**British Writing 1900-1950**

**Assignment 1: Critical Analysis**

**‘**The Waste land’ is a poem concerning the tensions between ‘proper’ (Davidson 122) and ‘improper’(Davidson 122). For Davidson the ‘proper’ side of the poem is its ‘scholarly apparatus’ (122) and a ‘respect for tradition.’ (122) Whereas the ‘improper’ becomes apparent in the paradox of this, a mere ‘lack of respect for tradition’ (122) evident in Eliot’s poetic and formal methods but also his ‘fascination with mutation, degradation and fragmentation.’ (Davidson 122)

Overarching thematic ideas in this extract range from this very theory of ‘proper’ and ‘improper’. Eliot blends traditional values and myth making alongside feelings of sexual desire, a land losing its presence and a fear of the modern world. All of which make up not only ‘The Fire Sermon’ but the integrity of the poem.

The opening scene of the section titled ‘The Fire Sermon’ (Eliot, line 174) depicts a landscape of complete desolation and ruin. The ‘River’s tent is broken’ (Eliot, line 173) therefore a sense of security and protection is broken. A ‘river’ is normally an image for renewal and life but is subverted by Eliot displaying a stagnant land that is left before the narrator’s eyes.

As the passage continues the river allusion quickly transforms into an extended metaphor. The river a traditional symbol of regeneration, life and fertility, quickly becomes the opposite in Eliot’s poem; a ‘dull canal’ (Eliot, line 189). This change in colour from an idyllic blue to a dissatisfactory ‘dull' (Eliot, line 189) is not only suggestive of the land decaying and rotting in front of the narrator’s eyes, but the life that modernism proposes. It is in this moment that a ‘reader [is] likely to come away from the poem bewildered by the […] shifting tones of the poem’(Davidson 128) as there is no clear distinction between the narrator’s viewpoint and Eliot’s more critical voice, they simply ‘mutate into each other.’ (Davidson 122).

Furthermore, the narrator’s comment ‘I was fishing in the dull canal’ (Eliot, line 189) resonates with the wider grail mythology used throughout the poem. Firstly, by ‘fishing’ (Eliot, line 189) this hints at the legend of the Fisher King. As the reader is made aware, the loss of this king’s fertility caused drought and infertility in his lands.

The narrator is ‘musing upon the king’s wreck’ (Eliot, line 191) echoing the death of the Fisher King, and consequently the slow decay of the land this myth becomes an explanation as to why London is seen as stagnant. Davidson comments that Eliot’s style appears to be ‘valorising myth over history’ (123) as the Fisher King is given a power over any other historical event or monarchy. Eliot implying that the only way to make progress in modern life is to believe a fictitious character. Eliot’s ‘passionate and paradoxical’ (Davidson 131) creation of myth ‘leads only to the continuation of [modern] life in all its variousness, confusions, tragedies, and improper desires’ and not as a new way of life. (Davidson 131)

The river is described as lifeless by listing items it doesn’t possess. There are ‘no empty bottles, sandwich papers, silk handkerchiefs, cardboard boxes [or] other testimony of summer nights.’ ( Eliot, lines 177-178). This asyndetic listing describes the abundance of objects that a person may consider as litter, but for the narrator this vast array of objects would confirm a human presence. The listing also heightens the pace of this line, adding to the lyrical nature of this extract due to the presence of a ‘song’ ( Eliot, line 176) but also adds liveliness, the listing of such objects is filling the void of the lack of human interaction.

Davidson notes that the poem returns again and again to ‘“improper” sexual desire temptation, and surrender and their often tragic consequences.’ (131) Not only has the land degenerated but the fertility of human population has ‘departed’ (Eliot, line 175) also.

The fire Sermon follows a ‘proper’ contextual link to Shakespeare’s *Hamlet* in the character of Ophelia, who critics claim her suicide was caused by pregnancy out of wedlock. This comment is heightened by Eliot as The Fire Sermon appears to follow suite. Ophelia’s death due to pregnancy resigns in the background, and ‘the nymphs’ become subject to this allusion in the foreground. ‘Their friends, departed’ (Eliot, line 180) with no ‘addresses’(Eliot, line 180), suggesting a lack of paternal support in the alluded pregnancy of the ‘departed’ (Eliot, line 175) prostitutes. The land has lost all hope of fertility due to the myth of the Fisher King but literally in a sense of the female population, and sexual industry leaving London.

The narrator also claims to hear the ‘sound of horns and motors’ (Eliot, line 197) the immediate sound of modernity - motor cars and their horns. The narrator is able to hear them ‘from time to time’ (Eliot, line 197) suggesting they are in the distance and not important to him, or he is unable to escape from their sound which rings ‘from time to time’ (Eliot, line 197) on repeat in his mind; modernity is inescapable.

Yet the reader is told in Eliot’s notes ‘horns and motors’ (Line 197) is a subversion of ‘a noise of horns and hunting’ taken from the *Parliament of Bees*. A story alluding to sexual desire, a picturesque scene of the Goddess of chastity bathing with her nymphs. The repetition of the ‘nymphs’ highlights Eliot’s ‘constant return to sexual tragedy’ (Davidson 122) but also represents the corrupt fertility of the wasteland.

Eliot’s narrator is able to hear signs of modernity, but represses it in order to attempt to rejuvenate the ‘brown land’ ( Eliot, line 175) and discover meaning as the Fisher King demands.

Moreover the original sound of ‘horns and hunting’ is vital to the story of the *Parliament of Bees* as the character ‘Actaeon was changed to a stag and was hunted to death.’ (Eliot, note 5, line 195) Eliot uses the ‘scholarly apparatus’ (Davidson 122) to inform the reader of multiple readings of the text, this ‘focused critical attention on the scholarly sources and allusions encourage[s] the kind of source hunting that began to take over readings of the poem.’ (Davidson 124)

Eliot reflecting upon how the reader is ‘hunting’ meaning to ‘death' in the poem. He may not have ‘ intended [the notes] to be taken so seriously and may even have been playing an elaborate and highly successful practical joke on the academic profession’ (Davidson 124). This unusual formal arrangement of the poem highlights not only the literary deviation from earlier traditional texts, Eliot creating a style of his own, but highlights the tension of the poem further. If even the ‘proper scholarly apparatus’ (Davidson 122) can be regarded as an ‘improper’ (Davidson 122) joke upon the reader then there is no clear boundary between them.

Is Eliot regarding tradition as ‘proper’ or is his writing attempting to suggest the two categories are more fluid than literary critics suggest? The river a symbolic image for this fluidity. In this case, ‘The Waste Land’ becomes no clearer whether the reader decides to take Eliot’s notes on board or not. There is a paradoxical connection between the epic myth of the Fisher King and the realistic scene of a decaying London and that is what makes ‘The Waste Land’ particularly open to different interpretations.’ ( Davidson 122.)

Citations:

Davidson, Harriet. ‘Improper Desire: Reading *The Waste Land*.’ *The Cambridge Companion to T.S. Eliot,* edited by A. David Moody, Cambridge University Press,1994, pp.121-131.

Eliot, T.S. ‘The Waste Land.’ 1922. *The Norton Anthology of Poetry. Fifth Edition.* Ed. Margaret Ferguson *et al.* New York: Norton, 2005. Print, pp 2535-2536.