

Thomas Stearns Eliot

He is one of the most significant figure of the 20th century, he is one of the great innovator of the 20th century: he was a **poet**, a **playwright**, but also a **literary critic**.

He wrote almost nothing negligible.

He was born in Missouri, in **1888**. He study at Harvard and at the Sorbonne in Paris and at Oxford: those giving a cosmopolitan bent to his education.

At the outbreak of WWI he settled in London where he started to work first as a teacher and then as a Bank Clerk.

In **1914** he met the american poet **Ezra Pound**, with whom he would work closely on several major poems.

In **1915** he married Viven Haigh-Wood: she was a British ballad dancer, but the marriage was not a success since she suffered from mental instability.

In **1917** he published his first collection of poems *Prufrock and Other Observations*, which establish Eliot as an important avant-garde poet, with its vocal fragmentation and allusiveness, with its precision of imagery, its condemnation of the modern world, together with the ricorrence to a dry selfconscious wit, this poem establish Eliot as a modernist poet.

In **1922** he founded the influential literary journal *The Criterion*, which he also edited during the 17 years of its publication.

In **1925** he became director of the publishing house *Faber and Faber*.

After the publication of its first collection of poems, unhappily married, Eliot suffered from a nervous breakdown, and he spends some time in a sanatorium in Switzerland, where he underwent psychological treatment.

During this period poetry became officially its only shelter, as well as the tool to transcend his personal situation and to represent the general crisis of western culture.

In Switzerland he completed his famous poem *The Waste Land* which was published in the first issue of *The Criterion* after Ezra Pound revision and cuts. Eliot later dedicated this poem to his friend Ezra Pound.

This poem explored the disintegration of values in the modern world. It was highly innovative and it confirmed Elliot as a major poet and also as a significant spokesman for his generation.

In **1925** he published *The Hollow Man*. This poem can be read as a sequel to the despair expressed in *The Waste Land*.

In **1927** Elliot became a British citizen and it was about this time that he entered the Anglican

Church finally finding the answer to his own uncertainties and to the despair of the modern world's lack of faith and religion. (Eliot is American from birth)

The major works of this period expressed Eliot's search for religious certainties and they include *Ash-Wednesday* published in 1939 and the *Four Quartets* published in 1943.

Ash-Wednesday is a poem with a penitential and questioning mood whereas the *Four Quartets* deals with the relation between time and eternity.

When his wife's mental instability got worse Eliot placed her into a mental asylum where she later died provoking a strong sense of guilt in Eliot.

Ten years later he was happily remarried to his secretary.

During the 30's Eliot also devoted himself to writing verse drama which he also continued writing during the 40's and the 50's. He isn't only a poet, he is also a playwright and a literary critic.

All his plays mainly address directly or indirectly religious themes.

During his life Eliot proved to be an extremely prolific writer. He even wrote a book of poems for children which is called *Old Possum's Book of Practical Cats* in 1939. This book was later transformed into the highly successful musical *Cats*.

During his life Eliot also wrote several works of criticism. He was an influential **literary critic** and in his critical essays he shared with the modern novelist **James Joyce** the view about the importance for the artist to be impersonal and to separate the man who suffers from the mind which creates.

He believed that the artist had to separate the man who suffers from the mind which he creates.

The characters of his works are often archetypes of human beings who turn their own subjective experience into a universal form which anyone can identify with.

His idea was that impersonality must prevail over personality.

In 1948 he was awarded the **Nobel Prize for Literature** and he was internationally recognised as one of the most important poets of the century.

He died in London in 1965.

Works

Eliot wrote in a period when new techniques were needed to express the complex realities of the so-called **Age of Anxiety**.

Even though a definitive interpretation of his work is not possible we can roughly divide his literary production into 2 periods: before and after his conversion to the Anglican Church.

Before his conversion to the anglican church

The works of the first period show a pessimistic vision of the world and the main works belonging to this first phase are *Prufrock and Other Observations*, *The Waste Land* and *The Hollow Man*.

All these poems expressed a certain nihilism (existence is useless) and reflects the sense of spiritual dryness of modern man.

