

## ANALYSIS

“The Waste Land” (1922)



T. S. Eliot

(1888-1965)

“[The essential meaning of the poem is reducible to four Sanskrit words, three of which are] so implied in the surrounding text that one can pass them by...without losing the general tone or the main emotion of the passage. They are so obviously the words of some ritual or other. [The reader can infer that “shantih” means peace.] For the rest, I saw the poem in typescript, and I did not see the notes till 6 or 8 months afterward; and they have not increased my enjoyment of the poem one atom. The poem seems to me an emotional unit.... I have not read Miss Weston’s *Ritual to Romance*, and do not at present intend to. As to the citations, I do not think it matters a damn which is from Day, which from Milton, Middleton, Webster, or Augustine. I mean so far as the functioning of the poem is concerned.... This demand for clarity in every particular of a work, whether essential or not, reminds me of the Pre-Raphaelite painter who was doing a twilight scene but rowed across the river in day time to see the shape of the leaves on the farther bank, which he then drew in with full detail.”

Ezra Pound (1924)  
quoted by Hugh Kenner  
*The Invisible Poet, T.S. Eliot*  
(Obolensky 1959) 152

“[Eliot’s] trick of cutting his corners and his curves makes him seem obscure when he is clear as daylight. His thoughts move very rapidly and by astounding cuts. They move not by logical stages and majestic roundings of the full literary curve, but as live thoughts move in live brains.”

May Sinclair  
quoted by Edmund Wilson  
*Axel’s Castle*  
(New York 1931) 108

“When all qualifications have been urged, ‘The Waste Land’ remains a great positive achievement, and one of the first importance for English poetry. In it a mind fully alive in the age compels a poetic triumph

out of the peculiar difficulties facing a poet in the age. And in solving his own problem as a poet Mr. Eliot did more than solve the problem for himself. Even if 'The Waste Land' had been, as used to be said, a 'dead end' for him, it would still have been a new start for English poetry."

F. R. Leavis  
*New Bearings in English Poetry*  
(1932; Chatto & Windus 1950) 114

"What he learned especially from [*From Ritual to Romance*] was the recurring pattern of similarity in various myths, the basic resemblance, for example, between the vegetation myths of the rebirth of the year, the fertility myths of the rebirth of the potency of man, the Christian story of the Resurrection, and the Grail legend of purification. The common source of all these myths lay in the fundamental rhythm of nature—that of the death and rebirth of the year; and their varying symbolism was an effort to explain the origin of life. Such knowledge, along with the researches of psychology, pointed to the close union in all these myths of the physical and the spiritual, to the fact that their symbolism was basically sexual—in the Cup and Lance of the Grail legend as well as in the Orpheus cults; pointed, in brief, to the fundamental relation between the well-springs of sex and religion....

In such a perception of the nature of myths, of 'a common principle underlying all manifestations of life,' Eliot found a scaffold for his poem, a background of reference that made possible something in the nature of a musical organization.... The poem thus embodies simultaneously several different planes of experience, for it suggests the likenesses between various waste lands. Its quest for salvation in contemporary London is given greater volume and urgency by the additional presence of the haunted realm of medieval legend.... Thus he who 'is now dead' is not Christ alone, but the slain Vegetation God; he is Adonis and Osiris and Orpheus....

As a result of this method of compressing into a single moment both the memory and the sameness of other moments, it becomes apparent that in 'The Fire Sermon,' the section of the poem which deals in particular with the present and the past of London, no sharply separating contrast is made between them. Squalor pollutes the modern river as it did not in Spenser's 'Prothalamion'; but there are also glimpses of beauty...although mention of Elizabeth and Leicester brings an illusion of glamour, closer thought reveals that the stale pretense of their relationship left it quite as essentially empty as that between the typist and the clerk....

To convey in poetry the feeling of the actual passage of life, to bring to expression the varied range and volume of awareness which exists in a full moment of consciousness, demanded, in Eliot's view, the strictest condensation. Above all, the impression of a fully packed content should not be weakened through the relaxed connectives of the usual narrative structure.... Poetry alone, through its resources of rhythm and sound, can articulate the concentrated essence of experience, and thus come closest to the universal and permanent; but it can do so only through the mastery of a concentrated form....

If, in severest analysis, the kind of poetry Eliot is writing gives evidence of social disintegration, he has expressed that fact precisely as the poet should, not by rhetorical proclamation, but by the very feeling of contemporary life which he has presented to the sensitive reader of his lines.... And in case there should be some feeling that either Joyce or Eliot has revealed a kind of bookish weakness in turning for the structure to literature rather than to life, it should be recollected that Shakespeare himself created hardly any of his plots, and that by the very fact of taking ready-made the pattern of his characters' actions, he was able to devote his full attention to endowing them with life. It is only an uninformed prejudice which holds that literature must start from actual personal experience.... The poet's imagination can work equally well on his reading as on the raw material of his senses. In fact, it is a mark of full human maturity, as Eliot has revealed in his discussion of the metaphysical poets, that there should not be a separation in an individual's sensibility between reading and experience any more than between emotion and thought...

I had been enjoying "the Waste Land" for several years before an interest in exploring the effect of Eliot's reading upon his development brought me to *From Ritual to Romance*. As a result of having read that book I can now follow more distinctly the logical steps by which Eliot was led to compose his structure, and can also perceive in detail the kind of stimulus and release that the book gave to his mind....

I had never seen a Tarot pack (and, if I had to bet, my money would say that neither had Eliot himself). But Miss Weston mentions that its four suits are Cup, Lance, Sword, and Dish, which thus correspond to the sexual symbolism of the Grail; and that the original use of these cards was 'not to foretell the Future in general, but to predict the rise and fall of the waters which brought fertility to the land.' Through such knowledge the exact emotional relevance to the poem of this 'wicked pack' is obviously brought into new focus.... 'The Waste Land' does not require recourse to the poet's reading in order to become comprehensible. Its structure is pre-eminently self-contained....

His Notes are simply a consequence of his desire to strip the form of his poem to its barest essentials in order to secure his concentrated effect. Such reading as an integral part of his experience, demanded certain sign-posts of elucidation if the reader was to follow the exact course...it is obviously necessary, for *full* understanding of some of his passages, to be aware of the special context of his allusions to other poets. In all cases when Eliot thinks that context essential to the reader of 'The Waste Land' he has given the reference, as...to the *Inferno*, *The White Devil*, and *Les Fleurs du Mal*... The self-consuming burning of sterile passion which is the theme of 'The Fire Sermon' receives added emphasis from the pertinent reminder of the exact expression of that theme by Buddha and St. Augustine, though no reading of their work is required for understanding the poem....

Some of the notes which struck me at first as useless pedantry or deliberate mystification of the reader, particularly the one on Tiresias, I now recognize as very useful to the interpretation of the poem.... Comparable to Eliot's use of Notes in 'The Waste Land' is the frequent presence, throughout his work, of epigraphs for individual poems... Again the intention is to enable the poet to secure a condensed expression in the poem itself, as well as to induce the reader to realize, even from the moment before the poem begins, that in reading poetry every word should be paid full attention. In each case the epigraph is designed to form an integral part of the effect of the poem."

F. O. Matthiessen  
*The Achievement of T. S. Eliot*  
(Houghton 1935) 33-44

"A portrait of a society from which grace has been withdrawn and which is dying of its own triviality and ugliness.... The matter of 'The Waste Land' is Baudelairean. It is no accident that the last line of the introductory poem of 'The Waste Land' is also the last line of the preface of *Les Fleurs du Mal*. That preface details the sins of the modern world as they appeared to Baudelaire, and it names as the most horrible of them all the sin of Ennui. Now Ennui, as it appears in much romantic literature is very much the same sin as the Christian sin of acedia, or spiritual torpor, and it might well be regarded as the most deadly of sins because it leads to all the others and interferes with one's struggling against them: it would be above all other sins the one most likely to appear, if we accept Christian postulates, in a man or a society deprived of grace....

The subject matter of 'The Waste Land' is in general similar to that of *Les Fleurs du Mal*. Yet if one will compare let us say *Le Jeu* with 'A Game of Chess,' one may perhaps note what Eliot overlooked. Eliot, in dealing with debased and stupid material, felt himself obliged to seek his form in his matter: the result is confusion and journalistic reproduction of detail. Baudelaire, in dealing with similar matter, sought to evaluate it in terms of eternal verity: he sought his form and his point of view in tradition, and from that point of view and in that form he judged his material, and the result is a profound evaluation of evil. The difference is the difference between triviality and greatness....

The meter of 'The Waste Land' is not the suave meter of *The Cantos* or of 'Gerontion': it is a broken blank verse interspersed with bad free verse and rimed doggerel. And what is one to say of the last eight lines of 'The Waste Land,' which are composed, as nearly as I can determine with the aid of the notes, of unaltered passages from seven sources? A sequence of such quotations cannot by any stretch of the imagination achieve unity, and its disunity can be justified on no grounds... The method is that of a man who is unable to deal with his subject, and resorts to the rough approximation of quotation; it is the method of the New England farmer who meets every situation in life with a saw from *Poor Richard*; it betokens the death of the mind and of the sensibility alike."

Yvor Winters

### MISINTERPRETATIONS

“Though much has been written on ‘The Waste Land,’ it will not be difficult to show that most of its critics misconceive entirely the theme and the structure of the poem. There has been little or no attempt to deal with it as a unified whole.... ‘The Waste Land’ has been almost consistently misinterpreted since its first publication. Even a critic so acute as Edmund Wilson has seen the poem as essentially a statement of despair and disillusionment, and his account sums up the stock interpretation of the poem. Indeed, the phrase, ‘the poetry of drouth,’ has become a cliché of left-wing criticism. Is it such a misrepresentation of ‘The Waste Land’ as this which allows Eda Lou Walton to entitle an essay on contemporary poetry, ‘Death in the Desert’; or which causes Waldo Frank to misconceive of Eliot’s whole position and personality. But more than the meaning of one poem is at stake. If ‘The Waste Land’ is not a world-weary cry of despair or a sighing after the vanished glories of the past, then not only the popular interpretation of the poem will have to be altered but also the general interpretations of post-War poetry which begin with such a misinterpretation as a premise.

### ELIOT’S METHOD

Such misinterpretations involve also misconceptions of Eliot’s technique. Eliot’s basic method may be said to have passed relatively unnoticed. The popular view of the method used in ‘The Waste Land’ may be described as follows: Eliot makes use of ironic contrasts between the glorious past and the sordid present—the crashing irony of ‘But at my back from time to time I hear / The sound of horns and motors, which shall bring / Sweeney to Mrs. Porter in the spring.’ But this is to take the irony of the poem at the most superficial level, and to neglect the other dimensions in which it operates. And it is to neglect what are essentially more important aspects of his method. Moreover, it is to overemphasize the difference between the method employed by Eliot in this poem and that employed by him in later poems.

