The Waste Land

by

T. S. Eliot

BORN in St. Louis, Missouri, on September 26, 1888, Thomas Stearns Eliot spent his youth in St. Louis and New England. Eliot earned his A.B. and an M.A. degrees in philosophy at Harvard University in 1906. He spent the next few years abroad (London, Paris, and Marburg, Germany) before settling in London in 1914. Since his early days at Harvard, Eliot had been writing poetry, but it was not until he met Ezra Pound in September 1914, that his work received any special attention. Pound was so impressed with Eliot's poem "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock," that he sent it to Harriet Monroe, renowned editor of Poetry, proclaiming it "the best poem I have yet had or seen from an American" (Pound in Ackroyd, p. 44). "Prufrock" was published in June 1915, and that same month, Eliot married Englishwoman Vivien (also spelled Vivienne) Haigh-Wood. In 1917, Eliot began work as a clerk for Lloyd's Bank in the Colonial and Foreign Department. Meanwhile, he continued to write poetry and, that same year, took a position as assistant editor at The Egoist, a prominent literary magazine. In 1922 in the English journal Criterion, Eliot published The Waste Land, a work that would revolutionize modern poetry with its radical use of free verse, multiple perspectives, and literary allusion. Eliot adopted British citizenship in 1927 and became a devoted member of the Anglican Church. His subsequent literary and critical works would reflect a growing political and religious conservatism. Eliot won the Nobel Prize for literature in 1948, married his second wife, Valerie Fletcher, in 1957, and died in 1965. The Waste Land remains one of the most dramatic expressions of the atmosphere pervading Britain after the First World War.

Events in History at the Time of the Poem

World War I. T. S. Eliot left Marburg, Germany, in early August 1914 just as World War I began. Since Harvard had awarded him a travel grant, he went to England and taught there at Oxford University. As a citizen of the United States, which would not enter the war until April 1917, the poet had a unique perspective on the toll it was taking on England and her people. Food had already become scarce when he arrived in London, and it was impossible to overlook the news-
paper headlines announcing the tremendous numbers of British causalities.

Historians still debate the initial causes of the war, but there is little room for argument about its effects. The British government, led by Lloyd George, had done its best to inspire patriotism and high spirits among the country's young men. Thousands volunteered for service, dedicating themselves to fight for the honor and glory of England. A century had passed since England had fought in a major war. Everyone imagined that this contest would "be an affair of great marches and great battles, quickly decided" (Fussell, p. 21). The enthusiasm and the expectation of a quick outcome were soon dashed, however, by the technological nightmares of the war itself: chemical weapons, machine guns, trench warfare. These "innovations" resulted in the slaughter of hundreds of thousands of young men as well as the destruction of farms, churches, cities, and, it seemed, much of Western civilization. During the Battle of Somme, for example, in July 1916, of the 110,000 men who attacked the German front, 60,000 were killed or injured (Fussell, p. 13). A year later, the third Battle of Ypres (July 1917), turned into a siege of several months that resulted in 370,000 British casualties. Soldiers were dead, wounded, sick, or frozen, and thousands of them literally drowned in the mud of the battlefield (Fussell, p. 16).

Though he did his best to enlist when the United States entered the war in 1917, Eliot himself never saw combat. Poor health prevented his passing the requisite physical exam. He tried to obtain a position in Naval Intelligence, but by the time the paperwork was completed, the war had run its course. Despite his lack of firsthand experience, the war had a tremendous impact on the poet. It would have been impossible to be in London during wartime and not notice the multitudes of refugees or the absence of young English men on the city streets. In addition to hearing the horror stories of those returning from the front, Eliot lost a very close personal friend, the talented young French poet Jean Verdenal, who drowned at Gallipoli in 1915.

Aftermath of the Great War. The Waste Land does not deal with life in London during the war, but with the aftermath of the war. Trying to figure out how to resume one's life after four years of horror preoccupied Londoners once the peace had been signed. A sense of waste and desolation filled the air. Many of the men who managed to survive the war suffered from severe neuroses associated with shell shock or post-traumatic stress disorder. To many veterans, the urban landscape itself appeared transformed: no longer did it seem a place of promise and excitement, but rather it took on a gloomy, ominous, even unreal aspect, as though it had lost its health.

Most significant is the shift in attitudes regarding technology. In the decades leading up to the war, people celebrated the idea of progress and the newfound conveniences of technology. But after the war a more sober appreciation of the destructive potential of technology emerged. The machine gun was a vivid example of the deadly power that technology had loosed on the world. Even a more benign device such as the typewriter lost any innocence it might once have possessed. Instead of making people's lives easier, it seemed to have dehumanized them and transformed individual "life" into mechanical routine.

