

The Theme of Crisis in the Poetry of Yeats and Eliot

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Abstract

W. B. Yeats and T. S. Eliot demonstrate the crisis of modern society in their poetry. Both poets were concerned about the disorderly and fragmented social condition of their time – a time of political turmoil, anarchy and chaos. They yearned for the more humane, cultured and promising times of the past, as their contemporary chaotic world endangered peace, happiness, and solidarity of its people. Their poetry presents a gallery of characters, whose ideological conflicts, cultural differences and racial discrimination revealed the crisis of modern society. Both poets deplored the fragmentation of modern society, which once had strong traditions, customs and values. For them, the absence of ethical and religious values gives rise to perennial anguish, disquiet and chaos. However, though both Yeats and Eliot handle the theme of crisis, the ramifications of their treatment are strikingly varied. This paper seeks to explore the theme of crisis as a split in society that they highlight in their poetry by bringing a contrast between some common binaries such as past/present; ideal/corrupt; colonized/colonizer; love/lust; fertility/infertility.

I

W. B. Yeats (1865-1939) and T. S. Eliot (1888-1965) demonstrate the crisis of modern society in their poetry. The poets focus on the cyclical, linear, or even chaotic contemporary events that underlie the poetic vision of each. Yeats, who is considered a “ghost that haunted Modernism”, is the pioneer (Albright 63). But both were aware of the disorderly and fragmented social condition of their time – a time of political turmoil and anarchy, which their poetry investigated with exceptional discernment. However, though they expressed the theme of crisis or tension of modern society in their poetry, the delineation of the crisis in their poems varied. Each had distinctive characteristic. Being the most significant poets

writing in English during the first half of the 20th century, they explored the theme of crisis as a split in society through a variety of binary opposites. A close examination of the binary opposites reflected in their poetry brings to surface a split in the society.

The term 'binary opposition' is a term by which we, in general, define two theoretical opposites set off against each other. Paul Innes defines the term as "[a] relationship of opposition and mutual exclusion between two elements: [...] masculine/feminine, cold/heat, or up/down" (74). The origin of this term is in Structuralism, and Structuralist analysis uses the notion of binary opposition in terms of both words and codes of a text. Ferdinand de Saussure, the Swiss linguist, says that "[t]he binary opposition is the means by which the units of language have value or meaning; each unit is defined against what it is not" (qtd. in Sorcha 122). According to Structuralism, a sign's meaning is derived from its context and the group to which it belongs. An example of this concept is that we cannot conceive of 'good' if we do not understand 'evil'. The term is also connected with Hegelian dialectic – "the synthesis of opposites", "a new concept which ... resolve[s] the conflict" and unifies "the opposing concepts, retain[ing] what is true and valuable in each" of the opposites (Lavine 210, 211). It is indeed a "framework for guiding our thoughts and actions into conflicts that lead us to a predetermined solution" (Raapana and Friedrich 1). Yeats and Eliot, following the Hegelian dialectical approach of thesis, antithesis, and synthesis, analyze the conflicts of their world in terms of the pairs of binary opposition, and try to find a solution, through what Hegel called synthesis. By depicting tensions between past/present; art/life; integration/disintegration; fertility/infertility; concrete/abstract; men/women; ideal/corrupt; they unravel the futility and anarchy of present society.

II

W. B. Yeats "dreamed in his youth of being a great popular poet, of writing epic and dramatic cycles to give back to Ireland, perhaps through Ireland to the world, an integrated vision of perfection" (Stock 161) and, was concerned from the beginning of his poetic career with opposites, with dichotomies which he considered to be central in experience. In his earlier poetry he explored the contrasts while later he found poetic ways of resolving them. Marjorie Howes says, "His thought was profoundly dialectical; for nearly every truth he made or found, he also embraced a counter-truth: a proposition that contradicted the first truth, was equally true, and did not negate it" (1). Yeats' poetry is, in fact, an exploration of tension between a series of oppositional binaries: age/youth; mortality/immortality; colonized/colonizer; ideal/corrupt; fragmented/unified; rational/irrational; art/nature; body/soul; passion/wisdom; time/eternity; being/ becoming; the heroic/ the non-heroic and so on. Within these binary opposites, "one set of meanings in a poem or complex of poems function, either consciously or unconsciously, to disarm or deconstruct another and opposite or near-opposite set of meanings in a poem or complex with a tension that jams any sense of a precise understanding the reader may attempt" (Olsen 215-216). The poet alluded to distinguished personalities, persons close to his heart and events of his contemporary period. He was concerned about Ireland, the British Empire, mythical heroes, corrupt and opportunist politicians, as well as political violence. All these elements

influenced his personal life as well as his poetry. Throughout his career, “dialogue appealed to him because it allowed him to stage conflicts between opposing principles, voices, or moods” (Howes 2). His dialectical vision enabled him to assess people, events and social phenomena with discretion and judiciousness. In his poems, he lamented for more humane, cultured and promising times of the past, as the present chaotic world imperiled the peace and solidarity of its inhabitants. His poetry presents a gallery of characters such as Augusta Gergory, Maud Gonne, Olivia Shakespear, John Synge, O’ Leary, William Murphy, O’Duffy and many more. Moreover, Coole Park and Thoor Ballylee – where he spent most of his time- also occupy a vital part of his poetry. Through the presentation of his characters’ ideological conflicts, cultural differences and, racial disparities, he depicts the theme of a crisis in his world. Yeats’ political poems like “Easter 1916”, “September 1913”, “Nineteen Hundred and Nineteen” focus on binary oppositions that reflected the crisis in contemporary society.

