
From the Instructor

Our final paper for WR 150: Modern and Contemporary American Poetry builds upon the analytical, argumentative, and research skills introduced in the first two papers. In order to enlarge the scope and complexity of their arguments, students are asked to conduct a more substantial exploration of multiple poems by any poet of their choosing, or a longer poem such as Whitman's *Leaves of Grass*. Similar to Papers 1 and 2 students must find their motivation for writing in the arguments of others; however, this time students are not provided any exhibit or argument sources for their consideration. Paper 3 required students to locate and engage with all source material independently. Beyond this the paper has to be 2500-3000 words in length and use at least five sources (two of which had to be argument sources). Better papers will feature a compelling and researched prelude, a multi-source stasis, exemplary usage of poetic terminology, and a purposeful usage of background and theory sources.

George Danis's final essay "The World of Eliot's *Waste Land*" is an incredibly sophisticated and ambitious argument about perhaps the most difficult and complex American poem ever written. What is most remarkable about George's essay is his engagement with long-standing literary critics such as Cleanth Brooks and D. C. Fowler; his usage of a variety of source material; and his poetic analysis, the breadth and depth of which any scholar of T. S. Eliot's work would find persuasive and illuminating.

— Jason Tandon

From the Writer

Prior to Professor Tandon's "Modern and Contemporary Poetry" class, I had never seriously read or written about poetry. Rather, like most of my classmates, the bulk of my exposure to poetry came in high school with a teacher spending at most around three weeks reading Shakespeare and requiring an iambic pentameter assignment at the end of the term.

In WR 150, however, I quickly came to appreciate and even enjoy the level of scholarship necessary to understand a poem. From group discussions and class lessons, I learned that poetic choices—such as allusion, form, or even rhythm and meter—that at first glance might seem arbitrary can hold a much deeper level of significance when interpreted within a particular historical or social context. Instead of reading a poem and searching blindly for blunt instances of alliteration or peculiar word spacing, I started to become a more perceptive reader, keenly reading for unique subtleties in the poem; like the critics whose work I researched for motivation, I wanted to develop the necessary sophistication to intuit a unique interpretation that I could call my own.

This was certainly not easy to do for T. S. Eliot's "The Waste Land," because parsing the poem's numerous literary, historical, linguistic, and mythological references often proved excessively challenging. To simplify the poem, I focused my energy on deciphering the significance of Eliot's unique proclivity for irony evident throughout the poem. Indeed, from the opening epigraph (a Roman oracle responding to questions posed to her in Greek) to the poem's closing stanzas (the titular Thunder does not speak) it's clear that the waste land's fertility is not intended to be restored.

Consequently, while some critics claim that Eliot's choice of a barren "waste land" as the poem's setting in conjunction with the poem's litany of spiritual references epitomizes a morally lost and spiritually arid post-WWI Europe, and as such serves as Eliot's call for spiritual revival, I argue that the poem's clearly purposeful irony instead speaks to the failures of religious and Christian thinking in Europe. Moreover, Eliot is drawing the reader's attention to the clear incompatibility of past religious thinking with the modern present through paradox and contradiction, offering an alternative morality that is neither bound by allegiance to a particular god nor rewarded by good faith. Rather, his world is "beyond good and evil" in the sense that it is a raw waste land, barren of past morality and thus subject to the will of the individual. In this sense, his work is uniquely empowering; unlike Eliot's eponymous J. Alfred Prufrock, who fails to seize the day, "The Waste Land" champions individual potential.

— George Danis

GEORGE DANIS

Prize Essay Winner

THE WORLD OF ELIOT'S WASTE LAND

In his 1923 essay “*Ulysses*, Order and Myth,” T. S. Eliot predicated that rather than the narrative style of poetry popularized by poets of the Romantic era, poets of the twentieth-century would instead employ James Joyce’s “mythical method,” a technique characteristic of heavy mythological, historical, and literary allusions used to create a “continuous parallel between contemporaneity and antiquity” (177). Doing so allowed a poem to reach a new universal level of significance regardless of era, much like that of the mythic heroes of Greece and Medieval Europe. More importantly, Eliot noted that making use of the mythical method allowed art to be possible in the epistemologically unstable modern world. Indeed, with the development of modernism came dramatic shifts in the aesthetic paradigm for both visual and literary artists; similar to the new aesthetic schools of cubism, futurism, and surrealism inspired by redefinitions of time and space by scientists and philosophers of the twentieth-century, Eliot argued that the mythical method provided poets with a technique to reconcile present ideas with older linear conceptions of narrative poetry. Specifically, according to Eliot, the poet gained a perspective that offered a new way of “controlling, of giving a shape and significance to the panorama of anarchy which is contemporary history” (178).

