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# METAPHORS OF SEXUAL VIOLENCE IN MODERNIST LITERATURE AND *THE WASTE LAND*

Excerpt from: T. S. Eliot, 'The Fire Sermon', in *The Waste Land*

At the violet hour, when the eyes and back  
Turn upward from the desk, when the human engine waits  
Like a taxi throbbing waiting,  
I Tiresias, though blind, throbbing between two lives,  
Old man with wrinkled female breasts, can see  
At the violet hour, the evening hour that strives  
Homeward, and brings the sailor home from sea,  
The typist home at teatime, clears her breakfast, lights  
Her stove, and lays out food in tins.  
Out of the window perilously spread  
Her drying combinations touched by the sun's last rays,  
On the divan are piled (at night her bed)  
Stockings, slippers, camisoles, and stays.  
I Tiresias, old man with wrinkled dugs  
Perceived the scene, and foretold the rest—  
I too awaited the expected guest.  
He, the young man carbuncular, arrives,  
A small house agent's clerk, with one bold stare,  
One of the low on whom assurance sits  
As a silk hat on a Bradford millionaire.  
The time is now propitious, as he guesses,  
The meal is ended, she is bored and tired,

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Endeavours to engage her in caresses

Which still are unproved, if undesired.  
Flushed and decided, he assaults at once;  
Exploring hands encounter no defence;  
His vanity requires no response,  
And makes a welcome of indifference.  
(And I Tiresias have foresuffered all  
Enacted on this same divan or bed;  
I who have sat by Thebes below the wall  
And walked among the lowest of the dead.)  
Bestows one final patronising kiss,  
And gropes his way, finding the stairs unlit . . .

She turns and looks a moment in the glass,  
Hardly aware of her departed lover;  
Her brain allows one half-formed thought to pass:  
“Well now that’s done: and I’m glad it’s over.”  
When lovely woman stoops to folly and  
Paces about her room again, alone,  
She smooths her hair with automatic hand,  
And puts a record on the gramophone.

[T.S. Eliot, ‘The Fire Sermon’, in *The Waste Land*  
<<https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/47311/the-waste-land>> [accessed 21 September 2022]

## Excerpt from: Megan Quigley, ‘Reading “The Waste Land” with the #MeToo Generation’

I did it again.

In Tuesday’s class, my undergraduate literature students were wrapping up a great discussion of Muriel Spark’s *The Prime of Miss Jean Brodie* (1961). We’d had a rigorous look at Brexit

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and Scotland, on the changing status of girls' education in the 1930s, on Free Indirect Discourse, and on what might be meant by a treatise of Moral Philosophy entitled, "The Transfiguration of the Commonplace." "Any further questions?" I asked. With five minutes on the clock a student somewhat reluctantly raised her hand: "Aren't we going to talk more about the fact that in this novel an art teacher is sexually assaulting a 15-year-old student?"

Of course I know that is part of *The Prime of Miss Jean Brodie*. Just as I know that in Virginia Woolf's *The Voyage Out* (1915), Richard Dalloway brutally forces a kiss on young Rachel Vinrace, undermining her sense of self and security perhaps for the remainder of her short life. I know about Fern's "easy" eyes in *Cane* (1923), which explain why, "when she was young, a few men took her"; about Connie's anal assault in *Lady Chatterley's Lover* (1928); about James Joyce's "heroic nastiness" (according to Richard Ellmann) in depicting Bloom's voyeuristic masturbation while watching young Gerty MacDowell in "Nausicaa." It's not that we don't discuss these various kinds of assaults in literature classes; we do. In a class on *Beloved* (1987) or *Sanctuary* (1931), for example, the theme of sexual brutality against women cannot and will not be ignored. But for many of these other texts, brutality against women seems a side note, a plot device, a narratological tick, a given aspect of modernity and changing gender roles in the twentieth century. Assaults and harassment against women in literature: it's just a notion I am used to, and, perhaps, along with Humbert Humbert, I don't always portray it as wrong. It certainly wasn't taught to me that way: I memorized "Leda and the Swan" in high school for an assignment and remember more compassion for swans than for girls. Even as a feminist scholar, I fear I've become somewhat accustomed to the pathos of "My Last Duchess" hanging on the wall.

