

Gender Identity and the Crisis of Masculinity in T.S. Eliot's "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock"

Bellour Leila

Department of Foreign Languages -Mila University Centre, Algeria.

Abstract

This paper vindicates that Prufrock's misogyny is inextricably interlinked with his homosexuality and the crisis of his masculinity. His journey is not in search for romantic love; it is a quest for gender identity especially that he inhabits a world where patriarchy is on the wane. The overwhelming question in "The Love Song" is "Who Am I?"

Keywords: Gender identity, misogyny, the crisis of masculinity, queer theory, "the love song of j. alfred prufrock", the feminine other, patriarchal society, homosexuality.

Résumé

Cet article, qui prend appui sur la théorie queer de Judith Butler, permet d'expliquer la misogynie de Prufrock. Elle est inextricablement reliée avec son penchant homosexuel et la crise de sa masculinité. L'odyssée de Prufrock n'est pas en quête d'un amour romantique ; mais bel et bien une exploration de son identité de genre, notamment celle qu'il a vécu dans un monde où la patriarchie est culbutée. La question qui se pose dans "La chanson d'amour" est : Qui suis-je ?

Mots clés : L'identité de genre, misogynie, crise de la masculinité, la théorie queer, "la chanson d'amour de j.alfred prufrock", l'autre féminin, société patriarcale, homosexualité.

ملخص

إن هذا المقال الذي يطبق نظرية النوع الاجتماعي لـ جوديث بتلر يبين أن كراهية بروفروك للمرأة مرتبط بالشذوذ الجنسي وانهايار رجولته. إن رحلة بروفروك ليست بحثا عن حب رومانسي بل تنقيبا عن هوية نوعه الاجتماعي، خاصة وأنه يقطن عالما أضحت فيه الأبوسية هشيمة. إن سؤال بروفروك الذي أثقل كاهله في "أغنية الحب" هو "من أكون؟"

الكلمات المفتاحية: هوية النوع الاجتماعي، كراهية النساء، انهيار الرجولة، نظرية النوع الاجتماعي، "أغنية الحب لـ ج. ألفريد بروفروك"، الآخر الأنثوي، مجتمع ابوسي، شذوذ جنسي.

The crisis of masculinity, in the modern age, which results in the deconstruction of gender boundaries, emanates from a cluster of socio-economic and political factors. Feminism is one of the factors that threaten to vitiate men's virility, which is reckoned in crisis. The prominent figure in queer theory, Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick states that "many of the major modes of thought and knowledge in Twentieth Century western culture as a whole are structured-indeed, fractured-by a chronic, new endemic crisis of homo/heterosexual definition, indicatively male, dating from the end of the nineteenth century."⁽¹⁾ In her book Deviant Modernism, Colleen Lamos also discusses male authors' concern with the crisis of the traditional male sexual definition. According to her, the writings of Eliot, Joyce and Proust are compelled and shaped by the contemporary turmoil in male gender and sexual identity and by disputes over masculine authority. Although their works manifest diverse responses to this dilemma-ranging from Eliot's reassertion of traditional authority to Joyce's flirtation with femininity to Proust's interrogation of the epistemology of sexuality-all of these writers confronted the modern challenge to normative understandings of manhood and paternal authority.⁽²⁾

Despite gender instability and mobility, Eliot defends a masculine and patriarchal tradition. The poet is not trying to transcend gender binarism and to reconcile the polarity male female. He is rather eschewing and lamenting the fragility of masculine identity. Another recent critic, who tackles the issue of gender in Modernism, is Ed Madden. In his book Tiresian Poetics, he uses the mythic figure Tiresias as an exemplar of queer gender in

Modernism. According to him, "There is something very queer about Tiresias". He is a "mythic transsexual [who] has represented a kind of liminal identity."⁽³⁾ Gendered both male and female, Tiresias exemplifies the blurring of gender bifurcation and the collapsibility of the binary male/female. Tiresias, who is the main personae in *The Waste Land*, represents effeminacy and the crisis of masculinity.

In the modern age, gender starts to be viewed as performative, owing to the loss of a stable subject. Men make herculean efforts to protect masculinity and to shore up patriarchy, which becomes on the wane. Their fear and abhorrence of the feminine become intense. In fact, the most recent readings of Modernism are tempted to gender this movement as masculine; however, a discussion of this issue, here, would increase the size of my paper fourfold.

Since its publication, "The Love Song" has provoked a wide range of readings. Eliot's critics might agree that "The Love Song" is about male-female relationships. But the failure of integration and fulfillment is interpreted differently. Some critical readings approach the poem as a psychological portrait of a male speaker who is unable to love, owing to his inadequacy and timidity. Others have focused on the problem of alienation, which is the individual's lot in the twentieth century. The critic A.G. George reads "The Love Song" as a poem of despair. In his words, "Prufrock's love song is the confession of the despair of a romantic aesthete unable to make an existential choice."⁽⁴⁾ Leon Waldof's critical view is that Prufrock suffers from an immense fear of love. According to him, there is "a fear of crippling reprisal", that is, fear of punishment for

possessing dangerous libidinal desires. Prufrock's paralysis is also due to his "fear that one's desires are inherently dangerous." He reads the whole poem as Prufrock's struggle to control his libidinal impulses, which he views as amoral⁽⁵⁾.

A throng of critics point out that the overwhelming question, in the poem, points to a metaphysical problem. Marta Sienicka contends that Prufrock suffers from an inner tension between his desire to relate to the feminine and his inability to do so. He identifies Prufrock's major problem as a dissociation of sensibility or a split of mind and body ⁽⁶⁾ The critic Robert McNamara argues that Prufrock suffers from self-fragmentation and that his "paralysis [is] a result, in large part, of his desire for a totalizing image of himself."⁽⁷⁾ Eliot's critic, Denis Donoghue, states that "The Love Song" is about "spiritual panic, the mind swirling in a void, or the penury of one's being in the world."⁽⁸⁾ Borrowing from Klein's and Fairbairn's theories of object-relation, Simten Gurac explains Prufrock's inability to forge a romantic relation with a woman as a result of an unsatisfying early object relation, which is rooted in infantile anxieties and frustrations. According to her, Prufrock's anxieties emanate from his early love bond with his mother ⁽⁹⁾.

