

Prufrock: The Delegate of Modern Man

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Abstract -The 'Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock,' a great work of art by the great modern poet and critic T. S. Eliot, started in 1911 was published in 1917 after the publication of the "Preludes" (1915). It is considered, a dramatic monologue as Tennyson's 'Ulysess' and has been composed in the pattern of Stream of Consciousness. It is the poetry of anguish against the growing materialism augmented by the impact of the World-War I (1914-1919). The trauma of the war lingered, making people apprehensive of the uncertainty of the situation and difference of the gigantic problems of life. Materialism and commercialism appeared to choke the human emotion and feelings that led the poets to attack the trend with wit and irony.

The Epigraph taken from Dante's 'Inferno' forms the root image of the poem. The Epigraph suggests the vagueness of the speaker's thought but the images are quite distinct and the range of wit is very wide. The opening line of the poem with their colloquial language presents a break from Victorian poetry –

'Let us go then You and I.' [1]

Prufrock has nursed love in his heart but has not been able to convey his feelings to his beloved. He ponders:

'we have lingered in the chambers of the sea.' [2]

Time has moved to form a bald on the middle portion of his head, yet he has not been able and courageous enough to cough out his feelings to his beloved and nor he feels the need of a face to meet the 'faces we meet.'

He is in the 'Autumn' of life advancing to 'Winter', yet is unable to express his love to his beloved, although he has been craving for the same since long and has been procrastinating and idle only fancying:

'There will be time there will be time.' [3]

suggesting his belief that there is a reason for every happening, taking place everywhere.

He evaluates himself that he has lived a club life having no life force save the passing of days and has measured his life with 'coffee-spoons.'

Prufrock suffers from inaction and indecision that reminds us of Hamlet, the prince of Denmark who had divided-self oscillating between 'to be or not to be.'

Keywords: anguish, monologue, Epigraph, refer, augmented, distinct, gigantic, bald, procrastination, defend, inaction, divided-self, predicament

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INTRODUCTION

'The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock' started in the year 1911 and published in 1917 is an ironical and satirical piece of internal monologue with the

characteristics of a dramatic monologue. In 1915 Eliot published series of four poems under the caption 'Preludes' presenting a picture of the society whose equilibrium was disturbed by the commercial

and materialistic attachments of people during the world-war I. Though the poems that followed from *Gerontion*, *The Wasteland*, *The Ash Wednesday*, *The Hollow Men* form a chain marking the growth of the poet's mind. Prufrock has been made to present his own tragic story of internal sufferings, want of resolution and self confidence in the background of the social corruptions.

Prufrock loves finds himself devoided of the self-confidence of proposing to his beloved while the warmth of youth, the aroma of glamour and even the passion of love dampen, and passes his days fancying:

'Time for you and time for me,

And time yet for a hundred visions revisions,

Before the taking of a toast and tea.' [4]

He wants to express the pangs of his heart but unable to cough out them fearing his predicament. To illustrate this Eliot has quoted six lines from the great Italian Master Dante's "Inferno" XXVII.

The speaker is Guido da Montefeltro placed in the 8th circle of Hell for giving evil counsel to a Pope. He is wrapped in a flame and speaks out from its trembling tip. Guido in response to the context regarding his punishment as asked by the pilgrim utters:

"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.' [5]

This is Guido least knowing that Dante is not with him in the grave.

Prufrock also tries to express his pitiable conditions of life believing that in whatever Hell he is, the reader is there too.

The Epigraph bears a relevance to the ideas presented in the poem by Prufrock, who is a lover and has burnt for the whole of his life in its flame like the flames of Inferno. He desires to confide his experience to someone who can really understand them and since he believes that everything in the world has the frustrating experiences of life, he can convince them and tell them without any reservation or shyness.

THE CRUX OF THE POEM

Prufrock embodies the timid wavering and non-committal attitude; typical of his culture. He is a modern Hamlet, bloodless and shorn of the vigour and violence of the prince of Denmark. The very poem is a

dialogue between the two selves of the protagonist, 'what he is and what he would be', and the inability of the speaker to meet the society face to face is clearly individual by the Epigraph of Dante, containing the confession of a timid person emboldened by the belief that his words will not go beyond the death's kingdom.

