

Seek Harmony in Human Nature --- a Study on the Female Images in “the Waste Land”

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ABSTRACT. T.S. Eliot is one of the twentieth century’s major poets, as well as an essayist, publisher, playwright, and literary and social critic. “The Waste Land” is published in 1922 as one of T.S. Eliot’s representative works. In this poem, Eliot shows the decadence of human nature as a main theme and develops it by referring to the difficulty of life. And, it should be a remarkable fact that there are many female images in this poem. By presenting women who suffer from boredom, lack of aims, frustration in love both from mythic origins and modern society, the flexible gender image and images related to females, Eliot is warning the modern secular man of the psychological, physical and social deterioration that result from industrialization and shedding light on the emptiness of modern love and the sick relationship of modern people. However, at present, among the main studies on Eliot’s “The Waste Land” at home, there are fewer researches that take female images as the starting point to discuss Eliot’s thoughts. Therefore, this paper aims at exploring the field of female images study on “The Waste Land”, if unable to fill the gaps of the research, but at least will help to reveal the meaning under the images of woman in this poems. At the same time, this paper will contribute to the creation and appreciation of modern poem and bring some enlightenment to other research.

KEYWORDS: T, S, Eliot, “the waste land”, Female images

1. Introduction

T.S. Eliot is one of the twentieth century’s major poets, as well as an essayist, publisher, playwright, and literary and social critic. “The Waste Land” was published in 1922 as one of T.S. Eliot’s representative works. Like some of his earlier works, this poem profoundly reflects the decline and decay of modern civilization and vividly depicts the spiritual emptiness of modern people. In this long poem, Eliot uses a large number of myths and religious alliterations from both the east and the west to render the poetry out of the limitation of time and space. Although, the poem mainly depicts the collapse of western civilization after the first world war, it largely reflects Eliot’s views on the whole human civilization. The characters in the poem are multifarious, the tone is also varied, and there are many languages used in this poem, as well as obscure and strange metaphors, rendering the poem rather difficult to understand. Generally speaking, the structure of the whole poem is loose and disorderly, and there is no traditional connection and logical development between the lines. However, it takes emotion, images and symbolic meaning as the main elements to form an organic whole, achieving an amazing overall effect. The poem is a typical modernism poem and full of Eliot’s irony and wit. 0

At present, among the main studies on Eliot’s “The Waste Land” at home, there are fewer researches that take female images as the starting point to discuss Eliot’s thoughts. In fact, to expose the sterility and futility of the Western culture, reveal the disillusionment and frustration of people and quest for a spiritual regeneration, Eliot employs many images in “The Waste Land” and female images is significant among those images. By using female images, Eliot shows the decadence of human nature as a main theme and develops it by referring to the difficulty of life. By presenting women who suffer from boredom, lack of aims, frustration in love both from mythic origins and modern society, the flexible gender image and images related to females, Eliot is warning the modern secular man of the psychological, physical and social deterioration that result from industrialization and shedding light on the emptiness of modern love and the sick relationship of modern people.

Therefore, this paper aims at exploring the field of female images study on “The Waste Land”, if unable to fill the gaps of the research, but at least will help to reveal the meaning under the images of woman in this poems. At the same time, this paper will contribute to the creation and appreciation of modern poem and bring some enlightenment to other research.

2. Female Images

2.1 Female Images from Mythic Origins

The first woman image to appear in the poem is the Sibyl in the inscription, suspended from the walls of Cumae in a cage. The children asks her, "Sibyl, what do you want?" She replies, "I want to die." This image comes from *Metamorphoses*, a Latin narrative poem by the Roman poet Ovid, considered his magnum opus. It tells the story of a Sibyl of Cumae who is the beloved of Apollo. She asks Apollo to promise her live as many years as the grains of sand in her land but carelessly she forgets to ask for eternal youth. Hence she becomes old and finally shrinks so small by her age that she is hung up in a cage and could only say: "I want to die". The sibyl's misfortune that confines to a cage and withers away indefinitely being preserved from death is her punishment. To grow old symbolizes the people's spiritual waste land. It also points to the theme of desperation and decadence in "The Waste Land". However, when further interpret this image, we can find that she is subject to man, to the patriarchal power from Apollo, the god of the sun. And Apollo does not give her any clues about the fact that she would not be young forever. In this way, the sibyl is an image of victim to man's absolute power.

