

The Water Ethic: An Elemental-Ecocritical Reading of T S Eliot's *The Waste Land*

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Abstract

The recent scholarship has evidently established the nexus between modernism and ecocriticism which reinforces modernist writers' anxiety of humans' changing relationship with nature. T S Eliot, one of the high priests of modernism, not only displays the evolving urban landscape but also cautions us about an imminent diseased and dysfunctional world. To further the burgeoning ecocritical discussion for understanding Eliot's poetry, this paper explores the depiction of one crucial elemental matter – water – in his literary masterpiece *The Waste Land*, and argues how water is presented as a dynamic entity in contrast to being a passive and fixed matter. Referring to some of the recent scholarship of elemental ecocriticism, eco materialism, and environmental ethics, it aims to discuss how humanity's failure to recognize water's agency has wrecked the earth, forcing us to live in a waste land. Thus, this paper is an attempt to read *The Waste Land* as a water ethic that recognizes a world of reciprocity and cautions us not to treat the non-human world as a commodity.

Keywords: Elemental Ecocriticism, Water Ethic, Ecomaterialism, *Revenge of the Thing*

Reading T S Eliot's *The Waste Land* as a cautionary tale of a degenerating civilization which is alienated from its harmonious connection with the natural world is no longer startling in the era of the Anthropocene. Though Eliot is primarily read as an urban poet whose focus is modern humans and their spiritual crisis in a post-industrialized world, he has been recently rediscovered by ecocritics who argue that his writings are loaded with environmental nuances. Like many other modernist writers, Eliot's discontent over human beings' changing relationship with nature can be traced in a number of his poems which informs us of a materialist and paralyzed society. To contribute to the ongoing ecocritical discussion for understanding Eliot's poetry, I explore the depiction of water in *The Waste Land*, arguing that water is presented as a dynamic and vibrant entity in contrast to being an inert thing. Drawing on the recent scholarship of ecocriticism, eco materialism, and environmental ethics, I discuss how humanity's failure to recognize water's agency has devastated the earth, compelling us to live in a waste land. Furthering Jane Bennett's idea of *thing-power*, I also develop the notion of *revenge of the thing* which results from treating the non-human world as a commodity and a space for exploitation. This paper, thus, is an effort to read *The Waste Land* as a carrier of environmental ethic that can remind us to show respect to nature and disown extreme human hubris.



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Contrary to popular belief that modernism is in opposition to nature, this literary movement has gradually proved how modernist texts can offer valuable resources for ecocriticism. A majority of the modernist writers showcase, through their work, a self-conscious testimony to the profound changes in human relations with the planet. Many modernist texts involve a crucial questioning of conventional ideas about nature, challenging our anthropocentric worldview. Modernism laments not only the loss of a center and the sense of alienation from the self and the society but also mankind's separation from the natural world. The "hyperseparation" between the human and the non-human world that commenced especially since the Industrial Revolution in western civilization reached its zenith in the early twentieth century (Plumwood 47-55). Modernist literature may, sometimes, affirm to traditional, romantic views of nature, but it also productively questions and problematizes them. A sustained interest in the natural world, portrayed either with a sense of agency and immediacy, or with a profoundly disturbing absence, can be traced in the works of writers such as E M Forster, T S Eliot, Virginia Woolf, Edward Thomas, and W H Auden. Critic Anne Raine considers that modernist texts bring forth a new environmental sensibility that is evident in the portrayal of destruction and displacement of the natural world brought by the new techno-scientific practices, forcing nature to recede "into the past or into the margins of modernity" (101). Though they might not directly address the environmental anxieties, these texts anticipate the evolution of ecological discourse that "complicate, critique, historicize, or abandon the concept of nature" (Raine 103). Elizabeth Black, in a similar vein, explores the importance of nature, place, and the environment to British modernist poetry, and discovers a haunting loss of some vital connection to the earth in the writings of some major poets including T S Eliot. Strongly arguing why modernism should be a crucial area of interest for ecocritics, she suggests that applying ecocritical insights does not encompass "anachronistically foisting current environmental opinions" onto modernist texts, but rather foregrounds "existing anxieties" in order to gain a deeper understanding of artistic responses to the natural world (40).

