

## Reflection of Early Twentieth Century Spiritual and Moral Vacuity in the Poetry of T.S. Eliot

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**Abstract:** Literature of the early Twentieth Century reflected the turmoil that had engulfed the entire world. There was a feeling among the common people that humanity had achieved the material progress at the cost of spiritual and moral values. Uncertainty and disbelief created a disturbance and disequilibrium in man and society. Science created doubts about the authenticity of religion and dismissed man's role in the universe, that itself seemed meaningless. The mass destruction during the First World War intensified disillusionment further. With the higher connection and meaning gone, man was just a wanderer on the face of the earth. Universe was reduced from a cosmos to a chaos – devoid of any significance. The writers of the age tried to depict this anxiety in literature. The Present paper focuses on the poetry of T.S. Eliot where one gets a clear reflection of the spiritual and moral vacuity that was prevalent in the early Twentieth Century.

**Keywords:** Twentieth Century, Science, Religion, Spirituality, Morality, Vacuity.

### INTRODUCTION

The early part of the Twentieth Century was a period of rapid progress when new discoveries and inventions were made each day. The scientific and rational outlook of man challenged the religious beliefs as scientific and logical approach was applied to the study of *The Bible*, leading to the creation of doubt in man's mind regarding religion.

The long cherished values and beliefs were defied and there was a total reversal of the old principles that had upheld mankind for so long. The social ideals were 'falling apart' and the Church that was earlier considered as the centre of values, was unable to hold the society together. The moral and ethical values were pushed to the back stage, which resulted in the confusion in the standards whereby man lives. What was left was the human life devoid of any real larger significance. It became illogical and irrational. There was no higher motive seen and a sense of meaninglessness prevailed.

Expressing his concern regarding the happenings, Ruskin exclaimed: "If only the Geologists would let me alone, I could do very well, but those dreadful hammers! I hear the clink of them at the end of every cadence of the Bible verses [1]." He was aware of the damage that geology with its rational viewpoint had done to the contemporary collective consciousness. Realising the gravity of the situation, Berdyaev stated: "Man stands amid a frightening emptiness. He no longer knows where the keystone of his life may be found; beneath his feet he feels no depth of solidity [2]." John Tyndall, in a lecture in 1874 said that in the Eighteenth Century, men had an "unwavering trust" in the "chronology of the Old Testament", but in Victorian

times men have had to become accustomed to "the idea that not for six thousand, nor for sixty thousand, but for aeons embracing untold millions of years this earth has been the theatre of life and death [1]."

The scientific outlook out rightly dismissed religion and a whole set of values that man had upheld for ages appeared useless. The focus of man shifted from God being the centre of the universe to a disparate pursuit of materialistic and worldly concerns which sublimated the spiritual and religious ideals. The stress was focused on the body but the soul was neglected. William Barrett expressed his uneasiness on the matter in his book *The Irrational Man* as, "The central fact of modern history in the West ... is unquestionably the decline of religion – it is no longer the uncontested centre and ruler of man's life – there is a loss of belief, though this loss is due to the critical in roads of science." [3] The homelessness and loneliness of man became unbearable. He was getting detached from the roots.

Scientific advancements had other harmful outcomes also. The First World War saw an exponential enhancement in the human destructive potential. The magnitude of the loss of men and material was unseen and unrecorded earlier in the history of human

civilisation. It not only had its impact on the course of human civilisation, but fractured the psychological wellbeing of man. It was what Henry James called, "The plunge of civilisation into this abyss of blood and darkness." [4] The War impacted the life of each and everybody. Europe in particular was a changed place after the 'Great War'. There was a marked shift in the ideas and ideology of the people. D. H. Lawrence in his novel, *Kangaroo*, writes:

*It was in 1915, the old world ended. In winter 1915-16, the spirit of old London collapsed, the city, in some way, perished, perished from being the heart of the world and became a vortex of broken passions, lusts, hopes, fears and horrors. The integrity of London collapsed, and the genuine debasement began... [5]*

London had been the centre of modern civilisation before the war: it was a city of sophistication, culture and standards. Towards the end of the war, it became a city symbolising horror, agony and anxiety. The disillusionment intensified as there was no particular consolation of anything great achieved after the war. Spiritual ideas and moral ideals gave way. What were left were disillusionment, anguish and chaos.

