

**T.S. Eliot's *The Waste Land*: *Bildungsroman* and the
European Mind**

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Abstract

The literary genre of *bildungsroman* describes literature that follows the psychological and spiritual development of the individual during their most formative years. Exploring the impact of society upon the emotional intellect of the individual and their personal growth, the genre's popularity spiked during the Romantic era and in the late 19th-early 20th century. This dissertation reads T.S. Eliot's 1922 poem, *The Waste Land*, as a *bildungsroman* and structures the poem's influences, from the European culture, into *bildungs'* three significant stages of birth, maturity and decay. It initiates the discussion of the poem being a formation of Eliot's own mind and the collective minds of Europe whilst commenting on the state of European culture and how to rebuild Europe's cultural abundance in the wake of the First World War.

Keywords: Bildungsroman, The Waste Land, T.S. Eliot, European Culture, Formative Years

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Chapter 1: Introduction

T.S. Eliot's 1922 poem *The Waste Land*, is a dramatic monologue split into a five section depiction of the modern world. The modernist masterpiece changes speakers, locations and times throughout the poem whilst drawing on an array of historical, musical, literary and popular culture references to highlight the colossal intensity of terror, futility and alienation of modern life. In his 'Tradition and the Individual Talent' (1919) essay, Eliot comments that the mind of Europe should always be considered superior in comparison to the mind of the artist since the individual artist unavoidably incorporates societal context to shape their own work (1919:36). Eliot discusses the importance of criticism and acknowledging the influence of the artist's predecessors, a notion inspired by Renaissance critic, Walter Pater and his own views on "the relation between the uniqueness of the individual entity and the way it exists" (Miller 1976:98). Pater's *Marius the Epicurean* (1885) notes that the "red rose came first, the white rose later, as its pale repetition" (Miller 1976:98) highlighting how an artist's work is a compilation of the inevitable influence of their predecessors, preventing it from ever being wholly original. Eliot later expands on this idea in his essay and uses his own literature to present how previous cultural entities influence present writing. Eliot demonstrates this by using *The Waste Land* as a commentary of the European culture as it stood in the 1920s, emphasised by the deliberate choice of multi-speaker perspectives and a continuous change of the narrative's setting. This project will take Eliot's literary representation of European culture and read the poem as a *bildungsroman* of the European mind. By exploring how the poem comments on the birth, maturity and decay of European culture, this project will define the stages of Europe's cultural growth and present an analysis of *The Waste Land*.

The Germanic term *bildungsroman* (commonly translated and identified as the novel of formation; ‘bildungs’ meaning ‘formation’ and ‘roman’ meaning ‘novel’ (Thamarana 2015)) is a literary genre that follows the individual’s spiritual or psychological development from their formative years through to adulthood. Though a contested term, the novel of formation is comprised of various different forms and styles to which the term is applied. Specialists of German literature consider the works of Goethe’s *Wilhelm Meister’s Apprenticeship* (1884) and Joyce’s *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* (1916) as prominent examples of *bildungsroman*. A single universal definition is subject to the genre’s encompassment of geographical origins, its association with other literary genres and the contrasting perspectives of different scholars and their own assumptions of its purpose. A primary geographical distinction of the genre is made between the German and English *bildungsroman* with German novelists concentrating on the individual’s internal or psychological struggle. Unlike the single focus of German novels, English novelists establish the individual’s identity based on external conflicts and their influence on the individual (Thamarana 2015). *Bildungsroman*’s exploration of the entirety of the individual’s life enables it to encompass other literary genres with a shared concern with the coming-of-age. Its scope includes autobiography and memoir writing as well as influencing the development of midlife fiction writing and cure stories. Autobiography and memoir writing use the fundamental structure of age development to explore the psychological growth of the individual throughout their life. Midlife fiction writing, like Stein’s *In Midlife* (1983), describes “progress narratives of the middle years” as a “new genre” based on *bildungsroman*. Whereas cure stories, particularly Beauvoir’s *The Coming of Age* (1970), narrate the stories of “conflict and resolution” with relation to the “idea of development to notions of illness and health” (Hartung 2016:43).

The development of *bildungsroman* and surrounding criticism of its definition and relevance to literature is parallel to societal changes associated with the Romantic era, Europe's industrialisation and the influences of Modernism. Romanticism spanned between the late 18th and early 19th centuries and was born out of the emerging physical confrontation of violent rebellion across Europe and the New World. The Storming of the Bastille in July 1789 and other political movements inspired a "desire for liberty" and "denouncing the exploitation of the poor" (The British Library 2014) whilst poets like Blake (1757-1827) and Shelley (1792-1822) explored nature, imagination and the marginalised individual. Europe's Romantic period evoked an emphasis on emotional rediscovery, individualism and self-expression in art, forcing society to question social injustices and repressive state power, which restricted individual freedoms in the public sphere. This resulted in a rapid creation of *bildungsroman* novels, featuring the self-involved protagonist who withdraws from actively engaging with the social world (Dilthey 1985). This inspired the spiritual growth found in *bildungsroman*, exemplary with Wordsworth's 'The Child is Father of the Man' in 'My Heart Leaps Up' (1807). Furthermore, a prominent increase in *bildungsroman* literature occurred within close proximity to the development of the autobiography famously initiated by Rousseau's 'Confessions' (1782), a text that focuses on the formation of the mind of the philosophe. With the exception of works like Emily Brontë's *Wuthering Heights* (1847) and Charles Dickens's *David Copperfield* (1849), society's transition from Romanticism to Realism (1850s) saw a dwindling of *bildungsroman* literature. Instead, writers began to favour writing that portrayed social responsibility and the realistic expectations of society. Despite the works of Wordsworth's *Prelude* (1799) and Shelley's *Frankenstein* (1818) suggesting its heightened success in the Romantic era, it emerged into greater prominence during the 19th and 20th century. The impact of Europe's Industrial and French revolution caused *bildungsroman* to revitalise and replicate its popularity and flourish in both England and the United States. These societal influences and

the general late adoption of the term (coined in 1817), meant authors unconsciously worked within the genre, developing novels, we now recognise as Bildungsroman. The sudden decline in the genre's once seemingly steady growth combined with the new age of German Reception Theory (1960s), inspired critical controversy in an attempt to depopulate *Bildungsroman* literature. Jeffrey Sammons' influential article 'The Mystery of the Missing *Bildungsroman*' (1981) argues the notion that *Bildungsroman* as a continuous tradition, is a critical hoax and its success during the Romantic period falls short in comparison to its neglect throughout the era of Realism (1981:229-46).

