

Chapter I: Absolute Irony: Expression of Modernist Aesthetics of Crisis

This dissertation seeks to posit that Thomas Mann's *Death in Venice* (1912) and T. S. Eliot's *The Waste Land* (1922) both strive to arrest the modern Westerners' slide into moral degeneration that pervaded the modern European societies. In order to address the modern crisis of moral ethics, both texts focus on portrayal of characters who indulge in morally degenerate acts. This comes in the form of irony as incorporated in the narrative structures of these texts. Both texts strongly imply urgencies on the part of the characters to move into a spiritually sound lifestyle. The narrative machineries of these texts not only teem with dramatization of a moral waste land but also suggest ways to redemption. However, the kind of ironic vision both these texts build on fails to propel the characters towards the path of regeneration - of rebirth of moral sense and of spiritual bliss - and as such, the irony in these modernist texts becomes absolute.

Set during one of the Balkan crises preceding the World War I, *Death in Venice*, a 1912 novella by German author Thomas Mann, arrests the attention of critics as an interesting modern work of art. Mann's work fictionally expresses the degenerating contemporary European crisis, that is, "decadence." Almost every sphere of life reflected this general crisis at that time. Decadence featured as the nucleus of modernity. The novella firmly posits itself in its own era as well as courageously attempts to critique the loopholes in the very phenomenon - modernity. Similarly, T. S. Eliot's legendary 1922 work *The Waste Land* employs apparently complex language, disjointed structure and far-fetched allusions and references from a hoard of sources forcefully building up diverse and multicultural intertextuality. The text replicates the climactic phase of the modern European crisis of moral degeneration and spiritual bankruptcy.

James F. Knapp criticizes the forms the modernist art works present themselves with. For instance, Cubism emphasized on producing "several representations of the same object rather than being "bound to more or less verisimilar optic image" (149). The audience faced hindrance in finding coherence as the work embeds destabilizing formal discontinuity, which meant a gap between the artist and the audience. During modernism, there appeared a general advocacy for a necessarily discontinuous relation between the literary style and its audience. Knapp points that T. S. Eliot through the following and similar other statements influenced what literary modernism developed into. Eliot states:

... it appears likely that poets in our civilization ... must be *difficult*. Our civilization comprehends great variety and complexity, and this variety and complexity, playing upon a refined sensibility, must produce various and complex result. The poet must become more and more comprehensive, more allusive, more indirect, in order to force, to dislocate if necessary, language into his meaning. (qtd. in Knapp 150)

In fact, in Eliot's authorizing the dislocation of language, which Knapp considered to have become a central mark of modernist verse, implies a critical practice of seeking 'meaning' within a complex, indirect, allusive literary artifact. This intensive focus on the role played by language in constituting meaning in relation to systems of social (dis)order points to a questionable facet of Modernist art. Knapp posits the intrinsic issue in the form of a question: "Is the discontinuous form of modern literature an opening out to reveal structures of social power, or is it instead an invitation to the closure of a new formalism" (151)? The use of discontinuous and fragmented form in the modernist texts like *The Waste Land* intends to recreate the social trend of drawing towards morally convictable lifestyle. But *The Waste Land* and most other highly modernist literary texts seem to end in a formalistic closure as

Knapp suspects. As such the textual irony becomes devoid of its mission: the spiritual transformation.

In the tightly woven fabric of Thomas Mann's *Death in Venice*, Bernhard Frank discovers a series of coupled details – allusion or metaphor – recurring, building, or metamorphosing. For him, for example, Tadzio's red tie, which Aschenbach later sports with and "contains testicular, overripe strawberries suggestive of the passion that leads to Aschenbach's demise" (99), is "ubiquitously phallic". One another detail from the final scene of the novella he focuses on is that of the abandoned camera and the tripod on which the camera is mounted. The tripod associates itself with one "at the Oracle of Delphi, presided over by Apollo, the god of prophecy" which serves, for Frank, as a counterpart for Aschenbach's conversion:

... from Apollonian intellect to a Dionysian, orgiastic life-style, the camera on its tripod has been abandoned. For the first time Aschenbach does not look at life through the distancing lens of his art, but confronts his feelings directly. Inside the camera is the photographic plate of his life, and, in that sense, the camera is indeed his coffin. (100)

Frank's suggestion about the slide of Aschenbach's slide into a morally degraded disposition through his abandoning of the camera relates to the cherished ironic vision of the modernist authors. Mann seems to be dexterously dramatizing the moral slide of the contemporary European societies.

As the review of the available literature shows, both *Death in Venice* and *The Waste Land* deal with moral degeneration, but the present research departs from all of the previous research works on these texts in that it seeks to respond to the issue of moral degeneration through the lens of absolute irony. An exploration of the form of absolute irony in these texts

is the burden of this dissertation. The framework for analysis comes in general from theories about the ironic vision and in particular from Alan *Horizons of Assent: Modernism, Postmodernism, and the Ironic Imagination*, which posits absolute irony as the characteristic feature of modernist literature. He also asserts that absolute irony verges on the pessimistic, since it cannot resolve the paradox that its use gives rise to.

Whereas the first chapter has introduced the main argument of the dissertation, the second chapter discusses absolute irony as the theoretical framework. The third chapter on *Death in Venice* shows that the characteristic structure of irony in the novella is that of absolute irony. Similarly, the fourth chapter demonstrates that despite moments of the suggested visions of redemptions, T. S. Eliot's ultimate despairing vision in *The Waste Land* makes his intended satire to turn into absolute irony. Finally the concluding chapter posits absolute irony as the defining feature of modernist aesthetics of crisis.

Chapter II: Absolute Irony and Modernist Irresolution of Contradiction

The present chapter discusses aspects of the literary philosophical trope of irony. As per the structural design of this dissertation, this chapter devotes itself to the discussion on the theoretical perspective so as to provide a framework for the textual analysis of the selected texts in the ensuing chapters. It begins with brief genealogical exploration of the ironic vision in literary and philosophical contexts in general and eventually establishes the concept of 'absolute irony' as a unique postulation of Alan Wilde. Absolute irony as engineered by Wilde critiques the way ironic vision resides in the textual world of most of the modernist texts. The chapter explores the chief constructs of ironic vision from the Greco-Roman time to the modern postmodern times. Thus the present chapter seeks to throw a spotlight on the conceptual framework of the whole dissertation. It provides methodological base to the dissertation.

Irony, a common literary trope, is a topic of interest to the philosophy. The term is derived from the Greek comic character *eiron* who triumphs over the stupid character, *ablazon*. However, the meaning of the term has undergone much change since, in that the Greek comic character *eiron* ultimately triumphed over *ablazon* through the technique of understatement while most of the modern critical uses of "irony" involves concealing of the real case in order to achieve special rhetorical or artistic effects. David E. Cooper explores reasons for irony to consider a topic of interest to the philosophy of literature. To him, it is generally encountered as a multi-faceted concept in that it is commonly characterized by plural connections or layers of meaning. The meaning - "simulated ignorance"- of the Greek term *eironeia* also necessitates a clarification of the need to indulge in the simulated form of existence and of the way she manages to communicate layers of meaning on the part of the ironist. However, the general belief that ironic trope needs always to convey an embodied sense of opposition with the literal meaning of the words used needs to be reviewed heavily if

we are to envision the broader and discursive ironic domains that in turn depend on the styles and nature of events chosen to apply. Lying cannot be considered as consisting of irony although there is also a gap between the reality and the speaker's words. Nor is deception the main or general intention of ironic utterances as some people would understand.

However, Cooper clarifies, “it is not just for the production of ironic speech and writing that writers such as Swift, Voltaire, Heine, and Anthony Powell are celebrated as masters of irony” (378). Cooper begins with the discussion of the two broad features in common with the trope of irony: the first, one in which “The words used by a speaker or a character in a book are not intended to convey...the attitude they superficially convey.” ... and the second, in which “... the purpose of the devices is a critical one i.e. to ridicule, mockery, and the like ...” However, he aims ultimately to guide us to a different feature of irony where “the irony belongs not to the events in themselves, but to the mute comment they pass on certain beliefs and sentiments” (378-79). In so-called “tragic irony,” too – though ridicule is no longer quite the point – the irony owes to the incongruence between the actual dispensation of Fate and the protagonist’s own understanding of events.

To Cooper, several literary critics since Friedrich Schlegel vehemently hold “irony” as “the essence of good literature” such as the nineteenth century Romantic Karl Solger who called irony “the most complete fruit to the artistic understanding;” Thomas Mann for whom “irony... is the sense of art itself;” Barthes who is well-known for taking irony as “the true test of writing as writing ... the essence of writing” (380); and further claims of this kind, especially made by French poststructuralists, such as Jaques Derrida.

Among such a number of versions of claims spurred regarding the definition of irony, Cooper directs us to the one that is inspired by the idea of world- or historical irony. In this vein, he considers especially over the beliefs two philosophers held: The first one, proposed

by Kierkegaard, insists that “since ‘actuality’ is itself ironic, it is the writer’s duty to take a ‘negative’, distanced stance toward it”, and the other one by Lukacs in which he, defining irony in relation to its use in novels, believes that “since existence, in modernity at least, is one of intrinsic ‘dissonance, breakdown or failure,’ the novel which is true to existence must be ‘essentially ironigenic’” (380). Such views, Cooper believes, can appeal and be digestible only to those minds who share these writers’s visions of existence.

While considering the views that regard paradox and irony in relation to the appeal to something inherent in literature, there appear at least two different developments. The first emphasizes on the ironic contrast or ‘contradiction’ between the status of a text as an artifice and its effect on readers. That is, the emphasis lies on the contrast between the apparent passion or commitment that may pervade a text and the comparatively cool detachment of the author. The second development, that of structuralists and deconstructionists, focuses on the alleged ironic gap between the author’s effort to convey a certain message and his inability to ‘control’ how the text will in fact be understood – a gap resulting from a ‘play of codes’ that intervenes between the author’s intentions and the readers. As this may severely refract the text’s intended meaning, the honest author will write in a manner “fraught with uncertainty” rather than anticipating any confirmed control over “the meaning of the work.”

I. A. Richards distinguishes between poetry capable of “ironic contemplation” from those incapable. He draws the distinction as:

A poem of the first group is built out of sets of impulses which run parallel, which have the same direction. In a poem of the second group the most obvious feature is the extraordinarily heterogeneity of the distinguishable impulses. But they are more than heterogeneous, they are opposed. They are such that in ordinary, non-poetic, non-imaginative experience, one or other set

would be suppressed to give as it might appear freer development to the others. (234)

In the lines above, Richards, as a New Critic, attributes essential formal qualities to the higher kind of poetry for irony to arise from it. The impulses must be not only heterogeneous but also opposed. Emphasizing on the opposition among the impulses for generating ironic effect, he further writes, “Irony in this sense consists in the bringing in of the opposite, the complementary impulses; that is why ... irony itself is so constantly a characteristic of poetry” (234) of highest order. For Richards and other New Critics, the deliberate employment of the quality of opposition of heterogeneous drives are accompanied with other formal effects such as fragmentation, contradiction and paradox all of which, working in unison with one another, conspire, in return, to bring about the desired ironic situation. Richards further elaborates on the context in which he favours irony to be situated:

These characters of aesthetic experiences can thus be shown to be very natural consequences of the diversity of their components. But that so many different impulses should enter in is only what may be expected in an experience whose ground-plan is a balance of opposites. For every impulse which does not complete itself in isolation tends to bring in allied systems. The state of irresolution shows this clearly. The difference between any such welter of vacillating impulses and the states of composure we are considering may well be a matter of mediating relations between the supporting systems brought in from either side. (235-36)

Richards obviously emphasizes that irony, or any kind of aesthetic experience takes the form of a “natural consequence” once the “diverse impulses” enter a strategically designed “ground-plan” where discursive oppositions push against each other. The designer of such a

platform struggles to build up more than anything else a crisscrossing network of oppositions so that the ultimate ironic or other aesthetic consequences of higher kind get naturally realized. Proudly anticipated, our consciousness, which is abandoned in a state of lack of fulfillment, craves for a resolution “evidently impossible to do so.” Thus, Richardsian discussion situates the irresolution of the contradiction as the methodological crux of the ironic vision.

Robert Penn Warren, Cleanth Brooks and other New Critics rather extend on the Richardsian notion of irony. For them, the poems that present parallel perspectives are of inferior kind in that they lack the poet's ironic vision of the possible opposing attitudes which great poetry incorporate in them. Furthermore, ambiguity is not a stylistic fault but an inevitable consequence of the powers of language -- an indispensable means of poetic utterance. The poetic experience is more delicately organized than ordinary experience. Irony, as for the New Critics, is a term which brings together the tension between different intellectual or emotional forces existing within a verbal structure. It balances heterogeneous impulses within the text. For them, it is a necessary condition of good poetry. The meaning of a poetic statement is ‘charged’ or qualified by the context in which, it appears, everything provides context for every other thing called mutual constitution irony.

