

# T. S. Eliot's *Wasteland* and Feminism

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## Abstract

The minority asks questions, and triggers power dynamics to transform and transcend. The Modernist movement portrays already defeated Post- World War One Man in a meeker light. The colonial white male base is urged to pass down the power to other members of society. T.S. Eliot depicts the new influential members of that society and grants them temporary authority. The poet adequately estimates the gender misbalance and introduces Transgender Tiresias, who watches over the newly empowered female typist enjoying her newly found independence. The poet also emancipates the famous clairvoyant and calls her the wisest women in Europe. The new authority naturally brings along new values, the most prominent of which seen with the unequipped eye are the equality of all human lives, and female emancipation.

**Keywords:** feminism, Post-World War One, new values, gender politics

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## Introduction

The 21st century blatantly asks the human being: are you the gender you think you are? The question seems absurd, and perhaps it is absurd, but the gender politics machine has been working hard to bring steamy fog to the modern mind, thus we question what we thought was already ours. From a metaphysical perspective, gender politicians have been advocating for the soul rather than the physical body, stating that the gender of a spirit is more important than the gender of the body. Institutionalized feminism is left with no choice but to agree, as women, along with the LGBTQ community, have been categorized as a minority. Therefore, army of minorities should work together, and, if one soldier falls, so falls the other.

## The Poem *The Wasteland*

The poem *The Wasteland*, written by T. S. Eliot and, published in 1922, is one of the first intellectual gates that led Post-World War One to new perspective regarding gender and its role in society. The poet depicts a woman who has questions; who has entered the work force as a typist (the female figure represented in the third section of the poem *The Fire Sermon*) or who takes birth control pills (the female figure represented in the second section of the poem, *Game of Chess*).

The First World War completed the Victorian era, where female bodies, whose tongues and minds have been mutilated, were perceived to be reproduction machines, left with the sole choice to mother the future generations. In the modernism matrix, T.S. Eliot is not worried about the future of female emancipation, as he knows, the societal fault will be corrected in the new era, namely by feminizing men and emasculating women: with, both sexes meeting on the same energetic frequency, two genders will meet in one body, the seesaw will be balanced and the gender injustice will finally be over.

In the first part of the poem, *The Wasteland*, *The Burial of the Dead*, T.S. Eliot portrays a woman

who is frightened and yet still brave enough to sit on a sled and “fall” down a steep slope in freedom:

“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.”

(T. S. Eliot, *The Wasteland*)

Female emancipation starts in high mountains, where the temperature is cold, and grizzly bears and goats reside. Mountains stand aloof from cities, which are the headquarters of civilization, and that’s where Marie far from the newly dismantled Victorian society.

In the *Game of Chess* section of the poem, Lil is depicted as a 3-year-old hysterical woman who is constantly menaced, criticized and disdained. Chess is a symbol of the systematic and strategic rape and suppression of women throughout history, leaving women vulnerable and, begging for their husbands to speak to them:

«*My nerves are bad to-night. Yes, bad. Stay with me. ‘Speak to me. Why do you never speak? Speak. ‘What are you thinking of? What thinking? What? ‘I never know what you are thinking. Think.’*» (T.S. Eliot, *The Wasteland*).

T.S. Eliot traditionally depicts a female who is not content with her sexual experience. As according to the poet she is either raped or an intercourse is forced upon her. “The sex in Eliot’s poetry is almost always bad sex, either libidinally limp or morally vicious” (Menand, 2002).

Lil is told to make herself smarter in order to justify her unattractiveness to her husband, who has been in the army for four years. She is only 31 and her mouth is missing teeth; according to society, it is her obligation to look alluring to her husband or he will “seek good times elsewhere”. She is menaced and shamed for her ugliness. She does not have financial independence from her husband, and is therefore urged to report to her husband where she spent her money.

*Now Albert's coming back, make yourself a bit smart.*

*He'll want to know what you done with that money he gave you*

*To get yourself some teeth. He did, I was there.*

*You have them all out, Lil, and get a nice set, He said, I swear, I can't bear to look at you.*

*And no more can't I, I said, and think of poor Albert,*

*He's been in the army four years, he wants a good time,*

*You ought to be ashamed, I said, to look so antique.*

*(T. S. Eliot, The Wasteland)*

She subtly defends herself and justifies her lack of allure as the fault of her birth control pills.

*"I can't help it, she said, pulling a long face, Its them pills I took, to bring it off, she said."*

*(T. S. Eliot, The Wasteland)*

She is mother of five children already and almost died at the birth of her youngest, George. And yet she is further attacked for her choice to take birth control pills, after confiding to her friend that she pays frequent visits to the chemist.

*"What you get married for if you don't want children?"*

*(T. S. Eliot, The Wasteland)*

The birth control pill is an ultimate symbol of female empowerment, as it grants a woman power over her body. With the creation of birth control pills, she is no longer viewed as tool that measures demographics.

Then, an alternative for not having a child was abortion. It is only recently that the U.S. legalized abortion in the country.

The Roe versus Wade case was one of those pivotal legal moments in terms of women's rights issues. On 22<sup>nd</sup> January 1973, the U.S. Supreme Court reshaped the Texas statute banning abortion.

Consequently, abortion, which had previously been banned throughout the country, became protected by the right to privacy by the 14<sup>th</sup> Amendment, the Supreme Court ruling, women then legally had the right to decide whether to have an abortion.

