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## Homoeroticism and misogyny in T. S. Eliot's *Life and The Waste Land*

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#### Abstract

There has been a renewed interest in reading the life story of T. S. Eliot by Gordon (2012) along with that of his first wife Vivienne Haigh Wood by Seymour-Jones (2009) with adjuvant scholarship on the poet's 'deviant sexuality' and disavowed homoeroticism. The biographical approach took a new turn in Eliot's case especially after the publication of *Inventions of the March Hare* (1996), which not only exposed or let's say help 'out' the closeted poet. The paper uses Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick's 'Paradigm of the Closet,' and Koestenbaum's idea of 'male literary collaboration' to complicate the study of a celebrated author who enthralled a whole century of readers. While the author seems not to die despite Barthes dictum, the paper problematises the author/poet/character nexus in *The Waste Land* and suggests that the detestable portrayal of women and their sexuality in the poem reflects a conspicuous psychic manifestation of repressed homosexuality, which engenders serious anxiety of the feminine. The bleakness of his magnum opus *The Waste Land*, read in the failed sexual encounters, is forced onto the feminine. However "outing Eliot" here should not be read as homophobic, and on the contrary the paper works its way down to demonstrate how psychological manifestations of a repressed homosexuality in the author enthralled a whole generation, till it turned out that societies of modern times can at times be tricked into celebrating misogyny.

**Keywords:** homoeroticism, misogyny, paradigm of the closet, outing, T. S. Eliot, *The Waste Land*



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### Public Interest Statement

The paper attempts at not only evaluating the influence of the personality of the author on *The Waste Land* but also tries to fill the gap in the scholarship on blatant misogyny in Eliot's oeuvre especially in *The Waste Land* by problematising Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick's the Paradigm of the Closet in light of Koestenbaum's concept of Male Literary Collaboration and insights from the biography of Vivienne Haigh Wood written by Seymour-Jones (2009), which brings in hitherto unknown facts of Eliot's life, throwing light on both the repressed homosexuality in Eliot and abhorrent portrayal of women in *The Waste Land*.

## 1. Introduction

The argument that there is a need to re-evaluate T. S. Eliot and his magnum opus *The Waste Land* (referred to as *TWL* hence) for homoeroticism and misogyny becomes valid if we realise that there is a lot that has happened especially in the last forty years, besides a few major earlier works of note, which kindles anxieties among social critics (Berberich, 2016; Ayers, 2020; Kumar, 2022). Recent scholarship has realised that modern societies on both sides of the Atlantic were victim of the bluff of the century in literary world especially after the publication of the facsimile edition of *TWL*, Eliot's letters edited by Valerie Eliot, the edition of *Inventions of the March Hare* (1996) and the biography of his first wife *Painted Shadow* (2009). Some major works by Eve Sedgwick Kosofsky (2008), Wayne Koestenbaum (2017), and Maud Elman (2013) drew critical attention to Eliot's personal relations with women and men, but cultural and social critics across the globe have failed to see through the façade what modern literature projected upon the world. It is yet to be proven that the social function of the so-called 'poem of the century' was just a heist. This becomes rather relevant as the last century came to its end with significant women empowerment, gender equity, and considerable representation of women.

From being a "compressed epic" lamenting "the plight of a whole generation" (Richards, 1924) concerned with "emotional starvation" (Wilson, 1931), amounting to a "great positive achievement" (Leavis, 1932), to the knowledge "that the poem issued, however circuitously, from the unhappiness of Eliot's first marriage" (Donoghue, 1974), to Miller's (2005) interpretation of the poem as "an elegy to Jean Verdenal," being a "double-talk," and "[A]nother portrait of female hysteria over which two men brooded" (Koestenbaum, 1988), *TWL* proved to be "enthralled by the femininity that it reviles" (Ellman, 2013). *TWL* and its author have proved to be a misogynistic bluff.

Recent re-evaluations have not only helped read a stark misogyny in the poem but also established the poet's homoerotic intentions, at times disguised in elegiac representations of man's love for man, as reflected in Eliot's letters (Eliot & Haffenden, 2014).

Admired for his "disturbing" "genius" (Laity and Gish, 2004) T. S. Eliot had a lot to hide – "a disastrous marriage, his near-phobic hatred of women, and the faint but unmistakable hint of sexual deviancy" (Dean in Laity and Gish, 2004). These and related issues came to the fore soon after *Painted Shadow*, the much acclaimed biography of Vivienne Haigh Wood, Eliot's first wife, came out, when prominent pro-Eliot critics rushed to his defence (Menand, 2002; Vendler, 1998), who insisted that Eliot was not gay, and they added that discussing his sexuality is 'heretic.' The outcome was not encouraging and there has been hardly any conclusive study, which could assert the connection between misogyny in *TWL* as a result of the homoeroticism of the author and the ill effects of 'male literary collaboration' on *TWL*.

## 2. Eliot and the 'Homosexual Panic'

### 2.1 Homoerotic Capital and Eliot

To problematise the poem's "indirect erotic expression" (Koestenbaum, 2017, p. 190), one has to look at the poem and the poet with considerable critical scepticism and renewed reading. If we look at letters of T. S. Eliot, and Eliot's first wife's biography *Painted Shadow* (Seymour-Jones, 2009) through Eve Kosofsky

Sedgwick's (2008) 'Paradigm of the Closet,' by focusing on the emotive and the personal and not rather tracing its hermeneutic intricacies and philosophical complexities (Brooker, 2018), we can see how it took almost a century of scholarship to rectify the sociology of the 'verbal icon.' McIntire's (2008) argument, "now that we have Eliot's pornotropic verses in print, rereadings of his canonical poems are almost mandatory" (p. 32) also helps lay bare the man behind the "pseudonymous" manuscript of *TWL*, by reorienting the reader to a fluidity of the sexuality hitherto evasive while acknowledging the limitations of reading the poet's homosexuality. If there is a homoerotic reading of the poetry of an authorial identity, which has competing and complex notions of selfhood as against the simplistic approach that either one is gay or straight, there is also a lack of scholarship on how is one to understand the quandary between an avowedly straight sexuality and homophobic inclinations with conspicuous built up of homoerotic capital in.

