

## T. S. Eliot's Poetry: A Barb on Sexuality and a Satire on Religious Practice and Modern Life

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### Abstract

Eliot's Poetry mirrors the Modern man's predicament in terms of love, religion, and life. The poet highlights it emphatically with a dig at each of the three.

Eliot is one of the most prominent poets of the Modern times. A Nobel Laureate, his poetry resounds with the versatility of his persona. Eliot as a poet is more emphatic and telling than as novelist and leaves an indelible imprint on the minds of the readers of Modern poetry. If the Twentieth century is remarkable in more ways than one, T.S. Eliot is definitely one of them. He was probably the most erudite poet of his time in the English language. As a poet, playwright, critic and editor, Eliot brought about a literary revolution in the Twentieth century with his outstanding works, a trendsetter in their own ways. His poems are a reflection of its time and highlight the complication, complexities, dilemma, hopelessness and despair of the modern life.

An undercurrent of pessimism runs through almost all his poems and Eliot's narrative technique underscores it intensely. Whether Eliot's use of the poetic dictions and references, an advertent attempt to make his poetry complex, is a moot point. But I personally opine that Eliot's poetic technique—epigraphs, allusions, symbols, images, and the voluminous text—justifiably records the mood of its time and outlines the intricate modern life. I can draw an analogy between the composite text and the thorny life. It is no exaggeration then that Eliot also happens to be the most difficult of all the poets.

Eliot chose his subject meticulously and wrote on contemporary political, social, and religious issues. His poetic themes range from dejected love, lost religious faith, spiritual bankruptcy to trauma, war, death, destruction to a wishful thinking, what life would have been, had his lady-love been there. Though Eliot was a proponent of Impersonality in Art, his poems bear the overtones of unsatiated or unrequited love as was the case in his personal life.

### Love and Sexuality

His first masterpiece, “The Love Songs of J. Alfred Prufrock” is a poem of dream and desire, of passion to propose the beloved, with a lurking fear of rejection and unacceptance. It is a dramatic monologue with the Speaker speaking in the First Person ‘I’ and addressing a friend, at times, as ‘You’. The protagonist is an aged, old lover with a very unpleasant appearance---bald-headed with a sparse hair-line, thin and loose limbs, feeble and jerky voice---but he still holds his excitement and emotion clung close to his heart, and wants to propose his beloved to marry him. His is a love-song divided between pessimism and timidity; he is high on his fervour but low on the degree of certainty vis-à-vis the reaction of his lady-love.

The speaker is in a state of ambivalence—thrilled at the thought of meeting the lady but disheartened at the idea of being snubbed by her. The old lover’s journey is grumpy and a struggle between hope and despair; the imagery used, as he set out to propose the woman, reflects his inner conflict and dilemma.

The images of the deserted streets, whispering and muttering of the ladies create a bleak scene, which further push the speaker on the dejection mode. He has the premonition of not being well-received by the lady due to his unlikable appearance and shabby sartorial-style.

“The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock” echoes the ennui intruding modern man’s life through Prufrock, who hesitating and flickering, lacks guts to express his love to his beloved. According to F.O. Matthiessen, “The point of calling this poem a *Love Song* lies in the irony that it will never be sung; that Prufrock will never dare o voice what he feels.”

The first line of the poem introduces a ‘You’ and ‘I’, where ‘I’ stands for the Speaker and ‘You’ remains under a cloud and is a matter of speculation---from being a friend or a lady or someone else. It is evening and ‘evening’ may have a different connotation here. That the speaker is in the ‘evening of his life’---meaning aged and old. Evening also symbolises serenity and tranquility, resulting out of inactivity and indolence.

“Like a patient etherized upon a table.”<sup>1</sup>

The speaker, compliant if not unwilling, views the evening in the aspect of etherisation and the metaphor of etherisation suggests the craving for immobility to the point of enforced release from pain. This is a projection of the speaker’s mind, which is in a state of conflict but presumably occupied with love. The image of “cat” suggests sex and the intense longing for inactivity. In preparing himself for the D-day, the day he would communicate his love to his beloved, Prufrock is overpowered by timidity as not only his physical appearance but also his dressing- style are unpalatable and an impediment to his love, pushing him in a state of constant conflict. He is haunted throughout by the all-pervasive question—of his passionate feelings getting accepted?

