

Post-War Europe:

*The Waste Land* as a Metaphor

Semy Rhee

A Senior Thesis submitted in partial fulfillment  
of the requirements for graduation  
in the Honors Program  
Liberty University  
Spring 2012

Acceptance of Senior Honors Thesis

This Senior Honors Thesis is accepted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for graduation from the Honors Program of Liberty University.

---

Karen Swallow Prior, Ph.D.  
Thesis Chair

---

Thomas Provenzola, Ph.D.  
Committee Member

---

Carolyn Towles, M.Ed.  
Committee Member

---

Brenda Ayres, Ph.D.  
Honors Director

---

Date

## Abstract

This thesis analyzes the mindset of twentieth-century Europe through the perspective of a modern individual that T. S. Eliot creates in his poem *The Waste Land*. Although *The Waste Land* is the greatest modernist poem, it is often criticized for its esoteric nature. A thorough examination of the poem is useful in understanding and appreciating Eliot's masterful demonstration of the modernist philosophy. This study analyzes the poem in light of the definition of modernism and the poem's metaphorical nature. It also aims to reconcile the two most confusing elements of the poem—its allusive content and fragmented structure—to the design and purpose of the work as a literary masterpiece with meaning. Although they may seem disjointed, all elements of the poem rather coherently communicate what modern society ultimately believes. The observable results of modernist beliefs are manifested in the modern individual's view of relationships.

Fragmentation and Hopelessness:  
Portrayal of Modernity in *The Waste Land*

### **Introduction**

The modern era was an influential period that shaped the development of western civilization throughout the twentieth century. A thorough analysis of modern philosophy, culture, and art reveals the mindset of modernity and how the historical events of the era influenced life during the early 1900s. T. S. Eliot's poem, *The Waste Land*, depicts an image of the modern world through the perspective of a man finding himself hopeless and confused about the condition of the society. When the poem was published in 1922, many readers and critics responded with mixed attitudes. While some regarded Eliot's poem as a masterpiece in high modernist poetry, many criticized the obscure and complicated nature of the poem. However, upon thorough analysis of the poem and its context, the poem proves itself to be a great modernist poem that demonstrates the prevalent philosophies of its era. It is through its apparent confusion and chaos that the poem paints a picture of the disjointed and barren world. Through its fragmented and allusive nature, *The Waste Land* illustrates the contemporary waste land as a metaphor of modern Europe.

### **Modernism**

#### **Overview**

The term "modern" is generally understood as an adjective expressing the state of being contemporary or possessing the qualities of current style. In art and culture, however, the terms modern and modernism pertain to the beliefs and philosophy of the society during the late nineteenth to the early twentieth century. Because the concept has

two different accepted meanings, the characteristics that constitute modernism and the modern world need to be defined to understand *The Waste Land* as a modernist poem.

### **Impact on Society**

Modernism was a social and artistic movement that influenced the western society during the years surrounding World War I. According to the overview of the modernist movement in *Encyclopedia Britannica Online*, a break from the previous era and a focus on experimentation characterize the period. Europeans and other western societies found themselves disillusioned and confused after World War I, when the Victorian values of industrialization, social progress, and scientific advancement seemed to falter (“Modernism” n. pag.). The effects of the war had “undermined humankind’s faith in the foundations of Western society and culture, and postwar modernist literature reflected a sense of disillusionment and fragmentation” (n. pag.). Thus, rejecting the previously accepted notions of order and security, the philosophers and writers during the modern era attempted to formulate a new perspective of and a solution to the disillusionment caused by World War I. More specifically in art and culture, artists “responded by trying to find new ways of seeing, new models of knowing . . . abandoning rules of perspective, and in literature, abandoning a fixed point of view” (Bentley and Brooker 17). The modern period and the modernist movement had significant and lasting effects on culture, art, literature, and philosophy of the society.

### **T. S. Eliot in the Modern Era**

Eliot, as a witness of the social turmoil and transformation surrounding the First World War, was heavily influenced by the modernist movement, and his works became the greatest expression of the perspective of the modern mind. According to Jewel Spears

Brooker's description of Eliot's style, his poems are "strikingly modern, avant-garde, [and] fragmented" ("Dialectic" 130). Most of his early poems, such as *Four Quartets*, *The Hollow Men*, and *Gerontion*, express the despondency and the confusion of the post-war era. *The Waste Land*, Eliot's most renowned poem, depicts this "search for redemption and renewal in a sterile and spiritually empty landscape" ("Modernism" n. pag.). Because of its complex structure and obscure allusions, the poem is criticized for its confusing and esoteric qualities. However, its uniquely disjointed and incomprehensible content and form make the poem the best depiction of the condition of the modern society.

