The Waste Land: T. S. Eliot's Journey of Realization and Revelation

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The Waste Land, by T. S. Eliot, appeared at a time when European society was not quite sure what to do with itself. Europe had just emerged from World War I, a war which had traumatized the continent and its society. Many felt the world was chaotic and inhumane. A sense of disillusionment and cynicism became pronounced and nihilism[1] grew in popularity. This was also a time of personal difficulty for Eliot due to his failing marriage and the disorder of his nerves. Eliot expressed all of these feelings in his poem. In fact, *The Waste Land* soon became known as "the work that best expressed the mood of a postwar generation disillusioned by the loss of ideals and faith in progress" (Dupree 7). *The Waste Land* does not, however, express only despair in the condition of modern society. Conscious of its actual degradation, Eliot sought a means to escape it. He did a great deal of research concerning fertility rituals and myths and indicated that "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). As Delmore Schwartz states, "Eliot's theme is the rehabilitation of a system of beliefs, known but now discredited" (209). Eliot felt that man needed to be brought back to these old beliefs, but was wary of stating this openly, fearing a direct approach would prevent the poem from being read. The modern man had become too hardened to accept Christian principles directly and, instead, must gradually be made aware of his condition. In order to achieve this, Eliot chronicled his

[1] Nihilism: (from the Latin *nihil*, nothing) a philosophical position which argues that the world, especially past and current human existence, is without meaning.

journey of realization and revelation in the form of *The Waste Land*, using the protagonist of the poem to represent his own passage to spiritual awareness and to convince man of the degradation of society and the need for reform.

The poem begins with the protagonist musing on spring:

> April is the cruelest 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. (1, 1-7)[2]

This passage is an indication of the extent of the degradation of man. He has sunken so low into depravity that he prefers to live a life of ignorance and to disregard the fact that he is living a half-life. April, the month in which spring begins, is no longer a joyous time in which new life is celebrated, but a cruel time of rebirth that reminds man that his own life is terribly empty.

The protagonist then addresses man directly, stating, "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" (I, 21-24). He then invites us into "the shadow of this red rock" (I, 26), an allusion to the Book of Isaiah, in which the Messiah's future coming is likened to "an hiding place from the wind, and a covert from the tempest; as rivers of water in a dry place, as the shadow of a great rock in a weary land" (*KJV Bible*, Isa. 32:2). Under this red rock, he will show the way to escape the mundane life man has brought upon himself.

The speaker then recalls the time he first realized the emptiness of his life. In the

[2] Citations from the poem are taken from *The Waste Land*, ed. Michael North (New York: Norton, 2001)

springtime, he says, he gave his lover hyacinths. Looking at her, with her arms full of flowers and her hair dripping wet, he expected to see happiness and fulfillment, but saw nothing. At this point, he realizes that true joy cannot be found in transitory things. The world holds nothing for him- "Oed' und leer das Meer" (1, 42)-desolate and empty is the sea. It is possible that Eliot came to this same realization through a similar cause, as he and his wife had a very unhappy relationship.

The protagonist then takes us on a journey through society, a journey that illustrates the full extent of human degradation and spiritual emptiness. In the first scene of "A Game of Chess," a wealthy couple is shown at home, living meaningless lives composed of dull routines. Their relationship is forced and artificial, each so self-absorbed that neither can communicate with the other.

In the second scene of this section, the extent of degradation is further revealed. A woman is in a pub discussing with a group of friends the advice she gave her friend Lil when Lil's husband, Alfred, was discharged from military service. She says she pointed out that Alfred, having been in the service for four years, "wants a good time" and told Lil, "if you don't give it to him, there's others will"(II, 148-149). She then rebuked Lil for looking "so antique" (II, 156), and Lil replied that it was because she had an abortion. She had already given birth to five children and did not want more. In this scene, sex is reduced to a duty a wife must perform to please her husband, and children are an obligation, not a joy.

In "The Fire Sermon," the depravity of man is further illustrated. A woman is shown in her apartment eating dinner with her lover. Their encounter after dinner is described thusly:

> The time is now propitious, as he guesses,
>
> 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. (III, 235-242)

When he leaves, "her brain allows one half-formed thought to pass: 'Well now that's done: and I'm glad it's over'."(III, 252) This attitude of indifference can be seen as even more depraved than lust and expresses the apathetic attitude of many after the war.

However, there is still hope. Sometimes, the protagonist can hear "the pleasant whining of a mandoline" (III, 261) near the walls of Magnus Martyr, a church "where fishmen lounge at noon" (III, 263). This brief glimpse of hope is an indication of the source of a meaningful life. The "fishmen" remind us of Jesus' disciples, the "fishers of men" (KJV Bible, Matt. 4:19), who were exhorted to journey throughout the earth, telling men of the gospel of Christ and the way to salvation.

In "Death by Water," the way of escape from the degradation of society is revealed. The protagonist tells us of Phlebas the Phoenician, who experienced death by water, which can be seen as a representation of baptism, the shedding of the sinful nature, and the acceptance of the "Living Water" (*KJV Bible*, John 7:38) of Christ. Phlebas is now dead to the world. He has forgotten "the cry of gulls, and the deep sea swell / and the profit and the loss" (IV, 313-314). He is no longer affected by the sin of modern society but lives separate from it. The narrator then addresses the reader: "Gentile or Jew / 0 you who turn the wheel and look to windward, / Consider Phlebas, who was once handsome and tall as you" (IV, 319-321). With this address, the

narrator reminds us that we are as mortal as Phlebas, and we also require this "Living Water." This passage is a direct contrast to "The Fire Sermon" quenching the fires of lust with the "Living Water" that provides spiritual cleansing. To truly experience life, our sinful nature must die.

The protagonist concludes by explaining his own realization that, like "Jerusalem Athens Alexandria" (V, 374), modern society is deteriorating: "London Bridge is falling down" (V, 426). At this time, he has a decision to make: "Shall I at least set my lands in order?" (V, 425) Will he avoid the decay of society and abandon his meaningless life for one with significance? His decision is evident in the last stanza of the poem. Amid the madness of the ruin of society, the protagonist finds "Shantih shantih shantih" (V, 433)-a peace that passes understanding. Like Phlebas, he has chosen to bid farewell to his dishonest, worldly self and surrender to the Living Water that has the power to quench the fires of corruption. It is through this passage that Eliot suggests his own discovery and his decision to experience the peace that passes understanding by surrendering the corrupt part of himself. The poem, composed of seemingly fragmented ideas and stream-of-consciousness thoughts, ends on a note of peace, a peace that Eliot has attained and wishes modern man to experience.

Works Cited

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Dr. Walter's Comments: *Cara's skillfully placed summatory phrases add rhetorical power to her "unified field theory" of deep meaning hidden in the debris of Eliot's influential Modernist poem.*