T.S. ELIOT – THE WASTE LAND

Short Summary

The poem begins with a section entitled "The Burial of the Dead." In it, the narrator -- perhaps a representation of Eliot himself -- describes the seasons. Spring brings "memory and desire," and so the narrator's memory drifts back to times in Munich, to childhood sled rides, and to a possible romance with a "hyacinth girl." The memories only go so far, however. The narrator is now surrounded by a desolate land full of "stony rubbish."

He remembers a fortune-teller named Madame Sosostris who said he was "the drowned Phoenician Sailor" and that he should "fear death by water." Next he finds himself on London Bridge, surrounded by a crowd of people. He spots a friend of his from wartime, and calls out to him.

The next section, "A Game of Chess," transports the reader abruptly from the streets of London to a gilded drawing room, in which sits a rich, jewel-bedecked lady who complains about her nerves and wonders what to do. The poem drifts again, this time to a pub at closing time in which two Cockney women gossip. Within a few stanzas, we have moved from the upper crust of society to London's low-life.

"The Fire Sermon" opens with an image of a river. The narrator sits on the banks and muses on the deplorable state of the world. As Tiresias, he sees a young "carbuncular" man hop into bed with a lonely female typist, only to aggressively make love to her and then leave without hesitation. The poem returns to the river, where maidens sing a song of lament, one of them crying over her loss of innocence to a similarly lustful man.

"Death by Water," the fourth section of the poem, describes a dead Phoenician lying in the water -- perhaps the same drowned sailor of whom Madame Sosostris spoke. "What the Thunder Said" shifts locales from the sea to rocks and mountains. The narrator cries for rain, and it finally comes. The thunder that accompanies it ushers in the three-pronged dictum sprung from the *Brihadaranyaka Upanishad*: "Datta, dayadhvam, damyata": to give, to sympathize, to control. With these commandments, benediction is possible, despite the collapse of civilization that is under way -- "London bridge is falling down falling down falling down."

About The Waste Land

"The Waste Land" caused a sensation when it was published in 1922. It is today the most widely translated and studied English-language poem of the twentieth century. This is perhaps surprising given the poem's length and its difficulty, but Eliot's vision of modern life as plagued by sordid impulses, widespread apathy, and pervasive soullessness packed a punch when readers first encountered it.

Of course, "The Waste Land" is not quite the poem Eliot originally drafted. Eliot's close friend and colleague, Ezra Pound, significantly revised the poem, suggesting major cuts and compressions. Thanks to Pound's heavy editing, as well as suggestions (specifically about scenes relevant to their stormy, hostile marriage) from Haigh-Wood, "The Waste Land" defined Modernist poetry and became possibly the most influential poem of the century. Devoid of a single speaker's voice, the poem ceaselessly shifts its tone and form, instead grafting together numerous allusive voices from Eliot's substantial poetic repertoire; Dante shares the stage with nonsense sounds (a technique that also showcases Eliot's dry wit). Believing this style best represented the fragmentation of the modern world, Eliot focused on the sterility of modern culture and its lack of tradition and ritual. Despite this pessimistic viewpoint, many find its mythical, religious ending hopeful about humanity's chance for renewal.

Pound's influence on the final version of "The Waste Land" is significant. At the time of the poem's composition, Eliot was ill, struggling to recover from his nervous breakdown and languishing through an unhappy marriage. Pound offered him support and friendship; his belief in and admiration for Eliot

were enormous. In turn, however, he radically trimmed Eliot's long first draft (nineteen pages, by some accounts), bringing the poem closer to its current version. This is not to say Eliot would not have revised the poem on his own in similar ways; rather, the two men seemed to have genuinely collaborated on molding what was already a loose and at times free-flowing work. Pound, like Eliot a crucible of modernism, called for compression, ellipsis, reduction. The poem grew yet more cryptic; references that were previously clear now became more obscure. Explanations were out the window. The result was a more difficult work -- but arguably a richer one.

Eliot did not take all of Pound's notes, but he did follow his friend's advice enough to turn his sprawling work into a tight, elliptical, and fragmented piece. Once the poem was completed, Pound lobbied on its behalf, convincing others of its importance. He believed in Eliot's genius, and in the impact "The Waste Land" would have on the literature of its day. That impact ultimately stretched beyond poetry, to novels, painting, music, and all the other arts. John Dos Passos's Manhattan Transfer owes a significant debt to "The Waste Land," for example. Eliot's take on the modern world profoundly shaped future schools of thought and literature, and his 1922 poem remains a touchstone of the English-language canon.

Character List

The Narrator

The most difficult to describe of the poem's characters, he assumes many different shapes and guises. At times the Narrator seems to be Eliot himself; at other times he stands in for all humanity. In "The Fire Sermon" he is at one point the Fisher King of the Grail legend, at another the blind prophet Tiresias. When he seems to reflect Eliot, the extent to which his ruminations are autobiographical is ambiguous.

Madame Sosostris

A famous clairvoyant referred to in Aldous Huxley's novel *Crome Yellow* and borrowed by Eliot for the Tarot card episode. She suffers from a bad cold, but is nonetheless "known to be the wisest woman in Europe, / With a wicked pack of cards."

Stetson

A friend of the Narrator's, who fought in the war with him. Which war? It is unclear. Perhaps the Punic War or World War I, or both, or neither.

The Rich Lady

Never referred to by name, she sits in the resplendent drawing room of "A Game of Chess." She seems to be surrounded by luxury, but unable to appreciate or enjoy it. She might allude to Eliot's wife Vivienne.

Philomela

A character from Ovid's *Metamorphoses*. She was raped by Tereus, then, after taking her vengeance with her sister, morphed into a nightingale.

A Typist

Lonely, a creature of the modern world. She is visited by a "young man carbuncular," who sleeps with her. She is left alone again, accompanied by just her mirror and a gramophone.

Mr. Eugenides

A merchant from Smyrna (now Izmir, in Turkey). Probably the one-eyed merchant to whom Madame Sosostris refers.

Phlebas

A Phoenician merchant who is described lying dead in the water in "Death by Water." Perhaps the same drowned Phoenician sailor to whom Madame Sosostris refers.

