

## **Journeying into the ‘Mental Wasteland’: A Psychopathological Reading of T.S. Eliot’s *The Waste Land***

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**Abstract:** Hailed as the most important work of the modernist period, *The Waste Land* has been the focus of numerous scholars and critics. When T.S. Eliot wrote *The Waste Land* in 1922, it was a difficult time for the world as well as for Eliot. He wrote this poem after a period of mental fatigue, exhaustion and depression. The crisis that forms the heart of this monumental work was at once universal and private.

This paper argues that even though Eliot strongly opposed the expression of one’s personality in artistic expression, *The Waste Land* is an indicator of the psychological processes in the mind of the poet and a result of those psychological processes. In his creative work, Eliot used the experiences of his mental illness and his consequent recovery to write the poem. Eliot used his illness as a source of artistic creativity and inventiveness and it is this abundance of personal energy and insight which made this work so profound and lasting. This paper tries to demonstrate, as Eliot himself believed, the connection between creativity and emotional stress through a psychopathological reading of *The Waste Land*.

**Keywords:** Eliot, Mental Illness, *The Waste Land*, psychopathology, creativity

Even the most careful and responsive reader must reread and do hard work  
before the poem forms itself clearly and unambiguously in his mind... And

it is easy to fail in this undertaking.

—Armstrong Richards

Thou this be madness, yet there is method in’t.

—Shakespeare

Hailed as the most important work of the modernist period, *The Waste Land* has been the focus of numerous scholars and critics. When T.S. Eliot wrote *The Waste Land* in 1922, it was a difficult time for the world as well as for Eliot. He wrote this poem after a period of mental fatigue, exhaustion and depression. The crisis that forms the heart of this monumental work was at once universal and private.

This paper argues that even though Eliot strongly opposed the expression of one's personality in artistic expression, *The Waste Land* is an indicator of the psychological processes in the mind of the poet and a result of those psychological processes. In his creative work, Eliot used the experiences of his mental illness and his consequent recovery to write the poem. Eliot used his illness as a source of artistic creativity and inventiveness and it is this abundance of personal energy and insight which made this work so profound and lasting. This paper tries to demonstrate, as Eliot himself believed, the connection between creativity and emotional stress through a psychopathological reading of *The Waste Land*.

While the poem has been viewed by most critics and scholars as an expression of modernist values and spirit, this paper investigates the connection between Eliot's psychological state and *The Waste Land*, in other words, "the relation between psychopathology and artistic creativity" (Trosman 709). The poem is full of literary allusions, complex and constant shifts in narrative, making it highly difficult for the reader to comprehend. The poem reflects the unstable mental state of the author in its structure. Eliot's statement goes on to justify this to a large extent: "Various critics have done me the honour to interpret the poem in terms of the contemporary world, and have considered it, indeed, as an important bit of social criticism. To me it was only the relief of a personal and wholly insignificant grouse against life; it is just a piece of rhythmical grumbling."

It is important to note that Eliot wrote *The Waste Land* while under treatment for mental illness in Lausanne, Switzerland. Eliot had self-diagnosed his psychiatric condition as

he was closely familiar with the symptoms since Vivienne, his first wife, suffered from prolonged psychiatric problems and spent the latter part of her life confined to a mental asylum. There could be several reasons and explanations behind Eliot's unstable state of mind but the primary argument here is that *The Waste Land* was a product of precisely this state of the author. "My nerves are bad tonight. Yes, bad. Stay with me / Speak to me. Why do you never speak. Speak. (*The Waste Land*)

Although there is no concrete evidence in Psychology to prove that there is a connection between creativity and psychopathology, such links have been explored by several psychologists and scholars alike. "Research describes how moments of heightened and euphoric mood make people have better access to vocabulary, memory, and other cognitive resources. People experiencing mania can often be more clever and imaginative, often show inflated emotional responses which may facilitate their talent in literature, and often have unusual stamina and remarkable capacity for concentration" (Koutsantoni). Some very prominent writers suffered from some form of psychiatric illness such as Sylvia Plath, Tennessee Williams, Virginia Woolf and Charles Dickens among others. How can one forget the magical and enchanting "Kubla Khan" written under the influence of opium by Coleridge?

