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

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With the advent of Modernism, male authors' anxieties and fears of an age that is threatened to be tainted with the stains of feminism have become intense and ineffable. Indeed, gender identity becomes very problematic and precarious in the modern times. T. S. Eliot's "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock" crystalizes an utter decline of masculinity, which becomes very rife in the modern age. Prufrock lives in a world devoid of love and romance, which has plunged his masculinity into deep crisis. He tries to rescue himself from the encroachments of the feminine Other, who seems to be pernicious to the very existence of a virile and manly society. Despite being objects of sexual desire, Prufrock's women fail to garner his interests, because they are the sworn enemies who are dangerous, repulsive and impugning to his manhood. Prufrock is afraid to confess his insidious desires, and hence, to galvanise the public opinion, because his homoerotic love will be thwarted and fatally condemned owing to societal constraints and limitations. Prufrock's journey is not in search for romantic love; it is a quest for gender identity, especially that he inhabits a world where patriarchy is on the wane. The overwhelming question in "The Love Song" is 'Who Am I?'

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The poem opens with what looks like a purposeful invitation of a nameless and sexless companion to make a visit in the evening, which is reminiscent of the violet hour in "The Waste Land". The speaker says: "Let us go then, you and I/When the evening is spread out against the sky/Like a patient etherized upon a table."[7] Prufrock, the vainglorious speaker, is encumbered by a pent-up sexual question which seems to be a proposal of marriage or a romantic declaration of love. This question is so overwhelming that it needs to be released. Proceeding to the following lines shows that Prufrock, who is roaming the dismal streets in search for a passionate relation, is tormented by deep psychological frustrations and ailments, which are evident in his description of the "restless nights". The half-deserted streets suggest a speaker

buffeted by extreme pangs of loneliness and solitude. Prufrock suffers from a profound sense of solitariness and aloneness, which is the individual's fate in the 20th century. Though he frequents these parties, Prufrock does not feel integrated but rather alienated and emotionally detached. In the poem, no genuine communication ensues between Prufrock and this lady or between Prufrock and his companion whose gender is unknown if he/she exists at all. Prufrock inhabits a world which is reft of communion and union. His relationships are frail, impersonal, and devoid of intimacy.

Prufrock's inwardness is reinforced by the use of a dramatic monologue and the epigraph, which suggests that he is one of the damned in this hellish existence, and that he speaks only because he is confident that no one is overhearing his thoughts. The interior monologue indicates Prufrock's inability to connect to the external world. His internal emotional conflicts and his overwhelming question are self-confessed. One might even venture to say that Prufrock has not left the room at all and that the journey takes place only in his mental landscape. Hence, the 'you', which appears at the beginning of the poem and disappears shortly, might be Prufrock himself who addresses himself in a desperate search for a companion and out of an urgent need for nearness and emotional approximation. He feels that he cannot "disturb [his own] universe"(5) of aimlessness and loneliness to declare his love to a woman.

The "Love Song" might be read as a peregrination of a man who is bent on showing and asserting his masculinity, which seems to be oozing away. The poem's opening lines deconventionalise traditional love. The simile of the evening as "a patient etherized upon a table"(3) bespeaks Prufrock's inertia and internal state of emotional crisis. Like the etherized patient, who is waiting to be operated, Prufrock's virility seems to be withering. He is very akin to a paralysed patient throbbing between life and death. The simile imparts impressions of an ailing and psychologically maimed lover who, seemingly, suffers from the torments and vagaries of love. Prufrock's very simple sexual question seems to be a heroic act, which demands huge herculean efforts. Whatever attempts he has made, Prufrock does not dare to avow his romantic love for this woman. He does not even have the words to formulate his thoughts and to communicate his surreptitious desire. He says: "It is just impossible to say what I mean"(7). So, in "The Love Song", not just romantic relations are torn apart, but even language fails as a connector or binder. In a self-talk,

Prufrock tries to find the adequate words to communicate with the woman. He says: "Shall I say, I have gone at dusk through narrow streets/And watched the smoke that rises from the pipes/Of lonely men in shirt-sleeves, leaning out of window?..."(6) The three dots after the question mark reveal Prufrock's inability to put his thoughts into words.

Prufrock's loss of virility and masculine vigour is evinced in his lack of "the strength to force the moment to its crisis"(6). He suffers from a weakness, which is usually associated with women but deemed to be insulated from men. His vainglorious heroic attempts are foredoomed to failure though he has "wept and fasted, wept and prayed"(6). Eliot uses an objective correlative to describe Prufrock's passivity, which indicates his loss of masculine vigor. The cat, Prufrock says, "rubs its muzzle on the window panes/Licked its tongue into the corners of the evening,/Lingered upon the pools that stand in drains,/[…] slipped by the terrace, made a sudden leap,/ And seeing that it was a soft October night,/Curled once about the house, and fell asleep"(4). In these lines, Prufrock compares himself to a feline, which is stereotypically associated with the female.