*TWL* hides his seemingly unwelcome sexuality in his time under the guise of the post-war trauma with latent homoerotic mourning for the lost masculinities in the carnage. Or what could be the acceptable strategy under which love for a man by a man could be articulated in a milieu largely homophobic? Despite some great output by contemporary feminist readers of T. S. Eliot and misogyny in his poetry, there is a remarkable gap, which could negotiate Eliot's engagement with eroticism and his complex relations with women, especially a gross antipathy to the female body and deviant sexuality in life and in *TWL*. The poem reflects equally Eliot's contravening attitude towards marriage and domesticity, and shows that the 'impersonality' stratagem was just a way to deflect attention from Eliot's self-advancement and institutionalisation. As a result of such an inquiry, keeping in mind that any or all results do not necessitate a fixed understanding of Eliot's homoeroticism, there is a subsequent question of the social impact of the poem and the poet.

## 2. 2 *TWL* and 'Improper Desires'

Eliot's early convictions in his aesthetic theories rooted in the very personal. Texts related to authors who are seemingly socially prejudiced may not necessarily obfuscate its underlying poetics, though poetry in such cases turn out to be a "message delivery system for ideas" (DuPlessis, 2002, p. 389). Moreover, there is a certain pre-Freudian psychology behind Eliot's "dissociation of sensibility," perhaps a complex fusion of multiple personality and immediacy, with personal abstraction. Eliot's "sexual energies...that are typically regarded as perverse" turn out to be "tinged with autoeroticism, recalling the association, drawn by Freud and incessantly reiterated in psychoanalytic and popular literature, between narcissism and homosexuality" (Lamos, 2009, p. 36). It can be seen that sex is one of the primary motifs of much of Eliot's poetry, as if it were a personal synonym for sin. It "attracts and repels, its urgency creating in the poet the same engulfing horror that he feels he, like Kurtz, deserves for breaking moral rules" (Seymour-Jones, 2009, p. 937). Nowhere in *TWL* does he present sex as natural, pleasurable and as a means of affirmation of life. "[T]he overriding tone of the poem," writes Davidson, "seems to yearn to be rid of improper desires" (p. 122), and this is achieved by foregrounding women characters while keeping men in the background, in the realm of memory and history, which repeats in flashes in occasional episodes in a general drama of harlotry located in the feminine. Perhaps it is the fear of abjection<sup>2</sup> that makes Eliot disavow homoeroticism, and which leads him to complicate his desire and love for the same sex in the poem. Moreover hundred years back who would expect a public figure like Eliot 'come out' of what Sedgwick (1985) calls the "homosexual panic" (p. 89).

*TWL* betrays sundry occasions of homoerotic desires woven in their disavowal. "Close reading with attention to biographical contextualisation" can lead to the study of the integrity of author of *TWL* as "more than a social construct or a fiction superimposed on intertextual anarchy" (Koestenbaum, 1988, p. 6). Despite earlier claims Eliot's position vis-à-vis modern feminism and gender studies remains broadly uninvestigated. His long association with elitism and a monolithically masculinist positing of modernism can be said to prove as major hindrance to his relocation in the sex/gender/erotic paradigm of his times. His dilemma, in a letter to Conrad Aiken, where he says, "to get married, ... and live in America all my life, ...

and conceal my opinions and forfeit my independence for the sake of my children's future; or ... retire at fifty to a table on the boulevard, regarding the world placidly through the fumes of an aperitif at 5 p.m." (Eliot, 2011, p. 449), not only shows how deeply he was torn between hedonism and moral obligations, but also shows an image of an aesthete who prefers a "table on the boulevard" to a heterosexual family life, and therefore a stable marriage.

### 3. Eliot and Homoeroticism

#### 3.1 The Wrecked Tangle

Lyndall Gordon, in her 1998 biography of T. S. Eliot said, "Who can now determine the exact ways people of the past bent their inclinations in order to construct gender according to absurd models of masculinity or femininity?" (p. 53). Her addition that "Verdenal was easy with Eliot," and that "The Frenchman's most important legacy for Eliot was to offer a blend of sensibility and intellect" (ibid) suggests evasion on her part as a contrast to her comprehensive examination of Eliot's relationships with women. She fails to investigate the homoerotic nuances of Verdenal's effect on his poetry. Moreover desire for the same sex is a disparate phenomenon, which may not be fundamental, and its representation in literature may either blur or brighten one's real self. In Eliot's case it seems it effected the former, though of course, by the time the century passed critics realised that there is no such thing as a binary in gender that hovers around received notions of masculinity and femininity, as earlier studies of Eliot struggled with. Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick (2008) warns that such an inquiry may "not incorporate a critical analysis of modern homo/heterosexual definition; and it will assume that the appropriate place for that critical analysis to begin is from the relatively decentered perspective of modern gay and antihomophobic theory" (p. 1).

Reading *TWL* in elegiac mode where a single speaker mourns the loss of his male lover, which "makes the poem intelligible but in the process neutralizes its radically disruptive, heteroglossic, entropic energies—energies that run amok in the early drafts of *The Waste Land*" (Churchill, 2005, p. 14), sounds technically admissible, but it doesn't take into account the fact that the heteroglossia she commends is a sheer gloss, and the entropic energies are a ruse to hide in the closet. Churchill's essay ends with seemingly comforting statement, "Our understanding of Eliot is richer and more profound if we attend to the many shadows—male, female, internal, external, Christian, anti-Semitic, gynophobic and homoerotic—that comprise this familiar compound ghost, and remember that we meet him, only tangentially, by reading his poetry," (p. 25) for those who may be interested or are fascinated by her first words in the very essay, "Was T. S. Eliot gay?" (p. 7). Her treatment of the subject matter is convincing in the beginning but letting the question float in a sea of diplomatic despair is not in good taste. The only decisive part of the above conclusive statement— "and remember that we meet him, only tangentially, by reading his poetry" is promising till we hide behind the slogan that 'the author is dead.'