### **Post-War Europe: The Real Waste Land**

The most important aspect of the poem that illumines its meaning and significance in spite of its obscurity and ambiguity is its metaphorical nature. Jean-Michel Rabate argues that "*The Waste Land* is fundamentally a poem about Europe" (221). The connection between the poem and the historical context of the modern era reveals that the poem metaphorically illustrates the actual condition of modern Europe; the barren and lifeless waste land is a metaphor of Europe after World War I. Eliot uses this "dialectic of analogies" (Kenner 433) to metaphorically depict the condition of post-war European society, demonstrating the "disillusionment of a generation" (421). Understanding this metaphorical nature of the poem is essential in studying the poem, in all of its confusing and chaotic elements, within its proper context. Harold Bloom, among many other critics who share the same opinion about the poem, argues that *The Waste Land* can be read as a "testament to the disillusionment of a generation, an exposition on the manifest despair and spiritual bankruptcy of the years after World War I"—a dead

land of spiritual famine and drought (Bloom 40). In his interpretation of the poem, Andrew Ross describes *The Waste Land* as a metaphor expressing the “cultural infirmity of Europe after the Great War . . . [as] a sign of [the] post-War times” (134). This argument for the metaphorical nature of the poem is valid; the text repeatedly refers to the decay of western civilization after World War I. The speaker observes the “Unreal City,” London, after the War—“under the brown fog of a winter dawn / A crowd [flowing] over London Bridge” (lines 60-62). He is disillusioned and confused at the scene; he “had not thought death had undone so many” (63). This surreal and foggy image of London—its streets filled with “sighs, short and infrequent,” and “each man fixed his eyes before his feet” (64-65)—accurately and poignantly demonstrates the despair and grim reality of modern Europe.

Rather than discussing the condition of modern Europe in factual terms, Eliot uses the poetic, the allusive, and the obscure to depict an image of the physical desolation of the war-torn society and also communicate a sense of spiritual disillusionment and despair. According to Eric Svarny, the dry, barren, lifeless images in the poem and the undeniable sense of futility form an “evocation of post-war London” (160). Svarny notes that the image of London in the poem is characterized by “guilt, shock, [and] incomprehension of traumatized society manifested . . . through historical, cultural, psychic dislocations” (163). For example, In the first section “The Burial of the Dead,” the speaker observes and describes London after the Great War as a broken, dry, and lifeless place full of dead bodies. London, a city once characterized by progress and abundance, has become nothing more than an “Unreal City” (60); it has lost its cultural and social vitality and has been reduced to a heap of fragments. Svarny further describes

this era for European society as a time during which “all idea of progress or development is reversed after World War I” (163). During the Modern age, including the Victorian era, people believed in the idea of progress and prosperity. However, they realized that their optimism and belief in security and peace did not protect them from the horrifying events of the war. Because they have been disappointed by the futility and impotence of the worldview and attitudes that their society relied on, people in modern Europe were disillusioned and confused in shock at the aftermath of the catastrophic war. This sense of disorientation and disorder is intensified by the obscure and allusive nature of the text.

Studying *The Waste Land* in light of its specific historical context demonstrates how the poem reflects the social conditions of the era and the qualities of high modernist literature. Kristian Smidt’s thematic analysis of the poem’s commentary on modern Europe thoroughly explains the correlation between the poem and the society surrounding the poem. As a modernist poem, *The Waste Land* turns away from the norm and tradition both in its ideas and style. Just as the modern man has found it “impossible to hold beliefs of bygone days” (121), Eliot reflects this modernist perspective in his experimental and unique style, defying ordinary and traditional form, aesthetics, logic, and thought. This is largely an attempt to find “new order through contemplation and exhibition of disorder” (121). The disjointedness that initially does not make sense in the poem is not a result of Eliot’s failed attempt to communicate meaning in an unconventional manner, but it is rather an artful yet realistic expression of the modern age’s attempt to construct a different paradigm and a solution that will explain reality and restore the sense of security of the past that has been lost after the War. *The Waste Land*, furthermore, is not only a reflection on European society but also “a comment on the

universe” (122). The modern man’s beliefs are not only a description of the post-war society but also an expression of the modernist worldview and attitude toward reality. Smidt uses dramatic terms to describe the tone of the poem; the modern man “expresses disgust with modern civilization and post-war society” (122). The speaker’s listless attitude in contrast to his eager search for meaning in the waste land communicates a sense of tiredness, demonstrating that although the modern man wants redemption, he does not genuinely hope to find satisfaction and relief from the society he lives in. This attitude explains why the speaker continually alludes to other cultures and texts; the abundant references to the past and exotic phrases in the poem reflect the modern man’s resistance to the contemporary and the increasing tendency to look to other societies and time periods.

