
Detecting Major Allusions and their Significance in Eliot's Poem *The Waste Land*

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Abstract

*The primal objective of this article is to detect major allusions and their significance in Eliot's poem *The Waste Land*. This poem is tremendously tough because of diverse interruptions in the narrative level, piled up contrasts, abundant use of allusions and a number of quotations which are from other languages rather than from English. The poet delineates spiritual crisis, pessimism, sexual perversion, infertility, cruelty and despondency in the Modern World through different allusions taken from multifarious unprecedented sources. The article writer extracts some words, verse lines and stanzas which are used as allusions in the poem, and tries to discern their significance in the poem. Their significance lies in their contribution to the depiction of major messages or themes of the poem. This article concludes with the assertion that the allusions employed in this poem are apt and felicitous. The teachers and the students who are interested in teaching and studying this poem will be benefitted from reading this article.*

Keywords: Allusions, Spiritual Crisis, T.S. Eliot's Poem *The Waste Land*

Introduction

Thomas Stearns Eliot (1888-1965) was an American-born, British, poet, essayist, playwright and critic. He is recognized as one of the twentieth century's major poets. He was awarded the Nobel Prize in Literature in 1948 for his outstanding, pioneer contribution to present-day poetry.

The Waste Land (1922) is an important landmark in the history of English poetry. This poem is widely regarded as a central text of modernism, and has frequently been described as the most important poem of the 20th century. It was written during the autumn of 1921 in Lausanne, Switzerland where the poet was just recovering after a serious breakdown in health caused by domestic worries and over work. The mental derangement of his wife, her untimely death in a mental hospital, and the nerve-shattering impact of First World War gave birth to desolation, pessimism and restlessness in the poet. He reveals his bitter perceptions of the world and considers it a waste land in this poem.

Detecting allusions in this poem is like detecting myths and anecdotes in *Srimad Bhagavatam* by Srila Vyasadeva, because both texts are obscure. The more we go through them, the more we explore

interesting and enigmatic things. It is a long poem which includes occidental as well as oriental literature and culture. It reflects the poet's profound knowledge and interest in Vedic literature and its teachings.

Foundations for the Present Waste Land

Eliot was influenced by Jessie Weston's book *From Ritual to Romance* (1919) which supplied him with the legend of the Grail and the Fisher King. He was impressed by James Frazer's book *The Golden Bough* (1890) which provided him with the knowledge of a number of vegetation and fertility myths and rituals, especially those connected with Attis, Adonis and Osiris. The waste Land of King Fisher, the waste land of King Oedipus of Thebes and the Biblical waste land provided a solid foundation for the wasteland of Eliot. King Fisher's kingdom had been laid waste by his own sexual sins and those of his soldiers who committed sin by outraging the chastity of a group of nuns attached to the Grail (cup used by Christ for the Last Supper) chapel. His land became dry and barren; the haunt and home of want and famine. Oedipus unwittingly killed his father and married his own mother. Gods cursed him in the form of plague that was epidemic and destructive. He had to do expiation, self-mutilation, self-exile, self-abasement and a prolong penance for spiritual peace and inner illumination. Moreover, Eliot got the idea about the title of this poem through the Biblical waste land or evil land of Emmaus, mentioned in Ecclesiastes and Ezekiel of the Old Testament. The Prophet Ezekiel warns his followers to remember God and give up idolatry. Their sins had laid the country waste. The present world has been a waste land because of our selfishness, arrogance, sexual perversion, treachery, lechery, vindictiveness and atheism.

Sections in the Poem

This poem consists of five sections. The title of the first section "The Burial of the Dead" is borrowed from Egypt of the fertility ritual myth. The effigy of the god of vegetation stocked with grains of corn on his body was buried under ground. After some days, the grains sprouted. It was said that god was re-born. Sometimes the fertility god was drowned in the sea and after-while, when it floated, it was said that god was re-born. He takes this concept to depict the lifeless and dry place full of corpses in London after the Great War. The title of the second section "A Game of Chess" alludes to the Thomas Middleton's plays *A Game at Chess* and *Women Beware Women*. The idea of a game of chess is an exercise in seduction. This section deals with the themes of love and sexuality. The title of the third section "The Fire Sermon" is taken from a sermon "Adittapariyaya Sutta (SN 35.28)" preached by Lord Buddha against the things of this world. His sermon tells us that fire purifies all things. The fourth section of the poem, "Death by Water" describes a man, Phlebas the Phoenician, who died, apparently by drowning. The title of the fifth

