Son and Lover in T. S. Eliot’s “Portrait of a Lady”

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Abstract
The present paper attempts to vindicate misogyny in T. S. Eliot’s “Portrait of a Lady”. To the best of our knowledge, no full length study has examined the effect of mother love in Eliot’s “Portrait of a Lady”, and its interrelatedness with misogyny. In the poem, the young man and the lady live in an isolated togetherness, because the young man is dispossessed of any sense of emotional and human commitment. Inspite of the lady’s abiding love, which is avowed via bombastic rhetoric, her attempts to awaken his passive and latent desire end with an utter failure. The man remains shut off from the world of passion. He strives to control himself in front of the lady whose desire is bestial and threatening to his very masculine identity. The man splits his lady into mother and lover. Hence, his mind becomes torn in an admixture of attraction and repulsion. As the paper evinces, mother love, which is in his entrails, prompts his visceral hatred of the feminine and renders him deficient in his capacity to love.

Keywords: Mother love, Portrait of a Lady, mother complex, misogyny.

Eliot’s misogyny, which is still a momentous query among Eliot’s critics and scholars, is partly rooted in his infantile love for his mother. His emotional frustration is a re-enactment of the anxieties of child-mother relation. Mother love surfaces in Eliot’s recently published letters. In a letter to his mother, dated 3 October 1917, Eliot, whose heart aches with the pain of longing to see his mother, writes: “Don’t talk about not seeing me again; it is too painful, and besides you shall see me again. I remember all those occasions you mention, and a great many more, usually beginning with the ‘Little Tailor’ and the firelight on the ceiling. But you must not doubt that you will see me directly the war is over” (Eliot 2009, 222). The insistence on ‘seeing’ emphasizes the importance of physical approximation. Eliot feels that he will not rest until he sees her in front of him. The childhood memories are still dwelling in his mind. He still remembers “Little Tailor”, a song she used to sing to him. In another letter, dated 12 January 1919, Eliot writes to his mother: “You have not been long out of my thoughts since then, I have been over all my childhood. I don’t feel like writing anything in this first letter except to say again how much I love you—if only I could have been with you these last few days. I do long for you, I wanted you more for my sake than yours-to sing the Little Tailor for me” (2009, 316). The poet still imagines himself a babe avowing declarations of love to his mother, and waiting for her to sing again a song that she used to sing to him while he was young. Eliot seems to be entrapped in a stage of childhood, and he finds it difficult to transcend this stage even when he is old. His experience of infantile anxieties, fears, and needs is probably due to the fact that Charlotte Champe Eliot was not so close to him in his infancy. According to Ackroyd (1984, 20), Eliot’s mother “was not […]
‘particularly interested in babies’, and in fact Eliot’s closest infantile relationship was with his nurse.” Charlotte was not deeply involved in the everyday upbringing of her babies. For Eliot, she brought a nurse, because she was always busy with social reforms and other matters.

Eliot’s need to appease maternal longing is also intense in a letter to his brother, Henry Eliot, dated 15 February 1920. In the letter (2009, 442), he states that his happiness will never be fulfilled until he sees his mother. He says: “Consider my position. I am thinking all the time of my desire to see her. I cannot get away from it. Unless I can really see her again I shall never be happy.” Inside that adult, there lurks an infant, who is terribly afraid of being separated from his love object: his mother. In a letter to his mother, dated 15 February 1920, Eliot becomes more obsessed with seeing her, repeating that he will experience no bliss in his life unless she comes and makes him see her again. He writes: “Now is this worth it, while you are still physically able to come here? For you to come and have time, settle down for a time and live with us? Unless I can see you once again for something better than the breathless visit I have described, I shall never be really happy to the end of my life” (Eliot 2009, 443). Eliot continues, “I only repeat that if you cannot come, if I can never again see you for more than ten days or two weeks, that I shall never be happy. And if you come, it must be quickly, soon” (444). Eliot seems to be mad in love with his mother. He views her as a romantic lover or as a babe. The letter was written while Eliot is in England very far from his mother in America. The pain of absence from his mother is reinforced by childhood anxieties caused by his feeling of isolation from her. These memories are still in the layers of his mind. Murray H. Sherman contends that Eliot’s sexual problems are inherent in his separation from his mother in his infancy. He states that “Eliot’s severe sexual inhibitions seem to have derived from his mother’s emotional absence during his infant years, her later domination of him, and his father’s abhorrence of sex” (Sherman 2007, 272). His mother’s absence left an emotional vacuum in his heart.

Eliot discusses mother love in an essay where he commented on D. H. Lawrence’s mother love in Fantasia of the Unconscious. In his commentary on the book’s chapter entitled Parental love, Eliot writes: “What he says about mother love in the Fantasia is better than all the psychoanalysis” (qtd in John J. Soldo 1983, 43). In his review of John Middleton Murry’s “Son and Woman”, which is a commentary on D. H. Lawrence’s novel Sons and Lovers, Eliot praises Middleton’s interpretation of mother love as the fulcrum around which all of Lawrence’s works swirl. Eliot states: “What Mr. Murry shows, and demonstrates with a terrible pertinacity throughout Lawrence’s work, is the emotional dislocation of a “mother-complex” (1930, 770). Eliot’s love for his mother might also be explained in terms of the so-called mother’s complex. To prevent readers’ interpretation of his works in the light of Lawrence’s mother complex, Eliot denies that this psychological problem is in vogue during the modern times. He writes: “Now, the ‘mother-complex’ of Lawrence does not seem to me in itself a sign of the times” (1930, 770).

Eliot’s puritan mother was a looming presence in his early life. She exerted an overwhelming influence on her child, and she assumed a full responsibility towards him. Mother love remained deeply ingrained in the layers of his memory as he grew old. According to Ackroyd, the “burden of maternal longing can last a lifetime, even in his sixties, at the time of his greatest public triumph, he confided to a
friend that he wished his mother had been there to share that success” (20). Charlotte’s love for the young Eliot was a kind of possession. She controlled his life completely, assuming the role of a dutiful mother. She wanted him to achieve the academic dreams and ambitions she craved for and failed to achieve herself, owing to the Victorian prescriptions of femininity. She used to care about his health and education. The schedule she asked him to follow was a rigid one. She even used to recommend the sort of books he should read. Before she died, she wrote a biography of her father William Greenleaf Eliot. She wrote in the dedication: “To my children, lest they forget” (1904, v). Charlotte’s puritanism had a great impact on Eliot’s relation with women. She taught her children self-denial and how to extirpate evil from themselves. Though she loved all her children, she was very much attached to Eliot, and she used to treat him as an adult. Eliot, in turn, had an absolute dependence on her.