Though "The Love Song" has been discussed extensively, many critics have not solicited attention to the theme of misogyny in the poem. There is a general consensus among Eliot's critics that in his early poems, including "The Love Song", there is a problem of union and communion between man and woman, but the vitriolic indictment of Eliot as a misogynous is a recent critical view.

Eliot's critics have been at pains to explain his repulsion and hatred for women, which is still a troublesome question that has not been convincingly answered. A coterie of critics view Prufrock as the alter ego of Eliot, who has a very dark vision of existence. According to them, Eliot does not just hate women, but he views humanity, in general, as repulsive and distasteful. Thus, his dislike of women comes as no surprise. One of the champions of this view, Russell Hope Robbins quotes Eliot who states that "The majority of mankind is lazy-minded, incurious, absorbed in vanities, and tepid in emotion, and is therefore incapable of either much doubt or much faith."⁽¹⁰⁾ Very much like Robbins, Denis Donoghue views misogyny as a normal stance in the case of Eliot, who has a very pessimistic philosophy of life. He states that Eliot "felt that much of human life was disgusting. In his Christian years he believed that his best practice, in addition to daily prayer, was to regard human relations as provisional and ancillary to some relation beyond them."⁽¹¹⁾ Donoghue finds Eliot's misogyny and his inhuman treatment of the closest people to him difficult to explain. He states: "I cannot otherwise explain, and can't explain away, his apparently heartless treatment of some people who cared for him and devoted many years to that care. I am thinking of Emily Hale, Mary Trevelyan, and John Hayward."⁽¹²⁾

A cluster of critics consider Eliot's misogyny as part of a tradition, which indicts the feminine. His depiction of the feminine in his verse is not divergent from that of Baudelaire or Laforgue, who believe that romantic relations are degrading. Lyndall Gordon takes side with the critics, who view Eliot's misogyny as mimetic of a long

tradition, which regards women with abhorrence. According to her, "Eliot seems to have regarded a seductive woman not as a human being but as a man's ordeal, a figure of sin with whom the man had heroically to consort. I think that Eliot's view of women had much more to do with traditional and literary prejudices than with the reality of his marriage, however unsuitable."⁽¹³⁾ Gordon's reading of Eliot's misogyny is cogent, because his hatred of women is evident even in the poems he composed before his marriage. His marriage to a hysterical woman, who suffers from physical and mental ailments only strengthens his misogyny. In her discussion of male American writers' representation of men and women in their writings, Gordon remarks the inhumanity with which women are treated. She maintains that "Male American writers (with the notable exception of James) do not readily conceive heroines with the depth and humanity they regularly accord to their great heroes. Eliot's earliest heroines followed a tradition in which women exist as stereotypes of poison or saccharine, devouring energy or sickly pallor."(Eliot's Early Years 25) Along similar lines, Flanzbaum Hilene finds Eliot's disgust of the body and his revulsion of women as part of a phenomenon called gynephobia, which becomes rife in the modern age. In Hilene's words, "American modernism seems to be full of gynephobic men [...] Avoidance of women, then, is required; fear women because they have too power over you. Fear women's bodies because who knows what hybrid fruit they will bring forth."⁽¹⁴⁾ Hilene finds an echo of her view in Walter Benn Michael's book Our America, which discusses the nativists' fear of the coming

generations brought up by non-nativist women. They expect these children to be perverse and out of control. So, to solve this problem, which erects them, they suggest sterile non-marital relationships with women. In the same vein, and in a daring attempt to interpret Eliot's misogyny, M. Teresa Gibert-Maceda concludes that "Eliot was aligning himself with the tradition that had stood against the stereotype of romantic love."⁽¹⁵⁾

Some of Eliot's recent critics discuss "The Love Song" by dint of an exclusive biographical approach, which is in sharp contrast with Eliot's theory of impersonality. Eliot's fear and dislike of women, according to Peter Ackroyd, seems to be paradoxical. He opines that Eliot's disgust of femininity is rooted in his very intimate relation with his sisters and mother, the reason why he finds it difficult to accept their erotic side. In his words, "It has often been noted how paradoxical that reaction is in a young man who from his first years had been surrounded by the affection of mother, sisters, and nurse. But the fact that he had close relations with women who supported or nurtured him makes it all the more likely that he found it difficult to accept their sexual nature also"⁽¹⁶⁾. In his childhood, Eliot was showered by the passion and affection of his mother, his sisters, and his nurse. Their tenderness and consideredness impelled him to perceive the nature of the feminine as pure and angelic. Eliot not only remained an extremely shy person, but he grew to view sex as vitiating and tarnishing. This attitude was reinforced by the Unitarianism of his family, which imbued him with the view of sex as nastiness.

Since the publication of "The Love Song" coincides with Eliot's marriage

(1915), many critics have interpreted the tormented male-female relationships, in the poem, as a dramatization of Eliot's failing marriage despite the fact that the poem was written in 1910. Carole Seymour Jones, who relies heavily on biographical details, considers Eliot's marriage as the main cause of his hatred of the feminine. She focuses on the influence of his wife, Vivien, on his life and poetry⁽¹⁷⁾.

This paper argues that gender and sexuality are the psychological manifestations of a repressed homosexuality, which engenders a mortal fear or at least grave anxiety of femininity. The thrust of these claims has been made somewhat scandalously by biographers like Carole Seymour-Jones in her biography of Eliot's wife, Vivienne; however, these critics' fraught and dubious analysis lacks judiciousness and ventures into the quagmire of unsubstantiated speculation. To the best of my knowledge, there's a paucity of biographical evidence for such assertions but no clear textual or theoretical support.

My claim of the existence of misogyny and homoeroticism, which has gone hitherto unnoticed, in the poem, is a daring attempt to offer an original and revealing window into the prurient aspect of Eliot's poem, which seems hazardous in the case of a canonical author, who is deemed to be the saint of modernism because of his theory of impersonality and his religious critical sensibility. Until the last few years, misogyny and homosexuality in Eliot's poems have been only rumours, which are sniggered in private. In fact, Eliot wants to defend Modernism and masculinity against the miasma of the feminine and to maintain

the shackles of patriarchy. The present paper provides a fresh reading of the poem in the light of contemporary conceptions/perceptions of masculinity. Reading the poem by dint of queer theory, in particular, is a personal endeavor, especially that the bulk of critical works on "The Love Song" have not dealt with male same-sex eroticism in the poem. Hence, queer theory is a development in Eliot's criticism.

