Cultural allusions and intertextuality in The Waste Land

Keys that unlock the poem, mystifying puzzles to obscure meaning, or the source of a rich array of interpretations? The allusions in The Waste Land may be too numerous and obscure to understand in full, but, as Ray Cluley suggests, finding out more about them and how they work takes you right to the heart of Eliot's themes and purposes.

In his essay 'Tradition and the Individual Talent' Eliot argued that no poet had his complete meaning alone and that 'his appreciation is the appreciation of his relation to the dead poets'. His poem, 'The Waste Land' illustrates this idea. An artistic patchwork that unites the traditions, myths and beliefs of the East and West with its multitude of cultural allusions and intertextual references, Eliot had to provide additional notes because the poem was so rich with literary and anthropological references. It's a typical modernist poem in being such a collage, but it's amazing just how much 'The Waste Land' depends on the work of other writers, and an understanding of other cultures, to make much sense at all.

'the wisest woman in Europe'

Take Madame Sosostris, for example. The poem clearly indicates that she's a mystic, a clairvoyant who can read Tarot cards, but a fuller appreciation of her role emerges when you realise she is an allusion to Aldous Huxley's novel Crome Yellow. Crome Yellow focuses on the disenchantment of an age that had seen World War 1 and its aftermath, so referencing such a work adds to the mood Eliot is to build on throughout 'The Waste Land'. Additionally, in Crome Yellow, Sesostris is a man dressed as a fortune teller woman, so by association the character of 'The Waste Land' is also sexually ambiguous.

Ambiguity and ideas of transformation are key to Eliot's poem: we have Philomel's transformation into a bird; the use of Tiresias who changed sex; Actaeon's transformation into a stag. There is also ambiguity in the role of the narrator for it transforms several times throughout the various sections; rather than a consistent narrator figure, there is a merging of voices, a fluidity of identity that crosses boundaries and knows no restriction of age, race, or gender. Madame Sosostris's card of the Phoenician Sailor readies the reader for this as those 'pearls that were his eyes' alludes to Shakespeare's The Tempest, the line featuring in Ariel's song which is one of transformation 'into something rich and strange'. In using so many cultural references, 'The Waste Land' does exactly that, making something rich and strange from its different sources.

'HURRY UP PLEASE IT'S TIME'

The concept of change is closely related to that of time. Eliot's interest in this is emphasised by the repeated cry of 'HURRY UP PLEASE IT'S TIME', the pub call for last orders strikingly out of place alongside the various historical references within 'The Waste Land'. The Sibyl, aging beyond normal mortality; Tiresias, resurrected from the dead to foresee the future; Philomel, living eternally as the nightingale: each of these figures embodies time. Madame Sosostris, too, is a similar figure for she is foretelling the future via her 'wicked pack of cards'. She is a prophet figure like the Sibyl and Tiresias, and as her cards reveal the future, so do they foreshadow elements of the poem. The 'drowned Phoenician Sailor' appears later and 'fear death by water' warns of this fourth section of the poem, while the 'one-eyed merchant' recurs as 'Mr Eugenides, the Smyrna merchant' of part three. Eliot associates the 'Hanged Man' with the hooded figure of part five and the 'crowds of people' are met again flowing over London Bridge. Such internal allusions serve to create a sense of unity within an otherwise fragmented poem, developing themes and concerns which are highlighted as timeless by the historical allusions. It's a particularly effective way to emphasise one key theme of the poem, that of regeneration.

'I do not find the hanged man'

The theme of regeneration features heavily in 'The Waste Land'. In being self-referential and repetitive, and in employing allusions to previous works and myths to resurrect sources of the past, 'The Waste Land' is itself an act of regeneration. Figures emphasising this include 'The Hanged Man' of Madame Sosostris's pack, associated in Eliot's mind with the Hanged God of Frazer's well known book, The Golden Bough. This Norse god, Odin, drank from a well of knowledge, but he had to trade one of his eyes to do so, making him similar to the one eyed merchant of line 52. The hanged god reference, however, comes from the time he speared himself and hung as a corpse, again in a desire for secret knowledge; after nine days and nights he was able to cast off death and thus become a figure of regeneration.

Yet despite these references to regeneration, there seems to be a contradictory desire for finality in the poem. Again, various allusions emphasise this. Sybil laments 'I want to die' in the epigraph and we are shown fear in the 'handful of dust' that is her longevity. References to Cleopatra, Dido, and Ophelia remind us of suicide, whilst the 'shanti shanti shanti' of the final line directly mimics the formal ending of Hindu literature. However, any possibility of an ending to 'The Waste Land' is denied entirely because of such references: allusions that flit back and forth across time mean the poem can never finish.

Cultural references to regeneration and fertility introduce the possibility of optimism in an otherwise bleak poem. The Fisher King of Arthurian legend, as alluded to here by the 'man with three staves', had a sickness that was reflected in the state of the country, his own weakness and sterility making it a barren waste land. He and his realm were one. Many have read Eliot's poem as an expression of the disillusionment of a generation or a criticism of contemporary society and its effect on the individual, and it has become something of a cliché, but this allusion to The Fisher King also represents hope, for to cure the individual is to cure the land, and vice versa. The Fisher King also adds to the poem's mythological feel, and in being without precise history, myth can explain past, present, and future. 'The Waste Land' is regenerative. It 'breeds lilacs out of the dead land' that is the past, 'stirring dull roots with spring rain' whilst at the same time using the past to interpret the present and future.

