Queer Affect in T.S. Eliot's Early Poems

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Introduction

What is it about T.S. Eliot's earliest works, from 1915's "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock" to 1922's *The Waste Land*, that continues to capture our attention a century after their initial publications? Do the formal elements of Eliot's art—the fluid schema and lilting language, the unforgettable lines, the experiments with poetic voice and collage—keep us reading, or does Eliot capture our attention by bringing our own affective experiences to life? Recent and influential studies of Eliot's work have connected the forms of his poems to the social and historical contexts that seem to have produced them, focusing, for example, on Eliot's engagements with mass and popular culture and on his aggressive anti-Semitism. In *T.S. Eliot and the Cultural Divide,* David Chinitz reads Eliot's prose as "one point of departure for the nascent discipline of cultural studies" and "suggests other reasons why renewed attention to Eliot's treatment of popular culture is instructive."[1] Another significant example is Anthony Julius's *T.S. Eliot, anti-Semitism, and literary form,* which argues that Eliot's anti-Semitism is at once indefensible and "integral to his oeuvre, an oeuvre which is to be valued and preserved."[2] Decades of Eliot criticism, including these two recent examples, has made it difficult to see beyond what has already been said. Not enough has been done, in particular, to develop a novel, more biographical approach to Eliot's works. My own reading of Eliot tries to develop such an approach, arguing that Eliot's texts continue to fascinate us because of the force and tension in their treatment of gender and sexuality.

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[1] Chinitz, David E. *T.S. Eliot and the Cultural Divide.* The University of Chicago Press, 2005, pp. 10.
[2] Julius, Anthony. *T.S. Eliot, Anti-Semitism, and Literary Form.* Cambridge University Press, 1995, pp. 40.

Following critics such as Colleen Lamos, Tim Dean, and Nancy Gish, I read Eliot's early poems for their representations of gender anxiety, misogyny, cross-gender identification, and potential queerness. I argue that the inherent misogyny of Eliot's early poems is due in part to his intense sexual frustration. Since masculinity was irrevocably linked with the possibility of successful heterosexual coupling in Eliot's society (as it is in our own), his own sense of sexual illegibility left him feeling anxious and inhibited. Poetry was not viewed as a masculine profession in England or America in the years leading up to and away from World War I, further stunting his masculine image. As if to prevent himself from being socially classified as feminine, Eliot attempted to claim masculine agency in his poetry through the denunciation of women, even if his hatred of women arises out of his own self-identification with them. "In the room the women come and go," Eliot writes famously in "Prufrock," a refrain that expresses simultaneously his utter fascination with these women and his frustration at being misunderstood by them.[3] Such palpable misogyny persists through his mental breakdown in 1919, though in *The Waste Land* it finds itself offset by a potential queerness that may be transformative.

A biographical approach is essential in understanding the sexual energies and nuances in Eliot's poems, and how they relate back to his own sexual life. That said, this paper will not "reveal" a secret part of Eliot that has never been discussed before. Instead, my argument pulls from numerous different critics to create a novel, queer understanding of Eliot's life and poetry. Important to my own claim is Colleen Lamos's argument that, "[u]ncovering homoerotic impulses does not unlock the enigma of Eliot's personality, nor are they the hidden truth of his work. Instead of operating as the scandalous key to Eliot's writings, those desires are woven into

[3] Eliot, T.S. "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock." *T.S. Eliot: The Complete Poems and Plays 1909-1950,* Harcourt Brace and Company, 1980, pp. 4.

its fabric and displayed on its most innocent surfaces."[4] Eliot's works contain undeniably queer, homoerotic, and feminine imagery. Instead of claiming that Eliot identified as either homosexual or queer, I posit that these instances of queerness in his works arise because of his struggles with self-hatred and conceptions of femininity.

My first goal in this thesis is to connect Eliot's internalized self-hatred and anxieties over being successful with the blatantly misogynistic, overly-anxious, and often queer rhetoric of his early poems—namely "Portrait of a Lady," "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock," and *The Waste Land.* The narrators in the first two pre-mental-breakdown poems are both emotionally unstable, attempting to suppress internalized feelings of sexual illegibility and alleged femininity through the intellectual denunciation of women. *The Waste Land*—written and published shortly after Eliot's mental breakdown—incorporates a wide range of fragmented narrators, misogynistic commentary, and various inexplicably anxious affects, all falling under the influence of an overarching feminine consciousness. Across these three poems, from 1910-1922,

[4] Lamos, Colleen. "The love song of T.S. Eliot: elegiac homoeroticism in the early poetry." *Gender, Desire, and Sexuality in T.S. Eliot,* edited by Cassandra Laity and Nancy K. Gish, Cambridge University Press, 2004, pp. 23-42.
Lamos emphasizes the homoeroticism of the text while mostly removing Eliot from the analysis. She opens with a paradox to show the struggles queer theorists face when confronting Eliot: "T.S. Eliot presents the dilemma of an avowedly heterosexual, homophobic writer whose work is obliquely yet significantly marked by homoerotic investments" (23). Homoerotic themes are deeply engrained within Eliot's works, yet they do not necessarily act as "confessions."

Eliot's internal anxieties over femininity and sexual impotency are sublimated onto the surfaces of his poems. Since femininity shares numerous traits with homoeroticism, queerness inevitably proliferates: "Moreover, same-sex desires are complexly interwoven with masculine and feminine identities" (23). Lamos's main claim falls much in line with my own—instances of queerness in Eliot's poetry do not reflect his own identity. Instead, his written feminine anxieties create queer themes and images within his works. Lamos also discusses Eliot's fascination with death and the elegiac form: "In general, romantic love is represented as elegiac in Eliot's poetry" (27).

