

Reading *The Waste Land* as it turns 100

## **T. S. Eliot's epic poem is a masterpiece—but what do we do with its view of classical Western tradition?**

by [Rebecca Bratten Weiss](#) in the [December 2022](#) issue



Writer and poet T. S. Eliot's *The Waste Land* was first published in 1922. (Source images: Camera Press / Unsplash)

In 2018, my sister and I visited the parish church of St. Michael and All Angels' in the English village of East Coker, where poet T. S. Eliot is buried. Although born in the United States, Eliot lived in England for much of his life, and his burial in the Somerset hamlet, where his ancestors had once lived, was in keeping with the convictions of a man for whom tradition was eminently important.

Arriving at Eliot's grave marked the end of a literary pilgrimage we had begun 20 years earlier. The plan was to visit each of the sites referenced in the titles of the poems in his *Four Quartets*. What began as frivolous literary tourism became over time a life motif. Tracking down Eliot sites felt like following a thread I'd picked up back when I was just beginning to explore the texts that had been formative for Eliot

and his writing: the Greek and Roman classics, Augustine, Dante, Shakespeare.

Back then I had believed that my task as an academic, writer, and educator was to preserve and interpret messages from an older time as guidelines for navigating the shifting contemporary world. The point of preserving tradition was the preservation of humanity itself. “These fragments I have shored against my ruins,” Eliot wrote in *The Waste Land*.

But at the end of our journey in East Coker, thinking about Eliot and about tradition felt different from the way it felt when we began. I had begun to question the implicit assumption that keeping alive the old traditions of Western thought could save humanity from our own fundamental stupidity and indecency. This, even in prepandemic 2018, was no longer a belief I could honestly entertain.

This month marks the 100th anniversary of the publication of *The Waste Land*, which is widely regarded as Eliot’s masterpiece and one of the most important works of 20th-century literature. The year 1922 was a landmark year for literary modernism in general, a time when writers who had survived World War I and the 1918 influenza pandemic were compelled to find new forms in an unrecognizable world. Today, many of the historical conditions of 1922—pandemic, war, rising authoritarianism—have returned. Perhaps it’s simply that humanity is always in a condition of catastrophe; everything is always falling apart, and we’re always working to keep it together. But this is particularly ominous when we consider what followed in the decades after the poem’s publication, including the continued ascendance of far-right European fascism and the Nazi Party. Amid all the catastrophes, similar movements are gaining traction today.

Eliot’s relationship to his own time was complex. He fervently attempted to align himself with tradition via the classics, but as an expatriate American in postwar Europe, he also belonged to what Gertrude Stein termed the Lost Generation. We might imagine *The Waste Land*, as a definitive work of modernism, to be iconoclastic. Yet for all its shattering of old norms and forms to clear the way for new ones, it is the opposite of iconoclastic. It’s more like the efforts of someone trying to salvage what’s left after the iconoclasts have swept through. It is Eliot’s monumental effort to assert unity amid the radical fragmentation of modernism.

Fragmentation—of postwar European civilization, of the household, even of consciousness itself—is the work’s dominant theme, reflected in its juxtaposition of

multiple literary styles and allusions to the Upanishads, Augustine's *Confessions*, Dante, and dance hall tunes with splashes of quotidian conversation. Along with the recurrent metaphor of dryness or barrenness, the motif of fragmentation evokes a landscape shattered by cataclysm. This was a poem for a postapocalyptic world, when all the glorious traditions and precepts of Western civilization had proved insufficient to prevent the citizenry from throwing themselves into an orgy of pointless, nationalistic, mutual destruction.

Reading *The Waste Land* today feels like reading about our own lives. For post-9/11 readers, the image of "falling towers," which Eliot intended to signify the fall of great civilizations, feels painfully vivid. His depiction of alienated European expatriates and "hooded hordes" has a new significance amid current debates about immigration. The lingering impacts of a pandemic seem hauntingly relevant. Repeated allusions to desert wastelands, broken landscapes, and the sickness of the land itself speak to our fears of global climate catastrophe. The landscape of Europe between the wars looks eerily like the present day as the threat of nuclear war rises again.

It is as though the speaker of the poem truly is the Tiresias who has "foresuffered all." So I wonder how Eliot so thoroughly failed to see that the obsessive need to hold on to the dream of Western civilization would be responsible for so much more destruction.

I can think of too many champions of Western civilization among my acquaintances who, like Eliot, believe in the vital necessity of the classics for the preservation of the human spirit. I am no longer shocked that their devotion to the great ideals of the canon did not inoculate them against dangerous and xenophobic ideologies. In the US, they lent their intellectual talents to the MAGA movement. In Britain, they promoted Brexit.

I remember a professor with whom I first studied Eliot's work at a conservative Catholic university, a man of great eloquence I once regarded as a scholar and a gentleman. I remember the fervor with which he expounded in his classes on the glories of Western literature. And I remember how, during the 2016 presidential election, this same professor sent a heartfelt letter to each of his colleagues, imploring them not to give up on such a pro-life presidential candidate as Donald Trump on account of mere inadequacies in style. The particular inadequacy of style we were adjured to forgive was Trump's *Access Hollywood* brag about assaulting

women.

The right's insistence on the preservation and teaching of the Western canon as key to the salvation of society can incline scholars of that ideological bent to claim Eliot as an ally or patron. Likewise, the trend of bemoaning all this modern decadence gives them an appetite for an Eliotian aesthetic.

