“BY THIS, AND THIS ONLY, WE HAVE EXISTED”:

APOCALYPTIC CYCLES IN T. S. ELIOT’S

THE WASTE LAND

by

DELANE HALTER CUNNINGHAM

A THESIS

Presented to the Department of English
and the Robert D. Clark Honors College
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of
Bachelor of Arts

September 2025

An Abstract of the Thesis of

Delane Halter Cunningham for the degree of Bachelor of Arts
in the Department of English to be taken September 2025

Title: "By This, and This Only, We Have Existed": Apocalyptic Cycles in T. S. Eliot's *The Waste Land*

Approved: *Dean Carol Stabile, Ph.D.*
Primary Thesis Advisor

Composed after observing the effects of World War I, T. S. Eliot's poem *The Waste Land* describes a society on the brink of collapse, a culture coming apart at the seams. He mirrors this apocalyptic destruction within his poetry, demonstrating it at every level of the work through the degradation of its very language. In the poem, Eliot considers the fate of humanity by bringing attention to the depreciation of culture, which he illustrates by seemingly haphazardly mixing references to a multitude of literary works. He argues that the human race is expiring culturally and that soon, it will be devoid of all meaning. The representation of sheer devastation in *The Waste Land* powerfully illustrates the splintering of everything meaningful: language, love, faith, and beauty. *The Waste Land* elegantly encapsulates the idea that it is our own actions which lead to the ultimate eradication of our culture. It illustrates the human fears of loneliness, of death, and the irrevocable loss of our identity.

Although the poem reflects Eliot's experiences during and prior to the 1920s, many of the central themes of the work can be recognized throughout human history. Medieval works like the Bible and *Beowulf* incorporate many of the same motifs present in Eliot's postmodern work, suggesting that the cyclical nature of apocalyptic collapse and renewal has long preoccupied our imagination. This thesis examines *The Waste Land* in order to analyze the meaning and

perceptions of the "death" of culture throughout time. Ultimately, it argues that Eliot, recognizing the historical cycles of destruction and rebirth, perceived World War I as a catastrophic rupture: a moment when the apocalyptic cycle failed to regenerate culture. What occurs in literature when the writers of that time are confronting the seemingly imminent mortality of their species? Why does it appear to remain consistent in poetry created in 1922 as well as medieval literature from the late 10th century? Despite the vast differences in these time periods, they offer insight and perhaps hope into the complicated, chaotic world of today.

Acknowledgements

I would like to thank my thesis committee and the University of Oregon faculty for their patience, knowledge, and help as I entered Eliot's *The Waste Land*. It was an honor and a joy to be able to examine this academically and culturally significant work and apply my own ideas to it. It has been my privilege to learn from and work with the excellent and accomplished faculty in the Clark Honors College and in the University of Oregon's English Department. I would like to thank Professor Shoop for first introducing me to the peculiar beauty of *The Waste Land* and for his guidance as I first began to navigate it, and Professor Bayless, who instilled in me a deep love for medieval studies and for the Old English language. I owe a deep gratitude to Dean Stabile, Professor Gallagher, Miriam Alexis Castellón Jordan and all the CHC faculty for their kindness and support in bringing this thesis to completion.

Finally, I would like to thank my family: my grandfather, Ron Halter, who encouraged my love of learning and taught me the important lessons of life; my grandmother, Jan Halter, who has always loved and supported me unconditionally; and my sister, Brynn Cunningham, my best friend and dearest to my heart. I dedicate this work to my mother, Marni Halter, who has been my constant support throughout my life in every endeavor I undertake and inspired me to live by her example. Thank you all for everything you have done for me. This achievement is possible because of you.

Table of Contents

Introduction

Why do we still read *The Waste Land*? What about this lengthy, sorrowful cacophony of allusions still appeals to us as a modern audience? It may be the same qualities that encouraged readers throughout history to seek out apocalyptic literature of all kinds and forms, hearkening back to ancient times. Something about apocalyptic literature is oddly comforting. Exploring chilling or tragic hypotheticals about our society reduced to its meanest state somehow reassures us about the flaws we see in it now. Extrapolating the potential directions that humanity might take forces us to examine our culture as it stands today through the harshest of lenses. It allows us to criticize ourselves, examining our best and most enduring qualities as well as our basest—all in hopes of avoiding those possible destructive futures.

Apocalyptic literature takes many forms and scrutinizes a myriad of topics. From subverting accepted societal norms and customs to radically changing the physical landscape of the world, this genre of literature grasps at the threads of our normality and pulls them out from under us. This type of subversion naturally differs depending on the era and offers key insights into what writers valued most in their time. Apocalyptic literature appears as far back as the Bible, seen in the story of Noah and the Great Flood in the book of Genesis. Flood narratives are a common staple of apocalyptic literature from cultures around the world, epitomizing a literal washing away of the old to make way for the new. The latter chapters of the book of Daniel introduce visions of apocalypse wherein the kingdoms of men are destroyed to make way for a divine and everlasting one. These themes are echoed in the final book of the New Testament, Revelation.

Revelation in particular offers a condensed example of the apocalyptic cycle, a specific, repeated sequence of events humanity experiences throughout history. It begins simply; as

humanity continues to progress and evolve, it eventually cannot sustain its growth or it begins to poison itself, resulting in an abrupt change in trajectory. This downward spiral is often preceded by the appearance of symbols as a warning. In some works, this cautioning takes the form of a figure possessing exceptional wisdom who predicts the coming catastrophe and futilely attempts to warn his peers. After these precedents occur, chaos begins. In Revelation, it manifests as a complete upheaval of the natural world, taking the form of seven plagues. Humanity is largely destroyed by these events; the virtuous ascend to heaven and the earth is left populated only by sinners. Nature continues to revolt, and the world is left devastated. However, this chaos and ultimate loss is not the final end. Rather, it is the fire of rebirth that wipes clean the land to make way for the next cycle. As the author of Revelation states, "Then I saw "a new heaven and a new earth," for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away" (Revelation 21:1). The coming of Christ at the end of the book marks the beginning of a new age, improving on the failures of the last. So too does the apocalyptic cycle end with the birth of an era; once the smoke has cleared and the earth begun to heal, new life can begin once again to grow.

The word "apocalypse" comes from the Ancient Greek word *apokalypsis*, which translates to a disclosure of knowledge, or literally "an uncovering". The Greeks appear to have understood apocalypse through its cyclical nature, using it to explain natural events through their mythology and even naming it Chaos, a figurehead for the destructive forces they observed around them. In the English medieval period, apocalyptic writings maintained their religious influence, stemming from the Bible or other pagan legends. Works such as *Beowulf* demonstrate a different sense of loss; rather than destruction on a grand scale, the apocalypse seen there is a loss of the world of the individual. Though, in true medieval fashion, the preceding events are unknown to modern audiences, the focus of medieval apocalyptic texts is on those who are left

behind rather than the change that preceded it. The Renaissance era saw its share of apocalyptic literature as well, as authors and poets like Dante framed their ideas of the afterlife in visions and predictions. In his *Divine Comedy,* Dante takes his audience through every conceivable region of death, illustrating the results of actions taken in life on an individual's post-death existence. His apocalypse is an internal one; amid the intensities of *Inferno* he delves deeply within the human soul, burning away sin and filth to come closer to a unity with God. After journeying through the many levels of Hell and Purgatory, he, through his protagonist, ultimately achieves that pinnacle and spiritual rebirth in *Paradiso*.

