

# Living with “The Waste Land” – by Lee Russell

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## A personal interpretation of T.S. Eliot’s famous poem

(completed 6/1/2013)

### Introduction

I first encountered T.S. Eliot’s masterpiece work “The Waste Land” while studying English Literature in 1984. In many ways I was a lazy student but my imagination was exponentially expanded as my reading of this poem progressed. As I write this essay in 2012 I can still remember how difficult I found it to read and understand the poem at that time. Despite the many challenges that it poses to the reader, this single work did more to build a sense of wonder about literature than anything else I had read. Twenty-eight years later my mind is still digesting Eliot’s references to religion, the Grail, Tristan and Isolde, the Hyacinth Girl, Madame Sosostris, the Thames nymphs, the balance between life and Death, and the shadows that fall between love and lust.

The poem did not settle quietly in my memory and in the end I had to return to it as an adult reader. I am not sure it is possible to say conclusively what effects Eliot intended to induce in its readers but I hoped to reach a sound personal interpretation of the poem, which is some ways closer to Eliot’s intention for it<sup>1</sup>.

I recently read of an interesting interview question for prospective English Literature degree students: “Should good poetry be hard to understand?” The effect and cause that this question attempts to examine are of course not directly related. However, poems which read well enough on a surface level may be significantly enriched by the poet through layers of literary allusion and imagery. In this poem Eliot has masterfully added entwining layers to the surface tale in a way that both taunts and entertains those who understand the references. If the poem has a fault it is to perhaps recognise that whilst the *sense of place* in the poem always resonates strongly, the surface tale itself can be very hard to grasp without the understanding that Eliot takes for granted.

Eliot started thinking about writing a long poem in 1919 but could not concentrate on it until he was given leave from work to visit a psychologist in Switzerland.<sup>2</sup> The poem was written against a personal backdrop of studying philosophy and poetry, foreign travel, an unhappy marriage and overwork followed by a mental breakdown. External events which one may assume influenced his view of the world include the First World War (1914-1918), the Russian Revolution (1917) and the 1918 worldwide influenza pandemic (known as the “Spanish Flu”). It must have seemed as if everything was changing and indeed the British social system shifted profoundly after the war. In part that change came from the carnage of over 2.5 million British military casualties on the battlefields<sup>3</sup> and in part from the estimated 250,000 British deaths from the Spanish Flu<sup>4</sup>.

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<sup>1</sup> “The poem is the responsibility of the poet but, it must be stressed, the responsibility of reading the poem falls on the reader and in his or her mind the pieces must cohere.” – Macrae, Alasdair D.F. (2010) *The Waste Land* - York Notes Advanced, London, York Press, p.45

<sup>2</sup> York Notes, p.7

<sup>3</sup> Source: Internet – “World War I casualties”, Wikipedia - [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/World\\_War\\_I\\_casualties](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/World_War_I_casualties)

<sup>4</sup> Source: Internet – “The 'bird flu' that killed 40 million”, BBC News, <http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/health/4350050.stm>

A whole generation had been savagely reduced in numbers. In the world that followed there was a strange connection between the diminished fertility of mankind and the wasted ground that lay on the battlefields, despite so much flesh and blood having been ploughed into that soil during years of trench warfare. If the land needed regeneration did mankind need that as well?

So is the poem a reaction to global events, magnified through the lens of Eliot's personal experience and mental state? Is he trying to steer his readers onto a particular path of future thoughts and actions, is he commenting on the behaviour he sees in Society or is he just making a public statement about his own beliefs? Perhaps the motivation for the poem is simply to help him, or us, to really *think* about 'the World'? Maybe the motivation is a mixture of all these things.

It is the spaces between Eliot's ideas and how he chooses to express them, his extensive use of external references and our understanding of them, which creates the opportunities for each reader to make a personal interpretation of *The Waste Land*. Eliot himself is not a reliable guide to whatever conclusions we may draw from the poem, since his own comments on it were rather contradictory. He cast it as both an 'impersonal object' and "... a wholly insignificant grouse against life". He said in 1932 that the poem was not an expression of the disillusionment of a generation, yet in 1951 he said that "... a poet may believe that he is expressing only his private experience ... yet for his readers what he has written may come to be the expression ... of the exultation or despair of a generation."<sup>5</sup> These ambiguities create, within the boundaries of the poet's clear intentions, the spaces within which each reader's imagination may lead them to their own conclusions about the poem. My adult re-reading of the poem has been fulfilling and I am sure will occasionally resonate within my own writing.

## An interpretation of *The Waste Land*

### *The Progression of the Story*

In my analysis the poem falls into 6 story segments:

|           |                           |   |
|-----------|---------------------------|---|
| Segment 1 | The Preface...            |   |
| Segment 2 | The Burial Of The Dead... | ... which introduces us to the physical world and inhabitants of <i>The Waste Land</i> .  |
| Segment 3 | A Game Of Chess...        | ... which shows contemporary life in <i>The Waste Land</i> .  |
| Segment 4 | The Fire Sermon...        | ... which is a <i>sermon</i> . We expect to receive guidance from a religious perspective on how to live a righteous life.  |
| Segment 5 | Death By Water...         | ... in following the Fire Sermon we expect this segment to show how mankind has responded to the religious advice. The water theme is a clear contrast to fire in the previous segment. |
| Segment 6 | What The Thunder Said     | ... having received Man's sermon, now we will hear God's words at the poem's conclusion.  |

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<sup>5</sup> York Notes, p.53-54

*The Preface* introduces a wide variety of themes including mortality, moral emptiness, sin and suffering, the subjugation of women and a fervent desire for a better life which pervade the entire poem and guide how we should interpret Eliot's ideas.

*The Burial Of The Dead* shows us the physical Waste Land which we come to understand is Eliot's description of the modern day world. This is a stony land which gives no relief from the Sun and little or no rain. There is some contradiction in how this world is described: in the opening lines there is talk of a 'spring rain' that stirs 'dull roots' but elsewhere it is typically described as a terribly arid place, offering no real shelter from the scorching sun, and in parts populated with red-faced people who 'sneer and snarl' from their doorways.

