

T.S. Eliot's *The Waste Land* and Other Selected Poems: An Indictment of Post-War Generation and a Quest for Redemption

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Abstract: World War I, spanning 1914-1918, brings about massive changes in human life devastating the existing structure of the world—inner and outer—helping emerge a generation with dissonant realities and socio-psychic maladies. T. S. Eliot, a top-ranking writer and poet among the founders of Modernism in England as well as in Europe, portrays a generation that engrosses on the problems they inherit. He commences with an individual psyche, spotlights the society and concludes diagnosing the wretched condition of the Europeans or the people of the world as a whole. His poems are finely interwoven not only to detect the inner troubles of post-war generation but also to postulate a possible exit for mankind in future. Yet the way the poet characterizes the society and envisions a particular solution demands much debate among the critics. Centering this rationale, this paper attempts to analyze post-war life to dissect its maladies, and re-evaluate the concept of redemption that Eliot puts forward through his poems.

Keywords: World War I, Post-War Generation, Indictment, Modernism, Redemption

1. Introduction

The 20th century, from its birth, marks cataclysm in all spheres of human life, particularly through two World Wars, affecting the thoughts and activities of modern generation. Such impacts and changes have been captured by the poets and writers, and they are reflected in their works. Among them, T.S. Eliot (1888-1965)—a poet, philosopher and critic of the century—observed keenly and presented the society successfully through his poems. The poems, he composed, are apparently complicated and abstruse in nature for versatile allusions and complex fragmentation, yet they sharply pinpoint the picture of disjointed modern world. His poems reflect post-war generation, their deformities in forms of psychological intricacies, spiritual drought, sexual barrenness, degeneration and even dehumanization, and foreground a certain quest for redemption. This paper examines Eliot's poems namely "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock" (1915), "Gerontion" (1920), *The Waste Land* (1922) and "The Hollow Men" (1925) in the light of Modernism. Though the poems were written and published in different years in between 1920s and 1930s, each of them holds strong applicability even after the Second World War, containing homogeneity in nature, content and implication. To have fuller grasp over modern life, the poems need expansive reading and analysis. This paper also aims at highlighting the homogeneity of the afore-mentioned poems in expounding indictment of post-war generation. Furthermore, the concept of redemption suggested by Eliot has also been put to reassessment.

Eliot was a versatile genius—a poet, playwright, essayist, literary and social critic, and a philosopher. The poet, an American by birth and a British by choice, called himself "classicist in literature, royalist in politics and Anglo-Catholic in religion" (qtd. in Levinson 121). A voracious reader, he studied and mastered language, theology, history and philosophy, and long before commencement of his literary career, he found tremendous impetus and interest in the French Symbolists—Rimbaud, Baudelaire, Mallarmé,

and Laforgue—whom he first encountered in 1908, in a book by Arthur Symons called *The Symbolist Movement in Literature*. Stephen Coote suggests, "The French Symbolist poets were of great importance to Eliot's development" (20). The year 1914 was a turning point for Eliot as it was the year Eliot met Ezra Pound (1885-1972), his real mentor and a proponent of imagism. Pound actually encouraged Eliot, helped him write and publish his early poem like "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock". Coote points out:

[Ezra] Pound was a brilliant sponsor of young literary talent, and Eliot was one of the finest disciples among the London Literary figures. Pound set about grooming Eliot, concerning himself generously in the material details of his life and borrowing money for the publication of *The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock and Other Observations*. (21)

Thus the French Symbolist poets and Pound paved the way for Eliot and a new literary trend called Modernism. Besides, Pound appreciated Eliot's poems and style of Modernism and praised Eliot as a modernist poet pronouncing that Eliot "has actually trained himself and modernized himself on his own" (qtd. in Eliot 7). The statement clarifies how Eliot has turned out to be a self-made modernist.