Many critics, such as Jay Martin, have argued that Eliot’s modernist poem “The Waste Land” correspondingly seeks to order the chaotic modern world; in particular with its substantial use of historical and literal references, the mythical method offers Eliot a satirical lens to perceive and give new meaning to the present (65). Critics have also argued, however, that the poem’s repeated allusions to fertility myth represent Eliot’s call for

religious revival in Europe. Notably, D. C. Fowler contends that the poem's ending represents "restoration" of the Fisher King's waste land; to him, the Indian words given at the end of the poem provide the "abracadabra element . . . just as the hero of the Grail romances was expected to speak the proper words before the wounded king and his land could be restored, so [does] the protagonist in 'The Waste Land' provide an incantation" (36). The negativism of the opening lines is therefore supplanted by the poem's closing line.

However, reading "What the Thunder Said" as Eliot's resolution to the problems dramatized earlier in the poem disregards the irony of the poem's last movement. Namely, the thunder *does not* speak and the Christian myths alluded to throughout the poem are not fulfilled—the waste land instead remains barren and spiritually arid as the Sanskrit lines in place of Christian prayer at the end of the poem more importantly represent a recapitulation of the poem's opening multilingual epigraph than a signal of conclusion. If "The Waste Land" represents Eliot's attempt to transcend the limitations of traditional poetic technique (linear narration) and instead write with the dominating twentieth-century ideas of relativity, randomness, and uncertainty in mind, perhaps his intent is to depict a world not only barren of traditional epistemology but also of Christian morality and religious certainty. With this interpretation in mind, Eliot's world consequently offers an alternative morality that is neither bound by allegiance to a particular god nor rewarded by good faith; in this sense, the waste land is a world beyond good and evil.

The allusion to the Roman oracle Sibyl in the opening of "The Waste Land" demonstrates Eliot's proclivity throughout the poem for irony, contradiction, and paradox. By depicting Sibyl as hanging in a jar and "wishing to die," Eliot is directly drawing attention to the limitations of the oracle's physical perception; ironically, she seems not to have been able to foretell her own fate as she is now physically trapped and subject to the same chaotic world as those who come and ask her for foresight and guidance. Although the decision to include a bilingual epigraph to begin the poem might seem unnecessarily academic, Eliot's choice is clearly meticulous when considering the technique used throughout "The Burial of the Dead." Much like the Roman oracle responding in Greek to questions posed in Latin, the poem's first movement is written with a motive

to unify ostensibly incompatible worlds: those of past, present and future. The result is a disregard for time and a particular emphasis on *place*; each line represents a different event as Eliot arbitrarily manipulates mythic and historical references. April, rather than being a month associated with birth and rejuvenation, is instead cast as “the cruelest month,” an inversion of the original opening lines of *The Canterbury Tales*; the romantic image of lilacs in the spring is similarly juxtaposed with barren “dull roots” unable to grow out of “stony rubbish” (1–4; 19–20). Yet amidst the first movement’s cluttered “heap of broken images” and seeming lack of sensible direction, there are brief moments of resolve and return to linear narration. Marie’s sled ride, for example, offers a pause from Eliot’s heavy use of direct allusion and historical reference at the poem’s onset. Furthermore, it also marks Eliot’s first use of a single tense for more than one line. While the poem begins in the present—“April *is* the cruelest month”—Eliot’s description of the “winter [that] kept us warm” and Marie’s memory is told entirely in the past (5).

In the first movement’s last stanza, however, the poem’s mythical and historical allusions compete simultaneously with the poem’s brief moments of narration. While the “Unreal city” is specifically identified as London, the passage contains allusions and direct references to Dante’s *Inferno* (60). Likewise, Stetson and the speaker are veterans both of Jutland (the famous naval battle of World War I as indicated in the footnotes) and Mylae, as referenced in the same line. Much like the phenomenon of “double exposure” in photography where two or more individual exposures are superimposed to create a single photograph, the effect is the kaleidoscopic blur of two worlds, articulated in defiance of traditional poetic boundaries of unified time and place. Although the effect does not produce immediate coherency, it does illustrate the importance of the reader’s perspective in relation to characters in the poem, a theme Eliot reiterates throughout the poem. Rather, the characters in the poem neither interact with one another nor understand their placing in the poem; much like Eliot’s call for the reader to transcend the poetic limitations of time and place, so too does understanding the poem’s integration of past, present, and future require a perspective not limited to the characters in the poem. Understanding “The Waste Land” consequently necessitates a nonlinear conceptualization of

time, an ability to simultaneously parse the meaning of seemingly disordered historical and literary allusions.¹