Prufrock is cognizant of the crisis of his masculinity, which is spelled out in his confession: "I have seen the moment of my greatness flicker"(12). The word 'flicker' evokes the withering or the extinction of the fire of his sexual desire. Prufrock, who tries to find a well-defined gender identity that he lacks, admits that he is not prince Hamlet or John the Baptist. He cannot be comparable to Lazarus either because he is not a man of miracles. Ironically, he says: "I am Lazarus, come from the dead,/ Come back to tell you all, I shall tell you all"(7). Unlike this figure, who came back to life, Prufrock's emotions will remain dormant, and his question, which is too much for words, will never be asked. Lazarus, which is a Biblical name, also refers to any person who has a strong determination to start again after failure. But this is not the case of Prufrock who he is a person of "no great matter"(6). He compares himself to an "attendant lord", very much like Polonuis, in Shakespeare's Hamlet, "meticulous; Full of high sentence, but a bit obtuse; At times, indeed, almost ridiculous-Almost, at times, the Fool"(8). The epigraph, which is taken from Dante's Purgatorio, suggests that there is no resurrection from his emotional death. Prufrock's vitality has drained, and he becomes very conscious of the fading away of his youth and strength. He feels that death, "the eternal footman"(12), is approaching him.

Prufrock suffers from a profound emotional debility, which can be explained in terms of a psychological problem dubbed aboulie. Eliot's biographer, Peter Ackroyd, defines aboulie as "a withdrawal into negative coldness, with an attendant loss of mental rigour and physical energy."[8] To express his lack of masculinity, Prufrock compares himself to glaring male figures, but he could not identify any similitude. He lacks the stamina and the courage of John the Baptist whose head was cut when announcing the coming of Jesus. Unlike John the Baptist, Prufrock is afraid of the aftermaths of his overwhelming love question. He also lacks the boldness, heroism, and romanticism of Hamlet. Unlike this figure, Prufrock's hesitation and incapability of decisive action is due to his cowardice and inadequacy. Prufrock's question whether he dares "eat a peach"(8) or not points to his reluctance and feeling of impotence because, traditionally, peach is a symbol of marriage and immortality.

Seemingly, Prufrock suffers from a 'dissociation of sensibility', emanating from an utter emotional turmoil. His intellectual and emotional sides are torn apart. The 'You', whom the reader presumes to be Prufrock's companion, disappears after line 12 because it is a mere fragment of his shattered self. Indeed, Prufrock does not only fail to connect to a woman; he fails to connect even to himself. In his discussion of the double, in male Modernists' texts, the critic Michael Kane writes: "Whatever the medical definition of schizophrenia […] the appearance of 'the double' is indicative of a crisis of identity of the white upper-class male towards the end of the nineteenth century."[9] In the modern age, masculinity is shaken. Men, like Prufrock, feel that their masculinity is undergoing a crisis. This sense of masculinity crisis intensifies his fear of women whom he associates with castration and death.

Since he fails to pose his question and thus to alleviate the heaviness that has burdened his mind, Prufrock keeps reiterating fragments of his inner thoughts that he is unable to verbalise. This reiteration is reminiscent of William Shakespeare's Hamlet. According to Eliot, the "levity of Hamlet, his repetition of phrase, his puns, are not part of a deliberate plan of dissimulation, but a form of emotional relief."[10] The repetition of phrases and sentences also indicates Prufrock's neurotic anxiety which seems to be masculine in nature. This Masculine anxiety is perhaps due to an intense fear of the miasma of the burgeoning feminist movement in the 20th century, a time when concern about manhood was intensified, especially that a myriad of men

died during the First World War. In a letter to his brother Henry, Eliot avows that the poem is an expression of an intense fear of death. He writes:

> I often feel that 'J. A. [lfred] P. [rufrock]' is a swan song, but I never mention the fact because Vivien is so exceedingly anxious that I shall equal it, and would be bitterly disappointed if I do not. So do not suggest to anyone how I feel. The present year has been, in some respects, the most awful nightmare of anxiety that the mind of man could conceive, but at least it is not dull, and it has its compensations.[11]

The oxford dictionary defines the swan song as follows: "(from the old belief that a swan sang sweetly when about to die) last performance, appearance, work before death of a poet, musician, etc."[12] The fact that the publication of the poem was confluent with the First World War throws fresh light on our reading of the poem. Owing to the ravages of war, there spread a fear among men that the manly society and the ideal of manhood might vanish and 'melt into the air '. In her discussion of the impact of the war on the modern man, Ana Garden-Coyne states: "The impact of war upon British men's bodies and minds-shell shock, disability, fear, alcoholism, and malingering-aggravated anxieties about masculinity."[13] In fact, the war has destabilized the individual's gender identity, resulting in the crisis of man's virility. During and after the First World War, which smashed up everything, men became very obsessed with the body, because man's health, and the strong body in particular, is the sinew of manhood, which is threatened by the ravages of the war. Prufrock, like any ordinary modern man, is very much concerned with his physicality. Garden-Coyne maintains that in

> the Twentieth Century, muscular action became firmly associated with masculine identity and the sexual body. In the aftermath of war, muscles came to symbolize the rehabilitation of the whole man, even when he was missing a limb. This was a powerful basis for rebuilding confidence in the male body and masculinity (164).

