

"a room of one's own", "wasteland" and "j. alfred prufrock": the affairs of socie...

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An underlying, general disgust for the opposite sex is one of the sentiments shared by writers Virginia Woolf and T. S. Eliot. While the two authors have similar perspectives on the two genders, both viewing males as the inferior sex, the means by which Woolf and Eliot come to this conclusion are quite different. Likewise, the emotions that arise from their beliefs are quite dissimilar. Writing in the aftermath of WWI, both authors have strong emotions about the society that has emerged from the rubble. Woolf, in "A Room of One's Own", takes on an air of defiance toward the societal implication that men are superior to women, and concludes by picking her way through a jumble of thoughts: that men are afflicted with an inferiority complex that can only be fed by women, and that it is society that perpetuates these circumstances. Eliot, on the other hand, feels that women are superior because they hold power over men; men need women, however disgusted they are by the female gender, because of the innate urge to procreate and because society dictates that man must have a mate. These ideas are portrayed in Eliot's poems "The Wasteland" and "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock." The two authors view men in an almost identical manner: they see the male as inferior, bordering on pitiful. This is exemplified by how the men in their works interact with women. Woolf claims that men only insist on the inferiority of women so that they can feel superior. She uses Napoleon and Mussolini as prime examples, saying that if "[women] were not inferior, they would cease to enlarge" (36). She even goes so far as to say that without women acting as a looking-glass, men would die, "like the drug fiend deprived of his cocaine" (36). Woolf considers that women were, "until Jane Austen's day...seen only in relation to the

other sex" (82). This stems from her contention that prior to Austen, the majority of writers were male, and considered women only in relation to men, and not as individuals. Eliot perceives the way that men deal with women slightly differently, but with the same pathetic ends. The first person narrator is the prime example of how men feel about women: Eliot appears to hate women because of the power they hold over men, and to hate men because of the power that women hold over them. In "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock", the speaker suffers from an acute fear of failure in love, and is afraid to even begin a conversation with a woman, lest she respond, "That is not what I meant at all; That is not it, at all" (6. 97). The speaker, having managed to make it through trivial societal circumstances such as tea, idle chit-chat, and reading novels, wonders it is even worth attempting to appear worldly. He is disgusted by the fact that he is drawn to women, and resents that he is held to a heterosexual bond that is so displeasing to him. He reveals his disgust with women when he speaks of their arms: "arms that are braceleted and white and bare / (But in the lamplight downed with light brown hair!)" (5. 63). Both Woolf and Eliot hold that men are inferior to women, although it seems that general opinion at the time did not agree. When these authors examine how women deal with men, their views become dissimilar. Woolf sees women as equal, if not superior to men, while Eliot feels that although women are placed on an untouchable pedestal, they are petty and ignorant. In his poem "The Wasteland", Eliot writes of the sterility of love and the male/female relationship. Three scenes of love are present in the poem, and all three are representative of how women act toward men. The first love scene in the poem shows the lack of emotion in a heterosexual

relationship – the woman should be loving and reminiscent, but because she is not, the man is emotionless as well: “ living nor dead” (56. 40). Later in the poem, when the speaker tells of an erotic encounter with a woman in a boudoir, he is commenting on the narcissistic side of women. This recalls how Woolf judges men: after the encounter, the female lover looks to the mirror, “ hardly aware of her departed lover” (63. 250). Eliot then describes the fruitlessness of love, the result of a woman’s inability to listen; there is a bar scene in which the woman rambles on, and will not listen to what the man truly wishes to say. Eliot’s belief that women feel superior is voiced in “ The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock” when he writes that “ the women come and go / Talking of Michelangelo” (3. 13); women are simply attempting to impress others, talking of art and culture rather than discussing anything of substance. Woolf, on the other hand, feels that women only speak of petty matters because they have had no chance at receiving real education or earning money. Even in her time, “ ladies [were] only admitted to the library if accompanied by a Fellow” (Woolf 8). She feels that even if given the chance to earn money, so that one could have a room of one’s own, such a thing would be nearly impossible; the woman would in all probability become pregnant, and need at least nine months to prepare for the child, depriving her of further earning ability. Woolf also feels that it is society that impedes a woman’s expression, stifling any genius that may be held within the confines of a female mind. Woolf and Eliot share the belief that society holds back both male and female growth. Woolf feels that women should be treated as equals to men, but knows that no laws can perform this act. When she finds that she is to receive an inheritance from an aunt, she is also informed that

the law allowing women to vote has been passed. She says that “ of the two - the vote and the money - the money...seemed infinitely more important” (37). Woolf realizes that men will still attempt to overpower and control women. With money, she can afford a room of her own in which to write, and that will make more of an impact on the world than the ability to vote. Eliot also believes that society does not allow people to do what they truly desire. Because of the strict demands that society makes on men to act towards women in a particular way, men inevitably feel resentment, and in turn become jaded. Though Woolf and Eliot use different means to express their beliefs, they arrive at highly similar ends.