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T.S. ELIOT AND THE RETURN OF THE SOLDIER

Re-gendering Nostos in "The Waste Land"

ABSTRACT: T. S. Eliot's 1922 poem *The Waste Land* reimagines the theme of the soldier's return in the wake of the Great War. In Part II of the poem ("A Game of Chess"), Eliot reveals the domestic crisis that the return of the demobilised soldier named Albert may cause. "A Game of Chess" is also concerned with the troubled homecoming of the unnamed, shell-shocked soldier who fought in "rats' alley" by exposing the strain of psychological trauma on his married life. Drawing upon the literary trope of *nostos* ("homecoming") that originates in Homer's *Odyssey*, this article examines how Eliot's treatment of the soldier's return revisits the archetype of return from war in modern conditions. By examining the two passages constituting "A Game of Chess," with a focus on relevant literary and cultural references, I investigate how the heroic, masculine narrative of *nostos*, homecoming in the classical epic tradition, is reframed in the domestic sphere associated with femininity.

KEYWORDS: T. S. Eliot, *The Waste Land*, *Nostos*, Return, Gender, The Great War, Shell Shock, Abortion.

Introduction

In his landmark modernist poem, *The Waste Land* (1922), T. S. Eliot responds to the aftermath of the Great War, exploring the theme of the soldier's return not only from the perspective of soldiers themselves but also from the perspective of the women around them in two passages constituting Part II of the poem ("A Game of Chess"). In the first passage of "A Game of Chess," one of the speakers appears shell-shocked, haunted by the memory of the battlefield in "rats' alley" (Eliot 1922, line 115). Christopher Ricks and Jim McCue note, "Rat's Alley was a trench in the Somme sector, taken over from the French by the British in 1916" (2015, 632). As I shall discuss later, the shell-shocked soldier's disengaged interaction with his wife set in a drawing room implies a troubled homecoming from the war. In a more direct manner, the second passage relates the impact of the return of another soldier Albert on his wife Lil. In these passages, Eliot reframes the trope of the soldier's return in the realm of domestic life involving both genders.

Although critics have engaged with the soldier's return represented in the poem to investigate Eliot's response to the post-war condition, the theme of return itself has not yet been extensively discussed. Richard Badenhuisen focuses on the war trauma on

married couples in “A Game of Chess:” “Eliot is interrogating the difficulty for veterans of returning home to an environment unprepared to deal with their problems” (2015, 155). Badenhausen positions *The Waste Land* as “a type of anti-elegy, a representation of trauma that elucidates the devastation of being blocked emotionally” (2015, 154). In contrast, my reading of “A Game of Chess” aims to explore the WWI soldier’s homecoming complicated by conditions such as shell shock and abortion as a revisit to the long-standing literary trope of return from the war. Oliver Tearle (2019) conceptualises how modernist poets such as Eliot make sense of the Great War by revisiting the classical tradition, especially Homer’s *Odyssey*. In a passing note, Tearle compares Homer’s and Eliot’s characters to demonstrate the modern degradation in the 1922 poem: Albert “falls short of the devotion and responsibility that characterize” Odysseus while Lil “becomes a latter-day Penelope” who fails to maintain the home (Tearle 2019, 88). Despite referring to Odysseus’s *nostos* (“homecoming”) from Troy, Tearle does not comment on its thematic relevance to Eliot’s response to the soldier’s return from WWI.

In this article, I argue that Eliot’s treatment of the soldier’s return in *The Waste Land* radically reimagines the classical trope of *nostos* in formal and thematic terms. As Edith Hall puts it, “In the *Odyssey*, the Greek word *nostos* signifies both the action of returning and the story about the person who returns by sea. Odysseus achieves his *nostos* but the poem about him will also be called a *nostos*” (2012, 163). The fragmentary style of *The Waste Land* in correspondence to the loss of totality in the global war subverts the Homeric mode of *nostos* that entails an overarching storyline of a hero coming home. Steering away from an account of an epic journey that displays heroism and masculinity, Eliot turns his gaze inwards, focusing on the soldier’s return to the domestic life problematised by war trauma and gender oppression. Combining a textual analysis with contextual findings primarily in histories of culture and medicine, I examine Eliot’s formulation of a gender-inclusive *nostos* that foregrounds the psychological and domestic crises of WWI soldiers and their spouses in Part II of the poem. The opening section of this article provides an overview of the trope of the soldier’s return in the ancient and modern renderings that are relevant to Eliot. Then I investigate how the impact of shell shock on the soldier unsettles his sense of being at home and alienates him from his wife. In the closing section, I examine the account of Lil’s reaction to Albert’s return from the war to reveal their complex sexual and social relationships.

