

Contemporary Classroom and *The Waste Land*

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Abstract: T.S. Eliot's *The Waste Land* marked a century of publication in 2022. Moreover, ever since, the way of learning, understanding, teaching and interpreting the poem has been widely diversified. This research paper tells how from 1922 to 2022, the methods of classroom teaching and learning of the powerful poem have gone through several milestones along with the social, cultural, economic and literary background of the era and with the mindsets and psychological approaches of the people. However, the poem has retained more charm and meaning over these decades. The paper primarily focuses on understanding the poem in today's classroom, the challenges and complexities and more.

Keywords: Contemporary, Classroom, *The Waste Land*, Aspects, Understanding, Progress, Modernism

Introduction

The expression of the title, *The Wasteland* has a wide array of meanings, among which one central meaning comes from the theme it deals with. Why waste? The poem by T.S. Eliot is a mouthpiece of world war I and its effects on the entire world – physical, emotional, literary and psychological. From this sense, it would not be disagreeable to define waste in terms of war. It is the war and the bloodshed which have made it a wasteland. Where there has been blood, there cannot be harvest. When the soil is moist with suffering and death, the soil cannot grow fertile for generations, and thus, the land has turned into a wasteland. Where we all reside, this modern land is a wasteland. Numerous allusions in the poem turn our focus towards the many occasions of war, loss and plight of not one but many generations that followed after the first world war.

Since 1922 when the poem was published and came to life, till today, the 21st century, there has been the evolution of a century altogether. There have been numerous advancements in every field. However, *The Waste Land* still stands firm and tall in the literary world. The modernity that started with *The Waste Land* continues to influence and do more literary works worldwide.

Cleanth Brooks commented that the poem itself exhausts its reading and is a sigh for the vanished glory of the past. Reading *The Waste Land* in the classroom for a century is itself an achievement in literature. However, the complexities and challenges have been varying accordingly. The methods of teaching, understanding and interpreting have also been different throughout.

Reading *The Waste Land* Over the Years

Over the years reading *The Waste Land* in the classroom is based on the different experiences and the type of connection it has had over the years. For example, reading the poem in the 1930s must have had the most connectivity with the readers who witnessed the wartime plight. The subjective theme of the poem, along with the background of the world war, would have been only better understood and, instead, more felt among the readers of that time. The methods of teaching the poem in the classroom during those years would consist of various discussions. However, they must have found common ground for the interpretation, like war and ruins, collapse and breakdown, the subjectivity of various religious themes and allusions in the poem etc.

Moreover, during the 1950s and later, when the terms like 'modernity' arose, the classroom teaching and learning of the poem would be based much on the rise of modernity and the period aspects of 'modern', apart from all the war emotions, destruction and plight of mankind towards the innumerable deaths and frightening bloodshed, the discussions must

have gone forward to the seasonal changes and what they brought with them, the metaphor of empty sexuality in the poem and the concepts of birth, rebirth and death.

Coming towards the 1980s, learning *The Waste Land* in the classroom would have caused the rise of specific different ideas than the previous decades. A few of those may be related to romanticism – the idea that existed ages ago in Europe. The poem tells that the idea of romance or love to create life is destroyed, and in the 'modern' era, an idea is just a form of entertainment, as seen in part three: *The Fire Sermon*.

Close to the end of the 20th century, the poem must have caused the idea of nihilism – a theory of the meaninglessness of existence and a denial of the afterlife. Throughout the poem, as Eliot seems hopeless, the concept of nihilism breaks out in an attempt to find another dimension of interpretation. Another concept or idea is the one of desolation, loneliness and metamorphosis. This metamorphosis is from one century to another, and along with that, old beliefs to new, a pattern of transformation — of lifeless days and nights and infertile land. The metamorphosis is from the death of religion to the entrance of a new era of modernity.

