

Of Wastelands and Eco-poetics.

An Ecocritical Reading of T. S. Eliot's Poetry.

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Abstract

This article is an ecocritical study of three of T. S. Eliot's most notable works: "The Waste Land", "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock", and "The Hollow Men". The poems are analyzed in detail and in relation with one another to highlight Eliot's understanding of man's relationship with nature through an elemental, ecomythical, and ecoreligious study. The article pursues a pattern in Eliot's writing of a Man-Nature relationship as it focuses on the ways in which nature interacts with and influences man's life, emotions, and faith.

Keywords: ecocriticism; Eliot; wasteland; Prufrock; hollow men; nature; poetry.

"Do I dare
Disturb the universe?"¹

Introduction

As a pandemic reduces the human population by millions, wildfires ravage the planet, water rises to drown and conceal entire cities, and plastic waste unbendingly resists dissolution to accumulate in heaps around us, humans stand guilty of—and victim to—environmental destruction. This, however, is not surprising to human existence that now realizes it was only a matter of allegedly insignificant concerns left unattended and catastrophic consequences long postponed. The anthropocentric view that modern life holds recognizes humans as the center of creation, and while privilege came with that status for decades, it appears that now is time for accountability to ensue.

In viewing humans as modest members of the ecosystem, ecocriticism rejects the notion that they stand as the uppermost rank of a hierarchy in which all is created for the benefit of their survival and growth. Ecocritical theory, then, allows for statements such as "mankind is efficiently committing ecocide, making the planet inhospitable for life of any kind" to be upheld (Nayar 241). Although it was not regarded so during most of the twentieth century, Eliot's poetry is heavily ecocritical; many of his poems

¹ See "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock" lines 45-46.

were overanalyzed figuratively but were never taken quite literally, which can amaze the reader with an unadorned description of today's environmental emergency. As Laurence Coupe argues in his *Myth*, it is now crucial to start taking nature as it is captured in modernist works in the literal sense, and not only "as a source of metaphors for a spiritual state" (187).

A century after its publication, *The Waste Land's* echo still resonates today, which makes it as prophetic as ever. The poem in itself functions as a lamentation for the past, a record of the present, and a forewarning of the future. Whether Eliot's poetry was merely a documentation of the state of the modern world through his own eyes, or a sort of prediction of an approaching future, it can be seen as an accurate vision because, as stated by Gabrielle McIntire, "the waste land of 1922 is still the waste land of today, and we are far from abolishing the ills that Eliot was anxiously representing" (191). However, it was not only *The Waste Land* which displayed Eliot's ecological concern, for, as this article attempts to demonstrate, his fears can even be traced back to "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock" and reignited later in "The Hollow Men".

It is in addressing the reader in the personal 'you' that T. S. Eliot's persona takes on the mantle to educate, criticize, and question the "hypocrite lecteur" (*The Waste Land* 76) in regard of the natural world ruined at the hands of human civilization. Eliot does not shy away from dispatching the culpability towards his readers, and he conducts a most crucial—but most uncomfortable—interrogation throughout his poetry. In order to conduct as thorough a study as possible of man's relationship with nature in Eliot's poetry, this article endeavors to answer the questions: How are the four elements of nature portrayed in Eliot's poetry? How does their portrayal relate to the status of the environment today? Will nature remain passive to Man's destructive methods, or is retaliation ensuing? Are humans aware of what is leading them to their own demise? Are the answers to be found in religion and mythology? Is there hope for remorse and repentance, or is this the end as anticipated by the poet?

Literature Review and Methodology

Of the many noted scholars who devoted a great interest to the works of T. S. Eliot, some recently began to recognize the ecocritical aspect of the poet's writing, among them is Elizabeth Black whose book *The Nature of Modernism* is an ecocritical reading of the literature of several modernists, including Eliot. Gabrielle McIntire, a specialist on Eliot, devoted a whole chapter to ecocriticism in *The Cambridge Companion to the Waste Land*. While these were perhaps the first to explicitly open the discussion of Eliot's ecocriticism, others brought diverse perspectives to the debate. Interestingly, Archana Parashar, Archana Verma, and Rajni Singh used the sustainable development discourse to discuss the impact of human development and civilization on the environment and the challenges it created; Verma and Singh even argue that Eliot's

work was “his step towards sustainable development” (45). Shibaji Mridha attempts an elemental study of water in *The Waste Land* by representing the element as a dynamic force that responds to human actions and around which the work centers. Some other studies on *The Waste Land* focused on the ecomythic aspect of the work such as Geoffrey Berry’s “An Ecomythic Reading of T. S. Eliot’s *The Waste Land*” in which he delves in detail in the poet’s allusions to mythology and the symbolism this carries in the ecocritical sense.

