

The Land and the Waste: Meaninglessness and Absurdity in T. S. Eliot's *The Waste*

Land

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Abstract



After the World War-1, there spread chaos and disillusionment in society, faith got shattered and life became meaningless. Jean-Paul Sartre's version of Existentialism is based on this meaninglessness and absurdity. Man faces an absurd and meaningless existence in this chaotic world. Thus these two are the main tropes of Sartre's philosophy. T. S. Eliot also lived in that chaotic age and composed his long narrative poem *The Waste Land* (1930) after the World War. This poem is based on the consequences of the war that caused absurdity and chaos depriving human life of real significance and value. This study explores and analyses these aspects of meaninglessness and absurdity in *The Waste Land* (1930) in the light of Sartre's philosophy and contends to say that almost all of the characters presented in the poem encounter meaningless and chaotic lives. Their lives are without any real purpose and are quite insignificant in a chaotic and disorderly world. So the land is full of the waste only. This meaningless life is nothing but a heap of the waste. By presenting this picture of chaotic life, Eliot intends to forward a solution in the form of rebirth of the lost religious faith and moral values. This research is significant because the aspects of meaninglessness and absurdity accurately relate to our current times where human beings face real existential threat and the significance of life is being lost. This awareness may lead to an immediate solution. Moreover, this study may provoke further research in this area in order to bring out the relevance of literary texts to all times and human life everywhere.

Keywords: Meaninglessness, Chaos, Absurdity, Disorderly, Existence, Significance

Introduction

T. S. Eliot's poetry is primarily existentialist in nature because it is replete with the realization that modern civilization and culture are chaotic, devoid of faith and values. This tragic sense of life is a direct result of the World War-1 that shook the very roots of the society and ruined life in the West. T. S. Eliot is well aware of his times and beautifully paints the picture of disorderly life in his long narrative poem *The Waste Land* (1930). All of the characters of the poem represent the disillusioned generation of war-torn Western society. In the same fashion, Jean-Paul Sartre, a renowned French philosopher and a leading existentialist thinker, scans this chaotic life in his fictional and philosophical works quite accurately. His version of Existentialism is primarily based on meaninglessness and absurdity of human life.

So, it is very interesting to explore and analyse T. S. Eliot's *The Waste Land* (1930) and this study intends to bring out the aspects of meaninglessness and absurdity in the light of Sartre's views. Jean-Paul Sartre views life as chaotic and meaningless. Man is sent into a disorderly world where life is insignificant and has no goal or destination. It tragically ends and sinks into nothingness. Man has no support or guidance except for his own self that can strive to bring him out of the chaos and void into which he is thrown.

Research Objectives

1. To bring out the aspect of meaninglessness in Eliot's *The Waste Land*
2. To explore and analyse the theme of absurdity in the text
3. To highlight the significance and importance of the analysis and exploration of meaninglessness and absurdity

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Research Questions

1. In what ways does the poem *The Waste Land* present the aspect of meaninglessness?
2. How does the selected text project and foreground the theme of absurdity?
3. Why and how is exploration of meaninglessness and absurdity significant?

Thesis Statement

T. S. Eliot's long narrative poem *The Waste Land* (1930) seems to engage with and project the concepts of meaninglessness and absurdity that accurately relate to the chaos and disorder of our contemporary human life.

Literature Review

In a 2017 article "Eliot's Waste Land and Modern Civilization", Mohammad analyses the poem and calls it a future depiction of what would happen. In a mythical way, Eliot foretells miseries, worries and issues of human civilization. According to this study, Eliot relates these miseries to war and its horrors. Mohammad (2017) says, "Eliot was successfully able to connect the then existing panorama with the modern age by using 'mythical method'. He would like to follow the poem and connects existing panoramic setbacks of modern life to antiquities" (n. p). Thus Mohammad generally analyses the issues and miseries of life present in the poem. He also relates that miserable life to the modern civilization. He does not pay special focus on meaninglessness and absurdity with the lens of existentialist thinkers.

