



A SPECIFIC STUDY OF T.S. ELIOT'S THE WASTE LAND

DR. ANAND KUMAR MINJ ¹

¹ ASSISTANT PROFESSOR, DEPARTMENT OF ENGLISH, GOVT. GAJANAND AGARWAL PG COLLEGE, BHATAPARA (C.G.)

ABSTRACT:

T.S. Eliot is an excellent symbolist poet whose poems are regarded as epoch-making landmark works in the history of modern Western literature.

He was awarded the Nobel prize in Literature in 1948. In his poems he deals with the imperfections of modern life. The first poem that made him famous was The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock. His other best-known poems are: Gerontion, and The Hollow Men. The same idea of hollowness of modern people is expressed in these poems. He claims that a modern is no better than a dead animal stuffed with straw.

The long lyric poem "The Waste Land" is Eliot's representative work. It has a variety of styles, draws from a wide variety of sources, and combines some characteristics of symbolism, imagism, and metaphysics. The poet has created many rich images of "Waste Land", most of which are difficult to understand and have complex and profound symbolic meanings. Thus, the poetry reflects the absurdity of reality, reflects on the plight of human civilization, and pursues the road to the redemption of the "Waste Land".

T. E. Eliot's period of active literary production covers forty-five years. He tried his hand in different faculties of creative writing. He wrote poems, plays, and literary and social essays and also worked as a journalist. He achieved distinction and wielded considerable influence in each field he tried his hands in.

It is a long philosophic poem divided into five parts. The 'Burial of the Dead' studies the wide spread evils in the modern Western world. Materialism is the root cause of it. Under its effect the society is dominated by sensualism, unholy love, fraud and misery. Those people are regarded as the dead who are devoid of spirituality and have no faith in God. 'A Game of Chess' studies the mentality of a modern woman under the influence of materialistic desires. "The Fire Sermon reminds of Lord Buddha' sermon that the world is on fire on account of different forms of fire-the fire of hatred, infatuation, greed, grief, sorrow and suffering. 'Death by Water' points out that water is the bottomless sea of worldly desires. The body is the weak boat. It is foolishness to long to cross the sea in the weak boat. The sea is agitated by the current of death. 'What the Thunder Said' stresses the loss of faith in God. T. S. Eliot's 'The Waste Land' is a satire on modern people guided by materialism, sensuality and superstitions. It inspires to rise to the sublime state of getting salvation.

KEYWORDS:

SYMBOLIST, LITERATURE, METAPHYSICS, ABSURDITY, WASTE LAND.

PAPER ACCEPTED DATE:

20th February 2024

PAPER PUBLISHED DATE:

22nd February 2024

INTRODUCTION

Eliot's creative writing can be dated back to his school days. He started writing at a very tender age. The poems of this period are immature, juvenile productions, yet showing signs of poetic talent. The poems written during this period were published under the names of The Smith Academy Record and The Harvard Advocate Prufrock and other Observations show considerable influence of Eliot's reading of Frerich writers. They are 'sophisticated observations of people, of social behaviour and of urban landscape', Eliot is satirical of Boston society, and the love theme, when it appears, receives an ironic treatment. The

rotteness, the corruption and decadence of contemporary society is exposed with a rare poignancy. The Love-song of J. Alfred Prufrock, The Preludes, Rhapsody on a Windy Night, The Boston Evening Transcript and Mr. Apollinax are some of the poems of this period that deserve special mention.

Gerontion, Burbank with a Baedekar, Sweeney Erect, A Cooking Egg. Sweeney Among the Nightingales, The Waste Land, The Hollow Men are the most significant poems that appeared during 1918-25. These poems reveal a deepening of the poet's distress at the corruption and

decay of contemporary European civilization. The range and scope of his poetry is now much enlarged. All these poems are great in every respect. The Waste Land, in particular, is a compressed epic for it portrays the state of the civilization out of which it grows. The effective use of style and technique is par excellence.

