

THE NINETEENTH CENTURY WASTELAND

SHAMSI FARZANA¹ & MD. RABIUL ALAM²

¹Assistant Professor, Department of English, Asian University of Bangladesh, Uttara, Dhaka, Bangladesh

²Lecturer, Department of English, Asian University of Bangladesh, Uttara, Dhaka, Bangladesh

ABSTRACT

The modern poets used the term wasteland from various points of view, but the Victorians also used wasteland imagery with great effectiveness to alleviate their melancholy moods. These poets see barrenness in nature and see the bitter irony of love too that kills their senses. The best wasteland poetry is to be found in poems by Tennyson, Browning, Arnold and inevitably the later poems of T. S. Eliot. In this paper, we want to study the process of purge, purgatory, and purification of their protagonists through their works. For Tennyson, it is an honest pursuit, for Arnold, it is almost like military enterprise, Browning's quest is like a holy traverse to the waste before the victory of the death to be attained. Thus, for Eliot, the wasteland is a place for the passive endurance of all the characters that exhibit in the postwar generation.

KEYWORDS: Wasteland, Spiritual Promotion, Purgatory, Purification & Passive Endurance

INTRODUCTION

After the ravages done by the World War I, the modern civilization has been reduced to a 'Waste Land' and the land has lost its fertility and ability to bring forth life. Out of the debris, even the living seems to be suffering from some kinds of spiritual wounds. Eliot was not the first poet who introduced the wasteland imagery in his poem. Tennyson also uses this term in 'the Holy Grail' the Eighth of 'the Idylls of the King'. The knight Percival's approaching from "the dry and rocky land of sand and thorns" in search of the Grail represents the difficult road which a man searching for another worldly ideal must traverse. For the worldly people, this world is full of dryness and thorn. Those who have a quest for spiritualism feel thirst as there is less water to quench. Lightings without rain strike the dust swirls up from the wasteland. This path is lonely and desolate. Only the saintly Galahad's perfect purity gives him the vision that transfers the simple chapel into the resting place to get the Holy Grail where he and Perceval can pray. Though Percival can see the glimpse of the Grail's radiance, others find it a lonely and waterless tract and find only death in the black swamp. It is only the godlike who can only see the little reflection to reach the Holy city or even can pierce through the wasteland to catch a gleam of the light of salvation.

DISCUSSIONS

The term 'wasteland' has been used by several writers in their writing that has various connotative meanings. In the poem "The Passing of Arthur" by Alfred Lord Tennyson, we can notice the use of the term 'wasteland'. In the lonely desolate land, Bedivere only is blown along a wandering wind and hear the hollow\ hollow sound. Sir Gawain, one of King Arthur's knight died. After that Sir Bedivere of wavering mind urges King Arthur to fight against Romans and Mordred. He says-

"O me, my King, let pass whatever will,
 Elves, and the harmless glamour of the field;
 But in their stead, thy name and glory cling
 To all high places like a golden cloud
 Forever: but as yet Arthur shalt not pass."(line 49-54)

Then Tennyson through Arthur warns ordinary men to avoid the spiritual wasteland as because they may consider this surge as a mystic salvation outside the duties of the mortal world. Like Percival hypocritical St Simone turned to dust. Like Tennyson, Arthur does not think the realities of life on earth are not waste and not dry and bare. Most men are Lancelot driven by worldly glory and kernel desire. Some are like Galahads who should follow the quest. Lancelot like men should help to build the kingdom of God on earth and serve mankind. To see earthly life as like dust was considered by Percival is wrong. So, King Arthur says to his followers not to pursue anymore.

"The phantom circle of a moaning sea.
 There the pursuer could pursue no more,
 And he that fled no further fly the King;
 And there, that day when the great light of heaven
 Burned at his lowest in the rolling year,
 On the waste sand by the waste sea, they closed.
 Nor ever yet had Arthur fought a fight
 Like this last, dim, weird battle of the west." (line86-92)

Here he wants to say that Though the ever-changing moaning sea (danger) is far away the pursuer (Bedivere) could pursue no more in the war field. Even the king is mortally wounded but with him, he cannot escape the mortal world like the other Arthurian knights. At the end of the year, it appears before him everything is waste. On the waste sand by the waste sea though the war is closed nevertheless King Arthur fought his glorious battle as it is in this weird battle of the west.

This view is in sharp contrast with T. S. Eliot's implications in the Waste Land that every man should seek in the waste the rose of salvation watered by the streams of grace. In T. S. Eliot's 'Wasteland' the Fisher King Legend the king should die in order to bring fertility whereas in Tennyson's 'Idylls of the King', Arthur should survive who represents earthly ideal, must live in order that his heritage may bloom. Nevertheless, Tennyson wants, without him, people should conceive his existence even after his death. His good deed can make desert into the garden. For both poets, there is a garden in the desert and a desert in the garden. Whereas Tennyson is hopeful that desert may blossom like the rose through the continuous strike, pursuit for the ideal by the mortal men. On the other hand, Eliot sees fertility for the wasteland only in the death-bringing search of the followers of Percival for the Holy Grail or the sacramental death of the fisher king.

