

Eliot breaks all the rules of epic poetry in *The Waste Land*. For an epic poem it appears to be too short; it does not have a unifying voice; and it lacks the primary characteristic that defines this genre—a hero.¹ Eliot, nevertheless, employs an epic structure that necessitates the presence of a pilgrim, of either gender, who has the opportunity to become a hero in the poem.

Listening for the
“Sound of Water over a Rock”
HEROISM AND THE ROLE OF THE READER
IN *THE WASTE LAND*

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The heroes of *The Waste Land* are its own readers. The guide/pilgrim structure of Eliot's poem places readers in the role of the pilgrim. In this role, active readers gradually develop qualities that later will characterize them as heroes. Eliot defines what it means to be a modern hero in three different phases of the poem: the first refers to Eliot's use of the second person in "The Burial of the Dead," which invites readers into the poem, yells at them, and then begins to lead them on a journey; the second places readers in the role of the active spectator; and the third phase of reader's interaction with the text consummates their role as the hero by becoming an active participant, a collaborator, who affects and alters the poem's essential meaning.

Very few mention the role of the hero in their scholarship on *The Waste Land*, and even fewer discuss it. The absence of a hero in the text is taken for granted to mean that there is not one. Images of nature in the poem, the dead trees, the barren tree branches, and the dry stone, give the illusion that all potential heroes or saviours have been overrun by corruption, moral decay, or their own mortality. This narrative needs a hero and Eliot's depiction of the land gives one the sense that heroes have either abandoned this place, or could not inhabit it. The land's rejuvenation is nothing more than a chimera and hope itself appears to be just as empty as the terrain that the poem describes. Many readers overlook the role of the hero because they are used to reading about the hero's actions on the page. The female or male hero of this poem, however, potentially is a reader who actively engages with the poem, though she or he is not physically a character on its printed pages. The hero, then, appears to be invisible, or just not there, but is in fact present at all times. Eliot and the voices that narrate his poem acknowledge a reader's presence by using the second person to speak to them in the first, fourth, and fifth sections.

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While some critics have called this poem an epic, they do not thoroughly discuss the possibility of a hero in the poem. Steve Ellis speculates in his work that the reader may be the hero of the poem, but this suggestion is only a passing one. The use of the second person as a way of referring to a "protagonist or hero?" is a conjecture that Ellis makes, but does not explore (Ellis 89). The word *hero* comes up in another piece of scholarship by Wayne Koestenbaum on collaboration and hysteria in the poem. Koestenbaum refers to Eliot's audience as "these heroic readers, whom John Crowe Ransom, in 1966, called 'those sturdy people who studied *The Waste Land*'" (113). This epithet, "heroic," suggests that the act of reading the poem itself is an act

of heroism. Though her work does not address directly the existence of a hero in *The Waste Land* or the use of second person, Jewel Spears Brooker also explores the text's relationship with its audience; instead of describing it as a heroic feat, she explains that it is dialogic. In an article on Eliot and collaboration,

Brooker argues that Eliot intended to create a common ground of understanding with readers in order to communicate with them. By undermining the popular concept that Eliot is elitist in his poetry, Brooker demonstrates that his real goal was to collaborate with his readers. In another article on "The Dispensations of Art" Brooker explains Mallarmé's thoughts on what happens during the reading of a poem. Again, she describes readers as collaborators, as "hidden poets," who ideally is "Every Reader" that encounters a poem like Eliot's *Waste Land* (27).

Little has been said about collaborative writing in literature and Brooker is the first to use this word in relation to Eliot's work. The idea of the solitary author is very much alive, but it is a myth. In "What the Thunder Said" readers collaborate in producing

meaning in Eliot's poem. The voices in the poem address, guide, encourage, compel, and coerce readers into the role of the hero. By placing readers in the hero's position, the poem causes them to imagine that the poem will end differently, perhaps better, than it started.

From the very beginning, the poem confronts readers with a sense of lack, with what is missing, and with what, presumably, the poem does not have. The opening lines generate the sense that something is astray: "April is the cruelest month," apparently because it "breed[s] / Lilacs out of the dead land" (Eliot ll. 1-2). These lines mock the Prologue to Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales* while also reversing its cheery sentiment:

Whan that April with his showres soote
The droughte of March hath perced to the roote,
And bathed every veine in swich licour,
Of which vertu engenderd in the flour
(Chaucer ll. 1-4)

Eliot's opening is a negation of Chaucer's. April showers pierce, "to the roote," March's drought and beget a flower in the medieval poem, but Eliot makes it clear in his version that the spring rain can do nothing more than stir "dull roots." Despite the rain, the opening lines express the land's inability to procreate because there is nothing in the "dead land" for spring rain to nourish in the modern world. The land has lost its fecundity and is deficient.

