

Modernism and the Crisis of Civilisation: A Comparative Study of “The Waste Land” and “Australia”

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Abstract

This paper examines the representation of the crisis of civilisation in T. S. Eliot’s “The Waste Land” (1922) and A. D. Hope’s “Australia” (1943) within the broader context of Modernism. Both poems, emerging in the aftermath of World War I, convey profound cultural disintegration, spiritual emptiness, and intellectual crisis. Eliot’s work portrays a fragmented Western civilisation characterised by a loss of faith, moral decay, and existential despair, while Hope critiques the sterility and derivative nature of the colonial Australian identity. Through a comparative analysis of imagery, symbolism, tone, structure, and philosophical foundations, this study contends that both poets diagnose the crisis of modernity from distinct yet converging perspectives. Eliot’s deeply allusive and fragmented poetic method reflects the breakdown of meaning, whereas Hope’s controlled and ironic style reveals the hollowness of transplanted culture. Despite their bleak portrayals, both texts suggest the possibility of regeneration. Eliot through spiritual transcendence rooted in Eastern philosophy and Hope through the potential for intellectual awakening.

Keywords: Modernism, Crisis, Civilisation, Hollowness, Intellectual Awakening

Introduction

The early twentieth century witnessed a radical transformation in literary sensibility with the rise of Modernism, a movement deeply shaped by the catastrophic impact of World War I. The war shattered faith in progress, reason, and stable cultural values, producing what many critics have described as a crisis of civilisation. Authors responded by rejecting traditional literary forms and embracing fragmentation, ambiguity, and experimentation. Within this context, T. S. Eliot’s “The Waste Land” emerges as a quintessential modernist text, portraying a spiritually desolate and culturally fragmented world. The poem’s discontinuous structure, multiple voices, and dense allusions reflect the breakdown of coherence in modern life. In contrast, A. D. Hope’s “Australia” offers a critique of the cultural and intellectual barrenness of Australian society. While less formally experimental, Hope’s poem engages with modernist concerns through satire and irony, exposing the limitations of a colonial culture dependent on European traditions and values.

A. D. Hope’s poem “Australia” showcases his complex interest in nature. While he initially depicts the landscape, he avoids the traditional, colourful “natural beauty” found in other poetry. As the poem progresses, the writer’s perspective shifts; he mentions military uniforms to symbolise destruction,

instilling a sense of fear rather than pride. His patriotism is not “blind” but rather the critical love of a true patriot who wishes to expose reality. He is deeply concerned by his country’s despair and its lack of cultural harmony. Hope highlights a “cultural desert” where unique music and stories are missing, leaving the people’s lives difficult and devoid of joy. Ultimately, he suggests that Australians should look beyond themselves and work toward the development of their nation. His deep dissatisfaction serves as a harsh critique of the country’s current state.

On the other hand, Eliot rejected the view that “The Waste Land” expressed the disillusionment of a generation, that is, of the post-war generation; the poet maintained that the poem had an immediate relevance to the temper and state of mind of the people belonging to the time at which the poem was written. At the same time, it must be recognised that the poem deals with a universal dilemma, that it reveals the state of affairs that characterised all ages in the past and that characterises the contemporary world. In other words, the poem is visionary and timeless. Thus, we may describe the character of this poem by saying that the essence of Eliot’s method lies in having created and enacted in this poem experiences that are both timeless and timely. That the poem relates to the post-war European conditions of life does not need to be laboured. It is a self-evident fact. Post-war Europe presented an immense panorama of futility and anarchy, and Eliot’s poem was an attempt to give shape and significance to that panorama. The critic who called this poem a “social document” was right. The poem gives us an authentic impression of the mentality of educated people in the psychological slump that took place immediately after World War I. It makes us aware of the nervous exhaustion, the mental disintegration, the exaggerated self-consciousness, the boredom, and the pathetic groping after the fragments of a shattered faith – all those symptoms of the psychic disease that ravaged Europe mercilessly like an epidemic. Eliot takes us into the very heart of “The Waste Land”, which was post-war Europe, and makes us realise to the full the plight of a whole generation. That generation is effectively symbolised by the shrivelled Cumaean Sibyl of the epigraph, with her desperate wish to die; by Madame Sosostriis, the fraudulent fortune-teller who knows nothing of the mysteries of life; by Mrs Equitone, to whom life has lost all variety and distinction; by Mrs Porter and Sweeney, an old procuress and her crude client; by the lady of situations, a victim of her own nerves and of the hysterical relationship with her lover; by Lil, who looks so antique while she is still thirty-one; by the typist and her seducer going through the sex act in an indifferent, mechanical, routine-like manner; by the demobbed Albert, who wants a good time, as do the loitering heirs of city directors; by Mr Eugenides, the dubious merchant; and so on.

Atul Kumar represents “The Waste Land” as a modern rewriting of classical myth, addressing modern sterility, alienation and the search for renewal through the transformation of ancient narratives. Jitendra explores “The Waste Land” by T. S. Eliot, a pre-postmodern poem with intertextuality, fragmentation, discontinuity in narrative structure and deconstruction of meaning. But there is not any researcher who specifically compares T. S. Eliot’s “The Waste Land” and A. D. Hope’s “Australia” as a modernist crisis of civilisation. This paper undertakes a comparative study of these two poems to explore how each articulates the crisis of civilisation in distinct yet interconnected ways.

