

Essay: "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock"

Though Prufrock appears to be passive and indecisive, bound up in meaningless routines and social expectations, and fears to reveal his inner feelings, he isn't the weak, spineless character that others attribute to him. Rather, he is a man of unusual sensitivities and introspection, and he has come to this ineffectual state because of the shallow world in which he lives. His world bears similarities to that of a growing group of people in today's society: single people. At the time of this poem, 1917, a new group of people were emerging in the relatively new industrialized society. These were people alienated and separated from their families and living in large, depersonalized urban areas. Single people at that time would not have been unlike the large groups of single people now.

A single person's life is quite different from life as a married person or life with a long-term intimate partner. Single people are far more isolated from other people than their married counterparts, and their lives are much more fragmented. Most single people have no thread of continuity running through their lives. That is, there is no one to come home to daily and relate the small incidental happenings of their days. Instead, when they come home, the house is empty. Whether they had a good day or a bad day is of little consequence to anyone. There is no one to tell, so the daily events become locked up inside them. Their friends hear only selected highlights of their lives. Relationships with other people are incidental, at social events, or at family gatherings. In other words, there is a reason to get together, making the environment somewhat artificial. They aren't together "naturally" as people are at home and away from social faces. The single person at home is totally alone.

Of the people we all know, there are only five types of relationships:

1. Business associates
2. Acquaintances
3. Friendships
4. Relatives
5. Spouses (or significant others)

Of these relationships, there is only one in which we are free to be intimate (sexually and otherwise), and that is with a spouse (or an intimate partner). This relationship allows us to be ourselves, without pretenses or inhibitions. It is the only relationship which allows us to be *completely* ourselves, and that another person can know us completely. All other relationships have restrictions regarding proper behavior, thus, we can't be wholly intimate. Single people who are without long-term intimate partners, then, only experience the other four restrictive relationships. They aren't free to be completely themselves with anyone. No one knows them intimately. As a result, large parts of their days and nights are lived inside their own heads.

I see Prufrock's dilemma related to the fact that he is a single person. He attends the parties and other social events, regardless of how dull or unsatisfying, because without them, there are few--if any--other social options available, for instance, "one-night cheap hotels." Over the years, he feels more and more weary of these events, and sees them as superficial, fragmented, and fruitless. He expresses his dislike of these endless, dull social routines when he says, "For I have known them already, known them all." He repeats this statement three different times, which emphasizes his boredom with his social life.

His life blurs into one long event, which is suggested by the yellow fog mentioned in the fourth and fifth stanzas. Fog is hazy and prevents clear vision. This yellow fog is everywhere, inside and out, and seems as endless and dull as the social gatherings. It's heavy and lethargic and seems to reflect his state of mind. It's also seeking to get inside some secure haven, like a stray animal.

Prufrock's passive, self-conscious, and inhibited personality isn't due to a flaw in his character. Rather, it is the depth of Prufrock's awareness, which is the source of his depression. His sensitivities make him more acutely aware than most other people of the circumstances. He's a victim of his own awareness.

There are three basic personality types, in regards to awareness levels. The first type, and by far the most common, is those who simply never look inward and question. They concern themselves with social convention and activities and live, more or less, on the exterior of life. They are conscious outside of themselves, but unconscious inside of themselves. For the most part, their eyes glaze over if you talk to them about inner feelings or things on an introspective level.

The second type is people who have a vague awareness, and a generalized sense of unfulfillment and unhappiness. However, they lack the introspective qualities—or perhaps they fear them—and, thus, they don't quite comprehend the source of their dissatisfaction. They tend to be pessimistic or depressive. However, I've observed that these people usually complain about their dissatisfaction, but they seem to avoid taking action about it. When others offer suggestions to help them, they reply with a "yes, but" kind of excuse, relieving them of the responsibility of action, and continue life as it is.

The third type, and the least common, is people who have a special sensitivity or awareness, and who are introspective. Prufrock belongs to this group. He's not a complainer like those in the second group. As Frederik Rusch says, "Prufrock understands his own predicament quite well. Although he calls himself a fool, he has wisdom about himself and his predicament" (915).

Introspective type people tend to be inward and hesitant to express their inner thoughts. This tendency, to some extent, is because few people understand, or care to hear about another's inner thoughts and feelings. This is even more true of men. Others seem uncomfortable or feel threatened by intimate disclosures, thus avoid these kinds of conversations.

An introspective person, then, has a more difficult time finding others who share their own depth of awareness. When engaged in social discourse, they have a heightened consciousness of its superficiality or triviality, but there is no relief from it short of relinquishing all social contact.

So, whom should Prufrock talk to? It seems that the people in his world are typical of most people. Because of his heightened sensitivities, he's acutely aware of the mundane way people see him: "How his hair is growing thin!" (40), and, "But how his arms and legs are thin!" (43). I disagree with Robert Cook, who says, "Prufrock is paralyzed by his fears of what people think" (912). Prufrock is merely becoming overwhelmed by this fragmented, superficial world. He has turned inward because there's nowhere else to go. Prufrock is frustrated because there is no one he can be honest with about his inner thoughts and feelings. He's already familiar with the reactions of others:

Would it have been worth while
If one, settling a pillow or throwing off a shawl,
And turning toward the window, should say: "That is not it at/all,
That is not what I meant, at all. (106-110)

The woman in this imaginary conversation seems disinterested with the conversation, as seen by her action of settling a pillow or throwing off a shawl. Someone interested wouldn't be fidgeting like this. These are acts of mild boredom and disinterest. She then turns toward the window, presumably away from him, and speaks. This is an act of rejection. I think he's already experienced this kind of reaction. I don't think he merely imagines that this would be her reply if he spoke to her. Nancy Gish describes him, thus:

He cannot act because he fears that nothing in the external world will correspond with his felt reality, that the lady has no similar feelings and will only say, 'That is not what I meant at all' Though he wishes to reveal the torture of living in an empty world and to ask for human contact, he fears the contempt of the very world he recognizes as trivial and divorced from his real desires. (17)

Unlike Gish, who attributes Prufrock's fear to his own inadequacy (13), I believe his fear is based on his own experience, the fact that there is no one who understands. By necessity, he is driven into his own thoughts and he goes through the dreary repetition of daily life because without it, there is nothing. I'm most in agreement with Rusch's Frommian view of Prufrock's predicament. Frommian theory asserts that it is a fundamental need of man to be part of something, that "the individual's needs and drives have a social component" (915). Prufrock "gets no comfort, no nurturing from his environment" (Rusch, 916).

The Dante's Hell that Prufrock lives is that he can reveal himself only to himself. He is both the "you and I," his outer self conversing with his inner self. There is no way out of his stale, lifeless world, just as no one ever returns from Hell. Prufrock's experience is the Hell of isolation, of being a single man, of being cutoff from revealing or releasing his inner life, and of receiving no understanding or empathy. But his isolation is not of his own making. It is beyond his ability to change it. It is a larger problem created by the structure of his society. No one returns from it, except through death.

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