

Theme of Disillusionment and Despair in T.S. Eliot's *The Waste Land*

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Abstract. Disillusionment and despair is the main theme of the modern poetry after the First World War. In the context of this theme, *The Waste Land* comes in its own frontier. The poet of this era presents the realistic and unconscious modern world. The depressed and despaired realities of life have shattered all illusions and romantic dreams. The tragedy of everyday life has induced in the poet a mood of disillusionment and so the poetry of today is bitter and pessimistic. *The Waste Land* is a documentary movie of disillusionment of the post-war generation. It examines the spiritual poverty of an urban age. The poem presents a vision of dissolution and spiritual drought.

Keywords : Disillusionment; mechanical; monotony; desolation; anxious; Pessimistic

Twentieth century in English literature is marked with the emergence of new and varied values in all fields of life. In this century the eminent writer and the poet, Thomas Stearns Eliot has made his special marks in the field of modern poetry. Eliot once said :

A great poet in writing of himself, writes his age.
(Tilak 2010 : 2)

This remark is applicable to Eliot himself. There is a conception about literature that Literature is the sensitive record of what the author feels in the society, sees in the society and observes in the society and Eliot proves this conception through his poetry and drama. T.S. Eliot is a classical writer. In 1928, he declared that he is classicist in literature, a royalist in politics and Anglo catholic in religion. Eliot's poetry and drama can not be understood without an understanding of his age.

Modern poetry is marked with a spirit of revolt. The top root of the new poetry which sprang up after the First World War is the revolt against 'Humanism' and 'Romanticism'. It is marked with pessimistic note. This note is due to poet's consciousness of the grim realities of modern materialistic life. This life has shattered all romantic dreams. The age of machinery has created a feeling of frustration among the people. The poet is in a mood of disillusionment resulting in a bitter expression in the form of poetry. Eliot's *The Waste Land* reflects the tragic gloom and despair of the post-war world.

By the last decade of the 19th century, there was a complete breakdown of the agrarian way of life and economy. It meant the end of rural England and the increasing urbanisation of the country. Industrialisation and urbanisation brought in their wake their own problems. There arose problems like the problem of over crowding, housing shortage, a significant increase in vice and ugliness. The atmosphere has increasingly grown more smoky and noisy. There has been a loosening in sex taboos and an increase in sexual promiscuity, for public opinion does not operate as a check in a crowded city. Early 20th century poetry widely reflects all these evil effects of industrialisation. Ennui and boredom of city life and its agonising loneliness are all brought out by poems like *The Waste Land*. The Victorian ethics of competition and money-relationship has given place to a new concept of social responsibility and social morality. The study of the sub-conscious, even the unconscious, is a major theme of modern literature. Intellect is no longer regarded as the means of true and real understanding, and emphasis is placed on feeling and intuition. Eliot traces the ills of present civilisation to the loss of religious faith.

Victorian taboos on sex are no longer operative. There is a break up of the old authoritarian pattern in family relationship. Woman has come to her own, and the notion of male superiority has suffered a serious blow. The war of the generations, of the old and the young, has resulted in a re-orientation of parent-child relationship. The rootlessness has brought in its wake its own problems and frustration. Eliot's poetry reveals a harrowing consciousness of this phenomenon of 20th century city life.

The first world war strained the authoritarian pattern of family relationship and increased tension and frustrations. The First World War brought an evil consequence for this modern era. It became a mundane result for the modern people. Political and religious scepticism, general disillusionment, cynicism, irony etc. have become the order of the day. Neurosis and spiritual gloom are widespread. Economic depression, unemployment, overpopulation, acute shortage etc have increased the hardship of life, and caused stress, despair and strain and nervous breakdowns.

Disillusionment and despair is the main theme of the modern poetry after the First World War. In the context of this theme, *The Waste Land* comes in its own frontier. The poet of this era presents the realistic and unconscious modern world. The depressed and despaired realities of life have shattered all illusions and romantic dreams. The tragedy of everyday life has induced in the poet a mood of disillusionment and so the poetry today is bitter and pessimistic.

Indeed, *The Waste Land* is a documentary movie of disillusionment of the post-war generation. The poet who is a cinematographer presents than any other poem of that decade echoes the sense of hopeless drift which afflicted the generation after the First World War. Undoubtedly, it presents the vision of Europe,

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mainly of London, at the end of the First World War. The poem exposes spiritual barrenness of modern society. The primary theme of the poem is the barrenness of man's contemporary spiritual state. The poem also exposes disillusionment of modern society. Sexual relationship between men and women has been reduced it to the level of the beasts which is the basis of the decay of modern civilization. It has caused the fertility of the land to be brought down, *The Waste Land* reflects the tragic gloom and despair of the post-war world. Twentieth century may be regarded as a poetry of despair, the life of the waste-landers has become unromantic. The poet looks at life without the spectacle of romance, and points it out with all its ugliness. The technique of the cinematographer is also exploited by the poet of *The Waste Land*. It is the poet's consciousness of the human situation – the human predicament, Which has been the same in all ages which should inspire poetic creation. Such is the source of inspiration of his own *Gerontion*, *The Waste Land*, and *The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock*.

