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Module: Literary Texts  
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## Unit III: Literary Modernism

### Lecture 1: Introduction to Literary Modernism

#### 1-Definition:

As a literary movement, modernism gained prominence during and, especially, just after the First World War; it subsequently flourished in Europe and America throughout the 1920s and 1930s. Modernism is characterized by a self-conscious break with traditional styles of poetry and verse. Modernists experimented with literary form and expression, adhering to the modernist maxim to "Make it new." Modernist authors sought to break away from traditions and conventions through experimentation with new literary forms, devices, and styles. Their work reflected the pervasive sense of loss, disillusionment, and even despair in the wake of the Great War, hence their emphasis on historical discontinuity and the alienation of humanity. They tended to perceive the world as fragmented. Moreover, it believes that we create the world in the act of perceiving it. It elevates the individual and the inward over the social and the outward, and it prefers the unconscious to the self-conscious. In many respects it is a reaction against REALISM and NATURALISM and the scientific postulates on which they rest.

A prominent feature of modernism is the phenomenon called the avant-garde; that is, a small, self-conscious group of artists and authors who deliberately undertake to "make it new." Frequently, avant-garde artists represent themselves as "alienated" from the established order, against which they assert their own autonomy; a prominent aim is to shock the sensibilities of the conventional reader and to challenge the norms and pieties of the dominant bourgeois culture.

#### 2- Some Attributes of Modernist Literature

##### a/ Formal/Stylistic characteristics

- **Perspectivism:** The locating of meaning from the viewpoint of the individual; the use of narrators located within the action of the fiction, experiencing from a personal, particular (as opposed to an omniscient, "objective") perspective; the use of many voices, contrasts and contestations of perspective; the consequent **disappearance of the omniscient narrator.**
- **Impressionism:** An emphasis on the process of perception and knowing: the use of devices (formal, linguistic, representational), to present more closely the texture or process or structure of knowing and perceiving.
- **The use of fragmentation and juxtaposition, motif, symbol, allusion.**

- **Experimentation in form:** In order to present differently, afresh, the structure, the connections, and the experience of life.
- **The (re)presentation of inner (psychological) reality,** including the "flow" of experience, through devices such as stream of consciousness.
- **The use of interior or symbolic landscape:** the world is moved "inside", structured symbolically or metaphorically -- as opposed to the Romantic interaction with transcendent forces acting through the exterior world, and Realist representations of the exterior world as a physical, historical, contiguous site of experience.
- **Time is moved into the interior** as well: time becomes psychological time (time as innerly experienced) or symbolic. Time is used as well more complexly as a structuring device through a movement backwards and forwards through time, the juxtaposing of events of different times, and so forth.
- **A turn to "open" or ambiguous endings,** again seen to be more representative of "reality" -- as opposed to "closed" endings, in which matters are resolved.
- **Irony and satire** are important tools used by the modernist writer to comment on society.

## **b/ Thematic characteristics**

Common concerns of modernism are: the breaking down of social norms, rejection of standard social ideas, and traditional thoughts and expectations, rejection of religion and anger against the effects of the world wars, the search for a ground of meaning in a world without God; the critique of the traditional values of the culture; the loss of meaning and hope in the modern world and an exploration of how this loss may be faced. As well, modernists tend to reject history, social systems, and emphasize alienation in modern urban and industrial societies

## **Lecture 2: T.S Eliot's "The Burial of the Dead", *The Waste Land*.**

### **1- Analysis**

Lines 1-4

April is the cruellest month, breeding

Lilacs out of the dead land, mixing

Memory and desire, stirring

Dull roots with spring rain.

An unknown speaker claims that "April is the cruellest month," even though we might usually think of spring as a time of love (1). But if you're lonely, seeing flowers blooming and people kissing might make you even more depressed about your "Memory and desire" (3). The spring rain might normally bring new life, but for you it only stirs "Dull roots" (4).

Also, you might want to note how Eliot really works the poetic technique of **enjambment** to carry each phrase over the line breaks with extra participles or -ing words (i.e., breeding, mixing, and stirring).

These lines are also written in almost-perfect iambic meter, which is really supposed to give you a sense of stability in a poem. But Eliot's enjambment keeps making it unstable by making every thought seem unfinished.

