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The Moral Waste Land: A Comparative Study of Moral Decay in *The Waste Land* and  
"Patriotism"

Both *The Waste Land* and "Patriotism" are unique literary works in their regard to their view on human honor and the role of an individual in the world. When *The Waste Land* was written England was starting to recover from the First World War. In this war, there was an unprecedented loss of life without a very satisfactory conclusion. The citizens of all countries involved felt disillusioned and shocked. In *The Waste Land* the lack of a narrator to connect the events to is used to express this disconnectedness. In "Patriotism" the narrator is a much stronger and more real person. In this story, the author, Yukio Mishima, uses the plot to express the disconnectedness the public felt. At the time "Patriotism" was written Japan was recovering from the aftermath of WWII; when that war finished Japan was forced to adopt a constitution that weakened the power of the emperor. Although the events in "Patriotism" took place before WWII, the story was written as a direct response to the decline of Imperial power and to Japan's inner turmoil. Both *The Waste Land* and "Patriotism" express the author's opinion on the level of social and moral decay in the authors' respective societies.

T. S. Eliot's life and the effects of WWI on Europe heavily influenced *The Waste Land*. Thomas Stearns Eliot was born on September 25, 1888 in St. Louis to Henry Ware Eliot and Charlotte Champe Eliot. During his life, "Eliot inherited but often struggled

with the legacy of his upbringing: moral rigor, a sense of duty, an acute conscience, and an emotionally constricted rationalism” (Taylor). After studying at Harvard and other places, he moved to Oxford in 1914. This is when his literary career really started to bloom. In 1917 he published his first book of poetry, *Prufrock and Other Observations*. When World War I ended in 1918 England entered a dark period in its history. There was an unprecedented level of unemployment and labor strikes, while at the same time corruption in the government led to the disassociation of Britain from its Dominions. The state of Great Britain became so bad that eventually the IRA was formed and Ireland revolted against Britain. After this period Eliot was so “physically and emotionally exhausted [that he] went to a sanatorium in Switzerland to recover” (Taylor). While in the sanatorium Eliot finished *The Waste Land*. In 1927, Eliot converted to Christianity and became a British citizen. The conversion to Christianity had a major effect on his work, this can be easily seen when it is noted that his next major publication was titled *Ash Wednesday*. Eliot received the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1948 and died in 1965. (Taylor).

“Patriotism” was also heavily influenced by the life of its author, Yukio Mishima. “Yukio Mishima was born Kimitake Hiraoka in Tokyo, Japan of January 14, 1925” (Adcock). His parents were Azusa Hiraoka and Shizue (Hashi) Hiraoka. Even as a young child Yukio was fascinated with ritual death, an obsession that continued through his whole life. His literary prowess was apparent when he started publishing short stories before the age of sixteen. He attended the University of Tokyo and then entered the army. His experiences in the army heavily influenced him later in his life. He received a position in the Ministry of Finance, but resigned in order to continue writing. He chose

to use a pseudonym in his writing so that he could, “mask his timidity, vulnerability, and aestheticism with an arrogant, even a provocative, persona” (Adcock). From that point forward in his life he sought to become the epitome of male beauty through exercise and the practice of the fighting arts, including boxing, karate, and swordsmanship. During the 1950’s and 1960’s Mishima’s reputation skyrocketed as he released many successful novels. Mishima also wrote critically acclaimed short stories, plays, and also wrote directed and acted in various films (Adcock).

Later in his life Mishima became a recording artist and successful television celebrity. Although he owned an Italian home, many English antiques, and ate Western food he came to “oppose the Westernization of Japan, even to hate it” (Adcock). Yukio created and led a private army that he called the Shield Society. This society wanted a return to the samurai ways. On November 25, 1970 he and a few members of the Shield Society, “invaded the headquarters of the Eastern Ground Defense Forces, took the commanding officer hostage, and demanded that the troops be assembled” (Adcock). When he started telling the troops that they should have fought to prevent Japan from adopting a constitution they laughed at him. He then proceeded to commit seppuku, a ritual form of suicide, by disemboweling himself with a dagger and then having one of his followers behead him (Adcock).

