

ARTHUR & REGENERATION IN T.S. ELIOT'S WASTE LAND

Seth Myers on The Search for Regeneration

T.S. Eliot's *The Waste Land* (1922) is rich in Arthurian imagery as it explores the dimensions of spiritual exhaustion in which Eliot's generation found itself in the wake of "The Great War," World War I. Eliot's second major poem, following *The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock* written seven years prior, was one of the pivotal poems of the twentieth century as well as of modernist poetry. Its influence has been felt far and wide: F. Scott Fitzgerald set *The Great Gatsby* in the year of the poem's release and as a further nod to the poem featured a "valley of ash," Ernest Hemingway's *The Sun Also Rises* featured a Fisher King figure (Jake Barnes), similar to that borrowed by Eliot from the Arthur legend, the title of Evelyn Waugh's *A Handful of Dust* is also borrowed from the poem, and Neil Gaiman uses the "handful of dust" phrase in his graphic novel series *The Sandman*. Key works informing Eliot's poem were Jessie L. Weston's *From Ritual to Romance* (1920) arguing for the influence of fertility rites from pre- or non-Christian cultures in the Grail and Arthur legend, and James Frazer's seminal work on comparative mythology and religion, *The Golden Bough* (1890), though Eliot soon

came to fully embrace the Christian faith after writing it. Francis Ford Coppola includes both books in the possession of Marlon Brando's Colonel Kurz character (who also recites lines from Eliot's *The Hollow Men* poem) in *Apocalypse Now*. The Arthurian legend, though written eight centuries prior to Eliot's poem, serves as a guide to the search for hope amidst the moral decay of Eliot's day and our own.

The Waste Land, published four years after the war had ended, marked the beginning of a battle over the mind of the twentieth century. Joseph Pearce claims that it is "probably the most influential and controversial poem of the twentieth century . . . at once a revelation and a revolution, polarizing opinion" between the avante-garde and traditionalists.¹ Its significance was explained in an obituary tribute to Eliot nearly half a century later,

Its presentation of disillusionment and the disintegration of values, catching the mood of the time, made it the poetic gospel of the post-war intelligentsia: at the time, however, few either of its detractors or its admirers saw through the surface innovations and the language of despair to the deep respect for tradition and the keen moral sense which underlay them.²

¹ Joseph Pearce, *Catholic Literary Giants: A Field Guide to the Catholic Literary Landscape* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2014), 173.

² *Ibid.*, 174.

When considered alongside other works by Eliot, such as *The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock* (1917) and *The Hollow Men* (1925) (composed largely from fragments edited out of *The Waste Land*), all despairing while indicting the vapidness of modern secular life, it characterizes his early years during which, as Russell Kirk summarizes, Eliot “peered into the Abyss.”³ Eliot’s persistent use throughout his poems of imagery from Dante’s *Divine Comedy*, the fourteenth century epic poem of a journey from *Inferno* (hell) through *Purgatorio* to *Paradise*, suggests the use of its structure to describe the evolution of his own literary career, as Joseph Pearce notes.⁴ Eliot’s conversion from his family’s Unitarian faith to orthodox Christian faith (and within the Anglican Church) in 1927 marked an abrupt change in his thought, and was such a shock to the literary community that Virginia Woolf found the news “shameful and distressing” and declared him “dead to us all from this day forward.”⁵ Eliot’s poem *Ash Wednesday* (1930) depicting his conversion, and play *The Rock* (1934) constitute his *Purgatorio* phase, Pearce claims, followed by the paradisaical vision of his Nobel-prize winning *Four Quartets* (1936-42). Nevertheless, even Eliot’s *Inferno*-esque works, *The Waste Land* and *The Hollow Men*, are yet held to be neither completely “despairing epilogue to a hopeless quest, nor yet an affirmation of triumph of spirit” as found in his later

³ Russell Kirk, *Eliot and His Age: T.S. Eliot's Moral Imagination in the Twentieth Century* (Wilmington, Delaware: ISI Books, 2008), loc. 2286, Ch. 4.

⁴ Joseph Pearce, *Catholic Literary Giants*, 177.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 177.

works, Kirk declares.⁶ Although powerful and novel for his time, Eliot's work echoes that of Arthur's journeys a millennium earlier.

