Voice of the Storm: T.S. Eliot’s *The Waste Land*

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The purpose of this thesis is to analyze how T.S. Eliot’s *The Waste Land* exemplifies the essential characteristics of modernism, particularly in its transgressive experimentation with language. *The Waste Land* is likely the single most significant work of modernist poetry ever written. Modernism was defined by its departure from the earlier poetic forms and conventions of European literature. This desire to transgress formed from widespread disillusionment with the status of western society after the carnage of The Great War. The war was not just disillusioning, the industrial scale of its carnage was without precedent. Any literary movement that could react to The Great War needed to be as disruptive, distinctive, and transgressive as the war itself had been. While the war shattered conventions through industrialized carnage, modernism instead used different vectors to express the insufficiency of the forms that had preceded it. The most important of these vectors, and the one that is most evident in *The Waste Land*, is voice. Eliot’s disruption of poetic convention is never more evident than in the unique ways in which he employs and develops his voice in order to express through new forms of poetic language the emotions and disruptions inescapable in the world of postwar Europe. John T. Mayer attests to the importance of voice in the poem when he writes that *The Waste Land* is defined by “the significant voices of its past, present, and future: the voices that have made it what it is.” (Mayer 245)

This paper will be analyzing *The Waste Land* to examine how it exemplifies some of the essential and definitive aspects of modernism. Specifically, it will be analyzing the ways in which Eliot experiments with language and transgresses against the traditional forms of language used in poetry. Linguistic experimentation is one of the most central elements of modernism. By analyzing how this element is evident in *The Waste Land*, my goal is to develop a thesis.
regarding how Eliot came to use these techniques, and how his use of these techniques reflects both on the poem itself and on the currents that inform modernism. This thesis relies on several assertions regarding the natures of modernism, Eliot’s writing, and the poem itself.

These assertions are: that modernism was a response to massive social upheaval, that linguistic experimentation is the defining characteristic of modernist literature, and that Eliot and his opus are among the greatest exemplars of the movement and its techniques. The purpose and the focus of the text in this first section is to provide support for these assertions from scholarly analyses of the text and of modernism. As prose and poetry were important parts of modernism, it was a movement deeply tied to literature, which makes language an inevitably important component of the artistic output that defines it. As language possesses such great importance to modernism, finding the particular traits of language that best characterize the movement are important to better understand it.

Based on the gathered evidence in the analyses made by numerous disparate scholars, it can confidently be stated that experimentation is the most important trait of modernist language use. While there is a massive degree of ground to be covered with regards to language and modernism as a whole, this essay will address those as it proceeds rather than delving into them here, because in the upcoming pages these topics will manifest as the elements of *The Waste Land* that best correspond to them are discussed.

The scholar Marshall Applewhite notes in his writing about modernism that “The expectation that art should be, or should deal with, "the beautiful" has long been abandoned. We now accept an opposite aesthetic cliche: the presumption that art should be, or should deal with, the ugly.” (Applewhite 418) This provides an excellent starting point, as he describes one of the greatest cultural shifts in western art, one that was closely tied to modernism. Applewhite writes
that “The modern ugliness involves self-limitation, an invocation of the noisome, the degrading, the inhumane, of desecration, revulsion, alienation.” Here he describes a shift in expectations of art, a shift in which the turmoil at the start of the twentieth century was instrumental. As Frederik Crews puts it, this is the era in which “poetry also begins to deal with flux and fragmentation.” (Crews 20) And Eliot was instrumental, perhaps the most instrumental artist, to these radical changes in the expectations of how poetic art could express emotion. He lead the charge that gave voice to the turmoil spoken of by Applewhite.

Therefore, understanding the artistic significance of *The Waste Land* requires understanding the reasons for this shift in perception. Crews provides more description in greater detail of the more specific aspects of modernism and how they relate to the philosophical underpinnings of *The Waste Land*, writing that the movement possesses “a tendency towards indirect presentation, a preoccupation with the presentness of the past, a different attitude towards time and history involving a break with and nostalgia for the past, all of which result from a common need to come to terms with the conditions of modernity.” (Crews 17) This speaks to the key philosophical goal of modernism: the need to come to terms with the current state of western society.

Universality, western hegemony, and progress were among those concepts battered by the upheavals of the period. The question of universality leads directly into one of the primary aspects of art that modernism sought to address: whether current forms of art were sufficient to express current human experiences, and if any form of art could do so. Srila Nayak’s writing on modernism goes into one of the major aspects of the time period, the growth of cities and urbanism, an aspect that changed the very physical world that Eliot and other artists inhabited. She writes that: “In *The Waste Land*, metropolitan borders cannot be hermetically sealed off
from postwar Europe, and a devastated and ghostly London is a reflection both of the collapse of empires in Europe and of the encroaching formation of national affiliations and homogeneous nations across Europe.” (Nayak 230) She goes on to describe how modernist literature addresses: “the city as the center of Western civilization and its attention to the social and political stratification of human identities that have characterized the Occidental city throughout its history” (Nayak 221). This is why Eliot’s London is an “unreal city”: it has lost the touchstones or convention and identity it once possessed. Both the sense of linear progression from the past Nayak mentions and the idea of that past as a solid foundation have been severely damaged.