Prufrock is a merciless analysis of his own self as well as the congregation of his society, bent up on keeping up appearances and dissipating its power of resolution in the trivialities of the daily routine:

To prepare a face to meet the faces you meet.' [6]

The problem of Prufrock is; an emotional commitment in the form of a love proposal, clear and unequivocal, and the anomalia of his heart; is expressed in his lifelong vacillation:

'So how should I presume?' [7]

And again tries to find out the way he should start to talk to his beloved:

'Then how should I begin?

To spit out all the butt-ends of my days and ways?

And how should I presume?' [8]

But he has been a coward all his life and his bald head and the shriveling body symbolize his cowardice nature:

'Time to turn back and descend the stair,

With a bald spot on the middle of my hair-' [9]

He is afraid of every gaze which seems to him to be fixed on him.

This very poem is the representation of the characteristics of the modern man through the characteristic features of Prufrock where the idea of communication and understanding has a direct bearing on Eliot's style, his mode of composition and the structure of his poems, for the thematic problem which is not only a problem regarding communication between one person and another, rather finally that of articulation itself.

Prufrock; towards the end of his monologue declares:

'It is impossible to say just what I mean.'

Prufrock imagines to meet his beloved at a table and expressing his proposal with a smile while biting his repast; and his proposal will be like the universe squeezed into a ball that reminds us of a conceit borrowed from the great Metaphysical poet Andrew Marvell's time honoured poem "To His Coy Mistress":

'Let us roll all our strength and all

Our sweetness up into one ball' ^[10]

disturbing her with the question of love but he fears her hypocrisy:

"That is not what I meant at all." ^[11]

This statement has multiplicity to Eliot's work of art, both the poetry and criticism and for this present poem better to say criticism of modern man's life, just passing the hours of life.

His irony of the modern man's character grows further in the indecision with that he is gifted and asserts that he is not prince Hamlet but only one of his lords, taking part in the same ceremonial journey that is the progress in the very story of the play. He even goes to equate himself with the 'Fool' in Elizabethan dramas who had no hesitation to quibble even with comparatively better.

Prufrock has grueling experiences of life, published in 1917, the poem was preceded by 'Preludes' (1915) that painted the picture of slum and speaks of the muttering retreats of the day-worker returning home, passing by 'one night-cheap hotel', 'saw-dust restaurant.'

Life for him is a picture melancholy and so is the atmosphere around the evening itself like a patient 'etherized upon a table' and encircling gloom thickness. Thomas Grey in his 'Elegy' also speaks of the encircling gloom as a projection of his mind. Prufrock can witness the yellow fog rubbing its back upon the window panes and licking them. Reference to October is very meaningful. P. B. Shelley in his "Ode to The West Wind" is a revolutionary optimist when he says-

'If winter comes can spring be far behind?' ^[12]

With Prufrock it is different- October moves to Autumn to a close only to clear ground for Winter, the season OF snow, bitter cold covering denuded trees with white snow. This is Prufrock's own lot who is in the advanced Autumn of life, advancing further into Winter and yet is unable to express his love to his beloved. He has been procrastinating.

'There will be time...'

His surroundings are all hypocrites or sophisticated. He has found the women degrading the great Renaissance painter Michaelangelo to mere chit-chat:

'In the room women come and go

Talking of Michaelangelo' ^[13]

He has experienced the eyes of the women in the club and felt himself 'pinned and wriggling on the wall' and therefore finds himself helpless to presume whether he should force the movement forward or not that reminds us of Andrew Marvell's lines:

'Let us roll all our strength and all

Our sweetness up into one ball.'

In the very poem 'To His Coy Mistress' if Marvell thinks of love; Prufrock on the contrary thinks of rolling this ball towards 'the overwhelming question.'