We are also shown some of The Waste Land's inhabitants. These people are living shallow unfulfilling lives that lack both any depth of spiritual feeling and the exchange of true love, both between men and women, and between them and God. These people are suffering and give short, infrequent sighs as they move along. They represent an infertile ground where God's love cannot take root.

Our education about the effects of moral and spiritual emptiness on the people of The Waste Land continues in *A Game Of Chess*. Relationships between men and women are failing: men have sex simply for a good time, in any manner they choose, whilst women are their playthings with little individual control over their destinies. The spiritual goodness that should exist between husband and wives has been replaced with a corrupted lust for bodily desires. We are presented with some shocking stories about the degradation of these people in a horrifyingly matter-of-fact manner. We are shown an opulent room of seduction that is decorated with an image of rape. We overhear an anxious woman talking to her lover but not receiving any true love in return. We witness his thoughts of reply and realise that he holds her in contempt whilst musing that they are stuck in a dirty place where even bones of dead men are lost. We watch a scene where a woman tells her companions how she told her friend to smarten herself up and be prepared to give her husband "a good time" after his four years in the army, or she would. Her friend has apparently never been the same since she took some abortion pills. There seems to be little hope for these people to choose a more righteous and loving way of life.

*The Fire Sermon* continues our education about the current state of The Waste Land. It begins and ends with references to Buddha's 'Fire Sermon' which could be taken as encouragement to give up the pursuit of burning human senses and instead seek a path of spiritual fulfilment. The body of the segment shows us scenes of failing human interactions: the young girls abandoned by their City lovers, the urge for sex as death approaches (185 – 186), the prostitution of Mrs Porter and her daughter, the rape of Philomel, Mr Eugenides' crude offer of illicit sex in Brighton, Tiresias observing the ritual of uncaring sex between the typist and the house agent's clerk, the decadent splendour of the Church of St Magnus Martyr, the flirtation of Elizabeth I and Robert Dudley upon a Thames that is now corrupted with oil and tar, the crude seduction of the woman on a canoe which 'undoes' her and the final recognition that these humble people now expect nothing from their lives.

Unless something changes these people will be locked into their suffering for ever. As Madame Sosostriis warns *The Burial Of The Dead*, this state of existence is to be feared. In 'Death By Water' Eliot shows how they will be locked into enduring this terrible mode of life over and over again, as wheel of life continues to turn. We are essentially warned that we

must learn the lessons of *The Fire Sermon* if we want to achieve spiritual fulfilment and enter Paradise upon death.

Finally *What The Thunder Said* makes clear the terrors that await us if nothing changes in The Waste Land. But some promise of redemption starts to emerge: we are reminded that God always walks with us in life and that if we can resist the temptations that we encounter then we may be able to praise God by following his commands: ***Give, Show Compassion, Show Control***. By doing these things we may eventually find spiritual peace and receive God's blessing: ***Shantih shantih shantih***.

Overall the poem seems to me to be a long and complex formulation of an apparently simple idea: mankind today is spiritually empty and this is poisoning both his soul and the physical world, but by sharing spiritually enlightened virtues with each other we can repair our world and lead happier lives under God's grace.

One wonders why Eliot chose to construct such a complicated way of making this point. I have often found that people learn best from examples and stories. Rather than just *telling* us to lead better lives, Eliot realised that we would need to put some effort into reaching that conclusion for ourselves. The Waste Land is his masterpiece story that forces a reader to work hard to decipher his meanings from the poem, and once that enlightenment has been attained it is our responsibility to choose how we proceed with our lives. We must also realise that the poem is born from Eliot's own suffering and healing, and the point of the poem may be as much for him to achieve a personal catharsis as it is to encourage a better way of life.

### ***The Preface***

The positioning of the story of Sibyl of Cumae as the poem's preface provides a symbolic image which overhangs the entire work. The preface translates as:

*“For I saw with my own eyes the Sibyl  
of Cumae hanging in a cage and the boys were  
talking to her: “What do you want, Sibyl?”  
She answered, “I want to die””.*

Sibyl was a Greek prophetess who gave enigmatic answers to questions posed by the people. She asked the God Apollo to grant her as many years of life as she had grains of sand in her hand. Unfortunately she forgot to ask Apollo to keep her young. She became increasingly old and feeble but could not die and her life eventually became an agony of boredom. She was hung in a basket in her shrivelled condition, too infirm to escape, and tormented by groups of boys teasing her with questions.<sup>6</sup>

Sibyl's story prepares us to engage with major themes in the poem of life and death, religious faith and moral emptiness, hope and resignation, sin and (by contrast) goodness, with a passionate plea for redemption and release from suffering.

These themes of infertility, of hope and struggle, of violent change and a longing for something better persist throughout the poem. But is there always a real desire for these things or are they as insubstantial as Claudius' inability to pray for the sin of murdering his

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<sup>6</sup> York Notes, pp. 10-11

brother?<sup>7</sup> We are not openly guided on this question by Eliot while reading the poem and each reader must form their own judgement.

### *The Burial Of The Dead*

The title of this segment of the poem is interesting. It is taken from the Anglican Church's burial service and evokes themes of life, death and religion. It can also be interpreted in the present tense as something that is happening now, or in the past tense as a reflection on things that have already happened. Thus the title draws our attention to philosophical thinking about life and death, as well as reflections on both past and contemporary society. If taken in a future tense, we are drawn to consider how society may develop.

In this segment there is a balance of expression of the physical conditions in *The Waste Land* and the state of the people who have inhabited it. The two forms entwine seamlessly in a way that raises the question of whether the environment shapes the people, or *vice versa*, or whether they shape each other in a mutually degrading symbiosis.

In the first 7 lines we are transported to the physical Waste Land. Here we find a land that has been dulled throughout the winter under a covering of 'forgetful snow'. The snow had rendered the land in a dull state of not needing to promote growth and life, but now April is heralding the return of spring and bringing rain that is '... breeding lilacs out of the dead land' [see line 2]. The physical world finds this transformation 'cruel' because it mixes 'memory with desire', the memory perhaps of what life can be like with a desire for that world to return.