Prufrock seems to be very much concerned about his spurious ideal image. To restore and assert his overweening masculinity, he shows a narcissistic and ingrained interest in his self-image and physical appearance. Prufrock's narcissism is evident in his concern with his appearance. He contemplates his "morning coat, [his] collar mounting firmly to the chin,/[His] necktie rich and modest, but asserted by a simple pin"(11). He also worries about his "arms and legs" which are "thin"(11).

Prufrock's love song is not a conventional one, for Prufrock would like to speak of love to a woman, but he does not dare due to his emotional passivity. The repetition of the image of the relaxing cat is to emphasize his dormant passions and his inability to integrate in a romantic world. The cat "sleeps so peacefully!/Smoothed by long fingers,/Asleep…tired…or it malingers,/stretched on the floor, here beside you and me"(6). In addition to its suggestion of emotional debility and aloofness, the recurrent image of the relaxing cat also attests to Prufrock's aimlessness and his vagrant and vain Odyssey. In fact, Prufrock wants to escape from his bounden masculine duty.

Prufrock is impervious to the music and the perfume in women's room. Even the woman's arms fail to disinter his desires and to awaken his silent bonds of affection. He remains aloof and remote, indifferent and emotionally blind to this woman's existence. In short, Prufrock does not look like an ordinary man because he is destitute of masculine ravenous desire. When he tries to be a bit romantic by referring to the ladie's bare arms, Prufrock immediately destroys this romanticism, muttering that on these arms "(in the lamplight, downed with light brown hair)"(5). He has a romantic glimpse, but he soon comes back to reality. He finds it difficult to overcome his inner inadequacies and inhibitions and probe into the physical and corporeal world of the Other. Prufrock even wonders if it is perfume, which makes him digress and talk romantically, because he is not romantic by nature; "Is it perfume from the dress", he asks, "That makes me so digress?"(6) Still, Prufrock wants to transgress the boundaries of his reticence and pose his romantic query, but he feels emotionally paralysed, unable even to act or to take the endeavour. In a daring attempt to introduce his passionate conversation with the lady, he shirks articulating his intense longings. He thinks, instead, of describing the desolate and ugly places he has gone through to reach her and the "lonely men" he has seen "leaning out of the windows"(6). Those men are the alter ego of Prufrock, who might be musing on his own state of psychological alienation and solitariness.

Prufrock is unable to love and to utter his love song since his romantic yearnings are dormant and stagnant. In words reminiscent of Andrew Marvell's "To his coy Mistress", Prufrock avows his fervid desire to consummate his love. In Marvell's poem, the raving lover says: "Let us roll all our strength and all/ our sweetness, up into a ball."[14] Prufrock's allusion to Marvell's poem evinces the stunning difference betwixt the two lovers. The romantic speaker, in Marvell's poem, urges his mistress to make love because life is very short and time is fleeting. Contrariwise, in "The Love Song", Prufrock is unable to proclaim his love song or to embody the virtues of romantic lovers. For him, there is enough time to "murder and create"(10). Though he strains too hard to find words to express his marriage proposal, Prufrock's hopes of articulating and formulating his question are dashed to pieces. He trails off into silence and sinks into an abyss of despair. Indeed, his love song is, ironically, a song of unattainable love.

Prufrock cannot disturb his own universe of shyness and hesitation, which renders him incapable of action. Even at moments when he is swept by a sudden gust of passion, he often digresses. Owing to his reluctance, the ageing lover keeps delaying asking his overwhelming question, trying to convince himself that "There will be time." When he considers the passage of time, he rejoices at having a lot of remaining time to ask his question, which indicates his hesitation. But the refrain, "There will be time", is also suggestive of his attempts to soothe his time-ridden mind by denying and repressing his fear of the transience of life that has left him behind. Prufrock's comparing of himself to a crab, a repulsive creature, which moves sideways, indicates his timidity. It also shows his fear from women and his need for protection, because the crab is protected from the outside attacks by a shell. He even thinks of denying what he means before asking his question. If he ever asked this question, he would say: "This is not what I meant at all"(7). Prufrock's hesitation culminates in his wondering if his overwhelming question is worth asking at all. He says: "And would it have been worth it, after all, would it have been worth while"(7).

