

Eliot's Poetry

Analysis

Eliot attributed a great deal of his early style to the French Symbolists--Rimbaud, Baudelaire, Mallarmé, and Laforgue--whom he first encountered in college, in a book by Arthur Symonds called *The Symbolist Movement in Literature*. It is easy to understand why a young aspiring poet would want to imitate these glamorous (affascinante) bohemian figures, but their ultimate effect on his poetry is perhaps less profound than he claimed. While he took from them their ability to infuse poetry with high intellectualism while maintaining a sensuousness of language, Eliot also developed a great deal that was new and original. His early works, like "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock" and *The Waste Land*, draw on a wide range of cultural reference to depict a modern world that is in ruins yet somehow beautiful and deeply meaningful. Eliot uses techniques like pastiche and juxtaposition to make his points without having to argue them explicitly. As Ezra Pound once famously said, Eliot truly did "modernize himself." In addition to showcasing (mettere in mostra) a variety of poetic innovations, Eliot's early poetry also develops a series of characters who fit the type of the modern man as described by Fitzgerald, Faulkner, and others of Eliot's contemporaries. The title character of "Prufrock" is a perfect example: solitary, neurasthenic (nevrastenico), overly (estremamente) intellectual, and utterly incapable of expressing himself to the outside world.

As Eliot grew older, and particularly after he converted to Christianity, his poetry changed. The later poems emphasize depth of analysis over breadth of allusion; they simultaneously become more hopeful in tone: Thus, a work such as *Four Quartets* explores more philosophical territory and offers propositions (=suggestions) instead of nihilism (=the belief that nothing has any meaning or value). The experiences of living in England during World War II inform the *Quartets*, which address issues of time, experience, mortality, and art. Rather than lamenting the ruin of modern culture and seeking redemption in the cultural past, as *The Waste Land* does, the quartets offer ways around human limits through art and spirituality. The pastiche of the earlier works is replaced by philosophy and logic, and the formal experiments of his early years are put aside in favour of a new language consciousness, which emphasizes the sounds and other physical properties of words to create musical, dramatic, and other subtle effects.

However, while Eliot's poetry underwent significance transformations over the course of his career, his poems also bear many unifying aspects: all of Eliot's poetry is marked by a conscious desire to bring together the intellectual, the aesthetic, and the emotional in a way that both honours the past and acknowledges the present. Eliot is always conscious of his own efforts, and he frequently comments on his poetic endeavours (tentative, sforzi) in the poems themselves. This humility, which often comes across as melancholy, makes Eliot's some of the most personal, as well as the most intellectually satisfying, poetry in the English language.

Context

Thomas Stearns Eliot, or T.S. Eliot as he is better known, was born in 1888 in St. Louis. He was the son of a prominent industrialist who came from a well-connected Boston family. Eliot always felt the loss of his family's New England roots and seemed to be somewhat ashamed of his father's business success; throughout his life he continually sought to return to the epicentre of Anglo-Saxon culture, first by attending Harvard and then by emigrating to England, where he lived from 1914 until his death. Eliot began graduate study in philosophy at Harvard and completed his dissertation, although the outbreak (scoppio) of World War I prevented him from taking his examinations and receiving the degree. By that time, though, Eliot had already written "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock," and the War, which kept him in England, led him to decide to pursue poetry full-time.

Eliot met Ezra Pound in 1914, as well, and it was Pound who was his main mentor and editor and who got his poems published and noticed. During a 1921 break from his job as a bank clerk (to recover from a mental breakdown), Eliot finished the work that was to secure him fame, *The Waste Land*. This poem, heavily edited by Pound and perhaps also by Eliot's wife, Vivien, addressed the fragmentation and alienation characteristic of modern culture, making use of these fragments to create a new kind of poetry. It was also around this time that Eliot began to write criticism, partly in an effort to explain his own methods. In 1925, he went to work for the publishing house Faber & Faber. Despite the distraction of his wife's increasingly serious bouts (attacchi) of mental illness, Eliot was from this time until his death the pre-eminent literary figure in the English-speaking world; indeed, he was so monumental that younger poets often went out of their way to avoid his looming (incombente) shadow, painstakingly (meticolosamente) avoiding all similarities of style.