The basic method used in ‘The Waste Land’ may be described as the application of the principle of *complexity*. The poet works in terms of surface *parallelisms* which in reality make *ironical contrasts*, and in terms of surface contrasts which in reality constitute parallelisms. (The second group sets up effects which may be described as the *obverse of irony*.) The two aspects taken together give the effect of *chaotic experience ordered into a new whole*, though the realistic surface of experience is faithfully retained. The complexity of the experience is not violated by the apparent forcing upon it of a predetermined scheme....

### ALL CHARACTERS ONE

The melting of the characters into each other is, of course, an aspect of this general process.... The effect is a sense of the oneness of experience, and of the unity of all periods, and with this, a sense that the general theme of the poem is true. But the theme has not been imposed—it has been revealed.... The poem would undoubtedly be ‘clearer’ if every symbol had a single, unequivocal meaning; but the poem would be thinner, and less honest. For the poet has not been content to develop a didactic allegory in which the symbols are two-dimensional items adding up directly to the sum of the general scheme. They represent dramatized instances of the theme...

### EXAMPLE OF METHOD

The fortune-telling of ‘The Burial of the Dead’ will illustrate the general method very satisfactorily. On the surface of the poem the poet reproduces the patter of the charlatan, Madame Sosostris, and there is the [1] *surface irony*: the contrast between the original use of the Tarot cards and the use made by Madame Sosostris. But each of the details (justified realistically in the palaver of the fortune-teller) assumes a new meaning in the general context of the poem. There is then, in addition to the surface irony, something of a [2] *Sophoclean irony* too, and the ‘fortune-telling,’ which is taken ironically by a twentieth-century audience, becomes true as the poem develops—true in a sense in which Madame Sosostris herself does not think it true. The surface irony is thus reversed and becomes an irony on a deeper level. The items of her speech have only one reference in terms of the context of her speech: the ‘man with three staves,’ the ‘one-

eyed merchant,' the 'crowds of people, walking round in a ring,' etc. But transferred to other contexts they become loaded with special meanings.... I have called the effect the [3] *obverse of irony*, for the method, like that of irony, is indirect, though the effect is positive rather than negative.... To sum up, all the central symbols of the poem head up here; but here, in the only section in which they are explicitly bound together, the binding is slight and accidental. The deeper lines of association only emerge in terms of the total context as the poem develops—and this is, of course, exactly the effect which the poet intends.

### TECHNIQUE OF ALLUSIONS

The transference of items from an 'innocent' context into a context in which they become charged and transformed in meaning will account for many of the literary allusions in the poem. For example, the 'change of Philomel' is merely one of the items in the decorative detail in the room in the opening of 'A Game of Chess.' But the violent change of tense—'And still she cried, and still the world pursues'—makes it a comment upon, and a symbol of, the modern world. And further allusions to it through the course of the poem gradually equate it with the general theme of the poem. The allusions to *The Tempest* display the same method. The parallelism between Dante's Hell and the waste land of the Grail legends is fairly close; even the equation of Baudleaire's Paris to the waste land is fairly obvious. But the parallelism between the death by drowning in *The Tempest* and the death of the fertility god is, on the surface, merely accidental, and the first allusion to Ariel's song is merely an irrelevant and random association of the steam-of-consciousness....

### BASIC SYMBOL

The basic symbol used, that of the waste land, is taken of course from Miss Jessie Weston's *From Ritual to Romance*. In the legends which she treats there, the land has been blighted by a curse. The crops do not grow and the animals cannot reproduce. The plight of the land is summed up by, and connected with, the plight of the lord of the land, the Fisher King, who has been rendered impotent by maiming or sickness. The curse can be removed only by the appearance of a knight who will ask the meanings of the various symbols which are displayed to him in the castle. The shift in meaning from physical to spiritual sterility is easily made, and was, as a matter of fact, made in certain of the legends. As Eliot has pointed out, a knowledge of this symbolism is essential for an understanding of the poem....

### STRUCTURE OF CONTRASTS

'The Waste Land' is built on a major contrast...between two kinds of life and two kinds of death. Life devoid of meaning is death; sacrifice, even the sacrificial death, may be life-giving, an awakening to life. The poem occupies itself to a great extent with this paradox, and with a number of variations upon it.... The fact that men have lost the knowledge of good and evil, keeps them from being alive, and is the justification for viewing the modern waste land as a realm in which the inhabitants do not even exist. This theme is stated in the quotation which prefaces the poem. The Sybil says: 'I wish to die.' Her statement has several possible interpretations. For one thing, she is saying what the people who inhabit the waste land are saying....

### REVIVING SPIRITUALITY

Eliot's theme is not the statement of a faith held and agreed upon (Dante's *Divine Comedy*) nor is it the projection of a 'new' system of beliefs (Spenser's *Faerie Queene*). Eliot's theme is the rehabilitation of a system of beliefs, known but now discredited.... Unlike Dante, he cannot assume acceptance of the statement. A direct approach is calculated to elicit powerful 'stock responses' which will prevent the poem's being read at all. Consequently, the only method is to work by indirection. The Christian material is at the center, but the poet never deals with it directly. The theme of resurrection is made on the surface in terms of the fertility rites; the words which the thunder speaks are Sanskrit words....

The Christian terminology is for the poet a mass of clichés. However 'true' he may feel the terms to be, he is still sensitive to the fact that they operate superficially as clichés, and his method of necessity must be a process of bringing them to life again. The method adopted in 'The Waste Land' is thus violent and radical, but thoroughly necessary.... In this way the statement of beliefs emerges *through* confusion and cynicism—not in spite of them.

## ANALYSIS OF POEM

### I

The first section of 'The Burial of the Dead' develops the theme of the attractiveness of death, or of the difficulty in rousing oneself from the death in life in which the people of the waste land live. Men are afraid to live in reality. April, the month of rebirth, is not the most joyful season but the cruelest. Winter at least kept us warm in forgetful snow.... Men dislike to be roused from the death-in-life.... The first part of 'The Burial of the Dead' introduces this theme through a sort of a reverie on the part of the protagonist—a reverie in which speculation on life glides off into memory of an actual conversation in the Hofgarten and back into speculation again. The function of the conversation is to establish the class and character of the protagonist....

There are references to Ezekiel and to Ecclesiastes, and these references indicate what it is that men no longer know: The passage referred to in Ezekiel 2, pictures a world thoroughly secularized.... Chapter 37 in particular, which describes Ezekiel's waste land, where the prophet, in his vision of the valley of dry bones, contemplates the 'burial of the dead' and is asked: 'Son of man, can these bones live?'... The passage from Ecclesiastes 12, alluded to in Eliot's notes, describes the same sort of waste land.... The next section of 'The Burial of the Dead' which begins with the scrap of song quoted from Wagner (perhaps another item in the reverie of the protagonist), states the opposite half of the paradox which underlies the poem: namely, that life at its highest moments of meaning and intensity resembles death....

The two quotations from the opera which frame the ecstasy-of-love passage...take on a new meaning in the altered context. In the first, love is happy; the boat rushes on with a fair wind behind it. In the second, love is absent; the sea is wide and empty. And the last quotation reminds us that even love cannot exist in the waste land.... Tarot cards were originally used to determine the even of highest importance to the people, the rising of the waters. Madame Sosostrius has fallen a long way from the high function of her predecessors. She is engaged merely in vulgar fortune-telling—merely one item in a generally vulgar civilization. But the symbols of the Tarot pack are still unchanged. The various characters are still inscribed on the cards, and she is reading in reality (though she does not know it) the fortune of the protagonist.

She finds that his card is that of the drowned Phoenician Sailor, and so she warns him against death by water, not realizing any more than do the other inhabitants of the modern waste land that the way into life may be by death itself. The drowned Phoenician Sailor is a type of the fertility god whose image was thrown into the sea annually as a symbol of the death of summer. As for the other figures in the pack: Belladonna, the Lady of the Rocks, is woman in the waste land. The man with three staves, Eliot says he associates rather arbitrarily with the Fisher King. The term 'arbitrarily' indicates that we are not to attempt to find a logical connection here.... The Hanged Man, who represents the hanged go of Frazer (including the Christ), Eliot states in a note, is associated with the hooded figure who appears in 'What the Thunder Said.' That he is hooded accounts for Madame Sosostrius' inability to see him; or rather, here again the palaver of the modern fortune-teller is turned to new and important account by the poet's shifting the reference into a new and serious context....

After the Madame Sosostrius passage, Eliot proceeds to complicate his symbols for the sterility and unreality of the modern waste land by associating it with Baudelaire's *'fourmillante cite'* and with Dante's Limbo.... In Baudelaire's city, dream and reality seem to mix.... The line, 'I had not thought death had undone so many,' is taken from the Third Canto of the *Inferno*...the Third Canto deals with Dante's Limbo which is occupied by those who on earth had 'lived without praise or blame.' They share this abode with the angels 'who were not rebels, nor were faithful to God, but were for themselves.' They exemplify almost perfectly the secular attitude which dominates the modern world....

The people described in the Fourth Canto are those who lived virtuously but who died before the proclamation of the Gospel—they are the unbaptized. They form the second of the two classes of people who inhabit the modern waste land: those who are secularized and those who have no knowledge of the faith. Without a faith, their life is in reality a death... The reference to Stetson stresses again the connection between the modern London of the poem and Dante's hell.... The protagonist, like Dante, sees among the

inhabitants of the contemporary waste land one whom he recognizes. (The name 'Stetson' I take to have no ulterior significance. It is merely an ordinary name such as might be borne by the friend one might see in a crowd in a great city.)... In having the protagonist address the friend in a London street as one who was with him in the Punic War rather than as one who was with him in the World War is making the point that all the wars are one war; all experience, one experience...

[The] allusion to the buried god will account for the ironical, almost taunting tone of the passage. The burial of the dead is now a sterile planting—without hope... I am inclined to take the Dog (the capital letter is Eliot's) as Humanitarianism and the related philosophies which, in their concern for man, extirpate the supernatural—dig up the corpse of the buried god and thus prevent the rebirth of life.... The last line of 'The Burial of the Dead'—'You! Hypocrite lecteur!—mon semblable,—mon frere!' the quotation from Baudelaire, completes the universalization of Stetson begun by the reference to Mylae. Stetson is every man including the reader and Mr. Eliot himself.

## II

If 'The Burial of the Dead' gives the general abstract statement of the situation, the second part of 'The Waste Land'... gives a more concrete illustration. The easiest contrast... is the contrast between life in a rich and magnificent setting and life in the low and vulgar setting of a London pub. But both scenes, however antithetical they may appear superficially, are scenes taken from the contemporary waste land. In both of them life has lost its meaning.

I am particularly indebted to Mr. Allen Tate's comment on the first part of this section...: 'The woman... is, I believe, the symbol of man at the present time. He is surrounded by the grandeurs of the past, but he does not participate in them; they don't sustain him.... The rich experience of the great tradition depicted in the room receives a violent shock in contrast with a game of that symbolizes the inhuman abstraction of the modern mind.'... Cleopatra... is perhaps the extreme exponent of love for love's sake, the feminine member of the pair of lovers who threw away an empire for love....

