

Sleeping Beauty and Hero, Too: T. S. Eliot's *Four Quartets* and *The Waste Land* as Substrata in *Fire and Hemlock*.

Marilynn S. Olson, Texas State University, San Marcos

Diana Wynne Jones's *Fire and Hemlock* is a complex novel. As she herself has noted, it is structured after T. S. Eliot's *Four Quartets*,¹ which, like Jones's novel, was written as musical quartets (in the opinion of commentators, Beethoven's late quartets), using different poetic voices to replicate varying musical themes.² Like the quartets, *Fire and Hemlock* uses different strands of narrative that intersect throughout the story, which disguises the plot from Polly, the protagonist, and the readers, too, until nearly the end. Polly suffers from a kind of amnesia throughout most of the novel, trying to piece together her lost history and the reason why it was lost, so the story is mostly told in flashbacks. The reader is further challenged by the fact that Polly is the focalizer, but her friend Tom performs most of the necessary actions.

As Martha Hixon has noted, there are several different narratives operating on the realistic as well as fairytale levels.³ Whole handfuls of different mythic sources are being combined to contribute to the basic tale. The details can be imagined spreading over notebooks like those used by Joyce for *Ulysses*; much of the fun of the novel, in fact, lies in connecting these bits together. In the main, however, Polly, a child of ten, gatecrashes a funeral in an old mansion near her grandmother's home on Halllowe'en. At the house, she makes friends—flirts with—a young man who has been married to the woman who is the major beneficiary of the deceased's will. The young man, Thomas Lynn, draws her out and starts a kind of writing game with her, wherein they make up and send back and forth heroic, adventurous tales under Polly's direction but with Tom's critical help. As we find, he is counting on her to eventually understand—over the next nine years—that he himself needs heroic rescuing from the evil woman in the house, his ex-wife Laurel. In fact, Polly, who has always wanted to be a hero, has been cast as brave Jennet, the girl who pulls Tam Lin from his horse and saves him from being a sacrifice for the Elfin Queen.

The heroic Polly of childhood, even without the veiled instructions sent by Tom in the form of books about Cupid and Psyche, the Three Musketeers, and so on—books about deliverance from consuming and dangerous females⁴—might have held on and won Tom. It is the cleverness of Jones's novel, and the seriousness of her use of Eliot's poems, that explains why Polly does not and why this is a good thing. Beyond the references to Tam Lin, Jones also calls upon the ballad of Thomas the Rhymer. Polly's Tom Lynn, a cellist, also is the Tom in this ballad; in fact, the novel, cunningly using the queen's strictures from the ballad, explicates the Rhymer's fight to redeem his own life and time. As is the case in *The Four Quartets*, the time that it is most important to redeem is Tom's and Polly's potential—their "might have beens": Polly's as an authentic person, Tom's as a musician.⁵ Although his days are numbered in a fairytale way—he has nine years before the elfin queen will use him to pay the teind to hell—Tom is up to the basic human task of trying to make music and thereby destroy death.

Polly and Tom's relationship, in the beginning, is a relationship between an adult and a precociously attractive child. Polly's grandmother, for example, is understandably worried about

Polly's vulnerability and possible danger in so admiring a grown man, whose motivations cannot be guessed. When Polly, however, at age fifteen, in a fit of unacknowledged sexual jealousy, attempts to find out the facts of Tom's situation, his physical ensnarement to Laurel, through the use of witchcraft (a method that Jones refers to in *A Sudden Wild Magic* as "squalid"), she falls in turn to Laurel's denigrating interpretation of Tom's attentions. She thereby loses her knowledge of Tom's friendship, her knowledge of herself as Hero, and her ability to help. It is nineteen-year-old Polly's attempt to uncover her wrongdoing, to regain her memory, and to help Tom that constitutes the present-time action of the story.

