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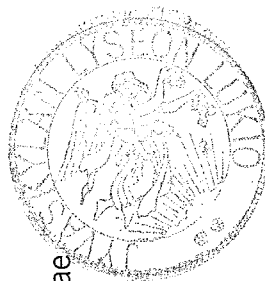


YORK NOTES

T.S. Eliot

The Waste Land

Note by Alasdair D.F. Macrae



GENERAL SUMMARY

Except in the case of narrative poems, it is extremely difficult to summarise a poem in a way that is fair to the nature of the poem. Because of its organisation (see Critical Approaches: Structure), *The Waste Land* resists the very idea of a summary. Nonetheless, like any other object, it can be described and even a crude summary may help to indicate the general shape of the poem.

In Part I, 'The Burial of the Dead', Eliot conveys a sense of apprehension and incomprehension in various characters presented in different situations. The lack of understanding is not helped by Madame Sosostris, a fortune-teller, whose enigmatic pronouncements only make sense later in the poem. The city, in particular London, is a grim place of people unable to live fully or see a way out of their deadness.

Part II, 'A Game of Chess', offers two scenes showing the essential emptiness of people's lives. The first presents, in a lavishly decorated room, a rich lady whose constant questions express her anxiety and lack of control. The second scene is set in a London pub where two women discuss the predicament in which Lil finds herself.

The theme of sexual dissatisfaction is explored in Part III, 'The Fire Sermon', where Eliot, moving about in time from Buddha and St Augustine to the present day, shows how man's aspirations to a higher, more spiritual mode of living are constantly thwarted by his subservience to his bodily appetites and his self-centredness.

In the brief Part IV, 'Death by Water', a drowned merchant's body decomposes in the sea. The merchant seems to have achieved nothing.

Part V, 'What the Thunder said', begins with a description of the death of Jesus and goes on to relate a gruelling journey through the desert to an empty chapel. The traveller has to suffer hardships, delusions and a sense that all is chaotic and meaningless before he arrives. In the final section of the poem the arrival of rain is intimated and the voice of the thunder offers three words of advice: 'give', 'sympathise', and 'control'. At

the very end these words are set alongside various phrases which echo themes and motifs which have appeared earlier in the poem.

If you are unfamiliar with *The Waste Land* or feel daunted by the prospect of reading the summaries and commentaries below, you may prefer to read Part Three, Critical Approaches, first. This discusses, among other things, the structure, language, style and meaning of *The Waste Land* and may give you an overview of the poem before focusing on the detail. Either way, this Note and the poem itself will benefit from being read on many occasions. Enjoy learning to understand this important work.

The title of Part I, 'The Burial of the Dead', intimates the central concern of the whole poem as well as of Part I. What do we mean by 'life' and 'death'? Each religion, in its ceremonies concerning the dead, gives some particular answer to the question. Many of these religious answers rest on

a belief in the possibility of resurrection or the contribution of the dead to the replenishing and perpetuation of life. In Christian terms, the sacrificial death of Jesus Christ, the God-man, is essential to the wellbeing of the world. In the non-Christian terms examined by James Frazer, the idea of sacrifice for the welfare of the tribe was extremely widespread.

Part I can be examined most easily by accepting Eliot's division of the seventy-six lines into four paragraphs or sections. Eliot's method requires that we move from section to section without looking for a kind of narrative continuity which he does not use; nor does he explain to us where he is going or what he is attempting to achieve. We must allow a pattern to emerge in our own minds.

In the first paragraph (lines 1-18), there are two units: lines 1-7 and lines 8-18. The two units overlap but, basically, the first is vegetal in emphasis and the second is social. The opening statement sounds paradoxical in that the month of April is traditionally seen in England as the first month of spring, gentle after the harshness of winter. Eliot seems to recall the opening lines of the General Prologue to *The Canterbury Tales* by Geoffrey Chaucer (1340-1400):

Whan that Aprille with his shoures sote (sweet)
The droghte of Marche hath perced to the rote ...
Than longen folk to goon on pilgrimages.

Eliot's poem, too, is concerned with a kind of pilgrimage or quest but, at the start of his poem, the traditional signal does not prompt the inhabitants of the 'dead land' to thoughts of hope and departure, quite the reverse. Winter is seen as the comfortable season, maintaining as it had done a minimal life where action was not called for. The arrival of April is an agony to the speakers because it makes demands of them and reminds them of past and future ('memory and desire'). The lilacs of line 2 occur elsewhere in Eliot's work as suggesting powerful emotion and tenderness (see his poem 'Portrait of a Lady') and in the waste land emotion must be avoided. The main imagery of these lines is of vegetable life and the verbs in the present participle ('breeding', 'mixing', 'stirring', 'covering', 'feeding') emphasise a lack of motion.

The progression of the seasons continues in line 8 but the 'us' are now more human, existing in a world of parks and cafés. Among the

smart people going round the fashionable places in Europe there is an anxiousness communicated in the abrupt shifts in the syntax of the speaker and in the restless movement from place to place. This is the Central Europe of the period around the First World War when the traditional aristocratic patterns and national boundaries were breaking up. The insistence by the Countess Marie that she is not Russian is possibly a reaction to the Communist Revolution in Russia in 1917 and a clinging to what she considers to be a more civilised nationality. The nervous, rootless mentality looks forward to the conversation of the rich woman in Part II.

Like the first paragraph, the second (lines 19-42) can be divided into two units. In the first of these units (lines 19-30), Eliot adopts a language strongly reminiscent of the prophetic books of the Old Testament. Just as the prophet Ezekiel was taken to the valley strewn with the bones of the dead and asked, 'Son of man, can these bones live?' so we are asked what life can come out of the wilderness of our world. Because we are spiritually dead we can envisage no possibilities but the unending routine of our journey through the desert of our days. What we must learn to understand is our condition of mortality, the fact of death and our present helplessness. The Cumaean Sibyl of the epigraph asked for unending life; she was granted her wish and her handful of dust became a rebuke to her.

The two questions from Wagner's opera provide a frame for the episode concerning the hyacinth girl. The story of Tristan and Isolde is one of the world's great love stories. The first quotation comes from the beginning of Wagner's opera on the subject; a sailor longs for his loved one. Later in the story the same words could be used by the wounded Tristan when he hopes for the arrival of Isolde from Ireland. His lookout on the sea cliffs tells him that there is no sign of her. His urgent hopes are disappointed and when she does eventually arrive the strain is too much for Tristan and he dies. In between the anticipation and disappointment of Tristan's love are set the anticipation and bewilderment of the lover of the hyacinth girl. The moment of intensity, of ecstasy, was built up to, but, at the very point when everything hoped for should have been realised, he had frozen and his vision had shown him what Tristan had experienced, the emptiness and futility of his love.

