"I WILL SHOW YOU FEAR IN A HANDFUL OF DUST":
CORPOREAL ANXIETIES IN T.S. ELIOT'S EARLY POETRY

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While many studies on T. S. Eliot’s poetry focus on his representations of the self, in this thesis, I argue that the body as depicted by Eliot not only registers the cultural anxieties that modernity invokes, but is also employed by the poet as a vehicle with which to explore anxiety. I discuss how the poet’s angsts about the modern urban life are mapped out onto the bodies he describes in his early poetry. I argue that Eliot’s metaphysics of the body—his philosophical analysis and representations of the body—is a reaction to the culture of his time. In this study, I conduct a close textual analysis of poems from *Prufrock and Other Observations* and *The Waste Land* to illustrate that the body is a manifestation of the anxieties of modern life in Eliot’s poetry.
To My Children,

Rayan and Leen
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INTRODUCTION

From the time T. S. Eliot’s debut collection *Prufrock and Other Observations* was published, his works have been generally viewed as anti-romantic and his diction and subject matter revolutionary and modern. This critical response to his works was based on his use of metaphors and themes drawn from his historical moment. According to Steve Ellis: “this novelty and impact of Eliot’s work stem in part from its uncompromising immersion in the modern urban experience” (9). His early poetry derives its subject matter from the alienating conditions of the modern industrial metropolis (Ellis 9). Especially in his poems, Eliot paints the conditions of his age i.e. modern urban life in the early twentieth century.

A number of Eliot scholars, fascinated by his use of dramatic monologue as a central technique in his early poetry, delve into the depth of his protagonists’ psyches. Indeed, Eliot’s poetry yields interesting material for psychoanalytical studies. “The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock,” or instance, has been studied, analyzed, reanalyzed and psychoanalyzed extensively. *The Waste Land* is also a material for an abundant body of criticism, especially in terms of the fragmentary collage aspect of the poem as a reflection of the fragmentation of the soul in modern Europe. In the midst of this huge number of studies on Eliot’s literary corpus, a number of voices make statements that truly capture the spirit of Eliot’s works. One of the renowned critics who declare T. S. Eliot a poet for the self is J. Hillis Miller. In his *Poets of Reality*, Miller states:

> Though reality is unity, all men, by the fact that they exist as conscious selves, are alienated from it, and must travel the path of appearance, the “Way of Seeming.”

. . . The pathos of human condition is man’s inescapable exclusion from absolute experience. … This pathos, in all its complexity, is the chief subject matter of
Eliot’s early poetry. … Whatever exists for the self exists as already part of the self, and the self can never encounter anything other than itself. (136)

In other words, immediate experience is unattainable for the human being because any description of that experience is always already personal and thus fallible. This strand of thought prevailed through much of the history of scholarship on Eliot’s poetry. Since the early 1960s, the time when Miller’s aforementioned statements appear in publication, the body of criticism on Eliot has expanded and developed following the academic trends of criticism such as the relatively recent wave of body studies. Among these influential studies are studies that re-investigate of the body-mind relationship. Renowned contemporary critics such as Gabrielle McIntire and Colleen Lamos are pioneers in drawing attention to the significance and impact of the body as fundamental material for theoretical and literary studies of Eliot’s works. In response to such academic developments, it is only expected that the poetical works of a canonical figure such as Eliot will be re-visited and researched in light of this intellectual development in criticism. This study attempts to bring recent critical thinking about the body to bear on Eliot’s poetry.

The necessity to revisit Eliot and other canonical authors becomes more pertinent when the poet himself states that modern poetry must speak of the body. Eliot states that modern poetry should be inspired by the corporeal experience of the modern individual and derives its language from “the cerebral cortex, the nervous system and the digestive tract” (Eliot 30). Eliot’s statement suggests that corporeality is the rhetorical idiom of modernism. He posits that the body is at the center of modernist literature. In Eliot’s poetry, the body is more than an organic structure; it is also a means for the expression of thoughts and release of emotions into the world. Whether we view the body in monistic, dualistic or behaviorist terms (i.e., regardless of our view
of the classic mind/body problem), the body is a fundamental component in the formation and the expression of the self in Eliot.

With the poet himself emphasizing the importance of the body, not only to his own works, but also to modernist poetry in general, it would be expected that the topic of corporeality in Eliot would be studied exhaustedly. However, this is not the case. In fact, critical readings of Eliot’s perspective on and depiction of physicality are scarce. First of all, there is no published book that is dedicated to this topic. There are a few endeavors to explore the importance of the body in Eliot’s poetry in published books like Gabrielle McIntire’s study of the representations of female bodies in “The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock” in her book *Modernism, Memory and Desire: T. S. Eliot and Virginia Woolf* and Colleen Lamos’s *Deviant Modernism: Sexual and Textual Errancy in T.S Eliot, James Joyce, and Marcel Proust*. These books are both insightful analyses of central texts in the modernist cannon, but they are both too focused on issues of gender and sexuality. In their focus on the sexed body, they do not give adequate attention to the significance of the body in Eliot’s work. They overlook the significance of the body in Eliot’s poetry as a symbol for the culture of his time. While this study admittedly touches upon issues of desire and femininity, it is more devoted to reading the larger implications of corporeality in Eliot.

While McIntire’s and Lamos’s books are two examples of publications that briefly discuss the representations of physicality in Eliot’s poetry, there are a few unpublished studies that make the case for the presence and significance of the body in Eliot. To start with, Maili Öst discusses the theme of corporeality in Eliot’s plays in an online-published thesis titled “And Then They Found Her Body”: T. S. Eliot’s Corporeal *Cocktail Party*.” Öst’s study argues that *The Cocktail Party* reveals:
[A] characteristic tendency of Eliot’s drama to cloak broad existential and structural implications into a veil of seemingly light comedy. At Eliot’s *Cocktail Party*, the body is peculiarly hidden behind social restraint and tradition at the same time as the entire ritual evolves around answering to bodily needs. Through her seemingly flippant remark, Julia pricks a hole into the cocktail party tissue to reveal its carnal intestines. In this and similar instances, *The Cocktail Party* may indeed be seen to answer the call of phenomenology to “enter . . . the familiar only to illuminate its constitutive reality.” (13)

While Öst’s thesis is a phenomenological analysis of corporeality in one of Eliot’s plays, my study obviously differs in its focus on Eliot’s poetry, specifically, on his early poems including “The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock,” “Preludes,” “Rhapsody on a Windy Night,” and, last but not least, *The Waste Land*. Another academic body study in Eliot’s poetry is a dissertation titled “Eliot Among the Women” by Shannon Crunk Hipp in 2011. This study asserts that Eliot’s distaste for female bodies is a sign of admiration due to his personal struggle against the limitations of his male body. Hipp explains in the abstract of his study:

> Literary criticism has long decried the propensity of women in Eliot's work to suffer and die violently. This investigation offers no apologies for such grim realities; instead, it reiterates that Eliot fixates, even obsesses, on the bodies of women. However, Eliot's abiding interest in women is rooted not in hate but admiration, as he struggled against the limitations of his male body in the pursuit of complete Christian devotion.

While Hipp’s is a more comprehensive study of Eliot’s poetical and dramatic works, it falls into the same pattern of many gender studies of Eliot’s poetry. It is more or less a biographical
reading of Eliot’s poetry because it’s ultimate goal is to understand the poem through the poet and vice versa. Both Öst’s and Hipp’s readings of the body in Eliot’s poetry hardly connects the poet’s anxieties about the larger issues of his time with the body. Also, what I find lacking in these studies, which my study attempts to achieve, is the attention to the poet’s reaction to his milieu and his obvious repugnance with modern urban life in the early twentieth century. In this study, I contend that through his depiction of the body, Eliot expresses his own distaste of and anxiety about modernity. In what follows, I shall develop an analysis of the corporeal metaphysics in Eliot’s poetry with cultural references. In doing so, I differ from previous discussions, in which Eliotean physicality is often examined to expose his supposedly secret sexual orientation or antifeminist tendencies. Instead, I see Eliot’s representations of the body as visionary warnings against the consequences of the alienation and materialism of modern urban life.

Eliot’s poems show us that the modern subject’s bodily experience is central to modernity in literature. The body in Eliot is subject to its spatial and temporal context. It is impinged upon by modern urbanism. Therefore, in order to understand the Eliotean concept of corporality, discussing the modern urban context that shapes it is unavoidable. To this purpose, Elizabeth Grosz’s definition of the city is applicable. In *Space, Time, and Perversion*, Grosz defines the city not only as a place but also as “a complex and interactive network that consists of social activities, processes and relations” (105). The city is “a semi-permanent but ever-changing environment” which has a spatial aspect and an abstract nature (105). In “The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock,” for instance, the urban landscape is inspired by Eliot’s own experience in living in urbanized areas like London, Boston and St. Louis (Hargrove 34). In many of his poems, Eliot depicts an urban mise-en-scène: streets, gas lamps, newsstands, smoke,
and city blocks. The city in Eliot’s poetry is not as a body-friendly place as it may seem to be. It is a place of cruel standards to which bodies do not always live up. The unrealistic perfectionism of “citified” bodily living moves the urban subjects to loathe their own imperfect bodies (Grosz 53). The Eliot’s characters are disappointed at the unsolvable inadequacies of their corporal reality. Their bodies are constant reminders of inevitable change and inherent limitation, and the signs of their bodily change have to be concealed under garments or façades. Urban life has standards that challenge the feebleness of human corporeality. Bodies in cities are often restless, isolated, and circumscribed.

Generally, Eliot’s poetry expresses a deep and intricate vision of human physicality. He depicts the complex, multifaceted body situated in the socio-economic and psycho-sexual context of the early twentieth century European metropolis. Moreover, Eliot’s depiction of the body is ostensibly a by-product of his endeavor to document the modern experience, which according Minsoo Kang can be defined as “the simultaneous sense of exhilaration and anxiety about the now and what it might hold in store. Each modern expression is characterized by this inherently ambivalent attitude toward the present” (Kang 18). Such fear of an unknown origin and towards an unknown object is characteristic of the experience of modernity in Eliot’s poetry. Anxiety is “diffuse,” “free floating,” “lacking a specific object” and can be “pinned to items, traits or situations.” (Giddens, Self-Identity 83)

While many studies on T. S. Eliot’s poetry analyze the self through a psychological or a biographical lens, in this thesis, I argue that the body as depicted by Eliot not only registers the cultural anxieties that modernity invokes, but also uses the body as a vehicle with which to explore anxiety. I discuss how the poet’s angsts about the modern urban life are mapped out onto the bodies he describes in his early poetry. I argue that Eliot’s metaphysics of the body—his
philosophical analysis and representation of the body—is a reaction to the culture of his time. In this study, I conduct a close textual analysis of poems from *Prufrock and Other Observations* and *The Waste Land* to illustrate that the body is a manifestation of anxiety in modern life.