When Jones borrowed from Eliot's *Four Quartets*, and, perhaps, the commentaries upon them, as a foundation for her story, she borrowed imagery and incidents: the symbolic fire of *Fire and Hemlock*,⁶ the funeral with no one to bury,⁷ the swimming pool that fills with visionary water,⁸ the bits of paper that form a monster in the street,⁹ the dance of life and death that constitutes the Harlequinade,¹⁰ the rose garden as the moment outside of time that begins and ends her novel (as well as *The Four Quartets*),¹¹ the scrying and attempts at foretelling that Polly resorts to,¹² and her grandmother's fear of possession that causes her to give Polly the opal necklace,¹³ are elaborations on lines out of "Burnt Norton," "East Coker," "The Dry Salvages," and "Little Gidding." "Little Gidding," the fourth quartet, also provides the action and pre-trial conversation for the final chapter of Jones's novel.¹⁴ More generally, Jones also uses the idea that time can be redeemed (or, more simply, that one can have second chances), a theme she also pursued in *Archer's Goon*, a simpler novel, written at approximately the same time.¹⁵ But it is important to see, first, that Polly's cocoon-like, amnesiac state is potentially curative¹⁶ and, second, that the final visit to the Rose Garden, like the action of "Little Gidding," is analogous to the grail quester's arrival at the Chapel Perilous in *The Waste Land*. In fact, perhaps because *The Waste Land* and *The Four Quartets* have thematic connections, one poem is as important as the other in Jones's novel.

It is Polly's forgetfulness and inability to act that tie her most closely with psychological reality; although her state on one level is shown to be brought on by her awful deed, it is also a state that we understand to be the natural result of her developmental stage, one that is persuasively portrayed, for example, in the novels of Zibby Oneal. Jones in her essay on the heroic points out that loss of belief in oneself as hero separates the teenager from the child.¹⁷ Polly, a heroic child, loses part of her self when she reaches puberty and must find it again. Part of this state has to do with simply not knowing what is expected of her in the games of courtship and changing circumstances around her. There are too many changes to adapt to easily, and Polly's youth, her susceptibility to the influence of strong personalities and damaging pastimes, is realistically and sympathetically described. "Oh, why aren't girls locked up by law the year they turn fifteen? They do such *stupid* things!" (229). Tom's rapacious woman, from the position of sexual maturity and adulthood, gets rid of Polly's influence in Tom's life simply by making her feel embarrassed and gauche, an easy task.

In Polly's case, however, the "cocoon" state also preserves her from destructive sexual relationships. Tom's contribution to Polly's child life was rich and valuable. He gave her the foundation for an appreciation of art, of music, and of literature and fostered her ability to write stories. Because she was his friend, she felt important even when the things that should have supported her were taken away, and that importance preserved her from despair, even suicide.

She is, however, even with her grandmother's help, more vulnerable as a teenager than as a child. Her parents reject her, see her as a threat to their various relationships, and deprive her of a home. Simultaneously, Polly's good looks make her the focus of admiring masculine attention from young and old, causing the repellant Mr. Piper to refer to her as "that" sort of girl, even though she is emotionally a child. In short, Polly's chances of fulfilling her personal potential—of growing into authentic maturity, of writing, of finding true love—would be extremely slim if she had been awake enough to try to find love in the wrong places. Although disaffection is somewhat unnerving in Polly's case, like Keats's "drowsy numbness," which is one of the symbolic uses of "hemlock" in the story, it is the state that Eliot puts forward in both *The Four Quartets* and *The Waste Land* as a way of finding the power of divine love. From the point of view of St. John of the Cross, the negation of action and appetite can be a way of moving in the direction of identity, redemption, and creativity.¹⁸

An awakened Polly also would be likely to be undermined by the bad examples around her had she not come to grief the first time that she erred. Jones's novel also explores the world of Books Two and Three of Eliot's *The Waste Land*, in which romantic love has become an evil reflection of the ruin of society. A central reason that Polly cannot simply be courageous Jennet pulling Tom off the horse of his enchantment has to do with this dilemma: the women in Tom's life and her own are possessive, selfish people (the men also have their failings). They use their sexual allure to own people. Polly's powers of attraction put her in danger of simply reduplicating the Elfin Queen.