'there are only you and I together'

Myth does more than extend the poem's span across time or emphasise its significance; it creates a poem that is impersonal. In 'The Waste Land' the poet persona does not have a single, clearly defined identity, and the multicultural references, together with the fragmented structure, forces our attention on the content and deliberately makes identifying a singular poetic voice difficult. By employing the words and phrases of other poets before him, Eliot is able to keep his distance; he's there, but he's 'the third who walks always beside you', glimpsed but never really seen. 'The Waste Land' is less about writing and more about reading. Even Madame Sosostris, who may be considered a poet figure inasmuch as she reveals truth, is really primarily a reader for she finds her truths in cards which demand interpretation. Even she is forbidden to see the blank card which the merchant carries, suggesting that full interpretation will always be elusive.  
'thinking of the key, each confirms a prison'

Eliot's poem defies any definitive reading and he acknowledges this via figures like the Sibyl, Tiresias, and Madame Sosostris, figures associated with riddles. Considering the complexity of the poem, such references are very apt. But do you have to understand all of the puzzles to enjoy the poem? Certainly not; in some ways simply reading it aloud is enough. A deeper appreciation of 'The Waste Land' may come from understanding each allusion, but the use of so many that are obscure seems to mark a deliberate attempt to reintroduce an element of mystery to poetry, the intertextual references teasing with additional depths of meaning rather than simply validating the work by indirectly name-dropping Ovid, Dante, Wagner, Milton and Shakespeare. There is barely a single line within the poem that does not refer to another source, be it another poem, the Bible, Greek, Roman, or Germanic myth, Eastern mantra or Australian army ballad, and readings of 'The Waste Land' are just as numerous and varied. The cultural references of the poem are rather like the cards of Madame Sosostris, each depending upon individual interpretation, for anything else would be too restrictive. Rather than existing independently in an apparently fragmented structure, and far from making a 'sprawling chaotic poem' as Eliot claimed, the allusions and intertextual references in 'The Waste Land' co-exist to bind it into a unified pack that can be dealt and read again in different ways. It's up to the reader just how 'wicked' they allow the pack to be.

**Article Written By:** Ray Cluley teaches English at South Downs College.

This article first appeared in emagazine 43, February 2009.

# he Waste Land – Who Is TS Eliot’s ‘You’?

It’s easy to forget a word as simple as the second person pronoun ‘you’. But, as Dr Thomas Day shows, it is well worth paying close attention to the various ways in which it is used. Whether speaking to an individual character, to a more general humanity, to the reader or the poet addressing himself, the complexity of voices in the poem extends not only to the speaking voice, but also to the person being addressed.

TS Eliot’s The Waste Land is a poem full of weird and wonderful words (‘Equitone’, l.57; ‘inviolable’, l.101; ‘Shakespeherian’, l.128; ‘Eugenides’, l.209; ‘carbuncular’, l.231; ‘Co co rico’, l.392; ‘Ile fit you’, l.431; ‘shantih’, l.433), but one of the oddest is also one of the plainest – the word ‘you’.

## Dante and Baudelaire

Who are we supposed to imagine Eliot is addressing when he uses ‘you’? It could, of course, be us, the reader. Dante, Eliot’s poetic master, addresses the reader at a number of points throughout The Divine Comedy, a text which The Waste Land variously echoes.

*Think, reader, if I became weak at the sound of those cursed words, for I did not believe I would ever return here.*

Dante’s overt acknowledgement of the reader makes the experience he is narrating feel all the more real – we are asked to share in the fear he feels as he journeys through hell, and our imaginations are actively recruited in this process. Eliot also overtly names the reader he is addressing, via an allusion to the conclusion of Charles Baudelaire’s poem ‘Au Lecteur’ (‘To the Reader’):

*‘You! hypocrite lecteur! – mon semblable, – mon frère’ (l.76)*

Like Dante’s, Eliot’s/Baudelaire’s address to the reader affirms a shared experience: the reader is referred to as the ‘brother’ of the poet, and is said to be ‘similar’ to him. But before giving that reassurance the line affronts the reader by denouncing him/her as a hypocrite. The poet and critic Geoffrey Hill has written of the ‘intimate hostility’ The Waste Land derives from Baudelaire’s line, and that effectively characterises Eliot’s relationship with the reader, or the ‘you’, elsewhere in the poem, which both opens up to us and holds us at arm’s length. We are invited into intimate spaces, ‘(Come in under the shadow of this red rock)’, to share in some kind of secret knowledge,

*And I will show you something different from either  
Your shadow at morning striding behind you  
Or your shadow at evening rising to meet you  
only for the speaker then to try to frighten us off:  
I will show you fear in a handful of dust  
ll.26-30*

The poem alienates its reader, most obviously because of the difficulties its multilingual intertextuality presents; but, strangely, our alienation may be what makes us similar to the poet. Confronted by so many textual fragments and uncertain of how they all fit together, we share in the despair given voice in ‘The Fire Sermon’:

*On Margate Sands.  
I can connect  
Nothing with nothing.  
ll.300-2*

Similarly, just a few lines before he shows us fear in a handful of dust, the ‘I’ is with us, on the receiving end of the transaction:

*And I was frightened (l.15)*

## A Specific or General ‘You’?

Eliot makes one very significant change to ‘Au Lecteur’. In the penultimate line of his poem Baudelaire had addressed the lecteur/reader as ‘Tu’; Eliot quotes the final line of Baudelaire’s wholesale, but tacks on to the front of it the word ‘You!’ ‘You’ is not quite the English equivalent of ‘Tu’; the English word does not distinguish between singular and plural (and informal and formal) address in the way that the French words ‘Tu’ and ‘Vous’ do. But something is gained as well as lost in Eliot’s translation, since ‘you’ often oscillates between the general and the particular to deliberately disorientating effect. ‘Death by Water’ is a case in point:

*Gentile or Jew  
O you who turn the wheel and look to windward,  
Consider Phlebas, who was once handsome and tall as you.  
ll.319-21*

‘Gentile or Jew’ suggests that ‘you’ is addressed to everybody, regardless of their creed, but then it becomes clear that this is being addressed to sailors; not all sailors though, only ‘handsome and tall’ ones, which perhaps makes us feel the speaker has someone specific in mind. Conversely, ‘What the Thunder said’ starts out with a solitary ‘you’ who then seems to multiply before our very eyes.