Eliot became interested in religion in the later 1920s and eventually converted to Anglicanism. His poetry from this point onward shows a greater religious bent (piega), although it never becomes dogmatic the way his sometimes controversial cultural criticism does. *Four Quartets*, his last major poetic work, combines a Christian sensibility with a profound uncertainty resulting from the war's devastation of Europe. Eliot died in 1965 in London.

T. S. Eliot: The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock (1919)

*Eliot was born in St. Louis and educated at Harvard University, but most of his adult life was passed in London. In the vanguard of the artistic movement known as Modernism, Eliot was a unique innovator in poetry and *The Waste Land* (1922) stands as one of the most original and influential poems of the twentieth century. As a young man he suffered a religious crisis and a nervous breakdown before regaining his emotional equilibrium and Christian faith. His early poetry, including "*Prufrock*," deals with spiritually exhausted people who exist in the impersonal modern city. *Prufrock* is a representative character who cannot reconcile his thoughts and understanding with his feelings and will. The poem displays several levels of irony, the most important of which grows out of the vain, weak man's insights into his sterile life and his lack of will to change that life. The poem is replete with (pieno di) images of enervation (infiacchimento) and paralysis, such as the evening described as "etherized," immobile. *Prufrock* understands that he and his associates (compagni) lack authenticity. One part of himself would like to startle(far sussultare) them out of their meaningless lives, but to accomplish (realizzare) this he would have to risk disturbing his "universe," being rejected. The latter part of the poem captures his sense defeat for failing to act courageously. Eliot helped to set the modernist fashion for blending (fondere) references to the classics with the most sordid(gretto, meschino) type of realism, then expressing the blend in majestic language which seems to mock the subject.*

What makes this poem different from a normal love song?

*S'io credesse che mia risposta fosse
A persona che mai tornasse al mondo,
Questa fiamma staria senza piu scosse.
Ma perciocche giammai di questo fondo
Non torno vivo alcun, s'i'odo il vero,
Senza tema d'infamia ti rispondo. (1)*

Let us go then, you and I,
When the evening is spread out against the sky
Like a patient etherized (2) upon a table;

Let us go, through certain half-deserted streets,
The muttering retreats
Of restless nights in one-night cheap hotels
And [sawdust \(3\)](#) restaurants with oyster-shells:
Streets that follow like a tedious argument
Of insidious intent
To lead you to an overwhelming question . . .
Oh, do not ask, "What is it?"
Let us go and make our visit.

In the room the women come and go
Talking of [Michelangelo. \(4\)](#)

The yellow fog that rubs its back upon the window-panes,
The yellow smoke that rubs its muzzle on the window-panes
Licked its tongue into the corners of the evening,
Lingered upon the pools that stand in drains,
Let fall upon its back the soot that falls from chimneys,
Slipped by the terrace, made a sudden leap,
And seeing that it was a soft October night,
Curled once about the house, and fell asleep.

And indeed there will be time
For the yellow smoke that slides along the street,
Rubbing its back upon the window-panes;
There will be time, there will be time
To prepare a face to meet the faces that you meet;
There will be time to murder and create,
And time for all the works and days of hands
That lift and drop a question on your plate;
Time for you and time for me,
And time yet for a hundred indecisions,
And for a hundred visions and revisions,
Before the taking of a toast and tea.

In the room the women come and go
Talking of Michelangelo.

And indeed there will be time
To wonder, "Do I dare?" and, "Do I dare?"
Time to turn back and descend the stair,
With a bald spot in the middle of my hair--
[They will say: "How his hair is growing thin!"]
My morning coat, my collar mounting firmly to the chin,
My necktie rich and modest, but asserted by a simple pin--
[They will say: "But how his arms and legs are thin!"]
Do I dare
Disturb the universe?

In a minute there is time
For decisions and revisions which a minute will reverse.

