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**T.S. Eliot's *The Waste Land***

T.S. Eliot created a literary masterpiece in his world-renowned poem *The Waste Land*; in 433-lines Eliot created a political statement, which pertains to the past, present, and future of society. It appears Eliot composed *The Waste Land* in the hopes that society would question itself and the direction the modern world was taking. In Eliot's opinion, the modern world appears to have lost its moral compass, with people no longer comprehending one another never learning from mistakes made in the past, and digging themselves further into both physical and spiritual desolation. To establish this viewpoint, Eliot employs allusions to other works of literature that had also attempted to make a political statement, such as Dante's *The Divine Comedy*. Eliot extracted various allusions from what may be considered the oldest piece of literature in history, the Bible. The use of these allusions complicates *The Waste Land*, making it difficult to divulge the meaning of the work as a whole. It appears that Eliot purposefully did not restrict himself to employing works from any certain time period or region in order to overwhelm the reader and enlighten him or her to his opinion that the modern world is moving towards desolation unless it unites, finds a common ground, and with it finds the straight path that appears to have been lost.

Choosing to begin *The Waste Land* in April automatically creates a connection with Christianity and the dying and resurrection of Christ as Chaucer did in the opening of his general prologue to *The Canterbury Tales*. If Eliot is making a statement about the spiritual desolation of the modern world, the biblical allusions chosen by Eliot would reasonably compliment that statement and make the reader aware of the guilt Eliot believes mankind should feel for

forgetting what has been done for him by Christ's suffering. In part one, Eliot employs two biblical allusions within less than five lines of each other. The first, from Ezekiel 2.1 serves as a reminder that the "Son of man" (line 20) was created to watch over the world, but instead has created "a heap of broken images," (line 22) that cannot fulfill and protect him. Eliot then connects what man has done to the world to the consequences he will now have to endure, just as Ecclesiastes 12.5 is "devoted to the old age and decline of the world when it is discovered that 'all is vanity'" (pg. 5). These two allusions set the stage for the biblically themed meaning of the remainder of the poem. Christ suffered for man to be saved, and now, through the complications of the modern world, man has forgotten that gift. At the conclusion of the poem, Eliot employs one of the most well known pictures in the Bible as his final allusion to the great work, and that is the betrayal, crucifixion and resurrection of Christ that shook the world in Matthew 27. He does this in lines 322-327 of part five. It is appropriate for this to serve as the final allusion to the Bible because it serves to establish not only what Christ did for man, but also parallels the hypothetical earthquake man is creating that will result in death; according to Eliot that death will occur "with little patience."

I cannot do Eliot justice if I do not take the time to mention his ability to not only span across all time periods, but he also does not limit himself in the type of audience his work can reach. Although the biblical allusions I mentioned above appear to me, a Christian, to be the most prominent of religious allusions in the poem, I do recognize various allusions to other works that extend the poem's audience to include the people of different religions such, as Buddhism and Hinduism. For example, part three of the poem, "The Fire Sermon," is taken directly from a sermon preached by Buddha. The notes to *The Waste Land* inform the reader that this sermon was "making a statement against the things of this world," (pg. 11). The Norton

Critical Edition provides a text of the translated “Fire Sermon”; the sermon focuses on what has caused the world to catch fire and states that it is the fire of passion, hatred, infatuation, birth, old age, death, and despair. Therefore, Eliot not only extends his audience, but also unveils a deeper meaning to the poem to the reader who chooses to do his research. It is my belief that, with the title of a section Eliot makes clear his belief that the things of this world have corrupted man.

T.S. Eliot also drew heavily from Dante. In [Allusions to Dante] from Eliot’s “What Dante Means to Me,” Eliot states he made the use of Dante “in the attempt to reproduce, or rather arouse in the reader’s mind the memory, of some Dantesque scene and... establish a relationship between the medieval inferno and the modern world,” (pg. 113). It can be argued that the largest drawing from Dante’s *Inferno* is Eliot’s renaming of London as the “Unreal City” in lines 60 and 208. In the time of Dante, the unreal city would have been speculated to be Florence due to Dante’s heavy allusions to Florence’s pop culture of the time and corruptions that had or were occurring in the city. Eliot appears to make the same connection Dante achieved with Florence to the new world power of the modern world. The city of London is present throughout the poem. This would be because Dante recognized London as the leading city, and saw it was heading in the same direction as Florence did in the 1300s. The most powerful allusion pertaining to both London, the “Unreal City,” and the *Inferno* occurs in line 63 as a crowd of people is depicted walking over the London Bridge and it is stated just as it was in the *Inferno* that the speaker “had not thought death had undone so many.” According to “Eliot on *The Waste Land*,” Eliot intended it to be explicitly clear that he was in fact making an allusion and parallel between Dante’s city and contemporary London. Eliot tells the reader that he must recognize the allusion or “he would have missed the point” (pg. 113).

