

The Motif of Journey as Objective Correlative in T. S. Eliot's "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock"

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Abstract:

The motif of journey is of prime significance to any aesthetic appreciation of T. S. Eliot's "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock." Beginning with an invitation to a journey, the poem displays the frustration of its eponymous speaker Prufrock in his love quest. From this vantage point, there has been much critical focus on the meaning and nature of Prufrock's journey. In contrast to the large body of the research on the poem, this study seeks to analyze the work through the critical lens of Eliot's own theory of objective correlative. It is argued that the motif of journey functions as the central objective correlative in this modernist poem and that all other objective correlatives such as the atmosphere of sickness, and images suggesting Prufrock's paralysis of will, feelings of anxiety and ennui, as well as his communicative isolation in the modern world are organically linked to this motif. Ultimately, the poem displays the inner workings of the mind of an alienated individual agonizingly incapable of asserting his existence in the modern world.

Keywords: Journey; Prufrock; Objective correlative; Modernism.

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1. Introduction

The American-born twentieth-century English poet, literary critic, and verse dramatist T.S. Eliot (1888-1965) has been hailed, along with T.E. Hulme and Ezra Pound, as one of the most influential theorists of the modernist movement in the early twentieth-century. These figures revolutionized Anglo-American poetry, contending that traditional poetic forms and subject matters could no longer express the experiences of the artists in the modern world. They were pioneers in their use of free verse and the development of the subject matter of poetry. Eliot's *The Waste Land* and Pound's *The Cantos* are renowned as two of the most innovative and influential poems in the English language. Hulme who held the leadership of the so-called imagist poets provided the intellectual drive for Pound's movement of imagism, which Eliot identified as the inception of modern poetry (Beasley 1). During his career, Eliot's literary position was unparalleled; his critical ideas have also been as significant as his poetry, influencing a generation of mid-twentieth century critics such as I.A. Richards, F.R. Leavis and the American New Critics.

In 1906, Eliot entered Harvard University; he had his BA in 1909 and his MA in English literature in 1910. Upon reading Arthur Symonds's *The Symbolist Movement in Literature* (1899), Eliot became familiar with the French symbolists' free verse poetry. It was especially through his reading of the French symbolist Jules Laforgue's poetry that he recognized a parallel with the Elizabethan and Jacobean poetry to which he was attracted. Consequently, his poetic style was transformed from the rather traditional experiments in verse to a modernist style, which is typically ironic, self-conscious, and is located often in an urban setting. This is characteristic of Eliot's "Conversation Galante," "Preludes," "Portrait of a Lady," and "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock," all written between 1909 and 1911 and contained in his first book of poetry, published in 1917 (Beasley 8). In 1909, Eliot took Irving Babbitt's course Literary Criticism in France and was influenced by Babbitt's anti-romantic views.

Eliot's poems such as "Cousin Nancy," "The *Boston Evening Transcript*," "Aunt Helen," and more ambitious works such as "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock" and *The Waste Land*, are expressive of the "radical transformation in moral values and class structure brought about by that cultural shockwave known as modernism" (Murphy 143). As the following review of literature suggests, Eliot's first important poem "The Love Song" has been the subject of much critical discussion.

According to Soles, the poem depicts the insecurities of a middle-aged person who dares not to ask a woman the "overwhelming question" because he thinks that she will not accept his proposal and thereby his fragile self-esteem will be completely destroyed (59). In an early study, Walcutt focused upon the motif of love in the poem. As he maintains, except for incidental reference in Brooks and Warren's *Understanding Poetry*, the "Love Song" aspect of the title has been generally neglected. He argues that his reading of the poem "does define

