CHAPTER-5

Death by Water & What the Thunder Said
Introduction In this section Death by Water, Eliot shows the significance of water as a means of purification and rebirth. There are two associations—one from Shakespeare The Tempest and the other from the ancient Egyptian myth of the god of fertility. The death of Phoebes, the Greek sailor, is an example of people who devote themselves to worldly pursuits. Their youth and strength ultimately will be consumed by death. Stephen Spender remarks:

“Death by Water crystallizes the hidden elegy that is in The Waste Land, hinted at, as we have seen, in ‘Those are pearls that were his eyes.’ The passage has, however, an innocence of cleansing waters which seems outside both the sordidity and the apocalyptic fire of the rest of the poem. It seems an escape from a mood and perhaps that is its virtue.”

The poet tells the story of Phoebes, a young and handsome sailor who was drowned after leading a boring business career. He was caught in a whirlpool and passed through various
stages. There is no chance of re-birth for the sailor who represents the modern man, because there is no desire to follow spiritual values. The rejection of higher values is the cause of the inevitable decay of modern civilization.

“Phoebes the Phoenician, a fortnight dead,
Forgot the cry of gulls, and the deep sea swell
And the profit and loss”

Williamson writes:

“When “Death by Water is executed in Part IV,” it marks the end of the journey on “the waters of Leman,” the ultimate fear represented by the drowned Phoenician sailor. It rewrites the dirge which associated Ferdinand with the sailor.”

The moral is that all men are travelers subject to the lure of change, decay and death. The sailor has forgotten the cry of seagull, the roaring of the rough waves and his business affairs.
His body rose and fell in the waves and ultimately he was sucked by the whirlpool of death. Cleanthes Brooks comments.

“The drowned Phoenician sailor recalls the drowned god of the fertility cults. Miss Weston tells that each year at Alexandria an effigy of the head of the god was thrown into the water as a symbol of the death of the powers of nature, and that this head was carried by the current to Byblos where it was taken out of the water and exhibited as a symbol of the reborn god.”

The first reference is to the song of Ariel sung to Prince Ferdinand about his father’s death—“Full fathom five thy father lies”. The drowned body has suffered “a sea-change into something rich and strange”. The second reference, according to Miss Weston, is to the ancient ritual in Egypt, where an effigy of the fertility god was thrown into sea at Alexandria to indicate his death. The head was carried by the waves and was followed towards Byblos where it was salvaged and worshipped as the
god reborn. There is a contrast between the drowning of the effigy and the drowning of Phoebes. There is no re-birth in the case of the sailor because he has wasted his life in worldly pursuits. Salvation is possible for those who pursue the things of the spirit and have faith in God. This is a warning to the modern man that he must bear in mind the death of a drowned sailor, and take a lesson from him to devote his life to higher values.

“A current under sea

Picked his bones in whispers. As he rose and fell

He passed the stages of his age and youth

Entering the whirlpool.”

There is a warning to all mankind (both Jews and non-Jews) to beware of the materialistic life and worldly pursuits like turning the wheel and looking to the direction of the wind.
“Gentile or Jew

O you who turn the wheel and look to windward,

Consider Phoebes, who was once handsome and tall

as

you.”

The idea is that the people, who devote themselves to worldly pursuits and accumulation of riches, will be punished and drowned in whirlpool of death. Their youth, strength and wealth will not be of any use to them. Deliverance from death can be achieved only through pursuit of moral values and practice of love of God. Cleanthes Brooks writes:

“One may suggest that ‘Death by Water’ gives an instance of the conquest of death and time, the ‘perpetual recurrence of determined seasons’, the ‘spring and autumn, birth and dying’ through death itself.”

Williamson concludes:
This part closes, after the fashion of others, by including the audience in its frame of reference. But if the ultimate fate of the protagonist has been indicated, neither his fortune as told by the Madame, nor his experience in the Hyacinth garden, has been exhausted. Hence what remains must belong to a different order of experience from that which properly terminates in death by water, or else to a different attitude toward water.”

1. According to Eliot; “Tiresias is the central figure in the poem, an interested spectator of the modern wasteland, what Tiresias sees is the substance of the whole poem.”

2. Ovid’s Tiresias is very useful for Eliot in his mythical method. He belongs to the past and present. He is a link between the waste land of Oedipus and the waste land of modern civilization. Though physically blind he is gifted with prophetic vision. Moreover he has experience
of life both as a man and a woman. He is an enlightened commentator on the modern wasteland. He is at once the relic of the past and an inhabitant of the past. He is the voice of sensitive humanity deploping the loss of spirituality in the modern world and probing into the strange disease.

3. According to a story, this wise Theban Soothsayer in his youth once was the goddess Athena, bathed naked in a pond. In great wrath the goddess struck him blind but since his mother was a friend of hers, she bestowed upon him the gift of prophecy as a compensation. According to another story, Tiresias saw two snakes copulating and disturbed them with his stick, and the snake in wrath transformed him into woman.

