

The Insignificance of Life: Reading “The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock”

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Abstract: In “The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock”, T.S. Eliot penetrates into the incommunicability and insignificance of the common people’s life in the modern society. Between the 1st and 2nd World War, poetry and criticism were mainly dominated by a single figure, T.S. Eliot, who was esteemed on both sides of the Atlantic. His poem “The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock” is known as the first masterpiece of modern poetry. In the poem, the poet use fragmentary images and language to illustrate Prufrock’s mental state and the fragmentation of the postwar reality. In the poem, T.S. Eliot penetrates into the incommunicability and insignificance of the common people’s life in the modern society.

1. Analysis of the setting and the fragmentary images

In “The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock”, Prufrock has gone through five stages of mental struggle: Decision, Procrastination, Destination described, Doubt and Self-Rejection. In these five stages of mental struggle, Prufrock’s mind is full of confusion and doubt and finally leads to self-rejection. The setting of the poem is in the evening at an urban area, where is sick and dirty; the “half-deserted streets”; the “sawdust restaurant with oyster shells” and the “yellow fog” and the “yellow smoke” that cloak the city in a shroud of dirtiness and uncleanness). The dehumanizing and depersonalizing effect of the big city makes the speaker Prufrock rather lonely and isolated. The setting of the poem settles the major messages of the poem: the meaningless, isolated and despair of the common people’s life in the modern society.

Another device T.S. Eliot uses to reveal Prufrock’s mental state and the postwar reality is the fragmentary imagery. The Oxford Concise Dictionary of Literary Terms points out that T.S. Eliot “replaced the logical exposition of thoughts with collages of fragmentary images and complex allusions”. It is claimed by Martin Scofield that the technique of the fragmentary is “related to, is perhaps a reflection of, a concern with the fragmentary in the subject matter of the poetry. The mind of Prufrock is unable to cohere into a single train of thought, unable to squeeze ‘the universe into a ball/ To roll it towards some overwhelming question.’ Prufrock’s mental state, his mind and thought, are reflection of the reality. The shattered images in his mind are the reflection of the modern society. Ordinary people, under such an environment, are to a great extent insignificant and trivial.

In the beginning of the poem, the evening is described as “spread out against the sky/ Like a patient etherized upon a table”. The evening is depicted as a sick person “etherized” upon an operation table. According to Martin Scofield, evening in Eliot’s poetry is often a time when “the pressures of the social and workaday world are eased, and the individual may be prompted to search for a deeper and intenser life within himself”. Evening and night are times when “the mind can turn inwards towards its inner images, towards an unconscious life”. I agree with Scofield that evening is a time when people can calm down and read for their inner mind. However, in the poem the image of the evening is sick, immobile and musty; therefore, people cannot really relax themselves and have a better understanding of their spiritual world. Another thing being described is the street, which is like “a tedious argument of insidious intent”. The image of the street is boring and trivial with “insidious” scheme hidden behind it. The whole background and atmosphere is sick, immobile and “etherized” which corresponds to the postwar reality that is distorted and musty.

To spit out all the butt-ends of my days and ways? The image of the insect being pinned on the wall and twisting painfully makes readers have a sense of discomfort and unease. It unmasks the

speaker's inner and nameless anxiety. The fragmentary imagery T.S. Eliot uses represents Prufrock's mental state that is disordered, trivial and confused. Therefore, Prufrock tries to seek for his own identity and a certain kind of meaning in life. However, his quest unavoidably leads to failure. With the fragmentation of the postwar reality, individual, to a great extent, cannot go against the social environment. Common people's life, as a mirror of the society reality, is accordingly trivial and insignificant.

2. Prufrock's fruitless efforts to be of significance makes a sharp contrast to the insignificance of his life

Prufrock's fruitless efforts to be significant and make himself heard, appreciated and understood form a sharp contrast to the insignificance of his life. In the opening stanza, Prufrock offers an open invitation to the readers: "Let us go then, you and I... /To lead you to an overwhelming question.../Oh, do not ask, 'What is it?'/ Let us go and make our visit. The invitation is tempting and leads readers to have a sense of promise in these lines. However, as a matter of fact, Prufrock seems to promise everything and gives nothing in particular. Another example is that Prufrock highlights his question or the thing he ponders in his mind again and again; nevertheless, the result comes to nothing. He repeats "there will be time" from now and then and prolongs the time to make his proposal and ponder the question, which strengthens the importance of his question and is a means of attracting readers' attention and focus. He says: There will be time, there will be time; To prepare a face to meet the faces that you meet; There will be time to murder and create; And time for all the works and days of hands; That lift and drop a question on your plate; And time yet for a hundred indecisions; And for a hundred visions and revisions; Before the taking of a toast and tea. Disturb the universe?

Here Prufrock uses big words to stress the significance of his question. However, after all the indecisions and revisions, he still could not raise the proposal and reveal the question. Prufrock just ponders the question again and again in his mind and finally lose the courage to convey it. F.B. Pinion points out that: His procrastinating indecisiveness is reflected in the broken repetitiousness of his musings, as he thinks of time in hand, or dwells with encroaching skepticism on the worthwhileness of action, until the thought of it fades out of mind.

