

**THE WASTE LAND AND THE LOVE  
SONG OF J. ALFRED PRUFROCK:  
A COMPARATIVE APPROXIMATION\*\***

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**ABSTRACT**

*The present paper attempts to look into T.S. Eliot's major thematic concerns and formal strategies through pointing out the similitudes that approximate his two major poems: The Waste Land and The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock. The external world bears the semblance of pessimism and despondency, a compass that determines the direction of the movement of the characters and the outcome of their quest. The paper endeavours to canvass the poet's extensive use of literary reminiscence and evocation which comply with his juxtaposition of the ideals of the past with the reality of the present. These techniques involve enriching references to religious symbolism and mythology. The use of such techniques, it is concluded, both runs in accordance with the psychological movement in the two poems and serves the purpose of the universalisation of Eliot's interest.*

The vision of T.S. Eliot and his consistent view towards the plight of man in the modern age, gave his poetry a generic interest tinted by an overt condemnation of the manifestations of moral dereliction and an indignation at the loss of the values of the past. This can easily be caught in his two major works: The Waste Land and The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock.\*\* The latter can in fact be largely considered as an earlier statement of the former, and perhaps as a foretaste of both its thematic concern and formal strategy. A close reading of The Waste Land and of Prufrock reveals the existence of striking affinities in terms of structure, technique, characterization, setting, and view which this paper endeavours to both highlight and decipher.

Both poems are essentially pessimistic and are pervaded by images of fog, blankness, and lifelessness. The basic concern of Eliot is agreed to be the "destruction of the sensitive individual by the surrounding sordidness and by the perversion of ancient values."<sup>1</sup> This idea is embodied in the symbolic and mythical figure of the Fisher King, the sick King and his "waste land" who symbolize "the sick soul and the desolation of this material life."<sup>2</sup> This concern continued to be the principal theme that Eliot explored in most of his poems, along with the other metaphysical poets like Ezra Pound and Amy Lowell. Intellectual complexity and "waste land vision" characterized the vogue of such poets

who were responding to the circumstances of their own age. In this context, it is worthy of note that Eliot believes that poetry should "embody a man's reaction to his whole experience."<sup>3</sup> This is why the man / environment relationship is important in his poems.

Eliot's hero is a man who senses his inadequacy and who is tragically aware of the pointlessness of his pursuit as well as of the emptiness surrounding him. His struggle proves to be painful and is doomed to a predestined failure. Prufrock is in fact the generic Eliot character whose quality of being "an intellectual construction of various and quite independent experiences," as Eliot himself comments, enables him to transcend the role of a mere character to that of "the name of a zone of consciousness."<sup>4</sup> The "protagonist" in *The Waste Land* is subject to continuous metaphorical transformations. Thus, like Prufrock, he transcends the state of being a mere character.

In order to contain the paradoxical aspects that surround the analysis of Eliot's characterization, it is useful to highlight the fact that the personae in the two poems are labelled with suggestive names. The "character" is in fact almost unsubstantial, he is "projected by a means of a series of illusory characters."<sup>5</sup> Prufrock is presumably the speaker in the poem using the "I" and the "you;" the latter being a virtual presence. The two pronouns, as Robert B. Kaplan opines, stand more as "two aspects of the same person - the public personality and the Ego" than as two separate entities.<sup>6</sup> In *The Waste Land*, the "I" of the speaker who is Tiresias seems to unite all the personae of the poem, mainly the Fisher King, the Phoenecian sailor, Madame Sosostris, Belladonna, and the Hanged Man. According to Eliot, Tiresias, who is the central consciousness of the poem, encompasses the experience of all the characters: Tiresias, "although a mere spectator and not indeed a 'character' is yet the most important personage in the poem, uniting all the rest."<sup>7</sup> Further, and although blind, Tiresias is gifted with a deep insight into human experience. To Eliot, what Tiresias sees, is indeed the substance of the poem. To Kaplan, Tiresias is himself "a condensed history of man."<sup>8</sup> And to Grover Smith in turn, "the whole poem is Tiresias's stream of consciousness."<sup>9</sup>