Major Themes

Death

Two of the poem's sections -- "The Burial of the Dead" and "Death by Water" --refer specifically to this theme. What complicates matters is that death can mean life; in other words, by dying, a being can pave the way for new lives. Eliot asks his friend Stetson: "That corpse you planted last year in your garden, / Has it begun to sprout? Will it bloom this year?" Similarly, Christ, by "dying," redeemed humanity and thereby gave new life. The ambiguous passage between life and death finds an echo in the frequent allusions to Dante, particularly in the Limbo-like vision of the men flowing across London Bridge and through the modern city.

Rebirth

The Christ images in the poem, along with the many other religious metaphors, posit rebirth and resurrection as central themes. The Waste Land lies fallow and the Fisher King is impotent; what is needed is a new beginning. Water, for one, can bring about that rebirth, but it can also destroy. What the poet must finally turn to is Heaven, in the climactic exchange with the skies: "Datta. Dayadhvam. Damyata." Eliot's vision is essentially of a world that is neither dying nor living; to break the spell, a profound change, perhaps an ineffable one, is required. Hence the prevalence of Grail imagery in the poem; that holy chalice can restore life and wipe the slate clean; likewise, Eliot refers frequently to baptisms and to rivers – both "life-givers," in either spiritual or physical ways.

The Seasons

"The Waste Land" opens with an invocation of April, "the cruellest month." That spring be depicted as cruel is a curious choice on Eliot's part, but as a paradox it informs the rest of the poem to a great degree. What brings life brings also death; the seasons fluctuate, spinning from one state to another, but, like history, they maintain some sort of stasis; not everything changes. In the end, Eliot's "waste land" is almost seasonless: devoid of rain, of propagation, of real change. The world hangs in a perpetual limbo, awaiting the dawn of a new season.

Lust

Perhaps the most famous episode in "The Waste Land" involves a female typist's liaison with a "carbuncular" man. Eliot depicts the scene as something akin to a rape. This chance sexual encounter carries with it mythological baggage – the violated Philomela, the blind Tiresias who lived for a time as a woman. Sexuality runs through "The Waste Land," taking center stage as a cause of calamity in "The Fire Sermon." Nonetheless, Eliot defends "a moment's surrender" as a part of existence in "What the Thunder Said." Lust may be a sin, and sex may be too easy and too rampant in Eliot's London, but action is still preferable to inaction. What is needed is sex that produces life, that rejuvenates, that restores – sex, in other words, that is not "sterile."

Love

The references to *Tristan und Isolde* in "The Burial of the Dead," to Cleopatra in "A Game of Chess," and to the story of Tereus and Philomela suggest that love, in "The Waste Land," is often destructive.

Tristan and Cleopatra die, while Tereus rapes Philomela, and even the love for the hyacinth girl leads the poet to see and know “nothing."

Water

"The Waste Land" lacks water; water promises rebirth. At the same time, however, water can bring about death. Eliot sees the card of the drowned Phoenician sailor and later titles the fourth section of his poem after Madame Sosostris’ mandate that he fear “death by water.” When the rain finally arrives at the close of the poem, it does suggest the cleansing of sins, the washing away of misdeeds, and the start of a new future; however, with it comes thunder, and therefore perhaps lightning. The latter may portend fire; thus, “The Fire Sermon” and “What the Thunder Said” are not so far removed in imagery, linked by the potentially harmful forces of nature.

History

History, Eliot suggests, is a repeating cycle. When he calls to Stetson, the Punic War stands in for World War I; this substitution is crucial because it is shocking. At the time Eliot wrote "The Waste Land," the First World War was definitively a first - the "Great War" for those who had witnessed it. There had been none to compare with it in history. The predominant sensibility was one of profound change; the world had been turned upside down and now, with the rapid progress of technology, the movements of societies, and the radical upheavals in the arts, sciences, and philosophy, the history of mankind had reached a turning point.

Eliot revises this thesis, arguing that the more things change the more they stay the same. He links a sordid affair between a typist and a young man to Sophocles via the figure of Tiresias; he replaces a line from Marvell’s “To His Coy Mistress” with “the sound of horns and motors”; he invokes Dante upon the modern-day London Bridge, bustling with commuter traffic; he notices the Ionian columns of a bar on Lower Thames Street teeming with fishermen. The ancient nestles against the medieval, rubs shoulders with the Renaissance, and crosses paths with the centuries to follow. History becomes a blur. Eliot’s poem is like a street in Rome or Athens; one layer of history upon another upon another.

Summary and Analysis of Section I: "The Burial of the Dead"

"The Waste Land" begins with an excerpt from Petronius Arbiter’s *Satyricon*, in Latin and Greek, which translates as: “For once I saw with my own eyes the Cumean Sibyl hanging in a jar, and when the boys asked her, ‘Sibyl, what do you want?’ she answered, ‘I want to die.’” The quotation is followed by a dedication to Ezra Pound, Eliot’s colleague and friend, who played a major role in shaping the final version of the poem.

The poem proper begins with a description of the seasons. April emerges as the “cruellest” month, passing over a desolate land to which winter is far kinder. Eliot shifts from this vague invocation of time and nature to what seem to be more specific memories: a rain shower by the Starnbergersee; a lake outside Munich; coffee in that city’s Hofgarten; sledding with a cousin in the days of childhood.

The second stanza returns to the tone of the opening lines, describing a land of “stony rubbish” – arid, sterile, devoid of life, quite simply the “waste land” of the poem’s title. Eliot quotes Ezekiel 2.1 and Ecclesiastes 12.5, using biblical language to construct a sort of dialogue between the narrator –- the “son of man” -– and a higher power. The former is desperately searching for some sign of life -– “roots that clutch,” branches that grow -- but all he can find are dry stones, dead trees, and “a heap of broken images.” We have here a forsaken plane that offers no relief from the beating sun, and no trace of water.

Suddenly Eliot switches to German, quoting directly from Wagner’s *Tristan und Isolde*. The passage translates as: “Fresh blows the wind / To the homeland / My Irish child / Where do you wait?” In Wagner’s opera, Isolde, on her way to Ireland, overhears a sailor singing this song, which brings with it ruminations of love promised and of a future of possibilities. After this digression, Eliot offers the reader a snatch of speech, this time from the mouth of the “hyacinth girl.” This girl, perhaps one of the

narrator's (or Eliot's) early loves, alludes to a time a year ago when the narrator presented her with hyacinths. The narrator, for his part, describes in another personal account –- distinct in tone, that is, from the more grandiloquent descriptions of the waste land, the seasons, and intimations of spirituality that have preceded it –- coming back late from a hyacinth garden and feeling struck by a sense of emptiness. Looking upon the beloved girl, he "knew nothing"; that is to say, faced with love, beauty, and "the heart of light," he saw only "silence." At this point, Eliot returns to Wagner, with the line "Oed' und leer das Meer": "Desolate and empty is the sea." Also plucked from *Tristan und Isolde*, the line belongs to a watchman, who tells the dying Tristan that Isolde's ship is nowhere to be seen on the horizon.