One might assume that Charlotte’s overpossessive love for her son is responsible for his repulsive view of the feminine. Her crippling influence upon him prevents him from forming amatory connections in adulthood. According to Carole Seymour Jones (2001, 35), it “was his dominating mother who crippled him in his later relationships with women.” Eliot’s vehement hatred of women because of mother love attests that he is still in the Oedipus complex stage. Charlotte’s power over her son stops his ability to love other women. Her protective possessiveness sometimes arrested him. So, his travel to Europe is probably to get rid of her dominance and shake free from her stronghold. In an essay, Eliot admits that to develop as an artist, one has to abandon his family and follow art alone. He feels that he cannot be fully himself unless he separates from the bounds of his mother. In “A Romantic Aristocrat”, he states: “The Arts insist that a man shall dispose of all that he has, even of his tree, and follow art alone. For they require that a man be not a member of a family or of a caste or of a party or of a coterie, but simply and solely himself” (Eliot 1976, 32). Eliot, here, is expressing his fervid desire to lead a life of his own, far from Charlotte Eliot. However, he hides his secret wish by asserting that for any artist to develop his individual talent, he must dissociate himself from others in order to be devoted to art. Charlotte Eliot was always dissatisfied with Eliot’s sojourn in Europe. Her love for him was a very selfish one, because she wanted to keep him besides her and for her own sake. In this respect, Seymour Jones states: “Certainly Eliot’s feeling for his mother was deeply ambivalent, love mixed with fear which was replicated in the alarm, physical revulsion and violent misogyny which women were to engender in him” (35-6).

The dominance of his mother makes him view any woman as powerful and even devouring. In his poems, men suffer from aboulie or ennui, which is similar to Baudelaire’s characters. Seymour-Jones attributes Baudelaire’s ennui to his relationship with his mother, who used to dominate him very much as Charlotte Eliot dominated her child Thomas Stearns Eliot. In her words, Baudelaire’s sense of paralysed inaction may have its roots in the love/hate relationship Baudelaire had with his mother. Although close to her after the death of his father when he was six, he bitterly resented her domination over him and expressed great hostility to women in his diaries; he compared the act of love to the ‘torture of a surgical operation’” (Seymour-Jones 48).
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So, mother complex results in misogyny and abhorrence of the physical body.

In addition to his mother, Eliot lived with four sisters, who shrouded him with maternal love and kindness. However, the dominance of females in the house developed in Eliot a feeling of fear and apprehension from the power of the feminine. Sherman maintains that as “an adult he had a phobia of cows, a graphic symbol of his fundamental feeling of intimidation by maternal figures” (271). Besides his mother and sisters, Eliot was very much attached to an Irish nursemaid named Anne. The latter, who was Anglo-Catholic in religion, left indelible traces on his personal life. She did not just pave the way for his conversion to Anglo-Catholicism in 1927, but she was also consoling for the young Eliot, who was constrained by his dominating mother and his father’s Puritan codes of behavior. The memory of Anne and her influence on his personality was always in his blood. John J. Soldo quotes Eliot’s letter to Marquis W. Childs in which Eliot admits her profound influence on him. In the letter, Eliot states that “the earliest personal influence I remember, besides that of my parents, was an Irish nursemaid named Anne Dunne, to whom I was greatly attached” (Soldo 4). Anne provided Eliot with love and she gave him a sense of freedom from the pressure of his mother. Being an Anglo-Catholic, she also provided Eliot with a sense of relief from the rigid puritanism of his father.

Indeed, Eliot’s mother, his sisters and his nurse exerted an enormous, and sometimes unpleasant, influence upon him. This partly accounted for his denigration of heterosexual relations through portraying the female not just as devouring, but at times, as an ideal mother/Virgin. In this regard, Seymour-Jones states that “Eliot escaped the ‘deeply wrong’ heterosexual form of love through the creation of woman as an ideal object” (48). So, in some of his poems, like “La Figlia Che Piange”, Eliot depicts the feminine as an ideal object of love or an ethereal lady, who resembles the Virgin Mary. Eliot’s fear and dislike of women, according to Ackroyd, seems to be paradoxical. He contends that Eliot’s disgust of women owe to his very intimate relation with his sisters and mother, the reason why he finds it difficult to accept their erotic side. In his words, “It has often been noted how paradoxical that reaction is in a young man who from his first years had been surrounded by the affection of mother, sisters, and nurse. But the fact that he had close relations with women who supported or nurtured him makes it all the more likely that he found it difficult to accept their sexual nature also” (Ackroyd 44-5). In his childhood, Eliot was showered by the passion and affection of his mother, his sisters, and his nurse. He perceives the nature of these women as pure and angelic. Thus, he remains an extremely shy person. The tenderness and consideredness of the women, in his childhood house, made him view the feminine as a Virgin. Hence, he grew to view sex as vitiating and tarnishing. This attitude was reinforced by the Unitarianism of his family, which imbued him with the view of sex as sinful. In his discussion of St. Theresa, Eliot suggests that mother love might prompt the person to pursue a spiritual life as a substitution for this mother love. Eliot (1993, 163) states that Richard Crashaw “lost his mother, and even his step-mother, very early; it is possible that unsatisfied filial cravings are partly responsible for his adoration of St. Theresa. (Incidentally, it is possible that St. Theresa herself suffered from somewhat the same trouble; we remark that in her vision of paradise, the first persons she identified were her father and mother.” The loss of the mother as an object of love might
push the person to turn to Madonna as a substitute mother. This might explain Eliot’s revulsion at sexuality and his repudiation of the feminine. He sometimes views the woman as a mother or as a Virgin.

The first part of “Portrait” opens with an epigraph, which alludes to John Webster’s *The White Devil*, a play which depicts women as victims of a patriarchal society. Adultery and murder are also among the play’s major themes. The words of the epigraph, “I have caught an everlasting cold” (Eliot 1996, 317), are uttered by Flamineo while he is dying. John Webster is one of the most famous misogynists in Jacobean drama. In his plays, he represents the female’s body as dangerous and threatening. In his comment on the epigraph and its relevance to the thematic concern of the poem, Christ Buttram Trombold states that in the context of Eliot’s poem, the line, from Webster’s *The White Devil* “seems to underscore ironically the emotional coldness of the speaker or to introduce the impending presence of death for those involved in empty, polite social ritual” (1997, 94). The epigraph, which is pessimistic, is in sharp contrast with the title of the poem, which evokes a Mona Lisa-like portrait.