Throughout the poem various prophetic figures appear, including the Sibyl, Ezekiel, Tiresias, the Buddha, and the thunder of the final part, Madame Sosostris, with her bad cold, is an *ironic* version of the prophetic figure. Her name itself sounds like a cheap imitation of some Egyptian deity and the Tarot pack which, according to Jessie Weston, had played such a central part in the most crucial fertility rites of Ancient Egypt, has now become part of the equipment of a bogus fortune-teller. Nonetheless, the paradox of Madame Sosostris being 'the wisest woman in Europe, / With a wicked pack of cards', is continued in the fact that, however bogus she may appear to be or even try to be, her reading of the cards does foretell the events and characters of the poem. Little attempt is made by her to explain the cards and she offers only one piece of advice: 'Fear death by water' (drowning) but, in an indirect way, she indicates the nature of the waste land with its 'crowds of people, walking round in a ring', she sees the temptation of Belladonna and she points to the lack of spiritual enlightenment in the absence of the Hanged Man.

The description of London in the final paragraph of Part I provides evidence for Madame Sosostris's cryptic vision. Eliot, using a composite of Baudelaire's Paris, Dante's Hell and, according to Ezra Pound, the London of William Blake (1757-1827), creates a horrifying picture of people locked in a mindless, life-destroying routine. In Canto III of his *Hell*, Dante, after describing the stream of souls condemned for their spiritual emptiness, isolates one figure whom he recognises as a Pope who has been guilty of the cowardice of refusing high office and thereby allowing a wicked Pope to misgovern the Church. The figure of Stetson seems to be given a similar character by Eliot. By referring to Mylae, as well as to Dante's medieval Hell and Baudelaire's 'swarming city' of the nineteenth century, Eliot is anxious to stress that the problem he sees is not one unique to London in 1922, but is endemic to humankind. At one level, the conversation in the streets of London is a piece of macabre, surrealistic comedy, but, at its deeper level, the episode recalls the title of Part I, 'The Burial of the Dead' and the fertility rites which are so crucial to the meaning of the whole poem. Stetson, the reader, must tend the buried corpse, whether that corpse be an effigy of the god, a human sacrifice, or what the Bible calls 'the old man' which the Christian has to bury before a new life is possible (see Romans, Chapter 6). The Dog, a friend of human beings, could be any temptation to humans to look for

II A GAME OF CHESS

In Thomas Middleton's *Women Beware Women* (1621), each move in the game of chess is matched by a move in the seduction of Bianca. It is a story of lust, manipulation and deceit. In this part of *The Waste Land*, Eliot, while focusing on two modern episodes, incorporates a wide range of references to women who were victims of lust and deceit.

The first episode (down to line 138) is given an elaborate, mock-epic setting. The description of the room carries memories of the meeting of famous lovers like Antony and Cleopatra and Dido and Aeneas but the ornateness of the decorations has an excessive and artificial quality. The convoluted syntax of the long sentences leads the reader into confusion but, as the description moves to the picture of Philomel, a more sinister element disturbs the mind. After Philomel was cruelly assaulted, she was given by the Gods the voice of the nightingale with which to proclaim the wrong done to her, but the world (and the 'hypocrite reader') still relentlessly pursues her. The sickly oppressiveness of the room leads into the claustrophobic hysteria of the woman.

The inverted commas indicate the words of the woman, anxious and questioning. The lines in between the woman's questions belong to her male companion and the lack of inverted commas suggests that we are overhearing his thoughts and not his words. He seems resigned and even playful, though in a macabre way, as if he has heard her frantic questions so often before that he knows proper replies to be useless. His state of mind, however, does not suggest health but a preoccupation with loss and death.

The second episode, beginning at line 139, is set in a pub in the Cockney area of London. Eliot, in a note on the typescript, said that he did not wish to indicate the Cockney pronunciation by using odd spelling but something of the intonation and style of Cockney English is communicated by him. The story told about Lil and Albert is sordid and lacking in any suggestion of love. Child-bearing is presented as a squalid burden, with the wife's health and appearance deteriorating and the

location is the land of captivity, of lamentation, and always the poet is made aware of how dead the land and the people have become.

Joining the second section (lines 187–202) to the first are echoes from the scene in James Joyce's *Ulysses* when Bloom goes to the funeral of Paddy Dignam: 'The rattle of bones', the rat, the canal and the gas-works all evoke the unpleasant episode of the funeral. In the gloomy industrial setting with its canal and gasworks the speaker, who is linked to Prince Ferdinand in *The Tempest*, fishes on a winter evening. The death of his father and brother who were both kings suggests that he is now king himself, the Fisher King of the wasteland. There seems little hope of his catching a fish in a polluted canal in winter and his thoughts are fixed on the unburied remains of his relatives. Spring has not yet arrived but it does not promise any purification or fertility. The hectic traffic of the city and the sordid relationship of Sweeney and Mrs Porter are in sad contrast to the heroic hunt and the encounter between the Goddess of chastity and Actaeon. Similarly, the farcical washing of the prostitutes' feet is a parody of the feet-washing ceremony in the chapel of the grail celebrated by the choir of boys.

The short section (lines 203–6) with the nightingale's song reminds us of the story of Philomel described in lines 99–103 and emphasises the themes of assaulted innocence and the power of lust.

In the following lines (207–14), Eliot reinforces his general claim that London, representative of urban living, is corrupt and has lost its spiritual vision. The Smyrna merchant, one-eyed we remember, is a decadent version of the Phoenician traders who, according to Jessie Weston, had transmitted knowledge of the fertility religions in the old days. The merchant's appearance, his unimpressive samples, his crude language, his suspect invitation, all indicate the fallen nature of the modern trader.

