View metadata, citation and similar papers at core.ac.uk

brought to you by CORE

provided by Virtual Commons - Bridgewater State University

Undergraduate Review

Volume 11 Article 6

2015

"The Chambers of the Sea" and a "Knock Upon the Door": Questioning Meaning in T.S. Eliot's "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock" and "The Waste Land"

Mara M. Araujo
Bridgewater State University

Follow this and additional works at: http://vc.bridgew.edu/undergrad_rev

Recommended Citation

Araujo, Mara M. (2015). "The Chambers of the Sea" and a "Knock Upon the Door": Questioning Meaning in T.S. Eliot's "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock" and "The Waste Land". *Undergraduate Review*, 11, 26-30.
Available at: http://vc.bridgew.edu/undergrad_rev/vol11/iss1/6

This item is available as part of Virtual Commons, the open-access institutional repository of Bridgewater State University, Bridgewater, Massachusetts.
Copyright © 2015 Mara M. Araujo

"The Chambers of the Sea" and a "Knock Upon the Door": Questioning Meaning in T.S. Eliot's "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock" and "The Waste Land"

Mara Araujo

Man has often struggled to understand the pain and suffering that plagues human existence. Out of the rubble of war and the breakdown of the individual, only fragments remain, pieces scattered about yet bound by the journey within. This is the world of Prufrock; this is the world of the wasteland. Considered by many to be T.S. Eliot's finest works, both "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock" and "The Waste Land" present broken thoughts, images, and allusions, fused together to reveal the disintegration of the modern world. In "Prufrock," allusions to great art, literature, and heroic Christian figures serve as ironic comparisons to a prudent, cautious man who is unwilling to commit. Though he searches for answers in his struggle, Prufrock's stifling idleness and inhibition ultimately place him in his own private hell, the Inferno from which there is no escape. Similarly, in "The Wasteland," the recurring allusions, among them Shakespeare's The Tempest and Dante's Purgatory, highlight the speaker's quest for meaning in a seemingly meaningless and desolate landscape. Nevertheless, the various speakers in "The Wasteland," united in the blind prophet Tiresias, find themselves in Purgatory, searching for illumination and salvation. Thus, "The Wasteland" differs from "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock" because, although the speakers in both poems are searching, Prufrock's journey ends in definite pessimism while the speaker in "The Waste Land" is left still searching.

One need look no further than the title of "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock" to see how fatally doomed Prufrock is. For instance, there is usually an expectation that a love song should be tender and beautiful, yet his name inspires no such sentiments. What is audibly clear, however, is the rhythmic dissonance between the "love song" and the unromantic Prufrock. In fact this first ironic juxtaposition announces all future ironies, which set Prufrock apart as a failure. The title is then followed by six lines of Italian poetry taken directly from Dante's Inferno. The epigraph relates the words of Guido da Montefeltro, a man forever trapped in the Inferno, who confides in Dante because he does not believe Dante can escape hell and reveal his secrets to the world. Critics regard this as a telltale sign of Prufrock's inevitable demise, for Dante will return to write his poem, but Prufrock cannot escape his private hell (Ellis). Prufrock is trapped by "an overwhelming question" which he constantly toys with yet never fully addresses (Eliot 10). He notices in a room the women who "come and go / Talking of Michelangelo" (Eliot 13-14). He wants to open the door and speak to one of the women, but he cannot do it. Instead, he contemplates the "yellow fog" and "yellow smoke" that "curled once about the house, and fell asleep" (Eliot 20-22). Thus, his "own lack of resolve is like the languid fog, the cultivated boredom of ordinary, passive citizens" ("The Love Song"). Furthermore, his "lack of resolve" also stands in high contrast with Michelangelo, one of the art world's most influential figures. Of course, this is but one of the many instances where Prufrock is left comparatively weak.