*Who is the third who always walks beside you?  
When I count there are only you and I together  
But when I look ahead up the white road  
There is always another walking beside you  
Gliding wrapt in a brown mantle, hooded  
I do not know whether a man or a woman  
– But who is that on the other side of you?  
ll.359-65*

Although ‘you’ and ‘I’ aren’t explicitly said to be walking side by side, we assume they must be because they are ‘together’. But, confusingly, the ‘you’ then appears to be some distance in front of the speaker, who is looking ahead up the white road at ‘you’ next to a mysterious other. Even more confusingly, the last line in this passage identifies another other ‘on the other side of you’. Yet if ‘you and I’ are walking ‘together’, as was initially claimed, the one on the other side of you must be ‘I’. It’s rather like a trompe l’œil which never quite resolves itself however hard you look at it.

## Eliot’s Three Voices

A lecture Eliot gave in 1953 entitled ‘The Three Voices of Poetry’ casts some light on the question of who the poet is talking to. There are three interrelated voices to be heard in a poem, Eliot argues:

The first voice is the voice of the poet talking to himself – or to nobody. The second is the voice of the poet addressing the audience, whether large or small. The third is the voice of the poet when he attempts to create a dramatic character speaking in verse; when he is saying, not what he would say in his own person, but only what he can say within the limits of one imaginary character addressing another imaginary character.

The voice we have been considering thus far is the second voice, the voice of the poet addressing the audience; ‘whether large or small’ may be a source of uncertainty, even anxiety, for the poet, particularly for one such as Eliot who has aspirations towards literary immortality and the guaranteed global readership that goes with it – Eliot clearly wants to keep company with the great writers to whom The Waste Land frequently alludes – but whose readers could easily feel so alienated by his obscure text that they just decide to forget about it, consigning it to obscurity in the other sense of the word. The narrowing and widening of the ‘you’ address, as seen in the above lines from ‘Death by Water’ and ‘What the Thunder said’, may reflect this uncertainty about audience. You could argue that the ‘you’ (and the ‘I’) in the passage from ‘What the Thunder said’ is more like what Eliot terms the third voice: the dramatic situations he has in mind, his notes to the poem inform us, are the Antarctic expedition in which the weary explorers had the constant delusion that there was an extra person amongst their number and the account in Luke’s Gospel of the journey to Emmaus, whereby two of the disciples converse with a stranger whom they later recognise as the risen Christ, at which point Christ disappears from sight. But the third and second voices are intertwined, since the ‘you’ of those lines also pertains to the poet’s uncertainty about the readership and its nature; although ‘you’ is distinguished from the unidentifiable others in these lines, seeming much more familiar to the poem’s speaker, at the level of second voice the ‘you’ is the unidentifiable other(s). When you publish your poetry, you can never know who will receive your work. ‘I do not know whether a man or a woman’ – that is one thing, among others, that the poet might wonder about his or her reader.

*My nerves are bad to-night. Yes, bad. Stay with me.  
Speak to me. Why do you never speak? Speak.  
What are you thinking of? What thinking? What?  
I never know what you are thinking. Think.  
ll.111-14*

The third voice, that of a dramatic character speaking in verse, is the most prominent in this passage from ‘A Game of Chess’, not least because the speech is ensconced in quotation marks. We do not know whether it is a man or a woman speaking, though we might suspect a woman, a woman on the verge of a breakdown, if we know a little about Eliot’s first wife, Vivienne. But listen a little closer and you might also hear strains of the second voice. ‘What are you thinking of?’ Something else the poet doesn’t know about his readers, which he may dearly love to, is what they are thinking, specifically what they are thinking as they read his work. A few might tell him what they think in person or in print – whether it’s what they really think is another matter – but the majority will remain silent. The anxiety that clearly afflicts this dramatic character might also beset the poet who feels uncertain what his readers think of his work: ‘Do they like it? Do they like me?’ A little further on in ‘A Game of Chess’ the poem attempts to simulate enthusiastic responses, as a kind of wish fulfilment:

*It’s so elegant  
So intelligent  
ll.129-30*

And, although ‘My nerves are bad to-night [...]’ sounds like a one-sided harangue, the poet is listening very carefully for the response that resides in the silence of these lines: ‘Yes, bad’ acknowledges the presence of an interlocutor who may have asked the speaker for clarification (are they hard of hearing?), and the solitary ‘What?’ at the end of the third line (l.113) gives us to think that they have attempted to say what’s on their mind, albeit inarticulately.

The response that we do hear barely seems like a response at all.

*I think we are in rats’ alley  
Where the dead men lost their bones.*

‘I think’ picks up the previous questions and frustrations, but otherwise these lines are surreally discontinuous. The third voice recedes (no quotation marks here) and the first voice, the voice of the poet talking to himself, or to nobody, comes to the fore. These words sound like they haven’t even come into contact with the world, that they are stuck inside the poet’s head – a ‘half-formed thought’ (l.251), like the one that passes through the head of the typist in ‘The Fire Sermon’.

## Connecting with ‘You’

The impossibility of connection, via language, with others haunts The Waste Land: it informs the lines in ‘What the Thunder said’ that depict the mind as a prison, which Eliot glosses in his notes by referring us to the philosopher FH Bradley, who thinks of subjective experience as a ‘circle closed on the outside’ which is ‘opaque to others’. One of Eliot’s aims in The Waste Land – an aim which he theorises in an essay entitled ‘Tradition and the Individual Talent’, written in 1921 whilst working on the poem – is to escape from this prison of the self, though it is open to question whether the poem actually achieves this. He gave The Waste Land the working title ‘He Do the Police in Different Voices’ (taken from Dickens’s Our Mutual Friend), an alternative which nicely captures the method, or else the madness, of the poem: there are in fact more than three voices, the abrupt jump cuts between different speakers, the escape from self enacted through this taking on of other voices, other identities.

Of course, this could be only the illusion of an escape since another way of understanding the first voice of poetry, the poet talking to himself or nobody, is as a sign of madness. The shapeshifting ‘you’ is crucial to the poem’s polyphonic utterance (speaking in different voices), giving three-dimensionality to the different dramatic contexts in which speech is situated and enabling language simultaneously to inhabit different planes of address.

