

## **Concept of Past and Present in T.S Eliot's Wasteland**

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### **Abstract**

The wasteland seeks to portray a world which is dry from all human emotions and feelings. Eliot describes wasteland as a place which is barren, dry, infertile, desolate, inhospitable, sterile having no vegetation. He defines a generation of shock from world wars where there is no comfort and spiritualness. The poet discovers a condition of modern world, where man lives a purposeless life. In the poem, Eliot describes a condition of present world through myths, historical and literal references which offers a satirical lens to perceive and give meaning to present world. Eliot creates a parallel between past and present, where past is something which is unified, has spiritual significance, is joyous, harmonizing. The poet also fears his own end, therefore he too submits himself to the

God. Through the poem Eliot highlights the need to belief in God, attain true self and be redeemed.

### **Keywords**

Disjoint poem, past-present in Wasteland, civilisation under shock, heteroglossia, fragmentation, desire.

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*And he is not likely to know what is*

*To be done unless he lives in what is not Merely the present, but the present moment*

*Of the past, unless he is conscious, not of what is dead, but what is already living.*

T.S Eliot, "Traditional and Individual Talent"

The wasteland is a poem that appears to be a mixture of sorts, a disjoint poem where one can find fragmentation, dehumanisation and chaotic modern world. The wasteland seeks to portray a world which is dry from all human emotions and feelings. Eliot describes wasteland as a place which is barren, dry, infertile, desolate, inhospitable, sterile having no vegetation. He defines a generation of shock from world wars where there is no comfort and spiritualness. R.J Owens in his article titled 'The Wasteland writes, the first impression of The Waste Land is of multiplicity, of plurality. The reader is aware of,

and responds to, the various parts of the poem, but he feels that the parts are separate, unconnected, and lacking in any cohesion.' Wasteland is a poem where the present civilization is confused, chaotic and lacks any emotion towards mankind. It portrays a barren land where humanity is degrading. Brian Crews writes in his essay, Heteroglossia and T.S. Eliot's The Wasteland, 'This is pure heteroglossia where we again find a variety of voices, a mingling of the past and the present, the presentation of a consciousness made up of fragments, with ironic references to distortions of famous literary passages from the past. In this particular case a noble past is contrasted with a decadent and obscene present'.

The poet discovers a condition of modern world, where man lives a purposeless life. In the poem, Eliot describes a condition of present world through myths, historical and literal references which offers a satirical lens to perceive and give meaning to present world. Eliot creates a parallel between past and present, where past is something which is unified, has spiritual significance, is joyous, harmonizing.

There is believe and faith in religion and the Supreme. There is a system to follow. There is solace, calmness in everything. The past is symbolised with happy memories, spending time with each other, there is a belief in marriage, love and relationships. Eliot provides audience

with examples of the past where there is togetherness and harmony.

*And when we were children, staying at the  
archduke's, My cousin's, he took me out on a sled,*

*And I was frightened. He said, Marie,           15*

*Marie, hold on tight. And down we went. In the  
mountains, there you feel free.*

*I read, much of the night, and go south in the  
winter. (15)*

In the above lines there is freedom, innocence of childhood and faith in each other. 'Hold on tight' symbolises a belief which the people have in each other. There is trust in relationships. There is innocence of childhood which is lost in the present. 'In the mountains, there you feel free. I read, much of the night, and go south in winter'. The line is an example of the present, where in the past the mountains were peaceful, there was solace in the mountains but now that peace is lost. There is now the harshness of winters. The condition of Marie in the present is portrayed, where she is alone, in solitude and has insomnia. She lacks company of the past. There is lack of intimacy in relationship, therefore at night she has no one and nothing to do but read to her solitude. The memories of the past is symbolised with desire and hope but now there is a shift in the present where present, is symbolised with bareness of wasteland. As Delmore

Schwartz states, "Eliot's theme is the rehabilitation of a system of beliefs, known but now discredited" (209).

Eliot in the epigraph of the poem, by depicting the Sibyl of Cumae also draws a comparison between the twin world of past and present. In the past prophetess Sibyl desired to be immortal and was granted her wish. The past is described as something which has a 'want' to live and desire to be fulfilled. Cumae desired to live an immortal life but as the time passed she regretted her wish, as she forgot to ask for an eternal youth. She wished to die in the present, the want, the desires she had are now of no significance. She was living a life of decay and remorse where she desired to die. The poet is directly drawing attention to the plight of the present time where people are living without any desire or purpose. They are just living to exit in this world. They are living a life of 'living death'. In the past the Sibyl desires to live eternally but in the present she desires to die. Eliot describes present world as chaotic, where there is no hope of regeneration in the barren land of wasteland. The life of people in wasteland has become like a machine, which is governed by clocks. The natural human instincts are lost in this land. Eliot thus finds a parallel between the men of the past and present where the men of the present find the month of April, as the 'cruellest month'.