This brings us back to Eliot's mental health and the treatment he received for it. Trosman believes that the treatment given to him by his psychiatrist Roger Vittoz was instrumental in churning out a poem that has received a huge amount of praise from all quarters in the last century. Eliot had written some portions of the poem at Margate, where he spent a few weeks trying to get his nerves under control before moving to Lausanne. Margate had certainly not helped his nerves as is evident from the lines, "On Margate Sands/I can connect/Nothing with Nothing/The broken fingernails of dirty hands." (Eliot *The Waste Land*)

At the time when Eliot was undergoing a psychological decompensation characterised by depression, inability to work, exhaustion, and somatization, he was able to transform his suffering into a work that has been hailed as most representative of the preoccupations of the modern age. We are thus confronted in this instance with a significant link between psychopathology, reintegration, and subsequent creative achievement. (Trosman 709)

Scholars and critics believe that Vittoz's self-created technique of treatment, which he first applied to himself, helped Eliot write such a powerful piece of work. "Vittoz believed that he could determine the workings of the cerebral hemispheres by feeling their vibrations through the patient's forehead with his hand. By assessing a patient's cerebral responses to simple tasks which he proposed, he believed he could monitor the disordered vibrations and gradually educate a patient to master his brain functions (Trosman 713).

"Eliot was depressed, exhausted, and threatened by fears of a psychotic disintegration." (Trosman 713) Beginning with relatively simple tasks, Vittoz helped the patient gain a sensation of mastery over incomplete functions. After a degree of control was established, more complex duties were assigned. In this approach, the patient established a sense of ego power over previously experienced disequilibrium and chaos in mental processes. Gradually, by focusing on minimum sensations, thoughts, ideas, and actions, Eliot gained a sense of mastery over a mind that he had previously believed to be "deranged," incapable of volition, or of successfully employing energy. Vittoz rejected Freud's psychoanalysis as he believed that the unconscious processes were a danger to his method of treatment. While his method attempted to bring about "unity and integration" of the brain, Vittoz believed that psychoanalysis worked in opposition to the fundamentals of his theory.

Eliot was the last child born to his parents who had already reared enough children before him and had passed their youth where they could give attention to him. Both his parents

were involved in other things, and he almost grew up as a neglected child or at least a child who was never fussed over. His marriage to Vivienne too had not turned out as expected. He had married Vivienne because of her vivacious and exuberant charm and energy. It was an attempt at creating an alternate world for himself in Europe; a family away from “family”. He had hoped that her positive energy would enthuse in him some vibrancy, but Vivienne had slipped into an incurable depression thus distancing the two resulting in separation. Instead of being affected by her positivity, Eliot may have been affected adversely by her illness. The fact that Eliot’s family, particularly his father, disapproved of his marriage to Vivienne distanced him from them. His father’s death in 1919 further disillusioned him and all these incidents became fertile grounds for his mental disequilibrium. Vittoz diagnosed Eliot with “insufficient brain control.”

The predominant symptom complex was depression with exhaustion, indecisiveness, hypochondriasis, and fear of psychosis. His personality was vulnerable to specific injuries that disturbed his narcissistic equilibrium. He was aloof and distant, and he guarded himself against the intrusions of others with an icy urbanity. Compulsive defenses enabled him to isolate his emotions should their impact threaten him with excessive traumatization. Sexuality was a potential danger not only because of intense intersystemic conflict but because instinctual forces threatened him with loss of ego control and dominance. (Trosman 712)

Deep psychopathology may exist in lives that appear tranquil and are relatively in accordance with cultural norms. However, that may be, it would appear to be especially difficult for the artist, particularly the literary artist, to deal with internal conflict through repression, as his attention during the creative process is turned inward and must inevitably reawaken those conflicts that other individuals may be able to suppress (Dalton 47).