We see such generic characters in Eliot's poetry as Sweeney and Burbank that are not individuals but symbolic figures typifying the grossness and decay of the contemporary society. Thus, Sweeney is apathetic. A professional pugilist in his early life keeps just a pub in his old days.

T.S. Eliot's 'The Waste Land' is an inspiring poem. There are only three da's that can bring about human welfare. They are Datta, Dayadhvam and Damyanta that represent charity, compassion and self control. They can save the mankind from the destructive ruin. Datta represents what we have given by now. What do we have to give except ourselves? It is our duty to give ourselves completely to some good cause. We ought to devote ourselves to the service of the world. Unfortunately, we lack in faith and devotion and it is the cause of our troubles and worries. Without courage, we cannot surrender to the Will of God. When we arouse this courage in ourselves, we succeed in acting like great heroes. Those who make wise calculations, fail in such tasks. Faith is the only key to unlock the gates of this mystery. Wisdom guides in worldly affairs of getting and spending. What a great man does becomes immortal. No succeeding generation may ruin that. The second sense suggested by Da is Dayadhvam that is to sympathise. In fact, the source of sympathy is the union of individual with the society.

MODERN THEME: MATERIALISM AND SENSUALISM-

The basic theme of the poem is the spiritual and emotional sterility of the modern world. Cleanth Brookes says that its theme is the living death of the modern wastelanders. Man has lost his faith in God and religion and this decay of faith has resulted in the loss of both spiritual and emotional vitality. Consequently, life in the modern wasteland is life-in-death like that of Sibyl in Cumay. Eliot's philosophy imparts the view that human beings should do something whatever. It is better to do evil than to do nothing. In this modern desolate world, the people exist like dead things. They are to be compared with a stick, a gutter, a pire etc. They live a life of complete inactivity, lifelessness and apathy. That is why winter is welcome to them and "April is the cruellest month."

The poem, thus, presents a vision of desolation and spiritual drought. This spiritual and emotional sterility of the denizens of the wasteland arises from the degeneration, vulgarisation commercialisation of sex. It presents a true picture of life in Europe in the modern context. Eliot's study of the fertility myth convinced him that the sexual act is the source of life and vitality when it is exercised for the sake of procreation and when it is an expression of love. But, when it is exercised for the sake of

momentary pleasure, it becomes a source of degeneration and corruption. Then, there is primacy of flesh over spirit that results in spiritual decay and death. The Christian feedback is the basis of the poem. Human nature is liable to temptation of the flesh. Giving way to these temptations means a denial of the spirit and the disobedience to God that results in suffering and degeneration. The views of Cleanth Brookes deserve mention:

The Christian material is at the centre, but the poet never deals with it directly. The theme of resurrection is made on the surface in terms of the fertility rites.

The sexual relationship has become a meaningless routine. It is a mere mechanical relationship that provides only with carnal satisfaction. Sexual relationship in the middle classes is equally mechanical. This is seen in the relationship of a typist and a clerk. The typist submits herself to the clerk with a sense of total indifference and apathy. There is neither repulsion nor attraction.

This perversion of sex is also seen in the lower classes of society. The songs of the three Thames daughters clearly show that they have been sexually exploited but they can do nothing about it. All Europe is burning with lust and sexuality. Hotel Metropole is a hot-bed of homosexuality, a relationship that is essentially sterile. Perversion of sex results in neurosis, boredom, ennui and disillusionment of modern man. The poem is, thus, an expression of the disillusionment of the age. Both the past and the present are telescoped in The Waste Land.

MODERN WORLD: BOTTOMLESS SEA OF WORLDLY DESIRES AND LOSS OF FAITH IN GOD-

In "The Waste Land " Eliot uses the symbol of water as the bottomless sea of worldly desires. The body is the weak boat. It is foolishness too long to cross the sea in the week boat. The sea is agitated by the current of death. Thus, it is a warning to materialistic people. But water suggests purification and rebirth also. The poet tells about the loss of faith in God. It is the sad result that west is turned into waste and the west land has become The Waste Land. People have forgotten the eternal message of Jesus Christ. This part of the poem opens with the arrest and crucifixion of Jesus Christ. The next story deals with the search for the Holy Grail. The knight is searching for it with his companions, but he discovers no water, but only rock and the sandy road. A man like Tiresias does not suffer from want of water among rocks. Even among rocks he discovers water and water-springs. It is the rock of worldly ambition, but without grace of God.

