

A Study of Unresolvable Meaning in *The Waste Land*

Dr. Sajjad Ali Khan

Abstract

Eliot's The Wasteland is an ambiguous poem. It suggests more than one meaning. It represents the spirit of modern literature, and modern literature is suggestive. He makes use of irony as a mode of representation. The poem is multi-voiced and not a consistent utterance. The form of the poem is a pastiche. The poem seems to have a dream like logic. However, the poem, in spite of an apparent disjuncture of form, signifies a structure of unity when all parts are taken together. Tiresias is the protagonist of the poem and he is the one who could show others the way out of damned existence. He narrates what he views in the wasteland as a detached spectator but he is not the only speaker of the poem. The wastelanders are given a way out of their circular existence: to give, sympathize and control. Nevertheless, the vision of destruction looms large over the inhabitants of modern wasteland. Therefore, Tiresias undertakes to seek deliverance for himself. He plunges into the purgatorial fire. The ending of the poem indicates two diametrically opposed directions: one which Eliot implies, and the other one which the Wastelanders bring upon themselves as a consequence of their own lack of spiritual values.

Keywords: Ambiguous, Spiritual, Values, Modern, Apocalypse

The Waste Land was first published in England on October 16, 1922. Almost ninety-four years after its publication, the poem continues to challenge the comprehending wits. It is an ambiguous poem. It suggests more than one meaning. It represents the spirit of modern literature, and modern literature is suggestive. The poem is multi-voiced and not a consistent utterance: "The difficulty of deciding where one voice fades out and another is switched on can only be resolved on the basis of individual estimate; there are no stage directions suggesting identifications and re-emergences" (Thormahlen83). The form of the poem is a pastiche. The poem seems to have a dream like logic. The scenes in the poem keep shifting from one to the other. However, the poem, in spite of an apparent disjuncture of form, signifies a structure of unity when all parts are taken together. Therefore, the meaning of the poem lies in the pattern or the overall design. Eliot wrote *The Waste Land* over the course of 1921. He did not compose it in one attempt. It is possible that his various attempts at composing the poem may have contributed to various narrative voices in the poem. Woolf's brilliant insight in her essay "Modernist Fiction" (1919/1925) explains the process of creativity: "We do not come to write better; all that we can be said to do is to keep moving, now a little in this direction, now in that, but with a circular tendency should the whole course of the track be viewed from a sufficiently lofty pinnacle" (Cited in Rainey 897).

It is argued that the epigraph of the poem needs special attention because it seems to hold the key to an understanding of the poem: "For on one occasion I myself saw, with my own eyes, the Cumaean Sibyl hanging in a cage, and when some boys said to her, 'Sibyl, what do you want'? She replied, 'I want to die'." (Eliot). Who is the speaker of these lines? Rainey states in the Introduction to the poem: "The speaker of *The Wasteland*, then, is an identifiable character, a 'quester', who is somehow performing actions analogous to those of Percival or Parsifal, attempting to restore the land which has been wasted" (124). He appears to be a touchstone of excellent spiritual values. He is a blind seer, Tiresias, in the Greek tragedies. He has the gift of prophetic powers which qualifies him the wisest among the

living. The traditional heroes of the Holy Grail romances – Percival or Parsifal – aim to embody the very virtues Tiresias already possesses. He is awaiting his own resurrection. It seems to be Tiresias's fate to wander "among the lowest of the dead" (Eliot 246). However, in the last part of the poem, it is not Tiresias but the non-human prophetic authority that speaks mysteriously through thunder. In the following lines, he reveals his identity: "I, Tiresias, though blind, throbbing between two lives, / Old man with wrinkled female breasts" (Eliot 218-219). He is the protagonist of the poem and he is the one who could show others the way out of damned existence. His omniscient presence in the poem adds to a sense of strangeness and mystery to the atmosphere of the poem. He narrates his experience of seeing the Cumaean Sibyl – a sacred figure in antiquity – in her condemned state, condemned for wishing to live longer. The possibility of escape from her prolonged suffering is clearly stated by her wish to die – that alone could put an end to her suffering. Death seems to be the necessary precondition for rebirth. The Cumaean Sibyl stands figuratively for the state of modern Wasteland which is spiritually dried up lacking humane. Does the epigraph of the poem condition the reader's response as to what he might expect from the poem? This epigraph is vitally important in terms of thematic concerns, meaning and subject-matter of the poem; it touches upon the central concern of the poem – death wish. We are told in the text that this wish is not granted her yet. From here onwards, the speaker narrates what he views in the wasteland as a detached spectator but he is not the only speaker of the poem.