My students who live in the age of Donald Trump and Brett Kavanaugh, however, are often enraged, and, insistently, they are taking me to task for my blind spots. It's as if my classes are acting out the undergraduate version of what occurred with the feminist roundtable at the Modernist Studies Association conference in Columbus this past November. The topic—"Do We Need a Feminist Roundtable?"—asked, somewhat sheepishly, if, in the posthumanist age, feminism may have gone the way of typewriters and landlines. Is it still really vital? The response by conference attendants (needing to drag additional chairs in from other rooms to participate) answered a resounding YES to this question. In the #MeToo Era, feminism has been revitalized, even as it interrogates its own historical shortcomings and theoretical limitations. Post-structuralism, complicity in the neoliberal ravaging of global economies and the environment, racism, classism, and homo/transphobia, have all, often rightly, smeared feminism's reputation, and complicated its pedagogical effectiveness. "But," as Jessica Bennett declares in *The New York Times*: "the #MeToo moment has become something larger: a lens through which we view the world, a sense of blinders being taken off."

[...]

Yet simultaneously, for me, the old Eliot is changing rapidly, as students interrogate "The Waste Land," this quintessential High Modernist text, with new eyes in the #MeToo Era. Because of its canonicity, the frequency with which it is taught on college syllabi across the world, and because of its famous difficulty and openness to interpretation, "The Waste Land" acts as a kind of test case of how the #MeToo generation can change the way we read.

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Indeed, teaching “The Waste Land” over the past decade has markedly changed, both because students have access to sources of allusions at their fingertips through technology, but also, more recently, with the reconsideration of sexual abuse and sexual harassment on campuses made visible through the #MeToo protests. From Title IX officers at universities to the #SayHerName movement, from pussy hats to battles over transgender bathrooms, our students are more sensitized to and informed about the battles that rage over gender, sexuality, intersectionalism, and power than they were just a very short while ago. The first time I heard “The Waste Land” called an “abortion poem” I thought I had misheard my student; now I hear it frequently (and convincingly) called a poem that stages and performs racial and gender violence and investigates trans\* experience. My own teachers directed me away from Lil to Philomel to Nightingales and Keats—our students want Keats, but also to discuss, really discuss, the assault of the typist.

Empathy, Tiresias’s key characteristic, is offered here in these essays as a model reading practice. It was also what Tarana Burke, the founder of the #MeToo movement, emphasized over a decade ago in her work with black young women in the South: “Empowerment through Empathy” worked, she declared. A victim herself of sexual violence, she argued that “the most succinct way to show empathy” and to enable change was to simply state: “MeToo.” About a year ago, when the nation was reeling from the Harvey Weinstein allegations, the actress Alyssa Milano, in an effort to show that sexual violence and assault were not merely the purview of the rich and famous, tweeted: “Suggested by a friend: If all women who had been sexually harassed or assaulted wrote ‘Me Too’ as a status, we might give people a sense of the magnitude of the problem.” She had 55,000 replies in 12 hours and 85 million mentions within a month. We are all familiar with the names now associated with sexual harassment allegations in politics and entertainment, including Bill Cosby, Roger Ailes, R. Kelly, Matt Lauer, Brett Kavanaugh, Donald Trump, and in academia, too, with scandals at Stanford, NYU, and Columbia within the last 6 months alone. In the field of literature and theory, a recent letter to *The Chronicle of Higher Education* demands that Judith Butler step down as President Elect from the MLA after she signed a letter protesting the allegations against Avital Ronell, while another article in the same publication asks “Should we still cite the scholarship of serial sexual harassers?” While we have a sitting American president who mockingly tweets that we need to all be “very gentle” because we’re in the “#MeToo” generation, my students want less evasion, and more direct conversation about how our canonical authors have addressed sexualized violence.