Revered as one of the greatest literary contributions to Modernism, *The Waste Land* captures the impacts of cultural decay in a post-war society. Eliot uses both past and present cultural allusions to highlight the rot of 1920s Europe in comparison to previous cultural highpoints, including classical Greece, Rome and the Renaissance. With the recognition of society's transition into the age of Modernism (1900-39), critics like Franco Moretti found scope to distinguish *bildungsroman* as being a "symbolic form' of modernity" (2003). Moretti indicates that the genre's relevance links to the way it portrays "generations dismantling societal constructions of capitalism" which he uses to argue the defining characteristic of the novel of formation is the protagonist's youth. Despite the new age of German Reception Theory (1960s), which inspired critical controversy in an attempt to reduce the *bildungsroman's* acceptance in mainstream literature, the 1980s provided new conceptual approaches to *bildungsroman*. The post-Second World War society saw an increase in translation of German research into English and the influence of structuralism provided more open-minded scholars with the means to approach and explore the genre. In Mikhail Bakhtin's 'The *Bildungsroman* and its Significance in the History of Realism', the general preface of the genre is argued to present "the image of *man in the process of becoming*" (1986) to the reader. Bakhtin's defining

of *bildungsroman* is frequently adopted since it highlights the literature as being a coming-of-age genre, focusing on the individual's spiritual growth whilst accepting the individual is expected to rebel against societal constraints.

Edward Said explicitly identifies the three great human episodes common to all cultures and traditions as the "birth, maturity and decay of the body" (Hartung 2016:40). The genre's split into this three-stage narrative structure enables the novel to explore the individual's psyche and identity, whilst following their spiritual growth from their formative years, through adolescence, to a steady state of adulthood. When reading *The Waste Land* as a *bildungsroman*, the European culture substitutes the individual's body and we can identify Greek Tragedy as the birth, the Renaissance as the maturity and post-First World War Europe as the decay of the European culture. The episode of birth is the first of the three-stage *bildungsroman* structure and is arguably the most significant period of the trio. Hartung notes that the genre is "primarily concerned with the first half of life rather than with the later phases or old age" (2016:41), evident through the notable works of Charles Dickens's *Great Expectations* and Jane Austen's *Pride and Prejudice*. Traditional *bildungsroman* predominantly focuses on the protagonist's early childhood and *bildungsroman* novels exploring the years of maturity can often be mistaken as midlife fiction. The fundamental concept of *bildungsroman* influenced the progressive narrative of the "middle years" as "being a new fictional genre" based on "the revision of *bildungsroman*" (Hartung 2016:12). Unlike midlife fiction which solely focuses on the middle years, *bildungsroman* novels continue the narrative from childhood, through adolescence and into adulthood. It depicts an "experimentation with alternative possibilities of feelings and the idea of learning represented through epiphanic scenes of revelation" (Gullette 1988:29-36), making the state of maturity the protagonist's desired goal. With parallels between cure stories and the stage of decline, Rooke (1992) argues both cure stories and *bildungsroman* novels are chiefly

“concerned with basic identity themes, with the relationship of the individual to the society, with an assessment of what living well means and with the question of what comes next” (Hartung 2016:43). The characteristic relationship between the individual and society is vital in the *bildungsroman* stage of decline. Particularly explored in English origins of *bildung*, it involves the possibility of a ‘decline’ or type of ‘progressive narrative’, constituting an age identity associated with the recall of the individual’s youthful years.

The genre’s growth since its unconscious launch in the Romantic era, its exposure to contrasting criticism and the geographical influences of its development have resulted in multiple variations in *bildungsroman*. Eliot conforms to two main branches; *Kunstlerroman* (the novel of the artist’s mind) famously written as Joyce’s *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* (1916) and *Zeitroman* (the development of the era alongside the personal development of the individual) exemplary through Golden’s *Memoirs of a Geisha* (1997). Reading *The Waste Land* as a *bildungsroman* is rewarding in the way it will provide a new unexplored perspective of Eliot’s purpose for writing the poem and his outlook on the European culture.

Chapter 2: Birth of the European Culture

In the late 18th century, youth was beginning to be viewed in close relation to the process of modernisation. The reorientation of youth was predominant in literary contexts with the idealistic beauty of the youthful male in neoclassical aesthetics or the artistic depictions of youth in Romanticism. The desirability associated with youth contrasted with the connotation of ugliness, associated with old age and specifically with ageing women. The extreme shift of beauty in parallel to age in the 18th century highlighted the “masked deficit in real social status and influence” (Hartung 2016:42), predominant in the representation of age during the Enlightenment period, which *bildungsroman* literature worked to replenish. Simultaneous to the pleasant physical aesthetic of youth, a focus on the years of adolescence saw the characteristic of impressionability and its impact on the protagonist’s actions. The concept of impressionability describes a distinctiveness found in the adolescent or early adulthood of an individual. Kinder and Sears’ 1985 study recognises individuals between the ages of 12-18 as having a distinctive “flexibility and openness to change”, coining these as the ‘impressionable years’ (Gwon & Jeong 2018:603). Homing in on individuals in their most impressionable years, accurately depicts the individual’s susceptibility to their environment as being essential for their character moulding, which in English origins of *bildungsroman* is reflected as being parallel to the protagonist’s actions. With the redevelopment of youth being key in *bildungsroman* literature, the recognition of Greek or Attic Tragedy being the birth of the European culture suggests it is the foundation of the culture’s evolution. In most, if not all, academic circles, a familiarity with the Classics was crucial for academic recognition and success. From the Renaissance onwards, both Grammar and Public school pupils in England would have been steeped in the language and literature of classical Greece and Rome, a practice still upheld in the 21st century. As a part of the ancient world, Greek Tragedy remains a vital branch of the study of humanities due to its undeniable influence in shaping modern society,

