Prufrock’s Paralysis

When people feel afraid to take risks or make important decisions, they sometimes create faulty excuses for themselves. Even though they acknowledge that “taking a dive” has the potential to bring many good things into their lives, they allow their fear and apprehension to take control. Often dealing with regret as a result of this, they may even justify their loss of past opportunities by focusing on the negative aspects of what could have happened if they had felt brave enough to take those risks. This situation can be seen in the poem, “The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock,” by T.S. Eliot. Through various forms of imagery, the poem shows that Prufrock not only feels apprehensive towards expressing his inner feelings to a certain woman, but also feels anxious around others in society. Ultimately, Prufrock lives his life paralyzed by his emotions, never overcoming the fear of self-expression that causes his inaction.

Early in the poem, the reader perceives Prufrock’s awkwardness when he deals with ordinary social situations. When Prufrock talks about interacting with others, he thinks:

There will be time, there will be time
To prepare a face to meet the faces that you meet;

And time yet for a hundred indecisions,
And for a hundred visions and revisions,
Before the taking of toast and tea. (26-34).

With this, Prufrock shows that he carries little grace and charisma when dealing with others. As it is necessary for him to “prepare a face” when meeting other people, he unnaturally sees simple human interactions as burdensome. Although “preparing a face” for others cannot be considered completely unnatural, Prufrock’s self-consciousness creates a paralyzing desire to avoid dealing with them. And, as he claims that there is ample time before having “toast and tea” with other people, he believes that he has abundant opportunities to push back not only his decisions, but
his indecisions as well. Moreover, when Prufrock continues to describe his social interactions, he shows that he feels disconcerted when others pay attention to him. He states:

And I have known the eyes already, known them all—
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
To spit out my all the butt-ends of my days and ways?
And how should I presume? (55-61).

Thus, when other people look at Prufrock, the attention being given him makes him feel like a specimen whose every body part is being scrutinized. Presenting the image of an insect “pinned and wriggling on the wall” for all to behold, he feels helpless when he is in the company of others since he unconfidently assumes that they silently criticize him. As he wonders, “How should I presume?” he lacks the ability to naturally hold a conversation or even to express himself. Simply put, Prufrock’s incredible self-consciousness and pessimistic assumptions about how others view him paralyze him in ordinary social instances.

Just as Prufrock lacks the most basic social skills, he is also unable to profess his true feelings to a certain woman and even attempts to justify his inaction. As he contemplates what he should do, he creates flawed excuses for holding back on expressing his love. He says:

Do I dare
Disturb the universe?
In a minute there is time
For decisions and revisions which a minute will reverse.
For I have known them all already, known them all—
Have known the evenings, mornings, afternoons, (45-50)

With this, Prufrock claims that it is suitable for him to remain inactive and keep his feelings a secret. As he fears creating change in his and in others’ lives, thus “disturbing the universe,” he consequently feels apprehensive about professing his love. And as believes that he is a wise man
who has “known the evenings, mornings, [and] afternoons,” he believes that he is right to think that overcoming his hesitation and anxiety will bear no fruit in the end. Furthermore, when Prufrock thinks about the future after passing on his opportunity to express his feelings, he continues to insist that he is right to maintain his inaction. He states:

And would it have been worth it, after all,
Would it have been worth while,
After the sunsets and the dooryards and the sprinkled streets,
After the novels, after the teacups, after the skirts that trail along
the floor—
And this, and so much more?— (99-104)

Here, Prufrock wonders if the times he would have spent with the woman he loves are worth conquering his fear. As he rhetorically asks if showing his true feelings “would have been worthwhile,” he doubts the intrinsic value of spending ordinary moments with her over the rest of his life. Afraid of any sort of change, he fears that a new life with the woman in question will drastically alter how he carries out his own everyday life in the present. That is, as he holds back on conveying his true emotions, Prufrock fabricates inadequate reasons that develop out of his fear of change and pessimistic view of taking risks.

As Prufrock decides to bottle up his feelings and fears normal social interactions, he has a desire to simply hide away from the world. As he discusses his fear of communicating with others, he asserts, “I should have been a pair of ragged claws / Scuttling across the floors of silent seas” (73-74). Thus, Prufrock wishes to do away with all his internal conflicts by becoming a simple-minded crustacean. As he talks about “scuttling across the floors of silent seas,” he desires to be closed off from the world and to be unknown, thus avoiding any change or social activity. Also, as he longs to be a crab rather than a human being, he desires to be instinctual and to run away from the complex, personal problems he wrestles with. After all, as his social paranoia essentially stems from his over-analytical personality, losing the ability to
think would grant him peace of mind. Moreover, when Prufrock continues to claim that it is not right for him to change his life by conveying his inner emotions, he declares, “I am no prophet— and here’s no great matter; / I have seen the moment of my greatness flicker” (83-84). Here, Prufrock asserts that it is not his place to show his true feelings. Declaring himself to be “no prophet” who can speak to the world with confidence and eloquence, he believes that it is naturally impossible for him to voice his love for his beloved. And, as he states that he has “seen the moment of my greatness flicker,” he thinks that nothing worthwhile will happen to him for the remainder of his life, even if he expresses his feelings to the one he loves. In other words, Prufrock simply wants to escape from all his troubles and sees no benefit to overcoming them.

Throughout the poem, different forms of imagery vividly portray Prufrock’s apprehension towards interacting with others and conveying his true feelings. Paralyzed by his fear, he creates faulty excuses for himself and believes that it is perfectly fine for him to succumb to his negative emotions. But even though Prufrock is an incredibly flawed character, ordinary people cannot claim to be that much better than he is. All people feel fear and anxiety at many points in their lives. Confessing one’s love for another is never an easy task, and people often feel concerned about how others view them. However, “The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock” compels its readers to overcome life’s obstacles. Through the character of Prufrock, Eliot urges the poem’s readers to avoid succumbing to fear and hesitation. As the reader comes to better understand the fictitious character’s flawed nature, they learn invaluable life lessons.

- Ramon Tuason