



T.S.Eliot's Construction of Prufrock as a Prototypical Modern Hero in "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock": An appraisal

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Abstract: T.S Eliot stands out as one of the chief exponents of modern literature. He delineates the anxiety and disorder of his age through his keen and realistic spectacles. Literature is considered to be the mirror of a society and Eliot is a master painter who skillfully sketches the true picture of modern era. His poems are not simply rhythmic verses but the archive of depressing history and events that profoundly molded the shapes and forms of his literary career. He depicts Prufrock as a prototypical modern hero in the poem, "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock" and exposes the story of failure, frustration, uncertainty, conscious-inertia, self effacement, spiritual barrenness and utter hollowness of modern men and civilization through him. This paper attempts to substantiate Prufrock as a prototypical modern hero by analyzing images, allusions, and philosophical basis which have been closely ingrained in the very fabric of the poem.

Keywords: Prototypical, modern, representative, civilisation, hyperconsciousness, inertia, dehumanization.

I. Discussion

Prufrock: An embodiment of split self and fragile fixity

Eliot opens 'The Love Song' with a quotation from one of Dante's epic poems to suggest that like Count Guido Prufrock is also in hell but unlike count Guido's hell his hell is on the earth. Prufrock's hell is a modern imprisoned city with dark and gloomy sky and evening which is compared to a "patient etherized upon a table". This dehumanizing imagery implies the disorder and unpleasant milieu of the mind of Prufrock and the world around him. However, in the beginning of the poem we are not sure if he or his split self invites his assumed beloved to accompany him as Prufrock changes his minds incessantly and makes and remakes his promises and sayings. But a close perusal of the later part of the poem indicates that it is his split self that he wants him to accompany rather than his beloved because he is too timid to ask a woman for company or mere love. Prufrock is distressingly famous for making and revising his decisions to practicalize his actions and plans. He makes up his mind but suddenly he shuns it thinking that:

"There will be time to murder and create,

And time for all the works and days of hands"(lines: 28-29)

But time, like space, has only a subjective existence for Prufrock. As a result, past, present, and future are equally immediate, and Prufrock is paralyzed by the heavy burden of the duty that time brings to him. Like one of Bradley's finite centers, he "is not in time," and "contains [his] own past and future" (KE, 205)

He falsely confirms himself that he will get enough time "for a hundred indecisions" and "for hundred visions and revisions". This indecisiveness puts him into a quagmire of confusion and ultimately there is no materialization of his plans and decisions. He is a master of deferment of plans. Procrastination is his prime characteristic. He fails to concretize his decisions not only because of his plans are incomplete but also because of the lack of courageous endeavour. He lacks the both virtues in him. He thinks that his slight movement shall put the whole universe in to turmoil and endless strife. This hyper-consciousness paralyses his actions what is expressed in the lines here:

Do I dare

Disturb the universe?(Lines: 45-46)

This might be termed as "conscious inertia" which pervades every plans and inaction of Prufrock like the hero of the novel 'Notes from the Underground' by Dostoevsky where the underground man (the hero) is too conscious about the consequences of his actions to materialize his plans..

The Self-deception and artificiality of Prufrock:

The active sense of self deception runs through the every vein of the protagonist, Prufrock. He is caught in an unending conflict within himself. The conflict is as to whether he will live by his own desire or he will live by the set of rules established by the society. He is not even as courageous as Hamlet, the hero of Shakespeare to break the shackles of thoughts and hyperconsciousness to avenge his father. The condition of Prufrock who is the mouthpiece of modern men is even more miserable than that of Hamlet. So he laments:

No! I am not Prince Hamlet, nor was meant to be;
Am an attendant lord, one that will do
To swell a progress, (lines: 111-113)

This is the contemptible condition that Prufrock undergoes. He is a true representative of modern men who cannot live his own life and he is in a constant dilemma because of a tormenting world around him. Very often we, the modern men are to conform to the living of the life of other which is an instance of utter self deception. This painful entanglement leads to the utter isolation from the mainstream of society as they want to escape the abrasive reality by hiding themselves. As a result, alienation, frustration and uncertainty become the tag marks of the modern denizens. According to Traversi, man is psychologically handicapped. He is unable to take the necessary actions. The idea of duplicity in its both aspects, within the man and between the man and society, has a general impact on him. Hugh Kenner in his "The Invisible Poet" specifies that the conflict between Prufrock, who stands for the modern man and himself and also his conflict with the society "condemns him to boredom and passivity". He considers man's role in the society no more than that of a fool. The fact is expressed, explicitly, in the poem where Prufrock is analyzing himself as:

"At times, indeed, almost ridiculous
Almost, at times, the Fool" (lines 118-119).

