

## T. S. Eliot's Tragic Strategy in: The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock

Ahmad Satam Al-Jumaily

Department of English, College of Arts and Letters, Cihan University, Kurdistan Region - Iraq  
[tombraider.1988@yahoo.com](mailto:tombraider.1988@yahoo.com)

**Abstract:** It is a truth universally acknowledged that T. S. Eliot was the major world poet of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. It is also well known that he was interested in drama and had attempted to revive the heritage of classical tragedy. His famous play *Murder in the Cathedral* (1936) was a good example on his attempts. Such facts prove that Eliot considered tragedy to be the most sophisticated literary type that can best represent the human nature, and reflect the artistic excellence of the artist. All his works have the seeds of tragedy inside them. They were pregnant with the classical grand spirit of thought, and looked at humanity with a tragic vision, similar to that of Plato, Aristotle, and Dante. Even his poems show such tragic attitude. They imitate the epics of the classical writers but with a modern air. Almost all critics agree that Eliot is classical in thought but modern in style. This study then takes as its point of departure the idea that the poem: "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock" is a tragedy. By dealing with the poem (written in 1912) as a tragedy, the research tackles a topic which is not attempted by previous criticism. It shades light on the psychological nature of the poem which is still obscure and hidden for most readers. The research reconsiders the theme of the poem, the development of meaning within it, and the spirit of the poet which envelops it. Psychoanalysis will be the main approach for the critical method of this study. It is the best key which can give a better understanding of the text. The incidents presented in the text will be viewed as a sort of "objective correlative"<sup>1</sup> for the tragedy of Prufrock.

[Ahmad Satam Al-Jumaily. **T. S. Eliot's Tragic Strategy in: The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock.** *N Y Sci J* 2013;6(7):111-116]. (ISSN: 1554-0200). <http://www.sciencepub.net/newyork>. 17

**Keywords:** Eliot's Tragic Strategy; Love; Song; Alfred Prufrock

### Introduction

#### The poem has all the characteristics of a tragedy:

1. It deals with an important topic. A subject of life or death. It describes the tragic life of Prufrock as an individual of the modern age, but later on the text generalizes the case of the hero to include all the people of the same age during that span of time: the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. At the end of the poem the poet uses the plural form to suggest the archetypal nature of the text.

2. The hero of the poem is "presented with his tragic flaw inside him."<sup>2</sup> From the beginning of the text he is presented with a split in his spirit, a weakness in his character, a disease in his mentality, a sadness in his mood, and a fear in his shaken personality. He is closely similar to Hamlet. Even the name itself is presented linguistically with a division inside it. The word Prufrock is morphologically divided into two morphemes: { Pru } and { frock }.

3. The state of mental and physical paralysis clearly shapes Prufrock's thoughts and limited actions. He lives in a state of inertia similar to the people of his day; a state that comes as a result of suffering from the complicated modern life.

4. Another feature of tragedy in the text is represented by the three unites which appear regulated and systematic in the poem. The action takes place within twenty-four hours as a sign of the unity of time. The main incident revolves around one

plot to preserve the unity of action. And since there is no physical movement, because the action happens in one place, hence the unity of place is also accomplished.

5. The fatal impact of the supernatural (which is represented psychologically in the text) is drawn carefully in the poem to lead the hero to his tragic end. Everything is imposed (his subconscious wish dominates his conscious will) on him and moves forward while the hero only obeys and moves through the lays of his inferno-like life to his tragic end. He never resists his destined end or tries to alter what waits for him ahead.

6. The grand language of the poem is another important feature of a good tragedy. The lofty language guarantees both the psychological nature of the text and the extent of painful suffering through which the tragic hero passes.

7. Like all the famous tragedies-especially those of Shakespeare-women play a vital role in increasing the suffering of the hero and leading him to his deadly end. In the poem the female characters are presented dangerous and fearful. Prufrock openly discloses his fear of women in many instances in the poem.

8. A good tragedy, as Aristotle argues, must develop organically: it should have a beginning, a middle, and an end, with the parts related in a clear casual pattern to relate a single action:

Just as in the other representational arts a single representation is of a single thing, so too the plot since it is a representation of action, ought to represent a single action, and its parts: the incidents ought to be so constructed that, when some part is transposed or removed, the whole is disrupted.<sup>3</sup>

The Love Song, meets all these requirements. The first poetic paragraph can be considered the beginning, the last part the end, while all the remaining body of the poem is the middle of the tragedy. What is interesting about this division in the poem is the fact that these three parts complete each other in a smooth way to build the united structure of the poem. Prufrock appears at the beginning a hesitating character, at the middle quarreling with his other self, and at the end surrendering.

