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Fertility, Sterility, and Salvation in *The Waste Land*

T.S. Eliot's *The Waste Land* is so famously cryptic that many critics assert the impossibility of finding an all-inclusive interpretation (Poquette). At first glance, it seems improbable that the poem yields *any* interpretation; however, after a second venture, one cannot help but notice that the mythical allusions, the increasingly pathetic characters, and the despondent tone all lead to a common wellspring: the theme of modern spiritual failure and the resulting sterility. While this interpretation may not embrace the whole of *The Waste Land*'s majesty, it does weave most of its shadowy fragments into a coherent whole and is a convincing candidate for the poem's ultimate message.

Eliot's own comments and writings support this interpretation. In a general note, he stated that much of *The Waste Land*'s ideas and symbolism was inspired by two books: Jessie L. Weston's *From Ritual to Romance*, on the Grail legend; and Sir James Frazer's *Golden Bough*, in particular the volumes *Adonis, Attis,* and *Osiris*, which discussed ancient fertility rituals and vegetation myths (Stallworthy 2294). Furthermore, Eliot's essays and plays "stress the importance of tradition, religion, and morality in art and society … [and] affirm his belief in the vanity of human wishes and the need for complete submission to God in a world otherwise devoid of meaning ("T.S. Eliot" 2-3). Throughout *The Waste Land*, Eliot draws upon such diverse religions as Christianity, Buddhism, and pagan mythology to outline his concern for modern selfishness and spiritual deadness: his footnote to the last few lines of "The Fire

Sermon" broadly hints that the "collocation of these two representatives of eastern and western asceticism … is not an accident" (Stallworthy 2305).

At the heart of *The Waste Land* is its tragic commentary on the relationship between the sexes. According to Eliot himself, just as the male characters melt and shift one into the next, "so all the women are one woman" (Stallworthy 2302). In the fallen wasteland world, the archetypal male is Fisher King, whose emasculating wound has cast a pall of sterility upon the land; according to legend, he can only be healed when a questing knight asks the appropriate questions about the Grail and the Lance (the female and male fertility symbols, respectively). However, little attention has been paid to the Fisher King's female counterpart: the "sexually violated yet sterile female," whom Philip Sicker identifies as the Belladonna (424). Eliot's fictional creation, she is introduced in Madame Sosostris's Tarot deck and represents the modern degenerative woman, and the sickly female personas throughout the poem are fragments of her whole. Her name is aptly chosen: The belladonna is a poisonous flower (traditionally associated with the Devil) that causes muscle relaxation, severe disorientation, convulsions, and possible death. One of its effects is to inhibit secretions, thus limiting fertility; it is also used in an eye cosmetic that is associated with prostitution (Sorrel). Appropriately, the Belladonna is described as "the prostitute who, despite innumerable fornications, never conceives or gives birth"; she appears in many of Eliot's poems and is often characterized by "acute neurasthenia, nervous chatter, hysterical laughter, and general physical and psychological debilitation" (Sicker 420).

Her wholesome opposite is the hyacinth girl, who comes out of the garden "sexually willing and eager with her hair wet and her arms full of flowers" (Sicker 421). The hyacinth was worshiped as a fertility symbol in many ancient cultures, and the garden where it grows is a spatial metaphor for that long ago sexual innocence that haunts us in our collective memory

(Sicker 422). This garden is not wholly distinct from the biblical Garden of Eden, where Adam and Eve lived in prelapsarian innocence. While the Hebrew word Adam means "man," Eve or Chava interestingly means "life" and is called "the mother of all living" ("Name: Adam"; "Name: Eve"; Scott). In this archetypal woman is the embodiment of life-giving fertility, the "heart of light" (line 41). The blinding of the male narrator outside of the hyacinth garden is analogous to the Fall from Eden, where in the "awful daring of a moment's surrender / Which an age of prudence can never retract," mankind was thrown from its original sexual innocence[1]: "I could not / Speak, and my eyes failed, I was neither / Living nor dead" (404-05; 38-40).