the specific objective correlative organically necessary, as Eliot thought, to the communication of the emotion" (72). Somewhat in contrast to Walcutt's views, Gish refers to various problems from which Prufrock suffers and claims that the anxiety and distress to which Prufrock is exposed is so much that it lacks what Eliot refers to as an objective correlative. In his view, this is because Prufrock's "anxiety far exceeds any given situation," (125). In another study, Banerjee opines that the poem most clearly reflects the form which was in the words of the poet drawn from his study of Laforgue and Elizabethan drama (962). In his opinion, Prufrock's world is a mirror of his consciousness in a Bradleyan sense in that all events are happening simultaneously in his consciousness, serving both as its own subject and object (963). Along the same lines, Childs argues that the poem is meaningful "in a Bradleyan light" (686). He offers a deep analysis of the Prufrockian metaphor of a patient spread out upon a table in the opening lines of the poem and explains their relation to Eliot's doctoral dissertation "Knowledge and the Object of Experience in the Philosophy of F. H. Bradley." In his view, the poem reflects a "reading of the dissertation and the dissertation a reading of the poem" (686). From another critical perspective, Haba has discussed the sense of community in the poem reflected in its very first line. As he notes, if we accept the possibility that the "you" of the first line refers to you and me, that is, to any reader of the poem, then, as the final stanza suggests, we may also participate imaginatively in Prufrock's experience. Accordingly, we feel his hesitations, suffer his indecision, and feel our own insignificance, and thus we succumb to the lure of our fantasies. Likewise, the first line of the poem has been the subject of Jacobs's thematic analysis of the poem. He suggests that Eliot could have replaced the pronoun "I" with the pronoun "me" in the first line of the poem but he intentionally did not so. Rejecting the interpretations that this is a flagrant slip in grammar, or that Eliot used "I" because he wanted a rhyme for the word "sky" of the second line, he asks: "Is not that sense of wrongness precisely the note which Eliot would wish to strike in his poem about J. Alfred?" He argues that this sense of wrongness is in harmony with the very theme of the poem, that is, "the wrongness of the society" (5). In his view, Eliot from the first line informs readers that "there is a flaw in the world, that all is not sound in this company, that things untrue and improper abound, that these individuals are marred" (6). Jacobs' critical views are in line with those of Blum. Identifying Prufrock's character as "fretful and futile," he argues that Prufrock is aware of the meaningless of his life. Consequently, he mocks his world and himself as part of it, conscious of the fact that there is no possibility for him to change himself or his world (425).

As the above literature review suggests, the majority of these critical readings have addressed thematically various aspect of "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock," especially in relation to Prufrock's desperate condition in the modern world. While this study recognizes the complexity of Eliot's poem and respects these critical interpretations, its objective is to delineate the mechanism or mode through which the poet renders Prufrock's plight in the modern world, a critical perspective which has received less scholarly attention. Moreover, to

the best of researcher's knowledge, no critical study has comprehensively analyzed the motif of journey in the poem specifically in relation to Eliot's notion of objective correlative. Indeed, various interpretations of Eliot's poem suggest that one cannot have an exhaustive interpretation of a poet as erudite and well-read as T. S. Eliot without recourse to Eliot's own poetical theories. Accordingly, this study has focused upon the motif of objective correlative in the poem for a better appreciation of its aesthetic and artistic dimensions. The central research questions posed in this regard are as follows: How can one come up with an interpretation of "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock" in good Eliot fashion? Or, how fruitful might be any study of Eliot's work in the light of his own critical theories? In view of this, what is the significance of a critical analysis which reads Eliot's poem by recourse to his theory of objective correlative? More precisely, what is the main objective correlative in the poem, accounting for its various thematic interpretations? In the following, some major aspects of Eliot's modernist poetry are first explored, and then the analysis of the poem will be presented largely by drawing upon his theory of objective correlative.

