

T.S. Eliot and A Summary of The Waste Land

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- Perhaps the most significant modernist poetry is *The Waste Land*. Some praised it as the age's breakthrough poetry when it debuted in October 1922, while others despised it for its scholarly appeal and classical tone. There are several references, quotes, and footnotes in this famous poem, making it everything but simple to read. Some of the lines are in French, while others are in German or Italian. The last section is in Sanskrit. The total number of lines is 434.

But why did the poet need so many notes and references? Well, Eliot wanted his poem to be modern but to do that he felt he had to incorporate past historical, mythological and literary ideas in a new form.

- Gone were the neat iambic rhyming lines and straightforward narratives of the past. Newly arrived were experimental free verse, varying line length, fragmentation and urban mythology.
- To completely comprehend every line and the terminology employed, a novice reader undoubtedly requires references. Because of the nature of the beast, the reader cannot ignore the numerous direct and indirect cultural influences found in *The Waste Land*. Although Eliot was well aware of the citations, he maintained that they were included to appease critics who had accused him of plagiarism in several of his earlier works. Between the close of World War I and the beginning of the 1920s, a number of poets were trying to distill the cultural crises into a single, lengthy work.

For Eliot, recovering in Switzerland from a nervous breakdown, the time was ripe. Out of his personal trauma came the impersonal art. He returned to England with 19 pages of a new poem which he showed to none other than fellow American Ezra Pound, the spark and energy behind the modernist movement.

- Pound edited Eliot's poem, cutting bits out, sharpening it up, effectively halving it. Eliot dedicated the poem to Pound who he called the better craftsman (IL MIGLIOR FABBRO)

Ezra Pound knew he had a winner:

'Eliot's *Waste Land* is I think the justification of the movement, of our modern experiment, since 1900.'

When it was released in 1922, the western world was still recovering from the devastation caused by the First World War, which claimed tens of millions of lives. In the first industrial war, the extent of the devastation was simply astounding.

With its changing scenes, many voices, and form alterations, T.S. Eliot's poem seems to capture the essence of contemporary consciousness. The rule was uncertainty. The war machine had replaced the old pre-industrial way of life, which had vanished forever.

Where was the world heading? What lay ahead? What was the cost of life now that so many people had died so quickly during the Great War? Crucially for Eliot, in the midst of all this chaos and estrangement, where was God?

The Waste Land conjures up no magical answer to this question but instead takes the reader on a long journey full of swift changes, through bleak environments to a possible redemption.

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Underpinning it however are two crucial themes:

- **Fertility** - the wasted land must be renewed. Eliot took inspiration from ancient vegetation rituals as described in the book *From Ritual to Romance* which highlights the progression from primitive pagan festivals through to spiritual quests for the Holy Grail and the healing of the Fisher King.
- **Healing** - for the land, and humanity, to experience rebirth, man and woman must come to terms with fear, sex and religion within their own relationships.
- In a world gone insane, Eliot's poem might represent a quest for a fresh spirituality. It is replete with references to religion, mythology, and the occult. The individual's predicament in both nature and society, as well as the relationships between men and women, are often contrasted.

However, keep in mind that the poem also features a Phoenician sailor, an Austrian countess, a London pub landlord, Cockneys (east end Londoners with distinctive accents and their own language), a typewriter wearing questionable underwear, and a shabby young clerk.

It is difficult to read. Not at all. Along with snippets of German, French, Italian, and Sanskrit, there are several citations and references. An encyclopedia may be necessary before you try it.

- Nonetheless, it is a crucial poem because it helped the contemporary world emerge from the gloomy abyss of cultural dismay into the light of fresh hope and form, leaving it kicking and screaming, dejected, and spiritually withered.

The Waste Land blends mythology and reality, the ancient and the modern, history and the present, symbolism and psychological disarray. It had a direct impact on authors like Allen Ginsberg (*Howl*), F. Scott Fitzgerald (*The Great Gatsby*), and Ernest Hemingway (*The Sun Also Rises*).

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The Waste Land - Names of the Five Sections

I. The Burial of the Dead (lines 1 - 76)

The natural cycle of the seasons reversed. April is cruel because life cannot now emerge from the ruined soil. Expectations turned upside down. Fear in a handful of dust. The future occult. Corpses buried in the Unreal City (London). Twisted morals.

II. A Game of Chess (lines 77 - 172)

Alludes to two plays by English dramatist Thomas Middleton: *A Game at Chess* (1624) and *Women Beware Women* (1657). Both focus on sexual intrigue. The game of chess is a cover for seduction and rape; the London pub scene a raunchy post-war dialogue about abortion and future relationships.

III. The Fire Sermon (lines 173 - 311)

Taken from the Buddha's fire sermon, noted by Eliot 'corresponds in importance to the Sermon on the Mount. Basically, Buddha tells how to achieve liberation from suffering by detachment from the five senses and the mind. Longest section based in London, by the River Thames. Concerns relationship between a typist and a clerk and the role of blind Tiresias. Religious and Shakespearean allusions.

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IV. *Death by Water* (lines 312 - 321)

Shortest section. Related to section I and the tarot symbol of the drowned Phoenician sailor. Also St Paul's letter to the Romans chapter 2, for example:

⁹Tribulation and anguish, upon every soul of man that doeth evil, of the Jew first, and also of the Gentile;

¹⁰But glory, honour, and peace, to every man that worketh good, to the Jew first, and also to the Gentile:

V. *What the Thunder Said* (322 - 434)

Final section. The meaning of the thunder in this case relates to a Hindu fable found in the ancient Sanskrit text of the Upanishads, 5. The supreme deity Prajapati speaks with the force of thunder and utters a special syllable to the gods: *Da*, meaning 'be restrained'. To the humans he utters *Datta*, 'give alms' and to the demons *Dayadhvam*, 'have compassion.' The thunder also relates to the storm that led the Grail Knight to the Chapel Perilous and also has a biblical connection in several books.