

On “an overwhelming question” in The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock

“UNE QUESTION ECRASANTE” DANS LA CHANSON D’AMOUR DE J. ALFRED PRUFROCK

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Abstract: This paper is an endeavor to analyze “an overwhelming question” in The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock. As the Eliot’s representative work of early poetry, this poem delineates the deep theme of modern character separation in western countries. In this poem, the interpretation of the overwhelming question is crucial for the appreciation of the whole poem. This paper analyzes the use of images and allusions and philosophical basis for the poem. Thus the author gets the conclusion that this question which Prufrock never speaks out is his psychological conflict. He is pondering whether he should reveal his true self before the public.

Key words: Prufrock; an Overwhelming Question; Psychological Conflict

Résumé: Cet article est une tentative d’analyser une question écrasante dans La chanson d’amour de J. Alfred Prufrock. Comme les travaux exemplaires sur la poésie d’autre fois d’Eliot, ce poème délinée le thème profond de la séparation moderne des caractères dans les pays occidentaux. Dans ce poème, l’interprétation de cette question écrasante est cruciale pour l’appréciation du poème entier. L’auteur conclut donc que cette question dont Prufrock n’a jamais parlé revient à son conflit psychologique. Il est en train de réfléchir s’il devrait se dévoiler devant le public.

Mots-Clés: Prufrock; Une question écrasante; Conflit psychologique

T. S. Eliot is an outstanding poet in modern literature. The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock is one of his earlier works, in which Prufrock proposes “an overwhelming question”, but he never tells us what it really means. Although it is challenging to say exactly what he means, a lot of critics have tried to give their own answers. According to Wikipedia, many believe that Prufrock is trying to tell a woman his romantic interest in her, others, however, believe that Prufrock is trying to express some deeper philosophical insight or disillusionment with society, but fears rejection. This paper would like to make this question concrete. In my opinion, this question which Prufrock never speaks out is his psychological conflict. He is pondering whether he should reveal his true self before the public. In this poem, Eliot employed many images and allusions to imply this question to readers. Moreover, the philosophical idea of the poet also provides us a clue to understand it.

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1. THE USE OF IMAGES TO IMPLY THE QUESTION

Although the “overwhelming question” is not put forward until in the tenth line, the forgoing lines have created a certain atmosphere. At the beginning, Prufrock asks “you and I” to “make our visit”. As many critics point out, here, “you and I” are not two different people. “You” is a thinking and sensitive self; while “I” is a public and outward personality. In the other word, “you” is Prufrock’s true self. Then the poet employed the image “the evening” “spread out against sky”. It implies that the whole world is covered in the dark passively. Therefore, it is difficult for most of people to distinguish the true self and the self under a mask.

The second stanza, “In the room the women come and go, Talking of Michelangelo.” tells us that this party belongs to a social gathering of middle-upper class. Since Prufrock has “thin arms, thin legs and thin hair” “with a bald spot”, he does not want to expose the shortcomings to other members of the party. Thus he asks himself “Do I dare to disturb the universe” by this question. Obviously, Prufrock is very self-conscious, but not self-confident. With so many unfavorable conditions, he is incapable of confronting this “overwhelming question”.

In the third stanza, Eliot adopted the image: fog and smoke, which usually cover or shut out something, to create the same effect as the image, evening. Because “the yellow smoke” is almost everywhere, Prufrock thinks “there will be time” “To prepare a face to meet the faces that you meet; to murder and create”. This face, this persona, is not the true Prufrock. The real person has been “murdered” and this new face is something he must “create”. These lines: “And time yet for a hundred indecisions, And for a hundred visions and revisions. Before the taking of a toast and tea.” tell us that Prufrock is hesitating about this decision before going out for the party. The phrase “There will be time,” repeated five times between lines 23 and 36, represents his hesitation and delay, in order to conceal the anxiety in his inner world.

However, Prufrock is still unwilling to act out his thoughts, because he has known others all ready. He fears that his self-revelation will be mocked by them, say the women in the party, who are braceleted, white and talking of Michelangelo. Even if he voiced this thought of self-revelation, his voice would “die with a dying fall”.

As Prufrock has known the women, they also fix him “in a formulated phrase, when I am formulated, sprawling on a pin, when I am pinned and wriggling on the wall”. As we know, in the study and collection of insects, specimens are pinned into place and kept in cases. Prufrock feels as though he is being brutally analyzed in a similar manner. The women are so penetrating that he cannot jump out of the role which he has played in former days. Therefore, he compares himself into a crab with “a pair of ragged claws, Scuttling across the floors of silent seas”. Only in this way could he not be perplexed by this question.

In the latter part of the poem, deciding not to try, Prufrock questions whether his efforts would have been worthwhile. He believes “It is impossible to say just what I mean”. Although he needs to be able to share his true self with someone who will accept himself as he is, he is afraid to do so, fearing that the physical intimacy with a lady will not bring emotional intimacy, and wondering if she will reject him as she is “settling a pillow by her head”. After a long range thinking pass, Prufrock seems to come back the reality. He states “I grow old ... I grow old ...”, and asks himself a series of questions, such as “Shall I part my hair behind? Do I dare to eat a peach?” He has become so concerned with his appearance prepared for others that he worries about such trivialities.

At the last, disappointed at himself and others who cannot appreciate his true identity, he loses his courage to put forward this question and leaves this uncomplimentary contradictions behind. Only drowning in the hypocritical world can he feel the deep inner peace.

