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Abortion and Body Politics: A Feminist Reading of the Lil Episode in *The Waste Land*

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As a milestone work of modernist poetry, T. S. Eliot's *The Waste Land* presents alienated gender relations that serve as an important entry point for analyzing the spiritual crisis of modernity. This study employs Foucault's theory of body politics and draws on the critical perspective of French feminist theorist Hélène Cixous to reread the abortion narrative of Lil in the second part "A Game of Chess". By analyzing the patriarchal mechanisms imposed on female bodies, this paper examines how this female figure is positioned under patriarchal power's gaze. The research indicates that Lil's bodily trauma is not merely a product of power discipline but also a radical rejection of reproductive obligations. In women's resistance to patriarchal oppression, their bodies become sites of both suffering and struggle. This analysis expands the dimensions of feminist criticism regarding *The Waste Land* while offering insights for contemporary gender politics. As the process of civilization continues to objectify female bodies, a critical reflection on biopolitics becomes an essential path out of the spiritual wasteland.

Keywords: The Waste Land, body politics, feminism

Introduction

T. S. Eliot and *The Waste Land*

T. S. Eliot (1888-1965), a central figure in Anglo-American modernist literature, produced works deeply intertwined with the cultural transformation of the early 20th century. Born in St. Louis, Missouri, he studied at Harvard University (1906-1914), where he engaged extensively with philosophy, Indian thought, and Sanskrit—an intellectual background that later shaped his poetic vision. After moving to Europe in 1914, he was championed by Ezra Pound, whose editorial guidance helped bring *The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock* (1915) to publication, signaling the arrival of a new modernist voice.

Published in 1922, *The Waste Land* employs fragmented narration to reflect the spiritual crisis of post-World War I Western civilization, becoming a literary manifesto for the "Lost Generation" (Sicker, 1984). Eliot's later turn toward religious themes, particularly in *Four Quartets* (1943), earned him the Nobel Prize in Literature in 1948. His personal life—especially his troubled first marriage to Vivienne Haigh-Wood and his late, happier second marriage—also informs the representation of gender relations in his work.

The Waste Land is widely regarded as a landmark work in western literature. Pound hailed it as a new paradigm for English and American poetry and one of the most representative works of modernism (Bartky, 1990). Its dense imagery, cross-cultural intertextuality, and dialogic structure grant significant space to female

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figures. These characters, rooted in both myth and lived experience, form a crucial framework for the poem. Therefore, this study selects the Lil episode as a case, combining Foucault's body politics with French feminist theory represented by Cixus, to uncover the gendered power mechanisms embedded within the poem.

Literature Review

Feminist interpretations of *The Waste Land* have gradually moved from the margins to the center of Eliot criticism. Existing scholarship often highlights the tendency to objectify female figures and neglect their subjectivity. Early critiques either focused on the text's alleged misogyny or remained at the level of typological character analysis (Huang, 2005), often neglecting the dialectical interplay between bodily trauma and power structures.

Western scholarship began relatively early. Gordon (1977) argued that while Eliot drew heavily on Western female archetypes, his portrayals largely lacked subjective depth. These figures fall into two categories: mythological women such as Cleopatra, Dido, and Ophelia, who are cast as sacrificial victims of passion or symbols of frustrated desire (Farzana, 2015); and quotidian post-war women depicted through trivial domestic detail. For example, Brooks (1939) interpreted the hyacinth girl as a symbol of lost innocence and absent redemption, yet such readings rarely engage with the structural violence of patriarchy. Later feminist criticism shifted toward the politics of female discourse, examining mechanisms of silencing. Woodward (2013) noted the systematic erasure of female speech, reflecting the marginalization of women's subjectivity. Hassan and Hussein (2015) emphasized how patriarchal systems reinforce gender subordination via cultural symbols and legal frameworks.

Chinese scholarship has shown a distinct critical orientation in their feminist interpretations of *The Waste Land*. Wang (2009) argues that Eliot's texts exhibit misogynistic tendencies, where women were deprived of autonomy and all positive traits. Female figures simply became the victims of the loss of identity in modern society. Wang (2013) proposes binary interpretive models to explain the dual positioning of female roles. However, such interpretations often rely on the existing theoretical frameworks of the West, leading to insufficient attention to potential narrative spaces for resistance within the text.