In 'The Fire Sermon' sexual relations are presented as violent or mechanical; respect and affection are absent. In the episode of the typist and the 'young man carbuncular', Eliot's concern is to show their mechanical behaviour. He opens the description by suggesting an automatic quality in the eyes and back of the office worker who is reduced in the monotony of his work to the status of a 'human engine'. The typist's life seems to be contained in the display of her clothes and food; she is bored and tired, has nothing to offer or withhold. The clerk

III THE FIRE SERMON

Just as in Part I, the title 'The Burial of the Dead' does not explain itself till Stetson's planted corpse appears at the end, so the force of the title 'The Fire Sermon' is not made clear till Eliot invokes the Buddha and St Augustine in the final lines of Part III. In his notes on these lines, Eliot stresses the importance he attaches to the teaching of those saints of east and west, both of whom had experienced the pleasures of the body before deciding to follow a spiritual path. In this part of the poem, Eliot presents a series of incidents that demonstrate his agreement with the decision of the two ascetic figures.

The first section (lines 173–86) uses Edmund Spenser's idealised vision of human love in the setting of an earthly paradise where the nymphs of the pure river celebrate the wedding as a background contrast to the example of casual, sordid modern sex. Nature itself is now spoiled and the clutched fingers of leaves suggest desperation. The recurring refrain from Spenser's joyful wedding poem now sounds plaintive or even mocking. What song can the poet sing in the brown land where the river is now polluted with the rubbish of uncaring people? This modern

accomplishes his sexual task without apparent pleasure and the actions do not affect either character. Do they have personalities that can be affected? The casual but obvious **rhymes** make each action predictable and dispassionate and nowhere is this more striking than in the final four lines (253-6) where the typist's easy acceptance of her dishonour is in contrast to the anguished song of Olivia in Goldsmith's novel *The Vicar of Wakefield* (1766).

The role of Tiresias in the poem is indicated in Eliot's note on line 218 and in this section he provides a crucial time dimension to the episode. In the particularities of his description and by involving contrasting examples from earlier periods (for example, Sappho and Goldsmith), Eliot seems to attribute a unique squalor to the modern world; Tiresias, however, assures us that he, with his comprehensive experience of the living and the dead, has seen all this before.

Line 257, 'This music crept by me upon the waters' refers back to the previous record on the gramophone, back also to Ferdinand in lines 191-2, and forward to 'The pleasant whining of a mandoline' (line 261). The line works differently with each of these references: the record with which the woman anaesthetises her feelings pervades the city and is a cold reminder of human insensitivity; the music Ferdinand heard was Ariel's song of consolation to him and this music might counteract the nastiness of the previous scene; the mandoline is a 'pleasant whining', a paradoxical description which combines pleasure and pain. This section (lines 257-65) certainly offers a pleasing sensation but there are hints that the sensation is flimsy and not to be trusted too far. The poet's, 'O City city,' has a distinctly solemn tone, the lounging fishermen are not fishermen and the glory of the church is a physical one and not necessarily spiritual.

For those readers who know Wagner's operas, it is easy to see a connection between the 'splendour of ... white and gold' (line 265) and the shining of the sacred gold in the river, the loss of which is lamented by the Rhine-maidens in the passage down to line 306. The opening description of the Thames is reminiscent of the description of the same river at the beginning of Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* (1902), a book greatly admired by Eliot, in which Conrad tries to show how precarious our civilisation is and how depraved the human heart can be. The modern and the renaissance Thames with its traffic has an obvious appeal but the lament of the Rhine-maidens reminds us that something

has been lost. Even the spectacle of Queen Elizabeth in a golden barge like Cleopatra's, the sound of bells on the wind and the white towers cannot balance the lament. The three river-maidens tell the same story of violation and confusion; they appear to have no hope or impetus towards a new life. In the three accounts (lines 292-305) by the Thames-girls there is a progression in degradation as if the three reports could be by the same person describing her fall from honour, the situation 'After the event' and her descent into a state of madness where her world has fallen apart and even her command of language has broken down.

The final lines (307-11) of Part III do offer some hope in that the Buddha and St Augustine each came to an understanding of his problem and saw a way forward. St Augustine's expression of gratitude is the only explicit invocation of God in the entire poem. The spacing of these lines, however, with the final burning left trailing without a full stop, may suggest that there is no one final solution to the problem of human sin, or at least that it is not clear at this point in the poem.

IV DEATH BY WATER

The original manuscript of Part IV had ninety-three lines and the deleted sections do help us to a fuller understanding of the surviving ten lines. A dead sailor, resembling Coleridge's Ancient Mariner, recounts the story of a fishing trip which ended in disaster. The story has close links with the final voyage of the Greek hero Odysseus (Ulysses) imagined by Dante (*Hell*, xxvi) and Tennyson. Ulysses was seen by Dante and Tennyson as a man with an insatiable curiosity, unable to accept the idea of his dying, and driven to seek new experiences. His attitude is the extreme opposite of that of the Buddha and St Augustine expressed at the end of Part III. Furthermore, the surviving lines about Phlebas are virtually a translation of the final part of Eliot's poem, 'In the Restaurant', written in French some four years earlier. In that poem a dirty old waiter tells a customer how, at the age of seven, he had been on the point of having sex with a young girl when he was interrupted by the arrival of a big dog and he ran away. The following lines about Phlebas come after the waiter's sordid story: 'Phlebas the Phoenician, a fortnight drowned,

forgot the cries of gulls and the swell of the 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. Just imagine, it was a hard fate, considering he was once a tall, handsome man.' The implication is that Phlebas, like the waiter, had sought physical pleasure and not spiritual wisdom.

The waiter's story also helps to connect Phlebas with Mr Eugenides more securely. St Paul, who was specially concerned with preaching the gospel to the Gentiles, wrote to his fellow missionary, Timothy: 'But they that will be rich fall into temptation and a snare, and into many foolish and hurtful lusts, which drown men in destruction and perdition' (1 Timothy 6:9). The merchant is trapped in his ambitions. Eliot, so fascinated by Conrad's account of Kurtz's degeneration in *The Heart of Darkness* (1902), must have remembered the story-teller's question:

Did he live his life again in every detail of desire, temptation, and surrender during that supreme moment of complete knowledge? He cried in a whisper at some image, at some vision – he cried out twice, a cry that was no more than a breath – 'The horror! The horror!'

Phlebas has passed beyond such urgency but, in entering the whirlpool, he is locked in the cycle of his futile life, his death is fruitless. Jessie Weston, in her book, discusses how a wooden effigy of the god of fertility was thrown into the sea at Alexandria and carried by the current to the Phoenician coast, a symbol of the dying and rebirth of the year, a fruitful death by water. Eliot warns the reader to learn from the sad example of Phlebas and give careful thought to the direction of his life.