For I have known them all already, known them all--
Have known the evenings, mornings, afternoons,
I have measured out my life with coffee spoons;
I know the voices dying with a dying fall
Beneath the music from a farther room.
So how should I presume?

And I have known the eyes already, known them all--
The eyes that fix you in a formulated phrase,
And when I am formulated, sprawling on a pin,
When I am pinned and wriggling on the wall,
Then how should I begin
To spit out all the butt-ends of my days and ways?
And how should I presume?

And I have known the arms already, known them all--
Arms that are braceleted and white and bare
[But in the lamplight, downed with light brown hair!]
Is it perfume from a dress
That makes me so digress?
Arms that lie along a table, or wrap about a shawl.
And should I then presume?
And how should I begin?

.....
Shall I say, I have gone at dusk through narrow streets
And watched the smoke that rises from the pipes
Of lonely men in shirt-sleeves, leaning out of windows? . . .

I should have been a pair of ragged claws
Scuttling across the floors of silent seas.

.....

And the afternoon, the evening, sleeps so peacefully!
Smoothed by long fingers,
Asleep . . . tired . . . or it malingers,
Stretched on the floor, here beside you and me.
Should I, after tea and [cakes and ices, \(5\)](#)
Have the strength to force the moment to its crisis?
But though I have wept and fasted, wept and prayed,
Though I have seen my head [grown slightly bald] [brought in upon a platter, \(6\)](#)
I am no prophet--and here's no great matter;
I have seen the moment of my greatness flicker,
And I have seen the eternal Footman hold my coat, and snicker,
And in short, I was afraid.

And would it have been worth it, after all,
 After the cups, the marmalade, the tea,
 Among the porcelain, among some talk of you and me,
 Would it have been worth while,
 To have bitten off the matter with a smile,
 To have squeezed the universe into a ball
 To roll it toward some overwhelming question,
 To say: "I am [Lazarus, \(7\)](#) come from the dead
 Come back to tell you all, I shall tell you all"--
 If one, settling a pillow by her head,
 Should say: "That is not what I meant at all.
 That is not it, at all."

And would it have been worth it, after all,
 Would it have been worth while,
 After the sunsets and the dooryards and the sprinkled streets,
 After the novels, after the teacups, after the skirts that trail along the
 floor--
 And this, and so much more?--
 It is impossible to say just what I mean!
 But as if a [magic lantern \(8\)](#) threw the nerves in patterns on a screen:
 Would it have been worth while
 If one, settling a pillow or throwing off a shawl,
 And turning toward the window, should say:
 "That is not it at all,
 That is not what I meant, at all."

.....

No! I am not [Prince Hamlet, \(9\)](#) nor was meant to be;
 Am an attendant lord, one that will do
 To swell a progress, start a scene or two,
 Advise the prince; no doubt, an easy tool,
 Deferential, glad to be of use,
 Politic, cautious, and meticulous;
 Full of high sentence, but a bit obtuse
 At times, indeed, almost ridiculous--
 Almost, at times, the Fool.

I grow old . . . I grow old . . .
 I shall wear the bottoms of my trousers rolled.

Shall I part my hair behind? Do I dare to eat a peach?
 I shall wear white flannel trousers, and walk upon the beach.
 I have heard the mermaids singing, each to each.

I do not think that they will sing to me.

I have seen them riding seaward on the waves
 Combing the white hair of the waves blown back
 When the wind blows the water white and black.

We have lingered in the chambers of the sea
 By sea-girls wreathed with seaweed red and brown
 Till human voices wake us, and we drown.

