The Waste Land War Relationships

Eliot's The Waste Land is not a typical war poem. It does not offer the same simplicity and accessibility of wartime poets, and it does not necessarily offer the same view of themes and virtues of war poems, such as faith, duty, patriotism, and civilisation. However, Eliot does deal with the after effects of war, with the problems faced by those directly involved on the front lines and by those left behind at home, whose lives and personal traumas are sometimes neglected in study. This essay will look at the ways in which the war affected male-female relationships, focusing particularly on the way different experiences both psychologically and physically for each individual creates a distance between partners.

In "A Game of Chess", Eliot uses female sexuality to explore the post-war effects on society, and to communicate the physical desolation wrought on both men and women and the general sense of despair that blanketed the war-torn civilisation by looking into the state and obscurity of male-female relationships. Jean-Michel Rabaté concludes that "Eliot had taken the war as a pretext for a situation of exception that allowed him to get married quickly to a seductive and brilliant English woman. He would torture her (and himself) in words and deeds", finding that "the war provided […] the possibility of torturing one's partner in a couple." Whether or not Eliot intentionally entered into his marriage with Vivien Haigh-Wood with the explicit objective of torturing either himself or his wife is debatable, though it is clear that the theme of torturing one's partner or lover is a prevalent one in the poem.

This section of the poem showcases two separate scenes highlighting two differing kinds of women in society: the first scene observes a moment from the life of an upper-class woman while the second scene follows a conversation between lower-class women. The first woman, surrounded by "jewels", "satin" and "vials of ivory and coloured glass" containing "her strange synthetic perfumes" is awaiting the arrival of or reunion with her husband, who can be read as a war veteran. Eliot invokes the story of Ovid's Philomela, a woman who is raped by her sister's husband, the king, who cuts out her tongue to ensure she does not speak about it. Philomela manages to tell her sister what has happened, and her sister avenges her by murdering the king's son and feeding him to the king. The story summons up the idea that perhaps the woman is unable to express her true, internal self to the outer world. Though this scene is not sexual, the lack of sexuality shows the reader the difficulty of rekindling romantic intimacy with a partner after the experience of a war. It also offers the reader a look into the unerotic intimacy shared by a couple and the way in which war can destroy this kind of non-sexual, almost platonic side of male-female love. The connotations of Philomela's story, however, prepares Eliot's audience to face the brutality of sexual violence that comes up later again in the poem.

It is not only the woman in this section that displays an inability to express or communicate her true self or thoughts. She implores her partner:

Speak to me. Why do you never speak? Speak.

What are you thinking of? What thinking? Think.

I never know what you are thinking. Think.

The woman's desperation is clear: the blank verse of this first part becomes increasingly irregular in both length and meter, indicating a sense of disintegration. Her husband's responses appear non-verbal, without quotation marks, to imply that the duo is incapable of communication. The husband's replies echo earlier comments made by the speaker of the poem in "The Burial of the Dead"; when the woman asks him "Do / You know nothing? Do you see nothing? Do you remember / Nothing?" and further questions "Are you alive, or not?", Eliot seems to draw connections to an earlier voice remembering a scene from their younger years: "I could not / Speak, and my eyes failed, I was neither / Living nor dead, and I knew nothing." This deterioration into nothingness, felt by not only the tortured soldier and the younger speaker but the wife, too, who is surrounded by luxuries and a partner safely returned home from war, who ostensibly 'has it all', exhibits the universal sense of fragmentation that has rendered society in an almost perpetual state of falling apart. Here, Rabaté's idea of torturing one's partner with words seems to ring true, though it is an unintended, unaware torture, an after effect of the war that leaves the couple unable to communicate and express themselves accurately and, in the process of attempting to find the right words, unknowingly end up tormenting one another.

There is another kind of torture reserved for male-female relationships in The Waste Land, observed in the sexual exploits in several instances to which the reader is privy. The second part of "A Game of Chess" follows the conversation between two women about the circumstances of their mutual friend, Lil. The speaker explains that Lil's husband, Albert, is returning from war, and that it is time she 'smartens' up her appearance: "think of poor Albert, / He's been in the army four years, he wants a good time, / And if you don't give it him, there's others will." The reader discovers that Lil used up the money that Albert gave her to get a new set of teeth on an abortion instead, after nearly dying in childbirth with her fifth child. According to Richard Badenhausen, "Of particular interest to [Eliot] is the manner in which domestic spaces are inhospitable to traumatised soldiers struggling to reconcile their wartime experiences with the very different demands of civilian life." Whereas the previous couple of this section struggle to communicate efficiently, here the reader witnesses the effects war has on the sexual intimacy of a couple; Albert, who has been in the army for years, is entitled to a beautiful (or at least pleasant-looking) wife upon his return, according to the speaker. Yet Lil has waged a personal war against her own body after giving birth to five children, which has left her looking "antique", and has been told that this is something to be "ashamed" of. She is compared to Hamlet's Ophelia in the ending lines of the section, and the question of self-destruction shrouds Lil's character. While it is true that traumatised soldiers often found it difficult adjusting to everyday life after the war, Eliot articulates the problems faced by the soldiers' wives left behind, some of whom have gone years without seeing their husbands or partners. A study found that "dealing with the process of integration following the return of a soldier is equally or more stressful [for the family] than periods during the war/deployment", noting various different stressors and citing Schuetz from 'The Homecomer': "The home to which [the soldier] returns is by no means the home he left or the home which he recalled and longed for during his absence." The distance between husband and wife becomes something not only geographical but physical and emotional – Lil is expected to doll herself up and give herself to a man she hasn't seen—or hardly known—in years. The Waste Land highlights the difficulties suffered not only by traumatised soldiers but also their wives; and it indicates that the abyss of lack of intimacy between the two as a direct result of war is something that causes catastrophic havoc on male-female relationships.

