

Mapping the Modern Mind: Mental Health Echoes in *The Waste Land*

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Abstract: Parts of *The Waste Land* (1922) were written by Eliot in 1921 while recovering from a mental breakdown at a sea shelter in Margate. Fragments from the poem reflect his vulnerable psychology, originating in continued alienation and disrupted communication: “My nerves are bad tonight. Yes, bad. Stay with me./Speak to me. Why do you never speak? Speak.” The poem echoes mental health issues as entwined with the urban experience characteristic of modernity, manifested in the generation’s fractured sensibility, hampered connection and severed relationships. The paper examines the poem’s indirect and direct reflections on mental health through its diversity in content and form. It will observe how the poem connects the various consequences of modernity—alienated identity, disrupted communication, affective disconnect, and ecological crisis—all echoing the generation’s disillusionment and mental fragmentation. It will ultimately attempt to understand how the poem transcends temporality to confront the contemporary mental health crisis, providing cues to receive them with more openness and empathy.

Keywords: *The Waste Land*, T.S. Eliot, mental health, modernity, ecological crisis, communication, alienation, fragments, fractured sensibility, relationships.

According to Gabrielle McIntire, *The Waste Land* (1922) can be considered “the exemplary ur-modernist poem,” evoking fresh perspectives from its readers while providing social commentary, reflecting the era’s most pressing concerns that primarily emanated from the impact of the First World War and industrialisation (2). With this work, Eliot emerged as “a poet who tried to rethink the foundations of the world order” after the War (Rabate 9). The looming threat of a collapse is evident in “London bridge is falling down falling down falling

down” (Eliot 426). However, the poem captures not only the crisis and devastation as consequences of the War and modern civilisation but the urban experience in its entirety—as also manifested in people’s fractured sensibility, hampered connection and severed relationships. Sorum notes that meaning-making and communication also became “casualties of the War” (171). This paper examines the poem’s indirect and direct reflections on mental health through its diversity in content and form. It will observe how the poem connects the various consequences of modernity—alienated identity, disrupted communication, affective disconnect, and ecological crisis—all echoing the generation’s disillusionment and mental fragmentation. It will ultimately attempt to understand how the poem transcends temporality to confront the contemporary mental health crisis, providing cues to receive them with more openness and empathy.

John F. Schumaker argues that the conditions of modernity have given rise to forces, processes, and cultural motivations leading to an enormous mental health crisis in “an age of insanity” (1). He observes that if a culture does not recognise the need for social connectedness, its members will be vulnerable to psychological and emotional disorders (7). *The Waste Land* constantly hints at these factors and processes that cause isolation and psychotic disintegration, as echoed in disrupted communication and unfulfilled relationships among the characters in the poem. However, while the poem was hailed as an embodiment of the disillusionment, alienation and meaninglessness characteristic of its time, Eliot himself called it a reflection of his psychological state (Trosman 709), contrary to his notion of the poet’s impersonality as elucidated in his 1919 essay “Tradition and the Individual Talent” (McIntire 3). Written in 1921, mostly when Eliot was spending time at the Margate sea shelter to recover from his mental breakdown and then in Lausanne, Switzerland, to seek treatment from Dr Roger Vittoz, the poem is considered as “rooted in personal issues and preoccupations” (Gordon 39). These issues included Eliot’s struggle for survival as an

American in London. At the same time, his father disapproved of his career choice, his hasty decision to marry Vivienne Haigh-Wood, an Englishwoman, without his parents' consent, his sexual incompatibility with his new wife as she openly confessed to Russell who now became her lover, her ill-health and suffering from "nerves, complicated by physical ailments," his struggle with influenza necessitating complete mental rest, his father's death, and his intense longing for his mother while she was getting older (Eliot qt. Rabate 14). As Eliot described the poem as "the relief of a personal and wholly insignificant grouse against life," it has also been read as a product of a "reintegrative process following a psychological decomposition" (Trosman 717), valuing artistic creativity for its ability to liberate people from mental suffering.

The poem echoes communication breaches among the characters that influence their personal relationships, thus reflecting the modern condition where humans struggle to connect with themselves or with each other. A. Walton Litz notes the "quintessentially Jamesian experience" at the heart of Eliot's work: "The tragedy is that of one who can perceive but cannot act, who can understand and remember but cannot communicate" (21). In the first section, the "hyacinth girl" (Eliot 36) complains of failed communication as marked by silence, despite good intentions—"I could not/ Speak, and my eyes failed, I was neither/ Living nor dead" (38-40)—referring to her inability to communicate the passion which she once felt, while comparing the modern world with a desolate sea of nothingness. In the next section, Madame Sosostris, the famous fortune-teller, predicts crowds of people in the speaker's future, walking aimlessly in circles, reflecting a lack of connection and communication. The reference to crowds continues in the final episode of this section, as the speaker observes people "undone" by death, streaming across the London bridge, as they could barely talk but only "sigh," with their eyes "fixed" on their feet (63-5). While the speaker mentions only contemporary London, it encompasses allusions to Dickens's London

(“the brown fog of a winter dawn”), Baudelaire’s Paris (“Unreal City”), and Dante’s hell (“the flowing crowd of the dead”).