The poem opens with what looks like a purposeful invitation of a nameless and sexless companion to make a visit in the evening, which is reminiscent of the violet hour in "The Waste Land". Prufrock, the vainglorious speaker, is encumbered by a pent-up question, which seems to be a proposal of marriage or a romantic declaration of love. This question is so overwhelming that it needs to be released. Proceeding to the following lines shows that Prufrock, who is roaming the dismal streets in search for a passionate relation, is tormented by deep psychological frustrations and ailments, which are evident in his description of the "restless nights". The half-deserted streets suggest a speaker buffeted by extreme pangs of loneliness and solitude. Prufrock suffers from a profound sense of solitariness and alienation, which is the individual's lot in the 20th century. Though Prufrock frequents these parties, he is not integrated but rather alienated and emotionally detached. In the poem, no genuine communication ensues between the Prufrock and this lady or between Prufrock and his companion whose gender is unknown if he/she exists at all. Prufrock inhabits a world, which is reft of communion and union. His relationships are frail, impersonal, and devoid of intimacy.

Prufrock's inwardness is reinforced by the use of a dramatic monologue and the epigraph, which suggests that Prufrock is one of the damned in this hellish existence, and that he speaks only because he is confident that no one is overhearing his thoughts. The interior monologue indicates Prufrock's inability to connect to the external world. His internal emotional conflicts and his overwhelming question are self-confessed. One might even venture to say that Prufrock has not left the room at all and that the journey takes place only in his mental landscape. Hence, the 'you', which appears at the beginning of the poem and disappears shortly, might be Prufrock himself, who addresses himself in a desperate search for a companion and out of an urgent need for nearness and emotional approximation. He feels that he cannot disturb his own universe of aimlessness and loneliness and declare his love to a woman.

The "Love Song" might be read as a peregrination of a man, who is bent on showing and asserting his masculinity, which seems to be oozing away. The poem's opening lines deconventionalise traditional love. The simile of the evening, as "a patient etherized upon a table"⁽¹⁸⁾, bespeaks Prufrock's inertia and internal state of emotional crisis. Like the etherized patient, who is waiting to be operated, Prufrock's virility seems to be withering. He is very akin to a paralyzed patient throbbing between life and death. The simile imparts impressions of an aching and psychologically maimed lover, who, seemingly, suffers from the torments and vagaries of love.

Prufrock's very simple emotional question seems to be a heroic act, which demands huge herculean efforts. Whatever attempts he has made,

Prufrock does not dare to avow his romantic love for this woman. He does not even have the words to formulate his thoughts and to communicate his surreptitious desire. He says: "It is impossible to say just what I mean!"⁽¹⁹⁾ So, in "The Love Song", not just romantic relations are torn apart, but also language fails as a connector or binder. Prufrock's loss of virility and masculine vigour is evinced in his lack of "the strength to force the moment to its crisis."⁽²⁰⁾ He suffers from a weakness, which is usually associated with women but deemed to be insulated from men. His vainglorious heroic attempts are foredoomed to failure though he has "wept and fasted, wept and prayed"⁽²¹⁾.

Prufrock is cognizant of the crisis of his masculinity, which is spelled out in his confession: "I have seen the moment of my greatness flicker."⁽²²⁾ Indeed, the word 'flicker' evokes the withering or the extinction of the fire of his sexual desire. Prufrock, who tries to find a well-defined gender identity that he lacks, admits that he is not Hamlet or John the Baptist. He cannot be compared to Lazarus either because he is not a man of miracles. Unlike this figure, who came back to life, Prufrock's emotions and passions remain dormant. Indeed, he is a person of "no great matter."⁽²³⁾ He compares himself to an "attendant lord", very much like Polonius, "meticulous; Full of high sentence, but a bit obtuse; At times, indeed, almost ridiculous—Almost, at times, the Fool."⁽²⁴⁾ The epigraph, which is taken from Dante's *Purgatorio* suggests that there is no resurrection from his emotional death. Prufrock's vitality has drained and he becomes very conscious of the fading away of his youth and

strength. He feels that death, “the eternal footman”, is approaching him.

Prufrock suffers from a profound emotional debility, which can be explained in terms of a psychological problem dubbed *aboulie*. Eliot’s biographer Peter Ackroyd defines *aboulie* as “a withdrawal into negative coldness., with an attendant loss of mental rigour and physical energy.”⁽²⁵⁾ To express his lack of masculinity, Prufrock compares himself to glaring male figures, but he could not identify any similitude. He lacks the stamina and the courage of John the Baptist whose head was cut when announcing the coming of Jesus. He is afraid that his head might be “brought in upon a platter.”⁽²⁶⁾ Unlike John the Baptist, Prufrock is afraid of the aftermaths of his overwhelming love question. He also lacks the boldness, heroism, and romanticism of Hamlet. Unlike this figure, Prufrock’s hesitation and incapability of decisive action is due to his cowardice and inadequacy. His question whether he dares eat a peach or not points to his feeling of impotence because, traditionally, peach is a symbol of marriage and immortality.

Seemingly, Prufrock suffers from a ‘dissociation of sensibility’, emanating from an utter emotional turmoil. His intellectual and emotional sides are torn apart. The ‘You’, whom the reader presumes to be Prufrock’s companion, disappears after line 12 because it is a mere fragment of his shattered self. Indeed, Prufrock fails to connect to a woman because he fails to connect even to himself. In his discussion of the double, in male Modernists’ texts, the critic Michael Kane writes: “Whatever the medical definition of schizophrenia [...] the appearance of ‘the double’ is indicative of a crisis of identity of the white upper-class male towards the end

of the nineteenth century.”⁽²⁷⁾ In the modern age, masculinity is shaken. Men, like Prufrock, feel that their masculinity is in crisis. According to Kane, “The appearance of the figure of the ‘double’ in literature is thus [...] seen as a result of a crisis affecting man’s narcissism, threatening him with castration or even death.”⁽²⁸⁾