This spiritual failure creates deadly results in *The Waste Land*. According to Sicker, as sex fell from its original social and religious context, it was increasingly seen "either as a matter of male force or of female seduction," and correspondingly, mankind's perception of women has fallen into the stereotypes of victim and seductress (423). Eliot hints at this degeneration in repeated references to Richard Wagner's *Tristan und Isolde*; in the original legend, Tristan marries the virgin Isolde of the White Hands and eventually abandons her for the adulteress Princess Isolde ("Tristan & Isolde"). This contrast is again evoked in "A Game of Chess," where the "burnished throne" reminiscent of sultry Cleopatra is quickly juxtaposed with the victim Philomel, whose sister's husband raped her and cut out her tongue (77; Hunter, "Philomela"). Later, the two are combined in Queen Elizabeth I of England; seduced by the Earl of Liecester as a teenager, she died a bachelorette and a seductress, having many times used the possibility of marriage for political gain (Weir). Both stereotypes are degenerative versions of the original woman, Marie the hyacinth girl, "who was neither victim nor seductress, but an equal, eager constituent in the act of love." However, as *The Waste Land* suggests, mankind dwells not in the

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1 This moment has been interpreted both as sexual ecstasy and sexual failure (Sicker 430). I don't see why both can't happen; I have interpreted it accordingly.

original Garden but in the modern wasteland; therefore, as the female characters of the poem meld into each other, their final product is the victimized and seducing prostitute, instead of the hyacinth girl (Sicker 424).

Thus, *The Waste Land* opens with cruel nostalgia, “mixing / Memory and desire” as the narrator painfully awakens from winter’s “forgetful snow” (3-6). In old age, the speaker is confronted with the sickly fruits of his folly, a “heap of broken images, where the sun beats, / And the dead tree gives no shelter, the cricket no relief …” (22-23). In agony, he must face his waste and sterile life and the reckoning of his Creator: “What are the roots that clutch, what branches grow / Out of this stony rubbish?” (19-20). Finally, he sees a zombie-like London suffering from boredom[2], where he tries to warn his colleague Stetson against arriving at his own sordid fate. In many ways, “The Burial of the Dead” is a summary of the pathos-filled story that the rest of *The Waste Land* tells in painful detail. It is the beginning and the end of the story: the loss of innocence and, through shame and repentance, the remembrance of hope.

In “A Game of Chess,” we meet the first phases of the deadly Belladonna. The title was inspired by two plays by Thomas Middleton, *A Game at Chess* and *Women Beware Women*; the latter contains a scene in which “a mother-in-law is distracted by a game of chess while her daughter-in-law is seduced: every move in the chess game represents a move in the seduction” (Stallworthy 2298). In the second chapter of *The Waste Land*, Eliot captures these elements in an elegant and horrific storyline. Here, we watch two women playing a deadly game; its moves are those of seduction and treachery, and like chess, it ends in destruction.

As we enter the smoky lair of the rich Belladonna, our reality begins to unravel. All around, solidity gives way to wavering reflections: the “burnished throne, / Glowed on the marble, where the glass / … Doubled the flames of sevenbranched candelabra / Reflecting light

2 Suggested by Footnote 1 on pg. 2298 of the Norton anthology.

… as / The glitter of her jewels rose to meet it …" (78-84). Our senses are assailed with "strange synthetic perfumes, / Unguent, powdered, or liquid—troubled, confused" (87-88); even speech is distorted, constantly echoing and doubling back on itself. At the heart of the scene is the lady herself, who projects the narcissistic atmosphere even as she is shaped by it. The Belladonna fancies herself a victim like Philomel, whose tragedy adorns her walls. "My nerves are bad tonight. Yes, bad. Stay with me," she pleads to her companion, whom she insinuates is the cause of her nervous condition: "Speak to me. Why do you never speak. Speak" (111-14). When her lover remains unresponsive, she desperately threatens to "rush out as I am, and walk the street / With my hair down so" (132-33). Here, she has morphed into the completion of her degenerative character; she is "neither simply victim nor seductress as she fancifully projects herself into her true role – the streetwalker or harlot" (Sicker 425). The rich Belladonna comprises another piece of Marie's antithesis: Instead of fertile, healing wetness, her hair "[u]nder the firelight ... Spread out in fiery points," and her strident insistence is a sharp contrast against Marie's inviting silence (108-09); the noxious atmosphere of her fantasy world is a sad reminder of the "artificiality and superficiality of modern sexual experience" (Sicker 424).