V WHAT THE THUNDER SAID

The first fifty lines of Part V are set in the bleak desert landscape visited briefly in Part I and the longed for rain is not seen to arrive throughout Part V. There is an atmosphere of remembered drama lapsing into anticlimax in lines 322–30. After the momentous and painful last hours of Jesus's life, the man whom his followers had believed was a god is dead. In lines reminiscent of the words of the inhabitants of the dead land (lines 1–7), they accept a minimal life without obvious hope of a resurrection; only the distant rolling of thunder beyond the mountains suggests spring and a new start.

In the second paragraph (lines 331–58), Eliot describes the journey through the waste land. The questing knight in his search for the Grail has to travel through inhospitable territory where he is subject to horrifying delusions. Hope on this journey in the desert is merely hypothetical: the form of the paragraph is determined by a series of 'ifs' with their answering 'buts'. The desert takes on a malevolent appearance, taunting and frightening the traveller. Water, the source of life, is totally absent. In the first paragraph the controlling word is 'after'; now, after the death of the god, the wounding of the Fisher King, the loss of personal faith, man must confront his own impotence.

Paragraphs three and four (lines 359–76) can be taken together. Eliot indicates in his notes that he is describing the journey to Emmaus and the decay of Eastern Europe manifested in the Communist Revolution in Russia. The disciples of Jesus, stunned by his death, are so blinded by their own helplessness that when the resurrected Jesus appears they fail to recognise him. Reality and hallucination cannot be distinguished by them. In his final message to his followers, Jesus warned of cruel times to come when there would be oppression and false prophets. For Eliot, Russian Communism with its atheist creed offers

deluding prophecies to the blinded masses, and now they stumble about in their spiritual desert. Russia, however, is not unique but merely one aspect of the cycle of error and destruction seen throughout history. All men share the tendency to accept the unreal world as if it were the real. Eliot here suggests the contrast, specifically described by St Augustine, between the City of Destruction with its false values and the City of God with its Christian values.

Both the journey to Emmaus and the swarming over plains are examples of misguided pilgrimages but enlightenment can take place in unlikely circumstances. These two journeys are aspects of the knight's journey in search of the Grail. In the following two paragraphs (lines 377-94) the horrifying details of the knight's journey are described. Many of these details remind us of times which have occurred earlier in the poem; just as the five questions in lines 359-71 echo the anxious questions of the woman in Part II, her room is recalled and turned upside down in lines 377-81. The knight's ordinary power of perception is upset and he is mocked by echoes and hallucinations. His mind is on the edge of madness and the ruined chapel in its desolate location in the deceptive moonlight seems like a cruel joke after the agonies of his journey. The omens are not promising but the appearance of the cock heralds a new dawn and the flash of lightning intimates the arrival of the long awaited rain. In the knight's acceptance of his own emptiness, a miracle can take place.

The thunder section (lines 395-422) seems to occur parallel to the climax of the quest for the Holy Grail and even takes the place of the expected questions to the Grail. The country of India is still in the dry season and nature awaits the coming of the rain. In this case, however, the thunder announces not rain but the advice by which men's lives can be revitalised. As at the end of Part III where St Augustine and the Buddha are united, Eliot is intent here on joining western and eastern wisdoms together. Eliot may also be making a criticism of the state of the Christian church in Europe and suggesting that westerners have to look outside their over-familiar systems to find fresh inspiration in the east; this reading of Eliot's intention squares with the gloomy thought in lines 410-16. Eliot chooses to go back to an older wisdom whose very language lies behind all the varied developments of the Indo-European peoples. The words of advice (give, sympathise, control) heard in the

sound of the thunder are straightforward and are central to the major religions. In the waste land, these virtues are absent.

Eliot presents three confessions illustrating the mentality of the waste land in an attempt to diagnose the spiritual emptiness that results from ignoring the teaching of the thunder. In the first, it is difficult to determine to whom it is addressed; 'my friend' was originally 'my brother' and it seems likely that the reader is being confided in. It is possible also that, if the surrender is sexual, the 'I' could be female and, indeed, the encounter described has a similarity to Francesca's account to Dante of her fateful love for Paolo (*Hell*, V). This account, however, has little in common with the various surrenders in Part III, 'The Fire Sermon': the speaker here is trembling with emotion and the surrender is a supreme moment, a moment of giving. There is, nonetheless, an undoubted suggestion of folly which 'an age of prudence can never retract'. Such is the general dullness of the person's life that this moment is unique but secret and it does not appear in the public-or official accounts of his life. Mention of empty rooms, obituaries and the solicitor suggests that he considers himself already dead but there are parallels between this experience and the relationship with the hyacinth girl in Part I.

In answer to the challenge to sympathise or show compassion, the speaker confesses that, from his point of view, each individual is separated from all others and such is the self-centredness of people that they live locked away from each other. Both Count Ugolino and Coriolanus were led by their self-seeking nature into treachery against their own people and, because they can show no sympathy for others, they bring on themselves cruel punishment. The woman in the room in 'A Game of Chess' is similarly imprisoned in her own anxious mentality.

The third aspect of giving, according to the thunder, is control and, in particular, self-restraint. The connection between giving and control is not immediately obvious but Eliot's example does help to explain the connection. Without self-control one cannot give to another. If Coriolanus, for example, had learned to restrain his arrogance he could have communicated with his fellow Romans but he was so concerned with his image of himself, 'the key', that he could not appreciate the situation around him. Eliot uses the analogy of sailing to explore what can take place between two people. The good sailor does not impose rigid control on his boat; he accepts the power of wind and water and bases his

steering of the boat on his understanding of this power. The boat 'responded gaily' as if glad to cooperate with man and wind and sea. Unfortunately, there are few other examples of this cooperative activity between man and nature elsewhere in the poem. Too often, as in both the episodes in Part II, the opposite happens and people choose to live artificially. The speaker in line 420 says, 'your heart would have responded' as the boat had but this verb is conditional and he cannot offer the right control, the appropriate invitation. He cannot do so because he has no self-control. Lines 279-89 offer a comparable situation where Elizabeth and Leicester have the chance to develop a relationship of mutuality but, instead, they turn the situation into a silly game and so remain trapped in their own solitudes.

