Excerpts from “The Waste Land” by T.S. Eliot

Lilacs (2): just the flower; couldn’t find any notable allusions associated with it

tubers (7): like potatoes and such. You know, root vegetables that grow in the ground? Turn up?

son of man (9): biblical allusion; “Son of man, stand upon thy feet, and I will speak of thee,” says god to Ezekiel. In the valley of dry bones, God asks Ezekiel, “Son of man, can these bones live?” Ezekiel responds, “O Lord God, only thou knowest.”

Unreal City (14): allusion to a poem by the French poet Baudelaire. “Swarming city, city full of dreams / Where the spectre in full daylight accosts the passer-by.”

London Bridge (16): the bridge in London that crosses the River Thames, this is not to be confused with the famous Tower Bridge (the one you’ve seen). A bridge in some form or another has existed in the spot of the London Bridge since 55 CE. Note the line that follows is from Dante’s *Inferno* and is a reference to souls in limbo (the spiritual place between heaven and hell).

nymphs (22): mythological elf-like creatures associated with nature. Eliot here is alluded to a poem written during Elizabethan times where they are described as “lovely Daughters of the Flood.” Eliot call them “Thames-Daughters” in his own notes to the poem.

Thames (23): the main river which flows through London

gashouse (30): factory which manufactures and supplies natural gas. Natural gas was used to light London before electricity.

garret (32): attic

Eliot is concerned because I chopped up his poem. Take that, T.S.!



April is the cruelest month, breeding

Lilacs\* out of the dead land, mixing

Memory and desire, stirring

Dull roots with spring rain.

5 Winter kept us warm, covering

Earth in forgetful snow, feeding

A little life with dried tubers\*.

What are the roots that clutch, what branches grow

Out of this stony rubbish? Son of man\*,

10 You cannot say, or guess, for you know only

A heap of broken images, where the sun beats.

And the dead tree gives no shelter, the cricket no relief,

And the dry stone no sound of water.

Unreal City\*,

15 Under the brown fog of a winter dawn,

A crowd flowed over London Bridge\*, so many,

I had not thought death had undone so many.

Sighs, short and infrequent, were exhaled,

And each man fixed his eyes before his feet.

20 The river’s tent is broken: the last fingers of leaf

Clutch and sink into the wet bank. The wind

Crosses the brown land, unheard. The nymphs\* are departed.

Sweet Thames\*, run softly, till I end my song.

The river bears no empty bottles, sandwich papers,

25 Silk handkerchiefs, cardboard boxes, cigarette ends

Or other testimony of summer nights. The nymphs are departed.

A rat crept softly through the vegetation

Dragging its slimy belly on the bank

While I was fishing in the dull canal

30 On a winter evening round behind the gashouse\*

White bodies naked on the low damp ground

And bones cast in a little low dry garret\*,

Rattled by the rat’s foot only, year to year.

Unreal City

35 Under the brown fog of a winter noon

1. Identify the contradictions in the opening stanza. How does the speaker characterize spring?

2. How does the speaker characterize winter in the second stanza? Is winter better than spring? Explain.

3. In the third and fourth stanzas, the speaker characterizes how man (people) perceive the world. Are these images negative or positive?

4. Note the allusion connoted in the fifth stanza (lines 14-19). The speaker clearly ties this allusion to a real place (London, where Eliot himself lived). Explain the allusion and the thematic weight it carries.

5. Stanza 7, where are all the people?

6. What is the only sign of life left in the “Unreal City”/London?

7. Explain Eliot’s tone.