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The Roadmap: exploring T.S. Eliot's *The Waste Land* with World War One literature

By

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T.S. Eliot's *The Waste Land* explores the broken world of England following the impact of World War One. Eliot's use of fragmented imagery with references to past work reflects the obliterated values of Europe after the First World War. To the many men who fought it, the Great War was supposed to be a fun adventure but turned out to be a generational killing machine producing horrors England had never seen. Eliot's *The Waste Land* explores the rubble of postwar England using a collage of shattered images. By connecting *The Waste Land* with war memoirs and other literary works of the era, one can recognize the impact of World War One on the world's modern memory and ultimately see the power of memory as a tool to overcome the disillusionment caused by clash of the pre-war aesthetic fantasy with the industrial, material apocalypse that was the brutal reality of World War One. Crucially, *The Waste Land* by T.S. Eliot recalls the transformation of the innocent pre-war world, grieves as Europe becomes a place of hopeless decay, and finally offers a possible solution to overcome the disillusionment of the war through the power of memory.

World War One or the Great War was supposed to be the war to end all wars. Cities across Europe in the August of 1914 erupted with jubilation following a series of declarations of war. Thousands upon thousands of men gathered their childhood friends and proudly, happily, marched to the recruiting station. What was expected from the Great War and what these men received were two entirely different experiences. Ultimately, this disconnect between expectation and reality would lead to the bitterness and disillusionment highlighted throughout T.S. Eliot's *The Waste Land*.

To understand *The Wasteland*'s subject matter, one must begin with the war while keeping these beginning lines in mind:

April is the cruellest month, breeding

Lilacs out of the dead land, mixing  
Memory and desire (Eliot 1-3).

The "memories and desires" here would be those of the world before the war, as exemplified through Rupert Brooke's "The Soldier". or at least a desire to return to that innocent world. To understand the upper-middle class or white-collar innocent world of the late nineteenth century, one can read J.-K. Huysmans' *Against Nature*. Huysmans' text perfectly captures the excesses of European bourgeoisie life before the war. The French novel explores the upper-class decadent life of the Duc Jean des Esseintes as he explores the aesthetic pleasures of his time: "He would spend hours reading or daydreaming, enjoying his fill of solitude until night fell" (Huysmans 19). The story details the fictional life of a wealthy French aesthete who never worked a single hard day in his life within the hazardous industrial factories. The wealthy aesthetes and artistic types, personified by figures such as Oscar Wilde, were blamed by the older conservative generations of the time for the moral decline of Europe. Once the declaration of war was announced, both sides rejoiced and came together under the banner of nationalism as briefly mentioned in Hobsbawm's *Age of Empire*. The Great War arrived seemingly as a cure for the moral decline of Europe as seen by the conservative classes and at the same time was speculated upon as the ultimate aesthetic pleasure for the modern liberal and artistic youths. Thus, the announcement of the First World War seemed to eliminate all political, social, and class divisions within Europe.

### **“Forever England:” Fin de siècle, to World War One**

Certain groups of European society expected the Great War to be the ultimate aesthetic experience to define the new century. These expectations are reflected upon in Modris Eksteins' *Rites of Spring*, in which the author discusses the Russian ballet of the same name while comparing and contrasting the similar experiences and responses to World War One: “Our century is one in which life and art have blended, in which existence has become aestheticized” (Eksteins xvi). As examined within Ekstein's text, Stravinsky's ballet *The Rite of Spring* was a life-changing artistic experience that quaked throughout early twentieth-century Europe. Similarly, in the early years of the Great War, people expected the ultimate artistic experience from its trenches like the previously mentioned romanticized Napoleonic wars. Contrastingly, due to rapid industrialization and urbanization, the First World War instead delivered ultimate ruination to the warrior artists and artistic visions of the early twentieth century.

*The Strange Death of Liberal England 1910-1914* by George Dangerfield provides the political context for Great Britain leading up to World War One. The book mainly argues that the Liberal Party of England destroyed itself through several blunders and details those mistakes in full. Notably, Dangerfield's focus on the self-destructive Liberal Party of England is key for the book's connection to T.S. Eliot's *The Waste Land*. The book explores the Liberal Party of England's battle with the House of Lords, the brewing Ulster rebellion, the rowdy women's suffrage movement, and the nationwide work strikes. Dangerfield's text unveils the Liberal Party of England as “an irrational mixture of whig aristocrats, industrialists, dissenters, reformers, trade unionists, quacks, and Mr. Lloyd Geroqe” (Dangerfield 72). Dangerfield shows how before the Great War, Great Britain was already on the brink of utter chaos. The announcement of the

war seemed to arrive at the perfect time to bring England together under the banner of nationalism. However, once the paper-thin beauty of nationalism was washed away by the industrialized killing of World War One, all that remained was the hideous broken world of T.S. Eliot's *The Waste Land*.