2. Eliot's Modernist poetry: Objective Correlative

T. S. Eliot is one of the "difficult poets of the 20th century, perhaps of all time" (Murphy ix):

The truth is, Eliot's style of poetry, very much unintelligible at times, is often intentionally that way. The poet of "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock" and *The Waste Land*, "Gerontion" and "The Hollow Men," to cite but a few of the titles for which he is best known, was never one to make his readers' lives easier. (Murphy ix)

The complexity of Eliot's verse is partly due to his firm belief in the allusiveness of poetic language, expressed often in terms of subtle symbolic imagery. Though Eliot's reputation as a modernist poet rests mainly on *The Waste Land* (1922), his "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock" is also a major modernist poem. The two poems register his idea that the language of modern poetry should be allusive. As he remarks in his essay "The Metaphysical Poets": "Our civilization comprehends great variety and complexity, and this variety and complexity, playing upon a refined sensibility, must produce various and complex results. The poet must become more and more comprehensive, more allusive, more indirect, in order to force, to dislocate if necessary, language into his meaning (289). Eliot's statements are characteristic of the so-called symbolist poetry characterized by the sense of musicality, obscurity, mystery, the use of free verse, and symbols. In this respect, Stéphane Mallarmé's critical insights shed more light on symbolist poetry. In his essay "Crisis in Poetry," he observes that language's inability to express what he calls the soul and essence of things or their truth has engendered a substantial and fascinating crisis in literature. To overcome this crisis, symbolists have attempted to make use of free verse instead of traditional forms of rhyme and meter; this also has led them to avoid using description in their poems in favor of the evocative, the allusive and the suggestive style (34-40).

A main aspect of Eliot, Hulme and Pound's poetry was their reinterpretation of the use of the poetic symbol as used by the symbolists. Hulme and Pound used the term image for symbol, and in 1912 Pound founded imagism, a movement later referred to by Eliot as the beginning of modernist poetry. Eliot's version of the symbolists' poetic symbol, which he called "objective correlative" shared much aspects of the Hulme and Pound's notion of the image. For the symbolists' symbol was objective correlative (Beasley 33). "Indeed, Eliot serves as a pivotal figure for the changing attitude of literary criticism toward the poem/literary text's value as an aesthetic 'object.'" (Laity 8). In "Hamlet and his Problems," Eliot maintains that

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; such that when the external facts, which must terminate in sensory experience, are given, the emotion is immediately evoked. (*Selected Essays* 145)

Eliot goes on to observe that in the scene where Shakespeare presents Lady Macbeth's sleep-walking speech and in the speech of Macbeth hearing the death of his wife, the words are totally correspond to the speaker's state of the mind:

You will find that of mind of Lady Macbeth walking in her sleep has been communicated to you by a skillful accumulation of imagined sensory impressions; the words of Macbeth on hearing his wife's death strike us as if, given the sequence of events, these words were automatically released by the last event in the series. The artistic 'inevitability' lies in this complete adequacy of the external to the emotion. (*Selected Essays* 145)

Eliot then maintains that "this is precisely what is deficient in *Hamlet*" (*Selected Essays* 145). In the course of his review of the play *Hamlet*, Eliot deliberates on what to him seems to be the drawback of Shakespeare's work in expressing the emotional state of the protagonist's mind. *Hamlet*, he argues, is like sonnets "full of some stuff that the writer could not drag into light, contemplate, or manipulate into art" (*Selected Essays* 144). As Eliot maintains, "Hamlet (the man) is dominated by an emotion which is inexpressible, because it is in excess of the facts as they appear" (*Selected Essays* 145). Eliot concludes that "Hamlet's bafflement at the absence of objective equivalent to his feelings is a prolongation of the bafflement of his creator in the face of his artistic problem" (ibid.). As an example, Eliot draws upon Hamlet's disgust of his mother and points out that his mother is not an adequate equivalent for this feeling; "his disgust envelops and exceeds her" (ibid.). It is therefore a state of the mind which "he cannot understand; he cannot objectify it, and it therefore remains to poison life and obstruct action" (ibid.). Eliot's theory of objective correlative can be applied as a critical lens for the analysis of "The Love Song of J. A. Prufrock."