From here Eliot switches abruptly to a more prosaic mode, introducing Madame Sosostris, a "famous clairvoyante" alluded to in Aldous Huxley's *Crome Yellow*. This fortune-teller is known across Europe for her skills with Tarot cards. The narrator remembers meeting her when she had "a bad cold." At that meeting she displayed to him the card of the drowned Phoenician Sailor: "Here, said she, is your card." Next comes "Belladonna, the Lady of the Rocks," and then "the man with three staves," "the Wheel," and "the one-eyed merchant." It should be noted that only the man with three staves and the wheel are actual Tarot cards; Belladonna is often associated with da Vinci's "Madonna of the Rocks," and the one-eyed merchant is, as far as we can tell, an invention of Eliot's.

Finally, Sosostris encounters a blank card representing something the one-eyed merchant is carrying on his back – something she is apparently "forbidden to see." She is likewise unable to find the Hanged Man among the cards she displays; from this she concludes that the narrator should "fear death by water." Sosostris also sees a vision of a mass of people "walking round in a ring." Her meeting with the narrator concludes with a hasty bit of business: she asks him to tell Mrs. Equitone, if he sees her, that Sosostris will bring the horoscope herself.

The final stanza of this first section of "The Waste Land" begins with the image of an "Unreal City" echoing Baudelaire's "fourmillante cite," in which a crowd of people –- perhaps the same crowd Sosostris witnessed –- flows over London Bridge while a "brown fog" hangs like a wintry cloud over the proceedings. Eliot twice quotes Dante in describing this phantasmagoric scene: "I had not thought death had undone so many" (from Canto 3 of the *Inferno*); "Sighs, short and infrequent, were exhaled" (from Canto 4). The first quote refers to the area just inside the Gates of Hell; the second refers to Limbo, the first circle of Hell.

It seems that the denizens of modern London remind Eliot of those without any blame or praise who are relegated to the Gates of Hell, and those who where never baptized and who now dwell in Limbo, in Dante's famous vision. Each member of the crowd keeps his eyes on his feet; the mass of men flow up a hill and down King William Street, in the financial district of London, winding up beside the Church of Saint Mary Woolnoth. The narrator sees a man he recognizes named Stetson. He cries out to him, and it appears that the two men fought together in a war. Logic would suggest World War I, but the narrator refers to Mylae, a battle that took place during the First Punic War. He then asks Stetson whether the corpse he planted last year in his garden has begun to sprout. Finally, Eliot quotes Webster and Baudelaire, back to back, ending the address to Stetson in French: "hypocrite lecteur! – mon semblable, – mon frère!"

Analysis

Eliot's opening quotation sets the tone for the poem as a whole. Sibyl is a mythological figure who asked Apollo "for as many years of life as there are grains in a handful of sand" (North, 3). Unfortunately, she did not think to ask for everlasting youth. As a result, she is doomed to decay for years and years, and preserves herself within a jar. Having asked for something akin to eternal life, she finds that what she most wants is death. Death alone offers escape; death alone promises the end, and therefore a new beginning.

Thus does Eliot begin his magisterial poem, labeling his first section "The Burial of the Dead," a title pulled from the Anglican *Book of Common Prayer*. He has been careful to lay out his central theme

before the first stanza has even begun: death and life are easily blurred; from death can spring life, and life in turn necessitates death. Cleanth Brooks, Jr., in "The Waste Land: An Analysis," sees the poem's engine as a paradox: "Life devoid of meaning is death; sacrifice, even the sacrificial death, may be life-giving, an awaking to life." Eliot's vision is of a decrepit land inhabited by persons who languish in an in-between state, perhaps akin to that of Dante's Limbo: they live, but insofar as they seem to feel nothing and aspire to nothing, they are dead. Eliot once articulated his philosophy concerning these matters in a piece of criticism on Baudelaire, one of his chief poetic influences: in it, Eliot intimated that it may be better to do evil than to do nothing at all -- that at least some form of action means that one exists.

This criterion for existence, perhaps an antecedent to Existentialism, holds action as inherently meaningful. Inaction is equated with waste. The key image in "The Waste Land" may then be Sosostris's vision of "crowds of people, walking round in a ring." They walk and walk, but go nowhere. Likewise, the inhabitants of modern London keep their eyes fixed to their feet; their destination matters little to them and they flow as an unthinking mass, bedecking the metropolis in apathy.

From this thicket of malaise, the narrator clings to memories that would seem to suggest life in all its vibrancy and wonder: summer rain in Munich, coffee in a German park, a girl wearing flowers. What is crucial to the poem's sensibility, however, is the recognition that even these trips to the past, even these attempts to regain happiness, must end in failure or confusion. Identities are in flux. The Hofgarten memory precipitates a flurry of German: "Bin gar keine Russin, stamm' aus Litauen, echt deutsch." Translated, this line reads roughly as: "I'm not Russian at all; I come from Lithuania, a true German." It is not clear who the speaker is, but whatever the case the line is nonsensical; three distinct regions of Europe are mentioned, though Lithuania arguably has far more to do with Russia than with Germany. The sentence itself depends on a non sequitur, anticipating by almost a century Europe's current crisis of identity, with individual nations slowly losing ground to a collective union. In Eliot's time, that continent was just emerging from the wreckage of World War I, a splintered entity teetering on chaos; Germany, in particular, suffered from a severe identity dilemma, with various factions competing for authority, classes that were distrustful of one another, and the old breed of military strong-men itching to renew itself for the blood-drenched decades to come.

