

Moral Predicament in T. S. Eliot's '*The Hollow Men*' and '*The Waste Land*'

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Abstract

'Modernity' came with a cost. In the deleterious context of the two wars, the age was characterised with uncertainty, amorality and predicament. These existential dilemmas found place in the poetry of the times. And T. S. Eliot voiced them vociferously in his poems. His poems throw light on the mundane, meaningless urban life, the isolation and faithlessness of city dwellers, and their timid withdrawal from any action or emotion. This paper attempts to understand the moral predicament of modern man in the context of Eliot's interpretation of the breakdown of values in modern life. Eliot's *The Hollow Men* and *The Waste Land* have been picked for the analysis of the malady and the sickness of the times as delineated therein. This study has been undertaken to show how the poet clearly understood 'the moral dilemma' of his times, and suggested a way out of 'the Waste Land'.

Keywords: T. S. Eliot, Moral Predicament, Modern Poetry, The Waste Land, The Hollow Men

Introduction

In the nineteen twenties, the English poetic scene was dominated by Modernists like T.S. Eliot and Ezra Pound. Eliot once said, "a great poet in writing of himself writes his age" (Tilak 11). Twentieth-century poetry is a

poetry of revolt. The poets turned away from the romantic tradition that had become debunked; a tradition adopted by the Georgian poets. This revolt was exemplified in the poetry of T.S. Eliot. The poet saw life in all its blatant, stark realism. Tilak, speaking about the features of modern poetry, asserts: "The heavy thud of bus traffic, the creaking of tramcars, the rattling noise of railway trains, the drone of an aero plane, all these find their echo in modern poetry" (Tilak 17).

The poetry of T.S. Eliot unveiled the squalor and dinginess of the Industrial Revolution. The colloquial language, speech rhythms, prosaic diction, and subject matter of Eliot's poems echoed the stark realities that characterised modern man's life. 'How do we live?' and 'How should we live?' - are the two fundamental questions which form the nucleus of the themes of Eliot's poetry. His poems throw light on the mundane, meaningless urban life, the isolation and faithlessness of city dwellers, and their timid withdrawal from any action or emotion. In his popular poems, such as "Prufrock", "Preludes", *The Waste Land*, and "The Hollow Men", Eliot expresses his discontent with such a life, which is nothing more than 'death-in-life.' This paper limits its scope to two of Eliot's very popular poems, and drawing illustrations from them, throw light on the moral predicament of the times. Eliot's *The Hollow Men* and *The Waste Land* have been picked for the analysis of the malady and the sickness of the times as delineated therein.

The Hollow Men

We are the hollow men
 We are the stuffed men
 Leaning together
 Headpiece filled with straw. Alas!
 Our dried voices, when
 We whisper together

Are quiet and meaningless
 As wind in dry grass
 Or rats' feet over broken glass
 In our dry cellar
 Shape without form shade without colour,
 Paralyzed force, gesture without motion;

Those who have crossed
 With direct eyes to death's other Kingdom
 Remember us--if at all-- not as lost
 Violent souls, but only
 As the hollow men

The stuffed men. (Jain 69)

This 'hollow' man represents the residue of the younger generation that was thrust on the pyre of the notorious war. Obsessed by gruesome thoughts, the young people of the twentieth century became sceptical about the beliefs and mores of the older generation. Thus, eluding the guidance of elders, they drifted away from home, and the morality and integrity that were once upheld by their predecessors. They became, therefore, 'hollow men.' The word 'hollow' implies something meaningless, devoid of values and worth, and bereft of purpose.

Keeping in mind the disillusionment of the generation, T.S. Eliot initially wrote *The Hollow Men*, to serve as an Epilogue to *The Waste Land*. In its present form, it consists of five sections that contain the poet's ruminations on the relationship of this world to the world of eternity, and the subject of human nature. Like *The Waste Land*, *The Hollow Men*, too, is a dramatisation of a state of emotional and spiritual sterility. It is pervaded by feelings of guilt, remorse and anguish: guilt and remorse for an unknown sin, and anguish of an unknown identity. It delineates the monotonous repetition of a death-in-life existence. Referring to Eliot, Baudelaire writes that Eliot thought it was actually better for humans "to do evil than to do nothing: at least we exist" (Herbert 42).

