Theme and structure of T. S. Eliot’s ‘The Waste Land’ (1200 words)

1. ‘The Waste Land’ by T. S. Eliot is a poem in five sections, each carrying a symbolic title. It expressly describes a state of intense loss, when life has become depraved and meaningless. Eliot is a great innovator in modern English poetry. He adopted a new colloquial vibrant style and an irregular metre in ‘The Waste Land’. While he set the trend for future poetry, the structure and theme of this poem were criticized at the time of its publication. The Waste Land was written in 1922, after the shocking experience of the First World War (1914-1918). The waste and deprivation and the prolonged agony of the trench warfare, had made life seem meaningless and fragmentary, in the face of such purposeless slaughter and bloodshed. The poem reflects the bitter fruits of such a devastating experience.

2. Eliot’s methodology in the poem is to use suggestive phrases, word pictures and images, to describe a general emotion, rather than a specific state of mind. He focuses on people’s minds and their mindless actions, or actions in a state of mental apathy rather than on action or incident. The poet moves quickly from image to image, and from idea to idea, with apparently no narrative links. This conveys the futility of life as well as its fragmented state.

3. The fragmentary, unconnected images and sentence structure of the poem was also influenced by Eliot’s study of Indian mysticism, in general, and by Patanjali’s Sutra, in particular. Patanjali’s theory was “that only essential words are necessary, and that a complete sentence structure is not always needed.”

4. ‘The Waste Land’ takes decay in the city and city life as a poetic theme. All cities including those in the past have been burial
grounds because only death is living there. All spirituality and contact with Nature is also lost in cities.

5. Individual characters and fortune melt into general characters and fortune of all those living in the city. Degradation here is due to the mechanisation of life. Imagery is sensuous and all the five senses are involved. Yet, it is synthetic imagery. One sense evokes the other. For example, ‘scarlet pain’ conveys the intensity of the pain by linking it to the scarlet colour of blood, imagined to be oozing there from. Such metaphors in very few words, raise the imagery of banal city life to the first intensity.

SECTION ONE ‘THE BURIAL OF THE DEAD’

6. The first section of the poem is entitled ‘The Burial of the Dead’, and has a very striking opening: “April is the cruellest month, breeding / Lilacs out of the dead land, mixing / Memory and desire, stirring / Dull roots with spring rain.” In Europe and USA, after the long winter months of white and frozen stretches of land, April marks the onset of spring and fresh vegetation. Yet, Eliot links this revival of life with cruelty and death, perhaps because Christ was betrayed and crucified on Good Friday in April. This implied significance also connects with the title of this Section.

7. The title, the structure, and the symbolism of this Section, also suggest the Vegetation Myths taken from the two well known works in Anthropology, namely, ‘The Golden Bough’ by Frazer and ‘From Ritual To Romance’ by Weston.

8. The vegetation myths erect the cycle of the seasons into a series of divinely ordered events, and this cycle of life is based on sex and is personified in ritualistic figures. The fortune of a land is believed to depend upon the treatment of these figures and thereby upon religious faith. “Winter kept us warm, covering / Earth in forgetful snow, feeding / A little life with dried tubers.” These lines convey that the inhabitants of the Wasteland, prefers the cold, barren, frozen dead season of winter to the season of spring because agriculture has given way to mechanical life of industrialization. People are no longer dependent on the land for
sustaining their lives. “..... Son of man, / You cannot say, or guess, for you know only / A heap of broken images. ... / I will show you fear in a handful of dust.”

9. Even the sea in this wasteland is dead and empty. A purposeless routine of city life, had undone too many people because they had no ideals to live for. “..... so many, / I had not thought death had undone so many.” “Sighs, short and infrequent, were exhaled, / And each man fixed his eyes before his feet.” Such images embody powerfully, the poem’s theme of purposeless pursuit of life and its pleasures.

SECTION TWO ‘THE GAME OF CHESS’

10. This is followed in Section Two entitled ‘The Game of Chess’, with a continuous theme of seduction, lustfulness, loneliness and profusion. The remarkable opening image here recalls the luxury and sensuousness of living life at the level of Cleopatra. “The Chair she sat in, like a burnished throne, / Glowed on the marble, .... / The glitter of her jewel rose to meet it.” Short descriptions of various levels of life from the wealthy lady to the typist in Section Three, are used to convey the monotony and futility of the sexual ritual.

11. The female characters represent several women, because the distinguishing spiritual identity of each woman is missing. In the vegetation myths woman represents the fertile earth bearing the wealth of crops of fruits. The city woman is sterile and cold, and lonely. The poet indicates this through the increasing crescendo of boredom. The question, “what shall we do tomorrow? / What shall we ever do?” is asked four times within five lines.