As he continues his rationalizations, Prufrock believes that "indeed there will be time" (Eliot 23). The constant excuse for procrastination becomes a recurring thought, inspired by Andrew Marvell's 1681 poem "To His Coy Mistress." Unlike Prufrock, Marvell's speaker argues that there is not enough time, and he and his lover must hurry to consummate their relationship. In other words, Marvell's speaker is a man of action; however, Prufrock is not. Prufrock proves to be not only indecisive, but also highly insecure. He is acutely aware of his "bald spot" and grows increasingly concerned that others will also notice his "thin" arms and legs. All he can do is daydream about the women he longs to talk to, yet even in his daydream his ability to communicate is hindered by insecurity and fear that the women will belittle him. He is, as J. Hillis Miller observes, "like a man running in a dream. However far [he] goes, he remains imprisoned in his own subjective space, and all his experience is imaginary." As he becomes increasingly self-conscious, Prufrock longs for simplicity. Prufrock believes he "should have been a pair of ragged claws / Scuttling across the floors of silent seas" (Eliot 73-74), rather than the bold man that would live out his desires. He admires even shellfish, the lowest form of life, if only for their movement "because they neither think nor speak; they simply act, something he is unable to do" (Blythe).

Although Prufrock's continues to cite great historical and literary figures, their greatness only serves to highlight his inadequacy. Even as he envisions his head "(grown slightly bald) brought in upon a platter," he is "no prophet" like the martyred

John the Baptist (Eliot 82-84). The comparison to greatness is no comparison at all, undone by the fixation on his bald spot. As he becomes more and more vulnerable, Prufrock continues to suggest that he is not worthy of the role of main character and confesses that he is also "not Prince Hamlet." He negates his role as Hamlet, preferring instead the position of an attendant lord, "one that will do / To swell a progress, start a scene or two, / Advise the prince; no doubt, an easy tool…At times, indeed, almost ridiculous-- / Almost, at times, the Fool" (Eliot 111-119). Once again, the positive image is thwarted by the negative undertones. The Fool whom Prufrock so easily identifies with is Yorick, the dead fool in Hamlet. The theme of death that foreshadows the remaining lines of the poem becomes more pronounced.

Prufrock ends his "decisions and revisions" (Eliot 48) with a disconcerting final statement about the futility of the material world. He concludes with death as "human voices wake us, and we drown" (Eliot 126-130). The water, which serves as a possible source of revival and restoration in "The Waste Land," has the opposite effect in "Prufrock." The waves are nothing more than a cold reminder of his insecurity; even the imaginary mermaids will not sing to him. In Prufrock's world, life is a daydream and there is no clear delineation between the state of life and death. Rather, as Jonathan Childs writes, "Like souls in the Inferno, Prufrock exists in a kind of living death [and] the more life he has left to live, the more he is left to wonder and to question" his dreamlike state. He wastes time and never asks his question. Although his mind has been feverishly at work recalling great heroic figures of the past, they are only useful in exposing the chaos in his mind. They all represent something great to aspire to, yet Prufrock sees that he does not measure up. For Prufrock, life was over the day it began.

The death theme continues in "The Waste Land," but what sets it apart from "Prufrock" is that the positive images, although often linked with decay, offer hope or perhaps a way out of the wasteland. As "Prufrock" began with an Italian epigraph, so "The Waste Land" begins in a similar fashion. A Greek and Latin epigraph discloses the story of Sibyl, from Petronius' Satyricon. Sibyl wants to die because, although she was granted eternal life, she failed to ask for eternal youth and is confined to a bottle to live out her days as a wasted shell. The quote depicts not only the struggle of the denizens of the wasteland, represented by the imprisoned Sibyl, but also the struggle that one might have understanding the fragmentary form of poem. The use of multiple languages also signals the poem's universality, applicable to the struggle of all humans, independent of geography.

The first section of the poem, entitled "The Burial of the Dead," highlights a key problem for those stuck in the wasteland; the residents are resistant to a spiritual rebirth. Resistance is characterized not only by the various voices, but also by the setting. In the wasteland, "April is the cruelest month, breeding / Lilacs out of the dead land, mixing / Memory and desire, stirring / Dull roots with spring rain" (Eliot 1-4). In parody of Chaucer's "General Prologue" in The Canterbury Tales, neither spring nor rain is celebrated as a source of life. The winter, however, is said to have "kept us warm, covering / Earth in forgetful snow, feeding / A little life with dried tubers" (5-7). To be sure, "April is anthromorphically cruel. By trying to awaken irresponsive roots, it is cruel. Since rebirth implies some effort on [the Waste Landers part] and any spiritual effort is hateful to them, they prefer winter or spiritual death" (Vijaya). The jetsetter Marie explains her fright when, as a child, her cousin took her out on a sled (16-18). She, as with many of the characters that appear in "The Waste Land," is afraid to relinquish control. Marie prefers instead, "pleasure and physical comforts" rather than "the shower of rain [which] surprises her and she seeks shelter from it as she is unaware of its purifying and fertilizing significance" (Vijaya).