Vivien Eliot, née Haigh-Wood. On June 26, 1915, T. S. Eliot married Vivien (also spelled Vivienne) Haigh-Wood, an Englishwoman whom he had known for only a few months. Most critics agree that this unfamiliarity was the source of much unhappiness over the course of the couple's life together. Vivien was unlike any of the women Eliot had ever known. She struck him as "adventurous and vivacious," traits to which the young intellectual was understandably attracted.
(Ackroyd, p. 63). For her part, Vivien saw the young Eliot as "a good-looking foreigner who could rescue her from the world of Edwardian respectability" (Ackroyd, p. 63). Her family belonged to the upper middle class, and she very likely felt stifled by a world of strict class divisions and social hierarchy.

Unknown to her fiancé, Vivien had suffered "nervous disorders"—migraines, mood swings, and insomnia—for quite some time; in fact, she had a history of illness dating back to childhood. He would learn this soon enough, for shortly after the wedding, Vivien suffered a nervous collapse. Actually, Eliot himself often succumbed to fits of nerves, and caring for his wife aggravated this tendency. No doubt the combination of their respective nervous conditions made the relationship unusually trying for both parties.

It is important to note that the Eliots' relationship went beyond a patient-nurse dynamic. Vivien not only had unrealized literary aspirations of her own, she also read and commented on her husband's work. A revealing example of Vivien's commentary appears in the manuscript of The Waste Land. The middle interlude of the second section of the poem, "A Game of Chess," which begins with, "My nerves are bad tonight . . ." is generally understood as an autobiographical description of the Eliots' marriage and one of Vivien's breakdowns; in the margin, Vivien has written, "WONDERFUL!" (Eliot, The Waste Land, lines 111-116).

**Ezra Pound.** An American poet and critic born in Hailey, Idaho, in 1885, Ezra Pound was one of the most influential men of letters in the early twentieth century. Pound moved to Europe in 1908 because he felt frustrated with the provincialism of American culture. He settled in London and for a time worked closely with Irish poet W. B. Yeats (see "September 1913," also in *WLAIT 4: British and Irish Literature and Its Time*). Later Eliot became involved in the British avant-garde, taking special interest in Imagism and Vorticism, literary movements that attempted to convey concrete images instead of abstract impressions.

In some ways, Pound is responsible for T. S. Eliot's success. When the two men met in 1914, Pound was the more established of the pair. In fact, Pound professed to "have more or less discovered [Eliot]" (Pound to John Quinn in The Waste Land, p. 1). Indeed, Pound, who had been acquainted with London's literary and artistic circles since 1908, did take the young Eliot under his wing. Not only did Pound introduce the London newcomer to other writers, but he also went to great lengths to get Eliot's work published. Besides sending Eliot's poetry to Harriet Monroe at the important journal Poetry, Pound encouraged Eliot to submit his work to the journals Blast, The Egoist, and The Dial.

The two often critiqued each other's poetry, suggesting revisions, and in the end, Pound played an instrumental role in Eliot's revision of The Waste Land. As evinced in the published manuscripts, he made several drastic editorial changes in the poem. Pound seemed to have a better sense of the overall structure of the poem, and so made editorial suggestions aimed at tightening the work. In retrospect, some critics believe that Pound gave the work a streamlined, polished shape and highlighted themes that Eliot had difficulty expressing, while others believe he misunderstood Eliot's message completely. Eliot himself considered Pound's advice invaluable and in recognition of such efforts, he dedicated The Waste Land to Pound, "il miglior fabbro," a quote taken from Alighieri Dante's poem *Purgatorio*, which means "the better craftsman" (Southam, p. 136).

**Lloyd's Bank.** Eliot had hoped to make his living as a man of letters lecturing and writing reviews. Unfortunately, as of 1917, this plan had not yet worked out, and he was forced to resign his teaching position and gain regular employment to make ends meet. Eliot took a job in the Lloyd's bank Colonial and Foreign Accounts department as a temporary employee, then worked his way into a permanent position. For Eliot, the position was ideal. He found the work interesting, it gave him an opportunity to write in the evenings, and it proved less draining than his teaching position had been. Soon, however, the bank position would become stressful too. By 1920, Eliot had been promoted to the information department of the head office, where he worked on the prewar debts between Lloyd's and Germany. Although he apparently welcomed the assignment, he began to resent the time it took away from his literary ambitions. Ezra Pound tried to raise enough money for Eliot to subsidize his income so that he could quit his job at the bank. Living expenses, however, combined with Vivien's poor health, kept Eliot there through the initial publication of The Waste Land until the mid-twenties.