I asked my contributors to consider: how has reading “The Waste Land” changed for the #MeToo generation? How is sex connected to violence, ritual, and power in the poem? Why is Tiresias, “Old man with wrinkled female breasts,” the primary source of knowledge in the poem, and how should we now understand Eliot’s claim that what Tiresias sees is “the substance of the poem”? How does the poem formally confront sexualized violence, through its allusions, section breaks, and lyric fragmentation? What do the notes to the poem direct us to see? Eliot first called the poem, “He do the police in different voices”: which voices do we hear, believe, and emphasize when we teach it?

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The following contributions, in more or less programmatic ways, answer these questions and suggest how we can be more direct about power, sexuality, and reading practices when we teach "The Waste Land." With startling new readings (is the "hyacinth girl" a depiction of a traumatized assault victim? Does the word "No" resound throughout the poem?), they help us to read the poem afresh. They show that the poem invites these #MeToo conversations through repeated allusions and retellings of stories of rape and through the discomfort it animates in the reader's mind and body. They ask us to interrogate the boundaries between the text and the collaborators producing the text. Importantly, by examining our students' diverse responses to the text (when they come from marginalized communities or reject the gender binary), they show the ways our classroom conversations continue to prove Eliot's relevance, even when knowledge of the historical suffering of the First World War is no longer a given. The pieces gathered here aim to give voice to scholars at different moments in their teaching careers (from graduate students to emerita) as well as to depict the challenges facing scholars who are teaching at diverse types of institutions (from R-1 Universities to women's liberal arts colleges to community colleges). I hope these voices can inspire and challenge the methodologies of our modernist classrooms.

[...]

[Megan Quigley, 'Reading "The Waste Land" with the #MeToo Generation', *Modernism/modernity*, 4 (2019) <<https://modernismmodernity.org/forums/reading-waste-land-metoo>> [accessed 21 September 2022]

## Excerpt from: Sharon Stockton, 'T. S. Eliot and the Rape of God'

In *The Waste Land* it is the symbolic function of the woman's body to be permeable - to be a channel for undefined external force. Sexual violence, as opposed to male sterility, is far from "unnatural" in Eliot's work, as Sicker would claim (422). The female body is represented as more or less degraded - more or less repulsive - depending on whether or not its materiality tends toward dissolution and effacement in its "rapability," as MacKinnon terms it - that condition or "position which is social, not biological, [and which] defines what woman is" (651). In general, actual female bodies of the twentieth century are limited to material proliferation and noise; this delineation accounts for "the various women in the poem who fail the quester," as Materer puts it (2). Roberson argues that all women of Eliot's early period negatively indicate the "flesh" that he could not infuse with "spirit"; it would seem, however, that the raped bodies of history, literature, and myth do suggest something more - a more perfect horror and effacement (477). The mythicized and /or mythic female escapes her material constitution as "rank" and anarchically productive; her body as material sign is subdued to the invisible force of abstract value.

A useful contrast, for example, can be made between the woman typist and the Thames sisters of "The Fire Sermon" - all of whom generally represent the "archetype" of "the sexually violated yet sterile female" (Sicker, 420). Sex for the typist is a degraded violation, meaninglessly bankrupt. She is "assaulted" in the midst of her drying underclothes by an all

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too personalized individual, the "carbuncular" clerk, himself constructed as a repulsive image of social mobility "on whom assurance sits / As a silk hat on a Bradford millionaire." The event, similarly, connotes nothing but its depraved materiality and is to be drowned out with the automated sound of the gramophone: "Her brain allows one halfformed thought to pass: / 'Well now that's done: and I'm glad it's over'"

