

Waiting in T. S. Eliot's 'The Waste Land'

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Abstract

Eliot's 'The Waste Land' has never ceased stirring controversy among critics and readers of English literature. The multiplicity of its implications and deliberate gaps to be filled by the readers are some of its outstanding traits. The present paper, however, focuses its attention on the act of waiting as an underlying theme unifying its loose structure. The study comprises two sections. The first is preliminary in that it highlights the great amount of debate and polar appraisals of the poem and its writer. The second, much the longest, explores the different dimensions of this topic.

Key words: Waiting; The Waste land; Meaninglessness; Redemption, Mythological; Saving

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INTRODUCTION

Unquestionably, T.S.Eliot's 'The Waste Land' (1922) is not only the most controversial poem in the twentieth century, but also the most outstanding one due to the great extent of dispute contention it has stirred among critics, researchers and students of literature alike. This is not surprising, given the fact that it is one of the major landmarks of European modernism. It represents a major breakthrough in the career of T.S.Eliot, the bank clerk

and American expatriate who has chosen England as his lasting abode. Eliot's mentor, Ezra Pound, played a crucial role in bringing the poem to maturity and refining it of its superfluous elements. Thanks to Ezra Pound, many of the poem's original lines and allusions have been drastically compressed, modified and reconsidered. This is perhaps one reason for driving Eliot to dedicate the poem to him, "il miglio fabbro" (Eliot, 1936a, p.50). The Latin phrase here suggests "the better craftsman" (Wilson, 1000), which is a convenient term qualifying the great teacher and mentor. If we take into consideration the facts of the virtual composition of the poem, it will not be surprising to recall all those types of appraisal or downright castigation according to the perspective adopted in viewing the poem and its author. Among other assessments of Eliot's poetry in general is the view that likens it to "a black diamond prism, reflecting myriad rays" (Cattai, p.xi). Indeed such a description is valid enough as the poem is full of all types of echoes and references, some of which reverberate in the mind without giving a specific signification. This experimental side of Eliot's poetry has stirred much contention and admiration among readers regarding its thematic and structural aspects. One reason behind this dispute is the fresh technical sides which betray his excessive admiration of the Metaphysical Poets like John Donne. Indeed he has in mind their devices when writing his own poems. He is quoted to be saying that the sentences of such poets are "far from simple but this is not a vice; it is a fidelity to thought" (Matthissen, p.31). In terms of structure, Eliot tries in this poem to make poetry resemble the musical variations on one underlying rhythm. One of his sayings is that "poetry began with a savage beating a drum in a jungle" (Bergonzi, p.91). Thus the witty and allusive sides of his poetry become a hallmark bringing with it various insinuations and suggestions. Maud Ellman's statement is relevant here as she finds that his poetry is,

a hollow echoing construct whose views reverberate to their

own indeterminacy. The poem is a sphinx without a secret, a poem which has been so thoroughly explained that it is rarely read. (Ellman, 92)

What is striking in this excerpt is the term 'indeterminacy': the potentiality of the poem to drive the reader to generate or find out as many implications as possible. If we borrow the terminology of the reader-response theory used by critics like Iser, Jaus, Ingarden and Fish, we can say that "the horizon of expectations" on the part of the reader is limitless. Indeed 'The Waste Land' is a highly demanding text that entails a presence of mind, profound thinking and full awareness of the cultural, philosophical, anthropological, religious and literary references it endlessly evokes. Reading this poem poses a problem, a serious challenge as it deliberately defies and breaches the traditional modes of writing verse. The various and even contesting voices emanating from the poem concurrently entail the presence of a new sensibility, a new awareness of the innuendos condensed in his intellectual worlds. Here the reader has to assume the role of the collaborator, the co-producer of a text that heavily draws upon and virtually appropriates other texts from the east and west, religious and secular. In the final analysis of the poem and its writer, one can easily notice that there is no consent among critics and researchers regarding its message(s), technique, categorization, even though the poet himself has provided the text with many useful and illuminating notes. In his article entitled, 'On Poetry and Poets', Eliot highlights the significance of these notes in saying,

The Notes to 'The Waste Land', I had at first intended only to put down all the references for my quotations, and a view to spiking the guns of critics of my earlier poems which accused me of plagiarism. I had sometimes thought of getting rid of these notes; but now they can never be unstruck. They have had almost greater popularity than the poem itself (Eliot, 1957, p.118).

One of the poem's weak points has been identified as being mainly exhibitionistic and showing off "a pompous parade of erudition" (Martin, p.92). A direct corollary of the tendency to keep verse away from the interests of the layman and imbue it with epistemological and intellectual references is this deliberate and sometimes unnecessary mystification. The charge often raised against Eliot and his school is that it is highly self-centred and exclusive. Hence the argument of those critics who suggest that Pound, Eliot and Lewis "all wasted their time and talent because of their troubled relationships with their audiences" (Materer, p.222). Even a critic of deconstructionist orientation like Harold Bloom shares these arguments in stating that Eliot's poetry is "mostly weak and his prose wholly tendentious" (Bloom, p.87). The fragmentary side of 'The Waste land' is sometimes seen as evidence testifying to the validity of the view that the structure of the poem is a blemish and an inevitable consequence of "the pressures of work and

life" (Tamplin, p.27). These incompatible views stem from the fact that Eliot has manipulated the notion of 'intertextuality', i.e., the deliberate hints and allusions to other texts which eventually illuminate and intensify (or mystify?) Eliot's own poem. 'The Waste Land' is in fact an intellectual quest where poetry becomes a mask for profound philosophy and epistemological excavation of man's innermost burdens and misgivings. Ironically enough, it is the same side of Eliot's poem which has been viewed as a serious drawback could represent its main prerogative if viewed differently. New Critic I.A.Richards celebrates this type of modern and modernistic writing as heralding a new sensibility that has to be appreciated in its own right. He is of the opinion that Eliot's 'The Waste land' "is evidence of our social response to the educated man's realization that traditional sources of belief have disappeared" (McCormick, p.190). Along the same lines argues F.R.Leavis and identifies a particular trait in Eliot's poetry ('The Waste Land' being at the forefront) as resting in "a de-realizing of the routine, common sense world, while hinting at a hidden spiritual reality" (Leavis, p.96). Leavis's argument which brings to mind the Russian Formalists' concentration on the concept of defamiliarization champions the major and unprecedented accomplishments of Eliot's writing. However, the same points which are laudable and admirable in some critics' views could be used as evidence for others suggesting a certain process of "a decline in quality, a systematic deterioration" (Savage, p.6).

