

# **From Isolation to Entrapment:**

*How External Forces Influenced the Early Works of T.S. Eliot (1910-1922)*

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In 1888, Thomas Stearns Eliot was born in St. Louis, Missouri. Thirty-four years later, he would be the published author of arguably the most influential and famous poem of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, *The Waste Land*. In the years between these two events, many factors shaped Eliot's mind and career as a poet, literary critic, and philosopher. Although he was well-educated in classical knowledge and displayed many literary allusions in his poetry, his personal and professional life experiences seem to have provided the primary motivation behind his work. An in-depth examination of the early works of T.S. Eliot reveals how he was chiefly affected and inspired by where he was living, with whom he was interacting, and the politics of the world around him.

In her third biography of the poet, T.S. Eliot: An Imperfect Life (1998), Lyndall Gordon writes how Eliot's "life and work were reciprocal parts of one design" (xii). Indeed, while he maintained a private façade, guarding his personal life closely by refusing the writing of his biography and the publication of his letters until the late 20th century, he was producing "his own biography, enlarging in poem after poem" (Gordon 1). Aiming to be a "poet who, out of intense and personal experience, is able to express a general truth" (Eliot qtd. in Gordon 2), Eliot packed his life experiences into pithy and prophetic poems that ultimately reveal to today's readers his psychological or physical isolation and entrapment.

With the aid of Lyndall Gordon's biography and second wife Valerie Eliot's 1988 publication of her late husband's letters in the anthology The Letters of T.S. Eliot: Volume 1, 1898-1922, this essay examines how events in Eliot's life during his formative and defining years of 1910 to 1922 are manifested in his poetry. During these years, he spent time in Paris and Oxford; relocated from the United States to London and lived there throughout World War I; fell in love with the daughter of a Unitarian minister at Harvard's Divinity School but instead

married a mentally ill British woman; met two of his biggest influencers, Bertrand Russell and Ezra Pound; and encountered sexual, financial, mental, and familial problems. His isolation began with his aspirations of being a poet amid Harvard University's penchant for a curriculum of science and mathematics and continued with him visiting and eventually moving to another country. His poems during this time reveal his alienation of being an American in a foreign country, especially those composed during World War I (1914-1918). Eliot was also set apart by his philosophical beliefs; as the curriculum of philosophy began to change in 1912, he adhered to the former course of study, disagreeing with the whole of Harvard's philosophy department.

Eliot's isolation eventually gave way to a sense of entrapment and a desire for escape. With his hasty marriage to Vivienne Haigh-Wood and establishment of residency in London, he found himself swimming in a sea of commitments to his wife and her burgeoning mental illness, to his family overseas, and to himself as a writer. Through the didacticism of his poems, Eliot appeared as a prophet for society, yet he was unable to comply with his own advice due to personal restrictions. This sense of urgency and need for freedom culminated in the 1922 publication of *The Waste Land*, which includes the epigraph from Petronius's *Satyricon* in which Sibyl says, "I long to die."

To begin exploring the psychology of a poet, an understanding of the environment in which the poet lived is necessary. Prior to 1910, Eliot had spent most of his life in Missouri (St. Louis) and Massachusetts (Boston and East Gloucester). As a young boy, he dabbled in poetry, writing quaint lyric poems about love or how he did not want to go to school. Following his graduation from Smith Academy in 1905 at which he recited his commemorative poem "At Graduation," Eliot enrolled as a college student at Harvard<sup>1</sup>.

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<sup>1</sup> Valerie Eliot, T.S. Eliot's second wife, included a Biographical Commentary section in the introduction of [The Letters of T.S. Eliot: Volume 1, 1898-1922](#) from which these details are taken (xix-xxvi).

At the turn of the century, American society was in flux. Known as the Progressive Era in United States history, this period included the advent of many reforms in response to an increasing industrializing society and rising immigrant population. One major reform during this time was in education. In 1905, Andrew Carnegie, steel tycoon and currently the richest man in the world, endowed \$10 million to a committee of university presidents, including Harvard's Charles William Eliot, with the idea that the grant would "raise standards in American secondary and higher education." With over 600 higher education institutions in the country, this committee took it upon themselves to differentiate the good colleges from the bad, and they established standards that served to stratify colleges in the future. Out of the 600, the committee found that "only fifty-two colleges met their criteria" as sufficient higher education institutions<sup>2</sup>.

As a result of the reforms going on in higher education, Harvard's curriculum shifted to espouse the standards outlined by the Carnegie committee during Eliot's undergraduate years. It was decided that the classics were no longer preferable courses of study, and universities began to emphasize and encourage scientific subjects such as physics, math, and chemistry. During his career, Eliot never enrolled in a science course and instead focused on French prose and poetry and philosophy. Because the "humanities suffered from President Eliot's notion that cultivation was for women" (Gordon 31), Eliot found Harvard to be an overall lackluster educational experience.

Eliot found not only Harvard but also the whole of the United States lacking in appreciation of poetry. Feeling as though there was "not one older poet writing in America whose writing a younger man could take seriously" (Eliot qtd. in Gordon 46), Eliot sought a change in his milieu. During February of 1910 (his senior year), he wrote Part II of *Portrait of a*

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<sup>2</sup> Tyack, David and Larry Cuban. Tinkering Towards Utopia. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1995. 91-92.

*Lady*, which contains a glimpse of what he was seeking: “My buried life, and Paris in the Spring,/ I feel immeasurably at peace” (lines 54-55). The following May, he developed a minor case of scarlet fever and was unable to take his final exams; however, he was still able to graduate from Harvard and enroll in a graduate program in philosophy. Through this program, he had aspirations to visit Paris the following October.

In addition to feeling a need to escape from his restrictive academic and American world, Eliot also endured tension with his family. As indicated by letters exchanged with his mother, Charlotte Eliot opposed both ideas of Eliot traveling alone and France as his chosen destination. On April 3, 1910, she wrote:

I can not [*sic*] bear to think of your being alone in Paris, the very words give me a chill. English speaking countries seem so different from foreign. I do not admire the French nation, and have less confidence in individuals of that race than in English.  
(Eliot 13)

Beyond her aversion to the French, perhaps Charlotte was concerned about her son because he had recently had scarlet fever. One of his older brothers, Henry Ware Eliot Jr., had been permanently scarred by deafness as a result of having scarlet fever as a child (Eliot 56). Perhaps she was also preoccupied by a personal agenda: in the same letter, she also wrote: “I should so have loved a college course, but was obliged to teach before I was nineteen.” Charlotte Eliot was 45 years old at the time her sixth and youngest child, Thomas Stearns, was born. She spent a large part of her life wanting to be a writer, but found herself “a dead failure” (Eliot 13). Earlier letters from 1905 and 1906 further reveal how Charlotte appeared to have been a rather overprotective parent, constantly conferring with his teachers regarding the health and well-being of her son. Although subsequent letters and personal accounts confirm that Eliot loved his

mother and the two shared a close relationship, the added pressure she brought to his life is notable and became more prevalent as years passed.

Nevertheless, Eliot journeyed to Paris in October 1910 to find respite from his American life. During the year-long period in which he was abroad, he was influenced by a variety of experiences: his development of a close friendship with Jean Verdenal in France, his travels to Munich and Northern Italy, and his immersion in the French language and culture. The poetry Eliot would produce while abroad and during the subsequent decade underscores the profound effects of his first travels abroad.

Upon his arrival, Eliot met Jean Verdenal at a pension in France where they both were staying. They became close friends, exchanging several letters in 1911-13 and only ceasing because Verdenal joined an infantry regiment to fight (and later, die) in the First World War. Although Eliot hit it off with Verdenal, the latter was the son of a doctor and a medical student on a completely different life path from Eliot's. Verdenal offered Eliot "a blend of sensibility and intellect missing in the English intellectual tradition since the 17<sup>th</sup> century" (Gordon 53). However, he did not supply Eliot with a direct connection to the artistic world:

I had only the genuine stimulus of the place, and not the artificial stimulus of the people, as I knew no-one whatever, in the literary and artistic world, as a companion—knew them rather as spectacles. (Eliot qtd. in Gordon 53)

Despite the lack of an artistic connection, the influence of Eliot's friendship with Verdenal is apparent in his poetry. For one, Verdenal was a devout fan of the composer Wagner, and while Eliot was in Munich, Verdenal encouraged him to attend one of Wagner's operas. Verdenal wrote to Eliot in February 1912: "Music goes more directly to the core of my being...*Tristan and Isolde* is terribly moving at the first hearing, and leaves you prostrate with ecstasy" (Verdenal

qtd. in Eliot 31). Later, Eliot would incorporate significant Wagner allusions, particularly from *Tristan and Isolde*, in *The Waste Land*. In addition, Eliot dedicated his first collection of poems, *Prufrock and Other Observations* (1917), to Verdenal who was killed in May 1915 in World War I.

In addition to the influence of this friendship, Europe was a place where Eliot was able to cultivate his talents as a poet. France was particularly alluring to him as he saw it the necessary alternative to America where “the status of poetry had fallen still lower than in England” (Eliot qtd. in Gordon 46). From studying French literature as an undergraduate, Eliot was most influenced by Charles Baudelaire (1821-1867) and Jules Laforgue (1860-1887) (Gordon 27, 43). Involved in the 19<sup>th</sup>-century French Symbolist movement, these two poets espoused the significance of the poet as a prophet through the symbolism of particular images (Gordon 39). Similarly, Eliot allied himself to somewhat of a prophet, painting a dismal picture of the 20<sup>th</sup> century and lamenting lost Victorian values in his poems. His multifaceted, 20<sup>th</sup>-century critiques began to center on women, sex, and city life. Both this subject matter and Eliot’s eloquent manner of delivery were influenced by his French predecessors: from Baudelaire Eliot gleaned “the more sordid aspects of the modern metropolis” (Eliot qtd. in Gordon 28), which he would further implement in *The Waste Land*, and from Laforgue he learned “the poetic possibilities of [his] own idiom of speech” (Eliot qtd. in Gordon 42). More than an escape from America, Eliot’s visit to France was almost like a pilgrimage. He admitted fifty years following his trip that he “had at that time the idea of giving up English and trying to settle down in Paris...and gradually write French” (Eliot 15).

Subsequently, between October 1910 and November 1911, he composed sections one and three of *Portrait of a Lady* and *The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock*—two poems that reveal his

emerging prophetic social criticism as well as a sense of isolation and alienation as an American in a foreign land. Both poems feature a male speaker who is uncertain and diffident when in the presence of a woman; however, their titles imply that each poem has a different focus. While *Prufrock* is more introspective and focuses on the internal monologue of the speaker, *Portrait* depicts the effects of the external world on the speaker, particularly the influence of one woman. These two poems are not mirror images of Eliot himself, but the conventions, themes, and diction he employs correspond with and provide insight into the environment and events of his life at the time.

Primarily composed in Munich, *Prufrock* reveals Eliot's isolation in Europe through the persona J. Alfred Prufrock. Prufrock fails to "disturb the universe" (line 46), and though he reassures himself through the repetition of the line "there will be time" (line 41), so much time has already passed that there is a "bald spot" in the middle of his hair and "his arms and legs are thin" (lines 40, 44). Prufrock's preoccupation with how the world views him seems to be the source of his hindrance; he keeps referring to what "they will say" (lines 41, 44), and consequently, he finds himself too afraid to "dare." He states: "I have seen the moment of my greatness flicker" (line 84). Though the poem concludes with a heroic couplet, ironically the final two words are "we drown."