After his conversion to the anglican church

The works of the second period show a more optimistic vision. After entering the anglican Church his religious faith gave him an optimistic vision of the world and so from a mood of desolation Eliot turned into an ardent believer in Christian faith.

The main works belonging to this second phase are *The four quartets*, *Ash-Wednesday* and his verse poems.

With his works Eliot represented the complexity of modern civilization. For Eliot this complexity resulted from the fragmentation of Western tradition which was the result of the Modern processes of industrialization, mass production and consumerism.

Alienated modern man no longer experiences a coherent sense of moral and religious community with his fellow man. His actions are no longer governed by a shared ethical code. The modern man is morally and spiritually empty.

Eliot sees his poetic mission as that of piecing together these broken worlds and finding redemption by creating a new symbolic system but inevitably such missions lead to a very difficult poetry.

The Waste Land

The main theme is the **opposition** between the **sterility** of the modern world and the **fertility** of the past.

The Waste Land is a complex, erudite, cryptic, spiritually earnest, occasionally lyrical poem, and it is one of the most recognizable poems of Modern Poetry

This poem was first published in 1922, and it was dedicated to Ezra Pound, who also played an important role in the editing of the poem.

This poem was acclaimed as the beginning of a new type of poetry, capable of expressing the post war sense of depression and futility.

With this poem Eliot he diagnosed the collapse of values that followed the bloodshed of WWI; it is characterised by shifting scenarios, multiple voices and changes in form.

The *Waste Land* is a very long poem, structured in five different sections:

1. The Burial of the Dead
2. A Game of Chess
3. The Fire Sermon
4. Death by Water
5. What the Thunder Said

The first one (**The Burial of the Dead**), dealing with the coming of spring, in a sterile land, is centered on the basic opposition between **sterility** and **fertility**, **life** and **death**.

The second section (**A Game of Chess**) is based on the juxtaposition of present squalor, and past ambiguous splendor.

The Fire Sermon reinforces the theme of squalor, and it introduces Tiresias, which is considered by Eliot the most important character in the poem.

Death by Water is based on the idea of purification by water.

What the Thunder Said conveys the image of the disintegration of western civilization and it suggest it possible salvation.

A possible solution is found in a sort of sympathy with other human beings, but anyway this solution does not modify the general atmosphere of desolation.

In addition to these five section, *The Waste Land* also includes Eliot own notes, which explain some of his metaphors, allusions, quotations and half quotations.

Eliot uses several myths, legends and symbols, but he was acutely aware of the difficulty: including some notes aimed explaining his references.

Eliot drew inspiration from a wide range of sources:

- *The Bible*
- Dante's *Divina Commedia*
- Shakespeare
- French Symbolists
- Metaphysical poets, and John Donne
- Homer's *Odyssey*
- Ovid's *Metamorphoses*

- *The Upanishads*, an Hindu sacred text.

In this regard Eliot openly declares that immature poets borrow, and major poets steal. He was firmly convinced that past and present must coexist in poetry, and for this reason we are fully entitled to consider him at the same time as the most influential poet, but also as the most influent poet.

According to Eliot a poet should write universal poetry, drawing inspiration from everywhere: from the past, from the present, and from other countries.

Style

The style of this poem is fragmentary: this stylistic fragmentation is evidente, first of all, from the structure of the poem itself, because although being a very long poem, *The Waste Land* doesn't show the typical narrative structure of long poems: it seems more to be made up of a series of disjointed verse paragraphs, and the reader cannot easily follow the story. There is the lack of an explicit link between the episodes described, and the reader cannot easily follow the poem.

Secondly, it is fragmentary because of the mixture of different poetic style, which are meant to reproduce the chaos of modern civilization.

The poet creates sharp juxtaposition of different registers of speech.

The Waste Land is also highly innovative in his use of language: its vocabulary is made up of words from several different languages: not only english, but even french, latin, german, sanskrit.

An other peculiarity of Eliot's style is that it requires the active participation of the reader, through the technique of implication: rather than using direct statements, Eliot prefers to use metaphor, similis and symbols to evoke emotions.

To this purpose, Eliot adopted what he called the **objective correlative**, which is the attempt at conveying and emotion without a direct explicit statement.