- (1) A passage from Dante Alighieri's *Inferno* (Canto 27, lines 61-66) spoken by Guido da Montefeltro in response to the questions of Dante, who Guido supposes is dead, since he is in Hell: The flame in which Guido is encased vibrates as he speaks: "If I thought that that I was replying to someone who would ever return to the world, this flame would cease to flicker. But since no one ever returns from these depths alive, if what I've heard is true, I will answer you without fear of infamy."
- (2) Anesthetized with ether; but also suggesting "made ethereal," less real.
- (3) Cheap bars and restaurants used to spread sawdust on the floor to soak up spilled beer, etc.
- (4) The great Renaissance Italian artist.
- (5) Cookies and ice cream.
- (6) Like John the Baptist (see Matthew 14: 1-12)
- (7) A man raised from death by Jesus (see John 11: 1-44).
- (8) Early form of slide projector.
- (9) Shakespeare's sensitive hero known for procrastination.

"The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock"

Summary

This poem, the earliest of Eliot's major works, was completed in 1910 or 1911 but not published until 1915. **It is an examination of the tortured psyche of the prototypical modern man--overeducated, eloquent, neurotic, and emotionally stilted** (artificioso, innaturale). Prufrock, the poem's speaker, seems to be addressing a potential lover, with whom he would like to "force the moment to its crisis" by somehow consummating their relationship. But Prufrock knows too much of life to "dare" (osare) an approach to the woman: In his mind he hears the comments others make about his inadequacies, and he chides himself for (si rimprovera per) "presuming" emotional interaction could be possible at all. The poem moves from a series of fairly concrete (for Eliot) physical settings--a cityscape (the famous "patient etherised upon a table") and several interiors (women's arms in the lamplight, coffee spoons, fireplaces)--to a series of vague ocean images conveying Prufrock's emotional distance from the world as he comes to recognize his second-rate status ("I am not Prince Hamlet"). "Prufrock" is powerful for its range of intellectual reference and also for the vividness of character achieved.

Form

"Prufrock" is a variation on the dramatic monologue, a type of poem popular with Eliot's predecessors. Dramatic monologues are similar to soliloquies in plays. Three things characterize the dramatic monologue, according to M.H. Abrams. First, they are the utterances of a specific individual (not the poet) at a specific moment in time. Secondly, the monologue is specifically directed at a listener or listeners whose presence is not directly referenced but is merely suggested in the speaker's words.

Third, the primary focus is the development and revelation of the speaker's character. Eliot modernizes the form by removing the implied listeners and focusing on Prufrock's interiority and isolation. The epigraph to this poem, from Dante's *Inferno*, describes Prufrock's ideal listener: one who is as lost as the speaker and will never betray to the world the content of Prufrock's present confessions. In the world Prufrock describes, though, no such sympathetic figure exists, and he must, therefore, be content with silent reflection. In its focus on character and its dramatic sensibility, "Prufrock" anticipates Eliot's later, dramatic works.

The rhyme scheme of this poem is irregular but not random. While sections of the poem may resemble free verse, in reality, "Prufrock" is a carefully structured amalgamation of poetic forms. The bits and pieces of rhyme become much more apparent when the poem is read aloud. One of the most prominent formal characteristics of this work is the use of refrains. Prufrock's continual return to the "women [who] come and go / Talking of Michelangelo" and his recurrent questionings ("how should I presume?") and pessimistic appraisals (valutazioni) ("That is not it, at all.") both reference an earlier poetic tradition and help Eliot describe the consciousness of a modern, neurotic individual. Prufrock's obsessiveness is aesthetic, but it is also a sign of compulsiveness and isolation. Another important formal feature is the use of fragments of sonnet form, particularly at the poem's conclusion. The three three-line stanzas are rhymed as the conclusion of a Petrarchan sonnet would be, but their pessimistic, anti-romantic content, coupled with the despairing interjection, "I do not think they (the mermaids) would sing to me," creates a contrast that comments bitterly on the bleakness (desolazione, freddezza) of modernity.

