

## სიკვდილის ტრიუმფი ტ. ს. ელიოტის პოემაში „უნაყოფო მიწა“

### The Triumph of Death in T. S. Eliot's poem "The Waste Land"

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#### აბსტრაქტი

ტ. ს. ელიოტის „უნაყოფო მიწა“ მოდერნისტული პოემის ერთ-ერთი ყველაზე კომპლექსური ნაწარმოებია, რომელიც მნიშვნელოვანია როგორც პოეტურ ფორმაში შემოტანილი სიახლეებით, ისე სხვადასხვა პრობლემატური საკითხის, მათ შორის, სტერილური ეროტიზმის, მორალურ ღირებულებათა კრიზისის, მათი თანმდევი უნაყოფობის, უიმედობის, ხსნის შეუძლებლობისა და ამ ყველაფრის საბოლოო შედეგის, კვდომის ესთეტიკის წამოჭრითა და თანამედროვეობის კონტექსტში განხილვით.

სტატიის მიზანია, გაანალიზოს კვდომის სიმბოლური მოტივი „უნაყოფო მიწაში“, კერძოდ, მისი ხასიათი, ტონი და ქვეტექსტი. ამის საფუძველზე კი წარმოჩინდება, თუ რას გულისხმობს მისი ტრიუმფი. სიკვდილი, როგორც ლაიტმოტივი, მოდერნისტული ლიტერატურის თანმდევია და მე-20 საუკუნისთვის დამახასიათებელი სულიერი კრიზისის შინაგან ბუნებას ასახავს. პოემის მიხედვით, ადამიანთა საყოველთაო დაკნინების მიზეზი ღირებულებათა ნიველირებაა. ამდენად, „უნაყოფო მიწაში“ სიკვდილის ტრიუმფი ინტერპრეტირდება, როგორც ამორალური არსებობის განუყოფელი ნაწილი.

სტატიაში ასევე გაანალიზებულია სხვადასხვა ასოციაციური პარალელი (მითოლოგიური, ლიტერატურული და რელიგიური რეფერენციები), რომელთაც ელიოტი შეგნებულად გარდაქმნის პოემის სტრუქტურის ორგანულ ნაწილად და ამრიგად, კვდომის შინაგან ხასიათს გამოკვეთს. კერძოდ, „უნაყოფო მიწაში“ პაროდულად ტრანსფორმირდება ლეგენდა წმინდა გრაალზე და „გამხმარი ძვლების ველის ხილვის“ (ეზეკიელი 37:1-14) ბიბლიური სიუჟეტი, რითიც ხაზი ესმევა როგორც უიმედობასა და ხსნის არარსებობას, ისე – ცხოვრების არსისა და მაღალი იდეალების ძიების აბსურდულობას. პოემაში უნაყოფობის სიმბოლო, ამასთან

ერთად, გრაალის პაროდირებული მაძებელი უსინათლო წინასწარმეტყველი, ტირესიაა, რომელიც ასოციაციურად კუმეს სიბილას, მისი სახით კი ისეთ არსებობას უკავშირდება, რომელიც გაჭიანურებულ კვდომას, სიცოცხლეშივე სიკვდილს განასახიერებს. გარდა ამისა, ფილომელას გაუპატიურების სცენაზე მინიშნებასთან ერთად ოფელიას სიგიჟის სცენისა და ქალღმერთ დიანასა და აქტეონის შეხვედრის პაროდირება ადამიანის სულიერი კრიზისის კიდევ უფრო ნათელი ამსახველია. პოემის ასეთი სიუჟეტური განვითარება კი საბოლოოდ ეხმიანება მე-20 საუკუნის გადაფასებული ესთეტიკის გამოსახვასა და მისი ახალი, მოდერნისტული პოეტიკის კრიზისულ ტერიტორიაში წარმოდგენას.