Eliot, in 1935, himself explained that the title of his poem *The Hollow Men* is a blend of William Morris's *The Hollow Land* and Rudyard Kipling's *The Broken Men*. Eliot's hollow men and Kipling's broken men have, in common, a feeling of being lost and having failed in Morris's *Hollow Land*. Brutus's speech in Shakespeare's *Julius Caesar* is commensurate with that of Eliot's hollow men:

There are no tricks in
 plain and simple faith,
 But hollow men, like
 horses hot at hand,

Make gallant show and
 promise of their mettle,
 But when they should
 endure the bloody spur,
 They fall their crests,
 and like deceitful jades
 Sink in the trial. (Tilak
 198)

The two 'epigraphs' provided by Eliot to the poem indicate the basic theme of the poem. The first one, 'Mistah-Kurtz – he dead,' is from Conrad's novel *The Heart of Darkness*. It is an uneducated announcement by an insolent servant. Conrad's novel made a great impact on Eliot's mind since it is an exploration of darkness in 'civilised hearts.' The second epigraph, 'A penny for the old Guy,' owes its source to the notorious Gunpowder Plot (1605) of the extreme Catholics under James I, which aimed at the assassination of the King and his ministers. However, the King was informed about the plot somehow, and Guy Fawkes, who was guarding tons of gunpowder in the cellar, was taken to task. Ever since, every year on the 5th of November, the effigy of Fawkes, stuffed with straw, is burned; and boys go from door to door collecting money for this popular celebration, saying 'A penny for the old Guy.' In both the epigraphs, the protagonists are the 'lost violent souls,' as referred to in the first section of the poem. They are different from and better than Eliot's hollow men who are incapable of any action: good or evil.

The moral predicament or the fallen state of man pervades the whole poem. The first section is a portrayal of the hopeless, empty state of the passive lives of the hollow men. In this section, the hollow men describe themselves as 'stuffed men.' This has an indirect reference to and affinity with the effigy of 'the old Guy' stuffed with straw. Their 'leaning together' points to their inner vacuity and complete lack of will, self-volition and strength to evolve themselves as full human beings. 'Headpiece filled with straw' and 'dried voices' are comments on their inability to think for themselves and lack of vitality. The hollow men's whispers are 'quiet and meaningless,' like their paralysed lives. Eliot describes them as –

Shape without form,
 shade without colour,
 Paralysed force, gesture
 without motion; (Jain
 69)

Such souls, traced out as a group, are linked neither to the good – as they lack faith in divinity – nor to the bad, as they are incapable of choosing evil. These souls are worse than even Satan's followers in Dante's *Inferno*, who

are rejected both by heaven and hell. The self-description of the hollow men, bitterly lamenting their fate - as Virgil tells Dante - is due to the fact that they –

have no hope of death;
and their blind life is so
mean, that they are
envious of every other
lot. Report of them the
world permits not to
exist; Mercy and Justice
disdains them: let us not
speak of them; but look,
and pass. (Sinha 435)

Their talk is meaningless, and their desire is futile.

Those who have crossed
With direct eyes, to
death's other kingdom
Remember us – if at all
– not as lost
Violent souls, but only
As the hollow men
The stuffed men. (Jain
69)

It is akin to the description of the explorers in *Heart of Darkness*:

Their talk, ... was the
talk of sordid
buccaneers: it was
reckless without
hardihood, greedy
without audacity, and
cruel without courage;...
(Sinha 435)

People, who have died and gone to 'death's other kingdom,' look back at the negative and meaningless world of the hollow men in despondency. 'Lost violent souls' like Kurtz and Fawkes took, no doubt, a wrong direction, but at least they acted courageously and with conviction. Their evil deeds are, therefore, preferable to the passive life of inaction of the hollow men. Hell is better than a realm of 'nothingness' that is rejected both by Heaven and Hell.