Commentary

"Prufrock" displays the two most important characteristics of Eliot's early poetry. First, it is strongly influenced by the French Symbolists, like Mallarmé, Rimbaud, and Baudelaire, whom Eliot had been reading almost constantly while writing the poem. **From the Symbolists, Eliot takes his sensuous language** and eye for unnerving (impressionante, che fa paura) or anti-aesthetic detail that nevertheless contributes to the overall beauty of the poem (the yellow smoke and the hair-covered arms of the women are two good examples of this). **The Symbolists, too, privileged the same kind of individual Eliot creates with Prufrock: the moody, urban, isolated-yet-sensitive thinker**. However, whereas the Symbolists would have been more likely to make their speaker himself a poet or artist, Eliot chooses to make Prufrock an unacknowledged poet, a sort of artist for the common man. The second defining characteristic of this poem is its use of fragmentation and juxtaposition. Eliot sustained his interest in fragmentation and its applications throughout his career, and his use of the technique changes in important ways across his body of work: Here, the subjects undergoing fragmentation (and reassembly) are mental focus and certain sets of imagery; in *The Waste Land*, it is modern culture that splinters (che va in pezzi, che si frantuma); in the *Four Quartets* we find the fragments of attempted philosophical systems. Eliot's use of bits and pieces of formal structure suggests that fragmentation, although anxiety-provoking, is nevertheless productive; had he chosen to write in free verse, the poem would have seemed much more nihilistic. The kinds of imagery Eliot uses also suggest that something new can be made from the ruins: The series of hypothetical encounters at the poem's centre are iterated and discontinuous but nevertheless lead to a sort of epiphany (albeit /sebbene/ a dark one) rather than just leading nowhere. Eliot also introduces an image that will recur in his later poetry, that of the scavenger (spazzino). Prufrock thinks that he "should have been a pair of ragged claws / Scuttling across the floors of silent seas." Crabs (granchi) are scavengers, garbage-eaters who live off refuse that makes its way to the sea floor. Eliot's discussions of his own poetic technique (see especially his essay "Tradition and the Individual Talent") suggest that making something beautiful out of the refuse of

modern life, as a crab sustains and nourishes itself on garbage, may, in fact, be the highest form of art. At the very least, this notion subverts romantic ideals about art; at best, it suggests that fragments may become reintegrated, that art may be in some way therapeutic for a broken modern world. In *The Waste Land*, crabs become rats, and the optimism disappears, but here Eliot seems to assert only the limitless potential of scavenging. "Prufrock" ends with the hero assigning himself a role in one of Shakespeare's plays: While he is no Hamlet, he may yet be useful and important as "an attendant lord, one that will do / To swell a progress, start a scene or two..." This implies that there is still a continuity between Shakespeare's world and ours, that *Hamlet* is still relevant to us and that we are still part of a world that could produce something like Shakespeare's plays. Implicit in this, of course, is the suggestion that Eliot, who has created an "attendant lord," may now go on to create another Hamlet. While "Prufrock" ends with a devaluation of its hero, it exalts (esalta) its creator. Or does it? The last line of the poem suggests otherwise--that when the world intrudes, when "human voices wake us," the dream is shattered (distrutto): "we drown" (affoghiamo). With this single line, Eliot dismantles (smantella, demolisce) the romantic notion that poetic genius is all that is needed to triumph over the destructive, impersonal forces of the modern world. In reality, Eliot the poet is little better than his creation: He differs from Prufrock only by retaining a bit of hubris (superbia, tracotanza), which shows through from time to time. Eliot's poetic creation, thus, mirrors Prufrock's soliloquy: Both are an expression of aesthetic ability and sensitivity that seems to have no place in the modern world. This realistic, anti-romantic outlook (punto di vista) sets the stage (prepara) for Eliot's later works, including *The Waste Land*.

T.S. Eliot (1888–1965). *The Waste Land*. 1922.

The Waste Land

Nam Sibyllam quidem Cumis ego ipse oculis meis
vidi in ampulla pendere, et cum illi pueri dicerent:
Σίβυλλα τί θέλεις; respondebat illa: ἀποθανεῖν θέλω.