In the second stanza the land's condition degrades as a speaker describes how parched and desiccated it is under the sun's heat: "[...] the dead tree gives no shelter, the cricket no relief, / And the dry stone *no sound of water*" (my emphasis ll. 23-4). While rain does not do any good in the first stanza, here merely the sound of it would make April a little less cruel by, at the very least, allowing one to *hear* the sound of water and fantasize about a forthcoming rain. Eliot's reference and reversal of Chaucer's Prologue at the beginning of "The Burial of the Dead" encourages readers to compare the introductory portions of these two texts. By doing so Eliot draws attention to what the wasteland is not. It is not fertile, not lavish, and not a place that one should want to be.

As a poem, *The Waste Land* is also understood by

what it lacks. It is a long poem, but perhaps not long enough to be an epic. It does not adhere to the epic formula. There are not demonstrations of human dignity, courage, valor, or triumph and most importantly – there is no apparent hero. Yet, the opening's reference to *The Canterbury Tales* indicates that from the very beginning Eliot's allusion to other epics means for readers to interpret his poem an epic or anti-epic.

Reading this poem negatively appears to lead to a dead end, because it reconstructs the sense of lack that Irigaray discusses in *This Sex Which Is Not One*. Although Irigaray's work is about the historical and cultural construction of female sexuality and identity, the "lack" that she explains has defined the idea of woman for hundreds of years is similar to the ways in which readers have been interpreting *The Waste Land* for over eighty years. This sense of "lack" assumes that there actually is one. It causes one to assume that the work lacks wholeness, is incomplete, or that something essential to the work is missing – a linear plot, a protagonist, a hero, a God that causes it to rain, or the optimistic "sound of water over a rock" (l. 355).

Rather than reinforcing the notion of "lack" that Irigaray describes as a historically female affliction, Eliot overturns it. He compels readers to experience the feelings of loss and lack that pervade the poem, but many of the absences that his poem makes readers conscious of are not absent at all. The role of the reader enables a sense of *presence*. A reader simply reading it allows the poem to come into being. It also permits other works outside of this one to become alive through memory, for a readerly presence to affect the text, and for a hero to materialize. By calling attention to what the poem is not or to what the poem does not have, Eliot attempts to reconstruct the epic genre, what it means to be a hero in this tradition, as well as how readers generally read.

In this case, the role of epic hero undergoes a dramatic alteration. Readers as heroes appear to diminish the grandeur that in part has defined the concept of heroism because this role bestows power upon readers that lack supernatural abilities. It also enables those who are not really engaged in learning, committed to seeking understanding, or those that feign knowledge to become spurious climbers, unworthy of the power entrusted to them. This scenario

is frightening; it facilitates apathy that can lead to misreading, misinterpretation, and to tragedy much like the rape scene in "The Fire Sermon." In "Literature in the Reader" Stanley Fish refers to meaning "as an action made upon a reader rather than as a container from which a reader extracts a message" (71). Eliot's poem does not "contain" a single meaning that all readers can reach into, pull out, and all agree upon. Reading, according to Fish, constitutes a kind of collaboration between the text and the reader, an "event" in which a reader must negotiate meaning with the text. As a way of further describing his theory, Fish also refers to literature as kinetic art because even though the language imprinted on the page never changes, except in translation or in the way that publishers present it in new editions, audiences certainly do. Placing readers in the role where they are encouraged to become heroes is a risk that Eliot takes. They might not notice that the poem speaks to them directly; they might not understand what the poem is asking of them; or they might not know that they have the potential to be a hero in relation to the poem. When readers *do* notice these things, though, their engagement favorably alters worlds both inside and outside of *The Waste Land*.

Despite the fact that Eliot breaks from conventions normally used in epic poetry, he decidedly engages in dialogue with past poetic traditions. Mikhail Bakhtin points out in his work that the epic genre itself "has from the beginning [been] a poem about the past" (Bakhtin 13). While Eliot reinvents epic structure and heroism in *The Waste Land*, he does not destroy the tradition behind the poetic form. It is broken into fragments; these fragments relate and speak to one another thematically. The poem's separation into five sections expresses the isolation, fragmentation, and multiplicity of our own minds and moments of being. Thus, the structure of the poem relies upon the structure of other early medieval epics. Particularly, a Danteian theme pervades Eliot's poem. In "What Dante Means to Me" Eliot states that he has borrowed from Dante "in the attempt to reproduce, or rather to arouse in the reader's mind the memory, of some Dantesque scene, and thus establish a relationship between the medieval inferno and modern life" (113). Like the *Inferno*, *The Waste Land* consists of a dialogue arranged between a

guide and a pilgrim. In Dante's poem there is a single guide, Virgil, but the voices that narrate Eliot's poem are many. As they narrate, they guide readers, who are heroes in training, through this modern version of hell.

