Elizabethan and Jacobean writers

Edmund Spenser, ‘Prothalamion’ (1596)

‘Sweet Thames! run softly till I end my Song’ is the final line of each of this marriage song’s ten stanzas. In The Waste Land Spenser’s nymphs with their green hair and flowers — images of fertility — ‘are departed’ and the river flows not to life but to death.

Andrew Marvell, ‘To His Coy Mistress’

After Eliot’s corruption of ‘Prothalamion’ comes this grim and witty carpe diem poem of the mid-seventeenth century, and the last words we hear from her on stage, David's song from The Tempest about the supposed drowning of Ferdinand's father Alonso also haunts. The Waste Land, associated with the fertility god thrown in the sea and the Fisher King.

John Webster, The Spanish Tragedy (late 1500s)

Webster, who was the first poet to record the death of John Dudley, Duke of Northumberland, wrote The Spanish Tragedy, one of the most memorable and influential English plays of the Renaissance. It is a grim and witty carpe diem poem of the mid-seventeenth century, and the last words we hear from her on stage, David's song from The Tempest about the supposed drowning of Ferdinand’s father Alonso also haunts. The Waste Land, associated with the fertility god thrown in the sea and the Fisher King.

French poets

Charles Baudelaire, Les Fleurs du Mal (1857)

Baudelaire was interested in this erotic and occasionally decadent collection of poems. As Eliot noted, the collection is linked both to Webster’s Grail Quest and to Wagner’s opera, with its sound in the latter’s Parzifal. It contains the Arthurian knight’s successful completion of the quest and cure of the wounded king of the Grail knights.

Ezra Pound, ‘Parasites’ (1886)

Quoted in ‘The Fire Sermon’, this sonnet is linked both to Weston’s Grail Quest and to Wagner’s opera, with its sound in the latter’s Parzifal. It contains the Arthurian knight’s successful completion of the quest and cure of the wounded king of the Grail knights.

Ragtime music


Tennyson

Despite Eliot’s early harsh criticism of Tennyson and other Victorian poets, The Waste Land’s ‘handful of dust’ has its origin in Maud (and possibly the phrase on to Evelyn Waugh).

Myth and legend

Ovid, Metamorphoses

After Phryne’s rape and mutilation by her brother-in-law Teres, her sister Procne kills her own and Teres’ son and serves him as a meal to his father. In escaping from him, Procne is transformed into a swallow and Philomela into a nightingale. Their song is heard in ‘The Fire Sermon’ and referred to in ‘What the Thunder Said’. The depiction of Tereus, the blind seer who has been both man and woman, and referred to by Eliot as the poem’s ‘most important personage’, is taken in part from Ovid, but also from Homer’s Odyssey and the plays of Sophocles and Shakespeare.

Richard Wagner, Tristan und Isolde (1865)

Quoted twice by Eliot in ‘The Burial of the Dead’. This story of tragic adulterous passion, with its drive towards night and death, became associated with Arthurian legend; the Rhine-Maidens of Die Götterdammerung merge with Spenser’s nymphs in ‘The Fire Sermon’. This is the final line of each of this marriage song’s ten stanzas. In The Waste Land, associated with the fertility god thrown in the sea and the Fisher King.

Religious texts

The Bible and Book of Common Prayer


Hinduism and Buddhism

A lesson from the Upanishads (a collection of Sanskrit philosophical texts that form the basis of Hinduism) found in ‘What the Thunder Said’ teaches the need for self-control, giving and compassion. The Waste Land’s final word ‘Shantih’ (peace) is the traditional ending to an Upanishad.

Dante Alighieri, Inferno

Dante’s description of the crowd of workers crossing London Bridge alludes to Dante’s unhappy spirits who in life had neither debated nor been unlawful to God, but had cared only about themselves.

Dante Alighieri, Paradiso

The depiction of Tereus, the blind seer who has been both man and woman, and referred to by Eliot as the poem’s ‘most important personage’, is taken in part from Ovid, but also from Homer’s Odyssey and the plays of Sophocles and Shakespeare.

William Carlos Williams, Spring and All (1923)

Response to The Waste Land challenging its view of spring, especially in ‘by the road to the contagious hospital’.

Evelyn Waugh, A Handful of Dust (1934)

This book’s title, taken from The Waste Land, was used to forego an unpromising scheme, including infidelity. The full line is ‘I will show you fear in a handful of dust’. Waugh’s novel Night Train retained the title of the poem.


From her collection Making Cocoa for Kingsley Amis, Cope’s limericks are wicked parodies of the original text.

Digital technology

In 2011 The Waste Land app, which contains audio and video readings, line annotations, interviews, a photo gallery and expert analysis, became astonishingly successful, getting rave reviews from academics and technology experts alike and earning back its production costs in only six weeks.

Other cultural references


Francis Ford Coppola, Apocalypse Now (1975, film)

Doctor Who: ‘The Lazarus Experiment’ and ‘The Hollow Men’ episodes

Andrew Lloyd Webber and Tim Rice, Cats (1981, musical)

Regrettative notes

Eliot, perhaps playfully or ironically, footnoted his own poem, sometimes expansively, often with no more than a terse citation. Later he expressed regret for having sent ‘so many enquirers off on a wild goose chase after Tarot cards and the Holy Grail’. Eliot, though conscious use of literary allusion should make it simple to trace his sources, but he might have added that ‘poems aren’t always entirely honest’. Not all his sources are acknowledged even in the ‘Notes’, and literary influence can be significant if less conspicuous than allusion.

Immature poets imitate; mature poets steal

T.S. Eliot

Detective fiction

A number of writers of detective fiction have found Eliot’s work to be fertile ground when naming their work:

Raymond Chandler, The Long Goodbye (1953)

P. D. James, The Skull Beneath the Skin (1982)


Apocalyptic fiction and teen novels

Nevil Shute, On the Beach (1957)

Louise Lawrence, Children of the Dust (1985)

Meg Rosoff, Just In Case (2006)

Rami Garcia and Margaret Stohl, Beautiful Creatures (2009)

The Age of Eliot

The influence of Eliot’s poetry (as well as his literary criticism and his work as an editor at Faber and Faber) was so pervasive that much of the twentieth century has been dubbed ‘The Age of Eliot’. Critical Northcpr Frye wrote that ‘a thorough knowledge of Eliot is compulsory for anyone interested in contemporary literature. Whether he is liked or disliked is of no importance; but he must be read.’

Ezra Pound, To whom the Waste Land is dedicated (and himself influenced by Eliot), suggested substantial revision; the poem in manuscript to make it the line that we know today. The original epigraph to The Waste Land was taken from Conrad’s Heart of Darkness, ending with Kurtz’s: ‘The horror! The horror!’ Pound persuaded Eliot to alter it to something more ‘weighty’.

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