

## AN ABSTRACT OF THE THESIS OF

Stephen James Summers for the degrees of Honors Baccalaureate of Arts in English and Honors Baccalaureate of Arts in Philosophy presented on May 22, 2008. Title: Under the Shadow of this Red Rock: Reading T. S. Eliot's *The Waste Land* for its Places, Persons, and Poetics.

Abstract approved:

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Thomas Stearns Eliot's 1922 modernist poem *The Waste Land* presents itself as an alternative to the decaying society Eliot found himself inhabiting. It begins as a personal means of pulling together one's fragmented consciousness, but in doing so Eliot manages to present a solution to a world of selfishness—looking beyond ourselves. Through a careful study of the landscapes and urban scenes Eliot presents we can see the progress of his characters' fates over the course of five seasons. A close look at these individuals populating *The Waste Land* will further enlighten our search for answers to the drought. Finally, Eliot's rich language will be its own ambiguous key to enlightenment, demanding that we critically consider the scenarios he presents. Along the way, Eliot will invoke an enormous number of literary and cultural sources to create the tale's framework, from Dante and Chaucer to Whitman and F. H. Bradley. The poet will also draw from religious traditions of the world, with a particular influence on Buddhism and Christianity to help navigate his wilderness. All the while, the tarot deck and Arthurian myth cycle will be our dubious guides. But at last, the journey will be worth it.

Key Words: T. S. Eliot, *The Waste Land*, tarot, humours, Philomela, Dante

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Under the Shadow of this Red Rock:

Reading T. S. Eliot's *The Waste Land* for its Places, Persons, and Poetics

by

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I understand that my project will become part of the permanent collection of Oregon State University, University Honors College. My signature below authorizes release of my project to any reader upon request.

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Stephen James Summers, Author

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## **DEDICATION**

To my teachers—

Past, Present, and Future—

and

To everyone who has ever taken the time—

To tell me something useful I didn't already know—

—I sincerely thank you.

**UNDER THE SHADOW OF THIS RED ROCK: READING T. S. ELIOT'S *THE WASTE LAND* FOR ITS PLACES, PERSONS, AND POETICS**

Introduction

“April is the cruellest month, breeding / Lilacs out of the dead land, mixing / Memory and desire” (Eliot 1-3). Thus begins the seminal work of modernism, T. S. Eliot’s *The Waste Land*, his epic for modern times. First published in 1922, the poem defined not only the emptiness Eliot perceived in his contemporary time but also addressed the spiritual “drought” in his own life. It is a poem begun and rooted within the deep recesses of past memory, and it relies upon these connections to make sense of the present and move tenuously forward. Thrown into a world of materialism and human isolation, devoid of passion and hope, Eliot seeks a mist in the midst of the drought, a shower of hope to wash the world anew. In recalling the myths of history, in recounting the legends and literature of the past, Eliot is not simply discussing a common theme in world literature. He does not write dispassionately from a distance, nor does he sum up a state of affairs that can be prodded with a pen and then forgotten; Eliot wrote in the middle of his own torment, with his world drying up around him. In the midst of some “hysteria” he could not rectify he wrote, and this poem is the therapeutic result of that period (Koestenbaum 115; Gold 519-20).

*The Waste Land* thus is Eliot’s personal journey to resolution but also a work for his world, and he writes it not only to comment but to correct. It is the effort of creation that will help him make sense of the result. Like the knights roving for the Holy Grail, Eliot will search for a water source to refresh the world even if no such rebirth exists. From its earliest elements to its final formation, *The Waste Land* was over seven years in



composing, and it can be read Eliot's own quest, varying as it does with the changes of time and tide over a span of years (Gordon 557). The wasteland can then be conquered only by first understanding it, identifying it; *naming* it as such gives *power* over it. The entirety of *The Waste Land* will be made up of connections that attempt to make sense of some aspect of experience. Thus we should view the poem not as a single solid aesthetic "artifact" but as an exploration of the "mode of dis-covery or dis-closure" (Spanos 231). Eliot believes that if he can show that this new world is nothing more than a recurring cycle with a means of escape, then he can defeat his demons. His paradigm for comprehension, his guide on the quest, is literature, the great conversations of the past.

Thus Eliot attempts to encapsulate a portrait of the past in his image of the future. Herein we are echoes of Homer's forever-questing Odysseus, Shakespeare's ever-deliberating Hamlet, and Dante's constant search for the Divine. Dante in particular will become an important contextual space. *The Waste Land* is populated with a great number of voices though at last they may all coalesce into one prophetic sound (Easthope 332). This voice—Eliot's own—becomes inseparable from the artwork itself, and the poet will use the power of speech to conjure names and truths that will bring light to a morally-, religiously-, and psychologically-dried-up land.

Eliot's masterpiece is a creation that will turn a darkened society into something comprehensible, making sense of the chaotic senselessness with the ciphers of the past. The poem is not proposing a remedy to the problem of contemporary culture; the poem *is* itself the cure. The poem is less an answer than an exploration of the means at which we attempt to find such answers (see Miller 160-5). Eliot has too much at stake in *The Waste Land* to play at pedantic solutions, and will instead stick to his own experience.

With this in mind, in each section of this essay we will focus a great deal of

attention on several themes throughout *The Waste Land*, many of them centered upon just these voices. First, we will be examining the settings that provide the backdrop to each scene, and how these motifs create a context for the heroic quest for renewal, from the literary and visual material they draw in. Beyond this we will be spending significant time studying the characters Eliot has chosen as his voices, the men and women of the wasteland, with all of their various problems of barrenness, isolation, decadence, ennui, and—perhaps—their hopes. We will do this through a line-by-line look at the language of form, how Eliot makes a work of art through the joining of apparent-incompatibilities. As the quest for rebirth unfolds, these patterns will be our guide through a darkened passage.

Finally, one caveat: in the words of Marianne Thormählen, “A work of art such as *The Waste Land* cannot be subjugated under any one fixed interpretative scheme, it lives its own life in its readers...” (Thormählen 40). As such I make no claims to have “solved” the “question of *The Waste Land*,” whatever that may be, I only present my own reinterpretation of the poem as I personally read it, just as Eliot presented only what he had found out for himself. Certainly, you the reader will do the same.

#### A Final Note:

References to “Eliot” and a line (or simply a line number alone) refer to the Penguin *The Waste Land and Other Poems*. Kermode’s references and Eliot’s “Notes on the Waste Land” are also from that volume. References to Valerie Eliot are found in *The Waste Land: A Facsimile* and “North” refers to the Norton Critical Edition of *The Waste Land*. Citations to Rainey are from *The Annotated Waste Land with Eliot’s Contemporary Prose*. Also, “*The Waste Land*” refers to Eliot’s poem, while “wasteland” is meant to address the physical landscape Eliot describes, not the poem itself.

### Part I: “The Burial of the Dead”

Eliot’s opening act of *The Waste Land* will quickly establish its setting as a variable one. Over the course of a few lines, we will be transported from Chaucer’s fourteenth-century England to Whitman’s nineteenth-century America and then back to Eliot’s own present time in his quintessentially-modern “Unreal City.” Overarching every piece of the tale will be a layer of classical and medieval contextualizing, typified by Madame Sosostris (our primary guide through *The Waste Land*) and her tarot deck. Also in the background is the humourism of the classical Greeks (Hippocrates and Galen) which will become a general background to all parts of the poem. In “The Burial of the Dead,” the totem will be earth and the humour will be melancholic; the wasteland unfolds as cold and dry as a rock in the desert night.

Eliot will also introduce us to the first players in his tragicomedy: the Hyacinth Girl, Stetson, St. Narcissus, and Madame Sosostris, among others. Throughout the poem the players will appear to be essentially incarnations of the same characters, though in different settings and various positions. The women caught between fecundity and creative forces will form a central character in the entirety of *The Waste Land*, and will appear here in “The Burial of the Dead” to establish the parameters for the character, a person somewhere between the pragmatic Sosostris and her poisonous “Belladonnas.” Marie longs for a past that has gone away, and Sosostris tells an uncongenial portrait of the future. Likewise Eliot’s men are similarly impotent, compensating for their lack through an opportunism that leads to further isolation; St. Narcissus finds himself drying out in the desert instead of finding relief in the shadows, and the other men are either forgetful—or buried. Within the language of the poem we will see Eliot’s ability to present a portrait of collage, fragments that form a unity almost through their disunity.

### Section One (ll. 1-18): Chaucer and the New Spring

Eliot begins *The Waste Land* at the *very* beginning, hearkening his readers' ears back to Geoffrey Chaucer and his Middle English. Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales* opens with springtime: "Whan that Aveyrille with his shoures soote / The droghte of March hath perced to the roote, / And bathed every veyne in swich lycour" (Chaucer 1-3). Eliot's poem follows this, beginning in that time of rebirth and renewal in winter's wake. Chaucer's imagery is apropos to the mood of his *Tales*, full of adventure and humor. For him, telling stories is about rekindling life, about rebirthing ideas to reinvigorate the tales' listeners. But Eliot will break with this tradition almost as soon as he recalls it. His goal is not entertainment so much as it is an attempt to resurrect a deadness he senses within his world (Bolgan 78). Yet though April may be the beginning of spring, heralding new life, Eliot's poem has nothing of Chaucer's "sweet showers" or bathed "vines." Eliot's *Waste Land* finds itself inured with death, not life, and must attempt to find its way back from there. Thus, as Eliot begins, "April is the cruellest month" because it brings death to life; it forces us to survey a horrible blighted land rather than the rebirth we had wanted (Eliot 1).

By way of explanation, the first line continues into the next two. Eliot writes that this April breeds "Lilacs out of the dead land, mixing / Memory and desire" (2-3). Here the "lilacs" recall Walt Whitman's "When Lilacs Last in the Dooryard Bloomed," written upon the loss of Abraham Lincoln. The lilacs have become a reminder of loss, a living thing that recalls death. The flowers do not bring joy, but instead make Whitman "mourn with ever-returning spring" (3). Springtime is just such a harbinger of loss. Likewise, William Yeats' "Easter, 1916" and Milton's "On the Massacre in Piedmont" all expound a springtime tainted with blood and death. Eliot is following this theme in trying to

reconcile fecundity with decadence. Hence, Eliot is “mixing / Memory and desire” together to produce something new. He is precisely “stirring / Dull roots with spring rain” and has more in common with Chaucer than first appeared by trying to remake life from death, to breathe life into a dead land (3-4). Again following Chaucer, Eliot will use dramatic monologues to present a cacophony of voices within *The Waste Land*. They will speak from the various positions and stations of his time, and Eliot will show a deft ability to slip into various voices with little effort. As with all good characters, their stories tell us as much about the narrators as they do about the plot.

Part I of the poem, “The Burial of the Dead,” refers to the sacred rite of the Anglican Church by the same name. Dead bodies are buried as a means of putting away their decayed flesh, of course, but also as a method of removing their influence from our minds. Burial is a physical means of demonstrating that the dead are truly gone away, and it carries a symbolic power through its connections to Christ and rebirth. The first section of *The Waste Land* is concerned with the relationship of the earth to its inhabitants, following the ancient Greek element of “earth” and its effects on preserving and destroying, by both giving life and burying it. Normally, dead bodies fertilize the ground so that lilacs can spring up in memorial, bringing life out of death. But here in the wasteland there has been no such burial and renewal; the people exist as the living dead.

In this cycle, life cannot return in the spring until the dead of winter have been buried. In fact, the winter served to keep the land dead, ironically, by actually keeping the dead *half-alive*. Eliot’s speaker relates: “Winter kept us warm, covering / Earth in forgetful snow, feeding / A little life with dried tubers” (5-7). The snows accumulate and cause the mind to forget reality, deadening the world. The narrator relates a subtle desire within him to resist the life-giving spring, and remain undisturbed under cover of a snowy

memory of how things have always been (Spanos 245). Memory will prove critical to Eliot in the framework of his epic; memory is the way he can find his way through the wastes of his contemporary world. Without it there is no context; forgetting what has gone before dooms us to knowing nothing of the future.

Eliot will invoke this powerful, universal memory of other poems, people, and places to guide his escape from a world of snowy, blank emptiness. We are already seeing an aesthetic principle of “wreckage”—the fragments that will make up *The Waste Land* must be seen as unified largely in their juxtaposition of disparity (Douglass 7), yet they remain as a useful guide. The “dried tubers” and frozen (though insulating) snow are only enough to keep skin and bone together in a weakened existence. Spring allows the burial of death and brings a potential for rebirth, just as the Fisher King must be destroyed for a new era of fertility to come (as we will see later). Eliot coaxes us onward: we are pushing for understanding; we want to get past “a little life” and into something much greater.

This returns us to the poem’s epigram, whose Latin is a quotation from the *Satyricon* by Petronius Arbiter that describes the plight of a Sibyl that gained immortality without eternal youth (Kermode 97). The Sibyl, now a dried-up specimen of decrepitude, says that her only wish is to die. She is the picture of a barren world that Eliot identifies with the wasteland of mythos. By placing this epigram at the outset of the poem, Eliot uses the Sibyl as his type of the broken contemporary human. She exists in a grotesque mockery of life, and her life must be ended before something new can begin.

*The Waste Land* came out of a period of personal turmoil for Eliot, surrounding his relationship to his poetry, to his first wife Vivien, and to his contemporaries (Miller 37). His personal well had run dry, and Eliot felt he lacked the abilities to create the poetry he wished. In answer to this time of mental and emotional torment, *The Waste*

*Land* would flow out of Eliot, as a physical manifestation of the *anomie* of his day. He later remarked,

Various critics have done me the honour to interpret the poem [*The Waste Land*] in terms of criticism of the contemporary world, have considered it, indeed, as an important bit of social criticism. To me it was only the relief of a personal and wholly insignificant grouse against life; it is just a piece of rhythmical grumbling. (Valerie Eliot 1)

Yet despite this cavalier explanation, the reader may see Eliot as closer to the Sibyl's point of view when he wrote the poem than to this revisionist reassessment. In a similar vein, the "Notes" Eliot appended to *The Waste Land* after its first printing are still in debate over their intended usefulness for understanding the poem. Some critics have posited that they present a significant number of red herrings that push the poem further into opaqueness (Kaiser 85-7). But we cannot simply take Eliot's anecdote at face value, nor can we fully accept that the notes are simply distractions. Of course, Eliot's boiling the poem down to little more than "a piece of rhythmical grumbling" by a frustrated young man is humorous, but there is some truth to what he says. *The Waste Land* is not a poem to be held at arm's length; it is supremely personal. The rotting Sybil did not have a purely *academic* interest in her fate. If the poem is not taken personally as a serious piece of self-exploration, it loses much of its power.

Moving to the formal level, the first seven lines of the poem have begun in a sort of regular pattern, though not one easily recognizable. Three lines end with an infinitive verb running into the next line and there is a complete stop in line four. The next two repeat the infinitive structure and the seventh line ends with another period break. Also, there is a deliberate mirroring effect between the similar images of "dull roots" in line

four and “dried tubers” in line seven. Each of the first six lines begins with a stressed syllable, pushing the reader off-balance from the beginning. The first line is almost fully trochaic, while the others are variously less-so. Further, every line but the fourth ends with an unstressed syllable, pushing us off-balance as it tumbles into the next line without pausing. The effect is disconcerting. Each of the seven lines has four hard stresses therein, though syllable counts vary from five to nine. This recalls the “sprung rhythms” of old Germanic verses and, more recently, Gerard Manley Hopkins’ work within the form. At any rate, there is a sense of unity in the poem, even if hidden, and it is no accident.

At this point, the poem shifts. The hinge is a new season: summertime. This new section reverts to proselike lines that (ironically) might have come straight from a diary. Eliot’s speaker relates:

Summer surprised us, coming over the Starnbergersee  
 With a shower of rain; we stopped in the colonnade,  
 And went on in sunlight, into the Hofgarten,  
 And drank coffee, and talked for an hour. (8-11)

Striking alliteration begins this section, with the repeated *s*-sounds on the front end. The alliteration links back to the Anglo-Saxon poets, and its Germanic roots tie into the allusion to the Starnbergersee, a lake near Munich, Germany, where King Ludwig’s Schloss Berg castle resides (Kermode 97). Eliot himself had been to the “mountain castle” in 1911, and to the Hofgarten, a garden in Munich. It is a setting of power and wealth, a perfect villa for the wasteland.

Here, away from the images of the dying Sibyl, summer is just so “surprising,” its beauty lulling us into forgetting the deadness of winter. Summer removes us once more from the season of death; the sunny heat is an opiate, drying up our resolve. In the midst



of that modern forgetfulness we begin to lose our existential identities, becoming little more than a part of the landscape. Amidst a rash of anapests, the metrical feet per line diminish from seven (in line eight) to just three anapestic feet (in line eleven). The speech becomes more ponderous as it becomes prosy. Similarly, the summer heat slows passions eventually to a lukewarm lethargy.

This passage was discovered by G. K. L. Morris to be related to the memoirs of a German Countess Marie von Wallersee whom Eliot had met and from whom he had taken the lines (Valerie Eliot 126). Line twelve of “The Burial of the Dead” is German, translating to “I’m not Russian at all, I come from Lithuania, pure German” (Kermode 97). Abruptly, the poem changes course with this new tongue, alerting us to a new speaker in the four lines before this and the six after. We have been thrust into a pastoral description of childhood bliss. However, the memories of this life of happy luxury will become synonymous with a land of effete and excess (Singh, “Some More Echoes...” 28). Curiously, this section was not obviously cordoned-off from the previous lines in any really noticeable manner, resulting in an overlaying of consciousnesses upon one another. Separate human consciousnesses intermingle throughout the poem, and Eliot will play with this overlapping method throughout his work as a means of bringing about a greater revelation. Conglomerating several disjointed viewpoints on top of each other will create a broader argument than a sole voice crying out in this wilderness.

But why is this second voice so different from the first? Why does the “Marie” voice, recalling a seemingly wonderful childhood of privilege, follow on the heels of the first shades of a darkling spring? It is here to begin the poem’s exploration of distinctly male and female elements, in trying to understand what has become of modern individuals. As always, first-person narrators tend to tell us as much about themselves

(usually indirectly) as they do about events. Consequently, there is something quite interesting about the strongly-feminine element in the “Marie” section. The opening lines of the poem had come from an unidentified speaker that seemed essentially male (in answering to Chaucer’s voice). Now they have been supplanted with the testimony of a woman’s reflections on childhood, and the text changes with it.

Here also a rhythm comes back into the lines, not as rigid as rhyme but still flowing and softly recalling. The poem’s opening lines of sprung rhythm and alliteration had harsher overtones, recalling masculine sagas of the bleak northlands. Now there is a lilting tone to the poetry that is much less masculine, and it has a light rhyme to it, further pushing it toward “romance” and the more “feminized” roots of the language. The sounds of “sled” at the end of line fourteen come back in fifteen in “frightened” and “said,” creating several off-rhymes. Further, the first syllable of “frightened” is repeated in the following line with “tight.” The assonance is repeated further from “sled” to the “e” sound in line sixteen’s “went,” and in the almost-rhymes of “feel,” “free,” and “read” in lines seventeen and eighteen. They also rhyme with “Marie” in line fifteen, creating something closer to a regular rhyme pattern than we have seen yet. With the change in narrator has come a change in the gender of the language itself.

Line seventeen is rather enigmatic, as Marie explains, “In the mountains, there you feel free.” This ambiguous statement holds two different meanings. On the one hand, the mountains guarantee a sort of freedom, in escaping the madding crowd of the city for the wilderness. However, the mountains are hardly free; they are indifferent and inhospitable to humans. This ambiguity is compounded by the strange following line. Marie finishes her tale by returning to the present, confessing, “I read, much of the night, and go south in the winter” (18). There is nothing especially odd about the phrase, but

reading “much of the night” betrays an attempt to escape something at night, avoiding loneliness with a surrogate conversationalist on sleepless nights. In her case it is precisely the mixing of “Memory and desire” that leaves her restless (Brooker and Bentley 63). The effect is again unnerving. The second part of the line makes her appear to be fleeing something, heading “south” to avoid the cold winters, and avoiding something threatening.

Noteworthy also is that the passage ends with a return to “winter,” and not accidentally. Winter was numbing, replacing activity with a deadened sleepiness; Marie’s reference to going “south in the winter” is an attempt to return to the numbing state. She escapes the banality of her elite, effete world only by looking to her innocent life in the past and returning to the comfort of ignorance. She refuses to address her fears about the present, unwilling to identify the source of her current troubles. Eliot is turning her character into a depiction of denial, a woman who studiously ignores the emptiness of the world she seeks. In imagining a time of empty happiness, Marie ignores the horrific problems of a post-war Europe that is as troubled as it was before the “archduke’s” death. Eliot’s poem will attempt to refute this kind of forced ignorance, in the poet’s attempt to clear away the smoke from his own mind.

### Section Two (ll. 19-42): St. Narcissus in the Desert

Line nineteen of the poem indicates another shift in speakers, from a personal human voice to an impersonal godlike sound. The “Son of man” reference in line twenty makes this clear, recalling directly the book of Ezekiel. God calls Ezekiel to be a prophet and Eliot invokes similar language to indicate his own calling. God told Ezekiel to go to his people, those who “are obstinate and stubborn.... And whether they listen or fail to listen—for they are a rebellious house—they will know that a prophet has been among them” (Ezekiel II.4-5). Apparently God has, once again, abandoned Israel to her own devices (Jones 288-9), and Eliot feels called to show his ignorant world its transgression—its own barrenness. This is more than a personal crusade; there is a prophetic clamor to this poem. And like the prophets of old, Eliot fears becoming a Cassandra, one prophesying truths that no one will believe. The term “Son of man” also recollects Christ and the hypostatic union that joins God and man in one person. It forces us to consider this wilderness in terms of the spiritual realm as well as the physical wasteland of rock and sand (Cahill 43). In the book of Ezekiel, God addresses the prophet with “Son of man,” to emphasize this connection, the position of humanity as the children of Adam and of God, simultaneously. Thus we have a mystic union here between God and humanity, and it connects the work of the poet—Eliot as prophet-seer—with the Old Testament prophets’ call for truth and with Christ’s redemption simultaneously. The one who sees the wilderness in the world is the one who will attempt to redeem it.

In this second section of “The Burial of the Dead” we have begun to explore the imagery of a dead landscape, and with it the medium again alters. From line nineteen until the word “images” on line 22, Eliot returns to iambic pentameter after the free-verse lines of near-prose preceding them. The passage begins in a scene of wilderness and the

poetic form remains traditional at first, but it breaks down under the strain of the unconventionality of this anti-pastoral landscape. Blank verse would be better suited to an *ode* to nature than to an indictment of it. Typical pastoral imagery: clear-running brooks, carefree singing birds, and heavily-laden trees are replaced by “roots that clutch” and “branches grow[ing] / Out of this stony rubbish” (19-20). Nothing lives here. The branches form also a connotation to the other tree, the cross of Christ, and the “stony rubbish” to his corresponding tomb. The Godlike voice says that the human prophet cannot know of such things, cannot find redemption in the deadness. New life comes from destroying the old, but the voice says we know nothing but “A heap of broken images” with no real meanings attached (22); we live in pictures that we cannot link back to realities.

The structure itself symbolically breaks down with the “broken images” of line 22, again alluding to the story of Ezekiel. To a hardhearted people God cries,

“I am about to bring a sword against you, and I will destroy your high places. Your altars will be demolished and your incense altars will be smashed; and I will slay your people in front of your idols.... I will scatter your bones around your altars. Wherever you live, the towns will be laid waste.” (Ezekiel VI.3-6)

This makes the cause of this waste land’s appearance out to be because of a spiritual dryness, and it is perhaps brought judgment upon a prodigal people. Thus this poem must be a kind of spiritual cleansing, a burning away of vileness, and thus it prompts this destructive fury in order to begin over. There are parallels here to Percy Bysshe Shelley’s “Ozymandias,” with its ancient king’s own smashed “high places” having been put in their place by indifferent, omnipotent Time and Nature (Douglass 12). These smashed

altars surrounded by dead bodies are a parody of worshipers following God, just as the waste land is a broken parody of life. The only means of producing life from barrenness is to begin over again.

Ironically, the narrating voice says that, “You cannot say, or guess,” these images’ significance, despite the fact that we certainly *do* understand such broken images, at least on some level. These images have roots in literary and human history. Following the “stony rubbish” that sprouts only dead trees (in what was once fertile soil) we see the beating sun, the “dead tree,” “the cricket,” and the “dry stone” (20-4). Here the overall effect is to emphasize the sterilization of the landscape. Both the female elements typically associated with the earth and nature, and the male elements associated with fertilization, have come up dry here (Ensslin 209-10). The stony ground is barren; a used-up people is reflected by a land drained of nutrients and a topsoil turned to lifeless sand. Adam could not be raised from this lifeless clay, and it symbolizes the graves it covers. The sun in line 22 does not heat warmly, but “beats” oppressively upon the ground, desiccating everything of life-giving moisture. The deadened tree recollects William Blake’s “Poison Tree” and Eden’s accursed trees, long since rotted by fallen humanity.

Here is the produce grown from hatred and sin, and it produces poisoned apples, both for our foes and ourselves. It provides no salvation from the awful heat; the distance between God and humanity is greatest felt here (Jones 290). The image also alludes to Ecclesiastes XII, according to Eliot’s own notes, with its lament on age and death. The passage describes a time when,

[T]he almond tree blossoms,  
and the grasshopper drags himself along  
and desire is no longer stirred.

Then man goes to his eternal home  
and mourners go about the streets. (Ecclesiastes XII.5)

This “desire” again has been lost in memory. The ancient fruit of Eden brought humans to their knees and brought the sting of mortality to all. Finally, Eliot finishes the passage, “And the dry stone [has] no sound of water” (24), recollecting Moses’ attempts to take water from rocks in the Exodus. The land is shriveled; there is no refreshment to be had. The voice recollects God’s words to Job, saying that humans cannot understand these matters of life and death, nor can they control them, a dark realization.

But there is some help here. Before line 24 has ended there is a word, “Only,” that breaks in on the desolation and exhales a breeze of hope. The voice has changed—again, uncomfortably suddenly—to a new one, not a booming executioner but a sly escapist who has found a “shadow under this red rock” and insists that we join him there (Eliot 25-6). This section is altered from another poem of Eliot’s, “The Death of Saint Narcissus,” written several years before *The Waste Land* though long unpublished. The first stanza of this poem invites us to:

Come under the shadow of this gray rock—  
Come in under the shadow of this gray rock,  
And I will show you something different from either  
Your shadow sprawling over the sand at daybreak, or  
Your shadow leaping behind the fire against the red rock:  
I will show you his bloody cloth and limbs  
And the gray shadow on his lips. (“St. Narcissus” 1-7)

The poem alludes to the eponymous second-century bishop. St. Narcissus’ was defamed with charges of having committed terrible sins, and he fled to the desert for solace. The

bishop could not live in the brokenness of the human world and sought refuge outside of it in the lonely shadow of God. He attempts to achieve a kind of union with Nature and God, but he becomes little more than a mirror for his own flawed nature (Gordon 559), like his Greek namesake. St. Narcissus is a man who thrives off the emptiness that Eliot fears and loathes, and yet the confused saint is our present guide.

Though the rock has inexplicably become red—dispelling the innocuous gray appearance of the saint—its invitation is the same: it offers an escape from the burning sun beneath a cool stone. The “shadows” it offers are like the winter that hid our consciousnesses from reality, and their shadows are not a permanent escape, only a temporary hiding place (Eliot 28-9). We can hear the voice of a half-crazed man of the wilderness, cracking his gums and gesturing toward a cave to escape the deadly heat of the midday sun. St. Narcissus is a prophet in the wilderness, the first figure we have come upon that appears to know something about the wasteland. Yet his appearance as a prophetic lunatic does little to put us at ease.

Our suspicions are confirmed in the final line when this “boon character” promises us useful knowledge but instead points only to the dust. He promises to show us “something different” from morning and night, from the lives and deaths of mortals, but he shows us something worse. “I will show you fear,” he shouts crazily in line 30, “in a handful of dust.” This phrasing originates in John Donne’s *Devotions Upon Emergent Occasions* (specifically Meditation XVII) in reference to the origins and ends of human lives. Later Alfred, Lord Tennyson and Joseph Conrad will also make use of it before Eliot does here. The rock is supposed to recall Isaiah XXXII.2, where it is meant to shade us from the sun “in a thirsty land.” But here it becomes something threatening (Wilson 308). Despite having “danced on the hot sand / Until the arrows came” and knowing the



wastes better than anyone else, St. Narcissus does not give us a means of escaping the deserts, Eliot says; instead he merely compounds our problems (“St. Narcissus” 36-7).

That final line of the section, line 30, carries a thinly-veiled threat that seeps into the rest of the stanza. Why would the boon guide in the desert try to add to our “fear” now? Following his Greek namesake, whatever St. Narcissus shows us is only, in a sense, a glimpse of ourselves in a reflecting pool. Thus the fear he shows us originates within ourselves. “Fear in a handful of dust” is the fear of the earthborn when confronted with mortality. As the children of the clay-raised Adam, people are here nothing more than God-breathed dust. The image, however, is darker than this. In Conrad’s story “Youth,” the character Marlow recalls the excitement and brazenness of his youth, saying he held the “heat of life in the handful of dust;” but Eliot inverts this image, finding the hot sands to be a threat to life (Franklin 278). The wasteland is covered in a dust that is nothing more than the rotted bones of humans long dead and buried, but it has been twisted into a menacing image rather than a familiar thought. Burying the dead returns dust to dust, giving back what is due to the earth our forebear. But in the present state of modern wilderness, fear surrounds the knowledge of our future demise. This prophet shows us what we feared most of all: our inevitable decomposition into the sands of time. The impersonal earth, personified in the figure of Narcissus, has already doomed us.

After this shattering revelation the stanza breaks away suddenly, falling back into German in lines 31-4. They are taken from the first act of Richard Wagner’s 1865 opera *Tristan und Isolde*; they are spoken by Tristan while he waits for his beloved Isolde to come from across the sea (see Harris 108-11). They translate to

Fresh blows the wind

To the homeland;

My Irish child,

Where are you waiting? (Kermode 98)

His hopes become tragically dashed by the third act, as repeated in Eliot's line 42. "Oed' und leer das Meer," says a shepherd watching for Isolde's ship, "Desolate and empty [is] the sea" (Rainey 79). She will not arrive until Tristan has died, essentially by his own hand. Their love was accidental and ends in tragedy, becoming the romance of a wasteland. These scenes (along with those of the hyacinth girl soon to appear) describe "the ultimate failure of love to overcome the despair of homelessness," and they suggest that Eliot's poem is about many forms of exile and separation (Cawelti 40). Suicide seems the appropriate end to life in this dead place where any hope or love is accidental or misbegotten. The waste land is within and without.

Between these Wagnerian interjections the stanza shifts again in lines 35-41, and a direct quotation appears for the first time, heralding yet another speaker: the "hyacinth girl." Lines 35 and 36 are directly spoken by a new female voice who says: "'You gave me hyacinths first a year ago; / 'They called me the hyacinth girl.'" Hyacinths are brightly-colored symbols of springtime and resurrection, sending us back to the opening of "The Burial of the Dead." The girl becomes identified with seasonal rebirth; she is a youthful fertility symbol, and from the reference to "a year ago" it appears she likewise recurs annually (Sicker 422). By proximity she becomes associated with Isolde; the hyacinth girl's reappearance is not enough to refresh the wilderness, just as Isolde returns to Tristan too late to save him (see Waldron 427-31). The hyacinth girl is described as coming back "late, from the Hyacinth garden" and is thus unable to resurrect the narrator (37). Although the girl returns with her "arms full" of flowers and her "hair wet" with dew, the person she meets fades away to nothing; her fertile appearance is not enough to

save him (38). The mention of wetness is significant since water is the most significant symbol of fertility in keeping the land from drying up (Weston 26). Yet now water is powerless to return fertility to the landscape.

The fading narrator says, tragically, “I could not / Speak, and my eyes failed, I was neither / Living nor dead, and I knew nothing” (38-40). The passage follows Thomas Kyd’s *The Spanish Tragedy*, after the man Hieronimo has had a transforming vision (Drain 36). The lines “I was neither / Living nor dead” also echo a paralyzed Dante Alighieri in Canto XXXIV of the *Inferno* when the narrator caught sight of Satan frozen in the middle of Hell (*Inferno* XXXIV.28-9; see also Saha 31). Dante, we should note, was a very strong influence on Eliot’s art and *The Divine Comedy* will become a critical context from which to understand the wasteland before Eliot is finished (Manganiello 40-83). This wasteland is paralyzing, drying up rivers in the desert. Like the Fisher King of myth, humanity has dried up though still not dead (Weston 114). Our narrating voice will follow the Fisher King in becoming a monument to isolation and desolation. He will find no answers but hollow silences.

So then, can he (and, by extension, humanity) be saved? Obviously the simple return of normalcy to the region with springtime is not enough to shake off the deadness trapping the land. The hyacinth girl as “fertility-goddess” has not been able to restore nature. On a more personal level for Eliot, Europe may have escaped the Great War, but society has not yet healed from the lingering effects. To find answers we have been “Looking into the heart of light,” but all we have found is “the silence,” and with it an agonizing pile of unanswered questions (Eliot 41). Despite the insights Dante’s visions might have offered, the line from Wagner cuts off the scene hopelessly—reminding us that everything remains dead and “empty” (Eliot 42). Old answers fail to explain the

present state of drought, and we will have to look further to find the source of the Fisher King's impotency. Yet Dante may give us some hope at last. We know the *Inferno* was simply the first step on the ladder to *Paradiso*. Perhaps *The Waste Land's* silence and paralysis will be likewise escapable, somehow.

### Section Three (ll. 43-59): The Famous Clairvoyante and the Fisher King

The poem's tone has been dire to this point, with little in the way of comedy except for dark ironies. Yet in this third stanza of "The Burial of the Dead," Eliot chooses to inject some humor into *The Waste Land* in the figure of Madame Sosostris. Her name is adapted from Aldous Huxley's *Crome Yellow*, where a character disguises herself as "Sesostris, the Sorceress of Ecbatana" and tells fortunes to unwitting dupes at a carnival (Diemert 175). Such a name undermines the credibility of our "famous clairvoyante" (43). Even her title is ironic since, presumably, a *truly* "famous" fortune-teller need not be called as such. The comedy is heightened by line 44 which relates wryly that Madame Sosostris "Had a bad cold, nevertheless [she] / Is known to be the wisest woman in Europe, / With a wicked pack of cards" (44-6). This voice is different from the others we've heard so far, with the comic mention of a bad head cold dispelling the air of authority such a woman would base her business upon. The character herself is likely based on sundry mystics and occultists Eliot actually met (see Childs 91). After the first pair of stanzas the seriousness has been consciously broken up, giving us the first character in the poem that is laughable in description. If a cold could challenge the accuracy of her prescience, our oracle sounds about as useful in prophecy as Sesostris the Sorceress.