This study, in its turn, targets Eliot’s poetry from an ecocritical insight, but seeks to specifically examine the Man-Nature relationship present in *The Waste Land*, “The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock”, and “The Hollow Men”. In so doing, this paper sheds light on the poetics of ecological dangers created by the human as expressed by Eliot. In order to do this, the study will rely on ecocriticism; it particularly considers the classical elements of nature celebrated in ancient Greek philosophy: earth, air, water, and fire, while basing its analysis in an urban context as per Eliot’s choice of setting. Ecopoetry is often characterized by either reverence of nature or disillusionment over its destruction (or both), and while it was not often associated with modernist literature, the sense of disenchantment that typifies Eliot’s work moves beyond spiritual terms into realist terms. As people began to live in complete estrangement from nature, Eliot, in an attempt to educate—or warn—his readers, brings them the issue in familiar packaging: the modern metropolis. Instead of restricting the grasp of nature to traditional terms, Eliot extends it to comprehend contexts that are closer to the reader, the city in this case.

Analysis

It is from a sense of cultural responsibility that Eliot pens most of his poems; his work has long been defined as didactic, and “whether he knew it or not, Eliot was writing a version of what we would now call ecopoetics, or ecocriticism” (McIntire 181). It was not an easy conclusion to draw for early twentieth century critics because ecopoetics, a relatively new term (and notion), was not seen in literature before the world wars. When nature was ever the center of a work, it was either to be venerated by romantics and transcendentalists, or to be used as the pastoral setting arranged as a contrast to the industrial chaos by realists. In the twentieth century, and particularly in the wake of the wars, it became difficult to view nature in an optimistic light, and this began to appear in modernist writing. For Eliot, poetry does not necessarily have to revolve around the aesthetic and appealing; in fact, he regularly investigates the contaminated and uncomfortable, and for him, this is to be found in the city, the naked core of modern reality. He argues that “the advantage for a poet is not to have a beautiful world with which to deal: it is to be able to see the boredom, and the horror, and the glory” (qtd. in Black, *Nature Poet* 6).

In another of her works, Black draws a link between Eliot's religious views and his growing concern for the environment; she explains how "closeness to God is achieved through a sense of re-enchantment with nature through immersion in sacred places" (Black, *Ecocritical Eliot* 5). This argument can be maintained through a reference to Eliot's immense interest in Buddhism throughout his life, and especially while he wrote *The Waste Land*: the weight of ecology in Buddhist principles must have sharpened—if not awakened—Eliot's environmental conscience. In addition to this, Eliot, throughout his childhood, witnessed the environmental decline of the then semirural St. Louis, Missouri, when industries were mounted: the Mississippi River was soiled and smoke invaded the city's air turning it into "a desolate place" (Verma and Singh 47). These images served as a lifelong fuel for the poet's work, as he explains himself, "the sort of material that I had, the sort of experience that an adolescent had had, in an industrial city in America, could be the material for poetry and that the source of new poetry might be found in what had been regarded hitherto as the impossible, the sterile, the intractably unpoetic" (qtd. in Sirr).

Eliot was not only greatly affected by Buddhism alone, but also by Greek myth and philosophy. Empedocles' four elements, earth, water, air, and fire, long since recognized as the temperaments of the universe, repeatedly find their way into Eliot's lines. If one were to examine the titles of the poem's parts solely, one would find that "The Burial of the Dead" evokes images of earth, "The Fire Sermon" explicitly indicates a return to fire, "Death by Water" plainly warns of avenging waters, and that "What the Thunder Said" awakens a sense of fury in the air. This understanding of *The Waste Land's* parts leaves one title unexamined, "A Game of Chess", and it is this one that summons the presence of humans into the balance—only, perhaps, to disturb that balance.

"The Burial of the Dead" opens with an odd reference to the month of April as "the cruelest month", contrary to what common belief indicates, where April brings spring, a rekindling of life. The speaker then proceeds to explain his revulsion of spring, emphasizing images of lilacs emerging out of lifeless land (lilacs, being symbols of spirituality and purity, disrupt the speaker's conscience, most likely his environmental conscience). The wastelander prefers to keep his eyes closed to the death of both principles and land surrounding him, but the earth "mixing / Memory and desire, stirring / Dull roots with spring rain" invades this blindness with agonizing remembrance (2-4). For, "what are the roots that clutch, what branches grow / Out of this stony rubbish?" (19-20), what principles could flourish in a dead land? It appears it is a rhetorical question because Eliot immediately provides an answer: "Son of man / You cannot say or guess, for you know only / A heap of broken images," after which he embarks on a meticulous portrayal of the wasteland, this heap of broken images (20-22).

In another interpretation of this passage, Verma and Singh consider the “dead land” and “dull roots” as an allusion to the deforestation that the world suffers from today (47). This can be further endorsed when one reads on; tubers, once containers of life, are dried, and lilacs, enchanting flowers, stir instead of blooming—ironically, in the last stanza in “The Burial of the Dead”, Eliot speaks of a corpse blooming (71-72): a corpse *blooms*, but a lilac *stirs*! The concept of corpses rising from the earth conjures another apocalyptic vision from “The Hollow Men” (which is, in many ways, a continuation of *The Waste Land*):

“This is the dead land
 This is cactus land
 Here the stone images
 Are raised, here they receive
 The supplication of a dead man’s hand
 Under the twinkle of a fading star.” (39-44)

Eliot’s imagery is powerful in the stanza above; the lines emit dryness and desolation, and the corpses that bloomed in *The Waste Land* now extend their hands in entreaty. Is it for forgiveness, or is it simply for another of the four elements—for water?