**The Poem in Focus**

**Contents overview.** Divided into five sections, The Waste Land has no single narrative thread. It
has perhaps been most aptly described as "a web of subcutaneous nerve cells whose synapses fire periodically as we proceed through the poem" (Sigg, p. 195). There is no linear plot development or even a consistent timeframe: the poem jumps around in both time and space across centuries and continents. There is, though, a common focus. The poem features a variety of voices that all speak to life in the urban world of post-war London.

In addition to the five verse sections of the poem, The Waste Land, also has its own footnotes. The notes were not published with the poem in its initial serial form but appended to it by Eliot for the book publication. Some controversy has been stimulated by the notes. Readers have either viewed them as a key to solving the mystery of the poem, or they have scorned the notes as, in Eliot's own words, "bogus scholarship" meant to lead scholars on a "wild goose chase" (Eliot in Litz, p. 10). On one hand, the notes may provide a sense of Eliot's own intellectual trajectory during the poem's composition; on the other hand, they do not offer any overall interpretation of its meaning. A unified, self-sufficient work, the poem stands entirely on its own terms.

Contents summary. "In the Cage." The Waste Land's epigraph comes from Petronius's Satyricon. In the Satyricon, Trimalchio, a rich, drunken millionaire, tries to surpass the outlandish tales told by his guests at a lavish banquet. The tale he tells is of the Cumaen Sibyl, a woman with prophetic powers who asked the Greek god Apollo for as many years as there were grains in her fistful of sand. Unfortunately, she forgot to ask for eternal youth to accompany immortality. Apollo granted her request, and as she aged, her body deteriorated until she was nothing but a bottle of dust. For his epigraph, Eliot chose the following quote: "Yes, and I myself with my own eyes even saw the Sibyl hanging in a cage; and when the boys cried at her: 'Sibyl, Sibyl, what do you want?' 'I would that I were dead,' she said in answer" (translation from Southam, p. 133).

Setting the tone of the poem that follows, the question (cited in the original Latin and Greek) conveys a sense of eternal despair and futility. The quote's context, Trimalchio's drunken feast, may also suggest the widespread decadence and apathy of Eliot's own age.

"The Burial of the Dead." The title of this section is the title of the official burial service of the Anglican church. Its famous first lines contain a multitude of references from Geoffrey Chaucer's Canterbury Tales (in WLAIT 3: British and Irish Literature and Its Times) to Walt Whitman's "When Lilac's Last in the Dooryard Bloomed." Readers might feel an immediate sense of disorientation because April and spring, the time in which the section is set, are generally thought to be periods of regeneration and festivity, rather than of funeral services. Introduced in this section are a variety of images that all carry a sense of bleakness and sterility, in which a strange melancholy and nostalgic lyricism are mingled. The section includes references to a number of infertile gardens and "stony places," and uses several different voices and scenarios to depict modern life as a type of hell on earth: "Unreal City, / Under the brown fog of a winter dawn" where "death had undone so many" (Waste Land, lines 60-61, 63).

Aside from the initial medley of images attached to the seasons, the poem's opening serves to invoke or awaken a multitude of speakers. Many of these speakers are anonymous and it is often difficult to tell where one voice ends and another begins. After the opening, we meet Marie, whose persona is based on a Lithuanian countess; she reminisces about sledding in the mountains as a young girl, feeling frightened yet free. The next episode features an unidentified voice whose dark prophesies, mixing biblical with modern idioms, seem to be a direct address to the reader: "Son of man, / You cannot say, or guess, for you know only / a heap of broken images" (Waste Land, lines 20-22). We then hear from the Hyacinth Girl, who has a rendezvous in the Hyacinth Garden that results not in intimacy but incomprehension; looking into the "heart of light" afterwards, one sees only the sea—alien (its description is given in German), empty, and silent (Waste Land, line 41). Rather than the source of life, it is presented as cold and barren—a reflection of the city. After this, Madam Sosostris, another prophet, gives an enigmatic tarot reading. Finally, readers are forced to experience the numbness of the London commuters, traveling to and from work in a wintry haze that starts to resemble the circles of hell found in Dante's Inferno.

All of these episodes suggest that the world of the poem is in decline. Each of the voices is searching for a way to escape its present environment, whether through memory, travel, sex, the occult, or the comfort of routine. The problem is that nothing seems to work. Readers not only witness this failure, but they also become implicated in its truth.