At any rate, 'The Waste Land' is marked by its combination of dramatic, symbolist and imagistic devices. Critic Bergonzi identifies further dimensions in this unique poem through the emphasis on its "cubism, extremity, atypicality" (Bergonzi, p.101). Because of the fresh technique employed in the poem, critics have not reached a consent regarding its type or even genre. Critic Hough, for instance, sees it as conveying an "epic quality" (Hough, 320), while to others it is "an anti-epic" (Bradbury & MacFarlane, p.617). Both have their own justifications and grounds for their judgments and speculations. As will be shown in the following pages, the hybrid mixture of forms, themes, techniques, disjointed structure could construe these incompatible and polar assessments. The multiplicity of views and contesting judgments have got nothing to do with the author's own intention or immediate objective. If we believe the author and keep aside Lawrence's dictum about the necessity of trusting the tale only, his words are illuminating, "a mere rhythmic murmur" (Righter, p.52). This is perhaps the reason behind his decision to become his own interpreter as seen in his notes affiliated to the original text. The poem operates on more than one level and is highly evocative. It eventually creates in the recipient's mind a host of reactions and sensations simultaneously. The title, for example, evokes some anthropological and cultural implications including the notion of the Apocalypses. The

intellectual climate prevalent in the poem sustains the view that the poem is after all "a war poem" (Hynes, p.23), although there is no direct or specific reference to war in the whole poem.

In its general framework, 'The Waste Land' is constructed out of a number of vignettes, patched quotations, and snapshots from different cultural, religious, and literary contexts. These references are from the east and west, modern and ancient, fictive and factual, historical and mythological. What brings all these together is the central topic of fear and barren lusts, of waiting and looking forward to a sign of redemption or salvation. It is worthwhile to note that T.S.Eliot shows a great interest and even admiration of the literary symbols or actual figures associated with waiting and endurance. His direct references to Hamlet and Michelangelo in his poems are axiomatic. Although he refers to that in his 'The Love Song of Alfred Pruffrock', 'I am not Prince Hamlet', the details of his biography show that waiting has been part and parcel of his own strained emotional life. His article on *Hamlet* has become a catch point for any serious reader or searcher of Shakespeare's masterpiece where waiting is pivotal. The other figure, actual this time, is Michelangelo. Again this name is associated with serene endurance and waiting. The Renaissance painter had to wait for four years to finish his frescoes "on the Sistine Ceiling, which amounts to forced labor to the Pope" (Canady, p.217). "Eliot's celebration of this famous painter is so great that he astounded the family by falling to his knees before Michelangelo's *Pieta*" (Gordon, p.122).

Eliot as an innovator has his own affinities with the arch modernist, James Joyce. The latter is known for his concentration on the concept of 'epiphanies', a series of situations where a new revelation or insight is triggered all of a sudden. Such is the formidable impact of the Joycean technique on Eliot that he (Eliot) wishes he had not come across anything by Joyce, "I wish, for my own sake, that I had not read it" i.e., (*Ulysses*) (Macrane, p.13). Eliot's structure of his poem is likewise fragmentary. These fragmentary shots and scenes in Eliot's poem revolve around five sections. Each section elaborates the stages of the modern searcher in pursuit of meaning and values in a valueless world. Section One is entitled 'The Burial of the Dead', with its emphasis on one natural element—dust. The second is 'A Game of Chess' with its direct implications of sexuality and procreation, but not regeneration. The third is 'The Fire Sermon' which foregrounds the second element—fire. In this section, Tiresias, the mythological seer and prophet, is introduced as a witness of the troublesome aspects of this futile world. In 'Death by Water', water is invoked not as a means of fertility and regeneration, but of death, drowning. In the last section 'What the Thunder Said', it is the wind that is stressed; it is the sound of thunder—the herald of rain. The orders of Buddha 'Da' are repeated thrice. Every time the same onomatopoeic sound is interpreted differently:

give, sympathize, and control. The poem terminates in the instructions of Lord Buddha about the necessity of transcending one's selfishness and annihilating his/her carnal desires and whims. Such desires have played havoc in the lives of the characters in the poem (with the exception of Tiresias). In this exploration of London's modern life, the searcher (perhaps the mouthpiece of the author himself) encapsulates in a very short span of time the whole history of Western culture and its impasse. The date of publication (1922) is noteworthy, as it reflects those hectic years of mass destruction and wholesale mortalities and genocide. In dovetailing the actual with the imaginary, historical with mythological, Eliot succeeds in depicting 'the panorama of futility', which is human history as Eliot conceives it. Through the shocking exploration of London's ignoble and dirty sides such as deserted streets, piers, brothels, pubs and places of rape, Eliot almost repeats the excursion of Leopold Bloom and Stephen Dedalus in Joyce's novel, *Ulysses* (1921). In both texts, time is compressed to the minimum and the dialogues or monologues keep shifting the reader to other dimensions in his/her experience. As such, the present reading of Eliot's poem is feasible, if not justifiable, if we bear in mind the extent of its pliability and potentiality to generate in the reader's mind a whole set of interpretations and judgments in accordance with the critical approach or perspective adopted. Of course, the study does not overlook Eliot's own warning within the corpus of the poem itself. Indeed Eliot quotes Baudelaire's impatient repudiation in his preface to *The Flowers of Evil*, of the self-complacent reader who is merely content with musing upon the tragic situation of the work "You,! hypocrite lecteur!_mon semblable,--monfere!" (Eliot, 1936a, p.76).

