

Addressing the Subject of Selves in *Prufrock*

To summarize George Whiteside's words from "On Our Knowledge of Immediate Experience" in his review of *Knowledge and Experience in the Philosophy of F. H. Bradley* by T. S. Eliot, Bradley Stressed that immediate experience is the origin of all knowledge. It is feeling an experience unaltered by thought— "raw reality" as Whiteside puts it. *Raw reality*, as opposed to human-constructed replicas or retellings of reality, is superior due to the erroneous nature of human thought (401). Man is prone to error due to many factors, one of which being perspective. Understanding the perspective of the author or the characters can grant a greater understanding of the work. When scrutinizing a work of literature, it is imperative to understand the perspectives of the characters and the author to make accurate judgments. In T. S. Eliot's poem, *The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock*, there is much controversy over the discussion of the subjects in Prufrock. The opening line of *Prufrock* addresses the characters *you* and *I* but ends with Prufrock addressing the seemingly more universal *we* and *us*. Understanding the subjects in Prufrock is dire in formulating sound meaning from the poem and its ending. This deep analysis of Prufrock will suggest that the speaker in Prufrock is speaking to another fragment of Prufrock and concludes the ending is just a dream.

The overall ambiguity of the poem and extensive use of allusion allows much room for interpretation which is the reason there is still discussion over the topic a decade later. As result of the poem being a "Love Song," many hastily assume the listener to be the lover of Prufrock. Similarly, it is common interpret *you* and *I* as literally the reader and Prufrock. After Eliot's personal life was made public over the years, many scholars now think that the *you* is a personal friend of Eliot or that Prufrock is in some way related to Eliot. Due to Eliot's frequent and intricate use of allusion in his poetry, scholars often try to relate the characters

in the poem to the characters in the referenced works, primarily *Inferno* and *Hamlet*.

Recently, Scholars find it more reasonable to assume that Prufrock is speaking to a separate self or fragment of himself, while some even argue that the whole poem takes place in his mind and that nothing ever happened.

A clear understanding of the meaning and purpose of the excerpt of *Inferno* that is the epigraph of *Prufrock* reveals much more about the narrator of the poem. Eliot's *Prufrock* starts off with the ambiguous line: "Let us go then, you and I" (1). What makes it ambiguous is not only the enigma behind the identities of *you* and *I*, but also the use of the word *then*. Frederick Locke notes the use of the word *then* implies causality or continuation of a previous event, but in the case of *Prufrock*, the poet seems to have left out the first part. This suggests that the preceding epigraph is an integral part of the poem that would hopefully clarify the confusion. The epigraph is a short excerpt from Dante's *Inferno*. Dante, who is touring the Eighth Circle of Hell, meets a man, Guido, who is stuck there as punishment for crimes he committed on Earth. Dante asks him how he ended up in Hell and Guido responds:

S'io credesse che mia risposta fosse
 A persona che mai tornasse al mondo,
 Questa fiamma staria senza piu scosse.
 Ma perciocche giammai di questo fondo
 Non torno vivo alcun, s'i'odo il vero,
 Senza tema d'infamia ti rispondo (Eliot "Epigraph").

If I thought my answer were
 to one who would ever return to the world,
 this flame would shake no more;

but since, if what I hear be true,
 none ever did return alive from this depth,
 without fear of infamy I answer thee (Ron 52).

When looking at the epigraph along with the opening lines of *Prufrock*, its purpose for causality becomes clear. Just like Guido, because Prufrock does not believe his story will be told *then*, he will tell his story. When considering this Prufrock-Guido character, it would be reasonable to expect that Prufrock, like Guido, is living in Hell in some sense. As Ron notes, the theme of the episode in *Inferno* that Guido features in is deception, and especially Guido's self-deception. Guido's Hell is not a form of physical pain. Guido's Hell is the shame of being a victim of fraud himself and his self-conscious awareness of it (965). Eliot makes Prufrock's self-awareness of his Hell very obvious: "I have measured out my life with coffee spoons" (51), is just one sign of how Prufrock finds his life stale. Eliot's choice to use this epigraph for a poem about self-consciousness only exemplifies the theme. Recognizing the relationship between the *I* in *Prufrock* and the *I* in *Inferno* raises the question if the *you* in *Prufrock* and the *you* in *Inferno* also have such similarities.

