



## What the Thunder Said

*This is the fifth section of The Waste Land. Its title derives from the Hindu holy book Upanishad, where the Lord of Creation speaks through the thunder. Here the agony of the protagonist of the poem is intensified, and he turns from the water that drowns of the fourth section, 'Death by Water', to the water that saves, to the search for another river.*

Thomas Stearns Eliot  
**The Waste Land**  
**(1922)**  
Section V

- After the torchlight red on sweaty<sup>1</sup> faces  
 After the **frosty** silence in the gardens  
 After the agony in stony places  
 The shouting and the crying  
 5 Prison and palace and reverberation  
 Of thunder of spring over distant mountains  
 He who was living is now dead  
 We who were living are now dying  
 With a little patience
- 10 Here is no water but only rock  
 Rock and no water and the sandy road  
 The road **winding** above among the mountains  
 Which are mountains of rock without water  
 If there were water we should stop and drink  
 15 Amongst the rock one cannot stop or think  
 Sweat is dry and feet are in the sand  
 If there were only water amongst the rock  
 Dead mountain mouth of carious teeth that cannot **spit**  
 Here one can neither stand nor lie nor sit  
 20 There is not even silence in the mountains  
 But dry sterile thunder without rain  
 There is not even solitude in the mountains  
 But red sullen<sup>2</sup> faces sneer and snarl<sup>3</sup>  
 From doors of mudcracked houses<sup>4</sup>  
 25 If there were water  
 And no rock  
 If there were rock  
 And also water  
 And water  
 30 A spring  
 A pool among the rock  
 If there were the sound of water only  
 Not the cicada  
 And dry grass singing  
 35 But sound of water over a rock  
 Where the hermit-thrush<sup>5</sup> sings in the pine trees  
 Drip drop drip drop drop drop drop  
 But there is no water
- Who is the third who walks always beside you?  
 40 When I count, there are only you and I<sup>6</sup> together  
 But when I look ahead up the white road  
 There is always another one walking beside you  
 Gliding wrapt in a brown mantle<sup>7</sup>, hooded<sup>8</sup>  
 I do not know whether a man or a woman  
 45 – But who is that on the other side of you?

1 **sweaty**. Sudati.

2 **sullen**. Adirati.

3 **sneer and snarl**. Ghignano e ringhiano.

4 **mudcracked houses**. Case di fango screpolate.

5 **hermit-thrush**. Tordo eremita, che Eliot riferisce di aver udito in Quebec.

6 **there are only you and I**. Ci siamo soltanto io e te (tale verso, legato al tema del viaggio dei due discepoli di Cristo ad Emmaus, è stato suggerito al poeta dal racconto di una spedizione antartica. Si diceva che il gruppo di esploratori, stremati, aveva continuamente l'impressione che vi fosse una persona in più tra loro).

7 **Gliding wrapt in a brown mantle**. Scivolando avvolto in un manto bruno.

8 **hooded**. Incappucciato.



What is that sound high in the air  
Murmur of maternal lamentation  
Who are those hooded hordes<sup>9</sup> **swarming**  
Over endless plains, **stumbling** in cracked earth  
50 **Ringed** by the flat horizon only  
What is the city over the mountains  
Cracks and reforms and bursts in the violet air  
Falling towers  
Jerusalem Athens Alexandria  
55 Vienna London  
Unreal

A woman **drew** her long black hair out **tight**  
And **fiddled** whisper music on those strings  
And bats with baby faces<sup>10</sup> in the violet light  
60 Whistled<sup>11</sup>, and beat their wings  
And crawled head downward<sup>12</sup> down a blackened wall  
And upside down in air were towers  
**Tolling** reminiscent bells, that kept the hours  
And voices singing out of empty cisterns and exhausted wells<sup>13</sup>

65 In this decayed hole among the mountains  
In the faint moonlight, the grass is singing  
Over the **tumbled** graves, about the chapel  
There is the empty chapel, only the wind's home.  
It has no windows, and the door swings<sup>14</sup>,  
70 Dry bones can harm no one.  
Only a cock<sup>15</sup> stood on the roof-tree  
Co co rico co co rico  
In a flash of lightning. Then a damp gust<sup>16</sup>  
Bringing rain

75 Ganga was sunken<sup>17</sup>, and the limp<sup>18</sup> leaves  
Waited for rain, while the black clouds  
Gathered far distant, over Himavant<sup>19</sup>.  
The jungle crouched<sup>20</sup>, humped<sup>21</sup> in silence.  
Then spoke the thunder  
80 DA  
*Datta*<sup>22</sup>: what have we given?  
My friend, blood shaking my heart  
The awful **daring** of a moment's surrender  
Which an age of prudence can never retract  
85 By this, and this only, we have existed  
Which is not to be found in our obituaries  
Or in memories draped by the beneficent spider<sup>23</sup>  
Or under seals broken by the lean solicitor<sup>24</sup>  
In our empty rooms  
90 DA  
*Dayadhvam*<sup>25</sup>: I have heard the key  
Turn in the door once<sup>26</sup> and turn once only  
We think of the key, each in his prison  
Thinking of the key, each confirms a prison  
95 Only at nightfall, aethereal rumours  
Revive for a moment a broken Coriolanus<sup>27</sup>

9 hordes. Orde.