The suggestion that she is "known to be the wisest woman in Europe" smacks of comically-overarching advertising. In fact, this woman is the spiritual descendent of the Sibyl from the poem's epigram, a comic character who becomes a foil to the tragic Sibyl (Brooker and Bentley 77). Irony notwithstanding, that pause at the end of line 45 before the modification "with a wicked pack of cards" leaves us a bit uncomfortable. The line breaks between 45 and 46 in such a way as to leave two antithetical statements extant: the

lines read both that this is the wisest woman in Europe and that she is the best tarot reader in Europe. Ironically, these are extremely contradictory notions that would seem to cancel each other. Yet the lines presumably equate capriciousness fortune-telling with empirical scientific reasoning. In so doing, Eliot is debunking a myth that says objective knowledge will bring salvation from ignorance and emptiness. Eliot is writing of a Europe that has been broken and sunken to a wasteland. No amount of knowledge or logic has saved the modern world from self-destructing, and thus the scientist in his laboratory has no more knowledge of the universe than does an actor-clairvoyant.

The “wicked pack of cards” is itself humorous, pointed at fears of the occult, thus verifying their usefulness among adherents and antagonists to fortune-telling. Jessie Weston’s *From Ritual to Romance*, a book heavily influencing *The Waste Land*, strongly connects the tarot with ancient fertility rituals instead of placing it exclusively within the realm of prophecy (Foster 115). Ancient tarot decks can be found originating in ancient Egypt and China with similar numbers and symbols (Weston 78), and these likely made their way to Europe through the nomadic Roma peoples, who are still associated with such occult practices. Thus the Egyptian-sounding name Sosostriis and her image of the carnival Gypsy fortune-teller fit appear perhaps to fit with the tarot’s origins (Weston 79). The cards have Eastern roots in their figures and symbols; however, the four suits are also conspicuously found in British Grail legends, among other sources (see Matthews and Matthews 91-2).

The individual suits all have specific connotations. The tarot cup represents the Holy Grail itself, and corresponds to the modern suit of hearts (perhaps due to the myth of Christ’s blood falling into the Grail under the cross). The lance (or stave) corresponds to our suit of diamonds, and might have also been the wand or scepter; it is also tied to the

Grail Lance, that pierced Jesus' side while he hung on the cross (Matthews and Matthews 85). The swords suit would later become the spades, but one of the "Hallows" or magical items in the Fisher King myth is also the broken sword of a Wounded King that Gawain or Perceval must mend to resurrect him (Matthews and Matthews 86). Finally, the fourth suit, the Dish (or Coin, Pentangle, Circle) transformed strangely into the modern clubs suit, seems to have less-specific sources (Weston 77). As Weston points out, these two dominant symbols are also tied to fertility imagery, with the phallic and vaginal connotations of lance/sword and cup/grail. In fact, Arthurian legend usually paired imagery of a young male holding a lance alongside a maiden carrying the Grail, further emphasizing the connections (Weston 75-6). Traditionally, a tarot reader was more a predictor of seasonal changes and fertility than of an individual's future.

Sosostris begins our tarot reading and, not surprisingly, it appears to be a poor fortune. She says, "Here... / Is your card, the drowned Phoenician Sailor" (46-7). Strange, though, is the next line, encapsulated in parentheses: Eliot's narrator thinks to himself, "(Those are pearls that were his eyes....)" (48). He references William Shakespeare's *The Tempest* when Ariel sings falsely to Ferdinand that his father is dead. Ariel speaks of the body transforming within the waters through the "drowning," singing,

"Full fathom five thy father lies;  
Of his bones are coral made;  
Those are pearls that were his eyes;  
Nothing of him that doth fade  
But doth suffer a sea change  
Into something rich and strange." (*The Tempest* I.ii.397-402)

Despite that those shipwrecked in *The Tempest* all actually survive, there are ominous

overtones for the tarot reading through the connection. This speaks to a burial that may not lead to resurrection. Even though his father is not actually dead, Ferdinand believes he is until he sees him later and the Duke occupies a sort of death-in-life in the meantime. The ambiguous nature of this reading is disconcerting. Madame Sosotris in *The Waste Land* is predicting her client's drowning, and by foretelling such an end she may be blithely dooming him to a similar fate as a sort of living dead man. We would do well to heed Ariel's warning (Tamplin 365). This death-in-life situation is a fitting position for humanity in the wasteland.

The Phoenician sailor card has further connections to ancient ritual besides the tarot. Water resources are essential for life and civilization, and, as such, many ancient cultures connected water with deities. Furthermore, sacrificing creatures (or even humans) might be required (symbolically or otherwise) in order to appease the gods and release the waters (Weston 26, 53). This is one of the first direct images of the Fisher King we find in *The Waste Land* (or the Wounded King, depending on the context), the impotent ruler of the wasteland. Having lost his youth and fertility, the old king must be replaced with a younger, vital heir in order to bring back the land's fecundity (Matthews and Matthews 164; Weston 119). This sort of "burial of the dead" ensures the arising of new life. In this context, our interpretation of the tarot reading alters. Instead of an accidental death, the Phoenician's drowning appears to have been planned, perhaps, as a means of recovering life in the wilderness. It becomes then a sacrificial image, either through the choice of a selfless, noble innocent, or because of a disturbing societal homicide. The fish reference also recalls Christianity, and associates the drowned sailor with Christ in his death and resurrection. Actually, this connection is less farfetched than it may appear, for there were early British legends of Christ and Joseph of Arimathea



(traditionally Jesus' uncle) traveling to Britain and bringing the Grail there (Matthews and Matthews 98-9). Somehow a sacrifice must occur to restore the landscape. There is much at stake in the first card Sosostris draws.

This section carries other meanings as well. Line 48 has something very odd about it: it ends, within parentheses, with "Look!" though this is not found in Ariel's words from *The Tempest*. Here the narrator averts attention from the Phoenician Sailor card to the next one, the Belladonna, though having it written within parentheses is odd. Who is speaking from within the parentheses? The narrator appears to be directing his own thoughts, attempting to distract himself from the unpleasant first reading that dooms him.

The carnival atmosphere of this scene clashes with the gravity of the words Sosostris speaks. There is something enchanting about the whole scene that tries to defy the power of Madame Sosostris' pronouncement. Bright colors and strange incantations seem to swirl in the background and produce a distracting effect. Further, the scene begins to fill with its own music; the signal to "Look!" creates a group of alliterative *l*-sounds in lines 48-50: "Look! ... / ...Belladonna, the Lady... / the lady of situations." This patch of consonance follows up the string of strong *w*-sounds in lines 45-6, where we heard that Sosostris was "known to be the wisest woman in Europe, / With a wicked pack of cards." The two strong groups of alliterations have an incantatory effect; we can hear the clairvoyant's sing-song voice selling her services as sooth. The words form a mystical milieu engulfing the whole scene—but it is a put-on sort of mysticism, a façade hiding something. Eliot at last leaves us with two strong impressions: the first is an image of people acting like amused children, playing at dangers they do not comprehend. The second is that they have unwittingly opened Pandora's Box. Instead of a hopeful fortune for the wasteland, all we have is the unfortunate drowned sailor.

Our second card drawn is Belladonna, the so-called “Lady of the Rocks, / The lady of situations” (49-50). She seems the definitive *femme fatale*. Belladonna carries myriad meanings: first it refers to a poisonous plant. Paradoxically, this nightshade is also a medicine, and a cosmetic (hence its Italian name meaning “beautiful lady”). Added to these inherent meanings, Eliot connects her to the “Lady of the Rocks” referencing Leonardo da Vinci’s painting, *Madonna of the Rocks* that depicts Mary watching as the child Jesus blesses the child John the Baptist. The Virgin Mary, as idealized mother figure, does not readily come to mind as a “lady of situations.” However, these images—the holy virgin and the dishonest whore—represent two of the oldest socially-constructed roles for women. Eliot conflates them into one in these lines, mixing in a bit of irony about the ridiculous nature of such classifications. In doing so he connects fertility with barrenness and virtue with malevolence. Interestingly, in an ancient Indian myth, the chaste hero Rishyaçringa is seduced by a figure like our Belladonna, and thus the drought-stricken land was restored to fertility (Weston 30). This woman will reappear in many forms throughout *The Waste Land*, and her role here is critical to escaping the drought.

Eliot’s “Lady of the Rocks” refers to the rocks in the background of da Vinci’s painting, rocks that are as ambiguous as Eliot’s Belladonna. Rocks are stabilizing forces (as in Christ’s parable of the wise and foolish builders), and they are meant to be immobile foundations. Yet, simultaneously, rocks are dangerous, able to crush people or shipwreck vessels, (like Prospero’s in *The Tempest*). Although the red rocks of the desert provide shade amidst the burning sands, they are also harbingers of mortality (Eliot 24, 30). Rocks here also recall Marie’s mountains from the first stanza, providing safety and “freedom” in their shadow (17). This is especially interesting since the real Marie, the countess Eliot met in Germany, believed in the efficacy of fortune-telling cards (Kermode

97). The profusion of feminine voices early in *The Waste Land* is interesting, and it is noteworthy that Marie, the hyacinth girl, and Madame Sosostris are not easily classified into stereotypical female roles within Eliot's world. He is not looking to propagate stereotypes; the artist has bigger aims than that.

The second half of the third stanza continues Sosostris' soothsaying in similar fashion. In his notes on *The Waste Land*, Eliot explains that he made his tarot pack more to suit the needs of the poem than to duplicate a real deck. Nevertheless, the next card turned over by Sosostris in line 51, "the man with three staves," is an authentic card, though Eliot says he "arbitrarily" chose it as his image of the Fisher King ("Notes on *The Waste Land*" 71). The Fisher King derives from Arthurian legend as well as Celtic, Egyptian, and other mythologies in surprisingly similar form. It refers to a ruler who has been wounded somehow, in battle or possibly otherwise, and the wound (usually in the legs or groin) has rendered the king sterile (Matthews and Matthews 164). The "dolorous blow" that wounded him removes his ability to govern and renders him to the status of invalid. He is now either bedridden or limited to performing some meaningless task such as fishing. With the king's decline, so goes the nation; the Fisher King's infertility extends to the landscape. His wounding causes drought and blight and turns fertile regions into a wasteland until someone can reverse the situation. Traditionally, some young knight (Perceval or Gawain) must save the king either by some acquisition of or use of the Holy Grail (perhaps by merely identifying it), or through ritually sacrificing the old king and replacing him with a younger one (Weston 53, 116, 121).

The third card Sosostris holds up, the three of staves, depicts a man looking off into the distance across a sea to mountains. Yearning for escape, he remains trapped on the sand where he stands. The symbolism is apparent: the Fisher King's wounds doom the

once-great warrior to a life of banal fishing. The phallic lances he once fought with have now accumulated and rusted in the absence of combat. They also represent scepters that he no longer rules with adequately. The triad also connotes the Holy Trinity, as sacred lances that are useless without the blood in the Grail (Matthews and Matthews 85). The king's poles may also symbolize past, present, and future. They recall his heroics long since gone, and they also show his present stasis, but they also hint at the potential for future life, should any knight come to save him. Like the first card and the drowning Phoenician, the Man with Three Staves reminds us that the Wounded King's rebirth is fundamental to remaking the landscape (Weston 55, 59-60).

Hard on the heels of the Three of Staves is "[T]he Wheel" of Fortune, the fourth card Sosostris draws (Eliot 51). Further elements of the human condition are the caprices of fate and fortune; just as a heroic king was given power and glory once upon a time, they can just as easily be taken away. But there is a universality implied by the concept of the wheel, as well. In lacking knowledge of the future (despite Madame Sosostris' best efforts) everyone is subject to Fate's decrees, and there is a community in this. Being human means being subject to forces beyond one's control, and it binds everyone—peasant or king—to the same essential destiny. Additionally, wheels are constantly spinning; however dark the present, things may reverse at any moment. There is as much a sense of hope engendered by The Wheel as there is consternation.

Card number five is "the one-eyed merchant" with its own sinister connotations. The merchant, like the sailor, will become a dominant male character type in the poem, and this character with one eye (perhaps with an eye patch or staring at us sideways) seems particularly crooked. Merchants like this one (the Phoenicians especially were renowned traders) spread ancient fertility rituals throughout the Mediterranean (Weston

37, 43). The Greco-Phoenician Adonis cult became especially widespread. Adonis was a beautiful youth who was killed by a wild boar sent by Artemis. Yet he was thought to be resurrected from Hades every year for a short while in the form of the blood-red anemone flower (Ovid X.709-39). For the Phoenicians Adonis represented the resurrecting nature of the earth more directly than Demeter, the major goddess of the earth. The Adonis cult was tied also to the worship of Tammuz, its forebear, and both were seen as very important in guaranteeing the fertility of the land (see Weston 34-47). These Life Cults recreated scenes of death, burial, and resurrection in order to keep the land fertile. Coupling these nature cults to an exchange of culture and trade universalizes the figure (in bringing the knowledge to others), but it seems to be a bit of a shady deal. The one-eyed merchant is another sort of clairvoyant, exchanging ritual for reward.

The next card, noticeably blank, is a bad omen says Madame Sosostris. What she is “forbidden to see” feels menacing (Eliot 54); if our spiritual guide cannot understand it, how will we manage? This hidden knowledge coincides with the mystery cults the Merchant is spreading (Weston 41, 143). There is an occult nature to the burden of knowledge he bears, making us all the more uneasy about Sosostris’ revelations. On the other face of the card is the outcome of the quest, one that cannot be known until later.

Interestingly, the seventh card Sosostris mentions in this passage is the “Hanged Man” in line 55, but it does not actually appear in the deck. Eliot wrote in his “Notes on *The Waste Land*” that “The Hanged Man, a member of the traditional [tarot] pack, fits my purpose in two ways: because he is associated in my mind with the Hanged God of [Sir James G.] Frazer, and because I associate him with the hooded figure in... Part V” (Kermode 99). The Hanged Man will actually make an appearance later in the poem, suggesting the efficacy (or lack thereof) in Sosostris’ foretelling. Frazer’s *The Golden*

*Bough* deals with many of the fertility ritual connections across cultures that Weston and Eliot would draw from in their respective works. Frazer's "Hanged God" refers to the ritual hanging of an effigy representing Carnival, described at length in *The Golden Bough*. The tarot card for the Hanged Man matches up with this Hanged God as it depicts a man hanging upside-down on a Tau (T-shaped) cross (Abrams 2371). The connections to Christ are unmistakable, though the inversion of the figure seems unusual. It actually fits within the Christ image, as the figure is not actually dead but instead lies in stasis as he waits patiently until the time is right to begin again. As such, this card represents sacrifice and the shedding of blood, as well as resurrection. It is also associated with spring, which should come as no surprise.

But Madame Sosostris does not find this card in her reading. Does that indicate there is no resurrection for the wasteland? The Phoenician sailor has gone overboard and drowned, beginning the renewal ritual, but if there is no Hanged Man how can the wasteland be resurrected? Ignoring the question, Sosostris looks up from the cards finally and says calmly, "Fear death by water" (55). We should say so, having seen the fate of the Phoenician sailor. Notably, tarot readings were originally a means of avoiding natural disasters such as floods, and the allusion here is ironic (Brooks 91). Death has already claimed one victim (the sailor will be seen again in Part IV) and now it appears that the rituals are not working. The life that was supposed to arise from a sacrificial death is nowhere to be found. Such a death appears now to be in vain, and Sosostris indicates that we will need help from another quarter than the old rituals; something or someone new will need to come upon the scene in order to resurrect the wilderness. Beyond this is a further aspect in this warning, advising the characters to avoid "passional" water or temptation, suggests Tamplin, a helpful warning that will go unheeded by the denizens of

*The Waste Land* in the next two parts of the poem (364). The human relationships in the poem will be largely based upon predation and temptation, and this advice will become as important as avoiding deep water.

The cards have turned too disturbing for our tastes and perhaps for our clairvoyant's as well. As such, she changes her repertoire, and says next, "I see crowds of people walking around in a ring" (56). This last glimmer of prophecy is comically, generically predictable from a second-rate clairvoyant. However these "crowds" will become very important in the poem, particularly in the final part. The "ring" of people will also become representative of urbanity and will appear in the fourth stanza of "The Burial of the Dead" as well. Sosostris concludes with a bit of small talk, capping the mildly-comic nature of this section with a little more lightness. She admonishes her visitor, "If you see dear Mrs. Equitone, / Tell her I bring the horoscope myself: / One must be so careful these days" (57-9), for all the world sounding like a little old lady who has stayed out drinking tea too late. Yet there remains a significant amount of danger and fear in her prophecies that does not dissolve with the conversation (Diemert 176). Somehow the carnival oracle with "a bad cold" has been transformed into a seer of the highest degree for a moment, and her words will soon enough prove their worth.

Once again, a close look at the language will further enlighten the scene. The name Sosostris mentions, "Mrs. Equitone," connotes something like "equivocating sounds." It is an adequate name for a carnival clairvoyant, who must only produce the right "sounds" to make a living. Sosostris in contrast has made sounds that are unpleasant, but probably true. Looking at other "equal sounds" brings us to lines 51-9, which share their own similar sounds. Having made a poetry of prosy lines for some time, Eliot returns to an Old English method of poetry, basing lines around a definite number of

accented syllables (see Barry). Even though the lines themselves range in length from eight to twelve syllables, each carries precisely six accented syllables (with the exception of line 55, although this is the central line in both position and importance). Harkening back to ancient Anglo-Saxon arts seems to create a worthy theater for discussing the ancient and arcane nature of soothsaying and occult rituals. Six is hardly an accidental number, too, in numerological terms. Six is both a human number (created as they were on the sixth day, in Genesis) and the devil's number (in triplicate). It is an incomplete, unfinished number, lacking the seventh. The nine lines make three sets of three sixes forming an ominous trinity of devilry. It appears that the occult nature of Sosostri's reading is echoed in the lines themselves which are also ill omens.

Before moving on, we should say a word about Jessie Weston's *From Ritual to Romance*, which has been used already and will continue to be used to address further points of background material for *The Waste Land*. Weston's book has fallen in and out of favor over the past century, but as her research was so ingrained in Eliot's creation of the poem, her book will serve as a fine guide to mythos and fertility ritual (see Leon Surette's "*The Waste Land and Jessie Weston: A Reassessment*").

At any rate, the passage of fortune telling is another piece to the puzzle of Eliot's own psychology. While the speaker has had his fortunes told by Madame Sosostri, he has actually proceeded through a sort of confessional with the clairvoyant (Nänny 337). In asking to be told the future, he is really asking merely to be told about himself, in a sense, wondering what will become of him. And as we shall see, the good Madame indeed gives Eliot an accurate reading of what will come of the wasteland. Intriguingly, Madame Sosostri may be a depiction of the Medicine Man character of ancient fertility myths, and her "herbs" are her predictions of the future (Weston 101, 110). Her doctoring



involves peering into the mists of the future for a glimpse of what might aid the present. In many ways she remains in sharp contrast to the Sybil at the poem's opening. But no matter how silly she first appears, this prophetic woman is still one of very few characters in *The Waste Land* aware of their surroundings (McRae 205-6). Yet since this doctor (ironically the "wisest woman in Europe") has few helpful prescriptions, we are still forced to look elsewhere for help. The wounded Fisher King has appeared, but his resurrection seems far off at this point. We will have to wait to see how the fortunes unfold. However, one card still remains unaccounted for—the one Sosostris was "forbidden to see." Having one card left unturned leaves the door open for a salvific figure, The Hanged God-Man, to show, if he ever does.

## Section Four (ll. 60-76): Dante in London

“Unreal City” (Eliot 60); with two words, the atmosphere of our comic clairvoyant has shattered. We have been handed a new, haunted narrator inflecting in four short syllables the dreadfulness of urban decadence. Fittingly, the terse introduction arrives in trochaic dimeter, one of the most unusual meters; there is something unnatural, automated, inhuman about this city. Eliot paints a city scene from the wasteland:

Unreal City,  
 Under the brown fog of a winter dawn,  
 A crowd flowed over London Bridge, so many,  
 I had not thought death had undone so many. (60-3)

Although the identification of “London Bridge” names the city, as far as the poem is concerned we have entered “Unreal City,” a strange construction of modern times. With its hazy “fog” and strange “flowing” crowds, Unreal City is a better description for this tumultuous realm of confusion than cheery Londontown; this is a beast from an urban nightmare. These opening lines borrow the French poet Charles Baudelaire’s “Les Sept Viellards” (The Seven Old Men). The lines Eliot borrows from Baudelaire translate to: “Teeming city, full of dreams, where in broad / Daylight the specter grips the passer-by!” (North 43-5). Baudelaire’s poetry, among other French symbolists, was a very strong early influence on Eliot’s work, and the latter would turn to its classicism and orthodoxy continually for inspiration (Ingelbien 43-4). Here it lends itself aptly to the scene Eliot envisions, where the nightmares do not dispel with waking.

Somehow we have gone back—or perhaps forward—in time to another season; the “winter dawn” of line 61 has created the fog in what was supposed to be springtime. Here the living dead flow over the bridge like the river they are crossing (Eliot 62). The

depiction of water is interesting in our wasteland-parched context, but it does not give life. Crowds walk across the river on manmade bridges, having no contact with the actual river except in the dirty “brown fog.” Besides, in winter time the waters will be icy, and there are no crops to water anyway. Madame Sosostris was right in predicting the moving rings of people, walking and going nowhere; the image of circularity and effort that arrives at nothing depicts a kind of hell on earth (Charity 149). Their movements are ponderous, dolorous, signified in line 62 with the repeated *o*-sounds: “A crowd flowed over London Bridge, so many.” Assonance makes their steps even heavier. They are soldiers marching nowhere, fighting a Pyrrhic battle against an unknown aggressor.

Eliot recalls Dante’s *Inferno* several times in this third stanza. The first reference is in lines 62-3, alluding to the third canto of the *Inferno* when Dante follows Virgil to the gates of Hell. Dante writes that he saw “...a train / Of souls, so long that I would not have thought / Death had undone so many” (*Inferno* III.46-8). Eliot likens the crowds of London to the hordes of damned souls running around Hell’s vestibule. In Dante, these are the souls of the opportunists and neutrals, people who stood for nothing in life and sought only personal gain (*Inferno* III; see Lowe 330). This amounts to a harsh criticism of the great city of his time, and of a modern culture valuing economics over ethics. Eliot’s crowd flows “over London Bridge,” likening the Thames, the river defining London, to the River Acheron, the entrance into Hell proper. This is hardly a ringing endorsement. Noteworthy also are the repercussions of such comparisons. Dante’s *Inferno* is the home of eternal poetic justice; that is, everyone in Hell is punished for their sins according to the sins they committed. For example, since our opportunists outside Hell never followed specific principles in life, in death they are not even allowed in Hell and are forced to chase after an ever-moving banner just as they chased empty gains on

earth. This Dantean backdrop sets Eliot's tone for his new vision of the "Unreal City."

However, the matter is further complicated by another allusion to Dante. Eliot's next line relates that "Sighs, short and infrequent, were exhaled" (64). This references the next canto of the *Inferno* when Dante describes the inhabitants of the First Circle of Hell, *Limbo*. Dante writes, "...Here we encountered / No laments that we could hear—except for sighs / That trembled the timeless air..." (*Inferno* IV.19-21). Though Dante's *Limbo*—the final resting place for the virtuous who died outside of Christ's salvation—is not a place of suffering, it still carries a sense of eternal loss. Homer, Virgil, and the others who dwell here do not shed tears of pain like the sinners in the other circles, but they still offer sorrowful "sighs." They forever understand the loss of being excluded from Heaven. Likewise, the empty people in the hellish, foggy Unreal City do not seem to be in pain, but in their blankness he recognizes their spiritual drought. Eliot owes a debt to Baudelaire here in his depictions of the city of London "urban spectrality" (Ingelbien 44-5); these masses are essentially an army of the living dead. Worse, the soulless lives they inhabit can lead only to a state of eternal emptiness. This train of God-fearing Anglicans has been confined to an earthly hell. The wasteland is not simply made up of physical infertility but of spiritual barrenness as well.

The final reference to the *Inferno* in the stanza comes in the next line when the narrator notes that "...each man fixed his eyes before his feet. / Flowed up the hill and down..." (Eliot 65-6). Our narrator refers to the last canto of *Inferno* when Dante enters Cocytus—the hole in the center of the earth where humans are frozen in ice alongside Satan for their rebellions against God and others. Dante sees the icebound traitors with

...some lying prone,

And some erect, some with the head toward us,

And others with the bottoms of the feet;

Another like a bow, bent feet to face. (*Inferno* XXXIV.15-8)

With eyes “fixed” upon feet, both Eliot and Dante describe a posture of shame. The marching Londoners and Hell’s traitors have this in common, a shameful consciousness of their own depravity. They study their feet rather than meeting another’s eyes. It is easier to march in step than to explore each other’s empty souls. The marchers, though moving “up the hill and down King William Street” (Eliot 66), are really as trapped and isolated as their Dantean counterparts.

By setting up his countrymen in comparison to Dante, Eliot adds insult to injury. He says that his contemporary world has created a hell for itself in modernity, but to make matters worse, they knew it all along. Though aware of the loss of personality and responsibility brought on by industrialization, none of these walking figures was brave enough to identify the situation as wrong. In their silence, these people have added to the wasteland’s power; they have succumbed to a crumbling empire of decadence, fully realizing it. Eliot is not alone in the wasteland, but he is alone in identifying it as such. His crowd marches from London Bridge up King William Street to St. Mary Woolnoth Church, not far north of the bridge. This church is associated with the antislavery advocates William Wilberforce and John Newton (the former as parishioner, the latter as pastor). Ironically, these men marching over the bridge are marching toward a church of freedom, but they would not yet be freed themselves. Dante placed on the gates of Hell the admonishment: “Abandon all hope, you who enter here” (*Inferno* III.7). That sign should be placed on the gates of Unreal City, too.

The tolling church bells echo the marching of the crowd. St. Mary Woolnoth stands in the middle of London’s financial sector, lending it a sort of corruption by

association; it was also near Eliot's workplace (Kermode 99). The "dead sound on the final stroke of nine" from line 68 refers to the sound of emptiness Eliot would listen to in the morning after everyone had entered offices and begun to work, leaving the streets deadly silent. Working has become a "dead-end job," so to speak; instead of tilling fields and raising crops, the modern farmer plants investments and cultivates interest. This vision of human labor is empty of personal significance, with no discernible produce beyond meaningless currency. Work ought to be noisy, dirty, sweaty, Eliot suggests, full of bucolic, familial joys. A city of unbearable silence has replaced the country pasture.

We will return to the language itself to get better handle on the scene. To this point (line 68), the stanza has carried a steady rhythm, matching the marchers pace for pace. The "title" of this section, "Unreal City" (60), is trochaic; but after that the next eight lines, the first half of this stanza, are basically iambic pentameter—the longest continuation of conventional meter Eliot has yet used. This coincides with the banality of the London crowd whose lives are nothing if not conventional, practical, and familiar. Their city is organized and regulated, if nothing else, and the meter demonstrates that; the bells keep the time, and the narration falls in line alongside. But after the final stroke of nine the iambic pentameter breaks down as the silence echoes. Into this silence, the narrator breaks in by saying, "There I saw one I knew, and stopped him, crying 'Stetson!'" (69). With the sighting of someone known to the narrator, dialog reappears and the tale shifts from a general indifference to an immediate urgency. The narrator wants to fill the silence, the lost rhythm, with something, and with relief he identifies his friend Stetson who has also become a prototypical member of London's bourgeois.

Ironically, the "interaction" the narrator has with Stetson is totally one-sided; Stetson's silence gives the darkly-comic impression that the narrator has assumed a

friendship that is hardly mutual. Having gotten Stetson's attention, the narrator exclaims, "You who were with me in the ships at Mylae!" (70). He references the First Punic War, when the naval forces of Carthage and Rome met at the Battle of Mylae, in the third century B.C. The wars were fought for regional predominance and because of economic interests, and one might argue that these ancient wars were thus a direct ancestor to the modern world wars. Eliot's speaker is presumably referring to having fought alongside Stetson in World War I. The "Mylae" anachronism is making the one-sided conversation more unreal and dreamlike. But there is an essential connection here after all, going back to our tarot reading: the Carthaginian settlements on the coast of the Mediterranean were founded by Phoenician traders. Madame Sosostris' first card was the "drowned Phoenician sailor" who has suddenly turned up in London (47). The anachronism serves to tie the past to the present, making two wars into one and the same. Sosostris is already proving her worth: Stetson and his fellow marchers is one of the living dead in Unreal City. Though he drowned millennia ago he exists now zombie-like, unable to recognize any comrades, and unable to find rest in the foggy dreams of Unreal City.

After this realization, the scene alters. In lines 71-5, iambic pentameter returns again as the speaker goes from registering surprise to falling back into conventionality, in the shape of small talk. But this is some strange small talk. The narrator asks, "That corpse you planted last year in your garden, / 'Has it begun to sprout? Will it bloom this year? / 'Or has the sudden frost disturbed its bed?'" (71-3). Our first instinct is revulsion at the thought of corpses in the backyard. But the corpses here are symbolic of the fertility cults that required the death and burial of one figure in order to fertilize the land. Here the Fisher King and the Hanged Man return to mind with their deaths intended to recover the land and reinvent life for another generation. But we have no answers yet, since Stetson

ignores the narrator's questions; perhaps the harvest is delayed. We should recall that Sosostris never found the Hanged Man in the deck, only the Man with Three Staves. Thus we have a Wounded King on our hands in this springtime without a life-bringing replacement; perhaps the wasteland will never yield new life.

The scene is inextricably connected to Christian imagery, specifically, which will become most apparent in "What the Thunder Said." Christ (essentially Frazer's "Hanged God") was also buried in such a "garden," and this context seems to be putting hope for resurrection upon shaky ground (Spear 283-5). The narrator seems to slip again into an anachronistic memory, making a reference to Cornelia's dirge in Act V of John Webster's *The White Devil*. Webster's tragedy has Cornelia musing on death as she sings, "But keep the wolf far hence that's foe to men / For with his nails he'll dig them up again" (V.iv.118-9). Graves are a protective place for the dead, and she advises protecting them from animals that would unearth the corpses. The purpose of this notion is clear: if the dead are not allowed to rest in peace, they cannot fertilize a future harvest. Interesting, however, is that Eliot adapts the quote to his purposes by referencing dogs in place of wolves, and calling it a "friend" instead of a "foe." By digging up the buried Fisher King, Eliot perhaps says the "friendly" creature is doing the land a favor by ending the cycle of death and rebirth. Though in his admonishments to "keep the Dog far hence" it is not clear that our narrator actually *wants* such grave-robbing to occur (74).

Using "dog" instead of "wolf" in Eliot's version further complicates matters. "Dog" is of course "God" spelled backwards, emphasized by the capitalizing of "Dog" in the middle of line 74. The "Dog" also makes reference to Anubis, the Egyptian god with a dog's head who symbolically buries the fertility god Osiris to ensure a new crop—another figuring of the Fisher King (Smith *The Waste Land* 98). Further, the movements of the



“Dog Star” Sirius told Egyptians when the Nile waters would rise and fall, and further connect this dog with the cycles of seasonal death and rebirth. The image is becoming more complicated: can we justify burying the past in hopes of finding a fertile future, or should we unearth the buried instead condemning them to death in vain (Frazier 185-6)? The language remains illusive and tonally strange, surrounding a character driven half-mad in his desire to make connections in this sea of foginess. Amidst the confusion we realize that this stillborn land may not be able to reanimate its corpses.

In the final line of Part I, the narrator’s voice rises as he speaks his last words. He yells at Stetson, ““You! hypocrite lecteur!—mon semblable,—mon frère!”” (76). The French is from Baudelaire’s preface to *The Flowers of Evil*, translating as “Hypocrite reader! [M]y likeness, my brother!” (Kermode 100). Our man sees an image of himself in the blank expression of his comrade, and it terrifies him. Once upon a time they fought side-by-side at “Mylae,” and now Stetson has forgotten him completely, engrossed in his own business. The speaker cries out here to frantically snap Stetson out of his trance, to coax one word of recognition from him. But he cannot, and he finally gives up in despair. Stetson is nothing more than a living ghost now. They share a common death-in-life with each walking alone through his own dreams, watching the time and distance of memories pass from the ships at Carthage to the Unreal City. April it appears, truly is the cruelest month, and with the opening Part of *The Waste Land*, it appears there is a long way to go toward finding resurrection. Spring is turning to summer, but there is still no harvest in sight.

## Part II: "A Game of Chess"

The poem here changes with the season. A spring without rebirth has led to a summer without warmth. Here the backgrounds are important, as they were in Part I; the dominant Greek element here is air, associated with heat and wetness, an element that brings passion and lust without communication or love. The couples of "A Game of Chess" will embody this theme, since none of the individuals here can manage to communicate with their partners in any meaningful way. The opulent settings become a burial chamber for any sense of real, positive love between individuals, with the rape of Philomela becoming the dominant motif. Matters of life and death become distilled to loud barroom conversations, as all the characters only seek their own goals without caring for anyone else.

This summer without love is populated by faceless, nameless figures, led by the figure of Lil. Whatever fertility might have existed within her is offset by the listless, loveless parties surrounding her. Perceval, the knight searching for the Holy Grail, makes his first "appearance" here. His presence connects the Arthurian search for the Grail (to heal the Fisher King) and for water (to revive the wasteland) to the quest for restoring meaningful human relationships.

Formally, Eliot's language throughout "A Game of Chess" will encompass both the upper class in its decadence and the commoners in their rottenness. Objects and artifacts will define these scenes in terms of language and aestheticism, and people who are wallpapered throughout this section will become successively less important. As the dry winds of summer blow on relentlessly, we realize that the wasteland is going to get worse before it gets better.

### Section One (ll. 77-110): The Burnished Cage

Having left the spring of change behind, we move to a summertime characterized by warmth and “heated exchanges” between characters drying out in the sun. Instead of fresh breezes, the air here is stuffy and confining, creating problematic relationships (Spanos 246-7). Taking another page from the past, Eliot recalls Thomas Middleton’s drama *A Game at Chess* in titling Part II of *The Waste Land*, preparing us for a contest between pairs of players. Middleton also uses the motif of a chess match in his tragedy *Women Beware Women*. In *A Game at Chess* Middleton stages a chess match representing political maneuvers between England and Spain regarding a marriage union between the “white rook” (English prince Charles) and the “black queen” (Spanish princess Infanta Maria). In *Women Beware Women* the game occurs between an unsuspecting mother and a duke’s procuress, with each move on the board being duplicated upstairs as the duke takes the girl to bed (Middleton II.2). Thus the innocuous-sounding title about playing a board game ironically becomes much more diabolical in nature. These “games” are about the politics of relationships, and they are not really games at all—at least not games anyone can win.

