T. S. Eliot's *The Waste Land*: Frightening Visions of the Destiny of Mankind

Selma CHOUCHANE *
Sétif 2 University | Algeria
s.chouchane@univ-setif2.dz

Date of submission: 12-01-2024 **Date of acceptance: 15-04-2024**

Abstract

T. S. Eliot's *The Waste Land* (1922) presents a bleak and apocalyptic vision of the post-WW1 world, which witnesses social, moral, and even religious decay and, thus, symbolically becomes a waste and sterile land. This paper examines Eliot's visions of the destiny of mankind through Stephen Cook's conception of apocalyptic prophecy and Edouard Glissant's conception of chaos to demonstrate that the world is still in a state of continuous collapse. The COVID-19 pandemic, for instance, perfectly captures the dystopian future that Eliot foreshadowed a century ago.

Keywords: The Waste Land, apocalypse, vision, chaos, COVID-19.

Introduction

The early twentieth century changed people's lifestyles dramatically in both Europe and America. A new modern life emerged as a response to technological advancement, the industrial revolution, and immigration. The traditional rural, communal, and conservative life dissolved into a more individualistic and liberal city life. Additionally, WWI had a great effect on both people and society. T. S. Eliot's *The Waste Land* (1922) is widely considered a masterpiece of modernist literature, offering a bleak and apocalyptic vision of the postwar world. Eliot locates modern man's lost self between the liminal spaces of the utopian past and the dystopian future. He highlights modern man's inability to preserve his moral values, construct permanent relationships, or have healthy sexuality. He even gives up his spirituality and runs after materialistic interests. The multifaceted chaos and decay of the modern world make Eliot refer to it as, symbolically, a waste and sterile land. The changes brought about by the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic

* **- Corresponding author**.

prompt us to revisit Eliot's apocalyptic vision in an effort to understand, "WHERE ARE WE NOW, 100 years later, with *The Waste Land*?"[1]

Many studies have discussed Eliot's prophetic visions in *The Waste Land*. For instance, Cornelia Cook (1996) noted that Eliot's oeuvre is characterized by a desire for a hidden apocalypse. However, "[t]he suggestion of an apocalyptic vision is planted, only to be withheld, or allowed to wither in a desert of unknowing".[2] Unlike Cook, who believes in the painful absence of vision and prophetic revelation in the poem, Haider Jabr Mihsin (2020) discussed the apocalyptic theme in Eliot's poem by focusing on the sterile and chaotic vision of both society and individuals' lives as a result of the spiritual exhaustion that has overwhelmed the modern world. Jaimee Poole (2020) focuses on the image of living death, evinced through both the impotence of the poem's prophetic voices and the fragmentation of the self. Although the above-mentioned studies provided an interesting analysis of Eliot's visions, they did not project these chaotic and/or impotent visions onto the contemporary world. This projection is well established by James Parker (2022), who sees that *The Waste Land* prophesied and inaugurated a modern type of crack-up. Although Parker did not deeply examine the different prophetic voices of the poem, his juxtaposition of the poet's cataclysmic description of the postwar world with the contemporary world enables him to deduce that we are still living in the same fragmentation, suffering, and decay.

This paper makes use of Stephen Cook's conception of apocalyptic prophecy and Edouard Glissant's conception of chaos to analyze the poem's different prophecies and juxtapose the modern and contemporary worlds to demonstrate that Eliot's visions are not exclusively about the modern world but represent futuristic, frightening, and accurate visions

[1]James Parker, (2022), T. S. Eliot Saw All This Coming, *The Atlantic*, para. 41, https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2023/01/ts-eliot-the-waste-land-poem-anniversary/672231/, date of consultation: 1/6/2023.

[2]Cornelia Cook, (1996), "The Hidden Apocalypse: T. S. Eliot's Early Work", *Literature and Theology*, vol. 10, no. 1, p. 73, https://www.jstor.org/stable/23924895, date of consultation: 15/6/2023.

of the destiny of mankind. Both S. Cook and Glissant provide a valuable framework for interpreting the poem's apocalyptic and uncertain portrayal of the future. S. Cook offers insights into various apocalyptic themes, including the revelation of hidden truths, the rejection of the current state of the world, the symbolic potency of mythic imagery, and the anticipation of cosmic upheaval and divine intervention, which not only facilitate an understanding of Eliot's poem as a critique of the modern world but also as an anticipation of the distant future. Glissant's concept of chaos, rooted in unpredictability, suggests that the fear of unpredictability emerges from the human desire to shape the future and impose order, which the poem portrays as futile attempts, often leading to disillusionment and failure. The study is significant in the way that it seeks to understand the continuous collapse of both the individual and society, which makes our lives more hostile and chaotic. This retrogression is remarkably evident in our response to unpredictable disasters such as the COVID-19 pandemic.

1. *The Waste Land*: A Painting of the End of the World

Apocalyptic literature is a genre of writing that typically deals with the end of the world. It tackles a cataclysmic event, such as a climatic disaster, pandemic, nuclear war, or any other kind of upheaval. This genre of literature focuses, prophetically or symbolically, on the time right after the catastrophe to depict in detail its impacts on the world order and the psychology of the survivors. It often explores themes of destruction, chaos, divine judgment, human suffering, and the ultimate triumph of good over evil. According to John J. Collins, apocalypticism as a literary genre bespoke a "worldview", which is a distinctive set of assumptions about the way the world works and the destiny of human beings within it. In other words, it is concerned with the way history was conceived, the role of superhuman agents in human affairs, and expectations relating to the end of history and a life beyond this one.[3]

[3]John J. Collins, (2020), "Apocalypticism as a Worldview in Ancient Judaism and Christianity", *The Cambridge Companion to Apocalyptic Literature*, edited by Colin McAllister, Cambridge University Press, p. 20.