"A Game of Chess." The title of this section comes from a play by Thomas Middleton (1580-
In the scene to which the poem refers, a game of chess serves as a metaphor for seduction, in which the movement of chess pieces corresponds to the maneuvers of the man and woman. The larger structure of the poem's "A Game of Chess" can be broken into three main parts: lines 77-110, 111-138 and 139-172. All three segments involve "romantic" scenarios, but they differ according to the socioeconomic status of the characters.
The Waste Land

The first subsection is characterized by elevated description and heightened rhetoric. It opens with an allusion to Shakespeare's Cleopatra on her 'burnished throne' (Waste Land, line 77; see Antony and Cleopatra in WLAIT 3: British and Irish Literature and Its Times). The woman described here lives like a queen in luxury, surrounded by tapestries, paintings, and perfumes. Amidst the elegance and opulence of the scene, the poem not only uses inflated language but it is also overtly sexual and artificial. The scene seems ripe for romance and seduction, until we realize that at least one of the pictures hanging on the wall is a rape scene from the classical myth of Philomel, who was turned into a nightingale after revealing the sordid details of being raped by her brother-in-law. This image of Philomel and the other "withered stumps of time" decorating the room seem to usher us out and down the stairs, as its female inhabitant sits brushing her hair. Though rich and sumptuous, the scene is sterile; there is no promise of passion here (Waste Land, line 104).

The second subsection of the poem leaves this world of luxury and affluence and shifts to a middle-class husband and wife. Readers witness a very strange exchange as both parties seem to be suffering from anxiety and nervous strain. The woman displays many of the same tendencies as Eliot's own wife, while the man might be experiencing shell shock. He is haunted by memories of the war and life in the trenches, and he might even be experiencing hallucinations and flashbacks. As in the first scene of the section, there is no romance or seduction here, despite the desperate attempts at conversation. Instead there is a failure to talk to, or at least understand each other. Both parties seem unstable and unable to see past their own anxieties to connect with the other.

Finally, in the third subsection, we are privy to a gossiping conversation taking place in a lower-class pub. Punctuated by the barman's calls of "HURRY UP PLEASE IT'S TIME," the account concerns Lil, friend of the subsection's anonymous speaker. Lil's husband gave her money to have her teeth pulled, and Lil has just spent it for another purpose—an abortion. (The delivery of her last child almost killed her.) Presently Lil is not feeling well, having taken the pills the druggist gave her to bring off the abortion. Not only is the speaker completely unsympathetic with Lil; she actually sides with the husband, telling Lil she should be ashamed to look so "antique" at 31: "Think of poor Albert / he's been in the army four years, he wants a good time / and if you don't give it him, there's others will" (Waste Land, lines 164, 148-149). The verse paints a degrading picture of lower-class married life. Such marriage, according to the poem, is all about sex and reproduction. There is no possibility of understanding or love; it is merely another sort of wilderness.

No matter which class one belongs to, "A Game of Chess" is just that, a game. Romance and friendship have mostly been reduced to unfeeling manipulation and strategic maneuvers, while lovers have become mere players, if not pawns. Ultimately, this section of the poem challenges modern assumptions about emotional intimacy and suggests that, if such intimacy is not already extinct, there may no longer be a place for it in contemporary urban society.

"The Fire Sermon." The title of this section of the poem originates in Buddhism. The Fire Sermon "was preached by Buddha to warn mankind against the fires of lust, anger, envy and the other passions that consume men" (Southam, p. 164). Accordingly, the poem presents several such scenarios. Echoes of Andrew Marvell's "To His Coy Mistress" run through this episode, foregrounding the idea of seduction and casting a dark shadow of urgency over the entire section. First, we visit the banks of the Thames River, apparently the recent scene of some festive summer evenings, but the magic of those evenings has dissipated and all that remains are garbage and disease. The focus zooms in on a rat crawling along the riverbank, recalling perhaps life, or rather death, in the wartime trenches, where rats fed on corpses strewn across the battlefield. (The middle-class husband, in the previous section, describes his home as a "rats' alley"—Waste Land, line 115). The riverbank sparks the memory of a shipwreck, as well as an Australian ballad from World War I about a brothel-keeper named Mrs. Porter, who was infamous for spreading venereal disease. From the low humor of the lines "O the moon shone bright on Mrs. Porter / And on her daughter / They wash their feet in soda water," the poem shifts to a rather morbid nightingale's, echoing the rape of Philomel from "A Game of Chess" (Waste Land, lines 119-201). Then we find ourselves back on the streets of London, only now it is later in the day and the commuters we met in "Burial of the Dead" are on their way home from work. The juxtaposition of such images of disease and defeat with images of domestic and commercial life, the tones—ranging from the lyrical to the pathetic—suggests some-
thing of the complexity of modern urban existence, conceived as simultaneously cheerful and sordid.

