CHAPTER-4

A GAME OF CHESS & THE FIRE SERMON
**Introduction** A Game of Chess is a device used by Middleton in the play entitled *Women Beware Women* where this game is played to hide the seduction of a young girl by a noble man. In this section the poet indicates the failure of sex-relationship in the modern world. Sex has become a purely physical kind of entertainment and has lost its moral and social purpose. Sex perversities both in high and low life, have become a matter of mechanical routine.

“The second section, “A Game of Chess” provides deeper insight into the failure of love. In the magnificent opening lines the poet, with a kind of buried irony, portrays a lady sitting at her dressing- table. He brings to bear all the forces of past great art upon this woman.”¹
The mother-in-law is kept busy in a game of chess while the daughter-in-law is seduced within by the Duke. The section **A Game of Chess** begins with these lines.

“The chair she sat in, like a burnished throne,

Glowed on the marble, where the glass

Held up by the standards wrought with fruited vines

From which a golden Cuspidor peeped out.”

The ‘she’ in the first part of this section is Belladonna, the lady of Rocks, the lady of situations, represents the agony of all the women in the poem who have been betrayed by their lovers. It is the ennui born of her husband’s cold and indifferent attitude towards her that has poisoned her life, as her name suggests; she does not destroy any body. It is she who is wasting herself bit by bit while waiting for a few moments of love, and it is true that because of her sad tragic life she has been reduced to a lady of situations, to a creature lost in
The lady of the Rocks (Belladonna) sat in a royal chair which looked a polished throne. The reflection of the chair could be seen on the marble floor. The looking glass was supported by pillars which had the designs of fruits and grapes carved on them. A golden image of Cupid hung from one of the pillars. Another small image of Cupid could be seen peeping out behind the wing of the golden Cupid. The flames of the seven candles burnings in the chandler, were reflected in the mirror. The double reflection appeared on the shining table while the glitter of the jewels of the lady which stood in their satin boxes, added to their brilliance.
“Doubled the flames of seven branched candelabra
Reflecting light upon the table as
The glitter of her jewels rose to meet it,
From satin cases poured in rich profusion”\textsuperscript{4}

The bottles of ivory and colored glass were opened and they gave out a strange fragrance of synthetic perfumes. The make up of the lady consisted of creams, powders and liquids. All these gave out a dizzy fragrance which drowned the sense in odors’. The fragrance was disturbed by the air which came fresh from the windows, and as it went up it fattened the long-lasting candle flames and turned their smoke towards the ceiling, thereby disturbing the patterns carved therein.

“In this description Eliot brings together all the resources of his aesthetic sense of the past in lines of original invention which nevertheless convey the sense of pastiche, as though all these phrases
assembled were fragments from wonderful masterpiece of the past.”

The logs of sea wood along with copper pieces, burnt in the fire place were paneled by colored stone. The flames appeared green and orange and in the dim light thereof was seen the carving of a swimming dolphin. The paintings and other works of art refer to stories of ancient love and rape. The scenes displayed in her room pertain to such mythical tales as comment upon her own tragic plight. The scene on the paneled ceiling images the banquet given by Dido in honors of Aeneas, her lover, who betrayed her. Another scene painted above the mantel tells the story of the rape of Philomel whose ‘inviolable voice’ still fills the waste land to whose inhabitants it is only the ‘Jug Jug’ of a bird song.

“The change of Philomel, by the barbarous king

So rudely forced; yet there the nightingale

Filled all the desert with inviolable voice
And still she cried, and still the world pursues,

‘Jug Jug’ to dirty ears.”

It looked as if a window opened upon a sylvan scene of the fate of Philomel so rudely raped by the barbarous king. Philomel who was transformed into a nightingale filled the desert with a sweet music. Even till today she continues to cry and still the world listens to her, but her cry has been interpreted as the reaction of her rape to the dirty ears of the modern man. Many other carved figures and decorations dealing with the stories and myths of the past could be seen hanging on the walls of the drawing room, staring images, and carving leaned out from the walls. The room appeared quite hushed and silent. Suddenly there was a footstep which indicated that some visitor was about to enter the drawing room. The lady sitting on that room got a little excited and with the light of the fire started looking for her brush in order to keep her hair in form. She brushed her hair, which are spread out in fiery points indicating her excitement. Williamson comments:
“The chase has not ceased, and the nightingale’s sounds are both representative of Elizabethan and associative modern. If the other pictures are withered stumps like Philomel’s tongue, they come into the class of ‘broken images’, but at least provide an inclination leaning, hushing the room enclosed.”

