

NATURE VERSUS DEGENERATED MORALS IN THE LOVE SONG OF J. ALFRED PRUFROCK AND THE WASTE LAND

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ABSTRACT

In every sphere of life, whether it be moral, spiritual or emotional, he uses the weapon of his rationality to win over the enemy of his unlimited desires neglecting the assistance offered to him by his morality, spirituality and emotionality. He sees only through the glass of materialism and rationalism. And the ultimate result of this is his indifference towards moral, spiritual and emotional values. He turns into beast; forgets his humanity; and thus, he is subjected to eternal miseries and misfortunes. The cluster of degeneration in today's modern man can be defined in terms one by one.

First of all, Moral Degeneration. This sort of degeneration in today's man has taken place because of the scarcity of the long cherished traditional moral values, virtues and qualities which a human being should possess to be humane. These are vanishing speedily leaving him morally blank. Today's modern man lacks in courtesy, politeness, honesty and civility. He doesn't consider others equal to him. He doesn't respect others' existence whether it is of a man or of an animal. He has become dead like a stone. He has neither kindness nor sympathy towards his fellow beings. He has forgotten how to behave how to talk how to treat his fellow being, and thus, he has turned into a haughty creature, which believes in the philosophy of his own and strives to fulfill his selfish ends. In such a morally degenerated environment nothing good can flourish.

INTRODUCTION

Man was no longer seen as a rational being as far as his behaviour was concerned. Family relationships underwent a change. The assessment of the relative roles of man and woman changed. The younger generation and the older generation felt the gap between them widening, resulting in a change of relationship between parent and child. No doubt, the discoveries in science brought a better understanding and a widening of horizons, but the astonishing ultimate result of it was the breakup of old traditional values and relationships and the ever-increasing feeling of rootlessness in the hearts of individuals. This gave rise to tremendous spiritual barrenness and personal frustrations. The atmosphere is well presented in Eliot's The Waste Land.

The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock is not a love song in traditional sense of the word. Eliot marks a break from the Romantic tradition of the nineteenth century. Romantic poetry, the stream of which ran at its highest flood in the first half of the nineteenth century, became weak and thin. By the end of the century, the romantic poets sought an escape from the realities of life into the world of nature and art. He also exploited the past for its pageant and glory. His poetry faces the problems of modern life and does not turn its back from urban civilization. Its settings are in the streets of London and the city slums. The ugliness of the factory surroundings and pollution of the smog and loneliness of the city life, in spite of its swelling crowd and exclusive parties, are represented by Eliot without any fear or favour. He does not white-wash the grim picture of urban surroundings. The restaurants smelling of oil and dust and rotten cabbages filled with saw dust, are found in The Love Song. Williamson says:

“In this poem (1917) we have the love song of a certain character, whose very name is suggestive of qualities he subsequently manifests.”⁹

The First World War brought in its wake further revolt against authority and existing beliefs and ideas. The post war period saw the generation gap widening still further. The older generation tried to keep up the belief in authority and the control of rationality in behaviour. The younger generation felt that they knew better. The war had its terrible effect. It caused more cynicism and skepticism about values of the older generation. Virginia Woolf writes about the evil effects of war:

“So prying and insidious were the fingers of the European War, smashed a plaster cast of ceres, ploughed a hole in the geranium beds, and utterly ruined the cook’s nerves at Mr. Brewer’s establishment at Muswell Hill.”¹⁰

General disillusionment resulted in a revolt in all fields of human behaviour and thought. There was a rebellion against accepted ideas in politics, morality and religion. There was a collapse of faith in established institution and beliefs. It reflected in the breakdown of social and family relationships. There was an atmosphere of „spiritual gloom“. The post war consequences gifted England with the depressed economy, widespread unemployment, great shortage of essential goods and mechanical human beings.

The despair and cynicism of the age resulted in the disregard of all established values. No values, moral, religious, social or ethical were considered to be absolute. In the field of politics, the Victorian complacency was being replaced by a questioning of the system. There was an increasing feeling that relationship should be based on equality. The feeling of Nationalism was giving way to internationalism, conflict was inevitable. During the years of war, life generally was lived in an atmosphere of hustle and restlessness.

Probably, the First World War brought in the feeling of being unsettled, a feeling of disillusionment and a growing sense of the impermanence of everything. A superficial gaiety and frivolity was to be seen. There was a sense of hurry and haste in all fields of activity.

