

Teaching Poetry: Introducing a Contextual and Textual Approach to Undergraduate Students

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ABSTRACT: Undergraduate students of English find poetry particularly challenging as it requires a knowledge of rhyming patterns, metre and diction. T.S. Eliot's *The Waste Land* (1922) is one of the most famous poems in the English language. It is also one of the most difficult to analyse. As a foundation text of Modernism, it presents special challenges for students due to the complexity of its language, allusions and images. I introduce two contrasting methods of analysis: contextual, in which I apply historical criticism to the poem, and textual, where I demonstrate the advantages of New Critical close reading. In the course of my analysis of *The Waste Land*, I provide guidelines for analysis and research. Some of the most important Eliot critics are also mentioned in order to suggest topics for research as well as class discussions.

Keywords: *The Waste Land*, Historical Criticism, New Criticism, Close Reading, Modernism, World War One.

La enseñanza de la poesía: introducción a un enfoque contextual y textual para estudiantes de Grado

RESUMEN: Para los estudiantes universitarios de inglés, estudiar poesía es un reto importante que requiere conocimientos de patrones de rima, metro y dicción. *The Waste Land* es T.S. Eliot es uno de los poemas más representativos de la lengua inglesa, a la vez que es uno de los más difíciles de analizar. Como texto base del Modernismo, presenta retos de análisis por la complejidad de su lenguaje, sus referencias e imágenes. En este artículo, se presentan dos métodos de análisis diferentes: un análisis contextual por medio del Criticismo Histórico, y otro textual, en el que se demuestran las ventajas de una lectura analítica basada en el Nuevo Criticismo. Al analizar *The Waste Land* se darán orientaciones para el análisis y la investigación. Se mencionarán algunos de los críticos más importantes de Eliot con el fin de proponer temas para la investigación, así como para el debate en el aula.

Palabras clave: *The Waste Land*; *Critica histórica*; *New Criticism* (*La Nueva Critica*); *lectura analítica* *Modernismo*: *Primera Guerra Mundial*.

1. INTRODUCTION

For undergraduate students with little experience of literary analysis, poetry is often regarded as a greater challenge than prose, as it requires not only an ability to identify structure, themes, tone and point of view but also a knowledge of rhyming patterns, metre and diction. As with all kinds of literature, poetry can be analysed in many different ways: from a biographical, psychological, reader-response or Marxist perspective, to name but a few. My article discusses two contrasting methods: the first, contextual (historical) and the second, textual (New Critical). I show how these two approaches can help students understand and appreciate one of the best-known and most complex Modernist poems in the English language: T.S. Eliot's *The Waste Land* (1922).¹ I discuss Eliot's poem in the context of Modernism and the disillusionment of post-World-War-One Britain. With the aid of New Critical theory, I show that a focus on structure, contrasts and allusions enables students to identify the critical features of a poem. I begin with a short introduction to historical criticism and New Criticism. This is followed by a brief overview of the nature and implications of meaning in the context of poetry. After a short overview of the complete poem, I focus on parts I and V. These are compared from a contextual and textual perspective in order to demonstrate that Eliot's poem can be read as a series of fragments (historical criticism) or as a unity (New Criticism).² My analysis is intended to act as a model for students and teachers. It can be extended and modified according to students' level of knowledge and skill in analysing literary texts. Suggestions for further reading are also provided in the main text and the footnotes.

2. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK: HISTORICAL CRITICISM AND NEW CRITICISM

2.1. Historical criticism

Historical criticism is popular among students. It seeks direct connections between historical events and works. As the critic reconstructs the past and understands the historical context of a work, s/he is able to see more clearly through the lens of the author's time (Lynn, 2001:23).³ Historical criticism considers how military, social, cultural, economic, scientific, intellectual, literary and (potentially) every other kind of history might help us to understand both the author and the work.⁴ Historical critics work with

¹ All references to this poem are taken from T. S. Eliot, *The Waste Land and Other Poems* (1972). London: Faber and Faber.

² For a book-length example of how the two views of the poem can be combined, see Marianne Thormählen, (1978). *The Waste Land. A Fragmentary Wholeness*. Lund: Gleerup.

³ Steven Lynn's (2001) *Texts and Contexts. Writing About Literature with Critical Theory* (New York and London: Longman) is an excellent introduction to the most common literary theories. It provides guidelines on how to apply the different theories and discusses practice texts. Lynn's book also provides comprehensive suggestions for further reading.

⁴ This position has been challenged by the so-called new historicists, who argue that history is related by others and thus not available in any pure or objective form. While I accept this limitation, I hope to show

three kinds of sources: written documents, unwritten evidence and tradition. By comparing accounts, the historical critic attempts to come as close to «the truth» as possible in order to understand the purpose, content and form of the literary text. I demonstrate how an understanding of the literary and historical contexts of Eliot's *The Waste Land* enables students to appreciate one of the most important features of Eliot's poem namely, its fragmentary and dark nature.

