

The Water Element in ‘The Waste Land’

The poem would undoubtedly be “clearer” if every symbol had a single, unequivocal meaning ; but the poem would be thinner, and less honest.¹

The four elements traditionally underpin all life. Earth supports and supplies food, air gives us oxygen and the winds, fire warms and illuminates—and water is *the* essential biochemical agent.

Earth has been described as the water planet. Water covers more than seventy per cent of its surface. The irony is that only a minute fraction of this watery abundance is directly accessible. Water is the one natural substance found in all three phases—solid, liquid and gaseous—and the only commonly occurring compound that expands upon freezing (if this were not so, lakes and rivers would freeze solid and aquatic life could not survive). Our own body masses are two-thirds H₂O. Even apparently dry dust is up to fifteen per cent water.²

Water’s physical, emotional, spiritual, socioeconomic and cultural significance is brought into sharp relief by the fact that the Oxford English Dictionary devotes a dozen pages to the word ‘water’—and this increases to thirty full pages if compounds such as ‘waterfall’ and ‘water-clock’ are included.

A vital symbol in all of humanity’s cultural and religious traditions, water is equated with both the primordial chaotic creative potential and the continual flux of manifest creation. Down through the ages, humans have viewed it as a source of life, a vehicle of cleansing and a centre of regeneration.³ So, it is no surprise water emerges as a central symbol in T.S. Eliot’s ‘The Waste Land’ (1922).

¹ Comment by Cleanth Brooks about ‘The Waste Land’.

² McTigue, 364–6.

³ Chevalier, 1081.

Written in the aftermath of the First World War—‘the war to end all wars’—Eliot’s poem reflects a chaotic world. A world stripped of its pre-war certainties, devoid of life-affirming beliefs and mercilessly buffeted by ‘the incessant rapid change that characterises the Machine Age’.⁴ Deeply disillusioned by the spiritual and temporal blindness all around him, Eliot subverts water’s usual fecund symbolism.⁵ Culture in ‘The Waste Land’ chokes under a pall of sterility. As F.R. Leavis commented:

The result is a breach of continuity and the uprooting of life ... The remoteness of the civilisation celebrated in ‘The Waste Land’ from the natural rhythms is brought out, in ironical contrast, by the anthropological theme. Vegetation cults, fertility ritual, with their sympathetic magic, represent a harmony of human culture with the natural environment, and express an extreme sense of the unity of life. In the modern Waste Land, ‘April is the cruellest month, breeding | Lilacs out of the dead land’ but bringing no quickening to the human spirit. Sex here is sterile, breeding not life and fulfilment but disgust, accidia, and unanswerable questions.⁶

Mimicking the first lines of the *Canterbury Tales*⁷ but completely reversing Chaucer’s joyful spirit, Eliot sets the tone at the outset—

April is the cruellest month, breeding
Lilacs out of the dead land,
Mixing Memory and desire, stirring
Dull roots with spring rain.

Though arising from the poet’s own personal turmoil, the poem evokes a powerful universality when construed as a modern evocation of Celtic fertility myths. Grounded in a Christian interpretation of the Grail legend and influenced by the ideas of Fraser and

⁴ Leavis, 90.

⁵ In fact, all four elements have become assertively recalcitrant in Eliot’s landscape—earth is sterile, air turns to ‘brown fog’, fire burns, and water drowns as well as being ineffective in promoting fertility.

⁶ Leavis, 90–1.

⁷ ‘Whan that Aprill with his shoures soote
The droghte of march hath perced to the roote,
And bathed every veyne in swich licour
Of which vertu engendred is the flour’

Weston, the poem compares the post-WW1 world to the Fisher King's wasteland—London is an 'Unreal City', life is fragmented, people try to find meaning in empty superstition.

Despite water and the season of spring being eternal partners in the symbolising of fertility and new life, the inhabitants of 'The Waste Land' cannot rejoice in spring, they prefer the barrenness of winter: 'Where water appears as desirable, it is only in recognition of a terrible need. One is more likely to drown in it as the vital principle than to slake his thirst by its symbolic meaning'.^{8,9}

World-wide, individuals and communities are out of tune with the sacred. Discord reigns. Spiritually-maimed and impotent, the Fisher King lurks 'behind the gashouse', fishing from the bank of a dirty, rat-infested canal. People are ignorant and afraid. Like Parsifal, they are not asking the right questions; their psyches are barren, shrivelled like 'dried tubers' and shut off from the fertile baptism of the Grail's healing waters, the power of spring's regeneration.