When viewed in the broader context of Western ironic critical tradition, the Anglo-American ironic critical tradition shows its root in the tradition of Kant through Pater and Coleridge whereas the New Critical ironic vision carries strong Hegelian influences. However, both of these traditions have been subject to criticism on the grounds that their conception of irony essentially lack conceptual depth compared to the European tradition. Paul A. Bove, who assesses the New Critical ironic vision as ‘intellectually exhausted’ and as embodying “an interpretive opacity obscuring the view of the very modernist literature” whose justification it sought to provide. Explicating his reasons to discard it, Bove writes:

[T]he New Critical tradition of ironic vision has been essentially nonspeculative and merely concerned with irony as a technique of poetic language. The ideology of this tradition is functionalist, systemic, and anti-historical. Following in the secularizing tradition of Hegel and Mill, it negates the importance of lived individual experience, of intentionality in the constitution of the world. Many of the implications of this tradition remain unthematized in most of the central texts. (245)

Bove critiques the intellectual shallowness of the New Critical ironic tradition which fallaciously undervalued the trope of irony by rendering it to the status of a functional attribute of the poetic language. Bove's analysis above resounds his objection in the way most of the New Critics's tendency to exploit irony as a part of the formal system of building up the so-called organic unity. This formal approach, for Bove, clearly indicates a serious problem: it nullifies the dimensions of ironic vision percolating through the historical events; and, it disregards the subtle relationship irony often builds with human existence itself.

It is in this context -- where the intellectually impoverished theories and practice of irony advocated by the ironic critical traditions as those of the New Critics and Anglo-American Critics prevail -- that critics in the twentieth century compellingly acknowledge the importance of the concept of irony Alan Wilde proposes in his book *Horizons of Assent: Modernism, Postmodernism, and the Ironic Imagination*. Bove, in alliance with many other critics supporting Alan Wilde's comprehensive theory on irony, not only rightly posits Wilde's proposition in the tradition of Kierkegaard and phenomenology but also recognizes it as "an alternative to the dominant modern and postmodern versions of Hegel and Schlegel offered respectively by the New Critical and deconstructive theorists and critics" (245). Bove observes that Wilde's postulation of a novel and self-conscious theory of irony in *Horizons of Assent* surpasses all the Western ironic tradition through modern and postmodern era. For

Bove, situating irony in its legitimate origin, the modern attitude of mind, the book raises its status from either mere formal machinery of form (the New Criticism) or an instance of play of the signs (Deconstruction) to the level of the deepest consciousness, which Wilde regards as a site of so many consciousnesses and where it connects to the lived experience of human beings. To quote Bove's own words:

Wilde insists that irony is neither the resolution of apparent oppositions in verbal paradox nor the 'topological aporia' of the sign itself, but rather "a mode of consciousness." Irony is essentially the modern attitude of mind, the 'vision' of the twentieth century's industrial world. Drawing on Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology of perception, Wilde insists that irony is rooted in the 'priority of perception' and is, as such, a pre-transcendental mode of consciousness: "an instinctive, untutored, and, as it were, a gestural seizing of the world, which simultaneously makes and unavoidable claim on human beings as so many consciousnesses incarnated in it. (245)

Bove's observation here resounds the fact that unlike the New Critics and deconstructionists, Wilde, in the first place, strongly favours to see irony as 'a mode of consciousness' rather than a slave to any sort of formalist 'politics' and as rooted in the 'priority of perception' in the second.

Bove's claims gain no less further assertion in Karen Lawrence's relevant explanation of how Wilde rejects "definitions of irony as a series of techniques [and] instead describes it as a "mode of consciousness," a response to conditions in the world" (177). Arguing quite in line with Bove, Karen Lawrence marks, in Wilde's theory:

...an interest in the shape of the work of art and in "the way it imposes order on experience, in particular, the way it creates a sense of balance, unity and

closure. As is clear from this list of aesthetic properties, [Wilde is] concerned with certain formalist (in particular, New Critical) assumptions about the way that texts are constructed. (177)

Bove and Lawrence agree with each other in their critique of the persistent use of sense of balance, unity and closure as the fundamental premises and structure to construct any work of art. These superficialities, undoubtedly, achieved a privileged position in terms of the construction of works of art as the New Critic overtly favoured them in their major texts.

A strikingly meaningful dimension of Wilde's postulation resides in the fact how he associates the thinking of this ironic consciousness of disjunction and disruption with modernity. Similarly, with no less brilliance does Wilde establish irony as the fundamental quality of the modern mind that instinctively views life and art through ironic sense. The modern ironic vision, according to Wilde, builds on the "tensive structure of beliefs" which may or may not resolve into a complete aesthetic experience embodies "the sign of the author's connection with being," retains his concern for irony to be figured out in close interaction with life and history (qtd in Bove 245). These preoccupations, in Wilde, always gain priority more than anything else.

Wilde's *Horizons of Assent* divides modern literature into three periods: high modernism, late modernism, and post-modernism. The historical dimension of Wilde's irony, an awareness of historicity of irony, produces a viable, though not so rigidly, taxonomy of modern literature which, Bove believes, functions as an effective means to perceive correctly, "the binary literary history of modern and postmodern so often advocated by proponents of the latter." Wilde's taxonomy, however, brilliantly recognizes the indeterminacy and mutual influences rather than obvious distinction between constructions of ironic mode across ages and acknowledges "persistent struggles in all periods with a world unwilling to be ordered or

made meaningful.” Indeed, Wilde shows that, in some ways, the entire tradition of modern irony is encapsulated in E. M. Forster’s career.

Bove provides a summary of Wilde’s classification of the forms of irony as:

... ‘mediate irony,’ which ... imagines a world lapsed from a recoverable ... norm, and is the mode of satire and the least common modern manner although it can be found, along with most other types, in Forster; ‘disjunctive irony’ which moves, even if reluctantly, toward paradox: “The ironist, far more basically adrift, confronts a world that appears inherently disconnected and fragmented;” and ‘suspensive irony,’ the primary postmodernist mode: “with its yet more radical vision of multiplicity, randomness, contingency, and even absurdity, [it] abandons the quest for paradise altogether – the world in all its disorder is simply (or not so simply) accepted. (247-48)

Notably, as Docherty observes, each of the forms of irony Wilde proposes seems to characteristically correspond to one of the twentieth century uses of irony: ‘mediate irony’ to irony as we know it, implying the opposite of what is actually said; ‘disjunctive irony’ to the irony typical of Modernist irony manifesting in the form of the New Critical paradox; and ‘suspensive irony’ to postmodernist irony that acknowledges disorder and multiplicity (266).

Bove, in his part, regards disjunctive irony -- Wilde’s favourite and, which Wilde calls ‘absolute irony’ after Kierkegaard, -- as “the most extreme form of modernist irony” viewing it in an opposing relation to general irony, Bove further elucidates:

Absolute irony is the dominant mode of much of Woolf, of *Mrs. Dalloway*, for example, and of Yeats. It is an extension of the general vision of the disjunctive ironists, but it is also qualitatively different for, among other things, it marks the limit of the aesthetic will to order and precipitates what

Wilde calls the modernist “Aesthetics of Crisis”: “the confusions of the world are shaped into an equal poise of opposites: the form of an unresolvable paradox.” These texts “achieve not resolution but closure – an aesthetic closure that substitutes for the notion of paradise regained, an image ... of a paradise fashioned by man himself... (247-48)

Docherty, in addition, recognizes Wilde’s argument of irony as “a general explanation of the movement away from unity and towards multiplicity in this century” as valid and acknowledges Wilde’s explanation for the Modernist writer’s typically circular form: “the artist retreats from her paradox and from the world it figure, a remote, hovering observer now, saved from the impossible choice but condemned to its inevitable repetition” (266). Highly content with the all-encompassing frame of reference Wilde envisions for his ironic sense characteristically against each period of modern history, Bove further illuminates the concept:

The story Wilde tells is of a modernism caught in a crisis produced by the contradictory strategies designed to meet its vision of disjunction, of a late modernism trying to alter the failed strategies but at too severe an aesthetic, human, and moral cost; and of a postmodernism less homogenous in its details than often suggested as it hopes to devise assenting responses to a random existence and sometimes succeeds, fails, or, more rarely produces a tentative order in the world of the ordinary. (249)

Giving a more concrete shape to what Bove emphasizes, Lawrence seeks to capture Wilde’s larger view of how the ironic mode of modernism changes as postmodernism begins to supersede in the Western critical tradition:

... both modernist and postmodernist irony are responses to a 'random and multiple world' in which the self is receding and dissolving. The difference, however, is located in the tone and attitude toward the contemporary crises (modernists despair; postmodernists assent to it); in the 'solution' to the crisis (modernists try to transcend the instability of life in the repose of art, whereas the postmodernists do not even try to pose an ideal aesthetic order); and in the degree of the writer's engagement with the world (modernists withdraw while desiring to be engaged in the world; postmodernists 'participate in the world'). (179-80)

Through his thematic differentiation, Lawrence evidently establishes that the characteristic structure of modernist literature is closely based on disjunctive irony as opposed to that of postmodernist literature, which is the reflection of suspensive irony. Wilde's position regarding the modernist literary form is thus adequately explained. Modernist art forms, for him, are wrought with gaps and structural fragments, and in their attempt to conjure up a cohesive balance, they end in disjunctive irony and despairing vision. Lawrence reiterates the fact as:

Like New Critics, ... [Wilde] focuses on aesthetic unity, balance, and paradox in modern literature but just ultimately to reject their notion that oppositions are resolved in "mutual balance and support," and finds, instead, that beneath the appearance of unity and balance, "fierce, unreconciled opposition remains." ... he speaks of the modernists' "tacit admission of failure to come to terms with its [the world's] complexity" and of the "despairing vision" common to all disjunctive irony. (178-80)

Providing a strong justification for the observations of various critics above, Alan Wilde in his insightful essay “Modernism and the Aesthetics of Crisis” unearths that modernist literature depended on and celebrated the form of perfect paradox characterized by coherence, unity and wholeness. Modernist literature deals with the modern crisis bravely. With its recognition of such a crisis, an anticipation of its resolution naturally follows. However, never does this anticipation of a resolution gets realized. Nor does it adopt a change in the approach i.e. the form of art used. Wilde rightly terms this bluntly rigid form of modernist art as ‘not mature but heroic’:

... modernist works structured on the principle of absolute irony—expresses a sort of brave helplessness, and perhaps if one wants an honorific to apply to these writers, the appropriate term is not mature but heroic. What we confront finally is a different kind of complexity: the heroism of consciousness making art of its own uncertainty and expressing in its very form, in the express rejection of an easy resolution the difficult aesthetics of crisis. (23)

The understanding of Wilde’s concept of modernist art as an ‘aesthetics of crisis’ and that of the concept of ‘absolute irony’ deeply interlink with each other. His essay, “Modernism and the Aesthetics of Crisis,” establishes that modernist art chiefly proves either to be a "religio-aesthetic withdrawal from existential time into the eternal simultaneity of essential art" in that it predominantly "presents itself as a congeries of so many closed, spatial, formally organized works: a series of self-sustaining or organic constructs distantly proclaiming their inherent superiority to the messiness of life"(13), or to embody "the burden of the modernist past" through the most unheroic of contexts in which the characters seem to recreate the conventionally applied scenes of ‘injunctions’ (14).

Wilde finds "the sense of modernism as something monumental, not to say marmoreal: a gallery of timeless heterocosms or imperious speaking heads"(14) in the modernist works. "Is this what modernism was:" interrogates Wilde, "a heap of icy aesthetic shapes or a ragbag of detachable moral injunctions?" In fact, for Wilde, the modernist act of connecting old injunctions in order to give them a new shape only 'expresses desire, not achievement' of their aesthetic goals, and this gap between 'desire' and 'achievement' informs the 'desperate undertaking' of modernism. While his major contention here concerns the dynamics of the modernist works, - those heaps of 'icy aesthetic shapes or the detachable moral injunctions' - his analysis drags inevitably on the scrutiny of the modernist criticism because the two formed a complicit relationship that was powerful enough to obscure our perception of what was going on under the name of modernism. Resorting to an approach which, in his own words, is archaeological in nature – “an uncovering of sedimented layers of criticism that obscures our view of the thing itself” (14), Wilde brilliantly exposes the loopholes in their model of criticism: their emphasis on consistency, coherence under the apparently disparate as capable of resolving the ambiguities and paradoxes which never occurs.

In a comparative study of the so-called antimodernist and pro-modernist aesthetics that appeared in the early modernist works, especially novels and poetry, Marianne DeKoven observes that this debate embodies only surficial politics in that like modernist form, the debate over its politics consists of unresolved contradiction and unsynthesized dialectic. Demonstrating a complexity in this politics of modernist form, which both male and female writers were equally engaged in, DeKoven posits:

The representation and its own negation coexist in the text in an oscillating simultaneity, an unresolved contradiction; not an 'ambiguity,' 'paradox,' or 'tension' resolved or contained by 'organically unified' form, as the New

Critics have it, but something entirely different: a coexistent doubleness that is resolved nowhere – that is reinforced in rather than eased of its contradictoriness by the radically disjunctive modernist form ... (685)

Thus, for the modernist writers as well as the critics, a form of art characterized by fundamental disjunction and coexistence of the representation and its own negation in the text proves to be seminal as they consider it an instrument to declare a breaking away of modernist art from the conventional realist art. This again justifies Wilde's claims about the way modernist works construct ironic visions.

