Prufrock Essay, Research Paper

The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock – Characteristic Downfall

In T.S. Eliot’s “The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock,” the author is establishing the trouble the narrator is having dealing with middle age. Prufrock(the narrator) believes that age is a burden and is deeply troubled by it.. His love of some women cannot be because he feels the prime of his life is over. His preoccupation with the passing of time characterizes the fear of aging he has. The poemdeals with the aging and fears associated with it of the narrator.

Prufrock is not confident with himself mentally or his appearance. He is terrified of what will occur when people see his balding head or his slim and aging body. He believes everyone will think he is old and useless. They will talk about him behind his back. (They will say”How is hair is growing thin!”) My morning coat, my collar mounting firmly to the chin, My necktie rich and modest, but asserted by a simple pin– [They will say: "But how his arms and legs are thin!"]

This insecurity is definitely a hindrance for him. It holds him back from doing the things he wishes to do. This is the sort of characteristic that makes Alfred into a tragic, doomed character. He will not find happiness until he finds self-assurance within himself. The repetition of words like vision and revision, show his feelings of inadequacy in communicating with the people around him.

J. Alfred Prufrock’s self esteem affects his love life greatly. The woman he is in love with is younger than he is and this distresses him. He does not believe that some younger women could possibly accept him or find him attractive. Expressing any kind of affection to her is awkward and difficult. Prufrock knows what he must say but cannot bring himself to say it. “Should I, after tea and cakes and ices, Have the strength to force the moment to it’s crisis?”(79-80) His apprehensiveness in his love life, is very troublesome for him indeed. He wishes greatly to express his affection but it becomes suppressed within him. He compares himself to Lazarus who was an aged man restored to life by Jesus. He feels that it will take a miracle to make him feel young again. Prufrock sees his age as the end of his romantic zeal. He assumes the response to his love will be snappy and heartless. Prufrock believes that women do not find older men attractive or see a possibility of romance in them.

The rhyme scheme Elliot uses in this poem depicts the disenchanted and confused mind of the narrator. The poem is written using a non-uniform meter and rhyme. Various stanzas are not of uniform length. This method is used to represent the mood and feelings in the verse. Prufrock is feeling confused and overwhelmed by the adversities of life so it is logical that his thought will have the same types of characteristics. His thoughts lead to ambiguity such as at the start of the poem. “There you go then, you and I”(1) This could be referring to Prufrock and himself, or Prufrock and his lover.

Elliot wrote this poem in a time when social customs were still considered an issue. Everyone had their place and did not vary from that. Stereotypes of groups were lived up to and nobody tried to change it. Elliot uses blatant images of different classes in order to show these dissimilarities. The lower class lived a meager, dull and predictable life. They spend “restless nights in one-night cheap hotels.”(6) The rich on the other hand are educated and enjoy life every day. They are busy and bustle around joyfully in order to get things done. In the room the women come and go Talking of Michelangelo.(13-14) Unfortunately, because of his age Prufrock feels that he does not belong to any of these classes. He has similarities pertaining to each of them but as a whole feels that he simply exists in his own classification.

The debate in Prufrock’s mind finally comes to a close when he compares himself to Prince Hamlet from William Shakespear’s masterpiece Hamlet. Hamlet was able to express his love and J. Alfred was envious of that. “No! I am not Prince Hamlet, nor was it meant to be”(111) He feels he is more like Polonius an old, attendant to Lord Hamlet who is intelligent, wise, and eager to please. Prufrock decides he is diplomatic, conscientious, and strives for perfection. However at the same time he tends to lack some sort of mental power, fears he is looking like a fool. This is the conclusion he comes to in order to decide to accept his place in society and live life the way he should.

Eliot uses the reference of time often in order to show the state of mind of the narrator. The contrasts used show the total indecisiveness of Prufrock. For the most part the examples are used to illustrate the stereotype of an old person. It is was accepted that aging people did not work and therefor had time for considering life and other aspects of their existence. And Indeed there will be time To wonder, “Do I dare?” and, “Do I Dare?”

His eternal dilemma is characterized by his belief that there will be time to consider everything. The time allusions are to show that Prufrock is getting increasingly older. He says “I have measured out my life with coffee spoons.”(51) This again shows his obsession with the passing of time.

Feeling like that of an outsider, Prufrock discovers he cannot exist with the type of people he once did. He can relate to them but he feels they will not accept him because of his age and appearance. His existence is solitary and boring while their state is fun and exciting. “I know the voices dying with a dying fall/Beneath the music from a farther room.”(52-53) He can hear the voices of his neighbors but he cannot go to them. He is bothered by the idea of the younger generation examining him. He wishes he could fit in but believes that is not a reality.

Fantasizing of a world where these problems do not exist is a pleasant daydream for Prufrock. He imagines the peaceful world under the sea where social classes do not exist. This shows the internal conflict still occurring within him. Even though he has overcome his problem with his love life, he still has many other worries to contend with. The mermaids are singing beautifully, but in his opinion, they cannot possibly be singing for him. His insecurity is still present and seems incurable. His fantasy world is brought to a crashing halt easily. “Till human voices wake us, and we drown.”(131) His only happiness can be found in daydreams and can be destroyed easily as such. Although giving him temporary relief from the pressures of his life, this dreamlike state is destroying his heart and only returning to the real world will save him.

In Elliot’s masterpiece “The Love Song of J.Alfred Prufrock,” as time passes so does the human spirit of the narrator. His heart decays by the moment. Even within his fantasies he is tortured by the ever-present problems which plague him throughout his life. He can’t even see the point in expressing his love because of the fear of being rejected. Elliot’s depiction of the worries of aging is a major aspect incorporated into the poem. Although Prufrock is a man of knowledge and society he is still a misfit because of a little characteristic he can do nothing about. Age kills us all, but for Prufrock it has already killed him.