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T.S. Eliot in 1906

T.S. Eliot 1888-1965
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The Mystery of Hope: The Pursuit of Salvation in the Works of T.S. Eliot

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Abstract

The works of T.S. Eliot seem to trace the spiritual autobiography of the man himself. Does T.S. Eliot’s body of work show a spiritual search for salvation in a world portrayed as meaningless? By tracing recurring images and themes through several of T.S. Eliot’s representative works, a desperate search for salvation and the fulfillment of that search can be discovered. The search starts with a fascination in the evils of human nature. The understanding of evil reveals a sense of meaninglessness and despair, which in turn creates a desire for a transcendent good. For Eliot, the only source of such goodness was the salvation found in Christ’s blood, which he believed had the power to remove evil from people and restore their higher natures.
If we see the discovery and acceptance of salvation as the goal of Eliot’s body of poetry, we can trace Eliot’s spiritual biography and his journey to salvation through each stage of his work. Looking at some of Eliot’s earliest poems, it can be argued that Eliot knew, from the very beginning, that he was looking for salvation, but he was not ready to choose that path until he had exhausted every other option. Although Eliot did not explore all of these options in real life, he used his poetry to explore different ways of responding to the world, to desire, and to his hope of having a meaningful experience. For Eliot, his search was in some way instigated by the stiff formality and resulting disassociation of his class, his family, and his family’s religion. The people he grew up around did not have to deal with the unpleasant and ugly parts of life because they were upper class, but they also did not, in Eliot’s eyes, have very many truly meaningful experiences. This pushed Eliot to begin a journey to find a great and transcendent experience that would alter his life and bring meaning and purpose to it. We can follow Eliot on this journey by looking at his poetry and his biography. The works of T.S Eliot reveal a spiritual autobiography that can be traced from the beginning of his poetry through his post conversion works as a perpetual search for the response to desire. His journey to salvation goes through several stages including disillusionment with his family’s faith and status, an exploration of evil, flirtation with and rejection of radical Christianity, the experience of meaninglessness and despair, and finally discovery of a valid Christianity.

In order to follow Eliot’s spiritual journey, it is imperative to understand his beginning, particularly his family’s Unitarian Christianity and the way that background shaped his concept of what he was looking for. Lyndall Gordon, in T.S Eliot: An Imperfect Life, explains that the Unitarian church was a reaction to the emphasis the Puritans of New England placed on damnation. The Unitarians chose to focus instead on the benevolence of God and on the nobility
in humanity. One of Eliot’s ancestors, William Greenleaf Eliot, said that “it is at once arrogant and dangerous to claim direct and extraordinary guidance” (qtd in Gordon 18). Thus “true salvation comes from human effort” (Gordon 18) and could be attained by following codes of conduct that contained distilled ideas of righteous behavior. Gordon points out that Eliot said “that his parents did not talk of good and evil but of what was ‘done’ and ‘not done.’ In abandoning Unitarianism, Eliot rebelled against those tepid, unemotional distinctions” (Gordon 18). T.S. Eliot knew that this was not an accurate way of looking at the world and was dissatisfied with the flattening effect this world view had on the world of experience; there can be neither great heights of joy or depths of despair when everything is limited by man’s capacity to understand should and should not. Eliot clarified this idea, saying “So far as we are human, what we do must be either evil or good; so far as we do evil or good, we are human; and it is better, in a paradoxical way, to do evil than to do nothing: at least, we exist” (qtd in Brooks 186). Eliot knew that an essential part of humanity was this dichotomy between good and evil that could not be ignored. Although Eliot’s family’s doctrine ignored good and evil, they still tended to suppress desires, particularly physical desires. Later in his poetry, Eliot would explore the sterilization that such suppression causes but also the chaos of not controlling desires. Therefore, another aspect of Eliot’s search was to find an appropriate response to desire.

Although his family’s Unitarian faith pushed Eliot away from Christianity, his mother’s faith created an ideal of sainthood that haunted Eliot throughout his life. Charlotte Eliot wrote poetry about “the vision of the seer” and “the prophet’s warning cry” (qtd in Gordon 9). Some of her poems deal with “turning points in the lives of the chosen: the Apostles and ‘The Unnamed Saints’” (Gordon 9). Gordon claims that “her image of the thinker who, from unfathomed depths, seizes on the sublime truth is almost identical with the dominant figure in her son’s vigil poems
of 1911 and 1912” (10). She speaks to those set apart “by gifts of genius” saying “Ye who despair/ Of man’s redemption, know, the light is there,/ Though hidden and obscured, again to shine” (qtd in Gordon 10). It’s interesting to look back on Eliot’s career and wonder if his mother knew that she was creating, in her son, a desire to be set apart. According to Gordon, Eliot “had a model of the perfect life before he left his mother’s side; the long term issue was whether he could make it his own” (11). From this we can see the trajectory of Eliot’s spiritual journey; Eliot knew that evil and good were somehow essential to salvation, he struggled with the despair his mother’s poetry spoke about, and he desired to find not only salvation but also to distinguish himself as a saint.

