

The wasteland: overview of a poem essay

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The Wasteland: Overview of a Poem Eliot provides for humanity a deep and complex picture, a story within a poem, alluding to culture in Europe and worldwide supposedly during the span of Eliot's own life at the time of writing this poem The Wasteland in the very early 1920s. In reviewing the poem in its entirety, one can gather that perhaps Eliot references the personal, social, cultural, and political situations in his life, in Europe and other nations during this time period, including actual historical events such as the astronomical WWI reparations demanded by the Allies from Germany in the Treaty of Versailles, the perceived Jewish/communist conspiracy to humiliate Germany at the end of the World War I, the great inflation in Germany preceding the Great Depression, the French and Belgian occupation of Duisburg, the Russian invasion of east Europe, the Irish resistance in Great Britain, the attempted coup of Germany by Hitler and the fascist, racist national socialists (NAZIs), Mussolini's fascist march on Rome, the surge in ideology against what was termed as Marxism, democracy, anarchy, and class warfare as well as the surge in ideology against the bankers financial systems, the struggle for women's suffrage in Europe, and the Bubonic Plague in India. Referencing the current cultural climate of this time in regard to the negative situations affecting the life of the writer Eliot himself is to put his poem The Wasteland into a workable frame, seeing his descriptions, narrations, imagery, voices, tone, form, and themes in the context of the environment from which this poem sprung. The deeply dark and disturbed imagery and tone which is woven throughout The Wasteland lends one to deduce that the poem is hinged on the personal and social struggles of this troubled time.

The epilogue of *The Wasteland* gives a brief glimpse into the Eliot's intended overarching theme, translated as "I have seen with my own eyes the Sibyl hanging in a jar, and when the boys asked her, what do you want? She answered, I want to die." The symbolism of death and of women suffering are woven throughout the poem, however it is unclear throughout the poem and in this epigraph if the women themselves do indeed want to be hanging or if the women are hanging due the actions of other persecutors and are simply resigned to their link to impending death. In deeper analysis of the poem, one would tend to lean toward to the latter of the two choices, that the women indeed have been hung against their will, however accept their fate, and even perhaps find a sick solace in death as a release from suffering. In the *Burial of the Dead*, the first section of Eliot's poem and title a reference to the Anglican religion of Great Britain, the speaker Maria claims to be a true German woman, from East Europe, Lithuania, and certainly not Russian.

She meditates in the beginning of the poem on the idea that spring time is the cruelest time of the year, mixing dark memories with fresh desire; she seems to have been more comfortable in the old winter time, because it matched her mood, dull and grey. With the coming warmth, she is surprised and even troubled, because the passion of the warm season seems so apart from what she knows. This section of the poem is complex and difficult to understand, however, one can surmise that although the woman is better off and coming back to life, even though she finds it difficult and uncomfortable to leave the darkness she knows so well. In the middle of this section, the voice and imagery of the poem changes to that of the narrator, the male,

who questions the ability of anything to live and grow in the “ stony rubbish” of a desert environment, juxtaposing the cold ice of female winter with the hot dry male desert. Can God “ the Son of Man” (an allusion to Jesus Christ) spring from a situation such as this, which is illustrated as a pile of fragmented “ broken images”, where the sun has dried up the land like a desert with no shelter or water. The only refuge is in the dark shadow of a red rock, and even there is only anxiety and “ fear in a handful of dust”. The narrator then poses the question to the Irish girl, “ The air blows fresh to the homeland, where are you lingering?” These references to a lack of safe shelter resonates loudly within the Europe during this time and even worldwide, where people do not feel safe anywhere and politics are both polarized and enmeshed, producing no clear answers. On the streets of London picture in the final scenes of this section, people who have traveled there from many lands and weighted by the severity of the current political climate see death and hypocrisy in one another, one crying out “ you hypocrite, my brother” (Iftikar).

In reading and analyzing the second section of the poem, A Game of Chess, one can deduce that, again, the woman being described in the first part is aristocratic, sitting in a chair like a throne and surrounded by marble, gold, candelabras, jewels, glass, and satin. The narrator describes her perfume as troubled and confused, drowned and stirred, like the smoke and patterned ceiling. In suggestion to the idea that this woman, Philomel, could be so beautiful in her natural form by not having been put under force by the “ barbarous king” and changed into a nightingale (a reference to Greek mythology), the narrator creates the image of a woman weighted down by