Some scholars have attempted to break away with the monolithic framework of misogyny, pointing out that women in Eliot's works are not entirely passive and can be interpreted as more multidimensional "New Woman" figures. In general, domestic researches still mainly focus on critical readings. Therefore, this study believes that the multiple connotations of these female figures and their connection to the poem's overall structure need to be further explored.

Theoretical Framework

Body Politics

In feminist theory, the body has become a central concept. French philosopher Michel Foucault posits that the body is not merely a biological medium but is also subject to political and legal constraints, serving as the site upon which modern power operates (Foucault, 1977, pp. 136-138). He pointed that since the classical age, the body has gradually become the object and target of power. The power is executed through a subtle yet highly efficient policy. The management of time, space, and activity serves to mold a body that is both docile and useful, a "docile body" (Foucault, 1977, pp. 136-138). Body is essentially a text, and its flexibility makes it an object that can be disciplined and inscribed. From the 19th century onward, power techniques became gentler. Explicit

physical penalties were supplanted by less visibly violent mechanisms. Institutions such as prisons, military camps, factories, and schools have emerged as the primary sites, all converging on the goal of producing docile bodies. Judith Butler extends this perspective to the field of gender, arguing that female body is particularly subjected to the disciplinary mechanisms of compulsory heterosexuality (Butler, 1993). Through the repetitive performance of gender norms, the body is inscribed with specific social expectations and cultural mandates, thereby incorporating women into a rigid regime of gender order. In this sense, the body is a nexus of power relations and a carrier of discursive traces.

Building upon his analysis of power, Foucault further develops the concept of *biopower*, to describe the new modality of modern power operations. He delineates two primary forms of biopower: First, it exercises disciplinary power over the individual body, treating the body as a machine. Through the meticulous management of time, spatial distribution, and control of activities, power seeks to maximize the body's utility and docility. This form of power permeates institutions such as the military, the workshop, and the hospital. Second, biopower aims to regulate the reproductive capacity and intervene the overall life processes of population. The ultimate goal of disciplining is to the overall control of the group's biological process. Through interventions in childbirth, healthcare, and demographic strategies, power manages human fertility and the quality of life. This shift marks a transition from mere subjugation of the individual body to the governance of populations, establishing the regulation of life as the core mechanism of modern power operations.

Eliot's representation of female body resonates strongly with this framework. Eliot likewise treats the body as a text inscribed with traces of competing forces. In *The Waste Land*, women's physical experiences, emotional traumas, and reproductive fates are not merely private expressions; they function as microcosms of the post-war European cultural crisis. These aspects will be analyzed in detail through close textual analysis in Section 3 of this paper.

French Feminism

When discussing feminism, Simone de Beauvoir remains an indispensable reference. As a pioneering French feminist, Beauvoir advocated for abortion rights and comprehensive gender equality. Her seminal work *The Second Sex* (1949) is widely regarded as the foundation of modern feminist thought. She asserts that "one is not born, but rather becomes, a woman" (Beauvoir, 2010, p. 283), drawing attention to the distinction between biological sex and socially constructed gender, as well as the interaction between natural functions and social roles. Beauvoir grounds women's inequality in the reality of sexual difference and identifies patriarchy as the primary culprit for women's subordination. She contends that women have historically been constructed as the "Other", in other words, as the subordinate counterpart to the male subject. Women were systematically deprived of subjectivity and moral responsibility. This concept became the core tenet of subsequent French feminist thought.

From the 1960s onward, the women's movement and rise of feminism deepened societal critique of patriarchal culture and consolidated progressive gender consciousness. By the late 1980s, the movement appeared to have secured a victory, with society celebrating the ideal of the superwoman who could successfully balance career and family. However, this superficial triumph masked persistent structural inequalities, feminism diverged into two orientations: One strand advocated equality through the elimination of gender difference; another insisted that female liberation must be pursued on the basis of recognition of difference. The latter profoundly shaped French feminist theories represented by Hélène Cixous, Luce Irigaray, and Julia Kristeva. Deeply influenced by Lacanian psychoanalysis, Derridean deconstruction, and Foucaultian power theory, this school of

thought is characterized by a high degree of theoretical abstraction. It focuses on the deconstruction of patriarchal order through language, philosophy, and psychoanalytic critique.

