

MASTER IN ADVANCED ENGLISH STUDIES: LANGUAGES AND CULTURES IN
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Final Master Thesis

FEMALE WASTELANDERS REVISITED:
GENDER EQUALITY IN *THE WASTE LAND*.

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Abstract

For years many critics strongly believed and defended Eliot's misogyny in his poem *The Waste Land*. But under the main motif of his poetry, that of sterility in human relations, the grief appears shared by both sexes. My approach to his poem will defend that Eliot was not mistreating the female gender, but matching both genders under the mechanization of sexual relations and its consequences: lack of regeneration and communication.

Keywords: Gender Studies, Feminism, Gender Equality, T. S. Eliot, *The Waste Land*.

Durante muchos años, la crítica literaria ha considerado que *The Waste Land*, de T. S. Eliot, es una muestra de la misoginia del autor, pero ambos sexos parecen estar condenados bajo el tema principal del poema: la esterilidad de las relaciones humanas. El enfoque de este análisis libera al poema de tal etiqueta, ofreciendo así una visión más conciliadora y ecuánime del poeta. El autor retrata a ambos sexos de la misma manera, mostrando la mecanización de las relaciones sexuales y las consecuencias de dicha mecanización: la incomunicación y la falta de regeneración.

Palabras clave: Estudios de Género, Feminismo, Igualdad de Género, T. S. Eliot, La Tierra Baldía.

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Female Wastelanders Revisited: Gender Equality in *The Waste Land*

Introduction

T. S. Eliot has been charged with misogyny and scholars have ventured that he tried to hide his supposed homosexuality under the mistreatment of the female gender by depicting them as victims of a male-centered society. As an example of this, Weinberg has declared that Eliot always shows a “scathing criticism of woman” (1984: 31). Miller also contributes to this idea when he talks of Eliot’s misogyny and troubled sex (2005: 314). I consider that these readings are only an attempt to demonstrate an idea that nowadays is widely accepted and that everybody is trying to change, but committing ourselves to interpretations that always place woman on the victim side may blur other possible readings. The sense of a unique imagination proper to women, and thus, a certain way to read literature, may reiterate the familiar stereotypes that the feminist movement is trying to erase (Showalter, 1977: 12). Domna C. Stanton has also called attention upon this point: “a disconnection with the real can lead to a regressive mystification of the ‘feminine’ and may yield nothing more than a new ‘lingo’, a code doomed to repetition and extinction” (1985: 73). I agree with Gilbert-Maceda, who has highlighted the way in which both men and women in *The Waste Land* are often described in the same “unflattering light” (1994: 107). In fact, I consider *The Waste Land* to be one of those literary texts that can be defined, in words of Monique Wittig, “as a war machine” (Butler, 1990: 119) – a text that directly attacks the hierarchical division of gender.

My approach will be based upon mainly the combination of two works: Judith Fetterley’s *The Resisting Reader* and Mary Devereaux’s article “Oppressive Texts, Resisting Readers and the Gendered Spectator: The New Aesthetics”. Fetterley’s theory basically aims to add the female point of view of a work that has been initially thought for an implied male reader. To do so, she puts on the front line the female reading of texts, resisting the imposed

male interpretation of such works. Fetterley defends a reading of the text against the text itself (1978: 13-56). Following this line of re-interpretations, Deveraux points out the necessity of “re-reading, [as] reading against the grain, or [as] re-vision”. This basically consists of the reappropriation of existing works by offering an alternative interpretation (1990: 346). My analysis of *The Waste Land* will not be another one in which the role of the female characters are labeled as “victims”, but rather a new feminist approach. I will try to demonstrate that both genders are treated equally in the main theme of the poem, which centers on confusion and identity crisis.

Besides this conciliatory feminist approach, I will also consider Eliot’s own vision of the literary process. In reading *The Waste Land*, one should be aware of Eliot’s own conception of poetry and criticism, not only to get the closest approach to what the poem meant for him, but also to establish a framework for future interpretations of his work. Eliot’s own notes to the poem mark those limits, and texts such as *The Use of Poetry and the Use of Criticism* shed some light to the possibilities of the different readings of his writings:

What a poem means is as much what it means to others as what it means to the author; and indeed, in the course of time a poet may become merely a reader in respect to his own works, forgetting the original meaning – or without forgetting, merely changing. (UPUC 1950: 130)

In this way, my reading of *The Waste Land* would be also guided by Eliot’s own perception of literary writing and theory; since I will pay close attention to the author’s notes and intentions, but also adding a new value to his poem, regarding his treatment of gender, and a new perspective for future feminist incursions in his work.