This characterization of a timorous, prosaic man reflects Eliot in many ways. For one, the contemplative Prufrock resembles Eliot, who has been described many times by those who knew him as a pensive man. Also, this poem reveals a fear Eliot had about himself—a fear that he, too, might miss the moment of his greatness. The final two words, "we drown," evoke an image of failure by suffocation, which Eliot metaphorically felt in Harvard and with his family. Further, Prufrock seems to have the potential of being a prophet. Like Laforgue, Eliot felt that it was "a

prophet's obligation to articulate what he alone knows" (Eliot qtd. in Gordon 69). By dividing Prufrock into both a conformist and a prophet, Eliot invokes the Laforgian characteristic of an internal dialogue between two sides of the self: "Let us go then, you and I" (line 1). This narrative split allows Eliot to broaden his social critique. On one hand, Prufrock is critical of a sordid external world in which vacuous and perhaps licentious women "come and go/Talking of Michelangelo" (lines 13, 14 and 35, 36); on the other, he is too cowardly to "dare" and make a change within this world. Ultimately, Prufrock's fear of rejection and self-induced alienation keep him from reaching his prophetic potential, which perhaps connects to Eliot's fear of failure and isolation while he was abroad.

*Portrait* depicts the role of the lady and her relationship with the speaker. As discussed above, Eliot composed Part II first while still a student at Harvard; however, he wrote Part I in November of 1910 while in Paris and completed the poem the following year upon his return to the United States. Unlike *Prufrock*, this poem is a linear narrative, taking place chronologically over a year, and it emphasizes the effects of external dialogue upon the speaker rather than the speaker's internal monologue. However, there are discernible distinctions among the three sections, seemingly representative of the different times they were written during Eliot's travels.

The first section of *Portrait* provides a morose view of human interaction as a few people in conversation sit about idly, not connecting with one another. Dark images of smoke and fog on a December afternoon create the ambience of the room in which the speaker and a few others are drinking together and engaging in banal conversation. A moribund feeling is evoked as the atmosphere is described as "Juliet's tomb" (line 6). The people with whom the speaker associates are portrayed as sycophants, blankly complimenting one another on the delight of their friendship, and he compares their association with one another to the thin, unharmonizing music

of “attenuated,” “mingled,” and “winding” violins and cornets (lines 16, 17, 29). Through minor details, he also emphasizes how this entire situation lacks substance. For example, following small talk, the people sit together silently drinking “bocks,” which Merriam-Webster defines to be “heavy dark rich beer aged in the fall and winter and sold in the early spring<sup>3</sup>.” Yet it is December. Although minor, this detail mimics the inconsistency and lack of harmony among these friends. What results from their interaction is the alienation of the speaker; he experiences a headache described as a “dull tom-tom... absurdly hammering” in his brain (lines 32, 33). As this section was written while Eliot was in Paris, it echoes his sentiments that the people were more like “spectacles” to him than artistic companions.

Even though Eliot composed it first, Part II takes place several months later in the spring and summer. The lady is first introduced in this section, and the influence of her dialogue upon the speaker becomes the focus, unlike *Prufrock* in which his internal monologue is emphasized. She describes in the first stanza of this section a rebirth she experienced in Paris that led her to “find the world/ To be wonderful and youthful, after all” (lines 55, 56). Through her speech, one discerns that she sees potential in the speaker and is encouraging his desire to explore. She tells him, “You will go on, and when you have prevailed/ You can say: at this point many a one has failed” (lines 62, 63). At the time of this section’s composition, Eliot has similarly reached his “journey’s end” at Harvard and sought escape (line 67). The lady’s encouragement of the speaker to depart is somewhat manipulative, however. As she extols him on his potential to accomplish great things abroad, she also adds “But what have I, my friend/ To give you, what can you receive from me?” (lines 64, 65). By posing this question, the reader sees how this lady holds a mysterious power over the speaker. Speechless, he asks himself, “how can I make a cowardly amends/ For what she has said to me?” (lines 69, 70).

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3 “bocks.” [Merriam-Webster Online Dictionary](http://www.merriam-webster.com). 2003. <<http://www.merriam-webster.com>>

In Part III, written in October-November 1911 just as Eliot returned to the United States, the lady's power and manipulation over the speaker becomes more discernible to both the speaker and the reader. Set in the following October, it takes place just before the speaker is about to depart, and he goes to say goodbye to the lady. Although aware that he is about to leave, she asks "why we have not developed into friends" (line 98). It appears as though she waits until the last minute to mention the possibility of their deeper union and insists that he keeps her in his mind by saying "Perhaps you can write to me... You will write, at any rate" (lines 93, 106). Fully aware of her manipulation, he thinks to himself, "*This* is as I had reckoned" (line 95); yet, he is delighted by her interest: "I must borrow every changing shape/ To find expression... dance, dance" (lines 109, 110). He also finds himself confused, "not knowing what to feel" (line 119).

Differing from the moribund, estranged quality of the first section, the second and third sections highlight how the speaker longs for companionship and is excited by the possibility of connecting with the lady. However, these sections also highlight her tainting effects. In Part II, she tells the speaker how the innocence of youth causes the young to "[smile] at situations which it cannot see" (line 50). "I smile, of course," the speaker immediately thinks, because through his alienation, he has maintained innocence (line 51). However, in the third section, he wonders about the success of her manipulation by asking himself, "would she not have the advantage, after all?" (line 121), and as a consequence of her power, he asks in the final line of the poem, "And should I have the right to smile?" Seemingly, Eliot is suggesting that interpersonal connections, particularly with women, can lead to contamination-- as if he is justifying his own self-induced solitude while abroad.

With the parallel between the speaker's impending expedition and Eliot's actual journey to Paris, *Portrait* offers insight into Eliot's diversified opinion of himself and how the external

world was affecting him internally. The speaker of *Portrait* seeks fulfillment as evinced by his numerous attempts of connections with people and his planned trip to escape his suffocating “grey and smoky” milieu (line 115). Eliot, too, was seeking escape from his resolute, aristocratic academic world and his overprotective mother. However, the speaker’s characterization of people (particularly the lady) as dark, shallow, and manipulative-- and his resulting conglomeration of feelings-- reflect a somewhat misogynistic, pedantic Eliot who is echoing the French influence of Laforgue and Baudelaire. Ultimately, Eliot found himself alienated abroad, defining the people around him as merely “spectacles.” While *Portrait* is a defense of Eliot’s seclusion during the years 1910-1911, *Prufrock* highlights his resulting timidity and fear.

During this time, Eliot also was seemingly preoccupied with his own sexual nature. There have been claims that he maintained a more-than-friends relationship with Verdenal, espoused by letters the two exchanged. For example, the following excerpt from Verdenal’s letter to Eliot on April 22, 1912 implies an ambiguous relationship between the two:

A persistent blaze of spring sunshine prompted me to go out into the woods today...it was a delicate, unreal scene, even fairy-like, I would say...I thought of writing to you, because *you* were especially called to mind by the contact with a landscape we appreciated together. (Eliot 34)

Gordon, too, discusses the homoeroticism between Verdenal and Eliot by describing a memory Eliot had of Verdenal “coming towards him across the Luxembourg Gardens, waving a spray of lilac” (Eliot qtd. in Gordon 53). Apparently, this memory “raised the question [for Eliot] whether the feeling between them was ‘queer’” (53). However, in subsequent letters he denies any sort of homoeroticism, speaking of “nervous sexual attacks” from being alone in Paris in which “one walks about the street with one’s desires and one’s refinement rises up like a wall whenever opportunity approaches” (Eliot 73). In these letters, it is clear that “these desires were for

women” (Gordon 53). Nevertheless, Eliot’s numerous apprehensions about sex are revealed in key passages of *Prufrock* and *Portrait*.

In the beginning of *Prufrock*, the speaker describes the slums of a random city, and along the street are “restless nights in one-night cheap hotels” (line 6), giving off an image of one-night stands and cheap prostitution. Such debauchery is unappealing and “insidious” to Prufrock as it was to Eliot (line 9); however, it opens the door to the poem’s pervasive sexual imagery that suggests a fear of sex. In the seventh, eighth, and ninth stanzas, the speaker claims he has been with a woman before, repeating several times “I have known them all already,” but he wonders if he could go through with the act of sex. He asks, “Should I, after tea and cakes and ices/ Have the strength to force the moment to its crisis?” (lines 79, 80). Moreover, Prufrock seems to fear how the woman would react. He states, “And I have seen the eternal Footman hold my coat, and snicker” (line 85), which perhaps could be revelatory of a fear of being seen naked by someone else. He also worries about leaving her unsatisfied; as she is “settling a pillow by her head” (line 96), she could say “that is not what I meant at all” (line 97). Ultimately, however, Prufrock decides that he will not even take advantage of these opportunities. The poem concludes with the bittersweet image of the singing mermaids beneath the ocean and Prufrock lamenting “I do not think that they will sing to me” (line 125). Thus, throughout the poem, Prufrock encompasses Eliot’s sexual apprehensions as he travels to a big city—invoking both fears that he will fail as a sexual lover and that he might not be courageous enough to even pursue a partner.

While *Prufrock* reveals a fear of sex, *Portrait* seems to highlight Eliot’s moral musings about sex. The first mention of sex appears as early as the epigraph in *Portrait* with the quote from Christopher Marlow’s play, *Jew of Malta*: “Thou hast committed—Fornication: but that was in another country/ And besides, the wench is dead.” This quote could be exposing a sexual

relationship between the speaker and the lady, particularly as it corresponds with the poem's imagery of decay. The lady speaks of how she is about to "reach her journey's end" (line 67), and even if she dies after he has left the country, the speaker would have committed fornication in another country, fulfilling the epigraph's prophesy. A further indication of a sexual relationship between the lady and the speaker appears in Part III, as the speaker goes for his final visit with the lady. Anticipating their meeting, he describes himself "mounted on my hands and knees" (line 87), and his "self-possession," which previously had been under control, suddenly "flares" (line 94). This sexual imagery and diction, coupled with Eliot's negative characterization of the lady, evokes a distasteful feeling about sex. Juxtaposed with the sexual implications within *Prufrock, Portrait* reveals how sex seemed to divide Eliot. While he desired it, this desire was muddled by his confusion of preference and his concerns about the missed opportunities, immoralities, and failures surrounding it.

These sexual implications found in Eliot's early poetry, in conjunction with his narrative style and timid-male characterization, reflect the effects of his journey to France in 1910-1911. Instigating the transition from an American student into a European poet, this trip proved to be invaluable to Eliot's poetry career and deepened his penchant for studying abroad. Though manifested through his first two major compositions of *Prufrock* and *Portrait* (the former of which would ultimately garner international acclaim), the effects of this trip were not perceptible to the rest of the world until 1914 when he published his works, accepted the Sheldon Travelling Award to study for a year in Oxford, and subsequently decided to live in England. In the time between his return to United States and the climactic year of 1914, however, Eliot resumed schooling at Harvard and found himself amid a changing academic and artistically dull world.

Just as before, the ambiance of the United States failed to be sufficiently stimulating for the burgeoning poet. Composing little verse between 1912 and 1914, Eliot temporarily shelved his poetry career to focus on working as an assistant in Philosophy at Harvard and pursuing a PhD in the field (Eliot xxi). During this time, however, philosophy was a changing discipline. In 1912, an epistemological movement called New Realism was launched by E.B. Holt's publication of the same name. Making a "stir in philosophy departments," New Realism became the orthodox curriculum of American philosophy (Eliot xxi). A 20<sup>th</sup>-century resurgence of an epistemological theory from the 1500s, New Realism came about as a rebuttal to the popular theory of Idealism.