The first line of the second part is also adapted, borrowed from Shakespeare’s *Antony and Cleopatra*. In the second act of that play, Antony’s attendant Enobarbus describes the first moment his master saw Cleopatra, saying, “The barge she sat in, like a burnished throne, / Burned on the water...” (II.ii.201-2). Likewise, Eliot’s female figure in line 77 rests on a chair “like a burnished throne” that “glowed on the marble” (77-8). Eliot thus describes his own woman with two diverging channels of relationships: the first is political, the unemotional marriage of convenience, and the second is purely amorous, involving illicit seductions. The descriptions of Eliot’s woman also recall John Keats’

poem “*Lamia*,” a retelling of the Greek myth of the demon lady *Lamia* (Kermode 100). She would eat children and seduce young men for the same purpose, having lost her own children to *Hera*’s jealousy. Taken together, the female characterizations presented here are in line with *Sosotris*’ *Belladonna*, the type of the poisonous, beautiful, deadly lady. The appearance of such a seductress should not be unexpected; a woman cannibalizing babies is a strong indicator of infertility.

In lines 77-93 *Eliot* describes a scene of ornate lavishness, producing an image of great wealth and power but also depicting an unhealthy decadence. Upon entering the chamber the poet begins his descriptions precisely where our eyes would land. We see first a female figure sitting on a chair like a “throne,” shining atop polished marble floors reflecting back the scene before us. This reflection is critical to the characterization; *Eliot* tends to associate his poetic women with the rooms they occupy and the possessions surrounding them (Wright 42). This is perhaps less a criticism of the women themselves as it is an indictment of the society that could distill a person to merely her material surroundings. *Eliot* seems actually to be mocking the idea of having women only as a comfortable sort of window-dressing; he entwines this woman almost-literally with the room she inhabits (addressed on equal terms with the chair she sits upon), and the result is far from comfortable.

This considerable amount of complex, ambiguous language adds to the atmosphere of the scene. Different clauses of one long sentence are nested inside one another, producing a muddled, claustrophobic effect within the stuffy chamber. Her chair is like a “glowing” throne because of the chair’s actual design but also, simultaneously, because of the regal posture of the woman sitting upon it (77-8). Likewise we see “glass” supported by “standards wrought with fruited vines / From which a golden *Cupidon*

peeped out / (Another hid his eyes behind his wing)” (79-81). This must be a looking-“glass” standing on the floor, enhancing the duplication effect of seeing characteristics in both the woman and the room. We find in the next two lines that this mirror “Doubles the flames of a sevenbranched candelabra, / Reflecting light upon the table” (82-3). Thus, in the center of a chamber we have a woman sitting on her “throne” by a table as a lampstand shines and is reflected by an ornate mirror beside her.

The imagery is rich with meanings, beginning with the throne itself. Weiss calls the entire picture a “fused image” where the language and symbols become unified into one entity, and we can easily agree (45-6). The throne connotes an image of power, wealth, and perhaps even divinity, apparently-exalting our female figure. Based on the other objects in her room, she actually represents a type of fertility goddess. For one, her mirror is held up by supports fashioned like fertile vines, heavy with grapes. Secondly, the cherubic “golden Cupidon” symbolize fertility and amorousness as both babe and matchmaker. The images of youth, love, and harvest lend a playfulness to the objects in the scene, especially with the parenthetical note about the bashful cherub. But the tone does not match the rest of the setting. The mirror creates images only by doubling what already exists. It reflects, moonlike (with its female connotations), but does not add any light to the darkened room. The only real source of light is the seven-armed lampstand, traditionally associated with Judaism and the Temple. The seven arms of the lamp can be taken as a number of completeness, from the days of God’s creation. However, the “doubling” effect of the mirror gives a sense of attempting to surpass this completeness, making it a sort of apotheosis for our “fertility goddess” here.

Considering this woman as some sort of deity will become ironic, however, due to the decadent nature of her chambers. The “sun” from her candles does not shine down on

a bountiful, natural world. Her table is spread not with a rich cornucopia of the fruits of the earth, but instead presents a sampling of produce from *beneath* the earth. “The glitter of her jewels” reflects in the light, “[f]rom satin cases poured in rich profusion” (84-5). Precious stones occupy her thoughts, not life-giving foods; money and wealth have become superior to life and health. The verb “poured” makes these jewels out to be an ironically undrinkable elixir. Her mirror might be considered a sort of “cup” or “goblet” for the reflected scene to go along with the undrinkable “drinks,” forming a parody of the Holy Grail and the blood of Christ that would have given rebirth. This is not the Grail, however, as it holds nothing, and merely reflects false shadows. It is empty of Christ’s blood just as this room and its tawdry trappings are empty of life. The entire salon has become more of a burial chamber than a living room; feeding solely on luxury leads only to decay, and this room is a perfect image of the modern wasteland’s power to drain life. Exchanging stones for bread here is a reminder of Satan’s temptation of Christ: while in the desert the Devil encouraged the fasting Jesus to transform stones into bread. Our woman apparently made the same deal, only in reverse.

The section continues after the stanza break with a further description of the table and its contents, where “sustenance” is found in the spoils of wealth. Eliot tells us that in “vials of ivory and coloured glass / Unstoppered, lurked her strange synthetic perfumes, / Unguent, powdered, or liquid” (86-8). The containers are of the highest order, but they again have replaced the edible with the sensual. The smells of the table are not from the garden but are “strange synthetic” odors. Everything about this spread is alien—even the smells are an unnatural mix of chemical elements. Such is the table of our ironic “fertility queen.” Eliot’s language here is similarly dark, using verbs like “lurked” and adjectives like “strange” to describe the perfumes that “troubled, confused, / And drowned the sense

in odours” (88-9). The air in the chamber has turned to chloroform; these perfumes are not floral but instead have a muddling effect that confuses rather than heightens the senses. Here are the smells of a prostitute in the place of a fertility queen, prefiguring the false love that permeates the scene. Having one’s senses “drowned” by such smells recalls the Phoenician sailor’s card from Sosostri’s collection. False perfumes and charms destroy sensation and life by drowning the consciousness.

The “air” element becomes even more prominent within the sounds of the chamber. The lady’s fragrances rise,

...stirred by the air

That freshened from the window, these ascended

In fattening the prolonged candle-flames,

Flung their smoke into the laqueria. (89-92)

The alliteration of *f*-sounds makes a blowing sound that mimics the air in the chamber. This claustrophobic air becomes a parody of a natural breeze blowing outside the chamber. Nature is also being badly-mimicked by the other items in the room. For instance, the only “fruits” of the earth in the room are welded upon metal “standards,” and fresh air is converted into a noxious fragrance subduing the senses. We are in a burial chamber. Here the living dead make a grotesque parody of a great feast. Even the air is poisoned. “Unguents” and ointments that ought to prolong life are ineffectual (88). And the lamps will burn out after they have used up all of the oxygen. The “laqueria” is a paneled ceiling of the type mentioned in the *Aeneid* at the feast Dido threw for Aeneas. Interestingly, the word comes from the root meaning “noose;” thus the ceiling itself becomes symbolic of some betrayal (Rogers 106). The fire in these incessant lamps is the backdrop for treachery in Eliot’s scene as it was in the *Aeneid* (Virgil I.726). The closer

we get, the more foreboding the chamber becomes.

Upon reaching the ceiling, a change occurs in the language; the air can be seen as:

Stirring the pattern on the coffered ceiling,  
 Huge sea-wood fed with copper  
 Burned green and orange, framed by the coloured stone,  
 In which sad light a carved dolphin swam. (93-6)

Another consonance appears, following our wake of *f*-sounds above; here we find a repetition of *s*-sounds emphasizing the sibilant, serpentine action of the smoggy smells circling toward the ceiling. The effect created hints at treacherous relationships. Eliot has allowed the language of the chamber to give the air some tactile physical properties; he is supremely able to mix the solid and the ephemeral within one setting (Brooker and Bentley 103). Sunken panels in the ceiling heighten the sense of claustrophobia from the spreading fumes. The off-rhymes of “coffered” and “copper” seem to evoke a third word: coffin, making the room a sarcophagus. The aromas and airs manage—almost physically—to “stir” the perception of the pattern on the ceiling, creating a moving sea. Thus Eliot calls it “sea-wood,” having transformed the motionless panels (in our minds) into so much driftwood floating on the ocean. The “copper” reflects its orange lights through the green seas amidst a “coloured stone” and depicts an image like an upside-down lighthouse. Finally, the sea contains a lonely dolphin swimming in the “sad light” of the murky waters, much like the drowned sailor; the lonesome, indifferent sea above the chamber makes it that much colder and lonelier. Eliot’s intersection of elements—copper and stone to represent earth, dolphin and sea-wood to recall water, candle-flames and smoke to recollect fire, and curling smoke and perfume to depict air—has created a new world in the ceiling. Fittingly, the realm exists inverted.



The carved dolphin does seem out-of-place, representing ingenious animal life, as it does. However, the fact that the creature is actually carved into the structure makes it a lifeless piece of stone or wood, motionless and frozen. The creature may reference the dolphin in *Antony and Cleopatra* (Singh “A Shakespearean Source...” 25); Shakespeare’s vital, playful creature in his tragedy is used as a foil for the dead chamber’s inanimate carving. The lone dolphin is as sterile as the stone it inhabits; without a partner its lineage will die off. As with everything in this echo-chamber, the image is a mockery of a long-lost reality. Likewise, the image of the “sea-wood fed with copper” makes a parody of a food chain (94); such inanimate objects can hardly feed living creatures.

Though Eliot’s narrator has been a distant observer to this point, he apparently “slips” in line 96 and makes a more subjective, specific judgment than before. He calls the light that illuminates the dolphin “sad”—a less-objective observation than he has held himself until this point. Thus we catch a glimpse of the humanity of the characters within the caged chamber; at last the speaker is not an automaton, and he cannot help but use emotion to describe his emotionless surroundings. Perhaps our speaker’s careful consideration of the room’s objects may simply be a means of distracting himself from the sexual tensions permeating the enclosure—as will become more apparent in the next section (Easthope 336). But regardless of his motivations, the effect is powerful, at once pushing the reader to his side of thinking and averring his observations. This glimpse of emotion reminds us that humanity did not wish to end up in a wasteland, and finding itself there it cannot help but be morose and remorseful.

In line 97 the scene shifts as the narrator looks above the table to the “mantel” on the wall. With the candelabra described as the only source of light in the chamber, we can assume the fireplace is empty of flame and heat, like the room’s occupants. The hearth is

old and “antique,” probably as ornate as the chair, and above it rests a portrait of the mythical transformation of Philomel (97, 99). Line 98 describes this painting as a piece of perfect verisimilitude, “As though a window gave upon this sylvan scene.” That last image is found in Milton’s *Paradise Lost*. In Milton’s epic, when Satan hears of Eden he finds a bucolic place of:

Cedar, and pine, and fir, and branching palm,  
 A sylvan scene, and as the ranks ascend  
 Shade above shade, a woody theater  
 Of stateliest view. (IV.139-42)

It was the perfect “theater” for the next act of the human tragicomedy: the Fall. Likening Eliot’s chamber to the spoiling of paradise is apt; misplaced love undid the garden and ruined humanity in the process, and this room is another piece of wilderness.

The “window” on the wall portrays not Eden but the myths of the Greeks; Eliot’s portrait in the chamber shows “The change of Philomel, by the barbarous king / So rudely forced” (99-100). In Ovid’s *Metamorphoses*, the lustful King Tereus lures his wife Procne’s beautiful sister, Philomela, into coming to his kingdom, Thrace. Once she arrives he rapes her, and after she threatens to tell of his treachery he cuts her tongue out. Philomela is eventually set free by her sister, and the sisters kill Tereus’ child Itys and serve the boy to his father for a feast. When he realizes his deed, the enraged king chases the women and all three are transformed into birds; the king becomes a hoopoe (with a crown-like crest and a phallic, sword-like beak) and the women become nightingales (whose [tongue-less] bills sing at night) (Ovid VI.430-721). Eliot’s scene becomes defined by this image of the problems of power, lust, and silence.

Line 100 builds further upon the image. Having described the gruesomely realistic

painting, Eliot's narrator declares,

...[Y]et there the nightingale  
 Filled all the desert with inviolable voice  
 And still she cried, and still the world pursues,  
 "Jug Jug" to dirty ears. (100-3)

Eliot presents a sustained irony in this image revision. The painting shows the nightingale Philomela singing mightily in contrast to her previous unjust silencing. Philomela "fill[s] the desert" with music, shattering the silence to protest her terrible mistreatment by the man Tereus (101). Though the literal painting cannot speak, Philomela's image cries out volumes. Thus, "still she crie[s]" although once silenced (102). Whether or not her portrait or person can speak, now her voice is "inviolable," a dark pun recalling that, as a nightingale, her songs cannot be ceased (even by nightfall) nor can her person be violated. She may have been the picture of desire violently misused (Brooker 141), but she has managed to escape this and fly above her aggressors. The image of Philomela becomes an answer to Keats' "Ode on a Grecian Urn," upon which Keats saw painted gods eternally pursuing women a la Tereus and Philomela (Murphy 91-2). Yet she continues to outrun them, though "still the world pursues" (Eliot 102). Male aggressors may pursue her on the wing, but at last they can never stop her voice; she may not have peace from unjust pursuit but neither will she be subdued by it again.

Yet this hopeful tone is undone by the final lines. The narrator explains, "And still she cried,... / 'Jug Jug' to dirty ears" (102-3). The phrase "Jug-Jug" is the Elizabethan-era onomatopoeia for a nightingale's trilling. Even though her transformation into a nightingale has set Philomela free to speak, the "dirty ears" that hear her sad cries are stopped up, indifferent to the sound. There is no pity for the woman, with these "ears"

only noting the horrific violence of the king; Philomela's tragic figure becomes nothing more to them than a coarse sexual joke (Brooker 141). Sorrow is not a shared emotion in the wasteland, where the only real sentiments are the love of excess, violence, and solitude. Eliot's switch from past tense to present in saying, "And still the world pursues" addresses the contemporary reader, forcing people to take responsibility for their passive indifference (102). Philomela's inviolable song has been silenced here in the enthroned woman's chamber—and everyone is to blame.

But let us look at the language of the poem for a moment. So far "A Game of Chess" has had an unusual metrical style. Until line 103 ("Jug Jug...") the section has been essentially made up of iambic pentameter (though with plenty of variations). However, a sort of pattern emerges within this setup. The beginning of Part II (line 77) is made of perfect iambic pentameter, and so are the third and the fifth lines (79, 81). This pattern continues almost unbroken until line 103. Conversely, in the even lines the metrical effect is not as steady; for example, the second line (78) has only four feet that are not purely iambic, line 80 begins in iambic pentameter and ends in something else entirely, and line 82 has six metrical feet and switches between trochees and iambs. The odd lines are much more regular than the even until 103. The effect (likely formed after the first drafting of the poem) becomes something like a dueling dialogue, a sort of conversation between a formal voice and a sporadic tongue. Under the heading of "A Game of Chess" the section could be placed in this context, figuring a battle of wills on the chessboard with one side's dispassionate moves and the other's erratic choices. In this chamber we have the placid calmness of a woman counting her jewels, contrasted with the uneasy reporting of the narrator as his eyes jump around the chamber. After line 103 the atmosphere will become more chaotic; the game is already lost, and the player whose

machinations have yet been passive can now go for the coup de grâce.

Having finished with Philomela, the narrator moves to look over the last pieces of decoration in the room. Besides the painting, the speaker sees more artworks where “other withered stumps of time / Were told upon the walls; staring forms / Leaned out, leaning, hushing the room enclosed” (104-6). Eliot’s rich language contrasts with the scene as he relates a gallery solely concerned with the tragic tales of the past. The people in the paintings are “trees” cut off in their youth that have become “withered stumps of time,” metamorphosing from life into drought-forced death. As with Philomela’s portrait, a great irony hangs over these pictures; here “hushing” stories—meant to silence—are loudly “told upon the walls,” but to little effect. Their perpetual silence speaks volumes, managing to drain all other sounds from the room. The effect is like a room of frozen statues, all with eyes wide and mouths open and each with a story upon its lips to remain forever untold.

Line 107 returns us to the present with the sudden sound of “Footsteps shuffled on the stair,” ringing out ominously in the chamber’s impenetrable silence. The speaker’s attention returns to the seated woman whom we have nearly forgotten. He looks at her anew and describes her with alien imagery: “Under the firelight, under the brush, her hair / Spread out in fiery points / Glowed into words, then would be savagely still” (108-10). The image is reminiscent of the magical figure of the poet-seer found at the end of Samuel Taylor Coleridge’s “Kubla Kahn.” Coleridge wrote that those espying him would recognize his mystical strangeness and cry,

...Beware! Beware!

His flashing eyes, his floating hair!

Weave a circle round him thrice,

And close your eyes with holy dread,  
 For he on honey-dew hath fed,  
 And drunk the milk of Paradise. (Coleridge 49-54)

The woman in the chamber is thus equated with this mystical, nearly-divine nature of the poet-savant as well, with her hair glowing in the firelight as though it had burst into flame. Although her hair-brushing motions appear to be conventional—even, perhaps, sensual—this connection adds much more power to them. She brushes her hair carefully, as though arranging charms, and it “glow[s] into words” like the incantatory spells protecting the inspired poet. The narrator is beginning to see her as less and less human, as though she were a fairy taking on human form with malevolent intent, or Coleridge’s “demon-lover” (Coleridge 16). Even her stillness is “savage” to the speaker in its strangeness, and he fears her even though she seems to pose him no harm (Eliot 110). The breakdown of communication between the couple is based on misunderstanding and eternal silence. Whatever love they might have had is lost to fear and distance.

This part of “A Game of Chess” might be seen as a prefiguring of “What the Thunder Said,” recalling the story of Perceval’s (or Gawain’s, depending on the version) search for the castle of the Holy Grail. In that tale Perceval arrives at the strange Chapel Perilous (lit only by a large candelabrum—like our chamber) and inside finds a dead knight. After leaving and returning to the Fisher King, Perceval discovers the chapel was magical and has killed every knight who stays there. To remedy this, a gallant knight must destroy the magical Black Hand of Satan to break the spell (Weston 175-7). Until Perceval returns to the castle and fights the devilry (resisting all temptation, sensual and otherwise), the place remains haunted by the deadly fiend (Wilson 303). Similarly, this “Chamber Perilous” will remain untouched until a brave “knight errant” can reclaim it, as

we shall explore further in the final part of *The Waste Land*. In the meantime, the couple in the chamber remains trapped in their living deaths.

Yet though the Arthurian quest motif remains in the background, the matter at hand is much more personal. This is about reconciling human beings to each other once again, and this chamber highlights the tragic extinguishing of interaction and passion between individuals who ought to love each other. All of the images in this room have conspired to present the idea that love has been ousted by lust in the forms of seduction and concupiscence. From the ill-fated desire of Mark Antony for Cleopatra, to the diet of the vengeful Lamia, to the Adam and Eve's loss of Eden, to the rape of Philomela, to the cold hair-brushing of the silent woman, every image has depicted twisted love. Hauck takes this as Eliot's indictment of women's "reproductive indifference," as though Eliot blames impassive, unresponsive woman for the wasteland's infertility (Hauck 111). Yet Eliot seems rather to be blaming both sexes indiscriminately, at least those populating the upper classes. While his enthroned woman certainly is cold and indifferent, Eliot's males are aggressive and loveless, perhaps more to blame than the women. The speaker himself is nearly empty of feeling, and he would rather stare at the pictures on the wall than make eye contact with the woman he is supposed to love. He shows us emptiness wherever he looks. His "Belladonna" has become the Sibyl of the poem's epigraph, doomed to a living death. And their joint separation has rendered him just as infertile.

### Section Two (Lines 111-38): Forced Conversations

In the last section, alternating lines of iambic pentameter gave the impression of a one-sided conversation, and this figure will return in lines 111-4. Here there are no alternations, just lines of rough iambic pentameter as if to show that the “dialogue” spoken is hardly an exchange of words. Apparently the silence is broken by the woman in the room, since the last section ended with her description (110). Whether or not she literally speaks them to the narrator’s ears or whether he is simply recollecting past conversations matters little. The words baffle him; he cannot even think of a response to her questions. In the “savage stillness” she moans, “[m]y nerves are bad to-night. Yes, bad. Stay with me,” desperately seeking communion with another person (111). The nervous problems she mentions deem her a “neurasthenic” woman, as the Victorians would have diagnosed her. Neurasthenia was a blanket term for various forms of depression, anemia, and lethargy from the nineteenth century. It was the disease of the First World War, a kind of general malaise—a deadening of the nerves and spirits. The figure is reminiscent of Vivien Eliot, T. S. Eliot’s first wife, who would eventually die alone in a mental hospital (McRae 208). The disease of modernity, Eliot implies, is not limited to the physical realm; our own minds have rebelled against us. This woman is empty of feelings except for her fear of abandonment and the illness it brings her.

Her companion is no source of comfort as he stubbornly refuses to give in and speak. Lines 112-4 have a kind of parallel structure to them, with a statement followed by a question, followed by an order as the intensity in the woman’s voice rises. She first pleads with the man to “Speak;” then, flustered, she demands to know what he is thinking about. Finally, she orders him simply to “Think.” These concessions show her increasing doubt in his ability to comfort her, or his ability to consider anything at all. Her



desperate begging for companionship speaks to the emptiness of her soul, and it increases in intensity when she sees the emptiness of the man's. Howarth discusses this theme in his essay on Eliot's "underworld" (455); this is a place where people may speak but no one listens, and thus no conversation brings any satisfaction of response. People—particularly a couple—are supposed to communicate on every level. The admission that she ““never know[s] what [he] is thinking”” is perhaps an admission of her failure to hear him as well as his failure to share with her (114). Ironically, the reader actually knows better than this woman what the narrator is thinking, because the conventions of literature give us access to more of his mind. Yet we can do nothing for him, inhabiting our separate worlds. Each of these two needs the other person to respond, an action that might pull them out of their nervous emptiness. But, tragically, neither can bridge the gap between their minds; instead they help *create* each other's isolated mental wasteland in a cruel twist.

As such, even when the woman admits aloud to needing the man, the thoughts of the narrator are elsewhere. He ignores her questions and muses instead on his status in the wasteland: “I think we are in rats' alley / Where the dead men lost their bones” (115-6). The reference is not likely directed toward a specific place, but rather to his general frame of mind. Beggars in the city alleys wither away to bones, and the rats take care of the rest; all that remains are the restless spirits of the dead. Rats represent nature as a destructive, scouring force, commissioned to remove the scum left in the wake of civilization. Here the narrator feels helpless against the purgative forces of an impassive universe. These same rats will return in Part III of *The Waste Land*, “The Fire Sermon.”

Following another line break, the dialogue returns. After the narrator's thoughts comes another barrage of questions from his female counterpart. Disturbed, the woman

asks, ““What is that noise?”” to which the narrating male answers in his head, “[t]he wind under the door” (117-8). He might have said it aloud to allay her fears, but he keeps the answers to himself. She gives voice to her distresses and he thinks his inside his head, with both of them infuriating the other by seeming to ignore the other, ironically. Eliot notes that the lines recall a Jacobean tragicomedy by John Webster, *The Devil’s Law Case*, where a character asks, ““Is the wind in that door still?”” (III.ii.162). Recalling that “A Game of Chess” concerns itself with the “element” of air and wind, we should note that this element is traditionally associated with the sanguine humour (from Galen), associated with lustiness and amorousness. In the case of our duo, the wind rushing under the door represents a love that cannot reach the inside. The wind of such passion is foreign to the female speaker, in fact, making her ask the narrator if *he* recognizes it. Whether or not he knows, he says nothing at all, effectually helping keep the “wind” out.

In fact, this is precisely what he says—that he knows nothing. She asks again, ““What is that noise now? What is the wind doing?”” yet her companion refuses to speak, thinking to “Nothing again nothing” (Eliot 119-20). The words are reminiscent of another line, this time from the fifteenth century. In Book VII of Sir Thomas Malory’s ponderous work of Arthurian legend *Le Morte Darthur*, Malory writes that Arthur at one point asks, ““What, nephew,’ said the king, ‘is the wind in that door?’” (VII.34). The line is very strange for it comes in the middle of the proposed marriage of Sir Gareth—Arthur’s nephew—to his lady, Dame Lionesse. The king interviews the two about their love for each other, and in the middle of his questions he rattles off the line above—to which no one makes any answer—before blessing their marriage. There is a connection between the wind and their professed love, and Eliot seems to be tapping into this elemental relationship. Love, like the wind, is fickle and capricious, blowing “wherever it pleases”

(John III.8). Here love is dispelled by selfishness; the narrator refuses to acknowledge the woman's fears and makes her out to be childish, rather than putting her worries to rest and restoring their connection. In the Greek sense, the element of air was associated also with human souls, the essence of a human being. Lacking air is equivalent to existing as nothing more than an automaton. This breakdown of communication is based in this loss of personhood and interaction with the world. Our "lovers" are too concerned with themselves to realize they have lost what little self they might have had.

The woman, unwilling to give up yet, asks angrily, "Do / You know nothing? Do you see nothing? Do you remember / 'Nothing?'" (121-3). Insulted, the man returns to his own mind, silently answering her accusations with: "I remember / Those are pearls that were his eyes" (Eliot 124-5). Without giving her the satisfaction of a response, he proves to himself that he does "remember"—he does know *something*. He remembers the fortune, with the Phoenician sailor cast overboard, to drift on the windblown seas of ardor and despair. Eliot references the tarot reading here in his "Notes on *The Waste Land*," but he also connects the current passage to line 37, strangely. It may be a stretch, but line 37 references the "hyacinth garden" where the woman says she "came back" from. The flower is a resurrection symbol; thus perhaps she is supposed to a figure reborn from the garden of springtime. Likewise, returning to *The Tempest* (and the "pearls that were his eyes"), Ariel had sung that Ferdinand's father was dead, while in fact they both lived. Thus when the two reunited it was as though each was resurrected from the grave for the other. All this is to say that the neurasthenic narrator of "A Game of Chess" appears to be "remembering" resurrections while unable to find one for himself. In connecting lines 37, 48, and 125, Eliot appears to be emphasizing the imagery of fertility as a remembrance in the back of the characters' minds. They are aware of what they have lost.

Bringing us back to the present “conversation” are the woman’s last words, ““Are you alive, or not? Is there nothing in your head?”” (126). In desperation she demands his response, but he again ignores her, his mind elsewhere. His repeated refusals to answer are reminiscent of Simon Peter’s denials of Christ. By refusing to address the relational gap, the narrator hopes to escape responsibility for their failure to communicate. He either has no intention of conversing with the woman or he has no knowledge of what is required for such an interaction. Instead he is sliding toward madness, his mind adrift on a sea of images that he cannot reconcile with his experiences. The narrator appears like the dried-up figure of the Fisher King, where his chronic wound is not physical but is mental and emotional. He might be able to remedy his isolation if he would focus his mind on the problem at hand (his general alienation) and find a solution for it (speaking). There *is* something in his head, but he cannot express it. Like Eliot’s pathetic figure of Prufrock (from his 1915 “The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock”) the narrator here cannot bring himself to take an initial step, and his mind continues to play him for a “Fool.”

In lines 127 and 128, our narrator avoids answering his companion as a new image forms in his mind’s eye. Music fills his mind, and the narrator recalls a performance of his day:

But  
 O O O O that Shakespeherian Rag—  
 It’s so elegant  
 So intelligent. (127-130)

In distracting himself from thinking or feeling anything of substance, our narrator instead sends some lines from a musical show through his tired head. Apparently a song of this nature was actually featured in the 1912 version of Florenz Ziegfeld’s theatrical

extravaganza the *Follies* (McElderry 29-31). One can imagine a chorus line kicking their heels to “Theeee *Shakes-pe-her-iaaaan Raaaaag!*” though it sounds monstrous. Eliot cannot resist a sarcastic poke at modern culture, with its loose grip on its own heritage. The modern Shakespeare is translated into the fashion of Eliot’s day, with all of the gusto and none of the substance of its ancestral performances. The extra “O” syllables were Eliot’s addition to the original song; he recreates a ragtime sound that mimics and consequently mocks the popular culture, producing a bathetic effect that clashes with the stateliness of Shakespeare’s literary genius (see North 51-4). Calling any show “elegant” and “intelligent” sets it up to be just the opposite, particularly with popular entertainment. The off-rhymes of those two words mimic the doggerel verses such productions would put to music, entertaining the masses with a bastardized art form. Like his contemporaries, our man is attempting to find an identity he can cling to. Unfortunately, all his consciousness can come up with to define itself is a horrendous theatrical extravaganza. He is losing any sense of self.

On the textual level those additional “O” sounds Eliot throws into the song are interesting. In chess, the castling move (a special move guarding the King with a Rook) is denoted on paper as “O-O” if the King castles to the near side or as “O-O-O” if he moves to the other side. In the context of “A Game of Chess,” the connotations make sense. By extension, line 128’s “O-O-O-O” would be an extreme form of castling, creating another sort of escapism for the Fisher King chess piece, perhaps. Wounded, the king leaves the fight and holes up in the castle. But in Eliot’s chess match, it is a losing blunder; the wasteland cannot be defeated by such a retreat to safety. The O-sounds of the “Shakespherian Rag” also remind us of zeros, indicating the value Eliot placed on such exhibitions. Shakespeare, a high point of Western culture, has been coupled to some

worthless and ridiculous piece of popular culture.

Breaking in on his wandering thoughts, in lines 131-4 the neurasthenic woman tries to get her fellow's attention one last time. In desperation she cries out,

“What shall I do now? What shall I do?  
I shall rush out as I am, and walk the street  
With my hair down, so. What shall we do tomorrow?  
What shall we ever do?” (Eliot 131-4)

There is behind all this a growing sense of urgency, as though time were always audibly running out (Gish 55). Our woman is increasingly conscious of her mortal limitations. The lines might be straight out of Prufrock's mind; from Eliot's “The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock” we have a similar confession of confusion and helplessness:

I grow old... I grow old...  
I shall wear the bottoms of my trousers rolled.  
Shall I part my hair behind? Do I dare to eat a peach?  
I shall wear white flannel trousers, and walk upon the beach. (119-22)

The parallels are apparent, noticeably the repetition in the respective first lines, and in the reference to going out in public while concerned for one's physical appearance to others. Also, their plans for the future are similarly vague. Prufrock tried to stave off a life of emotional emptiness due to an inability to take positive actions. Our lady in “A Game of Chess” is similarly trying to gain another's love, though her companion will not even acknowledge her. Without any sort of approval, the woman is desperate for some purpose to her life, hence her threat to go about the streets unkempt in an effort to be noticed. Prufrock wanted to “part [his] hair behind” for the same reason, just to be noticed.

As the woman's lines progress, they shift from the personal “I” to the inclusive

“we” between lines 131 and 134. At first she demands to know what she is supposed to do, but she realizes by the end of her exclamations—with deep sadness—that the emptiness is not hers alone. Her insistent and self-righteous demand, ““What shall I do now?”” smacks of wounded pride and makes the woman look like a child who has not gotten her way. But the calmly-whispered ““What shall we ever do?”” rings true—if sorrowfully—in the ears of its hearers; here she has realized that the loss is a great one and has hurt more than just herself. Whatever solitary peace the woman might have had earlier has been dispelled; her words and emotions now erupt unbidden from the unconscious “buried self” she can no longer suppress (Langbaum 100). Without the stability of mutual love and understanding, the world has fallen into an unrecognizable state. In answer to our lady’s worries of ““What shall we do tomorrow?”” Christ would have said, ““Therefore do not worry about tomorrow, for tomorrow will worry about itself”” (Matthew VI.34). But the godless world of the wasteland offers little such comfort. The meaninglessness of a decadent, soulless modernity has been condemned within this opulent chamber.

The section’s emotional climax has passed, and in its wake the spidery words of the man’s thoughts creep once again upon the page, in empty “response” to his lady’s worries. His thoughts are most disjointed of all now; the cold clarity of description he had at the beginning of “A Game of Chess” has been blurred by his attempts to suppress feeling. Line 135 begins indented where the previous line ended, as if picking up just where the woman’s words left off. They are, ironically, answers to her questions of how to exist in an empty world. The narrator produces a list of what someone must do: one begins with a cup of hot tea and has contingency plans for the day should inclement weather appear (135-6). Ironically, by saying, “The hot water at ten. / And if it rains, a

closed car at four” seems to get it backwards (135-6); the typical bored English socialite would probably begin (or end) the day riding around in the car, and would have the hot tea at four—instead of the other way around. But, as usual, everything about this world seems backwards. The narrator then suggests distracting oneself from any serious thought by “play[ing] a game of chess,” linking back to the section’s overarching motif (137). Society has degenerated to the point where love is a game of chance and strategy rather than a selfless desire to care for another. The neurasthenic woman has slowly become aware of this in her dark chambers, and is nearly frantic to escape its meaninglessness and regain the love of her comrade. Instead the man coldly suggests that they make pointless plans and play at games instead of making their relationship a positive reality.

It seems fitting, then, that his last four lines (135-8) end in a hackneyed rhyme of the *ABCB* variety. Line 138 presents a strange image in “pressing lidless eyes” while “waiting for a knock upon the door.” The line is long and unwieldy and it consists of trochaic heptameter ending with an extra accent—a *very* unusual meter. “[L]idless eyes” seem disturbing, as though human emotions have been supplanted by the unblinking eyes of fish or inanimate toy chessmen. In connoting the sea and the “dead” chess pieces, our “hero” again recollects the drowning sailor at the mercy of wind and wave. He has no control over his world; he cannot even use his eyes, his chief means of experiencing the world. Instead he must sit and feebly rub his blind eyes, waiting for someone to come and take him away. He plans petty actions to make order out of meaninglessness, but realizes all along the pointlessness. He will simply rummage around until he hears death’s knock upon the door and wait to be taken away. The trite rhyme neatly ties off a life that was just as unremarkable, though not without its own brand of tragedy.



### Section Three (Lines 139-72): Closing Time at the Pub

Eliot has seen enough of our duo and we are now off to the bar to eavesdrop on another conversation; naturally, it will be just as one-sided as the previous one. Eliot plunges into another dramatic monologue in this scene, with one character doing nearly all of the talking. The characters on the scene are the narrating woman, the bartender closing up shop, and the friend to whom the conversation is being spoken (who says nothing). Further, much of the conversation concerns the narrator recounting the words of their mutual friend Lil and her husband Albert. The narrator mentions Albert having gotten “demobbed” or demobilized from the military after the war and spends time talking in the bar about the conversation she had with Lil about Albert’s return. Like any good friend, the narrator had kindly offered advice to Lil after presuming Lil needed it. As with most first-person narratives, the character reveals herself as the central figure in the story she relates, making her anecdotes all the more interesting as personality indicators. The narrating woman is fascinated by relationships, especially interactions between couples; she essentially lives out her own romantic ambitions through advising others.

