

Thomas Stearns Eliot

(TS Eliot)

Details of Eliot

- Born: 26 September 1888 (St Louis, US)
- Died: 4 January 1965 (London, England)
- American English poet, playwright, literary critic, a leader of the modernist movement in poetry
- 1948: Awarded the Nobel Prize for Literature
- Graduated from: Harvard
- 1911-14: Back to Harvard to study Indian philosophy and Sanskrit
- 1914: Met Ezra Pound and moved to England

His Career

- Taught for a year
- Briefly worked as a clerk in Lloyds Bank Ltd, London

1922-39: Editor of *The Criterion*

1920-1965: Director/ Working editor of publishing house, Faber & Faber Ltd

Eliot's private life

1915: married Vivian Haigh-Wood; after 1933
she was mentally ill, and they lived separately;
she died in 1947

1957-1965: married and lived with Valerie
Fletcher

Literary works

- 1917: First important publication: ‘The Love Song of J Alfred Prufrock’ (*Prufrock and Other Observations*)
- 1919: Published *Poems*, containing ‘Gerontion’ (a meditative interior monologue in blank verse)

Literary Works (cont.)

- 1922: The Waste Land; in 5 parts; proceeds on a principle of ‘rhetorical discontinuity’ (rhetorical critics examine the structure, forms, devices and organization of a text and attempt to correlate these elements with the effects produced) reflecting the fragmented experience of the 20th century sensibility of the great modern cities of the west.

Eliot's work as a critic

- 1920: *The Sacred Wood* (essays) discuss the poet and tradition and introduce two phrases that were much discussed later in critical theory – **objective correlative** (in the essay, ‘Hamlet and His Problems’ – ‘a set of objects, a situation, a chain of events which shall be the formula of that particular emotion; such that when the external facts, which must terminate in sensory experience, are given, the emotion is immediately evoked.’) and **dissociation of sensibility**

Dissociation of sensibility

A phrase he invented to explain the change that came over English poetry after John Donne and Andrew Marvell (Essay, ‘The Metaphysical Poets’ – a result of the natural development of poetry (the direct sensuous apprehension of thought, like the odour of a rose) was lost by later poets. This Eliot termed as **dissociation of sensibility**

His short books (long essays)

1929: *Dante*

1931: *Thoughts after Lambeth*

1939: *The Idea of a Christian Society*

1948: *Notes Towards the Definition of Culture*

* These books proposed the view that whether a work is poetry must be decided by literary standards, whether it is great poetry must be decided by standards higher than the literary

Eliot's masterpiece work (Poem)

1943: The Four Quartets (each quartet is a complete poem)

His plays

1932: Sweeney Agonistes

1950: The Cocktail Party (poetic drama)

1935: Murder in the Cathedral

The Waste Land

First published in *The Criterion* in 1922

Next published in New York, *The Dial*

Finally in book form by Eliot with footnotes

- Dedicated to fellow poet Ezra Pound
- 433 line poem, in 5 parts
- Title and symbols in the poem suggested by Miss Jessie L Weston”

The Waste Land (Title)

- Eliot originally considered titling the poem *He do the Police in Different Voices*.
- In the end, the title Eliot chose was *The Waste Land*. In his first note to the poem he attributes the title to Jessie L Weston's book on the Grail legend, *From Ritual to Romance*. The allusion is to the wounding of the Fisher King and the subsequent sterility of his lands; to restore the King and make his lands fertile again, the Grail questor must ask, "What ails you?"
- A poem strikingly similar in theme and language called *Waste Land* by Madison Cawein, published in 1913 in *Poetry*.¹

The Waste Land (The poem)

- Fragmentary pieces of writings
- Loosely linked by the legend of the search for the Grail
- Portrays a sterile world of panicky fears and barren lusts
- Human beings waiting for some sign or promise of redemption
- Depiction of spiritual emptiness in the secularised city; the decay of the eternal city
- Heroic past contrasted with the degraded present

