

"The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock": A Lacanian Reading

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Abstract

The present study is going to provide a Lacanian reading of T. S. Eliot's poem "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock". Lacan introduced us a three-part model of the human psyche. These parts are the Imaginary order, the Symbolic order, and the Real order. The character formation suggested by Lacan is similar to the phases Prufrock goes through. This study aims to apply the Lacanian registers in the poem "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock ". My purpose is to show that Prufrock suffers from the failure in dealing with the Lacanian orders. He is the product of a distorted modern world.

Key Words: Psychological Fragmentation, Alienation, "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock".

Introduction

Eliot opens the poem with a quotation from Dante, which suggests that Prufrock, like Count Guido, is a prisoner in hell. The hell, for Prufrock, is living in the modern world. In this dramatic monologue, we learn about the character as he speaks. Prufrock is a character full of conflicts and he is dying for love while being terrified of the idea of falling in love. As a result, he is an anxious hesitant man of cowardice and inaction. His

cowardice makes him constantly avoiding the reality. He is a typical useless modern man who is continuously bothered by procrastination.

The poem starts as Prufrock walks through the streets with an unspecified, silent companion. The balding, insecure middle-aged man expresses his thoughts on his dull, uneventful life and his fear of communication, especially with women. He passes some cheap hotels and restaurants and reaches a social gathering where women are conversing. However, he sits passively and is hesitant to start a conversation for he is afraid of making a fool of himself. One main idea behind the poem is the lack of self-esteem. Prufrock is obsessed with his own sense of inadequacy and insecurity. The speaker is extremely self-conscious and considers himself a failure. Prufrock is concerned about what others, particularly women, will think of him. He talks of an "overwhelming question" but does not state what the question is.

Prufrock repeatedly reminds himself that there is no hurry. By saying "there will be time", he postpones his interaction with women around him. He does not take a step forward. He is trapped in the present, yet longs for the past and is unable to move forward. He dreams of escaping the suffocating social world he inhabits, of tea parties and pretentious chatter about art when he says "In the room the women come and go/ Talking of Michelangelo". He even wishes he were a crab at the bottom of the ocean, but not there facing his biggest fear. He claims he has seen all the faces before

and realizes that all these people are the people he has met many times before. He seems to rehearse everything he wishes to say to the woman in front of him yet remains silent. He imagines his own death and moves downstairs as if he is going back to hell.

As the poem goes on, there are more keys to find out about Prufrock's hesitancy. By mentioning Hamlet, Prufrock draws the readers' attention to a comparison between him and Hamlet, which he claims that he is not important enough to be compared to Hamlet: "No! I am not Prince Hamlet". At the finishing lines of the poem, the speaker realizes that time is passing and he is growing old. He hears the sirens singing, but not to him. Even in his fantasies he sees himself inadequate. He lingers in the more comforting state, the chambers of the sea, until the human voices chattering around him in a drawing-room return him to the less pleasant reality of his life, and he drowns again in the social pressures of those tea parties and the knowledge that society expects him to follow convention, marry one of the women he seems to find so intimidating, and settle down. In his mind, he drowns himself in the sea as a result of his unsuccessful attempts in his life.

Prufrock's Imaginations and Lacan's Imaginary

This poem is a spiritual journey, so all of it is the work of imagination. Why does Prufrock need a companion through this journey to share everything his mind and heart desire? The Imaginary is a state in which we cannot differentiate between us and the rest of the world. When Prufrock speaks, he speaks as if he is talking to himself. He may be dividing his id and ego. This conversation, the whole poem, may seem to be a discussion between the reality

and the desired, the id and the ego, which are parts of a whole and dividing them does not seem possible. The unity that an infant feels is the one Prufrock feels. At the beginning lines of the poem, he seems to be the infant going through the earliest stage Lacan suggests. Although imagination never stops throughout life and humans' minds are restless in this area, the following lines of the poem confirm that Prufrock is stuck at the Imaginary Order and is trying to pass it.

