

“YOU SEE THE CORNER OF HER EYES / TWISTED LIKE A CROOKED PIN”: THE IMAGE OF WOMAN IN T. S. ELIOT’S EARLY POETRY”

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ABSTRACT

The image of woman in T. S. Eliot’s poetry forms an essential part of its moral structure. Eliot’s image of woman is functioning as a symbol of; on the one hand, a decadent civilization and futile existence; on the other hand, regeneration and salvation. This indicates his acknowledgement of the significant role woman plays in the refinement and cultivation of moral values within the family, society and the world at large. In the early poetry, Eliot depicts a sterile corrupted world and a dwindling civilization, empty of any spiritual meaning. The image of woman in this poetry is of the same quality: dead in life, shallow, frustrated, a debased type, forming part of what Eliot calls a waste land. She is the true reflection of a chaotic world, heading towards its ultimate ruin.

Keywords: Woman, culture, city, waste land

T. S. Eliot’s poetry addresses a world of radical social changes, gross economic development and rapid scientific discoveries; all producing civilization’s restoring elements and its destructive weapons as well. The inauguration of the twentieth century came along with Charles Darwin’s theories of organic evolution and natural selection, Karl Marx’s interpretation of human’s history on the basis of class struggle, Sigmund Freud’s new psychological terminology concerning the hidden motivations of the subconscious mind, and Max Muller’s study of comparative religion. This boundless field of knowledge enlightened man, yet its negative,

misleading, and sometimes destructive aspects; left him with an overwhelming sense of alienation, confusion, and weariness. Within this context, Eliot dedicates his early verse to portray woman as trivial, faithless, lustful, sterile and hysterical. Eliot reduces love, the most sublime of human passions, to a mere physical act performed by those who had “abandoned the choice between two moral attitudes—for Good or for Evil—for preoccupation with a soul killing monotony of meaningless routine” (Maxwell 68). In most of the early poems the relation between man and woman ends “in uncertainty and irresolution, in disenchantment or unanswered questions” (Scofield 56). Eliot believes that an ordered and congruous society has at its core a harmonious relationship

between man and woman. The woman of the early poetry, however, is a type or symbol of a waste land. We first encounter this type of woman in "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock". The poem is a dramatic monologue that reveals the soul of an aging tragicomic figure named Prufrock who is, according to his own account, "physically unimpressive and sexually timid, [though] cultured and sensitive" (Pishkar 458). He is in love with a woman, yet the peculiarity of his character makes it impossible for his love song to materialize.

The epigraph of "The Love Song", from Dante's *Divine Comedy*, is spoken by Guido, a man in hell, who believes that he can speak freely without the fear of shame since none had ever returned from hell to the world. Guido, "condemned to hell for his continued attachment to the world ... treats the world as a reality which is desired, but never can be achieved again" (Ward 13). By the same token, Prufrock invites the reader, whom he believes to be in a hell of tormented passions, to listen to his love song, delivered in a shadowy world of frustrated passions.

The poem begins directly after sunset, suggesting its dominant tone of uncertainty and hesitation. The setting is a city with all its foul, sordid and shabby aspects:

Let us go, through certain half-
deserted streets,
The muttering retreats
Of restless nights in one-night cheap
hotels
And sawdust restaurants with oyster-
shells . . . (CP 13)

Prufrock's destination is a room crowded with women who "come and go / Talking of Michelangelo" (CP 13). The "rhyming of 'Michelangelo' and the singsong phrase 'come and go' suggests a general trivialization of culture" (Lawrence 320), where a sophisticated aesthetic subject becomes an element of gossip for pretentious women.