particularly through the myth of ‘the Greek Miracle’. Rabinowitz explains ‘The Greek Miracle’ is a myth used to “credit the Greeks (and more particularly the Athenians) with creating drama, history, philosophy, lyric poetry and history as we know it” (2008:3). It affirms the highly Western-centric view that our knowledge on these topics developed solely from the birth of Ancient Greece indicating a ripple effect onto our own society. Attic tragedy dates back to the 5th century BC and the foundational importance of the Greek civilisation and its prevalence in today’s society is continually made through the assertion of its direct link to modern western culture. The pillar of Greek Tragedy in the continued studies of the humanities provides narrative insight by challenging the narrative’s order through introducing tensions between the narrative’s binaries before ultimately resolving them. Greek Tragedy also influenced psychoanalytical criticism through the Freudian model of human psychological development, namely with the Oedipus and Electra complexes. Freud’s psychoanalytical theory divides the psyche into opposing forces, looking beyond the Ego. However, *bildungsroman* fuses the individual’s conflicting features in an attempt to build the Ego, making it an indisputable centre of its own structure. Greek Tragedy is significantly influential upon paleo modernist writing, a trope of modernism predominantly comprised of classical literary and historical allusions. Greek Tragedy as the birth of the European culture catalyses to the paleo modernist notion of “moving forward by spiralling back and refiguring the past” (Brooker 1994:54), iterating Eliot’s view of rebuilding the European culture with fragments of previous eras of cultural abundance.

The continual extraction from Greek Tragedy to develop society during succeeding eras indicates its undying prevalence, affirming Greek Tragedy as the birth of the European culture. Eliot’s *The Waste Land* is no exception to the influences of Greek Tragedy. Throughout the

length of the poem, Eliot elegantly sprinkles references to Greek Mythology, notably with the characters of foretellers. The epigraph, originally written in Greek;

For I once saw with my own eyes the Cumean Sibyl hanging in a jar,
and when the boys asked her ‘Sibyl, what do you want?’
she answered, ‘I want to die’

(Eliot 1922)

quotes the Latin work of fiction *Satyricon* of Petronius Arbiter. In Greek Mythology, the name ‘Sybil’ was used to describe old women who were considered capable of foretelling the future. The epigram distinctly refers to Apollo granting the Cumean Sybil immortality but upon failure of asking for perpetual youth, she withers into old age, and like mythology, the poem echoes her desire for death as a form of escape from a wretched living. The Sibyl reappears in ‘The Burial of the Dead’ as the “famous clairvoyant” (Eliot 1922), Madam Sosotris, who poses as a tarot card reader. Despite being “the wisest woman” and an omniscient being, Eliot uses a childlike rhyme of short vowels, “had a bad cold” to both belittle her power and depict her as an ailing person who embodies the desolate waste land he writes of, rather than as a beacon of hope, a more common connotation of seers in Greek Mythology. Similarly in his 1941 poem *Four Quartets* he disapprovingly describes tarot readers as “usual pastimes and drugs, and features of the press”, highlighting both his own personal distaste whilst belittling their relevance in society. Despite Eliot’s remorse for writing the tarot reader into the poem, referencing the Cumean Sibyl was imperative for commenting on the state of the European culture. The decrepit portrayal of the seer illustrates even the greater moments of the European culture, no matter how far from the decaying years they were, can still be tarnished by the culture’s decline. Eliot does this not only to emphasise the decline of Europe during the 1920s but to suggest that returning to the culture’s formative years to rebuild it is imperative to prevent

the destruction of how we perceive the past, in this instance, the era of Greek Tragedy, in newer writings.

Another key reference to Greek tragedy is in 'The Fire Sermon', where the speaker identifies themselves as the hermaphroditic character Tiresias.

I Tiresias, though blind, throbbing between two lives,
Old man with wrinkled female breasts, can see
At the violent hour, the evening hour that strives

(Eliot 1922:218-220)

Zeus gives the prophet the ability to see into the future, yet despite his power of foresight, Tiresias remains hopeless and sees no possibility for action irrespective of his prophecies. In the Sophocles' play *Antigone*, Creon assures Tiresias that he would "never disregard your advice" (Sophocles [c.441 BCE] 2013, 993) since his ability to "keep the city sailing straight" (Sophocles [c.441. BCE] 2013, 994), is based on heeding the past advice and instruction of Tiresias. Despite the overwhelming fragmentation and disconnect throughout the poem, Eliot ensures to create a personal connection between the reader and Tiresias through identifying the character as the first person speaker. This personal association supports the portrayal of Tiresias as a model of modern existence, a representation of the powerless figures suffering in a flawed Europe. Yet, the poet's intentional depiction of Tiresias' role as a Theban seer in *Antigone* and his ability to provide political guidance to Creon, is a microcosmic demonstration of how drawing upon the early stages of the European culture will provide society with the required fundamental essentials to rebuild the European culture, post the First World War.