The tragic decline that features apocalyptic literature often confuses it with dystopia.

The Waste Land paints an apocalyptic image of the world through different themes and imagery. According to S. Cook, "[a] rising apocalyptic imagination bore the germs of a fundamental refusal to tolerate this world's ugliness, sterility, and strife".[4] Eliot describes the postwar era as a barren, desert-like world that has lost its fertility and ability to bring forth life. It is a land without water or even the sound of water—only dust and stones that toll like bells. Eliot gives us horrific images, such as hordes of grasshoppers that eat and destroy everything, bats with baby faces, and "[t]he rattle of the bones, and chuckle [that] spread from ear to ear".[5] According to Wit Pietrzak, Section three, "The Fire Sermon", is perhaps the most terrifying section of the poem. It opens with "a vision of dead vegetation and a world after apocalypse which has been deserted by all life. There is no life but rats and corpses are moored at the bank of the Thames".[6] The clean water of the Thames River, as well as Lac Léman and the canal, becomes polluted with empty bottles, sandwich papers, silk handkerchiefs, cardboard boxes, and cigarette ends.

In section five, "What the Thunder Said", Eliot explicitly makes use of an apocalyptic motif. All the creatures are gathered, waiting for the thunder to speak, which metaphorically refers to the voice of God. When the thunder speaks, it is dry, sterile, and without rain, which confirms the end, not the coming forth of life. This image symbolically depicts the eschatological judgment, which, according to Collins, is one of the essential parts of the apocalypse.[7] Eliot increases the dystopic tone with "[t]he shouting and the crying".[8] He describes towers in Jerusalem,

[4]Stephen L. Cook, (2014), "Apocalyptic Prophecy", *The Oxford Handbook of Apocalyptic Literature*, edited by John J. Collins, Oxford University Press, p. 30.
[5]T. S. Eliot, (2000), *The Waste Land*, The Pennsylvania State University, 186.
[6]Wit Pietrzak, (2011), *Myth, Language and Tradition: A Study of Yeats, Stevens and Eliot in the Context of Heidegger's Search for Being*, Cambridge Scholars Publishing, p. 263.
[7]John J. Collins, (2014), "What Is Apocalyptic Literature?", *The Oxford Handbook of Apocalyptic Literature*, edited by John J. Collins, Oxford University Press, p. 7.
[8]T. S. Eliot, (2000), 325.

Athens, Alexandria, Vienna, and London falling. The vision of the towers evokes the fall of civilization and "a complete closure of the landscape".[9]

One of the key apocalyptic themes in *The Waste Land* is the collapse of traditional values and the breakdown of social order. Society is fragmented and in chaos. The poet exhibits the emptiness and horror of such a psychologically and morally dry life by focusing on people's failing attempts to find meaning and purpose in a postwar world. In "A Game of Chess", Eliot describes a powerful, wealthy woman living in luxury like Cleopatra but who fails to give meaning to her purposeless life. She asks her husband: "What shall we do to-morrow? / What shall we ever do?"[10] The woman expresses her eternal fear. She falls, with her husband, into the nothingness. She claims: "Nothing again nothing. / 'Do / 'You know nothing? Do you see nothing? Do you remember / 'Nothing?'"[11] The poet also insists that there is no rest from suffering: "Here one can neither stand nor lie nor sit".[12]

Eliot also emphasizes people's spiritual emptiness by shedding light on the empty chapel, which becomes the wind's home. The chapel, which once provided comfort and meaning to society, has been reduced to a mere shelter for the wind. Eliot is extremely dissatisfied with the way war and modernity have eroded and devastated traditional religious and cultural institutions, leaving people lost in a godless world. It is evident that "the Apocalypse does not offer a timetable about the end of the world but a template by which one can assess the theological character of the world in which one lives".[13] The modern man's lost spirituality and faith are seen in his inability to recognize the presence of Christ. For instance, Eliot describes two disciples walking together when one asks the other, "Who is the third who walks always beside you?"[14]

[9]Wit Pietrzak, (2011), p. 268.
[10]T. S. Eliot, (2000), 133-4.
[11]Ibid, 119-123.
[12]Ibid, 340.
[13]Christopher Rowland, (2014), "Apocalypticism and Radicalism", *The Oxford Handbook of Apocalyptic Literature*, edited by John J. Collins, Oxford University Press, p. 418.
[14]T. S. Eliot, (2000), 359.

In the previous verse, Eliot does not evoke the resurrection of Christ, who is perceived as the savior at the end of time, but rather his half-coming since the modern man is stuck in a living-death situation.

To support his depiction of the universal collapse and the end of time, Eliot alludes to different literary, cultural, and religious works. For example, the title of section one, "The Burial of the Dead", has been borrowed from the book of sacred prayers in England churches to convey the main theme of the poem, which is death and life after death. The book explains that only those who believe in Christ will resurrect after death and will not be delivered into the bitter pain of eternal death.[15] The poem refers to the Book of Revelation, the final book of the New Testament, which provides many prophetic revelations on the end of the world. It also refers to Dante Alighieri's three-part epic poem *The Divine Comedy*, mainly parts one and two: "Inferno" (Hell) and "Purgatorio" (Purgatory), to describe, on the one hand, the hellish existence of the modern man who has lost his spirituality and does not live righteously, and, on the other hand, the need to purify the sins, metaphorically through a purgatorial death. According to Collins,

