

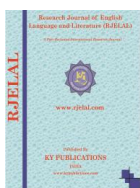


THE STRUCTURE OF “THE WASTE LAND”

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Abstract

It is indisputable that T.S. Eliot's *The Waste Land* is one of the most remarkable poems written in English. It was the most controversial and widely misunderstood poem which was bitterly criticized by critics on its publication in 1922. Louis Untermeyer calls it 'a piece of literary carpentry where the poet has stifled lyrical impulse'. Eliot links the present with the past, myth and legend with the help of allusions, symbols and phrases. It is not the result of spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings. It is loaded with learning and allusions. The paper deals with the structure of the famous poem 'The Waste land'.

Keywords: Myths, Allusions, Symbols, Spiritual Death, Sexual Frustration.

Introduction

"We are not, however, moving in a circle but on spiral up and down, the way up is the way down".

This is how Helen Gardener defines the structure of the poem *The Waste Land*. The structure of the poem is not progressive but circular and the poem ends where it begins. Graham Hough feels that *The Waste Land* is a mixture of so many styles like narrative dramatic, lyric, and allusive with mythical technique. The lost vegetation myths of the Tarot, the transfiguration of Philomel, the fertility myths of the Rhine maidens and the Thames daughters, all of these fragments enlighten the theme of death and rebirth in the poem and give a structure to it. Andrey T. Rodgers says:

"Early critics admired the poem tentatively, while admitting their anxiety over its lack of connective tissue, its shifting persona, and its questionable progress through a maze of literary echoes.....An increasing appreciation for the ironic effect of juxtaposing fertility myths with the sterility

of modern experience provided a clue to the basic tension of the poem."

Tiresias is the most important personage in the poem. He has lived the life of both a man and woman and constitutes of the central unifying thread of the poem. He is a string that unites all the five sections of the poem as T.S Eliot himself said, 'What Tiresias sees, in fact is the substance of the poem'. He reflects on the events of the past and the present and finds a striking resemblance between them. Tiresias is a mere spectator not a character. He assumes the role of a commentator on the modern wasteland.

The unity of the poem is reinforced by the use of various myths. Eliot assimilates four wastelands in this poem: The wasteland of king fisher, the wasteland of king Oedipus, the contemporary modern wasteland and the Biblical wasteland whose central vision carried through the myth of Holy Grail taken from Miss Jessie Weston's *From Ritual to Romance* and vegetation myth from *The Golden Bough* by J.G. Frazer. Cleanth Brooks remarks that the poem is:

“a sigh for the vanished glory of the past;
the living death of the modern
wastelanders.”

The atmosphere of desolation and sexual disorder, spiritual death is built up by various images like Mme. Sosostriis, Hyacinth girl, the unreal city, Princess Marie, the conversation between Lil and her friend, Sweeney’s visit to Mrs. Porter, the situation of three daughters of Thames, empty chapel and the typist girl. These images help to depict the main theme of sexual frustration and spiritual death which are reinforced by Eliot’s use of myths. Eliot has made use of these myths to convey his feelings about the contemporary world. The mythical method has given a circular shape to the poem. These mythical references have been connected with the modern wasteland which is the result of sex perversion, frustration, spiritual death and materialistic pursuits among the people.

One of the most noticeable features of Eliot’s poetry is his repetition of words. He often repeats a word to give special effect to its appearance in a new context. ‘Softly’ in ‘*Sweet Thames, run softly till I and my song*’ has a lyrical sense but a completely different sense in ‘*A rat crept softly through the vegetation.*’ He repeats a few words in the same emotional contexts with the same significance like the use of words ‘empty’ (‘*and voices singing out of empty cisterns*’; ‘*There is the empty chapel*’; ‘*In our empty rooms*’); ‘stone’ (‘*out of this stony rubbish ?*’; ‘*And the dry stone no sound of water.....*’); ‘stirring’ (‘*..... stirred by the air.....*’; ‘*stirring the pattern on the coffered ceiling*’); ‘clutch’; ‘water’; ‘dry’; ‘rocks’; ‘unreal city’ and the phrase ‘HURRY UP PLEASE ITS TIME’.

All the five sections of the poem have a sort of formal structure. The first section ‘*The Burial of the Dead*’ refers to the burial service of the Christian church and also to the burial of dead fertility shows the theme of spiritual death, sexual perversion and lack of faith. The wastelanders are spiritually dead. Any thought of re-birth is painful to them, so ‘*April is the cruelest month*’ for them. In the end of this section the poet also says that the hope of regeneration lies in the restoration of faith in church:

“There is a shadow under this red rocks.”

The same perversion of life is at the center of the second section, ‘*A Game of Chess*’ which is taken from Thames Middleton’s play, ‘*Women Beware Women*’ where game of chess is played to distract the attention of an old woman while her daughter in law is indulging in intercourse. In this section the poet indicates the failure of sex relationship in the modern world. The idea behind the tavern scene is that marriage is meant for regulation of sex-instinct only. The perversion of sex has made modern life barren and desolate:

“He’s been in the army four years, he wants
a good time,

And if you don’t give it him, there’s others
will, I said.

.....If you don’t like it you can get on with
it, I said

Others can pick and choose if you can’t.”

In the third section, ‘*The Fire Sermon*’ the title is borrowed from the sermon of Lord Buddha wherein he said that the world is on fire, ‘burning with the fire of hatred, infatuation, birth, old age and death. This section emphasizes that the whole world is burning in the fire of lust, anger, sorrows and misery. And it is responsible for corruption and decay of modern society. This kind of degeneration prevails in all classes of society the upper, middle and lower class. The typist girl has no sense of regret after the sex act:

“Well now that’s done: and I’m glad It’s
over.”

Paces about her room again, alone,

She smooths her hair with automatic
hand,

And puts a record on the gramophone.”

In fourth section, ‘*Death by water*’ Eliot shows the significance of water as a means of purification and rebirth. People who devote themselves to worldly pursuits will be punished and drowned in whirlpool of death and there is no hope of rebirth. It hints at the death of the wastelanders because of their materialistic pursuits:

“A current under sea

Picked his bones in whispers. As he rose and
fell

He passed the stages of his age and youth

Entering the whirlpool.”

The fifth section ‘What the Thunder said’ reiterates the moral lesson for the liberation of society from spiritual death and desolation through the three lessons as given by the Thunder- self surrender, sympathizing and self control. It talks about a fresh life of the death. The poet writes,

“We think of the key, each in his prison

Thinking of the key, each confirms a
prison.”

In this way, all the technical devices used by Eliot contribute to a circular shape. The poem ‘The waste Land’ is a poetic expression of the themes of spiritual barrenness, emotional dryness and sexual degeneration. The central vision of the poem is complex and complicated, so it is expressed through an equally complex poetic technique; the mythical framework, various allusions, comparisons and contrasts, rich images and symbols along with the narrator Tiresias who is the most powerful link and narrating everything he looks at. There is no linear development from scene to scene, but a circular one.

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