

Urban Despair and Dark Tone in T. S. Eliot's Poetry

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Abstract:

Urban life emerges as a recurring theme in T. S. Eliot's poetry, reflecting the everyday despair, despondency, and sordidness experienced by its dwellers in the major metropolises around the world. The daily experiences of people in cities such as Boston (New England), Harvard (a university town), Paris, and London are closely connected to Eliot's own life. Yet, his poems portray the predicaments of urban existence with objective detachment, transcending personal affiliations and achieving a universal resonance that speaks to the broader human condition. In particular, the routine-bound, hectic lifestyle and the burdened mental landscape of modern individuals ultimately lead to a distressing human condition. From this perspective, the present study explores Eliot's depiction of bleak, grim, and decaying urban life within the context of the twentieth-century modern metropolis. The study finds that Eliot employs a diagnostic and objective lens to examine the follies and sufferings of perplexed and pessimistic modern individuals. Yet, the striking point is that he reveals his insights into the grim urban reality with an artistic curiosity and intellectual rigor. Selected poems from *Prufrock and Other Observations* (1917) and *The Waste Land* (1922) by T. S. Eliot were used as primary data, while relevant research articles, book chapters, published books, and credible online materials were consulted as secondary sources. A qualitative approach was adopted, and all sources were cited using the APA 7th edition referencing style.

Key words: T. S. Eliot, despair, dark tone, sordid, alienated, morbid, metropolis

1. Introduction

Modern poetry is an offspring of the cities, and the poets are customarily urban poets (Hyde, 1991). T. S. Eliot's poetry portrays modern cities—drawn from places like London, Boston, and Paris—as a space marked by psychological, emotional, and moral decay. These urban settings symbolize the disintegration of human identity, the breakdown of communication, and the decline of spiritual values within an industrialized capitalist society. In the poems such as “The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock”, “Preludes”, *The Waste Land*, and “Portrait of a Lady”, Eliot captures the despair, alienation, and inertia that characterize modern urban existence. Prufrock, for instance, epitomizes a generation paralyzed by self-doubt and incapable of meaningful connection, while the female characters—like the typist or the lady in *The Waste Land*—reflect the commodification and emptiness of human relationships.

Using literary devices like metaphors, symbols, and archetypes, Eliot highlights the hazards of urban life. His imagery is filled with sordid details—such as “sawdust restaurants,” “grimy scraps,” “faint stale smell of beer,” and “rats’ alley”—which reflect both the physical filth of the urban environment and the internal despondency of its inhabitants. Rather than merely depicting external hardships, Eliot conveys a deeper spiritual and existential paralysis, influenced by the poetic visions of Baudelaire and Laforgue. Through fragmented narratives, symbolism, and dramatic monologues, Eliot constructs a metaphorical hell where human souls drift aimlessly, cut off from meaning, love, and redemption. Ultimately, his cities are not merely backdrops but active forces that shape and reflect the crisis of modern humanity.

Eliot's portrayal of urban despair, rooted in his personal experiences regarding life in modern industrial cities, reflects the broader, collective condition of twentieth-century urban humanity. His early poetry focuses on the physical decay of city life, while later works, especially *The Waste Land* and *The Four Quartets*, explore deeper spiritual emptiness. The analysis suggests that modern man's obsession with materialism and industrial progress results in disgrace and disorder in holistic living. The

paper concludes that a healthy and fulfilling life requires a return to organic, communal values grounded in genuine love and friendship.

2. Statement of the Problem

Thomas Sterns Eliot (1888–1965), popularly known as T. S. Eliot, is highly recognized as one of the leading modern poets in world literature (Rahman, 1984). Born in 1888 in Saint Louis, Missouri, USA, to Henry Ware and Charlotte Stearns Eliot, T. S. Eliot leaves for England as a fortune hunter and settles permanently in 1915. In London, he works as a banker, yet his strong fervor for literature soon brings him massive success as a poet, which brings him the prestigious identity of a co-editor of the *Egoist*. Eliot's experience of living in London had a profound and lasting influence on his poetry and ideas. His distinguished academic journey, from his hometown to several European universities, further deepened his understanding of urban life. On a successful completion at Milton Academy in Boston in 1905, he attended Harvard in 1906, resided there till 1914, and pursued his master's and doctoral degrees with an excellent academic track. During his Harvard days, Eliot, of course, attended a year abroad Tour, 'Junior Year Abroad', from America to Paris in 1910 to study French literature at the Sorbonne, followed by 'Part Two of the Junior Year Abroad' under the 'Sheldon Traveling Fellowship' in 1914. This tour allowed him to attend a summer study program at Marburg University in Germany, during which he also visited galleries and other tourist sites in Belgium and Italy (Cooper, 2006). Eliot's urban experiences, therefore, became cosmopolitan, extending from America to Europe, providing him with a great source of urban images in his poetry. Nevertheless, the experiences that he gathered in the city of London developed within him a surreal impression, much like Baudelaire's experience of Paris. He perceived London as a city of rumors and chaos. This negative impression about London city, however, extends to a further extent, since the cities, in particular, those of which are famous as university towns, he visited, including Harvard in the United States, the Sorbonne in Paris, and Marburg in Germany, could not impress him at all.