The violation of a woman makes a very good symbol of the process of secularization.... Our contemporary waste land is in large part the result of our scientific attitude—of our complete secularization.... Apparently the 'world' partakes in the barbarous king's action [rape], and still partakes in that action.... Edmund Wilson has pointed out that the rendition of the bird's song here represents not merely the Elizabethans' neutral notation of the bird's song, but carries associations of the ugly and coarse. The passage is one, therefore, of many instances of Eliot's device of using something which in one context is innocent but in another context becomes loaded with a special meaning.... The raped woman becomes transformed through suffering into the nightingale...

The reference to [a] section of *The Tempest* is, like the Philomela reference, one of Eliot's major symbols.... The song, one remembers, was sung by Ariel in luring Ferdinand, Prince of Naples, on to meet Miranda, and thus to find love, and through this love, to effect the regeneration and deliverance of all the people on the island.... The allusion is an extremely interesting example of... taking an item from one context and shifting it into another in which it assumes a new and powerful meaning... a death which becomes a sort of birth... assumes in the mind of the protagonist an association with that of the drowned god whose effigy was thrown into the water as a symbol of the death of the fruitful powers of nature but which was taken out of the water as a symbol of the revived god.... The passage therefore represents the perfect antithesis to the passage in 'The Burial of the Dead': 'That corpse you planted last year in your garden,' etc.... This contrast between the death in rat's alley and the death in *The Tempest* is made again in 'The Fire Sermon.'...

We have yet to treat the relation of the title of the second section, 'A Game of Chess,' to Middleton's play, *Women Beware Women*, from which the game of chess is taken. In the play, the game is used as a device to keep the widow occupied while her daughter-in-law is being seduced. The seduction amounts almost to a rape, and in a double entendre, the rape is actually described in terms of the game. We have one more connection with the Philomela symbol... The abstract game is being used in the contemporary waste land, as in the play, to cover up a rape and is a description of the rape itself.... Ophelia [in *Hamlet*], too, was very much concerned about love, the theme of the conversation between the women in the pub. As a

matter of fact, she was in very much the same position who has been the topic of conversation between the two ladies whom we have just heard. And her poetry, like Philomela's, had come out of suffering. We are probably to look for the relevance of the allusion to her here rather than in an easy satiric contrast between Elizabethan glories and modern sordidness....

### III

'The Fire Sermon' makes much use of several of the symbols already developed. The fire is the sterile burning of lust, and the section is a sermon, although a sermon by example only. This section of the poem also contains some of the most easily apprehended uses of literary allusion. The poem opens on a vision of the modern river. In Spenser's 'Prothalamion' the scene described is also a river scene at London, and it is dominated by nymphs and their paramours, and the nymphs are preparing for a wedding. The contrast between Spenser's scene and its twentieth-century equivalent is jarring. The paramours are now 'the loitering heirs of city directors,' and, as for the nuptials of Spenser's Elizabethan maidens, in the stanzas which follow we learn a great deal about those. At the end of the section the speech of the third of the Thames-nymphs summarizes the whole matter for us.

The waters of the Thames are also associated with those of Leman—the poet in the contemporary waste land is in a sort of Babylonian Captivity. The castle of the Fisher King was always located on the banks of a river or on the sea shore. The title 'Fisher King,' Miss Weston shows, originates from the use of the fish as a fertility or life symbol. This meaning, however, was often forgotten, and so his title in many of the later Grail romances is accounted for by describing the king as fishing. Eliot uses the reference to fishing for reverse effect. The reference to fishing is part of the realistic detail of the scene—'Whilt I was fishing in the dull canal.' But to the reader who knows the Weston references, the reference is to that of the Fisher King of the Grail legends. The protagonist is the maimed and impotent king of the legends.

Eliot proceeds now to tie the waste-land symbol to that of *The Tempest*, by quoting one of the lines spoken by Ferdinand, Prince of Naples, which occurs just before Ariel's song, 'Full Fathom Five,' is heard. But then he alters *The Tempest* passage somewhat...The protagonist in the poem, then, imagines himself not only in the situation of Ferdinand in *The Tempest* but also in that of one of the characters in the Grail legend; and the wreck, to be applied literally in the first instance, applies metaphorically in the second.... The allusion to Marvell's 'To His Coy Mistress' is...one of the easiest allusions in the poem. Instead of 'Time's winged chariot' the poet hears 'the sound of horns and motors' of contemporary London. But the Passage has been further complicated. The reference has been combined with an allusion to Day's 'Parliament of Bees.'...Day's 'sound of horns and hunting' has changed to the horns of the motors. And Acteon will not be brought face to face with Diana, goddess of chastity; Sweeney, type of the vulgar bourgeois, is to be brought to Mrs. Porter, hardly a type of chastity....

Mr. Eugenides, the Smyrna merchant, is the one-eyed merchant mentioned by Madame Sosostris. The fact that the merchant is one-eyed apparently means, in Madame Sosostris' speech, no more than that the merchant's face on the card is shown in profile. But Eliot applies the term to Mr. Eugenides for a totally different effect. The defect corresponds somewhat to Madame Sosostris' bad cold. He is a rather battered representative of the fertility cults: the prophet, the *seer*, with only one eye. The Syrian merchants, we learn from Miss Weston's book, were, along with slaves and soldiers, the principal carriers of the mysteries which lie at the core of the Grail legends. But in the modern world we find both the representatives of the Tarot divining and the mystery cults in decay. What he carries on his back and what the fortune-teller is forbidden to see is evidently the knowledge of the mysteries (although Mr. Eugenides himself is hardly likely to be more aware of it than Madame Sosostris is aware of the importance of her function). Mr. Eugenides, in terms of his former function, ought to be inviting the protagonist into the esoteric cult which holds the secret of life, but on the realistic surface of the poem, in his invitation to 'a weekend at the Metropole' he is really inviting him to a homosexual debauch. The homosexuality is 'secret' and now a 'cult' but a very different cult from that which Mr. Eugenides ought to represent. The end of the new cult is not life but, ironically, sterility.

In the modern waste land, however, even the relation between man and woman is also sterile. The incident between the typist and the carbuncular young man is a picture of 'love' so exclusively and



practically pursued that it is not love at all. The tragic chorus to the scene is Tiresias, into whom perhaps Mr. Eugenides may be said to modulate, Tiresias, the historical 'expert' on the relation between the sexes.... The essential horror of the act which Tiresias witnesses in the poem is that it is not regarded as a sin at all—is perfectly casual, is merely the copulation of beasts. The reminiscence of the lines from Goldsmith's song in the description of the young woman's actions after the departure of her lover, gives concretely and ironically the utter break-down of traditional standards.

It is the music of her gramophone which the protagonist hears 'creep by him' 'on the waters.' Far from the music which Ferdinand heard bringing him to Miranda and love, it is, one is tempted to think, the music of 'O O O O that Shakespearean Rag.' But the protagonist says that he can sometimes hear 'the pleasant whining of a mandolin.' Significantly enough, it is the music of the fisherman (the fish again as a life symbol) and it comes from beside a church (though—if this is not to rely too much on Eliot's note—the church has been marked for destruction)....

The song of the Thames-daughters brings us back to the opening section of 'The Fire Sermon' again, and once more we have to do with the river and the river-nymphs. Indeed, the typist incident is framed by the two river-nymph scenes. The connection of the river-nymphs with the Rhine-daughters of Wagner's *Gotterdammerung* is easily made... Like the Thames-daughters they too have been violated; and like the maidens mentioned in the Grail legend, the violation has brought a curse on gods and men. The first of the songs depicts the modern river, soiled with oil and tar. (Compare also with the description of the river in the first part of 'The Fire Sermon.') The second song depicts the Elizabethan river, also evoked in the first part of 'The Fire Sermon.' (Leicester and Elizabeth ride upon it in a barge of state....) Elizabeth and the typist are alike as well as different. (One of the reasons for the frequent allusion to Elizabethan poetry in this and the preceding section of the poem may be the fact that with the English Renaissance the old set of supernatural sanctions had begun to break up.... The third Thames-daughter's song depicts another sordid 'love' affair, and unites the themes of the first two songs... The songs of the three Thames-daughters... epitomize this whole section of the poem....

The moral of all the incidents which we have been witnessing is that there must be an asceticism—something to check the drive of desire. The wisdom of the East and the West comes to the same thing on this point. Moreover, the imagery which both St. Augustine and Buddha use for lust is fire. What we have witnessed in the various scenes of 'The Fire Sermon' is the sterile burning of lust. Modern man, freed from all restraints, in his cultivation of experience for experience's sake burns...

#### IV

Whatever the specific meaning of the symbols, the general function of the section, 'Death by Water,' is readily apparent. The section forms a contrast with 'The Fire Sermon' which precedes it—a contrast between the symbolism of fire and that of water. Also readily apparent is its force as a symbol of surrender and relief through surrender....

The drowned Phoenician Sailor recalls the drowned god of the fertility cults. Miss Weston tells that each year at Alexandria an effigy of the head of the god was thrown into the water as a symbol of the death of the powers of nature, and that this head was carried by the current to Byblos where it was taken out of the water and exhibited as a symbol of the reborn god. Moreover, the Phoenician Sailor is a merchant—'Forgot...the profit and loss.' The vision of the drowned sailor gives a statement of the message which the Smyrna merchants originally brought to Britain and which the Smyrna merchant, unconsciously and by ironical negatives, has bought. One of Eliot's notes states that the 'merchant...melts into the Phoenician Sailor, and the latter is not wholly distinct from Ferdinand Prince of Naples.' The death by water would seem to be equated with the death described in Ariel's song in *The Tempest*.... 'Death by Water' gives an instance of the conquest of death and time, the 'perpetual recurrence of determined seasons,' the world of spring and autumn, birth and dying' through death itself.

The reference to the ‘torchlight red on sweaty faces’ and to the ‘frosty silence in the gardens’ obviously associates Christ in Gethsemane with the other hanged gods. The god has died... It is the death-in-life of Dante’s Limbo. Life in the full sense has been lost.... The passage on the sterility of the waste land and the lack of water provides for the introduction later of two highly important passages: ‘There is not even silence in the mountains / But dry sterile thunder without rain—’ lines which look forward to the reference to the Journey to Emmaus theme a few lines later: ‘Who is the third who walks always beside you?’ The god has returned, has risen, but the travelers cannot tell whether it is really he, or mere illusion induced by their delirium.

The parallelism between the ‘hooded figure’ who ‘walks always beside you,’ and the ‘hooded hordes’ is another instance of the sort of parallelism that is really a contrast. In the first case, the figure is indistinct because spiritual; in the second, the hooded hordes are indistinct because completely *unspiritual*—they are the people of the waste land... Eliot, as his notes tell us, has particularly connected the description here with the ‘decay of eastern Europe.’ The hordes represent, then, the general waste land of the modern world with a special application to the breakup of Eastern Europe, the region with which the fertility cults were especially connected and in which today the traditional values are thoroughly discredited. The cities, Jerusalem, Athens, Alexandria, Vienna, like the London of the first section of the poem are ‘unreal,’ and for the same reason. The passage which immediately follows develops the unreality into nightmare....

