

Impersonality and The Love Song of J Alfred Prufrock

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Abstract:

Impersonality of poetry is one of the major concepts of T S Eliot. By this he means the presentation of a feeling or emotion in an objective way not just personally commented upon by the poet. In his famous essay 'Tradition and Individual Talent', Eliot has very elaborately talked about the meaning, nature and significance of impersonality. Most of his poems largely exhibit his given indigenous canon. 'The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock' is also a good manifestation of his desired practice of impersonality. Eliot has developed the main theme of the poem with such words, phrases, situations and objects that bring out the meaning or the theme of the poem almost as may be in the mind of the poet. The words and objects in the poem make the meaning of the poem. The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock reflects a close correlation between the stanza form and the fragmented, wandering flow of Prufrock's thoughts, particularly in connection with the unequal number of lines in the different stanzas and the variable speech rhythms. This paper qualitatively investigates the technique and style of the poet as to see how the subject matter has been impersonally portrayed. Relying upon the content of the poem and the criticism made on the poem, in particular and on the concept of impersonality in general, it has been concluded that the poet has been successful in maintaining impersonality of style in the poem.

Eliot's critical concepts, 'impersonality' and 'literary tradition' have paved the way for lot of varied discussion during his life and afterwards. Complexities and intricacies to understand these concepts are such that lots of books and articles have been written to elaborate upon them. A number of learned critics have opined on the meaning and philosophy of these ideas taking help of Eliot's originally coined phrases. T.S. Eliot, in his epoch making essay, *Tradition and the Individual Talent* (1919), declares his concept of the impersonality of poetry in the following words:

What happens is a continual surrender of himself as he is at the moment to something, which is more valuable. The progress of an artist is a continual self-sacrifice, a continual extinction of personality... Poetry is not a turning loose of emotion, but an escape from emotion; it is not the expression of personality, but an escape from personality (17, 21).

To Eliot a poem is not the overflow of feelings; it is not the loose expression of emotions; Reuben (PAL 2004) comments on Eliot's concept of the nature of a poem, "He conceives a poem as an object, an organic thing in itself, demanding a fusion and concentration of intellect, feeling, and experience." Olney (08), defining Eliot's concept of poetic impersonality, says: I do not mean, nor would either Yeats or Eliot mean, that the personal element ever ceases to be important. On the contrary, it is the very impetus that brings the poetry about and it is there as nodes of intensity in the finished poem; but it must not remain merely personal or it will not have entered into the poem at all. Yeats is also of the view, as quoted by Olney, that if a poet writes on the lost love, it must have been, in the first place, the personal experience of the poet himself. But when he comes to write a poem on it, it becomes the theme of the poem which speaks not to the poet alone but to us all. This is how a personal experience has to be conveyed in an objective or impersonal way- with an impersonal impression. T. S. Eliot has used the term 'objective correlative' as a means to produce impersonality in poetry. Eliot defines objective correlative as:

The only way of expressing emotion in the form of art is by finding an "objective correlative"; in other words, a set of objects, a situation, a chain of events which shall be the formula of that particular emotion; such that when the external facts, which must terminate in sensory experience, are given, the emotion is immediately evoked. (100)

"The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock" is one of the glaring examples of the establishment of impersonality (Objective Correlative) in Eliot's poetry. The main character of the poem, i.e. Prufrock, is the protagonist of the dramatic theme of the poem. "It is an examination of the tortured psyche of the prototypical modern man--overeducated, eloquent, neurotic, and emotionally stilted" (Sparknotes 2005). A very interesting

fact about the origin of the name “Prufrock” has been given by Stephen Stepanchev. He says that this name was suggested by a furniture company in St. Louis, Eliot’s birthplace (400). He says that otherwise the name is so rare that the telephone directories of fifteen major American cities failed to give a name like “Prufrock”.

Through the development of the indecisive thought of Prufrock in the poem, we come to know the absence of the poet’s personality in the depiction of the said character. Prufrock has been shown in total contrast with the romantic trend of character depiction where the poets would write to a large extent of their own thoughts and personal feelings. But Eliot marks a break with the romantic tradition especially of the nineteenth century. Speaking about the parallel between the form and content of the poem, Dallas (193) writes, “For example, *The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock* reflects a close correlation between the stanza form and the fragmented, wandering flow of Prufrock’s thoughts, particularly in connection with the unequal number of lines in the different stanzas and the variable speech rhythms.” This skill is, of course, one of the essential requirements of producing the impersonal effect in a poem. Here the poet has tried, in a great deal, to show his readers what is going on in the mind of the main character of the poem. The poet does not express the emotions directly; he evokes them by means of appropriate images and objects, which is what he calls objective correlative.