A large part of Eliot’s journey to faith was the exploration of evil. Eliot’s family did not see humanity as fundamentally flawed and did not have much use for the discussion of evil. Without an understanding or a grasp of the evil in the world and the depravity of individuals, Eliot would not have grasped the validity of the need for salvation. Perhaps because of an awareness of evil within his own soul, or perhaps only from observations of the world outside of his upper class family life, Eliot explored the concept of evil both in his observations of the different levels of society, cataloguing different examples, and by taking an aspect of evil and exploring it to its final result, as is the case with Prufrock and Sweeney.

“The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock” is simultaneously Eliot’s caricature of and justification for rejecting the upper class life of his family. Prufrock’s world symbolizes Eliot’s world of high class society at Harvard. Eliot felt that he had to reject this world on plausible grounds and Prufrock’s poem is his justification. The epigraph of the poem comes from Dante’s Inferno, and the speaker identifies himself and says that he is only sharing his thoughts because he knows no one returns from hell to tell the world. Ironically, the speaker is talking to Dante,
who does return to the land of the living and shares the man's speech with the whole world. Similarly, the poem is Prufrock's revelation of his personal thoughts and feelings that he would never reveal if he knew his contemporaries would find out.

Prufrock's struggle in this love song is that he wants to declare his love for a woman and to share his observation that there's another world out there where there are "lonely men in shirtsleeves, leaning out of windows" (Inventions 72) while the women of his acquaintance "come and go/ Talking of Michelangelo" (13-14) ignore. Prufrock somehow knows that his society is not being honest about their position and relationship to the rest of the world, and he wonders if he is a prophet who will "dare disturb the universe" (45) if he speaks out. Prufrock is unable to speak out, though, because he is afraid of what his peers will think if he goes against the expectations for him. He won't even say that he's attracted to a woman because he fears that she will say "that is not what I meant. That is not what I meant, at all./ That is not it, at all" (97-98). So, Prufrock decides that "I am no prophet—and that's no great matter" (83). He then consoles himself with the thought that it wouldn't have been worth it to say anything after all. For Eliot, the decision not to speak is whatdamns Prufrock. After Prufrock's decision, he loses what meaning he had in life and admits himself to be "almost, at times, the Fool" (119) He grows old and becomes concerned with even more trivial matters saying "I shall wear the bottoms of my trousers rolled. Shall I part my hair behind? Do I dare to eat a peach?" (121-122) and eventually declines to the point of living entirely in a dream world where the mermaids do not sing to him. The final result of this is that "human voices wake us, and we drown" (131), indicating that Prufrock, by being unwilling to challenge the erroneous view of the world, retreats into an unreal world where he is incapable of coping with the challenges of reality. This can be read as Eliot's criticism of upper class society people who, in his opinion, would not be able to deal with the
challenges the lower classes face because they have isolated themselves from those problems.

Having justified his disillusionment with his own class, Eliot next catalogued the evil at the opposite end of the spectrum from his upper class society. This exploration centers on the single character of Sweeney. J.C.C. Mays says of Sweeney that “by contrast with Prufrock, the failed idealist, [Sweeney] embodies the brutal vulgarity of solely naturalist values...Vulgarity overtakes suffering” (Moody 114). The poem “Sweeney Erect” begins with a series of classical allusions, and then shifts suddenly to a misogynistic description of a woman as “This withered root of knots of hair/ Slitted below and gashed with eyes.../The sickle motion from the thighs” (Complete 25). The mythological references are to emphasize that the depravity the reader is about to encounter is not a new development of modernity, but is a tragedy that has been repeated multiple times throughout our past, so much so that we have created beautiful myths to help accept and yet distance ourselves from the ugliness of life. The next stanza gives a graphic description of the woman having an epileptic fit. The focus of the poem then shifts to Sweeney, who is preparing to shave. He “knows the female temperament/ And wipes the suds around his face” (25). In other words, Sweeney is completely unconcerned with the well being of this woman with whom he has some sort of relation to. He thinks he understands this woman and sees nothing in her beyond her physicality and therefore does not think her worth his time. In fact later, as he is testing his razor he waits “until the shriek subsides.” This woman is not a person in the eyes of Sweeney. She is merely a body for him to use and then ignore. “The ladies of the corridor/ Find themselves involved, disgraced” and only stare at what’s happening. They say “that hysteria/ Might easily be misunderstood”(25), implying that sexual activity could be inferred from the scene. The last stanza in the poem provides a contrast to the inhumanity of the rest as Doris provides a foil for the other characters in the poem. At the end of the poem, “Doris,
towed from the bath,/ Enters padding on broad feet,/ Bringing sal volatile/ And a glass of brandy neat” (25). Doris is the one humane and compassionate character in the poem who does not concern herself with the sexuality present in the rest of the poem, but instead sees the suffering of the woman and responds to that with compassion and care.

