

From Sordid Sexuality to Ruin in T. S. Eliot's *The Waste Land*

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Abstract

Eliot's poem, *The Waste Land*, in the wake of the Great War or the First World War, which was a time particularly in Western Europe when civilization had fallen to pieces, and it was literally, quite literally in ruin as trenches were dug across the fields of France and Belgium and other countries in Western Europe and as the landscape itself is torn apart, finds only death and self-destruction instead of rebirth or any sense of revivification or any sense of life. The poem deals, in its fragmentary way, not only with the aftermath of the war in its physical repercussions but also with the breakdown of social norms, which earlier ensured cultural sureties. In the process the poem, while vindicating the despair of the individual pitted against the unmanageable disillusionment, shows that this urbanscape is devoid of love and seems to be unable to heal itself. What is left is a poetics of despair where the inhabitants of this ruin wait for redemption from their purgatories, and the search for love is laid to rest in pieces. The paper attempts to demonstrate that the fundamental problem of *The Waste Land* is the broken bonds of love and sordid sex, the primal cause of ruin and waste, all packed inside a montage of myths, left to the readers to sort out the mess till it dawns on them that all the voices, through their different tales, bemoan, chiefly, the lack of love, an idea that sounds essentialist but keeps in tune with its resonance with the poem.

Keywords: Ruin, Waste, Sordid Sexuality, Love, Fragments

INTRODUCTION

The early 1920s were a difficult time in England, politically as well as economically. Like most wars the war of 1914 to 1918 had created a boom in employment but soon after the war ended that employment boom saw a crunch that left over two million people unemployed in England. The Great War resulted in the death of ten million people leaving much of Western Europe in ruin. By 1918 much of the countryside in Europe that had been the inspiration for generations of European artists, painters, musicians and poets was in ruins, and the whole of Europe was quite literally by this point a wasteland. Buildings that had stood for millennia were destroyed.

People gradually accepted that wars had less to do with angry gods than they had to do with angry humans. Past wars, particularly in England, had their glory, but it became increasingly difficult to see the glory in the First World War. For a poet like Wilfred Owen poetry came out of trenches, and a whole generation had been sentenced to doom by their parents for a few acres of mud. A poet like Eliot could only create what he saw; shattered buildings, lost lives, empty shells, smithereens of broken windows and the whole life in fragments. *The Waste Land* is a collection of fragments and in the five parts of the poem there are fragments within fragments. The fragments are not Eliot's all the time, and these are not just images that Eliot quotes

but entire lines taken from other writers. There are over 60 different allusions in the wasteland to over 40 different writers in a half-dozen different languages past, present, modern, ancient, Western and Eastern. *The Waste Land* gives no single clear view, and there is no single voice, instead it presents many views and many voices each reflecting and refracting the other, perhaps reflecting the fact that the world is in ruins. As North (2001) puts it:

Eliot could only approach peace through conflict, as if he could only grasp linguistic unity as an implication of linguistic disorder, and, finally, as if he could imagine social solidarity only by extension of social chaos. Disorder thus becomes not a fault to be overcome, but a necessary moment in the process of arriving at order (p. 104)

Largely, scholars, throughout the past century and in the new one, have forwarded their interpretations in acceptable and sophisticated body of scholarship. Cleanth Brooks Jr. said as early as in 1937, "To venture to write anything further on *The Waste Land*, particularly after the work of F. R. Leavis and F. O. Matthiessen, may call for some explanation and even apology" (qtd. in *NCE*, p. 185). The apology lies in the later half of the twentieth century when newer literary theories allowed the individual reader to respond within the realms of plausibility of the hermeneutics of a text, what Eliot prophesied in 'The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock' (1915), "There will be time to murder and create, / And time for all the works and days of hands / That lift and drop a question on your plate;" and time "for a hundred visions and revisions."

Any "revision" or rereading of the poem can be done in increasing number of ways and no one way can be said to be superior to others. My present concern is not to challenge critics and biographers² who read misogyny, homoeroticism, anti-Semitism and bigotry of all sorts in Eliot's poems especially in *The Waste Land*, and they may be right in their own rights. This paper

attempts at reading the poem as an artefact that reflects the futility of modern times with regard to sexuality and love, which may be unrequited at times and at times stolid and unimpassioned. Any reference to Eliot's life and other his other works is confined to correlating to the above problem. The world of *The Waste Land* lacks unison of voices and hence presents an assemblage of lines of thought that do not even claim, "Our sweetest songs are those that tell of saddest thoughts." Here if there are songs, they are sad songs, or in refrains that say "HURRY UP PLEASE IT'S TIME" five times to be precise, or at best "Shakespearean rag."