12. The loneliness, the total isolation, and the lack of communication is conveyed through the structure of short questions asked by the same nameless speaker - “Speak to me. Why do you never speak? Speak / What are you thinking of? What thinking? What? / I never know what you are thinking. Think?” ..... “You know nothing? Do you see nothing? Do you remember / Nothing?” / I remember / Those are pearls that were
his eyes. / Are you alive, or not? Is there nothing in your head? / But”.

13. Such original broken line structure and metre effectively convey the fragmentary nature of city life. Other similes: “like a taxi throbbing waiting”, or images such as “She smooths her hair with automatic hand, / And puts a record on the gramophone.”, convey that there is nothing profound in the experience of love. “His vanity requires no response, / And makes a welcome of indifference.” The larger the city, the greater is one’s solitude.

SECTION THREE ‘THE FIRE SERMON’

14. Section three entitled ‘The Fire Sermon’ is connected with Section Two through the reference to Cleopatra’s sailing down the Nile, linking it with the song of the three daughters of the Thames. The three daughters are also linked to the ‘hyacinth girl’ in Section One. The three daughters speak one by one in turn, and the third one says “I can connect / Nothing with nothing..... / My people humble people who expect / Nothing.’ The Section ends with Buddha’s Fire Sermon and St. Augustine’s Confessions brought together in the last four lines: “Burning burning burning burning / O Lord Thou pluckest me out / O Lord Thou pluckest / burning”

15. Another important quote from this Section are the lines “Twit, twit, twit, / Jug Jug jug jug jug jug”. They illustrate the multi-dimensional structure of myth and imagery used in ‘The Wasteland’.

16. The reference is to the Greek myth about Philomela, whose chastity was violated by her elder sister’s husband, Tereus. After violating her he had her tongue cut off so as to prevent her from telling anyone about her misfortune. But Philomela created a tapestry to narrate her sorrow to her sister. The gods then turned Philomela in to a nightingale, who sings her sorrow through the night, and cries her heart out. Yet, the world pursues her because the sweetness of her voice attracts them as ‘Jug Jug’ to dirty ears and malafide intents. Even though she sings ‘Twit twit twit’ in
her melodious voice, the sound appears as ‘Jug jug’ which is an erotic sound for the men of passion.

17. The given extract occurs midway in Section, after the imagery of Mrs Poster and her daughter washing their feet in soda water, in the moonlight, with sounds of horns and motors audible in the background. The motor will bring Sweeney to Mrs. Porter in the spring.

18. By implication, Eliot conveys that the legend of Philomela is re-enacted again and again, in the Unreal City, where women like Mrs. Porter lead such insincere lives, that Eliot images them as washing their feet in soda water. Even the water that they use for washing their feet is not the natural water but the synthetic soda water used with alcoholic drinks. The synthetic water stands for everything sterile in the city life.

19. The quotation brings out the structural aspect of ‘The Wasteland’ in which the poet uses fragmented images, repetition of words and phrases as an effective technique to convey the worthlessness and futility of the city life. Eliot also uses references to myths and legends to convey more than the written words. All the symbolism and meaning associated with the legend becomes a part of the poem, thereby making it multi-dimensional.

SECTION FOUR ‘DEATH BY WATER’

20. ‘The Fire Sermon’ is followed by ‘Death by Water’. This is linked to the wicked pack of cards of Madame Sosostris in Section One and her forecast: “Fear death by water”. After the burning comes the drowning.

SECTION FIVE ‘WHAT THE THUNDER SAID’

21. The fifth and final section is entitled ‘What the Thunder Said’. After the water that drown, the nameless speaker turns to the water that saves. The agony of the stony place is intensified due to two reasons, (a) by the thirst for water and (b) by the doubt of its
existence. The search for water leads ultimately to the sacred river and to its wisdom. “If these were the sounds of water only.... / Where the hermit – thrush sings in the pine trees/ But there is no water.”

22. In this image, the sterility of the land and of life, reaches their climax. The Hermit Thrush bird resides in secluded Woodlands of Canada. Its notes are remarkable for the purity and sweetness of tone, and in their exquisite modulation they are unequalled. Its water dripping song is justly celebrated. Thus, in this climax the bird joins the rock in creating the illusion of water.

23. Constant delusion at the extremity of their strength, create a further illusion that there is one more member than could actually be counted by the travellers. At the dangerous Chapel everything is nightmarish.

24. The nightmare continues and the description matches Dante’s ‘Inferno’ Section one. The decay of the modern civilization is extended to ancient civilizations, through the imagery of ruins... “a blackened wall / And upside down in air were towers / Tolling, ..... bells, that kept the hours...”

25. Like the crowd on the London Bridge, the Wasteland extends to cover the Earth towards the East, till it reaches the Ganges, where “In a flash of lightning. Then a damp gust/ Bringing rain.” is indicative of only rain at first.

26. Water is announced by the damp gust, but there is nothing in the wasteland that is ready to receive the rains. “...while the black clouds / Gathered far distant, over Himavant.” Then spoke the Thunder in reprimand to the unknown speaker, who has “surrendered not to compassion but to passion.” “DA / Datta: what have we given?”

