"The Waste Land" by T. S. Eliot [C2]

Apice della letteratura modernista, questo poema di 433 versi, che attinge a leggende di culture ed epoche diverse, descrive un'umanità in cerca di redenzione dopo gli orrori della Prima guerra mondiale.

Considered to be a **seminal** Modernist work, **The Waste Land** was written **in the aftermath of** the First World War by American-born poet, **playwright** and literary critic Thomas Stearns Eliot. A 434-line poem divided into five parts, it addresses themes of death, loss and confusion. While **The Waste Land** is intentionally hard to decipher, lines and expressions evoke visceral images that can be universally understood.

MODERNISM

Born in St. Louis, Missouri in 1888, T.S. Eliot moved to England in 1914 and renounced his US **citizenship** in 1927. He became the most influential voice of the Modernist literary movement, arguing that, in modern times, "the poet must become more and more comprehensive, more allusive, more indirect, in order to force, to dislocate if necessary, language to his meaning." Eliot's poem **The Waste Land** is filled with allusions and references to other literary works, and in addition was heavily edited by his friend and **fellow** poet Ezra Pound. However, it has been so much referenced itself that parts may **chime** with those who have not read the poem. Take the opener as an example: "April is the cruellest month, breeding Lilacs out of the dead land, mixing Memory and desire, stirring Dull roots with spring rain. Winter kept us warm, covering Earth in forgetful snow, feeding A little life with dried tubers" "Aprile è il più crudele di tutti i mesi. Genera lillà dalla terra morta, mescola memoria e desiderio, desta radici sopite con pioggia di primavera. L'inverno ci tenne al caldo, coprendo la terra di neve immemore, nutrendo una piccola vita con tuberi secchi."

TUNING IN

Different voices come and go throughout the poem without explanation, as if the reader is **tuning** a radio (by the 1920s, regular radio broadcasts were being made the norm both in the UK and elsewhere in the world.) Among the many characters and voices in Eliot's poem, named and anonymous, there is a **clairvoyant** called Madame Sosostris; two working-class women who discuss false teeth; a blind **Theban prophet** from Greek mythology; a female **typist** who has an unpleasant sexual encounter; and a man who sees an **acquaintance** in the street, and asks him a strange question: "'That corpse you planted last year in your garden, 'Has it begun to sprout? Will it bloom this year? 'Or has the sudden frost disturbed its bed?" "'Quel cadavere che l'anno scorso hai piantato in giardino ha cominciato a germogliare? Fiorirà quest'anno? O il gelo improvviso ne ha danneggiato l'aiuola?'"

HANDFUL OF DUST

Some expressions from Eliot's poem have been used in the titles of other books. For example, Evelyn Waugh's 1934 novel **A Handful of Dust** takes its title from the line: "I will show you fear in a handful of dust." Perhaps the best-known lines of **The Waste Land** have been referenced many times; they are typically **oblique** and comfortless. "Unreal City, Under the brown fog of a winter dawn, A crowd flowed over London Bridge, so many, I had not thought death had undone so many." "Città irreale, sotto la nebbia scura di un'alba d'inverno una folla fluiva su London Bridge, tanta che io non avrei creduto che morte tanta ne avesse disfatta."

NOTHING?

Without imposing a clear narrative or moral message, Eliot brings together fragments from different myths, religious traditions, languages, locations, time periods, and texts to create a verbal collage. By the end of the poem he has alluded to texts ranging from the Bible and Shakespeare to Dante's Inferno, Sappho, Baudelaire, the Buddha's Fire Sermon, texts on folklore, and many more, some of them quite obscure. He even added five pages of

explanatory notes, although the reader is left to **draw their own conclusions** about what parts of the poem might mean. The following lines, which Eliot tells us were inspired by the 17th-century play The Devil's Law Case by John Webster, express disorientation in their meaning and their **arrangement** on the page. "'What is that noise?' The wind under the door. 'What is that noise now? What is the wind doing?' Nothing again nothing. 'Do 'You know nothing? Do you see nothing? Do you remember 'Nothing?'" "'Che cos'è quel rumore?' Il vento sotto la porta. 'E ora, quel rumore? Che sta facendo il vento?' Niente ancora niente. 'E niente non sai? Non vedi niente? Non ricordi niente?'"

PEACE...

In the final lines of the poem the voices appear to dissipate altogether, yet ultimately unite in the Sanskrit word for 'peace'. This enigmatic ending is also a reference to the Hindu texts the Upanishads. "London Bridge is falling down falling down falling down Poi s'ascose nel foco che gli affina Quando fiam uti chelidon—O swallow swallow Le Prince d'Aquitaine à la tour abolie These fragments I have shored against my ruins Why then Ile fit you. Hieronymo's mad againe. Datta. Dayadhvam. Damyata. Shantih shantih   shantih" "London Bridge sta cadendo sta cadendo sta cadendo Poi s'ascose nel foco che gli affina quando fiam uti chelidon – O rondine rondine Le Prince d'Aquitaine à la tour abolie con questi frammenti ho puntellato le mie rovine Why then Ile fit you. Geronimo è impazzito di nuovo. Datta. Dayadhvam. Dāmyata. Shantih   shantih   shantih." Beautiful and devastating, **The Waste Land** had a major impact on poetry both in English and in other languages. Eliot went on to write more influential works, including the 1935 play Murder in the Cathedral and a set of meditations called Four Quartets (1943). In 1948 he was awarded the Nobel Prize for Literature.

Glossary

- **playwright** = drammaturgo
- **citizenship** = cittadinanza
- **oblique** = indiretti
- **arrangement** = disposizione
- **in the aftermath of** = dopo i disastri di
- **clairvoyant** = veggente
- **Theban prophet** = profeta tebano
- **A Handful of Dust** = "Una manciata di polvere"
- **seminal** = influente
- **The Waste Land** = "La terra desolata"
- **fellow** = collega
- **chime** = suonare
- **typist** = dattilografa
- **draw their own conclusions** = trarre conclusioni
- **tuning** = sintonizzare
- **acquaintance** = conoscente