I. THE BURIAL OF THE DEAD

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 5
Earth in forgetful snow, feeding
A little life with dried tubers.
Summer surprised us, coming over the Starnbergersee
With a shower of rain; we stopped in the colonnade,
And went on in sunlight, into the Hofgarten, 10
And drank coffee, and talked for an hour.
Bin gar keine Russin, stamm' aus Litauen, echt deutsch.
And when we were children, staying at the archduke's,
My cousin's, he took me out on a sled,

And I was frightened. He said, Marie, 15
 Marie, hold on tight. And down we went.
 In the mountains, there you feel free.
 I read, much of the night, and go south in the winter.

What are the roots that clutch, what branches grow 20
 Out of this stony rubbish? Son of man,
 You cannot say, or guess, for you know only
 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 25
 There is shadow under this red rock,
 (Come in under the shadow of this red rock),
 And I will show you something different from either
 Your shadow at morning striding behind you
 Or your shadow at evening rising to meet you; 30
 I will show you fear in a handful of dust.

*Frisch weht der Wind
 Der Heimat zu.
 Mein Irisch Kind,
 Wo weilest du?*

'You gave me hyacinths first a year ago; 35
 'They called me the hyacinth girl.'
 —Yet when we came back, late, from the Hyacinth garden,
 Your arms full, and your hair wet, I could not
 Speak, and my eyes failed, I was neither 40
 Living nor dead, and I knew nothing,
 Looking into the heart of light, the silence.
Od' und leer das Meer.

Madame Sosostris, famous clairvoyante,
 Had a bad cold, nevertheless 45
 Is known to be the wisest woman in Europe,
 With a wicked pack of cards. Here, said she,
 Is your card, the drowned Phoenician Sailor,
 (Those are pearls that were his eyes. Look!)
 Here is Belladonna, the Lady of the Rocks,
 The lady of situations. 50
 Here is the man with three staves, and here the Wheel,
 And here is the one-eyed merchant, and this card,
 Which is blank, is something he carries on his back,
 Which I am forbidden to see. I do not find 55
 The Hanged Man. Fear death by water.
 I see crowds of people, walking round in a ring.
 Thank you. If you see dear Mrs. Equitone,
 Tell her I bring the horoscope myself:
 One must be so careful these days.

Unreal City, 60
 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.
 Sighs, short and infrequent, were exhaled,
 And each man fixed his eyes before his feet. 65
 Flowed up the hill and down King William Street,
 To where Saint Mary Woolnoth kept the hours
 With a dead sound on the final stroke of nine.
 There I saw one I knew, and stopped him, crying 'Stetson!
 'You who were with me in the ships at Mylae! 70
 '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?
 'Oh keep the Dog far hence, that's friend to men,
 'Or with his nails he'll dig it up again! 75
 'You! hypocrite lecteur!—mon semblable,—mon frère!'

The Waste Land Section I: "The Burial of the Dead"

Summary

The first section of *The Waste Land* takes its title from a line in the Anglican burial service. It is made up of four vignettes (=a short description in a book or play showing the typical features of a person or situation), each seemingly from the perspective (punto di vista) of a different speaker. The first is an autobiographical snippet (frammento) from the childhood of an aristocratic woman, in which she recalls sledding (andare in slitta) and claims that she is German, not Russian (this would be important if the woman is meant to be a member of the recently defeated Austrian imperial family). The woman mixes a meditation on the seasons with remarks on the barren (spoglio) state of her current existence ("I read, much of the night, and go south in the winter"). The second section is a prophetic, apocalyptic invitation to journey into a desert waste, where the speaker will show the reader "something different from either / Your shadow at morning striding behind you / Or your shadow at evening rising to meet you; / [He] will show you fear in a handful of dust" (Evelyn Waugh took the title for one of his best-known novels from these lines). The almost threatening prophetic tone is mixed with childhood reminiscences about a "hyacinth girl" and a nihilistic epiphany the speaker has after an encounter with her. These recollections are filtered through quotations from Wagner's operatic version of *Tristan und Isolde*, an Arthurian tale of adultery and loss. The third episode in this section describes an imaginative tarot reading (lettura dei tarocchi), in which some of the cards Eliot includes in the reading are not part of an actual tarot deck. The final episode of the section is the most surreal. The speaker walks through a London populated by ghosts of the dead. He confronts a figure with whom he once fought in a battle that seems to conflate the clashes of World War I with the Punic Wars between Rome and Carthage (both futile and excessively destructive wars). The speaker asks the ghostly figure, Stetson, about the fate of a corpse planted in his garden. The episode concludes with a famous line from the preface to Baudelaire's *Fleurs du Mal* (an important collection of Symbolist poetry), accusing the reader of sharing in the poet's sins.

