Rethinking Modernism in The Waste Land by T.S. Eliot through Shakespeare's The Tempest

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ABSTRACT

This paper examines how T. S. Eliot's modernist masterwork *The Waste Land* can be reimagined through William Shakespeare's *The Tempest*. Although the two works are quite different in historical context and literary form, they share deep concerns about the human condition, loss, fragmentation, and the possibility of renewal. Eliot's poem is a landmark work of 20th century modernism, while *The Tempest* stands as one of Shakespeare's most symbolic late plays. Eliot's writing highlights a deep awareness of literary tradition, often drawing on earlier texts—especially Shakespeare—to express the loss of faith in the modern world. By reading *The Waste Land* through the lens of *The Tempest*, this paper claims that Modernism doesn't just reject tradition; it transforms it to discover new ways of meaning. Using clear language and accessible analysis, the paper explores the thematic connections between the two works, particularly their shared focus on destruction, hope, and spiritual renewal.

Keywords:

Submission Date: October 17, 2025
Reviewed Date: October 22, 2025
Accepted Date: October 27, 2025
Published Date: December 5, 2025

INTRODUCITON

T. S. Eliot's *The Waste Land* (1922) is widely regarded as one of the most important poems of modern literature. It captures the disillusionment and fragmented spirit of the world after the First World War -a world devoid of confidence in religion, love, and the future. Rather than presenting a straightforward narrative, Eliot constructs the poem through multiple voices, rapid shifts in imagery, and allusions to texts and myths from

various cultures. This experimental technique marks the poem as distinctly modernist. William Shakespeare's *The Tempest* (1610–1611), in contrast, is a Renaissance play filled with magic, music, and themes of authority, forgiveness, and rebirth. Although the play begins with a violent storm, it concludes in harmony as Prospero chooses reconciliation over revenge. Despite their differences, both works examine the human need to restore meaning in the aftermath of upheaval. This paper proposes reading *The Waste Land* through *The Tempest* to understand modernism not only as an aesthetic of fragmentation, but also as an attempt to rebuild tradition. Eliot's poem, though bleak on the surface, contains seeds of renewal similar to the hopeful resolution of Shakespeare's play.

Rethinking Modernism

The term *modernism* is widely used to identify a cluster of new and distinctive features that appeared in the subjects, forms, concepts, and stylistic approaches of literature and the other arts during the early decades of the twentieth century, particularly in the aftermath of World War I (1914–18). Although scholars and critics often define modernism differently depending on their disciplinary focus—ranging from literature and painting to architecture, music, and philosophy—most agree that the movement represents a deliberate and radical break from the traditional bases of Western art and Western cultural values more generally. Modernism sought to redefine artistic expression by challenging established norms of narrative structure, linguistic coherence, moral certainty, and aesthetic harmony. It emerged as a creative response to a world that appeared to be undergoing a profound crisis of meaning.

The intellectual roots of modernism can be traced to a number of influential thinkers who questioned long-held assumptions about society, faith, morality, and the nature of the human self. Philosophers like Friedrich Nietzsche dismantled the foundations of Christian morality and declared the "death of God," arguing that traditional belief systems no longer held explanatory power in a rapidly changing world. Karl Marx exposed the exploitative structures of capitalist society, suggesting that economic systems shape human consciousness and cultural production. Sigmund Freud revolutionized the understanding of human identity by highlighting the unconscious forces, desires, and anxieties that shape behavior and thought, thereby destabilizing the Enlightenment model of a rational, unified self. James G. Frazer, in his monumental work *The Golden Bough* (1890–1915), drew parallels between Christian rituals and ancient pagan myths, demonstrating that supposedly "civilized" religious structures were rooted in universal patterns of primitive belief. Together, these thinkers created an intellectual climate that encouraged skepticism

toward traditional authorities and narratives, paving the way for modernist experimentation.

Modernism began to take clear shape in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, emerging as artists and writers attempted to make sense of unprecedented social, technological, and political transformations. Industrialization, urbanization, scientific discoveries, and the rapid spread of mass culture dramatically altered daily life. The trauma of the First World War further accelerated this crisis of confidence. The unimaginable scale of destruction shattered long-standing beliefs in human progress, divine order, and the stability of civilization. As a result, modernist literature often reflects a sense of fragmentation, disillusionment, and alienation. Authors abandoned linear plots and conventional narrative coherence, opting instead for experimental forms that more accurately represented the fractured consciousness of individuals living in an increasingly chaotic world. The stylistic innovations of modernist writers include fragmented structures, unreliable narrators, stream-of-consciousness techniques, symbolic density, and abrupt shifts in perspective or voice. These techniques were not merely aesthetic choices; they were attempts to respond truthfully to a reality that no longer seemed coherent or predictable. Modernist texts often demand active interpretation, reflecting the belief that meaning is no longer fixed but must be constructed through the interaction of reader, writer, and world.

