Mobility of Meaning in T.S. Eliot’s *The Waste Land*: A Deconstructive Feminist Reading

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Abstract

The present paper deals with the mobility of meaning in the text of T. S. Eliot’s *The Waste Land* as far as the representation of woman is concerned. I attempt to show that the image of woman in the poem is mobile and unstable and dependent on individual acts of interpretation. I apply a deconstructive feminist reading to the text to analyze the representation of the poem’s female figures. In the first part of the work I expose the first possible reading of the poem where women can be read as temptresses, prostitutes, sorceresses, neurotic, irrational, superstitious, unnatural and passive creatures. The second part presents another possible contradictory reading which argues that women are positively represented in the text. They rather seem connected with activity, reason, wisdom and art in opposition with the negative representation of man as exploiter, rapist and betrayer. Thus, the intent of the research is to show the mobility of meaning in literary works, the flexible and unstable nature of language, the openness of texts to contradictory interpretations. The work follows the Derridean pattern of reading where the reader moves among the unsettled words or the “undecidables” of a text, as coined by Derrida, to affirm the infinity of play and the multiplicity of meanings. Therefore, deciphering truth and escaping play become an illusion in the analysis of such literary works.

Key Words:

Mobility- meaning- feminism- deconstruction- contradiction- representation- female figures.
Introduction:

Published in 1922, *The Waste Land* is T.S. Eliot’s famous lengthy poem by which he won an international reputation due to its unconventional style, distinct poetic diction and ambiguous terminology. The poem represents a break with the immediate past as radical as that of Coleridge and Wordsworth in *Lyrical Ballads*. Its open style invites the reader to re-write the text and fashion it the way he likes. The fact of releasing language from its fixed rules and setting images and words free translates the poet’s desire to liberate the human mind from formal etiquette, classical clichés, fixity of meaning, limitation of critical performance and belief in absolute truths; it is a desire to decenter the authority of authorhood. Consequently, the reader becomes involved in the writing process: deconstructing the text, colonizing it and dwelling within its curves, then reconstructing it to make it his realm. Eliot unconventionally breaks with the literary traditions of classical poetry while traveling to the intricate corners of language, violating its code and untying its rusty knots. The poet plays the game of presence and absence to make his discourse reveal its unconventionality, its irregularity and inconsistency, its fragmentariness and insaneness. It is an unfinished discourse which maintains the reader’s hunger for a far-fetched truth.

The focus of the present paper is put on the representation of the female personae in the poem and the possibility to read the presence of women in the text from different or rather contradictory perspectives. The open nature of the language used in the poem, the ambivalent imagery and the ambiguity of terms provide the reader with the freedom of interpretation, which stands against the belief in absolute truths and author’s intentionality while arguing for the mobility of meaning and shattering the illusion of a central and unique reading of a literary work. The female figures are portrayed in the poem in a way that allows the reader to put them in the critical mold he chooses. With *TWL*, we move away from the meanness of images, fixity of meaning and uniqueness of representation to embrace plurality, multiplicity and diversity in the interpretive act. The reader is capable of extracting two different points of view about women in the text; we may perceive their positive as well as their hostile representation in two separate acts of reading. The purpose of the paper is to bring to the surface two contradictory, yet acceptable, interpretations of the same textual data. Eliot’s *TWL* is a masterpiece which permits its reader to move freely in the textual space to engage in an endless struggle for meaning.

³ Hereafter referred to as *TWL*.
1. The Deconstructive Feminist Approach:

In the present paper, the mobile process of interpreting Eliot’s *The Waste Land* is theoretically framed by a deconstructive feminist critical point of view. Since the representation of the female figures in the text is the main concern of the research, the reading is essentially feminist whereas the deconstructive approach is used as a strategy to tackle feminist issues, based on Paul de Man’s definition of deconstruction as “a strategy of reading” (qtd. in Davis and Shleifer 323). The work attempts to show that the text deconstructs itself by generating a positive view of woman on the one hand and its opposite on the other and how each reading is contaminated by the other due to the mobility of language. Deconstructive feminism rejects the belief in the transcendent absolutes and shares Jacques Derrida’s notion of “decentering the universe.” In many cases, two contradictory interpretations of the same detail in the text are provided. From a deconstructive perspective, the poem contradicts itself by showing simultaneously fascination with and abhorrence of women, describing them as signs of beauty and life while minimizing them into emblems of ugliness and death, considering them as vital to man but also as cursed sources of trouble.