On a similar note, Etienne Terblanche in *T S Eliot, Poetry, and Earth: The Name of the Lotus Rose*, arguably the first full-length book discussing Eliot's poems ecocritically, investigates an ecopoetic understanding of Eliot's poetry in connection to new materialism. In his opinion, the most important aspect of Eliot's "Earth-engagement" is how his poetry rediscovers in a remarkable manner the way that leads from nothingness to something meaningful (185). Eliot's recognition of nature's agency is evident in his portrayal of natural entities which apparently look inert, but gradually transform into something vibrant. Terblanche argues that earth has agency and vibrancy which is not non-responsive to human action. Considering Eliot's poetry as an anticipation of the concept of new materialism, he suggests that his major poems refuse to consider the non-human world in reductionist or essentialist terms. Seeking new perspectives on the conventional dichotomies such as nature vs. culture, being vs. thing, material vs. immaterial, new materialist ecocriticism

prevents the idea of living with idealized nature in union and harmony that is pervasive in traditional environmental imagination. Those who reduce matter to simple matter, refusing to acknowledge its agency, end up in a “Prufrock’s dilemma” in a post-industrialized world (Terblanche 186). Briefly discussing Eliot’s concern for the polluted Thames, he also suggests how his poetry criticizes a materialist culture that simply disregards its connections with nature. Thus, an exciting nexus between ecocriticism and Eliot’s modernist poetry can be traced in the recent ecocritical discourse that mostly developed in the last three decades.

Exploring Eliot’s poetry with an ecocritical lens can offer new insights into both the individual poet and the modernist imagination of nature. A reevaluation of Eliot as a landscape poet is crucial to appreciating the vast array of his poetic engagements which is often associated with “urban spaces, social commentary and linguistic experimentation” (Black 7). Elizabeth Black’s discussion of *The Waste Land* as a disturbing vision of a society that is “estranged from nature and on the brink of environmental collapse” strongly substantiates the idea that environmental catastrophe is a central concern in the poem (7). She furthers the argument by considering the poem as a prophecy of “environmental crisis and climate change,” and alluding to Eliot’s broader observations in other writings on the dangers of intensive farming and the exhaustion of natural resources by modern industry (89). In the same vein, Terblanche argues that *The Waste Land* adumbrates what we now term “global warming and the ecological crisis” which is manifested in the individual and collective disconnection of humans from the earth in form of the deficiency and desertification (71). Whether the discussion of global warming and climate change in relation to the poem is far-reaching or anachronistic can certainly be a matter of debate. However, the recent ecocritical inclination towards modernism confirms that the poem has potential environmental messages and concerns that require serious study. To further this ecopoetic understanding of Eliot’s *The Waste Land*, I explore the portrayal of one particular entity of our environment – water. Though both Terblanche and Black refer to water briefly in their discussion of the poem, the absence/presence of water is so pervasive in the construction of the poem that it itself requires a close reading ecocritically. In the process, this paper, primarily informed by elemental ecocriticism, materialism ecocriticism, and environmental ethics, intends to add something substantial to the emerging ecopoetic discourse of Eliot’s poetry.

The centrality of water to *The Waste Land*, both literally and symbolically, denotes the crucial place of water in our planetary life. Although Eliot was not writing as a hydrologist, and he was more invested in the symbolic nature of water in the construction of the sterility/fertility question, his emphasis on the pivotal role of water as a source of rejuvenation and as a protector of the cycle of nature cannot be overlooked. The poem’s constant reference to water and rain in the expressions such as “dead land,” “dull roots,” “stony rubbish,” “dead tree,” “dry stone,” “brown land,” “dull canal,” “damp gust,” “limp leaves,” “arid plain” and so on along with

