

The Apocalyptic Destiny of the Modern World

In the 16th century, modernization disrupted the ongoing traditional lifestyles and transformed the economy with its increasing demands and fast pace. Bearing the consequences of the new age, individuals had to quickly adapt to the rapid changes occurring in the world. With the benefits modernization introduces comes neglect for the well-being of humans and the environment as well as a subsequent acceleration of entropy. In *The Hollow Men* and *The Wasteland*, T.S. Elliot depicts how the progression of industrialized modernization causes the accelerating force of entropy and its pronounced effects on the environment and the human body.

German physicist Rudolf Clausius invented the theory of entropy in the 19th century. Entropy is defined as the measure of disorder in any system –closed or open (Davis & Shaw 1). It is based on the second law of thermodynamics which states that entropy has a natural tendency to increase until it reaches a heat death (Literature Thermodynamics). While it can remain constant with human intervention, it can never decrease. Thus, disorder and chaos are always naturally increasing in the universe. Moreover, the force of entropy accelerates in a closed system such as a closed area, a factory, and the human body. All systems, however, face the same fate, viz., heat death of the universe (Literature Thermodynamics). To elaborate, through processes of energy conversion occurs loss of energy in the form of heat, a disorganized form of energy that increases entropy. Entropy accelerates in the modern world because the shift to industrialization is coupled with increasing demands that come at the cost of humans and the environment. For industries to sustain, such demands, by nature, will increase entropy as they require a vast consumption of energy whether it occurs in industrial processes concerning manufacturing, machinery, waste generation, construction, or extraction of natural resources.

The effect of the increase of entropy on the body of the modern man is reflected through the physical symptoms, sensory decay, and an overall loss of vitality in both poems. In “Game

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of Chess”, the unsatisfied lady seeks intimacy and comfort from her unresponsive, numb husband. As she nudges him for a meaningful utterance, she says, “Do you see nothing? ... I remember/ Those are pearls that were his eyes/ Are you alive, or not?” (*The Wasteland* lines 121-126). Like pearls, his eyes, once beautiful, shiny, and full of life, have transformed into dull, lifeless, tired eyes through which he cannot even actively perceive his surroundings with. A parallel description is traced in *The Hollow Men* when the narrator speaks of the weak hollow men and says, “The eyes are not here/ There are no eyes here” (lines 52-53). The eyes are reflective of the overall fatigue that individuals endure because of a mechanical, low-quality life. While it surely can be interpreted as a metaphorical expression as the eyes are the windows to the soul, it also indicates that individuals are sensorily paralyzed and exhausted. Thus, the senses become numb due to being overloaded by the overstimulation and disorder brought about by industrialization. Mechanical labor and a desk-bound life consume the vitality of humans, and this is evident in *The Wasteland* when the narrator says, “when the eyes and back/ Turn upward from the desk, when the human engine waits/ Like a taxi throbbing waiting” (lines 215-216). The mention of the “human engine” aligns with Marx’s statement that workers will become appendages to the machine (Marx 18).

Physical symptoms that are not associated with sensory receptions also occur as the condition of the body degenerates due to entropy. Aging and deteriorating bodies, respiratory issues, dry voices, and a weak motor system are all signs of the human body falling victim to the high entropic state that society is quickly progressing towards. In *The Wasteland*, the narrator speaks about the disillusionment and alienation of individuals as he says, “sighs, short and infrequent, were exhaled, And each man fixed his eyes before his feet” (lines 64-65). This indicates a hindrance in respiratory functions due to high energy consumption, increased heat, polluted air, and overall stress. Such irregular and shallow breathing opposes the optimal form of breathing that is crucial for all functions of the body. It could indicate cardiovascular diseases

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and lung problems –workers who are exposed to hazardous substances and activities are the most vulnerable to such issues. With their shallow breaths, the hollow men cannot even form an audible utterance as the narrator says, “Our dried voices, when/ We whisper together/ Are quiet and meaningless” (lines 5-7). Their energy is depleted, and they are parched and weak. Not only is their ability to speak paralyzed, but their movement is also paralyzed. Their bodies have lost their motor functions as the narrator describes hollow men to have a “paralysed force [and] gesture without motion” (line 12). This indicates a lethargic body worn down by the demands of labor and the quality of life. The body becomes inactive, the strength of muscles declines, and the reflexes become slow as the well-being of the individual gradually declines with the incline of entropy in the body system and the universe. After all, all forces are futile and paralyzed in the face of the most powerful, destructive, and inevitable force of entropy. Moreover, the narrator Tiresias, who is an “old man with wrinkled female breasts” (line 229), states that he is “throbbing between two lives” (line 218). One could interpret that the old man is a witness to the harsh transition from a preindustrial world to a modern, industrial one. He throbs between two lives as he bears the agony of what is lost from the pure, cohesive, and organic life before shifting into the fragmented, mechanical one. The narrator continues to say as he awaits a guest, “He, the young man carbuncular, arrives” (line 231). The man, even though young, is not youthful, for his skin is red and inflamed as it resembles a carbuncle infection. With increased heat and disorder in a fast-paced life, individuals strive to keep up while their minds and body are worn out to maximum capacity.