Over the years, several ideas must have ruled over the classroom teaching of *The Waste Land* subjectively. These ideas are still prevalent in the current generation. However, many of them were only meant to connect with the readers and acquire their attention in the previous decades—the decades that witnessed the ruins and the decades that followed with similar ideas and news.

The Wasteland in the Classroom Today

Today is a different generation—the one who has accepted various forms of modernity and has started to live with the notion of being 'modern' by all standards. Thus, *The Waste Land* in today's classroom has challenges and interpretations. Below are some of the essential aspects of the subject.

The Conception of Progress

Over these years, the interpretations and styles of teaching and learning the poem have been evolving over time. The idea of progress has created another base for discussion of the poem. The poem has caused the progression of thinking and mindset in the readers. This progression is more about the illusion of mankind to the beginning of a new era, the acceptance of new theories and concepts from wartime plight, from destruction to new constructive ideas. *The Waste Land* in the classroom today consists of this interpretation of progress.

Multi-Cultural and Multi-Ethnic Values

The Waste Land is the best example of the combination of various cultures and ethnic values. The modern era focuses on finding common ground for various races, languages, ethnic groups and cultures. Therefore, studying this poem through diverse cultures and ethnic groups is a thrilling experience these days.

The poem throws light on various cultures like the Indian tradition, western thought, Italian thought, Christian values etc. The poem is a palette of all these cultures and ethnic values that lead to the study of each in depth while reading the poem. Today, the poem has led to more knowledge and emphasis on the various cultures found in the text.

Influence on Other Texts and Art

As stated earlier, *The Waste Land* has the most influence as a modernist poem. Through the poem, artists are influenced to write, paint and imagine the world through the modernist lenses and go on to create art that came to be known as modern art or simply contemporary art style. This style of art includes features like a realistic depiction of human life, a combination of shapes and objects, disturbing images, abstract representation etc.

On the other hand, the influence of other texts has a similar emphasis on modernism. Writings include experimentation and innovation of rebellious ideas, rejection of conservative values, acceptance of new themes and writing styles etc. Artists and writers have come across

realistic notions and freely expressed their ideas in society. All these influences are now seen as a significant part of reading *The Waste Land*.

The Idea of Fragmentation

This idea rules today's classrooms. We have seen various modern texts that deal with the concept of fragmented verse, fragmented style of writing etc. This fragmentation began with modernist poetry, the central piece of which is *The Waste Land*. Fragmented art and writing continue to rule the field of literature in today's world. The background of this fragmented idea is the first world war which is said to have broken mankind and caused disillusionment and loss worldwide. From *The Waste Land*, this concept of fragments developed and evolved to produce many more texts in the same genre.

The Psychological Study of Eliot

The interdisciplinary approach in today's classroom has made studying the psychological aspect of *The Waste Land* quite interesting. What the poet must have been thinking and what the people's psychology would have been when the poem was written is now given more emphasis. The poem's images, tones, voices, metaphors and setting are studied from a psychological point of view. The perspective of *The Waste Land* through a psychological lens dive deep into the mindset and thoughts of Eliot, his ideas, his background, his attempt to see into the depth of the situation and his ability to fetch a balance of the imaginary and reality and the supreme power to pen down all of it in a settling rhythmic form. Eliot's thought processes are closely seen and studied through this approach.

Language

The language of *The Waste Land* is itself a juxtaposition. The density of the language used throughout the poem is higher than the standard poetic language. Along with the ornamental words, the thoughts and multiple cultures assimilated in one place make it tough to read. It is tough to follow all the ancient languages exemplified throughout the poem in the current era.

The Indian consciousness and the western and European language versions have been so beautifully yet tactfully used, making it a complex poem to read and understand for today's learners. The language, sometimes simple and sometimes complex, with multiple ways to interpret and find meanings, leads to the overall difficulty of the poem's language.

