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Reversing Prufrock:

Finding the Love in Eliot's Song

Many scholars who conduct research into T.S. Eliot's poem "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock" find self-loathing, insanity, and even suicide reflected within the Prufrock character. Michael L. Baumann boldly states that the "overwhelming question" found in "Prufrock" is "Should I commit suicide?" and explains, "Prufrock wants death itself, physical death, and the poem, I [Baumann] believe, is explicit about this desire" (463).

Other investigations into Eliot's "Prufrock" focus on its label as "the first masterpiece of 'modernism' in English" (T.S. Eliot). Many critics analyze the poem through typical modernist criteria. In particular, Eliot's use of the 'stream of consciousness' style to depict Prufrock dominates many modernist critiques. In addition to the writing style, critics emphasize the disillusionment, rejection of traditional thoughts, metaphors, and Prufrock's aesthetic views as further reasons to shrink the poem's depth into simply a modernist creation (Mitchell). Critics direct their focus totally on the poem's 1915 publication date and overlook Eliot's mention of "Love." However, even though these tracks of investigation are valid, Eliot labeled his poem a "Love Song" for a reason, therefore readers should also consider another track of investigation and examine the poem as a love story.

My first reading of "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock" occurred before I was aware of modernist thinking. I didn't read Eliot's poem with other interpretations in mind, but rather I

read it for myself. The only critique in my knowledge base came from a 20-year-old woman, in her second year of college, who possessed a fairly positive outlook on life. When I read the title of Eliot's poem, I registered the "Love Song" as the purpose for the poem, and that is what I searched for as I delved into the reading.

While engaged in "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock", readers immediately become aware of an uneasiness and uncertainty. Willis D. Jacobs attributes this uneasiness to the formal grammatical structure of the poem. He believes that the author intentionally presents grammatical errors to force the reader into a subconscious anxiety. In particular he refers to the first line of the poem, "Let us go then, you and I" stating " 'You and I' is a phrase in apposition with the 'us' of 'Let us go then.' Therefore, it should grammatically read, 'you and me' " (5). Jacobs believes that this purposeful grammatical error instills the reader with a subconscious discomfort, which misleadingly guides the reader to search for a depressing undertone within the poem. The reader unknowingly searches for dark meanings in the poem to justify his/her doubt. However, readers may consider the notion that Eliot did not instill this insecurity to reveal a suicidal man in a corrupt society, but to mimic the emotions of a man preparing to propose to the love of his life. In this context, the subconscious uneasiness allows the reader to enter Prufrock's nervous mindset and feel his apprehension regarding his pending proposal.

To further instill a sense of uneasiness within the reader, Eliot's ambiguous choice of words in the title leave the reader wondering how to translate it. The title's vagueness is entirely contained in its only un-capitalized word, "of". Readers may interpret the word "of" in various ways. Valentin Videnov explores two interpretations for the word "of", explaining that the first and most common interpretation is "by". He later explains the importance of realizing that "of" can also be defined as "about" (126-7). There are further ways to define "of" that Valentin didn't

mention, including “belonging to” and “for.” These numerous definitions for the word “of” leave the reader pondering if the “Love Song” is “for”, “about”, “by”, or “belonging to” Prufrock. The uncertainty of how to translate the title leaves the reader’s mind continuously circling through possible ways of exploring the poem. The title confusion also adds to the insecurities brought forth in the opening lines. Because of the ambiguity, the reader should feel compelled to examine other interpretations opposite of the prominent interpretation of “death.”

