

Relations between men and women in "the waste land"



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In his poem "The Waste Land," T. S. Eliot presents multiple relationships between men and women, both historical and of his own creation. The interactions that he describes allow the reader to infer how Eliot views relationships, sexuality, and gender. He presents relationships as dysfunctional while only focusing on their negative aspects. Through description of various couples, Eliot presents gender in a stereotypical fashion which allows the reader to gain insight into how Eliot views the sexes, especially women. Throughout "The Waste Land," Eliot alludes to many historical events, mythical traditions, and literary works. He references three famous relationships that serve as a background for the relationships that Eliot creates and describes in "The Waste Land." The first allusion presented is to Wagner's opera "Tristan und Isolde." In this work, Isolde is unwillingly engaged to a King, a man she does not love. She instead falls in love with a knight, Tristan. The play ends tragically; both lovers die rather than give up their love ("Synopsis of Tristan und Isolde") Eliot also alludes to the relations between a King and his sister-in-law as described in Ovid's "Metamorphoses" (fn 1, p477) King Tereus, upon being overcome with lust for his wife's sister Philomela, drags her to the woods where he rapes her and then cuts out her tongue to silence her. Later, after her escape, she is changed into a nightingale ("Philomene"). A third and final reference from the poem is to Cleopatra. A woman in "The Waste Land" is portrayed as sitting on a "Chair...like a burnished throne," (l. 77) which is described in the footnote as an adaptation of Shakespeare's play "Antony and Cleopatra." In this play, Mark Antony believes that his lover, Cleopatra, is dead and he therefore impales himself on his sword. Cleopatra, awakening from a sleep, discovers that her lover is dead and commits suicide by means of a snake

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bite (" Mark Antony"). In these literary allusions, Eliot presents three relationships that are associated with despair and violence. In the "Metamorphoses" and "Tristan und Isolde," women are forced to be with men they do not love nor desire. All of the relationships involve violence and all end in tragedy. Examining the three relationships together gives the impression that any fleeting pleasure that relationships or love can bring will be insignificant to the ultimate violence, pain, and despair that is involved. The examples give the reader context for interpreting the relationships invented by Eliot in "The Waste Land" which are described in three sections of the poem: in a conversation between an aristocratic woman and her lover (l. 111-138), in a bar scene in which a woman gossips about her married friend (l. 139- 172), and in a sexual encounter between a typist and a clerk (l. 215-256). In the first of these relationships, a woman speaks to a man assumed to be her lover. The woman is of high social class. She sits upon a "throne" (77) in her house which is furnished with luxurious things. The woman is frantic and seemingly irrational during a conversation with her lover. We first hear her exclaim, " My nerves are bad to-night. Yes, bad. Stay with me." (111) This gives the reader an initial impression of an emotional and frightened character. She continues by demanding that her companion speak to her and tell her what he is thinking. She repeats herself frantically in her attempt to get him to respond to her (l. 112-114). This suggests that the woman and the man have poor communication with each other. When the man finally speaks, he is calm and enigmatic. He says, " I think we are rats' alley/ Where the dead men lost their bones." (115) This contrast with the woman makes her seem out-of-control on account of her emotions, her "nerves." She continues by asking, " What is that noise," to which he answers <https://assignbuster.com/relations-between-men-and-women-in-the-waste-land/>

"The wind under the door" (117). Again, the woman is compelled to speak because of her emotions, in this case fear. The man is calm and rational, recognizing the sound as merely wind. She continues to be frightened by the sounds she hears and continues to be reassured by the man, "nothing again nothing" (120). Throughout the dialogue between this aristocratic woman and her lover, she is compelled to speak and act because of her flighty emotions. She recognizes herself as the weaker of the two as she early on begs the man to stay the night. This section can be interpreted as Eliot's perception and commentary on the differences between genders. The dialogue is revealing about Eliot's perception of women, as the man is portrayed as calm and rational in comparison to the overemotional, irrational, and weak woman. The second relationship described in "The Waste Land" is the marriage between a man and woman, Albert and Lil. We are hearing about this marriage as the narrator, an unidentified woman in a bar, describes the advice she gave to her friend, the wife Lil. Albert is returning from war and while he was gone, Lil's appearance became more ragged and unattractive. The narrator therefore rebukes Lil, saying, "You ought to be ashamed, I said, to look so antique." (156) The narrator points out that Albert has "been in the army four years, he wants a good time" (148). The narrator is expressing the view that it is Lil's duty as a wife to be sexually available to her husband. If she is not willing to satisfy his sexual needs, or if she has not kept herself attractive enough to be desired by her husband, he is allowed to seek sexual satisfaction from other women. The narrator reminds Lil of this by pointing out "if you don't give it him, there's others will" (149). Lil attempts to defend herself by explaining that her deteriorating appearance was the result of pills she took to induce the