2.2. New Criticism

New Criticism, which is not «new» but emerged in the 1930s, represented a challenge to historicists because it posited the idea that the real concern of the critic is the text itself: a poem is an independent verbal object which exists for its own sake. It is isolated from its context and effects. One of the most valuable contributions which New Criticism has made to literary studies is «close reading» or explication, a technique which is fundamental to all literary students of prose and poetry alike. The New Critic analyses the interrelations and multiple meanings of the different elements of a text. Attention is paid to images, symbols, repetitions, contradictions, contrasts and other literary devices. New Critics see a text as a unity with a message. This unity may be created by opposition, contrast and ambiguity. As teachers of New Criticism, we must help students analyse the origin, nature and effect of the poem's unity.

2.3. Introductory questions for students

Before applying the above two literary theories to Eliot's poem it is important for students to consider the following questions: how far is it possible to render transparent and available to rational understanding a linguistic object which, though it contains numerous statements, makes no rational claims? *How* does a text mean? What in a text is irreducible to history or society? (Ayers, 2004: 12-13). While poetry highlights the physical dimension of words in as much as they are traces arranged on a page, it also consists of signification, of signs that in some fashion stand for something else, refer to some experience or fact according to an at least partially common code (Ayers, 2004: 17). Language is not only speaking, it is hearing. «Language speaks. Man speaks in that he responds to language. This responding is a hearing. It hears because it listens to the command of stillness» (Heidegger, 2004: 210). Modernist poetry is aware of the importance of hearing in poetry. It is thus important that while students explore the contributions of textual and contextual theories to their understanding of the poem, they do not neglect to listen to the work itself, to its sounds and rhythms. For reasons of space, the element of sound is not included in the following analysis. It should, however, be an important part of classroom discussions.

that historical criticism still has a special contribution to make to students' understanding of a poem by identifying salient ideas, values and events. For further information on the importance of historical criticism and new historicism in students' understanding of literary texts, see Raman Seldon, (1989). *Practising Theory and Reading Literature. An Introduction* (New York: Harvester Wheatsheaf), 94-99; Steven Lynn, (2001). *Texts and Contexts. Writing About Literature with Critical Theory*, 123-134.

3. THE STRUCTURE OF THE POEM

Before providing a detailed analysis, students must consider the structure of a text. As a poem about «the predicament of modern man in the midst of lost meanings» (Rosenthal, 1965: 81), *The Waste Land* is preoccupied with death and destruction. This is indicated by the titles of the five parts: «The Burial of the Dead», «A Game of Chess», «The Fire Sermon», «Death by Water», and «What the Thunder Said». The opening lines of part I, «April is the cruellest month», are among the best known in the poem. By inverting Geoffrey Chaucer's optimistic view in the prologue to *The Canterbury Tales*,⁵ Eliot makes it clear that this is a poem of decline and disintegration. Students should note the frequent references to death and destruction as a result of World War One which set the tone of the poem. The modern city is portrayed as a sterile construction created by the civilised world, a place in which the living are already dead.

In part II, «A Game of Chess», students should focus on the shift of attention from death to sex. The title of this section is taken from Thomas Middleton's Elizabethan play *Women Beware Women*, in which the moves of a chess game between two people are linked to the seduction played out by another pair. The presence of aphrodisiacs, linked to sexual desire and procreation, tells the reader that civilisation is losing its fertility. Students should pay special attention to the subject of fertility which returns in the final episode, where Lil is warned that when her husband returns from the Great War, he will be disappointed because his wife has failed to fix her bad teeth and has generally allowed her appearance to deteriorate since her abortion. The repetition of «HURRY UP PLEASE IT'S TIME» indicates the urgency of the situation, emphasised by the use of capital letters.

The third part of the poem, «The Fire Sermon», also addresses sex. The title is taken from Buddha's teachings about desire and the need to curb one's lustful tendencies. The «unreal city», i.e. the modern city, is associated with clandestine homosexuality. Students should note the repeated references to failed relationships. The section ends with the one-word line «burning», an exhortation to douse the fires of love.

The fourth part, «Death by Water», is the shortest of the five. It tells the story of the death of Phlebas, a Phoenician sailor, whose body was torn apart by the sea. The final line encourages readers to remember Phlebas, «who was once handsome and tall as you» (ll. 321-2). In this part of the poem, students should be encouraged to see how narrative can act as a warning to those who are willing and trained to listen.