D.W. Hamlyn's book A History of Western Philosophy helps elucidate a distinction between Idealism and Realism. One of the first philosophers to muse upon Idealism was British empiricist George Berkeley (1685-1753) who stated that there is nothing "without the mind" (180). Arguing that objects cannot exist without being perceived, Berkeley presented the supposition of imagining an unperceived object without thinking of its physical or sensory properties. Because it is impossible for us to imagine an object without characterizing it by sensory properties, the idea that unperceived matter exists is inconceivable. F.H. Bradley, "the greatest of the British Absolute Idealists," further expounded on this theory in 1893 with his book Appearances and Reality (281). Highlighting a distinction between reality and ideas, he declared that reality must be rational and consist of experience, while ideas represent unexplainable phenomena, such as space and time (281). Because Bradley was also an Absolutist, he decreed that only one reality exists, but each person's judgment of this reality is unique: "No judgment is entirely false and none is entirely true" (283).

By contrast, Realism is a theory that came about during the Middle Ages by William of Champeaux and later modified by Thomas Aquinas claiming that a material world exists independently of the mind<sup>4</sup>. Realists suggest that human senses are subjective to an objective reality, and what is inferred through our sensory perceptions is not necessarily what exists because of the material world's independence from the human mind (Hamlyn 107). Our claims about this world are made true or false by the way the world actually is-- independent of our cognitions of it-- and as a result, we may never truly know what comprises the objective, material world.

Holt's New Realism rediscovered this medieval philosophy, and like most American universities, Harvard became doused by a subsequent New Realist Movement that replaced Idealism as the dominant ideology after 1912. One of the most prominent New Realists was Bertrand Russell (1872-1970) who converted from Idealism to Realism with the publication of his book The Problems of Philosophy in 1912. Hamlyn states that Russell "came to believe that Idealism could not explain mathematical truth" (293). Given that Idealism acknowledges reality as only experiential, math is invalidated since its truths are derived analytically and not by experience. A visiting professor philosopher at Harvard in 1914 (just after the presidency of Charles William Eliot), Russell followed the pro-Math, anti-humanities trend in his publications. In 1917, he published the essay "Mysticism and Logic," putting forth the claim that aspects of one's knowledge acquisition could come about through description and acquaintance rather than direct experience (Hamlyn 295). In doing so, he was allowing for the verification of math (it can be derived analytically instead of experientially and still be real), and he "set himself up in clear opposition to the view of idealists such as Bradley" (Hamlyn 295).

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<sup>4</sup> "Realism, in Philosophy." The Columbia Encyclopedia, Sixth Edition. New York: Columbia University Press, 2001. <<http://www.bartleby.com/65/re/realism3.html>>

Eliot and Russell's paths first crossed in March 1914 at Harvard, and the relationship that would ensue after both were living in England would be one of professional and personal antagonism under the public guise of a close friendship (Eliot xxi-i). In the meantime, however, Eliot spent his remaining American years isolated from his Harvard contemporaries through his recalcitrant Idealist beliefs. In 1912, he picked up a copy of Appearances and Reality, and the following year began writing his dissertation on Bradley's epistemology. Standing apart from the New Realists, Eliot later commented in 1935: "it must be admitted that the New Realism, like most pre-War philosophies, seems now as demoded as ladies' hats of the same period" (Eliot xxi).

Thus the world of philosophy seemed to exacerbate further Eliot's isolation from the norm during 1912 and 1913. However, similar to his solitary experiences in France, his affinity to Idealism and its ostracism proved to be very influential on his writing. In March of 1914, Eliot received the Sheldon Travelling Fellow in Philosophy and again left the United States to study abroad. By this time, he began composing verse more prolifically, in which the contradictory yet instrumental influences of Russell and Bradley are undeniable. Although he wrote to a friend in 1914: "I shan't do anything that will satisfy me (as some of my old stuff *does* satisfy me...) for years" (Eliot qtd. in Gordon 94), the poems he did compose reveal a climactic conglomeration of personal, professional, and global influences.

One such poem is "Rhapsody on a Windy Night." First published in a magazine in July of 1915 (but composed at least two years earlier, according to Gordon), this poem appears to encapsulate Eliot's philosophical alienation and explores the "sordid city" theme similar to the opening lines of *Prufrock*. As indicated by the title, this poem takes place at night, and it describes four hours of a wanderer meandering through a city, noticing different scenes and

images. Eliot emphasizes the concept of time with frequent announcements such as “Half-past one” or “Half-past three” (lines 13, 46), evoking a sense of punctuality. These “divisions and precisions” of time give the poem a rational framework, but the content of the poem reflects a distorted, blurry reality (line 7). In the night, the wanderer’s memory becomes unreliable-- “the memory throws up high and dry/ a crowd of twisted things” (lines 22, 23) -- and he begins to relay irrational experiences and descriptions. For example, his journey throughout the city is directed by the advice of a “muttering” street lamp (line 37), and he recalls images of the moon as being a winking, smiling old woman (line 51).

Eliot’s employment of sensory imagery allows these irrational experiences to appear real. For example, in the description of the moon as an old woman, he uniquely details the way she smells:

... of dust and eau de Cologne,  
She is alone  
With all the old nocturnal smells...  
Smells of chestnuts in the streets  
And female smells in shuttered rooms  
And cigarettes in corridors  
And cocktail smells in bars. (lines 58-60; 65-68)

Although it seems unlikely to equate the moon with a woman who reeks of cocktails and cigarettes, this conceit is made graspable by Eliot’s sensory imagery; the details of the description conjure up memories of familiar smells such that that the reader himself can almost actually smell the woman/moon. Furthermore, the device of repetition in this poem is striking. “Lunar” (in both English and French), “street lamp,” and “twisting” are repeated images that are emphasized and made more tangible for the reader through their frequent mention.

Eliot’s construction of reality in this poem can be interpreted to reflect the contradicting influences of Bradley and Russell. The wanderer’s visions seem impossible to the reader.

Ostensibly, a street-lamp would not mutter at all, let alone tell a person to enter the wrong apartment only to be killed by “the last twist of the knife” (line 78), which is how the poem ends. A realist such as Russell would most likely declare these experiences as unreal for being unsound analytical derivations of the mind, but Eliot seems to posit that there is no way to disprove the existence of these experiences. As previously stated, Idealist Bradley concluded that reality is experiential, and “no judgment is entirely false and none is entirely true” (Hamlyn 283). By presenting “Rhapsody on a Windy Night” in a defined time structure with such tangible and repetitive sensory language, Eliot challenges Realism by depicting experiences that are nonsensical but ideally could be real due to their sensory and experiential palpability.

Eliot’s bold idealist beliefs would continue to affect him for years to come; however, the years of 1914 and 1915 introduced new changes and influences in his life. In many ways, these years represent Eliot’s evolution from youth to adult. First of all, he experienced his first love and marriage, although paradoxically with two different women. Early in 1914, he told Emily Hale, the daughter of a Boston Unitarian minister whom he had met two years prior, he was in love with her (Eliot xvii). With no apparent reciprocal commitment from her<sup>5</sup>, Eliot left the United States to fulfill the terms of his Sheldon Travelling award. The two exchanged a few letters “on a purely friendly basis” (Eliot xvii), but Eliot never again returned to the United States to live as an American citizen. In June 1915, he officially moved to England, declaring independence from his family in St. Louis, Missouri with a surprisingly sudden marriage to Englishwoman Vivienne Haigh-Wood (Eliot xxi).

Why Eliot married another woman so quickly has aroused much conjecture; however, there is also no denying that his love for Emily had a profound effect on him. Before leaving the

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<sup>5</sup> Corroborating letters between Eliot and Hale are scheduled to be released in Princeton University Library by 2020 (Eliot xvi).

United States a second time, Eliot composed one of his most beautiful but lesser known poems, “La Figlia Che Piange” (Gordon 81). Featuring a speaker whose everlasting love for a woman must go unreciprocated, Gordon posits the likely interpretation that Eliot invoked Emily as his immortal muse for this poem (81). A vast departure from *Prufrock*, *Portrait*, or “Rhapsody,” this poem is similar to a memoir, with the speaker looking back at himself in the third person when he was once in the presence of his unattainable beloved. His reminiscence of this girl takes place in a pastoral, idyllic setting, highlighting her purity:

Stand on the highest pavement of the stair—  
Lean on a garden urn—  
Weave, weave the sunlight in your hair (lines 1-3)

The speaker’s association of the girl with sunlit-woven hair and “arms full of flowers” reveals a departure in Eliot’s writing, particularly considering the setting and depiction of women in his prior poems (line 24). The golden hue of “La Figlia” is a stark contrast to the dark and smoky setting of *Portrait* and the eerie night of “Rhapsody.” Further, the speaker’s sweet memory of the girl in “La Figlia” is far different from the licentiousness of the women in *Prufrock*, the “talk of dying” evoked by the lady in *Portrait* (line 124), or the “washed out-smallpox cracks” on the moon/old woman’s face in “Rhapsody” (line 56). The girl in “La Figlia” occupies the speaker’s “imagination many days, / many days and many hours” (lines 18, 19), and he constantly wonders how “they should have been together” during both the “the troubled midnight and the noon’s repose” (lines 21, 24).

However, much like the actual situation between Emily and Eliot in which no romantic commitment was established, the girl in “La Figlia” poses as the speaker’s immortal muse rather than the two sharing an actual kinetic connection. “La Figlia” calls to mind the Romantic poem

by John Keats, “Ode to a Grecian Urn” (1820), in which two figures, a beautiful young man and woman, are emblazoned on an urn<sup>6</sup>. The speaker comments on the dichotomy of their immortality:

Bold Lover, never, never canst thou kiss,  
Though winning near the goal—yet, do not grieve;  
She cannot fade, though thou hast not thy bliss,  
For ever wilt thou love, and she be fair! (lines 17-20)

Even though the man and woman in Keats’ poem lack in vitality and cannot have experiences with each other, their beauty and love will never fade as beauty and love inevitably does in real life. Similarly, the speaker in “La Figlia” compares his relationship with the girl as a “gesture and a pose” (line 22). To him, the girl will pose in his memory forever, but he acknowledges they cannot be together. As Gordon states, Eliot “prefers to construct a memorable figure of a beautiful girl, literally a statue on a pedestal, to the disturbing alternative of coming together” (433). Indeed, while “La Figlia” reveals a unique romantic and tender side to Eliot, it also reiterates his disconnection. Although he later married hastily —shocking everyone, including himself-- this poem underscores his typical preference for being alone instead of risking failure through involvement.

Just as Eliot personally battled issues with women, he was also in the vicinity of burgeoning literal battles: England’s international relations were becoming hostile. On June 28, 1914, the heir to the Austro-Hungarian throne, Archduke Franz Ferdinand, was assassinated in Sarajevo by a Slav nationalist. On August 1, 1914, Germany declared war on Russia, and on August 4 and 12, Great Britain declared war on Germany and Austria-Hungary, respectively. Although at first many believed that the war would be “over by Christmas,” armistice was not

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<sup>6</sup> Abrams, M.H., eds. The Norton Anthology of English Literature. Vol. 2. New York: W. W. Norton, 2000. 851-853.

declared until November 1918 after enormous slaughter. Eliot confessed in a letter to his friend in September, 1914: “the whole experience [of war] has been something which has left a deep impression on me...No war ever seemed so real to me as this” (Eliot 58).