Form

Like "Prufrock," this section of *The Waste Land* can be seen as a modified dramatic monologue. The four speakers in this section are frantic in their need to speak, to find an audience, but they find themselves surrounded by dead people and thwarted (ostacolati) by outside circumstances, like wars.

Because the sections are so short and the situations so confusing, the effect is not one of an overwhelming (travolgente) impression of a single character; instead, the reader is left with the feeling of being trapped in a crowd, unable to find a familiar face.

Also like "Prufrock," *The Waste Land* employs only partial rhyme schemes and short bursts (rottura) of structure. These are meant to reference--but also rework-- the literary past, achieving simultaneously a stabilizing and a defamiliarizing effect. The world of *The Waste Land* has some parallels to an earlier time, but it cannot be approached in the same way. The inclusion of fragments in languages other than English further complicates matters. The reader is not expected to be able to translate these immediately; rather, they are reminders of the cosmopolitan nature of twentieth-century Europe and of mankind's fate after the Tower of Babel: We will never be able to perfectly comprehend one another.

Commentary

Not only is *The Waste Land* Eliot's greatest work, but it may be--along with Joyce's *Ulysses*--the greatest work of all modernist literature. Most of the poem was written in 1921, and it first appeared in print in 1922. As the poem's dedication indicates, Eliot received a great deal of guidance from Ezra Pound, who encouraged him to cut large sections of the planned work and to break up the rhyme scheme. Recent scholarship suggests that Eliot's wife, Vivien, also had a significant role in the poem's final form. A long work divided into five sections, *The Waste Land* takes on the degraded mess that Eliot considered modern culture to constitute, particularly after the first World War had ravaged (devastato) Europe. A sign of the pessimism with which Eliot approaches his subject is the poem's epigraph, taken from the *Satyricon*, in which the Sibyl (a woman with prophetic powers who ages but never dies) looks at the future and proclaims that she only wants to die. The Sibyl's predicament (situazione difficile) mirrors what Eliot sees as his own: He lives in a culture that has decayed and withered but will not expire, and he is forced to live with reminders of its former glory. Thus, the underlying plot of *The Waste Land*, inasmuch as (poichè) it can be said to have one, revolves around Eliot's reading of two extraordinarily influential contemporary cultural/anthropological texts, Jessie Weston's *From Ritual to Romance* and Sir James Frazer's *The Golden Bough*. Both of these works focus on the persistence of ancient fertility rituals in modern thought and religion; of particular interest to both authors is the story of the Fisher King, who has been wounded in the genitals and whose lack of potency is the cause of his country becoming a desiccated "waste land." Heal the Fisher King, the legend says, and the land will regain its fertility. According to Weston and Frazer, healing the Fisher King has been the subject of mythic tales from ancient Egypt to Arthurian England. Eliot picks up on the figure of the Fisher King legend's wasteland as an appropriate description of the state of modern society. The important difference, of course, is that in Eliot's world there is no way to heal the Fisher King; perhaps there is no Fisher King at all. The legend's imperfect integration into a modern meditation highlights the lack of a unifying narrative (like religion or mythology) in the modern world.

Eliot's poem, like the anthropological texts that inspired it, draws on a vast range of sources. Eliot provided copious footnotes with the publication of *The Waste Land* in book form; these are an excellent source for tracking down the origins of a reference. Many of the references are from the Bible: at the time of the poem's writing Eliot was just beginning to develop an interest in Christianity that would reach its apex in the *Four Quartets*. The overall range of allusions in *The Waste Land*, though, suggests no overarching paradigm but rather a grab bag (calderone) of broken fragments that must somehow be pieced together to form a coherent whole. While Eliot employs a deliberately difficult style and seems often to find the most obscure reference possible, he means to do more than just frustrate his reader and display his own intelligence: He intends to provide a mimetic account of life in the confusing world of the twentieth century.