The city and the war have a great deal in common in the roles they play in modernism, particularly in Eliot’s lens on the movement. Both are shadowy presences that alter every aspect of life. Eliot celebrates the city to a certain degree but also looks negatively on some aspects of its impact on the identities of an increasingly urbanized Europe. This ambivalence regarding urbanization and sharing the common view of the war as an atrocity both lead to an important point about the development of modernism. Eliot and his contemporaries worked so extravagantly to create radically different literary forms not just because they could or because they wanted to, but because they believed that these forms were necessary, that western cultural identity could not survive without a new language that could actively convey such a drastically changed landscape. Nayak’s commentary on urbanization in early twentieth century development and Eliot’s perspectives on it demonstrates one of the factors that created this sense of necessity. The city was all-pervading and all-consuming, just as the war had been, and nothing that held so much power over identities both individual or collective could be ignored or marginalized. Just as art needed to face the war and take it into account to remain relevant, it needed to address the city.
Crews says that *The Waste Land* “relies on and is an expression of the heteroglot nature of language and literature and that our knowledge and understanding of experience, if we are to make them meaningful, must always manifest themselves as text.” Here Crews touches on a very important point: that the many ways art relates to society are dependent on said art’s ability to connect with its world, which in the case of literature happens through language. Crews describes the importance of language through the understanding of reality it grants to people. If language is this important, of course, it requires great care to execute correctly, and it must be delivered in a form that fits the context it attempts to address. The chaos of The Great War and its aftermath disrupted reality in both martial and psychological dimensions, which under Crews’ theories of the importance of literature meant that forms of written art created for realities before this disruption could not suffice to contain it, and that not only was the creation of altered forms needed to convey the new emotions created by the era but that this task was necessary to preserve the very soul of European society, as without literary expression of their reality the people living within it would be unable to truly comprehend it.

Of course, language and writing do not merely exist or function as mechanisms for understanding reality within the bounds of high art. They exist across the entire spectrum of human communication, and borders between high and low as well as borders of religion and geography cannot fully impede them, which is especially true in the increasingly international era following Great War. The actual nature of this poetic language created by modernism, and the key aspect that made it such a radical experiment, was its use of multiple disparate voices from multiple disparate sources, brought together in the hope that multidimensional perspectives could accurately describe the multidimensional nature of the current world. As he puts it, the poem provides an excellent example of “the variety of voices and discourses that make up the
present, something which is a more generalized feature of modernism and which exerts a considerable influence on contemporary poetry.” (Crews 22)

One of the best descriptions of Eliot’s radical poetry comes from Lesley Wheeler, who writes that “The Waste Land famously contains many instances of unmarked allusion and dialogue; perspectives shift radically, without warning; languages clash.” (Wheeler 470) These clashes speak to a deeper radical streak within Eliot. Identifying and providing evidence for this adventurous nature helps locate the willingness to experiment that gave birth to The Waste Land. David Chinitz describes an event in Eliot’s personal correspondence that fortifies this concept. “His May 1922 "London Letter" in the Dial, for example, complains that "the respectable mob, the decent middle-class mob," has taken over high culture and turned it into a museum piece, averse to "adventure and experiment".” (Chinitz 239) This anecdote alludes quite well to one of Eliot’s major objectives in The Waste Land. Adventure and experiment are two words that certainly characterize modernism exceedingly well. And the idea of rebelling against a high culture that has become a “museum piece” is very much in line with Eliot’s radical departures from traditional poetic form and language.

The city and what it represented were not wholly sinister to Eliot, though he undoubtedly grew much more conservative with age. This is even more specific than just “the city”, as it concerns the ways urbanization and mass culture changed the ways art was consumed and created entirely new forms. Lawrence Rainey’s introduction to the poem describes “an uncanny gift for juxtaposing snippets of wistful lyricism against dry, matter-of-fact records of urban decay.” (Rainey 5). This description alludes to both Eliot’s ability to find poetry in the modern city and his frequent juxtaposition of seemingly opposed modes of language present in the urban environment.
As Sanders puts it, “Of the terms frequently repeated in T. S. Eliot's criticism, voice is surely one of the more familiar...Eliot is eminently the "invisible poet" assuming the various dialects of the tribe.” (Sanders 23) Crews, describing the importance of the poem to the western literary tradition, adds that “The Waste Land is a landmark in English literature as it emphasizes the nature of knowledge as language” (Crews 25), an idea closely tied to the concept, important to this thesis, that Eliot’s experimental poetic language was created to fill a desperate need for art that could adequately describe a vastly changed world. The city itself is not a sinister space and can be the source of beauty and rituals of renewal, even when it has been ravaged by chaos, like London and the other “all unreal” cities listed in The Waste Land.

Eliot opens by setting the tone of the poem and its objectives by establishing a distinctly modern and urban setting, starting with a character who “utters twentieth-century words that her prototypes of the past would not have understood” (Langbaum 105). By beginning with this passage, Eliot establishes many of the poem’s key aspects: he creates a modern, urban setting and makes clear that he will explore and express this setting using a naturalistic rendering of language and dialect unused in previous poetic works. Langbaum also adds that this section also conveys how “these people are repeating an ancient drama with ancient meanings; therein lies the poem's positive impulse.” (Langbaum 105), another indication of Eliot’s objective of applying the purposes of poetic tradition to the reality and language of the new world. Chinitz’s piece describes a key idea to understanding Eliot’s reasons for constructing such an unprecedentedly heteroglossic poem. “Behind such statements lies Eliot's model of primitive society, in which the arts are a shared public activity. The music hall thus becomes the English tribal ritual.” (Chinitz 239) Eliot forms a poetic epic from the chaos and dialect of the modern city, elevating it to the status of the models of previous inspirations for high art, the older “tribal
rituals” of Europe. Eliot himself draws connections between his own work with its unorthodox form and subject matter and the elite pantheon of western art.

