

IMPACT FACTOR: 7.86

ISSN0976-8165

THE CRITERION

AN INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL IN ENGLISH

14 Years of Open Access

Vol. 14 Issue-III June 2023

Bi-monthly Peer-Reviewed e-Journal

DR. VISHWANATH BITE

Editor-In-Chief

DR. MADHURI BITE

Managing Editor

www.the-criterion.com

AboutUs: <http://www.the-criterion.com/about/>

Archive: <http://www.the-criterion.com/archive/>

ContactUs: <http://www.the-criterion.com/contact/>

EditorialBoard: <http://www.the-criterion.com/editorial-board/>

Submission: <http://www.the-criterion.com/submission/>

FAQ: <http://www.the-criterion.com/fa/>



ISSN 2278-9529

Galaxy: International Multidisciplinary Research Journal
www.galaxyimrj.com

Self-Consciousness in T.S. Eliot's *Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock*

Mohd Adeel

Research Scholar,
Department of English and Modern European Languages,
University of Lucknow. U.P.

Article History: Submitted-10/04/2023, Revised-24/06/2023, Accepted-25/06/2023, Published-30/06/2023.

Abstract:

Modern poetry is marked with the spirit of revolt against humanism and romanticism. The note of pessimism, hopelessness, longing for a perfect life is always discernible in modern poetry that expresses a feeling of self-consciousness and self-doubt among the people. T S Eliot is a modern poet not merely because of the novelty of his themes and by awareness of his time but chiefly because of the new method evolved by him for poetic communication. His poem “Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock” is an excellent example of modern poetry that deals with the complexities and dilemma of modern man. The present paper attempts to deal with the description of love of J Alfred Prufrock and his problems while expressing his feelings to the world. Prufrock comes across as a victim of social anxiety. The paper tries to make an in-depth study of the situation faced by the protagonist who is in quest of a perfect life exempted from imperfections of a human life like ageing and social validation. Prufrock has always been known as an image of cautious, well-educated and moody urban man created from T. S. Eliot’s distinguished poem The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock. He uses clever expressions to tell the audience what has been haunting him for so long that it becomes his dilemma. In this paper, it explains that Prufrock’s suffers from a sort of social anxiety, he is full of self-consciousness and self-doubts pushing him to alienate and isolate himself from the world, where a perfect image is a must.

Keywords: Self-consciousness, self-doubt, frustration, ageism, opposite gender.

Introduction

The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock, commonly known as “Prufrock” is the early masterpiece written by American-born English poet T. S. Eliot. It was first published in the June 1915 issue of Poetry: A Magazine of Verse and later printed as part of a twelve-poem pamphlet

titled *Prufrock and Other Observations* in 1917. Considered one of the 20th century's major poets, Eliot attracted widespread attention for his poem "Prufrock" which was seen as a masterpiece of the modernist movement.

At the beginning of the 20th century, European and American life had undergone significant and irrevocable changes. Industrialization and new technologies had transformed society and workforce. And also, the War made the social situation more turbulent where the spiritual world of modern urbanite is on the verge of collapse and the whole western world is in a state of disorder. Eliot also observed that "the consciousness of confusion was particularly pronounced in the early 20th century" [1]. The Love Song of J. Alfred was created in such historical context. Eliot's friend, the poet Conrad Aiken once said that Prufrock was about a distressed and anxious freak [2]. The hero of the poem, J. Alfred Prufrock, a middle-aged intellectual living in a modern city who was timid, sensitive and irresolute told his bitter dilemma to his silent audience in his monologue.

Discussion

This paper attempts to focus on discussing Prufrock's self-consciousness from two aspects. Firstly, Prufrock had major self-consciousness regarding his machoism. He felt the opposite gender wasn't impressed by his weak physical masculinity and ignored him due to that reason. Prufrock's desire was not able to be satisfied in light of the deficiency of masculinity and women's strong position. Second, Prufrock's ideal society cannot be balanced with the society he is living in. He was confined by the real world and had no way to change and flee. Therefore, it was his dilemma that made him could not live in harmony with the real world and then led to him spiritually paralyzed and alienated. Prufrock as a typical figure alluded more or less to the spiritual situation of early modern westerners. As Cleanth Brook pointed out, "Prufrock" was not about the dilemma of individuals and individual cities, but about the dilemma of an era and Western civilization [3]. The beginning of the poem showed the speaker, J. Alfred Prufrock intended to go somewhere maybe be a salon or a party and visit someone. But actually, Prufrock did not go out until the end. He just stayed where he was. All of these were his fantasy. He seemed to need someone to confess his trouble and struggle by his extraordinary metaphors and allusions.