This poem forms a substantial part of the poems *Prufrock and other Observations* (1917). Prufrock is an embodiment of divided, indecisive and confused personality – split in his head and heart. The poem is not a love song in the traditional sense of the word. It has not a spontaneous outburst of feelings of the lover for the beloved, rather it is an analysis of the mind of the lover who is unable to take decision about making the proposal to the lady he loves. The poet has applied the technique of dramatic monologue to create the impersonal effect of poetry. “Eliot first achieves the extinction of his personality by setting “Prufrock” in the poetic form of a dramatic monologue” (Classic Notes, 2006). The torturous imagery, the broken sentences, the questions, the parentheses and the rapid jumps from situation to situation – all show that the mind of Prufrock is in a state of dilemma and tension. The “Love Song” is the story of a weak, indecisive and timid lover who only keeps thinking of taking some action but is actually incapable of doing so. His such helplessness has been objectively depicted by the poet throughout

the poem. William Ames gives his understanding of the poetic art of Eliot by pointing out his ability of objectifying a character's emotions and feelings. He writes:

In "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock", T. S. Eliot reveals the thoughts and feelings of the poem's subject, Prufrock, in a way that Prufrock could not have articulated himself, since it is the poem's objective to illustrate Prufrock's insecurity. By not commenting directly and allowing the reader to draw conclusions from clues given in dramatic monologue, Eliot adds meaning and rewards the reader.

R D Trivedi (1976), giving the synopsis of Eliot's poems, says that this "Love Song" is a dramatic monologue in which Mr. Prufrock (not the poet) unloads his mind to his own suppressed self – the 'you' of the poem (*Let us go then **you** and I*). This is also supported by Williamson who says, "The main interest of the poem lies in 'what goes on within the mind, rather than in the exterior events which provoke the mental activity and play of thought and feeling.'" Hence to portray this very inner self of the protagonist in an objective manner, the poet, instead of describing or narrating the situations directly, creates a kind of impression, which helps the reader appreciate the whole thing within the poem itself. Smith (705) speaks of the very grammar of the speaker in the poem. He writes, "Prufrock speaks not to the reader but to the two elements of himself, the surface objective-passive-milquetoast who does not dare to eat a peach and the inward subjective-active-ego who would dare if he could get out." He discusses the use of the personal pronoun "I" in the very first line of the poem. In his response to Melvin Luthy's objection over the use of "I", he says that actually it is the two personalities of the protagonist that are talking to each other, therefore, the appropriate pronoun to be used there is what has been used and it should not be "me" as proposed by Luthy. Jacobs (05) also supports the same view as described by Smith. Jacobs discusses the pros and cons of the right and wrong grammatical use of "I", and then concludes, "Is not that sense of wrongness precisely the note which Eliot would wish to strike in his poem about J. Alfred?" He says that it is actually the wrongness of the society, which has been portrayed, in a seemingly wrong use of the word "I" in the first line of the poem. The continuous flaws in the world have made the world an uneasy place to be at; same is

the feeling at the very start of the poem. The poet wants his readers feel the uneasiness of the surroundings. "By indirections, Eliot always exemplifies, we find directions out" (Jacobs. 06). In using such a befitting grammatical element, the poet has tried to depict the situation all objectively. Johnston (2005) comments on the purposeful use of the language, "In terms of the language discussed already, the speaking personality operates as an objective correlative, something apart and different from the poet for Prufrock is clearly not Eliot." He explains that creating such a character, the omnipresence of the poet's personality is nicely avoided and a coordinating consciousness is built up that hold all the readers close to the feelings presented in the poem.

In addition, to begin with, Eliot comes up to expose the character in a very subtle and complicated style and images. His Prufrock is the type of man who would like to avoid the anguish of his love even by means of anesthesia.

