

THE
CONNELL GUIDE
TO T.S.ELIOT'S



THE
WASTE LAND

“A critical tour-de force. This is a book
to go to first, and many times thereafter, in
thinking about Eliot’s masterpiece.”

MICHAEL O’NEILL, PROFESSOR OF ENGLISH,
DURHAM UNIVERSITY

ALL YOU NEED TO KNOW ABOUT THE
POEM IN ONE CONCISE VOLUME

by Seamus Perry

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The Waste Land

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Contents

Introduction	3
A summary of the plot	6
What is <i>The Waste Land</i> about?	14
What does the epigraph do?	21
Why is <i>The Waste Land</i> difficult?	30
Do we need to spot the references?	34
What is wrong with April (1-18)?	40
What is the waste land (19-30)?	44
What does the German mean (31-42)?	49
What does Madame Sosostris foresee (43-59)?	55
What happens on London Bridge (60-76)?	57
Who are these women (77-172)?	62
What is the Fire Sermon (173-214)?	81
What does Tiresias see (215-265)?	88
What do the Thames maidens sing (266-311)?	93
Who is Phlebas (312-321)?	97
What is that sound (322-394)?	98
What does the Thunder say (395-433)?	105
Is <i>The Waste Land</i> a pessimistic poem?	117

NOTES

<i>Eliot in the bank</i>	14
<i>The role of Ezra Pound</i>	20
<i>Who is speaking?</i>	36
<i>Stravinsky and The Waste Land</i>	50
<i>Ten responses to The Waste Land</i>	64
<i>Vivien Eliot in The Waste Land</i>	68

Introduction

The Waste Land, first published in 1922, is not far from a century old, and it has still not been surpassed as the most famous and, moreover, the most exemplary of all modern poems. In many ways, it continues to define what we mean by modern whenever we begin to speak about modern verse. Part of that modernity lies in the way it is sometimes referred to as a difficult poem; but, at the same time, as Ted Hughes once observed, without denying its genuine kinds of difficulty, it is also genuinely popular, and not just among the cogniscenti or the degree-bearing. “I remember when I taught fourteen-year-old boys in a secondary modern school,” Hughes once said, “of all the poetry I introduced them to, their favourite was *The Waste Land*.”

My own experience as a tutor confirms that students – once they allow themselves to become immersed in its rhythms and patterns, and as they begin to worry less about obscurity and start

attuning themselves instead to the interplay of its voices – take to the poem in a way they do to few others. Not for nothing was it included, in its entirety, in Helen Gardner’s *New Oxford Book of English Verse* (1972), a decision replicated in *The Oxford Book of Twentieth Century English Verse* (1973), edited by Philip Larkin, a poet not known otherwise for his hospitality to modernism. For the poem has indeed achieved what Eliot had conceived as an ideal: it is a committed work of the imagination that manages to speak to the broadest constituency of readers, as an Elizabethan play engaged the whole theatre.

Wordsworth hoped for a work of “Joy in widest commonalty spread”; and commonalty might seem in as short supply as joy in *The Waste Land*; but in truth it shares the predicament it imagines with all the generosity, self-awareness, and inclusive tact of Wordsworth at his most characteristic. The poem’s appeal is intellectual, certainly, but also visceral, as much about rhythms as it is about references; it is by turns wittily cerebral, ugly, tender, disabused, damaged, resilient, poignant. It is a place where you come across lines with all the barren immediacy of

*Here is no water but only rock
Rock and no water and the sandy road*

and the brilliantly psychologised horror poetry of

her hair

*Spread out in fiery points
Glowed into words, then would be savagely still*

but find, also, an unexpected lyrical loveliness that uplifts a wholly contemporary kind of perception – “Trams and dusty trees” – a powerfully unproclaimed sympathy:

*After the event
He wept. He promised ‘a new start.’
I made no comment. What should I resent?*

It fulfils in miniature the demands that Eliot made of the great poet at large: “abundance, variety, and complete competence” – the first of those criteria of greatness all the more surprising, and moving, to find accomplished in a poem that has its starting place in so barren a human territory.

The poetry is modern in a wholly self-conscious way, just as James Joyce’s *Ulysses* bears the marks of its own ingenious self-invention on every page; and, like Joyce’s masterpiece, the modernity of Eliot’s poem stems in large part from a strikingly powerful awareness of what’s past. My aim in this short book has been primarily to point out some of the fruits of that acute historical awareness – besides, I hope, sharing some of my own admiration of, and pleasure in, the extraordinary voicings and counter-voicings of this perpetually great work.

A summary of the plot

The Waste Land is a modernist poem and not a piece of narrative so it does not have a *plot* exactly; but, full of thoughts of Shakespeare as it is, its division into five movements might dimly remind us of the five progressive acts of a play; and it certainly has a trajectory of a kind. The poem has not always appeared that way: some reviewers thought it lacked any shape at all. Conrad Aiken, an astute familiar of Eliot's from Harvard, announced in his review of the first edition that "we must with reservations, and with no invidiousness, conclude that the poem is not, in any formal sense, coherent". F.R. Leavis, an early champion, asserted: "It exhibits no progression."

After several decades of dedicated critical and scholarly labour and ingenuity, there are probably few admirers of Eliot now who would say so quite so flatly: the poem has come across in most critical accounts for the last 50 or more years as a fully coherent piece of art, even if the coherence in question is sometimes a matter of an intently deconstructive self-consciousness. Indeed it is perhaps possible for criticism to make the poem feel a little *too* thoroughly organised, thus missing out on something of that sense of rebarbateness and dissonance to which its early readers often responded, and which probably still forms an important part of the feelings of most people

when they encounter it for the first time.