10 bats with baby faces. Pipistrelli con volti di bimbi (riferimento alla leggenda medioevale del Sacro Graal, secondo cui nei pressi della Cappella Perigliosa apparivano terribili visioni).

11 Whistled. Squittivano, fischiarono.

12 crawled head downward. Strisciavano a testa in giù.

13 exhausted wells. Pozzi esauriti.

14 the door swings. La porta sbatte.

15 cock. Gallo. Il suo canto rappresenta una nuova alba.

16 damp gust. Raffica umida.

17 sunken. Depresso (cioè il livello dell'acqua si era abbassato).

18 limp. Flosce.

19 Himavant. Montagna sacra dell'India.

20 crouched. Si rannicchiava.

21 humped. Incurvata.

22 DA / Datta. Dare (esortazione tratta dal libro sacro Indù, *Upanishad*). Da è la radice sanscrita di parole collegate al verbo 'dare'; ricorda, inoltre il suono del tuono.

23 in ... spider. In lapidi commemorative velate dal benefico ragno (riferimento a *The White Devil*, 1611, di Webster, drammaturgo elisabettiano).

24 lean solicitor. Scarso avvocato.

25 Dayadhvam. Andare d'accordo, essere in armonia, avere compassione (imperativo indù).

26 I have ... once. Citazione dall'*Inferno*, XXXIII, 46-47 ('ed io senti' chiavar l'uscio di sotto / All'orribile torre ...').

27 Coriolanus. Coriolano. Condottiero romano spinto a tradire il suo popolo da un'eccessiva autostima.



DA

*Damyata*<sup>28</sup>: the boat responded

Gaily, to the hand expert with sail and oar

100 The sea was calm, your heart would have responded

Gaily, when invited, beating obedient

To controlling hands

I sat upon the shore

Fishing<sup>29</sup>, with the arid plain behind me

105 Shall I at least set my lands in order?

London Bridge is falling down falling down falling down<sup>30</sup>*Poi s'ascese nel foco che gli affina*<sup>31</sup>*Quando fiam ceu chelidon*<sup>32</sup> – O swallow swallow*Le Prince d'Aquitaine à la tour abolie*<sup>33</sup>

110 These fragments I have shored against my ruins

Why then Ile fit you. Hieronymo's mad againe<sup>34</sup>.

Datta. Dayadhvam. Damyata.

Shantih shantih shantih<sup>35</sup>28 *Damyata*. Controllare sé stessi (imperativo indù).29 *I ... Fishing*. Io sedetti sulla riva a pescare (riferimento al capitolo relativo al re Pescatore in *From Ritual to Romance* di J.L. Weston).30 *London ... down*. Verso tratto da una filastrocca inglese.31 *Poi ... affina*. Citazione dal *Purgatorio*, XXVI, 148, in cui il fuoco purifica le anime dal peccato di lussuria.32 *Quando fiam ceu chelidon*. Quando sarò come una rondine? Citazione di una poesia latina che celebra l'arrivo della primavera e di Venere. La figura della rondine si riferisce a Filomela, la ragazza trasformata in uccello dal canto armonioso.33 *Le Prince ... abolie*. Il principe d'Aquitania dalla torre abolita. Citazione dal sonetto *El Desdichado* di Gérard de Nerval (1808-55) sulla perdita dell'amore.34 *Why then ... againe*. 'Allora vi accomoderò io. Gerolamo è pazzo di nuovo'. Citazione da *The Spanish Tragedy* di Thomas Kyd (1558-94). Gerolamo è reso pazzo dalla crudeltà e dall'inganno che lo circonda.35 *shantih*. Pace. Questa parola conclude le *Upanishad*.

## LITERARY COMPETENCE

## VOCABULARY

## 1 READ the poem and match the highlighted words with their Italian translation.

- |                              |                        |
|------------------------------|------------------------|
| 1 sciamanti .....            | 8 puntellato .....     |
| 2 accerchiate, cinte .....   | 9 distese .....        |
| 3 arpeggiò .....             | 10 sputare .....       |
| 4 che facevano suonare ..... | 11 incesplicando ..... |
| 5 ardire .....               | 12 rovesciate .....    |
| 6 remo .....                 | 13 gelido .....        |
| 7 che si snoda .....         |                        |

## COMPETENCE: READING AND UNDERSTANDING A TEXT

## 2 READ lines 1-74 again. They can be divided into five parts referring to different experiences, as Eliot himself suggests in his notes to the poem. Complete the table below, where the lines and the nature of these experiences are given.

