

M.A (English)
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Date _____

Page _____

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Topic :- The Waste Land: As a mirror of the post-war Generation

T.S. Eliot's "The Waste Land" is by far the most significant and representative poem of the twentieth century. It exposes the very soul of the modern generation with all its horrors, moral, spiritual and intellectual bankruptcy, disillusionment and waste. It particularly exposes the horror of war and the waste and frigidity that accompany and follow the modern warfare. Here the "Waste Land" is Europe devastated both physically and spiritually by the two world wars in a single generation. F.R. Leavis says: "The Waste Land remains a great positive achievement. In it a mind fully alive to the age compels a poetic triumph out of the peculiar difficulties facing a poet in the age. In 'The Waste Land' Eliot seems, more than in any other poem, and more than any other artist, to describe the contemporary post-war situation of Europe and America.

The Waste Land is a very important landmark in the twentieth century literature. It reveals the disillusionment caused by the First World War. It also shows dissatisfaction with the so called scientific achievement and an industrial progress of Europe. It ushers new values of modern society which are

the result of researches in psychology pioneered by Freud and Jung. All in all it is a historical landmark in English poetry and a basic document on contemporary society.

← Social Document :-

As a social document, it throws light on the living condition of people belonging to different sections of society in the modern world. There is a representative of the aristocratic class in the German princes of the first section. There is another Roman representative of high society called 'Lady of Situation' whose drawing room with all its beauty and glamour and synthetic perfumes is mentioned in the second section. She is a neurotic, waiting for lover at night. Both these ladies are sensual over sensitive, subject to fits of nervous break-down. Among the males of the upper strata of society, there are city-executives having fun with the girls at the picnic spots near the river ~~th~~ Thames. There is the rich merchant, a representative of the commercial section of the society, full of sex and homosexuality. Mr. Eugnides is fond of perversity of sex. To the middle class society belongs Madame Sososistris - the fortune teller who entertains people with all kind of tricks. Among the lower classes are Lil whose husband, just returned from army wants to have a good time. Then there is the typist girl, wanting mechanical sex in a room. Finally,

we have the song of three daughters of the river Thames who lost their virtue at the hands of several people. Eliot suggests that the same sense of sex which dominated Queen Elizabeth and Earl of Leicester finds an expression among the poor classes, on the banks of the river. The main idea is that sex perversity prevails among all sections of society.

← Growing disillusionment : →

The first world war did not solve the problem of Europe. On the other hand, it led to the establishment of Communism in Russia in October 1917. This led to dislocation among many European capitals. Thousands of refugees moved all over Europe in search of food and shelter. Eliot thinks that Communism is no solution to the problems of Europe because of its violence and godlessness.

The tragedy of Europe is poignantly depicted in the image of a woman playing on her hair as if it was a fiddle.

← Collapse of civilization : →

The civilization of cities is rootless. The people have no tradition, because it is a mass of people from different sections and groups without any unifying culture or ideas. The city stands for the important city of Europe. The towers of Eden's Alexandria, Vienna and London are falling. If the urban civilization has to be

saved, it can be rescued only by sacrifices and sufferings. Eliot highlights the cultural, moral decay of cities on account of the commercialisation of life where everything is for sale. Even in the matter of love, there is a question of profit and loss.

← Need for new values : →

The last section 'What the Thunder said' contains the substance of Eliot's thought. The rebirth of civilization is possible only through faith. He illustrates this point through the journey of knight perilous. There is another story of the two pilgrims and the hooded Christ to illustrate how faith can lead to success. Eliot draws on ancient Indian history when northern India suffered from drought and famine. The people prayed to Prajapati for help. The god answered their prayer and spoke three words through thunder. The three words are basic principles of the survival of civilization. The first principle is Datta - to give oneself to a noble ideal. It means commitment to a good way of life. The second principle is Dayadharm which means to sympathise. Selfishness has to be replaced by selflessness without universal brotherhood civilization can not progress. The third principle is Damyata which means discipline. It is an inner discipline for controlling one's thought and feeling. Eliot comes to the conclusion that a reform of the world should begin first with the individual.

So he decides to follow the three principles in his own life, with a hope it will lead to a better future.

The Waste Land is not only a record of disillusionment of modern generation but also diagnoses the spiritual disease of the age. It refers to universal tragedy of man, his spiritual sterility and lack of faith and character. It is infact, an embodiment of tragedy of the heart of life that man in this world had to undergo pains and sufferings because of the original sins and because of the current values of material civilization.