The poem's guides appear to be voices from the past, for they constantly offers accounts of it. The past in *The Waste Land* is something for which one longs; in the beginning of the poem it represents an idyllic time. After describing a winter where only "a little life with dried tubers" is maintained, the narrator remembers "coming over the Starnbergersee" during a shower. Then:

. . . we stopped in the colonade,
And went on in sunlight, into the Hofgarten,
And drank coffee, and talked for an hour.
(ll. 8-11)

The memory that the narrator summons here is one that expresses a state of contentment and reverie. A rain shower is in the center of this moment of joy in the narrator's memory. In the rest of "The Burial of the Dead," though, rain – water especially – poses a serious threat.

Even though this memory from the past, which recalls a time when it rained, embodies a calm and peaceful time in the narrator's life, in other parts of the poem the past represents something that one dreads remembering. This is most apparent in the first section of the poem when a speaker says: "'You gave me hyacinths first a year ago; / They called me the hyacinth girl'" (ll. 35-6). The tone shows hints of nostalgia until she recalls:

Yet when we came back, late, from the Hyacinth
garden,
Your arms full, and your hair wet, I could not
Speak, and my eyes failed, I was neither
Living nor dead, and I knew nothing.
(ll. 37-40)

For this speaker, remembering the past is a reminder of what has been lost – her love, voice, sight, and mind. The past tense she uses in the line "Living nor dead, and I knew nothing," however, indicates that she no longer "[knows] nothing." Admitting, "I knew nothing" suggests that the speaker now "knows" something. In

the last two lines are statements, from the same speaker,² that share wisdom about modern life: “Looking into the heart of light, the silence. / *Oed’und leer das Meer*” (ll. 41-2). The parataxis in these lines suggests that the silence the speaker experiences after remembering the Hyacinth garden is “desolate and empty” as the sea (translation).

The hyacinth girl’s memories may be about the past, but they represent the present situation and its crisis of water. She refers to it twice: before losing her ability to speak or see the speaker says that her lover had wet hair and the last line in German mentions the sea. Thus far, nothing good seems to come from water, except in the first stanza of the poem when the speaker recalls the summer and a “shower of rain.” Near the end of “The Burial of the Dead” a foreboding voice advises – “Fear death by water” (l. 55). Initially, this appears to be a strange axiom to live by. After all, the wasteland is dry and dusty. Madame Sosotris’ tarot pack, however, predicts that water is on its way and the warning that the speaker gives is rooted in historical knowledge. The line from *Tempest*, the “drowned Phoenician Sailor” card, and the hyacinth girl’s wisdom demonstrates that one should fear water for what it has caused in the past and what it can do presently. Water has contradictory functions in the poem; it causes both death and life. Even though Madame Sosotris says, “I do not find the Hanged Man. Fear death by water,” readers can recognize that water does not always signify death and destruction (l. 55). As mentioned before, in the poem’s first stanza readers hear about a pleasant memory that includes “a shower of rain,” followed by a stroll in the sunlight, and an hour’s conversation in a watering hole (l. 9). Later in the poem, though, water’s unpredictable nature induces fear of it. At the end of “A Game of Chess” Lil’s valediction reminds one of Ophelia’s farewell speech in *Hamlet*. Ophelia’s drowning, and perhaps Lil’s, however, was willful. As predicted, Phlebas the Phoenician also dies by water, though whether this occurs by accident or not is unknown. At the beginning of “The Fire Sermon” readers learn that the Thames, London’s river, is out of control – its “tent is broken” (l. 173). In “Death by Water” London’s unruly water metamorphoses into the sea, which picks at the dead bones of Phlebas, who the speaker warns “was once

handsome and tall as *you*” (my emphasis l. 321). Water clearly is dangerous – it is deadly, but in “What the Thunder Said” the poem reminds readers that the wasteland’s terrain is dry, dusty, and in need of water. The memory of “a shower of rain” at the beginning of this work is an agreeable one because nothing tragic happens, but the narrator also is careful to point out that her or his party sought shelter from the rain by “stopp[ing] in the colonnade” (l. 9). The speaker in the final section of the poem yearns for water or even “the sound of water,” but the source of this substance can not be safely found in the world of the wasteland only. It must come from some outside source.

While Bakhtin asserts that the epic is a poem about the past, Eliot proves that memories that involve water, consciously or unconsciously, depict a consciousness that is present. This creates a dialogue between the past and the present, between a time when it rained and a time when it will rain again, between what the hyacinth girl knew and now knows, and ultimately, between the poem itself and its contemporary audiences.

