

T.S. Eliot's Way Out of "The Waste Land"

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Abstract This paper is dedicated to a centennial anniversary of the publication of *The Waste Land* by T.S. Eliot, the poem that marks the beginning of modernism in literature and still remains one of the most influential and discussed poems of the XXth century. In this poem, Eliot examines the fundamental values of human existence. In the example of the generation of "lost souls", he describes the disintegration of life and moral standards, as well as strives to find a way for reconciliation with existential problems by examining the existent reality so as to make subsequent reintegration in order to continue life. Religious revelations are seen as the eternal wisdom that has never been hidden from man of any cultural tradition, and the point from which spiritual revival may start. Consequently, the method of comparative mythology was applied to the analysis of the content of the poem. A century after its publication, the poem has not lost its significance due to the depth of its penetration into the nature of human vices that corrupt human existence and the philosophical problems they engender. Unlike most previous studies that accentuated the motifs of despair, distress, and loss of hope as the main motifs of the poem, the paper stresses Eliot's search for ways out of the existing crisis, which represents the novelty of the paper, as well as its social implications.

Keywords The Wheel of Time, Disintegration of Souls, Death in Life, Regained Spirituality

1. Introduction

Published exactly a century ago in 1922, *The Waste Land* by T.S. Eliot still remains the most influential, and

one of the most read and discussed poems in modern poetry. *Its modernity stems in a large part from a strikingly powerful awareness of what's past* [1] and its correlation with present. It shows the disintegration of life and moral values of the generation of "lost souls" caused by the aftermath of the First World War, and the strive to find a way for reconciliation with experienced disasters and existential problems so as to make subsequent reintegration in order to continue life. According to Booth A.[2], the poem immediately became a literary and cultural landmark for the younger brothers of what is often referred to as "the lost generation," and acquired a meaning that had to do with a world that had been traumatized and diminished by an incredibly bloody war.

Due to the importance and depth of the philosophical and existential problems discussed by Eliot, Cleanth Brooks [3] called "The Waste Land" *a highly condensed epic of the modern age*. The fall of man, the need to retrace the steps in order to identify errors, an attempt to rearrange life anew in accordance with the Law of God are equally important to man today, as they were a century ago, or at any other time that marked a turning point in the history of humankind.

The epigraph, which comes from the "Satyricon" by Gaius Petronius, introduces the main motive of the poem, is the clue to its meaning, and a symbol of *death-in-life and life-in-death or an example of prolonged depression* [4]:

Nam Sibyllam quidem Cumis ego ipse oculis meis vidi in ampulla pendere, et cum illi pueri dicerent: Σίβυλλα τί θέλεις; respondebat illa: αποθανείν θέλω.

It is translated as I saw with my own eyes the Sibyl at Cumae hanging in a jar, and when the boys asked her: "Sibyl, what do you want?" she replied: "I want to die."

The four languages of the epigraph: Latin, Greek, English, and Italian, reflect both the multiplicity of voices in the poem, and multiplicity of its meanings. As an inter-text, the poem incorporates texts, cultures and religions spanning over thousands of years.

The Sibyl of Cumae, a seer, and a beautiful prophetess, enchanted Apollo who offered her anything she desired. She made a wish to live for as many years as there were grains in a handful of dust, but forgot to ask for eternal youth. Apollo granted her wish. Sibyl lived for hundreds of years doomed to eternal aging. As time passed, unable to die, she only continued withering away now wishing for death as an escape from her miserable existence.

According to another interpretation of the myth, Sibyl embodies the sacrifice of youth and beauty in the exchange for wisdom that the seer needed. Both interpretations are applicable to the life in *The Waste Land*. As Eliot wrote in *Knowledge and Experience*, *The life of a soul does not consist in the contemplation of one consistent world but in the painful task of unifying (to a greater or less extent) jarring and incompatible ones, and passing, when possible, from two or more discordant viewpoints to a higher which shall somehow include and transmute them* [4].

