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## **Interface of Nihilism and Modernity: An Analytical View of T.S. Eliot's *The Waste Land* and a Philosophical Antidote**

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### **Abstract:**

Modernity, owing to its exuberant and enigmatic adventures did open the world to numerous glories, but without exaggeration it may be said that it has been welded with depravity. Whatever may be the claims of the scientific world, the whole narrative started to be looked at with suspicion at the emergence of the First World War. T.S. Eliot's poem *Wasteland* is an offshoot of the decadence resulted from this war and it highlights the degrading effects of the modernity as a whole. The poem replicates this entire panorama whereby religion or any other moral order have lost their hold, thus, the world is overpowered by what in philosophical terms is known as 'nihilism'. Meaninglessness has prevailed and the spirit of man's existence has been shattered. Nietzsche's philosophical evaluation regarding the whole state of affairs which he feared would turn the world into a Nihilistic state is crafted with artistic wonder in the 434 lines of this poem. The Poem highlights the dichotomy where nihilism and modernity are interfaced.

Therefore, the current study will try to expatiate over the nihilistic overtones of the poem and to show how it depicts the chaos prevalent owing to the degrading value system which modernity has resulted into. An analysis will be made to show how under the modern premises the existing established orders are rendered irrelevant. The aim of the study is also to point out how different mythological and philosophical systems are brought into account to penetrate the complacency and meaninglessness of the existing world.

**Keywords:** Modernity, Nihilism, Chaos, T.S. Eliot, *Wasteland*, Meaninglessness, Mythology, Philosophy.

### **Background...**

The term '*Nihilism*' is derived from a Latin word '*nihil*' meaning a thing which has no existence. The term was first coined by *Ivan Turgenev*, the Russian novelist in his famous novel *Fathers and Sons* (1862). The term in the novel endorses to debunk all the existing and traditional social and moral orders. Turgenev had the influence of the

collective viewpoint of the Russian intelligentsia to which the entire gamut of the existing orders were useless. Thus, the whole intellectual makeup of Russia was bent on to deflate the current prevailing order. Hence, at the very outset, this discourse tried to prove the futility of the social fabric of the world. All the prevalent belief system of the world fell to shambles under the radical character of this movement. The far reaching effects of the movement threatened the whole narrative of the social and religious setup of the world. So as natural, the movement stimulated much debate and arrested a series of the reactionary voices. Even though there were some sympathizers who considered their bold viewpoint as heroic and sacrificial but nonetheless it became the subject material for a generation of writers in the literary world who vehemently exposed the chaotic implications of the movement as a whole. The chief literary attempts in this direction were, "Pisemski's *Troubled Seas* 1863), Leskov's *No Way Out* (1864), Goncharov's *The Precipice* (1869) and Dostoevski's *The Possessed* (or *The Devils*, 1871-72)." (Cuddon, 547)

Thus, Nihilism as a philosophical dictum pertains to negate the entire meaning of the world and sweep the world into pessimism. It deflates all the social, moral and religious orders and stresses their inapplicability to work collectively as the guiding force behind the human life.

Thomas Sterne Eliot was born on 26 of September, 1888. He died in London in 1965. He was an Anglo-American poet, playwright, essayist and one of the progenitors of literary modernism. In fact, to think of modernism without this acclaimed literary entity would be a baseless enterprise. The poet owing to his innovative stylistic tendencies revolutionized poetry and exposed the genre to new avenues. His poetic experiments like *The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock* published seven years before *Wasteland* had already set the stage for his distinctive nerve to depart from the existing poetic ideals. The poet did not write so much a great deal, but nonetheless his poems shook the entire notion of verse and channelized his radical character as a modernist in the strict sense whose poetry is wrought with the cerebral and elite technical experiments. His own view corroborates towards this fact, as he says, "my reputation in London is built upon one small volume of verse, and is kept up by printing two or three more poems in a year. The only thing that matters is that these should be perfect in their kind, so that each should be an event." (Eliot, *The Letters of T. S. Eliot*, 285) *The Waste Land* arrived on the scene with the same astounding merit. The poem with its edition in 434 lines got published in 1922. Eliot had first composed it into around two thousand lines, but, it was Eliot's friend Ezra Pound who edited it into the present wonderful craft.