II

What has already been mentioned is no more than an aperçu of the inexhaustible amount of arguments, controversy and judgments raised by critics who make use of a host of approaches in dealing with the poem---the moral, philosophical, religious, linguistic, anthropological, cultural, mythological, sociological and historical. The present paper selects a specific point in the poem, which engages the forefront, in content and structure. This can be felt throughout the different encounters of the searcher and the allusions and references the poem abounds with. Time with its formidable impact on both individual and collective consciousness is one of the recurrent, if not obsessive, concerns of Eliot's poetry. It is in the contention of LG. Salinger that time in his work has "the same kind of prominence as the idea of Nature in the poetry of romantics" (Salinger, p.448). In 'Gerontion', for example, time takes on a metaphysical turn and seems to be the distracter and oppressor of man's basic needs and desires,

After such knowledge, what forgiveness? Think now

History has many cunning passages, contrived corridors,
And issues, deceives with whispering ambitions
Guides us by vanities. Think now
She gives when our attention is distracted
And what she gives, gives with such supple confusions
That the giving famishes the craving. Giving too late.
What's not believed in, or if still believed,
In memory only, considered passion. Gives too soon
Into weak hands, what's thought can be dispensed with
Till the refusal propagates a fear.

Again in 'Four Quartets', the movement in time, the process of narration and changeability seems to be inseparable from life itself. Even old men are not exempted from this Eliotic underlying principle of adapting oneself to the dictates of time, even though the outcome may not match the desired effect. As he puts it,

Old men ought to be explorers
Here or there does not matter,
We must be still and still moving
Into another intensity,
For a further Union, a deeper communion
Through the dark cold and the empty desolation.

In his early and late poetry, time is recurrent and overriding. A further example is helpful. In 'Burnt Norton', he says,

While the world moves
In appetency, or its metallated ways,
Of time past and time future.

This oscillation between two times (past and future) constitutes the agony of waiting, sprinkling the poem with its unfulfilled or deferred hopes. It is worthwhile to note that waiting here is different from, say, Maurice Blanchot's experience of this sensation. Unfortunately it is not accompanied by its sequel or opposite, i.e., forgetting. In his novel, *Waiting and Oblivion*, Blanchot spells out the inaccessible in Eliot's 'The Waste Land', "Forgetting, waiting; waiting that assembles, disperses; forgetting that disperses, assembles. Waiting, forgetting" (Khatab, p.84). A further point has to be raised here in advance, i.e., the concept of waiting in Eliot's 'The Waste Land' is different from that expounded by absurdists like Eugene Ionesco. In his *The Chairs* (1952), for example, the aging couple waits passively for guests who never show up. The same holds true to Samuel Beckett's *Waiting for Godot* (1956) where Vladimir and Estragon give the sonata of time past and awe-inspiring present. The Godot of the title does not abide by the promise he has given to the poor tramps and instead keeps them waiting in their barren world endlessly. Harold Pinter's *The Birthday Party* (1958) emulates the Beckettian devices in order to show Stanley's fear of the sinister atmosphere besetting his experience at the seaside resort. His waiting finally culminates in the advent of the two strangers, McCann and Goldberg that put an end to his waiting in one of the memorable anticlimactic scenes.

In contrast to all those instance, waiting in Eliot's poem serves many thematic and structural sides. Almost

everything in it is involved with waiting in one way or another. If the poem, as already suggested, suffers from fragmentation in having an episodic and dislocated structure, the notion of waiting informs almost every bit and piece of 'The Waste land' and eventually bestows upon it a sort of cohesive unity. The central pattern of waiting is, of course, present in the title of the poem. The present of modern European culture is inflicted with sterility and spiritual desertification as the poem keeps reiterating. Thus the posterior or logical inference is the inevitable waiting for the redeeming moment of fertilization and evading all symptoms of modern malaise. It is this aspect of the poem that construes the fear expressed in the initial part of the poem, 'April is the cruelest month'. This section stresses the cycle of the seasons and the succession of nature's changes which contrasts vividly with man's invariable pursuit of lusts and carnal desires,

April is the cruelest month, breeding
Lilacs out of the dead land, mixing
Memory and desire, stirring
Dull roots with spring rain. (lines1-4)

This promise of revival takes the speaker by surprise since human life as perceived here is subject to the oscillation between "aspiration and despair" (Wright, p.237), i.e., and can not dream of attaining a rapid end for this gnawing waiting. Eliot's initial lines acquire additional significance as they indicate the underlying matrix of the poem's structure. It is the painful pursuit for a sign of redemption, of fecundity and regeneration, as occurring in nature.

This pursuit takes the speaker or searcher to different parts of modern London--bridges, chapels, bars, brothels, offices, parks...etc. Having given a comprehensive inventory of London through these vignettes and short scenes, the poet brings us to the instructions of the oriental philosophy and theology where peace (Shantih) becomes feasible. Unlike the nihilistic visions of the absurdists, waiting here is not totally futile. The poem does suggest a kind of hope, and possible redemption,

I sat upon the shore
Fishing with the arid plain behind me.(lines 424-425)

In contrast to the act of fishing 'behind the gas station'(line190), the speaker's final fishing is suggestive enough. It is far away from 'the rats' alley/Where the dead men lost their bones'(lines 115-6). In other words, the feasibility of fishing now is recognized when we remember that 'the arid plain (is) behind' the speaker. By the same token, one can say that a new vista of experience and hope might loom in his horizon.

Waiting, then, is part and parcel of the thematic and structural sides of 'The Waste Land'. In the scene already discussed, waiting is embodied in actual and concrete terms. Nevertheless the innumerable allusions and references contribute to enhancing this underlying topic. Take for instance the initial epigraph of the poem. In the

original plan of the poem as Eliot's wife suggests in her recollection of the poem and its composition, Eliot had in mind Conrad's famous words of 'The horror /The horror'. Thanks to Pound's advice, Eliot replaces this original epigraph by the current one which hinges on the idea of waiting,

Nam Sibyllam quiedam Cumis ego ipse oculis meis vidi in
ampulla pendere, et cum illi pueri dicerent: Ei Bvza a ri Θ E zEis
respndebat illa: 'arro ΘavEiv Θ' Ezw. (Eliot, 1988, p.85)