So right off the bat, he suggests that traditional forms of art might not bring the sense of closure and certainty they once did.

### **Lines 5-7**

**Winter kept us warm, covering**

**Earth in forgetful snow, feeding**

**A little life with dried tubers.**

The speaker says that instead of spring being the best time of year, "Winter kept us warm, covering / Earth in forgetful snow" (5-6). These lines show that when it comes to feeling bad, it's better to be forgetful and almost numb in your emotions, surviving on the little bits of joy in your life as if they were "dried tubers"

Also, the iambs of the first three lines have started to break down, although you're still getting those enjambed participle -ing words at the end of each line. Eliot is thematically showing you here that an unfinished thought has a way of infecting our sense of certainty.

### **Lines 8-12**

**Summer surprised us, coming over the Starnbergersee**

**With a shower of rain; we stopped in the colonnade,**

**And went on in sunlight, into the Hofgarten,**

**And drank coffee, and talked for an hour.**

**Bing gar keine Russin, stamm' aus Litauen, echt deutsch.**

These lines talk about how "summer surprised us," meaning that the poem's speaker has a crowd they hung out with in the past, but we're not clear who "us" is. At this point, you suddenly realize that you're probably dealing with a dramatic monologue, meaning that the poem is being spoken by a specific character.

This isn't Eliot, or some third person narrator. Think of the speaker as a character here.

"Coming over the Starnbergersee" makes the location of the memory more specific, because Starnbergersee is the name of a lake that's just a couple miles south of Munich, Germany.

The speaker then talks about how the group walked past a bunch of fancy columns and ended up in a city park in Munich known as the Hofgarten.

They drank coffee and talked for an hour.

Then you have strange line in German that says "I am not Russian at all; I come from Lithuania, a true German" (12). What this line tells us is that the speaker was having a conversation about who counts as a "true" German, and suggests that a true German can come from the country of Lithuania, which has Germanic historical roots.

### **Lines 13-18**

**And when we were children, staying at the arch-duke's,  
My cousin's, he took me out on a sled,  
And I was frightened. He said, Marie,  
Marie, hold on tight. And down we went.  
In the mountains, there you feel free.  
I read, much of the night, and go south in the winter.**

These lines continue on with the speaker's memories of childhood. And hey—they're not so bad.

You find out that the speaker is the cousin of an archduke, which means that he or she probably came from a pretty aristocratic background.

The archduke took the speaker out on a sled and told her not to be frightened. You find out at this point that the speaker's name is Marie.

It turns out Eliot's actually alluding to a real, historical figure named Marie Louise Elizabeth Mendel, a Bavarian woman who was born into a family with royal roots, and became Countess Larisch when she was nineteen. She was also the cousin of Archduke Rudolph, the Crown Prince of Austria.

It's not entirely clear why Eliot inserts Marie into the beginning of his poem. Yet, there was a widespread scandal in 1889 (Eliot would have been less than a year old) when the archduke was found dead with his mistress, leaving a gaping hole in the Austrian royal line of succession. This story could set off the motif of dead royalty that Eliot uses in this poem to symbolize the collapse of traditional forms of government and the "rule of the mob" in the 20th century.

Also, the countess Marie also barely avoided being killed when a socialist workers' movement swept across Bavaria and encouraged the killing and imprisoning of anyone of Marie's high class. Once again, we've got notes of the decline of traditional, high culture in a modern sea of stupid, violent, and worst of all, average people.

These lines close with Marie talking about how awesome and free you feel in the mountains.

She ends on a weird note, though, telling you that she likes to read during the night and travels south in the winter. The Countess had a difficult marriage and enjoyed her time away from the Count. In her memoirs *My Past* she wrote of spending time reading and writing away from her husband in their Bavarian mountain home Villa Valerie (in the town of Rottach-Egern, 54 km south of Munich).

### **Lines 19-26**

**What are the roots that clutch, what branches grow  
Out of this stony rubbish? Son of man,  
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. Only**

**There is shadow under this red rock,  
(Come in under the shadow of this red rock),**

It's not Marie who's talking anymore, but someone else. These lines throw you three verses from the Bible, and they basically talk about how your soul is like soil without water, which is, yes, as awful as it sounds.