In many poems, it is fair to ignore the importance of the listener other than being a point of view for a story. In *Prufrock*, However, Eliot draws attention to the listener by opening and closing the poem by addressing the audience with a different subject. Going back to *Inferno*, we can find a hint as to who Prufrock is addressing. Guido only tells Dante of his tale because he believes Dante to be stuck in Hell just as he is. Suggesting the *you* in *Prufrock* is in Hell just as the listener in *Inferno* is in Hell would be a hasty assumption as it stands. However, reading *Prufrock* again with this possibility in mind suggests the listener could be a separate *self* of Prufrock. The poem has numerous examples of fragmentation: "I have seen my head brought in upon a platter" (Eliot 82) is maybe the most literal example of

fragmentation of the body. "I should have been a pair of ragged claws Scuttling across the floors of silent seas" (Eliot 73) gives the image of a crab, but only mentions claws.

Fragmentation is littered all over the poem to convince the reader to think about the fragmentation of Prufrock's mind and self. Looking at *Prufrock* as a conversation between two selves of Prufrock coordinates well with the theme of self-consciousness. Prufrock is obsessed with the ways others think of him. Prufrock judges himself entirely on his own looks: "His hair is growing so thin...his arms and legs are thin" (Eliot 41-44). The separation of Prufrock into separate selves allows him to see himself as others see him. The fragmentation of Prufrock begs the question of if the proposed two selves of Prufrock are different. Although it may be a bold assertion, many claim the speaker is the social-self of Prufrock while the listener is the repressed inner-self of Prufrock. It would seem that only the narrator makes an impression on the story, but the listener does appear to almost interject at one point: "To lead you to an overwhelming question... Oh, do not ask, 'What is it?'" (Eliot 10-11). Prufrock interrupts the poem to seemingly prevent the listener from asking about the nature of the overwhelming question. This interaction can be interpreted as the social-self repressing the inner-self from doing what Prufrock truly desires—asking the overwhelming question.

Looking at Prufrock as a conversation between two selves of Prufrock allow for the interpretation of the ending as a dream that Prufrock uses to fool himself into thinking he has changed. The poems opening line set a precedent for the subjects as "*you* and *I*." The near entirety of the poem follows suit while not indicating a change in what was defined at the beginning. In the last stanza, the subjects change to the more universal words *we* and *us*. It was argued that the distinction between *you* and *I* emphasized the self-awareness of Prufrock. The subjects *we* and *us* are more unifying and indicate the abandonment of Prufrock's self-awareness as result of the lack of distinction. Eliot purposely made the decision to have

Prufrock liberated from his self-awareness. To understand this decision, the poem where the change occurred must also be examined:

Shall I part my hair behind? Do I dare to eat a peach?

I shall wear white flannel trousers, and walk upon the beach

I have heard the mermaids singing, each to each.

I do not think that they will sing to me (Eliot 122-125) (emphasis added).

The tone of the poem changes as Prufrock seems to finally make a choice as seen with the distinction of the line starting with *shall I* and the line starting with *I shall*. This stanza illustrates the illusion of change. Throughout the poem, Prufrock debates whether he should "disturb the universe" (Eliot 46) and after Prufrock has "seen the moment of [his] greatness flicker" (Eliot 84), Prufrock begins debating on whether he should or should not do simple tasks such as eating a peach. The decisions to wear white flannel trousers and to walk upon the beach are insignificant. The imagery of singing mermaids on a beach stands out in the poem. The poem is very depressing until Prufrock takes the listener to the beach. Mermaids are mythical creatures that represent physical beauty, something that Prufrock obsesses over. Although the final line of the quote stands out within the stanza by being more saddening, it blends with the gloomy theme of the rest of the poem. The final stanzas are in Prufrock's dream world used to deceive himself, like Guido, into thinking he has made a choice. He dreams of a place where his social-self and inner-self are one and cannot judge each other by how others see him—a place where he can escape his self-conscious. This makes even more sense when looking at the final line of the poem: "Till human voices wake us, and we drown" (Eliot 131). Prufrock is self-conscious of what others think of him. The human voices are what Prufrock think judge him and wake him up and drown him, away from the surface, from his dream.

The subtitle "Love Song" is ironic in the case of this poem. The poem reads nothing like a "Love Song." The overall tone of the poem is gloomy and Prufrock talks about his shortcomings throughout the poem. Assuming the speaker and the listener are lovers because the poem is a "Love Song" is a near baseless assumption. Many scholars and readers alike find the struggles of Prufrock universal to some extent. Many people who see Prufrock this way suggest that everyone is hesitant and that Prufrock is an exaggerated version of that trait. Although this perspective is convincing, it fails to address the switch in the subjects from *you* and *I* to *we* and *us*, which is a purposeful and meaningful change. Without going into too much detail, *Inferno*, *Hamlet*, and all of the other allusions tell the reader a substantial amount about Prufrock himself. It has been claimed that Eliot made Prufrock based on himself and that he is talking to a friend of Eliot's. In a letter, Eliot had sent to a friend, "My memory may deceive me but I am prepared to assert that the 'you' in The Love Song is merely some friend of companion...and that it has no emotional content whatsoever" (Miller 52). To assume there is no emotional content to the *you* is a rather drastic claim when considering that the listener is most likely also living in Prufrock's Hell. Such a claim cannot be discussed with the content in the poem, but it would be wise to notice that the *you* appears to have some importance in poem despite the author's claim. It will also be difficult to argue whether any characters in Prufrock are real or not. Prufrock himself is only a character in a poem he presumably wrote. It is indeed very convincing to see Prufrock as a story that takes place only in his mind. Possibly the most controversial part of this argument today is the interpretation of the ending. In the most general sense, whether it is fortunate for Prufrock or not. Looking particularly at the beginning and ending lines of the final stanza: "We have lingered in the chambers of the sea...Till human voices wake us, and we drown" (Eliot 129-131). Lingered could be referencing the way Prufrock's life has stayed the same. This has caused many to believe that Prufrock lingers until human voices wake him. Looking at the

shift in tense from *have lingered* to *wake* and *drown* seems to give the feeling of habitualness, a trait of Prufrock's life that he dreads.

The legitimacy of the sources is brought into question when some of them are as old as the 1960's. Most of the discussion about the subjects in Prufrock took place in the mid-nineteenth century. Today, most scholars would agree that the *I* is Prufrock and the *you* is a separate fragment of Prufrock. However, most scholarly articles present this information as a commonly held fact and fail to explain the significance or justify this interpretation. Due to this, many readers tend to either blindly agree with the scholars or interpret the story the differently. The discussion of this idea is still relevant as, although it was over-analyzed in the past, it has not been properly articulated in recent times to assist new readers. As result of this lack of discussion on the topic as of late, new readers tend to shy away from this interpretation due to the greater effort to reach this conclusion opposed to other viewpoints.

As demonstrated, Eliot's crafty use of subjects is necessary for understanding the story. The fragmentation of Prufrock allows for an extreme sense of alienation and self-consciousness. A close analysis of the excerpt from Inferno allows for the understanding of causality in the opening line which reveals the nature of the Hell that both characters inhabit. Eliot's use of fragmentation demonstrates not only Prufrock's fragmented thoughts but also enhances Prufrock's feelings of isolation and self-awareness. Identifying the switch in the subjects at the end of the poem may only appear the make the already mysterious ending more cryptic. However, realizing the speaker and the listener are the same person and that the purpose of this separation of character is to emphasize Prufrock's self-awareness reveals the nature of the ending and what happened to Prufrock.

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