Prufrock is very indecisive, unable to take a decision and execute it with firmness. Prufrock's self-pity and self-disgust are recorded through the tortuous streets and the fog-cat, and his desire-for-love is undermined by the mundane things such as coffee spoons and his picture of life measured out with the symbols of his terror of social and sexual failure.

Eliot draws his imagery from the contemporary world, and they are not used as mere adornment but form an integral part of the poetic work, delineating the precarious situation Prufrock finds himself in. The image of a 'cat moving in the fog: the yellow fog that rubs the back upon the windowpanes' has certain emotional quotients.

In *The Wasteland*, Tiresias being a hermaphrodite is another jibe at sexual impotence, barrenness and infertility. In the Second Section, "A Game of Chess", Eliot pinpoints the higher-class and lower-class sexuality. In the First Scene, a high-class, elitist, sophisticated lady is shown waiting for her lover amidst a spick-and-span ambience. Her wait becomes irksome and her cries shallow; finally, she yearns intensely for an excursion and a game of chess. Eliot, having a strong mastery over diction, uses the imagery of "chess" to portray the various stages of seduction. On the other, the sexuality of the middle class is straitjacketed and restricted to the reproduction and child-bearing, more often than not, at the cost of a woman's health. Through the scene of the London Bar Room and the amicable conversation between two women, Eliot outlines that a woman's beautification or cosmetisation is often of paramount importance for a healthy sexual life in the middle class.

Eliot's juxtaposition of both the scenes registers the stark contrast between the two sides of modern sexuality, where the high-class sexuality is dry, barren interchange inseparable from self-destruction and neurosis. Whereas the Second Scene is about rampant fertility related with a lack of culture and rapid ageing. It also nixes the delusion that sex can bring regeneration either cultural or personal.

'Gerontion' is Eliot's another old man, slightly older than Prufrock and a man sans ability to satisfy his sexual urge due to impotence. Old age brings to him not wisdom but confirmed decrepitude and impotence.

"I have lost my passion: why should I need to keep it  
Since what is kept must be adulteratd?"<sup>2</sup>

Each line of "Gerontion" is laced with discontented libido and project the old man in a hapless and helpless condition.

In *Ash Wednesday*, the image of Pagan, God of the Pastoral and half-man and half-goat, playing a flute and spell-binding everyone around, suggests the carnal desires which the speaker or man must not

capitulate to if he wants to be at the highest rung on the ladder spiritually. Eliot has maintained consistently in his poems that man must not cave into sexual lust if he wants to enrich himself religiously. Here, Eliot mentions categorically that if a man aspires to conquer spiritually or gain spiritual prominence, he has to keep his sexual drives in control.

Ironically, the sexual appetite is unfulfilled as the love is unrequited and leaves much to be desired. In “Burnt Norton” also, the image of “garden” signifies romance and sexuality. It earmarks a wishful thinking---things that might have been but never were---a reference to his relationship with Emily Hale, an old friend. So, the central characters in Eliot’s poems are sex-starved and receive no gratification whatsoever due to the old age and impotence. In my opinion, Eliot’s marital turmoil, i.e., his wife, Vivienne’s affair with Bertand Russel in the early part of their married life, may have been the rationale behind such a composition, where he jeers at sexuality, at times, explicitly which hits the readers harder.

## **Religion**

Eliot’s conversion to the Church of England had a bearing on his writing and brought a sea-change in his perspective for sure and influenced his later works. He links man’s taxing journey of life to the detachment from God. All his difficulties originate from his alienation from God and results in a life minus smoothness, uprightness, and tranquility.

A coalescence of introspection, solitariness and hopelessness form the theme of *Ash Wednesday*. Eliot’s man, in his poems, is far from happy and joyful. A bleak and dismal permeation constantly rakes up a question as to why Eliot’s character remains in a melancholic mood and whether his sombre mood is the product of religious emptiness and superficiality. Going away from God makes the man downbeat and he realises the worthlessness of the earthly and temporal aspirations and ambitions. What is noteworthy is that man must shed his sensual hunger in order to attain meaning in life. If man wants to enjoy his proximity to the Almighty, he must get rid of his desires and passions. His life must be a clean slate with no wrong or sin etched on it. Then he can ascend higher in life but he must turn back for a moment to assess his past. And if he overpowers his past self successfully, he moves ahead. The description here is allusive, suggesting that man cannot hope of soaring high in life or be at one with himself unless he controls his whims and fancies and expunges his wrong deeds or misdeeds.