Eliot's "very special relationship" with Verdenal and "The nature of this love is ambiguous, but European traditions of male friendship recognized various kinds of male bonding, as well as different ways of expressing affection between males unknown to the inhibiting codes that governed male-to-male behaviour in the United States" (In Laity and Gish, 2004, p. 26). It shows that Eliot's soured relations with Vivienne influenced the means and modes of his relation with Verdenal. This friendship "that had died was resurrected in memory and charged with an imaginative power quite beyond the living experience" (p. 27). Against this elegiac context Seymour-Jones's comprehensive biography of Vivienne makes a strong case for Eliot's homoeroticism. Her examination of the erotic triangle among Eliot and his wife, and Bertrand Russell, results in the conclusion that "there was an element of homosexuality by proxy in the way in which Eliot offered Vivien to Russell" (Seymour-Jones, 2009, p. 588), and which proved to be a wreck-tangle with Verdenal as the other. She is quite unequivocal about the German young man who had "Ostensibly... come to lend a hand during Vivienne's illness, but there is little doubt that he was, in fact, romantically and sexually involved with Tom." She adds, "Vivienne shared a room with Pearl, and Tom with Jack. Vivien could not have failed to be aware of the erotic nature of Jack's attraction for Tom, but she turned a blind eye to this unwelcome fact" (p. 1088).

### 3.2 'Male Literary Collaboration'

Though Carole Seymour-Jones's biography (2009) of Vivien Eliot locates the fiasco of Eliot's marriage largely to his homosexual desires, the intricate formalities that went into the transformation of the poem under Ezra Pound's collaborative effort illustrate the central concerns in the maintenance of male homosocial<sup>3</sup> bonds. Although Sedgwick's (1985) argues that "I am not assuming or arguing either that patriarchal power is primarily or necessarily homosexual (as distinct from homosocial), or that male homosexual desire has a primary or necessary relationship to misogyny" (p. 20), in the light of recent scholarship there is ample warrant to read misogyny in the author's personal discourse. It seems that the "erotics of male literary collaboration" guides the process of the making of *TWL* where Pound "reaches into Eliot's womb via textual emendation and excision – breaking past tissue and skin – to lay hold of a poem fundamentally concerned with the topographics of "waste"" (McIntire, 2008, p. 77). Pound's collaboration with Eliot ushers in a new era, which has "metaphoric resonances with sexual intercourse," and "the text that the two men produce might be described as their child" (Koestenbaum, 2017, p. 11). In the final stages of the completion of the poem Eliot and Pound used to engage in sexual banter and exchanged explicit dialogues referring to their transgendered roles in the collaboration. Pound would refer to Eliot as a 'bitch,' while he took pride in his midwifery performing Eliot's "caesarean operation" for the poem to take birth. Although "Pound fathered, husbanded, and procured Eliot's feminine Waste Land, and marked it as male" (Koestenbaum, 2017, p. 228), Eliot's act of giving his text up for the obstetric treatment established the exchange as homoerotic, where the feminine is largely excoriated. Here "the evidence implies that because male collaborators who enclose and exorcise women prefer each other's company" (ibid).

## 4. Eliot, *TWL*, and Women as Sites of Disorder

### 4.1 Women as Text

Eliot and Pound's equation of women with text, where these women could be "their wives, daughters, sisters, patients, and rivals— as mediators" not only reveals that their collaboration was a way to "steal women's reproductive power" but also that they had the predisposition to "hate women, or at least fear the "feminine"" (Koestenbaum, 2017, p. 10). Although Eliot tried his best to conceal these betrayals of homosexuality and misogyny in his poems especially the canonical ones like *TWL* and 'The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock,' close readings of his theory of impersonality reject it as a "ruse" to hush readers away from his "deviant" motives. Eliot's poetry "perpetuates a deferred self and this seriously undermines his aesthetics of impersonality" (Ellmann, 2013, p. 23). With queer theory and forays of feminist criticism into questions on male sexuality, race and class, contemporary critics find Eliot's poetry "dangerous" against earlier claims where Ackroyd said, "it would be the tritest form of reductionism to assume that Eliot, because he could not adequately deal with female sexuality, was therefore homosexual . . . When he allowed his sexuality free access,... it was of a heterosexual kind" (In Laity and Gish, 2004, p. 26). Various subjects of emotions, deviance in sexuality and the feminine "recur in Eliot's writing and make him a more confused figure than we found in . . . accounts that cite only his violent texts on women" (Scott, 1996, p. 423). Readers therefore find it difficult to tackle errant femininity in his poems especially "if we are to continue to read Eliot with something other than hostility or incomprehension" perhaps because the poem is "split between a longing for "improper' sexual desires" and a wish to be "rid" of them" (In McIntyre, 2015, p. 109). This reflects that Eliot's errant sexuality and complex relation to women in *TWL* is an issue to be seen as intertwined and complementary to each other and not to be traced as separate transgressive attitudes evoking his underlying misogyny and muddled masculinity.

### 4.2 Gender and Performativity in *TWL*

As far as performativity of gender in *TWL* is concerned Pondrom's (2005) suggestion that "Eliot recognised gender as performative," which she believes in because of "his portrayal of modern persons as unmoored from founding narratives" (p. 438), doesn't prove anything against his disavowal. Had Eliot believed in the

performativity of the gender he would not have suppressed Peter's article in 1952. Pondrom's careful analysis of three major instances in the poem are self-contradictory when she cites Eliot saying about Shakespeare and the problem of Hamlet, "we need a great many facts of his biography" and then she comments: "and we may well wonder if Eliot's comments should not apply to himself as well" (p. 435). After an examination of "three crucial emotional scenes" from *TWL*, Pondrom says, "[E]ach of these scenes reflects, I believe, memories of searingly intense moments from Eliot's private life, involving three different persons with whom his relationship was deeply personal" (p. 426), there is no doubt about at least one—his erotic love with Jean Verdenal, alluded to above in Seymour-Jones biography of Vivienne. Pondrom's emphasis that "each of these scenes involves markedly different performance of gender," is by no means admissible in light of Xavier Magne's dictum where he says that the homosexual "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" (in Miller, 2005, pp. 103-4), though to avoid homophobic precarity, as Butler would argue. Butler's (2007) own argument "Clearly, a homosexual for whom heterosexual desire is unthinkable may well maintain that heterosexuality through a melancholic structure of incorporation, an identification and embodiment of the love that is neither acknowledged nor grieved" (p. 95) attests this position.