In the opening lines of the poem, which invoke a funeral setting, a lady arranges for a meeting with a young man. They meet in a darkened room with “four wax candles” and “Four rings of light upon the ceiling overhead” (327). The lady, in the room, seems jovial and affectionate, trying to bully him into reciprocating her romantic urges. She tries to make her lover stunned by her profuse gentility. Thus, she uses romantic melodies to mesmerise him. The candles, in the room, suggest that she wants to burn lamps to make him see her and to brighten the conversation. The room where the lady invites the man was “prepared for all the things to be said” (327), which suggests that her love is not genuine and spontaneous like that of Romeo and Juliet. Her vows of love to him seem to be lies and her claims are pseudo-amorous and outmoded clichés. Though the description of the setting seems redolent of romantic love stories, the young man finds the atmosphere and the candlelight setting reminiscent of Juliet’s tomb. Like his early poems, in “Portrait”, the union of lovers is described by alluding to tragic love stories. The lady is like a witch with a babe face. She also resembles Keats’s “the beautiful lady without pity.” She lulls the young man, pretending to be passionate only to gain his confidence and trust. The lady plays the role of Romeo’s beloved, Juliet, in her sincere and whole hearted love. However, the young man rejects the Juliet-like beloved, Juliet, in her sincere and whole hearted love. However, the young man rejects the
must have read the young man’s interiorized identity. To activate his passions and lure him towards her, the lady profusely praises the man’s rarest attributes; she says: “how rare and strange it is, to find/In a life composed so much, so much of ways and ends […] To find a friend who has those qualities/So rare and strange and so unvalued too/Who has, and gives/Those qualities upon which friendship lives” (327). The word friendship, here, has sexual connotations. The quality of reciprocity, which makes true friendship, is absent in the young man. In the poem, there is no actual direct conversation between the man and the lady. Their speeches are disconnected and their utterances do not relate.

The cliché-ridden language of the lady, which is mingled with Chopin’s preludes, induces boredom and ignites neurosis in the man’s head. He says: “Inside my brain a droll tom-tom begins/Hammering a prelude of its own/Capricious monotone” (328). The man is absorbed in his own thoughts. He is psychologically confined, living in a world of his own. The young man’s intellectual privacy excludes the woman from his life. In the whole poem, the woman is the only one who speaks; the reader overhears the man’s thoughts, which indicates his deepness and the woman’s superficiality. The flood of the lady’s emotions fails to whip his passions, and it makes him wild with anger. The young man resorts to “tobacco trance” to escape the lady’s lures and to remain in a state of emotional dormancy. According to Laurie J. MacDiarmid (2005, 28), “The ‘tobacco trance’ that Eliot’s narrator slips into to escape the Lady’s sexual impositions serves as an inept escape from her conversational advances”. Very much like Prufrock, in “The Love Song”, the young man, in “Portrait”, keeps delaying and postponing a romantic encounter with the lady whose heartfelt affection fails to cure him of his feeling of irremediable isolation. The man tries to avoid the seduction of the lady and to defer the fulfillment of his fantasies; he says: “Let us take the air, in a tobacco trance,/Admire the monuments/Discuss the late events/Correct our watches by the public clocks/Then sit half an hour and drink our bocks/And pay our reckoning and go home again” (328). The man decides to banish the lady from his mind, and he refuses to succumb to her dreams and longings. Indeed, the man is afflicted with aboulie, a paralysis of will to act. To hide his paralysis of will and desire, the person plagued with aboulie usually resorts to futile actions. In discussing Hamlet’s reluctance to act, Ernest Jones states that he “eagerly seizes every excuse for occupying himself with any question rather than the perform-ance of his duty, just as on a lesser plane a schoolboy faced with a distasteful task whittles away his time in arranging his books, sharpening his pencils, and fidgetting with any little occupation that will serve as a pretext for putting off the task” (1910, 87). In “Portrait”, the male protagonist avoids action; he, instead, goes to “Admire the mountains/Discuss the late events/Correct our watches by the public clocks/Then sit for half an hour and drink our bocks” (328). The man suffers from an emotional desiccation, which makes him trapped in a state of hibernation. This emotional restraint makes it impossible for him to have any personal relationship with the lady.

In fact, the first part of the poem ends with no promise or hope of any romantic relationship between the young man and the lady, because the man resists the lady and her romantic world. The parentheses in the poem may suggest their separation. This alienation is also reinforced by the fact that the scene takes place in a closed dark room. This depiction of women inside closed rooms attests to the poet’s misogyny. Very much like in the patriarchal Victorian age, Eliot believes that women must be
incarcerated in houses. An example of this representation of the feminine is “The Waste Land” whose epigraph tells the story of the Sybil of Cumae, who is imprisoned in a cage and desperately waits for death. The second section of this poem, “A Game of Chess”, also takes place exclusively in a room. The original title of this section is “In a Cage”. Interestingly, in a letter to John Middleton Murry, dated Sunday 1926, Vivien Eliot writes:

I am in pain, in pain. I have been in gilded cages 11 years. One cage after another. I have never grown up. I don’t know anything. Can’t you tell Tom it is nicer to see birds free than in cages? People have always said to me, but why don’t you go away & do what you like? John, I never dared. First, it meant losing Tom. (Losing my hold on Tom). Now, it means hurting Tom, & losing myself, doesn’t it? (2012, 223).

In the second part of the poem, the man and the lady meet again after a certain lapse of time. This second meeting occurs in spring, the season of love and romance. This part opens with an epigraph, which is taken from Christopher Marlow’s The Jew of Malta. The epigraph is read as follows: “Though hast committed-/Fornication-but that was in another country/And besides, the wench is dead”(328). The epigraph expresses the young man’s view of the woman as a prostitute with ravishing desire. In the second encounter, the lady’s passion shows no sign of abating. She uses the smell of the lilacs, which are symbolic of youth and beauty, to gain the man’s interest. As the woman speaks, the man observes her twisting of the lilacs between her hands. Her repressed anger and aggression against the man unconsciously comes to the surface in the act of twisting the lilacs. This act suggests that the lady threatens to twist his very masculinity and virility. The lilacs, which she holds between her hands, are reminiscent of Baudelaire’s the flowers of evil. The woman’s twisting of the lilacs suggests that love is interwined with destruction. The hands are the only corporeal parts of the lady, which are mentioned in the whole poem. Eliot always depicts the body as fragmented and dismembered in his poems, plays, and essays. In a letter to Conrad Aiken, dated 30 September, 1914, he writes: “Anyway it’s interesting to cut yourself to pieces once in a while, and wait to see if the fragments will sprout” (2009, 64). The letter attests to Eliot’s intense revulsion of the body. Despite her herculean efforts, the lilacs cannot captivate her lover, who remains reluctant.