Eliot uses the Virgin Mary figuratively (*Ash Wednesday*) for man’s purification after he leaves this world. It means that once the sensual desire of man is destroyed, he becomes worthy of purification and blessings. He must triumph over the temptation of temporal delights as his lust for materialistic and mortal things prolongs his suffering and deepen the chasm between him and God.

Eliot deplors that the modern man's wisdom lies not in hearing God or His word but in worshipping worldly things. Such people tread the path of darkness and remain in limbo. They indulge in idolatry and, thereby, disregard God. With this, the reference again goes back to the Virgin Mary for her invocation for such misguided and directionless people. Significantly, Eliot maintains throughout that unless modern man is spiritually adept, he cannot live a meaningful and happy life. Spiritual ignorance incapacitates man to a great deal that he fails to lead a normal life.

In the longest Section of *The Wasteland*, *The Fire Sermon*, he refers to the Buddhist Fire Sermon, where "fire" symbolises, man's burning passions, which control his life. He advocates that man must set himself free from the five senses to put an end to all his sufferings. The doctrine of Buddhism propounds that the root cause of man's affliction is his uncontrolled desires and man must give up his wishes to lead a peaceful and upright life. Eliot's turning to Buddhism and Hinduism for the enlightenment of a decadent generation speaks volume of both the religions and this is certainly a recognition for the world's oldest religion, Hinduism.

The poet refers ardently to the religious void creeping in man's life and makes some Biblical references to strengthen his point of view. His *Burnt Norton* is a contemplation on time and religious devotion, on the gaping divide between materialistic understanding of the world and a deeper, spiritual existence. In a way, Eliot talks about the religious acumen of the Christian people and their mindset with regard to God. It is not only sexual degeneration but religious as well.

Eliot's use of the elements of nature is another vital feature of his poetry—soil, fire, water, thunder—and draws a parallel with the Indian mythology, where fire and water are the two main components of sanctity. Then, it's only befitting to say that the Eastern faith is within the purview of being a guide and a helper to solving the complicated equation of man's life.

### **Modern Life**

Modern life comes under a scathing attack in Eliot's poems, which bring out modern man's frustration and boredom in the most befitting manner. The poet is very forceful in portraying that the modern man is apathetic towards his environment and his laid back attitude becomes apparent in his passivity or inactivity. He puts forth that modern man's mind has a certain preoccupation with a particular 'thing' or 'question' that keeps troubling or haunting him to the extent that he finds himself in a state of fix.

Prufrock has a lot of things to attend to but his mind, rather his own self keeps fluttering back to the 'question' at hand of whether his beloved would accept his proposal or not. The imagery such as half-deserted street, mutterings and the women talking of Michelangelo highlight the modern man's plight of confusion, dilemma and phlegmatic disposition. It suggests that modern man or woman lives in a façade

of his own, flaunting meaningless things and attempting to project their intellectual side, but they end up being intellectually bankrupt. Ironically, the things which beautify their living room nullify their intellectual aspect. Besides, a person's unpleasant personality or countenance is a reason enough for his social discomfiture and he remains in a state of apprehension of not being socially accepted.

It is a stinging comment that Prufrock is trying to relay this message to his fellow beings and the contrast gets exhibited between the trivial landscape and a timid man, who is trying to make them comprehend his point of view in an unsuccessful manner though. He belongs to this society and he must not abandon it. Similarly, modern man is faced with a predicament and he cannot escape the society he lives in. He has to resign to his lot and reconcile to the circumstances he is a part of.

The modern man is frustrated at the thought of being a failure or unsuccessful in his endeavours. He invariably runs the risk of exposing himself, of being misunderstood and of becoming the object of ridicule and derision. Eliot is acutely aware of the saga of the modern civilisation. The superficial life, lacking depth and content, has induced in him an attitude of disgust. Eliot's proficiency in using images to bring to light the shoddy life is aligned with the juxtaposition of the trivial with the significant, the frivolous with the serious and the amorous with the acerbic. The images of 'ether' and 'patient' describe the time sans any activity and lack of vitality and vigour with regard to the protagonist.

