

Introduction to World Literature
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The Wasteland-I

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The Waste Land by T.S. Eliot Poetry Foundation
<https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/47111/the-waste-land>

POETRY FOUNDATION

The Waste Land
BY T.S. ELIOT

FOR EZRA POUND
II. MIGALOR FARRRO

I. The Burial of the Dead

April is the cruelest month, breeding
Lilacs out of the dead land, mixing
Memory and desire, stirring
Dull roots with spring rain.
Winter kept us warm, covering
Earth in forgetful snow, feeding
A little life with dried tubers.
Summer surprised us, coming over the Stunberger
With a shower of rain; we stopped in the coliseum,
And went on in nightgown to the Hogwashes,
And drank coffee, and talked for an hour.
Bin gar keine Russen, stamm' aus Litauen, echt deutsch.
And when we were children, staying at the arch-deck's,
My cousin, he took me on one of his sleds,
And I was frightened. He said, Marie,
Marie, hold on tight. And down we went.
In the mountain, there you feel free.
I read, much of the night, and go south in the winter.

What are the roots that clutch, what branches grow
Out of this stony rubbish? Son of man,
You cannot see or pass, for you know only
A heap of broken images, where the sun beats,
And the dead one gives no shelter, the cicada no relief.
And the dry stone no sound of water. Only
This is shadow under this red rock,
(Come in under the shadow of this red rock),

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Hello and welcome to today's session of the NPTEL course, 'Introduction to world literature'. Today we are taking a look at this very typical modernist poem, The Waste Land by T.S. Eliot. This is considered as the most poem of those times and Eliot of course is considered as the modernist writer of the early 20th-century. And today we are looking at one of the sections of this vast poem, The Waste Land and as most of you may already know this has been considered as one of the most difficult poems of the 20th-century and The Waste Land and Ulysses by James Joyce.

They are considered as [Inaudible 0:50] vast amount of plethora of Sacred material to access the text and to understand what it stands for. That said, it is important for you to keep in mind that the poem, wasteland has 4 sections. The first one being the burial of the dead. The 2nd one, a game of chess, 3rd is the Fire sermon and the 4th being death by water.

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The Waste Land by T. S. Eliot (Poetry Foundation) <https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/47322/the-waste-land>

To where Saint Mary Woolstoketh kept the hours
With a dead sound on the final stroke of nine,
There I saw one I knew, and stopped him, crying "Stenot!"
"You who were with me in the ships at Midol
"That corpse you planted last year in your garden,
"Has it begun to sprout? Will it bloom this year?
"Or has the sudden frost disturbed its bed?
"Oh keep the Dog far hence, that's feral to men,
"Or with his nails he'll dig it up again!
"You'd hypocrite laze!—non scintillabile,—non fere!"

II. A Game of Chess

The Chair she sat in, like a burnished throne,
Glowed on the marble, where the glass
Held up by standards wrought with fruited vines
From which a golden Cupidon peeped out
(Another hid his eyes behind his wing)
Doubled the flames of sevenbranched candelabra
Reflecting light upon the table as
The glitter of her jewels rose to meet it,
From satin cases poured in rich profusion:
In vials of ivory and coloured glass
Unstopped, lurked her strange synthetic perfumes,
Unseen, unthought, or liquid—strobbed, confined
And downward the some in odours stirred by the air
That flocked from the windows, where scented
In faintening the prolonged candle-flames,
Flung their smoke into the laparitis,
Sitting the pattern on the coffined ceiling,
Happ no wood-lid with copper
Burned green and orange, framed by the coloured scone,
In which sat light a carved dolphin swam.
Above the antique mantel was displayed
As though a window pane upon the splanxton
The change of Phloxed, by the barbarous king
So rudely forced; yet there the nightingale
Filled all the desert with inviolable voice
And still the cruel and still the world pursues
"Jug Jug" to dirty ears.
And other withered stumps of time

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For our session, we shall be focusing on the 2nd part which is, a game of chess and as you may know, this is also the title of a famous play by Middleton which is titled, a game of chess. So we try to take a look at this poem and read it closely and also understand some of the significant elements which have meant this poem one of the iconic representative, a literary pieces of the 20th century. And I should also tell you at the outset of this lecture that this may be one single way in which this poem can be read and if you survey the critical scholarship on the wasteland, you will see that there are ways in which the poem continues to lend itself to different ways of being read, to newer meanings which are emerging.

