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WASTED WOMEN: MODERN OPPRESSIONS IN T.S. ELIOT'S "THE WASTE LAND"

By

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Undergraduate Thesis

presented in partial fulfillment of the requirements  
for the University Scholar distinction

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Wasted Women: Modern Oppressions in T.S. Eliot's "The Waste Land"

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T.S. Eliot has frequently been criticized for his misogynistic treatment of women in his poetry. Few, however, have considered the role his portrayal of women plays in supporting his poetic themes. The narrative space of "The Waste Land" is dominated primarily by women, both contemporary and mythical, who illustrate the brutal relationship between men and women. This intensely personal relationship, however, is analogous to the relationship of the individual and society; like the individual, the women must make the decision to either speak out against their oppressors or keep silent and accept their circumstances. Either option places women at risk of further subjugation. In this way, the wasted scenography of "The Waste Land" acts as the backdrop to a crippled social world populated by subjugated individuals struggling to find their voice. Eliot portrays the female voice as the struggle against the ruined communication that characterizes the modern world. Contemporary and mythical characters converge in the poem, revealing the ineffectiveness of communication in a world where power barriers exist between the sexes. By juxtaposing mythical women from Ovid's *Metamorphoses* against the contemporary characters from "The Waste Land," this paper will demonstrate how far the poem's theme of social breakdown extends into our own society.

African American author Zora Neale Hurston once said, “If you are silent about your pain, they’ll kill you and say you enjoyed it” (Hurston). This speaks volumes about the value of having a voice; being heard ensures an identity as well as a manifest, legitimate place in society. Without a voice a person loses their substance, their essence, and any sense of authority. The possession of a voice is one of the greatest defenses against the chaos of the modern world. T.S. Eliot’s “The Waste Land” explores the role of the voice in the midst of this chaos in an attempt to illustrate the struggle for personal identity against the wave of modern oppressions. “The Waste Land” is, in large part, about a general social and cultural breakdown; this breakdown takes its shape in ruined communication and infertile human relationships. Eliot situates this breakdown primarily around women: most of the characters in the narrative are women, and the majority of the allusions made throughout reference women and their relationship to men. These brutal relationships between men and women parallel the relationship between the individual and society; like the individual, the women must make the decision to speak out against their male oppressors or keep silent and accept their circumstances. Either option places the women at risk of consequential wrongs and subjugation. The wasted scenography of “The Waste Land” acts as the backdrop to a crippled social world populated by subjugated individuals struggling to find their voice.

In order to accentuate the subjugation felt by individuals in the modern world, “The Waste Land” centers its focus on women; the inequitable relationship between men and women is analogous to that between a single person and his or her society. Eliot relies on two distinct categories of women to lend their voices to his wasteland. The first emerges from mythic origins: the women in this category include characters from classical Greek and Roman myths, particularly Ovid’s *Metamorphoses*. This collection of Classic myths highlights the unbalanced relationship between men and women, as well as between gods and mortals; the power structure in *Metamorphoses* is clearly delineated, making the stories within especially useful in considering the human relationships in “The Waste Land.” The second category of women in Eliot’s poem is the contemporary women of post-World War I Europe. These characters occupy a space of realism within the poem as a whole; their stories are mundane and even trivial, but these simple experiences speak volumes about the treatment and expectations of women in modern society. The representations of women within these two separate categories illustrate the same idea regarding the tremendous influence of voice in maintaining identity. An initial

consideration of the two most significant mythical women will highlight the tragic differences in the tales of the contemporary women.