The paper tries to read some of the most fundamental problems of the poem, muddled mythic allusions for the ruination and lack of vegetation and/or fertility, and sexuality in its baseness as reflected in a collage of flashes without any false effects of heterogeneity giving a holistic expression of Eliot's view of modern life. In a singularly complex package, there is depth range and exquisite expression that lends timelessness to the poem. Eliot has successfully woven the fabric of life in its inextricably tangled form where the sordid and the beautiful meet. The paper also tries to investigate if life in *The Waste Land* is neither heavenly nor hellish, if is it purgatory, and if is deliverance possible.

THE IDEA OF RUIN

There is a certain idea of exhaustion tied to a certain conception of progress that brings destruction. Eliot insinuates that the poem is an artefact of its own lateness from the point of its own conception thereby not being able to find, satisfactorily, words that make sense immediately. He speaks for a culture, which cannot be expressed in usual words, and thus he poaches lines and texts as a technique to wrench out some meaning, and says in the penultimate lines of the poem, "These fragments I have shored against my ruins" (430). Here fragments speak about the mindset of Eliot's time, a time of breakdown, or dissolution. The idea of ruin or ruination is not

simply the state of mind in which he finds himself but also in locating the fragments in a wider context of the Western civilization or the Western European world, which is quite symptomatic of the time and place of the composition of the poem³, the zeitgeist of Europe in ruin.

The poem thus not only presents the dissolution of the landscape but also the moral makeup of the societies of Eliot's times, the modern times, as a contrast to Victorian propriety or Victorian formality. The antithesis of Victorian propriety is Eliot's way of asserting what he calls the "unalterable law" in the poem 'Cousin Nancy.' The lines "Upon the glazen shelves kept watch / Matthew and Waldo, guardians of the faith, / The army of unalterable law" perhaps antedates *The Waste Land* in the sense that Matthew Arnold and Ralph Waldo Emerson, key figures in Victorian culture, also called Victorian sages, despite whatever experiment or whatever kind of radicalism they might tentatively have embraced here and there in their work, they at last tend towards a kind of cultural conservatism. Arnold's *Culture and Anarchy* articulates a program of what we could call 'sweetness and light' in culture of advocating for a stable set of truth-values that exist at the core of culture or cultural work. In Eliot's time, those values are, in many ways, under attack and are falling apart; they seem inappropriate; they seem to be outdated or archaic; they're out of step with his time.

There isn't however perhaps a sense of what values are in step with his time, it's a time that's out of joint as Shakespeare might have said or out of sync with itself. These "unalterable laws" we might characterize as master narratives, as stories or structures that lie behind or above or that surround the daily lives of people living in this historical context, stories of the nuclear family, of particularly the patriarchal family, of the rightness of law, of particular kinds of law, of state or of a well-conducted state, of the church or of belief in God and Theological principles, of Reason itself in fact, the rational mind, of culture knowing what Arnold says culture "is

the best of what is thought and said" (2006, p. 5), and that culture is something you can count on as stable, as right, and as embodying truth. For Eliot, there is a lack of that culture, something he searches for among these ruins. Moreover, in all this, Eliot reflects on what Lamos (1998) concluded about the poetry of that time, "one of the chief aims of the modernist movement, as they defined it, was the restoration of virility to poetry" (p. 55), and perhaps to those that it represents.

The lack of virility, and ubiquity of death and the dead opens the scene of the poem. He begins the poem with a strange reversal calling April the cruellest month. One of the possible reasons why April is said to be the cruellest month at the very beginning of the poem could be because April is a time of the upsurge of desire, of sexuality, in all living things, including humankind. It breeds memory and desire where the memory could be the memory of a loss, or of a better life in the past. It could also reflect the naturalistic bleakness of adult life, or perhaps the question that Prufrock evades when he says "Streets that follow like a tedious argument / Of insidious intent / To lead you to an overwhelming question ... / Oh, do not ask, "What is it?" (8-11), and purports to make his visit, again to a sterile exercise, staring in a solitary mood, out of the window looking at the fog out there. But soon he rationalizes his failure of nerve saying there will be time, "Time for you and time for me, / And time yet for a hundred indecisions, / And for a hundred visions and revisions, / Before the taking of a toast and tea" (29-32). That's the only solace for the inevitability of the time lost, and the world would not be the same again in *The Waste Land*, and what is left is "memory and desire" which another voice takes over.

This is the voice of a woman who intrudes in the first section for the first time when she says, "Summer surprised us, coming over the / Starnbergersee." Scholars have identified her as Princess Marie of Austria, and she is here experiencing memory and desire, the memory of the time before the war when being a princess meant

something, and she's looking back at a happier time in the past⁵. During World War One, of course, the great dynasties of Europe collapsed. She continues "With a shower of rain; we stopped in the colonnade, / And went on in sunlight, into the / Hofgarten, / And drank coffee, and talked for an hour" (8-11) and perhaps it reflects a moment of human communion, and in the isolation that affects Eliot's poetry, the isolation that we saw in 'Prufrock' or 'Portrait of a Lady.' This is a moment that transcends that feeling of loneliness and therefore, it is a happier memory in the past, but now missing.