This section introduces Tiresias, whom Eliot conceived as "the most important personage in the poem, uniting all the rest" (Waste Land, p. 148). In "The Fire Sermon," Tiresias witnesses one of the poem's central events, an encounter between "the young man carbuncular" (carbuncles are large puss-filled acne) and the typist (Waste Land, line 231). In this brief portrayal, at once sober and acid, what begins as dinner evolves into a sexual encounter that seems mechanized and unemotional. The typist is bored, while the vain young man, apparently interested only in the sex, welcomes her indifference. Tiresias indicates that the scene is all too common, at least among the working class, and the poem incorporates an Elizabethan sonnet, which serves to further satirize the sentimentality of conventional love in a modern, urban setting. Any further thoughts on the event are cut off by the gramophone, which silences the typist's thoughts and takes the reader out of her flat and down to the Strand, where music can be heard from apartments, restaurants, and churches along the way.

The rest of the episode consists of additional voices from various times in history, each telling a tale of "love." First, the poem takes us onboard Queen Elizabeth's sixteenth-century barge, where the Queen flirts with the Earl of Leicester not because of any romantic interest, but as a part of a political power play. From the river barge, the poem travels to twentieth-century Moorgate, London's financial district, and then to Margate Sands, the resort where Eliot spent time in 1921 recovering from nerves and assembling the first three sections of The Waste Land. The section nears its close in ancient Carthage, recalling Vergil's Aeneid and the suicide of Queen Dido, who threw herself on a funeral pyre when her lover Aeneas left her to found Rome. Concluding the section are fragments of the Confessions of Saint Augustine, a self-examining treatise that discloses his uneasy youth and spiritual journey before finding refuge in the Roman Catholic Church.

"Death by Water." By far the shortest section of the poem, "Death by Water" originated as a much longer piece, but Pound excised the bulk of it. The title refers back to Madam Sosostris and her tarot reading: "Fear death by water" (Waste Land, line 55). In this short section, a Phoenician sailor's body drifts underwater as an anonymous speaker laments the tragedy of his early death.

Phlebas the Phoenician may represent Eliot's young friend Jean Verdenal, who drowned in the war, in which case this part of the poem could be elegizing Verdenal's premature death. Various implications can be discerned in the lines. They perhaps suggest the inevitability of death, or the process of material economic exchange, or the importance of self-knowledge. Certainly the ocean imagery connects to the other images of fluidity in the poem. The section might also refer to the Christian ceremony of baptism, which purifies souls for admission to the church. The ceremony's use of water, depending on the spe-

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TIRESIAS

In his footnotes, Eliot claims that Tiresias serves, not as the poem's main character or central figure, but as its unifying persona. "What Tiresias sees, in fact, is the substance of the poem. . . . Just as the one-eyed merchant, seller of currants, melts into the Phoenician sailor, and the latter is not wholly distinct from Ferdinand Prince of Naples, so all the women [in the poem] are one woman, and the two sexes meet in Tiresias" (Waste Land, p. 148). Tiresias, according to Greek mythology, had lived as both a man and a woman. Because of these experiences, he was called to settle an argument between Zeus and Hera, the king and queen of the gods. They asked him whether a man or a woman experienced greater pleasure during physical intimacy. Tiresias supported Zeus's claim that the woman enjoyed it more, and as a result, Hera struck him blind. In Eliot's version of the myth, Tiresias is not only blind, but also shares male and female physical attributes: he is an "old man with wrinkled female breasts" (Waste Land, line 219).
The title provides a key to the three layers: Christianity, the Grail Legend, and Eastern philosophy. In relation to Christianity, “What the Thunder Said” might contain a reference to Revelations and John’s prophecy of the apocalypse, which was given to him as a scroll to eat. This scroll contained the mysteries of God. Themes of Christian damnation and salvation run through “What the Thunder Said.” There are possible allusions to the plagues and droughts that God set upon the Egyptians and promised to deliver in Revelations. There are several references to Christ’s last hours, from his last night spent in prayer in the garden of Gethsemane, to his betrayal by Simon with the cock’s crow at dawn. There is “frosty silence in the gardens,” and we hear the rooster cry “Co co rico co co rico” (Waste Land, lines 323, 392). The poem might also fore-

cast Christ’s subsequent arrest by the Roman soldiers and the crucifixion: “the agony in stony places / The shouting and the crying” and “He who was living is now dead” (Waste Land, lines 324-25, 328). In lines 359-365, we walk with the disciples along the road to Emmaus (a village some distance from Jerusalem) on the day of Christ’s resurrection. They are accompanied by a person whom they do not recognize, and in the poem an unidentified voice asks “Who is the third who is always beside you? / When I count, there are only you and I together / But when I look ahead up the white road / There is always another one walking beside you / Gliding wrapped in a brown mantle” (Waste Land, lines 359-363). The Gospel of Luke later reveals this unknown figure to be Christ after his resurrection. In addition to the Christian interpretation, the third figure anecdote, says the poem’s notes, recalls a memoir of an Antarctic expedition by the famous explorer Ernest Shackleton, in which the exhausted explorers hallucinate and imagine an additional traveler with them.