The Sibyl's unchanging desire for death being the initial reference to Greek Mythology in *The Waste Land*, sets the tone of the poem and affirms the unbearable suffering of the desolate

society post-war Europe had become. Eliot intentionally chooses the Greek references of the Sibyl of Cumean and Tiresias converting them into models of modern existence. The tone set by the epigram's reference contrasts with the later reference to Tiresias, indicating the poem itself as a literary foreteller to 1922 Europe. This suggests that using the knowledge of society's inevitable decline and elements from past cultural eras, namely Greek Tragedy, should be adopted to rebuild the European culture. This ideal is further highlighted by Eliot's own belief that "European political unity could not do without an intellectual form of cooperation" (Vanheste 2018), indicating political stability required a degree social unity and intellectual influence. Throughout the poem, Eliot writes from the perspectives of multiple speakers to accurately capture the different lives lived throughout the European culture and thus his writing falls under the *bildungsroman* branch of *zeitroman*, by using the poem as a formation of the mind of Europe, indicating that those who are aware of society's inevitable decline are the most powerless in their ability to stimulate change. The network of Eliot's quarterly published journal the *Criterion* (1922-39) was used as an "infrastructure for the dissemination of ideas about European culture" (Vanheste 2018). Eliot's contribution during and post-*The Waste Land* solidifies the notion of his using the poem to allude to himself and other writers whose literature works to critique society's social, economic and political flaws but has no governing hold on society's actions.

In Eliot's *Four Quartets*, he opens 'Burnt Norton' on the premise that time is an abstract concept with the opening lines; "time present and time past//are both perhaps present in time future//and time future contained in time past" (1941:1-3). The gravity of the terms "present" and "past" is used to create a momentum of ideas without assigning them to a particular time era, which Eliot does in *The Waste Land*. The themes of the nature of time and time as an abstract concept in *Four Quartets* is pivotal in understanding Eliot's idea of returning to the

formative years to rejuvenate the dying culture. With Europe's cultural birth being Greek Tragedy, we can assume that without it, there would be no culture and that without properly recognising its relevance, there is no hope for improvement within Europe. Eliot believed that "no poet, no artist or any art, has his complete meaning alone" (1919) and so he purposefully uses reference to Greek Tragedy for the epigram, a core preface of *The Waste Land*, to show the timelessness and impressionability of Greek Tragedy and how it will remain the foundation of any future work. This is important as it highlights the cultural influences of Greek Tragedy as being timeless whilst recognising its importance to rebuilding the European culture.

In his 'Tradition and the Individual Talent' essay, Eliot depicts the notion that the writer must "be aware that the mind of Europe is much more important than his own private mind" (1919) and that the artist must always consider his own work inferior in comparison to preceding artists. Eliot writes that "criticism is inevitable" and whilst we work to find the "essence" of the writer, we fail to notice that "the most individual parts of his work" are found "in which the dead poets, his ancestors, assert their immortality". He suggests that if we continue to critique writers and their work based on their conformity to the standards of which their predecessors wrote, then it would not be "new" nor would it be "a work of art". To understand the origin of Greek Tragedy, Friedrich Nietzsche's *The Birth of Tragedy* questions the Greek's relation to pain and comments their craving for "beauty" grew out of their "deprivation, melancholy and pain" ([1872] 1993:6-7). The philosopher then denotes that the Greek's earlier intense craving for "the tragic myth, for the image of everything terrible" was borne out of their exposure to "joy, strength, overflowing health, excessive abundance" ([1872] 1993:7). Nietzsche's exploration of Greek Tragedy along with Eliot's rejection of standardised literary conformity is key to understanding the overwhelming combination of cultural references, dating as far back as the Ancient World, used throughout *The Waste Land*. Eliot uses the

references of Greek foretellers to present the intensity of Europe's decline. If, like the Greeks, we fail to use the teachings of the formative years as a way to fix the culture, we will destroy the cultivation of our glorious eras in an attempt to use them to mask our own society's cultural shortcomings. Ransom comments that Eliot writes in a new "age of intelligence", where "we do not quote Greek Tragedy and modern cockney with the same breath or with the same kinds of minds" making it difficult to develop a single precise criticism of the poem because these "fragments could not be joined on any principle and remain what they are" (Ransom [1923] 2001). However, by viewing the poem's abundance of cultural referencing based on their *bildungsroman* structural significance, it allows us to analyse *The Waste Land* as more than just a representation for the decline of Europe, but rather as an instruction manual on how to rebuild it.

Chapter 3: Peak of the European Culture

Age narratives explore specific years of an individual's life and are typically divided into the years of adolescence, midlife and elderly or the years of illness. *Bildungsroman*'s exploration of the individual's process of 'coming-of-age' closely intertwines the genre within the critique of age narratives, particularly when reviewing the individual's middle years, or in this case, Europe's cultural peak. *Bildungsroman* centres around the individual's psychological and moral growth, as they journey to seek out answers and experiences, which typically enables them to flourish and achieve their goals at the peak of their lives. Recognising the stage of maturity in the *bildungsroman* genre as the high point of the individual's life, indicates that the cultural peak of Europe can be defined as the Renaissance period, chiefly in Eliot's case. The Renaissance is believed to have originated in Italy spanning between the 14th and 17th centuries, it is directly translated from French as 'rebirth' and is defined as a cultural revival, a renewed interest and appreciation for classical studies across Europe. The development of the Renaissance mirrors Nietzsche's notion of tragedy originating as an intense craving from an exposure to cultural abundance and joyous lifestyle. The Black Death (1346-1353) saw the death of one in three of the population of Europe, inculcating a sense of uncertainty and restlessness within society, challenging traditional practices, catalysing the search for better answers to solve the difficulties of human relationships with both the world and God (Hunt 1999). By the mid-16th century, the population in most parts of Europe began to recover restoring society's faith in the Catholic Church and New Protestant Church, religious bodies that "strove to establish their authorities over their followers" in most matters (Hunt 1999:109). The widespread implantation of religion successfully dominated Europe as it created a structured lifestyle for the population to adhere to, fulfilling an unconscious yet deeply craved desire for normality. Its influence across the continent meant new cultural and political relations began to form. The cultural revival of the Renaissance spread from Italy to France

and then throughout Western and Northern Europe with Latin becoming the *lingua franca* of the scholarly community of Europe. These religious bodies also influenced elements of the Renaissance's artistic style, namely the Church's commissioning of art, including Pope Julius II who had the Vatican covered in art by chief Renaissance painters Michelangelo and Raphael and the hiring of the architect Bramante to rebuild St. Peter's Basilica. Alongside the re-establishment of religion, the Renaissance saw the emergence of the philosophical stance of Humanism, centralising the human being and the belief that human nature is fixed and constant. Burckhardt argues that the "Renaissance saw the birth of man as an individual" (Hunt 1999:107), suggesting that although the Renaissance was the cultural highpoint for Europe, when looking at the formation of the individual through the age of Europe, it is the beginning of the population's openness to cultural change. The era sparked a sense of innovation and saw new technological advances of the Printing Press (Germany, 1440) significant for the mass-production of the Bible and other literature in the 15th century. Renaissance innovation not only influenced society's development but stimulated an increased demand for older inventions like eyeglasses (1300s) and the portable clock (Florence, 1410), making both everyday life easier and providing the opportunity for a mass-production of products throughout the Industrial Revolution (1760-1840).