The first appearance of a woman in “The Waste Land” occurs in the epigraph. Incidentally, Eliot originally chose a line from *Heart of Darkness* by Joseph Conrad, the dying words of the central figure, Kurtz: “The horror! The horror!” Eliot’s friend and editor Ezra Pound opposed the choice and a replacement was made (V. Eliot 3). The published epigraph of “The Waste Land” comes from *The Satyricon*, the satirical novel believed to have been written by Roman courtier Gaius Petronius. Roughly translated, the excerpt reads: “I have seen with my own eyes the Cumaean Sybil hanging in a jar, and when the boys asked, ‘Sybil, what do you want?’ she responded, ‘I want to die’” (Abrams 2147). The substitution of the classical for the contemporary proved apt: the Latin quote is critical for a feminist reading of “The Waste Land.” Though this epigraph comes directly from *The Satyricon*, the Cumaean Sybil also appears in Ovid’s *Metamorphoses*. Like many of the female figures that he works with, Ovid places the Sybil in a space of male dominion. As a young woman she had been offered a gift of her choosing by the sun god, Phoebus, in his persistent attempts to acquire her virginity. By exploiting her sexuality in an effort to gain power, Phoebus epitomizes the oppressive gendered hierarchy under which women suffer. The Sybil asks for as many years of life as grains of sand in a pile; unfortunately, she forgets to ask for endless youth as well. The god grants her wish for near-eternal life and promises to give her eternal youth only if she sexually submits to him. Despite the offer, she guards her virtue, thus sentencing herself to a slow death. As centuries pass the Sybil withers, losing her authority as well as her body. Ovid’s retelling of this myth ends on a relatively high note however when she explains to Aeneas: “But when I am no longer visible,/I will be recognized by my voice still,/According to the promise of the Fates” (XIV.226-8). When her physical identity becomes unseen, the Sybil will still have a perceived presence by means of her voice. The possession of a voice symbolizes a form of power; the ability to be recognized, to express thoughts and opinions through language represents a manifest existence in society.

Though this inclusion of the Sybil was not first intention, the allusion lends itself quite well to understanding the feminist thematic shape of “The Waste Land” as a whole. In “Women in Wasteland,” Astrid Ensslin suggests that the epigraph is programmatic to the entire poem (208); although the allusion has ties to two separate yet valid sources, each of these illuminate different aspects of the relationship between men and women. The direct quote from *The*

*Satyricon* depicts the Sybil as trapped within the confines of a glass bottle. She can see the expanse of her surroundings and also remains visible to any outsiders. However, she cannot escape; one of the cruelest forms of imprisonment is that which forces the captive to look upon the horizon of a future out of reach. Petronius's Sybil maintains a limited existence determined by a male oppressor. This male counterpart, however, does not even receive a face in the space of "The Waste Land." The results of his actions take shape in the Sybil's situation in the epigraph, but this oppressor remains largely underdeveloped by Eliot; this proves true for many of the women's male counterparts throughout the poem. The women throughout "The Waste Land" each appear unhappy and doomed, but what truly connects them is their depiction as prisoners in cages, rendering them dependent on their male counterparts (Ensslin 208). Male domination acts as the cage that has ensnared these women, forcing them to rely on men for their survival. In choosing to focus on the oppressed over the oppressors, Eliot emphasizes the base position of those individuals without a voice. In the end, the Sybil of *The Satyricon* would rather die than be a visible prisoner to an unseen male oppressor.

The reference to Ovid's Sybil, on the other hand, underscores the importance of voice. She recites her tale to Aeneas with traces of melancholy: "My better days have turned their back on me,/and scant old age with palsied step draws near,/which I must suffer for a long, long time" (XIV.211-13). However, unlike Petronius's portrayal of the Sybil, who so clearly represents the loss of autonomy caused by the subjugation of women, Ovid presents a woman who has grasped at the importance of her voice. As a seer, the Sybil of Cumae relied on her voice to share her prophecies; her voice acted as a gateway to the authority she enjoyed as the most famous of the Sybils (Abrams 2147). Even as she faces utter decay, the Sybil declares that she will still be recognized by her voice, a revelation that seems to serve as some small comfort (Ovid XIV.227). The Sybil's elevation of voice over body highlights the importance of the voice: it suggests that a person without a voice is merely a body, and a body does not have the privilege of an identity. Instead, the identity becomes the property and the creation of those unseen oppressors. A voice represents the power to define and maintain an identity, an ability that is especially important in the chaotic modern world. In "The Waste Land," the different ways that women communicate and don't communicate with men reveal this power.

