FROM THE INSTRUCTOR

In "T. S. Eliot's Profound Inquiry: Analysis of *The Waste Land* and *The Four Quartets* in the Context of the Restrictive Nature of Time," Sheila Sagear investigates Eliot's depiction of and attitude toward time in two canonical works of twentieth-century modernism. Saegar enrolled in the WR 150 seminar "Marvelous Modernism" because she was interested in writing about and researching *The Waste Land*, a poem she had some knowledge of before entering the course. Her final paper is what I call a long-arc research paper: Saegar wrote about and researched Eliot's depiction of and attitude toward time in *The Waste Land* for a shorter mid-term research paper, then extended that investigation into "Burnt Norton," the first of the *Four Quartets*, to develop a longer final research paper.

Saegar ponders the destruction and desolation of *The Waste Land* and considers Eliot's depiction of the futility of human existence bound by time and mortality, then asks the important question of whether Eliot posits a greater meaning and reality outside of time. She looks carefully at "Part V: What the Thunder Said," in which Eliot's modern epic seems to come to a climax and resolution. She writes that "Eliot breaks the confines of the 'beginning, middle, and end' narrative style and instead employs a speaker who transcends temporal *and* physical human restrictions, moving around time as humans move through space." This is a radical and imaginative reading of a poem that many critics argue ends with a sort of irony-laced pessimism. According to Sagear, Eliot gives the reader the experience of becoming unbound from time, "off the wheel," so to speak, and in doing so argues for a more optimistic reading of the poem that also points ahead to *Four Quartets*, in which she sees a similar strategy at work from the very beginning.

An important and compelling part of Sagear's argument is that there is more continuity than difference between *The Waste Land* and *Four Quartets*, an interpretation that is at odds with the mainstream critical view of Eliot as more pessimistic in *The Waste Land*, before he converted to Christianity, and more optimistic in *Four Quartets*, after he did so. Through a careful reading of the primary texts, and effective library and Internet research that brings a range of critical views to the conversation, Saegar argues successfully for this important connection and confluence between the two long major poems that bookend Eliot's career, and in doing so makes a valuable and original contribution to Eliot scholarship.

Anthony Wallace
WR 150: Marvelous Modernism: The Poetry of Robert Frost, T. S. Eliot, and Allen Ginsberg

From the Writer

This paper was born of a profound sense of wonder and longing; it's about Eliot and his poetry, but it's more about mortality, physics, existentialism, and an ever-present confusion around how we got here and where we are going. I wanted to study the art of a poet exploring these questions, but I really wanted to vocalize this tension around uncertainties of existence that I think everybody experiences, but most of us have learned to internalize. This is what goes into a 2 A.M. phone conversation before your 8 A.M. exam when you can't sleep because you're too distraught by not knowing who you are, what your purpose is, or if you are truly alone.

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Sheila Sagear

Meditations in *N* Dimensions: *The Waste Land, The Four Quartets*, and Eliot's Inquiry into the Restrictive Nature of Time

We begin by building a tesseract with poetry. This object, the four-dimensional equivalent of a cube, can be thought of as having axes in the three spatial dimensions and in one fourth dimension, time. In the universe we live in, it is supposedly physically impossible to transcend these boundaries, but this deters few deep and conscious thinkers from speculating on what could lie beyond them. T.S. Eliot is one such thinker who builds his tesseract with his poems *The Waste Land* and "The Four Quartets," introducing meditations that create uncertainty around the true limits of the dimensions we live in. In his own way, he speculates on whether this tesseract has more than four axes, beginning in *The Waste Land* with an emotional response to the destruction and desolation of World War I. Especially considering these expressions in Part V, "What the Thunder Said," it might be tempting to see the poem as an exploration of the effects of death on a society and its perception of physical and temporal boundaries. Similarly, Part I of "The Four Quartets," "Burnt Norton," follows a speaker who muses on these boundaries and wonders whether there must be a more meaningful existence beyond them. David Soud describes "The Four Quartets" as a poem in which

> a crescendo of images, allusions, and quotations culminate in a Dantean anticipation of the afterlife… and point beyond the boundary of death, where, for both Eliot and Barth, the dialectic of time and eternity is resolved. (205)

He argues that the poem is an inquiry into death, what comes after it, and what this says about the existence of time outside of our own plane of existence.

