Critique Of The Society In The Waste Land

In The Waste Land, T.S. Eliot strongly criticizes western culture after World War 1 as superficial, disordered, and immoral. He longs for a return to a time when people lost themselves in the study of language and classic literature instead of slaughtering each other by the millions. Through his skillful use of a disconnected, disorganized structure (complete with numerous random scenes and slips into foreign languages) and intensely negative imagery, the reader experiences Eliot's anger at a modern society that has lost its purity of yesteryear.

The structure of The Waste Land is free verse to the max-it sometimes rhymes for a couple lines and then abandons the effort, it jumps between various events and even descends into other languages to further amplify the confusion. For instance, the poem begins with some semblance of a rhyme scheme (breeding/mixing/stirring/covering/feeding, although these words are only related by their gerundive ending). Immediately afterwards, however, the rhymes abruptly end and for much of the poem, there is no poetic form and it seems as if Eliot is just writing his train of thought. On a larger scale, this train of thought manifests itself in the wide range of seemingly random scenes included in the poem. Throughout the verse, the reader witnesses Londoners walking on the Thames, some merchant asking Eliot "To luncheon at the Cannon Street Hotel" (213), a woman in an extravagant room complete with "satin cases poured in rich profusion" (85), and many other disconnected happenings. Most surprisingly, however, is Eliot's willingness to occasionally abandon English for a few lines and descend into another tongue. In lines 31-34, for example, the poem inexplicably slips into german, as the narrator states "Frisch weht der Wind/Der-Heimat zu/Mein Irisch Kind/Wo weilest du?". In line 76, Eliot again leaves English-this time for French, as he says "Hyprocrite lecteur!-mon semblable-mon frere!" Through this haphazard structure of indiscriminate events and foreign languages, Elliot forcibly conveys his distaste with modern culture-it seems to have no coherency and order. The moral disgust of such a horrible war made Eliot and many others frustrated and feeling like society had no direction or ethical standards. Remy Rhee articulates this perfectly in her thesis when she states "It is through its apparent confusion and chaos that the poem paints a picture of the disjointed and barren world" (Rhee 4). Pouneh Saeddi makes the same point when she argues that "Eliot expresses the loss of a universal understanding delineated in the fragmentation of language" (Saeddi 1). Eliot creates this confusion and chaos, this fragmentation of language, by employing such a free verse, "random" structure. The result is a clear illustration of the author's view that post-war society has lost its commitment to morality, scholarship, and the common good and just can't seem to return to its old, superior ways.

Eliot further conveys his resentment of modern culture through his explicitly negative imagery. He outlines "empty cisterns and exhausted wells" (384), "tumbled graves", (387) and "damp gusts" (394). Also included in the numerous depressing images conjured up by Eliot are "hooded hordes swarming over endless plains" (369) and "the drowned Phoenician sailor' (47). The author even goes into disgusting detail describing a rat, as "A rat crept softly through the vegetation/Dragging its slimy belly on the bank" (187-188). The effect of all this disheartening imagery is the message that Eliot is disheartened by the society in which he lives. The specific word choice that indicates vacancy, a lack of purpose (empty, endless, exhausted) shows how Eliot sees society-devoid of direction, meaningless, shallow. The frequent images of

death (including a hanged person, a drowned person, even a dead tree) quite literally signify how terribly the author views the state of modern culture (as dead itself) and also its capacity to kill and destroy. Through his specific, unpleasant imagery, Eliot conveys that society is uncommitted to a higher purpose and lacks the values it always used to abide by.

The Waste Land serves as T.S. Eliot’s expression of his exasperation with modern culture/society. The author feels that before the war and all the killing, people were more virtuous and sophisticated-they had a purpose and cared about learning and being kind to others. By using such an aimless, disorderly structure and extremely gloomy imagery, Eliot expresses his view that in the 1920’s, after World War 1 ended, society lacks the morals and overall direction and purpose that was present in pre-war Europe.