Those women, in whom Prufrock is interested and by whom he is disturbed, are artificial and fake, making a big fuss over Prufrock's signs of growing old: "(They will say: 'How his hair is growing thin!') / [...] / (They will say: 'But how his

arms and legs are thin')" (CP 14). Prufrock asserts that he has "known the eyes already, known them all- / The eyes that fix you in a formulated phrase" (CP 15). Consequently, the women are able to charm Prufrock only by their physical beauty: "And I have known the arms already, known them all- / Arms that are braceleted and white and bare" (CP 15). Yet this beauty is immediately undermined, for the charming arms are, "in the lamplight, / downed with light brown hair" (CP 15). It seems that the women of the poem represent "female animality" (Rosenthal 79), rather than any kind of spiritual grace.

Prufrock believes that he would never be able to convey his true self to the woman he intends to propose to and who, on her part, frequently repeats that she has been misunderstood: "'that is not what I meant at all. / That is not it, at all'" (CP 16). These sterile surroundings prompt Prufrock to evoke the image of mermaids bathing and singing. However, the mermaids would never sing to him as once they did to Ulysses and his mariners: "I have heard the mermaids singing, each to each. / I do not think that they will sing to me" (CP 17). Mermaids, being traditionally symbols of beauty, conceit, arrogance and temptation, are depicted as having, along with their natural hair, more unnatural one, since they are "wreathed with seaweed red and brown" (CP 17). This description given by Prufrock indicates his attraction to their physical beauty, missing what is more important: they are also symbols of life which Prufrock is too inert to engage with.

Another suffering figure appears in "Portrait of a Lady"; where Eliot presents a frustrated and self-deluding lady in a relationship with a man younger than her. The lady's love affair is not triggered by true passions and admiration, but as a substitute to boredom and weariness. The epigraph of the poem is from Christopher Marlowe's *The Jew of Malta*, suggesting the ethical uncertainty that characterises the poem.

The poem begins with the line "Among the smoke and fog of December afternoon" (CP 18), which coheres with the "death, gloom, trance, [. . .] lack of vitality . . . futility and indecision" (Maxwell 64) that characterises the atmosphere of the poem.

The emotional abuse that the lady inflicts upon the young man is evident from the very beginning, by telling him that “I have saved this afternoon for you” (CP 18). The dim lights in the lady’s room reminds the young man of ‘Juliet’s tomb’, a reference foretelling death and tragic love, and juxtaposing the lady’s lustful ends with Juliet’s true love. The reference to ‘Juliet’s tomb’ also suggests that the lady, who is “about to reach her journey’s end” (CP 20), stands for the “decadent romanticism” against the “dull realism” (Moody 22) of the young man. To create unison of feelings with her companion, the lady refers to Frederic Chopin. The man, however, is bored and irritated by her pretentiousness:

‘So intimate, this Chopin, that I
think his soul
Should be resurrected only among
friends
Some two or three who will not
touch the bloom
That is rubbed and questioned in the
corner room’ (CP 18)

Her companion is unable to realize that she is actually attempting to cover her deep doubts and anxieties.

The second part of the poem begins in spring since the lady “has a bowl of lilacs in her room / And twists one in her fingers while she talks” (CP 19). The blooming of lilacs symbolizes universal rebirth, while the lady’s twisting of the lilacs indicates the theme of death in life. She clings to an unfulfilling relationship because she fears being alone:

‘Ah, my friend, you do not know,
you do not know
What life is, you who hold it in your
hands;
(Slowly twisting the lilac stalks)
You let it flow from you, you let it
flow,
And youth is cruel, and has no more
remorse
And smiles at situations which it
cannot see. (CP 19)

This leads to the lady’s reminiscence of her past life in Paris to which she refers as her ‘buried life’. The expression recalls Matthew Arnold’s poem of the same title “with its Victorian melancholy, its slow-weariness, but also its romantic belief that there is a

‘buried life,’ ‘actual stream’ beneath the distracting surface” (Scofield 65). The lady, however, realizes her inability to express her inmost true self.