Lines	Features of landscape	Characters/vision involved
Lines 1-9: Christ's agony and death		
Lines 10-38: Two disciples of Christ's set out for Emmaus		
Lines 39-45: The two disciples have the illusion of company		
Lines 46-56: The vision of the journey continues through the present decay of Eastern Europe		
Lines 57-74: After the vision of the disintegrating city, the Perilous Chapel of the Grail legend comes into view		

**3 FOCUS** on lines 75-102.

- 1 Complete the notes below on the arrival at the sacred river and the commands uttered by the Thunder.
  - 1<sup>st</sup> command: ..... → meaning: .....
  - 2<sup>nd</sup> command: ..... → meaning: .....
  - 3<sup>rd</sup> command: ..... → meaning: .....
- 2 Now answer the following questions.
  - 1 Are the inhabitants of the waste land still alive?
  - 2 What is the danger of thinking of the key?
  - 3 Who does the figure of Coriolanus stand for?
  - 4 What does each inhabitant of the waste land have to accept?

**4 CONSIDER** the last lines. The visionary journey which the protagonist takes in search of the water of life leaves him sitting upon the shore, with the arid plain rather than the unreal city behind him. Now state

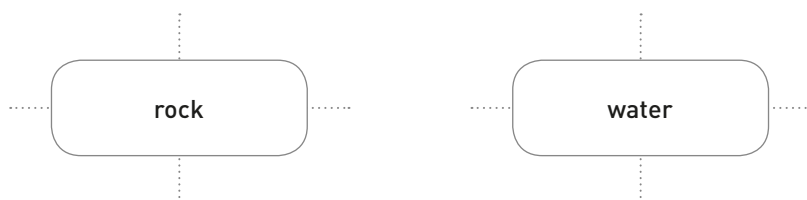
- the final guise of the protagonist;
- what 'these fragments' stand for;
- who the protagonist turns to in line 111;
- the message which closes the poem.

**> COMPETENCE: ANALYSING AND INTERPRETING A TEXT****5 FOCUS** your attention on musical devices.

- 1 Do these lines rely on rhymes?
- 2 Look for some examples of repetition, alliteration and assonance.
- 3 What effect do they create?

**6 CONSIDER** the layout.

- 1 Spacing may be an expressive device. Which sentences are broken and which words are isolated? Comment on the function of spacing.
- 2 Which images does the layout seem to create in lines 10-38?
- 3 Punctuation is almost absent in the first part of the section. What does this mean? When does it reappear? Can you think of a reason?

**7 READ** the opening lines (1-38) again: they describe the same desolate landscape of Section I (→T92) by contrasting symbolical images: rock and water. Say what these words are associated with here.**8 BEAR** in mind that the rock also represents the starting point of the allegorical journey from a sterile, decaying, present world towards purification, that is, water and fertility. Lines 57-70 state this journey has failed because it has led to the chapel, which is 'empty'.

- 1 How are both the chapel and the landscape around it connoted?
- 2 The quest for the Grail, which was the cup used by Christ at the Last Supper, became the symbol of a journey to spiritual salvation in medieval legends. Only a pure and spiritually worthy knight could find the Grail, after being severely tested. So what do you think the chapel symbolise?



**9 FOCUS** on the Thunder which speaks hiding his imperatives in Sanskrit.

- 1 Why does Eliot choose to go back to the tradition of the Indo-European peoples?
- 2 Why does he employ this old Indo-European language?
- 3 Why are these imperatives in antithesis to the society described by the poet in his poem?

**10 FIND** the lines revealing the new role played by the 'I', who is neither the witness nor the passive actor of Section I, but a man who has started his regeneration process.

**11 READ** the footnotes of lines 103-112 and find out:

- 1 what the popular English song may be associated with;
- 2 what kind of process the quotation from Dante's *Purgatory* represents.

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➤ **COMPETENCE: ESTABLISHING LINKS AND RELATIONSHIPS**

**12 DISCUSS.** Refer to the texts you have analysed from *The Waste Land* (→ T92-93) and state differences and similarities as regards

- the use of images;
- the use of quotations and allusions;
- the function of language.

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➤ **COMPETENCE: PRODUCING A WRITTEN TEXT ON A GIVEN SUBJECT**

**13 WRITE** a 10/12-line paragraph about the new figure of the literary critic and the role of literature in the modern world.