In part, this poem is about adhering to and deviating from the past; Eliot verifies this by modeling other epics. The ways in which he imitates traditional epic form illuminates how the theme and structure of *The Waste Land* parallels works like Dante’s *Divine Comedy*. Epics, such as Dante’s, are arranged by a dialogic relationship between a guide and a pilgrim. This rapport consists of a colloquy in which the pilgrim asks questions and, instead of obtaining answers, receives guidance. Eliot internalized this guide/pilgrim structure from Dante and many other poets from the medieval era and adopted it in *The Waste Land* to inspire a sense of the past, of its loss, and of the despondency of the modern condition.

The presence of a pilgrim is imperative to the essence of the poem because this figure embarks upon a long journey and develops into a hero. Even though there does not appear to be a pilgrim-like figure in the poem because she or he never speaks, the dialogic structure of Eliot’s poem necessitates it. The poem’s guides are not just ranting to themselves; they speak to someone in the second person and if the poem is being read at all, readers, at least, are listening. Even if the poem represents a one-way (verbal) conversation between the text and the reader, the guide/pilgrim

structure that Eliot employs necessitates dialogue. The fact that there even *is* a pilgrim is important because this figure represents the unenlightened seeker who is the hero in training. Even though it is important to note that *The Waste Land* is a poem about the past, it is also necessary to consider how Eliot rewrites this role and the qualifications that it takes to enter into it. To become a hero in this poem, to replace the traditional epic figure, readers must embark upon a journey, a type of spiritual quest, in which they will question the expedition's mission as well as the destiny of their own lives. They must listen and learn, and then they must act constructively or creatively.

Throughout the work multiple voices speak, explain, and illustrate the condition of the wasteland and its inhabitants. Like Dante's guide, Virgil, in the *Inferno* these voices guide someone on a spiritual quest through *The Waste Land*. This person or persons, however, never speaks. She or he is silent and is seemingly absent from the scene, yet the voices narrating the poem appear to address readers in a way that differs from other instances throughout literary history. In the second stanza, the narrating voice speaks, enticing readers to read on, explore, and discover what the world of the wasteland is like, where one finds "shadow under this red rock" and "fear in a handful of dust" (ll. 25-30).

This invitation to "[c]ome under the shadow of this red rock" differs greatly from the outset of the pilgrimage in Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales*. The speaker's request to "Come" is an ominous one that promises to "show *you* fear in a handful of dust" (emphasis mine). The speaker says "*you*," clearly indicating that she or he is speaking to someone. But who this someone is remains a mystery until the end of "The Burial of the Dead."

"You! hypocrite lecture! — mon semblable! — mon frère!" shouts the narrator, with exclamation marks, in the last line of the poem's first section (l. 76). The voice speaking here reflexively calls attention to the fact that she or he is not alone. The denunciation of readers occurs in a dialogue that allows readers to only hear one side of this confabulation, making it seem like it is a monologue or soliloquy. The dramatic techniques of expressing one's inner consciousness aloud, as it happens on stage or on screen, calls attention to the fact

that the voice crying out "hypocrite lecteur!" is not entirely engaged in a private conversation. Readers are silently present, but are not prepared to realize that the poem is addressing them in this manner.

This last line in "The Burial of the Dead" is one that Eliot borrows from a Baudelaire poem, "Au Lecteur." Baudelaire's last stanza states,

I mean *Ennui*! Who in his hookah-dreams
Produces hangmen and real tears together.
How well you know this fastidious monster, reader,
— Hypocrite reader, you! — my double! my brother!
— (Baudelaire ll. 37-40)

These lines are from an English translation, whereas Eliot quotes Baudelaire in French.

Eliot's line is meant to be understood as a direct reference to Baudelaire's poem because he uses quotation marks. With anger, Baudelaire's poem confronts reader apathy and lethargy. Readers, he exclaims, would "willingly make rubble of the earth/ And swallow up creation in a yawn" (ll. 35-6). Readers, he implies, are lazy "cowards" because "our soul's too weak to dare!" (Baudelaire l. 28). With vigor, Baudelaire and Eliot indicate that reading requires a bit of courage and work that modern readers are currently not putting forth.

