

High culture in t.s.
eliot's the love song
of j. alfred prufrock:
friend or foe?



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High culture bears a great significance in Eliot's poetry and in *The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock* he expresses its significance in life and the valuable lessons it can provide. He also manifests his concerns about culture's influence on his contemporaries but also about "the burden of vision" (Atkins 136) that the artist has to bear. Prufrock tries to escape the loneliness he feels by looking for wisdom in the past but even though high culture seems to be a friend that provides momentary solace, deep down it makes him more detached from his environment and more aloof. Should the artist resort to high culture in his effort to escape the impersonal and pretentious reality or is it just another mask behind which he tries to hide from life? For Eliot culture is the force that connects the past, the present and the future, the very thing that makes civilizations and societies advance and it includes art, history, religion and myths. The artist is a part of that cultural history that has shaped his world but he also has the power and even responsibility to change it and alter it and as Eliot has pointed out: "what happens when a new work of art is created is something that happens simultaneously to all the works of art which preceded it" (*The Sacred Wood* 44). He believed that the authors of the past are part of that history that shapes and defines us and that "historical sense involves a perception, not only of the pastness of the past, but of its presence" (*The Sacred Wood* 44). The functions of culture and tradition are numerous and multifaceted. The most important role that tradition can have in the present is being a source of wisdom and knowledge that can provide answers relevant to the present if people learn to use and apply this ancient wisdom that has been passed down to them through art. He uses Dante as an example of those writers of the past and says that "Comedy is in some way a moral education", <https://assignbuster.com/high-culture-in-ts-eliot-the-love-song-of-j-alfred-prufrock-friend-or-foe/>

underlining thus how important it is to not forget the continuous relevance of these texts in the present (The Sacred Wood 148). The contemporary artist also has a great responsibility to tradition and culture and he should try to find his own individuality through this constant dialogue with the past, “ the most individual parts of his work may be those in which the dead poets, his ancestors, assert their immortality most vigorously. [...] Looking at the writers of the past is exactly what makes a writer most acutely conscious of his place in time, of his own contemporaneity” (The Sacred Wood 43-44). He seems to envision tradition as a river that is always flowing and connecting everything, the past with the future but also vice versa, it is a “ development which abandons nothing en route, which does not superannuate either Shakespeare, Homer, or the rock drawing of the Magdalenian draughtsmen” (The Sacred Wood 46). Artistic creation is a process that changes and influences the society as a whole. In The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock it is evident that Eliot applies the principles that he has set out in his essays concerning tradition and culture by constantly alluding to various literary texts and myths that he juxtaposes with the moral decay of the industrial landscape in which Prufrock is trapped as he is taking a walk down “ streets that follow like a tedious argument/ of insidious intent” (1. 8-9) Even though Eliot would probably disagree with equating Prufrock with himself, it is evident that the poem is an internal monologue of an artist and his concerns so it is possible to understand his own reflections about life as an artist living in an impersonal and threatening city. The poem's epigram is from Dante's Inferno and “ the speaker, Guido de Montefeltro, consumed in flame as punishment for giving false counsel, confesses his shame without fear of its being reported since he believes Dante cannot return to earth” (in Baym and <https://assignbuster.com/high-culture-in-ts-eliot-the-love-song-of-j-alfred-prufrock-friend-or-foe/>)

Loeffelholz 1577). This epigram introduces us to the theme of hell which is manifested in the image of the city, full of smoke and loneliness where the artist, like Dante, is trying to escape his torment but he also introduces the theme of the prophet, the person who comes back from the vision of the hell but may fall in the moral and spiritual sin of false counsel as Guido did. The artist, unlike everyone around him, has understood that his life is a living hell while others live their lives unaware that they are already dead, “ for in Dante’s hell souls are not deadened, as they mostly are in life; they are actually in the greatest torment of which each is capable” (The Sacred Wood 150). The artist who has to bear the burden of this knowledge cannot articulate it to those around him and influence them because he is also aware of his own insignificance, his own mortality, “ I am no prophet” (11. 10). The artist feels trapped behind the mask that he is forced to wear because everyone around him seems to be distant and pretentious, “ There will be time, there will be time/ To prepare a face to meet the faces that you meet;” (4. 4-5). Using a literary allusion to Andrew Marvell, Eliot expresses this façade of smoke that blinds the artist and makes Prufrock want to live either in the nostalgic past or the distant future, but never in the present. This temporal and special displacement within Prufrock is also evident in Eliot’s allusion to Hesiod’s didactic poem Works and Days, “ And time for all the works and days of hands” (4. 7). Hesiod, the ancient Greek poet, cannot give him solace but instead he can only “ drop a question on your plate” (4. 8). Prufrock seems to look for answers in ancient wisdom but still he cannot answer this great elusive question. While Prufrock struggles to understand the cause of his loneliness and the reason why he cannot communicate his feelings, “ In the room the women come and go/ Talking of Michelangelo” (5. <https://assignbuster.com/high-culture-in-ts-eliot-the-love-song-of-j-alfred-prufrock-friend-or-foe/>