The three virtues advocated by the thunder are not to be separated from each other; they depend on each other and, in a sense, are interchangeable. They are reasserted in the second last line of the poem, but before that line Eliot introduces some difficult fragments. The Fisher King, the quester, has crossed the waste land and reached the open sea. The chapel has been reached and the thunder has told how health can be restored to the people. In his question: 'Shall I at least set my lands in order?' there is a movement towards some positive action but there also appears to be a concession on his part that whatever he can do is very limited. The quotations that follow (lines 426-9) do not resolve our difficulty in understanding what he means. The line from the nursery rhyme and the line from de Nerval's poem 'The Disinherited' suggest that he is surrounded by ruins; the lines from Dante and *The Vigil of Venus* look forward to the possibility of new life. As if he sees the reader's difficulty, the king tells us that he has to take comfort where he can find it and it is fragmentary. His appeal to the swallow in line 428 is equally ambivalent. The reader by now knows the tragic story of Philomel and Procne and how they continue, as birds, to lament their fate. The swallow of Tennyson's poem carries a message of love and traditionally in England the swallows flying from the south announce the coming of summer; the bird is a good omen and, according to a legend, it flew over the crucified Jesus singing, 'Console'.

This apparent confusion is probably deliberate. Throughout the poem, Eliot has used many techniques to widen the scope and application of his vision of life. At the end of each part, the reader feels himself or

himself addressed and the 'hypocrite reader' is caught again at the end of the poem. Hieronymo, driven partly mad by the cruelty and deceit around him, turns on the reader who thinks that the Fisher King is the man with the problem. Eliot forces the problems of the waste land on us because we, whether we know it or not, are the citizens of the 'unreal city' and we must find our Grail. The thunder repeats its advice and the mocking voice of Hieronymo is softened by the benediction of the last line.

CRITICAL APPROACHES

STRUCTURE

One of the difficulties most people experience when they read *The Waste Land* for the first time is that they cannot see where the poem is going. The poem appears to belong to none of the main types of English poetry: it is not a narrative or dramatic or descriptive or lyric or meditative poem. These types have characteristic forms of organisation and development but *The Waste Land*, although it manifests certain elements of these types, does not demonstrate an immediately recognisable method of organisation. The reader may find that he or she understands individual lines or even whole sections but does not see how they can fit together. Some critics have gone so far as to deny that *The Waste Land* is a poem at all, and T.S. Eliot himself had serious misgivings about the unity of the work even after he had reduced, with the help of Pound, what he called his 'sprawling chaotic poem'.

Undoubtedly, however, Eliot did have a method according to which he arranged the pieces of his poem. His arrangement or structure has much in common with the work of his contemporary artists in literature and other media (see Background). The parallel most helpful for our present discussion is that of film. A film consists of a sequence of photographs and the sequence is determined by the choice of the director who edits his total collection of photographs into a particular order. He can jump abruptly from one scene to another, introduce shots which go back in time behind the immediate action, even show shots from the future, present the dreams, fantasies and memories of characters. This process of arranging the shots is called 'montage'. In addition, the modern film director can manipulate not just the words of the characters but also sound effects to create atmosphere, evoke memories or arouse expectations. Eliot's method, in *The Waste Land*, of juxtaposing different pieces is very similar to the technique of montage. Such a technique allows the elements of the poem to act on readers in an associative way even though they cannot see, in the initial stages, where they are being led. Gradually, as they read on, certain themes, motifs, tones, even

characters begin to develop through repetitions, echoes and similarities. As in an instrumental work of music the main tune or pattern of notes is hinted at, elaborated on and returned to; so, in *The Waste Land*, the central concerns of the poem impress themselves on the reader's mind. There are several ways in which Eliot helps the reader to see the structure of his poem. In the first place, the poem is divided into five parts, each with a title which indicates the focus of the part, and each gathering together material appropriate to that focus. In Part I, Eliot outlines the problem of spiritual deadness. In Part II, he offers two particular examples of the mentality in the waste land which he expands on in Part III where he analyses the perversion of love. Part IV presents an alternative to the death by fire of Part III and indicates that this particular alternative is not a solution to the problem but merely a different sort of ending. In Part V the journey through the waste land is spelled out more clearly than before and the voice of the thunder suggests a remedy to cure the rottenness. This crude summary should not be taken as a description of a straightforward development; *The Waste Land* does not have a tidy plot.

One way in which readers follow the progression in a poem is to attend to the central person involved, be they the narrator or a character: events and situations are seen in terms of this person. In *The Waste Land*, there does not appear to be such a figure. If readers attach themselves to the 'T' in the poem, they quickly discover that the 'T' is not the same person throughout. Eliot, aware of the problem, offers, in his note on line 218, what appears to be a solution. He writes:

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, seller of currants, melts into the Phoenician Sailor, and the latter is not wholly distinct from Ferdinand, Prince of Naples, so all the women are one woman, and the two sexes meet in Tiresias. What Tiresias sees, in fact, is the substance of the poem.

This note is helpful in urging readers to dispense with their wish for distinct and realistic characters and in emphasising that there is a mentality prevailing throughout the poem. Readers may well ask, however, how Tiresias is to be distinguished from the author and how, if so many seemingly diverse characters fuse into each other, Tiresias can be



said to have any personality at all. During the period when he wrote *The Waste Land* (and the notes), Eliot was concerned that the poet should write impersonally: he, Tom Eliot, should not weep or laugh in a public poem. His note on the role of Tiresias should be taken seriously but not slavishly. The poem is the responsibility of the poet but, it must be stressed, the responsibility of reading the poem falls on the reader and in his or her mind the pieces must cohere. Each part of *The Waste Land* ends with an address to the reader: the hypocrite in Part I, the bystander at Ophelia's mad scene (Part II), the listener to the Fire Sermon (Part III), the voyager in Part IV, and, by implication, still the hypocrite at the end of the poem. The poem's shape and meaning emerge in the reader's mind in so far as he or she is able to grasp them; one has to see 'the substance of the poem'.

A further way in which Eliot helps the reader to see an order in the poem is through his use of **myth**. He acknowledges his debt to Jessie Weston's *From Ritual to Romance* for suggesting 'the title, ... the plan and a good deal of the incidental symbolism of the poem'. It may be that, as with Tiresias, Eliot alleges more than he fulfils but it is true that, throughout the poem, he establishes a network of references to the Grail legend and the vegetation rites closely associated with the legend. Vegetation rites are common to all societies and are so ingrained in the human mind that, even if an individual reader is unacquainted with the stories of the Rhine gold, Thammuz or even the Fisher King, he or she can perceive enough of the fertility network in the poem to give him or her a sense of continuity. The legend of the Grail is further described on page 9.

