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## Analysis Of T.S. Eliot's Poem The Waste Land

T.S. Eliot's *The Waste Land* (1922), is considered one of the most influential poems of the modernist movement, even maintaining its influence after the second world war and during the subsequent growth of post-modernism. Modernism, a cultural and literary movement, swept Western Europe in the early twentieth century. However, it was the horror and shock of the first world war that really transformed the movement. Modernists, such as Eliot, were rebelling against the traditional status quo and were struggling to find new ways of "expressing an experience that shattered a continent" (Lynch). Writers and poets therefore, had to create new ways of exploring this new and drastically changed world, creating controversial literary work, breaking away from the normative, traditional standard. *The Waste Land* is a deeply complex and riveting poem, with various cultural and literary references and ground-breaking structure and subject. During the course of this essay, I will firstly discuss the importance of Eliot within the modernist sphere then I will explain how the phrase from *The Wasteland*, "The fragments I have shored against my ruins..." is an adequate summary for Eliot's complicated poem.

Thomas Stearns Eliot (1888- 1965), was already an influential poetic voice within the modernist movement when he arrived in England, three months before the outbreak of war (Lynch). He was well-connected with the modernist sphere, famous American poet, Ezra Pound mentored him. Poets like Pound and Eliot, who were rebelling against the established literary norm, experimented with form, style, language, and subject. Many influential modernists like Eliot were questioning the older and more established ideals of the pre-war era, that were often seen as some of the primary causes of the war and the widespread suffering that it caused. The world they had previously inhabited soon became deeply fragmented. Modernist artists, writers, and poets sought to discover a new means to express this fragmentation and destruction. Stevenson states that although the effects of modernisation were evident, it was the great war that "made the destructive aspects of modernity inescapable and the need for new artistic forms unavoidable" (Stevenson). Eliot and his contemporaries challenged the meaning of everything and began to express their disenchanting world view, through new explorations of style and form. They wanted to show the world as it was, not as some magical fantasy that had previously been explored in the romantic and Victorian era. The subjects and societies that many of them studied were realistic. They were dark, harsh, and, in many cases, full of physical and emotional suffering. Eliot's influential role as not just a foremost modernist poet, but also as a literary critic and mentor, has been long-lasting and incredibly powerful, not only on the literary modernist movement, but on the literary sphere as a whole.

*The Waste Land* was published in 1922, with 64 pages, 433 lines, and five sections. It is considered the poem that cemented Eliot's reputation and notoriety – with the poem gaining a

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cult-like following in literary circles (Lynch). It is regarded as one of the central works of the modernist movement. *The Waste Land* is a “work permeated by the shadow of the great war” (Lynch). Lynch illustrates that the title of the poem is a metaphor for the desolate landscape of post-war Europe (Lynch). The poem’s subject reveals the widespread disillusionment felt by modernists in these “unreal cities,” devoid of proper human or natural connection (Eliot, 60). The poem also reveals a great deal about Eliot’s personal traumas. When Eliot wrote *The Wasteland*, Eliot was recovering from a nervous breakdown and other mental health issues and his marriage to Vivienne Haigh-Wood (who also suffered from mental health issues), was failing (Menand). These personal issues that encompassed Eliot’s life became in many ways’ central themes in Eliot’s exploration of the disenfranchised and fragmented society that the war and increased urbanization created.

The style and structure of *The Waste Land* were radical and controversial by the early twentieth-century standards. Eliot broke with poetic norms such as form and regular rhyming. Instead, he presents a drastically different form of expression. Eliot’s use of fragmented stanzas, irregular lines, and frequent off-hand classical literature references or untranslated foreign excerpts throughout the poem, were radically experimental (Spacey). *The Waste Land*’s jumbled form, in many ways, imitated the post-war reality at the time, full of chaos, confusion, and disenchantment (Lynch). His constant usage of historical, classical references combined the modern world with the ancient. He also skews the norm by rejecting the single voice dramatic monologue. The narrative is thus fragmented between various stories and perspectives. The poet takes readers on a journey, one that is dark, bewildering and fractured by multiple voices. The tone shifts constantly, and the language used by Eliot adds to the chaos and confusion. These multiple voices tell stories of emotional and physical hardship, and the shifting tone and narratives further enhance some aspects about post-war society. There is no plot in the waste land, no linear narrative that it adheres to, no character or narrator is really going anywhere, and they too will remain wandering in the sterile and bewildering wastelands. This also demonstrates the defects of their urban society. Readers follow Eliot on his confusing and bewildering search for an answer to a series of never-ending questions about society’s disillusionment – to which there seems to be no distinct fix (Spacey).

Throughout his five stanzas, Eliot examines the “modern” inability to form and maintain meaningful human connections in the post-war world. It is an exploration of failed relationships and marriages that he reveals some of his deepest personal faults and feelings. “A Game of Chess”, opens with the image of a woman sitting on a chair that is “like a burnished throne”, which could be as a reference to Cleopatra and her tragic relationship with Mark Anthony (Eliot, 77). The first half of the Stanza takes place in a magnificent drawing-room, that is covered lavishly and extravagantly with rich decorations and materials: “From Satin cases poured in rich profusion, in Vials of ivory and coloured glass”, “the coffered ceiling”, “the antique mantle” (Eliot, 85). The wealthy, upper-class woman who occupies the drawing-room, is like her

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surroundings, decorated to the point of overindulgence and excess; “the glitter of her jewels rose to meet it” (Eliot, 84). It seems that her preoccupation with meaningless material objects is a result of her unhappiness and loneliness.