In other writings Eliot presents lilacs as motifs of tender emotion, but these feelings are to be avoided in *The Waste Land* because they remind us of the better things we might want but which bring a pain of 'memory with desire'. April is also the start of pilgrimage season and the appearance of lilacs from the dead land is reminiscent of the resurrection of Jesus Christ. Thus we may also take the dried tubers to be a metaphorical image for mankind, aware of the potential for re-birth through the sacrifice and resurrection of Jesus, yet also struggling under a dulling mantle of forgetfulness (the snow) to accept the promise of God's love through the sacrifice of Christ (the memory and desire).

The vegetal opening of the story allows us to view the physical Waste Land and simultaneously to begin to consider the moral and spiritual Waste Land that mankind inhabits.

In lines 8 – 18 we are given our first look through Eliot's eyes at the social world of mankind's Waste Land. This is a world of parks and cafés where people meet to talk and drink coffee. There is little substance to the people here and they are not comfortable with each other; for example, Countess Marie Larisch is at pains to ensure we understand she is a 'pure German' from Lithuania and not Russian at all. She recounts how Archduke Ferdinand took out into the mountains on a sled where she felt free. She was frightened on the sled and held on tight while he took her down. Marie was not in control of her journey down the mountain and it frightened her. In a sense she is taking the opposite journey to Dante in the *Divine Comedy*, where the Pilgrim needs to climb out of Hell and up Mount Purgatory in order to reach Paradise. She fills her life by reading much of the night and travelling to

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<sup>7</sup> Shakespeare, William. (circa 1601) *Hamlet*, Act III, scene III

warmer lands in the winter. These initial characters are not currently on a path of seeking spiritual enlightenment and seem as stagnant as the dried tubers in line 7.

In lines 19 – 30 the writing takes on an Old Testament prophetic style and we receive our first sermon. We are told that mankind cannot even guess at what might be able to grow in the “stony rubbish” of The Waste Land. This is because Man only knows about a place where “... *the sun beats, and the dead tree gives no shelter, the cricket no relief, and the dry stone no sound of water.*” The Waste Land is an arid place of suffering where no relief can be found from the torments of the sun or incessant sounds of the crickets. The only escape might come from the “... *shadow under this red rock*”, but all that can be found there is a frightening “*handful of dust*”. Like Sibyl, if Man shelters under this rock all he will find is a protracted lifetime of suffering ending in a plea to be allowed to die.

Allegorically this is a place where God’s light is shining brightly and mankind knows of His message but it is not able to take root and grow. This causes suffering for Man because God’s message cannot be escaped from and it shines on him constantly (“... *your shadow at morning striding behind you... your shadow at evening rising to meet you*”). It is not even possible to try to hide from God’s message (“... *under this red rock*”) because that leads to “... *fear in a handful of dust*”, i.e. fear about death and the grave. By contrast, a righteous person would not fear death due to Christ’s promise of salvation.

Following the first sermon we are presented with a question phrased from Richard Wagner’s operatic tale of the story of Tristan & Isolde:

*The wind blows fresh towards my homeland.  
My Irish child, where are you waiting?*

Wagner’s opera opens with these lines spoken by a sailor pining for his girl. His words are overheard by Isolde who assumes she is being mocked and becomes angry. Shortly after Isolde is angered by Tristan and orders her companion, Brangäne, to prepare a magic potion that causes death. She then offers to make peace with Tristan by sharing a drink of the potion. Unknown to her, Brangäne has made a love potion causing Tristan and Isolde to fall deeply in love instead. In act 2 Tristan is mortally wounded when the lovers are discovered by King Marke and leaves Cornwall for his castle in Brittany. In act 3 Tristan waits for Isolde to come to heal him. A shepherd is asked to look for Isolde's ship and he replies "Oed' und leer das Meer", which translates as “waste and empty is the sea” (see line 42 of The Waste Land). When a feverish Tristan eventually hears that Isolde has come he tears the bandages from his wounds so that she may be able to heal him properly, but he dies in her arms.

There are various traditional sources for this story in both poetical form and prose. The versions are typically derived from the latter twelfth century works of the French poets Thomas of Britain and Béroul, or from the thirteenth century *Prose Tristan*, which translated the story into a long prose form tied into the arc of Arthurian legends<sup>8</sup>. In the poetic forms Tristan is bringing Iseult back to Britain from Ireland for King Mark, his uncle, to marry. During the journey they ingest a love potion which forces them to love each other despite Iseult’s betrothal and subsequent marriage to King Mark. Their love being inescapable, they begin an adulterous relationship which eventually results in their being condemned to death

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<sup>8</sup> My own knowledge of this area is very limited and these comments are drawn from the wikipedia article which can be found at [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Tristan\\_and\\_Iseult](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Tristan_and_Iseult)

by King Mark. They eventually escape together and finally make peace with the King after Tristan agrees to return Iseult to him and then leave the country.

Here we encounter one of the challenges of reading Eliot's masterpiece. Even without knowledge of Wagner's opera these lines create a sense of mystical wonder in the poem. They cause us to reflect on who this girl might be and where she may be found; in a sense we start to echo the emotion of the pining sailor, and that leads wonderfully into the tale of the 'hyacinth girl' which follows. Knowledge of the opera brings layers of romantic depth and legend into the poem which contrast sharply with the false love experienced by the Hyacinth Girl. Yet there are both similarities and differences in the two stories: Tristan and Isolde have experienced true love, but that love is falsely gained from the magic potion, whereas the Hyacinth Girl has only experienced an empty love that left her "... neither living nor dead."

It is notable that both the Hyacinth Girl and Tristan, male and female, have a kind of empty despair with the news of "Oed' und leer das Meer". I wonder if Eliot is highlighting an aspect of both love and truth between people in these contrasting segments. The ultimately unsatisfying nature of both loves suggests that Eliot believes something is lacking in the relationships between men and women, and that perhaps a more fulfilling love should be sought.