One of Yeats’s ways of portraying the crisis of modern society is the representation of the conflict between ideal political heroes and corrupt and opportunist political leaders. He praised heroes like O’ Leary, one of the guiding spirits of the Irish Renaissance, as “an embodiment of a romantic nationalism based on respect for artistic distinctiveness” as he believed that only “enlightened leadership and denigrating influential figures” can bring back peace and stability for a nation (Allison 190, 186). Yeats was afraid that “the narrow nationalism he earlier identified with Paudeen was helping to shape a rigid, confessional state controlled by a triumphalist Church guided by moralistic zeal” (Allison 196). The poet measured the distance between heroes like Parnell, O’ Leary, and modern Ireland’s political leaders like Murphy, Cosgrave, O’ Duffy, who were unsympathetic to the poet’s dream of the Unity of Culture. For the poet, ideal political leaders like Roger Casement, Arthur Griffith and Kevin O’ Higgins were guided by their strong will and tough minds in their endeavour to attain their political goals. He believed in the immortality of their great souls. In the poem “September 1913” he says: “Romantic Ireland’s dead and gone, / It’s with O’ Leary in the grave” (7-8). Modern leaders were unable to comprehend the true greatness of these ideal leaders and were too busy with “add[ing] the halfpence to the pence” (3) since they were greedy “fumble in a greasy till” (2). Their mercenary attitudes and crass materialism had made ‘Romantic Ireland’ seem dead and gone, although the great heroes of the past had dedicated their lives to the service of their country. The ideal leaders were moulded in the spirit of the highest heroic ideals of ‘Romantic Ireland’, but the opportunist politicians of the present were ‘petty-minded’ and vile. For Yeats, both Unity of Being and Unity of Culture are necessary for a great nation, for what he terms in the poem “Under Ben Bulbin” an “Indomitable Irishry” (V.16). He was concerned with Unity of Being and with achieving Unity of Being through art. To him, such unity is not confined to any one time. He believed that certain wholeness can be achieved if the distinctions of past, present and future can be dissolved. In Yeats’ “Sailing to Byzantium” he thus declares: “... I have sailed the seas and come / To the holy city of Byzantium” (15-16), because to him, Byzantium is a place above time. It is an ideal blend of culture and wisdom, and a kind of capitol of art. The opportunist and corrupt political leaders devalue and defame the old men, old values and old customs because they are “[c]aught in that sensual music

... neglect [ing] / Monuments of unageing intellect” (7-8). So the poet wishes to voyage to the holy city of Byzantium that stands for the unity of all aspects of life. As he writes in “A Vision”: “if I could be given a month of Antiquity and leave it to spend it where I chose, I would spend it in Byzantium ... I think that in Byzantium, ... religious, aesthetic, and political were one, that architect and artificers ... spoke to the multitude and the few alike” (qtd. in Arkins 70). For him, Byzantium is a symbol of Paradise as well as the Purgatory of man’s mind; it is a place of cleansing flames. Here, the mind or soul dwells in an eternal form. This poem is truly “a picture of a voyage from the material world to the holy city of eternity” (Pinto 122). This holy city might symbolise a New Ireland breaking away from its masters to develop its own philosophical, religious and artistic destiny. The poet in this poem imagines such a country where art will attain ultimate greatness. After all, it is art by which he wanted to achieve his doctrines of Unity of Being and Unity of Culture. To the poet, Unity of Being is an ideal valid both in time and Eternity. Frank Kermode says: “The dissipation and the despair that are the inevitable lot of the modern artist, who must live in a world where what Yeats called Unity of Being is impossible – a world of division, where body and mind work separately, not moving as one, where the artist’s motive and subject is his struggle with himself” (qtd. in Unterecker 38). Yeats’ poetry shows that ideal leaders are concerned about the Unity of Being and the Unity of Culture, whereas corrupt leaders are indifferent to both unities which are prerequisites to bring back order and harmony and to get rid of the crisis of modern life. Yeats has used the word “abstraction” – the isolation of occupation, or class or faculty – as the opposite of Unity of Being (qtd. in Allt and Alspach 397). The heroes of “Easter 1916” suffer an abstraction which Yeats associates with not only “modernity, logic and materialism”, but also “rhetoric, propaganda, Marxism, and much else” (Allison 194). For him, “abstraction” does not mean aesthetic failure; rather, it means fundamental poverty at cognitive and political levels.

The ideological conflict between Maud Gonne and Lady Augusta Gregory, who are two important characters in the poetry of Yeats and who played a vital role in his life, has further intensified the crisis in his poetry. Yeats’ poetry vividly describes these two personalities, who hold diametrically opposite ideological views and positions. Maud Gonne, an Irish Nationalist revolutionary, activist and “fierce political agitator” was determined to bring back freedom to Ireland even at the expense of bloodshed and actively took part in the Anglo-Irish war (Pinto 100). In contrast, Lady Gregory, an Irish writer, playwright, a guiding light of the Abbey Theatre, and “a woman of considerable literary ability with a great enthusiasm for the arts and a wide knowledge of Irish legend and folklore”, who played an important part in reviving interest in Irish literature at the beginning of the 20th century, believed in getting back the liberty of Ireland not through violence but through the parliamentary process (Pinto 100). Many of Yeats’ poems including “Adam’s Curse”, “No Second Troy”, “Among School Children” and “A Bronze Head”, represent Maud Gonne, who is described as “Helen, Leda, Pallas Athene, The Countess Cathlees, Rose [and] Phoenix” (Conner 72), by which the poet delineates a rigid, extreme and destructive woman, but nowhere in his poetry has he evaluated Lady Gregory with such epithets. In “A Bronze Head” the poet writes how he regrets the political activity and agitation of Maud Gonne. For him, Gonne’s political fanaticism could bring nothing but ruin and degradation