The eye image occurs in the second section of the poem. The hollow men cannot endure reproachful eyes even in their dreams. These are the 'direct eyes,' like the sharp and piercing eyes of Beatrice and Kurtz's concubine in Dante's poem and Conrad's story, respectively. In Eliot's poem, too, they are the eyes of those who can act and decide

and, therefore, go to the other world. Fortunately, the 'direct eyes' do not exist in death's dream kingdom, the kingdom closest to the 'real' world of hollow men. The second part is a speech delivered by one of the hollow men who fears reality slipping into the garb of intentional disguises:

Let me be no nearer
In death's dream
kingdom
Let me also wear
Such deliberate
disguises
Rat's coat, crow skin,
crossed staves
In a field
Behaving as the wind
behaves
No nearer – (Jain 70)

This section is a stark criticism of modern man who, in the mask of false complacency, in the veil of glittering materialism and in the façade of egocentricity has drifted away from the reality, and, consequently, is living in shallowness and isolation. Ironically, modern man fears to be 'somebody', finding a kind of peace in being 'nobody.'

In the third section of the poem, the poet presents to us the dead land of the hollow men, where the images of stone receive the supplication of the hollow men. The images such as "dead land," "cactus land," "stone images," "dead man's hand" are all representations of the sterility and disintegration of the Waste Land. "Twinkle of a fading star" signifies an ideal and spiritual reality beyond the reach of the hollow men.

Eliot, in the fourth section, describes this "dead land" as a "hollow valley," which is a pale and ghostly reflection of the lost times. In this land, they are without any vision unless "the eyes" return as the "perpetual" (not one that is fading or dying) star, as the "multi foliate rose," as the only hope for empty men. In other words, until the hollow men are bereft of created things, divinity will remain just a hope for them. They have to 'empty' themselves of the love of worldly things, in order to get inflated with the love of the Divine.

The fifth section adapts the tone of a children's rhyme that parodies the meaningless round of unfulfilled lives:

Here we go round the
prickly pear
Prickly pear prickly pear

Here we go round the
prickly pear
At five o'clock in the
morning. (Jain 71)

B.C. Southam says:

There seems to be an anthropological explanation for Eliot's use of a children's song here. In a 1923 review, he quoted from Frazer: 'how often with the decay of old faiths the serious rites and pageants ... [primitive religious dances] have degenerated into the sports of children.' In this context, the old fertility dance has become a modern *infertility* dance. (Sinha 442)

This section develops the reality, not the hope. Eliot says that the "shadow" is the cause of their frustration and despair. According to Maxwell, this shadow is the "attachment to self and to things and persons." It is this shadow that prevents the hollow men from reaching the kingdom of heaven. It comes between their dream and its fulfilment, the ideal world and the reflection of the earth. It keeps them away from heaven and God, making their lives cumbersome, as they pathetically exclaim, 'life is very long.'

In the end, the hollow men try to pray by mumbling incoherent bits of the Lord's prayer:

For thine is
Life is
For Thine is the (Jain 69)

and failing in their attempt. Such men die with a whimper of defeat, with a gasp of exhaustion.

The Hollow Men is considered the most pessimistic of Eliot's poems. In *The Waste Land*, no doubt, Eliot projects the spiritual disintegration of the world but, eventually, he leaves the reader with words of hope, "Shantih Shantih Shantih." *The Hollow Men*, however, leaves the reader with a choking sense of despair, candidly

suggesting that the web of moral and spiritual degeneration will go on and no human efforts can bring about any change. Eliot strongly points out the shallow interest of the people in their bare survival. He does not see any possibility of transformation both in the outer as well as the inner world of humanity. The hollow men are incapable of aspiring for a higher world of divinity.

