

## Unravelling the Unconscious: A Psychoanalytic Exploration of T. S. Eliot's *The Waste Land*

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### ABSTRACT

T.S. Eliot's *The Waste Land* serves as a cathartic expression of his unconscious mind, inadvertently projecting his traumatic experiences through fragmented themes and kaleidoscopic imagery. This modernist masterpiece captures the collective disillusionment of a generation in the aftermath of World War I, conveying the devastating consequences of societal upheaval. Through a psychoanalytic lens, this paper explores how Eliot's candid depiction of post-war Europe turns out to be a revelation of his unconscious fears and anxieties. The poem's timeless themes – disillusionment, spiritual decay, and the search for meaning – transcend generations, resonating with contemporary audiences. The poem can be regarded as a paradigmatic work, addressing universal concerns that persist despite changing times. This analysis provides a framework for grasping the ongoing relevance of Eliot's work, demonstrating how *The Waste Land* continues to serve as a powerful reflection of humanity's struggles with identity, purpose, and the search for meaning in an uncertain world.

### 1. Introduction

T. S. Eliot's *The Waste Land* embodied a generation's zeitgeist and disillusionment, especially after the First World War with its traumatic effects. The psychosomatic vulnerabilities pestering his existence found expression in this modernist magnum opus. As revealed by Eliot himself, he was grappling with a mental and physical condition that was far too removed from the ideal state of existence that he yearned for. His supplication to the enervation caused by overwork and the repercussions of his prolonged life with a mentally unstable wife brought him onto the verge of a nervous breakdown. As part of the therapeutic measures, Eliot underwent treatment for mental illness and spent his time between Margate and Lausanne where he scribbled his mind into words that transformed itself into an 'epic tale' of the collective expression of a whole generation in a fragmented form. It also saw the outpouring of his emotional expressions that were repressed deep down in the unconscious, searching for an outlet to bring about a catharsis.

### 2. Methodology

A psychoanalytical study of the poem *The Waste Land* would give an insight into Eliot's psyche and the reflections that gyrated out of that. Through this research, a projection of the world of Eliot is materialised which is also a reflection of his' as well as our contemporary world. This would aid us in a better understanding of the perception of the world and the tumultuous situation in which we are traversing to reach a sustainable conclusion. This psychoanalysis is oriented towards an incisive perception of the psyche at an individual and collective level that would yield positive results

### 3. Discussion

Eliot's theoretical espousal of impersonality could not contain the inadvertent revelation of his unconscious fears which resulted in an enhanced expression of an outpouring of his mental state. The incongruent lines and incidents that greet us in the course of the poem, validate the jumbled thought process that materialized in his psyche, to which he resorted as part of his poetic creation, "I have heard the key/Turn in the door once and once only/We think of the key, each in his prison/Thinking of the key, each confirms his prison/Only at nightfall, aetherial rumours/Revive for a moment a broken Coriolanus." (Eliot, *The Waste Land*) Such spurts of words can be identified as Eliot's expression of an urge to simultaneously deliver a surge of unconscious emotions. With no apparent connection

between various lines, the poem serves as a stream of consciousness that is abstruse. Eliot's psyche at this point was being analysed by Trosman. As Trosman puts it:

The predominant symptom complex was depression with exhaustion, indecisiveness, hypochondriasis, and fear of psychosis. His personality was vulnerable to specific injuries that disturbed his narcissistic equilibrium. He was aloof and distant, and he guarded himself against the intrusions of others with an icy urbanity. Compulsive defenses enabled him to isolate his emotions should their impact threaten him with excessive traumatization. Sexuality was a potential danger not only because of intense intersystemic conflict but because instinctual forces threatened him with loss of ego control and dominance. (Trosman 712)

In such a state of existence, Eliot must have had the urge to purge his psyche of all these complexities, which culminated in the creation of such verses. Although Eliot insisted on the impersonality theory by stressing that the artist should separate his personality from his artistic creation, most of his poetry is a result of his personal feelings and experiences. His statement regarding the mental illness that he was subjected to, which acted as a catalyst for creative writing, is an acknowledgement of this. As Eliot observes:

It is commonplace that some forms of illness are extremely favourable, not only to religious illumination but to artistic and literary composition. A piece of writing, meditated apparently without progress for months or years, may suddenly take shape and word; and in this state long passages may be produced which require little or no retouch," (Eliot 142).