Water, in all of its forms, and perhaps for dread of its eventual (and inevitable) insufficiency, is featured in Eliot’s poetry more than any of the other elements is. Most critics of T. S. Eliot’s poetry regard his allusions to water in a figurative light; often, they interpret it as a symbol for purity—and its pollution or absence as infertility and moral decay. However, as Shibaji Mridha puts it,

“The centrality of water to *The Waste Land*, both literally and symbolically, denotes the crucial place of water in our planetary life. Although Eliot was not writing as a hydrologist, and he was more invested in the symbolic nature of water in the construction of the sterility/fertility question, his emphasis on the pivotal role of water as a source of rejuvenation and as a protector of the cycle of nature cannot be overlooked.” (111)

Eliot’s interest in bodies of water, then, cannot be merely viewed as a metaphor, especially as he dedicated several of his verses to seas, oceans, rains, lakes, and most particularly, rivers.

During one’s attempts to decipher *The Waste Land*, one must consent that the river, at least for the speaker, is a character—and a central character, indeed, knowing the enormous influence it has had on Eliot’s childhood. The first mention of the river in *The Waste Land* occurs at the beginning of “The Fire Sermon”, where the speaker enters into an imagist description of it, repeatedly quoting Edmund Spencer’s “Prothalamion”

in addressing the river as “Sweet Thames, run softly, till I end my song” (176). This recurrent allusion was inserted specifically to create a contrast between Spencer’s Thames and Eliot’s Thames, between the sacred, enchanting rivers of the past and the polluted, dismal rivers of the modern world. The poet, moreover, repeats, “The nymphs are departed” again in reference to Spencer’s nymphs (175); they, creatures of nature and beauty, withdrew from the riverside and “have left no addresses” declaring of no intention to return (181).

In the description alluded to above, Eliot makes a note of the absence of litter; it disturbs the tone of the poem when, instead of the expected filthiness, the reader finds “The river bears no empty bottles, sandwich papers, / Silk handkerchiefs, cardboard boxes, cigarette ends” (177-178). Gabrielle McIntire, in her interpretation of the lines, says that “Eliot’s portrait of the river remains marred by the garbage that is missing” (180). Today, as well as in *The Waste Land* (for they are one), it has become an astonishing sight for a natural setting to remain untouched by man’s waste. Eliot’s speaker “By the waters of Leman [...] sat down and wept...,” for, although the sight of the once great, now contaminated river aggrieves him, he does not attempt to lecture, only grieves “not loud or long” (182-184). It appears that Eliot, while writing the poem, still recognizes it as a vain process, as an attempt to “[fish] in the dull canal,” a fruitless, hopeless endeavor (182).

Perhaps Eliot was not mistaken in his lack of faith in any form of future salvation of his fellow humans. It is today a fact that the same Lake Leman by which Eliot laments, and which was, at the time a clean haven, swallows a number of fifty-five tons of plastic waste every year. Why, then, should it be assumed that pessimism and not mere realism was behind Eliot’s writing? If even then, a century ago, he stood by the Thames and professed it “sweats / Oil and tar” (266-267), was he not right to despair? The speaker refers to a ship moving directionless in the sea, which ends in “drifting logs” (270-274). This, one must imagine, is the condition of humans, for nothing but destruction could ensue from sailing against the wind.

It is only at the end of this section when the reader sees an allusion to the element that comes at the core of its title. The lines “Burning burning burning burning / O Lord Thou pluckest me out” (308-309) are illuminating as to Eliot’s intentional purpose because one finally comes to understand why water dominates over a section supposedly dedicated to fire, revealing that the link between the two fastens in the process of purification. Eliot, because of his Christian and Buddhist awareness, believed in the purification that both water and fire bring. Under an ecocritical lens, the poem gives to understand that the suffering being inflicted on humans, if borne properly, will end in cleansing them from their sins against nature, and therefore, must result in their salvation.

In “Death by Water” and “What the Thunder Said”, two types of environmental threats related to water are discussed. On the one hand, in “Death by Water”, the main fear surrounds being drowned by water—which is a valid ecological hazard as the North Pole melts, and the water level rises all around the world as a consequence of global warming. On the other hand, “What the Thunder Said” brings forward another, perhaps more pressing, more petrifying, environmental question: the absence of water. Eliot is aware of the effect he has on his readers when he says, “I will show you fear in a handful of dust” (*The Waste Land* 30). The last section, or conceivably the entirety of *The Waste Land*, starts to appear like the fragmented hallucinations of a thirst-stricken speaker in extreme delirium, he ceaselessly dreams of water as it is shown in some of the verses:

“If there were water

And no rock

If there were rock

And also water

And water” (346-350).