On the other hand, the lady reveals a complete misunderstanding of the young man’s feelings and her assumptions appear to be false: “I am always sure that you understand / My feelings, always sure that you feel, / Sure that across the gulf you reach your hand” (CP 20). She remains unable to create a meaningful conversation, and she ultimately draws an uninteresting image of herself as a dull hostess:

But what have I, but what have I, my
friend,
To give you, what can you receive
from me?
Only the friendship and the
sympathy
Of one about to reach her journey’s
end
I shall sit her, serving tea to friends .
. . (CP 20)

However the young man announces, in the gloom of October, his intention to go abroad, upon which the lady comments: “I have been wondering frequently of late / (But our beginnings never know our ends!) / Why we have not developed into friends” (CP 21). This indicates that the lady’s role, at the end of the poem, “remains as empty, as vulnerable and as repetitive as ever” (Ward 28), a pattern which will appear again in Eliot’s early poetry.

Eliot’s next poem presents a real inferno of life in the metropolis. The modern city of “Preludes” parallels the Medieval Inferno “with its dramatic presentation of states of passion, despair, and suffering” (Scofield 35). Eliot’s inferno is inhabited with hysterical, capricious, and wanton women. This reminds that “Hell is not a place but a state; that man is damned or blessed in the creatures of his imagination as well as in men who have actually lived; and that Hell, though a state, is a state which can only be thought of, and perhaps only experienced, by the projection of sensory images” (Eliot, *Selected Essays* 250).

The third part of Eliot’s “Preludes”, presents a woman slothfully attempting to rise from bed in the

early morning. She tossed the blanket while she “dozed, and watched the night revealing” (CP 24), the poet addresses her, “the thousand sordid images / Of which your soul was constituted; / They flickered against the ceiling” (CP 24). The poet continues addressing the woman while morning arrived with its familiar sounds:

And when the entire world came
back
And the light crept up between the
shutters,
And you heard the sparrows in the
gutters
You had such a vision of the street
As the street hardly understands . . .
(CP 24)

Eliot’s personification of the street is an attempt to show its similarity to the woman, presenting her in the lowest possible status. J. Grover Smith writes the following in this regard: “Woman and street alike are earthbound: she supine in bed, ‘he’ trampled under foot; and in their hypothetical aspirations upward, when her soul’s images flicker overhead and his soul is ‘stretched tight across the skies’, they but mirror the degraded nature of their conscious selves” (140). The poem reflects the hideous and threatening aspects of both woman and modern cities.

The speaker of the poem exposes the darker side of the woman through his description of her ugly appearance:

Sitting along the bed’s edge, where
You curled the papers from your
hair,
Or clasped the yellow soles of feet
In the palms of both solid hands.
(CP 24)

The lines convey the despair, wretchedness and wickedness that characterises Eliot’s early image of woman. Finally, the woman appears in the fourth part of the “Preludes” in a quite different manner. This part presents old women who lack the necessities of life, besides being “as aimless as the withered leaves and newspapers” (Wright 23). They are the true reflection of the contemporary world which is dreadful, coarse and ignoble: “The world revolves like ancient women / Gathering fuel in vacant lots” (CP 25).

Eliot continues addressing the filthy aspects of modern cities in “Rhapsody on a Windy Night”. The speaker of the poem encounters a harlot loitering in the street: “Regard the woman / Who hesitates towards you now in the light of the door” (CP 26). The speaker is both enchanted and repelled by her wanton look. The enchantment is depicted through the image of the door opening “on her like a grin” (CP 26). The repulsion is evident from the ugly description she is given: “And you see the corner of her eye / Twist like a crooked pin” (CP 26). She is shabby and dirty as her surroundings: “You see the border of her dress / Is torn and stained with sand” (CP 26). The poem presents the image of woman in its most corrupted and debased form. The speaker expands his vision that even the moon, as a symbol of feminine spirituality, is converted into an ill and ugly harlot:

Regard the moon,
.....
She winks a feeble eye,
She smiles into corners.
.....
A washed-out smallpox cracks her
face . . . (CP 27)

