

## The Moral Nature in T. S. Eliot's Poetry: "The Waste Land" as an Ethical Poem

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### الطبيعة الأخلاقية في شعر ت. س. إليوت: الأرض اليباب كقصيدة أخلاقية

#### مستخلص البحث

تتناول هذه الدراسة الطبيعة الأخلاقية في شعر الشاعر الأمريكي ت. س. إليوت واهتمامه في التركيز على الجانب الأخلاقي في كتابة الشعر، حيث تبدو واضحة وجديرة بالاهتمام والدراسة. وبسبب مهارته وقدرته العالية في استخدام الرمزية فقد انتقد الحياة الغربية والتي تعتمد على المادة، خاصة بعد الثورة الصناعية، ولهذا فقد اسهم إليوت بخبرته الواسعة في انتعاش الشعر الأمريكي في القرن العشرين. كما وتركز هذه الدراسة على مناقشة الطبيعة الأخلاقية كصدي شاعري استخدمه ت. س. إليوت في شعره كما في قصيدته "الأرض اليباب"، كواحد من الشعراء الأوربيين والأمريكيين البارزين الذين سبقوه. وكيف تأثر بهم من خلال استخدامهم الطبيعة الأخلاقية كمادة شعرية هادفة، مما زاد اهتمامه بهذا الأسلوب، حيث شجعه على الكتابة في ١٥ المجال، ونتيجة لتأثره بالفكر الفلسفي في القرن التاسع عشر قام بكتابة قصيدته الشهيرة "الأرض اليباب". كما وتهدف هذه الدراسة إلى توضيح تفاعل إليوت مع بيئته المتعلقة بالإنسان وطبيعته الأخلاقية، من خلال مهارته الشعرية

#### Abstract

This study deals with the American poet T. S. Eliot from point of view of his interest in the moral nature in poetry. The moral nature in T. S. Eliot's poetry is notable. Eliot's poetry demonstrated his use of symbolism, because of his wide experience in the use of his poetry to criticize material life and write about the moral nature in his poetry. American poetry was enlivened in the twentieth century by T. S. Eliot.

This paper will examine the moral nature in Eliot's poetry. Also it will discuss the poetic echoes of T. S. Eliot through a specific study of the poem "The Waste Land". In addition, it will explain how Eliot's brilliance in relation to the American and European poets who preceded him. These poets influenced Eliot through their poetry which spoke of the moral nature. This influence increased his interest in ethical poetry and encouraged him to write his poetry about the moral nature. Eliot was also influenced by the philosophical thinking of the nineteenth century. The aim of this study is to illustrate the interaction of Eliot with his environment relating to both humans and their moral nature, through his poem "The Waste Land"

**Key words:** moral nature, ethics, diversification and aesthetics

#### ١- Introduction

The study of ethics and morality has significance to illustrate the relationship between literary ages in poetry, and how the past period influenced recent poetry. This influence helped develop the literary production of recent authors. It influenced the modernist writers in the twentieth century, specially, in poetry. Before and after ١٩٠٠ the modernist poets made great changes in the focus of modern poetry. "Morals have been highly regarded as a weapon in literature, especially when scholars, critics, and authors wanted to express their own thoughts, ideologies and manners (Abu Darwish & Al-Widyan, ٢٠١٦, pp.٧-١٦)". One of the famous poets in this period who used his poetry as an expression moral nature is the Anglo-American poet T. S. Eliot (١٨٨٨-١٩٦٥). Eliot was a skillful poet and leader through his influence in modern poetry. He is the most important critic and poet of the twentieth century, because he was influential and a forerunner in experimentation. He was awarded the Nobel Prize in literature in ١٩٤٨. Eliot wrote many poems in nature, but, in fact, he was not a poet of physical nature or beauty, he was a poet of moral nature. According to Williamson

(١٩٦٧, p. ٢٨): "Eliot is a poet of moral nature, or the history of man, not of physical nature or beauty or merely subjective life".

In the ١٩٢٠s there was a revolt against the mores or customs and conventions of the nineteenth century. Eliot's revision and reappraisal of the literature of the romantic age helped in the development of modern English poetry. These changes happened because of the First World War and its impact on life, especially, on the modernist literary movements. Eliot was influenced by these conditions, and he was influential in his surroundings through his talent in poetry. In addition, Eliot wrote many works, which had great value for modern poetry, like, "*The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock*" and "*The Waste Land*". These literary works have been printed and read through the last ninety years. Furthermore, these poems represent the two movements of poetry, modernism and postmodernism, because they always have a renewable voice in poetry, although, they were written in the second decade of the twentieth century.

