

comprehensive study guide to
THE WASTE LAND

by T.S. Eliot

艾略特的荒原



閱讀輔導

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COMPREHENSIVE STUDY GUIDE  
TO  
"THE WASTE LAND" BY T. S. ELIOT

Annotated and edited by  
the Literary Study Guides Association, Taipei

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## 艾略特的荒原

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# Introduction

*The Waste Land* is the most famous poem of the 20th century. When it appeared at the beginning of the 1920's it exerted an immediate and powerful impact on the consciousness of the post-World War I generation. It was received, like Joyce's *Ulysses* and Hemingway's *The Sun Also Rises* were to be a few years later, as both the expression of the doubts and uncertainties of an age and the revelation of a new technique in writing.

The excitement over the poem was well justified—the brilliant, original technique was there for all to see and for some to imitate. Yet few readers found themselves capable of giving a clear account of the meaning of the poem. One early admirer recalls that he saw himself in the same situation as St. Augustine in the *Confessions*: “If no one questions me, I know; if I have to explain, I don't know.” Eliot himself was no help. He wrote:

Various critics have done me the honor to interpret the poem in terms of criticism of the contemporary world, have considered it, indeed, as an important bit of social criticism. To me it was only the relief of a personal and wholly insignificant grouse against life; it is just a piece of rhythmical grumblings.

There is some truth in the statement. *The Waste Land* was written at a time of great strain in Eliot's life when

he was on the verge of a nervous breakdown from overwork, marital problems, and lack of funds. Yet, the publication in 1971, fifty years after the poem first appeared, of a facsimile of the first draft of *The Waste Land* shows the great care Eliot took in writing and correcting it, a fact that suggests he thought it was something more than mere grumblings.

In any case, the greater number of Eliot's contemporaries saw in *The Waste Land* a metaphor for spiritual aridity, boredom, and death wish—all characteristics of modern man. Others interpreted it as a quest for the meaning of life amid the absurdity of modern living, or as a mirror of the state of the human soul after the death of God, or as an expression of the contrast between man's desire for a full intensity of existence and the actual drabness of daily living. The most recent interpretation of *The Waste Land* sees it as a Buddhist poem on the horror of reincarnation on the wheel of life.

After half a century of scholarly analysis the poem is still enigmatic. To the best minds it remains a challenge, to students an ordeal, and to common readers a sphinx's riddle. This is perhaps, as in the case of *Hamlet*, the reason for its fascination. The undefinable meaning is its truth. Conrad Aiken, a close friend of Eliot and an early commentator of the poem, perhaps summed it up best when he wrote that the incoherence of the poem was a virtue because the subject is incoherence.

The editors of this Study Guide do not wish to add to the confusion of interpretations. Their aim is simply to

help undergraduate students of literature to achieve some insights by offering one interpretation which seems consistent and acceptable.

## STRUCTURE

*The Waste Land* can be read as a sequence of poems, each with a different speaker, setting, diction, and rhythm. The individual poems are of various length and grouped under five headings—The Burial of the Dead; A Game of Chess; The Fire Sermon; Death by Water; and What the Thunder Said. The first heading contains four poems: lines 1-18, 19-42, 43-59, and 60-76; the second, two: lines 77-138, 139-172; the third, four: lines 173-206, 207-214, 215-265, and 266-311; the fourth, one: lines 312-321; the fifth whose imagery gave *The Waste Land* its title, is made up of a poem extending from line 322 to line 423 and a conclusion to the whole sequence: lines 424-434.

None of the poems in the sequence is entirely independent from the others. In a note to line 218 Eliot himself says that the various individual speakers in the whole sequence, both men and women, all melt into one speaker, Tiresias, who appears for the first time in his own guise in line 218. Furthermore, the heading under which each poem falls links it by tone and subject matter to the others in that group. The headings themselves are related to one another through cross references throughout the whole of *The Waste Land*. For instance, the drowned Phoenician Sailor in the Sosostris passage of The Burial of the Dead

is the main subject of section IV, Death by Water.