One of Prufrock's impediments, which leads to his petrifaction, is his lack of self-confidence. He is afraid that his image is unattractive, and hence, of what others might say or think of him. He starts imagining women's acerbic comments on his physical appearance. He says: "They will say: 'How his hair is growing thin!'"(5) Prufrock is afraid of being mocked because of the thinness of his body, which indicates his lack of masculine vigour; "They will say: 'But how his arms and legs are

thin!'" (5) To appease his worries about his image, he thinks of parting his hair behind to shield from women's view the baldness of his hair. Prufrock desperately remarks that the women, in the room, are not interested in him. They averted their eyes from him, talking, instead, of Michelangelo. His sense of inadequacy is evinced in the refrain "In the room the women come and go/Talking of Michelangelo." After realizing the impossibility of his connection to the woman, Prufrock, at the end, goes to the beach where he saw the mermaids. But these matrons of enchantment, who are sexually tantalizing, are indifferent to him. He desperately remarks: "I have heard the mermaids singing, each to each./ I do not think that they will sing to me"(8).

Prufrock is afraid of their judgments, and thus, of being relegated and rejected. The phrase "dying fall" implies that they seem as if they are talking to each other, but they are commenting on him. This is why he says: "I know the voices", which means that they are talking about him. Prufrock has a paltry and horrible vision of himself. To reveal his worthlessness, he avows that he is "not prince Hamlet", who delayed his action, waiting for the right moment in order not to be suspected but never because of cowardice and diffidence. Prufrock even imagines himself as an insect, which indicates his lack of self-esteem and self-respect.

In an attempt to justify his reluctance to pose his query, Prufrock confesses his boredom with those women who frequent the tea parties or the drawing rooms. He says: "I have known them all already, known them all/ Have known the evenings, mornings, after-noons"(5). So, Prufrock, who is not a man of a susceptible nature, becomes bored not just with women but also with existence itself. He is leading a futile, aimless, and purposeless life. In a funny way of evoking one's life, Prufrock reflects on squandering his life, saying that he has "measured out [his] life with coffee spoons"(5). The line buttresses Prufrock's sense of ennui and points to his frequent going to these parties and his familiarity with these women who do not seem appealing to him. Prufrock ponders the significance of his question, wondering again whether his love question or proposal of marriage is worth asking at all. He says: "And would it have been worth while"(7). So, he conceives his question as puerile.

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

> certain male modernists (re)produced an 'unreal city', reviled as infernal and populated by semi-automated and monstrously disfigured humanity. This male modernist view perpetuates a misogynist French Symbolist tradition that transferred Romantic vision of a feminized nature to equally disturbing Decadent visions of City as a woman following Baudelaire.[15]

Prufrock's hatred of the feminine is also evinced in his silencing of the woman he pretends to love. In the whole poem, it is only Prufrock's voice, which is heard. The woman figures as an absence or a ghost. Following the patriarchal tradition, Prufrock associates women with rooms and men with the outer spaces, namely the sea and the streets. The phrase "formulated phrase" suggests women's lack of reason; it means to criticise someone without cogent and plausible proofs. Prufrock's repulsion for women, which he keeps quelled, is clear in his detachment and in tearing himself from the woman, remaining a mere observer rather than a participant. This brings to mind the collection of poems entitled "Prufrock and Other Observation". His emotional disengagement spurns any physical contact or involvement.

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

A deterrent force, which precludes Prufrock from declaring his love to his beloved, is his disgust of the body, the woman's and even his own body. In the Western tradition, man is always associated with the soul, while the woman is always perceived as a body. Seemingly, the woman in the poem figures as a mere object, which is clear in Prufrock's reference to fragmented corporeal parts of her body, like the eyes and the arms, rather than viewing her as a complete whole. In fact, Prufrock's desire is hampered by his profound fear and intense feelings of insecurity. Women's eyes, for Prufrock, are not seductive or stimulating, but rather threatening and frightening. He says: "I have known the eyes already, known them all/The eyes

that fix you in a formulated phrase"(5). Prufrock is afraid of women's terrifying gaze, which stigmatizes and objectifies him. It makes him feel like an insect "sprawling on a pin". The use of 'you', here, instead of "I" vindicates that the "you" in the opening lines is but a fragment of Prufrock's self. "The eyes that fix you in a formulated phrase" evokes an aura of surgery, which recalls to mind the opening simile of the "patient etherized upon a table". This sense is reinforced by the original title of the poem, which is "Prufrock Among Woman." The eyes of Prufrock's women are in sharp contrast with those of Beatrice. In his translation of Dante's Canto IV, Eliot states: "Beatrice looked on me with eyes so divine filled with sparks of love."[16] Contrariwise, Eliot's women, to borrow MacDiarmid's words, "use their eyes as daggers."[17]

Prufrock's ravenous women are not just repulsive, but also threatening to his very humanity and individuality. His vision of himself "formulated, sprawling on a pin/pinned and wriggling on the wall" (5), suggests cannibalism. Prufrock's sight of his head "brought in upon a platter" vindicates his fear of meeting the fate of John the Baptist who was sacrificed to Salomé, and it evinces his view of women as blood suckers. The line also evokes cannibalism and depicts Prufrock's women as oversexed dynamos, who view him as a sexual object rather than a human subject. In fact, the allusion to John the Baptist evinces Prufrock's misogyny. Michael Kane explains the significance of this Biblical story in the modernist context. He posits that

> the name of anything that was desirably undesirable was automatically woman-not by any means a new phenomenon, as the revival of the biblical story of Salomé and John the Baptist suggests. None the less, the revival of this story at the *fin de siècle* as well as the many writings along similar lines we have looked at is evidence of an intensification of the already strongly misogynist trend in Western history at this particular time when women were beginning to rebel in an organized fashion against such misogynist identification (Kane 101).