Her nameless male companion is also worthy of comment. He is the Fisher King, struck dumb by his eviction from the Garden and trapped in a self-enclosed world, unable to respond to the Belladonna's pleading. His responses, though few, are significant pieces to the ultimate puzzle. To her demand, "What are you thinking of?" he replies, "I think we are in rats' alley / Where the dead men lost their bones" (113-16); the "bones" that were lost have been interpreted by Louis Simpson (rather imaginatively) as male erections, which is consistent with the theme of sterility (qtd. In Sicker 431). More significantly, however, is an important line that Eliot deleted from the final draft. When asked "Do you remember / Nothing?" the male originally had

responded, “I remember the hyacinth garden,” (122-23; Sicker 422). In the final draft, he replies, “I remember / Those are pearls that were his eyes” (124-25). Both are the pitiful cries of a dumb-stricken mind that remembers his earlier sexual health and the awful fall that ensued.

The rich Belladonna next morphs into her lower-class cockney cousins, Lil and her gossiping friend. Here, narcissism takes on the added dimension of hedonism. Both women are preoccupied with sexual self-gratification, and neither is clearly victim or seductress. Lil's friend is seemingly the seductress, stooping to treachery and betrayal for sex: “[P]oor Albert ... wants a good time, / And if you don't give it him, there's others will” (147-49). However, her cynical attitude toward love indicates that it is likely “she too has been abused by derelict men” (Sicker 427). Similarly, Lil seems the victim, but we quickly find out that her marriage is based on hedonism, instead of a desire for reproduction, and that her despicable condition is a direct result of her attempt to stifle fertility. “What you get married for if you dont[sic] want children?” her friend demands unsympathetically (164). Her husband Albert, though not present, plays a significant role in these women's lives. Lil’s despondence and her friend’s smirking insinuations imply that Albert is the sort of man to cheat on his wife for sexual pleasure; or at least, he has given no indication that they should believe otherwise. His very absence reemphasizes the impotency of the modern wasteland male, whose moral weakness catalyzes the destruction of society. The chapter closes with a line from Shakespeare's *Hamlet,* “Good night, ladies, good night, sweet ladies, good night, good night” (172). Its connection with Ophelia, driven insane by flawed men and her own moral failure, demonstrates the tenuous line between victim and seductress and underscores the mental debilitation of all characters present.

The Belladonna's final transformation brings her to the pitch of her degenerative character. The typist “acts out the rapes which the rich lady labors to arrange and which Lil's

cockney friend" dreams about, but by this stage, she has been stripped of all human emotion and is unable to enjoy even the basest hedonism; her narcissism has reached such an extreme that her mind, "having long viewed all other individuals as mere automata becomes an automaton itself" (Sicker 428; 429). More machine than human, she has passed beyond being victim or seductress. She expends no effort to turn away the clerk's intruding "caresses / Which still are unreproved, if undesired" (237-38). After he rapes her and leaves, her mind is still "[h]ardly aware of her departed lover"; she "turns and looks a moment in the glass" as if to remind herself of her corporal existence, her half-dead mind "allows one half-formed thought to pass," and she retreats again into her self-absorbed world (249-51).

In the clerk, the male personage has also reached a frightening depravity. No longer pitifully dumb-stricken, he too has sunk into narcissism and become the sneering and cold aggressor: He "assaults at once; / Exploring hands encounter no defence"; he cares little that his female companion has grown numb to passion, and his selfish "vanity requires no response / And makes a welcome of indifference" (239-42). With "one final patronising kiss," he continues on his way with little thought to the lover he has abused (247). In forgetting her humanity, he slowly loses his own.