2. The Motif of Journey as Objective Correlative in "The Love Song"

Eliot's first major poem "The Love Song of J. A. Prufrock" (1915) is best meaningful in terms of his theory of objective correlative. Through various images, set of objects, and scenes, the

poet expresses the anxieties of a middle-aged man named Prufrock in a world which is at odds with his amorous aspirations. As ironically reflected in the title of the poem, Prufrock's plight is one of frustration in love and paralysis of will, associated with modern life. His state of mind is communicated to the reader primarily through the motif of journey which links organically all other objective correlatives together. In the opening section of the poem, the prevailing atmosphere is one of sickness.

2.1 Prufrock's Journey: A Sick Vision

In "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock," Eliot's objective correlative theory takes different forms and is expressed in terms of various images and scenes, all connected together through the motif of journey. Through this central objective correlative, Eliot presents Prufrock's love quest, probes into his psyche, and sheds light on the mainspring of his traumatic experience. The poem's epigraph, which is an allusion to Dante's *Inferno*, Canto 27, reads: "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" (Locke 54). The poet draws parallels between Dante's journey through hell and that of Prufrock through the hell of modern world. Like Guido de Montefeltro, Prufrock has been caught in a hellish situation without any possibility of redemption. The opening lines of the poem highlights further the motif of journey: "Let us go then, you and I, / When the evening is spread out against the sky / Like a patient etherized upon a table" ("The Love Song" 130). As Childs notes, critics have made these lines the cornerstone of their analysis of the poem. In this respect, their main preoccupation has been with the distinction between "you and I" (687).

Some critics take the "you" of the first line to be the reader. Another critical speculation suggests that it is Jean Verdenal, the young Frenchman to whom Eliot dedicated the volume. Others yet have speculated that the "you" is Prufrock's alter ego. It can also be no one in particular (Murphey 293). Indeed, the poem has frustrated any expectations of the reader for "a coherent speaking identity" (McNamara 367). Beginning in medias res, the poem reveals Prufrock's state of mind. From this vantage point, Abjadian observes that, the "you" of the poem is not a lady, a listener, or a companion. Rather, Prufrock is talking to himself in a mirror. In his view, "you and I" are two aspects of the same person, Prufrock's public personality and his ego" (486). Likewise, in her Jungian analysis of the poem, Jones views Prufrock as an extrovert, one "who is unable to resolve the conflict between the demands of his own individuality, and those of his persona, or social mask. In consequence, he struggles helplessly in an eternal hell of self-estrangement and moral indecision" (10-11).

In addition to the primary motif of journey, the next two lines of the poem introduce the image of evening as another significant objective correlative, revealing Prufrock's state of mind. As Brooker points out, "Prufrock, not the evening, is etherized upon a table. Like

everything else in the poem, the tired, sleepy evening is an aspect of Prufrock's mind" (908). The poem by virtue of its insight into Prufrock's mental state also reveals the state of the minds of myriads of people in the modern world. This is emphasized by the use of the first person plural pronoun, "we," in the final line of the poem which drowns "in the chambers of the sea" of human voices ("The Love Song" 135).

2.2 Prufrock's Argument: "It is impossible to say just what I mean!"

In "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock," Eliot not only evokes an atmosphere of sickness, but also renders Prufrock's abortive efforts to express his intension and sing his love song. Eliot here introduces various objective correlatives to dramatize Prufrock's bafflement at expressing his state of mind. Among other things, Prufrock's plight is one of communication failure. To understand Prufrock's desperate situation, the reader is to follow the course of his journey "through certain half-deserted streets, . . . / Streets that follow like a tedious argument" and lead him "to an overwhelming question . . ." ("The Love Song" 130). The half-deserted streets of the city are part of Prufrock's course of journey, functioning as an objective correlative for expressing Prufrock's feelings of ennui and isolation. The desolation of the scene is further intensified by the "muttering retreats / of restless nights in cheap hotels" (130). The images of lonely streets, stifling retreats, cheap hotels are other elements objectified by the poet for displaying Prufrock's mental state and position. They lead him to his overwhelming question.