This passage from *The Styricon* betrays the sense of imprisonment and longing to put an end to the intolerable state of meaningless waiting. Indeed the culminating scenes of the poem run in the same direction as they unfurl the state of imprisonment that is the inescapable lot of humankind. In ancient mythology, the Sibyl, a visionary woman, asks gods for granting her immortality. In her fever for this gift, she forgets to ask a further offer: eternal youth. Thus she was granted the former, but without the bliss of the latter. Hence her shrinking and turning into a bundle of bones and skin hung in a jar. When children used to ask her about her utmost desire, her answer is one and invariable: death. In the poem's various scenes and situations, many people are put in a similar situation where waiting can only be ended by death as their existence turns into a kind of death-in-life. Accordingly, it is hard to accept the view which sees this epigraph as "hardly elucidative" (Davidson, p.122). It does suggest this craving for a release from the unbearable process of meaningless waiting. Critic Hugh Kenner paraphrases her blight as resting in the compulsion "to remain alive" (Kenner, 136). The characters in the poem strive to remain alive, waiting impatiently for salvation. The Sibyl longs to death as a solution to her predicament. Between these types of waiting, the poem takes its precarious march. Thus the mythological references as suggested by the Sibyl epigraph bestow upon 'The Waste Land' richness and multiplicity stemming from the act of waiting and its different manifestations. The work Eliot makes use of is Sir James Frazer's *The Golden Bough* (1922). Eliot acknowledges the great impact of this book on his plan for the poem and its themes, "To the work of anthropology, I am indebted in general...I mean *The Golden Bough*" (Kelly, p.192). The other book is Jessie L. Weston's *From Ritual to Romance* (1920) and its use of the Grail legend and the Fisher King. In Weston's book, there is a recurrent pattern in various myths—the vegetation myths, the potency of the year, the fertility myths, the Christian story of the Resurrection. Thus the Christian and mythological elements run hand in hand in Eliot's poem. The common denominator in all these is the act of waiting.

The concluding section of the poem 'What The Thunder Said' develops the painful time undergone by Christ's disciples as they count the days in expectation of his resurrection or appearance at Emmaus. All the descriptions are carefully selected to suggest the tone of barrenness and bafflement following Christ's Crucifixion,

After the torchlight on the sweaty faces
After the frost silence in the gardens
After the agony in stony places
The shouting and crying
Prison and palace and reverberation
Of thunder of spring over distant mountains
He who was living is now dead
We who were living are now dying
With a little patience. (lines 322-330)

The formidable act of crucifixion itself is not shown in the poem. It only alludes to the varying manifestations of the act of slaying and how people, plants and inanimate objects are kept in a state of stunning and shock. This state of agony has its counterpart or objective correlative in the totally dry setting enveloping this historical event,

Here is no water but only rock
Rock and no water and the sandy road
The road winding above among the mountains
Which are mountains of rock without water
If there were water we should stop and drink
Amongst the rock one can not stop or think
Sweat is dry and feet are in the sand
Dead mountain mouth of carious teeth that can not spit.(lines
331-339)

The striking thing here is the predominance of the sense of place and its vast implications of aridity and absence of water. If Eliot has emphasized the images "of desert in the title" (Emig, p.74), the waterless places and 'sunken' rivers, the inescapable inference is that all are doomed to be in a ceaseless process of waiting for the moment of absolving themselves of this unbearable burden. In this twilight picture, wishful thinking, illusion, self-deception and horrifying reality get intermingled in one picture currently,

Who is the third who walks along beside you?
When I count, there are only you and I together
But when I look ahead up the white road
There is always another walking beside you.
Gliding wrapt in a broken mantle, hooded
I do not know whether a man or a woman.(lines 350-355)

Helen Gardner's judgment of this culminating episode in the poem is cogent enough. The apparition of Jesus is "born out of his disciple's grief over the Crucifixion" (Gardner, 1949, p.85). What matters for the current purposes of this paper is that Jesus was crucified on the Golgatha, hung for three hours under glaring sun, to be followed by three hours of darkness. After the burial of Jesus's body by Joseph Arimathea for three days, his body was not found. Jesus's mother and Mary Magdalene learnt that "in the Galilee. There you will see him just as he told you" (Mark 16, p.6-7). Inevitably Jesus's disciples, as given in the Gospels, will be awaiting his second coming or resurrection, a point the poem keeps hinting at in more than one situation. Interlaced with this major theme of death and resurrection and its drastic repercussions is the legendary tale of the Grail and the Fisher King. The significance of this episode for the underlying structure of

Eliot's poem can be seen in the Notes to the poem. There he states, "the title, plan, and a good deal of the incidental symbolism were suggested by Jessie L Weston's book on the Grail legend" (Eliot, 1936a, p.68). The Holy Grail is the cup used by Christ in his last supper with his disciples and later used to catch the dripping blood of his crucifixion. This search for the lost Grail has been seen as "symbolic of man's search for truth" (Macrae, 16). In the medieval romance, a recurrent image is that of the impotent king (The Fisher King) whose land turned barren. His impotence is the outcome of a particular maiming or sickness. This curse could only be "removed by the appearance of a certain knight who will do him a service in the castle" (Martin, p.50). In such works the gallant knight has to put up with all types of temptations and difficulties in the Perilous Chapel. If he has the guts to resist all these, he will be entitled to heal the sickly king. All these maladies and infertilities "will be lifted when the destined Deliverer asks the magic question or performs the magic act" (Gardner, 1949, p.85).

By drawing this implicit comparison or allusion, Eliot seeks to manipulate this parody or juxtaposition between two times and different sets of values: the present is bereft of such a knight and his healing therapy. Thus Eliot's people are doomed to be bound to their deplorable state of death-in-life, waiting and craving for that much-desired moment of redemption and release from their inferno. In Section Three, 'The Fire Sermon', the searcher assumes the voice of the Fisher King and embodies his malady by enumerating all types of infertility, decay and rottenness. The act of waiting becomes the most poignant act here,

The river's tent is broken: the last fringes of leaf
Clutch and sink into the wet bank. The nymphs are departed.
Crosses the broken land, unheard. The nymphs are departed.
Sweet Thames, run softly, till I end my song.
The river bears no empty bottles, sandwich papers,
Silk handkerchiefs, cardboard boxes, cigarette ends,
Or other testimony of summer nights. The nymphs are departed.
And their friends, the loitering heirs of city directors,
Departed, have left no addresses. (lines 173-185)

.....
But at my back in a cold blast I hear
The rattle of bones, and chuckle spread from ear to ear.
A rat crept softly through the vegetation
Dragging its slimy belly on the bank
While I was fishing in the dull canal
Musing upon the king my brother's wreck
And on the king my father's death before him.
White bodies naked on the low damp ground,
Rattled by the rat's foot only, year to year. (lines 188-195)

The state of pollution is self-evident here as seen in the garbage floating on the surface of the river that used to be once the habitation of nymphs. This unfavorable image of life implies the absence of such a knight that could bring back order and fertility. The description of the place clearly suggests that all tools have been used to prevent posterity and regeneration.

