

A Critical Study of T.S Eliot's – "The Waste Land"

Dr. Kusum Sindhu

Lecturer in English L.N.Hindu College Rohtak

Email: kusum.sindhu@gmail.com

KEYWORDS: Charted, Antagonistic, Paradoxical, Monotony Protagonist.

ABSTRACT

Eliot's Career is more easily charted for though he has had more influence than Yeats and his work both as poet and critic marks much more distinctly a major shift in poetic taste and poetic practice, he has not Yeats range and diversity". (David Daiches). He was influenced by Dante, Jules Laforgue and French symbolism. Eliot left America in 1914 and after a short stay in Germany, he settled in London the following years. He was assistant editor of 'The Egoist' and 'The Criterion' later he became the director of Faber and Faber. He was encouraged by Ezra Pound and his first publication was 'The Love Song of J.Alfred Prufrock' in 1915. The title is ironic for the middle aged. Prufrock, the speaker of the poem, shows himself timid. He remains trapped in a state of was hopelessness as social habit and consideration of his futility, overwhelm hi. His next work was 'The Waste land' published in 1922 dedicated to Ezra Pound.The poem is considered to be the centre of modernism. Eliot described himself as 'classical in literature, royalist in politics and Anglo Saxon in religion.'" "The waster land" was followed by poems 1909-25 which includes "The Hollow men". The poems 1909-35 include "The Journey of the Magi" (1927). "Ash Wednesday" (1930) and his four quartets.

The waste Land:

Summary: The Burial of the Dead: There was spiritual barrenness in England and April was the month. Even Nature has become antagonistic to them since they have become unnatural. Man can have only memory of the past. "Winter kept us warm" is quite paradoxical which means that there is spiritual death and

death is supposed to bring comfort to many. Summer came with a shower of rain and he men and women of England spent their time in a garden, where fashionably enough, they took coffee and wasted their time over nonsensical talk. It is fashionable, vanity with them to talk over a cup of coffee.' I read much of the night and go South in the winter', this is the boastful talk of many persons; they do not read; they go South for warmth of course like the rich idle here visiting hill-stations in summer.

The poet is disgusted with the irreligious life of the people-the western man in general. One can find only stony rubbish in the West-which means there can be nothing holy and purifying in man. There are only broken images where dead trees give no shelter and dry stone gives no sound of water. Everything is dry and materialistic and there is no relief in Western countries from this monotony. Man is not a body alone; he has a soul which he has to satisfy with spiritual thoughts. The red rock refers to the rock on which Christ was nailed to the cross and his blood dripped on it. Christianity and absolute faith in it will save the people from being sinners. If they come under this red rock, they can find a shadow which will protect them from all sinful paths of life. Man is reminded that he is nothing more than a handful of dust. He should become spiritual and realize the temporariness of earthly life when he should prepare himself for salvation. But the Western Man in the 20th century is engrossed in sensual pleasures.

The Protagonist is Tiresias. The protagonist stops one Stetson from the crowd and asks him most paradoxically enough whether the corpse he painted the previous year had started sprouting. This may refer to the secret murder he had committed and buried the dead body in the garden of his house. Such is the life of the people there, It may also mean the resurrection of the dead; death is essential for rebirth; the land is sterile and then it regains its fertility. What the poet means ultimately is that those who are spiritually dead are to be survived from their spiritual death. Hypocrisy is the order of the day. This reveals the sarcastic and ironical attitude of the poet to his countrymen.

A Game of chess; this title is equally significant and it speaks of the forced reduction of women. It also speaks of the indifference of women to chastity – the purity of the body. The poet brings the names of Cleopatra and Dido, known for their voluptuous beauty. Cleopatra welcomes Antonio in the most gorgeous manner possible and Dido also did the same when she had to receive her lover Aeneas. The description is meant to excite the sensuality of man. There are the pictures of persons who have been reduced.

The confusion and uncertainty of the people of the Western Countries are very well expressed in the conversation that takes place between the lover and his lady. Both of them are first excited and then confused. 'I shall rush as I am, and walk the street, with my hair down. What shall we do tomorrow? What shall we ever do to P' this betrays the utter confusion of the people there. Their life has become mechanical. They will play the game of chess, and they will indulge in forced rape of women. The women are also no good; they care not for chastity; they wait for the knock at the door by someone who will give them sexual satisfaction.

Lil's husband was demobilized after the First World War; remained all the time in the field sexually starved; but he had already begotten five children; his wife has lost her teeth. She must make herself smart for the occasion so that he may feel happy and enjoy her. She must go to a dentist and have a set of teeth and look good. But she complains and turns indifferent to the occasion; but then the other person says that if she will not, there are other women who will satisfy him. Once again this speaks of the indifference of women to chastity. Prostitution is common there. The poet makes fun of all ladies for whom even romance has become mechanical.