to Ireland. The poet writes in the poem: "I saw the wildness in her and I thought / A vision of terror that it must live through / Had shattered her soul" (16-18). The 'wildness' and the 'terror' that the poet observed in the personality of Maud Gonne would bring misery to Ireland, so he continues criticising her thus: "An intellectual hatred is the worst" ("A Prayer for My Daughter" 57). To Yeats, she debased herself by resorting to political violence and taking part in irrational party politics. In front of Maud Gonne, there were two possible ways to be taken; one being "broomstick" the other is "distaff" and she chose the broomstick which means "the witches' hats" (Unterecker 28). In contrast, Lady Gregory figures as the embodiment of natural aristocracy, aristocratic grace, dignity, equanimity and so on. Poems like "Coole Park, 1929", "Coole Park and Ballylee, 1931", "To a Friend Whose Work Has Come to Nothing", and "My Descendants", picture Lady Gregory positively. Her qualities are nurtured in time-honoured customs and ceremoniousness. "She became for him an image of aristocratic courtesy, too well-bred not to be humble, too assured not to be simple and direct in speech" (Unterecker 29). The poet thought that Lady Gregory was a source of strength for him as is clear from a letter he wrote to Mario M. Rossi after Lady Gregory's death. He writes in it; "I have lost one who had been to me for nearly forty years my strength and my conscience" (qtd. in Conner 79). She had a steadfast personality and Yeats was blessed with her firmness and care. To Yeats, both her estate and her person seemed a survival of an aristocratic past more esteemable than the present-day world. In "Coole Park, 1929" the poet writes that he "meditate[s] upon a swallow's flight / Upon a[n] aged woman and her house" (1-2). This "woman's powerful character / Could keep a swallow to its first intent" (18-19). She was the source of all "Great works" (5) and her house was where "traveler, scholar, poet" (25) could use as a resource. In this poem, Lady Gregory is seen as a fixed "compass-point" (21) around which other idealist leaders were "whirl[ing]" (21) because to them she was a "laurelled head" (32). Inspired by Lady Augusta Gregory, Yeats longed for a "spiritual and intellectual unity of self to be achieved by seeking one's opposite – the anti-self" (Allison 186). In fact, the ideological difference between two kinds of people had created another conflict in his society and so Yeats tried to portray the conflict created by political leaders who could be "caricatured as Paudeen" (Allison 186). Throughout his life, the poet was in favour of the kind of cultural nationalism that was fostered by both Lady Augusta Gregory and her son, O' Leary. In the poem, "An Irish Airman Foresees His Death" the poet writes, "My country is Kiltartan Cross, / My countrymen Kiltartan's poor," (5-6). He uses the figures of Irish Airman and Lady Gregory in his poetry both as individuals and archetypes. He emphasized personalities such as Lady Gregory because he believed that art and cultural nationalism are much more important than political fanaticism, revolutionary agitation and insular nationalism.

The crisis depicted in Yeats' poetry has also been expressed by a contrast between the glorified past and the degraded present. For him, whole the past was ennobling, the present is ignoble. In "The Gyres" the poet writes that "... ancient lineaments are blotted out. / Irrational streams of blood are staining earth" (4-5) and "we that look on but laugh in tragic joy" (8). Though the 'ancient lineaments' are gone, we (modern men) "[he]ave no sigh" and "no tear drop[s]" (11); therefore, the poet laments for the nobility of the past: "A greater, a more gracious time has gone" (12). Yeats observed that people suffered from

agony and frustration. Everything was degenerating and people from every walk of life were sinking lower and lower in corruption. The values, norms and traditions of the past were gradually decaying: “Ancestral pearls all pitched into a sty / Heroic reverie mocked by clown and knave” (“A Bronze Head” 26-27), so Yeats urges his contemporaries and successors to hold onto the tradition of glorious work which the Indomitable Irish had upheld over the years. The poet urges:

Irish poets, learn your trade,
 Sing whatever is well made,
 Scorn the sort now growing up
 All out of shape from toe to top,
 Their unremembering hearts and heads
 Base-born products of base beds. (“Under Ben Bulbin” V. 1-6)

Being bewildered, ‘the sort’ or ‘now growing up’ artists desecrate and mutilate Irish art. Artists of the past were a source of inspiration and led people to the Unity of Being and the Unity of Culture, while the ‘now growing up’ artists mislead people with their ‘base-born products’. In 1901 Yeats wrote in his essay “Ireland and the Arts” that he desired to “recreate the ancient arts, the arts as they were understood . . . when they moved a whole people and not a few people who have grown up in a leisured class and made this understanding their business” (152). The poet was disillusioned with the present world because it was sordid and materialistic. Sordid materialism compels him to escape to the world of fairies in Irish folklores. He always contrasts between the Irish folklores or faery land and the urban life or work-a-day world. Faery land is free of the toils and anxieties of the present-day world. In the real world life without conflicts and frustration is impossible and so the poet in “The Stolen Child” writes:

Come away, O human child!
 To the waters and the wild
 With a faery, hand in hand,
 For the world’s more full of weeping than you can understand. (9-12)

The complexity of modern life creates crisis and this world is ‘full of weeping’. The theme of crisis through the oppositional binary between the noble past and the ignoble present is also revealed in the poem “Nineteen Hundred and Nineteen”. The poet opens the poem saying “Many ingenious lovely things are gone” (I. 1), a theme which he continues in subsequent stanzas. Yeats wrote this poem during the 1920s when the violent Anglo-Irish War had broken out. The poet’s lamentation over lost peace and lost hope is obvious when he writes:

Now days are dragon-ridden, the nightmare
 Rides upon sleep: a drunken soldiery
 Can leave the mother, murdered at her door,
 To crawl in her own blood, and go scot-free;
 The night can sweat with terror as before

We pieced our thoughts into philosophy,
 And planned to bring the world under a rule,
 Who are but weasels fighting in a hole. (I. 25-32)

What is clear here is that there is no peace in the world now. Sleep is ruined by nightmares. Bloodshed is everywhere. The drunken soldiers are untouched even after murdering a mother. Night becomes a time of terror. People cannot but sweat and tremble due to the panic happenings of night. No man is any longer a man rather he/she becomes a weasel – the symbol of cruelty. Liberal hopes have gone up in smoke, since we all become weasels fighting in a hole. Today, all men are helpless and their walk is controlled by the “barbarous clangour of a gong” (II. 10). Those who “dreamed to mend / whatever mischief seemed / To afflict mankind,” (III. 26-28) are now “crack-pated” (III. 30) because, not only the “winds of winter blow” (III.29) around them but also “evil gathers head” (VI. 5) and “Herodias’ daughters have returned again” (VI.6). Here, Herodias’s daughters signify destruction. Throughout the poem, we see that the poet explicitly manifests the contrast between the noble past and the ignoble present.

The contrast between the colonized and the colonizer; between Ireland and the British Empire; the dominated and the dominant further underscore the crisis in contemporary society depicted in the poetry of W. B. Yeats. In the poem “Leda and the Swan” the poet explicitly shows how the weak are suppressed and, exploited by the strong, and depicts the mythical seduction of Leda by Zeus. Though the later is an established theme, the exploitation of the powerful over the weak cannot be denied. One of the themes of this poem is that Ireland, being a colonized country, was dominated, exploited and oppressed by England. If we interpret it from gender consciousness, we see that a woman is seduced or raped by a man, which also focuses on the contrast between the oppressed and the oppressor. Terence Brown evaluates the poem thus; “‘Leda and the Swan’ ... contextualize[s] the contemporary violence and terror” by dramatizing “a moment of brutal assault and rape” (441). Masculine violence and colonial aggression are clear when the poet says, “A sudden blow: the great wings beating still” (1). The quoted line deserves our attention. The phrase ‘sudden blow’ indicates sudden attack, which in terms of colonial perspective shows the British invasion of Ireland. Moreover, it is an act of aggression of men against women. In both cases, we see the contrast between the dominated and the dominant or the oppressed and the oppressor, which ultimately brings out the theme of crisis. In the sestet of this sonnet the poet writes:

A shudder in the loins engenders there
 The broken wall, the burning roof and tower

 Being so caught up,
 So mastered by the brute blood of the air,
 Did she put on his knowledge with his power
 Before the indifferent beak could let her drop? (9-10, 12-15)

The images of 'broken wall' and 'burning roof and tower' directly expose the political relationship of Ireland with England. These images also recall the images of "My wall is loosening" ("Meditations in Time of Civil War" VI. 4) and "Incendiary or bigot" (Nineteen Hundred and Nineteen" I. 45) with which the poet depicts the identity crisis that Ireland faced at that time. Declan Kiberd rightly comments about the poem when he writes "it [is] an allegory of Yeats's complicated feelings about England's relation to Ireland" (qtd. in O' Neill 162). What is clear is that the British Empire had imposed its imperial outlook over the Irish. The engendered identity crisis among the Irish afterwards spurred them to fight against British rule. Yeats was thus in favour of a nativism which is "a form of nationalism that is anti-imperialist yet derived from imperial structures of thought; like imperialism, it insists on an absolute distinction between the colonizer and the colonized, but it praises the colonized rather than denigrating them" (Howes 207). Colonialism, in fact, "crippled Irish culture by suppressing the native traditions, importing a vulgar English popular culture to Ireland, and ensuring that such art would serve nationalist propaganda rather than the vision of the individual artist" (Howes 218). Irish writers, suggest Yeats, should not try to cater to popular tastes or advocate political causes in their work; rather, they should have "no propaganda but that of good art" (Howes 218). The cost of British rule in Ireland was material in a conventionally political sense, involving wars of extermination and persecution. Though the British colonial power invaded the Irish social, cultural and political life and tried to destroy their identity, Irish nationalist leaders like O' Leary, and Robert Gregory fought against the oppression of the British rule to assert their cultural nationalism. The poem "Easter 1916" was written in response to the uprisings against British Rule taking place in Ireland during World War 1. In this poem Yeats describes how Irish patriots had enacted a heroic conflict with England to get freedom for the country because the obsession with the liberation of Ireland made Irish Republicans an unchanging object in a world of change and flux. The heroes of the rebellion – "MacDonagh and MacBride / And Connolly and Pearse" (76-77) – become symbols of heroic martyrdom and their history becomes blood-soaked. The lines "What is it but nightfall? / No, no, not night but death; (66-67)" evidence nothing but bloodshed. Throughout the poem, Yeats' use of the refrain "All changed, changed utterly: / A terrible beauty is born" also indicates bloodshed because the beauty which is born out of these deaths is born at the expense of life. Marjorie Perloff aptly comments: "What has been born is indeed a terrible beauty – sublime, awful [and] irreconcilable" (238). The poem, in fact, reveals a conflict replete with atrocity, violence and killing between the dominated and the dominant and thus highlights the crisis evident in contemporary society. Allison says, "The final instance of the oxymoron "terrible beauty" might suggest admiration and renewed hopes of redemption, but the poet suggests revolutionary action has been achieved at too high a price" (193). In the poem, the poet unveils the exploitation of the British and the emancipation from exploitation of the Irish.