*April is the cruellest month, breeding*

*Lilacs out of the dead land, mixing*

*Memory and desire, stirring*

*Dull roots with spring rain.*

*Winter kept us warm, covering*

*Earth in forgetful snow, feeding*

*A little life with dried tubers. (1, 1-7)*

April is a month of spring, a month of fertility and regeneration. It is described a sweetest month where flowers bloom, but for the men of present April appears to be a month of harsh winter. The month of April, reminds man of rebirth, where his own life is terribly miserable.

There was intimacy, togetherness, love and harmony in relationships of the past. The people had emotions and feelings for each other. The past was a time when people spent time together; there was communication and connection between people. 'And drank coffee, and talked for an hour'.... Eliot describes the pure and spiritual relationships of the past, like one of Elizabeth and Leicester. There is purity and something beautiful in their relationship. There was love without any bodily intimacy; it was the love of high society. This type of relationship lacks in the present. The relationships in the present are described as the moments in a chess game. There is strategy involved like in a game of chess. There is cunningness and a want to defeat each other. The partners or couples treat each other as opponents, trying to win and dominate. There is rape, domination,

humiliation, and subjugation, lack of intimacy, warmth and love in the present relationships. The matter of heart and soul do not exist. In 1926, I. A. Richards wrote about Eliot's "persistent concern with sex" and suggested that it was "the problem of our generation as religion was the problem of the last". Eliot gives examples of the present relationships where Philomela is raped, the upper class woman dominates her husband, the story of Lil is full of sexual intimacy only, and lack love between husband and wife, the typist girl has no different relationship but a relation of sexual pleasure. There is only desire of lust and pleasure in the present relationships. They just want to have some good time, where a man assaults and have physical intercourse with their partners and then leave, as in the case of Lil and typist. Eliot describes the lack of warmth in relationships of present. The poet through the poem draws parallel between present world and the past. R.J Owens beliefs, 'according to the idea which Eliot himself has set forth a poet becomes traditional, in the best sense of the word, through the ability to separate the continually living, essential ingredients in tradition and to experience them as an organic unity. The inter-war period's waste land in his poem is also filled with the living past which thrusts itself into the present'. Eliot is imbued by the feeling of the present world, which lacks coherence and plenitude, which the golden age of the past had. The poet in his work highlights the facts from the past world and compares them with the scenarios of the present.

There is difference between the worlds of the past and present where mankind is lost. The human emotions do not exist in the world of today. There is a constant battle between the individuals and within individuals. They strive to survive in this wasteland. The present world is barren like human emotions, it lacks vegetation and growth. It is the world where, 'April is the cruellest month'. The poem is claimed to be a post war poem, where there is sense of futility, distortion, delusion and hollowness. The world war has tranquilised mankind and society in general. Man does not know what to do with himself. The world is inhumane and chaotic to live, where man runs by the 'tick' of the clock. He has become a machine, and living a life of burden. The wasteland became to be known as, 'the work that best expressed the mood of a post-war generation disillusioned by the loss of ideals and faith in progress' (Dupree 7). Eliot in his poem, not only portrays a world of despair but he actually highlights how to escape it. Eliot did a vast reading, and worked hard before his master piece, "his reading in these and similar studies provided a way of seeing behind present day actions a substratum of past beliefs and practices that, though now lost to consciousness, continue to inform our daily lives in hidden but significant ways" (Dupree 8). The poet wants man to realise what he has lost in this barren land. He wants to restore belief, faith, trust, emotions and feelings in mankind. Eliot in his poem provides two ways, where man can attain salvation; one is to be redeemed by burning all

desires according to the eastern philosophy. The other is to submit self to God, according to western belief. The poet also fears his own end, therefore he too submits himself to the God. Through the poem Eliot highlights the need to belief in God, attain true self and be redeemed. The poem also wants to end all his desires and lust from the material world. He wants to be redeemed, this is the path he wants his readers to follow and attain salvation. He is showing a path to mankind, where he can escape all the corrupt part of self. It is to us what we follow, the poet just lights up the path. The poem full of fragmentation, there is steam of consciousness; the past is portrayed as a golden age. The poem ends with an illuminating message to the mankind and ends on a positive note. The poet has attained salvation; he is redeemed from all the materialism of the world. He has followed the path of God. He wants the modern man, to follow the same path and experience the power in the lap of God.

Modernism took mankind as a wave. He is struck by the sudden blow of the wars. There is a feeling of 'shell shock'. Man has lost everything even his inner most self. He is just a machine who runs by the orders of others. There is no meaning of love, relationship, feeling and emotion for him. He just lures to have 'a good time'. If one looks at the world of today from an aerial view, it looks like a game of chess, which Eliot has portrayed in his wasteland. There is want to achieve everything, through power and money.

Power has become a potent word, where one dominates the other. In the present world there is lust, where man gets lured of materialism. Everyday there are murders, rapes, threats, killings, violence, fear and the list is endless. This is what the modern and modern world become. Man has put himself to be questioned of what he has made of this world. There is no fear of God left. The countries fight for nuclear weapons and all kind of arms. They want to have everything. Why don't they understand that everything would destroy mankind, have they forgotten the World Wars?

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