Because he fails to pose his question and thus to alleviate the heaviness that has burdened his mind, Prufrock keeps reiterating fragments of his inner thoughts that he is unable to verbalize. This reiteration is reminiscent of Shakespeare’s Hamlet. According to Eliot, “The levity of Hamlet, his repetition of phrase, his puns, are not part of a deliberate plan of dissimulation, but a form of emotional relief.”⁽²⁹⁾ The repetition of phrases and sentences also indicates Prufrock’s neurotic anxiety, which seems to be masculine in nature. According to Mark Breitenberg, “anxiety is an inevitable product of patriarchy at the same time as it contributes to the reproduction of patriarchy.”⁽³⁰⁾ Masculine anxiety is perhaps due to an intense fear of the miasma of the burgeoning feminist movement in the 20th century, a time when concern about manhood intensified, especially that a myriad of men died during the First World War. In a letter to his brother Henry, Eliot avows that the poem is an expression of an intense fear of death. He writes:
I often feel that ‘J. A. [lfred] P. [rufrock]’ is a swan song, but I never mention the fact because Vivien is so exceedingly anxious that I shall equal it, and would be bitterly disappointed if I do not. So do not suggest to anyone how I feel. The present year has been, in some respects, the most awful nightmare of anxiety that the mind of man could conceive, but at least it is

not dull, and it has its compensations⁽³¹⁾.

The oxford dictionary defines the swan song as follows: “(from the old belief that a swan sang sweetly when about to die) last performance, appearance, work before death of a poet, musician, etc.”⁽³²⁾ The fact that the publication of the poem was confluent with the First World War throws fresh light on my reading of the poem. Owing to the ravages of war, there spread a fear among men that the manly society and the ideal of manhood might vanish and ‘melt into the air’. In her discussion of the impact of the war on the modern man, Ana Garden-Coyne writes: “The impact of war upon British men’s bodies and minds-shell shock, disability, fear, alcoholism, and malingering-aggravated anxieties about masculinity.”⁽³³⁾ In fact, the war has destabilized the individual’s gender identity, resulting in the crisis of man’s virility.

During and after the First World War, which smashed up everything, men became very obsessed with the body, because man’s health, and the strong body in particular, is the sinew of manhood, which is threatened by the ravages of the war. Prufrock, like any ordinary modern man, is very much concerned with his physicality. According to Ana Garden-Coyne, In the Twentieth Century, muscular action became firmly associated with masculine identity and the sexual body. In the aftermath of war, muscles came to symbolize the rehabilitation of the whole man, even when he was missing a limb. This was a powerful basis for rebuilding confidence in the male body and masculinity.⁽³⁴⁾

Prufrock seems to be very much concerned about his spurious ideal image. To restore and assert his

overweening masculinity, he shows a narcissistic and ingrained interest in his self-image and physical appearance.

Prufrock’s love song is not a conventional one, for Prufrock would like to speak of love to a woman, but he does not dare due to his emotional passivity. His detailed description of the relaxing cat, who is “Asleep.....tired.....or it malingers”⁽³⁵⁾, points to his dormant passions and his inability to integrate in a romantic world. In addition to its suggestion of emotional debility and aloofness, the recurrent image of the relaxing cat also attests to Prufrock’s aimlessness and his vagrant and vain odyssey.

Prufrock is impervious to the music and the perfume in women’s room. Even the woman’s arms fail to disinter his desires and awaken his silent bonds of affection. He remains aloof and remote, indifferent and emotionally blind to this woman’s existence. In short, Prufrock does not look like an ordinary man because he is destitute of ravenous desire. When he tries to be a bit romantic by referring to the ladies’ bare arms, Prufrock immediately destroys this romanticism, muttering that on these arms “in the lamplight, downed with light brown hair”⁽³⁶⁾. He has a romantic glimpse, but he soon comes back to reality. He finds it difficult to overcome his inner inadequacies and inhibitions and probe into the physical and corporeal world of the Other. Prufrock even wonders if it is perfume, which makes him digress and talk romantically, because he is not romantic by nature. Still, Prufrock wants to transgress the boundaries of his reticence and pose his romantic query, but he feels emotionally paralyzed, unable even to act or to take the endeavor. In a daring attempt to

introduce his passionate conversation with the lady, he shirks articulating his intense longings, thinking, instead, of describing the desolate and ugly places he has gone through to reach her. He also muses on the lonely men he has seen when looking out through the windows. Those men are the alter ego of Prufrock, who might be musing on his state of psychological alienation and isolation.

Prufrock is unable to love and to utter his love song because his romantic yearnings are dormant and stagnant. In words reminiscent of Andrew Marvell's "To his coy Mistress", Prufrock avows his fervid desire to consummate his love. In Marvell's poem, the raving lover says: "Let us roll all our strength and all/ our sweetness, up into a ball"⁽³⁷⁾. Prufrock's allusion to Marvell's poem evinces the stunning difference betwixt the two lovers. The romantic speaker, in Marvell's poem, urges his mistress to make love because life is very short and time is fleeting. Contrariwise, in "The Love Song", Prufrock is unable to proclaim his love song or to embody the virtues of romantic lovers. For him, there is enough time to "murder and to create". Though he strains too hard to find words to express his marriage proposal, Prufrock's hopes of articulating and formulating his question are dashed to pieces. He trails off into silence and sinks into an abyss of despair. Indeed, his love song is, ironically, a song of unattainable love.

Prufrock cannot disturb his own universe of shyness and hesitation, which renders him incapable of action. Even at moments when he is swept by a sudden gust of passion, he often digresses. Owing to his reluctance, the ageing lover keeps delaying asking his overwhelming question, trying to

convince himself that "There will be time." When he considers the passage of time, he rejoices at having a lot of remaining time to ask his question, which indicates his hesitation. But his repetition of the line "There will be time" is also suggestive of his attempts to soothe his time-ridden mind by denying and repressing his fear of the transience of life that has left him behind. Prufrock's comparing of himself to a crab, a repulsive creature, which moves sideways, indicates his timidity. He even thinks of denying what he means before asking his question. If he ever asked this question, he would say: "That is not what I meant at all/That is not it, at all."⁽³⁸⁾ Prufrock's hesitation culminates in his wondering if his overwhelming question is worth asking at all.