In the poem's second movement, "A Game of Chess," Eliot furthers this challenge to conventional poetic technique and thinking by creating the "cubistic woman," a collage of references to *objects* rather than an explicit description of one particular *subject*.² Specifically, while Eliot makes detailed references to the room and its contents, he dismisses anything uniquely characteristic to the woman. Consider the following fragment taken from the opening passage:

Reflecting light upon the table as
 The glitter of her jewels rose to meet it,
 From satin cases poured in rich profusion;
 In vials of ivory and coloured glass
 Unstoppered, lurked her strange synthetic perfumes
 (80–85).

The woman is consequently unimportant: although surrounded by symbols of significance, and in particular of beauty and sexuality, she signifies nothing as no symbol refers to anything peculiar to herself; that is, she is not sexual, the objects around her are. More subtly, as critics Jewel Brooker and Joseph Bentley carefully note of this particular passage, "nouns . . . things [that] are normally essential [or] thought of as essential, are peripheral and accidental" (103). Rather, Eliot's emphasis on qualities has the effect of misdirecting the reader from the subjects they describe.

More important than Eliot's challenge to traditional poetry are the epistemological implications of Eliot's technique. Specifically, while in the late nineteenth and early twentieth-centuries scientists and philosophers believed that the subject (the observer) and object (the observed entity) were divided and made tangible by the mind, it seems Eliot is instead following in the spirit of the twentieth-century paradigm, juxtaposing the idealization and supposed order of subject-object relations with a modern world of randomness, fragmentation, and relativity, a breakdown of the assumed continuity of observer and observed. Doing so importantly calls into question the woman's existence: if the objects do not refer to or *interpret her* (the role of the subject), she is not *experienced* by the objects in the

room³; Eliot's work to keep the woman unidentified and faceless is indeed incontestable when considering that the woman's reflection in the mirror is left unacknowledged. One interpretation of the woman, then, is that her significance is only apparent to those whose perspectives transcend the waste land and who have the ability to interpret her inclusion with Eliot's mythological and historical references (the readers). Indeed, questions concerning the woman's reality persist with the entrance of the unidentified visitor; it seems, moreover, that his indifference towards the woman furthers the argument that Eliot's intent is to confound the reader with questions concerning the significance of the woman to the man. Particularly convincing evidence is provided later in the canto as the conversation between the woman and the man shifts to the memory of her visitor:

He's been in the army four years, he wants a good time,
And if you don't give it him, there's others will, I said.

...

You ought to be ashamed, I said, to look so antique.

(And her only thirty-one) (148–151)

Lil, the woman, or "proper fool" about whom the visitor is speaking, is criticized for her apparent lack of sexuality and present inability to give her soldier husband a "good time"; she is further expected to have "[got-ten] herself some teeth" with the allowance given to her and "make herself a bit smart" (143–145). Yet unlike Eliot's earlier ghostlike woman, Lil's existence in the poem is clearly noted. Among the facts listed in Eliot's detailed description, Lil is thirty-one years of age, has bad teeth, has borne five children, has misspent her allowance and ruined her health with an abortion, and is married to Albert who is disgusted by her appearance.

Considering that Lil's dialogue is written entirely in the British vernacular, it thus seems that Lil's objectification coupled with Eliot's earlier de-emphasis of the woman in front of the mirror speaks to the crux of the second movement: with Eliot's numerous references to Eve and *Hamlet's* Ophelia in "A Game of Chess," the poet is perhaps offering a critique of gender relations throughout history, of "wasted women" subject to the will of men in myth. Indeed, neither woman embodies any particular sexual power to impose on their respected men—it follows that they are further objects to the hero's subject. Coupled with earlier allusions to fertility myth

and Eliot's acknowledged importance of Weston's *From Ritual to Romance* to the thematic composition of the poem, the importance of women in the second movement becomes strikingly clear and particularly useful for further interpretation when it is realized that the "waste land" is in mythic terms equivalent to the sexually barren woman.⁴