T. S. Eliot’s poem *The Waste Land* signaled the beginning of modern poetry. This poem is broken into five sections: “The Burial of the Dead,” “A Game of Chess,” “The Fire Sermon,” “Death by Water,” and “What the Thunder Said.” “The Burial of the Dead” is the introduction to *The Waste Land* in which the narrator wanders around London. On the way he converses with a clairvoyant, Madame Sosostris, about his

future, encounters the dead and an old friend. In "A Game of Chess" the narrator describes the room of a rich woman; it is filled with various perfumes and artificial substances obtained from a pharmacist. He then describes an encounter between two poor people who, while they are less artificial, are more immoral in their actions and conversation. "The Fire Sermon" is told from the point of view of Tiresias, a hermaphroditic seer. He views all the events happening in London, including a woman being raped, the narrator being propositioned by a merchant from Smyrna, and other events of a questionable nature, all while lamenting the loss of London's innocence in the form of the Thames River. "Death by Water" is the shortest section that only describes a Phoenician's death by drowning. "What the Thunder Said" is the conclusion to *The Waste Land*; it confronts the decay present in the poem, but also hints at the possibility of a solution. It starts with the narrator's travels through a true wasteland where thunder sounds constantly but rain never falls. The narrator describes a series of nightmare images including hooded hordes, upside towers, and babies with bat's wings. These images are tied to five of the world's major cities, "Jerusalem Athens Alexandria Vienna London" (Eliot 91). Then the thunder speaks to the narrator, describing to him the three basic precepts of life, Give, Sympathize, Control. A possibility identity of the narrator is then hinted at in the line, "I sat upon the shore Fishing, with the arid plain behind me Shall I at least set my lands in order?" (Eliot 93). This line connects the narrator to the Fisher King of Arthurian legend. The poem ends with the words, "Shantih Shantih Shantih," (Eliot 93). each Shantih means, according to Eliot, "The Peace which passeth understanding" (Eliot 101).

"Patriotism" was a prophetic vision of the author's reaction to Japan's decline. In

“Patriotism” Lieutenant Shinji Takeyama, an officer in the Japanese armed forces, finds out that his fellow officers have just instigated a revolt against the emperor. He is torn between loyalty to his friends and his love for his country. In the end he and his wife Reiko decide to take their lives using seppuku. After preparing their farewell notes and dressing in their finest clothes they proceed with the ceremony. In order to perform seppuku correctly Lieutenant Shinji takes his officer’s sword and disembowels himself with it. Then he removes the sword from his midsection and drives it through his neck. His wife follows him by taking her dagger and driving it through the back of her throat. Although in Western countries suicide is viewed as cowardly and immoral, in Japan at this time period, this form of suicide was considered honorable and noble.

The background and plot of *The Waste Land* and “Patriotism” tie them together thematically. In *The Waste Land* every individual seems like less of a person and more of a machine, each person’s personality can be interchanged with anyone else’s without changing that person at all. An example of this mechanization of each person can be seen in the typist’s reaction to the exchange between her and the clerk in “The Fire Sermon,” “She smooths her hair with automatic hand, And puts a record on the gramophone” (Eliot 85). Throughout every exchange between people there is interaction, but they are still disconnected from each other.

“Patriotism” takes the opposing view to *The Waste Land*. It shows people who are able to connect to other people and ideas and who are able to be real individuals. Each person in “Patriotism” has depth and life in them. In *The Waste Land* there is no honor and people are involved in the basest acts including prostitution, rape, and murder. Although “Patriotism” also deals with moral decay in the time period it was written, it

shows the decay from the point of view of a person who has the will power to fight it. "Patriotism" and *The Waste Land* both describe the same situation in a culture, where the traditions and morals of the culture are sinking into decay, but "Patriotism" shows that there are people strong enough to fight corruption, while *The Waste Land* takes a more negative view of the situation.

*The Waste Land* shows many examples of the immorality and disillusionment associated with the decay in London at that time period. The first indication of this putrefaction in *The Waste Land* is during "The Burial of the Dead" when the narrator recognizes an old friend and greets him by saying, "That corpse you planted last year in your garden, has it begun to sprout? Will it bloom this year? Or has the sudden frost disturbed its bed?" (Eliot 75). This references two things; one, the habit of a murderer to keep his victims close, and two, Sir James George Frazer's *The Golden Bough*. Eliot says in his "Notes on *The Waste Land*", "To another work of anthropology I am indebted in general, one which has influenced our generation profoundly; I mean *The Golden Bough*" (Eliot 94). One possible place where he used that work is in this stanza. In *The Golden Bough* Frazer discusses a curious rite that used to be practiced in Russia. This rite involved the worship of the death and resurrection of vegetation. In his description of the death of vegetation Frazer includes this line, "vegetation might be thought to share the incipient though still almost imperceptible decay of summer" (Frazer 371). When Eliot mentions burying a dead body in a garden he ties together death and the vegetation talked of by Frazer to further emphasize the decay of London at that time.

The next stanza of *The Waste Land*, "A Game of Chess" shows the ubiquitous nature of the decay in London. In the first portion of this stanza there is a description of a

rich woman's room. This room is described as a sterile, artificial room filled with "strange synthetic perfumes" (Eliot 77). The atmosphere is dead and still and in the room, "No will to exploit new sensations is present; the will has long ago died; this opulent ambience is neither chosen nor questioned" (Kenner 10). After a conversation between two people the narrative in this stanza moves to another character's monologue about a conversation she had with a friend. The woman talks about two people (Lil and Albert), and how Albert gave Lil money to get her some false teeth and instead she bought pills to give herself an abortion. Albert in turn is equally as unsavory and as the unknown speaker says, "he wants a good time, And if you don't give it him, there's others will" (Eliot 80). Both the rich and the poor in this stanza live in an artificial world of pills and perfumes and both are a reminder of the growing presence of immorality in London at that time. (Kenner 9-13).

