

## SPIRITUAL BARRENNESS, WAR, AND ALIENATION: READING ELIOT'S *THE WASTE LAND*

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### ABSTRACT

*In his widely celebrated poem The Waste Land (1922) Thomas Stearns Eliot, the Nobel laureate, pictures the spiritual downfall of the modern world and delineates the capitalist canon on the rise. People of this era are trapped into the materialistic quicksand that makes them totally sterile and hollow. Consequently, traditional beliefs like Christianity have been replaced by capitalism. The lack of spirituality, Eliot asserts, makes the modern man lustful and robotic where people are haunted by animal-like sex and deadened by routine-bound life. Eliot's modern human lives in an age which is chaotic and horrible at large and is caused by man-made war. The war creates refugees and maternal cry for genocide to grab the natural resources and leads the ecosystem to a destructive and fragile state. Eliot's morally decayed men are alienated not only from themselves but also from the friends and society they belong. Eliot also shows these horrifying condition in his poems like "The Hollow Men" and "Gerontion" to indicate spiritual emptiness, "Sweeny among the Nightingales" to describe lust and "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock" for the depiction of alienation of the modern inhabitants. In The Waste Land, there are recurrent and crucial themes such as spiritual dryness, sexual perversion, money making war, capitalism, lack of eco-sensitivity as well as isolation which have been focused by Eliot in a vivid manner. This paper aims at exploring the spiritual barrenness caused by the capitalist economy, mechanical sex, and war, and unveils how modern man destroys the ecosystem for profit and power keeping the spiritual issues behind as well. This research also investigates how Eliot presents modern civilization in quest of spiritual solace and finds the path of emancipation in this poem.*

**KEYWORDS:** *Spiritual Barrenness, Mechanical Sex, War, Capitalism, Ecocriticism, Alienation*

### INTRODUCTION

The collapse of spirituality and tradition makes the modern world sterile, lustful, and money oriented. It is obvious that materialistic attitude and spirituality cannot stay in an identical room. This current paper vividly depicts the prevalent maladies of the modern civilization reflected in *The Waste Land* of T.S. Eliot. Eliot rightly traces the crises of the modern man deadened by robotic and routinized life. To the waste landers, capitalism is the religion and as a result, they belittle the moral lessons of Christianity. Beneath this situation, people become either wholly or largely sexually perverse, religiously and spiritually arid, economically money and warmonger as well as mentally alienated.

More importantly, Eliot avouches that the dead world has no eco-concern and like the proletariat, the environment tolerates cruel treatment caused by the bourgeois society (as indicated by oil and tar on the river and the departure of the good nymphs from the sweet Thames). Since modern beings are obsessed with earthly gains, they put more concern on profit and loss. According to Marxist ideology, our world is “either wholly or largely conditioned by the way the economy is organized” (Bertens, 2001, p. 82). So environmental issues have the least value to them while the capitalist economy is on the rise.

In the poem, in order to show the spiritual dryness, Eliot focuses that April month is assumed as cruel whereas winter is warm to the waste landers. But the reality is different. Actually, a soul which is already barren or dead cannot taste the moral and spiritual values. According to Eliot, modern men are hollow men and indifferent to the bells of 9 O'clock, the time of Crucifixion of Jesus Christ. But they are busy with their dull routinized work and gather on the ‘London Bridge’. The church is left empty which has become only the wind home. So is the condition of the 20<sup>th</sup>-century modern society. Accordingly, mechanical sex happened by the want of morality is also pervasive in the poem of Eliot. He uses mythological figure, Tiresias, as an observer to unveil the animal-like sex of the wasteland. With the portrayal of Bilandona, the typist girl, the businessman of the Cannon-street Hotel and the lady, Eliot describes the carnal sex of the machine age. And in this corrupted society woman like Bilandona feels estranged and sex has become merely a routine to her (modern man). The prevalence of the sexual infatuation is contextually traced by J.H. Timmerman in section II “A Game of Chase” that “lust burns from the upper-class women to pub women” (Bloom, 2011, p. 158)

This study indicates the aftermath of World War I as well that has been significantly noted by Eliot in the poem. Eliot delineates the horrors and turbulence of war by mentioning Albert as an army of the war, refugees, lamentation of the mothers for their dead children and the corpse that is buried in the garden. All these chaos of the modern world are created politically by the capitalist economy to occupy natural resources and power and this is why “Clausewitz viewed war as a political instrument” (Miller, 2012). Therefore it is clear that in the capitalist economy women (for lust), wine (for merriment drunk by the business boss) and war (for grabbing natural resources and destroying ecosystem) are indispensable parts of the moneyed men devoid of spirituality.