Hyacinths are a resurrection symbol associated with the Greek legend around the youth Hyacinthus, a lover of the god Apollo. He was killed by accident by a discus thrown by Apollo. Rather than allow his lover to be taken by Hades, Apollo made the hyacinth flower from his spilled blood<sup>9</sup>. In his scene Eliot shows the lover of the Hyacinth Girl as being in an emotional and spiritual limbo as he looks upon her. He is unable to speak or see, "... neither living nor dead... looking into the heart of light, the silence" (lines 38 – 40). At best these lines from Eliot seem to be expressing thoughts about the lost potential for fulfilling fertility between this pair. In another sense his limbo state represents a failed resurrection in *The Waste Land*, without which it will not be possible for Man to be forgiven for sin.

From here we move on to Madame Sosostris who is portrayed as a sham, ironic caricature of the other prophetic figures who appear in *The Waste Land*. Her mystical fortune telling has led to her being known as "... *the wisest woman in Europe*" (line 45), which is indicative of her clients' lack of wisdom. Indeed, one of her clients is named as Mrs Equitone, which taken literally implies a flat character without variations. Despite this her cards do foretell certain elements within the poem. Other sources discuss the nature of her fortune telling which I will not replicate here. Instead I notice that, as a conversation, she does not really tell her client anything useful.

Madame Sosostris presents her client with the card of the drowned Phoenician Sailor and links him to the moment when the spirit Ariel lies to Prince Ferdinand in the *Tempest*, saying his father has drowned and his eyes have become pearls. Phoenicia in the Eastern Mediterranean was the ancient site of annual ceremonies to commemorate the death and resurrection of the god Thammuz. She also presents the Fisher King, the Wheel of Fortune, a preview in the poem of Mr Eugenides (from line 209) and a blank card that she is forbidden to see.

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<sup>9</sup> From Pseudo-Apollodorus, 1. 3.3. [see [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Hyacinth\\_\(mythology\)](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Hyacinth_(mythology)) ]

Linking her client to maritime themes of the Phoenician Sailor and the Fisher King provides expression for one of Eliot's sources for the poem, Jessie L. Weston's "*From Ritual to Romance*". In her book Weston argues that the Waste Land of the Grail Legends is part of a confused remnant of ancient procreation fertility rituals.

Thus on one level Madame Sosostris is providing useless information to shallow clients who nonetheless claim her to be a wise woman. However, on another level, if the reader takes on the role of her client and is assumed to be trying to understand what the nature of the Waste Land is, then she can be seen to be sharing pointers to the solution by drawing our attention to the problems of the Fisher King, Fate and the burden carried by Mr Eugenides that she is forbidden to see.

In Arthurian legends the Fisher King is the latest in a line charged with keeping the Holy Grail<sup>10</sup>. The Fisher King is always wounded in the legs or groin and cannot move on his own. His kingdom suffers in like manner as his injury; his impotence diminishes the fertility of the land and reduces it to a wasteland. Many knights try to find and heal the Fisher King but only the chosen, true pilgrims, can accomplish it.

We leave Madame Sosostris' parlour and enter the "unreal City" (ie London) during a smoggy dawn (lines 60 – 61). Eliot portrays a terrible scene where a crowd is passing over London Bridge, giving short frequent sighs and each person staring at the ground. Eliot's reflection that he "... *had not thought death had undone so many*" (line 63) firstly shocks by creating the impression of a suffering crowd of souls who have not passed on to heaven flowing over the bridge. Secondly, by allusion to Dante Alighieri's vision of the vestibule to Hell, we are reminded of the scene where those who made neither worthy nor unworthy acts in life are now condemned to race naked behind a banner whilst being continually stung by hornets and wasps.<sup>11</sup>

Eliot the Pilgrim then encounters a person he knows called "Stetson". He asks if the corpse that Stetson planted last year in his garden has begun to sprout and whether it will bloom this year, or if a sudden frost has killed those buds off. This reminds me of the resurrection of Hyacinthus, especially when linked to Saint Mary Woolnorth church sounding its bell on the "final stroke of nine" (lines 67 – 68, and that Christ died on the ninth hour). To me these questions do not sound objective: we are in a Waste Land where the Fisher King's infertility has caused the land to fail and a crowd of suffering souls is shuffling over London Bridge. The conclusion that Stetson's corpse will not begin to bud and bloom seems obvious, and by allegory that Stetson's soul has not started to travel on a more righteous path.

Eliot seems to be saying here that the inhabitants of the City of London are leading a sham life, enduring the smog in despair without making spiritual progress. In life their motions are predicting the torment that may await them after death when their empty existence will be punished. He finishes this second segment of the poem's story with a dramatic warning that flies at us like harsh words from the pulpit:

- [74]     *"Oh keep the Dog far hence, that's friend to men*  
[75]     *Or with his nails he'll dig it up again!*  
[76]     *You! hypocrite lecteur! - mon semblable, - mon frere!"*

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<sup>10</sup> See [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Fisher\\_King](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Fisher_King)

<sup>11</sup> See Alighieri, Dante (*circa* 1308) The Divine Comedy volume 1: *Inferno*, Canto III, 22 – 66, esp 52 - 66

The warning is directed straight at ourselves as the reader (“*You!*” – line 76). Eliot claims us as his fellow man and brother and warns that we should keep the Dog far away so it cannot dig up the corpse and hence destroy the chance of rebirth. The sermon-like wording of this warning and the preceding references to the *Inferno* indicate that we need to protect the seeds of righteousness that may be forming in our hearts. It follows that “the Dog” must be an internal and negative spiritual aspect of Man.

“*The Burial of the Dead*” is a long and complex section of the poem. It introduces the physical nature of the degradation of the Waste Land and its lost fertility. Through the Grail symbols and references to earlier fertility legends and rituals it shows how spiritual emptiness has caused physical suffering in life and the promise of eternal suffering after death. Shallow thoughtless lives are ironically parodied whilst the blessing of true love, both of our fellow man and God, is hinted at. As a physical allusion to the destruction caused by warfare in World War I, the section shows how a thoughtless Western arrogance has led to a blight on the fertility of mankind (hence the convoluted inclusion of Archduke Ferdinand via Madame Sosostris’ reference to *The Tempest* in line 48).