Seven year later she again disturbed another pair of snakes copulating, and was transformed into a man once again. Thus, he has experiences both as a man and a woman. Later on he was questioned by Zeus and Hera as to whether man is more passionate or woman. He declared that woman is more
passionate. At this Zeus was angry and struck him blind, but Zeus or Hera compensated upon him by conferring upon him, the twin gifts of prophecy and immortality.

Eliot acknowledges the importance of Tiresias and writes:

“Tiresias although a mere spectator and not indeed a character, is yet the most important personage in the poem, uniting all the rest. Just as the one eyed merchant melts into the Phoenician sailor and the later is not wholly distinct from Ferdinand, prince of Naples, so all the women are one woman and the two sexes meet in Tiresias.”
REFERENCES


What the Thunder Said

The moral of this section is contained in the message proclaimed by thunder for the liberation of society from spiritual barrenness. There is a need of effort for the realization of the spiritual goal. The first example is of the mythical journey of the knight to Chapel Perilous in the time of Fisher King who was successful in removing the curse from his land. The second is the Biblical journey of Christ’s disciples to Emmaus when they were accompanied by Christ in disguise and who disclosed his identify to confirm the truth of his resurrection. In contrast to the two journeys mentioned above, we have the march of uprooted humanity driven by war and by communist revolution to no particular destination and to no peace in the end.

“After the torchlight red on sweaty faces

After the frosty silence in the gardens
After the agony in stony places

The shouting and the crying”\(^1\)

The poet describes the final scene of the life of Christ—his betrayal and arrest, his trial and his fructification. First there is the march of the crowd and his followers. They took him to the garden. He was imprisoned and there after the trial began in the palace of the high priest. The mob feared that Christ might be released and so they did a lot of shouting against his expected acquittal. Then came the tragic act of Christ’s fructification which was accompanied by the convulsion of the earth and thunder in the sky. Stephen Spender writes:

“What the Thunder Said’ consists of a succession of visions in the desert of the world without God, dominated by the absence of Christ, the God who has not risen and whom the disciples cannot see.”\(^2\)

“He who was living is now dead

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\(^1\)Stanzas 9 and 10

\(^2\)Stanzas 10-12
We who were living are now dying

With a little patience”³

This was the sign of a new birth and the birth of a new religion. Christ is no more but he has left a philosophy and religion which is undying. We who live today are actually not alive. The Christian faith has declined and as such humanity is dying. Christ died for others, while the modern man is dying without any feeling of regret or hope. Cleanthes Brooks remarks:

“All the poet does not say ‘we who are living’. It is we who were living. It is the death-in-life of Dante’s Limbo. Life in the full sense has been lost.”⁴

The poet now describes the journey of the knight to Chapel Perilous. He describes the hardship of the way till he reaches his destination. Water refers to the water of faith.

“Here is no water but only rock

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Rock and no water and the sandy road

The road winding above among the mountains

Which are mountains of rock without water”

The followers of Christ are walking through a dry and stony region towards the chapel on distant mountains. Their bodies perspire on account of heat and the dry wind. They only see the broken rocks. Sometimes they hear the sounds of thunder. But there is no indication of rain.

“Here one can neither stand nor lie nor sit

There is not even silence in the mountains

But dry sterile thunder without rain

There is not even solitude in the mountains.”

They look at one another and sometimes feel doubtful whether they will at all reach estination. The doubt in the minds of spiritual seekers makes them proceed further and further in quest of their goal. They pass through insects and dry
grass but there is no sign of water. They are unable to hear the notes of the hermit-thrush which is like the sound of dripping water. This lack of water is symbol of the drought of the soul.

“But sound of water over a rock

Where the hermit-thrush sings in the pine trees

Drip drop drip drop

But there is no water”

Williamson writes:

“The search of Part V—for its parts make one journey—leads ultimately to the sacred river and its wisdom. Throughout, the illusionary character of the protagonist’s vision increases as his fortune converges. The experience of agony and its dissolution out of the physical conditions of this journey through the Waste Land, now the
desert scene of Part I which emphasizes the need of water.” \(^8\)

This journey is continued as the Biblical journey to the village of Emmaus. The opening lines supply the key to the story.
“Who is the third who walks always 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 one walking beside you”

There are two disciples of Christ walking together. Both were doubtful about the truth of the report that the dead Christ had arisen from the grave. One of the disciples feels as if there is a third person with a head covered with hood walking along with them. As he turns to verify, if there is a third person, the hooded figure becomes visible. The third person is Christ himself-duly resurrected- who reveals his identity at the end of the journey. Cleanthes Brooks remarks:

“The parallelism between the ‘hooded figure’ who ‘walks always beside you’, and the ‘hooded hordes’ is another instance of the sort of parallelism that is really a contrast. In the first case, the figure is
indistinct because spiritual; in the second, the hooded hordes are indistinct because completely unspiritual- they are the people of the Waste Land”.  

The scene now shifts to Europe. The First World War destroyed a good part of Europe. Millions were uprooted and the air was full of cry and lamentation.