Eliot's anxieties over gender performance decreased significantly, as he began coming to terms with his own non-normative identity.

In addition to tracking Eliot's self-identification across these three poems, I also note the major instances of queer, non-normative sexualities which appear throughout the narratives. I do not claim that Eliot identified as homosexual, asexual, or transgender. Instead, his uniquely ambiguous identity vacillates anxiously in relation to social constructions of masculinity femininity. In particular, his frequent attempts to combat or interpret his internalized femininity—from the self-hatred in "Portrait of a Lady" and "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock" to the self-accepting feminine consciousness in *The Waste Land*—unknowingly expand to encompass broad, overarching themes of queerness. Following these three essential poems, I conclude that as Eliot's own self-acceptance of his feminine, non-normative identity increases, instances of unintended queerness flourishes.

"Portrait of a Lady"

The poem which most prominently mirrors young Eliot's personal anxieties toward women is "Portrait of a Lady," written in 1915. The narrative centers around a young, anxious male narrator and his older female acquaintance. The basis for the mistress in "Portrait of a Lady" is Adeleine Moffat—a wealthy, middle-aged woman of esteem whom Eliot frequently visited while in Boston. Eliot studied at Harvard University for his undergraduate degree, exposing him to Boston's vibrant cultural scene and important early social interactions with women, which were mostly nurturing, as opposed to sexual, in nature. And while it is unwise to assume that "Portrait" is entirely autobiographical, the parallels between Eliot's early life and the anxious narrator are too similar to ignore.

The main similarity between the narrator in "Portrait" and Eliot himself is a shared sense of anxiety towards women. Peter Ackroyd pinpoints the anxious root of Eliot's early poetry: "But just as Eliot found in *Hamlet* obscure and inexpressible emotions which could not be dragged 'to light', so we are able to recognize in the tone and preoccupations of his poetry during this period a brooding dislike, or fear, of women."[5] Further, Eliot's emotional instability made him difficult to read, both socially and sexually: "His sexual instincts were, as he said, nervous in origin because they were implicated in his fear of ridicule and associated with feelings of guilt and self-disgust."[6] Eliot channels his frustrations in his poems, sublimating his anxious sexual tension into his art.[7] Eliot often follows a dissociative path, using his intellectual poems as vehicles to express his own sexual frustration.

In "Portrait of a Lady," Eliot offers a portrait of all women as emotional and unintelligent. Yet ironically, the male narrator also embodies numerous hysterical traits. The contrast of the emotional woman with the hysterical male narrator fits into Gish's argument of the "poetics of dissociation," presenting the reader with two paradoxical images ripped from Eliot's fragmented subconscious. The narrator suffers from ceaseless anxious fits throughout the poem, slipping into post-lapsarian descents at the slightest trigger: "And so the conversation slips

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[5] Ackroyd, Peter. *T.S. Eliot: A Life.* Simon and Schuster, 1984, pp. 44.
[6] Ibid pp. 45.
[7] Dean, Tim. "T.S. Eliot, famous clairvoyante." *Gender, Desire, and Sexuality in T.S. Eliot,* edited by Cassandra Laity and Nancy K. Gish, Cambridge University Press, 2004, pp. 43-65. Tim Dean disagrees with the claims posited here, instead opting for a more impersonalist approach to Eliot. Dean asks: "Does modernist aesthetic theory amount to more than a set of masks that criticism must tear away?" Dean hopes to "challenge this longstanding assumption, beginning from the simple hypothesis that impersonality represents a strategy of access, rather than a strategy of evasion," suggesting a new form of access to understanding Eliot's works (43-44). I argue instead that Eliot felt pressed to fit in with fellow artists by creating intellectual works, while also struggling with his father's disappointment.

/ Among velleities and carefully caught regrets."[8] Anxiety and sexual frustration set the framework of the narrative, characterizing the experiences of both the narrator and the woman, while also weighing the poem down with an inescapable lethargy. Yet despite the many similarities between the man and woman, there is one glaring difference that stratifies them: intellect. The intellectual male has agency over his anxieties, allowing him to emotionally remove himself from the woman: "Well! And what if she should die some afternoon, / Afternoon grey and smoky, evening yellow and rose; / Should die and leave me sitting pen in hand."[9] He purposely avoids sending the woman letters on the assumption that she will die soon, rendering his emotional outreach for naught. The woman, however, is hopelessly attached to the male narrator, lacking the mental strength to separate herself from him: "But what have I, but what have I, my friend, / To give you, what can you receive from me? / Only the friendship and the sympathy / Of one about to reach her journey's end."[10] Here, she is characterized as a desperate, emotionally unstable woman. Even though she recognizes the failure of their relationship, she lacks the intellect to end it, and her emotions cloud her vision. As the seasons progress, the narrator's self-possession gradually increases, forming a gathering fog of sexual and emotional indifference. The intellectual divide between male and female becomes increasingly apparent as time progresses and anxieties proliferate.