The historical considerations will only go so far. Biographical interpretation is a slippery slope, but it should nonetheless be noted that Eliot was, at the time of the poem's composition, suffering from acute nervous ailments, chief among them severe anxiety. It was during his time of recuperation that he was able to write much of "The Waste Land," but his conflicted feelings about his wife, Vivienne, did not much help his state of mind. The ambiguity of love, the potential of that emotion to cause both great joy and great sorrow, informs the passage involving the hyacinth girl – another failed memory, as it were. In this case, Eliot describes a vision of youthful beauty in a piece of writing that seems at first to stem more from English Romanticism than from the arid modern world of the rest of the poem: "Your arms full, and your hair wet." Water, so cherished an element and so lacking in this desolate wasteland, here brings forth flowers and hyacinth girls, and the possibility of happiness, however fleeting. That very vision, however, causes Eliot's eyes to fail, his speech to forsake him; love renders him impotent, and he is left "neither living nor dead" – much like the aforementioned residents of Limbo. The paradox is that such joy and human warmth might elicit such pain and coldness. Eliot sums it up with the line: "Looking into the heart of light, the silence." Using Wagner's *Tristan und Isolde* as a book-end device -- the first such quotation alluding to the beginnings of love, the second describing the tragedy of a love lost –- Eliot traces a swift passage from light to darkness, sound to silence, movement to stasis. (Tristan begins on a boat, with the wind freshly blowing, and ends on the shoreline, awaiting a boat that never comes.)

The same paradox is there at the very beginning of the poem: April is the cruelest month. Shouldn't it be the kindest? The lovely image of lilacs in the spring is here associated with "the dead land." Winter was better; then, at least, the suffering was obvious, and the "forgetful snow" covered over any memories. In spring, "memory and desire" mix; the poet becomes acutely aware of what he is missing, of what he has lost, of what has passed him by. Ignorance is bliss; the knowledge that better things are possible is

perhaps the most painful thing of all. Eliot's vision of modern life is therefore rooted in a conception of the lost ideal.

It is appropriate, then, that the narrator should turn next to a clairvoyant; after gazing upon the past, he now seeks to into the future. Water, giver of life, becomes a token of death: the narrator is none other than the drowned Phoenician Sailor, and he must "fear death by water." This realization paves the way for the famous London Bridge image. Eliot does not even describe the water of the Thames; he saves his verse for the fog that floats overhead, for the quality of the dawn-lit sky, and for the faceless mass of men swarming through the dead city. Borrowing heavily from Baudelaire's visions of Paris, Eliot paints a portrait of London as a haunted (or haunting) specter, where the only sound is "dead" and no man dares even look beyond the confines of his feet. When the narrator sees Stetson, we return to the prospect of history. World War I is replaced by the Punic War; with this odd choice, Eliot seems to be arguing that all wars are the same, just as he suggests that all men are the same in the stanza's final line: "You! hypocrite lecteur! – mon semblable, – mon frère!": "Hypocrite reader! – my likeness, – my brother!" We are all Stetson; Eliot is speaking directly to us. Individual faces blur into the ill-defined mass of humanity as the burial procession inexorably proceeds.

Summary and Analysis of Section II: "A Game of Chess"

The second section of "The Waste Land" begins with a description of a woman sitting on a beautiful chair that looks "like a burnished throne" -– a nod to Cleopatra in Antony and Cleopatra. She occupies a splendid drawing room, replete with coffered ceilings and lavish decorations. The setting is a decidedly grandiose one. We are not sure who the woman is: perhaps Eliot's wife Vivienne, perhaps a stand-in for all members of the upper crust, perhaps simply an unnamed personage whiling away the hours in a candlelit kingdom. Eliot writes of "satin cases poured forth in profusion," "vials of ivory and coloured glass," an "antique mantel" and "the glitter of […] jewels." Both the woman and the room are magnificently attired, perhaps to the point of excess.

One of the paintings in the room depicts the rape of Philomela, a scene pulled from Ovid's *Metamorphoses*. In the original story, King Tereus's wife bids him to bring her sister Philomela to her. Upon meeting Philomela, Tereus falls instantly and hopelessly in love; nothing must get in the way of his conquest. Racked with lust, he steals away with her and rapes her in the woods –- the "sylvan scene" Eliot mentions. He then ties her up and cuts off her tongue so that she may not tell others of what has happened. He returns to his wife, but Philomela is able to weave on a loom what has befallen her; she gives the loom to her sister, who, upon discovering the truth, retrieves Philomela, slays Tereus's son, and feeds his carcass to the king. When he finds out that he has been served his son for dinner, Tereus flies into a rage, chasing both Philomela and his wife out of the palace, and all three of them transform into birds. The speechless Philomela becomes a nightingale.

Snatches of dialogue follow. It seems plausible that the woman in the room is addressing the narrator. She complains that her nerves are bad, and requests that he stay with her. When she asks him what he is thinking, the narrator retorts, "I think we are in rats' alley / Where the dead men lost their bones." Still more harried questions follow; the woman demands to find out whether the narrator knows "nothing," then asks what she should do now, what they should do tomorrow. The narrator answers with a rote itinerary: "The hot water at ten. / And if it rains, a closed car at four. / And we shall play a game of chess, / Pressing lidless eyes and waiting for a knock upon the door."

The last stanza of the section depicts two Cockney women talking in a pub at closing time – hence the repeated dictum: "HURRY UP PLEASE IT'S TIME." The subject of conversation is a certain Lil, whose husband Albert was recently released from the army after the war. He gave Lil money to get a new set of teeth, but she has hesitated: "You ought to be ashamed, I said, to look so antique [...] I can't help it, she said, pulling a long face." Lil is apparently on pills, unhappy in her marriage, and mother to none. The dialogue grows more fractured and the closing time announcements become more frequent, and finally the stanza devolves into a quotation from *Hamlet*: Ophelia's final words to Claudius and Gertrude, "Good night ladies, good night, sweet ladies, good night, good night."

Analysis

This section once again ushers in the issue of biographical interpretation. It is tempting to read the woman on the “burnished throne” as Eliot’s wife, Vivienne; the passage then becomes a dissection of an estranged relationship. Some of the details point to failed romance or failed marriage: the “golden Cupidon” who must hide “his eyes behind his wing,” the depiction of Philomela’s rape –- an example of love cascading into brutality and violence -– and even the woman’s “strange synthetic perfumes” drowning “the sense in odours.”