Figures from earlier in the poem [appear]: the lady of ‘A Game of Chess,’ who, surrounded by the glory of history and art, sees no meaning in either and threatens to rush out into the street “With my hair down, so,’ has here let down her hair and fiddles ‘whisper music on those strings.’ One remembers in “A Game of Chess’ that it was the woman’s hair that spoke... The hair has been immemorially a symbol of fertility, and Miss Weston and Frazer mention sacrifices of hair in order to aid the fertility god.... The doors ‘of mudcracked houses,’ and the cisterns in this passage are to be found in Ecclesiastes [12], and the woman fiddling music from her hair is one of ‘the daughters of musick’ brought low. The towers and bells from the Elizabeth and Leischester passage of “the Fire Sermon’ also appear here, but the towers are upside down, and the bells, far from pealing for an actual occasion or ringing the hours, are ‘reminiscent.’ The civilization is breaking up...

The ‘violet light’ also deserves comment. In ‘The Fire Sermon’ it is twice mentioned as the ‘violet hour,’ and there it has little more than a physical meaning. It is a description of the hour of twilight. Here it indicates the twilight of the civilization, but it is perhaps something more. Violet is one of the liturgical colors of the Church. It symbolizes repentance and it is the color of baptism. The visit to the Perilous Chapel, according to Miss Weston, was an initiation—that is, a baptism. In the nightmare vision, the bats wear baby faces. The horror built up in this passage is a proper preparation for the passage on the Perilous Chapel which follows it. The journey has not been merely an agonized walk into the desert, though it is that; nor is it merely the journey after the god has died and hope has been lost; it is also the journey to the Perilous Chapel of the Grail story. In Miss Weston’s account, the Chapel was part of the ritual, and was filled with horrors to test the candidate’s courage.... In many of the Grail stories the Chapel was haunted by demons...

The fertility cults go back to a very early period and are recorded in Sanskrit legends. Eliot has been continually, in the poem, linking up the Christian doctrine with the beliefs of as many peoples as he can. Here he goes back to the very beginnings of Aryan culture, and tells the rest of the story of the rain’s coming, not in terms of the setting already developed but in its earliest form.... The use of Sanskrit in what the thunder says is thus accounted for. In addition, there is of course a more obvious reason for casting what the thunder said into Sanskrit here: onomatopoeia.

#### WHAT THE THUNDER SAYS

The comments on the three statements of the thunder imply an acceptance of them. The protagonist answers the first question, ‘What have we given?’ with the statement: ‘The awful daring of a moment’s surrender / Which an age of prudence can never retract / By this, and this only, we have existed.’ Here the

larger meaning is stated in terms which imply the sexual meaning. Man cannot be absolutely self-regarding. Even the propagation of the race—even mere ‘existence’—calls for such a surrender. Living calls for...belief in something more than ‘life.’... The comment on *dayadhvam* (sympathize) is obviously connected with the foregoing passage. The surrender to something outside the self is an attempt (whether on the sexual level or some other) to transcend one’s essential isolation. The passage gathers up the symbols previously developed in the poem just as the numerous references to sex made earlier in the poem.... The third statement made by the thunder, *damyata* (control) follows the condition necessary for control, sympathy....

I cannot accept Mr. Leavis’ interpretation of the passage, ‘I sat upon the shore / Fishing, with the arid plain behind me,’ as meaning that the poem ‘exhibits no progression.’ The comment upon what the thunder says would indicate, if other passages did not, that the poem does ‘not end where it began.’ It is true that the protagonist does not witness a revival of the waste land; but there are two important relationships involved in his case: a personal one as well as a general one. If secularization has destroyed, or is likely to destroy, modern civilization, the protagonist still has a private obligation to fulfill. Even if the civilization is breaking up—‘London bridge is falling down falling down falling down’—there remains the personal obligation: ‘Shall I at least set my lands in order?’...

#### CONCLUDING QUOTATIONS

The bundle of quotations with which the poem ends has a very definite relation to the general theme of the poem and to several of the major symbols used in the poem...The sister of Philomela was changed into a swallow as Philomela was changed into a nightingale. The protagonist is asking therefore when shall the spring, the time of love, return, but also when will he be reborn out of his sufferings...with the special meaning which the symbol takes on from the preceding Dante quotation and from the earlier contexts.... The quotation from ‘El Desdichado,’ as Edmund Wilson has pointed out, indicates that the protagonist of the poem has been disinherited, robbed of his tradition. The ruined tower is perhaps also the Perilous Chapel, ‘only the wind’s home,’ and it is also the whole tradition in decay. The protagonist resolves to claim his tradition and rehabilitate it.

The quotation from *The Spanish Tragedy*—‘Why then Ile fit you. Hieronymo’s mad againe’—is perhaps the most puzzling of all these quotations. It means, I believe, this: The protagonist’s acceptance of what is in reality the deepest truth will seem to the present world mere madness. (‘And still she cried...”Jug Jug” to dirty ears.’) Hieronymo in the play, like Hamlet, was ‘mad’ for a purpose. The protagonist is conscious of the interpretation which will be placed on the words which follow—words which will seem to many apparently meaningless babble, but which contain the oldest and most permanent truth of the race: ‘Datta. Dayadhvam. Damyaya.’... Like Hieronymo, the protagonist in the poem has found his theme; what he is about to perform is not ‘fruitless’....”

Cleanth Brooks  
*Modern Poetry and the Tradition*  
(U North Carolina 1939) 136-72

“Poem on the theme of the sterility and chaos of the contemporary world... This most widely known expression of the despair of the postwar era has as a structural framework the symbolism of certain fertility myths that reputedly formed the pagan origins of the Christian Grail legend. The Waste Land itself is a desolate and sterile country ruled by an impotent king, and the poem is divided into five parts: ‘The Burial of the Dead,’ representing the rebirth of the land after the barren winter; ‘The Game of Chess,’ a contrast between the splendor of the past and the aqualor of modern life; ‘The Fire Sermon,’ vignettes of the sordidness of modern life; ‘Death by Water,’ the vision of a drowned Phoenician sailor who at least dies by water, not thirst; and ‘What the Thunder Said,’ representing the decay of modern Europe, through symbols of the Grail legend.

The poem concludes with quotations from the Upanishads, its last word, three times repeated, being ‘Shantih,’ meaning ‘the peace which passeth understanding.’ In the 433 lines of the poem are included quotations from, allusions to, or imitations of some 35 different writers, as well as several popular songs

and passages in foreign languages, including Sanskrit. The original poem was far longer than the published text, which was severely pruned and edited by Ezra Pound, to whom the work is dedicated.”

James D. Hart  
*The Oxford Companion to American Literature*, 5<sup>th</sup> edition  
(Oxford 1941-83)

“T. S. Eliot is a culture hero... The width and the height and the depth of modern life are exhibited in his poetry; the agony and the horror of modern life are represented as inevitable to any human being who does not wish to deceive himself with systematic lies.... He is the descendant of the essential characters of [Henry James] in that he is the American who visits Europe with a Baedeker in his hand, just like Isabel Archer. But the further sense in which he is the heir of all the ages is illustrated when Eliot describes the seduction of a typist in a London flat from the point of view of Tiresias, a character in a play by Sophocles. To suppose that this is the mere exhibition of learning or reading is a banal misunderstanding... Only an American with a mind and sensibility which is cosmopolitan and expatriated could have seen Europe as it is seen in ‘The Waste Land’....

Literary allusion has become not merely a Miltonic reference to Greek gods and Old Testament geography, not merely the citation of parallels, but a powerful and inevitable habit of mind, a habit which issues in judgment and the representation of different levels of experience, past and present.... Henry James was concerned with the American in Europe. Eliot cannot help but be concerned with the whole world and all history. Tiresias sees the nature of love in all times and all places and when Sweeney outwits a scheming whore, the fate of Agamemnon becomes relevant too.... It is no accident that in ‘The Waste Land’ use is made of *The Golden Bough*, and a book on the quest of the Grail; and the way in which images and associations appear in the poem illustrates a new view of consciousness, the depths of consciousness and the unconscious mind....

Nowhere better than in Eliot can we see the difference between being merely literary and making the knowledge of literature an element in vision, that is to say, an essential part of the process of seeing anything and everything.... The subject of ‘The Waste Land’ is the sensibility of the protagonist, a sensibility which is literary, philosophical, cosmopolitan and expatriated.... J. Alfred Prufrock is unable to make love to women of his own class and kind because of shyness, self-consciousness, and fear of rejection. The protagonists of other poems in Eliot’s first book are men or women laughed at or rejected in love, and a girl deserted by her lover seems like a body deserted by the soul.

In Eliot’s second volume of poems, an old man’s despair issues in part from his inability to make love, while Sweeney, an antithetical character, is able to make love, but is unable to satisfy the woman with whom he copulates. In ‘The Waste Land,’ the theme of love as a failure is again uppermost. Two lovers return from a garden after a moment of love, and the woman is overcome by despair or pathological dependency. A lady, perhaps the same woman who has returned from the garden in despair, becomes hysterical in her boudoir because her lover or her husband has nothing to say to her and cannot give her life any meaning or interest....

The neurasthenic lady is succeeded in the poem by cockney women who gossip about another cockney woman who has been made ill by contraceptive pills taken to avoid the consequences of love; which is to say that the sickness of love has struck down every class in society: ‘What you get married for, if you don’t want children?’ And then we witness the seduction of the typist; and then other aspects of the sickness of love appear when, on the Thames bank, three girls ruined by love rehearse the sins of the young men with whom they have been having affairs. In the last part of the poem, the impossibility of love, the gulf between one human being and another, is the answer to the command to give, that is to say, to give oneself or surrender oneself to another human being in the act of making love. Elsewhere love either results in impotence, or it is merely copulation....

Eliot’s characters when they make love either suffer from what the psychoanalysts term ‘psychic impotence,’ or they make love so inadequately that the lady is left either hysterical or indifferent when the episode is over. The characters who are potent and insensitive are placed in contrast with the characters

who are impotent and sensitive.... In the same way, the plight of Prufrock is illuminated by means of a rich, passing reference to Michelangelo, the sculptor of the strong and heroic man. Only when the poet is the heir of all the ages can he make significant use of so many different and distant kinds of experience. But conversely, only when experience becomes international, only when many different and distant kinds of experience are encountered by the poet, does he find it necessary to become the heir of all the ages....

