

The Dialectic of The Closet: T. S. Eliot's Stratagem for Evading Detection in His Early Poetry

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Abstract :

Drawing on Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick's "dialectic of the closet", this paper aims at bringing to light T. S. Eliot's deviant sexual desires that are, intricately, woven into the fabric of his early poetry. Eliot's homoeroticism, expressed in an elegiac mode, is displayed on its purest surface due to the poet's subtle use of "sexual camouflage", a tactic which is enacted very carefully through his impersonality theory of poetry. Absorbed as one may have become in queer theory, this article weaves its way down to demonstrate that Eliot's sexual identity has been profoundly influenced by his failure to lead fulfilling relationships with his female partners in real life. Hence, the wheel of sexual desires seems to have turned from real yet poisoned male-female relations, to imaginative same-sex inclinations.

Keywords: Dialectic of the closet - deviant sexual desires- elegiac homoeroticism- impersonality theory- sexual camouflage- T. S. Eliot.

I- Introduction:

The last third of the nineteenth century witnessed a pivotal shift in sexual discourse where sexual identity became an underlying definer of the individuals' personhood as gender has been for decades. This has been, especially, due to the publication of Kosofsky Sedgwick's critically-hailed, and socially crucial academic intervention: "Epistemology of the Closet". The latter, zeroed in on the way in which homosexuality has been perceived and portrayed in many classical literary works; and argued that the topic of sexual identity is at the heart of almost all forms of literary writing, "an understanding of virtually any aspect of modern Western culture" Sedgwick (1990) maintains, "must be, not merely incomplete, but damaged

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in its central substance to the degree that it does not incorporate a critical analysis of modern homo/heterosexual definition”(p.1). Similarly, yet straightforwardly, Lee (1996) asserts that “homosexuality was, for the next generation of writers, an exclusive passport for literary success” (as cited in Woods, 2017, p.14).

Sedgwick's umbilical assumption is that the closet, while a publicly accessible concept addressing same- sex related epistemological issues, is not merely a tangible space, but a labyrinthine system of social and cultural knowledge in which deviant and abnormal form of sexuality is cloaked and disavowed. Sedgwick refers to the strategies used to avoid detection as “the closet”, and asserts that nearly all social and cultural mechanisms of secrecy have, implicitly, assumed the presence of deviant sexual secrets.

Since the appearance of Sedgwick's “dialectic of the closet”, the modernist prototype of art's autonomy has been regarded skeptically. Perhaps no other literary celebrity and popular icon of the twentieth century has been put under an eagle eye than Thomas Stearns Eliot has been. His enigmatic poetry has always been a battleground for a sheer number of furious critics. The revival of critical interest in Eliot's artistic legacy is, largely, sparked by the publication of his well- informed article “Tradition and The Individual Talent” and inflamed by his suspicious “Impersonality Theory of Poetry”. The basic misreading of Eliot's impersonality can be ascribed to his confusing “rhetoric of escape” (Dean, 2004); Eliot's critically evasive assertion that “poetry is not a turning loose of emotion, but an escape from emotion; it is not the expression of personality, but an escape from personality” (as cited in Bond, 2015, p. 102), kindled the very first fires of suspicion. Eliot personalized impersonality insofar as the Impersonalist aesthetic theory was conceived as nothing more than a shell or a “cortex” to hide inside. Put differently, Eliot's “rhetoric of escape” has led his most acerbic critics into hypothesizing about, precisely, what Eliot wanted to hide. Tim Dean (2004) contends: “the rhetoric of escape in Eliot's doctrine of Impersonality intensifies our sense that his poetic theory simply rationalizes the concealment of certain secrets” (p. 46). Queer critics of Eliot mount a similar argument asserting that Eliot's impersonality theory serves as “a strategy of concealment inseparable from the dialectic of homosexual closet” (as quoted in Dean, 2004, p. 51).