Ancient and Modern: The Return from the War in the *Odyssey* and Modernism

At the centre of *The Waste Land*, Eliot juxtaposes two homecomings with a direct allusion to *nostos* in Homer’s *Odyssey* by restaging the prophet Tiresias as a central speaker:

I Tiresias, though blind, throbbing between two lives,
 Old man with wrinkled female breasts, can see
 At the violet hour, the evening hour that strives
 Homeward, and brings the sailor home from sea.
 The typist home at teatime, clears her breakfast, lights
 Her stove, and lays out food in tins. (Eliot 1922, lines 218–223)

Originating in Homer's *Odyssey*, Tiresias is a seer of Odysseus's homecoming after the War of Troy. Having wandered for ten years after the war, Odysseus visits the ghost of Tiresias, who predicts his homecoming in the form of a sea journey. (Homer 2004, XI. 113–115) The allusion to the epic return of Odysseus, a sailor and soldier, is in contrast with the typist's circadian return set in London. The convergence of the epic mode and everyday life resonates with James Joyce's 1922 novel *Ulysses*, which rewrites Odysseus's ten-year wandering before his ultimate return into Leopold Bloom's one-day journey from and return to home in Dublin on 16 June 1904.

In a lecture on James Joyce in Paris on 7 December 1921, French critic and writer Valéry Larbaud summarises the Odyssean design of Joyce's *Ulysses*, which was serialised in *The Little Review* before its 1922 publication in a book form. (Larbaud 1922) Eliot used the term "nostos" when translating the "Ulysses" section of Larbaud's lecture: "The last books of the *Odyssey* relate the return of Ulysses to Ithaca ... To this part of the *Odyssey*, which is called the Return (*Nostos*), correspond, in *Ulysses*, the three last episodes" (Larbaud 1967, 101). In this translation, Eliot transliterates the capitalised 'Nostos' in Greek used by Larbaud in the original version. (Larbaud 1922, 406) He published this translation alongside *The Waste Land* in the inaugural issue of his journal *Criterion* in October 1922. According to Gabrielle McIntire, such a publication arrangement promotes high modernism by drawing a literary paradigm upon shared features of Eliot's and Joyce's 1922 texts. (2015, 22) One of the main features is the use of myth, which Eliot later conceptualises as "a continuous parallel between contemporaneity and antiquity" (Eliot 1923, 478). While Joyce radically rewrites Odysseus's journey into an everyman's urban experience, Eliot juxtaposes references to the ancient myth and observations of modern life to dramatise various homecoming situations in the post-WWI society.

The parallel between the ancient *nostos* and modern homecoming in Tiresias's vision creates a thematic framework for a discussion of the episodic narratives of the soldier's return in the poem. As Eliot notes, "Tiresias is the most important personage in the poem, uniting all the rest ... What Tiresias sees, in fact, is the substance of the poem" (Eliot 1922, 74; emphasis original). A considerable proportion of what Tiresias sees is the typist's domestic activities and sexual encounter with the clerk, whose visit is anticipated by both the character and the narrator: "I too awaited the expected guest" (Eliot 1922, line 230). In a relationship with the clerk referred to as her "lover" (Eliot 1922, line 250), the typist does not object to his "Endeavours to engage her in caresses / Which still are unproved, if undesired" (Eliot 1922, lines 237–38). However, before she fully consents, the clerk advances by force: "Flushed and decided, he assaults at once.

