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T.S. Eliot's Ideas on Identity in the Modern World

While T.S. Eliot is most popular for his work as an author, his influence as a philosopher cannot be understated. His time at Harvard studying philosophy created a specific writing style that's illustrated through his poetry, scholarly writings, essays, and even his plays. In observing Eliot's works, his fears, anxieties, dreams, and aspirations all become seen through practices of continuous repetition and intense delivery of these feelings. Works like "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock" showcase the fears that occupied Eliot's headspace, sharing insight into what ideals he saw as most important. In understanding Eliot's relegation of his own concerns, the philosophies behind these thought processes become more present. In analyzing the philosophies tied to Eliot, one can garner a better understanding of Eliot's intentions with his writing.

Although he tended to separate himself from his art, it's impossible to separate his intentions from his writings; his world view ultimately creates the world of every poem, play and story he writes. The philosophies Eliot communicates are still prevalent in current society, shaping our cultural search for truth and the possibilities of both our individual and collective potential. This led to question how T.S. Eliot's work impact current ideas on identity? Looking at his relationship with the ideals of Modernism, one can get a good impression of how his views developed and how that has changed or stagnated in a Post-Modern world. It's important to also look both inside and outside the English field; similar to how Modernism is interpreted differently depending on the division it's studied in, Eliot himself is viewed differently by English scholars than he would be by Philosophers. In pairing these views together one obtains the fuller knowledge needed to explore Eliot's impact on the world, not just within a field of

study. In studying these fields, it's imperative to factor in the changes that come with our contemporary time, exploring the absence of modern values in Eliot's time. Other outside fields like Psychology mention the importance of the subconscious and its impact on the individual. Especially in the context of Eliot's portrayals of women, it's necessary to explore how his personal biases impacted his works; without that recognition, one loses the neutral perspective that is needed for the fullest understanding of Eliot in relation to the rest of the world. Recognizing all these factors, Eliot's perspective seen in *Prufrock* reaffirms the importance of the self in relation to their identity.

Eliot's contributions to the Modernist movement cannot be ignored, especially in the literary world. There's a clear relationship between imaginative prowess and the stark dullness that comes with Realism. Samet Güven observes the relationship between Eliot and Modernism in their article, "A Modernist Approach to T.S Eliot's 'The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock.'". Güven mentions how Eliot is critical of modern urban life in his poetry, using the medium to undermine the value of industrialization. Güven writes how, "The imagery Eliot uses to refer to the setting underlines Prufrock's lack of self-confidence to undertake significant action. For example, Eliot tries to suggest Prufrock's inability to act due to his hesitancy by comparing the sky to an etherized person. This informs readers about the distorted psychology of the protagonist" (Güven 82). Eliot reacts to urban life with a sense of spite, that even the sky above them has an inebriated presence. In its comparison to Prufrock, there is a common feeling of disillusionment with life that is communicated. In Eliot's poem, he writes that, "There will be a time, there will be a time / To prepare a face to meet the faces you meet; / There will be a time to murder and create" (Eliot 26-28). One of the most prominent themes across Eliot's works, and even generally much of the Modernist movement, is the impact that time has. In *Prufrock*, the

repetition of time is stated in such a way that it reads similar to a Bible verse; however, this impact of time is contrasted with the ideas of presentation. Eliot shows life with more totality in phrases like “to murder and create”, it's an example of Eliot directly acknowledging the bittersweetness that life throws onto people. While it can be referential to the impressions one makes when meeting new faces, it's also representative of the Modernists' growing intention to show a fuller extent of life, showing insights that aren't so biased but insights that carry both good and bad with them.

Looking outside the English field of study, Carl Jung's work in Psychology gives insight into Eliot's perspective of the world and why he would turn to poetry in the first place. Mahdiah Kheradmand's article, “Active Imagination and Shadow in ‘The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock,’” highlights the ideology behind Eliot's decisions. Kheradmand helps define active imagination and applies it to Eliot's work, describing it as “similar to dreaming, but it should be noted that we are fully awake and conscious during experiencing active imagination” (Kheradmand 65). In applying this dreamlike state to Eliot's work, there is a clear sense that Eliot is fluctuating between that dream state and active reality. Kheradmand notes how Eliot vacillates between “you” and “I” throughout the poem, creating this conversation-like tone where she states that, “It is beyond doubt that communication with the inner life is always a courageous act, you awaken what is hidden and dark.” (68 Kheradmand). In recognition of one's active imagination, it is also a recognition of one's self-consciousness and their tendencies to steer towards dark subject content. Seen heavily in the character of Prufrock, Eliot portrays a constant stream of anxieties and desires, from his balding head or decision to disturb the universe, Prufrock becomes more scared the more he acknowledges his darker side. When paired with the idea of active imagination, one can collect Prufrock”. Griffiths communicates how

Heidegger and Eliot both share disillusionment with modernity and value placed in poetry. Although there is no direct evidence that either author read the other's work, they shared a similar worldview that is communicated through their respective works. Griffiths' comparison of Heidegger to Eliot shows the similar questions and worries they pondered throughout their lives. Heidegger questions the metaphysics of human existence, such as identity, substance, and time. Griffiths a general idea of what occupies his head most, and how barring that can be. In this reading, Prufrock's unraveling translates to a warning, where when one is steeped fully in their head, or even fully in reality that it limits one's potential. Through his pursuit of the active imagination, Eliot aligns himself with the ideals of Romanticism, leading to a subconscious bias that he likely did not intend for.