MODERN WORLD: DOMINATION OF MATERIALISM, SENSUALITY AND SUPERSTITION -

T.S. Eliot's 'The Waste Land' is a satire on modern people. They are guided by materialism, sensuality and superstitions. London has become an unreal city being domination by sin, corruption and perverted sex. Modern women lead a luxurious life. They had no sense of morality. The poem is a satire on sex exploitation of the poor. It tells

about the misery of those poor girls who pass their peaceful life near the river but they are seduced and raped.

POETIC TECHNIQUE: MINGLING OF ANCIENT WITH MODERN-

T.S. Eliot's poetic technique that he mingles ancient with modern. For example Tiresias in Greek mythology was the blind prophet of Thebes who revealed to Oedipus that Oedipus had murdered his father and married his mother. In this way, he is taken for a prophet exposing the hidden truth. Eliot claims that Tiresias visits the modern world. The symbolic significance of Tiresias is much greater. Tiresias is represented in this poem as a bisexual. He is blind but he enjoys the divine gift of prophecy and immortality. A story is prevalent about him that he once saw the goddess Athena bathing naked in a pond. Out of great wrath, the goddess struck him blind; but, since his mother happened to be a friend of hers, she bestowed upon him the gift of prophecy as compensation. According to another story, Tiresias saw two snakes copulating and disturbed them with his stick. Consequently the angry snakes transformed him into a woman. Seven years later he again disturbed another pair of snakes copulating and was transformed into man again. Thus, he had experiences both as a man and a woman. Later on, he is questioned by Jove and Juno whether man is more passionate or woman. He declares that woman is more passionate. At this Juno gets angry and turns him blind but Jove compensates the loss by conferring on him the twin gifts of prophecy and immortality.

Tiresias is the conscience of humanity, banished and disowned by thoughtless men and women. But his is the voice of sensitive humanity deploring the loss of spirituality in the modern world.

MYTHICAL BACKGROUND

Mythical background is the very soul of The Waste Land. It is through the use of myth that Eliot substantiates his ideas. The poet himself acknowledges that the primitive myths and legends that form the mythical background of the poem are so fundamental to the understanding of the poem that they are objective correlatives.

"The Holy Grail" legend is a medieval legend associated with the adventures of King Arthur and his Knights of the Round Table. The Grail was a cup used by Christ for His Last Supper. The blood of the Saviour was collected in this cup when he was crucified. Due to its medieval and miraculous properties it became an object of devotion and worship. It came to be built in several countries and its worship was organised. But a time came when the original Grail disappeared mysteriously from the chapel. It was generally believed that the lost Grail sometimes appeared in the sky as a floating saucer of great beauty and splendour, but it could be seen only by a knight of virginal purity. Miss Weston, in her *From Ritual to Romance*, has treated the legend critically and historically and has concluded that the Grail was associated with the fertility myth. It is witnessed by its sexual symbols.

This Grail legend was quite in vogue in an ancient time in a country ruled by King Fisher. A temple named Chapel Perilous still stood there. It was believed that the lost Grail was hidden in this chapel. By that time the King had become naimed and impotent owing to his sin of outraging the chastity of the nuns associated with the Grail Chapel. But the King had been waiting with the hope that he would regain his fertility someday other the ritual-wash of his sinful body.

The mythical wasteland of Fisher King symbolises contemporary decay and spiritual sterility. The sick King is symbolic of sick humanity. The sickness as such is caused by sexual sins, as is the case with the Fisher King. Sex has been denied its proper function. It has degraded to mere animal copulation. The sexual perversion has led to spiritual death. Spiritual health can be regained only by penance, suffering and self-discipline.