In commenting on the condition of Europe, Eliot demonstrates that he is primarily interested in and concerned with the society around him. Brooker examines *The Waste Land* as a metaphorical poem that creates “a portrait of the mind of Europe” (“Transcendence” 54). Brooker analyzes the poem with a psychological approach in understanding the modernist mindset. Eliot viewed the overall condition of Europe in terms of its mental condition; he examined the mindset and ideology of people and crafted his poem into an introspective work that demonstrates the modernist philosophy. The crisis of Europe during the modern era was the breakdown of its mindset. Eliot creates a connection between the mind of the poet and the mind of the society; what he communicates through the modern individual’s perspective in the poem reflects how he perceives the condition of European society as a whole. According to Eliot’s depiction in the poem, the mind of modern Europe can be characterized by distress, agony, and

restlessness (“Transcendence” 64). Eliot’s view of the relationship between the poet and the society reveals his consciousness of the state of his country. He believed that the “poet should never forget the mind of Europe—the mind of his own country—a mind which he learns in time to be much more important than his own private mind” (“Transcendence” 64). Various references to Europe and England reflect this deep contemplation of the condition of Europe. For example, Madame Sosostriis, to whom the speaker refers to in “The Burial of the Dead,” is described as the “wisest woman in Europe” (45). The poem also mentions various places in England, such as the Thames River (183-184), Queen Victoria Street (258), and Lower Thames Street (260). The recurrent references to Europe demonstrate that Eliot is chiefly discussing the condition of his country and western society. Thus, in *The Waste Land*, confusion about the chaos within the society and concern for the nation in such a state coexist and form a story of a broken society ravaged by war told and lamented by a poet who is deeply concerned for his country in the midst of his personal confusion and disillusionment.

Although he laments the hopelessness and despair in modern Europe, Eliot does not leave his commentary on European society as a criticism or lamentation but instead attempts to provide, or suggest, a solution for the predicament of Europe. He equated the condition of Europe to “schizophrenia” (“Transcendence” 65). The lack of coherence and logical pattern characteristic of such mental state is reflected in the image of “crowds of people, walking round in a ring” (56) in the midst of the “heap of broken images” (22). This portrayal suggests a sense of not only intellectual absurdity but also circularity; the mindset of the people lack coherence and a sense of progress. European philosophy and worldview during the modern era was something that had been developing over several

centuries. Brooker notes that the incoherence and dichotomy within the mind of Europe began in the seventeenth century. Swinging from the focus on the intellect in the Enlightenment era and the emotion in the Romantic era, European philosophy and mindset eventually resulted in an extreme disillusionment in the modern era. Eliot recognized a need for a cure for this breakdown to restore the condition of Europe, and the remedy for this crisis he subtly suggests in the poem is returning to the past. This remedy explains the function of the seemingly chaotic and absurd aspects of the poem including the numerous allusions. Eliot believed that the solution for this problem is to return to the European mindset before the modern era—to return to the greatest and most developed form of European mind shown in pre-modern philosophy and art (“Transcendence” 65). According to Eliot, as quoted by Brooker, “what analytic psychology attempts to do for the individual mind, the study of history . . . does for the collective mind” (“Transcendence” 66). Thus Eliot offers returning to the past as a cure to the modern individual’s disillusionment and frustration with the contemporary world he is living in.

### **Allusions**

One of the prominent elements in *The Waste Land* that makes the poem difficult to understand is the historical references and allusions to other literary works. The poem is laden with references to ancient, classic, and religious texts. Understanding the poem and its seemingly scattered and confusing references to historical literature as part of Eliot’s strategy of restoring the mind of Europe reveals meaning and design even in the poem’s most obscure aspects. Eliot in fact believed that “people should bring special knowledge to the reading of texts. In order to collaborate with the poet in the making of a

poem, readers must be willing to close the book and dwell awhile with Ezekiel and Dante” (*Mastery* 191). Eliot purposely used the extremely abundant allusions that require specific literary knowledge and annotations. Their purpose seems obscure, appearing to be a distraction to a thorough and easy reading and understanding of the poem. However, these allusions have a significant function in contributing to the theme of the poem. Even the most confusing allusions that seemingly obscure and distract the communication of meaning are “giving a shape and a significance to the immense panorama of futility and anarchy which is contemporary history” (Brooker “Transcendence” 59). According to Robert S. Lehman’s analysis of the poem, because Eliot “spent his life entranced by the objects of literary history—he alludes to Dante, Shakespeare, and Lancelot Andrewes” (67). The abundance of allusions not only demonstrates Eliot’s literary knowledge but also contributes to the poem’s metaphor by revealing a prevailing philosophy in modern Europe.