These construct in the reader’s imagination the vision of a man walking the deserted wasteland, picturing mirages of water, hearing sounds of nonexistent cicadas and hermit thrushes, even fancying the drip drop of water, then arriving at the horrifying conclusion: “But there is no water” (359). Even when Eliot refers to Ganga, an Indian river of great religious significance, it is “sunken” (396) in both symbolic and literal meanings. The river has dried up and shrunken, as have the moralities of humankind; Eliot perfects the image of this desolation in an earlier part of *The Waste Land*, in his quotation from Richard Wagner’s opera, *Tristan und Isolde*, “Oed’ und leer das Meer” (42) which translates to “Waste and empty is the sea.”

The thunder roars on and on, but there is no prospect of rain. Just as the speaker in “The Fire Sermon” abandons any hopes of the nymphs’ return, so does Prufrock in “The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock” abandon hope of the mermaids singing to him, he says, “I have heard the mermaids singing, each to each. / I do not think that they will sing to me.” (124-125). It strikes the reader that even mermaids, acknowledged for luring men to their deaths with their song, have ceased to call to them; perhaps even death rejects man after his atrocities as will be seen in “The Hollow Men”. Eliot closes “The Love Song” with a haunting line, he says, “Till human voices wake us, and we drown.” (131). He clarifies that it is not the mermaid’s song that drowns man; it is man’s own voice.

The fourth and last element to be inspected is air, an element less frequently alluded to in the works analyzed but not any less significant for that; one thing is certain: air is lacking in the wasteland. In a reminiscence of past times, one returns to T. S. Eliot's quotation of Wagner's *Tristan und Isolde*, in saying, "Frisch weht der Wind / Der Heimat zu" (31-32), which when translated, repeats as "fresh blows the wind to the homeland". Instances of fresh air in Eliot's poetry are scarce, but there is another in the first stanza in "A Game of Chess" which illustrates the deficiency of fresh air and the effect it has. The poet undoubtedly presents artificial scents in a pejorative light; he uses words such as "strange" and "odours" to refer to them, and explains that they "troubled", "drowned", and "confused" the characters present in the scene (87-89). In an instant, as the fresh air enters the room, he changes his diction into lighter terms, he says, "*stirred by the air / That freshened from the window, these ascended*" - emphasis added (89-90).

London, Eliot's homeland, where he lived most of his life and where most of his work was produced and set, has certainly not breathed this fresh air in the last two centuries since the industrial revolution, and has been often referred to, humorously but truthfully, as "The Big Smoke". The reference to smoke is not strange to Eliot's characters, but the wind might be, as the poet even ventures to ask once, "What is that noise now? What is the wind doing?" (*The Waste Land* 119) in complete alienation from nature. Smoke, however, is quite the familiar sight for the wastelander, and this is witnessed particularly in "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock" where Prufrock describes the latter with what appears to be an affectionate tone. He says,

"The yellow fog that rubs its back upon the window-panes,
The yellow smoke that rubs its muzzle on the window-panes,
Licked its tongue into the corners of the evening,
Lingered upon the pools that stand in drains,
Let fall upon its back the soot that falls from chimneys,
Slipped by the terrace, made a sudden leap,
And seeing that it was a soft October night,
Curled once about the house, and fell asleep." (15-22)

Eliot smoothly replaces "the yellow fog" at the beginning of the stanza with "the yellow smoke"; the change is almost unnoticeable, and as he uses the terms interchangeably, one begins to recognize the degree of familiarity that the inhabitants of the city have with the toxins in the air. In another understanding of these two lines, the transformation of the fog, a natural phenomenon, to smoke, a manmade poison,

presents the reckless process through which man's industry destroyed the concept of pure air. This is further reinforced by the metaphor that takes place after: the smoke is unquestionably likened to a house pet, most likely a cat, which shares the house with its occupants who ceased to notice its presence because of their unfamiliarity with clean air (a perfectly accurate metaphor for urban settings).

All of these traces of the contamination of the four elements culminate in the conclusion that the planet has undergone drastic environmental changes, which had even begun to manifest during T. S. Eliot's lifetime. In "The Burial of the Dead", there is a confusion of seasons as the speaker declares "winter kept us warm" (5) and "summer surprised us" (8). The reader today would confess that this is a recognizable truth, and would perhaps recall nostalgic memories of colder winters. This exact reaction can be found in the subsequent lines from the poem, "And when we were children, staying at the archduke's, / My cousin's, he took me out on a sled" (13-14), in which the presence of the sled indicates cold, snowy winters—winters that cannot be found in the wasteland. Later on, after Eliot establishes with his readers that the period is springtime, bringing lilacs and hyacinths into the scene, he returns with a reference to a "sudden frost" (73) and confirms the chaos of seasons.

The contamination spoken of in regard of the four elements did not just disturb the order of the seasons. It inflicted upon humans a rampant, pervasive epidemic, one of the greatest ailments ever to befall the modern man to make certain that he yields and returns to the temperaments of the universe, ashes to ashes and dust to dust. Although there are hints of nature's sedation and passivity in Eliot's works, especially in the opening lines of "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock", defiance and retribution are still found among its characteristics. In his reading of *The Waste Land*, Mridha bases his analysis on Jane Bennett's *Vibrant Matter* and her idea of "thing-power" to introduce the concept of "revenge of the thing". According to him, Bennett's idea that "ordinary items can surpass their status as objects, exhibiting vestiges of individuality or aliveness" (114) can also be expanded to include natural elements. To illustrate, the writer returns to the description of the river Thames that Eliot provides in *The Waste Land*, where he interprets "The river bears no empty bottles" (177) as its refusal to *bear* human waste.