The moon has lost her traditional role as guardian of lovers; she rather symbolises an age of fading love. The remnant of the glorious past is so insignificant that it is referred to as “the dry geranium . . . failing to satisfy the sense of smell, give way to the stale aroma of ‘female smells in shuttered rooms’ via the smells of ‘chestnuts in the streets’” (Gray 47). Woman, thus, is perceived as a symbol of evil because of the very nature of her relation with man. This discloses Eliot’s influence by Charles Baudelaire who believes that “what distinguishes the relation of man and woman from the copulation of beasts is the knowledge of Good and Evil (of moral Good and Evil which are not natural Good and Bad or Puritan Right and Wrong” (Eliot, *The Sacred Wood* 428-29). Eliot’s early poetry stresses on woman’s mechanical and lustful relationship with man, constituting an essential part of what he perceives as a world that lacks moral purpose.

In a more complex poem, “Gerontion”, Eliot’s meditation on the significance of human life is suggested from the very beginning in the epigraph from William Shakespeare’s *Measure for Measure*. The lines are spoken by the Duke while visiting

Claudio who is doomed to death. The Duke prompts him to desire death since life is but “conflict, cowardice, insecurity, disease, and the scramble for riches” (Drew 21), in which one ends old with “neither heat, affection, limb nor beauty” (Drew 21). This coheres with the theme of the poem which addresses the fact that Western ethics and values in the Modern era lack moral foundations that are necessary to the survival of European culture heritage.

The poem is written in blank verse, and the monologue is delivered by Gerontion; ‘a little old man’, who is waiting ‘for rain’ in ‘a dry month’ (CP 39). Gerontion lives in ‘a decayed house’ (CP 39), representing Europe at large. As part of Gerontion’s sordid household, the woman has a foul and filthy image. Instead of presenting her as a mother and or partner, symbols of productivity, kindness and love, she is a mere sick and petty housekeeper: “The woman keeps the kitchen, makes tea, / Sneezes at evening, poking the peevish gutter” (CP 39). Her sneezing suits Gerontion’s ailing world. “The gutter is animistically conceived as ‘peevish’, defying human will; it suggests malfunctioning, desuetude, blockage of the channels of purgation and disposal, the need for violent thrusts to free the pipes” (Juan 115). The poem is a representation of the condition of Europe in 1919, when it was pervaded by “dogwood and chestnut, flowering judas” (CP 39), as a symbol of betrayal. It was a period when, in Europe, there were many “ironic gestures toward Western religion, tradition, toward what they know ‘in memory only’, toward what history tells them” (Gross 47).

Consequently, in “Gerontion”, history is regarded as a fickle and deceitful mistress. To Gerontion, “history is the memory of the race, the memory of heroic actions, the memory of his own symbolic past with its distressing lack of continuity” (Gross 49). This variation is the reason for describing history as having “many cunning passages, contrived corridors” (CP 40). According to Harvey Gross, “the passage and issue- issues in the sense of exists but also in the sense of points of dispute or matters for decision- are already built- and prepared, there is the implication that the course of history is determined” (49). Man is destined to inhabit the corridors of history and be guided by vanities: “History has many cunning

passages, contrived corridors / And issues, deceives with whispering ambitions, / Guides us by vanities” (CP 40). History, as a tricky mistress, dooms man to his ultimate ruin. The main cause for his final destruction is that history provides a variety of deities and the real difficulty comes from man’s attempt to decide the authentic one. This abundance of deities which history provides makes “the craving for the one God goes unsatisfied and ultimately dies” (Vickery 28):

Think now
She gives when our attention is
distracted
And what she gives, gives with such
supple confusions
That the giving famishes the
craving. (CP 40)

In this confused world, Christ comes too late. He is “the last of a long line of dying gods; hence, people wearied from attempting to determine the true god . . . have lost the ecstasy of assent” (Vickery 28). All of which generates fear that there is no God at all:

Gives too late
What’s not believed in, or if still
believed,
In memory only, reconsidered
passion. Gives too soon
Into weak hands, what’s thought can
be dispensed with
Till the refusal propagates a fear.
(CP 40)

Lillian Feder mentions that ‘she’ in the passage of history may not refer precisely to history. Yet, “all the promise and disappointment, the aspiration and the failure of man’s role in history are conveyed through his relationship with a controlling mythical figure-a mother or a beloved, recklessly giving and withholding, without thought to the desires of the ‘weak’ recipient” (310). This, along with the moral degeneration, prompts Gerontion to picture the end of a perilous world:

What will the spider do,
Suspend its operations, will the
weevil

Delay? Be Bailhache, Fresca, Mrs.
Cammel, whirled
Beyond the circuit of shuddering
Bear
In fractured atoms. (CP 41)

The many names of women in the passage of destruction: de bailhache, Fresca and Mrs. Cammel, suggest the universal nature of the final ruin (Feder 310).

Eliot presents a waste land inhabited by covetous and lustful people in "Sweeney Erect", which epigraph is from *The Maid's Tragedy* by Francis Beaumont and John Fletcher. This sets the mood of the poem as one of betrayal and disappointment. The lines are delivered by Aspatia after been deserted by her lover, and upon which she orders her attendants to weave her story into a tapestry by drawing that of Ariadne's, her mythical counterpart, abandonment. For more emphasis on the theme of betrayal, Eliot makes a brief reference to Nausicaa who is forsaken by Ulysses. The juxtaposition of these mythical females with an epileptic is Eliot's parody of grief.

The first couple of stanzas are written in "the same 'classical' (or Senecan) vein, weighted with Latinate words and allusions to Greek place and myth" (Scofield 92-93). The lines refer to Ariadne deserted by Theseus. This episode, however, is immediately followed by the nasty atmosphere of a public house, where an epileptic wakes up in the morning: "withered root of knots of hair / Slitted below and gushed with eyes / This oval O cropped out with teeth" (CP 44). The woman's epilepsy is indicated from her violent movements: "Then straighten out from heel to hip / pushing the framework of the bed / And clawing at the pillow slip" (CP 44).

Sweeney, a debased character who appears frequently in Eliot's early poetry, is totally indifferent to "the epileptic on the bed", while she "curves backward, clutching at her sides", for he "knows the female temperament" (CP 45). Together, Sweeney and the epileptic form an image of a lustful and debased pair. The epileptic's hysteria makes a fuss in the brothel, consequently:

The ladies of the corridor
Find themselves involved,
disgraced,

Call witness to their principles
And deprecate the lack of taste . . .
(CP 45)

The owner of the house, Mrs. Turner, "intimates / It does the house no sort of good" (CP 45). Ironically, the women of the brothel are all concerned with the reputation of their public house lest it should be stained by the epileptic's uncontrolled behavior. Then another woman, Doris, appears "toweled from the bath, / Enters padding on broad feet" (CP 45). She is the only person who tries to calm down the epileptic by bringing "sal volatile / And a glass of brandy neat" (CP 45). The women of the public house live in a world of its own debased and twisted standards; they are totally indifferent to the final destruction to which their lives are pointed. As D. E. S. Maxwell believes, in Eliot's early poetry, "always love has been betrayed and fertility denied; always the hope of rebirth is offered. But the rebirth demands sacrifice, suffering, and a life conditioned by principles far different from those to which 'the ladies of the corridor' call witness" (81-82).

The theme of treachery along with debased and lustful characters continues in "Sweeney among the Nightingales". The 'Nightingales' of the title have two interpretations: on the one hand, the term, in slang, refers to harlots which is the exact nature of the women in the poem. Alternatively, it has a mythological depth, referring to Philomel who was raped by Tereus and metamorphosed into a nightingale, and whose song is a regretful lament about being raped by her brother-in-law. The difference between the two interpretations reflects the degeneration that the modern world has undergone.