Two elements in the poem which indicate a pattern are Eliot's use of **allusion** and his **imagery** and these will be discussed in the following pages. In *The Waste Land* they are not easily separable because Eliot takes his inspiration as much from his reading as from his direct experience.

ALLUSION

An allusion is an indirect reference made to something not immediately under discussion and a literary allusion is the inclusion in the work of one writer of quotations from, or reminders of, the work of another writer.



No author writes in a vacuum and all authors show, in differing degrees, the influence of their reading, but, what the reader encounters in *The Waste Land* is the deliberate incorporation of Eliot's reading. Eliot's own attitude to this practice is made plain in his essays written in the years prior to 1922. In his essay on Philip Massinger (published in *The Sacred Wood*, 1920) he writes:

Immature poets imitate; mature poets steal; bad poets deface what they take, and good poets make it into something better, or at least something different. The good poet welds his theft into a whole of feeling which is unique, utterly different from that from which it was torn; the bad poet throws it into something which has no cohesion.

He goes so far in 'Tradition and the Individual Talent' (1919) as to propose of the poet that 'we shall often find that not only the best, but the most individual parts of his work may be those in which the dead poets, his ancestors, assert their immortality most vigorously'. In his essay on the Metaphysical Poets in 1921, he develops his point and asserts that:

Our civilisation comprehends great variety and complexity, and this variety and complexity, playing upon a refined sensibility, must produce various and complex results. The poet must become more and more comprehensive, more allusive, more indirect, in order to force, to dislocate if necessary language into his meaning.

Eliot's concern with a cultural heritage, what he calls 'tradition', is central to all his work. In *The Waste Land* he uses allusions as evidence to show the permanent struggle of humankind to seek or reject truth. His technique, however, poses a number of problems for the reader. In the first place, how essential is it that an allusion be recognised? The answer must be that it varies from allusion to allusion. Some seem self-explanatory in their context in the poem; others seem to have no sense until their original context is known. In both cases, however, knowledge of the original context offers the possibility of a richer sense; otherwise, Eliot would be guilty of confusing the readers by expecting them to exclude from their mind the very associations triggered off by the allusion. The second question raised by the technique is: how much of the original context is being drawn on by the quotation of a single line or even a single word? If Eliot is fully in control of his poem the answer must be that the context in *The Waste Land* helps the reader to determine how much the allusion brings with it from its original context. One



example will suffice to illustrate both questions. Line 259 begins 'O City city, ...' The reader, arriving at this point, is aware that the City of London is one of the main locations used in the poem and could read line 259 without seeking any further sense or suspecting an allusion. However, the reader might detect a solemnity in this address to the City and might hear a connection between this line and line 257 which, although it is a quotation from Shakespeare's *The Tempest*, links with the biblical line 182, 'By the waters of Lemman I sat down and wept'. If these links are heard by the reader, he or she might well be reminded of Jesus weeping over the city of Jerusalem and when he or she consults St Matthew's account finds that Jerusalem, like London, rejects the prophets and their wisdom. This reading of the line, elaborate as it sounds, is supported by the context and by the overall preoccupations of *The Waste Land*.

In the rich and varied allusiveness of the poem it is worth looking at some of the main sources for Eliot's allusions and asking why and how he uses them. The Bible is probably the single most pervasive influence on the poem. Throughout the Bible there is a series of prophetic voices which denounce the way in which the people and their rulers have deserted the true God and pursued false values. From early on (line 19) in *The Waste Land*, Eliot is similarly concerned to expose the decadence and spiritual emptiness of his own time and he invokes the biblical tone and turn of phrase, so recognisable to English speaking readers, to lend authority to his personal vision. Furthermore, the desolation and captivity brought on themselves by the folly of the Israelites offer a parallel to the story of the Fisher King, the Grail and the waste land. This parallel is developed in the obviously Christian element in the legend and by Eliot's introduction of the Hanged Man (Christ) and the journey to Emmaus where the resurrected saviour, sacrificed for the salvation of his people, goes unrecognised.

Dante and Baudelaire are used by Eliot to support his view of the modern city as a condition of horror. Dante's *Hell* and *Purgatory* (significantly, Eliot does not allude to his *Paradise*) are extensions of life and illuminations of it; Baudelaire presents the 'unreal city' directly in his poetry. Both Dante's and Baudelaire's poetry shows an acute awareness of the reader. Eliot harnesses their moral force to confront his reader with the death in life he sees all around him.



Allusion continued

The allusions to Wagner's operas are explained in the notes and, for the reader who knows the operas referred to and their legends, the poem is enlarged by these echoes. Eliot is anxious to devise a poem of diverse materials and of wide suggestibility to appeal to different readers. Wagner's operas, exploring the perplexities and aspirations of human beings, themselves draw on their framework of ancient legends and **myths** and Eliot, in alluding to these complex operas, invites the readers to incorporate something of that complexity in their understanding of the poem.

IMAGERY

A poet, when writing of ideas or feelings, must, in order to avoid being too abstract, find terms which suggest the immediate, physical apprehension of these ideas and feelings; such terms are called images. The word '**imagery**' is more generalised and is used to describe the strands of associative language used by a poet. In Shakespeare's play *Hamlet*, for example, there is imagery of corruption and disease running through the play, constantly reminding the reader of the immoral and therefore rotten state of affairs in the court of Denmark.

Imagery of sterility and dryness, appropriate to the condition of the waste land, is evident from the first few lines of the poem where the arrival of spring is viewed with horror by the inhabitants of the 'dead land'. They survive minimally in the 'stony rubbish' (line 20) under a relentless sun. This desert is not in contrast to the 'Unreal City' of line 60 for, in both, the people lack will and vitality. The same symptoms are manifested by the characters of Parts II and III and in the background the rattle of dead bones (lines 116, 186 and 194) mocks the futility and essential deadness of their lives. The desert landscape of Part I reappears in Part V of the poem, in the section considered by Eliot himself to be the best written piece of *The Waste Land*. A change has taken place, however, in that the travellers through the lifeless sand and rock now crave for water and later, when tempted to despair in the 'empty cisterns and exhausted wells' of the ruined chapel, they reassure themselves that 'Dry bones can harm no one'. At the end, with the 'arid plain' behind him, the Fisher King, the ruler and embodiment of the waste land, faces

the sea; behind him also are the polluted river and the dull canal, and now the rain intimidated by the thunder offers new possibilities in place of the apprehension caused by the spring rain in line 4.