And I try to take you through this journey by doing a close reading of this text, a game of chess, the 2nd part of the poem, The Wasteland. And I hope this will also encourage you to go, access the entire works, The Wasteland and also access the critical scholarship which informs and accentuates our understanding of this poem. I read to you the first few lines from the 2nd part, a game of chess.

The chair she sat in, like a burnished throne, Glowed on the marble, where the glass Held up by standards wrought with fruited wines From which a golden Cupidon it in peeped out (Another hid his eyes behind his wing) Doubled the flames of sevenbranched candelabra Reflecting light upon the table as The glitter of her jewels rose to meet it, From satin cases poured in rich profusion; In vials of ivory and coloured glass Unstopped, lurked her strange synthetic perfumes,

Unguent, powdered, or liquid - troubled, confused
And drowned the sense in odours; stirred by
the air That freshened from the window, these ascended
In frightening the prolonged candle
flames, Flung their smoke into the laqueria, stirring the pattern on the coffered ceiling.

Before we go into the details of the poem, I want you to pay attention to the form. They will notice that the poem begins in blank verse, with unrhymed iambic pentameter. And as it progresses, we find that the sense of order in terms of meter, in terms of the structure, it begins to break down and this sense of breaking down, this lack of order that we will see as the poem progresses, is also representative of the modernist tension that Eliot is trying to convey. Keeping this in mind, we try to take a look at the poem in great detail.

The poem opens with a description of a woman who is sitting inside a really expensive room. And a burnished throne is a reference to Shakespeare's Antony and Cleopatra. It also heightens the Queen like sense of the room and the speaker is describing to you a certain room in which an elegant woman is sitting. And we also get to know that there are these references to fruited wines, sevenbranched candelabra which is a candleholder with 7 holes to fit candles, it is a Christian symbol as well.

And we find these many symbols classical, Christian, literary, all of those making its way into this text, into this part of the poem right from the outset itself. And there is a sense of luxury that he gets from these descriptions. It is very very expensive, it is very very luxurious and the poshness and the pompousness of this is something that sets the tone for the poem we would think but interestingly and ironically enough, this poshness, the grandeur of the throne, the grandeur of this scene completely shifts when the poem ends, when this part ends.

And towards the end, we will see that it is far removed from the initial images which are being presented before us. And it is this journey that makes this section extremely interesting and also representative. It is taking us through the ways in which different episodes of the modern life, we are talking about the early 20th-century. How different episodes of the modern life, they are present simultaneously but at the same time, they also pull you in different directions. They are not necessarily in a linear progressive order and more often than not, you also will find that the sense of order which is there in the beginning, it begins to break down.

And because, it is more because the sense of order is very very fragile and the centre cannot hold as (O)(6:15) would say in one of his other important poem in the second coming. Critics have spent time thinking about why Eliot chooses to open this part with this description which is very opulent. It also reminds us of certain images and certain symbols from a Greek play like when he is writing about the glitter of her jewels. And there is an ancientness, that is a certain classical value to this and this somehow accentuates the sense of breakdown which soon encompasses this poem halfway through.

And while he is describing this lavish room, if you notice, talks about strange synthetic perfumes. How everything in the contemporary, when he is talking about the early 20th-century, everything in the contemporary is getting drowned in these different orders and he is talking about the stinky perfumes that are oozing from vials and up to the ceiling. Laquearia refers to a fancy panelled kind of ceiling. So these descriptions tell us about, tell us in greater detail about the opulence which is there and it also tells us that there is something very very superficial and artificial about it.

It is the grandeur is there. It is like the description in Antony and Cleopatra. It is very powerful, very elegant but at the same time, there is a certain superficiality about it and artificiality about it which perhaps is one of the major things that this poem is also trying to convey to us. Then the poem tells us about the vials of ivory in coloured glass unstopped, lurked in this strange synthetic perfumes, powdered or liquid. And here, it begins to feel that most of the things sound very fake and almost tawdry and there is hardly anything original or sincere about it.