The urge to be more manly.

In this poem, Prufrock was tantalized by some unconscious behavior of those exquisite ladies which made him self-conscious about his looks. Prufrock felt he was less manly to deserve the attention of the opposite gender in a positive way. For example, Prufrock observed their arms “that are braceleted and white and bare. Is it perfume from a dress that makes me digress” [4]. It was distinct from above descriptions that what aroused his desire was the sensuous shock, the soft white arms of the women and the faint scent in the air. So, in this respect, the “love song” was not involved love, an erotic fantasy at best. It was Prufrock’s libido that made him have a maggot in his head. In the fall of 1959, Eliot explained to a reporter that “There was probably not much love in the life of J. Alfred Prufrock” [2]. Maybe Prufrock himself knew that his initiative only got women’s cold rejection and merciless ridicule. But actually, he was no more affectionate than they are. He wooed only by the lure of white arms. Prufrock was not particularly distinctive in his physical appearance. He was so anxious about making the wrong choice that he could not barely make any decisions at all. He did not dare to approach to those elegant ladies in the room because of his slight hair and thin body. He truly cared about what those ladies thought and was afraid of their judgements. He imagined what they would say like “how his hair is growing thin!” and “but how his arms and legs are thin!” So, he did not go further, just staying at a corner and wallowed into self-pity. The image of ladies talking casually of Michelangelo added stark contrast with the figure of Prufrock. Michelangelo, one of the three Renaissance heroes, was hailed by Roman Roland as “the noble peak of the Renaissance”. Michelangelo’s art was famous for the beauty of heroism, and the figures in his creation was robust and handsome. In his creations, whether it is David, Moses or Adam of Genesis, was distinguished by strong masculinity in sharp contrast to Prufrock’s baldness, thin arms and fine legs.

Hair also has a rich meaning in western culture. In the bible, hair is a symbol of male strength and courage. Samson, the biblical Israelite strongman, tore a lion as a lamb with his bare hands. The source of his magical power was his hair. Later, he was seduced by the prostitute Dalilah and shaved off his hair. Then Samson lost his power immediately and could not get revenge until his hair grew back. Without lush hair and strong limbs, Prufrock could be seen as a frail lamb in others’ eyes. British social and cultural anthropologist Edmund Leach thinks that hair has a symbolic meaning from the perspective of anthropology and believes that hair contains sexual

associations for example, head represents the male genitalia and the hair represents semen. That is to say Prufrock's baldness was a sign of his diminished sexual performance and deficiency of his masculinity.

The opposite gender gaze.

The poem originally had a subtitle which was Prufrock among the Women. Apparently Eliot's intending to set such a subtitle highlights the disparity in power between Prufrock as an individual and women as a group, which led to a tension between men and women [5]. The women seemingly formed a powerful siege against Prufrock. For example, Prufrock has already known how those women in the room look him up and down and judge him. He felt like their eyes "fix you in a formulated phrase, and when I am formulated, sprawling on a pin" [4]. Sprawling means someone sit, lie or fall with one's arms and legs spread out in an ungainly way. Here Prufrock was fixed on the wall by women's eyes as sharp as a pin. This was obviously what feelings Prufrock experienced under such condition—he was so helpless, fluttered and indisposed that he could hardly move like a dying insect. These women were arbiters of Prufrock's fate whose every move could be the death blow to Prufrock.