Each of the poems in the sequence is composed of a scene or setting followed by either a dialogue or a dramatic monologue:

| Part        | Passage                 | Setting or Scene               | Lines              | Speech                                                     | Lines |
|-------------|-------------------------|--------------------------------|--------------------|------------------------------------------------------------|-------|
| I           | Marie                   | Spring time                    | 1-7                | dramatic monologue by Marie                                | 8-18  |
|             | Desert and Garden       | Desert Sea and Garden          | 19-24              | dramatic monologue<br>dialogue between girl & male speaker | 25-30 |
|             |                         |                                | 31-42              |                                                            |       |
|             | Sosostris               | Fortune teller's stall or home | 43-46              | dramatic monologue                                         | 46-59 |
| Unreal City | City district of London | 60-69                          | dramatic monologue | 69-75                                                      |       |

The quotation from Baudelaire (line 76) is a comment on the whole of Part I

|     |                      |                              |         |                               |         |
|-----|----------------------|------------------------------|---------|-------------------------------|---------|
| II  | Neurotic lady Lil    | her bedroom                  | 76-110  | dialogue                      | 111-138 |
|     |                      | pub in London                | 139-172 | dramatic monologue            | 139-172 |
| III | River                | Thames in autumn             | 173-181 | dramatic monologue            | 182-206 |
|     | Eugenides            | Foreign businessmen in hotel | 207-211 | invitation in indirect speech | 212-214 |
|     | The typist           | Typist's room and actions    | 215-256 | inner monologue               | 257-265 |
|     | The Thames daughters | The river                    | 266-291 | triple dramatic monologue     | 292-305 |

Lines 306-311 comment on the whole of Part III in the



form of an inner monologue made of memories of reading in asceticism.

|    |                    |                                                |         |                    |         |
|----|--------------------|------------------------------------------------|---------|--------------------|---------|
| IV | Phlebas            | Sea                                            | 312-318 | rhetorical speech  | 319-321 |
| V  | Walk in the Desert | Death of God, desert, Chapel, Thunder, Ganges. | 322-400 | dramatic monologue | 401-423 |
|    | Finale             | Quester in the Waste Land                      | 424-425 | inner monologue    | 426-434 |

Each poem is highly dramatic and constitutes what T.S. Eliot has called an "objective correlative." By this term he meant a scene or series of scenes so organized by the poet as to contain the complex of thoughts, feelings, and emotions the poet means to convey. This way, instead of being an outpouring of subjective sentiment, the poem becomes an objective equivalent of the poet's state of mind. The reader has the responsibility of finding out what thoughts, feelings, and emotions are contained in the "objective correlative." A great deal of disagreement on the meaning of a modern poem comes from the use of this method by poets after Eliot—the poets no longer express their thoughts and feelings in abstract words, they only present an object, as painters do, in which the thoughts and the feelings are present. The poem is a symbol. Reading comprehension, then, is no longer a question of understanding the meaning of words; it requires a new habit of mind capable of grasping the symbolic meaning of things and scenes. As Nietzsche wrote: "Was not nature given to man so that he could find objects with which to

communicate with another soul?"

Each of the five headings of *The Waste Land* groups poems which are related by thought and feeling. "The Burial of the Dead," an expression taken from the burial service of the Anglican Church, collects poems dealing with the feeling of death-in-life, the feeling of the absence of true life in one's existence. The title of "A Game of Chess" derives from a scene in Thomas Middleton's play, *Women Beware Women*, in which a game of chess is described in terms of a game of sex played by an Italian duke in the act of seducing a young lady. This part brings together two vignettes of modern life: one representing a couple of the upper class and the other a couple of the lower class, both couple lacking the harmony of matrimony, both suffering equally from the battle of the sexes, the association of man and woman being a source of conflict. "The Fire Sermon" refers immediately to the Buddha's Fire Sermon against all forms of sensuality and groups poems which all deal with promiscuity and prostitution. "Death by Water" is a single poem on death as purification. "What the Thunder Said" refers directly to the voice of God in the Upanishads and indirectly to the voice of God on Mount Sinai. This section is made up of a series of vignettes progressing from scenes of the death of God in the soul of modern man to the rediscovery, or at least the memory, of primitive revelation. It also contains a finale to *The Waste Land* which recapitulates the main themes and shows the speaker trying to achieve, in the midst of a conflict of hope and doubt, some kind of peace