“Sweeney Among the Nightingales” continues the association of Sweeney with the classical myths and his portrayal as bestial. The first stanza solidifies this portrayal with a multitude of animal like images: “Apeneck Sweeney spreads his knees/ Letting his arms hang down to laugh,/ The zebra stripes along his jaw/ Swelling to maculate giraffe” (Complete 35). This sort of animal imagery continues for the entire poem and is employed to describe several of the characters. Presumably, the action of the poem is taking place in a sort of an inn or house of prostitution. The women described are unflattering depictions of conniving creatures who are planning some sort of treachery. The clues to this are that “Rachel nee Rabinovitch/ Tears at the grapes with murderous paws;/ She and the lady in the cape/ Are suspect, thought to be in league” (35). Later the nightingales sing just as they “sang within the bloody wood/ When Agamemnon cried aloud,/ And let their liquid siftings fall/ To stain the stiff dishonoured shroud” (35). This last stanza provides the meaning for the entire poem, which portrays the rapacity of human nature. Eliot is pointing out that the betrayal of Sweeney is merely a banal version of the betrayal of Agamemnon and that these sorts of betrayals have been happening throughout human civilization. His description of the nightingales excreting on the dead body of Agamemnon is a purposeful attempt to make the reader understand that the story of Agamemnon and the other myths are not nice little stories; they are archetypes of the tragedy of human existence and that tragedy is ugly and disgusting.
Early in his career, Eliot was interested in Christianity and explored some questions about what faith in Christ might mean. "Easter: Sensations of April" is a short poem, yet portrays Eliot's anxieties about religion. The poem explores ideas of faith and contrasts that with the lack of power in contemporary religion. The poem says:

The little negro girl who lives across the alley
Brings back a red geranium from church;
She repeats her little formulæ of God...

Geraniums geraniums
Withered and dry
Long laid by
In the sweepings of the memory (Inventions 23).

One of the key phrases here is "her little formulæ of God." Eliot feels that this formulation of Christianity causes it to lose its power. The simple faith of the little negro girl is beautiful, but the shriveling of the geraniums is Eliot's way of saying that the traditions of Christianity have lost their power or did not have power from the beginning. Eliot is concerned that conversion to Christianity would require placing his faith in something that he wasn't confident would come through. Eliot recognizes that faith is not a formula and seems uncomfortable with the idea that there might be unexplainable loss coexisting with the belief in a God capable of any miracle.

Despite this, Eliot knew that he could not continue simply to flirt with the idea of Christianity indefinitely. He wonders in "Entretien dans un parc" if "it is too late or too soon/For the resolution our lives demand" (Inventions 5-6). I think for Eliot that became the question: was he ready and able to commit to a Christian life or was he no longer eligible because he was
thinking about delaying conversion. I think Eliot's attitude is revealed at the end of the poem when he says "Some day, if God --/ But then, what opening out of dusty souls!" (33-34). Eliot fully realizes that conversion is not a simple matter but would involve looking deep into souls, and he is not ready to do that yet. Perhaps, though, Eliot overestimated the level of commitment required for Christianity. His "saint" poems of this period show that Eliot was fascinated yet repulsed by the sensationalism of ascetic "Christianity" as he envisioned it. These poems show that Eliot was imagining a radical faith that requires such extreme devotion from the individual that he or she is in danger of becoming insane or destructive. Eliot was attracted to the sensationalism such extremism provides, but was wary that too it often leads to waste because the object of devotion is not worth so much sacrifice.

The poem "The Burnt Dancer" provides an insight into Eliot's desire yet hesitation to commit to Christianity. In the first stanza, Eliot describes a black moth attracted to a flame saying that it is "Distracted from more vital values/ To golden values of the flame" (Inventions 6-7). This line shows that the moth is in danger of being destroyed because it is too attracted to something that is not appropriate for that level of fixation. He asks the moth "What is the secret you have brought us/ Of what disaster do you warn us/ Agony nearest to delight?" (19, 22-23). The questioning in this line warns the reader that this poem is not really about the moth, but rather about how humans sometimes become fixated on a single object. That concept is further strengthened when the speaker says "The destiny that may be leaning/ Toward us from your hidden star/ Is grave, but not with human meaning" (26-28). While a literal interpretation of these words would mean that the reader does not need to become involved in the fate of the moth because it is completely separate from human behavior. If the line is interpreted as a bitter and
ironic statement, we see that the speaker is satirizing the phenomenon of humans not learning from their observations. This interpretation is strengthened by the next line “O danse mon papillon noir!” (14). The plural form of this statement is translated “O dance my dark thoughts” (Note 222). With this subtle use of language, the speaker is identifying his own thoughts with the moth. Thus, any warning that the moth should hear must also be heeded by the speaker in order to prevent the destruction of his thoughts from an annihilation caused by oblivious fixation to a dangerous thought.