The final part of the poem, «What the Thunder Said», builds on the images of death and sterility in the previous parts but also offers hope. The title of part V derives from an Indian fertility legend in which men, gods and devils find the power to restore life to the wasteland by listening to what the thunder has to say. According to the Indian legend, men, gods and devils ask the thunder the same question and each receives a different answer: «give», «sympathise», and «control», respectively. Each response is

⁵ Eliot refers here to the first lines of the Prologue to Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales*:

«Whan that aprill with his shoures soote
The droghte of march hath perced to the roote,
And bathed every veyne in swich licourne
Of which vertu engendred is the flour.»

See section 4.2 «New Criticism» for a discussion of these lines.

followed by several lines representing the answers of the thunder. While critics disagree as to whether these responses are pessimistic or optimistic, they are generally thought to offer some kind of a solution as to how to restore life to the modern wasteland. Part V offers an excellent opportunity for student debate on the values of modern life. Students may also be asked to consider if the poem offers a pessimistic or an optimistic view of life.

4. TWO FORMS OF CONTEXT

Incorporated under the heading of context are the historical and literary frameworks of the work to be analysed. In the case of T.S. Eliot's *The Waste Land*, the Modernist movement and the events of World War One are of primary importance. Modernism and the war are complementary components of the cultural conditions which produced Eliot's poem. Some important characteristics of the movement are outlined in the following to indicate productive routes of enquiry for students. Modernism encompasses the activities and productions of artists – writers, painters and musicians – who felt that traditional forms of art, architecture, literature, religious faith, social organisation and daily life were becoming outmoded in the new economic, social and political conditions of the modern, i.e. late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century industrialised world. Modernism rejected the certainty of Enlightenment thinking and questioned the existence of a compassionate, omnipotent Creator. It was both reactionary and revolutionary as it viewed the past as different to the modern age: the world had become more complex, and the old authorities such as God, government, science and reason were subjected to intense critical scrutiny.

For the Modernist poet, the poetic image was the essential vehicle of aesthetic communication, and myth was a characteristic structural principle.⁶ *The Waste Land* is a foundation text of Modernism: it is fragmented and full of unrelated slices of imagery which combine to confuse the reader and present a pile of broken images.⁷ As I hope to demonstrate, however, it is possible for students to make meaning out of fragmentation and dislocation by understanding the context – literary and historical – which has produced these images (historical criticism), and by studying the symbolic qualities of the images and language (New Criticism).

It is essential for students to understand the main principles of Modernism when studying *The Waste Land*. The movement was a response to the death and destruction of World War One (1914-18), the first modern war of the industrialised world. World War One resulted in the deaths of ten million soldiers, doctors, nurses and other ranks (Sherry, 2005:1). Few understood why they were fighting. By the end of 1918, the resources – human, economic, mental and emotional – of the major nation states of

⁶ For further reading on Modernism, see Harold Rosenberg (1994). *The Tradition of the New*; Frank Kermode (1990). *Modern Essays*; B. Bergonzi (ed.) (1968). *Innovations: Essays on Art and Ideas*; M. Bradbury and J.M. McFarlane (eds.) (1976). *Modernism: A Guide to European Literature 1890-1930*.

⁷ Louis Menand discusses T.S. Eliot's place in literary modernism. He argues that Eliot correctly analysed the contradictions inherent in Modernist thought and transformed these into literary opportunities, of which *The Waste Land* is an excellent example. See Louis Menand (2007). *Discovering Modernism. T.S. Eliot and His Context*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Europe and North America were exhausted. Technological and scientific progress led to mass destruction of hitherto unimagined proportions. The war had transformed Europe: the Hohenzollern, Romanov, Habsburg, and Vaheddin (Ottoman) dynasties were gone. They were replaced by Bolshevism, authoritarianism, the beginnings of fascism, and fragile democracies. As one historian has expressed it:

The infrastructure of Europe lay in shambles, and the economies of the continent were in a precarious state. Perhaps worst of all, the emotional scars resulting from so much death and destruction could not heal because Europeans were ill equipped to understand and treat such trauma (Neiberg, 2005: 362-3).

The western front symbolised the horror of the war. It is estimated that approximately one third of Allied casualties were sustained at the front. Stretching 700 kilometres from the Belgian coast to the Swiss border, the conditions for the soldiers were appalling: mud, rats, and lice abounded. The boredom of the stalemate was almost unbearable.⁸ The conditions were immortalised in the engravings of Otto Dix (1891-1969)⁹ and the paintings of Paul Nash (1889-1946).¹⁰ As a useful background to Eliot's poem, students should consult the internet sites referred to in footnotes 8, 9 and 10.