9. Since any tragedy must have a sort of conflict, the conflict in this tragedy is internal; it is a psychological one between Prufrock and his other soul: between his conscious will and his unconscious wish.

10. And if each play must have a dialogue, The Love Song, maintains a fantastic and genuine conversation between Prufrock and his hidden self. The poem presents a rich internal monologue which shows the human spirit at the peck of its suffering.

11. The tragedy ends-as its common in all tragedies-in the implied death of its hero. Prufrock "reaches the state of death-in-life,"<sup>4</sup> which indirectly suggests physical death as we see this fact symbolized in the scene of drowning at the end of the poem.

#### **Eliot's Tragic Strategy**

Eliot's tragic strategy in the text is highly artistic, genuine and interesting. The richness of his strategy can be extracted from the following innovations in this type of literary creation:

1. Since Eliot was very much interested in the ideas of Sigmund Freud, he employs the psychological factor as the main technique to build up the pillars of this fantastic text. By doing so the author achieves many purposes. First, he meets the spirit of the age at the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century by introducing psychology into literary creation, and thus Eliot brings the requirements of modernism into his tragedy. Second, the problem of Prufrock himself is truly psychological; therefore, psychology is the best method by which the author can present the suffering of his hero to the audience. Third, a psychological text needs powerful language that can carry the tragic message which the writer wants to convey.

The psychological nature of the tragedy begins with the first lines of the poem. The reader of the text soon feels many voices speak at the same time:

Let us go then, you and I,

When the evening is spread out against the sky  
Like a patient etherized upon a table;  
Let us go, through certain half-deserted streets,  
The muttering retreats 5  
Of restless nights in one-night cheap hotels  
And sawdust restaurants with oyster-shells:  
Streets that follow like a tedious argument  
Of insidious intent  
To lead you to an overwhelming question... 10  
Oh, do not ask, "What is it?"  
Let us go and make our visit.  
In the room the women come and go  
Talking of Michelangelo. 5

The speaker wants his partner to go with him. The speech is carried out in a strange atmosphere in which the evening is compared to a patient etherized upon a table. The destination is not well decided, the restaurants are depicted cheap, the hotels are poor, the arguments are tedious, and everything seems mixed and hazy.

The reader soon discovers that the speaker is the same person but with a certain defect in him. The image of the sick person clearly stands for the diseased mentality of the speaker himself who soon escapes from himself, and halts the conversation to move to another topic. He starts to talk about women. This is the "objective correlative" which Eliot himself explains in his critical essay on *Hamlet*. Readers soon understand that the speaker is abnormal, and that the source of his suffering is women.

What is more interesting in the topic is the fact that neither Prufrock himself nor his other self move or start any visit. Like Vladimir and Estragon in Beckett's play *Waiting for Godot*, Prufrock is completely paralyzed to the point that he cannot do anything. He is not sure of anything. Like Hamlet, Prufrock only speaks but without any action. That is the first and main reason of his tragedy. In this respect this is the first sign in the tragic life of the hero; it is the tragic flaw in his character. He does not know what he wants and he is not able to achieve any meaningful action.

2. Eliot then starts to unfold the nature of madness in the character of the hero. He explains his fear of action and his hesitation:

And indeed there will be time	
For the yellow smoke that slides along the street,	
Rubbing its back upon the window panes;	25
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;	30
Time for you and time for me,	

And time yet for a hundred indecisions,	
And for a hundred visions and revisions,	
Before the taking of a toast and tea.	

It is not strange for Prufrock to establish a discourse of this nature. He feels the complex of inferiority. He thinks many times before making any action. Prufrock, like most of his generation, fears action because it is associated with death. The poem was written when Europe was preparing itself for World War I. The poem then is a mirror of its age. Prufrock stands for the hesitant European personality at the eve of the war. Prufrock keeps postponing action until he reaches the state in which his mind starts to accept illusion and places it in the mind instead of reality. Prufrock not only fears action but he also fears women:

And I have known the arms already, known them all—	
Arms that are braceleted and white and bare (But in the lamplight, downed with light brown hair!)	
Is it perfume from a dress	65
That makes me so digress?	
Arms that lie along a table, or wrap about a shawl.	
And should I then presume?	
And how should I begin?	

