

The Image of Woman in T. S. Eliot's *The Waste Land*

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ABSTRACT

Much has been written about Eliot's innovative technical and intellectual achievements, but not enough has been done on the role of woman in his poetry. The image of woman is part of the moral structure of T. S. Eliot's *The Waste Land*. Living in an age of spiritual bankruptcy, Eliot dedicates *The Waste Land* to portray a falling world in which the image of woman is part of the disintegration of civilization. Eliot sketches the woman of *The Waste Land* as trivial, faithless, lustful, sterile and hysterical. She sets the atmosphere of the poem as one of betrayal and disappointment. The image of woman in *The Waste Land* becomes Eliot's tool to attack futile modernity.

Key Words: Woman, Culture, Myth, Waste Land, Sterility

The Waste Land is regarded as the culmination of modern world's apathy; it is about land and dwellers gone waste as a result of a perfidious civilization. The world of the poem "with its heaps of broken images and its shocked and passive and neurasthenic persons, is a paradigm of war's effects, and of a world emptied of order and meaning, like a battlefield after the battle" (Childs 74). *The Waste Land* is set against a background of the Holy Grail legend and has its impotent king ruling the barren land. The setting is one "in which not only have the crops ceased to grow and the animals to reproduce, but the very human inhabitants have become incapable of having children" (Wilson 117). The poem is permeated by decayed and ruined human values once were regarded as human culture.

The epigraph of the poem is from Petronius Arbiter's *Satyricon*, and refers to the Cumaean Sybil who took a handful of sand and asked Apollo to grant her as many years of life as the atoms of sand in her

hand, foolishly forgetting to ask for a lasting youth. Sybil continued aging till she finally dwindled to an extent that she was “hung in a bottle and could only say ‘I want to die’” (Mundra 52). This foreshadows the atmosphere of the poem as one of decline and decess. The wastelanders, unlike Sybil, “are too afraid to want to die, but like her they are in a condition of unwanted life” (Williams 33).

This theme is evident in the “Burial of the dead”, which title suggests life’s continual process “of dust thrown and of souls reborn” (Kenner 135). A woman’s voice first emerges in the section, whose name is Marie. She begins by asserting that “April is the cruelest month, breeding / Lilacs out of the dead land” (lines 1-2). The lines reminds the reader of Attis, the god who dies and resurrects again in spring, and whose resurrection is depicted by “the lilac-colored blossoms at the very beginning of spring” (Vickery 249). Both April’s rain and the lilac herald a metamorphosis to occur, thus comes Marie’s description of the month as “the cruelest”, since she is too inert to accept any kind of change.

Later, both the protagonist of *The Waste Land* and Marie are surprised by summer’s ‘shower of rain’, since summer is “unlike both spring and winter, neither painful nor devoid of awareness” (Gish 48). Though the rain symbolizes natural growth, the wastelanders’ lack of vitality make them avoid it by protecting themselves in the colonnade. Marie, who talks with the protagonist for an hour in a public park, carefully asserts her nationality as German and not Russian. This indicates “the ethnological confusions of the new Europe, the subservience of patria to whim of statesmen, the interplay of immutable national pride” (Kenner 136):

Summer surprised us, coming over the Stranbergersee

With a shower of rain; we stopped in the colonnade,

And went on in sunlight, into Hofgarten,

And drank coffee, and talked for an hour

Bin gar keine Russin, stamm’aus Litauen, echt deutsch . . . (Lines 8-12)

Marie remembers defeating her childhood fears when she once went downhill on a sled. The incident gave her a feeling of freedom which she has never experienced thereafter:

And when we where children, staying at the arch-duke's

My cousin's, he took me out on a sled,

And I was frightened. He said, Marie,

Marie, hold on tight. And down we went

In the mountains, there you feel free. (Lines 13-17)

When Marie grows older, she spends her time reading "much of the night" and going "south in the winter" (Line 18), which is the counterpart of "the 'little life' of 'dull roots' and 'dried tubers'". By going south in the cold season, Marie is seeking physical comfort rather than any kind of spiritual warmth (Vickery 249). Marie's words reflect a consciousness which is wearied, dried up of warm emotions and clinging to "a deception of liberty, contradicting her dull present life" (Kenner 136). Marie's name reappears at the end of "The Burial of the Dead", when the city's crowd "flowed up the hill and down King William Street, / To where Saint Mary Woolnoth kept the hours / With a dead sound on the final stroke of ten" (Lines 66-68). This implies that even time heralds death for those already dead wastelanders.