Besides the feeling of being nailed to the wall, the poem repeatedly showed women in and out of the room, talking of Michelangelo, as if the women were the main characters in the room, delighting themselves with scenes of refinement and the cynosure of all eyes. While Prufrock, he was not so much a participant as a bystander on the edge of the party, always in a neglected position watching the group of women who blended very well into their environment, laughing and having fun. It is worth noting that the communication in the social gathering was all from women. All these will remind people of what Foucault said, that is "Power is saying." This can be said to be mandatory, through some definition and operation, thus these women in the room had the power to dominate. As the main body, they defined and judged whether Prufrock was fit to attend the party or whether he was qualified to pursue his libido. In fact, except the ladies of the social gathering, other images about women in this poem also appeared in a way that cannot be taken lightly. For instance, Prufrock still mentioned a biblical allusion to John the Baptize in which John, the prophet was died of a woman's provocation eventually. Although John was loved and respected by his people, his power still can hardly compete with the daughter of Herodias. And also, the image of mermaids, whether in ancient Greek mythology or in this poem, mermaids were

all very forceful, bright and lusty rather than weak and tender. Prufrock was the unbalance between his primitive desire and his own weakness. The weakness absolutely stemmed from his masculinity and his position comparing with women.

Act of balance between Real and Ideal world

The poet Eliot once wrote in his *Hamlet and His Problems* that “The only way of expressing emotion in the form of art is by finding an ‘objective correlative’; in other words, a set of objects, a situation, a chain of events, which shall be the formula of that particular emotion.” In this poem he also used the objective correlative to express Prufrock’s ideal world and real world. The unbalance between ideal and real world is the key to Prufrock’s dilemma. Prufrock longs for an ideal world. He **as** a depressed intellectual has his own paradise where he has been yearning for—a pure and free place where he can enjoy and relax without coldness and solitude. In this poem, he placed his hope for a wonderful life on the image of mermaid and sea. In the last eight lines of the poem, he fancied “I have heard the mermaids singing, each to each. I do not think they will sing to me” [4]. Mermaid is a very frequent image in western culture which has rich meanings such as sincerity, kindness and fairness. Mermaids are sometimes equated with the siren of Greek mythology especially the *Odyssey* by Homer. It is said that mermaids had no souls and they were seen as charming and heady creature whose enchanting singing would attract attention of the soon-to-be-shipwrecked sailors and then once they were lured, they will be killed by femme’s fatales. But here Prufrock said they would not sing to him. That is to say Prufrock wasn’t the one the mermaids wanted to hurt and kill. Because they were of one kind which possessed two kinds of different things. The mermaids were half human body and half fish while Prufrock’s mixture was his ideal world and real world, his libido and procrastination. No matter the mermaids or Prufrock, they were all confined to the junction with themselves and can never transcend the boundary. Some American researchers believed that mermaids were part of a group of apes that entered the sea during the evolution of the hominid into humans. But in the long evolutionary years, human beings forgot them and these mermaids became a legend. So, to some extent these mermaids were nothing but alienated from human beings and live in another world. The same is true of Prufrock who alienated from the social gathering, the real world he was living in intentionally or not.

Prufrock in Real world

In this poem, Eliot added an epigraph from Dante's *Inferno* [4] :

“S'io credesse che mia risposta fosse
A persona che mai tornasse al mondo,
Questa fiamma staria senza piu scosse.
Ma perciocche giammai di questo fondo
Non torno vivo alcun, s'i'odo il vero,
Senza tema d'infamia ti rispondo.”

The epigraph translates into English as: “If I thought that my reply would be to someone who would ever return to earth, this flame would remain without further movement; but as no one has ever returned alive from this gulf, if what I hear is true, I can answer you with no fear of infamy” [6]. These lines were spoken by Guido da Montefeltro, a man condemned to hell who promises to tell the *Inferno*'s speaker about the sins that have landed him in Hell. Regarding to the Hell Guido was imprisoned was the eighth circle called Malebolge (evil ditches). Dorothy L. Sayers writes that the Malebolge is “the image of the city in corruption: the progress disintegration of every social relationship, personal and public” [7]. Like Guido, Prufrock seemed to want to confess his audience something that could not be known by others maybe his sins and explained how he has been confined to a hellish, modern urban landscape.

In the beginning of the poem, the speaker described the urban landscape with some images to convey his feelings and impressions. For example, the speaker said the evening was like “a patient etherized upon a table” [4]. This image can well illustrate that in the speaker's eyes, the city where he was living even the country and the world have taken on a morbid appearance without any vitality or energy like a weak and unconscious patient waiting for surgery. Moreover, the speaker mentioned the yellow fog which is described as “rubbing”, “licking”, and “lingering” along the windows of houses and among the city. It seemed like a giant monster who is eager to swallow everything and his shadow pervades everywhere. It is quite clear that the yellow color of the fog is thus symbolic of the condition of modern life, which is shaped by technology and industrial production. The whole city was severely polluted by the products of mechanical civilization and the destroy of the ecological homeland of westerners is truly the first step toward chaos and disorder.