When Prufrock (lines 11-12) says "Oh, do not ask, "What is it?"/ Let us go and make our visit" it suggests that he is delusional. He, along with the reader, does not know what the real question is, let alone the answer. It is like the Imaginary, where the infant has no clear idea about what is going on around it. The state of not knowing anything for sure is very similar to the Imaginary of Lacan. Looking for the answer to an "overwhelming question" is only possible through imagination, or, in other words, the Imaginary. The suspense this "overwhelming question" conveys to the reader, makes one to take a look at oneself and question everything, similar to the Imaginary, in which a mirrored picture of oneself is needed to make us take a step closer towards the real concrete world.

Throughout the poem, as the journey of Prufrock and his invited companion goes on, we see all the fears and weak spots along with all the insecurities he has. "You", as Prufrock calls, is the repressed, hidden, unconscious double of him, basically all the ingredients we need to analyze the processed Imaginary he went through.

Prufrock's Mirror Stage

The grown-up Prufrock, thinking about the Imaginary, thinks that "...there will be time" (23) to gain back the lost object, the

unity. Passing through the Mirror Stage, he thinks "There will be time, there will be time/ To prepare a face to meet the faces that you meet" (26-27). These two lines confirm the presence of the Other which we need to see in the Mirror Stage. Lacan suggests that it is through the eyes of the Other that we gain an idea of who we are. In order to be recognized we need this Other. This idea of having an Other present never fades away through life. But Prufrock postpones the process of being seen due to his anxiety and insecurity by repeating the line "there will be time".

Prufrock's anxieties are revealed more as the poem goes. He is too conscious about his flaws and worries and that these flaws draw women back. The following lines of the poem talk about how Prufrock's reflected image in women's eyes is a concern of his:

...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: "But how his arms and legs are thin!"). (40-44)

His worries do not end here. It continues in lines 55-58 when he sees himself formulated, pinned and wriggling on the wall, being judged by the surrounding people. His inferiority complex ties him down, paralyzes him to take actions, like a child. During his journey, Prufrock takes the role of the Other himself. This is him who observes, though his verbs are in the past tense, as if he has passed this stage once before, when he says:

For I have known them all already, known them all:

Have known the evenings, mornings, afternoons, I have measured out my life

with coffee spoons; I know the voices dying with a dying fall Beneath the music from a farther room.

So how should I presume?

And I have known the eyes already, known them all The eyes that fix you in a formulated phrase. (49-56)

He continues in lines 62-64:

And I have known the arms already, known them all Arms that are braceleted and white and bare

(But in the lamplight, downed with light brown hair!).

One more aspect in Prufrock's life is alienation. As a modern man, he is trapped in an alienated, impersonal world. The refrain clarifies this as it goes "In the room the women come and go/ Talking of Michelangelo". Although Prufrock is in a place full of women, as he desired, he is unable to communicate and prefers his own closed, dull, monotonous world. He even wishes he were a crab down in the silent seas. He imagines his death and his head brought upon a silver platter, only because he is alienated. Fear, along with the sense of not belonging, makes him suffer. In line 86, he admits he is afraid when he wants to "force the moment to its crisis" and ask his "overwhelming question." He is hesitant to "drop a question" on the plate of the person in front of him and fears to be rejected. He also compares himself with Lazarus coming from the dead in line 94, as if he has seen all and went all the distance.

Prufrock's Unsuccessful Symbolic and His Lost Object

The Symbolic is a world of social rules and structures as well as gender differences. It is the world of subjects, objects and symbols. The number of the symbols in the poem is endless. At the beginning of the poem, there are images of shabby streets with cheap hotels and restaurants which are

symbols of Prufrock's uneventful, basic life. The cat, the peach, the crab, the coffee spoon, along with the use of objective correlative are only a few of the symbols in the poem. The need to use symbols, or in other words, language, is something that never dies for humans. The one thing that Prufrock cannot master is to communicate, to use the language properly. For 131 lines, he is making excuses in order not to open up a conversation. He is looking for the lost object, objet petit a, which is an ineffective search.

Unable to step forward, Prufrock stays where he is. For him, time is not moving not to the future nor towards the past. In line 39 he says "Time to turn back and descend the stairs" as if his movement is backwards. According to Lacan, an infant moves from the Imaginary to the Symbolic when it begins to learn the language. It becomes detached from its mother's world and enters its father's reign. So the movement is forward. But for Prufrock this does not happen. He simply fails to pass this stage.