Against this desolate background comes the complaining voice of a deserted girl, in the Hyacinth passage, expressing to her lover the quality of her affection: "'You gave me Hyacinths first a year ago; / They called me the hyacinth girl'" (Lines 35-36), indicating that her love affair is vital in her life. Yet the man she is addressing, actually the protagonist of the poem, fails her and she cannot achieve any integral relation with him. Here comes the significance of the incident as a memory from the past in which a chance is given to decide "between engaging in life or holding back" (Gish 52), and it is the second choice that the protagonist makes:

-Yet when we came back, late, from the hyacinth garden,

Your arms full, and your hair wet, I could not

Speak, and my eyes failed, I was neither

Living nor dead, and I knew nothing,

Looking into the heart of light, the silence. (Lines 37-41)

The unfulfilled love affair is made evident from the lines quoted from Richard Wagner's *Tristan und Isolde* which depicts "the wide, empty sea, which brings no sign of Isolde to dying Tristan" (Williams 31).

The other female character who appears in "Burial of the Dead" is the fortune-teller Madame Sosostris. Eliot depicts her as a comic character, having an absurd Egyptian name and suffering from a bad cold. She practices her job by the symbols of the Tarot Pack which she uses for commercial ends. Ironically, the Tarot Pack was used in ancient times to foretell the rising of the Nile, indicating the fertility season; with Madame Sosostris they turn to be "one item in a generally vulgar civilization" (Williams 53):

Madame Sosostris, famous clairvoyante,

Had a bad cold, nevertheless

Is known to be the wisest woman in Europe,

With a wicked pack of cards. (Lines 43-46)

During her divination, Madame Sosostris refers to Belladonna who is a "bedecked woman of luxury", mentioned in the bible as "arrayed in a purple and scarlet colour and decked with gold and precious stones" (Williams 53): "Here is Belladonna, the lady of the Rocks, / The lady of situations" (Lines 49-50). Nancy K. Gish believes that 'the lady of situations' suggests seduction, and the 'Lady of the Rocks' could be a hint to the "mermaids who lure men to their death" (53-54). All of which suggest that womanhood in *The Waste Land* is linked to themes of adornment, seduction, and fatality. It is significant that Madame

Sosostris does not see “The Hanged Man” who is associated with Christ and the ‘Hanged God’ of Frazer: “the god who sacrifices himself only to be ultimately reborn” (Kenney 39), bringing fertility to the land. She is unable to comprehend religion or to grasp the possibility of “a life-in-death or life-through-death, as well as a death-in-life” (Kenney 38).

In his notes to *The Waste Land*, Eliot wrote that the title “A Game of Chess” is taken from Thomas Middleton’s *Women beware Women*. The play presents the rape of a woman while her mother-in-law is playing a game of chess. The allusion to the play is to create a mood of deception, lust, and violence. Moreover, in the original manuscript of *The Waste Land*, there was the following line: “The ivory men make company between us” (Gish 61), which indicates that the purpose of the game in the poem is “to create an illusion of connection or relationship. If one plays a game, one need no talk” (Gish 61), for talking is either insignificant or revealing unbearable realities to the wastelanders. According to Hugh Kenner, the game of chess “is played with Queens and Pawns: the set of pieces mimics a social hierarchy, running from ‘The chair she sat in, like a burnished throne,’ to ‘Goodnight Bill. Goodnight Lou. Goodnight May. Goodnight’” (131). This is the manner “A Game of Chess” is arranged, presenting those of higher and lower classes, while exhibiting their lives which are linked to that of the king who is already an impotent one, spreading sterility and desolation throughout his land.