Indeed, being an American in warring foreign countries was difficult for Eliot, particularly considering he harbored pro-German sentiments early in the war. While visiting the German city of Marburg in July of 1914, he wrote to Aiken: “I find that I like German food! I like German people!” (Eliot 43). A few weeks later, he sent a letter home indicating his surprise and distaste for England’s war declaration on Germany: “I think it is silly to hold up one’s hands at German ‘atrocities’ and ‘violations of neutrality.’ The Germans are perfectly justified” (Eliot 56). In September, forced by the war to leave Germany, Eliot discovered the detachment of being an American in England at war. He stayed in a “seedy part” of London where he felt he did not “understand the English very well” and compared his difficulty “to take Englishmen” to a “brick wall” (Eliot 57). In addition, a short poem he had written was rejected by English publishers because “it paid too great a tribute to the charms of German youth to be acceptable to the English public” (Eliot 59). Eliot desired a transfer in October. In an appeal to his professor at Harvard, he wrote: “If you hear anything of German universities being open for neutrals in the spring, I hope you will let me know” (Eliot 60). The transfer never occurred.

In spite of his German sympathies, Eliot also seemed to harbor a somewhat anti-American opinion regarding the war. In a brief poem entitled “The *Boston Evening Transcript*,” he seems to criticize Americans for their neutrality. He employs the simile that readers of the *Boston Evening Transcript* “sway in the wind like a ripe field of corn” (line 2), evoking an image of American capriciousness and vacillation when confronted with different opinions. He also

alludes to François La Rochefoucauld<sup>7</sup> during a metaphorical scene in which the speaker feels himself “wearily” approach the end of the world (line 7), as if “the street were time and he at the end of the street” (line 8). This scene of disillusionment and hopelessness, juxtaposed to a depiction of American apathy, further reflects how Eliot found himself standing alone in his opinions of the war.

During this volatile time, Eliot began seeking interpersonal connections to rectify his recurring sense of isolation-- beginning with Ezra Pound. A poet himself, Pound spent much of his life promoting the modernist movement in poetry, particularly through his support of W.B. Yeats, Robert Frost, James Joyce, and Ernest Hemingway<sup>8</sup>. After reading *Prufrock*, Pound was instantly enamored by Eliot’s harmonious diction. On September 22, 1914, the two met, and Pound became Eliot’s mentor, companion, and father figure, even helping to pay for Eliot’s first volume of poetry and editing his major work, *The Waste Land* (Gordon 99). Eliot reflected in the 1960s: “My meeting with Ezra Pound changed my life. He was enthusiastic about my poems, and gave me such praise and encouragement as I had long since ceased to hope for” (Eliot xvii). Together, Eliot and Pound were “two young lapsed professors in exile from America” (Gordon 98), and without Pound’s fervent and indefatigable support, it is doubtful that Eliot would have become the esteemed poet for which he is known today.

However, despite Pound’s significance in Eliot’s early poetic career, in 1914 the eagerness of Pound for Eliot to produce more outstanding poetry was stressful. Having not written a critically eminent poem since *Prufrock* in 1911, Eliot worried that it would be his swan

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7 François La Rochefoucauld (1613-1680) was an observer of the King Louis XIV of France and also a pessimistic essayist who frequently wrote on the intrinsic sinful vices of human behavior. One of his famous essays, *Maxims*, written in 1663 “expressed the pessimism of the disillusioned nobility.” Eliot ascribes this disillusionment to the majority of Americans during World War I in “The Boston Evening Transcript.” Liukkonen, Petri. “François La Rochefoucauld (1613-1680).” *Authors’ Calendar*. 2003 <<http://www.kirjasto.sci.fi/rochefou.htm>>

8 Information on Ezra Pound acquired from “American Poets: Ezra Pound” © 2000-2003 Gunnar Bengtsson. <<http://www.americanpoems.com/poets/ezrapound/>>.

song. He wrote to his Harvard friend, the American poet Conrad Aiken, on September 30, 1914: “The devil of it is that I have done nothing good since J.A[lfred] P[ru]frock and writhe in impotence” (Eliot 58). Pound, who had begun investing so much in Eliot, also expressed concern: “Pray God ‘Prufrock’ will not be a single and unique success” (Pound qtd. in Gordon 101).

Unfortunately, Eliot’s attempts at composition during 1914 and 1915 were meager compared to the success of *Prufrock* and the eminence of *The Waste Land* that was soon to come. Lacking in substance and poignancy, the poems he produced during these years are abrupt and insensitive, and they lack consistency when viewed collectively. Two examples are “Aunt Helen” and “Cousin Nancy,” printed together in October 1915. First of all, these poems do not contain Eliot’s archetypal euphony, sensory imagery, or figurative language, but rather they are brief and straightforward narratives delivered by indistinctive speakers. Further, they do not impart prophetic or insightful morsels of wisdom like Eliot’s more striking works, nor do they evoke a particular mood or tone-- they are simply objective descriptions. The 13-line poem “Aunt Helen” tells of the speaker’s maiden aunt and how life after her death is silent. The majority of the poem is comprised of insignificant, impartial details such as “the undertaker wiped his feet” and “the footman sat upon the dining-table,” unrevealing of a greater truth or deeper meaning (lines 6, 11). Similarly, the first two stanzas of “Cousin Nancy” reveal a brave and independent woman who horseback rides, smokes, and dances. However, the third and final stanza drops Nancy and introduces the non sequitur of how Matthew and Waldo are “guardians of the faith” (line 12). Impassively detailed and desultory, these poems are weak and seem to lack inspiration compared to Eliot’s other works. And Eliot knew it. On November 16, 1914, he

admitted to Aiken: “It still seems to me strained and intellectual. I know the kind of verse I want, and I know that this isn’t it” (Eliot 69).

Perhaps the weaknesses and contradictions found in Eliot’s verse during these years are a reflection of his struggle adjusting. London was quickly becoming a hub for many refugees during the war, intensifying his sense of estrangement. Longing to be connected but instead further isolated by the war, Eliot increased his correspondence to home, writing more frequent and detailed letters that are particularly revealing of his discerning nature. One letter in particular written to his brother on September 8, 1914 depicts his perceptiveness of London at the beginning of the war and how he seemed to be more of a spectator than a participant in his polyglot London neighborhood:

The noise hereabouts is like hell turned upside down. Hot weather, all windows open, many babies, pianos, street piano accordions, singers, hummers, whistlers... violent talking-- English, American, French, Flemish, Russian, Spanish, Japanese... Meanwhile, a dreadful old woman, her skirt trailing on the street, sings “The Rosary” in front, and secures several pennies from windows and the housemaid resumes her conversation at the area gate. (Eliot 55)

This excerpt reveals Eliot’s anarchic milieu early in the war as well as his attentiveness to it. Although he was alone and alienated by the war’s flux, he used his distance to study closely those around him. With such vivid details in his repertoire, he found himself able to eke out a few significant lines of verse in the poem “Morning at the Window.”

A slight departure from “Cousin Nancy” and “Aunt Helen,” the details and observations in “Morning” are not random but rather are drawn from his letters home. For example, the “housemaids...at area gates” and “a passer-by with muddy skirts” (lines 3, 4, 7) are lines in the poem that parallel the housemaid and dreadful old woman from the letter above. In addition, the speaker of “Morning” is aware of many images and sounds going on around him, and yet he

seemingly goes unnoticed as an observer of the action. Thus, this poem's incorporation of detail and detached perspective parallels Eliot's isolation from the war as well as his fascination with it, setting "Morning" apart from some of his other poems during this period with an underlying meaning.

However, "Morning" does resemble "Aunt Helen" and "Cousin Nancy" in its pithiness and brusque tone. Containing little emotion and an indistinct meter, this nine-line poem lacks fluidity, and again the reader is confronted with an impersonal speaker. Whereas Eliot's letters home during this period were florid and animated in his descriptions of England's wartime environment, the speaker in "Morning" is uninterested in the "rattling breakfast plates," "twisted faces" and "aimless smile[s]" that he sees (lines 1, 6, 9). The second stanza also reveals that the speaker is physically above everyone else, looking down: "the brown waves of fog toss up to me...along the level of the roofs" (lines 5, 9). It as though he transcends everyone else and has no emotional attachment to the despondence, tears, and smiles that he witnesses below.

The speaker's brevity and detachment are possibly indicative of how Eliot felt amid the diversity and chaos of the war. First of all, he was an American overseas, and it was only by chance that he was studying abroad at the same time an international war began. With little personal investment in the fighting, he was already politically segregated and if anything, resentful for its interruption in his plans. However, he could not help but be intrigued by the disarray the war produced. In the same letter above to his brother, he also added: "It really is much more interesting to be in London now."

Although revelatory of Eliot's physical connection but emotional separation from the war, "Morning at the Window" was not one of Eliot's poetic achievements. He still found himself suffering from writers' block and plagued by "the consciousness of having made a

failure of one's life" (Eliot 58). Continuing to search for a place where he could finally belong, he moved to Oxford in October 1914 to continue work on his dissertation, but he quickly grew to detest Oxford, commenting in February 1915 that "the food and the climate are execrable" (Eliot 88). He further admitted in a letter to Conrad Aiken: "the War suffocates me, and I do not think I should ever come to like England" (Eliot 88).

Perhaps more than finding a *place*, Eliot simply longed to find a *person* to whom he could belong. In a former letter to Aiken from the preceding December, he wrote:

I have been going through one of those nervous sexual attacks which I suffer from when alone in a city.... I am very dependent upon women (I mean the female society); and feel the deprivation at Oxford—one reason why I should not care to remain longer. (Eliot 73)

Longing for change, companionship, or some artistic stimulus, Eliot found himself desperate. In the same letter, he added the indiscretion: "I should be better off, I sometimes think, if I had disposed of my virginity and shyness several years ago" (73). Indeed, the speakers of his stronger poems up to this point have been characteristically fearful and easily intimidated by women-- from Prufrock to the lover in "La Figlia." It is no surprise that Eliot, at age 27, had yet to connect with a woman on a physical level.

And then to make matters worse, on May 2, 1915, his best friend Jules Verdenal died. Serving as a medic for the Allied Forces in the Dardanelles, Verdenal was caught in the line of fire assisting an injured soldier on the battlefield (Gordon 137). The grief Eliot incurred from his death was profound and enduring as evinced by Eliot's later attributions to his friend. In addition to dedicating *Prufrock and Other Observations* to Verdenal, it is presumed that Eliot profiled his friend in the character of Phlebus in *The Waste Land* (at a time in which Eliot's marriage was suffering), and he publicly (although subtly) honored Verdenal in the April 1934 issue of *The*

*Criterion*<sup>9</sup>: "I am willing to admit that my own retrospect is touched by a sentimental sunset, the memory of a friend<sup>10</sup>." Eliot's dedications further encouraged critics to muse upon the possibility that their connection had been illicitly romantic, and the possibility exists that what Eliot lacked in female companionship he had found, but lost, with Verdenal.