“Let us go then, you and I,  
When the evening is spread out against the Sky.”<sup>3</sup>

Likewise, the modern life is without any warmth—enervated and effete. The predominant factors influencing his life are a mercurial mind, conflicting emotions and a lurking apprehension of failure in his mission. An adjunct to this is his premonition of being stranded halfway or midway and failing to reach his destination. Society, at large, offers no solace and provides no assistance in resolving the conflict or crisis besieging the modern man.

Disillusioned or disenchanting life forms the essence of Eliot's poems. This can spring out of a slew of things, mainly self-introspection, self-realization or the situations and the circumstances taking hold of the man. A unique feature has been man's faith; it means that religion has a distinct bearing on his life-style. A man's loss of faith in God somewhat pushes him into a state of dejection and he starts believing in the futility of his own self. Eliot's description of the modern life is suffused with confusion, quandary and uncertainty.

Gerontion, having abandoned his faith in God, is in search of truth. He epitomises the intellectualist, the man who relies solely on reason in his pursuit of truth, having renounced all faith in God. The poem, *Gerontion*, contains Eliot's first defence of the religious attitude to life, and his attack on

the philosophy of humanism. Gerontion's utterance, "I have no ghosts," marks the key feature of the poem. Ghosts in the poem stand for supernatural reality with which Gerontion has snapped all ties or connections. He is in sync with the picture which Eliot sketches in these lines, "If you remove the word "Human" all that the belief in the supernatural has given to man, you can finally view him as no more than an extremely clever, adaptable and mischievous little animal."(Selected Essays) <sup>4</sup>

This is indeed incisive and marks the height of the poet's use of sarcasm with respect to man's life. Significantly, man's loss of faith in his religious practice paves the way for a hollow life. The negativity in man's life is the resultant of his being devoid of faith and this destabilizes his life. Gerontion rues his inactive life, the passivity which has made his life dull and charmless. So, Eliot's main characters are entangled or lost into the maze of war, trauma, delusion and death.

Eliot brings to light the age-old rivalry of the Jews and the Christians. He doesn't mince words in showing that the two communities have been at loggerheads since time immemorial and assigns a belligerent attribute to the Jews, who symbolise the modern commercial civilisation. *Gerontion* is a poem laced with the idea of ruin, loss of strength, sterility and the loss of the emotional dynamism in life. This poem weighs heavily upon the spiritual emptiness and the physical dryness outlined in the line,

"Here I am, an old man in a dry month." <sup>5</sup>

Does the lack of faith rob man of the charm of life? Perhaps! As per Eliot, modern man is not at peace with himself; he is bereft of motivation and zeal living in a war-torn, war-ravaged world. It is noteworthy here that those who shun faith in God, make their life purposeless and meaningless. So, dullness or charmless life is man-made and Eliot points out vividly that man's relinquished faith is responsible for his mushrooming problems and endless suffering.

One of the most complicated poems ever, *The Wasteland*, records the turmoil, turbulence of the city-dwellers and Eliot mentions this metaphorically by using desert—a symbol of dryness, dreariness, barrenness, infertility and lifelessness. This is a puzzling poem on the surface and there is a parallel between the two central images: a modern city and a desert. *The Wasteland* captures the topsy-turvy world of the modern man wherein too many factors besiege him, ranging from fear, fortune to the experience of spring and, thereafter, the Wasteland. Eliot's choice of the title, *The Wasteland*, is very conscientious as "wasteland" is symbolic of the barrenness in man's life. The elements employed for an insight into life somewhat add to the intricacies of life. Does modern man entail a clairvoyant or a fortune-teller? Does fortune or fate play a role in life? Eliot cannot be confined to a particular theme or subject; he is not a fatalist either like Thomas Hardy, yet the introduction of a soothsayer, Madam Sosostriis, is to warn the man of the danger ahead. This lady acts as a caveat and a life, already fragmented by too many propositions, is apprised of the peril on the prowl and, in a way, directed to prepare him for



the inevitable. But Madam Sosostris' inability to see unravels the irony that fortune too has its limitations. So, man must not get carried away by fortune completely. Isn't this the greatest irony that she is without her normal vision but envisions and portends for others? It is indeed!

*The Wasteland* is a startling comment on the gloom and despair arising out of the war-ravaged world and a generation, countering copious unpalatable situations, and going through an ordeal. I personally feel that Eliot's poems are path-breaking for they do not conform to the popular, set norms and yet leave a mark of its own on the readers' mind. The structure of the poem is quite fragmented, but its uniform theme of despondency binds it together. Man treads the rocky path in his search for spiritual peace but after a prolonged and strenuous journey, caves into the nature of search.