Through this, the ability to act in response to human actions is given to nature, and the passivity with which it is misinterpreted is reassessed. Eliot's phrasing in the first stanza of "The Burial of the Dead" is a precise indication of the active state of nature; the fragments previously alluded to, "winter kept us warm" (5) and "summer surprised us" (8), demonstrate nature's power over humans and reinstates it as the superior. Multiple such instances ensue, as contact with nature often triggers fear in the speakers, the most alarming of these occurrences must be the description that Eliot delivers with meticulous emphasis in "Death by Water". He recounts,

"Phlebas the Phoenician, a fortnight dead,
 Forgot the cry of gulls, and the deep sea swell
 And the profit and loss.
 A current under sea
 Picked his bones in whispers. As he rose and fell
 He passed the stages of his age and youth" (312-317)

As the remains of the sailor merchant continue drowning in the sea, the currents move his bones effortlessly; it does not take a roar but a whisper of the waves to drag his bones. To engrain the lines in the reader's mind deeper, Eliot preserves Phlebas's consciousness: the dead sailor helplessly watches as his life passes in front of his eyes, with tones of regret and unattainable atonement.

Eliot, then, closes the section by addressing the reader in saying, "O you who turn the wheel and look to windward, / Consider Phlebas, who was once handsome and tall as you." (320-321). The word "windward" is a reminder of a passage analyzed earlier in the article, of a ship with red sails sailing "to leeward, swing on the heavy spar" (272), a ship that ends in a wreck. The speaker warns humans of their own vice and vanity, and of nature's greater strength, using Phlebas as an example for the rest of humanity, for as Black puts it, "the sea has no reverence for human attributes such as youth or beauty" (qtd. in Mridha 115). In his desperate state, he has forgotten all that "profit and loss" that was deemed worth striving for during his life. This would be the case of many wastelanders, for Phlebas is not the only example of the human condition in the poem.

Among the first characters introduced in *The Waste Land* is Madame Sosostris, the clairvoyante, whose apparition in the poem is of contradictory nature. She, a woman of superhuman talent, is at first defined with the incredibly mundane event of having "a bad cold" (44). From her cards, Madame Sosostris pulls the same drowned Phoenician Sailor spoken of above, of whom she says, "Those are pearls that were his eyes" (48)—the pearls perhaps serve as a metaphor for wealth that blinds its accumulator. Her other cards are no less prophetic of man's doom at his own wickedness than the first one: the Belladonna (symbolic of deception and dishonesty), the wheel (symbolic of the cycle of life and its shortness), and the one-eyed merchant (an allegory of human greed and hunger that turns a blind eye to its costs). The psychic closes her prophecy with "I do not find / The Hanged Man. Fear death by water" (54-55); amongst all her cards, she fails to find the one symbolic of sacrifice and human compassion. Greed and selfish intent are the downfall of man, for it is the absence of sacrifice that brings about the idea of death by water, a death that leaves no trace or legacy behind, a

death that assures complete oblivion. Eliot confirms this by the end of *The Waste Land*, he says, "By this, and this only, we have existed / Which is not to be found in our obituaries." (406-407).

Standing in contrast to doomed wastelanders is Philomela, changed into a nightingale, who is "inviolable" (101) because of her sacrifice against human brutality, but her song, much like Eliot's, falls to "dirty ears" (103), for "still she cried, and still the world pursues" (102). The Hyacinth girl, another of the poem's rare apparitions of beauty, is met with the inability to understand or express feelings of love and admiration (Black, "Nature Poet" 10), for, upon the sight of her, the speaker perplexedly asserts, "I could not / Speak, and my eyes failed, I was neither / Living nor dead, and I knew nothing" (38-40). The behaviors and reactions of characters as described in the poems here discussed provoke the idea that perhaps humanity has become not evil but merely mechanical, devoid of sensibility and sensitivity alike. A description that can be found in "The Hollow Men": "Shape without form, shade without colour, / Paralysed force, gesture without motion" (11-12).

It is seen repeatedly throughout *The Waste Land* that nature is often imitated, and attempts to recreate it are as common as they are unsuccessful. References to false teeth (144), synthetic perfumes (87), wrought fruited vines (79), carved dolphins (96), and dull canals behind gashouses (189-190) are abundant in the poem. The distance of humans from nature has inevitably affected them, and despite their failure to connect with it—and to control it—they still tried to manufacture it into their lives, on a smaller, less threatening scale. In their utter devotion to material success, humans have become self-indulgent and inobservant of the natural wealth around them. By the end of "The Fire Sermon", the speaker admits, "On Margate Sands. / I can connect / Nothing with nothing" (300-302). On a beach landscape, where one expects to find spiritual satisfaction, the wastelander struggles in vain. These verses ought to remind the reader of Prufrock, who, walking on the sands, can only conjure gloomy thoughts. It is, after all, in "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock", that remorse is visible in the following lines:

"And would it have been worth it, after all,

Would it have been worth while,

After the sunsets and the dooryards and the sprinkled streets" (99-101).