/ Exploring hands encounter no defence” (Eliot 1922, lines 239–40). The military language used here to describe non-consensual sex in a domestic setting, such as “assault” and “defence,” recalls the recently ended war. While the typist is sexually assaulted by her lover, Lil is coerced to have sex with her husband when he returns. Engaging with Eliot’s note that “all the women are one woman, and the two sexes meet in Tiresias” (Eliot 1922, 74), Rachel Blau DuPlessis comments that the overgeneralising statement connects a plethora of female characters afflicted by “the fierce problematic of sex-gender in *The Waste Land*” (2011, 299). While Tiresias’s hermaphroditic identity opens a conversation on sex and gender, his vision of homecomings in the *Odyssey* and Eliot’s appropriation has wider implications for rethinking the soldiers’ returns represented in the poem. These soldiers’ homes are not represented as havens but sites of complex mental realities and social forces.

By rendering the impact of shell shock on the soldier’s domestic life and foregrounding Lil’s reaction to her husband’s return, Eliot’s modern modulations of *nostos* offer a counternarrative to the classical tradition of the war hero’s return. However, even in the *Odyssey*, the earliest Western epic known for Odysseus’s heroic adventures, domestic experience is integral to his *nostos*. Sheila Murnaghan and Hunter Gardner argue:

Odysseus’ famous adventures on the high seas ... are narrated in a flashback that occupies just four of the *Odyssey*’s twenty-four books. Over half of the poem is set in Odysseus’ home on Ithaca and focuses on the problems caused there by Odysseus’ absence and on the artful, clandestine negotiations through which the returning hero gradually picks up the threads of his previous life. (2014, 1)

Thus, Ulyssean *nostos* is more than just a story of sea voyages; it also focuses on how Odysseus deals with domestic issues to reclaim his household from his usurpers. Murnaghan considers the trope of *nostos* “an experience that transcends gender, that maps onto the daily rounds of ordinary life, and that is psychological rather than physical” (2014, 112). Re-engaging with the literary archetype, Murnaghan’s reading of one of the first literary responses to WWI, Rebecca West’s *The Return of the Soldier* (1918), examines the repercussions of war on the shell-shocked combatant Chris Baldry and his wife Kitty, his cousin (and the narrator) Jenny and his ex-girlfriend Margaret Grey. Though West does not allude to the *Odyssey* in this novella, the thematic relevance of the return of the soldier and the attendant domestic complexities allows Murnaghan to establish it as a modern rendering of *nostos*. Building on and departing from Murnaghan’s rethinking of *nostos* and its modern adaptation in response to the Great War, I examine the modernist poetic appropriations of the classical trope by focusing on the vignettes of the soldier’s return associated with psychological and domestic crises in *The Waste Land*.

The Shell-shocked Soldier in the Drawing Room

Compared to the tale of Albert's homecoming, a more subtle account of a returning soldier's struggle to reintegrate into domestic life consists in the first episode of "A Game of Chess." This episode depicts an elaborately decorated drawing room where two characters have a strange conversation:

"My nerves are bad to-night. Yes, bad. Stay with me.

"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."

I think we are in rats' alley

Where the dead men lost their bones. (Eliot 1922, lines 111-16)

The use of quotation marks and lack thereof differentiate two speakers' voices. The first voice belongs to the woman introduced earlier in this scene: "Under the firelight, under the brush, her hair / Spread out in fiery points / Glowed into words, then would be savagely still" (Eliot 1922, lines 108-10). As I mentioned earlier, the second speaker might be a soldier having fought in the trenches in the Somme sector. He discloses his thoughts of corpses in "rats' alley" in response to the woman. That the woman probes for the soldier's thoughts while brushing her hair at night in the drawing room suggests that they are a couple. In this domestic space, the soldier's mind is preoccupied with the thoughts of the battlefield and dead soldiers. The present tense and the first-person plural pronoun in his answer ("I think / we are in rats' alley") suggest that the soldier's memory of the war experience is so vivid and present that it appears to interfere with his sense of his immediate surroundings.

