

Eliot's 'The Waste Land'- What the Thunder Said- A Critical Evaluation

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'What the Thunder Said', the final section of 'The Waste Land', effectively rounds off Eliot's portrayal of the wasteland that society has degenerated into and the ways through which one may seek for the divine grace for restoring its spiritual health. Throughout the previous sections of the poem, Eliot presents various snapshots of a physical, moral and emotional wasteland, where loss of faith in the spiritual and religious values of life manifests itself in materialism, corruption and promiscuity. There is an accompanying lack of communication and interaction between individuals which results in boredom, sense of ennui, desperation and despair. With the help of a sustained pattern of allusions to classical myths, particularly to that of the Fisher King, an evaluative framework of ironical contrast is suggested of the modern Wasteland with the morally vibrant ancient society. Thus, the ritual associated with the 'the burial of the dead' no more provides the prospect of 'redemption/ rebirth', there is the threat of the frost and of dog 'digging up the corpse'. The 'death by water' does not result in spiritual 'metamorphosis'; and 'fire' is not the 'purgatorial' one, it is the fire of lust and carnal desire.

Hence, references to destruction, thirst, desperation and automated behaviour pattern underline a dire urgency for salvation. 'What the Thunder Said', for the first time provides the much longed for prospect of rain: "a damp gust/ Bringing rain." However, one can achieve this stage only through the process of 'agonized' waiting, 'patient' suffering, and accepting the divine order of things: "After the frosty silence in the gardens/ After the agony in stony places." The section opens with allusions to the time when Jesus was taken prisoner in the garden of Gethsemane and was thereafter crucified. The reference seeks to evoke the full emotional and spiritual import of the cataclysmic moment,

which also signifies the incident of first meaningful death as an instance of great sacrifice that ended up in the resurrection.

There is a distinct evocation of the image of an earnest Knight who must pursue his search for the holy Grail despite all “snares and snarls” on the way. The recurring image of ‘water’ as the sap of life in various combinations and mutations highlights the arid conditions of the wasteland; it also reinforces the sense of increased spiritual thirst. Whether the ‘thunder’ will be followed by ‘rain/water’ is not an important issue just as it is not important if the knight laid hold of the Grail. The important thing is the spirit in which the quest is made. In previous sections, scenes of boredom and ennui indicate absence of any genuine and committed effort to grapple with the predicament of human existence. However, after all tortuous experiences of death, decay and destruction, the quest seems to be earnest and in the right direction. It continues in the arid terrain of ‘dry’ vegetation, through "dead mountain mouth of carious teeth". Even the "decayed hole among the mountains" and the site of an "empty chapel," with "only the wind's home" will not deter, nor will it dishearten, the pilgrim. The suffering, if accepted in the right earnestness, does not distract the pious mind. It is always rewarding as one immediately starts getting the glimpses of the divine presence: "Who is the third who walks always beside you?" Here, the "third" seems to be some divine figure. The biblical allusion in question refers to two men walking along the road to Emmaus, who do not initially realize that Jesus, who has just risen from death, is walking beside them “gliding wrapt in a brown mantle”. The response seems appropriate when said in the right way: “Dry bones can harm no one.” The piety and perseverance breaks the spell: "In a flash of lightning. Then a damp gust / Bringing rain".

The falling of London Bridge, a symbol of materialism and corruption, indicates a stage of total chaos. The stanza alludes to a passage in Hermann Hesse’s book ‘A Glimpse into Chaos’ in which the author writes:

“Already half of Europe, already at least half of Eastern Europe, on the way to Chaos, drives drunk in sacred infatuation along the edge of the precipice, sings drunkenly, as though hymn singing, as Dmitri Karamazov sang. The

offended bourgeoisie laughs at the songs; the saint and the seer hear them with tears.”

Europe is personified as a drunk lunatic singing on the edge of a cliff. The modern society is represented as being on the verge of total collapse, with no sign of recovering from the spiritual abyss. One is also reminded of the mass scale destruction of lives and property in the First World War. In this context, the sound of “maternal lamentation” suggests crying of the women over the loss of their men on the battlefield. The blind troops- “those hooded hordes swarming”- engage in an inhuman war “Over endless plains, stumbling in cracked earth”, only to experience death and decay in “a rats’ alley”. As a result of such destructive impulses, the cities over the mountains, which were once the hub of vibrant lives, are now collapsing in violet air. The word ‘Violet’ has been mentioned earlier also in the poem. It signifies the atmosphere of twilight, the end of the day. Naturally, everything seems almost ‘unreal’.

The healing ritual that concludes the poem alludes to the Hindu myth from the Brihadaranyaka Upanishad when an earnest prayer, jointly by humans, demons and gods, was answered by the God through thunder. Thunder plays an important role in this section. In the beginning, the thunder was accompanied by lightening, with the “damp gust bringing rain”. And finally, the thunder heralds the divine message- God delivering His message to three groups of followers — men, demons, and the gods. In one sense, it implies communion with the divine. The sound of the thunder “Da” was interpreted differently by the three groups of the followers- humans, demons and gods in terms of "Datta," "Dayadhvam," and "Damyata" meaning ‘to give’, ‘to sympathize’, and ‘to control’ respectively. This part of the Section signifies the eagerly awaited moment when the pilgrim gains control over himself and over the predicament, as the "sea is calm". But it occurs only after learning to give or to sacrifice oneself and to sympathize with "each in his prison". Words like “blood shaking my heart” and “controlling hands” suggest newly awakened consciousness, new determination, new control and new patience. It is appropriate, then, that the poem ends with "Shantih shantih shantih," which translates as "The peace which passeth understanding."

The last stanza of the section distinctly alludes to the Fisher King who, in myths and legends, has become associated with the Christian idea of a deity whose sacrifice had the capacity to redeem humankind. The Grail itself is said to have caught the blood of Christ and, thus, is believed to have acquired magical healing power. Over time, the legend related to the healing of the king and subsequent restoration of fertility of the land becomes analogous to Christ's resurrection and redemption of humanity. Thus, the allusion to the Fisher King and the related quest for the Holy Grail suggests the message that we have to continue this quest for salvation and purification at any cost, as succumbing to temptation will take the society back to the 'Wasteland' that formerly prevailed. The poem concludes on the pious note of 'Shantih shantih shantih' which emphasises the fact that there is still hope through religion. However, it does not mean to repose dogmatic belief in any orthodox religion; the vision of salvation emerges through the synthesis of insights from other religions.

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