Moreover, if "*The Waste Land* is about failure to achieve union" as Pondrom rightly suggests, it is definitely not "with an Absolute, an Other, the Self" or "with culture and tradition" (p. 427), because she contradicts herself and says "The narrator, who is by turns observer and actor, and whose avatars include both the sexually chameleon Tiresias and the impotent Fisher King, silently responds to the Hyacinth girl in language redolent of failure, impotence, and consequent self-loathing" (p. 427) in the lines "Yet when we came back...looking into the heart of light, the silence" (37-41), an episode which "did not achieve the promise of its inception" (p. 428). The promise is heteronormative, to begin with, but Pondrom admits that "the imagery of fertility associated with the woman is overmatched by the imagery of stasis and impotence assigned to her would-be lover" (p. 428) in the above lines. Moreover, it is this stasis and impotence of the lover that "continually threatens to become general ambivalence and even to tip over into resentful denigration of women" (Staten, 1995, p. 86).

#### 4.3 Eliot and Women as Images of Disgust

There is a certain dialectic between dryness and wetness that Eliot juxtaposes in *TWL* and some other poems (McIntire, 2008), and these images of dry, barren, and wasted landscapes reflect his abhorrence of the feminine secretions or as in Fresca's "hearty female stench," foregrounding the use of foul smell to portray the female body as disgusting. Though Eliot edited the phrase "hearty female stench" out of the 1922 version, "its powerful evocation of a repellent sensuality that inheres in the female body has wider resonance for *The Waste Land*, where cloying synthetic odours and clothing barely mask the bodies they conceal" (Porter in McIntire, 2015). Eliot's other canonical poems project a desire that "repeatedly meets its limit by confronting a traditional heterosexual desire that cannot thrive because it fails to come to terms with the perceived sordidity of the female body" (ibid). As early as 1910 Eliot evinced "a ruthless rejection of the body's uncleanness" (McIntire, 2008). From Gerontion's "I have lost my sight, smell, hearing, taste, and touch: / How should I use them for your closer contact?" (Eliot, 1963) to "so rank a feline smell<sup>[SEP]</sup>/ As Grishkin in a drawing-room" (Eliot, 1963), where Grishkin is the prospective "pneumatic bliss," yet repulsive, Eliot demonstrates clear abomination for the feminine odour. Lines in 'Lune de Miel' (July 1917) reveal how Eliot felt about his wife's presence regarding this: "Her physical presence, her smell, her clothes, her bodily functions, all repelled him" (Seymour-Jones, 2009). Eliot appears to have always cowered away from women and recoiled from "open sensual appreciation...expressing an oppressive and claustrophobic rendering of the female body whose excretions (smells) threaten to supersede desire" (McIntire, 2008, p. 91). It seems that there is nothing more "menacing to the precariously self-possessed classicist" (Pinkney, 1984), which must be "repressed from consciousness, but also the sense that libidinally delighted in it, and

accordingly all strong smells become dangerous allusions to these forbidden pleasures and the bewildering psychic 'space' in which they took place" (p. 86). Other issues related to the feminine such as "Abortions, broken fingernails, carious teeth, and female smells" in *TWL* are disguised under a sign of cultural decadence.

## 5. From Homoeroticism to Misogyny

### 5.1 Eliot and Misogyny

There have been studies (North, 1999; Lyon, 1999; Felski, 2000; McIntire, 2008; Jabeen et al., 2022) that steer beyond the poles of modernism/postmodernism towards redefining "the modern," fencing in both misogyny and new approach to 'the feminine.' Postmodern precepts of mass culture brought in erroneous opposition between high art and elitist modernism giving way to fluid and specious definitions of desire commensurate with the postmodern that were preferred to homophobic and misogynist forms of desire equated with the modern. Thus, debates on reconstructing Eliot's relation to sexuality/gender and racism have become a means to investigate intricate involvement of his works with contemporary feminism, homoeroticism and a professed homophobia. "[S]plit between a longing for "improper' sexual desires" and a wish to be "rid" of them" (In Lamos, 2009, p. 109), the poet-protagonist of *TWL* is "an agent of the "secret discontent" of his own class" (Bowen, 1994), and "of his sex" (Lamos, 2009).

Although Eliot tried his best to conceal and disavow the alleged misogyny and homoeroticism in his canonical works, and more so in his theory of impersonality, Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick's (2008) *Epistemology of the Closet* demonstrates how effective and evasive tactics were used by the poet to conceal his true self. Around the turn of the twentieth century there emerged a certain opposition between heterosexuality and homosexuality that got shaped on the lines of knowledge/ignorance paradigm to an extent that all the related mechanisms of homosexuality became infamously analogous with ignorance. Sedgwick (2008) terms this escaping of detection as 'the closet' and she maintains that all strategies of secrecy and verbal modes of indirection are part of a technique of concealment shaped in sexual deviance.

Eliot's misogyny in the continuation of a tradition (and individual talent), which arraigns the feminine, was not a singular instance of his age. Houle (2017) argues that the inherent misogyny in Eliot's early poetry is due to an "intense sexual frustration," perhaps because of a "sexual illegibility" as poetry was not "viewed as a masculine profession in England or America" (p. 3) at that time. Moreover it was rather to foreclose his classification 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" (p. 3). Flanzbaum's (2007) says, "American modernism seems to be full of gynophobic 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" (p. 123).

