



**Tikrit University**

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**M.A. Studies/ Modern poetry**

**Subject: T.S. Eliot's *The Waste Land***

**Asst. Prof Rudaina Abdulrazzaq M. Saeed Ph.D**

**Rudaina63@tu.edu.iq**

## T.S. Eliot's *The Waste Land*

### Eliot's Brief Biography:

Thomas Stearns Eliot (1888-1965), a poet, essayist, publisher, playwright, literary critic and editor. He is considered a central figure in English language Modernist poetry. His first attracted widespread attention for his poem "*The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock*" in 1915, which received as a modernist masterpiece. It was followed by some of the best known poems in the English language, including "*The Waste Land*" (1922), "*The Hollow Men*" (1925), "*Ash Wednesday*" (1930), and *Four Quartets* (1943). He was also known for his seven plays, particularly *Murder in the Cathedral* (1935) and *The Cocktail Party* (1949). He was awarded the Nobel Prize in Literature in 1948, for his outstanding, pioneering contribution to 20th Century poetry. learned Greek, Latin, French, and German, developing philological skills and gaining familiarity with varying philosophical traditions. While at Harvard, Eliot interested in French symbolist poetry, finding himself particularly drawn to Rimbaud, Verlaine, and Laforgue. These poets would prove influential for Ezra Pound as well.

In 1911, Eliot enrolled as a doctoral student at Harvard, reading deeply in Buddhism and learning Sanskrit. Having studied in Germany and at Oxford, he settled in England after the outbreak of the First World War, working as a teacher and, famously, as a banker. Eliot's Anglophilia was lasting: he was a leading figure in the London artistic scene along with Pound, Wyndham Lewis, and others, became a British subject in 1927, and converted to Anglicanism around the same time. Soon afterwards, he encapsulated his views as "classicist in literature, royalist in politics, and Anglo-Catholic in religion." All of these reflected in his writings especially his masterpiece *The Waste Land*.

## **Introduction**

In 1922, his status was confirmed by the publication of *The Waste Land*. Appearing as it did in the same year as James Joyce's *Ulysses*, the 434-line poem helped mark 1922 as a magical year in high modernism. Allusive, musical, and formally and linguistically complex, *The Waste Land* both diagnosed the chaos of modernity and provided an example of how art could order this experience; it expressed a widespread feeling of exhaustion and cultural crisis in the aftermath of the First World War. Like *Ulysses*, it mimicked and mined the different voices of urban life to create a bewildering and complex polyphony, and like Joyce's novel it used recursive patterning and mythic parallels to provide some semblance of organic harmony.

## **A Brief Summary about Each Part of the Poem**

### **1-The Burial of the Dead**

This is the first of five sections that make up *The Waste Land*. This section opens with the famous declaration that "April is the cruellest month" because it breeds lilacs out of a land that is dead, and that the winter snows were preferable because they covered this dead land, allowing us to forget what lay beneath. Then we have a countess, Marie, recalling how she used to stay at her cousin's the archduke's, and they went sledding. Another speaker talks of a mysterious shadow rising to meet us, and then we have a woman's voice, describing herself as the Hyacinth girl. The (presumably male) speaker who answers her seems to have lost all grip on reality when confronted with the woman coming out of the garden with her arms full of flowers and her hair wet.

FOR EZRA POUND

## IL MIGLIOR FABBRO

### 1-The Burial of the Dead

April is the cruellest month, breeding

Lilacs out of the dead land, mixing

Memory and desire, stirring

Dull roots with spring rain.

Winter kept us warm, covering

Earth in forgetful snow, feeding

A little life with dried tubers.

Then the section involves Tarot cards, used to foretell the future, which are dealt out by the clairvoyante, Madame Sosostris. This first part of *The Waste Land* ends with a male speaker meeting Stetson, whom he fought alongside in the Battle of Mylae (one of the Punic Wars of ancient times). He asks Stetson whether the corpse he planted in his garden has begun to sprout, returning us to the imagery from the beginning of the poem.

### 2- A Game of Chess

The Chair she sat in, like a burnished throne,

Glowed on the marble, where the glass

Held up by standards wrought with fruited vines

From which a golden Cupidon peeped out

(Another hid his eyes behind his wing)  
Doubled the flames of sevenbranched candelabra  
Reflecting light upon the table as  
The glitter of her jewels rose to meet it,  
From satin cases poured in rich profusion;  
In vials of ivory and coloured glass  
Unstoppered, lurked her strange synthetic perfumes,  
Unguent, powdered, or liquid-troubled, confused  
And drowned the sense in odours; stirred by the air  
That freshened from the window, these ascended  
In fattening the prolonged candle-flames,  
Flung their smoke into the laquearia,  
Stirring the pattern on the coffered ceiling.  
Huge sea-wood fed with copper  
Burned green and orange, framed by the coloured stone,  
In which sad light a carvéd dolphin swam.