The "overwhelming question" that bothers Eliot's distraught character is visiting a lady and proposing to her. Prufrock's timidity, ultimately, prevents him from confronting the overwhelming question: "Oh, do not ask, 'What is it?'" ("The Love Song" 130), he asks. Though communication fails him, Prufrock is enticed once more to make his visit; "Let's go and make our visit," he says (130). The destination of his journey is a drawing room, where "the women come and go / Talking of Michelangelo" (131). In fact, Eliot satirizes the world in which art and aesthetics have become the subject of superficial chitchat of gossiping women. Due to the lack of self-esteem and feelings of insecurity, Prufrock thinks that the women are superior to him and that they even might subject him to verbal abuse. This accounts for his fear of meeting their gaze, the "eyes" that would fix him "in a formulated phrase" (132). He thinks that,

... when I am formulated, sprawling on a pin,
When I am pinned and wriggling on the wall,
Then how should I begin
To spit out all the butt-ends of my days and ways?
And how should I presume? ("The Love Song" 132)

Here, the image of Prufrock being dissected, "sprawling on a pin," is Eliot's objective correlative for reflecting Prufrock's desperate situation. Prufrock is also afraid of women's potential response to his appearance: "With a bald spot in the middle of my hair / (They will say: 'How his hair is growing thin!')" (131) or "They will say: 'But how his arms and legs are

thin!')" (132). Proposing to a lady for him, indeed, becomes like disturbing the universe: "Do I dare / Disturb the universe?" (132), he contemplates. Likewise, he fails in his attempt to articulate his repressed feelings, thinking of what to say upon visiting the supposed lady of his love quest: "Shall I say, I have gone at dusk through narrow streets, / And watched the smoke that rises from the pipes / Of lonely men in shirtsleeves, leaning out of windows?" (133). Thus, Prufrock cannot ask the overwhelming question and he attempts to divert his attention from the issue by focusing upon "the yellow fog that rubs its back upon the window panes" and "[t]he yellow smoke that rubs its muzzle on the window panes" (130) and like a pussycat falls asleep.

As Murphy points out, the image of yellow fog or smoke which becomes Prufrock's object of contemplation is a good example of an objective correlative through which Eliot aims to achieve a specific effect. Such an image certainly colors the reader's response both to the scene and the tone and mood that it evokes, "creating an atmosphere of the lurid and the sickly" (248). It is thus in harmony with the image of the evening sky personified as an etherized patient in the opening stanza. It "licks its into the corners of the evening," lingers "upon the pools that stand in drains," and much like a housecat slips by the terrace, curls around the house and finally falls asleep (130-131). Thus, the enveloping fog distances Prufrock from the sordid realities of his social milieu. He briefly gets distracted, and his anguished self is shortly freed from the serious issue of his life, the overwhelming question.

From another vantage point, the image of the enveloping yellow fog parallels that of the drawing room from which Prufrock is socially excluded. In this respect, Prufrock's problem is also a communicative one in that he does not know how to express his intention even if he dares to join the women in the drawing room. "It is impossible to say just what I mean!" (134), he says. Eventually, Prufrock's endeavor for singing his love song leads nowhere and his voice dies like the "voices dying with a dying fall" in the drawing room (132).

2.3 Prufrock's Paralysis of Will: "So how should I presume?"

Prufrock's failure of communication is in tandem with the paralysis of his will. Both literally and figuratively, Prufrock's love quest commences with a journey through "certain half-deserted streets," ("The Love Song" 130) in a slum section of the modern city. As the poem's epigraph suggests, it is a hellish journey, without any specific destination. While Dante's journey through the Inferno and Purgatorio ends with a prospect of heaven in the Paradiso, Prufrock's journey seems to get him nowhere. The beginning and the end of this circular journey turns out to be the same. Almost, each stanza of the poem begins with the speaker's desire for commencing his journey but ends with his inaction and indecision, suggesting the frustration of his ambitions. Consequently, he is left with no choice but to postpone his decision:

There will be time, there will be time

To prepare a face to meet the faces that you meet;
 There will be time to murder and create,
 And time for all the works and days of hands
 That lift and drop a question on your plate:
 Time for you and time for me,
 And time yet for a hundred indecisions,
 And for a hundred visions and revision, ("The Love Song" 131)

Though Prufrock keeps meditating upon his problem, he suffers largely from indecision. Moreover, the pervasive sense of futility that permeates his life is revealed in the allusion to *Works and Days*, a didactic poem by the Greek poet Hesiod on the subject of farming and country life. The contrast is here between the fruitful agricultural labour and the futile "works and days" (131) of drawing room women, involved in superficial social gesturing. Nevertheless, Prufrock cannot dispense with the overwhelming issue: "So how should I presume?" (132), he contemplates. Ironically, he compares his case to those of John the Baptist, Lazarus come from the dead, and Hamlet. However, he is aware of the incongruity of these analogies. He thinks, for instance, of being only fit for playing the role of the fool rather than that of Prince Hamlet or, humbly, instead of the forbidden fruit, he may be allowed to eat a peach: "Do I dare to eat a peach?" (135), he asks. Although Prufrock thinks that he is fit for the role of the fool rather than Hamlet, Eliot ironically makes his case similar to that of Hamlet. "Hamlet's bafflement at the absence of objective equivalent to his feelings" (Eliot, *Selected Essays* 145) is parallel to Prufrock's bafflement at communication and forcing "the moment to its crisis" ("The Love Song" 133). Nevertheless, through a plethora of objective correlatives Eliot delves into the mind of Prufrock and display his sordid condition. Similar to John the Baptist whose head was "brought in upon a platter" (133) Prufrock's destiny is to be dictated by the whims of a woman at the tea party. Nonetheless, he is not a prophet and "here's no great matter" (133). Prufrock's predicament is seemingly a trivial one; yet it is a great and significant issue to him. It is like squeezing "the universe into a ball / To roll it toward some overwhelming question" (134). In the course of his visions and revisions, Prufrock wonders about walking on the beach: "I shall wear white flannel trousers, and walk upon the beach" (135), he says. He has heard that the mermaids sing each to each, but he is painfully aware that they won't sing to him. As his prosaic and "unromantic name" (Wei 38) suggests, he is not heroic enough for engaging in any amatory adventure.

4. Conclusion

The motif of journey is central to any aesthetic appreciation of T. S. Eliot's modernist poem "The Love Song of J. A. Prufrock". The poem is meaningful in terms of Eliot's theory of objective correlative whereby the poet through a set of objects or images, a situation or a chain of events expresses the emotions of its titular speaker. The poem's epilogue draws upon Dante's journey

through Inferno, thus highlighting the centrality of the motif of journey. This analogy is enhanced by the comparison drawn between the character of Guido and that of Prufrock, both being caught in a hellish situation without any possibility of redemption.

The poem properly begins with an invitation to a journey whose destination is rather frightening to Prufrock. In the course of this journey, Prufrock is to deal with the overwhelming question of his life, that is, proposing to a woman. Prufrock's problem is indeed that of the modern man suffering from decision paralysis and lack of communication. In each stanza of the poem, Prufrock thinks of making a decision and then distracts himself from the issue. Through a series of images, the poet expresses Prufrock's emotions and the roots of his suffering as a sick individual in a sick world.

The prevailing atmosphere of sickness is evoked by the image of Prufrock lying in bed, as if he is in the operating room of a hospital. Moreover, such images as the yellow fog falling asleep like a house cat and the evening sleeping peacefully suggest the passivity of Prufrock and his lack of heroism to face the overwhelming question of his life. Along the same lines, Prufrock's character is compared to that of John the Baptist, Lazarus, and the fool in *Hamlet*, serving as objective correlatives for expressing Prufrock's plight in the hell of modern world. All these objective correlatives are organically interwoven with the motif of journey, the central objective correlative of the poem. Following the course of Prufrock's journey empathetically, the reader becomes familiar with the mainsprings of his isolation and loneliness in the modern world.

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