The Anglo-Saxon culture felt both social connection and its loss deeply, evidenced in the medieval epic *Beowulf.* In medieval Britain, humans arranged themselves into social structures that reflected their lifestyles just as they do today. Anglo-Saxon society was heavily influenced by social customs, like those represented in *Beowulf* of gathering in the mead-hall for celebrations and recitations, gift-giving, and the relationships between different classes, such as lords and their followers. The literature produced in this period reflects what was considered meaningful to people of that time and their perceptions of how the world around them worked. A man without his lord and his hall would be bereft of what is meaningful to him, stripped of his cultural and societal identity. In *Beowulf*, the story of lost treasure from the dragon hoard centers on the original keepers who have since been lost to time, despite their riches and power. The poem reflects many of the themes present in Eliot's *The Waste Land* and offers historical evidence of apocalyptic cycles dating back to the medieval period.

The epic poem *Beowulf* contains smaller sub-narratives throughout the text, framed by the larger story of the titular Geatish hero and his triumphs. In preparation for the final battle of the story against the dragon, the poet begins to describe the history of the monster's treasure

hoard, stating "…Long ago, somebody now forgotten / Had buried the riches of a high-born race" (Heaney, lines 2233-35). This forgotten character is the last remnant of his civilization, left to mourn and remember the dead. He is "the only one left to tell their tale", the lone survivor of a devastating wartime tragedy that took from him his kinsmen and his life with them in the hall (Heaney, line 2238). The treasure is the only remainder of their greatness and the speaker "had buried them with great care", despite knowing that it will bring him little comfort for his many losses (Heaney, line 2233). The warrior gives a eulogy for the fallen and laments his misfortune. The treasure is no equivalent to the pain he has suffered, and he chooses to bury it within the barrow, spending the remainder of his life alone with his sorrow and remembering his people's former glory. The warrior in *Beowulf* considers the empty value of the hoard now that he has no one with whom to share it, stating "I am left with nobody / To bear a sword or burnish plated goblets" (Alexander, 94 and Heaney, lines 2252-53). The warrior feels the agony of his exile, bitterly mourning "Pillage and slaughter / Have emptied the earth of entire peoples" (Heaney, lines 2264-65).

Beowulf presents similar themes of apocalyptic cycles near the end of the work when the character of the thief is introduced. The thief is an important, yet often overlooked element of the story, and it is he who drives the dragon to action when he steals a cup from its hoard. In his work "Beowulf and the Plundered Hoard", Willem Helder explores the role of the thief in *Beowulf*, classifying the character as a herald of apocalypse and the symbol of the beginning of the end. The thief triggers the doomsday event by introducing the dragon, a monstrous being of flame and destruction which reflects ideas of a final judgement, such as those seen in the Book of Revelation in the Bible. The dragon is somewhat vindicated in its anger over the robbery of a cup, but the poet specifically makes the thief a sympathetic figure for liberating the gold from a

‘king’ who has wrongfully hidden it away. In this way, the thief begins an honorable path of action to continue the natural social order of hall, treasure, and friendship, and Beowulf completes it upon claiming the hoard. The final battle of the epic, resulting in the death of both the dragon and the hero is perfectly suited to the apocalyptic simultaneity—the loss of the old, and the beginning of a new era—with order represented by the recovered wealth, reclaimed from chaos.

The last warrior in Beowulf buries the treasure hoard and with it the legacy of his people, knowing that the treasure can never equal the lives and happiness lost in the war. He leaves the possibility of a traditional life in society behind him, choosing instead to withdraw into isolation and his misery. He finally accepts the transient nature of the world around him and understands that his personal tragedy is a small example of the loss that all experience during their lives, as all they know is ripped away by the passage of time.

This epic poem offers an example of a successful apocalyptic cycle documented in literature from far back in human history. Though the specific events and circumstances surrounding the poems have been lost to time, these works offer insight into human fears concerning the end of their world. Though Eliot’s form of apocalypse is comprised of a complete collapse of the natural world and human connection, culminating in a descent into depravity, the medieval world viewed it as the loss of the community, suggesting they crafted their identities from the society surrounding them. When the warrior is removed from his halls and his people, he is unable to function and ultimately fades into the vast emptiness that eventually consumes him. Human connection was as valuable to medieval audiences as it was to Eliot. Both voice their anxieties regarding its loss, imagining a world as far removed from normal, idealized society as they could. Though medieval works can be sorrowful and at times dark in tone,

modern readers might take comfort from these in works. Though medieval society did end in a way, humanity perseveres and retains its pursuit of progress and growth.

Though it may take many forms, the cycle of apocalypse is evident throughout human history. We have been wondering and writing about it from our earliest forays into literature, and our curiosity echoes through the ages. Feeling unable to prevent our lives from being torn apart by natural forces or by our own shortsightedness, humans tell themselves these stories as a consolation: the world may be afire, but from the ashes we can rise again—perhaps even greater than before. That is the core of apocalyptic literature. Apocalypse is not just an ending; it can be an opportunity for renewal. It allows us to do away with the old to make space for the new, and this cycle repeats throughout all time. An environmental collapse might spell disaster for humans, but it may also offer a chance for the earth to recover from the damage our species has inflicted on it. Despite any pain resulting from an apocalyptic transformation, it can simultaneously offer comfort: the potential for positive change. Importantly, apocalypse can look different depending on one's particular circumstances. Eliot—an educated, white man of means in 1922—mourned what he considered the "end" of culture. But this ending allowed for new forms of culture to take root, widening the scope of literature, of art, to make room for voices outside the privileged classes. Apocalypse is not solely destruction for its own sake. It offers us catharsis, and an opportunity for a better world to take shape.

Until the Great War, the belief that humanity would always continue in some form held fast. T. S. Eliot and his contemporaries watched their world change around them in ways never seen before. Though the war did end, Eliot began to worry: perhaps this time, the destruction was permanent. He watched and waited for years but saw none of the cultural recovery and reconstruction he hoped for. Perhaps, like Eliot, humanity would never truly recover from World

War I, with its devastation so beyond anything we had experienced prior. Perhaps the cycle was finally broken. From this fear *The Waste Land* was born, as Eliot simultaneously illustrates what he viewed as the death of human culture and preserves the few remaining "fragments… shored against [its] ruins".

Chapter 1: Existing Literature

As one of the most prominent examples of modernist poetry in the twentieth century, much has already been written on *The Waste Land*. In my research, I consulted writing by Eliot himself, both on other texts and his own work. I also examined Eliot's life from a biographical point of view to better understand the mindset from which the poem came. Understanding the many notes the poet left for audiences of *The Waste Land,* as well as the circumstances of his life and relationships, is crucial to comprehending the full scope of the work.

As stated previously, the notion of apocalypse is not a new one. Humans have been telling stories about the end of the world for as long as we have existed, and our literature has reflected that underlying anxiety since its earliest beginnings. Norse mythology references the climactic final reckoning, "Ragnarök"; Greek mythology likewise includes tales of the gods' descendants rising up in revolt, destroying them to make way for a new order. The Bible is another clear example: the book of Revelation completing the New Testament describes a complete annihilation of human systems and worldviews in favor of the new order of a divine entity. Some Biblical apocalypses are less obvious: the crucifixion and subsequent resurrection of Christ reflect many components of the genre as well. A famous Anglo-Saxon work, *Beowulf,* represents an example of medieval apocalyptic ideas from centuries before *The Waste Land*.