One of Prufrock's impediments, which leads to his petrification, is his lack of self-confidence. He is afraid that his image is unattractive, and hence, of what others might say or think of him. He starts imagining women's acerbic comments on his physical appearance. He says: "They will say: 'How his hair is growing thin!'"⁽³⁹⁾ Prufrock is afraid of being mocked because of the thinness of his body, which indicates his lack of masculine vigour; "They will say: 'But how his arms and legs are thin!'"⁽⁴⁰⁾ To appease his worries about his image, he thinks of parting his hair behind to shield from women's view the baldness of his hair. Prufrock desperately remarks that the women in the room are not interested in him. They averted their eyes from him, talking, instead, of Michelangelo.

Prufrock is afraid of their judgments, and thus, of being relegated and rejected. The phrase "dying fall" implies that they seem as if they are talking to each other, but they are

commenting on him. This is why he says: "I know the voices", which means that they are talking about him. Prufrock has a paltry and horrible vision of himself. To reveal his worthlessness, he avows that he is not Hamlet, who delayed his action, waiting for the right moment in order not to be suspected but never because of cowardice and diffidence. Prufrock even imagines himself as an insect, which indicates his lack of self-esteem and self-respect.

In an attempt to justify his reluctance to pose his query, Prufrock confesses his boredom with those women who frequent the tea parties or the drawing rooms. He says: "I have known them all already, known them all/ Have known the evenings, mornings, afternoons."⁽⁴¹⁾ So, Prufrock, who is not a man of a susceptible nature, becomes bored not just with women but also with existence itself. He is leading a futile, aimless, and purposeless life. In a funny way of evoking one's life, Prufrock reflects on squandering his life, saying that he has "measured out [his] life with coffee spoons"⁽⁴²⁾ The line buttresses Prufrock's sense of ennui and points to his frequent going to these parties and his familiarity with these women, who do not seem appealing to him. Prufrock ponders the significance of his question, wondering whether his love question or proposal of marriage is worth asking at all. He says: "And would it have been worth it, after all."⁽⁴³⁾ So, he conceives his question as puerile.

Prufrock's misogynistic view of women comes to the fore in the opening lines of the poem in his description of the bleak picture of the city, which has always been associated with women, following the lead of Baudelaire. In this regard, Jane Goldman states that

gendered readings of Modernism have evinced how some male modernists (re)produced an 'unreal city', reviled as infernal and populated by semi-automated and monstrously disfigured humanity. This male modernist view perpetuates a misogynist French Symbolist tradition that transferred Romantic vision of a feminized nature to equally disturbing Decadent visions of City as a woman following Baudelaire.⁽⁴⁴⁾

Prufrock's misogyny is also evident in his reference to John the Baptist. Michael Kane explains the significance of this biblical story in the modernist context. He states that the name of anything that was desirably undesirable was automatically woman-not by any means a new phenomenon, as the revival of the biblical story of Salomé and John the Baptist suggests. None the less, the revival of this story at the *fin de siècle* as well as the many writings along similar lines we have looked at is evidence of an intensification of the already strongly misogynist trend in Western history at this particular time when women were beginning to rebel in an organized fashion against such misogynist identification⁽⁴⁵⁾.

According to the Biblical version, a dance was organized in order to rejoice Salomé's uncle Herod. The latter said to Salomé to ask whatever she wanted. In response, Salomé's request was John the Baptist's head, and she was granted her wish. Henceforth, she has been considered the icon of the evil feminine or femme fatale.

Prufrock's hatred of the feminine is also evinced in his silencing of the woman he pretends to love. In the whole poem, it is only Prufrock's voice, which is heard. The woman figures as an absence or a ghost. Following the patriarchal tradition, Prufrock

associates women with rooms and men with the outer spaces, namely the sea and the streets. The phrase “formulated phrase” indicates women’s lack of reason because it means to criticise someone without cogent and plausible proofs. Prufrock’s repulsion for women, which he keeps quelled, is clear in his detachment and in tearing himself from the woman, remaining a mere observer rather than a participant. His emotional disengagement spurns any physical contact or involvement.

Prufrock’s disgust of women, at the end of the poem, amounts to escapism; he flees to the sea from their erotic demands. His act of escape is an attempt to rid himself of women’s attachment and to cordon off himself from the woe of sex. The journey does not end by a romantic consummation. One might opine that Prufrock’s journey is not in search for his beloved but rather to transcend the feminine Other. Prufrock sinks into water as a purifying power from the hell he lives in. His flee suggests his abandonment and utter remoteness not just from his beloved but from the whole reality, very much like the male speaker in “A Game of Chess”.

A deterrent force, which precludes Prufrock from declaring his love to his beloved, is his disgust of the body, the woman’s and even his own body. In the Western tradition, man is always associated with the soul, while the woman is always perceived as a body. Seemingly, the woman in the poem figures as a mere object, which is clear in his reference to fragmented corporeal parts of her body, like the eyes and the arms, rather than viewing her as a complete whole.

In fact, his desire is hampered by his profound fear and intense feelings of insecurity. Women’s eyes, for Prufrock,

are not seductive or stimulating, but rather threatening and frightening. He says: “I have known the eyes already, known them all/The eyes that fix you in a formulated phrase.”⁽⁴⁶⁾ Prufrock is afraid of women’s terrifying gaze, which stigmatizes him, objectifies him, and makes him feel like an insect “sprawling on a pin”. The use of ‘you’, here, instead of ‘I’ vindicates that the “you” in the opening lines is but a fragment of Prufrock’s self. “The eyes that fix you in a formulated phrase” evokes an aura of surgery, which recalls to mind the opening simile of the “patient etherized upon a table”. This sense is reinforced by the original title of the poem, which is “Prufrock Among Woman.” The eyes of Prufrock’s women are in sharp contrast with those of Beatrice. In his translation of Dante’s Canto IV, Eliot states: “Beatrice looked on me with eyes so divine filled with sparks of love.”⁽⁴⁷⁾ Contrariwise, Eliot’s women, to borrow MacDiarmid’s words, “use their eyes as daggers.”⁽⁴⁸⁾

Prufrock’s ravenous women are not just repulsive, but also threatening to his very humanity and individuality. His vision of himself “formulated, sprawling on a pin”⁽⁴⁹⁾, suggests cannibalism. His imagining of his head “brought in upon a platter” reinforces his fear of meeting the fate of John the Baptist, who was sacrificed to Salomé, and it also evinces his view of women as blood suckers. The line also evokes cannibalism and depicts Prufrock’s women as oversexed dynamos, who view Prufrock as a sexual object rather than a human subject.

