

The natural cycle of humanity and the decay of modern society in the wasteland

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There is no romance, no passion, only a mundane circular sequence of events, " crowds of people, walking round in a ring" (56). In *The Wasteland*, by T. S. Eliot, the society of the twentieth century is described as detached, dreary and monotonous. It is a collection of dysfunctional relationships and tedious tasks, saturated with an anxiety about death. There is a parallel between the atrophy of society and the land destroyed during the Second World War. To escape a routine and apathetic existence, humans strive for the unattainable, to overcome the limits of humanity.

However any departure from the natural cycle of the human world leads to the emergence of the wasteland. Although death haunts the speakers in the poem, it is liberation in comparison to the horror of the wasteland. There is persistent angst and fear of death in the poem, yet death is everywhere. The many speakers in the poem wish for immortality and to overcome the confines of humanity. In " *The Burial of the Dead*" the woman, anxious about her fate, goes to see the fortune-teller, Madame Sosostris, who pulls out the " *Hanged Man*" tarot card and warns her to " fear death by water" (55).

The fortune-teller's words reoccur later in " *Death by Water*", a description of the grotesque death of " *Phlebas the Phoenician*. " His death, symbolized by " *the whirlpool*," confirms that there is no regeneration; there is no return from " *the whirlpool*. " The realization of the fortune implies that fate cannot be defeated. In " *What the Thunder Said*" Eliot again states that there is no escape from death: " *He who was living in now dead/ We who are living are now dying*" (328-329).

In "The Burial of the Dead" the speaker desires to abandon memories, he describes spring as cruel; it causes sorrowful memories to resurface, while "winter kept us warm/ covering Earth in forgetful snow" (5-6). What he does not realize is that human existence is a collection of fragments that distinct memories in an ongoing cycle, illustrated in the first stanza of "The Burial of the Dead." Abandonment of memories leads to a futile existence. The wasteland first appears in the second stanza of "The Burial of the Dead" contrasting the first stanza, which is full of life and memories.

The narrator is separated from the natural course of existence and is addressing a person of the human world, "Son of man (...) for you only know a heap of broken images" (20-23). The listener is part of the human cycle, he is still part of time: "Your shadow at morning striding behind you/ Or your shadow rising to meet you" (28-29). He does not understand the true fear that comes once time ceases to exist the way the speaker does: "I will show you fear in a handful of dust" (30). The speaker has disconnected from society and drifted into the wasteland, suggested by Eliot's diction: "stony rubbish", "dead tree", "dry stone", "dust".

Only there has he discovered the true meaning of fear; an unearthly abyss. The wasteland is a situation or a place more terrifying than human imagination can conceive. It is complete emptiness, devoid of the structures of person, place and time. Without time memories become meaningless repetitions and cease to exist. The epigram at the beginning of the poem introduces the immortal character Sibyl. Sibyl is detached from the rest of

the world by her cursed immortality and lives withering away and shriveled up, longing for death, the only escape from her suffering.

The other immortal character in the poem, Tiresias, is " blind, throbbing between two lives" (line 218), also alienated from the human world, not only by his immortality but also because he is a hermaphrodite. Sybil and Tiresias's separation from the sequence of life compel them to lead a miserable existence. The voices of these immortal characters portray how only once immortality is experienced can death become a salvation, a place of peace. The modern relationships that Eliot portrays are devoid of love, companionship and desire.

The theme " when love fails, a wasteland develops" is recurring throughout the poem. The author constantly alludes to the legend of the Fisher King. In the legend, The Fisher King was hurt and became impotent and ill, disabling him to care for his kingdom. He was left alone to lead a meaningless life, fishing. Without his love the land deteriorated, lost its fertility and perished into the wasteland. Similarly, in the modern society, alienation from the natural world and a depletion of love leads to decay.

The woman in " A Game of Chess" attempts to speak to her significant other, distressed about their relationship. She pleads with him to stay with her, to speak to her and to share his thoughts with her (111-113). He is detached, remaining silent and thinking only of death. The man has separated from humanity while the woman remains part of the cyclical existence. The couple remains together yet their relationship has become a wasteland; there is

nothing between them. In "A Game of Chess", Lil and Albert's relationship is presented through a conversation in a pub.

Lil is revolting to Albert, he tells her that he cannot even bear to look at her (144). Lil's body is disintegrating, a consequence of the pills, given to her by the pharmacist, that she took to induce an abortion. They caused her to drastically age and lose her teeth. Lil's desire to not have children is portrayed as unnatural, "What you get married for if you don't want children?" (164). Lil's actions lead to her body becoming a wasteland. The encounter between the banker and the typist in "The Fire Sermon" again manifests the absence of love.

Their meeting is solely sexual and devoid of any feelings. Even the sex holds no pleasure and is non-reproductive. The woman is indifferent to their relations and upon his departure thinks: "Well now that's over: and I'm glad it's over" (252), as if she had completed another chore. These series of affairs reflect the atmosphere of the society, the lack of intimacy and the disconnection of human relations. The wasteland is a consequence of the failure to care, to love, to give birth and to partake in the cycle. T. S. Eliot creates a parallel between the wretched land of the Fisher King and the slaughter, destruction and ruin created by World War II.

The barren landscape left by World War II reflects the inner decay of humanity the same way the sterile land of the Fisher King is an outward projection of his inner sickness. The desolate landscape of the wasteland described in the beginning of the poem, returns along with the character of

the Fisher King. Eliot describes the miserable condition of the wasteland, sterile, dry and unbearable.

He creates a surreal image of a desert " mountains of rock without water", " endless plains", " cracked earth" (370), and " bats with baby faces in the violet light" (380). This place transforms into the barren kingdom of the Fisher King, suggested by " the empty chapel", which is an allusion to the Chapel Perilous. In the legend of the Holy Grail, Parsifal found the Holy Grail in the Chapel Perilous and life returned to the land. However, in the empty chapel in the poem there are only " dry bones", signifying that vitality will not return to the land like it does in the legend.

Instead society continues to decay illustrated in the line " London Bridge is falling down" (427). In reality there is no Holy Grail, there is no change: " I sat upon the shore/ Fishing with the arid plain behind me" (424-425). The banal, circular sequence of human life continues. Eliot explores the themes of life, death, immortality and alienation throughout *The Wasteland*. These themes are examined in various historical contexts, from ancient myths to the modern society and tied together by the immortal characters, Sibyl and Tiresias. Disconnected by the varying historical context and the many narrators, T. S. Eliot's style of writing in *The Wasteland* mirrors the disintegrated moments that give meaning to human life.

Human life is cyclical, routine and mundane with memories as the only specks of color on an otherwise gray canvas. Death is not an ending; it is only part of the cycle. Immortality, the desire to forget and deprivation of emotion and of love are unnatural and create a partition from the human

world where the wasteland appears. Modern Society consists of failed relationships and hollow humans existing in the " Unreal City. " Its loss of fertility and love results in the emergence of a wasteland.