

STERILITY AS A RECURRING THEME IN ELIOT'S THE WASTE LAND

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Abstract

Thomas Sterns Eliot's 1922 *The Waste land* does not only define the barrenness in the modern times but also addresses the spiritual "drought" and sterility in the modern world. The poem makes sense of the present by referring to the past literatures and their legends and connecting them to the present in reverse. The paper presents a comparative study between the 'glorious past' and 'the sordid' and sterile present according to Eliot's *The Wasteland*. Finding himself thrown into a world of spiritual sterility, a mechanical modern world, a world of materialism, Eliot seeks a shower of hope to wash the world anew.

This paper sheds light upon the sterility of the 'wastelanders', the people of the modern world and focuses sharply on the dead and utter sterility of modern civilization post-World War I Europe.

Keywords: Sterility, fertility, Waste Land, Modern Civilization

The Waste Land is a highly complex poem organized on the principle of five parts which opens with a compelling epigraph, that serves as a 'leitmotif' to the whole poem. This epigraph introduces the ancient prophetess, the Sibyl of Cumae, and her fatal utterance of a death wish. This prophecy sets the tone for *The Waste Land* as a poem that focuses sharply on the deadness and utter sterility of modern civilization post-World War I Europe. Eliot felt, was on the verge of total Collapse, due to its spiritual, intellectual, and psychological collapse. This central theme links up with the various parts of the poem.

Waste land is a land where no plant can grow; it is a barren land. The word barren is also given to a woman who cannot give birth. Thus, in Part one, our journey starts with the protagonist from the midst of the dry infertile dead wasteland which passes through many stages before it reaches the end of the journey. There are recurrent images of a dry, sterile landscape - a

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"dead land" with barren rocks, dead trees, "stony rubbish," "dry tubers," "dull roots" and "roots that clutch" all through the first part that give the reader a clear picture of the barrenness of the modern wasteland. These images are scattered over the two opening segments of Tiresias' commentary, the protagonist who appears much later in the poem. The beginning of the first part itself gives a general picture of what Eliot is trying to present as the waste land, "April is the cruelest month" is a reversed version of Chaucer's line in the Canterbury tales where he speaks about April being the sweetest month. Again, "breeding lilac" lilac which is a symbol of spring/fertility, is used here in a negative sense. In the same section, there is a scene of a man and woman exchanging Hyacinths¹, which is a kind of flower that is traditionally connected with the process of death-rebirth in vegetation cults and fertility rites of the Greek mythology. The phrase "I was neither living nor dead" refers to internal infertility which means death in life. In the same section, "I read, much of the night..." Night is the time for procreative activity, but here reading a book shows lack of fertility and love.

The second part speaks mostly of the ancient traditions followed by several cultures, specially the Eastern, which believe in the birth-death-rebirth cycle. The burial of the dead refers to the burial of the fertility gods which was a ritual during spring season in Egypt, Greece and Indian traditions. In countries like India who still have rituals like rebirth of nature and life, the ritual of burying fertility gods to let them sprout as spring plants is celebrated as "Holi" – the festival of colors for spring and the beginning of life.

The question raised here is, how can one recuperate fertility of emotions and life after it is vanished from the modern waste land? Modern man suffers from the sterility of emotions and intellect too and the waste land is the modern world where lack of fertility has dehumanized humans into machines and animals. By the end of part one, there is a call for heading towards the East where these traditions and cultures are still rich and are still followed, and modern man is asked to go towards this direction for the fertility of the barren waste land, "Your shadow at morning striding behind you..." L28-29 which suggests heading towards Eastern cultures. There is a comparison between the glorious past, that glorified culture and traditions, the sordid present, which has become sterile and the uncertain future where there is hope. The glory of the past lies in the glorifying of traditions, but the present is sordid and the future is uncertain. Leaves are dead in the treeless wasteland and dead leaves cannot give shelter which is an image of emptiness in life. Dry stones give a picture of no stream flowing so there is no sign of water either which refers to lifelessness. The dryness of life in the wasteland is later compared to the excess of moisture in the latter parts. In the third part, the undoing of the Thames Maidens by "the loitering heirs of city directors" is reinforced by the equally sordid pictures of Sweeney patronizing Mrs. Porter's bawdy-house, or the encounter between the typist and clerk in a seedy London flat. There are several other instances of recurrent imagery that reinforces the structure of *The Waste Land* making it an artistically composite piece that not only reflects the infertility

¹ Hyacinth according to the Greek mythology is a divine hero. His cult Amykles southwest of Sparta dates from the Mycenaean era. A sanctuary grew up around what was alleged to be his burial mound, which was located in the Classical period at the feet of Apollo's statue. The literary myths serve to link him to local cults, and to identify him with Apollo.

of the land but also the sterility in humans. For instance, a great emotion of love is reduced to the level of lust as seen in many parts of the poem.

Another example of the corrupt humans and nature is the reversed picture of Thames River presented as an impure and filthy place, opposed to what Edmund Spenser's Thames was pictured.

Sweet Thames, run softly till I end my song,

Sweet Thames, run softly, for I speak not loud or long. (184-185)

Spenser's Description of the River Thames as a beautiful place full of purity and joy in his "Prothalamion" a marriage song where the nymphs are agents of joy is reversed. Here the place is polluted and the nymphs are reduced to prostitutes. Summer time leaves behind smoked cigarettes and empty beers cans that have added to the filth which was left behind by prostitutes. Thames is no more pure, it is polluted by the industries pollution and waste just like human civilizations are polluted by the loss of spiritual, emotional and intellectual fertility. Modern society is compared to a rat's hole that has a very foul smell and has only one way, you have to come out from the same way. Here, modern man has entered the hole of the rat and there is no way out, except one which has a very bad smell. Modern civilization stinks, but the only way to get out of this degenerated infertile land is to pass through it and correct things. The speaker is suggesting that in order to clean up the dirt one has to lay feet in it first.