of mind in sight of the pathetic spectacle of life that *The Waste Land* describes.

Parts I, II, and III present characters in the modern waste land. Parts IV and V present the enveloping action—the death of a culture at the end of its normal course (“And we too are dying with a little patience”). Memory recalls the death of preceding civilizations: Phoenicia, Alexandria, Athens, and now London. It goes as far back as the beginning of Indo-European civilization in Hinduism.

### UNITY

In spite of their disjointedness, the poems that constitute *The Waste Land* all show a remarkable unity of tone and feeling. We have no trouble in accepting all these poems as the expression of one sensibility undergoing a period of moral crisis. *The Waste Land* is the objective correlative of that particular state of mind groping to achieve some kind of inner peace. In his note on line 218 Eliot says that what Tiresias, the central figure of *The Waste Land* sees, is the substance of the poem. Tiresias being blind, what he sees is really what he perceives in his sensibility, what he remembers, experiences, and hopes. All through *The Waste Land* we hear only one voice, the persona of Tiresias who assumes the various characters in the poem.

The arrangement of the sequence shows some kind of organic progression from the despair of “I want to die” in the epigraph to the final “Shantih,” the peace which passeth understanding. There is also a progress in debt of

experience from the voice of Madame Sosostris, the fortune-teller with a bad cold, to the voice of God in the thunder. Though Sosostris speaks in the present and the voice of God is something remembered, yet, in this poem, things remembered and things perceived are all equally present in Tiresias' consciousness.

The groupings of the poems also follow a sort of progression from 1) a description of the spectacle of present life (the first three headings) to 2) a drowning in materialism (Death by Water) and 3) a search for spiritual renewal (What the Thunder Said).

*The Waste Land* ends with a serenity of sorts—the speaker knows what he has lost of real life in the world he lives in, at this particular moment of history, and hopes and doubts at the same time that renewal is possible. His serenity comes from the realization that his task is to make the best of a bad job—to try to fit the fragments of his broken world together and be satisfied with the trying.

## TECHNIQUE

One characteristic of *The Waste Land* is the impersonality of the main speaker. As Eliot notes, he is not a character, we don't see him, we only hear him. He is only a voice, a language trying to communicate a state of mind, to give communicable form and shape to complex, subtle, fluid, almost ungraspable feelings which he himself hardly understands. His language is a tool for exploring the region of his deepest feelings. The difficulty we experience in understanding *The Waste Land* is the same difficulty the

speaker experiences in understanding his own state of mind. In another poem, Eliot will say: "We had the experience but missed the meaning," a remark that applies well to the experience of reading *The Waste Land*. Tiresias is not a definite character with definite views on life, but an anonymous carrier of a state of mind. The individual poems, vignettes, scenes are arranged to express that state of mind; they are studies in contrasts between images taken from actual living and images, references, allusions and hints of passionate intensity of existence:

| Part                     | Intensity of life                                                                                                                                        | Actual living                                                                                                                                                                   | Comments                                                                                                                            |
|--------------------------|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| I<br>Marie<br>1-18       | Indirect allusion to the Canterbury Tales: "Whan that Aprille with his shoures sote...." which stresses the joy of life rooted in nature and supernature | Sleeplessness (I read much of the night), uselessness (go south in the winter), rootlessness (Bin gar keine Russin ...)                                                         | Marie, of the international aristocratic set, recalls only one moment in her childhood which gave her a hint of what life could be. |
| Desert & Garden<br>19-42 | Possibility of love and life in the Hyacinth Garden, freshness (water in garden)<br><br>vision and light (heart of light in garden).                     | aloneness and death in desert<br><br>dryness and unbearable heat in desert,<br><br>intense glare and shadow in desert (your shadow... striding behind you...rising to meet you) | This key scene contains innumerable allusions to the Bible, literature and mythology. Scholars find new ones every now and then.    |
| Sosostris                | Allusions through the Tarot cards to the Egyptian                                                                                                        | The cards have degenerated into a tool for fortune-                                                                                                                             | The passage is the most compact and clearest                                                                                        |

|                               |                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                     |                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                           |                                                              |
|-------------------------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|--------------------------------------------------------------|
| 43-59                         | religious ritual which used such figures to determine the rise of the life-giving Nile.                                                                                                                                                                                             | teller's tricks.                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                          | comment on the decay of life from the sacred to the secular. |
| Unreal City<br>60-76          | Allusion to King William, mention of St. Mary Woolnoth church, loss of sacredness ("that corpse you planted in your garden" alludes to the burial of the fertility god in ancient rituals).                                                                                         | Life in London described in terms of Dante's <i>Inferno</i> (death-in-life), full of boredom (the quotation from Baudelaire's <i>Flowers of Evil</i> alludes to the main statement of Baudelaire that the basic sickness of man is boredom, whether he admits it or not). | Death-in-life is the condition of modern man.                |
| II<br>Neurotic lady<br>77-137 | Allusions to Shakespeare's Cleopatra, Pope's Belinda in <i>The Rape of the Lock</i> , Philomena, Milton's Satan (line 98 especially)<br>Main allusion to <i>Hamlet's</i> Ophelia (good night ladies, good night, sweet ladies...) in the last scene before her death (III, i, 163). | Dialogue between the neurotic lady and her male companion.                                                                                                                                                                                                                | Disharmony in the association of man and woman.              |
| Lil<br>139-172                | Allusions to Shakespeare's Cleopatra, Pope's Belinda in <i>The Rape of the Lock</i> , Philomena, Milton's Satan (line 98 especially)<br>Main allusion to <i>Hamlet's</i> Ophelia (good night ladies, good night, sweet ladies...) in the last scene before her death (III, i, 163). | Images of decay, corruption, abortion, sex as good time.                                                                                                                                                                                                                  | Disharmony in the association of man and woman.              |
| III                           | Quotation of Spenser's Prothalamium (Sweet Thames run softly.....) a poetic conception of the Thames where the wedding feast takes place.                                                                                                                                           | Physical and moral pollution on the river (empty bottles... slimy rats, Sweeney coming to Mrs. Porter.                                                                                                                                                                    |                                                              |
|                               | Wagner's Parsifal who had his feet                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                  | Mrs. Porter and her daughter wa-                                                                                                                                                                                                                                          |                                                              |