Because of the abundance of allusions and their varying meanings and effects in the poem, a brief summary of the most prominent allusive parts in the text is essential in understanding the highly allusive nature of the text. Based on Eliot’s notes on *The Waste Land*, many editors produce annotated versions of the poem to explain the seemingly obscure expressions. Lawrence S. Rainey’s *The Annotated Waste Land with Eliot’s Contemporary Prose* thoroughly examines the various allusions and historical references in the text. Some of the major genres of allusions are ancient, classical, and religious literature. The opening epigraph, although initially cryptic, is a reference to the Cumaean Sibyl’s words in a work by an ancient Roman writer Petronius in first century A.D., Virgil’s *Aeneid*, and Ovid’s *Metamorphoses* (75). The Sibyl’s words, “I want to die,”

communicates a sense of despair and hopelessness, foreshadowing the tone of the remainder of the poem. Eliot also alludes to works of classical authors—he cites Dante’s *Inferno* and *Purgatorio* and Milton’s *Paradise Lost* in his notes. Rainey notes that even in the dedication of the poem, he alludes to Dante’s tribute to the poet Arnaut Daniel in *Purgatorio* (76). Various lines in the poem allude to more recent writers to the modern era such as Chaucer and Shakespeare. The first line of the poem, “April is the cruelest month,” is often compared to the description of April in the General Prologue of Chaucer’s *The Canterbury Tales*, “which adopts a more conventional and cheerful treatment of spring” (76). Eliot’s depiction of the barren and lifeless land in contrast to Chaucer’s beautiful and fruitful image of spring emphasizes the distorted vision of spring and the unnatural and unfortunate condition of the barren land. Eliot also quotes Richard Wagner’s opera *Tristan and Isolde*. The poem does not only allude to literary works of the past, but it also refers to religious texts and religious tradition such as the Bible, St. Augustine’s *Confessions*, Buddhist literature, and quotes from Anglican Church rituals. In his notes on the poem, Eliot cites various verses from the Bible—references to Christianity and its tradition form the biggest part of religious allusions. For example, the image of the barren land in “The Burial of the Dead” is an allusion to Ecclesiastes 12. The poem’s description of “the dead tree [giving] no shelter, the cricket no relief” (23) echoes the description of the “evil days” when “the sun and the light and the moon and the stars are darkened” and “the almond tree blossoms, the grasshopper is a burden, and desire fails” (Ecclesiastes 12:1, 5). The correlation between the poem and Ecclesiastes demonstrates and emphasizes the barrenness, meaninglessness, and the dismal vision characteristic of modernity. In “The Fire Sermon,” contrastingly, the poem quotes

Buddha's Fire Sermon. Eliot explains that the Fire Sermon corresponds in importance to the Sermon on the Mount. *The Waste Land* combines contrasting religious references that create a sense of multiplicity, ambivalence, and confusion. Likewise, the diverse and seemingly random allusions in the poem reflect the skepticism and uncertainty of the modernist mindset.

Although the allusions in the poem bear intrinsic significance and meaning, they have purposes that are deeper than demonstrating Eliot's literary knowledge and poetic genius. One effect of these allusions on the poem as a whole is the recurrent interruption in the flow of the reading and understanding of the poem. The references that require knowledge of a literary work in understanding the purpose of an allusive phrase cause a disconnection in the continuous and unified study of the poem. These breaks in the flow of the poem create the fragmented structure and content. These interruptions diminish the unity of the poem by producing a sense of disjointedness. Because the allusions appear to be a mixture of unrelated ideas, or "a heap of broken images" (22), the disconnection among them inevitably results in causing confusion and a sense of chaos. The construction of *The Waste Land*, according to Eric Svarny's study, "makes history seem an accumulation of debris, a centrifugal and unintelligible process" (195). The poem's apparent reduction of history into a fragmented and incoherent mess reflects the modernist's disillusionment and despair toward the hopelessness of the past and present condition of the world. The effect of the allusiveness on the structure of the poem corresponds to the theme of fragmentation, an important concept that demonstrates the condition of the society and its mindset during the modern era.

Another more significant and less obvious purpose of the allusions is expressing a

desire to return to the past. What the allusions really signify is the nostalgia for the culture and values of the past when life seemed to make sense. Although modernists have a reputation of rejecting the values of the past and embracing experimentation, Eliot, “after the collapse of normative concepts such as tradition and nature, reinvented the notion of tradition in a highly modern and self-reflexive way, distancing it from history without eliminating history altogether” (Cianci and Harding 17). In her analysis of Eliot’s philosophy and logic in *The Waste Land*, Brooker explains how Eliot’s view of the past is demonstrated in the poem. According to Brooker, “the tendency to move forward by spiraling back and refiguring the past” is a significant characteristic of modernist literature, and Eliot’s works most prominently embody this characteristic among other modernist works (“Transcendence” 54). The poem’s allusions to other literary texts in the poem are all references to classic or ancient literature. This focus on the literature of the past signifies the idea of the “retrieval of antiquity” (54) that modernists were obsessed with. Brooker also notes that in *The Waste Land*, “the primitive mind and the modern mind are at once included and transcended in a greater mind - the mind of Europe” (“Dialectic” 139). The past and the present coexist in the poem and illustrate the mindset of Europe. To the modernists who were disillusioned with the present reality, “going forward involves going back . . . [and] securing the future means redeeming the past” (Brooker “Transcendence” 54). According to William Spanos, Eliot’s focus on the past demonstrates the “modern poet’s intense consciousness of crisis . . . a consciousness of the breakdown of notions of historical continuity and the emergence of temporal flux, of absurd time . . . and thus in his impulse to neutralize the terror of radical historicity by annihilating or transcending temporality itself” (226). Spanos describes the allusiveness