The opening lines of “A Game of Chess” inspire the mood of Cleopatra’s room, in its “rhythm and . . . lavish diction” (Gish 62): “The chair she sat in, like a burnished throne, / Glowed on the marble” (Lines 77-78). The lady who inhabits the room is the opposite to Cleopatra who lives and dies for love. The lady of *The Waste Land* leads an empty, loveless, and passive life, indicated by “the very changes, barge to chair, burned to glow and water to marble” (Williams 54). Besides, Cleopatra has “pretty dimpled boys ‘like smiling Cupids’” (Williams 54), while the lady of *The Waste Land* has her Cupids as unnatural and unanimated ones, used for ornamentation (Williams 54). The atmosphere of the lady’s room is that of extraneous tomb. As Helen Williams writes, “she may be . . . related to the corpse lying under a great golden candlestick which the Grail knight finds in the Chapel Perilous. The seven-branched candelabra . .

. the ‘staring forms, leaned out, leaning . . .’ have something of the ghost quality associated with the Chapel” (35).

The nature of the lady’s unreal personality is suggested from the very artificiality of her room which is crowded with her cosmetics and ‘synthetic’ perfumes:

In vials of ivory and coloured glass

Unstoppered, lurked her strange synthetic perfumes,

Unguent, powdered, or liquid-troubled, confused

And drowned the sense in odours . . . (Lines 86-89)

Those details concerning the lady’s room remind us of Alexander Pope’s *The Rape of the Lock* in which Belinda has on her dressing table the Bible placed among her cosmetics. Eliot has done much the same by his “ironic trick of confusing dressing-table with altar to suggest the excess of vanity” (Williams 54). The lady is also juxtaposed with Lamia the serpent- enchantress in Keats “Lamia”. Lamia’s magnificent Corinthian banquet-chamber is to be compared with the lady’s room which is of “the same heavily charged mingling of the senses rendered in the description of mixed light and perfumes” (Williams 55). All of which are “stirred by the air / That freshened from the window, these ascended / In fattening the prolonged candle-flames” (Lines 89-91). Another comparison is made between the lady and Dido, the African queen, who dies by burning herself on a funeral pyre after the departure of her lover, Aeneas. This is juxtaposed with the lady’s domestic fire, which is designed to enrich her room’s ornamentation, reflecting a loveless and empty life. The lady’s private room is decorated by a painting which depicts the rape of Philomel: “Above the antique mantle was displayed / As though a window gave upon the sylvan scene / The change of Philomel, by the barbarous king” (Lines 97-99). Philomel’s episode suggests lust as being a direct cause for wasting land and life, and this may reflect part of the lady’s dilemma. Philomel’s rape and her suffering transforms her into a nightingale with an “inviolable voice”. The lady of “A Game of Chess” is unable to

comprehend, and consequently to undergo such metamorphosis to a meaningful and graceful sort of existence.

At the end of Philomel's episode, Eliot changes the tense, bringing his readers to their contemporary world: "And still she cried, and still the world pursues, / 'Jug Jug' to dirty ears" (Lines 102-103). As Edmund Wilson says "the song of birds was represented in old English popular poetry by such outlandish syllables as 'Jug Jug' – so Philomel's cry sound to the vulgar" (93). In this sense, the "hint of evil comes in the way art is here rivalling, distorting, not merely enhancing Nature" (Williams 37).

The lady's peevish mood is indicated from the very description of her hair: "Under the firelight, under the brush, her hair / Spreads out in fiery points" (Lines 108-109). This quality of the lady's hair makes her no more a representative of "a fertility figure" (Williamson 35). She is placed in a glaring contrast to the hyacinth girl who has her hair wet with rain, symbolising life and productivity, while the lady represents "a siren queen, temptress delaying her quester, and a suffering victim in love herself, lonely and betrayed" (Williams 53). Her loneliness is evident from the following lines in which she addresses a heedless man-companion, or the protagonist of *The Waste Land*:

My nerves are bad to-night. Yes, bad. Stay with me

Speak to me. Why do you never speak? Speak.

What are you thinking of? What thinking? What?