The chief focus of this section is two scenes involving women: the first an upper-class woman and the second a lower-class one. There is a suggestion that

they are both trying to cope with husbands who have served in the recent war, but are also dealing with their own issues, too.

The section opens with a long and detailed description of the upper-class woman's dressing room, where she is using perfumes and other products to make herself look and smell nice. Then we have a conversation between her and her husband ( the reader going to understand whom she talks to) where they fail to communicate meaningfully with each other, partly because the woman is nervous and jittery, and because there is a suggestion that the man is suffering from shell-shock or PTSD.

From this scene, we move to a pub in the East End of London, where a working-class woman, Lou, is talking to Bill and some of her other friends about her friend Lil, whose husband Albert has come back from the war, wants to sleep with his wife again.

### **3-The Fire Sermon**

The section opens with a euphemistic reference to nymphs (i.e. prostitutes) plying their trade on the banks of the Thames, and goes on to refer to Sweeney visiting Mrs Porter's brothel, and an Australian drinking song about prostitutes.

The river's tent is broken: the last fingers of leaf

Clutch and sink into the wet bank. The wind

Crosses the brown land, unheard. The nymphs are departed.

Sweet Thames, run softly, till I end my song.

The river bears no empty bottles, sandwich papers,

Silk handkerchiefs, cardboard boxes, cigarette ends

Or other testimony of summer nights. The nymphs are  
departed.

And their friends, the loitering heirs of city directors;  
Departed, have left no addresses.

By the waters of Leman I sat down and wept...

Sweet Thames, run softly till I end my song,

Sweet Thames, run softly, for I speak not loud or long

. But at my back in a cold blast I hear

The rattle of the bones, and chuckle spread from ear to ear.

There is also the rape of Philomela by her brother-in-law Tereus, a foreign merchant propositioning the male speaker to a dirty weekend down in Brighton with him, and – most famously – a typist and a young estate agent’s clerk engaging in mechanical lovemaking (although love is largely absent here).

There are several different female voices, the supposed Thames-daughters (as Eliot’s notes call them), telling the reader their stories of how they were undone by men.

#### **4-Death by Water**

This fourth section is a breath of fresh air (as it were) after the longer third section: a short lyric of just ten lines, it focuses on Phlebas, a Phoenician tradesman from classical times, who has drowned at sea (the title of this section

takes us back to the Tarot card in the first section of *The Waste Land*, which warned us to fear death by water and referred to a drowned Phoenician sailor).

Phlebas the Phoenician, a fortnight dead,

Forgot the cry of gulls, and the deep sea swell

And the profit and loss.

A current under sea

Picked his bones in whispers. As he rose and fell

He passed the stages of his age and youth

Entering the whirlpool.

Gentile or Jew

O you who turn the wheel and look to windward,

Consider Phlebas, who was once handsome and tall as you.

## **5-What the Thunder Said**

The fifth and final section of *The Waste Land*, 'What the Thunder Said', is overwhelmingly written in unpunctuated, unrhymed, irregular free verse. It is as if the lack of water has led the speaker of 'What the Thunder Said', in his desire for water, to lapse into semi-coherent snatches of speech. The reader can find himself in a dry land, among people undertaking a quest to find the Holy Grail (although we need to read Eliot's notes to grasp this properly).

Much of this final section of the poem is about a desire for water: the waste land is a land of drought where little will grow. Water is needed to restore life to



the earth, to return a sterile land to fertility. (Shades of the Fisher King myth here again.)

After the torchlight red on sweaty faces

After the frosty silence in the gardens

After the agony in stony places

The shouting and the crying

Prison and palace and reverberation

Of thunder of spring over distant mountains

He who was living is now dead

We who were living are now dying

With a little patience

Along the way, in ll. 359-65, can get a weird digression which sees the speaker asking about a hallucinated third person s/he imagines walking alongside his/her travelling companion, a detail that he inspired, Eliot tells in his notes, by one of Ernest Shackleton's Antarctic expeditions, where one of the men suffered from the delusion that there was one more man among their number, an imagined extra person.