Prufrock is swept by a sudden gust of passion when contemplating the lady’s “arms which are braceleted and white and bare”⁽⁵⁰⁾. Though the description of the arms, which are seductive, is the most romantic moment

when Prufrock could have asked his overwhelming question, this attraction suddenly turns into repulsion when he reflects: "But in the lamplight, downed with light brown hair!"⁽⁵¹⁾ So, Prufrock seems to abhor and denounce women's bodies. His parenthetical comment might imply his search for a perfect angelic feminine, who is non-existent.

Prufrock's distaste for women's bodies amounts to his abnegation and denial of his very humanity. He imagines himself shrinking to an insect pinned to the wall. He also wishes to be a pair of ragged claws "Scuttling across the floors of silent seas."⁽⁵²⁾ The line expresses his desire to escape from this human society, which is blemished by women and resort, instead, to the sea, a pure or silent world unlike that of women.

Women's talking of Michelangelo is due to their interest in his masculine physical beauty rather than in his psychological qualities. Hence, their gossip is meant to satiate their sexual urges. According to James Miller, There were important museums in all these cities where Eliot could have witnessed the women who 'come and go/Talking of Michelangelo' Even Boston's Gardner museum had its Michelangelo (An implicit meaning of the line is often missed: Michelangelo's male nudes have well-built, sexually potent bodies naturally attractive to female art-lovers; the women coming and going would not, of course, mention this dimension in their admiring comments.⁽⁵³⁾

So, Prufrock, who feels in perils among women, tries to indemnify himself from being a means of quenching their defiling sexual passions. The refrain "In the room the women come and go/Talking of Michelangelo" reminds Prufrock of

women's sexual threat. According to MacDiarmid, "Bound to dressing and drawing rooms, Eliot's Ladies [...] use sex and sexuality to exchange men like commodities."⁽⁵⁴⁾

Prufrock is petrified by a great fear of the feminine, which precludes his ability to feel and project his emotions and feelings outward. He sums up his fears in the following declaration: "And in short, I was afraid."⁽⁵⁵⁾ Prufrock's presence in these rooms, 'among women', intensifies his fear of death, which he imagines coming in the image of a footman. So, Prufrock's hesitation is due not just to his timidity but also to his fear and apprehension of women. He is overwhelmed by a feeling of sexual insecurity. In this regard, the critic Colleen Lamos writes:

The motif of drowning is relentlessly reiterated in Eliot's texts, from "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock", "Hysteria", and *The Waste Land* through *The Four Quartets* and *The Family Reunion*. I have argued elsewhere that this motif of "death by water" reflects the rather obvious threat of female sexuality as well as Eliot's erotic idealization of the "Phlebas" figure.⁽⁵⁶⁾

Prufrock's obsession with old age despite being a middle-aged man is due to his fear of women, which issues his hallucination of drowning. As Colleen Lamos maintains, "The theme of drowning, relentlessly repeated from Eliot's earliest poems through *Four Quartets*, is inextricably bound up with anxieties concerning women and male sexuality."⁽⁵⁷⁾ One might view Prufrock's sinking into the sea as a transcendence of the feminine Other, because the city, in Modernism, is often associated with sex.

After realizing that his connection to a woman is as impossible as the marriage of heaven and hell, Prufrock,

at the end, repudiates his quest. He, then, goes to the beach. In his comment on the line of the mermaids, Miller writes: "Is this the moment that Prufrock realizes his sexuality does not extend to women, mermaids symbolizing the eternal female somehow purified? Or is it that the mermaids, with their fish tails, pose sexual threat in a relationship?"⁽⁵⁸⁾ To exonerate himself from women, Prufrock ultimately drops anchor in the sea, which is, archetypally, the womb of the mother and the symbol of purity. He flees from the women's world, preferring to remain a Madonna, virginal and free from the stains of the feminine. Prufrock's internal desires and conflicts are resolved by rejecting women and their society altogether.

Prufrock's inability to connect to the feminine Other is also on account of her culture and social class to which the poem makes a salient reference. Prufrock belongs to a high and elite culture, which is evident in his references to Hamlet, John the Baptist, Andrew Marvell, reading novels,...etc. Contrariwise, the woman belongs to a low culture, which is evinced in the refrain "In the room, the women come and go,/Talking of Michelangelo." Cultural discrepancies keep Prufrock and the lady apart from each other. Women, in Prufrock's world, are associated with gossip, boredom, ennui, aimlessness, consumerism, and with all trifles. In the modern age, even time, which is abstract, is quantified and measured in terms of consumption. In Prufrock's world, it is concretized, materialized, and measured by coffee spoons. In his comments on the line, "I have measured my life with coffee spoons", the critic Eric Sigg states that "the 'measuring' also describes Prufrock helplessly observing a drop of

his inner life disappear down someone else's throat with every vampiric swallow of coffee."⁽⁵⁹⁾ Prufrock's women frequent the orgiastic parties for pleasure-seeking. They are associated with the consumer culture. According to Rita Felski, "Not only does woman remain the archetypal consumer, but an overt anxiety comes to the fore that men are in turn being feminized by the castrating effects of an ever more pervasive commodification."⁽⁶⁰⁾ Indeed, Prufrock disdains this low culture, which is very boring and irritating for him. He, at the end, resorts to the sea as a neurotic repudiation of women and their mass culture, which is gendered feminine.

The central question the poem raises is what thwarts the male questor from winning the woman he loves. Prufrock's anxiety and frustration are mainly sexual; they are the result of his inability to love women and his inclination towards same-sex love. Prufrock's perverse desires are clear from the skulking "insidious intent" in the first lines, which conjures up impressions of a debased relationship, and purports that this relationship is sexually deviant. According to Miller, "the poem portrays a man who cannot love-feel several desire for-women; the question of same-sex desire is not confronted in the poem except by reference, obliquely. Some might well conclude that it is the main theme, even though not overtly sounded, in the poem."⁽⁶¹⁾ Though Miller is exaggerating in considering homoerotic love the poem's main concern, his inference of same-sex love, which is implied in the poem, is superb.

Prufrock makes herculean efforts to show that his love is for a woman. But his pretended love song hides a deep-seated misogyny and homoeroticism.