The projection of anarchy of the modern world, the spiritual emptiness and the conflict between civilization and barbarism and between the modern world and the ancient world reveals the extent of the theme of crisis in the poetry of Yeats. In his poetry, he illustrates how mankind becomes a helpless victim of impersonal forces and how humanity

is in constant crisis within the cyclic repetition of the phases of the Great Wheel, which Yeats expresses by the term 'gyre'. In the beginning of "The Second Coming" the poet writes:

Turning and turning in the widening gyre
The falcon cannot hear the falconer;
Things fall apart; the centre cannot hold;
Mere anarchy is loosed upon the world,
The blood-dimmed tide is loosed, and everywhere
The ceremony of innocence is drowned;
The best lack all conviction, while the worst
Are full of passionate intensity. (1-8)

The above excerpt describes the present state of the world – its political upheavals, the chaos and cynicism of modern civilization and the haphazard brutality of contemporary culture. The falcon no longer hears the falconer, which signifies civilization's loss of authority, and the spiritual crisis of modern people who no longer believe in Christ. Christianity is itself out of the control of Christ. So a world is seen which is disintegrating and witnessing blood being shed and where mortal existence is in crisis. Anarchy is everywhere, and chaos has taken over. Violence and hatred have spread, evil advances and the only law the world knows is disorder. The use of the passive voice in lines (4-6) illustrates the chaotic scene. As Smith comments "the passive voice gives the impression of a process in which human agency is no more than a helpless instrument and victim of vast impersonal forces" (qtd. in Fletcher 24). An atmosphere of fanaticism and violence has spread and the best lack all conviction and the worst are overburdened with passionate intensity. In the second stanza of the poem, the poet represents the birth of Christ and a new era which must face the same crisis because the second coming is "A shape with lion body and the head of a man" (14) who is "pitiless" (15). Moreover, the second coming is envisioned as a "rough beast" (21), so the birth of the new era will also be destructive. This might be an intimation of World War II. Thus, the new birth will not be a release for mankind / humanity; rather it will initiate more trouble, ugliness, cruelty, bloodshed and anarchy. Therefore, "'The Second Coming' encapsulates the era's mood of crisis" that is everlasting. (Holdeman 77)

The preceding discussion leads to the conclusion that multifarious tensions and conflicts between various sets of binary opposites serve to substantiate the theme of crisis in society. Yeats believed that life is a dramatic tension between contradictory entities. It is the tension between opposite principles which creates the movement of the cycles, which is "Yeats's explicit statement of the theme of cyclical historical narratives of creation and destruction and the rise and fall of civilizations. The present is a nightmare of terrible bloodshed, chaos and destruction" (Drake 93). All the binary oppositions stated above present the world depicted by Yeats as chaotic, anarchic, conflicting, filthy and destructive. For him, to achieve deliverance from this chaotic situation of modern society, people should be imbued with the spirit of cultural nationalism or idealist nationalism rather than any cheapened form of nationalism or nativism.

III

Eliot, the most influential poet of the modern age, seeks to express the fragile psychological state of humanity in the twentieth century. Modernist writers like Yeats intended to capture a world, which they perceive as fractured, alienated, and denigrated. Eliot too also saw society as fragmented and sterile, and imagined that culture was crumbling and disintegrating. In his poems, especially in *The Waste Land*, he spontaneously blends myths with present situations to show the disintegrated state of modern world. George Watson says, "When a great poet dies, myths crowd in. In Eliot's case the myths began years before he died, which is natural enough when you [we] remember that he lived the life of an established poet for over forty years" (47). He was also interested in the divide between high and low culture, which he articulated through musical analogies. He believed that high culture, including art, opera, and drama, was in decline while popular culture was on the rise. In *The Waste Land*, Eliot blends high culture with low culture and shows that the people of both cultures are sexually frustrated or dysfunctional, unable to cope with either reproductive or nonreproductive sexuality. Eliot's Fisher King thus represents damaged sexuality, Tiresias represents androgynous, ambiguous, and puzzling sexuality, and the women chattering in "A Game of Chess" promiscuous, unscrupulous and unbridled sexuality. Eliot uses fragmented images of historical and literary narratives such as the quest for the Holy Grail, the Bible, Dante, Shakespeare and many more to mirror his society's reliance on old traditions, customs, and aesthetic styles in the process of reformation of a new Europe. He did not choose to write in a fragmented way arbitrarily; rather, he chose a medium and a style that would look to replicate what he saw in the world around him. Eliot's fragmentation and assemblage of historical narratives create a poem with new meaning out of something old. *The Waste Land* incorporates certain recurrent thematic motifs, most of which are pairs of binary oppositions. Some of the most common themes are Life/Death; Fertility/Sterility; Love/Lust; Voice/Silence; Past/Present; Sight/Blindness; Antiquity/Contemporaneity and so on.