Thus, at the depths of his solitude, grieving for his best friend and curious for an experience with a woman, Eliot made his most impulsive decision: he married Vivienne Haigh-Wood at the Hampstead Registry Office on June 26, 1915 (Gordon 119). The couple having just met two months prior in April, this elopement took place without the knowledge of either set of parents. Attracted to "her impulsiveness, her smoking and dancing, and her eloquent intelligence," Eliot found Vivienne "wild, mercurial, a world apart from his serious mother" (Gordon 116). She offered him an escape from his cautious and shy disposition, drawing him out of his Prufrockian shell and seemingly embodying the tempting, powerful lady from *Portrait*. She also provided him an artistic stimulus which he had been lacking for several years. Although the stimulus would soon turn negative via their financial problems, her emerging mental illness, and their sexual incompatibility, it was better than the numbness and isolation he had been feeling up to this point. "At least we exist," Eliot said (qtd. in Gordon 120).

Just before their elopement, Eliot composed "Hysteria" (Gordon 180). A completely different kind of poem in comparison to his compositions prior and since, "Hysteria" is comprised of stream-of-consciousness sentences instead of lines and stanzas. The poem's unique structure and content suggests that it could largely have been inspired by Vivienne, depicting an

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<sup>9</sup> Eliot edited this international literary journal, founded and financially sponsored by Viscountess Rothermore, for nearly twenty years between World War I and II (Gordon 106, 141, 192).

<sup>10</sup> Parker, Richard. "T.S. Eliot and Jean Verdenal." *Exploring The Waste Land*. 29 Sept. 2002 <<http://world.std.com/~raparker/exploring/thewasteland/exjean.html>>

awareness of two people converging into a couple: “As she laughed I was aware of becoming involved in her laughter and being part of it.” However, unlike the seemingly Emily-inspired, tender lyric of “La Figlia,” “Hysteria” is tainted with a sense of lust and sexual rawness. The speaker describes the two of them kissing: “I was drawn in by short gasps, inhaled at each momentary recovery, lost finally in the dark caverns of her throat.” The speaker also takes notice of “the ripple of unseen muscles” and “the shaking of her breasts,” revealing his allure to the woman’s physique, and distracting him such that their time together splinters into “fragments of the afternoon.” Thus, in addition to form, this poem’s content is also unique among Eliot’s poems. Although “Hysteria” is not as tender or romantic as “La Figlia,” it is the first time one of Eliot’s speakers actually connects with a woman on both an emotional and physical level.

The excitement of such a connection is marked by the poem’s rushed, almost breathless stream-of-consciousness form; however, this loose structure also conveys a sense of impermanence that forebodingly paralleled Eliot and Vivienne’s deteriorating relationship in years to come. Whereas “La Figlia” is structured by three stanzas with rhyming lines, depicting how the speaker’s imagination will always be captivated by the girl’s immortal beauty for “many days and many hours” (line 19), “Hysteria” captures the passion of just one afternoon. Accordingly, while Emily served as Eliot’s immortal but untouchable muse for decades, Vivienne offered Eliot a temporary freedom from his isolation by their physical connection. Unbeknownst to Eliot, however, his freedom would not last long; the commitments and responsibilities of being married to Vivienne soon gave way to his entrapment.

Furthermore, the title of this poem is oddly significant. The etymology of the word *hysteria* connects back to the 19th-century notion that madness was believed to be caused by the

uterus (hence the connection with *hysterectomy*<sup>11</sup>). Curiously, the embedded prophesy in the title of this poem would be fulfilled as Vivienne's mind deteriorated throughout the 18 years of their marriage, and she frequently demonstrated bouts of hysterical behavior. It is also worth noting that although "Hysteria" was composed in 1915, it was physically placed several poems before "La Figlia" in Eliot's publication *Prufrock and Other Observations* in 1917. In fact, "La Figlia" was the poem he chose as the closure to his first book of collected poems-- perhaps a symbolic gesture for his continued love of Emily.

Thus, the events taking place during 1914 and 1915 in Eliot's life may have not immediately led to his most profound poetry, but the poems he did compose during these years reveal the numerous conflicts, contradictions, and influences in his life. Studying abroad in Germany and England, encountering World War I, meeting Ezra Pound, having relations with two different women, and experiencing conflicts and isolation in both philosophy and poetry culminated in his impulsive decision to get married. Such a decision represents how the events during these years transformed Eliot from a youth to an adult, particularly with the corollary of establishing a permanent living in England. However, being married also introduced a host of responsibilities and commitments for which perhaps Eliot was not ready. No longer isolated and alone in the world, Eliot would realize and express his entrapment in the years and through his compositions to come.

The first problem encountered by the newlyweds was pecuniary. How was Eliot going to support his wife, lacking a sufficient career and with an international war raging in the background? While he and Ezra Pound searched for jobs, they also both wrote letters to Eliot's parents in America entreating for financial assistance (Gordon 101). One letter in particular that

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11 "hysteria." Merriam-Webster Online Dictionary. 2004. <<http://www.merriam-webster.com>>

Eliot wrote to his father one month after the elopement reveals the pressure Eliot was already beginning to feel:

I have taken on a great responsibility... [Vivienne] has been ready to sacrifice everything for me. I owe her everything. I have married her on nothing, and she knew it and was willing, for my sake. She had nothing to gain by marrying me. I have imposed upon you very much, but upon her more, and I know you will help to make her life less difficult. (Eliot 110)

Thus, in addition to being in arrears to Pound, Eliot was starting to feel indebted to his new wife. As a result, his writer's block worsened. During the first eighteen months of their marriage, the couple changed residences four times in order to find something they could afford. Constantly being uprooted, they never fully settled in a place that would have provided Eliot the repose necessary for composition. In September of 1916, Pound wrote to John Quinn that "Eliot seems to be getting on all right (though he is producing very little, practically nothing)" (Eliot xxiii). The following November, Eliot confessed his despondency in a letter to his brother: "I find I am losing in every way" (Eliot 157).

Eliot's losses, however, were not solely due to the couple's financial plight. Another consequence to jumping into marriage so suddenly was Eliot's belated discovery of Vivienne's constant poor health. As a young child, she had suffered from tuberculosis but miraculously survived after a series of operations (Gordon 129). From then on, however, her immune system was permanently weakened, and the letters Eliot sent home during their marriage reveal Vivienne's frequent afflictions with stomach aches, exhaustion, and migraines (Gordon 129). In addition to her physical ailments, she also suffered from emotional and mental problems, contributing to frequent suicidal episodes (Gordon 125). Uncertain about how to handle her,

Eliot confessed to his brother in September of 1916 “the present year has been, in some respects, the most awful nightmare of anxiety that the mind of man could conceive” (Eliot 151).

Furthermore, and perhaps a consequence of Vivienne’s numerous maladies, the couple endured sexual problems. Gordon describes how Eliot was constantly surrounded by his wife’s “smelly medicines” and how Vivienne’s “disordered hormones led to heavy, unpredictable periods which stained the sheets” (124). As previously discussed, Eliot’s poetry from 1911 and 1912 suggest an already existing fear of sexual inadequacy: “Should I/ ...have the strength to force the moment to its crisis?” (*Prufrock* lines 78, 79). Vivienne’s vulgarity probably served to enhance and enforce his inhibitions, and within the first two weeks of being married, Vivienne confessed to Bertrand Russell (Eliot’s former teacher and friend that now lived near them in England) that “she had married her husband to stimulate him, but found she could not do it” (Gordon 120).

This confession opened the door to moral corruption and the beginning of the marriage’s ruination. Upon learning about the Eliots’ financial troubles and Vivienne’s sexual dissatisfaction, Russell offered for the couple to move in with him in September 1915 (Eliot xxii). The room he provided them was uncomfortably small, and Eliot had just accepted a position as a boarding schoolmaster; thus, just three months into marriage, Vivienne and Eliot lived separately, she with Russell, he at High Wycombe Grammar School (Gordon 123). Although this segregated situation mollified the Eliots’ money situation, it was detrimental to their sexual problems. During this split, it is assumed that Vivienne and Russell started engaging in an illicit romantic affair that lasted two-and-a-half years (Gordon 121).

Ottoline Morrell had been Russell’s mistress during these years, but she allegedly had begun neglecting him for other writers and artists in Oxford (Gordon 122). In his rejection, and

despite the fact he was nearly twenty years older than Vivienne, he found himself drawn to her “light, a little vulgar, adventurous, [and] full of life” personality (Eliot 115). In a letter from December 1915<sup>12</sup>, he said of Vivienne: “She is a person who lives on a knife-edge, and will end as a criminal or a saint—I don’t know which yet” (Russell 55). Russell’s curiosity and sympathy that she was a “spirited English girl tied to an over-refined New Englander” led to his pursuit, and she did not dissuade his advances (Gordon 120).

Gordon describes Russell involvement in Eliot and Vivienne’s marriage as “hopelessly intricate” and that he ultimately “brought evil on the marriage” (123). Indeed, Russell successfully pretended to be Eliot’s friend, deceiving and lying to him while simultaneously cuckolding him. During 1915 and 1916, Russell wrote several letters to Eliot’s parents extolling the young poet’s virtues, claiming Eliot was one of his “best pupils” and that he had come to know him as a friend as well as a student (Eliot 118). In another letter, Russell wrote: “It is quite funny how I have come to love [Eliot], as if he were my son” (Russell 55). Moreover, Russell endowed the couple with immense financial support—3,000 pounds in 1915 alone (Gordon 122). Through his kind words and ostensible generosity, Russell’s treachery was well-hidden. As Gordon states: “the most satanic conduct is when an exploiter appears to himself as well as others the kindest of benefactors” (122).

At the time, however, Eliot was unaware that Russell was even capable of such exploits. Endowing his friend with trust, Eliot profusely thanked Russell when he took Vivienne away on a private trip for a “change of air” in January 1916:

This is wonderfully kind of you—really the last straw (so to speak) of generosity... Vivien says you have been an angel to her.... I am sure you have

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<sup>12</sup> Russell included some of his letters of correspondence in his autobiography; however, he does not mention the affair, and according to Gordon, he destroyed all correspondence he had with Vivienne (121).

done *everything* possible and handled her in the very best way—better than I.  
(Eliot 127)

Thus, Eliot presumed Vivienne's relationship with Russell was platonic and even beneficial to her ailing health. Perhaps this blind trust stemmed from the first time he met Russell in March 1914. For years after their first meeting, Eliot admired the professor in spite of their opposing views of philosophy. He spoke of "Bertie" in a letter to his friend, Eleanor Hinkley: "I do enjoy him quite as much as any man I know...[he] is wonderfully perceptive" (Eliot 92).

In fact, Russell served as the inspiration behind one of Eliot's earlier, light-hearted poems, "Mr. Apollinax." Composed in 1914 following Russell's visit to Harvard, "Mr. Apollinax" is a satirical poem, mocking the stifling, snobbish ambience of ivy league schooling. Eliot caricaturizes Russell in the persona of Mr. Apollinax, whose candid and droll personality upsets the rich and pompous aristocracy during a scene in which they all come together for tea (Gordon 29). Jovial and perhaps a bit brash, Mr. Apollinax's laughter "tinkle[s] among teacups" (line 1) and resounds "like an irresponsible foetus" (line 7). While the speaker pleasantly finds Mr. Apollinax "submarine and profound" (line 8), his "dry and passionate talk" causes discomfort among the aristocratic dowagers, Mrs. Phlaccus and Mrs. Channing-Cheetah (line 17). Behind the professor's back, they deride his "pointed ears" and call him "unbalanced" (line 19); however, to maintain a façade of class and sophistication, the women obtusely focus on lemon slices and macaroons in Mr. Apollinax's presence.

While Gordon states the purpose of this poem is to applaud "Russell's assault on the gentility of the professor's tea party" (29), there are also subtle allusions and word choices which appear to link Mr. Apollinax to a sexual subtext. For example, the speaker states that Mr.