Wilde, thus, articulates the voice of many other critics and makes serious critique about the politics of the modernist form of art which tends habitually to build on paradoxes, contradictions and fragmentations, and then, to close its statements, but it never bothers about answering the anticipation of the resolution to the ethical moral spiritual issues it raises. Consequently, characters remain in a state of eternal despair and lack of fulfillment, though objective correlatives suggestive of the way out exist in the texts. Addressing such an impasse, then, Wilde postulates a unique case of irony which he calls "absolute irony: the conception of equal and opposed possibilities held in a state of total poise, or, more briefly still, the shape of an indestructible, unresolved paradox (16)." Also called 'disjunctive irony' and applicable to a number of modernist texts, the concept recognizes in the works, first, the enthusiastically built paradoxical situation where each of the multiple possibilities (states, drives or propensities) exist in opposition to or disconnected from one another; second, the paradox does not get resolved as it strives to control equally all the disconnected elements; and third, the situation or the work concludes in mere aesthetic closure.

Taking a cue from Wilde, this dissertation posits that Eliot's *The Waste Land* ends without resolution of the contradiction: the irony remains unresolved so that it can be said

assuredly that the rain does not fall. That is, owing to the infatuation with the vision of irony based on formal complexity, modernist texts, of which *The Waste Land* is a quintessential example, remain open-ended rather than providing a solution to the degenerate world they represent. In other words, they fail to suggest any moral-spiritual reformation or regeneration. Instead, representation of 'a morally debased world' and 'the alienated self' itself becomes the fulcrum of the literary aesthetics of these texts. Similar unresolved ambiguity marks the ending of Mann's *Death in Venice*. This tendency of the modernist literature collaborated with the newly flowering modernist literary criticism. The New Criticism, for example, through its advocacy of formalist literary theories, celebrates textual coherence and textual organicity under the fragmented structure at the surface level in order to concoct an ironic vision.

Since the aesthetic signifier of the ironic design of the modern world as engineered by the modernist art remains devoid of its aesthetic signified, this kind of vision of self-contained irony in the modernist literary works characteristically anchors with what Alan Wilde baptizes as 'absolute irony'. As the present chapter has established the conceptual framework of the research, each of the two ensuing chapters will attempt to see through the two selected texts so as to demonstrate the aspects of 'absolute irony' in the respective artistic worlds that is, existence of a state of paradox, irresolution of the paradox and the ending as a mere aesthetic one. The concluding chapter in its part will attempt to make a viable inference out of the discussions in the textual analyses sections regarding the mode of irony adopted in the modernist texts.

Chapter III: Absolute Irony in *Death in Venice*

Modernist aesthetics deals chiefly with the unresolved crisis of the modern mind. In their promise to duly respond to their consciousness of this crisis, modernist texts adopt an essentially ironic mode of expression. As discussed in the theoretical framework of this study in Chapter II, formal ambiguities and paradoxes built on complex images and allusions, the contradiction of which never resolve, construct the chief motifs of modernist irony. This chapter will focus on the textual analysis of such techniques as used in Thomas Mann's novella, *Death in Venice* so as to clarify their relationship with the nature of irony as deployed in the text. By doing this, this chapter will attempt to illustrate how design of the story strategically purports the protagonist Aschenbach's persistent ironic moral slides while ostensibly avoiding his rescue and moral rejuvenation against his tragic end/fall, and thus, the ultimate realization of the form of absolute irony.

Thomas Mann's 1912 novella *Death in Venice* narrates the tale of a writer's gradual downward slide and tragic succumbing to depravity. As critics view, the novella, with a blend of mythic narrative and psychological portrayal of characters, sets in motion a grave and looming tone of decay and death from the very beginning. Generally appreciated for its rich imagery and classical allusions, Mann called it "a story of death ... of the voluptuousness of doom." The plot of *Death in Venice* is wrought with paradoxes. Critics find multiple and opposing cultural, aesthetic, literary critical traditions and theories simultaneously at work in the narrative of the novella. This aspect pervades the characters so strongly that they - especially Aschenbach and Tadzio - appear to be enigmatic. The protagonist, Gustav von Aschenbach is endowed with conflicting emotions right from the beginning. Allusions to various aesthetic philosophies hover in the narrative structure of the novella to build the ultimate ironic vision. Aschenbach takes up a journey to Venice which poses him a series of emotional challenges that he strives to overcome as an experienced intellectual man. This

ensues more from the design imagined for the novella than from the necessary thematic conditions. The novella's plot moves on in such a way that against the generally pervading pressures to address Aschenbach's urgencies to come up with remedial and corrective actions and to duly redirect the straying away of his thoughts and activities which oppose the moral exigencies and boundaries he took pride in, Aschenbach, allows himself to depreciate from his aesthetic moral criteria. Critics equivocally agree that Mann endows his protagonist multiple ironic qualities that make him an allegorical figures. The characters, the setting and events of the novella show allegorical associations with multiple aesthetic cultures in the past – including both German philosophical tradition and Greek mythology.

The opening scene of the novella describes Aschenbach, the protagonist, who contemplates of vacationing, and thereby begins to drift away from his usual hard work during one of the summers. Confronting a writer's block and deeply fatigued of his overwork, he suspects a failure to advance his successful career further. To mitigate his mental sloth, he sets out on an excursion to a particular part of the city where his sights fall on a stranger with a red hair, standing on the steps of an old mortuary chapel. The narrative turns to presenting an irresistibly exotic impression that hits upon Aschenbach's mind. His contemplation upon the figure of the foreigner in the following passage bears significance in terms of the consistent parallelism it builds with the rest of the narrative contents:

He was clearly not of Bavarian stock and, if nothing else, the broad, straight-brimmed bast hat covering his head lent him a distinctly foreign, exotic air. He did, however, have the customary knapsack strapped to his shoulders, wore a yellowish belted suit of what appeared to be loden, and carried a gray waterproof over his left forearm, which he pressed to his side, and an iron-tipped walking stick in his right hand, and having thrust the stick diagonally into the ground, he had crossed his feet and braced one hip on its crook.

Holding his head high and thus exposing a strong, bare Adam's apple on the thin neck rising out of his loose, open shirt, he gazed alert into the distance with colorless, red-lashed eyes, the two pronounced vertical furrows between them oddly suited to the short, turned-up nose. Thus—and perhaps his elevated and elevating position contributed to the impression— there was something of the overseer, something lordly, bold, even wild in his demeanor, for be it that he was grimacing, blinded by the setting sun, or that he had a permanent facial deformity, his lips seemed too short: they pulled all the way back, baring his long, white teeth to the gums. (4-5)

The narrative teems with the rich imagery that describes the degree of Aschenbach's fascination with the deformed figure of the stranger, - "clearly not of Bavarian stock." The moment the readers become aware of the other facet of Aschenbach's consciousness that he places high value to his fame as an author of unwavering principle and thinker of high stature, they also become clear enough to see the contradictory relation between his beliefs and his recent inclinations towards exoticism. This continues to appear as the fundamental structural design of the novel. Clayton Koelb reckons the foreigner as, "the first of several who share at least a few of a number of significant features... that convey a sense of strangeness and of foreboding in Aschenbach..." (96), and at the same time Koelb brings us home to Mann's cogent weaving of a pattern of rich layers of meanings powerful enough to subtly combine Aschenbach's aesthetic contemplation on the beauty of Greek sculpture with his strangely evoked yet ambiguous homosexual ramblings along with the image of, "the divinity charged with the duty of conducting dead souls into the underworld" (97). As Koelb further explicates Mann's allusion to the Greek deity:

The wide-brimmed hat and the stick are of particular significance, for they are always part of Hermes's costume, even if he is otherwise naked, Hermes is the

messenger of the gods, the one who brings powerful visions to mortals – as he does here... One might well expect to catch a glimpse of him on the steps of a temple dedicated to the dead. (97)

Instigated into a sudden feeling of restlessness, Aschenbach jumps into a decision to embark on a travel to some exotic place. Koelb, further equates the figure of the foreigner at the chapel steps to another Greek divinity, the wine-god Dionysus, whom the Greeks took, “to be of foreign origin, a traveler ... to the Mediterranean world...” This analysis shows Mann’s intention to establish connection between, “the figure on the chapel steps and both the wine-bearing Dionysus and the message-bearing Hermes.” The mysterious figure imparts sullen message, “... one that will eventually conduct Aschenbach into the realm of the dead...” However, Mann’s hero erroneously, as some of Mann’s readers might do, ignores it just as an “intense exchange of glances between the two men” with insignificant quality of homoerotic sensibility. But contrarily enough, for Koelb, “... there is no doubt that the sight of the man starts the writer’s mind moving along a path toward the erotic, the exotic, and the forbidden” (97). Mann’s ironic vision clearly begins to assemble apparently disconnected images here. It takes some time to understand the kind of heterogeneous sensations he begins to weave together. A writer’s mind, supposedly unwavering, begins to encounter visions of ‘the erotic and the exotic’ that represent the ephemeral, the transient and ‘the forbidden’ as such. Thus, Mann brings together, in his character’s mind the contradicting emotions, which the character scarcely doubts.

Koelb further analyses that although very conscious of his not-very-big reasons for his wanderlust – a mere reaction to a case of writer’s block that he faces - Aschenbach never bothers reconsidering his travel plans. As Koelb explains:

He thus has every reason to be suspicious of his motives and to reject his wanderlust. But he does not reject it; he chooses instead to compromise enough with his unseemly longings to consider a trip to the south. He is careful to curb himself by planning a relatively modest journey no farther somewhere in the south of Europe and certainly not “all the way to the tiger... (98)

Here, Koelb demonstrates how Aschenbach begins to give a free reign to his wanton desire as opposed to his lifelong devotion to his profession of writing. On the one hand, the images brought to the first chapter of the novella - which also function as a *media res* beginning of the narrative giving it a tinge of classical epic tradition – provoke a deep sense of foreboding to the ensuing twists in the story, on the other hand, the narrator intensifies the details that persistently informs about his protagonist’s digression and detachment from his cherished values for the cultivation of which he is honoured at the national level. The narrative promisingly continues till the end to add to the undertones of deviant choices of an intellectual recognized widely for his self-discipline.

Mann devotes the whole of the second chapter of his novella to portray a full scale character of his hero. Gustav von Aschenbach, a distinguished German author, whose intellectual achievements have earned him a distinguished position in German cultural life including a public honour on his fiftieth birthday, a solitary, reserved, cerebral character takes shape of a full-fledged character, here. Mann’s delicacy and dexterity in constructing the lively image of this intellectual has been appreciated wholeheartedly. Mann, in fact carves his protagonist with such skill that the whole of the magnanimity of his mind manifests in this appealing composition named Aschenbach, as he describes:

Since his entire being was bent on fame, he proved himself if not quite precocious then at least, thanks to the resolute and precise persona he cultivated, mature and ready for life in the world before his time.

Barely out of school he had acquired a name for himself. In the space of ten years he had learned to perform his professional duties and manage his fame from his writing desk and to make every sentence of his correspondence gracious and pregnant with meaning... (12-13)

As is discussed earlier, by introducing multiple allegorical levels working in unison, Mann constructs meaningful facets of Aschenbach's personality: an avid believer of classicist aestheticism, a man with homosexual sensibilities and a potential prey to savage emotions. The conflicting forces these identities structurally foreshadow convincingly embody the power to raise the character, by the end of the novella, to a moral spiritual height from where it becomes apt to exact the intense and irreversibly ironic self-destruction. Thus, it is a necessary part of the narrative structure that devoted to his work, Aschenbach initially avoids the qualities of a romantic artist such as, emotional, spontaneous, feeling, inspired, etc. and has always cherished the qualities of a classical writer - rational, dedicated, hard-working.

Allusions to mythical contexts and aesthetic figures largely dominate Mann's strategy to build paradoxical aura. Koelb juxtaposes Mann's description of the physique of Aschenbach with that in the photograph of Gustave Mahler, the composer, the news of whose death in Vienna had shocked Mann. To him, Mann's narrator apparently builds a congruence between the artist and his work, but under the surface it represents the opposite. Combining the general with the particular he parodies, "Aschenbach' (Mahler's) face is then transformed into a kind of living text in which the narrator reads the traces of all the writer's imaginary mental adventures. The congruence of the man and his work is thus made complete" (100). Koelb's analysis here proves that Mann manipulates a list of autobiographical sources and his

impressions of more than one distinguished persons of his time to give his character a lifelike shape: a fact to confirm Mann's conception of his character as perpetually sliding downward. The motif of comparing his character with highly renowned artists embodies Mann's programming of uniting totally contradicting forces. The allusions anchors Aschenbach to highly dedicated status of the artistic figures and suggests simultaneously his failure to maintain the same. The higher he gets raised, the more questionable his morale becomes. Thus, the allusions subtly give rise to ambiguity and contradiction.