Most early feminist reviews dubbed Eliot as misogynist, and therefore the first serious investigations into his relation with women or his complex sexuality were undoubtedly biographical in approach. But besides the biography there are widespread leakages of that kind of cathartic writing strewn here and there in both Eliot's canonical works as well as the 'parerga'. Of Lyndall Gordon's two biographies, first *Eliot's Early Years* (1977), traces the journey of a man whose life was "famously flawed in its search for perfection" (*The New Yorker*), not lending much credence to simplistic abstractions, while second, *T. S. Eliot: An Imperfect Life* (2012), tries to dive deep exploring the relationships of his works with the four women in his life since his time in America till his death in the U.K. She "traced the opposing projections of Vivien Haigh-Wood and Emily Hale as, respectively, the demonic female and the exalted "higher dream" presiding over Eliot's spiritual journey through the temptations of sickness and sin (Vivien) to the transmutation of personal agony "into something universal and holy (Emily)" (Laity and Gish, 2004, p. 4).

### 5.2 Eliot the Sociopath

Eliot's early works demonstrate a clear state of disorder and multiplicity of voices especially in 'The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock' and *TWL*. Quite akin to F. H. Bradley's 'closed selves' (Eliot's Doctoral thesis

was on Bradley) and Freud's idea of 'the uncanny' *TWL* is a result of 'repetition compulsion.' Though Eliot's foreknowledge of the inherent 'split' explains admissible psychological distress, his own affirmation, that poets always defend the kind of poetry they write (Eliot, 2009), gives new ways to look at his 'dissociation of sensibility' and 'Guilt by Dissociation' (Lee, 2001). With his proper establishment in the literary circle of his times, of course due to the sheer poetic genius, Eliot was successful in hiding his pathology by manipulating multiple voices in *TWL*. Moreover they say that 'Organisational Sociopaths are rarely challenged, and often promote' (Pech and Slade, 2007)

Eliot seems not to be different from Laforgue or Baudelaire who found romantic relations with women degrading. On the contrary Eliot could have been deeply influenced by Baudelaire's misogyny, something that "can be understood partly in terms of a panicky effort to reject the feminine side of his own sexual nature, and, more generally, to put an end to the psychic scattering or self-dissemination of desire" (Bersani in Pinkney, 1984, p. 70). His perception of women, if seductive, as inhuman was more of "a man's ordeal, a figure of sin with whom the man had heroically to consort" (Gordon, 1977, pp. 76-77). His view of women was coloured with traditional and literary prejudices, which is evident in the breakdown of his marriages. Such is the case about Eliot's marriage with Vivienne, where her marriage "brought no happiness..., it brought the state of mind out of which came *The Waste Land*" (Eliot, xvii). When Eliot decided not to marry Emile Hale, who he met in 1912 it "came not very long after his profoundly significant friendship with Jean Verdenal (1911)" (p. 426). This is one of the probable explanations of the speaker of the Hyacinth Girl episode, who "experiences an intense crisis of agency in an encounter with a woman" (Bibb, 2011, p. 79), which demonstrates the presence of a loss under a 'mask' about which Butler (2007) says, "The mask thus conceals this loss, but preserves (and negates) this loss through its concealment" (p. 67).

One of the theories behind the probable cause of this deeply seated sexual bigotry traces it back to Eliot's childhood (Pinkney, 1984), and that 'splitting' is a major mechanism of defence in an infant. Eliot grew up with abnormal idealisation of his mother, and as "the good, compliant child in the family who can become the bad child in adolescence—ending up as the mad child—when, erring from the ways prescribed by the family, the parents and psychiatrists decide that such a shift must be pathological" (Van Deurzen, 2010, p. 221-22). Pinkney (1984) cites conspicuous misogyny and clear violations of women in his poems when he says, "any Eliotic text has to, needs to, wants to, in one way or another, do a girl in; and if it fails to achieve that goal, it is itself murderously threatened by the girl" (p. 18).

In a letter to Conrad Aiken, Eliot described how the self-consciousness of his sexuality impinged upon him in the city, and he says, "One walks about the streets with one's desires, and one's refinement rises up like a wall whenever opportunity approaches" (Eliot, 2011, p. 75), as if to "think like a sociopath and act like a saint" (Mitrof, 2004).

### 5.3 *TWL* and Misogyny

Phenomenologically, creative works are projections of the self, and though this debate demands great space that doesn't match the scope of this paper, a post-Freudian and post-Lacanian world warrants a reader, more than ever, to map the creative object onto the creative mind<sup>4</sup>. In fact lines that Eliot and Ezra Pound later omitted suggest that Verdenal may in fact be a ghostly presence in the poem and clearly evince Eliot's interest in homosexuality, something that asserts the great complexity of mind and self that always evades a singularity, which most new critics and proponents of Reader Response Theory tried to pin on a fluidity that the author-work is.

As a "rather tarnished literary icon" *TWL* interests modern readers for its "errant tendencies that were previously corrected, explained away, or ignored; its fragmentation, obscurity, and anti-Semitic and misogynistic representations appear as symptoms of modern aesthetic and social dilemmas" (Lamos, 2009, p. 108). Reflecting cultural crisis in post-war Europe, it is impersonal at the surface, but highly personal—a reflection of what went wrong in his life by the time he finished the first drafts of the poem. Though Eliot



argued that art is impersonal he conceded that *TWL* is the “relief of a personal . . . grouse against life” (Eliot, 2016, p. 531). While writing *TWL*, Eliot argued in 1921, that the choice of a myth is never random, rather guided by a personal view, or one’s desires — “The myth that a man makes has transformations according as he sees himself as hero or villain . . . Man desires to see himself . . . as more admirable, more forceful, more villainous, more comical, more despicable . . . than he actually is. [A myth] is not composed of abstract qualities; it is a point of view, transmitted to importance” (Gallivan, 1975).

Almost as soon as the poem was published in October 1922 keen and cognizant readers took no time to associate “A Game of Chess” and its very many allusions with Eliot’s troubled marriage. John Peale Bishop’s letter to Edmund Wilson cited Pound saying that “Eliot’s version . . . is contained in ‘The Chair she sat in like a burnished throne.’” *TWL* thus being supposedly an impersonal icon of New Criticism had “connections with Eliot’s own mental breakdown, and that Ezra Pound’s work on the poem transformed it from a “sprawling chaos” into something hard and powerfully disjunctive” (Koestenbaum, 2017, p. 190).