With this established context surrounding the Great War, one can then dive into *The Waste Land*. The first stanza of *The Waste Land* reflects back on the wholeness of pre-war society which was infatuated with moral purity, beauty, and the stability of the status quo. Eliot uses images of children sledding down a hill to reflect the innocence of England a few years before the war began and the loss of innocence: "Marie, hold on tight. And down we went" (Eliot 16). This line captures pre-war wholeness by using a moment of joy between two children, presumably German and British cousins, as a metaphor for the downfall of pre-war society. Tragically, as a metaphor for the millions of young men who died in the Great War, they willingly and joyfully slid down into the unknown reaching infinite depths of unspeakable violence.

One can see in the imagery of the cousins riding down the mountain a reflection of the kings of Britain, Germany, and Russia, all cousins, riding their countries down the mountain of war into mass destruction. Using Siegfried Sassoon's *Memoirs of a Fox-Hunting Man*, one can further understand the wholeness within the English countryside before the war. Using *Fox-Hunting Man*, Sassoon explores his early youth with memories of his first pony, fox hunting, and cricket games through the character George Sherston. There are countless moments within the text that capture the pre-war wholeness of Britain "As a rule I was inclined to be stand-offish about children's parties . . . a large party of jolly young people" (Sassoon 30). Following the

conclusion of the war, after the deaths of so many young men, it was hard to find parties of happy young people.

Sassoon's pre-war world was strictly made of sleepy country villages connected by dirt roads traveled by cart or horseback with little to no worry of worldly affairs: "The rest of the world was what [my aunt] described as 'beyond calling distance'" (Sassoon 3). This world, hinted at by Eliot in his first stanza of *The Waste Land* and explored by Sassoon in *Fox-Hunting Man*, is completely obliterated by the violence of the First World War: "The War seemed to have made up its mind to obliterate all those early adventures of mine" (280). George Sherston, standing in for Sassoon himself, constantly experiences death through the sacrifices of his comrades and tragically his pseudo-father figure Tom Dixon perishes from sickness due to the all-consuming violence and disease of the Great War. As seen in Sassoon's fictionalized-autobiography, down went the innocent world of the English countryside into the flames of war, like Marie with her cousin.

Why Sassoon didn't use his real name in *Fox-Hunting Man* is interesting to consider in correlation with *The Waste Land*. George Sherston serves as a manifestation of Sassoon's youth and his attitudes before the war. Through the trilogy of books by Sassoon, about Sherston/himself, the reader witnesses the transformation of an English youth into a grizzled veteran of the first industrialized war between nations. Quite simply, the Great War transformed Siegfried Sassoon into an entirely different person than he was before the war. Sassoon published his fictionalized autobiography in the latter half of the 1920s, thus within the realm of T.S. Eliot's *The Waste Land*. Siegfried Sassoon's trilogy further explores and gives life to the chaos hinted at by Eliot in his *The Waste Land*.

The pre-war wholeness of Great Britain is further explored through Virginia Woolf's *To The Lighthouse*. Woolf's novel not only sheds light on *The Waste Land* alone, but it serves as an excellent counterpart to Sassoon's *Fox-Hunting Man* as they both showcase images of pre-war wholeness: "Mrs. Ramsay, taking her place at the head of the table . . . an infinitely long table and plates and knives. At the far end, was her husband" (Woolf 82-83). *To The Lighthouse* details the lives of a sophisticated twentieth-century European family. By sharing similar elements to *Against Nature* and *Fox-Hunting Man*, Virginia Woolf's *To the Lighthouse* adds to the conversation when exploring T.S. Eliot's *The Waste Land*. The novel examines how drastically a family's life changed due to the First World War. Both the war and the Ramsay family experience consistent themes of death and decay.

*To the Lighthouse* by Virginia Woolf primarily focuses on the Ramsay family before, during, and after World War One. The first part of the novel takes place in a beautiful Edwardian mansion reflecting pre-war wholeness and tight-knit familial values. The second part of the novel reveals the decay of the mansion following the Ramsay family's move elsewhere and the death of some of its dearest family members. The third part of the novel details the family's return to the mansion and journey to the mysterious lighthouse that was discussed at the beginning of the novel: "With a sudden intensity, as if she saw it clear for a second, she drew a line there in the centre. It was done; . . . I have had my vision" (Woolf 209). This portion of the text reflects the struggle of post-war societal reconstruction within Great Britain as some portions of society looked for a return to pre-war values while others recognized there was nothing left of that world but waste. Ultimately there was an ideal vision of England's future, but how to achieve that vision was debated on multiple fronts. The second stanza of Eliot's *The Waste Land* expounds upon this debate on how to reconstruct England or if it is even possible.



