The pool was filled with water out of sunlight:
a deep dive into T.S. Eliot's Four Quartets & Fire and Hemlock

Abstract: ***Fire and Hemlock is a novel woven from a rich interplay of source texts and references. The main narrative is based on Tam Lin, with aspects of the Greek Myth of Cupid and Psyche, but T.S. Eliot's Four Quartets poems are a major source of the novel's distinctive aesthetics and atmosphere, forming their own hinterland of reference behind the main narrative. Many people study The Waste Land at school, but are less familiar with the Four Quartets. In this talk and paper I will explore some of the many connections between the two texts, from the obvious to the more subtle, which are a huge part of what gives Fire and Hemlock its distinct eerie magic.***

Fire and Hemlock is a novel woven from a rich interplay of source texts and references. T.S. Eliot's *Four Quartets* poems are a major source of the novel's distinctive aesthetics and atmosphere, forming their own hinterland of reference behind the main narrative. Many people study *The Waste Land* at school, but are less familiar with the *Four Quartets*. So I'm going to explore some of the many connections between the two texts, from the obvious to the more subtle, which are a huge part of what gives *Fire and Hemlock* its distinct eerie magic.

Before we begin though, let's have a quick look at some of the other texts that form the backbone of Fire and Hemlock. Everything in this book is connected. Diana is always skilled at using references in a way that adds depth, but doesn't alienate readers who aren't familiar with them. I always think if your story relies on people knowing the exact same things you do to be enjoyable, you've probably failed.

Diana herself has stated in her essay *Inventing the Middle Ages* that William Langland's *Piers Plowman* was a major inspiration for *Fire and Hemlock*. Written around 1370, we know almost nothing about the author. The poem is a satirical allegory told in a series of dream visions. You might think this doesn't sound much like *Fire and Hemlock*, and you're right. Instead it was something about the structure and the feel of the poem that got under Diana's skin.

> *What has always impressed me here is what you can achieve if you get behind your narrative and really push – the ideas start to run about over the top of it interlaced like the foam on the top of waves… what you are saying and how you are saying it are very closely linked.*
>
> *Langland lies behind that particular book in a way I find hard to define, even more than the ballad of Tam Lin or Eliot's Four Quartets, which are present in the foreground. I think it is in the movement of the narrative that his influence lies, but I am not sure.*
>
> *It is orchestrated in a tidelike advance and retreat, full of partial repetitions, where some things acquire a new meaning at each advance. Or so I hope.*
> ***Inventing the Middle Ages***

Of course the major element of the story is Scottish fairy story and folk song *Tam Lin*. A young woman named Janet encounters Tam Lin in the woods. He is owned by the queen of the fairies and is due to be sacrificed on Hallowe'en. Janet rescues him by clinging on to him as he transforms into different animals. Many folk musicians include the different song versions of *Tam Lin* in their repertoire, and it's also associated with a violin piece called the *Glasgow Reel*. The Fairport Convention interpretation with Sandy Denny is particularly famous.

Thomas the Rhymer is also woven into the story. It's another Scottish ballad about a young Thomas stolen away by the fairies, who could never lie, which is often cited as an influence on Keats' *La Belle Dame sans Merci*. Thomas the Rhymer was a real person however, known for his prophecies. Polly is of course struggling to write an essay about Keats in the final section of the book.

Cupid and Psyche and the *Odyssey* are the other story elements. Tom fights giants in the supermarket by blinding them after all. *The Odyssey* is also told in a loop of flashbacks, and the chiastic ring structure of the epic means you loop back to previous elements and reverse or invert them to create the second half of the X, as Diana does in the novel with elements of *Tam Lin*. True to this structure, I'm going to come back to what a chiastic ring is later. As to Cupid, as Diana put it in her essay *The Heroic Ideal* "Who is mostly blind and goes to work with a bow?"

The Golden Bough is another pivotal element. It's an Edwardian anthropology book on the history of magic, particularly the slaughter of ritual kings. Tom's gift of the book helps clue Polly in to what is really going on, and she reads it right before becoming completely disillusioned by the male authority figure of her father (who is of course called Reg, king, himself). There is also another sneaky link: The Doors song *Not To Touch the Earth* is inspired by the book and named after a quote from it. Making the Doors Seb's favourite band was both a way to wind up her son, and add another layer to the tapestry. Joseph Campbell's tedious *Hero's Journey* monomyth theory also draws heavily from the book, something I'll also come back to later.

> *But as soon as she read the beginning, with its strange story of the man pacing round the sacred grove waiting for the man who would kill him and take his place, she was gripped…She read as absorbedly as she had read Mr Lynn's first parcel of books: through 'Artemis and Hippolytus', 'Sympathetic Magic', 'The Magical Control of the Sun', 'Magicians as Kings', 'Incarnate Human Gods', 'The Sacred Marriage', and it was Swindon. Then to 'The Worship of the Oak', 'The Perils of the Soul', 'Tabooed Things', 'Kings Killed at the End of a Fixed Term'. Polly was about to begin on 'Temporary Kings' when she looked up to find she was in Bristol Temple Meads.* ***Where Now I***
>
> *She had to mark her page in some way or she kept losing her place, and she could not find where she had left off in Bristol for days. 'The Hallowe'en Fires' was it, or 'The Magic Spring' or 'The Ritual of Death and Resurrection'? Or was it 'Kings Killed When Their Strength Fails' or*
>
> *'Kings Killed at the End of a Fixed Term'? It took her ages to discover that she had been in the middle of 'Temporary Kings'.* ***Where Now III***

So let's go back to the main theme and look at *the Four Quartets*. TS Eliot is of course the Nobel Prize winning author of both *The Waste Land* **and** the poems that the musical Cats is based on. He wrote *The Waste Land* a short walk away from my house, while recovering from a nervous breakdown: "On Margate Sands, I can connect nothing with nothing". There is also an extremely Hunsdon House giant urn as a war memorial.

The Four Quartets was written twenty years after *The Waste Land*, in World War Two, and was Eliot's last major poetry collection. It's made up of four poems: *Burnt Norton* (my favourite), *East Coker*, *The Dry Salvages* and *Little Gidding*. He worked on it simultaneously with his play about Thomas Beckett, *Murder in the Cathedral*, and a large chunk of *Burnt Norton* was in fact an out-take from the play. The poems explore themes of time, mortality and change.