Chapter one deals with anxieties that pertain to the bodily self and the experience of the self in the world isolated from other bodies i.e. isolated from society. I argue that Eliot depicts his anxiety about modernity’s return to an imbalanced mind-body dualism where the body prevails over the mind. The body in Eliot shows the fixation of the culture of his time on sensuality that was on the rise in the first few decades of the twentieth century. Eliot also detests and the neglect of the soul by his contemporaries and expresses his concerns about the new corporeal freedom and the loss of a moral center that governs and regulates human life. He appears to deeply rebuke the body-centered culture of his time as one of the reasons behind the undertones of alienation and rootlessness that he reflected in his poetry. In this chapter, I use Cartesian philosophy of mind-body dualism and Maurice Merleau-Ponty’s phenomenology from *Phenomenology of Perception* as the theoretical framework to underline the emergence of an imbalance between the mind and the body in the Eliotean metropolis, especially in “Preludes,” “The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock,” and *The Waste Land*.

In chapter two, I look at the anxiety that the materialism of modern life induces within the body. I argue that Eliot’s poetic sensibility detects modernity’s rejection of the natural life cycle of the body and its emphasis on youthful and changeless bodies. By its nature, the body is grotesque, i.e. it consumes, changes, and dies; yet in modern urban life, the modern individual is expected to maintain a classical unchanging appearance. This inconsistency induces tension for the body. This aspect of Eliot’s poetry is best discussed through the lens of Baktin’s theory of grotesque realism and the carnivalesque tradition.
In chapter three, I extend the study’s focus to include the physical body in a social context where relationships and interactions instill an anxiety about gender differences. Here, I discuss gender as an additional cause for Eliot’s criticism of modern society. Eliot’s poetry depicts the changes in gender roles and gender hierarchy as worrisome and reprehensible. What is more important, Eliot finds it especially troublesome that women’s association with physicality has increased. Modernity seems to worsen the link between women and their bodies due to the indulgence in materialistic pleasures, the fascination with physical appearance and the revealing nature of women’s fashion. Also, men’s corporeality in Eliot’s poetry is emphasized more than in the past. As depicted in Eliot’s poetry, modern urban life takes its toll on masculinity. As the female body becomes a symbol of the modern, men complain of the influence of feminine culture over their lives. To elucidate the ideas in this chapter, I rely on textual analysis of passages from “The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock,” “Portrait of a Lady,” and The Waste Land.

Studying the corporeal anxieties in Eliot is a significant endeavor. Examining his poetry to understand his concerns and angsts about modern life can help us make sense of our time. What Eliot depicts about modernity in his works is significant to our present time because modernity is still relevant to us. According to Anthony Giddens, we have not yet reached post-modernity; we are still living in a late stage of modernity (78, Consequences). As we are living in the aftermath of the turbulent and traumatic first half of the twentieth century, Eliot’s corporeal concerns are still relevant to us because he articulates the physical anxieties of our modern life.
CHAPTER I.

SPIRITLESS BODIES IN THE ELIOTEAN METROPOLIS

“The change in spiritual attitude is the outgrowth of a change in
the material facts of the life of the group”

Thorestein Veblen

The Theory of the Leisure Class

One of the constant concerns of humans is the question of the soul and the body. This issue has a presence in almost all cultures. Every culture offers a unique understanding of the nature and the relationship between the soul and the body. This issue has become central to many philosophies in the modern era. The dualism of materiality and spirituality is especially significant in the early twentieth century. Its significance stems from the rise of capitalism and the development of technologies that made the body dominant and the placed soul in abeyance. With the advancement of science and the economic affluence in the late nineteenth century and early twentieth century, people no longer felt the need to adhere to the spiritual discipline of religion. Adherence to a belief system became nonsensical and confining as it prevented people from immersing themselves in the sensual pleasures of life.

This chapter explores the centrality of the body in the Eliotean city and the anxiety about the prevalence of materiality in early twentieth century urban culture as depicted in Eliot’s poetry. On the one hand, the modern city is a place where the body is made central to every aspect of daily life. On the other hand, the soul is alienated and out of place. In his article on modernity and enchantment, Michael Saler discusses this fragmentary aspect of the modern experience:
[The] modern Western world has lost the overarching meanings and spiritual purposes formerly provided by religious world views; the prevalent emphases on scientific progress, technology, and instrumental reason can be dehumanizing; the rapid changes of modern existence can yield feelings of anomie, fragmentation, and alienation. (693)

The loss of spiritual purpose and the feelings of anxiety and isolation are most evident in urban life perhaps because cities are centers for the scientific and technological marvels of modernity. Also, cities are where the loss of spirituality can be witnessed because they are where materiality is most evident in everyday life. The materialism of cities can be exemplified in the intricate and dense collections of technologies and networks of services and commerce. Cities are the locus where capital and commodities manifest.

In such a body friendly yet anti-spiritual environment, the body/soul dualism reemerges. A sort of a reversal of classical Cartesian mind-body dualism emerges and the motto “I think therefore I am” is almost changed to “I sense through my body and thus I know I exist.” This phenomenological experience is found in a number of the canonical poems of T. S. Eliot such as “The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock,” “Preludes,” and The Waste Land.

The opening description of urban scenery in “The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock” and “Preludes” indicate that physicality is central to modern urban culture. The cheap hotels that allow promiscuity and sexual affairs and the sawdust restaurants that satiate the appetite with cheap food show the temptation of the body in modern urbanism. From the opening lines: “Let us go then, you and I, / When the evening is spread out against the sky / Like a patient etherized upon a table,” the centrality of the body and the negligence of spirituality are laid out for the reader as the basis of modern urban culture (lines1-3). In other words, the image of the sedated
patient implies the absence of the soul and the overemphasis on the body in the Eliotean metropolis.

The triumph of materialism over spirituality in the Eliotean city continues to worry Prufrock throughout the rest of his monologue. Prufrock complains of the spiritless life in the Eliotean metropolis. He finds life in the city too fixated on material living that he questions the worth of disturbing the rhythm of urban life by asking a non-material question or to “have squeezed the universe into a ball / To roll it toward some overwhelming question” (lines 92-93). Prufrock tries hard to keep his spirituality afloat in the corporeal mayhem of the modern metropolis:

But though I have wept and fasted, wept and prayed,
Though I have seen my head (grown slightly bald) brought in upon a platter,
I am no prophet—and here’s no great matter;
I have seen the moment of my greatness flicker,
And I have seen the eternal Footman hold my coat, and snicker,
And in short, I was afraid. (81-86)

The martyrdom of John the Baptist alluded to in the lines above is an example of the degradation of spirituality into materiality and decay in the poem. The beheading of John the Baptist, who in this story represents spirituality, is an act of degradation especially that it was done in return of mere physical pleasure. This story exemplifies the lack of morality in Prufrock’s city. Prufrock identifies with the beheading of John the Baptist in his turmoil among a society immersed in corporeal pleasure. By comparison, Prufrock’s distraction from greater goals by the materialism around him is, according to his logic, analogous to the lusty king Herod beheading the spiritual leader. But even though he can relate to the prophet, he admits his
culpability in all the pleasure around him. He is “no prophet” because he, like his society, is preoccupied with consumption of pleasure.

Prufrock’s attempts to revive his spirituality are doomed to fail. He admits his inability or rather the impossibility of living a life of piety and faith in the modern metropolis. As he continues his monologue, Prufrock reaches the conclusion that modernity will hinder any attempt to transcend the corporeal momentum: “We have lingered in the chambers of the sea / By sea-girls wreathed with seaweed red and brown / Till human voices wake us, and we drown” (129-131, My Italics). As Cassandra Laity states:

[The] Eliotic numbed body [is] stung into sharp, percipient, erotic self-realization by the metropolis, world war, and technology. Thus in "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock's" concluding . . . turn "seaward," modernity awakens the speaker into acute erotic sentience—"human voices wake us, and we drown"—from the bodily/perceptual haze of its overtly urban sections. (15)

Similarly, “Preludes” exemplifies the same problem i.e. the body as the centerpiece of the Eliotean metropolis. The speaker in “Preludes” is not named or even portrayed as a person. Nothing is revealed about the moral or spiritual life of the speaker. All that is laid out for the reader is what he experiences through his body as if the body is the sole aspect of his existence. The more we read of the scene in which the body is situated, the more vivid the image of the body becomes. Every line builds a piece of the speaker’s body, yet almost nothing is mentioned about the soul:

The winter evening settles down

With smell of steaks in passageways.

Six o’clock.
The burnt-out ends of smoky days.
And now a gusty shower wraps
The grimy scraps
Of withered leaves about your feet
And newspapers from vacant lots;
The showers beat
On broken blinds and chimney-pots,
And at the corner of the street
A lonely cab-horse steams and stamps.
And then the lighting of the lamps. (I.1-13)

These lines, which describe nightfall in the city, illustrate Maurice Merleau-Ponty’s philosophy of the body in a metropolitan context. In *Phenomenology of Perception*, Merleau-Ponty states that the body in the modern metropolis appears as “an attitude towards certain existing or possible tasks” and its spatiality is not “a spatiality of position, but a spatiality of situation” (100). The body is “that strange object which uses its own parts as a general system of symbols for the world, and through which we can consequently ‘be at home in’ that world, ‘understand’ it and find significance in it” (Merleau-Ponty 237). To Merleau-Ponty, the body has its own mind which he calls “a corporeity of consciousness,” an intentionality of the body to explore and live in its surrounding. In other words, it is the body that is central to the Eliotian subject’s existence and not the soul. This is a clear reversal of Cartesian mind-body relationship. As Cartesian philosophy suggests that the mind is superior and in control of the body, the case is reversed in the Eliotian metropolis. In Eliot’s “Preludes,” the mind/soul/spirit is no longer central in modern
urban life and the body is brought to the fore. It is the body that dictates the life in the Eliotean city.

As the body becomes more dominant over spirituality in modern life, this emphasis on sensuality puts the body in a heightened state. The speaker in “Preludes,” for instance, is bound up with the world around him with his body more than his mind. He recognizes the time of day and the weather through his senses. From a phenomenological perspective, the body in the Eliotean city uses itself to participate in the visible world. The body, as depicted in “Preludes” is an “exemplar sensible” i.e. it is both tangible and sensible; it receives and causes stimuli. The Eliotean body in “Preludes” corresponds with Merleau-Ponty’s idea of the “flesh” as the generality of the sensible. It illustrates the intertwining of the sensate (the physical sensation of the world through the body) and the sensible (the conscious act of thinking) (177). In other words, the body is considered flesh in phenomenological terms when it is entangled in its corporeality as much as it is entwined in the surrounding physical world simultaneously. The same idea is found in “Rhapsody on a Windy Night:”

The street lamp said, “Regard that woman
Who hesitates toward you in the light of the door
Which opens on her like a grin.
You see the border of her dress
Is torn and stained with sand,
And you see the corner of her eye
Twists like a crooked pin.” (16-22)

The border between the bodily subject and the external world is broken down in the modern metropolis. The body here has no boundary to set its own existence from the street lamp, as it
becomes an extension of his optic and nervous systems (Gish 23). The intertwinements between the body as a seeable being and its ability to see is vividly expressed in this circle of perception depicted in the previous quote—the speaker sees the street lamp and in its light he sees a woman who in turns sees the speaker and attempts to approach him. The Eliotean body is almost always enmeshed in other objects or phenomena.