This scene is characterized by an unusual amount of eavesdropping and voyeurism on various levels. At the most fundamental narrative level, the events being discussed here would have originally occurred between the central (but non-appearing) characters of Lil and Albert. Going up one level, we have Lil speaking to the narrator (off-stage) about Albert’s return. The third story of eavesdropping is the conversation in the bar between the narrator and her unnamed friend. Above *this* level are the readers of the poem—us—peeping in on the story. At the very top, Eliot creates the entire situation for the reader to study. The effect is a bit uncomfortable when we realize one of Eliot’s

purposes in building this scene is to put his readers on equal terms with the audacious narrator. Though it seems vulgar for the narrator to casually spread Lil's personal information while at the bar, we as readers are doing the same thing every time we read something. We are listening in on their thoughts and seeing every action they take; we are also trying to borrow from their experience. Eliot plays with the rules of literature in provoking ways; by thus identifying his readers with these soulless narrators, he forces them to personally confront the empty wasteland. The connection is uncomfortable at best, and eavesdropping is losing its enjoyment.

While its implications may be thus far-reaching, the section's tone is flippant and conversational—perfect for the narrator delivering it. Confident in her status as a helpful friend, the narrator says, “I didn't mince my words [to Lil], ... / ... / Now Albert's coming back, make yourself a bit smart” (Eliot 140, 142). When Albert returns from the war he ought to simply be glad to back with his lover, Lil, unworried about appearances. Yet love is tainted here in the wasteland; it has become a calculated transaction more than a spontaneous action. We are still within the “air” element here in, so hot-blooded libido remains the backdrop to the scene. Thus the narrator says that Lil ought to make herself more desirable to avoid losing her husband's love, something she must now earn. Our narrator goes on recalling her conversation: “He'll want to know what you done with that money he gave you / To get yourself some teeth... / You have them all out, Lil, and get a nice set” (143-5). Ironically, dentures are legal tender for love. Interestingly, this image was one selected by N. P. Dawson as an example of the high bathos of *The Waste Land* in his disparaging contemporary review, “Enjoying Poor Literature” (39). But Eliot's intent is obviously sardonic. Getting dentures hardly seems the most titillating of all makeovers. The mouth may be sexual, but the teeth? Hardly.

What Dawson missed is that such bathos is precisely Eliot's *point* in the scene. If dentures are meant to produce arousal, there seems to be very little love in these characters. Divorcing the body's parts from the human being has created an atmosphere of cold indifference between couples who ought to love each other. The dentures first appear ridiculous, but the matter is actually quite dark. In the wasteland of emotions, to deserve love one must look a certain way, act a certain way, be a certain way (a belief persisting to our day). Yet, tragically, love cannot be bought even with these improvements. The narrator recalls Albert's words harsh, flat words to Lil: "He said, I swear, I can't bear to look at you" (146). This loveless marriage is perhaps not entirely the male's fault, as the narrator goes on to agree with him, saying, "And no more can't I" (147). Women share some of the blame for enabling a love that fixes worth solely upon appearances. This couple has no better relationship than that of the previous narrator and his neurasthenic woman. This love is a social contrivance or a poor charade—nothing more.

To make matters worse, a threat lies behind these words; the narrator relates to her friend, "[Albert's] been in the army four years, and he wants a good time, / And if you don't give it to him, there's others will, I said" (148-9). The speaker describes marriage in *The Waste Land* accurately as a world where no one is really special to anyone else. It is a world of sex without love and cohabitation without caring. Romance has vanished: Lil is simply a woman and Albert is just a man, and that is the extent of their relationship. Despite these damaging assumptions, however, the recounted exchange retains a comic element. After the narrator suggests that a better woman will steal Albert away if Lil cannot keep him happy, Lil's answer is priceless. She retorts with a sarcastic, "Oh is there[?]" to which the narrator responds haughtily, "[S]omething o' that" (150). Lil fired

back with the comic, “Then I’ll know who to thank” (151). But despite the humor, the precedent established here is dangerous as it puts aside any possibility of fidelity in relationships. Love in this realm can continue only as long as the economic transaction between the two parties is completed properly and on time; if either partner reneges, the agreement collapses. Such scrutiny would doom any love, and this is apparently the intent of Eliot’s world. In fact, the narrator believes she is actually doing Lil a favor by suggesting she should fix herself up to win back her husband. The narrator says there is no permanent bond between Lil and Albert, and that “If you don’t like it you can get on with it... / Others can pick and choose if you can’t.” She warns, “[I]f Albert makes off, it won’t be for lack of telling” (155). The narrator is as pragmatic as she is meddling.

Breaking in suddenly on the narrative in line 152 we hear the call, “HURRY UP PLEASE IT’S TIME” for the second time (see 141). This is the publican’s call for closing time at the bar where the narrator and her companion are drinking, having gossiped long into the night. The capital letters speak to volume of the bartender, but the lack of punctuation (excepting the apostrophe) in the line is a bit strange. Depending on where the speaker pauses in the sentence, the meaning changes slightly. Regardless, the line appears five times in this section, precisely in this format, in lines 141, 152, 165, 168-9 (the last call occurring back-to-back). Providing a backdrop to the conversations in the bar at first, these eventually words ring through the sounds of speech and hang in the air of the pub, stifling conversations. The night is over, public interactions have come to a close, and people now return to their own dark corners. Cheery talk and ale will be replaced again by individual loneliness; the bar’s crowd was protection from facing one’s own demons, but the last call indicates a return to isolation.

Returning to the narration, the reference to aging in lines 156-7 is worth a look.

The speaker mentions that she said to Lil, “You ought to be ashamed, I said, to look so antique. / (And her only thirty-one.)” As she mentioned before, the narrator is annoyed with Lil for having let herself go. Premature aging is a sign of infertility in this world; it seems that Lil is too young at thirty-one to need dentures, but the sands of the wasteland have corroded her. Rather than a natural progression from youth to age, people now age suddenly and abruptly, becoming “antique” before their time. Lil is supposed to be still youthful but she has become a rotten-toothed, unkempt, ancient-looking woman.

On this same note we realize she has lost whatever fertility she once had as well. In answer to the narrator’s accusations of her lost beauty, our speaker recounts Lil saying that she cannot have helped the appearance of aging. Lil said, “[P]ulling a long face, / It’s them pills I took, to bring it off...” (158-9). Lil’s abortion pills killed the life within her womb and effectually spread to the rest of her being. The narrator then confides in the reader that, “([Lil’s] had five [children] already, and nearly died of young George.)” (160). In a dark twist, Lil’s excessive production of children nearly killed her and has left her old and decayed. Intriguingly, Lil is the most fertile person in the wasteland, and she resents it here, wishing to end her fertility through harsh abortion aids (Wiznitzer 87). “The chemist said it would be alright, but I’ve never been the same” she had related to the narrator (161). The pills are unnatural, just like the rest of her situation. Ironically, the drugs that were intended to keep her young and well have made her aged and barren. Lil is becoming the visual depiction of the wasteland, a place that held promise of life but lost its power of recreation somewhere. She may still be alive, but as she calmly admits, she’s “never been the same.”

The narrator goes rather bluntly after relating Lil’s personal confession, telling her, “You *are* a proper fool” (162). This line is odd because of the italicizing of “are.”

Emphasizing words with italic lettering is not unusual, but this is the only time such a usage occurs in *The Waste Land*; italics are only found elsewhere in non-English words. At any rate, drawing attention to the “are” alters the meaning slightly, making the statement less caustic than it might have sounded. Saying the sentence this way is less accusatory than emphasizing “you” or “proper fool,” making it into more jocund than serious criticism. But at the same time, damage is still done—she still accuses Lil of being foolish without realizing Lil is trapped by forces beyond her control. The narrator either believes Lil is foolish because she took the pills, because she has not recovered from the abortion, or because she has so many children—or some combination thereof. But the point is, she refuses to sympathize with her friend, and instead elevates herself above Lil in refusing to sympathize. She contributes to Lil’s barrenness by withholding compassion for Lil, even ridiculing Lil by saying, “Well, if Albert won’t leave you alone, there it is,... / What you get married for if you don’t want children?” (163-4). This last line was actually spoken by Eliot’s first wife Vivien, making it a more personal barb than it first seemed (McDonald 185). Actually, it is a good question, and it will become a defining feature of *The Waste Land* in its denigration of conventionality. The narrator, ever helpful, essentially sums up with a “Well, you asked for it.”

But we should look at the narrator a bit more closely, here at last. She has transformed from a garrulous loudmouth who will not let her companion get a word in edgewise, into something more. She is a powerful character in that she has a *voice*, whereas many of the inhabitants of the wasteland have had little or nothing to say. In fact, she actually ignores the silencing call of the barman and in the meantime speaks her mind about the state of individuals who have lost themselves in social expectations. While Lil is indicted by her barrenness in contrast to Nature (Jones 292), this woman somehow

remains a free agent outside of such dichotomies. Though not entirely admirable, because of her ability to raise her voice and speak at least *something* into the dark, she is not actually an empty part of the wasteland. She is not necessarily attempting to buck the social conditions that have led to Lil's ruination and desiccation, but she is willing to bring them to light, even if indirectly. Eliot is making a point here—one does not have to be a hero to be aware of the truth. Much of the modern ennui can be blamed on a culture unaware of the consequences of its silences. As long as people remain unaware of their spiritual dryness, as long as couples refuse to communicate, as long as love is based on the current exchange rate, nothing will be solved.

Thus the narrator's mention of the "fool" in line 162 is apt within this context. The traditional clown amused and indirectly advised a monarch in court. Protected by the guise of a silly performer, the clown was the only one permitted to speak his mind and even criticize the king. Thus the narrator in this section of "A Game of Chess" assumes the role of the "wise fool," willing to spell out the ruined nature of the new love, even if not directly criticizing it. "What you get married for if you don't want children?" she demands (164). She could just as easily have asked, "Why pretend at love when you have none?" While others might notice a deterioration of love, most would never admit it for fear of admitting of their own failures. Before she is cut off by the closing bar, our lady has surprised us by becoming more the Sosostrian soothsayer than the town gossip. Afterward, she ends her veiled criticism just as innocuously as it began. She recounts a bucolic scene of Lil and Albert at dinner eating "gammon" (ham), almost as a sort of apology to singling out their struggles, and lets her words vanish into the mists of the night air (166-7). But we will not soon forget her insights.

At last the publican becomes more insistent, repeating his closing message for

emphasis (168-9). The last words we hear trailing off with the darkness are from Shakespeare's *Hamlet*: "Good night, ladies, good night, sweet ladies, good night, good night" (172). They are the last lines Ophelia utters in *Hamlet* (IV.v.72-3). By including this piece Eliot further identifies our narrator from "A Game of Chess" with the concept of the wise fool; Hamlet put on his "antic disposition" to fool King Claudius, but it eventually led to the death of his beloved, Ophelia. Hamlet's show of madness, intended to take revenge on Claudius, actually destroyed his relationship with Ophelia, her sanity, and eventually it took her life. The overtones of these connections are ominous. Ophelia ended up drowned like the Phoenician sailor; the wages of such wasted love is death, and this piece of *The Waste Land* ends suddenly, darkly. So much for a "good night."



### Part III: "The Fire Sermon"

This third part of *The Waste Land* becomes the direct successor to "A Game of Chess," replacing the lack of passion experienced in the last piece with loveless, destructive lusts in the current setting. Though it is associated with the element of fire (with the choleric anger and passions therein implied), "The Fire Sermon" takes us out of summer and into a drought-plagued autumn. The falling leaves in the first stanza are testimony to this; in place of a fruitful harvest, the wasteland only grows misbegotten liaisons and ill-intentioned deals. Pastoral scenes of country harvests and families have been replaced by furtive meetings in the back alleys of tired cities.

"The Fire Sermon" has a large cast of players: Eliot's Sweeney makes an appearance, as does the much sung-about "Mrs. Porter." More substantially, Eliot's major players will be: a female London typist, a "carbuncular" man, a Mr. Eugenides, and even Tiresias and Queen Elizabeth herself, among others. Each one presents a case study in the types of the wasteland. Each one creates relationships with others through transaction and exchange, following their uncontrolled passions (à la Augustine) in futile attempts to find relief. Perceval, the knight in search of the Holy Grail, returns here, but makes little progress toward his goal. The Fisher King becomes an important figure here as well as the physical embodiment of the wilderness; he will be simultaneously shirking and shouldering responsibility. In the meantime, humanity is having a difficult time resurrecting itself.

Yet, simultaneously, the river becomes a dominant theme in opposition to the fire. There is an element of hope here beginning to break the surface, although the waters themselves are so full of garbage it is hard to see any changes yet. But perhaps the river's songs will prove a positive incantation, given time and tide.

### Section One (ll. 173-206): Of Rivers and Rats

Our third section brings a new season—autumn—with everything that the “fall” entails. Its definitive element is angry, choleric fire, symbolic of uncontrolled desire. The sermon Eliot refers to in the section’s title comes from a sermon of the same name that the Buddha gave to a group of fire-worshippers as described in the *Samyutta Nikaya*, XXXV.28 (see Armstrong 126-8). The Buddha’s speech used the object lesson of a raging fire to emphasize the need to tame the burning lusts within the individual and achieve peace (see North 54-5). Eliot’s Fire Sermon picks up where the Buddha’s left off, though Eliot’s is more concerned with the problem of lust than its prevention. Fiery imagery will dominate much of “The Fire Sermon” since the element traditionally symbolizes passion, anger, and lust. It presents an intensity of feeling that has been completely absent in the poem until this point. However, fire both heats and burns, and it tends to burn itself out before bringing any lasting warmth.

Our first scene involves a new narrator’s longing look at a river; we can feel a tangible wish for renewal in his words, despite the disappointing position of society’s moral drought (Spanos 248). The scene is painted beautifully, if starkly: “The river’s tent is broken; the last fingers of leaf / Clutch and sink into the wet bank. The wind / Crosses the brown land, unheard” (Eliot 173-5). Eliot replaces the cheeriness of autumn scenes, with their vibrant oranges and yellows, with a vantage to bare trees—an image of dormant infertility. The “tent” has fallen, no longer is the river overshadowed by beautiful boughs full of foliage. Calling the leaves “fingers” makes trees out to be handless humans, anthropomorphizing the scene and making it more personal. What should have been a beautiful “sylvan scene” has turned into another burial scene. Autumn is typically heralded always by its bright colors, but the only color in this passage is the land’s dead

“brown.” Whatever fire once glowed in this burning bush has long been quenched.

Looking further at the language, we should note the use of the word “Crosses” in line 175. The term should be considered in all of its various meanings: it marks the wind’s movement, of course, but the word also indicates a general “crossness” with the landscape, a bitter frustration with the negative world of the wilderness. Singh suggests that there is another side to the use of this word, however; It may also entail the concept of biological “crossings” that create new living things, and it also brings to mind the cross of Christ, with its potential for spiritual rebirth (Singh “T. S. Eliot’s Concept...” 35-8). Line 175 summarizes the imagery with the final-sounding, “The nymphs are departed.” With the onset of fall and ending of the harvest, the spirits of the trees and streams are leaving before the winter. Notably, the nymphs of Greek mythology were not immortals, though the naiads and dryads lived a very long time. Now in their retreating, they represent the loss of human spirituality. These nymphs are also associated with our talk of elements; Paracelsus identified the element of fire (and the choleric humour) with the personification of nymphs, to which Eliot further alludes.

The speaker goes on to invoke Edmund Spenser while making homage to the river. He narrates, “Sweet Thames, run softly, till I end my song” (Eliot 176). The line first appears (repeatedly) in Spenser’s “Prothalamion,” his poem in celebration of marriage; the line set up an idyllic wedding scene of pleasant winds blowing over the gentle Thames. The epithet “sweet” is ironic in describing the Thames’ modern condition as a filthy, garbage-filled stream. But with the change in the season to chilly autumn, people no longer relax by the waters at eventide. The narrator explains, “The river bears no empty bottles, sandwich papers / Silk handkerchiefs, cardboard boxes, [and] cigarette ends / Or other testimony of Summer nights” (177-9). Eliot wryly notes that in the three

hundred years since Spenser, times have changed: the river has morphed from an idyllic wedding location to a liquid garbage dump. Again he sets up an allusion to give the reader specific expectations (here, the river is supposed to recall a joyful wedding celebration) only to turn them completely around on us, showing us only modern images of waste (Cunningham 75). Still, the speaker mourns even for these dirty remainders of humanity in the wake of the nymphs' exit, for there is no one left to speak to.

The gentle naiads of Spenser's time have fled the waters of earth, recognizing that the spirituality of the world has run out. Yet in remembering Spenser, we know that the narrator truly wishes that things could be as they once were. Eliot's speaker has turned Spenser's epithalamion "Prothalamion" into a song of lamentation. Love is washed away by indifference and its debris, and by autumn even these latter two have exited without a sign. Ellmann suggests that this is what caused the Fisher King's "dolorous stroke" that incapacitated the land: marriage (61). In modernity, marriage is not a celebratory, uniting force but is defeated by time and apathy. In place of Spenser's high spirits, the speaker instead realizes that whatever love once existed in this world has been washed away in the stream. He repeats his earlier words from line 175 into the empty air, not knowing what else to say.

Not only the nymphs of the past have vanished, but also "their friends, the loitering heirs of City directors; / Departed, have left no addresses" (180-1). These descendent "friends" are nothing like their ancestral nature spirits; Londoners do not adhere to the laws of nature, but to those of civilization. The language here is playful in spite of the scene's sobriety. Eliot's juxtaposition of modern "City directors" having "left no addresses" with fantastical "departed" "nymphs" as their "friends" heightens the absurdity of the scene. The only common bond of this disparate "marriage" of nymph and

city director is their direct opposition to each other, though the narrator misses all kinds of companionship. Eliot's strange use of the term "loitering" recalls Keats' "La Belle Dame sans Merci." Keats' last stanza has a knight detailing his undoing by the false love of an elfin seductress. Keats's knight ends the poem,

And this is why I sojourn here,  
 Alone and palely loitering;  
 Though the sedge is withered from the Lake  
 And no birds sing. (45-8)

The parallelism is fitting; the speaker of Eliot's poem and the knight of Keats' ballad both reside in a wasteland, having both been (perhaps) betrayed by false lovers. Both are "alone and palely loitering" although Eliot's speaker has been abandoned by the land and river itself, as well as humanity—not simply by one loathsome lady.

Moving on, line 182 carries an allusion to the biblical Psalms, where the psalmist laments, "By the rivers of Babylon we sat and wept / when we remembered Zion" (Psalm CXXXVII.1). Eliot alters this to: "By the waters of Lemman I sat down and wept..." where "Leman" is another name for Lake Geneva, the site of Eliot's poem's composition (Brooker and Bentley 130-1). There is another connection here, as well—the Swiss philosopher Jean-Jacques Rousseau also wrote of weeping by Geneva's shore (Kermode 101). In the Psalms the writer references the captivity of the nation of Israel, who had been exiled from their homeland to the foreign kingdom of Babylon. The sorrow also represents the individual poet's longing to return to Zion, the Promised Land of peace and plenty. Noteworthy is that the archaic term "leman" also refers to a mistress—usually with negative connotations. This "leman" then becomes conjoined to the motif of God's divorce from his lover, Israel, and from humanity in general (Jones 295).

There seems to be a close identification here between the poet Eliot and the narrator; it feels almost as though Eliot slipped in a bit more of himself than he intended when he mentions the site of his actual composition, Lake Geneva. We can nearly see the tears warping the pages of a manuscript as his narrator feels the sense of utter separation and alienation from companionship, longing for a Zion of past comfort. *The Waste Land's* consciousness is driven by this concept of loss. In a sense, people can only feel sorrow or joy if they can recall a time when the opposite existed. Thus the wasteland is not inherently tragic and hopeless—it is just the memory of a better time existing in the past that makes the present so catastrophic. At the start of *The Waste Land* Eliot hinted at this, speaking of spring “mixing / Memory and desire” and comparing the bleak *now* to the happy *then*. This motif of memory is enhanced here by repetitions within this stanza, three times repeating Spenser’s refrain. The power of memory pervades all.

Returning to the level of language, lines 183-6 add to the sense of repetition with their *AABB* rhyme scheme. The lines go:

Sweet Thames, run softly till I end my song,

Sweet Thames, run softly, for I speak not loud or long.

But at my back in a cold blast I hear

The rattle of the bones, and chuckle spread from ear to ear. (183-6)

As one of the simplest forms of rhyme, this *AABB* setup trades artistry for near-doggerel.

The words of this last “song” are somewhat banal; they distort Spenser’s poetic refrain from “Prothalamion” and they also refigure Andrew Marvell’s lines from “To His Coy Mistress” (see Rainey 102-3). Marvell’s familiar lines 21-2: “But at my back I always hear / Time’s wingèd chariot hurrying near” have been twisted by Eliot’s speaker into “[b]ut at my back in a cold blast I hear / The rattle of the bones, and chuckle...” (Eliot

185-6). Marvell's song attempts to evade the chains of mortality by living fully in the present. In contrast, Eliot's speaker has already seen time's chariot come and go over the "Deserts of vast eternity" (Marvell 24); he has nothing left to hope for. Eliot's speaker substitutes a cavalier *memento mori* (remembering mortality) for Marvell's desperate *carpe diem* (seize the day); Marvell's desire for more time is altered by Eliot into death wish. The "cold blast" of death's dark embrace and the "rattle of the bones" signifying the end of life will come as a welcome relief to the speaker. There are echoes of Prufrock here as well, where the latter says, "...I have seen the eternal Footman hold my coat, and snicker" ("Prufrock" 85; Smith *T. S. Eliot...* 68). Both Prufrock and Eliot's narrator look with some relief to the approaching sleep of death.

The most gruesome image here is the grin on the face of death, the "chuckle spread from ear to ear" of line 186; this little piece of synesthesia is particularly disturbing. Helmling equates this "death's-head image" with something out of a carnival haunted house (145). The "chuckle" is a laugh more of resignation and irony than of mirth, but the effect is as very much like an eyeless grinning skeleton. Some inescapable comedy exists in the image of a smiling skull, and Eliot manages to layer this on top of the pathos of the scene. In this vein is the strange comic relief found in realizing that things cannot get any worse. Yet simultaneously Eliot brings a sense of urgency to the scene. Although the death "rattle" seems to have spoken its last words and damned the narrator, Marvell's sense of *carpe diem* remains in the speaker's mind and it forces him to find some way to act, though doomed. Bolgan labels this the point where the "poet-protagonist" is forced to realize and undertake a quest for resurrection (50-1). Ironically, there is something about realizing death to be both inevitable and comic that galvanizes the character into action—though it may be some time before he understands his quest.

Stylistically, this first stanza is interesting for several reasons. While this stanza is written in a loose meter that roughly resembles iambs, it is actually organized by the number of stresses per line, recalling sections of “The Burial of the Dead.” The section from 173-186 (and 187, for that matter) is made up exclusively of lines with six strong stresses, returning us to Anglo-Saxon poetic conventions. Alliteration is also omnipresent throughout the section: lines 177-8 and 179-80 contain multiple *b*- and *d*-sounds, respectively. These strong sounds serve to separate the sibilant *s*-sounds that pervade the rest of the section. Spenser contributes to these *s*-sounds with his “Sweet Thames run softly... song” refrain, and the *s*-sounds become associated with the running streams. The *b*-sounds become associated with the debris of human civilization (“tent is broken,” “wet bank,” “brown land,” “empty bottles,” “cardboard boxes”), and the *d*-sounds are attached to endings (death, in general, and the “departed” nymphs with their lack of “addresses”). Alliteration forms a unity without necessitating rhyme or regular meter; the alliteration encapsulates the passage so well it even makes the rhymes of lines 183-6 feel contrived. It strengthens the soundplay and imagery of the passage considerably.

Moving forward, the second major stanza of “The Fire Sermon” begins with the unhealthy depiction of a rat slinking “softly through the vegetation / Dragging its slimy belly on the bank” (187-8). The image is a memory returning from “A Game of Chess,” recalling the “rats’ alley / Where the dead men lost their bones” (115-6). Rats purge the wasteland of rotteness as scavengers of flesh, decomposing the remains of life. Interestingly, the mud-crawling mammal inspires both fear and disgust, yet ironically it is a tiny animal that does not even hunt. Yet it remains a signifier of plague and death, and every creature—once dead—will eventually become its prey. The motion of “Dragging its slimy belly in the bank” recalls another creature equally loathed: the serpent in Eden.



God's cursed the serpent for tempting Eve and Adam, saying to the snake, "You will crawl on your belly / and you will eat dust / all the days of your life" (Genesis III.14). As dust-movers, rats share this punishment, and the connotations make rats also a symbol of corruption as well as consumption. As humanity kills itself off with violence and apathy, the world decays into food for rats.

The narrator then goes on to describe the scene where the rat appeared. The rodent approached, the speaker says,

While I was fishing in the dull canal  
 On a winter evening round behind the gashouse  
 Musing upon the king my brother's wreck  
 And on the king my father's death before him. (Eliot 189-92)

This passage has multiple origins, most obviously from Shakespeare's *The Tempest*. Ferdinand—upon hearing the spirit Ariel's music—says, "Sitting on a bank, / Weeping again the king my father's wrack, / This music crept by me upon the waters" (I.ii.393). In the play, Ferdinand had mistakenly believed his father was dead, and Eliot recalls this line to describe the narrator's position as one who has apparently lost his own father. Further, the reference is meant to be satirical; Ariel's songs are beautiful if beguiling to Ferdinand, but whatever noises our narrator hears are only the sounds of wreckage and dissolution (Moody "To Fill All the Desert..." 57). Unlike Ferdinand, our narrator has experienced real death.

The mention of "fishing" here is of critical importance, taking us back to the Fisher King motif. Chrétien de Troyes described the Arthurian legend of Perceval in his unfinished twelfth-century romance, *Perceval: The Story of the Grail*, and the story grew from there. The romance involves a castle with two kings: the old one is the "Wounded

King” and his son is the “Fisher King.” The elder king follows the traditional role of a mortally-wounded ruler (injured by a battle-spear or lance) rendered impotent and confined to his bed awaiting death or salvation (De Troyes 423-6). In his absence the land dries up. Meanwhile the king’s son—the “actual” Fisher King (other versions of the legend conflate the two kings into one)—is left only able to spend his days fishing in the river; he is similarly impotent to resurrect the land from the drought and famine (Matthews and Matthews 162, 164). This act of fishing entails more than a simple diversion; in British and Irish mythology it becomes a metaphor for seeking spiritual and philosophical answers outside of oneself. Celtic mythology alludes to a “Salmon of Wisdom” that, if caught and eaten, will provide the knowledge the hero needs to escape his predicament. (Matthews and Matthews 144-5). Thus, to fish is to seek transcendent wisdom.

Yet, though aware of these legends Eliot adapts them to his own purposes. Instead of a triangle structure with the Wounded King, the Fisher King, and Perceval (the knight who is supposed to speak the word that will break the curse and heal the king) at its corners we have a different setup. With Eliot, our speaker is apparently the Fisher King speaking of his father’s death (the Wounded King, presumably) in line 192; but before that he mentions “the king my brother’s wreck” (Eliot 191). In Eliot’s version, there seems to be two brothers and their dead father. This idea of three kings seems like too far a deviation from the original stories, so who then must be speaking?

In one sense perhaps we may attribute these lines to the character of Tiresias, as we will soon be discussing his overall importance to the narration of “The Fire Sermon” (Donoghue 193). But as he has not been properly introduced yet, I think this would be a misnomer. Looking back at the Grail tales, especially Chrétien de Troyes’ version, seems

to present the knight Perceval in particular as a potential speaker. Perceval was supposed to ask the Wounded King about the Grail, an act that would restore the king's life and return fertility to the wasteland (Matthews and Matthews 85). However, Perceval feels foolish and remains silent instead of mentioning the Grail, and the king is not restored until later (De Troyes 423). In Eliot's "retelling," the knight has not yet returned, and the kings remain ruined. Perhaps all three, including Perceval, are "kings" in that they are responsible for their lands and their subsequent decline. Now, the only one remaining—a narrating Perceval—returns to fishing in vain hope of bringing back the dead; Eliot's lines might be seen as Perceval reflecting on his own mistake in not restoring the wasteland (De Troyes 425). The foolish knight has condemned the world through his silence. This dichotomy of speech and silence is a critical theme of *The Waste Land*. In allowing their culture to run into decadence, many are responsible for their modern wilderness. Part of Eliot's power is in managing to implicate many in the speech of few.

The end result of Perceval's non-action is the image of "White bodies naked on the low damp ground" in line 193. Eliot displays the theme of decay by likening the dead kings to an image of damp white fish-bellies on the riverbanks. This imagery with its "white bodies naked" becomes connected to a ruined sense of sexuality as well; their nakedness only adds to the infertility (Crawford 48). Sickly-looking whitefish are representative of fallen kings from the past, palely rotting away; the Fisher King who tries to find answers from this "dull canal" is wasting his time (Miller 92). Wisdom is not to be found here, but only more of the dead. The kingdom is now directed not by the wise king in his castle but by "bones cast" at the whim of fortune (Eliot 194). The line is a pun upon casting lots (or "bones"), likening gambling implements to the skeletons of the dead land. Perceval had a chance at restoration, but he lost the bet. Now the kings decompose and

only rats remain to pick away their carcasses from “year to year” (Eliot 195).

There is a deliberate mirroring effect in lines 193 and 194 when the speaker mentions the “low damp ground” and the “low dry garret”—a close repetition of sounds. The garret is supposed to represent a person’s home, safe from the discomforts and dangers of the rats’ world of “low damp ground.” But through their juxtaposition the two have become intertwined in an abhorrent role reversal; people die in the mud, and scavenging rats tear into their homes. The death “rattle” image in line 195 is repeated from before (lines 115-6, 186), and the presence of the word “rat” within the letters is not a coincidence. These animals exist as symbols for death.

The next group of lines contains myriad literary allusions. The section continues with a reappearance of the twisted Marvellian lines from lines 185-6, this time adapted as: “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” (Eliot 196-8). Marvell’s chariots have been comically updated to modern automobiles. The lines also make reference to Elizabethan playwright John Day’s “The Parliament of Bees.” Day’s lines go:

When of the sudden, listening, you shall hear,  
A noise of horns and hunting, which shall bring  
Actaeon to Diana in the spring,

Where all shall see her naked skin.... (“Notes on *The Waste Land*” 72)

This allusion holds a *further* reference to another myth from Ovid’s *Metamorphoses*, the story of the hunter Actaeon’s destruction. Having accidentally seen the chaste goddess Diana bathing in the woods, the hunter was transformed by the goddess into a stag and killed by his own hounds (Ovid III.138-250). Finally, Eliot finishes the stanza off in lines 199-202 with his version of an Australian war ballad from World War I—slipping in his

character Sweeney as Mrs. Porter's apparent target for affection (Kermode 102).

This incredibly-dense compound image serves a singular purpose in recalling the loveless generation Eliot inhabits. The Buddha's Fire Sermon is focused on quenching lusts, yet *Eliot's* "Fire Sermon" seems already drained of any such feelings. Yet as the narrator's mind reverts to thoughts of men and women, the various resulting vignettes crowded into these lines convey an image of selfish sexual relations much in line with the Buddha's teaching. First, Marvell's "To His Coy Mistress" depicts male sexual aggression and seduction (like Middleton's *A Game at Chess*). Along these same lines, the raunchy "Mrs. Porter" ballads share the same sentiments, though unfulfilled. Similar to these, Day's and Ovid's words on Actaeon and Diana also deal with male sexual predation, but with different results. In contrast to Day's hardworking honey "Bees," humans do nothing selflessly but seek only to gain advantages over each other, especially in terms of sexuality (Perret 302). In the case of Ovid, the loss of Diana's chastity is rectified by the destruction of the man who was responsible (however indirectly); Actaeon's unconscious sexual designs on Diana are the cause of his death. The "Mrs. Porter" songs are also inextricably tied to the primal sexuality described by Freud (Asher 43). Even unconscious male predation leads to a destruction of love. The predator-to-prey twist in Ovid alters the formula a bit, punishing the male predator, but this is no remedy; mutual love has fled from the world.

Shifting to the side of *female* aggression, the mention of Sweeney in line 198 alongside the crude sexual figures of "Mrs. Porter / And ... her daughter" delivers another definition of twisted love (Eliot 198-200). The relationships are reversed here, following the character Sweeney from Eliot's, "Sweeney Among the Nightingales." Now the man (a zookeeper, of all things) is the sexual prey of two women. While the pair attempt "to sit

on Sweeney's knees," Sweeney continually resists their games and "declines the gambit, shows fatigue" ("Sweeney" 12, 28). In the last stanza of "Sweeney," these female aggressors are likened to Queen Clytemnestra, famous for the violent murder of her husband, the Greek hero Agamemnon. Also in "Sweeney," the nightingale reference recalls the earlier image of the Rape of Philomela from "A Game of Chess." The word itself has become slang for a prostitute, and it makes an ironic coupling to "The Convent of the Sacred Heart" ("Sweeney" 35-6; Kermode 95). Returning to *The Waste Land*, the mention of the cars' "horns" in line 197 is telling; along with the stag horns of the transformed Actaeon, these horns become symbols for cuckolding, another misshapen brand of love with men being the victims of *other* men's aggression.

More ominous is that this cancer is spreading to the "daughters" of this generation, destroying the young as well as the older "Mrs. Porters." This is along the same lines as the earlier statement about the demise of both Fisher Kings, "the king my father" and "the king my brother" (Eliot 191-2). The sins of the fathers and mothers will be visited upon future generations, apparently. The "soda water" bath of line 201 makes more sense in connection with the next line, where the French words translate to "—And O those voices of children singing under the copula" (Rainey 105). The quote is borrowed from French symbolist Paul Verlaine's poem "Parsifal," a sonnet about the Grail knight that takes its name from Wagner's eponymous opera. The line references a scene in Wagner's opera, where Parsifal washed his feet before going into the castle of the Grail, to demonstrate and safeguard his chastity (Kermode 102). Soda spring water used to be attributed healing properties; thus the notion of Mrs. Porter and her daughter washing their feet in the liquid is an attempt to be purified physically and spiritually, though here they wash in vain. The result is a grotesque parody of Christ washing his disciples' feet at the Last Supper, and

instead of cleansing them the soda water just makes them dirtier.

Formally, the stanza has been a loose iambic pentameter to this point, with a smattering of variations. Beginning in line 195, rhyme transforms the monologue into a sing-song tone as the imagery become more disparate and less causally-connected. Stable iambic pentameter falls apart as the kings—the stabilizers of society—are “wrecked” (191). Pale bodies of the dead and the monstrous, crawling rats turn the narration to notes of insanity, devolving into a singing, chanting hodgepodge of musical imagery. We can hear the narrator’s voice reach a crescendo as he mangles Marvell’s lines into “horns and motors” and shoves Sweeney into Mrs. Porter’s embrace. Interestingly, the ballad lines in 199-201 end with feminine rhymes, befitting their female aggressiveness (recalling Sweeney). The characters in these stories have come to life, but the effect is crazed, an odd mixture of past and present, half real—half make-believe. Conflating the accidental-“sexuality” of Diana and Actaeon to the suggestive songs of “Mrs. Porter” and Sweeney’s impotence serves to create a fused collage of infertile sexuality (Perret 292). And all the while, the crazed rhyming couplets (195-20) speak to the narrator’s growing madness.