1-2). Everyone around him is indifferent towards the profound truth that he finds in the artists of the past and use high culture as something mundane, a way for them to appear cultivated and pretentious while they go on living their insignificant lives in the living hell of the city. As Eliot points out in *Christianity and Culture*, “ culture itself is regarded either as a negligible by-product which can be left to itself, or as a department of life to be organized in accordance with the particular scheme we favour” (164) and while Prufrock wants to be able to connect with one of these women and escape his misery, he cannot surpass their ignorance towards everything he holds dear because “ the arts without intellectual context are vanity” (*Christianity and Culture* 95). Prufrock is in need of human contact and connection but he finds that his contemporary society is incapable of anything as sincere as that. The city is like an anesthetized body, “ like a patient etherized upon a table” (1. 3) and connection is almost impossible. As Murphy points out “ Eliot’s world would have been a world where matters of manners and decorum took precedence over more common human impulses, [...] the longing of the natural ease of human interaction without the constraints of social proprieties” (289). He constantly feels that he is being judged and that everyone is only looking at him, he knows “ the eyes that fix you in a formulated phrase” (8. 2) in order to comment on his flaws and observe him like a dead butterfly, “ When I am pinned and wriggling on the wall” (8. 4). Prufrock seems to blame others for his detachment like the stereotypical romantic artist who is ahead of his contemporaries and thus cannot fit in but deep down he realizes that he too can appear pretentious and judgmental. How can he approach a woman and really connect with her when he too puts everyone into stereotypes and equates all the women that “ come and go/ <https://assignbuster.com/high-culture-in-ts-eliot-the-love-song-of-j-alfred-prufrock-friend-or-foe/>

Talking of Michelangelo" (5. 1-2)? Could culture that he considers a haven actually be his own hell? Here Eliot puts a very important question to the front about the role of the artist in society: whether the artist should keep a distance from everyday life and the social sphere or take part in life even if he feels that he has a special burden to bear. Eliot tries to answer this question through Prufrock and figure out if high culture is a friend or a foe to the tormented soul of the artist. Prufrock seems to be split by this question and although he feels safe in the darkness of his room, in "the afternoon, the evening, sleeps so peacefully!" (11. 1), alone, away from those who are constantly judging him, it is his emotions that he cannot escape, the emotions that he cannot find a way to express and Eliot seems to know this painful reality when he writes that "the intense feeling, ecstatic or terrible, without an object or exceeding its object, is something which every person of sensibility has known" (The Sacred Wood 93). He cannot find himself in the comfort zone of his loneliness because what he really wants is a woman to share all his intense emotions with, the emotions that he fails to articulate, "It is perfume from a dress/ That makes me so digress?" (9. 4-5). He says: "I should have been a pair of ragged claws/ Scuttling across the floors of silent seas" (10. 4-5) because he has lost his identity in the chaos of the city but he cannot find his true identity when he is alone either because as Hart points out "personality is the collective fiction of a world in which experience is private but depends utterly upon the contingent presence of others" (176). Prufrock is like Hamlet when it comes to this feeling. He too is lost in indecisiveness and loneliness and they share what Eliot identifies in the character of Hamlet, "it is the buffoonery of emotion which can find no outlet in action" (The Sacred Wood 93). Even though Prufrock is like Hamlet, <https://assignbuster.com/high-culture-in-ts-eliot-the-love-song-of-j-alfred-prufrock-friend-or-foe/>

he cannot fully embody this stereotype of the greatest romantic hero who is deeply wounded by the maze he is in. He would have liked to have the majestic glory of such a hero but he comes in short, “ No! I am not Prince Hamlet, nor was meant to be;” (14. 1). No one will quote what he says or consider him profound and he cannot even be the protagonist in his own play, he only manages to be “ full of high sentence, but a bit obtuse;/ At times, indeed, almost ridiculous-/ Almost, at times, the Fool” (14. 7-9). Living according to the standards of his time seems to be frustrating but living by the standards of the sphere of high culture is even more depressing because nothing can help him escape himself. As Eliot points out, “ poetry is not a turning loose of emotion, but an escape from emotion; it is not the expression of personality, but, an escape from personality” (The Sacred Wood 52). Prufrock fails to fit into yet another image from the past, the image of the prophet who has to live a life of isolation and constant betrayal because he has the burden of knowledge and the God-given responsibility to save all those around him that have been lost. Even though he too knows this feeling and in his effort to learn from the past has considered assuming the role of such a savior, he admits: “ Though I have seen my head (grown slightly bald) brought in /upon a platter/ I am no prophet-and here's no great matter” (11. 8-10). He again has to face his own mortality and the failure of trying to aspire to mythical stereotypes that transcend reality. He says “ And I have seen the eternal Footman hold my coat, and snicker, / and in short, I was afraid” (11. 11-12) and the parallel he tries to draw to connect himself with his ancestors proves painfully unfruitful because he has to bear the inevitable fear of growing old and dying. Old age will not reward the romantic intellectual who will have to “ wear white flannel trousers, and walk

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upon the beach” (16. 2) and although he has heard the song of the mermaids, they will not sing for him “ I have heard the mermaids sing, each to each/ I do not think that they will sing to me” (16. 3-17. 1) Even though the society is indeed one of false pretenses and shallow human connections, it seems like Prufrock is not trying to get out of his hell by working through his problems and surpassing the sorrows that every human being faces, but instead hides behind the bubble of an ideal world that he has put together only with the pieces of history and culture that he handpicked from the ruins, thus like an unreliable narrator, he is creating a distorting lens through which he evaluates himself and judges everyone around him. The reader never finds out the answer to the question and as Mays points out, “(the poem) moves through the pattern of expectation, failure and suspended resolution” (in Moody 112). One thing is very clear from the poem though, that no matter where the individual choses to hide, it is the connection to others that he will eventually need the most. It is not Prufrock that will show others how dead they really are, but the human voices and the loss of and need for this connection that will make him realize that he was the one who was drowning all along, “ Till human voices wake us, and we drown” (19. 3).

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