While “Preludes” depicts the poet’s anxiety about the supremacy of the body in modernity, “Cousin Nancy” is one of Eliot’s poems that depicts the same problem pertaining to women:

Miss Nancy Ellicott smoked
And danced all the modern dances;
And her aunts were not quite sure how they felt about it,
But they knew that it was modern. (5-8)

These lines capture two aspects of the problem of modernity and the body. The first issue is that Miss Ellicott’s expression of modernity is recognized through what she does with her body i.e. her appearance and behavior. The fact that she “smoked / and danced all the modern dances”—two actions that involve the body—are what make her a modern woman. The other aspect of modernity pertaining to the body is the mixed feelings the older generation have towards these symptoms of modernity. The third line captures her aunts, or rather Eliot’s, anxiety about the impact of modernity on the body-mind harmony. It is interesting to note that the poet found older, not modern, forms of dance more appealing. According to Susan Jones:

“the traditions of ballet appealed to Eliot because its training required the subjection of the body to a rigorous physical discipline of the sort he equated with the spiritual discipline of religious acceptance. Eliot saw in dance not simply an
art form that draws attention to rhythmic and lyrical movement in time and space but one that also offered, in its religious origins, a liturgical component that he associated with the adoption of a “moral” position, a giving up of the entire body to the practice of the form.” (Jones 37)

The same concept of the desired harmony between the mind and the body, which Eliot finds in art, is found in the first few lines of “Portrait of a Lady.”

We have been, let us say, to hear the latest Pole Transmit the Preludes, through his hair and finger-tips.

“So intimate, this Chopin, that I think his soul Should be resurrected only among friends Some two or three, who will not touch the bloom That is rubbed and questioned in the concert room.” (I.6-12)

It is remarkable that the speaker thinks of the musician’s body as a device or instrument that transmits melodies through the “hair and finger-tips” (9). The harmony between the mind and the body embodied in the musician is an example of the Eliotean ideal body that is missing in the modern metropolis: the mind and body functioning in harmony, achieved by focusing the mental faculties and physical dexterity to a common goal. The use of the word “transmit” adds a metaphysical aspect to the metaphor, as it indicates a body in relation with an abstract, unseen realm. According to the speaker in “Portrait of a Lady,” the musician’s body is a prosthetic for his mind, which is in turn held captive to an entity beyond itself, in this case, music.

This metaphor of the musician exemplifies an aspect of the Eliotean body i.e. idle bodies in Eliot are often at the center stage of his poems whereas laboring and productive bodies, like the musician’s body, are often implied or briefly mentioned. The body of the Polish musician
that transmits melodies is similar to the hands that toil to cultivate the land in Hesiod’s poem to which Prufrock alludes in “the works and days of hands that lift or drop a question in your plates” (76). The body of the musician in “Portrait of a Lady” and the body of the farmers alluded to in “The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock” may seem to be uninteresting to the speakers in both poems because they are mentioned briefly. However, These bodies are in harmony with their physical existence. In subduing their physicality to productivity and creativity, these bodies disappear, not in the sense that they become meaningless, but in that they have transcended the worldly and become subjugated to a higher goal, i.e. productivity. They are bodies that no longer feel the burden of their purposeless weight, unlike the one in “Preludes”:

\[
\text{Sitting along the bed’s edge, where} \\
\text{You curled the papers from your hair,} \\
\text{Or clasped the yellow soles of feet} \\
\text{In the palms of both soiled hands. (III.35-38)}
\]

Bodies like the one described in the lines above or the ladies that roam idly in Prufrock’s salon talking of Michelangelo are often restless and anxious. These bodies contrast with the productive and creative bodies of the musician’s and the farmers’ in Hesiod’s *Works and Days*. These productive bodies appear content with their simple approach to its physical life. This simplicity is what modernity fails to offer. The Eliotean subject finds many elements of modernity to be unnecessarily complex and demanding, especially in terms of its fixation on the body.

Dancing and music only appear as glimpses in the otherwise body-crazed Eliotean city. They are briefly proposed as alternatives to older forms of worship and belief. As religion is no longer central to modern life, people search for a purpose to which they can dedicate their lives. However, as modernity promotes physicality and encourages the display of bodies, the soul
becomes more alienated, thus creating an imbalance in the life of the human. This imbalance between the body and the soul turns the human into a semi-living semi-dead being, the phenomenon that the following lines from *The Waste Land* captures:

Unreal City,

Under the brown fog of a winter dawn,

A crowd flowed over London Bridge, so many,

I had not thought death had undone so many.

Sighs, short and infrequent, were exhaled,

And each man fixed his eyes before his feet.

Flowed up the hill and down King William Street,

To where Saint Mary Woolnoth kept the hours

With a dead sound on the final stroke of nine. (III.60-68)

In this excerpt, Eliot illustrates the metaphorical death of a culture that is fixated on the body more than the soul. Eliot paints the grotesque result of living only to satisfy the body. In this kind of life, humans become more dead than alive. Even the relief one may feel by the brief mention of a spiritual place like the church of Saint Mary Woolnoth is quickly ruined by the fact that the landmark only serves as a time-telling device. According to C. D. Blanton, layers of allusion covers the heart of the City (London) “where the church of Saint Mary Woolnoth stands at the intersection of King William and Lombard streets” (39). This crowd is summoned by the chimes of the church, “not merely from Dante’s underworld, but also from The London Underground’s Bank Station” where Eliot used to work at Lloyds Bank. Blanton continues:

Indeed, the poem consistently imagines London as a series of strategic entry points through which commodities (human and otherwise) pass. Each
topographical element thus marks a node in the mundane network that subtends the City, creating a persistent allusive undertone that devolves its historical high culture into pedestrian mass experience . . . the City’s monuments are adapted to new purposes . . . Juxtaposed against modern monuments to finance, these condemned churches stand in cross-reference to the City geography of *The Waste Land*. (40)

The church is not mentioned in the poem as a spiritual haven. It only functions as a time-telling device. This is illustrative of the metaphorical death of the crowd that the poem describes. The Eliotean cityscape has no place for spiritual living; places of worship or even intellectual institutions like libraries, theatres or schools are almost never mentioned in his early poetry. The Eliotean city is designed mostly for the physical, not the spiritual. It is where the soul is out-of-place or homeless.

In Eliot’s poetry there is a permeating anxiety about the outcome of the metropolitan spiritless life. The focus on the body and the alienation of the soul makes human life mechanical. As Paula Young Lee notes in her article: “[the] rise of industrial capitalism and its abstraction of lives into labor-units” turned the human body into an engine of production and consumption (Young Lee 277). This is especially evident in the introductory lines to the scene of the typist and young man carbuncular in *The Waste Land*: “At the violet hour, when the eyes and back / Turn upward from the desk, when the human *engine* waits / Like a taxi throbbing waiting” (215-217).

While these lines exemplify the body as a producing machine, the scene of the typist and the young man carbuncular illustrates the body as an engine of consumption. In the Eliotean metropolis, life is mostly about consuming food in tins, emotionless sex and up-to-date forms of
entertainment. It is an imperative of modernity to indulge the body in pleasure but the soul is often neglected and kept in abeyance. This is what makes modern urban life spiritless and mechanical.

The nymphs are departed.

Sweet Thames, run softly, till I end my song.

The river bears no empty bottles, sandwich papers,

Silk handkerchiefs, cardboard boxes, cigarette ends

Or other testimony of summer nights. The nymphs are departed.

And their friends, the loitering heirs of city directors. (III.175-180)

These lines suggest how the natural rhythm of human life has changed in the modern metropolis. Because nymphs symbolize nature and harmony, their departure means that there is an imbalance. It becomes clearer in the rest of the lines that the imbalance lies in the material aspect of life. The absence of the creative and fostering powers of nymphs and its replacement with waste point towards the conclusion that materialism is at the core of the Eliotean metropolis and that consuming goods is principal to modern life. The polluted river is evidence to the excess of consumption and materiality of urban life so much so that the evidence of life in the city is measured by how much its inhabitants consume. Prufrock also complains that his entire life is only measured by “coffee spoons” instead of faith or morality. Spirituality has very little worth in a city where the people are concerned with “the cups, the marmalade, the tea,” and “the porcelain” (63) Prufrock bitterly admits that instead of contemplating transcendent ideas, he is asking material questions such as whether he should part his hair, eat a peach, wear white flannel trousers or have a picnic at the beach (120-123).
As depicted in Eliot’s “The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock,” the body in the Eliotean metropolis is privileged over the soul or the mind. Yet ironically, this attention to the body does not necessitate or guarantee contentment. The focus on the body to catch up with human imagination of perfection puts the body under so much pressure. The body in the Eliotean metropolis is always already assumed to be incomplete and in need of prosthetics to live up to the almost impossible standards of perfection in the Eliotean metropolitan society. Prufrock, for example, prepares “a face to meet the faces” that he meets whenever he is in public, and the women compensate the shortcomings of their bodies by conversing about Michelangelo. In a society such as Prufrock’s, the body is like an avatar that people manipulate and augment to their likings. The guest in portrait of a Lady for instance, uses his body as a façade to hide his thoughts. “I smile, of course, / And go on drinking tea” and “I keep my countenance, I remain self-possessed” (76-77, 89-90).

In the Eliotean metropolis bodies are fed, entertained, indulged in sensual pleasure, displayed, manipulated and used for many purposes and reasons. But the soul is in a state of aridity. The lack of spirituality that characterizes modernity worsened after the Great War. In The Waste Land for instance, the extent of the spiritual aridity and brokenness of modern life is fully realized and lamented.

What are the roots that clutch, what branches grow

Out of this stony rubbish? Son of man,

You cannot say, or guess, for you know only

A heap of broken images, where the sun beats,

And the dead tree gives no shelter, the cricket no relief,

And the dry stone no sound of water.
And I will show you something different from either

Your shadow at morning striding behind you

Or your shadow at evening rising to meet you;

I will show you fear in a handful of dust. (I.19-28)

The apocalyptic tone of the preceding lines builds up a kind of fear. They convey a feeling of restlessness and apprehension whose source is not named or specified. The last line above expresses Eliot’s idea of the body and its reality. As the soul is so neglected and alienated, it has been overtaken by fear and alienation. The soul is overridden with fear so much that it has become unidentifiable from fear. As for the body, it has been rendered to its ultimate nothingness after death. For Eliot, fear and a handful of dust is the sum of the human experience in modern life.