> A catastrophic imagination alone is not genuinely apocalyptic. […] To be sure, the hope of salvation in another world, whether conceived as a new creation in the future or as a heavenly world of eternal life, is not without its problems, as it lends itself to displacement of human endeavor. But at the least we should give it credit for its indomitable hope, which is not always supported by rational analysis of human affairs, but may well be indispensable to human flourishing.[16]

Along with the apocalyptic depiction of the world, Eliot continuously insists that there is hope for redemption through rebirth. Although this hope is far from being achieved, it is still a substantial component of Eliot's apocalyptic landscape. Collins classifies such works that provide

[15]"At the Burial of the Dead". (n. d.). *The Church of England*, https://www.churchofengland.org/prayer-and-worship/worship-texts-and-resources/book-common-prayer/burial-dead, date of consultation: 10/6/2023.
[16]John J. Collins, (2020), p. 35.

chaotic descriptions of the world along with a glimmer of hope as classical apocalypticism, to which, according to him, *The Waste Land* belongs.[17]

2. Visions of Human Existence

Apocalyptic literature is not exclusively related to the end of civilization or the world but also includes futuristic expectations that are perceived in the form of pessimistic visions and frightening prophecies of the destiny of mankind. According to Mihsin, apocalyptic literature "comprises of the quasi-prophetic and prophetic writings that are inclined to exhibit the world's pessimistic visions as well as melancholy and frightening prophecies of the destiny of mankind".[18] These visions and prophecies intervene in the normal course of a personal or communal experience to interpret it and foresee its outcomes. The apocalyptic visionary has access to the supernatural world. He/she "plunges into the sea of mystery, observes how things look from the perspective of transcendence, and is shaken to discover a coming impact of transcendence on history".[19] In *The Waste Land*, Eliot makes use of two visionaries, Madame Sosostris and Tiresias, to reveal the future. The two seers are borrowed from other literary texts and used to serve the poem's prophetic content.

2.1. The Fragmented Visions of Madame Sosostris

Eliot borrowed Madame Sosostris from Aldous Huxley's novel *Crome Yellow* (1921), in which a male character named Mr. Scogan disguised himself as an old female fortune teller and took the name of Madame Sosostris. The latter appears in "The Burial of the Dead" section as the famous clairvoyante. She is described as a mysterious figure who reveals the truth of the contemporary world with her tarot cards, and her revelation is successful in the sense that she describes the whole

[17]Ibid, p. 34-5.
[18]Haider Jabr Mihsin, (2020), "The Apocalyptic Image of the World in T. S. Eliot's The Waste Land", *International Journal of Innovation, Creativity and Change*, vol. 14, no. 7, p. 1290.
[19]Stephen L. Cook, (2014), p. 22.

substance of the text. In other words, her divination is both powerful and accurate. Eliot claims that she "[i]s known to be the wisest woman in Europe".[20] Madame Sosostris's tarot cards seem like a modern form of vision and prophecy since people have lost faith and no longer rely on religion to understand themselves and the world. The tarot cards displayed by the fortuneteller exemplify futuristic revelations that Eliot has collected and explained in the course of the poem.

The first card that Madame Sosotris talked about was that of the drowned Phoenician sailor. She tells the client as well as the reader, "(Those are pearls that were his eyes. Look!)".[21] Although the Phoenician sailor is dead, his eyes, which are becoming pearls, suggest that there is no complete death. The non-decomposition of his body connotes the poem's depiction of death as a hopeless desire. According to Harold Bloom,

> The brief fourth section, "Death by Water," the section that Ezra Pound said was essential when he was editing *The Waste Land*, is a *memento mori*. It is a reminder of death and the fulfillment of Madame Sosostris' warning at the end of the first section when she connected the drowned Phoenician sailor with the poet—"Here, said she/ Is your card"—and with Ferdinand in *The Tempest*, by the allusion to "Those are pearls that were his eyes." Now the Phoenician sailor is dead, and Eliot uses his death to remind us of death".[22]

In section four, "Death by Water", Eliot explains Madame Sosostris' vision of the drowned Phoenician sailor. He describes Phlebas' dead body floating in the sea, raising and falling with the current, to show that death is both inevitable and unpredictable. He states: "O you who turn the wheel and look to windward, / Consider Phlebas, who was once handsome and tall as you".[23] Eliot uses Phlebas' death scene to send an

[20]T. S. Eliot, (2000), 45.
[21]T. S. Eliot, (2000), 48.
[22]Harold Bloom, (2007), "Summary and Analysis." *T.S. Eliot's The Waste Land*, edited by Harold Bloom, Infobase Publishing, p. 46.
[23]T. S. Eliot, (2000), 320-1.

important message to all mankind, Gentile and Jew, to remember their purpose in life before dying like Phlebas and losing control over their own bodies.

Madame Sosostris also shows a card of undead crowds of people. She says: "I see crowds of people, walking round in a ring".[24] Eliot later gives more details about it. He describes London as hell and the crowds as not physically dead but spiritually dead. They flowed over the London Bridge, each fixing his eyes before his feet. They are in a state of death in life because they live without a meaningful existence. The ring or wheel is a recurring motif in the poem, which refers to the mechanical and repetitive nature of not only modern life but also contemporary life, as Parker notes: "Here we all are, us, in a herd, on the wheel".[25] By the end of the poem, Eliot comes back to London Bridge with the nursery rhyme, "London Bridge is falling down falling down falling down".[26] This apocalyptic destruction is reinforced by the next line from Dante's *Purgatory*, "Then he dived back into the fire that refines them".[27] In this regard, the "[p]urgation of sin through a refiner's fire is a precondition for emerging from the condition of death-in-life that Eliot has been describing. It becomes clear, too, that the condition of death-in-life is the state of sin".[28]