of the poem as “efforts of the modern literary imagination to mythologize the experience of contemporary life” (227). Regardless of whether he is successful or not in searching for a solution in the values of the past, the modern man creates a dismal image of modern Europe through subtly yet desperately expressing his desire for a cure for his disillusionment by continually returning to the past. Knowledge of this modernist reasoning is essential in understanding the principle, logic, or philosophy that is underlying *The Waste Land*—the foundational force that binds the fragmented elements of the poem and gives them meaning is, as Brooker argues, Eliot’s and thus the modernist’s unique style and perspective in understanding the world. Although the poem recurrently alludes to literature, it does not explicitly state the reason or purpose behind these references. The poem’s continuous yet subtle focus on the past reflects the modernist viewpoint; people during the modern period had a tendency to look back into the past to make sense of reality rather than looking forward into the future. Because they are disillusioned with the condition of their society, modernists do not believe that the currently existing ideas of their society will restore happiness and security in the future. Thus the modernist both subconsciously and intentionally holds on to the past as the cure for the desolation of Europe, attempting to get glimpses of the past times of security and prosperity.

In light of the modern perspective, *The Waste Land* uses its various allusions to remain consistent with the modernist reasoning and thought and thus demonstrate a realistic concept of the modernist mindset. One aspect of modernist thought that is evident in the poem is the rejection and disdain of the period preceding the modern era. Brooker notes that “the celebration of the human by Michelangelo and Shakespeare at the

dawn of the modern age had ushered in a period of humanism that had led in the nineteenth century to an easy and ungrounded belief in innate goodness and unending progress” (“Transcendence” 57). As this observation demonstrates, the modern man desires the optimism and security of the previous era and thus expresses this desire by referring to the literature and ideas of the past. Brooker argues that at the turn of the century, people were “sick of the idea that human beings are intrinsically good and capable of infinite progress” (58). Confidence in human ability to make progress and find satisfaction did not make sense to the modernists who were disillusioned about reality. The rejection of the worldview of the previous era and the embrace of a rather pessimistic and dark view of mankind corresponds to the modernist emphasis on the past, since the lamentation of the brokenness of man and the world is a concept of the past that can be found in the writings of classical authors such as Dante, whom Eliot alludes to significantly in the poem. In society’s thought and literature, the view of mankind and reality underwent a transformation. Brooker observes that “Eliot’s early writings . . . are grounded in a dark view of human nature,” which can be explained in light of his study of Fyodor Dostoevsky and Joseph Conrad’s works (58). The modern man’s worldview in *The Waste Land* reflects Eliot’s vision of humanity—Eliot, like his contemporaries, disdained the optimistic view of mankind and instead lamented man’s lack of future and hope.

### **Fragmentation**

The single most prominent aspect of both the form and content of *The Waste Land* is fragmentation. *The Waste Land* does not progress in a linear direction as most other poems do. There is no evident subject or element that flows throughout and gives unity to

the poem. The only binding force of the seemingly unrelated and chaotic lines is the very notion of fragmentation itself; disorder and incoherence flow throughout the entire poem. This pattern is easily observable in every part of the poem. Not only is the poem composed of four contrasting sections but it also consists of elements that repeatedly disturb its flow and unity. An example of this disturbance is the unintelligible phrases or expressions that are scattered throughout the work. In “The Fire Sermon,” incomplete and choppy phrases are followed by an obscure expression: “Weialala leia / Wallala leialala” (277-79). Clare R. Kinney also gives an example of deliberate fragmentation in the poem demonstrated in the structure of “The Fire Sermon.” The stanza that begins in line 300 says, “On Margate Sands. / I can connect / Nothing with nothing. / The broken fingernails of dirty hands. / My people humble people who expect / Nothing.” Kinney suggests that “this can be rewritten as follows: On Margate Sands / I can connect nothing with nothing. / The broken fingernails of dirty hands. / My people humble people who expect nothing” (276). The alternative that Kinney posits demonstrates that instead of writing in a unified and coherent style, Eliot intentionally creates line breaks to emphasize the speaker’s disjointed and incoherent state of mind.

The fragmented nature of *The Waste land* is not merely a stylistic element or an effect that a reader perceives from the poem but most importantly a principal concept of modernism. Eliot himself shows that this is a significant concept in the poem; the speaker’s recurring implying or mentioning the idea proves that fragmentation is an essential aspect of the picture of modernity that is presented in the poem. In the first part, “The Burial of the Dead,” the speaker describes the scene that he sees as “a heap of broken images” (22). Similarly, at the end of the poem, the speaker says, “These

fragments I have shored against my ruins” (431). Thus, from the beginning to the end of his reflections, the speaker of the poem is aware of the fragmented images that he sees in the land. To the modernist, the world is a fragmented place and reality is too disjointed and confusing to understand; he continually tries to “[grapple] with disjointed elements [as] a defense method of sustaining things that are being lost or destroyed” in modernity (40). Thus, the disconnected images and ideas in the poem demonstrate that the modern world is fragmented and also that the modern desires to escape from the despairing condition of his society.