|                             |                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                        |                                                                                                                                                                         |                                                                                 |
|-----------------------------|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| River<br>173-205            | washed before entering the castle of the Grail.                                                                                                                                                                                                                        | shing their feet (a euphemism for sexual organs in the original song quoted)                                                                                            |                                                                                 |
|                             | Verlaine's <i>Parsifal</i> (O ces voix d'enfants,...)                                                                                                                                                                                                                  | Images of impurity                                                                                                                                                      |                                                                                 |
|                             | Marvel's "At my back I hear Time's winged chariot hurrying near"                                                                                                                                                                                                       | Sound of horns and motors                                                                                                                                               |                                                                                 |
| Smyrna merchant<br>207-214  | Allusions to the mystery religion that Smyrna merchants spread around the Mediterranean coast in ancient times                                                                                                                                                         | Secretive meeting with prostitutes                                                                                                                                      |                                                                                 |
| Typist<br>215-265           | <p>Images of life based on rhythm of nature (At the violet hour... (l. 220 f.)</p> <p>Sex as part of the rhythm and mystery of nature (the violet hour that brings the sailor home from sea (l. 220-221), Magnus Martyr holds inexplicable spender... (l. 264-265)</p> | <p>Mechanical life (human engine, like a taxi, food in tins, record on gramophone, etc.)</p> <p>Sex as a dirty meaningless bodily activity, an escape from boredom.</p> | The decay of sexual relationship from a mystical experience to a bodily relief. |
| Thames daughters<br>266-305 | <p>Poetic river of Elizabethan time (l. 279-291).</p> <p>Rhine daughters weeping over the</p>                                                                                                                                                                          | <p>Modern polluted river (l. 266-278).</p> <p>Thames daughters indifferent to loss</p>                                                                                  |                                                                                 |

|                                  |                                                                                  |                                                                                          |                                                                                                                                                                                                                                        |
|----------------------------------|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
|                                  | loss of a treasure.<br>Implied poetic conception of the Rhine in Wagner's opera. | of virginity.<br>Loss of virginity amid pollution of the river and bodies.               |                                                                                                                                                                                                                                        |
| Carthage<br>306-311              | St. Augustine and Buddha both exhorting to sexual control                        | Implied desire to be delivered from a life of sensual subjection into spiritual freedom. |                                                                                                                                                                                                                                        |
| IV<br><br>Phoenician<br>312-321  |                                                                                  |                                                                                          | "Death by Water" compares the Phoenician culture that has grown to greatness and then decayed in materialism and death to the present Judeo-Christian culture of Europe (Gentile and Jew, 1. 319) which is also decaying the same way. |
| V<br><br>Death of God<br>322-366 | What the death of Christ meant to the disciples from Emmaus (Luke 24: 13-35)     | Implied comparison with what the death of God means to modern man.                       |                                                                                                                                                                                                                                        |
| Death of Cultures                |                                                                                  | The state of modern Europe, symbolized by London,                                        |                                                                                                                                                                                                                                        |



|                                                       |                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                              |                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                 |                                                                                                                                                                                    |
|-------------------------------------------------------|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| 367-385                                               |                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                              | <p>is compared to the destruction of previous civilizations (Jerusalem, Athens, Alexandria, Vienna), which all disappeared in violence.</p> <p>Imagery of nightmare and despair.</p>                                                                                                                            |                                                                                                                                                                                    |
| <p>Quest for Permanence &amp; Meaning<br/>386-423</p> | <p>Implied comparison with quest for the Holy Grail (l. 386-391).</p> <p>Implied comparison with the resurrection (l. 392-395)</p> <p>The origin of Indo-European civilization in the Hindu revelation. (The voice of God in Himavant) (l. 396-423)</p>                                                                                      | <p>Chapel, symbol of the sacred, abandoned by the modern world.</p> <p>The cock singing and signs of rain (fertility)</p> <p>Modern man needs this revelation to survive. Failure of the quest for the meaning of existence.</p>                                                                                |                                                                                                                                                                                    |
| <p>Finale<br/>424-434</p>                             | <p>The quotations in various languages, suggesting the confusion of tongues of the Tower of Babel, the end of an era, imply man's desire for a glorious culture (London before the falling down), for a sense of purification in suffering (<i>foco che gli affina</i>), for spiritual transformation (<i>quando fiam uti chelidon</i>),</p> | <p>The modern quester in the sterile modern world waiting for life to come back, and trying to save what he can from destruction. The quester can achieve peace of mind by accepting to live in a time of confusion of values and sterility (both physical and spiritual), knowing it is part of the normal</p> | <p>This finale to the whole poem is made up of bits and pieces from past literary works implying the fragmentary (Tower of Babel) conception of the world at the present time.</p> |