We can see clearly from the above lines that Prufrock is seriously lacking in confidence and desperately wants to be heard, appreciated and to be understood. The more he makes his efforts to gather readers' attention, the more insignificant his life and position seem as a result of his inability of facing himself and giving his own life a meaning.

3. The allusions intensify Prufrock's underlying anxiety

Secondly, the comparison between Prufrock and John the Baptist, Prince Hamlet, and Lady Lazarus intensify Prufrock's underlying anxiety. When Prufrock talks about himself, he refers to some Biblical and literary figures. The common associations of these figures are their significance and importance of being "something" and being the focus of attention. The result of such comparison makes Prufrock seem trivial and insignificant.

Prufrock compares himself to John the Baptist: "Though I have seen my head (grown slightly bald) brought in upon a platter, / I am no prophet—and here's no great matter. In the Bible, Mark 6.17-28 and Matthew 14.3-11, John the Baptist is framed and beheaded, and "his head was brought in a charger, and given to the damsel". John is known for his words of prophecy and he can foretell something of great consequence. Although Prufrock denies the similarity between John and himself, readers can sense his underlying desire to be important. What is more, the cut-off head of John on the platter is the object of observation. It is unable to speak a word, being watched and observed, and it is unable to communicate. The image expresses Prufrock's desire to communicate with others and to be understood.

Prufrock also alludes to Prince Hamlet, which makes his own situation more ridiculous. Prince Hamlet is of noble birth, who is known for his melancholy, contemplation and hesitancy. What

makes him totally different from Prufrock is that he has heavy responsibilities for his country and for seeking justice for his father; whereas Prufrock is just an ordinary man of insignificance in the modern society. The similarity between these two characters is their impossibility of taking actions. Although Prufrock tries to distance himself from Hamlet and deny the similarity, he indeed shares the same characteristic with Hamlet; that is their hesitancy and their impossibility of taking significant action.

There is an allusion to the play, which makes Prufrock seem ridiculous. He mentions that “And indeed there will be time/ To wonder, ‘Do I dare?’ and, ‘Do I dare?’/ Time to turn back and descend the stair, and he finds out that his uncle is praying, which is a decisive moment for him to make decision. On the one hand, Hamlet wants to kill his uncle and takes his revenge. On the other hand, Hamlet hesitates to take action because he is afraid that his uncle would go to Heaven because of dying at the moment of praying. Prufrock alludes the moment to Hamlet’s significant moment, which makes Prufrock more insignificant due to the sharp contrast he makes himself with Hamlet.

The image of Lazarus has the same function. Lazarus who comes back from the death is supposed to have something important to tell and have fantastic experience and adventure. In the Bible, John 11:1-43, it says: “Now a certain man was sick, named Lazarus...Now Jesus loved Martha, and her sister, and Lazarus. These things said he: and after that he saith unto them, Our friend Lazarus sleepeth; but I go, that I may awake him out of sleep. Then said Jesus unto them plainly, Lazarus is dead...And when he thus had spoken, he cried with a loud voice, Lazarus, come forth. Therefore he is the focus of attention. However, Prufrock is at the opposite of Lazarus because he is an ordinary man and the description of his daily life is not attractive at all. On the whole, the three allusions in the poem intensify Prufrock’s underlying anxiety to be significant and make his image even more insignificant.

4. Analysis of the poem as a journey of quest.

The poem can be viewed as a journey of quest, questing for identity and the meaning of life. In the poem, Prufrock is always seeking for an identity, which can be traced from his concern on his physical appearance, mental state and personality. Prufrock is over concerned about his physical appearance.

We can see clearly that Prufrock is a very anxious man, worrying about his appearance. What is more, his mental state is confused. He is most confused about the “overwhelming question” (10) On the whole, he is a man of self-centeredness and self-pity, which finally leads to self-rejection. What lies at the heart of the matter is Prufrock’s lack of an identity. Even he himself does not know who he really is let alone the readers. Therefore, Prufrock is always under great anxiety and wants to prove his significant. However, he is doomed to be disappointed because common people’s life in the modern society is so trivial and insignificant, which is decided by the triviality of reality.

Even the mermaids would not sing for Prufrock. He isolates himself from the mermaids and the ending of the poem seems hopeless. Lillian Feder points out that It seems the journey of quest at last comes to nothing. As J. C. C. Mays argues in “Early Poems: from ‘Prufrock’ to ‘Gerontion’”, “the characteristic tone is of weary, ironic self-deprecation. Footfalls echo in the mind, their destination forgotten and irrelevant. Mays also points out some features in the poem such as the “contradictory signals displayed by the elements of the title; the epigraph, pointing up the theme of paralysed self-consciousness; ...the undercurrent of threatening half-audible images, and the tendency of images, such as the uncontrollable life of their own”, which are reflections of the protagonist’s “irrelevant” and insignificant life.

5. Conclusion

All in all, in “The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock, T.S. Eliot uses fragmentary images and language to analyze the fragmentation of the postwar reality and on the other hand to reveal the theme of incommunicability and insignificance of ordinary people’s life in the modern society, which is a truthful reflection of the time. The poem completely swept off the romantic and

optimistic spirit of the Victorian Age and ushered in a new epoch the modernist poetry writing.

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