In *The Waste Land*, the "Golden Bough" story of vegetative restoration through the ritual consummation of the king and queen of the grove is evoked as a traditional way of bringing back the land, war-damaged society, and the Fisher King. It does not work because of the failures of the various relationships we see within the poem: the estranged upper class couple, the unfortunate Lil, the lost hyacinth girl, the typist and her carbuncular young man, the Thames maidens. In *Fire and Hemlock* the same "Golden Bough" situation seems to be evoked in a two-edged way. Frazer's volume is one of a number of books that Tom sends to Polly as a way of making her understand the nature of his situation and her heroic rescue role; thus, it seems to speak to potential restoration.

The story, however, more nearly affects the plot because it is an explanation of the situation that Tom finds himself in with the Elfin Queen. Every nine years she ritually subsumes the vitality of one of her consorts, not to the benefit of any society that we are aware of outside of the dubious family members who witness these occasions, but to renew her own power and youth or that of her king. In *Fire and Hemlock*, then, as in *The Waste Land*, simple sexual passion is rejected as the key to redemption. The redemption follows instead from Polly's approach to the Chapel Perilous in the Rose garden—which in Eliot's poem is now located in "Little Giddings" an historic monastery—following her remembrance of wrongdoing (by means of fiction and music and Fiona's Celtic cauldrons¹⁹ and advice), her penitence for it, her confession to Tom (who also confesses his wrongdoing to her), and the denial of self that unites her with the eternal moment of love.

In *The Four Quartets*, time—which has many of the characteristics exploited by Jones in that the past and future are present simultaneously—already has been redeemed at the moment of

divine incarnation, the still point in the turning world. This is the moment that makes “Good” Friday good: the fall of the first couple in the sacred grove has led to a divine rescue and a new covenant. Polly’s “terrible thing” in *Fire and Hemlock* is like the sin of the first parents: “behovable” in the words of Dame Julian of Norwich. As Eliot concludes in “Little Gidding,” however, purification and redemption from selfish desires is possible. Polly’s memory is critical to the process because Eliot says that memory liberates.²⁰

In Eliot’s “Little Gidding,” historical memory is foregrounded as redemptive, as it is to some extent in *Archer’s Goon* where medieval England, shorn of its temporal imperfections, is a kind of model for renewal. In *Fire and Hemlock*, however, Jones once again seems to be emphasizing *The Waste Land*. The fragments of tradition that the narrator has “shored” against his ruin at the end of *The Waste Land*, another allusive work, are the same kind of traditional stories and myths that, treated as history, provide the model for the right actions enacted here. As Tom notes, a fairy tale read attentively contains a “true, strange fact” (117).

Jones does not discuss Divine love, per se, in *Fire and Hemlock* but talks about the ways that we see it working within a human framework. Polly’s moments of seeing the eternal in the temporal come when she performs Pierrot and when she listens to Tom’s farewell cello performance. His rescue takes many more rescuers than did Tam Lin’s. First, Tom had to do a great deal himself—he had to be a friend, to assemble by the power of friendship and music a band of heroes. He had to rescue a horse and attain the wild power of Nature, rather than simply be pulled down from it. He had to call upon the Rhymer’s creative power of words and music, the same powers that made musicians attractive to the power-hungry queen. While Polly is in a pivotal role, she could not have found her own power as a neglected, abandoned child without the friendship of Tom, his quartet, or Fiona; without the arts; or without her faithful grandmother, whose lost life is redeemed in Polly’s success. The power of story and myth to inspire, to explain, to help us find patterns is celebrated throughout this enormously allusive work, but its purpose is to bring us, in the symbol of the creative, the purgative, the divine fire, to a triumph of human love.

Notes

Because the cost of quoting lines of poetry from *The Four Quartets* is prohibitive, the paper cannot have the examples that illustrated the oral version of the Phoenix address. Attentive readers will find many more suggestive lines than those mentioned here.