With religious, political, spiritual and technological advancements influencing the formation of the mind of the individual and artistic revival impacting the formation of Europe into a cultural high-point, a *bildungsroman* structure views the Renaissance as the peak of individual and cultural development within Europe, according to Eliot's perception. The reversed parallels of the emergence of the Renaissance from the Dark Ages with the emergence of Greek Tragedy indicates that whilst their impacts are linked, they are two different cultural momentums. In *The Waste Land* Eliot suggests there is hope of emerging from the decay of Europe, by taking

elements from cultural high-points to create a rebirth. The aftermath of the Black Death encouraged society to challenge previously accepted ideologies and traditions, forming a common desire to rebuild and strengthen society into what we now define as the Renaissance. This is partially reflected in *The Waste Land* through the way Eliot presents society in a state of decay caused by the decline of traditions and out-dated certainties, the foundation that held Western society together. Yet, unlike in the 14th century, Eliot's society dissolves into a desolate waste land, rather than emerging into a new cultural era. The members of Eliot's society are denied a cultural or spiritual epiphany and are forced to salvage the broken fragments of the vanished past, represented through the littering of cultural references throughout the poem. The poem's most significant tributes to the Renaissance are shown through his references to a plethora of Shakespearian plays and Dante Alighieri's 14th century epic poem, *The Divine Comedy*. In his essay 'Dante', Eliot acknowledged that both "Dante and Shakespeare divide the modern world between them; there is no third" ([1929] 1990), suggesting that their contributions to literature were unmatched, making their era of the Renaissance, Europe's cultural peak. In 'The Burial of the Dead', Eliot references Dante's *Inferno*; a poetic representation of Dante's journey through the nine circles of Hell, each circle depicting an increase in the severity of anguish and suffering. Dante, the speaker in *Inferno*, enters the Gates of Hell and openly realises that he "had not thought death had undone so many" (Eliot 1922:63), highlighting the intensity of death is a difficult concept to comprehend until confronted. Eliot uses this line from Canto 3 as the first reference to the epic to emphasise the severity of society's decline by using the initial comparison of his desolate wasteland to Hell, an unescapable place. The following line, Canto 4, alludes to Dante's first circle of Hell, where its descendants who died without Baptism can only exhale "sighs, short and infrequent" (Eliot 1922:64) as there is nothing that can be done about their condition. This immediate illustration of Dante's Limbo exemplifies society's decline into a wasteland was an inadvertent

misfortune, simultaneously enabling Eliot to reference to the dead of the First World War. Alternatively, having worked in the financial centre of London, Eliot uses the reference to Dante's limbo to draw upon his own feeling of hopelessness, which collectively plagued the workers in the "unreal city" (1922:60). Eliot creates this immediate vision of Hell in his 1915 poem, 'The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock', whereby the poem's epigraph is a six-line quotation from Canto 27 of Dante's *Inferno*. Eliot intentionally keeps the extracted lines in Italian to disconnect most Anglophone readers from the poem and allow the epigraph to state a tone of cynicism and hopelessness, not just in its meaning but through its mere presence. By selecting these particular lines, he emphasises that because "no one has yet returned alive" (1915) from the depths of Hell, the speaker is able to freely express themselves "without fear of being shamed" (1915) the intention of the speaker in Eliot's poem. In both *The Waste Land* and 'The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock', Eliot uses fragments of Dante's work to establish the setting for his poem, in *The Waste Land* he does it to prevent the severity of the culture's decay from being downplayed whilst in 'The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock', he does it to both disconnect the reader and set the tone of cynicism for the poem. The poet's use of the Renaissance references from Dante's *Inferno* as a way to establish these poetic devices shows his high regard for the work of the era, indicating it a cultural high-point for Europe.

Eliot's esteem for both Dante and Shakespeare inspired the use of Shakespearian quotes in *The Waste Land*, among all the voices Eliot echoes within his poem, those of Shakespeare are the most predominant (Purwarno 2003). The section 'A Game of Chess' focuses on the contrast between two opposing scenes of a high and low class society and continually makes references to a range of Shakespearean plays. The section depicts two different women who represent the two different sides of modernity and modern sexuality, this contrast highlights emotions and the desire for answers is universally experienced, irrespective of social standing, as it is an

element of the individual's midlife years. The decaying 1920s society is an inescapable life and although the intensity of its impacts can be altered based on social status, the associated emotions are ultimately the same for all. Eliot cites the opening simile "like a burnished throne" (Eliot 1992:77) from Shakespeare's 1607 play *Antony and Cleopatra*. This virtue of lushness surrounding the language and the woman is continued throughout the verse, eventually opposing with the woman's neurotic thoughts; "I think we are in rats' alley//Where the dead men lost their bones" (1922:115-116). As the lines continue, the increased use of questions directly followed by immediate answers, shows her thoughts become frantic and eventually they develop into meaningless cries; "O O O that Shakespearian Rag –" (1922:128). The contrast between the elegant introductory language to describe the woman's surroundings and her depleting restlessness demonstrates the notion of wealth being unrelated to happiness. Eliot's mentally distressed female speaker and Shakespeare's Cleopatra are unflatteringly contrasted despite the identical referencing of the burnished throne. Unlike Eliot's character, defined solely by her deteriorating mental state, Cleopatra is "beggared all description" (Shakespeare [1607] 2007:230) and defined as the epitome of beauty whose "vilest things//Become themselves in her" (Shakespeare [1607] 2007:274-275). This mock heroic contrast between the two women highlights that whilst writing of the Renaissance depicts flawless characters, characters from a post-First World War society are only flawed. The contrast reflects the cultural abundance of the Renaissance through Cleopatra and the decline of the European culture post-First World War through Eliot's character.