In the various sections of *The Hollow Men*, Eliot has attempted to reflect the fallen state of humanity. Eliot's hollow men are blind to their condition of hollowness, unlike the "lost violent souls" such as Kurtz and Guy Fawkes who are also hollow, but who are, at least, capable of exercising their own choice, becoming hollow on account of their evil and violent deeds. Eliot, through this poem, seeks to put forth the plight of those who are 'hollow' because they are capable of neither good nor evil, as they are a "paralysed force." These men belong to "death's dream kingdom," which alludes to Hell, to the secular world of pain and sorrow. They cannot even talk about the other world, "death's other kingdom," the perfect world of Paradise, in proper language. Images like "eyes" and "star," in fact, represent the fading and vanishing life force. One is actually aware of the spiritual grace symbolised by the eyes:

The eyes are not here
There are no eyes here
(Jain 69)

Eliot believes that in a world where even prayer is not possible, it is no wonder if "the world ends/Not with a bang but a whimper" (Jain 69).

The short lines and the repetitions, the varied and partial rhymes, emphasise the feebleness, limitedness and painlessness of men's lives. There is no steady development of meaning in *The Hollow Men*. The whole poem is an imitation of that civilisation which boasted about itself until the World War overtook it and shook it to its very foundations. *The Hollow Men* is considered as Eliot's last 'Prufrockian kick' at the mundane part of the universe. With this poem, Eliot's early phase of scepticism ended.

Our civilization comprehends great variety and complexity, and this variety and complexity, playing upon a refined sensibility, must produce various and complex results. The poet must become more and more

comprehensive, more allusive, more indirect, in order to force, to dislocate, if necessary, language into his meaning. (qtd. in Jain 131)

Referring, thus, to the Metaphysical Poets, Manju Jain gives emphasis to Eliot's awareness of the variety and complexities of the civilisation of his time. By being more allusive and, at the same time, comprehensive, Eliot has dwelt upon the varied moods of the tumultuous times; in the process, putting forth, subtly, to the readers of the twentieth century, the chaotic and pell-mell state of their lives.

Ezra Pound called *The Waste Land* the finest "experiment" of the "modern movement." He described it as the "longest poem in the English language because of its profundity, perplexity and density of poetic allusions, myths and meaning" (Jain 132). This poem is a result of the gloom and despair of the poet, during the nerve-shattering First World War. Also, the deranged life of the poet worked as a great impact, resulting in such a bleak and disturbing picture of the human predicament in the poem. *The Waste Land* is a vivid portrayal of the disillusionment of a generation.

Jessie Weston's book *From Ritual to Romance*, and James Frazer's *The Golden Bough* are the two most significant influences on Eliot's *The Waste Land*. Weston provided Eliot with the legend of the Grail and the Fisher King. The search for the lost Grail became a symbol for spiritual quest. The mythical desolate land of the Fisher King represents the contemporary wasteland, its decay and spiritual sterility. The sick king is a symbol of sick humanity. Cleanth Brooks remarks:

The shift in meaning from physical to spiritual sterility is easily made, and was, as a matter of fact, made in certain of the legends. As Eliot has pointed out, a knowledge of this symbolism is essential for an understanding of the poem. (Sinha 187)

The Golden Bough supplied Eliot with innumerable vegetation and fertility myths and rituals. Its study notified Eliot that all primitive myths follow a common pattern – death, rebirth and death. According to Frazer, the annual

cycle of the change of seasons is considered as an enactment of death and resurrection.

The mythical frame of the poem becomes complicated with the introduction of Tiresias, a wise Theban soothsayer. Tiresias, as represented in *The Waste Land*, is bi-sexual and blind. He bridges the gap between the past and the present. He is the voice of sensitive humanity, mourning the loss of spirituality. Eliot himself states the significant role of Tiresias in the poem. He writes:

Tiresias, although a mere spectator and not indeed a character, is yet the most important personage in the poem, uniting all the rest. (Tilak 132)

The various myths and legends meet in *The Waste Land*, impressing upon us the common malady of the present age, that is, the spiritual death of contemporary man. All these myths point to a universal remedy for sterility – spiritual health can be regained only through penance, suffering and self-discipline.