Eliot is regarded as a great figure in the poetical movement of modernism and postmodernism, because he wrote great works for over sixty years. Also, he was a contemporary of both the First and Second World Wars, which made him critical of violence in society. As a result of his skills in writing poetry, his poems were infused with humour as well as depth. In addition, Eliot was distinguished through his poems, which contained his purposeful ideas. This ability added to his reputation as considerable poet in English literature. He was skillful in his critical approach and he challenged romantic conceptions. According to Stewart and Bethurum (١٩٦٤, p. ٢٣٠):

Eliot challenged also the romantic conception of the poet as oracle or seer, and of poetry as a product of inspiration. He thought rather of the poet as a craftsman, expert in his craft and laboriously devoted to it. Great art, he believed, results only through "concentrating upon a task which is a task in the same sense as the making of an efficient engine or the turning of a jug or a table-leg.

The significance of Eliot in the contemporary poetry comes from his literary productions, which looked back to literary history, like Shakespeare, Chaucer and others. Also, Eliot used the modern poetic devices such as, symbolism, irony, fragmentation, allusion and metaphors. The psychological aspects and careful expressions appeared clearly in his poems. Merrill (١٩٧١, p. ٢٤), indicates that "Eliot has provided some notes which will be of more interest to the pedantic than the poetic critic". Eliot as an American poet was influenced by the landscape. But his imagery was not merely about the real world. Moreover, Eliot was influenced by the literature and imagination of Baudelaire. According to Galand (١٩٥٠, pp. ٢٧-٣٤) "Eliot did not only derive from Baudelaire certain lines, symbols or themes. His conception of poetry is also closely modelled on that of Baudelaire". Eliot lived in Britain and visited many European countries like France, Germany, Italy and others. So he acquired his experience from the literature of these countries and was influenced by their writers.

## ٢- Ethical poetry and morality

The matter of morality in poetry in sometimes comes as mysterious idea, it aims to criticise the negative position in society. In general, it is regarded as a literary type which resorts to subjectiveness and abstraction. Usually, it represents the poet's point of view through the use of poetical form or language meaning of poetry. According to Migliavacca (٢٠١١), pp. ٢٩٥-٣٠٤), "the morality of poetry lies first and foremost in its linguistic elaboration, since the poet is responsible for the quality of his people's language". The morality and ethical poetry are important as other imaginary and literary types, although many critics have defined them in different ways. Modern life affects the type and style of poetry through the use of the same facts in poetry. Modern poetry "arises from the fact that ethics have become buried in modern life (Ibid)". T. S. Eliot illustrated the moral nature in his poetry through his focus on and use of the facts of life in his poem "*The Waste Land*", when he criticized the modern life. "This prediction places the tone for "*The Waste Land*" as a poem that focuses piercingly on the deadness and utter sterility of modern civilization post World War I Europe, Eliot felt, was on the verge of total domination (Sauder, ١٩٩٧, p.١٩)". The morality in poetry has a high significance to criticize the negative position in real life, also to refer to the strong effect in the field of aesthetics.

## ٣- The Waste Land: Discussion and Analysis

The poem "*The Waste Land*" was one of the most famous poems for T. S. Eliot of several works, which participated in the development of his poetical reputation. This great poem is spirited with imaginative energy. Anyone who reads this poem feels excitement, because it contains an indication to the history in a glance to give meaning to the present. Also, it focuses on the moral nature which reflects T. S. Eliot's point of view toward real life. According to Abu Darwish & Al-Widyan (٢٠١٦, pp. ٧-١٦) "Eliot imagines the modern world as a wasteland, a land that has been mixed with ambiguity, aridness, and destruction". It is interesting to consider that this poem was written in five titles, which represent five parts. The critics dealt with it as a series, but they still called it "a poem". Although, it consists of many titles and parts, however, Eliot insisted that "*The Waste Land*" was intended to form a whole. This poem was not written in free verse or blank verse. Eliot used a unique style in writing it. The sense of fragmentation is not absent from the plot of poem. Furthermore, the poet referred to the world through the main title of the poem. The waste in the world was a result of war, which caused the disorder in the emotional sterility of western people. Eliot refuted that time, because he considered war against the moral nature. Therefore, the theme of the poem is the rescue of the waste land as a possibility of imaginative thinking and emotional feeling, but not certainty. It reflects the moral nature in Eliot's poetry.

