

Ecological Hazards and Alienation: A Study of Imagery in Eliot's "Prufrock"

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Abstract

This paper studies the use of images in T. S. Eliot's poem "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock" so as to explore how the arrangement of images supports Eliot's doctrine of objective correlative. It forwards the argument that the imagery portrays the speaker of the poem, Prufrock, as being one passing through mental alienation and procrastination, and establishes that the causes of his problems are industrialization, urbanization and ecological hazards. These problems are presented through the imagery, which, for the purpose of this paper, includes metaphors, similes, symbols, allusions, animation and personification as well. All the images, dug out and put together, reveal the deep irony which suggests Prufrock's mental alienation.

Key Words

Imagery, irony, alienation, procrastination, industrialization.

Introduction

"The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock", published in 1915, was Eliot's earliest masterpiece. Presented in the form of a dramatic monologue, the poem introduces us with an urban man deluded by industrialization and growing capitalism in the early 20th century. In a way, we find, in the poem, the representation of the poet himself, who despised liberal humanism and was "disillusioned with regard to human improvement" (Olsen 146). Packed with images and symbols, it takes us into the heart and mind of a man who is victim of inaction and indecision. "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock" seems to prescribe, as Michael North says, "a settled life on the soil, a cosmopolitan, famed or garbling together half the languages of humankind, who preached the virtues of a rooted tradition" (74). The poem proved Eliot's poetic craft, and success of the poem lies in the mythological and the literary references he uses, symbols, images, form and theme. All these components contribute to each other and make the poem's unified whole.

Eliot is one of the most read, reviewed and critiqued poets of the 20th century English literature. "Prufrock", among others, has drawn a good deal of interpretation

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from around the world. Some of the most significant ones, for this paper, have been discussed here.

Frederick W. Locke, in his paper "Dante and T. S. Eliot's Prufrock", tries to interpret Eliot's poem in the light of Dante and his *Inferno*. In the paper Locke attempts to critique and correct some of the claims of F. O. Matthiessen in his work *The Achievement of T. S. Eliot*. He believes that Prufrock in Eliot's verse has an analogical relationship to Gaido of Dante's poem (55). Locke discusses a little about images in the opening verse of "Prufrock," but does not elaborate its significance.

A. R. Jones's "Prufrock Revisited" studies the narrative structure of the poem to find the poem's meaning in the formal unity. He divides the poem into four sections: in the first section, we find Prufrock's movement in the street through the fog; the second section is a transitional one dealing with Prufrock's loneliness and inadequacy; in the third section Prufrock discusses what he did not do or will not do and the reasons for his inaction; and in the last section, Prufrock presents a "dramatic version of himself which leads first to his determination to rebel, however mildly, and then to the vision of the mermaids" (217). Jones finds that the poem is not only a portrait of individual sensibility but a description of the sensibility of the age it was written in, an age that sought not only answers but overwhelming questions. The sensibility of the age portrayed in the poem, Jones talks about, can be studied through the study of images used in the poem.

Paul Fussell studies the use of gestic symbols in "Prufrock" and compares it to the use of the same in Eliot's other poems. He relates the use of gestic symbols to the study of Eliot's doctrine of objective correlative. He writes that Eliot's idea of objective correlative and its necessity in the 20th century poetry can be found "in the use of recurring symbol in many of his earlier poems, the symbol of the automatic, interrupted, abortive or vacant gesture of hand or body" (194). He finds that Eliot is observant of the movement of hands or fingers in not only "Prufrock" but other poems as well. The gestures are suggestive of certain psychic condition. Fussell's study of symbols is helpful for understanding the intensity of Eliot's images.

Gabriel McIntire explores the impulses and limits of desire in "Prufrock" and other poems of Eliot. He finds that desires have been rendered in a number of ways in "Prufrock": "in the desire for propriety, for a language of accurate expression, for lost time, and in the latent sexual desires of a young or middle-aged man" (78-79). His observation of desires in Eliot's poems leads him to formulate his belief that Eliot situates women in each of his poems, in the discourse of sex; women have been

portrayed as sexual objects. The irony for him, however, is that their very sexuality is undesirable. He finds this dialectics of curiosity and disgust in "Prufrock" as well. He writes that in "Prufrock" the speaker is "mesmerized, shocked and repelled by the hair on women's arms . . . as though guile constitutes the feminine . . ." (92-93). McIntire succeeds in exploring the dialectics of curiosity and disgust in the middle-aged speaker of the poem but does not discuss the causes of such dialectics in him.