However, I voice that Eliot does something much deeper than this in both *The Waste Land* and "The Four Quartets." He is not necessarily concerned with physical death. Instead, he asks a broader question: what exists out there, beyond time? Is there any way we can reach it, be it in death or even somehow in life? Perhaps it is only in death that we discover the answers to these questions, but Eliot asks these questions without specific consideration for death. Eliot's true inquiry is clear in the close inspection of how he treats the passage of time in Part V of *The Waste Land.* He breaks the confines of the "beginning, middle, and end" narrative style, employing instead a speaker who transcends temporal *and* physical human restrictions, moving around time as humans move through space. These questions are also posed in the opening of "The Four Quartets," as we presumably see into the speaker's mind as he or she muses on the nonlinear nature of time and the meaning of its restrictions for humans living inside it. Eliot does this to communicate that although we are bound to the restrictions of time, there is, nonetheless, a part of the soul that is able to see beyond these

restrictions. We experience a profound longing for freedom from time that is intrinsic to the human experience.

The Waste Land focuses on concrete objects and frames descriptions that are easily pictured by the reader. For example, the speaker references "Rock and no water and the sandy road" (Eliot, *WL* 332) and "doors of mud-cracked houses" (Eliot, *WL* 345), real objects that evoke images of the tangible world. The speaker similarly incorporates descriptions of real-world civilizations in references to "Jerusalem Athens Alexandria" (Eliot, *WL* 374) and "London Bridge… falling down" (Eliot, *WL* 426). However, the speaker does not use tangible references to study the actual objects of these civilizations, but uses these things to enable us to clearly see the abstract ideas and emotions he really wishes to present. The objects presented in this poem are of this world, but the ideas presented—destruction, pain, and finally rebirth—transcend the particular locations or objects used to communicate them. Eliot goes beyond the concrete literality of any of these references in exploring the pure concepts of death and birth without any "filters," or context and preexisting knowledge, to limit the exploration.

This use of concrete objects to describe abstract concepts is seen in Eliot's use of many contrasting and seemingly disconnected references. For example, he speaks of Eastern and Western cultures side by side, referencing "Vienna London" as "Unreal" (Eliot, *WL* 376) alongside references to *Datta, Dayadhvam,* and *Danyaya* (Eliot, *WL* 401–418), which are Sanskrit words associated with giving and compassion. He also works with sound in the contrast of "frosty silence in the gardens" (Eliot, *WL* 323) to "Prison and place and reverberation" (Eliot, *WL* 326). While all these references are of this world, they are, at first glance, disconnected. What connects them is the emotion they evoke, specifically the emotion of resolution after destruction, which is not specific to any one location or object. This emotion transcends the confines of space and time, an abstract concept made reachable by tangible references.

With his explorations of abstract ideas and pure emotions, Eliot is widely considered to be one of the great "high modernist" writers. He is often associated with contemporaries Ezra Pound and E. E. Cummings, both of whom make extensive use of imagism, pinpointing a single instant in space and time and studying the emotions that arise only in that moment. However, *The Waste Land* differs in that Eliot does not explore a single instant; instead, the work moves around in time. The poem opens describing April as "the cruelest month" (Eliot, *WL* 1), and then describes that "summer surprised us" (Eliot, *WL* 8) and that the speaker goes "south in the winter" (Eliot, *WL* 18). This first stanza introduces the way Eliot works with time, moving from one time to another in an unstable and unpredictable way and rejecting the traditional narrative style with a beginning, middle, and end.

However, Part V begins with the word "after" (Eliot, *WL* 322). While Parts I through IV lack a traditional narrative form, Eliot suggests that the events of Part V exist "after"—or outside of—what was described before. Within Part V is a self-contained narrative. It begins with the tension presented by the stream-of-consciousness style phrase that begins "Here is no water but only rock / Rock and no water and the sandy road" (Eliot, *WL* 331). Here the speaker introduces the ideas of scarcity and need. However, when the speaker goes on to describe that *"Then* a damp gust [came] / Bringing rain" (Eliot, *WL* 393, emphasis added), suggesting that there is a movement of time, we find a before and after. "The black clouds / Gathered far distant" (Eliot, *WL* 396–397),

and suddenly there is movement, tumult, and a fundamental change. This change from the tension of "before" and the reviving clamor of "after" suggests the progression of time within Part V.