We then see Princess Marie coming up with another memory of a beautiful time in her childhood, a sort of epiphany. Though James Joyce used it as a secular term in his writings it actually goes back to sacred writs, when the three wise men came across the desert led by the steadfast star in the sky to the Christ child, and when they reached the Christ child, they had an epiphany, which is literally the experience of visitation with a god, the god in this case would be the Christ child. And so we have the Feast of the Epiphany in the Christian calendar, marking that occasion of the three wise men coming to the Christ child. An epiphany is, thus, any transcendent experience, elevating one above ordinary life and its dreariness into a moment of ecstasy. Now that too is part of the memory and desire, located in the past, a memory of a beautiful time when Princess Marie was a princess, before the fall of these great dynasties, the Romanovs in Russia, the Hohenzollerns in Prussia, the Habsburgs in Austria, etc. We proceed then with that epiphany of Princess Marie, "And when we were children, staying at the archduke's, / My cousin's, he took me out on a sled, ... / In the mountains, there you feel free. / I read, much of the night, and go south in the winter" (15-18).

Now, after the war, after the collapse of the empires, there is no princess or archduke any longer. Now instead we have this meaningless routine. It is perhaps one of those motifs of the wheel of fortune, a card in the Tarot pack that

Eliot comes to later. She proceeds "In the mountains there you feel free," and she says, "I read, much of the night, and go south in the winter." She's an insomniac like Eliot's other characters. We end that intrusion with the original voice, that philosophical meditative, melancholy voice that started the poem, and we go back to that voice at this point with a question that has a religious reference. "What are the roots that clutch, what branches grow / Out of this stony rubbish?" it seems, is an allusion to Hebrew Bible, the Old Testament as Christians would call it, to the greatest of the Hebrew prophets, the prophet Isaiah who predicted the coming of the Messiah as a root out of dry ground. Christians, of course, think Jesus is the messiah. The point of that image in Isaiah and in the life of Jesus is that a root does not grow out of dry ground. It requires supernatural intervention. And spiritually, the ground has never been dryer in Eliot's estimation than here in the modern wasteland. So the question, then, can be put without any hope of a satisfactory answer.

The next phrase, "son of man," is a decidedly biblical formulation. It's used in both the Hebrew Bible and the Christian Bible. It's often used to refer to Jesus, who was both described as the son of man and the son of God. There is absence of God in *The Waste Land* and when the lines read the "son of man," it cannot be the son of God. It proceeds "Son of man, / You cannot say, or guess, for you know only / A heap of broken images, where the sun beats, ... And I will show you something different from either / Your shadow at morning striding behind you / Or your shadow at evening rising to meet you; / I will show you fear in a handful of dust" (20-30). And despite blatant agnosticism and covert atheism in these lines, the line "I will show you fear in a handful of dust" is a possible allusion to the 'Book of Genesis' where God scooped up a handful of dust, puffed on it, and made mankind, with, according to Genesis, some spiritual dimension in his existence. That spiritual dimension is very much in question, leaving fear in that handful of dust in its place.

Here the original philosophical voice, that begins the poem, stops at this point and a new voice breaks in German, “Frisch weht defr Wind / Der Heimat zu / Mein Iriseh Kind, Wo weilest du?”⁶ This fragment from Wagner’s love opera is followed by another episode of memory and desire. This could be something close to Eliot’s own life, and I suggest it is. It is the ‘Hyacinth girl’⁷ episode, and the girl speaks about a better time in the past, “You gave me hyacinths first a year ago; / They called me the hyacinth girl.” The man she is addressing replies, “Yet, when we came back late from the Hyacinth garden, / Your arms full, and your hair wet, I could not / Speak, and my eyes failed, I was neither / Living nor dead, and I knew nothing, / Looking into the heart of light, the silence. / Oed’ und leer das Meer”⁸ (37–42). This was a mystic experience, looking into the heart of light, speechless, taken by the girl’s beauty, when the hyacinth girl was with him last year, or a few years back,⁹ and perhaps that relationship is gone now, or maybe there is something missing, something that is difficult to tell¹⁰. Pondrom (2005) argues, “In this context, the reader is encouraged to interpret the passage as signifying that her arms were full of the flowers he has given her. But the imagery of fertility associated with the woman is over-matched by the imagery of stasis and impotence assigned to her would-be lover” (p. 428). About the lines “I could not speak...the silence” (37–41) Pondrom goes on to say “The attitude of self-flagellation here has led some critics and biographers to see these lines as a commentary on Eliot’s early relationship with Emily Hale” (p. 428). “Oed und leer das Meer,” which translates as “wide and empty the sea” registers the pain of the loss of a loved one.