## DISCUSSIONS

With the arrival of modern science and the publication of Darwin’s theory of evolution traditional religious beliefs start dying and modern civilization has become spiritually and morally dead. Eliot depicts this spiritual disease in the way that God is dead to the waste landers as Nietzsche rightly remarks that “the death of God must lie at the center of all modern man’s thinking” (Coote, 1985, p. 85). Here the death of God shows the death of religious belief (Lavine, 1984, p. 324). So fruitless condition of the 20<sup>th</sup>-century people is prevalent in the poem caught by Eliot and for this Madame Sosostris’s tarot pack of cards does not bear the testimony of the ‘Hanged Man’ or Christ but it is blank that shows the faithless state of the modern man:

And here is the one-eyed merchant, and this card  
 Which is *blank*, is something he carries on his back  
 Which I am forbidden to see. I do not find  
*The Hanged Man* (52-55, emphasis mine)<sup>1</sup>

Now tradition has lost its sanctity and people do not hear it any more. With this connection, W.B. Yeats's uttering can be merged properly as, Yeats asserts, in "The Second Coming" that the Falcon (modern man) does not obey the falconer (tradition).

London city is called 'unreal' by Eliot because of its spiritual hollowness of the city dwellers whose goal has been dimmed and lost in 'rats' alley' and they are used to maintaining their daily work forgetting the prayer time and God. Innumerable dead souls aimlessly gather on the London Bridge showing indifference to God. The scenario is pictured:

Unreal city  
 Under the brown fog of winter dawn  
 A crowd flowed over *London Bridge*, so many  
 I had not thought *death* had undone so many (60-63, emphasis mine)

'London Bridge' is the embodiment of the wasteland and the word 'death' shows the spiritual degradation of the modern man. Thus London, indirectly the whole modern cities, has become Dante's hell as Coote contextually notes:

"The commuters of modern London are seen as the equivalent of Dante's  
 Spiritual death in the *Inferno*. London is a version of Hell (Coote, 1985, p. 31)."

The Londoners (modern people) are living as life in death. They are physically living like Ancient Mariner in "The Rime of Ancient Mariner" composed by S.T. Coleridge who also loses his spiritual urging and kills the Albatross, part of nature.

"Eliot was a religious poet from the day he was born (Hinchliffe, 1987, p.10)." In this degenerated land, Eliot observes, only hollow men live and this theme is also focused in his poem "The Hollow Men". They have withdrawn themselves from God's home and it becomes vacant where only air is visible. "There is an empty chapel, only the wind's home/ It has no widows, and the door wings" (389-390). Philip Larkintoo writes in the same vein in his poem "Church Going" that want of religious belief of the people makes the church empty and desolate. In this bleak state of the church reminds the comment of Timmerman:

<sup>1</sup>M.H. Abrams, *The Norton Anthology of English Literature* (vole.2, 6<sup>th</sup> ed.). (New York: W.W.Norton & Company. Inc. 1993),pp.2147-2156. All subsequent references to the text are from this edition and indicated in the paper only by respective line numbers within brackets.

“It is a wasteland out of control. To the modern age the Grail,  
the representation of Christ’s passion and shed blood, is reduced  
to the empty chapel, only the wind’s home ( Bloom, 2011, p. 165).”

As a result, Eliot’s waste landers see April month like a bad omen, though it is the sign of rejuvenation, and winter, the fragile season, is good to them: “Winter kept us warm” (5). They have actually become blind in terms of religion. This is because out of this stony land spirituality is a mere nightmare. Eliot shows the same view with the portrayal of Gerontion in the poem “Gerontion” where he wants rain in the dry season that is impossible to happen. Such is the situation of the modern time which is in the darkness of faithlessness.