I never know what you are thinking. Think. (Lines 111-114)

Those neglected questions of the lady, reveal part of the wastelanders dilemma: a pervading sense of alienation, estrangement and lack of a true understanding of the other:

What is that noise?

.....

What is that noise now? What is the wind doing?

.....

Do

You know nothing? Do you see nothing? Do you remember

Nothing?

.....

Are you alive, or not? Is there nothing in your head? (Lines 117-126)

In an attempt to attract the attention of her companion, the lady threatens to rush out and walk the street in an appearance like that of a harlot: “What shall I do now? What shall I do? / I shall rush out as I am, and walk the street / With my hair down, so.” (Lines 131-133). These words reveal a life which is neither significant nor purposeful. A life provoking boredom, weariness, and fear.

The fruitlessness of the lady’s life is made more evident since the rain, as a symbol of life and fertility, is avoided by the lady and her man-companion while reiterating their “stale routine” (Williams 23): “The hot water at ten / And if it rains, a closed car at four” (Lines 35-36). The lady’s acceptance of such a shallow life is from a belief that “worse may ensue from an attempt to probe too deep” (Maxwell 13). In this respect, she is may be compared with Prufrock who never dares to declare his “overwhelming question”. The lady’s episode also reminds us of the hyacinth girl, since both women ask for love which is denied them by the protagonist.

By moving into the life of those of the lower class, Eliot continues presenting a sham world, much like that of the lady. A life equally obsessed with the denial of nature, artificial teeth, [and] chemically

procured abortions” (Kenner 134). In this world, Eliot depicts a conversation between two women of the lower class while sitting in a bar and considering an artificial appearance in preparation to Albert’s, Lil’s husband, demobilization: “He’ll want to know what you done with that money he gave you / To get yourself some teeth [. . .] / He said, I swear, I can’t bear to look at you” (Lines 143-146). The conversation between the two women continues in a manner which represents “the brutal abstractions of a chess-game” (Kenner 134):

He’s been in the army four years, he wants a good time,

And if you don’t give it him, there’s others will, I said.

Oh is there, she said. Something o’that, I said.

Then I’ll know who to thank, she said, an give me a straight look (Lines 148-151)

Lil has done a violent abuse to the course of nature by her abortion pills that have affected her health and given her an old appearance:

You ought to be ashamed, I said, to look so antique.

(And her only thirty-one.)

I can’t help it, she said, pulling a long face,

It’s them pill’s I took, to bring it off, she said.

(She’s had five already, and nearly died of young George.)

The chemist said it would be all right, but I’ve never been

The same. (Lines 55-61)

The dialogue between the two women comes to a conclusion in the crucial question: “What you get married for if you don’t want children?” (Line 64). This question “puts ‘a good time’ against a background of the

frustration of life, and modulates the death theme to this level” (Williamson, “The Structure of the Waste Land” 35). Lil ends her role in the poem by her farewell words “Good night, ladies, good night, sweet ladies, good night, / good night” (Line 172), which call to mind Ophelia’s farewell words in *Hamlet*. Eliot makes it clear that Lil, like Ophelia, has a fragile mood and needs to satisfy men. However, Ophelia died for romantic love for prince Hamlet; while Lil maintains a lustful, loveless and an unproductive life. The persistent reference to the passage of time by the barman, “Hurry up Please Its Time”, is for the two women in the bar and the lady of the upper class, warning them to redeem their lives. It indicates that time flows; sweeping away all that comes within it and hardly offering a second chance to restore what has already been ruined.

The following section of *The Waste Land*, “The Fire Sermon”, addresses the aftermath Europe through the city of London: “It was in 1915 the old world ended. In the winter 1915-16 the spirit of old London collapsed; the city, in some way, perished from being the heart of the world, and became a vortex of broken passions, lusts, hopes, fears and horrors” (Childs 73). Indifference is the main characteristic of women in this section, instead of the terror and uneasiness which haunted them in the previous sections. “The Fire Sermon” has its women leading a life of mechanical lust, while the section aims at presenting this kind of twisted and sinful love affairs as the source of all the consequent social and spiritual maladies.