The poem opens amongst a desolate winter landscape, introducing the reader to the failed (social and romantic) connection between the narrator and the woman. Flickering candles illuminate the dark unknown, yet they are not bright enough for the narrator to interpret his

[8] Eliot, T.S. "Portrait of a Lady." *T.S. Eliot: The Complete Poems and Plays 1909-1950*, Harcourt Brace and Company, 1980, pp. 8.
[9] Ibid pp. 11.
[10] Ibid pp. 10.

surroundings: “And four wax candles in the darkened room, / Four rings of light upon the ceiling overhead.”[11] The mistress expects intercourse by preparing a romantic, candle-lit ambiance. This also suggests a post-coital moment, as noted by the narrator’s inspection of the ceiling. The next line suggests that the sexual encounter has failed, morphing the romantic ambiance into a dismal manifestation of lost love: “An atmosphere of Juliet’s tomb.”[12] The narrator appears to be virginal, not knowing what to expect from intercourse. This anxiety prevents him from acting, rendering him mute: “Prepared for all the things to be said, or left unsaid.”[13] He is anxious to bring up the sexual issue, but also preparing himself to confront the woman. Yet he ultimately represses his complicated feelings, remaining silent. The mistress attempts to push the narrator into sexual discourse through musical innuendo: “So intimate, this Chopin, that I think his soul / Should be resurrected only among friends / Some two or three, who will not touch the bloom / That is rubbed and questioned in the concert room.”[14] The intimacy of listening to Chopin together imitates sexual coitus. The woman is desperately trying to engage sexually, but the narrator’s anxieties prevent him from responding appropriately. He fails to reciprocate her feelings once again, marking him as both socially and sexually incompetent: “And so the conversation slips.”[15] The narrator’s descent continues, and by the end of this section he has resorted to self-belittlement: “Inside my brain a dull tom-tom begins / Absurdly hammering a prelude of its own.”[16] Unable to interpret his emotions, the narrator classifies himself as a dull,

[11] Ibid pp. 8.
[12] Ibid pp. 8.
[13] Ibid pp. 8.
[14] Ibid pp. 8.
[15] Ibid pp. 8.
[16] Ibid pp. 9.

forlorn figure. As the narrative shifts to spring, this overarching sense of emotional dissonance expands further.

Section two jumps ahead to the rejuvenation of spring: "Now that lilacs are in bloom."[17] The landscape surrounding this dysfunctional pair begins to come alive, while their relationship continues to fade. A large part of this disconnect between the narrator and the mistress is their age difference; at least one generation separates them, further inhibiting their ability to connect. The ageing woman criticizes the narrator for not taking advantage of his youth: "Ah, my friend, you do not know, you do not know / What life is, you who hold it in your hands."[18] While it may appear that the woman is the voice of reason in the narrative, Eliot portrays her as the exact opposite. She is unable to comprehend the narrator's actions and emotions, becoming bothered by his lack of interest in her. Eliot uses a misogynistic tone in the previous section—especially with his betrayal of the woman as frantically desperate for attention—but his dislike of women shines here. In response to the woman's perceivably ignorant remark, all the narrator can do is "smile, of course."[19] The narrator belittles the woman to forget his own struggles, placing himself at the less-invested, advantageous side of their relationship. This belittlement is more direct than the first section, as the narrator becomes increasingly self-absorbed and emotionally distant. This increasing dissension also appears in some of the symbolic motifs: "The voice returns like the insistent out-of-tune / Of a broken violin on an August afternoon."[20] Unlike the intimate, beautiful music of Chopin, the narrator now compares the woman to unpleasant, inharmonious raucousness. Her incessant droning takes the narrator out of his head, forcing him

[17] Ibid pp. 9.
[18] Ibid pp. 9.
[19] Ibid pp. 9.
[20] Ibid pp. 9.

to confront the outside world. While done out of genuine care, the woman's persistent attempts at emotional connection are in vain, as the narrator is socially incapable of reciprocation: "How can I make a cowardly amends."[21] He recognizes the woman's attempts at emotional connection, but does not know how to respond. Despondent self-reflection inhibits the narrator's sexual aura, leaving him at an emotional crossroads with his relationships. To hide his inner femininity, the narrator knowingly suppresses his emotions and sexuality, ostracizing the woman in an act of self-retribution. While reflecting further on his emotional dilemmas, the narrator identifies with the queer outdoors: "I remain self-possessed / Except when a street-piano, mechanical and tired / Reiterates some worn-out common song / With the smell of hyacinths across the garden."[22] Commonplace low art, mixed with mythological queer hyacinths, halts all contemplation. For the first time in the poem, the narrator finally makes some progress towards self-identification. He both sympathizes and identifies with these worn-out melodies and queer florae, dragging his queer internal affect out of his mind and into the visual aesthetics of the text itself. His non-normative sexual desires and emotional instability find solace in this fantastical garden, but this glimpse of self-knowledge soon becomes fraught with more anxieties: "Recalling things that other people have desired. / Are these ideas right or wrong?"[23] He makes the connection between his own self-inflicted femininity and traditional instances of queerness, questioning the concept of normalcy. This unresolved struggle climaxes in the final section, when the relationship finally reaches its bitter end.

By the time fall rears its changing, moribund face, the narrator has attained an elevated sense of emotional dissonance. Similarly, Eliot takes on an increasingly misogynistic tone,

[21] Ibid pp. 10.
[22] Ibid pp. 10.
[23] Ibid pp. 10.

further segregating his contrasting themes of intellect and emotion. The first instance of female inadequacy comes with a description of the woman's room: "My smile falls heavily among the bric-à-brac."[24] In Eliot's presentation, the woman does not have the intellectual wherewithal to organize these cluttered, fragmented objects into a coherent whole. Eliot himself, however, successfully strings together numerous affective fragments into a coherent narrative. In his (and the narrator's) eyes, only a male body is capable of channeling intellect into fragmented thoughts and emotions. The narrator holds a similarly misogynistic view, placing himself on a higher cerebral plane than the woman. Yet as previously discussed, this hatred of women and the self is paradoxical. The narrator loathes his ambiguous, "feminine" identity, displacing that hatred onto his woman friend. Yet by asserting this structural dominance over the female body, he undermines his own feminine identity. In the most literal and symbolic senses, this third, autumnal section brings about the "fall of man"—with his increasingly aggressive emotional detachment towards his female friend, the narrator creates a purgatorial paradigm which places him in a position of both self-hatred and isolation. Therefore, both the narrator's and Eliot's attempts of combatting internalized femininity through misogyny ultimately end in volatile self-implosions.

