

## Online Proceedings

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### POSTER SESSION 2

Commons East, Easel 15

2:30 PM to 3:30 PM

#### **The Literary Body: Modernist Experiments with Object and Image**

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*Mentor: Emily James, English*

The human body has been the subject of paintings, sculptures, music, dance, and film, inspiring masters across cultures and disciplines. However, in literary contexts, the human body frequently appears only through metaphors or veiled references. Authors are disinclined to deal with the corporeal, except in unavoidable situations such as trauma, illness, or death. Many writers have also noted an undeniable dearth of language accurately describing trauma and physicality. This shortcoming contributes to misunderstandings and ambiguity in textual analysis, which impedes consideration of the body as a substantial literary element. Rebecca West in *The Return of the Soldier* (1918), and Dorothy L. Sayers in *Whose Body?* (1923) experiment with the human body, portraying it as an aesthetic object. To this end, they apply modernist conventions such as minimalism, depersonalizing language, and photographic realism. Superimposing poetic stylistic conventions onto realism articulates intense and complex experiences that are hampered by inadequacies in the language of concrete prose. By eliminating abstractions from their descriptions of the human form, these writers explicitly engage with the body as an object and an image. Both Sayers and West effectively employ poetic imagery to overcome shortcomings in traditional narrative language, and reveal the aesthetic capacity of human bodies. This project discusses how, by objectifying the body and stripping away abstract human characteristics and emotions, these compositions transcend raw physicality and place the body in the context of literary art.