The man’s avoidance of any representation of the lady’s physical portrait is an inkling of his misogyny. The only physical parts of her body which are described, as mentioned above are her destructive hands. Klaus Herding states that “the interpretation of the hand as a symbol of sexuality-or the plenty of life in general-is common knowledge to connoisseurs of Renaissance art (2000, 351). Living under a ban of emotional inhibition, the young man erases the female’s body in the poem. The title of the poem is misleading because there is no exalting female portrait in the whole poem. Judith Buttler criticizes the view of women as shapeless and formless creatures. This view goes back to Plato. According to her, “Plato clearly wants to disallow the possibility of a resemblance between the masculine
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and the feminine, and he does this through introducing a feminized receptacle that is prohibited from resembling any form” (1993, 43). Butler adds that

Plato’s phantasmatic economy virtually deprives the feminine of a morphē, a shape, for as the receptacle, the feminine is a permanent and, hence, non-living, shapeless non-thing which cannot be named.

And as nurse, mother, womb, the feminine is synecdochally collapsed into a set of figured functions. In this sense, Plato’s discourse on materiality […] is one which does not permit the notion of the female body as a human form(53).

The portrait, by definition, is an object though it represents a human being. But Eliot’s lady is not just objectified like a figure frozen in a portrait; she is also erased in the poem because she is never described. In the whole poem, she remains unreal, frozen, and motionless. There is no physical description of her portrait, because physicality for the young man is so repellent.

The lady tries to remind the young man of the importance of life and to awaken him to the reality of the passing youth and the impending death. She says: “Ah, my friend, you do not know/What life is, you hold it in your hands” (328). The line is reminiscent of Matthew Arnold’s speaker, who aspires to “inquire/Into the mystery of this heart which beats/So wild in us” (70). The young man remains indifferent to the passage of time and to his fleeting youth. He does not realize the importance of the treasure he holds between his hands, which is youth. The woman tries to induce the man to perform a theatrical role of a lover. She says: “Youth is cruel, and has no remorse/And smiles at situations which it cannot see” (328). The lady’s description of the youth as “cruel, and has no remorse” (328) implies the destructive fire of passion and erotic desire. Her twisting of the flowers is probably to emphasize the withering of the flowers of youth. The man, unable to grasp or indifferent to what she says, “smile[s], of course/ And goe[s] on drinking tea” (328). His act of smiling, which recurs in the poem, is as puzzling and enigmatic as the smile Leonardo Da Vinci enchanted on the lips of Mona Lisa.

April sunsets stir up the lady’s buried life in Paris. The artery of memory takes the lady back to her sojourn in Paris where she committed a sinful act. Though the lady confesses the existence of a secret, she does not want to avow it. The “buried life” is an allusion to Matthew Arnold’s poem “The Buried Life”. The latter is about the impossibility of forging intimate relations and expressing intense love; that is, “to unlock the heart, and let it speak” (69). In “Portrait”, also, the expression of emotions is very difficult. They always remain suppressed and repressed. Gay Raine states that “one major theme”, in Eliot’s poems, “is the failure to live fully. Eliot inherited the theme of the ‘buried life’, from his awkward critical and poetic father figure, Matthew Arnold (2006, xix-xx). The theme of death in life, in the poem, is suggested not just by alluding to Matthew Arnold’s “The Buried Life”, but also by alluding to Romeo and Juliet, the tragic play where Juliet is buried alive. The theme of the buried life is another poetic version of Eliot’s critical theory, which urges the evasion of self-expression and the annihilation of personality. The ostensible secrets of the lady’s life and the slumbering memory, which is awakened by April, are unknown, but they seem to be erotic. According to Judith Butler (2004, 167), “to say, ‘yes, I
say I did it,’ is to claim the act, but it is also to commit another deed in the very claiming, the act of publishing one’s deed, a new criminal venture that redoubles and takes the place of the old.” Though she does not want to confide her concealed feelings and hidden secrets, the lady’s very act of avowing the existence of a buried life endows her with courage and mastery. The woman seems to be bold and threatening. She possesses a power that the young man seems to lack. Indeed, at the heart of the poem is a hidden struggle between them for domination and control. In her discussion of Sophocles’ play Antigone, Butler focuses on Antigone’s act of killing her brother, her burial of him, then her confession of the deed. She states:

Antigone comes, then, to act in ways that are called manly not only because she acts in defiance of the law, but she also assumes the voice of the law in committing the act against the law. She not only does the deed, refusing to obey the edict, but she also does it again by refusing to deny that she has done it, thus appropriating the rhetoric of agency from Creon himself(2004, 168).

Thus, the very act of confessing her “buried life” is in itself another sin, if we accept Butler’s view that speech acts are deeds.

Paris, in the spring, brings to mind Eliot’s sojourn in Paris between 1910 and 1911. Interestingly, Eliot wrote “Portrait of a Lady” in 1910. During his Parisian year, he struck up a friendship with a Frenchman called Jean Verdenal. Many critics raise speculations in regard to the kind of this relationship. Seymour-Jones, for instance, states that

[In his twenties […] Eliot’s struggle with contradictory urges to confess and yet to repress his homosexual feelings; it was a kind of torture, but one which explains to some extent the obscurity of poetry in which so many secrets demanded concealment. Among the secrets was his grief for Jean Verdenal, to which he had referred earlier in ‘Portrait of a Lady’(1915). In that poem it is once again, the month Tom associated with his friend’s death(211).

In the year Eliot spent in Paris, the latter was still under the reign of patriarchy. In this regard, Nancy Duvall Hargrove writes: “Paris in 1910-1911 was very much a patriarchal society in which men held power and privilege in every sphere, both public and private. Men held all public offices, dominated the business world, and were the authority figures in the home, making most, if not all, decisions” (2006, 76). Gender stereotypes in Paris, at that time, may have had an influence on Eliot’s portrayal of the lady in the poem. In fact, it is in tune with his misogynistic orientations.

Out of despair and in an insistent tone, the lady says that she is sure the young man understands her immense love for him. However, her words fall like daggers in his ears. He finds her voice like “the insistent out-of-tune/Of a cracked violin on an August afternoon”(329). Trying to provoke verbal declarations of love from the young man, the lady reminds him of his virility and masculine vigor. To impel his desire for action, she praises his invulnerability; she says that he is stronger than Achilles in the
Greek myth: “You are invulnerable, you have no Aschilles’ heel. You will go on, and when you have prevailed/You will think: at this point many a one has failed”(329). According to the myth, Achilles was the strongest hero in the Trojan war. When he was born, Achilles’s mother Thetis dipped him in the River Styx in order to ensure his eternity and permanence in life. But Thetis held him by one heel; hence, it remains vulnerable and liable to the destructive power of death. During the Trojan war, Achilles died when an arrow penetrated his heel, which was untouched by the water of the river Styx. The lady assumes that the youth will triumph only if he asserts his masculine vigor by striking up a relationship with her.