Right wing republicans have always been afraid to lose the white core base: they wanted their women to endlessly breed in order to overpopulate other races, nationalities and culture.

T.S. Eliot generously depicts prototype of women who have lost control over their bodies, thus are entrapped and encaged. T.S. Eliot originally named this section "In the Cage" but The Wasteland's main editor and T.S. Eliot's friend, Ezra Pound, renamed it "The Game of Chess". Sybil of Cumae, depicted in the introductory epigram of The Wasteland, is also hanging in a cage. But she is different from Lil, as even though she has been withering and fading, she still hopes to be recognized by her voice.

It is not a mere coincidence that T.S. Eliot depicts emancipated women in the midst of growing female empowerment spirit around the world. In the summer of 1920, the 19<sup>th</sup> Amendment was ratified in Tennessee Nashville, the world followed, more than 20 nations around the globe also gave women rights to vote.

The Nineteenth Amendment states that "The right of citizens of the United States to vote shall not be denied or abridged by the United States or by any state on account of sex.

The right to vote was an award of the Women's suffrage movement (led by the National American Woman Suffrage Association) that battled decade-long fight to obtain rights to vote.

Sybil says to Eeneas "But when I am no longer visible, I will be recognized by my voice still. The body is no longer relevant in the fate of a female, but her voice is a signal of power."

The cage is a great symbolism that T.S. Eliot utilizes: a raw and vivid metaphor of the female imprisonment of the Victorian era and beyond.

T.S. Eliot believes labor will emancipate women. In order for female independence to proceed, women should enter the workforce. The typist appears in the third section of "The Wasteland", in *The Fire Sermon*. She is never given a name, as she is known solely for her occupation and service to society. Her occupation is the symbol of the new era, implying everyday interaction with a machine, the typewriter.

"The female typist who works all day like a machine. She raises her eyes and comes back home from the machine in the evening. Her dull heart throbs with human warmth as she waits to be released from her boring work at the desk" (Farzana, 2015).

Her character is also the symbol of the forthcoming communist culture, which is based on egalitarianism, regardless of a person's gender or race.

The manifesto of the communist party reads:

"Owing to the extensive use of machinery and to the division of labor, the work of the proletarians has lost all individual character, and, consequently, all charm for the workman."

The typist is free, she returns home from work and begins mechanically preparing dinner: 'lights her stove, and lays out food in tins'.

She is the new model of work force, enjoying her new-found independence. It consequently alters the gender relation dynamics, and gender roles in society, and yet, the poem still depicts her in softer light, a woman, looking for love and waiting for a man, like Lil waiting for her husband from the army. But the typist does not have to report to her husband of where she spends money given to her, by her husband or a partner, because she works and the money is her

own. And yet, she is bored and tired, stuck in a system that expects her to work machine

The symbol of the newly emancipated woman, symbolized in the typist, is watched over by a transgender person, Tiresias.

"I, Tiresias, though blind, throbbing between two lives,  
Old man with wrinkled female breasts, can see  
At the violet hour, the evening hour that strives  
Homeward, and brings the sailor home from sea,  
The typist home at teatime,"

(T. S. Eliot, *The Wasteland*).

Tiresias questions gender norms, embodying both female and male aspects in her body and psyche. Therefore, s/he accepts both genders equally. She is a blind old man with wrinkled female breasts who sees the world from her/his perspective alone. Tiresias also throbs in between the living and the dead, and therefore is in touch with both realms, its existence is binary, in terms of gender and dimensions.

"The Fire Sermon" in which the narrator seems to blend with his avatar Tiresias, expressly described as having lived as both male and female. Further, although his body bears the marks of his past, Tiresias is not androgynous, but alternatively male and female" (Pondrom, 2005).

The figure is represented as the goddess of modern society; who equalizes genders; who interacts with both death and life; and who is blind and therefore, does not dwell in the wax of light.

S/he sees the brutal dynamics between male and female relationships, and witnesses men who have been traumatized by the Great War. S/he mocks men who suffer from hysteria, which has been considered a female trait over the centuries. Now the male profile and status quo is being shattered and dismantled. Men's virility is now questioned, their jobs are taken over, and wives no longer provide comfort at home.

T.S. Eliot goes one step further: openly and bravely declaring female superiority over male, and

stating that the famous clairvoyant Madame Sosostris, with her pack of cards, is “the wisest woman in Europe”. She is always being chased by the authorities, as her occupation is considered illicit and is not yet fully accepted by society. She is the symbol of the newly forming feminine consciousness: filled with female intuition and the ability to foresee, it's a subtle power over the masculine, crude and controlling personality.

Rachel Potter's “T.S. Eliot, Women and Democracy” describes Eliot's response to early twentieth-century political transformations, generally characterized as a move from individualistic liberalism to mass democracy”. Potter argues that missing from previous accounts of Eliot's views of democracy, and modernist political thought more generally, has been the significance of the changing roles of women. He ambivalently described the democratized masses as

feminine as major works from 1918 to 1920, including the Waste Land.(Cassandra Laity, 2007)

## Conclusion

The First World War dismantled men, took the pieces and glued the new man back together. The new God of the modern era, Tiresias steps in to the crevices of the shattered men and simultaneously emancipates women, so the two genders meet again with balanced and equalized forces.

S/he is the guardian of the typists who have newly entered the workforce, and distorts the nerves of the woman who is submissive to her husband. Female emancipation is an inevitable path that comes with new territories, it is both costly and rewarding, but it fully drowns the male ego.

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