Awareness and consciousness are projected in both Prufrock and the "protagonist." Their situations are made even more dramatic by being both "too much conscious and conscious of too much."<sup>10</sup> Prufrock's plight suggests an acute failure of belief and faith. His timid and self-conscious nature gives him a sense of torturing doubt and paralyses him even further. The prospect of achieving communion with the outside world scares him to the point of maiming his power of perception. Likewise, the protagonist of *The Waste Land* is bereaved by a loss of belief accompanied by feelings of agony and terror which are generated by the "failure of the capacity to believe."<sup>11</sup> Like Prufrock, his senses are

dulled and he feels uneasy at the promise of fertility. It is, therefore, quite difficult to guess whether their realization of mental suffering and social deterioration leads them to a defeatist or a constructive action. Thus, awareness and consciousness are two states of mind that distinguish the two "characters" from the rest; yet, such states do not change much of the existing reality.

Setting and vision are strikingly similar in the two poems. Prufrock opens with a voiced expression of torture and agony, bringing into view the scene in Dante's *Inferno* where Guido de Montefeltro's spirit is undergoing suffering in Hades<sup>12</sup>. The *Waste Land* equally opens with a picture of laceration and torture, where the cry of the mythical Sibyl "hanging in a bottle" calls for death because the long life she has been offered by Apollo failed to include eternal youth and health.<sup>13</sup> These images are reflective of the subsequent descriptions of the external world as well as of the internal one.

Eliot presents a world plagued with barrenness and sterility. Prufrock perceives the external world as a source of evil, perplexity, and mystery:

Streets that follow like a tedious argument  
Of insidious intent...  
To lead you to an overwhelming question...

Interestingly enough, the ellipsis points to which Eliot resorts, work to accentuate the sense of unresolved mystery. Similarly, in *The Waste Land*, the outside world is described as "stony rubbish" and as a "heap of broken images" where the trees no longer provide shady shelters:

What are the roots that clutch, what branches grow  
Out of this stony rubbish? Son of man, You cannot  
say, or guess, for you know only A heap of broken  
images, where the sun beats, And the dead tree  
gives no shelter, the cricket no relief, And the dry  
stone no sound of water...

Thus, Eliot's "character" is surrounded by sordidness and is entrapped by a rotting and decadent world of artificiality. To add to the difficulties, which they encounter in their quest of self-realization, they are flawed by a tragic deficiency – the incapacity to take action of any kind. A clear resignation to purposelessness and idleness is Prufrock's ultimate confine, when he feels that there will be "time yet for a hundred indecisions." The same attitude can be sensed in *The Waste Land*'s protagonist's wandering: "What shall we do tomorrow? / What shall we ever do?" Prufrock confesses that he was afraid after meeting the eternal

footman who stands for death. The protagonist in the "Burial of the Dead," on the other hand, fears the prospect of rescuing the waste land from imminent death, because by so doing he would lose the possibility of heroic realization and sacrifice.<sup>14</sup>

Both characters in fact suffer from inhibiting and defeating powers that paralyse their will. They are left with nothing but to follow their mechanical gestures of every day life like tea-time rituals which are regarded as great events. Prufrock overtly recognizes that he had "measured out his life with coffee spoons;" and the protagonist expresses determination: "I shall rush out as I am, and walk the streets," to avoid being subdued by passivity and abjectness. The sense of fatality reaches its climax when Prufrock draws a parallel between his own plight and that of John the Baptist, considering that even if he (Prufrock) is beheaded, nobody would take notice of it as it is "no great matter:" he had already witnessed the eclipse of his moment of greatness. In *The Waste Land*, the protagonist has become one of the dead – "I had not thought death had undone so many..."