In the concluding sections of the poem, the modern

searcher reaches the perilous chapel. It maintains the same state of terror invested with in the medieval legends. However, the temptations are not there and only the prevailing sense of death and decay fills the place. It is not expected that such a character carrying the familiar Prufrockian timidity and diffidence can fetch the much-needed remedy for the Fisher King's malady,

And bats with baby faces in the violet light
Whistled,
And crawled head downward down a blackened wall,
And upside down were towers
Tolling reminiscent..., that kept the hours
And voices singing out of empty cisterns and exhausted wells.
(lines 380-386)

Apart from the fear inherent in this description, the section is replete with the details of ruin, devastation, thirst and death. Everything has been diverted from its common sense,

In this delayed hole among the mountains
In the far moonlight, the grass is singing
Over the tumbled graves, about the chapel
There is the empty chapel, only the wind's home.
It has no windows, and the door swings,
Dry bones can harm no one.
Only a cock stood on the rooftree
Co co rico co co rico
In a flash of lightning. (lines 386-394)

Neither the searcher nor the chapel could match the medieval counterparts. It is not expected that this status of waiting and inertia could be lifted by the advent of such an individual lacking nearly all the qualifications of the traditional knight. He does not have the high sense of altruism and readiness to risk for others. Gone are such cases and examples once and for all, the poem seems to suggest, and the waiting will continue and the suffering will last indefinitely. Eliot's images are poignant in representing the painful state of waiting while things appear to have lost their original purpose and meaning: 'dry bones', 'no windows', and 'swing of door'. This bleak picture leads eventually to a wider context where the whole scene is that of sheer devastation covering many cities,

Cracks and bursts in the violet air
Falling towers
Jerusalem Athens Alexandria
Unreal. (lines 373-377)

Eliot is widely known for his theory of impersonality in poetry and many of his critical essays foreground the necessity of keeping a reasonable distance between the poem and its creator, the feelings and situations presented and the one who envisions them. In his often-quoted article, 'Tradition and Individual Talent' (1919) he asserts this side unmistakably. As he puts it, writing poetry means "a continual self-sacrifice, a continual extinction of personality" (Eliot, 1936b, p.14). In sharp contrast to all the statements professed here, a careful reading of 'The Waste Land' and the circumstances pertaining to its

composition and publication betrays a clear-cut personal touch. It is not only present in the general framework of the poem and the poet's own spiritual exhaustion but also in the discourse of his persona or representative. In all these, the topic of waiting is forcibly present if we recall the tense relation between the poet and his first wife. This relation has accelerated his mental breakdown and his eventual staying in a sanatorium (Lousane on Lac Lemane) in Switzerland, 'By the waters of Lemane I sat down and wept' (line 182). Lemane, of course, is the ancient name of Geneva where the poet spent some time recuperating. He ends the poem with his direct confession that the poem is no more than 'Fragments I have shored against my ruin' (line 43). Vivienne, his first wife, asserts the confessional tone of the poem by saying that 'The Waste Land' has "become a part of me (or I of it)" (Eliot, 1988, 584). If it is possible to say that Tiresias is the core of the poem as Eliot keeps pointing out, then there must be some affinities between the two, not least of which is the passive waiting and observing the terrifying and obscene manifestations of man's self-inflicted catastrophe. As his first wife was both his nurse and nightmare, it is expected that both persons will always aspire to and wait for the moment of release from this entanglement. From this perspective, the poem can be seen as a "psychodrama of her distressed half dozen years with him" (Brooker, p.48). The author himself makes no qualms about the validity of such inferences and analyses since he describes the poem in an unequivocal tone of grief and self-pity 'my ruins'. In other words, 'The Waste Land', if viewed from the biographical angle, is a paradigm, a record or testimony of his long march and waiting for a glimpse of hope and peace of mind. This process of painful waiting will be mitigated by his virtual conversion to Catholicism and marrying his secretary. Through such steps, he hoped to come to terms with reality, "and the possibility of truth and renewal" (Schwartz, p.208). If Eliot has identified himself with the blind Tiresias, the seer and helpless visionary, it is logical to conclude that the poem is a watershed experience in which the poet reconsiders his former experience and is on the threshold of a new life on many levels: domestic, ideological and doctrinal. The fact of the matter is that 'The Waste Land' is the most personal of all Eliot's poems irrespective of other views stressing its public voice. In fact there is a direct reference to his experiences as a clerk in Lloyds Bank. All details of his daily routine, the boredom and the mechanical sense of their relations are crystallized. Perhaps the most striking of these is the sexual relation between the typist and the clerk as well as the talks about 'sprouting corpses'. As a bank clerk, Eliot must have heard the gossips among his colleagues and staff members about such matters as 'That corpse you planted last year in your garden / Has it begun to sprout? Will it blossom this year?' (lines 71-2) As a typical modernist, Eliot has the exceptional ability to make the common talk seem uncommon and capable of carrying

mythological and symbolic references. The suggestiveness of this is left to the reader's discretion and experience. In George William's statement, "in actual life you do not plant corpses except in vegetation ceremonies... (This) evokes the corn-god Osiris" (Williamson, p.6). However the lines are capable of further connotations and implications. The 'sprouting corpse' could be the mines long buried in the land in preparation for the moment of sudden explosion and causing mass deaths and mutilations. The severed bodies and maimed figures are the inescapable consequence of the planting of such man-made corpses. If 'The Waste Land' refers to World War I, this is one of its usual strategies and routines. The final view to be mentioned in this regard is that the sprouting corpses could refer to human sexual desires no matter what great efforts man exerts to keep them under control. Such sexual frustrations with the poet's first wife would not stay buried. At last he succeeds after a series of long waitings to get a successful marriage and restore "his broad Gioconda smile" (Brooker, p.54). In all these situations, literal and figurative, personal or impersonal, waiting represents the rallying-point around which other meanings and implications cluster.