The wealthier woman acts as a microcosmic representation of the decline of the European culture, she begins at a peak explored through Renaissance references to Shakespeare and Milton's *Paradise Lost* reflecting a formation of the mind of the individual. However, her inability to remain rational about her lover's whereabouts catalyses a decline in her mental

state. This *zeitroman* conformity can be mirrored through Europe's inability to remain unified through culture and become submerged in an unhealthy desire for political power; evident from the establishment of the British Empire (early 1600s-late 1940s) and the First World War. Eliot uses inspiration from *Anthony and Cleopatra* (1607) and the Greek legend Dido as the premise of this section as both figures committed suicide out of frustrated love. The section is concluded with a woman's bar of chorus of "goodnight" (1922:170-173), reminiscent of Ophelia's farewell speech in *Hamlet* (1599) before she killed herself in an act of revenge based on her distorted perception of love. Yet, despite Eliot's speakers experiencing frustrated love, rather than escaping their suffering like the characters from the Renaissance writing, Eliot depicts them as unable to communicate their internal emotions, which as a result forces them to stay trapped in their diminishing lives. Another ironic Shakespearian tribute is made to *The Tempest* (1611) in 'The Fire Sermon' where Eliot refers to Ferdinand's grief "And on the king my father's death before him" (1922:192), of the King's, his father, premature death in the shipwreck. Despite being known as one of Shakespeare's last written comedies, Eliot intentionally references an emotionally low moment in the play to highlight the significance of loneliness and pain and how it can overshadow joyous moments. Eliot intentionally leaves his characters to suffer to emphasise the society he writes about is void of happiness because it is culturally broken, iterating the notion that cultural abundance is crucial for individual happiness. Eliot uses 'A Game of Chess' to highlight the disintegration of the mind of the characters, both in his own writing and the works he quotes from. The individual speakers of *The Waste Land* represent fragments of the mind of Europe and ultimately reflecting the continent's own state of dementia and disintegration into petty nationalism.

In 1922, critic Gilbert Seldes comments on *The Waste Land* as being literature "specifically concerned with the idea [...] that the land *was* fruitful and now is not" (2001:138) suggesting

that Eliot's allusions to previous cultural eras purposefully illuminates the decline of culture in relation to the past. With Eliot's idea that no other writer matches the works of Dante and Shakespeare, he affirms "that since the Renaissance, the clock of Europe has been running down" (Seldes [1922] 2001) and that whilst Greek Tragedy formed a cultural foundation, the Renaissance was pivotal for Europe's cultural growth. *The Waste Land* reveals that the impacts of the formation of the mind of the individual can be altered based on the environment the individual is exposed to. Whilst society post-Black Death escaped their suffering and actively rebuilt society into a cultural high-point, Eliot's speakers remain trapped in an insufferable life and the severity of the decaying society. Post-First World War Europe needs its members to adopt elements of the Renaissance to achieve their desire for a cultural rebirth.

Chapter 4: Decline of the European Culture

The midlife stages of *bildungsroman* assure that “even the bleakest event is a period” (Gullette 1988-41) and whilst an individual and cultural decline is regarded as being inevitable, Gullette’s perception indicates it is not indefinite. *Bildungsroman* literature primarily focuses on the transition from youth to adolescence but it also explores a “nostalgia for youth” (Hartung 2016:106) during old age. During the early 19th century, a sentimental idealisation of old age dominated society, masking the devaluation and fear of ageing by obscuring experiences of suffering, pain and poverty as “part of the self-evasion of culture” (Hartung 2016:27). Jean-Martin Charcot’s observations of old women introduced the methodological problem into gerontological knowledge to distinguish between the “senile and normal pathologies” of old age (Hartung 2016:27). This development between the normal and the pathological provided medicine with the authority to distribute advice on how to adopt a healthy lifestyle, but also to shape society’s standards of the desirable “physical and moral relations of the individual” (Hartung 2016:27). Similar to the views of age in the Romantic era, society began to distinguish the dualist visions of ‘healthy’ and ‘good’ from ‘decrepit’, ‘bad’ old age, forming the nostalgic association with youth. The individual’s nostalgic association for their own youth in the elderly stages is mirrored through the evolution of the European culture. Society reminisces cultural high-points: Greek Tragedy and the Renaissance, whilst simultaneously suffering in eras of decline such as The Black Death and First World War.

With the notion of illness being an aspect of ageing, Eliot considered the senescence of 1920s Europe to be pathological. The chief purpose of *The Waste Land* presenting a declining society enforces the idea that Europe is sick and enables Eliot to allude to the feeling of nostalgia, by incorporating references from cultural high-points, as the way to cure the decaying continent.

Born to a prominent Boston Brahmin family in St. Louis, Missouri, Eliot moved to England in 1914 and renounced his American citizenship in 1927, pursuing a life in Europe. *The Waste Land* is undoubtedly a cultural tribute to Europe and Gorham Munson critiques Eliot as having “taken great pains to blend with the European mind” (Munson [1924] 2001). Despite America having a “fresh boundless energy”, Eliot continued to indulge in the decaying continent as a “determiner of values”, rejecting the rising social and economic progress of America, including the Jazz Age and The Harlem Renaissance. Considered to have composed most of *The Waste Land* in the fall of 1921, Eliot was suffering from “a severe crisis of health” (Unger 1972:161), influencing his perspective of society, and reflected in the depiction of death and isolation in the poem.