Feminists and deconstructionists share a whole set of objectives. First, both of them came to disturb centers and destroy the notion of order and stability. While feminists challenge the social and literary premises of patriarchy, deconstructionists undermine the classical philosophical assumptions. The two theories object to the traditional concepts of center versus other, the dualistic and hierarchical thought, the prioritization of presence, logocentrism and phallocentrism. Furthermore, both theories denounce the pre-existence of facts and believe solely in interpretations; they are skeptical about the traditional absolutes, argue against the singleness of meaning and defy the fixity of rules. They doubt the stability of language and believe in the mobility of meaning in single sentences. In addition, the two theories reckon the illusion of closure, completeness and structurality. In general terms, we may define the two critical trends as challenging modes of thought which came to reject a specific set of literary traditions. Yet while feminism is considered as a social and aesthetic revolution against the patriarchal thought, deconstruction is seen as a reaction against pre-set philosophical absolutes. The cooperation between these two critical schools is productive enough to advance the field of gender studies and enrich the critical scope of literary works.
Literature lends itself to deconstructive readings as it relies heavily on the multiple meanings of words, exclusions, substitutions, intertextuality and the play of meaning. Reading literature calls forth the potential for a strong counter-reading; and reading literary texts in the deconstructive mode is not a matter of decoding the message, it is a matter of entering into the thoughtful play of contradiction, multiple reference, and the ceaseless questioning of conclusions and responses.

In the present analysis of TWL, a deconstructive strategy is followed to show how the text can undermine itself since it bears the seeds of its own critique. The poem fails by its own criteria because of the inconsistent and paradoxical use of concepts in it. It breaks the framework it makes for itself, then disintegrates whereby “two interpretations of interpretation, of structure, of sign, of play” are provided (Derrida 102). The paper touches on the mechanisms that lead to reveal hidden paradoxes in the text. The fact of having an unfixed and elusive image of woman in the poem shows how modernist literary texts lack unity, coherence and consistency, argues how meaning is mobile in the critical practice, and denies resolutions in the process of textual analysis. It is also the nature of the language used in the text that reflects its willingness to undergo different readings. I argue, first, that the poem provides a negative image of woman; then deconstruct this first reading by displaying the positive features of the text’s female personae. In the overall strategy of the present paper, the emphasis is put on the mutual contamination of the different readings, resulting in the impossibility of anything beyond literature.

2. The First Reading: The Negative Image of Women in TWL

In TWL, we can detect a pejorative representation of woman and a possible complicity with patriarchy. First, woman seems to be blatantly represented as an irreverent and irreligious being who stands for immorality and impiety. She is the origin of sin, the cause of the predicament of man and the source of the wasting of the land. In the text, woman can be read as a seducer and temptress as well as a whore and prostitute. Second, the poem refers to women as weak and passive creatures who are bound to satisfy man’s needs and assume the role of childbearing; they are rather connected with domesticity and irrationality. The work describes its female personae as hysterical, neurotic, and nearly mad. It similarly exposes us
to sorceresses and prophetesses to associate women with superstition and irrationality. In *TWL*, woman seems to acquire an “unnatural” character which makes her behave against the rules of nature as we may find in the figure of the working woman who abandons the traditional principles of motherhood and housework and pursues modernity. The world depicted in the poem is a womanized world where women stand on the top. The reversal of the old principles is shown to be the cause of the curse put on the land because woman is unfit for rule and unable to think and produce as man. In the poem, she is objectified physically and artistically: she is more connected with procreation and reproduction than with creativity and artistic production.

Departing from the title of the poem and going through the content, we are taken by its legendary framework. The Fisher King and the Grail legend underlie the structure and themes of the whole work. The wounded Fisher King cannot be healed unless the ideal knight asks the right question, and gets the Grail. “The result,” declares Jessie Weston, “is to break the spell which retains the Grail King in a semblance of life, and we learn, by implication, that the land is restored to fruitfulness” (13). Because of the Fisher King’s guilt, the land is laid waste by a prolonged drought which has destroyed vegetation. It is the effect of the hero’s right question to “restore the waters to their channel, and render the land once more fertile” (Weston 20-21). *TWL* follows the same legendary model of the human quest for regeneration where the search for the Grail “became a powerful narrative image for man’s search for spiritual truth” (Southam 82). The world pictured in the poem seems to be dim, dead, rotten and sterile because of the sinfulness of its people; thus the quest for purgation, though full of difficulties and hardships, is a must.

In the poem, intertextuality is a central feature that allows the text to extract data from the different versions of the Grail legend. In the Grail texts, women are generally depicted as enemies to God; they are associated with the devil and become the symbol of temptation and sin. They deflect men from their holy quests by tempting them and playing on their sexual instincts to let them miss the chance for the Grail; as a result, the land remains waste. Since the image of woman in the poem substantially resembles the one pictured in myth, we need to go back to the representation of women in these legendary texts. In the Grail tradition, the quest of the Holy Grail is a basic element. However, the way to reach that ultimate objective is full of hardships and tests. Woman usually assumes a satanic position while distracting man from religion and marring the holiness of his quest. Once tainted by the sin of lust, many
knights lose their chance for the Grail. In Paul Verlaine’s sonnet “Parsifal” from which the line “Et, o ces voix d’enfants, chantant dans la coupole!” (TWL) is taken, women are described as devils that have to be vanquished in order to attain the Grail.

