as it was something everyone was in need of. Eliot wanted to show people it was possible for them to handle all the death they had experienced. A healing process must occur in order for people to continue on with life. In line five Eliot writes, "Winter kept us warm, covering Earth in forgetful snow" (l. 5). This line implies that people had not begun to come to terms with the death they had experienced. It still comforted people to feel depressed and cold, both feelings winter brings to mind. More confirmation that winter does not have life in it is found in the line that says, "A little life with dried tubers" (l. 7). Winter was the time right after the war, the time in people's lives where there was not much hope, yet it was a comfortable place to be in. Spurr (1984) writes that "forgetful" and "snow" are compared nature. Giving snow a human quality makes the image stronger in Spurr's case showing a type of consciousness that pursues disorder in an inner world (p. 23).

Spurr (1984) says Eliot never unifies the disorder, but uses the inner imagination and looks out to the desolate sea the poem seems to display (p. 26). This modernist idea of desolation supports the idea of the world being in disarray after the war, in this time of winter. After winter the discomfort truly begins to be noticed, the soothing feeling of depression is gone with the sharp sting of the defrost. Dull roots begin to stir in the rain, the lilacs begin to blossom, and life begins again. This is a cruel process according to Eliot. It is the healing process after the war that is painful, but brings people back to a similar existence they had before the war, one with less pain and more life.

Edmund Wilson claims that the poem exhibits a "post-War world of shattered institutions, strained nerves and bankrupt ideals where life no longer seems serious or coherent" (Smith, 1983, p. 138). Eliot may show in

his poem that these things happened after the war, but he also seems to show that the shattered fragments of institutions and ideals can be rebuilt and reunified. As April, or this new season in time, begins the healing process can start, and these things can be reestablished.

The Waste Land shows high expectations raised by the idealism of Woodrow Wilson. However, whoever's idealism it was is not as important as the new expectations they had to try and rebuild countries and revive them again. These were desires put forth after the war and depicted in the poem by the first few opening lines. The mingling of memory and desire is obviously evident here. The way the world was in the past is now being desired again for the future. According to Spurr (1984), there is hope that the world can go back to how it was (p. 26). Also Cowley (1994) wrote in his *Exile's Return* that *The Waste Land* was socially discordant to its time. The poem stated that the past was exalted and the present was barren of emotion (p. 133). Most critics do not agree with this argument, they see the poem as totally about the crisis of modern culture, and the breakup of civilization. Eliot's purpose is to point out a contrast between some aspects of the past with the sordidness of the present. They see that the theme of the poem is, simply and generally, that of the "drifting barrenness in a world incapable of self-sacrificing devotion and no longer held together by bonds of love and faith" (Fraser, 1977, pp. 90-91). Yet so many people tend to pay attention to other critics who saw hope in the future coming about. Eliot might be saying that the past was dignified and the present is barren, but he is also saying it does not need to stay that way. He perhaps means that the healing process has begun, and things will go back to the dignified past, once the winter is gone, and the pain is dealt with. The memory and desire are mixing "stirring / Dull roots with spring rain" (ll. 3-4). Once again this line is another image of the healing process as roots grow deeper in the spring rain.

The roots must break through the hard ground in order to grow, but the rain softens the ground and nourishes the plants helping them grow. Not only are these references to growth and life about recovering after the war, but Gregory Jay also believes it is referring to Eliot's own personal life. He writes that Eliot had come to a standstill in his writing career at this point. He was having a hard time thinking of things to write about and was afraid that he would never have another good idea again. He alludes to this in some of his own writings, so there is a death that has occurred in his brain when it comes to ideas. The "death" does not last long, and though perhaps painful, Eliot thinks of new ideas, and this new creation he has made is the beginning of a new season. April represents the awakening of ideas and passions he was holding inside as the past he held was blocking his ability to write new works. The reference to "Dull roots" in this case can mean that his ancestry was dull. The winter and forgetful snow was a "secure oblivion that seduces

and comforts those who do not presume to begin writing again". Jay said that Eliot was in a state of fear that he might never be able to get out of because it felt comfortable to him (Jay, 1986, p. 133). This is often the case with most modernist poets as Eliot.

It can be possibly stated that despite the fear Eliot experienced, he forced himself to write this poem. There are many different interpretations and possibilities as to why Eliot wrote about April being a cruel month. Most of them make sense and are correct in their own way. He apparently wrote the poem quite rapidly. Martin (1986) mentions in an essay that no one really knows what the poem is about and that no one probably ever will be able to determine it (p. 153). His collection of essays, therefore, gives different interpretations as every critic does. He further explains how the poem was originally received in a variety of ways.