27. The inhabitant of the wasteland has failed to sympathise, and to break the self made prison of pride, which is the root of this waste. This person of pride can be dissolved only by the key of sympathy. “DA / Dyadhvam: I have heard the key / Turn in the door once and turn once only.”

28. Therefore, the proud person should exercise self control “DA / Damyata: The boat responded .... / your heart would have responded / Gaily, when invited, beating obedient / To
controlling hands.”  “Datta. Dayadhvam. Damyata. / Shantih 
shantih shantih.” Here, the moral of the sailor’s fate is extended 
to an image of the heart that is glad in obedience to the Will. From 
its “blood shaking” beat to “beating obedient” / To controlling 
hands...” this completes the condition of ascent to the higher love 
which might develop out of experience, which in turn would 
relieve the anguish.

The Fusion of the Theme, Structure and Imagery for creating the 
Unreal City

29. The theme, the structure and the imagery in ‘The 
Wasteland’ cannot be separated, and together they convey the 
problem of the unnamed speaker, as well as the only way out of 
this desert land.

30. After ‘Death by Water’ representing the fate of his Card, the 
agony of the protagonist is intensified. He turns from water that 
drowns to the water that saves. He searches for another river 
associated with the origin of the Tarot Cards. The garden and the 
agony of Section One, merges into the trials of Christ or the 
Hanged God, and unites them in the conclusion that he is dead, 
and the living are dying.

31. The agony in the stony places and fear are intensified, both by 
thirst for water and by the doubt of its existence. The search in 
Section Five makes one journey towards the East, and ultimately 
leads to the sacred river and to wisdom. Throughout the journey, 
as the fortunes of the illusionary characters converge, the vision of 
the unknown speaker increases.

32. The experience of agony and its doubt rise out of the 
physical conditions of the journey through the waste land. The 
desert emphasises the need for water. After observing “here is no 
water but only rock” the spirit is tortured by the desire for water, 
for the sound of water, and at least for the illusion of its sound, “but 
there is no water.” This torment is developed by thematic 
imagery from the ‘red rock’ through the ‘Lady of the Rocks’ to ‘only rock’.
33. Physical and spiritual anguish distort the vision of the protagonist. As he walks, he finds another figure “gliding wrapt in a brown mantle, hooded”. But again uncertainty besets him and he is unable to identify the third man. The ‘crowd of people walking round in a ring’, the last item mentioned by Madame Sosostris, stimulates the motion of the sailor ‘entering the whirlpool.’

34. The ‘Unreal city’ now extends to the East, embracing various centuries and cultures. The ‘lady of situations’ fiddles lullabies on her hair to her ‘bats with baby faces’ adding frustration to maternal lamentation. The bells, the tower, and the chanting voices of “The Five Sermon” are all inverted, the ‘empty cinterns and exhausted wells’, dry up, the fountain is linked to the images of ‘dust’ in Section One.

35. After the vision of the disintegrated city, the protagonist draws near the chapel in the decayed hole among the mountains. It is “only the wind’s home” and its “dry bones can harm no one”. It is linked to the ‘rat’s alley’ in Section Two, where ‘the wind under the door. / What is that noise now? What is the wind doing?’ In Section Three, ‘the wind crosses the brown land, unheard’. Then the “damp gust / Bring rain” only to announce the water, because nothing in the waste land is ready to receive the rains. “Ganga was sunken, the limp leaves / Waited for rain”; With “The jungle crouched, humped in silence”, the extreme point of devastation is reached. Then the Thunder of rain is heard over the mountains, stating the conditions of the promise of water. There is doubt, and denial of the water of life because the protagonist has surrendered to passion instead of to compassion and love.

36. Here the commands of the Thunder appear do not appear to make any sense to the protagonist, who carries on with his senseless existence and activities: “I sat upon the shore / Fishing, with the arid plain behind me. / Shall I at least set my lands in order? London Bridge is falling down falling down falling down...”
T.S. Eliot’s The Wasteland

1. In Wasteland, he reflects at random, on the sterility of cultural environment, and on what Yeats described as ‘the foul rag – and – bone shop of the heart’.

2. Imagery is the chief instrument of exposition in The Wasteland. The prevailing image for fertility is woman. In Nature, Water is fertility. Absence of morals in women leads to sterility and to ennui with sex. Absence of water, leads to desert and thirst and ‘Death by Water’.

3. The poem equates water with women through the reference to River Thames. Examples of frustrated women are brought out through several illustrations to cover the entire spectrum of female variety: from the sophisticated Cleopatra to the indifferent typist. Cleopatra dominated men with her personality but overplayed her powers. Ophelia is helpless and innocent victim of man. The girl in the narrow canoe illustrates the sexual drudgery of a returning soldier’s wife. An illusion of water is created, but when the rains are announced an come, no one is ready to receive the rain.