The Hell of Modern Man: Isolation in “The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock”

Modern man is somewhat of a dilemma in literature. Where the Romantics have glorified man, modernists seem to pity and condemn him. T. S. Eliot’s classic poem “The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock” is perhaps the best example of a literary examination of the modern man. This poem is one of the heartbeats of American literature, found in many anthologies and school syllabi. Eliot himself took great pride in the poem, early in his career he “felt that he would never again produce anything as good as ‘Prufrock’” (Childs 687). Perhaps it is because of this depiction of modern man that it is so revered. It was and remains “a major modernist preoccupation: the impress of urban industrial civilization on the human spirit” (Sultan 82).

“Prufrock” demonstrates the isolationism of the modern man through several techniques: the use of the framing devices (the title, the epigraph, the first lines) to set the mood of the piece; the isolation imagery throughout; the structure of the poem itself to suggest the most important ideas; and the concluding lines. Ultimately, these items depict the outcome of a modern society: an isolated “fool,” afraid of himself and the world around him.

It is important to discuss first who the poem is addressing. The poem begins, “Let us go then, you and I” (line 1). It is generally assumed that the poem is from J. Alfred Prufrock’s perspective, but who is the “you” to whom he refers? Often, there are three answers to this question: Prufrock is addressing himself, he is addressing a woman, or Prufrock is directly speaking to the reader. Donald Childs’ essay points out, “The title would suggest a lady,” but later concludes Prufrock “is addressing, as if looking in a mirror, his whole public personality” (687). Childs goes on to suggest “‘you and I’ are part of an internal monologue which is not meant to be heard. Prufrock is examining himself, and the poem is his inwardly directed thought process (Childs 688). While the text does not deny this, I do not think this is whom the persona
is addressing. It seems too existential. Carol Christ takes this one step further, arguing that this non-spoken monologue suggests the ultimate isolation of Prufrock: “the ‘you’ he addresses projects from his own mind. Eliot thus uses the potential for address that the monologue contains to emphasize the speaker’s isolation within his own consciousness” (221). While this certainly would emphasize the isolation of the piece, this isolation is made much more dramatic when looked at as if Prufrock is addressing his reader. It seems that Prufrock is inviting the reader, and all of humanity with him, to explore his life, and the isolation therein. This is ironic, because despite the invitation, Prufrock remains ultimately alone in his quest to find love.

Hoover asserts “Prufrock is a kind of modern day Everyman, implicating all of humanity in his fate with the opening command, ‘Let us go then, you and I’” (Hoover 15). Prufrock seems to suggest that all modern man shares in this fate with him, furthering the isolation felt by all who enter into this modern world.

Interestingly, this line also sets the tone of wrongness for the piece, not only in inviting a stranger to share in this experience, but also through the grammatical structure. Jacobs has a very succinct essay that points out that, grammatically speaking, “you and I” is incorrect and should read “you and me” (5). It is doubtful that T. S. Eliot, a master of the English language, slipped up, or was simply looking for a rhyme to “sky” in the next line. Rather, Jacobs suggests “most educated readers, reading the first line, sense something wrong in it… Is not that sense of wrongness precisely the note which Eliot would wish to strike in his poem about J. Alfred?” (5) The slight incorrect usage sets the stage for the wrongness portrayed in this modern society that Prufrock is confined to.

Having set the subject of the poem, and the immediate feeling of wrongness, it is relevant to also note the title and the epigraph. Much has been written on the words “The Love Song of J.
Alfred Prufrock.” There is little argument that the title serves to introduce the reader to the persona “J. Alfred Prufrock.” Much debate has occurred, however, over the nature of the “Love Song” aspect of the title. Some have claimed that the title “indicates Prufrock’s almost exclusive preoccupation with himself” (Walcott 71). Having established, however, that the poem is not directed to his inner-self, and noting that Prufrock seems to hate himself rather than be preoccupied, this assessment seems incorrect. It has also been suggested that the “Love Song” is directed to the woman with the shawl in line 67, who Prufrock wants to marry but ultimately has not the “strength” to ask (line 80, Walcut 71). I argue, however, that the title is supposed to be ironic. To Prufrock, there is no love in this modern world: “the irony lies not in the fact that what is called a song will never be heard, but rather that it is called a Love Song… The irony is that here in Prufrock’s hell, as in Dante’s, there is no love” (Locke 58).

Dante is another subject altogether. The epigraph preceding the poem derives from Dante’s Inferno. Guido da Montefeltro is speaking to Dante in the eighth circle of hell. Not expecting his story to be told “since no man has ever come alive out of this gulf of Hell,” Guido opens his own tale with these lines, simultaneously opening “The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock” for Eliot (Eliot 672). These lines are not to be skimmed over: “nowhere else in the range of Eliot’s use of the epigraph is it more successfully integrated into the structure of a poem as here in ‘Prufrock’” (Locke 59). This sets the tone and setting for the poem to follow: one of hell. This hell has taken its toll on Prufrock, rendering a question between his words and Guido’s: “couchèd in the Dantinean epigraph of the poem is a shadowy outline of Prufrock himself: he is, like Guido… a figure of living death” (Hakac 54). The epigraph serves to immediately place the reader (the subject of Prufrock’s address) directly into hell. Hoover says it particularly well: the setting of the poem, “the city at twilight, embodies all of hell” (28). This
implication of an urban hell furthers the feel of an alien world to Prufrock, and by extension, his reader.