Not only does Eliot move around in time throughout *The Waste Land*, but he does so in a highly fragmented manner. In Part V, a speaker erratically describes a landscape with "no rock / If there were rock / And also water / And water / A spring / A pool among the rock" (Eliot, *WL* 347–352) using short and frequent lines that repeat sounds and words, giving an impression of desperation, fragmented thinking, and an experience bordering madness. The way the speaker weaves his description is analogous to spinning us around so we lose our orientation, or any sense of the period in which the events described are taking place. The speaker goes through similar verbal exercises, with the fragmented and disorienting phrases "Falling towers / Jerusalem Athens Alexandria / Vienna London / Unreal" (Eliot, *WL* 373). In "T. S. Eliot's Concept of Time and the Technique of Textual Reading: A Comment on 'Cross' In *The Waste Land*, Line 175," Sukhbir Singh explores the meaning of the fragmented style of thought Eliot employs in Part V, claiming that "Eliot invites the reader to order the 'fragments' he has 'shored' against his 'ruin' into a 'coherent whole' by working out their possible relationships with each other" (38), and goes on to describe that this fragmentation allows the reader to interpret the movement of time in a variety of ways.

It is important to note that this fragmentation plays an important role in the interpretation of time in this poem, but instead of allowing the reader the flexibility to choose his or her interpretation, it actually necessitates the interpretation of the fragmentation of time itself. The fragmentation is used in a way that makes it difficult to see the progression of the narrative, and can most clearly be seen in the questions posed by the speaker at different points in Part V: the speaker asks "Who are these hooded hordes swarming / Over endless plains… What is the city over the mountains / Cracks and reforms and bursts in the violet air / Falling towers" (Eliot, *WL* 368–373). These questions emerge as if the mind that produces them is working erratically, creating short, disconnected phrases, and the questions posed are not tied to any specific time. The city could be any city, and the hooded swarms are not identified with a particular period. By these questions, Eliot creates the illusion that time is at least fragmented and discontinuous, and at most, absent.

It is then important to ask whether these communications refer to the past or the future. It is possible that Eliot has in mind a setting either long ago in the past or far out into the future; that is, periods no living person has experienced. As the fragmentation within Part V suggests a broken or absent sense of time, Part V does not occur in the past or the future, but simultaneously both and neither. Eliot communicates using tangible places and objects—he works within the confines of space—but he works outside of time, leaving in intentional ambiguities and communicating ideas as suspended in time. Charles M. Tung comments in "Modernist Contemporaneity: Rethinking Time in Eliot Studies and 'The Waste Land'" that Eliot's narrative of a population is "a static one whereby present and past are united in an eternal stasis" (381). The usage of the word "stasis" communicates quite well the way Eliot works with storytelling. He does not tell a story by concatenating events as first, second, and third; instead, he pulls ideas from this history and develops them alongside concepts related in ways other than time, as the history is "eternal," and something infinite has not a beginning, middle, nor end. This experimental narrative style configures *The Waste Land* as a unique aperture through which we see the timeless effects of long-term change, destruction and reconstruction, and death and life. This strategy allows us to experience these concepts out of context—even the seemingly inescapable context of time—and develop an emotional response to the concept itself.

"The Four Quartets" provide a complimentary perspective on the nature of time and our relationship with it. In Part I, "Burnt Norton," Eliot explores time as a malleable concept—something that can be examined and manipulated just like a physical object—rather than a fixed characteristic of existence. The speaker muses on the nonlinear nature of time in this part, and here Eliot refrains even from using objects, places, or people to communicate these thoughts, as he does in *The Waste Land*. Instead, he directly addresses these thoughts, calling Time by its name in a hypostatization of the abstract quality. The speaker muses that "Time present and time past / Are both perhaps present in time future, / And time future contained in time past" (Eliot, *FQ* 1–3), and it seems he speaks of these ideas as an informal proposal rather than a definite statement (as seen in the use of the word "perhaps"), vocalizing a spontaneous and unfiltered thought process. The speaker notices that the linearity of time is just an abstraction; time is not a true restriction of the universe, but merely an illusion, as seen in the speaker's suggestion that time present, past, and future really coexist with each other in the same plane of existence. Humans must be able to get out of time—or at least see around it—in some way, and time is not an impenetrable wall, but instead a translucent sheet that vaguely obscures what is behind it.