Refusing to give up, the woman reminds him of her impending death, which might be a shock to him. But her warning to the speaker of her death is, probably, to gain his sympathy and to arouse his passion. To strengthen his confidence in her, the lady assures the man that what she will give him is “only the friendship and the sympathy/Of one about to reach her journey’s end”(329). The lady’s romantic yearnings are mingled with lamenting her lost youth. The line suggests that the lady is afraid of death before fulfilling her desire. She is obsessed with time because old age makes her beauty and charm vanish, and this, in turn, diminishes her power of seduction. In fact, Eliot always depicts his women as old and vulnerable. In her waiting for death, the lady looks like the ageing Sybil and Tiresias in “The Waste Land”. Time, like women, was one of the enemies of perfection for Eliot. Though the man shows a reckless disregard for losing the lady, her words seem to have touched his sensibility, and he feels impolite not to reciprocate her gentle feelings verbatim. In response, he says: “You will see me again in the park/Reading the comics and the sporting page”(329). His escape from the room to the garden indicates his escape from the feminine sphere to the masculine one.

The man reads about murder and default, which are at odds with the romantic conversation the lady aspires to establish. The young man particularly remarks that “An English countess goes upon the stage (329). The countess who goes upon the stage does not just refer to the lady’s pretensions but also to her transgression of social norms. The Greek who was killed at a Polish dance relates to the young man who is with the lady in a room where a Polish composer’s preludes are sung. Because the lady’s pallid appetite is threatening to his masculinity, the man refuses to succumb to her seductions and to be involved in any kind of relationship with her. He feels that her gentility hides a cruel purpose. He says: “I keep my countenance-/I remain self-possessed”(329), which implies that marriage might rid him of his freedom. For him, to love means to give oneself completely to an Other. The man struggles vigorously to sustain the integrity of his self and to keep his status as an authentic man. According to Anthony Cuda (2010, 35), “[q]uestions of self-control-and the doubts and fears associated with relinquishing it-assumes a singular urgency in Eliot’s early poems. And it is clear that this urgency intensified during his philosophical studies at Harvard a few years later.” Though she tries with all her might to control the young man, her endeavors are doomed to failure. Her beauty does not captivate him and her entreaties for love, which are ‘full of sound and fury’, signify nothing to him. The man asserts his manhood and independence from her. He feels that any relation with the lady is laden with insecurity. To assert his manhood, he strives to resist the lady’s seductive power and her glamorous femininity. But his approximation of the lady is important for defining his gender identity. In this context, Sedgwick posits that “to identify as must always include
multiple processes of identification with. It also involves identification as against; but even did it not, the relations implicit in identifying with are, as psychoanalysis suggests, in themselves quite sufficiently fraught with intensities of incorporation, diminishment, inflation, threat, loss, separation, and disavowal” (2008, 61). Thus, identity formation necessitates penetration into a space, which exclusively belongs to the Other. Gail Mac Donald quotes Eliot, who recollects a scene from his childhood. He says: “I was always on the other side of the wall. On one occasion [...] when I ventured into the schoolyard a little too early when there were still [girls] on the premises and I saw them staring at me through a window, I took flight at once”(qtd in MacDonald 2004, 176). Eliot was always separated from girls in his childhood. He did not even play with them in the schoolyard. Whenever he met them accidentally, he used to flee out of shyness. Later, as he grew older, Eliot remains encumbered by a feeling of fear from women. In “Portrait”, the male speaker’s entrance into the woman’s room represents this slip into the feminine space. The speaker, then, decides to depart abroad and leave the feminine forever. The room mirrors the interiority of the lady. One might say that the existence of the lady is so important for the speaker to define himself and assert his manhood. Despite her love and sympathy, she remains scaring for the man, who is afraid that she might penetrate the boundaries of his one-ness.

The flowers and the music cannot distract the male speaker from his own self-absorption. He considers the woman’s gestures as mere extravagant romantic clichés. Hence, he remains irresponsible to her demands. He diverts his attention to the street music as a luring reveler for him. The man was attracted to “a street piano, mechanical and tired” which “Reiterates some worn-out common song”(329). So, the man resists captivation by the kind of music the lady prepares for him. He seems to be more inclined to the street piano than to Chopin’s preludes. Despite the music and the smell of the lilacs, which threaten his masculinity, the young man sustains his self-possession. The lady does not seem to have any magnetism for him. The smell of the hyacinths awakens the young man’s dormant memories. He says that “the smell of hyacinths across the garden-/Recalling things that other people have desired”(329).These things are romantic longings. Though he is moved by the smell for a while, he soon comes back to reality.

Contra to the man, who is silent, the lady is very talkative. She is like a witch, who seduces and enthralls through language. She whispers extravagant and irresistible words in the man’s ears. Her flood of emotions aims at whipping the man’s passions. It swallows his voice and renders his thoughts unverbalized. His icy silence, which marks Eliot’s early poems, emphasizes his aloofness and emotional detachment. The lady uses seductive and lethal rhetoric to stir up the man’s emotions and penetrate the kernel of his heart. Her passionate words are the tools she uses to hypnotise him and stimulate him to put an end to his celibacy. However, her power of rhetoric blocks out the young man’s voice and drives him into withdrawal. He resists captivation by her automatic and theatrical speech. In her discussion of the power of language and its productivity, Butler argues that it is a bodily deed. She postulates that saying is another bodily deed. And the body that speaks its deed is the same body that did its deed, which means that there is, in the saying, a presentation of that body, a bodying forth of the guilt, perhaps, in the saying itself. The speaker may be relaying a set of events in the past, but the speaker is
By avowing her fornication in Paris, the lady is beseeching the man to accept her sordid invitation. Butler states that “[s]poken words are, strangely, bodily offerings tentative or forceful, seductive or withholding, or both at once” (2004, 172). However, the lady’s romantic rhetoric fails to ring in his ears and her beauty does not lure his eyes. Though Butler ascribes to language a devouring power, the lady remains outside the man’s inner life despite her bombastic rhetoric. Inspite of being loaded with romantic sentiments, the poem is devoid of true romantic love.