Modernism is the concept used to imply a polygonal movement or revolutionary practices especially in literature, arts, music, film, architecture and the visual. Though the term is often placed to mean a period of time approximately between 1910s and 1940s, it actually emerged as a literary movement in the 1890s, reached its peak in the wake of World War I, and remained influential to the late 1940s. The term cannot be taken as a singular consistent movement; rather, it functioned as a multifaceted platform where a variety of movements, artifacts, thinkers, artists, and cultural practices came together under an umbrella term called 'Modernism'. It shook the base of literature adopting diverse, distinguished and novel characteristics in contents and concepts, language and styles, expression and narration,

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and structure of a literary work. Jeff Wallace declares Modernism as “the moment at which art stops making sense”(3). The term is defined by J.A. Cuddon as “A breaking away from established rules, traditions and conventions, fresh ways of looking at man’s position and function in the universe, and many experiments in form and style” (516). Peter Barry considers it an “Earthquake in the arts which brought down much of the structure of pre-twentieth century practice in music, painting, literature and architecture” (78). Modernism is therefore regarded as the herald of changes and experimentation because it has opened up ways for diversity in literature.

Modernism came into being as the corollary of intellectual contributions of the great triumvirate – Karl Marx, Sigmund Freud and Friedrich Nietzsche – and as a reaction to the extreme form of industrialized societies, rapid urbanization and finally horrible impacts of World War I. The term came out as a slogan for rejecting the conventional grounds, and for a way of thinking which motivates to suspect the fabric of traditions and conventions covering social, moral, religious, economic and political arena. Marx analyzed “social and economic” aspect of society, Freud came up with the investigation of “psychic process” and Nietzsche criticizes the whole structure of “western metaphysics”(Levenson 9). Questioning certainty and essence of beliefs and norms of society, Modernism has conquered and dominated literary fields of almost all countries of Europe and America such as France, Russia, Germany, England, and the U.S.A. Hence Cuddon calls it “A European and Transcontinental movement” (515). This statement clearly suggests that Modernism is rich in covering the vast regions of the world.

Modernistic literature represents post world war generation’s psychology, culture, society, politics, and economics. Fragmentation, stream of consciousness, automatic writing, plurality, diverse allusions, images and devices have coupled with the themes of alienation, individualism, impressionism and experimental forms or “avant-garde” in modernistic practices. Abrams claims, “The year 1922 alone was signaled by the appearance of such monuments of modernist innovation as James Joyce’s *Ulysses*, T.S Eliot’s *The Waste Land* and Virginia Woolf’s *Jacob’s Room*” (175). The statement marks the genesis of modernism and singles out three pioneers along with their seminal works. The nature of modernism pushes it towards sophistication, self-skepticism and experimentalism. Experimentalism is not only a breach with the old dependencies but also a clarification of the extreme panorama of void and chaos existing in the post-war society. So modernism “might mean not only a new mode or mannerism in the arts but a certain magnificent disaster for them” (Bradbury and McFarlane 26). Here the term has been given a wider and deeper scope since it is called both constructive and destructive as an approach to the literary mode.

Eliot’s poems have drawn the attention of scholars and critics from the beginning. Much research has already been conducted on the life and works of Eliot. Critics have focused mostly on *The Waste Land* or some other poems, explored many issues and come up with sharp and mixed opinions. For instance, Maleki et al in the article titled “Eliot’s *Ariel Poems*: The Predicament of Modern Man in

Quest of Spirituality” have declared Eliot’s ideology – content poetry as the expression of “the poet’s disenchantment with the profile of things in the modern man’s world” (51). As Eliot’s poems appear to be a minute study of modern society from individual to social level, hence there is ample space to re-evaluate his poems published in different years containing the same undercurrent theme or themes. To penetrate deep into his poems seems a visitation to darkness of the heart of a modern person or a modern society.