There are nevertheless scenes in the poems where company is sought as **part** of the struggle for a meaningful human experience and as part of the quest of spiritual gratification<sup>15</sup>. Loneliness is a feeling that is largely expressed throughout the poem. Prufrock starts making his presence felt by addressing an invitation: "let us go you and I." The protagonist of *The Waste Land* also longs for company to the point of "pressing lidless eyes and waiting for a knock upon the door..." The invitation to the unknown "you" involving a sense of company, that Prufrock makes, ends up being fruitless and devoid of meaning because of the fear that continues to haunt him. His hesitation finally leads to a failure to achieve spiritual communion because he is "like a patient etherised upon a table," who soon dissuades his invitee by the reference to the deserted, unwelcoming streets. In *The Waste Land*, and as early as "The Burial of the Dead," the "we" is used in "we stopped in the colonnade" implying company. But, despite such overt expression, there is a feeling of fear and paralysis which emanates soon after the "Hyacinth scene:"

...I could not  
Speak, and my eyes failed, I was neither  
Living nor dead, I knew nothing.  
Looking into the heart of light, the silence.

Such retreat springs from an inherent fear of personal inadequacy which drives both characters to find refuge in the sea. Prufrock shuns away from the existing reality and dramatically evokes what should otherwise have happened:

I should have been a pair of ragged claws  
Scuttling across the floors of silent seas.

He then compares himself to Hamlet and also to his attendant lord Polonius, evoking a kind of wise / fool image. As a last resolve, he resorts to going to the "beach," striving to associate himself with mythical sea-creatures, notably mermaids. His reverting from reality to myth along with the sea imagery, culminate in the drowning of both the "you" and the "I" embodied in the person of Prufrock. Equally impressive is the ending of *The Waste Land* in water imagery first by reference to "Ganga" (the Ganges), and later in the closing lines by a final manifestation of the protagonist sitting upon the "shore" fishing – an allusion to the "Fisher King" who is a symbol of resurrection like Christ.<sup>16</sup> The reader is intrigued by the endings of the two poems which carry far-reaching implications. Prufrock seeks an alternative to the present reality through his reverie about the mythical unearthly beings; an attitude which may be reflective of his inherent idealism that draws him back to the old values and to the glory of the past<sup>17</sup>. To some critics, he is an "aging romantic" through whom Eliot contrasts the "idealism" of the past with the deterioration of the present<sup>18</sup>. This contrast is also visible in *The Waste Land* especially in the nostalgic contemplation of the ancient ideals commanded by the "Thunder": "Give," "Sympathize," and "Control." The poet in fact makes use of the technique of literary "reminiscence" and reference as part of a delineation of his sense of the past. In the two poems there is a clear juxtaposition of the present with the past backed by enriching references to religious symbolism and mythology.<sup>19</sup> Kaplan considers that the use of literary reminiscence and allusion illustrates Eliot's understanding of the past as an "active part of the present."<sup>20</sup> Matthiessen argues along the same line, considering that Eliot's technique implies "a tacit revelation of the sameness as well as the contrasts between life of the present and that of other ages."<sup>21</sup>

The technique of literary reminiscence in fact goes hand in hand with the movement in the two poems which obeys to the association of ideas and to the flights of thoughts. Both poems run in a narrative sequence and are presented in the fashion of an interior monologue containing bits of dialogue that are revived from a past and vague association with an extra-textual context. The internal monologue itself creates a stream of consciousness which explains the psychological nature of much of the movement in the poem. Thus, the action occurs for the most part inside the mind of the speaker.

Again this technique of literary reminiscence is tightly linked with the subject matter of the two poems where Eliot adopts free verse. The most striking and at the same time puzzling element is the borrowing of lines and their patching in a totally new context. In addition to the opening of Prufrock with a quotation from Dante's *Inferno*, countless

references to other sources are also used throughout the poem: to the Greek poet Hesiod in "works and days of hands...", to Shakespeare in "voices dying with a dying fall...", to Biblical sources notably Matthew and John in "I have wept and fasted, wept and prayed..." and "I am Lazarus come from the dead..." to name but few. Similarly, *The Waste Land* recurrently makes references to Greco-Roman mythology and deity, to classics such as Dante's *Purgatorio* and *Inferno*, to Biblical sources like the *Ecclesiastes* and *Ezekiel*, to French works like Baudelaire's *Fleurs du Mal* in "You hypocrite lecteur! – mon semblable mon frère," and to Verlaine's "Parsifal" in "Et, O, ces voix d'enfants chantant dans la coupole," and even to Sanskrit sources. Shakespeare, nonetheless, remains one of Eliot's favourite sources: "the chair she sat in, like a burnished throne" is a most suggestive entry into a "Game of Chess."