From the beginning of "*The Waste Land*", the reader can notice some essentials in Eliot's writing of this poem, it is appropriate to the renewal of life and spring is one of happiness. Eliot refers to renewal of aspects of moral nature through the modern poetry. Moreover, the people of "*The*

*Waste Land*” are not happy when the spring is back again, because it is the cruelest season. This poem represents the reorientation of the psychological level and the sex level of the myth. This representation does not explain only the meaning of the whole, but also it indicates the reference to individual parts. According to Williamson (١٩٦٧, p. ١٢٥),

It is evident in the general attitude toward water, the life-giving element of the myth, and of course explains the use of water. When water appears as desirable, it is only in the recognition of a terrible need.

The poem of “*The Waste Land*” was written in different states of thinking by Eliot. Eliot's observations convey his belief in moral nature from line to line and section to section. Some lines were quoted from other historical events or legends. According to Abu Darwish & Al-Widyan (٢٠١٦, pp. ٧-١٦), “The poem is liberally sprinkled with secular and religious figures drawn from history, literature, the Bible, or the sacred Hindu scriptures”. Moreover, some references and allusions are not easily comprehensible, as in line ٢٢١. Although the difference and mystery lies in the first half of the poem, however, Eliot directs us to “Froude Elizabeth” in line ٢٧٩, to give an explicit situation in the Elizabethan age. In the last line, the poem goes to nothing. It has different voices of an unresolved conflict and infusing mythopoeic power. According to Migliavacca (٢٠١١, pp. ٢٩٥-٣٠٤), “the morality of poetry lies first and foremost in its linguistic elaboration, since the poet is responsible for the quality of his people’s language”. Therefore, the poet finished his poem by the repetition of the incomprehensible word “shantih shantih shantih”.

The poem “*The Waste Land*” has much tragedy through the classic pattern, which appeared by the Eliot’s style in this poem. Eliot used intellectual methods to write his poetry. He used a progressive style to put forth his ideas; for example, the progress is like the return, the way left like the way right and the way up like the way down. Eliot followed the style of Oedipus Rex and Death of a Salesman. According to Martin (١٩٦٨, p. ٣٩)

In *The Waste Land*, as in Oedipus Rex and Death of Salesman (to go from extreme to extreme) the protagonist is caught in a present that is the grip of the past, and the past keeps erupting into the present demanding acknowledgement and acceptance of an entity that is always now.

Eliot used the present language in his expressions as a modernist poet. Modernist poets tried to change or improve the history through the embodiment of the past in the present. In the first part of this poem, Eliot started with the present tense “*April is the cruelest month*”, then changed direct into the past tense “*winter kept us warm*”. He tries to insert the past in the present time. Eliot alludes to the episode in the past to give evidence to the present time. Furthermore, the current time is represented in London, which is an Unreal City, as he mentioned in lines ٦٠-٦٣:

“Unreal City  
Under the brown fog of a winter down,  
A crowd flowed over London Bridge, so many,  
I had not thought death had undone so many”.

(Eliot ١٩٥٤, p. ٤٢)

The crowds and the clock refer to London, which represents the new life and urbanization, especially, after the industrial revolution. Eliot tried to describe the change in society from the romance and moral culture into material culture. Eliot tries to explain how the moral nature declined after the development of the industry in Europe. Therefore, he refers to the workers who cross the London Bridge to the financial and business area.

### ٣- The Moral Nature of Eliot's poetry after the World Wars

The World Wars made a big change in the mind of poets. Eliot criticized the period after the First World War. This event changed many aspects of life. Certainly, poets are among the first who are influenced by these crises, because they represent the voice of humanity. Eliot by his skill could give new criticism through his poem "*The Waste Land*". In a sense, Eliot's speech was negative more than positive. "There is no distinction in "*The Waste Land*" between hell and contemporary life (Martin ١٩٦٨, p. ٢٨)". In addition, Eliot's poetry has a new technique, which is the juxtaposition in the setting of poem. The time gap among the events is to be zero, when the events are close with the others. For example,

"At the violet hour, when the eyes and back  
Turn upward from the desk, when the human engine waits  
Like a taxi throbbing waiting,  
I Tiresias, though blind, throbbing between two lives,  
Old man with wrinkled female breasts, can see  
At the violet hour, the evening hour that strives"

(Eliot ١٩٥٤, p. ٤٩)