As a result, Prufrock retreats to his own self which would result in two other problems: his inability to communicate and consequently his isolation. This duplicity makes Prufrock suffer helplessly. The two selves, that is, the personal and the social, have to tolerate each other (188-9). To the people in the society Prufrock, the representative of the modern Man, has a different self to put forward. This self as Eliot expresses is something artificial that should be prepared:

"There will be time, there will be time to prepare
a face to meet the faces that you meet" (Lines 26-27).

Man, in order to be accepted by others, tries to make himself as similar to them as possible. Joseph Conrad strikes the idea even further. He states: "*We can at times be compelled into a mysterious recognition of our opposite as our true self*" (19). Man is nevertheless, instinctively and naturally a creature different from what he puts forward in the public. It is palpable, for example, in his getting bored with his fellowmen as soon as they try to penetrate to his personal life. In this sense man is a hypocrite, a double dealer.

II. Indiscernible Communication:

Communication lies in the heart of reciprocal relationship. Improper communication mars the value of messages. In the 'Love song' the protagonist is vaguely incommunicable. He even is not aware about what he says and what he intends to do. He lets down not only the readers but also himself by his vague and distorted manner of communication. Moving forward and retreating is an obvious feature of the protagonist. Prufrock is a total failure in communicating with others around him and as a result, the people around him are disconnected and isolated. He is aware of his inability and inefficiency but still he cannot get himself out of this sea of doubt and disorder. He cannot make people feel what he really wants to convey which is visible in his endless struggle to expose the real meaning of his speech:

"That is not what I meant at all.
That is not at all" (lines 97-98, 109-110).

This unpromising ejaculation is nothing but a fear of being misinterpreted that keeps Prufrock hyperconscious. He is under his constant self-censorship and consequently he has to take back his words even when his words are appropriate. Tangible communication infiltrates the communicators' mind and makes a way to their inner selves. But this salient trait is shockingly absent in modern men and Prufrock is a representative of them. Since the protagonist, Prufrock is apprehensive about the accuracy of his purpose and speech he remains reticent. Eliot profoundly emphasizes this incommunicable trait of the so-called hero repeatedly in lines 97-98 and 109-110 in the poem. This silence on the part of Prufrock is the appalling symbol of his communicative failure. In the two lines Prufrock imagines that he would be able to break the ice and talk to someone, a woman in this case, what would be the outcome of that? Prufrock apprehensively believes it as being misinterpreted by the lady. He would say:

"It is impossible to say just what I mean!" (line:104)

Consequently Prufrock never tries a conversation and he remains silent. He seems to be willing to express what he has inside. Yet, he seems devoid of the means, hence words. Eliot carries on with this idea to line 117 where

he briefly and beautifully summarizes Prufrock: “full of sentence, but a bit obtuse” (13). Lack of communication as a theme of modern mans, Prufrock’s life, in turn, brings up the problem of isolation.

III. The utter isolation from society:

Isolation took its formidable shape and form in the beginning of the hay day of modernism. People became robotized and utterly mechanical having lost all the emotional and social relations with one another. There appeared an engulfing hollowness in the minds of men. All emotional and reciprocal attachments were severed. Men were forced to be segregated by the society and psychological disintegration. Humans became like an isolated island in a deserted sea where he has no hope for salvation or redemption. Every single man turned into a single dark lighthouse having no ray of light. Prufrock is both the product and victim of this modern society who is trapped in a predicament by his own personal inadequacies. As we have already cited that the poem starts with an invitation from Prufrock. He is a denizen of a modern big city where he feels grasped by engulfing loneliness and detachment. That is why; he has no companion to give him any company in his lonely life. As a result the poem is not a conversational one in a true sense rather it is a monologue where the protagonist speaks with himself. In the very first line Prufrock tells his “other half” not a beloved to be his companion:

LET us go then, you and I,
When the evening is spread out against the sky
Like a patient etherized upon a table. (lines:1-3)

The “you” and “I” are nothing but the two half and split selves of Prufrock. All the actions take place in the dark and confusing mind of the protagonist. There is no actual action. “Walking at dust through narrow streets”, “coming from the dead”, “disturbing the universe”, even such minute actions of “scuttling across the floors of silent seas” and other references to action, interspersed throughout the poem, are fake and false actions taking place in Prufrock’s imagination. He does nothing. He is far removed from the actual world to perform an action. He is isolated. He cannot enjoy being with others or if he can, it’s so painful to him. Others’ experience is no better. G.B. Harrison in his book Major British Writers, describe these people as “people whose pleasures are so sordid and so feeble that they seem almost sadder than their pains”. Besides, the imagery of the evening and the words chosen to describe the milieu is quite unpleasant and dehumanizing. The imageries like “patient” and ‘etherised’ at the first sight tell us a grave and repugnant tone and happenings. Again the title of the poem is ironical bearing a heading like “Love song” but telling a painful struggle of modern man to make contact with the world and its people. This sordid plight does not exclusively fall on Prufrock rather it is the meta- narrative of the failure and losses of modern men.

The idea of self-criticism and self-consciousness of Prufrock is so overpowering that he cannot think beyond the narrow line of his realm of thought. His world of thoughts is entirely bordered by his constant struggle to cope with the community around him. The idea of isolation, however, finds a new dimension in lines 42 and 44. In these lines Prufrock shows himself conscious of the people around him. He believes that they look at him questioningly. They are persistently finding faults with him. The most terrible scene takes place when they, Prufrock imagines it, begin to talk about his physical deficiencies. His hair and his arms as well as his legs are the targets of their criticism.

“They will say: ‘How his hair growing thin!’” (Line 42)

“They will say: ‘How his arms and legs are thin!’” (Line 44)

Prufrock deems himself to be an object of public mockery and laughing stock. He thinks that people around him closely observe all of his activities and movements. He imagines himself in a dehumanised manner. He thinks that the eyes of people are fixed on him for criticism as people fix their eyes on a pinned insect:

And I have known the eyes already, known them all—
The eyes that fix you in a formulated phrase,
And when I am formulated, sprawling on a pin,
When I am pinned and wriggling on the wall, (lines:55-58)

This inferiority complex bluntly exposes an enormous lack of confidence and fixity in him. Consequently this sense of hyper-consciousness about the surroundings is described as a hindrance to coming to an understanding of the world and its humans. The McGraw-Hill Guide to English Literature affirms the idea “*The consciousness presented in the poem is an intensely anxious and important one in that the speaker is unable to draw conclusions about anything*”. He is nervous about that. He thinks that he is under their scrutiny. Thus, he feels more isolated from them. He, consequently, gets to the point that finds “the chambers of the see” the only suitable place for him to dwell in (line 129). D.E.S. Maxwell in an essay, entitled “The Early Poem,” in the book “Critics On T.S. Eliot” states that, “*Prufrock... never penetrates beyond ‘the cups, the marmalade, the tea’ to a conclusion either with the ladies in the poem or with his surroundings*”.

IV. Prufrock’s sense of self-effacement:

The sweeping surge of modernism eroded not only the faith of humans in God but also battered the ground of self-confidence of modern men. Losing self confidence, modern men become totally wavering in their purpose

and actions. This is reflected in the inaction and puzzling attitude of Prufrock. He is a master of making revisions of his decisions and indecisions. This lack of confidence and internal fragility made people escapist and afraid of reality. Prufrock pacifies himself repeatedly and postpones his purpose by falsely assuring himself by telling that "indeed there will be time". But this much expected time never comes to convert his plans into actions. He is scared to reveal his plan rather he attempts to hide everything even his presence. All his attempts to meet the worlds and the people around him are crushingly thwarted.

Finding the situation unfavorable he cannot even kill himself. This is the most fateful tragedy of modern men that they cannot even "murder" themselves. The only option left in these circumstances is self-effacement which is favored by Prufrock to avoid the close contact of the reality. Perhaps that is why; Prufrock wishes to be lower animals. He dehumanizes his soul and identity.