Apollinax reminds him of “Priapus<sup>13</sup> in the shrubbery/ Gaping at the lady in the swing,” which evokes an image of a surreptitious Peeping-Tom looking up a swinging woman’s skirt (lines 4, 5). Further, while Mr. Apollinax is talking, the speaker hears in the background “the beat of centaur’s<sup>14</sup> hoofs over the hard turf” (line 16), evoking an image of lust and passion, particularly with the specific word-choice of “hard.” By incorporating such sexually-charged and mythological images, Eliot appears to be characterizing Mr. Apollinax as a lustful, womanizing character.

Furthermore, “Mr. Apollinax” contains significant sea-imagery. Depicted as “the old man of the sea” and grinning “with seaweed in [his] hair” (lines 9, 15), Mr. Apollinax comes across as a self-satisfied character, perhaps harboring sub-rosa knowledge beneath his grin. These images are in direct opposition to the sea-imagery of *Prufrock*. The cowardly Prufrock regretfully sighs: “I should have been a pair of ragged claws/ scuttling across the floors of silent seas” (lines 73-74), but instead he stands along the beach in “white flannel trousers” (line 123), failing to take a plunge. Contrastingly, Mr. Apollinax jumps right into the water: he is found “hidden under coral islands” (line 10). This comparison underscores how Mr. Apollinax and J. Alfred Prufrock are opposites of each other—while the former is sly and seemingly sexually experienced, the latter is shy and sexually timorous. It is impossible to know whether or not Eliot intended on making this nexus and even more impossible to know for certain if the sexual nuances surrounding the character of Mr. Apollinax were intended as a direct correlation to Bertrand Russell. Regardless,

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13 The Greek God of Fertility, Priapus is typically portrayed in sculptures and pictures with an inordinately large erect penis, and he was accused of raping another Greek mythological character, Hestia. Information acquired from “Priapus” The Ares Press. Aug. 1998 <<http://www.arespress.com/AresPages/Priapus/Priapus.html>>

14 Centaurs are mythological creatures that have a human-like head, arms, and trunk but a lower-half that resembles a horse. In literature they are often depicted as lustful creatures, representing the bestiality and baseness of mankind. “centaur.” Merriam-Webster Online Dictionary. 2004. <<http://www.merriam-webster.com>>

the sexual subtext of “Mr. Apollinax” is peculiarly prophetic considering how Russell would play out as a real-life Priapus in the middle of Eliot and Vivienne’s sexually barren marriage.

It is not certain when or how Eliot uncovered the affair; however, many critics assume that he knew by the winter of 1917 following its termination around the same time (Gordon 126). He wrote to his mother a year later: “Last winter was of course very trying, much more so than anyone can realise and I have never told you yet of all the things that we went through here- I shall when it is prudent to do so” (Eliot 262). Correspondingly, there was also a discernible change in tone in his compositions from 1918 and 1919. During these years, he wrote “Sweeney Erect” and “Sweeney Among the Nightingales,” two poems Eliot considered “especially serious” (Gordon 105). In these poems, Sweeney is Eliot’s archetypal innocent male protagonist who stumbles upon scenes of corruption and sin. “Sweeney Erect” features the decadence of this young man’s naivety when he engages in animalistic sex with an epileptic prostitute: “gesture of orang-outang/ rises from the sheets in steam...clawing at the pillow slip” (lines 11, 12, 20). In addition, Eliot appears to refer to his suffocating marriage through a subtle allusion to “Hysteria”: “hysteria/ might be easily understood...it does the house no sort of good” (lines 37, 38, 40). In “Sweeney Among the Nightingales,” similar animalistic imagery is employed. The corrupted Sweeney is described as being “apeneck” with “zebra stripes along his jaw/ swelling to maculate giraffe” (lines 1, 3, 4). After intercourse with a “silent vertebrate in brown” (line 21), he seemingly becomes witness to a murder: “liquid siftings fall/ to stain the stiff dishonoured shroud” (lines 39-40). Both of these poems are sated by human vice, and they disparage women through their association with predatory and parasitic imagery (Gordon 127). However, while Eliot was composing and promptly publishing these poems, both characteristic for their quatrain

stanzas and ABCB rhyme scheme, he meanwhile was writing “brief autobiographical fragments and poems” that would merge together in three years as *The Waste Land* (Gordon 146).

It is also important to remember that during the first years of Eliot’s precarious marriage and while he was writing hardened, misogynistic poetry, World War I was still raging in the background. An end to the war was not in sight in 1917, and in February of that year, Germany declared unrestricted submarine warfare. In April, the United States renounced its neutrality and declared war on Germany, joining the war effort as part of the Allied forces (Britain, France, Russia, and Japan) against the Triple Entente (Germany, Austro-Hungary, the Ottoman Empire). As a result, Eliot was bombarded by propaganda. Two-million posters and 20-million leaflets tugged on emotions to garner as much support as possible. Some of the posters included: “Everyone should do his bit to enlist to-day,” and “Avenge the Lusitania<sup>15</sup>.” These appeals ultimately led to the enlistment of 2.5 million men.

Perhaps Eliot was inspired by all this propaganda and wanted also to “do his bit,” but more likely, he felt that joining the armed forces would be a possible escape out of his suffocating marriage. In March of 1918, Eliot candidly expressed his discontentment a letter to his mother:

Everything looks more black and dismal than ever, I think. The whole world simply lives from day to day; I haven’t any idea of what I shall be doing in a year, and one can make no plans. The only thing is to try and fill one’s mind with the things in which one is interested in. (Eliot 221-222)

Of course, what Eliot was most interested in was the development of his poetry; however, he was preoccupied by trying to make ends meet through his time-consuming schoolmaster position:

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15 On May 7, 1915, 1201 passengers were lost when the German U-boat sank the Lusitania ship. 128 of the people were American, and afterwards, the United States begin to challenge the U-boat policy. Fehrenbacher, Melanie. Notes taken at the Imperial War Museum. London, England. 28 June 2003.

“All I wanted to do was write poetry, and teaching seemed to take up less time than anything else, but that was a delusion” (Eliot qtd. in Gordon 138). Thus, during the summer of 1918, he attempted to enlist into the United States Navy (Eliot 249). Seeking a position in active service, he longed for more writing time and an increased paycheck at a job he might enjoy more than teaching and more importantly, one that kept him away from home. Perhaps in addition to escaping, Eliot’s desire to enlist was in rebellion to Bertrand Russell, a well-known pacifist. Unfortunately, however, Eliot was rejected from active service due to a hernia, and he was not invited into Army Intelligence despite sixteen letters of recommendation—one from the eminent former president of Harvard, Charles William Eliot (Gordon 137). Disappointed and unable to better his situation, he wrote to his brother: “Not being fit for active service, I am much more useful in my present occupation [teaching] than in any limited service job...with an invalid dependent wife it is obvious that I should suffer very badly on private’s pay” (Eliot 241).

Although he was unaware at the time, joining the war effort would have allowed Eliot only a few months of reprieve as armistice was soon declared on November 11, 1918. Eliot’s own personal war, however, still seethed and intensified to its own international level with the sudden death of his father across the Atlantic. “A fearful day and evening” Vivienne notated in her diary, January 7, 1919 marked day in which Henry Ware Eliot Sr. died in St. Louis, and Eliot learned of it that evening from a cable notification from his brother (Eliot 267). This loss had many repercussions on the young poet. In addition to finding the “pain intolerable” (Eliot 267), Eliot was unable to attend the funeral due to pecuniary restrictions. He lamentably wrote in a letter to his mother that venturing overseas would be too financially handicapping: “I hope for another rise of salary in June... I can stay more comfortably and longer. And after that *often*” (Eliot 268).

Further, there also remained unresolved issues between Eliot and his father. In the same letter to his mother above, Eliot added, “If I can think that at the end of my life that I have been worthy to be his son I shall be happy.” Indeed, Eliot’s father had always disapproved of his son’s yearning to become a poet, wanting him instead to pursue a professional career as a philosophy professor. This disappointment was further exacerbated by Eliot’s sudden marriage to Vivienne, of which his father expressed deep disapproval. Consequently, a substantial inheritance that Eliot would have received, which would have greatly ameliorated his financial quandary, was instead redirected to his brothers and sisters (Gordon 197).

During May and June of 1919, Eliot composed “Gerontion,” his most bitter and despondent poem preceding *The Waste Land* (Gordon 165). Appearing as Eliot’s direct response to his wife’s affair (Gordon 127, 167), his lack of participation in World War I, and his father’s death, “Gerontion” is relayed from the perspective of an old man who reflects over his life with a sense of defeated resignation. This poem could be perceived as the ultimate fulfillment of Prufrock’s biggest fear: a man’s entire life has ultimately been a failure. Perhaps Eliot, too, felt himself a failure for not being able to serve in World War I. Not only was he unable to escape his fruitless marriage, but he also was unable to fight for the same cause for which his best friend, Verdenal, had courageously died. Correspondingly, the old man in “Gerontion” expresses regret for never having been “knee deep in the salt marsh, heaving a cutlass, / bitten by flies, fought,” (lines 5, 6) and in his old age, it is too late.

The poem begins with the depiction of a paternal relationship-- conceivably in connection to Eliot’s late father. As the old man is being “read to by a boy” (line 2), an image of closeness is evoked. Their contact is the only human interaction that occurs in the poem, and they are ironically united over the written word: the divisor of Eliot and his father with the former’s

desire to be a writer. Although this young boy/old man relationship is established in the opening two lines of “Gerontion,” the boy never again reappears; rather, the remainder of the poem focuses on the old man and his regrets. The mention of the boy and his subsequent neglect in the poem could be significant for many things. Firstly, although unspecified, the young boy could be the old man’s grandson, a role Eliot’s late father would never get to play, as he died before even meeting Vivienne. Further, the subsequent abandonment of the boy in the rest of the poem could be significant for Eliot’s financial abandonment by his father. Unlike his brothers and sisters, Eliot had been deliberately left out.

Thus, the absence of the boy in the rest of the poem leaves the old man to ruminate on his age and waning life; however, water appears to be the one missing element that could potentially revitalize his life out of its ennui. As in *The Waste Land*, water in “Gerontion” is infused with a spiritual power of rejuvenation: “I am an old man in a dry month...waiting for rain” (lines 1, 2). The poem takes place on two levels of time: the present and the past. At present, the old man lives in a “droughty house” with nothing to do but listen as a “goat coughs at night” and his wife “sneezes at evening” (lines 32, 10, 13). He offers up the despondent self-reflection that he is “an old man, / A dull head among windy spaces” (lines 14-15).

While he laments that life has become both literally and metaphorically desiccated, he reflects upon a not-so-dull past: a “history” with “many cunning passages, contrived corridors” (line 35). In addition to avoiding the literal battles of his generation, the old man regrets lacking the courage to fight for his values during when he was younger. Failing to express “romantic heroism, physical courage, and sentimental nostalgia” (Gordon 167), the protagonist in his youth instead gave in to “weak hands” and “unnatural vices” (lines 43, 45). Instead of starting out as a moral person, he rues that he acquired “virtues” through first committing “imprudent crimes”

(lines 47, 48). While the vices in which the old man participated are unspecified, the overall mood evoked by the poem reveals his life as one of regret and defeat.

