

The Waste Land: Deconstructing Spiritual Philosophy

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Abstract

This paper explores how philosophy is transformed from its original state with time. T. S. Eliot's poem, *The Waste Land* (1922) is taken as a primary text to explore the changing meanings of philosophy of established norms. Deconstruction is a theory inaugurated by Jacques Derrida in the late 1960s and became a major influence on literary studies during the late 1970s. Tyson (2006) says, "...according to Derrida, language is not the reliable tool of communication we believe it to be, but rather a fluid, ambiguous domain of experience in which ideologies program us without being aware of them (p. 249)." Since deconstruction sees the multiplicity and contradictions of meanings in the text rather than a single pre-established meanings, *The Waste Land* encompasses a number of such instances. "Meaning is created by the reader in the act of reading (Tyson: 2006, p. 258)." Therefore, the poem is successful and rich in bringing the fragmentations in the existing philosophy in the contemporary modern world. The poet brings the various references from different spheres of life such as mythology, art, literature, music etc. and each reference is deviated from its classical spirit. For instance, water, sex, human values, morality in profession have been found in different forms than they used to be. Water was the symbol of survival, but now it is the means of death. Similarly, sex is found deviated from its fundamental rhythm and it is now limited to physicality without any touch of spirituality. The poem contains the elements like fragmentations, meaninglessness, and gloom of the contemporary world which are clearly visible for deconstructing the pre-established philosophy.

Keywords: Deconstruction, The Waste Land, Poem, Postmodernism, Philosophy

Introduction

Each section of *The Waste Land* exemplifies Derridean deconstruction. For instance, Water, The Fisher King, the religious and mythological allusions, nature, London City can be seen through the lens of deconstruction. London can be viewed as the unreal city where alienation and dehumanization seem to be common phenomena. The water is a symbol of life, but it has become the cause of death. Deconstruction involves the close reading of texts in order to demonstrate that any given text has irreconcilably contradictory meanings, rather than being a unified, logical whole. Each section of The Waste Land exemplifies Derridean deconstruction. As Miller (1976), the preeminent American deconstructor, explains in an essay entitled "Stevens' Rock and Criticism as Cure", "Deconstruction is not a dismantling the structure of a text, but demonstration that it has already dismantled itself. Its apparently solid ground is no rock but thin air" (p. 330) Deconstruction was both created and has been profoundly influenced by the French philosopher on language, Jacques Derrida. He coined the term deconstruction, and argues that in Western culture, people tend to think and express their thoughts in

terms of binary opposition like day/night, masculine/feminine etc. Derrida in his book *Of Grammatology* (1967) suggests that these oppositions are hierarchies in miniature, containing one term that Western culture views as positive or superior, and another considered negative or inferior. Through deconstruction, Derrida aims to erase the boundary between binary oppositions.

T. S. Eliot's *The Waste Land* (1922) is an important landmark in the history of English poetry and one of the most talked about poems of the twentieth century. It is a long poem of more than four hundred lines in five parts entitled: 1) The Burial of the Dead 2) A Game of Chess 3) The Fire Sermon 4) Death by Water 5) What the Thunder Said. The poem presents a bleak and gloomy picture of human predicament in the twentieth-century. The gloom and despair are mirrored in the poem. The poem is full of literary and mythological references that draw on many cultures and universalize the poem's theme. The poem goes on to present a sequence of short sketches following an individual's baffled search for spiritual peace. *The Waste Land* draws much of its symbolism and narrative framework from the mythological stories. The poem is successful in deconstructing many of the established tradition, spirituality, and the truth established in the society.

Deconstructionism is an approach to literature which suggests that literary works do not yield fixed, single meanings, because we can never say exactly what we intend it to mean. It seeks to destabilize meaning by examining the gaps and ambiguities of language of a text. It pays close attention to language in order to discover and describe how a variety of possible readings are generated by the elements of a text. In other words, deconstructionists opine that there is no fixed center, rather there are many possible centers since the centrality is only the linguistic construct. *The Waste Land* incorporates numerous mythic allusions, varying voices, settings and tones, colloquial, lyrical and fragmented language and quotations from the works by various writers. In this paper, I will critically argue based on T. S. Eliot's poem *The Waste Land*, how the poem deconstructs the established dogmas related to spirituality by using Jacques Derrida's deconstruction, narrative inquiry and Gadamer's philosophical hermeneutics as theoretical frameworks.