## Talking to Yourself

Yet ‘you’ doesn’t necessarily bring the self into contact with others; ‘you’ can be a means of talking to yourself. It seems significant, in this connection, that the very final occurrence of the word in the poem, in its antepenultimate line, is spoken in madness, by Hieronymo, the protagonist of Thomas Kyd’s play The Spanish Tragedy (1592), who has been driven insane by the murder of his son: ‘Why then Ile fit you. Hieronymo’s mad againe’ (l.431). The most obscure word there is ‘fit’, meaning something like ‘oblige’ in its original context (Hieronymo is agreeing to write a play to entertain the court, though with the concealed intention of exacting revenge upon his son’s murderers). But ‘fit’, I would suggest, also retains something of its modern meaning, pertaining to the drama of connection and disconnection underscored in the previous, seemingly disconnected, line. ‘These fragments I have shored against my ruins’ (l.430). The poet and the reader do have to try to ‘fit you’ back together, because ‘you’, together with ‘I’, is the word which most attests to Eliot’s sense of fragmented or fractured identity.

**Article Written By:** Dr Thomas Day teaches English at Eton College.

This article first appeared in emagazine 73, September 2016.

# The Waste Land - subverting the quest

Rick Rylance shows how The Waste Land uses and subverts the archetypal quest narrative to make it fit for a modern, fragmented and dislocated world.

According to booksellers, the best selling work of literature in the twentieth century is J.R.R. Tolkien's The Lord of the Rings (1954-55). In the BBC'Big Read' poll of 2003 it was also voted number one, the nation's favourite book of all time. The recent epic film harvested Oscars, plaudits, and lorry loads of box-office cash.

## The Lord of the Rings

The Lord of the Rings is a quest narrative, in which hardy, unlikely heroes - Hobbits with furry feet, an old wizard and a dwarf, as well as more conventional muscular types - defeat the Dark Lord and his evil designs. It is a quest because a journey must be undertaken to achieve a physical end, in this case disposing of the malign ring, which is symbolic of regeneration. In The Lord of the Rings, catastrophe looms and the land is smashed and degraded. The Hobbit homeland - the nourishing, very English 'Shire' - is threatened. The very trees and forests rebel against their destroyers. The eco-catastrophes in the book express real concerns about damage to the natural world and are symbolic of larger forces. Mordor, home of the evil Lord, is associated with industrial production and its consequences. The hordes of mindless, violent Orcs are linked with the mutant populations of such societies. The all-seeing, invigilating eye of Sauron, the evil Lord himself, represents not only political tyranny, but also greedy, exploitative rapaciousness on an industrial scale.

## The Waste Land

T.S. Eliot's The Waste Land (1922) is probably the most influential work of poetic literary Modernism, that movement in all the arts which, in the 1910s and 20s, developed radical styles to represent the shocking, fragmenting realities of the new century: its huge cities, its industrial acceleration, its sky-scraping architecture, its demolition of traditional values, its World War 1. This wasteland also symbolises spiritual, ecological and social desolation.

Though The Waste Land is also a bestseller, it is a difficult poem. It looks difficult on the page; it groans with difficulty as you read it. Bits of foreign languages, unforgiving allusions and references, and the removal of those elements of conventional literature on which we normally depend - developing plot, consistent characters and locations, a trustworthy authorial voice - are an important part of its experience. It is, if you like, a literature of deprivation: it doesn't give you what you want. Many find this intimidating, and perhaps suspiciously elitist: though it has never been clear to me why making somebody discover something new is necessarily elitist. The actual social elites of Eliot's time - the affluent and well educated - would have found its style equally daunting and its content far from flattering. Nevertheless, whichever way one looks at it, the poem is hard to handle.

## Two quest narratives

The popular The Lord of the Rings and the notoriously difficult The Waste Land share common features. Both suppose the possibility of widespread social and cultural catastrophe symbolised by metaphorical wastelands; both are profoundly unhappy about the direction taken by the modern world; and both are quest narratives of a kind. This last may seem a strange claim to make in relation to The Wasteland. There is no clear journey to achieve transforming ends; there is no explicit fighting between good and evil as in the passionately violent The Lord of the Rings; and the poem lacks heroes and villains, or indeed much of a plot. So how is the poem a quest narrative? The Wasteland, I suggest, represents a quest for the elusive, conducted by the incompetent. It is a quest by the clueless.

## Myths of crisis and quest in The Waste Land

The Waste Land's scenario is based upon myths derived from some leading anthropologists, namely Sir James Frazer, author of The Golden Bough, and Jessie L. Weston, as the poem's notes suggest. But you do not need to have heard of either of these great scholars, who examined the use of myths by various peoples throughout history, to appreciate the familiar situation. There is a crisis in history and society and everything seems corrupt. This is revealed in the degeneration of the physical landscape, which has become a wasteland, and in the spiritually, morally and sexually damaged lives of its inhabitants. In these myths, the crisis is deep and long lasting and, to achieve any regeneration, a hero is needed who will undergo great sacrifice to replenish the world.

Eliot's anthropologists noted that this story is recognizable in the myths and religions of many cultures. The most familiar form in the West is the Christian story, in which Jesus Christ willingly sacrifices himself to save humankind from the consequences of original sin. Other forms of the scenario overlap with more conventional quest sagas, as in some of the tales of King Arthur where the search for the Holy Grail is attempted by the knights to redeem the collapsing world of Camelot.

The Waste Land makes ample use of these stories, and more. 'The Fire Sermon' and 'What the Thunder Said' allude to Buddhist as well as Christian versions, for instance, and Eliot wrote the poem from a hotchpotch of different sources. The very confusion of these sources and belief systems, like the poem's fragmented form, imitates the condition it diagnoses. The confusion of understanding it provokes in the reader reproduces the feelings of loss, bewilderment and purposelessness that Eliot thinks is typical of modern life.

Although some say The Waste Land predicts Eliot's eventual conversion to Christianity, it is more accurate to say that it is a poem of searching and drifting: an awareness of difficulty and an uncertainty over answers, a consciousness of religious ideas, but a lack of faith in them. Eliot was only received into the Church of England five years later, in 1927.