Throughout the whole poem, Prufrock is speaking to his second self in his mind, as if looking in a mirror and contemplating joining a party. The poem is his interior monologue, of which all images are employed to show Prufrock’s indecisiveness on the proposal of this “overwhelming question”.

2. THE USE OF ALLUSIONS TO IMPLY THE QUESTION

This poem abounds with allusions, which on the one hand, make the poem challenging; on the other hand, help the poet express a profound meaning with concise diction. The following part will analyze the use of some main allusions and their function for the implication of what Prufrock wants to say.

The epigraph before the first stanza comes from the Inferno of Dante's *Divine Comedy*. Guido da Montefeltro, a corrupt Franciscan, identifies himself to Dante, basing his self-revelation on confidence that no one else will discover his identity. Here, Guido da Montefeltro is alluded to Prufrock. The difference between them lies in that Guido da Montefeltro dares to reveal his true identity, but Prufrock is afraid to do so.

The focus of this paper, "an overwhelming question", also is an allusion. Eliot appears to have borrowed this phrase from James Fenimore Cooper's novel, *The Pioneers*. In this novel, one of the characters, Benjamin, asks a series of questions ending with the "overwhelming question." The original text is "The whole company were a good deal astounded with this overwhelming question". With this allusion, the poet seems to say that the overwhelming question is only one of these question which are perplexing modern human beings.

The phrase "There will be time" appears four times in the fourth stanza. "time" is quoted from Old Testament. The original sentence is "To everything, there is a season, and a time to every purpose under heaven. A time to be born, a time to die, a time to plant, a time to pluck up that which is planted; a time to kill, a time to heal..." Here, Prufrock continually postpones the meeting by saying "There will be time".

What's more, what we should never fail to mention is three characters: John the Baptist, Lazarus and Hamlet. In the 13th stanza, there are two lines: "Though I have seen my head (grown slightly bald) brought in upon a platter, I am no prophet--and here's no great matter". Here, the poet refers Prufrock to the prophet, John the Baptist. John the Baptist is a Jewish preacher and prophet of the First Century A.D., who urged people to reform their lives and who prepared the way for the coming of Jesus as the Messiah, but he was murdered because he had the courage to tell a king that he was living corruptly. He died because he spoke out the truth. Compared with John the Baptist, Prufrock lacks of courage to expose his true self to the others, so he says "I am no prophet—and here's no great matter", and take that as his excuse for his decision.

The second character is Lazarus. There are two versions about Lazarus. One is that, as a poor man, Lazarus is cold and hungry to death, but Jesus makes him live back. Another is that Lazarus is a beggar. When Lazarus died, he was taken into heaven. When a rich man named Dives died, he went to hell. He requested that Lazarus be returned to earth to warn his brothers about the horror of hell, but his request was denied. In this poem, Prufrock says, "I am Lazarus, come back to tell you all", but he doesn't say anything because he is afraid of being refused.

The two characters, John the Baptist and Lazarus are used to form a vivid contrast or comparison with Prufrock. He is neither a prophet nor a great sage; he is merely a perplexed, unheroic, inhibited, twentieth-century young man.

Another allusion lies in "No I am not Prince Hamlet, nor was meant to be; Am an attendant lord, one that will do". Hamlet is the protagonist of Shakespeare's *Hamlet*, Prince of Denmark. He is famous for his hesitancy and indecision. Hamlet can be alluded to as someone who talks at length, expressing anxieties, doubts, or unhappiness. (Andrew Delahunty, 2007, 228) Prufrock is a kind of modern Hamlet in that the former is also indecisive. However, Prufrock holds that he is not Hamlet, because he is neither as noble as the prince Hamlet nor meant to be so indecisive. Therefore, Prufrock compares himself with an unimpressive character in the Shakespeare play, an attendant lord. This attendant lord makes him look foolish at times. Similarly, Prufrock is worried that the words he speaks will make him look foolish, too.

This poem is full of quotes, historical or fictional persons, places and ideas. In the use of allusions, on the one hand, Eliot wants to show that Prufrock is a well educated modern man; on the other hand, he

establishes the tone and creates the tension by continually backing away from the main question.

3. PHILOSOPHICAL IDEA FOR WRITING THE POEM

“Most of studies of Eliot recognize that his early absorption in philosophy was very important for his development as poet and critic,...”(Richard Shusterman, 2000: 31) The creation of *The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock* is begun in September, 1910 and completed in August, 1911. During this period, Eliot studied the work of Bergson, and then settled on the philosophy of F. H. Bradley. “... we should mention one feature of Eliot’s Bradleyan philosophy which is helpful for understanding his early poetry, ...” this feature is referred to as solipsism.

According to this theory, communication of the inner life is always a courageous act of faith across a gulf of privacy and difference; and “the life of a soul does not consist in the contemplation of one consistent world but in the painful task of unifying jarring and incompatible ones. we see here the terrifying problem of personal already expressed in early works like ‘Prufrock’” (Richard Shusterman, 2000, 35).

In the poem, Prufrock is divided two selves. One is persuading Prufrock to ask the “overwhelming question”, while the other is trying to prevent it. They are never consistent throughout the poem. With this literary form, the poet attempted to reflect the predicament of human beings in modern world.

4. CONCLUSION

The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock is Eliot’s most striking early achievement. It is a dramatic monologue, which implies an ironic contrast between the “love song” and the inability of confronting “an overwhelming question”. The poet employed many broken images and classical or biblical allusions. Certainly, these significant techniques make the poem a famous work of the 20th century Literature. Although to a certain degree the specific meaning of the poem is open to interpretation, based on his study on philosophy and modern society, Eliot successfully reflects the perplexing question.

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