J Alfred Prufrock Essay, Research Paper

Love, Lust or Lackluster Lifestyle?

The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock demonstrates the effects of social and economic

pressure in the life of a Victorian man. T.S. Eliot shows us, in an ironic monologue, how the

reality of age and social position paralyzes his character with fear. The poem opens with six lines

from Dante s Infernio . This particular stanza explains that the speaker is in hell and the message

can only be told to someone else in hell. The speaker tells us that it is OK for the listener to hear

the message, since in order to hear you must already be in hell and no one ever returns from there.

So the message will never leave. I believe Eliot uses this message to infer that only a reader who

understands the loneliness and desperation of Prufrock can truly understand the poem. However,

in my research, I have found as many different interpretations of the poem as I have found

readers. Most agree; however, that Prufrock is speaking to the reader when he says you and

I (Line 1). Many readers also agree that Prufrock is a lonely man, but what type of company he

desires seems to vary greatly. Interpretations include sex, social company, long term love, and

even death. I believe Prufrock yearns for the sense of belonging, both with a female and with his

society. He struggles with issues of sex, age and social change.

The beginning lines of the poem(1-25) paint for a very descriptive picture of the street

where Prufrock is walking. It also alerts the reader of Prufrock s distaste for this area and this

society. He describes it as have deserted , muttering . one-night cheap hotels and sawdust

restaurants .(5-7) He contrasts that with his destination of a room where women come and

go/Talking of Michelangelo (13&14). Prufrock doesn t give the reader much insight into his

thoughts until line 26. From this line forward, we get a glimpse of what it must be like to be

Prufrock. He tells us There will be time, there will be time/ To prepare a face to meet the faces

that you meet (27-28), indicating repression. He must prepare himself mentally to be able to

put on the correct social image before he makes his visit (12). The rest of the poem simply

reinforces his struggle between the way he would like to be and the reality of his life. He begins to

ponder the overwhelming question (11) of whether or not he could have a romantic interlude

with one of the ladies he is gong to visit, but the socially acceptable and slightly neurotic side of

him emerges and he quickly switches his thoughts to his thinning hair. I believe he is trying to

gather the courage to approach one of these ladies (42-43&45-46) but looses the courage as

quickly as it came to him. He then laments about his indecision and lack of courage, in a minute

there is time/ For decision and revisions with a minute will reverse . The theme of Prufrock s

fickle thoughts run throughout the poem, as illustrated in his confidence about his outfit and taste,

then just the next line he his back to the insecurity about his age But how his arms and legs are

thin. (45)

Prufrock goes on to tell the reader of his experience I have known them all–/Have

known the evenings, mornings, afternoons, (50) describing the stages of his life from his youth

through his young adulthood to his present state, as a middle aged man. He feels the age and

eventual death of not only himself but of the society he is a part of. He hears voices

dying…..Beneath the music from a farther room (52-53), and realizes that he is at the end of his

time. I think he realizes that he is not a member of the modern society, nor am I sure he wants to

be. But he does feel that he is watched like a specimen formulated, sprawling on a pin (57). But

unlike a bug in a bug collection, he is still alive and tortured wriggling on the wall (58). He

realizes that his customs are a part of the past, but he is unable to see the way to move on. He

thinks perhaps he should spit out the butt-ends of my days and ways (60) but realizes he

wouldn t know how to resume life in the new world And how should I presume? (61).

2.

Prufrock goes back to his own way of thought and begins to remember the women in the

parlor and his mind begins to wonder to more physical elements of their company and he soon

begins to muster up courage again. His confidence becomes evident And how should I begin?/

Shall I say, I have gone at dusk through narrow streets/ And watched the smoke that rises from

the pipes/ Of lonely men in shirt-sleeves, leaning out of windows/… (69-72). This stanza has

almost a superior ring to it. As though Prufrock realizes he is socially superior to the men in the

windows. He is careful to point out that they are smoking but not wearing their jackets. They are

spending their evening leaning out of windows (72) overlooking narrow streets (70). A man of

Prufrock s stature would not do such distasteful things and would therefore be worthy of these

women s company. He carefully contrasts the women in the parlor whose arms braceleted, white

and bare (63) lie along a table, or wrap a shawl (67) with the informal and guttural image of

these men in town. J. Alfred takes seven lines to carefully draw us a picture of a formal evening in

this parlor, and only three to describe that which is distasteful to him. But knowing he will not be

act on his feelings he decides he would be better off as a pair of ragged claws/ Scuttling across

the floors of silent seas. (71-72)

Lines 75-86 tell of the sleep that both he and his culture are in. The cultures ignorance of

it s own impending death and his inaction regarding his desire for passion. He says he has seen

the moment of my greatness flicker (84) which his own admission of his mortality. And as he

looks back he realizes that he is lonely. Prufrock says it would have been worth it, after all (88)

worth the formality of his life he could simply have the company of one of these women. Perhaps,

even worth the gossip that would have occurred(89) if he could simply feel the passion of a young

man again. He hopes passion will bring him back to life(94-95). I believe his desire is much more

than sexual. Prufrock wants one of these women of intellect who will challenge him. He wants to

escape his own thoughts and have stimulating conversation. He wants a woman who will say that

is not what I meant at all. (110)

3.

Then back to the stately old Prufrock, who submits he will not even be able to be like

Hamlet , instead he will only be a pathetic advisor. He tells us he is so indecisive and so unable

to make a commitment to action that he cannot even rise to the occasion of the person most

known for his inaction. He basically tells us he is lower than low. He is intelligent, well spoken,

and educated(116-117) but so much a coward that he is almost ridiculous–/ Almost, at times,

the Fool. (118-119)

Although many of the comments and interpretations of The Love Song of J. Alfred

Prufrock that I have read seem to believe that the last 4 stanzas are a sign that he may break out

of his shell. I believe it is the surrender of all hope and the recognition of the inconceivability of

his desires. I think lines 120-130 are Prufrock s way of telling us of the dream of youth that he

will leave behind. He will not wear the bottoms of my trousers rolled (121) nor wear flannel

trousers, and walk upon the beach. These are the customs and actions of young passionate men.

Men whose physical appearance and less stuffy lifestyle will attract the mermaids (124). He

concedes I do not think that they will sing to me. (125) Prufrock leaves us with the thought of

how life and society can force us from our dreams and sink us with reality. We have lingered in

the chambers of the sea/ By sea-girls wreathed with seeweed red and brown/ Till human voices

wake us, and we drown. (129-131)

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