At the beginning of the poem, when Prufrock says "Let us go then, you and I", he does not seem to imply that this you-and-I is separated. He refers to the wholeness of the Imaginary which is sought after in the Symbolic. The longing for the lost unity is bold in his character. In line 11 he says "Oh, do not ask, "What is it?" as if he is unable to speak. Also, the description of the cat in the second stanza, which cannot enter the room and ultimately rests under the window is another sign of inability which adds up to that of Prufrock's. The repetition of "there will be time" in the third stanza gives us a good reason that Prufrock does not want to accept the fact that he feels he has lost his objet petit a and does not want his desire to take control. As a result, he postpones talking "before the taking of a toast and tea".

Prufrock's Separation and Alienation

Within lines 23-34, what Prufrock conveys to the readers is the absence. The thing that was part of him is gone and he talks nostalgically of it and continues to the next stanza. In line 38 he asks "Do I dare?" a couple of times and keeps the question unasked until lines 45-46 in which he eventually asks his question "Do I dare disturb the universe?" as if his speaking is a disturbance to the whole universe. Social rules of the Symbolic tie him down and do not let him speak his mind.

Prufrock has measured his life "with coffee spoons", but has never talked to anybody. He has been in search of his lost object but does not know that it is unobtainable. He has been separated from the society all his life. He is alienated. One of the elements of the symbolic is alienation which is referred to in the following lines" The eyes that fix you in a formulated phrase, And when I am formulated, sprawling on a pin, When I am pinned and wriggling on the wall Then how should I begin. (56-59)

The lonely men of lines 71-72 who are no different from Prufrock himself also suffer from alienation. For Prufrock, the entrance to the society, or as Lacan believes to be the starting point of language learning in the Symbolic for a child, is so hard that he wishes he could go down to the sea and live there quietly without any interactions with the public. In other words, he wishes to go back to the sea, or the womb, where he was only a pair of ragged claws, even before the Imaginary.

In the Symbolic, the child constantly compares himself with the father and feels incomplete as it does not have the authority the father owns. This feeling of rivalry and lack of success in gaining the attention of the mother as the child used to have earlier in its life leads the child into an alienated

world which is accompanied by the sense of separation. Prufrock here feels the same. He is not Prince Hamlet who had the power to avenge what he had lost. He is only a petit character which accomplishes nothing major, "an easy tool", "glad to be of use", "the Fool".

He sees himself so far-fetched from others that in the ending lines of the poem when he is near the sea and hears the mermaids singing, they are not singing to him. "I do not think they will sing to me". He fails to pass the Symbolic only because he is obsessed with not finding his lost object and stays alienated all his life.

Prufrock's Unsatisfied Desire

The dissatisfaction of desire is presented through several elements in the poem. According to The Norton Anthology of Theory and Criticism,

As soon as man begins to speak (there is no getting away from the masculine universal in Lacan), he must launder everything important or even routine about his bodily life through linguistic structures that don't exactly correspond to biological requirements. Lacan defines desire as what is left of absolute demand when all possible satisfaction of needs has been subtracted from it. In other words, desire is what by definition remains unsatisfiable. (1282)

As we see the following lines, "Is it perfume from a dress, that makes me so digress", suggest the presence of a desire which is unattainable and unsatisfiable. He is not even sure whether it is perfume or not, whether it is coming from a dress which is a feminine element yet for him it seems impossible to reach. There is a strong desire in Prufrock to connect to a female spirit which once he had in his early years as his mother. Although he puts himself into trouble to even start a conversation with one of the women present in that room, he can

never do. His desire remains unsatisfied. Lacan says this desire is never fulfilled. According to Green and LeBihan:

What is instituted at the moment of disruption of the Imaginary by the *nom du père* is Desire, a drive or urge to return to the utopian state of the Imaginary, of coherence, of oneness -from which the subject has been banned. Unfortunately, one can never fulfil one's Desire. The loss of the Imaginary is a permanent one. Once the division is made, there is no concealing the cracks. But this Desire is repressed, and this act of repression brings the unconscious into being. (164,165)

To calm himself, Prufrock makes a lot of excuses in order not to take a step forward to satisfy his needs. He tells us that "there will be time" in a number of lines. In line 55, he tells us that "And I have known the eyes already, known them all" and continues: And I have known the arms already, known them all Arms that are braceleted and white and bare

[But in the lamplight, downed with light brown hair!] (63-65)

These seemingly flaws for Prufrock are only excuses. He is afraid. At the moment of finding a substitute for his lost object, he backs off, like the cat which falls asleep before it enters the place in the second stanza.