The Waste Land opens with images of nature struggling to recover life after harsh winter, continuing with various efforts to recover not just a sense of vitality and life but meaning and purpose. Section one, "The Burial of the Dead," thus opens

April is the cruellest month, breeding
Lilacs out of the dead land, mixing
Memory and desire, stirring
Dull roots with spring rain.⁷

April is indeed the cruelest month, as Eliot reminds us that gone is "winter which kept us warm," along with the joyful memories of the prior year, though the cold did trickle its melting moisture into thirsty roots.⁸ Roots and branches struggle to grow out of the "stony rubbish," but scarce is water to give life, and absent is any shade since the trees are dead. Instead, dry stones provide the only relief from the searing sun, and what water can be found is often deadly, as attested by mention of drowned sailors and opening lines from *Tristan und Isolde* alluding to illicit love at sea.⁹ Ominous readings of Tarot cards loom, with hanged men, drowned men, and crowds straggle aimlessly across

⁶ Kirk, *The Age of Eliot*, loc. 2286, Ch. 4.

⁷ T.S. Eliot, *The Waste Land* in *The Complete Poems and Plays: 1909 – 1950* (New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, 1971), I.1-4.

⁸ *Ibid.*, I.5-7.

⁹ *Ibid.*, I.20.

London Bridge in a fog, evoking Dante's imagery from of the damned in Hades, as Eliot echoes Dante's surprise of "so many, I had not thought death had undone so many."¹⁰

Eliot looks towards faith for answers, as he asks

What are the roots that clutch, what
branches grow

Out of this stony rubbish? Son of man¹¹

citing Ezekiel 2:1 ("Son of man"), a book with the imagery of dry and lifeless bones which fits Eliot's *Waste Land* genre. Jesus himself (the Son of man) is challenged, as he continues

You cannot say, or guess, for you know only

A heap of broken images, where the sun beats

And the dead tree gives no shelter, the cricket
no relief

And the dry stone no sound of water.¹²

Biblical allusions abound: "roots that clutch" and "what branches grow" issue a challenge to Christ given the prophecy in Isaiah 11:1 that "a shoot will come up from the stump of Jesse; from his *roots* a *Branch* will bear fruit" (italics added); the "dead tree that gives no

¹⁰ Eliot, *The Waste Land*, I.61-62.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, I.19-20.

¹² *Ibid.*, I.21-24. Crickets without relief comes from Ecclesiastes 12:5, the "Son of man" from Ezekiel 2:1.

shelter” references a powerless Calvary, and the “heap of broken images” the symbol of a fragmented Christian Europe traditionally rich in religious icons.

The Tarot card figure of the man with three staves (one of several characters Eliot drew from Tarot cards) draws on the Arthurian figure of the Fisher King to further illustrate despair. A King so wounded that he cannot even mount his horse, the Arthurian Fisher King bides his time fishing until he can be healed. In Sir Thomas Malory’s account of Arthur, *Le Morte D’Arthur*, the wound of King Pellam comes from Balin delivering a “dolorous stroke,” leaving Pellam to lay “many years sore wounded” until the healing of the Grail arrives; the land likewise suffers, echoing his perishing.¹³ The wound has a spiritual significance, as it was delivered by the very spear that pierced Christ’s heart on Calvary, and thus requires a supernatural healing that only the Holy Grail can deliver. Malory’s waste land thus labors under the ominous penalty of sin, the same cause that Eliot would later come to realize is the source of plague for his own.

The wasting of the land, while an ominous sign, is however not one of ultimate despair. Sir Percival, the hero in French author Chretien de Troyes Arthurian poems (rather than Lancelot’s son Galahad in later literature like Malory’s), illustrates this. The etymology of Percival’s name, “he who has lost the vales,” refers to the demise of his father’s kingdom, though in fact Percival’s uncle seems more likely to have been the

¹³ Sir Thomas Malory, *Le Morte D’Arthur* (New York: Random House: Modern Library, 1999), Book II Ch. XVI “The Holy Grail,” l.357, p. 71.

Fisher King.¹⁴ But it is the figure of Percival's aunt who embodies the hope found in suffering. Once known as the "Queen of the Waste Lands" and "the queen of the most riches in the world," she claims to value her poverty as much as her former riches.¹⁵

Eliot further invokes the Arthurian imagery of a land suffering under the penalty of sin when he cryptically declares "I will show you fear in a handful of dust."¹⁶ That Arthur's times were not innocent is shown when Galahad, Percival, and others leave on their quest for the Grail, and Guinevere, in fear of the perils they will face, declares amidst weeping in the streets that "This madness has come on us for our sins" in Tennyson's nineteenth century retelling.¹⁷ Once on the quest, Percival encounters goodly apples, a gracious woman, a friendly plowman, and an old man, but they all crumble into dust and disappear into a "land of sand and thorns," as he comes to realize his own sins have made him unsuitable for the quest.¹⁸ Only Galahad (in Malory's account) will be able to gain a vision of the grail, as the hermit at the lonely country church where the Grail hides informs Percival that "thou hast not true humility, the highest virtue, the mother of them all," the same humility which told Christ "Take thou my robe,"

¹⁴ Arthur Groos and Norris J. Lacy, *Perceval/Parzival: A Casebook* (New York: Routledge, 2002), 4. The Fisher King.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, XIV.1, 691.