I'm going to explore the different axes in which *Fire and Hemlock* and the poems intersect: focusing particularly on the funeral, use of magic and power, and the ending. To save time I won't read out the quotes in the presentation version, they're all on the powerpoint.

To start with, of course the poems are presented as a "quartet" and Tom plays in a string quartet. The book is also split into four "movements"- *New Hero, Now Here, Where Now? and Nowhere*. A lot of the atmosphere and setting also come direct from *The Four Quartets*. I read *Fire and Hemlock* long before I read the poems, and I had an immediate jolt of recognition the first time I read them when I was in sixth form, before even knowing the connection between the two texts.

Diana outlines some of the main aspects herself in her essay *The Heroic Ideal*. If the undertow of the novel is a tapestry of myth and legend, the organising top structure and veneer is the modernist poetry of the *Quartets*.

Diana states:

> *Chapter two is full of echoes from Burnt Norton. The vases come from here. I chose the poem because it combines static meditation with movement in an extraordinary way, to become a quest of the mind away from the Nothing of spiritual death (Hemlock in my book), towards the Fire which is imagination and redemption — the Nowhere of my book. A heroic journey from Nothing to Nowhere is what Polly takes.* ***The Heroic Idea****l*

Diana talks about turning the volume of the *Four Quartets* up and down in the narrative, like an instrument in a musical piece. Let's look at some of the most obvious quotes where the poems are turned up the loudest, which I think for most people will immediately bring up mental images of Hunsdon House.

> *And we all go with them, into the silent funeral,*
> *Nobody's funeral, for there is no one to bury.*
> ***East Coker III***

> *What might have been and what has been*
> *Point to one end, which is always present.*
> *Footfalls echo in the memory*
> *Down the passage which we did not take*
> *Towards the door we never opened*
> *Into the rose-garden. My words echo*
> *Thus, in your mind.*
> ***Burnt Norton I***

> *Other echoes*
> *Inhabit the garden. Shall we follow?*
> ***Burnt Norton I***

As I mentioned earlier, I live in TS Eliot land. I actually run an experimental sound art and performance night called *Other Echoes*.

Times Out of Mind

Even the opening to Fire and Hemlock references the poems. On first glance, with its use of sea and fishermen imagery, *The Dry Salvages* seems the least relevant of the three to *Fire and Hemlock*, but it contains some absolutely key quotes

> *Pressed between yellow leaves of a book that has never been opened.*
> *And the way up is the way down, the way forward is the way back.*
> ***Dry Salvages III***

> *Polly sighed and laid her book face down on her bed. She rather thought she had read it after all, some time ago. It was called Times out of Mind, editor L. Perry, and it was a collection of supernatural stories. Polly had been attracted to it a couple of years back, largely because the picture on the cover was not unlike the Fire and Hemlock photograph – dusky smoke, with a dark blue umbrella-like plant against the smoke. And, now Polly remembered, she had read the stories through then, and none of them were much good. Yet – here was an odd thing. She could have sworn the book had been called something different when she first bought it. And, surely, hadn't one of the stories actually been called 'Fire and Hemlock' too?* ***New Hero I***

An important aspect of *Fire and Hemlock* is the paintings. Laurel leaves Tom some paintings in her will to represent the magical gifts he will receive, deliberately choosing low quality ones to show her displeasure. Polly shakes things up a bit by deliberately shuffling the stacks of pictures, and Tom's paintings show up as various scenes: violins, Lorenzo the horse, Polly's school play of Pierrot, a distorted fairground and the picnic guests at Tom's funeral.

The most important one though is the Fire and Hemlock photograph, the cursed *Obah Cypt* itself, which hides the lock of Tom's hair sealing his magical contract. It was a real photograph by Scottish photographer Gordon Strachan, that Diana bought at an exhibition, and which one of her sons still has framed at home. It was used as a cropped version on the

cover of a not very good album of Christian easy listening music from the 70s called Fireflake, but is also reflected in the poems.

In my beginning is my end. Now the light falls
Across the open field, leaving the deep lane
Shuttered with branches, dark in the afternoon,
East Coker I

In that open field
If you do not come too close, if you do not come too close,
On a summer midnight, you can hear the music
Of the weak pipe and the little drum
And see them dancing around the bonfire
East Coker I

There had been a time, some years back, when she had gazed at that picture and thought it marvellous. Dark figures had seemed to materialise out of its dark centre – strong, running dark figures – always at least four of them, racing to beat out the flames in the foreground. There had been times when you could see the figures quite clearly. Other times, they had been shrouded in the rising smoke. There had even been a horse in it sometimes. Not now. Here, now, she could see it was simply a large colour photograph, three feet by two feet, taken at dusk, of some hay bales burning in a field. The fire must have been spreading, since there was smoke in the air, and more smoke enveloping the high hemlock plant in the front, but there were no people in it. The shapes she used to take for people were only too clearly dark clumps of the dark hedge behind the blaze. ***New Hero I***

Up to now Polly had assumed they were trying to put the fire out. But this Christmas it began to seem to her that the people might really be trying to keep the fire going, building it up furiously, racing against time. You could see from the clouds of smoke that the fire was very damp. Perhaps if they left off feeding it for an instant, it would fizzle out and leave them in the dark. ***Now Here III***

One of the main aspects of the plot is Polly recovering her real memories from the layer of false ones imposed by the Perry-Leroys to erase Tom. This is also direct from the poems.

That the past experience revived in the meaning
Is not the experience of one life only
Dry Salvages II

Polly picked the book up, with her finger in it to keep the place in the story she was reading. 'Twotimer' it was called, and it was about someone who went back in time to his own childhood and changed things, so that his life ran differently the second time…Half the stories she thought she remembered reading in this book were not there – and yet she did, very clearly, remember reading all the stories which seemed to be in the book now.

For a moment she almost felt like the man in 'Two-timer' with his double set of memories…But it left Polly with a dreary, nagging suspicion in its place: that something had been different in the past, and if it had, it was because of something dreadful she had done herself. ***New Hero I***

She has to unravel her memories from the tangle of half-forgotten things and disjointed mental images left in the recesses of her memories. The opposite of Penelope weaving her tapestry.