Eliot considered every university town to be a dead one (Parveen, 2017). Yet, in Paris, he spent a highly productive time, reading Charles

Baudelaire, Jules Laforgue, and Tristan Corbière, whose works significantly instigated him to incorporate urban themes into his poetry. The city images in his poetry carry an autobiographical tone, most of which were drawn from his experiences in St. Louis and overlaid with impressions of Paris and London (Eliot, 1960). Eliot's poetry profoundly aligns with Hyde's thoughts, who pointed out that modern literature took its birth in the city, and with Baudelaire, especially with his discovery of men's loneliness, where the terms 'multitude' and 'solitude' remain interchangeable (Hyde, 1991). However, his idea of interchangeable 'solitude' and 'multitude' remains crucial here, as urban dwellers increasingly experience a range of inner and outer sufferings—such as alienation, boredom, ennui, and spiritual barrenness—which have become persistent and widespread around the globe and have been tempting subject matter for poetry. This continuum of loss and suffering among urban people, irrespective of any particular land area or boundary, forms the impression, which can be defined as urban despair. The poetry of T. S. Eliot again evokes a feeling of living in a frontier, a well-protected heaven, an ever-expanding hell, a dichotomy of haves and have-nots which is manifested through a mood or atmosphere, possibly pessimistic, grim, bleak, decaying, futile, and a pile of fragmented images of the urban setting. Such bleak, decaying, futile, and fragmented images of the urban setting thus signify the dark tone in Eliot's poems. Despite all the comforts and facilities provided through automation, modern urban life can in no way discard the horrific and nightmarish conditions of the city dwellers in the West and East.

3. Literature Review

Modern urban life epitomizes uncertainty, complexity, and morbidity, which provide the key elements for captivating themes for poetry. More specifically, it emerges as a dominant motif in twentieth-century modern poetry. Amal Saad Almenee (2020) observes that the urban setting plays a central role for many modernist poets, with particular attention to T. S. Eliot's influence on Abdel Sabour and other modernist Arab poets. Almenee identifies recurring tones of loneliness, alienation, frustration, and inner unrest in poetry—echoes of Eliot's urban imagery. Thus, the bleak portrayal

of the city in Eliot's works continues to exert a powerful influence across global modernist literature.

Trandafir (2016), in her essay "City Imagery in the Early Poetry of T. S. Eliot," explores the city's mirroring quality. She asserts that Eliot's early poems depict modern individuals trapped within sensory ailments and moral decay. In this context, the urban ambience seems to be a fragmented and disoriented modern self. Supporting this, Labang (2010) examines Eliot's characters as embodiments of despair, aloofness, and frustration. He attributes these conditions to social, political, economic, religious, and individualist crises that tear apart the lives of modern individuals.

Recognizing Eliot as an 'urban poet,' Meitei (2012) explores the urban temperament in Eliot's "Preludes" and "Rhapsody on a Windy Night." He shows how the rise of urban consciousness has resulted in a disorganized, filthy landscape, leaving individuals emotionally and spiritually exhausted. Meitei concludes that Eliot's consistent focus on urban life justifies his status as a truly urban poet. Again, G. M. Hyde (1991), in "The Poetry of the City," emphasizes that modernist literature was born in the city, particularly with Baudelaire's insight into urban solitude. He explores the paradox of 'solitude in the multitude,' showing how people in large cities like London or Paris live in isolation despite being surrounded by crowds. Hyde's insight underscores the psychological horror faced by modern urban inhabitants, a theme central to Eliot's work.