As the novella turns to Aschenbach's travel and his emotional adventures, his southward movement all the way through to Italy articulates much about the aesthetic choice Mann makes regarding such a setting for his novella. From the coast of North Italy he goes by boat to Venice, where he experiences a scene that has particular significance in the novella. After staying for some time in his first destination, Pola, the Italian port, he once again makes a hasty decision to board on a steamer bound for Venice in the hope of more exotic experience. His yet-half-conscious inclination towards the exotic becomes more and more obvious. Robert Tobin discovers direct connection between the theme of homosexuality and the destination Mann's protagonist chooses to head to. For Tobin, Aschenbach's desires for the "queer" and the "fabulously deviant" seem naturally to drive him to some, "nocturnal realm in which sexuality is at home" (33). Stressing upon the image of Venice as a site to seek homosexual experience at least from the time of Goethe and reminding of Mann's own homosexual contemplations, Tobin states:

In particular, Venice had become by the late nineteenth century a vacation center for homosexuals with means. Mann himself had played of this topos in an early story, "Disappointment," which describes a conversation between two solitary men in the Piazza San Marco of Venice; this can easily be read as a kind of attempted pick-up in which the cynicism and depression resulting from

the clandestine lives of upper-class homosexuals in the late nineteenth century is discussed. Given this background, Aschenbach's desire to visit Venice is a logical extension of both his writing and his encounter with the stranger in the park. (34)

Tobin here traces out Mann's homosexual contemplation in Mann's earlier works. He focuses especially on the one in which he got sparked by a real Polish boy he saw during his own visit with his family to Venice. It becomes key to his formulation of the events in *Death in Venice*. However, Mann neither attacks homosexuality nor praises it as the practice lacked a wide acceptance in early twentieth century Europe. Rather, he represents it as a symptom of the unhealthy obsession of an artist. The irony about Mann's love story is that neither participant ever speaks to the other. The lack of dialogue between them only adds to power of the trap of ambiguity for Aschenbach.

Tobin's analysis shows that the travelling author's sea journey to Venice and its setting both function very much as symbols of homosexual sensibilities. Tobin thus, agrees to the unanimous observation of critics regarding Mann's conceptual plan of characterizing the surroundings of the lonely traveler with rich implications of deviated passions which form an opposing relation to his inner values as a man of intellectual height. Even Koelb's analysis joins those of Tobin. Koelb recognizes Aschenbach's journey by boat from Pola (a place he abandons on account of being not adequately exotic so as to give plenty of relief as he seeks) to Venice as a journey to the zone of decay and death. As Koelb relates, just in the manner of the passages in Book VI of Virgil's *Aeneid*, Mann describes the character's easy "descent into hell," though "it is getting out again that presents the challenge" (100). Elucidating on the literary reason in Mann's Decision to put his protagonist, "to journey to Venice by boat across the Adriatic rather than by the more direct railway route overland south from Munich," Koelb argues:

The train trip to Trieste that Aschenbach does take is in fact hardly mentioned – it had no place in Mann’s plan for the hero’s journey downward. And of course a train has very little about it that could be considered classical, whereas boats can easily be accommodated to a mythic vision of the descent into hell. Boats are in fact an outright necessity for such a journey, and Mann provides an abundance of them. (100)

Thus, Mann’s design is persistent in its intention to conspire a horrific journey that accommodates images and figures of persistent moral ethical spiritual slide on the part of his hero. The journey gradually and overwhelmingly constructs as his symbolic spiritual journey downward and unties his intellectual integrity he cherishes. In the hope of the exotic, Aschenbach sinks deep into eternally despairing vision. Mann weaves such a powerful paradox for his protagonist.

Another of such images manifests in the figure of the man who “leads Aschenbach to the salesman who sells him his ticket to Venice” and whose speech relies on “a highly formal textual style to confront their homosexuality” (Koelb 34). Again, a powerful imagery of a vessel that “does not seem promising for a vacation cruise on the Mediterranean; but ... very well suited to a journey across the Styx into the land of the dead” (100) has been created in such richness that it evokes the scene of mythic journey through “hellishly cavernous” sea vehicle. Even the fellow passengers who accompany him in the boat – either the ticket official with “the easy going gestures... [and]... his yellow bony fingers” (27), or the hunchbacked sailor who leads Aschenbach about the vessel – all contrive to create images of “deformed and demonic presence”. These images again conspire to contradict with the unchallenged intellectual integrity Mann earlier characterizes his hero with. How would one connect visions of deformity and demonic presence with that of intellectual integrity

resounding divinity? Mann creates a hero in whom both of these opposing propensities exist simultaneously. Neither recedes; rather, each strives to override the other in vain.

Koelb suggests towards Mann's deliberation of an image of mythic journey to a place of debased and fallen qualities suggestive of death and decay that are Mann's aesthetic correlatives to his travelling character's spiritually downward movements. However, to Koelb, and to other critics, "[N]one of these ominous portents deters the eager traveler in the slightest." The image of spiritual decay and moral slide that Mann designs ahead is the one that relates to Aschenbach's encounter with the group of young people from Pola travelling in the boat. For Koelb, "one of the most grotesque figures in any of Mann's stories" (100) is the strangely dressed and overly made up old fop who accompanies the group. Like any of the other unnamed characters in the story, this character contributes to add to the queer, forbidden and debased emotions in Aschenbach. Mann's puzzling portrayal of the man with "a red necktie" over the "pale-yellow summer suit, ... a rakishly uptilted Panama hat" and the way he "outdid the others in his raucous show of mirth" simultaneously evokes a sense of beauty of the classical figure and that of his overt sexual image. Thus, Mann here portrays the drunkard as a figure of ambiguity dwelling in the borderline between morality and vulgarity: a site of tension between opposing emotions to represent a state of crisis:

Once Aschenbach had had a closer look at him, however, he realized with something akin to horror that the man was no youth. He was old, there was no doubting it: he had wrinkles around his eyes and mouth; the matt crimson of his cheeks was rouge; the brown hair beneath the straw hat with its colorful band— a toupee; the neck—scrawny, emaciated; the stuck-on mustache and imperial on his chin—dyed; the full complement of yellow teeth—a cheap denture; and the hands, with signet rings on both forefingers, those of an old man. (28-29)

One of the several instances where Mann tellingly dramatizes the crisis of the modern western individual, here Aschenbach finds himself in the shoes of modern western people and the so-called intellectual minds interpreting it for them. Mann, as a modern denizen of western society and, at least fictionally, his protagonist inevitably confront this psycho-moral crisis. But ironically enough, both men in their respective worlds, give in to the forbidden, the uncanny.

Aschenbach well encounters the lurking danger: “A shudder ran through Aschenbach as he watched him and his interplay with his friends. ... He had the impression that something was not quite normal, that a dreamlike disaffection, a warping of the world into something alien was about to take hold.” However, Mann confesses, “But in empty, unarticulated space our senses lose the capacity to articulate time as well, and we sink into the immeasurable” despite the fact that “Strange, shadowy figures—the superannuated dandy, the goateed purser from deep in the hold—passed through his quiescent mind with vague gestures and jumbled dreamlike utterances.” Referring to the future significance of the words of the dandified old man who drunkenly babbles on his compliments “to your sweetheart, your sweet, your most beautiful sweetheart...” (29-35), at the end of the journey. Koelb interprets, “The hero has already crossed not only the physical boundary of the Adriatic but also the spiritual boundary between the normal world and the mythic underworld where the normal rules of temporal precedence and of cause and effect no longer apply” (101). Aschenbach fails to recede from his gradual moral slide and, by the same token, in the inability to dramatize such a return of his character, Mann’s ironic suggestion fails to bring about the desired effect.

Soon he finds himself engaging with yet another man with mysterious suggestions, the gondolier who takes Aschenbach from a rambling route without consulting to the traveler. This passage represents a travel to danger in the novel. Although the gondolier irritates the

lonely traveler, with his strange behavior, he enjoys the ride and brings reference to death by imagining the boat he travels in making his coffin. The gondola Aschenbach takes ride on, the lagoon that Aschenbach has to cross to reach the barrier island of the Lido and the gondolier all allude to Greek mythology. Aschenbach's whole journey assumes mythic ambience. His ambivalent reactions to the travel evince once more to the haunting paradox of his life. However, the haunting presence of crisis does not appear as a coincidence but as a deliberate conception of the author.

Who has not battled a fleeting shudder, a secret dread and anxiety upon boarding a Venetian gondola for the first time or after a prolonged absence? That strange conveyance, coming down to us unaltered from the days of the ballads and so distinctively black, black as only coffins can be—it conjures up hush-hush criminal adventures in the rippling night and, even more, death itself: the bier, the obscure obsequies, the final, silent journey. (36)

The images that Aschenbach witnesses as he travels across the lagoon clearly link his journey with the mythical journey to hell. Allegorically, he also makes his spiritually and morally hell-ward movement to the zone of crime and death. He allows it to be “the final, silent journey” to the forbidden land with no any sign of self-correction. He realizes that “the seat in such a boat, that armchair lacquered coffin-black with its dull black upholstery, is the softest, most soothing, most voluptuous seat in the world” (36)? He expects his travel toward his moral death to be short: “‘The ride will be brief,’ he thought. ‘Could it but last forever.’ Rocking tranquilly, he felt himself drift away from the throng and the jumble of voices” (37). Infatuated with the ugliness, he hardly shows any willingness to reverse his journey across the Styx. The “gondolier, who loomed behind him on his raised plank” (Koelb, 37) represents both Charon and Hermes as Koelb further interprets:

That this gondolier is a version of Charon, the boatman of the river Styx in classical mythology, is an idea that occurs to Aschenbach himself as he resigns himself to letting himself be taken for this ride ... he is also another version of Hermes, the conductor of souls into the underworld. All these descriptions of bared, protruding teeth also put us in mind of the human skull, the death's head. There can be little doubt now about where the writer is going. (101)

Viewed from psychoanalysis, the physical pleasure that Aschenbach takes in the actions of the strong man behind him reflect his homosexual desire. Helpless in the hands of this driver, Aschenbach lets the gondolier impose his will, thereby satisfying his own perverse desires:

What was he to do? Alone on the water with this oddly obstreperous, uncannily determined man, the traveler saw no way of imposing his will. Besides, what a nice rest he could have if he did not lose his temper! Had he not wished the trip to last longer, last forever? It was wisest to let things take their course; what is more, it was highly pleasant. (39)

Even here things strike Aschenbach irrationally. He fails to remove himself from such uncanny feelings. Rather, he receives everything in so unnaturally romantic way quite contrary to his usual rigid conviction. And he gradually sacrifices his original values and garners perverse contemplations as he says to himself regarding the gondolier: "Even if you are after my purse and send me to the House of Hades with a bash of the oar from behind, you will have rowed me well" (40). In the following passage, Mann tellingly recounts how his hero gives in to the paradoxical confrontations hitherto:

... the figures encountered on the journey—the repulsive old fop with his "sweetheart" drivel, the outlaw gondolier defrauded of his fee—still rankled in

the traveler's mind. Though neither difficult to explain rationally nor even thought provoking, they were utterly outlandish — or so he found them — and unsettling precisely because of this paradox. (43)

The fact that these paradoxes do not settle in his mind again, evinces his gradual spiritual and moral slide into the domain of perversity, irrationality, passion and romanticism: from Apollonianism to Dionysianism. That is why, a feeling of indolence grips his mind that feels very unsuitable for a self-disciplined man like him. Again, that such coexistence of mutually exclusive values and beliefs in Aschenbach's character stems up from the novelist's modernist aesthetic conception: the envisioning of crisis in the form of paradox.

The gondolier leaves without his payments and Aschenbach lands to the Hotel des Bains. While at dinner in his hotel that evening, Aschenbach sees a beautiful but pale looking Polish boy enjoying his vacation there with his mother and sisters while his sisters are dressed in simple he looks differently unique among them. Aschenbach is fascinated by the beauty of the boy. He begins to draw an artistic picture of him in his mind. However, what he cultivates as a simple appreciation of the boy begins to take a shape of an overwhelming internal strife of his rational mind against his sensual sensibilities. In other words, his emotions divide into the Apollonian and the Dionysian in Nietzschean formulations. Astonished, amazed and startled, and what not, by the beauty of the boy, Achenbach is immediately and deeply sinks into the ditch of infatuation:

... his face—pale and charmingly reticent, ringed by honey-colored hair, with a straight nose, lovely mouth, and an expression of gravity sweet and divine — recalled Greek statuary of the noblest period, yet its purest formal perfection notwithstanding it conveyed a unique personal charm such that

whoever might gaze upon it would believe he had never beheld anything so accomplished, be it in nature or in art. (45)

He misses every chance to repulse from the sinking into the ditch and seeks either a pretense or a justification for his surrender to emotions and romanticism which he shunned all his life. For example he falls in love with qualities of the sea, which symbolizes escape from rigidity and also danger drowning:

He loved the sea and for deep-seated reasons: the hardworking artist's need for repose, the desire to take shelter from the demanding diversity of phenomena in the bosom of boundless simplicity, a propensity—proscribed and diametrically opposed to his mission in life and for that very reason seductive—a propensity for the unarticulated, the immoderate, the eternal, for nothingness. To repose in perfection is the desire of all those who strive for excellence, and is not nothingness a form of perfection? (55)

The passage is another of the series of instances in which Aschenbach goes on excusing himself for his deviant decisions. Here he resorts to his concept of the freedom any aesthete deserves while aiming at perfection of his creation.