In a reflective mode that characterizes his poetry, Eliot expresses his anxiety about the impact of modernity on the soul and the body. Although modernity promotes the material side of life, it falls short of changing the reality and the fate of the body. Neglecting the soul and its needs complicates life even further for the body. In short, even though modernity has promoted good living standards for human beings, it has complicated the mind/body relationship by focusing only on the corporeal aspect of the human experience. Eliot’s poetry illustrates how this emphasis over the body created an imbalance in the inner life of the modern subject, which eventually affected the material life negatively. This imbalance has two aspects: the first, which will be examined in the second chapter, pertains to the body itself isolated from society. I explain how modern life complicates the corporeal experience and creates a tension within the body. The second aspect, which will be discussed in the third chapter, is related to the social life of the body
and how fixating on materiality in modern life actually imposes on the social life of men and women.
CHAPTER II.

GROTESQUE AND CLASSICAL BODIES IN THE ELIOTEAN METROPOLIS

In the previous chapter, I explored the imbalance that modernity creates between the spiritual and material side of the human experience. By applying the concept of duality in western thought, I explained how modernity leans towards physicality and neglects spirituality. This inclination towards materiality was encouraged by economical affluence in Europe in the first two decades of the twentieth century. This period in history stands out as a time of wealth and leisure. People had access to various types of foods and drinks. Also, more sexual freedom was gained from the introduction of contraceptives. In addition, the upper classes, especially women, were fascinated by fashion and leisure sports. Modern urban life encouraged the pleasure of consumption and, at the same time, placed great importance on the body as an object for display, or a spectacle. This obsession with materiality has gradually led to a conflict within the corporeal life of the modern subject. Modern lifestyle creates a tension between the body as a subject that consumes and the body as an object for display. In this chapter, I argue that Eliot’s poetry depicts this worrisome tension within the body. Eliot’s poetry illustrates how the consumption of goods and food is in a state of conflict with the spectacle of the body.

Modern urban life places pressure on the individual to maintain the outward spectacle of the body. Although it is merely natural that the human body goes through cycles of birth, growth and death, or, modern individuals are pressured to work against the inevitability of their changing bodies. They all seek to maintain a sleek, fit and young body that is unchanging and static. Citified life encourages people to indulge in pleasure, but it pressures them not to allow for consequences of pleasure, and even, the consequences of simply living, to show on their bodies.
Eliot seems to resent this corporeal tension that is induced by the modern attitude toward the body’s natural needs and changes. Modernity, as depicted in Eliot, perplexes human corporeality by encouraging sexual pleasure and abundant nourishment for the body all the while rejecting the body’s progression through its life cycle. This problematic duality of modernity between consumption and appearance impinges on life’s natural rhythm. Birth, growth and death are inevitable and essential to human existence, but in the modern experience they are undesirable because they do not fit the desire for the spectacle in the Eliotean modern metropolis.

In this chapter, I look at Eliot’s poetry through the lens of Mikhail Bakhtin’s theory of grotesque realism. Bakhtin is significant to my argument in this chapter because he highlights the difference between the two states of the body: the classical and the grotesque (Demello 15). The grotesque body, according to Bakhtin, is an “open, protruding, extended, secreting body, which is opposed to the classical body, which is static, closed, and sleek. The grotesque body gives birth, grows fat, grows old, and dies” whereas “the upper classes embrace a body which does not change, which remains young and beautiful and without flaws” (Demello 15). The grotesque body is also fixated on the desire of the body’s lower stratum such as food and sex. While Bakhtin analyzes the two types of corporeality in terms of social class, I use his terminology to explain how both types of corporeality are equally present in Eliot’s poetry, sometimes even within the same body. In other words, modernity, as depicted in Eliot’s poetry, satisfies the grotesque body’s lower stratum but at the same time rejects its inevitable change. The body is naturally grotesque i.e. it consumes and grows old. Yet modern bodies almost always seek to maintain imaginary corporeal standards. In the modern urban context, the body is perplexed because it is both a grotesque and a classical body simultaneously. Modern urban culture encourages the body’s inclination for consumption, but undermines this pleasure with guilt and
anxiety about the natural changes of the body. There is a sense of rejection of the changing body and a demand for a static one.

In many cases, consumption of food and sex is not depicted in a positive light in Eliot’s poetry. Consumption is often paired with an overwhelming sense of guilt and sinfulness. Eliot depicts the body’s desire as a problem, and a measure for the moral life of a civilization. In this Eliotean test of morality, the early twentieth century European lifestyle measures low. From a Bakhtinian perspective, the hedonic modern experience is in fact another form of degradation, one that is experienced at the corporeal level:

To degrade also means to concern oneself with the lower stratum of the body, the life of the belly and the reproductive organs; it therefore relates to acts of defecation and copulation, conception, pregnancy, and birth. (Vice 155)

As far as the grotesque aspect is concerned, the tension between the classical body and the grotesque body is sometimes represented within the same body i.e. the same body has a classical side and a consuming one, or between two or more bodies where one body is grotesque and the other classical. Prufrock and Lil from *The Waste Land* are examples of the tension between the classical and the grotesque within the same body. An example of the second type is the juxtaposition between the scene of the wealthy woman and Lil at the pub in *The Waste Land*. Most of the examples of the grotesque are found among the female representations in Eliot’s poetry. “The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock” is a good example of the tension that modern urban culture creates within the human body. From the beginning of the poem, Prufrock invites the listener to go with him through the cityscape he is familiar with:

Let us go, through certain half-deserted streets,

The muttering retreats
Of restless nights in one-night cheap hotels
And sawdust restaurants with oyster-shells. (4-7)

It is interesting that the only parts of the city Prufrock takes his companion to are hotels and restaurants, both of which are landmarks for the consumption of food and sex. Prufrock does not choose to take his guest to any place of religious or intellectual, or even of national significance. His choice indicates how in the modern urban culture the body’s desire for consumption is what motivates the Eliotean subject. Life according to Prufrock is not measured by achievements or significant events; it is measured “with coffee spoons” (47). Prufrock’s whole existence is measured by how much he consumes.

Moreover, when Prufrock and his guest reach the salon, he recounts for us the pleasures he consumes there in the company of women.

And I have known the arms already, known them all—
Arms that are braceleted and white and bare
(But in the lamplight, downed with light brown hair!)
Is it perfume from a dress
That makes me so digress?
Arms that lie along a table, or wrap about a shawl. (62-68)

It is worth noting that the verb “know” here can imply sexual relationship. Prufrock enjoys visually, and perhaps physically, consuming the feminine bodies around him even though he claims to be bored. He, like his society, enjoys all the pleasure available to them, but at the same time, he rejects the body’s naturalness as he criticizes the woman for her body hair. The woman on the other hand displays her body as a classical spectacle that is “braceleted and white and bare” and perhaps hopes her perfume will take the attention off her natural body hair. However,
just like he helps himself to the sensual pleasures around him, he is also a subject for the consuming gaze of others:

With a bald spot in the middle of my hair—

(They will say: “How his hair is growing thin!”)

My morning coat, my collar mounting firmly to the chin,

My necktie rich and modest, but asserted by a simple pin—

(They will say: “But how his arms and legs are thin!”)

... 

And I have known the eyes already, known them all—

The eyes that fix you in a formulated phrase,

And when I am formulated, sprawling on a pin,

When I am pinned and wriggling on the wall,

Then how should I begin. (40- 46, 55- 60)

Consumption in the Eliotean metropolis is mutual. Every body is both a subject and an object for pleasure, which in this case is nonmaterial consumption. In the lines above, Prufrock laments his inability to reach the impossible standards of corporeality in the modern urban life. Although he works hard to appear fashionable —the morning coat, firm collar, rich and modest necktie—he cannot undo the changes of his body that make him an unseemly sight in his society. His hair loss and osteoporosis make him less desirable as a social companion and thus, by his society’s standards, less worthy of asking significant questions. In the modern metropolis, self worth is often determined by others opinions and in turn others’ opinions are formed by how one looks. Prufrock fails to meet the corporeal standards of the classical body that his society
demands. These standards are so established that Prufrock cannot dare to question or criticize them. He only loathes his coming short of meeting them.

As depicted in *Prufrock and other observations*, Prufrock finds it perplexing that his companions stare at and criticize his physique for showing signs of aging. On its own merit, aging is an evidence of life, however that is not the case in Prufrock’s modern urban milieu. To vividly illustrate his corporeal problem, Prufrock conjures up a character that contrasts with his physical condition to illustrate the kind of physicality required to suit his society. Naturally, he chooses a fictional classical body of royalty to contrast with his physical deterioration with. The classical upper class body is Hamlet’s:

No! I am not Prince Hamlet, nor was meant to be;

Am an attendant lord, one that will do

To swell a progress, start a scene or two,

Advise the prince; no doubt, an easy tool,

Deferential, glad to be of use,

Politic, cautious, and meticulous;

Full of high sentence, but a bit obtuse;

At times, indeed, almost ridiculous—

Almost, at times, the Fool. (111-119)

Prufrock bitterly admits the grotesque reality of his corporeality. His body image and his self-worth degrade from the type of body that Hamlet as a royal figure possesses to the degraded level of a Shakespearean clown. In a modern salon, Prufrock’s aging body is the equivalent of a Renaissance fool. The grotesque element of such Eliotean bodies is their fervent pursuit to live the life of classical bodies only to be repeatedly disillusioned. They strive for the possibility of a
forever-young body that, according to Bakhtin, is associated with the upper classes, which in reality is nonexistent.

Prufrock reaches the climax of his realization in this part of the poem and attempts to find an “anchor,” a reality or purpose for his body. He has come to the conclusion that his greatness cannot be achieved through his body, for it is a grotesque body that is bound to consume, age and die. He is now trying to let go of his high culture and use his dualistic worldview in which everything is either high or low to find his place in the order of the world.

Prufrock’s knowledge and cultural sophistication give him an illusion of greatness. Only when his body starts to fail does he recognize his ordinariness and even his insignificance. His infirmity demeans his social prestige. He realizes that he is not a remarkable unique individual, like Hamlet. His physical deterioration makes him less important in society, almost as “an attendant lord” or a supporting actor. His imperfect body makes him an auxiliary, a secondary individual, if not, a grotesque laughingstock.

For Prufrock to come to this realization of his lowly status, he must have always thought that vigorous young bodies are synonymous with nobility and royalty. Prufrock’s logic associates his disappointment in his physical frailty with the realization of his inconsequential role in society i.e. saying I am no longer young and energetic means I am not noble and princely in essence. In other words, Prufrock views the world through a hierarchical lens. To him, being healthy and youthful is a princely and high-status quality. To Prufrock, Hamlet exemplifies the perfect balance of body and intelligence.