Prufrock's sorrow can be interpreted as the void that we suffer from in our estrangement from nature, from which we have come and to which we belong. Is not witnessing sunsets and rain the quintessence of human experience? Is the material world we surrounded ourselves with worth surrendering that for? Prufrock wonders, and so do we.

The desolation of the human soul in the work of T. S. Eliot is always set in comparison with the desolation of the setting. The condemned characters are the product of though they themselves might have produced—contaminated places. Most of the critics who have published works in the ecocritical sphere concerning Eliot's poetry agree on this particular point. Black writes that in Eliot's decision to eliminate London's green spaces, a predictive reading of the future of the city if humans continue on this destructive path is implicitly described ("Nature Poet" 8-9). To reinforce her point, Black quotes Robert Harrison, who, in his book, *Forests: The Shadow of Civilization*, says, "If desertification occurs within, the forests cannot survive without" (11). This relationship of mirroring between the environment and the individual, the exterior and the interior, is not difficult to find in the poems reflected upon in this article.

Of all wastelanders and hollow men, J. Alfred Prufrock embodies the guilt-ridden, tormented soul whose awareness of the wrongdoings of humankind tortures, but whose environment paralyzes and prevents from acting. Prufrock lives in soot-covered rooms, eats sawdust tasteless meals, and aimlessly treads in half-deserted narrow "streets that follow like a tedious argument" (8), all similar, repetitive, and purposeless. It is then expected that Prufrock, though repeatedly becoming determined to begin (something!) thinks, "I shall tell you all" (95), but then always ends up asking, "How should I begin?" (59) "And how should I presume?" (61), which lastly turns into "And should I then presume?" (68). The stagnant, lifeless atmosphere that Prufrock is trapped in has a significant influence on him, for as the readers are made to understand, he is a well-learned, intellectual character with truthful views, but who can achieve nothing nonetheless.

Eliot does not falter in reporting instances of the lack of morality in modern society, and his attention remains focused on human relationships among themselves and with the city. Decadence is a key motif in Eliot's discourse, and he does not only see it in the physical environment but also in the shallow relationships that people maintain; this often takes shape in references to sexuality and infertility. In some passages, he associates man with nature through metaphors of sullied innocence and infertile relationships; as Parashar concludes, "the modes of perception in which the purity of rivers and women are ironically juxtaposed with the barren landscape is revealing" (161). In a sarcastic tone, Eliot describes a most intriguing scene: the reader who is acquainted with the story of Artemis bathing in the pond when Actaeon stumbles upon her might compare—as perhaps Eliot might have—Artemis's rage at the breach in her intimacy with Mrs. Porter bathing (only her feet!) in soda water under the moonlight and awaiting the arrival of Sweeney by the river Thames (*The Waste Land* 197-201). There are some interpretations that claim the passage to be taken from an Australian song about a bawdy house, which would strengthen the argument that Eliot was, indeed, criticizing a decadent modern practice that he saw as the end of chastity, and that, he believed, would bring destruction to humanity and all that surrounds it.

This is not the only occurrence where the poet described the death of spirituality in relationships. A few stanzas ahead from the passage above, one comes across a narration of an evening in the life of a couple—one that can hardly be called so. First introduced is “the eyes and back” (215), “the human engine” (216), or “the typist” (222), so barren of life and feeling that the only names she is given are related to her job and the machine she works on. As Eliot sees it, the monotonous tasks characteristic of industrial jobs deprave the workers of uniqueness, chaining them to their machines until it is hard to say where one ends and the other begins. Where the criticism of the typist is concerned in her mechanic behavior and her passivity, that of her partner, “the young man carbuncular” (231), is mainly of his egotism. The lines that narrate their sexual encounter start to sound like a rape, Eliot, through Tiresias, describes:

“Exploring hands encounter no defence;
His vanity requires no response,
And makes a welcome of indifference.” (240-242)

If an ecofeminist reading were to be applied on this passage, an understanding of how women and nature are equally mistreated at the hand of man would surely ensue. For just as the carbuncular man presumes to violate the woman feeding on her indifference, so does man postulate that the entirety of the ecological system exists for his benefits, and in taking its lack of response as consent, continues to consume and oppress it. Even the kiss at the end of the section is labelled “patronizing” (247), which reminds one of man’s conduct towards nature: force, rob, destroy, and then romanticize. Tiresias himself, with seven lives lived and countless horrors seen, is repulsed by the hypocrisy and dismay of this intercourse; one he cannot attempt to prevent as he did the snakes of his earlier life.