Eliot's extended metaphor of sexual distance between the men and women in "A Game of Chess" and the barrenness of the waste land climaxes in the poem's third movement, "The Fire Sermon." Specifically while early water imagery in the canto seems to foreshadow the inevitability of rain and the restored fertility of the infertile waste land, Eliot's ironic juxtaposition of rain with the dehumanization of sexual intercourse in lines 235–56 instead implies that such rejuvenation is not possible. Rather, if the women of the second canto are to be interpreted as metaphorically representative of the barren waste land, the impossibility of sexual fertility represents perpetuated aridity and the *impossibility of rain*. More specifically, although in lines 215–20 Eliot hints at the man's apparent lust for the woman, the dismissive concluding remarks by the woman of, "Well now that's done: and I'm glad it's over," instead imply the absence of lust (252). Moreover, the woman described as, "Hardly aware of her departed lover," illustrates the desensitization and utter indifference toward love making; sexual intercourse, instead of a symbol of rejuvenation, birth and a celebration of life, is made as mechanical as the woman's "automatic hand" (250; 255) and is further made significant when recalling the question of existence posed in the second canto.

Such lack of a human soul in "The Fire Sermon" has led many critics to conclude that much of Eliot's poem satirizes the modern mind and twentieth-century thinking. In particular, Cleanth Brooks has argued that "our contemporary waste land is in large part the result of our scientific attitude—or our complete secularization" (68). And when considering the third canto's clearly Christian prayers to "pluckest me out," Eliot is conceivably calling for an escape from the hellish waste land through divine intervention; this reference is perhaps a signal of Eliot's own disillusionment with the world of paradox, contradiction, irony, and hopelessness that the poem has become, a reference to the importance of religious thinking in the modern world as a basis for existence, ethics, and morality.

Yet when considering that many faiths—such as Buddhism (alluded to throughout “The Fire Sermon” and also the source of the canto’s title) and Christianity—consider sexual intercourse and asceticism as rival modes of achieving divine unity,⁵ the closing lines of the third canto suggest interpretation markedly different from Brooks’ work. Rather, prayers to “pluckest me out” of “Burning burning burning burning” are ironically preceded by dominating images of water throughout the canto; references to the Thames River and “music [that] crept by me upon the waters” are certainly not accidental and importantly evidence Eliot’s propensity for irony throughout the poem (257–260). And when additionally considering that the poem’s fourth movement, “Death by Water,” does not advocate rebirth from death—the protagonist, Phlebas, merely dies without hope for regeneration or resurrection in the poem’s symbolically shortest canto—the satirical message of the poem’s third movement becomes readily clear. Namely, Phlebas’ insignificant death mocks religion promising salvation or reward after death, both characteristics of the Eastern and Western theologies alluded to throughout “The Fire Sermon.”

Placing the third and fourth movements of “The Waste Land” in the context of the entire poem, by deconstructing assumed knowledge of good and evil, Eliot is perhaps suggesting the difficulty of existence for humans based on religious dogma. Specifically, while attacking the question of existence epistemologically in “A Game of Chess,” it seems that in “The Fire Sermon” and “Death by Water” Eliot is acknowledging that the present problem of existence in the modern world is a consequence of humankind’s religious beliefs, a problem not constrained to a particular gender or time period. The fact that the characters in “The Waste Land” have lost knowledge of good and evil (as derived from religious faith), keeps them from being alive—as critic Stephen Spender perceptively remarks, they remain “eternally dead” (46).

This argument is well supported when considering the poem’s final movement, “What the Thunder Said.” In particular, while visions of rain and water are referenced throughout the canto⁶, Eliot recapitulates the poem’s earlier feel of pessimism and cynicism with the movement’s closing lines. Specifically, although the protagonist is cast in the waste land, sitting upon a shore “with the arid plain behind me,” he is soon transported to the Unreal City—noted clearly by Eliot’s references to London and Dante—

and then finally to the East, presumably India, without hope for his European waste land as the “flash of lightning . . . Bringing rain,” floods the Ganga River. More subtly, this chaotic shift in geography not only exemplifies the poem’s earlier disregard for unity of time and place, but mocks any notion of narrative finality (394). Indeed, the Dante reference is not to Dante’s *Paradiso*, the last poem in the *Divine Comedy*, but to *Purgatorio*; as noted clearly in the text, the protagonist neither “sets his lands in order” nor ascends to any Christian heaven (426).