Following the myth of the Grail, the section of “What the Thunder Said” refers to the horrors that meet the Grail searcher to test his courage and faith when he reaches Chapel Perilous. The first and most important “horror” that he encounters is a seductive woman: “A woman drew her long black hair out tight” (378) before confronting less dangerous horrors like the bats with baby faces, the crawled head and the reverberating voices; these obstacles distance the searcher from the chapel. While the other horrors serve to test man’s courage, the presence of women tests his religious faith. Thus, in TWL, women and God seem to “act not in conjunction but in competition” (Gordon 97); women are thought to hinder salvation and regeneration. Man’s duty is to overcome women, the symbol of desire and lust, and control his sexual impulses in order to cure the king and end the drought. In this context, Gordon claims that “The woman, then, becomes an emblem of the decadent natural world which should be abandoned or dismissed” (108).

The text exposes the danger of females in terms of body, lust and sexual desire. We can refer to the figure of the distraught lady sitting in her dressing room in “A Game of Chess.” Her perfumes, make-up and jewels are the means she uses to lure her male companion. She is shown as a malicious temptress, especially when she plays on her man’s senses, those of the eye and smell: “In vials of ivory and coloured glass/ Unstoppered, lurked her strange synthetic perfumes/ Unguent, powdered, or liquid – troubled, confused/ And drowned the sense in odours; stirred by the air” (TWL 86-89). The artificially induced colors as well as the make-up and perfumes “introduce a theme which ends only with denunciations of fleshy appetites by Saint Augustine and Buddha at the end of ‘The Fire Sermon’” (Pinion 125). Women in the poem seem to be associated with the fire of lust and its destructive consequences.

The text provides the reader with seducing images of women and focuses on their tempting skill. The distraught lady seduces her partner using her hair’s beauty: “Under the firelight, under the brush, her hair / Spread out in fiery points/ Glowed into words, then would be savagely still” (108-10). The use of the adjective “fiery” in the description of the lady’s hair connects beauty and temptation with fire, and the adverb “savagely” may connote the
wildness of the sexual desire and the danger of surrender. Still in the same vein, the Hyacinth girl emerges in a seductive appearance: “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” (38-40). Her appearance entices the boy who immediately responds to her proposition and accordingly loses his ability of speech. After the first line that may suggest their sexual encounter, all the focus is put on the loss of the speaking ability, which reminds us of the inability of the Grail searchers to ask the right question. In the Grail legend, Lancelot, for instance, remains silent when the Grail manifests to him, due to his sinfulness with Guinevere. To be punished for his surrender, the wrongdoer is deprived of his speaking faculties and consequently misses the chance of restoring the land to fertility.

The second feature of misogyny which has to be explored is the description of the female body as a site for immorality and woman’s tool in the practice of whoredom and implication in prostitution. Andrew Swarbrick assures that “Elsewhere [in The Waste Land] women are to be identified as prostitutes” (10). Not only does the text depart from the Grail tradition in its representation of women, but it also brings us back to other legendary figures. Mrs. Porter, “a legendary brothel-keeper in Cairo,” (Southam 97) and her daughter are the symbols of whoredom in the text. The passage of Sweeney and Mrs. Porter is placed in “The Fire Sermon” section in order to connect sexuality with fire. Prostitution is represented in the poem as a sign of sterility and death. The lines preceding the passage are significant since they refer to the Fisher King and his sterile land: “While I was fishing in the dull canal / On a winter evening round behind the gashouse” (189-90). The dull canal and the winter evening suggest obscurity, despair and barrenness, and show the interconnectedness between sexuality and death. The idea of associating prostitution with death is even more realized with the abundance of death imagery in the passage involving the Mrs. Porter scene.

Furthermore, whoredom is linked with an indifference to chastity in the poem. Both the typist and the Thames daughter are depicted as submissive and passive whores, with no morality and emotionality. The typist seems indifferent while offering her body to the clerk: “His vanity requires no response / And makes a welcome of indifference” (241-42). Likewise, the Thames daughter is apathetic to her chastity: it is her male companion who weeps for her lost virginity while she seems unconcerned: “He wept. He promised ‘a new start’” (298). This focus on woman’s indifference to her purity aims to attack the debased and undignified characters of these female personae. Driven by a crude instinct and characterized by apathy
and dehumanization, these sexual encounters set off the curse on the land. Throughout the poem, the reader can sense the emptiness and meaninglessness of such sexual activities whose failure is due primarily to the sinful propositions of women. The blame is put on these prostitutes who host their clients at home and humilitatingly accept to be treated as mere objects of desire. Initiated by impassion and emotionlessness, sexual automatism is in turn another cause of sterility because it distorts human relations and instrumentalizes woman’s corporeality.