Lying awake, calculating the future,
Trying to unweave, unwind, unravel
And piece together the past and the future,
Between midnight and dawn, when the past is all deception,
The future futureless, before the morning watch
When time stops and time is never ending;
Dry Salvages I

But there seemed no way to discover what was different. Polly's past seemed a smooth string of normal, half-forgotten things: school and home, happiness and miseries, fun and friends, and, for some reason, a memory of eating toasted buns for tea, dripping butter. Apart from this odd memory about the book, there seemed no foothold for anything unusual. ***New Hero I***

The orchestra continued touring about for months. Polly did not see Mr Lynn again for a long time. In fact, when she looked back over these memories, all coming alive and surging back into her head alongside the plain and normal memories she had thought she had, it surprised her to find how very few times she did see him. Just those three times in over a year. Of course, she saw him again after that, but it seemed odd, considering how well she knew she knew him. ***New Hero VI***

"Don't wish your life away," she said. It became almost a motto of Granny's. Don't wish your life away. Polly stirred uneasily again. Because, it seemed to her, she might have done precisely that. Wished her life away. She had only a year left of those second, hidden memories. After that, her memory ran single again, and disturbingly blank and different. ***Where Now V***

The Funeral

The funeral at the start of the book is one of the places where the references to Eliot are turned up the loudest. Even before Polly enters the funeral and the house directly inspired by *Burnt Norton*, the poem is there.

Into our first world, shall we follow
The deception of the thrush? Into our first world.
There they were, dignified, invisible,
Moving without pressure, over the dead leaves,
Burnt Norton I

It was a windy day in autumn. In Granny's garden the leaves whirled down. Nina and Polly raced about, catching them…For a moment she almost did not dare follow Nina. But the dreamlike feeling was still on her. ***New Hero II***

The dry crisp autumnal atmosphere of the gardens is also there.

The silent withering of autumn flowers
Dropping their petals and remaining motionless;
Dry Salvages II

It was dingy in the gusty light of the autumn day, and full of comfortable armchairs lined up in not very regular rows. A number of people were standing about holding wineglasses and talking in murmurs. They were all in dark clothes and looked very respectable ***New Hero II***

She had to lean on the wind to keep beside him while they walked under some ragged, nearly finished roses and the wind blew white petals across them." ***New Hero II***

The most essential feature of the garden is the pool however, and that is direct from *Burnt Norton*.

Dry the pool, dry concrete, brown edged,
And the pool was filled with water out of sunlight,
And the lotos rose, quietly, quietly,
The surface glittered out of heart of light,
And they were behind us, reflected in the pool.
Burn Norton I

As he spoke, they pushed out from between the grey hedges into a small lawn with an empty sunken pool in it. A brown bird flew away, low across the grass as they came, making a set of sharp, shrieking cries. The wind gusted over, rolling the dry leaves in the concrete bottom of the pool, and a ray of sun followed the wind, travelling swiftly over the lawn.…"For instance," said Mr Lynn, and stopped.

The first time we see the pool, its dry grey conditions match the first half of the verse. There are hints of its glittering surface, but we don't see it in full until the end of the book, when Tom is due to be drowned in it. The second half of the chiasmus loop. Diana also adds hemlock to the pool edge in this scene, to tie the Fire and Hemlock photo back in– Charles sold Tom's soul to the Leroys using a picture of cow parsley, and the cow parsley is here ready for him to die.

The sun reached the dry pool. For just a flickering part of a second, some trick of light filled the pool deep with transparent water. The sun made bright, curved wrinkles on the bottom, and the leaves, Polly could have sworn, instead of rolling on the bottom were, just for an instant, floating, green and growing. Then the sunbeam travelled on, and there was just a dry oblong of concrete again."
New Hero II

The lawn now sloped clear down from the house to the place with the empty concrete pool, which was in full view, flanked by six-foot growths of hemlock. The pool was not precisely empty any longer. It was shimmering, all over a surface that did not seem to be there. Strong, colourless ripples bled upwards from it, like water or heated air, wavering the hemlocks and the trees where they passed. Polly could not look at it. ***Nowhere VI***

Even Morton Leroy is reminiscent of the poems. Diana has also mentioned that he came and haunted her from the audience of her own talk in real life.

Caught the sudden look of some dead master
Whom I had known, forgotten, half recalled
Both one and many; in the brown baked features
The eyes of a familiar compound ghost
Little Gidding II

The one person who spoke to Mr Lynn was a man Polly did not like at all. He turned right round, in the middle of talking to someone else, in order to stare at Mr Lynn and Polly. He was a big, portly person with a dark, pouchy piece of skin under each eye…He laughed, to pretend it was a joke. It was a deep, chesty laugh. Polly thought of it as a fatal laugh, the way you think about a bad cough. ***New Hero II***

Polly went back a step or so, gathering herself to jump her very highest. Something made her look through the bars of the gate. Someone was standing halfway up the drive, in the most shadowy part. It was a tall, bulky shape, standing very still. The face, looking straight at Polly, was blurred by the shade and by the bars of the gate in the way. The eyes looked smudged and big. As Polly stood, looking guiltily back, caught in the act of measuring to jump, the face somehow crystallised into Mr Morton Leroy's, watching her sardonically". ***Now Here I***

Of course Morton Leroy's name is also tied up with *The Golden Bough*: he's the king who dies. Laurel's current name is *Eudora Mabel Lorelei Perry Lynn*, Eudora is the nymph of "good gifts", debatable in Laurel's case. Mabel is considered a modern version of Meadhbh, the blonde "sovereignty goddess" of Irish mythology who confers kingship on men by marrying them. Lorelei is a siren who sits on a rock in the Rhine, luring sailors to crash into it. A Peri is a type of fairy from Persian mythology.

The Nowhere Vases are also a key image in the novel, and both them and the Ali Baba jars in the hall come straight from *Burnt Norton*.

The stillness, as a Chinese jar still
Moves perpetually in its stillness.
Not the stillness of the violin, while the note lasts,
Burnt Norton V

"Watch." Mr Lynn's hand moved on the right-hand vase. The vase began to spin slowly, grating a little. Two, three heavy turns and it stopped. Now Polly could see there were letters engraved on the front of the vase.

"HERE," she read.
"Now watch again," said Mr Lynn. His big left hand spun the other vase. This one went round much more smoothly. For a while it was a grey stone blur.