He is unable to understand the women and the world and fears that his predicament is that of Hamlet, the prince of Denmark who had divided self and could not decide when and how to attack the problem for a resolution oscillating like a pendulum between 'To be or not to be' ^[14] [Hamlet Act III, scene I] and consequently meets death. Prufrock wants to clear his stand and defends himself morally thinking 'I am not prince Hamlet.' He wants to be even attendant lord helping the progress of the story. He is aware of his inaction and therefore comments:

'I grow old... I grow old...

I shall wear the bottoms of my trousers rolled.' ^[15]

Which is an indication of his growing frustration and lack of self-confidence and fears his growing baldness and the thinning legs must be ridiculed by others that restricts him from proposing his beloved which may 'disturb the universe.'

G. B. Shaw in one of his plays pleasant titled 'Candida' made Eugene talk to Proserpine, the secretary to Reverend James Mavor Morell in connection with the suppression of the feeling of love but Eliot has presented Prufrock with a procrastinating spirit caused by the growing materialism and the license of the club life. All of us have our desires and we long to listen to the mermaids singing to us but at the end our desire remains only a dream making us sad with our loaded hearts:

'I have heard the mermaids sing each to each' ^[16]

And furthermore his fear is expressed through the line:

'I do not think they will sing to me.' ^[17]

John Keats spoke of the world as a hospital where 'men sit and hear each other groan.' Eliot's approach however differs in the sense that is objective and is spoken of for people in general.

CONCLUSION

To sum up it could be stated that Prufrock laments his inaction and indecision because sitting in the sea-chamber of dreams he has let the youth pass by and suddenly the situation seems to have changed from the dressing room surrounded by women talking of Michaelangelo to "chambers of the sea" surrounded by "sea-girls wreathed with seaweed red and brown." He fears that lingering in the chambers; he has grown oblivious of the instincts of youth as if lost in a

reverie till human voices wake him and generalizes this experience-

'Till human voices wake us and we drown.' [18]

The very imagery 'and we drown' sketches Prufrock's plight and generalizes it for the whole mankind and refers to the total paralysis of will as is evident in Eliot's poem the 'Hollow men', published in the year 1925 reckoned the sequel to his magnum-opus 'The waste Land' where he presents the picture of modern helpless fellow:

"Shape without form, shade without colour, Paralysed force, gesture without motion", seems to be a re iteration of the third line of the "Lovesong" where he compares the evening with 'a patient etherized upon a table' who is totally unconscious.

Maryam Ahtesham in her critical analysis of "The Lovesong of J. Alfred prufrock" quotes from a contemporary review published in 'The Times Literary Supplement' on 21st June 1917 by an anonymous reviewer that 'That the fact that these things occurred to the mind of Mr. Eliot is certainly of no importance to anyone, even to himself.' [19]

Whatsoever, this poem, now is one of the masterpieces of the modern age, and T. S. Eliot talks of the mental agony, anxiety, infertility, fears and loneliness which are the inborn disqualifications of the modern man and the predicament of the human beings in general.

REFERENCE

- 1) [Line 01] The 'Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock,'
- 2) [line 131] The 'Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock,'
- 3) [Line 26] The 'Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock,'
- 4) [lines 32-34] The 'Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock,'
- 5) Dante's "Inferno" XXVII.
- 6) [Lines 26-27] The 'Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock,'
- 7) [Line 54] The 'Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock,'
- 8) [Lines 59-61] The 'Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock,'
- 9) [Lines 39-40] The 'Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock,'
- 10) [Lines 41-42] "To His Coy Mistress": by Andrew Marvell
- 11) [Line 97] The 'Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock,'
- 12) [Line-70] "Ode to The West Wind" by P. B. Shelley

- 13) [lines- 35-36] The 'Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock,'
- 14) Hamlet Act III, scene I by William Shakespeare
- 15) [Line-122-123] The 'Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock,'
- 16) [Line 126] The 'Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock,'
- 17) [Line 127] The 'Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock,'
- 18) [Line 133] The 'Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock,'
- 19) 'The Times Literary Supplement' on 21st June 1917

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