Literature Review

Many critics have interpreted the poem from different perspectives. They have talked about the poem from deconstructive, narrative as well as philosophical hermeneutics theoretical frameworks. The poem presents a series of abruptly changing formats and its representative elements are disillusionment, spiritual dryness, and casual sexuality. It presents a metaphorical portrait of the modern world as dry and desolate. Humanity is emotionally, intellectually, and spiritually barren and dry; hence this representation in itself is the deconstruction of the centrality of the philosophies both in Western and Oriental horizons. "It is important to remember that all writing (or, more broadly, all communication), including our deconstruction of a literary text, continually deconstructs itself, continually disseminates meanings. In other words, strictly speaking, we do not deconstruct a text; we show how the text deconstructs itself" (Tyson: 2006, p. 265). The researchers' work is to show how a literary text deconstructs itself within it.

Deconstruction denies the centrality of the meanings of any literary texts. "*The Waste Land* then allows centrifugal forces to dissolve the relations between voices and speech types, perpetuating linguistic stratification until identity is lost" (Kelly: 2021, p. the 2). A sense of heteroglossia is presented in the poem i. e. it presents two or more expressed view points in a text or other artistic world. In *The waste*

Land, both the traditional views on various spheres of philosophy are presented differently. For example, “There is a shadow under this rock” (Eliot: 1922, line 24). The very expression deconstructs the traditional thinking of spiritual principles by showing the appearance of a new vision of it. Rajbhandari (2023) writes, “Postmodernist literature deconstructs established norms, ideologies, and institutions. It exposes power structures, challenges traditional binary oppositions, and questions the stability and universality of language. There is no notion of fixed interpretations” (p.70). Thus, we can see the different possible interpretations of any literary text.

The modern man had a glorious past, but now he has fallen down from his position. The line 65, “And each man fixed his eyes before his feet” (Eliot: 1922) shows the alienation of the modern man from society, religion, and spirituality. And it again suggests that the modern man has changed his location from one form to the other. In other words, he deconstructs human ideology and his identity. He turns to be individualistic by dismantling his earlier position. “A specific paradigm shift in modern astronomy and cosmology, initiated by Copernicus, established by Kepler and Galileo, and completed by Newton” (Tarnas: 2010, p. 260). It supports the philosophy of Derrida’s deconstruction that the centrality is changeable like language. Therefore, Derrida claims that language, human identity, culture, philosophy, and human identity are deconstructed, and they have no fixed ground.

The poem is rich in its spiritual symbolism, and there is the interplay between deconstruction and Eliot’s spiritual symbolism. Cargill (1969), writes, “The epigraph to ‘Gerontion’ shows that the appearance of the protagonist is wholly attributable to his spiritual depletion; it does not correspond to age: Thou hast nor youth nor age...” (p. 279). Likewise, there are a number of spiritual symbolism in the poem such as water, crumbles of the church, London city portray the philosophical shifts in the poem.

Discussion

T. S. Eliot’s *The Waste Land* focuses on the changing human identity and spiritual alienation by deconstructing the established notions. Derrida says that language creates the center, the language itself is arbitrary. Therefore, the center is questioned, and several other centers are established. Alienation has become the core medium to dismantle the center. Most of the references in the poem indicate alienation. Alienation is the state of being detached from something. There are several factors responsible for the alienation of the modern man in *The Waste Land*. “The scientific liberation from theological dogma and animistic superstition was thus accompanied by a new sense of human alienation from a world that no longer responded to human values...(Tarnas: 2010, p. 350). The poem deconstructs the idea of spirituality that exists in Western philosophy.

The beginning of the poem reflects the ironic instance. Zaki, T. N. A. (2024) opines that “The poem’s subversion of conventional Western values and beliefs may be seen in its use of irony and satire” (p. 1). “April is the cruellest month, breeding/ Lilacs out of the dead land, blending/ Memory and desire, stirring/ Dull roots with spring rain (Line 1-4),” are ironic because of the reality they describe the month of renewal and rebirth as a time of cruelty and loss of life. As deconstruction searches for the multiple meanings, we can view the traces of deconstructionist approach in the poem. The symbol of the month April is seen from the different eyes now than it was viewed in the past.

