On The Love Song Of J. Alfred Prufrock Essay, Research Paper

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In The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock, T. S. Eliot reveals the thoughts and feelings of the poem?s subject, Prufrock, in a way that Prufrock could not have articulated himself, since it is the poem?s objective to illustrate Prufrock?s insecurity. By not commenting directly and allowing the reader to draw conclusions from clues given in dramatic monologue, Eliot adds meaning and rewards the reader. His use of an epigraph heightens the reward and demonstrates that J. Alfred Prufrock cannot speak in life as he does in the poem. Through use of these techniques, Eliot creates a poem that is both subtle and effective at generalizing the insecurity of Prufrock.

The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock, gives the reader subtle hints about its meaning. The first of these comes in the epigraph from Dante?s Inferno: gives the reader subtle hints about its meaning. The first of these comes in the epigraph from Dante?s Inferno: gives the reader subtle hints about its meaning. The first of these comes in the epigraph from Dante?s Inferno:

S?io dredesse che mia reposta fosse

A persona che mai tornasse al mondo,

Questa fiamma staria senza piu scosse.

Ma perciocche giammai di questo fondo

Non torno vivo alcun, s?I?odo il vero,

Senza tema d?infamia ti rispondo. (27.61-66)

This is roughly translated to mean that if the speaker knew his words would be taken outside of Hades, he would not tell his story. Since he knows that Dante will not leave, he relates his secrets known only to the dead. Without the rest of the poem as context, this quote means little, if anything. This is how Eliot delivers meaning to his readers, by revealing small amounts of information at chosen intervals. The information may seem irrelevant until it is placed in the context of the entire poem, but by comparing his poem to the story told to Dante, Eliot warns the reader that this is not an ordinary monologue. In this case, the epigraph reveals that Prufrock himself could not have articulated his introspection of the poem, but this will not be evident until an analysis of the other images Eliot uses (Norton, 2140).

The poem is set as a monologue, since the speaker refers to a listener in the opening line as “you:” “Let us go then, you and I,” (l. 1). This lets the reader know that what is stated is being spoken to another person. Since a dramatic monologue typically reveals character traits that the speaker is unaware of, Eliot uses this to give the reader a clue about how to read his poem.

Eliot sets a scene that is identified by the recurring phrase, “In the room the women come and go / Talking of Michelangelo” (ll. 13-14). This probably places the scene at a social event, perhaps a tea party, and Eliot?s use of the “Michelangelo” reference, hints that this is an occasion for academics and their trivial discussions of famous artists. J. Alfred Prufrock is probably a student in this setting, but even if he is not, the setting remains one of light sophistication. Slowly, Eliot gives small amounts of information about the character of J. Alfred Prufrock:

And indeed there will be time

To wonder, ?Do I dare?? and, ?Do I dare??

Time to turn back and descend the stair,

With a bald spot in the middle of my hair?

(They will say: ?How his hair is growing thin!?) (ll. 37-40)

These lines depict a man with an overwhelming fear and insecurity about his situation, as Prufrock delivers a clue to this in each line. He convinces himself that there is time, so there is no need to rush into action. He asks if he can dare, and then has second thoughts and plans to “turn back” and leave the party. He is concerned with a bald spot and what people will say about it. He desires something very much, yet he is afraid to act. Eliot is not content with simply portraying a man who is insecure, instead, he uses the character?s own recollections and melancholy to deepen his meaning, “For I have known them all already, known them all? / Have known the evenings, mornings, afternoons.” Eliot shows further how the speaker convinces himself not to act, although it is unclear in this section of the poem what he wishes not to act on. The speaker is tormented by his neurotic insecurity, and he describes it in more detail in the successive lines.

If J. Alfred Prufrock was actually able to identify and articulate all of the feelings he demonstrates in the poem, he would most likely have been more confident and secure in himself. He then would not feel as insecure and would not need to write the poem. This is the paradox which is explained by the epigraph.

The epigraph from Inferno is what Eliot uses to show the reader that the poem is spoken, not as Prufrock would, but as what Prufrock would say if he were come back from another place, like Dante. This is a place where he could understand his insecurity and relate it in poetic form. While the speaker from Inferno has come back from Hades, Eliot does not make it clear where Prufrock is speaking from, but he is distanced, nevertheless, from the scene. The melancholy reflections in the poem are more like what an aged man would say in reflection of his youth, yet the speaker is apparently a young person who goes to academic tea parties with women who speak of Michelangelo. He is uncomfortable because he wishes to talk to them:

And I have known the arms already, known them all?

Arms that are braceleted and white and bare

(But in the lamplight, downed with light brown hair!)

Is it perfume from a dress

That makes me so digress?

Arms that lie along a table, or wrap about a shawl.

And should I then presume?

And how should I begin? (ll. 62-69)

This is what is troubling to Prufrock. He is afraid to speak to the women he sees because he feels that he will not speak well enough to have them interested in him, and his insecurity will not allow him to overcome this shyness. The women are young, as the references to “White” and “bare” indicate, and they are attractive to Prufrock. He is taken by their appearance, and it seems that he has had this problem before, since he has “known them already.”

What is odd about Prufrock is that, while he is impotent to act because he cannot begin to speak, he states what he feels about himself in an eloquent and poetic manner, worthy of any social setting, and probably enough to garner the interest of the women:

And the afternoon, the evening, sleeps so peacefully!

Smoothed by long fingers,

Asleep . . . tired . . . or it malingers,

Stretched on the floor, here beside you and me. (ll.75-78)

The flow and beauty of these lines demonstrates that Prufrock is capable of speaking about love in poetic style, so he should not be insecure. Again, it Is the understanding that Prufrock is speaking as though he were come back from another place, like Dante, that allows him to reveal his emotions in such heightened language. Prufrock has skill with language throughout the poem, but it is not Prufrock in the setting that is relating the scene. It is not the Prufrock of the scene that can quote from Marvell and Shakespeare; instead, it is the Prufrock of another place that is speaking in the poem. All this is given by Eliot?s use of a passage by Dante, but without the context of the poem as a whole, looked back on, as it were, the epigraph makes little sense and seems out of place. When taken in retrospect, the reference to Dante is not only appropriate, but it explains how a character as insecure and inarticulate as Prufrock can say exactly what he means in the poem (through the poet), but not in the scene in the poem.

Eliot draws, perhaps, on his own experiences to write The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock, but he extrapolates his sensations into the neurotic Prufrock, his alter ego. Since a poem spoken by Prufrock might have been unimaginative, Eliot chooses the device of a dramatic monologue to make his observations of the human condition. His use of the epigraph works well with the monologue to allow Eliot to write in the first person, and the technique keeps the poem fresh, even after several readings. It is more rewarding for a reader to make sense of a difficult poem, or a poem that makes its point in a very subtle manner, than it is to simply state an observation in plain language. Eliot makes a simple observation and keeps the reader interested by using unusual techniques that are both subtle and effective.

T.S. Eliot, The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock. The Norton Anthology of English Literature. 6th ed. Vol. 2. ed. M. H. Abrams New York, London: Norton, 1993.