"Portrait" sits in the middle of Eliot's professional and identity struggles, incorporating two separate levels of anxiety into the narrative. His failure to meet expectations of masculine success places him in a queer gender position, polluting his self-image with excessive anxiety and nervousness. Eliot projects this queerness onto the aesthetic features of the text itself, leaving a biographical mark on his art.

[24] Ibid pp. 10.

"The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock"

As already established, "Portrait of a Lady" is Eliot's attempt at supplanting sexual anxieties into a misogynistic narrative. With "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock," however, Eliot focuses more on confronting his social anxieties. By going backwards in time and analyzing "Portrait" before "Prufrock," I hope to show the extent of Eliot's emotional regression. Written four years before "Portrait," "Prufrock" gives us Eliot at his most vulnerable and naïve. The narrative is raw, emotional, and painful to read, yet beautifully captivating in its portrayal of excess feminine emotion. Unlike "Portrait's" sexual frustration and misogynistic aggression, the narrative here is dominated by feminine affect, literally drowning both the narrator and the reader with touchingly melancholic emotion: "Till human voices wake us, and we drown."[25] That said, "Prufrock" still depends on a pointed misogynistic tone.

The misogyny of "Prufrock" may seem tame when compared to the melodramatic presentation of the mistress in "Portrait," but it is still brazenly direct, focusing on female stupidity. Much of the anti-women commentary revolves around a single, repeating line that pops up multiple times throughout: "In the room the women come and go / Talking of Michelangelo."[26] The narrator views women as vapidly infatuated with mainstream "high art," circulating ideas they have overheard, but could not have articulated for themselves. Though the narrator suffers from ceaseless anxieties, he relishes in his intellectual strengths, using his mental superiority as a means of belittling and dehumanizing women: "After the skirts that trail along the floor."[27] Through intellectual denunciation, both the narrator and Eliot attempt to remove themselves from femininity. Yet despite their heightened sense of their own intellectual powers,

[25] "Prufrock" pp. 7.
[26] Ibid pp. 4.
[27] Ibid pp. 6.

the narrator's and Eliot's excessive anxieties directly link them to their misogynistic portrayals of women.

The narrator in "Prufrock" represents Eliot at his most inexperienced, fragile, and anxious. This youthful nervousness, contrasted with the imagery of maturation and decay, reflects the disapproval Eliot faced from his father. Eliot feared he would reach an old age before accomplishing anything meaningful with his life and was preoccupied by his father's masculine expectations for professional and economic success. The narrator suffers from both physical and social anxieties, letting outside opinions influence his self-image: "And indeed there will be time / To wonder, 'Do I dare?' / Time to turn back and descend the stair, / With a bald spot in the middle of my hair."[28] Nancy Gish discusses these hysterical anxieties in her article "Discarnate desire: T.S. Eliot and the poetics of dissociation," emphasizing that this narrator is one of Eliot's many "figures of modern unease [which] depict recognizable forms of psychological distress—notably what was clinically defined as hysteria—and whose famous concept of the 'dissociation of sensibility' can be traced directly to their language."[29] Gish also uses the term "dissociation of sensibility"—which she takes from Eliot's essay "The Metaphysical Poets"—in an attempt to

[28] Ibid pp. 4.

[29] Gish, Nancy K. "Discarnate desire: T.S. Eliot and the poetics of dissociation." *Gender, Desire, and Sexuality in T.S. Eliot,* edited by Cassandra Laity and Nancy K. Gish, Cambridge University Press, 2004, pp. 107-129.
Gish is heavily invested in discussing the numerous divides in Eliot's poetry: "That Eliot's poetry, especially the early work, depicts states of internal division, disorder, doubling, or multiple voices is well known. Especially in regard to 'The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock' and *The Waste Land*" (107). The male figures of Eliot's early poetry display symptoms of hysteria, rendering them objects of femininity. Eliot's own hysterical anxiety—especially regarding sex and women—shines through these multiple reflective characters. Gish further builds off Eliot's use of the 'dissociation of sensibility' while creating his poems: "In psychological theories of dissociation Eliot found, first, a way of understanding the seemingly fragmented modern self and, second, a way of depicting 'modern' states of consciousness in which desire is simultaneously present and absent" (107).

explain the method behind Eliot's madness in his own language.[30] The narrator in "Prufrock" is the physical embodiment of this shift away from metaphysical poetry, towards a more anxious, ambiguous affect: "Do I dare / Disturb the universe?"[31] Anxieties over his career choice and his desire to succeed are funneled into this narrator, whom Eliot allows to be nervous and anxious in public, as it were, whereas it seemed unacceptable for Eliot to externalize those fears himself. But as with any pent-up fears and emotions, they eventually implode.