Mechanical or animal-like sex is pervasive in *The Waste Land*. Sexual issues are also part of spirituality and religion. There should be coherence and unity within the spirits. But in this modern age sexual act is done in a robotic way. Eliot through Tiresias reveals what happens in the modern bed as “Tiresias have foresuffered all/ Enacted on this same divan or bed (243-244). Lust is an inseparable part of the modern couple. Eliot shows that Bilandona is no more with her lover spiritually while having sexual intercourse. Sex has become a routine that has to be enacted.

“*Hardly aware* of her departed lover /  
Her brain allows one half thought to pass /  
Well now *that’s done*; and I’m glad *it’s over*” (250-252, emphasis mine)

Carnal desire has taken the place of spiritual attachment. This sexual obsession is crucially mentioned in his poem “Sweeny among the Nightingales”. It is seen that Sweeny is extremely lustful. He used to have sex with the Nightingales (prostitutes) and it is a daily routine for him. Thus, in the modern era “there is no sense of joyous, here and no love – sex is merely a routine” (Coote, 1985, p. 82). The similar amorality is found between Mearsault and Marie, the typist, in *The Outsider* by Albert Camus while they are enjoying swimming and maintaining live together but there remains no love rather mechanical sex. Consequently, they are living in the spiritual hollowness.

In *The Waste Land*, Eliot subtly uses allusions and myths to juxtapose the ancient sexual issues with the modern carnal desire. Eliot portrays the story of Philomel who was raped forcibly by the barbarous king, Tereus and she was transformed into Nightingale whose sexual song is still voiced in the modern air:

The change of Philomel, by the barbarous king  
So *rudely forced*; yet there the nightingale  
And still she cried, and still, *the world pursues*  
*Jug Jug* to the dirty ears (99- 104, emphasis mine)

But what Bilandona does while her lover is having sex with her. There is no response from her and so her lover finds her passive and indifferent. Everything is done without reluctance:

If undesired,  
 Flushed and decided, he assaults at once;  
 Exploring hands encounter *no defense*  
 His vanity requires *no response*  
 And makes a welcome of *indifference* (238-242, emphasis mine)

This is the robotic and machine-like sex propounded by Eliot, and so does Earnest Hemingway in *The Sun Also Rises*. Hemingway's Lady Brett Ashley is the counterpart of this sexual extremism as she makes love with many in the novel whom she wants to. There is another reference of sexual perversion in the poem with the indication of Saint Augustine's Carthage mentioned in *Confessions* written by Augustine where he is sexually lustful and the Carthage has become an inferno due to lack of spiritual binding with God. Therefore, most of the allusions and myths in *The Waste Land* focus the sexual perversity with the juxtaposition of the modern world:

“the modern world is a wasteland devastated, by moral and spiritual wounds that have affected its representative organs and creative function, giving a central image of sexual sterility as a foundation for all the metaphorical allusions in the poem (Hinchliffe, 1987, p. 19).”

Besides, Eliot brings the sexual wilfulness with the notation of the businessman at the Cannon Street Hotel that shows again the bourgeois society who needs women for their carnal enjoyment. Where there is a money making business, there is a hotel (brothel) for the businessman to get entertained.

The horrors of war in the 20<sup>th</sup> century is another prominent theme in *The Waste Land*. Eliot crucially depicts the money-oriented World War I which is the creator of turbulent and chaotic living for the modern habitants. The hazardous state is mentioned this way that shelterless people becoming refugees are wandering, as happens to Davies in *The Caretaker* by Harold Pinter. Davies has lost his documents and domicile because of war. Even mothers are crying for their dead children in the poem and uncertain bombing snatches the sleep of man and makes the ease and normal days troublesome:

What is the sound high in the air  
 Murmur of the maternal lamentation  
 Who are those hooded hordes swarming  
 Over the endless plains stumbling in cracked earth (367-370)

The bourgeois capitalist economy creates this disastrous war thinking that the more war is, the more production of atomic energy and the more production means the more profit but less spirituality and humanity. This warmonger people contain less spirituality remarked by Lavine that “The eruption of World War I finally destroyed the belief in the continuing progress of civilization toward truth and freedom, peace and prosperity which the Enlightenment had fostered (Lavine, 1984, p. 326).” The morbidity of capitalism makes the modern man unheard the religious lessons and for this reason, they

go on killing the innocent mass while it is forbidden to kill a man in *The Noble Koran* that to kill a man is to kill the whole humanity:

“He who slayth anyone, unless it is a person guilty of manslaughter,  
or of spreading disorders in the land, shall be as though he had  
slain all mankind; but that he who saveth a life shall be as though  
he had saved all mankind ( Surah Al Maeda, 2005: 576).”