The section opens with a reference to Edmund Spenser’s “Prothalamion”: “The nymphs are departed. / Sweet Thames run softly, till I end my song” (Lines 175-176), suggesting a pastoral atmosphere, yet the lines that follow are ironical: “The river bears no empty bottles, sandwich papers, / Silk handkerchiefs, cardboard boxes, cigarette ends / Or other testimony of summer nights” (Lines 177-179). These lines are an indirect description of the modern unromantic Thames. The nymphs in their second appearance are real women of the twentieth century, which are deserted by their lovers: “The nymphs are departed / And their friends, the loitering heirs of City directors; / Departed, have left no address” (Lines 179-181). However, the ideal notion of Spenser’s Elizabethan age is presented with a suggestion that the past and present are much alike. As F.O. Matthiessen says, “the idealized Elizabethan

young men and women who appear as attendants in Spenser's marriage song begin to be seen with new eyes. They cannot be wholly unlike the present idle young men about town and their nymphs" (Matthiessen 39).

Sweeney, whose appearance is associated with illicit love affairs, appears in "The Fire sermon" in a highly suggestive manner, his companion this time is Mrs. Porter, another fallen woman: "The sound of horns and motors, which shall bring / Sweeney to Mrs. Porter in the Spring" (Lines 197-198). The lines refer to Andrew Marvell's "To his Coy Mistress" in which the sounds are those of "Time's winged chariot". In the modern city there is only the sounds of greed and lustfulness associated with Sweeney. Nancy K. Gish believes that the affair between Sweeney and Mrs. Porter recalls that of Actaeon and Diana. Actaeon the huntsman, was metamorphosed into a stag and doomed to death by hounds after seeing the goddess of chastity, Diana, bathing naked (50). The Diana of the modern age is Mrs. Porter who is bathing in "sode water" which suits a corrupted woman: "O the moon shone bright on Mrs. Porter / And on her daughter / They wash their feet in soda water" (Lines 199-201). The water in the passage has lost its healing power, it brings no purification.

Eliot relates the sterility of his age to the empty and dried up passions that envelop the most sacred human relations, converting them into mere animal desires. This is the topic of the typist passage, which is set against a background of automatic yielding. The moment is that of "the violet hour", suggesting that the typist's mind is fluttering between awareness and oblivion while she maintains her mechanical movements which well suits the modern-city's routine: "At the violet hour, when the eyes and back / Turn upward from the desk, when the human engine waits / Like a taxi throbbing waiting" (Lines 220-222). It is not out of context that the typist has her food in cans: "The typist home at teatime, clears her breakfast, lights / Her stove, and lays out food in tins" (Lines 222-223). Her "pathetic list of garments suggests shapes which fragment or distort the natural one of the body" (Draper 14):

Out of the window perilously spread

Her drying combinations touched by the sun's last rays,

On the divan are piled (at night her bed)

Stockings, slippers, camisoles, and stays. (Lines 224-227)

The typist has her meal with "the young man carbuncular" (Line 231), who is "a small house agent's clerk" (Line 232). After the meal is over and the typist is "bored and tired" (Line 236), the man,

Endeavours to engage her in caresses

Which still are unproved, if undesired.

Flushed and decided, he assaults at once;

Exploring hands encounter no defence;

His vanity requires no response,

And makes a welcome of indifference. (Lines 237-242)

The man's attempts to satisfy his lustful ends are neither encouraged nor rejected by the typist. His mean endeavours are depicted in a mock-heroic manner to make clear the degradation the modern man and woman have come to. After the event, the typist reveals her total unconcern to what has happened, as if were an insignificant dream:

She turns and looks a moment in the glass,

Hardly aware of her departed lover

Her brain allows one half-formed thought to pass

'Well now that's done: and I'm glad it's over' (Lines 249-252)

The line which immediately follows, “when lovely woman stoops to folly”, is quoted from Oliver Goldsmith’s *The Vicar of Wakefield*, in which Goldsmith dooms the adulterous woman to death. In Eliot’s poem, the woman is dead in life and this is presented through her mechanical response to life:

When lovely woman stoops to folly and

Paces about her room again, alone,

She smooths her hair with automatic hands

And puts a record on the gramophone. (Lines 253-256)