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

Prufrock is swept by a sudden gust of passion in contemplating the lady's "arms which are braceleted and white and bare"(11). However, the arms do not prompt a marriage proposal. Though the description of the arms, which are seductive, is the most romantic moment when Prufrock could have asked his overwhelming question, this attraction suddenly turns into repulsion when he reflects: "(But in the lamplight, downed with light brown hair!)"(11). So, Prufrock seems to abhor and denounce women's bodies. His parenthetical comment might imply his search for a perfect angelic feminine who is non-existent.

Prufrock's distaste for women's bodies amounts to abnegation and denial of his very humanity. He imagines himself shrinking to an insect pinned on the wall. He also wishes to be a pair of ragged claws "Scuttling across the floors of silent seas"(6). The line expresses his desire to escape from this human society, which is blemished by women. Prufrock, ultimately, drops anchor in the sea which is a symbol of purity. One might explain Prufrock's resort to the sea as a transcendence of the feminine Other, because the city in Modernism is often associated with sex. He prefers to remain a Madonna, virginal and free from the stains of the feminine. In fact, Prufrock's revulsion of the body is vindicated in the epigraph in which two lovers unite spiritually rather than physically. Prufrock leads a life of abstinence from sex and the body. He seems to be in a strife to lead a religious life. But he complains that he is "no prophet" though he has "wept and fasted, wept and prayed"(12). In fact, Prufrock's conflict between being a lover and being a prophet resonates with the debate, in the saint poems, between body and soul.

Women's talking of Michelangelo is due to their interest in this man's masculine physical beauty rather than in his psychological qualities. Hence, their gossip is meant to satiate their sexual urges. James Miller maintains that

> [t]here were important museums in all these cities where Eliot could have witnessed the women who 'come and go/Talking of Michelangelo' Even Boston's Gardner museum had its Michelangelo (An implicit meaning of the line is often missed: Michelangelo's male nudes have well-built, sexually potent bodies naturally attractive to female art-lovers.[18]

So, Prufrock, who feels in perils among women, tries to indemnify himself from being a means of quenching their defiling sexual passions. The refrain "In the room the women come and go/Talking of Michelangelo" reminds Prufrock of women's sexual threat. According to MacDiarmid, "[b]ound to dressing and drawing rooms, Eliot's Ladies […] use sex and sexuality to exchange men like commodities"(26).

Prufrock is petrified by fear of the feminine, which precludes his ability to feel and project his emotions and feelings outwards. He sums up his fears in the following declaration: "And in short, I was afraid"(6). Prufrock's presence in these rooms, 'among women', intensifies his fear of death, which he imagines coming in the image of a footman. So, his hesitation is due not just to his timidity but also to his fear and apprehension of women. He is overwhelmed by a feeling of sexual insecurity. In this regard, the critic Colleen Lamos suggests that the "motif of drowning [which] is relentlessly reiterated in Eliot's texts reflects the rather obvious threat of female sexuality.[19] So, Prufrock's fear from women and his anxiety about his masculine identity results in his hallucination of death by water. He becomes very obsessed with old age despite being a middle-aged man. He hysterically repeats: "I grow old… I grow old"(14) His fear of death, which is inextricably linked women, is also expressed in his reflection that he "spit out all the but-ends of [his] days and ways"(11).

Prufrock's inability to connect to the feminine Other is also on account of her culture and social class to which the poem makes a salient reference. Prufrock belongs to a high and elite culture, which is evident in his references to Hamlet, John the Baptist, Andrew Marvell, reading novels,…etc. Contrariwise, the woman belongs to a low culture, which is evinced in the refrain "In the room, the women come and go,/Talking of Michelangelo." Cultural discrepancies keep Prufrock and the lady apart from each other. Women, in Prufrock's world, are associated with gossip, boredom, ennui, aimlessness, consumerism and with all trifles. In the modern age, even time, which is abstract, is quantified and measured in terms of consumption. In Prufrock's world, it is concretized, materialized, and measured by coffee spoons, which certainly refers to those orgiastic parties, which are frequented by women for pleasure-seeking. In his comments on the line "I have measured my life with coffee spoons"(11), the critic Eric Sigg states that "the 'measuring' also describes Prufrock helplessly observing a drop of his inner life disappear down someone else's throat with every

vampiric swallow of coffee."[20] Prufrock's women frequent the orgiastic parties for pleasure-seeking. They are associated with the consumer culture. Rita Felski points out: "Not only does woman remain the archetypal consumer, but an overt anxiety comes to the fore that men are in turn being feminized by the castrating effects of an ever more pervasive commodification."[21] Indeed, Prufrock disdains this low culture, which is very boring and irritating for him. He, at the end, resorts to the sea as a neurotic repudiation of women and their mass culture, which is gendered feminine.