the chanting for rain and invocation of two significant rivers, the Thames and the Ganga, reminds us of a framework of water imagery that holds the poem together. Water in *The Waste Land* can be read not only as a backdrop of modern humans' suffering or a spiritual symbol of resurrection but also as a catalyst for driving readers into a required environmental discussion. The dynamism of water as presented in the poem refuses to accept its identity as passive and fixed. In this respect, the poem anticipates a recent development of the ecocritical discourse namely elemental ecocriticism. Elemental ecocriticism is a brilliant attempt to make humans aware of the significance of elemental materiality both inside the human body and the outside world. The recently published book *Elemental Ecocriticism* seeks an elementally invested ecocriticism that explores in fictional and critical texts "a lush archive for thinking ecology anew" (Cohen and Duckert 4). The book primarily addresses all the four major elements – earth, air, fire, and water – and their "promiscuous combinations," that functions within "a humanly knowable scale while extending an irresistible invitation to inhuman realms" (Cohen and Duckert 7). According to Cohen and Duckert, the editors of the book and also the authors of the introduction, water, like any other foundational element, is never still, never straight forward, and never reducible, but rather is "lively as language" (8). Emphasizing the materiality of water, they argue that humans must not ignore the lively, metamorphosis power of elemental matters. Cohen and Duckert provocatively ask: "How did we cease to know that earth, air, fire, and water move, rebel, ally, crush, and desire?" (5). They urge us to reconsider our traditional and anthropocentric way of looking at water in an attempt to understand human's complex dynamics with water.

Along the same lines, considering water as a prominent figure in environmental imagination, Serpil Oppermann and Serenella Iovino in "Wandering Elements and Natures to Come" argue how water signifies, symbolizes, and evokes images, emotions, and reveries, including our fluidic existence in the womb. They discuss elements such as water as "generative, always becoming, always in flux, going through inevitable stages of metamorphosis" (310). The portrayal of water in *The Waste Land* echoes an analogous form of ecomateriality when water is presented as responsible for the great change of the earth. The dry land is pining for rejuvenation brought on by water. The poem is not a simplistic representation of human-caused disaster, environmental or otherwise, that results in making everyone and/or everything suffer. Rather, it portrays the complex dynamics of environment by making water an active agent in answering back to human actions. The absence of water is so impactful in the poem that modern men are overwhelmed by its agency. Hermit thrush-like-modern men's chanting of drip drop drip drop is an expression of their powerlessness against the mighty water as they recognize that water has withdrawn itself, and resultantly, "the dead tree gives no shelter, the cricket no relief, / And the dry stone no sound of water" (19-24).

Water figures prominently in the aesthetic design of the poem, embodying itself in the form of rivers, canals, seas, and rain. All forms of water are shown as

dysfunctional: the deep sea is swelling where the body of Phlebas is devoured, the canal is dull, the rain is suspended, and the river is sweating “[o]il and tar” where “[t]he barges drift / With the turning tide” (267-269). Thus, the poem depicts water not as a mere resource or an inert matter, but as vibrant and active. The manifested dysfunctionality of water does not make itself weaker; rather it imbues water with more agency, making it more destructive. The representation of dynamism of a thing in art cannot be only limited to its affirmative and exuberant conditioning. The argument that aesthetics should avoid such things as the disgusting and the disturbing was already challenged by the modernist experimentation. In this regard, Terblanche argues how Eliot’s modern aesthetics have long been counting on opposites in creating a counter aesthetics to convey his ideas meaningfully. He believes Eliot showed us that the aesthetic should not be “confused with the artificial, the ugly-denying, or the decorative” (186). Thus, Eliot’s negative aesthetics of water should not be confused with its inertia and compliance. Water, on the contrary, is manifestly responding to human actions. Its anger and frustration are evident in its refusal to tolerate any more human burden. In the poem, the Thames refuses to swallow human-made garbage:

The river bears no empty bottles, sandwich papers,
Silk handkerchiefs, cardboard boxes, cigarette ends
Or other testimony of summer nights. (177-179)

Is it a silent fury? No. Eliot immediately adds to the last line the grave consequence: “The nymphs are departed” (179). The ethos of the poem suggests that humans are as vulnerable as the nymphs; if not physical, the spiritual death of humans is complete. Water, thus, is presented with an agency that can greatly impact its surroundings, changing the course of events. Water is certainly not reduced to a simple matter in reductionist or essentialist terms. Hence, the poem can offer a new materiality that is not centered around humans only since it strongly considers the recognition of the agency of the non-human world. Eliot seems to attend to elemental matters, giving back agency to nature, and writes against the reduction of the non-human world to a commodity and resource. Thus, the extent to which Eliot’s poetry anticipates eco materialism is a matter of critical study.