In order to do so, I will analyze the contrasts and parallelisms between the two genders. This analysis will be applied to the five couples that appear in the poem; namely Marie and her cousin (in “The Burial of the Dead”), the lovers in the hyacinth garden, the

young man carbuncular and the typist in “The Fire Sermon”, the neurasthenic woman and her silent interlocutor in “A Game of Chess”, and finally, Lil and her absent husband, also present in this second section. Furthermore, I will expand this analysis by studying the figure of Tiresias, the hermaphrodite voice of the poem, who, as Eliot himself comments in his own note to l. 218,

Although a mere spectator and not indeed a “character,” is yet the most important personage in the poem, uniting all the rest [...] and the two sexes meet in Tiresias. What Tiresias sees, in fact, is the substance of the poem.

I will establish a comparison between Tiresias and Madame Sosostris, the female prophet, and widen this analysis in relation to “Death by Water” and “What the Thunder Said”.

Marie and her cousin

In a first approach to the poem, we can clearly identify five couples who act through binary combinations, in which everything that is represented by a woman is completed by a man, and vice versa. This complementarity shows the need for a balance that, whenever is not reached, breaks the cycle of regeneration. In “The Burial of the Dead” Marie and her cousin appear as the first couple of the poem. Although her male counterpart is only seen through Marie’s eyes, we can observe that he is the one to save her from her fears by “taking her out on a sled” (l. 14). They went down the mountains, in the same direction that she takes when she goes south during winter. These actions acquire a substantial symbolism when related to the title of this section, “The Burial of the Dead”, and to the associations that the name “Marie” brings to our mind. Mary works as a double-edged (s)word: her name can represent, at the same time, the two “traditional” types of women in Western Catholic culture, Virgin Mary and Mary Magdalene; the pure, motherly, submissive woman and the ‘prostitute’, the independent woman free of male dominance. She herself and the dichotomy she embodies are released when she is thrown from the heights of the mountain downwards, that is– when she

is demystified. “The Burial of the Dead” also *buries* these old preconceptions, this dualistic image, and the new possibilities that are to come scare Mary. She finally decides to trust her cousin and, by “holding on tight” (l. 16), by getting closer to the opposite sex and reaching a balance, she reaches her liberation: “[...] And down we went. / In the mountains, there you feel free” (l. 16-17). Marie is free from labels but also from any kind of male influence, since she is the only one described without the presence of a love/sexual relationship, although the male presence is also present in this liberation. The reference to the descent from the mountain also evokes Dante’s liberation after his descent to hell. Marie’s liberation is, therefore, both literary and real, sacred and earthly, and represents the purge from old (hi)stories and traditions, establishing, at the same time, a connection with them.

The lovers in the hyacinth garden

In the scene referred to as “the hyacinth garden”, we find a girl recalling a previous year’s event with the hyacinths: “You gave me hyacinths first a year ago” (l. 35). This reference to the past implies that the fertility cycle, both the spiritual practice and the sexual relationship, has already come to an end and that it needs to start over again: “first a year ago”. It presupposes a necessary repetition that the male speaker in the hyacinth garden seems not willing to perpetuate, or at least not able to do so. Right after this erotico-mystical encounter, he remembers:

[...] *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*.

(l. 38-41, emphasis added)

We should remark the way in which we have access to the hyacinth man's feelings: he does not speak. The girl tries to communicate with him but she finds silence. Traditionally, silence "belonged" to women, and it was a silence imposed by the superior status of men in the patriarchal system. Here, we find the opposite thing: although it may seem that it is the hyacinth lover's choice not to speak, it is actually a silence required in order to make the gender system work. These requirements are what Judith Butler referred to as "performativity of gender", or how gender is constructed through society's different speeches and how we help to perpetuate it through the performance of assigned roles (1990: 15-16). Thus, the hyacinth man consented to establish a relationship with this girl, not in a natural way and because he wanted to, but because he is trying to fulfill what is expected from him. This behavior can also be found in the typist and in the boudoir scene, which I will analyze later.

Another reason to believe that both male and female genders are treated in the same way is the gender ambiguity detected in this passage by Cyrena N. Pondrom; namely, the homoerotic connection of the girl with the myth of Hyacinth. This connection, Pondrom argues, "forces a construction of gender" (2005: 426). The possibility of finding ambiguity in this part of the poem means that the gender roles are not clear. Therefore, one could consider that one gender is being submitted to the other, and vice versa: it would not be just one gender which is mistreated, but both and none at the same time. I will reinforce this reasoning by providing a very basic and symbolic interpretation of Hyacinth's death: it is said that Apollo killed his lover Hyacinth when the discus he had thrown accidentally struck the young boy. Apollo wanted to demonstrate that he was better at throwing the discus, and Hyacinth wanted to impress Apollo (Ovid, Book X, 162-219). Giving more importance to one of the two sides destroys a relationship, since it destabilizes the equality inside it. A balance between the two parts is necessary for regeneration.