SORDID SEXUALITY

Miller (2010) found the whole Hyacinth episode a passionate love response to the girl, possibly to the extent of spiritual as well as sexual fulfilment. On the other hand, George Williamson (2009) and Elizabeth Drew (1993) stick to the more

accepted version of a sexual fiasco. This entails Eliot’s use of the ‘Hyacinth girl’ here and Belladonna later as an unconventionally meaningful allusion to lack of fertility, although wrapped up in a lament for the loss of love and/or a beloved. Vickery (2015) linked the Hyacinth girl and Belladonna, the Lady of the Rocks, to the “great Asiatic Goddess of Fertility” (Frazer, 1990, p. 347), and argues that hidden in these two types, these women help Eliot present a conflict between fecundity and sterility. Then we proceed to Madame Sosostri’s episode. Madame Sosostri, a fortune teller, though profane, is posed as “the wisest woman in Europe” (45). She wields a “wicked pack of cards” (46) the Tarot pack¹¹ connected to folklore and fertility rites. Apart from many other things, she talks of the Phoenician Sailor who is called ‘Phlebas the Phoenician’ in section four, ‘Death by Water.’ The immediate theme is a theme in disguise. It appears that those drowned resurface and exist but only as corals or in a way that resounds “Those are pearls that were his eyes” (48), an allusion to Shakespeare’s *The Tempest*. Then the story turns to the “Lady of the Rocks”¹², a generic reference to the wasteland. It is a pile of rock and that’s the best we can do for ‘Our Lady’ in this naturalistic setting. A few lines later she sees “crowds of people, walking round in a ring”¹³ perhaps also the ‘Ring Around the Rosie’ where “we all fall down.” This fall has multifariousness¹⁴ in the lines after in this section that talk of death, when the voice says “I had not thought death had undone so many” (63).

The Waste Land also projects a strange phenomenon where Eliot’s women (and missing men) in the modern world have faint memories of lost sexual virility, and images of cosmetics abound the poem to give it a ritualistic colour. Eliot’s choices in naming the characters of the poem do not only use the mythological import and “literary burglary” (NCE, p. x) but also a tactical bluff that, I suggest, shouldn’t be called off. Eliot insinuates that mankind is unable to recollect the beauty of the “garden” or the “heart of light” and thus the poet’s capabilities have also

deteriorated. In "We have existed / Which is not to be found in our obituaries / Or in memories draped by the beneficent spider" (405-7), Eliot notes that it is a "love-denying spider" (*NCE*, p. 19), which suggests that he too cannot draw upon the good old memories accounting for the parody of failures. Edmund Wilson's strong comments on the poem relegate it to 'The Poetry of Drouth,' and he says, "Hereafter, fertility will fail; we shall see women deliberately making themselves sterile; we shall find that love has lost its life-giving power and can bring nothing but an asceticism of disgust" (*NCE*, p. 143). The Fisher King myth, then, attains importance here in the sense that lack of love and unimpassioned sex rather perpetuates sterility, and a life sans meaning is akin to death. The 'Fishman' who can hear at times "The pleasant whining of a mandolin," a sound from beside a church, can hardly be sanguine of life because Eliot notes, "the church has been marked for destruction" (*NCE*, p. 198).

For the reader, in the first reading, the incoherent polyphony in a poem as long as *The Waste Land*, these voices and fragments need something to cement these disparate constituents together, to give an idea of some order, because people cannot accept disorder and neither could Eliot. Throughout his life, he hoped that there could be some order or meaning beyond individual experience, and though he found it later in Church while composing the poem he found it in literature and myth. Additionally, the book that influenced him most, Jessie L. Weston's *From Ritual to Romance* published just two years before *The Waste Land*, had brought with itself a great deal of disorder. Eliot tells us in his notes to the poem that he culled most of the plan, the title and much of the symbolism for the poem from her book, which deals with the quest for the Holy Grail. *From Ritual to Romance* examines the connections of the Holy Grail to early pagan rituals, the Arthurian legends, and later Christian influences.

In the book Jessie Weston describes the story of a kingdom where the king, also known as the

Fisher King, is wounded in his genitals affecting his fertility. This kingdom is mythically associated with the health of the king and because of the injury, the vital, regenerative power of the land in this kingdom is lost. The kingdom has been turned into a wasteland. To restore the dried-up kingdom to its original health, the king's vitality has to be restored and therefore a pure hero or knight can do the task by facing trials and tribulations. Weston notes that this was the basis of quest stories of many cultures and also for the Christian quest for the Holy Grail. In a review of the book Wm. A. Nitze (1920) wrote, "Thus it remained for Miss Weston (Folk-Lore, xviii, 1907, 283-305) to reemphasize the idea of a vegetation myth and to explain the Grail ceremony as a ritual, parallel to, if not actually connected with the Phoenician Adonis rites" (p. 354). Moreover "the Task of the Hero (Ch. II) is to cure the infirm Fisher King and thereby to rescue the land from drought" (Nitze, p. 355).