His style is evocative

Eliot Rejected an idea of poetry based on the poet's own personality, and he uses the objective correlative of symbolic meaningful imagery, which forces the reader to contribute to the poem, by bringing its own connotation to the gaps and by bringing its own meaning to the unstated.

T: *The Burial of Dead*

- p. 206

A funeral service in the Anglican rite is called "The Order of the Burial of the Dead". The title of the first section of *The Waste Land* refers to it, since it is a metaphor for the condition of modern man, whose life is meaningless, empty, alienating and quite similar to death. In the passage that follows, traditional myths and symbols are used in an original way and acquire different and sometimes difficult connotations. This is why the poet himself added some notes to the edition in which the poem appeared.

April is the cruellest month, breeding¹
Lilacs out of the dead land, mixing
Memory and desire, stirring²
Dull roots³ with spring rain.
5 Winter kept us warm, covering
Earth in forgetful snow, feeding
A little life with dried tubers. [...]
Unreal City⁴,
Under the brown fog of a winter dawn,
10 A crowd flowed over London Bridge, so many,
I had not thought death had undone so many⁵.
Sighs, short and infrequent, were exhaled⁶,
And each man fixed his eyes before his feet.
Flowed up the hill and down King William Street⁷,
15 To where Saint Mary Woolnoth kept the hours
With a dead sound on the final stroke of nine⁸.
There I saw one I knew⁹, and stopped him, crying: 'Stetson!
'You who were with me in the ships at Mylae¹⁰!
'That corpse¹¹ you planted last year in your garden,
20 'Has it begun to sprout¹²? Will it bloom this year?
'Or has the sudden frost disturbed its bed?
'O keep the Dog far hence, that's friend to men¹³,
'Or with his nails he'll dig it up again!
'You! hypocrite lecteur! – mon semblable, – mon frère¹⁴!

- 1 breeding. Che genera.
- 2 stirring. Che stimola.
- 3 Dull roots. Sopite radici.
- 4 Unreal City. Città irreale (citazione dal poeta francese Baudelaire).
- 5 I had ... so many. "Ch'io non avrei mai creduto / che morte tanta n'avesse disfatta" (citazione dal Canto III dell'*Inferno*, vv. 56-57).
- 6 Sighs ... exhaled. Sospiri, corti e rari, ne esalavano (*Inferno*, IV, vv. 25-27).
- 7 King William Street. Una strada della City.
- 8 nine. L'ora d'inizio del lavoro nella City.
- 9 There ... knew. Là vidi uno che conoscevo (il poeta riconosce amici tra la folla, come Dante nell'*Inferno*).
- 10 Mylae. Battaglia navale nella Prima guerra punica (260 a.C.).
- 11 corpse. Cadavere (allusione alla mitologia egizia, secondo la quale

- il corpo del dio Osiride, dopo il suo assassinio, fu tagliato in pezzi che furono poi sepolti in diverse parti del Paese. Sua moglie Iside trasformò queste tombe in luoghi sacri sui quali veniva piantato del grano, che germogliava e cresceva ogni anno. Tale mito fornì a Eliot un gruppo di immagini legate alla morte e al suo progresso verso la rinascita).
- 12 Has ... sprout. Ha cominciato a germogliare.
- 13 keep ... men. "Tien lontano di qui il cane, che è amico dell'uomo" (citazione da *The White Devil*, 1612, di John Webster, drammaturgo elisabettiano).
- 14 You! ... frère. "Tu! Lettore ipocrita! – mio simile – mio fratello!" (citazione dalla prefazione di *Les Fleurs du mal* di Baudelaire che ricorda come tutti siamo ugualmente immersi nella stupidità, nel peccato e nella noia).

This extract contains the beginning of the poem (**lines 1-7**) and the end of the poem's first section (**lines 8-24**)

The Waste Land is a poem with an extraordinary symbolic and rhythmic complexity, which breaks into many directions, from its very beginning.

It starts with a reference to April, as the "cruellest month", while the reader usually associates April to a month of renewal.

Then he breaks again with the common view by saying that Winter, generally associated with cold temperatures, keeps human beings warm, it turns to be positive.