"The Fire Sermon" in *The Waste Land* is the most blatant analysis of the decay in London at that time. In the beginning the narrator laments the filthiness of the Thames and the horror that are the streets of London. As the narrator moves into the "Unreal City" (Eliot 83), London, he encounters a merchant, Mr. Eugenides, who propositions him. This small indication of the decay at that time transitions into *The Waste Land's* defining moment. In this scene a young man, a clerk, comes to the house and after dining with her, "Endeavours to engage her in caresses Which still are unreproved, if undesired. Flushed and decided, he assaults at once; Exploring hands encounter no defence" (Eliot 84). The scene is described by Tiresias, a blind hermaphroditic seer mentioned in many works of literature. In Eliot's notes he says this:

Tiresias, although a mere spectator and not indeed a 'character', is yet the

most important personage in the poem, uniting all the rest. Just as the one-eyed merchant seller of currants, melts into the Phoenician Sailor, and the latter is not wholly distinct from Ferdinand Prince of Naples, so all the women are one woman, and the two sexes meet in Tiresias. What Tiresias *sees*, in fact, is the substance of the poem (Eliot 97).

The effect of this quote is to show the reader that the passage by Eliot describing the rape of the typist is the quintessential analysis of the decay in London at that time. The decay in London is an unnatural violation of nature by a synthetic, mechanical new way of life.

In the last stanza, "What the Thunder Said," T. S. Eliot provides little hope for a solution to the problem he describes. The situation the narrator finds himself in is bleak. His surroundings consist of rock and dried mud, there is no water or hope of any; the landscape lacks the one thing that provides life and new growth. Even the thunder that sounds comes from a dry storm where there is no rain. The narrator is next assaulted by a series of nightmare images on the path to his destination. When he reaches his destination the thunder tells him three concepts that could help to save civilization, "Datta. Dayadhvam. Damyata" (Eliot 93). These concepts mean in turn, "Give, sympathise, control" (Eliot 100). Even after this revelation the narrator still sits in a wasteland where no water exists and where madness reigns. While with one hand T. S. Eliot's narrative proffers the means of salvation for the human race with the other he gives the knowledge that humanity will never use this knowledge to halt the decay.

"Patriotism" presents a similar view of the state of humanity at the time period it was written, but it provides for a solution to the problem. Each of the relationships that Mishima's narrator, Lieutenant Shinji Takeyama, experiences isolates him from the

world until he enters into his final relationship. Takeyama's first relationship is with his wife, Reiko; although the two of them are close they are isolated from the world. They lived by themselves in their house that, "rose like a solitary island in the ocean of a society going as restlessly about its business as ever" (Mishima 104). His next relationship is with his fellow officers in the Japanese army. Takeyama's relationship with them is eventually broken, casting him into isolation, when he realizes that, "I knew nothing. They hadn't asked me to join" (Mishima 99). What they had not asked him to join was a revolt against the emperor, which forced him to fight against them. In the end he decides to commit ritual suicide, which leads both to his final separation and his ultimate connection. As he killed himself he became, "a man in a separate world, a man whose whole being had been resolved into pain, a prisoner in a cage of pain where no hand could reach out to him" (Mishima 114). When Reiko followed him, she thought, "how the pain which had previously opened such a gulf between herself and her dying husband was now to become a part of her own experience, she saw before her only the joy of herself entering a realm her husband had already made his own" (Mishima 117). Their sacrifice connected them with each other and with the emperor for whom the sacrifice occurred. The title of the story "Patriotism" is taken from the word *yokoku* in Japanese. "The word *yokoku* means grieving over a country rather than loving a country (*aikoku*), which is a positive emotion" (Price). Mishima uses the isolation of Takeyama and Reiko in conjunction with the turmoil Japan was experiencing to show the moral decay present in his culture. He also presents a solution to this decay through the act of self-sacrifice, trust, and love for his country.

"Patriotism" and *The Waste Land* present very similar ideas in regards to moral

decay, they both present it as a disconnectedness from the surrounding world and as a general apathy towards immoral behavior. In *The Waste Land* T. S. Eliot presents a solution to this problem with the three precepts of Give, Sympathize, and Control. He says that if humanity lived by these three ideals the decay could be halted. Eliot then goes on to say that humanity is incapable of reforming itself enough to stop decay. This message of inevitability is directly countered by the conclusion to Yukio Mishima's "Patriotism." After emphasizing the social decay emanating from isolation and political turmoil Mishima uses Takeyama and Reiko's suicide to show the solution to the decay. Mishima's solution states that through self-sacrifice and devotion to one's country, unity between people can be created. This unity could provide a buffer to the decay present in Mishima's society. Eliot's solution to the problem of immorality was said to be impossible and Mishima's solution is fanatical. These two authors provide a bleak outlook for the future.