Idolized for his artistry, T. S. Eliot had a lot of secrets to burry, “a disastrous marriage, his near phobic hatred of women, and the faint but unmistakable hint of sexual deviancy” (as cited in Dean, 2004, p.43). Perhaps the best way to dig for the skull beneath the skin, and force Eliot out of his “carapace of privacy” (as cited in Dean, 2004), is to stretch far back over more than fifty years to John Peter's essay “A New Interpretation of The Waste Land” in 1952 to which Eliot reacted frantically. Although he hardly ever been influenced by myriad critical essays interpreting his writings, Eliot censored the one and only article to appear in his lifetime that ventured a somewhat homosexual insinuation of The Waste Land. Peter described “The Waste Land” as, fundamentally, an elegy driven by Eliot's sorrow over the death of his closest friend, most likely Jean Verdenal; towards whom, Eliot harbored some very special feelings. Eliot's suppression of the essay fueled critics curiosity about Eliot's sexual identity, Samiran Kumar Paul (2020) clarifies in this vein:

There is a certain poetic justice in Eliot's being forced out of the closet along with everybody else. Yet, paradoxically, it was Eliot's censorship that drew attention to Peter's interpretation as an issue of the closet in the first place, since his legal suppression of an academic article that might have languished

in obscurity generated the impression that there was something to hide. (The queer critique of impersonality, para. 2)

Critics have long been confronted by the tumultuous issues of Eliot's sexual corruption, yet they have always been reluctant to dive deeply into those muddy waters. Critical analysis of T. S. Eliot's major poetry acquaints us with the fact that over the past forty years, Eliot's literary works have been read as misogynistic rather than, potentially, homophobic. This is so because Eliot's poetry revealed unrestrained animosity against women. The latter are portrayed in negative shades as the oppressed, the raped, the prostitutes, the invisible victims and the marginalized. Hence, the earliest serious investigations into Eliot's sexual discomfort with women were biological in the first place.

Perhaps one of the most intriguing and convincing aspects of Eliot's life, is his tragic marital experiences which profoundly altered his sexual desires. One cannot overlook the fact that the absence of the female is hardly possible when the discussion pertains to their male counterparts. To that end, this paper will demonstrate how Eliot's sexual identity was profoundly shaped by his inability to maintain a healthy relationship with women. The latter, subconsciously, redirected his desires from real yet contaminated relationships to imagined, homosexual affections. By the same token, and following Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick's logic of the closet, the analysis will concentrate on how the dynamics of elegiac homoeroticism are subtly embedded within his early poetic works emerging in their most unblemished form due to the poet's effective, yet evasive strategies, methods of concealment, and indirect poetic techniques which have long mislead critics and obscured the poet's true self and interest.

II- Eliot's "Homosexual Panic":

As the nineteenth century faded into history and the twentieth century came into view, queer research and theory emerged as pivotal forces shaping the course of modern intellectual discourse. Inevitably, with the advent of the stark divide between homosexuality and heterosexuality, improper same-sex desires were pathologized culminating in what Sedgwick (1990) has, conceptually, termed "homosexual panic". High-caliber critics have, unswervingly, demonstrated that homosexual panic is not merely a theoretical construct, but a prominent and recurring theme among many prolific modernist writers' works. This phenomenon serves as a striking lens through which the intricate tapestry of modernist literature can be richly explored and understood.

T. S. Eliot, the closeted poet "whose whole career was an inside job" (as quoted in Dean, 2004, p. 43), is believed to suffer twentieth century's male malady of sexual anxiety. Eliot's censorship of the Peter's essay sparked significant intrigue among critics, particularly, in Peter's reading of the Waste Land as deeply intertwined with the dynamics of the closet. By attempting to suppress and obscure this interpretation, Eliot, unintentionally, flared up the flames of curiosity, intensifying the impression that a hidden sexual secret was lurking behind. Dean (2004) advances in this respect, "It is almost impossible not to read Eliot's legal action against Peter as a desperate attempt to re-closet what Peter had un-closeted but without the censorship, we might not have considered The Waste Land a question of sexual concealment and exposure at all" (p. 52).