Some people thought that the poem was puzzling and that Eliot just did not know how to write poetry (Martin, 1986, p. 138). These sometimes conflicting interpretations are dealt with as the entirety of the poem is studied by critics. Continuing on with the next couple lines of the poem Eliot left more images about the seasons to be understood. He has mentioned winter and spring, but he went on to talk about summer. He never concludes with autumn, however, but just continues with the story the poem tells ending with summer. "Summer surprised us...with a shower of rain" (ll.8-9) implies things are still not always perfect, but the life is there making things easier. "And went on in sunlight" (l. 10) shows that despite the rain life continues after the rain and there is sunlight again. Summer is the result of the pain and healing process that spring takes people through. Eliot is suggesting in his poem that the world can overcome difficulties and barrenness.

Through a healing process that may hurt, life can be restored once again to the world. The world after the war went through years and years of healing. It was never completely restored before there was another World War that left the land devastated once again. The cruelty occurred for a long time, but after the Second World War lilacs blossomed out of the dead land. It was a very long healing process, longer than Eliot probably imagined, but it was necessary. In the end seasons of summer came. The world has not seen another major war since then which suggests that summer has arrived again.

Eliot did not know all this was going to happen, of course, but he was giving people a type of hope in the midst of the fragments and wasteland left behind after the war. He had no idea the healing process would take long, but he had struggled with a similar situation in his own life. His writing had come to a desolate lonely place, but he began again and brought the world *The Waste Land*. Just by writing his poem he was proving that after the cruel process of getting things to grow out of dead land the results can be glorious.

Lilacs and other plants that must grow in desolate lands become hearty after breaking through the ground. Plants bear the wind and weather in order to blossom and live. The opening of *The Waste Land* is now quite different from the original "Boston night-town scene" he originally planned (Jay, 1986, p. 133). It is understandable why a poem entitled "The Waste Land" would begin with a depiction of a desolate land, or a place in need of a thaw.

The winter Eliot begins with makes the reader think of a barren wasteland where everything is dead. This modern sense of despair is there and continues even through the healing process. The thawing of winter into spring and the growth of the lilacs shows that the land is not going to be bare anymore. There is a growing and replanting that is happening throughout the dead land. The land so badly in need of life is now developing slowly and cruelly into the long desired summertime where life is abundant.

The Waste Land has been interpreted by a great assortment of literary critics with an array of differing opinions. Most of those opinions suggest that the poem is about desperation and death. The opening lines of the poem are clearly about new beginnings whether they are beginnings after a war, in Eliot's career, or in nature. Eliot is saying that in order for the new life generally associated with summer the pain that comes with April and spring must be dealt with after winter. Though it is not necessarily a "celebration of life" like Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales*, it is not quite the "ode of dejection" as Jay also refers to it. Rather it is perhaps an ode of rejuvenation, a bringing about of life through a cruel process after a lifeless time.

Conclusion

Though the poem is usually interpreted as one about the falling down of modern civilization, about the hopelessness of man in this desolate and barren life, yet the new beginnings suggested in the opening lines show that the poem is about hope after despair and life after death. Eliot's theme is, therefore, the rehabilitation of a system of beliefs, known but now discredited. This becomes conspicuous in the final lines of the poem. *The Waste Land* ends with an appeal for regeneration.

The poem seems to be an enquiry after principles of order because the disorder of the soul caused the disorder of society and culture. The reasons behind desolation and barrenness are the isolation of the spirit and the torment of sterility that led to the war, which are not part of the nature of man. The last part of *The Waste Land*, "What the Thunder Said," suggests that an act of faith exhorts to obey the thunder. What the poet must finally turn to is Heaven, in the climactic exchange with the skies: "Datta. Dayadhvam. Damyata." i.e. give, sympathize, and control or have self-discipline. The war was caused by the lack of love and faith, and by the selfishness of man. In order for life to begin again, to overcome death and

burial, there should be a purifying fire against low desires and lusts, and this fire brings about the painful resurrection (Ahmed, 2001, pp.134-35). Thus to give is to surrender the self to moral authority and duty, to lessen the claims of the self. To sympathize is to enter into a community of souls, and to transcend the worship of personality; it is a release from selfishness. To control is to govern one's soul to submit to external force (Jha, 1996, pp. 127-28). This act of faith and courage gives life to the waste land. This lifts the spirits; after the wreckage of lust and the torment of isolation, "Damyata" invites a happier perspective. The boat responds "Gaily, to the hand expert with sail and oar," like the boat upon which Isolde hears the sailor's song in "The Burial of the Dead." We have returned then to the beginnings of love, the promise of a joyful future.

The poem ends on a note of grace, allying Eastern and Western religious traditions to posit a more universal worldview. Eliot's poem adds up to a vision of the world as wasteland, awaiting the arrival of the Grail that will cure it of its ills. The end of the poem seems to suggest that that Grail is still within reach.

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