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The World According to J. Alfred Prufrock

In T.S. Eliot's poem, "The Love song of J. Alfred Prufrock", the envisioned speaker, Prufrock, is entwined in internal conflict while seeking to find his personal identity in a world that is void of any individual existence. Prufrock tries to express "some deeper disillusionment with society, but fears rejection" (Haiqui 79). Throughout the poem "he ponders whether he should reveal his true-self before the public" (Haiqui 79) or keep his conflicting identity to himself. He withdraws from the world and seeks shelter in his internal mind because the world according to the Prufrock, is dark and void of any personal freedom.

The poem begins with the image of "when the evening is spread out against sky" (1), implying that the world is submissively covered by a cloak of darkness. The world does not fight back, but passively accepts its ill-fate that was handed on a royal platter like John the Baptist. Individuals did not actively take a part in reforming the world and thus commenced to becoming victims of their surroundings and external influences. With the evening and darkness upon the world, individuals were unable to see their true-self and were hidden behind "the yellow fog...[and] the yellow smoke" (15-16) that lined the city's streets. The fog and smoke serve as an explicit image that implies the covering of society, the masking of identity, and the need for the individual to extract from the world around them.

In Prufrock's world, he is forced to be content in his silent reflection. He seeks internal refuge due to his excessive fear of rejection from the world that is detached from the individual. This common theme of the disconnected and isolated individual is demonstrated throughout Eliot's poem that disjoints itself from the romantic and realistic movement and moves into the genre of modernism. Prufrock inadvertently becomes the symbol of the modern character, separated from the western society. He is consumed by the frustration and the emotional conflict imposed by the newly formed, modern society.

Prufrock is a "representative man of early modernism" (Mitchell). He is considered to be "shy, oversensitive, sexually retarded, ruminative, isolated, [and] self-aware to the point of solipsism" (Mitchell). He is a spiritually exhausted individual who exists in the impersonal modern world, consumed by a sense of disillusionment and rejection of tradition. Prufrock lacks authenticity and struggles to reconcile his thoughts of understanding his complicated feelings and will towards life. He is isolated and feels incapable of decisive action. He believes that the only thing he could be sure of is his own existence and that the true knowledge of anything else is impossible. Yet, he attempts full heartedly to discover the world and its relations, as well as who he is as an individual.

"The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock" provides the reader with a unique and insightful "view of a character from without and within" (Pearce 56). As a reader, we are consumed in the immense images and allusions T.S. Eliot elicits. The descriptions, language, and unique writing style create an informative view of the modern man's perception of the world. These literary techniques also provide the reader with personal information from the speaker's internal monologue. T.S. Eliot was successful in his attempts to "contrast the privacy of observation,

insight, and dream with the social functioning of man, his appraisal by others, and his appraisal of himself as reflected in “the eyes” (55), thoughts, and words of others” (Videnov 126).

The use of the dramatic/internal monologue provides the audience with an in-depth analysis of the complicated middle-aged speaker who undergoes a depressing journey in life. Prufrock invites the reader to join him in this journey through the October night to the salon where “In the room women come and go/ Talking of Michelangelo” (13-14). This line produces a social setting within the salon that is engrossed by highly sophisticated upper and middle-class citizens who have gathered for superficial talks that are void of any meaning.

The women, who “come and go” (13), illustrate the surrounding world as lacking direction. With the constant running about and endless movements, the world seems to “lack authenticity and naturalness; it is full of sophistication [yet ironically] deprived of ‘wisdom’, upon which the word sophistication is actually based” (Videnov 127). The world is tired of insincere and simulated behavior.

Society has become a machine that produces conformed individuals who are merely products of mass production. These individuals are only concerned with face-value and are noted to hold a unique personal identity. Society has simulated individuals into a likened mold. Everyone is the same; fake and superficial. The individual was created by society's enforced conformity that has shaped people into a likeness that is rather drab and boring. People have become a product of the modern world, a mere statistic, and an additional body that exists. Individuals are no longer independents, but a part of the overwhelming society that lacks any significant substance. They are just another number to add to the census.

Prufrock was in love with the sophisticated and socially confident women who were taking tea and indulging in superficial conversation. These women filled the room with “voices

dying with a dying fall/ Beneath the music from a farther room.” (52-53). The endless and meaningless chatter has engulfed into a mass of voices that are “interchangeable, coming and going without any distinction” (Videnov 128). It is impossible to conjure an honest and loving conversation in such a place as this. The dismantled individual is consumed by the voices, clattering sounds, and chaotic atmosphere. Amongst the roaring chatter, music plays in the background. These additive sound devices serve the purpose of signifying the modern commotion of the city life where voices and sounds drown out the everyday ruckus of western society.