“Hurry up please it's time”.

The Fire Sermon: 'The Fire Sermon' was preached by the Buddha against the fires of lust, anger, envy and other passions that consume men. The text is generally considered to be the tabernacle carried by the nomads and pitched upon the river bank, made holy by its waters. But here the tent refers to the ordinary tent put up by the man and women of England and of Europe on some river bank, to which they come for a change and physical pleasures. It is past mid-night and they were here enjoying themselves.

The wind had crossed the unspiritual land of England and Sylphs had departed and nothing is seen on the bank, either now covered with dew or washed away by the waters of the river. Most sarcastically Tiresias takes a line, “Sweet Thames, run softly, till I end my song”. He sings for the ladies of England. The male friends of these ladies are the sons of city Directors known for their wealth and immorality. So Tiresias has to weep. Sitting on the bank of lake. Tiresias is the protagonist and he speaks on behalf of his creator, Eliot. Tiresias once again refers to the overindulgence of the

people in immorality. Ferdinand says that his father is dead and Alonso thinks that his son is dead. In short, they all have become immersed in immoral way of living.

The women are raped or they willingly lose their purity to make money by such practices. Jug, jug and Tereu-symbols of cheap sex, are implied. Men spend their week-end with somebody's women. Tiresias finds the sailor returning home from the sea and the typist from the office. Tiresias came across two snakes copulating in a forest. He hit them and was turned into a woman. Seven years later he saw the same two snakes and hit them again. As he had hoped, he was turned back into a man. On account of Tiresias' male and female experience, Jove called him in as an expert witness to settle a quarrel with his wife, Juno. Jove was arguing that in love the woman enjoys greater pleasure; Juno argued that it was the other way round. Tiresias supported Jove. Out of spite, Juno blinded him to make up for this, Jove gave him the power of prophesy and long life.

Eliot also draws our attention to the fluidity of the point-of-view in 'The Waste Land'. Tiresias, although a mere spectator and not indeed a character, is yet, the most important personage in the poem, uniting all the rest. Just as the one-eyed merchant melts into the Phoenician sailor and the latter is not wholly distinct from Ferdinand, Prince of Naples, so all the women are one woman and the two sexes meet in Tiresias.

What Tiresias sees, in fact, is the substance of the poem. Intercourse is the substance; the theme is spiritual sterility in man and woman and its salvation or regeneration.

The country itself is in the grip of a curse. Tiresias recognizes that the curse on Thebes has been called down by the

unknowingly incestuous marriage between Oedipus and his mother Jocasta and Oedipus's killing of his father. Thebes has been turned into a waste land and the land infertile. England and Western Europe are in the same flight.

Thus every man and woman is consumed by the fire of lust.

Death of Water: Again the poet refers to the fertility cult followed by the Egyptians – the effigy immersed in Alexandria and collected at Philebas – such death of summer is necessary for spring to rise up, or for the coming of the cycle of seasons. Death is essential for rebirth and rejuvenation of the soul. The poet speaks of baptism also: 'so many of us were baptized as Jesus Christ were baptized into his death. Therefore, we are baptized with his by baptism into death.'

What the Thunder Said: Eliot notes that in the first part, three themes are employed. First the story of two disciples travelling on the road to Emmaus (a village) on the day of Christ's resurrection. He joins them but remains unrecognized until he blesses their evening meal. The second theme specified by Eliot is the approach to the Chapel Perseus. This is the final stage of the Grail Quest. The knight is tested by the illusion of nothingness. This theme is interwoven with the Emmaus story. The third theme is the decay of Eastern Europe in the modern world referred to already.

Lines 312 to 328 refer to the course of events from the betrayal and arrest of Jesus Christ until the moment of his death. At the time of his death (of Christ), the earth shook and the sky blazed forth-there was the thunder over the distant mountains. Christ is dead and we who are living here are dying with no patience; we are spiritually dead which is equated to death.

Naturally we have ‘only rock and no water’ and sandy road. The road winds above among the mountains without river. But no drop of water is ever available. This is symbolic of spiritual barrenness; people are carious and can not even epic. There is no silence in the mountains; dry sterile thunder makes a hideous noise; there is no rain. Even if there be rock and water, there will not be the cicadas (singing bird) but only grasshoppers singing monotonously. The hermit thrust with say “drop, drop; monotonously and there is no water at all. Water is a symbol of spiritual holiness.

One is not aware of the third person walking always beside one. ‘You and I alone are there; who9 is the third one? Who is this you and who is this I?’ You are the person; I am the soul; and the third person is the Almighty, the universal soul, the guardian spirit.