No hint is given at this stage of whether Eliot the Narrator believes that mankind will redeem itself or if the Waste Land will continue and men will be condemned to eternal suffering after death.

### ***A Game Of Chess***

This third segment of the poem takes its title from Thomas Middleton’s ‘*Women Beware Women*’ in which each move in a game of chess represents a further move in the seduction of Bianca. It is a story of lust, deceit and manipulation, themes which we may reasonably expect to be explored in this segment.

The first 33 lines of this segment do not resonate very much for me personally (lines 77 – 110). The scene of an opulent room of seduction is described in detail but sounds too ornately unreal, in perfect symmetry with the lady’s synthetic perfumes (line 87). This sumptuous room is spoilt by various ‘dirty’ images including one of the rape of Philomel by King Tereus, but we assume that the owner of the room does not find them distasteful. The room represents the corrupt places in which ‘dirty love’ is practised but my lasting impression is that this scene does not enhance our understanding of the overall poem.

We then move to a strange section of dialogue between lines 111 – 138. We hear words spoken by a woman that are presented to us within speech marks and read the thoughts that her man thinks in reply but does not utter. The woman poses uneasy questions that betray her anxious feelings. She tells him that her “nerves are bad” and asks why he never speaks to her (line 111 – 114). She tells him that she never knows what he is thinking.

He appears to hold her in such contempt that he does not answer her questions. But in his mind he muses that they are in a dirty alleyway (‘rat’s alley’) where even bones of dead men are lost. She asks about a noise she hears and thinks in reply that it is just the wind doing nothing.

She sarcastically asks if he knows, sees and remembers nothing. In reply his mind remembers “pearls that were his eyes” and this causes us to recall the drowned Phoenician Sailor mentioned by Madame Sosostris. She wonders out loud if the man is even alive and in reply

he thinks of a popular 1912 song (the ‘Shakespearian Rag’). She wonders what she should do now or tomorrow, or indeed what they should ever do. In reply he thinks about having a bath and playing a game of chess. The latter idea seems to be a reference back to Middleton’s ‘*Women Beware Women*’ and we are left with the feeling that the man is simply playing with this woman.

The scene then changes for the final 34 lines of this segment (139 – 172) and we watch a discussion between four people in a pub. A woman is telling her companions how she told Lil to smarten herself up now her husband is coming home after being demobbed. She says that she told Lil to have her teeth repaired and be prepared to give Albert “a good time” after his four years in the army, or other people would. Lil apparently challenged her friend about whether she would give Albert a good time and she didn’t deny it. Her friend apparently told Lil that she looks ‘antique’ at the age of thirty-one and Lil explained that she has never been the same since she took some abortion pills (lines 156 – 161). Throughout the scene we hear the landlord call “Hurry up please its time”, but this sense of time running out also seems to apply to Lil, whose body is ageing faster than it should. After Lil’s friend has said goodnight to her friends the segment ends with a more generally applicable “goodnight” that seems to be directed towards the reader:

[171]    *“Ta ta. Goodnight. Goodnight.*

[172]    *Good night, ladies, good night, sweet ladies, good night, good night.”*

This sequence reminds us of Ophelia, driven mad by the death of her father and confusing love for Hamlet, bidding farewell before leaving to drown herself<sup>12</sup>.

The *A Game Of Chess* segment has shown us three scenes of corrupted love. Firstly there is the opulent room of seduction wherein notions of true love are lost amidst the window dressings of luxurious furnishings, synthetic perfumes and ‘dirty’ images. Secondly we see loveless relationship between the anxious woman and her silent lover who is manipulating her in the style of Middleton’s tale. Finally there is the story of Lil who is becoming old before her time after aborting a child while her returning husband may stray to get “a good time” from other women.

The sense of relationships failing between men and women is very apparent in this segment. There seems to be no hope that a better love can be found. Men are portrayed as uncaring potential rapists who are driven to have sex simply for a good time. Women are portrayed as playthings with little control over their destinies and certainly subservient to their men. In the Waste Land it seems that the goodness promised to a married couple upon their union has been corrupted and true love has been replaced by bodily desires. The people shown are finding this manner of living unsatisfying but lack the capability to change their ways. They are a physical manifestation of the “stony rubbish” (line 20) that is failing to heed the word of God and this seems to reflect an impression that there is also no hope of a love for God being found.

### ***The Fire Sermon***

So far we have seen the physical degradation of The Waste Land in *The Burial Of The Dead*, including the first sermon which challenges us to ask if any goodness could grow here. We were also shown how the inhabitants of The Waste Land have become thoroughly degraded

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<sup>12</sup> Shakespeare, William *Hamlet*, Act 4, scene V

through the sham prophesying of Madame Sosostris (“the wisest woman in Europe”, who now doesn’t seem to positively represent very much about all the women in Europe) and the ghost people of the City of London. In *A Game Of Chess* our understanding of the degradation of the people was developed further by the detailed examination of three scenes showing how love has become corrupted to the point that a love of God may be impossible.

Eliot now delivers his second sermon of the poem, *The Fire Sermon*. This is a long segment and he clearly has a complicated message to share. Judging by the title we may fairly assume it will not be comfortable. The title draws our attention to the fact that both Buddha and St. Augustine experienced the pleasures of the flesh before choosing to devote their lives to the spiritual path. The opening scene depicts the site of an earthly paradise that has become compromised by contemporary casual sex. The wind is not heard because there is nothing in the Waste Land to hear it. All the young beautiful girls have gone (line 175) and the physical landscape is no longer littered with rubbish from summer night meetings between them and “their friends” (180). Having enjoyed summer nights of fun with the girls, the ‘loitering heirs of city directors’ have left without giving their addresses, thus avoiding any responsibilities they may have towards them.