A second layer of meaning emerges from the section’s references to Jesse Weston’s study of Sir Galahad’s quest for the Holy Grail. In this section of Eliot’s poem, Sir Galahad approaches the Chapel Perilous, where the knight must face a final test of his courage before attaining the grail. We know that Galahad must bear witness to grotesque things, like “bats with baby faces, in the violet light”—an image belonging as much to the ambiance of European expressionism in the years before the Great War as to the world of medieval Gothic; we do not, however, know if Galahad passes his test and actually acquires the Grail (Waste Land, line 379). Late in the poem a rooster appears, recalling the disciple Peter’s final betrayal of Christ; it may also be signaling the departure of the ghosts and terrible spirits from the Chapel, something that would signify Galahad’s success. But the poem is ambiguous to the end and refuses to offer conclusive evidence of a new day.

The last layer of “What the Thunder Said” is rooted in “The Three Great Disciplines” of the Upanishads, treatises in the Sanskrit language on Hindu theology. Three groups of creatures approach their creator, Prajapati: gods, men, and demons. Each of them asks him for advice. To all, he answers, “DA.” The gods interpret this as “control,” as in “control yourselves.” The men interpret it as “give,” as in “give alms.” Finally, the demons interpret it as “sympathize.” After each interpretation, the poem offers a cryptic response about what each of these might mean. For example, after the command is interpreted as “Give,” the poem asks “What have we given?” and posts: “The awful daring of a moment’s surrender / Which an age of prudence can never retract” (Waste Land, lines 401, 402-403). The important point about the incorporation of the Sanskrit word is that it suggests that perhaps Christianity is not the solution to the problems of the Waste Land, nor is placing all faith in Sir Galahad’s Holy Grail quest.

As the poem ends, its text accelerates and spins out of control. The phrases of the verse get shorter, and the languages change even more frequently until the world it has created explodes. We are left with “shantih shantih shantih,” a phrase that translates approximately to “the peace which passeth understanding.” Perhaps the Waste Land we have experienced has been annihilated. If the
poem has succeeded, it might be because, by its last line, we have escaped from this waste land and reached a completely new and unfamiliar place that we cannot yet understand because we do not recognize it.

**Psychoanalysis.** "My nerves are bad tonight," says a speaker in the second section of *The Waste Land*, bringing to the forefront the individual's psychological condition (*Waste Land*, line 111). In 1922, the *New York Evening World* proclaimed psychoanalysis "our most popular science" (North, p. 65). This trend was not limited to the United States. By the early 1920s, psychoanalysis, especially as represented by Sigmund Freud, had become extremely popular in Great Britain also. Suddenly pamphlets addressing anxiety, nervousness and how to cope with one's repressed instincts appeared, and consumers could purchase "products which promised to 'control Stage-Fright and other forms of nervousness' in addition to preventing colds and headaches" (North, p. 66).

In England, the acute problem of shell shock had amplified the urgency of psychological questions. A psychological condition that affected many survivors of the First World War, shell shock is more commonly known today as Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder. Sufferers typically experienced an event that aroused intense horror and/or could have resulted in their death. Soldiers who witnessed the deaths of fellow combatants, as well as nurses and doctors who tried to help the wounded and dying, often suffered from the trauma of these experiences. Symptoms might include intense flashbacks to the event, recurring dreams, or severe reactions to cues that resemble or remind the sufferers of their original trauma.

Initially, psychoanalysts thought that shell shock was linked to hysteria (a common female malady thought to result from over-stimulation). The prescribed treatment often involved some version of the Rest Cure, which required isolation, bed rest and no stimulation from the external world. In other words, patients should not think or talk about their experiences, nor should they attempt to read or otherwise distract themselves. Instead, they should simply relax.

This treatment was not only prescribed to those soldiers who suffered from shell shock. It was a much more general cure for a multitude of psychological ailments. T. S. Eliot and his wife, for example, suffered from nervous disorders, and both sought refuge in sanitariums at various stages of their union. It should be noted, however, that sanitariums do not have the same connotations of disease and mental illness that they may carry today. Indeed, Margate Sands, where Eliot spent three weeks in October of 1921 recovering from excessive stress, was a fashionable seaside resort. In any case, psychological disorders and anxieties were not regarded as criminal or deviant. The public accepted them as illnesses that were both explainable and scientifically treatable.