Love and sex have lost their lustre; they have become an arena for playing out fears and obsessions, or are stifled by poverty and the daily grind. And Carol Christ interprets the poem, particularly its final section, as a 'sexual fantasy that represents the collapse of civilisation as an engulfment within an exhausted and blackened vagina, suggested in the images of empty cisterns, exhausted wells, and bats "with baby faces" crawling "head downward down a blackened wall"'.¹⁰

⁸ Williamson, 125.

⁹ By contrast, in the Shinto practice of *misogi*—purification under a waterfall—participants commune with the *kami* (deity) of the falls, to be cleansed, renewed and united with nature (Picken, 101–2). And, in the biblical tradition, Jehovah is compared with spring rains and the dew which makes the flowers grow (Chevalier, 1083).

¹⁰ Christ, Internet article.

The timeless womb of the sea is ‘bleak and empty’.¹¹ Madame Sosostris’ Tarot omens are inauspicious: ‘Fear death by water’. The drowned Phoenician sailor’s pearl eyes stir readers’ memories of another watery tale, *The Tempest*:

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.
But doth suffer a sea-change
Into something rich and strange.¹²

Rivers represent our life’s journey, the everchanging waters of the here and now (as epitomised in Heraclitus’ remarks that everything flows and that one cannot step into the same river twice). They also symbolise transitions: positive, such as crossing over from illusion to enlightenment; and, negative: such as the rivers of the Greek underworld that mark the punishments of the damned—Acheron, pain; Phlegothon, burning; Cocytus, mourning; Styx, terror; Lethe, oblivion.¹³ Negative aspects of river symbolism abound in ‘The Waste Land’. In the lines—

Unreal City,
Under the brown fog of a winter dawn,
A crowd flowed over London Bridge, so many,
I had not thought death had undone so many

—Eliot describes a mass of people flowing like water *over* a bridge, mirroring the motion of the River Thames below them. Crowds attending the Armistice Day memorial services in the years immediately after WWI often overflowed from Westminster Abbey down Whitehall and over Westminster Bridge. While Eliot’s allusion to water evokes its ritual

¹¹ Eliot’s line ‘*Oed und leer das Meer*’ (‘bleak and empty the sea’) is a reference to the dying Tristan hearing that the ship carrying his love, Isolde, cannot be found (Wagner’s *Tristan and Isolde*).

¹² Shakespeare, *The Tempest*, I, ii.

¹³ Chevalier, 809.

and purificatory symbolism as a cleansing atonement for the horrors of war, he gives the scene a hellish tinge, by inferring through references to the *Inferno*¹⁴ that this crowd, that the world at large, had gone through, and were still enveloped in, the living hell of war and its aftermath.

The experience of war leads individuals and societies to dwell upon water's destructive aspects. The clammy waters of personal and collective sorrow, sterility and loss of hope percolates through the collective unconscious. Images of water as a poison, as a destroyer, infect people's minds—the treacherous mud of the trenches, places of death, horrific injury, unrelenting discomfort, parasites and waterborne diseases; the unforgiving sea, arena for naval battles. Perhaps befouled with cholera or typhoid, the very water one drinks cannot be trusted.

Eliot associates the Thames with war and armistice, and later with pollution and barren sex. And rivers beyond Europe offer scant hope; he writes off the sacred Ganges as parched and sunken in drought—

Ganga was sunken, and the limp leaves
Waited for rain, while the black clouds
Gathered far distant, over Himavant.¹⁵

Boats and water are inextricably linked. On a cosmic scale, as in Egyptian myth, boats carry the sun and moon across the celestial seas. In Buddhist symbolism, the ship is a vessel that carries us across the ocean of existence to the shores of enlightenment. The Christian Ark is a ship of salvation.¹⁶ But, rivers in the poem, far from flowing with the thirst-quenching, blessed waters of everlasting life,¹⁷ are carriers of sterile doom. People

¹⁴ For example, compare Eliot's 'I had not thought death had undone so many' with Dante's 'There was a row of people so long, that I never thought death had killed so many' *Inferno*, iii. 55–7.