Then it grated, slowed, and settled, and there were letters on it too.
"NOW," Polly read. "NOW – HERE. What does that mean?" ***New Hero II***

The vases also assume importance with dealing with the supernatural Perry-Leroys. Classically in fairy stories, you should never eat or drink anything the fairies offer unless you never want to go home. Polly accidentally follows this rule because she's too anxious to drink her orangeade, and Tom takes her into the garden to avoid the food. Tom clearly knows the significance of the vases as well.

"Shut up," said Seb. "Listen. You didn't eat and you didn't drink, and you worked the Nowhere vases round first. Don't deny it. I saw you working them. And I haven't told my father that – yet. You owe me for that." ***New Hero III***

Polly loves to play pretend, and gets Tom to join in a game, which gives a new lease of life to the exhausted recent divorcé. "Human kind cannot bear much reality" is a double edged sword however, it could refer to living in denial like Polly's parents.

Go, go, go, said the bird: human kind
Cannot bear very much reality.
Burnt Norton I

"Making things like heroes up with other people, then being them," Polly explained. The tortoise head turned to her politely. She could tell he did not understand. It was on the tip of her tongue to show him what she meant by telling him how she had arrived at the funeral by being a High Priestess with the police after her. But she dared not say that. "I'll show you," she said instead. "Pretend you're not really you at all. In real life you're really something quite different.""What am I?" Mr Lynn said obligingly. ***New Hero II***

As previously mentioned, Laurel intends to give Tom low-quality paintings as a gesture of contempt, but Polly's interference instead brings life, colour and imagination back into his world via the paintings.

"Polly went over to the pictures on the other side of the room, the ones Mr Lynn was allowed to have. Sure enough, as she had expected, they were nothing like as good as the ones on the left-hand side. Most of them were terrible. Since the argument was still going on, outside on the landing, Polly tiptoed back to the pictures she had leaned against the wall by the window. Back and forth she tiptoed, putting all the good, interesting pictures she had already chosen into the stacks against the right-hand wall, and a few, not so terrible, to lean on the wall by the window, to look as if they had been chosen". ***New Hero II***

Nowhere

Via their imaginings, Tom and Polly create Nowhere, a fantasy land where real life happenings and people are subverted. However due to Laurel's spiteful magic gift it's a two way street, and the fantasy also comes back at them in real life, often in dangerous ways. The idea of Nowhere being a place that intersects with reality comes direct from the poems.

Here, the intersection of the timeless moment
Is England and nowhere. Never and always.
Little Gidding I

"But I still don't understand about Tan Coul," he said thoughtfully, with his big hands clasped round his knees – they were sitting at opposite end of the hearth rug. "Where is he when he – or I – do his deeds? Are the giants and dragons and so forth here and now, or are they somewhere else entirely?"…

…"Sort of both," she said. "The other place they come from and where you do your deeds is here – but it's not here too. …"It's like those vases. Now-here and Nowhere."
New Hero III

In concord at this intersection time
Of meeting nowhere, no before and after,
Little Gidding II

Polly put her head down again and found herself looking at a story called 'East of the Sun and West of the Moon'. The title made her blink and think a bit. "It could be a way of saying Nowhere," she said aloud, doubtfully." ***Now Here III***

For most of us, there is only the unattended
Moment, the moment in and out of time,
Dry Salvages V

She found her mind dwelling on Nowhere, as she and Tom used to imagine it. You slipped between Here and Now to the hidden Now and Here – as Laurel had once told another Tom, there was that bonny path in the middle – but you did not necessarily leave the world. Here was a place where the quartet was grinding out dissonances. There was a lovely tune beginning to emerge from it. Two sides to Nowhere, Polly thought. One really was a dead end. The other was the void that lay before you when you were making up something new out of ideas no one else had quite had before.
Nowhere VI

Incidental details

There are also various scenes in the novel that you wouldn't suspect came from the poems because they are woven in so seamlessly.

When Polly performs in her school Pierrot play, foreshadowed by her choice of painting, she suddenly finds herself in a state of creative flow reminiscent of Eliot's discussion of time and the experience of living.

> *Polly turned slowly through Pierrot's first cartwheel, with her legs drooping just as they should, and she had a sudden sense, as she turned, that she was part of a transparent charmed pattern in which everything had to go in the one right way because that was the only way it could go…The pattern had been there always, even though they were all making it just at that moment.* ***Now Here V***

There are also simple plot moments that weave in images from the poems. Polly first gets to know Seb as a person rather than just as Morton's intimidating son on an awkward train journey from London, setting the scene for their later relationship.

> *Or as, when an underground train, in the tube, stops too long between stations*
> *And the conversation rises and slowly fades into silence*
> ***East Coker III***

> *"To her surprise, Seb said quite cheerfully, "Did you have a good time in London? I did."*

> *Polly jumped rather. She had not expected him to speak. He had looked so fed up at being put in charge of her. But because he had spoken so cheerfully, she found herself replying, equally cheerfully, "Yes. Lovely, thanks." Hearing herself, she went into a silent panic. Quite apart from the fact that Seb was guarding her, she had not the least idea what you talked about to boys of fifteen.* ***Now Here III***

Polly's neglectful mother is miserable but obsessed with happiness, constantly paranoid people are "stealing" the happiness from her life. She had the experience but missed the meaning.

> *The moments of happiness—not the sense of well-being,*
> *Fruition, fulfilment, security or affection,*
> *Or even a very good dinner, but the sudden illumination—*
> *We had the experience but missed the meaning,*
> ***Dry Salvages II***

> *As she walked back to Granny's house, it began to seem to her that she knew what Tom meant. She had Ivy's example to show her that there were ways of thought that were quite unreal, and the same ways went on being unreal even in hero business.*
> ***Where Now IV***

> *"I only asked for a little happiness," Ivy began again. "You have to go out and take it in this world. Happiness won't come to you. I thought I'd found it this time, but he's being so secretive, Polly."*
>
> *Polly found herself attending properly to this. And it was such nonsense. It always had been. "Oh, honestly, Mum! You and your search for happiness!" she said. She tried to say it in a light and kindly way, but it took such an effort that her hands shook round her teacup. "Happiness isn't a thing. You can't go out and get it like a cup of tea. It's the way you feel about things."*
>
> *"But things have to go right if you're to feel happy," Ivy retorted. "And it's only my own little share of happiness that I want. Everyone's due that. I'm only asking for what should be mine."*
> ***Nowhere I***

One of the biggest sources of conflict between Polly and Tom is her disappointment at his reaction to her bad teenage attempts at creative writing. Her work is no longer the charmingly original work of a young child, once she's a teenager she loses confidence in her abilities and first tries to copy Tolkien, and then goes the opposite direction in reaction to Tom's disappointment, and pens a cringe-worthy original epic. This is also from *The Four Quartets*.