The description of woman as prostitute makes the reader aware of woman’s sexual passivity and self-objectification. By accepting to be an object of desire, the typist invests her body without worrying about her dignity; while her soul is absent, her body is there to satisfy the clerk’s physical need. She offers her lifeless corpse effortlessly and placidly: “Exploring hands encounter no defence” (240). The Thames daughter equally imbibes her own passivity; she accepts to be an object of desire and a source of pleasure for her partner: “Undid me. By Richmond I raised my knees / Supine on the floor of a narrow canoe’” (294-95). According to these lines, woman “consents to degradation as if it were foredoomed” (Ellmann 96). By attributing passivity to woman, the text can be said to reproduce and reinforce the patriarchal assumptions. Patriarchal societies had long believed that woman was born passive and should remain so; it is nature which bestowed upon her submissiveness and frailty while granting man with power and activity. The poem seems to reinstate these patriarchal premises by representing females as vulnerable, passive and obedient.

Women’s submission in the two sexual scenes of the typist and the daughter makes tangible men’s sovereignty. The clerk, unlike his female partner, seems strong and confident; he enters the house “with one bold stare” (232) and is described as “Flushed and decided” (239). Active verbs like “to endeavour” and “to assault” are allocated to him to show that he is the decision-taker in the scene. Similar to the clerk, the Thames daughter’s companion seems to be active; the expression “Undid me” (294) reveals his power over his subordinate partner. Recognizing his own potency, he assumes responsibility in the damage of the girl’s virginity by weeping for his deed. The poem seems to convey the patriarchal conviction that woman is uniquely a body and man is the owner of that body.

Still in the same vein, I may explore another female persona whose social situation is different from the other female figures of the poem. Despite their dissimilar marital status, Lil,
the typist and the daughter share the same mortifying aspect of the sexual experience. Married, Lil is also portrayed as a passive woman, sexually manipulated by her husband. In “A Game of Chess,” the representation of Lil as an object of desire and as an example of the woman who devotes herself to the satisfaction of her husband’s sexual whims may show that the text reproduces the negative stereotypes of woman so as to degrade her dignity and pride. Lil has to preserve her beauty in order to stimulate her husband: “Now Albert’s coming back, make yourself a bit smart” (142). The wife internalizes her role as man’s sexual object and feels dutiful to him: “He’s been in the army four years, he wants a good time” (148). Since Lil represents True Womanhood and stands for “the Angel in the House,” she seems to incarnate the ideal image of woman as required by the patriarchal system. The representation of women as passive in TWL can be interpreted as anti-feminist in two ways. First, the text can be read as a reinforcement of the Cult of Domesticity and an embodiment of “the Angel in the House” ideology. Second, the poem can be interpreted as an indictment against woman’s passive behavior as a source of her unhappiness and self-destruction. In all cases, the two interpretations show the hostile representation of woman in Eliot’s work.

Women’s naiveté and passivity reveal their insensibility and connect them with irrationality. The poem focuses on the irrational characteristic of woman through the description of its female figures as neurotic and hysterical in many cases. Women’s speech in the poem is most of the time disconnected, disrupted, repetitive and meaningless, hence hysterical. The nervous lady in “A Game of Chess” belongs to the upper-middle class and her speech appears to be a kind of hallucination. Knowing that hysteria was peculiar to the Victorian bourgeois family, the lady can be said to represent the bourgeois hysterical woman. The repetition of the word “nothing” may denote the nothingness, emptiness and meaninglessness of her speech. The interruptions of her utterances and the reiteration of certain terms show that she has some psychological trouble; Pinion clearly classifies her as a hysterical case: “her words [express] a high-strung impatience mounting repeatedly almost to hysteria” (126). Her psychosomatic disturbance uncovers her worry about the future; she imagines things: “‘What is that noise now? What is the wind doing?’/ Nothing again nothing” (119-20). She seems to be fearful and schizophrenic as a result of her repressive state under a conservative society. In addition, the Hyacinth girl appears hysterical as well since she speaks “like the mad Ophelia” (Kenner 138). Even in describing her arms as full and hair as wet, the girl looks like the mad Ophelia when she gathers flowers before her drowning. Lil is also psychologically unstable because of her insensible internalization of the patriarchal sexual
order; she is neurotic because she stands against herself and reinforces her own passivity. Woman’s neurosis in the text is thus related to her obsession with subordination and dependency and displays woman’s compliance with the patriarchal manifesto.

Woman’s lack of reason is not only shown through her hysterical behavior, but also through her superstition. In myths, and specifically in the Grail legend, women are connected with witchcraft. Madame Sosostris, the “famous clairvoyante,” is negatively represented; adjectives such as “bad” and “wicked” are used to describe her. In the line stating that Madame Sosostris “Is known to be the wisest woman in Europe,” (“The Burial of the Dead” 45) we can detect irony in “the wisest woman” and detachment in “is known to be.” Thus her fake wisdom, irrationality, lack of faith and replacement of an all-knowing God are the emphasized characteristics of such female fortune tellers. Madame Sosostris’s irrationality stands against the skepticism of her male client who seems more reasonable than her: he regretfully utters “Unreal city” (60) immediately after Sosostris’s description of the cards. The adjective “unreal” ridicules woman’s irrationality on the one hand and affirms man’s realistic vision on the other.