The Waste Land

The Waste Land has five parts, closely woven to form a compact structure. The epigraph of the poem narrates the story of Sibyl of Cumae. It explains, "Once I saw with my own eyes the Sibyl at Cumae hanging in a cage, and when the boys said to her, 'Sibyl, what do you want?' she answered, 'I want to die'" (Herbert 34). Thus, the epigraph reveals the central theme of the poem: life in the modern wasteland is a living death or a death-in-life existence like the life of Sibyl. It would be illuminating to brief analyse the poem, part by part, keeping in mind the central concerns of this study.

1. The Burial of the Dead:

The month of April is considered as a harbinger of spring and a renewal of life. The satirical tone of Eliot is sensed in the very first line of the poem – "April is the cruellest month" – assaulting the spiritually dead wastelanders. In *The Waste Land*, the spring season is described as 'cruel' because its inhabitants, cosily buried in

the oblivion of winter, cannot endure the pangs of remorse, of guilt, of awareness and consciousness that it may bring to life. They fear renewal and resurrection. They prefer a purely animalistic life: eating, sleeping and breeding, in order to evade painful memories and unrealisable desires. They are too indolent to strive to come out of their death-like state:

Winter kept us warm,
covering
Earth in forgetful snow,
feeding
A little life with dried
tubers. (Eliot 49)

The wastelanders are even bereft of 'dried tubers,' which stand for the dissipated and shrunken consciousness. Unable to go in deep, the roots 'clutch,' and they do so because they lack nourishment. They are not nurtured by faith. Thus, the urban landscape, which has now become an endless mass of 'stony rubbish,' is capable of bearing nothing but doubt and devastation:

What are the roots that clutch, what
branches grow
Out of this stony rubbish? Son of
man,
You cannot say, or guess, for you
know only
A heap of broken images, where
the sun beats,
And the dead tree gives no shelter,
the cricket no relief,
And the dry stone no sound of
water. Only
There is shadow under this red
rock.... (Eliot 49)

In *The Waste Land* there is no comfort and solace to be derived from the 'shadow' under the rock. Instead, it is a terrifying reminder of our mortality. Manju Jain, quoting *Job, viii*, writes, "we are but of yesterday, and know nothing because our days upon earth are a shadow" (qtd. in Jain 165).

Eliot delineates the fertility festival and youthful passionate love in the episode of the 'hyacinth girl.' The passage suggests the conversion of ecstatic love into frustration. It refers to a moment of mystical experience, an experience of annihilation. This is, clearly, a cue to the fact that, in such arid sterility, love cannot be found or expressed. The absence of love in the waste land is evident in the line, "Empty and desolate the sea." This is a reference to Wagner's opera that holds the possibility of the

transcendence of love, a transcendence which is absent in the dreary wasteland of modern life. By introducing 'Madame Sosostriis,' Eliot has assailed the practice of fortune-telling and the desire to know the future, which symbolises the lack of faith in oneself and God. Death is prominent as a metaphor in the fortune-telling of the 'famous clairvoyante,' who reflects the vision of the dead in London. She is unable to locate the tarot card of the 'Hanged Man' whom Eliot associated with Christ. This is due to her blindness towards goodness.

In the last passage of the first part, Eliot presents a stark picture of the city of London:

Unreal City,
Under the brown fog of
a winter dawn,
A crowd flowed over
London Bridge, so
many,
I had not thought death
had undone so many.
(Eliot 51)

Eliot acknowledges that he found in Baudelaire, "a precedent for the poetical possibilities, never developed by any poet writing in my own language, of the more sordid aspects of the modern metropolis...." He ends this part with a passage wherein Stetson, who represents a commonplace person, one in a crowd in a great city, enters. Cleanth Brooks comments, "Stetson is everyman including the reader and Mr. Eliot himself" (Sinha 376).