Ahmed and Alshara (2015) explore T. S. Eliot's *The Waste Land* (1930) and find that the poem is an accurate representation of disillusioned life and crises of culture. It depicts culture's failure and downfall. It points out that modern culture is without love, devotion, sacrifice and faith. People have become selfish and self-cantered. They have lost the feelings of sympathy and brotherhood. They say, "In *The Waste Land* T. S. Eliot expresses his fear and terror about the fate of humanity and culture, the fear and terror which prevailed in his early poems before *The Waste Land*" (Ahmed and Alshara, 2015, p. 159). In this study, less attention has been paid to the exploration of chaos and meaninglessness whereas these aspects are quite dominant in Eliot's masterpiece.

In a 2022 article "It takes your hand off the panic button': T. S. Eliot's *The Wasteland* 100 Years on", Dickson finds that Eliot's poem is really complex and has many layers of meaning. It is scattered and full of ambiguities. It does not follow a systematic and logical order like traditional poetry. He says, "Of all modernist literature, T. S. Eliot's *The Waste Land* is one of the hardest to piece together" (Dickson, 2022, n. p). He further says, "Anyone wanting dry textual analysis should look elsewhere: there is not a single straightforward reading of the poem on the offer" (Dickson, 2022, n. p). In this article, Dickson does not analyse meaninglessness, absurdity and chaos present in the poem.

In a 2011 article "Eliot's *The Waste Land* and Surging Nationalisms", Pouneh Saeedi discusses Eliot's poem in the context of the aftermath of World War and the consequences it created, especially in the form of surging nationalisms. It blurred the boundaries between the West and the East on the basis of fragmentation of language and loss of sensibility. She says, "In the midst of the ruins of both his personal life and Europe" (Saeedi, 2011, p. 1). In this study, Saeedi does not explore the chaos, absurdity and meaninglessness that prevailed modern life.

In the light of review of existing literature and scholarship, it has been found that no considerable research has been conducted that analyses the aspects of meaninglessness and absurdity as well as their consequences in T. S. Eliot's *The Waste Land* (1930). So, there exists this gap and this present study fulfils this gap by analysing absurdity and meaninglessness in T. S. Eliot's *The Waste Land* (1930).

Theoretical Framework and Research Methodology

So far as theoretical framework of this study is concerned, it utilizes Jean-Paul Sartre's version of Existentialism and further delimits itself to the concepts of meaninglessness and absurdity. So, T. S. Eliot's poem *The Waste Land* (1930) is analysed and explored in the light of these two concepts. Sartre believes that man has been thrown into a meaningless and chaotic world where his existence is absurd and insignificant. He has no map that helps him and guides though the chaotic conditions. This research is qualitative and mainly uses the approaches including description, interpretation and exploration. The research method utilized in this qualitative research is textual analysis that focuses on the interpretation, exploration and analysis of selected concepts of meaninglessness and absurdity leaving other themes or aspects present in the target text.

A Brief Overview of *The Waste Land*

Thomas Stearns Eliot was born in America and settled in Europe. He is one of the most influential writers and critics of 20th century being an elite scholar and poet. He lived in a chaotic and fragmented era shattered and devastated by two world wars. So, he mirrors it artistically and accurately in his writings.

T. S. Eliot's long poem *The Waste Land* (1930) is a literary masterpiece that stirred great admiration as well as criticism. With its publication, it shocked the literary world of its time. Although the poem lacks proper sequence and coherence, yet it presents the true picture of the time. It is a real comment on the war-torn, shattered and fragmented Western society. This long narrative poem consists of five sections which are in fragments. It is a dramatic monologue and visionary fiction. The sections are divided thus: "The Burial of the Dead", "A Game of Chess", "The Fire Sermon", "Death by Water" and "What the Thunder Said".

The first part "The Burial of the Dead" focuses on mortality and death that always haunt life. The second part "A Game of Chess" is a comment on sexual activities in the modern and chaotic world where these activities are done as formalities without any real joy and pleasure. The third part "The Fire Sermon" is also about the problems and issues of sex in the modern society. The fourth part "Death by Water" focuses on death again. It highlights the mortal nature of human life in this world. The last part "What the Thunder Said" relates to restoration and the poet tries to find some remedy for the suffering humanity in a miserable world.