By creating the character of a wealthy woman who sits alone in her boudoir Eliot sketches Belladonna in his own image of discontent. Belladonna, with her contrived expressions sits on a chair “like a burnished throne,” a description which is “sardonic in its intention” (Seymour-Jones, 2009). She is the portrait of Vivienne Haigh Wood, Eliot’s first wife, whose caprice Eliot struggled with. Belladonna, as Seymour-Jones says, is shown to be “powerful, phallic, castrating, her hair as fiery and venomous as Medusa’s snakes” and the picturesque “atmosphere is oppressively sexual: the woman’s desire is clear as she demands of the protagonist” (p. 914). There was a certain bestiality in the forced marriage with Vivienne “and his unwillingness or inability to comply turns their relationship into a parody of marriage” (Valerie Eliot in Seymour-Jones, 2009). Her reading of the connection between Vivienne’s sexual demands and Eliot’s panic is quite credible in the lines, “My nerves are bad tonight. Yes, bad. Stay with me. / Speak to me. Why do you never speak? Speak” (111-12). Ironically the second section of the poem was earlier titled ‘In the Cage,’ and later changed to ‘A Game of Chess,’ which is “less revealing” (Seymour-Jones, 2009) of his view of the marriage with Vivienne. The suffering sketched in this section is mutual, though the woman becomes importunate and the man keeps on retreating into a refuge of “Nothing again nothing” (120). Vivienne wrote to her friend about this detached behaviour “he is so reserved and peculiar, that he never says anything and one cannot get him to speak. That makes one much more lonely” (Seymour-Jones, 2009), a marked boredom well reflected in “The hot water at ten. / And if it rains, a closed car at four. / And we shall play a game of chess, / Pressing lidless eyes and waiting for a knock upon the door” (135- 138).

Eliot’s dissatisfaction with his marriage, and his pronouncement that it gives nothing for the spiritual development of a man, continued with the blistering portrayal of the only maternal figure in the poem, Lil, who “look[s] so antique. / (And her only thirty-one.)” (156-57). She blames her poor health on “It’s them pills I took, to bring it off, she said. / [SEP] (She’s had five already, and nearly died of young George.)” (159-60). Lil is expected, as a mother, to preserve her fertility and her children, but it seems that it is a burden. Her recent pregnancy almost killed her. Lil’s fertility is more of a threat, to her cherished identity, and she prefers an abortion to giving new life. It’s Eliot’s way to prove that Lil finds value in not procreating. In the response to the questions, “What you get married for if you don’t want children?” she says, “that Sunday Albert was home, they had a hot gammon, / and they asked me in to dinner, to get the beauty of it hot” (164, 166-167). It is well known that Vivienne had added the line “What you get married for if you don’t want children?” to *TWL*’s manuscript (Seymour-Jones, 2009). Seymour-Jones quotes Miller who says, “there is passion throughout ‘The Fire Sermon’ but it is the passion of a misogynist, burning with a hatred that seems almost inexplicable” (p. 924).

Although there is no doubt that Vivienne too had an illicit relationship with Bertrand Russell, Eliot was complicit and tolerant to “Vivienne’s affair with Russell,” because “opportunistically, while he needed Russell’s support,” he “offered Vivien as bait. Eliot, as much as Russell, had used Vivien for his own ends. Now both men would together grow tired of Vivien, as together they had once wanted her” (ibid).

In “Eeldrop and Appleplex,” a prose-piece that Eliot wrote for the *Little Review* (September 1917),

Vivienne is portrayed as Edith, “a contemptuous portrait which anticipates that of Fresca in the original unedited version of *The Waste Land*” (Seymour-Jones, 2009). Most of the times Russel and Eliot talked about Vivien “in a derogatory fashion.” Eliot’s misogyny, which he expressed in his struggle while editing *the Egoist* is evident in his statement, where he says, “keep the writing as much as possible in Male hands, as I distrust the Feminine in literature” (In a letter to H. W. Eliot Sr. qtd. in Seymour-Jones, 2009).

The discord between the couple swelled and took full-blown proportions by the time he finished writing *TWL*. He felt that this was deleterious to his poetic profess, and felt that, like Philomel, he too is silenced. This is evident in his letter to his brother Henry where he said that ‘Prufrock’ would be his “swan-song” (*Letters*, 2009). Vivienne, for Eliot, belongs to one of the saint/sinner or Madonna/whore paradigm, and definitely the latter in the ‘waste land’, which, therefore, leads to the question, “For if Vivien had been “whore,” who had been the pimp?” (Seymour-Jones, 2009). Whole of Eliot’s literature is bestrewed with this image of women, and a perfect embodiment of this woman of his imagination is ‘the whore<sup>5</sup>,’ who (perhaps the only category, I presume, Eliot had in mind creating his female characters in the poem), never conceives despite innumerable flings. Though at times it is quite confusing if she is actually a victimised but promiscuous female or she is a seductress or an actual prostitute. In studying Eliot’s Female Archetype in *TWL*, Sicker (1984) says that by reading the poem in Freudian and Jungian perspective along with works of Frazer and Weston it is evident that “the poem is about a sexual failure which signifies a modern spiritual failure,” and emphasizes, “Eliot counterpoints the legend of the castrated male with a less often recognized archetype: the sexually violated yet sterile female,” “the prostitute who, despite innumerable fornications, never conceives nor gives birth” (p. 420).

Since “all the women are one woman” (in North, 2001) for Eliot, the “whisper music” and the “bats with baby faces” scene, evokes “a vivid Kleinian phantasy of the envied riches folded away in the fertile interior of the mother’s body” (Pinkney, 1984, p. 111). The lines “blood shaking my heart / The awful daring of a moment’s surrender / Which an age of prudence can never retract” (402-4) have the image of “vigorous physical exertion other than sex that leave the blood shaking one’s heart,” and this “moment’s surrender” is rather a “Kurtzian ‘desire, temptation, and surrender’ of the poem’s original epigraph, which hardly points to a lyrical rendezvous with a hyacinth girl” (p. 112). This horror of the flesh hardly stops Eliot to write off the repulsion for the female body, and all the cloying odours of Cleopatra’s lust perfumes and images of tulle tippet bodies can “not screen the degraded physicality of their sexualized bodies...[J]ust as Lil’s imagined false set of teeth fail to obscure her decaying mouth” (Porter in McIntire, 2015).