¹⁶ Eliot, *The Waste Land*, I.30.

¹⁷ Alfred Lord Tennyson, "The Holy Grail" in *Idylls of the King* (New York: Penguin Books, 2004), 215.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 390 (p.216).

the hermit declares, as the “Lord of all things made Himself / Naked of glory for his mortal change.”¹⁹ Instead the hermit declares Galahad to be qualified for the holy quest, since he had “lost [him]self to save [him]self,” as Christ instructs us.^{20 21} Eliot’s imagery is thus grounded not just in Arthurian lore, but in the Christian faith he would soon find.

Arthurian imagery is absent during the middle sections of the poem, though a brief synopsis helps to reveal the power of its deployment at the end of *The Waste Land*. A bored ennui suffuses Section II, “A Game of Chess,” the antithesis of the purposeful quest for the Grail. Synthetic perfumes, a sad evening light and the room’s desert-like atmosphere are punctuated. And there is a mantle picture of Ovid’s Philomela who endured rape. The loss of human love highlights the depths to which confused, dry, and barren humanity has sunk, as the image of Philomela gives way to the marriage of Albert and Lil, who have resorted to contraceptive pills to stave off further pregnancies (though their having had five already would be remarkable in this day), leading to the question of the fate of love in marriage. Love stays on holiday in Section III, “The Fire Sermon.” A typist and her ambitious young lover make a love that is bored for her, lustful for him, and a boat on the oil- and tar-infused Thames is the venue for Elizabeth and Leicester to couple, both events

¹⁹ Tennyson, “The Holy Grail,” 445-447 (p. 218).

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 456 (p.218).

²¹ Matthew 10:39.

narrated by an aging and sexless, mythical Tiresias.²² Section III's title, the "Fire Sermon," appears in its final lines, with the lines "burning burning burning" cited from Buddha's Fire Sermon, a typical Buddhist indictment of the futility of desire. In a confessed intention to juxtapose wisdom both East and West, Eliot next follows with lines from Augustine's *Confessions*, "To Carthage then I came" (including its completion only in the footnotes, "where a cauldron of unholy loves sang all about my ears") and "O Lord thou pluckest me out / O Lord thou pluckest," before returning to Buddha with the concluding line, "burning."²³ The notion of water as a threat to life rather than its elixir is briefly included in the short section IV, "Death By Water," with the image of the drowned sailor Phebas, a cautionary lesson for those who venture on the seas of life, "Gentile or Jew," urged to "Consider Phlebas, who was once handsome and tall as you."²⁴

It is in the final section V, "What The Thunder Said" (reference to a Hindu sermon from the Upanishads), that Eliot navigates the poem towards a solution. The Chapel Perilous, where Lancelot was once tempted (to a tryst with the sorceress Hellawes, which he refused), accentuates Eliot's wandering search. Eliot refers the reader to Weston's *From Ritual to Romance* for explanation of the Chapel's significance: Weston offers

²² Tiresias was a blind prophet of Apollo in Greek mythology, who was transformed between male and female seven different times; in the poem's endnotes, Eliot claims Tiresias as a pivotal figure in the poem, giving insights into various characters of both sexes.

²³ Eliot, *The Waste Land*, III. 306 - 311.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, IV. 319 - 321.

the Chapel as a site of (“semi-pagan, semi-Christian”) rituals connecting with the spiritual world.²⁵ The church’s reduced state,

In this decayed hole among the mountains . . .

There is the empty chapel, only the wind’s home.

It has no windows, and the door swings²⁶

echoes the humility required of the Grail-seeker, though its desolation echoes imagery Eliot uses to depict the fallen state of Europe,

What is that sound high in the air

Murmur of maternal lamentation

Who are those hordes swarming

Over endless plains, stumbling in cracked earth

Falling towers

Jerusalme Athens Alexandria

Vienna London

Unreal²⁷

²⁵ Jessie L. Weston, *From Ritual to Romance*, Digital edition (1920), 73.

²⁶ Eliot, *The Waste Land*, V.386 - 89.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, V.367-377.

Eliot uses Jesus's furtive, resurrected appearance to the disciples on the Emmaus Road to suggest a rescuing presence,

Who is the third who walks always beside
you?