Nevertheless, a more fearful condition in modern urban reality reveals when its dwellers lose the normal scores of lives, and get infected with an irremediable physical and mental ailment. Stephen Spender (1976) interprets Eliot's Prufrock as a victim of a mechanized, impersonal urban reality. In "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock," Prufrock becomes an emblem of psychological imprisonment, failing to communicate or connect with others. His inability to ask "the overwhelming question" reveals a speech paralysis, leaving him in a state of inferiority and inner desolation. Spender concludes that Prufrock embodies the Baudelairean hell—trapped within himself, forecasting only boredom and horror.

This psychological torment is not limited to Prufrock but applies universally to modern city dwellers. Set in twentieth-century London, “The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock” reflects Eliot’s memories of his hometown, Boston, while metaphorically capturing the experiences of people living in modern metropolises. In this context, Syed Manzoorul Islam (2006) argues that the “city” in Eliot’s poetry transcends physical boundaries, instead becoming a metaphor for various emotional and psychological states. It symbolizes inexpressible and uncommunicable human experiences, creating an abstract and surreal impression of urban life. Islam sees the city as a space where its inhabitants struggle with irremediable sensory disorders—a surreal manifestation of modern existence.

Building on this metaphorical interpretation, Khondakar Ashraf Hossain (2002) introduces the concept of the ‘fallen sky.’ He argues that living in such cities implies a self-imposed imprisonment, born of exhaustion, depression, and disdain—a kind of self-created inferno. The physical decay of the urban landscape reflects the inner disintegration of its inhabitants, reinforcing the dark tone of Eliot’s poetry. Echoing this view, Dipti Tripathi (1997) references the image of “a patient etherized upon a table” from the poem “Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock” to describe modern cities as symptomatic of a decaying and ailing civilization. In *Introduction to Modern Bangla Poetry*, Tripathi (1997) suggests that no urban inhabitant escapes the physical and mental deterioration brought about by modern life.

Together, these studies affirm that the city in Eliot’s poetry is more than just a backdrop—it functions as an active force and symbolizes modern humanity’s existential and psychological crisis. The urban landscape in his poetry reflects decay, fragmentation, and despair, capturing the complex conditions of human life.

4. Research Gap and Objective of the Study

While considerable critical attention has been given to T. S. Eliot’s portrayal of urban life, a significant gap remains in understanding how the urban setting functions as a character in his poetry—transcending geographical boundaries and symbolizing a deeper existential and moral crisis. Eliot

presents urban inhabitants as trapped within a decaying moral and sensory landscape, victims of an automated, monotonous, and sordid lifestyle. Although scholars have explored themes of alienation, despair, and spiritual barrenness in Eliot's work, fewer studies focus specifically on how these conditions reflect the psychological and moral despondencies of modern individuals shaped by the mechanized routine of urban existence. This study, therefore, seeks to fill that gap by critically examining the moral and psychological decline of urban dwellers as depicted in Eliot's poetry, particularly through the lens of urban despair and its symbolic darkness. Additionally, the study aims to explore whether Eliot's vision allows any possibility of renewal or order within the disordered urban condition—an aspect often overlooked in existing literature.

5. Methodology of the Study

This study employs a qualitative approach, with a focus on content analysis. For the present study, selected poems from Eliot's first collection, *Prufrock and Other Observations*, and *The Waste Land*, have been examined as primary data. Relevant research articles, book chapters, published books, and review works have been used as secondary sources. All references have been properly cited following APA 7th edition guidelines.

6. Discussion

As previously noted, Eliotian cities evoke inexpressible suffering, complex psychological dilemmas, and acute alienation—conditions further intensified by the grim and sordid realities of the urban dwellers. In Eliot's poetry, the city mirrors human despondency, portrayed through a critical and artistic point of view. His use of image, allusion, metaphor, symbol, and fragmented narrative constructs a powerful and far-reaching universal appeal, reinforcing the pervasive despair and dark tone that define his urban landscapes. The following discussion further explores how Eliot's portrayal of bleak and oppressive urban life reflects the psychological and spiritual crises of the people in modern cities.

6.1 Urban Life: A Reflection of Urban Despair and Spiritual Decay

Modern people are imprisoned in an ailing urban reality, where hundreds of incongruities, physical and mental health hazards, chaos, and confusion prevail, enduringly and constitute a common experience for its inhabitants. It can be assumed that the major cause behind these incongruities and ailments occurs as the byproducts of nineteenth-century industrialized Europe. Entire Europe, including England, transitioned from an agrarian to an industrial economy, saw a rise—almost inevitably—to a capitalist economic system. As a result, London went through an abrupt and unrestrained urbanization, built upon the ruins of its pastoral and romantic ethos, and emerged as a metropolis soon. Eliot's first collection of poems, *Prufrock and Other Observations* (1917), portrays the irony of life in such a great metropolis, the city of London. The hero of its title poem, the "Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock", rightly epitomizes the physical as well as psychological ailment of his generation. He is so obsessed with this ailing human condition that he can never think of a recovery from it. His obsession culminates in his numbness, giving an impression of his inertia, which stands out as an emblem that signifies an omnipresent physical and psychological paralysis among the post-war generation of all Europe. Prufrock's utterance:

Let us go then, you and I,
When the evening is spread out against the sky
Like a patient etherised upon a table;

(Eliot, 2004, Lines:1–3)

— encompasses the metaphors and images herein, poignantly depicting the horrific picture of the urban people. The metaphor of a 'spread-out' evening and the image of an 'etherized patient' arouse surprises. They simultaneously suggest a grim medical atmosphere and a pseudo-romantic relationship, in which the poem's protagonist inevitably becomes afflicted with a Hamletian complex. As a result, he turns into a patient of speech paralysis, and never becomes successful in offering his beloved a love proposal. By presenting such metaphors and images, Eliot imports novelty,

which, according to him, was a “required violent stimulus of novelty” (Southam, 1994). However, it is important to note that Eliot’s portrayal of the ‘naked horror’ in urban life, marked by a sense of novelty, is not merely hypothetical. It is the French poet, Charles Baudelaire (1821-1867), who put the horrors of ‘urban angst’ down to us through his *Les Fleurs du Mal* (1857) before him (Hossain, 2010). Therefore, Eliot’s efforts can be seen as an extensive original undertaking or a revitalization of Baudelairean themes. He presents us with the unpredictable and often unthinkable dimensions of human thought—a nightmare. The penetrating image— ‘patient etherised upon a table’ evokes through its underlying meaning— the sick of Europe after the Great War. Eliot’s impression, ‘etherised’, carrying both clinical and romantic connotations, derives from ether—a substance commonly used for anesthetic purposes, yet suggestive of ethereal, dream-like states that evoke romantic associations. However, the clinical undertone of the pun undercuts the traditional Romantic depictions of evening, such as in Wordsworth’s (1770–1850) sonnet ‘It is a Beauteous Evening, Calm and Free’. Again, the simile of the evening as an etherized patient suggests the suspended state of Prufrock’s consciousness. It opposes the image of purposeful movement in the opening line: “Let us go then, you and I.” The word “ether” early in the poem foreshadows Prufrock’s drowning in its final lines:

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.

(Eliot, 2004, Lines 129–131)

This image of drowning suggests a powerful metaphor for the decline of the social and spiritual ethos prevailing in Western civilization. Ultimately, just as this cultural and existential decline is portrayed, Prufrock—the poem’s anti-hero—is himself symbolically drowning.

Nevertheless, what begins as a physical ailment suggested by the image of ether soon deepens into a psychological affliction that degrades into a form of dehumanized animalism. This descent culminates in a numb, voiceless condition—both literally and figuratively—as Prufrock describes:

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...

(Eliot, 2004, Lines 56–59)

Here, the protagonist is reduced to an object of dissection, incapable of authentic expression or communication. This psychological paralysis reflects a broader societal malaise—a spiritual disease that affects an entire generation, cutting across boundaries of race, region, age, and gender, ultimately leading humanity into a fragmented, incommunicable world.

A similar condition of existential disintegration is echoed in *The Waste Land* (1922), where a woman—representative of the upper-class European elite—exhibits signs of extreme nervousness, emotional emptiness, and communicative breakdown in a conversation with her lover:

“My nerves are bad tonight. Yes, bad. Stay with me.
Speak to me. Why do you never speak? Speak.
What are you thinking of? What thinking? What?
I never know what you are thinking. Think.”

(Eliot, 2004, Lines 111–114)

This woman’s mental fragility, sexual obsession, and inability to connect meaningfully with her partner underline a deeper spiritual void—both in body and mind. She epitomizes the moral and emotional bankruptcy of capitalist European society. Eliot expands this critique in *Preludes*, where the modern urban dweller is shown as spiritually and psychologically exhausted:

His soul stretched tight across the skies
That fade behind a city block,
Or trampled by insistent feet

(Eliot, 2004, Lines 38–41)

That is, the soul, too, becomes a casualty of modern life, stretched thin, obscured, or crushed by the mechanical, unrelenting pace of the city. Eliot's portrayal of urban life is thus both personal and deeply reflective of the disillusionment of post-war Europe. His keen observation regarding moral and spiritual decay in society is neither sentimental nor idealistic, but unflinchingly objective. In Eliot's vision, city life becomes the stage upon which human catastrophe unfolds—where individuals are imprisoned, alienated, and spiritually tormented within the structures intended to advance civilization.

