



Myth and modernity in the poetry of T. S. Eliot

Ayan Ghosh

Department of English, Arunodaya University, Uttar Pradesh, India

Abstract

T. S. Eliot is one of the most influential poets of twentieth-century modernist literature. His poetry reflects the spiritual crisis, cultural fragmentation, moral confusion, and psychological anxiety of the modern world. One of the most important features of Eliot's poetic technique is his use of myth. Eliot does not use myth merely as a decorative reference to the past; rather, he uses myth as an organizing structure through which the disorder of modern civilization can be understood. His poetry brings together ancient myths, religious traditions, classical literature, and modern urban experience to reveal the broken condition of modern humanity.

This article examines the relationship between myth and modernity in the poetry of T. S. Eliot with special reference to poems such as *The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock*, *The Waste Land*, *The Hollow Men*, *Ash-Wednesday*, and *Four Quartets*. Eliot's modern world is marked by spiritual emptiness, loss of faith, sexual sterility, emotional isolation, and cultural decay. To represent this condition, he employs myths from different traditions, including Greek mythology, Christian symbolism, Buddhist and Hindu philosophy, fertility myths, and Grail legends.

The study argues that Eliot's use of myth provides depth, order, and universality to modern experience. In *The Waste Land*, the mythical method enables Eliot to connect post-war European civilization with older patterns of death, rebirth, drought, and renewal. In *Four Quartets*, myth and religious symbolism move toward spiritual reconciliation and transcendence. Thus, Eliot's poetry transforms modern chaos into a symbolic and philosophical exploration of human suffering and possible redemption.

Keywords: T. S. Eliot, myth, modernity, modernism, *The Waste Land*, spiritual crisis, fragmentation, mythical method, cultural decay, redemption

Introduction

T. S. Eliot occupies a central position in modern English poetry. His poetry represents the anxieties, doubts, and disillusionment of the modern age. The early twentieth century was marked by rapid industrialization, urbanization, scientific development, decline of religious faith, and the devastating effects of the First World War. These historical changes created a sense of cultural crisis and spiritual emptiness. Eliot's poetry gives powerful expression to this condition of modern fragmentation.

Modernity, in Eliot's poetry, is not presented as simple progress. It is shown as a condition of disorder, alienation, moral exhaustion, and spiritual loss. The modern individual appears isolated, uncertain, emotionally weak, and disconnected from tradition. Eliot's speakers often suffer from paralysis, indecision, boredom, anxiety, and a lack of meaningful purpose. His cityscapes are frequently dark, mechanical, polluted, and spiritually barren.

At the same time, Eliot's poetry is deeply rooted in tradition. He believed that modern literature must maintain a relationship with the literary and cultural past. In his critical essay "Tradition and the Individual Talent," Eliot argues that the poet must possess a historical sense, which involves an awareness of both the pastness of the past and its presence. This idea is essential for understanding his poetic method. Eliot brings ancient myths, classical texts, religious symbols, and literary allusions into modern poetry to illuminate contemporary crisis.

The use of myth is one of Eliot's most important poetic strategies. Myth allows Eliot to impose order upon the chaos of modern life. It gives structure and symbolic meaning to fragmented modern experience. His famous use of the "mythical method" is especially visible in *The Waste Land*,

where modern London is connected with ancient fertility rituals, the Grail legend, the Fisher King myth, and religious traditions from East and West.

In *The Waste Land*, Eliot portrays modern civilization as barren and spiritually dead. The poem's fragmented structure reflects the broken consciousness of the post-war world. However, beneath this fragmentation lies a mythic pattern of death and possible rebirth. The waste land is not only modern Europe but also a universal symbol of spiritual dryness. Through myth, Eliot transforms contemporary disillusionment into a timeless human condition.

Eliot's poetry also reflects the tension between secular modernity and religious longing. His early poems often present spiritual emptiness and psychological paralysis, while his later poems move toward religious contemplation and spiritual discipline. In *Ash-Wednesday* and *Four Quartets*, Christian symbols, mystical traditions, and philosophical reflections become central. Myth and religion are no longer only methods of diagnosing modern crisis; they become paths toward renewal.

The relationship between myth and modernity in Eliot's poetry is therefore complex. Myth represents continuity, order, memory, and spiritual depth, while modernity represents fragmentation, rootlessness, skepticism, and cultural dislocation. Eliot does not simply reject modernity or escape into the past. Instead, he uses myth to interpret modern experience and expose its spiritual poverty. Through myth, modern life becomes part of a larger cultural and metaphysical pattern.