Again the word “drowned” appears, and with it comes the specter of death by water. In this case, the thick perfumes seem to blot out authentic sensations, just as the splendid decorations of the room appear at times more menacing than beautiful. The trappings of a wealthy modern life come at a price. The carving of a dolphin is cast in a “sad light.” The grandiose portraits and paintings on the wall are but “withered stumps of time.” By the end of this first stanza, the room seems almost haunted: “staring forms / Leaned out, leaning, hushing the room enclosed.” The woman, for her part, is a glittering apparition, seated upon her Chair (Eliot capitalizes the word as if it were a kingdom) like a queen, recalling Cleopatra -– and thus yet another failed love affair.

First Tristan and Isolde, now Cleopatra: twice now Eliot has alluded to tragic romances, filtered from antiquity through more modern sensibilities -– first that of Wagner, the great modernizer of opera, and then that of Shakespeare, perhaps the first “modern” dramatist. Quotation and allusion is of course a quintessential component of Eliot’s style, particularly in "The Waste Land"; the poem is sometimes criticized for being too heavily bedecked in references, and too dependent on previous works and canons. The poet’s trick is to plumb the old in order to find the new. It may seem at first ironic that he relies so much on Ovid, the Bible, Dante, and other older works of literature to describe the modern age, but Eliot’s method is an essentially universalist one. Just as the Punic War is interchangeable with World War I -– the truly “modern” war of Eliot’s time -– so can past generations of writers and thinkers shed light on contemporary life. Eliot’s greatest model in this vein was probably *Ulysses*, in which James Joyce used Homer’s epic as a launching pad for a dissection of modern Dublin. In contrast to modernist poets such as Cendrars and Appollinaire, who used the choot-choot of trains, the spinning of wheels, and the billowing of fumes to evoke their era, or philosophers such as Kracauer and Benjamin, who dove into the sports shows and the arcade halls in search of a lexicon of the modern that is itself modern, Eliot is content to tease modernity out of the old.

This is not to say that "The Waste Land" is free of the specifics of 1920s life, but rather that every such specific comes weighted with an antiquarian reference. When Eliot evokes dance-hall numbers and popular ditties, he does so through the “Shakespeherian Rag.” When he imitates the Cockney talk of women in a pub, he finishes the dialogue with a quotation from *Hamlet*, so that the rhythms of lower-class London speech give way to the words of the mad Ophelia.

That said, “A Game of Chess” is considerably less riddled with allusion and quotes than “The Burial of the Dead.” The name itself comes from Thomas Middleton’s seventeenth-century play *A Game of Chess*, which posited the said game as an allegory to describe historical machinations –- specifically the brewing conflict between England and Spain. What might the game allegorize for Eliot? He offers it up as one of several activities, when the woman demands: “What shall we ever do?” Simply a slot in a strict numerical ordering of the day, chess recalls “lidless eyes,” as its players bide the time and wait “for a knock upon the door.” We are not far removed from the masses crowding London Bridge, their eyes fixed on their feet. Modern city-dwellers who float along in a fog are neither dead nor living; their world is an echo of Dante’s Limbo. Chess belongs therefore to this lifeless life; it is the quintessential game of the wasteland, dependent on numbers and cold strategies, devoid of feeling or human contact. Interaction is reduced to a set of movements on a checkered board.

Summary and Analysis of Section III: "The Fire Sermon"

Eliot opens this section with the image of a river, wind crossing silently overhead. We are on the banks of the Thames, and Eliot cites Spenser’s “Prothalamion” with the line: “Sweet Thames, run softly, till I

end my song." The river is empty; "the nymphs" of Spenser's poem have departed, as have "their friends, the loitering heirs of city directors." Eliot unspools imagery that evokes modern life – "empty bottles, sandwich papers, / Silk handkerchiefs, cardboard boxes, cigarette ends" – by describing what is *not* in the river. In other words, the Thames has become a kind of stagnant slate, devoid of detritus but also of life. The narrator remembers sitting by "the waters of Leman" –- French for Lake Geneva, where the poet recuperated while writing "The Waste Land" -– and weeping. His tears are a reference to Psalm 137, in which the people of Israel, exiled to Babylon, cry by the river as they remember Jerusalem.

Suddenly the death-life of the modern world rears its head. "A cold blast" is sounded, bones rattle, and a rat creeps "through the vegetation / Dragging its slimy belly on the bank." Rats appear several times in "The Waste Land," and always they carry with them the specter of urban decay and death –- a death which, unlike that of Christ or Osiris or other men-deities, brings about no life. At this point, the narrator, "fishing in the dull canal," assumes the role of the Fisher King, alluding to Jessie L. Weston's *From Ritual to Romance* and its description of the Grail legend. According to this study, of critical importance to the entirety of "The Waste Land," the Fisher King -– so named probably because of the importance of fish as Christian fertility symbols -– grows ill or impotent. As a result, his land begins to wither away; something akin to a drought hits, and what was once a fruitful kingdom is reduced to a wasteland. Only the Holy Grail can reverse the spell and save the king and his land. A typical addendum to this legend involves a prior crime or violation that serves as cause for the Fisher King's malady. By association, the rape of a maiden might sometimes lie at the root; hence Eliot's allusion to the tale of Philomela in "A Game of Chess."

The allusion to the Grail is doubled by a possible reference to Wolfram von Eschenbach's *Parzival*, a version of the Percival stories; in this account, the brother of the Fisher King (Anfortas) tells Parzival: "His name all men know as Anfortas, and I weep for him evermore." Eliot's lines "Musing upon the king my brother's wreck / And on the king my father's death before him" seem to combine the Percival legend with *The Tempest*, in which Ferdinand utters the verse: "Sitting on a bank, / Weeping again the King my father's wreck." (North, 11) Eliot has already twice quoted *The Tempest* – "Those are pearls that were his eyes," in "The Burial of the Dead" and "A Game of Chess" –- and here he links Shakespeare's fantastical drama, and the accompanying image of water racked by turbulent weather, with Grail mythology.