*TWL* creates a permeable image of women’s body, more of “a channel for undefined external force. Sexual violence, as opposed to male sterility, is far from “unnatural” in Eliot’s work” (Stockton, 2021, p. 29). By transforming his queer feelings into the production of a “quasi-queer bildungsroman, in which Eliot learns to shed his feminine weakness” (Houle, 2017, p. 19), Eliot tries to overcome his prejudice where he fails especially in his introduction of the (in)famous clairvoyante, Madame Sosostriis, “a modern incarnation of Tiresias” (Dean in Gish, 2004, p. 57), who offers “ominous, cryptic visions.” There is a clear discomfort in Eliot, which is “channelled into Sosostriis, who ultimately predicts all the subsequent developments of the poem” (Houle, 2017, p. 19). Eliot fails in overcoming his prejudice here because “Madame Sosostriis dishes out a debased and second hand form of spiritual knowledge” where “Such second hand knowledge, misrecognition, physical decay, sexual degradation, and unconsciousness have broken apart the language and beliefs of a common culture” (Potter in Laity and Gish, 2004, p. 226)

Moreover since it is understood that, for Eliot, poetic voice is rather readily accessible via feminine agency, there is vulnerability and dispossession of the erotic self. This counterintuitive argument is confirmed time after time in “The change of Philomel, by the barbarous king / So rudely forced” (97–100) or in “yet there the nightingale / Filled all the desert with inviolable voice” (137). The typist, after being sexually assaulted, “puts a record on the gramophone” (141). It echoes Marvell’s speakers who are understood “in relation to the breathtaking power of Philomela’s threat to tell of her assault,” yet, the “*Waste Land* sex is mute. Nobody’s tongue need be cut out here; the typist’s silence springs from apathy rather than being

imposed by mutilation” (Booth, 2015, p. 152).

When Eliot says in his notes, “What Tiresias sees, in fact, is the substance of the poem?” there are, seemingly, some fundamental clues hidden beneath this simplistic statement. Tiresias sees only one heterosexual act in the whole poem, and if that is the substance of the poem, this note is Eliot’s “most explicitly pedagogical one,” which “offers an example of the citational errancy of *The Waste Land* and its sexual pressures” (Lamos, 2009, p. 111). Tiresias, “a mere spectator and not indeed a “character,” is yet the most important personage in the poem, uniting all the rest” (North, 2001). This use of gender-bending, which attempts at a pseudo-femininity trying to prove his masculinity, empathises with feminine attributes. Tiresias is shown to be present in the worlds of both living and the dead simultaneously stuck between the binary of gendered lives of Eliot’s times.

Tiresias, who Eliot calls “the most important personage in the poem, uniting all the rest,” is more of a “voyeuristic “seer,” a peeping Tom peering through the blinds at a seedy sexual skit” (Lamos, 2009). In the image of Tiresias, *TWL* vindicates patriarchy by giving a panoptic perspective on sexuality, something the author-protagonist tries to achieve. Here the definition of patriarchy — “relations between men, which have a material base, and which, though hierarchical, establish or create interdependence and solidarity among men that enable them to dominate women” (Hartmann, 1976) — suits the male collaborative paradigm. Tiresias is located by Eliot in a space that is “voyeuristically apart from those he watches, enabling a flirtatious association with rape” (Stockton, 2021) as if complicit in what the carbuncular clerk does, who is “himself constructed as a repulsive image of social mobility.” Experiencing sex with women as man and with men as woman lends him a desired mobility across gender identities, especially when what he “sees, in fact, is the substance of the poem” seems doubtful. Tiresias, “endowed with a spurious androgyny and dubious spectatorship,” not only obscures “the powerful sexual conflicts in the poem” but also plays the “trope for the drag-like metamorphoses of masculine women and effeminate men” (Lamos, 2009, p. 112). Eliot knows and scripts an “obvious distaste” in Tiresias “for what is viewed as an unproductive set of possibilities for male-female intercourse,” which “cannot help but hint at the homoerotic” (Query, 2002)

Attributing the feminine role to Tiresias along with the (default) masculine role gives him a space for play where “[T]he suggestion that...fragments of myth, history and imagination are unified by their gender forms part of Eliot’s desire to enforce poetic unity in *The Waste Land*” (Potter in McIntire, 2015), enforcing, in turn, the idea that women are the sites of disorder. Potter suggests, “[T]his relation between disorder and implied unity is also significant when we consider the more specific question of Eliot’s writing of sexuality and gender difference in *The Waste Land*” something central to his depiction of the primal failures of the feminine and “its inhibitions as well as its violence, are the recurrent topic of these micro-scenarios” where “[W]omen... have been stymied and degraded” (Levenson, 2015; Kumar, 2020).

The following scene about Thames daughters, “passive victims undone by men” (Fuller in Harding, 2011), is another story of violation, and of illicit desire that is “subdued and skulking, lewd and protesting, creeping along the Thames and winding through the streets” (Marshall in Moody, 2009). The point of view, which mostly lies with victims, involving a sordid tale to be told: a tale about ‘rapability,’ that condition or “position which is social, not biological, [and which] defines what woman is” (MacKinnon, 1983). This also pertains to the misplaced ‘horror’ that Eliot felt, something inspired by heterosexuality but results in blatant misogyny.