In the last line, he addresses the readers: "O hypocrite reader, my fellow man, my brother," compelling us to intimately confront the profound state of spiritual emptiness and dissatisfaction in our own lives.

2. *A Game of Chess*

The second part of the poem presents, "a vision of dissolution and spiritual draught" (Sinha 377). Eliot's use of fertility myths purports to throw light on the primacy of the spirit over the flesh. Originally, the act of procreation was a spiritual practice, it was a source of life and vitality, undertaken to elevate one's soul to the higher levels. But, unfortunately, its severance from its primary function, has accounted for the spiritual and emotional barrenness in the modern era. It is exercised for the sake of momentary pleasure or monetary benefit, it has become a source of moral degeneration and corruption, and also a substitute for boredom.

'A Game of Chess' presents a sordid game of seduction and exploitation of innocents. This part contains two separate scenes wherein love is shown to have degenerated into a sort of routine matter, to satisfy a sexual appetite. The first scene takes place in the dressing room of an upper-class woman. A sterile, neurotic relationship persists between the couple. The woman tells her lover about her state of mind. Their verbal exchange reveals the general disease of contemporary industrial civilisation:

'My nerves are bad to-night. Yes, bad. Stay with me.
Speak to me. Why do you never speak? Speak.
What are you thinking of? What thinking? What?
I never know what you are thinking. Think.'

I think we are in rats' alley
Where the dead men lost
their bones. (Eliot 53)

The 'rats' alley' stands for "spiritual darkness and modern man's sense of loss."

'What shall I do now? What shall I do?
I shall rush out as I am, and walk the street
With my hair down, so. What shall we do tomorrow?
What shall we ever do?'
(Eliot 53)

These lines portray the ennui and meaninglessness of existence.

The second scene takes place in a pub, where some lower middle-class women are engrossed in futile talk about the mechanical relationship between a couple. Thus, such pervasion of 'animal-type copulation,' results in neurosis, boredom, frustration, disillusionment, despair and hopelessness.

3. *The Fire Sermon*

The fire sermon is associated with the Buddhist tradition. The sermon evokes Buddha's sentiments against the unholy fires of passion, hatred, infatuation, birth, death, sorrow, misery, grief and despair that consume men. The opening passage mourns the lost idyllic world of Spenser as depicted in his poem *Prothalamion*. Manju Jain says that the contrast

is between "the pastoral vision evoked by Spenser and the sordidness of the present. The contrast is ambivalent, however. It preserves an elegiac feeling for what is lost and also undercuts Spenser's idyllic world" (Jain 170).

The river's tent is broken; the
last fingers of leaf
Clutch and sink into the wet
bank. The wind
Crosses the brown land,
unheard. The nymphs
are departed.
Sweet Thames, run softly, till I
end my song.
The river bears no empty
bottles, sandwich papers,
Silk handkerchiefs, cardboard
boxes, cigarette ends,
Or other testimony of summer
nights. The nymphs are
departed. (Eliot 56)

Cleanth Brooks comments, "The contrast between Spenser's scene and its twentieth century equivalent is jarring" (Sinha 391).

This section of the poem provides a series of examples of sordid lust: Sweeney and the whores; Tereus' violation of Philomel, Mr. Eugenides' dirty offer of a weekend at the metropole, and the unfeeling encounter between the typist and the clerk ('seen' by Tiresias). This is contrasted with the seduction of Goldsmith's Olivia, the flirtatious relations between Queen Elizabeth and the Earl of Leicester, the violations of the three Thames' daughters, and the lusts of the young St. Augustine.

Water in the modern wasteland is a negative element.