6.2 Emotional Sterility and Psychological Paralysis in Urban People

A modern metropolis, with its overwhelming crowds and mechanical pace, foreshadows the imagery found throughout Eliot's poetry—images such as 'lonely men in shirt-sleeves, leaning out of windows' or the 'capricious monotone' and 'the damp souls of housemaids, sprouting despondently at area gates'. These metaphors reflect an all-consuming condition of automation and ennui that swallows every aspect of urban life. The routines, emotions, vices, and virtues of the middle-class people lay the foundation for Eliot's portrayal of urban life.

It is important to note that the city in modern poetry does not merely refer to a geographical location. Rather, it represents a psychological condition—a state of spiritual dislocation and existential despair (Islam, 2006). The modern urban condition is also characterized by a constant conflict: a dilemma between the haves and the have-nots, action and inaction, nature and automation, affection and indifference, and pleasure and ennui. Within this tension, Eliot's city dwellers are portrayed as spiritually exhausted and sickened by the monotony of routine-bound lives. Their repetitive, time-regulated existence generates a profound sense of despondency and meaninglessness.

This is especially evident in "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock", where Prufrock's obsessive listing of mundane activities reflects the overwhelming mechanization of modern life. He becomes paralyzed by indecision, entrapped in a cycle of inaction and self-doubt. His cynicism and self-awareness manifest in his rhetorical question:

And would it have been worth it, after all,
After the cups, the marmalade, the tea,
Among the porcelain, among some talk of you and me—

(Eliot, 2004, Lines 88–89)

That is, Prufrock imagines proposing to his beloved during an intimate moment, yet the proposal remains unspoken. Later, he considers another attempt, evoked in the romantic atmosphere of the day, only to retreat again:

...After the sunsets and the dooryards and the sprinkled streets,
After the novels, after the teacups, after the skirts that trail along the
floor –
And this, and so much more?

(Eliot, 2004, Lines 103–105)

This reflects a Hamlet-like procrastination—a psychological paralysis that robs him of both courage and voice. His inability to act is deeply rooted in the spiritual vacuum of the metropolis.

Prufrock’s inertia is not merely personal but profoundly symbolic. His passivity becomes emblematic of a broader psychological malaise that affects all who live in the urban setting. This theme is extended in Eliot’s “Portrait of a Lady”, where Prufrock’s female counterpart finds herself similarly entrapped in a world of automation and absurdity. Her condition is revealed through her internal monologue:

Inside my brain a dull tom-tom begins
Absurdly hammering a prelude of its own,
Capricious monotone
That is at least one definite “false note”
– Let us take the air, in a tobacco trance

(Eliot, 2004, Lines 32–36)

The lady's speech portrays a life devoid of authenticity and intimacy, reduced to mechanized activism and hollow social rituals. Her mental state reflects the same existential void that plagues Prufrock—a world where communication is futile and meaning is absent.

As Prufrock's condition deepens, he begins to experience psychosis. His grasp on reality weakens, and he hallucinates, imagining women's 'braceleted hands' lying on tables or being taken under the sea with his beloved by 'sea-girls wreathed with seaweed red and brown'. He believes they can be saved only by human voices—yet even that hope fades. Prufrock's fate, therefore, is not an isolated tragedy but a symbolic drowning in the abyss of hesitation, uncertainty, and despair. His wait for a 'human voice' remains endless.

In contrast, the speaker in "Portrait of a Lady" offers a faint glimmer of hope. She seeks to begin anew, to establish a meaningful relationship. Yet, even her attempts collapse into uncertainty and absurdity. Her conscience is haunted by the regretful question: "Why have they not developed into friends?" Eventually, she finds herself "really in the dark" (Eliot, 2004), mirroring Prufrock's fate. Thus, whether it is romantic or platonic relationships, in the urban world, everything dissolves into disillusionment and despair. The very idea of love in the modern city is replaced by urban despair.

This despair continues in Eliot's *The Waste Land*, particularly in the figure of the typist lady. Like Prufrock and the lady in Portrait of a Lady, she too suffers the fate of mechanized emotional emptiness. However, her condition goes further, crossing the boundaries of moral and psychological degradation. Love, in her world, is stripped of affection and humanity; it becomes transactional, impersonal, and routine:

Flushed and decided, he assaults at once;
Exploring hands encounter no defence;
His vanity requires no response,
And makes a welcome of indifference.