The second woman whose origins are firmly rooted in classical myth appears in the second section of "The Waste Land." In the opening scene of "A Game of Chess," which takes

place in an obscenely ornate boudoir, the apathetic and nameless woman of the narrative is conflated with a mythical figure out of Ovid's *Metamorphoses*. In Ovid's retelling of the myth, Philomela is raped by her brother-in-law, King Tereus, and when she threatens to tell all who will listen about this crime he has committed against her, he is moved to cut out her tongue. The "change" comes when, after serving Tereus a feast made of his own son, Philomela and her sister escape his rage as if on wings; and indeed, they each have been transformed into nightingales. (VI.966-8). Frequently Ovid uses metamorphosis as a mark of punishment; however, in the myth of Philomela, it acts as a restoration of her purity. Eliot's use and placement of this image suggests that he intentionally framed the moment of her change (rather than her assault) within this room:

Above the antique mantel was displayed  
As though a window gave upon the sylvan scene  
The change of Philomel, by the barbarous king  
So rudely forced; yet there the nightingale  
Filled all the desert with inviolable voice  
And still she cried, and still the world pursues,  
"Jug Jug" to dirty ears. (97-103)

This passage almost says more about the "gendered desert" in which women find themselves than the rest of the poem. The image hangs above the "antique mantel" – the description of which enhances the ostentation of the room – taking a prominent position in the scene. However superficial the woman may seem, whether her choice in décor was well-informed or not, the presence of this painting in the space of her room hints at hope for the female wasteland. Indeed, the mention of a "window" suggests associations of voyeurism, a trait linked to Tiresias in "The Fire Sermon." This conflation of reader and prophet offers an ability to see the conclusion of the scenario. The woman in the chair appears lost and trapped in her spiritual listlessness, but when juxtaposed against the vivacity of Philomela-as-nightingale the reader can predict a possible escape.

The rape of Philomela by a king is symbolic on more than one level. Given his title, Tereus is portrayed as a literal figure of authority which puts him at a higher social position than Philomela. This power imbalance immediately marks her as a potential victim to oppression. Although the inclusion of this myth follows the pattern of under-represented male counterparts

found elsewhere in the poem – Tereus, in this section at least, is never named, nor is his act of violence – his presence undeniably haunts the passage. Though he no longer actively holds dominance over Philomela, the effects of his torment resonate within her existence. As any individual or body with power might, Tereus traps his victim in her place of oppression so that she cannot escape to rise up and find freedom; to prevent her indictments becoming public, he cuts out her tongue, leaving her literally and symbolically silent. Ovid describes his relentless cruelty in *Metamorphoses*: “And even after this –/One scarcely can believe it, but they say/That even after this, the man continued/to violate her mutilated body” (809-11). After denying his victim a voice, the oppressor does not pause in the subjugation of his inferior. In this way Tereus represents a figure of power, one who presides over disadvantaged populations and cannot bear the possibility of equality.

In another more profound sense, Tereus symbolizes the power that exists between bodies. All of the other power structures in “The Waste Land” have fallen (“Jerusalem Athens Alexandria/Vienna London” [374-5]), and yet, as Michael Levenson points out, power persists in the “zone of personal intimacy” (5). Sexual power can be the most destructive, as in many situations the victim may not be aware of their own subjugated position. Jessica Benjamin situates such oppression within the contexts of Marxism: “Domination is located in the principle of commodity exchange,” she notes, and that in exchanging his labor for wages, the worker loses recognition and control over the object he produces. The exchange of labor for wages “masks the domination of one class over another. As domination is rationalized and depersonalized it becomes invisible, and seems to be natural and necessary” (186). Male domination, too, seems a natural and necessary feature of most cultures. Family structures typically place the wife as the husband’s inferior and children, brought up in such an environment, go on to perpetuate the power imbalance. Philomela’s rapist, in performing such a deplorable act of sexual violence, embodies male domination and a ritual of subjugation. This ensures that the victim remains submissive and unable to escape from the control of their oppressor.

Philomela, however, does not remain silently in Tereus’ control. She and her sister exact a gruesome revenge after which the “change” occurs: the two women become nightingales, a bird known for its song. Given this new form, Philomela “filled all the desert with inviolable voice.” All the reaches of the desert – whether Eliot’s wasted London or Ensslin’s sterile female sexuality and spirituality – receive the woman’s song. Her voice, which now defies Tereus’