The central question the poem raises is what thwarts the male questor from winning the woman he loves. Prufrock's anxiety and frustration are mainly sexual; they result from his inability to love women and his inclination towards same-sex love. In fact, Prufrock tries to overcome his effeminacy through misogyny. That is, he fights the feminine within him through his hatred of the feminine. Prufrock's perverse desires are clear from the skulking "insidious intent" in the first lines, which conjures up impressions of a debased relationship, and purports that this relationship is sexually deviant. The overwhelming question, which he cannot ask, is, to use Oscar Wilde's words, "The love that cannot speak its name." In other words, Prufrock is a homosexual. Central to our point is the queer theorists' view that homosexuality is interlinked with effeminacy and misogyny. Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick remarks the "natural effeminacy of male homosexuals, their 'natural' hypersensitivity, their 'natural' hatred of women, their 'natural' identification with women."[22] Miller, who based his view on Eliot's biography, also draws attention to the poem's homosexual overtones. In his view, "the poem portrays a man who cannot love-feel several desire for-women; the question of same-sex desire is not confronted in the poem except by reference, obliquely. Some might well conclude that it is the main theme, even though not overtly sounded, in the poem" (The Making 153). Though Miller is exaggerating in considering homoerotic love the poem's main concern, his inference of same-sex love, which is implied in the poem, is superb. This homoerotic desire is evident in his effeminacy. Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick posits that there are two modes of homosexuality. She writes: "Enduring since at least the turn of the century, there have presided two contradictory tropes of gender through which same-sex desire could be understood."[23] In the first trope, which is called gender separation, the homosexual does not possess any of the qualities associated with women. He strives to maintain gender boundaries. In the inversion trope, the homosexual (either man or woman)

holds characteristics of the opposite sex (Epistemology 87). Prufrock's homosexuality is, obviously, of the second type, because he embodies many feminine qualities. He represents "a woman's soul trapped in a male body"(Epistemology 87).

Prufrock makes herculean efforts to show that his love is for a woman. But his apparent love song for a woman is a mere alibi for misogyny and homoeroticism. According to Xavier Magne, the homosexual must "take pains to appear sexually interested in women, to be intimate with women, to seem to relish open, and frequently obscene, sexual talk about women. This last is much in his programme for hiding sexual indifference or downright physical aversion to women" (Qtd in The Making 104). In his discussion of the poetic mask, a technique Eliot borrowed from Jules Laforgue, and which he considers the same as the Uranian (i.e. the homosexual mask), Miller quotes from Xavier Magne's book The Intersexes in which Magne spells out a statement that befits Prufrock's psychological case. He states that "the normal man can tell the lady he loves of his passion without fear of being ostracized. He can even discuss his love with his friends, and their response is likely to be sympathy." Contrariwise, the Uranian, i.e. the homosexual,

> must often 'go through' the most overwhelming, soul-prostrating of loves, finding his nerves and mind and body beaten down under the passion, his days and nights vilified or poisoned by it, all without his doing anything so persistently as to hide his sentiment forever from the object of it! To hide from his closest friends, from suspicion by the world! Hide it he must…Ever the mask, the shuddering concealment, the anguish of hidden passion that burns his life away! (The Making 103)

Prufrock keeps his overwhelming question hidden because his emotional yearnings have strayed beyond the borders of heterosexuality. Though he beckons the world to an overwhelming question, he retracts and retreats, requesting "Oh, do not ask, "What is it?""(3) Prufrock's question that he does not dare to ask points to a homosexual secret. The command "Oh do not ask" recalls the American homosexual policy "Do not ask, do not pursue, do not tell." Despite his bombastic and fustian determination to "tell you all" of his love, Prufrock cannot fulfill his promise, simply because his romantic love is Uranian.

Prufrock's homoerotic innuendo comes to the fore in the epigraph to the collection of poems entitled Prufrock and Other Observations. The epigraph, which is taken from Dante's Purgatorio and dedicated to Eliot's male friend Jean Verdenal, reads as follows: "Now can you understand the quality of love which warms me towards you so that I forget our vanity, and treat the shadows like the solid thing" (3). The words are spoken by Statius to his male fellow poet Virgil whom he tries to embrace forgetting that they are mere shadows. This love, which is profound and enormous, is perverse because it is addressed not to a woman but rather proclaimed by a man to another. Though he does not make any reference to homosexuality in the poem, Martin Scofield maintains that the "epigraph from Dante *(*Purgatorio XXI, 133-6) suggests the strength of Eliot's feeling for Verdenal, who was killed in the French expedition to the Dardanelles in 1915."[24] In the epigraph, which stresses the importance of physical proximity, the speaker is overwhelmed by a twitching desire to embrace his male beloved out of encumbering love, forgetting that they are mere spirits. This proclivity to physical approximation and attachment to a man is in stark contrast with Prufrock's repudiation of the female body in the poem. Hence, it suggests homosexuality and homoeroticism.