In the second section is focused on the opposition between fertility and sterility, life and death. It contains one of the most surreal episodes of the whole poem: the speaker in fact walks through London, which is mentioned with the expression "unreal city" a reference to Baudelaire who used a similar expression to refer to Paris in one of his poems; London is the

symbol of materialism, consumerism, because inhabited by creatures that look like walking ghosts, that stare and sight only in front of their feet. This is an idea of people who are totally absorbed by work that have lost the ability to communicate to each other. This image conveys an idea

of death within life and lack of communication

There is a sensation of unreality, due to:

- presence of people who look like walking ghosts
- presence of a brown fog at dawn which conveys an idea of unreal darkness
- the sound of the clock bell, which is a dead sound; the church bell no longer signifies a call to prayer, but it signifies a call to work; in the modern world, work has replaced the function of pray;

The speaker recognizes someone he knows among the crowd: he calls him Stetson. This is the name of an American large hat, which is usually worn by cowboys, and for this reason some critics see in this name a valid reference to Eliot's friend Ezra Pound (he used to wear this kind of hat). Eliot actually denied this connection.

The speaker connects his encounter to a memory of the Punic Wars. The two men fought together in the first Punic War (between Rome and Carthage).

This reference to the past world is meant to reproduce the present clashes of WWI.

It is difficult to analyze Eliot's poem, because there are so many references.

The speaker asks Stetson about the fate of a corpse planted in his garden: he asks if the buried corpse has already begun to sprout; it is an ironic and comic description of the burial rite, as a form of gardening.

The section ends with a direct address to the reader:

'You! hypocrite lecteur! - mon semblable, - mon frère!'

This is a quotation from the preface of *Le fleur du mal* of Baudelaire.

This final line connects the poet to the reader, since they both share a condition of spiritual emptiness and desolation.

The **style** is highly citatory: in this passage we find references to

- Dante's Inferno (when he describes the crowd of walking ghosts)
- Baudelaire's Parisian poems (at line 8 *unreal city*)
- Baudelaire's preface to *Le fleur du male* (last line)
- at line 22 we have a reference to a minor 17th century dramatist's tragedy, John Webster's *The white devil*. Webster wrote

O Keep the Wolf far hence, that's fought to man

All these quotations make the text very complex, since there can be different levels of reading, according to how many references the reader is able to notice and appreciate.

Eliot makes use of free verse: lines are not of the same length, there is neither a regular scheme nor a traditional meter, and there isn't

T: *The Fire Sermon*

- p. 208

Unreal City

Under the brown fog of a winter noon

Mr Eugenides, the Smyrna merchant

Unshaven, with a pocket full of currants

5 C.i.f. **London**¹: documents at sight,

Asked me in demotic French²

To luncheon at the Cannon Street Hotel

Followed by a weekend at the Metropole³.

At the violet hour, when the eyes and back

10 Turn upward from the desk, when the human engine waits

Like a taxi throbbing⁴ waiting,

I Tiresias⁵, though blind, throbbing between two lives⁶,

Old man with wrinkled female breasts⁷, can see

At the violet hour, the evening hour that strives⁸

15 Homeward, and brings the sailor home from sea,

The typist home at teatime, clears her breakfast, lights

Her stove, and lays out food in tins.

Out of the window perilously spread

Her drying combinations⁹ touched by the sun's last rays,

20 On the divan are piled (at night her bed)

Stockings, slippers, camisoles, and stays¹⁰.

I Tiresias, old man with wrinkled dugs

Perceived the scene, and foretold the rest¹¹ –

I too awaited the expected guest.

25 He, the young man carbuncular¹², arrives,

A small house agent's clerk, with one bold stare¹³,

One of the low on whom assurance sits

As a silk hat on a Bradford millionaire¹⁴.

The time is now propitious, as he guesses,

30 The meal is ended, she is bored and tired,

Endeavours¹⁵ to engage her in caresses

Which still are unreprieved¹⁶, if undesired.

Flushed¹⁷ and decided, he assaults at once;

Exploring hands encounter no defence;

35 His vanity requires no response,

And makes a welcome of indifference.