Shades of the Gothic are introduced here, which are echoed by the bats with the baby faces in the chapel. We are also in the realms of Arthurian myth here, and the Grail quest: the Chapel Perilous was the place, in Sir Thomas Malory's *Le Morte d'Arthur*, where Lancelot was tempted – as with 'The Fire Sermon', temptation re-emerges as a theme.

Can one remain spiritually pure and focused, or will the lure of the body become too strong? This section – and the poem – ends with the arrival of rain in a thunderstorm, where the DA sound of the thunderclap is interpreted in light of the Hindu Upanishads.

## **Discussion**

*The Waste Land* does not have one speaker. Instead it presents many different voices, in order to add more complexity to the poem. Leading the reader to play a game of knowing who said what. A good place to start with an analysis of *The Waste Land* is to examine the importance of literary allusion. Eliot's poem draws on a vast number of literary and religious texts and traditions. In addition to this, there is what is called the 'mythic method': Eliot's use of a mythic narrative or structure.

He probably borrowed this idea from James Joyce, who had used it in his novel *Ulysses*, which was published in book form in 1922, the same year as *The Waste Land*, but which had been appearing in instalments in the *Little Review* for several years prior to that. Eliot wrote an essay in praise of Joyce's use of ancient myth, and borrowed this for his own poem – drawing on Arthurian legend (e.g. the Fisher King) and various other religious and literary traditions. The Fisher King myth, which helps to explain so much of the poem's imagery and themes, is summed up by Pericles Lewis on Yale's Modernisms site:

The Fisher King is impotent, his lands infertile and drought-stricken; one cause of this infertility is a crime, the rape of some maidens in the king's court. Only the arrival of a pure-hearted stranger ... permits the land to become fertile again.

This is the modern world: civilization has been reduced to a 'waste land' and the land has lost its fertility and ability to bring forth life. Even the living seem to be suffering from some kind of spiritual wound. But how can we fix this society? By regaining spiritual and psychological enlightenment and making peace with our demons. But that's easier said than done.

The literary allusions raise all sorts of questions about *The Waste Land* as a work of poetry itself. The poem's use of allusion can be linked to something Eliot championed in poetry, which is the idea of impersonality. Good poetry, for Eliot, is impersonal: it's not all about the poet's own feelings and experiences.

This is a very anti-romantic position, going against the likes of William Wordsworth and Samuel Taylor Coleridge, who put the self, the idea of 'I', at the centre of poetry. 'I Wandered Lonely as a Cloud'. Eliot in his 1919 essay '*Tradition and the Individual Talent*' argues that a new poet joins the poetic tradition by both being different from what has gone before, but also by suggesting a sense of continuum with the past. So, don't disown the past, but incorporate it into your own work – and even a cursory analysis of *The Waste Land* shows that it is obviously full of such examples, from Shakespeare, Spenser, Marvell, etc.

The use of other poets' words also helps to reinforce Eliot's theory of impersonality, since his own voice (even if we could assume that the speaker of the poem is Eliot himself, which is dangerous in itself) is often interrupted by the words of others. Indeed, Eliot's original title for early drafts of the poem was 'He Do the Police in Different Voices', a line he borrowed from Dickens's novel *Our Mutual Friend*, about a man who reads out the newspaper reports and puts on different voices for the policemen quoted in the report.

## **Literary Context**

"The Waste Land" is considered a landmark in 20th-century English literary history. Published in 1922, it shocked many contemporary critics with its irregular metrical and rhyme patterns, sometimes disturbing subject, and depiction of the alienating conditions of modern life.

In this sense, "The Waste Land" represents a decisive break with Victorian poets and writers like Samuel Taylor Coleridge, William Wordsworth, and John Ruskin, as well as with the literary modes that dominated the late 19th and early 20th centuries. Eliot's poem rejects the rigid meter and sometimes sing-song rhymes of Victorian poetry, opting instead for a collage of different dramatic monologues rendered in a stream of consciousness style.

This is not to say, however, that Eliot entirely rejects all prior poetic models. On the contrary, from Dante to Shakespeare, Eliot frequently and explicitly alludes to many of the grand masters of literature, sometimes even quoting directly from other works and citing them in the footnotes. Indeed, throughout "The Waste Land," Eliot appears to be actively mourning the loss of an earlier artistic era, whose norms and meaning-making he sees as having been shattered by the wreckage of World War I and 20th-century modern life. "The Waste Land" is now considered a canonical

work in its own right. It is a leading example of Modernist poetry (if not the leading example), and was heavily influenced by another major Modernist work, James Joyce's novel *Ulysses*, which Eliot read the same year that he was writing "The Waste Land." Modernism was a literary movement of the early 20th century that emphasized a sense of large-scale social and aesthetic change in the wake of significant disruptions to European life (namely, World War I). With its damning depiction of the alienation and isolation of modern life, and its rich evocation of the confusion and disorder of post-World War I society, "The Waste Land" is a prime example of the Modernist movement.