Eliot, then gives us an example of emotionally and intellectually degenerated man, who cannot express, what he is thinking. He finds himself in a dilemma situation. He seems to be intellectually and emotionally bankrupt and by remaining in such condition he met only troubles himself, but also the people associated to him. In the poem, in the lonely chamber of Belladonna comes her husband, she tells him that she is feeling nervous and requests him to stay with her, perhaps she fears he will go else where. He does not speak to her-his silence gnaws at her heart; she wants to know what has been occupying his mind; she cries in a bewildered tone;
“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.’”

He does not speak, because he feels, he has nothing significant to speak. He is aware of the fact that he is culturally and morally impotent. Tires as looks into his mind, which is equally a scene of torture.

I think we are in rats’ alley

Where the dead men lost their bones.

There are the words that Belladonna’s husband would have uttered. What a fine image to explain the death-in-life that they are forced to lead! Belladonna again cries;

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

Nothing?"
Yes, he is incapable of doing all the above mentioned things. He is maimed and his senses are defunct; he cannot see or remember anything. He is neither living nor dead, his mind is quite blank:

“Are you alive or not? Is there nothing in your head?”

This has a reference to Ariel’s song in *The Tempest* where the eyes of the drowned man are converted into pearls. The lover who is mentally exhausted feels that the line he has quoted from *The Tempest* is meaningless. It is a sort of rag for the waste lenders, though in its original context it appears so intelligent, significant and beautiful. The empty and aimless life of a woman belonging to upper and affluent class, is mentioned here. The lady does not know how to kill her time. She has no idea of how to use her leisure. Life has become a boring routine. She does not know what to do with herself and with the time at her disposal. She feels that she should break the conventions of society and rush out into the street, as she is not dressed. Her hair is untidy and disheveled. She does not know what she
will do tomorrow. There is nothing to do in life except following the monotony of routine. The lady asks her lover what they should do? Both the lover and the lady have no idea of the meaning and goal of life. The dullness of the lazy aristocratic life breaks her: ‘What shall we do tomorrow? What shall we ever do? Her husband has been silent all the while’. Tires as again peeps into his mind in which he reads the following:

“The hot water at ten.

And if it rains, a closed car at four.

And we shall play a game of chess,

Pressing lidless eyes and waiting for a knock upon the door.”

Again a comment upon and rejection of the mechanized, dull routine life which does not allow even sound sleep. The first is the hot water bath at ten o’clock. Thereafter he will go to the club in a closed car if it rains. At the club they will play a game
of chess. There is a reference pertaining to Middleton’s play entitled *Women Beware Women*, where a game of chess is played with the mother-in-law in order to distract her attention and to enable a lustful Duke to seduce her daughter-in-law. The knock upon the door will be a signal that the love-affair should be brought to an end. In ‘A Game of Chess’

> “Eliot juxtaposes a sterile encounter between a neurotic couple with the reckless fertility of the woman in the pub, echoing fears, about the multiplication of the defective element in the population.”

In the second part we are introduced to Lil, aged 31, another wasteland, who has prematurely grown old and has lost her physical charm due to poverty and childbearing. Her story is told, in a pub by one of her friends who knows “very well” Lil’s husband, Albert. Now that Albert is coming home, after four years of military service. She gives ‘practical’ advice to Lil to make herself a bit smart. The money Albert gave her for getting
a nice set of teeth she spent on pills for abortion. Her friend tells her that Albert
"............wants a good time,

And if you don’t give it him, there’s other will, ...
...
...
..."14

Who is responsible for her bearing five children? She? If not, why should she be looked down upon by her own man who has ruined her youth and beauty for his pleasure? Lil’s friend, the interlocutor of this part is perhaps herself one who would give Albert ‘a good time’. She feels flattered to tell her friends in the pub that she dined with Albert one Sunday.

Well, that Sunday Albert was home, they had a hot gammon,

And they asked me in to dinner, to get the beauty of it

hot-”15

Thus, we see that Lil’s is a tragedy of perverse sex-relation without love. About the situation of modern man, who is wandering aimlessly, James Truslow Adams says:
“We are floundering in a morass”\textsuperscript{16}

It throws light on the tragedy of Lil who has lost her health and is yet unable to keep her husband. It reveals perversion of married life where child-bearing has to be controlled and at the same time, the sensual husband is to be prevented from mixing with other women. There is again and again the cry of the barmaid asking the clients to hurry up as the bar is about to close. The pub is to close down and the clients are bidding farewell to one another.