There is a mention of a peach which is probably the most significant symbol of the poem. The peach, as always referred to in a literary sense, signifies a female figure. In Lacan's psychoanalysis, all the desires and dissatisfactions start from an absent female. We spend all our life looking for the unity with our mother which we lost in the Symbolic order. In line 122, Prufrock asks "Do I dare to eat a peach?", he sees himself as an old man which cannot even eat a peach, as if he is so far away from his desire which he repressed during his years.

There is also a mention of the name of the father in lines 92-93 when he says: "To have squeezed the universe into a ball/ To roll it toward some overwhelming question". The desire of the mother is replaced by the name of the father, according to Lacan. The image of the ball is linked with the sexual theories of Lacan which take every symbol into account. The ball, a symbol which presents the father, creates an image in these lines. The "ball" is the representation of the appearance of the father in Prufrock's mind which leads him to the big question, the question he never asks. The role of the father for Lacan is that it filters your reaching out to your desires. Prufrock does not dare to ask his big question which he desires.

Studying Lacan, we learn that there is incompatibility between desire and speech and speech can never express desire wholly. During the poem Prufrock repeatedly hesitates to ask his question. There are also several lines which Prufrock says that is not what he meant if he ever asks his question. For instance, in lines 97-98 he says, "...That is not what I meant at all; That is not it, at all" which he repeats in lines 109-110 as well. In line 104, he again says "It is impossible to say just what I mean!" So he is no exception. The rules of Lacan apply for Prufrock, too.

Prufrock's Trauma of the Real

For Lacan, the Real is all that a person is not, the unattainable dimension of life, a place with no absence with countless objet petit a. Prufrock states that he is not a prophet nor Prince Hamlet. The world Prufrock is chained to seems to have lots of lost objects which are out of reach. In the psychic universe of Lacan where he can take the hand of what is not real, probably his lost part (Let us go then, you and I), everything is possible and impossible. The

journey he has is not a materialistic one, as Lacan describes the Real, a world which is both physical and material. For Lacan the Real does not exist, for existence is a product of the mind. Prufrock seems to be in search of the Real, a world with unity and no sense of loss. But such a world does not have a real existence. That is why Prufrock is lost. He never settles. He is tired of his unending search.

Seldon believes the Real is where "the subject meets with inexpressible enjoyment and death" (158). At the end of the poem, Prufrock goes into the sea and never comes back. He chooses death as the alternative to end all his suffering. For Lacan, trauma of the Real happens when we put our pain into words. That can be a reason why Prufrock refuses to talk. He does not want his pain become real. Das Ding or The Thing for Lacan is what is lost. An object which is the source of our desire, but is not identifiable. We do not know what it is. As Prufrock says "Do not ask "What is it?" Let us go and make our visit" (11-12). One key element in Lacan's Real is the role of fantasy, or in other words, the fulfillment of a desire. Prufrock has a dream, as we all do, to unite with what we have missed. He is fantasizing for 131 lines. Fantasy of a company with whom he can share all his private feelings, or a female companion for all the years he has left. He fantasizes his coming from the dead, or even his funeral, or his head brought in upon a platter.

The vision at the final lines of the poem is nothing to be ignored. Prufrock's fantasy that there are mermaids singing in the sea each to each, but not to him confirms the fact that his desire remains unsatisfied, like the desire Lacan introduced us.

Conclusion

The persona in this poem does not act according to the expected social rules of his

time. He behaves abnormally as if he is suffering from psychological issues. His mental status is a little different from what we expect. Reading the poem from a Lacanian perspective gives us a better understanding of what the character in T. S. Eliot's poem is going through. This character is a personage which represents Eliot himself or any other modern thinker of the time. By approaching this character through Lacanian ideas, we come to one perception: modern men or modern thinkers in the 20th century suffer from the same thing, alienation and loneliness.

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