Allusions

Allusions form one of the most significant parts of *The Waste Land*. The allusions form the central part. Allusion refers to some past biblical notion or event that has already occurred and is remembered. It can be a reference to an idea, book, or author. *The Waste Land* has numerous allusions to Dante, the Bible, John Webster, Shakespeare, Milton, Ovid, Heese, Spenser and Indian Upanishads. Moreover, there are many historical references as well.

The Complexity and Challenges

While reading the poem in the classroom today, there are many aspects of complexities and challenges. The poem reached a comprehensive set of allusions and multiple themes and languages. The fantastical elements and the actual facts are amalgamated to provide a new vision of possibility. There are five parts of the poem, each telling a different story. Eliot speaks of various things at one go—the dead, the seasons and their connection to human lives, the time etc. There is a repetition of specific sentences throughout the poem—maybe because he wants to attract particular focus to those. The poem consists of various poetic devices, forms and styles. Though the poem is free verse, sometimes there are other poetic styles intact in the poem. There are various images created throughout—effortless and complex, real and imaginary, broken and perfect – it all sounds beautiful to ears but also disturbing. There is a confused and troubled tone. Eliot mentions various places and just the names—we never interpret what he wants us to – Jerusalem, Athens, Alexandria, Vienna, London etc.

Some wings do not fly, and some imaginations do not end. There are multiple ways to interpret a few lines and various colours in the imagery. All this only increases the complexity

of understanding and interpreting *The Waste Land* today. Wordplay and sentiments are connected in fiery flames and 'faint moonlight'. The seasonal changes define more than just climatic changes—they tell more profoundly about the change in mankind, the change of emotions and more. The poem is a fine example of multiple interpretative voices from a single person. This variety of choices has made it a complicated piece of art. The voices speak deeper than ordinary thoughts, flawlessly about flaws and endlessly about darkness and light.

The key to the poem is not easy to comprehend. The concepts vary from person to person. It has immense possibilities for thoughts and action. There are many consequences to the actions rising and falling. The poem captures all the images satisfactorily in a subjective manner.

Philosophies Generated through the Poem

The Waste Land has generated various philosophies over time. It has given rise to many biblical ideas and religious notions, and in contemporary times, the philosophy of cubism, expressionism, symbolism, pessimism, desolation, rebirth and nihilism. These philosophies have a different impact on modern times. Learning the poem through the aspect of these philosophies makes it a meaningful and, at the same time, meaningless piece of art. The poem has everything yet denotes nothingness, dryness and drought. While some philosophies represent a whole system of ideas and thoughts, others only show the futility of existence.

Modernity in the Context of *The Waste Land*

The Waste Land, being the central piece of poetry in the modernistic canon of poetry writing, has evolved the idea of modernity today. We reach a higher level of modernity when we see the symbols juxtaposing each other, the voices trespassing each other, and the images having multiple ways to understand. *The Waste Land* is a beautiful combination of the epic and the lyric—a feature practised by modernist poets. The poem contains the holy and the unholy—another exciting feature and combination of the classic and modern. Eliot points out the end

of the civilization of spirituality and beliefs as well as the beginning of modern civilization, which is empty and futile. He is confused as he does not express any particular emotion at this stage. He's neither happy nor sad. However, a pessimistic tone and a few words of hope remain throughout. Eliot outdoing all the realities and advances of a pessimistic world and introducing the new era of modernity is immensely commendable.

Conclusion

All these aspects covered here have greatly affected the study of *The Waste Land* in the classroom today. *The Waste Land*, a representative piece of modernism, has shown desperate senses of transition and has won over the hearts by fiercely breaking the poignant realities of human actions and their consequences. *The Waste Land* in the contemporary classroom is a perfect example of imperfection shining out beautifully, incorporating all the visions and realities, all the glory and degeneration, decadence and acceptance. It is pretty clear that the poem is a complex and challenging piece of art that justifies the classic and the modern in one go. Disillusionment and faith go hand in hand throughout *The Waste Land*.

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