### **An Analytical View...**

The poem *The Waste Land* is one of the outstanding artistic attempts the whole literary world has ever witnessed. This wonderful masterpiece nonetheless shook the entire literary world both for its unique artistic texture and the brilliant capture of the atrophy and decadence of the modern industrial world. The poem is divided into five

sections; *The Burial of the Dead*, *A Game of Chess*, *The Fire Sermon*, *Death by Water* and *What the Thunder Said*. This brilliant artistic endeavour came to the front in 1922 i.e. only three years after the First World War. The War nevertheless turned this world into a living hell with huge destruction and devastation. The unimagined ruin in terms of around ten million lives being eliminated and innumerable materials being destroyed, turned the world anarchic and full of depravity. Thus, Modern age wrought with the continuum of the advancement in science and technology has brought the man at crossroads. The war made the man lose hope in the glorious scientific world. It seemed there was a hidden anarchist in the new discoveries and inventions. Though the effects were felt at the wake of the war but it goes back to the epoch of renaissance that the West boiled with the hot intellectual debate. Ideologies after ideologies swept the West with a recurrent challenge for the established orders. Religion as an established institution started losing its hold since then, as remarks Seyyed Hossein Nasr in his awakening text *A Young Muslim's Guide to the Modern World*:

These challenges to religion have varied from political ideas which are based on secularism to the denial of the religious foundation of morality and the philosophical denial of the reality of God and of the afterlife or of revelation and sacred scripture. (Nasr, 142)

This whole panorama led the world into chaos. Eliot, in his poem takes notice of the same fact. The existing established religious or moral orders are shunned as irrelevant and the world is turned into a nihilistic state under which the spirit of man's existence is shattered. What Nietzsche observed in terms of the inapplicability of the established orders which turned the world godless in every aspect is the thematic pattern within which Eliot has framed this poem. Nietzsche's stance regarding this wretchedness was an open warning in which he alerted man towards the prognosis of the shaking influence of modern age. His maxim of 'God is dead', primarily in the collection *The Gay Science* (1882) whereby in a proclamatory tone, he points out:

God is dead. God remains dead. And we have killed him. How shall we comfort ourselves, the murderers of all murderers? What was holiest and mightiest of all that the world has yet owned has bled to death under our knives: who will wipe this blood off us? (Nietzsche, *The Gay Science*, 120)

He elaborates this view in his famous text *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* as:

When Zarathustra had heard these words he took his leave of the saint and spoke: "What would I have to give you! But let me leave quickly before I take something from you!" – And so they parted, the oldster and the man, laughing like two boys laugh. But when Zarathustra was alone he spoke thus to his heart: "Could it be possible! This old saint in his woods has not yet heard the news that God is dead!" – (Nietzsche, *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, 5)

This analytical stance created a sensation both in the intellectual and the common circles. This view rather pertains to the fact that the hollowness of the modern world

is bent with the consideration of the irrelevance of religion. His belief is incorporated by the essence that these orders have likely been shunned and there would be corrosive and mordant consequences with every metaphysical conviction side-lined and immense trouble will wreak havoc in the world.

T.S. Eliot does not formulate his critical view over a certain philosophical discourse but he narrates the deprivation and the decadence in his own artistic manner. With his artistic mastery, he depicts the nihilistic state by appropriating the essential milieu to negotiate this philosophical discourse, unlike the progenitors of this movement who programmatically tried to deflate the establishments. He penetrates deep into the western society, subjected to the large scale disintegration and chaos by the onslaught of the futile rendering of the scientific innovations.

At the very outset of the first section *Burial of the Dead*, Eliot captures the decadence of the modern world, thus abruptly setting the stage for the whole course of the thematic pattern of his work.

