

Cook 1
Research Paper
T. S. Eliot

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T. S. Eliot, perhaps one of the most controversial poets of modern times, wrote what many critics consider the most controversial poem of all, *The Waste Land*. *The Waste Land* was written using a fragmented style. This is a style that is evident in all of Eliot's writings. There are several reasons for his using this approach, from a feeling of being isolated, to a problem articulating thoughts (Bergonzi 18, Cuddy 13, Mack 1745, Martin 102).

What influenced Eliot the most in writing poetry was a book he read written by the English critic, Arthur Symon, titled *The Symbolist Movement in Literature*. This book is about French symbolist writers of the 19th century. From this book, the author who had the greatest influence on Eliot is by far Jules Laforgue. Laforgue's influence is evident in many of Eliot's poems, sometimes to the point of plagiarism. Like Laforgue, Eliot uses dialogue between men and women that doesn't seem to communicate a thing. Other author's had an influence on Eliot as well, like Henry James and Joseph Conrad. All of these poet's had the common themes of estrangement from people and the world, isolationism, and the feeling that they were failing to articulate their thoughts (Bergonzi 7, 50, Cuddy 30, Mack 1743, Martin 41, Unger 8) .

Henry James influence on Eliot's poetry is evident in the Jamesian qualities he uses. For example, the opening verse of *The Waste Land* ends with the Jamesian note, "I

Cook 2

read, much of the night, and go south in the winter" (Mack, 1751). Although Lafourge, Conrad, and James were used as sources for Eliot when he composed poetry, there is still a distinct Eliotic quality whenever his work is read (Bergonzi 7, 50, Cuddy 55, Mack 1743, Martin 41, 97, Unger 10). When Eliot began to compose *The Waste Land*, he used all the different themes, techniques, and style's he had been developing to this point. *The Waste Land* is developed entirely using fragments and quotations. This is symbolic of his despair in succeeding in ever fully articulating meaning. Although it is fragmented, it also reveals moments of continuity and wholeness quantified with recurrent themes of time, alienation, isolation, and articulation. Because Eliot used fragmentation as his style when writing this poem, it survived being cut in half by the editing of Ezra Pound. Many author's argue that Ezra Pound could have edited many more parts out, without effecting the meaning Eliot was trying to convey (Bergonzi 11, Mack 1743, Martin 20-22, 110, Ricks 9, Unger 18).

T. S. Eliot's use of estrangement in poems is his way of expressing feelings between himself and the world. His inability to give himself to, or to possess others is an example of the greater problem of isolation. The isolation theme is prevalent throughout *The Waste Land*, with many of his characters entwined. This is probably related to his problem of articulating. Whatever his reason for using isolation it caused him to turn towards god for answers. In 1927 he was accepted as a member of the Church of England. Prior to this time he used isolationism and alienation throughout all his poems and plays, up to, and including *The Waste Land* (Mack 1745, Martin 16, Unger 12, 18).

Cook 3

Perhaps it was Eiot's religious convictions, or his ideals towards culture, religion, and sex that had the greatest impact on the development of *The Waste Land*. He felt that if all of man had set a common goal to unite culture,

religion, and sex that it would solve the ill's of civilization. His feeling's towards sex was that casual sex is "having sex for the sake of sex" (Martin 108). It is evident in *The Waste Land* that sex has been dehumanized, no one enjoys it, it appears to be portrayed as a chore. This is obvious in verses II and III. In verse I, "The Burial of the Dead", Eliot allows an exception. In this verse I see the hyacinth girl as a woman of beauty and sensuality. However, in verses II, "A Game of Chess" and III, "The Fire sermon", I fail to see where anybody is enjoying sex. It appears that they are having sex for the duty and not the pleasure, even though there appears to be no reason, such as bearing a child (Martin 16, Ricks 90).

"A Game of Chess", begins and ends with fragments from Shakespear's plays. The next fragment I saw was an abrupt switch to the story of Philomel, who was raped by a "barbarous king". Then it switches to a story of a woman with bad nerves. It is obvious that she is waiting for something, but I do not know what. Now the verse switches to a scene in a bar where Lil and a friend are talking about Albert who was just released from the army. Albert had given Lil, some money for new teeth, however, Lil spent the money on pills that would induce miscarriages. Lil took five of these pills indicating she had five miscarriages. A side effect of these pills was that they added thirty years to Lil's looks. I believe that Lil will stay with Albert due to this effect. Perhaps Albert is the only man who will have her (Mack 1753, Martin 108).

Cook 4

The beginning verse of "The Fire Sermon" is indicating a change. The nymphs of old are departed, nobody believes in them any more. The Thames river is not the same. It is now polluted, losing it's sense of serenity. Then it switches to another reference to the rape of Philomel before changing to the scenes with Tiresias. Teresias, who is a blind prophet, has been both male and female (bisexual?). He tells a story of more devalued sexual relations about a liaison with a typist. I see the typist, who I think is supposed to appear as an erotic object, as someone without any erotic appeal. Her surroundings are very uninviting. Her "stockings, slippers, camisoles, and stays" (Mack 1758) are piled on the divan, yuck! There is no excitement, no energy. I am sure this has a direct bearing on Eliot's feelings towards sexuality. After this scene Eliot switched back to fragmentary writing. Within these fragments there are some echo's of the typist and then the verse ends with one word, "burning" (Mack 1760) standing all alone on the page (Cuddy 30, Mack 1750, Martin 109).

The 4th verse, "Death by Water", is entirely symbolic of death followed by rebirth. It tells of the corpse that is deteriorated by the sea. The current rising and falling implies regeneration, or hope, for humankind (Kenner 80, Mack 1760).

In the 5th verse, "What the Thunder Said", I see thunder as a promising of rain, which is symbolic of rebirth. There is also symbology of Christ's renewal when Eliot refers to the "third man" who is walking beside the man in the lead, but when counted can only count two. And then again when he refers to the cock crowing which is connected to the story Christ told of Peter's betrayal. The cock could also indicate the coming of morning and new hope (Kenner 110, Mack 1761, Ricks 70).

Cook 5

For me understanding and comprehending "The Waste Land" would have been impossible without the notes supplied at the end of each page in our text book. Although I have read many different books on this poem it is still impossible for me to entirely comprehend it. I believe Eliot summed it all up when he said "In *The Waste Land*, I wasn't even bothering whether I understood what I was saying" (Martin, 42). To me this was very obvious. The way he jumped from point to point, and quote to quote, there was obviously no reason nor rhyme. But then again, it is very obvious that Eliot knew exactly what he was doing and the impact that he would have on modern literature. I believe that Eliot wanted the poem to be difficult and he no doubt conceived of it's difficulty as an important aspect to it's total meaning. I have learned much of T. S. Eliot in all the various readings I have done. What I learned was that Eliot was a very intelligent yet difficult man. He

had very strong moral convictions and was determined to try and influence mankind. I don't think he had any real influence on mankind's morals, but he certainly impacted modern literature (Unger 36).

Cook 6

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