Eliot's text is also ambiguous regarding the presupposed failure of the sexual encounter and the amorous relationship between the girl and the speaker. Relating the scene to that of *Tristan und Isolde*, which closes this section with verse 42: "*Oed' und leer das Meer.*", we can see how the insufficiency of response before such a situation is shared by both the girl and the speaker. As Marja Palmer argues,

The Wagnerian frame of expectation and abandonment surrounds its context, consisting of an ambiguous relationship between the hyacinth girl and the speaker. . . Was the hyacinth girl failed by the speaker, or has he been deceived by her? The text provides no clear answers.

(Palmer, 1996: 164)

The girl's memories seem to be full of melancholy. The speaker's thoughts are full of deception. Both are facing a situation that none of them are able to control: but who is the one to blame? Both the girl and the male speaker are powerless before a disconnected communication and forgotten rituals.

The neurasthenic woman and her silent interlocutor

In "A Game of Chess" we find the couple formed by a neurasthenic woman, described only by the objects that surround her and who directly addresses her partner in what is almost a monologue; and the partner himself, who does not appear described in any way and has no voice. The woman's attributes are transformed into something artificial, and the man's memories also refer to the artificiality of perception: he only remembers the Shakespearean quote "those are pearls that were his eyes"; therefore, perception in both genders is lost, especially when regarding the capacity of empathy (Palmer, 1996: 178). It is important to remark, as Carol Christ does, that "Eliot associates carefully composed female image with an insufficiently articulated male voice" (1981: 36). Especially in this section of the poem,

where the lack of vision – the Cupid covering his eyes, the male lover (“Do you see nothing?”, l. 122), the reference to Shakespeare (“Those are pearls that were his eyes”), Albert, who cannot stand looking at Lil- is “juxtaposed to images of a deconstituted body, imagined alternately as male and as female” (1981: 33). Therefore, Eliot does not show an exclusive victimization of women, but both male and female are victims of similar circumstances. Both men and women are involved in an artificial behavior established by society but perpetuated by them: their acts are mechanical, expected, but never spontaneous or desired. Thus, their choices are conscious, but their sense of responsibility remains silent: this is the way in which male figures chose to fulfil their penance, while the female voice speaks abruptly.

Moreover, the neurasthenic woman is subtly associated to Philomel and her rape. Philomela was “rudely forced” by Tereu (l. 100), but in exchange she got an “inviolable voice” (l. 101) that filled the desert. It is easy to identify this desert with the waste land, and the inviolable voice with the motif repeated along the poem, that of the absence of communication and balance. As we know, Philomel could not talk because Tereu cut her tongue. However, she could tell her story by weaving. This weaving can be associated with the neurasthenic woman and the brushing of her hair, which would “spread out in fiery points/ Glowed into words” (l. 109-110). Thus, the unspoken story of Philomela is performed by this woman, who is rhetorically “raped” by her interlocutor’s silence, in a parallelism with Tereu’s act when he cut Philomela’s tongue. Both women persist on trying to communicate; both men are victims of their silences’ consequences: but both sexes are ultimately transformed in symbols of their own stories.

The insistence upon Philomel's myth and the incapacity to speak her trauma, and Eliot's attempt to give her a voice in his representation of the world's decadence, are important issues to take into account, especially when considering that many have read this

passage as a proof of Eliot's misogyny. By contrasting Philomel's figure to that of the modern woman, Eliot adds a quality of pathos to every woman in the poem, hinting to their condition as victims of sexual carelessness (Palmer 1989: 205); and making men participants of the same feeling of desolation.

By these means the monologue of the neurasthenic woman and the thoughts of her interlocutor acquire a great relevance. As I have said before, she insists on speaking because "her nerves are bad tonight" (l. 111) and she "never knows what he is thinking about" (l. 114). Contrary to the hyacinth lover's episode, which was specific in time, this couple seem to have a continuous problem with communication that has never been solved. It is not usual for them to communicate, so we can conclude that their relationship is not very profound; they seem to be occasional lovers. Besides, if the neurasthenic woman seems to have problems with her nerves, her lover is not much better. He seems to suffer some emotional problem that keeps him silent, or simply not willing to speak. The woman's obsessions about the noises of the wind and the door also help to portray their isolation, and the extreme silence perceived in the scene. Furthermore, these noises directly address to the previous description in which the silenced voice of Philomela is represented: "And still she cried, and still the world pursues, / "Jug Jug" to dirty ears" (l. 102-103). For the man, the noises are "Nothing again nothing" (l. 120). This is important if we take as a background the myth of Philomel. Now that she, and the female, has a voice, is it relevant if the male character seems not to listen to it? Now that the roles have been inverted, has anything been improved? Again, Eliot is showing us the need for a balance between the two sexes, and the two genders.