Illuminating the core troubles of a mechanical and industrialized generation of the 20th century and expressing the sense of void in human beings, Eliot examines an individual’s heart and thoughts in the poem “The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock,” turns to “Gerontion” for more mature observation, and investigates society and mankind as a whole in the poems *The Waste Land* and “The Hollow Men”. All these poems suggest the impacts of war, the evil outcome of rapid population growth and unplanned urbanization reflecting how variations have overtaken cultural practices, and given birth to complications and incongruities – social, moral and legal. Vacuity of spirit can easily be traced out as one of the accusations that Eliot has brought against modern men and society. Multiple forms of vacuum such as intellectual, moral, spiritual and sexual are obvious in Eliot’s poems. Many critics have endeavored to focus on the aspect of spiritual blankness in his poems. Ruland and Bradbury termed it “contemporary sterility” (257) and “historical, spiritual, religious and psychic crisis” (265) in the book entitled *From Puritanism to Postmodernism*. Commenting on the poetry of Eliot, particularly on *The Waste Land*, G.M. Hyde, in an article titled “The Poetry of the City,” explains it as “sexual sterility” (346). Mittal is of the view that “The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock” is an expression of “man’s vanity that stands in the way of his apprehension of the truth of human spirit” (12) and “Gerontion” is a poem which “is steeped in Eliot’s sense of spiritual degeneration of contemporary civilization” (49). So critics’ points of view and their statements suggest that Eliot’s poetry documents a vista of decadence and drought of post-war generation.

Prufrock, Gerontion, Tiresias or any other characters mentioned or referred are shallow and hollow in spirit. They are unlike the old man of W.B. Yeats in the poem “Sailing to Byzantium”, Santiago of Hemingway in *The Old Man and the Sea* or Ulysses of Tennyson in the poem “Ulysses” as the latter represent the spirit of life, energy, thirst for knowledge and indomitable power of humans. Yeats’s Old-man sings of power, of soul and articulates, “An aged man is but a paltry thing / A tattered coat upon a stick unless / Soul clap its hands and sing and louder sing” (9-11); Santiago declares invincible caliber of humans uttering, “A man can be destroyed but not defeated ”(Hemingway 75); and finally Ulysses embodies the spirit of life and intellectual spirit such as the spirit of knowledge and for knowledge as he proclaims, “To follow knowledge like a sinking star / Beyond the outmost bound of human thought ” (Tennyson 30-31). If these characters and those of Eliot are put for comparison, it is revealed that they bear in them some sparkling attributes which Eliot’s characters lack acutely.

Lack of spirit is projected through Prufrock and Gerontion. External images of “The yellow fog” (15) and “The yellow smoke” (16) in “The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock,” represent a sense of decay and drought of spirit, even the diseased state of life. In “Gerontion” the images “dry month,” (1) “decayed house,” (7) “dry brain,” (75) and “dry season” (75) imply the dryness of spirit. Emptiness and corruption are reflected through the polluted environment of an industrial city littered with rocks, moss, stonecrop, and iron. Even the physical disfigurement of Prufrock and the agedness of Gerontion reflect their impotency both biological and spiritual. This motif is expounded as Prufrock utters:

I grow old . . . I grow old. . . .
I shall wear the bottoms of my trousers rolled.
Shall I part my hair behind? Do I dare to eat a peach?
I shall wear white flannel trousers. (115-18)

These lines prove Prufrock’s physical defects and inability. To take a step for a paltry work, he seems to give a serious thought over what might happen next. He is acutely aware of his defects, and so fears to face others or communicate with them. On the other hand, Gerontion cannot think properly, express boldly and perform actively. He describes the dark and bleak pictures of different cities, different people and events of history. His condition is, “The word within a word, unable to speak a word, swaddled with darkness” (17). It explains how acutely traumatic situation Gerontion is going through which has already snatched away his power to communicate and mean anything to the full. He therefore sees no light or hope but finds himself engulfed in bleak darkness.