Using Eliot’s biography, one might explain the man’s indifference to the lady by his spiritual vision, which does not match with a life of eroticism. The young man feels disgusted of a life of communion. He rather opts for a life of solitariness, preferring to shut women and all amusements from his life. This dispensing of all enjoyments of life in search for the Absolute is rooted in Eliot’s early mystical sensibility. In a letter to Geoffrey Faber, dated 18 September 1927, Eliot writes:

There is another good thing of life too, which I have only had in flashes. It is the sudden realization of being separated from all enjoyment, from all things of this earth, even from Hope; a sudden separation and isolation from everything; and at that moment of illumination, a recognition of the fact that one can do without all these things, a joyful recognition of what John of the Cross means when he says that the soul cannot be possessed of the divine union until it has divested itself of the craving for all created beings (2012, 712-13).

The man’s silence, in the poem, indicates a kind of mystical/spiritual vision. His emotional detachment is probably an attempt to atone for his deep-seated desire, which he considers as sinful. Lyndall Gordon remarks that 1910 is a critical year for Eliot. At that time, women, time, and the absolute started to weigh heavily on his mind. She states that “there was in the spring of 1910 some critical intersection of Eliot’s private problems—is social isolation, his uneasiness in Boston, his resentment against women, his fear of time and decay, the encounter with the French poets and Arthur Symons, and the secret wish to know the absolute” (1977, 35).

In the third part, the man meets the lady for the third time in October. Though nearly a year crept by since the first encounter between the lady and the young man, there is no advancement in their relationship. The times of the protagonists’ meeting do not suggest any romanticism. In the three sections of the poem, they meet in the afternoon. As he was approaching the room of the lady, he feels “ill at ease.” The young man tries to transcend his state of emotional paralysis; he” mount[s] the stairs and turns the handle of the door”(330), but this makes him feel degraded and imbues him with a sense of humiliation. It makes him feel “as if [he] had mounted on [his] hands and knees”(330). The image suggests a lack of courage and masculine vigor. He seems frail like a new born babe. The man fails to love the woman, because he has a callous and unfeeling heart. Despite feigning callous indifference to the
lady, the man is very afraid of her. He is afraid romantic love might imperil his manhood. According to Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick (1985, 36), “[t]o be feminized or suffer gender confusion within a framework that includes a woman is, however, dire, and […] any involvement with an actual woman threatens to be unmanly. Lust itself […] is a machine for depriving males of self-identity.” So, the man is struggling to exert control over the woman and to preserve the ideal of masculine sufficiency. He does not respond to her need for love, because sexuality is dangerous; it represents a “potential dissolution of the self” (Rita Felski 1995, 177).

At the end of the poem, the lady’s ardour towards the young man starts to cool as she fails to ignite his physical spark. To escape from her lure and desert her forever, the young man decides to leave the country, turning a polished face to the lady. Indeed, this is not surprising in Eliot’s early poems in which, as Ackroyd remarks, there is “a consistent preoccupation with retreat, with withdrawal into seclusion” (38). The man’s journeying abroad is an utter refusal of her sexual invitations. He does not just divest himself of any commitment, but he also torments his beloved and makes her suffer the woes of love by not submitting to her demands. Like Prufrock, who escapes to the sea and St. Narcissus, who escapes to the desert, the male speaker, in this poem, departs to another country. At the end, the lady’s heart is utterly broken as she realizes that her desire for the man is a mere wishful thinking, and that her overriding romantic cravings can never be fulfilled. The lady, knowing about the man’s departure to another country, asks when he shall return. But it seems that the young man’s motive for travel is to seek knowledge; that is, he is abandoning the emotional life in preference of an intellectual one. Afraid of an empty life left after separation from her lover, the woman wishes to keep the ties of her love by asking him to send her love letters when he journeys to another country. She wants to be present with him, in his travels and residences, albeit via letters only. Despite her beggings of correspondence, the young man’s sense of self-possession strengthens. In fact, abandoning the woman and deserting her is a tradition in patriarchal societies. In this respect, the critic Lois C. Cuddy (2000, 176) states:

‘Portrait of a Lady’ is supposed to be written about […] every woman abandoned through time by a man seeking to fulfill his own destiny.

The tradition that includes Ulysses and Aeneas offered Eliot numerous examples that contextualize the universal condition of a man required to leave both the home that he resents and needs for security and also the woman weeping for the loss imposed on her by that man’s departure. Despite the pain suffered by the hero, it is a world created by men for the advantage of men.

Again, the young man’s smile, as in the first part of the poem, is enigmatic. His constant smiling, as the lady talks, might be a mere act which indicates politeness. The lady poses an overwhelming question; “why we have not developed into friends” (330). The young man’s self-possession is shaken for a while, but this makes him feel in the dark, because any possibility to relate to the lady seems gloomy. The lady fails to find the reason why they fail to relate so closely as all their friends expect. The reason is, obviously, the man’s repulsion for women.
The male protagonist, at the end, imagines himself undergoing physical metamorphosis. He says that he will adopt and borrow faces in an attempt to express his inner self: “And... I must borrow every changing shape/For my expression” (330). The line implies his sense of an unstable self. According to Butler (1993, 190), the “subject is [...] never coherent and never self-identical precisely because it is founded and, indeed, continually refounded, through a set of defining foreclosures and repressions that constitute the discontinuity and incompleteness of the subject.” The man presents his lady as a possessor of animalistic desire. Hence, he thinks of romanticism as a degradation into savagery and barbarism; “dance, dance./Like a dancing bear./Cry like a parrot, Chatter like an ape” (330). Romantic relations engender bestiality, because the male speaker imagines himself doing actions, usually associated with women and animals. The ape and parrot suggest imitation, which invokes Butler’s view that gender and desire are not innate and that they are repetitions of norms. The parrot suggests automatic behavior which does not express the inner thoughts and feelings. In Arnold’s “The Buried Life”, to which Eliot alludes, the speaker says: “And long we try in vain to speak and act./Our hidden self, and what we say and do./Is eloquent, is well-but ’t is not true” (71). In Eliot’s poem, also, genuine feelings do not exist, and this is emphasized by the profuse allusions to Arnold’s “The Buried Life”. The male speaker, who does not possess sincere feelings, remains silent, while the lady is regurgitating romantic clichés. She is like the street piano, “mechanical and tired,/ Reiterates some worn-out common song/With the smell of hyacinths across the garden/Recalling things that other people have desired” (329). But though the young man recalls things that others have desired, he fails to imitate their desires. He is too weak to unlock his heart and get involved in a life of love and romance. He wants to break from the traditional heterosexual relations.

