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T.S. ELIOT'S "THE WASTE LAND (1922)" IN COMPLIANCE WITH DEPRAVITY OF  
MODERN MAN

MOIRANGTHEM DOLLY

Asst. Professor

Department of English

St. Philomena's College, Bannimantap, Mysore, India



MOIRANGTHEM DOLLY

ABSTRACT

T.S. Eliot's *The Waste Land* is one of the most outstanding poems of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. T. S. Eliot (1888-1965) is, perhaps, the most widely discussed English poet of the last century. As is well known, his works contributed a great deal to the emergence of 'English' as an academic discipline. His creative writing provided a justification of the study of English as a subject in universities. Eliot's poetry articulated the anguished predicament of modernity's quest for meaning and significance in a world of seeming chaos, fragmentation and heterogeneity. Eliot perceived the divisions and tortured convolutions of consciousness, which is a major preoccupation in his poetry, not merely as aberrations of the individual psyche but as symptomatic of, and resulting from the historical and cultural circumstances of his time. This chapter unfolds the topic sentence of the present study and tries to explain what the theme of Depravity is about in Eliot's poem 'The Waste Land'.

**Keywords:** depravity, consciousness, symptomatic, heterogeneity, Waste Land.

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INTRODUCTION

Thomas Sterns Eliot was one of the significant literary figures in twentieth century. He was one of the greatest Englishmen of letters and poets of the Modern Age. His literary career extended well over a period of forty-five years, and during this long span of time, he dominated the English literary scene and wielded wide authority and influence. He revealed his sensibility as a poet, a dramatist, a critic and a pamphleteer all rolled into one and achieved eminent success in each of these fields. No other English poet of the modern times has shown such versatility and originality as Eliot. He has become a part and parcel of the English literary tradition which he had modified and enriched for the benefit of the coming generations. He has become a part of the consciousness of his age, which cannot be understood without him. Thomas Stearns Eliot, American English poet, playwright, and literary critic, was the undisputed leader of the modernist movement in poetry.

With the passing of time, the poem has been increasingly appreciated and glowing tributes have been paid to Eliot's remarkable achievement. Exhaustive commentaries of such penetrating critics as F. R. Leavis,

Matthiessen, and Cleanth Brooks have gone along toward revealing the real meaning and significance of *The Waste Land*, and as a result it has come to be regarded as a highly condensed epic of the modern age. "The Waste Land is still the most influential poem of our age; nothing else so truly reflects the age and redeems it."

*The Waste Land* is at once a profoundly moving and an equally distressing poem. In a word, T. S. Eliot has tried to paint the sterility and the disturbance of the modern world that the poem came just a few years after the end of The First World War explains to some extent its deep pessimism. A year or two after the war was over, people were quite happy, but then in the following years they were completely disillusioned in all respects. This elation gave place to-

**Sexual perversion:** According to Eliot, sex is an important aspect of life. It is an expression of love and means of procreation. Today sex has been perverted in its proper function and is utilized for animal pleasure and monetary benefits. It has, therefore, become a source of degeneration and disease. It has also led to the erosion of moral values and has turned to be a hurdle in man's spiritual progress. Easy sexual relationship is found among all sections of the society. Eliot cites the instance of German princess in the first part of the poem. This is parallel to the love-affairs of Queen Elizabeth with the Earl of Leicester in the Tudor period. There is also another instance of freedom of sex in high society. Eliot mentions it in the career of Lady of Situations. In the second part of the poem, the perversion of sex prevails among the lower classes of society. Eliot mentions the story of Lil and the experience of three daughters of Thames. Another example is that of a mechanical sex between the typist girl and her boyfriend. In the poem, another example is that of a homo-sexual relationship exemplified by Eugenides. Eliot sums up the story of European lust through the words of St. Augustine:

To Carthage then I came

Burning burning burning burning [307-308]

He means that the whole of Europe is being destroyed by the fire of sexuality.