The very first line of the poem appals the reader: "April is the cruellest month" (Eliot 1). Commonly speaking, April is a harbinger of joy and relief after an experience of frost, decay and inactivity. Why is it given a different meaning here? It is 'the cruellest month' because it mixes "memory and desire" (Eliot 3). The Concise Chambers Dictionary gives the meaning of desire, "a longing or wish; strong sexual interest and attraction": of memory, "the ability of the mind to remember." This word 'desire' – 'strong sexual interest and attraction' – holds a vital meaning for the inhabitants of the Wasteland. Religion offers a way to reconcile with 'desire' in the form of marriage but the wasteland is devoid of religious faith. Oriental philosophy offers self-renunciation and gradual control over 'desire' through discipline and training of the mind. Eliot seems to suggest that the re-awakening of 'desire' in April stands in the way of achieving a state of consciousness which could arouse a sense of complete spiritual dryness and horror of being at the actual state of things. He makes use of irony as a mode of representation. Eliot ironically wishes the "forgetful snow" to continue to cover them (6). The snow made them forgetful but April brings back 'memory and desire'. Who is speaking these lines to whom? It is possible that the poet is addressing these lines to the reader. The narrative shifts abruptly to Marie's short account of a childhood experience without prior preparation for it: "I am not a Russian, I come from Lithuania, a real German" (Eliot 12). Marie announces her identity in German. She recounts her childhood experience of sledging with her cousin, the archduke. Tiresias speaks with the prophetic authority of a seer linking "the roots that clutch" with "hold on tight" (Eliot 19). Eliot stresses on 'hold on tight' which seems to suggest that the Wastelanders must 'hold on tight' to spiritual values (125). He addresses the "Son of man" who pretends to know little of darkness (Eliot 20). The 'son of man' has little understanding of what life is; he knows only bits and pieces of redundant things: "A heap of broken images" signify the extent of his perception which is limited and impaired (Eliot 22). He lives under the influence of what he presumes to be "shelter and relief" (Eliot 24). The nature of his perception is illusory. He is accustomed to seeing things on their face value. Therefore, there is no sign of water – water traditionally stands for purification; instead there is the dry stone suggesting spiritual dryness. The line that follows generates speculation among the critics of the poem for its possible meaning. Tiresias, in a commanding tone and from the vantage point of the knower, states the

knowledge of his understanding: "Only/There is shadow under this red rock" (Eliot 24-25). He shows the 'son of man' the way to 'shelter and relief'. In the next line, Tiresias invites him to "come in under the shadow of this red rock" (Eliot 26). The 'red rock' seems to symbolise church – a spiritual sanctuary. Tiresias is determined to show him the actual state of affairs not the over-trivial little things which the 'son of man' mistakes for truth. He wishes to awaken him from moral laxity. He offers him a different spectacle of things: "I will show you fear in a handful of dust" (Eliot 30). There is a German quotation addressing the likes of 'son of man': "The fresh wind may take them to their destination" (Eliot 31-4). This wind blows only if the 'son of man' listens to the speaker's words.