The life in the world of the Waste Land, devoid of the real spirituality, truth, meaning and purpose needs reconsideration and incorporation into another perception of reality. It indicates to the fact that death is sometimes sought after as an escape from the endless purposelessness; otherwise, one has to resort to the age-long wisdom in order to find a way out of the waste land.

This unity of past and present is expressed in the poem through numerous myths, legends, allusions, symbols, and quotations that indicate to the unity of humankind with common essential, eternal values, virtues and vices in spite of diversity of religions and cultures. They illustrate not only the glorious past, but also the sins and moral laxity from which the mankind has suffered throughout its history. As Ushakova notes, *The Waste Land* is part of a more universal natural cycle, a protracted failure of the system, a necessary component of the endless process of dying and rebirth, the manifestation of a universal law [5].

The vanity of man is observed by an impartial observer, another seer – Tiresias, who belongs to all time: the past, as well as the present. Tiresias, a figure from classical mythology, has both male and female features, *Old man with wrinkled female breasts*. Although he is blind, he can “see” into the future. Like the Sibyl in the poem’s epigraph, he is destined to watch the sordid deeds of mortals, and, according to Brooker and Bentley [4], defines a binary perspective that represents the point of view of the poem. Tiresias is a figure from the ideal order of myth.

2. Methodology

Due to Eliot’s heavy reliance on the study of the world mythology and multiple references to the Holy Bible, the

Book of Common Prayer, the Buddha’s Fire Sermon, and the Brihadaranyaka Upanishad, as well as to cultural and anthropological studies by Sir James Frazer in *The Golden Bough* and Jessie Weston’s in *Ritual to Romance*, the method of comparative study of mythology was used in the analysis of the poem. The method, which T.S. Eliot himself [6] called *the mythical method, a way of controlling, of ordering, of giving a shape and a significance to the immense panorama of futility and anarchy which is contemporary history*. It is based on the common function mythology plays in the life of human societies. Joseph Campbell [7] described it as a fourfold function: 1. The metaphysical function, which awakes a sense of awe in view of the mystery of being. 2. The cosmological function, which explains the shape of the universe. 3. The sociological function, which validates and supports the existing social order. 4. The pedagogical function, which guides the individual through stages of life.

According to Jung [8], mythological thinking is a symbolic language that is used by man to model, classify and interpret the outer world, society and himself. In neo - mythologism, started by Richard Wagner, who thought that art was created via myth, myth is treated as the poetry of life perception that has a universal character. At the basis of Nietzsche’s neo - mythologism is the cyclic concept of the “eternal rotation” of the world. These ideas lead to the mythical method of thinking, as in the world that is governed by the law of constant repetition, we can discern in any present event its past and future incarnations [9].

Frazer’s studies of the world mythologies showed that mythological motifs and archetypes are repeated not only within one culture, but have a universal character. This approach of comparative studies of world mythologies was adopted by T.S. Eliot in *The Waste Land* and is followed in the present paper.

3. Discussion

The poem unfolds as a wheel of life, starting with spring, with the first four parts coinciding with the four seasons and main elements, while the fifth part corresponds to the Spirit that is to save Life from the meaningless rotation.

The first part, *The Burial of the Dead*, corresponds to the element of Earth, and shows the degeneration of modern man, who has lost faith, as well as moral and spiritual values. The poem begins with the picture of the waste city as a reflection of the devastation brought about not only by the war, but also by the degradation of man who waged it. It shows purposeless, meaningless existence of people who have lost not only their spirituality and identity, but also a sense of unity. They are depicted as a generation of multiple, meaningless, disconnected, detached voices.