The second stanza of *The Waste Land* begins with a voice speaking from the post-war world: “What branches grow/out of this stony rubbish?” (Eliot 19-20). The speaker asks what will grow out of the rubble of the war reflecting European society trying to recreate order in the post-war world. This instance also reflects society’s reaction to modernity as they wonder what will come from further technological advancements. Was there to be more mass killing machines from the Great War or all encompassing, gloom inducing, smoke spitting factories? For an individual of the time, the industrial revolution created stony machines that not only took many people’s jobs, but thrust them into a new age of technology. Thus, European society waited in angst at what else was to come from such a violent modernity.

One can gather a sense of what was to be expected by European society from the Great War in “The Soldier” by Rupert Brooke: “If I should die, think only this of me:/That there’s some corner of a foreign field/That is forever England” (Brooke 1-3). Just these few lines by Brooke painted death on the fields of battle as a beautiful aesthetic experience. As seen in *Against Nature* by Jois-Karl Huysmans, the culture surrounding the fin de siècle searched for the ultimate life experience through aesthetic pleasures, gluttonous decadence, and tragically through war. Brooke, like others of his time, expected the next war to be fought with glorious Napoleonic battles filled with men fighting in the line, cavalry charges, and booming artillery shredding the enemy or scaring them away. At the end of such battles left the “beautiful” corpses of men behind for mothers and lovers to mourn over. With these expectations of war still intact the people of Britain completely ignored the violence and different style of combat seen in the war in South Africa against the Dutch Boers at the turn of the century thus resulting in the high levels of disillusion and shock at the industrialized combat of the First World War. With this, one can see how the nationalistic gullible sons of aristocrats and hard-working men made their way into

trenches searching for the ultimate life experience or to simply die and forever become a piece of England on a not-so foreign field. This failure of the ultimate aesthetic experience would be the irony and tragedy expounded upon within Eliot's *The Waste Land*: "I will show you something different from either . . . I will show you fear in a handful of dust" (Eliot 27-30). What people wanted from the Great War and what they got from it were two entirely different experiences, thus resulting in the disconnected or disillusioned *The Waste Land*. Ultimately, *The Waste Land* shows how the pre-war aesthetic fantasy would be obliterated by the industrial, material power contained within the brutal reality of the Great War. The grave of the soldier in Rupert Brooke's poem transforms from an idealized "forever England" to Eliot's "handful of dust" through the brutal violence of the war experience. This violent transformation is central to *The Waste Land*'s "modernness" and further pulls its essence from war writings.

### **Bones and Rats: Trench Life in *The Waste Land***

World War One began in the summer of 1914 following the assassination of Archduke Franz Ferdinand of Austria. What started as an act of Serbian terrorism morphed into an all-out European war. "The pace of events was such that there was no time to clarify . . . between warning and intent" (Strachan 19). Germany, Austria-Hungary, Bulgaria, and the Ottoman Empire formed the Central Powers. While Great Britain, France, Italy, Romania, Russia, the United States, and Japan worked together as the Allied Powers. All previous visions of war, based on nostalgic reminiscences of Napoleon warfare, were wiped out by trench warfare, machine guns, crawling artillery barrages, and poison gas. The Great War introduced industry to warfare, thus resulting in an industrialized land of waste filled with death and despair.

After four years of brutal fighting, the combatants of the First World War agreed to a ceasefire on November 11th, 1918. In the months that followed, an assessment of Europe revealed a disillusioned society shocked and soiled by four years of constant industrialized hyper-violence. An estimated forty million people were killed as a result of the war. Veterans returned home from the front with stories of their comrades blown to pieces by shells or thoughts of the corpses of school yard friends tangled in barbed wire. Other tales told of men's lungs burned from the inside out by chlorine gas or being buried alive by the earth moving artillery shells. Many veterans of the war returned shell-shocked meaning completely out of touch from reality. These soldiers' stories revealed to the English home front "the old Lie: Dulce et decorum est / Pro patria mori" (Owen 55). No longer for England nor Europe was it honorable and sweet to die for one's country. All that remained in the so-called beauty and aftermath of war was further explored in Eliot's *The Waste Land*.

Wilfred Owen is arguably one of the most influential poets to come out of the Great War. His articulation of what he saw in the trenches provided the post-war survivors with a terrifying look at what the war was truly like and not at all related to the pre-war expectations hinted at in "The Soldier" by Rupert Brooke. For Rupert Brooke, image of infinite mind and death immaterialized. Owen shows everything as physical and material.

Bent double, like old beggars under sacks,  
 Knock-kneed, coughing like hags, we cursed through sludge,  
 . . .

But limped on, blood-shod. All went lame ; all blind (Owen 55).