However, these are nothing but his pretenses to justify his 'beyond-age' fantasy where he attempts to take the course that his heart desires for which he is bent on to confuse his infatuation roused at the sight of the boy with his newly invented perverse deviant aesthetic beliefs:

This childish fanaticism aimed at so benign a target gave the boy's mute divinity a human perspective: it made an exquisite work of nature—a statue, a mere feast for the eyes—something worthy of deeper consideration and laced

the figure of an adolescent, already remarkable for his beauty, against a background enabling one to take him seriously beyond his years. (56-57)

Notwithstanding his high and serious intellectual position and his age, he continues to cross every boundary of wisdom, propriety and morality. This excessive erosion of values secretly incurs disease and decay in his life.

The following day Aschenbach sees the fascinating boy again and comes to know through his friends's conversation during their play that his name is Tadzio. Later, Aschenbach finds that the boy's health is weak with his teeth bluish in color. To add to the scene of decay, degeneration and lurking death, in the ensuing part of the novel, Aschenbach senses a strange kind of stress brought by sweltering sea air and the seasonal winds. These are correlatives for the spiritual deterioration on the part of the character of Aschenbach. He senses an urgent need to leave the city:

For the second time—and this time definitively - the city had proved itself extremely harmful to him in such weather. Braving it out obstinately seemed unreasonable, the prospect of a shift in the wind being quite uncertain. An immediate decision was of the essence. Returning home was out of the question at this point: neither his summer nor his winter quarters were ready.
(63)

But instead, he once makes moves towards a safe destination: “a small seaside resort not far from Trieste.... He rose, resolute, to his feet” (64), to address this urgency. But he finds himself in a state of mental conflict as soon as his feet move away from the city. This reflects the extremity and degree of licentiousness he allows himself. His brave intellectual dictums undergo serious corrosion:

Indeed, he felt that should he leave now, shame and pride must prevent him from setting eyes again on the beloved city that had twice brought him low, and this conflict between the soul's inclination and the body's capabilities suddenly struck the aging man as so serious and significant, his physical defeat seemed so ignominious, in such urgent need of redress, that he could not comprehend the frivolous resignation with which he had decided to acknowledge and bear it with no true struggle. (68-69)

Quite noteworthy, Aschenbach actually procrastinates his departure and he responds querulously to the hotel staff who reminds him of time to leave. Making a psychological study upon the scene just before Aschenbach practically makes a fake leave from the hotel, Gorman Beauchamp comments, "... his procrastination, his querulous response to the concierge' reminder of the time – depicts... the workings of his unconscious: his dithering delays are Aschenbach's desperate attempt, disguised even from himself, to see Tadzio one last time" (391). This psychoanalysis once more justifies the character sketch of Aschenbach as spiritually weakening person.

Anyway, as Aschenbach decides to leave the city and boards on a ship heading to a train station, he regrets his impulsive decision. Moreover, he is startled to learn that his luggage were set to port to the wrong city. He is relieved to return to the hotel owing to misplacement of his luggage. He then wonders upon his unnatural joy, he realizes that his hopes to see Tadzio were the prime reason.

From time to time his breast still shook with laughter at the thought of this mishap, which, he said to himself, could not have befallen even the luckiest of men at a more opportune moment ... he said to himself, everything would be fine again, a disaster averted, a grievous error rectified, and everything he

thought he had left behind would once more open up before him, his to enjoy for as long as he so desired . . . And was it only the speed of the launch or was there actually, on top of it all, a breeze blowing in from the sea? (71)

This incident portrays the biggest erroneous indecision showing his lasciviousness. His desire to avoid any compulsion to leave the city is further supported when, although, he receives his mis-transported luggage back, he does not think of leaving Venice anytime soon. Instead, for a few following weeks he regularly follows Tadzio around the hotel. In fact, the secret cause of his inability to leave the city is realized when he admits that “he felt the rapture of his blood, the joy and agony of his soul, and acknowledged to himself that it was Tadzio who had made it so hard for him to leave...” (71).

Thereafter, Tadzio becomes the centre of Aschenbach’s universe, following him in a daily routine basis. His attraction towards the beauty of the physique of the boy, whom he compares with the venerable Greek gods and goddess, turn in to an obsession:

Effigy and mirror! His eyes embraced the noble figure standing there at the edge of the blue, and in a rush of ecstasy he believed that his eyes gazed upon beauty itself, form as divine thought, the sole and pure perfection that dwells in the mind and whose human likeness and representation, lithe and lovely, was here displayed for veneration. (82)

However, Koelb observes that Aschenbach’s comparison of the boy’s figure with the Greco-Roman past derives not just aesthetic relation. He argues that Tadzio’s “classical beauty, [is] more appropriate to dead statues than to living beings. Another is his fragility, which seems to put him at some risk of an early death” (102). Aschenbach’s linking Tadzio with classical beauty as such gives the meaning of his proximity with death again. This is why, he should

have avoided it as soon as possible. On the contrary, he drowns in “intoxication” and attempts to aesthetically justify his desire:

... the aging artist welcomed it unquestioningly, indeed, avidly. His mind was in a whirl, his cultural convictions in ferment; his memory cast up ancient thoughts passed on to him in his youth though never yet animated by his own fire. Was it not common knowledge that the sun diverts our attention from the intellectual to the sensual? (82)

For some time, he feels that the beauty of Tadzio has inspired him to resume his writing project, “...he formulated that little essay - a page and a half of sublime prose based on Tadzio’s beauty - the purity, nobility, and quivering emotional tension of which would soon win the admiration of many ...” (86), but he does not consider it necessary to tell the world “its origins”, and “only a beautiful work itself” is enough to disclose. Thus, his conscious act of hiding his emotions for the boy reveals his true nature once again. Similarly,

[T]he contrast between the masterful control displayed in Aschenbach’s prose and the utter lack of control slowly overwhelming his emotions is particularly sharp. That the inner licentiousness is really in control is shown by the fact that the writer, upon completing his literary work, feels “as if his conscience were indicting him after a debauch... (Koelb, 106)

The juxtaposition between Aschenbach’s command as a writer of prose and his licentiousness in dispatching the same while handling his emotions practically highlights how Aschenbach has let go his tight hand open and set his reins free. When, one day, the boy’s eyes meet the older man’s chasing eyes, Tadzio responds with a smile which he reckons as a ‘fatal gift’. The climactic episode recounting his ambivalence regarding his erotic love for the boy further sheds light on the adult writer’s character:

Oddly indignant and tender admonitions welled up inside him: ‘You mustn’t smile like that! One mustn’t smile like that at anyone, do you hear?’ He flung himself on a bench, frantically inhaling the plants’ nocturnal fragrance. Then, leaning back, arms dangling, overwhelmed and shuddering repeatedly, he whispered the standard formula of longing—impossible here, absurd, perverse, ridiculous and sacred nonetheless, yes, still venerable even here: ‘I love you!’ (96)

Koelb, in this regard, comments:

The smile reduces the aging lover to a helpless, seething broth of emotions. Once returned to solitude, Aschenbach for the first time utters the declaration of love we knew he was longing to make. But even here, even at the highest pitch of emotional stress, the writer knows that his avowal is impossible under these conditions, absurd, reviled, ridiculous. We are not allowed to forget, even in this moment of supreme intoxication, just how far out of bounds Aschenbach has let himself go. (107)

With his declaration of love, the impression of the veneration for beauty Aschenbach has been constructing all through suddenly comes to its true form - his steeped homoerotic passion disclosed.

After some weeks, Aschenbach senses horrible smell in the air that disturbs his sleep. He suspects of the authorities of the city concealing the spread of cholera. His fear that his favorite object of art and fascination Tadzio might leave, builds strange connection with such concealing, for Aschenbach:

And so Aschenbach felt a morose satisfaction at he officially concealed goings on in the dirty alleyways of Venice, that nasty secret which had merged with

his own innermost secret and which he, too, was so intent on keeping: he was in love and concerned only that Tazio might leave, and he realized not without horror that in the event he would not know what to make of his life.

(100)

At this point his obsession with the boy reaches a climactic phase, so much so that he follows the boy sometimes to the church and sometimes gondolas. At other times he finds himself waiting for the boy to appear at his hotel room. He begins to realize how shameful his dark secret love is:

Loneliness, the foreign environment, and the joy of a belated and profound exhilaration prompted him, persuaded him to indulge without shame or remorse in the most distasteful behavior, as when returning from Venice late one evening he had paused at the beautiful boy's door on the second floor of the hotel and pressed his forehead against the hinge in drunken rapture, unable to tear himself away even at the risk of being discovered and caught. (104-5)

Perversity clearly overwhelms and stands on the completely opposite pole to his earlier self-discipline. Aschenbach finds his life in paradoxical situation as he confronts numerous contradictions, ambiguities and contrasting emotions. He begins to see everything from the perspective of his obsession. He starts interpreting and defining the world around him so as to justify his complex or ambivalent dispositions:

Thus did the man's infatuation determine his way of thinking; thus did he seek to defend himself and preserve his dignity. Yet at the same time he kept paying willful, obstinate attention to the unsavory events in the depths of Venice, the adventure of the outer world that merged darkly with the adventure of his heart and fed his passion with vague, illicit hopes. (107)

The infection of Cholera that slowly begins to engulf the city with its murky goings on that have already claimed some lives merge with the malicious disease infecting the life of Aschenbach. According to Koelb, the disease speedily thriving through the medium of the waters around the city quickly spreads from the margin to the centre of narrative of the final chapter. He explains:

It becomes a force in Aschenbach's life as powerful as his passion for Tadzio, and in fact it proves to be somehow mysteriously connected to that passion. Mann brilliantly arranges matters so that even the cholera participates in Aschenbach's mythic-erotic fantasy, taking on unmistakable traits of the Greek god Dionysus [the god of intoxication [who] arrives in Venice in the form of the cholera epidemic, ... (108)

One more mysterious encounter grapples the adult writer at the hotel. A band of street musicians arrive there. They perform in front of the hotel guests which Aschenbach and Tadzio enjoy watching. However, the guitar player who leads the performance reminds Aschenbach the gondolier and the foreigner in Munich. Once more, grotesque visions of foreignness, perversity, obscenity, danger and brutality haunts Aschenbach:

The lyrics of the song were merely silly, but in his rendition—what with the facial expressions and body movements he used, his suggestive winks, and the way he licked the corners of his mouth lasciviously—they became ambiguous, vaguely obscene. Protruding from the soft collar of his open shirt, which clashed with his otherwise formal attire, was a scrawny neck with a conspicuously large and naked-looking Adam's apple. (112)

His obsession with the physical figure of the anonymous characters he encounters testify his infected and deteriorated state of rationales. Demonstrating relation between Mann's story and Nietzsche's *The Birth of Tragedy* (1872), Koelb adds in this connection:

The Nietzschean Dionysus shows himself particularly strongly in the performance of the laughing song, in which the refrain consists entirely of a certain rhythmically structured but still very natural laughter... Nietzsche's Dionysus is the god not of the individual but of the group ... He is the god who dissolves the separate psyche into the communal, and his representation on the Greek stage was the chorus. The laughing song achieves the Dionysian result of dissolving all the onlookers, including not only the hotel guests but the employees as well, into a single mindlessly laughing chorus. (52-109)

The contrast between the shades of light Mann throws upon his hero in the beginning chapters and in the chapters in the latter parts of the novella provides significant revelations. The earlier chapters characterize Aschenbach highly in the Apolline lights, and contrarily, later, as in the present chapter, Mann projects his hero increasingly in the light of Dionysian light. However, like always, no elimination of the mental tussle makes any room ever. Instead, the very tussle gets intensified to the extent that only the ultimate force of death intrudes in before the heat of collusion opposite forces calms down in his mind.

As cholera has really spread throughout the city killing many in the city, Aschenbach is more worried about Tadzio's family leaving the city than about his deteriorating health. He even refrains from telling the boy's mother about the epidemic. At night, Aschenbach hidden lustful emotions symbolically appear in his dreams. His eventual participation in the revelry clearly shows the Dionysian drives taking over the writer. He just formulates a warning in his mind as he would say to Tadzio's mother:

'Permit me, Madam, stranger that I am, to give you a piece of advice, a warning withheld from you by self-serving interests. You must leave, leave immediately, with Tadzio and your daughters! Venice is infested.' He might then lay a farewell hand on the head of that taunting deity's agent, turn on his heel, and flee the quagmire. Yet at the same time he felt infinitely far from seriously wishing to take such a step. It would lead him back, restore him to himself, (124)

Aware that he has drifted too far, he constantly struggles with his divided conscience to flee the quagmire. However, too terrified with fear that his such step would take his object of obsession away from, he never takes no action, ending in another step downward in his slide. Koelb clarifies the origin and impact of his inability to take action:

He is often overwhelmingly intoxicated by an amalgam of his lovesickness and his physical infection. He has long known for certain that prudence would require him to leave the city, but he cannot. Charity would require him to share the knowledge he has with the apparently unsuspecting Polish family, but he cannot. He cannot undertake any action that would cause a separation from the boy, even though all their lives are in danger. (109)

Mann's ironic vision here, like anywhere else, rises from Aschenbach's action and thought directed to infatuation with the image of the Polish boy who is actually the symbol of his homoerotic desires rather than anything else. Thus, all in all, infection, to which he characteristically responds with ambiguity, draws him to the abyss.

