

## I. Poetry: *The Waste Land* by Thomas Stern Eliot

In order for us to appreciate Eliot's poem as a modernist text we have to take into account not only the historical context (which we discussed in detail at the beginning of the course) of the poem's publication, but also Eliot's biography and especially his aesthetic views. Students are recommended to "google" the main events in the writer's life that influenced his writing of this poem, in particular.

\*Students might find the following elements interesting to investigate:

- Eliot's family and social status
- His education, studies, and knowledge
- His meeting with avant-gardist Ezra Pound, in particular
- His wife and marital life
- His financial situation
- His mental breakdown and health issues

\*As regards Eliot's aesthetic views, the following statements are a selection of some of his most famous pronouncements about literary texts and about his poem *TWL*. Students could "google" more.

1/ Eliot makes this observation in his essay on *Hamlet* published in 1919, three years before *TWL*. "*Qua* work of art, the **work of art cannot be interpreted**; there is **nothing to interpret**; we can only **criticize it according to standards in comparison to other works of art.**"

2/ In *The Metaphysical Poets*, published in 1921, a year before *TWL*, Eliot writes: "We can only say that it appears likely that **poets in our civilization**, as it exists at present, **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 results. **The poet must become more and more comprehensive**, more **allusive**, more **indirect**, in order to force, to dislocate if necessary, language into his meaning."

3/ Eliot wrote: "Various critics have done me the honour to interpret the poem (*The Waste Land*) in terms of criticism of the contemporary world, have considered it, indeed, an important piece of social criticism. To me it was only the relief of a wholly insignificant grouse against life: it is just a piece of rhythmical grumbling."

4/ In the prepublication version of *The Waste Land* the poem's epigraph was taken from Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* (1900), as the narrator recounts the death of Kurtz: "Did he live his life again in every detail of desire, temptation, and surrender during that supreme moment of complete knowledge? He cried

in a whisper at some image, at some vision—he cried out twice, a cry that was no more than breath—“The horror! the horror!””

5/ Virginia Woolf, another famous *Modernist*, wrote in her diary in June 1922, four months before *TWL* was published: “Eliot dined last Sunday and read his poem...*The Waste Land*, it is called...Tom’s autobiography – a melancholy one.”

**Suggested topics for class discussion and revision before the exam:**

- 1/ the way Eliot’s upper-class status/ education, studies, and knowledge influence his aesthetic views
- 2/ the way Eliot’s aesthetic views (especially number **1** and **2** mentioned above) influence his writing of the poem
- 3/ how his modernist technique in *TWL* is a reflection of his education and knowledge of the literary heritage
- 4/ what accounts for his “Elitism” and how it is reflected in the poem
- 5/ how the poem is partly a reflection of Eliot’s life difficulties (social, financial, marital, religious...)
- 6/ how the poem is partly a reflection of Eliot’s times (including historical events like WWI; new developments in sciences, especially anthropology, psychology; new ideas in philosophy and arts...)
- 7/ what makes Woolf consider *TWL* as Eliot’s autobiography (quote 5 above)
- 8/ what makes the poem “a melancholy one”?
- 9/ what possibly accounts for Eliot’s taking of the above mentioned passage from Conrad’s *Heart of Darkness* as epigraph for his poem
- 10/ would it have been suitable as epigraph had Eliot decided to keep it? If yes, why?
- 11/ what possibly accounts for Pounds’ suggestion of the actual epigraph about Sibylla?

\*Some of these topics have already been discussed in class.

For more clarification of the modernist aspects in Eliot’s poem *TWL* (at the level of structure, poetic voice, setting, style, narrative, themes...), and as a reference for preparation for future examination (quiz), two non-conclusive pdf. articles are attached. Any questions about the articles are most welcome.