Indeed, Eliot's censorship not only veiled but deepened the "sexual subtext", turning the poem into a site of both repression and revelation- where elegiac homoeroticism simmers

just beneath the fragmented surface- waiting to be unearthed by Eliot's most ardent detractors. Peter's article hypothesized a narrator grieving the loss of a dead homosexual friend (Paul, 2020); identified most plausibly, as Jean Verdenal- a youthful French student, and eager poet who had been Eliot's confidant during his sojourn in Paris. Eliot's drowned beloved, is portrayed in the poem, as Phelebas the Phoenician "who was once handsome and tall as you" (T. S. Eliot, 1930, p. 65). To ground this argument, Peter contends: "At some previous time the speaker has fallen completely- perhaps the right word is 'irretrievably'- in love. The object of this love was a young man who soon afterwards met his death, it would seem by drowning" (as cited in Miller, 1978, p. 10). Two years following Verdenal's death in World War I, Eliot commemorated him by dedicating "Prufrock and Other Observations, 1917) to Jean Verdenal, who was reported to have harbored mutual feelings for the poet. Verdenal's letters revealed having deep-seated emotions for Eliot as Faltejskova and Lee (2010) note: "his letter of 26 August 1912 shows torment and guilt from experiencing such physical desires" (Eliot's Sexual Orientation, para. 5).

Judith Butler's psychoanalytic conception of "melancholic homoeroticism" between men, inspires Collen Lamos to delve into Eliot's ambivalent feelings towards a dead male friend. Ultimately, Lamos ended up framing Eliot's homoerotic poetry within an elegiac context. Common to modern Western culture, melancholic homoerotic poetry emerged as a profound expression of intellectual thoughts in the early twentieth century. These perceived pathological attachments were regarded as a blemish that tarnishes the reputation of its indicator. Hence, they were, frequently, shrouded in denial and veiled through disavowal.

a- Concealing the Self Behind the Mask:

Grappling with masculine anxiety, Eliot dubbed "the cat who could never be caught" by Meriam More (cited in Churchill, 2005, p. 1)- masterfully amasses the materials needed to build a closet as solid and impenetrable as Elsinore's castle. So as not to be trapped and his true agenda never be revealed, Eliot employed his doctrine of impersonality as a clever tactic of evasion shielding himself from his most acerbic critics; who left no stone unturned in their search for the keys that help open the closet, and, hence, unlock his deeply buried erotic secret.

If we were to acknowledge that Eliot constructed his closet by acting as if he has something to conceal; we might even interpret this as a prescient strategy, deliberately, reinforcing critic's suspicion that a secret is, intricately, shrouded within the layers of his most cryptic poetry. In the same vein, Dean (2004) advances: "But actually all we need to recognize is that, in an age when any secret seems to imply a sexual secret, it was inevitable that Eliot's opacity would be interpreted as cloaking a specifically erotic mystery" (p. 52).

By the close of the 19th century, when homosexuality gained prominence, Eliot in his essay "Reflections on Contemporary Theories" addresses the notion of "Secret Knowledge". With striking openness, Eliot, provocatively, asserts within this context: "you possess this secret knowledge, this intimacy, with dead men" (as cited in Menand, 2007, p.71). By intertwining his "peculiar intimacy" with "Secret knowledge", Eliot brings to the forefront the homoerotic undertones inherent in his poetic theories. In a bid to unveil the meaning embedded behind the phrase "secret knowledge", Sedgwick (1990) clarifies: "... that knowledge meant sexual knowledge, and secrets sexual secrets, there had in fact developed one particular sexuality that was distinctively constituted as secrecy" (p.78), and that was male homosexuality.

Bringing to light the sexual dynamics interlaced into the Eliotic verse seems hardly possible without emptying the aesthetic impersonal theory of its masquerade. This stems from impersonality being used “as a pretense or “ruse” devised to deflect readers from the author’s deviant desires” (as quoted in Laity, 2004, p.9). Adopting Sedgwick’s logic of the closet yields insightful interpretations of Eliot’s poetic verse; nevertheless, this perceptive reading is often done at the cost of the poet’s impersonal techniques of writing. Merrill Cole argues in this respect: “Eliot’s escape from personality dovetails neatly with the closet” (as quoted in Dean, 2004, p. 53).

b- Looking for Skeleton in Eliot’s Closet:

Eliot’s secret is often deemed to be biographical in essence. James E. Miller (1978), having quoted some lines from *Tradition and The Individual Talent* about hiding the true self behind the impersonal mask, notes: “such language seems not be shaped by the “impersonal theory” but by a personal anguish (and the possible need for concealment) that lies behind the theory itself” (p. 36). There is no doubt that a text has its anchorage in the poet’s life experience as Christopher Ricks affirms: “a poem is the pearl that grows around a bit of grit in life” (as cited in Hoffmann, 2004, p. 1). By the late 1920s, Eliot was recognized for his dazzling writing and puzzling cryptic poetry. Eliot was quite sure that the very first stumbling block they encounter while reading his poetry, succeeding generations would search high heavens querying about his personal life; Dean (2004) points out in this line of thought: “anyone who announces, as Eliot did, that poetry is an escape from personality can expect; now more than ever, to have his personality ripped open like a fox” (p. 43). However, he never gave a blank check to anybody ever, to learn about his private life. In a letter from Eliot to his mother, Eliot noted:

About my letters... what I suggest, even beg, is that you keep all or any that you want to keep, but leave instructions that they be destroyed after your death, I do not want my biography, if it is even written- and I hope it won’t- to have anything private in it. (Eliot & Haffendan, 2012; as cited in Bradford, 2018, p. 514)

Understanding the intricacies of same-sex affections requires at least some familiarity with what W.B. Yeats (2000) refers to as “the foul rang and bone shop of the heart” (p. 297). One of the theories dealing with the source of Eliot’s masculine anxiety suggests that such sexual unease, most presumably, stems from the deep-seated influences of his childhood experiences. (Pinkney, 1984; as cited in Abbas, 2023). While Belma S. Steinberg (1991) argues that psychologically speaking, the child distinguishes the good from the bad by dividing them into “self” and “not self”, Pinkney believes that the infant employs this “splitting” as a mechanism of psychological defense. Based on these psychological perspectives, the biographer Peter Ackroyd advances: “for some writers, the family is merely something from which to escape, but for Eliot it was the formative influence” (as cited in Query, 2014, p. 350).

Eliot’s ambivalence towards sexuality mirrors the strict principles instilled in him by his Unitarian upbringing. His family upheld morally stiff and conservative codes of behavior. At a very young age, Eliot’s father ingrained in him the principium of “prohibition upon pleasure” and that sex is reprehensible, disgraceful and even equated with vice (as cited in Faltejskova & Lee, p. 2010).

Eliot's erratic and inherent sexual bigotry towards women also started at a very young age, as it was largely tied to the pervasive presence of women in his surrounding -his mother and sisters- and, more significantly, to the misfortune of his unhappy marriages. Young Tom boxed up unclear feelings towards his mother, he both loved her profoundly, for simply she is his mother, yet he often came to be angry with her for being authoritarian and controlling whose sole gratification was to live, vicariously, through her son. Seymoure Jones sets forth in this respect, "certainly Eliot's feeling for his mother was deeply ambivalent love mixed with a fear which was replicated in the alarm, physical revulsion and violent misogyny which women were to engender in him" (as cited in Bellour, 2014, p. 143). However, no aspect of Eliot's personal life has been more captivating than the story of his disastrous marriage. Sir Herbert Edward Read said that Eliot was like "one who had some secret sorrow or guilt" (cited in Sharpe, 1991, p. 5). One of the crucial events that dramatically cursed Eliot's fate took place on April 24, 1915 when he got married to Vivien Haighwood, Eliot's first wife. The newlywed couple started a life, the least one can describe it as not so much temptuous or lustful, as it was reported. The couple were not able to keep up a flourishing sexual relationship as Vivien is believed to have, bitterly, suffered from what would today be diagnosed as "neurasthenia": a state of hysteria marked by severe nervousness. This mental disorder made her behavior quite changeable and, at times, so unbearable. In addition to this malady, she had also a complication with an extremely capricious, arbitrary menstrual cycles, creating problems with both her personal hygiene and the couple's ability to live a normal sexual life. As early as 1910, Eliot had expressed a "ruthless rejection of the body's uncleanness" (MacIntire, 2008; as cited in Abbas, 2023. p. 212). Similarly, Seymoure Jones (2009) reported: "Her physical presence, her smell, her clothes, her bodily functions all repelled him" (cited in Abbas, 2023, p. 212). Even more troubling, and if critics are right, problems in Eliot's marriage, truly began when he uncovered that Vivien had engaged in an affair with a man named Bertnard Russell, during the first year of their marriage.