The Waste Land appeared in the aftermath of World War I (1914-18) – one of the most destructive wars in human history – revealing an indictment of postwar European culture and an expression of disillusionment with contemporary society which Eliot believed was culturally barren. Harold Monroe, a prominent publisher of that time, refused to publish the poem declaring it, “absolutely insane” (Wallace 5). Levenson calls it, “a pronouncement of the problem of cultural unity” (122) since the poem depicts social vista and inner troubles of people and has been a literary symbol of social, cultural, spiritual and psychological disintegration of our life which is in spirit a death-in-life. *The Waste Land* is sub-divided into five sections; each has a definite title, but it is one and a unified poem for characters, narrator and the affinity of themes. Tiresias narrates the story of *The Waste Land* and elucidates decay and degeneration of post-war society in all possible ways mostly sexually. The poem exhibits corruption, deception, crime, hollowness and dehumanization or objectification of human beings, particularly of women. About the poem *The Waste Land*, Richards remarks, “It illuminates his concern with sex, the problem of our generation” (275). This comment indeed outlines the significance of Eliot’s poetry stressing on the generation and its cardinal complications.

The poem is packed with sexual imagery and references like the incident of Marie and her cousin, the story of Philomel, Lil and Albert, Sweeney and Mrs. Porter with her daughter, nasty Mr. Eugenides, and finally the typist girl and the

young man. To all of the above-mentioned characters, sex is neither a power nor a productive force; rather, it is a daily chore, a kind of habit which breeds deception, violence, corruption and mistrust. Thus spiritual blankness is projected through sexual barrenness. This is what Warwood terms as “modern oppressions” which reflects “the effectiveness of communication in a world where power barriers exist between the sexes” (02). To indicate this indictment, Tiresias’s utterance is worth quoting, “I think, we are in rats’ alley / Where the dead men lost their bones” (115). Human beings, here, are depicted as machine or robot. They are completely devoid of inner strength and power, power of soul and intellect. In the poem “In a Station of the Metro,” Pound criticizes degeneration in life and describes it as “The apparition” (1). Shakespeare in the play *Hamlet* brands this kind of life as beast life. As Hamlet proclaims, “What is a man / If his chief good and market of his time/ Bebut to sleep and feed? A beast, no more!” (4.4.31-34). Thus Eliot testifies dearth of spirit in modern man. The same theme recurs in the poem “The Hollow Men”. The poem begins with a confessional statement:

We are the hollow men
We are the stuffed men
.....
We whisper together
Are quiet and meaningless. (1-2, 6-7)

The above quotation bears testimony to the fact that post-war generation contains serious vacuity and hollowness in them. They are nothing better than hollow and stuffed men.

Moral values are important in defining qualities of an individual. A steep decline in moral values and principles in society causes crimes, deception, violence and sexual degeneration. Society becomes devoid of human values and moral considerations. Moral vacuum is another disease of post-war generation. Prufrock likes cheap hotels to visit and prefers abandoned roads to crowded ones. His choices reflect a sense of decay in values and taste. Evening and etherized patient are brought together for comparison, and this analogy refers to an extreme form of despair. “The Burial of the Dead” illustrates idleness and decay. Marie is duped and sexually violated by her own cousin. After being raped, she speaks out, “I was neither Living nor dead / And I knew nothing / Looking into the heart of light, the silence” (38-40). These lines suggest sufferings and wretchedness of women under the clutch of sex-maniac men. “A Game of Chess” elucidates moral hollowness, crimes and artificiality. Relation between a wedded couple, Lil and Albert, is also based on solely physical pleasure and lustfulness. They share no sense of togetherness, mutual respect, love and trust. Copulation 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 severed from its primary objective, and is exercised for the sake of momentary pleasure or lust, it becomes a source of degeneration and corruption. It then represents the primacy of the flesh over the spirit resulting a steep spiritual decay and death. Thus Lil is objectified and treated as nothing but an insignificant machine. That is what a marriage stands for to the people in the waste land.