Ta at. Goodnight Goonight.\textsuperscript{17}

This line is an adaption from the farewell of Ophelia in \textit{Hamlet}, thereby bringing a note of sadness and pathos into the story. These are Ophelia’s last words in Hamlet IV, V. She drowns herself, driven mad by her father’s death and by Hamlet’s rejection. The line does not serve merely as an ironic contrast. It evokes Ophelia’s anguish and suggests
correspondences with the other women in the poem who are victims. The suffering beneath the coarse surface of Lil’s story is suggested by the quotation. Ophelia also recalls the hyacinth girl. There is a note of elegiac pathos in the farewell. Eliot seems to plead that marriage is meant for regulation and discipline of sex life and not for sex perversion. It symbolically sums up the tragedy of the married life of Lil and Albert. Stephen Spender remarks:

“This dialogue of only twenty movingly pregnant lines is followed by thirty-three lines of conversation overhead in a London pub. Their character and quality is, I suppose, the nearest in the poem to the Ur-Waste Land scenes from modern life. They are little more than programmatic. They establish that the married life of a demobilized soldier and his working-class wife can be sordid. They do very little beyond this, though they are
brought back into the frame of the past impinging on the present in the quotation from Ophelia’s farewell to the ladies of the court of Denmark in the last line.”

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REFERENCES


The title of this section is borrowed from the sermon of Lord Buddha wherein he said that the world is on fire, burning with the fire of hatred, with the fire of infatuation, with birth, old age and death, sorrow, lamentation and misery, grief and despair. It also reminds one of the confessions of St. Augustine wherein he represents lust as a burning cauldron. Both in the East and West lust has been condemned as a source of evil, but the spiritually dead, modern humanity knows only lust, and no true love. The section is sermon, but it is a sermon by examples only. Stephen Spender writes:

“The opening of the third section, ‘The Fire Sermon’, like that of ‘A Game of Chess,’ has breadth of orchestration, weaves together the theme of past and present, and is a prelude before the curtain has gone up on the dream of the small house agent’s clerk and the typist. Eliot’s
method, the scientific mode developed from Joyce, of portraying the past parallel with the present, is very much in evidence”¹

The section opens with Tires as surveying the Thames scene in the autumn.

“The river’s tent is broken: the last fingers of leaf

Clutch and sink into the wet bank. The wind

Crosses the brown land, unheard. The nymphs are departed.

Sweet Thames, run softly, till I end my song”²

The holiness of the Thames river has come to an end. The last leaves of the autumn season fall on the bank and sink into the water. The wind moves without any rustle. The nymphs, who used to play on the river bank, have gone away. The poet addresses the sweet Thames and requests her to flow softly, till he finishes his song. Cleanthes Brooks remarks:
“The Fire Sermon makes much use of several of the symbols already developed. The fire is the sterile burning of lust, and the section is a sermon, although a sermon by example only. This section of the poem also contains some of the most easily apprehended uses of literary allusion. The poem opens on a vision of the modern river. In Spenser’s ‘Prothalamion’ the scene described is also a river scene at London, and it is dominated by nymphs and their paramours, and the nymphs are preparing for a wedding.”

At that time, the river does not carry empty bottles and sandwich papers and silk handkerchiefs and card-board boxes and cigarette ends or any other remnant of the picnics held on summer nights. The young girls have disappeared as also their friends and lovers who are the wandering successors of executives of city firms who will not come again to the river.
"By the waters of Leman I sat down and wept... ...

Sweet Thames, run softly till I end my song,

Sweet Thames, run softly, for I speak not loud or long.

But at my back in a cold blast I hear

The rattle of the bones, and chuckle spread from ear to ear”

Tires as sits on the river bank and looks at the water of the river and cannot help weeping. What a great change now! The sweet Thames and its old associations are no more. Instead there is the pollution of the river and the contamination of its surroundings. The poet refers to the waters of Leman. The reference is to lake Leman where Bonnivard the patriot was imprisoned. The other reference is to the fire of lust as the word “Leman” means a mistress or a prostitute. Instead of the gentle music of the water of the Sweet Thames, he hears the sounds
of the laughter of young men and women enjoying sex which sounds to him like the rattling of bones. The laughter of the modern sensualist is jarring and unpleasant as the jingling and clashing of the bones. Williamson writes:

“Water in the modern waste land is a negative element, a river of lust. After this apparent but not real non sequitur, he reinvades the Thames.”

The poet now refers to another scene: fishing near the river. The poet tries to fish in the canal behind the gas house, where a rat creeps near him. Instead of finding a fish, he comes across an ugly rat. This reminds him of the story of Ferdinand where the king was exiled by his brother who usurped his throne.

