

The Waste Land, a Social Document of the Modern World Areeba

Thomas Sterns Eliot is considered the most influential writer of the twentieth century on the grounds of his wide-ranging contributions in the fields of drama, criticism, poetry and prose. *The Waste Land* is his the most influential work. Published in 1922, the poem is regarded as the seminal work and an epic of modernist literature. The poem offers a social critique of the modern world. It exposes the moral and spiritual degeneration of the modern world with all its horror and disillusionment. It shows the dissatisfaction associated with the industrial and scientific progress of the post-war Europe. The main theme of the poem is life-in-death. It suggests the living death of the inhabitants of the waste land- the modern world. The poem incorporates many unrelated references from history, mythology and religion and mirrors the fragmentation of the modern world. Eliot got huge inspiration from Jessie Weston's *From Ritual to Romance* and Frazer's *The Golden Bough* for *The Waste Land*.

Divided into five sections- The Burial of the Dead, A Game of Chess, The Fire Sermon, Death by Water, and What the Thunder Said, the poem displays the disillusionment, hopelessness, failure, and cynicism of modern life. Eliot not only unfolds the predicaments of the modern society but also offers solutions to them. Hentia is of the view, ***"In light of the desolation of the West, Eliot feels that another Renaissance is necessary"***. As a social document, the poem highlights the living condition of people belonging to different strata of the modern society. The character of Countess Marie in the first section represents the physical and psychological dislocation of the aristocrats after the war. The Lady of Situation stands for the modern world's obsession with sensual beauty, glamour, and lust. Among the males of the upper strata of society, there are city-executives having fun with girls at picnic spots near the river Thames. There is the rich merchant who represents the commercial class of the society. Madame Sosostris- the fortune-teller represents the middle class of the society.

The Waste Land goes beyond the dilemma of a definite time. If it presents a picture of spiritual emptiness, a general lack of aim and sexuality devoid of emotion, it is reflecting not merely a set period of time, but epitomizing all the periods of the history of mankind marked by such features. Eliot mentions Theban waste land, King Fischer's waste land and the Biblical waste land to show that tragedy is at the heart of life. The world has been plagued by moral barrenness in the past as well. The first section, The Burial of the Dead, begins with a reference to Chaucer's *The Canterbury Tales*.

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,

Contrary to Chaucerian notion, April is not the month of spiritual rejuvenation for the modern waste landers. For modern man, regeneration is painful as it brings back the memories of a more fertile and happier past. He prefers the month of winter because it is the month of forgetfulness for him. This shows the depravity of the modern man that he prefers ignorance over rejuvenation. In ancient times, the source of inspiration for life and achievement was faith. But the modern man's values have changed. The Christian faith and compassion are no longer regarded as objects of life. This has resulted in general deterioration of life:

A heap of broken images, where the sun beats,



And the dead tree gives no shelter, the cricket no relief,

And the dry stone no sound of water. Only

There is shadow under this red rock,

The modern world is a mere *heap of broken images*. The *red rock* stands for the Christian faith which, according to Eliot, is the only way of salvation for the modern man.

According to Eliot, the modern man is living a mechanical life lacking love and compassion. He draws a parallel between Cleopatra's love and the loveless affairs of modern people. Cleopatra's love was vigorous and intense and she was ready to suffer for love. On the other hand, modern man has no emotional involvement in his physical relations. Eliot sums up the sexual pervasion of the modern society through the words of St. Augustine,

To Carthage then I came

Burning Burning Burning

This is seen in the mechanical relationship of the typist and the clerk. The typist gives herself to the clerk with a sense of total indifference and apathy. There is neither repulsion nor any pleasure, and this absence of feeling is a measure of the sterility of the age. It is just animal like copulation. This mechanical life has caused various types of mental illnesses in modern man. The Lady of Situation is leading a neurotic life. Her lover too suffers from mental exhaustion. He says,

I think we are in rats' alley

Where the dead men lost their bones.

Eliot is of the view that the modern man has no value for human relationships. He lacks empathy and humanity in general. He only thinks of his own interest and has no regard for others. He has become self-centered and egoistic. Modern man is like Coriolanus and he is the embodiment of selfishness. Each person is imprisoned in his own self and has lost the key of sympathy and brotherhood.

We think of the key, each in his prison

Thinking of the key, each confirms a prison

Modern civilization has lost its roots and an important cause of this disintegration is the enormous power wielded by politicians. They jeopardized the lives of the millions for their selfish interests. The lamentation of the war victims filled both plains and hills.