In this regard, R. P. Draper writes: “The change of voice in Eliot’s poetry is an implied comment on a cultural change which explores modern sexual behaviour to a damaging comparison with traditional moral attitudes” (14). Another episode follows and that is of Elizabeth I, introduced by the lines “Weialala leia / Wallala leialala” (Lines 277-278), echoing Richard Wagner’s *Gotterdammerung*. The lines refer to “the song of the Rhine maidens who [. . .] weep because the river’s gold has been stolen” (Gish 80). This sorrowful song comes after a bleak description of the modern age, when the scene shifts suddenly to the river at the age of Elizabethan I in which the surroundings are glorious and the words are chosen to evoke a sense of adornment, luxury, and perfection:

Elizabeth and Leicester

Beating oars

The stern was formed

A gilded shell

Red and gold . . . (Lines 279-283)

Nevertheless, the relationship between the Queen and her lover is an illicit one. Elizabeth and Leicester’s gilded shell fails to veil their vain and sterile passions “with which they drift ‘past the Isle of Dogs,’

ironically enough towards ‘The peal of bells / White towers’ suggestive of sanctity from which they are excluded” (Williams 61). The episode ends by a second reference to the Rhine maidens’ song, in which they lament the loss of the river’s beauty.

“The Fire Sermon” ends with the Thames-daughters whose song “sets up a background of loss and despair against which their voices become individualized examples of general sorrow” (Gish 80). The first of the Thames-daughters gives the name of her birth place and that of her seduction. She only describes how she was seduced:

‘Trams and dusty trees.

Highburg bore me. Richmond and Kew

Undid me. By Richmond I raised my knees

Supine on the floor of a narrow canoe’. (Lines 292-295)

The second of the Thames-daughters mentions that her seduction happened at Moorgate and that her seducer wept after their encounter. Yet she was passive and indifferent:

‘My feet are at Moorgate, and my heart

Under my feet. After the event

He wept. He promised “a new start.”

I made no comment. What should I resent?’ (Lines 296-299)

The third of the Thames-daughters is at Margate and she “focus[es] on ‘nothing,’ a word invoked in both the Hyacinth garden episode and the conversation with the nervous, demanding woman” (Gish 81). The emphasis is on the notions of alienation and estrangement which characterises the lives of women in the twentieth century:

‘On Margate Sands

I can connect

Nothing with nothing.

The broken fingernails of dirty hands

My people humble people who expect

Nothing.’

la la . . . (Lines 300-306)

The passage ending with “la la”, echoes the Rhine maidens’ mourning song which Eliot purposely “cut[s] off [. . .] as an emblem of their emotional debility” (Gish 81). “The Fire Sermon”, “which opens by Thames water, closes with a burning that images the restless lusts of the nymphs [. . .] the typist and [. . .] the Thames-daughters. They are unaware that they burn. ‘I made no comment. What should I resent?’” (Kenner 148).

“What the Thunder Said” continues pursuing a frightening dreamy journey, where the “murmur of maternal lamentation” is heard “high in the air” (Lines 366-367). To enhance the sense of horror, an ambiguous and sinister woman appears: “A woman drew her long black hair out tight / And fiddled whisper music on those strings” (Lines 377-378). She could be the same nervous lady in “A Game of Chess”, yet her “golden Cupidon” is contorted into “bats with baby faces in the violet light / Whistled, and beat their wings / And crawled head downward down a blackened wall” (Lines 379-381). This final nightmarish image of woman is in agreement with her corrupted and irresponsible role throughout the poem.

In *The Waste Land*, woman has her role shaped to suit a world plunged into the darkness of anarchy, inertia, physical and spiritual barrenness and emptiness mainly caused by the lack of traditional

and religious values. Eliot, who believes that no peaceful and congruous society is ever attainable without a tuneful relationship between man and woman, perceives twentieth century woman of the shabby metropolises as sterile, debased, pretentious, wearied, and superstitious; hence, failing to establish a wholesome relation with her man companion. She is presented as being responsible for family and social disintegration in an intentional disintegrated style.

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