

MUSIC

“Then Spoke the Waste Land; Songs and Fragments” is a recital performed by the UNED English Faculty Group; it premiered in Madrid, April 6, 2022, at the 34th European Association for American Studies Conference (EAAS).

The recital is a combination of music and verse. Passages from *The Waste Land* are read, interspersed with comments from Eliot’s friends, such as Ezra Pound and Virginia Woolf, or his wife, Vivien Haigh-Wood. These voices emerge from different texts, letters, novels, even autobiographies, and all reflect on the poem. We can even hear William Carlos Williams’s reaction to the poem when it was published, as he annotated it in his *Autobiography*. They perform against a musical backdrop which ranges from Wagner to popular song.

The poem is recited thematically, rather than in an orderly fashion from beginning to end. Passages are grouped around seven main motifs. Beginning with a Prologue / Overture, it continues with: “Spring and Love,” “The City,” “Here is Belladonna,” “Dry Desolation,” “Death By Water,” “Distant Spirituality.”

The recital is available at: <https://canal.uned.es/video/624ea08db6092302c6288f02>. What follows are brief introductions of each section, as well as the fragments and music included in each of them.

1. PROLOGUE / OVERTURE

The recital opens with the song “Twentieth-Century Blues,” which Noël Coward wrote for the American musical film *Cavalcade* (Frank Lloyd, 1931). Its lyrics (“Why is it that civilized humanity / Can make the world so wrong?”) resonate with the historical context from which *The Waste Land* emerged—and sadly, with our own. Although Eliot initially thought of Coward’s plays as mere entertainment, he came to appreciate them as he wrote his own drawing-room comedies in the 1950s. Curiously, the protagonist of Eliot’s *The Confidential Clerk*, Colby, was, like Coward, born in Teddington.

Music: “Twentieth Century Blues” (Noel Coward, *Cavalcade*)

Fragment: “Then in 1914 ...” (T.S. Eliot, *Letters of T.S. Eliot*, vol. 1)

2. SPRING AND LOVE

The song “It Was a Lover and His Lass” (from Shakespeare’s *As You Like It*) evokes spring as the ideal setting for the fulfilment of love. The first lines of *The Waste Land* negate traditional spring openings and, in subsequent scenes, we find

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examples of thwarted love. The melancholy frustration of the hyacinth garden lovers is associated with the sailor's song in Richard Wagner's *Tristan und Isolde* ("Frisch weht der Wind"). The so-called "neurasthenic woman" and her aloof partner, likewise, seem painfully unable to communicate.

Music: "It Was a Lover and His Lass" (T. Morley & W. Shakespeare, *As you like it*);
"Frisch weht der Wind" (Richard Wagner, *Tristan und Isolde*)
Fragments: "April is the cruellest month...", "You gave me hyacinths first a year ago...", "My nerves are bad tonight..." (*The Waste Land*)

3. THE CITY

The Waste Land is a markedly urban poem. Eliot's Unreal City can be identified with London and with Dante's Inferno, where "death had undone so many." The poetic speaker, like a *flâneur*, walks its streets, visits its landmarks, and talks to its people—Mr. Eugenides or Stetson, who performs a frustrated fertility rite. The Unreal City is also the setting for the encounter between the typist and the "young man carbuncular," witnessed by the prophet Tiresias. The musical background for this section is the popular Flannagan and Allen song "Underneath the Arches," which comically evokes the squalor of modern cities.

Music: "Underneath the Arches" (Flannagan & C. Allen)
Fragments: "For having lived in Westminster..." (Virginia Woolf, *Mrs. Dalloway*);
"Unreal city... winter dawn," "Unreal city... winter noon," "At the violet hour..." "This music crept by me upon the waters..." (*The Waste Land*)

4. HERE IS BELLADONNA

The song "When I Take my Morning Promenade," with its teasing lyrics on the changes in women's fashion, was made famous by Marie Lloyd, the "Queen" of London music hall. In 1922 (the year of publication of *The Waste Land*), Eliot wrote an obituary essay on Lloyd and the popular vitality of the music hall, which he always admired. With this song we are introduced to various female voices / portraits in *The Waste Land*: Madame Sosostriis, "famous clairvoyant," the "neurotic woman," Lil and her friend chatting at the pub, the typist at home "at the violet hour," and finally Ophelia.

Music: "When I Take My Morning Promenade" (A.J. Mills & B. Scott)
Fragments: "Perhaps not even you can imagine..." (Vivien Haigh-Wood, *Letters of T.S. Eliot*, vol. 1); "Here is Belladonna...", "In vials of ivory and coloured glass...", "When Lil's husband got demobbed...", "The typist home at teatime..." (*The Waste Land*)



5. DRY DESOLATION

In *The Waste Land*, the Thames “runs softly,” but carries debris and waste. As one would expect, the poem is rich in images of natural decay and drought. “The nymphs are departed,” although we can hear the singing of the Rhine maidens from Wagner’s *The Twilight of the Gods* (“Weialala”). As an ironic contrast to hopeless desolation, “Thanks to These Lonesome Vales” (an air from Henry Purcell’s opera *Dido and Aeneas*), evokes an idyllic pastoral setting, where “Diana’s self might resort” –Dido, Aeneas and Diana are indirectly alluded to in the poem.

Music: “Thanks to These Lonesome Vales” (Henry Purcell, *Dido and Aeneas*); “Weialala leia” (Richard Wagner, *Das Rheingold*)

Fragments: “What are the roots that clutch...,” “The river’s tent is broken...,” “A rat crept softly through the vegetation...,” “The river sweats...,” “Here is no water but only rock...,” (*The Waste Land*); “Then out of the blue...” (William Carlos Williams, *Autobiography*)

6. DEATH BY WATER

Early in the poem, Madame Sosostris sees “death by water” on her tarot cards. Phlebas the Phoenician has drowned. It is uncertain whether his body will metamorphose “into something rich and strange,” as Ariel sings to Ferdinand (who believes his father has died in the shipwreck) in Shakespeare’s *The Tempest*. Viewing Phlebas’s death as an absolute end or as a promise of resurrection is probably the key to interpreting *The Waste Land*. Ezra Pound, who reduced the original “Death by Water” to only ten lines, considered this section the heart of the poem.

Music: “Full Fathom Five” (R. Johnson & W. Shakespeare, *The Tempest*)

Fragments: “Here, said she...,” “I remember...,” “Phlebas the Phoenician...” (*The Waste Land*); “Various critics have done me the honour...” (T.S. Eliot, *The Waste Land. Facsimile*)

7. DISTANT SPIRITUALITY

Eliot became interested in Hinduism as a student at Harvard. He took the parable of the voice of thunder from the *Brihadaranyaka Upanishad* (the Upanishads are foundational texts of Hinduist theology). The thunder’s message (*data*, *dayadhvam*, *damyata*) is to “give, be compassionate, and control yourself.” Despite the final pandemonium of quotes in different languages, *The Waste Land* closes with a benediction in Sanskrit: “Shantih shantih shantih.” Because of its spiritual longing and Hinduist background, George Harrison’s “My Sweet Lord” (1970) seems an apt musical background for this section.

Music: “My Sweet Lord” (George Harrison)



Fragments: “Ganga was sunken...,” “DA Datta: what have we given?...,” “DA Dayadhvam: I have heard the key...,” “DA Damyata: The Boat responded...,” “I sat upon the shore ...” (*The Waste Land*)