Eliot's Mental Breakdown

One of the main catalysts of Eliot's mental breakdown was the death of his father in January 1919. "Vivien wrote in her diary," Ackroyd notes, "that it was a terrible ordeal for him."[32] His hyper-masculine father, who "always placed great emphasis upon success in business," was always disappointed in Eliot, "bewildered" at his decision to become a poet.[33] In a fitting end to a relationship characterized by ridicule and resentment, Henry Ware Eliot died before ever seeing his son become successful:

> Now his father was dead. He had died without seeing any evidence of his son's capacity except for a few strange poems in a slim volume. For a young man who had been trying so hard to win his father's approval, the loss was extraordinarily great: not least because Henry Ware Eliot represented the American aspiration towards success, thrift and practicality which exerted so powerful an influence throughout Eliot's life.[34]

This catalytic event was one of the main contributors to Eliot's mental downfall, setting the stage for years of identity struggles to come. Before having had sufficient time to cope, Eliot received more bad news. "His unhappiness was compounded," Ackroyd writes, "by the fact that, at the

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[30] See: Eliot, T.S. "The Metaphysical Poets." *Times Literary Supplement,* 1921.
[31] "Prufrock" pp. 4-5.
[32] Ackroyd pp. 9.
[33] Ibid pp. 19.
[34] Ibid pp. 91.

end of January, Knopf decided to turn down the book."[35] Eliot's fear of failure had, ironically, been realized shortly after his father's death. These two events, combined with the effects on Eliot of World War I, fragmented his psyche, disillusioning him to his art. His temper also flared up sporadically during this period of self-loss, crippling his marriage: "Certainly he was himself capable of violent emotions, and in her diary Vivien [Eliot] remembered an instance of his sudden and violent ferocity."[36] Eliot was spiraling out of control, unable to find inspiration. This breakdown devastated his nerves and senses as well: "Eliot's hypersensitivity was another reason why domestic life was becoming intolerable for him: he was, for example, highly susceptible to noise, and he found no peace in such [raucous] surroundings."[37] After months of suffering, Eliot finally sought mental help in more peaceful surroundings, allowing him to focus on his masterwork of self-discovery: *The Waste Land.*

The Waste Land

In the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, hysteria was viewed as a strictly female affliction. It was believed that a woman's emotional frailty and ignorance made her more prone to fits of panic. However, this hysterical classification was not applied to men in the same way. Even if a man suffered from a nervous breakdown and fits of frenzy, he would not have been diagnosed as hysterical. Because of men's supposed intellectual superiority and greater emotional discipline, it was unlikely for them to be diagnosed as manic. In *The Waste Land,* T.S. Eliot indirectly discusses this gendered, hysterical grey area. Eliot is made uncomfortable by the female characters in the poem, portraying them as hysterical, mysterious, and excessively emotional. Yet ironically, Eliot's own language is manic-depressive and histrionic and thus

[35] Ibid pp. 91.
[36] Ibid pp. 108.
[37] Ibid pp. 95.

embraces the hysteria he seems to criticize. Because he saw himself as extremely intelligent, and since society did not associate hysteria with men, Eliot's emotional outbursts and fits of mania are justified in his mind. The instances of misogyny in the poem suggest a deep-rooted suspicion of his own self-identification with femininity. Yet unlike in "Portrait of a Lady" and "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock," Eliot directly identifies with many of the female characters in *The Waste Land.* Though instances of misogyny remain in the poem, Eliot has also become more accepting of his ambiguous social and sexual identity, structuring *The Waste Land* around an overarching female consciousness. In *The Waste Land,* his misogynistic representation of female hysteria, as well as his general discomfort with the female sex, suggests a larger queer narrative of self-discovery, registering Eliot's attempts to accept his own femininity. This narrative also entails a proliferation of queer language and imagery, contributing to the female consciousness behind the seemingly-unrelated fragments of the poem.

"The Burial of the Dead"

Women in the opening section of *The Waste Land* are represented as either weak and dependent upon men or as mysterious entities. In the poem's opening lines, the reader is introduced to Marie. As the first of many narrators, Marie establishes the theme of the weak, hysterical female. Her anxieties are apparent from the very first line of the poem: "April is the cruellest month, breeding / Lilacs out of the dead land, mixing / Memory and desire, stirring / Dull roots with spring rain."[38] She remains deeply afraid of this April purgatory, where death and life comingle, memories go to die, and new emotions rise from the soil. Marie is ultimately scared of change, content to live in an inflexible world. The rejuvenation of April shatters this

[38] Eliot, T.S. *The Waste Land. T.S. Eliot: The Complete Poems and Plays 1909-1950,* Harcourt Brace and Company, 1980, pp. 37.

illusion for her, forcing her to confront her dread of transformation directly. The images of April prompt her to recall memories of her past weakness: "And when we were children, staying at the arch-duke's, / My cousin's, he took me out on a sled, / And I was frightened. He said, Marie, / Marie, hold on tight. And down we went."[39] Even from a young age, Marie was dependent upon men to help her confront her anxieties and fears, a fact Eliot puts on full display as if to emphasize feminine weakness.

And yet the central paradox of *The Waste Land* emerges from Eliot's misogynistic commentary. Whether he wishes to recognize it or not, Eliot suffers from the same anxieties as Marie; the two are perfect parallels of one another. Eliot, who started working on this poem post-breakdown, channels his own insecurities and weakness into Marie as a means of indirectly addressing his emotions. Since he is a man, and society did not believe men could be hysterical, his only way of venting is through projecting unacceptable emotions onto a fictional woman. The poem begins with Marie's anxieties and weakness as if to allow Eliot to express his own internalized fears. In this first stanza, Eliot attempts to eradicate his femininity through the misogynistic representation of Marie as unalterably weak. And yet, directly behind this physical manifestation of Eliot's own fears comes a cognizant realization of his similarities to Marie. Thus begins the overall narrative arc of the poem, which leans towards an ever-expanding feminine consciousness.

The second stanza of "The Burial of the Dead" adds to the poem's queer undertones, which arise out of Eliot's blooming femininity. Instead of being presented directly, the queerness is shrouded under the ambiguous guise of heteronormativity. This stanza focuses on the "hyacinth girl" and her presumed male lover. This is an allusion to the homosexual Greek

[39] Ibid pp. 37.

romance between Apollo and Hyacinth. Eliot also refers to this myth in "Portrait of a Lady," when he was still unsecure of his ambiguous, non-normative identity. But at this point in his career, especially post-mental-breakdown, Eliot's self-acceptance begins to reshape his imagery. As will become apparent, however, this newfound feminine confidence does not eradicate his misogynistic tone. A prime example of Eliot embracing his non-normative identity in *The Waste Land* is his decision to tackle "male hysteria."