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# CHARIHO REGIONAL HIGH SCHOOL RESEARCH PAPER RUBRIC

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12th Grade

	5 Exceeds Standard	4 Meets Standard	3.5 Nearly Meets Standard	3 Below Standard	2 Little Progress Toward Standard	0
<b>Presentation</b>	All guidelines followed; attention to visual appearance; MLA format applied with no errors	All guidelines followed; MLA format applied with few noticeable errors	Most guidelines followed; MLA format applied with some errors	Some guidelines followed; MLA format applied with many errors	Few guidelines followed; MLA format not applied	SUBMITTED
<b>Thesis and Content Development</b>	A controlling idea that conveys a perspective on the subject is very clear and strongly developed; many appropriate facts and details are included; thesis clearly identifies the purpose of the paper and engages with exceptional content and/or style.	A controlling idea that conveys a perspective on the subject is clear and well-developed; appropriate facts and details are included; thesis identifies the purpose of the paper and engages with strong content and/or style	A controlling idea that conveys a perspective on the subject is generally clear and somewhat developed; some appropriate facts and details are included; thesis generally identifies the purpose of the paper and engages with good content and/or style	A controlling idea that conveys a perspective on the subject is unclear and poorly developed; few appropriate facts and details are included; thesis does not identify the purpose of the paper and engages with weak content and/or style	A controlling idea is not developed; facts and details are not included; no thesis	
<b>Organization</b>	Outstanding order and structure enhances meaning; strong and varied use of transitions; conclusion effectively supports thesis and provides a strong sense of closure	Strong order and structure supports meaning; effective use of transitions; conclusion effectively supports thesis and provides sense of closure	Good order and structure supports meaning; some effective use of transitions; conclusion gives some support of thesis and provides some sense of closure	Weak order and structure detracts from meaning; ineffective use of transitions; conclusion gives little support of thesis and does not provide sense of closure	No order or structure; no transitions used; no conclusion or sense of closure	
<b>Strategies</b>	Creative use of appropriate strategies (e.g., facts and details, describing or analyzing the subject, narrating a relevant anecdote, comparing and contrasting, naming, explaining benefits or limitations, demonstrating claims or assertions, providing a scenario to illustrate)	Effective use of appropriate strategies (e.g., facts and details, describing or analyzing the subject, narrating a relevant anecdote, comparing and contrasting, naming, explaining benefits or limitations, demonstrating claims or assertions, providing a scenario to illustrate)	Some effective use of appropriate strategies (e.g., facts and details, describing or analyzing the subject, narrating a relevant anecdote, comparing and contrasting, naming, explaining benefits or limitations, demonstrating claims or assertions, providing a scenario to illustrate)	Ineffective use of appropriate strategies (e.g., facts and details, describing or analyzing the subject, narrating a relevant anecdote, comparing and contrasting, naming, explaining benefits or limitations, demonstrating claims or assertions, providing a scenario to illustrate)	No strategies used	
<b>Discussion and Analysis</b>	Exemplary discussion and analysis of research topic	Insightful discussion and analysis of research topic	Adequate discussion and analysis of research topic	Vague discussion and analysis of research topic	Incomplete or no discussion and analysis	
<b>Research Sources</b>	Outstanding research; exceeds required number and type of sources	Good research; required number and type of sources	Fair research; less than the required number and type of sources	Poor research; almost none of the required number and type of sources	None of the required number and type of sources included	
<b>Word Choice</b>	Exceptionally rich, lively, and precise language enhances meaning	Clear, precise language supports meaning	Somewhat clear and generally precise language creates adequate meaning	Weak limited language makes meaning unclear	Very limited language seriously impairs meaning	
<b>Sentence Fluency</b>	Sentences vary greatly in length and structure enhancing flow	Sentences vary in length and structure sustaining flow	Sentences vary slightly in length and structure restricting flow	Sentences vary little in length and structure disrupting flow	Sentences do not vary in length and structure inhibiting flow	
<b>Conventions</b>	No errors in grammar, usage, or spelling	Few noticeable errors in grammar, usage, and spelling	Some errors in grammar, usage, and spelling	Many errors in grammar, usage, and spelling	Excessive errors in grammar, usage, and spelling	
<b>Revisions and Editing</b>	Revisions and edits enhance writing or student has score of 90	Revisions and edits improve writing or student has score of 72	Revisions and edits improve writing somewhat	Revisions and edits improve writing very little	Revisions and edits do not improve writing	

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41

82