The use of the women in this poem was to represent sex like Tiresias. "Sex and relationship are the common threads linking the different parts not just of 'A Game of Chess' but of the whole of *The Waste Land*" (Day ٢٠١٠, p. ٨٠). Also, the women represented the anarchy mentioned by Eliot like Madame Sosostri. Eliot dislikes the woman as a part of his life experience, because he suffered in his early life from some doubts about his wife. This attitude made him lose trust in women. Therefore, this attitude appeared clearly in his poem "*The Waste Land*". Eliot had different attitudes toward women, and he described them in many ways, such as, fear, attraction, hostility, fascination and disgust. Although he was a misogynist, he used the women very clearly in his poetry. These contrasts which appear in Eliot's poetry illustrate how Eliot investigates the moral nature in his poetry. According to Freer and Bell (٢٠١٦, p. ١٦), "The moral question of free choice and determinism is no longer contained in analytical thought-experiments, and a broader understanding of the nature of evil has prompted literary investigations too". Eliot has three types of women in his poem "*The Waste Land*". Each one represents a different style of moral nature which is criticized by Eliot. This diversification in the characters of the poem illustrates Eliot's ability to use the manner and expression sophisticated way. According to Martin (١٩٦٨, p. ٤١),

The shifting of the candles by Madame de Tornquist, the entrance of  
Doris from the bath, the successive actions of the typist and the

clerk, all reflect nothing individual in these person-no charming inconsistency, no personal diabolism-but are clearly ritual actions that they perform in order to fulfill their roles in a ritual drama.

In “*The Waste Land*” used a new technique in the structure of poetry. He surprised his contemporaries of poets and writers. This poem made a big change in modern poetry, because it contains a new configuration for the real life. Eliot uses the present from the first line then back to the past tense. He tries to present the past for doing a comparison between past time and current events. Also, this contrast between past and present in the poetry of Eliot indicates his rejection of real life. According to Pearce (١٩٦٧, p. ٧٤): “He drops from time to time into more fragmented utterance as if he is thinking to himself, while at other times he heightens his style to produce a more incantatory effect”, Furthermore, Eliot used the erotic tenses in the middle of the poem, like “*white bodies naked on the low damp ground/ bones cast in a little low dry garret*”. The poet used the seduction, which is represented by Tiresias. “The force of this allusion is therefore very complicated; on the one hand, Eliot seems to want to steal wholesale the terror of morality which Marvell evokes before defying it (Williams ١٩٧٣, p. ٥٩)”. In section v, Eliot goes ahead by present tenses from lines ٣٢٢- ٣٧٧. In one section of “*What the Thunder said*”, Eliot used sophisticated symbolism, when he referred to the voice of Thunder which is not by the contemporaries. Moreover, he used great mystery in his verse and it is difficult to understand by average readers. “Because of the peculiar allusive structure of his verse, it is difficult to draw a line between who is and who is not actually in his poems (Martin ١٩٦٨, p. ٤١)”. This poem has some rhetorical fragments like “*A Game of Chess*” by its sensual and romantic feeling. Also, “*Death by Water*” indicates the anthology of Greek. These fragments are concerned with the whole of the poem not with each part. In “*Death by Water*” Eliot loosed the control on the poem. He had trouble with rhythm, trouble with tone and sometimes he loosed the idiom. This section makes some confusion to simple readers, because they need to understand and recall Dante’s Ulysses or Tennyson’s works. In addition, Eliot’s poems make the reader live in all times past, present and future. It contains some incomprehensible words from the past, which indicate the present.

The poem includes the high characteristics of postmodernism. The readers can expect it as satiric poetry, because it has more criticism of real life, Also, it focuses on the negative aspects in the past and present. The voice of satire appeared in the poem through the talking about unreal cities, like London. According to Haque (٢٠١٦, pp. ٤-١١), “Eliot was very much concerned with the emptiness and nothingness of the modern life and in very convincing style he did portray this voidness successfully”. Moreover, Eliot made the readers draw the subject matter from themselves, because his poetry has a mystery specially “*The Waste Land*”. In addition, the exhortation was not absent from this poetry legend. Eliot was a preacher in this poem. In the part of “*The Fire Sermon*” he used many symbols, which indicate the using of literary allusions. He used the Elizabethan love to glance to the real love, comparison with sterile love in recent time. Therefore, Eliot tried to focus on the moral nature of people relationships.