“Musing upon the king my brother’s wreck

And on the king my father’s death before him.

White bodies naked on the low damp ground
And bones caste in a little low dry garret,

Rattled by the rat’s foot only, year to year.”6

Today the scene of the river bank is very depressing. White naked bodies can be seen on the buildings of the bank. They are disturbed by the rats to be found on the bank. Today the roads along the bank are full of motor cars; the hooting of the horns is a signal for Mrs. Porter to meet her lover Sweeney. The face of Mrs. Porter shines under the moon-light. She is accompanied by her daughter. They wash their feet not in the river water but in soda water. The sound of the Church music brings dirty thoughts to man. Cleanthes Brooks writes:

“The protagonist in the poem, then, imagines himself not only in the situation of Ferdinand in The Tempest but also in that of one of the characters in the Grail legend, and the wreck, to be applied literally in the first instance, applies metaphor in the second.”7
He would like to debauch the innocent children singing in the choir. This song is followed by the song of the nightingale. Her song which appeared sweet to people in ancient time now is considered as a call for sexual enjoyment. When Tiresias sees Mrs. Porter and her daughter washing their feet in soda water, the following lines from Paul Verlaine’s ‘Parsifal’ arises in his mind, And, 0 these children’s voices singing in the dome. Williamson writes:

“The irony belongs to his vision: water has lost its proper efficacy, has become malignant. But the choir melts into other sounds that carry a theme—the song of rape belonging to the nightingale.”

This line refers to the choir of children singing at the foot washing ceremony preceding the success of Parsifal’s quest and the lifting of the curse from the Fisher King and his country. But looking at Mrs. Porter and her daughter washing their feet, he is stunned at the parody of a pious ritual. He anticipates that Sweeney will rape Mrs. Porter’s daughter and Mrs. Porter will
be happy because after all, she is a procuress. He feels that Miss Porter is crying like Philomel-nightingale ‘Twit twit twit Jug jug jug jug Jug, and Sweeney is chasing her.

“Unreal city

Under the brown fog of a winter noon

Mr. Eugenie’s, the Smyrna merchant

Unshaven, with a pocket full of currants”

The poet calls London the unreal city because unbelievable things happen in this town. Rape, lust and cheating go on without any hindrance. The poet recalls a scene in London in the fog of a winter noon when he meets Mr. Eugenie’s, a merchant from Smyrna, who is ugly and unshaven. His pocket is full of samples of currants and business documents. He stays at Cannon street hotel and spends the week-end at the Monopole hotel. Both the hotels were notorious for sex perversions including homosexual contacts. The merchant invites the protagonist to lunch. The merchant of
today has his eyes on lust and money making. Cleanthes Brooks writes:

“Mr. Eugenie’s, the Smyrna merchant, is the one-eyed merchant mentioned by Madame Sosostris. The fact that the merchant is one-eyed apparently means, in Madame Sosostris’ speech, no more than that the merchant’s face on the card is shown in profile. But Eliot applies the term to Mr. Eugenie’s for a totally different effect.”

Eliot now gives another instance of mechanical sex-relationship. The girl typist who works in the office, rises from the desk in the evening

“At the violet hour, when the eyes and back

Turn upward from the desk, when the human engine waits
Like a taxi throbbing waiting,

I Tires as, though blind, throbbing between two lives.”

Her daily routine of drudgery is now over. She is like a human machine, like a throbbing taxi. Tires as, the protagonist gives us the picture of the typist. He has personal experience of such girls as he has led two lives, as a man and as a woman. The typist gets home, prepares her tea, cleans dishes and then prepares the dinner. She collects the clothes drying on cloth line hanging outside the window and she arranges them. Williamson writes:

“The introduction of “the typist” illustrates Eliot’s device of syntactic condensation; functioning as both object and subject, she exemplifies the metamorphic flow of things in this poem.”

Tires as visualizes the scene in the girl’s room as she waits for her lover. He is young clerk of a house-agent who has a look
of confidence but he is actually nervous. He is compared to Bradford Millionaire with a silk head. He has no culture or inner confidence. He approaches the typist and knows that she is bored. He is not disappointed by the girl. She is indifferent to his love-game. After completing his sex-act, the clerk gives a farewell kiss and goes downstairs.

“Endeavour’s to engage her in caresses
Which still are unreported, if undesired.
Flushed and decided, he assaults at once;
Exploring hands encounter no defense;
His vanity requires no response,
And makes a welcome of indifference.”