But in the passing of Arthur represents in part Tennyson's vision of a world in which ideals seem to have failed. Even his last survivor follower Bedivere wanted to appear half-unfaithful. God still wants to speak through nature-"in the

shinning of the stars” and he “flowering of his fields” but man’s destiny in a dark barren land of mist and uncertainty, blasphemy and betrayal. Arthur has won his present battle Modred lies dead before him. And because one follower of him still alive so he will come again in near future age. Like T. S Eliot, Tennyson does not want redemption from the ruined chapel. Salvation for Tennyson springs from a broader way than that brought about by any personal cleansing. Tennyson’s hope of God’s love can be felt in the panorama of the waste war field. After the clouds of doubt have blown away. God’s pinnacle stars shine with love in the distant sky.¹

“His floating dirge is going and Bedivere says

Somewhere far off, pass on and on, and go

From less to less into the light.

And the new sun rose to bring

The new year.” (Line 457-459)

Moving shoreward above the steeply rising floor of the deep sea, from dark-blue water into troubled green, they pass the edge of "soundings" and roll up over the lake. Their instrumental mourning echoes the life histories of the waves that are rolling in, minute by minute and hour after hour, bringing their messages from far-off places.²

In Browning’s “Childe Rolando the Dark Tower came” has the significance of wasteland like the spiritual expedition. Childe means would be a knight who wants to search of the fabled Dark Tower met with a hoary cripple. The weird old man by pointing a dusty road into an ominous plain tells him that he will find the dark tower in that direction. Though the quest must meet with inevitable failure and death, he still continues his search. It has a logical connection between Edgar’s song in Lear and this chivalric background. Browning insisted with these lines that Rolando smells the blood of another British man. Child Roland to the dark tower came. His word was still-‘Came, Fie, for hand, fain, I smell the blood of a British man’. But every danger he endeavors near the route to Ghent to Aix are like trails to test his mental and spiritual power. Whatever bleak part of the journey he faces like a black eddy of the stream, every staring bone of the horse and every thistle of the land is there to bring out the best part in him.

According to W. Bagehat, the poem presents the contrast and conflict between two types of characters, the sensuous and the aesthetics, and this conflict is universal; it is as much modern and Victorian as it is medieval. There is a contrast between two kinds of goodness which have long been controlled and always seen likely to be contrasted, in the world, the ascetic and the sensuous.³

In contrast to T. S Eliot’s ‘The Wasteland’, Browning’s’ wasteland is one that can be conquered by man’s unaided courage. Here rat’s alley does not signify the process of rebirth rather the rats’ of decay can be killed by knights’ spear. Roland does not know any fort of a richer country so he cannot wander in the waste. Though two of his friends Cuthbert and Giles betrayed him and Roland quashes the memories since they cause him a pain equal in intensity to the grotesque present.⁴

He continues his journey until he comes before a river that swallows the older trees. As he crosses the river he fears that he might step upon a dead man’s face. Suddenly he sees a blackbird glides over his head and looks up to see the plain, surrounded by mountains.

But he has no intuition to approach the mountains but got the realization that “this was the place”.

He focuses on two bent mountains in the distance and recognizes between them the Dark Tower, made of brown-stone and lacking any windows. It is also presumed that Roland has not achieved anything but that reaching the Park Tower is merely a symbol for finally reaching Death itself. His journey is not solely through the landscape but through the confrontation with himself.

Heat the same time antagonized by his own inner fears and attacks. His half dead like horses' fate is constructed by himself by showering only hatred. Through his hatred toward the beast, he shows hatred towards himself. In T. S. Eliot's *Wasteland*, there is a band of Percival's followers but here Roland's followers who betray him and now he is alone and solitary. Roland's attitude to nature is “See or shut your eyes” by acknowledging the truth of a terrible world. Perhaps this is what makes Roland a hero. Roland's heroic death shows the futility of an individual in an empty world and a celebration of the heroic attempt to declare individuality. Nevertheless like Percival he sees heavenly glimpse before the end of life. Though at the end he may seem to fail eventually he has truly conquered. But Eliot's knights, after a long hard journey through the hostile lands feel only bitter discontent but Rowland however, encounters before the blind tower, a glorious fellowship with other knights. For Browning, the *Wasteland* is a place of victory.