So it reveals that having want of spirituality and moral lessons the upper-class people create war and continue genocide over the man as well as land. Experiencing the move of capitalist war, W.B. Yeats also becomes frightened and prays for his daughter, Annie, in the poem “A Prayer for My Daughter”. Yeats is worried whether his daughter can survive in this war-torn world.

Eliot describes the aftermath of war using myth as well. To show the death and decadence of the man-made war, he notes the myth of Puni War between Rome and Carthage (Eliot’s note) and merges it with this modern war. The war creates innumerable deaths and makes thousands of people wounded: “You who were with me in the ship at Mylae! / That corpse you planted last year in your garden” (70-71). The modern world distorted by war becomes degenerated and filled with corpses cluttering here and there. The devastation of war indeed makes people castrated as Lil and lustful like Albert in the poem. By Albert’s home-coming from war, Eliot indicates his carnal desire whereas Lil has become sexually unwelcoming. As a result, this barren state of Lil may not make Albert sexually happy and he will get benefitted by other women: “He’s been in the army four years, he wants a good time /And if you don’t give it to him, there are others will” (148-149). In the same manner, Gross tells us the degraded condition of war trouble society that war renders “men either impotent or brutally lustful and women either hysteria or frigidly acquiescent” (Hinchliffe, 1987, p. 36). This similar issue is also portrayed by Hemingway in *The Sun Also Rises* where Jack Barnes is shown as an impotent man caused by war. This is not the end of war effect rather it also destroys the culture and tradition, the eminent paradigms, of the European civilization:

Falling towers  
Jerusalem Athens Alexandria  
Vienna London  
Unreal (374-377)

Capitalism and war go together. Shortly after the Industrial Revolution modern minds get routinized and mobilized for-profit hunting simultaneously and owing to this situation private ownerships and entrepreneurship become high. “Capitalism is an economic system based on the private ownership of the means of production and their operation for profit” (Gilpin). Eliot points out this scenario in *The Waste Land* to show the hurry of the businessman for pursuing money who actually believes in the capitalist economy. By picturing Mr. Eugenides, the Smyrna merchant, Eliot focuses the hypocrisy, lust and bourgeois economy of the modern era:

Unreal city  
 Under the brown fog of winter noon  
 Mr. Eugenides, the Smyrna merchant  
 Unshaven, with a pocket full of *currents*  
 C.i.f. London: *Documents* at sight  
 Asked me in demotic French  
 To luncheon at the *Cannon Street Hotel* (207-213, emphasis mine)

Thus, the very money oriented and lustful purpose is reflected here. The 'Cannon Street Hotel' is the embodiment of both sexual perversity and business meeting. A modern man like Gregor Samsa in *The Metamorphosis* of Franz Kafka experiences the weariness and boredom of maintaining a dull routine and it is caused by his boss, the agent of capitalism, who knows only work, not the human passion, that carries money. The modern economic system, according to Harari, will not last 'a single day' if the bourgeois society fails 'to believe in capitalism' (Harari, 2014, p. 126).

Capitalist creed is also visible at the edge of the river Thames. Once it was a good place for the general mass and good nymphs but in the modern age, it has become a place for business meeting and picnic spot for the waste landers where modern products like sandwich papers, empty bottles and cigarette ends are found on the river. All these elements reflect the aristocratic society who controls the mode of production of the state following the footsteps of capitalism:

The river bears(*ed*) no empty bottles, *sandwich* papers  
 Silk handkerchiefs, cardboard boxes, *cigarette ends*  
 Or other testimony of *summer night*. The nymphs are departed  
 And their friends, the loitering heirs of  
*City directors* (176-180, emphasis and addition mine)

To show this rise of commercialism and consumerism Eliot brings Lil's example that for becoming smart for her husband Lil should buy modern cosmetics advised by her friend. It is the hegemony of capitalist class where diseases are spread among the people so that they would buy the products to be cured the capitalist industries produce: "Now Albert's coming back, make yourself a bit smart (142)." To be smart means to use modern cosmetics leaving natural decor and make the producers more wealthy.