The reference to the trenches in the name of "rats' alley" indicates that shell shock may take a toll on the returning soldier. Rick and McCue specifically assign the name to a trench on the Somme through personal communication with the historian of military cartography, Peter Chasseaud. (2015, 632) Referring to Chasseaud's 2006 study *Rats Alley: Trench Names of the Western Front, 1914–1918*, Badenhausen comments that "the reference to 'rats' alley' [...] was a common wartime name for a trench, where corpses sat at the mercy of rats picking away at limbs" (2015, 157). Through different references to the same historian, both comments allude to the typical condition of the trench war represented in Eliot's poem. The Battle of Somme is a useful reference point to shed light on the shell-shocked soldier's experience in the poem. According to the medical historian Ben Shephard, "On the Somme, shell-shock and 'nervous disorders of war', hitherto a marginal medical problem, became a major drain on manpower" (2002, 41). The impact of the Battle of Somme on soldiers' mental faculties was related to the tremendous loss the British Army experienced: "So heavily did the dead and wounded lie in no-man's land that it took days, in some cases weeks, for stretcher-bearers to reach and recover them" (Shephard 2002, 39). In Eliot's poem, the unnamed soldier's intrusive thought of the decomposing corpses in "rats' alley" exhibits one of the shell-shock symptoms covered

by *The Times* on 25 May 1915: “past experiences on the battlefield are recalled vividly” (quoted in Shephard 2002, 28). The soldier’s nervous disorder echoes the woman’s complaint about her bad nerves at the beginning of the conversation. The specialist’s and public’s growing concerns about nervous breakdowns in the early 20th century paved the way to conceptualise and understand shell shock during and after WWI. Shell-shocked soldiers often disconnect from other people, including their spouses. Notable examples of married couples affected by the husband’s shell-shocked condition in modernist literature include Chris Baldry and Kitty in West’s *The Return of the Soldier* (1918), Septimus Warren Smith and Lucrezia in Virginia Woolf’s *Mrs Dalloway* (1925), and Christopher Tietjens and Sylvia in Ford Madox Ford’s tetralogy *Parade’s End* (1924–1928).

Compared to these contemporary writings, Eliot’s poem addresses the shell-shocked soldier’s return and inability to reintegrate in a more nuanced way. In the drawing room, both the unnamed soldier and his wife have neurological symptoms and struggle to connect, as the following conversation illustrates:

“What is that noise?”

The wind under the door.

“What is that noise now? What is the wind doing?”

Nothing again nothing.

“Do

“You know nothing? Do you see nothing? Do you remember

“Nothing?”

I remember

Those are pearls that were his eyes.

“Are you alive or not? Is there nothing in your head?” (Eliot 1922, lines 117–126)

Except for the quick exchange on the wind at the door, the woman does not follow up on the staccato replies the soldier gives. The sense of disconnection peaks in the final question quoted above, making the woman appear inconsiderate and even cruel. However, the lack of connection between each question and answer, the soldier’s usual silence (“Why do you never speak”), and his reply placed outside the quotation marks indicate that he makes all these responses in his head rather than utter them.

However fragmentary and disconnected they may seem, the shell-shocked soldier’s responses reveal intertwined themes of assumed death and survival in the form of an assemblage of literary allusions from various sources, which are extracted and recontextualised here to indicate his wartime experience. Eliot notes that “The wind under the door” refers to John Webster’s *The Devil’s Law-Case* (1623): “Is the wind in that door still?” (III. 2. 146; Eliot 1922, 73). In the original play, a surgeon asks this question when he mistakes for the sound of the wind the groaning of the fatally wounded character, Contarino, when he regains consciousness. The reference to a sign of surviving a severe wound may suggest the shell-shocked soldier’s survival of his time in the trenches. The soldier’s thoughts then drift to line 125, which contains an allusion to the shipwreck in Shakespeare’s *The Tempest* (1611): “Those are pearls that were his eyes” (I.

2. 399). In the original play, the line is part of Ariel's song that imagines the subaquatic transformation of King Alonso. By singing this song, Ariel leads Prince Ferdinand to believe his father drowned. The ambiguity of the life-death boundary in these literary references resonates with the woman's question of whether the soldier is alive or dead and reminds the reader of the multitude of the dead and wounded lying in trenches.