We are told in the text that Tiresias is a lone wanderer in the dry and barren wasteland. Is he a lost voice in the wasteland? He is offering cure to the spiritual maladies of the 'son of man' because he has the power to see. He has the knowledge of the spiritual deadness of the 'son of man'; he suffers because of this knowledge. He suggests a way of deliverance to the 'son of man' but he is not prepared to pay heed to his words. The speaker/deliverer achieves a wordless contact with reality: "I could not/speak, and my eyes failed, I was neither/Living nor dead, and I knew nothing, /Looking into the heart of light, the silence" (Eliot 38-41). His vision is above words. It is, presumably, the highest spiritual state of being where he is unable to speak, see and know; he embodies truth. He is blessed with an extraordinary visionary insight. He is in a state somewhere between life and death. He is spiritually alive; he can 'look into the heart of light.' Here 'silence' implies higher understanding – the esoteric mystery of life; it stands in contrast to the failure of communication that takes place among the inhabitants of the wasteland. It is followed by a German quotation: "Desolate and empty the sea" (Eliot 41). This once again refers to the state of the wasteland of contemporary times. It is in urgent need to be cured by a magical touch but there are no signs of it yet. On the other hand, the wasteland is dominated by evasive characters like Madame Sosostriis and Mrs Equitone who connote intrigue and equivocation. Madame Sosostriis enjoys the reputation of being the wisest in the contemporary world. She assumes an overwhelming authority over the destinies of the ones who consult her wisdom, and assigns to them cards of her own invention. Traditionally, a woman practising this kind of art was considered to be the emissary of the devil. Her wisdom stands in sharp contrast to Tiresias's visionary insight. She deals with the 'forbidden'; therefore, she must be careful lest she might conjure up a malicious spirit or she might be afraid of the law. She is spiritually blind and is unable to "find/ The Hanged Man" (Eliot 55). The 'Hanged man' is Christ. Water is a purifier, and death by water suggests purification but she forewarns, "Fear death by water" (Eliot 55). It is also the title of part IV of the poem.

Tiresias moves into the "Unreal City" (Eliot 60). It is of course London. Most probably the financial and commercial district of London has been referred to because Eliot knew it very well. It is understandable that it is the epicentre of modern wasteland. He sees its unreality under the foggy atmosphere of the winter dawn. Tiresias views people passing over London Bridge just before the clock striking nine. These self-occupied people of the Wasteland appear to him as ruined by death. Death is no longer transfigurative as death is known to be. The inhabitants of the wasteland are adamant not to learn their lessons from the destruction caused by death; they cannot foresee their own death which must happen, sooner or later, in the midst of their false hopes, fears and expectations. Death in the wasteland does not embody the traditionally associated idea of re-birth. Eliot encapsulates their state of indifference: "And each man fixed his eyes before his feet" (65). Tiresias recognizes one of them as Stetson; he is crying because he is unlike others. Tiresias recognizes him as his companion in his adventure of spiritual wandering and quest. This part of the poem implies re-birth and regeneration according to the ancient myths. Here dog symbolises the forces

hostile to re-birth. It is necessary for a corpse to be remained buried so that re-birth may take place. This part of the poem is the symbolic representation of the act of burial of the corpse in the ancient pagan world. Stetson is the priest presiding over the ritual.