To begin the exploration of the world opposite of death it is important to consider that “The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock” is in fact a love story, with the “overwhelming question” containing the four most nerve wracking words in the English language, “Will you marry me?” The first step in identifying the poem as a love story and not as a death sentence is for the reader to understand how to interpret the opening lines of poem. Instead of approaching the opening lines, “Let us go then, you and I,” as if the speaker of the poem is talking to someone, the reader might consider that the lines “are part of an internal monologue which is not meant to be heard” (Childs 688). This idea of an internal monologue is illustrated by the introduction taken from *Dante’s Inferno*. “Just as Guido de Montefeltro’s words are not to be taken back to the land of the living” (Childs 688), no one outside of Prufrock’s mind should be receiving his internal debate. “He is addressing as if looking into a mirror, ‘I’ and ‘you’ differentiating between his thinking sensitive character and his outward self” (Childs 687). He has not gone insane, but instead has reached a point of apprehension. It’s the day that he has planned to propose to his love and it is at that moment, when he comes face to face with himself in the mirror, that his mind begins to fire through all the possible answers to his “overwhelming question.”

In lines 1-22, while Prufrock examines himself in a mirror, he begins to see the extreme differences between himself and his love. He places his situation under extreme scrutiny and

observance, much like “a patient etherized upon a table” (3). He dwells on the realization that his life is filled with “cheap hotels” (6), “sawdust restaurants” (7), and “half-deserted streets”(4), while her life is filled with Michelangelo exhibits, “porcelain” (89) china, and “toast and tea” (34). These opening lines illuminate the importance of class and inform the reader that Prufrock’s social standing is not as elite as his love’s. As much as he tries to ignore the subconscious worries, this realization of a social gap leads him to consider further troubles that may arise should he propose.

Lines 23-81 of the poem depict Prufrock’s hesitancy regarding the inevitable judgment that awaits him should he follow through with his proposal. The following lines inform the reader that Prufrock plans to propose at a public party.

And time for all the works and days of hands
 That lift and drop a question on your plate:
 Time for you and time for me,
 And time yet for a hundred indecisions
 And time for a hundred visions and revisions,
 Before the taking of toast and tea (29-34)

The “question” refers to his proposal, while lines 31-33 depict the hundreds of different scenarios Prufrock envisions for how the proposal will play out. The reference of “toast and tea” paints the image of the party for the reader. Prufrock wonders if it’s worth it, constantly asking, “Do I dare?” (38) and “How should I begin?” (69). The idea of proposing in front of her friends seems unsettling as they would whisper and scrutinize him in not-so-hushed tones. The lines “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?” (35-8) illustrate how

difficult it would be for Prufrock to propose while everyone around him is proclaiming reasons he isn't good enough to be with her. "He thinks of how these sharp people may make fun of him" (Walcott 71) and wonders if he will have the "strength to force the moment to its crisis" (80) by following through with the proposal. Then he realizes that if he were to propose in front of the ruthless on-lookers, she may decline his proposal.

In lines 82-110 Prufrock considers what could happen if she declines his offer. If the lady were to deny that there was anything between them by saying "That is not what I meant at all" (97) then he feels he might as well die. This fear is made evident in the line "And I have seen the eternal Footman hold my coat, and snicker," (85). He wonders "Would it have been worth while" (100) to endure all of the social torture if she were to refuse him. In the lines "And would it have been worth if, after all, / After the cups, the marmalade, the tea, / Among the porcelain, among some talk of you and me" (87-9) the reader learns that Prufrock is second guessing his public proposal. In mentioning the formal party necessities of "tea", "porcelain", and "marmalade" the reader can envision the tea-party themed affair. Also, remembering that "you" and "me" refers to the "thinking" Prufrock and the "outward" Prufrock, the reader learns the reason Prufrock is second guessing his public proposal is due to the fear of the gossip that would undoubtedly circulate about him even before he proposed. Prufrock feels that even if physical death does not claim him if she were to refuse, then social death certainly would, and that's probably just as bad, if not worse.