According to Xavier Magne, the homosexual must “take pains to appear sexually interested in women, to be intimate with women, to seem to relish open, and frequently obscene, sexual talk about women. This last is much in his programme for hiding sexual indifference or downright physical aversion to women.”⁽⁶²⁾

In his discussion of the poetic mask, a technique Eliot borrowed from Jules Lafarge⁽⁶³⁾, and which he considers the

same as the Uranian (i.e. Homosexual mask), James E. Miller quotes from Xavier Magne’s book The Intersexes. Magne spells out a statement, which befits Prufrock’s psychological case. He states that “the normal man can tell the lady he loves of his passion without fear of being ostracized. He can even discuss his love with his friends, and their response is likely to be sympathy.”⁽⁶⁴⁾ Contrariwise, the Uranian

must often ‘go through’ the most overwhelming, soul-prostrating of loves, finding his nerves and mind and body beaten down under the passion, his days and nights vilified or poisoned by it, all without his doing anything so persistently as to hide his sentiment forever from the object of it! To hide from his closest friends, from suspicion by the world! Hide it he must...Ever the mask, the shuddering concealment, the anguish of hidden passion that burns his life away!⁽⁶⁵⁾.

Prufrock keeps his overwhelming question hidden because his emotional yearnings have strayed beyond the borders of heterosexuality. Though he beckons the world to an overwhelming question, he retracts and retreats, requesting “Oh, do not ask, “What is it?””⁽⁶⁶⁾ Despite his bombastic and fustian determination to “tell you all” of his love, Prufrock cannot fulfill his promise, simply because his romantic love is Uranian.

like the solid thing.”⁽⁶⁷⁾ The words are spoken by Statius to his male fellow poet Virgil whom he tries to embrace, forgetting that they are mere shadows. This love, which is profound and enormous, is perverse because it is addressed not to a woman but rather proclaimed by a man to another. According to Martin Scofield, “The epigraph from Dante (Purgatorio XXI, of Eliot's the French expedition to the

Prufrock’s homoerotic innuendo comes to the fore in the epigraph to the collection of poems entitled Prufrock and Other Observations. The epigraph, which is taken from Dante’s Purgatorio and dedicated to Eliot’s male friend Jean Verdenal, reads as follows: “Now can you understand the quality of love which warms me towards you so that I forget our vanity, and treat the shadows feeling for Verdenal, who was killed in 133-6) suggests the strength Dardanelles in 1915”⁽⁶⁸⁾ In the epigraph, which stresses the importance of physical proximity, the speaker is overwhelmed by a twitching desire to embrace his male beloved out of encumbering love, forgetting that they are mere spirits. This proclivity to physical approximation and attachment to a man is in stark contrast with Prufrock’s repudiation of the female body in the poem.

The dedication of the volume, Eliot's male friend Jean Verdinal, who died during the war and whom Eliot used to love too much, seems suspicious in regard to the poem, which is supposed to be a man's love song for a woman. Eliot's biographer, Peter Ackroyd, states that "Jean Verdinal became an army officer in November

Prufrock and Other Observations, to 1914, joined the 17th infantry regiment in February 1915 and then three months later was killed in the Dardanelles: the first, but not the only, friend of Eliot to be killed in the war."⁽⁶⁹⁾ In his essay "Dante", Eliot spells out a statement, which invokes homoerotic desire. He states:

A great deal of sentiment has been spilt, especially in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, upon idealizing the reciprocal feelings of man and woman towards each other, which various realists have been irritated to denounce: this sentiment ignoring the fact that the love of man and woman (or for that matter of man and man) is only explained and made reasonable by the higher love, or else is simply the coupling of animals.⁽⁷⁰⁾

Indeed, the phrase between parentheses suggests homoerotic desire or male-male love. Like Guido, in the epigraph to "The Love Song", Prufrock is perhaps afraid of spreading his infamy, which is a defiling and demeaning desire. He finds it difficult to avow his latent homoerotic love, because he lives in a society raged so exhaustively against homosexuals.

Dante, in Canto XXVI, describes the damned in hell whose suffering emanates from their fervid debased desires. Eliot, in his comments on Dante's meeting with his predecessors, Guido Guinicelli and Arnaut Daniel (Canto XXVI), states: "In this canto the Lustful are purged in flame, yet we see

clearly how the flame of purgatory differs from that of hell. In hell, the torment issues from the very nature of the damned themselves, expresses their essence; they writhe in the torment of their own perpetually perverted nature."⁽⁷¹⁾ In queer theory, perversion is used as another synonym for homoeroticism or sexual deviance. Prufrock's self-castigation when he "wept and fasted, wept and prayed" is perhaps an act of contrition to purge himself and atone for his nefarious passions. Male friendship has enormously increased by the advent of modernity. In this regard, Sarah Cole states that

The relationship between canonical modernism and the problem of male intimacy varies considerably-in some cases, it seems that modernism effectively usurps the voice of the scared friend for its own purposes; at other times, the figure of the lost friend is offered as an emblem of modernity; friendship can stand both as a bulwark against totalizing features of modern culture or as a sad causality of those processes⁽⁷²⁾

The poem's dedication suggests its speaker's mourning and bemoaning of the death of a lost beloved male friend,

but he is unable to confess because of social prohibitions. In this respect, Judith Butler writes:

If we accept the notion that the prohibition on homosexuality operates throughout a largely heterosexual culture as one of its defining operations, then the loss of homosexual objects and aims [...] would appear to be foreclosed from the start. I say 'foreclosed' to suggest that this is a preemptive loss, a mourning for un-lived possibilities [...] When certain kinds of losses are compelled by a set of culturally prevalent prohibitions, we might expect a culturally prevalent form of melancholia, one which signals the internalisation of the ungrieved and ungrievable homosexual cathexis.⁽⁷³⁾

Indeed, this homoeroticism is rife in the modern age, which is still patriarchal inspite of the waves of feminism. As Michael Kane points out, "Male narcissism and homoeroticism have, however, always been central, if hidden, features of patriarchal culture."⁽⁷⁴⁾ This homoeroticism might be perceived as a bulwark against the threat of femininity. Prufrock's narcissism is interlinked with his homoeroticism. In this regard, Kane states: "One almost automatically associates narcissism and

homosexuality with the image of a man pursuing or being pursued by his double."⁽⁷⁵⁾ So, Prufrock's obsession with his self-image and his dissociated self, represented by his double, the 'you' in the opening lines, can be explained in terms of homoeroticism.