Having examined the context of the poem, and how this relates to the isolationistic feeling of the poem, it is relevant to examine the isolation imagery itself. A contemporary of Eliot’s, Octavio Paz, said, “modern man is Eliot’s protagonist. Everything is alien to him and he recognizes himself as nothing” (Hoover 14). This is particularly true for the persona of Prufrock: he sees himself as nothing through his isolation imagery. One of the ways this is presented is through images that are separate from Prufrock himself. One of these occurs in second stanza: “In the room the women come and go / Talking of Michelangelo” (Line 13-14, Line35-36). These lines suggest that Prufrock is somehow separate from these women, in a room where he is not involved. He seems to spend the course of the monologue watching something from a distance. As the poem concludes, Prufrock discusses the mermaids, an image that will be discussed in depth later in this essay. In describing them, Prufrock states, “I have seen them” followed by a description, which implies that he has not actually been with them. The closest he gets is “by the sea-girls” but does not actually seem to interact with them in any significant way (lines 126-128, emphasis added). This separation from every human interaction around him emphasizes the isolation of the poem. It demonstrates “the failure of communication” between the inhabitants of this modern society—we, the reader included—driving them and us from each other and any significant relationship (Wallcutt 71).

Isolated images in and of themselves emphasize the separation of Prufrock from his society. Eliot’s use of synecdoche demonstrates this idea. “The eyes” of lines 55-61 imply a person watching, but Eliot choses to use the eyes as a person themself. This effect of separating a part from the rest of the body seems to represent Prufrock himself: a part, but also separate
from this society he lives in, making it hell. This is similarly so for “the arms” in the next stanza. The arms of the women are described in great detail: “braceleted and white and bare” (line 63). Little else is given such adjectives. By only discussing their arms, the isolation of the body part, alienation is emphasized.

Prufrock’s “visions and revisions” demonstrate his extreme self-consciousness, which seems to bring about his isolation. He questions himself constantly: “How should I presume?” is repeated three times through the course of a few stanzas (Lines 54, 61, 68). He worries what “they will say” twice, and while it is implied that these are the guests of the tea party, he doesn’t define who they are directly (lines 41, 44). His fearful assessment of his fellow-beings in this world he lives in, those that he fears even though he cannot necessarily define them further, characterizes his lonely nature. He analyzes to a point of paralysis, in fact “many doubt whether Prufrock ever actually arrives at the party he so vividly imagines” (Christ 221). I would agree with this assessment. His “hundred indecisions/ And … a hundred visions and revisions” ultimately hamper him from actually attending (Line 33-34). He is so isolated that the only interaction he engages in takes place in the images and examinations of his mind.

The yellow fog is of interesting note in terms of the isolationist imagery. The yellow fog, Hakac points out in his examination, “is the only section of the poem which is organically complete and which ends on a positive note of satisfaction… Subconsciously [Prufrock] associates the cat-fog’s provocative behavior with what he desires most: love” (52). Indeed, the only comforting images are presented in this the third stanza: the yellow fog “rubs its back”, “rubs its muzzle”, and the beautifully cat-characteristic line, “curled once about the house and fell asleep” (lines 15-22). One of the only positive adjectives of the poem, “soft,” is found in this section as well. This fog is the only thing that seems to touch something else at any point in the
poem: where everything seems so isolated, the yellow fog, ironically, is the only thing that seems connected to something. Hakac argues furthermore that “no other lines in the poem have the effective physical maneuvers and sexual connotations of these” (53). There seems to be a sexual charge to the yellow-fog, in that it, “woos, experiences a climax, and rests” (53). Prufrock is so isolated from his fellow man in his hell-like society that the closest he comes to intimacy is through the somewhat disgusting image of yellow smoke, presumably the pollution of this modern industrial hell.

James Haba argues that the isolation imagery brings Prufrock closer to the reader, in that they are able to share in their alienation together: “the poem’s work… is to rob the reader… of his own alienation” (53). While I see the point that Haba is attempting to make, I disagree. The reader and Prufrock are not isolated together, they are isolated separately. Rather than bring them together, the isolation seems only to alienate them further: they cannot connect with anything in reality, or, as will be discussed later, in fantasy.