These feelings continue to build in the next section, lines 203-6, which appears to be a nearly-nonsensical return to the nightingale’s song from line 103 in “A Game of Chess.” “Twit twit twit” is the sound the “tongue-less” bird Philomela makes, and the other sounds are taken from John Lyly’s 1564 *Alexander and Campaspe*. Lyly’s words, “Tis the ravished nightingale; / Jug. Jug. Jug. Jug. tereu, she cries” refers to Philomela’s rape, breaking down into the mournful cries of the bird (Kermode 102). “Tereu” becomes not only the song of the bird but also a shortened form of Tereus, Philomela’s rapist (see Eliot 25-6). The nightingale’s song eternally proclaims her violator’s name, though eternally it proclaims in vain; she can never forget her pain or return to a sense of

wholeness. “Tereu” also sounds very similar to “true,” as though this interaction were a true representation of human relationships, an invocation that dampens the prospects of achieving love in the wasteland. Disjointed, twisted love is the new “true love,” essentially. This first piece of “The Fire Sermon” caps with this uncomfortable return to the natural world where the desolation of human community has spread even to the birdsongs. The Buddha’s Fire Sermon has had little enough effect; if lust is dissipating at all, it is only because its purveyors are all dying off.



## Section Two (ll. 207-48): Tiresias on Love

With the onset of nightfall the bird stirs and flees, vanishing into the darkness. When we awaken we have left the sylvan forests behind and have returned to the “Unreal City” of “The Burial of the Dead.” We began “Under the brown fog of a winter dawn” (Eliot 61), but time has passed and now we stand in a foggy “winter noon” during business hours, though a fog still confuses the city (208). Our camera lens then focuses on an individual with his own name, for a change: “Mr. Eugenides, the Smyrna merchant” (209). His appearance is likewise specific, as he is: “Unshaven, with a pocket full of currants / C.i.f. London: documents in sight” (211). This businessman’s “documents” indicate the cost, insurance, and freight (C.i.f.) of a shipment of currants to London, although Eliot changes the meaning to (or mistakes it for) “carriage and insurance free to London” (“Notes on *The Waste Land*” 72). Currants were a product of Smyrna, the ancient city founded by the Greeks on the Lydian coast (now İzmir, near Ephesus in modern-day Turkey; south of the site of ancient Troy). Raisins—dried and withered grapes—depict a produce of barrenness; raisins are the proper crop of the wasteland (Tamplin 353).

The “Unshaven” face of our merchant may indicate the distance he has traveled or that he is more concerned with turning a profit than grooming. At any rate, the scruffy face contrasts with the signifier “Mr.” and the gentlemanly name “Eugenides” (Greek for “good birth”). Likewise his “demotic French” is not poetic, only a pragmatic, common sound (212). Tactlessly, he invites the narrator to do business at the Cannon Street Hotel, before suggesting that the pair spend “a weekend at the Metropole,” a hotel famous for hosting such trysts (Rainey 106-7). The Cannon Street Hotel is a cosmopolitan meeting-ground with Continental connections; naturally, it also housed Wagner when he came to

London with the libretto (text) of his *Parsifal* (Kermode 102). Mr. Eugenides is the picture of the modern city-dweller, a complement to the marching crowds of bodies in the first part of *The Waste Land*. As a merchant trading between classes and cultures in search of profits alone, he is the symbol of decaying empires (Roessel 171-2). He becomes a strange cross between the “one-eyed merchant” and the “Phoenician sailor” Madame Sosostriis divined in “The Burial of the Dead.” In another sense, he is also a trader between past and present, a sort of bridge character. While he certainly exists in the modern realm (attested to by his “C.I.F.” freight and his “demotic” French), Mr. Eugenides is also representative of the ancient world, (as a product of ancient “Smyrna” rather than a member of the modern metropolis of İzmir).

The following stanza will bring a new prophetic voice upon the scene. Lines 215-48 depict the direct reflections of the prophet Tiresias as he watches the doings of the men and women of the city. In Ovid’s *Metamorphoses*, Tiresias came upon a pair of copulating snakes in a wood and struck them with his staff—suddenly being transformed from man to woman. Seven years later he found the snakes once again and struck them a second time, thus returned to his original sex. Because of his experience as both man and woman, Tiresias was called upon to arbitrate in Jove and Juno’s argument over whether men or women gained more pleasure from sex; he sides with Jupiter that women most enjoyed sex, and in anger Juno blinds Tiresias. Jove would later compensate Tiresias with prophetic powers in exchange for his lost sight, and he became an unquestionable seer (Ovid III.316-38). Another myth holds that Tiresias actually came upon a bathing goddess rather than coupling snakes, similar to the tale of Actaeon and Diana (Perret 298). Other tales hold that he was a sort of prostitute while in the form of a woman. Either way he knows something about love and the sexes. Writing his commentary on the poem, Eliot

indicates the importance of this figure in *The Waste Land*:

Tiresias, although a mere spectator and not indeed a “character,” is yet the most important personage in the poem, uniting all the rest. Just as the one-eyed merchant... melts into the Phoenician Sailor, so all the women [of the poem] are one woman, and the two sexes meet in Tiresias. (“Notes on *The Waste Land*” 72)

Yet, Eliot cannot be completely taken at his word here, since much scholarship has questioned the truthfulness of this statement. In reality, this poem is not really about one person, the man-woman Tiresias, but rather about the relations of men and women within the wasteland (Wiznitzer 91). The problem of the wasteland is the infertility created by the separation and isolation between men and women. Thus Tiresias, Mr. Eugenides, and the other individuals are the heralds of this world, but they are not its chief players.

In terms of parallelism, it makes sense that the man-woman Tiresias would find a match in a similarly dualistic personality; thus he is paired alongside Mr. Eugenides, who fits the bill as a man simultaneously ancient and modern, common and elite, aloof and personal. As the narrator to whom Eugenides speaks (and propositions in lines 213-4) is not yet clearly identified, the speech becomes directed at the man-woman Tiresias. Its homoerotic undertones become even stranger by involving the “transsexual” Tiresias, and the poem’s speakers become further revealed within the various masks they wear (Dean 54). “The Fire Sermon” continues to find heterosexual love to be unsatisfying and meaningless, so perhaps Eliot here is pursuing an alternate route to relationships. At last, it little matters who Mr. Eugenides speaks with, as we know he is looking for nothing resembling love. He is a merchant, first and foremost, and transactions trump intimacy.

Taking a step back from the characters, we should stop to admire the view. Thus

far Eliot's city has used color to tell the time. Brown fog signified noon earlier, and now "the violet hour" has come upon us, "when the eyes and back / Turn upward from the desk" (Eliot 215-6). The "violet hour" is the point of twilight balanced perfectly between the warm, ruddy day and the cold, blue night, gorgeous moment of beauty in the cosmos. But the wasteland's citizens are too busy working to notice the delicate change of atmospheric hues. Eliot draws his characters in sharp contrast to the softly-painted backdrop of twilight: they are soulless, lurching, robotic machines. When the clock strikes the end of the workday, their bodies mechanically turn away from workstations. Eliot likens their lives to automatons, calling them "human engine[s] / Like a taxi throbbing[,] waiting" (216-7). Labor has undergone a change following Industrialism. Gone are the days of skilled handcrafting, and artisanship; humans must now do menial work as useful machines without any thought for individual satisfaction. The human as engine is the quintessential anti-romantic portrait of the new age; the city is the new desert (Ensslin 214). Even the *language* is mechanical, carrying an uninflected, monotone sound and lacks artistry; hence the "human engine waits like a taxi throbbing waiting."

But then a personal human voice breaks in as Tiresias introduces himself for the first time. He appears in contrast to these "human engines"—through naming himself he immediately establishes his unique personhood. Unlike other characters in the poem, Tiresias begins by introducing himself, firmly-establishing the point from which his thoughts flow; thus, he creates a solid point from which to stand. He boldly identifies himself, saying, "I Tiresias, though blind, throbbing between two lives, / Old man with wrinkled female breasts, *can see* [emphasis added]" (218-9). Before expostulating what precisely he sees, the prophet shows his credentials. Even lacking eyes he sees the world clearer than anyone in modern times; unlike his fellow human machines and human

rodents, Tiresias can understand the state of the world because he knows *himself* most clearly of all. Eliot writes in his notes that “What Tiresias sees, in fact, is the substance of the poem” (“Notes on *The Waste Land*” 73). In a tidy paradox, here we see that the perfect ken of the modern world comes from the blind seer.

Through Tiresias’ visions we now come upon a tale of the violet hour: a lovers’ tryst (or, perhaps, two snakes copulating, if you will). Eliot describes a young man’s return to his lover after work as bringing “the sailor home from sea” (221), recalling Robert Louis Stevenson’s epitaph, “Requiem.” Eliot’s “Notes” also indicate a reference to Sappho, the ancient Greek lyric poet in these words; they refer to her poetic invocation of Hesperus, the evening star that returns laborers home at nightfall (Rainey 108). The connection to darkness (via Sappho) and death (a la Stevenson) gives the return of Tiresias’ young man an ominous air. His female counterpart is introduced by her role rather than given a name: she is a “typist,” defined by her mechanical work alone just as impersonally as the “Smyrna merchant” was. Typing, notably, is the modern successor to handwriting; it is a job that sacrifices the personality and creativity of the handwritten word for efficiency and practicality. It is a decidedly unromantic occupation. She is further presented as an automaton, with her mechanically efficient housekeeping underscored by her placement of food in “tins” rather than on decorative but impractical china (Eliot 222-3); she is concerned more with the ends of her work than the means. She is absolutely the modern woman, eluding impractical sentimentality.

Tiresias’ narration becomes more interesting when his gaze turns to the woman’s window, where she has:

perilously spread

Her drying combinations touched by the sun’s last rays,

On the divan are piled (at night her bed)

Stockings, slippers, camisoles, and stays [corsets]. (224-7)

Her raiment appears to consist entirely of underthings, and these objects “perilously spread” may have been recently used, having just been washed and hung up to dry in the fading sunlight. This term “perilously” refers us back to Perceval’s “Chapel Perilous,” invoking again the uncompleted quest that remains central to escaping the wasteland (Dilworth 43). Like the women who attempt to seduce the knight Perceval, this woman appears to have another occupation besides typing. “Combinations” makes for an ironic pun here; it refers to her sets of underwear, but also makes it seem as though the clothes are keys to unlocking a puzzle. Further, the clothes also take on different characteristics depending on how they are *combined* with the human form, effectually making the woman either chaste or seductive. Her clothes represent her ambiguity, contrasting passion and emotion with her intellectual, mechanical work and housekeeping, creating in her a very ambiguous nature. Though by day she operates as a machine (like everyone else in this city), when night falls her daytime persona goes with it. Her other persona is typified by her combinations and her “divan,” which would seem to make a lonely bed. “Divan” itself has Persian origins and connotes every definition from council to account book to writer to divine object. It exists as a point of intersection for our lady, where her entire life becomes unified. Yet, sadly, it is only used for empty human interactions.

Into this domestic scene our “sailor home” returns, Tiresias’ long-“expected guest” (Eliot 230). Our young man’s description is hardly complimentary. Tiresias calls him “carbuncular,” making an odd connection between his pimpled appearance and the red carbuncle gemstone. Aptly, the man is “semi-precious” at best, living the high life of a “small house agent’s clerk” (232). Our romantic image of the returning sailor has

morphed into another figure from the wasteland's mold: here is an ugly, sniveling, wastelander masquerading as a man. His title is as unremarkable as they come, as the assistant to an inconsequential real estate agent, and his "one bold stare" is out of place on such a meaningless face (232). Tiresias likens the man's ludicrous confidence to the "silk hat on a Bradford millionaire" (234). Bradford was known for making wool fortunes for the nouveau-riche during World War I (Rainey 109). The metaphorical trappings of nobility upon such a low man's head drape him like the fool's cockscomb.

The carbuncular man's "seduction" of the lady is likewise petty and passionless as he waits and calculates the best moment to attack. Tiresias explains: "The time is now propitious, as he guesses, / The meal is ended, she is bored and tired" (Eliot 235-6). Our man sees not that the time is *right* but that it is "propitious," useful to *him*. He calculates his moves in order to achieve an intended goal, regardless of the woman's or even his own feelings. He waits for her guard to drop and moves in like an invading army as he "Endeavours to engage her in caresses / Which still are unreprieved, if undesired" (237-8). Our pair forms the perfect wasteland couple; with a self-destroying "love" in a sort of mutual "prostitution" they set all feeling aside (Sicker 420, 428). The choleric young man is the archetype of hollow lust, inflamed red with his passions as "Flushed and decided, he assaults at once" (239). Emotional responses have already been burned away in his ruddy passion, and her cold resignation to the point that "His vanity requires no response, / And makes a welcome of indifference" (Eliot 241-2). Like insects, the two mate and move on, illustrating a general "vacuousness" of meanings (Cooper 224). The man sees the woman as object, and she sees him as insect. They have no human connection, and these two manage only to make a love of indifference.

Tiresias then interjects his own feelings into his prophecy, pulling away from the

scene momentarily to muse upon it (indicated by bracketing his own words with parentheses to keep such soliloquies separate from the rest of the scene). He expounds,

(And I Tiresias have foresuffered all  
 Enacted on this same divan or bed;  
 I who have sat by Thebes below the wall  
 And walked among the lowest of the dead.) (Eliot 243-6)

The term “foresuffered” is coined by Eliot here to indicate the universality of Tiresias’ experience. The seer has both been man and woman, seer and voyeur. Hence he easily envisions himself playing out similar scenes, “Enacted on this same divan or bed.” This four-line *ABAB*-rhyming quatrain contains echoes of the prophet’s incantations, raising him a level above the dullness of the scene itself. In his long and various life, Tiresias has been one acquainted with love and its alternatives. His phrase “foresuffered all” ties him to the entirety of human experience, its climaxes and its degradations. Unlike the other characters in *The Waste Land*, Tiresias recognizes that the “spiritual failure” of the land is intrinsically tied to its “sexual failure” (Langbaum 113). In the sense Tiresias becomes likened to the figure of Christ on the cross, shouldering the sins and afflictions of all humanity. Similar to the female Philomela, this man had the will of the gods “rudely forc’d” upon him, and suffered undue harm (McRae 211-2). Thus Tiresias becomes one of few sympathetic and tragic figures in *The Waste Land* since (like Christ) he did not deserve the punishments he was given. As the universal human, he is afflicted by human evil.

Tiresias’ prophecies and insights are the results of many long years of human observations. The blind seer, long prophesying from “below the wall” of Thebes (Eliot 245), saw the events that brought about the fall of the families of Oedipus and Creon, and



these become a backdrop to his new in *The Waste Land*. In the stories of Oedipus, love can be considered akin to an Aristotelian moderation point between two extremes: hatred and lust. Oedipus' natural love for father and mother unwittingly turn to a lack of love for his father (Oedipus mistakenly kills his father, Laius), and an excess of love for his mother (he unwittingly marries his mother, Jocasta); Oedipus' perverted love ends up ruining him. Tiresias has watched their lives unravel (alongside everyone else in Oedipus' and his uncle Creon's families) through such misbegotten love. Oedipus is responsible for the wasteland his kingdom has become, just like the Fisher King. Eliot's line 246 recalls Book XI of Homer's *Odyssey*, recounting Odysseus' journey to the underworld and his subsequent consultation of Tiresias. Tiresias foretells that if Odysseus and his men can refrain from lusting after the possessions of Helios, the sun god, they will return home safely. Later Odysseus is trapped for seven years as the goddess Calypso's lover, delaying him from returning home to his wife Penelope. Tiresias suggests that false love was the undoing of many of the Greeks and will be just as destructive for modern people. Self-gratifying *eros* and lukewarm *philia* love have defeated *agapē*—true, complete love.

On a textual level, we should note that Eliot's lines from 215-56 were first written as rhyming quatrains until Ezra Pound edited out some of the lines and left an irregular pattern behind in Eliot's poem (Valerie Eliot 22-53; Kermode 103). This explains the rather confusing rhyming system that results. The longest apparently-intact sequence remaining includes the twelve lines (three quatrains) from 235 to 246. While we have gotten quite used to the fragmentary construction of *The Waste Land*, these sorts of alterations toss out our calculations, to a degree. For instance, had this entire stanza been written in one poetic form or another, we could have probably managed to explain how well it fit to the text. Had the entire section been more regular, made up (for example) of

quatrains of iambic pentameter (elegiac stanza), we might have called it an elegy upon the slaying of romantic love. Conversely, if the lines and rhymes had been *less* regular than they now are, they might have represented the disjunction between idealism and reality, the actual event of love being a shallow comparison to what was expected. But by leaving his house in such disarray, Eliot is effectively thumbing his nose at *us* here, as textual analysts, by leaving some patterns alone and altering others. There is perhaps a wanton carelessness allowed into this poetic form simply for the sake of doing so. The meaning may be found in the form on occasion, or it may not. It appears Eliot is happy to keep things extremely disjointed; through this ambiguous bit of indifference, the poet nearly abandons poetic form as an adequate method of conveying meaning.

However, it would be naïve to cease entirely to seek meanings within the poetic forms. Something can still be gleaned in the patterns of the passages if we look a bit further. Tiresias' narrative has been a change from our previous narrators as an identifiable source of experience. Tiresias' distinction is his duality: he is a liminal spirit made up entirely of dueling natures, and this allows him to describe the paradoxes he describes in the modern world. Even lacking the use of his two eyes, the ambiguous Tiresias sees all things as dueling opposites and is capable of describing such "*two-ness*" as he sees it in humans. This becomes clear throughout the text in the form of the multiple word repetitions and binary images. Tiresias sees in pairs, expressing his visions in duplicated words and sounds (such as "wait" and "throbbing" "at the violet hour" in lines 215-20). Further, Tiresias always describes himself always as being both male and female as a "man with wrinkled female breasts," and an "old man with wrinkled dugs" (219, 228). His address to himself, "I Tiresias" (218, 228), is also doubled in the same way, describing himself always as existing "between two lives" (243).

The duplication effect continues with Tiresias' depiction of the other players in the scene. The woman's clothing also come in pairs as she sets out plural: "Stockings, slippers, camisoles, and stays" on her divan (Eliot 227). The binary nature of sexuality becomes reflected in her clothes. Within the omnipresent duality, sexuality is captured within stand-ins for humans, with the language of two "assaulting" "hands" adding duplicity to multiplicity (239-40). Multiplied mechanical motions keep the mind from involving itself in sordid affairs. Experience is also duplicated in this passage, as Tiresias notes by saying he has "foresuffered all [these events] / Enacted on this same divan" (243-4). Imagery aside, Eliot also employs the binary nature of the rhymes that remain in the passage to create an echoing effect. Rhymes appear in alternating pairs for much of the passage (though, as mentioned, not in *all* of it), continuing the effect of recalling memories. Alternating rhymes create a backdrop of an almost-subconscious repetition, unifying the entire section despite its variation.

Returning to Eliot's love scene, Tiresias notes that the lover's last kiss can only be thought of as "patronising" (247). It is a token show of respect erected as a half-apology for the youth's emotionless, invasive contact. There is nothing natural in this scene of artificial lovemaking. Though sexuality ought to have created a holy sort of duality as two lovers become one, we are instead left unsatisfied as these figures remain spiritually distant and indifferent (Bolton 28). Blessed union is defeated by selfish separateness, and the joining of two people this scene might have witnessed has instead been replaced by "one bold stare" from the selfish lover and an ending of separation (Eliot 232). The young man leaves under cover of night, "groping" his way numbly through the last exchange (247-8). Darkness is his calling card and it allows him an escape from any crushing self-consideration. Duplication has bred both duplicity and sterility.

## Section Three (ll. 249-65): The Gramophone Sonnet

This short section is a transitional piece of “The Fire Sermon,” pushing us away from the stabilizing influence of Tiresias’ lucid prophecy. Here we see something like a stream of consciousness as the actors fade into the music of the gramophone. This, and the on-again off-again rhyming scheme is carried over from the last stanza as the lights fade on the lovers’ meeting, with the two people remaining in a binary opposition. During their encounter the man was the active participant in contrast to the woman’s passive nonresistance to his machinations (Eliot 242). But with the male’s exit, Tiresias returns to his vision of the female and she becomes the new actor in the story. This is emphasized by the first action she takes after the carbuncular man leaves: she immediately looks in the mirror and refocuses her mind on herself alone, “Hardly aware of her departed lover” (250). The house agent’s clerk has left little enough a mark upon her mind.

Though Tiresias’ narrative imagery and even the rhyming couplets seemed to try to create a union of the two souls, they have all failed. The union was bred of the choleric fires of lust, and when its passions have dissipated, separation returns. Thus our typist can very easily forget her “lover” immediately after his exit. Our narrator continues, “Her brain allows one half-formed thought to pass: / ‘Well now that’s done: and I’m glad it’s over’” (251-2). An element of comedy surfaces here in her matter-of-fact thoughts, though dark. Her tone matches the farcical nature of love in this world, relegated to an act without any serious meaning. Her “one half-formed thought” in line 251 mirrors the description of her companion, who was denoted in the last stanza by his “one bold stare” (232). Each of them is simply “one” single person, obsessed with himself or herself alone. Each remains separated from the other by an isolated ego. They are one alone rather than one together, and Tiresias cannot help lamenting the infeasible duality of two “ones.”

Eliot continues the flat irony of line 252 with an allusion to Oliver Goldsmith's *The Vicar of Wakefield*. The song from chapter 24 of the novel goes:

When lovely woman stoops to folly,  
 And finds too late that men betray,  
 What charm can soothe her melancholy,  
 What art can wash her guilt away?  
 The only art her guilt to cover,  
 To hide her shame from every eye,  
 To give repentance to her lover  
 And wring his bosom—is to die. (Kermode 103)

The poem betrays a decidedly-sexist eighteenth-century sensibility, and its use by Eliot turns ironic. One would have a hard time imagining the typist of “The Fire Sermon” as an innocent virgin seduced by an unscrupulous man (Cunningham 77). In truth, “the young man carbuncular” seems perhaps as much the victim of their exchange as the woman, particularly due to her vestments spread on the divan that indicate similar encounters with other men are highly likely. Eliot’s woman is several generations removed from Goldsmith’s Olivia and Sophia, and his song serves only to underscore the farcical nature of the encounter between the typist and the clerk. The melodrama of seeking death as salvation from a checkered innocence has become justly laughable in the modern age. Instead the pragmatic typist “smooths her hair” and “puts a record on the gramophone” after the encounter (Eliot 255-6).

Though not as dramatic as seeking death, the music is its own way of escapism, as a means of distraction and as an anesthetic. The typist still attempts to escape whatever painful feelings of regret linger. Sexual behavior is perfunctory for the typist, and her

actions afterward are similarly programmed into her head. She “Paces about her room again, alone,” performing motions with an “automatic hand” in a kind of ritual dance designed to help her forget (254-5). This “dance” is accompanied by a musical machine. The gramophone is the perfect distraction; the player is a device that cheaply and conveniently reproduces music, but it replaces the personality and spontaneity of a human performer with the perfect, soulless efficiency of a mechanical device. The typist’s hand smoothing her hair mimics the mechanical motion of the needle on the record (256). Her words have become scripted much like the music itself, not knowing what to say (252).

Eliot has actually done a very clever poetic work here. He has managed to depict his woman as a machine—but the result is not as forbidding as such a comparison seems to imply. Instead, Goldsmith’s glib sentiments are replaced by a deep sense of sorrow for a woman who must hide herself in machinelike routines to defeat her discontent. We suddenly realize that we do not even know this woman’s name; she has none. Neither does the clerk, nor the Smyrna merchant; only the one watching these exchanges—Tiresias—has a name and a personality. Most of the players in this drama have no distinct identities. Their only markers are their professions—their mechanical purposes. This anonymity is as much a rejection of the modern age as Eliot has offered so far. Even Tiresias, the king of ambiguity, has a more distinct presence than those who actually *inhabit* modernity. Loneliness has not produced individuality but merely obscurity.

Throughout *The Waste Land* Eliot’s women appear to follow his men in a common pattern. They all become associated with the broken nature of the environment, and the typist is no exception. Rachel Potter sums them up as follows: “Madame Sosostris dishes out a debased and secondhand form of spiritual knowledge; the woman in ‘A Game of Chess’ mis-recognizes what the man is thinking; the women in the pub are in

states of extreme physical decay; and the typist is unconscious of her own state of sexual degradation” (Potter 226). Yet this cannot be taken as a vision of Eliot’s actual view of women. The men of the poem are also in similar states of decay: the “son of man” is wilting in the desert; St. Narcissus is inflicting wounds upon himself; Eugenides sees love in dollar signs; the rest are impotent, angry, effete, and nonexistent. Half of them are buried and the others are drowning. Like the speech in the bar and the “exchanges” between couples in “A Game of Chess” and “The Fire Sermon,” all we hear are vacuous words condemning a vacuous people. Eliot’s poetry is more an attack on the leisure society as a whole than it is a diatribe against women (Potter 227).

Our next stanza (lines 257-65) leaves the typist behind before morphing into a different sort of poem for the last section of “The Fire Sermon.” Eliot begins with another quotation from *The Tempest*, continuing Ferdinand’s speech about “the king my father’s wrack” from line 191. “This music crept by me upon the waters,” Ferdinand says of Ariel’s song about his father’s death (*The Tempest* I.ii.393). Here the same false notes that deluded Ferdinand now arch their way through the air from our typist’s gramophone with a similar intent, distracting her from unwanted thoughts. The next line informs us we have drifted out of the woman’s window and back to the streets of London, moving “along the Strand, up Queen Victoria Street” (Eliot 258). The speaker is heading eastward, following the River Thames from Westminster to the central City of London, the heart of finance and business in England and the world (in Eliot’s time). The strand—whether beside the modern Thames or on the rocky beach of Prospero’s isle—symbolizes confusion, catching the notes of music designed to mislead minds.

For the remainder of the stanza, the speaker laments the replacement of the past with the present times and its gramophone notes. The speaker (likely Tiresias) laments:

O City city, I can sometimes hear,  
 Beside a public bar in Lower Thames Street,  
 The pleasant whining of a mandoline  
 And a clatter and a chatter from within  
 Where fishmen lounge at noon.... (259-63)

The mandolin's notes represent honest, congenial music in contrast to Ariel's bedeviling songs and the mechanical strains of the gramophone. Tiresias longs for a past where the joyous songs of the peasant troubadour fill the air. This mandolin may play a "whining" song, but it is still preferable to the "automatic hand" guiding the gramophone's perfect repetitions (255, 261). Inside the public house with the fishermen, the world is casual and comfortable in contrast to the dark and lonely city beyond. Despite the usual darkness we have come to expect in these modern cities, Eliot follows Baudelaire in putting forth a city that is not really any viler "than nature, than life itself" (Nicole Ward 102). If such a scene could have existed in the past, perhaps it may return in the future.

These images of comfort and comradeship extend to a spiritual element. Between the "fishmen's" pub and London Bridge rests a beautiful church "where the walls / Of Magnus Martyr hold / Inexplicable splendour of Ionian white and gold" (263-5). St. Magnus-the-Martyr, one of architect Christopher Wren's most famous churches, has an interior dominated by twin rows of Ionian columns with white shafts and golden capitals. Coupling the magnificent church to the tavern next door produces a joint picture of benevolence in the midst of the dark city, a sense of goodness that combines the sacred and secular. The fishermen carousing seem to be irreverent men of the world, lusty and friendly, but their vocation ties them to Jesus' "fishers of men." Similarly, the Ionic architecture of the Anglican church creates a splendor that goes beyond religion. The



Ionians (one of the original four Greek tribes) were known chiefly as empiricists, relying on science over spirituality to answer questions of the world. Within these church walls the rational and religious can intermingle without conflict. Using this compound image, Tiresias espouses a viewpoint that the world was once united, including even the secular and the sacred, and such union should still be sought (Abrams 2378). The phallic pillars themselves become not a sexually-aggressive image, but one of fertility and prosperity. Pastoral memories of vanished eras drift back to the narrator like the notes of an almost-forgotten song. Purely artificial divisions have arisen in the world, and have resulted in monumental disunity. An “Inexplicable” beauty has turned to false division and decay.

We have called lines 249-65 the “Gramophone Sonnet” even though at seventeen lines and with an irregular meter and rhyme it hardly appears to be a sonnet. However, these short stanzas are thematically linked in a style not unlike the Italian Sonnet. The first stanza, from 249-56, presents the problem: a mechanical woman and her false, distracting music. The “solution” to this scene comes in the vision of the old, friendly city in the next stanza, lines 257-65. Here the counterpoint is a benevolent music of artistic, companionable humanity, with communal pubs and churches as opposed to a lonely London flat. This is fitting because the Italian *sonnet* translates to “little song;” thus the music motif running through these stanzas helps present them as a sort of sonnet.

As for the “songs” themselves, the first “octet” has an *ABABCDCD* rhyme scheme, its regularity indicating that Eliot and Pound refrained from repeating the edits of the previous section. The rhymes coupled with the rhythms of (mostly) iambic pentameter produce an even stronger sense of melodiousness. The first stanza is built within one of the most rigid of poetic structures—unusual for *The Waste Land*. We are presented with a stanza that shares many formal qualities with older literature, but surprisingly it produces

no answers to the present darkness, and only presents a problem. Its too-rigid singing—like the gramophone—is too constricting to be helpful.

However the “sestet” from lines 257-65 is quite the opposite. It actually has *nine* lines (a sestet and a half); its rhymes are either poor, aslant, or nonexistent; and its meter ranges from iambic trimeter to trochaic hexameter to nothing at all. Instead of having the sonnet “turn” at the usual ninth line, it shifts at the eleventh line when the speaker sings out of his memory, “O City city, I can sometimes hear...” (259). Likewise, the rhyme scheme is *ABCB'DDEFF* (where *B'* denotes the same word was repeated)—hardly an impressive use of repeated sounds—and the metrical pattern is too disparate to tie together. In effect, the second stanza is as unusual as the first was consistent. Yet in this looseness it avoids the depressing uniformity of the typist’s garret; instead of funeral marches, we have free-spinning lines that form the accompaniment to a cheerful tune from the convivial past. If the previous stanza is regular, then this one is a reel, a “little song” as full of jubilant soundplay as it is lacking in conventions. Eliot sets aside artificial poetic conventions to indicate that art should be fluid and organic, music from the mandolin, not from the gramophone. His answer to the stuffy city sounds is found in the reeling tune of this second stanza in all of its frivolous wending.

At any rate, the pair of stanzas ends with a couplet, giving a nod back to old poetic stylings while managing to create some sense of unity for our “sonnet.” We are reminded here again of the troubled “couples” of the wasteland, but with Tiresias’ recollections of a pastoral past, we leave this scene feeling renewed and somewhat hopeful.

## Section Four (ll. 266-311): The River's Song

After his musical musings, Eliot continues the same theme by presenting us with an actual song to consider. Re-envisioning Wagner's opera cycle *Der Ring des Nibelungen* (*The Ring of the Nibelung*), this section has Eliot crafting what he refers to as "The Song of the (three) Thames-daughters," which will continue through line 306 even after the real song ends ("Notes on *The Waste Land*" 73). The backdrop is the final opera in the cycle, *Die Götterdämmerung* (*The Twilight of the Gods*), wherein the Rhine-maidens (mermaid-like naiads) sing that the Rhine has lost its beauty since its gold has been stolen (Rainey 110-1). Eliot's text sings of a similar theft, the loss of benevolence and beauty from the River Thames. The apocalyptic nature of Wagner's *Ring* cycle makes such comparisons foreboding.

Eliot's "Thames-daughters" sing that the river bleeds "Oil and tar" instead of golden ripples or crystal water—identifying industry with natural destruction (Eliot 267). Tar is used for iron-smelting and is a byproduct of converting coal to fuel, making it a hallmark of modern industry. Oil greases the machines that ravage the natural world. Sticky and slimy, these substances are antitheses to the refreshing, clean water that once housed naiads. Saying that the "river sweats" out these liquids indicates the strain of the exploitative machine age upon nature (266). Symbolically, vessels of industry and commerce—"barges" adrift on "the turning tide"—subdue the once-great river (268-9). Despite this, the river maintains some of its ancient strength, since it directs where these vessels will go; the barges do not chart their own course, but actually "drift" "[t]o leeward, swing on the heavy spar" (268, 272). Rather than fighting the elements, modern vessels follow the wind, letting their "Red sails" do the work for them (270). These images of industry, laden with oil and tar, exist by using nature to their own ends.

Line 270 flashes out of the setting, suddenly describing its bright “Red sails.” The red sails are ironic in context; thus far in “The Fire Sermon,” hot red colors have signified only the fires of lust. We would expect a description of pale, blank, lukewarm vessels, but the passionate red defies this. The barge’s sail and mast can be taken as human symbols, in this case symbols of passion (the red sails) and death (the yardarm). The human vessel rides amidships, but the cross from which it hangs its colors is the cross upon which it will be hung. The speaker watches the scene and relates:

The barges wash  
 Drifting logs  
 Down Greenwich reach  
 Past the Isle of Dogs. (Eliot 274-6)

Greenwich is to the east on the opposite shore, a place of prosperity opposite the poverty of the Isle of Dogs (Kermode 104). Trade and resource-exploitation provides the dividing line between wealth and impoverishment. This first sung stanza ends with the Rhine-daughters’ refrain from Wagner’s opera, as they chant: “Weialala leia / Wallala leialala” (Eliot 277-8). When faced with the destructive nature of the modern world, these water spirits revert to chanting in their own natural language. Within their indiscernible words is a feeling of disappointment as the glorious strains of Wagner translate into little more than moaning sounds on the page (Waldron 433). Wagner’s magnificent opera music becomes whittled to meaningless chanting by a world that will not listen.

To begin the second verse of Eliot’s musical interlude, we are met by an apparition of Queen Elizabeth on a boat with her would-be lover Robert Dudley in line 279. Dudley was made First Earl of Leicester by the queen and was her closest courtier. Eliot’s notes quote James Anthony Froude’s *History of England*, containing a:

[L]etter of De Quadra to Philip of Spain [saying]: “In the afternoon we were in a barge.... (The Queen) was alone with Lord Robert and myself on the poop, when they began to talk nonsense, and went so far that Lord Robert at last said, as I was on the spot there was no reason why they should not be married if the queen pleased.” (“Notes on *The Waste Land*” 73)

Such a marriage never materialized, and their impotent courtship returns now as a symbol of lost love on the Thames. Ironically, the “Virgin Queen” had become entangled with fruitless romances with Leicester. Elizabeth I, though a powerful and gifted ruler, here appears as a sort of “Fisher Queen,” fishing for love on the river. She has no children to inherit the throne, and her lack of offspring condemns her society to a sort of political wasteland. Rather than fishing, the “Fisher Queen” seeks solace in “beating oars” futilely against the river, trying unsuccessfully to row against the current (Eliot 280). She becomes likened to the typist from earlier in “The Fire Sermon” as another woman in an empty relationship. The queen was born in Greenwich (another connection), and here she has effectively died (Abrams 2378). High or low, the wasteland destroys all classes.