The Role of the Protagonist:

Tiresias is the protagonist of the poem. “The wasteland” and he is the narrator of all events. T.S.Eliot, the poet, remains impersonal and totally dissociates him from the narration of the incidents. Though Eliot has employed the technique of contrast in presenting the matter and ideas effectively, from the beginning he puts them in the mouth toe protagonist. Eliot is justified in his impersonal theory of poetic creation.

Tiresias has led a life of sexuality, from his monologue brimming with accounts of such sexual incidents; he reader may well guess that by some stroke of luck or ill-luck he alone could have enjoyed both sexes. He is pre-eminently fitted also to speak of such matters poetically, allusively, metaphorically.

Tiresias tires us with his tiring accounts of sexual lust. In Ovid’s

‘Metamorphosed’ one comes across this story of Tiresias. He was travelling through a forest where on a branch of a tree he could espy two snakes copulating. He hit them with a staff. In truth, these two snakes were originally angels in Heaven and because of their amorous behavior; God cursed them to go down to the earth in the shapes of snakes. Accordingly they came down and in character with their temperament they were-often found in each other’s embrace. The female-snake grew angry with Tiresias for having seen them and hit them also. So she cursed him into a female and thus satisfied her spirit of revenge. Tiresias turned a woman, put on female clothes and enjoyed men for about seven years. Later, he had to return to his home and again travelled through the forest. He saw the same snakes copulating and he hit them. Perhaps he considered it a device to transform himself into a male again. The male-snake cursed him into a male. Thus Tiresias could be bisexual.

The character and role to Tiresias is very interesting. Though he has been immoral to the core, he is not without knowledge of the good things of the world, the ancient and the modern. But in no part of the poem is he found remorseful and hence he cannot e redeemed from his life of sinful deeds. In his old age, he is unable to indulge in sex-acts and hence he has turned a spectator and he comments upon others behavior mercilessly. He is certainly cynical, sarcastic and caustic in his observations of the moderns; he is another Jacques, the cynic of ‘As you like it’ with a difference; the pictures he offers of men and women of contrastive behavior and character are to be interpreted for their implications. He takes one instance from the royal family and the fourth from the low-classes. They are instances to be collected and contrasted with due emphasis upon the century in which they lived. The past and the present

mix together and offer a glorified and denigrated picture of the human beings, in their love and affecter for toe her. Seems to say empiratically that the past is marked by true love and the present – day by hypocritical love and affection. Hence his contention is that the modern world is a ‘wasteland’.

Tiresias paints the sense of fear of the modern woman, ‘what is that noise now’ what is the wind doing’ / those are pearls that were his eyes’? The reference is from ‘The Tempest’ written by Shakespeare where the supposed death of Alonso and his eyes becoming pearls is skillfully used here by the poet. Tiresias takes modern man only as an example of a very sensual man who loses his eye-sight, because of his excessive indulgence in seed and no realizes the high value of eyes. They were as valuable as pearls or it may also mean blind sex.

Tiresias picture of Lil and her mother-in-law and her husband Albert is very humorous. She has already given birth to five children by Albert and she has lost her teeth also. Albert, a military man, has been remitting money for her expenses; she has not yet purchased a tooth ‘set to look better. She will have to wear the artificial teeth so that Albert may be pleased with her and enjoy her; or he will seek someone else. This is a clear instance of absence of true love and affection between a unbans and a wife.

Much more realistic and diverting is the account that Tiresias gives of the white nymphs of the Western countries who spend their time in the company of the heirs of city directors. They are Lotharios. They pitch their tents, eat and drink and sexually enjoy, using contraceptives and, then depart, leaving nothing behind. Tiresias says that he sat down

on the banks of Lake Lemman and wept for their loose conduct!

It is really surprising to hear that Tiresias glorifies the Elizabethan days and often brings in the poetic lines of Spenser to strike a contrast of situations or conditions, as though people were highly moral and today in the 20th century they have become degenerate in moral conduct. Henry VIII was still worse than our moderns. He who reads the post-Elizabethan dramas of Ben Jonson, Middleton, Webster and Heywood will know that adultery was common in those days. The dramatists did not much exaggerate conditions of living.

Nothing is more astonishing than to find Tiresias offer a solution to the grave problems of human life a libertine solving a licentious issue. It is something like employing a criminal accused to sit in judgment upon the case. Men must know that somebody is always following them invisibly, namely perhaps their conscience. Symbolically he introduces the Grail Quest and the knight arriving at Chapel Perilous. He puts the questions and the answers are giving to him. Tiresias is unhappy that people instead of worshipping the true God pray to false gods. They do not drink water out of the living fountains but they take them from the cisterns – which run dry. He brings in the story of Peter and the crowing of the cock. Peter denied any relationship with Christ twice but the third time when the cock crowed, he admitted his close relation with him. Symbolically it means truth is established and the day will dawn. Darkness will be dispelled and the life of man willshim bright, prosperous and peaceful. Peter and other disciples will carry on the doctrines of Christianity after the demise of their teacher.

