



## Reading T. S. Eliot's "The Waste Land" through the Deep Panoramic Symbolism and Poetic Narrative

### KEYWORDS

Symbolism, labyrinth of meanings, socio-cultural, religious and secular experiences.

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### ABSTRACT

*This paper deals with the Reading T. S. Eliot's "The Waste Land" through the Deep Panoramic Symbolism and Poetic Narrative. Eliot's poem The Waste Land is a major work of modernist literature. Written in the aftermath of the First World War, Eliot's poem describes the disorganization and collapse of society. In recounting this, the poet covers a wide variety of topics, incorporates many different images, and encompasses manifold languages and cultures. One major theme that Eliot treats in detail is the role of technology and industrialization in the downfall of Western civilization. Unlike earlier modern poets such as Walt Whitman, Eliot uses The Waste Land to draw connections between the mechanization and technological advancement in everyday life and the degradation of human dignity. In this way, Eliot's poem can be read as a criticism of the Industrial Revolution and its effects on society.*

### Introduction

The significance of this paper is that Reading T. S. Eliot's "The Waste Land" through the Deep Panoramic Symbolism and Poetic Narrative it brings the degradation of the worker to epic proportions; Eliot is showing that this reduction is of great importance in the poem. The transgendered role of Tiresias also serves to reinforce the theme of emasculation present throughout *The Waste Land*. As Tiresias is emasculated, and he is unified with the modern worker, then the modern worker is also subject to this emasculation. In this way, Eliot shows that the "human engine" has tarnished and emasculated the modern man. Eliot probably worked on the text that became *The Waste Land* for several years preceding its first publication in 1922. Eliot's notes identify Tiresias as the most important figure in *The Waste Land*, and indeed he plays a key role in the poem as an objective observer. Eliot introduces Tiresias using the first person: "I Tiresias, though blind, throbbing between two lives The repetition of the word throbbing links Tiresias to "the human engine"; just as his mythological transgender state allows him to relate to both sexes, Eliot shows that he is also able to bridge both the classical and modern worlds. Eliot, having been diagnosed with some form of nervous disorder, had been recommended rest, and applied for three months' leave from the bank where he was employed; the reason stated on his staff card was "nervous breakdown". He and his first wife, Vivienne Haigh-Wood Eliot, travelled to the coastal resort of Margate for a period of convalescence. While there, Eliot worked on the poem, and possibly showed an early version to Ezra Pound when, after a brief return to London, the Eliots travelled to Paris in November 1921 and stayed with him.

### Discussion

*The Waste Land* was quickly recognized as a major statement of modernist poetics, both for its broad symbolic significance and for Eliot's masterful use of formal techniques that earlier modernists had only begun to attempt. The critic I. A. Richards influentially praised Eliot for describing the shared post-war "sense of desolation, of uncertainty, of futility, of the groundlessness of aspirations, of the vanity of endeavour, and a thirst for a life-giving water which seems suddenly to have failed." Eliot later complained that "approving critics" like Richards "said that I had expressed