The frailty and corruption of human love is largely presented in images of sexual degradation. Even in the episode of the hyacinth girl with all its marvellous promise there is a sudden inability to communicate, a sense of sexual inadequacy. In a less intense way, the two relationships explored in Part II reiterate the failure of men and women to achieve a partnership of mutual trust and care. The title of Part II, 'A Game of Chess' (see notes and glossary), emphasises the theme of deceit and sexual exploitation and 'The Fire Sermon', concerned as it is with burning, focuses on the fires of sexual lust. The 'sweet Thames' becomes the 'waters of Leman' or prostitution and Eliot is determined to demonstrate how disgusting and depraved men can become in the waste land. Women are reduced to sexual objects for the gratification of lust and they seem to accept tamely the mechanical role they are given to play. Dignity and honour are not considered any longer: 'She smooths her hair with automatic hand,' and, 'What should I resent?'. In the final part, however, in the responses to the voice of the thunder, there is a questioning of the selfish lust which had motivated the characters earlier in the poem; in particular, the sailing image of control and sharing counteracts the images of Philomel, Cleopatra, Dido, Queen Elizabeth and the other women.

A third strand of imagery communicates Eliot's fascination with the transformation of life into death and death into life. At the beginning of the poem the inhabitants of the 'dead land' are barely alive and in line 63, the poet expresses his surprise that 'death had undone so many'. In the final lines of Part I, however, there is some hope offered that the buried corpse may begin to grow. The Egyptian **myth** of Osiris (see note on lines 71-5) symbolised the dying of the land and its rebirth with the rising of the water in the Nile. Throughout the poem there is an uncertainty about the distinction between life and death: corpses can sprout but those who seem to be alive are sometimes 'neither / Living nor dead' (lines 39-40) or are asked, 'Are you alive, or not?' (line 126). This paradox of death in life is seen most acutely in the story of Jesus (lines 328-30) who, as god and man, had lived most fully but appeared to be killed on the cross. Jesus, however, epitomises the myths of the sacrificed

but resurrected god of fertility and he reappears to his followers and offers a new life. Earlier in the poem, Eliot cites many examples of transformation in people's lives, some suggesting an improvement, some indicating a deterioration or confusion. Philomel, transformed into a bird, is a plaintive reminder of the brutality of human life. Even Tiresias who has experienced so much as male and female, appears to be, like the Cumaean Sibyl of the epigraph, weary of all behaviour. Phlebas's death by water merely involves him in a repetition of his life: he does not escape from the wheel. However, the references to Ariel's song in Shakespeare's *The Tempest* allow that death by drowning may lead to 'something rich and strange', and St Augustine and the Buddha, when they are rescued from their burning condition, point to a fuller kind of living.

STYLE

Since the poem appeared in 1922, many readers have been impressed with Eliot's versatility in using different verse forms and in varying the tone. Part of his success comes from his competence in mimicking the style of other writers and even incorporating quotations from them; and part also stems from his ability to modulate the pace and seriousness of his poem. In a consideration of the effect of a poem, verse and language cannot, ultimately, be separated but, at this stage, for the sake of brevity and clarity, it is easier to look at each in turn.

VERSE

The lack of a sustained metrical form in *The Waste Land* led some readers to conclude that Eliot had smashed the traditional rules of verse and that he wrote in **free verse**. The poet himself, however, declared that no worthwhile verse can ever be called free because the poet is always in control of his resources. It is true that there is no consistent metre (or pattern of stressed syllables) running through the poem, and the number of syllables in a line varies from one to seventeen; some lines and sections have **rhyme** and others do not; and, in places, Eliot does not use punctuation marks in the conventional way. Nonetheless, he does employ one or more of such devices in different sections of the poem to give an

impression of flexible but ordered verse, and it is part of the reader's pleasure in the poem to follow Eliot from the extreme of casual conversation, as in the pub, to the extreme of mechanical nursery rhyme (line 426).

In the opening seven lines of the poem, the basic measure is the line of four stressed syllables but what holds the lines together is Eliot's use of the verbs in the present participle at the end of the lines, sounding like a rhyme, but always needing the next line to complete the sense: a momentum and suspense are created. The following lines sound more casual, a mere sequence of movements, until Marie describes her sled ride and then the short phrases, the alternation of 'we', 'he' and 'I', the repetition of her name, the heavy stress on 'down' (line 16), all contribute to communicate her breathless anxiety.

The first seventeen lines of 'A Game of Chess' consist of two sentences. Rhyme is not used but the stress pattern is reminiscent of Shakespearean **blank verse**. The syntax in both sentences is intricate and the lines run on into the next with the result that the reader has difficulty in keeping control of the sense. This confusion is increased by Eliot's use of past tenses of verbs which can often also serve as adjectives, for example, 'burnished', 'glowed', 'held up', 'wrought', 'fruited' in the first three lines.

A totally different example of Eliot's handling of verse can be seen in the episode concerning the typist (lines 215–56). Rhyme occurs in most of the lines although not according to any rigid scheme. In many of the lines the rhyme on a stressed syllable emphasises the unit of the line and the action of the scene progresses line by line in a mechanical, monotonous way. Sometimes the rhymes are so neat and obvious that they mock the actions; this effect is most noticeable when a shorter word is joined by rhyme with a longer one, for example, 'one bold stare' and 'millionaire', 'defence' and 'indifference', and 'alone' and 'gramophone'.

The description of the journey through the desert in Part V (lines 331–58) has no marks of punctuation and a reading of the passage depends heavily on Eliot's manipulation of the line and his use of repetitions and parallel phrases. 'Water' occurs eleven times, 'rock' nine times, 'mountains' five times and the five conditional clauses beginning with 'if' are answered by five statements beginning with 'but'. The repetitions, the lack of punctuation and the negation emphasise an

unending, unprogressing, nightmarish journey; the reader longs for relief, an exit from the labyrinth.

In the course of the poem, Eliot exploits to the full the possibilities of verse based on the stress patterns of conversational English, now tightening, now relaxing the tension. Rhyme is employed to round off a section or emphasise a point. Even in the most casual passages such as the conversation in the pub, the poet formalises the speech by making most lines complete in themselves, repeating 'she said' or 'I said' almost like a rhyme and introducing the refrain, 'Hurry up please it's time'.