Even though the idea of "male hysteria" was not socially accepted, Eliot subtly alludes to it to confront his own mania. The first lines of this second stanza establish the idea of male hysteria: "What are the roots that clutch, what branches grow / Out of this stony rubbish? Son of man, / You cannot say, or guess, for you know only / A heap of broken images, where the sun beats."[40] Eliot's narrator questions his natural surroundings, wracked by an inner turmoil I read as sexual, even if Eliot perceives it as spiritual and intellectual. The rejuvenation of April and the new life it brings forces Eliot's narrator, much like Marie, into a manic-depressive state of anxious questioning. The voice in this passage, furthermore, belongs to the larger feminine consciousness of the poem. Eliot knows nothing in actuality—his mind is composed of "broken images" loosely strung together by the threads of feminine disquiet. The feminine entity behind the poem calls his attention to his fragmented mind to guide him towards self-realization. Even though these lines, in the eyes of the deistic feminine entity, clearly classify Eliot as maniacal, his deep wealth of knowledge justifies his current destitute mental state.

In her article "'Male Hysteria': A Discourse Analysis," Ursula Link-Heer discusses the paradoxical nature of male hysteria. She writes that, "[t]he paradox of 'male hysteria' demonstrates … that traditional connections between illness and femininity (such as that between

[40] Ibid pp. 38.

hysteria and the womb) do not remain … unaffected by an epochal revolution in discourses."[41] And yet, she argues, this link between hysterical illness and femininity ultimately remains in the social consciousness, even with the development of modern medicine disproving any correlation between the two. This explains why Eliot is so unwilling to accept his hysterical mental state in the earlier sections of the poem: society still saw hysteria as an illness affecting only women. By sublimating his feminine feelings into *The Waste Land*, however, Eliot begins to overcome his prejudice against them. This sets the foundation for his production of a quasi-queer bildungsroman, in which Eliot learns to shed his feminine weakness and to embrace the queer aspects of his identity.

The third stanza of "The Burial of the Dead" registers this transformation. Instead of generating further images of hysteria, as in the previous two stanzas, Eliot introduces Madame Sosostris, a "famous clairvoyante." For Eliot, she is the archetypal woman, full of mystery and foreboding. She offers ominous, cryptic visions, creating an overall tone of discomfort. Women and femininity make Eliot extremely uncomfortable, yet here this discomfort is channeled into Sosostris, who ultimately predicts all the subsequent developments of the poem. Similar to how Eliot's hysterical, "feminine" mind controls his actions, Sosostris controls the outcome of the poem. In a sense, Sosostris is Eliot's internal-self. Tim Dean affirms this claim, arguing that Sosostris "represents not one of Eliot's demeaning portrayals of women, as is usually claimed, but his ideal poetic type."[42] She controls and manipulates the language and events of the poem,

[41] Link-Heer, Ursula. "Male Hysteria: A Discourse Analysis." *Cultural Critique*, No. 15 (Spring 1990), pp. 193.
[42] Dean pp. 44.

piecing together the fragments into a feminine narrative.[43] Sosostris offers a glimpse into the feminine consciousness operating behind the scenes of *The Waste Land.*

The last stanza of "The Burial of the Dead" focuses on hysteria and anxieties over death. A crowd of zombies floods the streets of London, forcing the narrator to confront his fears head on. "Under the brown fog of a winter dawn," Eliot writes, "A crowd flowed over London Bridge, so many, / I had not thought death had undone so many. / Sighs, short and infrequent, were exhaled, / And each man fixed his eyes before his feet."[44] London, with April on the cusp of blossoming, is filled with soulless crowds mindlessly going about their mundane routines. Even though April is the start of spring—when nature should be reborn and the optimism of rejuvenation should fill the air—it is also still reminiscent of winter, where death rules above all else. London in April is a liminal space: it is neither completely dead nor alive. The sight of life beginning to spring up from the death and decay of the landscape (both natural and urban) is the root of the anxieties of the multiple speakers in this first section of the poem. There is also some

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[43] Dean focuses exclusively on denouncing a misogynistic reading in favor of an impersonal, idealized poetic voice. Even Dean's harsh, Barthesian reading cannot separate Madame Sosostris from Eliot—they are parallel representations of one another. Sosostris maps out the events of the entire poem in fragments, much like Eliot's own fragmented writing; both "clairvoyante" figures intimately interact with the conscious cloud of the text. Thus, by writing himself as Madame Sosostris, Eliot embraces his femininity as a form of artistic expression. Even though Dean emphasizes an impersonal reading, he does believe that Eliot's own "hidden" sexuality serves a unique purpose in analyzing his poetry:

> My account of impersonality shifts the critical debate away from closet logic toward a different way of conceptualizing sexuality's impact on Eliot's poetry. Sexuality in Eliot involves hiddenness not as a mode of concealment, but as an occult mode of access with erotic implications (45).