It has been alleged that during manic episodes, periods characterised by elation, people can become more productive. There is some research that describes the connection between creativity and psychopathology, suggesting that this form of emotional distress and instability may contribute to the materialisation of creativity. (Kawas)

Inspiration has been compared to regressive mental states like dreams and madness since ancient times. Aristotle says that poetry "implies either a happy gift of nature or a strain of madness" while Plato talks about the state of "creative madness." Inspiring moments typically involve a flood of novel and exciting thoughts, associations, and images that overwhelm the capacity of the mind to keep up with them in the ordinary course of thought. Many people believe that their flashes of genius come from otherworldly beings like gods, muses, angels, or even demons because they feel so removed from the mundane world in which they normally exist (Dalton 48).

Ezra Pound, an eminent poet and critic, often termed the midwife of *The Waste Land*, edited the poem for Eliot. The poem, which is highly fragmented and complicated, was much more chaotic before it received treatment at the hands of Pound. Pound eliminated several portions and reduced the poem to a great extent. One can only begin to imagine how much more chaos and incongruity must have been in the poem before Pound worked upon it. The poem contains many references to Eliot's and Vivienne's relationship. Many of the lines were removed at Vivienne's insistence but yet several remain. It is worth mentioning here that the two most important people connected to *The Waste Land*, Vivienne and Pound, spent a significant number of years in mental institutes. One can say that *The Waste Land* was a product of three individuals, all three of whom had psychotic issues. "In the years preceding *The Waste Land*, Eliot was preoccupied with nerves-his own and his wife's; together, they suffered from vague and variously diagnosed emotional and somatic disorders" (Koestenbaum

115) According to Koestenbaum, “Eliot turned his hysteria into an institution, *The Waste Land*, while Vivien suffered a more literal institutionalisation” (118).

Although Eliot insisted on the impersonality theory by stressing that the artist should separate his personality from his artistic creation, most of his poetry is actually a result of his personal feelings and experiences. His statement regarding writing the fifth part of *The Waste Land* is an acknowledgment of mental illness as a catalyst for creativity.

“It is a commonplace that some forms of illness are extremely favourable, not only to religious illumination but to artistic and literary composition. A piece of writing, meditated apparently without progress for months or years, may suddenly take shape and word; and in this state long passages may be produced which require little or no retouch.” (Eliot 142)

While undergoing treatment for his illness, Eliot was helped by Vittoz in realising his latent thoughts, feelings and emotions. Vittoz helped him achieve a cathartic effect which in turn aided Eliot in writing his poem. Eliot had felt “tired and depressed” and was unable to focus on his writing. Vittoz helped him in his reintegration and assisted him in completing small tasks. With this treatment Eliot was provided with an insight into his past experiences, reintegrating and “mixing memory with desire” which Eliot used in writing the poem. The fragments in the poem could be the result of his own fragmented self which he depicts in his work. His attempt at self-exploration or self-unification is reflected in his effort to unify the poem. “These fragments I have shored against my ruins” (line 430), are the poet’s way of dealing with his illness and trying to overcome it.

Just like the poet, the poem is a piece of psychotic disintegration but just as Eliot puts his life back and reintegrates himself, so does the poem become a masterpiece. Both undergo disintegration, break into fragments and both emerge as masterpieces through this whole process of psychological crisis; Eliot as the writer of the finest literary piece of modern

literature and *The Waste Land* as the masterpiece. A world laid waste to the vagaries of the war recovers in the end. This is in keeping with Eliot recovering from his depression. His brain or mind, which had become a veritable “Waste Land” is saved from eternal and there is hope for rejuvenation and restoration of normalcy both at the universal and personal level. Thus, we see a peaceful resolution—*Datta. Dayadhvam. Damyata./Shantih Shantih Shantih*  
(43)

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