

Invitation, violation,  
and automation: the  
deterioration of desire  
in t.s. eliot'...



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In *The Waste Land*, Eliot utilizes women as a window to show the dissolution and distortion of love and desire. Eliot creates a progression from invitation, to violation, to automation through the use of three distinct female characters: the hyacinth girl, Philomela, and the young typist. These women give the reader an understanding as to how the waste land came into existence. As the reader observes the shifting landscape, the women in the landscape gradually transform from youthful, pure girls into sterile, mechanical beings. The erosion of intimacy is documented in these three crucial portions, showing a pre-corruption world, a tragic intermediary world, and the final product: the waste land. In these scenarios, Eliot's women exhibit the weakness and suffering that is a necessary part of the human condition. However, the transformations from pure love to a pale imitation of love show them to be detrimental to the landscape of desire. The foreshadowing of love's dissolution begins with an invitation for the consummation of love in the hyacinth garden. This is portrayed through a glowing remembrance of purity associated with fertility and fulfillment:

Waggoner 2' You gave me hyacinths first a year ago; They called me the hyacinth girl.' Yet when we came back, late, from the Hyacinth garden, Your arms full, and your hair wet, I could not speak, and my eyes failed, I was neither living nor dead, and I knew nothing, Looking into the heart of light, the silence. (Eliot 34-40)

The vibrancy and natural setting of this scene provide a sharp contrast to the seedier representations of love that appear later in the poem. The inaction of the narrator proves to foreshadow, not indicate, the dissolution of desire. Critic Cyrena Pondrom reads this scene as a specific entrance into the waste land itself: " In the agonizing light of the expectation of masculine dominance in literal physical and erotic connection,

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the speaker cannot connect in any abstract way” (Pondrom, 428). Pondrom’s premature identification of this particular male impotence as “agonizing” leaves no room for memory of a world before the waste land, which seems to be the crucial point on which the first portion is comprised, and the following parts build. Neither, however, does it leave room for an intermediary phase. Even at the point of failure, it seems that the purity of love is still preserved. The male speaker’s nervousness and inability to act stem from love, the “heart of light” (Eliot 41). Because the recalling of this scene mixes the “memory and desire” of the beginning lines, it signifies the world before the fall (Eliot 2-3). However, the event in the hyacinth garden and failure of the male counterpart to accept the hyacinth girl’s offering portends the waste land to come. Waggoner 3The role of feminine suffering in The Waste Land displays the “violation” portion of the text: the intermediate scene in our progression towards the waste land. This violation is shown through the agonies of Philomel, whose rapist cut out her tongue so she could not speak his name: The change of Philomel, by the barbarous kingSo rudely forced; yet there the nightingaleFilled all the desert with inviolable voiceAnd still she cried, and still the world pursues, ‘Jug Jug’ to dirty ears. (Eliot 99-103)Through the rape of Philomel, Eliot portrays the opposite of the nervous excitement and inaction displayed in the hyacinth garden. The assertion of desire becomes a desperate overcompensation of the previously failed male claim to power. The desire of the “heart of light” is replaced with a fulfillment “so rudely forced” (Eliot 41, 100). The sexually willing yet virginal hyacinth girl is replaced with the violated, muted Philomel. Interestingly enough, Eliot does not acknowledge the latter half of Ovid’s recount, in which Philomel weaves a tapestry which tells the name of her rapist (McRae, <https://assignbuster.com/invitation-violation-and-automation-the-deterioration-of-desire-in-ts-eliot-the-waste-land/>)

34). He instead weaves a version in which the nightingale's mangled syllables are, after much difficulty, able to convey her rapist's name: "Twit twit twit/Jug jug jug jug jug jug/So rudely forc'd. Tereu" (Eliot 204-207). This image of suffering and an inability to speak morbidly echoes the lost actions and unspoken words in the hyacinth garden. In this scenario, however, the masculine and feminine roles have been stained and violently distorted.