Eliot, indeed, pursues a poetic scheme of antinomies and contraries to develop his theme of crisis in society. Cleanth Brooks remarks: "The waste land is built on a major contrast – a device which is a favorite of Eliot's and is to be found in many of his poems, particularly his later poems. The contrast is between two kinds of life and two kinds of death. Life devoid of meaning is death; sacrifice, even the sacrificial death, may be life-giving, an awakening to life" (129). Eliot's contrast between life and death demonstrates that the people of the Waste Land, losing their spiritual values and ethos, are fascinated with death rather than life. "Death is the ultimate meaning of the Waste Land, for a people to whom its explanation is only a myth, for whom sex is destructive rather than creative, and in whom the will to believe is frustrated by the fear of life" (Williamson 129).

Both "The Burial of the Dead" and "Death by Water" sections of the poem refer specifically to the attractiveness of death. Death and rebirth for Eliot are integrally related to each other. In Eliot's poetry, water symbolizes death, which is a contrast with the common concept of water – a symbol of resurrection or life. In his portrayal of modern society, due to the wastelanders' lost-meaningful-contact with time-honoured beliefs and traditional

values of purity and sanctity, everything of this material world, including water, leads them to death. They have corrupted the life symbol (water) and made it into something to be feared instead of valued. For example, the Phoenician sailor dies by drowning – “Phlebas the Phoenician, a fortnight dead” (313). Water certainly does not represent life to him. Since he does not have faith, water means death to him. He cannot live in it. He also states, “By the waters of Leman I sat down and wept...” (182). Here, Lemon suggests “lust” (Williamson 139). The protagonist indicates here that the incident of unbridled lust has disturbed him. Water has been polluted. It now represents the death that results from the lack of self-control. It no longer stands for life. Water being the symbol of death to the wastelanders, there is no hope of resurrection: “That corpse you planted last year in your garden, / Has it begun to sprout?”. (72-73)

The contrast between fertility and sterility serves to highlight modern disintegration, chaos and anarchy, reflecting a state of crisis. The sterility of modern civilization is obvious in lines such as the following:

What are the roots that clutch, what branches grow
Out of this stony rubbish? Son of man,
You cannot say, or guess, for you know only
A heap of broken images, where the sun beats,
And the dead tree gives no shelter, the cricket no relief. (20-24)

What is obvious is that nothing spiritual, heroic and idealistic can grow in this futile, barren and dead land. The stone, the trees and the sun, the broken idols – all represent the spiritual vacuum/ crisis of the modern world. There are many images, for example ‘London Bridge’ in the poem that portray the theme of disintegration – “London Bridge is falling down falling down falling down” (417). According to Williamson, “London Bridge presents an image of modern disintegration, of sinking into the river. And these fragments follow: Then he hid him in the fire which refines them . . . when shall I be as the swallow – O swallow swallow . . . the Prince of Aquitaine at the ruined tower” (152). London city, which Eliot mentions in the poem, is used here as a symbol of a barren world because the people of this city are devoid of ethical values. The poet writes:

Unreal City,
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. (59-64).

The city is unreal as it has no civic life. In this city, human beings seem to be nothing but ghostly figures. Eliot contrasts present-day London with ancient society to unmask the squalor and filthiness of the present. *The Waste Land* is, in fact, primarily regarded as a poem that epitomizes the chaotic life of both individuals and society in the twentieth century. Thematically, it reflects the disillusionment and depression of the post-

World War I generation. The world that Eliot portrays in *The Waste Land* is one in which faith in divinely ordered events and a rationally organized universe has been totally lost. Traditional order and fertility are replaced by sterility and waste. The poem is not just a reflection of individual hopelessness and despair, but a view of the total spiritual exhaustion that has overtaken the modern world. Sterile, modern-day human society is waiting for a revival or regeneration that may never come. In fact, the sterility of the modern waste land is emphasized through a range of parallels and contrasts, as Eliot draws on his wide knowledge of European culture and world religions. Eliot uses a network of references throughout the poem to highlight the sterility of London life and the London milieu which “represent a linked series of painful memories, regret, loss, resistance to life, and sordid sex” (Haffenden 384). He projects an image of degradation antithetical to the freshness and vitality of the past. The poet also represents the contrast between good and evil as well as past and present by three women characters, viz. Marie, the Hyacinth girl and Madame Sosostriis, who are “presented so as to expose and dismiss any lingering hopes of renewal through a cultured aristocracy, through the experience of romantic love and through what is no more than a superstitious version of spirituality” (Wilson 84). Countess Marie, a woman with aristocratic background, the confidante of Empress Elizabeth of Austria, turns into a rootless refugee having no connection with family, community and nation. Her present rootlessness is obvious in the following lines:

... coming over the Starnbergersee
 With a shower of rain; we stopped in the colonnade
 And went on in sunlight, into the Hofgarten,
 And drank coffee, and talked for an hour.
 Bin gar keine Russian, stamm aus Litauen, echt deutsch¹. (8-12)