“A game of Chess” implies intrigues. Chess is the kind of game that involves players at loggerheads with each other. It is equally important to keep a very sharp eye upon the other’s moves. It is more like ‘gurg ashti’. This term has come from Persian language into Urdu. It is part of the oral tradition of Persian culture. When the wolves are unable to find anything to eat in extreme winter season; they gather in a ring staring at each other, and wait patiently for anyone to fall asleep. When this happens, the rest of the pack pounce upon him and devour him mercilessly. The term implies that there is a very stiff competition in the world; in case, you happen to be weak, the others will step over you regardless of everything.” A game of Chess” refers to amorous intrigues played by women upon men or the other way round. In a world like this, love is degenerated into lust, and sex is devoid of pleasure. In the first part of this section, Eliot describes the beautiful surroundings of scintillating lights weaving beautiful patterns upon a wall. It is reinforced by soothing rich odours. The mention of “golden Cupidon” and “a carved dolphin” enhances the significance of the ‘desire’ theme mentioned in the opening lines. Eliot delineates an extravagant setting to signify the fire of sexual desire. The effect of it is reinforced by the mention of Philomel’s rape: “yet there the nightingale/Filled all the desert with inviolable voice/And still she cried, and still the world pursues,/‘Jug Jug’ to dirty ears” (Eliot 101-104). The nightingale’s wailing cries cannot dissuade the Wastelanders from the pursuit of ‘desire’; that’s why she is crying in the desert. Or in other words, the wasteland has turned into a spiritual desert where she cries in plaintive tones. The woman in the opening lines is comfortably ensconced upon a lovely seat surrounded by beautiful sounds and colours in the background of “other withered stumps of time” (Eliot 104). The glistening appearances seem to hide a great amount of frustration. Suddenly the scene moves downwards into a state of tension. But who speaks these lines? It seems to be a collective voice of the couples caught up in the vicious circles of their own making. There is paralysis of speech and emotions which signify failure of communication. For any kind of speech to be communicative, it is necessary to be honest to one’s feelings and thoughts; it is less likely to find here in the wasteland where the language of intrigue and equivocation thrive. There is little possibility of deep intimate relations; they simply go through the motions. It brings into their hearts no comfort and pleasure to stem the tide of inward dryness and mental anxiety. Despite innumerable copulations, they remain inaccessible to one another, and the will to understand remains illusory; their relations, in short, lack emotional conviction and feelings of openness and sincerity.

From now on, the verses take on a different form. Eliot shifts the scene into the “rats’ alley/Where the dead men lost their bones” (115-116). It is a grotesque image signifying the state of the inhabitants of modern Wasteland. The bones which hold the structure of the body together are being eaten by the rats because the alley is crowded with rats who prey upon spiritually dead men’s bones. Cut-throat competition to survive at the cost of the other seems to be the principle of their lives. Eliot plays upon the word ‘nothing’ in the following lines: “You know nothing? Do you see nothing? Do you remember/Nothing” (123-124). They keep on living because the law of life keeps them alive. They have “Shakespearean Rag” upon their lips (Eliot 128). Eliot is ironical here. It is in contrast to their actual existence. It seems as if their moaning and sighs had taken on a hilarious expression. The wasteland is devoid of meaning. The days and nights go on following the cycle of nature leaving them in a suspended state of existence. There is no possible way to get out of monotonous existence: “What shall we ever do?” (Eliot 134). Their inability to search a lasting human relationship, something to ‘hold on to’ signifies meaningless existence. This is not the characteristic

feature of the inhabitants of the modern wasteland to question the nature of their existence. Eliot does not state it in direct language but implies it through a series of questions. The scene changes from the splendours of the luxurious class to the lower class. The setting of the scene is a bar where Lil is worried to death because her husband is coming back. Eliot employs a conversational idiom befitting the characters of the lower class. She does not show any sign of pleasure at her husband's return. Her self-indulgence has left her an empty shell; her husband might not find her attractive any longer. She seeks advice from her well-wisher who is little different from her. Their fears centre on keeping up sexual relations outside marriage. The energies of the inhabitants of modern wasteland are fully focused on it. The bartender's repeated announcement – "HURRY UP PLEASE IT'S TIME" – is a repeated invocation to hurry up (Eliot 152). They fail to respond to Tiresias's invitation to 'come under the red rock.' They are condemned to live mechanical existence. What can be done to awaken them from stupor?