Waggoner 4It is important to note that the roles in the two aforementioned scenarios still possess passion and struggle, which are obliterated in the mechanical world of the typist which Philomel's story precedes. The mistreatment of women embodied by Philomel's story gives way to the final destruction of love and desire. At this point, Eliot gives his poetic presence as an observer prominence by identifying himself as the blinded, dual-sexed Tiresias. In this voice, Eliot presents his vision of how intimacy operates in a fully developed waste land. Tiresias gained his female parts as punishment for striking two copulating snakes. Eliot's version of Tiresias is ironically forced by his agonizing prophetic powers to foretell the scene of sterile, deadened copulation between two characters in this ruined landscape.

Through the character of Tiresias, Eliot justifies his prophetic abilities, and is able to express his agonized observations without risking poetic vulnerability. He states in his notes on *The Waste Land* that "the two sexes meet in Tiresias" (Eliot qtd. in Rainey, 105). The dual sexuality of Tiresias permits Eliot to shift from a male to a female voice, and justifies his ability to discern both perspectives: At the violet hour, when the eyes and backTurn upward from the desk, when the human engine waits, I Tiresias, though blind, throbbing between two lives, Old man with wrinkled female breasts, can seeAt the violet hour... (Eliot 215-220, italics added)Waggoner 5Eliot

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employs imagery of machines and automatons in order to synchronize the death of love with the acceleration of industrialism. It is significant that the woman in this narrative is nameless, referred to only as “ the typist home at teatime” (Eliot 222). She is directly identified only by her profession: a “ human engine” (Eliot 216). Her body, deadened to external touch, only feels a pair of “ exploring hands” in place of intimacy (Eliot 240). Her “ young man carbuncular” is apathetic as to whether his actions are acknowledged or reciprocated. Philomel’s rape is eerily echoed when the young man “ assaults at once” after a failed attempt to “ engage her in caresses (Eliot, 239; 237).” Eliot scholar Philip Sicker distinguishes the young typist from her female predecessors by her lack of sexual desire: “ All pretense of genuine feeling has disappeared, and the typist, unlike her forerunners, does not appear even to possess a real sexual ‘ appetite” (Sickler, 428). The “ lovers” become two separate, mechanical entities. Even in her home, the typist is still an unfeeling automaton. Sickler asserts that the remnants of her sexuality lie “ an unstimulated, almost unconscious prostitution in which the body alone participates, or half-participates” (Sickler, 428). Waggoner

6However, Sickler’s phrase, “ unconscious prostitution in which the body alone participates” implies a deliberateness of the body which does not seem congruent with the poem itself. In light of Philomel’s story, the scene echoes rape. The typist’s body, “ bored and tired,” does not even attempt to engage in caresses. Her body feels nothing but a “ pair of exploring hands.” Her mind, like Philomel’s pathetic attempts for clear speech, can muster nothing but “ half-formed” thoughts. Paralleling this scene with halfhearted prostitution implies a certain amount of pragmatic willingness which she lacks. However, where the resistance and agony of Philomela is implicit, the

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typist puts up no defense. The thoughts after the “rape” are only half-formed because to actually digest the events would evoke too much human emotion for this sterile, mechanical place. In the background, to underscore the mechanical note of this scene, the gramophone’s artificial music plays on: “She smoothes her hair with automatic hand, /And puts a record on the gramophone” (Eliot 249-256, italics added). Just as Philomel’s broken tongue cannot utter the name of her rapist, the typist gives no complaint. As the hyacinths of the first scene symbolize fertility potential, the gramophone’s synthetic tune implies total stasis. In his personal annotations, Eliot states of the female characters in *The Waste Land* that “all the women are one woman” (Eliot, qtd. in Rainey 91). Upon dissection, these three scenes prove his assertion, and reveal an intricacy which connects three seemingly disparate women to the birth and death of intimacy between man and woman: a microcosm of the birth and death of a passionate, deliberate existence.

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