

The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock: A Postmodern Poem with a Postmodern Hero

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Abstract

The political and economic crisis of the 1930s diminishes the stature of Modernist movement and chronologically Postmodernism made its mark in different areas of study. Postmodernism is a Janus faced ideology—partly a continuation of and partly a deviation from Modernism. Published in 1915 in the Chicago magazine *Poetry*, T. S. Eliot's "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock" is considered as one of the masterpieces of Modernist poem. This paper sheds light on the Postmodernist features like intertextuality, allusion, juxtaposition, discontinuity, fragmentation, self-consciousness, ambiguity, and inability to face real world found in the poem. In a nut shell, this study establishes "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock" as a Postmodern poem and its protagonist Prufrock as a postmodern hero.

Introduction

Thomas Stearns Eliot is one of the high priests of Modernism who holds an esteemed position in the history of English Literature. He was deeply influenced by the concepts of classicism and tradition as enunciated by Babbitt and Santayana; and thereby denounced the tenets of the early modernists: attacking tradition, popularizing the freedom of individual self-expression. He emphasizes the need for tradition in his works, rejects the possibility of freedom in art, and denies the value of self-expression as hallmarks of artistic achievements. Being one of the prominent figures of 20th century Modernism, Eliot portrays the elements of Modernism in his poems. Published in 1915 in the Chicago magazine *Poetry* "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock" is regarded as one of the masterpieces of the Modernist Movement which displays the traits of Modernism.

As a modernist artist, Eliot is innovative and experimental in nature. He experiments with the form and structure of the poems. In "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock," he uses the well-known formula of the objective correlative to describe the mental state of Prufrock. John Hakac in his article "The Yellow Fog of "Prufrock"" gives a beautiful dramatic description of wooing and love-making between the yellow fog and the cat to intensify and clarify the theme of Prufrock's failure (Hakac 53-54). Eliot

actually describes the fog in terms of a cat to express Prufrock's psychology. He contemplates the action through the movement of the cat and the fog, but the contemplation ultimately ends up in inertia and drowsiness (Jain 46). Eliot uses different images in his poems to express the predicament of man. It is also considered as one of the characteristics of Modernism. The opening lines of the poem "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock" provides us with an image of a patient lying stretched upon a table under anaesthesia. This image suggests an operation of a patient. We can focus on the dilemma of the protagonist Prufrock through this image. The image of fog reminds us of an urban atmosphere filled with dirt, smoke, and soot. Modern civilization is complex and complexity comes to the forefront through the psychic state and activities of the characters. Not only these; other elements of Modernism which include minimalisation, distortion of forms, parody, and dislocation of grammar are found in Eliot's poetry.

Modernism reached its zenith during 1910 to 1930. It gradually lost its former eminence because of the political and economic crisis of the 1930s. Subsequently, Postmodernism made its mark in different areas of study. Earlier norms were broken and different fields of study like literature, music, film, fashion, and technology attained their own new dimensions in the era of Postmodernism.

Characteristics of Postmodernism

Postmodern art favours certain features such as intertextuality, allusion, juxtaposition, discontinuity, fragmentation, self-consciousness, ambiguity, inability to face real world, and emphasis on de-structured de-humanized subjectivity. The concept of Postmodernism can be explained in relation to that of a parent and child in the sense that it is partly a continuation of and partly a departure from Modernism. Eliot, the iconic figure of Modernism, portrays some aspects of Postmodernism in his poems. This section gives a detailed analysis of the above mentioned Postmodern elements in Eliot's poem "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock".

One of the heralding texts of Modernism as it is, "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock" also exhibits the major features of Postmodernism. One of the major characteristics of Postmodernism is the use of intertextuality. The term "intertextuality" was coined by Julia Kristeva. Each and every text is an intertextual adaptation of other texts which opens up a new horizon. It is an umbrella term which includes the echoing of a text into another. Many critics opine that "intertextuality" is considered as the new name for the literary terms like allusion and reference. It cannot be limited to either of those above mentioned literary terms. It includes a device like epigraph (Nasi 4-6). Eliot uses epigraph throughout the different stages of his maturity as a poet from "Prufrock" to "Four Quartets". The poem "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock" begins with an epigraph cited from Dante's *Inferno* xxvii, 61-66. It is in Latin. The epigraph is about Count Guido da Montefeltro's experience in the eighth chasm of Hell. In the eighth chasm of Hell Dante finds those sinners who misused their wisdom to deceive others. Count Guido, one of the sinners in the eighth chasm of Hell was punished for his treacherous advice to Pope Boniface. They are imprisoned and burnt in the flames of their consciousness. Believing Dante as one of the damned souls of Hell, Count Guido reveals his identity to him. A sense of intense pain and torment characterizes Count Guido. This epigraph provides a comparison between Count Guido and Prufrock. As Count Guido

does not want to disclose the true story to the entire world Eliot also indicates his ironic view of Prufrock's love song. Like Count Guido, the fraudulent Prufrock is also a self-deceiving man who uses hyperboles to avoid a situation. Eliot through this epigraph tries to show the behaviour and psychic state of Prufrock, a representative of present generation.

