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The Loss and Degeneration in T. S. Eliot's *The Waste Land*

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In his reading of *The Waste Land*, Philip Sicker points out: “The poem is about a sexual failure which signifies a modern spiritual failure. This failure is customarily associated with an emasculating wound suffered by an archetypal male, the Fisher King, who appears in various avatars within the poem”(420). Indeed, as Sicker points out, there is a variety of sexual implications in *The Waste Land*, and these sexual implications are associated with the sense of the loss of a part of the body.* The sense of the physical loss becomes a controlling metaphor in *The Waste Land*, signifying a sexual failure, degeneration, and ultimately the death of civilization.

Eliot opens the poem with a strong sense of degeneration:

April is the cruellest month, breeding
Lilacs out of the dead land, mixing
Memory and desire, stirring
Dull roots with spring rain.

Spring is supposed to be the season of renewal and rebirth. New leaves sprout out, trees blossom, and animals wake up from their hibernation after a long and severe winter. However, Eliot reverses this traditional concept of season. “Dull roots” in the dead land will not grow and bloom. F. R. Leavis connects this reversed meaning of April with the sexual sterility of the modern waste land, and says: “In the modern Waste Land, ‘April is the cruellest month, breeding / Lilacs out of the dead land’, but bringing no quickening to the human spirit. Sex here is sterile, breeding not life and fulfillment but disgust, accidia and unanswerable

question”(93). This sense of degeneration dominates the entire atmosphere of the poem. In this research note, I will focus only on the first section, “The Burial of the Dead,” and see how the degeneration theme is expressed in this section.

The possible danger of physical loss in sledding foreshadows the sense of degeneration in the first section. The speaker’s fear of the physical loss is expressed in his childhood experience when he sledded down a mountain slope:

My cousin’s, he took me out on a sled,
And I was frightened. He said, Marie,
Marie, hold on tight. And down we went. (14-16)

These lines not only foreshadow the speaker’s physical loss but also link to his later experience with the hyacinth girl in the second stanza. The hyacinth girl with her hair wet and arms full of flowers become an earth-mother figure, signifying sexuality and fecundity. However, having lost his speech and eyesight, the speaker cannot respond to the sexuality of the hyacinth girl:

…, I could not
Speak, and my eyes failed, I was neither
Living nor dead, and I knew nothing. (38-40)

Here Eliot clearly associates physical loss with the degeneration motif. Elizabeth Drew also points out the speaker’s physical paralysis, sexual failure, and subsequent loss of creative power as follows:

The Hyacinth garden brings the reminder of a fertility festival; the picture of the girl that of spring and abundance and an exquisite promise. But the conclusion is the torture of a vision seen and felt, with the power of creative response, of speech, movement, interpretation, withheld. (70)

As the flower of hyacinth symbolizes fertility, the Hyacinth garden is

supposed to be a fertile garden. However, the original meaning of the Hyacinth garden is reversed into the sterile garden, just as the fertile season of spring is reversed into the cruelest and deadly season in the first stanza.

The degeneration motif, represented by the failed vision of the speaker in the Hyacinth garden, is transformed into the Madam Sosostri's failed vision and feeling, caused by the bad cold. The suffocating world of Madam Sosostri, without any feeling of real sense, reflects not only the sterile modern world but also the world of the Tarot cards which Madam Sosostri uses. The symbols and figures of the Tarot cards, derived from ancient and Egyptian myth, were originally associated with fertile rites. However, a negative metamorphosis takes place in these figures, and myth becomes heavily satiric, suggesting degeneration. The Phoenician Sailor, the fertility god whose image is thrown into the sea for the sake of resurrection and rebirth, has eyes of lifeless pearls. These eyes obviously indicate his failure of vision, which is one of the manifestations of the castration complex in Freud's term. Metaphorically castrated, the Phoenician Sailor loses his power of fertility and renewal, and only represents "Fear of death by water"(55) without the hope of resurrection. Belladonna becomes a poisonous woman, as the belladonna signifies a poisonous flower, and the man with three staves becomes the Fisher King, as Eliot's notes indicate: "The Man with Three Staves I associate, quite arbitrarily, with the Fisher King himself" [Eliot's note]. According to Jessie L. Weston, the Fisher King is "suffering from extreme old age, health, and youth"(14). Charles Moorman also sees the Fisher King as "a symbolic representative of the life principle whose maimed condition indicates a failure in his virility; his traditional wound in the thigh becomes a symbolic castration"(197). And the Hanged Man becomes, as Eliot also notes, a hooded figure in Part V who haunts the exhausted

explorers of the Antarctic. All of these figures in the cards are closely associated with the degeneration motif.

The first section of the poem which started with a strong sense of degeneration, represented by “the dead land” and “Dull roots,” ends with the world of death, symbolized by the corpse planted in the garden in the fourth stanza. Here again, Eliot connects the degeneration motif with the failure of vision and feeling:

Under the brown fog of a winter dawn,
A crowd flowed over London Bridge, so many,
Sighs, short and infrequent, were exhaled,
And each man fixed his eyes before his feet. (61-65)

The brown fog shuts out the vision of crowd, and their views are limited to their feet. This suffocating world is the world of Madam Sosostriis. In a sense, they are metaphorically blinded in dense fog. Eliot also refers the line: “Sighs, short and infrequent, were exhaled” to Dante’s *Inferno* iv, 25-27: “Here, so far as I could tell by listening, / There was no lamentation except sighs / which caused the eternal air to tremble” [Eliot’s note]. B. S. Southam interprets this sigh as : “the sighs are those of the people who lived on earth virtuously but unbaptized, before the coming of Christ. Now they exist with desire but without the hope of seeing God”(77). Having lost their eyesight and cut off from God, they haunt the “Unreal City” like ghosts. The sense of sterility and degeneration culminates in the lines: “That corpse you planted last year in your garden, / Has it begun to sprout?”(71-72) These lines are directly related to the “Dull roots” of the dead land in the beginning part of “The Burial of the Dead” in the poem.

To Eliot, as we can see in the first section, “The Burial of the Dead,” the modern world is a Waste Land, symbolized by the loss of parts of the body, namely, the castration complex, which maims the creative power

and brings about degeneration. Throughout the poem, Eliot uses the image of physical loss over and over to focus his theme on degeneration and subsequent death of civilization.

※ Sigmund Freud regards the loss of a part of the body as a metaphor for castration complex. It seems that Eliot takes this theory and applies it in his poem. (Ref. *The Standard Edition of The Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*. Vol.IX)

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