The poetry of Wilfred Owen captures the essence of the Great War which turned the jolly young faces of August 1914 into crippled old men. These young men, like Owen, went to war inspired

by the pre-war promises of the ultimate life experience. Instead, they came back forever disillusioned and haunted by the war's true experience. Many veterans returned in the form of crippled caricatures, mental patients, or horribly disfigured corpses. In a dark ironic moment, Owen reflects on the condition of a comrade's corpse which completely contrasts the beautiful body left behind in Rupert Brooke's "The Soldier", Owen says:

Behind the wagon that we flung him in,  
And watch the white eyes writhing in his face,  
His hanging face, like a devil's sick of sin (Owen 55).

Ultimately, the poetry of Wilfred Owen completely wipes away all the pre-war mystic expectations surrounding the Great War. His verses revealed the harsh, disgusting, bitter truth surrounding industrialized warfare by detailing the horrifying experiences that disillusioned and embittered an entire generation.

A majority of this disillusionment and bitterness within *The Waste Land* came from society's ideas about warfare at the start of the Great War. Siegfried Sassoon perfectly captures Britain's expectations before the war with this quote: "a mounted infantry picnic in perfect weather" (Sassoon 228). Society expected the Great War to be fought with Napoleonic warfare tactics and not the industrialized yet stagnated killing machine they came to know. Napoleonic warfare, as seen in wars at the beginning of the nineteenth century, saw men lining up, firing at each other, waiting for the enemy to turn their backs, then came the valiant cavalry charge to end the battle and nominate a victor; all this occurred over a day or two. Meanwhile, battles could go on for months over the same few miles of land. Combatants would hide out in their line of trenches separated by roughly one hundred yards of space which came to be filled with barbed wire, corpses, and waste. From their respective trench lines, combatants would shell each other,

snipe heads peeking over the top, smoke, drink, all the while waiting in angst for the order to go over the top and attempt to take the enemy trench with a bayonet charge. Following the charge, men were machine gunned to death, gassed, or blown to pieces by the enemy artillery.

Ultimately, the life of a trench soldier in the Great War was dirty, redundant, and starkly different than what was expected. Rarely was the enemy ever seen for both sides despite the overwhelming atmosphere of death. Men were blown to pieces leaving no corpses behind for loved ones to mourn over.

In the "Unreal City" section of *The Waste Land*, one can envision the broken men returning from war and see the survivors of the Great War wander aimlessly over London Bridge:

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 61-63).

Eliot points out the ironic failure of pre-war expectations and ideals. Thousands of young men died in search of the ultimate experience of life as noted in the discussion of *Rites of Spring*. All the pre-war visions of *Fox Hunting Man*, *To the Lighthouse*, *Against Nature*, and *Goodbye to All That* were shattered by four years of grueling fighting. Such devastating combat resulted in the loss of some four million lives while prepping the seeds for the Second World War. Ultimately, society struggled to make sense of what happened within the Great War thus resulting in the violent disillusionment chaos yet contained within *The Waste Land*.

One can turn to *The Great War and Modern Memory* by Paul Fussell to further understand the impact of the war and the depths of irony within Eliot's *The Waste Land*. Fussell's text explores many pieces of literature surrounding the memory of the Great War to

further show its impact and importance within the modern world. Fussell's analysis of classic war texts breathes new life into the past while giving light to the darkness of *The Waste Land*: "Experience in the Great War [is] unique . . . ridiculous proximity of the trenches to home. Just seventy miles from 'this stinking world of sticky trickling earth' was the rich plush of London theater seats" (Fussell 64). This quote refers to the fact that the French trenches of the war were extremely close to England. The two different worlds were separated only by the English Channel therefore increasing the impact of the war on home front society. Home front tensions and anxieties are evident as well within *Rites of Spring*, *Memoirs of an Infantry Officer*, and *All Quiet on the Western Front*. The reality of the closeness of war mocks Rupert Brooke's "The Soldier" as the foreign fields with English bodies are revealed not too foreign at all. Fussell's text shows how the before, during, and after experiences of the First World War impacted the literary world: all resulting in the creation of *The Waste Land*.

Eliot ends the first part of *The Waste Land* criticizing the pre-war ideals, and the reader who followed them, that led to the mass devastation of World War I: "You! hypocrite lecteur!—mon semblable,— mon frère!" (Eliot 76). This line is a reference to a poem in French poet Charles Baudelaire's book *Les Fleurs du Mal* or *The Flowers of Evil*. Baudelaire's book is filled with dark poems with horrifying imagery from the nineteenth-century. Several of Baudelaire's poems in the text mention a wasteland; thus, making Eliot's own reference much more intriguing: "What we are: / oases of fear in the wasteland of ennui!" (Baudelaire 155). Hauntingly, Baudelaire seems to see the terrifying future containing Eliot's *The Waste Land*. Eliot speaks to the reader as he gazes upon the full bloom of the flower of evil: "That corpse you planted last year in your garden, / has it begun to sprout? . . . Or has the sudden frost disturbed its bed?" (Eliot 69-73). The corpses of youth who perished in the Great War were supposed to

fertilize a bright future, as predicted in Rupert Brooke's "The Soldier", but the massive industrialized violence of the war was unpredicted and so profound that the flowers never bloomed. Thus, all that remained was Eliot's barren waste land filled with bitter war memories and disillusionment.