The Waste Land opens with a reference to Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales*. In this case, though, April is not the happy month of pilgrimages and storytelling. It is instead the time when the land should be regenerating after a long winter. Regeneration, though, is painful, for it brings back reminders of a more fertile and happier past. In the modern world, winter, the time of forgetfulness and numbness, is indeed preferable. Marie's childhood recollections are also painful: the simple world of cousins, sledding, and coffee in the park has been replaced by a complex set of emotional and political consequences resulting from the war. The topic of memory, particularly when it involves remembering the dead, is of critical importance in *The Waste Land*. Memory creates a confrontation of the past with the present, a juxtaposition that points out just how badly things have decayed. Marie reads for most of the night: ostracized by politics, she is unable to do much else. To read is also to remember a better past, which could produce a coherent literary culture.

The second episode contains a troubled religious proposition. The speaker describes a true wasteland of "stony rubbish"; in it, he says, man can recognize only "[a] heap of broken images." Yet the scene seems to offer salvation: shade and a vision of something new and different. The vision consists only of nothingness--a handful of dust--which is so profound as to be frightening; yet truth also resides here: No longer a religious phenomenon achieved through Christ, truth is represented by a mere void (niente altro che un vuoto). The speaker remembers a female figure from his past, with whom he has apparently had some sort of romantic involvement. In contrast to the present setting in the desert, his memories are lush (rigogliose), full of water and blooming flowers. The vibrancy of the earlier scene, though, leads the speaker to a revelation of the nothingness he now offers to show the reader. Again memory serves to contrast the past with the present, but here it also serves to explode the idea of coherence in either place. In the episode from the past, the "nothingness" is more clearly a sexual failure, a moment of impotence. Despite the overall fecundity and joy of the moment, no reconciliation, and, therefore, no action, is possible. This in turn leads directly to the desert waste of the present. In the final line of the episode attention turns from the desert to the sea. Here, the sea is not a locus for the fear of nothingness, and neither is it the locus for a philosophical interpretation of nothingness; rather, it is the site of true, essential nothingness itself. The line comes from a section of *Tristan und Isolde* where Tristan waits for Isolde to come heal him (guarirlo). She is supposedly coming by ship but fails to arrive. The ocean is truly empty, devoid of (privo della) the possibility of healing or revelation.

The third episode explores Eliot's fascination with transformation. The tarot reader Madame Sosostriis conducts the most outrageous (poco credibile) form of "reading" possible, transforming a series of vague symbols into predictions, many of which will come true in succeeding sections of the poem. Eliot transforms the traditional tarot pack to serve his purposes. The drowned sailor makes reference to the ultimate work of magic and transformation in English literature, Shakespeare's *The Tempest* ("Those are pearls that were his eyes" is a quote from one of Ariel's songs). Transformation in *The Tempest*, though, is the result of the highest art of humankind. Here, transformation is associated with fraud, vulgarity, and cheap mysticism. That Madame Sosostriis will prove to be right in her predictions of death and transformation is a direct commentary on the failed religious mysticism and prophecy of the preceding desert section.

The final episode of the first section allows Eliot finally to establish the true wasteland of the poem, the modern 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. Stetson, the apparition the speaker recognizes, is a fallen war comrade (camerata, compagno). The speaker pesters him (lo assilla) with a series of ghoulish (macabre) questions about a corpse buried in his garden: again, with the garden, we return to the theme of regeneration and fertility. This encounter can be read as a quest for a meaning behind the tremendous slaughter of the first World War; however, it can also be read as an exercise in ultimate futility: as we see in Stetson's failure to respond to the speaker's inquiries, the

dead offer few answers. The great respective weights of history, tradition, and the poet's dead predecessors combine to create an oppressive burden.