(And I Tiresias have foresuffered all

Enacted on this same divan or bed;

I who have sat by Thebes¹⁸ below the wall

40 And walked among the lowest of the dead¹⁹.)

Bestows²⁰ one final patronising kiss²¹,

And gropes his way, finding the stairs unlit²²...

She turns and looks a moment in the glass,

Hardly aware of her departed lover;

45 Her brain allows one half-formed thought to pass:

'Well now that's done: and I'm glad it's over.'

When lovely woman stoops to folly and

Paces about her room again, alone,

She smooths her hair²³ with automatic hand,

50 And puts a record on the gramophone.

This passage introduces a key figure in the poem, **Tiresias**: he is the Theban prophet who was punished with blindness because he had seen Athen, the goddess of knowledge, bathing naked.

He became blind but he was able to see into the future: he was a seer.

This is divided into two section: the **first** (1-8) and the **second** (9-40)

Highlighted words:

- highlighted in **yellow**: description of the city of London, the external setting
- highlighted in **green**: description of the time
- highlighted in **light blue**: Mr Eugenides
- highlighted in **orange**: refers to the typist
- highlighted in **pink**: expression referred to Tiresias
- highlighted in **grey**: expression referred to the typist lover
- **pink** words: refers to the man's action and attitude
- **blue** words: typist's emotions and mood

First section

In the first section Tiresias is in London, which is the external setting; he is with Mr Eugenides: he is a merchant, whose name means "well born", someone of noble origin.

Now he is unkempt (trasandato), and he speaks vulgar french.

In this first section Mr Eugenides invites the narrator Tiresias to have lunch together and then he invites him to go to a hotel in Brighton, the Metropole, known for its sexual activity.

This scene evoke past and present time. Smyrna is a very ancient town, located in present Turkey, and so this is the image of an ancient merchant, but also there is the reference to the modern time, from the Hotel.

- **line 9**: *violet hour*: the sunset
- **line 12**: *I Tiresias*: it's the only explicit identification of the speaker

Second section

Tiresias assists to a squalid sexual encounter.

The setting in place changes: now the setting is a squalid untidied bedsitter, when we find a typist, who is waiting for her lover.

The setting in time: there is a mixture of past, present and future; Tiresias is a figure who comes from the past, and he has already experienced the events that he is now assisting to.

He is assisting to the squalid sexual encounter, in the present, and at the same time he is able to foretell the future.

Yet he cannot do anything to modify the future, he can only predict it.

Tiresias is an ermafrodite, because he was a man, and then he become a woman, and then he returned a man, so he posses the knowledge of both sexes.

He represents the supreme metamorphosis that brings the two sexes together.
He's qualified to summarize the whole human experience, He's qualified to assist to this sexual encounter.

The typist stands for the liberated woman of the early 1920s. She is independent and free, but this didn't bring her any happiness: she lives alone, in an untidy one room flat, full of uninteresting everyday objects; she lives an highly monotonous life. In this extract she is compared to a human engine, that act with automatic hand

The typist lover is a young man, carbuncular: carbuncle is an infection.

The typist is both morally and emotionally indifferent, bored and tired, but the man is not worried: he is only interested in his own satisfaction, he is only pleased with himself.

When he leaves her, he is satisfied. He is not able to grab the squalor he lived in.

Love is reduced to the fulfilment of mere instincts and physical desire: it's something practical and meaningless.

The typist's reaction to the young man is of pleasure for the end of the sexual encounter.

- **lines 49-50:** Reinforces the impression of dullness, monotony and sterility. Their relationship is no more than a parody.

The themes developed are:

Spiritual sterility and lack of communication:

Eliot want to underline how impossible communication through love is in the wasteland; love has been reduced to mere lust. Eliot deals with this theme through the **objective correlative**: he describes this sexual encounter with a language that evokes the scene, and he doesn't describe it directly

Negativity of city life:

city life is only linked to commercial transactions, and this is evident from some metaphors and symbols that Eliot adopt here:

- **line 5:** *C.i.f.*: it stands for "cost insurance and freight", this is a typical term of commercial transactions.
- the **typist**, who is the symbol of the liberated woman of the '20s

Antithesis between past and present:

this is evident through the juxtaposition of images belonging to the past and images belonging to the present