Edward Reed comments that nineteenth-century study of the mind had to continuously assert its support and mutual cooperation with religious thought. Reed writes that nineteenth Century “mainstream thinkers often attacked the promoters of scientific psychology as allies of atheism, but even a spiritual reading of their work reveals how false this accusation was.” This accusation echoes Browning's remark that belief in spiritualism was akin to unbelief. Religion, spiritualism and psychological study all sought for truth, yet the latter two seek truth outside of a deity, which made them dangerous in the eyes of many Victorians.⁵

Eliot sees salvation and rebirth in the mystic rose or in rain from heaven, Arnold finds it in social action. Eliot seems to show no certain faith in anything except salvation for the individual. In ‘the wasteland’ individual is addressed to seek divine grace. For Arnold, it is a path of active, almost military struggle. ‘Dover Beach’ is more characteristic of the bulk of Arnold's poetry. Arnold from the window of the palace sees the sea and he presents a darkling plain on which ignorant armies clash by night. Like the Greek Sophocles before the Aegean Sea laments for the past, the poet Arnold also mourns for the forgotten faith of Victorian people. He remains aloof and criticizes their sick-hurry and divided aims. Victorian people like ignorant armies clashes by night.

Matthew Arnold has little faith in a universal recovery. He sees in the Victorian landscape a spiritual and emotional emptiness and while this cannot be removed, it can at least be lightened by engaging in human love and relationship with others. This love is arguably or can at least be compared to the love of God, as the philosopher F.H. Bradley and writer T. S. Eliot rejected Arnold's Logic, Eliot claiming that “the effect of Arnold's religious campaign is to divorce religion from thought.”⁶

In the poem ‘A Forsaken Garden’ by Algernon Charles Swinburne shows the bleakness of nature by a deserted garden followed by a sea. The garden is surrounded by rocks, thorns, and weed which symbolizes a ghostly landscape. The flower beds are blossomless. The nightingales once sang are now disappeared. The only thing that is present here is those of change and destruction. So he narrates

To the strait waste place that the years

have rifted

Of all but the thrones that are touched

not of time.

The thrones he spares when the rose

is taken;

The rocks are left when he wastes the plain.

The wind that wanders, the weeds wind-shaken

These remain. (line 20-26, A Forsaken Garden)

The dense hard passage is blind and stifled. That crawls by a track none turn to climb. To the strait waste place that the years have rifling. Of all but the thorns that are touched not of time. The thorns he spares when the rose is taken; The rocks are left when he wastes the plain. The wind that wanders, the weeds only remain.

It is impossible to have a human presence here. Life seems barren but as long as there are sun and the rain, will populate this bleak landscape "all the yearlong". Lovers who once walked in the garden have gone to the grave. So love like the roses will perish. Existence here is just like a wasteland. Although love is as deep as sea it has to die. This poem shows the cyclical time since summer will appear again. In nature besides thorns roses will appear again. Flowers seem lush. It is the triumph of Christian virtue over pagan sensuality and aestheticism that causes the wasteland. Swinburne does not believe in pagan beauty since time will wane everything and the underworld goddess Proserpine gathers all things to herself. The blossoms in the sea will perpetually bloom whereas the flowers in the forsaken garden have disappeared far beneath its waves. The thorns of life give a dignity to the self to Swinburne's wasteland than the bitter truth of T. S. Eliot's Wasteland where everything has changed into debris by the First World War.

In Swinburne's world, creation will not end by the hand of the Christian lord but by a natural cycle. In her thoughts, Swinburne represents life by the land and eternity by the sea. Similarly, Micheal Joyner argues that although Swinburne is known to depict humanness through the image of the ravaging power of sequential time and death. The speaker hopes, but fails, to create a place within a time that is free from the march of time and decay. Past, present, and future are condensed in the "state" present time of the garden. (Jayreer 100-102)⁷

The city life is found in both Thompson's 'The city of Dreamful Night' and T. S. Eliot's "The Wasteland", Thompson's narrator is an alienated wanderer. As he walks, he encounters other aimless passersby. It is a haunted place. The purposeless people make a kind of penance to the silent, impersonal, 'necessity supreme' that permeates the entire city.

So he says-

There is no God; no fiend with names divine

Made us and tortures us; if we must pine,

It is to satiate no Beings' gall City life in. (line 15-17)

'The Wasteland' summarizes the Grail Legend, not precisely in the usual order. The Grail legend corresponds to the great hero epics, it dramatizes initiation into maturity and it speaks a quest for sexual, cultural, and spiritual healing. Grover Smith says-"Eliot's Wasteland suffers from a dearth of love and faith. It is impossible to demarcate precisely at every point between the physical and the spiritual symbolism of the poem. The contemporary Wasteland is not, like that of romances, a realm of sexless sterility. The argument emerges that in a world that makes too of the physical and too little of the spiritual relations between the sexes. The action of the poem, as Teiresias recounts it, turns thus on two crucial rebirths through love and sex the second rebirth without either. Since both fails, the quest fails and the poem ends with a formula for the suffering of purgation, through which Teiresias may achieve the second alternative after patience and self-denial – perhaps after physical death. The counsel to give, sympathize, and control; befits one whom direct ways to beatitude cannot release from suffering."⁸