The woman keeps on trying to speak to her counterpart, whereas the man keeps silent. This brings us to the climax of the "dialogue", in which she threatens: "I shall rush out as I am, and walk the street/ With my hair down, so." (l. 132-133). The menace of showing her state to the rest of the world, both physical and mental (and possibly caused by her

interlocutor), does not work, because he does not seem to care about it. Moreover, it seems to be a typical situation, because he does not take her seriously. She knows this, and finally asks: “What shall we do to-morrow? / What shall we ever do?” (l. 133-134). They seem to be stuck in the same point, in a repetitive cycle, with no regeneration. His answer confirms this, since he seems to repeat the daily routine that they follow:

The hot water at ten.

And if it rains, a closed car at four.

And we shall play a game of chess,

Pressing lidless eyes and waiting for a knock upon the door.

(l. 135-38)

The game of chess is a metaphor of their relationship. Again, we face the opposition of contraries (black/white), instead of reaching the middle course. Also, the fact of making reference to these extreme colors stands for the absence of a third and available option, where not everything consists of oppositions. However, the game is still a game for two, and men and women play under equal terms. Both male and female partake in a situation that escapes their abilities and they are being directed to an unknown destiny: “They are pieces as well as players” (Palmer, 1996: 174). These rigid gender roles, represented by the neurasthenic woman and her silent partner, are condemned to a repetitive spiral of apathy and lack of communication if the different sides are not connected or equal.

The change from the original title of this part of the poem (“In a Cage”) to the final “A Game of Chess” also reinforces this interpretation. The first title would focus our attention on the repressed female victim, and change the whole meaning of this part. But Eliot’s change is aimed to address our attention to the male-female relationship: “Both participate in the same

game on the same conditions; both share the experience of being forced to play life's game without any prospect of evading its inexorable rules" (Palmer, 1996: 176).

Lil and her husband

The next part of the poem is in itself another proof to believe that Eliot had in mind both genders when he wanted to portray decadence of the period and the way in which this decadence was ultimately represented by the instability of traditional gender roles. This is due to the difficulties that all of the characters in *The Waste Land* have to face in order to match their natural tendencies with gender as a category constructed through speech. As Pondrom puts it, "Eliot teases language to reveal the painful dialectic between production and reproduction of gender categories, between gender performed and gender experienced as imposed from without" (2005: 427).

Lil and Lil's friend conversation is the clearest example of this situation. To begin with, it results obvious, again, how the lack of communication affects relationships between men and women: the fact that Albert, Lil's husband, is absent in their conversation, and that it is her friend who speaks on his behalf, seems to be a consistent proof. The female speaker reflects a male attitude in her speech; she takes the leading role in the dialogue, telling Lil what to do in order to avoid Albert look for another woman. She assures the listener that Albert "can't bear to look at Lil" (l. 146), because Lil does not look pretty enough for him; and if she does not do anything about it, "there's others will" (l. 149). As we can see, Lil's friend's behavior perpetuates the old gender system in which women were defined by their relationships with men: being/not being pretty, having/not having children, being/not being married. The tension of the dialogue, the subtle confession of an infidelity and the exhaustion of these imposed roles are emphasized by the repetition of the "chorus" "HURRY UP

PLEASE ITS TIME”. Perhaps Eliot is calling our attention to the fact that these roles are not natural and that gender speech is obsolete: gender should not be constructed, but discovered and felt.

Lil’s response full of apathy about the way in which she looks, Lil's friend gives her a piece of advice: “If you don't like it you can get on with it” (l. 133). Lil's situation in this part of the poem summarizes the whole message: what can one do against something as established as gender behavior? The awkwardness caused by the contrast between society's expectations and one's own desires becomes the focus of the entire dialogue. With this scene, Eliot is portraying the misleading reality in which all of us move, both male and female. The fact that in this dialogue the voice of a man is performed by a woman is an evidence of how both genders, and not only one, help to keep the system immovable.

On the other hand, Lil neither feels comfortable with the answer to her problems. The exhausted female body here stands for the exhausting gender, which has been victim of the *construction*. Abortion pills seem not to be an effective answer to this, because she has never been the same since she took them (l. 161). Moreover, Lil’s friend’s accusation makes clear that the choice is inevitable, you cannot have both freedom and marriage at the same time: “What you get married for if you don’t want children?” (l. 164). This shows how a total rejection and resistance do not improve the conditions. Again, Eliot transmits the need for an equilibrium in which gender and sexuality grow together with society, without resulting unnatural or unwanted.