In addition to his small allusions to various works throughout the poem, Eliot creates images and allusions in the reader's mind that continue throughout. One example would be the allusion to the Tower of Babel from Genesis. The first argument one might give to state that the poem is a parody to the Babel legend is that Eliot employed the different works from all areas of the globe and literature to use as a modern day, complex lesson that would parallel the lesson to be learned from the beginning of the Bible. The story of the Tower of Babel focuses on God's people and the separation spiritually and physically inflicted on them by the creation of different languages. The people can no longer communicate with simplicity. By employing so many allusions, Eliot has purposefully made *The Waste Land* a work that is too difficult to decipher in one sitting, and some would argue it is impossible to ever draw the complete meaning of the text if one focuses too much on the use and reason behind the various allusions to literature. Again, Eliot would have done this purposefully, and similarly to his allusions to Dante, he would have intended the reader to understand. This is why he chose to use the various languages, such as German, French, and Italian. Employing the different languages would have drawn well-educated scholars to consider the Tower of Babel and if they dove in deeper they would likely conclude the same thing about the reason behind the various works.

Who is the speaker of *The Waste Land*? I strongly stand behind the hypothesis that Tiresias is the speaker throughout the poem although he is only named in part three. Eliot states in his notes to line 218 that Tiresias is the "most important personage in the poem, uniting all the rest," and that "what Tiresias sees... is the substance of the poem," (pg. 23). But why is this the case? I see it as a play on Ovid's character of Tiresias that will not only unite all parts of *The Waste Land*, but will also provide enlightenment to the meaning of the poem. In the story, Jove and Juno argue about the viewpoints of men and women concerning love. Unable to reach an

agreement, they chose to consult Tiresias because he would know both sides from his experience as a man and woman in parts of his life. After experiencing life as both a man and woman Tiresias chose to live life as a man, and therefore took Jove's side in the argument. Out of rage Juno blinded Tiresias. However, the Lord took pity on his state and gave him the gift of foresight. It is this gift that would make Tiresias the perfect "character" in Eliot's *The Waste Land*, if Eliot were in fact setting out to make a political statement on the future of the world. In part three Tiresias reveals himself to the reader with a forecast that would send chills up anyone's arms just as the original fire sermon did when first heard. Its purpose is to enlighten the listener or in the text's case the reader to the burning and destruction that will occur in the world if corruption continues. Tiresias says he has "foresuffered all" (line 243). Meaning he remembers the mistakes of the past and the outcomes the people had to suffer. And now he "looks" at the city of London and perceives the same desolation, and burning. Is there hope for the world? Tiresias appears to believe so, depending on how the reader comprehends part five of *The Waste Land* which begins with an allusion to Matthew 27 and the arrest, death, and resurrection of Christ when he suffered all so that the world could be saved from sin. Again I will state that it is Eliot's purpose to remind the reader of this fact. But if *The Waste Land* is in fact Tiresias foreseeing the future of the world then a reader can be left with hope. The last line "Shantih shantih shantih," (line 433), which translated today means "the peace that passes all understanding" is a common phrase of hope to Christians that the world will find peace and the corruptions of the world will one day come to an end.

Eliot employed various works to make a statement to the modern world. He was concerned with the path the world was taking and *The Waste Land* portrays that fear by bringing together many sources to allude to two major works of history, the Tower of Babel and the great

seer Tiresias, that would demonstrate to the reader of *The Waste Land* that the world was moving in the direction of destruction. A reader of the poem today should take a step back and look at it from a different perspective in order to fully comprehend why *The Waste Land* is fully relevant today. I think it is not too strong a statement to say that the readers of the poem from Eliot's time perhaps did not learn their lesson, and the world has spun into further desolation and distance from each other. Is New York City the next "Unreal City?" What would Eliot write now, and would the poem end with the hope that peace will pass all understanding?