The war produced a period of doubt followed by a flight from reality. Part of this flight was a desire for newness, which became «a universal preoccupation in the west after the war, [and was] accepted by socialists and conservatives, atheists and fundamentalists, hedonists and realists» (Eksteins, 2000: 257). The Modernists were part of the demand for newness in the cultural sphere. Eliot expresses this sentiment in the first four lines of *The Waste Land*:

April is the cruellest month, breeding
Lilacs out of the dead land, mixing
Memory and desire, stirring
Dull roots with spring rain (The Burial of the Dead, ll. 1-4)

Memory is no longer enough by the 1920s. Desire is associated with regeneration. It does not require that one forgets, but it presupposes and embodies a need to start afresh.

In addition to the more general works on Modernism listed in footnote 5, students are recommended to read the earlier-mentioned Ayers referred to in section 2.3, whose *Modernism. A Short Introduction* (2004) is a useful introduction to the Modernist movement, and whose second chapter, «T.S. Eliot and Modernist Reading», provides helpful guidelines on reading Eliot's poems. Students should also read Louis Menand's *Discovering Modernism. T.S. Eliot and His Context* (2007), especially the introduction and part I, «The Literary Object». While Ayers emphasises that however diverse modernist texts are, they are linked by concerns

⁸ See <http://www.firstworldwar.com/features/trenchlife.htm>; <http://www.anzacday.org.au/history/ww1/overview/west.html> for descriptions of life in the trenches. These sites feature photographs and links to film footage. Accessed 4 March 2010.

⁹ See <http://www.art-ww1.com/gb/texte/099text.html> for a short description of Otto Dix's most famous painting of the war, his triptych. Accessed 2 March 2010.

¹⁰ See <http://collection.britishcouncil.org/collection/artist/5/18421> for examples of Nash's paintings. Accessed 2 March 2010.

about social modernisation and the role of art and the artist, Menand proposes a new understanding of Eliot's place in literary modernism. Menand's book contains useful historical and theoretical analyses which highlight the importance of nineteenth-century thinking in Eliot's work (see footnote 7). The different approaches suggested by Ayers and Menand are a useful basis for classroom discussion. Students should be encouraged to consider the implications of the different perspectives for understanding Eliot's poem.

4.1. Historical criticism

One of the best-known historical critics of Eliot's poem is Lawrence Rainey, whose annotated edition of *The Waste Land* is an excellent source of information on the genesis of the poem, its printing history and Eliot's textual notes.¹¹ In the following analysis, I focus on aspects of Eliot's poem which are readily accessible to students and for which secondary sources are easily obtainable. Chronology is important in the first part of Eliot's poem, «The Burial of the Dead»: the passing of time is clearly marked. As a Modernist poem, however, images are fragmented and seemingly unrelated. The impact on the reader of such images cannot be properly understood without reference to their historical context. «The Burial of the Dead» portrays a world blown apart by modern technology. The different episodes are flashes of memory which cause the reader to constantly shift attention. By following the flashes in the order in which they appear in the poem, students can uncover the message of the first part of the poem.

In the modern, post-war world of «The Burial of the Dead», the numbness of winter is preferable to the spring. In the first eight lines, spring merges into summer. The reader is reminded of the recently concluded war by the mention in line 8 of Starnbergersee, a lake south of Munich, and Hofgarten (Court Garden, l. 10), in the centre of Munich, Germany. In line 12, the sentence in German expresses the necessity of disclaiming German nationality. After a brief interlude in which Eliot refers to the freedom of the mountains (l.17), the poem returns to the world of darkness and war: «Son of Man / . . . you know only/ a heap of broken images». This is the world portrayed by the earlier mentioned war artists Otto Dix and Paul Nash. It is barren: «the dead tree gives no shelter» (l. 23) and «the dry stone no sound of water» (l. 24). Students should be encouraged to study the poetic scenes alongside Nash's and Dix's paintings¹² and to read memoirs by the great writers of the war, e.g. Edmund Blunden, whose accounts of conditions at the front are not only graphic but also very poetic (see *Undertones of War*, 1989: 77-79).

The nothingness which is the wasteland of post-war Europe is contrasted with the memory of a hyacinth girl (ll. 35-40) with whom the poet seems to have had some kind of

¹¹ Lawrence Rainey (ed.) (2005). *The Annotated Waste Land with Eliot's Contemporary Prose*. Second edition. New Haven and London: Yale University Press. The essays Eliot wrote as he was compiling *The Waste Land* are also included as well as period photographs and a London map of locations cited in the poem.

