

Key Words in *The Waste Land*

This page links together the words that Eliot repeats in *The Waste Land*, and considers their significance.

- antique
- bed
- bells
- bones
- broken
- brown
- dead
- dry
- eyes
- fish
- rain
- rat
- red
- towers
- violet
- water

antique

- Above the antique mantel was displayed
The first occurrence of antique reflects Eliot's belief in the ancient as a source of value and meaning, through myth and artistic tradition. However, The tone of the description of the room is complex: the decadent and sensuous atmosphere is at once seductive and repellent. The antique mantel leads us to a work of art (hence beautiful), its subject taken from Greek mythology (hence meaningful), but the subject itself is the horror of unrestrained sexuality.
- You ought to be ashamed, I said, to look so antique.
In the second case, the word shifts in the mouth of Lou to a modern, debased, demotic meaning. In both cases, the word occurs in the context of the abuse of sex. The first, ancient use of the word is associated with rape, and the Lil's premature aging acts as a punishment for her abortion - The shadow of permanent sterility falls over her, after the voluntary sterility of the abortion.

bed

- 'Or has the sudden frost disturbed its bed?'
Both Flower or planting bed, but also with a suggestion of bed in its usual sense. The word fuses ideas of sexuality, death (bed) and vegetation - an example of Eliot's use of the Rituals Eliot found in Weston and Frazer.
- On the divan are piled (at night her bed)
As with the repetition of antique, the second occurrence of the word is limited to the vulgarised, modern, and sexually corrupt, devoid of the layered meaning of the first use.

bells

- The peal of bells
- Tolling reminiscent bells
This is a deliberate repetition of the image of the bell tower by Eliot. The second bell is reminiscent because it recalls the first time we heard it, but also because it reminds us of our own destiny.
'Ask not for whom the bell tolls, it tolls for thee.'

bones

An obvious image of death

- I think we are in rats' alley
Where the dead men lost their bones
- The rattle of the bones, and chuckle spread from ear to ear
- And bones cast in a little low dry garret
- A current under sea
Picked his bones in whispers
- Dry bones can harm no one

broken

Many things are broken in 'The Waste land'. It is a record of psychological turmoil (the poem was largely written during one of Eliot's frequent bouts of illness and exhaustion), political decline (for Eliot, Democracy was a deplorable institution), cultural decay, moral degeneracy, and spiritual sterility. To what extent does it offer hope rising from the destruction?

- A heap of broken images
- The river's tent is broken
- The broken fingernails of dirty hands
- seals broken by the lean solicitor

- a broken Coriolanus

brown

- the brown fog of a winter dawn
- Crosses the brown land, unheard
- the brown fog of a winter noon
- Gliding wrapt in a brown mantle

dead

The Waste Land is much concerned with life, death and the tentative possibility of resurrection.

- the dead land
- the dead tree gives no shelter
- I was neither
Living nor dead
- Where the dead men lost their bones
- the lowest of the dead
- Phlebas the Phoenician, a fortnight dead
- He who was living is now dead
- Dead mountain mouth of carious teeth

dry

The opening verses of Eliot's 'The Hollow Men' use images of dryness very similarly to 'The Waste Land'. it does not represent simply death (which in Buddhist thought, is the supreme goal of Nirvana, only reached by the most enlightened beings), but a lack of real life, a dreadful, sterile limbo state devoid of redemption or spiritual meaning.

- the dry stone
- a little low dry garret
- Her drying combinations
- Sweat is dry
- dry sterile thunder
- dry grass singing
- Dry bones can harm no one

eyes

Ackroyd in his biography of Eliot (T. S. Eliot: A Life, New York: Simon and Schuster, 1984) interprets the strength of this image as reflecting Eliot's acute self-consciousness.

- my eyes failed
- Those are pearls that were his eyes
- each man fixed his eyes before his feet
- Another hid his eyes behind his wing
- Those are pearls that were his eyes
- Pressing lidless eyes
- when the eyes and back
Turn upward from the desk

fish

This word signals the presence of the Fisher King in the poem.

- While I was fishing in the dull canal
- fishermen lounge at noon
- I sat upon the shore
Fishing

rain

The rain image clearly overlaps and reinforces that of water

- stirring
Dull roots with spring rain
- a shower of rain
- if it rains, a closed car at four
- dry sterile thunder without rain
- a damp gust
Bringing rain
- the limp leaves
Waited for rain

rat

Eliot returned to the image of the rat several times in his early poetry - most infamously in 'Burbank with a Baedeker: Bleistein with a Cigar':

The rats are underneath the piles.

The Jew is underneath the lot.

- rats' alley
- A rat crept softly through the vegetation
- Rattled by the rat's foot only

red

From the myriad connotations of this colour, Eliot underscores its suggestion of violence and destructive emotion.

- this red rock
- the torchlight red on sweaty faces
- red sullen faces

towers

An image of the city, cultural order and authority. Also a card in the tarot pack. Eliot moves from an idealised pure tower, through destruction, to an impossible, nightmare vision of an upside tower reminiscent of Bosch.

- White towers
- Falling towers
- upside down in air were towers

violet

This colour has a somewhat decadent quality, an echo of the fin de siecle poets such as Baudelaire who had a significant influence on Eliot

- At the violet hour
- At the violet hour
- the violet air
- bats with baby faces in the violet light

water

A key symbol of life and fertility in *The Waste Land*.

- no sound of water
- Fear death by water
- The hot water at ten
- the waters of Lemman
- They wash their feet in soda water

A repulsive image mixing vulgarity and cheap modern decadence, deliberately draining the word of its biblical resonance. An ironic reference to the washing of Christ's feet can perhaps be detected.

- 'This music crept by me upon the waters'
- Here is no water
- there is no water