Clare R. Kinney presents this notion of deliberate and purposeful disorder in terms of the progression of plot in *The Waste Land*. Understanding the role of the narrative in the poem is important because “difficulties with maintaining ‘connections’ within the narrative process . . . reflects the stylistic, syntactical and semantic dislocation” (277) that is characteristic of modernist literature and thus modernist philosophy. According to Kinney’s study of the narrative form within *The Waste Land*, the poem “offers the reader fragmentary, half-buried glimpses of a goal-directed plot” (275). While the lack of coherence in the poem obscures the meaning, *The Waste Land* simultaneously “seduces the reader into a search for the linear progression of conventional plot” that it lacks (273). The fragmentation within the poem is not merely intended to create chaos and confusion; it emphasizes and intensifies the struggle and agony of the speaker by communicating a sense of desire for linearity and structure in his perspective. This intentionality underlying the scattered form of the poem also explains the seemingly unrelated and fractured images, metaphors, and allusions throughout the poem. The implicit and subtle yet desperate desire for coherence and progression causes the speaker

to “constantly [entertain] different methods of ordering and containing its language” (278), hence using a plethora of varying sentence structures, rhythms, and allusions all within one poem. Even in the seemingly chaotic and nonsensical composition of the poem, Eliot had a strategy and purpose in communicating and implying the desperation and agony of the modern man.

Ultimately, however, despite the speaker’s desire for order and pattern, searching for meaning in the modernist world, the poem shows, proves to be futile. The disjointedness in the poem “exhibits not formlessness but a passion for form, largely unfulfilled” (Kinney 278). Although the speaker attempts to give meaning and structure to the incoherent and absurd reality of his time, he is still disillusioned and confused throughout his reflections. His efforts to create coherence and consistency by desperately grasping on various literary techniques and conventions “repeatedly and paradoxically [turn out] to represent not so much a narrative progression as a restatement of dearth, unhappy stasis, or absence” (278). What he is ultimately left with is absurdity and confusion instead of a logical and orderly plot. As the title of Kinney’s essay, “Fragmentary Excess, Copious Dearth: *The Waste Land* as Anti-Narrative,” suggests, the relationship between the form and content of the poem can be summarized as the paradoxical coexistence of “dearth and excess” (279). While the poem is characterized by a sense of lacking—“missing parts, missing links, missing climaxes—[it is also] characterized by copious augmentation and restatements” (279). Despite the speaker’s attempt to construct order and meaning with an abundance of fragmented ideas and phrases—despite the excess—he is nonetheless left with a sense of absence, lacking, or, according to Kinney’s terms, dearth. The closing lines of the poem demonstrate this

unfulfilled and futile effort. The relationship between the final lines and the rest of the poem is analyzed in Mary McGann's study of the poem; the fragmented yet "brief moments of illumination lead into the final epiphany, which reflects the method of the entire poem" (20). At the end of his reflections, the speaker attempts to find a sense of resolution and order. However, despite this attempt, his thoughts are still fragmented and his words still obscure and ambiguous. He quotes the nursery rhyme: "London bridge is falling down falling down falling down," (426) communicating a sense of decline of a prominent modern city in Europe. Even after his search for structure, reason, and meaning, the modern man does not see the rebuilding of the "Unreal City" (60) but sees its decline and decay. The speaker's last vision in the poem is that of the fragments of the city that has fallen down. Thus, as McGann argues, the poem traces the disordered and chaotic image of the world through the speaker's fragmented thoughts and ends with a vision of fragmentation and the realization that the world remains disjointed and chaotic. The final two lines of the poem also appear obscure and cryptic. The closing line, "Shantih shantih shantih," (434) which means "the peace which passeth understanding" reflects the fact that the speaker does not find security and meaning in the Unreal City but in another ancient religious text Upanishad. Eliot, in his notes on the poem, remarked that "What the Thunder Said" contains the theme of "the present decay of eastern Europe" ("Notes" 52). Because of this decline and decay, the speaker does not find resolution within the city, or the development of western civilization, but he turns to an ancient eastern religious text. Instead of quoting the almost identical expression from the Bible in Philippians 4:7, "the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding," Eliot deliberately includes this line from the Upanishad, a Hindu text. This turning away from the religion

and mindset that gave security to the western world to an ancient eastern religion emphasizes the futility and failure of Western society in providing security and a resolution for the modern man's confusion and doubt. At the end of his search through the fragments of modern thought and society, the modern man finds his efforts and the society around him to be ultimately futile and meaningless.

