

Threats to Patriarchy in the Selected Poetry of T.S. Eliot

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Abstract:

Through analyzing the selected poetry written by T.S. Eliot (1888-1965), this article explores the linkage between the crisis of men's identity and civilization against the backdrop of surging feminist ideas during the modern period. The works of T.S. Eliot are always connected with the anxiety of men. Attention will be paid on the mentality and response of his male speakers upon witnessing the transformation of modern women.

Modernist writings during the first half of the twentieth century are often marked by the concern over the crisis of identity and civilization. Political and economic stability that struck both Europe and the New World are often viewed as prominent reasons. Women never played a significant role in leading to the crisis mentioned. Conventional feminist criticisms often relate this phenomenon with the repression and oppression faced by women under male chauvinism. Relatively little attention has been paid to men's fear under the "terror" of feminism. Thus, this article studies men's anxiety and reaction in relation to the changing attributes and modern values of the twentieth century.

Keywords: T.S. Eliot, identity crisis, male chauvinism, feminist critique, gender relations

Introduction

Urban cityscape as shown from the works of various poets during the modern period demonstrates the adverse impact of modern life. The works of T.S. Eliot (1888-1965) are always connected with the anxiety and crisis of urban modernity. The image of males with different types of deficiency is not uncommon in his works. Critics such as Sandra M. Gilbert and Susan Gubar refer to his poetry as works "strewn with and wounded and weakened males such as J. Alfred Prufrock and Gerontion" (qtd. from Brooker 1994, 238). Other than relating the deficiency of males with their incompetence in gender relationships, it is also the aim of this paper to align the crisis of patriarchy with socio-political instability. In other words, the patriarch serves as the metonym of the state. The weakness of the patriarch is thus an indication of socio-political crisis. Against the corresponding historical backdrop, I suggest the fetishism of desire, rather than the rising status of women in society, as the real patriarchal threat that disrupts the long-established convention of male domination.

Materialized Urban Life in “The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock”

Conventional patriarchy is characterized by persistent paternal authority through the continuation of male heir. The subordination of women to domesticity supports male domination over economic productions. In “The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock” (1917), Eliot demonstrates how the rise of women in the modern world is associated with the crisis of patriarchy under materialized urban lifestyle. Eliot originally entitled the poem as “Prufrock among the women” (Potter 2004, 221). His final decision of naming his poem “The Love Song” demonstrates the ironic aspect of men’s actual status in the modern world. As the content of this “Love Song” provides no romantic association, the title implicitly suggests romance as a way to combat against material relations under the trend of commodity fetish, so as to save conventional patriarchy from its crisis. George Williamson observes how Eliot’s choice of using Dante’s *Inferno* as the epigraph of the poem is a “mixture of levity and seriousness” (Williamson 1996, 57). Though juxtapositioning the light-hearted title with the serious epigraph, it makes clear that Prufrock’s unsuccessful attempts in romance contributes to his hellish conditions on earth.

The speaker of the poem, J. Alfred Prufrock, fails to establish male authority due to the menacing threat of visible materialism that overrides invisible virtue. He has no confidence in the pursuit of women owing to his self-realization that there forms a gap between him and the ideal image of men from a modern perspective. For instance, he suffers from the deterioration of physical charm which further implies the deficiency of his strength as a man. In terms of physical appearance, visible signs of ageing start to appear on him:

With a bald spot in the middle of my hair —
[They will say: “How his hair is growing thin!”]
My morning coat, my collar mounting firmly to the chin,
My necktie rich and modest, but asserted by a simple pin—
[They will say: “But how his arms and legs are thin!”] (lines 40-44)

Prufrock’s awareness of his physical deficiency reflects how the ideal man is characterized by youthful attractiveness and the possession of wealth from the modern perspective of women. These two qualities are visibly detected. Prufrock’s sensitivity to both his visible sign of ageing and the invisible pressure of women’s gossips illustrates the binary hierarchy of invisibility over visibility. The gossips of the women form an invisible force that generate anxiety in him towards his visible symptoms of ageing. The intuition that his modest skill of tying a tie being ruined by the “simple pin” highlights the glaring flaw of emphasizing visible wealth over invisible virtues. Karl Marx gave a similar suggestion on how the commodification of experience destroys the essence of human virtue:

When Marx began to unravel the contradictions of the system, he did so on the understanding that capitalism negated our human essence and so had to be abolished if the human essence was to be realized. (Carver 1991, 281)

As a man's value is judged upon visible entities, the invisible human essence of Prufrock is degraded. This can be seen from how he aligns his minimal visibility with an insect "pinned and wriggling on the wall" (line 58).