Another perspective from outside the English field is found in Philosophy and reflecting on the importance of the individual. As seen prior in many people's analyses, identity is an existential force that looms over many works of literature. D. Griffiths explores the importance of the individual in his scholarly essay, "Daring to Disturb the Universe: Heidegger's Authenticity and The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock" comments how, " This struggle with conformity, individuality and limitation is exemplified in the protagonist of Eliot's poem, Prufrock, who suffers from a constant, pervasive obsession with the perceptions and precepts of the 'they'. This obsession contributes to and compounds his inauthentic state... This ironic tone is as unrelenting as Prufrock is himself in his constant indecision and revision" (Griffiths 8). The 'they' that is described are a faceless entity, encompassing the general attitude of society as a collective; Griffiths states it as implying everyone and no one, however it is closely tied to conforming with the rest of society in one's day to day lives. Heidegger's theory of the 'they' holds many of the same situations that Prufrock struggles with. In applying Heidegger's

questions of authenticity to Prufrock's emotions, Prufrock's stress stems from the same source as Heidegger's concerns. These concerns place an emphasis on the purpose of the individual, and how crucial identity is to one's potential in their day to day lives. Although related to the questions of the Modernists, the struggle of the individual in relation to society is an issue that is ever pervasive. Alongside that search for identity, Heidegger suggests a combination of forces that create obstacles for one's search for authenticity. Griffith relates this to Prufrock writing, "As the poem ends, as Prufrock resigns himself to drown in human voices, in the background we can distinctly hear the hum of the women who come and go, talking of Michelangelo. He gives up the possibility of coming to terms with his own existence and remains in the arid chattering world of the 'they'. Yet his failure is not final." (Griffiths 17). In Prufrock's failure to act, the causation of his worries are revealed. In this context, Eliot portrays what Heidegger values by exhibiting what it is not. Eliot exhibits the consequences of missing authenticity through the tone of the poem. There is a low mood that Prufrock is always experiencing, feeling low in comparison to all these other factors and people. When considered alongside the philosophical concerns with the individual, Griffith places Prufrock as a sentient non-individual; although he has autonomy, he is consumed by his own fears and succumbs to his own vulnerabilities, leaving behind this pessimistic perspective. Griffiths reaffirms Heidegger's theories of authenticity by characterizing it through Prufrock as an individual, and Prufrock's failure to own his identity. In Prufrock's situation, he effectively fails at failing

Continuing to explore different readings of Eliot, one important reading in relation to Eliot's ideas of identity are found in feminist readings. In observing these feminist perspectives of Prufrock, Eliot reveals his thought processes behind his portrayals of women. George B. Parks Jr.'s academic journal, "A Visit to the Brothel: Undertones in 'The Love Song of J. Alfred

Prufrock.”” exhibits Eliot’s subconscious tendencies in portraying women and how that subconscious is relative to his world view. Parks Jr. comments how “Prufrock's use of the word ‘Michelangelo’ identifies only the general subject matter of the women's talk. . . . first we note that the women who come and go from a common room are prostitutes who would use a private room for visits with their clients. Furthermore, these comings and goings would somewhat limit the women's talking in the common room to brief observations rather than any extended intellectual analysis”. Parks Jr.’s response highlights how the women shown in the poem are portrayed with a negative connotation. The women’s conversations are shallow and brief and when paired with their occupations, it's clear that Eliot placed them as separate from the rest of the upper classes. In this context, Prufrock’s perspective becomes reaffirmed against modernity. Although the character and views of Prufrock are ultimately separate from those of Eliot, there is still a level of Eliot’s personal identity that is embellished in his work. When comparing Prufrock to Eliot, Prufrock becomes this monumental figure, a figurative representation of woe and being over encumbered by one’s surroundings. In his comments on women, he repeats that they talk of Michelangelo, creating this image that these women are focused on the greats, similar to how most of us would be when talking about great art; however in the mentions of Michelangelo, Prufrock actively compares himself to that image, and in comparison falls short, adding to his reductive views of women. Brian Clifton adds to this feminist reading in their essay, “Textual Frustration: The Sonnet and Gender Performance in ‘The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock’” , commenting on how the structure of a sonnet adds to Eliot's ideas of masculinity in relation to the poet. In a close reading of the middle section of the poem, Clifton states how Prufrock is depicted as, “a speaker devoid of the inclination to perform heterosexual desire in an attempt to be perceived as masculine. In the process, his speech act drops the pretense of the sonnet

structure and instead expresses himself in a genuine way” (Clifton 73). The form of the sonnet itself functions as an implicit boundary that reinforces society’s status quo. While that masculinity is more hidden, its place in the structure of the poem connects deeply to Prufrock’s worldviews; Prufrock conforms to the status quo even when it’s to his detriment. As Prufrock compares himself to the rest of the world, he loses his identity.

