CHAPTER-3

THE WASTE LAND
Introduction  On the eve of the composition of *The Waste Land*, Eliot had been reading Miss Weston’s book *From Ritual to Romance* and was considerably influenced by it. He read in it of the Waste Land of King Fisher whose kingdom had been laid waste by his own sexual sins and those of his soldiers. This suggested to the poet the title of his poem, for to him all Europe appeared to be a spiritual waste Land, laid waste by the sexual sins of the modern man.

i. Oedipus has sex with his mother. His country suffered. Later on through his penance the county became prosperous.

ii. The soldiers of King Fisher ravished the nuns of the Chapel Perilous said to contain the Holy Grail. The king became impotent and his land suffered from famine. The king hoped that a knight would come and go to the church Perilous and his sin would be washed. This would be followed by his rebirth of the body of Fisher King and prosperity to his land.
iii. The Biblical Waste Land is mentioned in the Old Testament. The land and the people suffered because the people worshipped idols. Prophet Ezekiel warned them to give up idolatry. The decay and desolation of the Biblical Waste Land is mentioned by Eliot.

IV. Modern Waste Land is there due to sins of sex and fire of lust and hatred and evils of material civilization and lack of faith and devotion. Through suffering and penance and ‘DA’- Give, Sympathize, Control the modern waste land can be saved from chaos and ruin. This will mark the rebirth of a new world, the resurrection of humanity.

The Epigraph of the poem comes from the Satyricon, a satire of the poet, Petronius. Translated into English the Epigraph means;

“Once I saw with my own eyes, the Sibyl at Cumae hanging in a cage, and when the boys said to her, Sibyl, what do you want?” She answered “I want to die?” Thus the epigraph
suggests the theme of the poem: Life in the modern waste land
is a living death or a life in death, like the life of the Sibyl. It is
a long poem of about four hundred forty lines in five parts. The
first part is: The Burial of the Dead.
The Burial of the Dead

T.S. Eliot is a conscious writer and like any other artist, he cannot turn his face from the grim realities of this world. The world, in which we are living, is full of hatred, deceit, squalor and cunningness. This all are existing because of the absence of any positive faith. All our values whether it be moral, spiritual, mental, cultural, social, intellectual, physical or religious have been forgotten by the modern people.

T.S. Eliot wanted to present this situation of modern world through his literature. He wanted to draw our attention to these defects of modern civilization. He is of view that a poet’s aim should not be to entertain. It must have a moral and social purpose. This is the reason why in his most influential poem, The Waste Land, he has presented the maladies of our present day civilization and hits at the spiritual bankruptcy of our age. His anguish, when he sees himself as the destroyer of mankind, is apparent in his poem, The Waste Land. In this modern world, man has thrown away all the values and as a result, he has
become intellectually, mentally, physically, emotionally and spiritually impotent. Eliot desires to expose the root causes of this sickness and to dig out the evils of sex. His poem, The Waste Land, focuses attention on the different facets of life. Stephen Spender writes:

“The central theme of The Waste Land is the breakdown of civilization, and the conditioning of those who live within it by that breakdown, so that every situation is a symptom of the collapse of values.”

T.S. Eliot’s The Waste Land is an important landmark in the history of English poetry. The title of the poem refers firstly, to the burial of the dead fertility and secondly, the burial service of the Christian Church. It is believed that both burials are followed by re-birth. Cleanthes Brooks writes:

“The first section of ‘The Burial of the Dead’ develops the theme of the attractiveness of death, or of the difficulty
The citizens of the waste land are spiritually dead. They do not like to be disturbed from their futile routine of the modern life. The modern man is both emotionally and spiritually sterile, having lost his faith in all positive values of life and nature. April is traditionally regarded as a symbol of spring and re-birth, while winter is a symbol of decay and death. April is the cruelest month for the denizens of the modern waste land, for it signifies rebirth and reminds them of their spiritual decay and makes them to think of regeneration. The lines from the poem express the agony clearly:

“April is the cruelest month, breeding
Lilacs out of the dead land, mixing
Memory and desire, stirring
Dull roots with spring rain.”
The modern men are happy in winter because they can enjoy and make merry during that period. In April there are stirrings of life in nature. This stirring of life and return of fertility is painful to the waste lenders, for it reminds them of the dead fertility god and his rebirth. However, regeneration requires effort, and effort is painful to the degenerate man in the modern world. About the condition of the modern waste-lenders, W.P. Kenny says:

“April is the cruelest month to them for in this dead land any reminder of Life is cruel, just as the awareness of a joy we cannot share, provoke pain.”