'the disillusionment of a generation,' which is nonsense. I may have expressed for them their own illusion of being disillusioned, but that did not form part of my intention." Nonetheless, it was as a representative of a postwar generation that Eliot became famous. To compare Eliot's comments on the poem with the way it was received illustrates strikingly the fact that, as William K. Wimsatt and Monroe Beardsley put it, "The poem is not the critic's own and not the author's (it is detached from the author at birth and goes about the world beyond his power to intend about it or control it). The poem belongs to the public." *The Waste Land* made use of allusion, quotation (in several languages), a variety of verse forms, and a collage of poetic fragments to create the sense of speaking for an entire culture in crisis; it was quickly accepted as the essential statement of that crisis and the epitome of a modernist poem. Eliot's age itself was symbolic of an entry into mid-life. It was at 33, "in the middle of our life's way," that Dante had the vision of heaven and hell recorded in his *Divine Comedy*. It was at the same age that Christ was crucified. His death and resurrection form a major symbolic framework for *The Waste Land*. Although its first lines suggest an aversion to "mixing / Memory with desire" and to "stirring / Dull roots with spring rain," the poem's success results largely from Eliot's ability to mix modes and tones. The originality of *The Waste Land*, and its importance for most poetry in English since 1922, lies in Eliot's ability to meld a deep awareness of literary tradition with the experimentalism of free verse, to fuse private and public meanings, and to combine moments of lyric intensity into a poem of epic scope. Symbolism, labyrinth of meanings, socio-cultural, religious and secular experiences play a major role in this poem. As Reeves notes, "the first [throbbing] stresses the mechanicalness of the alienated 'human engine' which exists in terms of its parts [...] while the second reinvents the human engine with 'throbbing' humanity" (69). In this way, Tiresias is connected to the modern human condition. North agrees with this analysis, writing that "Eliot suggests a link between the reduced conditions of the modern worker and the mythical hermaphrodite who includes all experience" (99). In a letter to New York lawyer and patron of modernism John Quinn dated 9 May 1921, Eliot wrote that he had "a long poem in mind and partly on paper which I am wishful to finish". [2] Richard Aldington, in his memoirs, relates that "a year or so" before Eliot read him

the manuscript draft of *The Waste Land* in London, Eliot visited him in the country.<sup>[3]</sup> While walking through a graveyard, they discussed Thomas Gray's *Elegy Written in a Country Churchyard*. Aldington writes: "I was surprised to find that Eliot admired something so popular, and then went on to say that if a contemporary poet, conscious of his limitations as Gray evidently was, would concentrate all his gifts on one such poem he might achieve a similar success."<sup>[4]</sup> In Lausanne, Eliot produced a 19-page version of the poem.<sup>[5]</sup> He returned from Lausanne in early January 1922. Pound then made detailed editorial comments and significant cuts to the manuscript. *The Waste Land* is also characteristic of modernist poetry in that it contains both lyric and epic elements. Modernism continued the tendency, begun in romanticism, to prize lyric highly, but many modernist poets also sought to write in the traditionally highest form, epic. Eliot defined the lyric as "the voice of the poet talking to himself, or to nobody," and if we accept his description of *The Waste Land* as a "piece of rhythmical grumbling," it may seem to belong to the lyric tradition. Yet its broader ambitions are obvious. "Eliot came back from his Lausanne specialist looking OK; and with a damn good poem (19 pages) in his suitcase," wrote Pound after reading the manuscript of the poem. "About enough, Eliot's poem, to make the rest of us shut up shop." Pound defined an epic as a "poem including history." Although much shorter than Homer's *Iliad* or *Odyssey*, Virgil's *Aeneid*, Dante's *Divine Comedy*, or Milton's *Paradise Lost*, *The Waste Land* does contain history—both contemporary history and the history of the world understood in mythological terms. One of the factors that helped to create "high modernism" was the attempt of poets, after the war, to extend the techniques of the pre-war avant-gardes to address broad, historical questions, the sorts of questions normally addressed by epic. They remained suspicious, however, of attempts to tell the history of the world from a single, unified perspective—the "Arms and the man I sing" of the first line of Virgil's *Aeneid*, in which both the poet and his hero ("the man") are singular. Instead, their epics tended to treat historical experience as fragmentary, and often it is difficult to say whether their long poems are epics or merely collections of lyrics. Instead of granting perspective on history, they struggle to contain it in their irregular forms. In the first draft of his own fragmentary epic, *The Cantos*, in 1917, Pound had written that "the modern world / Needs such a rag-bag to stuff all its thoughts in." The modernist epic would have to be a rag-bag. Eliot would later dedicate the poem to Pound. It was not until April 1968 that the existence and whereabouts of the manuscript drafts were made known to Valerie Eliot, the poet's second wife and widow.<sup>[6]</sup> In 1971, Faber and Faber published a «facsimile and transcript» of the original drafts, edited and annotated by Valerie Eliot. The full poem prior to the Pound editorial changes is contained in the facsimile. At the request of Eliot's wife, Vivienne, a line in the *A Game of Chess* section was removed from the poem: «And we shall play a game of chess/The ivory men make company between us / Pressing lidless eyes and waiting for a knock upon the door». This section is apparently based on their marital life, and she may have felt these lines too revealing. However, the «ivory men» line may have meant something to Eliot: in 1960, thirteen years after Vivienne's death, he inserted the line in a copy made for sale to aid the London Library, of which he was President at the time; it fetched £2,800.<sup>[7]</sup> Rupert Hart-Davis had requested the original manuscript for the auction, but Eliot had lost it long ago (though it was found in America years later).<sup>[9]</sup> To maximise his income and reach a broader audience, Eliot

