

T.S. ELIOT'S "THE WASTE LAND" A MIRROR OF POST-WAR GENERATION

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T.S. Eliot is best known to most readers as the poet who wrote "The Waste Land" (1922). The poem is dedicated to Ezra Pound. "The Waste Land" like the Pound's "Cantos", is fragmentary in form and packed with literary quotations and allusions. "The Waste Land" is a poem where Eliot makes a serious attempt to give us an important philosophical message. It is an epic on man and on human civilization, particularly the Post-Renaissance European civilization and it also raises some basic questions about the sum total of human achievements since the dawn of history to the modern times. The poem is concerned with the spiritual wasteland of modern society, a wasteland which the mystics and religious thinkers have ascribed to the isolation of man from God, which means the death of soul, the collapse of moral and spiritual values and the reduction of the human life to the bare naturalistic and animal plane – 'birth, copulation and death'.

The theme, namely, the spiritual wasteland, is at once temporal and timeless; it pertains to the post-war. It may, therefore, be worthwhile to consider the comments; this poem has received from some of the major critics. F.R. Leavis wrote about the poem; "the poem is primarily a study in latter-day disintegration and deals with the incessant and rapid change the breach of continuity and the uprooting of life which characterize the machine age."¹ Similarly C.Day Lewis, another prominent critic of T.S. Eliot writes about the poem ".....'The Waste Land' seems to me chiefly important as a social document. It gives an authentic impression of the mentality of educated people in the psychological slump that took place immediately after the war. It makes us aware of the nervous exhaustion, the mental disintegration, the pathetic groupings after the fragments of a shattered faith – all those symptoms of the psychic disease which ravaged Europe as mercilessly as the Spanish influenza....."²

A common view prevalent among the critics is that "The Waste Land" is an expression of the disillusionment of the Post-war generation, that it expresses better than any other poem of the decade, the sense of hopeless drift which afflicted the generation after the World War I and that it is a vision of Europe mainly of London at the end of the War."³ In the way "The Waste Land" says something which is not entirely new that life has become barren and sterile, that man is withering, becoming important and losing all assurance and confidence.

When "The Waste Land" was published, I.A. Richards founds in it an articulation of the plight of a whole generation'. T.S. Eliot modified his stand on the interaction between the poetic expression of personal experience and its more general significance as interpreted by the reader: "A poet may believe that he is expressing only his private experience; his lines may be for him only a means of talking about himself without giving himself away; yet for his readers what he has written may come to be the expression both of their own secret feeling and of the exultation or despair of a generation."⁴

Eliot was deeply affected by the political and economic crisis in Europe during and after the First World War. "The Waste Land" reflects Eliot's acute concern with the disintegration of European civilization. This poem offers a scathing attack on the materialistic trends in Western civilization and bemoans the loss of ultimate values in modern man's life. T.S. Eliot himself wrote about the poem in his essay "On Poetry", "I wrote "The Waste Land" simply to relieve my own feelings."

"The Waste Land" is a series of vision: it has neither plot nor a hero. The protagonist here is not a person but a persona which changes from time to time. Sometimes he is a silent listener, sometimes a voice that asks questions but gives no answer or utters only some cryptic words.

The poem has five sections containing various shorts which brings before us with dramatic vividness and intensity the essential features of the experience characteristic of the life of the Wastelanders, such as an acute sense

of boredom and meaninglessness of all human activity and the degradations and perversions they suffered. Each of the five sections of the poem introduces a journey of no spiritual import, it is no more than a purposeless gyration, a perpetual marching on as a part of a routine.

The poem focus our attention on the different facets of life without belief and the poem gradually unfolds before us the terror and agony that accompany a loss of belief and the reverence of man from the Divine which implies man's absolute dependence on himself. Life is monetized; man-woman relationships are based on vulgar sexuality, every human being moves like an automation with a parched spirit and deadened soul. We are living in a world where "the will to believe is frustrated by the fear of life."

Helen Gardner makes an appropriate comment on the poem which may be kept in mind. She says "Although "The Waste Land" may begin with the dilemma of the modern 'mind' it discovers that the modern dilemma is the historic dilemma and to limit the poem's meaning to being primarily the expression of modern lack of faith is to mistake its form and scope."⁵

REFERENCES

1. F.R. Leavis, "T.S. Eliot," **New Bearings in English Poetry** (1932; rpt. London: Penguin Books, 1967), p. 90. Quoted in C. Day Lewis, **A Hope for Poetry** (1934). R.S. Pathak, **New Directions in Eliot Studies**. (New Delhi: Northern Book Centre, 1960), p. 52. Quoted in Eliot's "Notes" on "The Waste Land". Helen Gardner, **The Art of T.S. Eliot** (New York: E.P. Dutton & Co., Inc., 1959), p. 88-89.
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