*When the evening is spread out against the sky
Like a patient etherized upon a table;*

The evening reflects the mental state of the protagonist. Prufrock's indecision, his self pity and self disgust are depicted through a number of images which obviously stand for the so called mental status of the character, and these images very much appeal to the imagination of the readers. Christ (160), comparing the imagism of Tennyson's *Mariana* and Eliot's Prufrock, writes that the detailed elements of the description of landscape form a very vivid formula creating an objective correlative for *Mariana* and similarly, "Images function in much the same way in 'The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock'". He says that the images that are used to reveal the inner and outer world of Prufrock truly depict the situations as desired by the poet. Through these images the readers can read the sensibility of the poet's mind. The inner world of a character can be objectively narrated by the speech and moves of the character himself. Prufrock keeps talking to himself and repeatedly questions himself about the conflict haunting his mind:

*To lead you to an overwhelming question
Oh, do not ask, 'What is it?'*

These two lines introduce the very question in the mind of the character the significance of and unsure response to which has made the man so

hesitant and indecisive. This question is actually the making of marriage proposal, but is never outwardly revealed throughout the poem. The rest of the poem is a kind of nail-biting debate over when and how to make this proposal out. In so doing, the internal mental situation and the external surroundings of the character have been depicted with the help of such images and events which appeal to and help the imagination of the readers to understand Prufrock's condition along with the development of the poem. Johansen, in his review on Dennis Donoghue's book, *Words Alone*, talks about the author's views and appreciation of Eliot's poems. Johansen (2000) quotes Donoghue, "Eliot uses words to create images and impressions which do not attach themselves to any particular persons, places or things. In Prufrock, says Donoghue, these apparently objective references, to things like corners, pools, and drains ...enable us to imagine a scene, but they don't establish it as independent of Prufrock." According to Donoghue, words catch hold of the readers' mind while going through Eliot's poems. Words change into images and symbols, which provide objective correlatives for the readers to feel the effect of a given situation. He observes that Eliot seldom exposes his own personality in his poetry. "Rarely does Eliot, as opposed to Pound or Yeats, indulge in the conceit of expressing his own opinions or feelings through the voice of a poetic persona" (Johansen 2000). Haba (53, 54) indicates that this poem is truly representing the feelings that the poet wants and the society of the time offers to show. He says that even the occasional difficulty, in understanding the poem is very much part of the poem. Eliot has here depicted the characteristic alienation of the twentieth century in the character of Prufrock with exact detail of an individual's misunderstanding the society and its confusing effect on the protagonist. "Eliot may help us to see that the alienation which is a hallmark of the twentieth century is perhaps only a misunderstanding, a flawed perception, of ourselves and our experience" (p. 54). Haba has taken the point of the "you" in the first line of the poem. He says that though many critics have tried to explain as to who is meant by this "you", the most befitting and communicating, to Haba, is the reader of the poem. He says if this is so, the speaker of the poem makes us realize his existence with the strength of his love. "We seem to be there and not there with Prufrock, involved and not involved, caught exquisitely, painfully, totally between two worlds: the world of belief and the world of doubt,

of disbelief" (p. 55). This is nothing but an obvious success of the poet in involving the readers to experience the same feelings as those of the character of the poem as well as of the poet himself.

Ousby (1995), speaking of the technical and thematic skills of Eliot in the poem, says that the rhythmic quality of the lines is very much suggestive of exposing the theme of the poem in a picturesque way. He writes:

'In the room the women come and go/ Talking of Michelangelo.'
The rhythm of the two lines and their second appearance later give them a refrain-like role. However, they only appear twice, painting a picture of the hectic but shallow life, which is the basic experience of the speaker. They are snapshots with no depth.

Criticizing the same lines, Laci Berva has another quite internal observation of the protagonist's surroundings, he says: "as the first sign of Prufrock's being confused, and what is more, it makes the reader confused, too. The vision of a determined man fades away. One thing is sure, Prufrock got into a highly aristocratic company inside a room."

Berva, quite sharply, points out the effect of Eliot's mastery of the depiction of the character and his backdrop. The character's expression and the reader's impression have been shown in a real synchronization - Prufrock is confused in making out his proposal and so is the reader to understand the character in whole. Describing Eliot's technique of telling the insecure feelings of the character William Ames again says:

Eliot is not content with simply portraying a man who is insecure, instead, he uses the character's own recollections and melancholy to deepen his meaning, "*For I have known them all already, known them all— / Have known the evenings, mornings, afternoons.*"

Prufrock's intense self-consciousness is suggested by his preparing "*a face to meet the faces that you meet*" and by his frequently asked question "*Do I dare?*" "*Do I dare?*" He is eagerly anxious as to what people will say of him, "*(They will say: 'But how his arms and legs are thin!')*". His 'tedium vitae' is expressed in the line *I have measured out my life with coffee spoons*. Here Prufrock admits that his life is full of only trivialities. He has wasted a good deal of time in just insignificant

acts like taking coffee etc. Here the pettiness of modern city life is critically disclosed. Modern civilization includes a succession of tea parties and coffee sessions. The primordial image of the sea with *Mermaids singing each to each* symbolically expresses the suppressed self of Prufrock and his longing for amorous fulfillment. His utter lack of confidence is shown in the lines like:

*So how should I presume?.....
Then how should I begin
To spit out all the butt-ends of my days and ways?*

Lack of confidence first of all makes oneself an underestimated fellow. Failing to make the proposal out, he starts undervaluing his life and calls it as useless as the butt-ends of smoked cigarettes, which are thrown away. What can be a better metaphor to express one's idea of an underrated life! To cover up his internal timidity, an external (and quite befitting) excuse has been made by Prufrock in the lines:

*Is it perfume from a dress
That makes me so digress?*

Here he is pretending to say that it might be the fragrance of a perfume which has made him go off the point to speak out his love. Another referential excuse: *No! I am not Prince Hamlet, nor was meant to be;* again he is asserting to cover up his feelings of failure to act and does not want himself to be compared with the Prince Hamlet (the great metaphor of procrastination!), but ironically speaking, he faces nothing but a resemblance with Hamlet's failure. Artistically speaking again the mention of Prince Hamlet, given symbolically, adds a lot to expose the condition of Prufrock's divided mind. Laci Berva, in his article "Impersonality in T. S. Eliot: The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock" says:

T. S. Eliot does not express everything plainly. He applies possibly the most complicated, sophisticated metaphors, and besides this he does not expound any thought thoroughly in order to force the reader think over after every section what Prufrock is meditating on. And it is quite interesting that we do not even think of what Eliot wants to say to us.

In the end the protagonist has been shown planning to fight against his looming old age:

*I grow old I grow old
 I shall wear the bottoms of my trousers rolled.
 Shall I part my hair behind? Do I dare eat a peach?
 I shall wear white flannel trousers, and walk upon the
 beach.*

Just feeling young does not make one look young. To Eliot one has not only to think young of oneself but one has to take help of at least some of the material things used by the youth, and they are the things listed in the above given lines.

Hakac (52) finds considerable impersonal approach in the character of Prufrock. He observes, "He seems to have entered into a good mood for the observation, detached from himself and almost objective about what he sees, objective in the sense that none of the timidity and anxiety incipient in his opening sally (II. 1-12) is present here." In his critical essay, Hakac has tried to depict the subconscious of the persona who plays an independent role in the given situation. He has particularly described the importance of the "yellow fog", along with its different actions like rubbing, licking and slipping (53), to show the inward physical desires of Prufrock. These action images help us understand the otherwise inactive personality of the so called hero of the poem. Hakac is of the opinion that by going through the developing phases of the poem, "The reader is coming to realize more and more clearly that Prufrock is indeed a troubled man who makes an awkward entrance in the bleak dozen lines which begin the poem" (53). Obviously, this realization has become possible by using appropriate images and symbols to foreground the typical personality of the protagonist of the poem.

Thus all the scenes of hesitation, fear, pretension and helplessness have been depicted with self-explaining dialogues, images, objects and acts without the interference of the poet's personal thoughts and feelings. The author of the 'Spark Notes', found on Internet, speaking of the difference of Eliot's impersonal style and that of French symbolists, says, "However, whereas the Symbolists would have been more likely to make their speaker himself a poet or artist, Eliot chooses to make Prufrock an unacknowledged poet, a sort of artist for the common man." In other words, to Eliot a character is not the mouthpiece of the poet, but poet is the mouthpiece of his character. As T S Eliot

himself puts it forward, "We can only say that the poem, in some sense, has its own life. The feeling or emotion resulting from the poem is something different from the feeling or emotion in the mind of the poet"(Tra. IT). It means that the poem's meaning can be derived only from the poem itself and not from a supposed intention which preceded it. Laci is again of the opinion:

We can deduce the poet's intention only from the poem itself, which realizes the intention. This is the best example of what T S Eliot wanted to create in his poetry. He thought his task as a poet is not to be the object of a poem, but to be the subject of it, just as he wrote in Tradition and the Individual Talent.

It can be concluded that the feelings and emotions of the poet have been very well objectified by sketching the character of Prufrock. The thoughts, words, moves and actions of the protagonist make the poem 'a thing in itself' to feel understand a particular situation in the mind of the poet. After 'The Waste Land', Prufrock can be said to be the best example of Eliot's conformity with the idea of impersonality. We see considerable consistency in Eliot's approach to materialize his own abstract feelings in the shape of a poem.

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