As Eliot writes in one passage of *The Waste Land*:

“But

O O O O that Shakespeherian Rag—

It’s so elegant

So intelligent”

This passage alludes to Eliot’s anthropological perspective on art, and his deep awareness of its cultural importance as well as his possession of an open enough mind to form connections between the most ancient and venerable forms of art and the language of the modern world. By placing an allusion to a popular contemporary song named for Shakespeare, one which he has one of his characters describe as “elegant” and “intelligent”, within one of his characteristically radical passages, one in which his willingness to break the bounds of conventional poetic writing becomes most apparent, he draws a direct connection between the denizens of his modern urban world and the reified classics of western art. He connects contemporary popular music to reified literature, implying that both contain pieces of “a symbolic narrative of universal import rooted in primitive ritual” (Mayer 246)

These descriptions of his surprising artistic radicalism make it clear that Eliot was deeply committed to the task of developing a new poetic language that could cut across traditional class lines and speak to many strata of society. In order to do so, he looked to the most basic and

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1 This passage references *That Shakespearian Rag*, a comic song published in 1912 by Joseph W. Stern & Company with lyrics by Gene Buck and Herman Ruby and music by David Stamper.
primitive conceptions of artistic purpose, anthropological ideas of community ritual, and merged this ancient simplicity with the complicated global world he inhabited. And in doing so, he further blurred the perceptions of class and art that underlay traditional poetic forms, taking the ancient and “primitive” and making them new and dynamic. In the previous passage, for example, he does so by merging numerous layers of historical and contemporary art: the legacy of Shakespeare, absorbed into a contemporary song, related in naturalistic dialect within an epic poem. Eliot breaks down the boundaries between the modern “English tribal ritual” of the popular song and the old Elizabethan theater to create a broader perception of art.

The emphasis on unprecedented plurality of language continues beyond just the first segment and its many urban voices. The nature of the world that Eliot sought to describe with modernist poetry made this plurality necessary. As Lehman puts it, “the expansion of the poem beyond the form of the lyric presents new difficulties insofar as the synthesizing activities of a single (lyrical) consciousness can no longer be relied on.” (Lehman 68) The heteroglossic experimentation in *The Waste Land* goes beyond just cutting across class and temporal boundaries through the use of dialect. The societal disruptions of the modernist era went far beyond that, shaking Europe’s conception of itself in relation to the rest of the world. To encompass this new global perspective, as well as the disturbances in Europe’s once taken for granted superiority caused by the horrors of war, Eliot looked outside the boundaries of European traditions and language. Language is central to the poem, as presenting language from the past and present of Europe allowed Eliot to “Aurally parade its history and destiny” (Mayer 245). Crews writes that “The idea is that in our knowledge of the world as text, mythology and literary allusions parallel or correspond to contemporary experience and can also give them
significance.” (Crews 19), and *The Waste Land* shows a clear correspondence to historical events in relation to its disruption of the geographic-ethnic ideas of Europeanism.

As the poem progresses, Eliot shows that his dedication to what Brian Crews calls “The diversity of social speech types (sometimes even diversity of languages) and a diversity of individual voices” will be an enduring and continuing theme throughout the poem as he develops “a system of languages that mutually and ideologically interanimate each other.” (Crews 18) Eliot further develops this system through frequent invocation of sound, particularly music, both through onomatopoeia and through description. This use of music within the text of the poem synchronizes with his unusual employment of languages, and the two harmonize to create an unprecedented sense of sound that forms Eliot’s new poetic language. By presenting language in such unorthodox terms, he reveals “esoteric meanings “buried” in everyday living” (Mayer 246) by granting a mythic and poetic quality to contemporary Europe.

Continuing on and further into Eliot’s invocation of the swirling emotions in an urban environment, the following passages demonstrate how Eliot uses dialect and naturalistic representation of dialect in an unprecedented fashion in order to convey to the reader the depths of human emotion being expressed by the characters present in the text. By presenting their words in such a raw and unfiltered manner, Eliot breaks the boundaries that conventionally separate everyday speech and the emotions contained in it and the poetic forms that have historically been used to represent it.

Early on, this passage provides an excellent example:

““My nerves are bad tonight. Yes, bad. Stay with me.

“Speak to me. Why do you never speak. Speak.
“What are you thinking of? What thinking? What?

“I never know what you are thinking. Think.”

Here, he renders dialogue in a naturalistic manner nearly unprecedented in poetry up to that time. This particular passage provides an excellent example of how Eliot turns this experimentation towards the greater poetic purpose of conveying emotion. John T. Mayer connects this scene with Eliot’s own life, calling it “an intense scene of domestic desperation from his life with Vivien.” (Mayer 248) By indirectly invoking his own personal experience, Eliot blurs boundaries once again, this time between public and private. John Mayer describes _The Waste Land_ as a poem where “the personal is transmuted into the universal“ (Mayer 243), and this idea of transmutation is applicable to its blurring of temporal boundaries as well. Eliot takes the personal experience of a soldier and applies it not just to postwar Europe as a whole but to the whole span of European history. Mayer writes that while _The Waste Land_ conveys intense mental tension, Eliot draws from the internal struggles of everyday life rather than “his readings in abnormal psychology and religious neurosis” (Mayer 245) Eliot finds poetry not just in everyday events and conversations but in what he called “the poet’s inner world of nightmare” (Mayer 245), a mental landscape of anxieties that he not only describes but connects the wider collective consciousness of postwar Europe.