What is that sound high in the air

Murmur of maternal lamentation

Eliot's poem highlights the horrors of the modern wasteland and offers a promise of regeneration as well. It is possible through suffering and penance just like in the cases of King Fisher and the King Oedipus. Eliot brings together the wisdom of the East and the West and shows that spiritual regeneration can come, if only the modern waste landers heed the voice of the thunder: **Give, sympathize, and control.**

In a nutshell, *The Waste Land* is a social document of our times. Eliot does not glorify the past nor is he enamored by it. He is neither an escapist nor a romanticist; he is a stern realist who laid his hand on the pulse of the modern man. At the same time he is not a pessimist as he is hopeful for the

rejuvenation of the modern waste land. He believes that man may be an atom in this great universe, but he is an intense atom, capable of yielding energy and power. It is this latent power which needs to be discovered and utilized.

The Wasteland by T.S Eliot SQs

'A Game of Chess' is the second section of T. S. Eliot's 1922 poem *The Waste Land*, the impact of which was profound and immediate. The title partly alludes to a game of chess played in Jacobean dramatist Thomas Middleton's play *Women Beware Women*.

Story of Philomela

Philomela was a female character in Greek mythology, daughter of King Pandion I of **Athens**. She was the sister of **Procne**, who married King **Tereus** of Thrace.

On the fifth year of their marriage, Procne asked her husband to go to Athens and bring Philomela back, as the two sisters hadn't seen each other for a long time. Tereus agreed and went to Athens, where Pandion I told Tereus to take care of her, as if he were her father. However, on the way back to Thrace, Tereus gave in his lust for Philomela and raped her. He then threatened her not to say anything to her sister, but Philomela was defiant, angering him. So, he cut off her tongue and abandoned her. When he returned to Thrace, he told Procne that Philomela had died.

Philomela, however, although unable to speak, managed to weave the crime onto a tapestry and brought it to her sister. When Procne found out what had happened, she killed her son **Itys**, and served him to Tereus as a meal. Unaware, Tereus ate the meal, and he only found out when Procne and Philomela presented the severed head of **Itys** to him. Tereus grabbed an axe and started chasing the two sisters, who fled and started praying to the gods. The gods answered their prayers and turned all three of them into birds; Procne into a **swallow**, Philomela into a **nightingale**, and Tereus into a **hoopoe**.

The myth appears in **Ovid's *Metamorphoses***. The myth has been associated with the image of the nightingale and its song described as both exceedingly beautiful and sorrowful. In the 20th century, American-British poet T. S. Eliot directly referenced the myth in his most famous poem, *The Waste Land* (1922), where he describes,

*The change of Philomel, by the barbarous king
So rudely forced; yet there the nightingale
Filled all the desert with inviolable voice
And still she cried, and still the world pursues,
"Jug Jug" to dirty ears.*

Eliot employs the myth to depict **themes of sorrow, pain, and that the only recovery or regeneration possible is through revenge.**

Story of Hyacinth girl:

Hyacinth is a type of flower plant native to the eastern Mediterranean. Hyacinth is also the name of the Greek Hero **Hyakinthos**, who happens to be a lover of **Apollo**. The story of Hyakinthos is a tragic one. Hyakinthos was a **Spartan Prince**. His **beauty** and **youthfulness** have charmed many gods including Apollo. One day Apollo was teaching Hyakinthos how to throw the discus and for some reason his throw was so powerful that the discus hit Hyakinthos on the head and killed him. There are many theories that suggest the other Gods have caused Hyakinthos death. The most well-known one is of **Zephur**, god of wind, who because of jealousy had jinxed the discus.



Angry and heart-broken, Apollo grieved for his lover's death. Refusing to let Death claimed Hyacintho's body, from the drops of blood from the young man's head, Apollo sprung them onto the earth and there blossomed the flower of Hyacinth, known today as the Larkspur flower. The story of Hyacinthos and Apollo is about **homosexual love**. In Eliot's time, homosexuality was not tolerated and those who were gays or lesbians oftentimes faced harsh judgments and discriminations.

"You gave me hyacinths first a year ago, / They called me the hyacinth girl."

—Yet when we came back, late, from the Hyacinth garden, / Yours arms full, and your hair wet, I could not

Speak, and my eyes failed, I was neither / Living nor dead, and I knew nothing,

Looking into the heart of light, the silence.

It seems like he is remembering something that had happened to him in the past. The act of giving flowers and spending time in gardens symbolizes **innocent first love**. This is that kind of memory that everyone wants to keep and bring with them to the grave. At the same time, it is always this kind of memory that leads one to a blank state of mind when we recall them. The moment is gone but at least you have it inside your head, but you will die and so will those happy memories. **In the nothing really ever happened**, the moment is forever lost. Forgotten and erased. Only silence is left, silence and nothing else. The cruelty is that you could not even be aware of it.