**Loss of faith and moral values:** In ancient time, the source of inspiration for life and achievement for life was faith. People really believed in Christian values. Tradition increases the importance of moral conduct. Elderly people were respected. Character and saintliness were regarded as important assets. Moreover, more important than money and position were character and achievement. Today the values have changed. Money is the God of the modern people. Older people are hated. Christians go to the Church as a method of routine. There is a gulf between profession and practice. Hypocrisy is at a premium. Flattery is more important than merit. The result is that Christian faith and compassion are no longer regarded as objects of life. This has resulted in general deterioration of standard of life and yard-stick of reputation:

And upside down in air were towers

Tolling reminiscent bells, that kept the hours

And voices singing out of empty cisterns and exhausted wells. [382-384]

**Lack of human relationship:** In days of yore, people believed in intimate human relationship. There was the joint family system, under which resources were pooled and the needs of all were supplied. Today there is fashion of separate families. In olden times, there were certain loyalties to the community and loyalty to the nation. Such loyalties no longer exist. People have become self-centered and egoistic. There is no sentiment of sympathy and compassion for the members of distant families and the community. Each one thinks only of his own interest and how he can gain at the expense of others. Exploitation is the order of the day. Eliot mentions in the last section. As the poet feels that we are like Coriolanus and embodiment of selfishness. Each one is imprisoned in his own self. We have lost the key of human sympathy and brotherhood:

We think of the key, each in his prison

Thinking of the key, each confirms a prison [413-414]

**Commercialization of life:** Our values are different from those of the past. The barter system has been replaced by the currency system. We evaluate everything in terms of money. Mr. Eugenide is an example of modern businessman. He carries his contract and samples and documents and transit business in the hotel. He also wants to enjoy life. He is fond of sex, especially homo-sex which is available in many hotels. Similarly, the

company directors and the executives hold picnics on the banks of the river Thames. They enjoy their leisure time with beautiful girls:

And their friends, the loitering heirs of city directors  
Departed, have left no addresses. [180-181]

**Mental tension:** Modern psychologists have shown that majority of people are abnormal. They suffer various types of mental illness on account of the worries and anxieties and challenges of the modern life. When man is unable to face a challenging situation, he feels tense and frustration. Similarly, sex, too, becomes a source of tension and despair. In the second section entitled *A Game of Chess* the poet deals with sex intrigues and sex perversions. The fashionable society-woman called the Lady of Situation, is bored with her own life and has become extremely neurotic. Her lover, too, suffers from mental exhaustion. He says:

I think we are in rat's alley  
Where the dead men lost their bones [115-116]

Similarly, Lil has lost her interest in life. She is unable to hold her husband who wants more and more of sex. Her abortion has ruined her health. She feels physically and mentally broken, i.e. she looks so antique: It's them pills I took, to bring it off, she said.

(She's had five already and nearly died of young George)  
The Chemist said it would be all right, but I've never been the same [159-161]

For the ordinary man and woman, a dead and meaningless routine is mentioned by the poet as below:

The hot water at ten,

And if it rains, a closed car at four,  
And we shall play a game of chess,  
Pressing lidless eyes and waiting for a knock upon the door. [135-138]

People do not know how to kill time. This, too, is a source of tension. Certainly, Eliot has given a clear picture of spiritual chaos of European society after the First World War. But it may be noted that the decay of civilization is a part of the history of mankind. Crisis of the past quarter of the twentieth century was not a new event in the history of civilization. Such crises had occurred in the past and had formed a part of human culture. Eliot presents the present chaos and relation to similar period in the history of man and brings about relationship between the past and the present through the employment of the mythical method. The resembling contrast between the past and the present shows that the modern dilemma is a part of the universal and historic dilemma, namely the survival of human culture and civilization.

### Conclusion

To sum up, in between the two Great Global Wars, Eliot gained horrible experiences of the so-called modern life. He closely observed the lives of the people of the time and his observations were into poems which have been studied in the above chapters. Eliot has succeeded in highlighting the dilemma of an enervated man as well as the sordidness and pettiness of modern urban civilization. The message Eliot conveys is that regeneration is possible as it has always been possible through suffering and penance. Man has sinned and he must atone to God for his sins through sufferings. In the canonized *The Waste Land* – a poem that encapsulates the predicament of the post war generation, Eliot was a sheer conjurer with words. Full of classical allusions, *The Waste Land* is the touchstone of modern literature that beautifully evokes the fragmented human experience vainly striving for meaning in life. The coming generation has to wait for the things to come with all forbearance and fortitude till the world of our expectation comes into existence. It is a question of time we have to wait, wait and wait.....

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