The use of religious allusions in *The Waste Land* may suggest that religion had long been the key element which connected the man with spirituality. The title of the first section, “The Burial of the Dead” indicates the burial of the center regarding spirituality. “Obviously, the religious crisis started

when God was executed and science became the new religion of Europe” (Leila: 2016, p. 425). Deconstructionists claim that the truth remains changing due to the interplay of language. The center of philosophy shifted from religion to science I course of its time.

For the modern man, sexuality is only mechanical because there is no spiritual attachment in sexual relations. Sexuality was considered to be related to the spiritual dimension. There is the absence of spiritual feelings in the modern people’s sexual relation under the title, “A Game of Chess.” Tiresias as represented in *The Waste Land* is bisexual, and he symbolizes the sexual deviation of the modern man from nature. Even sexuality was defined by the linguistic dimension. Under the title “The Fire Sermon,” the reference of “the Metropole” suggests to us the sensual triumph over the spiritual feelings. Metropole is the name of a hotel popular for homosexuality which is itself the deconstruction of sexual concept. These all references seem to dismantle the established dogmas of sexuality.

Gadamer’s hermeneutics is related to the interpretation of *The Waste Land* has an interaction with its readers, some voices and the speakers have conversational forms of communication. We speak about some speakers of the poem and analyze the poem from the dialogic point of view of Gadamer. As in line 52, “one-eyed man” may be interpreted as the modern man’s only one eye signifying the materialistic eye where the spiritual eye is absent. For this interpretation, the context, interpreter’s culture, historicity etc. influence the act of interpretation. Likewise, the poem can be analyzed as a narrative inquiry since there are several stories in it. There is shadow under this rock” (Eliot: 1922, line 24) may be taken as data for the narrative inquiry.

The poem is a depiction of the philosophical deviation in different spheres of life of the modern man. The poem is successful to deconstruct the traditional philosophy which can be viewed in different references used in the poem. The Burial of Dead suggests the spiritual death of the Waste Landers. It refers to the burial of the dead fertility god and the burial service for the dead performed by the Christian Church. In both the cases, death is believed to be followed by rebirth. But the inhabitants of the contemporary wasteland are spiritually dead and the very thought of rebirth or spiritual re-generation is painful to them. The beginning line of the poem, “April is the cruellest month (Line 1)” suggests that April is the cruellest month for the denizens of the modern wasteland, for it signifies rebirth, and they prefer ‘winter’ or spiritual death, for re-birth implies some efforts on their part and any spiritual effort is hateful to them. The Waste Land is about fragmentation, degeneration and loss of values in the West. Modern men are unwilling to be creative, active, fertile and upright.

The opening lines are the meditations of Tiresias, the representative of humanity. Then there is a light chat between two inhabitants of The Waste Land, perhaps overheard and remembered by Tiresias. One of the two is a German Princess, Marie. She symbolizes the rootlessness of the modern man and the fact is that life is lived entirely on the physical plane. The Princess remembers only a cousin with whom she probably had a sexual relationship. She has no roots either in the family, community or the nation. Modern humanity, like the German Princess, lives entirely on the physical plane and entirely forgetful of religious and moral values. The Protagonist, Tiresias, then surveys the panorama of modern civilization and finds it spiritually barren and dead. Nothing spiritual can grow in this barren land. “O son of man” “fear in a handful of dust” are the Biblical phrases and the modern wasteland is linked up to the Biblical wasteland.

The poem introduces two episodes of guilty love which suggest the sexual degradation in The Waste Land. In other words, sexual act has become beastly and sinful because it is divested of all spiritual

importance, without any boundary between right and wrong. King Fisher himself is a symbolic figure of impotence and Tiresias is a bisexual character. These both characters in the poem represent the condition of sexuality in modern times. We can see the changing scenario in sexuality with time.