The other remarkable mythic female image is Philomela in the scene of "A Game of Chess," which takes place in an obscenely ornate boudoir, which is similar to the scene in Ovid's *Metamorphoses*. In this scene, the female character Philomela is raped by her sister's husband King Tereus. King Tereus locks her in a herder's hut in the forest and cuts off her tongue so that she could not speak. Philomela strives to let her sister know what has happened to her by hiding the words into the cloth and sending them into the palace. Her sister is very angry and kills the son of King Tereus to revenge after saving her sister. Their revenge provokes King Tereus' anger, and he chase the sisters as they manage to escape. In the escape the two girls grew wings, Philomela's sister becomes a swallow, and Philomela becomes a nightingale.

The act that King Tereus cuts off Philomela's tongue, rendering her silent in both realistic and symbolic sense, thus showing the absolute power patriarchal society. His violence haunts the poem as a shadow of male domination. Eliot deliberately places the female image of Philomela in a picture on the wall of luxurious palace, like the Sibyl in the *inscription*:

"Above the antique mantel was displayed
As though a window gave upon the sylvan scene
The change of Philomel, by the barbarous king
So rudely forced; yet there the nightingale
Filled all the desert with inviolable voice
And still she cried, and still the world pursues,
'Jug Jug' to dirty ears.
And other withered stumps of time
Were told upon the walls; staring forms
Leaned out, leaning, hushing the room enclosed."0

In these two scenes, the picture frame and cage is a metaphor for the living state of the two women as well as the female images appears in later stanzas. Dominated by male characters, suspended and losing voice in such oppression, they becomes only the objects for appreciation. Fortunately, although Philomela loses her voice as a human, she becomes a nightingale with beautiful voice. She could "fill all the desert with inviolable voice", through which she shows her confidence to the world, which is a direct resistance to the oppression of man. In "The Waste Land", Eliot writes the line "And still she cried, And still the world pursues" to suggest that although the voice of the female may be oppressed, but can't be eliminated.

By describing female images from mythic origins, Eliot shows his impression towards female images in the history and traditional recognition. Women are generally viewed as the victim of the patriarchal world, and this impression is imperceptibly expressed through the historical and mythic context, which is also conveyed by Eliot in his "The Waste Land".

2.2 Modern Female Images

In the first stanza of "The Burial of the Dead," an aristocratic woman drinks coffee and reminisces about her

privileged youth as a cousin of an archduke. She speaks in German about Russia, thus associating herself with two huge, decaying empires. Her memory suggests that she is of noble birth. In this canto, it depicts two scenes: The first one is that she meets a person in Germany, and the second one is that she slides with her cousin:

“Bin gar keine Russin, stamm’ aus Litauen, echt deutsch.

And when we were children, staying at the arch-duke’s,

My cousin’s, he took me out on a sled,

And I was frightened. He said, Marie,

Marie, hold on tight. And down we went.

In the mountains, there you feel free.

I read, much of the night, and go south in the winter.”

These two happy scenes seem to be irrelevant with the desperate atmosphere in the poem. However, Eliot indicates the experience of Countess Marie Larisch and Mary Vetsera in the history behind the name “Marie”. “Marie” represents the old European world order. In her youth, her aristocracy protected her. Now her life seems idle and useless. In these lines, Eliot alludes to a royal scandal in European history: the death of the crown prince Rudolf von Habsburg Lorraine in a riverside hunting palace with his mistress Mary Vetsera. The death of Rudolf leads to the decline of the Habsburg royal family in the following period. And his Countess Marie Larisch, is described by the European gentry as an “unwelcome person” for her introducing Rudolf to Mary Vetsera. And finally she is also abandoned by her Duke husband and has no opportunity to defend herself. Eliot’s lines serve as a “vice text” of history, brought by the Countess Marie Larisch. This stanza is Countess Marie’s wonderful memories of her youth and inevitably associated with the death of another Mary for inducing man. It can be inferred that Eliot uses this connection to demonstrate that Europe’s decadence results from destructive love, and women is the chief culprit. Therefore, the women images here are opium to the modern civilization. In a world, the noble female images in “The Wasteland” have no aims, no dependence, and no spiritual pursuit. They gradually exile and lose themselves in the luxurious life.

Then, another modern female image is Lil in the second canto. In this canto, two cockney women talking about Lil’s unhappy marriage. Lil is prematurely old from frequent abortion, which leaves her in poor health. Her husband ignores his wife’s physical condition and blindly pursues the pleasure of flesh. However, Lil, as a traditional wife, becomes a tool of frequent reproduction without resisting the miserable life, which manifests the indifferent relationship between modern man and woman:

“The chemist said it would be all right, but I’ve never been the same.

You are a proper fool, I said.

Well, if Albert won’t leave you alone, there it is, I said,

What you get married for if you don’t want children?

