

The Waste Land Creates Kinship

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I've tried to teach T. S. Eliot's poem, *The Waste Land* dozens of times. All but once, my attempts have been disastrous. *The Waste Land* is massive – 433 lines. There are more footnotes than poem[▣]. A scholarly reader should know, at the very least: *The Golden Bough*, *Morte d'Arthur*, Dante, Latin, Greek, German, French, Sanscrit, several ancient mythologies, Wagner, the geography of London, Baudelaire, and *The New Testament*. That reader is *not* a 20th-century, Canadian, university undergraduate. I gave up on *The Waste Land* twenty-one years ago – 1986 – deciding it was pretentious and unteachable. My Australian father-in-law would have called it “a real bugger.”

But the poem was on my 1985 syllabus. I'd been avoiding it all term. But one Friday in April, I urged the class – 44 upper-year students, nice kids – to do their homework: “Read *The Waste Land* aloud to yourself at least three times this weekend. One reading will take you about 40 minutes.” In spring, however, a young person's thoughts are tuned to matters more insistent than T.S. Eliot. My expectations, in other words, were modest.

On Monday, as I came down the hall to the classroom, I held a sheaf of lecture notes about an inch thick. Under the other arm, I carried copies of half a dozen reference books, including Jessie L. Weston's *From Ritual to Romance* and the complete plays of Shakespeare. If my students hadn't read anything, by God, I was going to prove that I had. And they were going to learn something about the poem in the process.

But three steps before the classroom door, I lost my mind.

A flashbulb exploded in my brain, short-circuiting the synapses controlling rational thought. I walked through the door, my blank face looking at their blank faces. My mouth opened and these utterly unexpected words came out: “Today, you're going to read *The Waste Land*.”

Then, I sat down in the front row, my back to them, facing the blackboard.

A journalist might write: “There was a stunned silence.” An understatement. Silence. A long, long silence. But I gritted my teeth, determined not to give in.

Then, from the back of the room, a shy voice spoke:

April is the cruelest month,
breeding [Lilacs](#) out of the [dead](#) land,
Mixing memory and desire . . .

I didn't turn around. She read eighteen lines. Then another silence, but not so long this time. A minute or so later, a second voice: “What are the roots that clutch, what branches grow out of this stony rubbish?” This passage contains four lines from *Tristan und Isolde*, in German. The young reader spoke flawless German. Everyone was listening now, intently. As the various voices arose, it became clear

[▣] I decided a footnote would be fitting. Amuse yourself. <http://eliotswasteland.tripod.com/>

that students were beginning to look ahead, to choose their verses. The poem's "Game of Chess" section, for instance, begins with a conversation between a man and a woman. Two drama students made this dialogue come alive in ways I had never before imagined. Forty minutes later, the poem ended, as a young man at the back of the room whispered the benediction, from the Sanscrit *Upanishads*: "*Shantih. Shantih. Shantih.*" Peace. Peace. Peace.

For a long minute, everyone was silent again. But it was a different silence. A profoundly altered silence. I left the room, without saying a word.

Two days later, the students pressed into the classroom. One young man said, "That was astounding. Like a prayer meeting." No lecture was necessary that day; everyone had vigorous opinions to offer.

That evening, I fell ill with a severe flu. I learned that, in my absence, astonishingly, there were no absences. This mixture of forty-four sundry young people had become a community, with a purpose. They discussed the poem unabated for three full periods.

I tried the same strategy the following year, in a different class. Life dripped out of the poem like a leaking tap. The readers were bored. Some laughed, or gossiped. A disaster.

Ten years later, one of the original group asked me for a reference letter. I went back to my grade book to confirm my recollection of her performance. Idle curiosity then prompted me to check on the whereabouts of three or four other students. What I found inspired me to look into the rest of those students. The results are striking. Of the forty-four, thirty-five have postgraduate degrees, and twenty-one are teachers.

Last year, at a conference, I met Nora – one of that poetic company. As our conversation ended, she paused, then said, "Since English 240, I've read *The Waste Land* many times. And behind that intimidating poem, I always hear the inspiring voices of my classmates."

Shantih.