Alongside referring to the dramatic survival from apparent death in early modern plays, Eliot draws upon the classical allusion to the shipwreck to formulate the shell-shocked soldier's perception of his home. The firewood in the hearth of the drawing room is depicted as ships in flames: "Huge sea-wood fed with copper / Burned green and orange, framed by the coloured stone, / In which sad light a carved dolphin swam." (Eliot 1922, lines 94–96) The Swedish translator of *The Waste Land*, Eric Mesterton, interprets the burning sea-wood as "oak wood from a wrecked or waterlogged copper-bottomed ship; it burned green because of being saturated with copper hydroxide" (quoted in Eliot 1932, 38, note 1), which Eliot confirmed in correspondence (Eliot 1932, 39). The image of the firewood taken from a wrecked ship correlates to the allusion to Virgil's *Aeneid* I, which introduces Aeneas, who survives from shipwreck and lands in Dido's Carthage:

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
That freshened from the window, these ascended
In fattening the prolonged candle-flames,
Flung their smoke into the laquearia,
Stirring the pattern on the coffered ceiling. (Eliot 1922, lines 86–93)

The word "laquearia," meaning "panelled ceilings" in Latin, refers to the festal hall of Dido, Queen of Carthage, in *Aeneid* I: "lighted lamps hang down from the fretted roof of gold, and flaming torches drive out the night" (Virgil 1999, I. 726–27). She is hosting Aeneas in this hall, who bears "gifts that survive the sea and the flames of Troy" (Virgil 1999, I. 679). Elizabeth Vandiver suggests that in Britain, the Great War was perceived by the classically educated generation as the second Troy not only because of the involvement of the Dardanelles but also the soldiers' valour and civilians' dignity in Flanders. (2010, 241) The marine image and classical allusion that feature the soldier's perception of his surroundings indicate that the trench war is reimagined as the Trojan War in this scene.

Through the reference to "laquearia" in the *Aeneid*, Eliot associates the allusion to Aeneas's vulnerable position after the Trojan War with the shell-shocked soldier's troubled condition in the poem. Although Eliot was deeply influenced by classical epics, his poetry rejects an easy appropriation of the hero rhetoric in such tradition and engages with it to reflect on modernity. In the poem "Gerontion," Eliot considers that heroism nurtures the condition for the Great War: "Unnatural vices / Are fathered by our heroism" (Eliot 1920, lines 44–45). Composed in 1919 (Ricks and McCue 2015, 467), "Gerontion" records Eliot's immediate reflection on the Great War and anticipates *The*

Waste Land. Stuck in a rented home, the narrator in “Gerontion” experiences the loss of senses: “I have lost my sight, smell, hearing, taste and touch: / How should I use it for your closer contact?” (Eliot 1920, lines 59-60). Even though the narrator does not participate in the war: “I was neither at the hot gates / Nor fought in the warm rain” (Eliot 1920, lines 3-4), his loss of senses resembles the symptoms of shell shock reported by *The Times* in 1915: “The soldier ... becomes a prey to his primitive instincts. He may be so affected that changes occur in his sense perceptions; he may become blind or deaf or lose the sense of smell or taste” (quoted in Shephard 2002, 28). The non-combatant narrator in “Gerontion” experiencing shell-shock symptoms implies the impact of the war across the board. The shell-shocked soldier in *The Waste Land* does not lose his senses but seems to experience changes in sense perceptions. He perceives the décor and objects in the drawing room as foreign and threatening. Historian Jane Hamlett suggests that the drawing room was essentially a feminine space in the middle-class home, which “contained distinctive gendered material cultures” in England in the late 19th and early 20th centuries (2010, 122). The materialised gendered division at home exacerbates the sense of estrangement between the couple, which is underscored by the reference to the relationship between Aeneas and Dido and the consequent hostility between Rome and Carthage in the *Aeneid*.

The sensory perceptions of the modern home and the intrusive memory of the technological war are melded in the soldier’s traumatised consciousness. In particular, the synthetic perfumes in the room that make the soldier feel disorientated and suffocated (Eliot 1922, lines 88-89) may evoke his memory of the war. In the late 19th and early 20th centuries, developments in chemistry contributed to both the booming industry of synthetic perfumes and to chemical war. One representative synthetic perfume launched after WWI, for example, was Chanel’s “No. 5,” which, according to fashion historians Valerie Mendes and Amy de la Haye, was blended by the perfumer Ernest Beaux in 1921. (1999, 57) They comment that Beaux “was famous for his innovative use of synthetic aldehydes to enhance the smell of costly natural ingredients such as jasmine” (Mendes and de la Haye 1999, 57). Although Eliot does not specify the brand of the synthetic perfumes, the scent of chemicals that bewilders the shell-shocked soldier may incite his memory of dealing with the unprecedented use of explosives and poison gas in WWI. Matthew Beaumont briefly mentions that by creating the phantasmagorical atmosphere of “Unreal City,” Eliot “provides a superimposition of two linked terrains: the prospect of urban modernity and the landscapes of technological war” (2016, 230). The soldier’s reaction to synthetic perfumes indicates that such superimposition permeates the domestic space.