“The Tarot Pack” suggests the modern wasteland such as London, Paris or representatively any other Metropolitan city. The Tarot Pack referred to in the passage was used in ancient Egypt to forecast the rise and fall of the river Nile. The Nile is the source of life and fertility. But in the present world, the function of the pack has been degenerated, and it is used for trite and forbidden fortune telling. Madame Sosostriis lives in constant fear of the police. “One must be very careful these days.” She says to the woman who has been consulting her. The various cards in the Tarot Pack represent the different personages which are to figure in the following sections of the poem. They are the drowned Phoenician sailor who symbolizes the fertility god. His image was thrown into the sea every year to symbolize the end of the summer. The cards also represents Belladonna who is a beautiful lady, Lady of the Rocks. She is the lady of situations, for she is adept in manipulating sex intrigues. She symbolizes womanhood in the present wasteland. The first section of the poem depicts that life in the contemporary world is a life-in-death and it is a living death because man has lost its faith in spiritual value. The ideal of life is deconstructed since it has multiple possible meanings at present. It is general decay and decomposition. Love has degenerated into lust, sex has lost its ideals as a source of life and vitality.

Similarly, “A Game of Chess” explores the failure of sex relationships in the modern wasteland. It has become the only source of pleasure without any touch of spirituality. The title “A Game of Chess” is the reference of one of the games of chess in Middleton’s play *Women Beware Women* (1968) where a game of chess is played to hide a seduction. Likewise, the Lady of the Rocks symbolizes the artificiality and superficial glamour of life. The dressing of her dressing table, cosmetics remind us the toilet tables in Alexandar Pope’s (1774) *The Rape of the Rock*. It shows the superficial relationship between man and woman. Philomela hears the sound of her lover on the stairs whom she has been waiting for. It signifies his arrival and their conversation contains the repeated question, “Think?” “Thinking?” and further, “Nothing, Nothing” suggests the futility and meaninglessness of modern men and women. In the past, death could lead to regeneration, but even death is devoid of significance at present.

“The Fire Sermon” is taken from the famous sermon of Lord Buddha in which the world is shown burning with lust, passion and hatred. It also reminds one of the Confessions of St. Augustine in which he represents lust as a burning cauldron. The modern man knows only lust but no true love. This section shows Tiresias surveying the Thames scene in the autumn. The leaves have fallen down and the wind moves without any rustle. The nameless ladies haunt the deserted Thames in search of momentary pleasure in the summer. Likewise, the rich sons of directors roam there in need of pleasure. The river is filled with empty bottles, cigarette cases, papers, handkerchief etc. which are the stuff used for pleasure. The water is a source of purification and regeneration but the modern man has polluted and defiled the water. The river “sweats oil and tar” and it symbolizes spiritual degeneration. The river scene can be compared with Edmund Spenser’s *Prothalamion*. In *Prothalamion*, the nymphs and their lovers prepare for wedding, but now they arrive there only for an orgy of pleasure.

The section, “Death by Water” deconstructs the traditional philosophy connected to water. Water is a traditional symbol of purification and regeneration. But in the modern land, it has lost its function and has turned into destruction. The Phoenician sailor, Phlebas was young and handsome, but he was drowned because his life was a sordid round of business activity and pleasure without the touch of

spirituality. He was caught in a whirlpool and passed the various stages of his “age and youth.” There is no rebirth for the Phoenician sailor due to his moral degradation. “Turn the wheel” (Line 320), gives us insights that the modern men try to be the masters of their own destiny which refers to that they have forgotten God.

“What the Thunder Said” indicates the possible rebirth of spirituality. According to the Upanishads, we are told how, when the land is threatened with famine and drought, the Divine or Prajapati spoke in thunder to his devotees-gods, demons, men and pointed out to them a way of salvation. In the same way, T. S. Eliot shows the way of spiritual rebirth, and his teaching is based on the ancient wisdom of India. But the ending of the poem is ironic itself.

Conclusion

Through this study, it is found that the essence and meaning of the pre-existing philosophy from myths, art, music, literature have changed and emerged with different meanings at present. T. S. Eliot’s poem, *The Waste Land* itself is rich in its subjects of philosophy with fragmentations, multiplicity of meaning, dryness etc. by observing the poem through the lens of deconstruction. The poem functions as a deconstruction of spiritual certainties, portraying where traditional binaries collapse and meaning become unstable. The pre-established norms, values, philosophy, institutions are deconstructed through the use of language. The text itself is the deconstruction of the pre-existing realities because it is a play of language which changes the meaning and understanding accordingly. Since deconstruction rejects the centrality of meanings and accepts the multiple meanings, the poem itself portrays the changing concepts of philosophy in modern times.

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