This study primarily draws upon Cixous's perspective. In her *The Laugh of the Medusa* (1976), she utilizes the language of patriarchy, arguing that the only way to displace male domination is to construct a feminine writing (*écriture feminine*). Cixous posits that women have long been silenced under male gaze, forced into silence as a form of compliance. For Cixous, feminine writing is a revolutionary practice aimed at subverting patriarchal language and order. Her concept challenges the foundations of male authority by insisting that women must write, must write themselves, and must use their bodies to give expression to their own thoughts (Cixous, 1976). In her opinion, female body is always objectified, gazed upon, and judged to satisfy male desire; it is never as something that belongs to woman herself. Cixous emphasizes using the position of the "Other" as a weapon to reclaim bodily sovereignty through writing. Consequently, this theoretical insight highly resonates with Foucault's body politics. Feminine writing also became a frequently cited argument in feminist criticism. Notably, Cixous refrains from giving a clear definition of feminine writing. She believes it is always close to the present moment, always in progress, and never truly finished. As she puts it, "Not only can we not define feminine writing today, but we never will be able to. It cannot be turned into a theory, sealed up, or translated into fixed rules" (Cixous, 1976, p. 878).

This open and flexible attitude leaves ample space for later scholars to borrow and develop the concept from diverse angles.

However, this study must treat Cixous's perspective with caution. According to her view, the subject of feminine writing must be biologically female. Even if a woman writes, should she employ traditional language and narrative patterns, her work cannot be considered feminine writing, as it remains entrenched with the patriarchal order. Likewise, any text authored by a man belongs inherently belongs to masculine writing, regardless of whether its content addressed women. As a male writer, T. S. Eliot inevitably situates *The Waste Land* within masculine inscription.

Therefore, a clear methodological explanation is required. This study does not claim that Eliot engages in feminine writing. Rather, it treats Cixous's theory as a critical lens. Specifically, it draws on her pivotal insight regarding "body as resistance" to explore how Lil's abortion narrative allows traces of authentic female experience through a patriarchal text. Lil's bodily experience opens a rupture, creating the possibility of the body as a place of resistance. In short, this research employs Foucault's theory of body politics as its analytical framework, while borrowing Cixous's insights to offer a new way of reinterpreting *The Waste Land*.

The Symbolic Writing of the Body

Patriarchal Discipline

The female figures presented in *The Waste Land* stem not only from Eliot's observation of reality, but also from his reflections on the post-war European crisis. Through depictions of women across different classes, the poem reveals their lived conditions within distorted relationships. Notably, before Ezra Pound's editorial revisions, the second section was originally called "In the Cage". This title clearly suggests that women are trapped in some hopeless situation. The final title, "A Game of Chess", further highlights women's passive role in gender relations, comparing them to chess pieces controlled by invisible rules.

Eliot first depicts an unnamed upper-class woman. He meticulously describes her luxurious surroundings—candle holders, jewels, perfume, ivory. Yet this material abundance fails to compensate for her spiritual emptiness.

"I think we are in rats' alley" (Eliot, 1922, l.115), this sudden line shatters the illusion of prosperity, exposing the character's inner desolation and anxiety. Through elaborate descriptions of décor, the poet subtly reveals the woman's objectified existence. Like the luxuries around her, she becomes part of this exquisite cage—simultaneously owner and owned. This reflects a deep contradiction in modern society. Material reconstruction after the war did not bring spiritual renewal. In Eliot's portrayal of upper-class life, women use consumption to avoid fundamental questions about the meaning of life. Jewels and perfume stop them from thinking about meaning, and construct a refined imprisonment for people. Women are like caged birds, gradually losing the ability to perceive reality.