Though Miss Weston's book opened up a line of fruitful investigation, *The Waste Land* helped us to understand that a Nature-ritual from ancient times underlies the Grail stories, and it would be an exercise in futility to not realize that Eliot's import of the myths carefully foregrounds the problems of the modern times¹⁵, chiefly, of missing love and its power to heal and to give rebirth to humanity that lies latent in the so-called burial grounds of an apocalyptic world that can heal itself with love. When Eliot says, "Not only the title but the plan and a good deal of the incidental symbolism of the poem were suggested by Miss Jessie. L. Weston's book on the Grail legend . . . Indeed, so deeply am I indebted, Miss Weston's book will elucidate the difficulties of the poem much better than my notes can do¹⁶" (*NCE*, p. 21), the concern here is that the myth of the Fisher King that Eliot uses, provides the poem, and therefore to the world, an order that is lacking.

The story made Eliot capable of rearranging the broken cobblestones of the streets of the European cities buried beneath the "unreal city"

and suggesting that there is an old story that we all share, a story of a city that we wish to enter but we should read the sign hanging over the door, the epigraph in Latin, (another fragment to notice) taken from Petronius' *Satyricon* where the Sibyl of Cumae, the gatekeeper to the gates of Hell or the underworld in Virgil's *Aeneid*, is hanging in a jar because she asked God for as many years of life as there were grains of sand in her hand and they granted her wish. Unfortunately, Sibyl forgot to ask for eternal youth along with eternal life so she ages tremendously forever. So the translation of the epigraph to *The Waste Land*—"I saw with my own eyes the Sybil at Cumae suspended in a cage and when the boys asked her "Sybil what do you want?" She replied, "I want to die"—is a caveat guarding the entrance to the wasteland. The prophet who can see the future wants to die. Eliot's allusion to Sibyl and to Dante's *Divine Comedy* sets the tone to connect this modern story with all of those stories and the many allusions that follow as multiple perspectives of the same scene, more like a Cubist painting, where different voices tell same stories from different angles lending a multiplicity of meanings to a plethora of myths. The obscurity of the poem arises not only from the inchoate aggregation of various fragments but also from the very many allusions that should ideally fit in as a jigsaw puzzle. If one gets these allusions well one can appreciate the "jug jug jug" (204) of the jigsaw puzzle of Eliot's despair and his lament when he says "I had not thought death had undone so many" (63). The ubiquitous question as to what went wrong keeps sneaking in throughout the poem; the question of lack of love and sordid sex necessitates a need for theory that Eliot fabricates through the broken flow of the poem.

In one of his essays, 'Baudelaire,' Eliot says, "What distinguishes the relations of man and woman from the copulation of beasts is the knowledge of Good and Evil... Having an imperfect, vague romantic conception of Good, he (Baudelaire) was at least able to understand that the sexual act as evil is more dignified, less

boring," and what is more boring then is the natural, "'life-giving,' cheery automatism of the modern world" (*NCE*, p. 186). Sex then turns out to be a primal concern for Eliot. I. A. Richards said about the poem, "It illuminates his persistent concern with sex, the problem of our generation, as religion was the problem of the last" (Brooker, 2004). The poem demonstrates that actual sexual encounters that take place in the poem are infinitely unfruitful. On the other hand, Eugenides' proposal of a homosexual tryst thwarts fertility by its very nature. The impossibility of regeneration by such means is symbolized by the currants in his pocket—the desiccated, deadened version of what were once plump, fertile fruits. The typist and her lover are equally barren in their way, even though reproduction is at least theoretically possible for the two. Living in so impoverished a manner that she does not even own a bed, the typist is certainly not interested in a family. But what Eliot tells in his notes about the Tiresias myth¹⁷, helps one appreciate the problematic of the latent misogyny underlying the depictions of abnormal physicality of women in the poem. His existence has both the opposite sexes merged so as to foreclose discriminatory projection of Eliot's voice while suggesting (an absent) comfort in Eliot's view of femininity. Despite being misogynistic, Eliot is able to achieve the desired effect of creating scenes that mimic highly unfruitful sexual flings. Through the character of Tiresias Eliot creates a window that suspends the epistemology of gender. In "I Tiresias, though blind, throbbing between two lives, / Old man with wrinkled female breasts, can see / At the violet hour, the evening hour that strives / Homeward, and brings the sailor home from sea, (218-21)" Tiresias goes on to tell what happens with the typist. Though blind, as a kind of peeping Tom, not necessarily only in this scene, the character of Tiresias definitively entails a degree of prominence of the motif to other motifs such as the lack of rebirth and urban decadence. He reports seeing a typical scene in urban London life, a young woman who is a