5 parts of The Waste Land

- I: *The Burial of the Dead*, introduces the diverse themes of disillusionment and despair.
- II: *A Game of Chess*, employs vignettes (short piece of writing) of several characters—alternating narrations—that address those themes experientially.
- III: *The Fire Sermon*, offers a philosophical meditation in relation to the imagery of death and views of self-denial in juxtaposition influenced by Augustine of Hippo and eastern religions.
- IV: *Death by Water* Includes a brief lyrical petition
- V: *What the Thunder Said*, concludes with an image of judgment.

Style of The Waste Land

- Made up of a wide variety of voices (sometimes in monologue, dialogue, or with more than two characters speaking).
- Marked by hundreds of allusions and quotations from other texts
- Disjointed structure, indicative of the Modernist style of James Joyce's Ulysses (which Eliot cited as an influence and which he read the same year that he was writing *The Waste Land*).
- In the Modernist style, Eliot jumps from one voice or image to another without clearly delineating these shifts
- Includes phrases from multiple foreign languages (Latin, Greek, Italian, German, French and Sanskrit)

Quotes in The Waste Land from

1. Homer
2. Sophocles
3. Petronius
4. Virgil
5. Ovid
6. Saint Augustine of Hippo
7. Dante Aligheri
8. William Shakespeare

Quotes in The Waste Land from

9. Edmund Spenser
10. Gerard de Nerval
11. Thomas Middleton
12. John Webster
13. Joseph Conrad
14. John Milton
15. Charles Baudelaire
16. Richard Wagner

Quotes in The Waste Land from

18. Oliver Goldsmith

19. Hermann Hesse

20. Aldous Huxley

21. Paul Verlaine

22. Walt Whitman

23. Bram Stoker

Scriptural writings in The Waste Land

- Eliot also makes extensive use of Scriptural writings including the *Bible*, *the Book of Common Prayer*
- the Hindu *Brihadaranvaka Upanishad*
- The Buddha's *Fire Sermon*

Cultural and anthropological studies in The Waste Land

- Sir James Frazer's *The Golden Bough*
- Jessie Weston's *From Ritual to Romance*

Symbols in The Waste Land

- Waste Land
- The Fisher King
- The Tarot Deck
- The Chapel perilous
- The Grail quest

Famous quotes from The Waste Land

- “April is the cruellest month”
- “I will show you fear in a handful of dust”
- “Shantih shantih shantih”
- Da, Datta, Dayadhvam, Damyata

“April is the cruelest month”

- “cruel” seems not to agree with the idea of spring (expressed in the metonymical “April”), which we associate with the positive attribute of life. For Empson, such ambiguities can be chalked up to the complexity of reality, the conflicted psyche of the poet, or error of expression.
- What makes April cruel in the poem (among other things) is that the hope of new life that spring evokes is, at least for Eliot at the time, always temporal. Unfulfilled hope is the worst sort of pain, and the speaker of the poem initially claims that it is preferable to live in winter, covered in “forgetful snow.”

“I will show you fear in a handful of dust”

- the how people fear what happens after death. It reminds me of the bible quote, "For dust thou art, and unto dust shalt thou return."

“Shantih shantih shantih”

- The Peace which passeth understanding”
- Inner peace, refers to a state of being mentally and spiritually at peace, with enough knowledge and understanding to keep oneself strong in the face of discord or stress
- Ksanti, one of the paramitas of Buddhism

Da, Datta, Dayadhvam, Damyata (V- What the Thunder Said)

- For men, “Da” becomes “Datta,” meaning to give; this order is meant to curb man’s greed. For demons, “dayadhvam” is the dictum: these cruel and sadistic beings must show compassion and empathy for others. Finally, the gods must learn control – “damyata” – for they are wild and rebellious. Together, these three orders add up to a consistent moral perspective, composure, generosity, and empathy lying at the core.