So far as structure of the poem is concerned, it does not utilize traditional technique. Lines and stanzas are not connected well for the sake of an easy reading of the poem. So, it is fragmented and ambiguous. Perhaps, there is a method in the madness because the poem is composed in a society that is in fragments, without any logical sequence or order. People have lost faith and moral values. They are spiritually dead. With the help of this depiction of the chaotic society, the poet, in fact, tries to shake these spiritually dead people and compels them to think and meditate. In the section "A Game of Chess", the rich lady is forced to say, "Think." (Eliot, 1930, p. 20). Actually, Eliot tries to urge the people to think and do something to come out of that chaotic condition.

For the sake of true depiction of the society, the poet tries to mix present with the past and populates his wasteland with diverse people belonging to different ages and sections of the society and, in this way, overlaps time and history. These different persons include St. Augustine, Buddha, Wagner and Ovid etc. He also portrays different places like London and Jerusalem. There are allusions to different people and myths as well.

Meaninglessness and Absurdity in *The Waste Land*

Jean-Paul Sartre, a French philosopher and writer, thinks that human life is primarily based on meaninglessness and absurdity. These two concepts are the foundation of his existentialist philosophy. At the same time, he believes in man's power of action and freedom of choice which enable him to give meaning to his meaningless and absurd existence. He says, "Neither will an existentialist think that a man can find help through some sign being vouchsafed upon earth for his orientation" (Sartre, 1948, p. 34). It means that man has been sent into a chaotic world where there are no signs to guide him. He is "thrown into the universe and into desolate and into isolation" (Kern, 1970, p. 169). According to Ellis (1988), man faces anguish because of this meaninglessness and absurdity (p. 24). T. S. Eliot's *The Waste Land* (1930) is replete with these themes. Eliot paints the picture of shattered and war-torn Western society. Almost all characters of the poem are found encountering a meaningless, absurd and chaotic existence. The very title of the poem is quite explanatory. The poem is a tale of the land that is full of the waste. This waste can be interpreted as the meaningless and absurd existence the people were experiencing. All characters of the poem represent the people of war-torn and shattered Western society where life lost all significance and meaning.

The first section "The Burial of the Dead" clearly comments on the absurd and meaningless life. The poem opens with this strange and unusual statement: "April is the cruellest month" (Eliot, 1930, p. 9). It is strange because April is generally considered a welcoming month that gives birth to life and causes hustle and bustle everywhere. For the waste landers, it is the cruellest month because they do not intend to welcome life that, actually, has become meaningless and absurd for them. It has lost charm and fascination. They do not want that meaningless life to be restored. The waste landers seem to prefer winter that is considered a symbol of death and decay. If life is meaningful, orderly and fascinating, the waste landers must welcome and enjoy it. It is a real tragedy of modern society where

people seem to prefer death to life. The cruellest April that breeds "Lilacs out of the dead land---" (Eliot, 1930, p.9) is unwelcomed. In this section, a German countess, Marie, is seen leading a meaningless and chaotic life. She is frustrated and shattered from within. That's why she tries to get relaxation in the company of her boyfriend. She says, "With a shower of rain; we stopped in the/ Colonnade,/ And went on in sunlight, into the Hof-/ Garten" (Eliot, 1930, p. 9). She also tries to fill the emptiness of her soul by reading books at night and enjoying the warm weather. She also goes down the mountains with her cousin being nervous and confused. All of her activities show that she wanders helplessly in order to find some recreation that is missing in her shattered and absurd life. In fact, this life is "a heap of broken images" and she lives in a world where "the tree gives no shelter, the/ cricket no relief" (Eliot, 1930, p. 11). This meaningless and soulless life must base on something meaningful and significant for the waste landers. This is the absurdity and meaninglessness Sartre talks about while defining human life. He believes that man has to counter a chaotic and meaningless existence that is nothing but a void. He says, "Life has no meaning *a priori*. Before you come alive, life is nothing" (Sartre, 1957, p. 49). So, the life of the waste landers is nothing. It does not have any meaning and significance.