To be the heir of all the ages is to inherit nothing but a consciousness of how all heirlooms are rooted in the past. Dominated by historical consciousness, the international hero finds that all beliefs affect the holding of any belief... Modern life may be compared to a foreign country in which a foreign language is spoken. Eliot is the international hero because he has made the journey to the foreign country and described the nature of the new life in the foreign country. Since the future is bound to be international, if it is anything at all, we are all the bankrupt heirs of the ages, and the moments of the crisis expressed in Eliot's work are a prophecy of the crises of our own future in regard to love, religious belief, good and evil, the good life and the nature of the just society. 'The Waste Land' will soon be as good as new."

Delmore Schwartz  
"T. S. Eliot as the International Hero"  
*Partisan Review*  
Vol.12 (1945) 199-206

"As an inheritor of the nineteenth century's determination to repossess all of history, modern man could often have the feeling, as Eliot remarked in Joyce, 'of everything happening at once'.... He gave voice to this awareness in 'The Waste Land,' the most ambitious long poem of the period. Its structure is the opposite of the diffusion of the *Cantos*, since Eliot attempted to compress the essence of an epic into a poem of hardly more than four hundred lines. He omitted logical connectives, and the reader must find his way through this 'music of ideas' in a way somewhat analogous to associating recurrent themes in a symphony. Eliot was much attacked for this method, though it was in deliberate keeping with his reasons for believing why modern poetry must be difficult.

In the effort to give further coherence to his structure he borrowed a device from Henry James, and introduced Tiresias, the prophet who had 'foresuffered all,' as a central observer who 'sees, in fact, the substance of the poem.' 'The Waste Land' may not succeed as a whole, it may exist simply as a succession of dramatic lyrics. But it interpenetrates the present and the past, it manages to treat on the same plane modern London and the world of primitive myth, and to probe thereby at the root causes of cultural decay. In discerning the imaginative possibilities in the use of myth, Eliot was at one with the leading creative minds of the age. He knew that he had found 'a way of controlling, of ordering, of giving a shape and a significance to the immense panorama of futility and anarchy that is contemporary history.'

Eliot could envisage the modern metropolis as an Inferno more affectingly than Pound could in the *Cantos*, since, as he observed, Pound's 'is a Hell for the *other people*, the people we read about in the newspapers, not for oneself and one's friends.' This complacency, this lack of feeling implicated in the struggle with evil, necessarily rendered much of Pound's observation of human beings 'trivial and accidental.' Eliot's peculiar intensity comes from his conviction that poetry must spring out of suffering.

What excited the first appreciators of 'The Waste Land' were its astonishing juxtapositions, its sudden transitions from the witty to the serious, its bewildering variety of literary allusions, its passages of satire and its passages of lyric beauty, and its unfailing expertness in phrasing. Few recognized sufficiently, even when Eliot reached the pit of his Inferno in 'The Hollow Men' (1925), how terrifying an exposure he was making of the emptiness of life without belief, or that his main theme was how much of modern life is merely death. That his overwhelming sense of the need for redemption must finally transform Eliot into a religious poet was not apparent to many at that time."

F. O. Matthiessen  
*Literary History of the United States*, 3<sup>rd</sup> edition  
(Macmillan 1946-63) 1342-43

“The Waste Land’ contains a single unified metaphor, variously given and dramatically developed. It can be seen in at least two realizations; the fable of the land itself (and of its King); the situation of love in its profane, sacred, and mystic forms. These are unified in terms of analogies involving the cultural and personal meanings of fertility. The fertility of the land has been directly associated many times with both religious and sexual rites; in the legends of the Fisher King, the King and his land suffer analogous wounds, which make fertility impossible. There are gradations in the dramatic treatment of love: lust, indifference, perverted love, the love of man for woman, divine love; these are associated throughout with religious legends, ceremonials, and rites, so that we can assume an identity of love with faith, or belief. A failure of *love* is a failure of *belief*; the struggle for a meaningful sexual experience is identical with the search for a satisfactory religious experience.... ‘The Waste Land’...is the acting out, the concrete bodying forth, of a human and cultural situation to be discovered in many forms in human history and legend.... The literal scene is London; actually the condition is supra-historical and archetypal... Dramatically ‘The Waste Land’ identifies its general circumstance in terms of a failure of great love, of sexual communion and spiritual communication...

The ‘drowned Phoenician Sailor’ signifies the efforts toward deliverance in the poem, efforts that will fail because Madame Sosostris’ advice is to ‘Fear death by water,’ not to welcome it as an essential sacrifice.... The ‘man with the three staves’ is the Fisher King himself, whose three ‘staves’ of Part V are the poem’s major religious and moral directive. The ‘one-eyed merchant’ appears later in Mr. Eugenides. The ‘Hanged Man’ cannot be seen, as the crucified Man was not recognized on the way to Emmaus; His sacrifice cannot be recognized in the waste land... It is necessary to appreciate that, in Eliot’s specifying of *personae* in the poem, all persons are one person and all details are integral parts of one situation. The ‘I’ is both an observer of these ‘crowds’ and a member; he is both victim and participant...

## I

The ‘Burial of the Dead’ is presented in two forms: of the god symbolically ‘planted’ to insure a renewal of fertility; of the death of the waste land itself, from which the protagonist fears to rescue it because he can do so only at the cost of a heroic realization and sacrifice....

## II

In Part II, ‘A Game of Chess’...there are several indications of [the] defeat of love; sexual ‘play’ has declined to the level of a ‘good time,’ or a routine place on the daily calendar of engagements, or ‘a game of chess.’ The opening lines of Part II are rich reminders of the past: Cleopatra, who gave ‘all for love’; Dido, whose grief over losing her loved one caused her to destroy herself...

This is a ‘Sweeney’ world [the pub]; the lines are written in a rapid, gossipy, colloquial tone. A woman rattles on to her companion about her friend Lil...both Cleopatra and Dido failed to win their lovers; the woman of the waste land cannot break through the fears of her companion to arrange a union more meaningful than ‘a closed car at four’ would suggest; and Lil, overcome by the pointless biological insidencies of her body, refuses to permit another life to come from it. Frustration, neurosis, abortion: these are the variations upon the ‘game of chess.’ Because religious incentive is lacking, belief fails of a divine purpose, love has no real opportunity for issuing either in a meaningful sexual relationship or in life itself. The full terror of this situation is presented in terms of a dramatic analogy of *faith* and *love*...

## III

It is important to see that the ‘Grail Knight,’ suggested from time to time in this poem (especially in Eliot’s notes), is never really free to contemplate the task of deliverance... Every suggestion of a placid, fruitful, credible, and divinely sanctioned world is canceled by the reductive terror that intrudes upon his thoughts....

## IV

If we recall the insistent refrain in the protagonist’s mind, ‘Fear death by water,’ and realize with what terror he contemplates the warning, Part IV can be understood as death from insufficient cause. The

'deliverer' surrenders his body to the water; this is no heroic act of sacrifice, but a death such as comes to all of us....

V

The Fisher King, alone moving toward a degenerated 'Chapel Perilous' through an ultimate chaos, receives the 'message' of the thunder and reflects upon its meaning for himself.... Part V is full of the reminders of physical and spiritual dying; it is a complex pattern of the forms of dying: the death of Jesus, the living death of those who have failed to recognize its meaning, the spiritual meaning of life as a preparation for dying. The loss, the desperate need, of faith, is expressed in the most brilliant of expressive passages, utilizing the images of drought...The Fisher King is left alone, 'Fishing, with the arid plain behind me'... Appealing to three fragments of verse in other languages (...they offer only a minimum of hope), he considers their evocation of penitence (the purifying fire), regeneration (the swallow), and resignation (the ruined tower) as exemplars of his own condition and resolve.... 'The Waste Land,' while it was many other things as well, was in some respects at least a concrete, dramatic realization (given a universal and therefore also a 'contemporary' form) of a world in which the strength of belief was hard to achieve, even more difficult to sustain."

Frederick J. Hoffman  
*The Twenties: American Writing in the Postwar Decade*  
(Viking/Crowell-Collier 1949-62) 330-43

"'The Waste Land' is, in part, a collection of characters and scenes drawn from the modern world: Madame Sosostris, the fortune teller; the crowd crossing London Bridge in the early morning fog; the woman sitting at her dressing table, and talking or trying to talk with her husband, or lover; the woman in an English pub discussing Lil with another woman; Mr. Eugenides, the Smyrna merchant; the typist and the clerk; the girl from Highbury and her experience in a canoe on the Thames; and others. These characters and scenes are symbols of the degradation and despair of the modern world.

But 'realistic' scenes like these are only a part of the representation. The poem's intention is to show these things in relation to others things, to show them both in time and in eternity, and thereby achieve a rich dimensional development. The modern scene is shown, first, in relation to the historical past, and it would seem that there has been a decline. The bored woman is compared unfavorably with Cleopatra, whom age could not wither nor custom stale, the comparison being suggested by the verbal reminiscence of Shakespeare's description of Cleopatra's barge. The theme, now littered with 'cardboard boxes, cigarette ends / Or other testimony of summer nights,' has deteriorated since Elizabethan times, when it was the scene of stately bridals, suggested by a line from Spenser's 'Prothalamion.' Apparent deterioration is everywhere: the typist is a degradation of Goldsmith's 'lovely woman'; Sweeney and Mrs. Porter lack the dignity of Marvell's lovers, suggested by the verbal echo of 'To His Coy Mistress'; and so on.

Further development in dimension (or depth of perspective) is achieved by showing the contemporary scene in a frame of reference which is essentially timeless, and which is drawn from ancient myths. Old Tiresias, who has suffered all, knowing 'both sides of love,' and 'fore-suffered all,' having the power to foresee the future, is a dispassionate spectator and chorus. If the suggested comparisons between the present and the past seem to point to present deterioration, the commentary of Tiresias suggests the view that the decline is more apparent than real. The Fisher King, from the Grail legend, and the desert country, repeatedly described, are other symbols of timelessness: the evil of the world, the poem intends to say, is as old as the world itself. The present evil, however, is not nullified, or mitigated even, by the larger frames of reference; it is, rather, given added weight and significance when seen in the perspective of man's long and ageless experience.

The ironic futility of 'Prufrock' is continued in 'The Waste Land,' but the despair is greater and the religious implications, it is important to note, are correspondingly more emphatic. It is as if the poem meant to say that man must be reduced to utter despair before there can be a conscious striving toward religious faith. Many passages in 'The Waste Land' suggest a religious 'solution' (Eliot's solution was to be developed in 'Ash-Wednesday' and *Four Quartets*). The desert passages recall the Old Testament in both tone and language.... Ecclesiastes 12 describes a waste land similar to that of the poem...

The allusion to Christ's agony and death...connotes Christian belief. The poem, however, reaches out to include all religions. Christ is associated with the Fisher King and other 'hanged gods,' and becomes one of many examples of the basic doctrine of life through death. Among the illustrations of the doctrine in the poem are the corpse buried in the garden (emblem of fertility rites), which the Dog threatens to exhume and thereby prevent the rebirth of life, and the drowned Phoenician Sailor, whose eyes undergo a supernatural change. The Sanskrit words at the end (meaning 'give, sympathize, control,' and 'the peace which passeth understanding') points up the antiquity and unity of religious belief."