The story of the poem describes Prufrock's visit to a woman, his ability to declare his love for her, and his later agonized recollection of the experience. Prufrock's two souls prevent him from action. It appears from the above lines that our (now we can say anti-hero) had a previous bad experience stored in his mind about women. This is why his subconscious flashes in his conscious bitter experiences with women.

His past experience with women is stored in his mind with the images of the braceleted hands of women, or the smell of their dresses, or the power of their eyes. And so if he will make his visit, he may face the same dangers! And so he kept on talking to himself more and more.

At this stage of the internal monologue the readers feel that Prufrock's mental sickness worsens, his fear increases, and his command on the two selves starts to lessen. Here he begins to imagine that his visit is true and he lived in a state as if he were in the presence of his beloved. Readers feel now that the borders between illusion and reality start to break inside Prufrock's mind. And this is a dangerous state in any mental disease.

But Prufrock soon recognizes that he is in need of some balance and tries to recover when he announces:

No! I am not Prince Hamlet, nor was meant to be;	
Am an attendant lord, one that will do	
To swell a progress, start a scene or two,	
Advise the prince; no doubt, an easy tool,	
Deferential, glad to be of use,	115
Politic, cautious, and meticulous;	
Full of high sentence, but a bit obtuse;	
At times, indeed, almost ridiculous—	
Almost, at times, the Fool.	

He doesn't want to be like Hamlet! This ironic part of the text gives a reversed meaning. His case is more dangerous than that of Hamlet because the latter was at least more active than the speaker. And soon Prufrock realizes that he is a fool. And here is the problem. Psychiatrists believe that when a patient is sick and he knows that and accepts it, he will not be cured, and this is the case of Prufrock. He has gone mad and will not be cured. What will he do then? The text tells us that he will completely live with his unconscious mind, and leave the material world of facts and realities:

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.	125
I have seen them riding seaward on the waves Combing the white hair of the waves blown back When the wind blows the water white and black.	
We have lingered in the chambers of the sea By sea-girls wreathed with seaweed red and brown	130
Till human voices wake us, and we drown.	

The first line suggests that Prufrock is impotent, because eating a peach in literature normally stands as a symbol for having sex. And Prufrock discloses this idea: he is not sure of himself whether he can do it or not. In fact, the main story of the poem describes Prufrock's visit to a woman, and his inability even to declare his love for her. The "you," and the "I" of the opening lines are considered to be the two parts of Prufrock's divided self: one part urges him to act, and the other holds him back.

He wants to fix his case but he doesn't know how; then he merely keeps his subconscious control him. He walks near the beach. He starts to hear the mermaids singing each to each. It seems as if

they invite him to join them. But even if he does so, they will not sing to him. Now Prufrock is ready to accept living with the mermaids more than living with human beings. The last three lines suggest that when human voices wake them (Prufrock and his other self) then they will drown. If there is no human voice there is no drowning, but when there is human voice drowning becomes a possibility.

Prufrock wants to escape humans and their voices. He surrenders at the end. The whole problem is solved in his mind: normal living with human beings becomes impossible for him. He wants to live in the chambers of the sea. There he will have his own life which the readers do not know anything about it. Because people do not know about the life of the dead. Eliot suggests this in his prologue to the poem:

*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.*

The translation of the above lines written in Latin is as follows:

" If I believed my answer were being made to one who could ever return to the world, this flame would gleam no more; but since, if what I hear is true, never from this abyss did living man return, I answer thee without fear of infamy. " (Dante: *The Inferno*, xxv1, 61-66).

For Dante hell can be a state of mind. Man can make of his life a hell, and this is the case with Prufrock. He suffers and is not able to surpass his suffering, and as a result he pays the price and his life ends in a tragic way. This is the nature of reality: no one can reach it. The moment it is reached it is no more reality. Prufrock no more recognizes reality; a tragic awful situation successfully pictured by Eliot. 3- In the last stanza of the poem Eliot's tragic strategy reached its climax. He starts to generalize the personal suffering of Prufrock and make it global. This is, in fact, the soul of Eliot's tragedy: a tragedy must reflect a general human suffering through a private experience which all people understand. In order to make of Prufrock's suffering global; Eliot turns to language and mould it to serve his unique style. He moved on from using the pronoun (I) to use the pronoun (we) which he repeats twice in the last three lines:

We have lingered in the chambers of the sea  
By sea-girls wreathed with seaweed red and brown  
130

Till human voices wake us, and we drown.

The wish for death in the poem becomes clear. It was not only the wish of Prufrock, but rather, it was the wish of all sensitive people who lived in the time in which the poem was written. The spirit of the age was catastrophic; Europe was preparing itself for a destructive war.