The "synthetic perfume" (Eliot, 1922, l.87) mentioned in the poem carries rich symbolic meaning. It represents an artificial and disordered reality. This manufactured scent creates a hallucinatory world that makes women internalize their objectification, while simultaneously serving as a tool to seduce men. By establishing such material symbols, men position themselves as the creators, permanently fixing women in the secondary sex. Women are locked into the status of the "Other", their value entirely dependent on male recognition. "Speak to me. Why do you never speak. Speak./What are you thinking of? What thinking? What?/I never know what you are thinking. Think" (Eliot, 1922, ll.112-114).

This desperate questioning reveals the deep crisis within upper-class marriage. On one level, it implies the woman's boredom and emptiness; on a deeper level, it represents her failed struggle to establish self-identity. Patriarchal norms lead to male superiority, and this power imbalance enables men to ignore their wives' anxiety and desire. As a result, female voices become ineffective, turning women into hollow people.

This kind of control through language damages the basic structure of relationships and reflects a broader crisis. Women cannot articulate themselves or participate in reciprocal dialogue. When government power and gender rules work together, the female body becomes both a disciplined object and a tool for power production (Foucault, 1977, p. 136). Eliot implies that this imbalance in gender relations is key to the spiritual wasteland of modern civilization.

The Controlled Female Body

Body control refers to the cultural and political domination of the body. In the past, people often associated it with physical punishments carried out by the state. However, Foucault points out that modern power no longer relies on visible violence. Instead, it operates through subtle methods of body politics, aiming to shape "docile bodies" (Foucault, 1977, p. 135). If upper-class women suffer spiritual imprisonment, then the narrative of Lil, a working-class woman, endures direct bodily control.

In this part, the Lil episode unfolds through pub gossip. This casual setting conceals the structural violence. Lil's female friends act as supporters of patriarchal rules. They insist that Lil must please her husband by getting herself "some teeth and a nice set" (Eliot, 1922, ll.144-145). All of this is predicated on the husband's needs: "he wants a good time. And if you don't give it him, there's others will" (Eliot, 1922, ll.148-149). Even if Lil dislikes this, her friends tell her to put up with it. Lil's own desires are irrelevant. In the special context of post-World War I Europe, female bodies were further treated as compensation for male trauma. With massive male casualties, surviving men's needs became a social priority. Women's bodies were reduced to compensation for male trauma. Reproduction was framed as duty. The issue of birth control in the early 20th century reinforces the lack of female autonomy. Historical studies show that lower-class women often lacked access to proper contraception and had to rely on illegal drugs or dangerous methods to end pregnancies (Beauvoir, 2010).

Lil resorts to abortifacient drugs after bearing five children, but this seriously damaged her health. When her friend said she looked older than her husband, Lil replied, “It’s them pills I took, to bring it off”. To her friends, Lil was “a proper fool” for doing this (Eliot, 1922, ll.159-162). They saw her actions as a violation of social and gender norms. In this way, everyday gossip becomes an informal site of discipline, where patriarchal standards are naturalized as common sense. Neither her husband nor her friends cared about her own will or health; they simply viewed childbirth as a woman’s natural duty. Marriage thus turns into institutionalized sexual oppression and reproductive slavery, and Lil’s body becomes docile, an object meant to satisfy male desire.

This narrative strongly echoes Foucault’s biopolitics. In modern society, the body is not merely a tool that restricts individual freedom, but an object manipulated by political power, including the state, governmental apparatus, and ideology. The female body is bound to reproductive obligation through medical, moral, and legal discourses (Foucault, 1978, p. 147). By normalizing and shaping “docile bodies”, society ensures their adaptation to systemic demands. When the body is reduced to a unit of labor, its subjectivity is effectively erased (Foucault, 1977, p. 139). Yet even here, resistance emerges. Lil’s abortion—however destructive—is a refusal of imposed maternity, exposing cracks in patriarchal discipline.

Silent Resistance

Silence as a Strategy of Resistance

As discussed previously, Lil is denied bodily and never speaks directly in the poem; her narrative is entirely mediated through the gossip of her friends. Within the discursive structure maintained by these women, her acts of resistance appear meaningless and are even dismissed as foolish. The female body, disciplined by the social discourse system, sees its subjectivity dissolved into an appendage of male desire. However, this very narrative of silence constitutes a Foucauldian strategy of resistance.

