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A Modernist Approach to T.S Eliot’s “The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock”¹

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Abstract

T.S. Eliot’s *The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock* carries the characteristics of modernist poetry such as objective correlative, fragmentation, free verse and irregular rhyming. It suggests a direct break with English romantic poets such as Coleridge and Wordsworth (Levis 75). Sara Thorne states that unlike the Romantic poets, Eliot attempts to convey the essence of life; and the content represents actual contemporary life rather than an escape from the grinding nature of reality (281). 'The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock' exemplifies Thorne’s definition of Eliot’s poetic art clearly. The poem is about a middle-aged man who cannot make a progress in life and dare to approach women due to his timidity. Hence, the title of the poem is ironic since Prufrock never talks about his feelings of love throughout the poem. His indecisiveness is also caused by self-isolation from the society as a modern man. He finds himself in a society which is not different from a hell for him, so Eliot portrays the complexities of the modern world vividly through the inconsistent psychology of Prufrock. Elisabeth Schneider clarifies that 'The Love Song' is more than a retreat from love, however; it is the portrait of a man in Hell, though until his truth is clearly realized, the hell appears to be merely the trivial one of the self-conscious individual in a sterile society (1104). Apart from the content, in the form Eliot uses objective correlative to relate feelings through the use of objects. The poem focuses on the dilemma caused by modern urban civilization and therefore, the purpose of this paper is to show how T.S. Eliot’s *The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock* reflects modernism in terms of its content and structure respectively.

Keywords: Modernism, The Love Song, T. S. Eliot, Alfred Prufrock.

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T.S. Eliot's "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock" carries the characteristics of modernist poetry such as objective correlative, fragmentation, free verse and irregular rhyming. It suggests a direct break with English romantic poets, such as Coleridge and Wordsworth (Levis, 75). Sara Thorne states that unlike the Romantic poets, Eliot "attempts to convey the essence of life; and the content represents actual contemporary life rather than an escape from the grinding nature of reality" (281). "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock" clearly exemplifies Thorne's definition of Eliot's poetic art. The poem is about a middle-aged man who cannot progress in life and, consequently, does not dare approach women, due to his timidity. Hence, the title of the poem is ironic, since Prufrock never talks about his feelings of love throughout the poem. His indecisiveness is also caused by self-isolation from the society as a modern man. He finds himself in a society which is not different from a hell for him, so Eliot portrays the complexities of the modern world vividly through the inconsistent psychology of Prufrock. Elisabeth Schneider clarifies that "The Love Song" is more than a retreat from love. It is the portrait of a man in Hell, though until his truth is clearly realized, the hell appears to be merely the trivial one of the self-conscious individual in a sterile society" (1104). Apart from the content, in the form Eliot uses objective correlative to relate feelings through the use of objects. The poem focuses on the dilemma caused by modern urban civilization and therefore, the purpose of this paper is to show how T.S. Eliot's "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock" reflects modernism in terms of its content and structure respectively.

Eliot emphasizes uncertainty of the modern world by creating such obscurities in the poem. He introduces two people at the very beginning of the poem: "Let us go then, you and I" (1). This line seems to be a dialogue between two people and draws the readers into the poem. It is clear that the "I" is the speaker, Prufrock, however, "you" is open to various discussions as the "you" could be the readers or Prufrock himself. If "you" also refers to himself, then this line could be interpreted as Prufrock's ego speaking to his unconscious. The ego is conscious of the norms of the society and tries to repress his desires. Although the pronoun "you" can suggest a lady at first sight, it is later found out that Prufrock abstains from talking to a female.

Eliot's Prufrock is affected by the mechanized urban life. The imagery Eliot uses to refer to the setting underlines Prufrock's lack of self-confidence to undertake significant action. For example, Eliot tries to suggest Prufrock's inability to act due to his hesitancy by comparing the sky to an etherized person. This informs the readers about the distorted

psychology of the protagonist. Stephen Spender puts forward that “the combination of the clinical and the romantic connotations suggest the state of suspended consciousness of the patient” (36). Also, through the deserted parts of the city which are filled with “cheap hotels” and “sawdust restaurants,” Eliot criticizes modern urban life. Furthermore, the description of the place with an emphasis on the visual imagery of “fog” underlines Prufrock’s situation. He says “The yellow fog that rubs its back upon the windows-panes, / The yellow smoke that rubs its muzzle on the window panes” (15-16). The yellow fog, which suggests pollution, covers all parts of the city, and it is also related to the inactivity of Prufrock due to his wavering mind. Eliot’s simile of the streets to “a tedious argument” emphasizes the hectic life in the city, a modernist theme. The streets which follow one another are associated with the “overwhelming question” that Prufrock can never dare to ask: “Oh, do not ask, ‘What is it?’” (11). This “overwhelming question” is never revealed throughout the poem as Prufrock does not want to discuss this question fearing that he would be forced to act.