also sought a deal with magazines. Being the London correspondent for *The Dial* magazine<sup>[8]</sup> and a college friend of its co-owner and co-editor, Scofield Thayer, the *Dial* was an ideal choice. Even though the *Dial* offered \$150 (£34)<sup>[9]</sup> for the poem (25% more than its standard rate) Eliot was offended that a year's work would be valued so low, especially since another contributor was found to have been given exceptional compensation for a short story.<sup>[10]</sup> The deal with the *Dial* almost fell through (other magazines considered were the *Little Review* and *Vanity Fair*), but with Pound's efforts eventually a deal was worked out where, in addition to the \$150, Eliot would be awarded the *Dial* magazine's second annual prize for outstanding service to letters. The prize carried an award of \$2,000 (£450).<sup>[11]</sup> In New York in the late summer (with John Quinn, a lawyer and literary patron, representing Eliot's interests) Boni and Liveright made an agreement with *The Dial* allowing the magazine to be the first to publish the poem in the US if they agreed to purchase 350 copies of the book at discount from Boni and Liveright.<sup>[12]</sup> Boni and Liveright would use the publicity of the award of the *Dial*'s prize to Eliot to increase their initial sales. The poem was first published in the UK, without the author's notes, in the first issue (October 1922) of *The Criterion*, a literary magazine started and edited by Eliot. The first appearance of the poem in the US was in the November 1922 issue of *The Dial* magazine (actually published in late October). In December 1922, the poem was published in the US in book form by Boni and Liveright, the first publication to print the notes. In September 1923, the Hogarth Press, a private press run by Eliot's friends Leonard and Virginia Woolf, published the first UK book edition of *The Waste Land* in an edition of about 450 copies, the type handset by Virginia Woolf. The publication history of *The Waste Land* (as well as other pieces of Eliot's poetry and prose) has been documented by Donald Gallup.<sup>[13]</sup> Eliot, whose 1922 annual salary at Lloyds Bank was £500 (\$2,215)<sup>[14]</sup> made approximately £630 (\$2,800) with the *Dial*, Boni and Liveright and Hogarth Press publications.<sup>[19]</sup> Eliot originally considered titling the poem *He do the Police in Different Voices*.<sup>[20]</sup> In the version of the poem Eliot brought back from Switzerland, the first two sections of the poem—*The Burial of the Dead* and *A Game of Chess*—appeared under this title. This strange phrase is taken from Charles Dickens' novel *Our Mutual Friend*, in which the widow Betty Higden says of her adopted foundling son Sloppy, "You mightn't think it, but Sloppy is a beautiful reader of a newspaper. He do the Police in different voices." Some critics use this working title to support the theory that, while there are many different voices (speakers) in the poem, there is only one central consciousness. What was lost by the rejection of this title Eliot might have felt compelled to restore by commenting on the commonalities of his characters in his note about Tiresias, stating that 'What Tiresias sees, in fact, is the substance of the poem.' In the end, the title Eliot chose was *The Waste Land*. In his first note to the poem he attributes the title to Jessie L. Weston's book on the Grail legend, *From Ritual to Romance*. The allusion is to the wounding of the Fisher King and the subsequent sterility of his lands. To restore the King and make his lands fertile again the Grail questor must ask «What ails you?» A poem strikingly similar in theme and language called *Waste Land*, written by Madison Cawein, was published in 1913.<sup>[15]</sup> The notes were added after Eliot's publisher requested something longer to justify printing *The Waste Land* in a separate book.<sup>[6]</sup> Thirty years after publishing the poem with these notes, Eliot expressed his regret at «having sent so many enquirers off on a wild

