

**COMMENTARY ON T.S. ELIOT'S THE WASTE LAND**  
**A Telescopic View of Modernism**

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**Abstract**

T.S. Eliot's *The Waste Land* is one of the most top-notch poems of the 20th century. It has been hailed as Eliot's masterpiece - the supreme triumph of the poetic artwork in modern times. Yet some critics have railed in opposition to it as an abstract, ambiguous and noticeably over-rated poem. This controversy does not, however, distract from the universal merits of the poem and the air of mystery of greatness that still surrounds it, and maybe that's why MacLeish, an American poet, in the 20th century, in his epoch-making poem called *Ars Poetica*, wrote "A poem should not mean but be." For the "rugged claws scuttling across the floors of silent seas" (from *The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock*), Eliot neither provided any translations for the six non-English languages (Latin, Greek, Italian, German, French, and Sanscrit) nor provided any references for the 30 different allusions because he wanted to intimidate them. The poem is symbolic of the

aridity and decadence of the western civilization as properly as the poet's personal inner despair at the desolate prospect of the post-World War I era, its chaos and frustration. The startling poem affords a veritable labyrinth of meanings and messages for our turbulent times. Eliot's use of complicated symbols and elaborate imagery provides richness and variety to the texture of the poem. This makes the poem itself a virtual "waste land" on which the 'hollow men and women' of the current generation find themselves in "a handful of dust."

**Keywords:** abstract, ambiguous, decadence, western civilization, MacLeish's *Ars Poetica*, post-World War I, hollow men.

## **Introduction**

Series of radically experimental works across different media that we would later come to call Modernism had its artists feel that the conditions of the modern life needed to start again and give up traditional forms of structure, orderliness, and expectations.

## **Modernism and The Waste Land**

The decisive shift in that period, as many people said, began earlier. Virginia Woolf said that 1910 was the year where everything altered or in her words, "in or about December 1910 human character changed" (Woolf, 1978). However, when we look at where the Modernist works began to appear—the very experimental modernist works; 1922 was the year of *The Waste Land*, Joyce's *Ulysses*, and Woolf's *Jacob's Room*. So there is a convergence—a sense of things coming to fruition in post-war years. In Eliot's poetry, there's a conscious agenda; Eliot at certain times said he was wilfully obscuring his works, and at certain times he said he wasn't and therefore the reaction to Eliot's experimental works was something like the reaction to Igor Stravinsky's *Rite of Spring* as people did not know how to construe it. It is safe to say that *The Waste Land* is a messy poem. Do human beings need a specific narrative of coherence? Do they want endings and conclusions? Have they learned to live with a certain amount of mess? The answer to these questions may also depend on us culturally as we have become accustomed to those Modernist forms which do not have those kinds of coherence that we associate with either the Victorian

novels or more generally with realism in the Western tradition. The Waste Land found a new way to express the modern world in all of its bruising and gleaming cacophonies. Eliot himself was accused of willful obscurantism, misanthropy and of high-minded despair at the paucity of 20<sup>th</sup>-century living. When Eliot looked out at the world of radio and television; radical art of Joyce or Stravinsky, and universal suffrage, he conceived only the barren and featureless plain. The confluence of the history that was not quite over in a new world that in Matthew Arnold's words was 'powerless to be born'(Arnold, 1855), there was a kind of curious logjam. We have got the political map of Europe being radically redrawn in the abiding chaos of the aftermath of the First World War that resulted in the rampant inflation in Germany in 1921, the declaration of Ireland as a free state in 1921, the aftermath of the Russian Revolution, the formation of the Soviet Union by the Bolsheviks, the abolishment of monarchy, and termination of the civil war with the upheaval of social conditions and the emergence of women's suffrage. Much sense had after the Second World War that social changes enforced by the war meant somehow that the world could never be simply resumed in the way it had been before and yet at the same time, there was a perpetual sense that everything had been blown away as the situation was like some bomb had gone off and it left everything in static, and we suspected that behind the facades there would be nothing.

Nevertheless, T.S. Eliot lived in the thick of such things, and therefore he took his time off from his job at Lloyds Bank and had his poem composed while convalescing from depression in Margate, Switzerland. T.S. Eliot read Hermann Hesse's *Blick ins Chaos* in German, and derived materials from it while composing *The Waste Land* as evident in one of the Hesse's lines, "Already half Europe, at all events half Eastern Europe, is on the road to Chaos. In a state of drunken illusion she is reeling into the abyss and, as she reels, she sings a drunken hymn such as Dmitri Karamazov sang. The insulted citizen laughs that song to scorn, the saint and seer hear it with tears" (Hermann, 1922, p. 607). Hesse's perspective was at least one that was bearing upon Eliot. Ergo, *The Waste Land* is an epic work, specifically a fractured epic as we cannot make coherent sense of it. It is experimenting with voice and language always.

The most destabilising fact about it is that we have no sense of a single coherent voice that's controlling the narrative. Even in the opening few lines, we can hear tonal shifts as we cannot identify who is speaking at any point—so it is fractured into multiple voices—it is almost as if it

is a play but not identifying who the characters are. In the use of language, it takes a very traditional language as there are moments in this work which could almost be lifted from Shakespeare's Antony and Cleopatra. However, then Eliot would completely disrupt that with a few popular songs or nursery rhymes or with some demotic speech. He would throw in other languages without providing translations. So there is an obvious surface-difficulty to it in that sense that some of it are not comprehensible to the readers. For instance, in the first section, there is an "us" in line 5, but in the line 8, there is another "us". Is that first "us" in line 5 seems to be everyone who has ever been alive or dead on the planet? Alternatively, it is quite the same as the "us" in line 8 which seems to refer to two people in a specific time; in a specific place—so that kind of confusion goes all the way through the poem.