The spiritual death of the moneyed people is juxtaposed by the portrayal of Phlebas in the poem who dies for business purpose drowning in the sea. By the death of Phlebas, Eliot wants to assimilate the spiritual death of the capitalist people who hanker after money. Consequently, Modern man meets his spiritual dooms because of his capitalist approach:

"Phlebas the Phoenician, a fortnight *dead*/  
 Forget the cry of gulls, and the deep sea swell /  
 And the *profit and loss*" (312-314, emphasis mine)

Ecocriticism is an important aspect to discuss in this article for the analysis of the impacts of war caused by the upper -class people in modern history. After the coming of the steam engine and the modern industrial technologies, the environment starts to get contaminated because the owners of the industries, lacking eco-concern, oppress and suppress both the proletariat and nature. Environmentalists see that the capitalists want more ‘natural resources’ and for this they ‘cause mass extinction of animal and plant life’ (Dawson, 2016, p. 41).

In *The Waste Land*, Eliot finds the modern nature like river Thames is polluted at large by the inhumane practices showed by the capitalist canon when the industrial development is going on unrestrictedly. Now Eliot’s Thames is full of trash and wastes, such as oil, tar, sandwich papers etcetera piled in it that ushers dried conscience of modern beings about eco-sensitivity:

The river sweats

Oil and tar

The barges drift

With the turning tide

Red sail (266-270)

Men of the age become sterile, and so does the ecosystem. Seeing this state of nature Eliot recalls and laments for the golden past of Thames: “By the waters of Leman, I sat down and wept/ Sweet Thames, run softly till I end my song” (182-183). Like Eliot W.H. Auden narrates the dying situation of nature in the poem “The Shield of Achilles” in the way that there is no sign of grass, no neighbourhood and so nothing remains to eat and nowhere to sit down.

To show the predicaments of the environment Eliot brings the paradigm of the Ganges, the river, and tells us that the Ganges is on the way to meet its dead end. The natural world of the modern time is about to vanish by the cruel and inconsiderable hands of materialistic society: “The Ganges was sunken, and the limp leaves/ waited for rain” (396-397). Among the corrupted air of capitalist society, nature cannot inhale the fresh and pure wind and this is again the consequence of spiritual barrenness on which this research has been developed. This barren nature of the environment is rightly traced by eco-critic Garrard that the earth is in the ‘way to mechanistic world view’ and as such nature is assumed as ‘dead and passive to be dominated and controlled by humans’ (Garrard, 2012, p. 9). But what we see age after age some poets like William Wordsworth from the west and Jibanananda Das from the east uphold and love nature and sing the greatness and hailing power of nature in their writings. However, in modern time this nature or ecosystem has intentionally been profaned and led to death devoid of spirituality.

In this modern wasteland, Eliot sees, people are alienated from the society they inhabit. There is mental estrangement in them and they used to maintain a dull routine that must be enacted. The lover has come and the beloved wants his company feeling alienated in the poem but the lover is indifferent. It seems they are the tow inhabitants of the tow verges of a river. She calls him, though he is just beside her, no response comes from him which shows the isolated state of modern beings:



“My nerves are bad tonight, yes bad. Stay with me

*Speak to me. Why you never speak. speak*” (111-112, emphasis mine)

The repetition of ‘speak’ shows that they both are isolated in one way or another. They are living in their own world where one cannot interfere other. Eliot’s “The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock” is the clear indication of alienation felt by modern man. Prufrock is afraid to disturb society by his thinking as his world is different from others. His indecision and fear make him an outcast in his own society he belongs to. Thus at the end of the day, modern man like Prufrock is only himself (alienated being) and there is no entry of others.

