

The unfortunate inferiority of women in the work of t.s. eliot



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The work of T. S. Eliot frequently presents society as degenerate and infertile. The deterioration of the post-war world is represented through the oppression and suffering of women – a concept explored most notably in Eliot’s 1922 work *The Waste Land*, but also in a number of his other poems. Eliot uses anonymous characters and allusion – a technique whereby the poet assumes the reader has previous knowledge of the subject matter – to suggest that there should indeed be a role for women in society beyond their domestic subservience to men. However, Eliot does not go about exploring this theme in such a way so as to appear indoctrinating, but instead simply presents the problems to his audience, thus allowing them to draw their own conclusions. As Harding states, ‘ Mr. Eliot doesn’t invite you to step across the dividing line and join him in guaranteed rightness – he suggests at the most that you and he should both try not to live so badly.’ In an age where women did indeed perform a predominantly functional role in society – for example, women were only enfranchised to vote in Britain in 1918 – it is important to consider Eliot’s unconventional honesty when he so openly presents the power of male lust – ‘ so rudely forced’ to ‘ encounter no defence’ despite female reluctance. Eliot’s sincere yet blunt portrayal of the treatment of the suffering woman in the 1920s inspires his audience to feel not only repulsion, but also shame at the state of affairs in what was considered the civilised world. Within the fragmented episodes of the five books in *The Waste Land*, Eliot relies on fictitious but symbolic characters to convert language into meaning. The second book, “ A Game of Chess”, begins with an allusion to Anthony and Cleopatra: ‘ The chair she sat in, like burnished throne.’ Instantly, this simile reminds the reader of how Cleopatra, a renowned leader despite being female, was undone by her love for <https://assignbuster.com/the-unfortunate-inferiority-of-women-in-the-work-of-ts-eliot/>

Anthony, and forced into death. The 'she' that the poet refers to transpires to be an indecisive, uncertain woman who mirrors the character of J. Alfred Prufrock from Eliot's 1917 poem "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock". She is lonely and calls, seemingly to herself, 'Why do you never speak? Speak. What are you thinking of.' However, unlike Prufrock's own internal indecisions - 'Do I dare / disturb the universe?' there is a more sinister subtext to the female character in *The Waste Land*. Eliot has previously referred to, in the prolonged opening stanza of Book II, the rape of Philomel ('The change of Philomel, by the barbarous king / So rudely forced'). Indeed, the allusion to the dominance of the patriarchal 'king' emphasises the line 'Are you alive, or not? Is there nothing in your head?' This remark, also relating to the shell shock experienced by World War One soldiers, questions the commonly held view that women had an inferior intellectual capacity, and were thus limited to menial, domestic tasks. Eliot later explores this in Book III, 'The Fire Sermon.' 'At the violet hour' Eliot forms a powerful presentation of the meaninglessness of sex, expressing his disdain at the male 'human engine' that 'like a taxi throbbing waiting' is impatient and controlling towards women. The female typist is a symbol of the functional, 'automatic' role of women towards men. The introduction of Tiresias - the ancient Greek half man/half woman, 'throbbing between two lives', is vital in showing the reader that the unfolding scene is a typical example of 20th-century relationships: 'I Tiresias...perceived the scene, and foretold the rest, I too awaited the expected guest.' Indeed, Eliot comments in his notes, 'Tiresias, although a mere spectator, and not a 'character,' is yet the most important personage in the poem, uniting all the rest.' The typist's boyfriend, 'a small house agent's clerk', is exemplified as animalistic as with 'one bold <https://assignbuster.com/the-unfortunate-inferiority-of-women-in-the-work-of-ts-eliot/>

stare', ' he assaults' her; however, not in a manner akin to the rape of Philomel. Instead, the act is ' unproved, if undesired'. Plainly, the woman acknowledges that such a task is now the convention, and must be carried out just like her typing, cooking, and drying. She states, summarizing the loss of love and the repression of women in a male-dominated world, ' Well now that's done; and I'm glad it's over.' Aside from the experience of the typist, there are two further examples of male/female relationships showing a woman to be suffering in *The Waste Land*. Firstly, the description of Elizabeth I and Robert Leicester, which has often been romanticised, is displayed to the reader in association with the positive imagery of ' red and gold', ' the peal of bells', and ' white towers.' The use of the objective correlative - the technique whereby the poet uses imagery or language to evoke a particular emotion - is highly prevalent here. The result, in this case, is nostalgia and joy. However, it must be recognized that these feelings were long in the past, and since the equality of such a relationship has been eroded while the power of women in the 20th century draws no parallels to that of Queen Elizabeth I. It must also be realized that despite the purity of the bond between Elizabeth and Leicester, they chose not to have children, and thus thwarted natural regeneration, the progression towards rebirth, and the development of a less depraved society - the central theme of *The Waste Land*. The final episode of " A Game of Chess" tells of an overheard conversation in a lower-class British pub. The character of Lil re-enacts the idea of women serving as helpers to their men. Her husband, Albert, has been in the army for four years. A friend of Lil comments that ' he wants a good time, and if you don't give it to him, there's others will.' Again, the dominance of men - ' Albert won't leave her alone' - and their craving for <https://assignbuster.com/the-unfortunate-inferiority-of-women-in-the-work-of-ts-eliot/>