Though Prufrock regards himself as a modest gentleman, he knows well that he is incomparable to great heroes such as John the Baptist or Prince Hamlet. In contrast himself as an invisible being with great heroes of visible fame, he turns himself into figure of ridicule. Still, Williamson suggests the common linkage between Prufrock and the prophet being the bygone of their great moments (Williamson 1996, 64). Besides, Prufrock foresees his death as being caused by woman. For Prufrock, the erosion of gender and social relations as mere material relations results in the crisis of patriarchy. Marx initiates that "[v]alue is a relation between persons" (Marx 1976, 167), which is also a precondition to the death of human civilization.

The final section of the poem shows the ambiguous thought of Prufrock towards modern values that distort established patriarchal authority:

I grow old ... I grow old ...
I shall wear the bottoms of my trousers rolled.

Shall I part my hair behind? Do I dare to eat a peach?
I shall wear white flannel trousers, and walk upon the beach.
I have heard the mermaids singing, each to each.

I do not think that they will sing to me. (lines 120-125)

In admitting ageing as the inevitable fact and considering new looks for himself, Prufrock indicates the inexorable substitution of old values by new trends as the golden rule of modernity. This adjustment of mentality becomes the sole way to combat against the trends of modernity. Instead of resistance, he is willing to evolve with modernity. The choice of interrogation reflects his doubts towards the outcome of making such an adjustment, which is also a response to his previous illustration of how "decisions and revisions which a minute will reverse" (line 48). The final part of the poem reflects his pessimistic stance towards the crisis of men in the modern world. Just like tragic heroes in Greek drama, anagnorisis often comes too late. When modern men become conscious of their collective crisis, they have already been drowned by the inexorable waves of modernity.

Uncertainty and Danger in "Rhapsody on a Windy Night"

Just like J. Alfred Prufrock, the male speaker in "Rhapsody on a Windy Night" (1917) is anxious towards the crisis that he faces in the modern world. The use of the dramatic monologue, instead of conversations, helps to illustrate his anxiety driven by loneliness at night. He struggles over the danger of wandering on lonesome sleepless nights. A dilemma occurs when wandering is the only

possible way to kill time in the contextual environment depicted. Besides, the streets are portrayed as landscapes with uncertain danger:

Every street lamp that I pass
Beats like a fatalistic drum,
And through the spaces of the dark
Midnight shakes the memory
As a madman shakes a dead geranium. (lines 8-12)

The speaker's perception over the beating sounds of street lamps resembles his own heart beat as triggered by nervousness. That the drum has been personified as fatalistic is a suggestion of the severe magnitude of danger at night.

Murray McArthur studies the biographical background of Eliot and relates his findings with the speaker's condition of insomnia. McArthur points out that Eliot "wrote [the poem] in Paris in 1911 during his acute-crisis in his twenty-second year" (McArthur 1994, 511). Other than this piece of information, the corresponding historical background helps to explain the portrayal of urban danger in Eliot's works. Written in the wartime era of political unrest, the poem can be viewed as a reflection of social anxiety. However, according to the text, it is discovered that the danger on street is related to women:

The street lamp said, "Regard that woman
Who hesitates towards you in the light of the door
Which opens on her like a grin.
You see the border of her dress
Is torn and stained with sand,
And you see the corner of her eye
Twists like a crooked pin." (lines 16-22)

The symbolic meaning of this prostitute imagery is intensified by the door behind her that looks like a grin, which can be defined as the snare of an animal upon the catching of a prey. In this sense, the woman is associated as an animal with wild instincts while the speaker becomes the potential prey. This reversal of conventional gender norms indicates how the change of power relations affects modern gender roles. Randy Malamud points out that Eliot "struggle[s] against the constraining forms of the past by brashly subverting formal expectations and conventions" (Malamud 1989, 84). The woman seduces the speaker to move from the outdoor domain to her indoor domestic space, which is also conventionally seen as women's sphere. Further subversions are then observed as both the outdoor and indoor domains are now aligned with danger. While the speaker feels insecure and powerless in the outdoor domain, his power is also doubtful in the domestic space governed by such female ownership.