section “What the Thunder Said” comes from the Hindu faith, which talks about how the gods, men, and demons of India asked their Father Prajapati how to live well. The Father answered each of them with the sound of thunder, which was heard as the onomatopoeic “DA”, “DA” and ‘DA”. Each of the three groups interpreted this sound in different ways. The gods thought it was the word Datta, which means to give; the men thought it was Dayadhvam, which means to have compassion; and the demons heard it as Damyata, which means to have self-control as mentioned in the Brihadaranyaka Upanishad. The opening stanza of this section recalls the event of resurrection of Christ in the Bible.

Literature Review

Allusion is one of the widely used literary devices. Abraham asserts that allusion in a literary text is “a reference, without explicit identification to a person, place, or event or to another literary work or passage” (8). Harmon maintains that an allusion is “a figure of speech that makes brief reference to a historical or literary figure, event or object” (15). Kirszenner and Mandell define an allusion as “a brief reference to a person, place, or event fictional or actual that readers are expected to recognize” (760). Similar notion is expressed by Pugh and Johnson who consider allusion “a person, a text, a historical moment, or some other such culturally recognized entity or event whether fictitious or factual” (108). Use of allusions makes writings profound and intricate. Cuddon remarks an allusion to “enrich the work by association and give it depth” (27). Kirszenner and Mandell also deem that “allusions enrich a work by introducing association and attitudes from another context” (760). *Oxford Dictionary of English* defines an allusion as “an expression designed to call something to mind without mentioning it explicitly” (44). For Mallik, an allusion is “a passing reference to someone, something, or some incident” (95). Allusion is one of the tools that turns an ordinary text into a literary one.

Different critics have expressed their views on *The Waste Land*. Kaplan writes “Eliot experiments with both the idea of human time and with the stream of consciousness” (28). It deals with the spiritual and emotional barrenness. The same analysis regarding the poem is expressed by Tilak who affirms that “the theme of the poem is the spiritual and emotional sterility of the modern world” (134). In the view of Beasley, this poem became “legible in the context of literary modernism itself” (10). Soni regards this poem as “Eliot’s classic poem” (262). Khan, Mansoor and Khan assert that this poem “digs the graves of ancients and shows us their immoral activities, waywardness and spiritual barrenness and this is the great craftsmanship of the poet” (615). Gardner contends that “although this poem may begin with the dilemma of the modern mind, it discovers that the modern dilemma is the historic dilemma.” (88). Davidson points out that “many abrupt changes and mutations in the voices of the poem often blur the proper boundaries

between identities, further increasing the reader's confusion about who is speaking." (23). Alkafaji and Marzoog describe it as "the poetic equivalent of broken strings of glass windows, it is bits of culture broken up by war and reassembled into a new frame. (76). Sultan and Shihab regard this poem to be "constructed out of vignettes, patched quotations, and snapshots from different cultural, religious, and literary contexts" (94).

Moody declares that allusion was "a crucial aspect of his personal life as a poet. Despite the ways in which Eliot manipulated allusion in his poems, the practice of allusion came naturally to him, and he often expressed his deepest feelings through allusions" (180). Chinitz affirms that "allusion in Eliot's poetry operates in this double fashion, simultaneously electing an estranged tradition and transforming it into distinctively modern idiom" (22). Williams makes an assertion that "the first sources are the Old Testament Hebrew prophets Isaiah, Ezekiel and Jeremiah" (67). Coote views Chess as "a diversion from violent and destructive sex in a world that has lost its moral bearing" (36). Alkafaji and Marzoog note that "allusions make it difficult for the reader to comprehend the poem; the difficulty is intended to show the complexity of the modern world" (86). Soni maintains that "Eliot does not confine himself to Western influence only, but also draws on Indian religion to reinforce his theme in the poem" (263). Spender is in the view that the poem ends not with "an affirmation of faith so much as with gestures of resignation which fall back on Buddhism: the oriental religion of the acceptance of the world as suffering the world in which every-thing is consumed by fire" (114). Khan, Mansoor and Khan consider Eliot's allusive and symbolic technique to "be far reaching" (619). The crux of this poem can be well understood through detecting and studying allusions and their aptness in the poem.