The other scene Eliot draws from his bank experience which is inextricably involved with waiting is the loveless and mechanical sexuality among some of its personnel. Each one of them is overwhelmingly bored by the monotony of his/her job and is looking for a sort of vent for his/her repressed desires. The reader is given a glimpse of the bank typist, a spinster, who keeps on waiting for a change in her routine life. This slight change takes the form of a sexual and loveless affair with a clerk whose face is full of carbuncles. The following scene in the typist's bed-sitter typifies all states of boredom, poverty and lack of sense. The typist's at home at teatime, clears her breakfast, lights,

Her stove, and lays out food in tins.
 Out of the window perilously spread
 Her combinations touched by the sun's last rays
 On the divan are piled (at night her bed)
 Stockings, slippers, camisoles, and stays. (lines 222-227)

.....
 He, the young man carbuncular, arrives,
 A small house-agent's clerk, with one bold state,
 The time is now propitious, as he guesses.
 The meal is ended, she is bored and tired.
 Endeavors to engage her in caresses
 Which still are unrequited, if undesired.
 Flushed and decided, he assaults at once;
 Exploring hands encounter no defence;
 His vanity requires no response.
 And makes a welcome of indifference. (lines 231-242)

The endless waiting for love or physical gratification on the part of the typist can have its reward in this totally mechanical act. It is devoid of genial warmth and tenderness. Actually she is in a state of atrophy, 'indifference'. This scene originally derived from

Eliot's first-hand experience of the monotonous lives of such people, shows that modern life has debased and dehumanized this emblem of many values and sacrifices. It simply turns into an "act of practical necessity", to use Allen Tate's felicitous phrase (Martin, p.31). Even procreation has been prevented by contraceptives as shown in the other scene of the poem. In other words, the act of waiting is reversed at the end. The departure of the so-called lover or partner is welcome with a sigh of relief, 'Well now that's done: and I'm glad it's over' (line 252). In both scenes, sexual desires appear to be disquieting and intimidating, just like the sprouting corpses. Love in a situation like this is just a dream or mirage and the waiting for the better will inevitably persist.

'The Waste Land' is infused with other aspects of this predominating leitmotif of waiting. If we leave aside the practical processes of waiting throughout the poem and the snapshots of waitings, it transpires that the central character, Tiresias, crystallizes this topic par excellence. He is directly involved in the act of waiting since he is practically bereft of the possibility of any virtual participation in life's activities. He is doomed to remain the helpless witness and observer of a promiscuous age, 'I, Tiresias, old man with wrinkled dugs / Perceived the scene, and foretold the rest--/ I too awaited the expected guest' (lines 228-30). In his capacity as a foreseer of the future and the keen memory of a remote, half-perceived past, Tiresias could wade in the darkness of the underworld and wait for his flash of epiphany to end man's predicament, 'And I Tiresias foresuffered all/ Enacted on this same divan or bed;/ I who have sat by Thebes below the wall/ And walked among the lowest of the dead' (lines 243-46). Tiresias, as the poet tells us, sums up the whole scene in the poem-- men and women, such as the Phoenician Sailor, Madame Eugénide, the Smyrian Merchant, Ferdinand, Mrs. Sosostris and Mrs. Equitone. He has even affinities with the poet himself, at least at the time of the composition of the poem. In those hard times Eliot suffered from physical exhaustion and depletion so that he had to recuperate in Lausanne. Another element which crowned his cup of misery is the death of his father which, in Vivien's phrase, "was a terrifying ordeal for the poet" (Ackroyd, p.133). If the poem talks about the hell of living with another person (his first wife), it also depicts the hell of the city itself (Ackroyd, p.134). The passive suffering and helpless waiting distinguishing Tiresias's existence make him the mouthpiece or the alter ego of Eliot at that time (1919). As a hermaphroditic prophet, Tiresias can only be content with waiting, speculation, interpretation and deploring his present situation. Unlike the urban elements in the poem, Tiresias enjoys the vantage point of explaining life and its different fields. As man and woman, he perceives life's strife in this world and the tortures of the underworld. In his character the two worlds of the poem converge for he is connected with Oedipus of Thebes, that classical legend

of the wasteland. He stands in middle ground, being in the modern wasteland with "the drought-infested, sin-ridden kingdom of the Medieval King Fisher" (Rai, p.75).

Equally in the same vein run the speech and acts of Madame Sosostris. All her clairvoyance is expected to be of some use and value for the searcher and his endless waiting and rambling. That he seeks her advice or judgment is indicative of his bewilderment into this Dantesque labyrinth or inferno. He longs to find the one who would provide an answer or solution for his state of oscillation and uncertainty. Unfortunately she is not well as she 'had a bad cold' (line 44). She instantly identifies the speaker with the drowned Phoenician Sailor (line 46), which, given the tone of the poem, is valid enough as drowning and spiritual death are central in the poem. However she gives a reference to Shakespeare's *The Tempest*, 'Those are pearls that were his eyes' (line 47). Anyone who has read or watched Shakespeare's final work will automatically recognize that Ferdinand is the typical image of the marooned young man waiting for union with his Miranda, "The Lady of the Rocks". Miranda herself has to undergo a long series of waitings till she reaches those ecstatic moments in that lonely and dreary island. The waiting of the couple contrasts vividly with the previous scenes of the typist and the clerk and their easygoing, but meaningless affair.

This juxtaposition between the modern and the past or what is mythological is once again felt in Eliot's reference to Wagner's *Tristan and Isolde*. Tristan is a knight from Cornwall, to the south of England while Isolde is the princess of Ireland. The opera centers on the events on a ship between Cornwall and Brittany (France). Tristan's main task is to get Isolde as bride for his uncle (King Mark). However, one of the twists of cruel destiny decrees that she should fall secretly in love with him. The latter can not breach his word to the King despite the great love he cherishes for her. Wounded by one of the king's followers, Tristan has to spend his time waiting impatiently for his sweetheart. No sooner does she arrive and consummate their union than he dies. Eliot represents this scene of waiting in the original German language,

Frish weht der Wind
Der Heimt zu.
Mein irisch Kind,
Wo weilest du?