Tires as, the protagonist remembers another spring in his youth, in which he had enjoyed the company of a German girl, Marie. For Marie, and other waste lenders, winter is a comfortable month, for it makes them forget the need to action. They go south in search of pleasure, and thus they remain warm in winter. Snow covers the earth, there are no stirrings of
life, and so the need of action is forgotten. A German princess-
Countess Marie appears on the scene and becomes the
exponent of a modern person. She says that she is not Russian
at all, she comes from Lithuania, she is a real German. She
recounts the memories of her childhood. She refers to an earlier
event when she and her friend were caught in the summer rain.
They all took shelter under a circular roof. Marie recounts her
experience to Tires as. Her cousin is an arch-duke and she had
much fun in his company.

“And when we were children, staying at the arch-
duke’s,

My cousin’s, he took me out on a sled”

Once they went out riding in a sledge. Marie was afraid,
but the Duke asked her to hold on to him tightly. It was such
fun. Perhaps they then experienced a moment of intense sexual
excitement. This conclusion is borne out by the fact that Marie
enjoys to go to the mountains and the south where she feels
more free, free for amorous adventures. Marie is a globetrotter.
She has no roots in the family or the community. She thus symbolizes contemporary restlessness. Men and women of England spent their time in a garden, where fashionably enough, they took coffee and wasted their time over nonsense talk. Tiresias muses on the complete desolation of a land devoid of all spirituality.

“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, seller of currants, melts into the Phoenician sailor, and the latter is not wholly distinct from Ferdinand, Prince of Naples, so all the women are one woman, and the two sexes meet in Tiresias. What Tiresias sees, in fact, is the substance of the poem.”

The Epigraph of the poem comes from the Satyricon, a satire of the poet Petronius. The poet narrates the story of the Sibyl of Cumae. In Greek mythology, Sibyls were women of
prophetic power; that of Cumae being the most famous of them. She was the beloved of Apollo who granted her the gift of immortality, but without eternal youth. The result was she grew old and withered with the passage of time. Williamson writes:

“The basic experience is that of the Fisher King, which is made universal in Tires as, and the central speaker comprehends not only characters within the poem but the audience which he taunts. The speaker also is the son of man, his inheritor and this inheritance is the lot of the Fisher King, whose experience he repeats.”

Man has lost faith in God and religion and this decay of faith has resulted in the loss of vitality both spiritual and emotional. The entire passage is closely reminiscent of the parts entitled Ezekiel and Ecclesiastes in the Old Testament.

“What are the roots that clutch, what branches grow

Out of this stony rubbish? Son of man,
You cannot say, or guess, for you know only

A heap of broken images, where the sun beats,

And the dead tree gives no shelter, the cricket no relief,

And the dry stone no sound of water”

The old civilization with its values and conventions is dead and gone, leaving only a heap of broken images. Nothing seems to grow out of its stony waste land. There is an old tree lying on the ground. It represents the good individual who once functioned like a shady tree and proved beneficial to others, but is now no more. The barren land is full of crickets but their music gives no satisfaction. The stony wilderness is symbolic of the spiritual barrenness. An angelic voice tells the protagonist to stand under the great red rock (the Christian Church) which represents God’s strength. The red rock symbolizes the Christian Church. The shadow of the rock is unchanging. It is an embodiment of eternity.
The shadow of the morals, however keep changing. The shadow falls behind the man in his youth as his career opens out in front. But with the passage of time the shadow falls in front of him, in the evening of life. This shows that man is essentially a heap of dust. The fear of death keeps man under great tension. Same is written in Ecclesiastes.

“No material possession can save us from death and the consignment of our bodies to dust from which it has spring. Any thought about life except this is vanity.”

The poet gives an example of fear in love. He refers to the story of Tristan who had a guilt passion for Solder. This guilty love proved fatal.

“You gave me hyacinth first a year ago;

They called me the hyacinth girl.”

The poet then gives the story of the Hyacinth girl. This is the first experience of a young lover. The lover is terribly excited.
Like the love of Tristan, the love of this young man is also a guilty love as he makes love to the girl secretly in the garden. In the words of Williamson:
“The capitalized Hyacinth suggests the vegetation god and a victim of love. The protagonist’s response is striking: a failure of speech and sight, a state neither living nor dead, describing the effect of the vision of the Grail upon the impure.”