It is this connection with senselessness and simple-mindedness which justifies woman’s imprisonment at home and forbiddance from public activities. This misogynistic idea is conveyed in the text through the description of the new woman as artificial, unconventional and even immoral. In “A Game of Chess,” we come across two types of women who are described as artificial. The two women represent two different social classes: the nervous lady, who stands for upper middle-class women, and Lil, who represents the lower-class woman. The title of the section can reflect the social identities of both figures: the queens and pawns of the chess game may symbolize these two categories of women. However, despite their social differences, the two female figures seem to share the same character. Both of them lose their naturalness and acquire an artificial identity; Lil through her use of pills and abandonment of her “natural” motherly role and the lady through her her artificial appearance and bourgeois milieu.

The reasons behind woman’s desertion of her “natural” role can be inferred from the text through the reference to the working woman. The persona of the typist has a great significance since it is the archetype of the working woman. The typist becomes inhuman.

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2 New woman seems to men artificial or “unnatural” because she leaves her home which is seen in a normative culture as her natural place. The term “natural” here does not mean innate or biologically-bound but is rather related to a set of standards dictated by patriarchal societies.
because of the nature of her work; she loses her femininity and acquires automatism even in her sexual relations. She is not given a name, but rather identified with her profession which evidently influences her behavior at home. She is identified with her typewriter using the same automatic hand both at work and at home: “She smooths her hair with automatic hand” (255). She becomes a machine herself; she is “a worker named metonymically for the machine she tends, so merged with it, in fact, that she is called a ‘typist’ even at home” (North 98). Once again, woman is represented as unnatural because she escapes her private sphere to search for an artificial position in society. Just like Lil’s artificial pills, work has a bad impact on woman’s feminine character.

The whole text is based on disorder whether in terms of structure or themes. The disorder which characterizes the land can be read as the result of woman’s challenge of nature and reversal of sex roles. The poem, reflecting the state of the land, is almost void of male personae. The poem or the land becomes a free space for women while men appear to be absent from the scene. The characters of the poem’s world are mainly females; it is a womanized city, ruled by women. Therefore, it falls under a sexual misrule; it is an unreal city governed by Madame Sosostris; an irrational and unnatural world because women stand on the top. The infertile land depicted in the text is a topsy-turvy kingdom because “it is ruled (and may indeed have been magically created) by a magical woman, a kind of sorceress” (Gilbert 163). The city witnesses a spiritual decline since it has no God and no religious center and the poem is imbued with pictures of dead bodies and withered plants. Thus, the most stressed element in the text is “[t]he circular death-in-life of Madame Sosostris’s world” (Spurr 29).

In short, we may say that the representation of women in the text of TWL can be interpreted as pejorative. Woman is pictured as a mixture of evil, weakness, passivity and irrationality. All these characteristics are the results of identifying woman with her biology; she represents evil because her body leads to sin. Her body has a tempting power on males and can be used to distract them from their holy purposes. Through the female body, the way to sin is widely open. Yet, although woman’s body is seen at this level as a point of strength allowing her to manipulate man, it can associate her with physical weakness and passivity; woman is considered as physically vulnerable and sexually passive. Still in the same vein, the female body associates woman with the physical aspect of life, and thus links her with irrationality. Procreation also connects woman with reproduction and excludes her from any intellectual participation. The text can be said to focus on woman’s physical identity and deny
her identification with reason and involvement in art. The image of woman as a body is central in the poem and entails all the negative attributions to the female sex.

3. The Second Reading: The Positive Representation of Woman in TWL

The interpretation of woman as absent and passive is contaminated by the textual arguments that illustrate the prominent presence of women and their active roles in the poem. Instead of seeing woman as an object of desire and an object of art, we may extract details that show her rather as a subject with desire as well as a producing subject of art. In many cases, she appears wise and reasonable rather than hysterical and superstitious. The unnaturalness of woman suggested in the first reading is no longer considered as a negative feature but as a factor which gives women power to challenge the patriarchal system. Even the interpretation of women throughout the poem as temptresses and whores is reversed in this second possible reading: instead of considering them as immoral initiators in sexual matters, they are rather seen as victims of man’s savage desire; it is man who is judged as rapist, exploiter and betrayer. Moreover, the reference to myth plays an important role to read TWL as a text which advances a positive image of woman. In short, all the textual details which have been used to reinforce the negative social view to women are hereby interpreted as feminist features.