The dialogue being represented concerns confusion, nervousness, and argument. Rendering this dialogue as a chaotic sprawl of repetitive fragments in plain language without conventional poetic structure emphasizes those very emotions: the loneliness and tenseness of the speaker is conveyed by stripping his words of any poetic embellishment. The repetition of words and simplicity of speech conveys a sense of desperation, a stripped-down portrait of
intense emotion suited for a postwar environment in which cultural guises and societal illusions fractured in the face of overwhelming, seemingly inexpressible emotion.

Shortly afterward, Eliot uses similar techniques in a passage, attesting to their importance:

“What shall I do now? What shall I do?”

“I shall rush out as I am, and walk the street

“With my hair down, so. What shall we do tomorrow?

“What shall we ever do?”

Here Eliot once again makes use of repetition, this time repeating key phrases even more than in the previous passage. The sense of urgency accelerates, keeping pace with the increased speed of modern urban life. But while the dialogue might seem rough, there is precision in Eliot’s word choices: he makes sure to remind the reader of the urban setting with a single mention of streets in the midst of the blur of emotion conveyed by the rest of the passage.

Eliot’s use of naturalistic language to convey emotion combines with his use of artistic allusions and his blurring of cultural boundaries in the following passage:

“HURRY UP PLEASE ITS TIME

HURRY UP PLEASE ITS TIME


Ta ta. Goonight. Goonight.

Good night, ladies, good night, sweet ladies, good night, good night.”
In this passage, as in the previous, Eliot uses naturalistic representation of dialogue in order to convey the depths of emotion being expressed. This extended dialogue is one of the most formally and linguistically daring of all of *The Waste Land*’s passages, and in it Eliot adds a sense of progression to the use of new poetic techniques established in the previous passages. The already radically experimental writing becomes even more experimental, just as the emotional subject matter of the writing itself becomes more intense. Eliot increases the number of techniques he uses, going from repetition and naturalistic representation of dialect to his use of capitalization. The jump from the previous passage to the sudden burst of capital letters emphasizes the strength of emotion present, a shock to the reader that helps convey a need to “HURRY UP” to the reader. Space, time, and subject blur as an exhortation to hurry almost immediately becomes a bedtime scene, leaving only the raw emotion being expressed.

In addition to the poetry of the dialogue itself, the final line comes from Ophelia’s suicide in Hamlet. Within a music-hall pub environment, closing time is signaled with an allusion to Shakespeare. The setting of the passage is both modern and lower-class, and the poetic language is very far from iambic pentameter. But by placing an allusion to Shakespeare within this format and environment, Eliot creates a link between past and present, between “high” and “low” culture. Invoking Ophelia’s suicide suggests two things: that the emotions conveyed by Shakespeare’s writing are universal and stretch across time and class and that the petty dramas of modern urban life can be as serious to their participants as an epic tragedy.

One of the key aspects of the poem is that Eliot never abandons conventional poetry or its European cultural routes entirely, but rather employs them alongside his more experimental methods. This has the effect of elevating the latter, placing them on equal footing with those forms and techniques already accepted in western art. Analysis of one of Eliot’s seemingly more
“conventional” passages (at least compared to the radical distortions of language, form, and
dialect he often uses elsewhere in the poem) demonstrates the significance of his blending of the
traditional and the inventive.

“A woman drew her long black hair out tight
And fiddled whisper music on those strings
And bats with baby faces in the violet light
Whistled, and beat their wings
And crawled head downward down a blackened wall
And upside down in air were towers
Tolling reminiscent bells, that kept the hours
And voices singing out of empty cisterns and exhausted wells.”

Here sound comes to the forefront again, but in description rather than onomatopoeia.
This shows that though Eliot often uses radical methods for expressing sounds he is still willing
to use more conventional poetic description, with the plurality of methods he uses attesting to the
importance of the subject to his writing. Sound is the subject Eliot confronts with every single
tool in his poetic arsenal. Sound is the base from which language arises, and the most important
aspect of *The Waste Land* is its ability to showcase the varying methods of conveying sound and
emotion through the myriad different ways written text can represent language. As Wheeler puts
it, “Sound is how Eliot expresses personal despair and social critique most forcefully, and also
how he survives the apocalypse.” (Wheeler 469). As this excerpt from the poem shows, Eliot has
an incredible talent for capturing apocalyptic imagery in sound. Even when he writes something
as seemingly simple as “London Bridge is falling down falling down falling down”, the way he employs his techniques of convention-breaking repetition, evocative of emotional speech, the emphasis conveys a sense of panic that speaks to the multi-dimensionality of the nursery rhyme allusion. It is not necessarily physical destruction, but a destruction of poetic form occurring through the radically distorted presentation of one cultural touchstone (the bridge) destroyed within two other cultural touchstones (poetry and the original nursery rhyme).