Detecting Allusions and their Significance in the Poem

The Waste Land is a poem of 434 lines of irregular lengths. There are various themes of this poem, but the major themes are spiritual crisis, pessimism, sexual perversion, infertility and despondency in the Modern World. Eliot has revealed these thematic aspects through the use of allusions in this poem.

April is the cruelest month, (Line: 1)

This is an allusive line taken from Chaucer's *The Canterbury Tales*. April falls in the spring season. It is the season of fertility and creativity. It reminds the modern waste landers of life and activity which they do not like, therefore this month is the cruelest month for them. This allusion is significant, because it reveals infertility that is one of the themes of this poem.

What are the roots that clutch, what branches grow/ Out of this stony rubbish? Son of man,
(Lines: 19-20).

Eliot borrows the phrase 'son of man' from the chapter 'Ezekiel' of *The Bible*. From Ezekiel (2:1) in which God addresses Ezekiel, whose mission will be to preach the coming of the Messiah to unbelievers, saying "Son of Man, stand up upon thy feet, and I will speak unto thee." Eliot visualizes the modern world as a waste land where branches do not give a shade, and the waste landers do not pay attention to the teachings of God. These assertions indicate infertility and spiritual crisis in the Modern World.

A heap of broken images, where the sun beats, / And the dead tree gives no shelter, the cricket no relief, (Lines: 22-23)

These lines allude to Ecclesiastes (12:5) of *The Bible* to show us that modern men have no faith in God. They believe in broken images. The broken images refer to false ideologies and idols. It is the land where the trees are dead and they can't give shelter. They can't enjoy or rejoice by the sound of the cricket, a brown insect which makes sound. These references point out spiritual crisis, desolation and pessimism.

The Lady of the Rocks. / The lady of situations (Lines: 49-50).

It is possible to be an ironic reference to Leonardo da Vinci's painting *Madonna and the Rocks*. The woman is also called "the lady of situations". She can be either beautiful or dangerous. She is an expert in manipulating sex-intrigues. This allusion is used in this poem to hint at sexual perversion in the Modern World.

Unreal City (Line: 60).

This phrase alludes to *Les sept vieillards* by poet Charles Baudelaire; it also refers to the "City" that is the name for London's financial district, located to the north of London Bridge. The speaker mentions "Unreal" or fake modern city whose "brown fog" suggests that it isn't the cleanest of places. The city is unreal because it is cut off from both natural and spiritual sources of life. The people are running behind money and material facilities.

"Jug Jug" to dirty ears (Lines: 103).

In Elizabethan poetry, this was a conventional representation of a nightingale's song. It is also a crude reference to sexual intercourse. It depicts the story of Philomela as narrated by Ovid in his

Metamorphosis. She was raped by the barbarous king Tarus, her own brother-in-law. Her tongue was cut by him. Later, she was turned into a nightingale. Deserts and forests have echoed with her sweet song. Nightingales still sing out their painful story, but it is mere senseless “Jug Jug” to the dirty ears of the modern waste landers. It reflects the situation of sexual perversion and cruelty existed in the present world.

"What is that noise? / The wind under the door (Lines: 117-118).

These lines allude to John Webster's *The Devil's Law Case* (3.2.162). A patient who is believed to have been stabbed to death groans in pain, prompting the surgeon to ask, "Is the wind in the door still?" It implicitly presents the modern people as the victims of boredom and despondency.

The rattle of the bones, and chuckle spread from ear to ear (Line: 186)

It alludes to Andrew Marvell's *To His Coy Mistress*: "But at my back I always hear / Time's winged chariot hurrying near" (21-22). This line hints at the hurried condition of modern men who do not have time for spiritual advancement or for the purification of their heart.

*To luncheon at the Cannon Street Hotel
Followed by a weekend at the Metropole. (Lines: 213-214)*

The Cannon Street Hotel and Hotel Metropole were two luxurious hotels of Eliot's time, although both had reputations for being places of questionable sexual activities. In the modern era, there are several grand hotels where sexual activities take place for money. Such sexual activities are done only for sensual satisfaction, not for creation.

When lovely woman stoops to folly (Line: 253).