The typist and the young man carbuncular

In “The Fire Sermon” we find another couple performing a sexual encounter without any kind of communication. Both appear described by the objects that surround them and by

their occupation. The young man carbuncular is a “small house agent’s clerk”, ironic enough if we think that his dedication is to sell future homes to people, and he seems to have no place to go but to the typist’s house; and only for an occasional encounter. Both of them embody an automatic sexual relationship that is present in the whole poem: a repetitive task without a creative source. Carol Christ associates work with sex, stating that “sex has become as mechanical and dull as the world of work. Convention and the need for release dictate that it should take place, but there is no insight gained or life enhanced” (1981: 82). This perfectly describes the way in which the sexual intercourse takes place:

The meal is ended, she is *bored and tired*,
 Endeavours to engage her in caresses
 Which still are *unreproved, if undesired*.
 Flushed and decided, he assaults at once;
 Exploring hands encounter *no defence*;
 His vanity requires no response,
 And makes a *welcome of indifference*. (l. 236-242, italics added)

The same apathy and fruitless, mechanical sexual intercourse happens in all the scenes throughout the repetition of images. Like Philomela with her weaving, and the neurasthenic woman with her hair; the typist repeats the same movements after the “undesired” cycle:

When lovely woman stoops to folly and
 Paces about her room again, alone,
 She smooths her hair with automatic hand,
 And puts a record on the gramophone. (l. 253-256)

Eliot is using repetition to complain about a repetitive cycle in order to keep us focused on the need for regeneration, and the reconsideration of the concept of gender and the

differences between genders. He chooses to do so by using the precise moment in which both genders are joined and are supposed to create a new life. The fact that sex is recurrent does not mean that Eliot had any fetish with sex, just as portraying mistreated women does not mean that he was a misogynist. Males also suffer the lack of communication with the opposite sex and suffer sexual problems, although the way to transmit it is through physical and mental powerlessness. The mechanical behavior, especially regarding sex and relationships between sexes, is present in both genders, under any circumstance. As I have mentioned elsewhere, most of the time Eliot uses a female voice, and a male silence, contrary to traditional literary roles. Furthermore, these voices are mixed with defragmented bodies and lives. Menand confirms this idea by explaining Eliot's use of sex:

The sex in Eliot's poetry is almost always bad sex, either libidinally limp or morally vicious. But that's because for Eliot bad sex was the symptom of a failure of civilization [...] Eliot was disgusted by modern life. (127-128)

Tiresias, the androgynous character

The reasons discussed so far acquire more strength when taking into consideration the main persona of the poem: Tiresias. As Eliot remarks in his notes to the poem,

Tiresias is the most important personage in the poem, uniting all the rest. Just as the one-eyed merchant, seller of currants, melts into the Phoenician Sailor, and the latter is not wholly distinct from Ferdinand Prince of Naples, so all the women are one woman, and the two sexes meet in Tiresias. What Tiresias *sees*, in fact, is the substance of the poem. (note to line 218)

Therefore, the plurality of female and male perspectives conform a single woman and a single man, and both of them are united in Tiresias. Furthermore, Eliot is not only putting on the same level both genders and, therefore, treating them as equals, but establishing a persona out of an "amalgamation or melting together of the other personae" (Churchill, 2005: 59).

This means that Eliot is criticizing, through the use of Tiresias as the main theme of *The Waste Land*, that is, egoism and isolation. It is an actual plea for plurality and fusion, against the separation and opposition that emerges whenever two unstable sides get into a dominant-dominated dynamics.

Stephen Coote compares Tiresias's hermaphroditism to the unconscious revealed by Freud, which would enable Tiresias to be "capable of any and all emotional and physical responses" (1985: 83). This would make possible the absence of gender in the poem's persona, and, at the same time, its ubiquity. Cyrena Pondrom thinks that this resource is not random and that it has a purpose: "in a poem of such length with so many shifting voices, avoiding pronoun reference to the narrator must have required a good deal of care" (2005: 429). This would imply a different interpretation depending on the gender role we are performing as readers. Therefore, the poem would not directly portray a unique situation in which one of the genders is the only sufferer, as it is the victimization of women, but would be offering a reading in which any situation affects both men and women. Following Pondrom's reasoning,

This narrative produces what it presupposes; we presume the narrator in this poem is male because he "*acts* male". Thus with the collaboration of the reader the narrator performs a failed masculinity. Within the poem we know next to nothing about the narrator's body [...] What we do know thus does nothing to reassure us about gender roles as essential. (2005: 429)