Understanding Eliot’s relationship with the unconventional forms of language and dialect he employs is key to understanding why he uses them. Chinitz writes that “Central to twentieth-century literary history as it is currently represented is the image of Eliot as the hero or antihero of a losing struggle to defend a pristine and sacralized high art from the threatening pollution of "lower levels" of culture.” (Chinitz 236) Even though Eliot became more conservative in his commentaries later in life, he was an artistic radical when he wrote *THE WASTE LAND*, in form if not politics. Even without reference to Eliot’s own opinions, *THE WASTE LAND* is the work of one who, while he might see high art as sacred in its own way, had no objections to polluting, disrupting, and exploding it. The image Chinitz describes is flawed not so much because it positions Eliot as a hero or antihero but because it frames him as a conservationist, a preserver, someone standing at the gates of the castle to bar entry. Artistically speaking, Eliot was deep inside the castle tearing it apart so he could add his own strange new renovations. “one who, despite his ambivalence, developed a quite progressive theoretical position on the relation between high culture and popular culture and attempted repeatedly to convert this theory into art.” (Chinitz 237)

The importance of dialect and the blurring of lines between traditional distinctions of class in art are evident both by the contents of the poem and by Eliot’s own writings elsewhere
and the analyses of them by scholars. “Eliot, a richly endowed singer, was possessed...of "many voices," all of which, incompatible as they might first appear, he colored for emotional effect at will, and all of which, when at his best, he joined into unified wholes, disguising his internal gear changes with a cunning craft.” (Sanders 23) One of the hugely influential hallmarks of Eliot’s style was the expansiveness of his literary toolbox. He drew from as wide a pool of references as possible. Elliot expands his sources beyond the usual set employed by western artists, and class is one of the axes on which he expands. Class was another one of those deeply held societal convictions shaken by the horrors of war. And class is of course deeply tied to the idea that certain forms of art are higher or more acceptable than others.

“Yet the new genre that Eliot envisions would not only appeal to the original working-class audience but also "cut across all the present stratifications of public taste-stratifications which are perhaps a sign of social disintegration". A poetic drama rooted in the music hall could at least begin to heal the dissociated modern sensibility.” (Chinitz 240) Eliot’s willingness to use vernacular in his poetry is one of the many ways in which *The Waste Land* stands as an example of adaptation. In the post-war world, class distinctions, and their reflections in perceptions of art, had become greatly blurred, and one of the objectives of modernism was to find a new language of art that could communicate with this new world.

The class stratification of European society was tied deeply to the perception of western, European superiority, the idea that this subset of humanity was possessed of greater wisdom and ability than the rest and was thus destined for endless prosperity and expansion.

The chaotic plurality of *The Waste Land* echoes the chaos of its historical context, which can be seen when Eliot disrupts geographical and temporal barriers to bring together people and events
from across time and space, most evident in the commentary on the Great War that appears in the famous “unreal city” passage:

“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.

Sighs, short and infrequent, were exhaled,

And each man fixed his eyes before his feet.

Flowed up the hill and down King William Street,

To where Saint Mary Woolnoth kept the hours

With a dead sound on the final stroke of nine.

There I saw one I knew, and stopped him, crying: “Stetson!

“You who were with me in the ships at Mylae!”

Robert Langbaum explains that “the connection of Stetson with the ships at Mylae—the naval battle where the Carthaginians or Phoenicians were defeated by the Romans...The protagonist unconsciously recognizes his fellow gardener as also a fellow sailor and Phoenician; for they are devotees of rebirth.” (Langbaum 102-103) The jump from the anglo name “Stetson” to the Mediterranean “Mylae” establishes the temporal and spatial displacements that occur in this section. In poetry, all of this location must be created using words alone. Because of this, all of the poem’s aspects are ultimately communicated through linguistic technique. But this section
is particularly notable for the ways in which it serves as a precursor to the waves of locational and cultural displacement via language and allusion that Eliot uses throughout the poem. Nayak associates this temporal and historical displacement with the social strife conveyed by the poem, writing that “In Eliot’s poem, forms of postwar citizenship and a new experience of national illegitimacy in a postimperial and postwar Europe collide with other fragmented identities from a Roman imperial past.” (Nayak 221)

The whiplash contrast between the description of London and the familiar names associated with it to the invocation of the classical world has a sharp, jarring effect that forces the reader to consider the “unreal city” in a new light. Eliot uses language not just to construct the descriptions of the city, the dialogue, and the commentary on war are displaced but to set them adrift in time and space. His decision to do so in this section is significant not just in that it connects his specific word choice to his vast scope of allusions but in that it also connects the text to the poem’s greater themes and their origins and resonances with the foundations and moods of modernism.

Ultimately, the blurring of boundaries between England and the Aegean provide an excellent example of Crews’ characterization of Eliot’s objectives as using connections in the past to render a baffling and chaotic present comprehensible. The invocation of Mylae and Phoenicia demystifies the war to some extent, implying that it was not as unprecedented as it was often perceived to be by connecting it to the long chain of violence in human history.

But at the same time, the distortion of reality in this section still speaks to the strangeness and terror of the war and its era by characterizing The Great War as an event so wrenching and monstrous that its very horror rips apart the boundaries of time and space and renders London an
“unreal city” filled with ghosts, as if the war had been a gory wound in history itself through which dead soldiers bleed out.

The “unreal city” passage also contains one of Eliot’s most important allusions to European artistic history: his invocation of Dante’s Inferno through the borrowed line “I had not thought death had undone so many”. Inferno was already a poem that invoked the classical world in order to comment on the author’s contemporary surroundings, making it a particularly apt choice for an allusion in this passage marked by trans-historical commentary. In addition to commenting on the ability of art to draw connections across time and space, Eliot’s use of Inferno also helps convey the scope of the tragedy which has afflicted Europe by associating it with hell itself. The trauma of the Great War is enough to reduce its survivors to suffering in a state which, through allusion to the suffering of souls in the afterlife, Eliot equates to a sort of living death. This vision of literally hellish devastation suggests that the Great War killed some spiritual aspect of Europe itself.