### Spiritual Vacuity

T.S. Eliot was the most influential poet of the first half of the Twentieth Century. He keenly witnessed the happenings that ultimately resulted in the decline of the spiritual values. His poetry is a commentary on the decline in the old value system that had upheld humankind for so long. He underlined a clear shift in the contemporary values from the old ones. The symbols and images that he employs in his poetry reflect this change. There is a fog in the opening lines of *The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock* symbolizing the blurred vision of the modern man whose religion is a matter of fashion reflecting in the 'necktie' and is not a discipline. The spiritual ideas were neglected and so were the practices. *Choruses from "The Rock"* underline his views on contemporary theology and spirituality. He felt as if people were moving away from the Church and losing their religion. Eliot's concern can be summarized in the following passage of the poem:

*Men have left GOD not for other gods, they say, but for no god; and this has never happened before That men both deny gods and worship gods, professing first Reason, And then Money, and Power, and what they call Life, or Race, or Dialectic. The Church disowned, the tower overthrown, the bells upturned, what have we to do But stand with empty hands and palms turned upwards In an age which advances progressively backwards? [6]*

Eliot felt that something has happened that "has never happened before": for the first time, man stands alienated from God. He claims that man is

facing a tremendous flood of meaninglessness for the first time. But he is quite critical of the logical approach as he condemns the knowledge gained to explain the surface phenomena, the physical and the visible world. Knowledge of this world has snapped man's connection with the other world. Man has gained knowledge of the laws of nature but not of the "stillness" of the soul. All the endeavours, "Brings knowledge of motion, but not of stillness;/ Knowledge of speech, but not of silence;/ Knowledge of words, and ignorance of the Word." (147) For Eliot, it is the ignorance and not the knowledge that mankind is progressing into. The ignorance is of the "Word" of Christ. Eliot saw modern secularism as having a negative impact on culture because to him it spelled disconnection. *The Hollow Men* as the title suggests, is a poem reflecting the humanity empty of spiritual values.

The point at which he began writing his critique of secular modern culture, *The Waste Land*, Eliot was struggling to understand how knowledge, experience, and belief all worked together to impact the culture and how they impacted his own sense of self [7]. *The Waste Land* is a reflection of disillusionment and disgust. London is reduced from a 'Dream City' to an 'Unreal city.' London is taken as a universal symbol of the Western civilisation going through decay and disintegration. The connection between man and man is lost and together they only form a 'crowd' that walks up and down the London Bridge. They are not physically dead but are spiritually and emotionally undone:

*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[8].*

Eliot in his poems paints the picture of the post war Europe where people are mentally aware but spiritually and morally lost. The progress is material but spiritually there is a drastic retreat. It is not London alone, but all the cities have become "Unreal" with false values. That is why Lyndal Gordon says that "the fact of Eliot's greatest, poetry was to convert urban reality into nightmare, hallucination, vision [8]." The life of the dwellers has become false, unreal and artificial at various levels. There is no clarity of vision as there is "brown fog" similar to the fog in Dante's Limbo, and Baudelaire's Paris. Eliot dismisses urbanisation and industrialisation. In his essay *Christianity and Culture*, he says:

*The more highly industrialized the country, the more easily a materialistic philosophy will flourish in it, and the more deadly that philosophy will be. Britain has been highly industrialized longer than any other country. And the tendency of unlimited industrialism is to create bodies of men and women — of all classes — detached from tradition, alienated from religion and susceptible to mass suggestion: in other words, a mob.*

*And a mob will be no less a mob if it is well fed, well clothed, well housed, and well-disciplined [9].*

He declares material progress as false; be it in London or anywhere in the world if achieved at the cost of spiritual and moral values. But material progress is there and everywhere leading Eliot to declare "Jerusalem Athens Alexandria / Vienna London / Unreal [6]". These are all cities without faith in religion. Hence they cannot develop as an organic whole. Instead of oneness, there is a heap of broken images. Mankind is unable to comprehend reality in totality. They can only know 'broken images' of life:

*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. (61)*

The images that Eliot uses are held together by the tension of their inter-relationships [10]. Eliot paints a picture of futility, trouble and purposelessness of the modern life. The imagery that he employs is selected very carefully to serve its purpose. Ackroyd says:

*Eliot was aware of what he called 'the void' in all human affairs—the disorder, meaninglessness, and futility which he found in his own experiences; it was inexplicable intellectually... [11].*