And the term, 'synthetic' is very very important. If you remember, it is the early 20th century. It is also the time when the modern world is ready to embrace technology, to embrace the good life that science and technology is providing to humanity and it is also the time when synthetic begins to invade daily lives in multiple ways. So here, one is not too sure whether Eliot is using synthetic in a very positive sense given the context that also, it almost appears that he is actually referring to, drawing our attention to the unnaturalness of modern chemicals and even the idea of beauty in the modern sense.

Look at those 2 images which are being juxtaposed here without really bringing them together, without really saying that he is trying to compared. The beginning is with a burnished throne. It

reminds us of Antony and Cleopatra, very classical in terms of literary illusion, in terms of the mythical references associated with it, in terms of Rome which is being invoked, it is very very classical. And at the same time, there is this reference to the synthetic perfumes and how everything is getting drowned in the sense of orders.

As you have by now figured, there is a speaker in this poem, we do not get to know anything about the speaker. The only function that the speaker seems to have is perhaps to just describe what he is seeing around and what he is feeling and the illusions that he is reminded of. So the speaker then follows the smoke from the candles, the room's ceiling and he also realises that it is made of Seawood fed with copper and it also makes it burn green and orange.

And during those times, lots of ceilings were made of copper. So that was more or less, a very commonplace illusion then and not so strange as it would appear today. And the speaker also sees sad light a carved dolphin swam. And this shows how the room has also taken this room which has the classical illusion to it but which is also highly synthetic and artificial and comes across as being very cheap and fake. It also has taken the image of something very natural and vibrant, a dolphin.

And that is being turned into a dead carving. It is as if the room wants to remind everyone of nature. It is really trying hard to give some element of authenticity and some element of naturalness to the many things which are part of that room but at the same time, it is able to do that only in a superficial way. If we take that room as a classic example of the modernist space which is what perhaps I would like to believe Eliot is also trying to do, it is not much unlike the modern world where there is a sense of naturalness, a sense of authenticity is deliberately being made to brought in but at the same time, it can be done only in an unnatural way.

It can be done only in an artificial, synthetic way. Going down, Above the antique mantel was displayed as though a window gave up on the Sylvan scene the change of Philomel, by the barbarous king so rudely forced; yet there the Nightingale filled all the desert with inviolable voice and still she cried and still the world pursues, "Jug Jug" to dirty ears. There is more classical references here. This, the lines of course describe some kind of a painting or a tapestry which is on the wall that lavish room and it also depicts the transformation of the mythical heroine, Philomela into a Nightingale and this takes place in the Sylvan scene.

Sylvan scene as we can see, as though a window gave up on the Sylvan scene. Sylvan scene is a reference, an illusion to John Milton's Paradise lost where he uses this phrase, the Sylvan scene to, it appears in book 4 in line 140. And this is one of the references about, it is about the transformation of someone into someone. It is about the myth of Philomela. So what is it about?

The myth of Philomela originally had featured in Ovid's metamorphosis. Ovid being one of the earlier Roman writers and in Ovid's metamorphosis which came out perhaps around the time of Christ, there is the story of Philomela who is again a mythical character and she was raped by her sister's husband, who happened to be the king, king Terius and in order to prevent any kind of disgrace and in order to keep his reputation, what king Terius then did was to cut out her tongue, very very gruesome.

He had he according to the According to this Greek myth, king Terius had her tongue cut out so that she would not tell on him. And this as we know, as gruesome as it sounds, this was also a part of many other legends and many other stories and it has been narrativised in different ways. And as per the story, Philomela then manages to tell her sister the truth, who happens to be this king's wife and this narration which she cannot for which she cannot use her tongue because it has already been cut off, her ability to communicate has been completely (14:00) for good.

And she then manages to tell the truth to her sister by weaving the story into a tapestry. And look at the power of imagination and the way in which the classical illusions are being made to enter this room that Eliot is describing before us. And as per the story, if we are interested in following that up, the 2 of them, what they did was after the sister gets to know about the truth, what they do is even more gruesome, they ice Terius' son and they feed the boy to Terius without really him knowing about it.

So they get Terius' own son killed and then they unknowingly makes King Terius eat, feed on his own son, that is how they get their revenge. So once Terius finds this out, he is of course really outraged and as per the myth, as per the story, Philomela escapes the rage of the King, the King Terius who had raped her and got her tongue cut out. Philomela escapes him by transforming into a Nightingale. And we find all of these things being packed into these roughly about 4 lines.