Recollections of blissful childhood images, the time of purity, when innocence was not lost, are followed by the scene of fortunetelling by Madame Sosostris, who is trying to foretell what will happen. Then the Paradise of the

childhood is replaced by a picture of the drab reality of the London Bridge with allusion to Dante's *Inferno*:

*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.*

According to Ushakova [5], devastation, barrenness and death in the poem cover all spheres of human existence, nature, the system of cosmic relations, and have neither space nor time boundaries. Modern world with its spiritual barrenness is perceived as a wasteland, the symbol of materialism, mechanical routine, isolation and loneliness that have made it an unreal city. The land has become a waste and desolate area where nothing can grow. The meaningless, routine life is compared with living death with no hope of rebirth, or resurrection. Dust will be turned to dust. The only hope that remains is that

*That corpse you planted last year in your garden,
Has it begun to sprout? Will it bloom this year?
Or has the sudden frost disturbed its bed?*

The corpse seen as the past civilization with its values-oriented life from which only a *heap of broken images* has remained.

Even personal life of people is devoid of meaning. The second part of the poem, *A Game of Chess*, which corresponds to the element of Air, depicts empty relations between men and women of two social classes. T.S. Eliot demonstrates that even personal relations between representatives of opposite sexes have become meaningless. Interactions lack love and true care for one another, no matter whether life is surrounded by luxury, or poverty. In spite of the statues of cupids that decorate the room of a well-off couple, there is no romance or pure love in their abode. They have nothing to talk about. A game of chess, a cerebral game that involves a strategy with the purpose to outwit a partner, is a substitute for the common interests. It is turned into a pastime, a symbol of failed expectations, which the woman feels more acutely. In despair at their meaningless life, the wife asks her husband:

*What shall I do now? What shall I do?
I shall rush out as I am, and walk the street
With my hair down, so. What shall we do to-morrow?
What shall we ever do?
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.*

The husband has nothing to answer. They are both isolated, imprisoned in their own selves.

A former soldier comes home with the aim not to care for his family, but to have fun and "a good time," and if an exhausted and crippled woman cannot provide him with it,

he may find another one who will. Eliot shows us that war affects not only those who fight. As Booth [2] notes, it is civilians who are decrepit and unappealing: the poem is populated not by maimed combatants but by civilian bodies that are the worse for wear.

However, as Brooker J., Bentley J. [4] have noticed, the focus in *A Game of Chess* is primarily on women. Taking female characters from art, history, myth, and contemporary life, Eliot creates a cubistic woman, a multi-perspectival portrait of women in waste lands, of wasted women in history and nature. The women from the second part of the poem have a fate that is similar to that of the Sibyl: they are entrapped, isolated, withered, confined to a limited space and serve as decorations for amusements of men. Yet, their importance in the poem becomes evident when understood that *a waste land in mythic sense is equivalent to a barren or unhealthy woman* [4].

The third part of the poem, *The Fire Sermon*, corresponds to the element of Fire, the fire of desire and passion that, according to Buddha, is the cause of all sufferings. According to Buddha's preaching, the senses and knowledge received by the senses are on fire. Only aversion for pleasure may put the fire out.

Lust, sex brought down to a satisfaction of an animal instinct, meaningless relations and violence have undermined the basis of modern society. Eliot describes *the Waste Land* as he sees it: it is barren, covered in garbage with rats scurrying around. Water in the river, which is traditionally perceived as a symbol of renewal ... *sweats/Oil and tar*, and the river itself is described as a *dull canal* in contrast to the Sweet Thames of Spenser's "Prothalamion": *Sweet Thames, run softly till I end my song*.

The scene is seen as a reflection of foul relations of people that are brought down to satisfaction of primitive instincts, lack true care and love for each other. The aim of love is no longer generation, birth and renewal. Eugenides suggests a homosexual tryst, which by nature excludes fertility. The relations between the typist and her lover are equally barren as they represent only satisfaction of lust without true feeling for one another and no intention of generation. The lover's ... *vanity requires no response, And makes a welcome of indifference*.

Afterward he Bestows on final patronising kiss, And gropes his way, finding the stairs unlit....