Eco materialism or material ecocriticism, a nexus between ecocriticism and new materialism, offers new ways of exploring language and reality, mind and matter, human and non-human, nature and culture, and so on. It engages in the complex discussion of “the agency of matter, and the interplay between the human and nonhuman in a field of distributed effectuality and of inbuilt material-discursive dynamics” (Oppermann and Iovino, “Material Ecocriticism” 79). Material ecocriticism opens up new textual possibilities of the materiality portrayed in art and literature, re-negotiating the boundary of customary human agency. *The Waste Land’s* tendency to echo an eco materialism is germane when we witness water not only as a dynamic matter but also as an *actant*. Scholar Bruno Latour coins the

term *actant* to refer to an active agent that has efficacy and can perform things. He describes *actant* as “any entity that modifies another entity in a trial,” something whose “competence is deduced from [its] performance” (237). Water portrayed in *The Waste Land* endorses Latours’s idea of *actant* as it engenders immense effects that can change the course of events and offers ample agency that can make a difference. The way the absence of water overpowers the landscape, making the human civilization a waste land, signifies its superior agency over humans.

However, water seems to rise above its *actant* form and alters itself into a *thing-power* in the poem. *Thing-power* is an idea developed by Jane Bennett that she establishes in her discussion of vibrant materiality of things. Bennett in her renowned book *Vibrant Matter* proposes a “vibrant materialism” that fundamentally subverts the anthropocentric dichotomy between life and matter, beings and things, and organic and inorganic. What she seeks to achieve is to foreground “the material agency or effectivity of nonhuman or not-quite human things” (viii). Analyzing the idea of *thing-power*, she argues how ordinary items can surpass their status as objects, exhibiting vestiges of individuality or aliveness. Though her idea of *thing-power* is predominantly related to man-made objects/matters/materials, the magnitude of her discussion is so broad that one can expand the idea to other natural elements. Bennett’s concept of vital materiality can be useful to corroborate the claim made above: “We are vital materiality and we are surrounded by it, though we do not always see it that way” (14). If a plastic bottle, some pollen, and a dead rat can be lively, vibrant, and self-organizing, as discussed by Bennett, why not water? Bennett may not precisely refer to inorganic elements like water as a *thing-power*, yet, her assertion of “a liveliness intrinsic to the materiality of the thing” is inclusive enough to imply that all matters, organic or inorganic, may fit in the category of vital materiality (xvi). Furthering her idea of *thing-power*, this paper suggests that water portrayed in the poem reveals such vitality and agency, particularly when obstructed and exploited, that we can consider its response as the *revenge of the thing*.

Bennett’s concept of *thing-power* which is capable of animating and producing “effects dramatic and subtle” answers for what water does to its environs in *The Waste Land* (6). The revenge of water is demonstrated in its withdrawal from its natural course, in its refusal to cooperate with the human world. The repetitive invocation of water in Section V: “What the Thunder Said” reflects not only its desirability and supremacy but also its retreating void:

If there were water
And no rock
If there were rock
And also water
And water (346-350)

Rivers, canals, seas not only throw back the garbage onto their banks but also cause

the death of animals and plants. Before water overpowers the land, as we can see in the poem, it hurt nymphs, hermit thrush, trees, roots, and leaves. More miserably, water here is not presented as it classically appears in stories such as the story of Noah's Ark in the Genesis. Section IV titled "Death by Water" clearly states that there is no chance for redemption and regeneration. Phlebas the Phoenician, now dead, is at the mercy of the deep sea that refuses to accept his body. Unlike as described in the mythical Greek underworld that shelters souls of the dead, here the sea devours his body indifferently: "A current under sea / Picked his bones in whispers" (315-316). This section satisfies one of the prophecies of Madame Sosostriis in the poem's first section, when she warns the speaker, uttering "[f]ear death by water," after pulling the card of the drowned Sailor (55). Black, in the same spirit, warns us that the dynamics of the waste land is a cautionary tale against exploiting and neglecting the natural world, on which our ultimate survival depends. Reminding us of the autonomous force of nature which consumes Phlebas and strips his body to its bones, she rightly argues: "the sea has no reverence for human attributes such as youth or beauty" (100). An ecocritical reading of this shortest section in *The Waste Land* can offer an understanding of the vulnerability of humans and a reminder of extreme human hubris. Showcasing the power of water, this section exposes, as Bennett uses in reference to the human's treatment to non-human world, the futility of "human hubris" and "earth-destroying fantasies of conquest and consumption" (xi). Ironically, here it is the humans who finally are consumed by the earth's elements. Thus, aesthetically challenging human hubris, water, as a vibrant matter teeming with agency and power, reminds us to question our anthropocentric, hierarchical understanding of the non-human world.