In the midst of the uninspiring images of the Waste Landers' obstinacy, the recurring signs of life remain persistent as a constant reminder of the possibility of revival. For instance, even as the modern world relies on the death predictions of Madam Sosostris, the "famous clairvoyant…known to be the wisest woman in Europe," the contrasting image of the drowned Phoenician Sailor with "pearls that were his eyes" serves as a reminder of the possibility of rebirth (Eliot 43-47). While Madam Sosostris provides a warning of death by water, the quote from Ariel's song in Shakespeare's The Tempest, alludes to the idea that death does not have to be the end:

> Full fathom five, thy father lies.
> Of his bones are coral made;
> Those are pearls that were his eyes;
> Nothing of him that doth fade
> But doth suffer a sea-change
> Into something rich and strange. (1.2.400-405)

In contrast to Prufrock's drowning, this drowning demonstrates the transformation that can occur to change circumstances in the wasteland. In closing the first section of the poem, the same image reoccurs in the form of a question posed by the speaker: "That corpse you planted last year in your garden, has it begun to sprout? Will it bloom this year?" (Eliot 70-71). Even though the question begins with the grotesque image of the corpse, the connection to the garden inspires the death and rebirth theme. The protagonist realizes that death carries the potential to sprout into a new life form.

In Section II, “A Game of Chess,” a similar image insinuates into the chaos of a couple’s sterile relationship. A wealthy upper-class woman, ironically compared to passionate figures such as Cleopatra and Dido, struggles to communicate with her husband. Even so, in the midst of her “strange synthetic perfumes/Above [her] antique mantel was displayed… the change of Philomel, by the barbarous king / So rudely forced; yet there the nightingale / filled all the desert with inviolable voice” (Eliot 87-101). The display of Philomel represents another life reborn from the death of the old. She has been purified through suffering, and even though the modern world only understands her song as a perverse “Jug Jug” (Eliot 103), her melody echoes still. Philomel’s song also mirrors the wealthy woman’s plea as she demands from her husband, “Are you alive, or not? Is there nothing in your head?” (Eliot 126) While her husband briefly contemplates Ariel’s song, the woman continues to ask questions that remain unanswered. Their situation is left unresolved, yet they are “waiting upon a knock upon the door” (Eliot line 138). The woman desires to “break the narrow cage of routine to which she is tied, [and she] is waiting for something to happen” (Vijaya). In an active and desperate questioning of her current state, the woman is representative of humanity’s hunger for meaning. Thus, her questioning distinguishes her from Prufrock, as he does not keep his search active but is instead drowned by the failure to find meaning. There are no answers for the woman as she is still in Purgatory, still seeking. That her search does not end highlights Eliot’s changing vision, from the complete pessimism in Prufrock’s world to the possibility of spiritual renewal in the dry wasteland.

Part III, or “The Fire Sermon,” calls for purification by means of fire. It is here that Tiresias finally asserts his presence as the all-seeing observer and participant in “The Waste Land.” He observes the typist preparing for an expected guest, and criticizes the mechanical sexual exchanges found in the modern age, declaring, “I Tiresias, old man with wrinkle dugs / Perceived the scene, and foretold the rest” (Eliot 228-229). After the sex act, which he compares to an assault, the woman, “puts a record on her gramophone,” calling to Tiresias’ mind the music coming from a church:

> This music crept by me upon the waters […]
> I can some times hear
> Beside a public bar in Lower Thames Street,
> The pleasant whining of a mandolin
> And a clatter and a chatter from within
> Where fishermen lounge at noon: where the walls
> Of Magnus Martyr hold
> Inexplicable splendor of Ionian white and gold.
> (Eliot 257-265)

Often considered one of the most encouraging images in the entire poem, this particular contemplation relates to a recurring image found in the Holy Grail and the Fisher King myths.