One can see the effects of the previously discussed warfare on a veteran within the "A Game of Chess" section of *The Waste Land*:

What are you thinking of?

...

I think we are in rats' alley

Where the dead men lost their bones (Eliot 113-116).

This moment can be understood as a veteran's wife or girlfriend trying to have a conversation with her shell-shocked significant other who is still haunted by the war. Shellshock, neurasthenia, or war neurosis was a mental and physical condition common in soldiers returning from war. Today, we understand this condition as a form of post-traumatic stress disorder. Laurinda Stryker, in the "Mental Cases" chapter of *Evidence, History and the Great War*, discusses shellshock by explaining symptoms of the condition: "War neuroses in the First World War were seen as taking two basic forms: hysteria and neurasthenia" (Stryker 157). She goes on to explain how shell-shocked soldiers displayed physical symptoms of deafness, mutism or others, while mentally they showed symptoms of insomnia, anxiety, and more. One can see the symptoms of shellshock, specifically the mutism and anxiety, within the anxious mute chess playing veteran from *The Waste Land*.

To further understand shellshock and its impact, one can look at the short life of Wilfred Owen, the famous British war poet who was gunned down by machine-gun fire just a few weeks

before the end of the Great War. In 1917, Owen spent six months in Craiglockhart War Hospital after being declared unfit for General Service. A few months before “on 1 May Owen was observed by his Commanding Officer . . . to be behaving strangely. He was [found] to be shaky and tremulous and his memory confused” (Stallworthy 183). This was the beginning of Owen’s trouble with Neurasthenia and common headaches as he explains in a letter to his mother (184). Pressingly, one can see a relationship between Wilfred Owen and the mute chess-playing veteran as they both struggled with shellshock, a condition all too common in veterans of the first industrialized war as they try to reclaim their lives in *The Waste Land*.

The ending lines of the “A Game of Chess” section in *The Waste Land* reflects the transcendent madness taking hold of England following the conclusion of the war. However, it is quite clear the soldiers returning home from combat are not the same jolly boys that left to fight the Great War in the autumn of 1914. As they return from industrialized combat, men struggle to comprehend and articulate to others what they have seen. A generation raised on pre-war innocence was violated by the intense industrialized fighting of the war thus explaining the post-war atmosphere of destruction and chaos: “HURRY UP PLEASE ITS TIME . . . Goodnight Bill. Goodnight Lou. Goodnight May. Goodnight” (Eliot 168-170). Insanity sets in as pre-war values are forced to say goodnight, goodbye, and give way to the newly formed “wasteland” of England. This insanity manifests itself through the massive violence within the vanquished countries of World War I, evident by the *Freikorps* units of Germany and the Russian revolution (Gerwarth). One can look back and see the rising popularity of war novels as a reflection for Europe’s desire to understand the post-war world and escape the maddening, nonsensical location that was the wasteland. Crucially, using *The Waste Land* one can see how the pre-war aesthetic fantasies clashed with the industrialized killing machine apocalypse that was the brutal



reality of World War One resulting in bitterness, disillusionment, and catastrophe in trying to understand the global impact of the war.

### **Apocalypse: The Rhetoric of the War Returns to England**

The third section of *The Waste Land*, aptly titled “The Fire Sermon”, remarks on the destruction of Western civilization. All traces of the pre-war past were eliminated through the violent conflict of World War One:

The river bears no empty bottles, sandwich papers,  
Silk handkerchiefs, cardboard boxes, cigarette ends

Or other testimony of summer nights. The nymphs are departed (Eliot 177-179).

The history destroying violence of war is highlighted within the works of Siegfried Sassoon, Edmund Blunden, Ernst Jünger, Erich Maria Remarque, and Henri Barbusse. Each author offers a different perspective of the war, reflecting their different backgrounds, but each of their works offers a text crucial to the memory of the First World War and an understanding on how *The Waste Land* came to be.

Samuel Hynes, in his stellar work *A War Imagined*, studied Great War authors and their key texts, in a work examining the memory and imaginings of World War One. Hynes lists each author and their key work in a simple calendar, with the exception of Barbusse, who published *Under Fire* in 1916. He explains how these texts came to be known as “the classic war books” that would define and fix the myth of the war and how they still retain their authority in the modern era (Hynes 424). Crucially, these authors with their respective works provide reflections that heighten and emphasize the chaos of T.S. Eliot’s *The Waste Land*. Furthermore, these works

showcase the destructive capacity of war and reveal nothing left but the trash as seen at the beginning of “The Fire Sermon”.

Siegfried Sassoon’s *Memoirs of an Infantry Officer* serves as a sequel to *Memoirs of a Fox-Hunting Man* and is the second work in the *Memoirs of George Sherston* trilogy. Each work is a semi-autobiographical account of Sassoon’s experience during the Great War with his *Infantry Officer* text focusing on his time in the trenches. The text opens in 1916 with Sassoon/Sherston boldly declaring: “*I had more or less made up my mind to die because in the circumstances there didn’t seem anything else to be done*” (*Infantry Officer* 3). Indeed, for Sherston/Sassoon all the jolly adventurous ideas of war from Autumn 1914 had long faded away like the cigarette ends and handkerchiefs in Eliot’s *The Waste Land*. All that remained for the wanderer of *The Waste Land* otherwise known as the veteran of the war were disillusioned thoughts as seen in Sassoon’s work and Eliot’s poem reflecting these ghastly themes. “In 1917 I was only beginning to learn that life . . . is an unlovely struggle against unfair odds, culminating in a cheap funeral” (Sassoon 156). Sassoon’s cynical reflections on his experience as a veteran of World War One reflects upon the doomed atmosphere that surrounds the struggling survivors within Eliot’s *The Waste Land*.

Sassoon’s final work of the Sherston trilogy *Sherston’s Progress* captures George Sherston’s experiences during the latter years of the war. The book begins with Sherston under the care of neurologist Dr. W. H. R. Rivers whose name was not changed within the book and treated Sassoon during his stay at Craiglockhart War Hospital. At Craiglockhart, Sasson crossed paths with fellow war poet Wilfred Owen and they shared poetry with one another though this instance is not detailed within the Sherston trilogy. Crucially, the text reveals how disillusioned and bitter Sherston has become as a result of the reality of the Great War: “I too am tortured, but

I begin to see that the War has remade me . . . life [has become] an obscene thing” (Sassoon, 96). The fictionalized Sherston captures Sassoon’s struggle to articulate and understand the horrors he saw during the war. As discussed earlier, the brutal violence of the war destroyed the lives and ideals of the innocent pre-war generation.

Edmund Blunden’s *Undertones of War* provides a brutal realistic account of trench warfare within the Great War. Blunden’s text is crucial in understanding the everyday conditions of British soldiers in the trenches of France. Blunden’s prose plays upon the natural occurring unnatural sights of the war: “At some points in the trench, bones pierced through their shallow burial, and skulls appeared like mushrooms” (Blunden 29). Similar language is seen within *The Waste Land*: “The rattle of the bones . . . /A rat crept softly through the vegetation” (Eliot 186-187). Sights such as these deeply scarred the minds of veterans who were used to the innocence of Edwardian England. The thrusting of innocent minds into the consuming depths of war explains the anxious mute chess player of *The Waste Land*. War of this caliber had never been seen before; thus, affecting millions of lives besides those who were sacrificed during the war’s carnage. Blunden himself comments on the life-changing experience of the First World War: “What an age since 1914!” (Blunden 31). The innocent minds of the pre-war generation did not expect such levels of destruction within the Great War. This disconnection between expectation and reality explains the upsurge in war memoirs and novels in the years after the war as writers tried to rearticulate themselves in the post-war era thus the distorted feelings captured within *The Waste Land*. The war writers provided voices for their fallen comrades and fellow survivors, within the environment of the post-war wasteland. In “What the Thunder said,” Eliot turns no man’s land of WWI into the post-war spiritual desert, but it is profoundly influenced by the

rhetoric of the war. To observe this influence, one can turn to Henri Barbusse's novel *Under Fire*, written during the fires of war in 1916.

*Under Fire* by Henri Barbusse serves as a chronicle for life in the French army. The text was first published in 1916, directly in the middle of the war's carnage. Barbusse's work is noted to have influenced Wilfred Owen and Siegfried Sassoon, both discussed in detail previously. Barbusse opens his text with a vision that provides an accurate description of Great War combat: "Two armies at death grips—that is one great army committing suicide" (Barbusse 9). This macabre language is similar to that used within Eliot's *The Waste Land*: "Who are those hooded hordes swarming/Over endless plains, stumbling in cracked earth" (Eliot 369-370). Ironically, Barbusse's text follows a horde of French volunteers as they wander over nameless plains in search of shelter and food before their next assault. The book spares no detail of life within the trenches with many ugly, petrifying, and downright comedic moments further revealing the bizarre world of soldiers within the First World War. Out of the war texts analyzed here, *Under Fire* provides the ultimate reflection of the tone within T.S. Eliot's *The Waste Land* as evident by lines such as this: "The stark reality of the huge and hopeless misery that brought [us] into being . . . the drama in which we are actors has lasted much too long" (Barbusse 17). These existential thoughts on the meaning of war provide an insight to the reader on what the war meant for the men who fought it and ultimately explain the disillusionment found within Eliot's *Waste Land*.