## No hero, no quest

Described in this way, it is perhaps easier to see similarities between the poem and The Lord of the Rings. In both, the world is under threat; the mutant, untrustworthy hordes are rising; evil pervades; those few who are good and heroic must redeem things by great personal sacrifice. With foreboding, both works evoke worlds needing redemption. But the differences are also profound. The quest in The Waste Land lacks its hero. The Hobbits may seem unlikely saviours in The Lord of the Rings, but like many characters in the novel - for example Aragorn - their unprepossessing early appearance changes to heroic conduct. The Waste Land has no equivalent. Tolkien's wizard Gandalf may sometimes be baffled, or temporarily set back, but he has a clear sense of needs and values, and the will and power to act. A comparable figure from The Waste Land is Tiresias from section III 'The Fire Sermon' who also has supernatural powers, can see backwards and forwards in time and, like Gandalf, apparently cannot die. But while Gandalf is urgent and active, Tiresias is passive, tormented and hopeless; he is a sufferer and not a doer.

If The Waste Land lacks its hero, it lacks its quest too. Were Tiresias able to do something, what would he do? There is no explicit task to perform. There is plenty of wandering about (the first and last sections of the poem especially make a feature of this), but there is no purposeful travelling. There is not even an explicit villain to combat. There is plenty of weakness, cruelty and violence, but these negative qualities seem to be characteristic of all this world's inhabitants. The spiritual war in The Waste Land is a war within, and not between easily distinguished powers. In The Lord of the Rings, evil is personified and externalised. In The Waste Land, it seems, we are all to blame. So The Waste Land also lacks its villain.

## Reversing expectations

What The Waste Land does is to take the outline shape of the quest - the journey to transform the world - and frustrate the achievement. It creates a world of the oblivious and the inert, not the purposeful and heroic. But, more movingly, it also creates characters who are to some degree aware of their own paralysis, who have a feeling for their predicament, but who resist, or cannot comprehend or act upon, its implications. The poem specialises in these halfway, suspended states. Here is how it opens:

*April is the cruellest month, breeding  
Lilacs out of the dead land, mixing  
Memory and desire, stirring  
Dull roots with spring rain.  
Winter kept us warm, covering  
Earth in forgetful snow, feeding  
A little life with dried tubers.*

It is often said that this evocative opening depends on reversals of expectation: on spring being cruel not invigorating, on winter being warm, on the emergence of life being resented and not celebrated. But what is also striking is its evocation of unresolved moments, of the terrible tension in things that are neither clear nor secure. The Waste Land is full of this in-between-ness: of the dead that won't stay dead, of the living who aspire to deathly inertia, of disappointed journeys with forgotten purposes, of scenes and relationships without point or conclusion, of myths without value, of - in the biggest let-down of all - supernatural utterances which seem to offer to resolve the mystery, but in fact thwart conclusion. What exactly does the thunder say at the end in its climactically anti-climactic way? It's as if Tolkien's heroes went all the way to what they thought was Mount Doom, only to discover they had the map upside down. Eliot's catastrophic tragedy of a demoralised, apparently ruined civilisation is told as farce and bumbling confusion, of a quest that is no more than a stumbling in the dark, of 'crowds of people, walking round in a ring', as the charlatan clairvoyant Madame Sosostris sees it in 'The Burial of the Dead'.

## The shock of the unexpected - defamiliarization

Why? Modernist art, of which The Waste Land is a classic example, often works by shock or doing the unexpected: dislocated human figures by painters like Picasso, discordant music, or crumbling non-narratives in literature are familiar features. One of its keywords might be 'defamiliarization', a term coined by the Russian critic Viktor Shklovsky in 1917 to describe how art makes the world strange and thus provokes us to think differently. Shklovsky thought this was probably characteristic of all art, but it is a particularly obvious characteristic of works of the Modernist period. The Waste Land does indeed 'defamiliarize': our reliable anchor points are taken away, the images are strange, and the situations are mangled. Defamiliarization works because we don't get what we are expecting. We enter literary works anticipating certain things (plot, character, 'meaning'). When we don't get them we can feel bewildered, daunted and even cheated. But this is the point of art works, Shklovsky argues: they 'make things strange'. They take familiar things and make us look in a refreshed way. The Waste Land is no exception. Just as the poem defamiliarizes traditional poetic language, it defamiliarizes expected narrative patterns, in this case the simplicities of the quest, which The Lord of the Rings, for all of its epic imagination, merely repeats. Waking up one day not in leafy Middle Earth but among the rocks and tubers of Eliot's 'The Burial of the Dead', Gandalf would have found the rectification of looming catastrophe both more difficult and more perplexing - which, of course, it is.

**Article Written By:** Rick Rylance

This article first appeared in emagazine 28 April 2005

# Reading Eliot in a new light - the complexity of context

Adrian Barlow explores the complexity of a poem's context, whilst revealing how an almost forgotten poem throws fresh light on Eliot's other works.

'Usk' is one of T.S. Eliot's least known poems. Written in 1935, hidden in his Collected Poems as one of five 'Landscapes', overlooked by readers and critics, its eleven lines have become almost invisible.

Last summer, however, a flurry of headlines brought 'Usk' into the news. 'T.S. Eliot scholar finds answer to pub poet's riddle' announced the Guardian. Other papers followed the story. Professor Philip Edwards of Liverpool University had made a discovery: a village near the Welsh town of Usk not only boasting an old once-whitewashed well but, nearby, an inn called the White Hart. The meaning of the poem, claimed the Guardian story, was now clear: 'Don't look for a deer or anything on four legs behind the white well; look instead for the White Hart Inn behind the well at Llangybi, Usk, and you'll know you're in the right place.'

'Usk' a cryptic poem about the pleasures of going to the pub? I don't think so.

Professor Edwards calls 'Usk' a 'short but baffling poem'. It is certainly short: sixty five words, just eight of which are more than one syllable. None of the words is, in itself, obscure, although 'spell' as a verb in the sentence

*Do not spell  
Old enchantments*

may be puzzling. But 'spell' provides a clue to the first half of the poem. Taken together with 'enchantments' and other words evoking medieval romance (the 'lance', for instance) or mystery (wells, often credited with magical or miraculous significance), 'do not spell' suggests a warning not to spend too much time pursuing the traditions and superstitions of the past. The poem, after all, speaks to someone who is on a quest: 'Do not .../Hope to find/The white hart .../Lift your eyes .../Seek ...'

