

APPROACHING *THE WASTE LAND* THROUGH ITS THEME

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Abstract

T S Eliot's The Waste Land is arguably one of the most influential poetic works of the twentieth century. Since its publication, the poem has evoked a great deal of criticism. It has often been criticized for having a rigid structure, for being excessively allusive and for its noticeable lack of unity. Concerted efforts have been made by readers and critics to distil its essence and arrive at a definite meaning. The poem, however, juxtaposes a host of ideas and images which make it exceedingly difficult for the reader to find a semblance of unity and meaning in it. Most of the early criticism that the poem evoked was hostile. Even the defenders of the poem, at times, sounded apologetic. Eventually, with more perceptive and insightful criticism coming along, the poem started yielding its inherent unity access to which is made possible by an acute examination of its theme and the technique which has been used by the poet to communicate this theme. The present paper attempts to demonstrate that the best way of approaching the poem is through its broad theme which paves the way for an understanding of its underlying structure and unity.

Key Words: Waste Land, theme, technique, unity.

The Waste Land has acquired the status of a classic ever since its publication in 1922. This has happened in spite of a very divergent kind of response, most of which is hostile. It has remained under fire for what has been described as lack of thematic continuity and absence of structure. Critics have described it as “a cross-word puzzle” (*qtd.* in Walker 136), ‘a brilliant and kaleidoscopic confusion’ (Aiken 201) and ‘poetry made of poetry and a parasitic growth on literature.’ (197)

The leftist critics, like David Craig, have attacked the poem for its rejection of what is called the progressive view of life and for its essential despair. On the other hand a critic like Yvor Winters criticizes the poem for “the fallacy of imitative form” (64) as Eliot according to him seeks his form from the debased and ‘stupid’ material with which he deals but which he merely imitates and does not judge and evaluate.

Talking about the allusiveness of the poem and the way it should be approached by the reader, Lawrence Rainey, in the preface to his book *Revisiting the Wasteland* remarks:

We might think of ourselves, then, as beginning at that familiar starting point of a classical mystery or detective fiction, the discovery of the corpse. Like many of those classical detectives, we shall first have to take note of a great many details, and no doubt we shall have to do a bit of tedious measuring, recording the precise size and weight of objects that must have played some role in the events that resulted in our corpse. (xii-xiii)

The defenders of the poem are apologetic even when adulatory. The poem has been defended as a musical piece with psychological unity. I A Richards described it as “music of ideas” (302) and there are others who see a single consciousness at work in the poem. Graham Hough has described both the musical and psychological explanations as untenable. In fact *The Waste Land* is what Bosanquet described as an example of difficult beauty which one has to earn with hard labour as against the easy beauty which lies plain on the surface. F R Leavis in his essay entitled “*The Waste Land*” perceives the poem as a self-contained piece of art which can mean a lot even without the aid of Eliot’s notes:

It is a self-subsistent poem. Indeed, though it would lose if the notes could be suppressed and forgotten, yet the more important criticism might be said to be, not that it depends upon them too much, but rather that without them, and without the support of *From Ritual to Romance*, it would not lose more. (*T. S. Eliot: A Collection of Critical Essays* 102-3)

Similarly Brooks in his essay, “*The Waste Land: Critique of the Myth*”, attempts to somewhat undermine the importance of the readers’ knowledge of various symbols and their relationships for an understanding of the poem. He asserts that he does not want to raise the question of,

....how important it is for the reader to have an explicit intellectual account of the various symbols and a logical account of their relationships. It may well be that such rationalization is no more than a scaffolding to be got out of the way before we contemplate the poem itself as a poem (*Modern Poetry and the Tradition* 136).

The best way to approach such a poem as *The Waste Land* is through its broad theme or, to be more precise, syndrome of themes. This broad theme consists of the perception that mechanization, secularization and materialism have made modern life purposeless and death dishonorable. This life is out of tune with the rhythms of nature so that April, the month of rejuvenation, appears to be as the cruelest month; and water, the symbol of life is totally absent from the Waste Land. This life and death is contrasted through allusion with another kind of life and death.

The modern world has become a Waste Land. This central symbol comes from the Grail legend as described in Miss Jessie Weston’s *From Ritual to Romance*. Miss Weston describes “The Waste Land” as a land blighted by a curse. In this land crops cannot grow animals

cannot reproduce and all vestiges of life have disappeared. Even the lord of this land, called the Fisher King, has been rendered impotent through some strange sickness or maiming. The curse can be lifted by the appearance of a knight who is able to divine the meaning of certain symbols displayed to him and ask the right questions about them.

Dimensions of this theme run like a thread through all the five sections of the poem. The first section, 'Burial of the Dead', illustrates the absence of life in *The Waste Land* with concrete slices of life like the reference to Mary Larisch's *My Past* and the description of the unreal city. In the process the poet reveals how fear and anxiety drive the Wastelanders to fortune-tellers like Madame Sosostris and to despair.

The second section, 'A Game of Chess' explains the purposelessness of life in the Waste Land through two scenes involving a girl and her unidentified visitor and a conversation between a married woman, Lil and one of her friends, about Lil's married life.

