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Drowning in Desire

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T.S. ELIOT EXPANDS upon romantic ideals of individuality in his poem

“The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock,” by hyper-focusing on the singularity of Prufrock’s consciousness. Though romanticism typically centers upon a positive depiction of the self, Eliot depicts Prufrock’s disintegration in a perpetual state of longing. Prufrock’s troubled awareness of his desire is depicted by the seemingly chaotic, but highly intentional irregularities in the poem’s form. Eliot uses irregular form to mimic Prufrock’s desire for companionship and the tension between his outer and inner selves.

Though Prufrock’s diction and irregular form contrast with the idea of a “love song,” Eliot’s subtle integration of traditionally romantic structures shows that Prufrock longs for companionship. Despite the form’s categorization as free verse, Eliot draws on the Shakespearean sonnet to structure his first two stanzas:

Let us go then, you and I,
 When the evening is spread out against the sky
 Like a patient etherised upon a table;
 Let us go, through certain half deserted streets,
 The muttering retreats
 Of restless nights in one-night cheap hotels
 And sawdust restaurants with oyster-shells:
 Streets that follow like a tedious argument
 Of insidious intent
 To lead you to an overwhelming question . . .

Oh, do not ask, "What is it?"
 Let us go and make our visit.
 In the room the women come and go
 Talking of Michelangelo. (1-14)

The first stanza and following rhyming couplet allude to the fourteen-line structure of a Shakespearean sonnet, historically used for love poems. This "ghost sonnet" subtly reveals Prufrock's romantic striving. His striking comparison between the evening "sky" and a motionless body is jarring following the title's claim that the poem is a "love song." The disconcerting opening simile is emphasized by the lack of rhyme in the third line, further highlighting the callous diction that masks Prufrock's desire. Though Prufrock sets a somber scene of a rundown city, his "I" desires accompaniment from a "you" in his lonely state. His longing for romance is stressed by the caesura in line 1, joining the "you and I" and offsetting them from the lonely setting. Eliot's use of white space starkly separates the rhyming couplet and opening stanza, demonstrating the divide between Prufrock and companionship. His bleak city and the realm of women and socialization are disconnected.

Attempting to pursue companionship and fulfill his desire, Prufrock creates an inauthentic mask, shown by Eliot's odd use of pronouns. Prufrock's alienation from women prompts him to create "public" and "private" versions of himself. The public self is a disingenuous representation of Prufrock — one he creates to entice women. The split between his two selves is shown by Eliot's use of the pronoun "you." Though "you" can be interpreted as a romantic companion, as in the poem's opening line, Prufrock also uses it to refer to his masked self. His description of "a face to meet the faces that you meet" (27) depicts the false persona that Prufrock displays in an effort to romance women that he meets. He is resolved about the necessity of his mask: "Time for you and time for me,/ And time yet for a hundred indecisions,/ And for a hundred visions and revisions,.." (31-33). Eliot plays on the pronouns "you" and "me" to show Prufrock's belief that there is a necessity for his public self, separate from the time for his true self. The inner rhyme between "indecisions," "visions," and "revisions" strengthens Prufrock's idea that his mask can be manipulated to satisfy his desire.

The chaotic rhyme scheme of the poem illustrates Prufrock's sense of unworthiness in his romantic pursuits and resulting need to mask his

inner self. The rhyme scheme in the seventh stanza highlights his feelings of unworthiness in love by stressing his perceived shortcomings:

And indeed there will be time
 To wonder, “Do I dare?” and, “Do I dare?”
 Time to turn back and descend the stair,
 With a bald spot in the middle of my hair —
 [They will say: “How his 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: “How his hair is growing thin!”]
 Do I dare
 Disturb the universe?
 In a minute there is time

For decisions and revisions which a minute will reverse. (37-58)

The strange return of the “B” rhyme (“dare”) in line 45 emphasizes Prufrock’s indecision. The repetitions of “Do I dare?” — specifically in the irregularly short line 45 — reinforce his questioning and uncertainty. The brevity of the line suggests that Prufrock’s confidence is withering away as the three words appear insignificant following lengthy lines: he has regressed from bold questioning to a timid uncertainty. The quadruple “C” rhyme from lines 41-44 demonstrates how Prufrock’s self-doubt is influenced by hyper-awareness of his flaws. Eliot’s repetition of an entire line centers upon Prufrock’s insecurities, specifically about the flaws noticed by others. The length of this line, especially when compared to the meager “Do I dare,” is indicative of the lasting effect the judgment has on Prufrock. Eliot’s use of brackets illustrates Prufrock’s resulting isolation by creating visual borders. The brackets also demonstrate the split between the public and private self. The brackets, like the outer self, shield the inner Prufrock to the public and show that women do not breach his mask to expose his private self. The robust appearance of the superficial judgment shows that Prufrock’s sense of unworthiness is caused by society’s assessment of him and his awareness of this.