And this is of course the exact sort of event that would require an approach like the one described by Crews: a crisis that breaks the boundaries between past, present, and future can only be comprehended in a language with wide-ranging elements uniting history and tradition with innovation. Both of these accomplishments relate to the greater goals of Eliot’s innovations in poetic language: by using his polyglot poetic language to both demystify the war and convey the sheer scope of its horror he directly addresses his objective of using new literary techniques to provide a more accurate description of the current state of human existence. “The way in which myth, legend and literary allusions continually show through the fabric of the poem also suggests the simultaneity of the past; but while the past underlies the present, it also forms part of the fabric of the poem itself, even of time and experience.” (Crews 19)
Of course, this invocation of the ghosts of the classical world also harkens back to an earlier line, when Madame Sosotris pronounces; “Here, said she, / Is your card, the drowned Phoenician Sailor,” This happens in the form of a prediction being made at an uncertain moment in time, and the act of prediction, implying a future event seen from the past, further emphasizes the atemporal unity of the events from across history that Eliot draws together. The Unreal City passage even stealthily comments on this connection, as part of the poem’s spirit of attempting to reconcile European identity in the face of chaos when Eliot has the two conversing ghosts speak of:

“That corpse you planted last year in your garden,

“Has it begun to sprout? Will it bloom this year?

“Or has the sudden frost disturbed its bed?

“Oh keep the Dog far hence, that’s friend to men,

“Or with his nails he’ll dig it up again!

“You! hypocrite lecteur!—mon semblable,—mon frère!””

The idea that the seemingly inexplicable and unprecedented Great War grew from seeds planted long ago brings some sense of order to the event. However, it is not necessarily comforting in its implication that the carnage was inevitable and predestined. This concept suggests that the only path forward that does not lead to long-seeded ruin is to do as Eliot has done and break the chains of culture and convention that held together classical and modern battlefields, to transcend geography and culture and language as Eliot does so often, including in
the passage in question. Otherwise “the dog” will dig up the shallowly buried corpse again, and more wars will render more cities unreal and ghostly.

The war, as has been explained, greatly shook Europe’s faith in the ideas that underlay the poetry of the prewar era. Postwar society, particularly postwar art, was forced to confront the question of how the highest echelons of the most “advanced” and sophisticated societies in human history could produce years of such unspeakable brutality. This is one of the many ways in which Eliot’s atemporal London is “unreal”. His blurring of timelines and wars in his description of soldiers haunting the city makes for a very pointed commentary on the idea of history as linear progression from barbarism to enlightenment: the English have supposedly reached such heights of culture and sophistication, and yet they still slaughter each other like Greeks and Romans (but on an even larger scale).

As the poem builds to its climax, Eliot brings together all of the various vectors on which he has broken through tradition: language, dialectic, time, space, and so on, into his epic invocation of Hindu poetry and mythology: his “Thunder sermon”. Wheeler notes that “Idiosyncratic music finally enters the recitation in the "Weialala leia" lines from "The Fire Sermon," imitating, as Eliot's note tells us, the song of the Rhinemaidens in Wagner's Götterdämmerung.” (Wheeler 471) Already, time and space are warping radically: Eliot is conveying the emotions of Postwar Europe through the form of Hindu epic poetry that alludes to German opera based on Norse mythology. Eliot’s invocation of religious ritual continues the connections across time made during his earlier invocations of the classical world and the ways in which he relates established “high art” to the modern “low art” of popular urban music.

Now he has broken the boundaries of space, time, and culture even further, and expanded both beyond the limits of Europe and across the walls between secular and religious art, drawing
a line all the way from the urban chatter from the poem’s first passages to ancient religious rites of renewal. His invocation of mythology and ceremony is “not a set of didactic principles or sum total of the wisdom based on any great religious tradition” (Rao 534) but a further attestation to the possibility of creating a system of meaning from the chaos of the modern world. Through the connections he has formed through his endlessly inventive use of language, Eliot makes a case that creating rituals of equal potency for the modern world is possible, and that these rituals, as expressed through his new unbound poetic language, can perform the task of renewing a world ripped apart.

The “Thunder Sermon” section provides another excellent example of how Eliot blurs geographical and cultural boundaries in the interest of creating a more resonant artistic language. His anthropological interests provided him with a background in studying the functions of ritual and religion, and in his exploration of sources of meaning outside of European culture he mined Indian spirituality as well. Rao writes that, in reference to Eliot’s use of Sanskrit, “A substitution of the bare English equivalents, needless to say, will not convey even a trace of what the poet intends and will not provide any scope to think of them or to understand them as they should be understood.” (Rao 533) He goes on to say that “If any reader substitutes the English equivalents for all the languages Eliot used, he is bound not only to realize the way in which the structure of the verse is shattered but also to find that the rich associations of the sources are missing.”

This is, of course, the key aspect underlying Eliot’s use of experimental and heteroglossic language: that doing so is necessary to describe the reality he is addressing, and that to do so without these new methods and to attempt the description solely using the poetic language of the past would be completely insufficient. When Rao writes that “…these seven Sanskrit words are irreplaceable” (Rao 531), he attests to the importance of Sanskrit to *The Waste Land*. This
importance comes from the relation between the use of non-english words and the invocation of non-western religion and the overarching goals and tenets of modernism. Rao is entirely correct that the use of Sanskrit words and Hindu spirituality are indivisible from the greater meanings of the poem. As has been established previously, societal upheavals culminating in the First World War caused a rapid erosion of trust in the long assumed supremacy of western culture and its relation to an imagined sense of inevitable historical progress from barbarism to civilization.