Eliot used contrast in “*The Waste Land*”. This contrast appeared in the titles of sections or in the lines of poem. Death is developed by the attractive theme in fear of men from reality. April is the cruelest month, despite the fact that it is the month of rebirth. This section introduces the theme of death through the protagonist who speculates in the gliding conversation then back into speculation again, as in line ١٩. “*What are the roots that clutch, what branches grow out of this stony rubbish?*” The protagonist answers himself, when he refers to being unable to know or guess, because that is only a heap of broken images. Furthermore, there is some contrast in the section of “*A Game of Chess*” like the contrast between the two kinds of life, or the two kinds of death. Also, the contrast between the rich life and poor life, in lines ٨٤-٨٦:

“The glitter of her jewels rose to meet it,  
From satin cases poured in rich profusion;  
In vials of ivory and coloured glass”

(Eliot ١٩٥٤, p. ٤٤)

There is a big contrast between the sections of “*The Fire Sermon*” and “*Death by Water*”. This is very clear in the symbolism of fire and that of water. These symbols are different in their kind, but they are used by Eliot to express that water causes death, and the preachment is created by the fire. In the last section “*What the Thunder Said*” “The “Thunder” is the voice of God in His fearful aspect (Southam ١٩٩٤, p. ١٨٥)”. Eliot used contrast in the time of speech. He refers to life in the full sense. The lack of water in the past caused the sterility of the waste land. However, the thunder is still a longer sterility. The thunder will bring rain and speech, but who can understand what the thunder said? Eliot indicates that God has returned and arisen. Also, the mountain, which is mentioned in the second stanza, it is not left in solitude in spite of thunder is used as symbolic meaning. The water is under the rocks. As Eliot mentioned in lines ٣٤٦-٣٥٢:

“If there were water  
And no rock  
And also water  
And water  
A spring  
A pool among the rocks”

(Eliot ١٩٥٤, p. ٥٤)

Eliot criticizes the new life, when he mentioned the rocks and the water. The water under the rocks of mountain, it is like the moral nature behind the behaviours of people. Therefore, Eliot uses the meaning of the poem to indicate the ethics in society from the critic’s point of view.

The effect of “*The Waste Land*” in English literature is not less than the “*Canterbury Tales*” by Geoffrey Chaucer who was the father of English literature. More than five centuries separate Eliot from Chaucer, however, they are brought together in the same characteristics of their work. Many similarities may be found between these great works, like fragmentation, comprehensive structure, inspiration and both challenge the critics’ attempts to improve on them at the end. According to Wollman (١٩٥٩, p. ٦٢), “Using fragments of the great poetry of the past to contrast the specious days of old with the degradation, decadence, sterility, and lack of a sense of direction of his own days”.

These works have the same characteristics of structure. Moreover, they link between April and pilgrimage. “*The Waste Land*” is a modern pilgrimage, and Eliot mentioned the idea of spring beginnings to prophesy a spiritual journey. “Eliot in his inversion of the Chaucerian prologue, invokes the sterility of modern existence, and his dismal tone is underscored through the illusive contrast to Chaucer’s tribute to spring renaissance (Kim ٢٠٠٧, p. ٢٩١)”. Both works are similar in their narrative. The characters of the poem represent the period of its poet. Therefore, these great works abbreviated the five centuries between their writers.

## Conclusion

Morality in poetry has a high significance to criticize the negative position in real life, also to refer to the strong idea in the field of aesthetics. When reading the poem of “*The waste Land*” for T. S. Eliot, the readers have a journey with pessimism. This poem indicates our lives for the time being. Eliot depicts modern life as a wasteland, which has been mixed with aridness, destruction, and ambiguity. This land represents an indication to pureness whether of land or people. Eliot tries to criticize the new life through his poem “*The waste Land*”. This poem is regarded a masterpiece in modern poetry, because it has a great diversity of characters, form and literary meaning. T. S. Eliot criticized the problems of society through the use of moral philosophy with religion to make the balance between happiness of people and well-being of others. Moral nature is very clear in Eliot’s poetry, because he is always against the destruction of nature whether of people or of land. Therefore, T. S. Eliot was not a poet of physical nature or beauty, he was a poet of moral nature. moreover, He tries to insert the past in the present time.

There are many interferences in “*The Waste Land*”, it was written by Eliot to indicate the ambiguity in new societies. He used a progressive style to put forth his ideas like contrastive ideas. Ethical poetry and morality are very clear in Eliot’s poetry, especially, in “*The Waste Land*”. Eliot used his skill in poetry writing and he improved his ability to focus on what he wanted. So, Eliot tried to focus on the moral nature of people relationships through his poetry and express his refusal of the position of bad things in life. Eliot appears through his poetry as a preacher who invites a return to moral culture in society.

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