(Eliot, 2004, *The Waste Land*, Lines 239–242)

Her reaction, or lack thereof, reveals a total detachment from the emotional consequences of intimacy. Her hollow reflection afterward deepens this image:

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.’

(Eliot, 2004, *The Waste Land*, Lines 249–252)

This moment underscores the total emotional and spiritual bankruptcy of modern relationships. Eliot portrays a society where even the most intimate of human experiences—love—has become mechanical, meaningless, and disposable. As Labang (2010) states, these characters reveal a state of frustration caused by their inability to fulfill repressed desires stemming from a lack of genuine love and friendship. In such a dehumanized world, Prufrock’s psychosis becomes inevitable and permanent. The “human voice” he awaits will never arrive. His symbolic drowning is not just the fate of an individual but the collective tragedy of modern urban existence.

6.3 The Collapse of Human Connection: A Symbolic Hell Inhabited by Drifting Souls

A modern metropolis, with its layered connotations, becomes a metaphorical hell populated by drifting souls. Its citizens revolve around conflicting extremes—spiritual disillusionment, material obsession, routine monotony, and emotional detachment. Although these urban dwellers live in a ‘hi-tech’ environment, they are estranged from authentic human connections. As Hossain (2006) argues, awareness of the urban anomalies—social unrest, communication breakdown, psychological inanity—forces individuals into self-denial and alienation from meaningful existence. This diseased consciousness of injustice and dehumanization reveals humanity’s rootlessness in a world driven by materiality.

Eliot's city reveals a quiet, listless misery, and renders an unforgettable pictorial impression of it in every detail (Pinto, 1954). His poems remind everybody of a hell even more terrible than the trench landscape of Wilfred Owen. The misery he exposes hardly means any physical suffering; rather, it penetratingly suggests the psychological plague. Eliot has interwoven both the 'Voyage Without' and the 'Voyage Within' in the spirit not of a fugitive or a tourist in search of the picturesque, but of an explorer (Pinto, 1954). His insightful exploration thus portrays both the physical and psychological journeys of his characters, set within an urban reality that gradually leads them to their demise within a process of dehumanization.

This very process of dehumanization runs consistently throughout Eliot's body of work—from his early collection *Prufrock and Other Observations* to his later masterpiece *The Four Quartets*. One of the most vivid early depictions appears in the poem "Conversation Galante", where dehumanization is expressed through a profound psychological emptiness and passive detachment. The speaker's interaction with the woman reveals this hollowness. Her question—"Does this refer to me?"—acts as a catalyst, prompting a striking moment of realization:

And I then: 'Sometime frames upon the keys
That exquisite nocturne, with which we explain
The night and moonshine, music which we seize
To body forth our own vacuity.'
She then: 'Does this refer to me?'
'Oh no, it is I who am inane.'

(Eliot, 2004, Lines 7–12)

This brief yet charged exchange reveals, on one hand, the speaker's fleeting awareness of his own vacuity; on the other, it subtly manifests the deeper existential meaninglessness that permeates his life. The emptiness reflected in both characters in "Conversation Galante" thus mirrors the broader spiritual and emotional desolation experienced by modern individuals in the

great metropolises. Eliot, of course, in this poem—and across much of his early work— owes much to French Imagist Jules Laforgue (1860–1887), whose poetry similarly explores themes of emotional disconnection and the hollowness of human relationships. Eliot adopts Laforgue’s ironic tone and fragmented inner dialogue to illuminate the modern soul’s detachment, decline, and growing alienation from authentic experience.

It is pertinent to mention here that Eliot’s “Conversation Galante” was eminently modelled on Laforgue’s “*Autre Complainte de Lord Pierrot*” (1885), which expresses the same mood of null-communication and emptiness (Unger, 1966). His Harvard Advocate poem called “Spleen” is also associated with the rudimentary form of “Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock,” the feminine Prufrockian version “The Portrait of a Lady.” Unger observes that the “Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock” eminently records the distraction and dejection produced by the ‘procession ... of Sunday faces’, by the social routines of the day and the sordid aspects of an urban alley, and then ends with a personification of “Life” as balding and greying man, fastidiously attired and mannered, waiting with self-conscious correctness as a social caller upon the ‘Absolute’ (Unger, 1966). Ironically enough, none of the characters in Eliot’s poems avail the chance of ‘self-correction’, nor can they think about the ‘Absolute’ since the core of their heart has been infected by vacuity. This sense of vacuity reaches such a height that Eliot’s character has to take rebirth and come back from the dead to tell all about his learning regarding death. The Biblical reference Eliot alludes to and presents through Prufrock:

To say: I am Lazarus, come from the dead,
Come back to tell you all, I shall tell you all” —
If one, setting a pillow by her head
Should say: “That is not what I meant at all.”

