

ALLUSIONS, SYMBOLS & IMAGERY IN T.S.ELIOT'S 'THE LOVE SONG OF J. ALFRED PRUFROCK'**Dr. Anindita Dutta****Asst. Professor****NITMAS Kolkata, India****Abstract**

'The Love song of J. Alfred Prufrock' a poem, by T.S.Eliot, could be analyzed from the perspective of its images, symbols, multiple allusions and references. This paper is directed to, the various literary, historical and biblical allusions contained in the poem. "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock" is a symbolic poem which reflects the condition and mood of the modern city dweller. It expresses the hollowness, infertility, the psychological trauma, the spiritual languor, the frustration and the restless state of mind of the post war generation. Eliot portrays the modern minds and their tensed vacuity through images and symbols which are mainly functional and compact. This poem of Eliot owes largely to the English metaphysical poets and the French symbolists poets, headed by Baudlaire. The allusions made in the poem, are discussed in detail, as T.S. Eliot's self-described "drama of literary anguish" paints the frustration of a man obsessed with his own inadequacy.

Introduction

T.S.Eliot's 'Prufrock', marks the beginning of modernist poetry. Begun in 1910 and published in 1915, "Prufrock" was Eliot's breakout masterpiece and almost certainly an expression of his own anxieties. T. S. Eliot belongs to a period which itself was in a dilemmatic state of two worlds –the old and the new; the pre-war and the post-war period. The breakdown of the First World War created a complete disillusionment and disintegration and introduced harsh materialism which devastated the moral and spiritual values. Eliot with his microscopic insight portrays the images of a despaired generation, the monotony and futility of modern civilization and the images of an imperial catastrophe. His first poem, "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock" from his first book "Prufrock & Other Observations" (1917), was the most discussed and interpreted American poem of the twentieth century. Like all of Eliot's poetry, 'The Love song of J. Alfred Prufrock' is full of allusions, packed with images and sensory impressions, and presented in language that ranges from the trivial banality of everyday conversation to rich rhetoric.

The Epigraph

The poem begins with a quotation from Dante's *Inferno*. The Epigraph written at the top, from Dante's "Inferno" signifies that the world of Prufrock is a kind of hell. The epigraph refers to a meeting between Dante and Guido da Montefeltro, who was condemned to the eighth circle of Hell for providing counsel to Pope Boniface VII, who wished to use Guido's advice for a nefarious undertaking. While journeying through Hell, Dante encounters Guido da Montefeltro. Dante meets the punished Guido (a false counselor) in the Eighth chasm of Hell, where Guido is wrapped in flame and is suffering eternal torment for the sins he committed on Earth. In the '*Inferno*' (xxvii, 61-66) the flame of Guido is asked to identify himself – "so may thy name on earth maintain its front" – and he replies, in the words of the epigraph: "If I thought my answer were to one who ever could return to the world, this flame should shake no more; but since none ever did return alive from this depth, if what I hear be true, without fear of infamy I answer thee." Guido speaks freely to Dante about his evil life only because he thinks Dante is dead and cannot return to earth to report it. The epigraph serves as an irony to Prufrock's intent. Like Guido, Prufrock had intended his story never be told, and so by

quoting Guido, Eliot reveals his view of Prufrock's love song. Prufrock's "song" is a similar confession of a soul in torment, though Prufrock's sins are errors of omission and inaction rather than of commission. If hesitation, inadequacy, and a lack of self-assertiveness are mortal sins, Prufrock deserves a place in Ante Hell among those who fail to do either good or evil.

Use of Symbols & Imagery

The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock leads the reader to understand the struggles, complications, and sophistication in the life of a middle aged man post World War I. The speaker, Prufrock, struggles with the desires of love and the isolation he feels after the period of time he spent away at war. The poem presents the apparently random thoughts going through a person's head within a certain time interval. The mental condition of Prufrock, a bald headed, middle aged man is symbolized by an etherized patient on an operation table. The patient is in a peculiar state of mind; he is conscious of nothing. Such is the condition of Prufrock. The long city streets are compared to monotonous arguments, one following the other. In general, Eliot uses imagery which is indicative of Prufrock's character representing age and decay. For example, "When the evening is spread out against the sky / Like a patient etherized upon a table"(lines 2-3) - It is evening tea time, but the evening has an unusual character as something seen through the eyes of the speaker. He sees the evening in the aspect of the etherization, and the metaphor of etherization suggests the desire for inactivity to the point of enforced release from pain. All this projects the mind of the speaker – a mind, it would appear, that is in conflict, but presumably concerned with love.

The poem alludes to historical and biblical figures as well as classical literary works and characters. On the surface, "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock" relays the thoughts of a sexually frustrated middle-aged man who wants to say something but is afraid to do so, and ultimately does not. The dispute, however, lies in to whom Prufrock is speaking, whether he is actually *going* anywhere, what he wants to say, and to what the various images refer. In the poem, we see the images drawn from the sordid city life and raised to the height of poetic intensity which Eliot learnt from Baudlaire.