Besides, the speaker's anxiety is related to the pursuit of material-based romance. Facing the temptation of prostitutes, the speaker has chosen the fulfillment of lust at the expense of legitimate procreation. He compares himself with an abandoned component and this highlights his incapability in reinforcing patriarchal values:

A broken spring in a factory yard,
Rust that clings to the form that the strength has left
Hard and curl and ready to snap. (lines 30-32)

The helpless and lifeless image of the broken spring in the factory yard shows implies how the speaker's masculine strength is under the threat of deterioration. He is prepared for his burial.

As the poem reaches its final stanza, the speaker shows a change of attitude. The scene describes his return to the apartment room after hours of wandering on the street. From the depiction that he climbs up the stair leading to his room, it is obvious he is reaching his destination with hope:

You have the key,
The little lamp spreads a ring on the stair,
Mount. (lines 73-75)

The lamp upon the stair is a little one that gives out limited amount of illumination. The light that it spreads out forms a ring, which symbolizes hope as darkness is replaced by daylight. Though the unpleasant domestic environment could be the cause that drives the speaker to become a wanderer at night, he eventually associates this place with hope and refuge. The dangerous encounters that he has on the streets enlighten him on the actuality of his domestic life. The domestic milieu also becomes where he "prepare[s] for life" (line 77). The poem ends with "The last twist of the knife" (line 78), which symbolizes his realization that having the chance to return home safely is a precious moment of life that he should cherish.

Temporal Relationship of the Two Sexes in "Sweeney Erect"

"Sweeney Erect" (1919) demonstrates Eliot's continuous engagement with the modern trend of temporal and material-based romance. Doris Sommer observes the linkage between literary romance and national security. She suggests the "metonymic association between romantic love that needs the state's blessing and political legitimacy that needs to be found on love" (Sommer 1991, 41). Based on her observation, I regard temporal romance that built upon sexual and material desire as illegitimate relations, an extension of romantic love without "state's blessing". They are thus relations linked to political illegitimacy being founded upon, in Foucault words, "the banished casual pleasure of sexuality" (qtd. from Sommer 1991, 38). These relationships symbolize moral degradation which is a rival of modern progress and human civilization. The pursuit of illegitimate relations implies temporal relations as a substitution to nuptial vows. Gayle Rubin suggests "Two people may meet in

friendship and exchange gifts and yet quarrel and fight in later times, but intermarriage connects them in a permanent manner” (Rubin 1965, 173). Permanent relations are not considered as desirable in modern life. Still, many women depicted in Eliot’s works are associated with goods for transactions between men.

In the poem, the voice of the omniscient speaker reveals the danger faced by Sweeney in his temporal and intimate relation with the prostitute. Though the female body is placed under male’s gaze, revealing a traditional prey-and-predator relationship between men and women, the object captured is a dangerous one. This arrangement reflects the legacy of Eliot’s gender subversion. Sweeney begins to associate the movement of the woman’s thighs with a sickle, which is a weapon that can harm or even castrate him. The woman is thus presented as a threat to his identity as a man. Another dilemma appears when he deprecates the woman’s manner during their sexual act:

Tests the razor on his leg
Waiting until the shriek subsides.
The epileptic on bed
Curves backward, clutching at her sides. (lines 29-32)

Tony Pinkney suggests that “the text remains coy about the link between the women’s convulsions and Sweeney’s gesture of testing the razor on his leg” (Pinkney 1984, 86). Eliot provides implicit hints to his reader regarding the unusual interactions of the two characters through allusions to Greek mythology. Sweeney and the woman are associated with Polypheme and Nausicaa respectively (line 10). As Sweeney tests the razor, the woman feels scared and screams. This reaction resembles Nausicaa’s frightened state upon seeing the naked Odysseus. As Sweeney is being compared with Polypheme, it makes clear that the woman’s shriek is related to the association of being shaved by the blind man Polypheme.

Meanwhile, the scream of the woman can be interpreted as a result of her over-excitement which annoys Sweeney. He waits for her to calm down by testing the razor on his leg. His annoyed mood and lack of understanding towards woman’s temperament reflects the actuality of sex without love in temporal relations. Potter is for the point of view that the poem is a mockery of “ridiculing a female sense of propriety” (Potter 2004, 225). She suggests that the “convulsive seizure” of the woman is “the result of either epilepsy or the sexual act” (Potter 2004, 225). Her displeasing attitude makes the temporal relationship ends with a stain. Temporal romance has now been turned into a disillusionment of pleasure.

Crisis of Civilization in The Wasted Land

The Waste Land (1922) is one of most important modern poems that demonstrate the crisis of civilization in the modern world. Problematic relationships between modern men and women form one of the prominent notions suggested in The Waste Land. The crisis of gender relations is related to sexual violence, communication failure and doomed relationships.

