
From the Writer

In writing my research paper on Eliot's *The Waste Land*, I knew that I wanted to focus primarily on the poem's third section, which I believed to be its turning point. Eliot's image of "the human engine" particularly stood out to me, and I knew that I wanted to incorporate it into my paper. In doing preliminary research, I stumbled upon Suárez's article, and his thesis gave me the idea of exploring the role of technology in *The Waste Land*. Given the volume of published criticism of *The Waste Land*, I found that my biggest difficulty was in finding original lines of argument and analysis, rather than simply summarizing the existing scholarship. I was able to overcome this by returning to the primary text, quoting and interpreting it directly without the aid of secondary sources. Additionally, my revision process helped me to further unify and develop my own ideas in the paper.

— Perry Schein

“THE HUMAN ENGINE WAITS”: THE ROLE OF TECHNOLOGY IN T.S. ELIOT’S *THE WASTE LAND*

First published in 1922, T.S. 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. As Eliot radically juxtaposes these images of modern industrial society against allusions to mythology, he uses the disjointed and chaotic structure of *The Waste Land* to demonstrate the difficulty of finding meaning in the modern world.

The basic structure of the poem exemplifies this notion that technology has contributed to this fragmentation of society. Critic Juan A. Suárez argues that Eliot tries to mimic a sound recorder in his writing style in *The Waste Land*. Connecting Eliot’s poem to sound montages created by experimental artists in which various sounds from radio broadcasts and recordings were spliced together, Suárez writes that “Eliot’s poem itself is based on zapping through a sort of prerecorded literary archive which seems to be kept on the air at different frequencies” (757). *The Waste Land*’s structure is rooted in machines. The technology subverts the established social order; the frequencies of the high and the low are recorded

side by side without any clear differentiation. As Suárez notes, “Once the channels are open they carry any and all sounds [...]” (764). The voices of kings are equated with those of the working class; modern technology has broken down the traditional customs and social barriers. Through this, Eliot links the structure of the poem to its content. The lack of an apparent pattern in the images Eliot incorporates mirrors the lack of a pattern that he sees in his society.

Eliot’s views of the contrast between conventional and modern life can be observed through the contrast between the images presented in the first and subsequent sections of the poem. In “The Burial of the Dead,” Eliot includes images of life prior to the war. He writes of the prewar upper class, who spend time at the “archduke’s, [m]y cousin’s [...]” and have ordered lives in which they “read, much of the night, and go south in the winter” (Eliot 286). They find meaning in Madame Sosostris’ cards and in the mythology of the classical world. Eliot contrasts their lives against the lives of those in the modernized and mechanized world. These include the women at the pub in “A Game of Chess,” and the typist in “The Fire Sermon.” Compared to the leisure class who enjoy their vacations in the mountains, the typist is “named metonymically for the machine she tends, so merged with it, in fact, that she is called the ‘typist’ even at home” (North 98). As her mechanical work consumes her identity, the typist represents a figure who has been degraded by mechanization. The monotony of her existence furthers Eliot’s commentary on the extent to which the Industrial Revolution has eroded the sense of purpose in human life. The other mechanical images in “The Fire Sermon” further develop this point.

Indeed, “The Fire Sermon” is the section where Eliot makes the degrading effects of mechanization most apparent. The most striking example of this occurs in the lines preceding the introduction of Tiresias: “At the violet hour, when the eyes and back / Turn upward from the desk, when the human engine waits / Like a taxi throbbing waiting,” (Eliot 293). Here, Eliot is directly connecting the modern laborer to a machine. The human becomes the mechanized “human engine,” reduced to the point where she is compared to a “throbbing taxi.” The continuously repeated tasks carried out by industrial laborers and office workers rob them of their individuality and, as Eliot argues, their humanity. North writes that “the figure of metonymy is used polemically to depict a metonymized society

in which individuals are both dismembered and standardized” (98). In this way, Eliot characterizes the “automatism and machine conditioning” (Suárez 749) of modern life as a contributing factor to the downfall of the modern human. As Tiresias is introduced in the next set of lines, this pessimistic view of modern society is further developed through his observations.

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 [...]” (294). 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. 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). The significance of this is that 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.

