

# *The Waste Land:* An Animated Journey

JULIA SANDS



*WRITER'S COMMENT: As a cartoonist, writer, and avid music listener, I found an exciting opportunity to combine these interests when Dr. Demory's prompt asked us to propose an adaptation of "The Waste Land" for visual performance. My choice of medium, animation, came from personal preference and from the childhood memory of glimpsing frightening animated scenes from the film *The Wall*. This power of art in motion to create scenes beyond imagination and stir up emotions beyond description offered the perfect outlet for the fantastic dystopia I saw in Eliot's poem. Animation remains a sorely underused medium outside of children's entertainment despite its near-limitless possibilities, making this essay an especially careful undertaking. With so many artistic liberties to take, I felt free to vary my prose in this piece as much as I do in my creative writing, making this one of the most enjoyable and rewarding essays I have written to date.*



—Julia Sands

*INSTRUCTOR'S COMMENT: In the summer of 2007, in my course in British Modernism (English 137N) I gave my students the option of writing a proposal to adapt T. S. Eliot's long poem *The Waste Land* for film. The assignment has three parts: a proposal that outlines the overall concept of the proposed film, a sample shooting script of one small segment of the proposed film, and an analysis of that shooting script that explains the writer's rationale for the choices made. I've given some version of this assignment in various courses, asking students to come up with ideas for adapting novels, nonfiction books, newspaper articles, and—occasionally, as Julia illustrates here—poems. Whether or not a proposed adaptation would really work as a film, the assignment gives students the chance to showcase their skills in interpreting*

*texts in a highly creative way. The Waste Land is a particularly challenging subject; after all, it's a classic high Modernist text that's famous for being difficult. It works by juxtaposition, symbol, and allusions to a staggering variety of prior texts and cultural artifacts—everything from bawdy drinking songs to Greek myth (in the original language, in some places). It's nothing like the plot-driven, character-centered novels that one usually associates with film adaptations (think Jane Austen). I wasn't at all sure that anyone would tackle this—it seemed too odd. But I love Julia's response to the assignment. It's creative, it demonstrates a thorough, sophisticated understanding of the poem and of animation styles, and an intuitive grasp of the challenges of adaptation. As a paper, it provides a wonderful reading of the poem—and as a film, well, I'd love to see it on the big screen.*

—Pamela Demory, University Writing Program



THE WASTE LAND INVITES ITS READERS into the complex world of a dark present and a forbidding future, and as a snapshot of modernized life it is as pertinent today as it was in 1922 when it was first published. The intricacies of T.S. Eliot's language and images allow for multiple interpretations. The poem's openness to myriad explanations means that, in a sense, each reader creates his or her own unique adaptation. And so it is not an interminable stretch to imagine adapting *The Waste Land* as a film. As with many poems, *The Waste Land* relies on images to convey its ideas, and internalizing them demands careful analysis of each thought and feeling they evoke. To translate the poem into a visual medium, with direct presentation of each image, offers a new way to interpret the work.

Of all the popular forms of visual media, animation would give the fullest possible depth to the wealth of images in *The Waste Land*. Unlike a stage or live action production, animation has few physical and temporal limitations. It can show, for example, Phlebas's remains underwater without special cameras or effects; scene changes can take place within seconds and with smoother transitions. The medium's versatility allows simultaneous literal and figurative interpretation of the poem: the words become literal images on the screen and the mood of the film captures their figurative meanings through style, sound, and color.

In order to convey the fact that the film depicts only one of many possible interpretations of *The Waste Land*, it will show only one character's journey through the landscape of the poem—implying that a dif-

ferent character would have a different experience. Tiresias, the blind prophet of Greek legend, is well-suited for this role; as a character in “The Fire Sermon” he has a direct connection to the poem. He also has a special significance to the work as a whole: according to Eliot’s notes, he “unit[es] all the rest” of the characters and “what he *sees*, in fact, is the substance of the poem.” Tiresias, then, is the most natural observer to witness the poem to the viewer, and will also act as narrator, speaking parts of the poem aloud as the images appear. His familiarity to audiences as a prominent figure in Greek myth and literature makes him an accessible and sympathetic character, and his blindness serves to strengthen the sense of loss and helplessness evident throughout the poem. His ability to see the future adds an implication that the events in the film may not yet have occurred, and that the poem may in fact be a warning, giving audiences some hope after viewing such a dark story.