**საკვანძო სიტყვები:** ტ. ს. ელიოტი, უნაყოფო მიწა, მოდერნიზმი

**Keywords:** T. S. Eliot, The Waste Land, Modernism

## Introduction

Modernist literature is concerned with the condition of modern man. It depicts the spiritual crisis characteristic of the 20<sup>th</sup>-century society. People of this period grew discontented, superficial, delusional, and alienated even from their selves. They led an inane, absurd, and immoral existence deprived of its inherent virtues. Death, frequently referred to as one of the central leitmotifs of Modernist literature, is outlined as the inner state of such people.

T. S. Eliot is one of the modernist writers depicting the decline in moral values in his works. In his poem, “The Waste Land”, he gives insights into the condition of modern man – his descent into immorality and barrenness. Eliot outlines spiritual death as a reflection of all these. Thus, according to the poem, death cannot be analysed as a biological phenomenon. It is instead represented as an integral part of the earthly existence of spiritually decayed people.

The symbolic “death-in-life” motif runs through the entire poem since the lives of the inhabitants of the “wasteland” are corrupted, and reduced to the biological existence. It creates a gloomy atmosphere in the poem, which, according to some scholars, is partly due to Eliot’s inner state and the circumstances under which he wrote the poem. It is also worth mentioning that “[...] Eliot has described not merely his ephemeral state of mind; More importantly, he delved into the causes of a common disorder in the soul of the twentieth century” (Kirk 2008: 62). These causes include the crisis of moral values manifested in different ways and arising implications of the triumph of death.

To the characters of “The Waste Land”, God is dead, so a moral code does not exist. This decay of order makes it impossible to distinguish between acceptable and unacceptable behaviour. Since the characters no longer follow the principles of ethical conduct, they become

morally degraded. As God is dead, under no circumstances can they regain any assurance of redemption, salvation, resurrection, and spiritual revival, which intensifies the idea that death is triumphant over the inhabitants of the “wasteland.”

Morally corrupted people fail to be in healthy relationships and form ever-lasting bonds with one another. Communication is collapsed among them, and the only form of intercourse depicted in the poem is sterile sex, which results in infertility, leading to death. Sterility is inherent not only to these sexual relationships but also to the life of modern man in general. Eliot combines the inner nature of the degraded existence and spiritual crisis in “waste” and demonstrates that the outside world can be the reflection of the condition of people. Thus, according to the poem, sterility is not only the outcome of superficiality characteristic of human relationships but also an illustration of the lifelessness and inner barrenness of people.

In his exploration of the modern “wasteland,” Eliot draws upon the myths and the symbols of different cultures, alludes to the biblical stories along with the works of the greatest writers such as William Shakespeare, Dante Alighieri, Ovid, etc., and even transforms them in accordance with the mythopoetic atmosphere of his poem. Eliot’s use of the mythic method gives “The Waste Land” a complex form making the idea of the triumph of death multidimensional.

## **Research Design and Methods**

The major focus of this research is to symbolically explore death, a prevalent leitmotif in Modernist literature, along with its implications for triumph in the modern context of T. S. Eliot's “The Waste Land”. Conducting both textual and qualitative analyses, the study interprets death as an inner state of those leading inane and immoral existences, shedding light on the triumph of death as portrayed in the poem.

To facilitate this analysis, a systematic literature review was conducted, gathering and synthesizing numerous sources, including scholarly articles, essay collections, and relevant books. The study encompasses both Georgian and international practices in literary criticism, providing a multidimensional interpretation of the essence of death and its triumph. Source selection and evaluation criteria considered relevance, accuracy, frequency, and reliability.

Given “The Waste Land's” multitude of intertextual paradigms, the research employed the textual analysis method for a close examination of Eliot’s hypertexts within the poem's modern context. This method encompassed myths, legends, literary works, and biblical stories.