Prufrock is also very critical of society, especially modern people’s hypocrisy. For example, he believes that the women who talk about Michalangelo do not know anything about either the artist or his paintings; however, to him, they just undertake such a task as it was fashionable to speak on artistic works among people, at that time. Schneider states that “certainly trivialities abound: proper neckties, artistic small talk, and the rest. That is the kind of society in which Prufrock moves, and, obviously, there is boredom in the empty fullness of its life” (1104). Eliot implicitly shows the hypocrisy of the modern world in this way. In addition to this, his use of imagery for streets underlines the meaninglessness of life. Actually, Prufrock is having an argument with himself rather than someone else and he cannot stop it. This can be related to Prufrock’s situation since he thinks that he will gain nothing if he attempts to propose his lady.

His deliberate delay of making a proposal is, because, according to Prufrock, making a proposal is a task even more difficult than committing a crime. This also suggests Prufrock’s lack of creativity, who expresses the difficulty of such a situation by stating “To prepare a face to meet the faces that you meet / There will be time to murder and create” (27-28). Since Prufrock is aware of the hypocrisy of the society he lives in, he feels insecure about his own appearance. Actually, he needs more time to prepare himself in order to impress others, as he feels inferior. Eliot implies that nobody shows his real face in this fragmented modern world, and that is the reason why Prufrock needs time to prepare a false face for himself. Prufrock is aware of the fact that he becomes more indecisive and timid, as time passes and he grows. He says:

My necktie rich and modest, but asserted by a simple pin—
(They will say: “But how his arms and legs are thin!”)
Do I dare?
Disturb the universe?
In a minute there is time
For decisions and revisions which a minute will reverse (43-48).

The parenthesis in the above quotation reflects Prufrock’s anxiety about the public opinion. In other words, he is worried about how his appearance will be evaluated by the others.

The inability to decide what he should do, suggested by the repetition of the question “Do I dare?” is the main problem Prufrock needs to solve. This interior monologue shows Prufrock’s fear of confronting the society, as he considers the modern society hypocritical.

Another aspect of Prufrock is that he is also aware of how he wasted his life attending trivial tea parties. He claims: “I have measured out my life with coffee spoons; / I know the voices dying with a dying fall / Beneath the music from a farther room” (52-54).

Prufrock knows the sounds of the ladies who were singing in these parties; however, he cannot dare to reveal his feelings towards the woman he loves. He is afraid of proposing in front of other people, thinking that they may make fun of him and tells that “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?” (56-9). He thinks that the lady would deny his proposal, if he voices his love in front of other people. Aware that he is not physically attractive or handsome, Prufrock feels like an insect trapped in his own skin. Furthermore, Prufrock clarifies that he spent most of his time in vain and compares his life to the butt-ends of smoked cigarettes by stating “To spit out all the butt-ends of my days and ways” (60). He admits that there are lots of trivialities in his life, and he has spent his life dealing with unimportant events.

In fact, Prufrock’s main problem is how to start the conversation. He would like to express himself with suitable words; however, he cannot choose the right ones. For this reason, he prefers to delay his declaration of love. He wishes to live like a creature living inside the sea. He states “I should have been a pair of ragged claws / Scuttling across the floors of silent seas” (73-74). It is understood that the metaphor of comparing himself to a crab summarizes Prufrock’s lack of progress in the society. In other words, his personal development moves sideways rather than forwards. He would like to escape from the reality like a crab which goes back to the silent seas. Lack of confidence leads people to think that they are underestimated, and this is also the case for Prufrock. He finds external excuses to

hide his self-confidence and states that “Is it perfume from a dress / That makes me so digress?” (65-66).

Prufrock is an extremely pessimistic man who is self-conscious of his inferiority and his disability to speak. He thinks that he cannot be compared with Shakespeare’s Hamlet because even Hamlet acts at the end of the tragedy. To show that he is unlike Hamlet, Prufrock comments: “No! I am not Prince Hamlet, nor was meant to be; / Am an attendant lord, one that will do / To swell a progress, start a scene or two, / Advise the prince; no doubt, an easy tool” (113-116). He means that he is not as courageous as Hamlet in terms of taking action. Prufrock admits getting older by repeating “I grow old [...] I grow old” and he wants to look young to be accepted by his beloved lady. At the end, he hears the singing of the mermaids; however, he is sure that they will never sing for him, since he is not courageous enough to propose to the woman he loves. These mermaids are in fact illusionary: symbols which imply that even in his dreams he cannot be happy. George Williamson claims that Prufrock’s love song “is being divided between passion and timidity; it is never sung in the real world. For this poem develops a theme of frustration, of emotional conflict, dramatized by you and I” (66). The last stanza “Till human voices wake us, and we drown” (131) implies that Prufrock’s struggle to reach a decision comes to an end, when is waked up by voices. This supports that Prufrock wants to escape from real life since he felt defeated by a modernity which leads to depression. Additionally, Eliot uses the word “drown” to emphasize Prufrock’s failure in the real world.