In T. S. Eliot's 'The Wasteland' there is some hope whereas in Thompsons' city dwellers completely lack this. So, Thompsons says-

That City's atmosphere is dark and dense,
 Although not many exits wander there,
 With many a potent evil influence,
 Each adding poison to the poisoned air;
 Infections of unutterable madness,
 Inflections of incalculable madness,
 Infections of incurable despair. (line 32-38)

Thompson in this poem characterizes the city as a place of loneliness, alienated and spiritual despair for the many. London in the nineteenth century went through this exploring of melancholia in its downtrodden underclass population.

The same sadness and alienation are found in Eliot's 'Ash Wednesday' and 'The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock'. In the 'wasteland,' the unreal city of London is focused. In Eliot's Thames river, there is filthy wastage whereas Thompson's Thames river is a calm and mighty and deep river. It flows from the depths of human soul into a boundless ocean of meaningless misery.

CONCLUSIONS

In fine it can be easily understood that writers in all centuries have compared their worlds to wastelands. Sophocles' hero king Oedipus was brought up in Wasteland, Ezekiel of Dry bones, Virgil's Aeneas traverses the misty plains. of the dark underworld. Milton portrays Christ tempted in the wilderness, Shakespeare portrays King Lear in a desolate and bleak heath. Bunyan's Pilgrim steps through many a place like Valley of the shadow of death. Each age comes with wasteland in its profound meaning. The Wasteland of the Victorian poets is, on the whole, more dignified, more static more regardless to sex more specifically social rather than individual, and more reminiscent of the past rather than that of most modern poets. Nevertheless, the rocky belt of the sea and wasted vegetation of cactus is more visible vital and meaningful symbols to the generation of Arnold, and Tennyson as they are to that of Eliot and twentieth-century poets. Though it is thought to be a modern discovery it had been thoroughly dissected and ravaged by the Victorians before the

twentieth century was in delusion.

REFERENCES

1. Albert, Edward. (Ed.). (1971). *History of English Literature*. The Concise Cambridge²
2. Antrim, Harry T. (1971). *T. S. Eliot's Concept of Language: A Study of Its Development*, Gainesville: University of Florida press.
3. Brett, R. L. (Ed.). (1965). *Poems of Faith and Doubt: The Victorian Age*. University of South Carolina Press⁶.
4. Bush, Ronald. Ed. (1991) *T. S. Eliot, the Modernist in History*, New York: Cambridge University Press.
5. Cuddy, Louis A. (2000). *T. S. Eliot and the Poetics of Evolution: Sub-Versions of Classicism, Culture and progress*, London: Associated University Press, Inc.
6. Dahl, Curtis.(Ed.). (1962).*The Victorian Wasteland*. New York, Oxford University Press¹.
7. Douglass, Paul. (2011). *T. S. Eliot, Dante, and the Idea of Europe*, Cambridge: Cambridge Scholars Publishing.
8. Grove, Robin. (1993). *Early Poetry of T.s. Eliot*. Sydney: Sydney University Press in association with Oxford University Press.
9. Haffenden. (General Ed.). (2011). *The Letters of T. S. Eliot 1923-1925*, Hugh, Haughton and Valarie, Eliot. Eds. New Haven & London: Yale University Press.
10. Herbert, Howarth. (1964). *Notes of Some Figures behind T. S. Eliot*, Boston: Houghton Mifflin.
11. <https://ardhendude.blogspot.com/2012/11/analysis-and-significance-of-lord.html>.³
12. Joyner, Michael, A. (1977). *Of Time and the Garden: Swinburne's A Forsaken Garden, Victorian Poetry*. P 99-105⁷
13. Karim, Daniel. (Ed). (1989). *Robert Browning Selected Poems*. "National Magic". London: Penguin Books. (Print)⁴
14. Keating, Louis Clark. (1958). *Humanities in the Modern World*, The Classical World, Classical Association of the Atlantic States Stable, Vol. 51, No. 8
15. Menand, Louis. (1996). *T. S. Eliot and Modernity*, The New Quarterly. Vol. 69, No. 4.
16. Parkinson, Francis Thomas. (1951). *W.B. Yeats Self-Critic: A Study of his Early Verse*, Berkeley: University of California Press.
17. Smith, Grover. (1956). *T.S. Eliot's Poetry and Plays: A study in sources and meaning*, 'On The Waste Land,' The University of Chicago Press⁸
18. Stange, G. Robert. (Ed). (1974) *Robert Browning Selected Poems. Mr. Sludge, the Medium*. Boston:Houghton Mifflin Company. (Print)⁵