In England, the Bloomsbury set, a group of prominent artists and thinkers including Lytton Strachey, Clive Bell, Roger Fry, and Virginia Woolf, began to introduce Freud and psychoanalytic ideas to the general public. Lytton Strachey's brother, James Strachey, published English translations of Freud, and the project was subsequently adopted by Woolf's Hogarth Press. Not only did the writers of Bloomsbury publish these editions of Freud, but they also wrote pamphlets about the possible applications of psychoanalytic methods to understanding art.

When Freudian concepts such as repression and the unconscious became part of mainstream culture, the general public tended increasingly to focus on them. Psychoanalysis began to affect, if not produce, the behavior it sought to explain; it became obligatory to develop complexes (North, p. 67). People began to accept both the idea that they harbored a deep, impenetrable emotional region with themselves, and the idea that their behavior might not always stem from rational causes. They started to look for psychological explanations of patterns of behavior, and to acknowledge that the unconscious might influence individuals in peculiarly oblique ways.

The proliferation of these ideas had a significant impact on many fields of endeavor, such as politics, advertising, and literature. For example, the notion that advertising might do more than simply notify consumers of the availability of a product had not occurred to anyone before (North, p. 77). Now the popular enthusiasm for psychology encouraged advertisers to consider ways of manipulating the customer's desires.

The complicated relationship of "modern" literature to psychology was likewise becoming widely recognized. Works like *The Waste Land*, James Joyce's *Ulysses*, and Virginia Woolf's *Mrs. Dalloway* (also in WLAIT 4: British and Irish Literature and Its Times) were all regarded as psychological studies. This affiliation of literary works to psychology helps explain the extreme critical reactions that such works inspired. Readers might find the perceived exploration of an in-
individual's psychology offensive (especially in the case of a character like Joyce's Leopold Bloom, who thinks about "base" matters such as masturbation and digestion) or they might find such an exploration fascinating. Probably the association helped The Waste Land get published, since it could be regarded as "a most distressingly moving account of Eliot's own agonized state of mind during the years which preceded his nervous breakdown" (Bush in North, p. 81). Marketing the poem as an extreme case study, given the popularity of all things psychological, might make it more appealing to readers.

Sources. Eliot's poetry assumes knowledge of a wide range of literary and cultural sources. The Waste Land draws upon classical mythology; English, French, and Italian poetry; Shakespearean drama; German opera; contemporary London landmarks; popular ballads; scientific and other learned treatises; biblical literature; and even Eastern philosophy. When the poem first appeared, its frequent deployment of allusions and quotations aroused widespread controversy. Many critics faulted the work for what they perceived as a lack of originality and even went so far as to accuse Eliot of plagiarism. However, other readers have suggested that Eliot's use of these sources represents an attempt to revitalize the great works of the past and reconstruct literary traditions.

Two main sources have often been used as "keys" to unlocking The Waste Land: Jesse Weston's From Ritual to Romance (1920) and Sir James Frazer's The Golden Bough (12 vols. 1890-1915). In the notes to the poem, Eliot implies that the secret to understanding The Waste Land lies in Ritual to Romance. In this work, Weston investigates the occult myth of the Fisher King, an impotent king whose land is cursed to endure infertility until a stranger arrives to take up specific challenges. Eliot and Weston connect this myth to Christ and the Holy Grail (Southam, p. 128). In the Christian myth, the Grail is the cup used by Christ and his disciples at the Last Supper and later to catch the blood from his side at the crucifixion. The Grail gets lost, and a knight (in Arthurian legend, Sir Galahad) must find it in order to bring healing and restoration to the dying kingdom. The knight's quest takes him to the Chapel Perilous, where, like the stranger in the Fisher King myth, he must answer certain questions about the Grail to lift mankind's curse.

Eliot studied James Frazer's The Golden Bough while at Harvard and claimed to draw upon Frazer's elaborate study of primitive myth and ritual, especially the vegetation ceremonies that were meant to appease the "powers of nature and ensure the continuing cycle of the seasons, with the life of the new year to be born out of the old" (Southam, p. 129). Other important sources for The Waste Land include (but are not limited to) Dante's Inferno and Purgatorio, The Confessions of St. Augustine, the Bible, The Tempest, the Upanishads, and Baudelaire's Fleurs du Mal.