Foucault emphasizes that the mechanics of power penetrates society like a capillary network (Foucault, 1980, p. 99). However, he also argues that power relations and resistance are inseparable, “Where there is power, there is resistance” (Foucault, 1982, p. 221). Lil’s abortion itself disrupts the biopolitical order. By choosing to terminate her pregnancy, Lil implicitly resists compulsory reproduction. Although this resistance is not expressed in language, it is more powerful than any verbal declaration. Taking her body as a battlefield, Lil defends the most basic right to female autonomy. This reading enters into dialogue with Cixous’s theory of écriture féminine. Cixous argues that women have long existed as objects within a phallocentric discourse. Patriarchal language is castrating; it places women in the silence of the “Other” through grammatical norms and the symbolic order. However, true resistance is not necessarily achieved through direct confrontation, but through the overflow of silence—that is, finding spaces within male narratives that have not been fully disciplined (Cixous, 1976, p. 879).

The friends’ repeated insistence that Lil should dress nicely exposes the implicit violence of gender norms. Male aesthetic standards become dogma, and pleasing the husband becomes a sacred duty. Although Lil’s abortion is condemned as “foolishness”, the element of autonomous female choice behind it constitutes a form of bodily resistance. Her damaged body, a consequence of miscarriage, becomes an experience that cannot be fully encoded by the male discursive system. When male discourse fails to contain female experience, silence itself becomes a force of deconstruction. Lil’s resistance resides not only in her actions but also in Eliot’s unique narrative structure. Her story reaches the reader through layers of mediation—filtered through friends and the poet. This multi-layered transmission creates narrative unreliability, which in turn deconstructs the authority of the male-authored text. The authority of the male author is weakened by this narrative distance. Meanwhile, the

colloquial dialogue among women, though seemingly upholding patriarchal values, also reveals a female alliance: They are simultaneously accomplices in discipline and potential agents of awakening (Warwood, 2013, p. 45).

Lil's silence is not passive submission but an active refusal. She refuses to justify her choices according to patriarchal norms. Within this silence, the female body retains its autonomy and silently challenges the established structure of gender power.

The Path out of the Wasteland

Traditional literary criticism often reduces Lil to a symbol of moral degeneracy, interpreting her abortion merely as the consequence of personal dissolution (Gorden, 1977). However, re-examining her through a contemporary feminist lens, this study advocates for reconstructing Lil's image as a subject of resistance—viewing her as an agent of awakening subjectivity.

To understand Lil's experience, we must situate it within the historical context of post-war Europe. The material wasteland triggered a profound spiritual crisis, traditional value systems collapsed, religious faith wavered, and the belief in civilization was thoroughly subverted. *The Waste Land* is a literary manifestation of this crisis. When genuine emotional exchange becomes impossible, when the body is reduced to an instrument of desire, and when life loses its capacity for reproduction and renewal, civilization sinks into a genuine wasteland. Against this backdrop, women endured a double oppression. While sharing in the spiritual crisis caused by the war, they were simultaneously assigned special missions in post-war reconstruction. They have to restore population numbers through reproduction, rebuild social order, and heal male war trauma by performing traditional gender roles. The female body became a vehicle for national revival, and female reproduction was invested with a significance that transcended individual will. Reconstructing Lil as a resistive subject offers important implications for feminist theory. Her resistance is not revolutionary in the declarative sense; rather, it is embedded in daily life. By taking abortifacient drugs, Lil defends her bodily autonomy through a destructive act, which essentially becomes a form of survival wisdom for the vulnerable under structural oppression. As Cixous argues, when women write their bodies, the partition, classes and rhetorics, institutions and orders will all collapse (Cixous, 1976, pp. 876-877).