One of the prime aspects of Postmodernism is the use of allusions. Eliot foregrounds allusions in his poem "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock." He alludes to Andrew Marvell's poem, "To His Coy Mistress." Marvell persuades his beloved to make love with him by emphasizing on the fact that time has its own winged chariot: "Had we but world enough and time" (qtd. in Jain 46), but Prufrock thinks that there will be enough time to make decisions. All his efforts ultimately end up in futility because of his indecisiveness. The lines "I should have been a pair of ragged claws/ Scuttling across the floors of silent seas" (73-74) alludes to Shakespeare's *Hamlet*. It reminds us of Hamlet's words to Polonius where he says: "for you yourself, sir, should be old as I am, if like a crab you could go backwards" (qtd. in Jain 49). This allusion suggests that Prufrock is panic-stricken and he demeans himself by comparing himself to a worm-like crab. Prufrock, instead of confronting the situation, retreats from it. So he compares his own activities to the scuttling movement of a crab from the sea-shore to the silent seas.

Literary work becomes a patch work in the age of Postmodernism. Juxtaposition is one of the devices of Postmodernism. It includes pastiche, collage, montage, and contrast between grand past and trivial present. In the poem "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock" Eliot juxtaposes Prufrock and the drawing room women (who are talking about Michelangelo) in order to show the contrast between them. The contrast shows that Prufrock is unable to express his feelings about his ladylove whereas the drawing room women can effortlessly discuss about Michaelangelo. There is an echo of the title "Works and Days," a poem by Hesiod (8th century BC) in "...the works and days of hands" (29) found in the poem "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock." The Greek writer Hesiod in his above-mentioned poem shows honest labour and instructions on agriculture; there lies a contrast between the two worlds—the world of the peasants evoked by the title of the poem and the sophisticated, over-refined society in which Prufrock lives. Eliot through the allusion in line 23 shows a contrast between Prufrock and the lover in Andrew Marvell's poem, "To His Coy Mistress." The lover in Marvell's poem persuades his lady-love to make love with him; otherwise time will pounce upon them like a predatory bird. In contrast to the lover in Marvell's poem, Prufrock, a postmodern entity, comforts himself by thinking that there will be enough time to propose his beloved. So there lies a sharp contrast between Prufrock and the other characters mentioned in the poem. Every text is a mosaic of past citations. In "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock" the evidences of past citations are unravelled with a degree of difference. The poem is a collage—as readers can find echoes and allusions of biblical lines, Shakespearean drama, poem of Greek writers. Eliot has created "Prufrock" who compares himself with Hamlet, John, the Baptist, and Lazarus but fails to act like them. Here lies the difference between Prufrock and the others mentioned above.

Ihab Hassan, one of the Postmodern critics sums up the characteristics of Postmodernism either with "De" or "Di." Discontinuity is one of them and Postmodern art favours the element of discontinuity. It involves an abrupt beginning or ending of a literary art. "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock" has a startling beginning:

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

The word “etherized” suggests the suspended state of Prufrock’s mind. The image of an etherized patient opposes the image of the intended activity to be performed by Prufrock in the first line of the poem. So there occurs a sudden transition in Prufrock’s mental stratum which is clearly evident from the images mentioned by Eliot.

Postmodern art reflects self-consciousness in it. “The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock” exemplifies the above mentioned aspect of Postmodernism through the protagonist of the poem. . The critics of “The Love Song of Prufrock” often cite the *dédoublement* of personality to explain the motif of self-division present in the poem. The motif of self-division engaged in the poem shows a psychic conflict between the duty and self-indulgence of art and it finally becomes the subject of Eliot (Oser 193-194). The term *dédoublement* can be defined as the undoubling or splitting of the self into subject and object. It can be further referred to as splitting of the self into thinking and observing—think and act just as “you” and “I” of the protagonist Prufrock. This Laforguian *dédoublement* used by Eliot in his poem “Prufrock” will lead to intense self-consciousness. It will collapse his will and power to think, feel and act. Self-consciousness is a split state where the person is aware of himself as well as those who observe him. The element of self-consciousness makes a person inactive as well as indecisive. The hero of the poem “Prufrock” is overpowered by self-consciousness which makes him indecisive in each and every aspect of life. The phrase “eternal footman” is an allusion taken from John Bunyan’s *Pilgrim’s Progress*. Christian in his course of pilgrimage to the Eternal City was given a coat by the ministering spirit of the Lord. He thought that the Lord would recognize his goodness as he was wearing the coat presented by Him. Prufrock’s self-consciousness is suggested by this allusion. Eliot has incorporated the story of John the Baptist in the poem:

Though I have seen my head (grown slightly bald) brought in
upon a platter, (82)

John the Baptist was beheaded on Herod’s orders and his head was brought upon a platter before the assembled mass as a reward for Salome’s dance. He was decapitated as he declared that Herod’s marriage to Herodias, Salome’s mother was unlawful. Prufrock draws a mock-heroic parallel between himself and John, the Baptist; he thinks that he lacks the courage to disclose the truth, unlike John the Baptist; and so he says “I am no prophet...” (83). The image of beheading suggests Prufrock’s terrified self-consciousness and split personality. Eliot alludes to Shakespeare’s *Hamlet* in the poem to express Prufrock’s desire to be free from his self-consciousness. The feature of self-consciousness is revealed by Prufrock’s action of descending the stairs. He is aware of himself while descending the stairs and at the same time he also notices others who are observing his action and his physical appearance. This split consciousness of Prufrock paralyses his actions and creates a great discomfort to him.

The Postmodern critics celebrate the aspect of fragmentation. In the poem “The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock,” we see that Prufrock has fragmented self—there lies a conflict between the social self and the inner self of Prufrock. The conflict between the two selves of Prufrock makes him indecisive. The readers observe that Prufrock is greatly attracted by the fragmented parts of the female body—“the eyes,” “the arms.”

This suggests fragmented personal identity. Eliot through his protagonist Prufrock shows the description of only “a pair of ragged claws” (73) of the crab instead of portraying the whole crab in the poem. It connotes the disintegrated personality of Prufrock.

Ambiguity is another feature of Postmodernism. Eliot utilizes this aspect of Postmodernism in his poem “The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock”. The “overwhelming question” mentioned in the poem belongs to a text where ambiguity plays a vital role. The phrase “overwhelming question” found twice in lines 10 and 93 creates an aura of mystery from its iterations. This question remains undefined and indeterminate; it can be interpreted as a question which concerns the meaning of Prufrock’s social life and existence. In the poem “The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock,” there is ambivalence in “Time to turn back and descend the stair” (39). At the top of the staircase there awaits a woman with whom Prufrock wants to meet. The image of the stairs is ambiguous as there are various possibilities of interpretation. There may be a possibility of communication by saving the distance between the protagonist and the awaited woman. It may also imply the effort needed to attain an ideal. Finally, Prufrock goes down the stairs as he lacks the courage to face the woman. The last line of the poem “Till human voices wake us, and we drown” (131) is significant as it provides an ambivalent connotation. There is an implicit fear in Prufrock’s mind regarding the marine world as mermaids traditionally drown their lovers. Prufrock remains in a trance which gives him a temporary relief. The words “wake” and “drown” are used in the poem in an ambiguous sense. There is no way of escape from the reality—either one will drown while indulging in dreams or will be awakened from dreams by human voices.

There is nothing real in the postmodern world. Inhabitants of this world are so unreal that they cannot even face the reality. They are afraid to face the reality since they have disintegrated self. Prufrock is shy in nature, so he cannot initiate a conversation. Like a crab which crawls back to the silent seas, Prufrock also retreats from an imminent situation. This happens because he cannot face the reality. Eliot makes a unique comparison between the two selves of Prufrock in his poem “The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock”. The poem begins with “Let us go then, you and I” (1).It suggests the conversation between the two selves of Prufrock. He becomes happy and delighted when one of his selves remains in a trance—his short-lived escapism from reality through the medium of a reverie of an ideal love with the mermaids gives him solace. At the same time he becomes panic-struck, painfully tensed, and abnormal in his daily life as one of his selves is unable to face the hard real world.

Prufrock can be considered as a Postmodern hero as he possesses the attributes of Postmodernism. His voice is the outcome of voices—echoes, allusions taken from the past, other literary texts. There are echoes and allusions from Shakespeare’s *Twelfth Night* and *Hamlet*, Marvell’s “To His Coy Mistress,” Hesiod’s “Works and Days,” The Bible.

Conclusion

Like Antony in Shakespeare’s *Antony and Cleopatra*, Eliot also hangs between Modernism and Postmodernism as his poems reveal amply the features of both Modernism and Postmodernism. We can see many Postmodern traits like intertextuality, allusions, juxtaposition, discontinuity, fragmentation, self-consciousness in the poem

“The Love Song of J.Alfred Prufrock.” The poem is marked by the crisscross of Postmodern theories. If we analyse the poem “The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock”—one of the masterpieces of Modernist poetry—from the perspective of Postmodernism, we can consider it as a Postmodern poem with a Postmodern protagonist.

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