Walter Blair  
*The Literature of the United States* 2, 3<sup>rd</sup> edition  
(Scott, Foresman 1953-66) 1054-55

"The latent intention of 'The Waste Land' might be called a reversal of Miss Weston's title—to translate romance back into its meaning as ritual.... The most important idea for Eliot in Miss Weston's scheme was that the Grail story subsumes a number of myths; this provided him with both a central myth and a basic system of metaphor....Under this myth any parallel myth or any of its parts is a potential metaphor for other members of the same class; hence translations of one into another are both frequent and sudden....

Miss Weston argued that the meaning of the Grail legend centered in the Fisher King, and was explained by the Vegetation or Fertility rites. In this connection she called attention to the use of the Tarot pack, including the contrast between its present disrepute and its past authority. And she emphasized the importance of the Vegetation rites 'as a factor in the evolution of religious consciousness.' Of course this statement oversimplifies the elements which are compounded in this poem. Basically its myths have a common meaning, which permits their union; and this fact testifies to something permanent in human nature, which may be repeated in individual experience.... The early note on the Tarot pack of cards shows how comprehensive it became for Eliot; his manipulation of the pack itself shows how he adapted it to that story and incorporated other elements of his poem. This pack, which Miss Weston had connected with the vegetation or revival myth, is the chief key to his plan....

The Hanged God, whom the Madame does not find, represents in the poem the final cause of the Waste Land and its possible restoration. In legend he was sacrificed in order that nature might be renewed. Now 'The Burial of the Dead' relates primarily to him, and the state of the land is an effect of his death. Any change in that state is contingent upon his revival, but also upon the attitude of the people. The Fisher King's role is to represent man's fate as it originates in sex but cannot transcend it; without this transcendence, which is figured in the Hanged God, he is doomed to death. The Fisher King is differentiated from the Phoenician Sailor by his awareness of the means of transcendence. Hence the first part of the poem develops the death theme, for god and man, and relates the fear of it to sex, as in the myth.

The Fisher King is a symbol of reproductive Nature, like the vegetation gods; having been maimed like them, he has become the object of similar rites; and it is to the volumes dealing with these gods that Eliot turns in *The Golden Bough*. But this king connects by his name with the Fish-Fisher symbols—an ancient Life symbolism, both pagan and Christian, which was based on the belief 'that all life comes from the water.' And it is to get both the Hanged God and the Fisher King into the Tarot pack that Eliot modifies its associations, for it becomes the unifying device by which he tells the fortune of the modern world... Reduced to its simplest terms, 'The Waste Land' is a statement of the experience that drives a character to the fortune-teller, the fortune that is told, and the unfolding of that fortune. But this latent narrative is both universalized and greatly complicated by being set in a framework of the legend in which Miss Weston had seen so many myths....

Miss Weston's treatment of the legend enables Eliot to see in the experience of sex the potentialities of the Fisher King and his Waste Land. In the poem the Fisher King is the prototype of the male characters who melt into one another, and his is the subsuming myth; hence the poem closes on him and his predicament, just as it develops after a comparable experience. He is the type who speaks throughout, even in the Tiresias interruption, which extends the speaker to include the other sex and to suggest the alternative consequences of blindness and vision....



The poem becomes a kind of dramatic lyric, in which the lyric themes are projected by characters associated with the central experience, and the individual fortune becomes a general fortune. The basic experience is that of the Fisher King, which is made universal in Tiresias, and the central speaker comprehends not only the characters within the poem but the audience which he taunts.... Ferdinand combines the roles of the Sailor and the Fisher King, or mediates between them.... As a modern knight of this legend, Ferdinand is a victim rather than a restorer...

The people of the Waste Land are not made happy by the return of spring, of fruitfulness to the soil; they prefer the barrenness of winter or the dead season.... When the lack of water is felt, it assumes a positive character; but for the most part it is a negative or something to be feared. This is a logical consequence of Eliot's inversion of the vegetation myth, which makes the inhabitants of the Waste Land fear the return of life. And this reversal enables him to express the theme of religious frustration in terms of the myth which subsumes so many myths, for sex can be seen as both the origin and the frustration of life."

George Williamson

*A Reader's Guide to T. S. Eliot: A Poem-by-Poem Analysis*  
(Farrar, Straus/Noonday 1953) 118-19, 121-30

"The Waste Land' is not a long poem, running to only 403 lines (plus several pages of notes). But its strange, shifting symbols, its imaginative power, its borrowings from myth and legend, its assimilation of a long poetic tradition, and its elaborate annotation—as if it were an ancient manuscript requiring explanation to the modern reader—give it a very special place in the poetic history of our time.

The poem is divided into five parts. In 'The Burial of the Dead' Eliot describes the stirring of life in the land with the coming of spring, when fertility prevails over the sterility of winter. 'The Game of Chess' begins with the splendors of Cleopatra and contrasts them with contemporary uneasiness and despair. 'The Fire Sermon' conjures up a picture of the ugliness of cities and the mechanization of modern life and emotion. 'Death by Water,' a brief lyric threaded into the poem, suggests the irony that water can bring death not only through drowning but through its absence, which causes drought, and the final passage, 'What the Thunder Said,' is a picture of drought—the decay and emptiness of modern life—'voices singing out of empty cisterns and exhausted wells.'

This picture of desiccation and gloom reflects the mood that followed the first World War. The poem's striking characteristics are variant rhythms and meters, borrowings from many writers, use of material from the legends of the Holy Grail and Frazer's monumental anthropological work *The Golden Bough*. Eliot introduces into the poem the blind seer Tiresias of Greek tragedy, whose function is to act as a central consciousness who 'sees, in fact, the substance of the poem.' As Strether sees his situation in Henry James's *The Ambassadors*. Eliot calls him in his notes 'the most important personage in the poem, uniting all the rest.'

The key image of 'The Waste Land' is obviously that of sterility, and throughout the worked there are constant variant symbols of drought and of disintegration, dryness and decay—dusty trees, muddy streets, desert rocks, dry bones, empty cisterns, exhausted wells. Water...relieves drought but can also be destructive. Fire is a destroyer. It is also a purifier. And with this, Eliot seeks to evoke the mechanical dreariness of modern cities in which people work and make love in a kind of mechanical sleep-walking routine. The poet constantly alternates his setting between present-day London and the past, and some of his shifts are very rapid.

In spite of its obscurities, the poem succeeds in evoking an atmosphere and a mood: even if we ignore the notes and do not perceive the full meaning, the precise use of word and image and the cadence produces an effect and evokes emotion. If the reader succeeds in bridging the continual contrasts to which Eliot resorts, he experiences an emotion not unlike that produced by music, in which feeling is conveyed without the use of words—or in this case by the use of words as if they were musical notes. This results in partial perceptions, which grow as we reread the work into a more complete understanding of the special way in which Eliot, through language, is able to convey subtle experience."

Lillian Herlands Hornstein, Ed.

"Then you believe that Mr. Eliot underestimates this culture, apparently?" [student question] "No, no. ...I'm perfectly willing for him to have his opinion, but to me I ain't interested in it." [Faulkner's fiction is full of waste land imagery, but he affirms transcendence, as does Eliot.]

William Faulkner  
*Faulkner in the University: Class Conferences at the University of Virginia 1957-1958*  
Frederick L. Gwynn & Joseph L. Blotner, eds.  
(1959; Random House/Vintage 1965) 150

"The theme is again the banality and barrenness of the contemporary world contrasted with the richness of traditional spiritual and mythological forces. There are two chief sources for the structure and symbolism of the poem: Jessie L. Weston's *From Ritual to Romance* and Sir James Frazer's *The Golden Bough*. Some knowledge of both these books is essential to an appreciation of the poem. Miss Weston's book is a psychological and anthropological study of the Holy Grail legend.

The story of the Grail appears in slightly different forms in many cultures, but it always concerns a dry, sterile, and cursed land (the 'waste land') ruled over by a Fisher King whose sexual impotence is connected with the plight of his realm. The wanderer or knight who arrives to voice the ritual demand for the Holy Grail is the talisman through which king and land are restored to virility. Frazer's work begins in an attempt to explain another widespread racial myth: the priest of the sacred wood who is killed each year by a candidate who thereby becomes the new king and priest. According to Frazer and Weston, both myths can be traced to primitive fertility rites; and students of comparative mythology believe that the element of sacrifice common to both has eventually found its way into Christianity as the ritual of the Eucharist. Miss Weston explains that secrets of these mystery religions were transmitted into Western Europe in pre-medieval times by Syrian and Phoenician merchants, and eventually emerged in the middle ages as the legend of the Grail.

In writing 'The Waste Land' Eliot also utilized Carl Jung's theory of primordial images or archetypes. With these materials Eliot constructs a poem of which the dominant theme is the contrast between human universals and modern materialism and banality. The epigraph is from the *Satyricon* of Petronius: "With my own eyes I saw the Sibyl suspended in a jar at Cumae, and when her followers said to her, Sibyl, what do you want? She replied, I want to die.' Thus two motifs of the poem are suggested: universal mythology and the death-wish deriving from boredom.

## I

The poem itself is divided into five sections. The first, 'The Burial of the Dead,' introduces the motif of the recurrence of life out of death and corruption, but depicts April as 'the cruelest month,' since it destroys the serene oblivion of winter (death) in order to create new life. A snatch of banal conversation is interposed; the thematic contrast between sublimity and banality is established. The concept of 'rootlessness' or lack of stabilizing tradition is suggested in the conversation and in the subsequent soliloquy (11,19-30). An exhilarating snatch of Wagner's *Tristan und Isolde* is quoted (31-35), but is followed by a bleaker line from the same opera: 'Empty and bare the sea' (1.42). In line 44 appears Madame Sosostris, a vulgarized clairvoyant who is the only descendant of the wise necromancers (or Sibyls) of the ancient world. She tells fortunes through the Tarot pack of cards, each of which bears a symbolic image. The Phoenician sailor is to reappear in the poem, and the man with three staves is identified by Eliot in a note as the Fisher King himself. The section ends with an allusion to the superstition of planting corpses with crops to insure fertility; the 'Dog' connects the incident with the Egyptian Osiris myth, which also concerns the resurrection of life.

## II

In Section II, 'A Game of Chess,' the motif is the absence of mythical meaning in contemporary marriage. Philomel, in an ancient myth violated by a king and transformed into a nightingale, can now produce only discordant sounds for the modern ear (11.99-110). Irony is achieved through reference to the

sublime passions of Cleopatra and Dido. Snatches of neurotic modern conversation are introduced (11.120ff) and at line 139 begins a vulgar cockney dialogue concerned with abortion and other unsavory aspects of modern conjugal relations. The refrain 'HURRY UP PLEASE IT'S TIME' is the call of the English pub-keeper at closing time. The idiotic farewells of the patrons then fade into the poignant song of Ophelia from *Hamlet* (11.169FF). Again sublimity is present, but the vulgar generation is too distracted to notice it.