Perhaps the most striking feature of “Gerontion,” however, is how outwardly it seems to address the affair between Russell and Vivienne. First of all, there is an ostensible attack on Russell for his betrayal through the mention of a “flowering judas” during the “depraved” month of May (line 20). While “flowering” often invokes a sexual connotation, “judas” is defined by Merriam-Webster as “one who betrays under the guise of friendship<sup>16</sup>.” The juxtaposition of these two words conveys an apt characterization of Russell, whom Gordon refers to as a “practised seducer” (127). Further, a possible reference to the affair comes when the old man asks himself, “After such knowledge, what forgiveness?” (line 34). With the repetition of “think” five times, he deliberates on the subject of forgiveness, realizing that “neither fear nor courage saves us” (line 45).

Although the old man finds it difficult to forgive, bemoaning how “these tears are shaken from the wrath-bearing tree,” he does not abandon the infidel (line 48). Instead, he tries to decipher a way to reconstruct what was lost:

I would meet you upon this honestly.  
I that was near your heart was removed therefrom  
To lose beauty in terror, terror in inquisition.  
I have lost my passion: why should I need to keep it  
Since what is kept must be adulterated? (lines 55-59)

This passage brings to light Eliot’s pain in response to his wife’s affair. He truly did lose Vivienne “in terror”: the fear of his sexual performance was a factor (although certainly not the *only* factor) that contributed to her abandonment of their wedding vows. The old man in

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<sup>16</sup> “judas.” Merriam-Webster Online Dictionary. 2004. <<http://www.merriam-webster.com>>

“Gerontion” further expresses how this rejection has atrophied his senses—a loss which further contributes to his inability of reaching his beloved: “I have lost my sight, smell, hearing, taste, and touch:/ How should I use them for your closer contact?” (lines 60, 61). Perhaps Eliot felt a sense of personal degeneration regarding Vivienne. Their relationship was never restored, and coupled with her worsening mental illness, their happiness together existed “in memory only” as “reconsidered passion” (line 42).

“Gerontion” concludes not with an absolution or a resolution, but rather unhappily with the old man aimlessly being blown by the wind “to a sleepy corner” (lines 74). Unseen by the world like “white feathers in the snow” (line 73), he realizes his life has amounted to nothing; his existence has influenced no one. The old man stands alone in his resignation, just as his “thoughts of a dry brain in a dry season” stand alone on a separate line concluding the poem (line 76).

During 1918 and 1919 while Eliot wrote “Gerontion,” his Sweeney poems, and a few French poems that he would publish together in a collection, he was also becoming aware of an inward calling to produce something greater. The first mention of what would become *The Waste Land* occurred in a letter to his mother on September 20, 1920: “I want a period of tranquility to do a poem I have in mind” (Eliot 408). Indeed, these years of his life up to this point had been devoid of tranquility. As he segued from isolation to suffocation, Eliot ended up in a faithless and insolvent marriage and experienced two major losses with the deaths of Jules Jean Verdenal and his father. He was also in a constant state of physical upheaval as he and Vivienne changed residences four times between 1920 and 1921, making a total of nine moves since their marriage in 1915 (Eliot xxii-xxv). Moreover, the impact of World War I still resonated. Introducing horribly lethal weapons such as poison gas, and invoking comprehensive destruction through

civilian-slaughtering air raids and submarine annihilations, the war underscored a bitter and violent side of humanity that Eliot conveyed through parts of *The Waste Land*.

In the fall of 1920, Vivienne's father fell ill, resulting in her worst mental breakdown to this point. She stayed up nights, screaming from stomach pain and migraines, and Eliot began to realize there was no end in sight to her hypochondria. He wrote in a letter from April, 1921:

I have been occupied with Vivien's illness...she has been in bed for the last five weeks, at first in a nursing-home, and lately, on account of the expense, at home...I have had some very anxious moments. In any case she cannot expect to be really well for a year or two. (Eliot 443)

Vivienne's constant state of trauma distracted Eliot from his writing. She demanded such constant attention that even Eliot's brother Henry deduced: "I imagine [she] is easily offended if she does not get it [attention] well buttered with graciousness and sympathy" (qtd. in Gordon 171). As a result of her all-consuming neediness, Eliot did not complete his great poem by June of 1921 as he had initially desired, although at that point, it was a very different text compared to the finished product (Eliot 444). Ultimately, however, Vivienne's histrionics served to enhance the intensity of Eliot's work--writing was his only form of escape. Although he had a nascent draft the summer of 1921, most of *The Waste Land's* construction took place in October to December of 1921 following his own mental breakdown.

In June of 1921, Eliot's mother and brother came to England to visit. In part because of the recent death of his father, Eliot wrote many excited and touching letters to his mother in anticipation of her arrival-- it was a chance for them to reunite after six years of separation. Despite his excitement, however, Eliot was also anxious; in particular, he worried about how to disguise his marital misery so as not to unduly worry his mother and tarnish their time together (Gordon 170). Although Vivienne only spent a total of 24 hours with them during their two-

month visit, she nonetheless made a memorable impression on Charlotte and Henry (Eliot 465). In a shocking letter to them after their return to America in August, she wrote: “I found the emotionless condition a great strain, all the time. I used to think I should burst out and scream and dance...you were so terribly failing me” (qtd. in Eliot 465). Subsequently, Henry reportedly told his mother, “she likes the role of the invalid... she needs to take her mind off herself; something to absorb her entire attention” (qtd. in Gordon 171).

After the departure of his mother and brother, Eliot finally collapsed in exhaustion. He visited a nerve specialist in early October, who ordered him to “go straight away for three months [to] rest and change” (Eliot 471). Vivienne, feeling slighted by her loss of attention, offered Eliot little support during this time. She wrote to her friend Scofield Thayer that same month: “Look at *my* position. I have not nearly finished my own nervous breakdown yet” (Vivienne qtd. in Eliot 478). Fortunately, Eliot’s collapse gave him a few months’ reprieve and a chance to complete *The Waste Land*. From October to December 1921, he lived in England and France (Margate and Lausanne, respectively), only seeing Vivienne occasionally for brief visitations (Eliot xxvi).

How Eliot felt at the time of *The Waste Land*’s composition can be inferred from its epigraph borrowed from Petronius’s *Satyricon*. The character of Sibyl is significant for her role as a prophetess and for being eternally cursed to a life of immortality without youth. When translated from Latin to English, the epitaph states: “When the boys said, *Sibyl, what do you want?* She replied *I want to die.*” Similarly, Eliot’s entrapment had reached its breaking point, and although he might not have longed to die, he had to find a way of escape, doing so by pouring his pain out in verse. After *The Waste Land*’s publication, he humbly defined it as a “just a piece of rhythmical grumbling” (Eliot qtd. in Time Magazine); however, his friend Conrad

Aiken identified it as Eliot's personal *Inferno*, while another friend, Mary Hutchinson, called it "Tom's autobiography" (Gordon 147).

To begin in a general sense, *The Waste Land* is about death in life depicted over the course of five sections<sup>17</sup>. Revealing a barren world with no hope for regeneration, many critics have declared this poem as Eliot's prophecy for post-war England (Gordon 24). Replete with repulsive and violent images of decay and destruction, this poem depicts life (particularly *city* life) paralyzed by doubt, anxiety, and boredom. Unable to be revived out of this paralysis, civilization ultimately disintegrates into a state of chaos and madness illustrated by the concluding lines "London Bridge is falling down falling down falling down" and "Hieronymo's mad againe" (lines 427, 432).

The poem opens with the famous lines "April is the cruellest month, breeding/ Lilacs out of the dead land" (lines 1-2). Contrary to popular conception in which April is associated with rebirth and springtime, this connection between April and cruelty introduces the poem's universal theme of degradation. Throughout the five sections, water and sexual imagery demonstrate how modern civilization is losing its ability of resuscitation, reproduction, and resurrection. Scenes featuring loveless sex, adultery, abortion, and rape-- as well as images of environmental desiccation-- reveal the deterioration of fertility and faith in the urban world.

The poem's first section, "The Burial of the Dead," serves to establish Eliot's convention of containment of opposites. "April is the cruellest month" (line 1) and "winter kept us warm" (line 5) are two perplexing examples that reveal a tension between expectation and result. Eliot often juxtaposes opposing images or themes on many levels in the poem to underscore ensuing tensions relevant in the modern world. Another example comes when the speaker of the first

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<sup>17</sup> The sections (I-V) are as follows: The Burial of the Dead, A Game of Chess, The Fire Sermon, Death By Water, What the Thunder Said.

section points out an interesting conjunction between death and life: “A crowd flowed over London Bridge, so many/ I had not thought death had undone so many” (lines 63-64). Although physically alive, the people of London are no longer *living*, as evinced by their perfunctory march to work. This death-in-life existence possibly echoes Eliot’s own sentiments and observations as he himself traversed the streets of London. The most significant example of opposite containment, however, is the contrast between the urban setting of *The Waste Land* and its largest literary influence, Jessie Weston’s From Ritual To Romance (1920). This book, acknowledged in *The Waste Land*’s supplemental notes for providing much of its “incidental symbolism,” investigates Arthurian-grail interpretations, vegetation ceremonies, and Fisher King legends from the 12<sup>th</sup> century. By drawing a parallel between these two very different settings and times, Eliot demonstrates how his concept of the waste land is universal.

In addition to opposite containment, Eliot also employs animalistic imagery to reveal a lack of higher transcendence in both faith and love in the waste land. For example, at the end of “The Burial of the Dead,” one man addresses another about someone who had been buried in a garden: “Has it [the corpse] begun to sprout? Will it bloom this year? ... Oh keep the Dog far hence...or with his nails he’ll dig it up again!” (lines 72, 74-75). This disturbing scene reveals how the waste land is without resurrection: symbolized by both the lack of flowers growing above the newly buried corpse as well as with the foul image of a dog rudely uprooting the body, preventing its spiritual rebirth. “The Fire Sermon” further contains sensory imagery highlighting the baseness of the Thames River. Some examples include: “a rat crept softly,” “its slimy belly,” “bodies naked on the low damp ground,” and “bones cast in a little low dry garret” (lines 187, 188, 193, 194). These images reveal a fear of death in the waste land and might also refer to the haunting images from in the trenches of World War I. Furthermore, Eliot’s vivid bestial imagery

appears during sexual scenes of the poem. In the very first line, the word choice of *breeding*<sup>18</sup> connotes a sense of artificial mate selection and controlled propagation, foreshadowing how sex will become artificial in the poem. In addition, Sweeney (who has a history of engaging in animalistic intercourse) reappears in “The Fire Sermon” and is followed by the lines “twit twit twit/ jug jug jug jug jug jug / So rudely forc’d” (lines 203-5). The implications of these examples reveal a forced, visceral (and failing) attempt at procreation in the waste land.

It is ultimately the waste land’s lack of love and faith that leads to its incapability to reproduce. In “A Game of Chess,” the lower character, Lil, reveals in a pub how she has had an abortion while her husband was away at war: “It’s them pills I took, to bring it off, she said...The chemist said I would be all right, but I’ve never been/ the same,” (lines 159, 161-2). This abortion of a fetus brought about through adultery is the beginning of the waste land’s curse of barrenness; following Lil’s abortion, the most important persona of the poem, Tiresias, is introduced. A blind, prophetic character that is omniscient but invisible to others, he exemplifies the infertility of modern civilization through his hermaphroditic impotence-- “throbbing between two lives,” he is an “old man with wrinkled female breasts” (lines 218, 219). He watches as another woman, a licentious typist, engages in sex with an “expected guest” (line 230). Although she does not object to his advances, she is “bored and tired” (line 236); the man “assaults her...and makes a welcome of indifference” (lines 239, 242). After he leaves, she “smoothes her hair with an automatic hand,” thinking, “Well now that’s done: and I’m glad it’s over” (lines 255, 250, 252). Such apathy and lovelessness surrounding sex is what ultimately precludes procreation. There is no love in sexual interactions. The final section of the poem challenges the

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<sup>18</sup> Miriam Webster dictionary defines breed (v) as: “to propagate (plants or animals) sexually and usually under controlled conditions.” “breed.” Merriam-Webster Online Dictionary. 2004. <<http://www.merriam-webster.com>>

<sup>19</sup> The Nightingale’s song of rape.

waste land's resulting sterility: "what is that sound high in the air," the speaker asks (line 367). The answer: "murmur of maternal lamentation" (lines 367-368).