¹⁵ A Himalayan peak at the headwaters of the Ganges.

¹⁶ Cooper, 152.

¹⁷ 'Jesus answered ... whosoever drinketh of the water that I shall give him shall never thirst; but the water that I shall give him shall be in him a well of water springing up into everlasting life.' (John 4:13–14)

drown in them; the poet quotes from Hamlet to remind us of Ophelia's watery grave.¹⁸ He also writes: 'The river sweats | Oil and tar'. These words link themes of industrial pollution and the imagery of water mixing with fire (such as the fire and water imagery in *The Twilight of the Gods*—an opera, incidentally, in which Wagner portrays Siegfried's death by spear; a fate that conjures up associations with the grievous spear-wound inflicted upon the Fisher King, the injury that renders him infertile and the land barren).

The 'dead season has come to the river'¹⁹ and the narrator, paraphrasing the bible, exclaims 'By the waters of Leman I sat down and wept'.²⁰ A fractured echo of the 'Rhine-daughters' of Wagnerian myth, three pseudo-sirens—modern nymph-substitutes, bleakly diaphanous simulacra of the bountiful fertility goddesses of spring—sing of their empty, unfulfilling passions. And, as 'the Thames-daughters recount their stories, we learn that they, like the Rhine-daughters, have been violated'.²¹

Psychologically, the Germanic Lorelei, and nymphs in general, express the female aspect of the unconscious.²² As guardian spirits of streams, springs and fountains, nymphs also symbolise the fatal enchantment of sensuality—the prophetic madness believed to seize humans who see them emerging from the water. An ambivalent feeling of fear and attraction, the 'fascination' of the nymphs can bring madness and destroy the personality.²³ D.H. Lawrence has dwelt upon this 'inhuman' aspect of nymphs and nature spirits:

In the woods and the remote places ran the children of Pan, all the nymphs and fauns of the forest and the spring and the river and the rocks. These, too, it was dangerous to see by day. The man who looked up to see the white arms of a nymph flash as she darted behind the thick wild laurels away

¹⁸ 'Good night, ladies, good night, sweet ladies, good night, good night.'

¹⁹ Williamson, 138.

²⁰ 'By the rivers of Babylon, there we sat down, yea, we wept, when we remembered Zion.' (Psalm 137) Leman, as well as being an Elizabethan term for 'sweetheart' or 'lover', is also the French name for Lake Geneva, by whose shores Eliot wrote much of 'The Waste Land' while convalescing to assuage psychological problems.

²¹ Williamson, 144.

²² Though, interestingly enough, there are some male 'nymphs'. In Swedish folklore, a *Näcken* is a male water-spirit who 'enchants young women by his beauty and fiddle-playing to a sure death on the bottom of a stream'. (*My Planet*, 15).

from him followed helplessly. He was a nympholept. Fascinated by the swift limbs and the wild, fresh sides of the nymph, he followed for ever, for ever, in the endless monotony of his desire.²⁴

The ocean embodies the undifferentiated state of primal formlessness. The Great Mother, it is boundless, limitless—‘All waters flow into it without filling it: all waters flow from it without draining it.’²⁵ It is supremely important in the Celtic tradition. Merlin, the Arthurian enchanter was ‘born from the sea’. The gods came to Ireland by sea and after death one reached the Underworld by sea. The ocean, with its tides, is a symbol of life’s dynamism. It is, simultaneously, a place of birth, transformation, death and rebirth.

The sea’s darker side, the one which ‘The Waste Land’ stresses, engulfs us in an unsettling ‘transitory condition between shapeless potentiality and formal reality, an ambivalent situation of uncertainty, doubt and indecision which can end well or ill’.²⁶ Eliot pointedly names his pithy fourth section: ‘Death by Water’—

Phlebas the Phoenician, a fortnight dead,
Forgot the cry of gulls, and the deep sea swell
And the profit and loss.