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abortion of what would have been her sixth child, " It's them pills I took, to bring it off, she said" (159). The narrator implies that during the labor of the birth of Lil's last child, she " nearly died" (160). It therefore seems understandable that Lil is not enthusiastic about the prospects of another birth. This does not sway the opinion of the narrator who asks, " What you get married for if you don't want children?" (164) The narrator therefore presents the view that even if a woman's life is in danger, this does not excuse her from her womanly duties of pleasing her husband sexually and consequently bearing his children. The opinion of the narrator, which may or may not be Eliot's, is a commonly held societal view, especially in Eliot's time. Married women are expected to serve the sexual needs of their husbands. They are expected to bear children, regardless of their personal desire for children or the threat that giving birth posed to a women's health in that time period. Reducing a woman to a means for men's sexual gratification and as an incubator for his children is extreme objectification. Philomela was equally objectified by her rapist, who viewed her as a means to gain pleasure and not as a human being. The marriage between Lil and Albert, which appears to be loveless, is also reminiscent of the forced union of Isolde and the King, in which Isolde was being forced into a marriage with a man she did not love. In the final relationship discussed in " The Waste Land," a blind prophet named Tiresias describes a sexual encounter between a female typist and a male clerk. A woman sits alone in her house, preparing a meal. A man enters. Although he notices that the woman is " bored and tired," he still attempts to engage her in sexual activity (236). The encounter begins somewhat lovingly, with the clerk engaging " her in caresses." (237) These advances are described as " unreproved, if undesired" (238). Seeing <https://assignbuster.com/relations-between-men-and-women-in-the-waste-land/>

that the woman is not going to object, the man, " assaults at once" (239). In this situation, the man is only thinking of the pleasure he will receive from the woman and has virtually no other concern for her once he has gained her consent. It does not bother him that she does not desire him or the sexual act. In fact, he " makes a welcomes of indifference," which suggests that he would rather her be disinterested (242). The man sees the woman solely as a sexual object, put in place for his sexual gratification. He has no desire to have an emotional connection with this woman, nor does he care whether she is receiving pleasure in return for his. When he leaves, he " bestows one final patronizing kiss," which is a condescending and demeaning gesture to impose on someone that was just used by you as an object (246). The woman is portrayed as unconcerned with this series of events. She thinks to herself, " Well now that's done: and I'm glad it's over." (252) The narrator of this scene is the blind prophet from Greek mythology, Tiresias. He had lived for some time as both a male and a female. Because of his knowledge of both sexes, Eliot describes Tiresias as, " the most important personage in the poem, uniting all the rest" and says that "...the two sexes meet in Tiresias. What Tiresias sees, in fact, is the substance of the poem." (fn 7 p481) Tiresias' account of the sexual act between the typist and the clerk is central to understanding the gender relations that Eliot is presenting. Tiresias comments that he " perceived the scene, and foretold the rest —/ I too awaited the expected guest." (229) This suggests that this scene between two " lovers" is one that Tiresias has seen, and most likely experienced, before, " And I Tiresias have foresuffered all/ Enacted on this same divan or bed." (244) If the scene is a predictable one, it must be fairly common. Therefore, Eliot could be presenting the scene with the typist and

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the clerk as an archetype for relationships between men and women. This scene portrays distinct gender roles that are thought of as socially acceptable. The man, like the husband Albert in the previous example, is supposed to take whatever he wants, sexually, from the woman he is dominating and the woman is supposed to let these things happen to her without complaint. Parallels can be seen between this type of domination of man over woman and in domination in the form of the rape of Philomela. She too was not allowed to complain or talk about her encounter. Her rapist ensured this by cutting out her tongue, therefore disabling her from speaking of what he did to her. In all three of these cases, the woman is objectified with the result of her being viewed as only a sexual object. The violence in the cases of all three of the historical relationships is also mirrored in the typist scene; the man "assaults at once" even though the woman is not objecting or fighting him. This sudden, violent image is not as dramatic as the violence seen in the historical relationships, yet it is telling that it is included at all. Eliot's description of the aristocratic woman might offer insight into how or why domination of women occurs. The woman here, whom Eliot presents stereotypically, is weak and is dictated by her emotions. She is obviously inferior to her calm, intelligent companion. The purpose of the women in both the historical relationships and those found in the poem is foremost to satisfy men and to be sexually available to them. This dehumanizes the women in these relationships to an extreme degree. The three relationships in "the Waste Land" are presented as loveless, sometimes violent, and dysfunctional. The ultimate impression is that relationships between men and women are bound to fail, and lead to despair or violence. Bibliography" Mark Antony." Oracle ThinkQuest Library. Web. 03 <https://assignbuster.com/relations-between-men-and-women-in-the-waste-land/>

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