White Hart Inns still abound - a reminder of how widespread the white hart symbol once was. It was prominent in the Quest for the Holy Grail - and hence in Arthurian legend. The white hart came to represent in Christian art and literature the idea of the resurrected Jesus. Is this the sense in which, as readers of Eliot's poem, we should take the white hart? If so, then one way at least of reading 'Usk' is to see it as a poem about a search for faith - and anyone who reads Eliot knows that such a search occupies much of his later poetry, certainly the poetry following 'The Waste Land' (1922).

In this poem, however, the 'old enchantments' clearly belong to the past: 'Let them sleep'. This first part of 'Usk' concludes with a warning that legend and tradition are appealing but should be treated cautiously: 'Gently dip, but not too deep'. Eliot put this line in quotation marks: a few minutes' 'googling' reveals that it comes from a song by the Elizabethan dramatist George Peele, from his 1595 play The Old Wives Tale. In a recording he made of 'Usk', Eliot read this line in a sing-song voice as if it were part of a nursery rhyme - perhaps a line remembered from his childhood.

As a poet, he believed strongly in the value of such personal memories. He once wrote to a friend, when he was having difficulty composing 'Little Gidding':

The defect of the whole poem, I feel, is the lack of some acute personal reminiscence (never to be explicated, of course, but to give power from well below the surface) ...

He expected these reminiscences to remain buried. They were important for him but not for the reader. If Eliot, then, did indeed go to Llangybi and find the White Hart Inn behind an old well, he would have enjoyed the fact that 'white hart' in the poem is polysemic, that it has more than one connotation, but he would not have expected his readers to identify all these meanings. In one sense, therefore, the poem is a warning to readers not to dig too deeply, or they will overlook the real significance of the poem. Whatever else he was, Eliot was not a 'pub poet' as the Guardian labelled him.

All Eliot's poems are conversations, not just with the reader (or, sometimes, with himself) but with other writers and other texts. It is often argued today that all texts borrow from other texts whether explicitly or implicitly, deliberately or unconsciously. Language is never new: words and ideas are constantly recycled and reinterpreted in the light of how they have been used in the past. This emphasis on intertextuality applies in particular to Eliot, and he was acutely aware of what he was doing by using direct and indirect allusion. In 'The Waste Land' (1922), for example, the accumulation of quotations and echoes ranging from the Upanishads to Ragtime literally represent 'these fragments I have shored against my ruins'.

In 'Usk' too Eliot uses a wide range of reference. Besides the quotation from George Peele, two other echoes are worth noting. 'Glance aside' seems to be borrowed from Shakespeare's 'Sonnet 76', in which the speaker asks:

*Why with the time do I not glance aside  
To new-found methods, and to compounds strange?*

'Glance aside' here asks whether it could be time for a change of direction; and though in 'Sonnet 76' the speaker eventually justifies his decision not to turn his back on the past, Eliot uses the phrase emphatically. In eleven lines there are eight imperatives; and these injunctions, together with the dominance of single-syllable words, give 'Usk' an unexpected force. As you read, the poem sounds like an incantation, itself a kind of spell. A further device, adding to this sense of a forceful spell, is the pairing of strong alliterating sounds in the first, middle and last lines: 'break ... branch', 'dip ... deep', 'pilgrim's ... prayer'.

For Eliot, then, 'glance aside' is a powerful command: 'Don't keep looking back to the past' (represented by the knightly 'lance', which provides an internal rhyme with 'Glance'). 'Look elsewhere'. But where? The answer comes in the second half of the poem.

'Lift your eyes'. If in one sense this poem is about a quest or pilgrimage, then these three words echo one of the most famous lines from Old Testament: 'I will lift up mine eyes unto the hills, from whence cometh my help' (Psalm 121). Eliot never uses the word 'hills' in 'Usk', but his description of a landscape 'Where the roads dip and where the roads rise' suggests clearly the undulating countryside of the Vale of Usk where the hills do indeed 'gently dip, but not too deep'. This line that Eliot borrows from George Peele's play thus refers backwards to the well which embodies the superstitions of the past and forwards to the landscape where the quest, the pilgrimage, will end. It is the middle line, the pivot, of the poem.

For Eliot the hills are where 'the grey light' meets the 'green air'. These are examples of metonymy: the sky evoked by reference to its appearance, the hilltop by its colour and the air you breathe there. Here, though, 'green' is also used metaphorically to describe the air - unlike 'grey', which is the actual appearance of the light. And it is here in the hills, the poem concludes, that the 'pilgrim's prayer' will be answered, the hermit's chapel found.

The idea of the remote chapel is an important symbol in Eliot's poetry. In 'The Waste Land' the 'decayed hole among the mountains' ('What the Thunder Said') is the Chapel Perilous of the Grail Quest, now empty ('only the wind's home') and derelict, a symbol of the death of faith:

*It has no windows, and the door swings,  
Dry bones can harm no one. (Lines 389-90)*

In Four Quartets, Eliot describes the chapel of Little Gidding as 'the end of the journey ... the world's end'. It is a place 'where prayer has been valid' and where 'History is now and England'. The hermit's chapel in 'Usk', the destination of another quest to the world's end (where earth meets sky), thus links the two most important poems of Eliot's career in an unexpected way. Far from being just a 'short but baffling' landscape poem, 'Usk' reflects Eliot's continuing search for an answer to 'that overwhelming question' first asked in 'The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock'. It also suggests his growing confidence that an answer is to be found, not in the 'Unreal City' of 'The Waste Land' nor in myths and legends, but in the quieter landscape whose contours are described in the second half of 'Usk'.