The dedication of the volume Prufrock and Other Observations to Eliot's male friend Jean Verdinal, who died during the war and whom Eliot used to love too much, seems suspicious in regard to the poem, which is supposed to be a man's love song for a woman. Eliot's biographer, Ackroyd, states that "Jean Verdinal became an army officer in November 1914, joined the 17th infantry regiment in February 1915 and then three months later was killed in the Dardanelles: the first, but not the only, friend of Eliot to be killed in the war"(43). Though so many exchanged letters between Eliot and Verdenal are lost, one of these letters, which could relate to the poem's epigraph, is sent by Verdenal to Eliot, and it is read as follows: "My dear friend, we are not very far, you and I, from the point beyond which people lose that indefinable influence and emotive power over each other, which is reborn when they come together again"(The Letters I 33). Though some critics, like James Miller, charge Eliot with striking a homosexual relationship with Verdenal, our view is that there is no crystal clear evidence of this homosexuality. However, there are hints at homoeroticism and homosexuality in the poem. The loss of a beloved object, who is a man, in "The Love Song", results in features, which Sigmund Freud considers the main mental features of melancholia. These features, for Freud, include "loss of the capacity to love."[25] This

might explain Prufrock's incapability of loving women. The melancholic also displays a sense of inferiority and worthlessness. According to Freud, the melancholic "represents his ego to us as worthless, incapable of any achievement […] he reproaches himself, vilifies himself and expects to be cast out and punished"("Mourning and Melancholia" 3043). All these symptoms are found in the character of Prufrock who despises himself to the extent that he dissociates himself from human nature. The melancholic is also characterized by "sleeplessness and refusal to take nourishment and […] by an overcoming of the instinct which compels every living thing to cling to life"("Mourning and Melancholia" 3043). These features are all present in Prufrock, who strolls the streets because of insomnia and rejects nourishment by fasting. He also becomes haunted by the idea of death, probably to join his beloved whose absence renders his life lifeless.

In his essay "Dante", Eliot spells out a statement which invokes homoerotic desire. He writes:

> A great deal of sentiment has been spilt, especially in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, upon idealizing the reciprocal feelings of man and woman towards each other, which various realists have been irritated to denounce: this sentiment ignoring the fact that the love of man and woman (or for that matter of man and man) is only explained and made reasonable by the higher love, or else is simply the coupling of animals ("Dante" 274).

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

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

themselves, expresses their essence; they writhe in the torment of their own perpetually perverted nature"("Dante" 255). In queer theory, perversion is used as another synonym for homoeroticism or sexual deviance. Prufrock's self-castigation when he "wept and fasted, wept and prayed" is perhaps an act of contrition to purge himself and atone for his nefarious passions. The historical context of the poem is very important, because it illuminates the homoeroticism of the poem. With the advent of modernity, male friendship has enormously increased. In this regard, Sarah Cole maintains that

> [t]he relationship between canonical modernism and the problem of male intimacy varies considerably-in some cases, it seems that modernism effectively usurps the voice of the scared friend for its own purposes; at other times, the figure of the lost friend is offered as an emblem of modernity; friendship can stand both as a bulwark against totalizing features of modern culture or as a sad causality of those processes. [26]

So, the poem's dedication might be read as an evidence of its speaker's mourning and bemoaning of the death or absence of a lost beloved male friend, but he is unable to confess because of the social prohibitions. In this respect, the glaring figure in queer theory, Judith Butler, writes:

> If we accept the notion that the prohibition on homosexuality operates throughout a largely heterosexual culture as one of its defining operations, then the loss of homosexual objects and aims [...] would apppear to be foreclosed from the start. I say 'foreclosed' to suggest that this is a preemptive loss, a mourning for unlived possibilities [...] When certain kinds of losses are compelled by a set of culturally prevalent prohibitions, we might expect a culturally prevalent form of melancholia, one which signals the internalisation of the ungrieved and ungrievable homosexual cathexis. [27]

Indeed, this homoeroticism is rife in the modern age, which is still patriarchal despite the waves of feminism. As Kane points out, "[m]ale narcissism and homoeroticism have, however, always been central, if hidden, features of patriarchal culture" (Kane vi). This homoeroticism might be perceived as a bulwark against the threat of femininity. Prufrock's narcissism is interlinked with his homoeroticism. His narcissism is clear in his hypermasculine awareness of his body. He dreads seeing his head which has "grown slightly bald"(6). He also seems dissatisfied with his hair which is "growing thin!"(5) and with his "arms and legs", which "are thin!"(5) Prufrock, implicitly, compares himself to Michelangelo. The writer and physician Ellis Havelock states that "Michelangelo, one of the chief artists of the Renaissance period […] was sexually inverted."[28] Michelangelo's homosexuality was notorious, and Eliot had surely read his homoerotic sonnets. According to Kane, "[o]ne almost automatically associates narcissism and homosexuality with the image of a man pursuing or being pursued by his double" (vii). So, Prufrock's obsession with his self-image and his dissociated self, represented by his double, the 'you' in the opening lines, can be explained in terms of homoeroticism.