In Eliot's *The Waste Land*, love degenerates into lust, and the perversion of the sexual function is shown to be the root cause of degeneration, despair, disillusion and decay. Thus in the *Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock* is at the centre, and the entire poem is but a projection of his consciousness. Similar is the case with *Gerontion*. *The Waste Land* examines the spiritual poverty of an urban age. T.S. Eliot presents in his poetry :

The torturing impact of the great modern city
upon the lonely individual.(Mundra 2001:15)

It depicts the urbanity of the modern world where men are turning their back to spiritual pursuits. Therefore it is a waste land – dry, desiccated and dreaded. The modern civilisation is spiritually barren, lascivious, dry and boring. There is not real love, no fertility, not life. But Eliot is not at all pessimistic. He hopes that the modern civilisation can be saved only with the help of the Oriental Philosophy of the Budha and *the Upanishads* and the occidental religion of Christianity.

The poem presents a vision of dissolution and spiritual drought. The spiritual and emotional sterility of the denizens of the waste land arises from the degeneration, vulgarisation and commercialization of sex. Eliot's study of the fertility myths of different people had convinced him that sex-act is the source of life and vitality, when it is exercised for the sake of procreation and when it is an expression of love. But when it is severed from its primary function, and is exercised for the sake of procreation and when it is an expression of love. But when it is severed from its primary function, and is exercised for the sake of momentary pleasure, it becomes a source of degeneration and corruption.

The Waste Land reflects contemporary spirit in its totality. Its anxiety, its despair, its neurosis, its boredom and mental vacuity have all been brought out. In the contemporary waste land there is corruption and sexual degeneration at all levels. The title *A Game of Chess* suggests that sex has become a matter of intrigue, a matter of moves and countermoves, a source of momentary pleasure, a sordid game of seduction and exploitation of the innocent.

Thus expressing the utter anarchy, futility and chaos of values in the modern world, life is like a dead alley, leading nowhere, and it is full of dead things – dead spiritually and emotionally. Life has become a meaningless routine.

The hot water at ten.
And if it rains, a closed car at four.
And we shall play a game of chess,
Pressing lidless eyes and waiting for a
knock upon the door. (Jain 1992:135-139)

Their sex-relation, too, is a meaningless routine, a mere mechanical relationship bringing them no satisfaction.

The Waste Land made a powerful impact upon the Western World and it went into many-European languages. The poet also shows the monotony, lifelessness and boredom of blight in civilised London, alike in the typist's bed-sitter, where love making, which should be fertilizing and significant, is automatic and creates the feeling now that's done; and I am glad it's over :

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? (131-134)

The remoteness of the civilisation presented in *The Waste Land* from the natural rhythms is brought out, in ironical contrast.

Not only sex has been commercialised, there also prevails abnormal sex-practices of various kinds. Thus Mr. Eugenides is a homosexual and Hotel Metropole is a hot bed of homosexuality, a relationship which is essentially sterile. All Europe is burning with lust and sexuality. Such perversion of sex results in neurosis, boredom, ennui, frustration and disillusionment, despair and hopelessness of the modern man. This is symbolised by the crowds flowing over London Bridge, listless and apathetic with their eyes cast down. All this faithfully mirrored in *The Waste Land* and in this respect the poem may be called a social document.

T.S. Eliot is very largely correct in holding this view. Indeed, the poem is both a disillusionment of the Post-War Europe, and at the running from the beginning to the end of the poem, to bring out the decay and desolation of contemporary civilisation. Eliot uses the technique of ironic contrast to emphasise the difference between the parallel situations in the present and past. In the past, fairies walked on the banks of river Thames; today prostitutes and call -girls wander on the bank in search of sex. The fairies washed their feet in sodawater. Thus myths give a unity to the theme and employ the sameness of experience. The poem has been a deeper and deeper probing into the cause of contemporary frustration, despair and gloom. Man has become spiritually dry and so his house has grown decayed. Desolation and sterility result from loss of faith. In the modern 'Waste Land' there is nothing at Land which truly present the post-war disillusionment of European Civilization. The ravages caused by the world wars form the first and basic theme of *The Waste Land*.

The background of the poem is desolate Europe after the First World War and its central theme is the disorder, disintegration, agony and frustration that possessed the people during and after the war. The greatness of Eliot is now an accepted fact. He is one of those great poets who have written in the English language :

They are a part of the consciousness of the age
which cannot be understood without them.

(Tilak, 76)

He is a representative poet as his poetry shows a keen awareness of the ills of contemporary civilisation, its modes of living and ways of thought.

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