This change of mood is reflected in the way 'Usk' is written. The first half of the poem is restless and disjointed from the start, the lines disrupted by repeated breaks. The opening line:

*Do not suddenly break the branch, or*

begins with a warning ('Do not ...', the first of four negatives in the poem - all in lines 1-6); it has no clear rhythm, it ends awkwardly and is the only line in the poem for which there is no rhyme. Even 'find' (line 2) manages to rhyme internally with 'behind' in line 3. By contrast, in the rest of the poem (lines 7-11) there are no negatives and no punctuation pauses until after 'chapel'. The idea of the quest is emphasised in the repetition of 'Where ... where ... where', while the sense that the destination is in sight is reinforced by the final triple rhyme 'there ... air ... prayer.' These are not accidental effects. Eliot himself once said, 'No vers is libre for the man who wants to do a good job.'

'Usk' seems to me to reveal much about Eliot's ways of thinking and writing. It also changes the way we think about his earlier poetry, and his later. In one of his most important essays, 'Tradition and the Individual Talent', Eliot himself acknowledged this:

*What happens when a new work of art is created is something that happens simultaneously to all the works of art which preceded it. The whole existing order must be, if ever so slightly, altered ... The past is altered by the present as much as the present is directed by the past.*

The relationship of any text to other texts and (in Eliot's case) to the texts to which it speaks directly through quotation, echo and allusion, provides a valuable contextual starting point. And each time we change the context in which 'Usk' is read - whether in relation to the group of poems called 'Landscapes', to its own geographical setting, or in relation to the author's life and other writing as a whole - we open up new ways of responding to a poem I have described as 'almost invisible' yet which rewards close reading. But while some contexts are illuminating, others are not. Eliot may or may not have stopped at the White Hart Inn for a glass of sherry while he puzzled over The Times crossword. If he did, does it make any difference to the poem or to how we can read it? I don't think so.

**Article Written By:** Adrian Barlow is editor of the Cambridge Contexts in Literature series, published by Cambridge University Press.

This article first appeared in emagazine 25 September 2004.

# T.S. Eliot - A clamour of voices

Different speakers within the poems, invented narrators and personae, voices from other texts and times - Andrew Green shows how Eliot presents multiple voices to create a dialogue between past and present.

## Introduction

Early in the twentieth century, developments in art, philosophy, psychology, drama, music and literature, which came to be known as Modernism, changed the idea of the author's voice. The notion of a single voice was challenged: division, fragmentation and multiplicity were privileged. Not one voice, but many. But what does this mean for the role of the author? Eliot himself wrote:

*Immature poets imitate; mature poets steal; bad poets deface what they take, and good poets make it into something better, or at least different. The good poet welds his theft into a whole of feeling which is unique, utterly different from that from which it was torn.*Selected Essays

This suggests therefore, that by replacing the single voice with a voice which weaves together allusions to other works and other writers, Eliot and his contemporaries are asserting a new individuality for the twentieth century.

Eliot's poetry incorporates a vast array of other poets' voices, all of which speak in and through the overarching voice that is Eliot (see articles on Eliot's use of literary allusion in emagazines 36 and 43 for a fuller exploration of this). This is seen even in the process of composing his poems: the dialogue between poetic voices is literally visible in the facsimile and transcript versions of The Waste Land, where Eliot's and Ezra Pound's annotations and voices interact in the creation of the final, familiar version of the text. But what is the reader to make of this clamour of fragmentary ideas and voices? As Eliot tears literary voices from one context to relocate them in another, he forces himself, his readers and even his sources to enter into a dialogue through which roles and voices are constantly negotiated and renegotiated. Through this dialogue, Eliot explores his symbiotic and experimental relationship with the voices of literary tradition. So it is that he asserts in 'Tradition and the Individual Talent' that:

*the most individual parts of his [the poet's] work may be those in which the dead poets, his ancestors, assert their immortality most vigorously*Selected Essays

Eliot clearly delights in playing - often quite humorously - with other people's voices. He goes beyond this, however, and displays an actor's skill in creating the plethora of personae that populate his poetry. It is part of the literary-linguistic game he plays with his reader.

## Eliot's personae

It is important, of course, not to confuse the voice of Eliot with those of his personae. It is always dangerous to relate any persona or character too closely with the author who has created them. It is, however, important to think about Eliot's relationship with the many voices he assembles. The process of composing the plethora of voices-within-the-voice of his poetry is studied. It is a dramatic dialogue worked out through repeated acts of ventriloquism. This suggests both an intimate engagement and a scrupulous detachment between the author and his personae. As Peter Ackroyd observes:

*it is possible that his detachment, of which so many contemporaries spoke, is simply the effect of Eliot looking at himself from the outside, arranging himself*

The same could be said of the many detached voices we find within his poetry.  
In a number of poems, such as 'The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock', 'Gerontion', 'Journey of the Magi' and 'A Cooking Egg' Eliot adopts the voice of a single persona. In other poems, like 'Mr Appolinax', 'Portrait of a Lady', 'Burbank with a Baedecker: Bleistein with a Cigar', and 'The Hollow Men', the titles themselves suggest the subject the poem seeks to voice. The language and voices of Eliot's personae, are frequently elaborate constructs, drawing on a range of different sources as a means of presenting self. We have already observed Eliot's method of alluding extensively to the poets of the past, but other voices are also everywhere in his poems. The babble of voices Prufrock hears as:

*the women come and go  
Talking of Michelangelo*Prufrock*,*ll.35-6

is represented in the rhythmic rise and fall of his language. Similarly, the voices he hears 'dying with a dying fall' (l.52) are not only the talk of the people he encounters, they are also embodied within the dead repeated 'd'. And the same 'dying fall' is voiced by Chopin's music at the end of 'Portrait' (l.122). Elsewhere, Eliot uses objects to speak - sometimes through their correlative meanings (for example, the broken lilacs of 'Portrait' (ll.41-6) or the coffee spoons of Prufrock (l.51) - but sometimes metaphorically ('The voice returns like the insistent out-of-tune/Of a broken violin' - 'Portrait', ll.56-7) or even literally, as in 'Rhapsody on a Windy Night', where the steady movement of time is recorded in the observations of a more than usually talkative lamp post.