April is the cruellest month, breeding  
Lilacs out of the dead land, mixing  
Memory and desire, stirring  
Dull roots with spring rain.  
Winter kept us warm, covering  
Earth in forgetful snow, feeding  
A little life with dried tubers. (Eliot, WL, Burial)

The poet gives a reflection of the decadent social, political and moral atmosphere of the English society whereby everything is hollow and futile. April otherwise commences the blissful spring season with all its charm and newness. But in the poem's scheme of things, it is full of dryness and sterility. Again in the proceeding lines he gives the same symbolically negative picture of 'winter'. Thus, the poet captures the emptiness of his world around. In the same section the poet furthers his argument by alluding to scripture and shows the purposelessness of man as well as his world. In the rich and profound verses Eliot highlights the barrenness of the modern world which by the insane use of the material provisions is turned into a waste land. This waste land has no fertility to nurture the roots or to ensure any kind of vegetation, but is only 'a heap of broken images'. There is disorder and disintegration all around. The poet says:

What are the roots that clutch, what branches grow  
Out of this stony rubbish? Son of man,  
You cannot say or guess, for you now only  
A heap of broken images, where the sun beats, (Eliot, WL, Burial)

The poet, through these beautiful verses gives the notion of the whole western culture with its crumbling shadow. Modernity has shattered everything from the west and has turned it only into "a heap of broken images". The whole natural world is captivated

under the clutches of the modern man. It seems that nature has lost its benignity and soothing quality to nourish the heart and the soul:

And the dead tree gives no shelter, the cricket no relief,  
And the dry stone no sound of water. (Eliot, WL, Burial)

In the last stanza of this section, the most indispensable idea endorsed with the central motif is crafted by the poet. He takes the reader towards the deprivation of the western city and begins his extensive narration of the pathetic situation under which the modern or a post-war man lives. The poem goes:

Unreal City,  
Under the brown fog of a winter dawn, (Eliot, WL, The Fire)

The poet declares London city as 'unreal' owing to the meaninglessness of its dwellers. The poet provides the reader with an account of the effects of the Great War which plagued West with around ten million deaths:

A crowd flowed over London Bridge, so many,  
I had not thought death had undone so many. (Eliot, WL, Burial)

Eliot further portrays the nightmarish consequences of the war by directly bringing a soldier named 'Stetson' whom the speaker asks about the dead soldiers of the War. He asks him what he did with the corpse which he planted in the garden. This corpse in fact is symbolic of the millions of the war victims. The poet says:

With a dead sound on the final stroke of nine.  
There I saw one I knew, and stopped him, crying:  
"Stetson!  
You who were with me in the ships at Mylae!  
"That corpse you planted last year in your garden,  
"Has it begun to sprout? (Eliot, WL, Burial)

So, this encounter with the soldier makes the reader realize that this poem is an offshoot of the Great War. This fact is also pointed out overtly in the study *From Homer to Eliot: Intertextuality and the Epic*, "the work that best expressed the mood of a post-war generation disillusioned by the loss of ideals and faith in progress." (Dupree, 7)

The poem progresses with the idea of the depraved relationships in the second section with a series of episodes in which the deplorable conditions of the city life are captured. The first episode depicts the wretchedness of a lady named *Philomel* whose relationship with her husband is pathetic, sans emotions and full of emptiness and artificiality:

As though a window gave upon the sylvan scene  
The change of Philomel, by the barbarous king  
So rudely forced; [...]  
Footsteps shuffled on the stair.

Under the firelight, under the brush, her hair  
Spread out in fiery points  
Glowed into words, then would be savagely still.  
“My nerves are bad tonight. 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 are you thinking”  
...  
“You know nothing? Do you see nothing? Do you remember  
“Nothing?” (Eliot, WL, A Game)

Family Relations is the main concern of the poem. Relationships in the western societies are hollow and artificial. There is nothing like love. Artificiality is reining the entire course of the families. The family system in West has overwhelmingly collapsed and consequently the whole Western social structure is in a worsening state. The ultimate result is — anarchy. The poem then outlines the general concern of meaninglessness entwined with heightening pathos:

“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 I ever do? (Eliot, WL, A Game)