The robotic modern life is haunted by alienation and with the portrayal of Bilandona, the typist girl, Eliot makes it clear that estrangement dwells in her (modern humans) after the departure of her lover. She is alone in the room doing the same task that every day she used to do:

When lovely woman sloops to folly and

Paces about her room again, *alone*

She smoothes her hair with *automatic hand*

And *put a record* on the gramophone” (253-256, emphasis mine)

So is the worst condition of the 20<sup>th</sup>-century people who have become alienated objects. Thus in the capitalist society we all work for ‘profit’ and ‘function as objects and become alienated from ourselves’ ( Bertens, 2001, p. 83). What Kafka’s Gregor Samsa in *The Metamorphosis* feels in the capitalist society, and so do the modern people. Gregor is completely alienated from his family and society he lives. Eliot focuses the spiritual alienation too by indicating an empty church that is left by modern beings. Instead of maintaining prayer in the chapel, people are busy with their daily affairs and by doing so they make themselves isolated from the church or spiritual calling. As a result, the ringing of prayer bells is not heard by them and after a certain moment it (church, God) becomes alienated itself:

“And upside down in air were towers/

Tolling reminiscent *bells*, that kept the hours/

And voices singing out of *empty cisterns*” (382-384, emphasis mine)

This is the complicated state of the modern man who is estranged mentally, socially and spiritually reflected in *The Waste Land* by Eliot.

One thing must be noted that in this decayed civilization Eliot hopefully and earnestly calls the corrupted, degenerated, and spiritually dead people to follow the tradition or the religious values that can only help emancipate the waste landers from their evil designs set by the materialist class:

A heap of broken images, where the sun beats a

And the dead trees give no shelter, the cricket no relief

And the dry stone no sound of water, only

There is a *shadow* under this *red rock* (22-23, emphasis mine)

To develop this idea he also brings the story of Saint Augustine who is full of lust but after realization, as his *Confessions* delineates, he wants purgation to God for sin: "O Lord thou pluckest me out" (309). John Donne also shows this sterile situation in the poem "Batter My Heart, Three-Personed God" where the speaker has become trapped by devil's work and by understanding his sin he laments to God and wants his forgiveness. Seeing this troublesome earth Eliot suggests three virtues, Nirvana of Buddha: Datta (give), Dayadhvam (sympathize), and Damyata (control) and by obeying Eliot's suggestion modern men can see peace or 'Shantih' all over the world. Kahlil Gibran in his book *The Prophet* affiliating with Eliot also enumerates a lot of humane and peaceful issues to set the universe in complacency and order where man will see no chaos rather there will prevail only blissful scenario instead. So the importance of spirituality has got a great concern in the poem for Eliot through which men of the modern era can get purgation from their degenerated and sterile condition of spirituality.

## CONCLUSIONS

To wind up, Eliot's *The Waste Land* is the masterful creation of the twentieth-century literary world that subtly showcases the downfall of spirituality and the rise of the materialist view of the modern world. With the development of science and the increase of bourgeois economy, people begin to lose faith in religion and consequently become hollow and fragile in terms of spirituality, morality, and tradition. Eliot in his poem elicits the facets of the nightmarish experience of the modern society. By depicting the absence of Jesus Christ in the Tarot pack of cards, indifference to the prayer time and the empty church, Eliot reveals the spiritual barrenness of modern humans. Eliot observes that the lack of spirituality makes the modern minds lustful and robotic as portrayed by Bilandona, the typist girl, and the businessman. It is also vivid that war has undone a lot: making refugees and killing children of mothers. In the capitalist economy, Eliot thinks, profit has got prime concern and thus the modern waste landers hanker after profit-oriented business keeping the spiritual and humane issues behind as indicated by Mr. Eugenides's money monger business in the poem. Living in the materialist world, modern people lack eco-concern and as a result, the river Thames and Ganges are contaminated. Modern man is isolated mentally, socially and spiritually depicted by Bilandona's loneliness just after the outgoing of her lover in the poem. All these salient features described by Eliot in the poem make *The Waste Land* as a masterpiece of modern text. Thus, Eliot's modern beings indulge in mechanical sex, war and earthly gains which lead them to spiritual aridity. Beneath this situation, Eliot advises the modern man to strongly obey and maintain the spiritual and traditional rules that can only be their remedies.

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