This sort of love is not free from fear and anxiety. Love offers no joy or relaxation under the conditions of modern life. Eliot is essentially Puritan and condemns the laxity in sexual relationship, so common in the modern age. There is another quotation taken from the German Opera namely, Tristan and Soled written by Richard Wagner. The meaning is: Empty and desolate, the sea.

“Madame Sosostris, famous clairvoyants,

Had a bad cold, nevertheless

Is known to be the wisest woman in Europe,

With a wicked pack of cards... ...”
Madame Sosostris, the famous fortune teller was suffering from a bad cold. She is known as the wisest woman in Europe, because she tells the fortunes of people with her pack of cards. The card of drowned sailor indicates something destructive, but which can at the same time be interpreted as something good and beautiful. Cleanthes Brooks writes:

“Madame Sosostris has fallen a long way from the high function of her predecessors. She is engaged merely in vulgar fortune telling- is merely one item in a generally vulgar civilization. But the symbols of the Tarot pack are still unchanged. The various characters are still inscribed on the cards.”

Here is a card Belladonna, the Lady of the Rocks, and the lady of sex situations. Here is yet another card of the man with three sticks. One More card represents the wheel. Here is another card of one-eyed merchant. The one-eyed merchant is the modern man whose eye of commerce has survived, but
whose second eye of religion is blinded. There is also a card which is blank. In the ancient world, both religion and commerce were united for the good of the community.


I see crowds of people, walking round in a ring.”

The hanged refers to either the fertility god or crucified Christ. Madame Sosostris does not find the card of hanged man in her Tarot Pack. This signifies that the modern men are blind to spiritual truths like the significance of the Crucified Christ or the sacrifice of the fertility god mentioned by Frazer. This card also shows death by drowning. The crowd of people refers to the office-going men and women. Madame Sosostris tells one of her clients that she will bring the horoscope and then she will tell the future of her client. Madame must be careful in making predictions because her art and craft is not recognized by the police.

“Unreal City,
Under the brown fog of a winter dawn,

A crowd flowed over London Bridge, so many,

I had not thought death had undone so many.”

This stanza deals with the barrenness of city life in modern civilization. The unreal city refers to London though it can represent any European Capital like Paris. The French poet calls Paris the unreal city. There is the scene of a wintry morning covered with fog is symbolic of the desolation and spiritual decay. There is a reference to Dante’s “Inferno”. Dante standing at the gate of hell, wonders at the multitude of people who are passing through hell. There is another reference to Dante’s epic when he stands before Limbo. Here he listens to the sighs of many souls. The reference is that the London crowd also includes people who are good and kind but have no faith in any religion. As the crowd reaches King William Street, the Church Clock strikes the hour of nine. This was the time for opening of offices and factories. When man becomes a wage-earner, his soul is deadened by routine. Business and
spirituality cannot go together. About the unreal city, Elizabeth Drew observes,

“The unreal city is cut off from both natural and spiritual sources of life and no longer has any thing of its old sense of community”\textsuperscript{16}

Tires as, the protagonist and the mouth-piece of T.S. Eliot appears on the stage and addresses his friend Stetson, who is walking in a London Street. The poet through Tires as questions Stetson about the corpse which he has planted in his garden.

“That corpse you planted last year in your garden,

‘Has it begun to sprout? Will it bloom this year?”\textsuperscript{17}

This reference is to the burial of Christ and resurrection later on. If one has faith in God, resurrection is possible. The corpse will sprout into a new life. With the loss of faith in religion, resurrection and rebirth will become meaningless. The basic idea is that under the conditions of modern civilization,
with the loss of faith in moral and spiritual values, the rebirth of man is improbable. The poet asks his friend further whether the corpse has been disturbed by the frost or by the dog, in each case it can never sprout and bloom. The dog may stand for the Dog star which heralds the rise of Nile water and thus brings fertility to the barren soil. Dog may also stand for some destructive creature who is an enemy of man. The digging of the corpse by the dog may refer to the unfriendly cults, the philosophies which are said to be friendly to man, but are in fact inimical to his spiritual life. For example science and communism are the philosophies which aim at increasing the happiness and material well being of man, but they are anti-religion as they do not take into account the spiritual requirements of human beings. Man is not only the body but also the soul. These philosophies neglect the soul, and surely man cannot live by bread alone. Again and again, he is warning his friend Stetson.

“Oh, keep the Dog far hence, that’s friends to men,

‘Or with his nails he’ll dig it up again!’”

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The warning of the protagonist to Stetson is applicable to all residents of the modern waste lenders.


    (New York: Charles Scriber’s Sons, 1949) 73.