oppression by being heard, shares her tragic story, and asserts her autonomy in the face of her former subjugation. As in the myth of the Cumaean Sybil, having a voice can be the only assurance of an independent identity. True to her word, Philomela does not keep quiet about Tereus' crimes: "I'll cast aside my modesty and speak/of what you've done; if I escape this place,/I'll go among the people with my tale;/Imprisoned here, my voice will fill the trees/And wring great sobs of grief from senseless rocks" (Ovid 785-9). Though her voice reaches every ear, she does not meet with compassion; instead, the world – those, like Tereus who actively guard their positions of power – pursues her. They chase her in an effort to keep her silent in order to keep hidden the truth of Tereus' deeds and the hierarchy of gendered oppression. However, the last line of Eliot's reanimation of the myth suggests that though the truth may be silent, it could never remain hidden; Philomela cries out to "dirty ears." The modifier "dirty" suggests that no one could be considered free from the permeating tendrils of the oppressive patriarchal system. Though she is hunted for silence, Philomela speaks out about what everyone already knows. The moment of Philomela's change, as opposed to her violation, appears intentionally, suggesting that even though the desert of female sexuality and spirituality has been raped (as the woman in the opening of "A Game of Chess" has been stripped of her identity amidst the extravagant décor of the room) a determination to speak out against committed and unacknowledged wrongs can result in a positive change. Such a relationship inserted into this part of the poem suggests that the wasteland of the modern world is -- in Eliot's eyes, at the very least -- characterized by a profound breakdown. Rape – both literal and metaphorical – recurs throughout "The Waste Land." This allusion to a very real and horrific rape (not just the rape but the outcome of that rape) represents the extent of the social and cultural breakdown. That Philomela's song and Tereus's name return later in the poem suggests that the theme of subjugation and control, rape and corruption, is present throughout and a defining characteristic of Eliot's wasteland.

Throughout "The Waste Land" these two women out of Ovid's *Metamorphoses* haunt the shadows of Eliot's contemporary characters, underscoring the feminine voice lacking in the modern world. Presented in juxtaposition against Philomela, the unnamed bourgeois woman of "A Game of Chess" illustrates the ruined communication that colors this modern wasteland. Before the intervention of Ezra Pound, this section of the poem was originally titled "In the Cage" (V. Eliot 17). Ensslin attributes the phrase to an early mistranslation of *The Satyricon*,

placing the Sybil in a cage rather than a jar (208). The difference in word choice between “cage” and “jar” is subtle, but important: “cage” connotes the capture of prey with the intention to abuse or kill; “jar” also suggests capture, but that which results in preservation. As one would keep strawberry jam in a jar, so the Sybil hangs in a jar and kept fresh and aware of her circumstances. The published title of the second section of “The Waste Land” suggests two plays by Thomas Middleton titled *A Game at Chess* and, more significantly, *Women Beware Women*, wherein a mother-in-law is distracted by a game of chess while her daughter-in-law is seduced: every move in the elder’s chess game corresponds to a move in the seduction (Abrams 2150). “In the Cage” and “A Game of Chess” both have considerable impact on the meaning of this section. The remnants of the original title suggest that the women within this section represent captured prey, trapped by relationships to their underdeveloped male counterparts in spaces of futility and infertility. As “A Game of Chess” unfolds, the reader finds the women within depicted as dependent on their faceless male counterparts, completely without an identity that does not rely on the existence of men. The current title, on the other hand, likens human relationships to a game of strategy. The stilted conversation between the upper-class woman of this section and her male companion suggests that this particular chess game has unfavorable odds; in fact there can be no winner on either side because the two characters don’t appear to be playing the same game. The woman seeks out conversation with the man in order to create her identity in relation to his; the man resists conversation with her because she has little to offer him. Their relationship appears broken, an exercise in futile conversation.

The upper-class woman of “A Game of Chess” not only exists as an unequal half of a broken relationship but also as a victim of modern superficiality. The description of her boudoir, which lasts for over thirty lines, suggests this modern life lacks substantial meaning and the decadence of the room acts as an attempt to compensate for that absence. The woman – like many of her peers – stifles thoughts of a meaningful existence with jewels and perfumes: “In vials of ivory and colored glass/Unstoppered, lurked her strange synthetic perfumes,/Unguent, powdered, or liquid – troubled, confused/And drowned the sense in odors...” (86-9). These perfumes represent a confused reality wherein one cannot trust his or her own senses. The phrase “strange synthetic perfumes” suggests the notion of manufactured reality; man has the ability to develop scents, placing him on the same level as a creator. Such power can corrupt and be corrupted. Placed in this context, the allusion to “the change of Philomel” demonstrates the