The ideas of Freud, Darwin, Marx, and Sartre disturbed the heritage of the established Western thought and reached with the Western mind to new borders which made people lost. The gap widened between the beautiful dream-like past, and the modern scientific present. In front of such a scene, a scholar like T. S. Eliot, cannot choose but feel sad and wait for the new coming tragedy.

This is why his tragic hero in the poem fears action, because any action in his mind is associated with death. This idea of the fear of death by action resulted from the suffering of the European people from the wars and their tragic ends. As a result writers, thinkers, and even normal people escaped from the world of external life and lived in their private personal worlds. This is why the modern arts ignored describing external nature and started to contemplate on the private psychological experience. In reality, this is one of the most important features of modern arts and modern literature of all its different types.

#### **What Sort of Tragedy?**

It is clear that this poem is a modern tragedy. The text employs all the characteristics of modern tragedy such as:

- a- The hero of the tragedy is a normal person; humble and from the low class of the society. Unlike classical tragedies in which the hero must be a person of high status.
- b- The style of the poem completely depends on dramatic monologue where the text depicts internal action instead of the external action which was the main element in classical tragedies. Like Arthur Miller's *Death of a Salesman*; most of the action in the text takes place inside the hero's mind. This is a general feature in all the modern plays especially the tragedies.
- c- The language of the text rests on new images which were considered oxymoronic in classical drama. The images and the symbols used in the text nearly reach a surrealistic point. The following are but a few samples of the modern complicated images used in the poem:

The yellow fog that rubs its back upon the widow-panes, 15

The yellow smoke that rubs its muzzle on the window-panes

Licked its tongue into the corners of the evening,

Lingered upon the pools that stand in drains

Let fall upon its back the soot that falls from chimneys,

Slipped by the terrace, made a sudden leap. ... 20

Actually, Eliot's experience of language has been developing especially in using relevant terms, common expressions, and rhythms. He wants to communicate a sense of "real life in modern conversation in order to change the physical real action into dramatic presentation."<sup>6</sup>

The verse paragraph which is employed in the poem also serves the dramatic function of the poem. The rhyme is used not only as a rhetorical ornament, but "the duple rising rhythms with more or less variations in the length of the line, is used for purposes of emphasis."<sup>7</sup> Such stress made by using the heroic rhythm serves the dramatic and tragic nature of the poem.

d- The setting of the text depicts modern atmosphere and describes modern times. The yellow smoke, the dirty restaurants, the cheap hotels, the polluted evenings, all of these reflect the panorama of modern period in Europe during which the poem was composed.

Besides, all the action of the text takes place at night; exactly a short time after evening. Such a depiction of place and time draw an image of death which can be imagined in the reader's mind; it can be seen through the eyes, and can be smelled even through the noses inside hospitals or near the sea; outside in the back dirty streets of the city, or in the muttering retreats of humanity.

e- Illumination in the text of the tragedy is also low, and the motion of the action is slow. All these portray the spirit of modern drama. They even carry the psychological nature of the text. Evening and darkness stand for the work of the unconscious, while the slow motion of the action refers to the hesitation inside the mentality of the diseased personality of Prufrock.

f- The music is composed in the tragic poem through the repetition of certain rhymes now and then, and the use of assonance and alliteration in the text; the following is but one example on the rhyme that creates music, and the assonance and alliteration used in the poem:

For the yellow smoke that slides along the street 24

To prepare a face to meet the faces that you meet; 27

And time yet for a hundred indecisions,  
And for a hundred visions and revisions,  
Before the taking of a toast and tea. 34

The repeated rhymes are clear in the above lines, and also the assonance which emerges from

the repetition of such pure vowels as: /i:/, and /e/.

Or the alliteration which results from the repetition of the consonants: /t/, /f/, /s/, and the nasal /m/.

g- Another feature of modern drama in *The Love Song* is related to the death of the hero at the end of the tragedy. In modern drama death is not necessarily physical; it can also be mental or symbolic. In *Waiting for Godot*, for example, Vladimir and Estragon, were mentally dead, like the bare tree beside them. It is true that they talk and breathe, yet they did not know who they were, what they wanted, and where they lived; they were only waiting for others to redefine the meaning of existence for them. This is exactly the case of our hero in *The Love Song*. All modern writers share the same view about life and they write according to the principles of modernism. This is why they present the same suffering and draw similar characters in their literary achievements.