The solitude of the isolated woman - opiating herself on the mass-produced "art" of the mechanical age - clearly stands in for what Eliot constructs as the condition of humanity generally in the early twentieth century. It is important to note that in this scene, Eliot places the reader and narrator (Tiresias?) of the poem beside the woman and not the man, as Brooker and Bentley point out (56). In fact, Eliot excised earlier portions of "The Fire Sermon" which follow the progress of the clerk as he departs the scene: he offers a "patronizing kiss," "gropes" to the stairs, and

... at the corner where the stable is,

Delays only to urinate, and spit. (*Waste Land Facsimile*, 47)

The excision heightens the extent to which point of view remains with she who is violated and not with the violator; the reader, then (by virtue of reading - by virtue of entering the waste land) must not only side with but remain with the victim. This is not to say that point of view is the woman's; Tiresias remains voyeuristically apart from those he watches, enabling a flirtatious association with rape that remains essentially private and powerfully sovereign: Eliot thus "theatricalizes," as Irmischer puts it, "the peculiar tension between the two positions of looking (the voyeuristic seeing- without-being-seen) and of being looked at" (590). It is hard to see in this mobility of the voyeuristic gaze the "collapse of gender distinctions" that Bose - and Eliot himself - argue Tiresias represents; rape fantasies in *The Waste Land* speak more to Eliot's need for a palatable vision of submission than to his desire for androgyny.

[Sharon Stockton, 'T. S. Eliot and the Rape of God', *Texas Studies in Literature and Language*, 39 (1997), 375-398 (pp.377-378)]

## Excerpt from: Susan Andrade, *The Nation Writ Small: African Fictions and Feminisms, 1958-1988*

I argue that reading allegorically allows one to elucidate new meanings in the domestic sphere of life and in intimate relations between people. The domestic, where women have historically set their novels, offers as sharp an analytic perspective on collectivity and national politics as does the arena of public political action. As readers of African literature, we must learn to read this realm more carefully.

[...]

a strongly and simply configured *topos* of gender runs through the literature of decolonization written by men. Women are celebrated or victimized, adored or abused; they are Mother Africa, an essential figure of nurturance, or they stand as prostitutes, figures who traffic in their own bodies and thus represent one of the nightmares of modernity. [...] These figures arise from men's projection of their own sense of anxiety or degradation [...].

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For feminists, the family reasserts itself continually, interfering with the normative reader's desire or expectation that it give way to a "deeper meaning" or "higher truth" about national life. These [African women's] fictions require that we perceive the simultaneous production of both literal and allegorical meaning: family does not disappear so that the glory or pathos of nation might be revealed. Instead, family retains its literalness, its banality, as well as its real material and social significance, thereby troubling the tendency of the national allegory to soar into the realm of the transcendent.

[Susan Andrade, *The Nation Writ Small: African Fictions and Feminisms, 1958-1988* (London: Duke University Press, 2011), pp. 1-38]

## Discussion Questions:

- What was your first reaction to reading this extract from 'The Fire Sermon'?
  - What stood out as important to you?
- Do you interpret the typist as a metaphor?
  - What about her 'assault'?
- Do you agree with Stockton that her experience is 'a degraded violation, meaninglessly bankrupt'?
- Do you think she 'clearly stands in for what Eliot constructs as the condition of humanity generally in the early twentieth century'?
- Are there ethical issues in the wake of #MeToo with interpreting sexual violence metaphorically?
- What is your response to Quigley's question: how has reading "The Waste Land" changed for the #MeToo generation?
- Do you agree with Quigley's assertion that "'The Waste Land' acts as a kind of test case of how the #MeToo generation can change the way we read'?
- How can we read metaphors / allegories of sexual violence 'more carefully', as Andrade suggests?
- Do you think we could read sexual violence like Andrade reads the family, as 'interfering with the normative reader's desire or expectation that it give way to a "deeper meaning" or "higher truth"'?