"The Fire Sermon" begins with a mood of autumnal despondency and a sense of desolation. The land is once again in the throes of sterility; festivities are over with the change of season. The pleasure seekers have gone behind their hiding places. It is Tiresias once again lamenting at the side of Thames: "Sweet Thames run softly till I end my song" (Eliot 183). He hears "The rattle of the bones, and chuckle spread from ear to ear" (Eliot 186). The inhabitants of the Wasteland look at human misery in a comical manner because they care a damn about the moral and spiritual implications of their daily existence. The surface comedy conceals their essentially tragic condition. The reference once again is given to the rattling of the bones: "And bones cast in a little low dry garret/Rattled by the rat's foot only, year to year" (Eliot 195-196). The reference to Sweeney and Mrs Porter brings back the theme of desire and sex intrigues "Twit twit twit/Jug jug jug jug jug jug" (Eliot 203-204). This once again brings back the reference to the sexual assault "So rudely forced" (Eliot 205). Tiresias sees at the twilight hour the end of a working day. He sees a typist girl who is awaiting her lover to ravish her. Before her lover could come, she winds up things in a mechanical manner. Philomela was 'rudely forced' but here this typist wishes to be ravished at will: "he assaults at once" (Eliot 239). The typist girl seems to be the modern equivalent of Philomela with a reversal of values. The couple here is picked up from the lower class. It is important to note that after he has done it with her, he gives the impression of indifference: "His vanity requires no response, /And makes a welcome of indifference" (Eliot 241-242). Tiresias laments: "And I Tiresias have fore suffered all/ Enacted on this same divan or bed" (Eliot 243). Tiresias moves to another part of the city where a fisherman sits at noontime to play on mandolin: "where the walls/Of Magnus Martyr hold/Inexplicable splendour of Ionian white and gold" (Eliot 263-265). From here on till lines 290, the lines get shortened. The situation invites Tiresias to say that "I can connect/ Nothing with nothing" (Eliot 301-302). What he sees everywhere: "Burning burning burning burning...." (Eliot 308-311).

"Death by Water" describes Phlebas the Phoenician. His death makes no difference to the inhabitants of the wasteland. The ones who are running the wheel are invited to "Consider Phlebas who was handsome and tall when he was alive" (Eliot 321). It forewarns the wastelanders that human life is transitory and accidental; phlebas died without warning. This part of the poem suggests resurrection through water.

The last part of the poem sets it apart from the rest. "What The Thunder Said" presents the world as drab: "Here is no water but only rock" (Eliot 331). Who speaks these lines? It is likely that the implied utterance of the poet may have assumed the visionary authority of Transcendental Being. In contrast to Hofgarten and the Hyacinth gardens, the garden depicted here lies buried in "the frosty silence" (Eliot 323). The land has turned dry

because there is no water here. Water is known to bring regeneration. These mountains stand in contrast to the ones where Marie and the archduke, her cousin, were sledging together in their childhood idyllic world. The mountains do not offer spiritual sanctuary: “There is not even silence in the mountains/But dry sterile thunder without rain/There is not even solitude in the mountains (Eliot 341-343). The repetition of water and rock seems to suggest the intensity of thirst. The “hooded” figure of Christ moves in silence: “Who is the third who always walks beside you” (Eliot 359& 364)? The “Murmur of maternal lamentation” can be heard (Eliot 367). Tiresias sees an apocalyptic vision of the “Falling towers” (Eliot 372). The images take on such strangeness that they add to the mystery of things: “And bats with baby faces in the violet light” (Eliot 379). Voices can be heard: “voices singing out of empty cisterns and exhausted wells” (Eliot 384). Visual and auditory images add to the grimness of an already grim scene. The whole atmosphere seems to predict destruction. It reflects the negligence of the spiritual: “There is the empty chapel” (Eliot 388). Suddenly the mood of the poem changes: “In a flash of lightening. Then a damp gust/Bringing rain” (Eliot 393-394). Rain brings much needed water and symbolises regeneration. It signifies re-birth in the Buddhist sense of the word: “To the Buddhist, there is no such thing as being glad of another birth; on the contrary, rebirth is the curse of living beings until they achieve *nirvana*” (Thormahlen 168). It is propitious for thunder to speak: “DA” (Eliot 400). The prophecy speaks through thunder: “Datta: what have we given” (Eliot 401)? The answer is clear: bloodshed and anarchy. The next command is to sympathize: “each in his prison/Thinking of the key” (Eliot 413-414). Sympathy demands compassion for the tortured, and a spirit of cooperation and mutuality. Once a human being is shut up in the prison of his desire, there is no way out. Who can turn the key and open the door of the prison? ‘Mukti’ is hard to come by. ‘Mukti’ is a key term in Hinduism. Its English equivalent is deliverance. ‘Mukti’ is granted to those comprehending wits who transcend the bounds of the flesh and the material through ‘tapasiya’ – ceaseless striving. The next command is to control: “beating obedient/To controlling hands” (Eliot 421-422). It is possible to discipline and train the mind through the power of the will and concentration. It brings to mind the classical notion of order, discipline and restraint. In the context of the poem, self-indulgence is a curse. The wastelanders are given a way out of their circular existence: to give, sympathize and control. These three distinct humane values are not suggested in abstract terms. Nevertheless, the vision of destruction looms large over the inhabitants of modern wasteland: “London Bridge is falling down falling down falling down” (Eliot 426). Tiresias’s response indicates that the Wastelanders pay little heed to what the thunder has spoken. Therefore, he undertakes to seek deliverance for himself: “Shall I at least set my hands in order?” (Eliot 425). He plunges into the purgatorial fire: “Then he vanished into the fire which refines them” (Eliot 427). Eliot borrows the idea of refining fire from Buddhism:

Buddha’s Fire Sermon visualized all living beings and all material objects inherent in samsara-bound existence as being on fire; far from making it the symbol of any one particular desire, no feature of the human condition is exempt from the flames it feeds (as opposed to the state of nirvana)” (Thormahlen 172).

Tiresias awaits his own ‘mukti’: “When shall I become like the swallow (Eliot 428). The intensifying perception reaches the state of crescendo and merges with the word “Shantih” (Eliot 433). ‘Shanti’ is another key concept in Hinduism. It suggests concentrated wisdom of the past of humankind. It reflects permanent state of peace that settles upon the seeker as a result of his philosophical exploration of the esoteric mystery of life.

Nevertheless, the poem does not end optimistically on a note of ‘shanti’. The reader is left with a premonitory feeling of disorder and destruction: “Hieronymo’s mad again” (Eliot 431). This line refers to the last part of *The Spanish Tragedy* by Thomas Kyd that ends on a destructive note. After the bloody revenge has been taken, the stage is littered with blood. This line brings to mind the disorder of Hieronymo’s passion of revenge. Hieronymo became the representation of the forces of Fate for the wrong-doers; similarly, modern wasteland invokes the wrath of such forces to destroy the wastelanders. The ending of the poem indicates two diametrically opposed directions: one which Eliot implies, and the other one which the Wastelanders bring upon themselves as a consequence of their own lack of spiritual values. Lack of fertility is felt to be the hallmark of the Wastelanders that accumulates itself in an apocalyptic vision of the future of humankind – the end of the human history. Eliot deplores the fast disintegrating culture. He wishes the past to be united with the present, tradition with modernity so as to give human history a sense of continuity. *The Wasteland* suggests humanity in its fresh re-definition of the past. He represents modern civilization as unwholesome. It is not because of the poet’s morbid state of the mind but because of the viewless, chaotic age. Eliot deplores the absence of an all-encompassing order that may save modern civilization from disintegration.

References

- Cookson, Linda & Brayan, eds. *Critical Essays on The Wasteland*. Harlow, England: Longman, 1988. Print.
- Eliot, T. S. *The Wasteland*. Lawrence Rainey, ed. *Modernism: An Anthology*. Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2007.
- Moody, A. D., ed. *The Cambridge Companion to T. S. Eliot*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994. Print.
- Rainey, Lawrence, ed. *Modernism: An Anthology*. Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2007. Print.
- Thormahlen, Marianne. *The Wasteland: A Fragmentary Wholeness*. Lund, Norway: C W K Gleerup Lund, 1978. Print.
- Weston, J. L. *From Ritual to Romance*. New York: Doubleday, 1957. Print.
- Williamson, G. *A Reader’s Guide to T. S. Eliot: A Poem-by-Poem Analysis*. London: Thames & Hudson, 1955. Print.