Aside from direct isolationist images, the very structure of the poem lends itself to the motif of alienation. This poetic structure of free form and loose rhymes was very new to its time. Speaking about publication, “Harold Monroe not only rejected [“Prufrock”] for Poetry and Drama but… thought it ‘bordered on insanity’” (Sultan 79). This insanity he disliked seems to come both from the interior monologue that defines the poem and the layout that gives it shape. Eliot certainly experimented in the realm of poetry: “Eliot insists that in poetry the true innovator never invents; instead, he or she ‘forces’ or ‘stretches’, ‘dislocates’ and ‘distorts,’ what has been given him into something new” (Sultan 87). The interior monologue is a significant part of this structure. Sultan explains why this inward examination was so significant: “‘Prufrock’ inaugurates the focus and the narrative technique that were to become so prominent in Modernist
English literature” (Sultan 88). Not only is the poem in first person, but it also seems to follow the unorganized thought patterns of the depressed persona. While some saw earlier printings of this monologue as “insanity,” this structure defined the beginning of new literary techniques.

Eliot’s structure, however, involves more than the interior monologue. It is certainly free form poetry (in a time when sonnets and closed form were the norm), but it does have some rules. There is a clear rhythm, part of that is repetition. The repetition of the phrase “there will be time” throughout the fourth and sixth stanzas suggests not only the monotony of Prufrock’s life, but his obsession with time as well. The stanza “In the rooms the women come and go/ Talking of Michelangelo” is also repeated, indicating a preoccupation with the image on Prufrock’s part, perhaps even a mild obsession with women in general. The repetition is not constant, however, there are breaks in this structure. There are rhymes throughout the 131 lines. Those that are not rhymed, however, serve to emphasize key points of the poem. The first unrhymed ending is the first stanza; in the line “To lead you to an overwhelming question” (line 10). Because question is not rhymed with anything, it seems a significant line of the poem, especially since Prufrock refuses to define or answer that question, perhaps pointing to the overall significance of the idea. The word “time” is used on twelve occasions in stanzas four and six, but it is not rhymed once. Surely there are many synonyms of time, and clearly there are many options that rhyme with the word. This shows the significance of time for Prufrock, perhaps his preoccupation with middle age, or just furthering his obsessive nature in general. Interestingly, the line “I do not think that they [the mermaids] will sing to me,” is not only not rhymed, it is the only single-lined stanza in the poem (line 125). No one, not even the mystical mermaids, interact with Prufrock.
The mermaids of “The Love Song” are particularly important. They are the only reference to song through the course of the poem (“I do not think that they will sing to me,” line 125), suggesting that they represent this love the title refers to. Hakac points out that in traditional symbolism, mermaids represent the “romantic reverie of ideal love” (54).

Unfortunately, because they do not sing to him, Prufrock is completely and utterly isolated from them. This is the ideal of love and he cannot attain it. It is something distant and out of reach for Prufrock (not to mention, imaginary). The mermaids encompass all that Prufrock can idealize about love. The mermaids and the sea are another topic for much debate. Especially the final line, in which Prufrock (and the reader, presumably) drown: “Till human voices wake us and we drown” (line 131).

James Haba argues that the drowning is symbolic of a baptism of sorts, where Prufrock is given a second chance: “we can perhaps begin to see the drowning… not simply death but also a baptism into a new life, initiation into a community more deeply and fully realized than any which either Prufrock or the reader has ever known” (54). Given the overall nature of the poem, and the tone of the line, I disagree with this assessment. Drown is an aggressive word, and does not seem to imply something as spiritually profound as baptism. In addition, the dark tone and isolationist imagery of the poem contribute to a much more negative ending.

I would argue that the mermaids are a fantasy of Prufrock’s somewhat removed reality. Hoover makes a very accurate assessment of the mermaids and their symbolism in connection to the water of the sea:

The ‘human voices,’ all the unnecessary and divisive tumult of modern society, still speak more loudly to Prufrock than does the natural roar of the sea. The result, paradoxically, is a different sort of drowning, the daily death in life of
obsessive self-consciousness. Prufrock’s stultified, jealously defended existence thus becomes a kind of suicide, for as he awakes and pulls back within himself, like a turtle within his shell, he sucks in also the waters of life, which drown him now though they could have saved him. (Hoover 17-18)

I agree with this statement, but would argue that he does not have the opportunity to save himself. The mermaids are ultimately not real, so the “human voices” of reality “wake” (the word implying awakening Prufrock from his fantasy) and submerge Prufrock back to this reality of hell. It is for this reason, his lack of love, he drowns and the modern man, his reader, drowns with him. All die in the course of this modern society, spiritually or otherwise. Reality cannot give modern man that which he longs for: “Against the symbolic drama of adult love which he subconsciously sees performed with effortless harmony in nature, and against his reverie of an ideal love with mermaids, pictured as pleasant but short-lived escapism, Prufrock stands by comparison painfully tense and abnormal in daily life” (Hakac 54).

There is little hope in this world of Prufrock’s: he is condemned to his hell of isolation. Some argue that “Eliot set out to shock the reader” in this poem (Locke 51). Perhaps that is what modern man needs to keep him from drowning. The readers, like Prufrock, find themselves in this hell with little escape. Modern society promotes isolationism, and produces characters like Eliot: fearful, analytical, and depressed. Perhaps T. S. Eliot is encouraging humanity to duck away from the oppressive self-consciousness that modern society offers, and fight isolation with real human-to-human interaction; that in this way, we will not drown.
Works Cited