The English were not alone in wondering about the end of the world; Greek and Roman mythology offers us a variety of possible outcomes after their respective hosts of gods and goddesses meet their ends. Eliot's inclusion of Tiresias as a character in *The Waste Land* appears to be an acknowledgement of this history, and the latter's extraordinary status as the "most significant voice in the poem", according to Eliot's notes, supports this. As time passes, the end

of the world takes on new shapes. We become less concerned about dueling deities in the sky and more about what is changing on the mortal plane.

It is important not only to understand a literary work but also the author of said work, and Eliot is an enigma unto himself. Thomas Stearns Eliot, better known today as T. S. Eliot, is considered one of the greatest modern poets of the twentieth century. He first rose to prominence in 1915 through widespread acclaim of his poem *The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock* and continued to create masterful poetry, prose, and dramas with such works as *The Hollow Men* and *The Cocktail Party,* as well as the poem he is perhaps best known for: *The Waste Land.* Eliot lived through World War I, a time of great emotional and cultural upheaval for society. His work reflects his thoughts on the events occurring in the world around him as well as his own personal anxieties. Though he did not fight in World War I, he was strongly affected by the devastation he observed and its resulting effects on the world. He famously struggled with women, as evidenced in his personal life and failed relationships. His first wife, Vivienne, was by many accounts a fragile and nervous woman who was often sent away to asylums for extended periods of time. Their marriage was not a happy one and Eliot grew detached from her, later stating that he had never truly loved her and had only convinced himself that he did. They separated, and she died alone in a mental asylum years later.

Eliot has stated that he owes the state of mind from which *The Waste Land* came to his first marriage, which suggests that no matter what his true feelings may have been for Vivienne, he was strongly affected by their relationship. The poem contains a deeply rooted tension between the feminine and the masculine, evidenced by Eliot's choice of speakers and symbols throughout the poem. Eliot felt a deep-seated revulsion toward the female and the concept of sexuality. This anxiety is evident in many of his works and specifically in *The Waste Land*. A

central theme in the apocalyptic genre is a focus on the idea of rebirth, the belief that from loss and destruction comes new life. Ultimately, the poem is a meditation on the themes of death and rebirth of culture and society. *The Waste Land*, like Eliot, is immensely preoccupied with this concept but simultaneously appears to fear and detest the actual idea of birth and the natural role of the woman. He, through his work, prefers to view the feminine as the great problem in literature and in culture, writing analyses of female characters compromising their male counterparts with feminine "guilt".

In his critique of Shakespeare's famous tragedy *Hamlet*, T. S. Eliot offers a unique insight into what he considered the true failure in the work: Hamlet himself. In his aptly titled criticism, *Hamlet and His Problems*, Eliot not only analyzes *Hamlet* in a new, critical fashion but also gives modern audiences a greater understanding of how Eliot understood gender and its function, both in society and in art. According to his writing, Eliot views Shakespeare's *Hamlet* as a flawed composite of several preceding efforts, combined to create an amalgamation which ultimately fails to craft a convincing narrative. Eliot believes that Shakespeare deviates from the original nature of the play, which in his opinion centers around Gertrude's guilt acting upon her son Hamlet. Shakespeare's inability to accept and insert what Eliot sees as the true theme results in the "artistic failure" of a conflicting and contradictory work still celebrated today. The irony of this analysis is not lost on modern readers familiar with both the fragmented nature of *The Waste Land* and with Eliot's personal views on women.

Unsurprisingly, Eliot blames Hamlet's descent into insanity on the sins of his mother; in Eliot's view, Gertrude's moral "degradation" is central to the failure of the work. Her too-swift remarriage to the murderer of his father evokes such a deep disgust in Hamlet that he cannot resolve it with reason. In this way Eliot introduces the now-famous concept of the "objective

correlative", stating that because Gertrude's shame is not large enough to justify Hamlet's emotional response, he is forced to spiral out of control. Her character, too small and unimportant in the play to act as a catalyst, is overcome by Hamlet's contempt. Eliot quickly adds that no increase in sin on the part of Gertrude would have saved the work; rather, her character is "so negative and insignificant that she arouses in Hamlet the feeling which she is incapable of representing". Jacqueline Rose, in *Hamlet: the Mona Lisa of Literature*, her examination of Eliot's criticism, ascribes particular importance to his comparison of *Hamlet* to Da Vinci's *Mona Lisa*. Eliot's choice to symbolize what he viewed as magnificent yet inherently flawed artworks with a feminine symbol further attributes each work's perceived faults to be due to women. His invention of the objective correlative, in Rose's view, is an attempt to dismiss or reject the role of the female character in the work. From his own words, we can understand Eliot's complicated relationship with women and his tendency to blame them for humanity's faults.

Walter Coppedge writes a critique of present-day society from the perspective of *The Waste Land* using his own interpretations both of the poem and the events occurring around him in 1990. Titled "Revisiting The Waste Land: What the Thunder is Saying", Coppedge applies *The Waste Land* to his own time period, much like Eliot's original intentions for the work. He notes several instances of apocalyptic imagery throughout *The Waste Land*, such as the bartender's potential function as the Angel of Apocalypse within Part III and quickly moves through the poem to the final segment where the thunder begins to speak. According to Coppedge, thunder represents a liminal stage within *The Waste Land*, as it hangs above the ruins of society with the potential for water, rebirth, and growth. It challenges the survivors to think selflessly in "the awful daring of a moment's surrender". However, because the survivors are not

pure and “think [only] of the key which will enable his escape” the poem ends on a pessimistic note, suggesting there will be no rebirth. Coppedge does not view this condition as permanent, however, and understands *The Waste Land* as a social commentary on his own time. When humanity can combat both its apathy and cultural and spiritual deficiency, then there may be hope for us to hear what the thunder is saying.

Coppedge states “the nymphs are departing, hastened… by… [the slowing of] conservation of the nation’s wild and scenic river system”, describing a current parallel in his time to the natural devastation present in the poem. Despite the myriad of abuses aimed at the earth, Coppedge claims that “even more destructive to the planet is the global-scale indifference and insensitivity”. He attributes this decline in empathy to everyday exposure to what he deems horrific, such as television, pornography, and popular music. According to Coppedge, it is the greedy devouring of our planet, the indifference to the damage we cause to it and each other, and the prevalent self-indulgence that plagues humanity that brings forth Eliot’s *The Waste Land* in 1990. He calls for an environmental awakening, a call back to the past and its traditions of respect and taking only what is necessary. Coppedge’s use of *The Waste Land* is a continuation of Eliot’s original purpose, as the former parallels it to the deficiencies he sees in in his time and wields it as a cautionary tale. “How long”, Coppedge asks, “before we are ready to listen to what the Thunder says?”

