

Existentialism in T. S. Eliot's Poem: 'The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock'

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Abstract

The poem of T. S. Eliot 'The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock' employs modernist concept of alienation by alluding to various conflicts that depicts Prufrock's frustration in dealing with day today situation. Existentialist choices offered to him and chosen by him make his attitude towards life passive and he annihilates mundane life as he is not able to retrieve his true self. The poem not only deals his psychological and social dilemma of his times but also heralds the modernist agenda that looks at things rather than participate in them. The images used in the poem are drawn from various literary sources which supports the claim of this post-war situation. The allusion to biblical Lazarus who wants to convey the unspoken to the world and the reference of being unlike Prince Hamlet are existentialist choices picked up by him. Prufrock suffers loneliness due to the social and psychological conditions of the times in which the poem was written. He suffers as an individual which represents the social trauma of the time. His suffering mind could not gain peace even with the mermaids who according to him will not sing for him although earlier he had heard them singing. So, the moments of going to the party, listening to the women in the party, his state after coming out of the party and being drawn till human voices wakes them are symbolic and allude to this existentialist phases in his life. Thus, he is representative of his times and his failure to discover his true identity due to the existentialist anguish in him signals at the social condition prevalent during the modern era.

Keywords: Existentialism, Alienation, Ambivalence, Allusion, passivity, Symbolism.

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Central to the philosophy of existentialism is a dictum that 'existence precedes essence', which is to say that individuals are born free and can shape themselves by making appropriate choices rather than holding to preconceived notions about their life. 'The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock' is a perfect example of this dictum about human conditions in First World War and therefore the philosophy is well reflected in the approximately 140 lines of the poem. The poem is well-known for the heralding of modernism as it was first published in 1917. After making an allusion to Dante's 'The Divine Comedy' in the prelude, the quest for the self-identity begins.

Prufrock takes the reader along with him on the journey with an unacknowledged simile that compares the evening to an etherized patient on the table. This anesthetization of evening alike a patient shock the reader bringing a gloomy, nervous, and dark side of life. This sets the passive note right in the beginning of the walk. All objects like streets, hotels, and the restaurants are painted with the same depressing state of his mind that do not admit interrogation. The un-interrogative preconceived life also frustrates the reader as he walks into the love life of the central figure in the poem.

When he visits the inside the room Prufrock hears the women talking about Michelangelo which reflects the dandyism of the mundane talk among the ladies who do not really appreciate the art of the Italian painter but still keep topic for showing rather than knowing. The love song thus shocks the reader with its very way of addressing the subject of love. He remains alone in the circle of many people who are not truly bothered about each other. The dramatic monologue of Prufrock shown through the interior monologue technique reflects this alienation and therefore loneliness on the topic of love and longing.

The microscopic depiction of his visit includes not only his observation of the people in the room but it is also supplemented with his own condition of the mind through the stream of consciousness technique. The element of time is dealt with the existentialist anguish by Prufrock. As in such tea parties' decisions and choices are reversed in flicker of moments. Alterations in thought patterns of choices are just a matter of few seconds. Here, visions, revisions, decisions, and reversion of these patterns are constantly made and therefore are hard to survive for long time. Prufrock knows about this fact of life and his disinterestedness increases.

The existentialist frustration about choosing between two thoughts makes his life boring and tedious. The fear of being alone and the fear of being in company of other makes his self-image and social-self clash with each other living Prufrock with little scope for presumption in the formulated time-frame. He knows that there is time for everything and yet is not able to make use of his time to enjoy and satisfy what he wills to do in his life. The poem penetrates deeply into the psychology of the central protagonist and urge the reader to look at Prufrock from the instinctive perspective too.

The knowledge of the parties and people's carelessness about each other makes it a trifle evening that drop questions on the plate as if to serve it as a dish. The use of the metaphoric image alike the eyes that deals with fixing Prufrock to a formulated time-frame by pinning him to a wall to be hung just like an ordinary picture enhances the social trauma. His physical weakness and his psychological behavioural conflict dare him not to disturb the universe. His mornings, evenings and the afternoons are measured with coffee-spoon. Another image that shows his ordinariness in an extraordinary meeting. Voices in the rooms are dying just like a music that is being played. Thus, the situation makes it uncomfortable for him and in his indecisive engulfing Prufrock not only makes it hard for himself but also for others to make any presumption about himself.