The human race tends to find it easier to exploit when it is not required to witness the evils of its deeds; thus, when it became rather necessary to destroy nature in order to afford luxury, cities were built. It is more than once in *The Waste Land* that Eliot returns to refer to the city as “unreal”, and a description of pollution and destruction always follows. The poem is overflowing with images of “trams and dusty trees” (292), overpopulated narrow streets, overfed rodents, crowds of indifferent people “eyes down and sighing, for all the world as if they were crossing the River Styx rather than the Thames” (Berry 11). On one occasion, the poet calls “O City city” (259), and to the city he proceeds to speak of simpler times when the voice of the gramophone is replaced with mandolins, where the walls of a church stood high and strong, and the fishermen gathered by the river for their drinks (259-265). Eliot, weary of the unreal city under the brown fog, dreams of nostalgic times, for it is true that when cities became intolerable, man found sanctuary away from his own ruins in nature.

Eliot does not deny that he is part of the situation, for just as he points at you saying, “You! Hypocrite lecteur!—mon semblable,—mon frère!” (76) in *The Waste Land*, and beckons you, “Let us go then, you and I,” (1) in “The Love Song”, he does not hesitate to declare, “We are the hollow men / We are the stuffed men” (1-2) in “The Hollow Men”. The pronouns and descriptions he uses never fail to include him, for he understands that we all lock ourselves in our own self-made prisons, “Thinking of the key, each confirms a prison” (*The Waste Land* 415), we stand and confess, “I have seen the moment of my greatness flicker” (“The Love Song” 84). Remorseful, mortified, and alarmed, Eliot’s characters begin to recognize their blindness, and he turns towards the past for answers—towards myth and religion.

The return to religion is rather a motif in his works, for he believes that the modern condition is the mere outcome of substituting religious rituals with machine-like conduct, breeding rootlessness and despondency. The presence of religion in *The Waste Land* proves indispensable to understanding how, in Eliot’s belief, humans are to cleanse themselves of their sins against nature. One begins to grasp the immensity of the impending doom that the wastelanders are bound to face, where the only solution is a return to god—perhaps not only in a spiritual sense, but in a physical sense, or in other words, in death. In *The Waste Land*, “The Love Song”, and “The Hollow Men” alike, death looms over the characters and around the setting ceaselessly. The speaker in “The Fire Sermon” declares “But at my back in a cold blast I hear / The rattle of the bones, and chuckle spread from ear to ear” (185-186); these lines are later on echoed in saying, “But at my back from time to time I hear / The sound of horns and motors” (196-197), which is an interesting analogy that Eliot draws between the sound of death and that of motors.

In a similar instance, where the reader and the speaker seem to be coming to the end of *The Waste Land*, the latter asks:

“Who is the third who walks always beside you?
 When I count, there are only you and I together
 But when I look ahead up the white road
 There is always another one walking beside you
 Gliding wrapt in a brown mantle, hooded
 I do not know whether a man or a woman
 -- But who is that on the other side of you?” (360-366).

These lines provoke a daunting sensation in the reader, which is Eliot’s intention, to remind him of the inevitable end, about which he goes on asking, “Who are those

hooded hordes swarming / Over endless plains, stumbling in cracked earth" (369-370). The hooded figures of death flood the earth leaving destruction in their wake—an image worthy of being referred to as apocalyptic.

The major appearance of Hindu influence in *The Waste Land* takes place in the closing section of "What the Thunder Said". According to Upanishads scripture, the thunder spoke the word "Da", and it was interpreted as giving by humans, compassion by demons, and control by gods. When Eliot writes the conclusion to his masterpiece, he condemns his readers for not abiding by those three principles. He asks, "what have we given?" (402) in a manner that might remind the reader of the collective tone in the "The Hollow Men": what are we, he questions, beside hollow men "Leaning together / Headpiece filled with straw. Alas!" (3-4). Perhaps the most recognizable characteristic of the hollow men is their symbolic blindness, a theme that *The Waste Land* and "The Hollow Men" closely share. In the latter, the poet explores blindness in a figurative sense saying:

"The eyes are not here
There are no eyes here
In this valley of dying stars
In this hollow valley" (51-54)

This passage, along with the rest of the poem, seem to be a continuation of *The Waste Land*, where the warnings have come to a stop, and the consequences begin to show. The "hollow valley" could easily be the same "arid plains" from *The Waste Land* referred to above. Eliot proceeds to describe the hollow men as "Sightless, unless / The eyes reappear" (61-62); these eyes, repeatedly mentioned, have been defined earlier in the poem as "Eyes I dare not meet" (21) that appear to be as blazing as sunlight, and that the speaker pleads against, "Let me be no nearer" (29).

There is a certain implication that the speaker deliberately and willingly avoids the eyes—or the light, obviously representative of truth. It seems to be Eliot's aim to explain to the reader that he, and every other wastelander, have known the truth about their misdeeds all along, but have chosen to look away from it. The notion is also present in *The Waste Land*, for, Tiresias, as the reader is frequently reminded, is blind but can see, yet what he describes as "the eyes and back" (215) does not—and it is not from a lack of eyes, but from a lack of willingness to do so. Only when they begin realizing that "this is the dead land" ("The Hollow Men" 39), only when they grasp that "We who were living are now dying / With a little patience" (*The Waste Land* 329-330), the characters pray for the eyes to reappear.

