This Class is adapted from ‘A critical reading of a landmark modernist poem’ by Dr Oliver Tearle, a literary critic and lecturer in English at Loughborough University. In addidition, elements focusing on the nature of modernism have been added y Dr Belfar Boubaaya Naciera

What is modern poetry?

Eliot has been one of the most daring innovators of twentieth-century poetry. Never compromising either with the public or indeed with language itself, he has followed his belief that poetry should aim at a representation of the complexities of modern civilization in language and that such representation necessarily leads to difficult poetry. Despite this difficulty his influence on modern poetic diction has been immense.

**A Summary and Analysis of T. S. Eliot’s The Waste Land**

In October 1922 Eliot published *The Waste Land* dedicated to [Ezra Pound](http://www.poets.org/poet.php/prmPID/161) [*il miglior fabbro.*](http://eliotswasteland.tripod.com/notes.html) It was in London that Eliot came under the influence of his contemporary [Ezra Pound](http://www.poets.org/epoun), who recognized his poetic genius at once, and assisted in the publication of his work in a number of magazines.

Growing professional success masked personal suffering as the Eliot’s marriage disintegrated, prompting a nervous breakdown in Eliot which resulted in three months' enforced rest. It was during this period that 'The Waste Land' was composed, his bleak masterpiece of psychic fragmentation. With its collage of voices, its violent disjunctions in tone and wealth of cultural allusion, 'The Waste Land' also resonated as a depiction of the ruins of post-war European civilization.

*The Waste Land* is arguably the most important poem of the whole twentieth century. It remains a timely poem, even though its origins were very specifically the post-war Europe of 1918-22;

Who is Thomas Stearns Eliot?

AnAmerican-born English poet, playwright, and literary critic, arguably the most important English-language poet of the 20th century. His poems in many respects articulated the disillusionment of a younger post-World-War-I generation with the values and conventions—both literary and social—of the Victorian era. He was awarded the Nobel Prize in Literature in 1948.

Impact of the poem on literature

*The Waste Land* has given rise to more critical analysis and scholarly interpretation than just about any other poem. The poem is known for its obscure nature—its slippage between satire and prophecy; its abrupt changes of speaker, location, and time. Despite this, it has become a touchstone of modern literature. Critics and readers are still arguing over what it means.

*The Waste Land* and its context in rejecting old forms and innovating new ones

To begin to understand the cultural impact of Eliot’s poem, we need to analyze *The Waste Land*in its literary context.

The most popular poetry in England in the second decade of the twentieth century was [‘Georgian’ poetry](https://www.britannica.com/art/Georgian-poetry-British-literary-group) (a group of poets who named themselves after King George V, who came to the throne in 1910).

In terms of subject matter as well as poetic form, Georgian poets were working largely in a well-worn tradition they’d inherited from the Victorians. Poetry was mostly focused on nature imagery and rural settings. The Georgians hadn’t really moved on from this, even though they’re writing in a post-Victorian world. The world of the early twentieth century is a world of motorcars, omnibuses, commuters on the London Underground, typists going to work in an office all day and then going home to canned food and gramophone records.

But you won’t find this modern world reflected in Georgian poetry, which is still largely concerned with birdsong, fields and hedgerows, and village life.

The problem people like Eliot had with such poetry – especially as an outsider who had grown up in America – was that it had lost its ability to arrest us, to make us see the thing being described in a new way. It wasn’t saying anything particularly new. Once something has been said in poetry, why say it again? Images and metaphors, when overused, lose their force and vividness.

It was something that a small number of poets in England had also started to address – [poets such as T. E. Hulme](https://interestingliterature.com/2015/03/27/10-short-poems-by-t-e-hulme/) who rejected much of what the Georgians stood for and instead called for a ‘dry, hard, classical verse’ based around fresh metaphors and new images.

How to move poetry forward?

How could Eliot find out how to move poetry forward? He would soon find his answer, while still an undergraduate, when he encountered the work of a number of nineteenth-century French poets, chiefly Charles Baudelaire and Jules Laforgue. Baudelaire’s influence in particular can be seen in *The Waste Land*: rather than writing about the rural world of villages and haystacks, Baudelaire (1821-1867) had often written about the modern city, the urban world of the metropolis. In the city a poet could find a whole host of new images, a completely new language for poetry. Somebody like Baudelaire found poetry in the everyday world of the city-dweller. (Baudelaire is quoted by Eliot in the closing line of ‘The Burial of the Dead’, the first part of *The Waste Land*.)