### III

The title of Section III, 'The Fire Sermon,' recalls a famous Buddhistic discourse on lust and fornication. Opening with a pastiche of Spenser's wedding song, the section soon contrasts this idyllic picture with the squalor of modern love ('Sweeney to Mrs. Porter in the spring'), heralded by motor horns and associated with the horror of rats. Mr. Eugenides (line 209) recalls the Syrian merchants who, according to Miss Weston, brought the mysteries to Europe; now they bring only sordid merchandise. Toward line 227 the narrator becomes Tiresias, the blind seer of Greek mythology who was the wisest of humans because he had been both woman and man; thus he embodies the sexual tension which is the motif of the section. Tiresias, present in modern London, views the sordid tryst of a typist and a clerk in a tenement bedroom. Modern love, promiscuous and perfunctory, has lost its mystery and has become no more significant than the playing of a phonograph record. The section ends with the song of the three Thames Daughters (inspired by the Rhine Maidens of *Die Gotterdammerung*), who relate the manner of their dishonoring, and with a final echo of the Buddhistic sermon.

### IV

The short fourth section, 'Death by Water,' parallels the drowning of the Phoenician sailor of 'The Burial of the Dead' with the previously established archetype of death and subsequent resurrection.

### V

The final section, 'What the Thunder Said,' begins on a note of hopelessness: 'he who was living' (Adonis, Osiris, Christ, symbol of the incarnation of Divinity) is now dead, and contemporary man is dying spiritually. The rock (spiritual sterility) is contrasted to water, universal symbol of the beginning of life. The 'falling towers' of the cities of the Near East and Europe are mentioned (11.373-76); the civilization which began in Greece and the Holy Land is toppling. The cock-crow (line 391), heard as Christ was seized by the soldiers, recalls the story of the Passion; rain (symbol of recurring life) shortly results. But this image is abandoned, and the poem turns to the Hindu myth of the thunder from the Upanishads.

The protagonist has now become the Fisher King himself; he wonders what action he can take against the ruin of the land. Three quotations follow: The first is from Dante: 'Then sprang he back into the fire that refines them.' The sinner Arnaut Daniel, viewed by Dante in Purgatory, gladly accepts his suffering since he knows it will bring redemption. The second is from the anonymous *Vigil of Venus*: 'When shall I become as the swallow?' Eliot's note connects this with Procne, in the Greek myth changed into a swallow to escape her suffering. The third, 'The Prince of Aquitaine at the fallen tower,' is from a sonnet of Gerard de Nerval; it refers to the poet whose life is ruined but who proposes to begin anew. The childish jingle of London Bridge stresses the theme of decay and collapse.

The poem then ends with a Sanskrit benediction; the word *shantih* is equivalent to 'the Peace that passes all understanding.' But this consolatory note is almost ironic in the context of the previous pessimistic passage. Thus the poem's theme is that the mythical death and rebirth of Osiris, Adonis, or Christ, the ritual which has nourished mankind for centuries, is no longer possible, since our age has lost its contact with the past and has become spiritually sterile. 'The Waste Land' is not, as is sometimes thought, a mere portrait of the generation of the Twenties; it is an analysis of the predicament of modern man in his relation to the universal spiritual forces of nature."

Donald Heiney  
*Recent American Literature* 4  
(Barron's Educational Series 1958) 487-90

“‘The Waste Land’ was drafted during a rest cure at Margate...and Lausanne...during the autumn of 1921 by a convalescent preoccupied partly with the ruin of post-war Europe, partly with his own health and the conditions of his servitude to a bank in London, partly with a hardly exorable apprehension that two thousand years of European continuity had for the first time run dry. It had for epigraph a phrase from Conrad’s *Heart of Darkness* (‘The horror! The horror!’)... In Paris that winter, Ezra Pound has recalled, ‘The Waste Land’ was placed before me as a series of poems. I advised him what to leave out.’ Eliot, from about the same distance of time, recalls showing Pound ‘a sprawling chaotic poem...which left his hands, reduced to about half its size, in the form in which it appears in print....

After Pound, by simply eliminating everything not of the first intensity, had revealed an unexpected corporate substantiality in what survived, Eliot’s impulse was to ‘explain’ the poem as ‘thoughts of a dry brain in a dry season’...a five-parted work of 434 lines entitled ‘The Waste Land,’ with sudden wrenching juxtapositions, thematic links between section and section, fragments quoted from several languages with no one present to whose mind they can occur: this dense textural unity...must have seemed to Eliot a little fractious until he had gotten used to the poem in its final form; which, as everyone who has encountered it knows, must take some time...

We shall do well to discard the notes as much as possible; they have bedeviled discussion for decades.... ‘I have sometimes thought,’ Eliot has said, ‘of getting rid of these notes; but now they can never be unstuck. They have had almost greater popularity than the poem itself... It was just, no doubt, that I should pay my tribute to the work of Miss Jessie Weston; but I regret having sent so many enquirers off on a wild goose chase after Tarot cards and the Holy Grail.’ We have license therefore to ignore them, and instead ‘endeavor to grasp what the poetry is aiming to be...to grasp its entelechy.’ That the entelechy is graspable without source-hunting, and without even appeal to any but the most elementary knowledge of one or two myths and a few Shakespearean tags, is a statement requiring temerity to sustain in the face of all the scholarship that has been expended during a third of a century of these 434 lines.”

Hugh Kenner  
*The Invisible Poet, T.S. Eliot*  
(Obolensky 1959) 145-52

“‘The Waste Land’ is the most important poem of the twentieth century, that is, the one that has caused the most discussion and is said by critics to be the culmination of the modern ‘mythic’ style. The poem, by Eliot’s own admission, is a collaboration with Pound. Pound edited it and removed a third or two thirds of it. The ‘continuity,’ we can assume, is therefore the work of Pound, who abhorred continuity in his own more ambitious poetry.... That it is lacking in unity is obvious (assuming, as I do, that unity is a literary virtue). Any part of ‘The Waste Land’ can be switched with any other part without changing the sense of the poem.

Aside from the so-called ‘mythic’ form, which is worthless and not even true—for Eliot misread James Joyce’s *Ulysses* when he saw it as a parallel to Homer—the underlying unit of the poem is tonal and dramatic, exactly as a Victorian narrative poem would be. Eliot tries to conceal this indispensable literary method by mixing languages, breaking off dramatic passages, and by dividing the poem into sections with titles. But what really keeps the poem moving is its rhetoric, its switches from description to exclamation to interrogation to expletive, sometimes very beautifully, as in the passages beginning ‘Unreal City’....

‘The Waste Land,’ because of its great critical reputation, not because of any inherent worth it might have, is one of the curiosities of English literature. Its critical success was, I dare say, carefully planned and executed, and it was not beyond the realm of possibility that the poem was originally a hoax, as some of the first readers insisted. But hoax or not, it was very shortly made the sacred cow of modern poetry and the object of more pious literary nonsense than any modern work save the *Cantos* of Pound.”

Karl Shapiro  
*In Defense of Ignorance*  
(Random House 1960) 53-54

“The years between 1910 and the second world war saw a revolution in the literature of the English language as momentous as the Romantic one of a century before. It is an Anglo-American development that is itself part of a whole European affair. Besides the names of Yeats, Joyce, Eliot and Pound we should wish to place those of Gide, Valery and Thomas Mann, perhaps Proust and Rilke from an earlier generation. Here is our identification parade for the modern spirit in letters...

I take it that the case of Pound's *Cantos* goes without saying; they are the wreckage of poetry; brilliant passages, sometimes long, sometimes the merest splinters, floating in a turbid sea of stammering and incoherent mumble. But even in 'The Waste Land' and the *Four Quartets*, where the level of the individual passages is far more consistent, and where it is just possible to give their arrangement some sort of publicly valid justification, the organizing principle is still quite inadequate for poems of this scope. These poems survive, and will survive, not assisted by their structure, but in spite of it.

This is true of much of the work of Pound, Eliot and Wallace Stevens—to name three of the founding fathers of modern poetry. Their poetry suffers, even on the level on which it functions so persuasively and brilliantly, from the lack of any other level, the lack of public, explicit, paraphrasable discourse. We know, of course, about the 'heresy of paraphrase' as it has been called—that we ought never to suppose that a paraphrase can tell us what a poem is 'about.' Perhaps we ought never to paraphrase a poem; but as with many other things that we ought never to do, we ought also to be able to feel that we could do it....”

Graham Hough  
“Imagism and Its Consequences”  
*Reflections on a Literary Revolution*  
(Catholic U of America 1960) 2, 38

“Each of the five sections of 'The Waste Land' introduces a journey undertaken by the inhabitants, generally a journey of no spiritual import, part of a social routine. Only in sections IV and V—'Death by Water' (the voyage of the Phoenician sailor) and 'What the Thunder Said'—does the travelling assume any wider scope. The first three sections of the poem deal with what we may call the social realities of the waste land: with what its people see and do. This picture is illuminated by occasional flashes of insight on the part of some of the speakers, by the introduction of Tiresias, who comments on the action, and by the hidden commentary of the allusions to past literatures.

In the fifth part the emphasis changes and we are shown behind the social coverings to see directly the disease of the land and its people. It has entirely the atmosphere of nightmare, but this apparent fantasy probes beyond the earlier social reality to the basic issues of the poem. We remain conscious of the preceding background, but are aware now that it was partly responsible for concealing from the people the true nature of their position.... From his vision of the world, which forms the foreground of this poetry, Eliot moves to contemplation of the true reality, contained in God, the still point. This process continues to the *Four Quartets*, where it is the social reality that is largely left implied, and direct contemplation of spiritual affairs occupies the foreground.”

D. E. S. Maxwell  
*The Poetry of T. S. Eliot*  
(Barnes & Noble 1961) 97-101

“'The Waste Land' has become such an assured part of the twentieth-century consciousness, one of the major vehicles for its sensibility, that we easily forget the transformation in worked. Realizing some of the possibilities latent in 'Gerontion,' it in effect at once proposed and confirmed a new basic style so powerful that the older basic style, charged deeply with egocentrism, would no longer be viable unless it met the challenge Eliot put to it.... The mythic truth of 'the Waste Land' was a truth pertaining to that area in the psychic cosmos at which historical process was touched and stabilized by a supervening theistic order. The fragments of history, understood mythically, manifested the fragmented consciousness of modern man.”