Eliot demonstrates that he shares the same sentiment as the French poet in the line that appears in "The Burial of the Dead," but he addresses readers more indirectly than Baudelaire does. He does not confront and admonish readers as harshly. Instead, *The Waste Land* illustrates the consequences of being an apathetic reader. This "Unreal" wasteland shows the results of indifference. Ironically, responses to *The Waste Land* express listless idleness similar to what Eliot's poem reproaches. Eliot and his narrator, surprisingly, do not condemn readers entirely. The speaker, Baudelaire's stand-in, refers to readers as "mon semblable" and "mon frère." This tiny gesture of kinship suggests that Eliot recognizes that indifference is a flaw common to all kinds of readers. The beginning of "Au Lecteur" also admits and accepts human failings by referring to these as "our" problems: "Ignorance, error, cupidity, and sin / Possess *our* souls and exercise *our* flesh" (emphasis added ll. 1-2). Eliot's poem implies that the

tendency to be passive readers, to yawn, and be lulled to sleep, while common, is still devastatingly harmful. Eliot's speaker does call readers "his likeness" and "his brother," but this does not soften the blow of the narrator's angry accusation against "You! hypocrite lecteur!" Meaning to shake readers awake, this indictment makes active readers aware that the "you" to whom the poem speaks means *them*.

Eliot begins his poem by calling upon Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales*, a significant text within a reader's literary cultural consciousness, while he ends "What the Thunder Said" with words from the *Upanishads*. This signifies the first task of the modern hero. As readers we must step outside of our realm of experience and endeavor to understand the one Eliot places before us. We must give of ourselves and temporarily surrender our current experience with the world in order to understand *The Waste Land*. A journey outside of our zone of comfort marks our first task as the hero. Although we are the hero(es) of *The Waste Land*, Eliot's version of modernity and the role of the modern epic hero separates us from the reality that the poem expresses by what Bakhtin calls "epic distance" (Bakhtin 14). It is clear that our position as the reader and the hero of the poem demands that we enter a poetic world that differs from our common experience with reality. The same is true for other epic heroes such as Beowulf, Arthur, Dante, Odysseus, and Leopold Bloom; all of these heroes must step outside of themselves or the environment in which they are comfortable.

Although the examples of heroes aforementioned are all male, specificity of sex or gender identity is not predetermined in the role of the reader/hero. While I will not address at length issues that surround the gender of the hero in *The Waste Land*, the heroic role in literature is most often considered male, or someone demonstrating masculine characteristics. In her work on HD, Susan Stanford Friedman admits that going on a long sojourn that is both physically and spiritually taxing is often understood as a journey for a male: "the quest of the male poet is present and understood as the anguished journey of the prophetseer for the absolute on behalf of all mankind" ("Who Buried HD?" 803). If Friedman were talking about literary characters, instead of authors, the role of the "male poet" could be

substituted with "male hero," for they are often used as synonyms. Eliot and his contemporaries, however, began to overturn this concept. Cyrena Pondrom's article on the "Performativity of Gender" expounds upon the complexity of gender identity in *The Waste Land*. Although she does not speculate on whether or not the gender of the hero is specified, she explains how the narrator, Tiresias, "acts male" and "performs a failed masculinity" (429). Even when a role, like the narrator or the hero, is stereotypically identified as a male position, either the performance of gender fails, is false, or defies the definition of being either male or female. Referring to heroic male archetypes from literary history in a poem about the modern world allows Eliot to reallocate the responsibilities of an epic hero onto the shoulders of readers of either gender.

Although Eliot's use of the second person in the early section of "The Burial of the Dead" suggests that the poem speaks directly to readers, he forgets about our bodies, our voyeurism, and our existence until "Death by Water" when the narrator asks us to "Consider Phlebas, who was once handsome and as tall as you" (l. 321). This, however, is not a passive forgetfulness. As spectators, we become more aware and conscious. Although our bodies are outside of Eliot's words, our minds and imaginations are at work in our reading of the poem. Our role of the hero in the *Waste Land* then is neither active nor passive; it signifies consciousness in the act of reading.

Occurrences where the second person is used to address readers appear in the first, fourth, and fifth sections of the poem. In most cases, the second person is used in the poem to address readers directly. The other uses of the second person in the poem appear throughout the middle sections. For example, the hyacinth girl states, "You gave me hyacinths first a year ago," later in "Burial" a narrator says "Thank you," and in "A Game of Chess" the narrator talks to her silent husband and states, "I never know what you are thinking. Think" (Eliot ll. 34, 57, & 114). An address in the second person also emerges at the end of "Death by Water" as the narrating voice comments:

Gentile or Jew

O you who turn the wheel and look to windward,
Consider Phlebas, who was once handsome and

tall as you.

(ll. 319-21)

In all of these citations from the text, the second person at least inadvertently addresses readers in the same manner that Eliot's quotation from Baudelaire does. Regardless of the different interpretative implications in the use of the second person, when reading and analyzing the poem, what the use of "you" suggests is that we as readers, who are outside of the text, enter it.