[Eliot, 2004, Lines: 88–98]

—summarizes the modern man’s vacuity of thought. It also underscores humanity’s estrangement from one another, as even after returning from the

dead, there is no one to listen, nor anyone to whom the secret of life can be revealed. As a result, an unending process of human degeneration and dehumanization becomes inevitable and is manifested through Prufrock. Therefore, when the speaker utters:

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;
I know the voices dying with a dying fall

[Eliot, 2004, Lines: 50–53]

—he represents the metaphor of a mechanized life in a detached human civilization where the true identity of human beings has been lost in a vicious circle of materialistic involvement. From this point of view, Prufrock's drifting soul represents his split consciousness, which has been possessed by deformity and inanity, which culminates in transfiguration to 'dumb animalism'—

...I am formulated, sprawling on a pin,
When I am pinned and wriggling on the wall,

[Eliot, 2004, Lines: 58–59]

The instance of losing human souls metaphorically suggests the loss of man's identity. Besides "Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock," "Portrait of a Lady," "Rhapsody on a Windy Night," "Morning at the Window," "The Boston Evening Transcripts," "Hysteria," "*La Figila che Piange*", etc., admittedly establish Eliot's conception of the loss of human identity in modern metropolis to its height. Like Prufrock, the lady in "Portrait of a Lady" also succumbs to dehumanization. She poignantly reveals her condition when she declares:

And I must borrow every changing shape
To find expression ...
Like a dancing bear,
Cry like a parrot, chatter like an ape.

(Eliot, 2004, Lines 109–112)

This confession highlights the loss of authentic identity, as she is forced to adopt artificial and grotesque forms of expression. Eliot's city, therefore, transforms into a kind of metaphoric zoo—an urban landscape where human beings have been reduced to lower species, their souls adrift in search of the Absolute: a meaningful, organic reality in place of the sterile, automated concrete jungle.

6.4 The Sordid Alley: A Bleak Urban Dwelling

A modern metropolis, by its very name, carries connotations of unspeakable sordidness. In Eliot's urban vision, inhabitants dwell "in rats' alley, where dead men lost their bones" (Prufrock), while city nights reveal "thousands of sordid images." Souls, he writes, are "stretched tight across the skies, ... that fade behind a city block, or trampled by insistent feet" (Eliot, 2004, pp. 22-23). Modern urban life thus becomes the epitome of listless sordidness.

These sordid images often draw upon Eliot's experiences in cities such as Boston, Paris, Munich, and most significantly, London. In Eliot's portrayal, London transcends its geographical boundaries to represent the broader industrial metropolis, where inhabitants share a common sense of disillusionment. Poems such as "Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock, Preludes", "Portrait of a Lady", "Rhapsody on a Windy Night", "Morning at the Window", "Conversation Galante", and others exemplify the persisting themes of bleak urban perspectives. Vivien de Sola Pinto (1951) captures Eliot's engagement with these grim realities:

"... the poet has thoroughly immersed himself in the destructive elements, the sordidness, the stupidity, and the ugliness of modern urban life, without surrendering to its values, which he treats with the curiosity of an artist and the irony of a keenly critical intellect." (pp. 161-62)

In Prufrock, the city's squalor is instantly apparent in Prufrock's invitation:

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:

(Eliot, 2004, Lines 4–7)

In addition, Eliot's portrayal of urban squalor in "Preludes" vividly captures the physical and moral decay of the people living in the modern metropolises. His choice of settings—half-empty streets, cheap hotels, and oyster-shell-strewn eateries—reflects the grime and desolation that define the metropolitan experience. These details expose a deeper sense of physical and moral deterioration, which suggests the sadness behind the inhabitants' unspoken "overwhelming question." This decay is further unfolded through the daily cycle depicted in the poem. As it opens:

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;

(Eliot, 2004, Lines 1–8)

Eliot conjures a grim tableau of industrial life: polluted air, litter-strewn streets, and general urban neglect—far removed from cleanliness or vitality. Eliot observes the whole day, the cyclic 24 hours, and continues recording the squalor picture of urban settings. Later in the poem, the morning scene continues this portrayal:

The morning comes to consciousness
Of faint stale smell of beer
From the sawdust-trampled street
With all its muddy feet that press
To early coffee-stands.