Another interesting example is Mr Appolinax. The contradictory nature of the man is finally summed up in the sounds of his voice. Sometimes this is verbal, encapsulated in 'his dry and passionate talk' (l.17), which both literally and metaphorically devours time. More powerfully, though, it is his laughter which captures him. By turns it 'tinkle[s] among the teacups' (l.2), is 'like an irresponsible foetus' (l.7) or is 'submarine and profound/Like the old man of the sea's' (l.l.8-9). The distinct and disturbing nuances of his laughter, like the odd dichotomy of his speech (which is both 'dry' and 'passionate'), mirror the contrasts that underpin the poem - England/America, Fragilion/Priapus, foetus/old man. Voice is also central in delineating the persona in 'Gerontion'. The old man may have 'lost my sight, smell, hearing, taste and touch' (l.59), but his voice still emerges as a powerful composite force growing out of 'The word within a word' (l.18) which is ironically 'unable to speak a word' (l.18).

The role of other voices in forging new individual voices (Gerontion's 'word within a word') is neatly summed up by the central persona of 'Portrait' who observes:

*I must borrow every changing shape  
To find expression ... dance, dance  
Like a dancing bear,  
Cry like a parrot, chatter like an ape.*ll.109-12

The formulation of personal expression is a constant act of playing with words and with language; a performance ('dance, dance/Like a dancing bear') which is necessary (the compulsion of 'I must borrow' and the imperative verb form 'dance, dance') in the attempt to convey meaning.

## Dramatic voices

As all this suggests, Eliot uses his poetic voices dramatically. Remember, he was also an accomplished dramatist and critic of the Renaissance dramatists. In sections I, III & VII of Choruses from 'The Rock', the poetry is conceived as drama and employs some of the conventions of drama. In places he assigns sections to particular speakers (such as THE VOICE OF THE UNEMPLOYED, THE ROCK, 1ST MALE VOICE, 2ND MALE VOICE, CHORUS). He also employs stage directions. This makes clear the dramatic nature of the poetry. Elsewhere, he adopts an array of biblical voices. In this passage from section V, for instance, they come thick and fast:

*Sanballat the Horonite and Tobiah the Ammonite  
and  
Geshem the Arabian: were doubtless men of public  
spirit and zeal.  
Preserve me from the enemy who has something to gain:  
and from the friend who has something to lose.  
Remembering the words of Nehemiah the prophet: 'The trowel in hand, and the gun rather loose in the holster.'*

Here we have first the weighty tone of the prophetic books and the Jewish history books of the Old Testament, followed by something of the balanced wisdom of the Proverbs, and finally an invocation of the prophet Nehemiah himself and a slightly tongue-in-cheek updating of his warnings to Israel. This combination steeps the poetry in a gravity similar to the works of another great religious poet, William Blake. It is this kind of embedded drama and interplay between the various voices of the poetry that is most typical of Eliot.

## 'He Do the Police in Different Voices'

Eliot's experimentation with voices perhaps reaches its height in The Waste Land. 'He Do the Police in Different Voices' was at one stage the working title for this poem. Aptly drawn from Dickens (himself a great author/actor) this is in itself suggestive. It indicates the extent to which Eliot conceived this poem as a palimpsest of voices. Each successive voice is laid down over, and competes with, the rest within the synthesising voice of the poet himself. To name but a few, we have Tiresias, Elizabeth and Leicester and Mr Eugenides ('The Fire Sermon'), 'voices singing out of empty cisterns' (l.384), garrulous drinkers in a pub ('A Game of Chess'), Madame Sosostris ('The Burial of the Dead', l.43), the voices of birds ('Twit twit twit/Jug jug jug jug jug', ll.203-4 and 'Co co rico co co rico', l.392), the bells of Magnus Martyr (l.288), the thunder, and the Rhine Maidens (Weialala leia/Wallala leialala: ll.277-8).

Besides these we also have competing tongues. Eliot was a very competent linguist. Several works in Poems (1920) are composed in French, including 'Dans le Restaurant', part of which reappears in English as 'Death by Water' in The Waste Land. English is obviously the major language, but we also find German: 'Bin gar keine Russin, stamm' aus Litauen, echt deutsch' ( l.12); French: 'Et O ces voix d'enfants, chantant dans la coupole' ( l.202); Italian: 'Poi s'ascose nel foco che gli affina / Quando fiam uti chelidon' (ll.427-8); and Sanskrit: 'Datta. Dayadhvam. Damyata.' (l.432). This serves to demonstrate the plurality of voices and cultures feeding into the eclectic world of the poem and the society it seeks to represent.

## Ownership of voice

The success with which Eliot manages the many disparate voices and tongues we have identified, including his own, practically demonstrates his assertions about the relationship between the poet and the voices of the past in 'Tradition and the Individual Talent'. The boldness with which he adopts and adapts the voices of his predecessors within the composite voices of his personae points to his mastery of the literary tradition and language. To modify the sentiments of Atticus Finch, perhaps an author never understands another author's voice until he has spoken with it.

## Suggestions for reading

To gain a full overview of Eliot's poetry, read Collected Poems 1909-1962. For a good insight into his views as a critic, it is well worth dipping into Selected Essays, where Eliot sets out his views on the literary tradition. It is also worth reading some of the plays (Murder in the Cathedral, The Confidential Clerk, The Family Reunion, The Cocktail Party and The Elder Statesman) where Eliot explores much more fully the potentials of dramatic verse. For an insight into Eliot's life, Peter Ackroyd's T.S. Eliot is excellent, and his short life of Ezra Pound is also of interest. To see the dialogue between Eliot and Pound very practically at work, the facsimile and transcript version of The Waste Land provides a fascinating record. Finally, for those interested in the development of the early Modernists in a variety of the arts, Christopher Butler's Early Modernism and Bradbury and McFarlane's Modernism both provide a wealth of material.

**Article Written By:** Dr Andrew Green is PGCE English Course Tutor & MA (Ed) Course Leader, School of Sport and Education Brunel University.

This article was first published in emagazine 47, February 2010.