Mutasem Al- Khader studies the poem as Prufrock's journey towards poetry and creativity. In the poem, he argues, Prufrock's real self as a poet has been manifested. He believes that a close reading establishes a connection among various parts of the poem, and ultimately represents Prufrock as a poet gaining maturity and creativity. To justify this thesis, he analyses the use of images in the poem. The analysis, however, sounds incongruent and forcefully applied. For example, the image of the yellow fog with back and a muzzle "overshadows", for him, "the poet's coming maturity and creativity" (52). It may be justified as an attempt to read the poem against the main current but fails, at large, to establish Eliot's point.

This paper forwards an argument that Eliot has presented the problems of the modern man like alienation, procrastination, inaction and indecision through the portrayal of a middle-aged urban man, Prufrock. In doing so, he relies more on imagery than on diction. Therefore, this paper has used the methodology of analysis and interpretation of images used in the poem. Moreover, it has used the theory of images as a tool, and has interpreted the meaning of the images and their arrangement in the poem with an objective to answer the problematic issues like: what causes Prufrock's alienation?, how does Eliot express his alienation?, and how does the use of imagery convey the idea of ecological hazards and industrialization?

Eliot and Imagery

The use of imagery is as old as poetry. The ancient Greek, Roman as well as the Indian poets used imagery to provoke special type of emotion through poetry. Many stories in *The Bible*, the Greek epics *Iliad* and *Odysseus*, and much of the Indological writings have made ample use of images. Images have special meanings and connotations. The meanings of images are arbitrary, and depend largely on cultures and ideologies of the societies. Temporal and spatial differences too are the key determinants of the meaning of images.

The use of imagery began to gain special value in the western literary history with the advent of symbolism. The symbolists used imagery to talk of one thing or idea in terms of the other. The imagists went one step ahead counteracting the loosely

defined images of the symbolists. Partly influenced by the Japanese haiku, the imagists cultivated language in their poems in such a way to create a vivid representation of objects or ideas. They believed that "image is not an ornamental device, but a shortcut to the true comprehension of reality" (Olsen 144). They made imagery the basic tool of their poems to express feelings and emotions that were, unlike the Romanticists' practice, impersonal.

Imagery is one of the commonest terms in the modern literary criticism. Although the term does not have a single stable meaning, it is commonly used, as M. H. Abrams writes, to make "poetry concrete, as opposed to abstract". The use and scope of imagery, according to him, is wide and varied. It is used, he writes, "to signify all the objects and qualities of sense perception referred to in a poem or other work of literature, whether by literal description, by allusion, or in the *vehicles* of its similes and metaphors"(151). He divides imagery into categories like visual, auditory, tactylic, thermal, olfactory, gustatory and kinesthetic.

T. S. Eliot, a child of symbolism as well as imagism, has a special craft of using imagery. His imagery is suggestive of the time he was living through. Imperialism was in its hay day leaving its consequences in almost every walk of human life. It had kept the economy in its grip through money market. Industrialization had led to the establishment of factories of mass production in the cities irrespective of the environmental effects in the life of the people. The monotonous routine life in the cities had caused anxiety, delusion and alienation among the workforce as well as the amateur citizens. At the time when Eliot was writing, neither politics nor economy was faring well in Europe. Britain was fighting anti-colonial activities in the colonial countries around the world. Moreover, the devastation of the First World War, and the threat from the Nazism and Fascism had made people hopeless about achieving peace, order and prosperity. Eliot's poems are rich with imagery indicating social, economic and moral life of Europe during and between the two greatest wars of the 20th century.

The study of Eliot's theory of objective correlative helps immensely to a reader of Eliot's poems as a complementary. Eliot's remark in "Hamlet and His Problems" is itself a demand for rich imagery in poetry. He writes in the essay, "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"(766). The set of objects shown and represented in the poem; Prufrock's physical, mental and emotional situation; and the chain of events together

contribute to construct the total image, and to explore poem's eco-socio-political horizons.

Ecological Hazards and Mental Alienation in "Prufrock"

"The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock " written before the first world war and published during the war, though mentions nothing about the war, is rich in imagery that suggests human despair, anxiety, alienation and indecision. Eliot, through imagery, presents the inaction of the modern man, who finds himself deluded by the growing industrialization and its consequences. The urban landscape, where Prufrock, the speaker of the poem, takes an imaginary journey along with his lover, is crowded with people who are, the imagery suggests, living apparently through despair and anxiety.

The epigraph from Dante's *Inferno* is presented as a judgment of the modern world that compares to the hell where the damned soul goes, never to return alive. Why did Eliot choose these lines for the epilogue of his poem? Had the world really gone hellish at the time he was writing? The imagery he has used from the very beginning of the poem suggests his anxiety and discomfort in the world growing hostile to humanity.