The near convergence of the modern world to a heat death is reflected through the pollution of nature and degradation of the environment, for the narrator asserts this entropic fate to be an inevitable destruction like any other. Nature is yet another culprit to industrialization whereby industries solely focus on production and consumption. An eco-friendly route and a clean, unpolluted nature are certainly not a priority. Natural sources

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extracted, waste disposed of in nature, non-biodegradable materials, dryness, and energy conversion all contribute to a vast acceleration of entropy. This industrial system's neglect of nature is conveyed when the narrator says, "The river sweats/ Oil and tar/ The barges drift/ With the turning tide/ Red sails/ Wide/ To leeward, swing on the heavy spar/ The barges wash/ Drifting logs" (*The Wasteland*, lines 266-274). Where there is no drought, there is contaminated water carrying the wastes and remnants of industrial processes and deforestation. Nature is ideally in harmony, for all elements seamlessly function together in a clean, undisturbed environment. With human intervention, however, the harmonious flow of nature is disrupted as it becomes a state of chaos and disorder. Here, entropy introduces an imbalance with its random clutter and increased heat emissions that dysregulate the natural water cycle and vitality of nature. For instance, as the narrator describes the wasteland, he says that in the dry mountains "of rock without water" (line 334), there is a "dry sterile thunder without rain" (line 342). This reflects the dryness of nature and the degeneration of its functions, for even the powerful thunder usually accompanied by rain has lost its potency and energy. Similar to the thunder, the wind as an element of nature also loses its force, for it "Crosses the brown land, unheard" (lines 174-175). In addition, the seasons of nature are a cycle of death and rebirth, but the increase of entropy and disorder imposes a hindrance to this orderly cycle. Nature subsequently becomes fruitless and barren. In *The Hollow Men*, the narrator enforces this reality as he says, "This is the dead land/ This is cactus land" (lines 39-40). A barren landscape is also reflected in *The Wasteland* when the narrator points out that "the dead tree gives no shelter, the cricket no relief/ And the dry stone no sound of water" (lines 23-24). Thus, nature is impaired. It does not rejuvenate itself as all matters are dead. The image of an apocalyptic lifeless desert reinforces the destruction due to entropy.

With the dispersion of energy into heat and the consequent advancement of entropy, the environments deteriorate as a whole. The increase of entropy indicates an increase in the

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loss of energy as heat in the universe. In *The Hollow Men*, the narrator repetitively describes a star to be a “fading star” and a “dying star” (lines 28, 44, 54). When the internal order of the star declines, there is a loss of energy in the form of heat. As a result, the star fades and loses its light. Thus, the narrator’s description of a fading and dying star is an explicit signifier of the growth of entropy in the universe. Moreover, the narrators of both poems frequently assert the apocalyptic destiny of the modern world. In *The Wasteland*, the narrator mentions a utopian city that is also subject to destruction as he says, “What is the city over the mountains/ Cracks and reforms and bursts in the violet air” (lines 371-372), for even perfection will eventually crumble into disorder. According to Claudius’s theory, it is a natural tendency for systems to move from order into disorder and, thus, entropy is inevitable. The inevitable natural entropic destruction is further asserted when the narrator lists Jerusalem, Athens, and Alexandria as examples of historically significant and glorious civilizations and cultures that were brutally destroyed (line 374). He implies that even modern, contemporary cities such as Vienna and London are also subject to destruction (line 375). The narrator also alludes to the great city of Carthage, which fell into flames at the hands of the Romans, as he says, “to Carthage then I am came/ Burning burning burning burning” (line 307). To further elaborate, he approaches Carthage as he suffers and burns from the decaying world, which is quickly approaching its entropic fate, viz., the heat death of the universe. Similarly, the narrator in *The Hollow Men* affirms the entropic, disordered state of modern society as he refers to the world as “death’s other kingdom” (line 14), “death’s twilight kingdom” (line 66), and “lost kingdom” (line 56).

*The Wasteland* and *The Hollow Men* convey a tone of despair and angst towards the collapse of the modern world due to entropy, an ally to modernization. In *The Wasteland*, the narrator says, “I will show you fear in a handful of dust” (line 30). Dust is the accumulation of disintegrated matter, but it is quite trivial. However, dust is inevitable and natural. Even in the

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overlooked and frivolous aspects of life, entropy with its all-encompassing nature always prevails. Even in the tiniest particles in nature, entropy permeates as it is not confined to the human bodies or larger bodies in nature. This inevitability of entropy in every corner is anxiety-provoking by itself.