A current under sea

Picked his bones in whispers. As he rose and fell
He passed the stages of his age and youth
Entering whirlpool.

Gentile or Jew

O you who turn the wheel and look to windward,
Consider Phlebas, who was once handsome and tall as you.

Here, water is assuredly inimical to life. In ‘whispers’, sea currents pick the lust from Phlebas’ bones. A ‘fortnight dead’, he reverses the course of his life, passes ‘the stages of

²³ Chevalier, 616, 708.

²⁴ Lawrence, Internet article.

²⁵ Chuang Tzu (cited in Chevalier, 837).

²⁶ Chevalier, 836–8.

his age and youth', as he enters a vortex.²⁷ Seen as a source of creativity, life, natural energy and magic, maelstroms are a manifestation of water's raw dynamism. Hesiod recounts that Aphrodite rose from the swirling waters.²⁸ Eliot's whirlpool reference also brings to mind Charybdis,²⁹ the hazardous maelstrom off the Sicilian coast that Jason encountered on his voyage in the *Argo*:

Don't let them, through sheer fecklessness, go plunging into
Charybdis, lest she swallow them down forever³⁰

In psychosexual and mythical terms, whirlpools symbolise the vagina, female potency and the capacity of the great mother goddess to reabsorb creation as a prelude to regenerating new life. So, Phlebas' corpse is grist for nature's mill. Whirlpools, too, have a spiral character and this links them 'to the cosmic symbolism of the moon, to the erotic symbolism of the vulva, to the watery symbolism of the shell and to such fertility symbols as helix or horn. In short, [the spiral, an 'open' and optimistic motif] stands for the repetitive rhythm of life, the cyclical nature of evolution and the permanence of being beneath the flux of movement'.³¹

In universal mythical terms, rain is the bearer of divine blessing and revelation. It is the active celestial principle, a gift from the sky gods: 'The rain, falling from the sky, impregnates the earth, so that she gives birth to plants and grain for man and beast.'³² Rain is symbolic of sperm, seed and blood; hence, it is linked with agrarian fertility rites and human sacrifice.³³ But, no matter how much the poem's protagonist sweats blood in his search for rain to slake his spiritual thirst, he only hears 'dry sterile thunder without rain' and voices 'singing out of empty cisterns and exhausted wells'—this latter phrase calls to mind the biblical imagery: 'Or ever the silver cord be loosed, or the golden bowl be broken,

²⁷ Williamson, 146.

²⁸ Cooper, 192.

²⁹ Charybdis stole oxen from Hercules; Zeus punished her by changing her into a whirlpool. (Lempriere, 143)

³⁰ Green, 172.

³¹ Chevalier, 907.

³² Aeschylus (cited in Cooper, 136).

or the pitcher be broken at the fountain, or the wheel broken at the cistern. Then shall the dust return to the earth as it was: and the spirit shall return unto God'.³⁴

So, in sloughing off his Phlebas persona, the transmogrifying narrator's agony is intensified as he turns from water that drowns to undertake a, perhaps vain, quest for water that saves, for life-quickenning rain. Fast losing hope of any resurrection or renewal, he complains that 'red sullen faces sneer and snarl | From doors of mudcracked houses'. His spirit is tortured by the desire for water³⁵ and he laments—

Here is no water but only rock
Rock and no water and the sandy road
The road winding above among the mountains
Which are mountains of rock without water
If there were water we should stop and drink
Amongst the rock one cannot stop or think
Sweat is dry and feet are in the sand

Even so, the poem's ending is tinged with a constrained sort of optimism. Pre-war values lie shattered, yet the polymorphic protagonist—Tiresias as Fisher King, Grail knight, sibyl, Grail maiden, Dido, and so on—asks himself should he at least set his own lands in order? This possibility echoes the Buddha's exhortation to 'work out your salvation with diligence'. The concluding lines convey a feeling that if enough individuals open their hearts and minds to a personal resurrection—allow their inner wastelands to bloom anew—the stronger becomes the foundation for a renewed earth, a fertile world whose thirst is quenched, a planet alive with personal, social and spiritual fecundity.

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³³ Chevalier, 782–3.

³⁴ Ecclesiastes 12:5–7.

³⁵ Williamson, 147–8.

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