

**Title** – “Quintessential Eliot: Elemental Imagery in *The Waste Land*”

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**Abstract:** While April may be the cruelest month, *The Waste Land* is arguably one of T. S. Eliot’s most puzzling poems. Seemingly inscrutable symbols interact in strange ways, and incoherence itself is used as a tool in the poem. In order to better understand what Eliot is doing and what he is saying about the world, my paper “Quintessential Eliot: Elemental Imagery in *The Waste Land*” explores imagery and symbolism pointing towards the four Aristotelian elements in nature, with the addition of aether as a fifth. “The Burial of the Dead” relates to earth, “What the Thunder Said” carries an association with the sky or air, and “The Fire Sermon” and “Death by Water” tend to speak for themselves in this matter. In order to fully understand this connection, this paper will address the significance of the five elements in both Greek and Hindu thought. As textual research reveals, Eliot draws on both schools of thought, as well as his own beliefs, to illustrate the meaninglessness and futility of modern life. Through earth, Eliot demonstrated death and barrenness; water is symbolic of an almost baptismal kind of death without the hope of resurrection; fire is illustrative of fruitless lust, and air symbolizes futility. Examining the aether in *The Waste Land* is also quite revelatory in terms of Eliot’s hope for the achievement of meaning amid the fruitless landscape of modernity. Eliot’s work displays the failure of

modernity, which would later lead to postmodernity, making his observations in *The Waste Land* well worthy of study as they relate to man's modern breakdown and even where he stands today.