In addition to these explicit depictions of sexual decadence in the waste land, barrenness is metaphorically exemplified by a parallel drawn between sex and water. Similarly glimpsed in "Gerontion," a dearth of water pervades *The Waste Land*; however, in the latter poem, this dearth (like the loss of reproductive capability) is a gradual process. In "The Burial of the Dead," water's connection to sex is first established in the third and fourth lines; "memory and desire" are induced by the stirring of "dull roots with spring rain." Subsequently, a "shower of rain" (line 9) surprises the speaker, and afterwards he and his lover drink "coffee and [talk] for an hour" (line 11). Although the speaker of this scene is unidentified (a common convention throughout the poem<sup>20</sup>) this second scene alludes to the sexually-charged coffee date in "Hysteria." With an implied connection to sex-- and by extension, procreation—water thus appears to embody the spiritual/Christian powers of rebirth and resurrection. As the ability of regeneration abates, however, water correspondingly becomes depleted. Thus, in the final section, the modern world's desiccation reaches its climax:

Here is no water but only rock  
Rock and no water and the sandy road  
The road winding above among the mountains  
Which are mountains of rock without water  
If there were water we should stop and drink. (lines 331-335)

Thunder can be heard, and even the sound of water is audible—"drip drop drip drop drop drop drop" (line 358)— but in spite of these delusions, "there is no water" (line 359). Without water,

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<sup>20</sup> In *The Waste Land*, Eliot masters the function of having an elusive speaker. Unlike *Prufrock* which features a distinctive protagonist/narrator, or "Morning at the Window" in which the speaker comes across as dull and impersonal, *The Waste Land* employs a variety of personas in order to emphasize the external aspects of the urban civilization rather than the internal musings of one person's mind. In doing so, Eliot seems to highlight how events in his life were the result of external, oppressive conditions and not the internal degradation of his own mind.

the metropolis “cracks and reforms and bursts in the violent air” (line 373), and civilization disintegrates with its “falling towers” (line 374).

Ultimately, these intricately intertwining forces of sex, water, death, and desiccation are what comprise the poem’s content, and they are bolstered by the innumerable literary, biblical, and personal allusions that are prevalent in the poem. One influence in particular is the French Symbolist poet, Baudelaire. As evinced by Lil and the typist, Eliot’s depiction of women in *The Waste Land* is generally negative, characterizing them as lustful, apathetic, and bored creatures easily conquered by men. In addition to Vivienne’s influence (simulated through Lil’s extramarital affair) Baudelaire was also known for misogyny and sordid sexual relations. In 1930, Eliot praised Baudelaire for making sex appear “less boring than the natural ‘life-giving’ cheery automasm of the modern world” (Eliot qtd. in Dent vii). More significantly, however, is Baudelaire’s influence on Eliot’s depiction of city life. In an allusion to his main volume of poetry, *Les Fleurs du Mal*, London is depicted as an “unreal city” that sits “under the brown fog of a winter dawn” (lines 60, 61). Throughout the poem, city life is full of squalor, and its living inhabitants are either “now dead” or “now dying” (lines 328, 329). Eliot’s bleak perception of urban life is significant for adding a prophetic didacticism to the poem that seemingly warns the reader against a life of complacency, devoid of love and faith.

This ascetic outlook is further enhanced by the poem’s religious foundation, demonstrated by numerous biblical and Buddhist allusions. Even though he was baptized by the Church of England in 1927 (Gordon 233), Eliot grappled with spirituality throughout most of his life, once stating in an interview: “For people of intellect I think doubt is inevitable. The doubter is a man who takes the problem of his faith seriously” (qtd. in Gordon 112). In many ways, *The*

*Waste Land* demonstrates this doubt, and in 1931, Eliot elucidated the world's necessity for faith in prose:

The world is trying the experiment of attempting to reform a non-Christian mentality. The experiment will fail; but we must be very patient awaiting its collapse; meanwhile redeeming the time: so that the Faith may be preserved alive through the dark ages before us; to renew and to rebuild civilization, and save the world from suicide. (*Thoughts After Lambeth*)

*The Waste Land*, as evinced by its incapability of resurrection, is the manifestation of this non-Christian world. Perhaps to fill the void of Christianity, the poem contrastingly espouses Buddhism. For instance, "The Fire Sermon" section concludes with an excerpt from Buddha's Fire Sermon<sup>21</sup>: "burning, burning, burning, burning/ O Lord thou pluckest me out" (lines 308-309), emphasizing the poem's themes of destructive passion and lust. Further, "What the Thunder Said" concludes with the Sanskrit words, "Datta, Dayadham, Damyata/ Shantih shantih shantih" (lines 433-4), which Eliot translated in his supplemental notes as: "give, sympathize, control/ The peace which passeth understanding." These inclusions of Buddhism in *The Waste Land* propose many implications and perhaps demonstrate a need for Christianity's reinstatement.

In addition to literary and religious allusions, several people from Eliot's personal life also make cameo appearances in *The Waste Land*. The mention of lilacs in the second line evokes an image of Verdenal, whom Eliot recalled "coming towards him across the Luxembourg Gardens, waving a spray of lilac" (Eliot qtd. in Gordon 53). Eliot also alludes to *Tristan and Isolde* in "The Burial of the Dead," seemingly honoring their shared penchant for Wagner. Most

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<sup>21</sup> According to the history of Buddhism, Buddha is known for delivering a sermon to 1,000 fire-worshippers, preaching how they were "afire with the fire of passion, the fire of aversion, the fire of delusion." Following this sermon, the audience was awakened to Buddhism. Thanissaro, Bhikkhu, ed. "The Fire Sermon" Samyutta Nikaya 22 May 1998 <<http://www.saigon.com/~anson/ebud/ebstut026.htm>>

significantly, however, is Eliot's characterization of Verdenal in the persona of Phlebus, the drowned Phoenician sailor in "Death By Water." Although this autobiographical connection has not been confirmed, many critics have linked the martyrdom of Phlebus, who is "a fortnight dead" but "who was once handsome and tall" (lines 312, 321), to the untimely death of the young Verdenal in World War I (Parker).

Meanwhile, the "hyacinth girl" from the "The Burial of the Dead" seems to correspond to Emily Hale. In an allusion to "Le Figlia Che Piange" in which the young woman's arms are "full of flowers" (line 20), Eliot seems to readdresses her through an expression of contrition in "The Burial of the Dead":

Yet when we came back, late, from the Hyacinth garden,  
Your arms full, and your hair wet, I could not  
Speak, and my eyes failed, I was neither  
Living nor dead, and I knew nothing. (lines 37-40)

The regret in this excerpt is perhaps in hindsight with Eliot, at the time of its composition, suffocating in a hellish marriage with Vivienne. Indeed, in Eliot's private papers during the 1960s, he wrote: "I was still, as I came to believe a year later [after the marriage], in love with Miss Hale" (Eliot xvii).

Of course, Eliot's relationship with Vivienne has several vignettes in the poem. His fear of sex comes through in the line "I will show you fear in a handful of dust" (line 30). Although dust seems to be insignificant, its inherent barrenness and lack of fertility could be likened to Eliot's inhibitions about his sexual performance. Then a few lines later, Madame Sosostriis the "famous clairvoyante" (line 43) offers opposite advice: "fear death by water" (line 55). Gordon posits that Sosostriis represents the "bogus" advice-giving Bertrand Russell, who doled out relationship advice to the couple during his behind-the-scenes affair with Vivienne (178). With

the ultimate conclusion of the poem revealing a destructive dearth of water, Sosostris's prophesy is undermined in spite of her fame. Perhaps as a means of retribution, Eliot similarly intended to undermine Russell's validity as a philosopher through the parallel to spurious tarot card wisdom; however, Gordon states that only Eliot's close friends picked up on the allusion (178).

In the prurient section, "A Game of Chess," many connections to Vivienne can be drawn. In addition to the scene of the cheating Lil in the pub, Vivienne's neuroticism appears during a scene between a husband and wife that displays their incapability of communicating with each other. The wife repeatedly asks paranoid questions such as "what is that noise?" and "You know nothing?" (lines 117, 122). Her husband seemingly blocks out her incessant questions by singing a riff of the "Shakespearean Rag" (line 128), a popular song to which Eliot and Vivienne had often danced (Gordon 116). The wife continues with her repetitive questions, "What shall I do...what shall we ever do?" (lines 131, 134) but again the husband does not respond. Instead, and perhaps evidence of Eliot's exasperation and restlessness, the husband thinks how he is "pressing lidless eyes and waiting for a knock upon the door" (line 138)-- possibly the knock of death.

It must also be mentioned that Ezra Pound's assistance in editing *The Waste Land* was instrumental to the poem's success. Exchanging drafts back and forth, Pound judged it to be "the longest poem in the English langwidge [*sic*]" (Pound qtd. in Eliot 497), and he persuaded Eliot to cut the original version to half of its length. Despite these drastic revisions, most of which Eliot incorporated, Pound knew this poem was one of great substance. In a letter written to the young poet on Christmas Eve of 1921, Pound wrote: "Complimenti, you bitch. I am wracked by the seven jealousies, and cogitating an excuse for always exuding my deformative secretions my

own stuff, and never getting an outline” (Pound qtd. in Eliot 498). Upon its 1922 publication, Eliot dedicated the poem to Pound in the epitaph: “il miglior fabbro” or “the better craftsman.”

In 1914, Eliot wrote: “It’s interesting to cut yourself to pieces once in a while, and wait to see if the fragments will sprout” (Eliot 59). *The Waste Land* became the ultimate fruition of his intellectual and personal fragments. Many facets of his life from 1910 to 1922 imposed strain and influence on the poet, but *The Waste Land* could have not been produced without Vivienne’s presence. He endured what he considered to be “marital hell” (qtd. in Gordon 705), but the marriage was the ultimate pressure cooker. “To [Vivienne] the marriage brought no happiness... to me, it brought the state of mind out of which came *The Waste Land*,” Eliot reflected in the 1960s (Eliot xvii). Today, readers everywhere are still intrigued, challenged, and captivated by Eliot’s masterpiece: a sacrificial work of art produced out of his misery.

Although Eliot reportedly maintained a reserved, well-mannered persona to the public, different sides to his personality (such as his inhibitions about sex, women, and failure, and his opinions of war, morality, and mortality) are revealed through a profound exploration of his poems. Simultaneously, a deeper grasp of his poems is attained through factual knowledge of his interpersonal connections and the time and physical location of their composition. To understand the Eliot of *The Waste Land* requires the knowledge of his previous life, an understanding of the years of isolation and entrapment, travels and war, sponsors and betrayers, that all contributed to its climactic composition. Indeed, as Gordon states, “it is only through the poetry that we see the whole man” (345).

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