As the heteroglossia of the text beckons our *presence*, rather than marking our absence, it also asks us to collaborate with it by taking on the roles of the student, spectator, and hero. As the fragments of the poem speak to and teach reader pilgrims, the poem's audience is nevertheless silenced. Traditional uses of the epic, Bakhtin points out, often locates the guide and pilgrim "in the same time and on the same evaluative [hierarchical] plan, but the represented world of the heroes stands on an utterly different and inaccessible time and value plan, separated by epic distance" (Bakhtin 14). Although our dialogic relationship with *The Waste Land* is not mediated by a heroic figure such as Odysseus or Beowulf, references to the past do not separate us from an immediate understanding of the poem. Even though we can not converse with the poem, our imagination can and does. Our imaginative dialogue with the poem is silent, but it signifies the first step in our journey crossing the poem's distant field of understanding. While Eliot creates a common ground and collaboration of meaning with his readers, his poem also pushes us into the challenging role of the hero who collaborates with the poem and creates meaning.

The second role of the hero that signifies a spiritual journey or a quest for enlightenment is an inactive one. Readers are students and the spectators during the middle sections of the poem. As they are guided through *The Waste Land* they experience the poem much like one does a film. Readers see image after image of the wasteland and are even given answers to certain questions such as: "What branches grow/ Out of this stony rubbish?" "Son of man" the voice narration answers (Eliot ll. 19-20). Reader's voyeurism signifies the second role of the reader/hero. Just as Virgil leads

Dante through the landscape of the *Inferno*, so are readers led and meant to be enlightened as they pass through the pages of this poem. The fragmented voices are past ones whose role is to teach and show readers the realities that modernity faces. The woman's reaction to Lil's resolution to her marital problem, for example, illustrates one aspect of modern times. "What you get married for if you don't want children?" indicates what was expected of women at this time (l. 164). The narrator suggests that having children and procreating is indispensable to marriage, to being a woman.

In another section of the poem, "The Fire Sermon," where readers are meant to sit, listen, watch, and learn from the ongoing events pilgrim readers are forced to be witnesses to carbuncular's uninvited and unwelcomed sexual advances. This situation puts readers in a double-bind. They want to act, to stop what is happening, but are incapable of doing so. Here, readers are incapable of acting heroically. Unlike the relationship between the guide and pilgrim in Dante's epics, readers can not reach out to change the present situation, nor can they ask their guides questions as to *why* this rape has to happen, and they certainly can not stop it. Readers are also placed in this type of intellectual paradox in an earlier section of the poem. In "A Game of Chess" the narrator showers the audience with questions asking, "What shall I do?" (l. 132). The narrator then provides a short list of things that could be done: "The hot water at ten. / And if it rains, a closed car a four. / And we shall play a game of chess" (ll. 135-7). These last two lines arrange ideas in an interesting way. The syntax suggests "if it rains...we shall play a game of chess," our reading of the this section's title indicates that, allegedly, we are already in "A Game of Chess." This implies that "if" is not a real question. If readers are in the middle of "A Game of Chess" it must have already rained, but memories of the dry barren landscape override this passing thought.

A reader's passage through a Dante-like hell is more than a tourist's expedition. As observers and heroes, readers are invested in the creation and outcome of *The Waste Land*. The reader's part as the spectator has the same effect that a film should on its viewers. The voices one hears and the images that flash in one's mind while reading the poem affects viewers differently than a tour of such events would. Readers witness and

become privy to the death, decay, rape, and destruction that she or he witnesses. In “The Fire Sermon,” readers become voyeurs by listening and witnessing Tiresias’s remembrance of a rape scene. Despite Tiresias’ androgyny, our voyeurism through the imagery of his recollection is thus associated to the male gaze. This voyeurism, however, is not intended in any way to be satisfying or fulfilling. The rapist’s “welcome of indifference” toward his vanity as well as the victim’s accepting and apathetic response to this violation of her body as she states, “Well now that’s done: and I’m glad it’s over” results in disgust rather than pleasure (l. 252). Our inability, as readers, to either stop or hinder this event of rape makes us just as apathetic as Tiresias. As readers, we lack the power to stop this rape and our need to keep reading the text distracts us from crying out in outrage. The text encourages a type of apathy that is different from reader apathy. The poem compels readers to move on, keep reading, and ignore what has just happened. These images of rape, however, stick with readers altering us in a way that simply a tour of *The Waste Land* or a slide show of images would not.

The third duty of the hero is much more active than the first two. Eliot clearly outlines in the voice of the thunder what a modern hero should do – give, sympathize, and control. Yet, in this analysis of the epic form it is equally important not only to know what we should do, but what we are doing as we read this poem and how this is indicative of our heroic role. In Bakhtin’s discussion of the “Epic and the Novel” he notes that: “We speak of the epic as a genre that has come to us already well defined and real. We come upon it when it is already completely finished, a congealed and half-moribund genre” (14). This genre clearly outlines that heroes must take action in epics. The reader as hero in Eliot scholarship has seemed unfathomable in the context of *The Waste Land* because there is so much wrong, so much decay, and rape that any worthy hero would step in and act against the forces of humanity that have caused this desolation. Yet, indeed as heroes and readers we do act against these forces of decay.