c- Turning the Wheel of Sexual Desires:

Carol Seymour- Jones' *Painted Shadow*, the highly acclaimed biography of Vivien, offers the most compelling argument to date for both the importance and the scope of influence of Eliot's homoerotic experience. In addition to offering a powerful account of his relationship with Verdenal, Seymour Jones digs into the intricate erotic triangle involving Eliot, Vivien and their friend Bertrand Russell arguing that: "There was an element of homosexuality by proxy in the way in which Eliot offered Vivien to Russell" (as cited in Lamos, 2004, p. 27). The psychological implications of this triangulated desires echoes Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick's pattern of "homosexual closet".

John T. Mayer, conclusively, asserts that Eliot's troubled marriage to Vivien Haighwood "altered his appreciation of his friendship with Verdenal, the relationship that had died was resurrected in memory and charged with imaginative power quite beyond the living experience" (as cited in Lamos, 2004, p. 27). Put differently, Eliot's failure to handle a successful relationship with women prompted him to redirect his sexual desires from the conventional male-female love to unconventional same -sex connections. Consequently, Verdenal's death provided Eliot with the opportunity to transform him into a symbol of deep, romantic longing in his poetry of the late 1910s and early 1920s.

Eliot's conceivable sexual concern in Jean Verdenal triggered the "poet of fragments" to produce what Koestenbaum (2007) identifies as "hysterical discontinuities" (p. 168). The

latter could be, comparably, understood in the light of the Waste Land's highly intertextual, elusive verses. Eliot's own revisions coupled with Pounds far reaching, extensive editorial cuts, subdued the homosexual subtexts and eliminated the poems that explicitly addressed queer erotic themes, such as *The Colombo* and *Bolo* verses which are considered to be among Eliot's most explicit and pornographic works. The latter are so, brazenly, provocative that they astounded even Pound who implored him to "try to normaly your vices" (as cited in Lamos, 2004, p. 27). Wayne Koestenbaum (2017) contends that Eliot's synergistic authorship with Ezra Pound entangles them in a homoerotic exchange, one that culminates in the birth of a poem rather than a baby. He clarifies that the two poets: "engage [s] in a symbolic scene of homo-sexual intercourse" (as cited in Paul, 2020, *Eliot's Erotica*, para. 17) and that "the text the two men produce might be described as their child" (as cited in Abass, 2023, p. 211).

III. Sexual Deviancy in Eliot Poetry:

The publication of Eliot's letters (1988) along with previously uncollected works unveils the poet's lifelong obsession with homoerotic issues. This is, particularly, evident in his early drafts of the *Waste Land*, *The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock*, and *The Love Song of St. Sebastian*.

a. The Waste Land:

Eliot's unfeigned passionate expression of affection for his departed homosexual friend, Verdenal, along with the profound grief over his loss, permeates the pages of the *Waste Land*. Eliot opens up the first of the five sections of the *Waste Land*; "The Burial of The Dead", lamenting Verdenal's death. He sets up the whole poem's mood by contrasting Chaucer's cheerful, fruitful April, with "April is the cruelest month," reflecting the personal significance of April 1915, when his male companion Verdenal passed away. In a similar vein, Patrick Query (2014) advances: "Eliot's most famous and, sexually speaking most controversial poem announces sexual tension at its outset. "April is the cruellest month" because of its propensity for "breeding", for "mixing"/ memory and desire" and quickening the Gerontionesque "[d]ull roots to life" (p. 353).