Though the lady is repulsive for him, he is afraid to be left alone in case the lady dies. He says: “Well and what if she should die some afternoon./Afternoon grey and smoky, evening yellow and roses;/should die, and leave me sitting pen in hand” (331). Despite his emotional detachment, the man feels deeply in need of an object of desire, which is evident in his reflection that the lady might die and leave him “[d]oubtful for quite a while/ Not knowing what to feel, nor if I understand” (331). The phrase “pen in hand” evinces that the man leads a kind of life, which is purely intellectual and thus masculine. His pondering of the possibility of the lady’s death, which brings to mind the allusion to Juliet’s tomb in the poem’s first part and the dead wench in the poem’s second epigraph, might indicate the pangs of guilt which he cannot hide. It seems to be out of his feeling of pity, sympathy, and kindness. The lady is an object of ambivalence for the speaker. Like Prufrock, he seems to be a schizophrenic, because his object is both loved and hated. This view is echoed, approximately, by Paul Murphy, who posits that desire, in the poem, “cannot be activated”. It “remains embryonic and undeveloped” (2003, 82). The man is afraid of being separated from the lady, but the possibility of their approximation is also terrifying. Eliot’s male speakers are very obsessed with Thanatos rather than Eros. The speaker’s fear of the woman’s sudden death is, possibly, a wish for her demise which signifies the end of her desire.

The atmosphere of the first and the third part dolorously fuses with the psychology of the lady and the young man. The fact that the first part takes place in September and the third part in October suggests
a circular movement marked by stagnation and the absence of any advancement in the relationship between the lady and the young man. The woman has withered away from the young man’s mind and memory.

Despite his repulsion for the lady, there is also a feeling of attraction towards her. In the poem, there is a fantasy of being loved by the mother. Regarding the lady’s old age, one is inclined to suppose that she is like a nursing mother, serving tea to her child. The child’s deep love for his mother might have an everlasting influence on his life. The young man projects aspects of the personality of his mother onto the lady. In addition to her bestowal of love, the lady is too considerate towards him, as a mother nursing her babe. So, the lady, who serves tea, represents one positive aspect of the mother, which is feeding. Drinking tea might be a substitute for maternal nourishment, which is unavailable. One might also compare the young man and the lady to Christ and Madonna, who should be worshipped in the light of votive candles. In her narration of the story of Fabian-Fruges, the critic Melanie Klein (1984, 158) states: “The wish to see the baker-woman in the light of the candles would thus express the desire to see her pregnant with all the children he would give her. Here we find the ‘sinful’ incestuous desire for the mother as well as the tendency to repair by giving her all the babies he had destroyed.” The young man seems to be tormented by an unbearable nostalgia for a communion with his mother. The room, which the man visits three times represents a maternal shelter that he needs to frequent in order to be sealed in her passion. The poem might be read as a hibernating memory of the male’s early childhood love relation with his mother, which results in an emotional inertia. In the first part, there is, like in “The Love Song”, a fluctuation in using the pronouns “I” and “we”, which evinces the man’s fragmented self. Klein states that in “adult patients, states of depersonalization and of schizophrenic dissociation seem to be a regression to these infantile states of disintegration”(10).

The infant sees the mother as an ideal object, but he also finds a bad aspect in her, which is whoring. David D. Gilmore (2001, 156) posits that “matriphobic form of misogyny” is “founded on the proposition that the boy’s feelings toward mother are fiercely ambivalent and that she is always perceived in starkly dualistic terms: as both engulfing and nurturing, seductive and castrating, and consequently as good and bad.” The second part of the poem opens with an epigraph, from The Jew of Malta: “Thou hast committed-/Fornication—but that was in another country/And besides, the wench is dead”(328). The man identifies the lady in the room with the one in the epigraph. Klein maintains that, in the infant, there are “infantile impulses to murder the mother, whose sexual relation with the father is not only felt to be a betrayal of the infant's love for her, but is altogether felt to be bad and unworthy. This feeling underlies the unconscious equation between the mother and a prostitute which is characteristic of adolescence”(Klein 160). In the poem, there are a lot of hints at prostitution. In addition to the epigraph, the lady’s “buried life” in Paris suggests immoral relationships that she may have had. It reveals the woman’s vicious nature. Since she has a lot of friends who frequent her room for tea, it is possible to think that she is a prostitute working in a brothel. The view of mother as a bad object, a prostitute, emanates from the infant’s unsuccessful attempts to deal with Oedipus feelings. This results, according to Klein, in “division into two trends, described by Freud […] as ‘heavenly and profane’”(160).
epigraph, which refers to the act of fornication, might also be read as an unconscious fulfillment of an incestuous desire with his mother.

The tenderness and coquetry of the lady cannot touch the shell of his heart, because his mother’s ardent love precludes his romantic relation with anyone from the opposite sex. Hence, he denigrates human love. According to Ernest Jones,

The maternal influence may also manifest itself by imparting a strikingly tender feminine side to the later character. When the aroused feeling is intensely "repressed," and associated with shame, guilt, etc., the memory of it may be so completely submerged that it becomes impossible not only to revive it but even to experience any similar feeling, i. e., of attraction for the opposite sex. This may declare itself in pronounced misogyny, or even, when combined with other factors, in actual homosexuality.(97).

The lady’s sexual advances are horrifying for the young man, because of his childhood relation to his soothing and gratifying mother. Memories of infancy, which burst to life involuntarily, make the man’s emotional relationships dry and never fulfilled. In the poem, the smell, which is intricately linked with the female body, reminds the man of his childhood. Esther Bick observes that in the early stages, the infant does not feel the unity of the different parts of his personality. Hence, the skin helps him experience a ‘binding force’ among these parts. According to Esther Bick (2011, 134), the “internal function of containing the parts of the self is dependent initially on the introjection of an external object, experienced as capable of fulfilling this function.” What might help the infant keep the parts of his personality together is the “nipple in the mouth, together with the holding and talking and familiar smelling mother” (Bick 134). Any sensual object might hold the parts of the personality together like light, smell, and voice. The mother’s voice and her smell help console the infant and bring him bliss, because they help him experience a sense of wholeness. The fact that the smell and the voice of the lady do not appeal to the young man can be explained by the fact that the real mother is absent, and this lady cannot fill the emotional vacuum of her loss. The smell rather separates and distracts him from the lady. So, his needs are unfulfilled and his desires remain ungratified.