His long resistance to immorality and lust, and his hard earned height of prestige are portrayed as crumbling and shattering in the sea of lust. All the visions of eroticism that he at first shuns but slowly gives in to, the fantasies, the aesthetic versions of his passions, his fears

and sense of guilt, all combine into one cauldron in his dream where he becomes one with the Dionysian reverie symbolized by the overpowering phallic figure which is the central of all the images:

It began with fear, fear and desire and a dire curiosity about what was to come. Night reigned, yet his senses were vigilant, for from afar there approached a din, a racket, a jumble of noise: a rattling, a blaring and muffled thundering, a shrill cheering as well, and a kind of howl in the form of a long-drawn-out *u* - all of it permeated with, overlain by the eerily sweet tones of a deep-cooing, insidiously persistent flute casting its shamelessly tenacious spell on his innermost being. But he knew a word, obscure yet naming what was to come: *'the strangergod.'* (126)

The dreamer at first takes by fear the nocturnal vision of the entrance of "*the strangergod*". The images of the grotesque sights, sounds and objects symbolize his ambivalent desires for the ecstatic moments of sexual acts that he secretly garnered in his mind while observing the beauty of Tadzio with a sense of infatuation. The dreamer at first takes by fear the nocturnal vision of the entrance of "*the strangergod*". The images of the grotesque sights, sounds and objects symbolize his ambivalent desires for the ecstatic moments of sexual acts that he secretly garnered in his mind while observing the beauty of Tadzio with a sense of infatuation. Quite relevantly, Beauchamp's psychoanalysis relates Aschenbach's dream with his shock of recognition. As he analyses, "... the god and his savage rites do not remain something separate from the dreamer, alien, Other, but become him – probably always were a part of his subconscious. Is not this the shock of recognition" (398)? The dream just as Beauchamp analyzes blends his initial fear with his giving in to the powerful desires.

The overwhelming Dionysian desires in Aschenbach overthrow his long-held Apollonian high moral injunctions and assert their power. He dreams that the men and women, with beasts revel and dance in the accompaniment of the terrible sounds of cymbals. They howl and produce the sounds of extreme revelries and sexual ecstasy “a long-drawn-out *u* – sweet and wild at once, like none heard before” which came infused with “deep alluring tones of flute.” They allure him “with shameless resolve to the festivities and the enormity of the ultimate sacrifice” (127), he resisted greatly, though, but only in the beginning:

Great was his repugnance, great his fear, honorable his intention to defend his domain against the stranger, the enemy of the serene and dignified intellect. But the noise, the howling, intensified many times over by the reverberating mountainside, grew out of control and swelled into raging madness. His mind was muddled by fumes: the goats’ pungent stench, the reek of panting bodies, a smell like that of stagnant waters, and another smell, likewise familiar - the smell of sores and rampant disease. (127-28)

Despite his great repugnance and resistance against the stench and disease, “[h]is heart throbbed to the drumbeats, his brain reeled, he was seized by wrath, by blindness, by numbing lust, and his soul longed to join in the round-dance of the god” (128). The resistance represents his past towering morale now under the challenge of the longing of his heart for lust.

At the centre of the dream revelries appears the gigantic phallic symbol, around which all the obscene activities take place and which raises with great exertion of power symbolically enacting his failure to control his enflaming desire:

The obscene symbol, gigantic and made of wood, was bared and raised with a roar of their watchword more ferocious than ever. On they raged, mouths

foaming, enflaming one another with lascivious gestures and licentious hands, laughing and groaning, thrusting the goads into one another's flesh and licking the blood from their limbs. But the dreamer was now with them, within them: he belonged to the stranger god. Yes, they were now his own self as they hurled themselves upon the animals, lacerating them, slaughtering them, devouring gobbets of steaming flesh, as they dropped to the trampled mossy ground for unbridled coupling, an offering to the god. And his soul savored the debauchery and delirium of doom. (128-29)

This description of Aschenbach's sensuous dream endows his repressed lust its full ambience. The dream clearly projects his ambiguous emotions that mixed what he has been trying to express as his purely aesthetic and creative sensibilities with what his unconscious mind desired for all through.

The absence of determination for the preventive measure cure the "debauchery and delirium of doom" that savoured his soul continues well in the aftermath of this dream encounter. Thus, as Richard White observes, when we see Aschenbach putting makeup and dyeing his hair at the hotel barber's to match Tadzio's age,:

We are bound to recall the earlier incident on the ferry, when Aschenbach was totally repulsed by the appearance of the "old-young man" and the contemptible desire to pretend that one much younger than one actually is ... we must regard it as his final degradation and humiliation, to be doing that which should disgust him more than anything else. But in this way, Dionysus the stranger-god punishes all those who deny him. (32)

As the narrator presents Aschenbach's satisfaction with the appraisal of the barber: "The spellbound lover left, agitated and confused, yet as happy as in a dream. His necktie was red,

his broad-brimmed straw hat wound round with a gaudy striped ribbon” (132). Aschenbach is unable to live without following Tadzio though he is exhausted. He had thrown aside all his literary projects.

The distinguished writer has deliberately chosen the road to the abyss, and he has done so with relatively little regret (just as Adrian Leverkühn, the hero of Mann’s late novel *Doktor Faustus* [1947] will do). To be sure, he appears aware that he has humiliated himself. To be sure, he knows he has placed himself squarely in the path of death. But the danger does not seem to him too great. In his present intoxicated state, a single moment in the presence of his beautiful Tadzio is worth any risk. (Koelb, 110)

A few days later, the severely ill writer keeps watching the boy for the last time in the beach as the Polish family to leave the city that day. “As he watches, his dying imagination transforms the figure of the youth into the god he had truly become Hermes the psychagogue, conducting the soul of the traveler to his home across the waters” (Koelb, 110). This image, for Rita A. Bergenholtz, not only “satirizes the romantic assumptions that enable such an exalted view of humankind” but also derives Aschenbach as a parody of a romantic anti-hero. This is why, notwithstanding the description of his literary career “as a ‘conscious an overweening ascent to honour[,]’ ...the novella focuses ...on his bathetic decline and fall. Indeed, from the outset Aschenbach’s supposed pilgrimage of artistic renewal moves relentlessly downward” (145). Ultimately, this very downward progress of the man takes his life.

Strict in moral values, famed for his intellectual writings, honoured with a title for his highly refined philosophical stand post, Aschenbach makes a slide down from his own avowed principles. This downward movement in his beliefs are correspondingly represented

in the series of events in the external worlds. Thus, as Bergenholtz observes, Aschenbach ironically shares the quality of “fallen queen” given to contaminated Venice, and as such, “our final view of Aschenbach emphasizes this fallen state: Gazing at Tadzio from his beach chair, Aschenbach’s tired head falls upon his chest, and he expires” (146). The climactic scene of the Aschenbach’s story projects his tragic death. His head falls to his chest. Symbolically, his intellect falls to his emotions. However, the kind of aesthetic achievement the novella cherishes does not reside in the death of the character but in the sustained tug of war between his intellect and emotions that does not end before his life ends biologically. That is, the mental conflict would exist as long as life. No resolution can emerge because the opposing forces would push in equally powerfully.

Aschenbach is very conscious about his own slide. An inner desire to correct his complacency and promiscuity persists every time he faces an ironical slide from his principles well up to the end of the novella. Despite his persistent desire to return to his normal pace of life (represented by his persistent desire to return home), the slide continues to such an extent/ distance that he faces an irrecoverable trap which ultimately begets him his fall. His desires, wishes, high aims, urgent thirsts and rebirth/rejuvenation remain unfulfilled. This lack of fulfillment, contentment, ultimate realization of deferred dreams i.e. ultimate irresolution of the complexity and contradiction correlated with Aschenbach’s ultimate failure to return home and join his dream project is the locus of the overall ironic construct structurally designed in the novella.

In conclusion, Thomas Mann’s novella, centering on its principle character, Gustav von Aschenbach, dramatizes his tragic moral spiritual slide. First, Mann builds his protagonist as a self-disciplined and classicist personality. For this purpose, Mann situates his character in the national history and philosophical tradition. Similarly, the narrative and characters of the novella also establish an allegorical relation between the mythic and the

modern world exploiting on multiple mythic, aesthetic and historico-cultural allusions that range from German aestheticism to Nietzschean distinction between the Apollonian and the Dionysian personality to Greco-Roman myths and aestheticism. After giving such a mythic setting and ambience to the characters and setting of the novel, the novelist leads his hero, who suffering from a writer's block embarks on a holiday trip and ends in landing the exotic land, Venice, along a slow and step by step corrosion of his earlier high moral values. The foreigner Aschenbach meets on the mortuary chapel, the old fop accompanying with the young men from Lido and the gondolier who rows him to his hotel all their part in inculcating in the aged man with romantic and pervasive homoerotic passion. This ultimately paves way to his falling in love with the Polish boy, Tadzio the obsession with whom compels Aschenbach to ignore all his considerations regarding his physical and moral spiritual health and he succumbs to the spread of Indian Cholera in the Venetian town. During the whole of the narrative of the novella, the narrator persistently evokes a sense of need for remedial return of the character from falling into the abyss of fatal obsession. However, the narrative of the novella, as it basically grapples with the modern crisis, characteristically avoids taking course to such a remedial measure, and consistently and eternally pushes the character to moral spiritual slide.

The theoretical framework of this research in Chapter Two has discussed Alan Wilde's proposition about a uniquely conditioned case of irony which he calls "absolute irony: the conception of equal and opposed possibilities held in a state of total poise, or, more briefly still, the shape of an indestructible, unresolved paradox (16)." The design of *Death in Venice* sets it completely in line with the concept of absolute irony that characterized the modernist literature in general. Thus, Wilde's claim regarding the modernist rigid structure which ends in formal closure gets actualized in Thomas Mann's *Death in Venice*

Chapter IV: Unresolved Irony in *The Waste Land*

The present chapter attempts to carry out a textual analysis of the major figures in the poem appearing either as witnesses or as participants of the incidents narrated through fragments of past memories or grotesque visions. Committed to establish an ironically opposed relations between the worlds strenuously forced together, Eliot's characters speak from heterogeneous points of view. They seem unanimously to mock at their own inability to respond authentically, as proper humans, to their emotionally charged moments, intent on, thereby, hopelessly, giving in to the overwhelmingly debased, perverse and degenerate passions. But, do the satiric comments Eliot's speakers make of the degeneration, corruption and emptiness of the moral, ethical and spiritual values of modern people find ultimate solace of mind through a remedial regeneration of the same? Do they show a capability to desire to reform? Does rain, the force of resuscitating new life to the dying roots of humanities, fall ultimately in the spiritually barren and dead modern land? Do they respond to the call of the thunder recommending the three seeds of regeneration – Datta, Dyadhvam, Damyata? Does the irony evoked through complex disposition of modern humans resolve for any better? Seeking answers to these vital questions in the epistemological framework of the poem, in terms basically of the potency of the irony implied and employed, will be the center of discussion all through this chapter. For the purpose, the contrasts, paradoxes, intertextuality, juxtaposition of overly torn off religious, cultural and mythical contexts that chiefly depend on the loosely connected structural components, especially the densely imposed allusions will be interpreted focusing on the major voices of the poem.

The Waste Land by Thomas Stearns Eliot holds a distinct position in the twentieth century literary history, chiefly for the poem's conception of an epitome of a modernist work – both in form and content. Working on the issue of the moral ethical spiritual bankruptcy that became a defining characteristic of the contemporary western societies in general. The

rigid moral injunctions that reigned the nineteenth century European communities, saw, by the turn of the century, a shocking corrosion spearheaded by the findings of the new social sciences, such as psychology, sexology and sociology. Their scientific positivism got disillusioned with the unprecedented horror and apocalyptic trauma caused by the World War I exposing the pervasive impacts of western imperialism. And, their experience of general alienation at the individual level accelerated amidst the excessive materialism as the gloomy dimension of industrialization and urbanization.

The major writings of the period as such predominantly show an obsession with depiction of a world in crisis – a world whose moral philosophical foundations crumbled away. In their attempt to unfailingly represent the emergent themes of their disintegrating civilization, these texts strongly felt that they required to break free from the conventional modes of expression. This resulted in the outburst of highly experimental art forms that were beyond the discernibility of the common readers of the time and of which Eliot's *The Waste Land* stands unparalleled chiefly owing to its fragmentary form that heavily depends upon allusions drawn from diverse literary, religious and mythical sources. Most of all, the way *The Waste Land* undertones with an overarching and gloomy ironic vision has increasingly attracted the numerous literary critical attentions right from its publication.

Complex as it is, the epic poem deludes its readers, both novice and expert, with its fragments of images that precipitate from nowhere. Structurally divided into five sections that further amalgamates multiple references that range from earlier literary texts to mythical figures and incidents from all across cultures to major world religions to ancient vegetation legends to funeral rites supported, or rather, complicated by Eliot's notes. Multiple figures, who represent ancient mythical to literary to modern contexts give their accounts in the form of disjointed vignettes, episodes and lyrics. Eliot's epigraph to the poem, in its part, substantiates the poem with a scene-setting image of Sibyl. It effectively acquires a miniature

form of the macrocosm of the poem which basically builds on the juxtaposition of ironically contrasting visions of past and present. The larger theme of the poem arising from a thorough and comprehensive study of the allusions, compactly distributed in the five formally distinct parts, effectively both contrast and parallel with the context of the legend of Sibyl, who, in the want of the regenerating power of death, is eternally doomed to immortality without youth.