The speaker opens up his monologue addressing his love, asking to accompany him through the town. It is evening paralyzed like "a patient etherized upon a table" (3). The personification of evening and the visual image of a patient lying unconscious upon the doctor's table are suggestive of the illness of the time 'evening'. In such an ill time, he asks his love to go on a walk through the streets that are half deserted. The description of the visual images shifts, then, to the use of auditory image of "muttering retreats" (5) only to shift back to the visual image of "one-night cheap hotels" (6), "sawdust restaurants", and "oyster-shells" (7). The speaker once again introduces auditory images "a tedious argument" (8) and "an overwhelming question" (10) before he closes the first stanza. Through the shift of the images, visual- auditory, visual- auditory, the speaker makes us have a glimpse of the town he lives in.

The whole of the second stanza and almost half of the third stanza are stuffed with imagery drawn from ecology and environment. These images further introduce us the town Prufrock lives in. The effects of urbanization and industrialization can vividly be seen in these stanzas. Imagery is yet stronger here, but what appeals us more is the animation of fog. The natural color of fog is white, but Prufrock describes the movement of yellow fog. Human induced ecological change has discolored it; the fog is industrial production, not natural one. It is evident in the description of the fog

alternately as "yellow smoke" (16). Such polluted fog curls about the house rubbing its back and muzzle against the window-panes. The fog stretches from the streets to the "pools that stand in drains" (18). We get here a vivid picture of unmanaged urbanization. We see drains that form pools but we do not see any outlet. Urbanization and industrialization have grown side by side to each other. The reference of the soot falling from the chimneys, slipping by the terrace and falling upon the back of yellow smoke makes clear about the ecological hazards brought about by urbanization and industrialization.

Industrialization has put human civilization at a risk of gradual degradation. The "yellow smoke that slides along the street" (24) is pervasive. It spreads all over the city "rubbing its back upon the window panes" (25) and getting into people's rooms. Industrialization has damaged not only ecology but has alienated man from the nature making him/her indifferent to the ecological hazards. It has made him selfish and inactive. Man has learnt to put off things. As the yellow smoke lingers along the streets taking time, so does the man in his action. Putting the urgent actions against ecological hazards aside, he keeps singing, "There will be time, there will be time" (26). Such a procrastinating character of Prufrock is the result of alienation of his mind from the urgencies of the time.

Prufrock, however, is not unmindful that he is ageing. Time is eternal; there always will be time, but youth and age are transient phenomena. There will always be time for meeting, for creation and destruction, for work and questions, for indecisions, visions and revisions. Time does not compensate for his procrastination. Prufrock is free to linger, to decide now only to revise after a while. His mental alienation has made him incapable of seeing his condition in relation to the condition of the society. He thinks of the eternal time and looks at himself ageing, only to be saddened. The visual/kinesthetic image of a man descending "the stair, / With a bald spot in the middle of my hair" (39-40) is highlighted by two exclamatory remarks jammed equally with visual images: "How his hair is growing thin!" (41) and "how his arms and legs are thin!" (44). The imageries drawn from the body of an ageing man are suggestive of dissatisfaction and individual degradation.

Prufrock knows what is befalling around him but lacks action because, as Stephen Stepanchev says, he is a "man of divided conscience" (400). He knows "all already" (49) and shares his knowledge of time, of ageing, of girls and sexuality using the fresh images that create his emotion. The visual image of a man measuring his "life with coffee spoons" (51), the auditory image of the dying voices and dying

music, the image of eyes that fix a person "in a formulated phrase" (56) and the braced, white bare arms with "light brown hair" (64) lying along a table are suggestive of Prufrock's mood. It is evident from these images that when a person suffers from mental alienation he keeps himself aloof from action and reflects on his knowledge of things.

Prufrock admits that he is going through mental alienation when he says, "I have wept and fasted, wept and prayed" (81). He corroborates this acceptance of his own state of being with the image of the personified time, afternoon and evening, stretching on the floor asleep, tired, or malingering. This alienation, Prufrock seems to insist, is of universal character. His inaction will, indeed, not disturb the universe as the latter has already been suffering from it. To justify this view, he presents us with the image of lonely men smoking pipes leaning out of the windows in narrow streets (70-73). Prufrock's vision of the flickering past and the image of "the eternal footman" holding his coat (85) present the dialectics of action and alienation which can be compared to the world before and after the industrialization.