sex stands in direct contrast with the decadence of the previous generation and Elizabethan England as a whole. Abortion, a taboo in Eliot's era, is presented as a last resort for Lil, who is desperate to avoid having any more children - (' She's had five already, and nearly died of young George...It's them pills I took, to bring it off'). Eliot presents the couple as altering the natural course of rebirth, stressing the supremacy of the male, whose libido dictates the course of their marriage. " Gerontion", written before *The Waste Land*, in 1920, proposes to the reader the idea that civilization has deteriorated through history's ' cunning corridors'. As Grover Smith states, "' Gerontion" symbolises civilisation gone rotten.' In the poem, Eliot does indeed focus on the obedient and passive role of women. Eliot alludes to Fitzgerald's " *The Rubaiyat of Umar Khayam*", a story that celebrates life and living for the moment: ' The woman keeps the kitchen, makes tea, sneezes at evening, poking the peevish gutter.' The technique of allusion, said by Richards to be ' a technical device for compression', works in tandem with the lamenting voice of the ' little old man' to create a negative image of humanity. The poet reiterates the domesticity of women as Eliot once again enforces the concept of women having to act in a maternal, but ultimately powerless role. " *Portrait of a Lady*", one of Eliot's earlier works, describes the life of an aging high-society lady through the voice of a younger man. Eliot shows the lady moaning as she approaches death; she is ' about to reach her journey's end.' Despite the favourable lifestyle the woman leads, she still fails to find fulfilment, as she cries ' you have no Achilles heel' to the young man because of his youth and promising future. The poem presents another unsuccessful male/female relationship, epitomized by the comment, ' we have not developed into friends.' Eliot juxtaposes the theme of women

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in both high and low society successfully; this is shown not only in "A Game of Chess", but also through the comparison of the lady in "Portrait" to the monotony of lower-class life in "Preludes", and more specifically in the third stanza, which quite possibly represents the female; 'you curled the papers from your hair' suggests that the speaking voice is now referring to a female. The theme of light and dark - 'light crept up between the shutters' - exposes society's own fragilities, as the woman is said to watch 'the night revealing the thousand sordid images of which your soul was constituted.' Vision and the senses are integral to this work, with Rickwood correctly stating that 'Mr. Eliot has been able to get closer than any other poet to the physiology of our sensations...to explore and make more palpable the more intimate distresses of a generation.' Indeed, the sensations in this stanza, like the use of allusion in *The Waste Land*, help transfer Eliot's thoughts into meaning; in "Preludes", this is the suggestion that the 'burnt out ends of smoky days' of lower-class life treats women no better than the riches of high society. Eliot presents the treatment of women in 20th-century life as little more than the barbarity of the ancient Greek world of Philomel and Tiresias. Within a great deal of Eliot's poetry can be found direct references to the treatment of women, but Eliot's own personal view seems to be disgust at the decay of humanity. While the west has become industrialized, she has not yet progressed on an emotional level, a fact highlighted by the treatment of females in society. As Kenner states, 'Eliot deals in effects, not ideas', and the effect of Eliot's presentation of the suffering woman is pity for the modern-day wasteland, devoid of rebirth and swamped in prejudice. Like writers such as Garland Hamlin and Theodore Dreiser, whose *Sister Carrie* explored the life of a farm girl in the modern urban world, Eliot questions the

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social issue of the oppression of women. His own turbulent relationship with his first wife, Vivian, led him to question the role of women in 1920s society: he was conscious of the sacrificial heroics they performed in the first World War, but was all too aware of the dominance of men, whose 'exploring hands encounter no defence' and inflict such animalistic brutality. Eliot allows his audience to conclude for themselves the subtext to his poetry, but it is indisputable that his work clearly provokes the reader to demand improvements to the treatment of women.