In the mythical background of the poem, Tiresias plays a significant role. According to Eliot, Tiresias is the central figure in the poem.

TECHNIQUE AND STRUCTURE

T. S. Eliot has used complex symbolic technique in his broad use of myth in *The Waste Land* in order to bring out the decay and desolation of contemporary civilization. The most significant of his symbols are drawn from ancient myths and legends. These symbols are centered round the basic theme of birth and rebirth. The myth and symbol used in the poem contribute a great deal to the poetic shorthand of T. S. Eliot. The role of Tiresias is highly significant chiefly because it establishes a relationship between the ancient and the modern and maintains thereby the flavour of the poem.

The symbolic structure of the poem is par excellence. The whole merit of the poem lies in its symbolic structure. His use of poetic shorthand and mythical symbols maintains the coherence of the structure of the poem. The poetic shorthand is his device for linking the contemporary wasteland with places and scenes of history by pertinent use of phrases, fragments of quotations and allusions from different poets. The traditional symbols used in the poem are easy to understand.

CONCLUSION

The wasteland remains a great positive achievement. It commands great importance in English literature. In it a mind fully alive to the age compels a poetic triumph out of peculiar difficulties facing a poet in the age. And solving his own problem as a poet. Mr. Eliot did more than solving the problem for himself. Despite being 'the dead end' *The Waste Land* has been a fresh start for modern English poetry. Eliot has not only the gift of connotation, but also a genius for describing a particular situation. In *The Waste Land* he seems to describe a contemporary post-war situation of a certain very small class of intellectuals of Europe and America. Eliot indicates the whole modern world, but in a subjective way. A pub-crawling prostitute

could understand very well what Henry James meant by the Prince and Mr. Verever: They were within the range of experience. But no charwoman or prostitute in London would recognise herself in the second part of "A Game of Chess", although it reports almost realistically the conversation of these ladies in a London pub. This passage does not objectively present the people it describes: it merely exists in the mind of the reader who is made to imagine that he is sharing the life of the people. But what he really sees or hears is a part of his own mind

The drama of *The Waste Land* is built upon the contrast of repeated and varying symbols of drought and rain. Much of its unified effect depends upon the frequent return of the theme of the unreal city with in "rams and dusty trees, its murky streets under the brown fog of a winter moon", its dull canal made suddenly terrible by the slim belly of a rat. In such repulsive images and insistent use of the sordid picture in order to project disintegration and decay Eliot seems to be close to Webster. The subtly differing connotations of the chief symbols within the course of *The Waste Land* itself are one of the strongest means by which the poet conveys the complexity of the existence that confronts him. It is purely in terms of Eliot's dominant images that help discern the way in which both their repetition and divergence help to bind together his various observations into a unified vision.

REFERENCES

1. Gordon, Lyndall. *Eliot's New Life*. NYC: Farrar, Strauss, and Giroux, 1988.
2. Ackroyd, Peter. *T. S. Eliot: A Life*. NYC: Simon and Shuster, 1984.
3. Behr, Caroline. *T. S. Eliot: A Chronology of his Life and Works*. The Macmillan Press, 1983.
4. Gordon, Lyndall. *Eliot's Early Years*. NY: Oxford, 1977.
5. Miller, James E. *T. S. Eliot's Personal Wasteland: Exorcism of the Demons*. penn 1977.
6. *Criticism: 1977-1986*. T. S. Eliot: Mand and Poet. Vol II. Orono ME: National Poetry Foundation, 1992.
7. Canary, Robert H. *T. S. Eliot: The Poet and His Critics*. Chicago: American Library Association, 1982.
8. Martin, Mildred. *A Half-Century of Eliot Criticism: An Annotated Bibliography of Books and Articles in English, 1916-1965*. buck 1972.
9. Gallup, Donald C. *T. S. Eliot: A Bibliography*. London: Faber and Faber, 1969.