The next stanza further strengthens the identification of the speaker's thoughts with the moth. It begins “Within the circle of my brain/The twisted dance continues” (30-31). The speaker then goes on to reveal precisely what it is about the moth-like behavior that could be so destructive, which is that the moth “Losing the end of his desire/ Desires completion of his loss” (36-37). In other words, the moth has chosen something unattainable as the object of his desire and upon being unable to find fulfillment, contemplates ending its life in fanatical pursuit anyways.

In "The Love Song of St. Sebastian," which Eliot did not publish in his lifetime, there is a similar issue of desire leading to destruction. The poem about St. Sebastian explores the extreme end that fanaticism can lead to while at the same time showing the importance of commitment to enduring/ worthy/ acceptable/ productive objects. In the poem, St. Sebastian is desperately in love with an unnamed woman. The poem has two parts that reveal two options that St. Sebastian considers using to obtain this woman. In the first half of the poem, the narrator addresses her saying “at the foot of your stair;/ I would flog myself until I bled...I should arise your neophyte” (Inventions 3-8). The term “neophyte” means a novice in the Catholic Church; its use here shows that the speaker has confused his devotion to God with his fanatical desire for this woman.
He then says that he will follow her, including following her in to bed. Although it is controversial as to whether or not self-flagellation is ever an acceptable practice, it is clearly inappropriate behavior for this circumstance and leads to destruction. A few lines later, he tells her that she will take him in because he will be

hideous to your sight
You would take me in without shame
Because I should be dead
And when the morning came
between your breast should lie my head” (17-19).

This man has such a strong desire to be accepted by this woman that he eroticizes religious devotion and martyrdom to the point that he will kill himself in order to have physical relations (even though he’s dead) with this woman.

In the second half of the poem, the narrator imagines a second scenario in which he will come to the woman and strangle her. He provides a little bit more information about his fanaticism for the woman in this part of the poem when he discusses the way her ears curl. While appreciating the curl of a loved one’s ear could be endearing, this man takes it to extremes by saying that he will remember it even after the world ends. This obsessive fixation with the object of desire is unhealthy, and the reader can guess that the narrator’s fascination will end tragically. This suspicion begins to be confirmed when the narrator says “I would come with a towel in my hand/ And bend your head beneath my knees” (22-23). This part of the poem is particularly disturbing because it indicates a desire for mastery and control because he wants her to bow to him and submit to his desires. This desire is expressed most strongly at the end of the poem when the narrator says “I should love you the more because I had mangled you/ And because
you were no longer beautiful/ To anyone but me” (36-38). This man has a fanatical desire to possess this woman so completely that he does not want anyone else to even think that she is beautiful. Yet once again, his desire for her is destructive. To want to possess someone in such an extreme way destroys the other person, physically or otherwise. In this case, the man imagines the extent to which he wants to possess this woman and his plan results in her physical death.

This poem demonstrates why Eliot was not ready to commit to Christianity in his early years of writing. He was not convinced that Christianity was the “more vital value,” and he knew that he had to be convinced of that validity before he could commit his life to it.

One of the reasons why T.S. Eliot’s works are considered great poetry is because each poem contains multiple readings, meanings, and significance. Thus, it is important to look at some of the poems from more than one perspective. For example, “The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock” has been discussed as Eliot’s rejection of his Unitarian, conservative background, and “The Love Song of St. Sebastian” as his rejection of fanaticism and blind devotion. Yet both of these poems can be read as Eliot’s perpetual struggle to grasp an appropriate response to desire. Prufrock and St. Sebastian can be seen as opposite polarities in a spectrum of responses to desire. Prufrock embodies apathy while St. Sebastian’s sexual violence shows the destructiveness of extreme action. Eliot’s struggle with the problem of desire extends beyond these two poems and becomes an important theme in *The Waste Land*.

The period of Eliot’s life that produced *The Waste Land* was one of turmoil and confusion. After deciding to reject Christianity, Eliot visited England and decided to remain there after meeting Ezra Pound who encouraged him to pursue a career in poetry. He also met and became interested in a young woman named Vivienne. Pound convinced Vivienne that she could “save Eliot for poetry – a notion designed to captivate her bent for fantasy” (117).
Vivienne rose to the challenge. She and Eliot became lovers, and Eliot’s sense of propriety led to their marriage on June 26th 1915 (Gordon 118). Gordon says that “when he failed to awaken to religious emotions, he abruptly tried an alternative, to awaken himself through marriage. It was probably this effort to bestir himself that lay at the root of The Waste Land” (Gordon 97). The marriage was a tragic failure. Vivienne was an emotional, physical and spiritual burden on Eliot’s soul. Although brilliant, lively, and talented, Vivienne was also moody, instable, and unfaithful. Eliot’s devotion to the sanctity of marriage led him to sacrifice his life by refusing to divorce her. It is unnecessary to detail the in and outs of this marriage, but it is obvious that his marriage was Eliot’s “personal hell” and the breeding ground for much of the emotional charge in The Waste Land.