The epigraph of the poem is from Aeschylus' *Agamemnon*. It refers to Agamemnon's dying words after Clytemnestra has smitten him. Thus, the sense of betrayal and death is imminent in the poem. The atmosphere of the poem suggests a sterile world, where the moon, as a symbol of fertility, is declining: "The circles of the stormy moon / Slide westward toward the River Plate" (CP 59). The raven, which "was to expose person's guilt of infidelity . . . and was also frequently held to visit blight and sterility on the land" (Vickery 242), is associated with bereavement: "death and the Raven drift above" (CP 59). Among these ominous signs, Sweeney is guarding "the horned

gate" (CP 59), of the Sacred Wood "where the ritual death of the old priest was enacted under the emblem of the crescent moon" (Mundra 45). The sense of despair is further emphasized by the line "Gloomy Orion and the Dog / Are veiled; and hushed the shrunken seas" (CP 51). Both 'Orion and the Dog' are stars that herald the fertility season in the ancient Egyptian calendar. In Sweeney's world, both are eclipsed, indicating barrenness. In agreement with this atmosphere, the sea as a symbol of life had ebbed, carrying no sign of vitality to Sweeney's world. (Mundra 45).

The setting of the poem is a public house in South America, where a number of shadowy figures are conspiring against Sweeney. The woman who is referred to as "the person in the Spanish cape" (CP 59), is a drunken harlot. While trying "to sit on Sweeney's knees", she "slips and pulls the table cloth" and "overturns a coffee-cup" (CP 59). "Reorganized upon the floor", the drunken harlot "yawns and draws a stocking up" (CP 59). The other woman in the poem is Rachel nee Rabinovitch, who "tears at the grapes with murderous paws" (CP 59). Both women are plotting against Sweeney: "She and the lady in the cape / Are suspect, thought to be in league" (CP 60). Significantly, Rachael and her sister Leah are both mentioned in the Old Testament as two pious and blessed women. In Sweeney's world, however, Rachael and her companion are apparently irreligious and disgraceful.

David Ward believes that the nightingales, which are referred to in the penultimate stanza, suggest the Philomel myth which "follows the familiar Ovidian pattern of rape, death, and rebirth in a new form" (36). The concept of death and re-birth is further emphasized by the reference to the nightingale's singing near "the Covent of the Sacred Heart" (CP 60), which makes them "a composite icon of Christian re-birth" (Feder 128). This occurs simultaneously with a violent, corrupted, and bloody world, represented by Agamemnon's murder at the hand of his wife, and that of Sweeney at the hand of his nightingale's, alluded to in the poem.

The sense of desperation with woman at its core is thoroughly explored in the *Waste Land*, which

is set "against a background of the Holy Grail legend and has its impotent king ruling the barren land" (Sulaiman 294). The poem explores a ruined heap of values which once constituted human culture. The image of woman becomes more intense and bleak, as it is compared and contrasted with a variety of biblical, historical, and mythological female figures. This paper, however, has given an account of the image of woman in Eliot's early poetry. The women of "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock" stand for an undervalued cultural heritage. They are symbols for lust and sexuality rather than love and fertility. Another type of woman appears in "Portrait of a Lady", where an elderly lady suffers from a purposeless life and an unsatisfactory relationship. "Preludes", "Rhapsody on a Windy Night", and "Sweeney Erect" present women that mirror the debased nature of life in modern cities. In "Gerontion", history is represented as a fickle mistress, cunningly deceiving and destroying vain men. Woman of Eliot's early poetry mirrors a world that has lost faith in spiritual values, religion, and tradition. Eliot dedicates his early image of woman to embody a whirlwind of bitter passions, lechery, desires, and trepidation. Significantly, Eliot's later poetry proceeds from this intense journey through the darkness of human soul and the chaos of the modern world into the purification and salvation of humanity. This is the topic of another study, especially in relation to the image of woman.

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