

# Therapeutic Reading on *The Waste Land*

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## ABSTRACT

T.S. Eliot regards mental illness as a crucial source of poetry creation and the purpose of writing poetry as catharsis of suppressed emotions and "grouse against life", gaining relief from extreme miseries, instead of communicating with others. The thesis attempts to discuss the function of catharsis therapy in *The Waste Land* from the perspective of poetry therapy, combining the poet's experience of mental sufferings before the creation of *The Waste Land* and the process of his creation and modification of the poem.

**Keywords:** poetry therapy, catharsis, mental illness, *The Waste Land*

## I. INTRODUCTION

T.S. Eliot regards mental illness as one of the most important sources and inspiration of poetry creation and he once said in his work *On Poetry and Poets* that the aim of the poet's creation is to get relieved from the extreme pains, instead of exchanging thoughts and ideas with others. Poetry creation is the source of inspiration as well as a therapeutic cure for his broken minds.

## II. THEORETICAL BASIS

Psychoanalytical theories offer Eliot profound theoretical basis for his therapeutic poetry writing practice. Starting from the perspective of psychotherapy, Freud makes his case study based on such major literary works in the west as *Oedipus Rex* from Sophocles, *Hamlet* from Shakespeare and *The Karamazov Brothers* from Fyodor Mikhailovich Dostoyevsky. He regards the writing process of the three authors as the one in which they got their suppressed sexual instincts relieved and therefore had their mental and spiritual illness cured. So the poetry creation may well be taken as the poetry therapy. In the process of poetry creation the authors vent out their suppressed instincts through their imagination and artistic expression. That is, the authors have their repressed desires fulfilled and transform them into artwork which may be well accepted by the general public and the society. The inhibited instincts in the real world get released through the channel of artistic fantasy, thereafter the wishes unfulfilled in reality get compensated in art. "In artistic activities, psychoanalysis considers

such behavior as the intention of relieving the unsatisfied wish — this will first be reflected on the authors themselves, ...the first objective of the artists is to free themselves as well as others who suffer in the same way as they do and enable them to release the repressed wishes equally." (Freud, 32) Literature is fundamentally a piece of highly autobiographical work. Writers are potential neurotics who find a healthy release-valve: literary, imaginative activity provides them with the release that prevents them from exhibiting neurotic symptoms. Thus writing is a form of confession, and literature is therapeutic: both for the writer and for the reader. Freud summed up the therapeutic philosophy of unconscious Catharsis from the relations between civilization and instinct. This provides solid theoretical basis for the analysis of the psychotherapy of *The Waste Land*. The paper will make a tentative attempt to discuss the catharsis therapeutic function of *The Waste Land* based on the poet's bitter life experience and mental sufferings during his earlier creative period of the poem and its creation and revise process.

## III. THE POET'S FRUSTRATED LIFE EXPERIENCE

In the earliest stage of his creation of *The Waste Land*, Eliot's mental state was caught in a difficult situation, agitated by multiple personal life experience, such as the worsening economic condition, the frustration in his literary pursuit, incompatible relations with his first wife Vivien, the death of his father and his bosom friend losing life in frontline battle field, etc. He had been troubled with such mental illness as emotional turbulence and could not continue his writing

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activities, accompanied with the symptoms like insomnia, anxiety, headache and abulia all day long. He referred to his then mental state and said: "everyone's life is engulfed in a such huge tragedy that everyone can hardly produce their personal feeling and personal thoughts...I have many things to write"(Zhang Jian, 55). Eliot planned to write a poem to clarify his unfortunate marriage and overburdened life in London. He attempted to vent out his discontent in life and repressed emotions through writing and walk away from his own spiritual waste land, which might well be understood as his original intention to create the poem *The Waste Land*.