¹² See, for example, Paul Nash's lithograph «The void of war», reprinted in Edmund Blunden, (1989). *Undertones of War* (inside front cover) and Otto Dix's «Flanders,» <http://www.art-ww1.com/gb/texte/100text.html>. Accessed 6 March 2010.

romantic relationship. Her sudden appearance and disappearance reinforce the Modernist idea of incoherence of time and place. The allusion to *Tristan und Isolde*¹³ in l. 42 draws the reader's attention back to Germany, to the German composer Richard Wagner. Students should consider how the polyphony and dissonance of the opera reminds the reader that there is no harmony to be found in the modern wasteland.¹⁴

After the section on the tarot reader, Madame Sosotris (to be discussed later in relation to New Criticism), the first part of the poem concludes with a portrayal of the «Unreal City», i.e. the modern, post-war city. This is desolate and depopulated, inhabited only by the ghosts of the past. The crowd flowing over London Bridge (l. 62) are part of a waking death and represent those who have died in the war. They are numerous: «I had not thought death had undone so many» (l. 63). Survivors of the war, and especially those who had taken part in major battles such as the Somme (1916), would remember the huge number of casualties – 60,000 alone on the first day of the Battle of the Somme.¹⁵

The poet's discussion with Stetson in the final lines of part I centres on the discussion of a corpse. While Stetson is not directly related to World War One (the reference to «Mylae» in l. 70 refers, in fact, to an ancient battle in the First Punic War), he re-directs the reader's attention towards the number of war casualties. Students should note how the poet underlines the futility of the sacrifices in the reference to the impossibility of corpses «sprouting» new life (l. 72), and the dog who can dig up dead bodies almost as fast as they are buried.

In Part V, students' attention should be focused on the return of the theme of death and destruction: «We who were living are now dying» (l. 329). It is a living death in a barren landscape. Unlike the war-time No Man's Land, however, the sterility derives from dryness rather than water-logged ground. The first half of «What the Thunder Said» builds up to an apocalyptic climax as the sufferers become «hooded hordes swarming/over endless plains» (ll. 368-9). The «bursts in the violet air» (l. 372) are like bombs exploding. They bring down towers, ancient and modern. The very air is cracking with the forces of destruction and «the tumbled graves» (l. 387) are fighting a losing battle with the encroaching grass. As his notes to *The Waste Land* tell us, Eliot connected the «hooded hordes» of l. 368 with the decay of Eastern Europe. The hordes represent the general wasteland of the modern world, particularly with regard to the break-up of Eastern Europe after World War One. The cities of Jerusalem, Athens, Alexandria, Vienna and London are like the London of the first part of the poem, «unreal» and doomed (l. 376).

The Waste Land is written not only against the background of the events of the war itself but also its peace terms. Students wishing to understand the context in which Eliot's poem was written need at least a superficial knowledge of the peace terms and their effects. This is not the place to review these but a useful source is Erik Goldstein's *The First World War Peace Settlements 1919-1925* (2002), which is specially written for

¹³ See <http://www.musicwithtease.com/tristan-isolde-synopsis.html> for a synopsis of the opera. Accessed 1 March 2010.

¹⁴ For excerpts from the opera, see http://video.google.se/videosearch?hl=sv&source=hp&q=tristan+und+isolde&oq=&um=1&ie=UTF-8&ei=MdqQS8TRMYr5-QaF_-WaBg&sa=X&oi=video_result_group&ct=title&resnum=10&ved=0CD0QqwQwCQ.

¹⁵ See, for example, M.S. Neiberg, (2005). *Fighting the Great War. A Global History*, 188-202.

students.¹⁶ Students should consider the harsh terms of the Treaty of Versailles and how these served to fuel discontent among the defeated nations. The Soviet Union was excluded from the League of Nations because of the prevailing hostility towards communism. Germany, as the principal former enemy, was also excluded from the League until 1926. The new order was further weakened by economic crisis. The pre-war trading economy could not be fully revived. Between 1919 and 1924, Russia, France, Germany, Austria and Hungary collapsed. Bank accounts and paper assets became worthless. As a result, broad sections of the European middle class, in Eastern Europe in particular, became dispossessed. There was a legacy of bitterness in Europe that fuelled the growth of right-wing politics, particularly in Eastern Europe. As students read about the historical context of Eliot's poem, they should consider how the physical barrenness of Eliot's wasteland was paralleled by the political, social and economic paucity of the participating nations in World War One. With the growth of radical nationalist and socialist policy symbolised by the emergence of fascism in Italy and Germany, Eastern Europe had become a direct target of Nazi expansion and rule. A number of countries, including Romania, Hungary, and Bulgaria, started to model themselves on the Fascist totalitarian model. Eliot's poem describes «cracks and reforms» which threaten to prolong the misery caused by the war, particularly in Eastern Europe.¹⁷

4.2. New Criticism

New Criticism offers students an opportunity to analyse the text of Eliot's poem without reference to its historical context. New and exciting interpretations are made possible by an all-textual approach. Cleanth Brooks was one of the first critics to apply New Criticism to *The Waste Land*. Brooks' views are printed in «*The Waste Land: An Analysis*» in the Norton Critical Edition of *The Waste Land* (2001). Students and teachers are recommended to read this essay, which discusses the sources and meaning of the symbols and myths in the poem, and in particular, the influence of Jessie Weston's *From Ritual to Romance* (1997).¹⁸ In the following, I focus on the theme and structure of *The Waste Land* and show how these are supported by contrasts. By comparing parts I and V, I demonstrate how students may discover «a fragmentary wholeness» which lends some kind of unity to the poem.

