

LaRoy's Literary Connections In The Waste Lands Prologue

As we move into the next book in the Dark Tower multi-verse, there is a lot to be said about King's references to other literary works, and the influence that these works have on King's writing of the Dark Tower. I've been waiting with anticipation to start reading the Wasteland because I feel that this book is where the Dark Tower really begins. Much like you had stated Rachel, the past is prologue. Now, as we get into the Wasteland, exploring some of these references can possibly shed new light on the quest for the Dark Tower. I'm going limit my comments to this week's reading and try not to get into 'spoiler' territory of later chapters in the Wasteland, and later books in the series. The sheer magnitude of literary allusion as we get into the Wasteland is so great that I feel to truly grasp the depth of meaning in the Dark Tower, you have to explore some of these references.

However, before I get into the meat of this letter, I also want to acknowledge something from the argument at the beginning of the Dark Tower, Wasteland. Although we have recently discussed Randall Flagg and his various pseudonyms in the Dark Tower, I think we should acknowledge the description of Marten Broadcloak and Walter Padick (Walter O Dim). In the argument King writes that Walter as the Man in Black who is a half human spell caster. As Walter's origins are not quite clear at this point, subsequent works tell us that he was an orphan of unknown origins who is likely Maerlyn's son giving him some supernatural heritage. However, even though we later find out that Walter is Marten Broadcloak (who is Randal Flagg), King writes in the argument that Marten is a much greater sorcerer than Walter. If I had not ever read the Dark Tower Series, it is fair to conclude that Walter and Marten Broadcloak are indeed different people. But, armed with the knowledge of Walter's/Marten's/Flagg's identity from subsequent writings, I am left with the question that if Walter, Marten, and Flagg are actually the same person why does King describe them as different people? Was this written before King knew that these three were the same people, or is this a just a little misdirection to reinforce reader perceptions that will later be broken? Based on subsequent books, I suspect that when king wrote the wasteland Walter, Marten, and Flagg had not yet become the same person in King's conscious mind. ****spoiler**** I honestly believe that many connections like this were not conscious to King until he wrote Wizard and Glass. In the afterward, King acknowledges

having to come to grips with the time that it has taken to write the Dark Tower series and that many parts of the Dark Tower were written so long ago that when he returned to them and expand the story further, he was already viewing the story differently. I also believe that although he made some references to some of his other works throughout the Dark Tower series, I think when he wrote wizard and glass, he realized that he had created a larger Dark Tower multiverse that embodies and encapsulates most of his literary works. subsequently, he consciously then makes an effort to complete the Dark Tower series with this in mind. That being said, I dont think King consciously thought that Walter, Marten, and Flagg were the same people until after the Wasteland.

Okay, so now back to the literary allusions in the Wasteland. As the entire Dark Tower series is an allusion to T.S. Eliot's poem the Wasteland, I think that it is only fitting to acknowledge a T.S. Eliot quote about being a writing. He once said,"Good Writers borrow. Great Writer's steal." Stephen King's Dark Tower series can be said to be an embodiment of this quote. Although some of the credit goes to Browning's Poem, Childe Roland to the Dark Tower Came, the series is more of a tribute to T.S. Eliot as King has stolen the post-modernist themes from Eliot's Wasteland. The world has moved on... in Eliot's mind, post world war I is the beginning of the end; technological advance is leading to the end of society. Even as King quote's Eliot's Wasteland at the beginning of King's Wasteland, we are given a bleak outlook into Roland's world that has moved on.

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. Only
There is shadow under this red rock,
(Come in under the shadow of this red rock),

Talk about a world that has moved on. But the most significant part of this quote is that of the shadow under the red rock. This is believed to be an old testament reference in the book of Isaiah in that one should fear shelter under a rock, especially a red rock (red implying a bloody rock). shelter under a rock, even when the world has died is not necessarily the best place to be. Just because WWI had ended doesnt mean the world was going to be a safe place. Just because Roland and his Katet have found some safety in the forest, it doesnt mean that they

are actually safe.

And I will show you something different from either
Your shadow at morning striding behind you
Or your shadow at evening rising to meet you;
I will show you fear in a handful of dust.