The poet sublimated his gloom and sadness towards his marriage into the poem. The original title for Part II is "In the Cage" instead of "A Game of Chess", which is taken from Henry James's novel *In the Cage*. The image echoes with the figure Sibyl who was trapped in a cage. Therefore the title suggests the poet's inhibited mental state of being caught in a loveless marriage and "memory and desire", to which he fails to find a solution. The image "cage" is used to refer to metaphorically the lust in both the novel and the poem. The protagonist in the novel is a young woman as a telegrapher working in the telegram "cage". She and her suitors both belong to the bottom of the society whereas they covet the lavish and fashionable life styles of the noble class. Eliot successfully duplicates the discrepancy in social stratum in the second part of the poem — the middle class couple trapped in the cage of marriage and the underclass Lil imprisoned in her slum dog. Both Eliot and Vivien were familiar with the image of the caged couple and "Vivien, in one the of sketches, pictured the cage as a deadly isolation, where the confined woman beats herself against the bars. To Eliot the cage meant the opposite, the perennial lack of privacy: 'It is terrible', he wrote, 'to be alone with another person'"(Gordon, 133). Undoubtedly the couple constrained in the cage both expect to break through the barricade of marriage and walk out of the desert of emotional coldness, obtaining their spiritual freedom.

The content of the first part in "A Game of Chess" concerning the ice-cold conversation between the middle class couple derives from the poet's unpublished poem *The Death of the Duchess*. According to Gordon's research, the poem was created in the years between 1916 to 1919 and was rewritten for Part II of *The Waste Land* (158). In *The Death of the Duchess* presents a couple trapped in a hotel room and failed to communicate their respective feeling. The only hope of the husband is to escape their marriage and this means death of his wife, a possible psychological death. Besides, the wife also holds a negative attitude toward their marriage, "If it is terrible alone, it is sordid with one

more"(Gish, 61). The icy and isolated relations between the couple and the poet's awful mental condition constitute the main circumstance of this part, and the room with "The Chair she sat in, like a burnished throne", "Doubled the flames of seven branched candelabra", her "satin cases", "vials of ivory and coloured glass" is imagined as "rats' alley" where he never speaks. The home which should have brought them warmth and sense of security has here turned into cold grave burying their emotions. The anxious wife complains to her husband, "My nerves are bad to-night. Yes, bad. Stay with me./ Speak to me. Why do you never speak Speak./What are you thinking of? What thinking? What?/I never know what you are thinking Think"(Eliot, T.S. Eliot Collected Poem 1902-1962, 57). Then a "savagely still[ness]" follows. "I" cannot fall asleep every night due to the indifferent relations with his wife and "I read, much of the night"(53). Insomnia makes "me" especially sensitive to noise, "What is that noise?/ The wind under the door./ What is that noise now? What is the wind doing"(57). Whereafter Eliot vents out his own pathological paralyzed feelings by the mouth of hyacinth, "I could not/Speak, and my eyes failed, I was neither/Living nor dead, and I knew nothing"(54). Scholar Gooderham believes that this recollection of "the hyacinth girl" are framed by two quotations from *Tristan und Isolde*. The first is a hopeful song, anticipating love, from the very first minutes of the opera, as Isolde is sailing to meet, and marry, King Mark. The second is from the opening of Act III, as the dying Tristan waits for Isolde to come to him- but, as his servant reports, "The sea is empty"(i.e.of ships). In between these quotations, Eliot places what appears to be the fragmented recollection of a past, failed love(Gooderham, 179). Finally "I" has the nymphs along the Rhine riverbank speak out the unhappy marriage of the speaker, "I can connect / Nothing with nothing. / The broken fingernails of dirty hands"(Eliot, T.S. Eliot Collected Poem 1902-1962, 64 ). Obviously, not only the "fingernails" of "I" are broken, but the failed sexual life and memory of his distressed marriage with Vivien are fragmented. Eliot once stood in Trafalgar Square, pointing to the flats of Crowford and said, "We lived there- I was very unhappy.....It was from there that Vivien threw her nightdress out of the window into the street in the middle of the night "(Gordon, 169). Her action tremendously humiliated the poet who then transformed the scene into the poem and depicted Vivien as a neurotic wife in "A Game of Chess", where she threatens to run out into the street with her hair loose like a hooker, "I shall rush out as I am, and walk the street/With my hair down, so"(Eliot, T.S. Eliot Collected Poem 1902-1962, 57). It seems that this is her only way to fight against her husband's icy cold silence and attract his attention. After the publication of *The Waste Land*,

Vivien remarked below these two lines that *The Waste Land* has become "a part of me".