The next section, titled “A Game of Chess”—a game involving adversarial relationships, strategic thinking and imagination of other’s perspectives – has conversations defined by the title and reinforces the impossibility of a meaningful connection (Sorum 171). The exchange between two women demonstrates failed relationships marked by a lack of emotions and only physical desires at work. One of the women is compared to Philomela from Ovid’s *Metamorphoses*, who was raped by King Tereus, her brother-in-law, who then cut her tongue so she could not reveal the secret. She took her revenge with the help of her sister and escaped by transforming into a nightingale. Such a comparison suggests the woman’s helplessness due to her inability to communicate her laments to the world, where she could only cry to herself over her bleeding wound. What follows are lines from a speaker frustrated by a communication gap, urging her listener to speak to her, reflecting the alienated modern human condition. According to Sorum, “The strange and richly ornamented scene in which the woman sits, a kind of carved queen in a “Chair . . . like a burnished throne” (Eliot 77) provides the setting for a breakdown in communication between the thinking voice of the poem, and the nervous woman” (Sorum 171). This voice is considered to be Vivienne’s, alluding to her vulnerable psychological state and her strained relationship with the poet, expecting, in futility, her legal union to lead to empathy (Gordon 46). Her hopes for successful communication are constantly thwarted as she asks questions reinforcing the pervading sense of emptiness—“Do/You know nothing? Do you see nothing? Do you remember/nothing?”—only to fetch no answers (Eliot 121-3). Navigating through themes of sexual and worldly pleasures, Eliot illustrates people’s cold inaction and passivity devoid of any emotional connection. The next scene continues the sense of frustration and barrenness caused due to the War by representing Lil’s failed communication with her husband, a War veteran, leading

to an unhappy marriage despite her prolonged suffering. According to Badenhausen, Eliot attempts to suggest the difficulty of traumatised soldiers in reconciling their War experience with civilian life as domestic spaces prove to be “inhospitable” to them (154). The section concludes with Lil echoing Ophelia from Hamlet just before her suicide – “Good night, ladies, good night, sweet ladies, good night, good night” (Eliot 172) - thus situating the “preceding marital portrait within the tradition of tragic love relationships that have collapsed due to miscommunication, misunderstanding, and a lack of intimacy” (Badenhausen 156).

The dire improbability of fertility and regeneration is underlined in the next section, “The Fire Sermon,” as sexual encounters continue to defy any real intimacy. The typist is indifferent to Tiresias’s sexual advances, and even though she does not resist them, there is no affective connection between them. The act of lovemaking seems mechanical, just like everything else around them in the modern world, as if it is a chore to be completed—“Well, now that’s done, and I’m glad it’s over” (Eliot 252). This idea is reinforced by the story of a maid losing her virginity when she lay “supine on the floor of a narrow canoe,” as if entirely indifferent— “I made no comment. What should I resent?” (295-9) The sense of meaninglessness continues, alluding to Eliot’s experience at the sea shelter—“On Margate Sands, I can connect Nothing with nothing” (300-2). This connection between fertility and land restoration is extended through an enduring image of the Fisher King in the poem, with multiple references to the Arthurian legend. In a note, Eliot expresses his debts to Miss Jessie L. Weston’s book on the Grail legend, *From Ritual to Romance*, where she connects the story of the Fisher King to fertility rituals. Fisher King, crippled and impotent due to a magical wound, has desolate, infertile lands and passes his time fishing at a lake until the knight Percival comes and heals him, restoring the land’s fertility and becoming the keeper of the Grail. In the third section, the king is “fishing in the dull canal/On a winter evening round

behind the gashouse/Musing upon the king my brother's wreck" (189-91), thus pointing to the society's decadence and the War as the causes of *The Waste Land* he portrays.