“HURRY UP PLEASE IT’S TIME

HURRY UP PLEASE IT’S TIME

Goodnight Bill. Goodnight Lou. Goodnight May. Goodnight.

Ta ta. Goodnight. Goodnight.”¹¹

A great poet, in writing of himself, writes of his age, said T.S. Eliot. This pronouncement of his is equally applicable to him. His poetry is deeply influenced by his age. All social, political, economic and literary tendencies of this age exercise a tremendous influence on him. It is an accepted fact that Eliot’s The Waste Land is the epic of the modern age, which presents a vivid and transparent panorama of the anarchy prevailing in the so-called contemporary civilization. Some critics call it „an age of Disintegration and Anxiety“. The industrial chaos due to migration of labour from rural areas, created abnormal conditions of living for the lower classes. The moral chaos arising out of the violence and destruction caused by the war, could not be replaced by the new system of values. Sex perversities ruined the life of cities.

With the growth of literacy and automatic printing presses, key-books and magazines became very popular. As such, quality declined as compared to quantity. Other means of mass media like the cinema, radio and television, were exploited for commercial and entertainment purposes. Human relationships became coarse and vulgar. The lowering of public tastes left its mark on literature. The detective stories, comics, sexy magazines, pot boilers, blue films further relate to the decline of public morality and public tastes.

Eliot attaches great importance to „tradition“. His conception of tradition is essentially dynamic. He declares that we should not adhere to tradition blindly or timidly. There should be conformity between the old and the new. The past should be altered by the present as much as the present is directed by the past. A poet who is aware of this, will be aware of great difficulties and responsibilities. An adequate knowledge of the past is absolutely essential. The future cannot be built up in the absence of the past. Thus, a tradition is a connecting link between the past and the future. Keeping in view the intrinsic value of literary tradition Eliot remarks:

“What is to be insisted upon is that the poet must develop or procure the consciousness of the past and that he should continue to develop this consciousness throughout his career.”¹²

Chaos cannot continue forever. The English writers showed a concern for a definition of their responsibility that would strike a balance between their desire for freedom of expression, of personal values and the sense of obligation to a wider and stricter social pattern.

“The person who ceases to care for its literary inheritance becomes barbaric; the person which ceases to produce literature ceases to move in thought and sensibility. The poetry of a people takes its life from the people’s speech and in turn gives life to it.”¹³

All his poetry reflects his religious bent of mind. It is the connecting link between the earlier and the later phase. In the early poetry, his approach is negative but in the later phase, it is positive. However Eliot’s themes are usually urban in the early phase of his poetry. The tone is satirical and ironical. He studies sophisticated city people and their habits and manners.

Eliot has forcefully expressed the spiritual and intellectual as well as moral degeneration. As far as emotional and physical degeneration is concerned, he has expressed it in various poems, such as Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock. Prufrock belongs to the contemporary aristocratic world. His society shows the perfection of urban civilization with its sophisticated luxury, artificiality, hypocrisy, loneliness, make-belief and the gay-record of social parties. It is a world disgusted with itself, bored to death and finding some relief in love and gaiety. The words of Prufrock come straight from the drawing room and the fashionable clubs. This modern civilization preserved its formal manners and mechanical bits of conversation. Actually this society is rotten, and hollow at its core. It has no emotional or spiritual reservoir of strength. In this modern world, which is devoid of any moral and spiritual force, evening spreads?

“Like a patient etherized upon a table.”²³

The Waste Land also describes a condition where there are no spiritual values and action is mechanical and meaningless. The lack of spiritual feeling is central to the modern wasteland, which is conveyed through the reflection of the mythical wasteland devoid of water, the source of life. However, since the poem appeared in 1922, there have been contradictory reactions to it. Some have dismissed it as a joke against academic critics and have seen Eliot’s notes as his final trick. Some have assessed it as the finest example of modernist art, reflecting in its own difficulties the complexity of the modern world. Some have heard in the poem a whimper of despair. Some have sensed that behind the cleverness of the poem a tortured lover was seeking to justify himself. The theories, interpretations and assessments are amazingly diverse and this fact has led some critics to admire the poem that can stimulate so many reactions.