As F.O. Matthiessen¹⁹ and Cleanth Brooks have already noted, the theme of *The Waste Land* is death-in-life, sterile *degeneration* which demonstrates the need for regeneration. It is Tiresias, who appears in part III («The Fire Sermon», l. 218) who

¹⁶ See especially chapters 3 and 5.

¹⁷ For a further discussion of Eliot's *The Waste Land* and the prevailing situation in Eastern Europe, see Matthew Hart (2007). «Visible Poet: T.S. Eliot and Modernist Studies», *American Literary History*, 19, 1: 174-189.

¹⁸ This is a landmark of anthropological and mythological scholarship which explores the Grail legend, uniting its folkloric and Christian elements. T.S. Eliot acknowledged the importance of Jessie Weston's work in his poem. J.L. Weston, (1997). *From Ritual to Romance*. New York : Dover Publications.

¹⁹ *The Achievement of T.S. Eliot*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1935. Matthiessen analyses extensive parts of *The Waste Land* from a New Critical perspective.

unites the different parts of the poem. Students should be encouraged to consider why Tiresias, a mere spectator and not a character, is the most important personage in the poem. As Eliot explains in his notes, «[w]hat Tiresias *sees*, in fact, is the substance of the poem» (*T.S. Eliot, The Waste Land*, 1972: 42). Since Tiresias is blind, he represents the eye of the mind. It is the inner reality which subsists through all the experience that he *sees*, uniting past and present, the characters in the poem and the «I» who is its mouthpiece.²⁰

Students should study the structure of the poem and how it is built up of contrasts, the most prominent of which is the series of scenes from modern life set against the memories of the myths related in *From Ritual to Romance* and even J.G. Frazer's *The Golden Bough* (1922). The contrasts are supported by suggestions evoked by Eliot's vast store of literary allusions. The poem contains dramatic contrasts of mood. The epigraph is important in understanding the poem. Drawn from the *Satyricon* of Petronius, it derides the heroic past and refers to the Cumaean Sibyl, a famous prophetess to whom Apollo granted a life of as many years as she had grains of dust in her hand. She forgot, however, to ask for eternal youth, and gradually shrivelled to nothing. The speaker in the epigraph claims to have seen her, hanging in a jar. When her acolytes ask her: «What do you want?» she replies, «I want to die». As Elisabeth Drew (1922) points out, the quotation reflects both the scornful attitude of the contemporary world towards tradition, and the despairing death-wish which forms part of the poem's emotional pattern (68). Part V, «What the Thunder Said», is the opposite, a conclusion which posits a different form of questioning about life resulting in the recognition of a peace which surpasses understanding (l. 433). While this peace is not achieved in the poem, it appears as a possibility, forming a psychic drama which permeates all five parts. In this part of the poem, students should discuss the relationship between the contrasts and the view of life that *The Waste Land* as a whole posits.

The ambivalence of the poet towards the suspension of the life which he is living and a rebirth is illustrated in the first lines of part I, where the normal association of new life with the spring is inverted. April is cruel and does not bring with it the «shoures sweete» of Chaucer's prologue to *The Canterbury Tales*, to which these lines are a direct reference. The possibility of renewal, expressed in «stirring/dull roots» (ll. 3-4) is stifled by a desire to return to the warmth of winter (l. 5). The escape to the mountains is only temporary. The first question of the poem – «what branches grow out of this stony rubbish?» – is answered in terms of doom which echoes the passage in the biblical *Ecclesiastes* addressing the coming of death: «when fears shall be in the way ... and desire shall fail: because man goeth to his long home ... Then shall the dust return to earth as it was» (chapter 12).

The lines which follow are elusive:

²⁰ For a further discussion of this view, see Elisabeth Drew (1949). *T.S. Eliot. The Design of His Poetry*. New York: Charles Scribner's Sons. I am indebted to Elisabeth Drew's analysis of parts I and V of *The Waste Land*.