The idea that the main point of "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock" is one of death is generally argued with lines 111-31. Critics often bring attention to the Hamlet reference to support the idea that Prufrock is considering death. However, Prufrock is clearly denying his

similarity to Hamlet. He proclaims, “No! I am not prince Hamlet¹, nor was meant to be;” (111) indicating that he is not the pitiful hero who can’t make up his mind and therefore suffers death. Additionally, critics use the drowning element at the conclusion of the poem to further support the “death” idea. It’s true that at a basic level drowning and death go hand-in-hand. Conversely, in the context of “The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock” it’s important to consider the preceding lines. Usually, critics use the John the Baptist² reference (“Though I have seen my head [grown slightly bald] brought in upon a platter”(82)) to illuminate the fact that John died at the request of the woman Salome, and that this reference alludes to Prufrock’s own death wish. However, there are two important points in this line and neither of them suggest Prufrock’s physical death.

James Haba examined the first point, incorporating the John the Baptist reference and the line “Till human voices awake us and we drown” (131) to deem “Prufrock’s drowning as a kind of baptism” (53). Haba implores the reader to view the “drowning, which is central to the poem’s conclusion, as not simply death, but also a new life, initiation into a community” (54) and to “read Prufrock’s drowning as his sudden and complete immersion in another order of experience” (57). The “community” that Haba speaks of, is the elevated society that Prufrock must jump into in order to be with his love. Haba states that once Prufrock hears human voices, he enters the human community (57). Prufrock has previously been living a life of minimal social interaction and attention. However, through Prufrock’s pending engagement, he will be “initiated into a community” and “immersed in another order of experience” of an attention-seeking and social world of which his love belongs. The water in which he is drowning is not a liquid, but the privileged social life that he will join once he marries the lady.

¹ Keep in mind that this Shakespearean character is infamous for his constant stream of thoughts, inability to make up his mind, possible insanity, and ultimate death, which parallels Prufrock’s assumed image.

² Biblical character who died at the request of a woman. He was an outsider and often considered insane, which mimics Prufrock’s image.

If the reader is still focused on the fact that, even though John was a Baptist, he was still killed at the request of a woman, it is important to notice the metaphor. The second point of the John the Baptist reference is to illustrate that in order to be with the woman he loves, the man that Prufrock currently is will have to die and he will have to be “born again” as a prominent and social member of an elevated society. At the request of the woman who is his future fiancée, Prufrock will have to change the man he is and become the man she needs him to be.

Even though Prufrock knows what he must do, the idea of jumping into the waters of a social society is still frightening. He relates the judgmental members of the unattainable society to evil, mythical mermaids and fears they will not accept him, worrying, “I do not think they will sing to me” (125). However, he begins to imagine his life with his love, both as prominent members of society and his worries disappear. In the line “I shall wear white flannel trousers, and walk upon the beach” (123), his wardrobe and choice of activity allude to a higher class than he is currently in. The final line of the poem, “Till human voices wake us, and we drown.” (131) inform the reader that Prufrock is no longer internally debating his plan of action. Not only is it clear that Prufrock decided to immerse himself into the elevated society and propose to his love, but the line also shows that Prufrock’s internal struggle came to an end. The use of “you” and “I” representing the “thinking” mirror man Prufrock and the “outward” physical Prufrock, are no longer present. They have united into a “we” indicating Prufrock’s “thinking” and “outward” selves have merged to form a complete and confident man ready to take the plunge into a new life as a husband.

“The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock” is a compilation of reversals. When engaged within the poem, it’s important to heed the hints of reversed thinking that Eliot carefully positions in his poem. Lines like “Streets that follow like a tedious argument / Of insidious

intent” (10-1) and “time to turn back and descend the stair” (39) are generally used to show Prufrock’s inability to reach a decision. However, these lines may have been purposefully written to suggest that the reader consider the reversals of previously reached assumptions. In the lines, “In a minute there is time / For decisions and revisions which a minute will reverse” (46-7) Eliot explicitly tells the reader to contemplate alternate explanations regarding the poem. If the reader acknowledges Eliot’s requests, he/she will discover three main reversals that are often mistakenly labeled as the reasons Eliot’s poem possesses a “suicidal” theme. First the reader will discover the importance of considering various definitions for the seemingly unimportant word “of” contained in the title. Second, the John the Baptist reference serves as a metaphor, illuminating an evolution into a new status of living as opposed to a death due to the inability to converse with women. Finally, the reader will learn that the concluding drowning element of the poem symbolizes a baptism into a new life and does not depict a death escape. Once the reader discerns these reversals, he/she will recognize that the poem is accurately titled a “Love Song.” With the constant remembrance of reversals in mind, readers will discover a joyous anecdote of a pending proposal and uncover the love contained in “The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock.”