The other thing that French poetry showed Eliot was that it didn’t have to conform to a strict rhyme scheme or metre: poetry could be [‘free verse’ or, as the French had it, *vers libre*](https://interestingliterature.com/2020/02/what-is-free-verse-introduction/). Eliot uses free verse in the fifth and final section of *The Waste Land*, in particular. His early poems, such as ‘[The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock](https://interestingliterature.com/2017/06/21/a-short-analysis-of-t-s-eliots-the-love-song-of-j-alfred-prufrock/)’, ‘[Preludes](https://interestingliterature.com/2016/09/15/a-short-analysis-of-t-s-eliots-preludes/)’, and ‘[Rhapsody on a Windy Night](https://interestingliterature.com/2017/11/30/a-short-analysis-of-t-s-eliots-rhapsody-on-a-windy-night/)’ all show Eliot depicting cityscapes and urban scenes within his work.

The use of Contrast of old elements and modern ones The clean waters of the Thames river, as opposed to Modern times. Bottles paper box. Cigarettes . Plastic bags. Pollution.

How to Analyse *The Waste Land*

Eliot’s wasn’t the first long modernist poem written about the War: an [intriguing poem by Ford Madox Ford, ‘Antwerp’](https://interestingliterature.com/2017/06/23/ford-madox-fords-antwerp-the-first-great-modernist-poem-of-wwi/), had been written in 1915 and was a poem that Eliot himself admired. In 1919, a British female poet named Hope Mirrlees wrote a remarkable avant-garde poem, *Paris: A Poem*, which was published a year later by the Woolfs’ Hogarth press and [anticipated Eliot’s poem in startling ways](https://interestingliterature.com/2019/04/modernisms-other-waste-land-hope-mirrlees-paris-a-poem-analysis/). But Eliot’s poem took the techniques of modernism to new heights.

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*.

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](https://modernism.research.yale.edu/wiki/index.php/The_Waste_Land):

*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: civilisation 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.

How should we interpret the questions addressed by T.S.Eliot?

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](https://interestingliterature.com/2016/03/01/a-short-analysis-of-wordsworths-i-wandered-lonely-as-a-cloud/)’, and so on.)

Eliot 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 you 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 examples from other poets such as [Shakespeare](https://interestingliterature.com/2014/04/22/five-fascinating-facts-about-shakespeare/), Spenser, Marvell,and others.

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) 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.

A structured, structureless poem: coherence and unity to a fragmented poem

Eliot elsewhere famously declared (in [his essay on ‘Dante’](http://www.bartleby.com/200/sw14.html)) Genuine poetry is able to communicate something to us even before it is understood.

How should we approach Eliot’s poetry and the question of what *The Waste Land* means? How can we analyse *The Waste Land* and discover its true meaning? *Is* there a true meaning? Eliot was often notoriously unhelpful at providing clarification or elucidation to his poems. His notes to *The Waste Land* – added as an afterthought to the original poem – tend to confuse the reader as much as they assist. When Eliot invites us in one of the notes to see the entire poem as focalised through the figure of Tiresias (a man who is a mess of contradictions: a blind seer, a man with breasts), should we take him at his word? Or is this Eliot trying to suggest coherence and unity to a very fragmented poem, after the fact?

Similarly, Eliot later dismissed the poem as a personal ‘grouse’ against life – contrary to what a hundred analyses of *The Waste Land* argued, the poem didn’t pretend to speak for a whole generation.

five individual sections of the poem in five separate posts. Below, however, we offer a condensed summary and analysis of these five sections, with links to the more detailed discussions.

Five sections make up *The Waste Land.*

First section: ‘The Burial of the Dead’

The section opens with the famous declaration that ‘April is the cruelest 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.

Then we have a section involving 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.

Second section ‘A Game of Chess’.

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. 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 (we infer) her husband, 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, wanting to resume married life. Lil’s numerous children are mentioned, and we are given a grim picture of poor Lil, who has grown prematurely old, partly as a result of the numerous pregnancies and partly because she has been using abortion pills.

Third section ‘The Fire Sermon’

It focuses not on marriage (as was the case in the previous section) but on other sexual relationships: 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, an Australian drinking song about prostitutes, 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). We then have several different female voices, the supposed Thames-daughters (as Eliot’s notes call them), telling us their stories of how they were undone by men.

Fourth Section ‘Death by Water’

It gives a breath of fresh air 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).

Fifth and final section ‘What the Thunder Said’

It is overwhelming 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. We find ourselves 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.) Along the way, in ll. 359-65, we 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 was inspired, Eliot tells us 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.

Paradoxes of rejecting the old and keeping it at the same time.

Shades of the Gothic: echoed by the bats with the baby faces in the chapel, also in the realms of Arthurian myth 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 ends with the arrival of rain in a thunderstorm, where the sound of the thunderclap is interpreted in light of the Hindu Upanishads.

In short, there can be no clear-cut and straightforward interpretation or analysis of *The Waste Land* that declares: ‘*This* is the true meaning of T. S. Eliot’s poem.’ The poem is full of curious and baffling moments.