I read that to you again. As though a window gave upon the Sylvan scene, the change of Philomel by the barbarous king so rudely forced yet there the Nightingale filled all the desert with inviolable was and still she cried and still the world pursues “Jug Jug” to dirty ears. And here comes the trust. Eliot is not interested in telling us the background of this myth. He is interested in not educating us to this myth but in telling us that in these times, in the modernist times, if this song sung by this Nightingale, think about the myth again, if the song of the Nightingale is sounding “Jug Jug” to your ears, it is because you are naive, you are uneducated, you have no idea what these classical references are about.

And this is a very typical modernist stance as well. And you can see that we buy now get a hang of this poem. It is very very cryptic and unless one has the help of some informed reading which is not being done, it is very very difficult to make sense of it. And every word does not just signify what it means but it has deeper illusions. It has classical references which only a learned person, which only an educated person, only someone who is trained that, can have access to. And this is perhaps Eliot’s and by extension most of the modernist writers’ take on the idea of understanding literature, the idea of interpreting art and this somehow sounds sums up their idea of an ideal reader as well.

So in a nutshell, what he is trained to tell us that Philomela’s song is still audible. It is still there but one really cannot make any sense of it, one cannot even hear it unless one is trained to hear it and trained to understand it. The poem then goes on to talk about the withered stumps of time.

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The Waste Land by T.S. Eliot (The Poetry Foundation) <https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/47122/the-waste-land>

Waste laid upon the walls, staring forms
Leaned out, leaning, hushing the room enclosed.
Fragments shuffled on the rain
Under the fatigues under the brush, her hair
Spread out in fiery points
Glazed into words, then would be wargily still.

"My nerves are bad tonight. Yes, bad. Stay with me.
"Speak to me. Why do you never speak. Speak.
"What are you thinking of? What thinking? What?
"I never know what you are thinking. Think."

I think we are in rats' alley
Where the dead men lost their bones.

"What is that noise?"
The wind under the door.
"What is that noise now? What is the wind doing?"
Nothing again nothing.
"Do
"You know nothing? Do you see nothing? Do you remember
"Nothing?"

I remember
Those are pearls that were his eyes.
"Are you alive, or not? Is there nothing in your head?"

but
O O O that Shakespeavian Rag—
It's so elegant
So intelligent
"What shall I do now? What shall I do?"
"I shall rush out as I am, and walk the street
"With my hair down, so. What shall we do tomorrow?
"What shall we ever do?"
The hot water at ten.
And if it rains, a closed car at four.
And we shall play a game of chess,
Pressing hollow eyes and waiting for a knock upon the door.

When Lil's husband got demobbed, I said—
I didn't mince my words, I said to her myself.

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And other withered stumps of time were told upon the walls; staring forms cleaned out, leaning, hushing the room enclosed. Here the poem is talking about the withered stumps of time, perhaps it is referring to the withered stumps that was left after Terius had cut out Philomela's tongue and it is also alluding that much like Philomela, most people in the modern times, they do not know how to express themselves in beautiful ways because the means of communication, the tools which they were most comfortable in using for communication have either been taken away or been severed for good.

So there is a way in which the modern man, there is a predicament that the modern man is also forced to remain silent in various ways, to remain withdrawn and unable to communicate in some way or the other. So unless one gets creative enough like Philomela who weaves her story into this beautiful tapestry, unless one gets creative in such novel ways, such interesting ways, ways which are not accessible perhaps to everyone, there is no way in which the thought could be communicated.

There is no way in which the stories can be told, no way in which one can reach out. That is also one of the typical modernist thinks that the poem is also try to tell us. So by extension, if we come back to the room which is being described over here, it is also possible to say that these tapestries which you can see on those roofs, they are also like fragments or withered stumps which are telling us about the past though it is through these walls. So there is a certain kind of a purpose which the narrator thinks that this tapestry also is serving.

And the figures in this tapestry, now the poem goes on to say, there is a leading and the lady is sitting on her throne and the poem also goes on to describe all the tapestry on the wall, everything around it, the other objects, the carvings. That also somehow is trying to tell us that there are many other stories from the past with a dying to be heard which are not being made accessible now for whatsoever reasons like the tongue which has been cut out or for other reasons due to which communication has been completely stalled.