As the impotent Fisher King, Eliot describes the wasteland that stretches out before him. "White bodies [lie] naked on the low damp ground," and bones are scattered "in a little dry garret, / Rattled by the rat's foot only, year to year." This last line echoes verses 115-116 in "A Game of Chess": "I think we are in the rats' alley / Where the dead men have lost their bones." In both cases, the setting is one of death, decay, a kind of modern hell. Eliot proceeds to allude to John Day's *The Parliament of Bees*, a seventeenth-century work that describes the tale of Actaeon and Diana: the former approaches the latter while she is bathing, and, surprising her, is transformed into a stag and killed by his own dogs. Here Actaeon is "Sweeney" – a character familiar from some of Eliot's other poems, and Diana is Mrs. Porter. It is springtime, suggesting love and fertility –- but also cruelty, in Eliot's version -– and Sweeney visits the object of his affection via "horns and motors." Again ancient mythology is updated, recast, and remolded. The stanza concludes with a quotation from Verlaine's "Parsifal," a sonnet describing the hero's successful quest for the Holy Grail.

Next come four bizarre lines: "Twit twit twit / Jug jug jug jug jug jug / So rudely forc'd. / Tereu." We recall "Jug jug jug" from "A Game of Chess," in which the onomatopoeia described the sound of Philomela as nightingale; "Twit twit twit" likewise seems to represent a bird's call. So we have returned to the tale of the woman who was violated and took her revenge, and "So rudely forc'd" refers to that violation. "Tereu," then, is Tereus.

"Unreal City" reprises the line from "The Burial of the Dead," evoking Baudelaire once more and bringing the reader back to modern London. Mr. Eugenides, a merchant from Turkey (and probably the one-eyed merchant Madame Sosostris described earlier) invites the narrator to luncheon at a hotel and to join him on a weekend excursion to Brighton. In the stanza that follows, the narrator, no longer himself and no longer the Fisher King, takes on the role of Tiresias, the blind prophet who has lived both as a

man and a woman, and is therefore "throbbing between two lives." Tiresias sees a "young man carbuncular" -- that is, a young man who has or resembles a boil –- pay a visit to a female typist. She is "bored and tired," and the young man, like Tereus, is full of lust. He sleeps with her and then makes off, leaving her alone to think to herself: "Well now that's done: and I'm glad it's over." She plays music on the gramophone.

The music seems to transport the narrator back to the city below. "This music crept by me upon the waters" is another quote from *The Tempest*, and Eliot proceeds to describe a bustling bar in Lower Thames Street filled with "fishmen." This account paves the way for another vision of the river itself: sweating "oil and tar," a murky, polluted body replete with barges and "drifting logs." Eliot quotes Wagner's *Die Gotterdammerung*, in which maidens upon the Rhine, having lost their gold, sing a song of lament: "Weialala leia / Wallala leialala." A quick allusion to Queen Elizabeth's boat-ride with her suitor the Earl of Leicester, described in James Anthony Froude's *History of England*, contains references to the rich woman of "A Game of Chess" ("A gilded shell") and another description of the sounds of the city -– "The peal of bells / White towers."

Finally, one of the "maidens" raises her own voice, recounting her proper tragedy. "Highbury bore me. Richmond and Kew / Undid me": in other words, she was born in Highbury and lost her innocence in Richmond and Kew. Bitterly she recalls how the man responsible promised "a new start" afterwards; as it now stands, the maiden "can connect / Nothing with nothing." The stanza ends with references to St. Augustine's *Confessions* and Buddha's *Fire Sermon* –- in each case to a passage describing the dangers of youthful lust.

Analysis

The central theme of this section is, to put it simply, sex. If death permeates "The Burial of the Dead" and the tragically wronged woman -– be it Philomela or Ophelia -– casts a pall over "A Game of Chess," "The Fire Sermon" is in essence a sermon about the dangers of lust. It is important to recognize that Eliot culminates this passage with an invocation of both Eastern and Western philosophy; he even says so himself in his notes. "To Carthage then I came" refers to Augustine; "Burning burning burning burning" recalls Buddha's *Fire Sermon*, in which "All things, O priests, are on fire." Both Augustine and Buddha warn against purely physical urges, as they must inevitably serve as obstacles or barriers to true faith and spiritual peace. The image of fire, familiar from countless representations of Hell in Christian art, is here specifically linked to the animal drives that push men and women to commit sinful acts.

Of course, to interpret Eliot's poetry this moralistically is to miss much of its nuance and wit. While recalling the strictest of religious codes, Eliot is at his most literately playful here, spinning *Tempest* quotations into odes to Wagner, littering Spenser's Thames with "cardboard boxes" and "cigarette ends," replacing Actaeon and Diana with a certain Sweeney and a certain Mrs. Porter. There is a satirical edge that cuts through this writing -– and perhaps real indignation as well. Much has already been made of the episode involving the typist and the carbuncular man. What is particularly fascinating about it is the way in which Eliot mixes and matches the violent with the nearly tender: the young man's first advances are "caresses" and he is later described as a "lover." At the same time, however, "he assaults at once," his vanity requiring "no response." It is close to a scene of rape, and the ambiguity makes it all the more troubling.

Eliot offers a voyeuristic glimpse of a young woman's home, her sexual liaison with a man, and her moments alone afterwards. Ironically, he presents this Peeping Tom's account from the narrative perspective of the blind Tiresias: the "Old man with wrinkled female breasts." The decrepit prophet who once lived as a woman recalls his encounters with Antigone and Oedipus Rex ("I who have sat by Thebes below the wall") and Odysseus in Hades ("And walked among the lowest of the dead") while witnessing a quintessentially modern bit of business. That Eliot resurrects ancient tropes and characters within such a vulgar scene is an act of audacity that was shocking in 1922, and still packs a punch. Readers today are perhaps less surprised by the episode, but it is hard not to be moved; quoting from Oliver Goldsmith's eighteenth-century novel *The Vicar of Wakefield*, Eliot describes the post-coital

woman pacing about her room: “When lovely woman stoops to folly.” An image of potential perfection has been spoiled; all that is left now is a mirror and a gramophone.

It was surely this kind of scene that so stirred John Dos Passos, and it does indeed find numerous echoes in *Manhattan Transfer*. Eliot’s poem was a crucial inspiration for Dos Passos’ epic portrait of New York. An American transplanted to Europe, Eliot's narrator floats through London in “The Fire Sermon,” beginning by the Thames and returning there to listen to the cry of the Rhine-maidens as they bemoan their fate: “Weialala leia / Wallala leialala.” Whether quoting older sources or capturing the rhyme and texture of modern life, Eliot is dealing in sadness; a sense of loss imbues the writing, bubbling to the surface in the maiden’s account of her lost innocence. Just as the narrator “knew nothing” when looking upon the hyacinth girl, so is the maiden faced with “nothing”: “I can connect / Nothing with nothing. / The broken fingernails of dirty hands. / My people humble people who expect / Nothing.”