The last two lines in the first part of "A Game of Chess" "And we shall play a game of chess, / Pressing lidless eyes and Waiting for a knock upon the door" (58) allude to the seductive scene in the game of chess in Middleton's *Women Beware Women*, highlighting the theme on sexual betrayal and emotional infidelity from an unfaithful wife. Eliot once referred to "adultery" in a suggestive way in his poem *Gerontion* (1919), "I have lost my passion: why should I need to keep it / Since what is kept must be adulterated" (31). Here the word "adulterated" both refers to the action of lowering quality by adding cheaper products in it and the action of fornicate. The poet probably is suggesting that it is his wife's unscrupulous "adulterated" betrayal of their marriage that makes he lose his passion in their marriage fundamentally.

The poet repeatedly portrays women as unfaithful to their marriage and regards a seductive woman as a man's lifelong ordeal. Does his view have anything to do with traditional moral prejudice? Actually soon after his marriage with Vivien Eliot found Vivien had an affair with his friend Russell who offered financial aid to the couple. This further deteriorated their already fragile marriage and deepened the poet's adverse and detest view to women who betray their true love. But Vivien's adultery behavior and Russell's uncontrolled lust and desire may have added fuel to the poet's literary creation between 1917 and 1919. The poet detached himself from his emotional whirlpool and threw himself into writing, transforming his tormented feeling in marriage into poetic lines, typically into "A Game of Chess" in *The Waste Land*, which may be taken as the poet's confession on his depressed marriage.

As a matter of fact, Vivienne's physical condition had deteriorated and it was impossible for them to have any kid at that time. In addition, Vivienne had covered up her state of illness in both physical and spiritual level, which was one of the principal elements for their estranged marriage. In one of his January 1916 letters to Russell while Vivien just recovered from a suicidal state of mind, Eliot mentioned one of her bad nights, "Vivien is not very well today.....She is alright when she is lying down, but immediately she gets up is very faint", Two days later Eliot wrote again, "Vivien is wretched today- another bad night" (Gordon, 159).

One year after their marriage, Eliot found that Vivien kept on taking medicine and kept on having illusions. These two lines in *The Waste Land* "My nerves are bad to-night. Yes, bad. Stay with me. / Speak to me. Why do you never speak Speak." (Eliot, T.S. Eliot Collected Poem 1902-1962, 57) indistinctly reflect Vivien was then in a state of

trance and neuroticism. Certainly this entirely unsatisfactory marriage and worn out relationship nudged Eliot into the edge of mental collapse.

#### IV. THE POET'S MENTAL THERAPY

On 12 October 1921 Eliot was given three months' sick-leave from the bank in 1921 for he believed he suffered from psychological troubles and decided to seek help from Dr. Vittoz in Lausanne at recommended by Julian Huxley and Ottoline Morrel who used to be his patients. Roger Vittoz, a Swiss psychiatrist, was the founder of a method of psychotherapy that enjoyed great prestige in the first quarter of this century. Eliot read Vittoz's book *Treatment of Neurasthenia by Means of Brain Control* (1913) and believed that he was afflicted with "aboulie" which means the loss of will power. In his letter to Richard Aldington, he analyzed himself based on his reading of Vittoz's work, "my 'nerves' are a very mild affair, due, not to overwork, but to an aboulie and emotional derangement which has been a life-long affliction" (Eliot, Volume I, 486) He highlighted the following passage in Vittoz's book which focuses on "aboulie", "Every idea, every act of will creates a feeling of fear in the patient's mind; he foresees the sterility of any effort, and he is gripped and crippled by doubt. It is this fear of willing anything that makes him will-less. for every effort is painful, every action fills him with anxiety" (Vittoz, 35).

Then Eliot came to Lausanne, Swiss and started his 6-week long psychotherapy with Dr. Vittoz. His method did not suppress memories and desires of the patients, but to train his patients in meditations which are similar to Buddhism in order to increase the patients' power of control over their will. Finally he helped his patients to get relief from their mental and spiritual pains and their reasoning ability by way of returning to moral balance.