The girl has gone through mechanical sex. She has no sense of regret. She gets up and looks at the mirror and arranges her hair, she is glad that the sex act is over. Eliot refers to the seduced girl in The Vicar of Wakefield who is full of shame
and repentance. In the past, loss of chastity was considered worse than death for a girl. But in the modern age it is a mechanical routine. The girl after the sex act looks towards the mirror mechanically and puts a record on the gramophone.

“When lovely woman stoops to folly and

Paces about her room again, alone,

She smoothes her hair with automatic hand,

And puts a record on the gramophone.”

Cleanthes Brooks says:

“In the modern world, however, even the relation between man and woman is also sterile. The incident between the typist and the carbuncular young man is a picture of ‘love’ so exclusively and practically pursued that it is not love at all.”
This gramophone music is heard by the protagonist and he walks up to the public bar in the Lower Thames Street, where he hears another kind of music. It is the music of the workers in the fish market who are relaxing in the cheap hotel. They listen to the music of Mandolins which is interrupted by their spoons at noon-time. This bar is situated near an old church which has beautiful paintings in gold, hanging on the walls.

“The pleasant whining of a mandolin

And a clatter and a chatter from within

Where fish men lounge at noon: where the walls

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Of Magnus Marty

Inexplicable splendor of Ionian white and gold.”

The poet now gives a picture of the river Thames. The daughters of the Thames lament the loss of their chastity and the pollution of water. The song of the first girl is about the pollution of the river Thames caused by trades and commerce. The river water is full of oil and tar. As the boats carry goods,
they pour their oil on the surface of the river. The river is dotted with a number of boats. Some barges move further, carried by the pressure of the wind on their sails. As the boats move, they wash the logs and shift them from one bank to another. These boats remind one of the scenes of the past, when England was ruled by Queen Elizabeth.

“Elizabeth and Leicester

Beating oars

The stem was formed

A gilded shell

Red and gold”

The queen and her lover—the Earl of Leicester are enjoying a pleasure trip on the river. This is a scene of love in high society. In this scene the woman is the superior, because she is a queen, whereas love-making at a lower level shows the superiority of brute male force. This royal love-making is as futile and meaningless as the rape of poor daughters of the
The poet describes the majestic movements of the royal barge glittering in red and gold as, it moves briskly on the water. It passes the towers situated on the river-bank.

The scene now shifts to what happens on the river-bank to the daughters of the Thames in the modern world. The first girl who comes from High bury tells the story of her sexual experience. In her boat, she passed through Richmond and Kew. At Richmond, she was sexually assaulted by a reveler on the floor of the boat. The second girl gives a similar story of her sexual experience.

“Trams and dusty
High bury bore me. Richmond and Kew
Undid me. By Richmond I raised my knees
Supine on the floor of a narrow canoe”

The second girl belongs to Moorgate. She was criminally assaulted by a young man. He felt repressed and promised that
he would behave better. The girl felt ashamed but did not express her displeasure. She kept quite. The third girl belongs to Moorgate sands. Tires as had been to this place. After the sexual assault, her mind was awakened. She could not remember anything. She is compared to broken finger-nails of dirty hands. This shows the insignificance of the seduced girl’s life. Williamson writes:

“As the Thames-daughters recount their story, we learn that they, like the Rhine-daughters, have been violated. The scene carries them down the river to the sea, and the moral journey is similar, ending in a state that “can connect Nothing with Nothing”, that calls its violation merely the “broken finger nails” of people who except nothing.”  

The unreal city of London, burning in the fire of lust is compared to Carthage. Carthage was called a cauldron of
sensuality by St. Augustine. He prayed to God that he should be saved through His grace.

“To Carthage then I came

Burning

O Lord Thou pluckiest me out

O Lord thou pluckest

burning”

As the title of this section suggests, The Fire Sermon refers to the universal flame of sex which is burning in this world. Buddha’s fire sermon reminds one that the fire refers to the lust, hatred, and infatuation. The remedy suggested by the Lord Buddha and St. Augustine for putting out this fire is self-control and moral discipline, which tames this strong desire. Eliot believes that the degeneration of the modern world is due to sex-perversion, and violation of the sanctity of sex and dignity of woman. Cleanthes Brooks writes:
“The songs of the three Thames-daughters, as a matter of fact, epitomize this whole section of the poem. With reference to the quotations from St. Augustine and Buddha at the end of “The Fire Sermon” Eliot states that the collocation of these two representatives of eastern and western asceticism, as the culmination of this part of the poem, is not an accident.”

REFERENCES


13. The Waste Land, 36