But "Eliot was far too clever a conservative to ally himself directly with Italian or German fascism—they were far too modern and flashy for him," points out critic Roz Kaveney, writing in the *Guardian*. Yes, Eliot was an inveterate snob. He was also clearly anti-immigration and, like Ezra Pound, antisemitic. Rejecting fascism because it isn't sufficiently sophisticated seems rather to miss the moral point. At the same time, it would be an error to assume that Eliot was indifferent to civilization's unmooring. An indifferent man would not have written a poem which so thoroughly maps out disillusion and disintegration.

From our vantage in history, the figure of T. S. Eliot seems to flicker between these two distinct iterations. On one hand, the author of "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock," *The Waste Land*, and *Four Quartets*, great works that capture perennial agons of the human heart and do so in language that has not lost its power nor been reduced to the curiosity of a period piece. On the other, the prim-faced bigot, the anxious snob, hoarding his shards and fragments of a broken civilization as though they could save him or anyone. Looking at the latter Eliot, it's easy to believe that he worked in a bank (which he did, from age 29 to 37) and liked it.

Eliot's extreme fastidiousness, his disdain even for the literary culture in which he moved, might have looked impressive to me once. Now it looks like a pose—a pose that I recognize in my far-right contemporaries. It's easy to see how his intellectual and cultural peers—and their descendants—would lack the heart to resist fascism.

That day in East Coker, with only my sister and the bones of Eliot in the church with me, I thought of all these people using the preservation of the Western canon to prop up their politics. I snapped out loud, "Get back here, Thomas Stearns, and collect your boys!"

When I teach *The Waste Land*, I do feel a little like an archaeologist who has arrived at the desolate landscape Eliot created to dig for lost bits and pieces of the great works of the Western tradition. As powerful as Eliot's language and rhetoric are, you don't need to hear the echo of Chaucer to appreciate the opening words, "April is

the cruellest month.” But once you start hearing those echoes, and the echoes within the echoes, the poem takes on multiple dimensions. One fragment leads to the next, and the next, opening doors into vast caverns of the past. It’s almost as though Eliot wanted to force our faces into the classics, saying, *Here’s some things you’re going to need for the end of the world.*

But the poem is more than a cultural project to save civilization; it is an act of personal desperation. The layers of allusion are intended not only to keep alive a disintegrating past but also to help the speaker make sense of his own disintegration.

This was personal for Eliot: he and his wife had both been seriously ill during the flu pandemic, and it had left them anxious and enervated. Some of the depictions of marital discontent in the poem, especially in the section titled “A Game of Chess,” portray not only an unhappy couple but an unhappy couple weakened by illness, trapped together in a miserable fever dream. Elizabeth Outka, in *Viral Modernism*, explores the influence of the pandemic on Eliot’s work, especially on the aesthetics of fragmentation and themes of hallucination and thirst. He frequently employs images of bodily distortion and mental delirium.

Eliot also associated the modern mind with fragmentation and an inability to put things into a coherent whole. In his essay on the Metaphysical poets, Eliot writes:

When a poet’s mind is perfectly equipped for its work, it is constantly amalgamating disparate experience; the ordinary man’s experience is chaotic, irregular, fragmentary. The latter falls in love, or reads Spinoza, and these two experiences have nothing to do with each other, or with the noise of the typewriter or the smell of cooking; in the mind of the poet these experiences are always forming new wholes.

I think Eliot exactly identifies what a poet’s work is, in any age, and why humans continue to be drawn to poetry, especially at times of great stress or pain or desire or joy: because we need that ability to put things together and find our place in that larger whole.

The modernists of Eliot’s era turned from the grandiose and historical to the personal and internal. *The Waste Land* is an epic, but it’s not about a hero who rides in to save the day. It’s about the individual journey from fragmentation to the peace

that passes understanding. In a similar way, James Joyce turned the epic voyage of Odysseus into the story of one man's day in *Ulysses*, and Virginia Woolf, in *Orlando*, wrote the biography of Vita Sackville-West as the story of a man of the Elizabethan era who wakes up as a woman whose life spans several centuries of English history. Like them, Eliot was trying his hand at making the interior, subjective, and personal take on the significance of the historical and epic.

In *The Waste Land*, we experience the speaker's personal fears and desires within the context of a larger story that ripples outward in time. In so many of the violent and ultimately nihilistic movements of nationalism across history we see this need for a broader identification with something bigger than oneself. It would be nice to think that poetry could save people from getting sucked into such movements, but the reality is, of course, that poetry can also be forced to serve nationalism's ends.

But we can read *The Waste Land* today in awe and admiration without buying the idea that only the preservation of Western tradition will save us. We can look instead for the story it tells about the tremendous human appetite for making order out of disorder as we search for our rightful place in our cosmos despite chaos.

*The Waste Land* can show us how to look back on the classical tradition in a positive way by awakening our latent ability to connect, to juxtapose disparate experiences across lines of culture, time, and subjectivity. E. M. Forster's mantra "only connect" may ring as having been too optimistic on the cusp of another world war, but after several other wars and two years of pandemic, we can surely see the value of making connections that matter, as the boundaries we have created between nations and cultures and times have been exposed as porous and artificial. We were all connected already. How we choose to honor that connection may determine how well we are shored against our own ruin.