The woman (who is thought to be a depiction of Eliot’s wife), attempts to address the narrator (perhaps a thinly veiled depiction of Eliot himself). It is clearly visible that this marital relationship is deeply fractured. She complains about her nerves and tries in vain to create or force a conversation with the narrator, “Speak to me. Why do you never speak? Speak... I never know what they are thinking. Think” (Eliot, 112). When the narrator finally answers her, it seems that he is disconnected emotionally from the relationship; “I think we are in rats’ alley/ Where the dead men lost their bones”, this remark also could be a reference to the emotional shell-shock that many returning soldiers suffered from in the aftermath of the poem. She harasses him further with more questions, becoming increasingly erratic and hysterical as the scene continues: “I shall rush out as I am, and walk the street... With my hair down” (Eliot, 133). Her husband’s answers remain dejected and emotionless. It almost seems that he is following societal norms and pressures in his interactions with his wife – he doesn’t seem to have it in him to care and show affection towards his wife. This couple essentially trapped their drawing room, stuck in the same cycle, aimlessly playing a game of chess; “And we shall play a game of chess, / Pressing lidless eyes and waiting for a knock upon the door” (Eliot 138). References to the ancient and tragic tales such as the romance of Anthony and Cleopatra, the rape of Philomena and the fisher king also indicates that “healthy” love and happiness are not considered possible in the waste land and is ultimately destructive for both parties in the relationship. The scene then switches to a completely different setting, one that is lower and working class. Lil and her fellow pub-goers are not as constrained by their social roles and expectations. However, Lil is still unhappy in her marriage and is also punished for immoral failings, “Well, if Albert won’t leave you, there it is, I said, what you get married for if you don’t want children” (Eliot, 163). The fragmentation of healthy relationships is shown by Eliot to be a multi-class issue that permeates all regardless of social standing.

Lack of water plays a significant role in Eliot’s narrative. The waste land is seemingly sterile and infertile, with no water and no rebirth. The aftermath and impact of war and increased modernization have not only damaged society internally but also at an external level. The Waste Land begins with a description of the dead and derelict landscape; “A heap of broken images, where the sun beats, And the dead tree gives no shelter, the cricket no relief, And the dry stone gives no shelter” (Eliot, 22). There are many more references to decaying roots and vegetation. No water can rejuvenate the waste land, so sacrifices must be made to gain fertility; “Fear death by Water” (Eliot, 55). The imagery of a desolate and fractured landscape is then compared with the “unreal city”, the dirty foggy London Bridge with its crowds that are devoid of an individualistic identity (Eliot, 60). “Uneasy cityscapes”, instead of nature, now dominate society (Stevenson). It is like Eliot is concluding that urbanization has caused the widespread

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fragmentation, resulting in the disintegration of humanity. Society, in a sense, has failed the Waste Land. They are the root cause of its destruction and failure.

The themes of foreboding failure and death remain prevalent throughout the poem. The final section, "What the Thunder Said", is incredibly dramatic both in imagery and subject. This section has actually been considered the most surreal part of the poem. It seems that the fragmentation and disillusionment that surrounded post-war society was slowly leading to some form of the apocalypse; "He who was living is now dead We who were living are now dying with a little practice" (Eliot, 329). All the post-war worlds seem to be spiraling and collapsing; "Falling tower Jerusalem Athens Alexandria Vienna London...London Bridge is falling down falling down falling" (Eliot, 373 & 426). Despite the widespread growth of big cities and increased rural migration to these big cities, people were more isolated than they had ever been before and now lacked the ability to maintain healthy relationships. The world has been fractured and destroyed in the aftermath of the war and urbanization. Civilization seems to be disintegrating and collapsing. However, the poem manages to end with a peaceful and almost hopeful note. He references eastern tradition and religions to demonstrate there is some hope or redemption for society: "Datta. Dayadhvam. Damyata..." – Give, sympathize, control (Eliot, 401). This Hindu fable offers a tiny prospect of salvation for the post-war devastated wasteland. The phrase "These Fragments that I have shored against my ruins" can be seen as an adequate summary of the poem and Eliot's resolution. He clearly is distressed about the perceived imminent destruction of the waste land and society – and the phrase seems to be an attempt for Eliot to ward off this destruction. He might even be trying to accept and come to terms with the foreboding destruction. Eliot has gathered all of these fragments from the "ruins" of the wasteland, in an "attempt to make things cohere" (Kaveney).

The Wasteland (1922) is considered one of the most famous modernist poems, having a long-lasting influence on the literary sphere. Eliot takes readers on a journey of a fragmented post-war Europe, exploring the numerous ailments that are some of the root causes of the disillusionment that fractured Europe in the aftermath of the war. Eliot also cleverly uses the disjointed form and style of his poem to further demonstrate this fragmented society. The poem captures a snapshot of not just of societies' emotional turmoil but also Eliot's personal problems. The phrase, "These fragments that I have shored against my ruins", is in some ways, a perfect summary for the chaotic and confusing poem. Eliot has gathered various fragments of this disjointed world in an effort to explain some of the disillusionment of society following the war. These fragments are combined to create a chaotic and confusing narrative. However, he seems to hope, inspired by eastern traditions and religions, almost in vain, for society's redemption and salvation – even if he has no real solution: "Shanith shanith shanith" (Eliot, 433).

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