The shell-shocked soldier’s return from WWI, which is compared to Troy, is not rendered a heroic action as glorified in the classical epics but a sequence of fragmentary memories. Post-war psychological trauma severely affects his ability to reintegrate into daily life, as the frustrating conversation with his wife shows. Suffering from neurological symptoms herself, the wife appears clingy and demanding, as demonstrated by how she starts a conversation (Eliot 1922, lines 111-12). She also craves attention and connection

in a melodramatic way: “I shall rush out as I am, and walk the street / With my hair down, so. What shall we do tomorrow?” (Eliot 1922, lines 132–33). However, her question, “Why do you never speak” (Eliot 1922, line 112) might explain, if not justify, why she acts this way, as the shell-shocked soldier is emotionally absent and mentally troubled. The shell-shocked soldier survives the war, returns home, and reunites with his wife, but their inability to build connections makes their home unhomely.

Albert’s Homecoming, Lil’s Suffering

While the tension between the couple in the drawing room relates to war trauma, it arises from the gendered power relation between another couple, Albert and Lil, in the following episode. In this episode, set in a London pub at closing time, the speaker recounts her conversation with Lil.¹ The speaker’s monologue is punctuated by the publican’s repeated announcement that the pub is closing in compliance with the wartime regulations of opening hours. Eliot’s use of “HURRY UP PLEASE ITS TIME” (Eliot 1922, lines 141, 152, 165, 168–69), according to Randall Stevenson, was “topical and newly familiar” to his reader when *The Waste Land* was first published (2013, 71). Structured by the war-related reference, the monologue begins with the husband coming home from the front: “When Lil’s husband got demobbed, I said— / I didn’t mince my words, I said to her myself” (Eliot 1922, lines 139–40). While the first round of the publican’s calls interrupts the speaker and urges her to exit the pub (Eliot 1922, line 141), it simultaneously prompts her to tell the story that reveals Lil’s unwillingness to manage Albert’s expectations on his return. After the war, as historian Joanna Bourke observes, “Married men returned to familiar beds; unmarried men sought companions. For these men, home was the ultimate retreat from the disciplines of military society” (1996, 168). As Eliot’s poem reveals, home may mean a retreat for Albert returning from the battlefield, but when he returns, his self-entitled and socially encouraged right to sex and procreation potentially makes their home unsafe for Lil.

The speaker brings up a complex range of Lil’s anxieties on the event of Albert’s return: economic, sexual and reproductive. She criticises Lil’s negligence of financial and familial obligations as a wife. These obligations revolve around the budget for Lil to get a set of false teeth to make her more attractive:

Now Albert’s coming back, make yourself a bit smart.
He’ll want to know what you done with that money he gave you
To get yourself some teeth. He did, I was there.

¹ The setting of the episode is inspired by the pub opposite 18 Crawford Mansions, Eliot’s residence between 1916 and 1920. In her memoir, Mary Trevelyan recalls that in the Crawford flat Eliot “used to watch the people coming out at Closing Time – that’s the origin of ‘Hurry up Ladies – it’s time’” (Trevelyan and Wagner 2022, 37). Eliot told his second wife, Valerie, that “this passage was ‘pure Ellen Kellond’, a maid employed by [Eliot and his first wife Vivien], who recounted it to them.” (Eliot 2011, 127)

You have them all out, Lil, and get a nice set,
 He said, I swear, I can't bear to look at you.
 And no more can't I, I said, and think of poor Albert,
 He's been in the army four years, he wants a good time,
 And if you don't give it him, there's others will, I said. (Eliot 1922, lines 142–149)

The speaker's interrogation into the false teeth seems legitimate, as the money Albert gave to Lil before he went to war has apparently not been used for this purpose. When he comes home after the war, he will be concerned with the financial arrangement and disappointed by his wife's refusal to enhance her appearance at his request. Jean-Michel Rabaté suggests Lil's lack of concern for her physical appearance demonstrates the difficulty of returning to pre-war life, as if "the demobilization has triggered a general demoralization, which would be marked by a loss of sensual appetite and a vanishing desire" (Rabaté 2016, 121). Lil's reluctance to resume the sexual relationship with her husband may be a sign of post-war demoralisation, but it also results from the couple's pre-existing domestic issues.