## **The Decadence of Moral Order**

In “The Waste Land”, God is dead leading mankind to moral destruction represented as death. There is a reference to the Crucifixion in the fifth episode of the poem:

After the torchlight red on sweaty faces

After the frosty silence in the gardens

After the agony in stony places

The shouting and the crying

Prison and place and reverberation

Of thunder of spring over distant mountains

He who was living is now dead

We who were living are now dying

With a little patience

(“The Waste Land”, 322-330)

In the Christian tradition, Crucifixion is followed by resurrection. In “The Waste Land”, however, it is the Crucifixion with which God’s life ends. There is no promise that resurrection will ever come. Although there is a hint of the reappearance of Christ, according to Eliot, this is nothing but delusion (Harding 1974: 22).

God’s death results in the decadence of moral order making human existence a prolonged process of death. This idea is embodied in one of the epigraphs of the poem, which comes from *The Satyricon* by Petronius. The main character of this novel says that he saw Sybil of Cumae hanging in a jar. Some boys were asking her what she wanted. Sybil answered that she wished to die. Sybil of Cumae is an oracle. According to the myth, she asked Apollo to give her as many years as there were grains of dust in her hand. However, Sybil forgot to ask for eternal youth, so as time passed, she grew endlessly older and older. In “The Waste Land”, she is a symbolization of the prolonged process of death and “death-in-life” (Kobakhidze, 2015: 188).

The symbolic “death-in-life” motif parallels Dante’s *Inferno* as well. In canto 33, Dante depicts the character who is bodily alive but spiritually dead because of moral corruption:

For with the vilest spirit of Romagna

I found of you one such, who for his deeds

In soul already in Cocytus bathes,

And still above in body seems alive!

(“The Divine Comedy”: Inferno, XXXIII)

Aside from this, Eliot’s depiction of the faceless crowd, hollow, ethically neutral people leading inane existence is the portrayal of the overall decline in moral values (Kobakhidze, 2015: 209):

Under the brown fog of a winter dawn,

A crowd flowed over London Bridge, so many,

I had not thought death had undone so many.

Sighs, short and infrequent, were exhaled,

And each man fixed his eyes before his feet.

(“The Waste Land”, 61-65)

In this episode, there is a slightly changed reference from *Inferno*. The words “I had not thought death had undone so many” are uttered by Dante the moment he sees the faceless crowd at The Gate of Hell. Virgil tells him that these souls have been morally neutral and are thus rejected both in Hell and in Heaven. This faceless crowd is transformed into the masses of parodic heroes in quest of “The Waste Land”. In Eliot’s poem, London Bridge is a symbol of the way of salvation and the people crossing it are “in search of” the Holy Grail (Kobakhidze, 2015: 210). However, they are all beyond redemption: at the end of the poem, London Bridge falls embodying the idea that to people like these, rebirth, resurrection, and spiritual revival cannot be regained. Thus, there is no hope for their survival from death.

Eliot embodies the idea of hopelessness and the impossibility of salvation using the parodic association as well. Throughout the poem, he frequently alludes to the Bible, especially to the prophetic books of the Old Testament so much so that “The Waste Land” can be treated as a reworking of certain themes explored in them. Interrelationships between these two texts are determined by the historical context. According to F. Jones,

[...] Perhaps they are the same: Europe in the twentieth century and Judah in the seventh century B. C. There is the same degeneration, described in terms of drought and the failure of vegetation and other vicissitudes of nature. Both speak of agony and alienation, of political instability and the deterioration of morality. There is the same authentic note of doom (Jones, p. 286).

The prophetic writings also suggest that deliverance will come. Eliot, in contrast, does not give any hope for salvation, redemption, and spiritual revival, which carries further implications of the triumph of death.