The second section "The Game of Chess" depicts chaotic and meaningless existence. In fact, it is Sartre's stance that life is meaningless and chaotic. The characters of lovers in this section are living in a world that is "utterly without absolute meaning" (Bohlmann, 1990, p. 14). The lady of the Rock sits and waits for the arrival of her lover. In her aristocratic chair, she looks "like a burnished throne" (Eliot, 1930, p. 17). But she finds that her lover has lost the warmth of love and sex. He does not seem to enjoy but meets his beloved in order to fulfil a formality. She cries out, "I never know what you are thinking" (Eliot, 1930, p. 20). This love-less and cold lover is a true picture of modern man who has lost charm and all fascination of life because of its absurdity and meaninglessness. The other couple is of Albert and Lil. Unlike the lady of the rock, they are poor and belong to an average class. They also lead chaotic, tasteless, colourless and fragmented lives. Abortions have ruined Lil's life and Albert faces and experiences the miseries and horrors of war. He is badly shattered and encounters a meaningless existence. Lil has grown old before time and always fears that Albert might turn to other women. He threatens her that "others can pick and choose if you can't" (Eliot, 1930, p. 24). Lil hates motherhood and destroys her health by eating birth control pills. It is height of absurdity that fertility is being hated and condemned. Lil and Albert have a hollow and shallow relation that is nothing but a compulsion. This is how the waste landers have lost meaning, charm and color of life. Even love and sex are mechanical routines.

Section three "The Fire Sermon" is sad and tragic vision of life that is hollow and absurd in modern society. It is full of lust and is without real values. These values add charm and beauty to human existence. In such society, sex is unprincipled and, that's why, it has lost real ecstasy. It is nothing but a mechanical routine. The waste landers are unable to be fully involved in love and sex. Consequently, their boiling and bad nerves are not soothed by the ecstasy of sex and love. This happens because of the emptiness of their spirits and souls. Their lives have become meaningless and absurd. In this section, the dull and dirty picture of the river is a comment on this absurd live. River Thames once used to be a place of entertainment, pleasure and joy. But, now, it is full of the waste. Eliot says, "The river sweats/ oil and tar" (Eliot, 1930, p. 35). Moreover, the story of the daughters of the river is another picture of meaningless and absurd life. The first girl gets raped at Richmond while lying on her boat. The frustrated man comes to her and rapes. In fact, he is also looking some means to fill the emptiness of his soul. He thinks that rape might help. The chaotic and disorderly modern life has forced people to be engaged in such useless and meaningless activities. Lack of faith and loss of religion have deprived them of moral and human values. The second girl also passes through a similar experience when she is assaulted by a lusty young man. The girl is unable to do or say anything. She simply declares, "I made no comments" (Eliot, 1930, p. 37). The third girl is also a victim of the same assault and encounters an absurd existence. She says, "On Margate Sand, / I can connect/ Nothing to nothing" (Eliot, 1930, p. 37). Her life is also insignificant and chaotic. This chaos, disorder and insignificance in the lives of the daughters of the river mirror meaningless life. It is the meaninglessness and absurdity Sartre points out as the foundation of life. According to Sartre (1948), man is born in a void and grows up in a world that is chaotic and life has no meaning (p. 28). Eliot's waste landers encounter same existence in a chaotic world. According to Kaufmann (1956), such lives are "essentially tangible" (p. 17). In this section, there is another example of chaotic and

meaningless life. A typist girl working in an office is unfamiliar to the real significance and value of life. Her life has sunk into nothingness. For her, sex is also a mechanical routine and a meaningless activity. Her lover meets her but they don't enjoy the real ecstasy rather she says, "Well now that's done: and I'm glad it's/ over" (Eliot, 1930, p. 34). It is real tragedy of her meaningless life that she is satisfied with a tasteless activity. T. S. Eliot also calls London the unreal city and compares it with Carthage. The city is unreal because it does not know real life. The working and walking people are spiritually dead. They are nothing but machines. Their lives are meaningless and chaotic.