While Eliot likely had no intention of constructing a feminist manifesto, the narrative fissures in *The Waste Land* create space for a resistant feminist reading. When the female body is utterly objectified, the wasteland becomes inevitable. Therefore, a feminist resistant reading must move beyond a singular critique of misogyny and instead focus on the counter-narratives latent within the poem. This marginalized working-class woman, in Eliot's portrayal, far exceeds the scope of a moral allegory—her bodily trauma and silent resistance ultimately become the blade that pierces the hypocritical veil of patriarchy. Such a reading not only enriches the interpretive dimensions of *The Waste Land* but also demonstrates the potential for literary criticism to intervene in real-world politics. Today, as the female body remains a site of contestation for political forces and reproductive rights continue to be a global flashpoint, Lil's silent resistance retains a reality that transcends the text. The path out of the spiritual wasteland may well be hidden within the mundane, the silent, and the bodily—unheroic yet authentic, incomplete yet resilient.

Conclusion

This study creatively integrates French feminist theory with Foucault's concept of body politics, offering a new methodological pathway for the gender criticism of *The Waste Land*. Through an in-depth analysis of the

bodily experience, emotional trauma, and reproductive destiny of the female figures in the poem, this research reveals the complex predicament of the female body entangled within patriarchal discipline and the post-war socio-cultural crisis.

The findings demonstrate that the female figures in the poem function not merely as metaphors for civilizational collapse but as embodiments of power mechanisms. The unnamed upper-class woman is trapped in a refined cage of material abundance yet spiritual desolation, her voice silently dissolved within the framework of gender power. In contrast, Lil's abortion narrative constitutes a micro-level resistance against biopolitics, opening a new path for a resistant reading. These two seemingly distinct predicaments share the same logic of power, that the female body is incorporated into the patriarchal disciplinary system and loses its autonomy. The double oppression suffered by women is not only an individual tragedy but also a refraction of the collective malaise of the era. It is worth noting that while critiquing patriarchal discipline, this study strives to excavate the latent space for resistant narrative within the text. The silent resistance discussed herein, though not articulated through language, possesses a disruptive power precisely because of its silence. It exposes the fissures in the power structure and the limitations of patriarchal discourse, providing fertile ground for feminist resistant reading. This seemingly passive resistance reveals the survival wisdom of the vulnerable under structural oppression, reminding us that even within the most rigid disciplinary systems, the possibility of resistance persists.

Employing a feminist perspective to analyze *The Waste Land* is not only significant but also feasible. Eliot depicts the collapse of modern civilization through diseased gender relations. However, compared to the women in the poem, the male figures remain relatively obscure. Consequently, the actions and fates of the female figures, which occupy a large portion of the text, inevitably shape the reader's understanding of the poem, making the inquiry into these images essential. By transcending the simplifying logic of traditional misogyny criticism, this study reveals the value of Eliot's text in critiquing modernity. When patriarchy attempts to control the female body, the illusion of progress in civilization masks the continuation of violence.

Admittedly, this study has certain limitations. The focus on a limited number of female figures, such as Lil, without extending to other characters like the Hyacinth Girl, means it does not fully capture the diverse dimensions of femininity in the poem. Future research could broaden the scope of analysis by situating *The Waste Land* within the trajectory of Eliot's entire oeuvre to examine the evolution of his female representations. Alternatively, a comparative approach could be adopted to contrast Eliot's women with those in the works of other Modernist writers, thereby illuminating the complex relationship between gender writing and Modernist poetics.

Finally, the gender predicament depicted in *The Waste Land* remains relevant today. The significance of this feminist resistant reading extends beyond literary interpretation. In light of ongoing global controversies over reproductive rights, such as the overturning of Roe v. Wade in the United States and the frequent occurrence of human trafficking and surrogacy scandals, the female body remains a core site of power struggles. Lil's experience in Eliot's poem serves as a warning, that if female autonomy is not safeguarded, any claim of civilization or prosperity will be illusion. The struggle for reproductive rights is fundamentally a struggle for bodily sovereignty. The path out of the wasteland may be neither grand nor heroic, but it is real, persistent, and embodied. When countless acts of resistance converge into a current, the fissures in the patriarchal system will eventually widen into structural change, and women will finally write their own voices upon this land from which they were once dispossessed. Therefore, this study hopes to alert readers to potential gender oppression and to keenly capture the suppressed moments of resistance.

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