If you look at this latter portion of the quote, we get an even greater sense of desperation. "Fear in a handful of dust" is the sense that we all fear death. We all will become dust, and that we may be afraid to live life just because we are going to die. In a post modernist mindset, why would want to pursue life when the world has moved on. Truly, an existential dread. TS Eliot's desperation is apparent as he seems to view the decay of society also as a realization that it represents a spiritual barren as well where spiritual truth is represented as a void. talk about depressing.

following this up with a quote from the Browning poem Childe Roland

If there pushed any ragged thistle-stalk
Above its mates, the head was chopped; the bents
Were jealous else. What made those holes and rents
In the dock's harsh swarth leaves, bruised as to baulk
All hope of greenness? 'tis a brute must walk
Pashing their life out, with a brute's intents.

here, we get an excerpt from a portion of the poem that is about a person walking through a wasteland that has also moved on. Its also a post modernist story of societal changes related to technology and the negative impacts it might have on human culture. Not quite post apocalyptic, but definitely major changes happening that lead to the destruction of the environment.

I had a professor who hated King's work and felt that he did not write anything original and that King just utilized literary procedural scripts to create pulp fiction. I think this is where we can say that this professor was expressing envy for King's success and was overly critical. King clearly was inspired by and used a lot of what

others had written (or stole from others) in the creation of his work. But of course, I have a biased opinion as I am a big fan of King's complete body of work. Some are better than others, but I do believe him to be one of the great authors of our time. In any case, King's Wasteland is where Roland's adventure truly begins.

The TS Eliot foundations of the Dark Tower go even further. In his Wasteland, Eliot relies heavily on Arthurian legend, in particular, the Fisher King Myth, where the Fisher King is the last of a long line descendant from King Arthur who is in charge of keeping the Holy Grail (Roland as the Fisher King and could the Tower be the Grail?) In a more metaphorical context, to Eliot, the "Fisher King" represents an infertile/sterile wasteland as the Fisher King was wounded and becomes impotent, so has the post WWI land, the land was wounded by humans and is now infertile and drought-stricken, the land is also sterile. In Eliot's Wasteland, we get a contrast between memories of past joys and fertility are contrasted with the desperation of a hopeless desert. Civilization has moved on and become a 'waste land' that has lost its fertility and ability to support life. The living are also suffering from the wound, if not physically, they are suffering from spiritual desertification. But how can this society and the spiritual wounds be fixed? Eliot provides suggests that this is possible through spiritual and psychological enlightenment and making peace with our demons. But that's easier said than done as the impotence and infertility can only be fixed by the arrival of a pure-hearted stranger.

Is this not the story of Roland Deschain of Gilead whose world is a Wasteland, and the quest for the Dark Tower to save everything from destruction, to fix the wounded land? He may be flawed (like most literary heroes are), but he is as pure-hearted as a person can be.

With all of this, the depth of Stephen King's reference to Eliot's Wasteland and Arthurian legends are overtly stated in the quotes at the beginning of the Wasteland. It is then left up to us to be willing to explore his telling of the story. Although our experience with Shardik is brief in this first section, the bear is another example referencing how Roland's world has moved on. It's clear that Shardik the bear represents technological advancement that has gone wrong. However, Shardik's name and story is another reference, albeit indirect, to the themes of spiritual wounding in Eliot's wasteland.

Just as a short aside, TS Eliot also included a weird tarot reading in his Wasteland. Mere coincidence with the drawing of the three, I think not.

Shardik is god-like bear in a story by Richard Adams. The bear is ferocious and when necessary can kill everything in its path who is seen as an agent of god's judgement and provides spiritual grounding but also represents considerable societal change that can lead to society's collapse. King's Shardik is already past this point, the worshipers are gone and many have tried to kill him. Adams is careful to not let the reader know whether or not his Shardik is more than just a bear, however, King ensures that we know his Shardik is a clear example of the technology that has led to the loss of civilization, that has caused the world to move on. I am actually left with the thought whether King is purposely saying that Religion as it is represented in Adams' Shardik is the cause of the societal decay that is represented in King's Shardik and Wasteland.

In the end, the death of King's Shardik may represent yet another example of spiritual wounding of Roland's world, yet another example of a wasteland.