Eliot, in this poem, is only trying to draw our attention towards this degenerated modern world. All the five sections of the poem give voice to one kind of degeneration or the other. As far as the first section The Burial of Dead is concerned, it makes us aware of the spiritual degeneration or the spiritual barrenness in modern man’s life. Eliot conveys a sense of apprehension and incomprehension in various characters presented in different situations. The lack of understanding is not helped by Madame

Sosostris, a fortune-teller, whose enigmatic pronouncements only make sense later in the poem. The city, in particular London, is a place of people unable to live fully or see a way out of their deadness.

The lines from the poem express it clearly:

“What are the roots that clutch, what branches grow

Out of this stony rubbish? Son of man,

You cannot say, or guess, for you know only

A heap of broken images.”²⁴

Part II A Game of Chess in The Waste Land, expresses the emotional degeneration. It offers two scenes showing the essential emptiness of people’s lives. The first scene presents this emptiness in a lavishly decorated room, a rich lady whose constant questions express her anxiety and lack of control. The second scene is set in a London pub where two women discuss the predicament in which Lil finds herself. The modern man is mentally impotent. He can’t think anything positive. In the poem, Eliot asks:

“Do you know nothing? Do you see nothing? Do you remember

Nothing?”²⁵

The theme of sexual dissatisfaction is explored in Part III, The Fire Sermon, where Eliot, ranging about in time from Buddha and St. Augustine to the present day, has tried to show how man’s aspirations to a higher i.e. more spiritual mode of living are constantly thwarted by his subservience to his bold appetites and his self awareness. It is too late when he realizes:

“To carthage then I came

Burning burning burning burning

O Lord Thou pluckest me out

O Lord Thou pluckest

burning”²⁶

Materialistic degeneration is presented in the brief Part IV, Death by Water. In this section, a drowned merchant’s body decomposes in the sea. He seems to have achieved nothing.

Part V, What the Thunder said beings with a description of the death of Jesus and goes on to relate a difficult journey through the desert to an empty chapel. The traveller has to suffer hardships, delusions and a sense that all is chaotic and meaningless, before he arrives. In the final section of the

poem the arrival of rain is intimated and the voice of the thunder offers three words of advice: „give“, „sympathize“, and „control“. The poem ends with hope of salvation. The poem gives an advice to regenerate themselves and wishes that everywhere in the world should be

„Shantih shantih shantih“²⁷

Thus we find that there is degeneration in every sphere of life. T.S. Eliot has expressed this sort of degeneration in his poems and it is apparent that moral and cultural degeneration is in the helm of Eliot's poetry. Present study has attempted to explore the moral and cultural degeneration in The Waste Land and The Love Song. These poems present a vision of spiritual death in the modern world that has never lost its power. But we should keep this view in our mind that the present wasteland is only another wasteland, different in external from but old in its internal spirit of hollowness and barbarity. The emotional and spiritual sterility are not new to human world. The senseless meaninglessness of the world does not paralyze or stupify Eliot. As Cleanth Brooks says:

“The poem is not merely a cry in the wilderness over something past and gone. It is a positive assertion of the need to rehabilitate a system of belief known but now misdirected.

AIM OF THE RESEARCH WORK

T.S. Eliot's approach to poetry was new and revolutionary. The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock (1917) declares its departure from the romantic tradition of love-poetry and introduces a poet who is profoundly conscious of his age. Here is a poet who felt that all creativeness lies in the realm of the spirit, that it arises from a state of mental suffering caused by spiritual stagnation and psychic sterility. He sees the choice for civilized man as between the pain of spiritual stagnation or the willing surrender to purgation, to the heavy toil of spiritual rebirth. The poet differs from others in the same environment in his awareness of the plight of modern man. Eliot established his reputation as the greatest force in English poetry with the publication of The Waste Land.

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

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PROPOSED RESEARCH WORK

Degeneration means one's passing into a worse physical, mental or moral state than one, which is considered normal or desirable on the part of human beings. This sort of chaotic transformation on the part of modern materialistic and mechanical human beings can be seen in abundance in *The Waste Land*. In today's scientific and materialistic world man is degenerating day-by-day. In a blind materialistic pursuit, he is forgetting all his moral and spiritual grandeur. In fact, the entire moral, spiritual, intellectual and physical traits, which are essential for a human to be humane, are vanishing day-by-day leaving him behind like a waste land where there is only barrenness that can never nourish the goodly tree of human being to survive or flourish in the poisonous environment of the modern social set up. He is on the verge of extinction because he has got completely degenerated.

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