By using Sanskrit, Eliot goes beyond even the employment of dialect and vernacular earlier in the poem, and emphasizes the importance of language to the poem. Language and class are deeply linked, and Eliot breaks boundaries between languages constantly in *The Waste Land*. These same boundaries undergirding language were tested, strained, and broken by the turbulence of the First World War. “So, it is not only in fiction but also in modernist poetry that we find a dependence on the intermingling of systems of language and hybridization.” (Crews 18)

In one section of the Thunder Sermon, Eliot writes:

“Ganga was sunken, and the limp leaves

Waited for rain, while the black clouds

Gathered far distant, over Himavant.

The jungle crouched, humped in silence.

Then spoke the thunder”

Once again, apocalyptic imagery and sound rise to the forefront. In fact, this passage shows many of the hallmarks of *The Waste Land*’s inventively ordered chaos. Eliot remains in
one location for the extent of the passage, but the scene described is perhaps as far from conventional European landscapes as possible. But this image of gathering clouds still conveys the emotional turmoil present in postwar Europe. And the final line continues the sense of progression Eliot has established throughout the poem: sound and dialogue have been the key elements of the poem, and Eliot has drawn them from across dialects, countries, and eras: now the natural world itself is speaking. Specifically, the thunder is speaking, a personification of apocalyptic potential.

In the poem’s grand finale, Eliot attests to the importance of his experimental use of language by bringing it to the forefront, finishing the poem with his most explosive uses of these techniques. *The Waste Land* ends with the passage:

“Poi s’ascose nel foco che gli affina

Quando fiam uti chelidon—O swallow swallow

Le Prince d’Aquitaine à la tour abolie

These fragments I have shored against my ruins

Why then Ile fit you. Hieronymo’s mad againe.


Shantih   shantih   shantih

Here, all of the allusions and experimentations Eliot has made use of collide in a violent chaos in which language itself seems to break down. The merging of eastern and western cultural influences is more evident than anywhere else in the poem, and it is characteristically achieved through the deliberately discordant juxtaposition of language. Eliot slides rapidly between
Italian, French, and the English of multiple dialects, before finally returning to the Sanskrit that characterizes the final section. The ending choice of words is of course deeply significant: “shantih” is an expression of inner peace traditionally used to end the poetry of the Upanishads.

This is a poetic convention, but not one of European origin, and its placement at the end of such a deeply unconventional poem attests to Eliot’s refusal to be hemmed in to any great degree by any forms or traditions, but rather to build upon them as components to create something entirely new. With this ending and the allusions that built to it, Eliot is not simply conveying sound or language to the reader, but the tranquility and inner peace invoked by the Indian poetry he draws from. And this returns to the ultimate goals of the poem: to uses a radical heterodox approach to language in order to create a poetic form capable of making meaning out of chaos. He sought to show that something artistically whole could be made even from shattered pieces. If the dead can walk again, then so can the dead soul of Europe.

The in-depth presentation of the most linguistically daring sections of the poem also demonstrates Eliot’s particular skill as a modernist writer, which makes him an ideal subject for this thesis. Crews summarizes that concepts here excellently by writing that: “Many modernist writers suggest that there has been some kind of rupture with the past and their work attempts to reestablish a link with it in the belief that this can overcome the sense of loss in contemporary society” (Crews 18), an excellent description of the task Eliot gave himself. He continues on to say that “Paradoxically, this leads to the necessary artistic creation of meaning in attempts to rediscover the past in the multiple forms of representation” (Crews 18), providing further support for the idea that Eliot saw his work as a necessary task to restore art to vitality.

“Rediscovery” is an excellent way to characterize the ways in which Eliot engages with the past, as he does not simply recycle it. When he draws on tradition, he does so in inventive
ways, such as when he connects Shakespeare to contemporary music halls or the parallels he draws between the wars of the classical and modern worlds. And in his invocation of the Upanishads, he performs a rediscovery of the past by drawing on a tradition largely unknown to the western world and one which was not traditionally mixed with other sources of artistic inspiration. Lehman provides further support for this idea when he describes Eliot’s own views: “Eliot notes, "someone said: 'The dead writers are remote from us because we know so much more than they did.' Precisely, and they are that which we know". The act of creation is nothing but the moment of knowledge that occurs when the tradition, through the production of "the new (the really new) work of art" reflects on itself. In short, through the poet, literary history achieves self-awareness.” (Lehman 67) This quote provides an excellent example of Eliot’s perception of the past and its artistic forms, one that is deeply relevant to analysis of the significance of *The Waste Land*. The “modern” part of modernism comes from the movement’s goal of creating a sort of poetic and artistic language that could perform tasks traditional forms were unable to tackle. In this quote, Eliot not only acknowledges that the modern consciousness has developed in ways that alienate it from traditional art, but that this connection between a collective reader and the temporal origin of the authors they read is an important aspect of art itself. After all, the purpose of language is to describe the world, with the increased sophistication and complexity of poetic language existing to describe deeper truths otherwise inexpressible. Describing the reality of postwar Europe, and therefore understanding it and reconciling it, would have been impossible without a contemporary language capable of accommodating it.

In the quote cited by Lehman, Eliot attests to the importance of art in shaping the ways people can understand and engage with the world they live in and the historical events that created it by saying that the authors of old did not just comment on the world they inhabited but
created the records of it that would shape the understanding of readers generations later. The quote is also significant in terms of the importance of poetic language itself that it implies. If the “dead writers” create the understanding that later generations have of their temporal conditions, then the forms and techniques used by those writers are not just idle aesthetics but an important aspect in the creation of history. Modernism itself provides an excellent example of this association between form and context. "The Waste Land" is not just a poetic work written in a certain historical context, or even just a work that engages with that context, but one whose every detail of structure and language reflect that context and serve as a monument to its societal impact.