Additionally, Dean believes that "his [Eliot's] impersonalist theory of poetry compels [him] … to embrace a passivity and openness that renders him vulnerable to what feels like bodily violation. Hence his propensity for embodying these qualities in women and sexually ambiguous youths such as Saint Sebastian and Narcissus" (45). I believe that by embracing his vulnerabilities and creating a deeply personal yet paradoxically passive narrative, Eliot unknowingly creates the omnipresent feminine consciousness of *The Waste Land.*

[44] *The Waste Land* pp. 39.

more specific imagery towards the middle of this stanza that reflects World War I: "There I saw one I knew, and stopped him, crying: 'Stetson! / 'You who were with me in the ships at Mylae! / 'That corpse you planted last year in your garden, / 'Has it begun to sprout? Will it bloom this year?"[45] This image has two distinct levels of meaning. Firstly, it continues this theme of life springing from death with the picture of rejuvenation sprouting from the remains of a decaying corpse. This image is also reminiscent of World War I, tying up this entire section with another link to male hysteria. As Ursula Link-Heer describes, "And it was finally the First World War, with its thousands of traumatized soldiers—the so-called 'shell-shocked' or 'war hysterics'—that more than anything else brought to an end the notion that 'male hysteria' was a 'disease to be taken seriously'."[46] The massive influx of mentally ill soldiers in the aftermath of the war created a sense of widespread doubt amongst the public, deeming "male hysteria" as nothing more than hypochondria. The narrator in this stanza is suffering from shell-shock, unable to cope with all the death surrounding him. Much like Marie, he is completely encumbered by hysterical anxiety. Implicitly, Eliot associates this condition with mentally plagued war veterans. Even though he did not fight in the war, Eliot begins to find acceptance with his own mental instability by comparing it to that of a shell-shocked, masculine soldier. By granting himself some of the masculinity of the war veteran, Eliot attempts to counter his feminine identifications. Much like the earlier stanzas of this section, this final image of a beleaguered veteran raises masculinity above femininity in relation to hysteria. This misogynistic discourse continues into "A Game of Chess," while the emerging feminine consciousness—best represented by Madame Sosostris—remains.

[45] Ibid pp. 39.
[46] Link-Heer pp. 192-193.

"A Game of Chess"

The second section of *The Waste Land*, "A Game of Chess," includes the most essential commentary on female hysteria in the entire poem. As in the previous section, in "A Game of Chess" narrators change suddenly, and yet all ultimately fall under the influence of an unmistakably feminine consciousness. The section begins with a conversation between a husband and wife. These characters, unlike the named individuals from the first section, remain nameless. They are meant to represent the archetypal husband and wife and, more broadly, the typical man and woman. While this constant shifting of narrators and characters may seem disorderly, it serves a larger purpose. In his book *Double Talk: The Erotics of Male Literary Collaboration,* Wayne Koestenbaum discusses the structure behind Eliot's fragmented narrative madness: "The metamorphosing narrator—now the Sibyl, now Marie, now Tiresias—is herself or himself a hysteric, moving, like Charcot's Geneviève, through the stylized phases of a fit."[47] The constant shifting focus of the poem mirrors a hysterical fit, whether Eliot intended it to or not. This lends further credence to the claim that a feminine consciousness resides behind everything in the poem, spreading an affective essence of palpable, non-normative identities through the mirrored hysterical structure. At this point in the poem, the hysterical air reaches a new height. The exchanges between the husband and wife provide the most quintessentially hysterical moments in the poem, building as they do upon Eliot's own experiences with mental illness and his continued tendency to disparage women.

The discourse between the man and wife in "A Game of Chess" provides an insightful look into the insistent misogyny of Eliot's masterwork. The wife is portrayed with the traditional

[47] Koestenbaum, Wayne. *Double Talk: The Erotics of Male Literary Collaboration.* Routledge, 1989, pp. 129.

symptoms of hysteria: "'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'."[48] Not only does she directly state that her nerves are tormented, but her speech is also affected. Her language begins to degrade as she falls deeper into her hysterical fit, signaling a communicative disconnect. There is, however, a glaring irony in this section. As Wayne Koestenbaum states, "The wife confesses bad nerves, but the husband is truly the hysteric, speechless as the man in the hyacinth garden so enraptured by the woman's hair that he could neither speak nor see."[49] Even though Eliot intentionally paints the wife as hysterical, the true hysteria lies in the husband's inability to connect emotionally with his ailing wife. Eliot does not criticize this hysterical male, instead justifying the husband's mental illness and clear emotional disregard just because he is a man. The wife keeps trying to get her husband to connect with her, but since he is consumed by his own hysteria, any attempts of understanding on his part fail to come into fruition. Eliot believes that the husband, since he is a knowledgeable man, is not to be blamed for this emotional divide. This is similar to the narrator in "Portrait of a Lady," who criticizes his emotional female friend while internalizing his own histrionics. And much like the link between Eliot and Marie in "The Burial of the Dead," Eliot here perfectly parallels the husband. He is extremely uncomfortable with women and unable to form sustained emotional connections with them. He throws all the hysterical blame onto women, even though men, such as the husband, are just as prone to hysterical fits. This is Eliot's way of coping with his internal struggles. By disparaging women, he is attempting to dissociate himself from the influence of hysteria. Yet once again, he reinforces the paradoxical movements of feminine

[48] *The Waste Land* pp. 40.
[49] Koestenbaum pp. 133.

association. While he may not classify himself as hysterical, hysteria has still touched him and revealed his own proximity to desires and conditions usually categorized as feminine.

The remainder of "A Game of Chess" is filled with petty female gossip. Much of the gossip relates back to men and the loyalty women should have for them: "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 other will, I said."[50] The wife is expected to be beautiful to please her husband. This is Eliot's own problematic commentary. Not only does he objectify women as hysterical beings, he also believes that they need to look attractive for their husbands. Eliot offers no equal criticism of men and masculinity, showing his unwavering stance against femininity. The numerous hysterically emotional discourses of "A Game of Chess" are Eliot's attempts to distance himself from his own femininity. Yet the instability of his attempts troubles the notion of any stable, natural gender identity, instead revealing Eliot's struggles with his own femininity and ultimate failure to project a convincing masculine aura. Even when Eliot is at his most misogynistic, the atmosphere of non-normativity endures and a larger feminine consciousness continues to establish itself in the poem.