"The Fire Sermon" is the frightening peak of *The Waste Land*, the climax of the action and the crest of corruption, but also the beginning of the resolution. There, we meet the blind seer, Tiresias, who Eliot calls "the most important personage in the poem, uniting all the rest." He states that "[w]hat Tiresias *sees* [between the typist and the clerk], in fact, is the substance of the poem" (Stallworthy 2302). In his all-seeing vision, this ancient seer predicted humanity's ghastly ailment; also implicit in him is the beginnings of the cure: According to legend, he was transformed into a woman for seven years and then back into a man (Hunter, "Tiresias"). In his

androgyny, the two sexes are united, and crushed together, they are forced to throw off their narcissistic stupor and acknowledge each other's well-being as vital to their own.

The title, “The Fire Sermon,” refers to a sermon by Buddha in which he advocates asceticism as an escape from the burning of corporal sins (Thera). This fits seamlessly into (and perhaps is the origin of) *The Waste Land*'s imagery scheme, where water and fire are related respectively to spirituality and worldliness and thus to fertility and sterility. That water should be connected with fertility is not unusual, as it is psychoanalytically linked to the womb and therefore birth; fire then is a logical choice for sterility, both because it is water's natural antithesis and because it was the Buddha's representation of worldly sin. Although it is sprinkled throughout chapters one and two, the fire and water imagery bursts urgently into the foreground in the final three chapters.

“The Fire Sermon” begins with an image of “Sweet Thames” so corrupted that the “nymphs are departed” and the banks are home to slimy vermin (175-76). So noxious is the river that it cannot bear even trash, which is at least a “testimony of summer nights” (179): an ominous foreshadowing of the pleasureless sex to follow. The chapter ends with a rush of river imagery, as if being swept uncontrollably downstream. “Burning burning burning burning,” the speaker finally pleads, “O Lord Thou pluckest me out” (308-09). Ironically, we learn in the next chapter that the speaker has become “Phlebas the Phoenician, a fortnight” drowned (312). In mankind's arrogance, we have ignored the warning that death is the common end for those who attempt the treacherous waters: “Gentile or Jew / O you who turn the wheel and look to windward, / Consider Phlebas, who was once handsome and tall as you.” We are like Phlebas, who “[f]orgot the cry of gulls, and the deep sea swell” and “passed the stages of his age and youth / Entering the whirlpool” of undiscriminating death (313-21).

Here, Eliot has completed his sobering commentary on modern society. We need only look at Madame Sosostris's Tarot deck to confirm our worst suspicions: Present is the "Phoenician Sailor," drowned in his pride; "Belladonna" the treacherous prostitute; and "the one-eyed merchant" Mr. Eugenides, who is linked with "homosexual liaisons" (47-52; Stallworthy 2302). All are antitheses of fertility. Conspicuously not present is the "Hanged Man," the god who sacrifices his life so that his resurrection may restore fertility to the land (55; Stallworthy 2297). From innocence, mankind has descended into spiritual denial, then estrangement, and finally numbness; as a result, our sexuality has been corrupted, and our appropriate end is death. We are doomed, or so it seems.

But no. At the brink of demise, Eliot offers us hope. Although we die, we are also reminded that death is the first step to resurrection. It is interesting to note that "Death by Water" is perhaps the gentlest of the poem's chapters; its overall image is not terror, but peace. Although Phlebas forgets the lovely "cry of gulls, and the deep sea swell," so he also forgets the "profit and loss" so stressful in life (313-14). In death, his eyes that reveled in perversion turn to beautiful pearls. Similarly, death has the power to transform mankind from corruption back to a purified state of life. Steeped in life-giving water, we are given a second chance.

One might wonder how the same water that gives life can turn and destroy us. The answer lies in our own choices. Water, or desire, is a natural tool. When used wisely, water sustains life and quenches fire; but untamed, it kills just as easily as it saves. In the same way, wholesome desire is necessary to fertility, but selfish desire is the first step toward sexual failure. This important distinction and self-discipline, Eliot suggests, is the ultimate key to salvation.