The first allusion is in lines 19-20. It's based on Ezekiel, and it asks you what could possibly grow from your spirit, which is like "stony rubbish" (20). (Son of man, by the way, is a phrase commonly used in the Bible.)

Compare "rubbish" to "fragments" in the final section of Section V. Eliot is referring to the apparent disorderliness of his poem, as well as the rubbish heap of Western/world history, and asking what can be salvaged from it. The tone here is prophetic and recurs throughout the poem. Eliot identified the sexless prophet Tiresias) as the central voice of *The Waste Land*: this is most likely his/her voice breaking in.

You (meaning whomever the speaker is speaking to) live in a world that is as hard on you as a beating sun, but your trees (meaning your ideas and your spirit) are dead, and they can't comfort you or give you shade.

You're dying from spiritual thirst, and there is "no sound of water". All you're going to get is a half-hearted comfort, like shadow under a "red rock".

Eliot may be saying that the world is filled with death and pain akin to a desert that yields no sweet relief of its hardships. The parentheses are probably an experiment in [iconicity](#), and denote shelter and isolation. The tree has grown impotent and died. So what's left is a lifeless rock to seek shelter at Your shadow standing towards the sun (sunrise) and your shadow standing with your back to the sun (sunset).

### **Lines 27-30**

**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.**

These next three lines are totally creepy, because the speaker suddenly promises to "show you something different from either / Your shadow at morning striding behind you / Or your shadow at evening rising to meet you" (27-29).

Eliot's use of **parallelism** in lines 28 and 29 suggests a certain mirroring effect in the two shadows, which gives you a confused sense of traveling into two opposite directions at once.

'Your shadow' might be a metaphor for death, or the passage of time.

Line 30 is one of the most famous lines of the poem, it was later alluded to in the title of Evelyn Waugh's *Handful of Dust*. It refers to fear of dying: dust to dust. The reason dust is so scary is because that's exactly what you're going to turn into some day.

#### **Lines 31-34**

**Frisch weht der Wind**

**Der Heimat zu**

**Mein Irisch Kind**

**Wo weilest du?**

These lines are written in German and taken from Richard Wagner's opera *Tristan and Isolde*, which tells the story of two doomed lovers. They're spoken by a sailor who thinks sadly about a girl he's left behind in his travels.

At this point, the poem takes on a tone of mourning for a love that was once great, but is now absent.

Another big reason for this tone of mourning is no doubt the fact that World War I had ended only four years before Eliot published "The Waste Land." The Great War was awful, blood mess, and during the four years that it lasted, over nine million soldiers were killed. Needless to say, it set off a huge sense of despair all across Europe, as people became convinced that the so-called "sophistication" of the Western world had come to a bitter end with young men shooting each other over political goals from which they were far removed.

This sense of despair made artists realize that if there was going to be any way forward, they were going to have to radically rethink how they created art, and this is definitely part of what's informing Eliot's experimental style in this poem.

From a formal sense, Eliot also really starts upping the ante on the fragmentary aspects of his poem at this point (hint: it's only going to get more fragmented).

Throughout this poem, Eliot's always taking bits and pieces from the "high culture" that people in the Western world don't fully appreciate anymore and mixing them up with surprising images and other snippets.

But Eliot is convinced that this culture, like it or not, used to provide a common point of reference for everybody, and now that it doesn't have the power to unite people anymore, daily experience seems more disconnected from any sense of meaning. That's why we only get those bits and pieces, instead of complete allusions.

#### **Lines 35-42**

**"You gave me hyacinths first a year ago;**

**They called me the hyacinth girl."**

**—Yet when we came back, late, from the Hyacinth garden,**

**Yours arms full, and your hair wet, I could not**

**Speak, and my eyes failed, I was neither**

**Living nor dead, and I knew nothing,**

**Looking into the heart of light, the silence.**

**Oed' und leer das Meer.**

It seems like a woman is speaking again in these lines, and she remembers a time when she was young and someone gave her nice hyacinth flowers, all romantic-like.

Eliot uses the poetic technique of **apostrophe** here, meaning that the woman is addressing another person who doesn't seem to be present in the poem at this point.