The technique of evocation of images, which resuscitates other literary works, offers a series of quotations and adaptations from different sources in different languages. To Kaplan, this "serves to universalise or internationalise the context" and makes the poem rich with values of "truth" that make the poem "transcend time and place." 22 To Matthiessen in turn, Eliot's understanding of "human experience" and his wish to "interpret it accurately" stands as the driving force towards the use of such varied reminiscences into the texture of his own poetry.23

From what has been discussed, it is quite safe to conclude that by seeking to universalise his poetry, Eliot goes all lengths to associate artists from different times and places in his project to create a poetry that aspires to synthesise and unify human concerns. As a metaphysical poet, he tries in his own way to defend the prospect of freeing humankind from the "prison of the self" which, he thinks, stands as a stumbling bloc in the way of mutual understanding. His characters are somehow involved in this project: at the consummation of their experiences, they come to the knowledge that ultimately leads to the "peace which passeth understanding." Such realization even brings them to come to terms with the principle that their physical death may bring about their spiritual rebirth.

## NOTES

### \*\* Hereafter referred to as Prufrock

1. Robert B. Kaplan, *Notes on T.S. Eliot's Major Poems* ( London: Coles, 1972), 23.
2. F.L. Lucas, "Early Review," in *T.S. Eliot: The Waste Land: A Selection of Critical Essays*, edited by C.B.Cox and Arnold P. Hinchliffe (London: Macmillan Education Ltd.,1986),34.
3. F.O.Matthiessen, *The Achievement of T. S.Eliot* (London: Oxford University Press,1947), 101.

4. Hugh Kenner, *The Invisible Poet*, T. S. Eliot ( London : W. H. Allen &co.),99.
5. Bernard Bergonzi, T. S. Eliot ( London: Macmillan, 1972), 139.
6. Kaplan, 19.
7. Quoted in Kenner, 100.
8. Ibid.
9. Kaplan, 30.
10. Grover Smith, *T. S. Eliot's Poetry and Plays* ( Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1956), 58. This idea is also explored in George Williamson, *A Reader's Guide to T. S. Eliot* ( New York: the Noonday Press,1957),123.
11. F. R. Leavis, *New Bearings in English Poetry* ( Chatto & Windus,1932), 94.
12. Bergonzi, 35.
13. See Eliot's note n° 1 on the poem where the epigraph from Dante's *Inferno*, Canto XXVII, lines 61-66, is literally translated into English as follows: " If I thought my reply were to one who could ever return to the world, this flame would shake no more; but since, if what I hear is true, none ever did return alive from this depth, I answer you without fear of infamy."
14. See also Eliot's note no. 2 on the poem in which he translates the epigraph borrowed from Petronius, *Satyricon*, Chapter XLVIII , and which reads as follows: " For I myself saw with my own eyes the sibyl of Cumae [ in Italy] hanging in a bottle; and when the boys cried to her, 'Sibyl , what do you want?' she used to reply, 'I want to die'."
15. This idea is extensively discussed in Kaplan, 21-24.
16. Williamson, 25-26.
17. See Eliot's note n° 78 on the poem which makes reference to Jessie L.Weston's chapter on the Fisher King legend in her celebrated book *From Ritual to Romance*( Anchor Books , 1957).
18. Kaplan, 24.
19. Ibid. This idea is largely explored by Matthiessen as well as by Cleanth Brooks in his *Modern Poetry and the Tradition* ( North Carolina: University of North Carolina Press, 1939), chapter II, *passim*.
20. Kaplan,29 ; Matthiessen, 120.
21. Ibid,112-3.
22. Kaplan, 29.
23. Matthiessen,119.