The bracelet-ted arms, the lamplight on the table, the shawl and perfumes might be a cause of his digress. He believes that it is better to be a pair of ragged claws scuttling across silent seas than assuming any such human identities. The refusal to identifying himself with any role across the stretch of life shows that he is tired of life and choices offered by it. His

casual and un-interrogative approach towards mundane thing makes the matter hard for him to enjoy the afternoons and evenings. His peacefulness is lost in sleep and alike Lazarus he wants to convey something untold to his audience but the modern absurdities of formalities do not allow him to put his thoughts across and the task is impossible and burdensome. The loss at romantic subjects like sunsets, novels, tea talks, and other topics that have failed to console his soul and therefore do not bring comfort to his mind that keep longing for some unknown and undiscovered self.

He is not alike Prince Hamlet who in his indecisiveness was unable to make choices during appropriate times. Prufrock is aware of the choices offered by life and is ready to choose the positive note for his life. He knows that he can be deferential, obtuse, full of high sentences, polite, meticulous, cautious, foolish but he is useful as an ordinary man. The fact about growing old does not threaten him. He knows about how people can turn faces away from each other by throwing glance at the scene outside windows and so neglects every talk between himself and the persons in company of him. He prepares himself well for the time of party and wonders in doubt about parting of his hairs behind. This inner and outer conflict between his own-self and the social-self makes Prufrock life hard to live.

He had heard mermaids singing to each other but does not believe that they will sing for him. He would remain by the sea till human voices wake him and he is drawn along with the readers. The frustration and hopelessness of Prufrock's attitude makes him a representative of his time and as the reader finishes the poem, he wonders at the creative capacities of the poet who leaves him shocking surprised. As Eliot has himself said in '*The Tradition and Individual Talent*' (1919) while giving analogy to the creativity of the poet by referring him as the catalyst, that is, the man who suffers and the mind which creates.

So also, Eliot in his '*The Use of Poetry and the Use of Criticism*' (1933) says,

"In a poem which is neither didactic nor narrative, and not animated by any other social purpose, the poet must be concerned with expressing in verse...this obscure impulse... He is oppressed by a burden which he must bring to birth in order to obtain relief. Or, to change the figure of speech, he is haunted by a demon, a demon against which he feels

powerless, because in its first manifestation it has no face, no name, nothing; and the words, the poem he makes, are a kind of form of exorcism of this demon.”

The existentialist absurdities and the truth takes toll on Prufrock's life. His hopelessness and anguish is reflected throughout the poem. He claims to be King Lazarus rather than Prince Hamlet. His attitude towards everything according to him is of a positive person. However, in his frustration brought due to the situation presented in the party he becomes a non-believer. He is drawn due to this nihilist and passive negativity towards the end of the poem.

Like in all existentialist literature and as in all absurd thoughts starting with Socrates to Kierkegaard, to Dostoevsky, Sartre, Nietzsche, Beauvoir, Kafka, Camus and Beckett, this poem has all the modernist element that respect the school and movement and thus the poem needs attention from existentialist perspective too. In his attempts to discover himself in order to know the meaning of his life, he takes up individual responsibility by his personal freedom and deliberate choices but the party situation dooms him and he fails to discover the purpose, and hence, changes his will to passiveness and frustration in life. The poem becomes an example of existentialist urge that is reflected through the discontentment in life of the central figure.

Prufrock prepares himself for the social gathering to celebrate some unknown cause hints at the purposelessness of social and individual life which in itself is absurd and existentialist way to deal with one's life. This disinterested way of looking at the protagonist through the dramatic monologue style is brought for the reader by the writer makes the poem a sumptuous dish to be cherished. The talented, unforgettable Prufrock will surely linger in the memory of reader long after the poem is read wherein lies the true success of the existentialist poem.

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