financial and political powers outside of her control as well as the purposelessness of elitist living. She is pictured in tears, crying under the stressors in which she has no choice, yet also “fiery” and “savage” in her ways, waiting for her lover to return. The monologue and dialogue of the lower class women at the end of this section juxtaposes against the rich, although their lives are just as frantic. These women linger in a bar and wonder where their safe haven may be, try to spend their meager money wisely, attempt to stay beautiful so as not to lose their men, some returning from the army, they float about seemingly purposelessly and wild, without direction, influenced by anxiety related to poverty, alcoholism, abuse, and repeated childbirth, yet clinging to the men who can provide them with support. After the bartender’s repeated calls of “HURRY UP PLEASE IT’S TIME”, the women leave the bar singing lonely goodnights, reminiscent of Ophelia’s farewell speech in Hamlet, and also mirroring the Irish girl from the previous passage, called to find their homes. The third section of the poem, The Fire Sermon, is the longest part of The Wasteland, finds the narrator, a symbol of woman in her wetness, in tears on the banks of the River Thames, having lost her lover, weeping from the past romantic relationships turned violent and disturbed, feeling a sense of having been used or raped in the imagery of the “broken river’s tent”, the hymen split by “loitering heirs of city directors”.

The reference to the river is repeated further in this section in a song by three daughters of the Thames, at one point singing, “the river sweats oil and tar, the barges drift with the turning tide” which may be symbolic of the either forced or natural passivity of women, the water symbol, the river,

toiling under the commerce of the oil industry, run by men, and again alluding to the male politicians or city directors who rape the earth with unethical commerce. With the end of this passage comes references to Saint Augustine's Confessions and Buddha's Fire Sermon, stating, in simple terms, that man will be pulled from hell, from "Carthage", the business center between the West and East, burning, and yet saved, by the hand of God (Ackerley). Death By Water is the fourth section of this poem and also the last lines of an earlier poem by Eliot, *Dans le Restaurant*, translated, *In the Restaurant*. These last lines describe the fate of Phlebas, the Phoenician, illustrating the narrator, perhaps Eliot himself, in what appears to be a major turning point of the poem, even a self argument or call to self in the mind of the writer. Here Phlebas from Phoenicia, also a crossroads of cultures and business, like Carthage, and source of the modern alphabet, a symbol of the springing of language, the poet, speaks from the inner soul of the poem from the point of view of the healthy masculine, the man who holds control of the situation and is able to make changes.

Here, Phlebas is sucked into the darkness of the feminine, the coaxing, creeping power of water, he forgets the profit and the loss, the balance of business, ignores the warning in the "crying of gulls", and the quiet undercurrent of the ocean, the "whirlpool" pulls him to his death. The narrator calls to the gentiles and the Jews, the ones still running the ship, the business machine, and warns them not to leave their posts, to protect their masculinity, the dry ship, and to avoid a death similar to that of Phlebas by the evil temptress (Kermode). The narrator knows that Phlebas was once as

“ handsome and tall” as the other men, begging the sailors to not fall into the depths of the ocean, the cold death of a man who’s lost control of his life.

Death By Water is the one area of the poem where the man stands firm in his warning against the powerful force of femininity, which can overwhelm masculinity just as much as the masculine can overwhelm the feminine.

Differing from the suffering of women at the hands of extreme, uncontrollable, and unbalanced masculinity, Death By Water focuses now on the opposite polarity, the suffering of man at the hands of extreme, uncontrollable, and unbalanced femininity, wonderfully illustrated in the imagery of the small ship vying to keep control in the vastness of the ocean, and in the case of Phlebas, unable to do so and succumbing to death by drowning in her. This section serves as both an example of the power of the extreme feminine and a warning to other men. It is here when Eliot seems to most powerfully emerge from the poem himself, as a man giving advice to the other men who are still living. In the final section of the poem, What the Thunder Said, the speaker speaks with the voice of omnipotent authority, like God, illustrating the desert of male humanity, the rock without water, the sweat dry and feet stuck in the sands, throats without water, the opposite suffering of that in Death By Water.

Here the “ red sullen faces sneer and snarl from doors of mudcracked houses”, and the feminine, water, is nowhere to be found. The narrator pleads for water, if there were only water, “ a spring, a pool among the rock”, then perhaps salvation would be at hand, but there is no water. An allusion to an Old Testament prayer, “ who is the third who walks beside

you”, calls the reader to the fact the God’s redemption is sought and not found (Martz). The suffering of woman reenters the poem, the “ maternal lamentation”, as the dry empire, squeezed dry by rampant power in extreme masculinity, tumbles the cities, the “ falling towers, Jerusalem, Athens, Alexandria, Vienna, London”. And here, with the fall of the dry masculine world, can woman slip back into the picture, in soft, dark silence, in babies, in the aftermath of the great breakdown, the graves and broken buildings, the “ empty chapel with no windows”. It is here that her presence comes with the rain, and mixes, finally, in a moment of intertwined salvation with masculinity. The narrator, a man, then speaks personally, “ I sat upon the shore, fishing, with the arid plain behind me; shall I at least set my lands in order?” Here, the man is thoughtful after the fall of the choked empire and the refreshing showering rain, wondering how to make things right, for “ London Bridge is falling down”. An allusion to the desire of a free India sings from the final words of the poem, “ shantih, shantih, shantih”, the peace which passeth understanding.

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