Or, more creepily, she might actually be talking to herself, which would suggest a deep sense of longing or mourning for something that's gone. And a little break with sanity, too.

Somewhere in the woman's distant memory, something went really really wrong. She remembers how suddenly, without warning, her love went south, so to speak. She felt she "was neither / Living nor dead, and [she] knew nothing" (39). It's like her soul just up and died.

These lines finish with another line in German from Wagner's Tristan and Isolde opera, which translates as "Waste and empty is the sea." This basically means that at some point in the speaker's life, there was a great love; but that time is gone, and her soul is now empty.

**Lines 43-46**

**Madame Sosostris, famous clairvoyante,  
Had a bad cold, nevertheless  
Is known to be the wisest woman in Europe.  
With a wicked pack of cards. Here, said she,**

The speaker shifts again and tells you about a fortune-teller named Madame Sosostris, who "Is known to be the wisest woman in Europe" (45), even though she gets a "bad cold" like everyone else.

Sosostris is a literary allusion to Madame Sesostris, a fortune-telling fraud from Aldous Huxley's novel *Crome Yellow*, a satire of high British culture which was published a year before "The Waste Land."

This woman also has a "wicked pack of [tarot] cards" that she uses to tell fortunes. Tarot cards are special hand-held cards that people have been using to predict the future since the 1400's in Britain and elsewhere.

In these lines, the speaker seems to be really critical of this woman's superstitious schemes (especially since he seems to think a mere cold would throw off her skills), but the speaker goes on to take some of the images in her tarot cards pretty seriously

**Lines 47-50**

**Is your card, the drowned Phoenician Sailor,  
(Those are pearls that were his eyes. Look!)  
Here is Belladonna, the Lady of the Rocks,  
The lady of situations.**

Sosostris pulls cards, and the first one shows "the drowned Phoenician Sailor" (47). The Phoenicians were a group of people from around 1,000 B.C.E. who really knew their way around a boat.

The next line has Sosostris telling you that "Those are pearls that were his eyes. Look!" (48). This line is taken from Shakespeare's *The Tempest*, and it describes how a person lying at the bottom of the sea for a long time has had his eyeballs turn into pearls.

Eyes are windows into the soul, and if a person's eyes have hardened into pearls, it's a logical assumption that the soul is completely hardened and dead, too.

The next card Sosostris pulls is "Belladonna," meaning "Beautiful Lady" in Italian, but also referring to a type of poison called nightshade.

Of course, the "Belladonna" is not actually a tarot card—Eliot's just pulling that out of... somewhere. Some folks think this is an allusion to Leonardo's famous painting, *Madonna of the Rocks*, which gives us a distinctly Christian way to read these lines. After all, in the Christian tradition, rocks symbolize the foundation that the Christian church provides for your life.

So we get a weird combo of associations here—Christian faith and poison. Maybe that's why the woman is called "the lady of situations": she can be either beautiful or dangerous, depending on what's going down.

### **Lines 51-55**

**Here is the man with three staves, and here the Wheel,  
And here is the one-eyed merchant, and this card,  
Which is blank, is something he carries on his back,  
Which I am forbidden to see. I do not find  
The Hanged Man. Fear death by water.**

More tarot cards. Next, Sosostris pulls you "the man with three staves" or three staffs, which is an actual card that represents famine and drought in the land, and relates back to the "stony rubbish" that the poem compares your soul to in line 20 (yes, this poem can be a bit judgmental).

Then there's "the Wheel," which represents the wheel of fortune or *rota fortunae*, a medieval symbol of how life and death keep going in an endless circle and how good and bad fortune often come to us for reasons we can't control.

After this, Madame pulls "the one-eyed merchant" (another totally made up tarot card), and then finally, just when you're about tarot-ed out, there's one last card that shows someone carrying something on his back, but you can't see what it is.

Sosostris says she does not find "The Hanged Man," which sounds like a good thing at first, but this card actually would've symbolized spiritual rebirth.

And as if that weren't bad enough, the lady tells you to fear death by water. You might normally think this means drowning, but don't forget, you can also die by lack of water...like in a waste land.



Eliot may be totally making these cards up, but in the world of the waste land, they've got all kinds of symbolic significance.