Eliot bestows the pathetic sense to the lady which in turn replicates the mass level deprivation of the post-war western populace especially the traumatic conditions of the family life. This, in fact is an issue with a long series of thinkers and analysts who are worried about this fragmented family system. Most outstandingly this has some aching implications for traditionalists like Hossein Nasr. His concern in the book *A young Muslim's Guide to the Modern World* pertains to a smooth theoretical backing for this transition in the family vis a vis in the whole social structure. He remarks:

During the past two generations the atomized family has also begun to break up almost like the splitting of the atom. The rate of divorce, which for a long time was banned by the Catholic Church, has risen so sharply that today more than 50% of all marriages in the big urban centres of America and much of Europe lead to divorce and many children are brought up in single parent families...Promiscuity has now become so prevalent in the West, however, that many people instead of calling promiscuity "promiscuity" simply have tried to change the moral norms themselves and believe that any kind of sexual behaviour that is followed by an adult is morally acceptable as long as it does not affect the lives of other people. For many modern Westerners there is no longer any Divine Norm or morality of Divine Origin which is accepted in this crucial question. (Nasr, 202)

The poem progresses with the same motif with another episode in which the speaker narrates an agonizing account of Lil, another female character. The speaker reveals to her friends in a brothel, (clued in the line preceding the episode, “Presiding lidless eyes and waiting for a knock upon the door”) that how she advised Lil to prepare herself in a good fashion for her husband Albert recently discharged from his military service. The speaker advises her in the following manner:

When Lil’s husband got demobbed, I said-  
 I didn’t mince my words, I said to her myself,  
 HURRY UP PLEASE ITS TIME  
 Now Albert’s coming back, make yourself a bit smart.  
 He’ll want to know what you done with that money he gave you  
 To get yourself some teeth. He did, I was there.  
 You have them all out, Lil, and get a nice set,  
 He said, I swear, I can’t bear to look at you.  
 And no more can’t I, I said, and think of poor Albert,  
 He’s been in the army four years, he wants a good time,  
 And if you don’t give it him, There’s others will, I said. (Eliot, WL, A Game)

This whole account clearly depicts the wretched conditions of the society where relationships are based only on animal desires. There is no scope for mutual love and happiness. Materialism has led man to merely satisfy his animal instincts and feed his arrogant self. The verse ‘hurry up please’ is a clichéd account of the machinations of the modern age in which everything is weighed on material terms. There is no scope for the spirit to be fed in humane terms. The speaker further reproaches her friend for her exhausted charm to which her friend replies that she has already bore five children with deadening strokes. The poet says:

You ought to be ashamed, I said, to look so antique.  
 (And his only thirty – one.)  
 I can’t help it, she said, pulling a long face,  
 It’s them pills I took, to bring it off, she said.  
 (She’s had five already and nearly died of your George.) (Eliot, WL, A Game)

This whole scene puts forth the general social contamination whereby relationships are reduced only to fulfil the sexual desires of men and the marriages, merely to agreements and surrenders of women to lead their slavish lives.

The theme of sexual promiscuity is again carried in the third section called *The Fire Sermon*, in the famous typist episode. A lady is visited by a man, who after being first served meals, satisfies his animal instincts. The lady remains at the height of her docility. The poet says:

The meal is ended, she is bored and tired,  
 Endeavours to engage her in caresses  
 Which still are unreproved, if undesired  
 Flushed and decided, he assaults at once;

Exploring hands encounter no defense;  
His vanity requires no response,  
And makes a welcome of indifference.(Eliot, WL, The Fire)

The terrible modern world is depicted with its prevalent unworthiness, rueful and nasty condition. The man leaves straight and mechanical and the lady is glad for he leaves, "Well now that's done: and I'm glad it's over." This brings into limelight the amplifying effects of the War for it turned the world into a dystopia and devoid of any meaning.