According to the champions of queer theory, gender is constructed through a reiteration of norms. Judith Butler, who asserts the performativity of gender, states that "performativity is not a singular act, but a repetition and a ritual."[29] For Butler, gender is not a stable or a static fact. It is learned, and then performed by imitating a model. In her view,

> [g]ender ought not to be construed as a stable identity or locus of agency from which various acts follow; rather, gender is an identity tenuously constituted in time, instituted in an exterior space through a *stylised repetition of acts*. The effect of gender is produced through the stylisation of the body and, hence, must be understood as the mundane way in which bodily gestures, movements, and styles of various kinds constitute the illusion of an abiding gendered self (Gender Trouble 179).

Hence, gender identity is not innate but rather inculcated by vicarious learning. There is ample evidence, in the poem, that gender is constructed. Prufrock, for instance, is

very obsessed with the society's judgments and comments because his gender identity and self-perception seem to be socially determined. Indeed, gender identity in "The Love Song" is performative. This is evident in his determination "to prepare a face to meet the faces that you meet"(4). The lines indicate that though Prufrock has an effeminate personality, he strives to borrow and perform a masculine role. Indeed, his private and effeminate self does not dovetail with his public or social one. His inner conflict stems from the fact that his public self, which is expected to perform a masculine role, is infected. He is unable to perform this masculine role because his inner self is not masculine by nature. Prufrock's psychological problem emanates from his inability to associate or fuse his public self with the private one. His social self attempts to be masculine and to adopt to the social norms and conventions, whereas his inner self is effeminate.

Aware that he will shock the world by his failure to perform his masculine role prescribed by his society, Prufrock asks: "Do I dare? Do I dare disturb the universe?"(5) By not acting his masculine role to fulfill the society's expectations, Prufrock has contravened the norms fabricated by his patriarchal culture. Butler argues that "gender is produced as a ritualized repetition of conventions, and that this ritual is socially compelled in part by the force of a compulsory heterosexuality" (The Psychic 144). Butler reiterates the same view as follows:

> Gender is the repeated stylization of the body, a set of repeated acts within a highly rigid regulatory frame that congeal over time to produce the appearance of substance, of a natural sort of being. A political genealogy of gender ontologies, if it is successful, will deconstruct the substantive appearance of gender into its constitutive acts and locate and account for those acts within the compulsory frames set by the various forces that police the social appearance of gender (Gender Trouble 43-4).

Despite many endeavours, Prufrock fails to act his masculine role. His question "Shall I disturb the universe?" does not only indicate his inability to perform his conventional and traditional role, which is masculine. It also suggests an unconventional homoerotic love which Prufrock is afraid to vent. Eve Kosofsky

Sedgwick invokes 'homosexual panic', which refers to man's fear of being identified as a homosexual (Between Men 89). This homosexual panic precludes Prufrock from asking his overwhelming question which remains closeted. Due to the social constraints, which baffle his perfervid emotional discharge, Prufrock's insidious intents remain mere internalised thoughts which are never spelt out.

Prufrock's hell emanates from the dueling parts of his own personality. He is trapped between two conflicting desires: a homosexual and a heterosexual one. These conflicting desires have shattered his unified self. In addition to his search for words to sing his love song, he is also trying to gesticulate the appropriate gestures to perform his masculine role. Prufrock wants to assert his masculinity by dressing like a man or a suitor. He describes his "morning coat, [his] collar mounting firmly to the chin,/ [his] necktie rich and modest, but asserted by a simple pin" (5). In this regard, Judith Butler writes: "In my view, performativity is not just about speech acts. It is also about bodily acts. The relation between the two is complicated."[30] Despite his attempts to assume a masculine identity, Prufrock's endeavours are doomed to failure because his inside or private self is destitute of a masculine essence.

Though, traditionally, clothes evince one's gender, Prufrock attempts to dress like a woman, and this affirms his effeminacy. He talks of the "skirts that trail along the floor"(7). In discussing drag, which refers to men's wearing of women's clothes, Judith Butler states: "I would suggest as well that drag fully subverts the distinction between inner and outer psychic space and effectively mocks both the expressive model of gender and the notion of a true gender identity" (Gender Trouble 174). Drag, or cross-dressing, according to Butler, reveals the fluid and precarious nature of gender. In her words, "*In imitating gender, drag implicitly reveals the imitative structure of gender itself-as well as its contingency*"(Gender Trouble 175). Prufrock ponders the possibility of parting his hair behind like a woman, hence, transcending the boundaries of masculine identity. He asks: "Shall I part my hair behind?" (8) Prufrock's gender identity is seemingly feminine, and he finds it too difficult to perform a masculine role. His behavior and utterances resemble those of an actor, who is training and preparing for performance. Prufrock's overwhelming question is, probably, "Who am I? Am I a man or a woman?"