In the same section, the modern industrial city, London, shows "Unreal life" an artificial life in the industrial city where pollution, causes fog to be brown and not white, a sign of pollution and degeneration. The industrial evolutions have not only corrupted nature, but also man. This is another picture presenting sterility and corruption. Eliot is talking of the unreal city of London again in this section which he earlier mentioned in the first section as Baudelaire's poem talks of Paris and the same unreal cities as in Dante's hell *Inferno*. Here the comparison between all three texts refer to the modern European world where people are dead in life.

Unreal City,

Under the brown fog of a winter dawn,

A crowd flowed over London Bridge, so many,

I had not thought death had undone so many.

Sighs, short and infrequent, were exhaled,

And each man fixed his eyes before his feet. (L60-65 p62)

In the same section the protagonist, Tiresias is introduced and this character is well-chosen from the Greek myth that says about Tiresias being experienced both man's and woman's life and knows how it is to be both. Eliot shows another image of love reduced to lust in the character of a working woman and compares her experience with the woman of the glorious past, from Oliver Goldsmith's *Vicar of Wakefield*. This part shows a mechanical sexual act. A modern woman typist, expects a guest, her superior in the company, just to have physical relation with him unwillingly, but without any resistance. Tiresias the prophet knows what is going to happen with the typist but cannot do anything except feeling sad for her because he had been in her place before. The guest is a house agents clerk whereas the lady is in an inferior job therefore he exploits her. He finally leaves the house after giving her a kiss. Without any reaction she looks in the mirror saying, "Well now that's done: and I'm glad it's over." This shows how mechanical and infertile love affair has become.

When lovely woman stoops to folly and

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Paces about her room again, alone.

She smooths her hair with automatic hand,

And puts a record on the gramophone. (280-283)

The reversed line from Oliver Goldsmith, "when a woman stoops to folly" she simply commits suicide, but a modern woman when she "stoops to folly", she takes a hair drier and combs her hair, then listens to a record on the gramophone when she loses her chastity and feels happy that it is over. Olivia sings in Goldsmith's *Vicar of Wakefield* when a woman is betrayed by a man she must die but here modern woman walks about in the room and combs her hair mechanically and then listens to music. The typist girl has no other option as a working woman and has to satisfy her man at home and officially at the place of work. Eliot here appears to be asking women to commit suicide but is not punishing men. This shows the degeneration of modern society.

The section smoothly comes to end at the polluted water, which is polluted with the industrial wastes, oil and tar. Industrialization has made rivers impure as modern civilization has made human beings impure. However, as the water doesn't accept oil and tar, modern man should not accept the mechanical modern civilization which lacks humanity. The appearance of the river is described precisely here to send this message.

The huge progress and the developments in science that came after the first world war, led to the degeneration of modern society. The modern man becomes an animalistic and mechanical creature, who is emotionally, intellectually and spiritually dead.

In part IV, *Death By Water*, the excess of water kills people where the modern man is suffering from lack of fertility. This fear of death by water in a land lacking water is an ironical imagery. The image of the character of the fertility myth, the Phoenician sailor, drowns because of the excess of water stands in contrast with the images in section one of the poem where there is lack of fertility because of lack of water.

The last section of the poem takes us towards an optimistic end of *The Wasteland* giving hope for the future. The need for going back to the Eastern tradition and understanding the values by going back to religious beliefs is the only way out. It is also the only solution for making the modern world a more fertile place, spiritually, emotionally and intellectually. The questions here are, will there be rebirth of faith again? Christ was reborn in the past but will it happen again? Rebirth of faith is wanted but will Christ be resurrected? Christ questions God, "Why do I have to suffer?" But then he says "let God's will be done." There is an image of a knight that goes to search for the grail, who according to the myth, sacrifices his life to get spiritual fertility. The search for the Holy Grail legend here refers to the search of spiritual fertility. Christ was supposed to be reborn but the grail in which his blood was gathered is lost and only if it is found Christ will be resurrected. The section summarizes the whole poem where all cultures are brought together. Christ's death here refers to the absence of faith which can only be regained if modern man is willing to sacrifice. The desert in this image where the section comes to an end, is the spiritual desert of modern civilization which lacks water and therefore vegetation or any form of life. The desert is only filled with the infertile thunder which means only noise bringing no rain water. A small bird is singing which sounds like the drops of water. The sound made by the desert bird is like water where there is no water, which gives a ray of hope in this dry and brown painting of the wasteland.



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In the last part of the last section, the thunder is making three different sounds that are "give" which means give, "dayadhavam" that means sympathize, and "damyatta" which means be controlled according to Sanskrit in the Hindu myth, then "shantih" which refers to the internal peace. The three sounds of the thunder are an optimistic note with which our journey comes to an end. The message is that if one has all three, there will be "shantih". The repetition of the word "shantih" is the same as in the sacred book of Upanishad. Therefore, in order to reach to the source of the open sea which is pure from all pollutions and filth, one must turn to the old traditions, learn to sacrifice in order to get internal fertility, and go back to God. The fisherman in the end is fishing in a clear sea where there is life and this sea is reached at the end of the wasteland. This image stands in contrast with the image earlier shown of the polluted water where no life can prevail. "Shall I at least set my hands in order?" It is a rhetorical question which means that everyone, each individual should set his hands in order, and then only the others will follow. Eliot has employed many cultures, religions and myths in order to tell us this fact. Thus we come to the understanding that the sterility of the modern wasteland can be changed into fertility, and there is always hope.

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