One of the biblical prophecies reworked by Eliot is “The Vision of the Valley of Dry Bones” (Ezek. 37:1-14) according to which, Ezekiel has a dream-like vision that God brings him to the valley full of dry bones and asks him whether these bones can live. Then He tells Ezekiel to prophesy over them that God will cause the breath of life to enter into them and they will come to life. As Ezekiel is prophesying, the scattered bones come together and rise as a great army. After this, God says that these bones are the people of Israel and tells Ezekiel to prophesy to these people as well that He will put His spirit in them as well, bring them up from their graves, make them alive, and settle them in their land (Ezek. 37:1-14). The imagery of the resurrected bones can be symbolically analysed as the embodiment of the ideas of hope, rebirth, and spiritual renewal. Hence, the promised movement of the Israeli people from death to life is spiritual. Considering this, Ezekiel’s prophecy, regarded as the message of encouragement (Fox, p. 6), seeks to give the people of Israel hope for salvation, and redemption.

On having employed the technique of parodic association, Eliot transforms the core motifs of Ezekiel’s prophecy. More specifically, he changes the ideas of resurrection, hope, rebirth, and redemption embodied in the vision into sterility, hopelessness, the impossibility of salvation, and the state combining all these – inner death. Accordingly, the biblical imagery of the resurrected bones is transformed in “The Waste Land” into that of the lifeless fragments: “Dry bones can harm no one” (“The Waste Land”, 390), which is a further indication of the triumph of death.

### **Infertility**

According to “The Waste Land”, infertility is an integral part of modern man’s existence. It is represented as the outcome of inane relationships among people and symbolizes moral sterility and lifelessness leading to death. In this poem, “waste” is an expression of the spiritual crisis of the characters.

The inner aspect of the deterioration of morality is embodied in the failure of vegetation. Employing the imagery of “the dry stone,” “cracked earth,” “dry grass,” “the dead tree,” “limp leaves,” “dead land,” and “dry sterile thunder without rain,” Eliot depicts a lifeless area, where no sign of regeneration appears. He outlines the absence of water as the main cause of infertility in nature: “Here is no water but only rock” (“The Waste Land”, 331). The absence of water is a symbolization of the impossibility of purification and spiritual rebirth as by baptism making the land a metaphorical desert.

The inner barrenness of people is personified by the infertile land depicted in the poem. Eliot makes this characteristic even more apparent by providing insights into the nature of human relationships. As stated by A. P. Frank,

[...] several metaphorical deserts are the results of broken-down human relationships (among couples, whether married or not, in 'A Game of Chess') and the consequences of an incapability to enter upon loving and faithful partnerships (the 'cauldron of unholy loves' of 'The Fire Sermon') (Frank 1990: 36).

All the couples portrayed in “The Waste Land” and their sexual encounters are infertile. According to N. Frye, “The sexual unions in the poem are as sterile as the waste land itself” (Frye 1963: 67).

Thames daughters (ironically referred to as “nymphs”) are among those engaged in sterile, occasional sex along with “their friends, the loitering heirs of city directors.” They are depicted as “passive victims undone by men” (Fuller 2011: 138). Relationships between Lil and Albert, parodic counterparts of Hamlet and Ophelia (Kobakhidze, 2015: 205-206), are characterized by sterility as well. Lil has had an abortion, as for Albert, the man she is waiting for to return from the war, is represented as an extremely superficial character to whom the physical appearance of his partner is of paramount significance:

He said, I swear, I can't bear to look at you.

And no more can't I, I said, and think of poor Albert,

He's been in the army for four years, he wants a good time,

And if you don't give it to him, there are others who will, I said.

(“The Waste Land”, 146-149)

The sexual union of Sweeney and Mrs. Porter, ironic counterparts of Goddess Diana and Actaeon, is to be infertile as well. Whereas Diana is bathing as Actaeon sees her by accident, Mrs. Porter washes her feet in soda water on a spring evening and waits for Sweeney. Even though the couple is to meet in a season of fertility and renewal, it is emphasized in the poem that their union is not going to be fertile (Kobakhidze, 2015: 191).

Sterile erotism, one of the underlining themes of “The Waste Land”, is further explored in the second episode (“A Game of Chess”) containing reference to the rape of Philomel:

Above the antique mantel was displayed

As though a window gave upon the sylvan scene

The change of Philomel, by the barbarous king

So rudely forced; yet there the nightingale

Filled all the desert with inviolable voice

And still she cried, and still the world pursues,

'Jug Jug' to dirty ears.