Eliot paints the boat the queen rides on as follows: “The stern was formed [from] / A gilded shell [of] / Red and gold” (281-3). Although bedecked with ornaments of gold and scarlet, Eliot points out that this craft is a “gilded shell”—nothing more than a beautiful surface over a false interior; it is ideally suited to their pointless love-making. Even the monarchy has turned false in the wasteland; the queen is no different than a commoner, playing out designs of lust and conquest within the vessel. Eliot is performing an act of leveling by exhibiting the loveplay of Elizabeth—an incredibly popular ruler—and Leicester’s as parallel to the affairs of the second-rate clerk and typist. Position and

power hold no guarantees of wisdom. Thus the “brisk swell / Rippled *both* shores [emphasis added]” (284-5), condemning *both* the dwellers of Elizabeth’s posh Greenwich and the poor of the Isle of Dogs alike. Eliot is not blaming one class for the world’s problems, but all classes. He does not hate the gilded boats of the rich so much as the general indifference such objects have fostered. He does not want to see his generation washed away and “Carried down stream” without any protest at all (287).

The song of the Thames-daughters ends with ironic images of love as “The peal of bells / [and] White towers” form a reminder of a time of traditional love and marriage (288-9). Wedding bells tolled for one of the highest expressions of love, sacrificial and enduring. Here they ring for something else. Such bells recall John Donne’s “Meditation XVII” as church bells sing out for both weddings and funerals. Donne’s piece speaks to the universality of humankind, professing that everyone’s life affects everyone else. Such sentiments are shuffled aside now; empathy and love have vanished with Donne. These bells by the Thames seem to ring for some sort of funeral. “The Fire Sermon” has so far constantly conjoined concupiscence to the death of the *spiritual* person, and here it is tied to the death of the *physical* body as well.

As the Thames-daughters close the second verse of their song with the repeated refrain from lines 277-8, we can distinguish now the sounds of lamentation (290-1). Just as Wagner’s Rhine-daughters wept at the loss of their river’s gold, Eliot’s river nymphs weep to see what has become of the Thames. Its natural beauty is overrun with barges of tar and floating logs cut from ancient forests; the very “gold” of the water has been stolen and reforged into a facade upon the monarch’s floating toy. The Thames-daughters speak for Eliot in resenting the misappropriation of wealth and power on the river, as the people of the city rob invaluable life from its waters.

As their song fades, we are transported back to Eliot's time, as evinced by the incursion of "Trams and dusty trees" upon our reflections (292). "Dusty trees" sounds foreboding; the trees seem to be covered in soot or ash and form another unnatural image of death-in-life. The descriptions in the next pair of lines are parodied from a passage from Dante's *Purgatorio*, where the speaker cries, "Oh, please, remember me! I am called [La] Pia. / Siena gave me life [bore me], Maremma death [undid me]" (*Purgatorio* V.133-4). La Pia was a woman of Siena, murdered by her husband in the region of Maremma; Highbury is in the north part of Greater London, while Richmond and Kew are resort areas in west London (Kermode 104). The connection with La Pia makes the person in the canoe out to be a female figure. As the speaker remembers drifting downriver she says, "Highbury bore me. Richmond and Kew / Undid me. By Richmond I raised my knees / Supine on the floor of a narrow canoe" (Eliot 293-5). Richmond is an ancient monarchical setting, and Kew is known for its Royal Botanical Gardens. Her negative attitude toward these elite locales results in her gesture of indifference, resignation, and some amount of impudence. Her posture here is also a suggestion of an upended sexuality (Bolton 27; Gardner 90-1). It is a sort of opposite to a kneeling, deferential posture toward power, showing no respect for the impressive places she passes in returning to the slum area of Moorgate in east London (Eliot 296).

The woman goes on in the next stanza, recounting her story:

"My feet are at Moorgate, and my heart

Under my feet. After the event

He wept. He promised a 'new start.'

I made no comment. What should I resent?" (296-9)

Her story is preeminently sexual, based on both the details and her tone, and it links this

woman back to our London typist (she is the same figure, essentially). Her “supine” position and “raised knees” produce a passively sexual posture, but also involve a strange parody of giving birth (though to nothing in particular). The canoe she speaks of is phallic, an aggressive figure that apparently traps her. From line 297 her story becomes more specific and personal; “the event” is a loveless sexual encounter. Her pose recalls the bar scene from “A Game of Chess” and the discussions of abortive love and also Philomela. Unusually, the female figure is here portrayed as eminently pragmatic in contrast to the weeping male figure. “What should I resent?” she casually asks, if their sexuality resulted only in loveless sterility. What else might she have wanted, she wonders. While the man hopes for “a new start,” the woman is not so deluded (298). She did not expect true love from their encounter, and unlike the man she is contented with her lot. She makes “no comment,” unwilling to encourage him (299).

Like the typist, here is Eliot’s modern woman, the Belladonna who has escaped the bonds of sentimentality. This woman’s passions have been buried with her heart “Under my feet” in the foul slums of Moorgate (297). Dark city streets burned the innocence and affections out of this woman long ago, and the shell that remains acts mechanically to avoid unpleasant feelings. The image is disturbing: Eliot’s citizens have planted their souls deep in the ground and stomped all over them, wondering why they existed at all. Her narration turns to the landscape again, mentioning “Margate Sands,” another resort location on the strand (300). “Margate” echoes “Moorgate,” creating a parallel from two very-opposite settings, equating the elevated with the degraded.

T. S. Eliot actually stayed at the Margate resort from October to November of 1921 as he worked on *The Waste Land* and attempted to regain his diminishing health (Kermode 104). At this same moment in time the American modernist Wallace Stevens



had published his poem “The Snow Man” in the October 1921 issue of *Poetry*. As Eliot continues the monologue in lines 301-2, Stevens’ poem seems to be purposely invoked. When Eliot’s narrator states, “I can connect / Nothing with nothing,” the final stanza of Stevens’ “The Snow Man” comes to mind: “For the listener, who listens in the snow, / and, nothing himself, beholds / Nothing that is not there and the nothing that is” (Stevens 13-5). Stevens believed that the individual mind made meanings of the universe, that the artist creates significance by experiencing the world and expressing it. Eliot borrows this idea here. Being able only to connect “Nothing with nothing” is an admission of the artist’s failure to make sense out of personal experience. All old parameters of experience have become useless because the places, people, and phenomena of the past have nothing to do with the present; thus “Nothing with nothing” else can be compared, and nothing can be finally understood.

This sense of general misunderstanding is juxtaposed with a *new* understanding, that one can understand a solid, real “Nothing” by exploring this society of *nothings*. The speaker has come to the realization that everything she sees tells her “Nothing” of truth—not because of her own lack of understanding but simply because there *is* nothing true about the world she experiences. The mind races to connect patterns from its experiences, but continually fails to do so (Drain 34). Like Stevens’ “Snow Man,” Eliot’s woman has become lucid, realizing that the world has ruined its own meanings; she sees exactly how empty it has become. Thus her expression becomes less a pitiful admission of self-doubt than a perceptive realization that this world is no longer able to make sense on its own; it has removed all parameters of meaning and left a solid mass of “Nothing” in its wake. Through this identification she manages to find a strange sort of solace.

The next image, the “broken fingernails of dirty hands,” depicts an abject,

laboring people, the sort that the resort at “Margate Sands” was built upon (Eliot 303). Eliot’s next two lines, “My people humble people who expect / Nothing” (304-5), recall the voice of God to the Hebrews in the Old Testament. After their disobedience Jehovah promises the Israelites that if they repent he will end the drought:

When I shut up the heavens so that there is no rain... or send a plague among my people, if my people, who are called by my name, will humble themselves and pray and seek my face and turn from their wicked ways, then will I hear from heaven and will forgive their sin and will heal their land. (II Chronicles VII.13-4)

Here the “Nothing with nothing” begins to make more sense. The woman says that, like the Israelites of old, her people have fallen under a plague of decadence and ruined relationships. They have heard God’s promise, but though they are a “humble people who expect / Nothing” (304-5), this humility paradoxically keeps them from repenting. Knowing that they do not deserve divine reinstatement, they choose not to accept it. The people are degraded and poverty-stricken, but they remain that way because they will not accept a God who can save them. They break their hands and bend their backs under the weight of hopelessness, but they will not raise their faces to heaven except to smirk, wanting “Nothing” of God and expecting the same in return. These people suffer under their own cruel yoke, and with them the wasteland remains blighted, scorched, and broken.

The strange “la la” of line 306 is left out of quotation marks, indicating that our speaker has gone and we’ve returned to an echo of the Thames-daughters. It is something of an absurdist transitional line. Although “la la” reestablishes the idea of a melody (as a musical note) it is severely out-of-place with the serious tone of the lines preceding it.

However, it contains an echo of the mermaids' refrain: "Weialala leia / Wallala leialala," and breaks off the ends of the syllables to create a sense of ending (Eliot 290-1). "The Fire Sermon" is drawing to a close.

The final section of "The Fire Sermon," lines 307-11, returns to the Buddha's eponymous speech while also referencing St. Augustine's *Confessions*. Eliot writes in his "Notes on *The Waste Land*," "The collocation of these two representatives of Eastern and Western asceticism, as the culmination of this part of the poem, is not an accident" (74). As described in his *Confessions*, Augustine's youth was full of sexual and spiritual dalliances, and he recollects, "I came to Carthage and all around me hissed a cauldron of illicit loves.... I sought an object for my love; I was in love with love" (*Confessions* III.1; see North 58). The mention of Carthage recalls the Punic Wars from line 70 of "The Burial of the Dead," as well as the Phoenician merchant who will be reappearing in the next act. The world and its burning lusts led Augustine astray before God rescued him. St. Augustine writes, "I also entangle my steps with beautiful externals [endless temptations]. However, you rescue me, Lord, you rescue me" (X.53). Another translation is: "I entangle my steps with these outward beauties, but thou pluckest me out, O Lord, thou pluckest me out!" (Kermode 105). Eliot pairs Augustine's fervent wish for salvation from worldly lusts to the words of the Buddha's Fire Sermon. The "Burning burning burning burning" line from the Buddha's sermon, intersticed within Augustine's words, demonstrates Eliot's purpose in unifying East and West to condemn the impotent fires of lust that have spawned a wasteland (308). Both St. Augustine and the Buddha wished for freedom from the body's slavish attachment to sexual passions. The image is necessarily complex, with the element of fire representing both the concupiscent passion and the desire to burn it away (Tamplin 368). A different, cleansing flame must defeat the selfish fire.

Finally, the physical construction of this last piece of “The Fire Sermon” (266-311) is worthy of a closer look. As this section is dominated by the theme and presence of music, it makes sense to base its lines around musicality. The most obvious use of sound is heard when the Thames-daughters break into Wagner’s song with their rounds of musical notes (277-8, 290-1, 306). The meters of the first two stanzas (266-91) are semi-regular, made up of iambs and the occasional trochee, though they could be described only as the loosest sort of dimeter. The first stanza scatters rhymes around seemingly at random, forming an *ABCDEDBFGHG* “system” with only three pairs of rhymes (266-76). The second stanza is even more chaotic, limited to the rhymes of “shell” and “swell” in 282 and 284, with several other off-rhymes or rhymes separated by significant distances (“oars” in line 280 is far from 285’s “shores” and the near-rhyme “bells” is four lines after “swell”). Combining distant and almost-haphazard rhymes and a quick up-and-down meter gives the impression of variable waves rocking a barge back and forth, crafting an accurate image of the river itself. Hearing and feeling the waves rise and fall lends an air of inevitability to the Thames-daughters’ songs as well; just as the boat must follow the swells, there is little escape from the currents of life in the wasteland. The river motif becomes an accurate depiction of confusion.

The last section of “The Fire Sermon,” lines 292-311, looks as though it would be formally even freer than the stanzas preceding it. However, ironically, an inspection turns up a regular rhyme scheme in the primary stanza in the form of the elegiac stanza. Though this section looks nothing like quatrains of iambic pentameter, the rhymes are present, and with the exception of lines 302 and 305 (concerned with their repeated “Nothings”), the stanza rhymes almost too-perfectly with its *ABAB CDCD EFEF* construction. This technique of using rhyme to form a tidy condensation of the story is

borrowed from Byron to an excellent effect here (Brady 38-9). Juxtaposed alongside the stoic, formal structure is the breakdown of human control. Here Eliot mirrors the theme of the “humble people” in line 304, people who have built a city that appears technically perfect (like the systematic rhymes) but is actually a cluster of random meaninglessness. The rhymes feel like a gaudy slipcover on a broken piece of furniture.

As “The Fire Sermon” draws to a close, it begins to pick up speed, driven by quick, clipped syllable sounds. With the speed the scene’s intensity increases, too, as we move from images of the river to the opposite—depictions of the “Burning burning burning burning” fires of lust (Eliot 308). The passions that have been on display throughout all of Part III are firing at their hottest and fastest now, threatening to burn away any meanings in the desire for pure sensation. Our totem has been fire this past section, and here the fires of lust are raging out of control, despite the efforts of the Buddha and St. Augustine to stay its power. It burns freely now, ravaging the scene and destroying everything within it, hot enough even to burn away the river that has symbolically held it at bay until this point. Here at the end we are left with one word, one image of the wasteland, this “burning” (311).

Yet we must note once again that though fire destroys the good, it also purges the evil; paradoxically, in its destruction it purifies. Thus we have come upon a turning point in *The Waste Land*, and there is a strange sense of relief in the devastation brought about by the flames. With nothing left to lose, perhaps the world can be reborn from the ashes of its unquenchable fires.

## Part IV: "Death by Water"

Eliot's shortest section of *The Waste Land* perfectly reflects the fragility of human life in its short, sudden, and inexplicable drowning of Phlebas the Phoenician. The dominant element here is obviously water, and the burial of Phlebas corresponds to the winter of the human soul. Yet *without* this burial of the deadlands—without this killing off of the wasteland—there can be no hope for resurrection. The phlegmatic Phlebas here manages to be one and all of the human characters in Eliot's epic, and with the sailor's submergence we see potential for the first time for the Fisher King to cease fishing. Suddenly with this drowning comes a hope that this baptism will raise up some new creation.

### Section the First and Only (ll. 312-21): Death of a Sailor

Madame Sosostris' tarot deck returns to haunt us as the short fourth act opens in Eliot's drama. In line 47 of "The Burial of the Dead" the good medium drew our card, revealing "the drowned Phoenician Sailor." With this she charged us to "Fear death by water" and now, it appears, with good reason (55). The Greek element is very clear this time: water, associated with the phlegmatic, calm, passive personality type. Though ocean of water appears suddenly in the poem—a life-giving element that might have resurrected the wasteland—it turns fierce, drowning our sailor instead of reviving him. From autumn we have come upon a harsh winter, a season of frigid death, and it presents the "nadir of the spiritual journey" of the Fisher King and the inhabitants of the wilderness (Spanos 249-50). Eliot increases the feelings of impotency by allowing the reader to arrive too late upon the drowning scene to do anything but watch. As "Death by Water" opens we have no time to think before seeing we are too late, finding "Phlebas the Phoenician, a fortnight dead" (312). He is another incarnation of the merchant sailor type in the poem, unifying Mr. Eugenides, Ferdinand's father, and the Smyrna merchant, and he represents humanity in its entirety, sinking into the sea.

Part IV is actually a modified translation from the last stanza of Eliot's French-language "Dans le Restaurant," a poem written several years before *The Waste Land*. The section of "Dans le Restaurant" roughly translates to,

Phlebas the Phoenician, two weeks drowned,  
 forgot the cries of the gulls and the swell of Cornish seas,  
 and the profit and the loss, and the cargo of tin:  
 an undersea current carried him very far,  
 taking him back through the stages of his former life.

Think of it, it was a hard fate;

he was after all once handsome and tall. (Kermode 46; 105)

Throughout *The Waste Land* Eliot has been willing to incorporate not only the writings of others but also his own literary trails. As he has done with his other poems (“The Death of Saint Narcissus,” “Sweeney Among the Nightingales,” and, to a lesser extent, “Gerontion”), here Eliot references his “Dans le Restaurant” because it is the best way to depict the image he wants. The latter is a dramatic monologue about a well-to-do man eating dinner in a restaurant (hence the title), who silently derides the waiter for his inept conversation (Kermode 94). Meanwhile the waiter speaks of the rains and a memory of himself at age seven with a younger girl (to whom he gave primroses and with whom his “love” was ruined by a bothersome dog). The scene fits in well with the general tenor of *The Waste Land*, alluding to memories of lost loves and forgotten rains while also evoking the Hyacinth Girl of Part I. On top of this, the waiter’s speech is another one-way conversation, spoken to one who would prefer not to hear any of it.

“Dans le Restaurant” and “Death by Water” all end in the same boat, so to speak, with the indifferent sea as the closing element to a scene of human loss. The sea is the last resting place for the dead. With the sailor, the whole of humanity is dying, both past and present; his status as a “Phoenician” makes him representative of the ancient past and his worries about “the profit and loss” make him a hallmark of the modern age of commerce (Eliot 314). Now in dying he has forgotten everything, including, “the cry of gulls, and the deep sea swell / And the profit and loss” (313-4). These three separate images will be telling, as we shall soon see.

The first forgotten sense is the sound of crying of “gulls,” recalling Eliot’s earlier wasteland-related poem “Gerontion.” That poem depicts human futility as a “Gull against



the wind, in the windy straits” (69). The image is a naturalistic one of human isolation in the face of universal natural indifference (Summers 19). In “Death by Water” the mention of multiple gulls, all crying at each other, becomes an image of the human community, interacting, communicating, and competing as a social group. Phlebas forgets human society and communication first of all in his drowning as he dies lonely and isolated from humanity.

Secondly, Phlebas another image, the “deep sea swell” (313), representing the world of nature with its raw power and resources, the leviathan that both provides food for the gulls and threatens to drown them with stormy winds. While the human world was the first piece to fall away, losing the world of nature—the entire planet—creates a sense of isolation on a much greater scale. The term “swell” may also be a key to recognizing Phlebas as associated with the Egyptian fertility god Osiris, both of whom carry phallic implications (Smith *The Waste Land* 106-10). Phlebas (even his name is phallic-sounding) has lost whatever fertility potential he once held amidst the overwhelming “deep sea swell.”

Having lost companionship, his world, and his procreative energies, in drowning Phlebas has also forgotten all of the “profit” of his life (314). Everything he built in the unstable world has fallen into the depths alongside his waterlogged corpse; his achievements are all gone, along with his occupations, friendships, beliefs and knowledge. Yet though everything is lost, Phlebas accepts his fate phlegmatically, unemotionally. He makes no attempt to avoid drowning in a sea of indifference, though it appears to steal his life away completely in vain.

But perhaps unexpectedly the last thought to flash through the Phoenician sailor’s head before water filled his lungs concerns his “loss[es]”—everything negative in his

world (314). At the close of life's register with all debits and credits entered, Phlebas finds he has ended up with a very deep deficit. While his life is inundated by the sea's "swell," all he can think of is that everything has been for naught; he has come out a failure at last. But his view may be shortsighted and premature. His death may in fact turn out to be a ritual cleansing rather than a tragic, meaningless accident; we do not know yet whether this "baptism" could be followed by a rebirth (Langbaum 115). In ancient Alexandria an effigy of the god Adonis was thrown into the sea and was resurrected by the people seven days later (Weston 47). However, we still have no indication that the drowning Phlebas can be reborn in the same way, or that such a rebirth could return fertility to the land.

In the meantime, the sea itself "Picked his bones in whispers" (Eliot 316). Brutal nature consumes its own, destroying the sailor as a cancerous part of its being, with an image that harkens back to the "pearls that were his eyes" from *The Tempest* from "The Burial of the Dead." The waters eat away this human bacterium in order to cleanse itself of rot, producing its own "sea change." In contrast to the gaudy celebrations of the Adonis fertility cults, the sea does its work silently, efficiently in its opaque depths. It is the great balancing point of the world, and having seen the plague of infertility for long enough, the sea itself has finally used its powers to wash the slate clean again.

In the next several lines Phlebas the Phoenician is further identified as the universal person; this shifts the meaning of his drowning from a punishment for one evil individual to making it a purifying point for the entire human race. Eliot writes that "As he rose and fell / He passes the stages of his age and youth / Entering the whirlpool" (316-8). Traveling through both youth and age, Phlebas simultaneously represents the human mortal existence. Then Eliot does something strange: he suddenly reaches into the poem

as an authoritative narrator and demands the reader's direct attention in an uncharacteristically direct manner. Eliot speaks to us directly with the repeated pronoun "you," saying: "Gentile or Jew / O you who turn the wheel and look to windward, / Consider Phlebas, who was once handsome and tall as you" (319-21). Age is irrelevant in the human figure of Phlebas, and so is culture and class; whether Jew or Gentile, whether one steers the boat (holding power and status) or simply looks to windward (following orders) does not really matter. Phlebas' death is our joint, universal death.

The image of the one who "turn[s] the wheel" fits within the context of Madame Sosostri's predictions. The wheel of the ship symbolizes control—human mastery over the random power of nature—but it also represents the ever-spinning wheel of fortune that underpins and upends humanity without any sensible logic. The vision of one turning the wheel on the vast ocean becomes a symbol of human futility in the face of a cyclic world, and the question then turns to escaping this circularity [à la the Buddhist approach to enlightenment] (Mayer 272). The death of the sailor becomes a cautionary tale that independence is an illusion—and a costly one at that. Back in "The Burial of the Dead" Madame Sosostri turned the Fisher King's card ("The man with three staves") and identified it with the drought of the wasteland; naturally, the very next card she drew was "the Wheel" (Eliot 51). Human powerlessness is continually connected with the unpredictable nature of the cosmos.

The look and sound of the language in "Death by Water" add to its meanings. Alliteration in particular forms a powerful link to earlier parts of *The Waste Land*. Looking again at the passage, we see a great deal of alliteration:

*Phlebas the Phoenician, a fortnight dead,  
Forgot the cry of gulls, and the deep seas swell*

And the profit and loss.

A current under sea

Picked his bones in whispers. As he rose and fell

He passed the stages of his age and youth [emphases added]. (312-7)

Many strong *f*-sounds appear in the first few lines, and the next section is dominated by *s*-sounds, flowing and swishing back and forth to mimic the waves engulfing Phlebas. Even the structure of the section has been made to mirror ocean waves, with the broken lines recalling the sea's breakers. The consonance found in the "whooshing" *w*-sounds in lines 318-21 again repeat the movements of the ocean:

Entering the whirlpool.

Gentile or Jew

O you who turn the wheel and look to windward,

Consider Phlebas who was once handsome and tall as you. (318-21)

Following these auditory effects, the occasional end-rhymes also mimic the rise and fall of erratically-recurring waves. The word "Phlebas" comes from the Latin "flebas," (though spelled enigmatically in the *Greek* way by Eliot) meaning essentially "you wept" (Nänny 339). Even at the level of the language itself the victim of the waves becomes an object of pathos and sorrow; his death demands our tears.

In Part IV we are left trying to determine Phlebas' final fate since the whole poem hinges upon the question of whether he—as humanity—will rise from the sea or be drowned in it. Line 316, "...And he rose and fell," seems at first glance to be a reversal of Christ, going from life to death. Phlebas has been drowning for two weeks in comparison to Christ, who was dead only three days before rising again; the Adonis cults also submerged their effigies for just a week before rescuing them from the sea (Weston 47).

Perhaps an answer may be found again in “Dans le Restaurant,” lines 28-9. Here the text translates to, “A current under the sea carried him [Phlebas] far away / Returning him to the stages of his former life” (Kermode 94). This line seems hopeful: the waves do not crush him against a rock or drop him into unknown depths, but instead return him to a former self, an older stage in humanity’s history. Here the whirlpool is already coupled to Madame Sosostris’ wheel of fortune and now becomes a wheel of time and chronology. Our spinning sailor is being returned to an earlier part of the wheel, passing once again through stages of age and youth. As the wheeling whirlpool whisks him away, he is being taken back to the beginning, back to a pre-fallen time and space. This must be *some* kind of rebirth though an unusual one. Here are echoes of Noah’s Ark amidst the Deluge—these waves are meant to cleanse the world and give birth to something new.

Yet though we may have discovered some degree of hope in these lines, the most striking words of all are found in the final line of “Death by Water,” again lifted from “Dans le Restaurant.” The tone of the narrator is calm and conversational despite the darkness surrounding the scene he describes. He makes no demands, only asking politely that we “Consider Phlebas, who was once handsome and tall as you” (321). The comparison makes this figure personal: Phlebas is *ourselves*. To resurrect the wasteland, like Phlebas we must abandon meaningless life-as-we-know-it for the fearful unknown of a new existence. In essence, only with the human race sprawled on the sea floor will something new come to earth. Too much of the world is broken to be fixed; the old way must die to make room for the new. These lines form a fitting obituary, demanding we realize that although death leads to rebirth, death is not a genial goodnight—it is a sudden ending to all we know. As such, Eliot finishes soberly with this one instruction, reminder, and warning. Before undertaking self-renewal, he says, only “Consider Phlebas.”

### Part V: “What the Thunder Said”

This, the final act in *The Waste Land*, is the connecting point, the final piece to the puzzle that creates a key to all the rest. After winter came upon us with another “burial of the dead (Phlebas),” we have been transported back to the wasteland in a new springtime. Along with this “newness,” we find a new elemental base for this season: the Greek element of *aether*. Originally the name for the air breathed by the Olympian god, aether later came to describe the realm beyond the earth, the stuff of space. Notably, the Bön tradition, (the oldest extant spiritual system in Tibet), carries similar elemental units to the Greeks system, and they also carry an element of “space” or aether to represent some new, alien matter.

With aether as our setting we should not be surprised to have something from beyond the earth entering the scene; thus Christ now appears from the “aethereal” heavens and arrives on earth. As evinced with its combining aethereal and terrestrial beings, Part V will be concerned largely with tying up the threads of myth together as we watch for rain to return to the parched land. The quest for reintroducing fertility becomes fulfilled when Perceval finally finds his way back to the Chapel Perilous and when the voice of the thunder ushers in the rains.

Most of the other characters within the fifth segment are either anonymous or are only vaguely-suggestive of individuals. Thus we have the “third person” walking alongside (who is either the Christ or an imposter), the woman fiddling in the crumbling city (who hails the end of a culture), and finally the unnamed Fisher King, who finds his own voice at last in the booming sounds of the thunder. There still remain large groups of people here, the soulless inhabitants of Unreal Cities, but they do not become the central figures in the plot. Likewise, the individuals here—though usually unnamed and

opaquely-described—are noticeably different than their forebears from earlier in *The Waste Land*. The merchants and Belladonnas have drowned with Phlebas. With a rebirth comes a new sort of person; the aether will bring something very new to the scene.

Eliot's poetic language will alter here as well. He leaves behind complex metaphors and stanzaic constructions and substitutes in the simple Sanskrit syllables of the *Upanishads* in an attempt to find a new center for the human intellect and spirit. His combination of the spiritual traditions of East and West will help contribute to the search for a way out of the wasteland as Eliot allows transcendent meanings to break the surface of the poem's language for the first time. In doing so, he will help raise up a new force that will resurrect the desolation of the wasteland.

Section One (ll. 322-65): One Walking in the Wilderness

Returning once more to Madame Sosostriis, it appears from Part IV that she was right in advising us to “Fear death by water” (55). However, we should also recall her last bit of fortune-telling, when she sees, “crowds of people, walking round in a ring” (56). This is an odd piece to finish with if we are meant to believe that humanity died with Phlebas, but it appears that the “ring” or wheel of human life has been resurrected (to whatever degree) in the reappearance of people. Thus we should look to see what sort of people have managed to outlive Phlebas and his ledgers. The stories begin to coalesce into one tangible *something*, and where that piece takes us will be the focus of this final piece. This is the second spring, coming after a long year of drought. Thus the poem’s end returns to the beginning in an attempt to supersede it and escape last spring’s infertility (Rajan 12). We can only watch to see what will unfold.

Eliot writes in his “Notes on *The Waste Land*” that “In the first part of Part V three themes are employed: the journey to Emmaus, the approach to the Chapel Perilous (see Miss Weston’s book) and the present decay of Eastern Europe” (74). Naturally there is more going on in the poetry than Eliot cares to elaborate upon, but his words are a starting point from which to frame “What the Thunder Said.” The first image we are given is a frightening one; we see a scene from just before the crucifixion of Christ, with “the torchlight red on sweaty faces” of a menacing throng (Eliot 322). Here we recall the enemies of Christ coming to capture him in the Garden of Gethsemane, “After the frosty silence in the gardens / After the agony in stony places” (323-4; see Luke XXII-XXIII). We suddenly realize that the ruddy circle of torches and faces make up none other than the crowds of people Madame Sosostriis prophesied. We have not come upon a resurrected species of human yet at all if they are still willing to sacrifice the spotless



Lamb. These same red, “sweaty faces” will symbolize the bloodstained guilt of humanity at its darkest.

Singh ties these figures back to Stetson’s betrayal of the narrator back in “The Burial of the Dead,” coupling the image of a backstabbing Stetson and his fellow bankers to that of Judas and the Christ-hating Pharisees (Singh “Eliot’s ‘The Waste Land’” [sic] 46). Christ’s agonized prayers for deliverance “in the gardens” are met only by a “stony” silence from God and with the “shouting and the crying” of a crowd that has come to spill his blood (Eliot 325). Christ is pictured here in the midst of vile chaos, trapped by the people he came to deliver. Abandoned by his friends and captured by his enemies, the end has come near.

The next several lines appear abruptly on the horizon, following awkwardly on the last line without any pausing punctuation. From 325, Eliot describes the scene:

The shouting and the crying  
 Prison and palace and reverberation  
 Of thunder of spring over distant mountains  
 He who was living is now dead  
 We who were living are now dying  
 With a little patience. (325-30)

The result is an uncomfortable enjambment that drives us forward through the distressing scene while searching frantically for a resting point. Until line 359 with its appearance of the third “who walks always beside you,” there will be no punctuation marks to break the story. Interestingly, these opening lines are some of the most lyrical passages of “What the Thunder Said,” creating in the garden the sounds of pounding feet as the inevitable march to crucifixion continues (Brady 41-2). We will return to this phenomenon later.

At any rate, the “shouting and the crying” in “[p]rison and palace...” alludes to the death of Christ and explaining the chaos and sorrow experienced by Christ’s disciples, friends, and family upon his death (Eliot 325-6). It also becomes an indicator that all of humanity is implicated with him in his death. From the dredges of society (the “prisons”) to its highest settings (Pilate in his “palace”), all are responsible for the crucifixion. According to the Gospel of Matthew, after Christ dies, many tombs (“prisons” for the dead) open up and some of the dead are resurrected (Matthew XXVII.52-3), and also the great veil of the temple (God’s “palace”) is ripped in two (XXVII.50-1). In having all of these prisons and palaces shaken by Christ’s death, we once again see a social class-leveling happening. Just as the entire world was implicated in the destruction of Christ, likewise no one in any station of society is excluded from whatever resurrection he can provide. Eliot calls this the “thunder of spring over distant mountains,” indicating that “He who was living is now dead” (327-8). Suddenly, concisely Eliot gives us an explanation for how society first found itself in the wasteland. Christ was killed, and with him all that was good in the world was destroyed, leaving behind only an all-encompassing darkness.

As a result, “We who were living are now dying,” continues Eliot (329). Though their death may not be as sudden as Phlebas’ was, with Christ’s death everyone is apparently doomed and, “With a little patience,” we too will be lost (30). This is a reversal of resurrection; while Christ remains buried in the ground, hopelessness pervades the entire world and continues to dry it up. The wording here is strangely ambiguous. “Patience” as a chosen response to a situation beyond one’s control; by extension, we cannot choose whether or not to die, but we can choose how we respond to that death. Responding patiently to such forces changes the slant of the words; it is as though we are

meant to embrace death as a sort of purifying of our souls (Moody *Thomas Stearns Eliot: Poet* 97). Echoes of Dante's Purgatory appear in this view; undertaking a small death "patiently" may have a self-purifying effect.

Despite this possibility for "patient" reformation, it is interesting to note that Peter and Christ's other disciples scatter immediately after Jesus is killed, returning to their old lives not knowing what else to do. Unwilling yet to patiently risk suffering similarly to Christ, they return to fishing on the Sea of Galilee (John XXI). With this image the Fisher King returns to the poem as a symbol of ineffectual, impotent work; he becomes tied to these sheep that lack their shepherd. All of these characters fish for answers in the absence of Christ and direction. They present imagery of reversed hope; Christ was supposed to rise from the grave and conquer death, returning the land to its fertility and resurrecting humanity with Him. But while Christ certainly must be dead, the wasteland does not appear to be vanishing anytime soon (Harding 22).

Stanzas two and three of "What the Thunder Said" flash back from Jesus Christ and the Fisher King to recall an older wasteland, the place where the Israelites wandered while they followed Moses out of Egypt toward the Promised land of Canaan. While wandering in the Desert of Sin (aptly named—but actually referring to a Semitic deity), the Israelites twice beg Moses for water, and God tells Moses to acquire the water from rocks (Exodus XVII.1-7; Numbers XX.2-13). The imagery was meant to show God's providence for his people, miraculously causing the water to appear from barren rocks in a dead wasteland. However, either Moses or the other Israelites (and, by extension, the rest of humanity) usually misinterpreted the instructions or blamed God for not providing water the first place. Thus we hear similar whinging complaints in the following lines of *The Waste Land*:

Here is no water but only rock  
 Rock and no water and the sandy road  
 The road winding above the mountains  
 Which are mountains of rock without water  
 If there were water we should stop and drink  
 Amongst the rock one cannot stop or think. (331-6)

Ironically, Waldron uses these lines among other instances of the poem to demonstrate the musicality inherent in *The Waste Land*, even when the lines seem little enough like high art (422). Here the cacophony of human voices encapsulates an image of humanity in the absence of God, dry and thirsty in a dead, rocky waste. Their petulant cacophony sounds eerily like complaints of ignorant children.

Those same lines 331-6 have a singular construction. They create a sort of transitive philosophical argument that ends up as essentially circular. Line 331 ends with the picture of a “rock,” the same word that begins line 332; line 332 ends with a “road”—an image in turn repeated in line 333. The pattern continues, so that the effective result is a series of propositions, paraphrased as:

- (1) No Water, but Rock,
- (2) Rock, and No Water, but Road
- (3) Road in the Mountains
- (4) Mountains so Rock but No Water
- (5) If Water then Stop and Drink
- (6) Rock, therefore No Stop and Drink.