The imposition of violence upon the opposite sex forms an important notion in the portrayal of men and women relationship in the poem. Brooker observes that this theme is brought out by the use of mythical allusions (Brooker 2004, 130-149). The reference to the myth of Tereus and Philomel suggests the imposition of violence on the opposite sex. Such an imposition runs in two directions, from man to woman and also the other way round. The poem suggests that the relationship between men and women can easily be disrupted by sexual desire, as it can give rise to violence with disastrous consequences. For instance, Tereus's sexual desire is transformed into violence that victimizes Philomel. His desire is destructive to his relationship with his wife, Procne. Procne's subsequent act of violence implies that there is a potential for women to impose violence on men. Such violence can even be more harmful than what men have done to them. Though Philomel is muted by Tereus, her transformation into a nightingale revives her voice. Philomel's voice has metaphorically presented as an illustration of sexual desire and violence:

[T]he link between sexual desire and violence can be seen in the various shadings of "Jug jug" – at once a parody of sounds of sexual intercourse, a slang expression for prostitution, the sound of a mutilated singer, and the dark undersong of the nightingale...." (Brooker 2004, 141)

The cries of the nightingale, as represented by the sound of "Jug Jug", demonstrate a linkage between sexual intercourse, prostitution and rape. As the speaker mentions the world's pursuit of such crying to dirty ears (lines 102-103), it is obvious that sexual desire and violence are unavoidable in the modern world. People who are morally degraded interpret things with sexual associations all the time. Besides the myth of Tereus and Philomela, Eliot mentions the "sylvan scene" which is a reference to the depiction of Eden in John Milton's *Paradise Lost* (line 98). This reference reminds readers that the sin of human beings originates from our ancestor. The original sin reflects how Adam's patriarchal authority is threatened by his wife's temptation, and later challenged by the quarrel between his two sons. This shows that the crisis of patriarchy is related to the threat of women and domestic crisis.

The second problem that occurs between men and women is the problem of communication. In "A Game of Chess", the content and style of the dialogues violated the usual etiquette of conversations:

"My nerves are bad tonight. 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."
I think we are in rats' alley
Where the dead men lost their bones. (lines 111-116)

Eliot's use of multiple speakers creates puzzle to readers in the sense that both the identity and the number of speakers is unknown. Through the quotations, a change of speaker is noticed. The first

speaker asks for a companion but the problem of miscommunication occurs. The series of questions demonstrate that the two speakers do not understand each other, both in speeches and thoughts. From the “reply” made by the second speaker, it is obvious that the “reply” is not a comprehensible response to the questions, a representation of communication crisis in their relationship.

Thirdly, the problematic relationship of the two genders is shown by the crisis in matrimony. For instance, the marriage between Lil and her husband, Albert as depicted in “A Game of Chess” is in crisis. The health of Lil is at risk as a result of taking abortion pills. A dilemma occurs in this action. Patriarchy cannot be continued due to the rise of women’s autonomy. However, Lil still has to satisfy the sexual desire of her husband though her health is under threat, making women a tool for fulfilling men’s desires. The relationship between husband and wife is rather fragile in the sense that physical and sexual attractions are the sole things that connect the relationship. Albert cannot bear to look at Lil as her teeth have been falling out due to the adverse effect of the abortion pills. It seems that to fulfill the need of the husband becomes prior in maintaining the marriage:

He’s been in the army four years, he wants a good time,
And if you don’t give it him, there’s others will, I said. (lines 148-149)

Here, “a good time” for the husband means satisfying his sexual wants. It is considered as the obligation of the wife to obey the husband. That the husband is in thirst for sex is related to his social role as a soldier who has been away from home. This could also be a historical reference that Albert has just returned from the frontier from the First World War that lasted for four years. Her friend told Lil that if she fails to satisfy his husband’s desire, her position will be under threat. It is an irony that Lil knows well that her friend is actually having an affair with her husband. This shows how the modern world is full of suspicions and legitimate marriage becomes a superficial formality.

Conclusion

To conclude, the four selected poems have seemingly revealed the crisis of patriarchy as related to material fetishism, the rising status of women and men’s deficiency in the urban world. However, reading along the love song of single men such as like Alfred Prufrock and Sweeney, towards the tales of Tereus and Albert in *The Waste Land*, it is not difficult to know that the actual crisis of patriarchy comes from men’s desire and their pursuit of gender relations.

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