Carol Christ has also identified this lack of gender mark, especially regarding the final lines of the poem in "What the Thunder Said". The poem's persona refers to different human situations in ungendered terms, as well as it keeps a distance from gender when developing its voice and its figuration. A language liberated from gender allows the poet to imagine a possible human fulfillment (1985: 34-35). Therefore, we can see how Eliot does not give priority to a male or a female voice, or to male or female experiences. Instead, he

universalizes the human experience by avoiding the focus on one part of it. Suzanne Churchill has referred to Tiresias's condition as "a chiasmus of heterosexuality", by which Eliot makes the male and female poles of heterosexuality collapse (2005: 23). In this way, gender in *The Waste Land* is not a stable concept, but an exchangeable and undefined one, so that there are moments in which the identification of the persona, of Tiresias, under one gender or another is blurred. Furthermore, his position out of time as an eternal figure wandering between the world of the living and the world of the dead gives him a privileged perspective throughout which he reaches a focus for every human quality. This emphasizes the barrenness of every character in the poem. He transcends the label of "bisexual", being witness of the indifference and emptiness between men and women (Palmer, 1989: 199).

Besides the union of both sexes in the persona of Tiresias, we may also establish a contrast with the character of Madame Sosostris. Like him, she can foretell the future to which every character of *The Waste Land* is condemned, and also belongs to a different sphere, where she can be witness of this future but does not take part in it. The main difference between her and Tiresias is that she is a failed prophetess: while she warns her client to "fear death by water", and therefore, to be stuck in the cycle; Tiresias is proclaiming a death needed for regeneration: like the Sybil, who appears in the Greek excerpt previous to the poem; and like the bartender in "A Game of Chess" with his "HURRY UP PLEASE IT'S TIME".

Madame Sosostris also takes part in the gender ambivalence and the changing sex; as her origins are those of sexual ambivalence (Smith, 1954: 491). This is due to the external origin of Madame Sosostris, whose name was influenced by Eliot's reading of Huxley's *Crome Yellow*, where a male character disguise as a gypsy woman to tell fortunes in order to conquer a village girl (1954: 491). Smith argues that, although there is no proof of Sosostris's transvestism along the poem, the argument acquires importance when we take into

consideration the rest of the poem and Eliot's notes, since they encourage an interpretation based upon other literary allusions (1954: 492). Eliot shifts from one gender to another, playing with ambiguity and showing how a female role or description can fit that of a man (Tiresias) without forgetting that this man also works as a woman. Gender roles and behaviors are blurry, and Eliot is showing us how our construction changes the way we understand life: he has demonstrated how these roles are interchangeable and ambiguous.

Even so, we should not ignore the female role of Madame Sosostris. We can counter Pondrom's belief about Tiresias acting in a more male way by establishing a contrast between the two separate figures. Both are prophets of what appears as a doomed future, and both have physical deficiencies: while Tiresias is blind, Madame Sosostris is a charlatan that fails in her reading of the tarot. She also "has a bad cold" and is conscious of the illegality of her work, fearing the police. Tiresias can clearly sentence and foresee what is to happen to every character. Both characters gain strength when are compared, when they complete each other – when they come together as one. If every woman is simply one woman, and that woman is inside Tiresias, one can conclude that Madame Sosostris is also inside Tiresias. The same reasoning can be applied to every man that appears in the poem. At the same time that Tiresias is simply a man, he is every man that appears in the poem: he is the hyacinth lover; he is the wandering man that finds Stetson, the silent man who will not speak to the neurasthenic woman, or the coarse clerk assaulting the typist. The man in *The Waste Land* follows his basic instincts, his animal passions, unable to communicate or to look for regeneration. The same happens to the female "wastelanders": none of them, no matter if innocent or experienced, if rich or poor, have the ability and the will to communicate and to search in the other the features they lack. Every man and woman suffers the consequences of their believed self-sufficiency and selfishness (Bentley, 1988: 45).

Madame Sosostris's foretelling also suggests the change claimed along the poem. The ending of traditional roles appears symbolized by the blank card at the end of her prediction:

And here is the one-eyed merchant, and this card,
Which is blank, is something he carries on his back,
Which I am forbidden to see. (l. 52-54)

The indeterminacy of the card leaves a door open to the future of the wastelanders: once our roles are exhausted, what comes next? The blank card is the perfect representation of the undefined. We need to keep in mind that the one-eyed merchant represents every man in the poem. Regarding the myth of the Grail and the Fisher King, everyman stands for Parsifal, since his silence is the male silence present in the poem. Parsifal's insouciance vis a vis the Fisher King's illness is also the carelessness for life in the waste land. In the poem, the Fisher King is also present in the female characters, since they are the ones suffering this lack of preoccupation. Brooker and Bentley point out that the traditional use of this kind of fertility myths consist of blaming the land's (the woman's) barrenness, but Eliot uses this myth differently, only to show that:

Although some myths show the impotence of kings and gods to be caused by a failure of the feminine earth, most myths, and certainly the ones Eliot refers to centrally, put it in the opposite way. The king falls first into incapacity or guilt, and his land follows him into barrenness and disease. He is responsible for the catastrophe that befalls both himself and his land. (Brooker and Bentley, 1989: 97)

Thus, the balanced relationship between male and female becomes essentially important to the success of existence and its regeneration.