This expressive statement of painful waiting has been translated as follows, Fresh blows the wind from off the bow,

My Irish maid, where lingerest thou? (Williamson,32)

In contrast to this highly moving and expressive representation of waiting, Eliot's picture is one of bewilderment, silence and nothingness. Here Eliot refers to minor characters. The hyacinth girl, for instance, is an image of forlornness. She is separated from her lover and she recalls those moments of tenderness which are

no longer there. Waiting is implicit in this scene although only the memory appears to be at work,

Your arms full, and your hair wet, I could not
 Speak, and my eyes failed, I am neither
 Living nor dead, and I knew nothing,
 Looking into the heart of light, the silence. (lines 38-41)

Time is brought to standstill here and the speaker can not wait. The only option open before him is gaze 'into the heart of light' (or is it darkness?) as shown in Eliot's admiration of Conrad's modernistic novel?

If the absence of those idealistic views of life represented by the archetypal figures of Ferdinand and Tristan, is the more striking here, the poem further elaborates the issue of waiting in other minor scenes and vignettes. The continuous allusions in the poem to ancient, historical or mythological situations tinge the whole poem with a predominant climate of sexuality, violence, fornication, incest, pandering and impotence. All these are dovetailed to the central act of waiting. The brothel scene, for instance, in 'A Game of Chess' is indicative of the incongruity between the present state of decay and degeneration and the inimitable past. The unmistakable act of waiting for clients contrasts vividly with the throne Cleopatra used for her torturous waiting for death following Anthony's death,

The Chair she sat on, like a burnished throne,
 Glowed on the marble, where the glass
 Held up by standards wrought with fruited vines
 From which a golden Cupidon peeped out
 (Another hid his eyes behind his wing)
 Doubled the flames of sevenbranched candelabra
 Reflecting light upon the table as
 The glitter of her jewels rose to meet it,
 From satin cases poured in rich profusion;
 In vials of ivory and coloured glass
 Unstopperd, lurked her strange sympathetic perfumes. (lines 77-87)

In this over-ornate brothel, Eliot juxtaposes the archetypal waiting of the Egyptian Queen (Cleopatra) with its vast implications of fidelity and romantic love, with the indiscriminate and profane waiting for clients. Waiting in this scene takes the form of physical temptation, a snare to catch its victims. Critic Grover Smith adds a further layer to this already obfuscating topic. As he puts it, the scene shifts from this traditional topic of love to Shakespeare's "the voyeuristic Iachimo, the dirty trickster, (who) tells over the details of the pure and faithful Imogen's chamber" (Smith, p.122-3).

However, this explicit exposition of carnal desires could take a further turn in Eliot's gallery of people doomed to wait in agony, indifference or passion. In lines (96-103), the poet forces the reader to recall the tale of cruelty of King Tereus and his ravishing his sister-in-law, Philomel. His evil does not end in this outrageous act, but he goes to the extreme in cutting her tongue lest she betray his secret. All the raw material of this anecdote is derived from Ovid's *Metamorphosis VI* (Haffenden, 384). In her

lack of speech, Philomel has to weave a piece of cloth ('the antique mantle' (line 97) as a token of conveying the crime to her sister, Procne. The two sisters are metamorphosed into nightingale and swallow, consecutively. These sweet songs of the birds appear harsh to people like Tereus 'Jug jug, to dirty ears'. In all these, the reader is enabled to perceive the immense efforts to cut this waiting short and divulge the secrets to all people.

Here the poet is not content with suggestion regarding his themes. Rather there is a direct value judgment when the poem refers to the 'dirty' practices. In line with this gloomy and decadent picture of human beings, the poem further elaborates this state of degeneration, decay and dejection. Sweeney, a typical Eliotic image of the corrupt man, appears here as one of the clients of Mrs. Porter's brothel. In the London nights, the process of waiting is accompanied by certain rituals of welcome and gratifying the clients,

I hear
 The sound of horns and motors, which shall bring
 Sweeney to Mrs. Porter in the spring
 O the moon shone bright on Mrs. Porter
 And on her daughter
 They wash their feet in the water. (lines 196-201)

The whores here can do anything to satisfy their clients in order to make their waiting feasible. This is one of the common comforts provided by 'the unreal city' in the aftermath of World War I. It is to this place that Sweeney and his like resort, awaiting their chance of gratification.

The poem broadens the scope of the sexual obsessions so as to become a phenomenon. The poem's emphasis on 'Burning burning burning' (line 308) is evidence that the previous situation is not merely an individual case. Rather it is rampant in many slices of society. In brief but expressive snapshots, Eliot enumerates the states of wholesale rapes undergone by the Thames girls. As they narrate their painful tales, one can only recognize that their waiting is meaningless since there is nothing to look forward to. The picture is totally bleak and dismal,

Highbury bore me. Richmond and Kew
 Undid me. By Richmond I raised my knees
 Supine on the floor of a narrow canoe'.
 'My feet are at Moorgate, and my heart
 Under my feet. After the event
 He wept. He promised "a new start"
 I made no comment. What should I resent?'
 'On Margate Sands.
 I can connect
 Nothing with nothing.
 The broken fingernails of dirty hands.
 My people humble people who expect
 Nothing.' (lines 293-305)

In his notes, Eliot suggests that this scene is only a parody of the idealistic world in Wagner's G "otter d" ammerung (gods's Dawn, III, i,) about the celebration of the Rhine daughters (Eliot, 1936a, p.71). This traumatic experience in the lives of the three Thames girls reveals that the act

of waiting in a situation like this is virtually devoid of any meaning or sense. Only nothingness looms in their horizon, as in the case of the hyacinth girl discussed earlier.