In her work “‘The still point of the turning world’: Cyclical Time and Rebirth in T. S. Eliot’s *The Waste Land* and Thomas Mann’s *Der Zauberberg*”, Primrose Young examines the role of time in apocalyptic literature, comparing and contrasting a linear timeline with what she refers to as “cyclical time”, which she argues is present in both works. She posits that *The Waste Land* defies traditional “clocktime”, choosing instead to highlight its failing as a system, though

the poem does not offer any alternative structure of time. The work pauses linear time in order to hold up "a mirror to the turning world of snowballing chaos and catastrophe in early twentieth-century Europe". *The Waste Land* cannot exist in normal circumstances; it requires a complete degradation of all systems, including time, in order to make its point. Young likens the poem to the central point on a gramophone, held in perfect stillness as the rest of the world churns around it. She questions whether this unchanging state is a successful tool for Eliot's goals of reflection and whether it can offer any true hope for redemption.

Time in many forms ceases to exist in *The Waste Land*, and so too does normal space. Thus, the reader is left only with a strange internal sense of both, where the previously accepted norms of both constraints become external and alien. Eliot's poem exemplifies this through its language, jumping seemingly at random through voices, settings, and actions. However, his use of myth ties the fragments together, creating a cyclical sense entirely of its own. "Like that of its source myths", *The Waste Land* becomes a cycle of events in human history that repeat in simultaneity rather than develop in a meaningful fashion. Because Eliot relates the same story over and over again, often "enacted on this same divan or bed", the reader gleans little hope for ever escaping the bounds of *The Waste Land*. Young notes that "it is no coincidence that all the stories are of failed love and sexual disappointment, the very factors which prevent physical rebirth", and would be the only escape from the perpetuity of the cycle. Young's work calls into question the effects of the cyclical apocalypse: should we even strive for a rebirth? What can come from repeating the same actions and achieving the same results each time? The concept of apocalypse answers these questions by suggesting that we progress each time we experience a cycle, but Young claims there is no true rebirth to achieve when all that occurs is repetition of the same cause and effect. Eliot's *Waste Land* is "hermetically sealed", protected from both the

winds of change and time as well as the turning of the years. It can act as a scale to compare ourselves against, as we question our own cultural degradation and what—if anything—can be done to undo it. Combined with Young's analysis, Eliot's work takes on an even greater importance; we must strive not to repeat but move forward, actively taking steps toward progress to escape the mindless emptiness of cyclical time.

Cornelia Cook, in her work "The Hidden Apocalypse: T. S. Eliot's Early Work", studies the evolution of Eliot's use of scripture in his poetry. She compares his earlier works with his later efforts and hypothesizes that his employment of this device is not a shift from the atheistic to the religious but rather from one scriptural model to another. Eliot moves from a surface-level use of allusion to intensify emotion for his audience to a new function: to demonstrate the emptiness of the divine within the world of his works. Because his references are "obvious", the reader does not have to deeply examine each one to understand the intention behind its inclusion and can instead interpret them as further proof of the underlying theme of deep "spiritual hunger". In Eliot's earlier work, *The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock*, the main character experiences a sense of futility, but when accompanied by an allusion to the story of Lazarus, the emotion of the speaker is elevated to an exhaustion beyond the mortal plane.

Eliot's inclusion of the "rock" motif in the first segment of the poem represents a myriad of references, many from the Book of Isaiah, in which the "rock" is implied to be salvation through acceptance of God. However, in *The Waste Land* "there is no rock", suggesting that there is no available salvation present in this iteration of the world. Cook notes that *The Waste Land* is rampant with emptiness; rather than describing what is present, Eliot often at length emphasizes the losses present in the world. According to Cook, the word "branch" is a common epithet for the Messiah and is referenced throughout the Bible. By asking "What are the roots

that clutch, what branches grow…" Eliot tells us that what is important is that which was lost, not what remains. This passage serves to stress both the literal barrenness of the desert and culture, as humanity now exists in a bleak, sterile place with no hope of divine intervention. The characters in *The Waste Land* desire rebirth as passionately as they are able; voices break through the poem's structure with questions, and some such as Madame Sosostris seek it out through divine means—but all are ultimately unable to see it, let alone engineer it themselves.

Cook describes *The Waste Land* as a poem that "strictly resists" overtly naming any form or kind of religion. Instead, it makes vague and veiled references, prompting the reader to fill in the blanks with their own knowledge of scripture. Thus, *The Waste Land* is an exercise in its own futility, possessing a dimension accessible only to those who are at the very least versed in scripture. If we are truly denizens of Eliot's *Waste Land* as he feared, the poem ceases to function as a readable work and instead becomes an inscrutable memorial to a more spiritually rich era.

Chapter 2: A Close Reading of *The Waste Land*

The early twentieth century was a time of great upheaval, especially in the literary world. New ideologies, manifestos, and artistic expressions emerged as the world began again to change. The modernist literary movement is generally understood to encompass the period of 1900-1940, or from the beginning of the 20th century until World War II. The beginning of the movement was heralded by artists and authors expressing themselves at the turn of the century, reexamining the value of humanity after experiencing the tragic horrors of what was then known as "The Great War", or World War I. In *The Waste Land*, Eliot considers the fate of humanity by drawing attention to the depreciation of culture, which he illustrates by seemingly haphazardly mixing allusions to a multitude of literary works, arguing that humanity is expiring culturally and that soon it will be devoid of all meaning. This apocalypse, Eliot fears, will be the last. In apocalyptic literature, the concept of "The End" functions as the lowest possible point, the devastating catastrophe, or complete social and political anarchy. It forces humanity to examine itself at its most despicable—and if it succeeds, it causes us to question everything humans have taken for granted and reminds us to be watchful of where we are heading. Eliot's famous poem elegantly encapsulates the idea that it is not the destruction of the world around us that we should fear, but rather the failure to be reborn. This is represented in *The Waste Land* as a slow decay of everything meaningful in our culture: a culture that even today, Eliot warns, is slowly dying before our eyes.

Disgusted by his perceptions of modern society and the filthiness of sexuality, Eliot ardently desires a post-apocalyptic rebirth in *The Waste Land* but cannot engineer it without the female role. Thus, one of the main tensions in the work is the nature of the relationship between two genders. This conflict of sexuality results in a spiritual deficiency that Eliot cannot resolve,

and with no solution modern society continues its downward spiral into abstract meaninglessness. The poem is a collection of religious and mythological references, allusions that carry important significance and can differ between their real-world meanings and those implied in the context of the poem. These tensions yield great insight into the poem's central conflict between gender and theology. Each character, voice, or symbolic figure represents an important facet of this relationship between the apocalyptic failures of identity and culture throughout *The Waste Land.*

Eliot's epic poem is a jumble of voices, thoughts, songs, and phrases; it is composed of seemingly random references to obscure literature and myth. The language itself illustrates the total ruination present in the poem. In truth, it is not an actual catastrophe that befalls the world in *The Waste Land*, but rather a catastrophe of language and form. The words Eliot chooses are specific in their role as the refuse of a culture fallen to ashes. His use of the sonnet in the third section of the poem that parodies love and meaningful connection illustrates the central point of the work: as our values begin to erode, so too does language and human culture.

The Waste Land describes a dearth of meaning in a number of ways. By juxtaposing symbols from more culturally rich time periods with examples from the waning present in 1922, it criticizes the regression humanity has allowed to occur. Famously, the epigraph of the poem is a quote from Petronius' *Satyricon*, in which the Cumaean Sibyl, an oracle of great power, has experienced the relentless passage of time, growing ever older but unable to die. At the opening of the poem, the Sibyl looks into the future and in response to what she sees, simply states "I want to die". The Sibyl mirrors Eliot's fears as he sets himself up in a similar role. Omnipotent in the world of *The Waste Land*, Eliot stands above it all and deems it irredeemable. He looks out over the debris of a slowly expiring culture and laments his, and our, inability to escape it.