It is also important to remark certain parallelisms between the classical myth of Tiresias and the development of the poem itself. These parallelisms can be established from a particular moment onwards: from the homosexual encounter in "The Fire Sermon". I

associate this episode with the two snakes that transformed Tiresias into a woman – since this homoerotic moment would imply two phalluses. In Tormählen’s words, this personage transcends both man and woman, since Eliot uses Tiresias because his story is especially related to sex , and “sufficiently related to the wastelanders and their existence to warrant the kind of status given [by Eliot]” (Tormählen, 1978: 78):

Unreal City

Under the brown fog of a winter noon

Mr. Eugenides, the Smyrna merchant

Unshaven, with a pocket full of currants

C.i.f. London: documents at sight,

Asked me in demotic French

To luncheon at the Cannon Street Hotel

Followed by a weekend at the Metropole. (l. 207-214)

Besides of this association, the contrast between the name of “Mr. Eugenides”, which means “well-born”, and the use of his “demotic French”, the French of the common people, follows the line of Eliot’s motif about unbalanced dualisms. Besides, it is also important to bear in mind the note to line 210: “the currants [...] and the Bill of Lading were to be handed to the buyer upon the payment of the sight draft”. The note shows how the currants may imply an arranged and paid sexual relationship: Mr. Eugenides, the buyer, shows the bill as a proof of their possible contract – he is offering money in exchange of sex to the poem’s persona. Moreover, we can consider this as an inversion of the classic role of women as prostitutes, which would be another reason to think that gender roles in Eliot poetry are not fixed and stable, treating all of them in the same way.

Another similitude between the myth and the poem lies on the first appearance of Tiresias, who is already both male and female after the meeting with “the snakes”: “I Tiresias, though blind, throbbing between two lives, / Old man with wrinkled female breasts . . .” (l. 218-219). He insists on his double sexuality and his age while, at the same time, relates the story of the typist and identifies with her:

I Tiresias, old man with wrinkled dugs
 Perceived the scene, and foretold the rest—
 I too awaited the expected guest. (l. 228-230)

In comparing this excerpt with Ovid’s myth, we can see how the homosexual encounter would have transformed Tiresias into a woman, but it seems that the cycle within the myth has not been closed: he is old, and he is still a woman. In the myth, after spending 7 years as a woman, he is forgiven and recovers his previous male form, because he could finally understand what being a woman feels like. In the poem, there is not such a closure; so a second meeting with the snakes and the seven years of womanhood are not represented. The second couple of snakes would stand for the completion of the reproductive cycle, for the Ouroboros: “the symbol of the undifferentiated, the invariable or common principle that brings together everything; [...] the fatal encounter of the opposites” (Cirlot, 2004: 351). This absence makes Tiresias a symbolic presence of that disconnection between contraries, although he is at the same time the ultimate union of both genders: a desirable state, although not reached.

The symbolism of the seven years that Tiresias spent as a female also stands for regeneration, for the union of the two different forces, since number seven comes out from the addition of three (male) plus four (female), the complete human being and complete world, the original unity (Chevalier and Gheerbrant, 1993: 942). This would mean that the

myth of Tiresias is not only used to represent an unattained balance, but also that the incomplete development of the myth along the poem represents another resource for Eliot's purpose. If both genders are uneven, if the differences between them prevent communication to happen, then love and balance, and equality, could never be accomplished. Like Tiresias, we should develop both genders inside of us and not only be ascribed to certain ways of behavior.

Death by Water and the end of the cycle

The verses of "Death by Water" make an immediate reference to Madame Sosostris's failed prediction, which reminds us of her double role as both fortune-teller and as Tiresias's (counter) part. In the episode of Madame Sosostris, we can clearly see what Carol Christ has defined as the duality between a clear female image and an unarticulated male voice. In "Death by Water", the articulated voice is Tiresias's, who represents the union of both sexes. The prophecy is fulfilled under this hermaphrodite voice, as a necessary ending for the repetitive cycle which the rest of the poem has been subject to. Thus, the image and voice of Madame Sosostris and her foretelling becomes complete when Tiresias describes the now disarticulated male body; and we may not forget that both of them represent the same person, with shifting genders.

The death of Phlebas not only stands for the symbolic death of the resurrecting god, but also for the ending of every man and woman present in the poem, even Tiresias's or Madame Sosostris's. This is a way to put an end to the unsuccessful gender construction and performativity, which has proven their failure along the whole poem.