The overall tone of the poem is dark, as seen in its sometimes cryptic language and in images of waste and apathy (e.g., the passionless encounter Tiresias witnesses in “The Fire Sermon”). The film’s style will reflect this tone. Despite its common use in children’s cartoons, animation can be quite serious and even morbid; one example can be found in the work of British artist Gerald Scarfe, who lent his dark style to the live action/animated film *The Wall*, which might be used as a model for the “Waste Land” film. In order to encompass the wide range of themes and images in the work, the film will be feature-length and aimed at an adult audience. Using a Western style of animation (as opposed to an Eastern style like Japanese anime) would also place the work in the geographical setting Eliot wrote from, with his American background and his British surroundings. Color scheme will be critical to conveying the dark tone of the poem overall and will play a role in expressing its moments of action and, occasionally, hope. Most scenes will be rendered in dull colors but will often contain certain background elements or characters in brighter hues to create a contrast between themes, as Eliot contrasted images and motifs in his poem. In other scenes, one monochrome or completely dull color scheme will change over time to a new one to present a shift in tone. For instance, the opening might begin with a typically bright April spring scene, only to fade to duller colors within a few moments, reflecting how the poem presents an image of a typically optimistic time of year and follows it with a pessimistic word choice: the text describes April as “the cruelest month” and how flowers emerge from “the dead land.”

Certain color schemes will signify the various leitmotifs woven through the poem; the “jug jug” of the nightingale and its reference to Philomela of Greek myth will be accompanied by a red-orange scheme intimating blood and conveying the violence of that story.

A musical score is crucial in creating the appropriate mood for the visuals. In order to avoid treating the source material as an historical artifact, and to enhance the timelessness of the work beyond the present day, neither modern popular music nor that of Eliot’s era will be included in the soundtrack. Instead, an orchestral score will be used. Instruments within the score will vocalize some of the characters, as Tiresias will be the only source of spoken dialogue, to locate him as an observer “outside” the film’s events. Each recurring leitmotif will have not only an assigned color scheme, but a musical motif. For instance, each time the water motif appears on screen—at the Thames in “The Fire Sermon” or at Phlebas’s watery grave in “Death by Water”—a “Water Theme” plays. The speed, volume, and arrangement of this piece of music varies depending on the situation; when the woman in “The Fire Sermon” puts a record on the gramophone, the “Water Theme” plays faintly to introduce the sailing imagery that follows. In the drought of “What the Thunder Said,” the “Water Theme” might play off-key or even backwards. A possible composer for the project can be found in Nobuo Uematsu, one of the foremost music creators in Japanese animated films and video games (Uematsu). His experience in the genre, as well as his wide range of skill with piano, orchestral, and choral music of varying moods, would complement the equally wide range of images in the film.

As with any live action film or stage performance, an animated film requires a script in addition to storyboards and character and background designs. The following scene adapted from “Death by Water” illuminates what such a script might look like, showing the style and technique at work and illustrating why animation is a particularly appropriate vehicle.



#### IV. Death by Water

Phlebas the Phoenician, a fortnight dead,  
Forgot the cry of gulls, and the deep sea swell  
And the profit and loss.

A current under sea  
Picked his bones in whispers. As he rose and fell

He passed the stages of his age and youth  
Entering the whirlpool.

Gentile or Jew

O you who turn the wheel and look to windward,  
Consider Phlebas, who was once handsome and tall as you.