In the beginning of the poem, the speaker described the urban landscape with some images to convey his feelings and impressions. For example, the speaker said the evening was like “a patient etherized upon a table” [4]. This image can well illustrate that in the speaker's eyes, the city where he was living even the country and the world have taken on a morbid appearance without any vitality or energy like a weak and unconscious patient waiting for surgery. Moreover, the speaker mentioned the yellow fog which is described as “rubbing”, “licking”, and “lingering” along the windows of houses and among the city. It seemed like a giant monster who is eager to swallow everything and his shadow pervades everywhere. It is quite clear that the yellow color of the fog is thus symbolic of the condition of modern life, which is shaped by technology and industrial production. The whole city was severely polluted by the products of mechanical civilization and the destroy of the ecological homeland of westerners is truly the first step toward chaos and disorder.

In western culture, yellow still has a meaning of timidity such as “yellow streak” and “yellow-livered”. Hence it is reasonable that the character of Prufrock had some similarities with the city where was covered by the yellow fog, or maybe Prufrock was influenced by the atmosphere and condition of the city. Everyone was more or less unhealthy mentally and this unhealthy was mainly embodied on their interaction. They could not interact with others especially the hero, Prufrock. Even though they had a conversation, it was empty and tongue-in-cheek just like the coming and going arty ladies who could only talk in generalities about art. Looking back the whole poem, he was actually trapped in a circle of self-expression, sealing himself in a literal “real” space and eliminating the possibility of interacting with others to achieve real alienation. He said that he should have been “a pair of ragged claws, scuttling across the floors of the sea” [4]. The image of claws might have come from Laforgue whose claws also often complained of having a pair of tentacles which is so sensitive that feel too much [9]. Prufrock was so sensitive and discreet to the world around him that any minor details could hurt him. He felt how shallow and boring the world was. He wanted to take some meaningful action but lacked energy and brave. The only thing he could do was fancy and dream. Therefore, Prufrock imagined an arcadia and yearned for rebirth because of the dissatisfaction and despair of reality, which led him to believe that the world was a wasteland of death, without hope or change. After all, this was a dream rather than reality. That was why “Till human voices wake us, and we drown” [4].

Conclusions

Through reading and analyzing *The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock*, it can be found that there are two different kinds of self-consciousness in the hero Prufrock himself: the first being under the social anxiety given by opposite gender and the other finding the real world too harsh and distressing due to age and sense of alienation, which is pushing him to be alone and isolate himself. Prufrock feels uncomfortable in his own skin and constantly looks for social validation from others throughout the poem. Prufrock was foreign to the society in which he lives in, wandering on the fringe of private and solitary life. The true reason that led to such an imbalanced condition was the collapse of westerners' spiritual and ecological homes. *The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock* was in fact a ruthless song or monologue in which there was no pure love at all but a kind of helplessness for human feeling, an irony on the spiritual crisis of modern Westerners, and a dilemma of the westerners represented by Prufrock.

Works Cited:

Damrosch, D., et al. (2003) *The Longman Anthology of British Literature*. 2nd Edition, Addison-Wesley Educational Publishers Inc., Boston.

Ackroyd, P. (1984) *T. S. Eliot: A Life*. Simon & Schuster Inc., New York.

Brooks, C. (1988) *Teaching the Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock*. Jewel Spears Brooker. *Approaches to Teaching Eliot's Poetry and Plays*. The Modern Language Association of America, New York, 78-87.

Eliot, T.S. (2009) *Selected Poems of T. S. Eliot*. Faber and Faber Ltd., London.

Alighieri, D. (2011) *The Inferno* (Hollander, R., Hollander, J., Eds.) Princeton Dante Project, Princeton.

Alighieri, D. (1949) *Dante: The Divine Comedy, Hell* (Sayers, D.L., Ed.). Penguin Books, London.

Wang, Q. (2016) *On the Significant Issues in "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock"*. *Journal of Sichuan Normal University (Social Sciences Edition)*, No. 5, 122-130.