extent of that corruption in men. Ensslin's desert of sterilized female sexuality and spirituality results from male domination (210); the debased position of women in this desert results from male oppressors "fixing the disadvantaged [women] in their disadvantage" (Bartky 27) by exploiting them either sexually – as in the capture and repeated rapes of Philomel – or socially – as in the case of the upper-class woman who keeps "strange synthetic perfumes" in order to entice her male companion. Either way, women find themselves confined to an existence determined and approved for them by men. The vivid image of Philomel merges on the walls of the boudoir with "other withered stumps of time" (104). This suggests two conflicting notions regarding the upper-class woman of the beginning of "A Game of Chess." First, considering Eliot has situated these other images with Philomel's ilk, the reader infers that the bourgeois woman has intentionally adorned her room with mythical role models, women who have succeeded in breaking free from their imposed silent existences. However, these images are characterized as "withered stumps of time," implying that the woman and her contemporaries no longer remember the triumphs of their role models, rendering them irrelevant in the modern world. In this world, appearance receives recognition before voice, illustrated in this final description of this bourgeois character: "Under the firelight, under the brush, her hair/Spread out in fiery points/Glowed into words, then would be savagely still" (108-10). The woman – and indeed, all women in "The Waste Land" – does occasionally utter "glowing" or meaningful words, but these only take shape in her appearance and disappear before they can be given consideration. With one half of the conversation between the sexes thusly silenced, communication becomes ruined and futile.

The ruined communication that characterizes the modern world emerges in the dialogue between the upper-class woman and her under-represented male counterpart. The punctuation of this stilted conversation suggests that the woman's companion is the narrator of "The Waste Land" (or at least one of the authoritative voices of the poem):

"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. What shall we do tomorrow?

What shall we ever do?"

The hot water at ten.

And if it rains, a closed car at four.

And we shall play a game of chess,

Pressing lidless eyes and waiting for a knock upon the door. (131-9)

A careful examination of the exchange between the woman and her companion reveals much about the condition of the female voice in Eliot's wasteland. For example, although the speaker is never concretely determined to be male, the authority he holds over the woman suggests the answer. She attempts to speak with the man in an attempt to build her identity in opposition to his; he gives her very little beyond a precise schedule of mundane events. Her spoken lines are jarring and chaotic while his replies avoid engagement with her and resist conversation: this resistance is particularly evident in Eliot's recorded reading of "The Waste Land," in which the cadence of these lines offers the image of a completely detached partner halfheartedly trying to soothe the other's concerns. The man does not directly address the things she says, instead muttering placating phrases. Cyrena Pondrom posits that this woman represents Eliot's first wife, Vivienne Eliot (426). The two married impulsively after Eliot moved to England, and their relationship deteriorated as her mental instabilities became unmanageable. He viewed their relationship with a sense of obligation and guilt, and although he did love her, he had no desire to live as her husband (Gordon 118). Superimposing this biographical information over the character of the bourgeois woman lends "A Game of Chess" a new layer of meaning. The relationship between these two people faces ruination, infected by apathy and inequality. Believing himself to be – in some way – above the woman, the man easily dismisses her anxiety without understanding what she is saying: her voice becomes invalid as does her presence in their relationship.

The juxtaposition of this upper-class woman with the story of Philomel's change highlights the tragedy of the modern world by demonstrating how apathy characterizes that world. Men and male oppression have stripped both Philomel and the woman of their identities: Tereus reduces Philomel to the sum of her sexual parts, and the woman's companion relegates her to a space of superficiality. Philomel rebels against the male oppressive power that has attempted to void her voice, demanding recognition and justice. In comparison, the woman of "A Game of Chess" succumbs to the oppressive male power; in all likelihood she has not done so wittingly, but rather because submitting is easier than fighting a social institution. With indifference the bourgeois woman accepts her position as the lesser counterpart of a faceless

male character. Her voice has no value in this society, where men determine acceptable forms of existence for their female others.