And this scene, the scene of this room which is about the poem opens with, it concludes with this image of a woman who is in the room and she is also brushing her hair into fiery points. Under the firelight, under the brush, her hair spread out in fiery points. Glowed into words, then would be savagely still. It may appear like there are these set of random images which are being strewn together over here that it really does not make sense. But I think when we read and as the poem progresses, this nonlinearity, this inability to make sense it further gets accentuated.

So if you think about the first scene which we just took a look at, it opens with this really lavish room in which a woman sitting like a queen and it ends by this woman brushing her hair into fiery points and we find that there is hardly anything, there is no story that we get from this. It is only a predicament that is being showcased over here. It is only one episode which tells us about this inability to communicate, to tells about this hidden treasures of the past which are now not accessible.

It is also telling us about the crisis within which modernis situations are caught in. Now it goes to the next segment and at the end we will come back and see how these different segments also connect well with each other and how out of this seemingly erratic threat, if we will see if there is anything that is emerging as well. So when we move to the next segment, we realise that there is no order in terms of form, in terms of rhythm and this is how it goes.

My nerves are bad tonight. Yes, bad. Stay with me. Speak to me. Why do you never speak. Speak. What are you thinking of? What thinking thinking? What? I never know what you are thinking. Think. I think we are in rats alley where the dead men lost their bones.

So right after the first scene which is in this lavish and also cheap and fake looking room, we are being introduced to this woman who is sounding neurotic. We have no idea about the context.

We just know what she is speaking and she sounds neurotic. She is clearly not happy and she wants to communicate and she is frantically asking these questions and obviously not getting any of those answers. And we also find that the structured iambic pentameter that we could see till the end of the first segment, it is completely lost here. It completely off-rails now. And it also makes sense because now it is a neurotic woman who is speaking and this neurotic behaviour perhaps the poem is also trying to tell us that it is now more common than it was in the past because it is the times that we are living in.

And what are these times that we are living in? In the following line we get a sense of what those times are like. I think we are in rats' alley where the dead men lost their bones. We will come to the reference, rats' alley very soon. So before that, pay attention to the breakdown and the structure. So we also realise that maybe there is a way in which mental breakdown of the character who is being shown here is also getting represented.

There is also perhaps a very subtle suggestion that when one sticks to tradition as Eliot also had believed in, one when one sticks to the classical past, there is an order and there is a structure which he also tries to show formally, in terms of form over here. And the moment that structure goes away, the moment the classical tradition or the past that one that you are holding onto goes away, there is complete breakdown. It is almost like neurosis. You do not make sense of that at all.

And if you are familiar with some of the dominant ways in which modernists thought and spoke they also believed in the ability of the past to bring in a sense of cohesion. They believed in the ability of the classical tradition to bring in more stability to the collapsing modern times. And we could also see that attitude getting reflected and prevalent in this poem as well. Now coming to this section, I think we are in rats' alley where dead men lost their bones, there is no conclusive way in which one can say what this reference is about.

There is a consensus that this is perhaps about the war. Eliot lived during the war times, early 20th century, the First World War and the Second World War and it is in between these wars that modernism also saw its greatest pinnacle, the high point of modernism was between these 2 wars. So the speaker is perhaps referring to those awful trenches that soldiers lived in during the First World War. If you are familiar with the war poetry about the young soldiers who wrote

poetry while they were on these war fronts, completely de-glorifying and demystifying war and saying that there is hardly anything heroic in dying at the war front.

It is just sad and it is unfortunate and it also takes us away from that sense of looking at war as this glorious instance, glorious death, romanticising about the many ways in which war creates heroes. And we are familiar with a number of War poets who spoke about that and Eliot clearly does not romanticise war. This is very very evident in all of his poems. He talks about men who are completely torn apart because of the war. Eliot's poem do not talk about the heroes which come after the war.

It only talks about men who are amputated, men who are handicapped, men who completely lose their sense of manhood itself the moment they come back from the war. And later in the poem, we find it getting closer to that theme as well. And there is also another reason to assume that perhaps the reference is to those dark trenches in the war front because the military companies used to give very morbid names to refer to those trenches and that is a historical fact. So perhaps this is now reference to one of those trenches and the reference to rats but again come towards the end of the poem.