The British author John Fowles describes the sea as our evolutionary amniotic fluid, the elemental entity in which we were "once enwombed, from which our own antediluvian line rose into light and air" (282). While his discussion establishes the centrality of water in the evolution of the planet, we are also reminded that if this primal force is a giver of life in this planet, it may take that life back as well. There can be no denying that water and the rest of the planet are elementally intertwined. The failure to realize the planet loaded with elements that are bound by love and pulled apart by strife, creating "a swirled mess of obligation," can cost the whole planet greatly (Cohen and Duckert 20). In *The Waste Land*, the natural cycle of water is clogged as there is no rain. Water no longer presents itself in its pristine form, rather as polluted, unclean, and dull. Resultantly, the modern landscape is presented as an infertile, meaningless, and fragmented space that requires the blessing of water. Hence, the meditative prayer to water to show pity on us and to make the earth livable again is implied throughout the poem:

By the waters of Leman I sat down and wept ...
 Sweet Thames, run softly till I end my song,
 Sweet Thames, run softly, for I speak not loud or long. (173-184)

The poem seems to make us acknowledge the supremacy of water by recognizing its agency. The way water answers back to humans' actions by changing its ways and forms can be suggestive of its metamorphic nature on which we humans do not have control. Thus, there is no denying that *The Waste Land* can cater to diverse environmental ethical schools of thought since it apparently documents, as this paper argues, a water ethic that advocates the recognition of water as a dynamic and powerful agent.

At the center of any environmental ethics is the idea of respect to the diversity of the planet. This respect should not spring from the fact that the non-human world is useful to us for its instrumental value. Rather, it should originate from a sense of awe that we all are interconnected in a symbiotic matrix. In this respect, Aldo Leopold's idea of "the land ethic" can be crucial, which sensibly addresses man's relation to the earth. First published in 1949, Leopold's classic book *A Sand County Almanac*, and especially his essay "The Land Ethic" can be considered one of the earliest texts that initiated the environmental ethics discourse. To Leopold, land is not merely soil; rather it "enlarges the boundaries of the community to include soils, waters, plants, and animals, or collectively: the land" (204). His land ethic proposes a symbiotic relationship between humans and land that should grow out of respect. He believes a direct communication is required with nature beyond our own self-interest to extend our ethical position. Considering man-made changes more severe and comprehensive than evolutionary changes, Leopold states: "Waters, like soil, are part of the energy circuit. Industry, by polluting waters or obstructing them with dams, may exclude the plants and animals necessary to keep energy in circulation" (217). Therefore, he proposes an ethical relation to earth that cannot exist without love, respect, and admiration for land, and a high esteem for its value. His biocentric holistic embrace of the whole ecosystem as something valuable which deserves respect and preservation is crucial to my discussion of water as a dynamic entity that is worthy of respect. *The Waste Land* shows that if one elemental entity like water goes out of balance, the whole earth suffers imbalance. If we intend to obfuscate and conquer "a fountain of energy flowing through a circuit of soils, plants, and animals," we must be prepared to live a ghostly life of memory and desire in an arid plain (Leopold 216). The phrasing of the title of this paper, "The Water Ethic," is, thus, an appropriation of Leopold's idea of the land ethic. Hence, a water ethic, like Leopold's land ethic, changes the role of humans from a conqueror of the earth to a plain member of it.