"The Fire Sermon"

Eliot's overarching commentary on female hysteria, and lack of direct commentary on his own male hysteria, becomes muddled in "The Fire Sermon." In this section, Eliot plays with the idea of gender as a social concept. As Cyrena N. Pondrom states in her article "T.S. Eliot: The Performativity of Gender in *The Waste Land,"* "long before [Judith] Butler, Eliot teases language to reveal the painful dialectic between production and reproduction of gender

[50] *The Waste Land* pp. 41.

categories, between gender performed and gender experienced as imposed from without."[51] This challenge to gender norms comes with the introduction of Tiresias. Tiresias—much like Marie, the war veteran, and both the husband and wife from "A Game of Chess"—should be read as a reflection of Eliot himself. Eliot's misogyny seems to disappear entirely in this stanza, as he focuses on gender more explicitly. Tiresias has both male and female aspects, allowing them to transcend gender-based discriminations: "I Tiresias, though blind, throbbing between two lives, / Old man with wrinkled female breasts, can see."[52] The inclusion of Tiresias suggests an increasing comfort on Eliot's part with femininity. Eliot uses this image of gender-bending to justify his own femininity, proving that he can still retain masculinity while also having feminine mental attributes. Tiresias throbs between "two lives": he is present in both the worlds of the living and the dead, but he is also stuck in the middle of traditional male and female lives. Even though he uses the male pronoun when referring to himself, Tiresias does not have an assigned gender. Instead, he is an ambiguous mix of both male and female. Prior to this, Eliot was unapologetically misogynistic in his treatment of women to develop his own masculinity. However, at this point in the narrative, he seems to realize that an individual can exist with both masculine and feminine attributes, thus learning to embrace his femininity instead of merely killing it. Sadly, this revelation does not make him any less misogynistic or any more accepting of women. "The Fire Sermon," in addition to this revelation of gender performativity and the ability for masculinity and femininity to co-exist, also offers vivid images of female vapidity.

In the paragraph after Tiresias' introduction, Eliot once again shifts towards misogyny. He introduces a new female character with a scathing description of her moral character:

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[51] Pondrom, Cyrena N. "T.S. Eliot: The Performativity of Gender in *The Waste Land."* *Modernism/Modernity,* No. 12:3 (September 2005), pp. 427.
[52] *The Waste Land* pp. 43.

She turns and looks a moment in the glass,
Hardly aware of her departed lover;
Her brain allows one half-formed thought to pass:
'Well now that's done: and I'm glad it's over.'
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.[53]

This woman is characteristically different from the other females presented so far. Instead of being hysterical, she is emotionally detached from her lover, instead consumed by vain narcissism as she blankly admires her own beauty in a mirror. Instead of critiquing the emotional fragility of women, Eliot now attacks their vanity. This shift can be traced back to his earlier revelation with Tiresias, where he learned to accept his feminine emotions. Since he can no longer critique women based on emotions, he now focuses on attacking their fascination with their own bodies, and those bodies themselves.

"What The Thunder Said"

In "What The Thunder Said," Eliot has finally come to terms with his emotional affliction. Instead of worrying about his femininity, Eliot embraces it to craft the most unique section of the entire poem. This section is riddled with Eliot's hysteria; he no longer feels the need to hide or qualify it. The imagery conveyed by this section is extremely fragmented and disconnected from the rest of the narrative. In a sense, it mirrors an emotional fit, much like the hysterical arc of the feminine consciousness. Eliot includes multiple sound effects and seemingly unrelated images to bring this poem of self-acceptance to a fittingly maniacal close. In the very

[53] Ibid pp. 44.

last stanza, Eliot states: "These fragments I have shored against my ruins."[54] From the mental ruins of his hysterical mind, Eliot has succeeded in crafting a fragmented poem of epic proportions. These multiple fragments all fall under the same feminine clairvoyante consciousness, reverberating throughout the poem with a single, collective rhythm.

The Waste Land is an incredibly complex poem. Yet at its very core, it serves as a journey towards acceptance of femininity and an embrace of hysteria. By the time the poem closes, Eliot no longer wishes to eradicate the feminine emotional intricacies of his own poetic imagination. He also includes a feminine affective consciousness behind the numerous fragments of the poem, viewing himself as an all-knowing clairvoyante. While he remains misogynistic due to a genuine lack of understanding for women, Eliot eventually learns to embrace his hysteria to create a deeply personal poem that reflects his own inner tumult and the social pressures he felt as he began his career as a poet.

Conclusion

Does this story of self-acceptance and growing queer awareness on the part of a famous male author justify all the misogyny it performs for us and thus perpetuates? This was a concern I had as I began this study and still have now that it has concluded. And yet Eliot's poetry—in particular early poems like "Portrait of a Lady," "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock," and *The Waste Land*—continues to be studied and taught, and we need to continue to develop language to hold him accountable for his negative representations of women and to help articulate the queer futures he struggles to imagine for himself and for his readers. If I am not claiming that Eliot himself was queer, perhaps I am claiming that his poems are, or can be read that way. As our assumptions about gender and sexuality continue to evolve, our understandings of what Eliot

[54] Ibid pp. 50.

once called “the existing monuments” of literary history will change as well.[55]

[55] Eliot, T.S. “Tradition and the Individual Talent.” *Selected Prose of T.S. Eliot,* Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 1975, pp. 38.

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