
T. S. Eliot's Modernism in The Waste Land

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ABSTRACT

Thomas Stearns Eliot (1888-1965) was born in St. Louis, Missouri, of an old New England family. He was educated at Harvard and did graduate work in philosophy at the Sorbonne, Harvard, and Merton College, Oxford. He settled in England, where he was for a time a schoolmaster and a bank clerk, and eventually literary editor for the publishing house Faber & Faber. Later, he became a director of this famous publishing house. During the seventeen years of its publication (1922-1939), he edited the exclusive and influential literary journal Criterion. In 1927, Eliot became a British citizen and about the same time entered the Anglican Church. Eliot has been one of the most daring innovators of the 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. Eliot is a poet from the Modernist period, which is from around World War I to World War II. The Waste Land, T. S. Eliot's masterpiece, is a long, complex poem about the psychological and cultural crisis that came with the loss of moral and cultural identity after World War I. When it was first published, the poem was considered radically experimental. Eliot dispenses with traditional verse form. He presents sordid images of popular culture with erudite allusions to classical and ancient literature and myths. The title itself indicates Eliot's attitude toward his contemporary society, as he uses the idea of a dry and sterile wasteland as a metaphor for a Europe devastated by war and desperate for spiritual replenishment.

The World War from 1914 to 1918 was a defining moment in the world history. It not only had a lasting and profound effect on the literary sensibilities of a generation but also gave a new dimension to their society. The war brought about a great surge of literary output. Poets such as Siegfried Sassoon, Wilfred Owen, and Ivor Gurney created a new form of poetry, as they attempted to give expression to the horrors of war. Literature became the key medium through which the experience of modern warfare was articulated. Writers of the period were acutely aware of the sense that they were significant agents of a modernist movement. Poets such as Ezra Pound and TS Eliot, and writers such as James Joyce, DH Lawrence and Virginia Woolf, were profoundly self-conscious about what they were trying to achieve.

In April 1914, just three months before the outbreak of war, a young American poet from Harvard arrived in England. TS Eliot was already emerging as a significant poetic presence, having been identified by American poet Ezra Pound, who was to remain a close friend. In 1915 his first significant poem, The Love Song of J Alfred Prufrock, was published, but it was The Waste Land, published in 1922, that Eliot is most known for. Widely regarded as the most influential poem of the 20th century, the 432-line poem is a work steeped in the shadow of World War I. The title of the poem is an allusion to the devastation of the war and the poem itself, a metaphor for the devastated landscape of post-war Europe. But the First World War also

shaped literature in other ways. The evolution of “modernism” – the cultural and literary movement that emerged in the early-20th century – was intimately bound up with the shock and experience of the First World War.

Eliot’s *Waste Land* is I think the justification of the ‘movement,’ of our modern experiment, since 1900,” wrote Ezra Pound shortly after the poem was published. T.S. Eliot’s poem describes a mood of deep disillusionment stemming both from the experience of the First World War and from Eliot’s personal painful experiences. Born in St. Louis, Eliot had studied at Harvard, the Sorbonne, and Oxford before moving to London, where he completed his doctoral dissertation on the philosopher F. H. Bradley. Because of the war, he was unable to return to the United States to receive his degree. He taught grammar school briefly and then took a job at Lloyds Bank, where he worked for eight years. Unhappily married, he suffered a breakdown soon after the war and wrote most of *The Waste Land* while recovering in a sanatorium in Lausanne, Switzerland, at the age of 33. Eliot later described the poem as “the relief of a personal and wholly insignificant grouse against life...just a piece of rhythmical grumbling.” Yet the poem seemed to his contemporaries to transcend Eliot’s personal situation and represent a general crisis in western culture. One of its major themes is the barrenness of a post-war world in which human sexuality has been perverted from its normal course and the natural world too has become infertile. The poem is deliberately obscure and fragmentary, incorporating variant voices, multiple points of view, and abrupt shifts in dramatic context. The motif of moral degeneration, however, is prevalent throughout the poem, the premise being that contemporary Europe, obsessed with novelty, trends, materialism, and instant gratification, lacks the faith and substance to reaffirm its cultural heritage, to re-establish the sense of order and stability that historical continuity once provided. In an attempt to counter the cultural deficit of the present with the rich cultural heritage of the past, Eliot combines images from pagan rituals and religious texts with ancient fertility rituals and allusions to legends of the Grail. These images of ceremony and tradition are set against bleak images of modern life, where spiritual death breeds cultural death, and the ashen landscape reflects a barren world void of transcendental value.

Early modernists had barely begun to attempt the use formal modernists’ technique while *The Waste Land* was quickly recognized as a major statement of modernist poetics, both for its broad symbolic significance and for Eliot’s masterful use of formal techniques. The critic I. A. Richards influentially praised Eliot for describing the shared post-war “sense of desolation, of uncertainty, of futility, of the groundlessness of aspirations, of the vanity of endeavour, and a thirst for a life-giving water which seems suddenly to have failed.” Eliot later complained that “approving critics” like Richards “said that I had expressed ‘the disillusionment of a generation,’ which is nonsense. I may have expressed for them their own illusion of being disillusioned, but that did not form part of my intention.” Nonetheless, it was as a representative of a postwar generation that Eliot became famous. To compare Eliot’s comments on the poem with the way it was received illustrates strikingly the fact that, as William K. Wimsatt and Monroe Beardsley put it, “The poem is not the critic’s own and not the author’s (it is detached from the author at birth and goes about the world beyond his power to intend about it or control it). The poem belongs to the public.” *The Waste Land* made use of allusion, quotation (in several languages), a variety of verse forms, and a collage of poetic fragments to create the sense of speaking for an entire culture in crisis; it was quickly accepted as the essential statement of that crisis and the epitome of a modernist poem.