The “sterilized female sexuality” of this modern wasteland takes emblematic shape in the second woman of “A Game of Chess.” Towards the end of the section the voice of the narrative makes an abrupt shift into lower-class vernacular. A woman – the friend of the unseen Lil – sits in a pub, and her domineering narrative evokes an image of the sexually objectified woman:

Now Albert’s coming back, make yourself a bit smart.  
He’ll want to know what you done with that money he gave you  
To get yourself some teeth. He did, I was there.  
You have them all out, Lil, and get a nice set,  
He said, I swear, I can’t bear to look at you.  
And no more can’t I, I said, and think of poor Albert,  
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. (142-9)

Beyond this gossip, Lil does not have a presence in the pub. She literally has neither voice nor agency as her friend recounts their conversation to a voyeuristic audience. Her story revolves around the relationship of a soldier and his wife, and yet the concern of Lil’s friend centers on Lil’s desirability to her husband; her body has become a sexual object not only in the eyes of her husband but her female friend as well, and, by extension, the society of which they are a part. The friend briefly steps into the role of narrator not because “The Waste Land” tries desperately to impart a sense of chaos but because she – like the male narrators of the poem – upholds and enforces the male oppressive powers that subjugate women like Lil. Seeing Lil straying from accepted social and sexual norms, the friend encourages Lil back into the cage represented by the relationship with her husband.

The recreated conversation between Lil and her friend also acts as a failing game of chess because neither fully comprehends the other’s perspective. Futility colors the entire exchange wherein the friend occupies a space of female submission and Lil represents resistance to male power. The friend plays a game of strategy pressuring Lil to give in to the culturally valued sexuality of the modern woman. Such sexuality implies that the only goal in a woman’s life is to look good and bear her husband’s children. Adhering to this cultural expectation has ruined Lil’s body and therefore her existence: when her friend points out that Lil does not look as young as

she once did, Lil responds, “It’s them pills I took, to bring it off, she said./(She’s had five already, and nearly died of young George)” (159-60). Revealing the cause of her sickly appearance – pills she has taken to induce an abortion – Lil amplifies the sexually subjugated position of women in the modern world. Until very late in the twentieth century, lower-class women did not have access to reliable contraception so pregnancy occurred frequently. After giving birth to five of her husband’s children Lil must have felt wretched: enough that she obtained pills that would rid her of a sixth child but also wreaked havoc on her body. Her husband – as well as her friend – appears to have no regard for her wishes and only want to continue to use her as a sexual outlet; and if she will not make the effort to be attractive to him he will apparently think nothing of finding a replacement (149). In this context, marriage becomes a sort of legalized rape, a situation where the man has the right to sexually oppress the woman, forcing her to submit to his desires. As a result, the relationship between Lil and her husband is characterized by sexuality without fertility – the wife’s reliance on her pills suggests the couple’s sexual relationship exists as an outlet for the husband’s desires rather than for procreation – a relationship that “has been bankrupted by the demands placed upon the wife to serve as décor, as procreation machine, and as domestic servant” (Gunnink 3). In this subjugated position, Lil loses the freedoms that ought to go with being an autonomous person – the freedom to govern the sexual use of one’s body, for example – and becomes a vivid embodiment of the results of male oppression in the modern world.

As this exchange unfolds, other voices frequently overrun the friend’s appropriation of Lil’s, emphasizing an identity that has been blotted out by the surrounding cultural and social expectations. The friend here plays the role of narrator, directing the conversation as well as the audience’s attention to what she deems the important issue: namely, Lil’s sexual relationship with her husband. The scene becomes constrained within the limits of male oppression, with every word uttered by Lil’s friend contributing to the degradation of Lil’s identity. Throughout the scene, another voice punctuates the exchange of the two women, and the longer it persists, the more the meaning of the words shifts: “HURRY UP PLEASE, IT’S TIME” (141). As the disparagement of Lil’s appearance continues, the bartender’s cry departs from its original and innocuous intentions and begins to signify a perfunctory and brutal sexuality. Inadvertently he bolsters the friend’s attack against Lil, implying that “time is catching up with [her], in the form of dentures and decay” (Ellmann 137); Lil will soon outlive her so-called usefulness and identity

as a woman and will have to face either death or exile to the gendered desert inhabited by her peers. This prompting evokes Ovid's tale of the Sybil, who faced centuries of physical decay but clung to the promise of her voice as comfort. Lil, however, does not have a voice outside of the male-dominated social structure; as with the upper-class woman of the beginning of the section, Lil personifies the characteristic apathy of the modern world. She has discovered that abandoning personal identity and autonomy in favor of oppression is common and much easier than fighting to have her voice heard. As the epitome of the sexually objectified woman, Lil loses her voice amid the surge of social pressures that seek to enforce male oppression.