#### V. WRITING AS A WAY OF "CARTHASIS"

Eliot finished part V of *The Waste Land* while he was undergoing the treatment in Lausanne. He integrated the fragmented verse lines he created in his early stay in London into a complete poem and made the following remarks on writing in 1931, "It is a commonplace that some forms of illness are extremely favorable, not only to religious illumination, but to artistic and literary composition. A piece of writing, meditated apparently without progress for months or years, may suddenly take shape and word; and in this state long passages may be produced which require little or no retouch" (Eliot, V. *The Waste Land: A Facsimile* 129). According to the account of Valerie (Eliot's second wife), this is Eliot's description of his feelings on the moment when he finished the last part of the poem. The poet made

further comment on creation and illness in his work *The Use of Poetry and the Use of Criticism* in 1933,

*I know, for instance, that some form of ill-health, debility or anemia, may ... produce an efflux of poetry...To me it seems that at these moments, which are characterized by the sudden lifting of the burden of anxiety and fear which presses upon our daily life so steadily that we are unaware of it, what happens is something negative....*

The accompanying feeling is less what we know as positive pleasure, than a sudden relief from an intolerable burden .(Eliot, 144-146)Eliot wrote to Bertrand Russell on October 15, 1923 that he was happy Russell liked the poem, "especially part V. which in my opinion is not only the best part, but the only part that justifies the whole, at all"(Southam, 185).

If the first four parts of the poem are the writing of the poet's symptoms of spiritual illness, the last part might be regarded as both the signal the poet sends out for help and approaches for his mental recovery . He attempts to search for the cure of his broken minds in the first two stanzas in part V. and comes to the realization that he and the people who are stranded in the same living condition as he does confront with spiritual death, "He who was living is now dead/We who were living are now dying"(Eliot, T.S. Eliot Collected Poem 1902-1962, 66), and we thirst for a new life symbolized as "the sound of water" and birds' "singing", "If there were water/ And no rock/ If there were rock/ And also water/ And water/ A spring/A pool among the rock/ It there were the sound of water only/...he hermit-thrush sings in the pine trees/Drip drop drip drop drop drop drop" (66-67). The poet's inhibited burden of this moment has been transformed into the verse lines the releasing images and rhythm . The poet confirms the inner barrier and burden has been cleared off and he has found his own voice and inward self in the bird's dripping song.

The rest of part V. after the "water-dripping song" may be considered as a return, a regression from the fractured mental state towards wholeness and reintegration of the consciousness and the unconsciousness, that is , the effectiveness of his psychotherapy. Growing up in the area of New England, he frequently visited the eastern coast and spent their vacation there with his family, thereafter he developed a keen love for waters, sailing and sailor . The influence of such experience can be seen most distinctively in the end of part V. where he writes his scarce sweet childhood memory , "The boat responded/Gaily, to the hand expert with sail and oar/The sea was calm, your heart would have responded/Gaily, when invited, beating obedient/To controlling hands" (69). Such imagery of sea as "boat", "sail" and "sea" stands for the poet's childhood happiness, and is the very validation that

he has regained the spiritual balance and pleasure. While receiving the medical treatment from Dr. Vittoz and practicing the meditation , he focused on the image "water" which symbolizes spiritual fertility throughout the poem. Under the guidance of the "controlling hand " from Dr. Vittoz, Eliot translates his misery and anxiety into "calm[ness]" through the writing of "water" imagery in the poem and realizes the state of "Shantih". Thus *The Waste Land* does function as a psychotherapy to a certain level, judging from the poet's experience of mental suffering, the process of his creation and the contextual contents.

## VI. CONCLUSION

Consequently, considering the elements like Eliot's experience of poem wring, revision and illness, *The Waste Land* may well be regarded as therapeutic poem through which the poet cures his own mental and spiritual illness. It is the portrayal of the poet's inner anxiety and suffering as well as his experiment on poetic therapy through which he obtains the unexpected "Shantih" in the process of the writing on his own frustrations and pains. Unfortunately, three months after his completion of the poem, the poet once again suffered from mental instability, which suggests that the poet's spiritual integration in his writing process could merely relieve his pains temporarily. The "catharsis" confessional writing alone might not get his mental illness cured thoroughly.

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