The first inviting feature in the poem is the prominence of its female characters. The world of TWL appears to be a womanized world where females outnumber males. Man seems to be absent from the scene and far from the center while the focus is put on women who become central characters. The domination of woman is also evident through the character of Madame Sosostris, the ruler of the land, who leads and guides men. Women are placed at the top of the social ladder while men are led to the bottom. Furthermore, the first character introduced in the poem is a woman, Marie, who is present in the section while her male cousin is absent; he is not identified by his name, but only referred to as “he.” Marie’s recollection of memories suggests that he only exists in memory. His absence may argue for the death of the male world, the change of centers and the culmination of the oppressive system. Marie’s scene may suggest a desire to put an end to patriarchy and give power to women, especially that the text refers to man’s cruelty and oppression.
The text of TWL voices woman and becomes a site for expressing and representing those who are silenced in the real world. The poem becomes a fictional fair world which is created to substitute for the real oppressive one. The plight of women is shown to be a common, human and universal issue through the poem’s multiple languages and different nationalities of its female characters (the German Marie and the British Lil). This idea of the universality of woman’s plight is central in the feminist theory; Michelle Rosaldo, for example, “argues that women are universally associated with the domestic, and men with the public domain and that this underlies the universal subordination of women” (Humm 229).

From a political point of view, feminists claim that the position of woman has deteriorated more and more with the capitalist system. When Marie introduces herself as German and not as Russian, the reader goes to the fact that the poem is concerned with the situation of woman in the capitalist world. Knowing that Marxist and materialist feminist theorists have explored the collaborative relation between capitalism and patriarchy, we may assume that “the systems of capitalism and patriarchy are mutually supportive” (The Dictionary of Feminist Theory 23). Feminists give two main forms of capitalist oppression: the sexual division of labor at home and in the field of production, and the historically specific organization of procreation and sexuality. TWL makes an assault on this dehumanizing and materialistic economic system because its oppressed female personae belong to capitalist rather than communist societies; it voices the suffering of women, their exploitation within the capitalist division of labor and their deprivation of an active presence in the public sphere.

In the poem, women are portrayed as active figures whether in implicit or explicit manner. In the light of the Grail legend framing the poem, the paralyzed and disabled Fisher King can be contrasted to the active females symbolized by the queens of the chess game that are moving in all directions. In the process of subverting the rules of the patriarchal system, the text presents the position of the two sexes through these symbols: the king may represent the current static position of man and the queens may stand for the new active role of woman. While the myth of the Fisher King remains in the background to indicate man’s absence and passivity, the queens of the chess game are brought to the foreground in the second section of the poem to emblematize the active and dynamic presence of women.

Still in mythical terms, the text’s reference to the metamorphosis of Philomel stresses the intelligence, mental capacities and artistic potentiality of such mythic female figures. The
reader goes back to the active role played by Philomel and her sister Proce to avenge Tereus when they feed him with his son’s meat. The intelligent reaction of the two sisters is even approved by the supernatural powers which save them from the hands of the tyrant. It is not only through revenge that Philomel proves powerful and clever, but also through her artistic achievement; Philomel’s silencing by Tereus stimulates her faculties and allows her to express her suffering in an artistic form. Harriet Davidson succinctly describes her story as “a paradigm of the simultaneously destructive and creative force of desire” (129). When Philomel gets the idea of representing a picture of her sufferings in a tapestry, her artistic power is embodied and “her web becomes a kind of writing, a dossier to defend her speechless flesh” (Ellmann 97). The allusion to Philomel can suggest that woman is intelligent and talented enough to be a producing subject of art and to be associated with intellectual activities in contradiction with what patriarchal societies have claimed.

The image of the active woman can also be detected in the figure of the rich lady in “A Game of Chess.” Not solely do the queens suggested from the title denote activity, but so does the queen-like persona of the section. The woman as a speaking and self-expressing subject is symbolized by the character of the rich lady whose voice dominates her conversation with her companion. Face to man’s silence, the lady convulses with words: “Speak to me. Why do you never speak. Speak” (112). Roles are reversed in the poem: while man becomes silent and inarticulate, woman is given a voice; she is no longer hushed but rather mature and effusive. Moreover, the description of the lady as unnatural or artificial suggests her defiance of the concept of “nature” as defined by the patriarchal system. Her make-up and artificial appearance are an expression of dissatisfaction with the traditional identification of woman as “the Angel in the House”; her unnaturalness reveals her spirit of challenge and her longing for changing woman’s miserable situation.

Besides, the lady’s refusal of submission and subordination becomes obvious when she expresses her sexual desire. She becomes desirously involved in her sexual affair: “I shall rush out as I am, and walk the street, / ‘With my hair down, so. What shall we do tomorrow?’” (132-33). These hallucinating words express the heat of the lady’s sexual desire, her celebration of her own corporeality and her search for a new subjectivity which would grant her with power and activity. The character of the lady makes the poem concern itself “not just with women as objects of desire, but also, with women as subjects with desires” (Davidson 127). In this statement, Davidson affirms that the image of woman as an object of
desire is also present in the poem, but I would say that even if the figures of the typist and the Thames daughter can be seen as objects of desire, this can be read as a positive feature in the representation of woman. It can be interpreted as a condemnation of the passive and submissive woman. Such figures could have been included in the text to criticize the passive sexual character of women or even to expose the negative repercussions of man’s sexual domination.