*from The Waste Land, T. S. Eliot*



## *The Waste Land: Death by Water*

### [A Sample Shooting Script]

*Cut to an underwater shot, at a low angle looking up toward the churning surface of the water. The “Fire Theme” is ending, its final booming brass notes fading into echoes, as if swallowed up by the sea. A shadow becomes visible in the center of the screen, moving slowly at first, then at breakneck speed on a collision course with the viewer. Tiresias crashes into the water, bubbles streaming out around him.*

*Cut to shot at a high angle, above Tiresias looking into the depths of the water. Once the sloshing calms, the slow and melancholy piano of the “Water Theme” burbles to the surface. The camera draws downward into the darkness, fading from blue to black, but another small shadow is just visible in the center of the screen, an outline of something lying at the bottom. Crying seagulls can be heard softly, as if from far away, growing louder until they overcome the music.*

*Cut to shot of Tiresias’s blank eyes, as he begins to “see.”*

*Cut to shot of seagulls wheeling in a clear blue sky. The camera swoops down into a side view of a single-masted Phoenician ship cutting through an open sea: its sail striped in bright colors, its many long oars slicing into the water. A variant of the “Water Theme” returns, upbeat and driven by the orchestra with occasional piano flourishes like the waves splashing against the ship.*

*Cut to shot of the swarthy, well-built Phlebas in rakish sailing attire, leaning forward with one boot propped on the bow of his ship. He stands in the midst of his oarsmen, one of whom is Tiresias, unobtrusive at the edge of the shot and looking lost. Phlebas shades his eyes against the sun as he scans the horizon. After a moment, he discovers what he has been searching for and points toward it, dancing with excitement.*

*Cut to shot of Phlebas's point of view: a strait of shimmering blue water just opening between two green banks of land. The "Water Theme" rises to a triumphant crescendo.*

*Cut back to shot of Phlebas on board his ship, dispensing orders to his crew. The camera follows him as he retreats below decks, alone.*

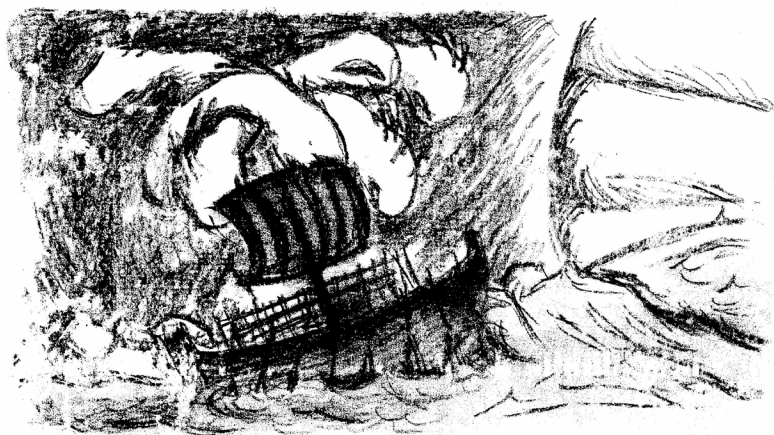
*Cut to view of the ship's interior. The world in the heart of the ship is dark and the walls are bare; everything here, even the light peeking through the planks from outside, is tinted blue as the color scheme reverts to the blues, grays, and greens of the water motif's color scheme. The camera follows Phlebas down a short corridor to a doorway at the end.*

*Cut to shot from inside the room Phlebas opens. The camera circles around him until it is over his shoulder, coming to rest on his view of a hold full of cargo: trunks upon trunks of exotic wares, barrels, and sacks, some labeled in an equally exotic alphabet, others blank and mysterious.*

*Cut to shot of Phlebas nodding in approval, then making his rounds about the hold, opening trunks and toeing sacks with his boot to judge their contents. In the midst of the dull blue colors the contents of the opened trunks are bright, shedding their light on Phlebas's face. Once everything seems satisfactory, the camera follows him back to the doorway, but he does not exit. Instead, he sinks onto a trunk and surveys his cargo, blinking sleepily.*

*Cut to shot of the ship outside, still making its way rapidly toward its destination. Land is visible in the background and the sun is dipping into the horizon; the arch of the sky grows a darker blue, turning orange nearer to the earth. The music grows slow and restful.*