Eliot's poetic technique is also modernist in form. His poems employ fragmentation, allusion, multiple voices, shifting perspectives, irony, and symbolic complexity. These techniques mirror the disorder of modern

consciousness. Yet myth provides hidden unity within this apparent disorder. The result is a poetry that is both radically modern and deeply traditional.

This article aims to examine how T. S. Eliot uses myth to represent modernity. It analyzes the symbolic, religious, cultural, and psychological functions of myth in his major poems. The study demonstrates that Eliot's use of myth is not ornamental but structural and philosophical. Myth becomes a means of understanding modern alienation, cultural collapse, and the search for spiritual meaning.

Major Thrust

1. Modernity as Fragmentation and Spiritual Crisis

Modernity in Eliot's poetry is characterized by fragmentation, alienation, and spiritual emptiness. The modern world appears materially advanced but morally and spiritually exhausted. Human beings have lost connection with religion, tradition, community, and inner meaning.

In *The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock*, the speaker represents the modern individual trapped in self-consciousness and indecision. Prufrock is unable to act, love, or communicate authentically. His world consists of social rituals, artificial conversation, and emotional paralysis. The poem reflects the psychological fragmentation of modern urban life.

In *The Waste Land*, the crisis becomes civilizational. The modern city is presented as unreal, mechanical, and spiritually dead. People move like lifeless figures through London, suggesting emotional and moral exhaustion. The poem shows a world where relationships are broken, sexuality is empty, religion is weakened, and cultural values have collapsed.

Eliot's modernity is therefore not merely historical but existential. It represents a condition in which human beings are cut off from sources of meaning. This crisis creates the need for myth, because myth provides symbolic order and spiritual depth.

2. Eliot's Mythical Method

The "mythical method" refers to Eliot's technique of using ancient myths and literary traditions to organize modern experience. Instead of presenting modern life in a straightforward narrative, Eliot places contemporary events beside mythic patterns. This method allows him to reveal the deeper meaning of modern disorder.

In *The Waste Land*, Eliot uses the Fisher King myth, the Grail legend, fertility rituals, classical mythology, Christian symbolism, and Eastern religious texts. These references create a complex structure that connects modern barrenness with ancient images of drought, sterility, death, and rebirth.

The mythical method gives universality to modern suffering. Modern Europe after the First World War is presented not as an isolated historical moment but as part of a recurring human pattern of decline and renewal. Myth helps Eliot show that modern crisis is both contemporary and timeless.

This method also reflects Eliot's belief in tradition. For Eliot, the past is not dead; it continues to shape the present. Myth becomes a living structure through which modern poetry can recover cultural memory.

3. Myth and Urban Alienation in "Prufrock"

Although *The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock* does not use myth as extensively as *The Waste Land*, it contains important classical and literary allusions that deepen the

modern condition. The poem opens with an epigraph from Dante's *Inferno*, placing Prufrock's modern psychological confession within a mythic and spiritual framework of damnation and self-revelation.

Prufrock's world is urban, artificial, and emotionally sterile. Streets, cheap hotels, sawdust restaurants, and social rooms create a landscape of modern alienation. The speaker's repeated question, "Do I dare?" reveals his inability to act. He is a modern anti-hero, far removed from heroic figures of myth.

The poem also contains references to Lazarus, Hamlet, and the mermaids. These allusions contrast heroic or spiritual possibilities with Prufrock's weakness. He says, "I am not Prince Hamlet," admitting his own lack of heroic identity. The mermaids, associated with beauty and mythic imagination, will not sing to him. Thus, myth appears as something lost or inaccessible in modern life.

Through these references, Eliot shows that modern individuals are disconnected from heroic, spiritual, and imaginative traditions. Prufrock's identity is fragmented because he cannot participate in any meaningful mythic order.

4. The Waste Land as Mythic Structure

The Waste Land is Eliot's most important poem for understanding the relationship between myth and modernity. Published in 1922, the poem reflects the disillusionment of post-war Europe. Its fragmented voices, broken images, and shifting languages represent a civilization in crisis.

The title itself suggests barrenness and sterility. The waste land is both a physical and spiritual landscape. It represents modern Europe, where faith, love, fertility, and cultural unity have disappeared. The poem's structure draws heavily on fertility myths and the Grail legend, especially the figure of the wounded Fisher King whose land becomes barren.