Mythical Framework of the poem: The theme of the poem ‘The waste land’ is quite

simple'. It is a spiritual regeneration that the poet aims at achieving in his modern world of ours. In modern world morality has been thrown to the winds and people do not care to look back again on the cultural and spiritual heritage of the past that their ancestors had left behind them. England of olden days was one of moral and spiritual bliss, peace and prosperity. The First World War had completely devastated the economy of the country. No wonder people could not look to be moral and spiritual if they were to live or exist even. Further, to make matters worse, the young and the middle-aged men who had joined the 1914-18 war were slain and eat women of England, though widowed, were hard up to find second husbands. No wonder immorality became the order of the day. Eliot was much sorrowed to notice the prevailing conditions in the Western World and he could find this world of ours to be spiritually barren and sexually fertile or immoral.

The mythology that Eliot refers to is very significant. The same, thinking modern man is so much vexed with the immoral and non-moral life of man and woman in the Western countries that he does not like to live. People have become ungodly, faithless, immoral and unreliable. To drive home this desire to die and not to live among irreligious and bad people of Eliot refers to the story of Erbil as reported to Greek mythology. 'Sybil was a sorceress, and in her desire to live immortally she prayed to Zeus and he granted her immortality. But the poor woman forgot to ask for perennial youth and hence she was ageing and declining in health. There came a time when she could not follow her profession of prophesying also; her mental and physical strength forsook her. She wanted to die; but she could not die; so she converted herself into a parrot and imprisoned herself in a cage. Little boys who came there asked the parrot what it wanted and she replied. 'I want to

die'. That is the cry of the sane, modern man also. Unable to mix himself with others he shuts himself up in the cage of his house.

"It is in the 'Game of Chess' that Eliot refers to a rape scene. In Greek mythology there is the story of Philomel and Trees. Her sister was prone when they were all sleeping one night; Trees forcibly took away Philomel and raped her there. In order that she might not disclose the matter of reduction to her sister, he ruthlessly cut off her tongue. Zeus took pity upon her and metamorphosed her into a nightingale and she flew into the thick forests from where she has been singing her melancholic song night after night.

The story of Tiresias is also quite significant. He is the protagonist of the poem; he is the narrator of all these incidents since he is very familiar with sex-acts. He alone could be an expert in stating which of the sexes enjoys more in love. Zeus and Hera had debate on this issue and in order to settle it, Tiresias was ordered to come up to the heavens, and on being questioned by Hera, he replies that it was the woman who enjoyed more in the sex-act. She grew quite angry with him and cursed him with blindness. The two sexes go actually blind when they excessively indulge in it. The mythological story runs thus. Two angels in Heaven were attracted very much to each other and they were found hugging and kissing each other. God grew angry with them and transformed them into serpents; they descended down to the earth and there they enjoyed each other in a forest. Tiresias happened to go along to the forest and he saw the serpents in physical union. The female one cursed him with a female form. Tiresias became a woman and enjoyed men for seven years; on his return he found them in the same act and the male one cursed him into a male. Thus he got back his original form. So he

could be bisexual and hence was called by Zeus to settle his question or clear his doubt.

Mythology serves as a carrier of the poem's meaning. Each one of the mythological stories serves to enrich the meaning of the poem. Indeed, Eliot has exaggerated the materialistic aspects of human life. But since a majority of the people has lived a sensual life during his life0time, Eliot seems to have been disgusted with such living. Philosophers and very religious men do not live when values of life have been ignored. It is a pity that human beings have focused their attention on the vulgar aspect of life, instead of devoting themselves to a decent living sanctified by religion and religious faith.

‘Symbolic pictures in waste land:

Tiresias, the protagonist of the poem “The waste land” is blind when he is introduced to us as one who addresses us about the modern world and its moral and spiritual vacuum. As a blind man, he cannot see, but can only perceive. What he perceives is the substance of the poem. By the technique of contrast of the moderns with the ancients, he derives home the theme of spiritual sterility of the modern age. Men without religion and spiritual inclination are as good as dead and they can be found only in a state of death-in-life.

Tiresias is the symbol of a unifying figure. He is an important personage unifying all the rest. The Sybil is a symbol of boredom, weariness and horror of very long life on earth. She is so much bored with living that she longs to die; only she cannot die since immortality has been conferred upon her by God Zeus. He cannot withdraw it also and so she has transformed herself into a parrot. The parrot symbolizes the philosophers and wise people of

the world who want to die because of the wastefulness of life. Water is the cleansing symbol of purifying the souls of sinners.

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