A more reflective scene is then shown in the first person, perhaps looking through the eyes of ‘Eliot the Pilgrim’ as he guides us across The Waste Land. He begins by telling us that he wept ‘by the waters of Leman’, which invokes a sense of place for both the Hebrews in exile (Psalms 137) and Lake Leman (ie Lake Geneva) where Eliot was treated for mental illness. He acknowledges that his voice will not be heard for long before accentuating Andrew Marvell’s “*To his Coy Mistress*” by mixing that poet’s urging of a girl to make love with him because time and death are pressing towards them, with the spectre of Death standing behind him (line 186).

Eliot then transports us to a scene near a gasworks by the ‘dull canal’ (which may be the River Thames) where he sat fishing and thinking (in the guise of Ferdinand in *The Tempest*) about his father’s death. In a depressive tone he thinks about drowned bodies lying naked on the ground (line 193) and the bones of other corpses that have been thrown in an attic where they are only disturbed by rats’ feet. In this scene of death he sometimes hears the sound of cars bringing Mrs Porter (possibly a brothel keeper in the First World War) and her daughter. The moon shines on them while they wash their feet, providing an odd contrast between Mrs Porter’s occupation and the chaste Diana (goddess of the Moon) of Roman mythology. At the conclusion of this scene we are reminded of the end of Parsifal’s journey when, having resisted all temptations, he succeeds in curing the wounded King Amfortas (the Fisher King). Parsifal’s feet are washed in an act of humility and the choir boys of the Holy Grail sing in celebration (‘Et O ces voix d’enfants, chantant dans la coupole!’ – line 202). If Eliot is our Parsifal, however, what he sees is temptations being consumed and prostitutes having their feet washed: in such a Waste Land the Fisher King cannot be cured.

“Twit, twit... Tereu” again reminds us of King Tereus who raped Philomel before we are again taken into the ‘Unreal City’ (London, line 207). London is again under a smog when an unshaven Mr Eugenides asks in vulgar French to join him for lunch followed by a weekend in the Metropole Hotel in Brighton, perhaps suggesting an invitation for illicit sex in that infamous resort.

We don’t know how our pilgrim guide responds to that invitation because we are then transported into the body of Tiresias, a most powerful prophet from the classical world who

appears in Ovid's *Metamorphoses*. Tiresias experiences life as both a male and a female ('throbbing between two lives, old man with wrinkled female breasts' – lines 218 – 219) and as a spectator observes evening rituals ('the violet hour') as the working day draws to a close. He sees coastal fishermen returning to port at dusk. Women, symbolised by a typist, are tidying their homes and preparing a meal while their undergarments dry in the last touch of the setting sun's heat (lines 221 – 230). In time their male visitors arrive in the form of wealthy yet vulgar manufacturers (line 234) who seduce them while they are bored. Their seductions are 'unreproved, if undesired' and the men 'assault at once', needing no response from these women and welcoming their indifference. The scene reminds us in a twisted sense of Philomel's plight but here the women appear to be indifferent to the men's desires. Between lines 243 to 246 Eliot reminds us of Sophocles' story of *King Oedipus* and uses Tiresias in the gestalt male-female form to create a sense that God has cursed the Waste Land because of this corruption of love. The men leave shortly after having sex and the women are hardly aware that they are gone (line 250). The woman that Eliot focusses on has a single thought of being glad that it is over before pacing her room again, smoothing her hair out of habit and playing a record.

Eliot then contrasts the scene of men from Billingsgate fish market chattering in a public bar in Lower Thames Street with the 'inexplicable splendour of Ionian white and gold' in the church of St Magnus Martyr. Perhaps the (decadent) wealth of the church is impossible to explain in contrast to the harsh lives of the fishermen. The fishermen also remind us of the plight of the Fisher King and now, after so many references to London life, we are justified in concluding that the corruption of London is both a source and exemplar of decay in Eliot's Waste Land.

Recognising London as a source of corruption in *The Waste Land*, Eliot proceeds to both describe and lament the plight of its river, which presumably is losing its capacity to fertilise the land, hence representing the infertility of the Fisher King (lines 266 – 278). The waters of the Thames should bring life to London but are instead sweating 'oil and tar' while the wash of passing barges causes 'drifting logs' (dead trees) to float past the Isle of Dogs. At the sight of this pollution of the Thames Eliot the Narrator (or perhaps in the role of pilgrim or Parsifal, in this dreadful land) cries out the Rhine Maiden's lament of 'Weialala leia, Wallal leialala' (from Wagner's "The Twilight of the Gods", in which the theft of sacred gold leads brings a dullness to the Rhine). The Rhine Maidens' lament is then repeated after we see a scene of flirtation on the Thames between Elizabeth I and Lord Robert Dudley.

The story of Royal flirtation is followed by a bleak copulation scene set in a canoe as it travels along the Thames (lines 292 – 306) that is recounted to us by the woman. She tells us how she was on her back and raised her knees as they passed Richmond and Kew, an act which 'undid' her (this is a reference to Dante's 'Purgatory' within which the story of the murder of 'La Pia' by her husband is recounted<sup>13</sup> - La Pia is forced to endure Purgatory because she died before she had repented her sins). The nameless woman and man (perhaps representing Everyman) pass by poor parts of London (Moorgate) where he weeps and promises a 'new start' but she says nothing to that and instead asks what she should resent. The man does not suggest anything useful to her and instead says that he connects 'nothing

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<sup>13</sup> See Alighieri, Dante (*circa* 1308) *The Divine Comedy* volume 2: *Paradise*, Canto V, 133 – 135: "Siena made me, Maremma unmade me" – in a straight reading of *The Waste Land* this line can be taken to indicate a loss of virginity, but Mark Musa's translation [Penguin Classics translation, 1985] of the key line as 'Siena gave me life, Maremma death' suggests that this act of sex on the canoe is sinful and could also lead to the woman's death (literal), or perhaps her suffering of penitence in Purgatory

with nothing', where he finds his 'humble people who expect nothing'. If the phrase 'my people humble people' is taken as a superior talking about lesser people, then one might wonder if the man on the canoe is the Fisher King, whose sex act does not bring fertility but instead may lead to a sinful death. This section ends with a fading refrain of the Rhine Maidens' lament.

This long sermon ends in Carthage where St Augustine experienced the power of lust before discovering the power of spiritual love. Here there is 'burning burning burning burning' (which creates an image of sinners enduring punishment in Hell) but Eliot the Pilgrim, our Parsifal, is pulled out of the flames (lines 309 – 310) in a direct reference to Buddha's 'Fire Sermon'. All human senses are burning with the fires of lust, anger, ignorance, but by following the Noble Path man may become tired of these things of the senses and instead become a tree of the cycle of birth – death – rebirth.

Thus ends the Fire Sermon.

### *Death By Water*

In *The Burial Of the Dead* Madame Sosostris warns her client to 'fear death by water' (line 55) so we may wonder what will now be revealed in this segment. So far in the poem we have already seen how the shallow, lustful lives of the inhabitants of the Waste Land are both unsatisfying and demeaning to themselves, leading to their spiritual degradation and concomitant physical degradation of the landscape. In *The Fire Sermon* Eliot the Pilgrim has started to suggest that the pursuit of spiritual fulfilment may be the way to escape from the suffering which otherwise awaits these people, and from which they expect 'nothing' from their lives (lines 301 – 306). If Madame Sosostris' prophesy is correct we will encounter a terrible situation in this segment.

As published, this segment is very short at just 10 lines. It was originally ninety-three lines long and Macrae said that "... the deleted sections do help us to a fuller understanding of the surviving ten lines"<sup>14</sup>. However, I am interested in the impact of the *published* poem and hence will focus only on these ten lines.

The title of this segment clearly contrasts with *The Fire Sermon*. Whereas *The Fire Sermon* shows us how the power of spiritual love is superior to Earthly lusts, the title '*Death By Water*' suggests something very different. Phlebas from Phoenicia (and hence having some association with Mr Eugenides from Smyrna) drowned a fortnight ago and his body has been picked over by the currents under the sea while he forgets the sounds of the world and his lust for profit. Those currents caused his corpse to rise and fall within the water column, during which he was passed to another stage of existence within 'the whirlpool' (lines 317 – 318). Phlebas is stuck on another cycle of the wheel of life and gives a warning to any 'Gentile or Jew' (ie any person, regardless of faith) who is looking for a direction ('turn the wheel and look to windward') that he was once as beautiful as them ('handsome and tall as you').

Phlebas's preoccupations with his appearance, his beauty and his lust for money have meant that upon his death his soul has not passed to Paradise and instead he is condemned to another round on the wheel of fate. The clear warning is that only by learning from the Fire Sermon can one attain spiritual fulfilment and gain Paradise upon death.

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<sup>14</sup> Macrae, Alasdair D.F. (2010) *The Waste Land - York Notes Advanced*, London, York Press, p.31

Other interpretations of these ten lines are of course possible, but this reading sits well with me.

### *What The Thunder Said*

We finally reach the concluding segment of the poem. The title indicates that something important will be revealed. God is sometimes said to speak with Man with a thunderous voice in the Old Testament, “*God thundereth marvellously with his voice*” for example<sup>15</sup>, whilst in Norse mythology the god Thor (god of thunder and lightning) is sometimes associated with fertility. Thunder is often an indicator of impending rain and the world of *The Waste Land* is in desperate need of rain in order to reinvigorate the land. Eliot also explicitly links the title to the message given by Prajapati in Brihadaranyaka-Upanishad (see ahead to the comments from lines 400 for more on that).

The segment opens with a scene set around the arrest and execution of Jesus Christ. Eliot reminds us of how the Earth shook with God’s wrath when Jesus was killed with the line “... *reverberation of thunder of spring over distant mountains.*” Rolling thunder in the mountains can hold a promise of rain, which *The Waste Land* desperately needs, but now Jesus is dead mankind is dying ‘with a little patience’. The thunder sound might indicate some small hope for rain that could reinvigorate the land, in a similar way that Jesus’ resurrection offers some hope for mankind’s spiritual salvation.

The next section describes the physical Waste Land in more detail but the preceding sections (and indeed the tone of the whole poem) tell us that this should also be taken in an allegorical sense of Man’s spiritual condition. There is no water here and without the nourishment of water life cannot prosper. There is simply rock and “the sandy road” which winds through mountains of rock. The road indicates a path to be followed but it presents a terrible journey where there is no water to drink, where you cannot stop or think, where you cannot sweat, where you cannot stand or lie or sit (presumably because it is so hot), where you can hear the sterile thunder of God’s wrath that does not bring rain, and where there is not even solitude because you are confronted with “red sullen faces” that “sneer and snarl” at you from the “doors of mudcracked houses”. This path sounds like a place that Dante could have imagined, although whether it represents an endless journey of punishment in Hell without any hope of redemption, or penitence in Purgatory remains to be seen.

Some enfeebled wishing for easier circumstances then follows as our Pilgrim journeys along the sandy path wanting some sign of release from the torment of *The Waste Land*. This traveller almost humbly begs for any sign of rain, or some sign of spiritual healing in the allegorical sense, by asking:

“if there were water and no rock”, or  
    “if there were rock and also water”, or  
        if there were “water, a spring, a pool among the rock”, or  
            if there was “the sound of water only not the cicada and dry grass  
                singing”

The Pilgrim wishes for the sound of water flowing over a rock... but eventually has to accept that “there is no water”.

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<sup>15</sup> Old Testament, Job, 37:5

If Man is taken to be the infertile rock then this section suggests there is no hope of spiritual salvation.

Between lines 360 – 366 my interpretation is that we, the reader, are drawn into the poem to accompany the Pilgrim and ask the question “*who is the third who walks always beside you?*” (line 360). This can be a reference to Shackleton’s story of how men, at the last of their strength, might come to believe there was one more person present than could actually be counted. Was this a delusion, or was God walking with them? And if so, does this mean that God even walks with us in *The Waste Land*, but we must suffer to the limits of our strength in order to see Him? This section could also be a reference to St Luke’s tale of how two disciples who walked with Jesus after his death were prevented from knowing him<sup>16</sup>.

