

## ANALYSIS

“The Waste Land” (1922)

### 12 BASIC PRINCIPLES

1. The fragmented poem expresses a modern psyche fragmented by loss of a unifying faith. It is not linear, but a series of lyrical passages without logical connectives--comparable to a Cubist collage, or to a black and white silent film with overlaid exposures.
2. The speaker has multiple identities:
  - a. As Eliot, the poet
  - b. As Tiresias, historical consciousness for modern world
  - c. As Grail Knight (will) and Fisher King (Soul) in framing myth
  - d. As Everyman in the modern world, the spiritual waste land
3. Externally, nothing happens in the poem. The inaction expresses *spiritual paralysis*, rendering the psyche or soul in the secular modern world: dissociated, fragmented, and rootless, due to prevailing Atheism and materialism—resulting in fraud, selfishness, lust, angst and mechanical human relations.
4. As the poem proceeds, its various images and events illustrate the same themes—spiritual paralysis, etc.--and the repetition creates what Pound called a “vortex” with the waste land image at the center, giving an effect of spiraling up or down, as evoked in Part IV called “Death by Water.”
5. References to vegetation myths root the framing myth of the Grail and the Fisher King in ancient fertility rites. Coinciding myths add depth and universality.
6. The unfolding of the fortune (the destiny of the modern world) that contributes to the poem’s structure is foreshadowed in the Tarot pack, which once had real religious meaning. But Madame Sosotris [so-so] is a fraud who no longer believes in the cards, and the fortune she tells is quite ambiguous (though her advice to fear it is not; it is ignorantly destructive). That she finds the Hanged Man (God) missing is an appropriate coincidence, ironic because she understands none of its spiritual importance.
7. “Death by Water” is a dominant motif in the poem because it defines the ways out of the Waste Land: literal death (drowning suggests the ultimate extinguishing of all desire, like fire); or spiritual rebirth (dousing suggests “sea change,” by baptism and the vegetation god regeneration mythology). Hence Part IV, “Death by Water,” is a central image, indicating alternative possibilities.
8. There are Christian biases in the poem, but it also affirms Buddhism. It is written largely in terms of the ancient pagan fertility myths and the Grail myth, which supposedly subsumes the Christian myth along with others. No one in the poem believes in any myth, however. And this is the point: the Waste Land is without true religious belief or spiritual sustenance (without water). Eliot implies that it does not matter what your religion—your faith--may be, so long as it sustains your soul.
9. The mythological quest for the Grail is made symbolically analogous to a religious quest for belief (a slight distortion of Jessie Weston’s thesis in *From Ritual to Romance*).
10. The lack of belief, or faith, is made analogous to lack of love in the poem. A failure of love is a failure of belief; the struggle for a meaningful sexual experience is analogous to the search for a satisfactory religious experience.
11. The literary allusions to the past make ironic contrasts to the sterile and degraded present, but they also imply recurrence of the waste land throughout human history, giving them a comprehensive archetypal resonance. Some allusions provide glimpses of traditional values which have since

become “broken images.” Shakespeare survives as a pop tune.

12. What the Thunder says is how to live, not how or what to believe: Give, sympathize, control. The ending of the poem is not pessimistic, it is provocative, instructive and inspirational. Your inner Knight needs to get off the couch, heed the Thunder and go searching for your Grail.

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