Modernist Crisis of Civilisation in T. S. Eliot’s “The Waste Land” and A. D. Hope’s “Australia”

At the heart of both poems lies a profound sense of barrenness, spiritual in Eliot’s case and cultural in Hope’s. Eliot opens “The Waste Land” with the famous line, “April is the cruellest month, breeding lilacs out of the dead land...” (lines 1–2). Traditionally, April symbolises renewal and rebirth in many cultures. However, Eliot subverts this association by presenting regeneration as a painful process. The “dead land”

signifies a spiritually exhausted civilisation incapable of sustaining life. This paradox reflects the modernist sense that renewal itself has become unbearable in a world devoid of meaning. Furthermore, Eliot writes, “A heap of broken images, where the sun beats” (line 22). This line encapsulates the fragmentation of the modern consciousness. The “heap” suggests disorder, while “broken images” symbolises the collapse of cultural coherence. Civilisation is no longer a unified whole but rather a collection of disconnected fragments.

In contrast, “Australia” begins with a similarly subversive claim: “They call her a young country, but they lie” (line 5). Hope immediately challenges the myth of the nation’s vitality. The phrase “but they lie” introduces a tone of scepticism, suggesting that Australia’s supposed youth masks deeper stagnation. The landscape imagery reinforces this idea: “A woman beyond her change of life, a breast still tender but within the womb is dry” (lines 7–8). Here, Hope employs a striking metaphor for sterility. The land is feminised but rendered barren and incapable of reproduction. This image parallels Eliot’s “dead land”, although Hope’s focus is more explicitly biological and cultural. Eliot’s barrenness is metaphysical and universal, reflecting the collapse of Western civilisation, whereas Hope’s is localised and cultural, exposing the limitations of the colonial identity. However, both converge in their portrayal of a world devoid of vitality.

Disillusionment is a defining feature of modernist literature, and both poets articulate it through their depictions of urban life. Eliot writes, “Unreal City, under the brown fog of a winter dawn” (lines 60–61). The “Unreal City” represents modern London as a space of alienation. The “brown fog” obscures vision, symbolising moral and spiritual confusion. Later, Eliot describes the crowd: “I had not thought death had undone so many” (line 63). This line, echoing Dante’s *Inferno*, suggests that the living are spiritually dead in the modern world. The city is a site of mass dehumanisation. In *The Fire Sermon*, Eliot presents a mechanical sexual encounter: “The typist home at teatime, clears her breakfast, lights....He, the young man carbuncular, arrives,” (lines 222–231). This scene depicts intimacy devoid of emotion, reflecting the degradation of human relationships. Hope’s critique is more overtly satirical: “Her five cities, like five teeming sores” (line 17). The simile reduces urban centres to pathological growths, undermining the notion of progress. The word “sores” conveys decay and corruption. Eliot presents disillusionment as tragic and existential, whereas Hope uses irony and satire to expose mediocrity. However, both reveal a deep dissatisfaction with modern civilisation.

Eliot’s imagery is highly allusive and draws on texts such as the Bible and Eastern philosophy. “Here is no water but only rock” (line 331). Water symbolises life and renewal, and its absence signifies a spiritual drought. Hope’s imagery is more direct. The rivers are like veins in a body that is dead. This metaphor presents the land as lifeless, reinforcing the notion of cultural sterility. Eliot’s symbolism is complex and intertextual, requiring active interpretation, whereas Hope’s imagery is more immediate and accessible. Eliot’s poem is divided into five sections, each marked by fragmentation and shifting perspectives. This disjointed form mirrors the chaos of modern life. However, Hope employs a controlled structure that reflects classical poetic traditions. Eliot’s form embodies disorder, whereas Hope’s imposes order to critique disorder. Eliot evokes existential dread while Hope employs satire.

Despite their bleakness, both poems suggest a renewal. Eliot concludes, “Shantih shantih shantih” (line 434). This Sanskrit phrase signifies a spiritual peace. Hope writes, “The desert prophets come” (line 24), suggesting a potential transformation.

Conclusion

Both “The Waste Land” and “Australia” are powerful modernist responses to the crisis of civilisation shaped by World War I. Eliot’s fragmented, allusive style captures the spiritual desolation of Western civilisation, while Hope’s satirical and structured approach critiques the cultural emptiness of a colonial society. Despite differences in form and tone, both poems converge in their exploration of decay, disillusionment, and the possibility of regeneration, making them essential texts for understanding Modernism. We may thus regard “The Waste Land” as an epitome of the “Decade of Despair”, which followed World War I. The poem aims at presenting to us the various crosscurrents, emotional, intellectual, and psychological, which together contributed to the general atmosphere of that unhappy period. It is chiefly a study of a cross-section of all the people who were thinking and feeling at a time when thought and emotion were particularly confused and disturbed. As such, it is not just a document of that period; it is the document par excellence, a picture of the composite mind of the generation which succeeded to the legacy of World War I.

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