The myth of the Fisher King gives symbolic meaning to modern sterility. Just as the wounded king causes the land to become infertile, modern humanity's spiritual wound produces cultural barrenness. The possibility of healing depends on spiritual questioning and renewal.

The poem also uses seasonal imagery. April, traditionally associated with spring and rebirth, becomes "the cruellest month" because rebirth is painful in a spiritually dead world. This reversal shows the breakdown of traditional natural and cultural meanings.

Throughout the poem, Eliot combines modern scenes with mythic echoes. A typist's mechanical sexual encounter is placed beside older myths of love and fertility, revealing the degradation of modern relationships. The Thames is associated with both modern pollution and classical river imagery. This contrast between past and present exposes the spiritual decline of modern civilization.

5. Fertility Myths and Spiritual Sterility

Fertility myths play a central role in Eliot's poetic vision. Ancient fertility rituals often dramatize cycles of death and rebirth, drought and rain, sterility and renewal. Eliot uses these myths to interpret modern spiritual dryness.

In *The Waste Land*, images of dryness, rocks, dust, and dead land suggest a world without spiritual nourishment. Water becomes a powerful symbol of purification and renewal, but it is often absent or threatening. The repeated longing for rain expresses the desire for spiritual regeneration.

Sexual sterility is another major theme. Modern sexual relationships in the poem are mechanical, loveless, and

emotionally empty. Eliot contrasts these sterile encounters with mythic traditions in which sexuality was connected with fertility, renewal, and sacred meaning. In modernity, sexuality has lost its spiritual and emotional value.

The fertility myth therefore allows Eliot to criticize modern civilization. The problem is not merely social disorder but spiritual barrenness. Modern people have lost contact with sacred patterns of life, death, and renewal.

6. Religious Myth and the Search for Redemption

Eliot's poetry gradually moves from cultural diagnosis to spiritual search. Religious myth and symbolism become increasingly important in his later works. Christianity, in particular, provides a framework for understanding suffering, purification, and redemption.

In *The Hollow Men*, Eliot presents human beings as spiritually empty and morally weak. The poem's speakers are neither fully alive nor fully dead. They exist in a state of paralysis and incompleteness. Religious images appear, but they are fragmented and uncertain. The poem ends not with heroic conclusion but with spiritual collapse.

In *Ash-Wednesday*, Eliot's poetry moves toward religious conversion and spiritual discipline. The poem expresses the struggle between doubt and faith, desire and renunciation, weakness and prayer. Myth here becomes more explicitly religious, connected with Christian ideas of repentance and grace.

In *Four Quartets*, Eliot achieves his most mature spiritual vision. The poems explore time, eternity, suffering, memory, and divine presence. Christian symbolism, mystical thought, and philosophical meditation combine to suggest the possibility of spiritual stillness within temporal change.

Thus, myth in Eliot's later poetry becomes a path toward transcendence. It does not merely expose modern emptiness; it points toward spiritual renewal.

7. Eastern Myth and Philosophy

Eliot's use of myth is not limited to Western traditions. He also draws upon Hindu and Buddhist thought, especially in *The Waste Land*. The concluding section of the poem includes references to the Brihadaranyaka Upanishad through the words "Datta, Dayadhvam, Damyata" and "Shantih shantih shantih."

These Sanskrit words suggest giving, compassion, self-control, and peace. They offer a possible ethical and spiritual response to modern crisis. After the chaos, fragmentation, and barrenness of the poem, the Eastern religious ending introduces a vision of discipline and inner peace.

Buddhist ideas also influence Eliot's treatment of desire and suffering. The "Fire Sermon" section of *The Waste Land* alludes to the Buddhist teaching that desire burns and causes suffering. Modern civilization is shown as consumed by lust, restlessness, and dissatisfaction.

By incorporating Eastern philosophy, Eliot expands the spiritual scope of his poetry. He suggests that modern crisis requires wisdom from multiple religious and cultural traditions. Myth becomes a universal resource for spiritual reflection.

8. Myth, Tradition, and Cultural Memory

For Eliot, myth is closely related to tradition and cultural memory. Modernity is dangerous because it often cuts

individuals off from the past. Without tradition, modern people become rootless and spiritually empty.

Eliot's poetry is filled with allusions to Dante, Shakespeare, the Bible, Greek mythology, Buddhism, Hinduism, and European literature. These allusions create a dense network of cultural memory. They remind readers that modern experience is connected to earlier civilizations and spiritual traditions.