Readers may benefit from a reinterpretation of Eliot’s poem. The blissful anecdote of “The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock” can also be appreciated through the form of a prose piece.

The Internal Struggle of J. Alfred Prufrock

A man wakes up too early in the morning and his eyes are immediately drawn to the small box on his bedside table. He begins to sweat instantaneously. He rolls out of bed and drags himself to his bathroom to splash cold water on his face. The man in the mirror is mocking him. The mirror man reminds him that he slept in a cotton t-shirt, which is now drenched in sweat and

faucet water, while she probably wore a silk nightgown that's worth twice as much as the thing in the box on the bedside table.

"You're wrong mirror man," he warns the inanimate object.

But he can't help think about the less-than-scenic view from his window.

He walks to his window, hoping the view isn't as bad as he imagines. Of course, he's not that lucky. The mirror man has ventured into the living room with him, standing in his window to gloat as he takes in the view. The dingy hotels, the unsanitary restaurants, and the abandoned streets scream the words the mirror man thinks.

"You can't be serious. You're still considering asking her?" the mirror man asks in disbelief.

The man tries to ignore the mirror man's jibes as the smog from the ocean and pollution begins to creep along the cheap neighborhood. The mirror man disappears into the smog, and the man is left with his own thoughts. Thoughts that immediately turn to her. For a brief second, he imagines the proposal again. He pictures the occasion he had chosen to present her with the small box. It was in three days. His momentary relief of happiness is extinguished by the intruding thought of her friends from the Michelangelo exhibit and what they would say.

The sudden image of her friends spurs another rush of unwanted thoughts. He begins to recall the few times he joined her at her special events. It was all he could do to make himself enter to the house – no, the mansion- and descend the staircases into the designated room for the gathering. Once he made it to the table, he always felt as if it wouldn't have mattered if he had made it down the stairs. He would sit silently as she and her friends discussed the newest arrivals via engagement to their small group. They were brutal. He could picture her friends gathered in the corner at their reception assessing every thing about their wedding, well, probably just

assessing him. “He’s too skinny” “He’s too bald” “Why did he think he could wear that tux?”

Suddenly the idea of proposing in front of them at the party seemed a foolish choice. A thought strikes him.

“That’s only if she says yes! She could say no...”

He imagines sitting through the formal affair, dodging the glances and pretending not to hear the remarks. Then comes the big moment.

“What if she denies having feelings for me? What if she feels embarrassed with the presence of her “elegant company” and reveals that she was never that serious?”

He runs through the possible outcomes of a “no” response. The thought sends his body into frenzy. Clouds fill his lungs, needles prick his stomach, waves rush through his head, and an iron fist squeezes his heart.

“I’d rather kill myself than live through that,” he thinks.

The thought leaves his head as quickly as it came. He wasn’t that guy. He wasn’t that insecure.

He thinks about the social mockery he would endure. It was a fate worse than death and it would be a constant affliction through the length of their engagement. There was a high possibility it would last well into the first part of their marriage too.

“The first part of *our* marriage...”

A wave of confidence suddenly flows through his bloodstream. If he was with her, he could beat death. Physical and mental.

He looks over his shoulder at the box on the table. He smiles. She won’t say no. He knows that. And maybe he will drown in her world, but it won’t be so bad. She’ll jump with him. They’ll be together.

He pictures a future of walks along the beach and responsibilities as prominent members of society. For the first time, he can imagine swimming in her world. She won't let him drown.

Besides, it might be nice to learn to breathe under the social waters.

“What the hell...” he thinks, “I’ll jump.”

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