It is also worth noting that "The Waste Land" was heavily influenced by the poet Ezra Pound, another Modernist, who served as an editor for T.S. Eliot and cut "The Waste Land" nearly in half. The poem is dedicated to him, with a note in Italian that translates to "the better craftsman."

## Symbols

- ***The Waste Land***; the title itself serves as a powerful symbol of the barrenness and spiritual desolation of the modern world. The waste land represents a landscape of spiritual emptiness, moral decay, and cultural fragmentation, devoid of vitality and fertility. It reflects Eliot's pessimistic view of modern civilization as a wasteland devoid of meaning and purpose.
- **The Unreal City**; described in the poem's opening lines, symbolizes the soulless, mechanized urban landscape of modernity. It is a place of spiritual alienation and moral degradation, where human connections have been replaced by anonymity and isolation. The Unreal City represents the dehumanizing effects of industrialization and urbanization, as well as the loss of community and connection in the modern world.
- **Water**; Water appears as a recurring symbol throughout the poem, representing both purification and regeneration, as well as destruction and death. It symbolizes the cleansing power of redemption and rebirth, as well as the destructive forces of dissolution and decay. Water imagery evokes themes of baptism, renewal, and the cyclical rhythms of life and death.
- **The Fisher King**; The figure of the Fisher King is drawn from Arthurian legend and serves as a symbol of woundedness and spiritual malaise. The Fisher King's kingdom has become a wasteland due to his injury, mirroring the spiritual desolation of the modern world. He represents the decline of

traditional values and the loss of spiritual vitality, waiting for redemption and renewal.

- **Tarot cards;** The tarot cards that appear throughout the poem symbolize fate, destiny, and the mysterious forces that govern human existence. Each card represents a different aspect of the human condition, from desire and temptation to redemption and transcendence. The tarot imagery underscores the theme of determinism and the idea that human lives are shaped by forces beyond individual control.
- **The Chapel Perilous;** is a symbol of spiritual crisis and existential dread. It represents a place of spiritual danger and uncertainty, where individuals confront the darkness within themselves and grapple with questions of faith and meaning. The Chapel Perilous embodies the psychological turmoil and existential angst of the modern age, where traditional beliefs have been undermined and replaced by doubt and skepticism.

## **Themes**

- **The cultural decline and isolation of modern life;** "The Waste Land" is a scathing critique of modern civilization and its descent into moral and cultural decay. Eliot portrays a society in decline, marked by spiritual emptiness, moral corruption, and social fragmentation. The poem's various vignettes depict scenes of urban squalor, psychological breakdown, and moral degradation, reflecting Eliot's pessimistic view of modernity as a wasteland devoid of vitality and purpose.
- **Death and rebirth;** "The Waste Land" is structured around the motif of death and rebirth, drawing on themes of resurrection and renewal from various religious and mythological traditions. The poem's imagery is suffused with symbols of death and decay, yet these are juxtaposed with images of fertility, regeneration, and the promise of new life. Eliot suggests that out of the ashes

of destruction, there is the potential for rebirth and renewal, echoing the cyclical rhythms of nature and the eternal cycle of life and death.

- **Religion, spirituality, and nihilism;** Eliot explores the spiritual desolation of the modern age, characterised by a sense of emptiness, alienation, and existential despair. The poem's characters are haunted by a profound sense of disillusionment and loss, searching for meaning and redemption in a world devoid of spiritual significance. Eliot draws on religious imagery and mythology to evoke a sense of spiritual bankruptcy and moral decay, suggesting that the modern world has lost touch with its spiritual roots.

## **Conclusion**

Eliot portrays the fragmentation of the modern world in *The Waste Land* through various means. The poem combines different styles and draws from a wide range of sources, reflecting the absurdity of reality and the plight of human civilisation. It deconstructs the structure of modernism and exposes a claustrophobic world devoid of regeneration and hopefulness. The poem presents a wasteland that symbolically suggests the spiritual death of modern men, reflecting the ambiguity, aridness, and destruction of the modern world. However, amidst the despair, there is also a promise of life and hope of resurrection, as Eliot suggests that out of death and winter come spring and new life. The fragmented and desecralised condition of the urbanised soul is mirrored in the broken and scattered images of the poem, highlighting the estrangement of the human mind from the natural world.