Living death is one of the most important themes of the poem. It is not coincidental that the epigraph is about Sibyl Cumae, who is stuck in eternal distress. Eliot writes: "[I saw with my own eyes the Sibyl at Cumae hanging in a cage, and when the boys said to her: 'Sibyl, what do you want?' she answered: 'I want to die']".[29] Sibyl Cumae was a famous figure in ancient mythology, featured in the works of several ancient authors like Homer, Virgil, and Ovid. She was known for her wisdom,

[24]Ibid, 56.
[25]James Parker, (2022), para. 17.
[26]T. S. Eliot, (2000), 426.
[27]Ibid, 427. This is Bloom's translation. See Bloom, (2007), "Summary and Analysis", p. 51.
[28]Harold Bloom, (2007), "Summary and Analysis", p. 51.
[29]T. S. Eliot, (1971), *The Waste Land: A Facsimile and Transcript of the Original Drafts including the Annotations of Ezra Pound*, edited by Valerie Eliot, Faber and Faber, p. 126.

knowledge, and ability to communicate with the gods. She was said to have lived in a cave near the city of Cumae, located in southern Italy. Sibyl asked Apollo for a long, eternal life but forgot to ask for eternal youth. She grew old, and her body became smaller with age; only her voice was left. Her suffering makes her want to die. Eliot uses this mythological prophetess to anticipate the terrifying mood of the in-between state of living death prevalent in the poem.

The complexities of living death give a new meaning to death as being associated with both fear and desire. Eliot refers to the fear of death, more specifically the fear of eternal death, when he claims: "I will show you fear in a handful of dust".[30] At the same time, death is the only way through which people may purify their sins and reach salvation. Although Eliot gives hope of redemption, it is important to note that Madame Sosostris did not find the card of the hanged man, which refers to Christ. In section five, Eliot insists again that rebirth is elusive with the death of the savior and the living death of the wastelanders. He argues: "He who was living is now dead / We who were living are now dying / With a little patience".[31]

Madame Sosostris tackles the issue of sexuality when she displays the card of the Belladonna, which means the beautiful woman in Italian. The Belladonna refers to both the Virgin Mary and the prostituted woman. Eliot uses this paradoxical image as an archetype of the modern woman who has lost her chastity and falls into unhealthy sexual relationships. Another card exposed by Madame Sosostris is that of the man with three staves, which later Eliot connects with the Arthurian legendary figure, the Fisher King. This figure is the impotent ruler and the prevailing spirit of *The Waste Land*.[32]

The Fisher King ruled over a prosperous kingdom and was tasked with guarding the Holy Grail, which would later help him save his kingdom. Many versions of the story recount that the Fisher King has

[30]T. S. Eliot, (2000), 30.
[31]Ibid, 328-30.
[32]Harold Bloom, (2007), "List of Characters", *T.S. Eliot's The Waste Land*, edited by Harold Bloom, Infobase Publishing, p. 23.

been punished by God due to women's assaults in his court. He suffered great pain due to a wound on his leg, and his kingdom was stricken with drought. The Fisher King embodies "the traditional practices of fertility cults at a time when sex was a central part of religious practices".[33] However, with his injury, he lost his fertility. It is important to note that "mythic symbolism is of no mere antiquarian interest. It is of pressing relevance, because […] the images provide openings into the transhistorical world. They have a transcendental quality that extends humans beyond themselves".[34] Eliot metaphorically alludes to the Fisher King myth and the Belladonna to reflect the infertility and meaningless sexuality of both the modern man and woman.

Although Madame Sosostris is the most expressive prophetic voice in the poem, she is forbidden to see everything; "[h]er vision is fragmentary".[35] Her position as the wisest woman in Europe does not negate her limited skills, which are seen in her skepticism and her inability to trust anyone. She tells the client: "Thank you. If you see dear Mrs. Equitone, / Tell her I bring the horoscope myself: / One must be so careful these days".[36] Madame Sosostris' words suggest that the modern world is dangerous, and although she is a famous clairvoyante, she cannot predict any danger or ensure her safety. This inability to conceptualize a full vision of the future may suggest that this vision surpasses the time span of the modern world and is frightening to the point that Madame Sosostris' conscious mind could not bear it, as Glissant argues: "the chaos-world exists because unpredictability exists".[37]

2.2. The Non-Interpreted Visions of Tiresias

[33]Jaimee Poole, (2020), Dying with a Little Patience: A Reading of *The Waste Land* in Juxtaposition with Theology. Thesis, Auckland University of Technology, p. 49, https://hdl.handle.net/10292/13616, date of consultation: 20/6/2023.
[34]Stephen L. Cook, (2014), p. 22.
[35]Jaimee Poole, (2020), p. 35.
[36]T. S. Eliot, (2000), 57-9.
[37]Edouard Glissant, (2020), *Introduction to a Poetics of Diversity*, translated by Celia Britton, Liverpool University Press, p. 21.