Section four "Death by Water" presents the tragic picture of life that is fully wasted in the worldly and materialistic pursuits. This hectic routine has transformed man into a machine robbing him off moral, human and spiritual values. At the end, this meaningless life has been swallowed by the cruel death. By perceiving life as tragic, Eliot reflects the very foundation of Sartre's existentialist philosophy that is based on meaninglessness and absurdity. In this section, Eliot finds that land is full of the waste. It has turned barren. The water that causes rebirth of life and is symbol of purification, is now a cause of death. The Phoenician sailor, Phlebas, drowns in the water and dies. "PHLEBAS the Phoenician sailor, a fortnight/ Dead, / Forgot the cry of the gulls and the deep sea/ Swell/ and the profit and loss" (Eliot, 1930, p. 39). The dead sailor forgets everything after being carried away by the cruel waves. After living a meaningless life that passed in counting coins, is being ruined by the whips of death. This is what human life is: without any significance or value. This cruel fate and tragedy of the sailor is a warning and a lesson for all human beings. They are being carried away by the ruthless waves of death. Eliot (1930) says, "Consider Phlebas, who was once handsome/ and tall as you" (p. 39) but, now, he is nothing and exists nowhere. In this section, Eliot gives reference to an Egyptian effigy. That effigy is of the fertility god. It is thrown into the river at Alexandria but the waves carry its head to Babylon. The head of the effigy is worshipped and considered as a re-born god. Eliot wants to point out that there is salvation for the god but not for the sailor. It means that life devoted to higher cause is meaningful and significant whereas the life of the waste landers is meaningless and insignificant because they have lost religious and moral values. This life has become chaotic and disorderly. It is clear that the life that is passed in counting coins like Phlebas is no life at all. It ends on a note of nothingness. Eliot warns modern man by showing him the tragic fate of the sailor. In fact, he wants the disillusioned modern man drag himself out of his chaotic condition by realizing the absurdity and meaninglessness of his life. He can give meaning to his absurd existence by committing to some higher cause. He must learn a lesson from the life and fate of the sailor and strive for attaining a significant and meaningful life.

In the final part "What the Thunder Said", T. S. Eliot claims that the thunder is a source of liberation for the waste landers whose lives are absurd, chaotic and meaningless. They have lost real charm and beauty of the life owing to spiritual depravity and moral degradation. Their life is hollow and shallow. Eliot (1930) says, "He who was living is now dead/ we who were living are now dying" (p. 40). The death pointed out in these lines mainly points the moral and spiritual death of the living. This death and loss of values has turned the fertile soil into a waste land. The charming and blissful life has become insignificant and colourless. So, according to the poet, this chaotic life needs immediate solution. Eliot makes a reference to Knight's journey to Chapel Perilous. The Knight is searching for the Holy Grail that is a source of rebirth and regeneration. Eliot intends to say that the unfortunate modern man has lost that Holy Grail and is wandering aimlessly with perplexed heart and confused mind. He cannot find the actual cause and aim of his life. This Holy Grail stands for that higher cause that adds significance and meaning to life. The shattered modern man needs that cause urgently. In this section Eliot also refers to Christ trial. Christ is going to Emmaus in the company of his disciples. He disguises for the sake of confirmation of resurrection. The hooded figure accompanying the disciples is, indeed, Christ who helps his followers in their way to spiritual adventure. Eliot wants to say that modern man's meaningless and absurd life has no such goal. Modern man has lost the company of the Christ who may help him or guide through his chaotic life. So the meaninglessness, absurdity and chaos are largely caused by the shattered faith that has resulted in the loss of moral, spiritual and human values.

Conclusion

With the lens of Jean-Paul Sartre's existentialist views, it has been found that T. S. Eliot's long narrative poem *The Waste Land* (1930) projects and engages with the aspects of absurdity and meaninglessness. Sartre believes that man has been sent into a chaotic and disorderly world where his

life is insignificant and meaningless. Ultimately it sinks into nothingness. This is what Eliot portrays in his poem. All characters in the poem are disillusioned, frustrated and helpless. Their lives are ruined by the worldly and materialistic pursuits. Moreover, war-torn society offers no hope, support or guidance. They have lost faith and have no moral, human and religious values. The working and walking people are spiritually dead. So, the land is full of the waste and rubbish. In fact, the meaningless, absurd and chaotic life is nothing but waste. At the end of the poem, Eliot suggests that this shattered and fragmented life must have some higher cause in order to add significance and meaning. Restoration of faith can be an immediate solution. This study is significant because the issues and miseries of the waste landers accurately relate to the problems of humanity in our contemporary world. There is chaos and an absence of moral, human and religious values. This exploration of absurdity and meaninglessness in Eliot's poem may stir up some practical solution that adds significance and meaning to life. Moreover, this study may provoke further research in this field.

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