

Women are  
dismissed as  
insignificant in both  
the poetry of larkin  
and eliot essay...

[Literature](#), [Poetry](#)



On the surface, the observations that Eliot and Larkin make about women in their poems suggests that they are predominantly disinterested towards them, shown in their cynicism, cruel language and the objectification of women personas. But this is only the view if you are looking at the women as literal representations of themselves. In many of the poems the women are used symbolically as a way of communicating larger messages more easily, and allowing them to be portrayed in a way which is understandable and relatable to the reader, such as directly using the voice and thoughts of a persona, or the setting in which they stand.

Eliot and Larkin both explore the theme of the degradation of sex and the corruption of relationships that exist between human beings. In doing this, both poets portray women as objects that are victims of society's exploitation, used purely for lustful and seedy encounters. Eliot's *Wasteland* is amongst other things a critique on sexuality, exploring this corruption of sex, introduced first in *A Game of Chess*, and extending to *The Fire Sermon*. In *A Game of Chess*, Eliot parodies Cleopatra in the opening, to use as a contrast between the erotic, natural and regal Cleopatra and the "synthetic" and oppressive nature of the woman persona, illustrating the corruption of sex and romance. This is reflected in Eliot's vivid descriptions; the nightingales "inviolable" voice falls on "dirty ears" whilst the "world pursues" showing the attempt to corrupt something that was once pure; real love and relationships. "Withered stumps" suggests a transformation from vitality to stasis, reflecting the change of sex from meaningful to meaningless.

Cleopatra is a symbol of true love; she committed suicide after her love died, but Eliot's female persona is surrounded by the corruption of sex, with a picture on the wall depicting the rape of Philomel, and her loveless relationship with the man, who centres on indifference. In this *The Wasteland* reflects Eliot's relationship with his first wife Vivienne Haigh-Wood, for whom it appeared Eliot had no real love for; "Under Pound's influence, Eliot was persuaded that the marriage would help him burn his boats and commit himself to poetry by staying in England." [1] This suggests that the marriage was not built on love, as relationships should have been, but rather for a practical reason, corrupting the traditional, meaningful marriage, to something worth very little, paralleling the degradation of relationships explored in *The Wasteland*.

It was a very difficult marriage for them both; Vivienne's health was poor; she suffered from extremely heavy and irregular menstruations which affected her mental health also, leaving them unable to sustain an intimate and sexual relationship, culminating in their separation in 1932. In the *Fire sermon*, the omniscient Tiresius witnesses a sexual encounter between a lecherous young man and a "bored and tired" typist. The young man leaves immediately following their entanglement, leaving the women alone and unsatisfied; "Well now that's done: and I'm glad it's over." There is no romance between the couple, it is described in rape-like terms, with the use of violent language; "he assaults at once," and "gropes", and finally "bestows one final patronising kiss,". Another example of Eliot's observation on sexual degradation is in the first stanza of *Prufrock*. "Restless nights" "

one-night cheap hotels” suggests unsatisfactory encounters; a corrupted view of sex and women, to whom Eliot shows his contempt through all of these poems.

Larkin, like Eliot, uses the theme of degradation and the objectification of women in his poetry, in a way that does clearly suggest his dismissal and disregard of women. This can be seen clearly in Sunny Prestatyn. The poster focuses on the woman’s sexuality; “ breast-lifting arms” “ thighs” and “ tautened white satin” using the woman very obviously as an object of perfection to attract tourists, and therefore are exploiting the woman for their own means. The poem then becomes quite sinister in the language used. The woman has been completely defaced and violated with “ snaggle-toothed” and “ boss-eyed” face having been drawn on. The description of the poster has turned violent, again reflecting the effective rape of the woman, with a “ knife” having been used to “ stab right through”, although this is said in a almost humorous tone “ tuberous cock and balls” as if this is fun to do, and not humiliating to the woman. This could be seen as to show a complete disregard and exploitation of women, such as that which could be suggested in Eliot’s poetry.

Many of Eliot’s observations of women are shrouded in pictures of violence, in which the women are often portrayed innocently as victims. In *The Wasteland*, *A Game of Chess*, Eliot illustrates this with a reference from Ovid’s *Metamorphoses*; a painting depicting “ The change of Philomel” stands on the “ antique mantel” a picture of violence, rape and mutilation. Violence is emphasised throughout this section, starting with blank verse,

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the meter becomes increasingly irregular towards the latter part of this section, as does the line length, highlighting the woman's lack of control in certain situations. " My nerves are bad tonight. Yes, Bad. Stay with me.... I think we are in rat's alley/Where the dead men lost their bones." The room itself seems claustrophobic and " enclosed", with the perfumes having " drowned the senses". There is an obvious lack of caesura in the opening section of the poem and this, combined with the enjambment in the poem, " these ascended/In fattening the prolonged candle-flames" lulls the reader into a dangerous, trance-like state, drawing attention again to the complete deterioration of control, reflecting the mental state of the woman who cannot tell what her guest is thinking, and can neither force his feelings or actions towards her; "' Why do you never speak?

