

A COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS OF EZRA POUND'S IN A STATION OF THE METRO AND T.S. ELIOT'S THE LOVE SONG OF J. ALFRED PRUFROCK

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ABSTRACT

Pound and Eliot's satiric criticism on the new morality of the modern world is skillfully achieved in their famous poems, "In a Station of the Metro" and "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock". This research paper is aimed at a comparative analysis of these poems, with particular regards to their thematic concerns and stylistic features.

Key words: American Literature, Satiric criticism, Comparative analysis, Critique of the Modern World, Existentialism

Ezra Pound and T.S. Eliot, two of the most prominent and prolific literary figures of 20th century America, had seen all the limits of misery and despair in the world. They had been 'in many a land' to realize that there was 'naught else in living'. The backdrop of the World Wars and 1930s Great Depression reflects an extreme sense of loss, dejection and melancholy in their literary output.

Both, Eliot's 'Prufrock Song' and Pound's 'Metro Poem', deal with the similar contemporary issues in a critical tone. These poems launch a stark comment on the modern man living in moral world of immoralities, darkened with the evils of capitalism, hypocrisy, indifference, emotional and aesthetic downfall and social alienation. All these societal vices end up with the establishment of a fatal "USURA System" that sucks the life from man's body reducing him to the level of cadavers; "Corpses are set to banquet/ At behest of usura", says Pound.

Eliot's primary concern in the 'Prufrock Song' is that of the hell to which human being are subjected every day of their lives. The Epigraph to this song has been taken from Dante's "Inferno". Translated from the original Italian, the lines are as follows:

"None of us get out of here alive; if I thought that you could tell the world of my shame, I would reveal nothing, but since you cannot escape this hell, I might as well have a confidante."¹ This hell of Prufrock is not his alone; it is shared by every human being who ever lived. In Pound's view this could be interpreted as the hell of 'Usura' in the modern world, from where there's no escape for the modern man. The 'faces' at the 'station of the metro' that Pound comes across are all searching their way out of the material hell, however, they're unable to pluck themselves off the 'wet, black bough'.

¹ Calvin, K. (2001) 'Glossary of "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock"' (online article)
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This hell of 'usura' has caused a definite sense of social-alienation and detachment in the modern man's life. J. Alfred Prufrock, a vivid representation of modern man, is divided between two selves—"You and I", the real and the social selves. This split personality of Prufrock parallels the alienated existence of the people at the 'metro station', scattered as 'petals'. Lost in a 'crowd', they are yet alone, being detached from society as well as from their own true selves. The allusions to "wetness" and "yellow fog" in these poems are symbolic of the liquidity of modern man's life. This fog signifies his mental state and indifferent attitude that doesn't allow him to remove the vacuum from his life and have a clear vision of the humanity around.

Man's internal conflict due to the gap between his inner and outer selves is reflective of his social hypocrisy also. He's wearing the masks to hide his real self in order to survive in a world of false moralities. Prufrock, the mouth-piece of Eliot, comments on the social face that is being used to kill the 'true' face of the man. "To prepare a face to meet the faces that you meet; / There will be time to murder and create" (Line 26-27), he says. 'The apparition of these faces' on the Metro station exemplifies Eliot's critique on the masked-existence of modern man. These people in a 'crowd' are putting on false 'faces' on their real personalities. They have thus no energy to confront reality by cracking the masks of deceptive appearances. This split and alienated personality of modern man has not only generated an identity crisis in his life, but also has resulted in his reduction to a non-human lacking the emotionality and a humanitarian strength. For instance, Eliot compares Prufrock with animals like a cat 'rubbing its back upon the window panes' (line 15) or 'a pair of ragged claws/ Scuttling across the floor of silent seas' (line 73-74). Similarly, Pound views 'these faces' as an apparition, reducing them to the level of ghosts, highlighting the vagueness and uncertainty of their lives.

Boredom is one of the most prominent characteristics of the modern times. Today's man is bored by the decorum and routine of modern life, and can find nothing substantial to hold on to or no higher purpose to look forward to. His life is a monotonous whole in spite of the constant movement of 'metro' with which Pound compares it. The 'faces at metro station' and a persona like Prufrock epitomize the frustration and impotence of the modern individual. They seem to represent unfulfilled desires and modern disillusionment. Such phrases as "I have measured out my life in coffee spoons" (Prufrock: line 51) capture the sense of a bored un-heroic nature of life in the twentieth century. Prufrock's weaknesses could be mocked, but he is a pathetic figure, not grand or substantial enough to be tragic, so are the people in Pound's poem as they could be called Eliot's 'Oyster-shells' hollow from within, having no expression on their 'faces' like ghosts.

Moreover, both the poems exhibit a definite sense of defeat and hopelessness, typical of modern man's life. "In a station of the metro" compares train with a "wet, black bough" and since train is representative of life, the modern life thus is being called a dark, unproductive impotent branch with which the men are hanging like petals. The idea of 'petals' itself signifies the hopelessness and defeat of these 'faces' moving in a modern 'crowd', for the petals alone are of no productive nature unless they get assembled in form of flower. In other words, they are dead. Secondly, the grave-like image of the sub-ground metro station establishes the idea of lifelessness and bleakness in life. "Flowers underground; flowers out of the sun; flowers seen as if against a natural gleam, the bough's wetness gleaming on its darkness, in this place where wheels turn and nothing grows"(pg.185)². Likewise in "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock", Prufrock expresses a sense of defeat and hopelessness as regards to his quest for spiritual meaning and love in life. His inactivity and passive resignation is evident throughout the poem. "I grow old...I grow old (line 120)", he says, expressing his hopeless approach towards a dynamic future life. In the end, being defeated, he gives up on love and

² Kenner, H.(1971) "The Pound Era", California: University of California Press

spirituality and concludes on life in modernity "We have lingered in the chambers of the sea /By sea-girls wreathed with sea-weed red and brown, /Till human voices wake us, and we drown."