The final woman who exemplifies the subjugated position of women in the modern world appears in the third section of "The Waste Land." The title of this section, "The Fire Sermon," comes from the title of a sermon preached by the Buddha against the fires of lust and other passions that destroy people and prevent regeneration (Abrams 2152). Such a title sets the stage for a section heavily populated by a sterilized sexuality that encourages sex without conception. Building off of the behavior begun by Lil, the typist in "The Fire Sermon" embodies sexual objectification. The working-class description of her room fights against the excessive description of the boudoir in "A Game of Chess;" this opposition dampens the easy apathy and superficiality attributed to the upper-class woman of the earlier section. Such a change suggests that the typist, as a member of a lower class, would have an easier time of finding meaning in her life: in an existence characterized by struggle, bright spots become easier to see. However, the distinct apathy that colors the relationship between the typist and her companion darkens these bright spots and cheapens the woman's existence.

Throughout their interaction, the typist and her companion – "the young man carbuncular" (231) – seem at odds, and yet they have a sexual relationship. The man exhibits a clear determination to have sex with her, while the woman seems disinterested if not completely opposed. The lust of the man represents the sterilized sexuality and infertility characteristic of the modern wasteland: the lack of biological intent to reproduce reduces sex to an act of pure pleasure; and while it does have the potential to be pleasurable to both parties, the typist seems to function merely as an accessory to male hedonism:

The time is now propitious, as he guesses,  
The meal is ended, she is bored and tired,  
Endeavors to engage her in caresses

Which still are unreproved, if undesired.  
Flushed and decided, he assaults at once;  
Exploring hands encounter no defense;  
His vanity requires no response,  
And makes a welcome of indifference. (235-42)

The disconnect seen between these two characters intimates at the theme of failed human relationships that runs throughout “The Waste Land.” This particular scene evokes the episode between Tereus and Philomel, although this tryst may be characterized as a much more ambiguous rape. Words such as “caresses” (237) and “lover” (250) appear in conjunction with “undesired” (238) and “assaults” (239). The emotions between the typist and the young man appear significantly imbalanced. The woman is “bored and tired” (236) and indifferent (242), while the man is lustful, “flushed” (237), and vain (241). Yet she lies back and endures his actions in a way that suggests the event is recurrent (“expected guest” [230]). This entire scene exemplifies the sexual objectification that places women under male control. The relationship between the typist and the young man seems devoted solely to the man’s needs and desires; her role in their partnership requires only that she submit to them. Although the scene brings to mind the image of Philomel, the contrast between the two women again emphasizes the tragedy of reality. The typist appears accepting of her circumstances: she acts as though she believes her role in society is that of sex object. None of Philomel’s hope and action takes shape in the typist, condemning the woman to a space of ruin. In fact, the only words that emerge from the woman’s mind do not even get vocalized, merely thought: “Well now that’s done: and I’m glad it’s over” (251). She reveals herself to be completely devoid of attachment to the man and their relationship; she silently accepts her existence within the confines of the man’s expectations.

In *T.S. Eliot: An Imperfect Life*, Lyndall Gordon suggests that in real life women were often the recipients of Eliot’s poetic confessions: the women in his life possessed more of him than his poetry (401); in “The Waste Land,” women instead become the medium of confession, demonstrating the harsh reality of the modern world. The poem acts as an exploration of contemporary relationships between the sexes. Placed alongside the tales of mythical women out of Ovid’s *Metamorphoses*, these human relationships take on new elements of devastation. Contrasted against the heroic voices of Ovid’s women, Eliot’s contemporary women come up short, afflicted with the modern condition of apathy. As a result the oppression of their identity



overtakes them, rendering them victims to control. So too becomes the individual in society: male oppressive power takes its ultimate shape in governing bodies and public officials. With pervasive apathy reaching the farthest corners of society, individuals discover the ease of acceptance. Like the typist, they keep silent and accept their circumstances and use their voice only to concede the situation. Without rebels such as Philomel to resist the institutional oppression the domination will continue to degrade human relationships as a whole.

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