

T. S. Eliot: *The Waste Land*

- I. A challenging poem
 - A. *The Waste Land*, dating from 1922, is dense with literary allusions (*intertextuality*)
 1. These references are from both the western and eastern cultural traditions
 2. They include Augustine, Dante, Shakespeare, the Bible, Ovid, Baudelaire, Milton, Webster, Spenser, Marvell, Goldsmith, Wagner, and Buddhist and Hindu Scriptures
 - B. Eliot also uses a dizzying array of languages that includes Italian, German, French, and Sanskrit
 - C. The large number of explanatory notes by the author also complicate our reading
 - D. Reading the poem is a metaphor for trying to make sense of a present overwhelmed by the weight of the past—the experience of modernity
 - E. Even more than “Prufrock,” *The Waste Land* is about the alienation and despair of modern life
 - F. Eliot’s good friend and fellow poet Ezra Pound helped edit and shape the poem’s drafts into its final form
- II. Sources and influences
 - A. Chaucer’s *Canterbury Tales*
 1. The poem’s opening, about April being “the cruellest month,” is an ironic inversion of Chaucer’s General Prologue to the *Canterbury Tales*
 2. Where Chaucer saw April as characterized by “sweet showers” that restore the lands
 3. Eliot’s April is cruel, “breeding / Lilacs out of the dead land” and “mixing / Memory and desire”
 - B. King Arthur and the quest for the holy grail
 1. Frequent allusions to the Fisher King refer to the grail quest legends
 - a) The Fisher King is wasting away, suffering from a wound in the “thigh”
 - b) The “thigh” is a euphemism for the genitals
 - c) Because the King’s body is not fertile, the land is barren and sterile
 - d) The grail seekers must obtain the grail in order to heal the Fisher King and the land
 2. In *The Waste Land*, the land is not just literally, but spiritually barren and dry
 3. There are repeated references to death, decay, lovelessness, and the emptiness of modern life
 4. In place of love and passion, we often find only indifferent and joyless sex
 5. The poem does offer a final vision of redemption and restoration
 - C. Other mythological sources
 1. The legend of Philomela and the nightingale
 - a) (Recall the discussion of Philomela in Keats’s “The Eve of St. Agnes”
 - b) Tereus, king of Thrace, raped his sister-in-law Philomela and cut out her tongue to prevent her from talking
 - c) Philomela wove her story into a tapestry that she sent to her sister, Procne
 - d) Procne cut up her son, cooked him, and served him to Tereus
 - e) He pursued her and the gods changed Tereus into a hawk, Procne into a swallow, and Philomela into a nightingale, who sings sweetly of her suffering

2. The legend of Tiresias
 - a) Tiresias was the greatest of the prophets of classical mythology
 - b) He was changed into a woman by the gods as because he killed a female snake
 - c) Later he was changed back to a man after killing a male snake
 - d) Zeus and Hera asked him to settle an argument about which of the sexes derived the greatest pleasure in making love
 - e) Tiresias claimed that the female had more pleasure, and Hera struck him blind
 - f) Zeus could not restore his sight but gave Tiresias the power to know the future

III. The sections of the poem

A. "The burial of the Dead"

1. This section includes many references to destruction, desolation, and dryness ("And the dry stone no sound of water," "I will show you fear in a handful of dust.")
2. There are references to falsehood, deception and fortune-telling (Madame Sosostris, famous clairvoyante, / . . . With a wicked pack of cards.")
3. The city of London is depicted surrealistically ("Unreal City, / Under the brown fog of a winter dawn")

B. "A Game of Chess"

1. Here, we encounter references to Vergil's *Aeneid*, Milton's *Paradise Lost*, and the Philomela legend
2. Juxtaposed with the beautiful music of the nightingale and the Philomela story, we have fragments of conversation
3. These may have been based on conversations between Eliot and his wife, who was hospitalized for mental illness
4. A recurring motif in this part of the poem is the juxtaposition of bits of mundane conversations
5. Sometimes they are conversations in which speakers are struggling to make sense of something
6. The poem often moves from mythology and prophecy to trite, everyday conversation
7. Yet even trite utterances often seem charged with meaning
 - a) "HURRY UP PLEASE ITS TIME"—the equivalent of "last call" in an English pub—sounds apocalyptic
 - b) "What is that noise?," the plea of a mentally ill woman, is also a question about a world we struggle to understand
8. A pub conversation alludes to a woman's attempt to induce a miscarriage, after five children
9. Natural fertility is being stifled even as the land is suffering from barrenness

C. "The Fire Sermon"

1. "Sweet Thames, run softly till I end my song" is an apparent reference to Edmund Spenser
2. The repetition of "But at my back . . . I hear" alludes to Andrew Marvell's "To His Coy Mistress" (But at my back I always hear / Time's wingèd chariot hurrying near")
3. There are references to Sir Parsifal and the Quest for the Holy Grail
4. Parsifal, or Percival, has the power to heal the Fisher King's wound and restore the land.
5. There are fragmentary phrases that allude to the Philomela story

6. We hear a first-person narration from Tiresias, introducing himself as “blind, throbbing between two lives.”
 - a) Here, he observes an incident between a woman who is a typist and her lover, a clerk,
 - b) After their dinner—food laid out from tins—two have sex, but it is loveless and joyless
 7. The theme of loveless sex is repeated in the voices of the daughters of the Thames
 8. According to Eliot’s note, they are equivalent to the Rhine-Daughters in Richard Wagner’s opera, *The Twilight of the Gods*
 9. Here, though, they are prostitutes
 - D. “Death by Water”
 1. This is a very short section, with images of death and decay
 2. Phlebas the Phoenician is a dead body, tossed by ocean currents
 3. There is a reminder that Phlebas “was once handsome and tall as you.”
 - E. “What the Thunder Said”
 1. Eliot’s note mentions three themes in this section
 - a) “the journey to Emmaus,”
 - (1) The journey of Christ’s disciples to the village of Emmaus after his crucifixion
 - (2) Christ appears to them but they do not recognize him
 - b) “the approach to the Chapel Perilous”
 - (1) The Parsifal myth
 - (2) The Chapel Perilous is where he will be tested, and if successful, the Fisher King will be healed and the land restored
 - c) “the present decay of eastern Europe.”
 2. There are repeated references to dryness, and thunder without rain
 3. A footnote of Eliot’s mentions an Antarctic expedition by Shackleton
 - a) The explorers in the expedition always thought there was one more person among them than they could actually count
 - b) Eliot connects this to the story of Jesus’s disciples on the Emmaus road, unaware who was walking among them
 4. Other images
 - a) Crumbling civilization, falling towers
 - b) Empty chapels
 5. Hope for redemption
 - a) Words from the Upanishads (commentaries on Hindu scriptures)
 - (1) *Datta* (*Give*, that is, alms-giving)
 - (2) *Dayadhvam* (*Sympathize*, that is, show compassion)
 - (3) *Damyata* (*Control*, that is, have self-control)
 - b) These attributes lead to the final line of the poem, *Shantih, shantih, shantih* (“the peace which passeth understanding.”)
- IV. Reflections and connections
- A. Eliot thought that the poem’s allusions to mythology and classic literature provide a framework to hold the poem together
 - B. Our struggle as readers of the poem is a metaphor for our struggle to understand the modern world
 - C. Connections
 1. The 1973 Genesis song, “The Cinema Show,” is a loose adaptation of the scene between the typist and the clerk and includes references to Tiresias
 2. The 1990 graphic novel by Martin Rowson adapts the poem to a *film noir* parody