Hamlet seems to have been Eliot's mouthpiece both in poetry and criticism. It is not just coincidence that the allusion of Hamlet comes as one of the most effective images in "Prufrock". The theory of objective correlative he propounds in his essay "Hamlet and His Problems" has well been applied throughout the poem, most effectively in the two preceding stanzas before the mention of Hamlet. The objects, situation, and events in these stanzas foreshadow Hamlet's mental alienation and procrastination. Both the stanzas seem to raise the same question, but some images are altered or added in the next stanza. For example the arrangement of images in line 88 "cups, the marmalade, the tea" have been modified in line 102 as the novels, the tea cups and "the skirts that trail along the floor", and the image of a girl "settling a pillow by her head" in line 96 has been elaborated into the image of a girl "settling a pillow or throwing off a shawl, / And turning toward the window" in line 108 and 109. Both the stanzas end with the girl admitting her inability to express herself in language: "That is not what I meant at all" (97). Eliot fulfills the incompetency of language with the competency of images.

Prufrock, living in an industrial city with yellow smoke all around and going through mental alienation marked by procrastination and indecision, has yet a vision of a world where mermaids sing each to each "riding seaward on the waves" (126), and of "sea-girls wreathed with seaweed red and brown" (130). But he knows that he cannot push the moment to that direction. Instead, he has to live the life of a ridiculous

fool (118-119) with the consciousness of time and age. His remark "I do not think that they will sing to me" (125) is as simple in diction as it is grave in its intension. The modern man in a busy industrial city has nothing to do with such visions and imaginations. Eliot succeeds in arranging the images that work as shades of colors to portray the modern urban man's psyche and the exigencies set amid ecological hazards of industrialization.

Prufrock's Delusion and the Deep Irony

Putting together the images of the poem, from the sick evening "spreading out against the sky/ Like a patient etherized upon a table" (2-3) to the "sea-girls wreathed with seaweed red and brown" (130), we get a view of a middle-aged urban man caught in the dialectics of action and alienation. The soot falling from chimneys in the yellow street of yellow city threatens his existence. The ecological hazards around his city make him ask an "overwhelming question" but he cannot ask it. He is deluded by the overwhelming urbanization and industrialization. The delusion has resulted in his inaction and procrastination. He is, in fact, neither capable of action nor competent in speech. We can figure out his character and personality from the images Eliot uses in the poem, though there are frequent and abrupt breaks in the poem. The poet's visions are scattered all over the poem, but they have neither unity nor coherence. The poem, say Ruland and Bradbury, "with its hard modern irony, its sense of contemporary sterility, its fragmentary method and *vers libre*, the exemplary modern poem" (257). However, the coherence and unity of images compensate for the loss of linguistic coherence, and make the poet succeed in organizing his particular emotion.

Eliot's use of imagery bears deep irony, as does the title of his poem. Why does Eliot call it a song, or precisely a love song? Is it a song because it is monologue? Does it bear any element of song? Then what about love? The title of the poem makes the readers expect something romantic. The epigraph from Dante's *Inferno* gives us a little hint that Eliot is going to tell us something different from love and romance. The first line "Let us go then, you and I" opens up romantically but what follows next, "When the evening is spread out against the sky/ Like a patient etherized upon a table", is entirely anti-romantic. The entire poem then presents us with a man's odyssey into his own psyche. He proposes his love a visit of the city but soon we find that the city is not worthy of a visit. The images of "half deserted streets" (4), "one-night cheap hotels" (6), "yellow fog" (15), "the pools that stand in drains" (18), and "the soot that falls from chimneys" (19) make the city unworthy of a visit by lovers.

Prufrock proposes his love a visit of his city but gradually, as the poem unfolds images stanzas by stanzas, we find that Prufrock is incapable of making love. In fact, he is incapable of any action and speech. He remembers many actions to be performed urgently, but instead of carrying them out he puts them off for future chanting at ease "There will be time, there will be time" (27). In the similar way, he thinks of "an overwhelming question" (10) but does not dare ask it. He dismisses it telling, "Oh, do not ask, 'what is it ?'/ Let us go and make our visit" (11-12). The organization of images suggests us Prufrock's disinterest towards women. For example, his description of "arms that are braceleted and white and bare/ . . . downed with light brown hair" (63-64) is suggestive of his attitude to women. He admits it in line 66 when he says, "That makes me so digress". This is where the biggest irony lies; unlike the suggestion of the title, the poem is neither a song nor is it about love. It is a monologue of a middle-aged urban man passing through mental alienation deluded by the industrialization, urbanization and their byproduct, ecological hazards.

Conclusion

"The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock" is, thus, a poem about a middle-aged urban man passing through the dialectics of action and alienation because of industrialization and its byproduct, ecological hazards. Eliot succeeds in creating a vivid picture of the modern alienated man represented by Prufrock by the means of images arranged in such a way that work as shades of colours in a painting. In addition to the images, the application of his doctrine of objective correlative and the arrangement of objects, events and situations in the poem portrayed Prufrock's character as a modern urban man passing through a series of inaction and procrastination.

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