Although the story of the hyacinth girl and her man is a story of romantic love, it truly represents sterile love because their love is devoid of fertility. They live like “neither / Leaving nor dead” (40-41), which emphasises that Marie, a symbol of aristocracy, is leading a meaningless life. The last example the poet gives in the poem to outline the spiritual crisis of modern people is that of Madame Sosostriis, a cunning and false fortune-teller. Despite her claims to foretell the future, neither of the cards she uses in fortune telling exhibits optimism; rather, every card she uses is a symbol of crisis in modern society. The card of the “drowned Phoenician sailor” (47) indicates something destructive, “Belladonna, the lady of the Rocks, / The lady of the situations” (49-50) is a sexual pimp, “the man with three staves” (51) refers to the Fisher King who is lusty, and “the one-eyed merchant” (52) denominates the modern man whose eye for commerce has survived although the eye of religion/ morality/ethics is blind. The final card which she does not find is “the Hanged Man” (55). This denotes that Christ is absent from this modern world. It might be pointed out that Eliot’s characters are not only particularized and individualized but also appear as voices that express the monotony, ennui, inertia and uncertainty of modern people.

One crucial predicament that wastelanders confront is the constant failure of communication, which again delineates the theme of crisis. This is first illustrated in the Hyacinth girl scene (35-41). She indicates that she is unable to speak, and therefore cannot communicate with the protagonist. Similarly, the poor woman says “Speak to me. Why do you never speak? Speak” (112). She feels the need to communicate but does not know how. The wastelanders are all locked up in their prison cells, thinking of the keys that will release them, yet failing to get release from prison. Their egotism, vanity and selfishness keep them from understanding each other. Finally, the encounter between the typist girl and the young man reinforces the problem of selfishness. Neither the typist nor her visitor is interested in each other. The typist girl, who like other wastelanders is “trapped in complicity, in misery, [and] suffering”, is quite careless about sex because it is loveless, routine work (Haffenden 383). Eliot expresses the distaste of the typist girl thus: “Well now that’s done: and I’m glad it’s over” (250). They just want to please themselves. Because of this narcissistic focus on the self, there is no communication between them. All these people are types. Therefore, their personal agony and suffering stand for the universal problems of human beings. David Seed thinks that in *The Waste Land* Eliot persistently implies “the absence of verbal communication reflect[ing] a lack of emotional contact. Love is referred to ... as something missing or degraded” (104). Near the beginning of Section II Eliot refers to the story of Philomel who is transformed into a nightingale and who filled the entire desert with her “inviolable voice”. “Inviolable” is a very important term here because it sets up a contrast between the purity of Philomel’s voice and a sterile landscape; even more importantly, it leads to a contrast with the dirty ears which hear her song.

The contrast between love and lust by which Eliot exposes the corruption of sex in modern society also depicts the theme of crisis. Sylvan scene depicts the change of Philomel, who was raped by King Tereus, husband of her sister Procne. Eliot states, “And still she cried, and still the world pursues” (102). The change of Philomela took place many centuries ago; yet it is still happening today. A second instance of sex, which is unendorsed by Christianity, occurs in the pub scene (140-172). Albert wants a good time and he does not care who he hurts to get it. He is not concerned about the possibility of his wife dying in childbirth. The attitude prevalent in society is that lust must be gratified, no matter what the consequences are. This theme is also seen in the sexual encounter of the typist girl and the young man (222-256), who “become human specimens enacting a meaningless sexual ritual” (Seed 101). The typist is bored and tired. The young man is flushed and decided. Eliot states, “His vanity requires no response, / And makes a welcome of indifference” (III. 241-242). He is not interested in exciting or pleasing her; he is only obsessed with his own satisfaction. ‘Love’ in modern society is not really love – it is merely the loveless gratification of carnal desire. It is practical, boring, and meaningless. Love was once treasured, but is now reduced to sex for pleasure and nothing else. In addition, Eliot contrasts the love of Elizabeth and Leicester (279) with lovers of the present day (represented by the Thames daughters). The love of the past was enduring and real, while the love of the modern world is transitory and phony. Cleanth Brooks says:

Love is the aesthetic of sex; lust is science. Love implies a deferring of the satisfaction of the desire; it implies a certain asceticism and a ritual. Lust drives forward urgently and scientifically to the immediate extirpation of the desire. Our contemporary waste land is in large part the result of our scientific attitude – of our complete secularization. Needless to say, lust defeats its own ends. The portrayal of the change of Philomel, by the barbarous king' is a fitting commentary on the scene which it ornaments (138-139).

Moreover, Lil's position is grim and hopeless. Utterly worn down by poverty, pregnancy and abortion, she is nevertheless expected to make herself 'a bit smart' and give Albert 'a good time'. Her plight resembles the sad condition of Ophelia and they both become objects of pity. In this corrupt world of sensuality, they cannot expect happiness; rather, they are seen as tortured, cheapened and denigrated beings. We can behold a contrast between man and woman in which the later is subjugated by the prior, revealing a crisis in power relations.