The Waste Land opens with another equally chilling statement, claiming "April is the cruellest month, breeding / Lilacs out of the dead land", immediately describing the painful process of post-apocalyptic rebirth. New life comes, but at a great cost. These lines are also the first allusion to another literary work, subverting the opening words of Chaucer's *The Canterbury Tales*. The nature motif continues as the poem abruptly changes speakers; the reader is introduced to Marie, who goes sledding with her cousin and "read[s], much of the night, and go[es] south in the winter". Marie describes a paradise of the natural world, ever-changing from the "shower of rain" to the following "sunlight". Appearing in the first stanza, Marie is a unique figure in the poem in that she experiences real emotion: from the "summer [that] surprised us" to the fear and exhilaration she felt as "down they went. / In the mountains, there you feel free". Marie also describes her cousin, who tells her to "hold on tight". Though upon a first reading the cousin is presumed to be referring to the sled, it is plausible he may be telling her to keep her grasp on the emotions she experiences. This surprisingly gentle vignette provides the 'before' image of *The Waste Land*, where characters make real connections and the natural world remains unpolluted, able to grow and change with the seasons.

This idyll cannot last, however, and Eliot plunges immediately into the present of *The Waste Land*: opening our view into a desert, devoid of natural resources. Though there are a myriad of interpretations of the poem, it is almost universally believed that it is composed of many speakers. In the passage entitled "The Burial of the Dead", after the introduction of Marie there is an apparent change in voice as the poem begins to reference the Christian Bible, addressing a "son of man". Each selection has a different theme: the first, from Ezekiel, is a deity addressing a mortal man. It asks what the man understands of the growth of world around him, but immediately answers itself saying "You cannot say, or guess, for you know only / a heap of

broken images, where the sun beats…". This specific description of "broken images" strongly suggests the symbols humans have used to signify intangible entities such as culture or religion. We are forced to rely on art—flawed human reproductions of those things that are hidden to us—as we attempt to transmute invisible deities onto the mortal plane of our understanding. This phrase may also allude to the fragmentary nature and style of poetry Eliot himself employed. Eliot appears to be criticizing his own art form through the voice of a god who reprimands humanity for ceasing to perceive the pure world around it, choosing instead to hide in its kaleidoscope of decaying culture. By ignoring the "roots that clutch" and the "branches [that] grow / out of this stony rubbish", humanity has lost sight of what is truly meaningful in its crusade for skepticism.

According to Eliot's notes, several lines from this stanza are taken from the books of Ecclesiastes and Isaiah, from a preacher depicting the misery of advancing years. The voice of the deity offers something "different from either / Your shadow at morning striding behind you / Or your shadow at evening rising to meet you". The descriptions of wasted trees and "dry stone [with] no sound of water" echo the fear and confusion present in the twentieth century as artists and writers attempted to discover something lasting that would somehow immortalize them in history or culture. Though the actual object the deity offers remains a mystery, it can be inferred that it is something outside the normal passage of time as it suggests it will stop human life at its zenith. The final line of the stanza further confirms this theme. The haunting phrase "I will show you fear in a handful of dust" suggests the ultimate result of the passage of time: the absolute end of human life and its achievements, and a return to the dust from whence it came.

This stanza also further incorporates the motif of nature: in these lines the natural world is again suggested to be a source of misunderstanding and fear for the human race. The

description of the loss of shelter and water, both basic human needs, in a desert-like setting with only religion and impending death for company are utterly desolate circumstances. The poem evokes a sense of isolation in the reader, as though we are seeing through the eyes of the last man on earth; a sentiment common in the twentieth century as trauma and solitude more strongly affected those impacted by the war. *The Waste Land* is adept at weaving aspects of culture and humanity together: here nature and the environment are partnered with religion to illustrate how the natural world breaks down in the face of our cultural decline.

In direct contrast to the earlier innocence of Marie the poem presents a new female character, known only as the "hyacinth girl". Little information is given about her, other than she received hyacinths a year ago from the person to whom she is speaking. However, this mysterious other person is unable to respond in any fashion when confronted by her. The two individuals in this scene are clearly close, having just returned "late, from the Hyacinth garden". The girl is vibrantly alive, her "arms full, and [her] hair wet", but the speaker is paralyzed and enters a state of being "neither / Living nor dead". The speaker stares at her, "into the heart of light, the silence" but cannot reach her. Unlike Marie and her cousin, who "hold on tight" and together experience an energetic moment of life, these two are unable to recapture their previous intimacy and are lost to "Oed' und leer das Meer", the "dull and empty of the sea". Where previously both Marie and her cousin are able to connect in an emotionally meaningful way, the hyacinth girl is severed from her partner despite her authentic vivacity. This loss is but one of many in *The Waste Land* and depicts the slow depreciation of true affection in Eliot's portrait of the world.

There is another apparent change in tone and speaker in the next stanza as the reader meets Madame Sosostris, who is "known to be the wisest woman in Europe / With a wicked

pack of cards". Madame Sosostris begins immediately to consult the tarot cards to read her client's future. Though it is never stated to whom she is speaking, the stanza suggests that this reading is for us, the reader. Her reading is a continuation of the motifs of the poem; with each card she draws corresponding directly to the five sections of the poem and the apocalyptic cycle. She begins with the "drowned Phoenician sailor", a direct reference to Shakespeare's *The Tempest*. Eliot maintains a theme of water throughout the poem, viewing it as essential to apocalyptic death and subsequent rebirth. In *The Tempest*, Ariel and the other spirits view Alonso's death not as a finality but rather as a purification, a "sea change", and describe his transformation from mortal flesh to something beautiful and otherworldly with the phrase "Those are pearls that were his eyes". Madame Sosostris quotes the line exactly, suggesting that Eliot wants to draw attention to the idea of cleansing and reincarnation present in Shakespeare's work.

The next card that Madame Sosostris draws is the "Belladonna, the Lady of the Rocks". This appears to be a reference to Leonardo da Vinci's *Madonna on the Rocks*, a portrait of the Virgin Mary and the Christ child as they are adored by the infant John the Baptist. However, this woman is not the pious Virgin in da Vinci's painting, but rather the "lady of situations", a gentler term for a sexually promiscuous woman. Madame Sosostris calls her "belladonna", evoking a less than virtuous sense. Belladonna may literally mean "beautiful woman", but its use here alludes to its function as a cosmetic as well as its true nature as a poison. This card depicts a loose, immoral woman whose beauty is inauthentic, obtained through falsehoods such as cosmetics, and her underlying deadly character. This corrupted female figure is everywhere in *The Waste Land*, primarily appearing in the form of Cleopatra in "A Game of Chess", the second segment of the poem. To Eliot, women are significant contributors to the collapse of civilization.

Throughout the poem he criticizes them heavily and struggles futilely to achieve apocalyptic rebirth without help from the female.