And in continuing with this, where the dead men lost their bones, it is again talking about the intensity of death when it needs you at the warfront. But whatever the reference is, it does not take too much to guess that. Rats' alley is significantly not a pleasant place. It is an unpleasant place, it is a dark place and it is a place that where no one wants to be and it also symbolizes decay. It symbolises something that you would rather stay away from and that is the way in which he is also presenting the modern times, the narrator is presenting the modern times.

Continuing, what is that noise? The wind under the door. What is that noise now? What is the wind doing? Nothing again nothing. Do you know nothing? Do you see nothing? Do you remember nothing? So again, it is a neurotic series of speech. It hardly makes any sense except that there is a very visible trauma, except that there is a very visible crisis that whoever is making is going through. We only get snippets of the conversation here.

Again there is no context, there is no background, there is no way in which we can know what this is about and what had led to this neurotic condition. And we also find that there is a sense of

paranoia being built in when the character is saying, what is that noise? What is that noise now? What is the wind doing? There is a sense of paranoia which is gradually building in and this was very very real during those war times. The sense of paranoia about how and when things will go wrong.

And here even the sound of wind coming through the doorway and again you know there is an illusion, a very strong illusion to John Webster. And Elliott is also referring to this play, the Devil's law case and it has a line which goes like this, is the wind in that door still? So look at the way in which Eliot is also inserting these references from the past almost trying to tell us that in order to make sense of the present which is mostly neurotic, which does not have any original images, there is only a cheap, fake kind of an imitation which is far from pleasant.

He is also trying to say that in order to talk about the present, in order to make sense of the present, you really need to bring in images, you need to bring in literary illusions from the past whenever it is needed and he keeps doing that in a very generous fashion throughout his writings you would say which is why it is very very important also to have a glossary of terms when most of the times when you are trying to read modernists works, specially Eliot's poems.

We also find the speaker of the poem tried to comfort this character who is neurotic, whose paranoid. One can only make assumptions because we only have snippets of these conversations. Perhaps, it is the speaker of the poem who is trying to reassure this character, saying that does nothing. It has nothing again. And the repetition of the word, nothing is very very important. It goes without saying that it is clearly a reference to the shallowness Eliot is living in, Eliot is talking about. It is nothing.

And also think about the modernist play but it is waiting for (())(29:01). This does not comfort this character at all. It is in fact you know again followed by a series of anxious questions whether the speaker of the poem actually knows nothing or not. So this is as if there is no end to this paranoia, there is no end to this neurotic condition and there is no way in which anyone can comfort or bring this person out of the situation that he or she is now in.

And look at the structure of the poem here now. Do you see how the word do is here placed way inside the margin. And the structure of the poem continues to get more and more erratic over

here. There is hardly anything here which tells us that this is the typical structure that a poem has. And this is an experimentation that we find most of them, most of the modernist poets doing. It is evident in Pound's poem, it is evident in the other writings and you will see that it is a typical modernist trend as well.

This deliberate debunking of a structure, this deliberate attempt to move away from a formal structure that one is more familiar with. And it also here when we look at the structure and see how the Do is placed inside, way inside the margin and how the rest of it is not really in any particular order. It is also talking about the collapsing condition of the mind, collapsing condition of the modern life itself by extension.

And to this question to which perhaps there are no direct answers, do you remember? You know nothing? Do you see nothing? Do you remember nothing? And as a response or we do not even know whether the speaker is actually having this conversation in his mind and not really trying to comfort the character who is now paranoid and neurotic at the same time but from that time onwards, when he begins to respond to this and when he remembers something we find that the poem also enters another level.

It also goes to a different tone and a different setting altogether. We are no longer in that room which looks lavish and luxurious which reminds us of the many many classical references. And from now on, we find that the poem is actually holding up a mirror against the modern society that the poem is also trying to talk about. It is kind of trying to give us a sense of what it is to live during those times. We will wrap up the session for today and we will continue looking at the rest of the poem in the next session.

I hope by then you will also be familiar with the poem and also will get a hang of how the form and the structure and how the different terms are being used here and also try and find more references and the critical scholarship within which this poem is located as well. So we wrap up with today and we continue reading, a game of chess in the next session. Thank you for listening and I look forward to seeing you in the next session.