

First World War and the Changing Notions of Individual and Society in T.S. Eliot's "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock"

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Abstract

The First World War (1914-18) was a milestone in world history as it changed not only geographical markings of States but also proved to be a watershed moment for the modern period of English Literature. The poem 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. 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 society as a modern man. Eliot portrays the complexities of the modern world vividly through the inconsistent psychology of Prufrock. 'The Love Song' is more than a retreat from love, however; it is the caricature of a man in Hell, the hell appears to be merely the trivial one of the self-conscious individual in a sterile society. Therefore, the paper focuses on how the war shadowed on the notions of individual and society with special reference to T.S. Eliot's "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock".

Keywords : Modernism, Individual, Society

Introduction:

'The Love Song of J Alfred Prufrock' is a poem by the poet and critic T S Eliot, and a key document of literary modernism. It was first published in Poetry magazine in June 1915, and later collected in Eliot's first book, Prufrock and other Observations (1917). As both a poet and critic, T. S. Eliot investigated Western cultural history. Eliot was particularly interested in modern history, which begins with the Renaissance in the 15th century. From his 20th-century vantage point, Eliot was of the opinion that Western culture is in a state of decline and therefore that early modernity (the 15th through 18th centuries) surpasses late modernity (the 18th century onward). "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock" reflects Eliot's views on these cultural and historical trends.

One window into Eliot's diagnosis of 20th-century Western culture is the explicit contrast J. Alfred Prufrock draws between himself and the eponymous character of Shakespeare's Hamlet, written three centuries earlier. Eliot suggests that Prufrock's feeble, self-conscious, unheroic character is the product of a superficial contemporary culture. After all, in his view, 20th-century modernity is a degraded version of the early modern era that produced Prince Hamlet.

Still, Hamlet and Prufrock have certain issues in common. Both are indecisive and struggle to take action, both feel alienated from the people around them, and both express discontent with

the capacity of language to “say just what [they] mean.” Yet Hamlet is an exemplar of grand internal drama who wrestles with life’s enormous questions, whereas the self-conscious Prufrock is reduced to discussing trivialities such as whether to part his hair at the back. While Prufrock also struggles with questions of greater meaning, he cannot muster the certainty or boldness to even state the questions.

Eliot implies that the difference between Hamlet and Prufrock is largely one of social context. Something has been lost in the three-hundred years between the two characters. When he says, “I have seen the moment of my greatness flicker,” Prufrock is also speaking as the voice of modernity itself. It’s not just Prufrock but 20th-century modernity that is “cautious, meticulous... [and] a bit obtuse.” Hamlet can’t decide whether or not to avenge his father’s murder; more broadly, he struggles to discern the worth and purpose of human life. By comparison, Prufrock can’t decide whether it’s even worth it to ask such questions, nor can he articulate them. Eliot argues that later modernity is one that discourages heroism and the genuine gravitas of the prince, forcing the contemporary individual to stoop to the superficial “high sentence” and mocking irony of the fool.

Eliot uses a number of notably modern techniques to construct his 'love song' which is, ironically, not a lyrical praise of beauty or confession of undying devotion. Instead, the reader is invited to explore the mind of a nervous man, presumably middle-aged due to the reference the "bald spot in the middle of [his] hair" (40), who is apprehensive about attending social functions where "the women come and go/Talking of Michelangelo" (13-14).

In the early 1900’s artistic movement of modernism dominated many facets of aesthetic representation as writers, artists, and musicians abandoned the starched, conventional styles of the Victorian age for a less restrictive form of expression. Artisans, particularly the writers of the period, experimented within their craft by ignoring the traditional narrative and poetic forms in an attempt convey their personal disdain for the social climate of a newly industrialized culture consumed with monetary wealth and the ideals of genteel refinement that attended to its standards. This contempt for the conventional values of society became a prevailing theme of modern American literature, as writers like T.S. Eliot turned the focus of their works away from the portrayal and praise of upper and middle class society and toward their personal critique of this mode of life. Eliot's poem, "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock," embodies this popular modern theme by directing the reader's attention toward how an individual is subconsciously affected by the standards of society by focusing on the self and how social ethics can drive feelings of inadequacy and alienation.

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toward the members of society who felt the intense isolation that results from, essentially, not "fitting in", and in a society dominated by wealthy tycoons and modern industry, Eliot used his skill to challenge the ideals of the ruling class and to draw attention to the most simplistic, yet modern, concept of all: the individual.

Society gives us a set of unspoken rules and regulations that must be abided by which helps an individual stay away from the criticism; thus is Eliot's message in his poem, "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock." This poem has been given a cynical voice in which Eliot tries to convey his message of modern society and its expectations. He is in a position in which he knows what the flaws in society are but does not have the courage or the ability to convey the message to the rest of the people. He fears what "they" might say and how "they" will treat him, will ruin him if he exploits society. Eliot gives evidence of the mockery society exhibits in line 41: "They will say: 'How his hair is growing thin!'" (775).

Towards the end of the poem the reader gains a sense of irony and sarcasm that is expressed within the tone: "Till human voices wake us, and we drown" (778). "Human voices" is supposed to represent a helping hand in which any person in trouble can be helped by humanity. However, these human voices only cause the person in need to "drown" in their words. This is ironic because, as indicated above, humanity is the coexistence of a fellow human with the help (if necessary and available) of another fellow human when he/she is in need of it. However, metaphorically speaking, the person in need in the poem (Alfred) only receives negativity and hostility from society and his fellow men, thus causing him/her to drown in the words of the human voices. This is the most important set back of society conveyed by Eliot in his poem.

The poem represents Prufrock's journey toward his sea of poetic creativity, where his real self as a poet is revealed and realized. Prufrock's movement toward his goal is the thread that unifies all the parts of the poem, which initially seems to be a poem made of fragments. These fragments then thread together the individual self and how society impacts the individual. The inner workings of a modern mind are represented par excellence through the lens of learned but extremely shy Prufrock. The World War not only impacted the armies and geographies of States but the jolt was felt till the individual and surrounding society. The poem is a masterpiece which paints and narrates the tragedy, dilemma and after-effects of the ironic 'Great War'.

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