> *That was a way of putting it—not very satisfactory:*
> *A periphrastic study in a worn-out poetical fashion,*
> *Leaving one still with the intolerable wrestle*
> *With words and meanings. The poetry does not matter.*
> ***East Coker II***

> *Polly finished her huge narrative during the summer term. The day after she had finished it, she went round with the oddest mixture of feelings, pride at having got it done, sick of the sight of it and glad it was over, and completely lost without it. By the evening, lost-without-it came out on top, and she began to make a careful copy in her best writing….The longer she spent copying, the more she admired it. Some parts were really good. The part, in particular, where Tan Coul is wounded in the shoulder and Hero has to dress the wound. She strips off Tan Coul's armour and sees "the smooth, powerful muscles rippling under the silken skin of his back". Wonderful! Polly went round whispering it admiringly to herself. "The silken skin of his back!*
>
> *The postcard was from New York. It had two words written on it.*
> *Sentimental Drivel. T. G. L.*
>
> *Dear Polly,*
> *Tom wishes you, for some reason I can't understand, to consider the human back. He says there are many other matters you should consider too, but that was a particularly glaring example. He invites you, he says, to walk along a beach this summer and watch the male citizens there sunning themselves. There you will see backs – backs stringy, backs bulging, and backs with ingrained dirt. You will find, he says, yellow skin, blackheads, pimples, enlarged pores and tufts of hair."* ***Where Now IV***

> *She found she knew exactly what Tom meant. She writhed. Oddly enough, it was all the bits she had been most pleased with that now made her writhe hardest."* ***Where Now IV***

Polly's secondary school has a craze for fortune-telling and superstition. Of course it's a way for the plot to introduce Polly's protective opal necklace and set up her later stealing Tom's photo, but it's also straight from *The Dry Salvages*.

release omens
By sortilege, or tea leaves, riddle the inevitable
With playing cards, fiddle with pentagrams
Dry Salvages V

Nina passed her a note enrolling her in the Superstition Club on the spot. The club became all the rage in the course of a week. Everyone joined. The rules were to believe all the superstitions in Nina's book and to find as many more as you could. If you found ten new superstitions, you received the Order of the Black Cat, personally drawn by Nina on a page of her rough note pad. People's blazers soon became decorated with rusty pins they had picked up, their hands black with rescuing pieces of coal, and their shoulders sprinkled with spilled salt every lunch hour. ***Now Here I***

The superstition simply took a new turn and became a craze for fortune-telling. The day the craze started, Polly had her fortune told three times, once by paper top, once by palmistry, and once with a pack of cards. The next day she had it done by tea leaves and I Ching.

No matter how often she tried, she always got her hand in half-full, lukewarm Maybe. She gave up and put her name down for the Prefects' mirror instead…you looked in the mirror in a nearly dark room saw the face of someone behind your reflection who was going to Influence Your Life. Unfortunately, by this time the teachers had had enough. Polly was queuing for her turn at the mirror when she distinctly saw the face of the Deputy Head appear in it behind the boy who was looking at that moment. It was clear he was real." ***Now Here I***

Where's my photo, the one I stole?

At the still point of the turning world.
Burnt Norton III

The Prefect's Mirror also sets up the crucial scene where Hunsdon House lets Polly in to steal Tom's photograph from Laurel's collection. If Polly hadn't had already experienced it at school, she may not have realised the significance of spotting Tom's photo in the mirror. I always think of it as the turning point of the book.

In windless cold that is the heart's heat,
Reflecting in a watery mirror
A glare that is blindness in the early afternoon.
Little Gidding I

Polly stood in front of it and looked back at herself in the mirror, surrounded in a dim silver filigree of birds, leaves and animals. The cracks of light from the shutters made the mirror look dark and deep. Polly's hair blazed white in it, and her face looked shy and wondering, not at all like the face of the trespasser she was. Over her left shoulder, very clearly, she could see one of the photographs in the pattern of little pictures on the far wall. That made her snort with laughter and the face in the mirror grin, remembering the Prefects' mirror and the face of the Deputy Head. ***Now Here II***

The House is dead, also reflecting the fact that the Leroys can't create or give life themselves, they can only steal other's vitality and creativity.

Dust in the air suspended
Marks the place where a story ended.
Dust inbreathed was a house—
Little Gidding II

She stood in the bushes and watched the house carefully. And it was empty. Lived-in houses give you a sense of life, and Hunsdon House was dead, dead as the bare twigs of the pruned roses. ***Now Here II***

Laurel has a whole collection of images of the different young men whose life-force she has drained over the centuries.

Whatever we inherit from the fortunate
We have taken from the defeated
Little Gidding III

She laid the photograph carefully down on the satin quilt of the bed and went across to the pattern of little oval pictures hanging on the wall. Taking one out had left a rather obvious gap in the middle of the pattern. But there were, as Polly thought she had remembered, a number of spare hooks sticking out of the wall round the pictures. Evidently Laurel liked to spread the pictures about and arrange them into different patterns from time to time. ***Now Here II***

"Oh, heavens!" Polly cried out. "However young did they get him?" She clapped her hand over her mouth. She had not meant to say that, not out loud, not even in her head, and Mr Leroy could well have overheard." ***Where Now V***

It's reminiscent of the kind of trophies serial killers collect, and also shows how the Leroys think they own these people. They live life as a zero sum game where someone always has to lose for you to win. Laurel takes from the defeated, and always inherits from herself. Polly's vision of Tom and Morton Leroy arguing cements this.