Roy Harvey Pearce  
*The Continuity of American Poetry*  
(Princeton 1961) 306, 310

“By mid-decade [*The Dial*] had become the most influential American journal.... In William Carlos Williams’ *Autobiography*...[we] learn that *The Dial*, presenting Eliot’s poem, ‘wiped out our world as if an atomic bomb had been dropped on it.’... *The Dial* caused an explosion so splendid that echoes of the great event would continue to return from remote places even in 1960 when, in Enid Starkie’s study of French influences on English writing, we hear that Eliot, ‘awarded by *The Dial*...their poetry prize for his *Wasteland*...became the most significant poet in the English language of his day....’ *The Dial*’s crusade in Eliot’s behalf is ...nothing less than the crusading spirit of 1910 that had by 1922 conferred on this journal its peculiar power.... Publishing ‘The Waste Land’...publicized both the uniqueness of American writing and its authority. November, 1922, was a signal moment in the history of the world...for then it was that this journal and this poet and this national literature assumed their proper role: first among equals in the republic of letters....

And now, as fierce men in England and the United States undertake to destroy the myth of Eliot, it is appropriate to return to that time when *The Dial*, introducing ‘The Waste Land,’ decided to sponsor Eliot’s work.... [Eliot] and Cummings shared essentially the same opinion on the quality prime in art of the first rank: it must be intense. When a work is intense, Eliot and Cummings agreed, it provokes in the reader a heightened sense of his own being.... A man reared within a native utopian tradition, taught to admire only those intense works which bring an audience to life, Eliot has written a continental literature in the American grain....

Alone among American poets he was not victimized by that ‘localism’ which...takes so much of American writing out of the field of comparison with European letters’ and requires for our writers a ‘special standard of judgement.’... Although Eliot’s poems are ‘the products of a constricted emotional experience’ [Edmund] Wilson said, the work of a man who ‘appears to have drawn rather heavily on books for the heat he could not derive from life,’ nevertheless Eliot’s ‘detestation of Sweeney is more precious than Mr. Sandburg’s sympathy for him’.”

William Wasserstrom  
“T. S. Eliot and *The Dial*”  
*The Sewanee Review*  
Vol. 70, No.1 (Winter 1962) 81-92

“A work of 434 lines in five sections, ‘The Waste Land’ is undoubtedly the most famous and influential poem written in English during the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Many of its symbols were drawn from Jesse L. Weston’s *From Ritual to Romance*, a study of themes and legends, and James G. Frazer’s *Golden Bough*, a monumental work on anthropology and myth. Basically, ‘The Waste Land’ is an examination of modern Western civilization in terms drawn from the Grail legend; the Fisher King is ill and impotent, and his kingdom is laid waste; only the arrival of the Grail knight, who will ask the three thaumaturgical questions, will destroy the spell and restore the kingdom to fertility. The poem is highly allusive and ironic, and consists of a panoramic juxtaposition of episodes, historical sketches, imaginary landscapes, miniature dramas, and lyrical interludes.

The first section, ‘The Burial of the Dead,’ begins with April, ‘the cruelest month,’ in which the advent of spring only serves to reawaken the dull, sterile world to an awareness of its condition. Various protagonists and scenes are introduced which are allusively symptomatic of the living death of the 20<sup>th</sup>-century waste land. Section II, ‘A Game of Chess,’ deals primarily with lust and sterility. There is a sharp contrast between the two scenes, the one in an opulently furnished bedroom, the other in a London pub. The title of the section is taken from Thomas Middleton’s play, *Women Beware Women*, in which a woman is distracted by a game of chess while her daughter-in-law is being raped. In ‘The Fire Sermon’ (III) the 20<sup>th</sup>-century world is merged with the past by means of the figures of the fisherman and of Tiresias, the ancient seer who had seen snakes coupling and had been changed, for a time, into a woman.

The theme of boredom, barrenness, and shame in sexual encounters is reiterated in the scenes between the typist and the ‘youth carbuncular,’ Elizabeth and Leicester, and the three Thames maidens. Part IV, ‘Death by Water,’ refers back to the ‘drowned Phoenician sailor’ of Part I and to the prophecy to ‘fear death by water.’ Part V, ‘What the Thunder Said,’ suggests the approach to the Chapel Perilous of medieval

legend, and, as Eliot's notes indicate, 'the present decay of Eastern Europe.' The thunder speaks the words of the Upanishad, 'give, sympathize, control'; the final word, *shantih*, is the equivalent of the 'peace that passes understanding.'

Eliot has said that in its original form the poem was twice its present length and that the work of cutting it was entrusted to his friend Ezra Pound... The poem has been widely and variously imitated by other poets, Eliot's contemporaries as well as younger writers. More has been written about 'The Waste Land' than about any other work of modern poetry. No English or American critic has been able to feel that his work is complete without a consideration of the poem, which, because of its rich symbolical content, is susceptible to almost endless interpretations."

Max J. Herzberg & staff  
*The Reader's Encyclopedia of American Literature*  
(Crowell 1962)

"'The Waste Land' is both the most controversial and the most influential poem of the twentieth century. Every sizable anthology of modern verse includes it; and when smaller collections leave it out, the anthologists feel called upon to explain themselves. Critics and historians of modern literature invariably discuss its meaning and influence, and literary autobiographers give accounts of their first meeting with it.... It is inescapable. 'The Waste Land' is something like the modern epic....a mirror of a certain modern fatigue and dismay....if we would know our time, we must know this poem..."

The waste land of the twentieth century is in some degree Eliot's creation. Not all of us would think ourselves in rat's alley if Eliot had not taught us to, nor would everybody think this a time to shore up fragments against cultural ruin. Our lack of faith in what we can make of our world may have been shaped by what some [Marxists] call Eliot's defeatism.... It seems to some thoughtful men that the central imaginative task of the new writer of the second half of Eliot's century is clear: he must discover an escape from the imaginative world of 'The Waste Land.' This is no easy thing, this creation of a new world, for the pull of Eliot's poem is mighty. 'The Waste Land' has then an insistent claim on our attention. First, it is an esthetic monument of the first order. Even its detractors recognize its considerable poetic merit."

Robert E. Knoll, ed.  
Introduction  
*Storm over the Waste Land*  
(Scott, Foresman 1964)

"'Genuine poetry,' T. S. Eliot has written, 'can communicate before it is understood.' It is well to keep this truth in mind in approaching what is perhaps the most celebrated, the most difficult, and the most influential of modern poems. On its publication in 1922 'The Waste Land' was met by one group of readers with cries of outrage and indignation: at best it was a muddle of obscurity; at worst it was, as one critic called it, 'the greatest hoax of the century.' But for another group of readers it seemed to sum up everything they obscurely felt about the emotional sterility of modern life, especially of metropolitan life, in the postwar western world. It would be wrong to assert that these readers *understood* it: the poem is imperfectly understood, after much critical study, even today. But it thrilled a nerve in these readers: it communicated to them *before* it was understood."

The reasons for its obscurity are obvious. It contains passages from seven different languages, including Sanskrit; it quotes or alludes to some thirty or forty other works of literature, from the Bible to little-known popular songs; it jumps without warning from Europe to Asia, from present to past, from subject to subject, from tone to tone, depending for its effects on violent juxtapositions rather than on orderly transitions; it leaves its various speakers unidentified, and these speakers, according to Eliot's notes, melt into one another; finally, it is based, like James Joyce's *Ulysses* and *Finnegans Wake*, on a substructure of recondite ritual and myth—the myth of the maimed fisher-king whose lands have been laid waste by a curse laid on them, the myth of the Holy Grail whose mysteries, when learned, will restore his lands to fertility.

It is best to disregard these sources of difficulty on one's first approach to the poem. There are, after all, passages which offer little difficulty; and one can sense the mood, the emotional meaning, of the whole

without understanding it with intellectual precision. The central meaning of the poem comes through despite its obscurity of detail.

The theme of the poem is the emotional and spiritual sterility of modern life, of life without faith or love. The poem makes us feel how much of modern life is merely death. Its central metaphor is that of the desert, or waste land—the barren land where nothing lives or grows. The waste land is Eliot's image for modern civilization. Modern civilization is largely urban; hence Eliot presents his theme in terms of city life, specifically of London. Its king is the maimed fisher-king of the Grail legends, symbolic of the sick soul. The attempt to learn the secrets of the Grail, which will cure the king and restore his lands, is unsuccessful, but Eliot gives some indication of the nature of those secrets—of the qualities that have been lost and not been found—in the three Sanskrit words uttered by the thunder at the end of the poem: *Datta* (Give), *Dayadhvam* (Sympathize), *Damyata* (Control). The theme of sterility is carried largely by glimpses into the inconsequential or sordid lives of inhabitants of the modern waste land. These people live insignificant lives without faith and without love. A number of sordid sexual relationships are depicted in the poem, all of them marked by the failure or absence of love.

The poem will be most rewarding, of course, to those readers who have enough literary knowledge to respond to Eliot's use of allusions. Allusions may be used either straightforwardly, to reinforce and deepen the emotion that is being presented, or ironically, to comment on a situation by the use of contrast. Eliot uses allusions in both ways, but most characteristically he uses them ironically. Three examples must suffice. Perhaps the author alluded to most often is Dante. The line 'I had not thought death had undone so many' near the end of Part I is a direct quotation from the *Inferno*. Its use is ironical because it is here applied to the living, and it transforms the modern-city waste land into a region of hell. The London crowds 'walking round in a ring' (to and from work), each man with his eyes fixed before his feet, are the living dead.

In Part III, which depicts a number of loveless sexual relationships outside of marriage, the lines 'But at my back from time to time I hear / The sound of horses and motors...' combines allusions to Marvell's 'To His Coy Mistress' ('But at my back I always hear / Time's winged chariot hurrying near') and to John Day's 'Parliament of Bees' ('You shall hear / A noise of horns and hunting, which shall bring / Actaon to Diana in the spring'); but Eliot's chariot is an auto, his horns are automobile horns not hunting horns, and they bring not Actaon to Diana but the vulgarian Sweeney to the married Mrs. Porter. Even more effective is the allusion to a song from Goldsmith's *Vicar of Wakefield* which concludes the typist-home-at-teatime episode. Goldsmith's song asserts that 'When lovely woman stoops to folly / And finds too late that men betray,' her only recourse 'is to die.' But Eliot's 'lovely woman,' after her seduction by the 'young man carbuncular,' only says, 'Well now that's done: and I'm glad it's over,' and puts a record on the gramophone. Sexual transgression has lost significance, both emotionally and morally, in the modern waste land. Eliot is able to make these points dramatically by the skillful use of allusion."

Laurence Perrine  
*100 American Poems of the Twentieth Century*  
(Harcourt 1966) 130-32  
with James M. Reid

"After 'The Waste Land' Eliot never used the mythical method again. It had served him well there to express his feeling (which may or may not have come to conscious thought) that sex and religion are intricately interwoven—for the Holy Grail, or cup, and the Knight's lance, of the Grail legends, were transparently sexual symbols—and his growing conviction that myth was a kind of knowing, and that it would be found the only possible answer to the negations of scientific naturalism.... Only a very clever technician in verse would have thought of describing the typist's 'love affair'...in hidden disintegrating sonnets."

Hyatt H. Waggoner  
*American Poets: From the Puritans to the Present*  
(Houghton 1968) 422, 424

Michael Hollister (2015)