The existentialist theory is applicable on both the 'Prufrock Song' and 'Metro Poem', for these poems explore modern man's individual self-centered approach towards life. For today's man existence is not all that counts, soul nor emotions hold any significance in his life. The 'faces' at the Metro Station and in the 'Saw-dust restaurants' in "Prufrock Song" are making an existential struggle by letting on the monotonous progression of life. "In the room the women come and go/ Talking of Michelangelo" parallel the 'crowd' stationed around a 'wet, black bough'.

Literary movements, like political, religious, and artistic, generally arise as a reaction against the immediate tradition. The Victorian artificiality and sentimentality characterize the immediate tradition against which 'Imagism' rose. "This was 'Wordsworthian Decadence' the kind of poetry from the immediate tradition which the Imagists despised", says Ian Johnston (1999). Pound initiated the Anglo-American Imagist Movement in 1909 that highlighted the dynamic significance of 'an image'. Imagism promoted the direct expression, simplicity, precision, clarity, uniqueness and concentration in poetry. Moreover, the Imagists believed that the poetry should present concrete images instead of abstract ones because the abstract has lost its meaning in the modern world. "In a station of the Metro" is the best example of an imagist poem for it justifies all the essential features of 'Imagism'. Though, Eliot's "Prufrock Song" negates the imagists' precision and shortness yet retaining a definite clarity, directness and concentration of meaning. Each stanza in Eliot's poem deals with a single 'image' as an 'intellectual and emotional complex in an instant of time' as Pound explains it. In both the poems this is more of the poet's psycho-analytical process that gives it a meaning than the language or diction. Moreover, the concrete images of 'metro', 'petals', 'bough', 'oyster-shells', 'braceleted arms' and 'coffee spoon' reveal the concreteness of life making a better sense to the modern reader.

"Modern poetry must address the modern world with
modern language and images appropriate to the modern
experience, unfettered by the conventions which had grown up
over the centuries."³

Stylistically also, "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock" and "In a Station of the Metro" use some similar devices. The technique of juxtaposition that is characteristic of Ezra Pound's poetry is evident in Eliot's poem also. For instance, the element of physical movement presented in both the poems is juxtaposed with the psychological stagnation and passivity of the modern people. People in the metro station, hanging with a moving train are yet stationed in a monotonous world. The same sense of inactivity is presented in Eliot's song juxtaposing the initial movement of the poem. The "Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock." starts on a note of energy ("Let us go. . ."), and for all the rising and falling of the passages seems in places to gather a significant energy. But as soon as it reaches "No, I am not Prince Hamlet" whatever energies Prufrock may have generated by his intense dissatisfaction with life dispel immediately, and Prufrock proves to be an indecisive lethargic man of the modern world. Secondly, the 'Metro poem' further presents a juxtaposition between the physical and metaphysical by comparing the human 'faces' with those of ghosts. Moreover, the image of a 'crowd' juxtaposes the social-alienation and detachment of these modern 'faces'. In the same way, the words in "Prufrock song": "I have measured out my life in coffee spoons", could be taken as an example of juxtaposition.

³ Lecture on T. S. Eliot's "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock" and *The Waste Land* [The text of a lecture delivered, in part, to the Liberal Studies 402 class on January 16, 1997, by Ian Johnston. This text is in the public domain, released June 1999]

DOI:<http://purpleslurp.net/ps.php?theurl=http://www.mala.bc.ca/~johnstoi/introser/eliot.htm>

The first six words lead the reader to expect a significant insight into something--the rhetorical build up in the language promises something fruitful; however, the prosaic last three words indicate an immediate devaluation of life.

Another modern stylistic device is the 'stream of consciousness' that is being used in both the poems. This technique presents the apparently random thoughts going through a person's head within a certain time interval, in which the transitional links are psychological rather than logical, so does happen in these two poems. The poems under discussion lay more emphasis on the poets' psycho-emotional workings than the action. The incoherent thoughts of a train, 'petals' and 'crowd' are put together in a single image. Similarly, the shifting focus of Prufrock is meant to reveal the momentary existence of modern persona.

"The mind that found 'petals on a wet, black bough' had
been active. The "plot" of the poem is that mind's activity,
fetching some new thing into the field of consciousness." (pg. 186)⁴

Thus, the poets of the modern age, T.S. Eliot and Ezra Pound, both raise an "over-whelming question"⁵ in their poetic critiques of the contemporary world. Their own personal frustration and disillusionment make them portray the modern 'faces' to ask them 'do they call this passivity, selfishness and alienation a life?' and if it is so then 'is such a life worth living?'. This "over-whelming question" produces a universal appeal in these poems, questioning the meaninglessness and absurdity of the modern world.

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?—⁶

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⁴ Kenner, H. (1971). *The Pound Era*. California: University of California Press

⁵ "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock" by T.S. Eliot (line 93)

⁶ "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock" by T.S. Eliot (line 99-103)