Man is devoid of spiritual efficacy and emotional competence and both these create a vacuum of sorts in his life, which in turn, disturbs his life to the utmost. Modern life is without meaning, both emotional and spiritual. There is no synergy between his life and emotions or for that matter spirituality. Life is influenced predominantly by the good and the evil. These are the two chief components governing modern life. But man is oblivious to both good and evil. He is lying dormant and in a state of apathy. His life has lost much of its shine and spine both. He is indifferent to the environment around and remains unmoved, and that's why, perhaps, he hails winter, as winter is associated with lack of work culture and passivity. He dislikes spring (April) as it stirs his passions and feelings and he does not want it to be so.

Eliot, being a realist, slams the sexual depravity of the modern civilisation and puts it vehemently that sexual dissoluteness and debauchery lead to decay and degeneration. Amidst all the problems and perplexities, not everything is lost, and the derailed life can be pulled back on the track by virtue of resoluteness and goodness. Despite Eliot's rebuttal, his poems unfurl the troubles and tribulations devouring the modern life. But to claim that the tone of *The Wasteland* is entirely negative is to undo the work of its intrigue and charm.

Intellectual futility, spiritual bankruptcy, sexual discontent, and imbalanced life form the cornerstone of Eliot's poetry. Eliot's use of epigraphs to start his poems, is to set the stage and tone of the poem. Eliot exhibits firmly that without religion and God, man cannot live a normal and upright life. The technical revolution has intruded his life and made him to shun his faith in God, for sophistication and modernism are not in sync with his belief.

Modern life is hollow, dry, coarse, and meaningless. The hollowness here is also indicative of spiritual vacuity and loss of purpose in life. He leads a directionless and purposeless life and has no vision whatsoever. His mind and body are "stuffed" with insanity, senselessness, listlessness, and sadness. He is sans eyes and has no sight or vision; he can neither envision anything nor decipher based on his discernment. His physical appearance evokes no attention and he is as good as dead. Eliot lambasts the



shapeless and meaningless men in *The Hollow Men* and his diatribe ends with a jarring and hard-hitting narration. A Nursery rhyme as an abrupt adjunct to the conclusion only adds to the mystic that Eliot's works are. The images, the narrative-technique, the poetic-devices, and the diction—all add to the theme and make his works unparalleled.

Eliot's fusion of the Orient and the Occident is quite notable. Eliot beautifully blends the East and the West! Or I shall say that the East provides solace to the Western unease and guides or shows the direction to the restive and lost people. It resolves the crisis to some extent and makes people realise the importance of "Datta", "Dayadhvam" and "Damyata", meaning To Give, Compassion and Self- Control. Europe may be notches above and placed on the higher pedestal than Asia, but India is definitely a healer to the lacerating wounds of Europe as marked in Eliot's poems. India's rich culture and glorious heritage can certainly guide a whole generation gone astray and reeling under the consequences of War towards spirituality. As an Indian, I revel in the fact that Eliot looks up to the Indian Upanishads for the path partially both to solution and peace. India is capable of restoring sanity amongst the young lot and the old order of glory, so that, the modern man enriches himself from the glorious past and learns to invoke the same in his personal life.

Eliot's penchant for Vedic thought finds a testimony in his mention of the aforesaid three prime virtues. The concepts from the Sanskrit texts are used as a framework to give shape to and sustain the numerous notions that form the human psyche on a spiritual journey. After having talked about the chaotic and disorganised life of the modern man, Eliot offers the remedial measures and the healing therapy for resolving the messy life. The road to salvation is through the sacred river, Ganga and Himavant:

"Ganga was sunken, and the limp leaves  
Waited for rain, while the black clouds  
Gathered far distant, over Himavant." <sup>6</sup>

Eliot uses as many as five languages in the concluding part of *The Wasteland*. The last line of the poem, "Shantih, shantih, shantih" finally brings in peace, hope and rekindles the warmth in life. The subtle message is that atonement or penance can bring peace and restore the meaning in life. At last, peace prevails after a tumultuous journey and puts life at ease. So, Eliot's sarcasm gives way to the path where man regains his hope and looks forward to an upright and settled life. That is perhaps the beauty of Eliot's compositions!

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