

The burial of the dead



**ASSIGN
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Section I: “The Burial of the Dead” “The Waste Land” begins with an excerpt from Petronius Arbiter’s *Satyricon*, in Latin and Greek, which translates as: “For once I saw with my own eyes the Cumaean Sibyl hanging in a jar, and when the boys asked her, ‘Sibyl, what do you want?’ she answered, ‘I want to die.’” The quotation is followed by a dedication to Ezra Pound, Eliot’s colleague and friend, who played a major role in shaping the final version of the poem. The poem proper begins with a description of the seasons. April emerges as the “cruellest” month, passing over a desolate land to which winter is far kinder. Eliot shifts from this vague invocation of time and nature to what seem to be more specific memories: a rain shower by the Starnbergersee; a lake outside Munich; coffee in that city’s Hofgarten; sledding with a cousin in the days of childhood. The second stanza returns to the tone of the opening lines, describing a land of “stony rubbish” “arid, sterile, devoid of life, quite simply the waste land” of the poem’s title.

Eliot quotes Ezekiel 2. 1 and Ecclesiastes 12. 5, using biblical language to construct a sort of dialogue between the narrator “the son of man” and a higher power. The former is desperately searching for some sign of life “roots that clutch, branches that grow — but all he can find are dry stones, dead trees, and a heap of broken images.

We have here a forsaken plane that offers no relief from the beating sun, and no trace of water. Suddenly Eliot switches to German, quoting directly from Wagner’s *Tristan und Isolde*. The passage translates as: “Fresh blows the wind / To the homeland / My Irish child / Where do you wait?” In Wagner’s opera, Isolde, on her way to Ireland, overhears a sailor singing

this song, which brings with it ruminations of love promised and of a future of possibilities.

After this digression, Eliot offers the reader a snatch of speech, this time from the mouth of the ??? hyacinth girl.??? This girl, perhaps one of the narrators (or Eliot's) early loves, alludes to a time a year ago when the narrator presented her with hyacinths. The narrator, for his part, describes in another personal account ???- distinct in tone, that is, from the more grandiloquent descriptions of the waste land, the seasons, and intimations of spirituality that have preceded it ???- coming back late from a hyacinth garden and feeling struck by a sense of emptiness.

Looking upon the beloved girl, he ??? knew nothing???: that is to say, faced with love, beauty, and ??? the heart of light,??? he saw only ??? silence.??? At this point, Eliot returns to Wagner, with the line ??? Oed??™ und leer das Meer???: ??? Desolate and empty is the sea.??? Also plucked from Tristan und Isolde, the line belongs to a watchman, who tells the dying Tristan that Isolde??™s ship is nowhere to be seen on the horizon. From here Eliot switches abruptly to a more prosaic mode, introducing Madame Sosostris, a ??? famous clairvoyante??? alluded to in Aldous Huxley??™s *Crome Yellow*.

This fortune-teller is known across Europe for her skills with Tarot cards. The narrator remembers meeting her when she had ??? a bad cold.??? At that meeting she displayed to him the card of the drowned Phoenician Sailor: ??? Here, said she, is your card.??? Next comes ??? Belladonna, the Lady of the Rocks,??? and then ??? the man with three staves,??? ??? the Wheel,??? and ??? the one-eyed merchant.??? It should be noted that only the man with

three staves and the wheel are actual Tarot cards; Belladonna is often associated with da Vinci's "Madonna of the Rocks," and the one-eyed merchant is, as far as we can tell, an invention of Eliot's.

Finally, Sosostris encounters a blank card representing something the one-eyed merchant is carrying on his back "something she is apparently forbidden to see." She is likewise unable to find the Hanged Man among the cards she displays; from this she concludes that the narrator should fear death by water. Sosostris also sees a vision of a mass of people walking round in a ring. Her meeting with the narrator concludes with a hasty bit of business: she asks him to tell Mrs.

Equitone, if he sees her, that Sosostris will bring the horoscope herself. The final stanza of this first section of "The Waste Land" begins with the image of an "Unreal City" echoing Baudelaire's "fourmillante cite," in which a crowd of people "flows over London Bridge while a brown fog hangs like a wintry cloud over the proceedings. Eliot twice quotes Dante in describing this phantasmagoric scene: "I had not thought death had undone so many" (from Canto 3 of the *Inferno*); "Sighs, short and infrequent, were exhaled" (from Canto 4). The first quote refers to the area just inside the Gates of Hell; the second refers to Limbo, the first circle of Hell. It seems that the denizens of modern London remind Eliot of those without any blame or praise who are relegated to the Gates of Hell, and those who were never baptized and who now dwell in Limbo, in Dante's famous vision. Each member of the crowd keeps his eyes on his feet; the mass of men flow up a

hill and down King William Street, in the financial district of London, winding up beside the Church of Saint Mary Woolnoth.

The narrator sees a man he recognizes named Stetson. He cries out to him, and it appears that the two men fought together in a war. Logic would suggest World War I, but the narrator refers to Mylae, a battle that took place during the First Punic War. He then asks Stetson whether the corpse he planted last year in his garden has begun to sprout.

Finally, Eliot quotes Webster and Baudelaire, back to back, ending the address to Stetson in French: ??? hypocrite lecteur! ??“ mon semblable, ??“ mon frere!???