Eliot’s personal biases contribute to his ideas of the individual, society, and identity. In discussing identity in relation to life philosophy one can reflect on what ideals have changed or stagnated in the past century. Although Eliot is far removed from our contemporary time, the ideals he aligned himself with still remain prevalent today, for both better and worse. Eliot’s “The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock” reads as a warning, showing the importance of perseverance while also showing the danger of being washed out in one’s overthinking; the poem frames the mind as the most helpful and detrimental tool one has at their disposal. In Prufrock’s failure to own an identity, Although contradicting Eliot’s personal views, Eliot exemplifies the importance of the self, and how crucial that personality is in relation to one’s identity. In seeing Eliot’s writing as a collection of contradictions, the audience sees the liminal space Eliot existed in and the impact of a commitment on one’s search for meaning in an overstimulating world.

Annotated Bibliography

Clifton, Brian. "Textual Frustration: The Sonnet and Gender Performance in 'The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock.'" *Journal of Modern Literature*, vol. 42, no. 1, Oct. 2018, pp. 65–76. *EBSCOhost*, <https://doi.org/10.2979/jmodelite.42.1.05>.

Clifton's studies of Eliot highlight how biased Eliot portrayed women throughout his works. Clifton analyzed Eliot's masculine tendencies and how they constantly rear their head throughout Prufrock's reflections. The inclusion of this source adds an additional layer to Eliot's hypocrisy that he channels through Prufrock.

Eliot, T.S. *The Waste Land and Other Poems*. Edited by Michael North, Second ed., W.W Norton & Company, 2022.

Eliot's work is a crucial part of my essay, functioning as a primary source and as an insight to Eliot's point of view. It is the basis of the paper and without it many of these sources would come across as more speculative than scholarly.

Griffiths, D. "Daring to Disturb the Universe: Heidegger's Authenticity and The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock." *Literator*, vol. 30, no. 2, Aug. 2009, pp. 107–26. *EBSCOhost*, <https://doi.org/10.4102/lit.v30i2.81>.

Griffiths shares a philosophical perspective on Prufrock as a character. From their readings of authenticity it portrays Prufrock as a non-individual, closely associating itself with the claims of my argument. Griffith helps outline who Eliot is by helping state who he is not and stating what failures he committed to end up in that condition. The inclusion of this article adds perspective to the more philosophical elements of Eliot's work.

Güven, Samet. “A Modernist Approach to T.S Eliot’s ‘The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock.’”

Journal of History, Culture & Art Research / Tarih Kültür ve Sanat Arastirmalari Dergisi, vol. 4, no. 2, June 2015, pp. 80–87. EBSCOhost, <https://doi.org/10.7596/taksad.v4i2.435>.

Güven’s article touches on Eliot’s work through the lens of the Modernists, relating amore philosophical perspective to his work that I find fascinating. The historical connections from past to Eliot’s present keep a sense of the conceptual ideas that helped build and define Eliot's work Güven attempts to prove Eliot’s essence of life through himself; something that seems to contradict Eliot’s thoughts on great works of art. He reinforces the idea of realism and emphasizes it along Eliot’s contradictions Güven argues that Eliot’s work is focused on revealing the complexities of the world through its hypocrisy.

Kheradmand, Mahdiah. “Active Imagination and Shadow in ‘The Love Song of J. Alfred

Prufrock.’” *Akshara: An International Refereed Research Journal of English Literature and Language*, vol. 14, May 2022, pp. 62–73. EBSCOhost, research.ebsco.com/linkprocessor/plink?id=311534df-f49b-32b8-87c7-cd1cadae4312.

Kheradmand’s article helps give a perspective of Eliot through the lens of Psychology. The source’s study of the subconscious adds a layer to Eliot’s personal biases and where his hypocrisy shines most. The mentions of Active Imagination adds depth to Prufrock’s fluctuations between reality and the unreal, adding complexity to Eliot’s writing style and the emotions that Prufrock fluctuates between.

Parks Jr., George B. "A Visit to the Brothel: Undertones in 'The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock.'" *Philological Review*, vol. 49, no. 2, Sept. 2023, pp. 77–85. *EBSCOhost*, research.ebsco.com/linkprocessor/plink?id=aa0b3e3c-a673-3ef7-bd23-1fdee6760a67.

Parks Jr. reaffirms Eliot's negative portrayal of women by highlighting the word choice Eliot utilizes. The source portrays how Eliot characterizes women and their focuses throughout the poem, relating this sense of distraction to the interactions he has with these women. The inclusion of this source adds feminist reading of the source material while also sharing how Eliot fails to characterize these women as three dimensional as Prufrock is; it's addition restates Prufrock's constant comparisons that he makes to everyone else in the world.