One of the most explicit and extended passages exploring same- sex desires and the propensity for male friendship is featured in the "Hyacinth girl" episode from "The Burial of the Dead" section (lines II 36-39), "You gave me Hyacinths first a year ago; /They called me the hyacinth girl. /_Yet when we came back, late, /from the Hyacinth garden/Your arms full, and your hair wet, I could not /Speak..." (T. S. Eliot, 1930, p. 54). The lines from this scene appear, deceptively, quite unblurred, at first glance; however, Eliot's moments of heartbreak and distraught state of mind winded up in a series of haunting and deeply sorrowful recollections. There is little consensus on the true nature or significance of the incident. A widely held interpretation is that Emily Hale, Eliot's second muse, represents the Hyacinth figure symbolizing poignant memory of a lost or failed relationship (as cited in Silkin, 2016). Other critics, however, contend that the term "hyacinth" evokes the myth of Hyacinthus, the boy adored by Apollo. Still, it is equally plausible to associate the purported "Hyacinth girl" with the poet's emotional reminiscence of a "friend coming across the Luxembourg Gardens in the late afternoon, waving a branch of lilac" (as cited in Bloom, 2007, p. 68). The poem, intricately weaves the figure with themes of death and the Great War trenches, giving birth to the crucial line (328), "He who was living is now dead" (T. S. Eliot, 1930, p. 66), which

alludes to Jean Verdenal, who tragically perished during the World War I, seemingly, by drowning.

Among the most evocative and elegiac homoerotic allusions in *The Waste Land*, are those imbedded in what "The Thunder Said" section (lines 400-407); where the melancholic tone and emotional depth reach their utmost expression: "Then spoke the thunder/ DA/Datta: what have we given? / My friend blood shaking my heart/The awful daring of a moment's surrender/Which an age of prudence can never retract/.../Which is not to be found in our obituaries" (T. S. Eliot, 1930, p. 68). The references to blood and instances of surrender evoke an intense, intimate relationship that both "the bother" and "the friend" seem to experience. Consequently, they are depicted as tormented and remorseful, weighed down by the deviant physical desires they have succumbed to, yet later come to regret. According to David E. Chinitz (2014), the exact nature of the "surrender" has long preoccupied critics sparking extensive debate for decades. Chinitz believes that the surrender is imbued with elements of both: profound shame, "which an age of prudence can never retract" (line 405); and deep secrecy, "which is not to be found in our obituaries" (line 407). The issue of "surrender" brings to mind Jean Verdenal's letters from August 26, 1912, which reveal his torment and guilt over experiencing such physical desires (as cited in Faltejskova & Lee, p. 2010).

Colleen Lamos and Harriet Davidson have both highlighted the issue of "deviance and perversion" in Eliot's poetic works. Davidson (1997) refers to what she terms "improper desires" in the *Waste Land*, suggesting that: "[T]he overriding tone of the poem, seems to yearn to be rid of improper desires" (as cited in Pietrzak, 2011, p. 258). This perspective, Davidson believes resonates with Eliot's inherited attitude towards sexuality.

b. Eliot's "Love Songs":

"The Love of St. Sebastian" and "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock" are two other evocative Eliotic poems that profoundly illustrate the recurring theme of postmortem love and serve as crucial intertextual sites for exploring homoerotic undertones.

b.1. The Love of St. Sebastian:

The Love Song of St. Sebastian which first appeared in Eliot's letters to Aiken around 1914, and later reemerged with notable manuscript variations in the 1996 publication of the *March Hare*, stands as one of Eliot's most enigmatic and erotically charged poetic compositions. In an earlier letter to Aiken, Eliot reflected on his visits to art galleries across Europe, noting the prominence of three great depictions of Saint Sebastain: Mantegna, The Antonello of Messina and Memling. However, it was Mantegna's portrayal of Saint Sebastain that, particularly, inspired Eliot in crafting his poem. Eliot's portrayal of Saint Sebastian often mirrors the artistic depictions in which he is represented as an eroticized body, expressing a complex interplay of pain and pleasure while being pierced by the soldiers' arrows; "Because his flesh was in love with the burning arrows/ He danced on the hot sand/ Until arrows came/As he embraced them his white skin surrendered itself/To the redness of blood and satisfied him" (T. S. Eliot, 2015, p. 271). In these lines, Eliot expresses his conflicted inner sexual desires, which he had, carefully, subdued in his earliest works. However, the sexually charged language he employed unveils his underlying homoerotic imagination. The use of the word "came" alludes to the role of the arrows within the homoerotic cult associated with the traditional portrayal of Saint Sebastian. According to James E. Miller's (2008) interpretation of the poem, the adjectives employed- such as "piercing", which conveys a