Polly saw Mr Lynn was wanting to change the subject. She filed that away in her mind, along with the other things she knew about Mr Lynn and Hunsdon House. She had a feeling they were beginning to add up into something she almost understood."
New Hero VI

There really was not a sound from downstairs. Nothing but thick, dead stillness. She began almost to wonder if Mr Leroy and Mr Lynn had been there at all. There was only her banging heart to tell her that they had been. That, and her anger. Her anger seemed to have been growing all this time, underneath her fear, until it was large enough to hide the fear completely. She thought of Laurel and Mr Leroy in the audience on television, watching Mr Lynn. As if they owned him! Polly thought. They don't. They can't. Nobody owns anyone like that!" ***Now Here II***

Polly read to the place where the villainous Simon Legree came in, and suddenly realised she was reading "Leroy" every time the book said "Legree". She stopped, appalled, and took the book back to the library. ***Now Here I***

"Laurel," said Mr Leroy, gently swinging his stick, "my wife, is rather a special person. What's hers is hers for keeps. So, to put it bluntly, keep your thieving hands off, little girl. This is the last warning you'll get." ***Now Here V***

The part of Polly which seemed to be questioning everything at once agreed. No, you don't understand, do you? You could have got it all wrong. He's probably only accusing you of stealing pictures. So you'll give them back before he goes to the police. But the main part of Polly had no doubt at all. …"No!" Polly almost shouted. The two parts of her came together into a pillar of white anger. "I told you no, and I mean no!"
Now Here V

Power of course is a major theme of the novel. Who has power, who is allowed to have it, and how they choose to use it. Tom is engaged in a power struggle with the Perry-Leroys for his freedom, but he also uses Polly in many respects. Morton and Seb Leroy have different tactics, but they both want to control and suppress Polly.

Bristol

Bristol marks the start of part three: *Where Now*, when Polly becomes a teenager and her family starts to unravel. It's one of the sections where Diana turned the volume back up on the *Quartets*.

One of the first things she mentions in *The Heroic Ideal* is the quote "the river is a strong brown god"

I do not know much about gods; but I think that the river
Is a strong brown god—sullen, untamed and intractable,
Dry Salvages I

The bridge was a flat double strip under the cables, hung high, high up between two cliffs. Polly walked out to the middle and stopped. The wind took her hair there and hurled it about. She leaned both arms on the chubby metal fence at the edge and looked down, dizzyingly far, to the sinewy brown water of the Bristol Avon racing between thick mud banks below. ***Where Now I***

Polly's increasing distress at her rejection by her father and his new girlfriend, and their determination to completely ignore that she's supposed to live with them now is also reflected in the poems.

The chill ascends from feet to knees,
The fever sings in mental wires.
East Coker IV

*Something was odd somewhere, something was not quite right. From the way Joanna behaved, it seemed almost as if she thought Polly was only here on a short visit. But surely that couldn't be true? Dad must have told her that Polly was living here now**…** As soon as she knew that, her uneasiness flooded everything else, blotting through all her other feelings like spilled bleach. Her throat felt like a sore white tunnel of shame. Dad hasn't told Joanna! she thought.* ***Where Now I***

After spotting Morton Leroy on the bridge in Clifton, Polly walks back into town, completely despondent and hopeless, with no idea where to go.

Tumid apathy with no concentration
Men and bits of paper, whirled by the cold wind
Burnt Norton III

She found herself in a part with tall office blocks, narrow towers of office, each with a thousand windows. Like stripes of graph paper, she thought. The wind hurled seagulls round the graph paper and old peanut packets round her feet. She turned a corner, and instead of offices, she found a narrow street. Here the houses were suddenly old, dark, and a little bulging. Like stepping from Here to Nowhere, Polly thought. ***Where Now I***

Morton then uses the bits of paper to create a monster and use them to trick Tom into nearly running Sam over.

The rubbish pounced and pattered behind them in the wind. Almost like little creatures running after us, Polly thought in a dreamlike way. Her dreamlike feeling at once became the feeling of pure nightmare. For a moment, as you do in nightmares, she could not move. In the middle of the dark little street, the pattering rubbish was slowly piling upon itself, floating slowly and deliberately into a nightmare shape. ***Where Now II***

When Polly spots Tom's car parked near Bristol Harbour, she suddenly has direction and motivation again.

If you came this way,
Taking the route you would be likely to take
From the place you would be likely to come from,
Little Gidding I

Polly went on walking, but now she had somewhere to go. She was following a tugging in her head. It was like an instinct, the way migrating birds go, or salmon swim, sure and unhesitating, to the right place in the end. ***Where Now II***

Spying on Tom

Polly's gift is knowing things, and she picks up a lot of things about Tom's situation by reading between the lines and from the books he gives her. Once into her teenage years though after the traumatic events of Bristol and the funfair accident, she starts to doubt herself and her perceptions.

"Knowing things is Polly's heroic gift," said Mr Lynn. Polly had not realised before that she had a gift herself. It was a surprising discovery. ***Where Now II***

Seb takes advantage of Polly's loss of confidence, and her panic that she could lose Tom, by nudging her into spying on him magically, with disastrous consequences. Here's another loop: the first time the fortune telling imagery from *The Dry Salvages* came up it was in a positive context- making friends at school, and gaining the locket of Tom's photograph that is a step in his freedom. When we revisit is the second time it's in a destructive context- Polly behaves like her jealous and insecure mother or Laurel, and abuses the freely given gift of the photograph for dark magic to control Tom. Once again an element is reversed in its second appearance.

release omens
By sortilege…or dissect
The recurrent image into pre-conscious terrors
Dry Salvages V

Polly thought silence had descended for certain this time, but Tom said, dim and blue, and breathless from being tangled in string, "My parents had died and we'd nothing. I was in Council care when Laurel almost adopted me. I know how Leslie felt…Telling me things, Polly thought. A farewell gift. ***Where Now VI***

"I told you he was obstinate," said Seb. "But you must know how to get round that. There are ways and ways of asking, aren't there? If you really want to know, you have to ask him the right way – make it impossible for him not to answer somehow."
Where Now VII

She took down the Fire and Hemlock picture and propped it against the wall at the back of her low table. She put the ashtray in front of that, so that she could stick the twigs of hedge in the crack between it and the picture. Carefully, between the twigs, she balanced the five painted soldiers Tom had once sent her. She had to use all five, because she had never been sure which two stood for Tan Coul and Hero. In front of the ashtray she stood the hemlock head, upright in a milk bottle. She put the straw in the ashtray itself, heaped as far as possible into the same shape as the burning straw in the picture, and mixed it with a few strands of her own hair. She knew it was important to mix herself and Tom together in the elements of the picture. She had it all worked out, as blindly and instinctively as a flea jumps to suck blood.