The Waste Land is considered one of the most important works of Eliot’s career in part because of the amazing amount of meaning, richness, and complexity in the poem. A few of the key themes in The Waste Land include the universalizing of human experience, the destruction that comes from uncontrolled desire, the struggle to control desire, and the sterility that results when desire is improperly controlled.

Several places in the poem, Eliot reminds readers that the poem is not only about historical examples, but about the readers themselves. The startling line: “You! Hypocrite lecteur!—mon semblable,—mon frere!” (Norton 76), explicitly attaches the subjects in the poem to the reader. The quote from Baudelaire carries the force of the “universalization” of the experiences described. This sets the scene for the poem. In many of the examples, the connection between the historical with the modern is often seen. The poem tells, among other things, the story of desire that is part of everyone’s history and has created the particular approach to desire of the 20th century.
The first part of the story shows that uncontrolled desire leads to destruction and is portrayed by the story of Philomel. Philomel’s brother-in-law, Tereus, traveled to her house to bring her back to his palace at the request of her sister, Procne. But when Tereus arrives he immediately lusts for the body of the beautiful Philomel and resolves to do anything in his power to win her favor, either by bribery or force. He asks her to accompany him back to his palace on the pretense that it will be a visit to her sister. Philomel agrees, longing to see her sister. Once his ships had reached his own shores, Tereus led Philomel deep into the woods and raped her. She rails against him and threatens to tell everyone of the evil he has done. Even if she is locked up in the forest, she claims she “will fill the woods with my story and move the very rocks to pity” (North 48). In response, he cuts out her tongue. She weaves her story into a blanket and sends it to her sister, who comes to rescue her. When they get back to the palace, Procne is so enraged for her sister’s injury that she swears she will revenge her. She kills him and Tereus’ son, cooks him, and feeds him to her husband. When Philomela and Procne reveal their vengeance to the king, he is enraged. As they flee from him, they turn into nightingales and forever fill the woods with their cries (North 48-49). This story is important for *The Waste Land* because it is an archetype of uncontrolled desire and the destruction that results from it. Tereus acted with lust, the scientific, purely mechanical part of desire, instead of with love. Love is a natural control for lust and “implies a deferring of the satisfaction of the desire; it implies even a certain asceticism and a ritual” (Brooks 193). Thus, lust can be seen as ‘secularized desire.’ Brooks explains that “the violation of a woman makes a very good symbol of the process of secularization . . . Our contemporary wasteland is in a large part the result of our scientific attitude—of our complete secularization . . . The waste land of the legend came in this way—the modern waste land has come in this way” (193). Brooks points out that Eliot strengthens the theme of universal guilt.
with a subtle tense change in describing Philomel’s actions after being changed into a
nightingale. The quote is “and still she cries, and still the world pursues.” Brooks comments
“apparently the ‘world’ partakes in the king’s action, and still partakes” (193). Modern society is
just as guilty of lust and rape as the ancient world, but it has also ‘secularized’ desire in another
way: attempting to control it to the extent that it loses all its meaning.

The story of Philomel can also be seen as a continuation of the extreme reaction to hope.
Harriet Davidson, in the article “Improper Desire: Reading The Waste Land,” supports the
interpretation that Eliot portrayed two extremes of reaction when she says of The Waste Land
that it “can be read as a poem about the proper and the improper” (Moody 122). Davidson
observes that “both modes—of sterile propriety and fertile impropriety—cause despair, but
neither is repudiated entirely” (Moody 126). Too much restraint leads to apathy and failure, but
excessive pursuit of desire results in the destruction of the object of desire.

The results of such “improper desire,” as Davis would call it, are recognized as being so
destructive that the modern world has attempted to control desire. This control, though, comes
with its own set of problems, as Eliot vividly catalogues in The Waste Land. Although
controlling desire is not apathy per se, it corresponds to apathy in the Prufrock and St. Sebastian
dichotomy because it leads to meaningless and disconnection. The first effect of this control is
that the world has become sterile as a result of too much control, as is beautifully described in
the opening of the poem. The discussion in the pub is the second image of uncontrolled desire
that continues to have unhappy results, although not as overtly violent as in the ancient world,
but the scene also depicts the side effects of incorrectly controlling desire A third effect is that
the lower part of desire—lust—remains, but the meaningfulness of desire is lost, as portrayed by
the scene with the woman and the clerk.
The first section “The Burial of the Dead” begins with the famous lines

April is the cruelest month, breeding
Lilacs out of the dead land, missing
Memory and desire, stirring
Dull roots with spring rain (1-4).

