

T.s. eliot's the waste land



**ASSIGN
BUSTER**

appears here] appears here] appears here] appears here] T. S. Eliot's "The Waste Land" The errancy of paternal citations and the disruptions of maternal intertexts are everywhere evident in *The Waste Land*, which elaborates the conflicts evident in "Hysteria," "Whispers of Immortality," and "Ode." In the wake of scathing criticism directed against Eliot in the 1970s and 1980s by Harold Bloom, Maud Ellmann, Terry Eagleton and others, the literary pieties that formerly exalted the poem have been abandoned, leaving it a rather tarnished literary icon. *The Waste Land* is now primarily of interest for precisely the errant tendencies that were previously corrected, explained away, or ignored; its fragmentation, obscurity, and anti-Semitic and misogynistic representations appear as symptoms of modern aesthetic and social dilemmas. Attractive to current readers insofar as it resists coherence, the poem has lately been interpreted as a critique of literary and sexual proprieties. It lacks "respect for tradition," is fascinated with "mutation, degradation, and fragmentation," split between a longing for "'improper' sexual desires" and a wish to be "rid" of them. (Charles W. Pollard, 2003, pp 90-110).

In a curious twist of literary history, recent critics of *The Waste Land* have returned to the questions that concerned its initial readers, before its elevation to the status of a classic. Troubled by its disorderliness and its debasement of literary value, Eliot inserts beautiful quotations into ugly contexts, and that his poem is a considerable affront against aesthetic sensibilities. Trying to recapture this sense of *The Waste Land*'s offensiveness, critics at the end of the century stress its chaotic structure, its multiple voices, and its internal conflicts, which render it an unfinalized, open text. In so doing, however, they continue to beat a dead horse. Since the

poem's publication, readers have been obsessed with the issue of its unity versus its fragmentation, torn between its centripetal and centrifugal forces, divided between its assertions of coherence and its dispersal of authority.

Noting its "fissured" critical history, if you choose the terminology of religious transcendence, then *The Waste Land* emerges as a politically conservative poem, but if you employ a Bakhtinian terminology, then *The Waste Land* is virtually a revolutionary poem, opening the cultured, upper-class salon to the heteroglot 'streets.' Finally in this poem, heteroglossia and the monologic battle it out to an exhausted standstill.

The Waste Land depicts in painful and desperate ways the modern dilemma of masculine heterosexuality. The poem compels its readers to face dying civilizations, its citations serving as an obituary of the Austro-Hungarian, Ottoman, Russian and British empires. *The Waste Land*, like Schliemann's Troy, is a ruin of a ruin, comprising treasures and detritus, glittering jewels and broken potsherds scattered on a plain, its historical importance lying in its willingness to remain a ruin and not seek to become a monument, notwithstanding attempts of critics to rebuild the city. For this reason "The Waste Land" is the least nostalgic [poem] in the language, and Eliot, an agent of the secret discontent of his own class.

Eliot is an agent of the "secret discontent" of his sex. The nostalgic yearnings for maternal union or for paternal filiation in his poetry are framed by hardnosed, violent abjections of femininity and homophobic displacements of masculine affection. Like Eliot's other early poems as well as his prose writings, *The Waste Land* records the catastrophic failure of the Law of the Father, not, as Davidson would have it, a "resigned acceptance of the Symbolic" order. *The Waste Land*'s notoriously profuse and esoteric

allusions, like those in " Ode, " are a performance of citationality that displays both the iterative constitution of discursive authority and the particular deviations that citational practice takes in Eliot's texts. (Sharon Stockton, 1997, pp 34-44)

Taking Eliot at his word, the continuity between the sleazy Eugenides and the handsome, elegized Phlebas attests to the disavowed erotic currant they share. Far from proving that Eliot was secretly homosexual or that the " hyacinth girl" is Verdenal in disguise, these contiguities demonstrate the vagrancy of forbidden desires and identifications which Eliot considered errant and, especially later, tried to distinguish sharply. Indeed, they testify to the force of Eliot's determined, stiff-upper-lip affirmation of heterosexual masculinity. In short, The Waste Land splits sanctioned homoeroticism from degraded homosexuality, in much the way that women are split between virgins and whores. Critics have continued the job of policing the boundary in order to prevent the Smyrna merchant from corrupting the Phoenician sailor.

Work Cited:

Charles W. Pollard, 2003. Words Alone: The Poet T. S. Eliot; Christianity and Literature, Vol. 52, pp 90-110

Sharon Stockton, 1997. T. S. Eliot and the Rape of God; Texas Studies in Literature and Language, Vol. 39, pp 34-44