

**The Undead:**

**The Interweaving Images of Birth and Death in “The Waste Land” by T.S. Eliot**

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### **The Interweaving Images of Birth and Death in “The Waste Land” by T.S. Eliot**

The breakout, stasis, and expansion of an unprecedented destructive war sabotaged historical traditions and state stability on the continent. “The Waste Land” by T.S. Eliot, portrayed with a great number of mythological characters and historical figures, is incontrovertibly one of Eliot’s philosophical and meditative poems that present the crisis of world in face of the advent of new ideologies, the transformation of life styles, and new patterns of social mobility. The masterpiece has been the primary target for literary studies; most of the researchers who study this piece of poem predominantly make comparison between the portrait of the cities and states presented in the poem and the societal status quo in the age when the poem is composed; and they attempt to elucidate Eliot’s personal perspective to the modern world in the changing of history in this poem. However, as these studies concentrates on the author’s own viewpoint to the world or on the relationship between history and poetry, the common poetic emotion of man or society in the poem appears to be neglected. So, with the numerous examples of allusions and metaphors, how does T.S. Eliot represent the two fundamental elements of human’s creation—birth and death— in the age when inherent values and orthodoxy were dissolved by the impact of a war and the war’s subsequent upheavals, and what do the archetypes of birth and death function as to the milieu in the poem? From birth to death and again from

death to rebirth in the Waste Land, human's subconsciousness seemingly unconsciously breaks through the confinement of the time and demonstrates itself from mythology to rituals, and the religious unconsciousness appears to be attached to the two elements—birth and death—which are significant characteristics in Christianity as Jesus Christ's Passion and Resurrection show and in Buddhism as the concept of *samsara* or reincarnation indicates. The essay purposes to examine T.S. Eliot's representation of the archetypes of birth and death in the poetic depiction of a postwar ruined city and to discuss the presentation of human being's intrapsychic complex sculpted by the history and the states by the use of the two elements.

In Carl Jung's essay "On the Relation of Analytical Psychology to Poetry," it is stated that "the work of art we propose to analyze, as well as being symbolic, has its source not in the personal unconscious of the poet, but in a sphere of unconscious mythology whose primordial images are. . .the collective unconscious" (1000)<sup>1</sup>.

What has been demonstrated in T.S. Eliot's "The Waste Land" is not the individual affection to the world of the poet himself; instead, it is the series connection, pastiche or collage of the collective memory that subsists in human's thought in various phases of history. "The first section of 'The Waste Land,' 'The Burial of the Dead' refers to:

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<sup>1</sup> All the quotations by Carl Gustav Jung are from *The Norton Anthology of Theory and Criticism* (2001).

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[1] the burial of the dead fertility god, and [2] the burial of service performed by the Christian church” (Tiwari and Dodiya, 89). In “The Burial of the Dead” of the poem, the diction *burial* insinuates one of the ineludible rituals of the human being and simultaneously extends the image to the passion of Jesus Christ. In the chapter “The Burial of the Dead” of the *Book of Common Prayer*, the book of the Church of England and other Anglican churches, it quotes from the twenty-fifth and twenty-sixth verses of the eleventh chapter in the Gospel of John that goes “Jesus said to her, I am the Resurrection and the Life./ He who believes in me will live, even though he dies; and whoever lives and believes in me will never die” (274). T.S. Eliot adapts the name as his title of the first section that is identical to the name in the *Book of Common Prayer*. Although the title announces the decease or the termination of a specific object that has been animated, there is connotation through the quote from the religious records, which intimates the hope of resurrection. This use of the integrating of the dualistic concept as one illustrates the spirit of the Christianity based on the death and the rebirth. Jesus Christ’s Passion would be a catastrophic heartbreak that makes the Apostles and the followers dolorous, but simultaneously the archetype of the death of the Messiah also connotes the Resurrection and the Ascension that return the blissful joy to the initial sorrow in the eyewitness. The image of death in “The Burial of the Dead” does not regard death as the termination

of all but the impetus to generate the birth. This conception is also pertinent to the belief of the reincarnation in Hinduism and Buddhism. This title, taken from the reference to the religion, defines death as a cycle from rise to fall and then from fall to rise. In the coexistence and reciprocity of the opposites, the flowing cosmos of humankind is thus represented; furthermore, the self-rejuvenation and resurrection of a dead civilization prognosticates the traditions being substituted by a newer fashion, instead of being unchanged.

In the first verseline of the same section of the poem, Eliot writes “April is the cruellest month, breeding/ Lilacs out of the dead land, mixing” (Line 1-2)<sup>2</sup> with association to the General Prologue in *The Canterbury Tales* by Geoffrey Chaucer.