Spring is supposed to be a time of lush growth and of the promise of new fruit, so when spring is dry, everything is dead and there is no hope of fertility. The first stanza speaks about a spring in which there is no fertility. The advent of spring brings, instead of fertility, only the rebirth of painful memories of lost desires. The speaker says “Winter kept us warm, covering/ Earth in forgetful snow, feeding/ A little life with dried tubers” (5-7). In forgetting desire there is protection, but the stirring up of desires when there is no possibility of obtaining the object of desire is merely a cruel mockery of the sterile state of life and portrays “the difficulty in rousing oneself from the death in life in which the people of the waste land live” (Brooks 187). The sterility portrayed abstractly in the first section is repeated in each example.

The next scene in this section shows that uncontrolled desire still exists and both permitting it or trying to control desire has unwanted consequences. In this scene, two women are talking in a pub. The one woman is telling the other that she needs to make herself look better for her husband that’s coming home from the war because “he wants a good time,/ And if you don’t give it him, there’s others will” (148-149). This woman is informing her friend that her husband’s sexuality is not going to be controlled by the needs of her body and that his inability to control his sexual drive will lead him to infidelity. In addition, the woman’s attempt to control her own fertility has negative side effects. Lil’s teeth are falling out, and she has begun to age prematurely. She reveals that “It’s them pills I took, to bring it off . . . (She’s had five already,
and nearly died of young George.)” (159-160). Her attempt to control her husband’s desire leads to her own infertility. Once again we see that sexual desire creates a problem. Excess sexuality creates overpopulation or unfaithfulness, but the attempt to control fertility damages the woman’s body and causes her to age. Thus, neither uncontrolled nor controlled sexuality seems to work. 

The third, and perhaps most memorable, scene about desire is that of Tiresias watching the “carbuncular clerk” make love to his girlfriend. Tiresias is a mysterious and recurring image in the poem. Because he sees both past and future, he can be seen as the link between all of these images of desire. Also, Tiresias is famous because he was turned into a woman for a period, and crossed the divide between the sexes. He is therefore the most experienced person in regards to desire, and his melancholy observations of the love scene is a powerful indictment on the modern approach to sexual desire. Eliot sets the scene by describing the time of day when people get off work with “At the violet hour, when the eyes and back/ Turn upward from the desk, when the human engine waits/ Like a taxi throbbing, waiting” (215-217). By this description, Eliot has set the tone for the meaninglessness in the scene. Humans have been reduced to machines and have lost their individuality and meaning. The typist has returned home, washed the dishes, and begun to make supper, when

“the young man carbuncular, arrives,
A small house agent’s clerk, with one bold stare . . .
the time is now propitious, as he guesses,
The meal is ended, she is bored and tired,
Endeavours to engage her in caresses
Which still are unreproved, if undesired.
Flushed and decided, he assaults at once;
Exploring hands encounter no defense;
His vanity requires no response,
And makes a welcome of indifference” (231-242).

Here, obviously, is lust, a form of desire, and it lacks meaning or any affection. This is not productive desire and does little to better the lives of either character. The clincher is the girl’s reaction: “she turns and looks a moment in the glass,/ Hardly aware of her departed lover;/ Her brain allows one half-formed thought to pass: ‘Well now that’s done: and I’m glad it’s over.’” (248-251). Thus, such lustful desire uncontrolled by propriety is meaningless. The intercourse between the two individuals is completely sterile. The comment that “I Tiresias have foresuffered all/ Enacted on this same divan or bed” (242-243), shows once again that this is a universal problem for humanity. In each of the examples, desire is not responded to in a productive and healthy way.

The feeling that there is no way to approach desire productively and consequently that there is no hope of a transcendent answer is explored in Davison’s article. The article notes that many “interpretations concur that the barren waste of the poem’s title is a metaphor for the chaotic life within the poem and that the enormous longing to escape that life implies that a world of greater propriety, of stability, order, and beauty must exist somewhere, usually in a transcendent realm of the past, of religion, or of the aesthetic imagination” (Moody 123). Davidson goes on to disagree with this interpretation, arguing that “the power of the poem...comes from its refusal to supply anything to appease the longing for propriety... nothing transcends the effects of finitude and change brought on by the regeneration of April” (123). Davidson’s claims are interesting and to some extent valid. At this point in his life, Eliot
had rejected the ideal of the absolute. As Davidson points out, his doctoral work some years previous to the publication of *The Waste Land* asserted that there were no absolutes. Davidson observes that the attempt to destroy desire is ultimately rejected because it is unsuccessful and thus desire remains but is not explained or given a satisfying place. That Eliot did not completely reject either side, as Davidson claims, is key to understanding Eliot’s eventual solution to the problem.

