

Are We Living in T.S. Eliot's 'Waste Land'?

It's almost a century since T. S. Eliot shocked the world with the *avant garde* innovation of "[The Waste Land](#)," the fragmentary form of which reflected the fragmented brokenness of the modern world that it satirized. Like a modern-day inquisitor, Eliot questioned the value of modernity: "What are the roots that clutch, what branches grow out of this stony rubbish?" Nor was he afraid to answer his own question in scathingly blunt terms: "Son of man, you cannot say, or guess, for you know only a heap of broken images ..."

The poem presents a panoply of characters, all as vain as they are vacuous, signifying the synonymous nature of vanity and vacuity. Empty heads and empty hearts leading empty lives. Unreal people in an unreal city. Virtual people in a virtual reality devoid of virtue.

The crowd of commuters flowing over London Bridge, their heads as full of brown fog as the suffocating smog through which they walk. "So many," says Eliot, echoing Dante, "I had not thought death had undone so many." Dead men walking.

The typist. A type we all know. A soul dehumanized by her mindless mechanical job and her mindless mechanical life. Her drying underwear, "perilously spread" and "touched by the sun's last rays," prophesy the loss of her virginity, sacrificed with passionless pathos as the "young man carbuncular" makes his move: "Exploring hands encounter no defence; his vanity requires no response, and makes a welcome of indifference." Having done with her, he bestows "one final patronizing kiss, and gropes his way, finding the stairs unlit." Mechanical sex as a mindless distraction in her mindless, mechanical life. "Well now that's done," she mutters to herself, "and I'm glad it's over." Will she say the same of

her life when it, too, is touched by the sun's last rays? Is it as meaningless as her maidenhood?

The poet, recoiling from the horror of modernity's madness and seeking life-giving water in the arid desert of the waste land, finds, at the moment of the poem's conclusion, the peace that passeth understanding and the faith that heals.

Years later, Miss Prim, a character in a recent bestselling novel, [*The Awakening of Miss Prim*](#) by Natalia Sanmartin Fenollera, follows in the poet's footsteps, rejecting the Waste Land for the breath of life: "She didn't want to go back. She couldn't bear the thought of burying herself again in that dark, narrow place, shutting herself up in the dull gray cell where she'd spent so much of her life." And then, in beautiful poetic prose, she voices the longing to escape from the suffocating atmosphere of technological unreality into the freshness of the real world, emerging from virtual reality to reality itself and breathing it in with freedom-filled lungs:

There was also the matter of air. Miss Prim now needed air. She needed to feel it on her face as she walked, to smell it, to breathe it. Sometimes she found herself wondering how she' lived so long without the need for air. On winter mornings in the city she left home wrapped up to her ears, scurried to the underground, descended the steps with dozens of other people, and shoved and jostled her way onto a train. She emerged with the crowds and rushed to her office, where she spent a long day. Meanwhile, where was the air? At what point in her life had she forgotten about the existence of air? Walking without having to rush, a pleasure as simple as taking a stroll, wandering, ambling, even idling – when had something so ordinary, so humble, become a luxury?

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[IMAGE CREDIT: Pixabay]