Among modernist writers, T. S. Eliot stands as one of the most influential and intellectually rigorous figures. Eliot believed that contemporary Western culture had lost its spiritual grounding and become disconnected from its historical and moral roots. Rather than rejecting the past outright, Eliot sought to recover meaning by re-engaging with the literary and religious traditions that preceded modernity. His concept of the "historical sense," elaborated in his essay "Tradition and the Individual Talent," argues that a new work of art gains significance only through its relationship with the entire canon of literature. For Eliot, innovation and tradition are inseparable: the modern writer must contribute to the ongoing dialogue of culture, not sever it. In his poetry, Eliot frequently incorporated myths, biblical stories, medieval literature, classical epics, and Renaissance drama—especially the works of Shakespeare—as frameworks through which to explore the anxieties of modern life. Rather than using these allusions merely as decorative references, Eliot employed them to expose the spiritual barrenness of the twentieth century by juxtaposing it with the richness of the past. This interplay between ancient and modern material reveals Eliot's conviction that cultural memory can guide humanity through periods of crisis.

Thus, modernism in Eliot's hands becomes not just an act of artistic experimentation but also one of reconstruction. While embracing new forms and techniques, Eliot sought to rebuild a sense of cultural coherence by drawing upon the depth of literary tradition. In this way, he represents a synthesis of rupture and continuity, innovation and preservation—an approach that shapes *The Waste Land* and marks it as one of the defining works of modernist literature.

Overview of *The Waste Land*

Published in 1922, *The Waste Land* consists of five sections: "The Burial of the Dead," "A Game of Chess," "The Fire Sermon," "Death by Water," and "What the Thunder Said." Through its fragmented narrative and shifting voices, the poem portrays a spiritually desolate world. The opening line, "April is the cruelest month," subverts the traditional symbolism of spring, revealing how new life becomes painful in an age haunted by loss. The poem begins with a section entitled "The Burial of the Dead." In it, the narrator describes the seasons. Spring brings "memory and desire," and so the narrator's memory drifts back to times in Munich, to childhood sled rides, and to a possible romance with a "hyacinth girl." The memories only go so far, however. The narrator is now surrounded by a desolate land full of "stony rubbish."

He remembers a fortune-teller named Madame Sosostris who said he was "the drowned Phoenician Sailor" and that he should "fear death by water." Next, he finds himself on London Bridge, surrounded by a crowd of people. He spots a friend of his from wartime, and calls out to him. The next section, "A Game of Chess," moves abruptly from the streets of London to a gilded drawing room, in which sits a rich, jewel-bedecked lady who complains about her nerves and wonders what to do. The poem drifts again, this time to a pub at closing time in which two Cockney women gossip. Within a few stanzas, readers travel from the upper crust of society to London's low life. "The Fire Sermon" opens with an image of a river. The narrator sits on the banks and muses on the deplorable state of the world. As Tiresias, he sees a young "carbuncular" man hop into bed with a lonely female typist, only to aggressively make love to her and then leave without hesitation. The poem returns to the river, where maidens sing a song of lament, one of them crying over her loss of innocence to a similarly lustful man. "Death by Water," the fourth section of the poem, describes a dead Phoenician lying in the water -- perhaps the same drowned sailor of whom Madame Sosostris spoke. "What the Thunder Said" shifts locales from the sea to rocks and mountains. The narrator cries for rain, and it finally comes. The thunder that accompanies it ushers in the three-pronged dictum: "Datta,

dayadhvam, damyata": to give, to sympathize, to control. With these commandments, benediction is possible, despite the collapse of civilization that is under way -- "London bridge is falling down falling down falling down."

The poem mixes scenes from modern urban life with echoes of ancient myths, religious texts, and literary works. While it largely paints a picture of despair, it also gestures toward renewal. The final invocation, “Shantih shantih shantih,” suggests the possibility of spiritual peace.