*The Waste Land* captures and embodies the sentiments of a whole generation in the aftermath of World War 1. Being in a period of unprecedented tumultuous happenings, Eliot too, like his contemporary citizens, was overwhelmed by the external and internal conditions that affected Europe. The war disrupted the peaceful lives of people, sent shockwaves and destruction all over, and generated a traumatic effect on the general public, of which Eliot was a part. For him, all wars are one and they serve only one purpose, that of destruction which is followed by disillusionment. Therefore he regards wars as having a purpose that fulfils nothing, with a universally pessimistic tone.

According to Eliot, the protagonists or participants of wars, throughout the ages, share a common feature that makes them incorrigibly universal: "Under the brown fog of a winter dawn/ A crowd flowed over London Bridge, so many/I had not thought death had undone so many./Sighs, short and infrequent, were exhaled/And each man fixed his eyes before his feet/Flowed up the hill and down King William street/To where Saint Mary Woolnoth kept the hours/With a dead sound on the final stroke of nine/There I saw one I knew, and stopped him, crying: 'Stetson!'/You who were with me in the ships at Mylae!"(Eliot, *The Waste Land*). Mylae stands for the naval battle between Rome and Carthage, it is regarded as a symbol of warfare and Eliot uses it here for World War One to showcase that wars and death will never change and that they all are the same. This is true for all ages including the contemporary ones. In this world of ongoing wars, the condition of humanity remains the same with no respite to the suffering they endure. History repeats itself constantly, yet it is something that never changes.

The repercussions of war left a gaping void that people found hard to fill. Loss of faith in religion, and scepticism regarding a God who no longer seemed capable of restoring their trust led them to a disarrayed state of mind. This led to a spiritual sterility and decay that left people confused and mentally stagnant. The search for meaning in a meaningless world fostered a potential disillusionment that found no respite or solution. This meaninglessness resonates with the contemporary world's dilemma too. Eliot sees all wars as one. This is more relevant now than ever. It brings about only one outcome which includes only the disintegration and destruction of humanity that tags along with it the degeneration of values and the lack of moral existence.

An era marked by an unprecedented pandemic, followed by a quadruple of wars in which the threat of devastation and destruction of the world looms high. These ongoing wars don't leave a niche for the

scope of even the disillusion as they are not yet over, unlike the World Wars which saw a culmination. Frustration, helplessness, and suffering are some of the effects people experience on an epic scale. They become more insignificant and less eligible even to be called “the marginalised,” by virtue of not being heard. Their situation is even worse than Eliot's Wastelanders in that they encounter the stunning reality of a bewildering displacement and the constant threat of loss of theirs and their dear ones. Wars, the harbinger of large-scale destruction and devastation, are the inevitable universal conditions that remain menacingly convincing throughout the ages. This is the lone situation where a preconditioned solution always exists that is impossible to implement owing to the intense nature of its existence. This reiterates Eliot's viewpoint that all wars are one. The need for peace and understanding in an increasingly globalised and uncertain world remains significant and relevant in such a scenario.

In the poem, Eliot makes the nervous speaker utter, ‘My nerves are bad tonight. Yes, bad. Stay with me. / Speak to me. Why do you never speak. Speak/What are you thinking of? What thinking?What?/ I never know what you are thinking. Think.’ !” (Eliot, *The Waste Land*) These are the words that are believed to have been uttered by Vivian, Eliot's wife, in real life. By projecting these words Eliot unconsciously is trying to purge his mind. His repressed fears are brought to light by way of this Freudian Symbolic process. As Dalton puts it:

Deep psychopathology may exist in lives that appear tranquil and are relatively in accordance with cultural norms. However, that may be, it would appear to be especially difficult for the artist, particularly the literary artist, to deal with internal conflict through repression, as his attention during the creative process is turned inward and must inevitably reawaken those conflicts that other individuals may be able to suppress. (Dalton 47)

Through the poem, Eliot expresses the bewildered and insecure state of people's existence in Europe after the war. Eliot puts it in the poem, “He who was living is now dead/ We who were living are now dying/ With a little patience” (Eliot, *The Waste Land*). They have lost all conviction and are slowly in the process of mental degeneration in a wasteland. Modernist traits of Loss of faith in Religion and God can also be discerned here. People live in an arid land, “Here is no water but only rock/ Rock and no water and the sandy road/ The road winding above among the mountains/ Which are mountains of rock without water/If there were water we should stop and drink/ Amongst the rock one cannot stop or think/ Sweat is dry and feet are in sand” (47) testifies to the occurrence of aphasia that Eliot must have faced while writing the poem, for we know that the original manuscript of the poem was a jumbled lot that Ezra Pound edited. This can be interpreted as Eliot's inadvertent alacrity to let go of his mind of the repressed thoughts. The contemporary world with its collage of atheism and veneration is even more disoriented than that of Eliot's wastelanders, trying to navigate through the Internet Existence where a surge of uncertainty bombards them incessantly.

In the poem, Eliot says, “What are the roots that clutch, what branches grow/ Out of the stony rubbish? Son of man,/ You cannot say, or guess, for you know only/ A heap of broken images, where the sun beats, / And the dead tree gives no shelter, the cricket no relief,/ And the dry stone no sound of water.” (46) Here, by the phrase, “a heap of broken images,” Eliot means and testifies to the occurrence of aphasia that he must have faced while writing the poem, for we know that the original manuscript of the poem was a jumbled lot that Ezra Pound edited. This can be interpreted as Eliot's inadvertent alacrity to let go of his mind of the repressed thoughts

Tiresias, the symbol of Eliot's confused mind, who is neither here nor there and neither a man nor a woman takes up Eliot's thoughts, “I Tiresias, though blind, throbbing between two lives/ Old man with wrinkled female breasts, can see” (47). Here Tiresias is depicted as having both male and female traits. It can also be interpreted as a confused state of human existence. This confusion which seems contagious, reigns throughout the poem. Tiresias, the one who survives, and is immortal, stands for the bewildered state of Eliot's existence. As long as the war and confusion do not cease, this bewilderment will continue to reign supreme.

The allusions are another way of symbolism through which Eliot expresses his unconscious. They serve as a gateway to project his unconscious fears, “The change of Philomel, by the barbarous king/ So rudely forced; yet there the nightingale/Filled all the desert with inviolable voice/ And still she cried, and still the world pursues,/ ‘Jug Jug’ to dirty ears.” (46) The allusion to the story of the molestation of Philomel by King Tereu could be an expression of getting annihilated by the traumatic situation that he had to undergo. It projects an unwilling submission to a life that is devoid of security and safety, owing to Europe’s condition as well as his mental problems.

#### **4. Conclusion**

Wars cause economies to collapse. The ongoing wars in Europe, Africa, and the Middle East show signs of a slowdown in economies which result in having an indirect impact on people across the globe. Despite an era of the internet, which speciously brings the world together, in a divided scenario, the idea of global stability and peace remains a myth. The current global scenario calls for a peaceful existence between nations. The masses’ yearning for peace, security, and stability resonates with Eliot's themes. The comprehensive and cumulative aftermath of war is yet to be known, but certainly, it will not be anything less and different than Eliot’s wasteland. With more advancements in technology, the consequences of the wars are bound to become more pathetic and irreversible and consequently the parallel effects could be equally grave. This is the ongoing relevance of Eliot's work. It’s a powerful reflection of humanity’s struggle with identity, purpose, and search for meaning in an uncertain world. The poem is a paradigmatic work that addresses universal concerns and persists despite changing times. Though the setting might differ the themes remain almost similar and the problems faced by the masses have a shared quality between them both then and now.

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