“The Fire Sermon,” the third poem of *The Waste Land*, explores a cruel form of moral vacuum. Here Sweeney, who represents the world of lust, instincts and unconscious drives in man, has sex with Mrs. Porter and her daughters. Mr. Eugenides, a merchant, is homosexual. Even the typist girl and the young man go for copulation without genuine passion and desire. They are pictured like robots leading a pre-designed life having nothing inside the heart or brain. Hinting at the predicament, the poet has Tiresias state, “The human engine waits like a taxi throbbing waiting” (215). This line exposes the reality of post-war generation and vision of dissolution that equalizes human beings and a taxi, removing differences between them.

Eliot brings a serious charge of psychological complexities in multiple forms that post-war generation contains in them as cardinal features. Fragmentation, frustration and disorientation are core parts of them. Prufrock is depicted as utterly a fragmented, frustrated and disorientated person. Eliot explores disintegration and indecisiveness through Prufrock. The way Prufrock leads his life and speaks out his inner desire and difficulties, clearly shows his bleak state of mental set-up. He appears to be a complete embodiment of disappointment about life and its bright prospect. For this, he demeans the worth of life and claims, “I have measured out my life with coffee spoons” (48). This indeed expounds his viewpoint of life. Even his failure to take a simple decision of proposing a lady shows psychological deformity in a person. He always looks for a hundred visions and revisions but fails to take a single working decision. He fears to socialize himself because he knows that he has countless problems, both psychological and physical, for which he thinks that others will laugh at him. And for that reason, he tries to keep himself away from other people in society. In “Gerontion,” the narrator Gerontion finds himself confused about his own age, own existence and destination. He fails to decide where to go and declares his poor condition, “I have lost my sight, smell, hearing, taste and touch” (59). Even in the poem “The Hollow Men,” two narrators Kurtz and Old Guy carry the same motif and tone. This poem resonates the same psychological aspects. Their frustration comes to light with the statement, “This is the way world ends” (85). This extract exemplifies horrific depression inherent in Eliot’s characters as they fail to imagine anything positive and optimistic about life and this world.

The Waste Land projects an absolute picture of degeneration, decay and decline in all aspects of life and spheres of society. This spiritual and emotional sterility of the denizens of the waste land arises from the degeneration, vulgarization, and commercialization of sex. The people of the waste land have different attitude, life-style and culture. They are obsessed with artificiality, physical pleasure and social crimes. There is nothing called humanity or fellow-feeling among them for other people. No bond is made out of trust, friendship or true sense of togetherness. Instead they are related to each other for profit-making purposes. Life is extremely mechanized and unreal. It seems evident that there is no central power or authority to regulate or to lead them to the right track in order to protect them from the fire of inferno. This milieu reminds what Yeats states in his poem “The Second Coming”, “ Things fall apart; the centre cannot hold / Mere anarchy is loosed upon the world” (3-4).

The world seems full with anarchy, and everything falls apart without listening to the center. “The Burial of the Dead” introduces some characters such as Madame Sosostris, Belladonna, Stetson and one-eyed merchant. All of them represent decay and degeneration. The episode of Marie and her cousin reflects deception, violence and sexual crime. This whole scenario can be explained with the phrase, “A heap of broken images” (22) which suggests that the proliferation of human knowledge has only confused the poet’s vision as the images seen in a shattered mirror are fractured and distorted or represents the incoherence of modernist social structures, and the mind it creates among citizens.

“What the Thunder Said,” the final segment of *The Waste Land*, focuses mainly on dryness and quest for solution. The term “dryness” indicates both physical and spiritual dryness of human beings as well as mythical dryness in society. Scarcity of water and poor condition of mankind reflect absolutely a disastrous state. People of the waste land have no water which symbolically refers to the want of hope and optimism for something better. Actually this critical scenario of the external world hints at the inner set-up of post-war generation. All kinds of bonds and relationships that help to sustain order and stability in human life are about to collapse. Eliot presents the entire scenario with the image of London Bridge. In “What the Thunder Said,” the poet remarks, “London Bridge is falling down falling down falling down” (427). Here “Bridge” reflects order, stability, connectivity and strong relationships.