typist, transcribing some bits and pieces by other writers or by other authors or thinkers perhaps, reproducing mechanically in an alienated fashion as against the visionary thinker. He goes on to say, "I Tiresias, an old man with wrinkled dugs / Perceived the scene, and foretold the rest— / I too awaited the expected guest" (228-30). Then a young man "carbuncular" arrives. He is a small-time clerk and Eliot describes his attire to tune in with the English sartorial practice of the class and time to which he belongs. Tiresias goes on to report that the young man thinks, "The time is now propitious" (235) and tries to engage her in caresses "Which still are unreprieved, if undesired" (238). He almost rapes her though he "encounter(s) no defence" (240). He thinks that the lady's indifference is welcome, which is a misreading if the reader also thinks that way. It is the futility of resistance on the part of the young typist that makes her behave that way. Perhaps she felt that she would never be heard, and thus her voice is muted, only a few of her actions speak. Tiresias reports that the young man leaves only after bestowing "one final patronising kiss" (247). To the typist "Her brain allows one half-formed thought to pass: / 'Well now that's done: and I'm glad it's over'" (251-52).

Elizabeth and Leicester are perhaps the most interesting of the three couples in the poem, however. For political reasons, Elizabeth was required to represent herself as constantly available for marriage (to royalty from countries with whom England may have wanted an alliance); out of this need came the myth of the "Virgin Queen." This can be read as the opposite of the Fisher King legend: To protect the vitality of the land, Elizabeth had to compromise her own sexuality; whereas in the Fisher King story, the renewal of the land comes with the renewal of the Fisher King's sexual potency. Her tryst with Leicester, therefore, is a consummation that is simultaneously denied, an event that never happened. The twisted logic underlying Elizabeth's public sexuality, or lack thereof, mirrors and distorts the Fisher King plot and further questions the possibility of renewal,

especially through sexuality, in the modern world. This, however, proves to be an ironic contrast, to the debased trysts of the poem, the romanticised episode of Elizabeth and Leicester, which breaks the monotony of the sordid scenes of the section. Yet the lack of noble connotations for the royal figures suggests another cultural (and sort of "stony") rubbish, announcing the death of romance. It also helps to reinforce a contrast between royalty and magnificence, and the sordidness of modern times. This passage lends quite an effect reflecting the sterility and the vacuousness of love in modern times; Elizabeth and the typist stand alike.

It seems Eliot takes great effort to critique the modern situation and diagnose the cause, the aetiology, and in the process lays bare the pervasive ills of the time, chiefly the fraught relation between men and women, though by invoking the myths of the ancient time and various archetypes—Belladonna being one, "the Lady of the Rocks, / The lady of situations" (49-50). In one of his pronouncements that "all the women are one woman" (NCE, p. 23) he adds to the difficulty in making up a meaningful message, but at the same time, it becomes evident that the unmitigated lament for societal chaos, where there is lack of love or only mechanical love, is located in the feminine. It seems that if Marie, though not identical to the "hyacinth girl," antedates her especially when the speaker invokes "The awful daring of a moment's surrender / Which an age of prudence can never retract" (402-3) about which Eliot said in his notes, "Behind this line lies the lament of Francesca de Rimini, whom Dante encounters in the second circle of Hell, where she is being punished eternally for having committed adultery with her brother-in-law Paolo Malatesta. As she tells the story in Canto 5 of the *Inferno*, the two fell in love while reading a romance about Lancelot" (NCE, p. 18).

Also, the poem's motif of infertility can be read as the modern disregard for feminine voices, which is a theme that lurks beneath the textual surface of the poem. Elizabeth Drew's (1949)

argument that Belladonna, who appears as a presiding deity, “presumably symbolizes the quality of all the women in the poem they are all the antithesis of the idea of fertility. Her name suggests poison and the numbing of sensitivity, coupled with the aridity of rocks and a preference for ‘situations’ instead of fruitful union” (p. 72), reflects the everyday tragedy of failed romances that could be full of love and the juxtaposition of the unwanted with the lustful sex, had there been a better societal share of these missing voices, who speak but cannot say what makes them suffer.