From the typist to this last suffering woman, lust seems to portend sorrow, and that sorrow seems in turn to be an integral feature of the modern world. The typist is never named because she is ultimately a "type," a representation of something larger and more widespread. Eliot is diagnosing his London and his world with a disease of the senses, through which sex has replaced love and meaningless physical contact has subsumed real emotional connection. Ironically, the Fisher King’s impotence then results from an excess of carnality. The image of the river sweating oil recalls a Biblical plague, and the “burning” at the end of the section brings Hell to mind. Through it all the river courses, carrying history along with it. All the poet can do, it seems, is weep.

Summary and Analysis of Section IV: “Death by Water” and “What the Thunder Said”

“Death by Water” is by far the shortest of the poem’s five sections, describing in eight lines “Phlebas the Phoenician” lying dead in the sea. An echo of the “drowned Phoenician” Madame Sosostris displayed in “The Burial of the Dead,” Phlebas is apparently a merchant, judging by the reference to “the profit and loss.” Now “a current under sea” picks his bones.

“What the Thunder Said,” the final section of "The Waste Land," picks up the same thread, referring in the first stanza to the passion of Christ, another famous deceased. The “torchlight red on sweaty faces” perhaps indicates the guards who come to take Christ away; the “garden” is Gethsemane; “the agony in stony places” refers to the torture and the execution itself; and “of thunder of spring over distant mountains” describes the earthquake following the crucifixion. From Christ’s death springs life; similarly, the Phoenician is killed by water, that life-giving force, that symbol of fertility and rebirth. As in “The Burial of the Dead,” life and death are inextricably linked, their borders blurred at times: “He who was living is now dead / We who were living are now dying / With a little patience.”

The second stanza describes a land without any water: only rocks, sand, “Dead mountain mouth of carious teeth.” The thunder brings no rain and is therefore “sterile.” “Red sullen faces sneer and snarl” at the poet as he makes his way through this desolate land – another wasteland. The poet laments the absence of water, thirst imbuing his verse with longing; he imagines the “drip drop” of water on rocks, but concludes by acknowledging that, alas, “there is no water.”

What follows is an allusion to Luke 24, as well as to a passage in Sir Ernest Shackleton’s *South*; two travelers walk upon a road, and seem to be accompanied by a third, unnamed wanderer. Does this “third” exist, or is he merely an illusion? Shackleton’s passage involves three men imagining a fourth by their side; in the Biblical scene, two travelers are joined by the resurrected Christ, but do not at first recognize that it is Him.

Eliot then moves from the individual to the collective, casting his gaze over all Europe and Asia, seeing “endless plains” and “hooded hordes.” It is a nearly apocalyptic vision; the great ancient cities of the Mediterranean (“Jerusalem Athens Alexandria”) and Europe (“Vienna London”) all seem “unreal,” as if

they were already phantoms. Eliot refers to the “violet air,” echoing the “violet hour” of “The Fire Sermon,” but also suggesting the twilight not just of a day, but of all Western civilization. “Violet” is one of the liturgical colors associated with baptism; Eliot might be alluding to the Perilous Chapel in Jessie L. Weston’s *From Ritual to Romance*, through which the knight must pass in order to obtain the Grail and which represents a sort of liminal passage or baptism. Certainly the next stanza, with “voices singing out of empty cisterns and exhausted wells” and “bats with baby faces," suggests the Perilous Chapel –- a nightmarish place that tests the knight’s gall and instills dread. Eliot describes towers that are upside down, and a woman who plays music with her hair, recalling the rich woman in “A Game of Chess” whose “hair / Spread out in fiery points / Glowed into words,” and “tumbled graves.” (In some versions of the Grail legend there is likewise a perilous graveyard.)

Finally, a “damp gust” brings rain. Immediately Eliot invokes the Ganges, India’s sacred river (“Ganga” in the poem), and thunder, once sterile, now speaks: “Datta,” “dayadhvam,” and “damyata." The words the thunder offers belong to the *Brihadaranyaka Upanishad*, and describe the three dictums God delivers to his disciples: “to give,” “to control,” and “to sympathize.” This profoundly spiritual moment of communication between men and God, of a dialogue between the earth and the Heavens, seems to promise a new beginning. Civilization is crumbling -– “London bridge is falling down falling down falling down” –- yet the poem ends with a benediction: “Shantih shantih shantih."

Analysis

The final stanzas of "The Waste Land" once again link Western and Eastern traditions, transporting the reader to the Ganges and the Himalayas, and then returning to the Thames and London Bridge. Eliot’s tactic throughout his poem has been that of eclecticism, of mixing and matching and of diversity, and here this strain reaches a culmination. The relevant *Upanishad* passage, which Eliot quotes, describes God delivering three groups of followers -– men, demons, and the gods -– the sound “Da.” The challenge is to pull some meaning out of this apparently meaningless syllable. For men, “Da” becomes “Datta,” meaning to give; this order is meant to curb man’s greed. For demons, “dayadhvam” is the dictum: these cruel and sadistic beings must show compassion and empathy for others. Finally, the gods must learn control – “damyata” – for they are wild and rebellious. Together, these three orders add up to a consistent moral perspective, composure, generosity, and empathy lying at the core.

Recalling his earlier allusion to Buddha’s *Fire Sermon*, Eliot links “Datta” with a description of lust, of the dangers of “a moment’s surrender / Which an age of prudence can never retract.” This, it would seem, is the primary sin of man. Crucially, however, Eliot notes that “By this, and this only, we have existed” -– reminding the reader of his work on Baudelaire, and his argument that an evil action, because it signifies existence, is better than inaction, which signifies nothing. Man’s lustful deeds are “not to be found in our obituaries”; they remain intangible to some degree, not to be committed to paper or memory. But they linger on nonetheless, haunting the doers but also imbuing them with a sense of self; for once, Eliot almost seems to suggest the value of “a moment’s surrender,” of giving up control for one fleeting instant, no matter the consequences. Indeed, such an act is perhaps preferable to that which the “beneficent spider” -– a reference to Webster’s *The White Devil*, according to Eliot’s notes –- allows; “empty rooms” and a “lean solicitor” cannot hope to understand the impulses that lead to an act of “folly.” Is “an age of prudence” even worth the trouble?