HURRY UP PLEASE ITS TIME

Well, that Sunday Albert was home, they had a hot gammon,

And they asked me in to dinner, to get the beauty of it hot-

HURRY UP PLEASE ITS TIME

HURRY UP PLEASE ITS TIME”

In this way, Lil is also a image to show the oppression from man in the modern society. As a result, she becomes a walking shadow with no emotion and no desire to change her life. There is a contrast images of noble women and common women. However, in fact, they share the same emptiness and pains, who just represents the emptiness and pains that modern people suffers. The poet sees the modern world as a waste land in which every experience is drawn by the feelings of desperation in life. If modern people could not deal with the relationship between man and woman, the modern world will also fall in to spiritual “Waste Land”.

3. Flexible Gender Image

In fifth canto of “The Waste Land,” “What the Thunder Said,” the speaker asks an unknown pilgrim about a mysterious fellow traveler who might be a hermaphrodite. The lines allude to Jesus Christ’s appearance, after his crucifixion and resurrection, to two of his disciples on the road to Emmaus:

"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
Gliding wrapt in a brown mantle, hooded
I do not know whether a man or a woman
-But who is that on the other side of you?"

The "brown mantle, hooded" suggests a ghostly monk. However, the mystery man, Tiresias, might be a hermaphrodite. In Eliot's creative process, gender roles became more flexible. In the Victorian era of the nineteenth century, women were confined to the family, and the Puritan atmosphere determined most social interactions. The First World War changed society, and women strived to break through customs. In 1918, British women began to actively fight for voting rights, while during the jazz age women even began to smoke and drink in public places. In the early 20th century, women are allowed to go to school, and affluent women could be enrolled in the university. Modernist writers have created the role of gay men and lesbians, reimagining the characteristics of men and women.

Eliot also praises the end of the Victorian era and expresses concern about the inner freedom of modern society. "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock", one of his other famous poems, reflects the image of modern man, as a vulgar creature. As it has been found that women themselves are given a new role in the working class. And in "The Waste Land", the central figure, Tiresias, is a holistic role, represented by a combination of two genders. In a sense, it is the attitude that Eliot advocates towards man and women, towards the modern society, that woman and man are not on the opposition. There is no hierarchical relationship between them because they can be embodied by the same person image. If modern people can correctly treat the relationship between man and woman, the society will be more harmonious.

4. Images Related with Females

An image related to females is the land. In the traditional concept, land is an image for mother, a splendid and productive female image. However, in "The Waste Land", Eliot also imagines the modern world as a waste land, which cannot be equal to the traditional image of land. In Eliot's land, various characters are unable to cope with reproductive or non-reproductive behavior. The First World War not only eliminated a whole generation of young people in Europe, but also ruined the land. War and chemical weapons destroy the life of plants, leaving behind debris and massacres. In "The Hollow Men," the speaker discusses the dead land, now full of stones and cacti. The infertility of the waste land is a remarkable fact. And if the female images could not give birth to new life, there is an indication that everything is in decadence.

Another image related to females is the image of water. In the traditional poetry criticism, water may symbolize life and death, which is also related to female characters. Although water has the potential to regenerate life and fertility, it can also cause drowning and death, such as the sailor Phlebas from "The Wasteland." Just like Odysseus in Homer's "Odyssey", he realizes that the malicious intention is wrapped by sweet voice. Therefore, Eliot reminds the readers to pay attention to simple objects, because things that seem harmless can become very dangerous. Water, just like females, if it can not be treated correctly, will become a potential danger to the modern society. Therefore, the way people treat females is still the key to solve the present problem in the society.

5. Conclusion

Like many modernist writers, Eliot wishes his poetry to express the fragile state of humanity in the twentieth century. The ideal inheritance of the Victorian era and the trauma of the First World War challenged the male identity, allowing the poets to question the romantic literary tradition and describe the spiritual waste land of modern people. And Eliot used various female images both from mythic and historical origins and modern society. They are all the miniature of modern people who are aimless, desperate with splitting personalities. In addition, they are oppressed by the males. This, perhaps, is the real problem of society that Eliot was addressing. It is precisely because of the suppression and discipline of women in the patriarchal society that the basic relations between man and woman in the society are destroyed, rendering women unable to express themselves and participate in the normal actions in an equal manner. If men and women cannot maintain normal communication, how can the society become progressive? This is the core problem that Eliot proposes and tries to solve in "The Waste Land." And in the final part of the poem, he creates a new character who transcends the limitation between genders, and realizes a harmony of human nature.

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