The third section entitled 'The Fire Sermon' constitutes the heart of the poem focusing on the fire of lust that consumes the Waste Land. After a graphic description of a typist's rape scene and reference to the illicit relationship between Elizabeth and Leicester the section combines together Buddha's 'Fire Sermon' and St. Augustine's description of the fire of lust. The fourth section, 'Death by Water' contrasts the fruitless drowning of the Phoenician sailor with the meaningful drowning of the fertility Gods.

The fifth and the last section of *The Waste Land* is the best and most effective part of the poem. Bertrand Russell admired it and Eliot said that this part redeems the whole poem. This section begins with a description of Christ's crucifixion and the loss of faith in the Waste Land which has led to the absence of water that symbolizes life. Not to speak of water, even the sound of water is not audible. The abject condition of the Waste Land is illustrated with a reference to the decay of Eastern Europe. However, the poem does not end in despair. Hope is held out in a return to the essence of all religious teachings summed up in the three DAs of *Prajapati* as described in the *Upanishads*: *Datta* (give), *Dayadhvam* (sympathize) and *Damyata* (control). This return will ensure *Shantih* – the peace that surpasses understanding.

The main theme or the thematic syndrome of *The Waste Land* centres on the comparison and contrast of two different kinds of life and death and its main thrust is to show how materialism, mechanization and secularism have rendered modern life meaningless and death ignoble.

What has, however, made *The Waste Land* the most genuine specimen of modern poetry is the technique through which this theme has been communicated. Theme and technique, as Eliot rightly saw, are inseparably interwoven. This has to be borne in mind in relation to any discussion of technique of *The Waste Land*. Eliot has adopted what he himself described as the mythical method to deal with the theme of *The Waste Land*. Defending James Joyce's *Ulysses*, Eliot remarked that the modern world of anarchy would be made possible for art only through the mythical method. In *The Waste Land* he has used the whole of the known mythology as well as literature. Three main myths however stand out as most prominent.

The first of these is the myth relating to the Grail Legend. According to the Christian belief the Grail or the bowl in which Christ had his last supper and into which his blood was collected later by Joseph of Arimathea, was lost in a mysterious way. Its loss symbolized the loss of spiritual reality and gave rise to a whole series of quest legends of which the Arthurian legends are the most famous. Knight after knight sets out in search of the Grail but the belief is that only that knight can have access to the Grail who is absolutely sinless and sexually pure. Such a knight is tested by severe trials while approaching the Chapel Perilous.

The second myth, or, to be more precise a whole complex of myths, is the fertility myth. In ancient Middle Eastern cultures and, according to Frazer (*The Golden Bough*), in most other cultures of the world it was believed that the sacrifice of a God was necessary for the renewal of life. Adonis and Attis and Osiris were some of the ancient Middle Eastern deities who were sacrificed for this purpose. Frazer sees the belief in Christ's crucifixion also as a continuation of the fertility myth.

The third is the Tiresias myth which comes from ancient Greek mythology. When Tiresias was a young man he saw, while travelling through a forest, two snakes copulating with each other. He hit them on the head and was converted into a woman and lived in that capacity for many years. Years later when he was travelling through the forest again, he saw two snakes (the same or another couple) and again hit them on the head and was transformed into a man. Once Jove had a quarrel with his wife, the goddess Juno, about who enjoys more in the sexual act. Tiresias was called in to decide and he ruled in favour of Jove who had been arguing that the female enjoys more than the male. This enraged Juno who took away the eyesight of Tiresias. To compensate for this Jove granted him prophetic powers and immortal life.

Interwoven with these myths is all literature known to T S Eliot – Greek, Sanskrit, Buddhist, Christian and the poetry of Dante, Shakespeare, Marvell and many other poets. The result is that *The Waste Land* is a piece of literature born of literature. Eliot adopts the cubist technique, juxtaposing elements of the past and the present and giving us a sort of pastiche or collage. The essence of this mythical method is in Eliot's word's "the maintenance of a continuous parallel between antiquity and modernity." The poet works in surface parallelisms which, in essence, are contrasts and surface contrasts which in reality are parallelisms. This generates tremendous irony, serving as the principle of structure for *The Waste Land*. Fortifying this structure is the predominant point of view of what F R Leavis calls the inclusive consciousness beyond time and space. This consciousness represents every man and every woman, all men and all women, of all ages, times and places of which Tiresias is a prototype. Brooks in the same vein remarks:

With the characters as with the other symbols, the surface relationships may be accidental and apparently trivial and they may be made either ironically or through random association or in hallucination, but in the total context of the poem the deeper relationships are revealed. The effect is a sense of the oneness of experience, and of

the unity of all periods, and with this, a sense that the general theme of the poem is true. But the theme has not been imposed—it has been revealed. (*Modern Poetry and the Tradition* 169)

This technique gives to *The Waste Land* a definite kind of unity which may be different from the kind of unity found in other types of poetry but is a genuine kind of unity.

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