Readers, as spectators on this quest for enlightenment, watch and hear Eliot’s picture show of imagery and music. In “What the Thunder Said” the water dripping song tells us: “Here is no water but only

rock/ Rock and no water and the sandy road” (ll. 332-3). A few lines later the narrator begins to imagine “if there were water we should stop and drink” (l. 335). The voice that narrates this song tells us that there is no water and imagines what it would be like if there were water.

Not the cicada
And dry grass singing
But sound of water over a rock (ll. 353-5)

Merely the sound of water would be enough to give the narrator hope in this passage, but sadly the stanza paragraph ends by acknowledging, “there is no water” (l. 358). This is how the passage ends for the narrator, but for the reader who is outside of the text *The Waste Land* is becoming a much less desolate place. Although the narrator tells us “there is no water,” it is too late for the spectator. We have already imagined and heard the sound of water in the preceding lines:

But the sound of water over a rock
Where the hermit-thrush sings in the pine trees
Drip drop drip drop drop drop drop (ll. 356-358)

As readers, our engagement with *The Waste Land* no longer lies in the role of the spectator because we have imagined the image and sound of water into being. We now have become an active participant in the poem. Eliot anticipates this hope and meets reader’s expectations in the voice of the thunder.

The poem provides readers with the sound of water, “drip drop drip drop drop drop drop,” but it is a reader’s imagination that makes the dripping sound turn into real water. The melody of the dripping song produces the effects of melopoeia, a term that Pound uses in “How to Read” (25). Melopoeia indicates that the words create a type of music and that the meaning of this sound surpasses the meaning of the poem’s words or syntax. Pound’s word also suggests that music’s meaning avoids allegations of elitism because it is accessible to all who hear and consciously listen to it. He states: “*melopoeia* can be appreciated by a foreigner with a sensitive ear, even though [she or] he be ignorant of the language in which the poem is written” (25). Even though Eliot uses at least five

different languages in his poem and makes reference to numerous literary texts, the meaning that is most essential to the poem is not esoteric. At the very least, readers can hear the sound of water aurally, and upon doing so become heroes of this modern epic by providing that which could not exist in the wasteland without them.

The narrator says, “there is no water,” insinuating that there is no hope, no fecundity, no life, and lastly, no water. While the poem tells us that there is no water, readers expect rain anyway. The presence of the voice of the thunder, the certainty of rain that will follow, and the sound of rain that the repetition of “Shantih shantih shantih” represent are all merciful acts. The image and sound of water is only given to us in the text, but by imagining the sound of water into a reality, we bestow mercy on the wasted land and ourselves. The imaginative power of the person objectively outside of the text, the reader, materializes Eliot’s imagery into life.

Although Bakhtin discusses the epic genre in fixed terms, Eliot’s poem proves its malleability. Eliot defies the conventions of this genre, while also adhering to them. He states quite clearly in “Tradition and the Individual Talent” the need for artists to consider the past. Eliot himself rewrites the past, yet his depiction of heroism in *The Waste Land* does not demolish old concepts of the hero. As Bakhtin acknowledges the role of the modern hero in his work, he states:

It is possible, of course to conceive even “my time” as heroic, epic time, when it is seen as historically significant; one can distance it, look at it from afar.... But in so doing we ignore the presentness of the present and the pastness of the past; we are removing ourselves from the zone of “my time,” from the zone of familiar contact with me.

(14)

Although this may be true for other epics, in *The Waste Land*, however, Eliot does not distance us from this role of the hero so that we may “look at it from afar” and objectify it. Instead, he places us in the role of the hero so that the presentness of our time and the pastness of the allusions to epics join. The epic structure of *The Waste Land* necessitates the reader’s role as the

hero. This creates quite a different interpretation of an epic hero. The hero no longer must be a man who fights off demons or dragons. A modern epic hero may simply be anyone who is sitting and reading attentively. The reader/hero, though, must take action. He or she must give something to the poem.

Reading the hero in this text hinges upon reading *The Waste Land* as a modern epic. As Bakhtin discusses the novel in *The Dialogic Imagination* he states that “the style of a novel is to be found in the combination of its styles; the language of a novel is the system of its languages” (262). The same is true for Eliot’s poem; its use of the guide/pilgrim structure from the *Divine Comedy* employs epic conventions, necessitating a hero’s presence in relation to the poem.