The battlefields depicted within *Under Fire*, with their vulgarity explain why so many men returned from the Great War disturbed by their service: "Along the hazy, filthy, and unwholesome space . . . there are rows of dead. [Many have] half-mouldy faces, the skin rusted or yellow with dark spots" (Barbusse 164-165). One can only imagine what went through soldiers' heads when they saw such horrific things similar to this scene. Barbusse's text, written

for the audience of 1916, knows scenes such as this will be read by fellow soldiers and the citizens of the home front alike. Therefore, Barbusse's text serves a double purpose: to relate to the soldiers of World War One and showcase to the world the horrors of war.

Ernst Jünger first published *Storm of Steel* in 1920, almost two years before the appearance of Eliot's *Waste Land*. Jünger's memoir encapsulates the German war experience through the eyes of a young German soldier serving on the Western front of the war. On a basic level the text perfectly captures the monotony of everyday trench life. Jünger's trench details serve as an eerie reflection of French and English trench life as seen through the works of Barbusse, Blunden, and Sassoon. The grouping and examination of these texts together reveal though these soldiers served on different sides of the conflict, they all shared the same horrific war experience. In the latter half of Jünger's *Storm of Steel* there is this notion of the ultimate sacrifice for nothing; a nod to the German experience of the Great War. Despite the many successes on the battlefield, the German war effort proved not enough to be decisive. The German Homefront thought their nation was winning the conflict, but they were shocked by the results of the war and infuriated by the harsh conditions within the Treaty of Versailles.

While advancing upon some British trenches with his men, Jünger is wounded in the chest: "I felt the bullet taking away my life. . . . where I was going, there was neither war nor enmity" (Jünger 282). Jünger's description of being wounded in combat reflects a few lines from "What the Thunder Said", the final section of Eliot's *The Waste Land*:

He who was living is now dead

We who were living are now dying

With a little patience (Eliot 328-330).

Eliot's lines here capture the experience of the thousands of men who were slowly dying of agonizing wounds. Men were stuck in the middle of no man's land, too far to be rescued by comrades. With little hope to be healed, one could only wish for the sweet embrace of death just as Jünger welcomes it in his quote from *Storm of Steel*. The appeal of death is a consistent theme apparent within *The Waste Land*:

Here one can neither stand nor lie nor sit  
 There is not even silence in the mountains  
 But dry sterile thunder without rain (Eliot 340-342).

Playing with the memory of the constant artillery barrages that truly came down like a storm of steel, the speaker of *The Waste Land* suggests it is better to embrace death than to go on living the nightmare of the modern industrial reality.

The last few stanzas of *The Waste Land* perfectly pair with Erich Maria Remarque's war novel *All Quiet on the Western Front*. Likewise, to Jünger's *Storm of Steel*, Remarque's work also provides insight into the German soldier's experience during the war. Remarque's text and Eliot's verses stand together proposing the ultimate solution to prevent such horrific events from ever happening again: memory. Almost all of the previous texts discussed capture and analyze the memory of the war in all its overwhelming ugliness in contrast to its beautiful expectations as the ultimate aesthetic experience. T.S. Eliot's poem *The Waste Land* serves as a map to the themes of these texts and landmarks them so we can better understand the impact of the Great War and perhaps prevent such all-consuming devastation from harming the people of the world again. The last few lines of Remarque's text serve as a memorial, a tool for remembrance, for the many others who perished as a result of the First World War: "He fell in October, 1918 [while] the army report confined itself to the single sentence: All quiet on the Western Front" (Remarque

296). The ending of *All Quiet on the Western Front* suggests that quiet reflection on the horrors of the past along with the memory of the fallen will aid in the future prevention of all-encompassing conflict

Through the established significance of *The Waste Land* in relation to these texts one can recognize the impact of World War One on Western Society and the necessity of the war's memory. Hordes of innocent young minds were annihilated within the first industrialized war initially fought with noble Napoleonic battle tactics. No one on earth in the Autumn of 1914 could have predicted the total destruction and devastation brought by World War One. Neither should one forget the masses of civilian casualties as a result of the British Naval Blockade of Germany nor the casualties of the Russian Revolution, both direct effects of World War One. Crucially, the First World War completely changed how we understand war and all its assets. One must analyze these texts and remember the war to prevent such havoc from wrecking the world again. One must also use these texts to remember those who died in the fields of no man's land, those who struggled to survive, and those who couldn't survive the post-war wasteland.