Burial of the Dead:

'The Burial of the Dead' is not a poem in its own right, but the first of five sections of *The Waste Land*, which was published by T.S. Eliot in 1922. This masterpiece is a critical commentary of modern life, especially what it can do to the human soul, which is not always pleasant to behold. *The Burial of the Dead* helps set up the themes and ideas behind the poem as a whole.

The main idea of *The Waste Land*, in a nutshell, is that modern people are losing the ability to connect with the things that make us authentically human. He especially saw us as failing to communicate meaningfully with one another, to set up systems of morals that serve the human soul, and to muster up the courage to be proper caretakers of the world around us. After all, if we cannot speak to each other effectively, what chance do we have of developing values and passing them onto our children, let alone fixing the world's many problems? To put it another way, we as modern folks are effectively 'dead' to traditional values like courage, community, and morality. What we think of as our individual 'lives,' our daily activities and dealings with one another, are in Eliot's eyes equivalent to a mass burial of dead souls.

How does this affect the rest of the poem?

This sets up the poem, the ideas in this first chapter comes back again in the following chapters. One of the most apparent sections that directly relates to *The Burial of the Dead* is *Death by Water*. It is connected directly to the third speaker when he is with Madam Sosotris and she calls him the Phoenician Sailor and warns him that his death will be by drowning. In the later section, ***Death by Water***, the speaker is this **Phoenician Sail** and, in his death, he has forgotten his worldly cares as sea creatures pick apart his body. This section rebuts the ideas of renewal and regeneration that may have come across throughout the story- such as the man crying out to Stetson on the London Bridge. The corpse will yield nothing more than the product of decay.

Continuing with the idea that the poem rebuts the ideas of renewal and regeneration, the last



section, *What the Thunder Said*, with the imagery of the apocalypse with a crucified Christ that is not resurrected. We are told **"He who was living is now dead"**. This chapter of the poem suggests that the end of life is near, that there will be no renewal and no survival. This connects back to the ghost-filled London with the **"unreal"** experiences since a pathetic civilization receives a profound end. The poem ends in a flash of light and a release of rain. Here, the flash of light symbolizes a glimpse of truth while the rain symbolizes vitality. I briefly hope for the possibility of regeneration of our modern society. The burst of allusions at the end of the piece are a final attempt of cohesion. **"These fragments I have shored against my ruins"** suggest that it will be possible for human life to continue on despite the failed redemption from God. Thus, maybe renewal and survival are still possible for the world. Maybe our modern minds are not as worthless as we believe. Maybe, just maybe, we are still worthy to be saved.

Style

The Waste Land is written in a literary vein known as **modernism**, which flourished between the two world wars in Europe and the United States. Modernism is characterized by an experimental, free-verse style with abrupt changes in poetic voice and point of view. 'The Burial of the Dead' is a perfect example of this, as the reader is never quite sure who is speaking, or if Eliot is simply quoting another work.

Eliot's use of **allusions**, or references to outside literary texts and historical events, together with his love for experimentation, make his poetry hard to understand for beginners and scholars alike. It's best to read *The Burial of the Dead* first by trying to grasp the literal meaning of the words and only then to explore the hidden meanings behind the words. For the curious reader, there are many versions of *The Waste Land* available using scholarly **annotations**, or explanations of Eliot's more obscure allusions.

Unreal City:

Eliot's London references **Baudelaire's Paris ("Unreal City")**, **Dickens's London ("the brown fog of a winter dawn")** and **Dante's hell ("the flowing crowd of the dead")**. The city is desolate and depopulated, inhabited only by ghosts from the past. Eliot utilizes the "Unreal city", London, as the main setting for "The Wasteland". The city comes to embody the title of the poem, being portrayed as **ugly, cruel and grey, lacking any real human warmth or meaningful connections**.

In his first reference to the "unreal city", Eliot describes a scene, borrowed from **Dante**, of "a crowd" that **"flowed over London Bridge"**, each man's eyes "fixed before his feet". This haunting image likens the entrance into London to Dante's description of masses crowding toward the gates of hell, clearly setting an ominous tone upon the city, giving "unreal" a sinister definition. This reference shows Eliot's despair over the city and its people.

In this stanza, within **"The Fire Sermon"**, Eliot provides his most **positive outlook toward the city**. Eliot seems to affirm that though the city may be part of the cause of suffering and the emptiness of modernity, it is also the **catalyst to transform that suffering into art**. London is both the source of alienation and disillusionment, and the ingredients from which to create the artistic antidote.