By deconstructing the dominating intellectual and cultural paradigms of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries and in place advocating a world not based on the assumed order of subject-object relations, the certainty of faith, or even a definitive knowledge of one’s existence, Eliot is successful in his employment of the mythic method; “The Waste Land” indeed remains omnipresent, or, as personal friend Ezra Pound (also to whom the poem is dedicated) remarked in his review of the poem, “news that stays news” (Raine 96). This significance, however, is somewhat contrived when noting that critics are still unable to agree on a concrete interpretation of the poem. Yet when considering the implications of Eliot’s aesthetic technique, breaking down the narrative style of poetry set before him and instead challenging the reader to transcend assumed unity of time and place, Eliot is conceivably articulating a world beyond the constraints of not only literary technique but more importantly morality and ethics as the Fisher King’s disillusionment and spiritual exhaustion throughout “The Waste Land” perhaps reflects the limitations of religious faith.

This interpretation has particularly strong resonance with Nietzsche’s philosophy as explicated in *Beyond Good and Evil*. Though written roughly fifteen years apart, both “The Waste Land” and Nietzsche’s work importantly focus on deconstructing past morality and philosophy, in favor of advocating a world of freedom for the adequately fit individual; for Eliot, this amounts to transcending the limitations of past poetry and instead supposing the new Cubistic and Futuristic modernist world. Nietzsche’s analysis similarly accuses past philosophers of blindly accepting Judeo-Christian values, therefore resulting in a false interpretation of morality; Nietzsche, rather, does not consider certain virtues and vices to be *a priori* good or evil but instead unproven values reflective of a particular religious narrative, an assumption that importantly weakens an individual’s poten-

tial (200–205). His philosophy hence moves into the realm “beyond good and evil” in the sense of leaving behind traditional morality—he instead calls for his readers to no longer be ashamed of differences in the face of a supposed morality-for-all. Likewise, by deconstructing conventional poetry and supposed morality, Eliot is inviting his readers, those strong enough to leave behind requisite assumptions such as linear time and place, to this world. Recalling the visual movements associated with modernism (that is, futurism, cubism, and surrealism) as a graphical representation of the technique used in “The Waste Land,”⁷ this philosophical interpretation is perhaps best captured with Casper David Friedrich’s *Wanderer above the Mist* (1818). Specifically, Eliot is advocating transcending a chaotic modern world and ordering it as the individual sees fit, neither being constrained by traditional philosophy and science nor subscribing to a particular moral narrative. Unlike Eliot’s J. Alfred Prufrock, who fails to seize the day, “The Waste Land” champions individual potential. In this sense, the poem achieves universal significance, a testament indeed to the legacy of Eliot’s mythical method.

NOTES

1. Indeed, as will be shown, the poem's opening epigraph cannot be understood without first reading the ending.

2. Futurism and Surrealism: as critic Jacob Korg writes on Eliot's technique, "The Surrealist effect is like that of an image remembered from a dream; it embodies a profound emotional impression, but its meaning remains elusive." The most important motifs of Surrealist art are paradox and contradiction. Futurist artists sought to depict speed rather than stagnancy in their works and this is reflected throughout much of the nonlinearity and arbitrary use of tense in "The Waste Land" (89–91).

3. An illustrating example of this paradox can be seen in mathematics. In *Principia Mathematica*, Newton acknowledged that mathematics rested on the manifestation of objects by the subject; numbers could only be identified with a relation, a means to make an abstraction tangible. Consequently, without a subject to interpret significance, and define with a relation, an object has no meaning; two objects correspondingly have no reality in themselves. One possible interpretation of the title, then, is that it symbolizes such epistemological stalemate and inability to reconcile present theory with traditional theories of knowledge and knowing (Brooker and Bentley 64).

4. Examples of fertility myth and the barrenness of the waste land early in the poem: "breeding/ Lilacs out of the dead land" and "that corpse you planted last year in your garden...will it bloom this year?" (2; 72)

5. A major motivation for asceticism is the brevity of sexual intercourse. Rather, ascetics maintain that a more permanent relationship with God is achieved through traditional prayer, humility, and sacrifice (Brooker and Bentley 124).

6. As in the third movement, rain may be interpreted as a symbol of restoration and rejuvenation.

7. Consider Duchamp's *Nude Descending a Staircase, No. 2* as a "heap of broken images."

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