Davidson is, to some extent, correct in the interpretation that both excessive control of desire (propriety—Prufrock) and chaotic desire (impropriety—St. Sebastian, Philomel, etc) are rejected, but her claim that there is no solution is inaccurate. Although *The Waste Land*, does not provide a specific answer or solution to the problem of what to do with desire, it does give clues about what such an answer would need to look like. It needs to have an element of both desire and control. The famous line at the end of *The Waste Land*, “these fragments I have shored against my ruins” shows that despite the despair and despite not yet having found the answer or the appropriate action to take in response to desire, Eliot endorses the idea that some action must be taken to deal with desire. In addition, the final instruction of the thunder is interpreted as control. The accompanying stanzas provide an “image of the sailboat both propelled by and controlling the wind and water combines the force of desire and control in a productive way. In this image order and control are linked to the continuation of desire in the boat’s movement across the water” (Moody 131). Thus desire must exist and effect change, but that force must be controlled and directed. This is the solution to the sterilization and chaos that can alternatively be created by the problem of desire. Eliot’s later poetry shows that he eventually found a satisfying answer along these same lines to his question of how to respond to desire.
For Eliot “to experience the world as a waste was a prerequisite to experiencing it in faith” (Gordon 157) and Eliot’s experience of waste culminated in *The Waste Land*. He was then capable of receiving grace. Eliot converted to Christianity in 1927 and finally found the appropriate response to desire: desire must be surrendered to a higher power because the ability of the individual to find fulfillment is flawed and must be aided by the “wounded surgeon” (*The Four Quartets* 127) who destroys desire in order to purify love. Although this seems paradoxical, the beauty of Eliot’s *The Four Quartets* lies in the willingness to struggle with and accept such paradoxes. Eliot dealt with paradoxes most of his life; early in his life he thought that he had to commit himself to one of either extreme of the paradoxes of life but was unsatisfied with that as a solution. He realized, as evidenced by his conversion to the Anglican Church, a moderate denomination, that he could accept part of both. Eliot satisfied his wrestling with paradoxical extremes by choosing a “middle way.”

Eliot realized that he had been looking at the landscape of his life in the wrong way. He had not understood that the contradictions that he worked so desperately to solve were actually the foundation of understanding. Once he converted, he found it necessary to look back on his life and redefine what he has experienced in order to redeem his life. Eliot says of himself “We had the experience but missed the meaning. / And approach to the meaning restores the experience/ In a different form, beyond any meaning/ We can assign to happiness” (133). Eliot has come to understand that he must redefine everything in order to find true meaning and understanding of his life. A crucial part of this process is the recognition and acceptance of contradictions such as

To arrive where you are, to get from where you are not,  
You must go by a way wherein there is no ecstasy.
In order to arrive at what you do not know
You must go by a way which is the way of ignorance.
In order to possess what you do not possess
You must go by the way of dispossession (127).

To rephrase this specifically for the theme of desire, in order to gain the fulfillment of your desire you must relinquish the desire. Eliot explains to himself why this must be so, saying
I said to my soul, be still, and wait without hope
For hope would be hope for the wrong thing; wait without love
For love would be love of the wrong thing; there is yet faith
But the faith and the love and the hope are all in the waiting.

Wait without thought, for you are not ready for thought” (The Four Quartets 127).

The reason why he is not ready for thought is because there is, “At best, only a limited value/ In the knowledge derived from experience./ The knowledge imposes a pattern, and falsifies./ For the pattern is new in every moment/ And every moment is a new and shocking valuation of all we have been” (125). In other words, humans are incapable of making the right decisions because they have only a limited wisdom derived from experience and this experience clouds the bigger picture. While Eliot assumed that he could obtain his desire through extreme action or could get rid of desire by ignoring it, what was really needed was a process that would start with desire and lead to salvation. Eliot explores this thought with “say that the end precedes the beginning,/ And the end and the beginning were always there/ Before the beginning and after the end./ And all is always now” (121). The entire process he went through to arrive at salvation was already in place at the beginning and that, although he did not know the outcome, God knew that the process would end in salvation.
For Eliot, this was a difficult lesson to learn. It seemed circuitous and even torturous. He started with one goal in mind and ended up being diverted into a completely different path than what he expected. He describes this experience by telling us that

“What you thought you came for
Is only a shell, a husk of meaning
From which the purpose breaks only when it is fulfilled
If at all. Either you had no purpose
Or the purpose is beyond the end you figured
And is altered in fulfillment” (139).