Tiresias also serves an important function as the lens through which the reader observes the typist. The typist, and the automatic and mechanical way that she goes about life, serves as the most notable example in the poem of the loss of meaning in modern life. The unnamed typist is an archetype; Eliot uses her to represent all women in the industrialized society. As North notes, “The typist is horrifying both because she is reduced by the conditions of labor to a mere part and because she is infinitely multiple” (98). In this way, by providing as few details regarding the typist as possible, Eliot generalizes her to show the degradation of all

women. Eliot further emphasizes the differences between the typist's life and the traditional way of living by noting that she "lays out food in tins" (294). As the clerk arrives, exemplifying the modern working class man in much the same way that the typist exemplifies the modern working class woman, Eliot identifies him as "one of the low" (294). Later, Eliot has Tiresias mention how he has "walked among the lowest of the dead" (295). North uses this association to establish Tiresias' relationship to the clerk, but the connection goes both ways; the clerk is also linked to the "lowest of the dead," further reinforcing the notion that modernity has reduced the condition of humanity. The typist's indifferent attitude towards sex further emphasizes the lack of purpose that Eliot sees in modern life. As Smith notes, "The typist is automatic in her job and in her love-making," (114) further highlighting the idea that modern humans have been reduced to living machines. By generalizing the characters, Eliot is demonstrating that the scene between the typist and the clerk is not a unique one; these incidents occur every day in the modern city.

What distinguishes this particular scene from the multitude of similar occurrences in the aftermath of the First World War is the presence of Tiresias. The blind prophet, a character from classic Greek literature and mythology, serves as a major unifying figure in the poem. Having lived as both a man and a woman, Tiresias is able to relate to both the clerk and the typist in this scene. This scene is not, as Suárez summarizes it, "one more vignette of present-day decadence" (749). Tiresias puts this encounter in context; Tiresias who has "sat by Thebes below the wall" (Eliot 294) links the modern and classical worlds. This "build[ing of] a timeless myth in a modern setting" (Smith 110) gives meaning to this encounter. By linking the chaotic present with the traditions of the past, a pattern emerges from the disorder of the poem. The mythological context establishes that *The Waste Land* is not a perpetual state; it has not always existed, and will not always exist. Here, Eliot gives the first indication that it may be possible to find meaning in contemporary life.

While on the surface this glimmer of meaning in the chaos of *The Waste Land* seems contradictory, the poem contains several examples of finding a position in between the extremes. The simplest example of this is Tiresias' position between the male and female genders. Eliot also places several key passages of the poem in the space between night and day. The

typist's scene occurs at the "violet hour" (Eliot 294). Eliot uses the time of day to link this scene to the fall of the "unreal city." The image of the "unreal city" is repeated throughout the poem, and by calling the modern city "unreal," (288, 293, 299) Eliot is differentiating between the modern, degraded human condition, and the true experience of human existence. The final mention of the "unreal city" notes that it is falling, Eliot writes: "Cracks and reforms and bursts in the violet air / Falling towers / Jerusalem Athens Alexandria / Vienna London / Unreal" (299). The "violet air" and the "violet light" (Eliot 299) place this scene at the junction of night and day, and link it to the arrival of Tiresias earlier in the poem. In this way, Eliot shows the startling images of human squalor in "The Fire Sermon" to be the turning point in the poem. Suárez notes that "the gramophone's sound closes the poem's bleak, nechromantic first half. Shortly afterward begin the intimations of rebirth and redemption" (750). If the images of "The Fire Sermon" show a pessimistic view of the modern world, Eliot does offer hints that the situation can improve, and that meaning can be found. Through this, Eliot bridges the gap between a pessimistic view of the present and an optimistic view of the future.

While Eliot paints a bleak picture of human life in the modern world, he indicates that meaning can be found in life through the context of mythology. Indeed, the mythological framework gives a great deal of meaning to the poem's most striking example of the purposelessness of modern life. In addition to perspective provided by Tiresias, the typist's sexual encounter with the clerk is foreshadowed by the rape of Philomel alluded to in "A Game of Chess." The repeated image of the Fisher King also provides a mythological context to the poem. Near the end of the poem, the Fisher King asks, "Shall I at last set my lands in order?" (Eliot 301). Maintaining his position between a bleak and desolate view of the present, and hope for a rebirth of civilization, Eliot leaves the answer to this question ambiguous. Just as the Fisher King may one day reclaim his lands, Eliot offers signs that humanity may recover from *The Waste Land*.

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