Chinitz provides invaluable insight into Eliot’s creative process by writing in regards to his anthropological studies and how they led him to the conclusion “that art originated not for purposes of pure aesthetic pleasure but as a component of ritual...Poetry and narrative could not be separated from music and dance, ritual and religion, the corporeal and the sexual; art was not private but public, an activity in which the entire tribe participated.” (Chinitz 238) Just as Eliot sought to bring high and low art together, he sought to merge both the newest and oldest aspects of humanity’s artistic self, looking to the then-cutting edge venues of music halls and connecting them backwards to ancient rituals across cultures. That Eliot would seek to take poetry back to its earliest origin shows the revolutionary scope of his artistic ambition. He wanted to create a poetic language that could cover the newest topics and yet still fulfill the most primordial purposes of poetry. His invocations of tradition and ritual speak to his desire to create a new form of poetic language that can fill these sacred purposes in a wildly different age. But at the same time, creating something that would resonate on such a deep level required novel approaches.
As Kenner puts it, “His point seems not to be, what used to be often alleged, that the present is tediously inferior to the past: rather that the present is inferior to its own best potential insofar as it courts resemblance to the past. Tradition, with the whole past of Europe in its bones, ought to be engaged on something new.” (Kenner 37). Eliot, after all, is willing to invoke the past and use its traditional forms without placing it above or below the present. The connections he draws across time, such as his fusion of the Great War and the classical world, are evidence of his commitment to giving the events and emotions of the present the status afforded to past events and traditions. Crews described *The Waste Land* as “about the decay of culture in modern Western society when many consider present experience as chaotic, fragmentary, sterile and meaningless”.

If those terms comprised an accurate description of the realities of modern Europe, then it would be impossible to describe them poetically. *The Waste Land*, however, stands as an argument that this is not the case, and that the reason that some would consider the modern era to be inexpressible in poetic form is that they are unwilling to innovate and develop the new forms and methods of employing language necessary to render the present artistically comprehensible. In other words, “but once this state of affairs is understood in terms of the heteroglot nature of language, literature and culture, then the artist is able to provide the text which can reestablish the links with the past and restore its significance.” (Crews 19)

Ultimately, the experimental nature of *The Waste Land*’s language (and its influence on modernism as a whole) can only be understood through analysis of the historical conditions that created them and their impact on European poetic and literary traditions. As established, Eliot’s linguistic innovations were not done simply out of curiosity but to fulfill a societal need for such versatile language adapted to the new conditions of society. Crews writes that “the process of the
poem is precisely to feed life into the dead land (contemporary culture) with dried tubers (forgotten links with our past)” (Crews 23) As described before, Eliot was deeply concerned with the vitality of European art and believed that it could only be maintained by using radical experimentation to create modern forms that would continue its legacy while accounting for the often-confusing breakdown of traditional boundaries that characterized the modern world.

Crews also writes that “Eliot's poem demonstrates not only the importance of the past in the present, but the existence of the past in the present, and by recovering those fragments of an apparently forgotten culture, the reader may regain sight of the fact that this is indeed what makes up our present and makes it meaningful.”, which further describes the importance of historical context to the formation of the poem and its language. Nayak writes that “The Waste Land is populated with those troubled sites in Europe whose material and cultural spaces can no longer be mapped in terms of a prewar cartography.” (Nayak 239) This description and linking of cartography to culture is key to bringing together the conditions that created modernism in order to describe why linguistic experimentation, particularly Eliot’s, was so key to its existence as a movement. Parallels can be drawn between the ideals of European culture, of which the nation-state and dreams of political dominance were components, and the earlier forms and conventions of art and poetic language.

Eliot and the modernists were the vector of reflection through which the disruption that the war wrought socially, politically, and physically was transmuted into an equally monumental disruption in the artistic world. The solidity of the previous conventions of European poetry, of defined forms and meters and rhyme schemes, seemed to reflect a confidence in a harmonious natural order that no longer seemed secure after the horrors of World War One. Nayak ultimately summarizes her own thesis by writing that: “Eliot confronts the emergence of the nation-state as
the new signifier of universality, which ends the Edwardian dream of imperial consolidation in Europe. If the decline of the British empire is an integral part of Eliot’s early modernism...then the complex interplay between nationalism and the cultural poetics of empire can be understood as a significant aspect of Eliot’s modernism.” (Nayak 235)

As Crews put it, “The Waste Land is, in a sense, a poem about whether we can make contemporary reality meaningful and how to do so.” (Crews 18) Eliot answered in the affirmative, and the methods he chose were those outlined over the course of this paper. Those methods were defined by experimentation with language in which he broke the boundaries of European poetic forms in numerous ways to create what John T. Mayer called “an anguished personal revelation and an austere cultural monument, reflecting and indicating the poet and the age.” (Mayer 241)

The anguish of the work arose from an atmosphere of chaos. The nightmares of WW1 disrupted Edwardian and Victorian dreams of imperial domination. Perceptions of British and European exceptionalism were shattered, and the poetry of this society shattered along with them. These perceptions were based on myriad boundaries: spatial boundaries between nations, temporal boundaries between past and present, and linguistic boundaries between languages, dialects, and poetic forms. The shattering of European ideals broke the boundaries that had created them. Eliot’s genius lay in his realization that a new poetic language could be created from the possibilities of these shattered boundaries.