Madame Sosostris then draws the "man with three staves", believed to represent the Fisher King, another central figure within the poem. Some analyses of *The Waste Land* interpret the entire poem as a loose retelling of the legend of the Fisher King, but at the very least this card acts as a direct reference to him and brings his story to the forefront of the reader's mind. Though there are many conflicting accounts of the Fisher King, most agree on two components of his legend: that he served as the guardian of the Holy Grail, and that he was injured in the "thigh", which was understood in medieval times to mean that he had suffered injury to the phallus. This type of injury was debilitating to a medieval man, which is why it was often euphemized with "thigh" or "groin". The Fisher King suffered this as both a physical injury and an intangible one, taking away his ability to continue his lineage. Thus he remains an ironic figure guarding the Grail— protecting a symbol of fertility yet robbed of it himself.

Eliot may have felt differently about the Fisher King, viewing him as having succeeded where he cannot. The Fisher King is impotent but possesses the Grail, theoretically allowing him to procreate without the help of a woman or any kind of sexual relationship. It is this tension that is central to "The Fire Sermon", the third section of the poem, which depicts the sexually successful but emotionally empty relationship between a man and a woman. Beginning in the nineteenth century, the Holy Grail became synonymous with the ideal of the feminine. The Fisher King represents a male figure, stripped of his ability to propagate and who must rely on the woman, here depicted as a literal object. This disingenuous and unequal relationship results in the Fisher King's land suffering as well, becoming a wasteland not dissimilar to Eliot's. In

fact, Eliot himself wrote that the title of his poem is drawn from Jessie L. Weston's novel on the legend of the Holy Grail, *From Ritual to Romance*.

Madame Sosostris then draws the "Wheel", representing chance, and the "one-eyed merchant", the latter of whom carries on his back a mysterious burden veiled from the "famous clairvoyante" and by extension to her audience. The fourth section of the poem, "Death By Water", is brief, referencing only Phlebas the Phoenician. Madame Sosostris warns us here to "Fear death by water". Phlebas is nothing but a corpse, possessing no new meaning or special quality. In direct contrast to the earlier drowned Phoenician Alonso and his "sea change", Phlebas drowns but is not resurrected; rather, he is irretrievably lost to the water. He is apparently a victim of chance: where Alonso was transformed in death, Phlebas is condemned to endless decay. This reminds the audience that death is ultimately inescapable, and that the wheel of chance can only offer equal parts hope and despair. Here, water can both kill and resurrect, but it is outside our power to determine which. The structure of this section is reminiscent of Biblical parables, which usually offer some kind of lesson or significance to the audience within their overarching narratives. Phlebas's story offers the reader no comfort, merely remarking on his demise and warning the reader, as the one to "turn the wheel and look to windward / [To] consider Phlebas, who was once handsome and tall as you".

The one-eyed merchant card is significant in that it is not a traditional component of a tarot deck and must be deciphered in a different fashion. Many interpretations of this card suggest it represents a crooked salesman, symbolizing greed and corruption. Throughout the poem but featuring prominently in the fifth and final section of the poem, "What the Thunder Said", Eliot elaborately illustrates his vision of the world today: a kind of "unreal city", populated with strange mutations of people, perhaps undead, traveling throughout the city, each

"fix[ing] his eyes before his feet", seeing neither each other nor the world around them. A recurring theme throughout the poem is the "violet hour", a liminal time within the city where the speaker walks through the streets of London, covered in "brown fog". He sees a large number of people crossing the bridge, and remarks that he "had not thought death had undone so many". This image of the city's population abandoning it returns later in the poem, where the speaker is again walking through emptying streets. This time, however, he is completely alone. There are no other people present in the city, now deserted and left to rot. The speaker is truly alone, no longer accompanied even by his myriad of literary and cultural references, as he repeats "the nymphs are departed" and "have left no addresses". He implores the river, "Sweet Thames, run softly till I end my song", a prayer to finish the work he has begun. However, he knows that his own final demise is imminent, confiding that "at my back in a cold blast I hear / The rattle of the bones, and chuckle spread from ear to ear".

Madame Sosostris completes her reading with a seemingly innocuous phrase "I do not find The Hanged Man". Though this may at first seem positive, this sentence is the final condemnation of humanity. In tarot, The Hanged Man represents a figure of fertility, who is sacrificed so that his resurrection might bring abundance and growth back to the lands of his people. Often associated with the figure of Christ, the Hanged Man acts as a last resort to revitalize the natural world. In the final segment of the poem, Eliot links the Hanged Man with the mysterious "hooded" third person who "walks always beside you" as a representation of the desired final outcome of the apocalyptic cycle. Ideally, humanity exits the cycle battered but prepared to shed its sins and mistakes to pave the way for progress. We must undergo the horrific trial, the sacrificial murder, to earn our transformation. Just as *The Waste Land* encapsulates the idea of art created through suffering, so too must humanity suffer in order to better itself.

Madame Sosostris' inability to uncover The Hanged Man in this reading suggests that humanity is past the point of redemption, and that no sacrificial lamb will appear to deliver us from this apocalyptic cycle.

Although *The Waste Land* is full of allusions to mythologies and other literary works, one of its most meaningful is the presence of Tiresias in "The Fire Sermon". Perhaps most known for his roles in *The Odyssey* and Sophocles' *Oedipus Cycle*, Tiresias was a blind prophet who figured prominently in Greek mythology. He lived through seven generations in the city of Thebes and underwent not one, but two, sex changes during his lifetime. Tiresias had the gift of foresight, and though his prophecies are often ignored to the peril of the listener, he provides the audience with unusual omnipotent insight into the story and perhaps functions even as a link to the divine. In Eliot's poem, Tiresias appears as a strange, dual-gendered entity. He seems to function as the narrator of his interlude in Part III, and states that he "perceived the scene, and foretold the rest / [he] too awaited the expected guest". This suggests that this is the same Tiresias as appears in mythology: an ever-present, all-knowing watcher.

Interestingly, Greek mythology claims that Tiresias received much of his knowledge of the future through communing with the dead. In the poem, Tiresias describes himself as "blind, throbbing between two lives", implying his liminal state: he is both genders at once, both blind and all-seeing, mortal yet gifted with divine power—and perhaps simultaneously alive and dead. This also creates cause to wonder: why tell this seemingly pointless story of two passionless lovers? Why does Tiresias, seer of all things in life and in death, choose this single, unimpressive moment? Perhaps because this moment represents every devastated moment in *The Waste Land*. Tiresias experiences the paradox of living death, but in truth, all of humanity does. The two people in the vignette fail to truly connect, even with their bodies, and do not feel even the

slightest twinge of emotion. They go about their rendezvous like clockwork, and when it has ended, the woman "turns and looks a moment in the glass, / Hardly aware of her departed lover" and sighs, and says "'Well now that's done and I'm glad it's over'".

Tiresias further relates that he has "walked among the lowest of the dead", corroborating the idea that he observes the world from our same ground and finds it cold and lifeless. He has "foresuffered all / Enacted on this same divan or bed". He has watched this same scene unfold countless times; a single moment capturing the apathy that has befallen the human race. We exist, but do not live. As Man drones on into oblivion he walks beside us, a powerless form of divinity watching the world detach itself from everything that has meaning. This is the epitome of *The Waste Land*, and Tiresias illustrates and embodies the larger claim of Eliot's work.