We then witness a scene repeated across centres of civilisation like Jerusalem, Athens, Alexandria, Vienna and London, where women are crying (at His crucifixion Jesus told his followers to cry for themselves and their children, not for Him<sup>17</sup>) and blindfolded figures (who presumably are unable to see their companion, God, walking beside them) stumble over endless plains of cracked earth. Again, does the presence of this unseen companion suggest we are in Purgatory and there is *some* possibility of redemption?

Our Pilgrim, this Parsifal that we are following, still has to endure many horrors in *The Waste Land*. From line 378 he is tempted by a woman playing “whisper music” by fiddling her hair like a violin, by bats with the faces of babies that whistle and beat their wings around him, and which ‘sing’ out of empty cisterns and exhausted wells<sup>18</sup>.

At line 386 the Pilgrim has to confront the last temptation of despair at a decayed hole in the mountains where there is an ‘empty chapel’ that is ‘only the wind’s home’. The chapel has no windows and its door swings on the wind (but significantly *does* therefore offer a way in) and a cockerel is on the roof, announcing the dawn while there is a flash of lightning.

Our Pilgrim has nearly reached the end of his spiritual journey and the cockerel has announced the coming dawn while the lightning has announced a storm that is now bringing rain in a ‘damp gust’. This rain will fill again the River Ganges and fall over the holy mountain Himavant. Below the mountains the jungle is crouched and silent, waiting.

At last, at line 401, God speaks to the Pilgrim, mankind and ourselves, in the voice of thunder: “**DA**”.

In the lines that follow Prajapati’s questions to the gods, demons and men in the Brihadaranyaka-Upanishad are referenced by Eliot’s use of ‘DA’ and contrasted with Eliot’s questions to us. Prajapati confirms that we must all restrain ourselves (‘damyata’), give (‘datta’) and be compassionate (‘dayadhvam’). Eliot shows that Men have started to learn and accept the follies of their past. Speaking to us in the first person he determines that:

- all we have *given* is a moment’s submission to temptation “which an age of prudence can never retract”, and that

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<sup>16</sup> Luke, 24:15-16

<sup>17</sup> Luke: 23:27-8

<sup>18</sup> Jeremiah 2:13

- we have not been *compassionate*, by referring to the story of Count Ugolino's punishment in Dante's *Inferno*<sup>19</sup>. Eliot says that we judge harshly by locking men away with no hope of release ("I have heard the key turn in the door once and turn once only" – lines 412 – 413) and that this kind of thinking prevents us from achieving the compassionate state that God demands ("Thinking of the key, each confirms a prison"), but
- Eliot concludes by saying that we can show restraint in the future: "the boat responded gaily, to the hand expert with sail and oar". When we all achieve this state the sea is calm and our hearts will respond gaily when finally invited to work in time "to controlling hands".

I take that final thought to mean that when Man finally accepts God's word as the 'controlling hands' that determines how to behave, then he will finally achieve a calm state with happy hearts.

In these penultimate thoughts Eliot at last holds out some hope for mankind's redemption.

In the final section of this segment, and of the poem, we take on the role of the Fisher King. He has crossed The Waste Land and arrived at the sea where he can at last fish with that arid land behind him. He starts to think about putting his lands into order and recognises that they have been decaying (line 427, I choose this different explanation for that line from the human sacrifice meaning suggested by Alasdair Macrae<sup>20</sup>), that some repentance and suffering for past sins is required (line 428 – see York notes p.40) and that a love for all men will be needed (line 429, see York notes p.41).

Eliot tells us in the voice of the Fisher King that these final thoughts have been presented to us in order to strengthen us against the ruins that lie all about us The Waste Land (line 431, I again choose a different explanation from Macrae).

For me line 432 ('Why then I'e fit you. Hieronymo's mad againe') does not fit with the poem's closing tone. The story of Hieronymo arranging to murder his son's killers during a play (from *The Spanish Tragedy*<sup>21</sup>) only makes sense if Eliot is highlighting the risk of men continuing to act badly despite everything that has been learnt. My judgement is that the poem is not enhanced by this sentiment, which has been very obvious throughout the previous segments.

The poem concludes with a reminder of Prajapati's expectations that we will:

**Give** – *Datta*  
**Sympathise** – *Dayadhvam*, and  
**Control** – *Damyata* ...

<sup>19</sup> See Aligheri, Dante (*circa* 1308) *The Divine Comedy* volume 1: *Inferno*, Canto XXXIII

<sup>20</sup> Macrae, Alasdair D.F. (2010) *The Waste Land - York Notes Advanced*, London, York Press, p.40

<sup>21</sup> Kyd, Thomas (1594) *The Spanish Tragedy*

before concluding with a blessing from the ending an Upanishad, 'Shantih shantih shantih', for which the Christian equivalent is: '***And the Peace of God, which passeth all understanding, shall keep your hearts and minds through Christ Jesus***'<sup>22</sup>.

At last we have reached the end of our reading, the end of the Pilgrim / Grail Quester's journey and the end of the Fisher King's suffering.

Eliot has shown us a terrible *extant* world of corruption and degradation. The chances for release from suffering in the world he has shown have been slight. The torments experienced in life and which may follow in the afterlife have been dissected in great detail. In terms of the overall tone of the poem I do not feel that Eliot had any great hope that mankind would be able to attain a greater state spiritual peace, hence the Fisher King's question of "*shall I at least set my lands in order*" (line 426) rather than him having a purposeful determination to do so. Despite this apparent pessimism Eliot does reveal the qualities that he believes men will need if the world is to be improved: **Give, Sympathise** and **Control**. The final blessing both promises God's love and implores us to seek it.

End

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<sup>22</sup> Macrae, Alasdair D.F. (2010) *The Waste Land - York Notes Advanced*, London, York Press, p.42 and Philippians 4:7