Only

There is shadow under this red rock
 (Come in under the shadow of this red rock),
 And I will show you something different from either
 Your shadow at morning striding behind you
 Or your shadow at evening rising to meet you;
 I will show you fear in a handful of dust (ll. 24-30)

Students may reflect on the change of mood which has taken place in the first part of the poem as it moves from the parching heat and drought of the desert to hope and a longing for relief and shade; from the mocking invitation to find something different from loneliness and emptiness to the final sardonic revelation of human reality without the shadow giving it the shape of a man: «fear in a handful of dust» (l. 30).

The life-death theme is extended with the appearance of the seer, Madame Sosostris.²¹ The latter is a modern, vulgarised version of Egyptian practisers of magic who professed to control fertility. She is not interested in controlling the sources of life. She fears the police, and the muffled nature of her voice reflects the unclear nature of her message about death by drowning. She does not understand the symbols on the tarot cards and is thus the carrier of neglected meanings. Eliot transforms the traditional pack of cards to suit his own purposes. The drowned sailor is a reference to Shakespeare's *The Tempest* («Those are pearls that were his eyes» is a quotation from Ariel's song). That Madame Sosostris will prove to be right in her predictions of death is a commentary on the failed religious mysticism of the preceding desert section. Students may consider this view in terms of whether the poem offers an optimistic or pessimistic view of life.

The death theme of the poem is related at the end of part I to the horror of life in a modern city. The latter is referred to as «unreal» (l. 60) because it is cut off from both natural and spiritual sources of life and has lost its original identity as a community. It is indeterminate as it is cloaked in a blanket of «brown fog» (l. 61). The figures crossing the bridge resemble those of Dante's Limbo, who were never baptised. In his note to line 63, «I had not thought that death had undone so many», Eliot refers to Book III of Dante's *Inferno*. The reference in Dante's work is immediately followed by the description of one «who made, through cowardice, the great refusal» (Drew, 1949: 73). The final line of part I of *The Wasteland* makes it clear that this refusal encompasses both the hypocrite reader and the poet himself. Students should discuss Eliot's conclusion that everyone is torn between the living death of the wasteland and surrender to the symbolic death which offers hope of rebirth.

Unlike the first part, part V of Eliot's poem centres on inner drama as the mood changes abruptly from hope to despair. The landscape is full of horror, lit only by a flash of lightning and followed by a refreshing «damp gust/bringing rain» (ll. 393-4). While

²¹ For a discussion of the origins of the name «Sosostris» and the functions of the seer, see Burton Blistein (2008). *The Design of the Waste Land*. Maryland: University Press of America, 98-103.

the poem does not end with the coming of the rain, it does offer the possibility of peace at last. To understand part V, it is necessary for students to have some knowledge of the legend of the Chapel Perilous, which is part of the grail legends and is addressed in Chapter XIII of the earlier-mentioned *From Romance to Ritual*.²² According to legend, the chapel is the site of an (unidentified) adventure fraught with extreme peril to life. In the final part of Eliot's poem, Chapel Perilous is reached. However, the events that follow are ambiguous. Students should note that the following lines, quoted earlier in relation to historical criticism, take on a new meaning when analysed from a New Critical perspective:

He who was living is now dead
 We who were living are now dying
 With a little patience (ll. 328-30).

This could be a reference to Christ, who is pictured as no longer alive in the modern world. But it could also be a reference to the time between the death of the god and his resurrection. Students may consider the implications of each of these interpretations. As the protagonist moves towards the Chapel Perilous, s/he travels through a landscape ravaged by extreme drought. The traveller is solitary but there is no peace, only mental torture from «dry sterile thunder without rain» (l. 342). Mysterious and hostile figures «sneer and snarl» (l. 344) as the protagonist trudges along the sandy road.

As already noted in the earlier discussion of «the hooded hordes» (l. 368), Eliot draws attention in this section to the decay of Eastern Europe. This is the birthplace of all the religions of the ancient world. Eliot's note shows that the quotation is taken from Herman Hesse's *Blick ins Chaos*, which describes Eastern Europe in terms of drunken wanderers singing as they walk in a holy madness. Students should focus on the images which create a sense of madness. They should note, for example, that Eliot sets the scene in violet light which represents the twilight of civilisation. The chaos of destruction and nightmarish distortions are so excessive that it is all «[u]nreal» (l. 376). The cities fall as a woman fiddles with her hair and bats crawl down walls. Bells toll and voices sing from «empty cisterns» (l. 384) and «exhausted wells» (ll. 384-5) that had once held the living waters of faith. The voices are like the ghosts that haunted the Chapel Perilous and the Cemetery Perilous of the Grail legends. As Elizabeth Drew argues, these can be associated with «initiation ceremonies into the mystery cults concerned with the attainment of increased spiritual powers» (85). They link with the myths which describe journeys to the underworld. Not all reach the latter. The chapel in Eliot's poem is surrounded by the graves and dry bones of those who have failed in their quest. It is hollow, «only the wind's home» (l. 388). The single sign of life is a cock who crows, heralding the arrival of rain. However, before the latter can arrive, the scene is changed to India.