This Prufrockian obsession with the physical perfection of Hamlet holds very little significance to the young man carbuncular and the typist in The Waste Land. This couple is far too self-involved and absorbed by their corporeal pleasure that they hardly give any thought any
thing else, let alone achieving perfection. The scene of the carbuncular young man and the typist illustrates the grotesque body’s fixation on the consumption of visceral desire of men and women.

The typist home at tea-time, clears her breakfast, lights
Her stove, and lays out food in tins.
Out of the window perilously spread
Her drying combinations touched by the sun’s last rays,
On the divan are piled (at night her bed)
Stockings, slippers, camisoles, and stays. (III.222-227)

Almost every detail of the typist’s life given in the poem indicates her consumerist lifestyle; her furniture, clothes, food and entertainment. According to John Xiros Cooper:

[We] are urged by the text to be interested in the clerk and the typist as social types, not fully realized characters . . . [the] typist is fixed in the posture of the passive and mechanical consumer of cultural commodities, on the one hand, and, on the other, of sex. The male clerk is given literary and artistic pretensions to go along with the pimples [and] predatory reflexes. (32-33)

The description of the typist’s clothes especially the stays show that she likes to appear fashionable and to manipulate her body to appear as an upper class body. It is known historically that only upper class women wore corsets to show their high status and their social privilege as members of the leisure class. Bourgeois women used the corset later during the industrial age to appear fashionable (Veblen 154).

She turns and looks a moment in the glass,
Hardly aware of her departed lover;
Her brain allows one half-formed thought to pass:

“Well now that’s done: and I’m glad it’s over.”

When lovely woman stoops to folly and

Paces about her room again, alone,

She smooths her hair with automatic hand,

And puts a record on the gramophone. (III. 249-256)

It is interesting how she immediately tries to numb her fleeting feeling of guilt or anxiety after the clerk leaves by consuming modern forms of entertainment. She does not allow herself to be bothered by the reality of her relationship, which is devoid of passion and sincerity.

According to Paula Young Lee, “[in] the society of the spectacle, the feminine body was the conflicted symbol of consumerism.” (Lee 278) The typist’s body is a good example of this aspect of modern life. She is not only depicted as a consumer, but also as an object of consumption.

As a social type, the typist belong to a social category called *the flapper* which can be defined as a woman who likes to be fashionable and enjoys herself. The flapper as a figure might be associated with sexual license (Blom 354). The typist as a social type is the epitome of consumerist bodies in a society that centers on the body.

In addition to being an illustrative example of the consumption of sex in the Eliotean waste land, the story of typist exemplifies another kind of bodily craving. This desire often occurs along side the desire for sex. In Eliot’s poetry, there is usually a connection between food and sex. Consumption of sex is almost always associated with food in Eliot’s poetry. In “The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock” and “Portrait of a Lady” for instance, Eliot depicts the obsession with the elitist society as well as the working class with food and beverages. Take for example “sawdust restaurants with oyster-shells,” “the taking of a toast and tea,” “I have
measured out my life with coffee spoons,” “after tea and cakes and ices,” “After the cups, the marmalade, the tea.” (7-34-51 -79-88) Also, the host promises to spend her life serving tea to her friends (65). In these examples the consumption of food and beverage is explicitly stated with the company of women. In some cases, however, the link between them is implied as in the poems that describe prostitutes. Take the image of the approaching woman in “Rhapsody on a Windy Night”:

The street lamp said, “Regard that woman
Who hesitates toward you in the light of the door
Which opens on her like a grin.
You see the border of her dress
Is torn and stained with sand,
And you see the corner of her eye
Twists like a crooked pin.” (16-22)

According to a French liberal reformer in the late nineteenth century, “there were two kinds of prostitutes: those who were promiscuous “by nature,” and those who entered the profession due to external “circumstances.” Some women accept prostitution only to soothe their grumbling stomach. This social malady was “the scourge of the poor and the delight . . . of the rich,” for these hapless women, rendered vulnerable by their overwhelming hunger, would allow their bodies to sate the sexual appetite of the wealthy, reinforcing classed relationships inside a consumer society . . . it was capitalism itself that produced prostitution, which was systemic, not individual” (qtd. in Lee 279).

The statement above by the French reformer proves that that capitalism and materiality are the culprits of the tension modern life creates within the body. In order for the body of the
prostitute to consume food, she has to allow her body to be consumed as a sexual object. Although she plays the role of the subject and the object of consumption, a prostitute will only keep her source of income if she does not allow for the consequences of pleasure to show on her body i.e. she has to avoid getting pregnant and maintain a sleek and young body. As for the wealthy consumer of the prostitute’s body, their grotesqueness is obviously evident in the act of sexual consumption. On the other hand, their wealth and class guarantee the maintenance of an upper class classical body that is more of a spectacle than a real body. Also, the fact that the consumer must be a man, this further ensures that consumption of sex will not have any problematic consequences such as pregnancy.

Another vivid example of the tension that modernity creates between the living body and the static body is found in the A Game of Chess section of *The Waste Land*. There are two instances of corporeal grotesqueness and classicalness in this section. First, the juxtaposition between the scene of the wealthy woman and the scene at the pub is evident of the tension between the two body types. Second, there is a corporeal tension in the pub scene within Lil’s body. Her friends nagging remarks and advice exert the tension in this scene.

In the first case, even though Eliot makes no connection between the two scenes, the contrast between the two women’s lifestyles helps define each other. The wealthy woman’s body is situated in a static mode as if displayed in a museum. In this image, Eliot depicts the ideal upper class classical body; A body that appears more sculpted than a living being and one whose grotesque attributes has been intentionally ignored and in stead is presented as a spectacle (Vice 157). However, the lady is aware of her lifeless lifestyle and wishes to experience the grotesque version of life:

“What shall I do now? What shall I do?
I shall rush out as I am, and walk the street

With my hair down, so. What shall we do to-morrow?

What shall we ever do?” (131-134)

These lines suggest the wealthy woman’s desire to be freed from upper class restrictions over her body. She wants to let her body experience the visceral life of the lower classes. Her desire to have her hair down while she walks the street indicates her wish to be rid of any control over her femininity.

As the story of the wealthy woman reaches the streets, the space where the grotesqueness of bodies is conspicuous, the scene move to a pub where Lil and her friend speak about Lil’s corporeal issues. The story of Lil contrasts with the previous image of the wealthy woman. The latter is shown to have a classical body but seeks to experience the life of the grotesque on while Lil’s body already went through illness, pregnancy and abortion is evidently a grotesque one; A body so grotesque that her friend is urging her to undergo a major makeover including a dental work:

But if Albert makes off, it won’t be for lack of telling.

You ought to be ashamed, I said, to look so antique.

(And her only thirty-one.)

I can’t help it, she said, pulling a long face. (155-158)

Lil’s friend utters the very theme of this chapter. She tells Lil not to let her body show any signs of aging or giving birth because they make her appear “antique.” Now that her husband is coming back from war, Lil is pressured by her friend to have a makeover including a dental work to please her husband. Here we see how the tension falls on the woman’s body and not the man’s.
Bodies in the Eliotean metropolis do not only consume material pleasures like sex and food. They also consume time. Prufrock recounts how he as a member of his community indulges consumption of time as an evidence of possession of leisure and pleasure. The term leisure which Thorstein Veblen uses in his book *The Theory of the Leisure Class* to call an entire class of society “connotes . . . non-productive consumption of time” (43). Veblen adds: “the whole life of the gentleman [or ladies] of leisure is not spent before the eyes of the spectators who are to be impressed with that spectacle of horrific leisure . . . For some part of the time his life is perforce withdrawn from the public eye” (Veblen 43). Even the time spent away from the public eye must be accounted for. The proof for this absent or unseen leisure time usually take the form of non-materialistic goods such as “quasi-scholarly or quasi-artistic accomplishments.” (45)

A vivid example from Eliot’s poetry that illustrates Veblen’s aforementioned concept of displaying scholarly and artistic accomplishments is found in “The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock.” Take the lines “In the room the women come and go / talking of Michelangelo” as one example. This couplet shows us an instance of consumption of time and display of prowess. These female bodies move about the room and speak of fine art to prove their “pecuniary ability to afford a life of idleness.” (43) Additionally, their talk of Italian mannerist art sounds like an evidence of some leisure time spent away from the public eye in observing classical art. Moreover, Prufrock continuously complains how time is uselessly consumed in his circles. For I have known them all already, known them all: / Have known the evenings, mornings, afternoons, / I have measured out my life with coffee spoons.” (49-51)

In the Eliotean metropolis, time as goods for consumption is always available for the leisure class. However, it is often abused and consumed unproductively:
There will be time, there will be time
To prepare a face to meet the faces that you meet;
There will be time to murder and create,
And time for all the works and days of hands
That lift and drop a question on your plate;
Time for you and time for me,
And time yet for a hundred indecisions,
And for a hundred visions and revisions,
Before the taking of a toast and tea. (26-34)

It bothers Prufrock to see that time, which can be a crucial factor in serious issues, is being wasted for pleasure. However, he is also guilty of consuming time without significant concrete results. This emptying of time from production is a condition of modernity. Eliot contrasts pre-modern agrarian cultures that connected time with space, production and natural phenomena with the “empty time” in modernity that is separated from significant activities or commitments (Giddens 17). This emptying of time from significant activities has lead to objectifying the body. As bodies are no longer used instrumentally, they become objects for showcasing and display.

In this chapter, I have argued that modernity places the body in a state of conflict between its materialistic lifestyle and its exterior appearance. The bodies in the Eliotean metropolis are tensioned because of the conflicting principles of modern life. On the one hand, capitalism promotes consumerism and indulgence in pleasure. This entices the Eliotean individual to consume food, sex and even time. On the other hand, modernity insists on maintaining the spectacle of the body and rejects the changes that naturally occur in the body, be
it consequences of pleasure consumption such as pregnancy and obesity or simply natural phases in the human life cycle such as old age. These opposing forces on the body cause a kind of corporeal anxiety in the Eliotean individual. Although this anxiety stems from the self i.e. it is a psychological state, it is evidently mapped out on the bodies that Eliot depicts in his poetry.
CHAPTER III.

SOCIAL BODIES IN THE ELIOTEAN METROPOLIS

In the first chapter, I explored T. S. Eliot’s depiction of modernity as a body focused culture. By fixating on sensuality, modernity creates an imbalance in the dualism between the mind and body. Unfortunately, this inclination towards materiality eventually threatens the well being of human corporeality. In the previous chapter, I argued that as modern life becomes more materialistic, the body is placed under opposing forces. In other words, while the body is encouraged economically and socially to consume and indulge in sensual pleasure, it is placed under a great deal of pressure to maintain an unchanging ever-young appearance. This is one of the anxieties that is inscribed on the bodies Eliot depicts in his poetry. While the anxiety discussed in the previous chapter is limited to the same body, the other anxiety that Eliot represents in his poetry is concerned with the social life of these bodies. In this chapter, I examine the corporeal representations of gender in Eliot’s poetry to show how Eliot’s anxiety about modernity is inscribed on the bodies of men and women. I argue that Eliot depicts modernity’s failure to improve the male and female corporeal experience and its negative impact on gender association. By gender association I mean the socially constructed views that originate in western thought in which women are associated with physicality and men with the mind/soul.