"The progress in *The Waste Land*, for there is progress," Helen Gardner said in one of the most helpful early books on Eliot, "is not the progress of narrative, movement along a line, the progress of an Odysseus towards his home or of Bunyan's pilgrim from the City of Destruction to the Celestial City." It is, she says, rather, "a deeper and deeper exploration of an original scene or theme", which usefully conveys both a sense of progressing somewhere purposefully and a sense of getting nowhere fast at the same time.

So how should we try to understand its organisation? Aiken himself went on to suggest in his review that "Mr Eliot is perhaps attempting a kind of program music in words" – as though he were emulating a tone poem by Richard Strauss, such as *Don Quixote* or *Till Eulenspiegel*, in which the music seeks, without using words, to describe episodes in the title character's story and to evoke the fluctuations of his adventuresome emotions.

The Waste Land has many characters, not just one; but, as Eliot's own note to line 218 observes, in a way all the characters are parts of a single consciousness or, as Eliot says, a little mysteriously, "personage"; and while no narrative exactly, you can see the poem as a symbolic depiction of the vicissitudes of that consciousness. The musical analogy has appealed to many critics: "the organisation which it achieves as a work of art...

may be called musical”, said Leavis. “If it were desired to label in three words the most characteristic feature of Mr Eliot’s technique,” said I.A. Richards, “this might be done by calling his poetry a ‘music of ideas’.” (Both were picking up a theme from Eliot himself, who spoke in several places about the parallel between music and poetry.)

Allowing for the obvious difficulties, here is an attempt to summarise the plot of the poem, to many points of which I shall be returning later in this book.

I. The Burial of the Dead

The poem opens with a voice, unidentified, apparently speaking on behalf of an ‘us’, also unidentified, characterising the coming of spring in a starkly counter-intuitive way, as the unwanted re-imposition of a vitality happily lost through the dormancy of the preceding winter. This voice then merges, unannounced, into a recollection of episodes that occurred, at some unspecified time, in Munich and on vacation in the mountains: the poem only lets us know that a speaker is called ‘Marie’, a member of a grand family. The verse then goes through another transition, both in register and location: now the voice emerges from a dry and stony desert, invoking a biblical resonance in its address to “Son of Man” (which

comes from Ezekiel) to whom a prophetic voice promises to show “fear in a handful of dust”.

The next episode, the recollection of a desperately tongue-tied encounter between the speaker and a young woman, comes framed by two bits of German, both taken from Wagner’s great love opera *Tristan and Isolde*. And then another abrupt change: we hear a dubious clairvoyante, Madame Sosostris, casting someone a fortune with a pack of tarot cards; and then another: a different ‘I’ again remembers crossing London Bridge, bumping into an old acquaintance, and enquiring in what seems a deranged way about a bit of bizarre gardening: “That corpse you planted last year in your garden, / Has it begun to sprout?”

II. A Game of Chess

Eliot offers a diptych of female portraits. The first, which opens with an allusion to Shakespeare’s Cleopatra, describes a woman in an immensely elaborate and thickly odorous drawing room; she is described in a confusingly ornate and sophisticated syntax; a painting on the wall depicts an ancient story of sexual violence. She conducts a fraught, one-sided non-conversation with a man, presumably her husband, whose thoughts remain darkly unarticulated. Then, jumping to the other side of London, a second study portrays a woman talking in a pub as closing time approaches: she has

a tangled and inconsequential story to tell about a friend, Lil, and the homecoming of Lil's husband, Albert, after his time in the army during the Great War. The section ends with the drinkers ejected from the pub, bidding each other goodnight.

III. The Fire Sermon

A view of the desolate Thames, described in an anonymous voice haunted by poetry of the English Renaissance (Edmund Spenser, Andrew Marvell, Shakespeare). The heterogeneity of the succeeding verse is disorientating: a scrap of an obscene ballad about a brothel-keeper; a lovely line from the French poet Paul Verlaine; some uprooted fragments of Elizabethan English; a *non sequitur* of a story about an ambiguous encounter with a merchant from Smyrna. And then we arrive at what Eliot's note describes as "the substance of the poem", narrated by a version of Tiresias, an aged blind prophet from Greek myth: he watches the seduction of a typist by an opportunistic "house agent's clerk", and gently intuits her thoughts after the clerk has gone.

Another 'I' enters the poem, recalling the sound of music from another London pub, and the glory of the interior of a London church; and then we return to an evocation of the Thames, both the contemporary waterway of "Oil and tar" and the glittering river of the reign of Elizabeth I. Wagner

now returns to the poem, this time with a quotation from his opera cycle *The Ring*, which opens with the singing of the three beautiful Rhinemaidens. Except Eliot offers us not Rhinemaidens but Thames maidens, whose unhappy experiences in love are charted down the length of the urban river, from Richmond and Kew in Surrey down to its estuary, where the river empties out into the sea, at Margate in Kent. Descending now into the poem's greatest moment of studied incoherence, some scraps of St Augustine juxtapose abruptly with a repeated fragment of the Buddha's Fire Sermon; and at this point of linguistic near-collapse, the section closes in fire.

IV. Death by Water

A short section describes the physical dissolution of one Phlebas, a sailor from Phoenicia, whose corpse has fallen apart after a fortnight in the ocean. A moralising voice warns the reader to remember his example.

V. What the Thunder said

The opening lines evoke an arid desert-scape with a reiterative, sparse power. We tune in, briefly, to the voice of a traveller, whose journey is mysteriously haunted by an elusive third figure