She was rather annoyed that she had nothing to stand for the horse that sometimes appeared in the smoke, and she wished she could have used Tom's blood, but her white top had been washed. Instead, she used the postcard which said Sentimental drivel. She did not mind losing that.
Nowhere IV

Laurel also takes advantage of Polly's loss of confidence to manipulate and shame her into abandoning Tom.

The trilling wire in the blood
Sings below inveterate scars
Burnt Norton II

"There was a sort of flatness and finality to everything. Her jet of misery burst through the flatness like a drowning flood. She floated in it like a corpse for nearly a week." ***Where Now VII***

Polly could not say anything. Shame rose up in her and scoured through her, bleaching everything. This was far worse than she had ever felt in Bristol. She could only look across at Tom's hunched shape, bleached faint and wavering like a mirage. Oh, what a fool she had been! ***Nowhere IV***

The Ending

First time readers often find the ending of *Fire and Hemlock* difficult. It's also one of the sections where Eliot's poetry is turned up the loudest.

The Four Quartets supplies a lot of the bleak atmosphere, and underpinning of the ending, however there are also things going on structurally that directly relate to some of the other source texts. Before we look directly at the quotes from the *Four Quartets*, let's instead go back to some of the previous discussion of storytelling itself.

Eliot starts *Burnt Norton* with a quote from Heraclitus.

ὁδὸς ἄνω κάτω μία καὶ ὠυτή
The way upwards and the way downwards is the same.

Heraclitus was an Ancient Greek philosopher who lived about a century before Socrates. We don't know much about him, and only fragments of his writing survive. His mottoes were πάντα ρει - everything flows and "no man ever steps in the same river twice". Always *becoming*, never statically *being*. Once again we are back again at Langland's tidal flow of story.

Κάτω here, literally down in Greek, also brings to mind the κατάβασις, the descent to the underworld often required of heroes in classical mythology. Diana mentions this as something on her mind when writing the book:

It gave me Tom's recent divorce from Laurel. And Calypso, when she finally agrees to let Odysseus go, tells him he has to visit Hades first. This could be her way of saying "I'll see you in hell first!" but, since she is a nymph and semi-divine, it becomes literal truth and means "You'll have to pass through death first." This ties in wonderfully with the "tithe to hell" that the fairy folk have to pay in Tam Lin and gave me the ending of the book. ***The Heroic Ideal***

Polly has to descend to the depths of her own memories and shame in order to rescue Tom.

I have mentioned Homeric chiasmus and Joseph Campbell earlier. If you take a creative writing class, you are often taught a simplistic graph of how stories should go, with exposition, conflict, rising action etc, based on Campbell's Monomyth. However there are other ways stories can work.

My own background is in ancient history, particularly the Bronze Age. *The Odyssey* was mentioned earlier as one of the threads that form the tapestry of *Fire and Hemlock*. Homeric epic uses something called a chiasmus structure. Chi is the Greek letter that looks like an X. In a chiastic phrase or plot, the second half finds a way to reverse the first half. You work your way in, until a pivotal moment and then work your way out in a mirror image. We have already seen the concrete pool and fortune telling images used in this way in Fire and Hemlock.

Here is a simple example from the Iliad often used to illustrate this.

Book 24 of the Iliad: the departure of Priam
***A** Priam orders the **wagon** prepared*
B** he goes to the storeroom for the **ransom
C** he speaks to **Hecuba
D** Hecuba responds, voicing her fear of the dangerous proposal and her **hatred for the killer of her sons
***C** Priam tells **Hecuba** he is determined to go*
***B** he collects the **ransom**, which is described in detail*
***A** finally the **wagon** is prepared*

The whole overall plot of the epic is also structured in the same way- the first three chapters are mirrored in the final three chapters. *The Odyssey* plays with this structure even more, creating complicated inner loops of Penelope and Telemachus' stories around *Odysseus*' flashbacks and return to the present. In Homer's pre-literate era this was as much a tool to help bards memorise pieces as it was for literary effect. *Fire and Hemlock* also follows this pattern in many ways, both in the way it loops back to reveal Polly's memories, and the way it uses reversals of the *Tam Lin* story in its ending. Janet hangs on to Tam to save him, Polly has to let him go.

This often baffles first time readers who are not expecting this reversal or how it's shown by hints and subtext in the writing rather than outright explained. This isn't how fairy stories go!

Diana herself states in *The Heroic Ideal*:

In order to organise this, I found that the narrative moved in a sort of spiral, with each stage echoing and being supported by the ones that went before. I had to work very hard in the final draft to make sure the echoes were not repetitions, because at the same time I was establishing another set of resonances that had to be hidden in the same spiral.
The Heroic Ideal

The final chapters of the book are absolutely sections where the volume is turned back up on Eliot.

Repeat a prayer also on behalf of
Women who have seen their sons or husbands
Setting forth, and not returning:
Dry Salvages IV

"Your grandfather," said Granny. "He was called Tom too. She does like that name. You should have heard him play the violin, Polly. But she took him when the nine years were up. I didn't know any charm to help. I was left alone, with Reg ready to be born."

"Oh." There seemed nothing Polly could say. This explained so much about Granny, and probably a great deal about Reg too. She sat in the dark, thinking of Granny, all these years doing what she could not to forget, and a memory came to her. Her own hands with woolly gloves on, carefully hanging a little oval photograph up in the place of the one she had decided to steal. She wondered if the old-fashioned boy in it had been her grandfather. ***Nowhere V***

Laurel's supernatural train combines both images from Eliot and the companies of riders from *Tam Lin*. (The train station name Miles Cross itself comes from *Tam Lin*).

You are not the same people who left that station
Or who will arrive at any terminus,
While the narrowing rails slide together behind you;
Dry Salvages III

The brakes of the train were shrieking. A station of some kind was sliding into view. Tom stood up. "Well, I'd had years of Laurel, and you hadn't." ***Nowhere VI***

Many people find the ending of *Fire and Hemlock* very confusing. As I have already said, it subverts the ending of Tam Lin, while combining that with Eliot's musings on mortality, detachment and cause and effect.

