

Rachel Watts

Dr. Rice

ENGL 4560

30 November 2020

T.S. Eliot's *The Waste Land* and the Perpetual Clairvoyant

T.S. Eliot's *The Waste Land* is famous for its many allusions and multi-lingual quotations. Whether these are from modern or classical works, they are found throughout the entire work. Of all the allusions included, however, there is one notable theme—the clairvoyant. The epigraph that begins the poem references the Cumaean Sibyl, the first book narrates a visit to the famous (but fictional) clairvoyant Madame Sosostris, and the classical figure Tiresias is mentioned thrice in book three. By incorporating the Cumaean Sibyl, Madame Sosostris, and Tiresias as not only characters but in a first-person position, Eliot places himself as the perpetual clairvoyant, able to accurately and credibly perceive and depict the reality of the world.

First, we are introduced to the Cumaean Sibyl. Her position is not in the poem proper, but rather in the epigraph that begins the poem. The epigraph is primarily in Latin, with the dialogue being in Greek and says:

“Nam Sibyllam quidem Cumis ego ipse oculis meis

vidi in ampulla pendere, et cum illi pueri dicerent:

Σίβυλλα τί θέλεις; respondebat illa: ἀποθανεῖν θέλω.”

This quote speaks of the blind Sibyl of Cumis, a seeress, who, when asked what she wants, says she wishes only for death. Not only does this quotation serve to set up the tone of the poem as depicting the world as a desolate waste land, it serves as Eliot's invocation. He uses this quote to appeal not to a muse, as might traditionally be done, but to a clairvoyant. This gives him the ability

to depict the world as it is, with accuracy and insight. This first reference to a clairvoyant is the key to all the others, because it is this invocation of the Sibyl who sees the world as a place full of despair that, in terms of the poem, grants Eliot the ability to see the waste land around him and to depict it properly.

Second, we see the famed clairvoyant Madame Sosostris. She is the only one of the three clairvoyants Eliot weaves into the poem who is not figure in classical myth or literature. She is the modern clairvoyant-- a tarot reader with a head cold-- and instead of imparting her clairvoyant abilities to Eliot as is the case with the Sibyl, she the narrator of his own future. She speaks of the death of the Phoenician Sailor, who perishes later in the poem and is identified as Phlebas, and she foreshadows the woman seated on a throne later in the same book. She is placed strategically, for the narrator is still exploring and realizing the world. Yes, he is disillusioned, just as he is for the entirety of the work, but he has not yet seen the entirety of the depravity of the world.

The narrator sees Madame Sosostris's reliability in the coming stanzas, however, as he experiences and surveys the world. He dips in and out of conversations, of songs, and of situations for the remainder of book two, and experiences not only the fulfillment of her prophecies, but the truth of his own perception of the world. These two things combined confer a degree of credibility on both Madame Sosostris, and on the narrator himself. The prophecies that come true prove Madame Sosostris's clairvoyance, with the accuracy of the portrayal of the world prove the narrator's own clairvoyance. Madame Sosostris is a transitional stage in the string of seers that Eliot weaves throughout the poem. She shows him enough to confirm his own view of the world as shown through the invocation of the Sibyl, and in doing so transitions to the third clairvoyant.

Tiresias, the third clairvoyant that Eliot incorporates, is unique for two reasons. First, he is the most frequently mentioned of the three; Eliot mentions him by name three times in book three.

Second, he is the only one that Eliot actively identifies with his narrator. Every time he is mentioned, he is referred to as “I Tiresias.” The narrator has moved from calling upon a clairvoyant, as in the case of the Cumaean Sibyl, to visiting a clairvoyant for confirmation, to finally becoming the clairvoyant himself. Not only this, but Tiresias is a return to the classical clairvoyant, as opposed to the modern clairvoyant as in the case of Madame Sosostriis. He has been granted not only the ability to see the world as it is in the present, nor only the ability to perceive the future, but the ability of the Sibyl to see the depravity and desolation of the world for all that it is. In identifying himself with Tiresias he places himself not only as the modern clairvoyant, but the perpetual clairvoyant, seeing the world as it is, was, and will be—and just as Tiresias does and just as the Sibyl does, after seeing the world as it is, he despairs.

Tiresias is the perfect introduction to book five; he is the narrator himself given the power of sight. And yet it is in book five, when no seer or clairvoyant is created or referenced, when the narrator truly comes into his own as a clairvoyant. He moves from small scenes of despair and depravity to sweeping views of the entire world. He sees how empty it is, how truly it has become a waste land, and reaches the point of the Cumaean Sibyl wherein he can long for death to release him from the despair of being trapped in this world, just as she was trapped within a bottle, and just as Tiresias was trapped within a body that was not his own. And yet, the narrator does not give in to this despair—instead, he finds peace. Finally, there is order, even if he is the one who has imposed it. The sea, an oft-occurring motif, is finally calm. He is the seer of his own life; he has seen the world as it is and has chosen peace.

In incorporating all three of these clairvoyants, Eliot places himself, or at least his narrator, among them. He gives his own vision of the world credibility by surrounding it by the visions of those who are established clairvoyants. Those who the readers have not heard of he

gives credibility, as in the case of Madame Sosostris, and those who we have he interpolates with the narrator so as to give the narrator credibility. In incorporating the Cumaean Sibyl, Madame Sosostris, and Tiresias as not only characters but in a first-person position, Eliot places himself as the perpetual clairvoyant, able to accurately and credibly perceive and depict the reality of the world.

## Works Cited

Eliot, T. S., and Helen Vendler. *The Waste Land and Other Poems*. Signet Classic, 1998.