*The typist
Hardly aware of her departed lover;
Her brain allows one half-formed thought to pass:
Well now that's done: and I'm glad it's over*

puts a record on the gramophone to free herself from a cheap sexual encounter by resorting to popular culture.

Eliot compares these degraded relations with a glamorous scene from the past of Queen Elizabeth I, the "Virgin Queen" and the Earl of Leicester. Their relations,

though also devoid of future, were pure and romantic. They are, in turn, opposed to the legend of the Fisher King, the renewal of whose kingdom was connected with the renewal of the Fisher King's ability to generate.

Speculating about human nature, Eliot compares St. Augustine's and the Buddha's despair at the imperfection of human beings and their lives. These leading representatives of Eastern and Western asceticism both were equally burdened by the sinfulness and imperfection of the world. In his "Confessions" St. Augustine prays to God *O Lord Thou pluck me out* while Buddha in his "Fire Sermon" calls to get rid of earthly passions and desires that keep "burning" the human nature, in order to get free from earthly troubles. Desires, symbolized by fire, as a source of suffering, have to be suppressed, the lusts of the flesh have to be overcome to free man from everlasting curse and clear way to salvation, graduation to Nirvana or union with God.

In the fourth part, *Death by Water*, which is dominated by the element of Water, is shown a fulfilment of one of the prophecies of Madame Sosostris in the first part of the poem. *Fear death by water* was her prediction as she pulled the card of the Drowned Sailor. The Drowned Sailor is Phlebas the Phoenician, a tradesman sailor who drowned a fortnight ago. He is in the state of complete oblivion as he has forgotten the cry of gulls, the deep seas swell so familiar to a sailor, and the profit and loss – the main care of a tradesman. He no longer knows what he knew, what he was born to know, or his purpose. He has forgotten all the things which were essential for his life. All that remained of him are his bones which are carried by an undersea current in eternal whirl up and down. This eternal rotation of bones in a whirlpool passes the stages of his age and youth, *implying the existence of the center around which they rotate* [10], which might be a recollection of memory. We are all reminded to remember Phlebas, *who was once handsome and tall as you*. It is not only that Eliot reminds us that the physical reality of death and decay triumphs over all. Implicitly it reminds us of the importance of memory and the remembrance of the purpose of our existence. The rotating bones of Phlebas the Phoenician may be seen as the final stage of Death in Life depicted in previous parts of the poem, with no hope of resurrection unless we remember the purpose that we are for. Brooker J., Bentley J. [4] suggest, that in the context of the Frazerian myths, Phlebas is related to Osiris, the god whose body was placed in a current which carried it from the place of his death to the place from which it would be taken from the water as a symbol of rebirth.

In the poem Eliot follows the way of ancient Mysteries of Initiation, which included the journey to Underworld. R. Steiner [11] described the path of a person who tries to seek the Spirit behind the veneer of the material world. At some moment of his spiritual pilgrimage, he begins to perceive life as death. This stage indicates to his descend to the underworld where he makes a journey through Hell. In

case of failure to purify himself, man perishes. If succeeding to be able to undergo transformation, man comes back to life completely transformed by spiritual fire. Mysteries revealed that God and understanding of universal laws and harmony are in the soul of man.

In *The Waste Land*, the theme of spiritual pilgrimage is connected with the theme of the search for the Grail, which, according to Ushakova [5], correlates with the strife for spiritual perfection, purification and redemption. These themes dominated in Eliot's works since the 1930s. As it is, T.S. Eliot describes his own journey to the underworld, his own pilgrimage and search for the Holy Grail. It is he who descends to the Hell of modern meaningless reality in order to measure the depth of the fall of man in hope to find spiritual strength to continue life.