However, Eliot's use of tradition is not simple nostalgia. He does not present the past as perfect. Instead, he uses the past to measure the disorder of the present. Myth provides standards of meaning against which modern fragmentation becomes visible.

Cultural memory also gives poetry depth and continuity. Eliot's modernist technique shows that even fragmented modern consciousness contains echoes of older stories, rituals, and beliefs. The past survives in broken forms within the present.

9. Myth and the Modern Individual

Eliot's modern individuals are often alienated, indecisive, and spiritually weak. Prufrock, the hollow men, and the figures in *The Waste Land* lack stable identity and moral direction. They live in a world without meaningful collective myths.

In traditional societies, myths help individuals understand their place in the universe. They provide shared values, rituals, and symbolic meanings. In Eliot's modern world, these shared structures have collapsed. As a result, individuals suffer from isolation and confusion.

Prufrock cannot become a heroic figure because he lives in a diminished world. The hollow men cannot pray properly because their spiritual language is broken. The people of *The Waste Land* cannot love meaningfully because their culture has lost sacred connection.

Eliot uses myth to dramatize this loss. The contrast between ancient mythic patterns and modern weakness reveals the diminished condition of modern humanity.

10. Fragmentation and Unity in Eliot's Poetic Form

Eliot's poems often appear fragmented because they include multiple voices, languages, quotations, and abrupt transitions. This fragmentation reflects the broken condition of modern civilization. However, myth provides an underlying unity.

In *The Waste Land*, the poem's surface is chaotic, but the mythic structure of death, sterility, and possible rebirth holds it together. The Fisher King myth, fertility rituals, and religious references create hidden order beneath the apparent disorder.

This combination of fragmentation and unity is central to Eliot's modernism. His form expresses modern chaos while his mythic method seeks meaning within that chaos. The result is a poetry that is difficult but deeply meaningful.

Eliot's poetic form suggests that modern life cannot be represented through simple narrative. It requires collage, allusion, symbolic structure, and mythic depth. Myth becomes the invisible architecture of modernist poetry.

Conclusion

The poetry of T. S. Eliot presents a profound exploration of myth and modernity. Eliot's modern world is marked by spiritual emptiness, cultural decay, emotional paralysis, sexual sterility, and fragmented identity. His poetry responds to this crisis by turning toward myth, tradition,

religion, and cultural memory. Myth becomes a method through which the disorder of modern life can be understood and symbolically organized.

In *The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock*, Eliot presents the modern individual as isolated, indecisive, and disconnected from heroic and spiritual traditions. Classical and literary allusions reveal the distance between mythic greatness and modern weakness. Prufrock's failure to act reflects the paralysis of modern consciousness.

In *The Waste Land*, Eliot's mythical method reaches its fullest expression. The poem connects post-war European civilization with ancient fertility myths, the Grail legend, the Fisher King, Christian symbolism, Buddhist teaching, and Hindu philosophy. The waste land becomes a universal symbol of spiritual barrenness. Through myth, Eliot gives structure to fragmentation and reveals the possibility of renewal, however uncertain.

In *The Hollow Men*, modern humanity appears spiritually empty and incomplete. Religious symbols are present but weakened, suggesting a world unable to achieve faith or moral action. In *Ash-Wednesday* and *Four Quartets*, Eliot moves toward a more explicitly religious and philosophical vision. Myth and Christian symbolism become means of spiritual discipline, purification, and transcendence.

Eliot's use of myth is not an escape from modernity. Rather, it is a way of confronting modern crisis. By placing modern life within ancient symbolic patterns, Eliot shows that contemporary suffering is part of a larger human struggle involving death, desire, sin, memory, and redemption. Myth universalizes modern experience while also exposing its spiritual poverty.

The relationship between myth and modernity in Eliot's poetry also reflects his theory of tradition. He believed that modern poetry must engage with the past in order to create meaning in the present. His allusions to Dante, Shakespeare, the Bible, classical mythology, and Eastern scriptures create a rich cultural framework that challenges the emptiness of modern secular life.

Ultimately, Eliot's poetry suggests that modern civilization cannot survive through material progress alone. It requires spiritual renewal, ethical discipline, cultural memory, and a restored sense of order. Myth provides Eliot with the language and structure to express this need. His poetry remains significant because it captures the crisis of modern humanity while searching for possibilities of meaning beyond fragmentation.

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