LANGUAGE

In the sections on **allusion** and **imagery**, Eliot's choice of language has already been discussed, but something has to be said about his variety of tone and his shifts in vocabulary. *The Waste Land* is a dramatic poem featuring many characters and many scenes. 'He Do the Police in Different Voices', the original title of the poem, offers a clue to Eliot's method of juxtaposing characters and scenes, sometimes for the sake of contrast, more commonly to demonstrate the common fate of all people.

In Part I, after the solemn tone of lines 19–30, derived from the prophetic books of the Bible, Eliot introduces the lyrical intensity of the episode with the hyacinth girl. The man is caught in an emotional paralysis where he can neither speak nor see nor even feel conscious. His condition of helplessness is followed by the description of Madame Sosostris, 'famous clairvoyante'. A clairvoyante is a person who, often in a state of trance, sees what is not present. Madame Sosostris seems to be a direct contrast to the blinded lover but Eliot presents her in such an ironic manner that she emerges as a comic parallel to the man. Her name (see page 16) suggests her bogus status and Eliot immediately undercuts her reputation as a 'famous clairvoyante' by telling the reader that she 'had a bad cold'. In the following lines, with a similar **irony**, 'wisest' is contradicted by 'wicked'.

A similar shift of mood, and tone is apparent in the opening thirty-three lines of 'The Fire Sermon'. Eliot, first of all, presents alongside each other the gentle grace of Spenser's world and the vulgar details of the modern scene. The refrain, 'Sweet Thames, run softly till I end my song' comes to communicate an elegiac mood, a sense of regret. This mood is

disrupted by the introduction of 'bones', 'chuckle', 'rat', 'slimy belly' but reappears briefly when the narrator muses on the death of his father and brother. Eliot allows no mood or tone to prevail for long and his lines on Mrs Porter bring an incongruous comic touch to the section. The placing of the French quotation is obviously intended to act in the reader's mind as a comment on Mrs Porter and her crudity, but the pure voices of the children in the chapel are given new words to sing in the lines immediately following.

Such shifts and juxtapositions occur throughout the entire poem: they constitute the texture of the poem. Ornate vocabulary gives way to colloquial dialogue, lyrical moments are interrupted by sordid intrusions, the comic and the macabre coexist with the solemn words of religious instruction, one language is supplanted by another, until in the final lines of the poem the fragments are collected together.

MEANING

Since the poem appeared in 1922 there have been many contradictory reactions to it. Some readers have considered it to be an intellectual puzzle devised for such people as enjoy crossword puzzles. Some have dismissed it as a joke against academic critics and have seen Eliot's notes as his final trick. Some have assessed it as the finest example of **modernist** art, reflecting in its own difficulties the complexity of the modern world. Some have heard in the poem a whimper of despair. Some have sensed that behind the cleverness of the poem a tortured lover was seeking to justify himself. The theories, interpretations and assessments are amazingly diverse and this fact has led some critics to admire a poem that can stimulate so many reactions. Others have been suspicious about a work in which so much is unclear.

Eliot's own comments have not helped to elucidate the problems posed by *The Waste Land*, partly because his own attitude to the poem changed over the years. Originally, readers in the 1920s were encouraged by Eliot's theories of poetry advanced in his essays to believe that the poem was an impersonal object but, later in his life, Eliot described it as a 'wholly insignificant grouse against life; ... a piece of rhythmical grumbling'. In 1932 Eliot wrote:

When I wrote a poem called *The Waste Land* some of the more approving critics said I had expressed 'the disillusion of a generation', which is nonsense. I may have expressed for them their own illusion of being disillusioned, but that did not form part of my intention.

In 1951, however, he asserted that:

A poet may believe that he is expressing only his private experience; his lines may be for him only a means of talking about himself without giving himself away; yet for his readers what he has written may come to be the expression both of their own secret feelings and of the exultation or despair of a generation.

What is undoubtedly clear, whatever Eliot felt he had intended or disguised, is that certain obsessions, habits of temperament and attitudes are discernible in the choice of incident and image. Eliot's concern with blighted sexuality is too persistent to be considered incidental or contrived: it has the urgency of an unsolved personal problem.

To acknowledge a personal foundation in the poem is not to undermine the whole construction. The view of life presented in the poem is narrowed by the peculiar bias of the author but, by fusing his personal element into the larger story of the Grail and the fertility myths and offering some possibilities beyond his own condition, Eliot succeeds in persuading the reader that such a view has a wider validity. Mention of other possibilities raises the question that has vexed critics: does the poem contain a progression? The first three parts examine the spiritual sickness of the waste land and in the final part, after the journey to the Chapel of the Grail is completed, the voice of the thunder offers a diagnosis. Lacking the capacity to give, one is unable to live in any worthwhile sense. How can one discover this capacity? Eliot seems uncertain as to how to proceed. After the commands of the thunder have been interpreted and the lack of genuine giving has been conceded, the poem concludes with a series of apparently contradictory statements and the eventual blessing (see note on line 433). Thus, Eliot does indicate the direction of a progression and he has shown what has caused the sterility of the waste land; what he does not present (and it is probable that he could not at this stage in his life) is a demonstration of a regeneration. Eliot, like the tormented Hieronymo, understands his situation and can dare to hope. The reader familiar with the poet's later work, where his individual regeneration is explored, can see the journey through the waste

land as a hard stage towards the Christian solution he eventually found. Eliot, in *The Waste Land* and his other works, sees the human condition in religious terms and shows little understanding of the economic and social pressures on people. There is little evidence of a sympathetic view of human frailty. Eliot's use of literary **allusion** and ancient myth tends to confirm the opinion that he sees his fellow humans from a distance.

In his critical essays, Eliot asserts that enjoyment precedes interpretation for the reader of poetry. Even for a reader who is antipathetic to what seems to be Eliot's view of his generation or human nature, *The Waste Land* offers a great deal of pleasure. It has proved to be a most memorable poem full of wit, sharp insights, unusual perspective, haunting **rhythms**, suggested depths and sad images of apathy and lovelessness. The poem's enduring popularity and its enormous influence on poets in many languages provide evidence that, for many readers throughout the world, it touches a nerve, it prompts a recognition, it presents, not necessarily *the* truth, but a truth about human failures and aspirations.