The conclusion to this rather-messy series of propositions is that the presence of rock becomes antithetical to the potential for finding water present. Eliot’s lines here are

fascinating in their subtlety, though they seem to record merely the nonsensical cries of thirsty travelers. The lines end up as testament to the infertile circularity of the wasteland and its inescapable oppressiveness. The argument ends up back where it began, having accomplished nothing; we are going to need some new aethereal logics. Losing fertility also removed people's intellect so that they cannot understand any concept other than "water" and "rock," as they plead for refreshment. The Fisher King fishes and these people search for water, but they are all now the living dead (329).

The speaker relates that there is no relief from the desolation: "Sweat is dry and feet are in the sand / If there were only water amongst the rock" (Eliot 337-8). The people are dying and going mad, with their bodies desiccated and their minds addled to the point of seeking water in the cracks of the dry stones. Mountains have turned totally dry and "dead," now nothing more than a "mouth of carious teeth that cannot spit" instead of a river's "mouth" (339). These "carious" or decayed teeth waste away as people's bodies dry up like cotton, and within this picture we are reminded of dried-up Lil's dentures from "A Game of Chess." The sun is merciless and it gives no reprieve to tired souls or to feet that can no longer cool themselves with sweat (340). No dignity remains out here in the wilderness. With the death of God, death has finally come to humanity.

Returning again to the Bible, we see further allusions to the present wasteland. During the life of the prophet Elijah the nation of Israel endured three years of drought due to the sins of King Ahab and Queen Jezebel (I Kings XVII-XVIII). The drought and political dangers drove Elijah to hide out in the mountains, but the wasteland affords him no peace even there. Eliot depicts Elijah's feelings in line 341, saying,

There is not even silence in the mountains  
But dry sterile thunder without rain

There is not even solitude in the mountains  
 But red sullen faces sneer and snarl  
 From doors of mudcracked houses. (341-5)

Eliot re-envisioned Elijah's wasteland in order to provide perspective on the present.

Especially in American literature, there is a tendency to attach a pastoral element to open, desert places, but Eliot rejects that sentiment, saying that the wasteland humanity finds itself trapped in has nothing to do with freedom and adventure. This is not a land of clarity and refreshment but a land without water, stifling, confusing and ultimately deadly. Like Elijah's three-year drought, this has become a matter of survival. In Elijah's case, after many false prophets had been killed, God eventually relented and sent rains to refresh the land (I Kings XVIII.40-6; XIX.9-18).

But we do not have this same assurance of returning refreshment in Eliot's poem—at least not yet. Instead, thunder and lightning taunt without releasing water (Eliot 342). Calling this thunder "sterile" ties it to the Fisher King as well, with his dolorous wound limiting him only to impotent fishing. Every bit of this scene is practically aching for rebirth, but no figure here is capable of achieving it. The world will need divine intervention to escape the cycle of continual death. All the while the "red sullen faces" of the humans implicated by the famine and drought are neither repentant nor convivial (344). They become a part of the desolated landscape and are doomed alongside the earth if no rain falls.

However in the midst of line 345, the focus shifts. No longer looking at the landscape, suddenly we now have a different—hopeful—voice speaking. The objective tone that has permeated to this point is thrown out with the last part of line 345. Suddenly a thought appears in the narrator's mind—showing up too quickly even to make a new

line, too surprised by the strange feeling of hope to notice that it is written on the wrong side of the page. But here our new speaker appears in all of his innocent naivety, blurting out the ridiculous thoughts on his mind: “If there were water” (345). We have a sudden vision into the mind of a character that cannot stop himself from thinking aloud: *But if there were only water....* The thought is too sweet even for him to dwell upon, for fear of having reality shatter such hopes. But the damage has already been done; this tiny spark of hope—whatever its origin—has caught fire just enough to survive. Recovering his stoicism, but still refusing to extinguish the fire of hope, the speaker goes on to say,

If there were water

And no rock

If there were rock

And also water

And water

A spring

A pool among the rock. (345-51)

The words are as simple as the landscape framing them as the speaker’s dry brain cannot gasp out anything but the most basic of syllables. He wishes for water; even if the dry rocks remained and only a handful of refreshing water pooled amidst the dead stones, it could bring the land back to life. In his words, the narrator invokes another biblical reference. The Hebrew prophet Isaiah spoke of the wrath of God turning the earth into a wasteland, but that God would relent and return water to the wasteland. Isaiah writes, “Water will gush forth in the wilderness and streams in the desert. / The burning sand will become a pool, the thirsty ground bubbling springs” (Isaiah XXXV.6-7). This is precisely the transformation the speaker longs to see.

Our narrator continues to speak, though now taming his unreasonable hopes; he no longer wishes to feel a pool of cool water, instead he would be satisfied with even just:

...the sound of water only

Not the cicada

And dry grass singing

But sound of water over a rock

Where the hermit-thrush sings in the pine trees. (Eliot 352-6)

This hermit thrush is an American bird Eliot studied in his youth, and it is associated with Whitman's poetry. Instead of the song of the cicada—the cadence of the dead drought-lands (see Ecclesiastes XII.5, “when... the grasshopper drags himself along and desire no longer is stirred;” also, lines 20-4 in “The Burial of the Dead”)—Eliot wants to hear the sounds of the hermit thrush. Its song is water-like, articulated as, “Drip drop drip drop drop drop drop” (Eliot 357). This birdsong haunts the poet's ears, tantalizing him with the sound of water without its substance. Yet he begs to hear it, to be haunted by it, rather than hear nothing at all. With the bird trailing off into “drop drop drop drop” we hear the speaker's hopes dropping with it, realizing that the bird has no power to sing the wasteland out of its drought. He captures the continual ruination of his hopes by iterating again at the end of the stanza, “But there is no water” (358).

The next stanza is phrased in a different speaker's tone, with the margins returned to their original position following the dashing of the last narrator's spirits. But the dampened hopes do not last long, as this new speaker has a sudden query that dispels the previous speaker's thoughts. Another person has suddenly come upon the scene and joined the pair of conversing humans (the speaker and the listener). Eliot alludes here to two separate accounts of such a “third party” appearing on a journey. First he recalls the



accounts of Ernest Shackleton's Antarctic expeditions, where in the confusion of the harsh elements, an extra member of the expedition seemed always to walk with his men (North 60). Eliot also alludes to the story of the Road to Emmaus in the Gospel of Luke, where two men walk beside the resurrected Christ without realizing at first who he is ("Notes on *The Waste Land*" 74). The biblical account goes as follows:

Now that same day two... [men] were going to a village called Emmaus, about seven miles from Jerusalem.... As they talked and discussed these things with each other, Jesus himself came up and walked along with them; but they were kept from recognizing him. (Luke XXIV.13-6)

Both references seem apt here as the speaker wonders aloud, "Who is the third who walks always beside you?" (Eliot 359). The pronouncement is strange; up until this point, the speakers of *The Waste Land* have been largely alone, or at least they have watched others and commented on them from a distance. Suddenly our company is turning into a crowd; so much for a lonely wasteland.

The speaker draws back after articulating his wonderment, attempting to employ logic and rationality to explain the apparition. "When I count," he says, "there are only you [the companion] and I together / But when I look ahead up the white road / There is always another one walking beside you" (360-2). His logic from a broken wasteland is insufficient to explain the supernal phenomenon. Yet another biblical reference further illuminates this visitor. Jesus once said to his followers, "For where two or three come together in my name, there am I with them" (Matthew XVIII.20). His words have come true as Christ joins these travelers on a road through the desert. The verse just prior, 19, seems appropriate here as well, where Christ says, "Again, I tell you that if two of you on earth agree about anything you ask for, it will be done for you by my Father in heaven." It

seems that Christ has resurrected here in the desert with these two humans in order to grant their wish—to refresh their land. Symbolically, the road they tread exits the desert.

However, the human travelers do not fully understand this yet, and the results of this second coming remain to be determined. At any rate, the poet is giving back the power of transforming the land—of raising a people again to life—to Eliot's generation, back to a people who thought they had no power. Christ comes to walk beside humans in their darkest hour to give them power back, saying, "I tell you the truth, whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven" (Matthew XVIII.18). The power of renewal has arrived, but humanity must choose to embrace it in order for life to be restored. The soul has been given a power beyond reason, and Eliot thus sets up the solution to escaping the wasteland: one must abandon the vestiges of ruined logics and economics and embrace an understanding of wisdom beyond one's own experience. Thus Christ's coming represents the aethereal substance from beyond human experience that can save the world from its base elements.

Human reason has already been thrown into doubt (being symbolically unable to count the figures on the Emmaus road), and this can be read as an indictment of the positivism that had an extremely negative effect upon Eliot's society. Eliot saw that such human "reason" was responsible for the outbreak of the worst war in world history. Eliot wants to set it aside at present in favor of something better.

With this in mind, the speaker's fragmenting consciousness becomes less abstracted and is limited only to tactile, sensible observations. Thus he makes no abstract inferences about the coming of the Son of God, but only describes what he sees, a "white road" and a figure "Gliding wrapt in a brown mantle, hooded / I do not know whether a man or a woman" (Eliot 361, 363-4). The description is interesting in its anonymity; the

stranger resembles a desert nomad, stealthy and secretive, neither identifiable as a man nor a woman—something from beyond this world. The sacrificial lamb is foreign to a world where “the profit and loss” dominate ethics; this alien figure is not completely human at all. The figure’s brown mantle symbolizes Christ’s relinquishment of divine power and glory in taking on the poverty of human flesh. His humble description recalls Isaiah’s prophecies about the Messiah to come:

... [He appeared] like a root out of dry ground.

He had no beauty or majesty to attract us to him, nothing in his appearance that we should desire him.

He was despised and rejected by men, a man of sorrows, and familiar with suffering.

...[W]e esteemed him not. (Isaiah LIII.2-3)

It is fitting then that such a figure should appear now to rescue humans from their darkest hour. He is the “root” of a foreign, fertile plant, humbly arising to lead them from the dry lands into an oasis.

The white road is the symbolic way out of the wasteland, though we do not yet know where it leads. Its dusty whiteness becomes coupled to Christ’s purifying death, purging sin like the bleaching desert sun. Our speaker’s terminology is telling: he refers to the third figure not as walking alongside the pair but as “gliding” over the path, uncontained by the milieu; he has power over the terrestrial elements. The “Hanged Man” Sosostri mentioned in “The Burial of the Dead,” has arrived on the scene, and after a period of stasis he has returned to action (55). The next word in line 363 is “wrapt,” punning on “rapt;” it indicates the speaker’s enthrallment in this new apparition of hope. In all ways this figure is very different than anyone the speaker has ever experienced. He

is apparently a person, but simultaneously he is much more than human; his strangeness is not menacing, but intriguing. We can hear the notes of hope in the speaker's voice in line 365, dismissing any fears of the unknown. He demands again of his companion, “— But who is that on the other side of you?” The dash indicates his hastiness, betraying a nagging feeling that this preternatural presence is the peripatetic persona of Providence. Perhaps the Logos has returned to rewrite the human story, though there is still a chance the image is merely a tantalizing mirage (Harding 22-3). But despite any doubts, the speaker attempts to find the form, enraptured by a hope for any “living water” this stranger on the road might have (see John IV.10-1, 14; Revelation VII.17).

Before finishing with this piece we should consider for a moment its formal elements. Since the start of “What the Thunder Said” the stanzas have followed a strange pattern by throwing out all punctuation entirely. The result is what amounts to an exceptionally long run-on sentence from the first three stanzas. Until the erotemes framing stanza four appear (lines 359 and 365), Part V has essentially been nothing but one continuous thought (aside from the offset musings of the third stanza) and the next punctuation will not appear until the period in line 384. This minimalistic style breaks with the rest of Eliot's poem since nearly every prior section has used punctuation to shape its meanings, however creatively employed. So far, questions have dominated the narrative, rather than satisfying conclusions, but this may be beginning to change.

Yet the dramatic stylistic choice of nearly abandoning punctuation for sixty lines of poetry demands our attention. With the excising of punctuation comes an increased pace as the poem picks up speed and begins to gain forward momentum, not content to remain in the wasteland. What these stanzas lack in direction and instruction, they make up for with their capacity for hope. In the midst of drought, here appears an unexplainable

sense of hopefulness that even the narrator cannot adequately fathom or convey. Thus the narrative is not punctuated—it does not stop and collect itself—until the strange figure appears on the road to Emmaus. With the coming of this outsider, a Son of Man, thoughts of tragedy and sterility become supplanted by this unusual sense of hope. The hopelessness of line 328 and 329’s “He who was living is now dead / We who were living are now dying” has been pushed aside with the realization that a some sort of resurrection has occurred in the meantime. The narrator’s hopes are piqued by the stranger on the road: if Christ came back to life, perhaps he can raise humanity with him. By speeding up the pace and not allowing the story to conclude before resurrection has occurred, Eliot appears to be indicating his own hope for humanity’s resurrection from ennui and anomie.

Of course, death still controls the land, but somehow death seems less like an end here than as some contiguous part of new life to follow. After Christ was killed in the first few stanzas, he has been resurrected afterward, and even appears to be walking alongside humans once again. The significance of this portrait of a risen Christ reappearing cannot be understated; his return is necessary to resurrecting the wasteland and healing humanity’s dolorous wounds. However, Eliot has not yet established whether Christ’s reappearance alone will be sufficient to bring water back to the land and revive it. The spark of hope has returned with the Morning Star, but whether or not it will reignite humanity’s flame remains to be seen.

### Section Two (Lines 366-94): Music from Unreal City

Questions still loom, surrounding Christ's reappearance: has he come to save or destroy? The first stanza of this second section (lines 366-76) begins by recalling a passage from Hermann Hesse's 1920 *Blick ins Chaos (Glimpse into Chaos)*. In his essays, Hesse iterates a portrait of modern Europe teetering on the edge of a chaotic abyss, seeing the Russian Revolution as an open door to anarchy (North 60-2). In this stanza we see Eliot's vision of the wasteland is tied to this view of modern Europe, as Eliot's multitudes lurch toward apocalypse and destruction unaware of their doom. The previous section of "What the Thunder Said" asked the question of who would walk beside humankind and guide people out of the wasteland. This stanza asks if it makes any difference. He begins a series of three questions with, "What is that sound high in the air[?]" (Eliot 366). All the narrator can hear are the sounds of wasted cities and the "Murmur of maternal lamentation" for a lost generation (367). Their sorrow echoes the plight of the Israelites whenever they were abandoned by God: "This is what the Lord says: 'A voice is heard in Ramah, mourning and great weeping, Rachel weeping for her children and refusing to be comforted, because her children are no more'" (Jeremiah XXXI.15). These words are repeated in Matthew II.18 as the baby boys of Bethlehem are murdered in Herod's efforts to destroy Jesus. The allusion seems fitting here, with humanity facing spiritual, emotional, and physical death.

Rachel weeps for her children (the Israelites, thus by extension all of Western culture) who have lost their way in the wilderness, much like Mary who lost her son Jesus on the cross. The pair mourn for the loss of hope for a future renewal (incidentally, the name Rachel translates to "Lamb of God," one of Christ's titles). The tantalizing glimpse of God that the speaker caught in lines 359 and 365 has now been drowned out by the

wailing of the inhabitants of the Unreal cities. A generation's ignorance of the oncoming wilderness has turned to terror and wailing at its impending approach; laughter and leisure have become tears.

We are drawn back again to Madame Sosostris' vision from line 56 of "crowds of people walking around in a ring." In the last stanza we had just such a "crowd" of three walking in the desert; but they were not walking in circles—they were apparently walking straight out of the desert. Yet here in the fifth stanza of "What the Thunder Said" we see another sort of crowd, an ocean of humanity drying up in the imprisoning cities of impersonality and indifference. Our observer asks his second question of the scene, "Who are those hooded hordes swarming / Over endless plains, stumbling in cracked earth / Ringed by the flat horizon only[?]" (Eliot 368-70). Our good clairvoyant's predictions have turned up accurate once more: here people walk in directionless circles, heading toward nothing but an empty, "flat horizon." The cracked earth is the dried-up mud that was once fertile soil, and it manages to create an image of desiccated, broken corpses. There is no water in sight, there is no apparent hope left for these "stumbling" zombies aside from death. Their "hooded" faces attempt to keep off the cruel sun, but instead they only keep the forsaken multitudes walking in darkness.

Our observer of this disintegrating realm asks one final question: "What is the city over the mountains[?]" (371). Without waiting for an answer, he bluntly describes what he can glimpse of the cities of humanity: "Cracks and reforms and bursts in the violet air / Falling towers" (372-3). What humans have constructed, nature is shaking to pieces. Towers are crashing to the ground, and highways are splintering and bring "reformed" into broken, useless roads to nowhere. These images are threatening, but they also involve a sense of purgation with the term "reformed." It is as though the earth is attempting to

cleanse itself of the wasteland of the modern city, and it has actively begun to do so. The “violet air” turns to *violent* air, raining down destruction rather than sending salvation. This is industrialism’s darkest hour; humanity had erected walls—militaries, economies, and societies—to protect itself from such incursions of nature, and now these protections are being tossed aside like dead autumn leaves. This is an apocalypse in its strongest sense, the end of an age and the end of a people.

The observer witnesses this vision universally in the dwellings of humanity, and he rattles off several key cities in quick succession: “Jerusalem Athens Alexandria / Vienna London” (374-5). Each of these represents a critical aspect of human culture. First, Jerusalem is a holy city, representing the religious center of the West as the birthplace of the major monotheistic religions, Judaism, Christianity, and Islam. The second city, Athens, stands out as the center of Western humanism, rationalism, and philosophy, begun by Socrates, Plato, and Aristotle. Thirdly, Egypt’s Alexandria was a capital of knowledge, with its great library and architectural wonders dedicated to expanding and transmitting science and learning. Together this “trinity” represents the human being at its fullest, with its spiritual heart, its questioning mind, and its wisdom-seeking spirit. The mention of Alexandria is particularly interesting as perhaps the prototypical human city. It was a port town of great wealth and commerce, located on the Mediterranean Sea, and it remains representative of conquest and order in being founded by the Macedonian king, Alexander the Great. Beyond this, Alexandria was also the site of the Adonis resurrection cults mentioned in “Death by Water” (Weston 47), making it a very tidy reference.

The two metropolises the speaker envisions in line 375, Vienna and London, are the proper descendents to the three ancient cities of line 374. The religion, philosophy, and commerce of the ancient world came to its fullest fruition in modern cities such as



these two. Vienna, onetime capital of the Holy Roman Empire, transformed from a city of orthodox religion and traditional government to an urban center of new artistic culture. Following further growth and industrialization, the city eventually turned decadent, known for its luxury, including hugely extravagant balls. By Eliot's time, the city had become symbolic as a place of leisure and effete rather than for its previous creative energy. Similarly, London was also a great industrial center, and by the end of the nineteenth century the city had taken its place as the capital of the economic world. With its influence rapidly expanding through the spread of colonialism, wealth became the new nobility in London, and progress became the new emperor. Driven only by the markets, the individual consciousnesses of London became secondary to the city itself.

To Eliot, these two metropolises represent the decay of Western Civilization. The civilizations and achievements of the ancients have been watered down to a lukewarm decadence in modern times. The philosophical pillars upon which the modern society was founded were thought invincible, but they have suddenly crumbled. As with Rome, excess and decay have eaten away at the supports until the entire edifice has finally come crashing down. The poet pronounces everything about civilization that seemed to be true to be utterly, finally, "Unreal" (376).

Eliot's next stanza brings the camera lens in closer, moving on from the spectacle of the collapsing city to the creatures afflicted by the destruction. With no explanations we are thrust upon a surreal scene of the world in apocalyptic disarray. Our first image is of a strange woman playing her "long black hair" like a violin, fiddling "whisper music on those strings" (377-8). There is something cannibalistic about this image; the female form is not being invoked as a source of beauty but is being used as a tool to create an artificial artwork. Instead of the model, she is the paintbrush, so to speak. Interestingly,

this figure may also be connected with our image of Vivien Eliot as the tragic, barren female artist (McRae 214). The image mirrors the “maternal lamentation” of the last stanza and creates a feminized picture of art here that stands independent of the wreckage around her. Though her musical creativity is born of sorrow, her music is powerful enough to create at least the “whisper” of a distraction from suffering.

This female’s fearless, selfless pose stands in sharp contrast to the shocking scenes surrounding her. Our other actors are something from a bad film. The narrator speaks of “...bats with baby faces in the violet light” that “crawled head downward a blackened wall” (Eliot 379, 381). Oddly enough, these apocalyptic creatures add music to the scene: these bat-boys continually “Whistle... and beat their wings” (380). Like Lewis Carroll’s Wonderland the wasteland has been finally, fully inverted and there may be an intentional comic effect between the juxtaposition of the violin woman’s grace and the ridiculous posture of the bats (Helmling 146). Conversely, there is a Dantean aspect to the scene, following the central theme that hell is the opposite of heaven. Thus the earthward-facing (note the repetition in “downward down” in line 381) demonic creatures are guarding a hell populated by humans (represented by the black-haired woman), tucked between buildings and towers that are also “upside down” (382). The cityscape is straight out of *Dracula*, and even more ominous (Beagle 40-1).

The Unreal City that called itself heaven on earth no longer bears any trappings of comfort or success. Even the bells—which rang for religious and social order—are inverted now, tolling for nothing in particular. The upside-down bells signify the loss of social frameworks and (following the recent publication of Einstein’s laws of relativity) even doubts in empirical science, the modern source of universal truth. We are reminded again of Baudelaire’s nightmare city, a realm that seems to have become even bleaker

since “The Burial of the Dead” (Ingelbien 51). Eliot’s music reaches a crazed crescendo here as the bells ring out aimlessly, no longer “keeping” any specific “hours” (Eliot 383). The narrator has not simply glimpsed Hesse’s chaos but has finally fallen into its pit. The “violet” color in the sky is not dawn but the darkening dusk of a world near its end. An endless night appears ready to fall on the wasteland, though things had seemed to be improving.

The final line of the stanza alludes to Richard Strauss’ 1905 opera *Salome*, concerning the imprisonment of the prophet John the Baptist by King Herod at the request of Herod’s niece, Salome. In Strauss’ version, John sang while incarcerated in an empty cistern (Kermode 106). Thus the “voices singing out of empty cisterns and exhausted wells” represent the imprisonment and drying-up of whatever goodness remains in humanity (Eliot 384). The once-prophetic voice of John has become Cassandra’s voice; his words of salvation go unheard, reverberating within stone walls.

Worth noting is that Salome’s “Dance of the Seven Veils”—the dance that won her uncle Herod’s favor (and, consequently, John’s demise)—is thought to have originated in the vegetation cults of the Babylonians, related to the mythological story of Ishtar’s attempt to bring her lover, Tammuz, back from the underworld (Weston 34-42). The dance is usually a means of returning fertility to the land, but here it only leads to barren and corrupted sexuality, depicted by Herod’s “incestuous” relationship with his brother’s wife (Matthew XIV.1-12). The “exhausted wells” housing prophets are symptomatic of cultural sterility. Like the other women of *The Waste Land*, the black-haired musician has her own infertile, dry “well” (she impotently “whispers” on her violin as a result of her barren womb), though she seems unlike the other characters in her stoicism. Instead of embodying an empty sense of sexuality, this woman actually appears

to be the prototype of the independent artist, in sharp contrast to the forces of destruction surrounding her. She becomes a stable, chaste foil to the speaker's fears about the sexuality that would have given birth to the hideous bat-human offspring (Bolton 26).

Having gone through Unreal City once again, it feels as though "What the Thunder Said" has taken us back to a time *before* resurrection and the Road to Emmaus. We have been forced to return to the uprooting civilization. But dark as it has been, there may still be a few bright points. First, humans still remain, even though their carefully-constructed world has been turned upside-down. The human artist still exists (the violinist) and the human prophet also survives (John's voice in the cisterns), although how long they can manage to outlive the bat-baby creatures is uncertain. However, identifying the unreality of human civilization is simply a step toward purging the world of its deadness and giving birth to a new earth. The third figure in the wilderness, though absent in the city, should not have permanently vanished.

Additionally, after the dearth of punctuation thus far in Part V, we should note that this stanza ends with an unusual period (384). It will mark a significant turning point before the arrival of the next stanza as the poem changes locales from the apocalypse-blighted modern cities to the medieval Chapel Perilous.

As we approach that Chapel Perilous in lines 385-94, we realize that the previous stanza formed something of an introduction to this seventh stanza. Now the desolate skylines of the Unreal Cities have morphed into the castles and towers of King Arthur's realm. This return to the past is signaled, paradoxically, by the disappearance of rhyme after the stanza from 377-84. We would expect the rhymes to come with the medieval landscape instead of the modern cityscape, but Eliot reverses this in his effort to turn the world upside-down. Here in the seventh stanza (385-94) we finally return to the heroic

quest for the Grail that has been abandoned since “The Fire Sermon.” We will return to the quest motif to see if the relic is powerful enough to awaken the Fisher King from his sleep of impotence and resurrect his lands.

Unfortunately, the setting of our scene is not especially inviting for rebirth. We have left the city for the country only to be reminded that the country is not a pastoral landscape but a “decayed hole among the mountains” (385). Not that this should come as any surprise. What *is* surprising is the appearance of vivid—living—grass mentioned in the next line. The speaker says very distinctly, “In the faint moonlight, the grass is singing” (386). While the appearance of something green and living is encouraging we should remember that the grass grows between apparitions of dead humanity: “Over the tumbled graves” (387). Nevertheless, the green grass “singing” in the moonlight is a start. We cannot help but recall Whitman’s *Song of Myself* and his definitions for such grass:

I guess it must be the flag of my disposition, out of hopeful green stuff  
woven.

Or I guess it is the handkerchief of the Lord,

A scented gift and remembrancer designedly dropt,

... Or I guess the grass is itself a child, the produced babe of the vegetation.

Or I guess it is a uniform hieroglyphic. (Whitman VI.3-8)

Eliot’s speaker agrees with Whitman’s final conclusion, that the grass “... seems to me the beautiful uncut hair of graves” (Whitman VI.12). Such anthropomorphism has been unknown in Eliot’s poem to this point, and to describe the grass as jubilantly “singing” is enough to startle the reader. But the point is clear: death, it seems, will be forced to make way for life, and even these graves are positioned for rebirth. No more are we envisioning the decomposing bones of the “rat’s alley,” (Moody “To Fill All the Desert...” 62).

Instead, the bones buried within these graves feed the joyous grass and begin to rouse new life.

Noteworthy too is where this graveyard lies: directly alongside an ancient chapel. Death in this graveyard is not meant to be an ending but a spiritual transformation that leads to resurrection. Like the heroic quest itself, the ritual is circular and unending rather than linear. Therein, the windowless chapel holds a certain element of hope, despite its foreboding solitude. Like the Chapel Perilous of the Grail legends, this “Cemetery Perilous” presents a challenge to the quester who comes upon it to complete a task (Blackmur 79). Perceval, last found in “The Fire Sermon,” is once again being offered the chance to redeem the land if only he can recognize his task and point out the Grail (De Troyes 424-5).

In an effort to imply that human resurrection is not limited to hemispheres, Eliot has linked the Western religious imagery with Eastern concepts from Buddhism and Hinduism. These connections will become even more apparent near the end of *The Waste Land*. Thus in calling this place “only the wind’s home” (388), Eliot is consigning this chapel to the unenlightened human world—the realm of dissatisfaction and suffering. The goal of Buddhism is to achieve Nirvana, which translates from the Sanskrit to mean “to stop blowing,” in the sense of the blowing out the flames of one’s false desires (Armstrong 80-3, 203). Essentially, Nirvana would mean putting aside every attachment to the world of falsity, giving up every desire for a tainted world. It is the polar opposite of the dissatisfying, loveless arrangements of the men and women occupying *The Waste Land* (Dilworth 44). Applying this to the chapel, we can see the symbolism in having the building filled with the discontented “wind” since the quest has not yet been completed (Eliot 389). Without windows, the door “swings” back and forth restlessly, trying to

release its pent-up energies. There is a tangible feeling of anticipation on the scene that even the grass can sense; something big is about to change.

Our perspective then shifts back to the graveyard. “Dry bones can harm no one” murmurs the speaker, ironically (390). We remember that in the Valley of Dry Bones such skeletons as these were resurrected by God in front of the prophet Ezekiel, making an army of the living dead (Ezekiel XXXVII.1-14). In an amazing visual metaphor, Ezekiel stands in a valley of bleached human skeletons, and God instructs him to infuse these bones with life. Ezekiel recounts God’s voice saying,

“...prophesy, son of man, and say to [these bones], ‘This is what the Sovereign Lord says: Come from the four winds, O breath, and breathe into these slain, that they may live.’ So I prophesied as he commanded me, and breath entered them; they came to life and stood up on their feet—a vast army.” (Ezekiel XXXVII.9-10)

God was speaking of reanimating the Israelites in their own spiritual wasteland, and Eliot borrows this story as a means of escaping his moral wilderness. The Israelites were living without hope like dead bones in a valley, before God raised them up. Eliot wants to call upon that same powerful deity that said, “‘Therefore prophesy and say to them: “This is what the Sovereign Lord says: O my people, I am going to open your graves and bring you up from them; I will bring you back to the land of Israel”’” (Ezekiel XXXVII.12).

The message here is plain: to borrow from William Butler Yeats, “Surely some revelation is at hand.” The wind swirling through the chapel now appears to be the breath of God, waiting to inspire and imbue the dead with new vitality. Unresolved, however, is whether or not the speaker will recognize this potential for salvation in the voice of the “wind”—the breath of God (Thormählen 43-4).

Moving forward, our deserted chapel has one last figure of interest. The speaker looks up at the chapel and sees that, alone, “Only a cock stood on the rooftree” (Eliot 391). A rooftree is an erstwhile name for the ridgepole, the crossbeam to which rafters are attached to support a roof. The rooftree is the final support for the ceiling. Eliot’s imagery is symbolic; the rooster who will crow at a new dawn in the next line with his “Co co rico co co rico” routine is simultaneously heralding a new age (392). Traditionally the rooster’s cry is thought to dispel evil night spirits every morning, and here it works to this same effect (Brooks 105). The rooftree comes to represent the entirety of the human past, and it recalls both the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil (whose fruit forced Adam and Eve from Eden) and to the cross (or “tree”) upon which Christ was crucified. The rooster perches upon the trees at both the beginning and end of the human story he crows because something “is finished” (John XIX.30). Similarly, this same rooster crowed thrice to signal Peter’s denials of Christ, showing the total abandonment of Jesus’ followers when his end finally came (John XIII.38; XVIII.15-27). But at this point, the cross is empty and the denials have passed. All that remains are a burial ground of dry bones and a (French-voiced) chanticleer crowing at the top of its lungs that a new dawn has broken.

The rooster’s cry had brought the disciple Peter back to his senses after he denied knowing Jesus, and the cockerel’s call also became a signal of recognition for Perceval when he needed to identify the Holy Grail to save the land from drought (Matthews and Matthews 85). Nature has apparently taken matters into its own hands, speaking out of the mouths of poultry. When the speaker saw the rooster atop the rooftree, something in the world instantaneously changed; an immediate transformation occurred “In a flash of lightning” (Eliot 393). “Then a damp gust,” cool and refreshing, rises up from the stifling



landscape—finally “Bringing rain” (393-4). Just like that, one moment, one flash, and the world has been transformed.

The long-“sterile” thunder finally gave birth to the real thing (Jones 301). Once death ruled over everything, and now the water of life is beginning to fall from the skies like manna. Whatever the identity of our third party appearing on the road, the figure has come to begin a resurrection (Langbaum 128). The quest is apparently complete—the Grail has poured out rain—but the poem is not yet finished. Strangely, it feels that a resolution came too soon, with about forty lines left in the poem. Yet before sorting out this mystery, we should pause a moment in this oasis. Like Elijah after three years of drought in Israel, we have finally seen the clouds gather again (I Kings XVIII.44-5). After a journey that has felt as long as the prophet’s wait, a pause seems well-deserved.

Before pressing on, we should examine once more the overarching motif of these last three stanzas: the sense of omnipresent musicality that seems almost out of place with the rest of *The Waste Land*. It thematically ties together the stanzas from lines 366-94, while also recalling the sounds of the “cicada” and the water-like call of the hermit-thrush in lines 356-7. In fact, the first line of our second section of “What the Thunder Said” actually begins with an invocation of music, asking suddenly, “What is that sound high in the air[?]” (366). In a city that has morphed into a plutonic netherworld, all that we can make out are its strange sounds, the “Murmur[s]” of line 367 and the sounds of “[c]racks and reforms and bursts in the violet air” (372). The soundplay is enhanced on the micro-level with alliteration; for instance, the *m*-sounds of line 367 do indeed give the sensation of a group of noisy mutterers populating the Unreal City. A more complex arrangement of sounds follows as the speaker asks, “Who are those hooded hordes swarming / Over endless plains” (368-9). The alliteration of the *h*-sounds is distinct, but there is also an

assonance based on the long *o*-sounds as well. These two sounds pair up to make a low, mournful, wailing sound (recalling Edgar Allen Poe's "The Philosophy of Composition") that adds to the frightening and sorrowful nature of the scene.

The next stanza follows up this elegiac melody with more music. The first image is of the woman making a violin from her dark hair, fiddling "whisper music on those strings" (378). This first line is poetically unusual since it carries seven stressed syllables and only three unstressed beats. The effect slows the pacing of the section, forcefully slowing the reader after the frenzied explosions and violence of the previous stanza's sounds. This funereal figure fiddles a slow song, ignoring the frenetic noise of the human-bat creatures (380). Even John the Baptist and his fellow prophets sing out of the wells—forming an ironic chorus for the scene (384). All the while, the bells ring to toll out the funeral of civilization (383). Their "reminiscent" tolling recalls Donne's bells once again, ringing for all of humanity.

Besides the images and sounds, this stanza also has taken on a formal structure based upon musical composition. The stanza is made up of end rhymes in an *ABABCDDE* pattern (with those *C* and *E* lines carrying their own off-rhyme on "wall" and "wells"), about the tightest rhyming structure we have found in the entirety of *The Waste Land*. The rhymes enhance the chorus-like sound of the lines, which also take on a pattern of rough iambic metrics as well. Eliot glories in juxtaposition, planting a sense of rhythmic order into a scene of the uttermost chaos. Things slowly run down to nothing. In "The Hollow Men," Eliot would later describe this scenario aptly by saying disintegration now comes "Not with a bang but a whimper."

The final stanza our Section Two, lines 385-94, we are removed from the noisy city to a deserted chapel in the mountains, far away from fading human voices. Yet here

we find even more music, and it seems to increase the strains of hope that have existed in the midst of civilization's overturning. With the bat-people flapping around the upside-down city, we see something admirably brazen and quintessentially human about the woman plucking "violin" strings at the end of the world. Elements of real culture, true art, appear impervious to the general cultural collapse. In the midst of darkness, some flames still have not been snuffed out. And as modern urban humanity's song fades, the musical movements of nature begin to swell once again. Out in the mountains, "The grass is singing" and the rooster crows "Co co rico co co rico" (386, 392). Then, finally, the thunder itself sings out "In a flash of lightning" (393).