It is commonly believed that modernity improves women’s social status by giving them more freedom in the private and public spheres. Women gained voting rights and were given wider access to education. They were also able to attend social gatherings and public celebrations/occasions. In their social lives, women especially upper class socialites openly expressed their feminine identity and sexuality. On the whole, women sought to free themselves
from the traditional restrictions exercised by society on their lives. While many aspects of women’s lives relatively improved especially in terms of education and career, their continuous attempts to divorce from the socially constructed views of female corporeality were not entirely successful. As modern life relied heavily on and emphasized materiality, women, being traditionally associated with physicality in western culture, found themselves bound by the confining social views of the female body as an object for pleasure and as a reproductive machine. However, women were not the only victims of modern life’s fixation on the body. The dominance of materiality also influenced traditional masculinity. Men became more aware of their body image in an unprecedented way. They have become more aware of what they wear and consume.

Modern feminists and social activists aimed to undo the traditional restrictions on women’s bodies; however, this disruption of gender roles did not actually improve the fact that women are traditionally affiliated with physicality. Instead, modern urban culture reinforces both genders’ link to physicality and further limit women to their bodies. Eliot’s poetry reveals an anxiety around gender and the body: it shows that he sees women’s associations with the body increasing in modernity, rather than decreasing. Further, his work evidences an anxiety about increased attention to the male body. Both problems are best illustrated in “The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock,” “Portrait of a Lady,” “Morning at the Window” and *The Waste Land*. The first section illustrates the myth of women’s emancipation from the patriarchal gaze and from their equation to corporeality. I argue that many of the representations of women in Eliot’s poetry reveal culturally salient anxieties about women’s conditions especially in regards to their relationship with their bodies and with men. The argument of the chapter falls into two sections: the female body and the male body. The section on the female body discusses the representations
of women’s bodies in his poetry; their fashion, social and sexual life. The second section explains the corporeal issues that impact masculinity such as infirmity, boredom and a feminized social life.

A. The Female Body

As modern societies aimed to break from tradition, women struggled to divorce from the conventional views of the female body. Women in the early twentieth century, for example, began to dress and conduct themselves like men in public. However, Eliot’s poetry tells us another story. Women’s liberation from patriarchal dominance was more imagined than real because many aspects of female physicality remained unimproved. Ideally, women fought to get rid of traditional restrictions over their role in society and to gain more freedom. Yet this freedom was often exploited by both sexes. With the rise of industrial capitalism and materiality, women’s bodies have become commodities. As the early twentieth century urban culture glorified appearance and sensuality, women have become more plunged into corporeality rather than freed of it.

In addition to the economic and cultural factors that caused women to be defined by their bodies, there was also an intellectual catalyst that treated women’s sexuality as an experiment. This was the influence of modern feminist intellectuals and social activists who argue that “the body is a continuous and important site of struggle; [and that] through the body women can resist gender domination” (DeMello 17). Another feminist writer, Hélène Cixous, states in her famous piece “The Laugh of the Medusa”: women must write through their bodies . . . They must invent the impregnable language that will wreck partitions, classes and rhetorics” (42). In the literary field, Virginia Woolf writes in *A Room of One’s Own*, that in order for women to be freed from
the male domination in the literature, female writers should make their books “somehow to be adapted to the body” (112). These efforts to free to liberate women from the male supremacy might have had good intentions and lead to some satisfactory results; however, as depicted in Eliot’s poetry, this resistance took a wrong turn and resulted in inscribing women’s bodies with the very association with physicality that they sought to divorce from. According to DeMello, modern “women are always conscious of their bodies in ways that men are usually not “because women must constantly monitor their appearance and behaviors in order to please men, under whose gaze they continuously operate [or] because they must take into account the ways in which their reproductive abilities influence the activities that they engage in” (17). As depicted in Eliot’s poetry, these are some of the aspects of women’s corporeal experience that modernity fails to improve or alter.

Eliot’s depiction of modernity’s failure to improve the traditional views of the female body and his anxiety about gender has often been misinterpreted as chauvinistic and antifeminist. The female imagery in his poetry is often taken as the embodiment of the poet’s aversion to femininity based on his real life experience. In her book *Modernism, Memory and Desire: T. S. Eliot and Virginia Woolf*, Gabrielle McIntire, for example, asserts that in Eliot’s poetry there is a desire for the undesirable especially in male-female relations as depicted in his early poetry (90). This desire for the female, according to McIntire, can neither come to terms with its sordidness nor meets the normative heterosexual desire. Women in the Eliotean metropolis suggest desire by their presence, but the sensory details of their appearance causes repulsion to Prufrock. The extra-linguistic communication of women’s flesh and fashion disrupts Prufrock’s world. McIntire also suggests that Eliot’s distaste for the body in general and aspects of female corporeality is evident in his poetry early in his creative career (90). The interesting aspect of this
rejection is that Eliot felt compelled to revisit and describe it in his work, perhaps to overcome this disgust for the body.

McIntire’s aforementioned analysis of desire in Eliot’s poetry is indeed a plausible explanation, however, I argue that it falls short of explaining why revulsion, instead of desire, compelled Eliot to write about women. I find that there are more reasons behind Eliot’s rejection of the female body than its uncleanliness. I contend that, rather than sheer dislike for women, Eliot’s poetry depicts his anxiety about the changes in modern life by reacting to the most representative symbol of modernity i.e. the female body. In other words, Eliot seems to pin his anxiety about his time on the female body because it is a representative symbol of modernity. As Whitney Chadwick notes in her book Women, Art and Society: by 1913, the female body itself was being perceived as an important signifier for modernity (Chadwick 262). When examining the women in his poetry, it becomes clear that Eliot’s anxiety was not about the female body in general, but rather, about an emerging type of femininity whose fashion choices were media for the elucidation and expression of the modern (Chadwick 262). This type of uncontained, rampant femininity that stretches beyond its physical space and intrudes the space of the other sex by appealing to the senses of the viewers characterizes most of the female characters in the Prufrock collection and The Waste Land. As a traditionalist who disliked change, Eliot was repulsed by the changes in modern life. And because many of these changes involved giving more sexual and social freedom to women, Eliot viewed these developments in the female corporeal experience as a sign of the decadence of the time. His early poetry, especially his first collection Prufrock and Other Observations, is full of examples of the sexual freedom of female bodies. In “Rhapsody on a Windy Night” for instance, Eliot illustrates the failure of modern urban life to advance the state of women in society:
The street lamp said, “Regard that woman
Who hesitates toward you in the light of the door
Which opens on her like a grin.
You see the border of her dress
Is torn and stained with sand,
And you see the corner of her eye
Twists like a crooked pin.” (16-22)

A similar scene that describes a woman in the street appears in “Morning at the Window”:

The brown waves of fog toss up to me
Twisted faces from the bottom of the street,
And tear from a passer-by with muddy skirts
An aimless smile that hovers in the air
And vanishes along the level of the roofs. (5-9)

In both examples, Eliot paints images of modernity’s failure to improve the condition of women. Part of the freedom and prosperity are misused to exploit women’s bodies. These two scenes show us how modern urban life does not really advance women’s cause for real freedom and independence. In her book *The Problem with Pleasure*, Laura Frost states that the epitome of the modern urban feminine is “a creature who orbits contemporary amusement” and freely picks up her sexual companions, “yet she is plagued with anxiety and alienation (2). It is disappointing to know that the archetypal woman in modern life is a woman who chases after the illusion of freedom and chooses to be sexually exploited in the name of liberation. It is also quite discouraging that neither education nor career appears any where in Frost’s example of the life of the modern woman. Instead, only entertainment and promiscuity are her main concerns in life. It
may be hard to realize, but women in modern life are hardly liberated from their bodies. If anything, women’s bodies are being willingly allowed to be exploited in the name of progress and open-mindedness.

Not only low class women are exploited, upper class ladies are also a spectacle for the masculine gaze. In Prufrock, for instance, women’s fashion is about reaching the farthest beyond the physical boundaries of the body:

Arms that are braceleted and white and bare

(But in the lamplight, downed with light brown hair!)

Is it perfume from a dress

That makes me so digress?

Arms that lie along a table, or wrap about a shawl. (62-68)

A similar instance is seen in The Waste Land: “Unstoppered, lurked her strange synthetic perfumes, / Unguent, powdered, or liquid—troubled, confused / And drowned the sense in odours; stirred by the air / That freshened from the window” (87-90). Women’s fashion has become more about extending the boundaries of their corporeal space, rather than containing their bodies. Women in early twentieth century hardly dress to cover their bodies, but rather, they dress to catch the eyes of men. This is evident in the “skirts that trail along the floor” and the large ornate hats that were in vogue in the early twentieth century (Ewing 56). One may wonder what purpose do extra long skirts, synthetic perfumes and huge hats serve other than stretching the physical space of women. Prufrock continues: “And this, and so much more?” after which he complains of the distraction and confusion which women’s perfume is causing him: “And should I then presume? / And how should I begin?” (69-70). Eliot portrays women’s fashion as distracting and inexcusable because they are emblematic of the change and instability of his
time. The wardrobe of women does not cause his discomfort per se, but rather by what these fashion choices stand for.