Tiresias was a legendary character from Ovid's *The Metamorphoses*, known for his wisdom and prophetic abilities. He was a man by birth but was transformed into a blind woman as punishment for interrupting the sexual encounter of two snakes. He was able to see into the future and predict events with great accuracy. He is often associated with the themes of gender and sexuality, as he was both a man and a woman. Eliot uses Tiresias as both a narrator and a seer to give us a neutral and unique perspective on love and sexuality. He claims in his notes that Tiresias, while "a mere spectator and not indeed a 'character,' is yet the most important personage in the poem, uniting all the rest".[38]

Tiresias gives us three examples of illicit love affairs: the typist and the clerk, Elizabeth Ⅰ, and a woman having sexual intercourse with an unknown man or men. The typist invites the clerk to her house. After the meal, she is tired and cannot interact with his caresses. Yet he forces her, and she does not resist. Eliot shows how sexual activities are no longer connected to feelings or pleasure. It is significant to note that the typist is happy when the sexual intercourse is over, though she does not feel any regret. In an attempt to escape from this joyless encounter, she looks at herself in the mirror and listens to music on the gramophone. Elizabeth Ⅰ is known to be the virgin queen, who was restricted from marrying to protect England's foreign policy. Although the queen is not involved in illicit love affairs, Tiresias insists that there is no harmony between her and healthy sexuality. He also reveals the way sexuality has lost its integral meaning and traditional function and has been reduced to a mere joyless activity among anonymous people. He highlights the meaningless sexual practices that are void of any feelings or satisfaction and, despite that, fulfilled without regret, and relates them to his own suffering. He claims: "I Tiresias have foresuffered all".[39] The sexual suffering that Tiresias unifies enhances the living death theme already established in the poem.

According to Poole, Tiresias offers no revelation in spite of the fact that he has seen everything.[40] Poole goes further and explains that

[38]qtd in. Jaimee Poole, (2020), p. 35.
[39]T. S. Eliot, (2000), 243.
[40]Jaimee Poole, (2020), p. 35.

"Tiresias is a symbol of prophetic impotence who sees but does not communicate in the way that Madame Sosostris does".[41] However, Tiresias implicitly communicates his visions. He only does not interpret them in the way Madame Sosostris does when she links her visions with fear, death, sterility, and hell. According to Parker, regarding the difficulty of sexuality, "Tiresias has the answers for us—or some of them. […] Tiresias will be our guide. With Tiresias, who knows both sides of love, we will lurk, we will peep".[42] Tiresias implicitly discloses his prophecy about the brokenness of sexuality in the modern world and its continuity to contemporary times through his unpredictability. Glissant argues that "[i]t can be frightening to give up on the ability to 'change the world'. Because to change the world means this, it means giving the world a future, that is, predicting. And giving that up is perhaps frightening for our sensibility".[43] Tiresias' inability or unwillingness to interpret his visions suggests that these visions are frightening and repetitive to the extent that he is unable to find a substantive way to interpret and/or explicitly communicate them. In this regard, "Tiresias's vision amounts to an endless repetition of past sufferings".[44]

Eliot uses the two prophetic figures, Madame Sosostris and Tiresias, to communicate his ambiguous and frightening visions of the destiny of mankind. Apocalyptic visionaries believe that "[t]he sovereign finality of absolute reality will imminently prove incontestable".[45] Eliot's mythical technique "provides a pattern, a way of controlling and ordering and giving shape to what is shapeless and chaotic. It provides a norm for measuring the extent of degeneracy [and] shows that the present spiritual predicament is an ever-recurring phenomenon and so a universal significance is imparted to it".[46]

[41]Ibid, p. 37.
[42]James Parker, (2022), para. 26-27.
[43]Edouard Glissant, (2020), p. 67.
[44]Cornelia Cook, (1996), p. 74.
[45]Stephen L. Cook, (2014), p. 23.
[46]Dilip Barad, (n. d), *The Waste Land by T.S. Eliot*, PowerPoint Presentation, 18, The Wasteland | PDF | T. S. Eliot | Poetry (scribd.com), date of consultation: 2/7/2023.

3. *The Waste Land* and the COVID-19 Pandemic: One Century of Continuous Collapse

It is possible to read Eliot's futuristic visions in *The Waste Land* as a living reality of contemporary times, mainly during the COVID-19 pandemic, since "visions concern a far-flung future, not an imminent shaking of earth and heaven".[47] Eliot foreshadows a dystopian future in his prevailing pessimism regarding the barren modern world. He first states that the waste land needs water to be reborn. Later, he reduced his hope to only the sound of water. Finally, he wrecks this hope when he desperately concludes that there is no water, which means that rebirth is elusive, if not impossible. Although Eliot presents a kind of hope in the last section of the poem with the thunder's three Sanskrit words that encompass important advice to guide the modern man in this waste land: Datta (give), Dayadhvam (sympathize), and Damyata (control), and the three last words of the poem, "Shantih, Shantih, Shantih", which mean piece, still the only way to reach rebirth, which metaphorically refers to the reestablishment of social order, is conditioned by people's regaining spiritual enlightenment. Thus, "the final images that swirl through the last lines of the poem suggest destruction prior to reconstitution".[48] Despite Eliot's efforts to find meaning or redemption, he obviously predicts the persistence of suffering, as Harriet Davidson argues: "This final section returns to a barren waste, an inhuman landscape where repetition suggests a pointless circularity".[49]

Many parallels can be noted between the poem's visions and the pandemic. Both catastrophes have affected the whole world. In *The Waste Land*, Eliot does not only describe Europe or Western civilization as a waste land but also the world of both "Gentile [and] Jew".[50] He uses a collage of stories with a polyvocal narration and combines verses in different languages, including English, German, French, Italian, Latin, Greek, and even Sanskrit. He also refers to different religions and religious figures, such as Saint Augustine and Buddha, to point out the

[47]Stephen L. Cook, (2014), p. 23.
[48]Harold Bloom, (2007), "Summary and Analysis", p. 51.
[49]qtd in. Wit Pietrzak, (2011), p. 266.
[50]T. S. Eliot, (2000), 319.

disruption of traditional religious values in the modern world. According to Amariit Singh Datta,

> Eliot feels that old religious values and faith in God had died down. Science has given infinite power for destruction without moral and spiritual equipments. The result is a spiritual chaos in the modern Wasteland inhabited by "Hollowmen" who have not even the power for prayer. This spiritual impotence and mental decay has made Eliot disillusioned about the present day world.[51]

The contemporary world is also characterized by the same spiritual impotence. It is only when the pandemic shook people's consciousness about divine power that they remembered, in Eliot's words, "the hand expert", who is in control of everything. A noteworthy instance occurred when a mosque in Berlin held a call for prayer simultaneously with bell-ringing at a nearby church,[52] symbolizing a collective return to spirituality and repentance as a means of coping with the crisis.