In the second and third stanza, there is nothing to do on an uneventful autumn evening. The spreading fog of October evening resembles a cat that is lazily walking. The fog also symbolizes the confused state of mind of Prufrock and the unhealthy physical environment of city life. The confusion of Prufrock is a product of the cross section of the post war world full of disillusioned people. The yellow, cat-like fog curls and falls asleep (i.e., settles) around the house. The image of the 'fog' as cat is another reflection of the speaker's mental state: desire which ends in inertia. If the cat image suggests sex, it also suggests the great desire of inactivity. The speaker sees the evening in aspects of somnolence, or of action lapsing into inaction, both artificial and natural – sleep and etherization. With intentional dissonance, the image again portrays the urban pollution in almost playful, endearing terms.

The tensional image of climbing stairs, with its implication of effort, only exposes his weakness in the self-conscious disabilities proper to unromantic middle-age. And so Prufrock desperately clings to the comfort of time: in the possibilities of a 'minute' he finds the courage to mention 'decisions' where before he could only utter 'indecisions'. He recalls the time he has known, the trivial and timid measuring out of his 'life with coffee spoons'. Prufrock here simply sums up the entire existence of the superficial but sophisticated set of people, who are being captivated within a monotonous circle of trivialities.

"I know the voices dying with a dying fall" (52) **refers** to Orsino's first lines in **Shakespeare's Twelfth Night**. The "*dying fall*" of overheard music echoes the opening of Shakespeare's Twelfth Night where Duke Orsino, the man who is in love with love, asks for more music, the food of love, because he craves satiety.

Literary & Biblical Allusion

The **first important allusion** made in this poem is to the artist **Michelangelo**. Michelangelo, a Renaissance Italian sculptor, painter and poet is best known for his work in the Sistine Chapel and his sculptures, such as David. Often, artistry implies sophistication as well as creativity and education. 'In the room the women come and go...Talking of Michelangelo' (13-14, 35-36) The French Symbolist Jules Laforgue has a similar line about the masters of the Sienne school. Eliot parodies Laforgue but creates a realistic scene of intellectual gossip. The lyrical repetition is emblematic of the speaker's indecision. The lines – "Woman come and go, talking of Michaelangelo" even satirizes the vague pretensions of the modern ladies in a symbolic way. When the lines concerning Michelangelo repeat themselves, they first emphasize the theme of being static, and secondly the theme of indecision. Instead of the initial image of static women speaking about a great man, the focus this time is that the women "come and go" (36) and their inability to choose a place in which to exist. To this end, the speaker writes about a "*time yet for a hundred indecisions, / And for a hundred visions and revisions*". Prufrock's anxiety is rooted in the social world. Not only is he afraid to confront the woman talking of Michelangelo (whose most famous sculpture, David, is the epitome of masculine beauty, a daunting contrast for the flaccid Prufrock), he seems intimidated by the social posturing he must engage in.

Another **allusion** made here is of John the Baptist. He condemned King Herod for taking away his brother's life. Baptist was killed by Salome and she brought his head to King Herod. Hence, Prufrock says that he is not like John the Baptist. John lived for a purpose and died for a cause whereas Prufrock wishes to die because he finds his life to be purposeless.

The prophet of "*Though I have seen my head (grown slightly bald) brought in upon a platter / I am no prophet - and here's no great matter*" (81-2) refers to **John the Baptist**, whose head was delivered to **Salome** by Herod (*Matthew* 14:1-11, and **Oscar Wilde's** play *Salome*). The story goes that, John the Baptist, "who wept and fasted, wept and prayed," rejected the amorous enticements of Salome. He had to die because Salome, the dancing girl, requested the head of John the Baptist on a silver platter from King Herod. Prufrock's observation of his "(grown slightly bald)" head parodies the event and gives it the flavor of mock-heroism found throughout the poem. Though he has prepared for his trial of strength, he is no prophet like John the Baptist; certainly not the hero of Wilde's *Salome*. Though he has aspired to such a role, his self-consciousness makes him extremely sensitive to social discomfiture – reflected in the image of his head 'brought in upon a platter,' another likeness to John. And so his great moment has passed, and the 'eternal Footman' of social fate – has snickered as he held his coat, dismissing him with the shame of inferiority added to defeat. Timidity has conquered his amorous self. In excusing himself he has seized on a parallel which both exposes and mocks his weakness.

Between the introduction of **Michelangelo** and the next figure, **Lazarus**, the theme of indecision runs through the poem with derivations of the line "*So how should I presume?*" As it leads into Lazarus, it combines the unwillingness to make a decision with a theme of Lazarus' knowledge. The speaker does not wish to presume an answer to any of life's questions for fear of making the wrong decision. "*I am Lazarus, come from the dead*" (94) refers to either the **beggar Lazarus (of Luke 16)** returning for the rich man who was not permitted to return from the dead to warn the brothers of a rich man about Hell, or the **Lazarus (of John 11)** whom Christ raised from the dead, or both. The situation of hell, is reiterated by reference to Lazarus. Prufrock says – "I am Lazarus, come from hell to tell you all". The contemporary world is a world of dead man, i.e those who are spiritually sterile and stoic.