The image of the arms “that are braceleted and white and bare” is a synecdoche for the female body (68). The displaying nature of these arms demonstrates the new reality of the female body, that it has become a public spectacle. The woman with the seemingly perfect “braceleted and white and bare” arms is a social performer according to Prufrock. Her performance aims to show her superiority through her body: braceleted arms show possession of capital, white arms symbolize racial privilege and bare arms suggest unembellished beauty and thus the desirability of her body to eligible male companions. Historical accounts of early-twentieth-century fashion report that women invested large sums of their income in the fashionable “S” shape or the exaggerated curve corset. This body-altering piece of underwear was designed to give women a sculpture-like appearance, a temporary reshaping of women’s busts, waists and backs (Ewing 290). Investing capital, time and physical stamina to bear with such painful yet temporary body alteration inspires women to exert all efforts to make sure their physical and financial investment is appreciated and eventually rewarded. If anything, this proves that women are still using their bodies to appeal to the male gaze. Even though the female body is not as restricted and confined, women still use their bodies to communicate extralinguistically through their bodies. One may think that the social and political slogans that called for the freedom of women would rid women of the need to appeal to men through their bodies. The fact remains that, as depicted in Eliot’s poetry, women in the early twentieth century was very much aware of the power of her physicality. And they have used their bodies to their liking.
It is interesting to note that, as depicted in Eliot’s poetry, although the power of femininity over men is invisible, it is not less violating, aggressive and intrusive than masculine physical violence. Eliot depicts this experience in The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock”:

The eyes that fix you in a formulated phrase,
And when I am formulated, sprawling on a pin,
When I am pinned and wriggling on the wall,
Then how should I begin
To spit out all the butt-ends of my days and ways? 60
And how should I presume? (56-61)

In this graphic description, Prufrock expresses what it feels like to be the target of women’s gossip. His anxiety is caused by women’s silent invasion of men’s senses through visual, audial, verbal provocation. He equates his feeling of violation by women’s overwhelming agency and their physical presence to the beheading of John the Baptist. “I have seen my head (grown slightly bald) brought in upon a platter” (82). In the same way that Salome manipulated the king to behead John the Baptist, women in the Eliotean salon use their bodies to manipulate the thoughts and the life of men:

Is it perfume from a dress
That makes me so digress?
Arms that lie along a table, or wrap about a shawl.
And should I then presume?
And how should I begin? (65-69)

Via their perfume, fashion, body movements and witty conversation, women can influence Prufrock’s thoughts and emotions. He captures a glimpse of how his attraction to women’s
scents and bodies makes him “digress” and loses his train of thought (66). He is anxious about
the future of his masculinity in a culture where the boundaries of gender are threatened as such.
Prufrock’s reaction to this feminine performance shows his inability to comprehend or accept the
new female body. He seems oblivious to the pantomimic expressions of the female body
language, nevertheless, he finds them worth musing on in his monologue: the open-heartedness,
vulnerability and reaching-out of the arms lying along the table, the emotional retreat of arms
wrapped about a shawl, the inviting maneuvers of arms throwing off a shawl or settling a pillow.
These women’s efforts to reach to Prufrock, whether sincere or opportunistic seem to hit a wall
of indifference or oblivion at Prufrock’s end. Such unwanted response to the efforts of these
female bodies makes them frustrated: “That is not it at all, / That is not what I meant, at all”
(100-101). The dialogue that women are trying to initiate with Prufrock through their bodies is
doomed to fail since his awareness is anxiously, or merely pretending to be, seeking the
“overwhelming question” (10).

Eliot channels his anxieties about modern life into his representations of the female body
to warn against the unchecked changes in social life that are occurring around him. One
particular aspect of the female social presence that worries Eliot is the treatment of of women’s
bodies as theatrical spectacles. This deterioration in modern urban culture i.e. the worsening of
women’s association with physicality is found in the couplet: “In the room the women come and
go / Talking of Michelangelo” (13-14). It is rather puzzling that Prufrock repeats these two lines
only twice throughout his contemplation on serious universal questions and never mentions them
again. He iterates them as matter-of-fact statements without relating them to the lines before or
after. This raises questions about the reasons Prufrock has for mentioning these women, their
exercise and their topic of conversation, and whether this scene is significant to Prufrock’s
unconsciousness. In *Landscape as Symbols in the Poetry of T. S. Eliot*, Nancy Hargrove suggests that these “bored and boring women talk tediously and ignorantly of Michelangelo, whose art and passionate grasp on life contrast painfully with Prufrock’s passivity” (51). Extending from Hargrove’s valid comment on the boring and bored women, I contend that there is more to these lines than the mere contrast between Michelangelo’s impassioned art and Prufrock’s docility.

The aforementioned couplet from “The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock” illustrates how the social conditions of women’s corporeality have not much improved in modern urban life. Strolling up and down a salon when bored is not a particularly modern female practice. It can be traced back in the literary tradition to Jane Austen’s fiction. In *Pride and Prejudice*, having been just invited by Catherine Bingly to join her and Elizabeth Bennet in their exercise around the room, a maneuver by which Miss Bingly employs Miss Bennet as a foil in order to highlight her superiority and wealth, Mr. Darcy states: “You either chuse this method of passing the evening because you are in each other's confidence, and have secret affairs to discuss, or because you are conscious that your figures appear to the greatest advantage in walking;—if the first, I should be completely in your way;—and if the second, I can admire you much better as I sit by the fire” (Austin143). This eighteenth century case of body display illustrates that women commonly employed walking as a technique for display. Similarly, the women in the Eliotean salon are clearly not discussing intimate secrets since Prufrock can easily hear the topic of their conversation. Consequently, the second motive explains why women aimlessly “come and go.” This analogy in the representation of women may appear to suggest that women’s imagery in Eliot is outdated and misogynistic, but I contend that they imply an essentialist aspect of the dynamics of male/female relations that will always be present but differ in manifestation.
Comparing women’s conditions in the world of Austen’s book brings to bear a striking parallel. Women in Austen as well as Eliot work hard on enhancing the visual charm of their bodies by any means, including graceful body movements, clothes and accessories and witty bantering, or in this case, sophisticated art. In the Eliotan Salon, women complement their visual appeal with intellectual conversations about renaissance mannerist art. Their talk of Michelangelo is an ornament to accessorize their appearance, just like the bracelets, perfumes and the trailing skirts. These women know enough about art to understand that it can make them sound more cultured and that it can be used to enhance their appeal to the other sex. However, just like the “braceleted and white and bare” female bodies are exposed under lamplight to be blemished and impure the rhyming o in “come and go” and “Michelangelo” implies the pretentiousness and shallowness or emptiness of the women’s conversation (13, 63). Similarly, the hostess in “Portrait of a Lady” is another example of using more than fashion to augment the social body image. Being aware that she is past her prime, she does not attempt to display her body like the women in the Eliotean salon. Instead, she surrounds her self with interior décor (candle lights and flowers) and engages the guest in a moralizing conversation about her good morals.

The women strolling in the Eliotean salon present their bodies as spectacles for their society. By walking up and down the room, they exhibit their bodies. The aim of their exhibition is to display their bodies as commodities to attract men or flaunt their social rank. These women advertise their bodies as products of hard work, and walking ensures the best presentation and marketing of these commodities. This art of feminine showmanship is worrisome to Eliot. It is not clearly stated what bothers Eliot about these women or their conversation about Michelangelo. I suggest that the image of these women bespeak his anxiety over the bold
presence of women in the masculine intellectual sphere, their unprecedented intimidation of men, and their infiltration of men’s senses through their fashion and scents.

The concept of women’s bodies on display is not the only corporeal implication in “In the room the women come and go / Talking of Michelangelo” (13,14). Another interesting aspect of these lines is the significance of the artist’s name. It is well known that Michelangelo’s name is synonymous with nude sculptures and painting, loaded with religious symbols and half-hidden eroticism. Invoking a name with such legacy casts its corporeal and aesthetic connotations on the speakers. In other words, discussing an artist known for his fascination with the naked body inspires the viewers/listeners in the Eliotean salon to imagine the concealed sculpturalness of the speakers’ bodies using only the power of suggestion. Michelangelo is a name that suggests eroticism when mentioned especially by women.

Speaking of a leading figure in the Mannerist school of art, which is notable for its intellectual sophistication as well as its artificial un-naturalistic style, supports Prufrock’s impression that the women lack genuine interest in art. By supplementing their presence with “talking of Michelangelo,” the Eliotean women excite erotic passion. This is a telling example of civilization as an indirect channeling of primitive impulses. In other words, the conversation about Michelangelo’s work generates a mental picture in his paintings and sculptures where women pose in attractive sensual manners and men display expressive stretched postures. Whereas the Christian content of his works is important, the unabashed celebration of the human form is unescapably arousing. Michelangelo’s name also suggests an air of antiquity associated with Florentine sculpture. Interestingly, the nostalgia and romance often attributed to Michelangelo’s art, which is one reason for his art to be discussed in the Eliotean salon, is said to be so mannered, empty, lacking in expression and invincibly boring. (Müntz 25) It is thus not
surprising that the topic of the lady’s conversation actually matches—if not causes—the speaker’s dissatisfaction and boredom. So choosing Michelangelo as a topic of conversation defeats the very purpose of the conversation.

While elitist women in the Eliotean metropolis use art and strategic conversation to augment their bodies and impress their society, common women are still to a degree controlled by their ability to please men and to produce children. The average woman’s corporeal experience is exemplified in the scene between Lil and her friend in *The Waste Land*:

> When Lil’s husband got demobbed, I said,
> I didn’t mince my words, I said to her myself,
> Now Albert’s coming back, make yourself a bit smart.
> He’ll want to know what you done with that money he gave you
> To get yourself some teeth. He did, I was there.
> You have them all out, Lil, and get a nice set,
> He said, I swear, I can’t bear to look at you.
> And no more can’t I, I said, and think of poor Albert,
> He’s been in the army four years, he wants a good time,
> And if you don’t give it him, there’s others will, I said. (II.139-149)

We see here an example of how men are defined by what they do and what they achieve whereas women are defined by how they look and their reproductive abilities (DeMello 120). In the same example we find an instance of a woman making a “Patriarchal Bargain” (122 DeMello). The passage begins with a man’s achievement and his need to celebrate his physical achievement in the war. Although Albert is absent from the scene, his patriarchal rights are being enforced by a woman who repeatedly stresses for Lil the desirability of her husband especially
now that his body has survived warfare. According to DeMello, “because so many of these practices are painful, they also serve as an important test of a man’s strength and courage” (120). The same woman who points out the desirability of Albert’s body as a warrior repeats to Lil how her body is not fit to be in a relationship with Albert’s. Lil’s case exemplifies how women are still defined by their ability to produce children and appear desirable or marriageable. Modern life failed to change some of the inherent characteristics of male and female bodies.

Lil’s inability to escape her body is exemplary of women’s condition in modern urban life. Before the war Lil dedicated her body to housewifery and childbearing. Post-world war Lil was also defined by her ability to please her husband sexually and to maintain a pleasant youthful appearance. Women, as depicted in Eliot’s poetry are prisoners of their bodies. Women may have had the illusion that they can escape the confinement of the traditional role of women’s bodies; yet, their liberation from tradition does not guarantee their utter freedom. Escaping domestic life to the public made women prone to exploitation and display. Leaving the household may not be the best thing that happened to women because it only made them more defined by their appearance. The women strolling up and down the Eliotean salon in “The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock” and the poor woman in “Rhapsody on a Windy Night” prove that the condition of modern women, in regards of their corporeal experience, is abysmal and confining.

B. The Male Body

As the materialism of modern life imposes on women’s corporeality, Men are also affected by such imposition. However, the masculine experience is obviously different from women. Men struggled to define the boundaries between their social domain and the women’s.
According to Rosa Mayreder, “[civilization] feminized men by making the lives of men and women more alike . . . the more culture grows and grows sophisticated, the more anti-virile influences are on the increase” (Blom 243). This amalgamation between gender differences entails having aspects of traditional masculinity identity modified. In “The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock,” the speaker feels that the primitive impulse of his masculinity is “smoothed by long fingers … tired … [and] stretched on the floor” (lines 72-74). Prufrock complains about this modern, over-civilized, and thus, too feminized, lifestyle. His masculine identity as a male is compromised by the overemphasis on social decorum. The typically feminine etiquette that Prufrock is compelled to observe and the strain this type of control exert over his appetite, now compromises his physical stamina and sexual competence. Being forced to participate in a feminized style of life threatens his “strength to force the moment to its crisis” (80).