The epigraph of the poem brings to fore the eternally doomed existence of the mythic character, Sibyl of Cumae, the prophetess of Apollo, who was immortal without eternal youth. The paradox which characterizes her as trapped in such an eternal doom has its roots in the fact that the eternal blessing embodies its eternal curse and she lacks power for the redemption from such a curse. So, only death can rejuvenate her life but death is absent by default. Whether or not the thematic-linguistic structure of the text and the trope of irony exist in a harmonious relation in *The Waste Land* constitutes the chief analytical part here. Bibb Aaron's argument seems most relevant in this regard. Arguing in support of Brooker and Bentley's interpretation made in *Reading The Waste Land: Modernism and the Limits of Interpretation*, his analysis provides important insights into the nature of hope Eliot endows his characters in the poem. Bibb contends that, "the poem offers no *promise* of release or salvation, but is rather despairing about the hope for an end to suffering within life... [and thus,] death is, the poem suggests, the only sure hope for release." As Bibb maintains, the poem's reader can clearly see the "demand for transcendence of paradox". To him, "The poem's characters are moving toward 'a transcendental unity,' one that 'contains rather than resolves paradoxes . . .'" They are eternally and inescapably trapped so that they "have no way of imagining this unity's possibility" (74-77). The modern wastelanders dwell in a paradox much like Sibyl because their urgent need is unattainable through the continuation of their way of life. They need to transcend their wintery life.

The beginning lines of the poem at once impress upon the mind an abrupt and shocking statement, 'April is the cruellest month' against readers's general expectation regarding spring. Spring offers sprouting of new plants but here they sprout 'out of the dead land'. For Bibb, Brooker and Bentley's interpretation is certainly correct in its contrast between Marie's present experience and her memory of the winter. But regarding its dichotomy Bibb posits that, "to frame the time in which, 'Winter kept us warm' as the speaker's idyllic past... undercuts... the speaker's stated justification for April's being the cruellest month" (78). Bibb further argues that April is "cruel precisely because it... disturbs the warm torpor of winter, perpetuating an empty existence." The use of past tense indicates that the winter is viewed from present time as an idyllic past as opposed to the currently running spring which the speaker views in turn with resentment because it is April which "... 'mixing/Memory and desire,' removes the 'forgetful snow' ... had provided winter's warmth, a sort of hibernatory sleep, somewhere between life and death." Bibb further intrigues that the problem of speaker locates not in the recently past winter but, in fact, in the speaker's present relation with April. That is why, the speaker "lament[s] against the cruelty of spring as it begins life's empty cycles once again" (78-79). What readers mark in this expression is the shameless indulgence with winter and repugnance for spring. Since they are deeply habituated to it, their faculty to attempt an escape from the indulgence is blunt. Thus, it manifests the paradox of inability by default to wish for what they need most in life. As such, nothing but vision of lifelong despair reigns their being.

Almost all of the speakers in the poem show similar resentment with the present life. But they lack desire to move to another state of spiritually blissful state of existence. The modern characters need death, the only means to end their misery in life. As Bibb further argues *The Waste Land*, "... seems more to 'question, and even to propose a life without hope for, a quest, or Chapel, or Grail in the modern waste land'"(79) if we are not to be carried

away by Eliot's notes about Jessie L. Wetson's *From Ritual to Romance*, where we are made to interpret characters in terms of a Grail quest within the rhetoric of the poem. Bibb contends:

The Waste Land is not, . . . a model for a model for how we should live in the world, with hope for a transcendent experience of reality; it is, rather, an expression of a desire to escape a world tiresomely defined by sex and desire. Eliot's early speakers tend to depict sexuality and desire as overwhelming threats to agency and selfhood, force capable of destroying individual. (79)

Thus, Bibb believes that the speaker of the opening lines of *The Waste Land* represents modern aristocratic woman who expresses an indulgent desire to dwell in the all-time winter season that is, an unending season of free sex and desire and so opposes the idea of returning to the world of seasonal cycles. In the world of seasonal cycles, life would follow the natural process of change that would keep it fresh through practice of human propensities that could spiritually elevate people. But the sterilization of such propensities and desire for excessive immorality displaces, in the moderners, the value of regeneration which would reverse their spiritually downward movement, that is, their perpetual moral slide.

K. Narayana Chandran offers a significantly revealing comparison between "the larger context of Hindu tradition" i.e. "the Upanishadic tradition of chanting the *Shantih mantra*" and "the specific context of its use in *The Waste Land*," and argues that the last line, "Shantih, shantih, shantih," happens to be the most "devastatingly ironic in the whole poem" (681). As to Eliot's intentional omitting of "Om" in *The Waste Land* and its deeply suggestions, he infers:

Eliot's propriety in severing *Om* from "Shantih" rests on the fact that in a poem that offers little more than non-essences in "broken images," *Om*, the quintessential source of all order and harmony in life according to the

Upanishads, does not and cannot find a place. Distraught and divided, the personages in *The Waste Land* can neither mediate on *Om* nor utter it. (683)

In line with the argument Chandran forwards, Beerendra Pandey sees Eliot's intentional choice of avoiding *Om* as connected with the ironic situation in which the wastelanders are incapable of achieving the redemption, the possibility of which is suggested by Lord Indra:

...they neither possess these qualities nor do they deserve it by their actions...The inhabitants of the wasteland are still not prepared to welcome the sweet showers of spring and dislike the warmth of winter. Even the references to the ritual close "Shantih" cannot bring them redemption because of their wilful indifference. "Shantih" without being prefaced by *Om* is made "to serve ironic end." (117)

Thus, this characteristic lack of and indifference to identification with the very spiritual values essential for the remedial of the degenerate state tightly relates to the deliberate disjunctive between highly suggestive cults of the world and ironically indifferent response of the modern westerners: a relation the form of the poem itself preconceives.

Steven Helmling, in his essay "The Grin of Tiresias: Humour in *The Waste Land*" claims, quite different from what critics opine generally, that a tone of humour rather than "by structures of syntax, narrative continuity, or a single persona", and thus weakening the power of the poem as a proper satire or genuine irony. Instead, the sense of ambivalences become more acute than resolve in that "the conflictedness expressed in "amalgam(s) of yielding and opposition below the level of consciousness"; the sense of being haunted by "other kinds of experience that are possible" (139); This observation holds relevance to this research in that it signals towards lack of bitterness, even ferocity" of satire in *The Waste Land*. This argument sets the poem in the parameter of 'absolute irony' or the modernist

irony that fail to resolve, as discussed by Alan Wilde. Helmling further explains the nature of humour that rises against the ironic vision capable of resolution rather than being limited to fun:

A ... jokey self-consciousness, a ... "something like a sense of humour "that attends anyone "conscious of himself as acting," recurs throughout the poem, often at its most allusive moments, when echoes and fragments of the literary past are remembered. That what we remember is often absurd or trivial is a theme sounded, with varying degrees of humor from the affectionate to the sarcastic, throughout the works of the master modernists, ... The humor of *The Waste Land* repeatedly contrives to afflict "high"-culture allusions, mastery of which is the peculiar vanity of the intellectually ambitious, with "low" and mocking caricatures of them that recur like obsessive thoughts. (145)

For Helmling, the figure of Tiresias in section III of the poem, "The Fire Sermon" most represents the moments of being "conscious of himself as acting." The Cumaean Sibyl's figure suggesting a dying out attenuated civilization is comically represented through the character of Madame Sosostris in the "The Burial of the Dead" as thriving on anxiety and chaos of modernity thereby resurrecting the death of faith in superstition the former so strongly suggests. In "A Game of Chess", the opening scene self-consciously mocks the frightened world's "conspiracy" against "unpleasantness." Continuing the tone of self-mockery and "below the level of consciousness," Eliot twice parodies Andrew Marvell's great couplet that Eliot hailed in "The Fire Sermon." Eliot ambitiously endows Tiresias with compassion equal to Christ's but this pagan figure suggests no hope of any deliverance as Christ does promise. Tiresias does not weep like Christ, instead, "he laughs – or grins, or chuckles – crossing the vision of the seer with the mirthless humour of the moralizing

satirist” (140-148). Helmling further clarifies how Tiresias’s grin diminishes the poem’s serious mission of reforming the degeneracy among moderners:

[...] grin of Tiresias is also implicated in Eliot’s aspiration to “the saint’s ambitious task,” which it qualifies, and resists, and implicitly judges as a vanity or even a blasphemy. For Tiresias’ self-lacerating grin expresses an ironist’s jaundiced view of the saint’s project; for him, sympathy and compassion are a meaningless ordeal, undergone reluctantly, and unrelieved by any faith that there might be something redemptive in it. While Tiresias is the closest thing to a Christ-figure in the poem, the grin of Tiresias exorcises, by mocking it, the temptation “to conceive of himself as a Messiah.” Tiresias is both a saint, and a caricature of a saint, and thus also a vehicle, and a caricature, of Eliot’s ambitions as a soul. (148)

In fact, Helmling goes on to argue that along the lines of Eliot’s praise of Marlowe, *The Waste Land* could well be hailed as “a farce of humours.” The ambivalent humour of *The Waste Land* to the effect of defeat of the intended irony takes its formula from Eliot’s own comment on Marlowe in which he concludes Marlowe’s art as attaining its effects by something not unlike caricature” (qtd. in Helmling, 151).

What Robert S. Lehman in his part argues evidently sets him in alliance with Steven Helmling and other critics. Lehman’s rigorously attempts to establish that Eliot’s so-called ‘mythical method’ replaces satire in its pure form from the final version of *The Waste Land* to the effect that “the conflictual poles of his poetics: the critical-historical and the creative, tradition and innovation” that Eliot struggles to reconcile remain the mere location of the formal role played by satire: he, indeed, avidly examines, vis-à-vis Pope’s satire, the early

drafts of *The Waste Land*, where satire appears, to Lehman, “as an immanent means of managing the excesses of literary history... while distinguishing himself from it” (65).

The mythical method, as purported by Eliot, promises to distinguish itself from what he called “the literary-historical repetitions that it thematizes.” However, in this process Eliot, for Lehman, not only seems increasingly “lifting himself by his own hair” but also, being aware of the fact that if an immanent consciousness of generic technique cannot successfully recollect literary history, it (literary history) must be transcended, he is compelled to “turn to the ‘mythical method,’ in essence a turn to a principle outside, or prior to, the tradition in which every satirical gesture, no matter how self-aware, must remain” (76). Revealing that the disappearance of satire from the final draft of the poem, as Pound cut its early drafts to ribbons to the difficult of establishing “whether what we read is satire, or satire of satire,” Lehman enquiringly argues:

What becomes of satire, when... ‘self’ and ‘other’ are not just dangerously similar but demonstrably the same thing?... In *The Waste Land*, then, satire (of satire) ends up inviting the dangerous proximity of literary history (including satire) that it was supposed to manage. The relatively stable system of differences promised by satire as a generic form dissolves into a vertigo of undecidable self-parody,... ” (76)

Eliot through his poem attempts to offer a comment upon the way modernity enters the European life of industrial advancement. His observation finds serious unending gaps in the moral spiritual conception of modern people. While they consciously experience their incessant spiritual fall against the towering material progress, they fail to retreat from such a debased trap. But since Eliot’s poem also present people in similar trap and fails to pull them out of the abyss of moral bankruptcy, the poem does nothing but repeat the same process in

its poetic world. Even the technique of mythic method produces a parody of the paradox of the modern society's eroding values.

C. M. Shanahan comments on Eliot's effort to incorporate multiple poetic urgencies authors confront and posits through a comparative study revealing Laforgue's influence in Eliot, that Eliot's poems end in "disgust with the world around him. His pain is poignantly expressed in almost Romantic terms... But then there is the ending,... very much as if he didn't want either himself or the reader to take seriously the sentiment of disgust expressed in the rest of the poem..." (118). The disjunction of feeling that lie between different parts of the same poem, is very applicable to the nature of irony in Eliot, and as Shanahan observes in Eliot's earlier poems, this continues in the design of *The Waste Land* too.

"The Burial of the Dead," "A Game of Chess," "The Fire Sermon," "Death by Water," and even most of "What the Thunder Said?" all recounts the feelings of stunned upon the degenerating world around them which flood and swarm and precipitate from nowhere to the reader's dislocated understanding as is the wont of "stream of consciousness" technique and we are taken by poignancy of the situation. However, towards the end of the poem the persona – who is at once the embodiment of Tiresias, the Fisher King and the poet himself – either calmly sit for fishing or chants the Hindu mantra, in a manner of parody: "Shantih, shantih, shantih", as if no emergency exists after an encounter with a hoard of horrifying images. No action for the restoration of the lost spiritual dryness is expected. Whether to seek reform or not is upto the audience. No promise of return to the paradise is ever expected. This merely blunts the apocalyptic sense of loss of Edenic peace of mind. Why the lashing of bitter words, then, one wonders.