### **Fragments and Ruin: A Kind of Conclusion**

English poet Robert Graves in his autobiography *Good-Bye To All That* waves goodbye to the pre-war world. Graves' memoir is crucial in the modern memory of the Great War by perfectly capturing the malaise suffered by all in the years after the war thus serving as an excellent companion to *The Waste Land*. Graves has no comment on the present wreckage of European society; thus, using his text he ponders on the past and its connection to the war. Like Sassoon, Graves opens up his text discussing his pre-war childhood and family history filled

with moments of late-nineteenth-century innocence: “Let me at once record my two earliest memories. The first is being loyally held up at a window to watch . . . Queen Victoria’s Diamond Jubilee in 1897” (Graves 1). This moment drips with pre-war nationalistic sentiment that inspired so many young British men to go to war. Later, Graves recalls being a child pushed around in a carriage by a nanny and being pat on the head by Algernon Charles Swinburne, ironically a nineteenth-century romantic poet.

These early moments from Robert Graves’ autobiography, though possibly fictional, perfectly capture the elements of pre-war wholeness as examined in the works of Huysmans, Sassoon, and Woolf. The difference between those authors and Graves is he acknowledges the obliteration of those past values while confirming his newfound position within the wasteland of post-World War One society. This attitude shows as Graves articulates one of his school memories in correlation to the war: “Let me begin my account of Charterhouse School by recalling the day that I left, a week before the outbreak of War” (Graves 36). Thus, the impact of the war was so great on Graves that even his pre-war memories are set up in conjunction with his memory of the war. He recalls a profound philosophical question asked by his beloved school friend Raymond, only to recall Raymond’s death in Cambrai: “Yet in 1917, when he was with the Irish Guards, I rode over to his billets one afternoon . . . and felt as close to him as ever. He got killed at Cambrai not long after” (Graves 48). Such a beautiful, profound memory of friendship from Graves’ mind is violently intruded upon by the Great War. Graves’ embittered yet disillusioned attitude towards the war can simply be summed up with this quote from *The Waste Land*: “Well now that’s done: and I’m glad it’s over” (Eliot 252). Over was the industrialized meat grinder that stole Graves’ youth and killed his comrades. World War One left Robert Graves disillusioned from the post-war reality that was the wasteland, thus he turned to



his past to contextualize his situation in the present. In conjunction with Eliot's *The Waste Land*, *Good-Bye to All That* provides the modern scholar a crucial understanding of the impact of the First World War and solidifies the importance of remembering the war.

During the middle portion of *Goodbye to All That*, Graves discusses his military service in the First World War with detail. As a captain in the English Army, Graves saw firsthand the horrors of war that would be detailed in the lines of many verses and prose by war poets like him: "Those we could not get in from the German wire continued to swell . . . dead faces changed from white to yellow-grey, to red, to purple, to green, to black, to slimy" (Graves 163). This portion of Graves' text shows how the corpses of fallen comrades became a part of the physical rubble or rubbish of World War One. In their respective works, both Graves and Eliot wave goodbye to the past, showcase terrifying visions of war, and laugh ironically at how the post-war world did not live up to the expectations of European society.

In conclusion, by connecting *The Waste Land* with war memoirs and other literary works of the era, one can recognize the impact of World War One on the world's modern memory and ultimately see the power of memory as a tool to overcome the disillusionment caused by clash of the pre-war aesthetic fantasy with the industrial, material apocalypse that was the brutal reality of the Great War. *The Waste Land* by T.S. Eliot in conglomeration with works discussing and from the era in question serve as landmarks on the map that showcases the transformation of the innocent pre-war world, into a grieving Europe filled with hopeless decay, and finally offers a possible solution to overcome the disillusionment of the war through the power of memory: "I have heard the key" (Eliot 412). This line serves as a reference to Dante's *Inferno* when the character Ugolino recalls his sons starving to death in prison similarly to the millions of sons who died in the barbed wire prison in No Man's Land. The "I have heard the key" line serves

Eliot's declaration of content upon discovering a possible way out of the disillusioned *Waste Land*: through the power of memory. Precious memories seem to offer a place of rebirth like a desert in the embittered post-war world: "I sat upon the shore/Fishing, with the arid plain behind me" (Eliot 424-425). Eliot mimics the myth of the Fisher King, who was charged with the task of guarding the Holy Grail, using his opus *The Waste Land* to guard the memories of the Great War from those who will attempt to think again it is sweet and fitting to die for one's country.

Using *The Waste Land* and the context of the previously discussed texts or fragments of memory one can recognize the power of memory as a potential way to overcome trauma: "These fragments I have shored against my ruins" (Eliot 431). Within *The Waste Land* Eliot collects the fragments of memory to support the remains of pre-war innocence hoping to salvage an escape out of the post-war malaise. Ideally, through the power of memory and the fear of another waste land we as scholars can prevent the event of another world war.

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