Eliot’s interest in myths is pronounced as he “seems to imply that ‘The Waste Land’ is a modern grail legend, and that the overarching narrative of the poem is one of the journey to the empty chapel” (Bolton). The church is thus the quester’s final goal, where the Grail will be found and used to restore the King’s dry kingdom. Of course, the journey is not yet over and the speaker continues with the theme of the purifying fire, “Burning burning burning burning / O Lord Thou pluckest me out / O Lord Thou pluckest” (Eliot 308-310). His desperate cry carries both “a warning from Eastern religions against the sins of the flesh” and a “confession from the Western church father Augustine of his own foolish lusts,” but the lines also illustrate the possibility of extracting meaning from the ashes (Taylor).

The Eastern influence originates in the section’s title, a reference to the Buddha’s Fire Sermon. In his sermon the Buddha suggests that “a rejection of earthly desire is the only way to be released from samsara, the cycle of birth and death that is the suffering characteristic of humanity” (Johnson). Likewise, Augustine, in his Confessions, recognizes the difficulty of leading a Christian life and the subsequent need to purge one’s self of sexual sins and selfish desires. It is no coincidence that these allusions immediately follow two of the most sexually charged scenes of the poem. Consequently, in both the Western and Eastern reference, fire signals the need to cleanse one’s lust. While readers may interpret the sexuality in this particular section as further evidence of the disintegration of the Waste Landers, the amalgamation of the two theologies culminate in the possibility of finding a way out of the wasteland.

Many critics find the events in the fifth and final section, “What the Thunder Said,” also indicate the inescapable misery in the wasteland. Yet there are also fragmentary hints that the land may once again be restored to its former grandeur. Although lines 328 through 330 focus on “the living who are now dying / With a little patience,” lines 360 through 366 reference a reassuring image of the risen Christ. The speaker asks,

> Who is the third who walks always beside you?
> When I count, there are only you and I together
> But when I look ahead up the white road
> There is always another one walking beside you…

Although Jesus was not recognized by two of his followers on the road to Emmaus, the important and positive aspect of this scene is that the speaker notices that Jesus is not only present, but that he is always present. The inquisitive nature of

the observation once again references the search for meaning among the ruins of the wasteland. The symbolic church associated with the Holy Grail now returns as "the empty chapel" (387-388) which, "on the surface suggests failure in the quest, but in Arthurian legend the moment of greatest despair is the necessary moment that precedes the discovery of the Grail." In keeping with the Christ imagery, the Easter story similarly describes "the despair of finding an empty tomb…followed immediately by the joy of discovered resurrection" (Taylor).

Here, the poem moves into a final "heap of broken images" (Eliot 22) as the voice of the thunder provides the three principles of renewal from the Indian Upanishads. Returning to the universal aspect of the poem, Eliot employs three Sanskrit words, which not only address the fundamental problems of the wasteland, but also allude to possible solutions. Datta, the first statement, translates into the giving of one's self. Though the following lines ascribe pride and survival as the primary motivation of humans, they also construct the sacrificial nature of love as a miracle, ultimately the one ideal that should matter in the world. The second statement, Dayadhvam, calls for compassion in a world filled with lonesome people locked inside themselves. Finally, Damyata stresses the importance of self-control. Each of the three statements "suggests a getting beyond the obsessions of self…as a first step toward personal and societal renewal" (Taylor).

In the final lines of the poem, the image of Phlebas, the Phoenician-Fisher King, returns. He awaits something beyond drowning while fishing for peace that "passeth understanding." He sits "upon the shore with the arid plain behind [him]" and questions, "Shall I at least set my lands in order?" (Eliot 423-425) While he has not yet found all of the answers, he wonders still if he should prepare his land for rain, reiterating the recognition that rain is not only necessary but also imminent. The remaining fragments repeat the Upanishads, followed by the last line "Shantith shantith shantith" (Eliot 434). In his notes, Eliot defines this line as "The Peace which passeth understanding," or more specifically as "God give me peace." The repetition of this phrase echoes Augustine's cry, and his realization in "The Fire Sermon" that "there is a higher power who can and does rescue him from his desperate circumstances" (Taylor).