The search for any meaning or purpose is useless. The representation is of a failed civilisation wandering in emptiness. There is no conscience and hence no consciousness of spirituality or religion. The spiritual values have not been replaced by any other good forms of moral or ethical code, but there is a blankness of goodness and all good things have been replaced by evil where there is no help for pain and all men wander on the dark plain. The connection with God has been intentionally snapped by man who has caused the crumbling of the entire value system whereby man lived. *The Waste Land* is the true reflection of the spiritual void that was created in the age. Stephen Spender in his commentary says:

*The central theme of The Waste Land is the breakdown of civilisation, and the conditioning of those who live within it by that breakdown, so that every situation is a symptom of the collapse of values. This theme is prevented from being journalistic (expressing the despair of a post-war generation merely) by the vision of the whole past civilisation within which the contemporary examples of modern life are enclosed [12].*

The entire poetry of T.S. Eliot gives a judgement on the degraded European values in the Twentieth Century. Eliot wants man to evolve

consciousness that can understand mysteries of the universe beyond physical dimensions.

### **Moral Vacuity**

The decline of the religious and spiritual values impacted the social and moral codes of life as well. The economic position drew the focus of man and emphasis was laid more on the financial stability rather than on anything else. The European urban lifestyle was the representation of capitalistic society where money played a dominant role in every individual's life. The new economic order replaced the old established order leading to the degeneration of relationships and values. The moral and ethical codes of life were loosened leading to the emergence of double standards and hypocrisy in life. The worst hit was the middle class that witnessed a total reversal of Victorian moral system. The traditional roles of women in the household alone were gone and women claimed equal place alongside men. The institution of marriage was severely hit as people adopted the practical approach to life where money had gained the centre stage position. *The Waste Land* narrates the exact story/stories of the moral corruption prevalent in the times. The physical desires took over ignoring the sanctity of marriage. A different new morality established itself which was in complete contrast with the earlier one. The new morality, thus, advocated the release of sex from unnatural restraints, taboos and inhibitions, so that it would fall into place among other natural instincts and demand no more than its normal place in human affairs [13].

In the section *A Game of Chess* of *The Waste Land*, Eliot paints the picture of a rich and luxurious setting. The scene juxtaposes the past and the present and draws the meaning. There is sexual readiness that we see in the section. There is a lack of value system to check licentiousness. The sense of sin and vice in premarital or extramarital relations was not there. The example of the typist and the carbuncular is a typical representation, "Exploring hands encounter no defence;/ His vanity requires no response,/ And makes a welcome of indifference[6]." The incident evokes 'indifference' to the act and it becomes a momentary release from the monotonous city life routine for the pair. There is loneliness of the individuals as they are cut off from the roots. According to Cleanth Brooks, "The seduction amounts almost to a rape, and in a double entendre, the rape are actually described in terms of the game [14]." The European lifestyle becomes empty of thought and the actions are meaningless. The civilisation seems to be moving with the momentum of falsehood. The presence of Tiresias fuses time and place thereby making it universal.

The scenes of moral laxity are time and again spotlighted by Eliot throughout his poetry. Eliot reinforces his point in the *Choruses from "The Rock"* where he underlines the moral corruption and laxity that has become the accepted part of the daily life. People

have given up the ethical core of existence and intentionally indulge in this kind of sloppiness. The filial ties have been broken and the relationships have become convenience based:

*Living on, sunken in moral corruption;  
Many came back well broken,  
Diseased and beggared, finding  
A stranger at the door in possession [6]*

Eliot is worried towards the moral and spiritual vacuity that has crept into the society and has snapped man's connection with the Divine. His is a keen observer that can see the tragedy behind the landscape. His poetry is a true reflection of the happenings of his time.

### **CONCLUSION**

Towards the end, one can say that the early part of the Twentieth Century was a turbulent period. The scientific advancements and the World War I impacted all the spheres of man's life. Europe was never the same again and the whole human psyche had been split by the happenings of the world. The connection between man and God was gone as man questioned the very existence of God on the logical grounds. The values that humanity had cherished for so long vanished and there was despair, anxiety and hopelessness in life. The poetry of T.S. Eliot is a true reflection of the spiritual and moral vacuity that had crept in the human civilisation. Eliot focuses the vacuity and emptiness of values to suggest value. He dismisses the logical and rational approach of man and wants humanity to surrender to God with full faith.

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