The poem reaches the pinnacle of its thematic concern when the poet points towards the degenerating circumstances of the modern world. The poet achieves his purpose by bringing forth the crumbling state of affairs of the London City in his erudite and eloquent tone in the following manner:

London Bridge is falling down falling down falling down(Eliot, WL, What the Thunder)

The whole scenario in turn, reveals the atrophy of the modern city and the debilitating effects of modernity in general. Man has turned into an immoral beast and his race for material pursuits has turned him into an unemotional entity. Therefore meaninglessness has engulfed the world stage. The anarchy prevalent is a recurring concern for the humanity. Hopelessness has occupied its space in every quarter of the social fabric. Religion as discussed earlier has lost its grip. The result of man's split with these orders is what has been figured out craftily by the poet in all the above designs.

After capturing an extensive picture of the whole deprived and decadent Western society, the poet finally in the last few stanzas dramatically comes to a solution. Owing to his in-depth study to the Hindu mythology and scripture his belief is shaped by the fact that the redress of the whole atrophy is hidden in this tradition. He crafts the account at the end while alluding to Upanishads. He makes the reader sense how the frustrations of the modernity can be eliminated through the antidote he suggests and with which he himself finds peace. Nasr in his *Young Muslim's Guide* also hints towards this issue as he says:

From the beginning of the twentieth century...many Westerners who have had the thirst for spiritual experience and religious knowledge but who have not been able to find what they have been seeking in the context of the existing religious institutions in the West have turned to Eastern religions. Some have turned to Hinduism, others to Buddhism and a number to Islam and especially to Sufi teachings within Islam. This tendency has certainly grown during the last few decades and continues to be strong. (Nasr, 145)

Therefore, Eliot had a keen insight of this entire predicament and with same insight he suggests salvation in the mythological belief system. He rather tried to build a deep bond between man and the tradition. His profound research in the rituals and the mythological systems make his stance clear as remarked in the study *From Homer to Eliot: Intertextuality and the Epic* as, “his reading in these and similar studies provided a way of seeing behind present-day actions a substratum of past beliefs and practices that, though now lost to consciousness, continue to inform our daily lives in hidden but significant ways.” (Dupree, 8) Thus, Eliot wonderfully concludes the poem by bringing forth a maxim from Upanishads in order to bracket the central thematic pattern of his poem. Eliot says:

Ganga was sunken, and the limp leaves  
 Waited for rain, while the black clouds  
 Gathered far distant, over Himavant.  
 The jungle crouched, humped in silence.  
 Then spoke the thunder (Eliot, WL, What the Thunder)

The poet hints at the Hindu implications of his anecdote. Ultimately he derives some sort of teaching from this mythic system, he says: ‘Da-Data’ which means Give, ‘Da-Dyadhvam’, which means to sympathize and ‘Da-Damyata’ which means to control and ends this wonderful artistic piece with words again from Upanishad which read:

Shantih Shantih Shantih (Eliot, WL, What the Thunder)

These words finally elaborate the notion that the poet has found peace from the wretched and devastative predicament of the modern world.

Therefore, the poem has a hidden message for the reader whereby the poet invites him to a certain belief system in order to reform the prevalent anarchy. He finds the solution to confront the nihilistic state by delving into the rich repository to end the chaos and disorder all around.

### **Conclusion**

Therefore, the poem *The Waste Land* has an in-depth capacity to bear the philosophical notion to negotiate the praxis of the modern age with an adverse smothering of the cosmic humanistic ideals. It captures a graphic picture of the entire recesses of the modern society where the materialistic dictums are on vogue wreaking havoc on the established moral orders. The freedom which man celebrates has caused devastation in every social system. The dignity of man is eclipsed under the shadow of the animalistic instincts. The poem brilliantly exhibits the whole narrative with a photographic veracity. The series of episodes in terms of depicting the sexual promiscuity and family breakdown glimpse the fragmentation and chaotic world affairs. Thus, the poem’s transparent narration of the modern world’s denigration is a vivid account of the nihilism within which the world is caught. The poem displays the poet’s own keen insight of the fatigued society. He scathingly repudiates this entire

ill-formed setup and at the end wonderfully corroborates the antidote wrought with his own belief in a spiritual and mythical system.

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