



## **Parallel Studies in American/Afro-American Literature, Part II “Black and White Images in Alienation”**

Curriculum Unit 79.01.08  
by Robert Johnson Moore

### **Rationale**

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This unit, in keeping with the purpose of its antecedent developed last year, points out parallels in selected writings of white and black American writers who, under the same canopy of creative and humanistic expressions, share interests in the same themes, experiment with similar writing styles, and find themselves facing the same artistic conundrums. This particular section examines the theme of *alienation* in the poetry of T. S. Eliot and LeRoi Jones. Hardly contemporaries, these two poets from diverse racial and cultural backgrounds are spiritual kinsmen—soul brothers—for their visions of the modern age interface on the same plane. Whereas Eliot was the prophet of the apprehensive twenties, of its innate fear of a technological age on the brink of war, Jones became the oracle of the explosive sixties, of its rage at an insensitive world that systematically exploited black people. A careful study of the poetry of Eliot and Jones reveals that one decade was the harbinger of the other.

Note: This course, designed for high-ability juniors and seniors, demands a keen interest in poetry.

### **Course of Study**

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Comparative Biographies

T. S. Eliot (1888–1965) LeRoi Jones (1934– ) Imamu Amiri Baraka

Thomas Stearns Eliot was born in St. Louis, Missouri of a New England family that lived in America for more than two hundred years. When he enrolled at Harvard University in 1906, he was returning to the region where his family had its roots. In spite of this, he felt out of place in New England. After Harvard, Eliot continued to study in France and in England, of which he later became a citizen in 1927. During World War I, he was a schoolteacher, a banker, and then a writer for a publishing firm. He had written several controversial poems expressing his pessimistic view of modern life. Eliot became the prophet for disenchanted writers of the twenties, including Ernest Hemingway, Gertrude Stein and F. Scott Fitzgerald.

His most famous poem, "The Waste Land" (1922), shocked the very foundations of the age. His images were far from pretty, for there was too much ugliness to reveal. Though it met with many sharp criticisms, "The Waste Land" nevertheless became the most important single poem written by an American. Difficult to read because of Eliot's use of quotations and obscure literary allusions, his poems manifest a strange link with the past which is underscored by a shocking use of irony. Such innovations dominated his work and laid the foundation for trends in modern poetry; these reecho in the poetry of LeRoi Jones some fifty years later.

LeRoi Jones (renamed Imamu Amiri Baraka) was born in Newark, New Jersey in 1934. After graduating from high school, he attended Howard University when he was nineteen. In 1961 he received a John Hay Whitney Fellowship to sponsor his writing career. He has written several plays, a novel, and poetry. His poetry is much influenced by the modern poets Pound, Olson and Eliot. His first volume of poetry, "Preface to a Twenty-Volume Suicide Note" and its sequel, "The Dead Lecturer," reveal a search for new ways of expression. Like Eliot, Jones is not an easy poet to read. His images are often unpleasant; they uncover vividly, humorously, and sometimes sardonically the ugliness that Eliot presented in his poems.

Lee A. Jacobus in "Imamu Amiri Baraka: The Quest for Moral Order," gives us an exciting insight into both poets. He writes, "LeRoi Jones' poetry describes a quest for a moral order which he feels ultimately impelled to create for himself on his own terms. It begins as a moral order similar to T. S. Eliot's in "The Waste Land" . . . and is related to Eliot's hanged man, who appears frequently in Jones' work." <sup>1</sup>

### **"The Waste Land"**

Divided into five parts. "The Waste Land's" first section, "The Burial of the Dead," contains paradoxical images of life and death: "April is the cruellest month, breeding/ Lilacs out of the dead land, mixing/ Memory and desire, stirring/ Dull roots with spring rain." Spring reminds us of the past winter, the poetic symbol of death. Ironically, "Winter kept us warm, covering/ Earth in forgetful snow, feeding/ A little life with dried tubers." The tubers are corpses of the flowers yet to bloom with the help of summer's "shower[s] of rain." The conversation that takes place in the Hofgarten reflects the organic imagery of growth from some source: "Bin gar keine Russin, stamm' aus Litauen, echt deutsch." The frightened girl taken down the mountain in a sled by her cousin must be convinced that "there you feel free." The mountain sleighride represents the descent into the cold earth, where freedom is gained through death. The image of growth out of decay continues: "What are the roots that clutch, what branches grow/ Out of this stony rubbish?" "Son of man," and "A heap of broken images" follow; a "dead tree gives no shelter, the cricket no relief," and "the dry stone no sound of water" Fear is evoked "in a handful of dust," for dust represents the ultimate death of us all. The hyacinth girl who appears ponders her own mortality: She is "neither/ living nor dead," and ignorant, she looks vacuously into "the heart of light, the silence."

The image of the "drowned Phoenician Sailor" appears in a tarot reading warning of "death by water" "The Hanged Man," Eliot's symbol of redemption, of Christ, does not appear in the reading of the cards. Following this, Eliot gives vague account of some catastrophe witnessed on the Thames: "I had not thought death had undone so many." A figure recognizes a seaman and asks "That corpse you planted last year in your garden,/ Has it begun to sprout? Will it bloom this year?" underscoring the paradox that life comes out of death, that resurrection starts in the grave.