Prufrock asks questions to himself throughout the poem and they are generally about everyday matters such as “Shall I part my hair behind? Do I dare to eat a peach?” (124). These questions prove that he does not control himself; that is, he finds himself powerless just like people in the modern societies. He even cannot decide upon trivial questions on his own because the fear of failure thoroughly pervades him. Based upon such rhetorical questions, it can be put forward that Prufrock seems to be affected by the 20th century social pressures.

Besides being thematically modern, the form of “The Love Song of Prufrock” also highlights the characteristics of modernist poetry. T.S Eliot was highly influenced by the French Symbolists who thought that “it was impossible to use conventional language to convey sensations as we actually experience them” (Thorne 279). Eliot believes that poets should look for ways to express their emotions implicitly and he sees “objective correlative” as a solution. He states:

The only way of expressing emotion in the form of art is by finding objective correlative; in other words, a set of objects, a situation, a chain of events which shall

be the formula of that particular emotion; such that when the external facts, which must terminate in sensory experience, are given, the emotion is immediately evoked” (qtd. in Thorne 282).

For this reason, Eliot uses characters like Prufrock to mask himself in order to be objective. Each symbol in his poetry represents certain emotions. As mentioned before, Eliot’s imagery of the city with “half deserted streets” (4), “cheap hotels” (6), and “sawdust restaurants” (7) refer to the corruption of city life while “yellow fog” (15) is objective correlative for Prufrock’s inertia.

In addition to the objective correlative, the form of this poem also suggests modernist attributes. Eliot uses Robert Browning’s poetic form, the dramatic monologue. However, he alters the form unlike the uninterrupted monologue of Browning’s personas. The poet interrupts Prufrock’s speech by asking the readers to involve: “Let us go and make our visit” (12).

Eliot’s use of figurative language also reflects his fragmentation. For instance, he talks about humanity through the synecdoche of certain body parts. Thorne explains:

References to detached body parts (face, hands, voices, eyes, arms) intensify the loss of humanity by reducing individuals to fragments. Similarly, Prufrock sees himself in terms of his bald spot and legs and his clothes; in terms of the face he must prepare for society (283).

This literary device implies that people are isolated from each other just like their body parts in the modern world and this leads to loneliness among people.

Moreover, rhyme scheme of the poem is irregular and this can be associated with the disorder in the modern world. Also, the number of words in a line varies, in that, some lines such as “Do I dare / Disturb the universe” (45-6) consist of just three words while others “Though I have seen my head (grown slightly bald) brought in upon a platter,” (82) include more than ten words. These variations can be related to the irregularities of modern societies as well as the modernist writer’s breakaway from traditional forms of writing which involves meter and rhyme. Furthermore, there are lots of fragmented sentences such as “And time yet for a hundred indecisions, / And for a hundred visions and revisions, / Before the taking of a toast and tea.” (32-34). The fragmentation obvious in these lines can be associated with the inconsistency of modern life. In addition to fragmented sentences, the unequal number of lines and variable speech rhythms highlight the chaos in 20th century society.

Eliot repeats some sentences within the same line intentionally to foreground Prufrock’s problem with the modern society as well as himself. For example, the repetitions

in lines “There will be time, there will be time” (26), “To wonder, “Do I dare?” and, “Do I dare?” (38) or “I grow old [...] I grow old [...]” (122) underline “the tedium of the chic but superficial world Prufrock inhabits” (Bloom 17). Actually, these lines may also refer to Prufrock’s routine and boring life which he is fed up with. His repetition of words like “evenings, mornings, afternoons” in lines “For I have known them already, known them all: / Have known the evenings, mornings, afternoons,” (49-50) backs up the idea that he leads a mundane life.

The sequence of the events is chaotic, that is, there is inconsistency in his speech in terms of time which means that he confuses past and present; “And the afternoon, the evening, sleeps so peacefully” (75). He goes back and forth in time and this leads the readers to deduce that Prufrock is mentally confused like other people in the modern world.

As a consequence, T.S Eliot’s poetic style in “The Love Song of Prufrock” shows his departure from romanticism to modernism. The poet introduces new themes together with techniques such as irregular rhyming, free verse and fragmentation in form. These irregular sentence structures and rhyme patterns are closely related to the personality of the main character. J. Alfred Prufrock does not feel comfortable in his society, since he is tired of his artificial society and his search for a secure sense of identity turns out to be a big failure. He suffers from not only mental but also physical weaknesses. Craig Raine lists the reasons for Prufrock’s failure as “Prufrock feels physically inadequate, socially disadvantaged, nervous, romantically charged, reluctant to imperil a relationship and physically impure. So he fails to act” (71). The poem finishes where it begins since Prufrock does nothing to express himself. For this reason, it is not exactly clear what Eliot would like to mean as Prufrock states in the poem “It is impossible to say just what I mean! / But as if a magic lantern threw the nerves in patterns on a screen:” (105-106). However, it can be put forward that Eliot reflects the despair and anxiety of the people in the modern world through the protagonist. Besides, he criticizes the 20th century societies in which there is lack of communication among people through Prufrock. The failure of communication stands for the isolation and loneliness of the people and thus, the poet achieves to represent the paradoxes of modern urban civilization.

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