Who is the third walking beside you?

The idea of the exhausted gender categories and the clash between natural impulses and constructed behavior appear again in “What the Thunder Said”, under a third option beyond the two classical genders. The third option, the perfect balance and union of the two sides, is represented by Tiresias:

But when I look ahead up the white road

There is always another one walking beside you

Gliding wrapt in a brown mantle, hooded

I do not whether a man or a woman

-But who is that on the other side of you?(l. 362-366, italics mine)

As the poem advances, the power of a certain gender is removed. Instead we face the possibility of a fusion of sexes in a single person, a third option: Tiresias. This fusion means, at the same time, the removal of the differences between one sex and the other. Tiresias transcends sexual and gender differences only to call attention upon a common point: we are all subjugated by society’s construction. The clue lies in being conscious of the differences between this artificial construction and our own natural impulses. The presence of the third option, the third *person* is that of what every man and woman has in common. Tiresias, after the event of the snakes, has become a mixture of the two sexes in a single body, representing the need for this balance. As Nageswara Rao points out, this “third” is the god Varuna “the third whenever two plot in silence” (1976: 59), a deep knowledge of what transcends and goes beyond differences. The poem has showed that, if we are unable to understand the other, we will be blinded by our own vanity and will fail in that search of regeneration. Disconnection and lack of communication have isolated the human being so that there is no possibility of progress. Using the metaphor of the wheel present in the poem, if the two forces

do not work together, men and women get stuck: the wheel will not spin. Viorica Patea properly summarizes this point when stating that “the revealed truth leads to [...] where the ‘I’ abandons itself to the mysticism of love and discovers its indissoluble unity with the other” (2007: 107).

Conclusions

There seems to be enough proofs to think that T.S. Eliot is not mistreating the female gender but establishing a harmony between both sexes as a main resource for his poem’s motif: resurrection and regeneration. Both male and female figures are victims of decadence and paralysis and none of them seem to have an answer for solving that problem. This can be seen in the five couples analyzed, where traditional gender roles are little by little abandoned and always subject to judgment. Marie is symbolically liberated from the traditional labels society ascribes to women, and she does so with her cousin’s help. Also, the traditional female silence is inverted and performed by the hyacinth lover, whose relation to the myth of Hyacinth reminds us of the dangers of vanity. The female voice and this male silence in the boudoir scene represent an example of the alternation between deconstituted bodies of both genders.

The feminine voice is always talking of Philomel’s change, not in a reproachful way but in a releasing one. Lil’s episode represents a strong proof of the mismatch between constructed gender and gender as it is really felt. As Palmer confirms, “the essential dimensions in which relations between sexes are set in the poem is on of *mutual* despair” (Palmer, 1989: 209; italics mine). Eliot is inviting us to reconsider the need for communication throughout the repetition of the same problem under different points of view:

our focus should be on understanding and communicating with each other, and not being subject to society's expectations.

Tiresias is the ultimate expression of this message, being used as a resource against ego and isolation, and also for ambiguity, making every scene and character in the poem accessible to the readers, either male or female. Tiresias is the universal speaker, voice and persona of the poem that Eliot wanted to convey as expression for the ideal of the balanced communication between genders, and he also completes this by adding the contrasting figure of Madame Sosostris.

Finally, this need for developing gender sensitivity is also present in "Death by Water", where both male and female voices are present, and "What the Thunder say"; where the voice aims to put an end to repetitive established behaviors, and tries to join the features shared by both sexes. All this proves that Eliot was not mistreating his female characters, since both genders are being mistreated by Modern society. Yet they are not passive players, they also have some responsibility in their choices. When the young man carbuncular or Lil's friend mistreats the typist of her friends, they are responsible for it, not society. He is not a misogynist, since his poem shows how gender construction throughout speech has failed for both men and women. Communication and understanding are necessary steps in order to liberate our bodies from the limits artificially imposed to them. Perhaps this is why Eliot's aim was to "transmute his [the poet's] personal and private agonies into something rich and strange, something universal and impersonal" (1951: 137); something detached from gender labels.

I hope that my analysis may shed some light on *The Waste Land* and on T.S. Eliot's intentions, which have been deeply distorted by perhaps too intricate and twisted readings that forgot to stay on a more simple level. I cannot find any trace of a possible misogynist

treatment of the female gender, nothing that would point out victimization due to the subjugation of one gender to the other. Both genders share the same sufferings from the lack of communication, although they may not be aware of the other's condition. This lack of communication unbalances both sides, causing the chaos in *The Waste Land*. My reading is simply a call to try and conceal our past with our future, providing a new feminist, releasing interpretation of one of the most important and challenging 20th century poems concerning gender.

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