Eliot's practice of allusion has encouraged readers to search for a key to the poem somewhere outside its borders. Instead of grappling with the poem itself, they expect to find what it means in sources like The Golden Bough. But even a careful consideration of The Waste Land's notes and sources does not provide a recipe for interpretation. The sources may help explain some of Eliot's own thought processes, or bring references into sharper relief, or promote an understanding of the poem's many echoes and voices. Ultimately, however, the disorientation experienced when reading The Waste Land cannot be remedied by an outside source, for this shock effect comprises the heart of the poem.

Literary context. The form of The Waste Land is unlike that of any work Eliot's contemporaries had ever encountered. It attempts, many critics agree, to mirror the so-called modern condition. According to this view, experience is broken, fragmented, alien and alienating. The world is out of joint and hopelessly equivocal. Thus, the poem consists of a montage of voices, echoes, and quotations. Inherent in this polyphonic form, in Eliot's ventriloquism, may be the suggestion that everything one can experience is necessarily secondhand. There is no truly original thought or expression—only the great store-

HE DO THE POLICE IN DIFFERENT VOICES

Originally, Eliot planned to call the poem, "He Do The Police in Different Voices," a quotation from Our Mutual Friend, by Charles Dickens. In this novel, "Sloopy is a foundling adopted by old Betty Higden, a poor widow. 'I do love a newspaper,' she says. 'You mightn't think it, but Sloopy is a beautiful reader of a newspaper. He do the Police in different voices.'' (The Waste Land, p. 125). The title would have pointed up the dramatic nature of the poem and the different voices readers encounter along their journey through its landscape.
house of cultural forms waiting to be revived like discarded fashions. The decay of the life of language is reflected in the routinized and disembodied existence of human beings in the modern metropolis. In the face of such a drying up of the immediate sources of life, the poet can only wonder: "What shall [we] do now? What shall [we] do?" (Waste Land, line 130).

On the other hand, the poem can be viewed as attempting to inject new life into a culturally dead world. Though fragmentary, the quotations and echoes may be the only available lifeline out of the waste land of the modern world. Perhaps by harking back to the best thoughts and ideas of the past, the poem will somehow be able to rejuvenate a sense of literary tradition or culture. In any case, the consensus is that, in his rendering of the shattering incongruities of modern civilization, Eliot’s poetic design and linguistic modulation are both groundbreaking and powerfully expressive. Unlike many other poets of the early twentieth century, Eliot did not write directly in conventional poetic forms. He incorporated them, usually ironically, when it suited his purpose, but believed that poetry must change itself drastically in order to represent life in the modern world. In his view, conventional forms were not adequate to the modern condition because they implied a vision of order that was artificial and contrived.

Reception. Few poems have provoked such strong reactions from their readers as The Waste Land. Critics’ original responses fell into two sharply opposed camps. While readers either loved the work or hated it, everyone recognized the impact that it would have on poetry and literature. The poem was undeniably innovative. Written in free verse, it made heavy use of literary allusions, refused linear or logical interpretations, and relied more on emotional impact than on any rational argument.

The opinions of the poem’s detractors may best be represented by Louis Untermeyer, who shared his disdain in the Freeman, dismissing the verse as “a pompous parade of erudition, a lengthy extension of earlier disillusion, a kaleidoscopic movement in which the bright pieces fail to atone for the absence of an integrated design” (Untermeyer in Grant, p. 151). He also complained that “Mr. Eliot does not disdain to sink to doggerel that would be refused admission to the cheapest of daily columns” (Untermeyer in Grant, p. 152). Untermeyer faults the poet for writing about “low” subject matter, topics that are inappropriate for the newspaper, let alone literature. The poem, said this and other reviews, had nothing real to say to the world. Instead it was merely a showcase of Eliot’s own personal erudition. The references to Dante and Shakespeare were plain arrogance and episodes like the one featuring the “young man carbuncular” were included for their shock value alone.

In the Double Dealer, another more sympathetic reviewer charged that, though the poem...
can appreciate all of its intellectual and emotional associations because their significance is of such an individual nature (J.M. in Grant, p. 171).

Finally, there were critics who thought the poem a work of genius. Their reviews attempt to justify the disorientation that most readers experienced. Conrad Aiken, for example, claimed that the poem "has an emotional value far clearer and richer than its arbitrary and rather unworkable logical value" (Aiken in Grant, p. 160). Aiken praised the overall emotional impact, concluding his review with the proclamation that "the poem succeeds . . . by virtue of its incoherence . . . [and] its ambiguities" (Aiken in Grant, p. 161). What would otherwise be flaws become virtues because they are honest representations of modern experience.

—Erin Templeton

For More Information


