Evolution of attitude in eliot’s "the love song of j. alfred prufrock”

Evolution of Attitude in Eliot’s “ The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock” T. S. Eliot’s notoriously opaque “ The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock” can be interpreted only by acknowledging that the speaker’s thought process is not consistent throughout but an ongoing process. On first reading, the poems stanzas seem to belong to separate plots or lines of thought, but unity can be perceived if we think of the structure of the poem as reflective of the developing mental state of the speaker, with certain longer stanzas representing the processing of an attitude and other shorter groups of lines portraying an epiphanous or especially problematic moment precipitating a shift in the attitude of the speaker. The progress of the speaker’s attitude looks as follows: the speaker first believes it is useless to inquire into meaning, he then ponders whether he might create meaning by doing something great, he decides it is too late for him to do anything great, he wonders whether it might have been worthwhile to do something meaningful, and finally he decides there was no meaning to be found after all. The first indication of the speaker’s attitude comes early when he compares the evening to “ a patient etherised upon a table” (3) and attributes “ insidious intent” (9) to “ Streets that follow like a tedious argument.” The apparent attitude here is that of aimlessness and cynicism, two attitudes that lead the speaker to “…an overwhelming question.” (10) The question, “’What is it?’” (11), probably refers to the most overwhelming question of all, the question of where meaning can be found in mundane existence, popularly phrased as “ What is the meaning of life?” and often put to a lonely sage on a mountaintop. The end of the first stanza gives a preview of what the speaker’s ultimate decision will be in that he represses the question (11) choosing instead to distract himself by making some kind

of “ visit.” (12) The visits the speaker has mentioned thus far were to “ one-night cheap hotels” (6) and “ sawdust restaurants” (7), places where he can find entertainment to distract himself, amusement, in the etymological sense of the word, if you will. This is an interesting twist on the age-old question of what is it; instead of giving an answer or even saying it is impossible to answer, the speaker seems to imply that it is not productive to ask or even, as he will later state, that it is dangerous to consider. The refrain, “ In the room the women come and go/ Talking of Michelangelo” (13-14), perhaps indicates a moment of cynicism that captures the essence of Prufrock’s problem. He is extending his assessment of the monotony of everyday life and social calls to things that those around him consider important. The poem places these two lines in their own stanza to highlight the speaker’s attitude toward them. A sense of general disdain seems to come through as the speaker realizes the aimlessness of inane conversation and socialization, all of it a distraction from questions that have real significance or perhaps the significant question. A problem of interpretation of literal meaning arises in the third stanza that will continue to be vexing for two whole stanzas. The speaker begins to speak of a yellow fog which might be interpreted as pollution (the poem has alluded to city life several times already), actual fog, or some other unknown phenomena resembling yellow fog. Perhaps the fog is real or perhaps it is not, the real significance to the meaning of the poem is in the ability of any of these manifestations of fog to cloud the mind of the speaker. The fog could be a description of exactly what the speaker decided to do at the end of the first stanza, distract himself from dangerous questions of meaning. In line twenty-six the theme of time is introduced. The speakers assertion that “ there will be time” to consider the question later,

indeed “ time yet for a hundred indecisions,/ And for a hundred visions and revisions,” follows his description of the yellow fog to show the nature of his self-deception. This will become important towards the end of the poem, when the speaker contemplates his growing old (120). It is at that point that he decides there is no time left to make a decision. The stanzas between lines thirty-seven and fifty-four effect an important shift in the poem. The speaker shifts his focus from the futility of asking “…What is it?” (11) to a new question, “…Do I dare?” (38) or “ Can I make a decision to ‘ Disturb the universe,’ (46) and bring meaning to my own life by doing something out of the ordinary?” The speaker mourns the regularity of his life when he says “[I] Have known the evenings, mornings, afternoons,/ I have measured out my life in coffee spoons” (50-51). After equivocating for the first thirty-six lines, the speaker has now clearly delineated his problem and considered doing something great, something out of the ordinary to break out of a cycle of tedious existence. In searching for something that can give him meaning, the speaker looks to the companionship of women and decides he has “ known the arms already, known them all” (62), and he has not found meaning in that yet, so he looks to accumulated experience as a source of meaning. He remembers walking “…through narrow streets” (70) and seeing “…lonely men in shirt-sleeves, leaning out of windows” (72). That the men are lonely and without any apparent purpose causes the speaker to reject his human experience as a source of meaning, and decide there would be as much meaning in being “…a pair of ragged claws [perhaps a crab]/ Scuttling across the floors of silent seas.” (73-74)The lines “ I am no prophet—and here’s no great matter;/ I have seen the moment of my greatness flicker” (83-84) signal another change in the speaker’s perspective. He is now

resigned to his insignificance. After this point he no longer considers whether he dares “ Disturb the universe” (46) but whether it “ Would have been worth it, after all” (87). Whether or not he decides it would have been worthwhile to make the decision to do something great, he obviously believes that the opportunity to make that decision has passed. Finally, in lines 111 and following, as the speaker grows old or recognizes his age, he decides that it would not have been worthwhile to act on his impulse to do something great. After all, he is not “…Prince Hamlet, nor was meant to be” (111). He believes that his role was that of an insignificant extra, only a spare presence to “ swell a progress.” (113) In a series of short stanzas the aged speaker considers one more time whether he might do something out of the ordinary, even something small like part his hair behind (122) before he ultimately rejects his impulses to find or create meaning as folly, comparing his questions of meaning and greatness to the siren song luring man to his death. With that assertion, the speaker has come full circle. As he stated in the very first stanza, the “ overwhelming question” (10) of “ What is it?” (11) has not been productive for him, and, indeed, it is dangerous.