(Eliot, 2004, Lines 14–18)

At this juncture, each image reinforces the pervasive urban decay: the lingering odor of beer, dirtied streets, and the weary rhythm of daily routines—all highlighting a life mired in monotony and degradation. Symbolic decay becomes even more pronounced as the street lamp takes on the role of narrator:

“Remark the cat which flattens itself in the gutter,
Slips out its tongue
And devours a morsel of rancid butter.”

(Eliot, 2004, Lines □35–37)

This grotesque image of animal behavior in the gutter mirrors human moral decline—a metaphor for a city life stripped of dignity, meaning, and genuine human connection. Eliot’s imagery owes much to Baudelaire and Scottish poet John Davidson (1857–1909). Davidson’s poem “Thirty Bob a Week” was particularly influential in shaping Eliot’s “dingy images” (Southam, 1984). These images, thus, reflect not only the city’s physical grime but also its internal spiritual barrenness. In T. S. Eliot’s “Preludes,” the later movements revisit the theme of both inner and outer sordidness, illustrating how modern life defiles the environment and the human soul. The poem suggests that even sleep offers no escape from this spiritual contamination:

You dozed, and watched the night revealing
The thousands of sordid images
Of which your soul was constructed;

(Eliot, 2004, Lines □26–29)

Here, Eliot portrays the inner self as being just as polluted as the external world, reflecting how the modern human condition distorts the sound courses of life. The boundary between body and soul, between the public and the private, becomes increasingly blurred.

This is further emphasized through the unsettling imagery of a grimy urban bedroom, where the physical body becomes a site of filth and decay, mirroring the internal collapse of dignity and purity:

Sitting along the bed's edge, where
You curled the papers from your hair,
Or clasped the yellow soles of feet
In the palms of both soiled hands.

(Eliot, 2004, Lines 35–38)

Through this grotesque depiction, Eliot evokes a horrific sense of degradation. The mundane rituals of daily life are rendered bleak and sordid, reinforcing the poem's vision of a spiritually bankrupt modern existence.

6 Conclusion

T. S. Eliot's vision of the modern metropolis presents a deeply unsettling yet profoundly insightful critique of early twentieth-century urban existence. Across his poetry—"The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock", "Preludes", "Portrait of a Lady", "Rhapsody on a Windy Night", *The Waste Land*, and others—the city emerges not simply as a physical space but as a psychological and spiritual condition marked by paralysis, dehumanization, and existential decay.

Through his fragmented narratives, dense allusions, and startling imagery, Eliot constructs a bleak urban landscape where individuals are trapped in mechanical routines, spiritual emptiness, and communicative failure. The city's streets are filled not with vitality but with ghost-like figures—'souls stretched tight across the skies' wandering through sordid alleys, measuring life with coffee spoons, and drowning silently beneath the weight of unmet desires and unspoken thoughts.

Eliot's characters—Prufrock, the typist, the upper-class lady, the speaker in "Conversation Galante"—are all deeply symptomatic of this modern malaise. They suffer from an inner fragmentation that mirrors the external chaos of the industrial city. Whether it is Prufrock's speech paralysis, the mechanical sexuality of the typist, or the spiritual fatigue of the women in *The Waste Land*, each figure represents a fractured self, caught in the machinery of a world that has lost its moral and metaphysical bearings.

Drawing influence from Baudelaire, Laforgue, and Davidson, Eliot revitalizes and deepens the tradition of urban despair. Yet, his critique is never merely aesthetic. It is a philosophical exploration of the post-war European psyche—a generation disillusioned by shattered ideals, haunted by a sense of loss, and numbed by relentless monotony. The modern city becomes a symbolic hell where dehumanization is the norm, and the soul's cry goes unheard.

In this context, Eliot's poetry serves as a powerful indictment of the spiritual bankruptcy of modern civilization. It exposes the cost of progress: a humanity estranged from itself, lost in its own constructed labyrinths of desire, mechanization, and spiritual indifference. By turning the metropolis into a stage for universal existential tragedy, Eliot offers not just a portrait of modern life, but a warning—of what we become when connection, compassion, and meaning are sacrificed at the altar of materialism and routine.

Ultimately, Eliot's urban vision is not simply pessimistic but revelatory, since it reveals the void at the heart of modern existence and compels readers to confront it. It prompts us to consider what remains of the soul in a world saturated with noise and motion.

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