1 “Inventing the Middle Ages” (7); “Heroes” (7). [Available on official fansite (June 2008) <http://www.leemac.freereserve.co.uk>] To some extent, Jones’s helpful discussion of her use of Eliot is like Eliot’s notes to *The Waste Land*. That is, since *The Four Quartets* are very difficult poems, they do not immediately help the reader unfamiliar with the works. The assertion that *The Four Quartets* is important also may disguise the fact that *The Waste Land* is, perhaps, just as important.

2 Smith (253). He calls this “generally understood,” citing as an example D. Bosley Brotman “T. S. Eliot: ‘The Music of Ideas’” *University of Toronto Quarterly*, xviii (October

1948): 20-29. See *T. S. Eliot's Poetry and Plays: A Study in Sources and Meaning*. Grover Smith. U Chicago P, 1950, 1956, rep 1967.

3 "The Importance of Being Nowhere: Narrative Dimensions and Their Interplay in *Fire and Hemlock*" 96-107. *Diana Wynne Jones: An Exciting and Exacting Wisdom*. Eds. Rosenberg, Hixon, and White. Peter Lang, 2002.

4 Jones has many such monsters: the Bush Goddess and Nick's Mother in *Deep Secret*, the Listanian queen in *A Sudden Wild Magic*, the Witch of the Waste in *Howl's Moving Castle*, etc. etc.

5 "Burnt Norton" I: 6-14.

6 Fire is frequently mentioned in *The Four Quartets*, in a number of different ways. The purgatorial aspect of fire is mentioned, for example, in "Little Gidding," IV: 1-14. See also "Little Gidding" V: last five lines of the poem.

7 "East Coker" III: 11.

8 "Burnt Norton" I: 33-40.

9 "Burnt Norton" III: first section

10 "Burnt Norton" II: 6-23.

11 *The Four Quartets* starts with a rose garden at "Burnt Norton" that contains both the past and the unactualized future potential. The garden, as Smith notes, is "a symbol of the moment drawing all times together and of the moment eternally here out of time, that is, the moment immediate to God" (259), "At the still point of the turning world" ("Burnt Norton" II; "Little Gidding" I: 54-55.) The question of how simultaneous time can be redeemed is answered in the fourth quartet, "Little Gidding," where one approaches the garden, like the grail chapel, with prayer. As Eliot (relevantly) notes, the seeker's purpose is not what she/he thought it was ("Little Gidding" I: 31-36).

12 "The Dry Salvages" V: 1-14.

13 "East Coker" II: 23-44 talks about the limitations of experience and fears of the old.

14 "Little Gidding" II: 33f.

15 See Olson, "Cats and Aliens in the Unreal City: T. S. Eliot, Diana Wynne Jones, and the Urban Experience." *Diana Wynne Jones: An Exciting and Exacting Wisdom*: 149-162.

16 See, for example, "Burnt Norton" II:24f; III. "East Coker" III.

17 See “The Heroic Ideal—a Personal Odyssey.” *The Lion and the Unicorn* 13.1 (1989): 129-140.

18 Eliot’s poem is mystical. The idea that the dark night—denial of self—can lead to knowledge and joy is central to his ideas. In more human terms, it might be expressed something like this: When Polly takes Laurel’s interpretation of her relationship to Tom as truth (“the knowledge imposes a pattern and falsifies” (“East Coker” II)), it causes her profound humiliation. Humiliation, while painful, can lead to “humility,” a positive quality in Eliot (and here). “Detachment” is without selfishness or pride and, thus, permits love (See Smith 292). “East Coker” III: 41-42 also explicates the ending of the book, as does “East Coker” V: 29-30.

19 Jessie Weston’s discussion of the Grail legend and its parallel or lack of parallel with Celtic cauldrons of plenitude was one of the famous sources for *The Waste Land*.

20 “Little Gidding” III: 7-10.