The poem seems to oppose the patriarchal division of sex roles and the confinement of woman into the institution of marriage and motherhood. Lil who is assigned the role of housework and child rearing can be compared to her husband who is a fighter, working in the public sphere. This division of tasks is the main cause of Lil’s unhappiness; her miserable conditions illustrate the aftermaths of the patriarchal system which traces the geographical frontiers of each sex and creates a gap in the couple life. The depiction of the female victimhood in the poem is less an index of female powerlessness than an indictment against the cruel patriarchal system.

Woman’s personality and intelligence can be greatly sensed in the second section of the poem. Reserved to women characters, “A Game of Chess” is a part which uncovers female cleverness and intellectual competencies. As a game, chess requires much reason and women seem to be apt to play it, especially that the rich lady is invited by her male companion to compete with him: “And we shall play a game of chess” (137). Her reason and intelligence are echoed in these lines: “It’s so elegant/ so intelligent” (129-30). The poem’s emphasis on woman’s rationality and brilliance defends her against the patriarchal prejudices which claim that woman’s biology makes her closer to irrationality and emotionality than reason.

TWL can be judged as a feminist work that supports women and condemns men. Throughout the poem, female figures occupy a high status whereas males are driven to lower positions. The text tries to subvert the patriarchal prejudices that promote the idea of female immorality by depicting woman as a victim of man’s desire rather than a seducer and temptress. In most of the sexual scenes, man is pictured as rapist. The instances of rape are symbolic, especially if we refer to Sunder Rajan’s definition of rape: “Literally, rape as the forcible penetration of the female body by the male sexual organ is the expression of male sexual domination and hence of patriarchy itself” (77). Therefore, rape stands for the violation
of woman’s humanity in addition to the manipulation of her body; it can be identified as a form of social and cultural violence too.

While referring to the title as well as the mythical background of the poem, we can trace back the causes of the wasting of the land. The Fisher King fell under a curse because, according to the myth, as described by Jessie Weston, he was “ensnared by the beauty of the daughter of the Pagan king of Norway, whom he has slain, he baptizes her, though she is still an unbeliever at heart, and makes her his wife, thus drawing the wrath of Heaven upon himself. Godpunishes him for his sin” (22). This significant part of the myth can be seen as the essence of the whole text of *TWL* since the title and the content of the poem are based on the myth of the Fisher King; it must be related to all the details of the legend. The cause of the curse, which involves male violence and cruelty towards women, is a kind of physical and social rape. Also, Philomel’s story stands as the best symbol of rape: according to the myth, Philomel is cruelly raped by her brother-in-law. The latter’s crime ends up in a curse and Philomel is transformed into a nightingale singing the human tragedy: “As though a window gave upon the Sylvan Scene/ The change of Philomel by the barbarous king/ So rudely forced [. . .]” (*TWL* 98-100).

There is an emphasis on man’s cruelty starting from the first line of the poem and going through the characterization of its male personae. The opening line of the poem “April is the cruellest month” (1) associates April, the symbol of the season of reproduction, with cruelty; it becomes cruel because of the cruelty and violence of man. Like the clerk, the male companion of the Thames daughter seems to rape her by making her supine on the floor and placing her by force in a surrender position. The man responds to his inner appeal to sin but promptly admits his own brutality; “the ‘he’ seems passive in his violence, weeping at his own barbarity” (Ellmann 97). Other male personae like Sweeney, the sex-seeker, may stand for man’s cruelty and beastliness too. In the poem, the emphasis on rape could be read as an indirect attack against the aggressive patriarchal system which abuses women both physically and socially.

Man’s selfishness can lead to the physical and symbolic death of woman. Lil is objectified by her husband, she has to use pills and make abortions but not disturb his mood. Man’s sexual egotism causes the destruction of woman’s health and the loss of her femininity; Lil becomes “unhealthy and now perhaps barren, directly from the effects of the abortifacient
but indirectly from the effects of being used by a male” (Bentley 44). The typist partner is also depicted as exploiter since he seems “incapable of forming a relationship because of the selfish obsession with the mere gratification of physical appetite” (Swarbrick 11). Therefore, the poem’s heterosexual relationships prove to be sterile, frigid and unproductive because of man’s selfish, unfeeling, and improper sexual behavior. As a sex-seeker, man abuses his wife’s health, then taunts her and rejects her. Albert shows his revulsion at his wife’s appearance: “He said, I swear, I can’t bear to look at you” (146). His inhumanity and ingratitude are emphasized also ironically in the phrase “poor Albert” (147). His selfishness and cruelty are more perceived in his likely betrayal of his wife because of his sexual instincts: “And if you don’t give it him, there’s others will, I said” (149). The poem appears to criticize the male’s inclination to beastliness, his exploitation of and ingratitude to women.