**Lines 56-59**

**I see crowds of people, walking around in a ring.**

**Thank you. If you see dear Mrs Equitone,**

**Tell her I bring the horoscope myself:**

**One must be so careful these days.**

Suddenly, Sisostris has a vision of people "walking around in a ring" (56), which could go back to the wheel of fortune image.

Or, as the line suggests, these folks are walking around, either trapped inside a circle or circling around it. Either way, it sure doesn't sound like they have much direction.

And finally, it could also refer to the circles of hell that make up Dante's Inferno, a classic of 14th-century Italian literature that describes every little detail of life in hell. This book no doubt inspired Eliot not only because of its subject matter, but because of the sheer detail that Dante uses to describe hell, thus giving his religious beliefs a complex, yet cohesive sense of order and stability. This kind of faith-based stability is exactly what the modern world lacks in Eliot's eyes.

After Sisostris has done her thing, she asks you to give a message to one of her other clients (Mrs. Equitone), saying that she'll deliver a horoscope herself to make sure it doesn't get stolen. Because at the end of the day, a fortune teller's gotta get paid like everyone else.

**Lines 60-68**

**Unreal City.**

**Under the brown fog of a winter dawn,**

**A crowd flowed over London Bridge, so many**

**I had not thought death had undone so many.**

**Sighs, short and infrequent, were exhaled,**

**And each man fixed his eyes before his feet.**

**Flowed up the hill and down King William Street,**

**To where Saint Mary Woolnoth kept the hours**

**With a dead sound on the final stroke of nine.**

The speaker shifts again, this time to someone who's peering out over an "Unreal" or fake modern city whose "brown fog" suggests that it isn't the cleanest of places.

The phrase "Unreal City" is actually a reference to Charles Baudelaire, a 19th-century French poet whose collection, *Fleurs du Mal* (1857), brought light to the unsavory sexual practices and indulgent lifestyles of the poet's time (just like Eliot does in "The Waste Land").

The speaker remembers watching a crowd flowing over London Bridge like zombies, and says he "had not thought death had undone so many" (63). Here, Eliot is definitely talking about the circles of hell in Dante's *Inferno* (he's basically quoting the poem here), and is comparing modern life to living in hell, you know, where all the dead people are.

The people in this scene are sighing and staring (more *Inferno* allusions) only at the ground in front of their feet. They seem pretty unsatisfied with their undead lives.

The speaker mentions a landmark street in London, and notes how a church bell (of an actual church—St Mary Woolnoth) let out a "dead sound on the final stroke of nine" (68). There we go again, associating religion and death.

In a formal sense, you should also notice how every now and then, Eliot will throw you a little rhyming couplet, like he does with "feet" and "Street" or "many" and "many". Again, these sudden bursts of classic, recognizable form help remind us of the overall sense of cultural fragmentation that Eliot is trying to convey in this poem.

Or in other words, we still have reminders of the structured, orderly world that once existed in Europe (ah, yes, the bygone days of the heroic couplet), but reminders are all they are, since they've been shattered into pieces and scattered over the waste land of modern intellectual and emotional life.

#### **Lines 69-76**

**There I saw one I knew, and stopped him, crying: "Stetson!**

**You were with me in the ships at Mylae!**

**The corpse you planted last year in your garden,**

**Has it begun to sprout? Will it bloom this year?**

**Or has the sudden frost disturbed its bed?**

**Oh keep the dog far hence, that's friend to men,**

**Or with his nails he'll dig it up again!**

**You hypocrite lecteur!—mon semblable—mon frère!"**

"The Burial of the Dead" ends on a pretty gruesome note, in which the speaker claims that he saw someone he knew from an ancient war (named Stetson) in the flowing zombie-crowd and asked him if the "corpse [he] planted last year in [his] garden" has begun to sprout" (72).

Normally, we think of burying the dead in order to get them out of sight. But this speaker is so demented that he thinks planting a body in the ground is like planting a seed that's supposed to grow. The speaker then gives the Stetson man advice about keeping the dog and the frost away from where the corpse is planted.

He's also alluding to John Webster's *The White Devil*, which contains the same lines as 74 and 75 above.