Prufrock's death wish to suicidal propensity of the modern man is evident in different parts of the poem. The poet has used various images to highlight the idea; for instance- "pinned on the wall" [L-58], "The floors of the silent sea" [L-74], "The eternal footman" [L-85], "Chambers of the sea" [L-129], "We drown" [L-131], "m Lazarus" [L- 94]etc.

The most obvious theme in connection with **Lazarus** is the theme of death. As the speaker moves away from **Michelangelo**, he gradually begins to insert death language. He begins by mentioning dusk, a symbol of the end of life, in line seventy and follows with "*Asleep...tired...or it malingers*," (77). Death is sometimes referred to as the "*eternal sleep*"; using the term "*malingers*" inspires images of a long dilapidating illness that could result in death. He then speaks of "*the eternal Footman*" (85). In keeping with the unity of the poem, the idea of death is introduced early in the poem when the speaker says "*the evening is spread out against the sky / Like a patient etherized upon a table*" (2-3). A person who is etherized has the ability of coming out of his death-like state, much like Lazarus rose from his tomb when Jesus Christ called him back into life.

The **final literary reference** made in this poem is to **Shakespeare's** character, **Prince Hamlet**. Prufrock says – "No, I am not Prince Hamlet, nor was meant to be". Prufrock is indecisive and tensed like that of Hamlet. However, he is unlike Hamlet, as he has no sense of responsibility. The speaker realizes or, at least, comes to the conclusion that he is not the hero of the story as Prince Hamlet was. Alfred Prufrock abandons the thought of his love because he has no way of expressing his love for his loved one. Hamlet, like Prufrock, is indecisive and anxious about future consequences. Prufrock echoes Hamlet's famous "*to be or not to be*" (3.1.66) at the end of this line ("*nor was meant to be*"), a line that is about wondering whether it is worth existing ("*to exist or not to exist*"). Prufrock however rejects the idea that he is Prince Hamlet, suggesting that he is merely "*an attendant lord*" (112) whose purpose is to "advise the prince" (114), a likely allusion to Polonius. Prufrock also brings in a common **Shakespearean** element of the **Fool**, as he claims he is also "Almost, at times, the Fool." To him, he is more of a **Polonius**, a bumbling, sententious fool; educated but lacks accomplishment and will never be more than a minor character in the drama of life. "*Full of high sentence*" ("*speaking all classy-like*") is an **allusion** to the General Prologue of **Geoffrey Chaucer's Canterbury Tales**, in which the narrator describes the Clerk of Oxford as "*Ful of hy sentence*" In Chaucer the description is a compliment, but Prufrock turns it around to sound pompous and silly.

The long, heavy sounds of weariness are heard in the line "*I grow old.....I grow old...*" while he asserts the unromantic character to which he resigns himself, resolving however to be less sportive in dress (by wearing his trousers rolled). Prufrock, in seeking and failing to become a hero in his own life, therefore condemns himself to ultimate waste and isolation. Through Prufrock's inability to speak this "overwhelming question," he gives up his chance to live, love, and communicate with happiness. Prufrock says he has "heard the mermaids singing, each to each // I do not think that they will sing to me." The latter sentence, represents self-condemnation. Prufrock, crushed under the pressures of modern life, crumbles from within.

Sea Imagery

Our final image of this archetype of anti-heroism is Prufrock walking along the seashore, trousers rolled to prevent their being wet. His hair is carefully combed over his bald spot. The thinness of his legs and arms cannot be concealed by morning coat and trousers. The imagery of the sea, begun with "*oyster shells*", again emerges at this point; it is the imagery of his suppressed self. . The sea images also represent the mind of Prufrock which is violated by stormy waves and cannot be relaxed.

The lyrical note comes with the erotic imagery of the mermaids. This watery, floating imagery involves the relaxation of all effort, offers a submerged fulfillment. It is ended when '*human voices wake us and we drown*' - with the intrusion of reality, which drowns the inner life, the 'us' in Prufrock. **Michelangelo, Hamlet, Lazarus, Orsino**, would have plunged into the waves to hear the song of the mermaids and to drown in the pleasures that come with life's embraces. Prufrock is finally awakened from his dreams only to drown in the dry sterility of a wasted existence.

Conclusion

The symbols and images used by Eliot in "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock" emerge out of Eliot's deep realization of a sense of anarchy, futility and alienation of man in a world, fragmented and disintegrated by war. With feelings of weariness, regret, embarrassment, longing, a sense of decay, and an awareness of mortality, "Prufrock" has become one of the most recognized voices in modern literature. Here, Eliot has 'amalgamated, adapted and extended', the techniques of the English Metaphysical poets and the French Symbolists. The allusions used here are captivating and the emotional conflict, confusion and isolation portrayed here elevate the literary and artistic majesty of the poem.

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