Next comes sympathy –- “dayadvham” -– as if Eliot were reminding the reader to show compassion for lustful men and women. We cannot help but remember the grief-stricken maiden of “The Fire Sermon” or the lonely typist with her gramophone; at the root of such tragedy is, after all, a sincere love for humanity. Eliot cares for these characters he has created, these refractions of his own modern world. The sermonizing of previous stanzas here gives way to a gentler view, albeit in the form of spiritual commandments. “I have heard the key / Turn in the door once and turn once only” refers to Dante’s *Inferno*, in which Count Ugolino starves to death after being locked in a tower for treason. The subsequent allusion to “Coriolanus” completes the cycle: a Roman who turned his back on Rome, Coriolanus is another example of an outcast. These distinctly male visions of loneliness and removal echo the female counterpart of the typist, alone in her room at night. Eliot asks us to sympathize with these figures, and to acknowledge their pain.

The following stanza lifts the spirits; after the wreckage of lust and the torment of isolation, “Damyata” invites a happier perspective. The boat responds “Gaily, to the hand expert with sail and oar,” like the boat upon which Isolde hears the sailor’s song in “The Burial of the Dead.” We have returned then to the beginnings of love, the promise of a joyful future. “Your heart” is perhaps even an address to Eliot’s wife, begging the question of whether their romance might be rekindled. It is worth noting the tense Eliot employs: “would have responded” implies a negative. It is possible that what we are seeing is merely a token of what might have been, and not what is.

More direct is the past tense the narrator uses in the next stanza, in which he sits upon the shore, fishing. He is once again the Fisher King, impotent and dying, and he is flanked by an “arid plain.” We are unable to fully escape the wasteland. Eliot tempers the hope of the previous lines with this evocation of despair. “Shall I at least set my lands in order?” the narrator asks. The end is drawing near. The world is collapsing: London Bridge falls, Dante is quoted yet again, and an excerpt from Nerval involving “Le Prince d’Aquitaine” points to a crumbling or destroyed tower –- “la tour abolie.” The hellish imagery of earlier parts of the poem returns here, complete with another view of modern-day London, with its towers and bridges. The word “ruins” is of particular importance: “These fragments I have shored against my ruins.” The narrator is still attempting to stave off destruction...or perhaps he has at last surrendered, accepting his fate and that of the world.

“Why then Ile fit you. Hieronymo’s mad againe” is a reference to Thomas Kyd’s *The Spanish Tragedie*, a late sixteenth-century text in which Hieronymo lapses into insanity after his son is murdered. The brutality and violence of man come to mind. What became of control, sympathy, and generosity? As if to answer the question, Eliot repeats the Eastern dictum: “Datta. Dayadvham. Damyata.” Against the ills of the modern (and pre-modern) world, those three words still hold out the promise of salvation. “Shantih shantih shantih” is an acknowledgment of that salvation; it may be interpreted as a blessing of sorts, putting to rest the sins, faults, trials and tribulations that have preceded it. Redemption remains a possibility. Interpretations of "The Waste Land" as unrelentingly pessimistic do little justice to the hopefulness, however faltering, of these last lines. Rain has come, and with it a call from the heavens. The poem ends on a note of grace, allying Eastern and Western religious traditions to posit a more universal worldview. Eliot calls what he has assembled “fragments,” and indeed they are; but together they add up to a vision that is not only European but global, a vision of the world as wasteland, awaiting the arrival of the Grail that will cure it of its ills. The end of the poem seems to suggest that that Grail is still within reach.

"The Waste Land" and the Holy Grail

As part of a foreword to his notes on "The Waste Land," Eliot writes: “Not only the title, but the plan and a good deal of the incidental symbolism of the poem were suggested by Miss Jessie L. Weston’s book on the Grail legend: *From Ritual to Romance* (Cambridge).” Eliot proceeds to claim that he is deeply indebted to Weston’s book, and that its subject matter informs much of his poem.

From Ritual to Romance is a scholarly work that studies in great detail the various legends of the Holy Grail. In it Weston uses such terms as “Fisher King” and “Waste Land,” and also delves into the importance of the Tarot pack –- which Eliot uses as a prop in the Madame Sosostris episode. Most important to Weston’s book is the Grail itself: the famed cup from which Jesus drank at the Last Supper, and which was used to collect his blood after the crucifixion. Many stories involving the Grail exist. In one such tale, the man with the lance who pierces Jesus’s side on the cross is cured of blindness by the blood in the cup. Endowed with restorative powers by its association with Christ, the Grail becomes one of the great relics, sought after by kings and knights for centuries.

Weston focuses in particular on medieval accounts of the Grail legend, but links these tales to earlier traditions. For example, some of the Mystery cults during the Roman Empire -– hidden sects, each dedicated to a single God –- practiced baptismal rites by blood, reminiscent of the life-giving powers the blood in the Grail offers. Fertility, restoration, and rebirth are the key themes; they constitute the promise of the Grail, its capability to save an individual and even an entire land from calamity.

In the archetypal version of the story, a king falls ill or becomes impotent. As a result, his kingdom turns desolate. The ravaged lands, wasting away, need a remedy. So a brave knight heads off on a quest to obtain the Holy Grail, which will bring life and fruitfulness back to the kingdom. The knight must face numerous obstacles, and near the end of his journey passes through the Perilous Chapel, a nightmarish place that represents his biggest challenge yet. When he finally finds the Grail, it restores the king and his kingdom. Rejoicing follows.

Wagner and Verlaine have plucked at this tale, and Eliot borrows from their versions. For the most part, however, the poet invokes that original template which Weston seeks in her own work; he even casts himself as the Fisher King at several points, and describes the rains come to cleanse the wasteland at the poem's end. Of course, how happy an ending Eliot offers is up to debate. There is little in the way of specific reference to the Grail itself in the poem. Eliot refers to those elements and figures that surround the holy chalice in the various tales –- the impotent king, the wasteland, the perilous chapel and cemetery, the rejoicing of the restored kingdom -– but rarely to the cup as an object. The Grail does not magically appear in the final stanzas, come to rescue us all; instead, Eliot suggests, it is up to mankind to construct our own salvation.