'The Waste Land', one of his most influential works is commonly regarded as one of the most important works of modernist literature. In the place of a traditional work, with unified themes and a coherent structure, Eliot produced a poem that seemed to incorporate many unrelated, little-known references to history, religion, mythology, and other disciplines. He even wrote parts of the poem in foreign languages, such as Hindi. In fact the poem was so complex that Eliot felt the need to include extensive notes identifying the sources to which he was alluding, a highly unusual move for a poet, and a move that caused some critics to assert that Eliot was trying to be deliberately obscure or was playing a joke on them. Yet, while the poem is obscure, critics have identified several sources that inspired its creation and which have helped determine its meaning. Many see the poem as a reflection of Eliot's disillusionment with the moral decay of post-World War I Europe. In the work, this sense of disillusionment manifests itself symbolically through a type of Holy Grail legend. Eliot cited two books from which he drew to create the poem's symbolism: Jessie L. Weston's 'From Ritual to Romance' (1920) and Sir James G. Frazer's 'The Golden Bough: A Study in Magic and Religion' (1890). The 1922 version of 'The Waste Land' was also significantly influenced by Eliot's first wife Vivien and by his friend Ezra Pound, who helped Eliot edit the original 800-line draft down to the published 433 lines. The title of the poem refers to a myth from 'From Ritual to Romance', in which Weston describes a kingdom where the genitals of the king, known as the Fisher King, have been wounded in some way. This injury, which affects the king's fertility, also mythically affects the kingdom itself. With its vital, regenerative power gone, the kingdom has dried up and turned into a waste land. In order for the land to be restored, a hero must complete several tasks, or trials. This ancient myth was the basis for various other quest stories from many cultures, including the Christian quest for the Holy Grail. Eliot says he drew heavily on this myth for his poem, and critics have noted that many of the poem's references refer to this idea.

Scott-James, in his analysis of the poetry, is able to tell us what is not to be found in Eliot. "There is no joy, no exultation, not even pleasure except the pleasure which is shown as spurious. There is no portrayal of common emotions, except when they are depraved, or silly. All the things which common men think of as practical and desirable vanish into insignificance under his vision." And Wallace Fowlie tells us what can be discovered there: "More fervently than any other poet of the twentieth century, Eliot has sung of the permanence of time, the experience of one time which is all time. He sings of it when he speaks of the flower that fades, of the sea that seems eternal, of the rock in the sea, and of the prayer of the Annunciation.... In such [passages] the poet reveals his true mission, that of transmuting his intimate emotions, his personal anguish, into a strange and impersonal work. In this way, the poet becomes aware of his presence in the world, where his major victory is the imposing of his presence as a man by means of his lucidity and his creative power."

Eliot's own analysis of Joyce's *Ulysses*, served as the most important model for *The Waste Land*. Eliot's intentions in making a miniature epic out of the various lyrical moments and borrowed fragments make up the poem. He wrote that the parallels Joyce draws between his own characters and those of Homer's *Odyssey* constitute a "mythical method," which had "the importance of a scientific discovery." He went so far as to compare Joyce to Einstein. The mythical method, according to Eliot, "is simply a way of controlling, of ordering, of giving a shape and significance to the immense panorama of futility and anarchy which is contemporary history." Many of Joyce's readers have felt that Joyce himself did not necessarily aim for control

and order, but most are in agreement that Eliot's essay describes well the intention of *The Waste Land*, in which the many parallels that have been briefly discussed here help to convert chaos into a kind of order. Eliot shows that communication is the key to keeping the world from becoming a Waste Land, and that it is the only thing that can save it. Eliot uses speech and failure of speech to give the image of the poem a positive connotation. The way that Eliot presents this theme in the poem is positive because he shows that speech and communication are important.

Like many modernist writers, Eliot wanted his poetry to express the fragile psychological state of humanity in the twentieth century. The passing of Victorian ideals and the trauma of World War I challenged cultural notions of masculine identity. This made artists question the romantic literary ideal of a visionary-poet capable of changing the world through verse. Modernist writers wanted to capture their transformed world, which they perceived as fractured, alienated, and denigrated. Europe lost an entire generation of young men to the horrors of War, causing a general crisis of masculinity as survivors struggled to find their place in a changed society. The aftershocks of World War I directly contributed to the dissolution of the British Empire. Eliot saw society as paralyzed and wounded, and he imagined that culture was crumbling and dissolving. "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock" (1917) demonstrates this sense of indecisive paralysis as the speaker wonders whether he should eat a piece of fruit, make a radical change, or if he has the fortitude to keep living. Humanity's collectively damaged psyche prevented people from communicating with one another, an idea that Eliot explored in many works, including "A Game of Chess" (the second part of *The Waste Land*) and "The Hollow Men."

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