goose chase after Tarot cards and the Holy Grail».<sup>[16]</sup> There is some question as to whether Eliot originally intended *The Waste Land* to be a collection of individual poems (additional poems were supplied to Pound for his comments on including them) or to be considered one poem with five sections. The structure of the poem is also meant to loosely follow the vegetation myth and Holy Grail folklore surrounding the Fisher King story as outlined by Jessie Weston in her book *From Ritual to Romance* (1920). Weston's book was so central to the structure of the poem that it was the first text that Eliot cited in his «Notes on the Waste Land». The style of the work in part grows out of Eliot's interest in exploring the possibilities of dramatic monologue. This interest dates back at least as far as "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock". *The Waste Land* is not a single monologue like «Prufrock». Instead, it is made up of a wide variety of voices (sometimes in monologue, dialogue, or with more than two characters speaking). The style of the poem overall is marked by the hundreds of allusions and quotations from other texts (classic and obscure; «highbrow» and «lowbrow») that Eliot peppered throughout the poem. In addition to the many "highbrow" references and/or quotes from poets like Baudelaire, Shakespeare, Ovid, and Homer, Eliot also included a couple of references to "lowbrow" genres. A good example of this is Eliot's quote from the 1912 popular song «The Shakespearian Rag» by lyricists Herman Ruby and Gene Buck.<sup>[17]</sup> There were also a number of lowbrow references in the opening section of Eliot's original manuscript (when the poem was entitled «He Do The Police in Different Voices»), but they were removed from the final draft after Eliot cut this original opening section.<sup>[18]</sup> *The Waste Land* is notable for its seemingly disjointed structure, indicative of the Modernist style of James Joyce's *Ulysses* (which Eliot cited as an influence and which he read the same year that he was writing *The Waste Land*).<sup>[19]</sup> In the Modernist style, Eliot jumps from one voice or image to another without clearly delineating these shifts for the reader. He also includes phrases from multiple foreign languages (Latin, Greek, Italian, German, French and Sanskrit), indicative of Pound's influence.

## Conclusion

Eliot's intentions in making a miniature epic out of the vari-

ous lyrical moments and borrowed fragments that make up *The Waste Land* can best be understood in terms of his own analysis of Joyce's *Ulysses*, which served as perhaps the most important model for the poem. Eliot wrote that the parallels Joyce draws between his own characters and those of Homer's *Odyssey* constitute a "mythical method," which had "the importance of a scientific discovery." He went so far as to compare Joyce to Einstein. The mythical method, according to Eliot, "is simply a way of controlling, of ordering, of giving a shape and a significance to the immense panorama of futility and anarchy which is contemporary history." Many of Joyce's readers have felt that Joyce himself did not necessarily aim for control and order, but most are in agreement that Eliot's essay describes well the intention of *The Waste Land*, in which the many parallels that have been briefly discussed here help to convert chaos into a kind of order. Like other modernist models of history—Yeats's gyres, Pound's vortex, Joyce's Vichian cycles—Eliot emphasizes the current moment as one of crisis, either preparing for or recovering from a radical break in history. This radical break certainly has something to do with the first world war, but it is also an aspect of the modernists' eschatological view of the world, that is their fascination with the problem of destiny and the last judgment.

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