The Waste Land

The Burial of the Dead

“The Waste Land”, a dramatic monologue published by T. S. Eliot in 1922, is considered the masterpiece of Modernist poetry.

The poem is dedicated to Ezra Pound, the leader of the imagist movement (he saw image as the most important stylistic device), who suggested Eliot to cut out the narrative parts of his poem.

Poetry, instead of telling something, suggests an atmosphere; it communicates needs and it disregards cause and effect links. Its structure consisted, therefore, of the juxtaposition of scenes: the poem is like a patchwork, a sort of cubist work. Unity is given by the atmosphere, which is one synthesised by the title of the work (“The Waste Land”). Indeed, the title acquires different meanings: “Land” becomes a world (the Western one), a kind of culture. On the other side, “waste” expresses the condition of sterility of the world, land, culture as well as their spiritual sloth.

T. S. Eliot suggests reflection more than directly telling something. The book was considered almost impossible to read and the critics asked the poet to add some notes to the work (even if in his opinion the notes would not explain much more).

The obscurity of the text depends on its intertextual nature and it is the result of a poem made up by a frequent use of quotations from different cultures, languages, periods. The quotations are later reshaped to convey new meanings, suitable to the world Eliot was trying to talk to.

Now, considering structure, “The Waste Land” begins with a quotation from Petronius’ “Satyrikon”, where it is the Cumana Sybil to speak. She is questioned by a group of children about her desires and she immediately answers: “I want to die”. Then follows a dedication. The work is indeed dedicated to Ezra Pound who, in the Italian language, is connoted as “Il miglior fabbro” (Ezra Pound suggested those cuts that made of “The Waste Land” the dramatic monologue it is today).

The structure of the work is arranged into five sections and it is made up by 434 lines. The titles of each section refer in different ways to the same situation and rely on rites and rituals coming from different cultures: Western culture, Eastern cultures, the Indian culture.

The text, all in all, is a means to express the mood, the feelings of loss and despair of a generation, the Modernist generation, of which World War I is only one expression.

The “Land” is “Waste” because it can promise no harvest: in a few words it has become sterile, in opposition to the fertility of the past. Eliot criticizes the aridity of the present world, that seems to promise nothing but fragmentation and spiritual sloth.

The atmosphere is conveyed by a paradoxical Spring. People generally associate April to the rebirth of nature; April is “cruel” because it promises something that will never exist. April doesn’t give us the harvest we expect, but Lilacs (flowers used in funeral services) coming from a dead land. Promises are therefore neglected.

Human being has been disillusioned in the Modernist era and this is visible through Eliot’s recodification of Jeffrey Chaucer’s “Canterbury Tales” in the first two lines of the poem (April is no more “the sweetest month”, but the cruellest one, because there is no rebirth and all expectations are neglected).

Though the use of the progressive aspect, Eliot adds dynamism to the text, trying to explain what happens in April.

**April:**

* It shows a dead land, that offers flowers for the funeral
* It mixes memory and desire -> we don’t live in the present -> the Sybil can only see past and future and she doesn’t like her present
* Rain is supposed to fertilize the land, but the roots are dull
* All our natural expectations are denied

Degrading of nature -> degrading of culture