The returning sounds of nature signal the chance to return the wasteland to its former fertility. All along, the cities and realms of human civilization were "Unreal," and the house of cards inevitably fell as soon as a gust of wind appeared. As Gaia—the earth herself—finally speaks directly to human civilization, humanity is forced at last to listen to precisely "What the Thunder Said." The aether of the thunderous heavens has lent an ear to humanity's crisis and sung down music from the spheres. With its voice come healing rains, and the making of what will hopefully be a new world.

### Section Three (Lines 395-422): A New Old World

So where are we left? The cities are gone and the old ways have gone with them. But the rain has returned. Like Noah's flood, these rains appear to have come to purge the earth and begin creation over. Ironically, the rainwater has destroyed the power of Phlebas' drowning seas and has killed the ancient leviathan—death—looming forever beneath the surface (Frye 144). Yet just as the long-awaited rains return, we are taken away from the scene into an aethereal realm beyond the earth. Eliot is moving us to a point of distance from which to contemplate exactly what has happened. Part V has been a point of convergence for all our narrative threads, and in listening to "What the Thunder Said" we will essentially recapitulate the journey we have undertaken. Our teacher is the cosmos itself, and while human voices quiet beneath the life-giving rain showers, we can now hear exactly "What the Thunder Said."

With the change of scenery, the viewpoint also shifts now from West to East, so to speak; for the moment we are leaving behind the threads of the Judeo-Christian scriptures, the Franco-British Arthurian Romances, and the Middle-Eastern fertility cults. In their stead Eliot has planted another world of mythos from the realm of ancient Hinduism. We thus turn from the setting sun of the West and look to a new sun rising in the East, returning to one of the cradles of human civilization: India. Seemingly from all around, a loud voice booms out, "Ganga was sunken, and the limp leaves / Waited for rain, while the black clouds / Gathered far distant, over Himavant" (395-7). The River Ganges (or "Ganga") created a region in Northern India of incredible fertility, beginning a civilization, and has long been revered by Hindus. Likewise, the Himavat (or "Himavant") is the Hindu snow-god, the personification of the Himalayan Mountains. Under normal conditions, the entire system of nature is unified as one; the ecosystem

represents a passive rejection of selfishness and egotism (Ward 135). These words are spoken by a new, omniscient voice that signals a change of scene from the realistic settings we have seen all through *The Waste Land* into some sort of divine parable.

The speaker's first words frame a contiguity between forest and mountain and stream that humans would do well to notice. Between the snow runoff and the flooding river basin, the two deities of mountain and river normally bring life to a region. Drawing from the ancient Indian *Rig-Veda*, Weston notes the importance of the Indian rivers in shaping a culture, and suggests how easily the physical river might have become a deity of sorts for the people relying upon its predictable flowing (Weston 25-7, 36, 45). Thus to see the Ganga "sunken" and a naked Himavant adorned with few and "black clouds" is to see the wilderness stretching to all corners of the earth. The wasteland dries up humans like so many "limp leaves," and meanwhile the rainless clouds tease them from a far horizon (Eliot 395). On the verge of a breakthrough, tensions are high: "The jungle [lies] crouched, humped in silence" (398). They await a word that will release the rains and fill the land with life again. Bent in "silence," no creature wants to break the spell; they will not speak until the gods send down their own words.

Our omniscient narrator suddenly cries out, "Then spoke the thunder" in line 399, and we see every part of nature straining to hear the speech—the leaves stop flapping, the jungle turns its head, and the almost-vanished River Ganga herself ceases to flow for just a moment. To their waiting ears, the cosmos utters just a single syllable to the dry lands: "DA" (400). The reference is to the Brihadaranyaka, a section of the philosophically-introspective *Upanishads* (the last part of the Vedas, ancient Hindu sacred texts) ("Notes on *The Waste Land*" 74). Within that text, Eliot references a story about when three different groups of beings—gods, demons, and humans—each ask the Creator for a

message, and the Creator responds with the same message for each of them, the single syllable “*Da*.” However, each group hears the “*Da*” differently, as though it meant the beginning of a Sanskrit word, either: *Datta* (give), *Dayadhvam* (sympathize), or *Damyata* (control) (North 62-3). The parable is concerned as much with how we interpret what we hear as it is with what the Creator actually intended to say. Eliot uses this as a framework within which to explore the progressions we have made through the wasteland.

Interesting, however, is that Eliot changes the order in which the words appeared in the original text. The gods received the word *Da* as *Damyata*, to control oneself; humans take the word to mean *Datta*, to give of oneself; and the demons believe the thunder spoke *Dayadhvam*, to sympathize with others. But Eliot rearranges this, suggesting that the order has more significance for his readers if rearranged in this way (Ward 135-6). Eliot begins with the human interpretation of *Da* as “*Datta*: what have we given?” (401). The sound of rolling thunder becomes a signal, just as the crowing of the rooster heralded rain in the last stanza. Here the thunder’s *Da* echoes in the consciousness of the poem’s speaker as *Datta*, demanding that modern humans lose their self-centeredness and give selflessly to others. This signals a sort of existentialism suggesting that the only escape from ennui is action; one can only escape the aimless boredom of a decadent existence by acting rightly and unselfishly toward one’s fellow humans (Brooker and Bentley 190-1).

Eliot’s human narrator then recalls coming to the aid of a friend with the power of “blood shaking my heart” and experiencing the “awful daring of a moment’s surrender / Which an age of prudence can never retract” (Eliot 402-4). These difficult lines depict a scenario where a tragedy has struck the narrator’s companion, and the speaker is given the opportunity to act and help his comrade. Whether it the friend’s *shed* blood that shakes his heart or the narrator’s *own* blood beating in his heart, the blood-connection

between these two humans makes them kin, and demands that one friend aid his fellow. Blood becomes the totem of humanity, hearkening back to Christ's shed blood; it represents the common bond that ties humans together through a shared frailty. Eliot sets up an exemplar for the thunder's message for humans to "give," and how the narrating actor chooses to act entails consequences. If the narrator isolates himself and ignores his companion's problems, humanity will not escape its anonymous, isolated wasteland. But by daring to undertake a frightening "moment's surrender" and giving to his friend—opening himself up to trouble and danger—the speaker finds solace and companionship. There is something revitalizing in this sacrifice of oneself (Sorum 33). It is by these acts—a person reaching out to another, giving (*datta*) to another, sacrificing one's own safety for the life of another—that we can now live. "By this," such selfless acts as these, "and this only, we have existed" cries the narrator (Eliot 405).

Both hopefulness and an admonition are implied here. By saying that selfless giving is the "only" way humans have ever existed, Eliot is effectively rejecting the selfish world in which he dwells. The Western emphasis on the single individual, isolated from the rest of humanity, is a false paradigm and will only extend to a culture of despair. Instead we should substitute a loving, innocent, reciprocal relationship, almost like that found in the Hyacinth Garden of "The Burial of the Dead" (Ward 136). Life is found in the "surrender" of every "moment," in the giving up of power and not in the grasping at strength. To live selflessly is not a means of gaining fame and glory—it "is not to be found in our obituaries"—but it is good and right (Eliot 406). Just before this, the sagacious speaker advised the reader that "an age of prudence can never retract" the choice one decides to make when put to the test. Hence even if we were to act perfectly prudently for an entire "age," if we acted wrongly and chose to ignore our true mission

when the opportunity arose, we could never make up for that misstep. Conversely, to act correctly when called upon will “cover over a multitude of sins” (I Peter IV.8; see also James V.20). Eliot invokes the words of ancient Hinduism to combat Western notions of egotism, and with them he demands that humans give of themselves for others to find meaning and hope in life. Here is that strain of existentialism, again, that demands that we *act* to escape meaninglessness, rather than watch things fall apart from a point of stasis. Without this, there is no humanity, only human lemmings hastening to self-destruction.

The stanza rolls onward, animating an image of a “beneficent spider” that covers over our “memories” of past actions with so many cobwebs (Eliot 407). Our existence is not to be found in the cobwebbed-corners of our homes or possessions, nor are our lives capable of being stuffed into envelopes, with “seals broken by the lean solicitor / In our empty rooms” (408-9). The “beneficent spider” carries a reference to Webster’s *The White Devil*, from a misogynistic section suggesting that widowed women will remarry before the spiders can even “Make a thin curtain for your epitaphs” (V.vi.158). Similarly, the “lean solicitor” breaking seals may intentionally-recall Mr. Utterson, the lawyer of Robert Louis Stevenson’s *Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde*, another story greatly concerned with the multiplicity of voices (Satpathy 287-8). What good we do to our fellow humans will far outweigh the broken “seals” of our wills at our deaths; they mean much more than the “empty rooms” and possessions we leave behind. Our benevolence may not come up in our wills or “obituaries,” but this is of little import in the long run.

Eliot is here making an argument for orthodoxy. Individual material gains are of little worth, and they lose considerable value for us upon losing our lives. Paradoxically, it is the seemingly-minor things—*doing unto others*—that will outlive us, and they will mark a better legacy for humanity than funeral notices, cobwebbed tombstones, or vast



estates. In this first part of the thunder's speech, humans (particularly Western humans) have been instructed with a new ethos: replace the ego-obsessed individual with a consciousness of others. Interestingly, this is an ethic ascribed to by both Buddhists and Christians alike (among others), as Eliot further brings disparate traditions together as he winds up *The Waste Land*. It is especially important to consider this notion of "empty rooms" from line 409—the last words we hear before the thunder rolls again. No matter what individual gains one amasses in a lifetime, all our possessions are utterly *empty* of value at life's end. Better to have empty rooms in one's home than in one's soul, since, "What good is it for a man to gain the whole world, yet forfeit his soul?" (Mark VIII.36). Likewise, the Buddhist *Udanavarga* says, "Verily, it is the law of humanity that though one accumulates hundreds of thousands of worldly goods, one still succumbs to the spell of death" (Borg 71). One must, it seems, lose the self to gain all the rest.

Having finished with this first vignette, the thunder rolls again, shouting "Da" into the world consciousness once again, though this time it seems to groan out, "Dayadhvam," "sympathize" (Eliot 411). As the sound recedes, we enter the speaker's contemplating mind as he says,

I have heard the key  
 Turn in the door once and turn once only  
 We think of the key, each in his prison  
 Thinking of the key, Each confirms a prison. (411-4)

Eliot here recalls one of the darker stories of Dante's *Inferno*. In the Ninth Circle of Hell Dante finds Count Ugolino, who was imprisoned with his children by his enemy, the Archbishop Ruggieri, and was eventually driven by starvation into eating his own children (*Inferno* XXXIII.42-72). Ugolino, now in Hell, recalls, "'And then I heard them

nailing shut the door / Into that fearful tower—a pounding that came / From far below....” (XXXIII.42-4). The “key” locking the door is the sound of his death sentence; hearing it “turn once only” indicates that, once turned, this door will never be unlocked. Echoes of Eliot’s own cries for relief from his modern imprisonment appear in these lines (Litz 14). The key that might have set Ugolino and his children free was tossed into the river, giving the count one thing to eternally contemplate: the loss of the key and the isolation it brought to “his prison” (Eliot 413-4). The key becomes synonymous with a release that is simultaneously desired and impossible to achieve.

In his “Notes” Eliot also connects this passage to F. H. Bradley’s *Appearance and Reality*, a work of philosophy Eliot was much interested in. This “key” section alludes to Bradley’s text, wherein the philosopher suggests that our experience within the world is as personal and subjective to our points of view as are our thoughts and feelings (Bradley 346). Bradley therein describes what he sees as an error in believing humans can truly understand each other. He writes,

Our inner worlds, I may be told [by one who believes that experiences in the real world are universal], are divided from each other, but the outer world of experience is common to all; and it is by standing on this basis that we are able to communicate. Such a statement would be incorrect. My external sensations are no less private to myself than are my thoughts or my feelings. (Bradley 346)

His point is simple: humans are trapped within their own experiences of reality, unable to look objectively past their own egos to find a means of escaping their confining, solipsistic worlds.

The act of “Thinking of the key...confirms a prison” for each person, writes Eliot

(414). Even becoming obsessed with escaping our mind-prisons becomes a means of being enslaved to them. “Only at nightfall,” continues Eliot’s speaker, “aethereal rumours / Revive for a moment a broken Coriolanus” (415-6). Coriolanus was a perhaps-mythic Roman general of the fifth century B.C. who left Rome in anger over its democratic leanings, only to return to lead an enemy tribe against Rome. In his usual roundabout way, Eliot imagines that humans—the prisoners of their isolated minds—are only able to “revive” themselves a bit and become aware of their confined situation when all else has been stripped away (in the darkness and loneliness of “night”). Eliot calls these stirrings of realization within the soul the “aethereal rumours” of the night winds. This is fitting, as “What the Thunder Said” is tied to elemental aether from the stars. Symbolically, it requires something outside of the human mind to make people realize their faults.

Ironically, this “key” that locked up humanity also contains the power to set its soul free, to escape from the dried-up ego and the blighted wasteland. Having *given* of ourselves (Datta) and *given* up our power to be selfish, we have begun to *sympathize* (Dayadhvam) with our fellow mortals. This sympathy is more than simply giving out of our excess and is more just taking pity on a pathetic figure. To truly sympathize is to become a compassionate person, seeking to understand the suffering of others and help alleviate it. One must first identify with another in order to feel sympathy; a person must not be an isolated *giver* doing good to a *receiver*, but must instead realize that the two, the *I*-ego and the *you*-other, are not at all different. This sense of compassion comes across in *Mahayana* Buddhist literature. One goal of such Buddhism is cultivating “*bodhisattva*”—the mind of a Buddha that takes pity on another and desires to help save the other from suffering (Armstrong 130). The thunder speaks out against selflessness here, desiring the destruction of the ego preventing us from identifying with our fellow mortals.

In contrast, Dante's Archbishop Ruggieri becomes a symbol of antipathy, and his cruel entrapment of Ugolino causes both to be cast into hell. Likewise Bradley's depicted solipsism suggests that humans have come so far in isolating themselves inside their own minds that they hardly even share the same world. The "key" promises a tantalizing escape from the "solipsistic self-consciousness"—the prison of our own making (Allan 104-5). Ruggieri and Ugolino become symbolic of humanity's failings, unable to develop the compassion and sympathy needed to prevent the arrival of a human wasteland. Just as a key was needed to unlock the prison doors, humanity requires an element from beyond humanity to set people free again. Thus the aether of the heavens came down to set them free, sending Christ in human form to snap humanity out of its solipsism. It would take an infinitely-greater human to break the bonds of moral, emotional, and social drought. As such, the "nightfall" that came with Christ's crucifixion (see Mark XV.33) ironically brought with it a revival of the human spirit. By looking at the compassion and sympathy that caused Christ to sacrifice his life to resurrect humanity from the wasteland, we can see the escape for humanity. Dayadhvam demands that we do not simply give or give up petty possessions and ideas, but that we go further, cultivating a spirit of sympathy for our fellows as a protection against all-pervasive, self-destructive solipsism. It is the only key that will free us from our self-made prisons.

Thunder rumbles out once more in line 417 as another loud "Da" reverberates over the landscape. The final interpretation is "Damyata"—*control* (Eliot 418). Following the instructions to "give" and "sympathize," we have a third scene, one that is not as dark as the last two. Instead we have a person guiding a sailboat, gliding over the waters. The mere appearance of water is a positive sign after the drought, and the existence of a boat (albeit an ancient sort of vessel) is a sign that humanity has not been utterly ruined by the

apparent destruction of civilization. Unusually, our guide here is as calm as the waters.

The narrator intones,

Damyata: The boat responded

Gaily, to the hand expert with sail and oar

The sea was calm, your heart would have responded

Gaily when invited, beating obedient

To controlling hands. (418-22)

There is a very personal sense of confession about these lines, and while the language is a bit strange, it is not threatening. We can tie this passage directly to Eliot, who himself felt a great sense of joy and peace while sailing on the waters (Gardner 81-2). The personal pronoun “your” in line 420 is notable; it adds a personal, conversational sense to this section, with no sign of enmity or darkness anywhere. The sea’s “calm” is a much-needed relief. Like the narrator says, our “hearts” really do react “Gaily” to this image of natural peace and tranquility.

The scene illustrates the concept of Damyatta as having spiritual control over the self. Just as the sailor guides the boat’s tiller to avoid sharp waves, the wise person steers his or her own self—eliminating anger, lust, jealousy, and other “waves” that might rock the consciousness. This scene becomes a sort of yogic practice focused upon self-control. The goal here is to make one’s passions—one’s very “heart”—beat “obedient / To controlling hands” (421-2). We wish to control a heartbeat that has been driven out of control by the concupiscence, fear and confusion of the wasteland. This is total control, making peace out of a world that has had no peace. Eliot’s words eliminate all problems and questions and leave the mind clear with the hand on the tiller and the boat moving calmly through the sea. Here is his new human.

Our sailor is really none other than the resurrected Phlebas the Phoenician. Before, the cares of the world, the stresses of “the profit and loss” drove him overboard. But now he maintains control of his ship, his soul. Madame Sosostris’ admonitions to “Fear death by water” have dissipated with the gentle falling rain. Eliot presents a new paradigm, suggesting that the way to peace was within our grasp all along. He suggests that if we can kill our basest desires—if we can escape the aggressive and destructive instincts that created a wasteland of empty isolation—then there remains hope of finding peace. With the coming of Christ (the “Hanged Man” Sosostris could not see) in “What the Thunder Said,” even Phlebas—the incarnation of the merchant (who cared more about ledgers than loving others)—has been brought back to life as a new man, content and calm.

Despite its positive imagery, lines 418-22 still contains a strange bit of ambiguity. After discussing the calm waters, Eliot mentions a “heart” responding “[g]aily, when invited, beating obedient / To controlling hands” (420-2). The words seem somehow risqué. But it serves as an intentional reminder of the omnipresent dangers inherent in letting our passions exceed our “control.” In the wasteland of meaningless sensuality, controlling one’s passions is a never-ending task. These lines remind us of the dungeons we are escaping when we seek to control our base selfishness. As both the Christian and Buddhist traditions would attest, escaping suffering and falsity is not a one-time event but a daily struggle to follow a better way. The lust of the flesh will always be present just beneath the surface, but if even Phlebas can rise above it, then surely this new world affords hope for us. There is an echo of Matthew Arnold’s “Dover Beach” in Eliot’s line 420. Arnold’s epochal poem concerned the descent of the world into anarchic destruction, and Eliot’s “The sea was calm” practically mirrors the first line of “Dover Beach.” By re-invoking this context, Eliot is creating a sense of closure for the wasteland Arnold had

long before identified. If they lose self-interest and gain compassion for others, humans can finally escape the cycle of destruction they have so long been trapped within.

I want to return once more to the voice of the thunder in “What the Thunder Said” before moving on to the final section of *The Waste Land*. In invoking the *Da*-sounds of the thunder, Eliot has changed the ultimate direction of the poem. By allowing the world itself to break in and have say its piece (in the form of the thunder), Eliot is refocusing the poem from the human to the universal. The booming, methodical, repetitious voice does not allow for ignorance or resistance from humans. The ideas of giving, sympathizing, and controlling are anti-individual and are meant to broaden people’s outlooks beyond themselves as they enter their consciousnesses. It makes perfect sense to put these words in the mouth of the atmosphere itself, creating a cosmic voice that humans cannot fail to hear. Interestingly, the *Da*-sounds of the thunder may also invoke the Dada movement in literature and art in the late 1910s, the anti-art current that became a forum for protesting the war and other capitalist ills. *Da* then becomes effectually a rejection of the civilization that created the wasteland. Eliot’s thunder sends a Dadaist message to the society even as it sends the rain, instructing people to never build up a society of loveless modernity again.

Nature herself has been awakened and has sent a message from the clouds about the solution to humanity’s self-made problems. In this rejection of human institutions, we find release. The time for subtlety has passed; with the rains come resurrection and remonstrance. The wasteland was greater than a simple weather phenomenon, and escaping it will take more than one person’s ideas or another—it will require the reordering of the entire world.

## Section Four (Lines 423-34): Dénouement

With the thunder's words still ringing in our ears, we have reached the last leg of our journey out from the wasteland. After the thunder's interlude, the first figure we find on the human landscape is the Fisher King himself. For the first time we see the king's perspective as he at last speaks to us, "I sat upon the shore / Fishing, with the arid plain behind me / Shall I at least set my lands in order?" (Eliot 423-5). This three-line stanza speaks volumes about the human condition as it has been personified by the Fisher King, (or Sosostri's Man with Three Staves). From his parched tongue we hear of the suffering of the Fisher King who has been trapped in the wilderness (see Weston 114, 123). He was so broken from the wearying wounds of civilization that he could not even stand up to fish; he could only sit by evaporating pools and hope for the rains to return (Eliot 423). All the while the "arid plain behind" him has stretched out as far as the eye can see, taunting him to find impossible solutions (424). The only thought he could understand concerned his imminent death; in line 425 he alludes to words from the book of Isaiah: "This is what the Lord says: Put your house in order, because you are going to die; you will not recover" (XVIII.1). In his short speech, the king relates that, like all humans, he has seen the inevitability of his mortal end, but until now he has not known a way to escape it. He is unable to tell with any certainty what the future holds, apart from a painful end (Harding 23, 28). In the meantime, he has divided up his paltry personal possessions and put his "lands in order," not knowing what else to do.

An irony exists in that statement as well. Although the Fisher King wishes to set things "in order" before he expires, he does not have the power even to do that. The wasteland has arisen precisely *because* his lands were beyond his control; had he been strong enough to order them as he pleased, they would have remained fertile. The Fisher



King's words become expressive of the tragic fragility of human life in the universe, especially when their destruction created by those same humans. Thus children chant, "London Bridge is falling down falling down falling down," as even infants know that the life of civilization is not eternal (426). London Bridge is an image of wealth, power, and success, and all of modern civilization crumbles with its fall. Just as the three booming *Da*-sounds of the thunder signaled the return of the rain, the three repetitions of the bridge "falling down" insist that rebuilding it would be futile. We are here to save humanity from itself, not to create another wasteland at the first possible opportunity. The reliance upon materialism must fundamentally change to release humans from self-bondage.

Eliot then backs away from the Fisher King and the children's song and invokes Dante yet again, a man who long ago felt the snares of the wasteland as he walked through "dark woods, the right road lost" (*Inferno* I.2). Yet having heard from the thunder, we are no longer in the *Inferno* of the wasteland; instead we arrived at the Mountain of Purgatory. Line 427 of *The Waste Land* references *Purgatorio* XXVI.133-48. On this level of the mountain, people who sinned sexually during their lifetimes are purged of their sins by passing through cleansing fires. Here Dante sees the Provençal poet Arnaut Daniel and hears him speak of his own sins. Arnaut speaks to Dante at the close of the canto, on the highest terrace on Mount Purgatory,

"I beg you, in the name of that great power  
 guiding you to the summit of the stairs:  
 remember, in good time, my suffering here."

Then in the purifying flames he hid. (XXVI.144-7)

The allusion makes perfect sense, having eradicated the false love of the wasteland's denizens here at last. From passing through "A Game of Chess" and "The Fire Sermon,"

Eliot knows his people's need for purification.

Line 428 calls upon a more esoteric source, an anonymous poem of the fourth century A.D. known as *Pervigilium Veneris* or "The Vigil of Venus." The poem references the tragic story of Tereus and Philomela once again, as the poet longs for spring to come: "How long in coming is my lovely spring? / And when shall I, and when the swallow sing? / Sweet Philomela cease;—or here I sit" ("The Vigil of Venus" 87-9). Likewise, the end of Eliot's line 428, "O swallow swallow" is an ironic reference to Tennyson's part IV of *The Princess: A Medley*. The latter dealt with the issue of women's education. Again, the point is to recall the sufferings we have passed through on the way through the purgatory of the wasteland.

Continuing his allusive tour de force, Eliot's line 429 is taken from the French Romantic Gérard de Nerval's sonnet "El Desdichado," (Spanish for "The Unfortunate"). The line Eliot selects, "Le Prince d'Aquitaine à la tour abolie," translates to: "the Prince of Aquitaine in the wrecked tower;" the sonnet surrounds the musings of a man who has lost his beloved (Drain 33). The key to this allusion is the tower. One of the tarot cards has the image of a tall tower (or tree, in some cases) being struck by lightning (Kermode 108). One could also tie this tower to the Chapel Perilous that tested Perceval and the other knights. The tarot card itself is representative of failure or trouble, but it may also represent an epiphany of the mind (see Weston chapter 13). Madame Sosostri's "wicked pack of cards" was the antithesis of spiritual rebirth, and these last incantations following the thunder's roars are meant to be held in opposition to her watered-down magic (Kirsch 15). Along with the allusions to Dante, this mention is meant to combat the misuse of spirituality that was rampant in the wasteland before the thunder spoke. In this last piece of the journey, such falsity is swept away, with the tower becoming a new epiphany.

Finally, one last allusion appears in line 431 (we will return to 430 in a moment). Eliot's disembodied narrator recalls another phrase flitting through his mind: "Why then Ile fit you," he cries, borrowing from Thomas Kyd's Elizabethan drama *The Spanish Tragedy* (431). The words are spoken by Hieronimo as he prepares a play-within-a-play in order to exact revenge for the murder of his son Horatio. The double meaning on "I'll fit you" suggested Hieronimo's intentions of both planning the entertainment and using it to satisfy his vengeance (Kyd IV.i.68; see also North 64-6). The last half of Eliot's line 431, "Hieronimo's mad againe," is actually the subtitle to the revenge play, indicating Hieronimo's descent into apparent (and real) madness in his plotting to avenge Horatio's death. Hieronimo also wishes to present his play in various "original" languages, so the actors will speak Italian, French, Greek, and Latin. Eliot includes this reference ironically, since the last several lines (and a significant amount of *The Waste Land*) have come from the "original" languages. Bringing in multiple different tongues here is intended as a sort of magical "abracadabra" effect, like an incantation meant to make the poem's message effective (Fowler 35). This has been the story through all of *The Waste Land*, as Eliot's jumbled voices from his own play-within-a-play have contributed to the universal effect of his words (Hays 37). While depicting the strange, incessant voices of a maddened throng, they also have managed to unify humanity in its very confusion.

Yet more importantly, this character defined by his *action* is meant to be a foil to the passive people of *The Waste Land*. Hieronimo represents one who "acts" toward achieving his aims, unlike the Fisher King who forever "ruminates" Hamlet-like (Fodaski 148). Hieronimo represents the sort of person who brings about much-needed change. But throughout this poem, Hieronimo has been absent and The Fisher King has been inactive; Eliot has been associating the Fisher King with the tarot card for the Man with Three

Staves (ironically, a card with good omens), rather than tying it to Hieronimo (Nänny 343-4). Somehow these opposing figures must be reconciled into one in order to understand humanity. There must be some single person's experience at the center of the milieu in order to make sense of what has happened (Easthope 340). Eliot himself is that central consciousness that witnesses all; he is the "Tiresias" of the poem, watching from outside and tying the vignettes together. He exists behind all of his characters, piecing together what they are too myopic to realize—that there is a way out of deadness.

Eliot's line 432 tells us that we have reached our journey's goal, having found an end to the whirlwind recollections of a fragmented world. The repetition of the Sanskrit words "Datta. Dayadhvam. Damyata" brings us back to ourselves, so to speak. In the traditional tale of the thunder's speech, the gods and demons remembered what the cosmos had instructed them, but humans constantly forgot and needed to be reminded (Mohanty 85-6). Thus the repetition here makes perfect sense, forming a sort of liturgy to keep humans attuned to the correct path of the cosmos. These words also prepare us for the final sounds to echo across the milieu.

As the thunder dies away and the rains fall harder, the raindrops splash on the ground and carry one repeated sound back to our ears: "Shantih shantih shantih" (Eliot 433). This phrase ends the Hindu Vedic *Upanishads*, and its meaning is akin to the Christian phrase: "The Peace which passeth understanding" ("Notes on *The Waste Land*" 75). While there may be a tinge of irony to these words since the world has not yet returned to peace and plenty, I do not agree with Chandran, who maintains that this is not meant to be a benediction at all (see Chandran 681-3). The last two lines must be intended as a note of closure; "Shantih shantih shantih" is meant to indicate the attainment of peace within one's mind, returning to a realm of the soul's tranquility (Dwivedi 52-3). Though

recovering the landscape may be a long and arduous road, even the sound of these words indicates that something in this world has been dramatically altered since “The Burial of the Dead” in the first spring. The words invoke a positive desire for continued resurrection that outweighs any of the poem’s troubles to this point. The proclamation may be taken as a wish to begin again with a clean slate, and they hold the power to turn that desire into an eventual reality.

Before making these last statements, Eliot essentially breaks the fourth wall, stating, “These fragments I have shored against my ruins” (430). The lines of his poem, the words of its characters, and the imagery of a crumbling universe—all of these “fragments” are meant to be a warning to the self. Eliot is trying to protect the realm of humanity from the desolation caused by apathy and decadence (Venegas 250). Eliot employs the fragments of a shattered past in trying to protect a benevolent future. The power of memory is invoked once again; remembering the pain of a year spent wandering in the wilderness will guard against sinking again into that abyss. Within each of the voices of his work are pleas for renewal—within his language we hear a man in the wilderness crying out for rebirth. And here, at last, he has finally found it.

## Conclusions

Somehow, reading Eliot inevitably returns us to Dante. *The Waste Land*, like the *Divine Comedy*, is another “pilgrim’s progress” through Hell and toward Heaven. If we recount our journey through *The Waste Land*, seeing locales and hearing individuals that might have come directly from Dante’s pages, we can identify a progression that has taken place. In “The Burial of the Dead” we entered Hell’s vestibule, saw the souls of those men who had sought meaning in the wrong places (St. Narcissus, Marie’s companion, and Stetson), and had no allegiances but to themselves. “A Game of Chess” took us deeper within hell, showing us the hollow pleasures of mammon and the victimization of women (the woman in the chamber, Lil, and the friends in the bar) incited by false desires. Then, in “The Fire Sermon” we saw the inevitable result of such a marriage. Misbegotten relationships had given birth to lonesomeness, isolation, and destruction of the individual soul. We saw people frozen in their hopeless worlds (like those trapped in Dante’s icy Cocytus) for having betrayed others and themselves (see *Inferno* XXXI-IV).

Yet, like Dante, Eliot does not leave the story in Hell. After the decaying of humanity, we watched as the old self was drowned in “Death by Water” and saw the world ritually cleansed through this baptism. This purgation of malice had a marked effect, drowning concupiscence and false desires. With the drowning of the old humanity came an epiphany. In its wake, “What the Thunder Said” inhabits a world that has been (and continues to be) resurrected; it is a tale of remaking the world. It brings with it a new sense of justice, demanding that the human race care for each other. Violence and indifference have been transformed into compassion and benevolence. Turmoil has turned to peace. It is this peace—“shantih shantih shantih”—that we can finally cling to.

In this sense, the poem itself has been a Purgatory of sorts where we have traveled up a mountain of fire that burns away our lust and selfishness. Dante passed through that same fire six hundred years before, and Eliot returns us to that same peak in an attempt to purify and renew humanity. We may note here that Eliot's poem can be seen to have taken place not only over the span of five seasons but also over the course of three days. Following Dante, the events of *The Waste Land* may be seen as having symbolically occurred between Good Friday and Easter Sunday. Thus *The Waste Land* inhabits the dark space between Christ's death and his resurrection three days later (actually two for you nitpickers). The rain and the thunder serve as the "benediction" to an arduous, world-encompassing (and truly "catholic") Mass (Hathaway 53-4). The rain has fallen, refreshing and hopeful.

Yet we should not forget the great sacrifices that come with this realization. In bringing in a new world order, Eliot is seemingly writing off his contemporary world as utterly hopeless. As with Noah's flood we have seen renewal in its wake, but only after complete destruction of the old world. Phlebas' drowning ought to remind us of the cost of the quest, just as the tower of the Hanged Man in the last scene is a reminder of Christ's cross that was necessary for resurrection. However, in the aftermath there is much hope. The Fisher King spoke before in the past tense, "I sat upon the shore / Fishing, with the arid plain behind me [wondering] / Shall I at least set my lands in order?" (423-5). But he has left these dark thoughts of "dry brain in a dry season" behind (see "Gerontion" 75), having been healed at last. With him the lands are also reclaimed. Perceval has found the Grail and survived the Chapel Perilous, and the king's mouth has been opened, while before he could only silently fish and stew. He has been reborn, and the heroic cycle has been completed. Something new and positive has supplanted the old.

The Fisher King, it would seem, is the central human character of the narrative, though he has little “screentime” in Eliot’s poem. Yet, in the guise of the wounded king, Eliot has been working out his own salvation “with fear and trembling” (see Philippians II.12). It seems only fitting that Christ figures into his image of resurrection. Jesus himself, we recall, has some history with fish and fishing. At the beginning of Jesus’ ministry he came upon two brothers, Andrew and Peter, fishing in a lake and called out to them, “Come, follow me, and I will make you fishers of men” (Matthew IV.19). Regardless of the theology involved, this image is directly translatable to the problem of a wasteland in modern society. Christ came to resurrect people’s dead lives (metaphorically and otherwise) and the language of fishing makes Jesus’ words applicable to our Fisher King. Christ came to free people from dead-end lives, and to give them a new mission with meaning by showing them how to love others. Through his teaching, sacrifice, and rebirth, he has given his followers a new life, and Eliot uses this same picture to return the Fisher King to life, along with all of humanity. The Vedic Thunder and the Resurrected Christ bring the same message of rebirth.

There is hope here for the emotionless men and women populating all wastelands in all times, whose spirits have become dried up and deadened. “These fragments I have shored against my ruins” cries the Fisher King (430), and so should we. The memory of the quest for renewal becomes a shield against falling prey to such debilitating unfruitfulness again. Should anyone have to pass through the wasteland again, the memories here invoked prove that the quest can be completed again. Though perhaps not a cure, it is preventative medicine to avoid the self-ruination of the human species.

In *The Waste Land*, we have passed through the stages of darkened human life. We have been through melancholy and despair, experienced the ineffectual rush of



passion, giving way to misdirected desires, and fallen into resignation and given up. But Eliot refused to leave us in that pit of despair; he has shown us a new season, and with it comes recreation as a new human. It is a rebirth into a new beginning. Like the Buddhist goal of escaping *samsara* or suffering, we have found a new element to help us escape the everlasting cycle of sufferings.

We've ended in Purgatory, perhaps, but Paradise is at least in sight and Hell is far behind, drowned in the sea. We are making our way up the mountain toward hope. That is what the "shantih shantih shantih" is there for, to despoil the fears and confusion with an everlasting peace. Here Eliot has found comfort and meaning for himself in the midst of a confused world. Perhaps we can manage the same.

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