Reading *The Tempest*

The Tempest is one of Shakespeare’s most symbolically charged late plays, centered on Prospero, the rightful Duke of Milan, who uses his formidable magical powers to orchestrate events on a remote island. Years before the play begins, Prospero and his young daughter, Miranda, were betrayed and cast adrift by Prospero’s ambitious brother, Antonio, who conspired with King Alonso of Naples to seize the dukedom. Miraculously surviving this treacherous exile, Prospero and Miranda found refuge on an uninhabited island, where Prospero devoted himself to mastering the arts of magic and gaining control over the island’s supernatural forces.

When fate brings Antonio, Alonso, and Alonso’s son Ferdinand close to the island, Prospero seizes the opportunity to confront his past. Using his magical powers, he summons a powerful storm the titular “tempest”—to shipwreck the nobles. The storm does not harm them but scatters them across the island, creating an atmosphere of confusion that allows Prospero to test, manipulate, and ultimately transform them. The play then follows multiple intertwined plotlines shaped by Prospero’s orchestration. His airy spirit servant, Ariel, carries out Prospero’s commands with speed and precision, guiding the survivors into different groups. Ferdinand, separated from his father, encounters Miranda, and the two fall instantly and sincerely in love an event Prospero has subtly arranged. Their budding romance becomes a symbol of harmony, renewal, and the healing of old political divisions.

Meanwhile, a darker subplot unfolds among the other survivors. Sebastian, the King’s brother, encouraged by the scheming Antonio, plots to murder Alonso and seize power. This mirrors the earlier betrayal of Prospero, highlighting the recurring cycles of ambition and treachery that the play seeks to expose. In contrast to the political machinations of the nobles, another comic yet meaningful subplot involves Prospero’s resentful servant Caliban. Caliban, the island’s original inhabitant, forms an alliance with two drunken ship

workers, Stephano and Trinculo, and together they absurdly plot to overthrow Prospero. Their rebellion, although humorous, reflects themes of colonization, resistance, and the struggle for autonomy—issues that modern critics have explored extensively.

As the narrative unfolds, Prospero moves steadily toward the resolution of his internal and external conflicts. Although he has the power to destroy his enemies, he ultimately rejects vengeance, choosing forgiveness instead. In a climactic scene, he reveals the treachery that Antonio and others had committed, not to punish them, but to awaken them to their moral failings. Prospero then frees Ariel from service, acknowledging the spirit's loyalty, and grants mercy even to Caliban, recognizing him as part of the island's natural order. The union of Miranda and Ferdinand symbolizes the restoration of political harmony, promising peace between Milan and Naples. With his goals accomplished, Prospero decides to renounce his magical powers, breaking his staff and drowning his book of spells—an act often interpreted as Shakespeare's symbolic farewell to the stage. The survivors prepare to return to Naples, where Prospero will reclaim his rightful position as Duke of Milan.

Despite the initial chaos and conflict, *The Tempest* ultimately moves toward reconciliation and renewal. Prospero's transformation from a wronged and embittered exile to a wise and forgiving leader embodies the play's central moral vision. Many scholars interpret *The Tempest* as a meditation on creativity, authority, and the transformative powers of the human mind. The play explores the tension between power and mercy, illusion and reality, and destruction and healing, making it a profound reflection on human nature and the redemptive potential of forgiveness.

Shakespeare's Legacy in Eliot's *The Waste Land*

At first glance, the two works appear vastly different. *The Tempest* is a play that ends in harmony, while *The Waste Land* is a poem marked by fragmentation and suffering. Yet both works engage with themes of destruction and renewal. In *The Tempest*, the storm disrupts the known world, but it also creates the conditions for transformation. Similarly, *The Waste Land* depicts a civilization in ruins, but within the ruins lie the potential seeds of spiritual rebirth. T.S. Eliot's *The Waste Land* exemplifies how Shakespeare's legacy shaped Modernist literature. Although modernist writers sought new artistic methods, many—including Eliot—strongly acknowledged the importance of tradition. Eliot argued that no poet writes in isolation; instead, each writer participates in a continuous literary heritage. Shakespeare's profound exploration of human emotions, moral dilemmas, and metaphysical questions made him an essential touchstone for Eliot. In *The Waste Land*,

Eliot incorporates numerous Shakespearean echoes. These allusions serve not as ornamentation but as meaningful bridges between the modern world and earlier human struggles, suggesting that contemporary despair has deep historical roots. The notion of waste—physical, moral, and spiritual—is central to Eliot's poem. The barrenness of the land mirrors the barrenness of modern existence. Yet both Eliot and Shakespeare present cycles of destruction followed by renewal. In *The Tempest*, the island becomes a space where characters confront their past and emerge transformed. Eliot's poem, though bleak, suggests that renewal requires confronting the desolation of the present.