Despite this minor concession, Eliot seems to maintain his fatalistic attitude toward London throughout most of the poem. In his final, and perhaps most important usage of the "unreal city" motif, Eliot presents a vision of **decay and destruction**. He reminds the reader that despite its present state, **London will fall like the great cities of the past** through **"cracks and reforms and bursts in the violet air"**. London is not forever, and regardless of its successes or failures or anything else, it will one day be gone, becoming like any emblematic city from antiquity: **just an emblem, an intangible**

memory; unreal.

Eliot's "The Wasteland" concentrates on the **depression and despair of life as part of death**. It is his description and characterization of "unreal city" and images of the city life that supports his subject that city life is **dirty, overcrowded and malicious**. "**Under brown fog**", "**like a taxi throbbing waiting**", "**crowd flowed over London Bridge**" are images he illustrates of what he wants the reader to focus on. Interestingly, Eliot also uses contrasting ideas to the city life: **prison compared to palace**. Palace being the most luxurious living life, to a prison being the most depressing (and punishable) living life. Furthermore, Eliot mentions "**London Bridge**" and "**the Hanged Man**". London has a history as being a great, wealthy and powerful empire for hundreds of years. But London also has a **dark history of crime and punishment** - and the **London bridge structure is a symbol to that piece of history**. In the Elizabethan era, people who committed crimes were mutilated and had their heads chopped off, and then their heads were placed on stakes above London Bridge to warn everyone of what happens to them if they commit a crime. Eliot's description of "**crowd flowed over London Bridge**" is an imagery that it is not only the living that crowds the London Bridge, but the spirits of the hundreds of people who died decades ago. The "Unreal City" is Eliot's description that millions and millions of souls crowd the city. Could it be his point that it is useless to determine the living with the unliving in a cruel and depressing city?

Fire Sermon:

The title of this section, "The Fire Sermon", is taken from a religious sermon given by **Buddah** which encouraged his listeners to give up and seek freedom from earthly passions, which are represented by fire. This idea of turning away from the Earth is a prominent theme in this section. In this sermon, he encourages people to stay away from earthly passion – free themselves from the **fire of lust**. This is a rather **ironic** reference that Eliot made because in this chapter, that is exactly **opposite** of what people do – they cannot resist lust or earthly passion.

Eliot, in the voice of **Tiresias**, telling his view on relationships among the society these days. He, in the shoe of Tiresias, a blind prophet but has seen it all. He was forced to watch all those empty relationships between humankind. To Eliot, sex is dirty, a sin that all humankind is covered with, a sin that will make us all go to hell.

The Tempest in the Waste Land

In "The Tempest", after the Prospero's father died, Prospero becomes the rightful Duke of Milan. Because of jealousy, his brother abandoned him on an island so that he can be King. After several years of mastering his magic skills, Prospero gets revenge on his brother by summoning a storm to wreck his ship. This reference expresses Eliot's view on the modern world, hopelessness and stranded. People can turn their back on each other, even to their family, because of jealousy and vengeance.

The **Phoenician Sailor** – Phlebas, the Smyrna Merchant – Mr. Eugenides, have the same symbolic character, and are related to Shakespeare's play The Tempest. In "The Tempest", Ariel's song to the shipwrecked Ferdinand, is about the drowning of **Ferdinand's** father, Alonso.

The Waste Land has many references about The Tempest: the drowning of Alonso and Ferdinand is seen as their purification by water, so Eliot was impressed by the perspective or the view that the suffering is changed into art. Ferdinand is related to Phlebas, and Mr. Eugenides. Since drowning is done by water, which this leads to purification, water plays diverse roles in the poem and is the symbol of purification, baptism, refreshment, and growth.

Tiresias:

In Greek mythology, **Tiresias** was a **blind prophet of Apollo in Thebes**. At Thebes, Tiresias played an active part in the tragic events involving Laius, the king of Thebes, and his son Oedipus. Besides longevity, another of Tiresias's features involves his having lived as a man, then as a woman, and then as a man again. He was blinded either by **Athena** or by **Hera** for having either seen the first one naked or offended the latter goddess by taking **Zeus'** side in a marital argument. However, his punishment came with subsequent rewards: the **gifts of foresight and long life**.

Elizabeth and Earl of Leicester:

Robert Dudley, 1st Earl of Leicester, was an English statesman and the favourite of Elizabeth I from her accession until his death. He was a suitor for the Queen's hand for many years. On Elizabeth I's accession in November 1558, Dudley was appointed **Master of the Horse**. In 1564, Dudley became Earl of Leicester.