"What the Thunder Said" is Eliot's offering of hope. We have passed from innocence to corruption to death, and through death we are revived into purity; however, it is not *our* death

and resurrection that saves us, but that of a greater being. As the chapter commences, the speaker is so desperate for water that he is on the brink of insanity:

> Here is no water but only rock
>
> Rock and no water and the sandy road ...
>
> If there were water we should stop and drink
>
> Amongst the rock one cannot stop or think ...
>
> If there were only water amongst the rock ... (331-38)

There seems to be no hope, as “He who was living is now dead / We who were living are now dying” (328-29). The mountains are filled with “dry sterile thunder without rain” and although the “[d]rip drop drip drop drop drop drop” of water fills the speaker's mind, “there is no water” to be found (342; 358-59). But lo, a seeming apparition is before us:

> Who is the third who walks always beside you?
>
> When I count, there are only you and I together
>
> But when I look ahead up the white road
>
> There is always another one walking beside you ... (360-63)

At His divine presence, towers topple and the sinful “city over the mountains / Cracks and reforms and bursts in the violet air (372-73); joy rushes into the unfriendly landscape and we hear “voices singing out of empty cisterns and exhausted wells” (385). Then, “a flash of lightning,” and then arrives the “damp gust / Bringing rain” (394-95). Water, desire, fertility returns to the wasteland.

Who is this man? This is our resurrected savior, our Lord Jesus Christ who bought our forgiveness with his life. This too is the Hanged Man, who sacrificed himself that fertility may be restored. For Eliot, all of these deities merge into one central concept: thanks to a higher

grace, humanity has been given a second chance. That we may guard our chance well, we are given three words of Buddhist wisdom by the rumbling thunder: *Datta, Dayadhvam, Damyata*; give, sympathize, control (Stallworthy 2307). We are asked, “what have we given?” (402); what have we given to each other? We must reach beyond our narcissism and sympathize with our friend, spouse, and fellow human being. We must control our selfish desires that they may serve life, not death. Above all, we must control them, so that they don't control us. If we give, sympathize, and control, we need not fear water: “The boat responded / Gaily, to the hand expert with sail and oar.” If we give, sympathize, and control, we need not fear desire: “The sea was calm, your heart would have responded / Gaily, when invited, beating obedient / To controlling hands ...” (419-23). The wasteland is conquered, and we sit “upon the shore / Fishing, with the arid plain behind” us. We see a victorious vision of our Unreal City where the nightmarish “London Bridge is falling down falling down falling down” (424-27). Finally, there is the “Peace which passeth understanding”: “Shantih shantih shantih” (Stallworthy 2308; 434).

For thousands of years, people have felt the hot breath of the wasteland at their backs. For thousands of years, they have yearned ever more desperately for peace. In *The Waste Land*, Eliot captures the terror of their plight and clearly demonstrates that there is only one escape from the wasteland of our selfishness: through spirituality. His poem is unusual that is not only presents a problem, but also a solution that is both complex and insightful. If humanity is to escape the wasteland, each and every one of us must consider our own personal contribution (or lack thereof) to mankind's progress. Eliot does not give us the option of easy blame. Is it not wealth that makes the difference, for the rich Belladonna is just as manipulative as her lower-class counterpart, and Lil's friend is just as vapid as her rich cousin. It is not marriage or women's status in society, for the single working typist fares just as poorly as married housewife-ish Lil.

Nor is it men's oppression of women, as many are quick to clamor, for in every interaction, the female is equally responsible for the degradation of both sexes; to further pin their behaviors on patriarchal society would render the interpretation a pointless blame-fest. Furthermore, the wasteland men obviously suffer keenly from the deteriorated relationships as well. Although they too have their part of the blame, it would be unwarranted animosity to suppose that they wished to perpetuate this unhappy state of matters. The poem *does* clearly demonstrate, however, that when society's morals fail, it is women who suffer most, which is an unpleasant but accurate reflection of the real world. The stakes are high and very real. If we fail, we lose true and radiant life. But to win, we need only realize that our ransom has been paid, that the hope of restoration has been perpetually offered and we need only to reach out and embrace its streaming light.

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