CONCLUSION

Eliot tries to reconcile the problems of the inhabitants of the wasteland by importing myths both from the West and the East. In this pursuit, he invokes at first the Judeo-Christian tradition that has several stories of prophets who speak in tongues possibly taken over by a divine agent that speaks through them while they themselves might not know the language or even often what they’re saying. By the end of *The Waste Land*, in part five, there’s a condition that is very similar to this that invokes the Buddhist tradition called Nirvana. Nirvana is the peace or wisdom that is won by those who are no longer the same self and are devoid of passions that have been blown out after such a transformation. The word ‘Nirvana’ literally means that, and Eliot may have developed an entire theory of poetry inspired by ‘nirvana,’ what he called the theory of impersonality of poetry. Perhaps, for him, the secret to writing real poetry or a great poem was to be unlike the Romantic poets and to strive for what he termed as the “continual extinction of the personality” by suppressing his own personality. The probable idea behind Eliot’s theory as well as behind surrealist art at the time was that the poet or the artist could access experiences common to everyone so that they were no longer a self or a person, but a vehicle for the collective.

In Freud’s *Civilization and its Discontents*, which came in the 1930s after *The Waste Land*, one notices a certain fantasy for a kind of mastery. Especially at the end of the book Freud asks where Eros has gone or where has the power of social or cultural bonding gone in the face of Thanatos, the force of aggression and death. Though Freud doesn’t really have an answer for that question, his book is addressing itself to that question, trying to find a way out of the crisis in civilisation or in what he calls in German ‘kultiviert’ or the idea of cultured being, of someone who is self-aware and embedded in or enmeshed in stable notions of value of family and state. Eliot’s suggestion, “the poet must become more and more comprehensive more elusive more indirect in order to force to dislocate if necessary language into his meaning” (*NCE*, p. 126), took him to the extreme. Here the metaphor of location in this place is suggestively a wasteland so it’s a space of forced dislocation.

There is a strong sense of disaffection, alienation, or a certain ennui of a kind of general boredom or a kind of existential boredom in spirit and mind that gives it a Baudelairean twist. Eliot’s preoccupation with the ‘Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock’ (1915) lingers and looms large in *The Waste Land*. Not only do the fragments in ‘A Game of Chess,’ ‘The Fire Sermon’ and ‘What the Thunder Said’ try to attain a higher level of ethical conduct and thereby alleviate the sufferings of the Wasteland, but also the punch line(s) that became the line(s) of the century — “April is the cruellest month, breeding / Lilacs out of the dead land, mixing / Memory and desire, stirring / Dull roots with spring rain,” suggest a reversal of values that transformed most of the romance into rituals.

The ritualistic rhythm of life lends ennui and breakage of emotional bonds of love. From the female body emanates an unwanted obscenity that follows from Eliot’s wider beliefs in his earlier poems like ‘Prufrock.’ All the invocation of Upanishadic philosophy and Christian beliefs is to blow the lewd out of private existence.

Sexual intimacies are void of emotions leading to neurotic isolation. There is a marked disconnection and lack of meaningful unity in the relationships between men and women throughout the poem, very much evident in all the failed dialogues. Most of the sexual encounters result in failure perhaps because the scene is set outside the garden, not within the spaces where hyacinths grow, resulting in unimpassioned lovemaking, which is what they call raw sex. The fragment that alludes to Wagner's *Tristan und Isolde* does not suggest, I think, a phenomenological portrayal of death-in-love, while some lines do hint faint slant to that interpretation, but rather of lack of hope and unrequited love.

Though *The Waste Land* spawned a legion of atypical criticism, for example, there is the sexist myth in disguise (Harris, 1977), there is the myth of women as the Grail (Abdoo, 1984), Eliot's political conservatism for mythologically loaded idiom in modernist erudition led to remarkable backlashes in the last quarter of the last century but his epic juxtaposition of ancient with the modern towards the development of a problematic that had universal echo, won him against the charge that he had an elitist disdain for all that was below a certain class of society. Reading Eliot for the plight of the lower classes in the kinds of categories of suffering that he deals with, is beyond the scope of the paper. The desacralized urban world of *The Waste Land* has no space for other problems howsoever significant, and Eliot, despite all the bewildering concoction of uneasy ventriloquy¹⁹, makes it clear that the men and women of his poem should appear as they are; anxious, listless, restless, decadent, and above all, devitalized.