Eliot was a great aficionado of music halls and thought it was one of the most marvellous of contemporary forms, and indeed even though he was ill in the whole course of 1921 when he was writing the poem, he took time out to write one essay and that was an essay lamenting the death of Marie Lloyd. It was published in Eliot's monthly London Letter in The Dial magazine on November 1922. Eliot was extremely aware of contemporary developments, and as a full-time banker at Llyods, he also became a supporter of Maynard Keynes' caustic reprimands on the Treaty of Versailles which had been signed in 1921. The poem, therefore, has all sorts of laments beginning in part 3, where we have all these sentences about how the nymphs are deported and how the heirs of city directors and their friends are departing. Financial catastrophes have emptied the vast city on the desolated wasteland, and somehow that seems to be connected to a strange form of sexuality. Ergo, different kinds of economy flow all through the poem in the realm of linguistics, sexuality, and economy. On breaking up with the established forms, Eliot had Joyce's Ulysses, specifically the so-called *Circe* episode or episode 15 of Ulysses on the back of his head. It led him to write a passage of about 50 lines which we no longer have in the poem. Those 50 lines were the original beginning to part 1, and it described a group of young men who were having a rowdy night in Boston and had been out drinking too much. So initially the poem might have begun in such a way as to suggest that all the many voices that came subsequently were overheard in the course of a rowdy night at the town. Those first 50 lines were taken out by Ezra Pound. When Eliot brought the poem to Pound in January 1922, Pound stripped out the kinds of significant narrative beginnings that would give you handles to reading

the poem as a whole and ergo Joyce was a significant influence on Eliot at that time, and it gave him a sense of freedom that as a Modernist writer, they could do almost anything with everything (Eliot, 1971). Since the 1970s when manuscripts were made available, we could see how much of *The Waste Land* we have lost. For much of it, we are happy to lose as well, as some of it is very interesting, and there are very problematic ideas about women. For example, in the original, unedited manuscript, there are slightly derogatory comments on intellectual women being rather dull, which perhaps we would not want to see now.

On the other hand, the changes, in the beginning, are hugely significant as evident in the line “*April is the cruellest month*” which takes us back to Chaucer, but Chaucer associates spring with its healing and regenerative properties. The opening lines which Pound put there really is the first line of the poem that set the entire sense of a destabilised tradition as Eliot is doing something to shock the audience and he turns around saying what we have traditionally thought of spring as healing and regenerating is no longer working. Spring-like events have become moments of atrocity in the First World War where spring is the Spring Offensive.

### **The Waste Land: An Obscure Work or A Work of Rhythmical Grumbling?**

Regarding the usage of myths in the poem, I believe that modern writers inherited their obsession with myths from the Victorians. However, they were not obsessed with the content of myths because myths were, for them, were translations without originals. When Eliot in January of 1922, brought the incomplete work to Pound in Paris, he happened to come at an extraordinary moment because Horace Liveright, head of the Modern Library and Boni and Liveright Publishers, was interested in buying new works by exciting writers. When Pound brought the manuscript of *The Waste Land* to Liveright, he was disappointed in the length of the poem being short, and therefore asked Eliot to add anything. So the notes that were added by Eliot to the poem were intended to pad out the poem. Also, the notes are very unimportant as it was added on to add up some pages to give it kind of a bogus scholarship. Therefore, Eliot did not take as much from Jesse Weston's *From Ritual to Romance* as he mentioned in citations and notes. Eliot did the same thing as Joyce did when publishers asked him to soup it up. There is also something deceptive about the poem so that if we go through 12 volumes of Frazer's *The Golden Bough* thinking here is the key to unlock the meaning of the poem, we will not find ever. The same is

true if we read the whole of the Western literature because all we would be doing is adding an enormous number of footnotes to the text that remains in some respects as inaccessible as it was. The notes are playing tricks on us as Wendy Cope in *The Waste Land: Five Limericks* famously said, “*I hope you will make sense of the notes.*” The notes, therefore, proliferate into other texts and whether the poem is freestanding in that sense or whether we do not need anything is much more controversial unless we have Eliot’s particular Harvard-Western education.

### **Conclusion**

Modernist writers were quite uneasy about the modern world; the modern world increasingly democratic, and increasingly becoming a mass world--a world of mass communication. Modernist works like *The Waste Land* belonged to that world but also shied away from it. In the 20<sup>th</sup> century, there was massive excitement about progress in media, literary experimentation, and technological development, and this was a period of history where change was happening rapidly than in any other periods. Consummation of Modernity is with the First World War; the period rested on uncertainty and contradiction, and the extreme scale of suffering that came out of the capacity of human beings to mass-produce, and to mass-produce weaponry. If you then come to literary modernism, what it was doing, and what the Modernist writers were doing was that they were responding to the idea of modernity but they were responding in contradictory ways; they were looking with great excitement at themselves, and were finding new forms of experimentation and literary technique that mimicked things they saw in a new technological world. At the same time, there was an enormous amount of fear, and uncertainty about fragmentation with loss of a sense of self, and lack of any stability in society. Many features we see in Modernist writing; the way it would tend to fracture unities as evident in *The Waste Land*'s multiple voices who or which in some ways acknowledge things we cannot see or understand in the world that had become a much more bewildering place.

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