Lil is not willing to stimulate Albert's sexual desire, as this might impregnate her again after she has had five children by the age of thirty-one and nearly died in childbirth:

You ought to be ashamed, I said, to look so antique.
 (And her only thirty-one.)
 I can't help it, she said, pulling a long face,
 It's them pills I took, to bring it off, she said.
 (She's had five already, and nearly died of young George.)
 The chemist said it would be alright, but I've never been the same. (Eliot 1922, lines 156–61)

While Lil may suffer from unexpected side effects of the abortifacient she took, it is also likely that she was advised to take pills with unsafe elements. Christina Hauck suggests that the "pills" Lil could purchase from the chemist at that time might contain "ergot, [a] compound of lead, [or] oil of savin" (2003, 243). Ricks and McCue's editorial note briefly mentions the dangerous abortion measures in the context of *The Waste Land*: "Before the age of the Pill, dangerous remedies were available under the counter. Partridge gives 'bring it away' as 20th-century slang for 'effect an abortion'" (2015, 639). After outlining the birth control situation before the invention of the Pill, if the capitalised word indeed refers to the oral contraceptive pill introduced in May 1950, Ricks and McCue could have provided more specific information about "the pills" in the poem. Megan Quigley critiques the note as "practically nothing," which falls short of guiding the reader of the # MeToo Generation to understand gender issues in *The Waste Land* (2019). In response to Quigley, Ricks asserts that the editor's key priority is to provide a "full and precise record" rather than "critical appreciation or exegesis" (2019, 469). While the editorial note may be brief and indirect, it does draw the contemporary reader's attention to the law and practice of abortion in the context of the poem.²

² While abortion was still a crime in Britain during and after the Great War, it was difficult to establish the incidence of abortion because the term is underdefined and underused outside the medical profession

An examination of Lil's abortion in its context is critical to consider what home means to her and Albert on his return from war at personal and collective levels. Historian Barbara Brookes writes: "The popularity of the coalition government's slogan 'Homes fit for heroes' went beyond the appeal of a neat council house to the wider emotional resonance of a wife and family. Shaken by the upheaval of war, contemporaries clung to traditional gender roles to provide a sense of stability in a changing world" (1988, 10). The collective desire to return to the pre-war normality, with the appeal of a stable home and a large family, was generally unfulfilled in the interwar years. Abortion was condemned for causing a reproductive crisis that "would lead to a breakdown of the family, the community, and the nation" (Hauck 2003, 229–230). Such discourse is charged with class consciousness: "Debate about working-class abortion focused on the perceived ignorance of the aborting woman, who was often imagined to be uninformed about the dangers of abortion and who was often depicted as hapless in the face of her husband's sexual demands and her own fecundity" (Hauck 2003, 229–230). The viewpoint echoes the speaker's response: "You *are* a proper fool" (Eliot 1922, line 162; emphasis original), when she learns that Lil is misinformed by the chemist.

Knowing that the abortifacient has done visible damage to Lil, the speaker still upbraids her for not wanting to meet her sexual and reproductive obligations: "Well, if Albert won't leave you alone, there it is, I said, / What you get married for if you don't want children?" (Eliot 1922, lines 163–64). Brookes comments, "Maternity was regarded as a responsibility of married life, even if a woman had been sexually coerced or experienced contraceptive failure" (1988, 8). As Eliot's poem reveals, Lil has already had five children and nearly died in childbirth, and her abortion beyond this point should have been empathised.³ The speaker's criticism of Lil perhaps reflects a social concern about the declining reproduction rate during and after WWI. An anti-abortion narrative at that time claimed: "The British Empire would be trampled by its enemies, whose reproductive rates were significantly higher than Britain's" (Hauck 2003, 230). Although the poem does not indicate whether the speaker proactively responds to such discourse, the war rhetoric used by the anti-abortionist resonates with the formal effect of the speaker's reproach (Eliot 1922, lines 153–164) structured by the references to the early closing legislation: "HURRY UP PLEASE ITS TIME" (Eliot 1922, lines 152, 165). Stevenson notes, "Legislation introduced under the Defence of the Realm Act had by 1915 curtailed pub opening hours in areas of the country deemed to be closely involved in the war effort. In 1921, these registrations were extended nationwide" (2013, 71). Counterpointed with the early closing legislation, the speaker's insistence on Lil's