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NOTES

1. A Norton Critical Edition of *The Waste Land*, abbreviated as *NCE* in the article, is used for all necessary references as well as line numbers. It also serves to avoid the confusion that many texts, published with the permission of Eliot pose.
2. See Peter, J. (1952), Gordon (1998), Lamos (2009), and Miller, J. E. (2010).
3. Eliot wrote much of *The Waste Land* when he was a patient at a sanitarium in Switzerland, trying to overcome his nervous breakdown. This was in the city of Lausanne on Lake Geneva and there, Eliot would have heard other patients from different parts of Europe speaking different languages. It is likely that some fragments from what he overheard turn up in this poem John Crowe Ransom called it "apotheosis of modernity" in Grant, M. (Ed.). (1997). *TS Eliot: The Critical Heritage* (Vol. 27)
4. See p. 41 of *Culture and Anarchy*, where Arnold says, "It is by thus making sweetness and light to be characters of perfection, that culture is of like spirit with poetry, follows one law with poetry. I have called religion a more important manifestation of human nature than poetry, because it has worked on a broader scale for perfection, and with greater masses of men." Eliot's subtle understanding of the huge ideological change that time thrust on him, made it evident to realize the search for the "unalterable law," the law that he searched in poetry and then in religion.
5. See Valerie Eliot's notes to the published manuscript of *The Waste Land*. She says that Eliot based this "sledding incident" on a conversation he had with the Countess Marie Larisch, who published her reminiscences of the Austrian nobility in *My Past* (1913).
6. "'Fresh blows the wind / To the homeland / My Irish child / Where do you wait?" (from German). The first of two quotations from Richard Wagner's *Tristan und Isolde* (first performed in 1865). This one, which occurs at the beginning of the opera, is part of a song overheard by Isolde, who is being taken by Tristan to Ireland, where she is to marry King Mark. The original story, put into German verse in the middle ages by Gottfried von Strassburg (Wagner's source), gradually became part of Arthurian literature and thus came to be associated with the Grail legend Eliot refers to elsewhere in the poem." (*NCE*, p. 6)
7. In Greek mythology Hyacinthus was a boy loved by Apollo for his sexual beauty. He was struck by a discus

- in a competition between Zephyr and Apollo after which he dies. He is reincarnated as a purple flower and hence the name. Perhaps this led some critics, to the improbable conclusion that the Hyacinth girl is actually male, and more so due to shared beliefs that hyacinth is a male sexual symbol.
8. "Desolate and empty is the sea" (translated from German). The second quotation from Wagner's *Tristan und Isolde*. This one, taken from the third act of the opera, occurs as the dying Tristan waits for news of Isolde, arriving by sea." (NCE, p.6)
 9. The suggestion here is that then there were rain and therefore flowers grew. In *The Waste Land* nothing ever grows, and not even in the final section of the poem 'What the Thunder Said' any rain falls.
 10. What is important here is that Cyrena N. Pondrom lends a significant credence to my assertion that it was a reflection of some "great guilt" that Eliot might have had regarding someone, who Pondrom thinks is Emily Hale, and she cites Lyndall Gordon's *Eliot's Early Years* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1977) and Cassandra Laity and Nancy K Gish's (eds.) *Gender, Desire and Sexuality in T. S. Eliot* (2004) for this.
 11. On the one hand the Tarot pack suggests chance and mysteries of eternal nature, and on the other it also informs the role of various characters that fit into its design. They are more of a mutually exclusive set of puppets in Eliot's hands that further his voices to seek a lost cause.
 12. In the poem all the men are one man and all the women are one woman, and here the 'lady of the rocks' is referred to as Belladonna, which suggest the stock character type, or perhaps those that go to pubs and bars in those times, those who gossip in a restaurant. Yet beneath this lack of any clear meaning there is a sense of grossness and violation of innocence, and therefore of sex and fertility.
 13. This quotation from Dante, "I see crowds of people walking in a ring," is when Dante first peeped over the edge of Hell, which is portrayed in the *Divine Comedy* as a gigantic pit funneling down through the earth, and with terraces or circles cut into the edge of the pits, and people are being punished on these various ledges for the sins they committed in their mortal lifetime. So we have the wheel image then applied, people going around in that circular motion forever and ever in Hell.
 14. "In his notes, Eliot refers the reader to two passages from Dante's *Inferno*. The first is from Canto 3, which takes place just inside the Gates of Hell, in a vestibule to which are consigned those who are equally without blame and without praise. Looking at this great company, Dante delivers the exclamation Eliot translates in 1. 63. The next line is taken from Canto 4, in which Dante descends into the first circle of Hell, or Limbo, where those who died without baptism languish, sighing impotently, for there is nothing that can be done about their condition." (NCE, p.7)
 15. John Crowe Ransom called *The Waste Land* "apotheosis of modernity" in Grant, M. (Ed.). (1997). *TS Eliot: The Critical Heritage* (Vol. 27)
 16. Eliot notes, "I recommend it (apart from the great interest of the book itself) to any who think such elucidation of the poem worth the trouble"
 17. "Tiresias, although a mere spectator and not indeed a "character," is yet the most important personage in the poem, uniting all the rest. Just as the one-eyed merchant, seller of currants, melts into the Phoenician Sailor, and the latter is not wholly distinct from Ferdinand Prince of Naples, so all the women are one woman, and the two sexes meet in Tiresias. What Tiresias sees, in fact, is the substance of the poem." (NCE, p. 23)
 18. See Suárez' 'T. S. Eliot's "The Waste Land", the Gramophone, and the Modernist Discourse Network.'

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