sense of “penetration” and others like “burning”, “embraced”, and “surrendered”- create an impression that the arrows’ penetration evoke a sense of sexual gratification. Furthermore, the arrows add a homoerotic dimension to the poem, reinforcing what Colleen Lamos identifies as “the connection between male same-sex desire, self-love, and masochism” (as cited in Query, 2014, p. 352) that frequently manifest in Eliot’s works. Although these lines are extracted from *The Death of St. Narcissus*, Miller (2008) contents that: “it is precisely at this moment in the poem that Eliot’s Narcissus assumes the role of Saint Sebastian as depicted in classical art masterpiece” (p. 249). Eliot’s, seemingly, nonchalant comment to Aiken, “there is nothing homosexual about this” (as cited in Ricks & McCue, 2015, p. 1142), stands in sharp contrast to Miller’s conviction that Eliot was, indeed, aware of the homosexual connotations surrounding Saint Sebastian during the late 19th and early 20th centuries. Eliot’s remarks on the pictorial representation of Saint Sebastian- particularly the interplay of pain and pleasure conveyed through the arrows penetrating his body- along with his critique of the renowned photographer Fred Holland Day, known for his homoerotic depictions of nude young men posed as Saint Sebastian with arrows, significantly influenced the homoerotic picture associated with Eliot’s poem.

Child’s interpretation of St. Sebastian poem as a confessional narrative where a poetical character driven by a desire for a woman, subjects himself to self – flagellation, so as to enter his beloved bed only to ultimately strangles her to death, places the poem within a realm of profound skepticism. Richard A. Kaye has extensively explored the homosexual resonance of Saint Sebastian for poets of Eliot’s time. He explains that in an attempt to distance himself from potential accusations of homosexuality, Eliot deliberately stripped away the homoerotic content traditionally embedded in Saint Sebastian, by transforming the narrative into a cautionary tale where a female figure triggers sexual havoc. However, Kye strongly contends that the femininity of the desired figure in Eliot’s *Love Song* is based solely on the single mention of her breasts, implying that the poem is laden with subtle homosexual implications (As cited in Miller, 2008).

b.2. The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock:

Eliot’s other “*Love Song*” poem is even more baffling than that of his *St. Sebastian*. Richard A. Kaye believes that: “Eliot’s masochistic and murderous Saint is transformed...into the paradigmatic modernist sufferer Prufrock as self- punishing as the poet’s Sebastian, but now not only passive but too paralyzed to commit any act” (as cited in Miller, 2008, p. 246).

In his earliest poem, “*The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock*,” Eliot delves subtly into the emotionally and neurotically disturbed realm of the refined modern man who grapples with a profound sense of masculine anxiety. Living in world bereft of love and romance, the emotionally distressed Prufrock is deeply enmeshed in a quest to find a meaningful relationship where he can both bestow and experience genuine affection. The fact that the women who are, purportedly, the objects of desire in this poem, fail to capture Prufrock’s interest call into question Prufrock’s and, possibly, the poet’s sexual identity. Like many contemporary men, Prufrock seems cursed by a “male malady” of female hatred. The latter are perceived as perilous, repugnant, and a threat to his sense of masculinity. Prufrock’s anxiety and frustration stems from his propensity towards same -sex love, which is evident from the poem’s opening lines. The poem transcends a mere pursuit of romantic

affection. Instead, it evolves into a complex search of sexual identity. Prufrock's repeated questioning of "who am I?" lays bare his profound inner turmoil and search for tranquility through understanding.