(“The Waste Land”, 97-103)

In this passage, Eliot alludes to the 6<sup>th</sup> book of *Metamorphoses* according to which Tereus rapes Philomel, the sister of his wife, Ponce, and in an attempt to cover his guilt, cuts his victim's tongue out. Philomel manages to inform her sister about Tereus' treachery and as Procne finds it all out, she decides to take revenge. She kills her son, Itys, and puts the pieces of his body in her husband's dinner. Procne and Philomel flee after Tereus discovers what they have done. The sisters are transformed into a swallow and a nightingale and Tereus himself is changed into a hoopoe (Murphy 2007: 452-453). Violence, lust, the singing of the bird, and Procne's killing of his son embody the ideas of sterile erotism and infertility (Kobakhidze, 2015: 204-205). Furthermore, according to R. Kirk, “On a wall, the picture of the metamorphosis of Philomel is a symbol of the reduction of woman to a commodity—often a sterile or stale commodity—in modern times” (Kirk 2008: 72).

In “The Waste Land”, Tiresias, a hermaphrodite creature, combining all of the poem's characters and thus representing a symbolic “paradigm” of a human, is a symbol of sterile sex (Kobakhidze, 2015: 193, 196). He is also represented as a parodic hero in his quest for the Holy Grail. Tiresias is not as young, strong, pure, naïve, and inexperienced as Perceval, which is among the reasons why the quest has no positive outcome in Eliot's poem (Kobakhidze, 2015: 195-196). Unlike Perceval, Tiresias cannot save the king and the whole kingdom from sterility, which results in infertility related to the death motif.

## Conclusion

From the analysis above, it may be concluded that according to “The Waste Land”, death is triumphant over modern man. It is outlined as an inner state reflecting all the aspects of the condition people found themselves in in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, such as deterioration of morality, crisis of values, incapability of communication, disillusionment, ethical neutrality, futility, isolation, and alienation. This overall decline of modern man is echoed in Eliot's depiction of the poem's “wasteland,” a metaphorical desert, on which death is given the power to “undo so many.”



Associative symbolism used in “The Waste Land” offers crucial insights into this idea. Transforming the underlining themes of the legend of the Holy Grail and the biblical prophecy of “The Valley of the Dry Bones”, Eliot embodies the ideas of hopelessness and the impossibility of salvation. Furthermore, his reworking of ancient myths and numerous literary works in the modern context of the poem adds depth to the narrative making inner bareness and spiritual degradation of the characters even more apparent.

All the characters of “The Waste Land” are projections of immorality, ethical neutrality, and futility of modern man including the mass of people crossing the London Bridge, Lil, Albert, Mrs. Porter, Sweeny, and Thames daughters along with their “friends.” Aside from them, Tiresias is regarded as the symbol of inner bareness, whereas Sybil of Cumae is outlined as a personification of the prolonged process of death and “death-in-life.” Due to their spiritual decay, all of these characters are annihilated by a devastating power of inner death, which follows that death is triumphant over them.

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### ავტორის შესახებ:

რუსუდან ჯანაშვილი ივანე ჯავახიშვილის სახელობის თბილისის სახელმწიფო უნივერსიტეტში სწავლა 2019 წელს დაიწყო. 2023 წელს მან წარმატებით მოიპოვა ინგლისური ფილოლოგიის ბაკალავრის აკადემიური ხარისხი. ამჟამად ის ინგლისური ლიტერატურის სამაგისტრო პროგრამაზე სწავლობს და, ამავედროულად, ასწავლის ინგლისურ ენას.

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Rusudan Jananashvili started studying at Ivane Javakhishvili Tbilisi State University in 2019. In 2023, she successfully completed her studies and obtained a Bachelor's degree in English Philology. Currently, she is an MA student of the same university majoring in English literature. She also teaches the English language.

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