*Cut back to the cargo hold, where Phlebas rests against a wall. Time*





*has passed; orange light infiltrates the dark room with the coming of sunset. Suddenly, everything rocks. Phlebas is thrown to the floor. He scrambles to his feet as the “Water Theme” turns ominous, blasts from the brass section recalling the violence of the “Fire Theme” and deep cellos foretelling the coming “Thunder Theme.”*

*Cut to shot of Phlebas arriving on deck, frantic and panting.*

*Cut to shot of calamity outside. The ship has entered the strait, but there is a nasty surprise waiting—a monster on the rocks, toothy and fearsome, with six heads snapping down at the hapless crew. They attempt to fight it off, but those who get too near are plucked up and devoured by the creature, leaving behind only the shrill shriek of a clarinet.*

*Cut to Phlebas, the camera following him down the length of the ship as he roars orders to steer out of danger; these orders take the form of trumpet blares in the midst of the music. Sequence of shots of the crew scurrying to the oars; another brief shot of Tiresias, still at his place, gripping his oar in panic.*

*Cut to wide-angle shot of the ship turning away from the monster. The six heads snap at the sail but the ship is pulling to calmer waters.*

*Cut to on board the ship, followed by a sequence of shots of the crew falling over one another in relief, some laughing. A brief shot lingers on Tiresias, pawing blindly at his oar.*

*Cut to Phlebas, who does not look at all relieved. Outrage mars his features as he glances back towards the hold, then stalks toward it, again to check his cargo. Before he can reach it, another smattering of trumpets alerts them to a new danger. The camera follows Phlebas as he dashes to the bow of the ship, then soars to a high angle as he gazes into the violent, thrashing whirlpool dragging his ship in.*

*Cut to close-up of Phlebas’s horrified expression, followed by a vacant frame as he flees the screen.*

*Cut to wide-angle shot of the ship falling victim to the whirlpool. It is over in seconds, wood splintering into the air as the craft is torn asunder and its crewmen thrown free of the wreckage, only to be swallowed up by the void.*

*Cut to a series of underwater shots of Phlebas struggling against the tide, to no avail, intercut with a sequence of shots showing Phlebas in various stages of his life: as a child, dashing up to a shady-looking tent like Madame Sosostri’s from “Burial of the Dead”; as a young man at war, reminiscent of Albert’s experience in “The Chess Game”; as a mature man, fishing on the*

*edge of a river, as in “The Fire Sermon.” In the final shot Phlebas is unconscious, a lead weight sinking to the bottom of the sea.*

*Dissolve to another, deeper underwater shot. The churning fades; what settles to the ocean floor are a smattering of bones and rags of clothing. They bury themselves in the sandy bottom, where the rags flutter in the deep sea current.*

Tiresias: *(Voice-over, mournfully)* Phlebas the Phoenician, a fortnight dead, forgot the cry of gulls, and the deep sea swell, and the profit and loss. A current under sea picked his bones in whispers. As he rose and fell he passed the stages of his age and youth entering the whirlpool.

*Cut to Tiresias in the calm water from the beginning of the scene, blind to the bones beneath him, paddling back to the surface where he bobs helplessly on the waves. It is twilight above the surface.*



*Cut to a wide-angle shot of Tiresias at sea; a steel ship passes nearby.*

*Cut back to Tiresias. We hear muddled, inarticulate shouting, growing louder as the sailors grow near, but the shot remains on Tiresias doggedly paddling to stay afloat.*

*Cut to close-up of a hand grasping his.*

*Cut to shot of a man pulling him aboard a dinghy that begins to row back toward the larger ship. Tiresias huddles in one corner.*

*Cut to shot on board the ship as one by one the rescuers clamber aboard. Their captain stands watching, only the arm on his hip visible in this shot as he surveys the scene.*



*Cut to close-up of the captain; it is the Young Man Carbuncular from "The Fire Sermon." He glances at Tiresias, mumbles some orders, then turns away, muttering about deadlines, where his ship and cargo need to be, and how fast they need to get there. Tiresias turns aside, voice audible but lips still.*

Tiresias: (Voice-over) Gentile or Jew, o you who turn the wheel and look to windward, consider Phlebas, who was once handsome and tall as you.