Sexual violence also plays a part in The Waste Land, specifically in "The Fire Sermon" section.

Linking back to the Philomela invocation from “A Game of Chess”, this section of the poem sees Tiresias, the speaker, watch the rape of a woman by her lover. Badenhausen states that “one of the recurring features of The Waste Land is how often potentially charged emotional moments are accompanied by ‘indifference’” and Tiresias tells the reader that the young man’s “vanity […] makes a welcome of indifference.” This indifference can be traced to the letters Eliot received from Maurice Haigh-Wood, his brother-in-law, who spoke of the “complete indifference” of the men who had fought on the front lines and were exposed to the horrors that those at home could not imagine. Badenhausen explains that Eliot sought to publish Haigh-Wood’s letter so that the public could better understand why soldiers who had returned from war were so reluctant to speak of it. There is a Freudian undertone throughout the poem, particularly between the first couple in “A Game of Chess”, wherein the situation whereby a trauma victim is unable to express their trauma leads to shellshock. The indifference the young woman feels from the violent act parallels the indifference the soldiers felt upon returning home from war, like the unspeaking, shellshocked husband from “A Game of Chess”; both parties the victims of atrocities, both parties left with the thought: “Well now that’s done: and I’m glad it’s over.”

At the same time, Eliot chose to include a reference to Elizabeth I in this section. Elizabeth and Leicester’s liaison is traditionally depicted as something of a romantic affair, which contradicts the earlier part of this section, whereby the typist has clearly become accustomed to a lack of romance, intimacy and love and has come to expect the detached violence that her lover brings. Eliot strips Elizabeth of her titles, of her royal connotations and nobility:

Elizabeth and Leicester

Beating oars

The stern was formed

A gilded shell

Red and gold

This technique allows her to become just another noun in the fragmented verse of this section of the poem, almost as if implying her vulnerability or at the very least nakedness, much like the violated typist. To compare the Virgin Queen with the rape of the young woman could suggest that war has ‘raped’ England, or even civilised English society, leaving it with an indifference to the matters of domestic trauma, fragmented and desolate in the aftershock of the war. On the other hand, it is possible to imagine that Eliot has used this comparison to highlight the absence of intimacy in couples after the war, even going so far as to twist Elizabeth’s romance into something dry and meaningless, lost at sea with their “beating oars.” This foreshadows Eliot’s “Death by Water” section, which incurs notions of cyclicality and repetition rather than burial and regrowth, thereby disrupting the process of mourning not only for lost loved ones but for the loss of what those loved ones were once able to provide with regards to intimacy, closeness and familiarity. This creates confusion and obstruction, placing an ocean of emotional distance between the first couple of “A Game of Chess”, Lil and Albert, the typist and her lover, and Elizabeth and England/Leicester. In this way, they are tortured the same way Phlebas the Phoenician is, rising and falling in the “whirlpool” of the sea, lost in the abyss of emotional separation.

This same section, “The Fire Sermon”, introduces the reader to Tiresias. Tiresias is a figure from Greek mythology, who “though blind […] can see” into the future. He is an “old man with wrinkled female breasts” and shares a relationship with those whose lives he narrates in the poem. In being the narrator of this section, “throbbing between two lives”, Tiresias carries the burden of the traumas the typist endures and can do nothing about it. Dori Laub asserts that “the listener to trauma comes to be a participant and co-owner of the traumatic event: through his very listening, he comes to partially experience trauma himself.” Despite the fact that he has “foresuffered all”, Tiresias is unable to share a genuine intimacy with the typist, as he himself has become a victim of her trauma. Freud’s theory of traumatic disassociation seems to be proved in Eliot’s version of Tiresias, who as the witness of extreme psychological traumas such as death, sexual violence and devastation on an immense scale means that he is directly suffering and cannot remove himself from the identity of a victim. His repetition of “I Tiresias” throughout this section of the poem seems to instil the idea of his inability to grasp onto his own identity, and slips into the lives of those he witnesses, blurring the identities between the real victim of trauma and Tiresias’s perceived traumatic experiences. Though the relationship between Tiresias and the typist is not a typical male-female relationship, Eliot has utilised this speaker in such a way as to further intensify the feeling of a lack of intimacy between the pair, as a direct result of the trauma they have experienced in their own ways.

This essay has looked at the ways in which war and its aftershock has brought havoc to the male-female relationships presented in The Waste Land. As I have mentioned, The Waste Land is not a typical war poem; it is not rooted in any particular event, though its conception will have been hastened by the First World War and its effects on Eliot himself. The Waste Land conceals the roots of its characters’ trauma, nor does it reveal any kind of redemptive aspect or sign of societal growth as a functioning civilisation; instead, Eliot pays close attention to those who have been left in suffering, who are trapped in suffering and will remain that way in his poem. The damage evident in the male-female relationships of the poem are equally a result of and cause of this suffering, much like the “torture” of “words and deeds” Eliot found himself in. The “debilitating emotional distance” in all of the male-female relationships of the poem is, in fact, each individual’s own personal waste land.