Eliot is proposing that the end we originally desired was not the true goal of the journey that our desire started but was only a picture or an image to start the process. He explains “Desire itself is movement/ Not in itself desirable;/ Love is itself unmoving,/ Only the cause and end of movement” (122). Eliot started on a journey of desire and after surrendering that desire and learning humility he found that the purpose of his journey was not to have his desire fulfilled but to have it purified and transformed into something better: love. Love does not elicit movement and is therefore the best goal. The problem with desire is that it is too bound up with “sin and error” (143) to remain unchanged after salvation. Eliot struggled with desire all of his life, both with wanting to fulfill his desire and with a sense of shame that he should even acknowledge those desires. He is relieved when he discovers “the use of memory:/ For liberation—not less of love but expanding/ Of love beyond desire, and so liberation/ From the future as well as the past” (142). Eliot directly outlines a parallel to the polarity of excessive desire and apathy. He says that there are three conditions: attachment, detachment, and, in between the two, indifference (142). This indifference may seem negative, but when combined with Eliot’s explanation that “Love is
most nearly itself/ When here and now cease to matter” (129), it is understood that it is not that the individual should cease to care because of detachment; rather, the indifference is the recognition that what is truly valuable lies in another sphere and cannot be gained through excessive attachment. Although Eliot makes it clear that the journey to salvation involves starting with desire and ending up with love, the path one must take towards this is harder to describe. He describes that there is a transformation in the process; “See, now they vanish/ The faces and places, with the self which, as it could, loved them,/ To become renewed, transfigured, in another” (142). Eliot realizes that desire must be dealt with, but the way to do so is counterintuitive. To appropriately respond to desire is to surrender it. Eliot proclaims “The only hope, or else despair/ Lies in the choice of pyre or pyre—/ To be redeemed from fire by fire” (144). This image of redemptive fire echoes the Old Testament’s purification through sacrifice. Eliot wonders “Who then devised the torment? Love./ Love is the unfamiliar Name” (144). David Moody explains that “in this way the desire ... is made at one with the Love”(153).

The answer of how to best respond to desire is intimately related to humility in The Four Quartets. As foreshadowed in The Waste Land by the image of the boat, the best response involves both action and control. Through his conversion, Eliot realized that the only way to approach ones’ desires (or anything, for that matter) is with humility. He exclaims

Do not let me hear
Of the wisdom of old men, but rather of their folly,
Their fear of fear and frenzy, their fear of possession,
Of belonging to another, or to others, or to God.
The only wisdom we can hope to acquire
Is the wisdom of humility: humility is endless” (125-126).
But Eliot does not just declare that humility is necessary, he also explains why, realizing that

“What there is to conquer
By strength or submission, has already been discovered...
by men whom one cannot hope
To emulate—but there is no competition—
There is only the fight to recover what has been lost...
But perhaps neither gain nor loss.
For us there is only the trying. The rest is not our business” (128).

Individuals are not in complete control of their lives. They must submit to knowledge and forces beyond their understanding. For Eliot, this meant the church and Christianity. He declares that

“You are not here to verify,/ Instruct yourself, or inform curiosity/ Or carry report. You are here to kneel/ Where prayer has been valid” (139). Understanding, meaning, and even existence are not something that the individual can stand aloof from, control, and yet still experience. Instead understanding requires “the awful daring of a moment’s surrender” (Norton 403). Desire, salvation, life itself requires surrender in order to be validated.

Eliot finally arrived, towards the end of his life, at a place where he could enjoy the fulfillment of his desire. He married a second time and found himself almost ridiculously happy. He had found the ability to enjoy desire by facing what he feared most: “possession/ Of belonging to another, or to others, or to God” (126). This ability came through surrender to God and to God’s valuation of the world. This is supported by Psalms 37:4-5 “Delight thyself also in the Lord, and he shall give thee the desires of thine heart. Commit thy way unto the Lord; trust also in him; and he shall bring it to pass.” Eliot learned that although God requires the surrender of everything; He purifies, returns and then fulfills the desires. Eliot’s journey to salvation was
long and hard, requiring him to wander through disillusionment with his family’s faith, a
discovery of evil, rejection of Christianity, and the foiling of all the human approaches of desire.
His realization that secular humanity did not have a way to deal with desire that was satisfactory
for him sent him back to the Church to see if he had missed the meaning the last time. To his
great surprise and joy, he found that the Church offered a viable and acceptable approach to both
desire and life. Eliot recorded the high points of his spiritual journey in his poetry and other
written works, but still declined to prescribe a pattern of salvation. He “offers neither doctrine
nor a revelation” (Moody 151) and the ideas in his poetry “do not define meanings so much as
point in a definite direction . . . (they) neither inform nor instruct, but establish a certain
orientation” (Moody 151). Eliot points the reader towards God but refuses to say exactly what
must be done, and it is up to each reader to decide how he or she can respond to desire with
humility and submission.
Works Cited:


