

Analysis of eliot's the love song of j. alfred prufrock



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T. S. Eliot's "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock" begins with an epigraph from Dante's *Inferno*. Being translated, it says: "If I thought that I was speaking/ to someone who would go back to the world,/ this flame would shake no more./ But since nobody has ever/ gone back alive from this place, if what I hear is true,/ I answer you without fear of infamy." The speaker, in this case, will only tell his story with the knowledge that living ears will never hear it. Eliot's Prufrock faces the same situation; he has a story to tell - a love song to sing - that he didn't dare to declare among the living. Only now, where nobody can hear him, can Prufrock finally declare what cannot be said. He has been condemned to a kind of hell by his inaction.

This hell is cast in a yellow light. Images of yellow overwhelming the landscape abound: "The yellow fog that rubs its back upon the window-panes, the yellow smoke that rubs its back upon the window-panes" (15-16). Yellow is a color associated with cowardice. Fittingly, Prufrock's world is cast in this yellow light because his world is a world of cowardice. His inability to speak his feelings and the fear of what implications that would hold have confined him to where he is. Essentially, Prufrock has proved himself to be a coward. This prison is a coward's prison. Had Prufrock sung the song he meant to sing, he would not be in hell.

Yet it seems Prufrock had been planning to make his declaration. He always meant to say what had been plaguing him. He seemed to feel that he had all of the time in the world to act on his feelings:

And indeed there will be time

For the yellow smoke that slides along the street...

There will be time, there will be time

To prepare a face for the faces that you meet;

There will be time to murder and create,

And time for all the works and days of hands...

Time for you and time for me,

And time yet for a hundred indecisions,

And for a hundred visions and revisions,

Before the taking of a toast and tea. (22-34)

Prufrock's time to act was limited, but he didn't know it. He thought that time would be limitless ("There will be time, there will be time"), and he found that it wasn't. The tragedy is now that Prufrock is finally speaking his mind, his words will nevertheless remain unheard. He has all the time he needs now, yet his true time has passed. He cannot speak to the woman he loves. He can only speak to a great void, certain that he will not be heard.

The stanza mentioned in the previous paragraph illustrates Prufrock's constant internal turmoil. He must "prepare a face to meet the faces" that he meets, for he cannot simply be who he is. The simple "taking of a toast and tea" requires "a hundred indecisions" and "a hundred visions and revisions." He is so repressed that tea is a major trial. It is clear that the actions of everyday life bring great turmoil to Prufrock. He does not know how to act and does not know how to say what he wants to say. Every

utterance is thought out and analyzed in his mind a hundred times. He is paralyzed by the fear of social criticism:

And I have known the eyes already, known them all -

The eyes that fix you in a formulated phrase,

And when I am formulated, sprawling on a pin,

When I am pinned and wriggling on the wall,

Then how should I begin

To spit out all the butt-ends of my days and ways?

And how should I presume? (54-61)

The image of Prufrock "pinned and wriggling on the wall" creates an image of him being totally exposed and on display. He is much like a specimen being primed for dissection. When on display, he is vulnerable to the criticism of his peers. The eyes that Prufrock speaks of are their eyes. Thus, one can see that simply functioning in the social world puts Prufrock in a state of extreme distress. He does not know how to act and fears being exposed. It is no wonder that he has difficulty declaring his feelings of love to a woman.

This is the question that ultimately overwhelms Prufrock - the question of love. This question is presented in the first stanza: "Streets that follow like a tedious argument/ Of insidious intent/ To lead you to an overwhelming question.../Oh, do not ask, 'What is it?'" (8-10). This "overwhelming

question" haunts the rest of the poem. The way that the sentence trails off after "To lead you to an overwhelming question..." implies that it is a loaded question, and one that will not be answered easily. Love could have served as a paradise for Prufrock, even a type of heaven. Yet he chose to forsake heaven for hell. Why anyone would do such a thing is a question that cannot possibly be answered easily. Prufrock spends the entire poem trying to explain this.

Aside from the question of why Prufrock let love get away from him, there is the question of what could have happened if he had, in fact, spoken his feelings. That question is what ultimately kept Prufrock from ever acting. The fear of what could have happened was simply too great. "And would it have been worth it, after all?" (86) Prufrock asks repeatedly. He does not know how to eloquently express himself - "It is impossible to say just what I mean!" (104). He imagines the possible outcomes of his declaration of love:

Would it have been worth while

If one, setting a pillow or throwing off a shawl,

And turning toward the window, should say:

"That is not it at all,

That is not what I meant, at all." (106-110)

Prufrock harbors a fear that if he was to really express what he feels, he would be misunderstood, or, worse, rejected. That is the fear expressed in "That is not what I meant, at all." He runs the risk of loving this woman and

not being loved in return. Would it be worth risking this by declaring his love - "Would it have been worth while?" Prufrock will never truly know the answer to that question.

The poem reaches somewhat of a climax at the stanza discussed in the previous paragraph. Up to that point, the poem focuses on Prufrock's deliberations and hypothetical questions. He contemplates what could have been: "Would it have been worth while, / To have bitten off the matter with a smile, / To have squeezed the universe into a ball..." (90-92). He also rationalizes his current situation: "For I have known them all already, known them all- / Have known the evenings, mornings, afternoons, / I have measured out my life with coffee spoons" (49-51). All of these musings lead up to his ultimate question - the question of love. The poem climaxes with Prufrock's greatest fear: that he should speak his mind to the woman he loves, and she replies, "That is not it at all, / That is not what I meant, at all" (109-110). In a sense, Prufrock has justified his cowardice up to this point. He has presented all of his reasons for not making his declaration. He has shown the reader all of the parts of himself that he was too afraid to show the world. Basically, up until this climax, Prufrock has been preparing himself for making his declaration.

Naturally, the letdown comes after the climax. Prufrock acknowledges his inabilities and begrudgingly realizes who he is:

No! I am not Prince Hamlet, nor was meant to be;

Am an attendant lord, one that will do

To swell a progress, start a scene or two...

At times indeed, almost ridiculous -

Almost, at times, the Fool. (111-113; 118-119)

Shakespeare's Hamlet, much like Prufrock, falls victim to great internal conflict and does not know how to act upon his feelings. They are both victims of indecision. However, in the end, Hamlet does act - which Prufrock never does. Prufrock acknowledges that he is simply not who he is - "No! I am not Prince Hamlet, nor was meant to be." This is his rationalization for not acting on his emotions - that is simply not who he is. The role he is destined to play, instead, is that of "the Fool." This is the great letdown. He will never be the person he wishes to be.

The social world is simply a world that Prufrock cannot be comfortable in. Who he feels he should be socially and who he truly is do not match up. He wishes to be able to assimilate flawlessly into the social world. "I have heard the mermaids singing, each to each" (124), Prufrock observes. These mermaids are figures of women, precisely the figures that Prufrock cannot communicate with. He wishes for them to sing their song to him. However, "I do not think that they will sing to me" (125), Prufrock contends, accepting his life's position. The mermaids can only exist as visions in Prufrock's dreams. He has "lingered in the chambers of the sea/ By sea-girls wreathed with seaweed red and brown/ Till human voices wake us, and we drown" (128-130). He can dream of existing with these creatures until the reality hits him. "Human voices wake us," bringing Prufrock to the real world, the human world, where he drowns. This is a world where he cannot exist. Only <https://assignbuster.com/analysis-of-eliots-the-love-song-of-j-alfred-prufrock/>

in his hell can he speak, asking himself the nagging question: " Would it have been worth it, after all?"