The poem raises the curtain with what appears to be an uncommon approach to traditional romance; seemingly, aimed at asserting Prufrock's masculinity. Plagued by serious psychological uneasiness, Prufrock extends an invitation to an anonymous genderless visitor for an evening encounter: "Let us go then, you and I (when the evening is spread out against the sky/ like a patient etherized upon a table" (T. S. Eliot, 1930, p. 3). The succeeding lines reveal how deeply consumed by loneliness and isolation, Prufrock wanders the bleak, desolate streets in search of a meaningful, and passionate relation.

In this "Love Song", both romantic relationship and language collapse into failure. Prufrock struggles to find the right words to communicate with his female partner, unfortunately, he is unable to articulate his thoughts into an intelligible speech. Instead, he kept endlessly repeating fragmented pieces of his inner turmoil, unable to bridge the gap between thought and expression. This failure to convey cohesive ideas, illustrates what Wayne Koestenbaum (2007) terms "hysteric discontinuities", which has been referred to earlier in this paper as a suppression of Eliot's potential romantic obsession with his deceased male friend Jean Verdenal (p.168). This unwarranted anxiety undermined the protagonist's confidence in his physical being, hence causing a deep sense of inadequacy. This mounting frustration reduces the body to mere fragments/ Hair, arms, and legs. Prufrock reiterates: ("They will say: "How his hair is growing thin!")/ ("They will say: "But how his arms and legs are thin!") (The Waste Land, 1930, p. 4). Prufrock's inability to love or be loved by women, along with his feelings of inefficiency and imperfection offers subtle yet traceable clues of elegiac homoeroticism. It is no coincidence that Sedgwick (1990) refers to "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock" as a "manifestation of homosexual panic" (p. 240). Eliot's dedication of Prufrock and Other Observations to the memory of his male companion Jean Verdenal, heightens the feeling of suspicion, particularly that the poem opens with an epigraph from Dante's Purgatorio; a heading, Eliot frequently revisits throughout his career. This epigraph serves not only as an important marker of homoeroticism, but also as a remarkable embodiment of elegiac love. Speaking to Virgil, his poetic guide and cherished friend Statius declares: "So may you find/ The measure of the love that warms me to you when for it/ I lose all else from my mind, forgetting we are empty resemblances/ and taking shadows to be substances" (as cited in Lamos, 2004, p. 29). Eliot placed these lines at the outset of the Prufrock poem. To Eliot, the cabalistic voice of Statius in Dante's Purgatorio echoes that of the late Verdenal. With such an epigraph, the poem, compellingly, leads its readers to ponder that Prufrock's professed love might not be intended for a woman, but rather reflects a deep and intimate affection between men.

IV. Conclusion:

To wrap up, for the multifarious gibberish that has been recounted against Eliot's sexual anxiety; enough ink has been spilled in an attempt to bring to light his true sexual identity. Nevertheless, there has been only a handful of conclusive studies, scarcely sufficient to uncover any definitive homoerotic identity. Despite the fact that Eliot's letters and poems reveal intense psychological anguish, uncertainty and perverse sexual desires, they offer no categorical biographical evidence of homosexual experience. Conversely, there is no concrete proof to suggest that he entirely abstained from same- sex relationship either (as cited in

Churchill, 2005). Eliot's desperate efforts to keep the closet doors firmly locked through his impersonality theory proved futile in front of Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick's "dialectic of the closet". Sedgwick deftly uncovers how Eliot skillfully employed misleading techniques of evasion and subterfuge, and intricate strategies of indirection- each hinting at a concealed homoerotic inclination- to evade detection of his most relentless critics who spend years probing for skeletons in the poet's private closet.

It seems both inadequate and even presumptive to accuse "a once existed as living, breathing, writing" poet (as quoted in Churchill, 2005, p. 7) of being homosexual solely based on some sites of elegiac homoeroticism in his early works; particularly, in the presence of hardly any biographical evidence of a homosexual experience. Therefore, the most reasonable conclusion for this paper, which is till a work in progress, is that Eliot's sexual identity has been significantly influenced by his failure to maintain successful connections with his female partners in reality, redirected his sexual desires into imaginative (elegiac) homosexual desires towards his deceased male friend, Jean Verdenal.

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