His final words are from *Fleurs du Mal* by Charles Baudelaire, a poem published in 1857 that dealt with themes of modern eroticism and decadence, basically calling people out for many of the same things Eliot is in "The Waste Land." Sure, plot-wise, this is our latest speaker calling out

his zombie buddy named Stetson, but you might also look at it as Eliot calling out the reader for being a lazy hypocrite.

The speaker more or less admits that he's no better by calling you "mon frère" or "my brother" in French. So after reading all this stuff about how awful the world's gotten, you get to find out that the speaker of the poem personally blames you, himself, and pretty much everybody for what's happened.

## 2- Form

Like "Prufrock," this section of *The Waste Land* can be seen as a modified dramatic monologue. The four speakers in this section are frantic in their need to speak, to find an audience, but they find themselves surrounded by dead people and thwarted by outside circumstances, like wars. Because the sections are so short and the situations so confusing, the effect is not one of an overwhelming impression of a single character; instead, the reader is left with the feeling of being trapped in a crowd, unable to find a familiar face.

*The Waste Land* employs only partial rhyme schemes and short bursts of structure. These are meant to reference—but also rework—the literary past, achieving simultaneously a stabilizing and a defamiliarizing effect. The world of *The Waste Land* has some parallels to an earlier time, but it cannot be approached in the same way. The inclusion of fragments in languages other than English further complicates matters. The reader is not expected to be able to translate these immediately; rather, they are reminders of the cosmopolitan nature of twentieth-century Europe and of mankind's fate after the Tower of Babel: We will never be able to perfectly comprehend one another.

## 3- Themes

### • The Damaged Psyche of Humanity

Like many modernist writers, Eliot wanted his poetry to express the fragile psychological state of humanity in the twentieth century. Modernist writers wanted to capture their transformed world, which they perceived as fractured, alienated, and denigrated. Europe lost an entire generation of young men to the horrors of the so-called Great War, causing a general crisis of masculinity as survivors struggled to find their place in a radically altered society. As for England, the aftershocks of World War I directly contributed to the dissolution of the British Empire. Eliot saw society as paralyzed and wounded, and he imagined that culture was crumbling and dissolving. Humanity's collectively damaged psyche prevented people from communicating with one another, an idea that Eliot explored in many works, including "A Game of Chess" (the second part of *The Waste Land*) and "The Hollow Men."

### • The Power of Literary History

Eliot maintained great reverence for myth and the Western literary **canon**, and he packed his work full of **allusions** and quotations. In "The Tradition and the Individual Talent," an essay first published in 1919, Eliot praises the literary tradition and states that the best writers are those who write with a sense of continuity with those writers who came before, as if all of literature

constituted a stream in which each new writer must enter and swim. Only the very best new work will subtly shift the stream's current and thus improve the literary tradition. Eliot also argued that the literary past must be integrated into contemporary poetry. But the poet must guard against excessive academic knowledge and distill only the most essential bits of the past into a poem, thereby enlightening readers. *The Waste Land* juxtaposes fragments of various elements of literary and mythic traditions with scenes and sounds from modern life.

- **The Changing Nature of Gender Roles**

Over the course of Eliot's life, gender roles and sexuality became increasingly flexible, and Eliot reflected those changes in his work. In the repressive **Victorian era** of the nineteenth century, women were confined to the domestic sphere, sexuality was not discussed or publicly explored, and a puritanical atmosphere dictated most social interactions. Queen Victoria's death in 1901 helped usher in a new era of excess and forthrightness, now called the Edwardian Age, which lasted until 1910. World War I, from 1914 to 1918, further transformed society, as people felt both increasingly alienated from one another and empowered to break social mores. English women began agitating in earnest for the right to vote in 1918, and the flappers of the Jazz Age began smoking and drinking alcohol in public. Women were allowed to attend school, and women who could afford it continued their education at those universities that began accepting women in the early twentieth century. Modernist writers created gay and lesbian characters and re-imagined masculinity and femininity as characteristics people could assume or shrug off rather than as absolute identities dictated by society.

- **Love**

The references to *Tristan und Isolde* in "The Burial of the Dead" suggest that love, in "The Waste Land," is often destructive. Tristan dies and even the love for the hyacinth girl leads the poet to see and know "nothing".

