*The Waste Land*

by Erin Templeton

*The Waste Land* is an influential and experimental 435-line poem written by Thomas Stearns Eliot and first published in 1922. Structurally, it is a pastiche of different verse forms, both traditional and contemporary. It also contains several different languages, as well as allusions to texts as diverse as the *Upanishads*, Dante Alighieri’s *Inferno*, and Charles Baudelaire’s *Les Fleurs du mal*.

Composition Process

According to Lyndall Gordon (1999), T. S. Eliot began work on his long poem *The Waste Land* in 1921, though he had been thinking about it as early as late 1919. Originally conceived in four parts, the poem was drafted in bits and pieces over the course of a year. Gordon suggests that Eliot had a draft of the first two sections of the poem by May 1921 and then resumed writing in the fall while on leave from Lloyd’s Bank. He spent this period convalescing first at Margate, a coastal vacation town in England, and later at a sanitarium in Lausanne, Switzerland where he underwent treatment for a nervous breakdown. The discovery of a pre-publication manuscript of the poem in 1968 reveals that both Eliot’s first wife Vivienne (1888-1947) and his friend Ezra Pound (1885-1972), a fellow expatriate American poet, helped revise the poem into its final form before its initial publication in 1922. Pound’s influence on the draft is especially pronounced. He encouraged Eliot to tighten the metrics of certain passages, and cut the ‘Death by Water’ section from its original ninety-two lines to a mere nine. The poem was published almost simultaneously on both sides of the Atlantic. The American little magazine *The Dial* published *The Waste Land* in its November 1922 issue, which came out in New York in late October, and Eliot’s own new literary magazine, *The Criterion,* published the poem in its inaugural October 1922 issue in London.

Structure and Themes

The poem is composed in free verse and has five sections, which vary in length: ‘The Burial of the Dead’, ‘A Game of Chess’, ‘The Fire Sermon’, ‘Death by Water’, and ‘What the Thunder Said.’ The poem is richly allusive and polyvocal. Critics have yet to reach a consensus regarding the narrative structure of the verse. Some, taking their cue from Eliot’s original (and ultimately discarded) title ‘He Do the Police in Different Voices’, have argued that there is a single narrative voice who ventriloquizes various speakers through the poem. Others claim that the poem is populated by an assorted cast of characters from across time and space: Dido, Ophelia, Philomel, Tiresias, the Fisher King, and many more, including a varied cast of contemporary Londoners from across the socioeconomic spectrum. In addition to its multiple voices in several different languages, the poem also contains a wide array of allusions to both classical authors such as Ovid and Homer and more contemporary figures like Aldous Huxley and Ernest Shackleton. The poem reaches beyond western culture to explore Buddhism and Eastern thought as well as the anthropological treatises *From Ritual to Romance* and *The Golden Bough.* Finally, it blurs the distinction between high and low culture as, for example, allusions to Wagnerian opera coexist alongside references to popular ragtime and minstrel songs.

At its core, *The Waste Land* is about life in London following the catastrophe of World War One (1914-1918). By the time of its composition in the early twentieth century, all of the familiar cultural institutions that formed the foundation of day to day experience in the United States and western Europe had experienced seismic shifts. The church, the family and the workplace were all in the midst of tremendous upheaval. Thinkers like Charles Darwin, Albert Einstein, Sigmund Freud, Friedrich Nietzsche and others had raised fundamental questions about religion and faith, science and technology, the human psyche, gender expectations and the nature of sexuality. Eliot draws upon religious texts from the *King James Bible*, The Anglican *Book of Common Prayer*, *The Fire Sermon*, and the *Upanishads* to probe the role of religion in contemporary life and explore the Eastern traditions of Hinduism and Buddhism in light of what appeared to be a faltering Christianity. Connections with other people, both erotic and platonic, grew less personal and more mechanical as London became more standardized in the wake of the Industrial Revolution. The fragmentation of the verse form in *The Waste Land* mirrors the fragmentation of life in war-torn London and the increasing disorientation of urban experience. 1922 London was for many a broken world where the familiar had become impossibly strange. Eliot attempts to render these feelings of confusion and alienation in the reading experience.

Critical Responses

From the time of its publication, responses to *The Waste Land* were wildly divergent. The poem won *The Dial* prize for poetry in 1922, though Lawrence Rainy (1998) has argued that the prize was determined before the editors of the magazine had even laid eyes on Eliot’s verse. Moreover, the *Times Literary Supplement* praised its ‘range, depth, and beautiful expression’ while *Time* magazine reported rumors the poem was a hoax. As scholar Michael North has remarked, the poem ‘has been at the heart of academic literary criticism since there was such a thing’ (x). The inclusion of Eliot’s footnotes with the poem’s first book publication fuelled speculation that there was a key to unlocking its many mysteries even though Eliot himself later claimed that the notes were nothing more than a ‘wild goose chase.’ Unsurprisingly, the poem has been one of the key texts of New Criticism alongside Eliot’s critical essay ‘Tradition and the Individual Talent,’ which argues that a work of art must be taken in context with the literary traditions that precede it.

References and For Further Reading:

Ackroyd, Peter. *T. S. Eliot: A Life* (1985) Simon and Schuster: New York.

Eliot, T. S. *The Waste Land: A Facsimile and Transcript of the Original Drafts Including the Annotations of Ezra Pound*. Edited by Valerie Eliot. New York: Harcourt Brace and Company, 1971.

Eliot, T. S. *The Waste Land*. 1922. Michael North. Norton Critical Edition (New York: W. W. Norton, 2000.

Gordon, Lyndall. *T. S. Eliot: An Imperfect Life* (1999). W. W. Norton: New York.

Rainey, Lawrence. *Institutions of Modernism: Literary Elites and Public Culture*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1998.

Paratextual Materials:

T. S. Eliot reading *The Waste Land* <http://town.hall.org/Archives/radio/IMS/HarperAudio/011894_harp_ITH.html>

iPad users can download [*The Waste Land* app](http://thewasteland.touchpress.com/?tpnav=1) for iPad put together by Faber and Faber, Eliot’s publisher, and touchpress. In addition to the poem itself (presented with or without annotation), the app provides facsimile images of the manuscript and features six recordings of the poem, two by Eliot himself, as well as Alec Guinness, Viggo Mortenson and Ted Hughes. In addition, there is extensive video footage including a full performance of the poem by Fiona Shaw and expert reflections on the poem by noted authors Jeanette Winterson and Seamus Heaney, and also from Faber poetry editor Alex Keegan.

Image of one page of the manuscript facsimile: <http://people.virginia.edu/~sfr/enam312/tsewlms2.jpg>