Therefore, an attack on male sovereignty and a revelation of the signs of sexual inequality are obvious in the text; however, this does not echo a call for the creation of another center or a world in which the female dominates. Although the text defends woman and disapproves of man’s supremacy, it preserves an egalitarian spirit; it rather advances the extermination of the binary thinking of the patriarchal system. The relationship between man and woman in the poem fails because it is unbalanced where one of the two sexes dominates, the way that the rich lady, Albert, and the clerk do. If complementarity and serene coexistence do not characterize the relation between the two sexes, the lack of communication, frigidity of emotions, and physical and spiritual sterility will prevail and the social chasm will never be bridged. The call for a harmonious and balanced life uniting the two sexes together is embodied in the symbolic persona of the androgynous Tiresias, the mythic figure who stands for the social space which should encompass and celebrate the two biological sexes in an equal way.

The fact of interpreting the text as a work which advances a positive view of woman and which shares with feminism some principles can be justified not only thematically, but also stylistically. Knowing that it is French feminists who rely on the texts’ modes of writing in their critical analysis and search for feminist features, we can examine the poem’s style from a French feminist perspective. French feminists reveal the use of a new linguistic code or what they call “feminine writing” in some male or female-authored texts. According to them, the feminist writer speaks from the Imaginary Order where he violates the signifying code of the Father and creates his private code of language. The writer’s desiring self for the
mother is unwilling to die; it resists castration and remains attached to the mother’s body, the source of the language used by the writer. For them, the genre of the work is substantial and poetry is seen as a freer and more convenient space than other genres for writers who produce the feminine. If we consider TWL as a multiplicity of genres, joining poetry with fiction, narrative passages, dramatic monologues and tragedies, this can be itself a sign of feminine writing.

Feminine writing transcends the inherent traditions of literature. Conventionally, grammar, semantics and syntax were highly respected according to a previously imposed linguistic code. Male writers used to abide by a stable and fixed system of meaning, aligning themselves with the Phallus which stabilizes language. The traditional male sentence strictly conforms to grammatical and syntactic rules, clearly carries fixed meanings and is measurably put in ready-made molds. Moreover, the traditional use of language has been based on a strict binary thinking. According to Cixous, this kind of writing is marked within a Symbolic Order that is structured through “dual hierarchical oppositions” (101).

In the poem, the violation of grammatical and punctuation rules, and the presence of incomplete sentences indicate a challenge of the traditional mode of writing. Additionally, the indirectness of style, symbolism, figurative language and metaphors help us establish the connection between the style of the poem and feminine writing. The use of parody is similarly indicative since feminists see it as an effective way of subversion. All of these signs announce a break with the traditional code of language and the establishment of a new private code.

Conclusion

Dedicated to the study of the female representation in the text, the present paper attempts to show that the image of woman is mobile and unstable since it can be interpreted in opposite ways. In the first reading of the text, negative images of woman are extracted and studied in the five sections of the poem. The portraying of woman as whores and prostitutes are embodied in the personae of the typist, the Thames daughter and Mrs Porter. Irrationality is attributed to woman through the figures of the nervous lady in “A Game of Chess,” naive Lil and pub lady, and superstitious Madame Sosostris. These portraits reinforce the negative social view of the female body as a danger threatening purgation and piety on the one hand and as an emblem of woman’s frail biology and innate passivity on the other.
Contradictorily, the second reading attempts to show the feminist features of the text by including a positive view of the poem’s female figures. The rich lady in the second section is interpreted as more rational and sensible than her male partner. The figures of the typist, the Thames daughter and Philomel are not depicted as innately passive objects of desire but rather as victims of a ferocious male system and of man’s egotism and brutality. This supportive portrayal of woman in the poem is paralleled with a negative representation of man whose untamed instincts and inhuman character lead him to the sexual abuse and psychological harassment of woman; he is portrayed as rapist, exploiter, and betrayer. Not only does the content of the poem bring about this second reading, but so does the use of a feminine mode of writing in the text.

My approach of the text is based on what Derrida calls ‘close reading’, by means of which the logical incongruities inherent in the textual structure are brought to the surface and their deconstructive role is revealed. The text is open to the infinity of playing, and its closure is shown to be illusory because of the mobility of meaning and instability of the signification process. Therefore, there is no central reading which would limit the text’s free play and close the play off within the framework of the structure. On a deconstructive basis, the reader can never reach an end or establish a compromise. The text’s different interpretations place us within the Derridean pattern of reading where he moves among the undecidables of a text and affirms the infinity of play and the multiplicity of meanings. Therefore, deciphering truth and escaping play become an illusion in the analysis of Eliot’s poem. Following the law of contamination which states that there is no way out, the reader cannot make a real choice. Without ever reaching an end, reading should take into account various itineraries where the text is an open system, and the reader is part of it.

Works Cited