The transformation of the raped Philomela into a nightingale as per Ovid’s tale is akin to “the transformation of the “raped” male subject into a mutilated, feminized poet (or author surrogate).” It does not entail any sympathy for women, and “for a man to be feminized in *The Waste Land* simply means that he is figuratively sodomized by a powerful woman, like the bridegroom victimized by the succuba in “Ode” (Lamos, 2009, p. 112). The scene, where Philomel appears, is strewn with “phallic endowment(s)” and Philomel the terrible figure for the politics of intimacy helps the poet come back, again and again to “‘improper’ sexual desire, temptation, and surrender and their often tragic consequences” (Davidson in McIntire, 2008, p. 69). Except Marie all other modern women of *TWL*: the Hyacinth girl, the lady on the

throne, Lil, the typist, Fresca and Myrtle, ones included in the first draft and later removed, are one, reduced to the image of the seductress, the whore, repeatedly ravished. For them Eliot uses “chattering, prostituting, diseased, or physically repellent” images (McIntire, 2008). Marie is “the primal prelapsarian ancestor of that modern female” (Sicker, 1984, p. 421) who uses cosmetics, such as the “strange synthetic perfumes” and the “vials of ivory and coloured glass” and a scent to drown “the sense in odours.” Marie’s reading at night implies that “either that she is insomniac, or that she is not having sex “much of the night”” (Koestenbaum, 2017). Unlike the hyacinth girl who is sexually willing with wet hair and arms full of hyacinth flowers, Marie recalls her childhood “mixing / Memory and desire...”(3). She overcomes her fear when sledding down the mountain, and “[H]er sexual desires are repressed, with her childhood trauma, and as Eliot went to Lausanne, she goes south, in search of warmth and a cure” (Koestenbaum, 2017). She is “defensive,” and there is certain “uneasiness,” and “before her uneasiness is allowed to grow the scene is over” (Bush, 2009). The story in *TWL*, thus comes back to square one, to what Frank Kermode called “mortuary eroticism,” which “serves less as a legitimation for a denigrated homosexual passion than as a way of achieving imaginary union with the lost one” (Lamos in Laity and Gish, 2004, p. 29). The disturbing brevity with which Eliot dwells on Phlebas the Phoenician, ‘a fortnight dead’ is reflective of subconscious errant desires that Eliot tries to hide beneath a ventriloquy in an effort to defer any contiguity with a heterosexual melancholia. Generally most of Eliot’s early poetry is homoerotically elegiac. Regardless of biographical sources melancholia is a characteristic feature of the modern masculine mind, and Eliot knew that love between men was considered pathological but he couldn’t evade the homosexual panic.

## 6. Conclusion

Can we argue then that “the gender anxieties and homosexual desires that pervade” Eliot’s works were always “displaced or disavowed” (Lamos, 2009, p. 1)? If “Baudelaire’s misogyny can be understood partly in terms of a panicky effort to reject the feminine side of his own sexual nature” (Pinkney, p. 70), Eliot’s case is more of homosexual panic where “violence towards women” is “so startling as to leave the reader constantly troubled” (Pinkney, p. 146). *TWL*, it seems, presents no option to the reader till he cannot abject, “as the poem does,” he “will not be able to identify fully; and a reader who cannot identify homoeroticism will not know all that the poem disavows” (Cole, 2004, p. 115). This suggests, out of many, a homoerotic oriented reading, but to limit it to the only feasible reading would lead to ridiculously essentialist narrative. This reading of *TWL*, as here, offers an argument that forecloses such a “totalizing vision,” not only due to its anti-homophobic approach, which has been counter-intuitively used to empower voices in the margin, that the poem subverts, but also because it opens up what is hidden beneath the foregrounded images of hysteric women, malevolent dames, and maledicting sorceresses, outing the closeted author-narrator at last. As Koestenbaum (2017) says, “I presume that collaborative texts could not help spilling secrets that singly-authored texts had the composure to hide,” *TWL* not only exposed Eliot’s “lascivious criminality and sexless chumming” but also found itself to be a “damning evidence of Eliot’s misogyny” (McDonald, 2004). What else could have been worse than the fact that Wyndham Lewis denied the would-be poet of *TWL* the publication of ‘Columbo and Bolo’ poems? It was definitely surprising and rather ironic that “it was Lewis – something of a bad-boy iconoclast of English modernism – who policed these representations of race, sex, and ribaldry out of the nascent canon of literary modernism” (p. 28).

*TWL* has a power that suggests a tragedy of the sordid, concomitant with its attending conviction, contrasting baseness and nobility. There is a lurking pathology in the mind of the poet-protagonist of which only little is transformed into reader’s response. The supposedly dead author is more like a cadaver who has dissected himself out of sight; he is perhaps Atthis, the god who buried himself in Stetson’s garden, about to spring, to give the reader lessons in anatomy. To many, this despair is a trick, but to me Eliot’s conception of *TWL* is born out of extreme emotions expressed through voices enthused with passion and despair at once. However his understanding of underlying fatality in homosexuality somehow transforms into the ruinous landscape where love of man for man led him to misogyny, in turn, reflecting a queer narrative of

“a pornographic Eliot, a smutty Eliot, and an Eliot committed to investigating the tensions between satire, sex, and race, as well as between memory and desire” (McIntire, 2008, p. 32).

**Notes:**

1. The Boni and Liveright edition as used in *The Norton Critical Edition* edited by Michael North (2001)
2. Sedgwick (1990) defines it as “a neologism meant to be distinguished from ‘homosexual’ and connotes a form of male bonding often accompanied by a fear or hatred of homosexuality.
3. McIntire (2008) borrows the term directly from Conrad Aiken who designated the Bolo poems as “parerga” in an essay called “King Bolo and Others,” which he wrote to celebrate the occasion of Eliot’s sixtieth birthday in 1948.
4. See (Simonton, 2014; Kaufman, 2016)
5. Sicker (1984) says, “While Eliot explores the features of this mythic woman most extensively in *The Waste Land*, her face comes as no surprise to readers of his earlier verse. We catch glimpses of her in the love-starved society matron in “Portrait of a Lady,” in the female whose eye “twists like a crooked pin” in “Rhapsody on a Windy Night,” in Grishkin with her “uncorseted friendly breast,” in the libidinous Princess Volupine with her “blue-nailed, phthisic hand,” in Sweeney’s epileptic mistress, and in the drunken harlot in the Spanish cape who tries to sit on his lap in “Sweeney among the Nightingales.””

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