In the early 1920s, Europe was suffering from the effects of World War I (1914-1918) and Eliot’s own damaged outlook on society was best encapsulated through the illustration of the decaying mind of Europe. The First World War affected Europe’s economic balance, putting countries into debt and stimulating a wide acceptance of political ideologies, exemplary through the Bolsheviks in Russia and fascism that triumphed in Italy and later, Germany. A large portion of the population had first-hand experience of the war and struggled to process the trauma and regulate their emotions causing a rise in shell-shock sufferers. This experience also contributed the influenza epidemic, killing more than 25 million people globally. The war also changed societal standards of gender; women became empowered and the Suffragette (1903-1918) movement began to advocate for women’s equal rights and men were expected to achieve redefined mental and physical standards of strength. Society’s lacking support systems to treat sufferers of psychological trauma or illness, particularly men, meant that individual’s sought out an emotional connection of empathy through literature and other art forms. Poets like Siegfried Sassoon and Wilfred Owen were among those who worked to spawn a new wave

of literary output to express the horrors of life in the trenches. The emergence of War-poetry, an unusual artistic development to have risen from a state of “melancholy and pain” (Nietzsche [1872] 1993:6-7), possessed low tones and conveyed the themes of death, conflict and fear. The Great War (1914-1918) also shaped the culture with the emergence of Modernism in the early 20th century, a movement that was intimately bound up with the experiences associated with WWI. It explores society’s turning point into an approach that yearned to revitalise the way modern civilisation viewed life. Some theorists consider it an “innovation in art, literature and music” whilst others believe it is based on the aesthetic engagement that came with “the idea of the new” (Nadell 2006:57). With primary focuses on the aspects of urbanisation, political change, cultural awareness and new technological and scientific progress, Modernism was interpreted as either “welcoming freedom or moral collapse” (Cuddy-Keane, Hammond, and Peat 2014:140). Developed from the modernisation of civilisation, Modernism marks “a radical break in the European culture”, producing what Harold Rosenberg described as “the tradition of the new” (Walz 2012:6). In 1971, Ezra Pound wrote *The Waste Land* was “the justification of the ‘movement’, of our modern experiment, since 1900” (Masters 2016). Critics frequently associate *The Waste Land* as one of the greatest modernist poems, because of the way Eliot incorporates the elements of deteriorating mental stability and a disintegration of life. The poet’s use of different speakers and abundant cultural allusions, makes *The Waste Land* a representation of an entire culture and its crisis; a poem belonging to the public. Society’s inability to produce a “joyous culture with excessive abundance” (Nietzsche [1872] 1993:6-7) post-World War I, broke Europe’s cyclical structure of salvaging the culture to quench a common desire for a fuller life. Instead it revelled in misery resulting in an inevitable decay. Eliot’s deteriorating health disconnected him from America’s cultural abundance of the 1920s and allowed him to create an emotional connection with the “hopelessness and resignation of Europe” (Munson [1924] 2001). By using *The Waste Land* as the subgenres of

kunstlerroman and *zeitroman* within *bildungsroman*, he writes as “though the whole literature of Europe [...] has a simultaneous existence and composes a simultaneous order” (Eliot 1919), merging his own mind with the mind of Europe.

The Waste Land uses fragments of different cultures and cultural high-points to emphasise the severity of the continent’s ruin. The opening stanza of ‘The Burial of the Dead’, an iconic rewrite of Chaucer’s prologue to *The Canterbury Tales*, immediately affirms the low tone expectations of the poem. It highlights the themes of hope and youth, typical connotations of Spring, which become overpowered by the trauma of the war and therefore cannot be experienced, making “April the cruellest month” (Eliot 1922:1). The section’s allusion to the “archduke” (Eliot 1922:15) evokes memories of Archduke Franz Ferdinand, whose assassination sparked the beginning of the war, indicating that even in a season of renewal and growth, tragedies like the war have an intense and long-lasting impact upon society and its ability to progress. The section continues to depict a scene of post-war Europe through the metaphorical line “A crowd flowed over London Bridge” (1922:62) to describe the faceless crowds in the trenches whilst simultaneously presenting the erasure of the individual caused by the cultural deficit in a mechanised, post-war society. This loss of the individual mind is further explored through the use of the multiple speaker perspectives, contributing to the emotional disconnect between the reader and the speaker and the speaker with themselves. It is also expressed through the fragmented structure of cultural references, used to represent the broken fragments of culture littered in a decaying society. Disconnect is crucial for understanding *The Waste Land* as a *bildungsroman* text; the genre works to explore the growth of the individual either through a spiritual awakening evoked internally or through the influence of external factors. The disconnect of the poem prevents the individual or the collective minds of Europe from achieving a spiritual awakening suggesting a life of abundance is unattainable

because of the severity of society's destruction. This unattainable goal deviates from traditional *bildungsroman* literature and works to instruct readers that society needs to use the "heap of broken images" (1922:22) of the past to salvage the future, as the present cultural lifestyle is too damaged. Eliot explores the inability to achieve a state of fulfilment through a feeling of disconnect in his 1941 poem, *Four Quartets*. In the first section, 'Burnt Norton', the speaker is enchanted by the "unheard music hidden in the shrubbery" (1941:29) and longs to find the children whose laughter he can hear. Similar to the society in *The Waste Land*, the speaker is spiritually hopeless and remains trapped in a naturally beautiful world, he is unable to reach the children and "hidden laughter" mocks the speaker's, and our own, enslavement to time. Eliot writes both poems in a post-war society and using low tones, he conveys his own feelings of discontent and hopelessness of living in a cultural decline, forced to reminisce the periods of Greek Tragedy and Renaissance. In the first half of the final section, 'What The Thunder Said', Eliot builds an apocalyptic climax of people suffering in continually destroyed cities, particularly with the following verse;