(Brookes 1988, 8). Apart from the abortion-related slang "bring it away" suggested by Ricks and McCue, women use phrases such as "bring me round," "put me on my way" or "put me right" to refer to the termination of their pregnancies by using pills and douches and dissociated these methods from "abortion", a term "usually reserved for a surgical procedure" in the early 20th century (Brookes 1988, 8).

³ Despite the illegal status of abortion in the early 20th century, medical records show that "many women routinely aborted every pregnancy after the fourth child" (Brookes 1988, 8).

reproductive obligation resonates with another kind of “war effort” by increasing the birth rate for the sake of the nation’s future.

While the publican’s calls interrupt the speaker, they punctuate the speaker’s projection on Lil’s sexual and reproductive obligations in such a way that it creates a contrapuntal effect whereby the speaker’s personal view advances the wartime domestic ideology and may even seem patriotic. The publican’s call (Eliot 1922, line 165) interrupts the speaker after she asks Lil the question quoted above (“What you get married for if you don’t want children?”). The formal effect caused by the publican’s interruption helps the speaker establish her view that reproduction is a non-negotiable part of a marriage in the form of a rhetorical question. When resuming her monologue, the speaker does not report Lil’s response, if there is any, but goes on to describe the couple’s family reunion: “Well, that Sunday Albert was home, they had a hot gammon, / And they asked me into dinner, to get the beauty of it hot—” (Eliot 1922, lines 166–167). As the speaker must exit following the final calls (Eliot 1922, lines 168–169), her narrative ends with the moment of the apparent domestic ideal, leaving the couple’s unresolved issues untold.

From the speaker’s account of the conversation, we can see that Lil is not rejoicing over her husband’s homecoming. While her husband has been away for four years (Eliot 1922, line 148), she has been in charge of their household, taking care of five children, which is challenging for a thirty-one-year-old woman whose health has been compromised by difficult childbirth and abortion. However, her husband’s absence perhaps means four years of freedom for her from sexual oppression in the marital institution. When Albert returns, she will be expected to meet his sexual needs, and her feeble attempt to resist procreation by not having a nice set of false teeth is about to be defeated. Albert’s return may even be life-threatening to Lil, as it might put her through childbirth again with a high risk of maternal mortality or the dangerous practice of abortion. It is also worth noting that the illegal status of abortion contributed significantly to its inherent danger. When the speaker warns that Albert will have affairs with other women, possibly even herself, if he is sexually unsatisfied at home, Lil responds, “Then I’ll know who to thank, she said, and give me a straight look” (Eliot 1922, line 151). Her response may imply that she is not concerned about Albert’s infidelity as imagined by the speaker but sees it as a form of liberation and perhaps survival from the anticipated jeopardy of a future pregnancy.

Conclusion

In this article, I have investigated Eliot’s representations of the trope of the return of the soldier in *The Waste Land*, specifically Part II of the poem under the heading of “A Game of Chess.” In “A Game of Chess,” Eliot displaces the heroic implications of two soldiers’ returns by exploring to what extent their returns reshape their domestic experiences and affect their spouses. In the first instance, homecoming is represented as

the shell-shocked soldier's psychological experience, which interferes with his reintegration into family life. In the second instance, Albert's homecoming could be said to be a threat to his wife Lil, who has suffered from abortion and difficult childbirth. Eliot's approach to the trope of the soldier's return shows an inward turn of the representation of *nostos* from the heroic narrative in the classical tradition, into a modernist exploration of the impact of such return on domestic life, by highlighting traumatised consciousness and female experience to make *nostos* a gender-inclusive experience.

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