

How has the poet fused past and present in the poem “The Waste Land?

Writer: T. S. Eliot | Generated: Jan 26, 2026

How has the poet fused past and present in the poem “The Waste Land?” [NU: 2015, 17] Or, How does T.S. Eliot make a link between the past and present in “The Waste Land?” [NU: 2019] Or, Comment on T.S. Eliot’s use of myth in “The Waste Land.” [NU: 2015, 18, 21] ★★★

A myth is an old story that explains nature, life, or culture. It connects the past to the present by carrying old beliefs and meanings into modern life. T.S. Eliot’s (1888–1965) poem “The Waste Land” (1922) is full of old myths and modern pictures. Eliot brings stories from the past and joins them with modern life. This way, he shows how human suffering, sin, and hope repeat again and again. The myths give meaning to the broken modern world. Below are some prominent examples from the poem.

Tiresias: Tiresias is a prophet from Greek myth. He lived in Thebes during the rule of Oedipus. Once, he saw two snakes in love. They cursed him and changed him into a woman. After seven years, he again saw snakes. Then he became a man again. So, he had lived both as a man and a woman. Later, Zeus and Hera asked him a question: who loves more, a man or a woman? He said the woman loves more. Hera cursed him with blindness. Yet he got the gift of prophecy. Oedipus, king of Thebes, killed his father and married his mother. A curse fell on his land. Tiresias asked him to repent to save the land. In the poem, Tiresias is blind but can see the truth. Eliot writes:

“And I Tiresias

I who have sat by Thebes below the wall

And walked among the lowest of the dead.”

Here, Tiresias is a bridge between old Thebes and modern wasteland. He sees both past and present.

Vegetation and Fertility Myth: The poem also uses old farming myths. In Egypt, people told the story of gods like Osiris, Adonis, and Attis. The god was buried with seeds of corn. Later, the corn grew again, showing its rebirth. This cycle shows death and new life. Eliot uses this in "The Burial of the Dead." He writes about spring rain that makes dull roots grow. This also links with the story of Christ, who died and rose again. Just as Christ renewed faith then, he can also renew the modern world. This myth of rebirth joins the past with today's need for salvation.

The Fisher King and Holy Grail: Another central myth is of the Fisher King. He was a sinful king. Because of his sins, he became sick. His land turned dry, and people starved. In another story, his soldiers raped the nuns of the Grail Chapel. For this sin, his land suffered. He hoped a pure knight would come to Chapel Perilous and heal him. Sir Parsifal, a holy knight, came and removed the curse. In Eliot's poem, the Fisher King's wasteland stands for modern life. Modern people are spiritually sick and must seek repentance. Eliot writes:

*"To Carthage then I came
Burning burning burning burning
O Lord Thou pluckest me out
O Lord Thou pluckest burning"*

Here, the repeated "burning" shows pain and sin. Like the Fisher King, modern people suffer and need healing.

Biblical Waste Land: Eliot also uses the Bible. In the Book of Ezekiel, the people of Emmaus turned from God. Their land became barren. The prophet told them to worship God again. Eliot writes about "rock," "dead tree," and "dry grass." These show the same biblical wasteland. In the poem, they stand for the modern world, which has lost its faith and fruitfulness. Only God can heal it, as in the old story.

In summary, Eliot mixes many old myths with modern images. He brings in Tiresias from Thebes, the farming gods, the Fisher King, the Grail, and the Bible. All these show one truth: sin brings death, and repentance brings life. By joining past and present, Eliot shows that human life moves in a cycle of death and rebirth.