There is only the fight to recover what has been lost
And found and lost again and again: and now, under conditions
That seem unpropitious. But perhaps neither gain nor loss.
For us, there is only the trying.
East Coker V

"Yes," said Polly. "And I agreed to forget Tom, though I never said for how long, and that isn't the same as giving him up. But I haven't come to quibble." She looked carefully between Laurel and Leslie, two fair heads. "I claim that Morton Leroy has forfeited his right to Tom's life. And he'll have to find someone else or go himself." ***Nowhere VI***

Janet rescues Tam by hanging on no matter what, Polly has to let Tom go to save him.

In order to arrive there,
To arrive where you are, to get from where you are not,
You must go by a way wherein there is no ecstasy.
In order to arrive at what you do not know
You must go by a way which is the way of ignorance.
In order to possess what you do not possess
You must go by the way of dispossession.
In order to arrive at what you are not
East Coker III

"Hush, dear," said Laurel. "Now, Morton, this is what I say. I shall give both of you a chance. Tom can use anything which is truly his. You can use the exact equivalent. The one who enters the pool first is the one who goes. Don't you think that's fair, Polly?"

"No," said Ann, and Mr Leroy cried out, "Laurel! I've no strength!" and Ann added, "But Tom has. That's the catch, isn't it?" ***Nowhere VI***

Laurel's pool is the wrong kind of Nowhere, the grey draining kind, that can't create or nourish anything. Not the Nowhere where anything is possible.

Here the impossible union
Of spheres of existence is actual,
Here the past and future
Are conquered, and reconciled,
Where action were otherwise movement
Of that which is only moved
And has in it no source of movement—
Driven by daemonic, chthonic
Powers. And right action is freedom
From past and future also.
Dry Salvages V

The pool itself was – wrong somehow. It lay above, or beyond, or perhaps below the two standing on the lawn, like an open trench in a different dimension. Polly's mind kept trying to tell her it was not really there, in spite of the funnel of ripples sucking back into it. Those ripples only showed because they rippled everything they passed in front of. As Polly was turning to look, they spread and ponded like a sea tide to shimmer across the green lawn and cover Tom and Mr Leroy from the knees down. Or had the ripples risen? Neither Tom nor Mr Leroy had moved, yet the funnel of transparent ripples was now somehow up to their waists. ***Nowhere VI***

Whatever Tom's friends do to try to save him will have the equal and opposite effect to what is intended. His strength weakens him. The only way to equip him to win is to take everything away.

Every phrase and every sentence is an end and a beginning,
Every poem an epitaph. And any action
Is a step to the block
Little Gidding V

In my beginning is my end. In succession
Houses rise and fall, crumble, are extended,
Are removed, destroyed, restored, or in their place
East Coker I

Laurel, with chilly, malicious logic, had made sure that there was only one way Tom could win. All right, Polly thought. So the only way to win is to lose. I'll have to lose. ***Nowhere VI***

Tom sinks to the bottom of the pool and is nearly lost. "Here is a place of disaffection" is always one of the quotes that sticks in my mind the most in relation to *Fire and Hemlock*.

Here is a place of disaffection
Time before and time after
In a dim light: neither daylight
Burnt Norton III

Descend lower, descend only
Into the world of perpetual solitude,
World not world, but that which is not world,
Internal darkness, deprivation
And destitution of all property,
Desiccation of the world of sense,
Evacuation of the world of fancy,
Inoperancy of the world of spirit;
This is the one way, and the other
Burnt Norton III

"Polly kept her eyes on the greyed, uncertain shape of Tom below. He was definitely below now, in the wrong perspective of that current, deep beneath her. Around her, everything became grey-green ripples, but she did not feel the ripples, or anything else particularly. She had meant to harden her mind and be as stony as Ivy, but she seemed stony already. Kind feeling seemed to bleed away from her as she went downwards. Love, companionship, even Nowhere meant less and less. All she felt was a numb kind of sadness. The truth between two people always cuts two ways, she thought. And she had to go on. ***Nowhere VI***

Once Morton Leroy loses, and Tom is free, Polly and Tom are left in a strange new no-man's world where their relationship is no longer defined by Tom's desperate need to survive or Polly's longing for the love and support she doesn't receive from her parents. A different kind of nowhere.

In the uncertain hour before the morning
Near the ending of interminable night
At the recurrent end of the unending
Little Gidding II

There was an interval of jarring pain, scourging cold and numbing heat. Ages long. After that, the world hardened in jolting stages to pale whiteness. And with it came sadness, such sadness. Polly found herself, shivering and for some reason dripping wet, sitting on the edge of the concrete trough. The grass round it was greyed with the first frost of winter, and greyed further by the rising sun. The grey was as bitter as Polly felt. ***Coda***

Polly doesn't quite have the words to describe it yet.

Or say that the end precedes the beginning,
And the end and the beginning were always there
Before the beginning and after the end.
And all is always now. Words strain,
Crack and sometimes break, under the burden
Burnt Norton V

She thought of Ivy once standing implacably blocking the hallway. She thought of all the things Tom might have said – which Seb would have said – just now to change her mind. It was the things not said that showed they might have a great deal in common. And Tom had spent so many years defying Laurel. One of the things he had to be saying, by not saying, was that there had to be some way to get round Laurel's chilly logic. Perhaps there always was a way. ***Coda***

Nowhere is always a place where the impossible can happen however…

Caught in the form of limitation
Between un-being and being.
Sudden in a shaft of sunlight
Even while the dust moves
There rises the hidden laughter
Of children in the foliage
Burnt Norton V

The jet of misery died away and became a warm welling of hope. "This is quite impossible," Polly said carefully. "For you, the only way to behave well was to behave badly. For me, the only way to win was to lose. You weren't to know me, and I wasn't to remember you." She saw Tom's head tip again as he began to get her gist. "If two people can't get together anywhere—"
"You think?" Tom said with a shivery laugh. "Nowhere?" ***Coda***

The final lines of the book with the car crushing Laurel's roses often confuse people even more with their abrupt shift in tone, but they are after all "the hidden laughter of children in the foliage".

"Even in that early light Polly could tell Leslie had been crying his eyes out. But he had recovered enough to pretend to be normal.

"Hey!" he called out. "That car of yours is sat on top of the roses back there. Squashed them flat!"
Coda

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