

The Very Unlovely Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock

“The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock,” by T. S. Eliot, is best known for its ironic bastardization of what a love song should be. In fact, the poem reads much more as the narrator’s stream of consciousness than an actual love song. Though efforts are made by Prufrock to make it sound romantic, each allusion falls far short of romance. Instead, the reader is presented with a window into Prufrock’s broken mind, through which his less than desirable nature is made all too clear. Through Eliot’s use of imagery, metaphors, and word choice in the narration of Prufrock, the reader is given insight into Prufrock’s shy, egotistic, and paralyzed nature.

In the third stanza of the poem, Eliot’s use of an extended metaphor, coupled with some other literary techniques, paints Prufrock as a socially isolated character. Immediately proceeding the Michelangelo couplet, the stanza is written as follows:

The yellow fog that rubs its back upon the window-panes,
The yellow smoke that rubs its muzzle on the window-panes
Licked its tongue into the corners of the evening,
Lingered upon the pools that stand in drains,
Let fall upon its back the soot that falls from chimneys,
Slipped by the terrace, made a sudden leap,
And seeing that it was a soft October night,
Curled once about the house, and fell asleep. (Eliot, 15-22)

The metaphor of a cat is first most apparent when analyzing these lines. Notice how Eliot uses phrases such as “rubs its back,” “rubs its muzzle,” “sudden leap,” “curled once about the

house,” and others to clearly point to the metaphor. With this established, it is important to look into the reasoning behind the cat imagery. By nature, cats are not very sociable creatures. In contrast to dogs, who are commonly referred to as “man’s best friend,” cats most often keep to themselves. Now the meaning of the metaphor is clear: Eliot essentially compares Prufrock to the cat in this stanza. It fits his characterization well; Prufrock has a very hard time socializing with others (particularly women), and spends the entire poem trying to bring himself to talk to just one girl. However, Eliot does not simply use metaphor to convey this in the stanza; careful word choice also leads to the same depiction. Prufrock refers to “yellow fog” and “yellow smoke,” which ties back to his own mind: clouded. He cannot act and is paralyzed, blocked by his own thoughts. The color yellow, often associated with cowardice, just supplements this idea. Further, notice how Eliot uses the word “lingered,” which just furthers the notion of being reluctant to act. Finally, when looking at the story of the cat as a whole in this stanza, nothing is accomplished. The cat essentially moves around in the night, but by the end it just “fell asleep.” In the same way as Prufrock, the cat did not act in any significant way.

The crab metaphor in “The Love Song” uses similar techniques, but illustrates a different side of Prufrock: his egotism. Prufrock narrates, “I should have been a pair of ragged claws / Scuttling across the floors of silent seas” (73-74). Most apparent in these lines is Prufrock’s desire for insignificance. He clearly alludes to being a crab, which is a very simple creature. However, in doing so, he implies that he currently is significant (logically, he cannot wish to be insignificant without being important). He suggests that he has the capability to “disturb the universe” (46), to use another line from the poem. Reading deeper into these lines

reveals more about Prufrock's character. First, the same sense of isolation is apparent. He wishes to "[scuttle] across the floors of *silent* seas." This imagery paints the picture of a vast, "silent" ocean. Prufrock wants to be alone, and wants to escape from the real world.

Furthermore, this reaffirms Prufrock's paralysis. The entire poem is comprised of Prufrock essentially weighing in his head whether or not to speak to the woman. He is paralyzed by his thoughts. In this line, he wishes he would be a crab, but the action he wishes the crab would engage in would be merely "scuttling." Simply put, Prufrock would not have to worry about talking to the woman or anything; he would be a crab doing a mindless task. This metaphor shows the depth at which he over-thinks this issue, in addition to the fact that he wishes he wouldn't be so mentally paralyzed.

Eliot's use of hyperbolic metaphor best illustrates Prufrock's paralyzed disposition.

Toward the end of the poem, Eliot writes:

And would it have been worth it, after all,

....

To have squeezed the universe into a ball

To roll it toward some overwhelming question,

To say: "I am Lazarus, come from the dead,

Come back to tell you all, I shall tell you all" (87-95)

Once again, Prufrock returns to the universe analogy. As the poem progresses, his analogies keep getting grander and grander. Further, they have more of a cosmic view, and are much more detached than the previous ones (even less focused on the real world task at hand, and instead dealing with grand problems). Prufrock deems asking the question so incredibly

difficult that it is on par with “squeez[ing] the universe into a ball.” What should be a relatively simple question instead becomes an “overwhelming” one, simply because he is over-thinking it. In the next two lines, another incredible hyperbole is made: Prufrock compares himself to Lazarus. In this reference Eliot makes to the bible, Prufrock essentially believes that his task is as complicated and as painful as Lazarus’ death. Furthermore, his egotism is once again apparent: he believes that he is so important that his asking the question would have equal footing with the miracle performed by Jesus in the New Testament. Finally, the first line of the stanza also has important meaning: Prufrock has graduated from merely delaying his asking the question to questioning whether to ask it at all. Simply put, he convinces himself that he should not ask; his paralysis has completely stopped him.

Prufrock’s “Love Song” is clearly anything but one. However, Eliot offers a unique psychological analysis into the mind of a social outcast. Eliot’s use of literary techniques portray a man incapable of normal day-to-day life, constantly mulling over every action he takes, debilitated by this paralysis. Eliot’s very effective analysis brings up the question as to where he got his inspiration, and whether he could have possibly used his mentally unstable wife, or himself as a model.