A water ethic is a non-anthropocentric approach that celebrates the integrity, stability, and beauty of the earth, respecting all its organic and inorganic entities for a healthy planet. All species, all organisms, all entities, all ecosystems should be treated as having their own unique, intrinsic value that cannot be substituted. *The Waste Land* can certainly be read as an attempt to recognize this value of non-human entities through its display of agency and *thing-power* of water. The revenge of water tells an alternative tale of vulnerable human civilization, humbling humans' lofty vision of

themselves. It signals the anthropocentric mindset of humans that constantly blinds us about the life-flow that surrounds us. The crowd crossing the London bridge briefly exhibits our negligence of the constant presence of nature: “A crowd flowed over London Bridge, / ... / And each man fixed his eyes before his feet” (60-63). The crowd seems to be obsessed with their lives, their loss, their sufferings, nonchalant about the life of the Thames which has literally functioned as a life-force for the city of London. It is, then, not surprising why the speaker laments in the final section: “London Bridge is falling down falling down falling down” (427). An ecocritical interpretation of the falling can be understood as a failure to connect with the Thames respectfully. In this regard, the poem seems to address what Cohen and Duckert call “the binding of the elements” through love and respect. Reminding us of the “swirled mess of obligation,” they argue how earth, air, fire, water, interstices, and impossible hybridities with which we are coextensive are “intimate aliens” (20). The common materiality among all things on earth should bind us together with a common purpose for a mutually respectful co-existence.

Thus, *The Waste Land* adumbrates an environmental ethics making us aware of the inherent value of non-human entities and championing the idea of respecting nature. Even if the poem is burdened with the disturbing and dreadful images of water, its faith on “a flash of lightning,” “a damp gust,” and “black clouds” to bring rain, finally, signals a return to Mother Nature (394-397). This return signifies a revival of faith and respect, even if it occurs in a limited fashion. Though the Ganga does not promise its blessing, the poem’s much-discussed chanting of *shantih shantih shantih* in the end faintly signals a restoration. In Eastern mythology, the Ganga is worshiped as a river goddess, which signifies a reverence for the power of nature. The tales of mythical, magical power of natural entities maintained in ancient cultures can be compared with the present-day dynamics of agency and intrinsic value delineated in environmental ethics discourse. However, a water ethic relevant to the age of the Anthropocene requires more complex understanding in the light of elemental ecocriticism and eco materialism. Water needs to be understood as a dynamic entity that has immense metamorphic power to change the course of action. Apart from considering water as a crucial life forming element that demands respect, we should recognize its intricate agency and power of retaliation. This shift in ethical position is required to understand water as, in Cohen and Duckert’s words, “a storied tumble of relation, sudden rupture, and material burgeoning” (8). Acknowledging the materiality and fluidity of water can help re-define our complex relationship with it. A new water ethic, thus, is a call for hope that foregrounds the shared materiality of humans and the non-human world.

The ecocritical discourse embedded in Eliot’s *The Waste Land* problematizes our anthropocentric understanding of the poem that tends to focus mostly on the interest and existence of the modern individual humans. It requires us to take an ethical position environmentally, which can stimulate a symbiotic relationship between humans and the non-human world. Eliot’s modernist aesthetics, thus,

brings forward not only a modern man's alienation from the society but also an alienation from the natural world. The crucial presence of water in the poem aptly reminds us that if the reciprocity between human and nature suffers, the earth is no longer a healthy place to live. Thus, the implied water ethic demands our respect and our recognition of its intrinsic value, metamorphic power, and agency. The disputes within the ecocritical discourse over intrinsic/non-intrinsic value, thing/object, biocentric/ecocentric individualism/holism, moral agency and so on might pose a challenge to our understanding of the non-human world and our relation and response to it. However, what is crucial is not to be bogged down by the conflicting ideas, but to claim moral responsibility of human actions. In this regard, we can, once again, turn to Leopold who sensibly asserts: "A thing is right when it tends to preserve the integrity, stability, and beauty of the biotic community. It is wrong when it tends otherwise" (224–225). The eco-poetic aesthetics of *The Waste Land* powerfully kindles that right and wrong in us, reminding that nature was integral to modernist imagination as much as it is to us today.

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