Part II, "A Game of Chess," presents overlapping images: one of a jaded woman seated on an elaborate throne surrounded by wealth, the other of a bored housewife talking with her neighbor. She is toothless; her husband cannot bear the sight of her. If she does not improve her appearance, her neighbor warns, her husband will seek others. The woman, only thirty-one and under heavy medication, provides a vivid image of encroaching,

premature death brought about by middle-class decadence. The refrain: "HURRY UP PLEASE ITS TIME/HURRY UP PLEASE ITS TIME" warns of fleeting mortality.

Part III, "The Fire Sermon," presents an image of an old man well aware of impending death. At his back he hears "The rattle of the bones, and chuckle spread from ear to ear," while sitting by the bank of the Thames, which for once "bears no empty bottles, sandwich papers/ Silk handkerchiefs, cardboard boxes, cigarette ends/ Or other testimony of summer nights." Promising to speak neither loud nor long, he sees the rat creeping "softly through the vegetation/ Dragging its slimy belly on the bank/ While [he] was fishing in the dull canal"—a chilling reminder of the scum that accompanies a technological age. The bones of the dead are "Rattled by the rat's foot only, year to year." In the background emerge the sounds of progress—"horns and motors."

"At the violet hour" the speaker assumes the role of Tiresias who, blind and sexually ambiguous, sees "The typist home at teatime." She "clears her breakfast, lights/ Her stove, and lays out food in tins." Piled on her divan are "Stockings, slippers, camisoles, and stays," obligatory paraphernalia for the modern woman. The clerk arrives to engage in empty lovemaking. Void of feeling, she is "glad it's over." The music of the gramophone evokes images of the sweaty river, streaked with "oil and tar." Upon the water sails a barge that, reaching Carthage, bursts into flames: "Burning burning burning burning/O Lord Thou pluckest me out . . ./ burning" The fire purges the sea of the oil slick; symbolically, the soul is cleansed of sin.

Part IV, "Death by Water," presents the image of the dead Phoenician whose bones have been picked by the sea current. His body ebbs up and down:

"As he rose and fell/ He passed the stages of his youth/ Entering the whirlpool," serving as a grim reminder to all, "Gentile or Jew," of the inevitable.

Part V, "What the Thunder Said," echoes the images of barrenness, of waste. Hell is depicted as a mountainous region where there "is no water only rock" and where

one can neither stand nor lie nor sit  
There is not even silence in the mountains  
But dry sterile thunder without rain  
There is not even solitude in the mountains  
But red sullen faces sneer and snarl  
From doors of mudcracked houses.

Behind the two figures in the poem walks a third, hooded in a brown mantle, of indeterminate sex. Tiresias? Other hooded creatures wail at the "Falling towers/ Jerusalem Athens Alexandria/ Vienna London/ Unreal" representative cities of decaying cultures. The images of "bats with baby faces in the violet light" and "voices singing out of empty cisterns and exhausted wells" sharpen our sense of sterility. A series of images—the

“decayed hole,” the “faint moonlight,” the “tumbled graves,” the “dry bones”—accentuate the feeling of waste. Finally, a flash of lightning, rain, thunder. The image of the old man fishing on the shore returns to remind us that “London Bridge is falling down falling down falling down.” The Indian incantation—“Datta. Dayadhvam. Damyata.” (Give, sympathize, control)—pleads for order to a declining universe. The plea goes unanswered.

#### “Preface to a Twenty-Volume Suicide Note”

The fragmented structure of “The Waste Land” typifies much of LeRoi Jones’ poetry. The vision of the world as wasted, infertile, godless and rat-infested characterizes the works of both poets. Jones makes specific references to Eliot’s work in his poems. But whereas Eliot feels that a renewed vision of God may provide a moral order to the world, Jones repudiates the “White Man’s God” and searches desperately for a black divinity. Lee A. Jacobus points out poems from Jones’ “Preface” which show Eliot’s influence. In “From an Almanac,” Jones talks about winter winds and words drowned in the wind, words at the mercy of the ‘clown gods.’” (p. 98) The hanged man appears:

Respect the season  
and dance to the rattle  
of its bones.  
    The flesh  
hung  
from trees. Blown  
down. A colder  
hand, will grip  
you. Your bare  
soul. (Where is the soul’s place. What is  
nature?) Winter rattles  
like the throat  
of the hanged man.