It is an allusion to Oliver Goldsmith's novel *The Vicar of Wakefield* (1762), in which Olivia, returning to the place where she was seduced, sings: "When lovely woman stoops to folly / And finds too late that men betray... It represents the modern world where seduction is common. It is an indication of cruelty and sexual perversion.

This music crept by me upon the waters (Line: 257).

This line alludes to Shakespeare's *The Tempest*. The music of the gramophone reminds Tiresias of the music which he once heard as he walked on the bank of the river Thames. It reminds him of pleasant

music, but such melodious music is not heard in the present time. Music is a voice of the soul. It is pleasing and soothing, but the people in the Modern World are deaf to such music. They love hustle and bustle of the city. They have despondency, because they do not have serenity.

The river sweats / Oil and tar / ... / Weialala leia / Wallala leialala (Lines: 266-278).

Eliot takes this song from *Götterdämmerung*, the last opera in Wagner's "Ring Cycle". People have defiled the purity of the river. It has been completely polluted and commercialized. They have commercialized and defiled the virginity of innocent and helpless womankind. This song indicates the moral and spiritual pollution of men in the Modern World.

Burning burning burning burning (Lines: 308).

Eliot takes this line from the Buddha's *Fire Sermon* which describes the burning of passion, attachment, and suffering. According to most accounts, the Fire Sermon was preached by the spiritual teacher known as Buddha. It was intended to encourage people to give up the "fire" of lust for sex and worldly possessions. People in the modern era do not pay attention to such a preaching; therefore they are burning in the fire of desolation, pessimism, lechery and ambition.

Who are those hooded hordes swarming / Over endless plains, stumbling in cracked earth
(Lines: 369-370).

These lines allude to Herman Hesse's essays *The Brother's Karamazov*. These lines refer to rude, uneducated and filthy people who pollute the modern world. They also refer to the troops of the First World War sweeping across Europe and destroying everything. The political leaders of rich and powerful countries are eager to wage great wars to expose their power and pomposity without caring about the deaths of innocent folks and citizens.

DA / Datta: what have we given? (Lines: 401-402).

The line is a reference to the Hindu fable in which gods, men, and demons each in turn ask the lord of creation, Prajapati, "Please instruct us, Sir." To each he utters the syllable "Da" and each group interprets the answer differently. The people in the modern time are sad, because the more they get, the more they desire. They don't want to give, but just want to take. The divine voice advised them to give others. Giving means gaining contentment.

London Bridge is falling down falling down falling down (Line: 427).

This famous nursery rhyme was prevalent in Eliot's time, and still well-known in many places today. It depicts the decay and destruction of civilization. Social norms and values are falling down in the name of progress and modernity.

Datta. Dayadhvam. Damyata. (Line: 433).

The terms "Datta", "Dayadhvam" and "Damyata" are taken from the first line of "The Brihadaranyaka Upanishad" in which God presents three sets of disciples with the mystic syllable DA. "Datta" means (give) for men who are avaricious, "Dayadhvam" (compassion) for the demons who are cruel and "Damyata" (control) for the gods who are naturally unruly. The poem closes with the repetition of the three words the thunder said, which again mean: "Give, show compassion, and control". These are Eliot's final words of advice to his audience. We have to follow the divine voice if we desire to live in the world happily and peacefully. The people of the occidental society are advised to follow the three terms in their real life if they want to survive in the world.

Shantih Shantih Shantih. (Line: 434)

It is a final chant of benediction. It is the traditional ending to *The Brihadaranyaka Upanishad*. Eliot regards this chant as the peace which passes understanding that is the expression of ultimate resignation. It indicates that "Shantih" is necessary in our life, but it is missing from our life. We have got commotion in place of tranquility in the Modern World that is a more terrible and more anarchical waste land than that of Eliot.

Conclusion

The Waste Land is an allusive poem that contains literary allusions, religious allusions, mythical allusions, cultural allusions and so on. These allusive references are exploited to reflect the situations, deeds, notions and manners of men and women of the Modern World which resembles the waste land. These allusions contribute to the themes of sexual perversion, commotion, cruelty, spiritual crisis, pessimism, infertility and desolation in the Modern World. It can be concluded that the allusions used in this poem are utterly apt and proper. Sensible detection and consideration of allusions can be expected to result in understanding this poem well.

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