These acquired spiritual strength and hope are shown in the fifth part of the poem, which corresponds to the non-material, fifth element – the Spirit. According to Brooker and Bentley [4], the final section of *The Waste Land*, *What the Thunder Said*, enacts an emergence from extinction into a renewal of suffering, suffering that is overt, and is both mental and physical. The "escape downward" has turned out to be fruitless. The rebirth of conscious anguish and desperate, searches for ways of interpreting the universe, however painful and insufficient they are, constitute an exhilarating affirmation.

After having made a complete circle around the four seasons of the year, and four main elements, we come back again to spring, the season of rebirth. But meaningless rotation does not bring relief to man. We are in the garden of Gethsemane, where Jesus Christ was arrested and crucified, crucifixion seen as the denial of God and His laws and commandments by man.

*After the torchlight red on sweaty faces
After the frosty silence in the gardens
After the agony in stony places
The shouting and the crying
Prison and palace and reverberation
Of thunder of spring over distant mountains
He who was living is now dead
We who were living are now dying*

Our living death is shown through the picture of the barren land:

*The road winding above among the mountains
Which are mountains of rock without water*

The agony of man, suffering a living death in stony places, creates an impression of hopeless despair. However Eliot's journey to Hell was not made only with the purpose to realize the sinful nature of man and the depth of his fall, but to remind us of the spark of God's Spirit that was also put into us at creation. The Spirit is revealed through allusions. There is a possibility of salvation.

If there were water we should stop and drink.

The living water is identified with Christ. The

appearance of water in a poem called *The Waste Land* calls attention to the possibility of revival and rebirth. The myths behind the poem associate water with the lifting of the curse from the land [4]. The pilgrim begins to feel that there is still hope, which is expressed through his wish:

*If there were rock/ And also water
And water
A spring
A pool among the rock
If there were the sound of water only
Not the cicada
And dry grass singing
But sound of water over a rock*

Then comes the reminder that God has never abandoned us, though we fail to understand it:

*Who is the third who walks always beside you?
When I count, there are only you and I together
But when I look ahead up the white road
There is always another one walking beside you
Gliding wrapt in a brown mantle, hooded
I do not know whether a man or a woman
—But who is that on the other side of you?*

The scene is connected with the death and resurrection of Christ. When the news of the return of Jesus had spread, his two disciples went to Emmaus searching for Him. Jesus came in front of them, but they could not recognize him [12]. This spiritual blindness is seen as the reason for the crumbling of the modern world: *Falling towers/ Jerusalem Athens Alexandria/ Vienna London* – the greatest cities of our civilization are falling down, like London Bridge; everything is empty, turned upside down and descending to Hell. Even the House of God on Earth is empty:

*There is the empty chapel, only the wind's home.
It has no windows, and the door swings,
Dry bones can harm no one.*

The Perilous Chapel, according to J.L. Weston, is an important element of the hero's initiation, introducing him to the secret sources of life, both material and spiritual. In a barren land, an empty chapel is also a serious stage of testing, overcoming which leads to the first signs of a long-awaited rain [5]. Then, after the images of destruction and emptiness of the wasteland comes the sound of the cock crowing *co co rico co co rico*, heralding the approach of dawn. And with a flash of lightning comes *a damp gust/ Bringing rain*, bringing hope to the wasteland.

We are transferred to another cultural tradition, to the banks of the Sacred river of India—Ganga, where people and nature are also expecting the rain of living water. Eliot shows us that people of all cultural traditions, burdened by similar weaknesses, equally received God's revelations, though in different ways.

*Ganga was sunken, and the limp leaves
Waited for rain, while the black clouds
Gathered far distant, over Himavant.*

The jungle crouched, humped in silence.

Then come three claps of thunder with the syllable DA repeated three times. Thunder and lightning being the main attributes of the Supreme God of Ancient Greece and Rome – Zeus/Jupiter, whose voice is identified with the voice of the Almighty and Omnipresent. Eliot makes allusion to the Upanishads, sacred texts for Hinduism and Buddhism [13]. When Brahma was asked by his children how to achieve inner peace, he gave them a mantra “DA”, which was interpreted by them in three different ways as ‘Datta’, ‘Dayadhvam’, and ‘Damyata’. The first Da (Datta) is questioning: *what have we given?* The second Da (Dayadhvam) is translated as “to sympathize,” the third Da (Damyata) corresponds to “control” [14].