"I should have been a pair of ragged claws

Scuttling across the floors of silent seas". (lines:73-74)

According to David Spurr, this two-line interlude ending on "the floors of silent seas" forms an encapsulated version of the remainder of the poem, in which the frustrated effort to establish purposive discourse leads once again to withdrawal downward and inward to a silent world of instinctual being.

Nothing can depict the dehumanization of modern man more limpidly than this. It seems that to convert himself to a lower animal is more desirable to Prufrock, the representative of the modern men than dragging his dreary existence. Prufrock feels worse about himself under these circumstances. The above reference to the "silent seas" and "ragged claws" do express the ultimate self-pity. He is descending into his own hell and he brings the readers along with him. This sets us thinking about the humane essence of modern men who are like the hollow caricatures living a life of low animals in the shape of man. Eliot invites us to look into the deep and empty heart of humanity through his mouthpiece, Prufrock. Eliot appears to be a master of shock here. He gave the poem a lovely and romantic title named "Love Song" which is like a sugar-coated pill and which is sweet at surface but extremely bitter underneath. As we go through the poem we become shocked and disillusioned. We find ourselves in the complex web of questions relevant to our own existence and sadly enough there is no answer to this existential crisis. This disillusionment and frustration are the hallmarks of Prufrock who epitomizes the ignoble plight of modern men. Eliot's use of dehumanizing images is brilliant and apt to illustrate the sordid condition of modern men. Eliot sketches Prufrock as a victim of the modern society who is trapped by his own personal deficiencies.

A quest for existence and complete surrender:

The "Love Song" is actually not a love song but an elegy of a modern man who is stuck in an infinite dilemma and constant failure to prove his active existence. Prufrock is a neurotic character who is troubled with an "overwhelming quest". This quest may indicate multiple meanings. But one dominant meaning is Prufrock's constant soul-searching. This quest for the meaning and purpose of life is always a concern for the modern men. Prufrock is hyperconscious about declaring his virile existence though his inadequacy of actions is a stumbling block to do so. Being demoralized, Prufrock takes pain to boost up his sagging spirit by wearing the bottom of his trousers, or eating a peach which is recognized as a traditional sexual symbol. But still the barometer of his courage does not permit him to break the manacles to give him a bold assertion of his powerful presence among people around him. He masters courage to "begin" but his fear leads him to the silent seas. His puny existence has led him think that he has "measured out his life with coffee spoons" (line,52). So his "love song" remains a distressing song till the end of the poem because of his abortive attempts and constant failures. Ahsanul Hague endorses this in the following line:

"Prufrock, the Eliot surrogate, sings a 'love song' in a most melancholic strain that we never hear"

Prufrock goes through an endless struggle to prove his existence and identity. But his struggle brings no result for him as all his efforts have been thwarted by his mental incapacities. He thinks to escape from this depressing and stark world by dreaming and drowning in the deep sea bottom. But he cannot sever the binding thread of reality that allows him no flight from the mundane and bleak world. The voices of humans around him bring him back to his desolate and isolated den. He wants to remain in his dream till any reminder of the society wakes him up.

"Till human voices wake us, and we drown." (line: 131)

V. Conclusion

In the light of the above discussion, it is safe to say that Eliot's depiction of Prufrock's fragmented self is actually a technique of showing the modern world as fragmented as a "heap of broken images" where the protagonist, Prufrock, tries to mend things and bring an order in an utterly futile manner. But at the same time he is shown to be trapped in this world of indifference and constant war within himself. He is suffering from "Ennui" of the uncaring world. He is sterile and incapable of anything requiring an effort. However, these traits are not exclusively of an individual named Prufrock rather the modern men in general embody these distressing features. Actually the character of Prufrock amply portrays the condition of modern men living in so-called "Unreal city" depicted in "The Waste Land" by the same poet. This city apparently looks fashionable and glossy but it provides nothing "but red sullen faces, sneer and snarl" for its frustrated denizens. The world of

modern men is a world of chaos and confusion what has been limpidly illustrated by Prufrock's nightmarish experiences. He is an apt representative of modern men who keep themselves busy in soul-searching but cannot find any panacea for the disease and disarray they are suffering from. Thus Prufrock embodies the true spirit of modern times like a prototypical hero.

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