Eliot’s irregular structure reflects how Prufrock’s unsatiated desire disrupts the linear passage of time in his troubled state of mind. The seemingly chaotic structuring of the verse paragraphs demonstrates Prufrock’s incoherent consciousness, wrestling with playfulness and agitation

at his isolation. His sudden mental transitions are illustrated by Eliot's use of white space and ellipses between disconnected stanzas:

Is it perfume from a dress
 That makes me so digress?
 Arms that lie along a table, or wrap about a shawl.
 And should I then presume?
 And how should I begin?

.
 Shall I say, I have gone at dusk through narrow streets
 And watched the smoke that rises from the pipes
 Of lonely men in shirt sleeves, leaning out of windows? . . .
 I should have been a pair of ragged claws
 Scuttling across the floors of silent seas. (65-74)

The stark white space between the disjointed stanzas signifies a mental break, an unconscious leap in Prufrock's erratic mind. Eliot's use of ellipses illustrates the disconnection between the discordant verse paragraphs and imitates Prufrock's mental wrestling between lightheartedness and despair. Prufrock begins with subtle mocking of his obsessive desire, speculating if it is women's "perfume" or enticing "[a]rms" that draw him. The disembodied quality that Eliot gives the "arms" feeds into the playful tone, as it would be ridiculous and shocking for Prufrock to desire a simple arm. Prufrock's wit undergoes an unknown transition through a block of white space and ellipses, and he returns to the somber scene of the rundown city. His return to this scene suggests a darker attitude toward his loneliness and unmet desire. This attitude trails off into ellipses and through a blank patch of time, returning Prufrock to playfulness. The comparison of himself to an isolated pair of ugly claws, scuffling around in silence, returns to witty commentary about his alienation.

Prufrock's craving for companionship and creation of his public mask lead to his eternal desire. After wrestling with his desire, Prufrock acknowledges that he has lost control over himself: "No! I am not Prince Hamlet, nor was meant to be;/ Am an attendant lord,..." (111-112). The exclamation that he is not Prince Hamlet shows his agitation with his romantic failures and hints at his loss of autonomy. In contrasting himself with Hamlet, Prufrock asserts that he does not have a choice about what to "be" anymore. Eliot punctuates this realization with caesura, articulating Prufrock's distress over his loss of freedom. Eliot's omission of the "I" in

line 112 further demonstrates Prufrock's loss of control. The excluded "I" suggests that Prufrock is ruled by his public self. Though he crafted the public mask to entice women, he may have given up control in splitting himself. The public self steers him into unwanted roles of "an easy tool," (114) "[p]olitic, cautious," (116) and a "Fool" (119), when Prufrock's intention was to attract women. His perpetual state of longing is depicted in the irregular structure of the closing verse paragraphs:

I have heard the mermaids singing each to each.

I do not think that they will sing to me.

I have seen them riding seaward on the waves (124-126).

Eliot surrounds Prufrock by the objects of his desire but structures the white space to permanently divide them. Though Prufrock's "I" hears and sees the women and is still enticed by them, he realizes he will not be able to reach them. He is in a limbo of longing, but Prufrock projects his failure in a poignant way: his "drown[ing]" (131) surrounded by beautiful women is powerful, even if they will never know him.

Though the poem's form contrasts that of a typical "love song," it imitates Prufrock's state of mind, compromised by desire. Human desire is often an uncontrollable urge, so its constant presence in Prufrock's mind leads to erratic mental bounds. The form is chaotic, but desire grounds each stanza, binding discordant structures and attitudes together with a common principle. Even after the donning of his mask leaves unsatisfied cravings, Prufrock's failure is not mediocre. The tragic limbo completes the "love song" better than if he had been satisfied, as the want for romance never vanishes.

Bibliography

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