Such ruptures in intimacy and communication, many rooted in the War, are aggravated by the pervasive death and disintegration imagery in the poem. Although the First World War forms the backdrop of the poem, the focus is on its devastating effects on bodies and minds, on suffering rather than on its origins (Badenhausen 147-8). The modern world is portrayed as a literal wasteland. Corpses abound in the poem; there's a preoccupation with endings—the end of childhood, death by water, and failed marriages. Nihilism dominates modern life, which lacks any spiritual guidance. The reader encounters the death of nature at the very beginning of the poem, as springtime, usually the period of fertility, is declared the "cruellest month" (Eliot 1). Later, the river, a symbol of life and renewal, is reduced to a "dull canal" (189). Many allusions, like Dante's *Divine Comedy*, are associated with death. In the final section, people suffer, cities are destroyed, and chapels are decayed.

Ruination, however, goes beyond spatial boundaries: "These fragments I have shored against my ruins" (Eliot 430) allude to the speaker's fragmented subjectivity and signify the fractured sensibility of the post-War modern world and the disoriented urban experience. There are five sections with constantly changing speakers, the structure is disjointed, many lines are irregular in rhyme and meter, and the languages used are multiple. Frequently varying voices produce an effect of confusion, urgency and helplessness. While in one section, vernacular is used, another includes musical fragments, such as Spenser's wedding song, a soldier's ballad, a nightingale's chirping and a mandolin tune. Fragmentation is the poem's prominent literary strategy, as evident in its textual fragments, referential excess, and "a heap of broken images" (21-2), mirroring the "modern crowd experience" while also calling the reader out for meaning-making, analogous to "urban rebuilding" (Morrison 30-2). According

to Trosman, the poem itself is an attempt at reintegrating his fragmented self, turning “adversity to poetic advantage” (717).

The poem has been read as a pastiche of different verse forms, combining old formal patterns with a free verse to express its debts to the literary tradition while breaking away from past practices (McIntire I). The repetitions in the poem not only manifest repressed trauma but also attempt to reconstruct subjectivity in a rapidly changing world. The poem is replete with historical references—literary, cultural and artistic—and personal memories, functioning as an elegy to the declining culture while suggesting parallels to the contemporary problems. Badenhause observes the poem as a “site of mourning,” with the “elegiac project” being particularly visible in “Death by Water,” posing questions about loss and grieving (152). Bringing fragments from the past into the present, the poem blurs the boundaries of time.

The Waste Land transcends temporal borders to confront the contemporary mental health pandemic. For its own time, it is a path-breaking work in exploring mental health issues in an uncensored way at a time when the focus was on ‘moving on,’ and mental health issues were hardly discussed. What Eliot went through at that time takes the name of modern-day depression and anxiety. Although Eliot went for therapy, the poem itself is written in a manner that is not clinical or threatening, tackling mental health more directly. The issues echoed in the poem remain relevant even today. The repetition can be seen as “a circumvolution of an endless cycle,” symbolising “modern emptiness”, thus mirroring a social and cultural criticism that seems to foreshadow the problems of our times (Campbell 26).

The impending ecological crisis against the backdrop of strained communication is echoed in the poem, such as in its references to “brown fog” (Eliot 208) or the river sweating “oil and tar” (266-7). Such imagery shows how modernity has impacted our relationship not only with ourselves and other humans but also with nature: “the fundamental way in which moderns experience themselves and the world is creating the conditions for an environmental

holocaust, and an associated indifference” (Schumaker 155). Our lack of ecological awareness is worsening our “planetary health” and “giving free reign to the modern ecological pathologies,” both physical and psychological (Schumaker 156). The outside environmental mirrors and aggravates the psychological crisis within, adversely impacting our relationships. Internalising the threats to our physical world causes ecological anxiety, guilt, despair, and grief.

However, accompanying this pessimistic state of society is hope for survival, regeneration, and a better tomorrow. Morrison observes that *The Waste Land* paves the way for “new ways of ordering, mapping, and governing modern city experience” for “potentially utopian restructurings of modern urbanity” holding “a latent power of revolutionary renewal” (31-32). Even the references to death suggest it is a necessary stop for rebirth. In the allusion to Philomela, for instance, her transformation demonstrates the possibility of a new life after a brutal end. The possibility of redemption is suggested in the allusion to the Hindu mantra of “Datta, Dayadhvam, and Damyatta” to counter mental turmoil with “Shantih,” the peace which passeth understanding (Eliot 433-4). The final section of the poem returns to the Fisher King legend and describes the “arid plain” as “behind” him so that he can “set lands in order,” thus bringing hope for rejuvenation. Schumaker observes modernity’s capacity for “environmental dissociation,” which allows for an acknowledgement of environmental threats while keeping them out of their working consciousness (157). Harmony with nature can only be nurtured when people feel more disturbed about the environmental crisis and reach a “conscious state of eco-anxiety” (Schumaker 167). Only by establishing a peaceful connection with nature can we empathise with each other and strengthen our relationship with ourselves.

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