Again the striking disparity between the position of urban women (the typist, Mrs. Porter and her daughter, and the three Thames girls) and the traditional image of love is forcibly felt in Eliot's recurrent allusions and witty insinuations. In line 253, for instance, he quotes Oliver Goldsmith's song in his *The Vicar of Wakefield*. This work talks about a girl who has been raped and can only wait impatiently for her own demise as a solution for her gnawing state of disgrace. This is suggested in the line 'When lovely woman stoops to folly'. To this, one can add the pub scene that moves in the same direction: sexuality and futile waiting. Eliot presents a pub scene where two female friends drink and discuss the possibility of the return of Lil's husband (Albert) from his military service (line 139). Her friend, Lou, expects that Albert, as a man who has been away from his wife and spending a long time awaiting this moment, will be in need of sexual satisfaction. It appears, however, that the wife is too bored and tired of waiting for him. Hence her drinking bouts in which she spends even the money he has given her to get a new set of teeth. Lou clearly warns her about the possibility of Albert's change of mind if she does not reward his long waiting,

He's been in the army four years, he wants a good time.
And if you don't give him, there's other will, I said. (lines 148-149)

If the husband has been away from her all this long time, the direct corollary of this is Lil's spending her own time in monotony and waiting. She is has got so accustomed to the pub as the only resort in this absurd act of waiting that she is reluctant to leave although the waiter notifies all about the closing time 'Hurry up please. It's Time' (lines 153-168-169). Waiting in this episode is half-expressed in the desires of the characters in question but does not escape the attention of the discerning reader.

Thematically and intellectually, the poem hinges on the idea of imprisonment and the concomitant topic of waiting. If we leave aside the Sibyl, the recurrent images in the poem are those of imprisonment and waiting for that moment of release,

I have heard the key
Turn in the door again and turn once only
We think of the key, each in his prison
Thinking of the key, each confirms a prison
Only at nightfall, aethereal rumours
Revive for a moment a broken Coriolanus. (lines 412-417)

If the predominating impression here is that of imprisonment and detention, then, it is natural that waiting would be man's lot in this world. Some accept this status with serene endurance and get acclimatized while the majority feels defeated and disillusioned like the broken Coriolanus.

The approach used throughout this paper has stressed the inextricable link between text and context, writer and poem. This inevitably foregrounds the intellectual background of the poem. Eliot started his career as a student of philosophy (Bradley and Bergson) and his philosophical postulates inform all his writing. Bergson refers to the spiritual realm in man's experience which is deplorably missing in the modern European mode of living and thinking,

Beyond the words and signs of the spoken and written word lie the sentences that give them sense, beyond the forms of life lies the élan which finds expression in them. (Alexander, 12)

This transcendental reality implied by Bergson's view is one of Eliot's lasting misgivings and apprehensions. As a man, he has this swaying between spiritual elation and "the pull of desires" (Drew, 92). All this is manifested and dramatized in the poem in its different situations. One is apt to round off this paper by quoting Eliot's own words in which he celebrates the spiritual life and acts of Lancelot Andrews. In talking about what is present there, the poet indirectly admits the absent elements in his life as well as the lives of his miserable characters,

I know not how, but when we hear of saving or mention of a Saviour, presently our mind is carried to the saving of our skin, of our temporal state, of our bodily life and farther saving we think not of. But there is another life not to be forgotten, and greater the dangers, and the destruction were to be feared than of this here, and it would be well sometimes we were reminded of it. (Eliot, 1936b, p.343)

The poem suggests that the change awaited and the regeneration much desired could only be achieved if those people avoid the practices the poem has elaborated at length. Only by fulfilling such a prerequisite would nature go back to its normal course and hope might thrive,

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. (lines 396-399)

The poem ends as evinced here with the possibility of rain gratifying the needs of people, flora and fauna. Buddha's instructions of giving, sympathizing and controlling are the precondition for such good. The poem has exposed that all its people (with the exception of Tiresias) have been involved in a vicious circle of waiting and temporary carnal satisfactions. What they long for and can not dream of attaining is "to reap the rich harvest of self-transformation" (Mishra, p.10). If there is an overriding topic in the whole poem, it is manifested in the control and annihilating of the "selfishness and lust" (Frazer, p.770). This spiritual pursuit and deploring of the current state of degeneracy align the poem and its writer with what Matthew Arnold has expounded in his fine poem 'Dover Beach'. In both, the situation of modern European man is pitiable and unenviable. As the Victorian poet and critic puts it,

Ah, love, let us be true /To one another! /For the world, which

seems/To lie before us like a land of dreams/So various, so beautiful, so new/ Hath really neither joy, nor ove, nor blight/ Not certitude, nor peace, nor help for pain/And we are here as one on a darkling plain/ Swept with confused alarms of struggle and flight/ Where ignorant armies clash by nigh.

CONCLUSION

It has become evident by now that the present reading of the poem has foregrounded the ingenious use of the topic of waiting, actually lived by its people or invoked by the recurrent allusions to various religious, mythological, historical and literary contexts. The poem has selected representative situations and events from London's modern life that eventually render a shocking image of the cultural wasteland. It also presents the predicament of man at the cross-roads. There is a great measure of cruelty, violence and moral degeneracy. There are representative cases of fornication, rape, incest and aggression. This contemporaneous plane of the poem is imbued with mythological, artistic and epistemological echoes which give the poem a universal appeal. The mythological allusions are thematically justified in that they highlight the juxtaposition between the inaccessible past and the shocking and baffling present.

For all its ostensible objectivity in presenting its topics, 'The Waste Land' is essentially personal and subjective in that it refers to Eliot's own predicament as poet and man. There is a direct confessional tone in the poem. Also the choice of scenes and references is deliberate in that they are meant to intensify the autumnal and pensive mood prevalent throughout the whole poem. In this regard, one can say that the study has focused only on the prominent points and references in the poem. Covering all those references entails a space much wider than what is allotted here. Obviously the poem has invested the idea of waiting with various dimensions and many implications. The most remarkable of all is this insatiable yearning for a transcendental reality, redemption which is embedded in the poem while its characters indulge in flagrant surrender to man's instincts and its drastic repercussions.

Eliot's masterpiece has undoubtedly shown how poetry can provide the reader with intellectual joy, stylistic virtuosity and moral and religious commitment if the poet is endowed with the qualifications Eliot has. In fact reading 'The Waste Land' remains a very stimulating and rewarding experience for it combines the aesthetic, intellectual and literary elements in one inseparable whole. Herein lies the particularity of the poem along with its never-ceasing allurements and mysteries.

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