### Conclusion

The purpose of Eliot's search in all his writings was to find a way out of the spiritual darkness of the modern mind. The poet supplies us with a personal experience which he, later on, generalizes. He presents to us "what we now realize to be the logic of the unconscious; the picture of what we now recognize as an inferiority complex."<sup>8</sup> His aim was to elevate the human mind to sublime ends. For Eliot "Humanism though preferable to naturalism, was not enough; it could not defend itself rationally."<sup>9</sup> He felt that modern life was too harsh to be cured with mere moral lessons. Being so pessimistic, Eliot turned to tragedy and adopted it to be his main strategy in his thinking and literary production.

He was interested in the heritage "of his forefathers." The Greeks were right, he thought, when they insisted on tragedy and considered it the main therapy for the spiritual sickness of private persons and complete societies. He tried his best to revive the classical drama but with little success. In such a case he turned to poetry in order to achieve what he was not able to fulfill in drama.

Most of his early poems (before his conversion in 1935) were tragedies. They did not show any hope; they end gloomily and tragically.

In *The Waste Land* the search comes to nothing. In "Gerontion" the old speaker in the poem waited for *rain* but no drop descended on his bald head. In "The Hollow Men," the poet proves the futility of modern life now and again, and in *The Love Song* the same thing happened.

The poem showed that the vitality of modern man has dropped to the nil. Eliot presented to us a character so fearful and futile to the point that he

could not take the silliest decisions. Prufrock who was first presented in the poem as an isolated personality, turned out as the poem progressed to represent a whole community. Eliot made it very simple: if you (readers) want to know about life in the twentieth century just turn to Prufrock as a representative sample.

As soon as one turns to study the character of Prufrock it becomes clear that he is a tragic character. All the features of the tragic character can be seen in the personality of Prufrock. The poem itself turned to be a tragedy. It has a plot, characters, argument, setting, unities, illumination, music, rising and falling action. The Love Song is by all standards a tragedy. One can even safely assume that all Eliot's poems before his conversion ( because after his conversion, glimpses of hope started to appear in his mystical poems) were tragedies with a certain tragic structure inside them. Eliot's tragic strategy arises not only from his interest in classical tragedy, but also from other reasons as well:

- a- The period in which he lived.
- b- The history of his family.
- c- His relationship to his wife.
- d- The influences he had been exposed to in his education.
- e- His interest in philosophy.
- f- His wish for humanity to live in a better way; in peace and prosperity.

All of these factors(which cannot be explained thoroughly due to limitations of time and place) make Eliot present the ugly face of life to his readers so as to warn them from the tragic condition in which they live hoping to achieve a sort of *catharsis* in their souls.

The Love Song then is a tragedy which presented Eliot's vision to humanity. Eliot therefore, is a writer of Tragic Poetry; a term which no critic used after Aristotle who considered this type of literature the finest type of art because it enlightens the human mind, and cures the human spirit. Whenever people read The Love Song, they feel pity for Prufrock, and at the same time they fear lest they become like him in action, in thinking, and in behavior.

#### Notes

<sup>1</sup> The *objective correlative* is a set of objects, a situation, a chain of events which shall be the formula of a particular emotion; such that when the external facts are given, the emotion is immediately

invoked. See Vincent B. Leitch, (ed.,) *The Norton Anthology of Theory and Practice* (London: Norton, 2000), P. 1090.

<sup>2</sup> Wilfred L. Guerin, et al., (eds.) *A Handbook of Critical Approaches to Literature*, fifth edition (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), P.29.

<sup>3</sup> Aristotle, *The Poetics* in *The Norton Anthology of Theory and Practice* P. 97.

<sup>4</sup> C. B. Cox & A. E. Dyson, *Modern Poetry: Studies in Practical Criticism* (London: Edward Arnold, 1979), P. 77.

<sup>5</sup> T. S. Eliot, " The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock," in *Ten Twentieth-century Poets*, edited by Maurice Wollman (London: Harrap, 1972), P. 67. Subsequent references to the text of the poem will be to this edition.

<sup>6</sup> K. S. Misra, *The Plays of T. S. Eliot: A Critical Study* (New Delhi: Sanaa University Publications, 1977), P. 94.

<sup>7</sup> Helen Gardner, *The Art of T. S. Eliot* (London: Faber and Faber, 1968), P.17.

<sup>8</sup> J. Isaacs, *The Background of Modern Poetry* (London: Edward Arnold, 1952), P. 56.

<sup>9</sup> Hyatt H. Waggoner, *American Poets from the Puritans to the Present* (Louisiana: Louisiana University Press, 1984), P. 414.

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6/2/2013