According to the champions of queer theory, gender is constructed through a reiteration of norms. Judith Butler, who asserts the performativity of gender, states that "performativity is not a singular act, but a repetition and a ritual."⁽⁷⁶⁾ As she puts it,

Gender ought not to be construed as a stable identity or locus of agency from which various acts follow; rather, gender is an identity tenuously constituted in time, instituted in an exterior space through a *stylised repetition of acts*. The effect of gender is produced through the stylisation of the body and, hence, must be understood as the mundane way in which bodily gestures, movements, and styles of various kinds constitute the illusion of an abiding gendered self⁽⁷⁷⁾

So, gender identity, in Butler's view, is not innate but rather inculcated by vicarious learning.

There is ample evidence, in the poem, that gender is constructed.

Prufrock, for instance, is very obsessed with the society's judgments and comments because his gender identity and self-perception seem to be socially determined. Indeed, gender identity in

“The Love Song” is performative. This is evident in Prufrock’s determination “to prepare a face to meet the faces that you meet.”⁽⁷⁸⁾ The lines indicate that though Prufrock has an effeminate personality, he will borrow and perform a masculine role. Indeed, his private and effeminate self does not dovetail with his public or social one. This is evinced in the following two lines: “There will be time, there will be time/To prepare a face to meet the faces that you meet.” The lines show that Prufrock’s public self, which is

expected to perform a masculine role, is infected. He is unable to perform that role because his inner self

Aware that he will shock the world by his failure to perform his masculine role prescribed by his society, Prufrock asks: “Do I dare? Do I dare disturb the universe?”⁽⁷⁹⁾ By not acting his masculine role to fulfill the society’s

is not masculine by nature. Prufrock’s psychological problem emanates from his inability to associate or fuse his public self with the private one. His social self attempts to be masculine and to adapt to the social norms and conventions, whereas his inner self is effeminate. Prufrock even thinks of parting his hair behind like a woman, thus stepping beyond the already-established canons of gender.

produced as a ritualized repetition of conventions, and that this ritual is socially compelled in part by the force of a compulsory heterosexuality.”⁽⁸⁰⁾ Butler reiterates the same view as follows:

expectations, Prufrock has contravened the norms fabricated by his patriarchal culture. Butler argues that “gender is

Gender is the repeated stylization of the body, a set of repeated acts within a highly rigid regulatory frame that congeal over time to produce the appearance of substance, of a natural sort of being. A political genealogy of gender ontologies, if it is successful, will deconstruct the substantive appearance of gender into its constitutive acts and locate and account for those acts within the compulsory frames set by the various forces that police the social appearance of gender⁽⁸¹⁾

Despite many endeavors, Prufrock fails to act his masculine role. His question “Shall I disturb the universe?” does not only indicate his inability to perform his conventional and traditional role, which is masculine. It also suggests an unconventional homoerotic love. Because of social

constraints, which baffle his fervent emotional discharge, Prufrock’s ‘insidious intents’ remain mere internalized thoughts, which are never spelt out. In his assertion of the performativity of gender in the poem, the critic Cyrena Pondrom writes:

Gender offers itself here not as automatic, inborn and unreflective, but as a complex set of coercive cultural expectations that are performed in social behavior. The women of the poem appear alternatively as threatening and dismissive or as objects of compulsive desire mixed with a subtle revulsion [...] the theme of a man seeking to define who he is in relationship to the other sex emerges in the poem almost immediately⁽⁸²⁾

Prufrock's hell emanates from the dueling parts of his own personality. He is trapped between two conflicting desires: a homosexual and a heterosexual one. These conflicting desires have shattered his unified self. In addition to his search for words to sing his love song, he is also trying to gesticulate the appropriate gestures to perform his masculine role. Prufrock wants to assert his masculinity by dressing like a man or a suitor. He describes his "morning coat, [his] collar mounting firmly to the chin, [his] necktie rich and modest, but asserted by a simple pin-"⁽⁸³⁾ In this regard, Judith Butler writes: "In my view, performativity is not just about speech acts. It is also about bodily acts. The relation between the two is complicated."⁽⁸⁴⁾ Despite his attempts to assume a masculine identity, Prufrock's endeavors are doomed to failure because his inside or private self is destitute of a masculine essence.

Though, traditionally, clothes evince one's gender, Prufrock attempts to dress like a woman, which affirms his

effeminacy. He talks of the "skirts that trail along the floor."⁽⁸⁵⁾ In discussing drag, which refers to men's wearing of women's clothes, Judith Butler writes: "I would suggest as well that drag fully subverts the distinction between inner and outer psychic space and effectively mocks both the expressive model of gender and the notion of a true gender identity."⁽⁸⁶⁾ Drag, according to Butler, reveals the fluid and precarious nature of gender. In her words, "In imitating gender, drag implicitly reveals the imitative structure of gender itself-as well as its contingency."⁽⁸⁷⁾ Prufrock ponders the possibility of parting his hair behind like a woman, hence, transcending the boundaries of masculine identity. He asks: "Shall I part my hair behind?"⁽⁸⁸⁾ Prufrock's gender identity is seemingly feminine, and he finds it too difficult to perform the masculine role. His behavior and utterances resemble those of an actor, who is training and preparing for performance. Prufrock's overwhelming question is, probably, "Who am I? Am I a man or a woman?"

Conclusion

Prufrock is blasé about romantic life. His torment is due to the bifurcation of his gender identity. The latter might be described as liminal, for he aspires to perform his socially expected masculine role, yet his gender identity seems to be feminine or rather vacillate between the feminine and the

masculine. Prufrock fails to be courageous, self-assured, and to imperil a romantic relationship. His masculinity, which he attempts to perform, ends with an utter failure. Prufrock's love song does not have a kernel of truth, for his hankering for women is a mere pretense, which veils his deep-seated feelings of fear and

repulsion for women. The latter cannot stir his desire or ignite the fire of his passions, because he seethes with smoldering morbid emotions which veer to men. Prufrock fails to confess

and release his repressed emotional tension and to fulfill his fervid homosexual desire because it violates the shackles of heterosexual norms.

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