The speaker goes on to suggest that "What might have been is an abstraction / Remaining a perpetual possibility / Only in a world of speculation" (Eliot, *FQ* 6–8), reinforcing his initial thought that time is truly an abstraction and adding that there are other possibilities that exist in other "times," where humans cannot reach them. He does this by mentioning the "perpetual possibility," suggesting the stasis instead of the movement of time, which means that this possibility must exist in some higher plane of reality. While apparently human and consequently bound by time, the speaker strikes us as quite enlightened—he notices that there may be a way to see beyond time. He notices the translucency of the sheet. Christopher Ricks points out that "[t]he confused distinction which exists in most heads between 'abstract' and 'concrete' is due not so much to a manifest fact of the existence of two types of mind, an abstract and a concrete, as to the existence of another type of mind, the verbal, or philosophic" (257), suggesting that the enlightenment of the speaker—his verbal, philosophic mind—is vital to the development of these thoughts. Ricks also reflects the space the speaker imagines in his description of the speaker's mind. In his comment that the nature of the speaker's mind is not abstract nor concrete but philosophical, he implies that the speaker is not exploring any dimension of this world, but rather that of another world. If he lives in a two-dimensional page, the speaker does not look left or right, but out of the page.

Having come to this conclusion, the speaker begins to think about his own role as a temporal being. "If all time is eternally present," he says, "All time is unredeemable" (Eliot, *FQ* 4–5). He suggests that if all time exists eternally—if time is fundamentally static instead of moving—then time must have no meaning. In "Knowledge and Experience in the Philosophy of F. H. Bradley," Eliot himself comments on these lines by pointing out that "that which is purely in time cannot be said to exist at all" (110) articulating the speaker's real-time realization by concluding that time itself is a construct, specific to this plane of existence, and therefore has no meaning outside of the universe in which we are bound.

The speaker goes on to ask "to what purpose / Disturbing the dust on a bowl of rose-leaves / I do not know" (Eliot, *FQ* 16–18). The speaker begins to question his role in a temporal existence, asking what his purpose is here, whether it is merely to "disturb the dust," if he is bound by an illusion to begin with. The reference to dusty rose-leaves, a bowl of potpourri, brings to mind Henry Austin Dobson's poem "Pot-Pourri," in which a speaker "plunges [his] hands among the leaves: /

An alien touch but dust perceives … memory of the vanished days / When they were roses" (1–6). These few lines magnify the emotion the speaker of "The Four Quartets" implies in his reference to dried rose-leaves. His mind is occupied with death, dryness, and lack of meaning. The dried leaves imply empty purpose and an absence of opportunity, and "disturbing the dust" (Eliot, *FQ* 17) suggests a totally meaningless existence. He makes this statement with a slightly sarcastic and questioning tone, and coupled with his musings on the meaning of time, the speaker's greater suggestion is that there must be a way to break out of this lower, time-bound plane of existence and into a higher one where the true possibilities of the universe are not obscured. What purpose do we have here? he asks, and concludes that he does not know, suggesting that there must be something more meaningful to which we may aspire.

The question of what exactly this more meaningful purpose is not necessarily the question at hand. The point is that while the speaker is bound by time and may not be able to see beyond it, he is, nonetheless, able to sense that there is *something* beyond it. Furthermore, he longs for it. This longing can be seen in the speaker's tone as he disparages the actions of his life, "disturbing the dust," and senses something more meaningful beyond time. He questions the meaning of his own existence as he realizes that there must be some higher plane of being.