The woman, in “Portrait of a Lady”, thinks that she pulls the man to her like a babe by the music and the flowers’ smell. Hence, she assumes that the man understands how much she loves him. She says: “I am always sure that you understand/My feeling, always sure that you feel”(329). In the pre-verbal stage, the babe feels that he is completely understood and united with his mother through bodily communication, which includes the smell of the mother and her voice. In this stage, the unity between the child and the mother is via the body as the infant is unable to communicate. According to Klein, this “unity means being fully understood […] at best, such an understanding needs no words to express it, which demonstrates its derivation from the earliest closeness with the mother in the pre-verbal stage” (188). In the third part of the poem, the man, in a pensive mood, ponders the possibility of the woman’s death. In fact, he wants a severance from the lady to form his identity and get the freedom to go
on with his own life. This separatedness can be possible only by the young man’s journey abroad or by the lady’s death. In psychoanalysis, for the infant to start speaking, he must be severed from his mother. The man says: “Well! and what if she should die some afternoon […] should die, and leave me sitting pen in hand”(331). In fact, writing might replace speaking as a means of communication. The fact that the man is silent throughout the poem suggests that he is still in the pre-verbal stage.

As the lady speaks, she receives no response from the tongue tied man who just smiles. This smile is reminiscent of the smile of Mona Lisa in Leonard Da Vinci’s portrait. Strangely enough, critics have overlooked the possibility of some influence on Eliot by Leonardo Da Vinci. In his interpretation of the smile of Mona Lisa, Gustav Kobbé states that “the laughing were nothing else but the reproductions of Caterina, his mother, and we are beginning to have an inkling of the possibility that the mother possessed that mysterious smile which he lost, and which fascinated him so much when he found it again in the Florentine lady’ (1916, 70). The man might have recalled the smile of his mother when he was young. Hence, his smile is that of a child smiling at his enchanting mother. The smile also evinces that the young man is trapped in an Oedipal stage, and he is unable to express himself through language. He smiles, because, like the infant, he cannot verbalise his thoughts. In his attempt at interpreting the smile of Mona Lisa, Herding views the smile as the projection of the artist’s ambivalent feelings of desire and fear from women. He states: “Threat and desire-these are the antipodes that determine the artist’s relations to women, the (re) construction of his childhood in his paintings, and the famous smile. A manifestation of Leonardo’s trauma in his art can be found in the ambiguity of threat and desire that is best expressed in the smile’ (Herding 346). The young man, in Eliot’s poem, is torn between these two feelings of desire and fear, which are fused in his puzzling smile.

Critics of the poem have not noticed the homosexual desire, which is interrelated with misogyny and mother love. This theme is invoked by the hyacinths, which recall the homosexual love of Hyacinthus and Apollo in the Greek mythology. In her commentary on the significance of the flowers of hyacinth in the poem, the critic Marja Palmer (1996, 69) states that “the function of the myth of Hyacinth implied in the reference to the flower is to underline the painful absence of love. Suffering and death are involved in the yearning for love.” Hyacinths recall to mind the Greek myth of Hyacinthus, which tells the tragic end of love. According to the myth, Hyacinthus was an extremely beautiful boy who was very much loved by god Apollo. Once, Hyacinthus and Apollo were throwing a discus to each other. Zephyrus, the god of west wind, who also loved Hyacinthus, deflected the discus out of jealousy. Consequently, the discus swerved and killed Apollo after hitting him on the head. The memory of the hyacinths indicates that the man is mourning the loss of a beloved, who is now lost or dead. In “Mourning and Melancholia,” Sigmund Freud writes:

Profound mourning, the reaction to the loss of someone who is loved, contains the […] loss of interest in the outside world-in so far as it does not recall him-the same loss of capacity to adopt any new object of love (which would mean replacing him) and the same turning away from any activity that is not connected with thoughts of him. It is easy
to see that this inhibition and circumscription of the ego is the expression of an exclusive devotion to mourning which leaves nothing over for other purposes or other interests (3042).

The loss of a person whom the man loved intensely makes it impossible for him to love someone else, because this implies a betrayal of this loved person. The line of the hyacinths, which recalls “things that others have desired” (329), brings to mind Eliot’s male friend Jean Verdenal. Though there is no avowal by Eliot of the existence of any homosexual relationship with Verdenal, the strong bonds of affection between them cannot be denied. Homosexuality might also be read as a reaction to Eliot’s family’s sensual inhibitions and prohibitions. Basing her view on Eliot’s biography, Seymour-Jones states that for Eliot, “Bergsonian exhortation to taste life to the full enabled him to cast off Bostonian inhibition and, free from the watchful eye of his mother and his classmates, to allow himself to create an emotional bond with Jean Verdenal” (52). One might view mother love as a factor which consolidates homoeroticism. In discussing the relationship between child’s mother love and his possible homosexual desire in adult life, Sigmund Freud writes: “By repressing the love for his mother he conserves the same in his unconscious and henceforth remains faithful to her. When as a lover he seems to pursue boys, he really thus runs away from women who could cause him to become faithless to his mother.” (1916, 66). It is plausible that Eliot had Leonardo Da Vinci’s portrait of Mona Lisa, in mind, when he composed “Portrait”, especially that Leonardo also was inspired, in drawing Mona Lisa, by his infantile relation with his mother. Eliot viewed Leonardo’s Mona Lisa in the Louvre in his Parisian year (Hargrove 90). Interestingly, Eliot started writing “Portrait” in 1910. One might compare the male persona to Da Vinci, drawing a portrait of his Mona Lisa and, in the process, he is giving vent to his deep-seated feelings of repulsion towards women. Freud states: “We content ourselves by emphasizing the fact, concerning which hardly any doubt still exists, that the productions of the artist give outlet also to his sexual desire” (Leonardo 121). Because of mother love, Eliot’s male persona, in “Portrait”, appears in a state of torture between desire for the opposite sex and love for his mother. In other words, man in Eliot’s poems finds himself in a dilemma or conflict between fulfilling his sexual urges and remaining faithful to the mother. But this conflict always results in an intense repudiation of the feminine.

**Conclusion**

In “Portrait of a Lady”, there is a romantic scenario, but no amorous interchange. There are fantasies, but no true love. The young man and the lady lead a kind of disconnected co-existence. Their one-sided conversation loses its meaning, because the young man never speaks out his inner thoughts. The gashing romantic lady cannot penetrate and dwell in the man’s heart, because he lives under a ban of inhibition and insecurity, which originate in mother love. His amorous bond with the latter creates a deep and indelible friction in his relationships with women. The young man’s identity oscillates between son and lover. Hence, he approaches the lady with an ambivalent attitude of attraction and withdrawal. Mother complex precludes the man from reciprocating the feelings of the lady, who is seductive and
whose desire is overwhelming. In addition to his attitude of repulsion and indifference, the young man is
tormented by a feeling of insecurity, because he views the lady as terrifying and devouring. Thus, he
remains emotionally detached and unresponsive to her needs and demands.
References