“What is that sound high in the air

Murmur of maternal lamentation

Who are those hooded hordes swarming

Over endless plains, stumbling in cracked earth”  

The roads were full of refugees. The children suffered a great deal. The crowd marched without any hope and direction. The sound of the cavalcade of refugee was disturbed by the cries of women and the cries of children. Some of them dropped on the way. Many of them lost their reason and moved here and there like mad men. Cities were full of ashes and damaged
houses. Many towers and big buildings crashed to the ground. The civilization of many modern capitals like Athens, Vienna and London, was threatened with extinction. This was the havoc caused by the First World War. Cleanthes Brooks writes:

“Eliot, as his notes tells us, has particularly connected the description, here with the ‘decay of eastern Europe’. The hordes represent, then, the general waste land of the modern world with a special application to the breakup of Eastern Europe, the region with which the fertility cults were especially connected and in which today the traditional values are thoroughly discredited. The cities, Jerusalem, Athens, Alexandria, Vienna, like the London of the first section of the poem are ‘unreal’, and for the same reason.”12
The poet now describes the scene in the Eastern Europe. The Russian Revolution affected many countries. Nearly half of Europe was in a state of Chaos. The Russian upheaval is described through the story of the crazy woman.

“A woman drew her long black hair out tight

And fiddled whisper music on those strings

And bats with baby faces in the violet light

Whistled, and beat their wings.”¹³

Her black hair flew in the air while the lady played music on the string of her hair. The fiddle of the black hair is a token of miserable and sad music. The sad spectacle of civilization going to pieces in combined with the horror felt by the knight and his followers as they move towards Chapel Perilous. According to a tradition, the knights had to face many horror to prove their courage and they had to face terrible vision and hallucinations as for example bats with baby face and towers upside down in the violet lig...
“It is a description of the hour of twilight. Here it indicates the twilight of the civilization, but it is perhaps something more. Violet is one of the liturgical colors of the church. It symbolizes repentance and it is the color of baptism.”

This shows the utter disintegration of modern civilization. Even today the bells ring in the churches calling the people to prayer but the empty minded audience reminds us that true faith has departed and religion has been reduced to a mere ritual. The lack of the true spirit of faith has made the soul of humanity an empty cistern. This ultimately shows that real faith has departed from the Christian people. Williamson writes:

“The unreal city extends to the east, embracing centers of various cultures; the “lady of situations” fiddles Lullabies on her hair to “bats with baby faces”, adding frustration to man...”
The broken church in the modern world reminds the poet of the deserted Church towards which the knight and his friends are marching.

“In this decayed hole among the mountains

In the faint moonlight, the grass is singing

Over the tumbled graves, about the chapel

There is the empty chapel, only the wind’s home.”

He has nearly reached the journey’s end under the moonlight. He sees the dancing grass. The grass seems to be singing. This indicates the success of knight as he enters the empty church at the top of hill, which is full of wind, coming from the broken windows. There are graves out-side but there is no fear of ghosts. The knight feels happy as the cock crows and announces the end of the night and the return of the light. The lightening flash brings with itself a shower of welcome rain to fertilize the thirsty land. The successful journey of the Knight marks the victory of faith over temptation and suffering.
“The cock in the folk-lore of many people is regarded as the bird whose voice chases away the powers of evil. It is significant that it is after this crow that the flash of lightning comes and the damp gust Bringing rain.”

The poet now turns from Western Civilization to the civilization of India. In the history of every nation or civilization, there comes a time of a spiritual crisis. The poet has already given the example of the successful march of the knight to the Chapel Perilous.

“Ganga was sunken, and the limp leaves Waited for rain, while the black clouds Gathered far distant, over Himavant.

Then spoke the thunder”
Now he has turned for the river. Ganges has achieved a lower water level which only indicated a spiritual decline. The land was hot and dry. The leaves cried for rain. The dark clouds appeared over the Himalayas in the north. Williamson writes:

“And Ganga (the Ganges) in the Waste Land waits for it. The sacred river, now sunken, was the home of the earliest vegetation myths, and its religious thought is represented here by words from an Upanishad, which is identified in the notes.”

The poet refers to one of the Hindu Upanishads, where in a period of doubt and confusion, men, gods and demons prayed to the creator. God answered their prayers through a divine thunder, which uttered one word thrice Da, Da, Da. Each group gave its own interpretation. S. Radhakrishnan writes:

“The parable concludes: ‘This very thing the heavenly voice of thunder repeats, da,
da, da that is, control yourselves, give, be compassionate. One should practice this same triad, self control, giving and compassion”\textsuperscript{20}

Men said “Da” which means “Data”… “Give” Demons said “Da” which means, “Dayadham” which means to “sympathies”, further the gods said “Da” which means “Damyata” i.e. “control”. According to Eliot, all the three shows the path of salvation for humanity, because man has all the three qualities i.e. human, demonic and angelic. Eliot calls these three things as the three categorical imperatives which are necessary for the survival of humanity.