- **Death**

Two of the poem's sections -- "The Burial of the Dead" and "Death by Water" --refer specifically to this theme. What complicates matters is that death can mean life; in other words, by dying, a being can pave the way for new lives. Eliot asks his friend Stetson: "That corpse you planted last year in your garden, / Has it begun to sprout? Will it bloom this year?" Similarly, Christ, by "dying," redeemed humanity and thereby gave new life. The ambiguous passage between life and death finds an echo in the frequent allusions to Dante, particularly in the Limbo-like vision of the men flowing across London Bridge and through the modern city.

#### **4- Motifs**

- **Fragmentation**

Eliot used fragmentation in his poetry both to demonstrate the chaotic state of modern existence and to juxtapose literary texts against one another. In Eliot's view, humanity's psyche had been shattered by World War I and by the collapse of the British Empire. Collaging bits and pieces of dialogue, images, scholarly ideas, foreign words, formal styles, and **tones** within one poetic work was a way for Eliot to represent humanity's damaged psyche and the modern world, with its barrage of sensory perceptions. Critics read the following line from *The Waste Land* as a statement of Eliot's poetic project: "These fragments I have shored against my ruins" (431).

Practically every line in *The Waste Land* echoes an academic work or canonical literary text, and many lines also have long footnotes written by Eliot as an attempt to explain his references and to encourage his readers to educate themselves by delving deeper into his sources. These echoes and references are fragments themselves, since Eliot includes only parts, rather than whole texts from the **canon**. Using these fragments, Eliot tries to highlight recurrent themes and images in the literary tradition, as well as to place his ideas about the contemporary state of humanity along the spectrum of history.

- **Mythic and Religious Ritual**

Eliot's tremendous knowledge of myth, religious ritual, academic works, and key books in the literary tradition informs every aspect of his poetry. He filled his poems with references to both the obscure and the well known, thereby teaching his readers as he writes. In his notes to *The Waste Land*, Eliot explains the crucial role played by religious symbols and myths. He drew heavily from ancient fertility rituals, in which the fertility of the land was linked to the health of the Fisher King, a wounded figure who could be healed through the sacrifice of an effigy.

### **Infertility**

Eliot envisioned the modern world as a wasteland, in which neither the land nor the people could conceive. In *The Waste Land*, various characters are sexually frustrated or dysfunctional, unable to cope with either reproductive or nonreproductive sexuality: the Fisher King represents damaged sexuality (according to myth, his impotence causes the land to wither and dry up), Tiresias represents confused or ambiguous sexuality. World War I not only eradicated an entire generation of young men in Europe but also ruined the land. Trench warfare and chemical weapons, the two primary methods by which the war was fought, decimated plant life, leaving behind detritus and carnage.

### **5- Symbols**

- **Water**

In Eliot's poetry, water symbolizes both life and death. Eliot's characters wait for water to quench their thirst, watch rivers overflow their banks, cry for rain to quench the dry earth, and pass by fetid pools of standing water. Although water has the regenerative possibility of restoring life and fertility, it can also lead to drowning and death. Traditionally, water can imply baptism, Christianity, and the figure of Jesus Christ, and Eliot draws upon these traditional meanings: water cleanses, water provides solace, and water brings relief elsewhere in *The Waste Land*. Eliot thus cautions us to beware of simple solutions or cures, for what looks innocuous might turn out to be very dangerous.

- **The Fisher King**

The Fisher King is the central character in *The Waste Land*. While writing his long poem, Eliot drew on *From Ritual to Romance*, a 1920 book about the legend of the Holy Grail by Miss Jessie L. Weston, for many of his symbols and images. Weston's book examined the connections between ancient fertility rites and Christianity, including following the evolution of the Fisher King into early representations of Jesus Christ as a fish. Traditionally, the impotence or death of the Fisher King brought unhappiness and famine. Eliot saw the Fisher King as symbolic of humanity, robbed of its sexual potency in the modern world and connected to the

meaninglessness of urban existence. But the Fisher King also stands in for Christ and other religious figures associated with divine resurrection and rebirth.

**Exercise:** Explore the symbols of fertility and infertility and explain their relationship with allusions to legends like **the fisher king** and **Osiris**.

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