The four verselines of the very medieval literary work goes:

Whan that Aprill with his shoures soote  
 The droghte of March hath perced to the roote,  
 And bathed every veyne in swich licour  
 Of which vertu engendred is the flour;  
 [When that April with showers sweet  
 The drought of March had pierced to the root,  
 And bathed every vine in such liquid  
 Of which virtue engendered is the flower].... (Line1-8)<sup>3</sup>

Chaucer’s use of April in the first verseline of the General Prologue represents a

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<sup>2</sup> All the quotations from “The Waste Land” are from *The Norton Anthology of American Literature*. 7<sup>th</sup> ed. (2007)

<sup>3</sup> All the quotations from the General Prologue of *The Canterbury Tales* are from *The Norton Anthology of English Literature, Vol. 1: The Middle Ages through the Restoration and the Eighteenth Century*. 8<sup>th</sup> ed. (2006)

force of reproduction bringing the life to the earth in April; from March to April, the optimistic tone and the transition from the death to reincarnation is thus demonstrated.

At the same moment, Eliot's use of this allusion, on the other hand, inherits the symbolism of April that is handed down and repetitively emerges in human's mind.

April is one of the months of spring and awakes animate beings from the hibernation,

death in another form. In "The Burial of the Dead," April sculpts a new era that

announces the revitalization of the lilac but April itself in different phase of history

has distinct signification. Living in a dead society sabotaged by disastrous

unsettlement and hullabaloo of human's enmity, and witnessing the advent of death to

civilization, people alive stay in the state of half-death or living as the undead. They

anticipate the termination of the April that keeps them awakened to be eyewitnesses to

more calamities and the fall of the humanity collectively constructed by commons.

Sufferance from the ravage of human's barbarism and vandalization in the

international warfare and witness of a tradition's continuance to decadence and

collapse would not be more favorable than dying in the warfare to avoid psychic

torments in terror and uncertainty. Also, the death that the people pursue suggests

the eternal life and generation of a new form of life.

Sigmund Freud postulates that human's existence is consisted of two basic urges—*eros* and *thanatos*. "Eros is the desire to live, whereas thanatos is the wish to

die. However, an intermediate state also exists which is called death-in-life” (Tiwari, 70). This elucidation that combines the two opposite elements in human society is relevant to the undead that comprises many mythological and legendary beings that are departed yet behave like the animate beings, such as zombies and ghouls. In “A Game of Chess,” the lust of human being is portrayed through the verselines on the subject of the intercourse of man and woman. Lust is the propelling power to birth as it is the cause of reproduction. From the dame to the girl by the Thames, lust becomes indulgence. ““What shall I do now? What shall I do?/I shall rush out as I am, and walk the street/ ‘With my hair down, so. What shall we do to-morrow?’/ ‘What shall we ever do?’” (Line 132-135). As the lines express the dame’s despair to suppress the innate sexual impulse, the wilderness of spirituality is nothing less than the true death.

From the third section to the fourth section, the images of fire then reconstruct the images of death and birth and link themselves with archetypes in the first section. “The Fire Sermon” suggests the spiritual conception of afterlife in Buddhism and medieval Christianity:

To Carthage then I came  
 Burning burning burning burning  
 O Lord Thou pluckest me out  
 O Lord Thou pluckest  
 burning. (Line 307-311)

The verselines of Eliot has the reference from St. Augustine of Hippo the

theologian. Fire is the epitome of desires of humankind and the natural element that destroys animate nature to the barrenness; nevertheless, in the perspective of Buddhism, fire, particularly Shiva's fire, epitomizes the devastation of the physicality of the dead yet the power of purification that devastates lust of human being and sublimates the spirituality. That is to say, the motif of the burning fire is the macrocosm of humankind's lust but conversely the microcosm of forms of purgation. It announces the corporeal death; however, it confers the regeneration and instillation of barren spirits.

Besides the images of fire, the poem is also characterized with the intermittent emergence of the motif of the water. "A current under sea" in the fourth section of the poem is unmistakably applied to describe the images of water. The current of the water portrays the tumble of lust and the energy of tumble that generates new life. As soon as the water converges as a deluge or a great flood, it is a symbol of destruction drowning the earth as well as a symbol that occurs in mythology, such as in Christian mythology and Hindu mythology; in opposition, as soon as the water evaporates, it is also a symbol of destruction desiccating the vitality and fertility. Water, here, shows its duality—the force of annihilation and the force of generation forming as a whole. The Christianity baptizes the followers with water as a ritual signifying the cleansing from sins. The ancient paganism immerses the idols into



rivers and then picks them up a few days later and the ritual is regarded as the rebirth of the deity. Both fire and water signify birth, death and revival. Eliot applies these images repetitively to express mankind's epiphany to life and death and the aspiration to renewal and the collective unconsciousness of man that lurks under every individual.

The value of T.S. Eliot's "The Waste Land" is deeply ingrained in the human affection having its origin from the collective unconsciousness. The poem draws attention to religious myths of metempsychosis and resurrection to elucidate the connotation of birth, death and rebirth in the cosmos. The human's intrapsychic complex is rooted in the birth as the starting point of life as well as the end, and the uncertainty of death-in-life that gives no identity or faith to the commons; simultaneously it is indicated that the inescapability of death and the probability of death also symbolizes the inevitability of rebirth and possibility of life to suffer from the disasters in history. Death comprises a force of new-born; thus, the birth and death merge into a duality, instead of standing as two opposite elements, and through the duality, human shows anxiety and complicated mentation in the uncertainty of the death-in-life.

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