Having established that "What the Thunder Said" concludes a story told with a fragmented or completely absent sense of time and suggests a profound tension stemming from destruction and desolation, and that "Burnt Norton" presents an account of longing for an existence outside of time, it is necessary to study the narrator of both poems. The disconnected manner in which the story is told and the deliberate choices of the speaker of *The Waste Land* to disorient the reader and remove any previous bias suggest a speaker who goes beyond the confines of time and space. The speaker must take on a god-like omniscience. "What the Thunder Said" necessitates this type of storyteller because only a god-like figure could tell the story like this. Only this figure could know of a state beyond time and communicate the resolution that would pertain outside of these confines. Some of the last lines of *The Waste Land* illustrate the position and state of this omniscient speaker, as he recounts that "I sat upon the shore / Fishing, with the arid plain behind me / Shall I at least set my lands in order?" (Eliot, *WL* 423) The speaker looks behind him at the fallen world he has recounted, and implies he has the power and responsibility to "set the lands in order." The speaker communicates a resolution to the concepts of destruction near the end of the work, a resolution that does not exist in this plane of being, but one outside of time.

The speaker of "Burnt Norton" creates a sharp contrast with the god-like speaker of "What the Thunder Said." Instead of being omniscient, the speaker is very much bound by time. The speaker vocalizes a feeling of restriction, especially in his recounting of the passing day, as he says that "Time and the bell have buried the day, / the black cloud carries the sun away" (Eliot, *FQ* 130–131). These lines not only provide a look into what the speaker sees—the steady passing of time, unreachable by his own hands—but they also provide insight into the speaker's emotional response to the passing of time. He feels powerless and caged, "buried" like the day, living in darkness as black as the clouds overhead, restricted and limited by the passing of time. This evidence necessitates a temporal, human speaker who notices the restrictive nature of time but is unable to change or go beyond it.

Throughout Parts I through VI of *The Waste Land*, time is presented as an impediment to the hope of rebirth. The speaker moves erratically through time in an attempt to escape its confines.

However, the speaker finally concludes that "I have heard the key turn in the door and turn once only" (Eliot, *WL* 412), suggesting liberation from the world where "each confirms his prison" (Eliot, *WL* 414), the prison of time. Outside of time, "the boat responded/Gaily, to the hand expert with sail and oar" (Eliot, *WL* 418–419). There is rain, and there is again abundance. This is the purpose Eliot had in mind as he employed an omniscient speaker telling a story outside of time. The speaker conveys that there is hope, perhaps not within time as we know it, but outside of it. He reports from outside of time, "with the arid plain behind" (Eliot, *WL* 424) and communicates that there will one day be abundance; there will be "*Shantih,*" the peace of understanding. Similarly, in "Burnt Norton," the temporal speaker communicates a deeply rooted longing in himself for a more meaningful existence outside of time and communicates that he knows that there must be something outside of it: "What might have been and what has been / Point to one end, which is always present" (Eliot, *FQ* 47–48), suggesting that the linear nature of time as he sees it is merely an illusion, and that the "present" moment, the only moment that really exists, is the closest one can get to this state.

The coupling of a god-like, omniscient, and immortal speaker who is not bound by time and a human speaker who longs for that very existence provides a unique perspective on the human experience. In these works, Eliot argues that a higher plane of existence does exist, and that it is an intrinsic part of the human experience to long to reach it. It follows that Eliot is concerned with much more than exploring physical death and what lies beyond it, as David Soud argues. The ideas presented in this poem reach beyond these temporal, human topics, and Eliot instead explores and questions what is beyond without referring to physical death. He obscures the linearity of time and questions the impenetrability of physical bounds, and he often does so without reference that he *himself* is human and restricted in these ways. It may seem odd that Eliot would be raising these existential questions, as he had converted to Christianity by the time he wrote "The Four Quartets," but it seems that Eliot was not occupied with the implications these questions had on religious doctrine. He questioned because the questions were there, and they must be asked. If he were an artist, he would paint off the canvas and leave the observer to wonder how the brush strokes hover in mid-air. Instead of pointing "side to side" to another place or another time, as most writers do, he points "up" into another dimension that we cannot fully comprehend. He makes this inquiry into what exists beyond the laws of physics to question the most fundamental axioms of existence, using his poetic grace and luminous curiosity to propose other axes to our so carefully constructed tesseract. He works as a physicist with his art, studying overwhelming unknowns of the largest scale yet conceding to a deep desire for simplicity and truth. His questions leave us peering through the translucency of what we believed to be opaque and longing to explore this profound and beautiful tension between the certain and uncertain.

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