Eliot, in his poems like “The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock,” “Gerontion” and “The Hollow Men” expounds critical maladies of humanity. In *The Waste Land*, he goes further illustrating human life and finally puts forward a possible solution to the maladies. *The Waste Land*, as its title suggests, is set in the debris of human history and civilization. The poem, in forms and themes, represents a kind of psychological pilgrimage through the fragmented artifacts of civilization in pursuit of deliverance from the “unreality” of the modern world and a hope for redemption. In crafting the poem, Eliot has applied an allusive technique that allows him to cultivate a sense of cohesion amid this chaos, a metaphysical awareness through which he recognizes potentials for redemption only to deny its consummation. Though his idea of redemption invites much debate and criticism based on the conception that modern poetry never provides any solution except revealing the fact, still this quest for redemption can claim reevaluation. John Bowen explores the quest of redemption in *The Waste Land* and compares Eliot with Benjamin. Bowen comments that, “*The Waste Land* is full of desire for change; it sees a world of brutality and chaos which it yearns to redeem” (50). Actually Eliot’s reflection of post-war generation always hints at an exit. It longs for light in darkness and hope of reconstruction in ruins.

The urge for salvation in the wake of the fall of Man has served as the prime source of inspiration in epics throughout literature, from *The Iliad* to *Paradise Lost*. Homer had relied on Greek mythology while Milton turned to *The Bible*. Eliot’s idea of redemption is based on Christianity, Hinduism, Buddhism, mythology and history. While

focusing on spiritualization of life in the poem *Ash Wednesday*, Malekiet al comment, "Eliot aims at the spiritualization of human life through the spirit of eternal feminine" (47). Regarding the message of *The Waste Land*, Rion observes it as "a good example of this apophatic aesthetics," "the lament for the lost cities," "a prayer from the spiritual desert"(32). *The Waste Land* has historical, cultural, social even allegorical significance. It can be reevaluated as an effort not as a final solution. It is quite evident when Eliot states, "Shall I at least set my hands in order" (426) and further remarks, "These fragments I have shored against my ruins" (431). In fact, the quest for redemption can be justified as it is forwarded for order and minimum stability in human life. Furthermore, this solution has got much more humanistic appeal than literary as it contains one doctrine, "Datta. Dayadhvam. Damyata" (430). The words mean to give, to sympathize and to control. The significance of "What the Thunder Said" in the repetition of the word "Da" (430) thrice lies not in a pronouncement of any Truth but in its evocation of three questions. Taken from the Upanishads, this dialogue is also paralleled in the Grail legend as an exchange with the Grail's keeper that begets wisdom and draws the scope of the waste land together as a personal pursuit for metaphysical identity. Actually to bring peace and order in human life, this could be a perfect way, a perfect method. Even the quest for redemption can be interpreted as a result of the poet's love for humanity because he came up with the idea after the First World War when people were totally disappointed and confused about life. In this sense, this idea was the best for that time. It appeared to be a flash of light for the people who were in the middle of dark cave.

Eliot's process of redemption has a deeper meaning for incorporating diverse religions, cultures and mythologies. Here he transcends European border and presents the concept as a universal one beating barriers of time and culture. Though after the Second World War, the situation was so critical that it gave no space to any kind of resolution, still the idea of coming up with such an inventive and light-bearing concept can certainly be appreciated. Furthermore, his idea can work as a bridge between different religions and cultures like western and eastern because he took eastern light to illuminate the fallen western. It might be vice-versa, if needed, for the sake of peace and order on the globe. In fact, Eliot through his poems documents the state of post-war generation especially of psychic state ranging personal to social even to all humanity on the face of the earth as a whole. He detects troubles of the generation and does it so well that his poems are considered to be specimen for modernist literature. His suggestion to get rid of this critical state breeds much criticism and debate, yet its worth can be defended from humanistic point of view. His approach contains significance for its uniqueness, diversity and deep wisdom. From this viewpoint, Eliot's quest for redemption is praiseworthy and will be the same in the coming days and his approach to solution is considered to be an air of optimism at the heart of utter pessimism and despair.

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