The images of children dancing in the winter, the cruelest month for Jones, and of bones rattling in the cold wind are reminiscent of images in Eliot's "Quartets" as well as "The Waste Land." But for Jones the dance itself is a paradox. The dance of the old men and the sterile women mock their predicament. How could there be dancing under such circumstances of decay? For Eliot the dance is a metaphor for the sex act—faith in the possibility of restoring the moral order of the universe. The children of Jones cannot, should not, dance until their bodies are warmed by a "refining fire." "Preface" is a quest for a moral order, but not within the Christian framework that Eliot clings to in his poems. Jones' God has to be found in the apparent disorder of the black experience. Jacobus explains,

The disorder of the season is reflected upon in the Alamanac poems and becomes ultimately apocalyptic in "Roi's New Blues" (pp. 45-6) when he offers us an abrupt shift in address . . . recalling "Winter kept us warm" in "Winter locked us in. (On/ the floor, at midnight/ we turned blind/ embrace." (p. 101)

The "grey horsemen/ with sunny faces" are riders of the apocalypse who will avenge the black man's loss but, ironically, they are white (grey means white in black talk); total vindication is in doubt.

Jones collection, "The Dead Lecturer," continues his search for a responsive God. "A Poem for Democrats" features the hanged man of "The Waste Land," who merges with the Phoenician merchant to share a death by drowning—mafia-style, with cement shoes:

(transporting your loved one  
across the line is death  
by drowning.  
Drowned love  
hanged man, swung, cement on his feet.)  
But  
the small filth of the small mind  
short structures of  
newark, baltimore, cincinnati, omaha. Distress,  
europe has passed we are alone. Europe  
frail woman, dead, we are alone.

The last three lines parallel Eliot's "The Waste Land":

Jerusalem Athens Alexandria  
Vienna London  
Unreal

Although Jacobus draws other interesting parallels in Eliot and Jones, students should be encouraged to draw their own.

## Lesson Plans

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The reading list for Eliot and Jones follow:

“The Waste Land” (1922)  
“Quartets” (1917)  
“Preludes” (1917)  
“Morning At the Window” (1917)  
“The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock” (1917)  
*Preface to a Twenty - Volume Suicide Note* (1960)  
*The Dead Lecturer* (1964)

“Prelude,” “Morning,” and “Prufrock” appear in *American Literature* of the Houghton Mifflin Literature Series, available in most high schools. A review section, *For Greater Appreciation*, provides excellent questions for class discussion.

Prerequisite for understanding the poems of Eliot and Jones is the study of the basic elements of the poem itself. The meanings of the following terms should be reviewed:

rhyme  
rhythm (meter)  
free verse  
blank verse  
figures of speech  
simile

metaphor  
personification  
alliteration  
consonance  
assonance  
imagery (image)  
theme  
verse  
stanza  
symbol  
paradox  
irony

Juniors and seniors have already been exposed to poetry, so the review need not be extensive. The teacher should make a crucial distinction between poetic image and metaphor. Gaston Bachelard in *The Poetics of Space* makes it clear that metaphor is a mere analogy for an object or idea. Image is far more profound. He states, "The reader of poems is asked to consider image not as an object and even less as the substitute for an object, but to seize its specific reality. For this, the act of the creative consciousness must be systematically associated with the most fleeting product of that consciousness, the poetic image" (p. xv). To Bachelard all images come from the universal soul; the poetic image transcends language. "It is always a little above the language of signification." (p. xxiii)

The poetry of Eliot and Jones draws heavily on universal images of decay, sterility, and alienation. Eliot felt that "the only way of expressing emotion in the form of art is by finding an 'objective correlative' . . . a set of objects, a situation, a chain of events which shall be the formula of that *particular* emotion; such that when the external facts, which must terminate in sensory experience, are given, the emotion is immediately

evoked.”<sup>2</sup> Students should look for examples of images that serve as objective correlatives in the poems of Eliot and Jones.

## Notes

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- Lee A. Jacobus, “Imamu Amiri Baraka: The Quest for Moral Order,” *Twentieth Century Views—Imamu Amiri Baraka (LeRoi Jones): A Collection of Critical Essays* ed. Kimberly W. Benston (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall, Inc., 1978) pp. 97–111. All further references to this work appear in the text.
1. See “Hamlet and His Problems,” in *Selected Essays 1917–1932*, p. 145. Quoted in M. H. Abrams, *The Mirror and the Lamp*, p. 26.

## Student Reading List

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Eliot, T. S. “*The Waste Land*” and *Other Poems*. Harcourt, Brace, Jovanovich, 1962.

Jones, LeRoi. *Preface To A Twenty - Volume Suicide Note*. Totem Press, 1961.

Jones, LeRoi. *The Dead Lecturer*. Grove Press, 1964.

Schorer, Mark et. al. (eds.) *American Literature*. Houghton Mifflin, 1968.

## Supplementary Reading List for Teachers

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Abrams, M. H. *The Mirror and the Lamp*. The Norton Library, 1958.

Bachelard, Gaston. *The Poetics of Space*. Beacon Press, 1969.

\*Benston, Kimberly, ed. *Twentieth Century Views — Imamu Amiri Baraka (LeRoi Jones) : A Collection of Critical Essays*. Prentice-Hall. Spectrum Book, 1978.

Eliot, T. S. *Complete Poems and Plays*. Harcourt, Brace & World, 1962.

\* extended bibliography given in index of this book



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