

Comparative analysis of "la belle dame sans merci" and "the lovesong of j. alfred...



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It comes as no surprise that love poems are not a rare commodity. Whether they're about a lovesick man pining for his soul mate or a general reflection about how one perceives love, these poems offer an analysis of one of the most innate desires of our human nature. Despite inevitable differences in writing style and point of view, there can be times where love poems employ similar strategies to tackle such an analysis. John Keats' "La Belle Dame Sans Merci" and T. S. Eliot's "The Lovesong of J. Alfred Prufrock" are no exception to this occurrence.

Both poems use two different and distinct settings to assess their experiences with love; the first setting to characterize the protagonist of the poem being alienated and abandoned with respect to love; the second setting to recall or imagine love as if to resolve their alienation and solitude. Further comparative analysis will show that the settings in both poems allow for the protagonist to offer a universalization of love through self-reflection. The first setting of both poems begin by establishing a world of despair, suggesting that the protagonist has been alienated or abandoned with respect to love.

"La Belle Dame Sans Merci" opens with a knight waking from a dream, "On the cold hill's side" (Ln. 44) It can be inferred that the poem is set in the late fall, as "the sedge has withered from the Lake/and no birds sing" (Ln. 3-4), and "The squirrel's granary is full/And the harvest's done" (Ln. 6-7). The beauty of springtime has faded, and the cold and bleak winter is fast approaching. The hillside is devoid of life. The bleakness and desolation of winter and the description of the cold hillside draws the relationship between it and the knight's current circumstance in regards to love.

He didn't just wake up on the cold hillside with the woman or any fellow knights. The unnamed addressee of the knight's tale of woe found him "Alone and palely loitering" (Ln. 2). Like the bleakness of winter brings abandonment of life from the cold hillside, the knight's state of desolation is brought about by the abandonment and alienation of love in the form of the woman with whom he's in love. Similar to "La Belle Dame Sans Merci", T. S. Eliot's "The Lovesong of J. Alfred Prufrock" provides a first setting that suggests the protagonist feels alienated or abandoned with respect to love.

Prufrock establishes a dirty, urban setting, a city with "half-deserted streets," "one-night cheap hotels/And sawdust restaurants with oyster shells" (Ln. 4, 6-7). This description suggests a lower-class area of the city, one that is abandoned by most people. Not only does Prufrock suggest that the area is abandoned, he also describes the streets as full "of insidious intent" (Ln. 9). In addition to the deserted area of town, Prufrock makes note of a yellow fog lacing the buildings along the insidious streets.

He describes the fog like a cat, rubbing "its back upon the window-panes/Licked its tongue upon the corners of the evening/Lingered upon the pools that stand in drains" (Ln. 15, 17-18). Like the abandoned streets, it may be that Prufrock feels abandoned and alienated by love. He attributes his suggested alienation to his physical inadequacies, fearing that women will only see his thinning hair and thin arms and legs (Ln. 41, 44). And like the yellow fog lingering throughout the streets of the deserted city, Prufrock's alienation from love follows him wherever he goes.

With a shift in setting comes a shift in the protagonists' outlook on love.

While the first setting implied that the protagonist felt alienated or abandoned by love, the second setting for both poems is used to recall or imagine past love as to resolve their alienation and abandonment from love. After the knight in "La Belle Dame Sans Merci" realizes that he has awoken on a grim and desolate hillside, he launches into his tale about his time with the woman. Instead of being on the cold hillside, the knight describes how he met the beautiful woman in a meadow, one full of "roots of relish sweet/And honey wild, and manna dew" (Ln. 13, 25-26).

Because of how the knight describes the meadow, it can be inferred that it is springtime. This is a significant contrast to the bleak, wintry hillside that he described previously. With the contrast in this setting comes a contrast in how the knight characterizes love. In the meadow, the knight meets a beautiful woman with long hair and wild eyes. The knight describes her as having an almost fairy-like presence (Ln. 14-16). He makes her a garland for her head and bracelets from the flowers in the meadow (Ln. 17-20). The woman eventually takes the knight back to her "elfin grot", or, cave, where he kisses her.

By establishing a different setting where the knight appears to experience love, the second setting in "La Belle Dame Sans Merci" serves to resolve the knight's alienation and abandonment from love. T. S. Eliot's "The Lovesong of J. Alfred Prufrock" similarly offers a second setting where Prufrock tries to recall love to resolve his alienation from it. The dirty, urban, insidious streets laced with an ominous yellow fog suggest that Prufrock is alienated from

love. He fears not being able to find a woman that will be able to look past his physical inadequacies.

