

Discussion Questions for "The Waste Land"

"The Waste Land" is a complex poem filled with literary allusions and multiple themes. Several of the themes of the poem are listed below, as well as a catalog (non-exhaustive) of literary allusions.

Themes

- The Holy Grail

The Grail theme is alluded to throughout the poem. According to Grail legends, the grail is the cup used by Jesus at the Last Supper. As such, it is a holy relic and central to Christian theology. During the Middle Ages, several quests were undertaken to find the grail. Various reasons were given for the quests, including the ability for the grail to heal the sick.

One of the legends which sprang up dealt with an aging king, known as the Fisher King, who attempted to find the grail to restore his health. As king, the fate of his kingdom was tied up with his personal fate, so that as he suffered, his kingdom suffered, leading to droughts and famine. The references to the drowned Phoenician sailor, the cracked and parched earth and the drought all point to the tie-in to the Fisher King.

- The death of the King and the connection with the king and sacrifice

The Golden Bough, written by Sir James Frazer, was an influential book dealing with mythology, religion, and culture. Eliot read this book and made several references to the book in "The Waste Land." The central tenet of Frazer's work was that the vitality of the king was connected in the minds of his subject, with the vitality of the land. If the king lost his vitality, then the land lost its vitality. Rather than have the land (and therefore all the people) lose its vitality by the senescence and death of the king, the people would sacrifice the old king and appoint a new, robust king in place of the old king.

Frazer noted this pattern repeating in several cultures and believed that the pattern was also seen in the birth/death/regeneration cycle of the seasons. He theorized that this birth/death/regeneration cycle led to the development of demi-gods (such as Adonis, Attis, Orpheus, etc.) who signified this seasonal change. Eliot made use of this theme in the work, but questioned whether the pattern still held true, or whether the gods would not come back.

- Sacred or Scriptural allusions

Eliot makes use of allusions to Jewish, Christian and Buddhist scriptures throughout the work. He references *Ecclesiastes*, the *Psalms*, the New Testament (*Works of the Apostles*), Buddha's "Fire Sermon" and the *Upanishads* in the poem. Many of the references are elegiac and point to the past, echoing the theme that the patterns which held in the past might not hold in the present.

- Literary allusions

Eliot begins the poem with a reference to the *Canterbury Tales*, and the month of April. In the prelude to the *Canterbury Tales*, Chaucer writes: "When April with his sweet showers/ The drought of March pierces to the root/ And bathes every vine in such liquor (water)/Of which virtue is engendered (made) the flower."

Eliot's take on the showers of April is quite different. In "The Waste Land," the rain is cruel and "breeds lilacs out of the dead land." It is evident that Eliot's rain is not generative, but harmful.

Throughout the poem, Eliot makes references to *The Tempest*, particularly the sea scenes "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. . ."

Similarly, the lines in "The Waste Land" recall Clarence's dreams when imprisoned in Richard III "Methoughts I saw a thousand fearful wracks; / A thousand men that fishes grow'd upon; /Wedges of gold, great anchors, heaps of pearl, /Inestimable stones, unvalued jewels, /All scatt' red in the bottom of the sea. . ."

Eliot frequently quotes lines from *The Divine Comedy*, most notably those referring to the multitude of dead souls crossing the river Acheron: "I had not thought death had undone so many. Sighs short and infrequent, were exhaled, /And each man fixed his eyes before his feet." Dante borrowed these lines from Virgil, when Aeneas visited Hades: "Multitudinous as the leaves that fall in a forest/ At the first frost of autumn, or the birds that out of the deep-sea/Fly to land in migrant flocks, when the cold of the year/Has sent them overseas in search of a warmer climate./ So they all stood, each begging to be ferried across first. . ." (By the way, Frazer borrowed the title of his book, *The Golden Bough* from the *Aeneid* "There is a golden bough—gold the leaves and the tough stem--/Held sacred to Proserpine; the whole wood hides this bough. . ."

Virgil, in turn, borrows the image of souls appearing as thick as leaves in a forest from Homer in *The Iliad* "As in the generation of leaves, so is that of humanity. /The wind scatters the leaves on the ground, but the live timber/ burgeons with leaves again in the season of spring returning. / So one generation of men will grow while another dies."

- World War One

Eliot makes a direct reference to the war in the second section of the poem when he talks about Lil's husband being "demobbed." The First World War had a profound effect on people because for the first time, war became impersonal, technological and brutally efficient.

Questions

1. Does Eliot believe that the world, or at least Western civilization, is coming to an end? Does his tone suggest this?

2. How do the images of the Fisher King and the appointment of a new king influence the work? Do you think Eliot has hope that a new, vital king will be found?
3. How do the images Eliot employs (death, flooding, famine, drought) imply that the poem is about death and lack of regeneration?
4. Does Eliot believe that ennui is a force leading to the dissolution of the world?
5. Why does Eliot make use of allusion to sacred writings in his poem? What is he trying to say by using these writings?
6. Is it significant that the *Tempest* is Shakespeare's last play, and that Eliot makes references to dead characters in the play?
7. Why is the Arthurian legend incorporated into the poem?
8. Does Eliot hint that regeneration is not possible in his references to incomplete or vapid sex acts?
9. Why does Eliot reference Cleopatra in the poem? Is he trying to connect the fate of Antony and Cleopatra (who ultimately lost to Augustus, to modern men?)