And no rock

If there were rock

And also water

And water

A spring

A pool among the rock

If there were the sound of water only

Not the cicada

And dry grass singing

But sound of water over a rock

Where the hermit-thrush sings in the pine trees

Drip drop drip drop drop drop drop

But there is no water

(Eliot 1922:346-358)

The repetitive alternation of “rock” and “water” signifies the inescapable cycle society will inevitably be trapped in, preventable by using elements of previous cultural movements, before they too are destroyed, to help rebuild society. Alternative to a physical thirst, the section depicts an increasing desperation for a cultural saviour through the line “if there were the sound of water only” (1922:352). It reflects a thirst for a spiritual and moral guide to release society from their suffering, indicating the severity of decay and the desperation for any shred of hope, regardless of how minute. Unlike the earlier sections of the poem, ‘What The Thunder Said’, is heavily based on religious and spiritual references, particularly to Upanishads (Hindu Fables). The repetitive use of the pre-linguistic speech sound of ‘dah’ in the chant “Datta. Dayadhvam. Damyata.” is similar to the speech patterns of young children explored Freud’s ‘fort/da’ game (1920). In his essay, *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* (1920), he discusses the significance of the game enabling his 18-month grandson to force his mother to retrieve a cotton reel he would repeatedly throw from his cot, through the use of a ‘Oo’ noise. This arguably suggests that despite reaching a point of resignation in both the poem and European culture, society’s inability to grow further forces civilisation to return back to the simplistic life of pre-cultural abundance and rebuild society, as a child would build a castle in the sand. The allusion of returning to previous cultural abundance further instils a sense of defeat and hopelessness suggesting there is no possibility for progression and the only way to experience happiness, is by returning to previously experienced stages of peace and cultural abundance. The poem leads up to the final chant of “shantih, shantih, shantih” (Eliot 1922:433), a traditional ending to an Upanishad. In notes to the poem, Eliot translates the chant as ‘peace which passeth understanding’, an expression of ultimate resignation. The adoption of a

repetitive break in lines and stanzas allows the poem to move away from typical poetic forms and experiment with structures normally associated with religion and philosophy; a different take on culture. It provides reference to earlier cultures like Greek Tragedy and links to Nietzsche's idea of eternal recurrence, the concept of universal existence recurring in an "infinite cycle as energy and matter transform over time" (ThoughtCo 2020). In his book *The Gay Science*, Nietzsche embraces the concept and presents it as a thought experiment, proclaiming that "it is not enough that eternal recurrence simply be believed [...] demand that it actually be loved"; in order to recreate it into all that it was it must be wholly accepted (Kain 2007:53). This solidifies the possibility of a cultural revival through the adoption of the timeless entities of Greek Tragedy and the Renaissance. Nietzsche's eternal recurrence encourages the decaying European society to wholeheartedly return to the culture's formative years to restore it to a state of abundance.

The Waste Land is a poetic depiction of the decaying European culture and Eliot uses the poem as a vessel for his own remedy for cultural recovery. With the core essence of the poem revolving around the decline, the intellectual allusions to previous cultural high-points depict the poem as a *bildungsroman* of the mind of Europe but also provides analytical scope as a cure story. Cure stories stem from *bildungsroman* and by adopting a *bildungsroman* approach when analysing the poem, it is evident that Eliot used elements of cure story-writing to indicate the birth (Greek Tragedy) and the peak (Renaissance) of the European culture should be returned to, to prevent the culture from further declining into complete disintegration, and instead, work to salvage the culture and form a cultural rebirth, a new Renaissance.

Chapter 5: Conclusion

The genre of *bildungsroman* primarily defines literature that explores the development of the individual, the process considered as a coming-of-age. Reading Eliot's *The Waste Land* (1922) as *bildungsroman* has provided insight into Eliot's own comments on the state of Europe during the 1920s and encapsulates the era of Modernism. By perceiving the European culture through the scope of *bildungsroman*, the significant cultural periods of Greek Tragedy, the Renaissance and 1920s Europe can be identified as the three key stages of birth, maturity and decay. Eliot's continuous allusion to and quotation of Greek Tragedy and Renaissance literature throughout the poem depicts the idea of using an abundance of cultural elements of the past to help rebuild the decaying cultural state that is post-First World War Europe (1920s); Eliot's society. *Bildungsroman* incorporates various subgenres but the poem chiefly reflects the branches of *kunstlerroman* and *zeitroman* as the formation of the artist's mind and the development of the era alongside the individual's personal development. It uses poetic elements to represent the collective minds of different individuals and their experiences of living in a decaying post-war society, so that the poem describes the formation, high point and then collapse of the mind of Europe. This project's exploration of *The Waste Land* using as *bildungsroman* reading has helped to categorise and restructure Eliot's notion of the significant time periods of the European culture and how they have impacted the overall development of society and history of the European culture. It has also provided an alternative insight into Eliot's paleo modernist perspective, particularly in relation to his high regard and fascination for the European culture in comparison to the American. It suggests insight into Eliot's purpose for writing *The Waste Land* as a *bildungsroman* reading alludes to the poem as being an instruction manual for salvaging the decaying European culture. Whilst providing insight to T.S. Eliot and his own writing, the concept of using a *bildung* reading on texts uncommonly considered as works of

the genre, opens up new research avenues into the genre and how it can be applied to other texts. One interesting research possibility could extend to using a *bildung* reading of other major modernist texts, specifically James Joyce's *Ulysses* (1920). Joyce famously commented that he "put in so many enigmas and puzzles [...] it'll keep the professors busy for centuries" (Ellmann 1982:521). Although distinctly approached in a non-linear way, applying a *bildung* perspective links to its literary relations to Homer's epic poem, the *Odyssey* (8 BCE) as it follows the perspective of an individual man on his journey of self-discovery. These texts have elements of Greek mythology which in a greater analytical approach to a *bildung* of the European culture, classifies it as part of the cultural birth of Europe. The poem highlights the duality of cultural decay in a post-war society alongside the possibility of finding hope in contemporary culture of his beloved music halls and popular song references which he also quotes in *The Waste Land*.

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