It represents a river of lust:

O the moon shone bright
on Mrs. Porter
And on her daughter
They wash their feet in
soda water (Eliot 56)

The quest of the Holy Grail is relevant in 'The Fire Sermon' since, symbolically, it is a quest for the drug of potency. Eliot culminates this section with the collocation of the Buddha and St Augustine, the two representatives of eastern and western asceticism. According to them, sensual temptation is like a burning fire, which can be mitigated by developing an aversion for the pleasures of the senses. This will lead to freedom from passion and, thus, from rebirth.

4. *Death by Water:*

The threat of the clairvoyant in the first section – “Fear death by water” – comes true in the fourth section: ‘Death by Water.’ Two weeks after drowning, Phlebas, the Phoenician sailor, has forgotten his maritime concerns and is reduced to bones under the sea. This incident is a reminder that death comes to all. This part brings together all the previous references to death by drowning – the drowned God of fertility cults, Prince Ferdinand’s supposedly drowned father in *The Tempest*, the drowned Ophelia in *Hamlet*, and Madame Sosostris’s prediction of ‘death by water.’

Water is associated with both death as well as re-birth. “Waiting for rain” is the leading motif in Eliot’s *Gerontion*, since rain can fructify the “cracked land.” The dual role of water is found in the Christian sacrament of baptism. Water is sprinkled on the new-born to bring about the death of the old self and lead to spiritual rebirth.

5. *What the Thunder Said:*

In this section, ‘resurrection’ is the major theme. Eliot, in a letter to Bertrand Russell, wrote that the fifth and final part was “not only the best part, but the only part that justifies the whole” (Sinha 198). The first section of the fifth part consists of three themes: The journey to Emmaus, the approach to the Chapel Perilous and the present decay of Eastern Europe.

The story of the journey to Emmaus is told in *Luke, XXIV*. On the day of Christ’s resurrection, Christ joins his two disciples on the journey to Emmaus. But, unfortunately, they do not recognise Him until He blesses them in the evening. The second theme is taken from *Ritual to Romance*, in which the protagonist reaches the ‘Chapel Perilous, the shrine of the Holy Grail. But, the Grail never appears. The third theme takes up a description of the chaotic state of Europe.

Manju Jain draws our attention to the fact that none of the three themes achieve a resolution in the poem: Christ remains unrecognisable, the Grail never appears, and the refugees do not find a haven. Thus, *The Waste Land* ends on a note of pessimism and despair.

In the second section, the scene shifts to India, where many gods and goddesses reside, and the Ganges makes the land fertile. But the poem focuses on a period of draught that coincides with spiritual sterility. So, all the creatures of the earth – gods, humans, and demons – approach Prajapati, the giver of all wisdom, for assistance. Prajapati, through the voice of the thunder, guides them,

repeating a Sanskrit syllable/word thrice – Da. Each of the groups interprets the word of Prajapati in its own way – da, da, da; that is, to control, to give, and to sympathise. Critics have found the resolution of the spiritual crisis in the tripartite message of the thunder. The poem ends with a movement towards the restoration of faith and the end of spiritual drought. Eliot ends the poem with “Shantih. Shantih. Shantih.” which is a formal ending to the *Upanishads*. Critics remark that Eliot’s shift to Eastern culture, for a word with enough depth in meaning, indicates the inadequacy or state of decay of European culture:

London Bridge is falling
down
falling down falling
down.

The Waste Land, as a social and cultural critique, presents a crisis or breakdown of European civilisation. Consequently, the poem has been interpreted as ‘an imperial epic,’ and as ‘an image of imperial catastrophe.’ The apocalyptic vision of the falling towers of imperial cities, in *The Waste Land*, is described as ‘unreal’, just as London is the ‘unreal city,’ because of the spiritual decay.

Thus, the poem does not merely reflect “the disillusionment of a generation,” it goes much deeper. To quote Bullough, “it goes beyond a mere diagnosis of the spiritual distemper of the age” (Tilak 137).

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