²² See <http://www.sacred-texts.com/neu/fr/r/fr16.htm> for further details of the different legends concerning the Chapel Perilous and the Cemetery Perilous. Journeys to the Chapel were made in order to recover a dead body or a piece of the altar cloth. Accessed 8 March 2010.

The Indian myth from the Upanishads²³ represents the Supreme Lord of Creation speaking to his offspring. According to these Hindu fables, the thunder «gives», «sympathises» and «controls» through its speech. The reader feels relief because finally s/he is to be offered a measure of consolation: the fragments which bear witness to the destruction and chaos of the earlier parts of the poem are about to be resolved in a climax which offers the hope and reassurance of peace. The Thunder's response is not only an integral part of Eliot's poem but is based on earlier poetry and drama, mostly from the seventeenth century and including Webster's *The White Devil* (l. 407), Dante's *Inferno* (l. 411) and Kyd's *Spanish Tragedy* (l. 431). The use of the term «fit» in l. 431 reinforces the importance of poetry. An archaic term for sections of a poem or play, «fit» is used in Eliot's poem in the sense of «to render into a fit», i.e. to make into poetry. Students should pay special attention to the relationship between narrative and life posited in the final part of the poem.

The first two answers, to «give» and «sympathise», appear to offer little hope as they lead to a prison: «We think of the key, each in his prison/Thinking of the key» (ll. 413-4). However, the third answer, to «control», offers greater potential even if it also implies a degree of dominance, obedience and a surrendering of the self. In the final lines, the reader is assured that, with determination and effort, it is at least theoretically possible to unite the fragments of the post-war world to create a new and better life. The Fisher King of Weston's *From Ritual to Romance* recognises that the best solution to the present situation is to put in order what remains of his kingdom. To do this, he must take care of the «heap of broken images» (l. 22) and the ghosts walking over London Bridge (l. 62) described in part I. This is no mean feat as London Bridge itself is «falling down» (l. 426); it is, however, the only remedy available to the Fisher King. The various allusions in the final lines of the poem have been analysed in many different ways. Students will find examples on the internet²⁴ and in the works cited in the present article. I subscribe to the view presented by Cleanth Brooks, who concludes that what appears to be «meaningless babble, contains the oldest and most permanent truth of the race: Datta. Dayadhvam. Damyata. After this statement comes the benediction: Shantih Shantih Shantih (*The Waste Land*, 1937: 205). The final three words, translated as «peace which passeth understanding», join the alternative world of the Indian myth with the Christian world of the New Testament as it echoes the words of St Paul in his Letter to the Philippians (4:7). We do not need another world: it is sufficient to improve the one we already have.

5. *THE WASTE LAND*: A CHALLENGE, CRITICAL AND DIDACTIC

For nearly one hundred years, critics have tried to answer the question «is *The Waste Land* a series of fragments, disconnected allusions to past events and works

²³ See <http://www.hinduwebsite.com/upaindex.asp> and <http://www.hinduwebsite.com/upanishadindex.asp> for further information on the origins and contents of the Upanishads and the Upanishadic philosophy. Accessed 6 March 2010.

²⁴ See, for example, <http://www.std.com/~raparker/exploring/thewasteland/explore.html> (accessed 6 April 2010) and <http://www.tickey.co.za/poetry/The%20Allusions%20in%20TS%20Eliots%20The%20Waste%20Land.pdf> (accessed 6 April 2010)

reinterpreted within the context of a post-war world, or is it a unified whole, with an identifiable theme and sets of contrasts which serve to reinforce the main ideas and message?» The enormous amount of critical material published on Eliot's poem is a testimony to the complexity of this question. It is nonetheless one which must be asked because it is fundamental to our understanding of the poem and its various allusions. By focusing on the first and last parts of the poem, I have highlighted some of the possibilities for exploration of the poem in the undergraduate classroom, offering suggestions for further reading where appropriate. Historical criticism and New Criticism offer two contrasting and extremely productive starting points for an exploration of one of the most difficult poems in the English language. If we accept the truth of the statement that «[a]ll the critic can offer is suggestions; the reading stays with the reader» (Thormählen, 1978: 17), we have a duty to provide our students with the ability to analyse and make judgements on critics' commentaries; this is best achieved by helping them to become critics themselves. No poem is too difficult if we have the tools with which to read and analyse it. Our journey starts at undergraduate level and continues for as long as we read and think about literature.

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