Both the waste land catastrophe and the COVID-19 pandemic can be seen as divine punishment because people are more and more giving up their faith in God; "[s]uch devastation is a punishment for forgetfulness, infidelity, or abominations".[53] In contrast, Daniel Ighakpe thinks that

> The Bible does not support the claim that God is using pandemics and other sicknesses to punish people today. Although the Bible reports a few occasions when God used sickness to punish people (for example, He caused some individuals to have leprosy), these isolated incidents, however, were not indiscriminate pandemics

[51]Amariit Singh Datta, (2003), "Eliot and Modern Sensibility", *A Critical Study of T.S Eliot: Eliot at 100 Years*, edited by D. K. Rampal, Atlantic, p. 40.

[52] "This Video Shows a Berlin Mosque Broadcasting a Call to Prayer During the COVID-19 Pandemic", (2020), *Fact Check*, para. 11, This video shows a Berlin mosque broadcasting a call to prayer during the COVID-19 pandemic | Fact Check (afp.com), date of consultation: 23/7/2023.

[53]Cornelia Cook, (1996), p. 70.

> that spread to innocent people. Rather, such events were specific judgments on individuals who had clearly rebelled against God.[54]

To refute the relationship of the pandemic with divine retribution is illusory, mainly in a world full of all types of sin and sinners. Noel O'Sullivan claims that there are two street statements he heard in March 2020 from people who firmly believed what they were saying: "[t]he first saw COVID-19 as a punishment from God for a world that had betrayed him; the second was convinced of its satanic provenance. […] The first presents an image of a vengeful God while the second understands the world as susceptible to the unfettered activity of the devil".[55] It is obvious in both cases that the world is witnessing religious chaos, where people are closer to the devil than to God.

The massive deaths during the pandemic urge people to think about their sins and redemption. For instance, Pastor Joseph Ndayizeye at Rugombo Pentecostal Church in Burundi leads a prayer after the death of President Pierre Nkurunziza, addressing the ongoing pandemic as God's approach to corporate sin and repentance. He claims: "It is not normal for the virus to invade the country and even kill the president. […] God punished us with the coronavirus pandemic because of our sins. Let us repent our sins and ask God for forgiveness and our prayers will be heard".[56]

The pandemic can also be regarded as punishment for the sexual degeneracy witnessed in the contemporary world. One century after the publication of *The Waste Land*, people are still unable to recognize the pure meaning of sexuality, which has been distorted to the extent that the

[54]Daniel Ighakpe, (2020), "Is COVID-19 Punishment from God?", *ThisDay*, para. 7, https://www.thisdaylive.com/index.php/2020/08/20/is-covid-19-punishment-from-god, date of consultation: 1/6/2023.

[55]Noel O'Sullivan, (2021), "Theodicy: Where is God in COVID-19?", *Maynooth College Reflects on Covid-19: New Realities in Uncertain Times*, edited by Jeremy Corley et al., Messenger Publications, p. 112.

[56]qtd in. Tonny Onyulo, (2021), "Is COVID-19 God's Punishment? African Christians Debate as Their Presidents Die", *Christianity Today*, https://www.christianitytoday.com/news/2021/march/tanzania-magufuli-dies-covid-president-burundi-god-punishme.html, date of consultation: 25/6/2023.

line between freedom and perversion has been blurred. Heerak Christian Kim, a former congressional candidate in Virginia, argues that COVID-19 is God's punishment for homosexuality, which he maintains must be criminalized in the United States. He states: "Many Christians believe that COVID-19 is punishment by God against #America because of legal protection of homosexuality which the Holy Bible requires that nations illegalize (sic) by national, state, [and] local laws".[57] Kim goes further and claims that "Christians are saying until homosexuality is illegalized (sic) in the United States of America, Americans can expect God to punish America, send plague after plague […] COVID-19 is only the first plague. And there are more plagues coming".[58] In this regard, pandemics in general and COVID-19 in particular may be regarded as punishment for humanity's disobedience or sin.

Similar to the turmoil depicted in *The Waste Land*, COVID-19 has significantly affected society, instilling widespread fear, loss, and disruption. Contemporary people's selfishness and individuality are more accentuated during the pandemic. People exhibit a notable propensity to prioritize their personal safety above the well-being of others. Those who do not take precautions are obviously selfish in their disregard for others, seeking "unbounded freedom and the discretion of time and resources".[59] The pervasive selfishness transcends the individual level and is also evident among nations. While certain countries have exhibited solidarity, such as Algeria providing medical help to China at the onset of the crisis and Russia offering support to Italy, others have demonstrated selfishness through the abduction of each other's medical supplies. The pandemic has enforced social distancing measures, mask-wearing, and lockdowns, making people's lives more stressful and depressive. It has also deepened their skepticism toward

[57]qtd in. Avira Bechky, (2022), "COVID-19 is God's Punishment for Homosexuality, Republican Says", *Metroweekly*, para. 3, https://www.metroweekly.com/2022/09/covid-19-is-gods-punishment-for-homosexuality-republican-says/, date of consultation: 20/6/2023.