Eliot's fear and hatred of women run throughout the poem. Women are frequently implied to be repellant, immoral creatures throughout *The Waste Land*, cast in roles of corruptors of men or as victims of violence. The second part of the poem sets out to illustrate this point in detail. Taking its title, "A Game of Chess", from Thomas Middleton's play describing seduction as moves on a chessboard, this segment of the poem demonstrates the theme of the debauched female and her varying moral failures. A woman waits upon "a burnished throne", surrounded by golden luxury. The richness of the room she resides in is described in exquisite detail, although the woman herself is not. The reader is allowed only fragments of a description, that of the "glitter of her jewels" and her "strange and synthetic perfumes". The woman in this stanza is merely set dressing; both Eliot and society value her only as decoration, and she remains motionless in her gilded room until she is needed. Her external beauty is all that matters, both to her and to anyone who sees her, and her individuality begins to disappear into it. Her thoughts

begin to jumble, “troubled, confused / And drowned the sense in odors” and the structure of the section, originally written in blank verse, begins to degrade. As the fresh air from the window drifts in, “stirring the pattern on the coffered ceiling” the shine of her possessions begins to fade, leaving behind a “sad light” in which “a carved dolphin swam”. This image in particular appears to exemplify the stanza; the woman and the dolphin, both objects of natural beauty, are preserved artificially, held motionless and captive to their purpose as ornamentation.

This unnamed woman becomes utterly lost in the haze of her “vials of ivory and colored glass” and becomes agitated, pleading with another speaker that her “nerves are bad tonight” and to “stay with [her]”. She becomes aggressive, repeatedly asking him to speak to her, commanding him to think, and wondering aloud why he never speaks and what he thinks about. He rarely responds, and only cryptically. She ignores this as she is frightened by a noise, to which he responds that it is “the wind under the door”, or “nothing”. Dissatisfied with his answers, the woman begins to spiral further into distress, wondering “What shall I do?” and singing pieces of a nonsense song. This supposed dialogue was described by those who knew Eliot and his wife of being strikingly reminiscent of recurring conversations between the two, suggesting that Eliot may have drawn from his personal experience of intimate disconnect as one of the many vignettes in *The Waste Land*. This couple struggles even to have a simple conversation, as the woman sequesters herself further into her anxiety and the other speaker drifts into apathy. Both attempt to communicate but are unable to reach each other, resulting in a return to the robotic patterns they have existed within now: “the hot water at ten. / And if it rains, a closed car at four”. The two begin their version of the game of chess, shifting their relationship into a combative, anti-romantic sense as they anxiously hope for someone to interrupt them, “pressing lidless eyes and waiting for a knock upon the door”.

This portion of the poem also refers to the myth of Philomela, a return to the ideal female archetype and contrasting the cloying, saccharine woman in the golden room. According to Greek mythology, Philomela was a young woman who was raped by her sister's husband Tereus, who afterwards cut out her tongue. Philomela wove a tapestry telling of her plight and sent it to her sister, who took revenge on Tereus by killing their son and serving his body to her husband as a meal. When Tereus realized what had happened, he chased the sisters into a wood intent on murdering them. They prayed to the gods for salvation and were turned into birds. Eliot sets up Philomela as a sympathetic figure, as "still she cried, and still the world pursues", despite the horrific traumas she has already endured. Even transformed into a bird, Philomela's song is too good for humanity, falling upon "dirty ears". The inclusion of the Philomela myth symbolizes sexual violence and its prevalence throughout the wasteland of humanity, and that not all women are corrupted. Eliot offers characters such as the hyacinth girl and Philomela as examples of pure creatures who are ultimately desecrated by those around them in order to illustrate the full extent of humanity's fall.

In the fifth and final section of the poem Eliot's wasteland takes its ultimate form, as the reader is swept into what has been left behind after the devastation human culture has experienced. After the world has experienced apocalypse, represented here in a montage sequence of "torchlight", "frosty silence", "agony", and "the shouting and the crying", the reader is left in a place where there "is no water only rock… and the sandy road… winding above mountains". Many people have perished in the disaster, described obliquely as "he who was living is now dead", although there are survivors, contrasted as "we who were living are now dying". The remainder of humanity is suffering, left on a ruined planet with no resources upon which to rely. This is not progress; this outcome of the apocalyptic cycle is the opposite of what

it should be. Humans have been reduced to "red sullen faces sneer[ing] and snarl[ing]" and have entirely forgotten the culture they once prized. They are unable to recognize the Christ figure, the hooded Hanged Man, asking "Who is the third who walks always beside you?"

In this world Eliot creates, the apocalyptic destruction is absolute. The "dry sterile thunder without rain", the utter lack of solitude even in the mountains, and the "falling towers" all serve to project images of regret and loss. We have abused nature and now it abuses us; we were unwilling to create meaningful social connections but are now forced to exist in close quarters; and our culture—the art, architecture, and manmade creations we have constructed are being destroyed before our eyes. This place boasts its own set of horrors, including "bats with baby faces" and a woman with "long black hair [drawn] out tight / [Fiddling] whisper music on those strings". These unnatural parodies of what was once beautiful illustrate the strange renderings of human culture in a space that warps them to serve an opposite purpose. Instead of inspiring passion or connection, these horrible amalgamations exist as shadows of their former selves, haunting the vast, barren emptiness of the post-apocalyptic landscape.

After systematically examining religion, sexuality, and culture as the major tenets of humanity in the twentieth century, Eliot determines they are each failing. *The Waste Land* offers no solution, only a numb acceptance of what Eliot believes is inevitable. Every line, every word in the poem is carefully chosen to represent the utter dissolution of culture and meaning. Tiresias, the references to Christianity, as well as the other religions and mythologies throughout the poem serve as cultural depreciators: by placing them alongside what he considered the "refuse" of the human race, Eliot illustrates how far humanity has fallen from its former glories and to its ultimate fate. The present is worthless; the future will only continue to spiral into destruction. Eliot's jumbled "fragments shored against [his] ruin" are the last, forlorn remnants

of humanity. Even their structure reflects the total barrenness of their surroundings; to imagine true devastation, language must degrade and ultimately cease. It represents the final result of humanity's destructive choices in the twentieth century. At the conclusion of the poem, even those remnants begin to fade, leaving the reader with only a few, scattered phrases of "Shantih", translating to "peace beyond all understanding", to protect him from what lies ahead for the human race. This ominous phrase can be considered the final answer in the question of Eliot's optimism. "Shantih", this transcendent acceptance of the extinction of all meaning in the human race, is Eliot's recognition that there is no longer a solution to save humanity from itself.

Chapter 3: The Last Apocalypse

The Waste Land is a bleak assessment of humanity, morbidly characterizing humanity's traits and cultural progressions as weaknesses, failings, and flaws. Its erratic allusions and references illustrate its argument for the pervasive superficiality in modern culture as well as its ruling on the inevitable decline of mankind. The representation of sheer devastation in *The Waste Land* is powerful in illustrating the splintering of everything meaningful: language, love, faith, and beauty. The complete loss of human connection is so profound in the poem that each section features it as the central motif. Though at first it may seem random, the selection of the symbols and figures in the poem culminate at the poem's conclusion to create a resounding echo of the failures of the world to encapsulate true meaning. Eliot's ability to cohesively interweave references to such a wide variety of human works in a text intended to represent chaos symbolizes the peculiar beauty of *The Waste Land*. Though a specific definition of 'culture' is difficult or impossible to satisfactorily determine, the poem seems to have its own understanding of the meaning of the word. By referencing and including literature from a wide range of sources, Eliot establishes 'culture' in *The Waste Land* as a universal construct that connects humanity, no matter where—and when—they may reside.