It looks as if Eliot is writing to an audience that he believes has run out of time to fix its mistakes. An obsession with the concept of time overtakes the poet as he writes most of his works including the ones discussed here. In *The Waste Land*, a warning resonates in the tongue of Madame Sosostris, "One must be so careful these days" (59), and in a bartender's voice, we are urged to "HURRY UP PLEASE ITS TIME" (141) over and over again. As we move through the poem, things turn almost irredeemable: when the aridity destroys the land in "What the Thunder Said", the speaker admits, "one cannot stop or think" (336) as they have come to the end of their rope.

The process is quite similar in "The Love Song", where the protagonist seems to comfort himself with the thought "And indeed there will be time" (23), a thought he is uncertain of. He repeats to himself that "There will be time to murder and create [and repent?]" (29); as he turns to you, the reader, he attempts to comfort you in turn, "Time for you and time for me" (31). However, the optimism is not complete as he immediately adds "And time yet for a hundred indecisions, / And for a hundred visions and revisions" (32-33). Prufrock knows that it is false hope that he persuades himself of—that reminding one's self that there will be time is indeed why one is out of time. In "The Hollow Men", the characters seem to be recollecting a time when they thought "*Life is very long*" (83) just before doom befell them.

The three works thus presented in this article, while fundamentally treating diverse topics, remain inseparably linked to one another through the ecocritical tone that Eliot adopts in each of them. There is an explicit understanding that human civilization has wronged the natural world and, hence, placed itself largely in the eye of the storm, but, as it has been demonstrated throughout this work, the relationship that man has with nature is indestructible. Whether it is through the presence of the four elements in human life, the return of nature as an active force against human offenses, the portrayal of fear and remorse as man's response to environmental disaster, or the religious and mythological routes taken as escapes or sought as solutions, Eliot has undeniably written early ecopoetry. In his work, earth, water, fire, and air are persistent characters; dread, guilt, blindness, and death are tireless motifs; and the gods, the devils, the immortals, and the undead are ever-present mentors.

Conclusion

These and "other withered stumps of time" (*The Waste Land* 104) leave us with a question for Eliot: is there hope for repentance, or is this the hopeless end? Upon finishing *The Waste Land*, the readers find themselves obliged to wonder, "whether renewal, of psyche or land, is possible in a world where the fresh lilacs of spring bring only cruel memories" (Berry 4). An understanding of "The Love Song" and a slight glance over "The Hollow Men" do not anticipate much hope in favor of humans, and many critics agree

with the impossibility of the situation. Nevertheless, Eliot's conceptions are rather vague and remain open to interpretation; the ambiguity he chooses to conceal his meaning behind leaves the conclusion to the reader's imagination.

Gabrielle McIntire, for instance, declares that the passage from *The Waste Land* "(Come in under the shadow of this red rock)" (26) is followed by the lines "I will show you fear in a handful of dust" (30) only to offer temporary consolation proceeded by terror (185-186). In "The Hollow Men", it is explained that humans are beyond the reach of hopefulness, as the lines describe:

"There, is a tree swinging
And voices are
In the wind's singing
More distant and more solemn
Than a fading star." (24-28).

The hollow men have given up hope for restoration and have started awaiting the "Multifoliate rose / Of death" (64-65), which brings about the only glimpse of ending the terror. Their prayers receive the dreadful answer "For Thine is the Kingdom" (91) and "For Thine is / Life" (92-93): no escape is to be had from the Earth they destroyed; they are to bask in their ruins for eternity, much like the Sybil of Cumae in *The Waste Land's* epigraph. Eliot marks the end of the poem with the haunting promise that "This is the way the world ends / Not with a bang but a whimper" (97-98), but one dares to ask, what if the apocalypse he threatens us with is not the end?

Eliot's perception of religion guarantees an optimistic ending that—despite the gloom that hangs about his work—the poet actually expresses in some instances. If looked for thoroughly, hope can be found in *The Waste Land* in the notion that once humanity has been cleansed from its sins, there might be finer prospects for it. The line "Dry bones can harm no one" (391), though unappealing upon first reading, could have an optimistic interpretation if one considers that perhaps Eliot believes that after the sacrifice takes place, when man learns not to harm, a new dawn is certain and a more just ecosystem is expected. After all, Eliot stresses that the thunder is "Bringing rain" (395), the long awaited rain, and makes certain not to end his most sensational poem upon a gloom-ridden note. Instead, his closing line, "Shantih Shantih Shantih" (434), is left to reverberate in the reader's mind; the words translate from Sanskrit into "the peace which passeth all understanding" settling the debate and reassuring the reader that Eliot does, indeed, intend well for us.

It is just as well to say that Eliot's writing was prophetic because, as Lowell Duckert says, "the ways we narrate stories, and the stories themselves, can shape the earth(s) to come." (qtd. in Oppermann 2015, 316). Perhaps, then, Eliot's oracle of a fire which refines resonates in today's world; we did, undeniably, disturb the universe, but if we have suffered the earth's wrath in biblical proportions, in fires, in droughts, in floods, and in plagues, then it must be time that we forbade our sacrifice to be in vain. It must be time we heeded the forewarnings of the high priest of modernism.

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