[58]Ibid, para. 7

[59]Thomas Henricks, (2020), "Selfishness in the COVID-19 Age", *Psychology Today*, para. 5, https://www.psychologytoday.com/us/blog/the-pathways-experience/202008/selfishness-in-the-covid-19-age, date of consultation: 15/6/2023.

each other and the natural world, extending to doubts about the efficacy of vaccines and resulting in vaccine hesitancy.

The poem's theme of living death in a postwar world could be seen as resonating with the experience of contemporary times, where extreme suffering, isolation, and hopelessness still persist. For instance, Eliot describes April in the first verse of his poem as the cruelest month due to its connection with rebirth, which seems that not only the modern man but also the contemporary man is unable to achieve. According to Parker,

> April is the cruellest month because we are stuck. We've stopped dead and we're going rotten. We are living in the demesne of the crippled king, the Fisher King, where everything sickens and nothing adds up, where the imagination is in shreds, where dark fantasies enthrall us, where men and women are estranged from themselves and one another, and where the cyclical itch of springtime—the spasm in the earth; the sizzling bud; even the gentle, germinal rain—only reminds us how very, very far we are from being reborn. We will not be delivered from this, or not anytime soon.[60]

Living-dead people cannot cope properly with the challenging experience of the pandemic, which has also had a significant impact on their mental health. The pandemic has been associated with increased rates of anxiety, depression, and suicide. People's daily lives have been disturbed by the limitations and precautions taken to stop the spread of the virus. They could not easily access essential services or participate in social activities. The virus has brought feelings of fear of death and the desire for death, particularly for those who have lost loved ones or have been impacted by its economic and social consequences.

The Waste Land is one example of literature that captures the anxieties and uncertainties prevalent during the modernist period. Modernist literature often portrays a world on the brink of apocalypse or undergoing profound existential crises. For instance, F. Scott Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby* (1925) illustrates the corruption of the American

[60]James Parker, (2022), para. 1-2.

Dream through people's pursuit of materialism, symbolizing the collapse of traditional values in the modern era. Joseph Conrad's novella *Heart of Darkness* (1899) offers a bleak portrayal of imperialism and the modern man's capacity for darkness and savagery. Similarly, William Faulkner employs an experimental narrative style and fragmented structure in his works, such as *The Sound and the Fury* (1929) and *A Rose for Emily* (1930), to reflect the decline of the Old South and convey broader themes of decay and collapse. Samuel Beckett's *Waiting for Godot* (1954) explores modern man's existential crisis by shedding light on his suffering in a seemingly meaningless world. While these works may not explicitly depict an apocalyptic scenario, their fragmented narratives and exploration of social, moral, and religious decay reflect the modern world's breakdown and chaos. In contrast, other works like George Orwell's *Nineteen Eighty Four* (1949) and Aldous Huxley's *Brave New World* (1932) explicitly delve into dystopian futures, portraying societies where technology and social control have eroded individuality and humanity.

Although these texts, among others, collectively convey a prevailing sense of pessimism, suggesting the multifaceted and continuous decay of the modern world and the futility of effecting change, *The Waste Land* shows its uniqueness in its dense symbolism that captures the fragmented and decaying state of modern society. Eliot's masterful use of intertextuality by combining a vast array of literary and cultural references from different languages and historical periods efficiently underscores the complexity and interconnectedness of human experience. Finally, the poem's reliance on mythical characters and narrators not only provides layers of allegory and allusion that invite readers to delve into the depths of human existence but also offers a futuristic exploration of the human condition that seems endlessly repetitive.

Conclusion

The Waste Land not only describes the spiritual and moral cataclysm of the modern postwar world but also foreshadows an apocalyptic vision of what is to come. The different seers in the poem

communicate implicitly and explicitly their ambiguous and frightening visions of the destiny of mankind. Madame Sosostris' revelation describes the whole substance of the text, while Tiresias unifies the different voices. Madame Sosostris' vision proves its accuracy in the poet's further explanation. She was able to see the modern man's purposeless life, his living-death situation, his sexual sterility, and his ultimate need for the purgation of sin. However, she is forbidden to see everything, which makes her vision fragmented and ambiguous. Tiresias implicitly communicates his vision about the suffering caused by sexual decay. His inability to conceptualize a full vision or intervene to interpret it suggests that it is both frightening and endlessly repetitive.

Although *The Waste Land* was written in a different historical context, its futuristic vision and prevalent pessimism provide a framework for interpreting the dystopic and chaotic contemporary world, in which "we no longer have any landmarks. Everywhere we look, we find catastrophe and death throes".[61] COVID-19 discloses the extent to which the contemporary world has collapsed and makes us realize that we are living in the dystopian future foreshadowed by Eliot one century ago. The pandemic may be regarded as a form of divine retribution for humanity's perceived spiritual decline and moral decay. This crisis has plunged individuals into the same feelings of fear, loss, and disruption, amplifying their selfishness, loneliness, and skepticism, which permeate not only their interpersonal relationships but also their perceptions of the natural world. In this regard, it is evident that we are never getting away from the waste land's gloomy life since "[t]he poem's discontinuities no longer startle us. Rather, they feel like home".[62]

Ultimately, Eliot's poem serves as a poignant reminder of the enduring relevance of literature in interpreting and coping with societal crises, extending beyond historical contexts to encompass future challenges as well. It perfectly exemplifies the way literature offers a space for envisioning potential futures, enabling readers to contemplate

[61]Edouard Glissant, (2020), p. 45.
[62]James Parker, (2022), para. 37.

the consequences of existing trajectories and explore alternative paths forward.

References

Alighieri, Dante. (2003). *The divine comedy: The inferno, The Purgatorio, and The Paradiso*. (John Ciardi, Trans.). New American Library.