Brahma's first commandment is unselfishness. We all exist by what we have given and are able to give one another. The second commandment is sympathy, true care for one another without which *we are all confined to our own prisons, dreaming of a key to get us out of our self-isolation* [10]. The prison metaphor dramatizes the entrapped condition of modern man and his need for key to unlock the door.

*Da
Dayadhvam: I have heard the key
Turn in the door once and turn once only
We think of the key, each in his prison*

The third commandment *Damyata* – control tells us to moderate our arrogance and lust, and to obey the God who is the only one able to control the boat of our lives:

*DA
Damyata: The boat responded
Gaily, to the hand expert with sail and oar
The sea was calm, your heart would have responded
Gaily, when invited, beating obedient
To controlling hands*

Once more we are given the main Commandments of all religions and are left on the sea-shore with the Fisher King wondering: *Shall I at least set my lands in order?* Because without it *London bridge is falling down falling down falling down* together with our crumbling civilization. The key image of the Grail myth and the poem being the image of the Fisher King. The meaning of this image is determined both by its traditional semantics and one of the main ideas of the poem - the search for a way out of the lifeless desert of the spirit and salvation from distorted forms of existence in an equally unattractive world. The image of the Fisher King is associated with the themes of illness, infertility, liberation from them and the rebirth of all the productive forces of the world [5].

According to Brooker and Bentley [4], the most important lines in the last part of *The Waste Land* are *Shall I at least set my lands in order?* and *These fragments I have shored against my ruins*. They indicate to a shift from the motifs of searching for the way out of the social and psychological crisis to a motif of coming to terms with the

existing reality. The main theme of the poem is seen as the grief for lost community, while the mythological allusions are regarded as attempts of search for that community in past traditions that help us to realize the nature and extend of contemporary loss. However, Eliot's nihilism may be traced further, to the questioning of the very meaning and purpose of human existence, the way it was speculated about in F. Nietzsche's *On the Genealogy of Morality* [15], as Eliot, like Nietzsche, sees this condition not only pertinent to modern humankind, but as a pervasive one throughout man's history.

Nevertheless, contrary to Nietzsche, in *The Waste Land* Eliot tries to show us that the way back to the *Paradise Lost* has never been hidden from man. Only following *the hand expert* can we all regain it. After all, as one more religious tradition teaches us: **ובארץ שבשמיים אלוהינו אחד** – *We all have one God, in Heaven and on Earth*. Only following His guidance can man come back to life completely transformed by spiritual fire and acquire *Shantih shantih shantih*, – the inner peace which passeth understanding.

4. Conclusion

Resort to a mythical method, as *a way of controlling, of ordering, of giving a shape and a significance to the immense panorama of futility and anarchy which is contemporary history*, which T.S. Eliot [6] chose for his poem *The Waste Land*, is a recurrent method used in many works of the world literature, as mythology interacts with literature through a constant, direct flow of myth into literature, as well as through indirect influence of religious mysteries, rituals, folk festivities, and fine arts. Mythology has always been a constant and main source of themes for fictional works. Literature, as such, originated from myth with its stress on universal values, close connection with religions and their cults. Its development went through gradual desacralization of myths and shifting stress from deities to man. In more recent time mythological concepts, aesthetical, philosophical studies and folkloristics have also influenced the way literary works have been created. Return to mythological thinking, as an archaic form of thinking, is often seen as the way to get closer to the origins of modern problems through the study of mythological archetypes. In *The Waste Land* one of such archetypal characters is the Fisher King, together with whom the author of the poem is trying to find a way of putting his land in order.

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