Prufrock not only blames women for the loss of his virility, he also resents the feminized social decorum. He loathes the painstakingness of simple habitual actions like the taking of a toast and tea, measuring with coffee spoons, after “the cups, the marmalade, the tea, / Among the porcelain” (89-90). Prufrock seems to hate these tedious arrangements. He is both bored and annoyed for having to suppress or control his appetite for pointless social customs such as eating only specific amounts of food in specific quantities on specific occasions. These remnants of Victorian body discipline challenge the voracious appetite that is traditionally associated with masculinity (Bordo 108). Prufrock and the guest in “Portrait of a Lady” find the new social norms confusing and hypocritical: They meet their society “Prepared for all the things to be said, or left unsaid. /… And so the conversation slips /Among velleities and carefully caught regrets” (6-15).
In addition to the feminized lifestyle that Prufrock is compelled to observe, his infirmity is another challenging problem of his corporeal existence. His body’s failure to live up to the standards and demand of his social life threatens Prufrock’s masculinity:

With a bald spot in the middle of my hair—
(They will say: “How his hair is growing thin!”)
My morning coat, my collar mounting firmly to the chin,
My necktie rich and modest, but asserted by a simple pin—
(They will say: “But how his arms and legs are thin!”)
Do I dare
Disturb the universe? (40-46)

In these lines, Prufrock mentions two corporeal concerns: his aging body and his meticulous observation of fashionable appearance. Both anxieties are produced by the social fascination with the physical attractiveness in modern urban culture. Prufrock works hard on maintaining a pleasant and elegant clothing style. He sounds very particular about the details of his apparel: “mounting firmly,” “rich and modest,” “asserted by a simple pin,” all of which illustrate how well he tries to keep up with the social demand of visual corporeal aesthetics, only to be disappointed by his failure in his mission. The X-ray-like gaze of the society is fixated on the aspects of Prufrock’s body that he cannot change i.e. his aging body.

This continuous Prufrockian struggle to win the approval of his demanding society and his constant failure to succeed in this mission leads him to experience bouts of frustration:

And I have known the eyes already, known them all—
The eyes that fix you in a formulated phrase,
And when I am formulated, sprawling on a pin,
When I am pinned and wriggling on the wall,

Then how should I begin

To spit out all the butt-ends of my days and ways? (55-60)

Prufrock is repeatedly disappointed at his inability to overcome his physical limitations or achieve the physical perfection that is demanded by his culture. His constant anxiety and obsession over his body leads him to eventually become fed-up with these demands. This ennui or boredom is yet another nuisance besides the feminized social life and the infirmity that troubles Prufrock’s corporeal experience. Although boredom is often thought of as a mental state caused by monotony or lack of novelty, in Eliot’s poetry it almost always manifests in physical gestures. According to McDonald, in modernity, boredom and anxiety are closely related the one can invoke the other (72). To understand the state of ennui that the Eliotean figures suffer, it is helpful to quote Crouch’s analogy between modernist architecture and physicality. Crouch suggests that more than any other art, modern architecture and design are “the most intimately linked to the physical conditions of modernity and daily life” (618). For the most part, modernity treated human bodies the same way it did architectural and aesthetic objects. Modern buildings are, more or less, stylistic responses to the conditions of modernity: symbolic of the triumph of modern form, but lacking in practical application (Crouch 621). The same thing can be said about the Eliotean representation of corporeality. In Eliot’s poetry, modern bodies are showcased as aesthetic artifacts of triumph and modernization, the thing that leads to the state of ennui and anxiety that is especially characteristic of his early poetical works. “Preludes” and “The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock” in particular, depict situations where the state of mind is made vivid and almost tangible when described in physical terms. Take for example the cruelly tedious—almost deadening—effect of habit:
For I have known them all already, known them all:
Have known the evenings, mornings, afternoons,
I have measured out my life with coffee spoons;
And I have known the eyes already, known them all
And I have known the arms already, known them all—
Arms that are braceletèd and white and bare
(But in the lamplight, downèd with light brown hair!) (49-72)

“To have known” implies boredom and emptiness. Most of the aspects described as being already known are particularly related to material living: the predictable fashion, the orchestrated dining ceremonies of the “evenings, mornings, afternoons,” the measuring of his life with coffee spoons, and the expected gaze and criticism.

Prufrock is not only bored with his own physical life, but he is also frustrated with the typicality and repetitiveness of social customs and public gatherings. In such societies, almost every physical move is rehearsed and predicted: certain forms of greetings, exchanging verbal pleasantries and physical courtesies, only certain styles of clothes are worn and specific types of food consumed. This may well be fascinating to an outsider, but to the regular participant, it is soul-deadening especially for an intellectual such as Prufrock who is not only bored with his daily rituals, but also with the social habits of men and women.

The repetition of “I have known already” in “The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock” is illustrative of boredom and lack of interest and conveys the feeling to the listener—especially the long rounded vowel in “known” (49 72). For instance, measuring his life in coffee spoons makes the reader physically engaged in the restricted, exhaustingly detailed and elaborately ceremonial social customs in Prufrock’s society. Also, the spitting of the butt-ends of cigarettes is a physical
action that gives the reader a bodily sensation of the triviality of Prufrock’s existence (Hargrove 52). It is noteworthy that the ornate details of the social life that Prufrock describes are boring because of their repetitiveness and are articulated in a language that instills the same sense of boredom, as Prufrock varyingly repeats “I have known” ten times within twenty lines.

In all its artificial complexity, the social life of men and women alike is as boring and frustrating as the social bodies that lead it. The perfumes, the bracelets, the shawls and the skirts distract Prufrock from his musings on serious existential issues, not because he is intellectually stimulated, but because he is physically provoked. All the artificiality of elitist society distracts Prufrock from the overwhelming question by arousing his bodily urges. It is naïve to deny that such corporeal excitement may intrigue him, however, he is bound to feel bored eventually. In turn, this constant state of boredom induces his anxiety.

As depicted in Eliot’s poetry, the innovativeness of modern urban life in the early twentieth century has impacted on the social and personal life of men and women. Although many women enjoyed more professional and educational opportunities, modern urban life has failed to significantly rid women of the socially constructed association with sensuality. By becoming a symbol of the modern, the female body binds its owner to the limitations of corporeality. In The Waste Land and “The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock,” women are still regarded for their reproductive abilities and as objects for the male gaze. Men’s condition in modern urban life is also influenced by modern views of corporeality. “The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock” illustrates how traditional masculinity is threatened by the feminized lifestyle and the demand for everlasting youth. Men’s bodies have become subject to the social standards of a culture obsessed with materiality and visual pleasure.
CONCLUSION

My thesis analyzes the representations of corporeality in Eliot’s poetry. I have argued that Eliot depicts examples of the body as it registers the prevailing anxiety about modern life. As a poet with great sensibility, Eliot was conscious of modernity’s impact on the individual’s life. From his depiction of the modern body, it is clear that the body itself was not the target of Eliot’s disgust. The body was merely a symbol of the things he disliked and was anxious about in the modern metropolis. Eliot’s representations of anxiety are unique because he uses the body as his medium of expression. The body in Eliot’s poetry is a vehicle that carries the poet’s feelings and reactions to his time.

One major aspect of modernity that worries Eliot and that is vividly registered on the body is the abandonment of spirituality in modern life and its replacement with an obsession with physicality. The opening lines of the first poem in Eliot’s debut poetical works describes the poet’s anxiety about the prevalence of materiality in the modern world. This fixation on sensuality has lead to two subsequent corporeal anxieties: one pertaining to the individual body and another to the body in a social context. The first physical anxiety, discussed in chapter two, deals with one of these anxieties that pertain to the body itself. By its very nature the human body tends to consume and is inclined to change. However, modern life complicates the nature of the body. On the one hand, the prosperity of modern life encourages the individual to indulge the body’s desire for materialistic pleasure such as food and sex. On the other hand, the aesthetic standards of modern living demand the body to remain young, fit and sleek. Indulging one part of human corporeality while policing another creates a tension for the modern person. This confusing way of life induces anxiety in both the men and women in the Eliotean Metropolis.
Another worrisome aspect of modernity that Eliot’s poetry depicts, examined in chapter three, is the social life of the body. Although the corporeal social concerns of men and women may vary, the social life of both sexes is impacted by the craze of sensuality that is characteristic of modern urban life in the early twentieth century. Many feminist activists worked hard to free womankind from the traditional shackles of the past, especially the view of women as mere bodies and objects for men’s pleasure. Women may have worked hard to rid themselves of such confinements, but the modern inclination towards sensuality opposed their efforts. The cultural norms of modern urban life, as depicted in Eliot, still emphasize the association between women and physicality. “The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock” depicts how women display their bodies and flaunt their fashion and beauty. The portrayal of women’s bodies in *The Waste Land* illustrates how women’s ability to please men sensually and bear children is still viewed as their assigned social role. In the midst of this focus on women’s bodies, men find themselves living an increasingly feminized lifestyle. “The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock” illustrates how the more women gained more dominance in the social life, the more men are becoming anxious about their masculinity. Also, with modernity’s emphasis on youth, infirmity becomes a threat to the masculine body.

This attempt at reading the significance of the body in Eliot, admittedly, only begins to scratch the surface of an untapped subject in Eliot’s poetry. At the very least, I hoped to have shifted some of the critical focus on the exhausted subject of Eliot’s sexual orientation and the “overwhelming question” of his homosexuality. This is not to say that such a question is unimportant, but it seems that the majority of articles written about this topic hit a brick wall of uncertainty and futility. My study is an endeavor towards looking past Eliot’s biography and attempting to approach his poetical works from a broader perspective. The most important work
my analysis of Eliot’s metaphysics of the body aimed to achieve is helping readers question their enthusiasm for modern life. Eliot’s poetry may not explicitly state the disadvantageous consequences of modernity on the individual. However, it presents the modern attitude towards physicality as flawed and in need of a moral makeover. Eliot successfully communicates his anxiety about hypermodernity through the body, but he also wraps his depiction of the body in enough ambiguity to encourage readers to pose their own understandings and questions as to the reasons and the ways in which modernity fails the human being. Eliot’s poetry provides enough corporeal examples as to render modern urban life in the early twentieth century morally questionable.

Future studies on Eliotean corporeality, and modernism, in general may endeavor to find more connections between the body in Eliot’s poetry and modernity. Another way forward would be to conduct a comparative study that explores and contrasts Eliot and his contemporaries in terms of their response to the culture and the politics of their time. Moreover, as the first chapter of this study only begins to touch upon the topic of phenomenology in Eliot’s poetry, future studies can delve into this aspect of his poetry supported by the diversity of phenomenological theories.
WORKS CITED

Primary Sources


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