Eliot's view of the state of human culture in the early 1920s is bleak, suggesting thar he believed that humanity had reached a point beyond redemption even through apocalypse. Because he did not see the world experience healing in the way he expected, he believed the apocalyptic cycle was broken beyond repair. Based on the pattern of apocalypse throughout history, humanity had never before failed to come through the fires of rebirth. However, due to the terrible destruction he saw wrought by World War I and the ensuing cultural depreciation, he deemed his time to be the end of nature, sexuality, and spirituality as he knew it. Thus, he crafted

The Waste Land as a memorial to the past and placed the immortal Tiresias within it as a representation of the fading remnants of better cycles that had resulted in successful rebirths and progress. Eliot felt that we could no longer be comforted by apocalypse, for our suffering had no purpose. We drift alone and lost through time, bereft of anything that may have once held meaning.

However, Eliot's fear is unfounded. Because he is examining his own time from within it, he is unable to apply the same objectivity as he might to various other periods throughout history. Human lives are made up of days, but humanity has existed for eons. The gradual positive changes that occur throughout an apocalyptic cycle are not visible to humans in our limited lifespans. World War I was both subjectively and objectively terrible, but our existence today proves that it was not the end of all things. A decade later World War II began, and that conflict was followed by many more wars and conflicts. Despite this litany of violence, the continuation of our species suggests that there is always hope. The real purpose of apocalypse is to forge new progress out of the remains of the old, like a phoenix rising from the ashes. In this way we can offer our own interpretation of "shantih" as reaching the peace of knowing there is always more to come.

From this discussion, the question inevitably rises: will humanity always depend on destructive cycles to progress to the point of world peace? Will we know it if we reach it? Will we perpetuate cycles of death and destruction for eternity, or will we reach a point of ultimate achievement, wherein we have no more need for progress? These questions remain amongst the wreckage of *The Waste Land* and cannot yet be answered.

Yet, we are reminded: apocalypse is not solely an end. It is darkness used to illuminate; it contrasts what we could lose with what we hope to become. Throughout human history, we have

relied on apocalyptic cycles to destroy our flawed, outdated systems to create space for the new. In this way, apocalypse can be seen as a force of justice. It can dismantle existing power structures so entirely that we have no choice but to start over, to learn from our experiences. It can forge an environment so new that we must decide again how we fit within it; it can even forgive us for our transgressions against nature. We must live within the cycle, but we are not necessarily doomed by it. Instead, it can show us the very best of ourselves—our enduring resilience, and our persistent hope for a better future.

For now, we depend on apocalypse to burn away the old to make way for the new, and to date, it is "by this, and this only, we have existed". Only time will tell, and history will judge.

Bibliography

Berry, Geoff. "Modernism, Climate Change and Dystopia: An ecocritical reading of light symbology in Conrad's Heart of Darkness and Eliot's "The Waste Land"." *Colloquy: Text Theory Critique [E]* 21 (2011): 81-100.

Chandran, K. Narayana. ""Shantih" in The Waste Land." *American Literature* 61.4 (1989): 681-83. *Duke University Press*.

Comley, Nancy R. "From Narcissus to Tiresias: T. S. Eliot's Use of Metamorphosis." *The Modern Language Review* 74.2 (1979): 281-86. *Modern Humanities Research Association*.

Cook, Cornelia. "The Hidden Apocalypse: TS Eliot's Early Work." *Literature and Theology* 10.1 (1996): 68-80.

Coppedge, Walter. "Revisiting the Waste Land: What the Thunder Is Saying." *Nat. Resources J.* 30 (1990): 471-76.

Green, Martin. "Man, Time, and Apocalypse in 'The Wanderer', 'The Seafarer', and 'Beowulf.'" *The Journal of English and Germanic Philology*, vol. 74, no. 4, 1975, pp. 502–18., www.jstor.org/stable/27707954.

Griffiths, Matthew. "Climate change and the individual talent: Eliotic ecopoetics." *symploke* 21.1 (2013): 83-95.

Eliot, Thomas Stearns, ed. Greenblatt, Stephen, and M. H. Abrams. "The Waste Land." The Norton Anthology of English Literature: The Twentieth Century and After. 8th ed. Vol. F. New York: Norton, 2006. 2294-2308.

Eliot, Thomas Stearns. "Hamlet and His Problems." The Sacred Wood. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1921; Bartleby.com, 1996.

Foster, Genevieve W. "The Archetypal Imagery of T. S. Eliot." *PMLA* 60.2 (1945): 567-98. Modern Language Association.

Hammond, Adam, and Julian Brooke. "He Do the Police in Different Voices: A Website for Exploring Voices in T. S. Eliot's The Waste Land." *He Do the Police in Different Voices*. Laughingsquid.us, 2011.

Heaney, Seamus. trans. "*Beowulf*". *Beowulf: A New Verse Translation*. Farrar, Strauss, Giroux, New York, 1999. pp. 153.

Helder, Willem. "Beowulf and the Plundered Hoard." *Neuphilologische Mitteilungen*, vol. 78, no. 4, 1977, pp. 317–25., JSTOR, www.jstor.org/stable/43343150.

Kearns, Cleo McNelly. "Apocalypse and Wisdom: The Problem of Tone in TS Eliot's Poetry." *Christianity & Literature* 41.2 (1992): 121-139.

Kinney, Clare R. “Fragmentary Excess, Copious Dearth: ‘The Waste Land’ as Anti-Narrative.” *The Journal of Narrative Technique*, vol. 17, no. 3, 1987, pp. 273–285., www.jstor.org/stable/30225191.

Longenbach, James. “Matthew Arnold and the Modern Apocalypse.” *PMLA*, vol. 104, no. 5, 1989, pp. 844–855. *JSTOR*, www.jstor.org/stable/462576.

Nevo, Ruth. “The Waste Land: Ur-Text of Deconstruction.” *New Literary History*, vol. 13, no. 3, 1982, pp. 453–461. *JSTOR*, www.jstor.org/stable/468792.

Offutt, Scott. "“What Tiresias Sees”: Discord, Revelation, and Nausea in The Waste Land." *The Common Room* (2009).

Rose, Jacqueline. "Hamlet - the Mona Lisa of Literature." *Critical Quarterly* 28.1 (1986): 35-49. Web.

Sicker, Philip. "The Belladonna: Eliot's Female Archetype in The Waste Land." *Twentieth Century Literature* 30.4 (1984): 1-12. Hofstra University.

Umberto Rossi, and R. M. P. “Images from the Disaster Area: An Apocalyptic Reading of Urban Landscapes in Ballard's ‘The Drowned World’ and ‘Hello America.’” *Science Fiction Studies*, vol. 21, no. 1, 1994, pp. 81–97., www.jstor.org/stable/4240309.

Wasson, Richard. “‘Like A Burnished Throne’: T. S. Eliot and the Demonism of Technology.” *The Centennial Review*, vol. 13, no. 3, 1969, pp. 302–316. *JSTOR*, www.jstor.org/stable/23737738.

Young, Primrose. ‘The still point of the turning world': a comparative investigation of the portrayal of cyclical time and rebirth in TS Eliot’s' The Waste Land' and Thomas Mann’s' Der Zauberberg'. Diss. University of Birmingham, 2013.