In collaboration with Eliot’s words, readers imagine the sound of water into a reality. Without either the poem’s words or our minds, this silent hope would not exist. The effects of melopoeia, the melody of the dripping song, cause readers to imagine the sound of water that brings rain and renewal to this desolate land. The poem’s interaction with readers defines, necessitates, and encourages this type of heroism, not readers themselves. While the resources within the poem and the cultural consciousnesses of readers permit us to collaborate in the production of meaning, our relationship with the text, as always, is limited. The voices of the poem may speak directly to us, the hero, but we can not effectively converse back with them. The activity of the reader’s mind is handed over to Eliot and his poem. When entering the journey of the text, as readers we give of ourselves, and later we give silently by filling in the spaces between the words and fragments.

As we give over our minds and ourselves by entering the text of Eliot’s poem it becomes clear what the essential characteristic of a hero is. Although our imagination defines our heroism, it is the act of giving that makes us heroic. As the thunder begins to speak it says:

DA

Datta: What have we given?

(ll. 400-401)

“What have we given?” is the question we must ask

ourselves as heroes. Many may answer that we have given nothing. The landscape is still one of waste, but as the clouds fill the sky, the thunder speaks, and we listen knowing, as we have already heard in our minds, that rain is soon to follow. Jessie Weston's *Romance and Ritual* states that the challenge of "the hero's question is to restore the waters to their channel, and render the land once more fertile" thus making "the task of the hero . . . that of restoration" (Weston 36). Restoration of hope is precisely what the reader hero gives *The Waste Land* here and the gift that readers give is not a selfish one; it is for the land and the community.

Helping the community is part of what qualifies one to be a hero. In *The Theory of the Novel* Georg Lukács notes:

The epic hero is, strictly speaking, never an individual. It is traditionally thought that one of the essential characteristics of the epic is the fact that its theme is not a personal destiny, but a destiny of a community.

(66)

In relation to *The Waste Land*, readers are individuals whose actions not only benefit themselves, but the community inside and outside of the poem. Although readers in the role of the hero have already taken action – they have imagined the sound of rain into a reality – there is more work to be done. It is not enough for readers to walk away from this poem feeling positive and enlightened. They must teach others; they must give further. After all, datta, dayadhvam, and damyata, the chant that is repeated in the last section of the poem advises us to give, sympathize, and control. Not only must a pilgrim/reader/hero give water to the land, rejuvenating it; they must maintain its fecundity. In a lecture that deals with the notion of the spiritual journey, like the one Eliot's poem represents, medieval scholar Marsha Dutton claims that:

Above all medieval literature insists that the journey toward wisdom, understanding, knowledge, clarity of thought and mind in the search of meaning requires the honest and rigorous use of words: to ask and seek and insist and argue and finally to

report, to carry back the word to those who are just beginning their journey.

(Dutton 21)

As implied before, although Eliot revises the epic form he listens to the tradition of the genre. Heroes, Dutton affirms, must "ask and seek and insist and argue." The relationship readers have with *The Waste Land*, however, has limits. They can not ask the text questions as Dante can Virgil; they can not argue with it and reasonably expect answers. But they can seek and insist, as is the first task of the reader-hero. The final task that Dutton claims that the hero must fulfill, "to report, to carry back the word to those who are just beginning their journey," is the same one that the voice of the thunder asks readers to reflect upon.

By the end of the journey through *The Waste Land*, readers prove that they are not like the readers that Baudelaire and Eliot balk at and call hypocrites. Readers become heroes, if they choose to be, if they choose to read carefully, to imagine the sound of "water amongst the rock" (l. 338). They become heroes in *The Waste Land* ultimately by forgetting that they are readers. Ignoring the text which says no water can be found, readers imagine the sound of water into a reality and thus engage in what later in the poem Eliot's calls an "awful daring of a moment's surrender / Which an age of prudence can never retract" (ll. 403-4). Bakhtin's notion of epic distance then not only shrinks, it disappears. The poem's structure and dialogic nature collapses the sense of epic time and space. As it does so, readers once again must be willing to give time, understanding, and a moment of surrendering to one's imagination. Even with the foundation of common ground that Eliot lays, the poem would remain inaccessible to readers who were unwilling to give. Yet the dialogic elements in the use of second person and the poem's epic structure call us into Eliot's world. It is because of our relationship and collaboration with the poem that we become the heroes of this text. As the poem gives us knowledge, we give it hope and together define heroism for modernity. In *The Waste Land*, the role of the hero – the role of the reader – not only shows us that there is hope of rain, life, and fecundity in the modern world, but that this hope lies within ourselves and our imaginations.

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NOTES

1. For the purposes of this essay a hero indicates a person of either gender.
2. The comma at the end of line 40 suggests that the speaker has not changed.

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