Though there is much anguish and perversion in "The Waste Land," the end does not equal to the despair found in the opening lines. On the contrary, it "makes a promise and prophecy… [and] suggests that regeneration is possible as it always has been possible through suffering and penance. Man has sinned and he must atone to God for his sins through sufferings" (Vijaya). However intangible the definition of hope and peace, it is something the human soul still yearns for. Unlike "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock," where religious references serve only as a comparative tool in order to expose Prufrock's shortcomings, in "The Waste Land," religious images signal the potential of a spiritual rebirth. The difference reflects a time in which Eliot "evinced a wary fascination not only with various denominations of Christianity, but with Buddhism, as well." Considering these earlier studies of different faiths and Eliot's eventual conversion to Christianity, one is left with a more optimistic reading of "The Waste Land." The poem "offers a bleak vision of modern life, but religion and literature remain the means by which one may transcend this bleakness" (Bolton).

By the end of "The Waste Land" and the "Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock," it is clear that a journey has taken place. The journey is a chaotic excursion that has instigated many questions along the way. For Prufrock, the inner conflict regarding his place in a changing world leads to a dead end. The futility of life is the only meaning ascertained from his journey. In "The Waste Land" too, the threat of hollowness is ever present. The difference, however, is that even in chaos, in doubt, and in the questions raised by one's labored existence, there are always signs that the speakers are on the verge of finding a way out. The speakers, who serve as a symbol for all who wrestle with meaning and purpose, cry out for peace.

Works Cited

Blythe, Hal, and Charlie Sweet. "Eliot's The Love Song Of J. Alfred Prufrock." *Explicator* 52.3 (1994): 170. Academic Search Premier. Web. 7 Nov. 2014.

Bolton, Matthew J. "Literary Contexts In Poetry: T. S. Eliot's "The Waste Land." *Literary Contexts In Poetry: T. S. Eliot's 'The Waste-land'* (2006): 1. Literary Reference Center. Web. 6 Nov. 2014.

Childs, John Steven. "The Love Song Of J. Alfred Prufrock." *Magill'S Survey Of World Literature*, Revised Edition (2009): 1-2. Literary Reference Center. Web. 7 Nov. 2014.

Eliot, T.S. "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock." Ed. Jahan Ramazani, Richard Ellmann, and Robert O'Clair. *The Norton Anthology of Modern and Contemporary Poetry*. 3rd ed. Vol. 1. New York: W.W. Norton, 2003. N. Print.

Eliot, T.S. "The Waste Land." Ed. Jahan Ramazani, Richard Ellmann, and Robert O'Clair. *The Norton Anthology of Modern and Contemporary Poetry*. 3rd ed. Vol. 1. New York: W.W. Norton, 2003. N. Print.

Ellis, Robert P. "The Love Song Of J. Alfred Prufrock." *Masterplots II: Poetry*, Revised Edition (2002): 1-3. Literary Reference Center. Web. 7 Nov. 2014.

Johnson, Allan. "Voices And Language In T. S. Eliot's The Waste Land." *Critical Insights: T.S. Eliot* (2010): 74-89. Literary Reference Center. Web. 6 Nov. 2014.

Miller, J. Hillis. *Poets of Reality: Six Twentieth-Century Writers*. Cambridge, MA: The Belknap Press of Harvard UP, 1965.

Taylor, Daniel. "Living With a Big Poem: Reflections on the Waste Land." *Books & Culture* Sept.-Oct. 2005: 42+. Literature Resource Center. Web. 11 Nov. 2014.

"The Love Song Of J. Alfred Prufrock." *Magill Book Reviews* (1990): Academic Search Premier. Web. 7 Nov. 2014.

Vijaya, K. R. "A Critical Study Of The Wasteland: Poetry As Metaphor." *Language In India* 10.2 (2010): 21-109. Communication & Mass Media Complete. Web. 6 Nov 2014

About the Author

Mara Araujo is a graduating senior majoring in English and minoring in Communications. Her paper was completed in the fall semester of 2014 as part of the Modern British Poetry course taught by Dr. Tom Curley (English). Upon graduating, Mara plans to pursue a career in publishing.