The Burial of the Dead , from T.S.Eliot’s The Waste Land (1922)

April is the cruellest month, breeding  
Lilacs out of the dead land, mixing  
Memory and desire, stirring  
Dull roots with spring rain.  
Winter kept us warm, covering  
Earth in forgetful snow, feeding  
A little life with dried tubers.  
Summer surprised us, coming over the Starnbergersee  
With a shower of rain; we stopped in the colonnade,  
And went on in sunlight, into the Hofgarten,  
And drank coffee, and talked for an hour.  
Bin gar keine Russin, stamm’ aus Litauen, echt deutsch.  
And when we were children, staying at the arch-duke’s,  
My cousin’s, he took me out on a sled,  
And I was frightened. He said, Marie,  
Marie, hold on tight. And down we went.  
In the mountains, there you feel free.  
I read, much of the night, and go south in the winter.

Aprile è il più crudele dei mesi, genera   
Lillà dalla terra morta, confondendo   
Memoria e desiderio,   
Le radici smorte con pioggia di primavera.  
L'inverno ci mantenne al caldo, coprendo  
Con neve immemore la terra, nutrì   
Una vita misera con tuberi secchi.  
L'estate ci sorprese, giungendo sullo Starnbergersee  
Con uno scroscio di pioggia: noi ci fermammo sotto il colonnato,   
E proseguimmo nella luce del sole, nel Hofgarten,   
E bevemmo caffè, e parlammo un'ora intera.   
Bin gar keine Russin, stamm' aus Litauen, echt deutsch.   
E quando eravamo bambini stavamo presso l'arciduca,   
Mio cugino, che mi condusse in slitta,   
E ne fui spaventata. Mi disse, Marie,   
Marie, tieniti forte. E ci lanciammo giù.  
Fra le montagne, là ci si sente liberi.  
Leggo gran parte della notte e d'inverno vado al sud.

The poem begins with the description of the seasons (spring, winter, summer)and moves from talking about nature to a personal experience. This experience is a memory about the dramatis personae’s holidays in Austria. The dramatis personae calls April ‘’the cruelest month’’ that is rather unusual because April and spring are usually connected to Rebirth, fertility, bloom and love. In fact the poem begins with an allusion to Chaucher’s The Canterbury Tales were April is connected to sweetness, flower and rebirth:

‘’ When in April the sweet showers fall  
And pierce the drought of March to the root, and all  
The veins are bathed in liquor of such power  
As brings about the engendering of the flower,  
5 When also Zephyrus with his sweet breath  
Exhales an air in every grove’’

Spring is described in an unexpected way and it is connected to death and barrenness. Firstly because it is defined ‘’cruellest’’ as if provoked violence against the ‘’dull roots’’ stirring them. Secondly because the flower the dramatis personae is speaking about, the lilacs, are flowers connected to death and funerals (as later, the hyacinths).

In addition the lilacs are bred ‘’out of the dead land’’. How it is possible? Spring didn’t made fertile the land but nevertheless the land bred out the flowers. This means that the ‘’dead land’’ or ‘’Waste land’’ and the Lilacs refer symbolically to something else. On the other hand this land (strangely kept warm by winter) seems connected to the dramatis personae who is speaking in first person plural (‘’ kept us’’, ‘’surprised us’’) even if later the reader understands that the speaking voice is referring to herself and her cousin.

The ‘’spring rain’’ recalls the image of water and life and then of baptism. Baptism and ‘’the Burial of the dead’’ are both religious ceremonies and belong to the Religious code. In these first lines, winter and spring, life and death, baptism and burial, fertility and barrenness seem to coexist and change roles (‘’mixing’’, ‘’stirring’’). April or the resurgent nature is called ‘’cruel’’ because it actually blooms on a modern land that is ‘’waste’’ and can generate nothing . The ‘’dead land’’ symbolize the modern society, waste (uselessness) and morally death.

The poem is, as Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock, a dramatic monologue. It is composed by juxtaposition of scenes connected by an atmosphere of death, ‘’waste’’ and ‘’sterility’’ created right from the start by the title.

The title The Waste Land refers to a myth from From Ritual to Romance(The Fisher King- Chapter IX)*,* in which Weston describes a kingdom where the king, known as the Fisher King, is sterile. This injury affects the kingdom itself. With its vital power gone, the kingdom was turned into a waste land. In order to restore the land, a hero must complete several tasks.

The first stanza of The Burial of the Dead makes reference to the ancient pre-Christian vegetation myths and fertility ceremonies analysed by Frazer in The Golden Bough, another source often used by Eliot.