However, Prufrock attempts to resolve his alienation by shifting the setting from the insidious streets of a city to the beach. The mermaids he imagines serve the purpose of reminding him of love he once knew. Prufrock recalls a time where he shared intimate moments with a woman; he knew her eyes and what it meant when she looked at him; he remembers her arms, the color of their hair, and the exact bracelets she wore. Prufrock remembers how the smell of the woman's perfume would distract him and how he and the woman could spend the day stretched out on the floor asleep together (Ln. 55-56, 62-67, 75-78).

Even though he sees the mermaids, Prufrock assumes that they will not see or sing to him. Instead, he continues to watch them and reflect on how they remind him of love. Despite this rather vague and ultimately depressing second setting, the new setting, in contrast to the first, attempts to solve Prufrock's feelings of abandonment and alienation. The function of the two contrasting settings in "La Belle Dame Sans Merci" and "The Lovesong of J. Alfred Prufrock" is not the only similarity that the two poems share.

By the conclusion of both poems, the protagonists end up offering a universalization of love by undergoing an extensive self-reflection. The knight in "La Belle Dame Sans Merci" offers his universalization of love through an external self-reflection. He is sharing what he has learned to an unnamed listener. After recreating his dream for the listener, it becomes clear that the dream established a universal truth about love. After his day

with the woman, the knight dreams that he: Saw pale kings and princes too,
Pale warrior, death pale were they all;

They cried—" La Belle Dame Sans Merci Hath thee in thrall! " The knight continues to recreate his dream by explaining to the unnamed listener that he also saw " their starved lips in the gloam/ with horrid warning gaped wide" (Ln. 37-42). The description of the men in the knight's dream implies that his situation is not unique. Others have met a person that makes them fall completely in love. The woman in the poem becomes a symbol of that person. The experiences they share with that person are so vivid and full of life that everything else seems overwhelmingly bleak and desolate.

Upon realizing that one cannot spend their life with that other person, they feel abandoned. Their lips " starve" for a kiss from their beloved, a kiss that they will never again experience. By externalizing his self-reflection, the knight arrives at the universal truth that falling in love with someone who is not meant to be your beloved is something that everyone can or will experience. Unlike the knight's external self-reflection in " La Belle Dame Sans Merci", Prufrock offers a universalization of love through an internal self-reflection.

He is not addressing anyone or anything; he is assessing himself by thinking through his experiences with love. Prufrock offers a more psychological assessment of himself, an assessment that focuses on his inability to see past his own shortcomings. After acknowledging the failed relationships in his life, Prufrock begins to realize that maybe he is the problem, and that because of who he is, he didn't deserve the love in the first place. Prufrock

proclaims the he “ is not prince Hamlet/nor was meant to be” (Ln. 111).

Instead, Prufrock equates himself to “ an attendant lord” (Ln. 112).

By assigning himself the role of the attendant lord, Prufrock draws out similarities between he and Polonius. Polonius was not the Prince; he was the Chief Counselor for Hamlet’s father. He was often criticized for his lack of better judgment, and tried to talk like someone in a higher “ ranking” of society. Shakespeare even uses him to “ start a scene or two” (Ln. 114). Prufrock spends a significant amount of time working himself up to talking to the women he imagines, and worrying that he will be ignored due to his physical inadequacies or might say the wrong thing.

Like Polonius, Prufrock is afraid of looking like a fool. Through this internal self-reflection, Prufrock arrives at the universal truth that people can set themselves up for failed relationships because of their inability to look past their own shortcomings. When one broods over his or her own physical, emotional, intellectual, or even financial inadequacies, they prevent the possibility of finding someone that will accept them for who they are. It is a self-defeating attitude, like Prufrock’s, that can alienate us from the chance of finding true love.

There are times when two love poems can unintentionally come together to provide a deeper analysis than if read separately. A comparative analysis of John Keats’ “ La Belle Dame Sans Merci” and T. S. Eliot’s “ The Lovesong of J. Alfred Prufrock” offers such an analysis. The two poems show how not only setting and self-reflection can eventually result in a universalization of love. By examining the first setting, both poems show how a bleak and desolate

setting can function as the protagonists' feeling of abandonment and alienation from love.

When the poems change setting, it becomes clear that the protagonists' are changing the setting to recall or imagine love as to resolve their alienation or abandonment. Finally, through both an internal self-reflection by Prufrock and an external self-reflection by the knight, the settings allow for the self-reflections to result in the protagonists offering a universalization of love. "La Belle Dame Sans Merci" concludes by the knight establishing that losing someone that you were once in love with is not a unique situation.

"The Lovesong of J. Alfred Prufrock" concludes by Prufrock accepting that dwelling on personal shortcomings and inadequacies inhibit us from finding someone who actually accepts us for who we are. If there is anything that can be taken from this comparative analysis, it is that we must learn from the knight and Prufrock, and work to move on from past loves and personal shortcomings. Allowing a past love to make you feel abandoned and dwelling on personal shortcomings is easy. It is moving past them, I am afraid, that takes effort.