Shanahan adds that Eliot shares with Laforgue an expression focusing on his own "appreciation of the ironic fact" that individual conventional actions of character may be of,

rather than that on “bitterness.” Shanahan names the effect of this method as “puncturing of emotion or the safeguarding of it through irony” (121). Shanahan discusses one another disjunctive quality of Eliot’s poetry:

One of the most disconcerting things about the poetry of Eliot and Corbiere... on one’s first contact with it, is their seemingly irresponsible excursions into flippant language in the midst of a serious subject. The poet claims the right to follow the darting process of contradictory thought rather than to make a logical exposition in ordered language... the hysterical passages in the first and last sections of “The Waste Land” are vouched for by the surrounding irony, by a “recognition, implicit in the expression of every experience, of other kinds of experience which are possible.” (121-22)

Shanahan, here, clarifies Eliot’s deliberate avoidance of logical presentation of events in *The Waste Land*. This gives the poet, as Shanahan claims, a freedom to throw in multiple contradictory images and ideas – that create possibility to implicit meanings. According to Ben Bakhtiarynia, such “plurality of competing voices and values pervasive throughout Eliot’s text,... resonate precisely with Nietzsche’s idea of disintegration” (121). Bakhtiarynia, in fact, sees Nietzsche’s idea in a striking resemblance to the formal technique and overall mood of *The Waste Land*. Quoting Nietzsche to shed light on the idea of dissolution of values and goals through synthesis, Ben posits:

“The strength of the spirit may be worn out, exhausted, so that previous goals and values have become incommensurate and no longer are believed; so that the synthesis of values and goals (on which every strong culture rests) dissolves and the *individual* values war against each other: disintegration.”
(Qtd. in Bakhtiarynia, (121))

As Bakhtiarunia believes, the competing multiple spiritual religious rites on which the poem relies so heavily do not overpower each other convincingly. That is there impresses 'an equal poise of opposites: the form of an unresolved paradox' as Wilde would argue. What such a disposition achieves is nothing but the exhaustion. As Bakhtiarunia adds:

... the exhaustion, if not in the individual voices themselves, is reflected by the coexisting congeries of religious traditions: pagan, Christian, Indian, and Buddhist placed together in no apparent order and subject to no recognizable hierarchy. Thus, despite the fact that Eliot realized the task of overcoming the epistemological and cultural crisis of nihilism was painful and arduous, *The Waste Land* repeatedly exhibits traces, expressed through its voices, of an unconscious Buddhistic yearning for the cessation of willing altogether. (121)

Bakhtiarunia's considerations on this cessation of willing further connect closely with what he argues as the only consistent presence in the epistemological consciousness construed in form of *The Waste Land*: the nothing. Bakhtiarunia posits that the word 'nothing' figuring ten times in combined form and the words 'not' and 'cannot' that appear thirteen times in the poem, prompt the readers to *think the nothing*, which for him, creates "a looming, anxiety-laden presence" all through the poem. Relating this nihilistic aura of the poem stemming out of the repetition of negating words to the strategically complex construction of the paradox of nothingness, Bakhtiarunia advances:

These negations affirm the pregnant absences pervading the poem: the absence of relief from suffering, of communication, of sexual fulfillment. Hence, the 'nothing' and the 'nots' are not merely significant as linguistic derivations of 'nothing,' but also essentially tied to the epistemological crisis of nihilism. The consequence that the true world, or Absolute, lies beyond experience or,

even more disconcertingly, the view shared by both Eliot and Nietzsche that it is a fictional construct projected on the nothing, heightens the subject's recognition of nihilism. (113)

The nihilistic vision, as discussed here, evidently justifies the fact that the poem ends formally before the rain falls off the thundering clouds. Rather, the eternal dryness and sterility pervades the world of *The Waste Land* in the absence of the rainfall: a perfect paradox of nothingness that never resolves.

Peter Penda scrutinizes the interrelation of Eliot's theoretical poetics and the poetics utilized in *The Waste Land* in terms of the ideological aspects of the aesthetic of disorderly order. In this regard, he points to a duality of nothingness of life on the one hand and establishing order and comprehensibility on the other, is reconciled by means of the aesthetic unity of opposites. For clarifying this aspect of duality in Eliot, he posits:

In *The Waste Land*, T. S. Eliot glorifies the concept of disorder, but eventually tries to make his poem more comprehensible and orderly by providing explanations to his allusions in extensive notes. He also insists on filling the fissures of the modern difficulties with numerous references to a meaningful past. *The Waste Land's* ideas of non-being and its sense of a nothingness of life that leads towards disorder are opposed to the implicit idea of establishing order. (133)

However, the idea of establishing an order doomed to remain on the implied level in that by positing a world of cultural as well as textual disunity, the implied or desired state of unity hardly manifests, rather, the desire to realize the implied continues, ungratified. Penda rightly calls Eliot's aestheticization of life's disorder and the nothingness it leads to, that is, his reconciling of the disorderly aspects of social life with his interest in obedience to the

tradition of regeneration through pain a “poetics of disorderly order.” As a consequence to this, for Penda, the flooding images and topics in the theme and structure of *The Waste Land* push up “a multitude of contrasting and seemingly incoherent representations, references, and subject matters.

Discussing the motif of inconsistency employed in “A Game of Chess”, where the case of ‘a neurotic woman waiting for her lover’ is contrastingly matched with ‘a constantly interrupted dialogue of the two women in a restaurant about their friend Lil’ with a background of cruelties of war in the contemporary Europe and the crumbling family lives, Penda comments: “Both upper and lower classes live a meaningless life of despair and hopelessness which is emphasized by purposeful grammatical ambiguity and insistence on the word “nothing”: Nothing again nothing. / ‘Do/ ‘You know nothing? Do you see nothing? Do you remember/ ‘Nothing?’” (140). These characters are evidently doomed to their respective complexity of existence that fundamentally features inescapable paradox.

Moving to “The Fire Sermon,” Penda again discusses sense of dis(unity) of the prophet, Teiresias who witnesses the “picture of the dead Thames and of foggy London” merges with that of “a passionless and meaningless love-making scene”. Analyzing the scene reflecting nothingness, Penda explicates:

An image of urban London shifts to that of the Elizabethan period and then the section ends with Carthage being burnt down. Once prosperous, Carthage was destroyed and the implication is that such destiny is awaiting London as well. Barren love making gives no hope for the future. Here, also, the idea of nothingness is emphasized: ‘On Margate Sands./ I cannot connect/ Nothing with nothing./ The broken fingernails of dirty hands./ My people humble people who expect/ Nothing’ (141).

What the speaker, evidently trapped in the complex and unresolving crisis characterized by visions of nothingness, seeks to connect with is the pervasive nothingness, rather than achievement of something higher and more relieving. “Death by Water,” similarly reminds Penda “of human transience based on the contrast of the past and the present” with “no consolation or hope for both life and afterlife, only a sense of loss and the inevitable decay of human flesh” (141). Here, the picture of Phlebas the Phoenician who drowned in combined with the idea of beauty as he “was once handsome and tall as you.” The final section of the poem, “What the Thunder Said”, as Penda suggests, ends in the acceptance of the unacceptable – a peaceful toleration of spiritual decay. To him, the section gives:

a pessimistic representation of the dead and the dying and the falling towers of both Asian and European capitals. The invitation to give (datta), sympathise (dayadhvam), and control (damyata) is answered as this part finishes with “the peace which passeth understanding” (shantih). Utter pessimism prevails, and it is suggested that both physical and spiritual decay be accepted with peace. However, “the peace” is not spiritually rewarding or consoling, but mere acceptance of the inevitable. (141)

With this analysis of the text of *The Waste Land*, Penda concludes that behind Eliot’s such a form of art exists his urge to invent a new form of art that would comply with his ‘poetics of disorderly order.’ In a manner of drawing his conclusion, Penda posits:

Making the “incoherent” and fragmentary and acceptable poetic idiom, Eliot succeeded in creating a new aesthetic form. Such a “disjunctive form” with “the absence of transition,” at first glance, shows a disruptive and disunified cultural reality; however, when scrutinized more carefully, the poem is clearly

loaded with the ideology of its contrary states: order and unity that propagate no changes. (144)

In absence of a unity with the power to propel changes in the degenerate reality of the social life, the politics of the conception of the poem in so fragmentary and dense a form ends in a self-incurred aesthetic defeat of the poem in particular, and of the modernist art in general.

Thus, critics's claim that, satire in *The Waste Land* fails to realize in its original function due to excessive dependence on combining of the opposing poles preeminently through the use of packed allusions to the effect that it ultimately dissolves, has deep relevance to the central concern of this research: since the contradicting conditions restricts the characters's deep need to reform and regenerate the vanishing power of spirituality leads to a situation which directly connects to Wilde calls the modernist aesthetics of crisis: "the confusions of the world are shaped into an equal poise of opposites: the form of an unresolvable paradox." Critics also agree that like many other modernist texts, *The Waste Land* ends in "an aesthetic closure that substitutes for the notion of paradise regained" (qtd. in Bove, 248). That the central paradox of rain falling or not falling remains unresolved unmistakably renders Eliot's irony in *The Waste Land* absolute – an irony which also characterizes the modernist 'aesthetics of crisis.'

Chapter V: Absolute Irony: Fundamental Characteristic of Modernist Aesthetics

The concept of absolute irony that Alan Wilde explains in his seminal work *Horizons of Assent: Modernism, Postmodernism, and the Ironic Imagination* is both an extension and vehement rejection of the irony as conceived and favoured by the New Critics and other formalist critics. Modernist use of irony, for Wilde, takes the form of absolute or disjunctive irony in that it involves the conception of equal and opposed possibilities held in a state of total poise. That is, modernist works irresistibly contain an imagination of the shape of art as an indestructible, unresolved paradox. This unresolved paradox marks what he calls the crisis in modernist aesthetics. Analyzed with recourse to Wilde's postulation of absolute irony, the selected representative modernist works, Thomas Mann's *Death in Venice* and T. S. Eliot's *The Waste Land* both teem with containment of paradoxes without any anticipation of their resolution so that the intended satiric effect, that is, the reform in the characters end up in a paralyzing despairing vision.

As the analysis in Chapter III reveals, Mann's *Death in Venice* recounts the story of an honoured aging writer's gradual slide into the abyss of perversity and contagious spiritual world which he erroneously confuses with his aesthetic principles so that his perverse homosexual desires -- which stand in direct contradiction with his much avowed principles of self-discipline and ideally sound intellectual life -- could be disguised or obscured. The ironic disposition that controls the narrative is such that the protagonist is transfixed to a conflicted psychology that disallows him to take any resolute action to avert the impending fall to an abyss; rather, it pushes him along an unending slide from his earlier values laying him naked of his intellectual discretion and ultimately he loses his life. This eternal delay in making any preventive decision stems up directly from the existence of equally powerful but opposed ideas embedded in the very construction of the ironic vision. The character's anticipation of a return from the homoeroticism is as viable as his potential but unexpected fall onto

intellectual impotence. The consequence is: the psychological stalemate never gets resolved. This very irresolution confirms the author's conception of his protagonist as a man in crisis. This justifies Alan Wilde's theory that modernist works of art reside in the conception of individuals essentially in crisis and despair. As the will to resolve the crisis is left to an eternal pending, this leads definitely to what is arguable as the state of absolute irony.

The analysis of Eliot's masterpiece, *The Waste Land* in Chapter IV also reveals no less an instance of dramatization of absolute irony. The five sections of the poem with no apparent connection to each other blurs the reader's perception with distantly connected, or rather, disconnected, allusive words, phrases, lines and references that range from historico-cultural to literary to mythic past and draw on figures that either speak up their own story or narrate some other individual's state of moral, ethical and spiritual dryness that lacks a power to regenerate. Just as the mythic character Sibyl in the epigraph of the poem foreshadows, all the voices in *The Waste Land* resonate with the conception of life as a curse and helplessly anticipate freedom from the seasonal cycles of their lives complicated by the contrasting images that cater with nothing but an inherent contradiction. However, in their wish to escape from their lives which are morally degenerate, spiritually empty and sexually defunct, they lack a will to regeneration that is possible only through the pain of death as envisioned in any religion. For this reason, the essential crisis, or rather a moral spiritual crisis, remains a paradox that never endeavors to resolve. Despite the fact that the thunder recommends its three solutions – Datta, Dayadhvam and Damyatya, neither does the speaker imagine to cause the rain fall nor do the characters embody the power to resuscitate life force in their spiritually dry waste land. As such, the crisis remains: what comes out is a mere state of unresolved irony amidst eternal despair.

In conclusion, modernist works of art depend on an aesthetic theory and practice the fulcrum of which is an essential and unresolved crisis. Irony is evoked through a situation of

unresolved contradiction and paradox. That the closure completes only at the formal level renders the desired ironic effect ineffective. This state of unresolved, disjunctive, or absolute irony establishes the modernist art as fundamentally a practice of aesthetics of crisis and despairing vision, and not one of resolution and rejuvenation.

This research has thus carried out a successful diagnosis of the nature of modernist aesthetics and has recognized its one significant dimension: a response to crisis. The findings might suggest new directions in the studies relating to modernist trends in world literature. A further research is viable, for instance, on the justification for or a way-out to the modernist aesthetics of crisis and despairing vision.

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