*Behind him, thunderheads gather in the distance.*



THE METHOD USED TO DEPICT THIS SCENE, and that will be used similarly in the others, directly translates the words into images and uses music, color scheme, and action to convey the tone of the words. In this way the scene grasps both the form and content of the poem and captures them on screen. This method and the stylistic and narrative choices made in this scene act to elucidate one possible explication of the poem for the film's viewers.

Fanciful and sudden transition sequences convey the abrupt and sometimes confusing ends of each section of the poem while adding cohesion to the film. "The Fire Sermon" ends in the poem with a strange chant, and in the film with Tiresias being physically plucked from one part of the poem and thrust into the next. The score aids in smoothing the rough transition from one scene to the next; the principle theme of "The Fire Sermon" is still resounding at the beginning of the scene and the "Thunder Theme" heralds the end. The "Thunder Theme" occurs near the end of the scene and ends Phlebas's life, acting as a musical motif to foreshadow the approaching end of the film.

Other leitmotifs from elsewhere in the poem (and the film) make appearances here to again provide cohesion and to reflect the intertextuality of the written work. Music and color are the most effective tools in referencing other parts of the film; the orange scheme heralding the monster's attack would have been used at the "burning" end of "The Fire Sermon" and at other times in the film when the song of the nightingale refers to Philomela's violent tragedy. The juxtaposition of foreboding orange with calming blue, associations made between colors and moods

by the earlier parts of the film, adds to the suspense. Also, orange and blue are complementary colors in the art world, making the contrast between them bold and striking. Other motifs appear in the action on screen: as Phlebas's life flashes before his eyes in the whirlpool, he takes on roles or visits other scenes from elsewhere in the poem. This technique fulfills Madame Sosostris's prediction of "the drowned Phoenician Sailor" and illuminates this connection for the viewer. Tiresias's appearance on board the ship adds linearity to the film that is not immediately obvious in the poem, which the viewer might find helpful in seeing the work as a meaningful story, and not just a sequence of random images.

Images added to the film that are not explicitly apparent in the text nevertheless trace their roots back to the poem, adding deeper meaning to the images and helping to explain what the poem might mean by them. The "whirlpool" is a nondescript entity in the poem, but takes the form of Charybdis in the film, adding another layer of reference to Greek myth already evident in Tiresias and Philomela. It also offers one possible explanation of how exactly Phlebas died at sea, for Phlebas's mission at sea is unclear in the poem. The text never shows him in life, but it does hint at it with its reference to "profit and loss." Portraying him as a trader in the film both illuminates and undermines his life; as Eliot's text suggests, all is forgotten after death. There is only decay in store for Phlebas, his crew, and his precious cargo.

While the poem mentions Phlebas is "a fortnight dead," contrasting an ancient Phoenician sailing ship with a modern motorized vessel binds Eliot's era with the present day. In this way the message in "Death by Water" that this scene interprets—to be mindful of one's own mortality—becomes applicable to both time periods. As Tiresias is a figure in ancient Greek myth, he witnesses events far in advance of his own era. By doing so, and by actually taking part in them as he does in this scene, his journey becomes temporal as well as physical and releases his observations from the boundaries of any one time period. The inclusion of the Young Man Carbuncular breaks even more temporal boundaries and is another film self-reference recalling "The Fire Sermon." Though he is "a small house-agent's clerk" in that section, he may figuratively be the "sailor home from sea." Using him again in this different setting—or alternate timeline—supports and confirms the message that no one can escape Phlebas's fate, no matter the time or place.

This scene provides an example of how well-suited the versatility of animation is for an adaptation of this film. An action scene on this scale could be rendered in either an aesthetically dark or beautiful way, while at the same time every color choice supports or contrasts with one of the many motifs in the film. While other visual media could provide equally intriguing versions of the poem, animation is uniquely capable of translating the words into color, sound, and fanciful action to grasp both form and content, providing a new array of possible interpretations.



### Works Cited

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