Both texts begin with scenes of disorder. In *The Tempest*, the storm scatters characters and creates confusion. However, this chaos leads to healing, self-discovery, and reconciliation. Prospero's forgiveness is key to restoring harmony. Similarly, *The Waste Land* portrays a world fractured by war and disillusionment. Its fragmented structure reflects the broken psychic landscape of the time. Yet the poem's movement toward "Shantih" hints at the possibility of healing. Eliot's references to Shakespeare are deliberate and symbolic. One of the most striking is the borrowed line "Those are pearls that were his eyes" from *The Tempest*. In Shakespeare's play, the line describes a sea change—a transformation of death into beauty. In Eliot's poem, it becomes a haunting reminder of loss and transformation in the modern world. Another example is **"**fishing in the dull canal … musing upon the king my brother's wreck", which recalls Ferdinand's mourning yet emphasizes spiritual decay. The drowned Phoenician Sailor in "Death by Water" parallels the Tempest's shipwreck, turning magical rebirth into a reflection on mortality. Even the poem's fragmented voices mirror Ariel's song, highlighting dissonance and disorder. These Shakespearean allusions enrich the poem's depth. They connect Eliot's depiction of a fractured, disillusioned modern world to timeless human struggles. By referencing familiar images of loss, transformation, and renewal, Eliot shows how the spiritual crises of the twentieth century echo universal concerns.

If we rethink modernism through the lens of *The Tempest*, we can still discern its echoes in modern literature, as exemplified by Eliot's *The Waste Land*. The dialogue between past and present reveals how modernist writers drew on classical texts to express the fragmented, disillusioned realities of their own age, transforming inherited forms and themes into reflections of the modern condition. So, when *The Waste Land* is read through *The Tempest*, modernism appears not as a movement of pure negation but as a dialogue with the past. Eliot's use of Shakespeare shows how modernist writers repurposed traditional texts to express new realities. Just as *The Tempest* moves from chaos to

harmony, *The Waste Land* hints at the possibility of spiritual renewal amid modern collapse.

Conclusion

Both *The Waste Land* and *The Tempest* explore the fundamental human quest for meaning in the aftermath of turmoil, though they do so from different cultural moments and with distinct aesthetic strategies. Eliot's poem captures the desolation of the post-World War I world a landscape marked by spiritual dryness, cultural exhaustion, and emotional paralysis. The modern individual, fragmented and disillusioned, wanders through a symbolic wasteland in search of purpose. Shakespeare's *The Tempest*, on the other hand, presents a Renaissance journey from disorder to harmony, where conflict ultimately gives way to forgiveness and renewal. Prospero's island becomes a transformative space where characters confront their failures, acknowledge their human limitations, and move toward reconciliation.

By reading Eliot's poem through the lens of Shakespeare's play, we begin to understand that modernism does not simply reject the past in its effort to express new realities; rather, it reinvents inherited traditions to interpret contemporary experience. Eliot's engagement with Shakespeare is not nostalgic but transformative—he reframes Shakespearean symbols of rebirth, healing, and transformation to illustrate the fractured spirit of the twentieth century. What appears, at first glance, to be a poem of despair gradually reveals its dialogue with older texts that offer models of recovery and renewal. This interplay between past and present demonstrates that the modernist aesthetic is deeply intertextual, drawing strength from earlier literary forms even as it reshapes them to confront modern anxieties.

Ultimately, *The Waste Land* can be seen as a modern counterpart to *The Tempest*: a work that acknowledges the overwhelming presence of suffering, disillusionment, and cultural collapse, yet still gestures—however faintly—toward spiritual rebirth. Eliot's final invocation of "Shantih," like Prospero's renunciation of magic and embrace of forgiveness, suggests a moment of transcendence beyond the wreckage. Through Shakespeare's influence, Eliot reminds us that even the bleakest landscapes contain the seeds of renewal, and that the human hope for restoration endures across historical and literary boundaries. In this way, *The Waste Land* not only portrays modern despair but also affirms the timeless possibility of regeneration, making its dialogue with *The Tempest* a powerful example of literature's continuous cycle of destruction and renewal.

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