At the Burial of the Dead. (n.d). *The Church of England*. https://www.churchofengland.org/prayer-and-worship/worship-texts-and-resources/book-common-prayer/burial-dead, date of consultation: 10/6/2023.

Barad, Dilip. (n. d). *The Waste Land by T.S. Eliot* [PowerPoint Presentation]. The Wasteland | PDF | T. S. Eliot | Poetry (scribd.com), date of consultation: 2/7/2023.

Bechky, Avira. (2022). COVID-19 is God's Punishment for Homosexuality, Republican Says. *Metroweekly*. https://www.metroweekly.com/2022/09/covid-19-is-gods-punishment-for-homosexuality-republican-says/, date of consultation: 20/6/2023.

Beckett, Samuel. (1954). *Waiting for Godot*, Grove Press.

Bloom, Harold. (2007). List of Characters. In Harold Bloom (Ed.), *T.S. Eliot's The Waste Land* (pp. 22-25). Infobase Publishing.

-----. (2007). Summary and Analysis. In Harold Bloom (Ed.), *T.S. Eliot's The Waste Land* (pp. 26-52). Infobase Publishing.

Collins, John J. (2020). Apocalypticism as a Worldview in Ancient Judaism and Christianity. In Colin McAllister (Ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to Apocalyptic Literature* (pp. 19-35). Cambridge University Press.

-----. (2014). What Is Apocalyptic Literature?. In John J. Collins (Ed.), *The Oxford Handbook of Apocalyptic Literature* (pp. 1-16). Oxford University Press.

Conrad, Joseph. (1899). *Heart of Darkness*. Blackwood's Magazine.

Cook, Cornelia. (1996). The Hidden Apocalypse: T. S. Eliot's Early Work. *Literature and Theology*, 10(1), pp. 68-80. https://www.jstor.org/stable/23924895, date of consultation: 15/6/2023.

Cook, Stephen L. (2014). Apocalyptic Prophecy. In John J. Collins (Ed.), *The Oxford Handbook of Apocalyptic Literature* (pp. 19-35). Oxford University Press.

Datta, Amariit Singh. (2003). Eliot and Modern Sensibility. In D. K. Rampal (Ed.), *A Critical Study of T.S Eliot: Eliot at 100 Years* (pp. 32-42). Atlantic.

Eliot, T. S. (2000). *The Waste Land*. The Pennsylvania State University.

-----. (1971). *The Waste Land: A Facsimile and Transcript of the Original Drafts Including the Annotations of Ezra Pound*. Valerie Eliot (Ed.). Faber and Faber.

Faulkner, William. (1929). *The Sound and the Fury*. Jonathan Cape and Harrison Smith.

-----. (1930). *A Rose for Emily*. The Forum.

Fitzgerald, F. Scott. (1925). *The Great Gatsby*. Charles Scribner's Sons.

Glissant, Edouard. (2020). *Introduction to a Poetics of Diversity*. (Celia Britton, Trans.). Liverpool University Press.

Henricks, Thomas. (2020). Selfishness in the COVID-19 Age. *Psychology Today*. https://www.psychologytoday.com/us/blog/the-pathways-experience/202008/selfishness-in-the-covid-19-age, date of consultation: 15/6/2023.

Huxley, Aldous. (2013). *Crome Yellow*. Dover Publications.

-----. (1932). *Brave New World*. Chatto and Windus.

Ighakpe, Daniel. (2020). Is COVID-19 Punishment from God?. *ThisDay*. https://www.thisdaylive.com/index.php/2020/08/20/is-covid-19-punishment-from-god, date of consultation: 1/6/2023.

Mihsin, Haider Jabr. (2020). The Apocalyptic Image of the World in T. S. Eliot's *The Waste Land*. *International Journal of Innovation, Creativity and Change*, 14(7), pp. 1290-1297.

Onyulo, Tonny. (2021). Is COVID-19 God's Punishment? African Christians Debate as Their Presidents Die. *Christianity Today*. https://www.christianitytoday.com/news/2021/march/tanzania-magufuli-dies-covid-president-burundi-god-punishme.html, date of consultation: 25/6/2023.

Orwell, George. (1949). *Nineteen Eighty Four*. Secker and Warburg.

O'Sullivan, Noel. (2021). Theodicy: Where is God in COVID-19?. In Jeremy Corley et al. (Eds.), *Maynooth College Reflects on Covid-19: New Realities in Uncertain Times* (pp. 111-122). Messenger Publications.

Ovid. (1958). *The Metamorphoses*. (Horace Gregory, Trans.). The Viking Press.

Parker, James. (2022). T. S. Eliot Saw All This Coming. *The Atlantic*. https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2023/01/ts-eliot-the-waste-land-poem-anniversary/672231/, date of consultation: 1/6/2023.

Pietrzak, Wit. (2011). *Myth, Language and Tradition: A Study of Yeats, Stevens and Eliot in the Context of Heidegger's Search for Being*. Cambridge Scholars Publishing.

Poole, Jaimee. (2020). *Dying with a Little Patience: A Reading of The Waste Land in Juxtaposition with Theology*. [Thesis, Auckland University of Technology]. https://hdl.handle.net/10292/13616, date of consultation: 20/6/2023.

Rowland, Christopher. (2014). Apocalypticism and Radicalism. In John J. Collins (Ed.), *The Oxford Handbook of Apocalyptic Literature* (pp. 407-421). Oxford University Press.

This Video Shows a Berlin Mosque Broadcasting a Call to Prayer During the COVID-19 Pandemic. (2020). *Fact Check*. This video shows a Berlin mosque broadcasting a call to prayer during the COVID-19 pandemic | Fact Check (afp.com), date of consultation: 23/7/2023.