



FORM AND FRAMEWORK OF "THE WASTE LAND"

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Abstract

T.S. Eliot's 'The Waste Land' is a poetic expression of the spiritual barrenness, moral vacuity, emotional dryness and sexual degeneration especially under the impact of materialism, industrialization and scientific advancement. Eliot's poetic talent is alien to the English tradition because he was one of the most distinguished poets who perceived literature in a very obsolete and profound manner. 'The Waste Land' is not a straight forward narrative poem. The device employed by Eliot to link the present with the past, myth and legends with the help of allusions, symbols, quotations and phrases. It is a mixture of many styles like narrative, dramatic, lyric & allusive. Through a protagonist named Tiresias, Eliot gives his impressions about the modern people. This paper deals with the mythical technique, form and style of Eliot's poem, 'The Waste Land.'

Keywords: Myths, Allusions, Spiritual Barrenness, Mythical Technique

INTRODUCTION

T.S. Eliot's 'The Waste Land' was the most controversial poem published in 1922. It is loaded with allusions and learning. After the proper analysis, Cleanth Brooks described the poem as a 'highly condensed epic of the modern age'. Louis Untermeyer called it 'a piece of literary carpentry, where the poet has stifled lyrical impulse'. 'The Waste Land' has generally been criticized for lacking in the structural unity. It has been regarded as a collection of separate poems, 'a heap of broken images, a piece of literary carpentry, scholarly joiner's work.' The structure of the poem is not progressive but circular and the poem ends where it begins. Helen Gardner points out that in the poem:

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

Some critics point out that its structure is musical. I.A. Richards has called the poem 'music of Ideas'. Sometimes it seems not to make sense;

sometimes it seems emotionally incoherent; now and then it sounds even musically incoherent. It happens because he leaves out connections and transitions, but this is true only in a grammatical sense. George Williamson writes,

"If he omits the grammatical signs of connections and order, he preserves the psychological or poetic signs. No order, no discourse; but he writes the discourse upon which all poetry depends. Because poetry has a higher kind of order than that of prose it is not released from that order."

The epigraph of the poem is taken from Roman poet Petronius which describes the story of Sybil of Cumae who was gifted a long life by God Apollo, but with the passage of time, she lost her teeth, eyes, health and reduced to a mere skeleton. The epigraph translates, "For once I myself saw with my own eyes the Sibyl at Cumae hanging in a cage, and when the boys said to her 'Sibyl, what do you want?' She replied, 'I want to die.'" And this

epigraph takes the readers directly into the soul of the poem. The central motive death-in-life and rebirth is represented by his adoption of mythical technique and for contrasting the past glamour with modern sordidness, as remarked by Cleanth Brooks that 'The Waste Land' is:

"a sign for the vanished glory of the past; the living death of the modern waste landers."

Mythical technique enables Eliot to give shape and significance to the spiritual chaos and degeneration prevailing in this materialistic world. Eliot has drawn the myths from James Frazer's book 'The Golden Bough' and Miss Jessie Weston's 'From Ritual to Romance'. The Holy Grail legend is a medieval legend which is associated with the adventures of King Arthur and his knights of the round table. Philomela's myth shows the violation of a woman. The seasonal cycle of nature is responsible for the ancient vegetation myth. Adonis, Atis and Osiris are corn gods and associated with vegetation myth. The Indian legend of the Thunder refers to one of the Upanishads. Eliot also uses the myth of Tiresias from Greek mythology and introduces him as the central figure of the poem. Tiresias has lived the life of both a man and a woman. Tiresias is the central unifying thread of the poem as Eliot himself said:

"what Tiresias sees, in fact, is the substance of the poem."

Tiresias is a string that unites all the five sections of the poem like variety of flowers in a garland. The poem deals with the theme of spiritual degeneration because of sins of sex perversion, materialistic pursuits and lack of faith in religion. But through various myths the poet suggests the idea of regeneration through suffering, penance and death which gives the poem a circular shape and helps Eliot to convey his feelings about the contemporary world.

Some critics agree to the fact that 'The Waste Land' possesses a formal structure. For example, the first section 'The Burial of the Dead' deals with the theme of death in life. 'April is the cruelest month' for them. German Princess Marie is the symbol of hollowness of modern man. Hyacinth girl shows

sexually perversion. Mme. Sosostriis befools others for money. There is only hope of regeneration or rebirth lies in the restoration of faith:

'There is a shadow under this red rock.'

The second section 'A Game of Chess' points out the spiritual death, where game of chess is played to distract the attention of an old lady while her daughter in law Bianca is indulged in sex with Duke. Poet shows this desolation even through the myth of Philomela who was raped by the King Tereus:

"The change of Philomel, by the barbarous king so rudely forced; yet there the nightingale."

'The Fire Sermon' brings a picture of the modern world which is burning with the fire of lust, anger, sorrows, grief, misery, old age and death. The typist girl has no sense of regret after the sex act. In fourth section, 'Death by Water' Eliot shows the significance of water as a means of purification and rebirth. The Phoenician sailor is an example of the modern businessman who devotes himself to worldly pursuits and meets his death:

"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 final section 'What the Thunder Said' illustrates the theme of spiritual death of the Waste Landers, but it also talks about a fresh life after death. F.R. Leavis feels that 'The Waste Land' has unity of the inclusive consciousness. The main themes are introduced in first section and developed in second and third. The fourth section forms a lyrical interlude and fifth section is the climax.

The atmosphere of desolation and sexual disorder, spiritual death is built up by various images like Mme. Sosostriis, Princess Marie, the unreal city, the conversation between Lil and her friend, Hyacinth girl, Sweeney's visit to Mrs. Porter, the situation of three daughters of Thames and empty chapel.

'The Waste Land' is not a straight forward narrative poem. The poet uses minimum words and gives us maximum meanings to achieve

condensation. Eliot assimilated four wastelands in the 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 along with the myth of Tiresias. All these technical devices used by Eliot contribute to a circular shape and works as the framework of the poem. There is no linear development from scene to scene, but a circular one.

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