The poem's constant shifting from the present to the past and vice versa further underscores the theme of crisis. The ancient myths, classical legends, allusions to old literary masterpieces, landmarks in world history are all frequently juxtaposed in the context of contemporary events and personalities, casting a fresh and illuminating light on both the past and the present. Eliot was acutely aware of the conflicts, contradictions complexities and fragmentation taking place in his society. He offers a more general and much more complex contrast between the present and past by focusing on the symbol of the river Thames, where we see a depressing picture of the modern river in winter. In Eliot's poem the Thames is filthy and its 'nymphs' have used it for their sordid and clandestine sexual encounters. This past experience is linked ("Mixing / Memory with desire" 2-3) with a present yearning. Eliot writes, "And when we were children, staying at the arch-duke / Marie, hold on tight. And down we went (II. 13-16). The adult Marie is socially well-established and outwardly secure but she is inwardly restless and unsatisfied; she represents the typical individual of the chaotic modern world. Clarie Saunders comments: "Marie seems to me [her] by the social and political upheaval of the First World War but everyone, man or woman, whose apparently flourishing existence is, in fact, rootless" (48). In the central section of the poem, 'The Fire Sermon', the linking of present and past is achieved through the figure of Tiresias. In classical mythology Tiresias was distinctive for having experienced life and love both as a man and a woman. Eliot is utterly disillusioned about the society he has described as a waste land, but he does offer hope and a means of recovery. In Part V "What the Thunder Said", the three keywords of DA - Datta (give), Dayadhvam (sympathize) and Damayata (control) – are the keys to new life for the Waste Land. They are the antithesis of modern problems. If people learn to give, sex will gain new meaning as an expression of emotion and it will no longer be debased. If they sympathize with each other, they will be able to communicate their true feelings and listen to those of others. Finally, if they develop self-control, their faith will revive and they will no longer fear life or death.

“The Hollow Men” which is “a poem about the dilemmas of belief” and sometimes considered to be a mere appendage to *The Waste Land* also explores the theme of crisis (Cooper 55). This poem is charged with binary oppositions that spectacularly picture the crisis of hollow men of the modern waste land. The earth is itself a ‘dead land’ and the people living here are the ‘living-dead’. The epigraph of the poem contrasts the soul and body: “Mistah Kurtz – he dead. / A penny for the Old Guy”. Mister Kurtz, as we see in the novella, *The Heart of Darkness* by Joseph Conrad, is a European slave trader who had travelled to Africa in order to conduct his business; he is a character who lacks soul. So he is a true hollow man. And Old Guy Fawkes is a dummy/ puppet without body. Both represent physical and spiritual emptiness. At the very outset of the poem, the poet, showing the difference between the ideas of lack and abundance (hollow/stuffed), wants to voice what men lack and what they have in great quantities. The poem starts thus: “We are hollow men / We are the stuffed men. . .”(1-2) where hollow/ stuffed is a pair of binary opposites by which the poet shows the two different types of men or we can say double-standard of human mind – one being denuded of spirituality, the other is “Headpiece filled with straw” (4). This duality of human mind creates a crisis in society and gradually leads it to the dissection of its bond. In the fifth part of the poem, the poet shows the opposition between ‘idea/ reality’, ‘motion/act’, ‘conception/creation’, ‘emotion/response’, ‘desire/spasm’, ‘potency/ existence’ and ‘essence/ descent’, which comprehend both expectation and achievement together with failure in the last verse – ‘falls the shadow’ (68-90). To the poet, the people of this ‘cactus land’ do not have real value or significance, and so there are conflicts and crises everywhere. These conflicts and crises are responsible for demoralizing humanity and for destroying understanding, sympathy and respect. The outcome is an inescapable and inevitable split in the social fabric.

To sum up this section, we can say that by his use of myths, art of characterization, and description of the present situation of the world Eliot explores the theme of crisis as a split in society. His ideas are varied – “abstract and concrete, general and particular; and, like the musician’s phrases, they are arranged, not that they may tell us something, both that their effects in us may combine into a coherent whole of feeling and attitude and produce a peculiar liberation of the war” (Miller, *Land* 157).

IV

We can conclude that Yeats and Eliot explore the theme of crisis in their poetry by pointing out conflicts or contrasts between Nature / civilization; faery land / present world; past / present; antiquity / contemporaneity; sterility / fertility; body / spirit; life / death; fire / water; resurrection / death; hollow /stuffed; low society / high society; rich/ poor; bourgeois / proletariat; men / women; voice / silence; active / inactive; good / evil; reality / appearance; pure / corrupt; natural / unnatural; philosophy / myth; master / slave; dominance / subordination; power/ weak and so on. They deplore the fragmentation of modern society, which once had strong traditions, customs, values and the like. The poets are unhappy because the modern world is not conducive to equality, fraternity, and solidarity – values essential to foster a sense of well-being, wholesomeness and harmony

in society. In modern society, like Eliot nobody– including Yeats– can connect anything. Everything is disjointed: “On Margate Sands/ I can connect/ Nothing with nothing” (*The Waste Land* 300-302). These two poets maintain that “what once was a unity, gathering all together, has exploded into fragments. The isolated ego faces the other dimensions of existence across an empty space. Subjects, objects, words, other minds, the supernatural – each of these realms is fragments of a broken world” (Miller, *Reality* 2). They have eloquently shown that in modern world, “the unseen God of Arnold or Tennyson becomes the dead God of the Nietzsche” (Miller, *Reality* 2). The absence of moral and ethical values gives rise to perennial anguish, disquiet and chaos. It is, however, noteworthy that though both Yeats and Eliot handle the theme of crisis, the ramifications of their treatment are strikingly varied. Individual and distinctive inflections in their treatment of the same theme resulting from such ramifications lend a special potency, relevance and significance to their literary achievements.

Endnote

¹ “I’m not a Russian woman at all; I come from Lithuania, a true German.”

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