### **Impenetrability**

The idea that the poem is communicating through the fragmentation of the text and the speaker's failure to find meaning despite the disjointedness is that truth and reality are uncertain and ultimately unknowable. The poem uses the themes of fragmentation and incoherence to purport an epistemological idea—the obscure nature of the text created by allusiveness and incoherence communicates, according to Eric Svarny, the notion that the text is ultimately impenetrable. Even with a thorough understanding of the allusions and themes in the poem, the intentional obscurity and confusion within the text do not change. The poem seems to “[promise], for a moment, to achieve a unity of vision, with all of its voices . . . but the moment rapidly expires and the gesture proves futile” (Habib 241). The prevailing message of this purposeful and artful absurdity is that the text is impenetrable, just as truth and meaning are obscure and impenetrable in the modern world. Many scholars have been attempting to give clarity and meaning to the poem, but identifying a single and definite meaning remains a difficult task. Likewise, finding meaning and coherence is ultimately futile and unsuccessful at the end of the poem; the difficulty in interpretation demonstrates the futility of attempting to connect the fragments and dichotomies into a whole and to make sense out of the despair and barrenness in the modern world. This focus on impenetrability is a distinctly modern

characteristic that Eliot demonstrates through his poem. Svarny notes that unlike neo-classical poetry, which is characterized by clarity and explanation, modernist poetry is characterized by obscurity, ambiguity, and experiment (161). Reflecting the qualities of its time period, *The Waste Land* is laden with fragments and obscure literary elements that “no knowledge of literary antecedents can clarify an effect” and the disjointedness of the text “[stirs] echoes rather than providing meanings” (163). Furthermore, the impenetrability of the text and thus truth and meaning results in the realization of the “chronic ‘impossibility’ of articulating history itself” (Ross 134). The speaker attempts to make sense of reality and reflects on the images of the post-war society. However, the impenetrability and the despair of the modern society make his attempt futile and unfruitful. Ross argues that “despite our time-honored acceptance of *The Waste Land* metaphor, it remains to be shown how the insolvency of post-War history is, in fact, effectively written into Eliot’s poem” (135). The metaphor and the allusions are explained, but the Great War is still a problem that confuses and disillusion Europe and shatters the sense of security and meaning that people of the previous era relied on.

### **Meaninglessness of Relationship**

In a modernist society that lacks hope and a sense of significance, many aspects of life lose their meaning and are reduced to trivial things. One aspect of life during the modern era that is emphasized in the poem is human relationships. In *The Waste Land*, relationships between people in the modern society are reduced to something that is sterile, lifeless, and dry. The various characters that appear in the poem are unable to carry a logical and coherent dialogue. As a part of the already fragmented whole, any attempt for conversations between people reflects the fragmented and incoherent

structure and content of the poem. This impossibility of meaningful communication corresponds to the dismal and hopeless reality of the modern society and also intensifies and dramatizes the speaker's anguish and frustration at the isolation and loneliness in the modern world. For example, the speaker's attempt to have a conversation in the second part, "A Game of Chess," demonstrates the impossibility of communication and thus relationship: "Speak to me. Why do you never speak. Speak. / what are you thinking of? What thinking? What? / I never know what you are thinking. Think" (112-114). The speaker of these lines is unable to communicate with the person he is speaking to; this failure in communication reflects the isolation and lack of connection that characterize relationships within the disillusioned and dismal modern society. The speaker again questions, "What is that noise now? What is the wind doing? / Nothing again nothing. / Do / You know nothing? Do you see nothing? Do you / remember / Nothing?" (119-124). These lines suggest a sense of chaos and obscure the meaning of potentially unequivocal expressions; the speaker is unable to communicate anything articulate and meaningful. Through this depiction of relationships and communication, Eliot demonstrates that one of the social effects of the War is the lack of harmony and community and the ultimate isolation of the individual resulting from the sense of despair and meaninglessness in the midst of the desolation of modern Europe.

One aspect of human relationships that is often trivialized in the poem is that of romantic love and thus the significance and meaning of love and relationships. In "A Game of Chess," relationships and love are reduced to something that one seeks for self-centered pleasure. The discussion of the relationship between Albert and his wife suggests a sense of a lack of satisfaction and meaning; the characters "live sterile lives

with synthetic comforts and sex that substitutes for love” (McGann 18). Eugenia Gunner notes that “sexual love in *The Waste Land* is a failure of spirit and loss of passion in the world” (24). This idea of sterility and infertility pervades the image of the barren landscape and the description of human relationships throughout the poem. In her analysis of the theme of relationships in *The Waste Land*, Cyrena Pondrom notes that the poem is “about failure to achieve union—with an Absolute, an Other, the Self, an object for knowledge, and with culture and tradition—and fragmentation is its ultimate condition” (427). The idea of fragmentation not only characterizes the form of the poem but also describes the modern individual’s relationship to all things—to life, truth, knowledge, society, and others. The failure in communication and the trivialization of relationships demonstrate the “breakdown of a wide variety of kinds of human relationships, and a failure of love” (427). This lack of fulfillment and meaning in relationships and love is one of the greatest tragedies of the modern society. It is a “profound challenge to a stable order in social experience, an order which human cultures have sought to achieve through centuries of essential constructions of the self” (439). In a society in which relationships lack meaning and fulfillment, the modern individual becomes disillusioned at the lack of security and certainty that results from the failure of relationships.