Speak./What are you thinking of? What thinking? What?'" These violent images to which the woman has no control over are repeated in the latter half of this section, in which a woman has no power regarding contraception, having to resort to an abortion, which takes its toll on her body; " I've never been the same." directly referring to gender inequality of the time, and the lack of empowerment which women held, being unable to control certain aspects of their lives, be it contraception or abortions. These images show a very accurate and detailed observation of women but are portrayed by Eliot in a sympathetic light, unlike that of Larkin's poetry, which seems much more dismissive of women.

One interpretation of women in Larkin and Eliot's poetry, which does not reflect the view that women are insignificant to the poets, is that the women

are not literal, but a symbolic representation; a vessel used to communicate other ideas. This would mean that it is not women being ridiculed and dismissed in their poetry, but the idea's they represent. In Eliot's poetry the women seem to represent society, with the male personas such as Prufrock, estrangement from society, not a woman, with the difference in mental state between himself and those in the society immediately surrounding him. This is shown in the triviality and tediousness of the language used when describing his surroundings, and the repetitiveness of the very simple rhyme scheme; " In the room the women come and go talking of Michelangelo."

It is also shown is his fear of being judged by society, because of his differences; " and when I am formulated, sprawling on a pin, when I am pinned and wriggling on a wall" and " Though I have seen my head (grown slightly bald) brought in upon a platter" In Larkin's poetry however the women could be interpreted as a symbol for himself; This is suggested in Faith Healing with the sudden volta in the last stanza. The tone of the poem switches from a mocking observation to a more general, emotional view which Larkin also feels; " In everyone..." He realises that wanting comfort and love to transform lives is part of the human nature, although it is an unrealistic view, as only a small minority have truly felt love, and the majority in which he includes himself lead tragic and meaningless lives; " As all they might have done had they been loved."

Eliot and Larkin both use women as a symbol of the superficiality and the obscene consumerist nature of society. This is first shown obviously in The Whitsun weddings, where Larkin mocks the synthetic nature of women in

The Whitsun Weddings, in his description of the girls on the platform. This is shown in the mocking tone of the little details which show the artificiality and cheapness; “ nylon gloves” and “ jewellery substitutes,” This could first be interpreted as an unfair attack on women, and their desire to be something other than what they truly are, with all these details merely facades. This could again be seen in the poem, The Large Cool Store. The women’s clothes are “ machine embroidered” and “ thin as blouses” poor imitations of the more fashionable clothing, ill-fated to fall apart because the quality of the material; what they truly are, not the fashionable items which they first appear to be, much like how the women were represented with their shiny veneer in The Whitsun Weddings.

Although another interpretation is that the women do not represent women, but rather they society as a whole, and its falseness. In The Large Cool Store, the excess “ heaps” of clothing is emphasised in the obvious listing of items of clothing and the colours; “ lemon, sapphire, moss-green, rose...” showing a gross and unnecessary surplus of materialistic items. If you looked at this poem as a representation of society rather than of women, Larkin is not mocking or ridiculing women, but rather that of the general public. Eliot also comments on the false nature and excesses of people, though not to the same extent as Larkin. In A Game of Chess, it is a woman’s overindulgence being portrayed. The description of the woman’s room is loaded heavily with artificial objects; her perfume is overwhelmingly “ synthetic” and strange. The room itself is bursting with objects of wealth to the point of excess, but they are portrayed depreciatingly, with the dolphin cast in a “ sad light” and

the paintings having “withered”, showing Eliot’s view on the gross excesses of the wealthy.

One view of Dockery and Son is that Larkin is being extremely dismissive of women; “One notices how patrilineal the poem is: the issue of reproduction is discussed in terms of father and son, with the role of wife and mother entirely elided!”[2] This is a comment upon the complete displacement of women in the poem, in a poem about sons. It could also be suggested that this is a disruption of the typical family units. The persona in the poem thinks that Dockery has just followed the “innate assumptions” of society that one should marry and bring children into the world. The persona questions this, saying how he feels that a son, would mean “dilution” thereby stifling a person’s creativity and freedom.

This could reflect Larkin’s own view of family life, the reason that Larkin never married. Although, in Dockery and Son, there is also a growing sense of regret, and doubt that the persona did the right thing, for he will leave behind “nothing” as his legacy, emphasised with the repetition of the word. The ending is ambiguous as to whom, himself or Dockery, was better off. This shows that although the poem would seem on the surface to completely ignore women, when it is a subject in which women should be central, the poem is about identity, fulfilment and the legacy which we as individuals leave behind, rather than children and families, so it is unfair to say Larkin is being dismissive of women in this poem. “Larkin’s fury against women is not so much a declared state of siege against them personally as it is an internal battle raging within himself.”[3] This reflects the contrasting views that



although Larkin did have various long-lasting and fulfilling relationships with women in his life, suggesting his dependency on women, he never fully committed to one of them; at one point in his life he was emotionally attached to 3 of them simultaneously.

On the surface, the view that suggests Larkin and Eliot's contempt for women is apparent in many of their poems. Women are seen to be portrayed as the inferior sex, concerned mainly with keeping up facades, and easily be used for exploitation. Although another view is that both poets use women symbolically, rather than literally, as a way to represent a larger idea, such as the consumerist nature of society, or in fact themselves, allowing them so explore ideas with more depth and effectiveness. Taking this view into consideration, it would be unfair to say they dismiss women as insignificant, because it is not the nature of women being explored.

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