There is always another one walking beside
you.²⁸

But it is at the Chapel where Eliot's solution begins, as it is there that is first heard the crack of lightning heralding the return of a life-sustaining rain. Eliot turns to Hindu scriptures, the Upanishads, to explain the meaning of the thunder from a fable. In response to the uncontrolled burning of desires that Eliot addressed earlier with both Buddha and Augustine, he finds the Hindu virtues of self-control (Damyata), compassion (Dayadhvam), and generosity (Datta). These virtues are repeated in the poem's final lines, followed by "Shantih shantih shantih" which Eliot equates to the Christian phrase "The Peace which passeth all understanding."²⁹

It is here, at the end of all things (of the poem) that the Arthurian Fisher King makes a final appearance. Eliot opines

I sat upon the shore

Fishing, with the arid plain behind me

Shall I at least set my lands in order?

²⁸ Eliot, *The Waste Land*, V.360-363.

²⁹ Ibid., V.433-434. Eliot explains this significance in the poem's endnotes in T.S. Eliot, *The Complete Poems and Plays*, 55.

London Bridge is falling down falling down
falling down . . .

These fragments have I shored against my
ruins.³⁰

before interspersing even more eclectically-drawn references, in original Italian and French of course, then concluding with his Hindu phrases. The Fisher King's long quest for a solution appears as nearly close at hand as that which Eliot would find in his own life a few years later, as he anticipates ordering his lands for the healing and revival, without which, the act would be more like the final arrangement of one's affairs before death.

The quest for regeneration, for a redemption of lives and lands from the effects of the sins of humanity against God and humanity, is well illustrated for *The Waste Land* by the Arthurian saga. In the years that soon followed publication of *The Waste Land*, Eliot would come to full Christian faith (supplanting the Unitarianism of his familial forebears), and exhibit the redemption and regeneration he found in lines from *Ash Wednesday* (1930) such as

Blessed sister, holy mother, spirit of the
fountain, spirit of the garden
Teach us to care and not to care
Teach us to sit still
Even among these rocks,
Our peace in His will . . .
And spirit of the river, spirit of the sea,

³⁰ Eliot, *The Waste Land*, V.424 - 427.

Suffer me not to be separated
And let my cry come unto Thee.³¹

and from *The Four Quartets*, which led to his receiving the Nobel Prize in Literature in 1948, playing on the dual meaning of “end” as not just “finale” but “purpose”:

In my beginning is my end . . .
In my end is my beginning . . .³²
We shall not cease from exploration
And the end of all our exploring
Will be to arrive where we started
And know the place for the first time.³³

Eliot’s end, his purpose, whispers to him throughout the experiences of both tragedy and beauty, as he continues

Through the unknown, remembered gate
When the last of the earth left to discover
Is that which was the beginning;
At the source of the longest river
The voice of the hidden waterfall
And the children in the apple-tree
Not known, because not looked for
But heard, half-heard in the stillness
Between two waves of the sea.³⁴

³¹ T.S. Eliot, “Ash Wednesday” in *The Complete Poems and Plays*, 67.

³² T.S. Eliot, “East Coker,” I.1, V.38; these are the first and final lines of the poem.

³³ Eliot, “Little Gidding,” V.26-29.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, V.30-38.

The voice Eliot hears echoes that of another medieval figure, Julian of Norwich, with the lines

And all shall be well and
All manner of thing shall be well,³⁵

prefacing the conclusion of the quartet of poems with an intertwining of images of the Holy Spirit and its tongues of flame with that of Jesus's crown of thrones,

When the tongues of flame are in-folded
Into the crowned knot of fire
And the fire and the rose are one.³⁶

Thus, the unquenched burning of Augustine's decrepit Carthage and the Buddhist's untamed desires, found in *The Waste Land* and which have scorched and made desolate both Eliot's and Arthur's lands, are subsumed, and redeemed, by the holy burning fire of the Spirit and the passion of the Son of God.

³⁵ Eliot, "Little Gidding," V.42-43.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, 44-46.

Bibliography

Arthur & Regeneration in T.S. Eliot's *Wasteland*

Seth Myers on The Search for Regeneration

Eliot, T.S. *The Complete Poems and Plays: 1909 – 1950*. New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, 1971.

Kirk, Russell. *Eliot and His Age: T.S. Eliot's Moral Imagination in the Twentieth Century*. Wilmington, Delaware: ISI Books, 2008.

Malory, Sir Thomas. *Le Morte D'Arthur*, The Modern Library Edition. New York: Random House, 1999.

Pearce, Joseph. *Catholic Literary Giants: A Field Guide to the Catholic Literary Landscape*. San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2014.

Tennyson, Alfred Lord. *Idylls of the King*. New York: Penguin Books, 2003.

Weston, Jessie L. *From Ritual to Romance*. 1920. Digital Edition.