### **Conclusion**

*The Waste Land*, because of its complexity and depth, is a difficult poem to understand and analyze. The most notable aspects of the poem that have been discussed in this analysis illumine some, though not all, characteristics of modernity that are depicted in the poem. According to Eliot’s image of the modern world in *The Waste*

*Land*, the modern society is surrounded by obscurity, chaos, disillusionment, and a desire to return to the ancient times of security and order. In a world void of meaning and fulfillment, the modern man is in despair at the futility of life and relationships. Because of its accurate depiction of modernity through the seemingly absurd yet realistic and intentional design, *The Waste Land* remains the greatest metaphor for the mindset and condition of modern Europe.

## Works Cited

- Bentley, Joseph, and Jewel Brooker. *Reading the Waste Land: Modernism and the Limits of Interpretation*. Amherst: U of Massachusetts P, 1990. Print.
- Bloom, Harold. *T. S. Eliot: Comprehensive Research and Study Guide*. Broomall, PA: Chelsea House, 1999. Print.
- Brooker, Jewel. "Dialectic and Impersonality in T. S. Eliot." *Journal of Literature and the History of Ideas* 3 (2005): 129-51. *MUSE*. Web. 5 Feb. 2012.
- . *Mastery and Escape: T. S. Eliot and the Dialectic of Modernism*. Amherst: U of Massachusetts P, 1994. Print.
- . "Transcendence and Return: T. S. Eliot and the Dialectic of Modernism." *South Atlantic Review* 59 (1994): 53-74. *JSTOR*. Web. 5 Feb. 2012.
- Cianci, Giovanni and Jason Harding. *T. S. Eliot and the Concept of Tradition*. New York: Cambridge UP, 2007. Print.
- Eliot, T[homas] S[tearns]. *The Waste Land and Other Poems*. Orlando: Harcourt, 1962. Print.
- Gunner, Jeanne. *T. S. Eliot's Romantic Dilemma*. New York: Garland, 1985. Print.
- Habib, Rafey. *The Early T.S. Eliot and Western Philosophy*. UK: Cambridge UP, 1999. Print.
- Kenner, Hugh. "Eliot's Moral Dialectic." *The Hudson Review* 2 (1949): 421-48. *JSTOR*. Web. 5 Feb. 2012.
- Kinney, Clare. "Fragmentary Excess, Copious Dearth: 'The Waste Land' as Anti-Narrative." *The Journal of Narrative Technique* 17 (1987): 273-85. *JSTOR*. Web. 5 Feb. 2012.

Lehman, Robert S. "Eliot's Last Laugh: The Dissolution of Satire in *The Waste Land*."

*Journal of Modern Literature* 32.2. (2008): 65-79. ProQuest. Web. 5 Feb. 2012.

McGann, Mary. "*The Waste Land* and *The Sound and the Fury*: To Apprehend the

Human Process Moving in Time." *The Southern Literary Journal* 9 (1976): 13-

21. JSTOR. Web. 5 Feb. 2012.

"Modernism." *Encyclopedia Britannica Online Academic Edition*. Encyclopedia

Britannica, 2011. Web. 5 Feb. 2012.

Pondrom, Cyrena. "T.S. Eliot: The Performativity of Gender in *The Waste Land*."

*Modernism/Modernity* 12 (2005): 425-42. Literature Online. Web. 5 Feb. 2012.

Rabate, Jean-Michel. "Tradition and T. S. Eliot." *The Cambridge Companion to T. S.*

*Eliot*. Ed. Anthony Moody. UK: Cambridge UP, 1994. 210-22. Print.

Rainey, Lawrence. *The Annotated Waste Land with Eliot's Contemporary Prose*. New

Haven, CT: Yale UP, 2005. Print.

Ross, Andrew. "*The Waste Land* and the Fantasy of Interpretation." *Representations* 8

(1984): 134-58. JSTOR. Web. 5 Feb. 2012.

Smidt, Kristian. *Poetry and Belief in the Work of T. S. Eliot*. London: Routledge and

Kegan Paul, 1961. Print.

Spanos, William. "Repetition in the Waste Land: A Phenomenological De-struction."

*Revisions of the Anglo-American Tradition* 7 (1979): 225-85. JSTOR. Web. 5 Feb.

2012.

Svarny, Eric. *The Men of 1914: T. S. Eliot and Early Modernism*. Philadelphia: Open UP,

1989. Print.