The society not only removes the individual voice from the scene but also positions the individual “... formulated, sprawling on a pin/ When I am pinned and wriggling on the wall” (57-58) like a specimen waiting to be examined and pronged. The world is highly judgmental, hypocritical, and harsh. According to Prufrock, the world around him is a separate entity; detached from humanity.

Prufrock displays this detachment as he is “trapped inside [his] own excessive alertness” and is only able to look out upon the world from “deep inside some private cave of feeling... he [sees] the world and others with unflattering similarity, he could not and would not do anything about the dilemma and finally fall[s] back on self-serving explanations” (Mitchell). Prufrock's detached living is constrained to the conditions of a “narrow, constricted life of empty form, a meaningless existence that shuts out reality” (Halverson 578).

Prufrock is submissive and conclusively reluctant. He sees the evening sky as “a patient etherized upon the table” (3). This intense feeling of sedation suggests his desire for inactivity and a need for things to be less real; even to the point of enforced release from society's inflicted pain. He longs to feel numb, void of suffering, and tranquil in his chaotic surroundings.

The world around him is consumed by social, political and economic forces that have evolved from the change in the industrial and urban society. His personal perspectives on his surroundings invite the audience to the world in which Prufrock lives- a world of both internal and external conflict. The world is painted by the speaker's mind and voice that allows the reader to learn the way of the streets and suggests the character "at their end, as well as the nature of the urge which takes this route" (Williamson 52) to finding oneself and life. Yet despite his knowledge of growing old he seems to believe that time is on his side. He feels as if he has an endless amount of time to be lethargic and complacent in his inactivity.

Prufrock continually mentions that there is an immense availability and unlimited amount of time for decision and actions. According to Prufrock, "There will be time, there will be time/ To prepare a face to meet the faces that you meet;/ There will be time to murder and create" (26-28). He has time to build his esteem, define who he is, and construct a new face that is acceptable to the shallow urban society. His true identity will be "murdered" and his new face will be created and ready to present to the public.

Prufrock then continues by stating that, "There will be time... And time yet for a hundred indecisions/ And for a hundred visions and revisions/ Before the taking of a toast and tea" (28, 32-34). This insinuates Prufrock's hesitation and anticipated delay to make a decision about his identity. He dawdles in his indecisiveness that represents the current anxieties in his internal realm. Yet, even if he were to be proactive and create the perfect "face" his words would fail to "say what [he] meant at all" (97). Eventually he fails to succeed in the harsh, hypocritical world that retaliates against the modern individual.

T.S. Eliot attempts to reflect the difficult decision that faces human beings in the transformation to the modern world. He seeks to answer, what is life and what does it mean?

When unable to answer this "explicitly universal significance" (Halverson 572) Eliot allows Prufrock to drift into a dream state in the natural and authentic silent seas. The sea represents freedom from the incapacitating world. It is the antithesis of the confined rooms and narrow streets where the poem rests. In contrast, the sea is seen to be "deep, formless, and windblown" (Halverson 580). The occupants of the sea, the "sea-girls"(130) further demonstrate separation from to the shallow women of the modern society who idle their life away in the salon. The mermaids are a "fleeing image of everything [Prufrock's] own world is not" (Halverson 580) - unconstrained and free. Thus only in a dream, not in reality, are we free to be who we are and accept our uniquely formed identity.

Once we come to this realization, we are awoken from the dream by the loud voices of "the chattering of the women who aimlessly come and go and intrude upon our awareness, the life which they represent, now made unbearable by the vision of the sea, and suffocates us" (Halverson 580).

At the end of the poem, Prufrock comes to realize that "his own acceptance of authentic being would necessarily require a revolution of his "days and ways", a completely uprooting change. He has seen "a vision of freedom, but, unable to grasp it, he again sinks into the bondage of an artificial, empty life where everything is formulated and measured out, where he must "prepare a face" and meet other prepared faces, not people" (Halverson 579),

As a reader, we are intimately connected with Prufrock's agonies and intricate mediation about the nature of things, his hopes, which he knows to be vain, and his final distressing and pathetic acceptance of his hopelessness. We assume a bond with Prufrock and begin to see the world according to his eyes is a harsh reality where individuals' hopes, dreams, identity, and freedoms are squeezed out of them by modern society.

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