**Who is Prufrock? Understanding Eliot’s “The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock”**

“The Love song of J. Alfred Prufrock” is one of the first major poems by T.S.Eliot. It is a masterpiece in terms of imagery, stylistic innovation and poetic merit. The most remarkable aspect of the poem is the character of Prufrock as presented through Eliot’s extraordinary treatment of this dramatic monologue.

As evident from the poem’s title, the central concern of the poem is J. Alfred Prufrock’s love life and his complex anxieties. The name Prufrock immediately gives the impression of an ordinary modern man with mediocre lifestyle. He is representative of every common citizen of an urban metropolis. Therefore, there is a disparity created at the very beginning by the juxtaposition of a traditional poetic model (a love song) and a prosaic ordinary name. Eliot makes Prufrock a speaker, delivering a monologue, to an unknown listener in the poem. He begins by saying “Let us go then you and I”. There is a presumption made that there is a separate entity, the listener, in the poem. However, it gets more evident later that this unknown listener is none other than Prufrock’s other self. We get to understand that Prufrock is torn between these two selves, diametrically opposite to each other.

**1. Prufrock: The Two Selves Fused in One**

Throughout the poem, we find Prufrock oscillating between two kinds of emotions. On one hand he wishes to assert himself, to declare his love to the desired woman; on the other hand, he wishes to stay silent, descend to some oblivious state where he does not need to act on his desires. These two impulses fuse together to create the complex persona of J. Alfred Prufrock. On one hand he wishes to bare his soul like Lazarus:

*I am Lazarus, come from the dead,*

*Come back to tell you all, I shall tell you all*

On the other hand, he seeks oblivion and wishes that his tale is never revealed:

*It is impossible to say just what I mean!*

The first Prufrock longs to gain his lady’s attention, wishes to swim with the mermaids, is the eternal romantic at heart; the second Prufrock is the cautious realist, aware of his growing age, his bald spot on head, his thinning physique, his ordinary mundaneness. The poem is a struggle between these two personalities, trying to overpower each other till the second one wins and they both “drown”.

# 2. Prufrock: Sensitivity and Intellect

From the way in which Prufrock observes his surroundings and comments on other human actions, it is evident that he is a man of superior sensitivity. He is well read and even affluent enough to afford a certain cultivated standard of life. However, He is aware of the monotony and hypocrisy of human social interactions. He feels that people wear masks to camouflage their real intensions. In a way he sees himself as a misfit in this “formulated” world. His lack of tact and social skills make him feel exposed and vulnerable:

*The eyes that fix you in a formulated phrase,*

*And 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?*

Interestingly, Prufrock is a well-dressed man. He wears formal dress complete with a tiepin. However, he imagines this very pin to be something with which he is pinned down to a wall. His appearance becomes a matter of fake masquerade and he is worried sick of being looked at and analysed. In this he equates himself to the etherised patient, an image he uses in the beginning to describe the evening.

Prufrock’s power of imagination is so intense that he can make us visualize the fog as a sentient creature, almost catlike. He talks about measuring his life with coffee spoons. He uses objective images to communicate the emotion of despair, monotony, predictability and littleness. The coffee spoons, representing his evenings spent in the same predictable routine, measure his life and he gets aware of the passage of time through these images. Therefore, while the human beings are seen as lifeless robots, non-living and non human things come alive in Prufrock’s imagination.

Prufrock knows that in order to succeed in his amorous adventure he needs to wear a mask, to become something other than what he is. At the same time, he knows that he will never fit in or belong to his surroundings. When he is at a social gathering, in a coffee shop, a pub or restaurant, he retires to a corner and looks at the fog gathering on the window pane. Walking along the sandy beach he dreams of mermaids and their song. His remarkable intellect flashes in his dark humour:

Though I have seen my head (grown slightly bald) brought in upon a platter,

I am no prophet — and here’s no great matter;

So Prufrock inflates his actions, creates a climactic tension only to deflate it. He makes us feel that his act of proposing to a lady is as significant as murder or creation, as if he will end up disturbing the universe by this enormous act of courage, only to say at the end that it is no great matter at all. All he talks about throughout the poem is “visions” and “revisions”, apparently high-sounding words, but in context of “toast” and “tea”.

# 3. Prufrock’s Crisis and the Trope of Masculinity

Throughout the poem, Prufrock repeatedly talks about his physical appearance. He has a bald spot on his head, his hair is growing thinner every day, his arms and legs are not muscular or strong. In short, he is the epitome of ordinariness. However, at the same time, he is aware of the expected image of virility and masculinity that is present in the minds of people. He talks about figures like Michelangelo, Hamlet, John the Baptist and immediately says that he is no one compared to these people (“I am no prophet”, “I am not Prince Hamlet”). He obliquely refers to Marvell’s poem “To His Coy Mistress” when he talks about lapse of time and his inability to roll the universe into a ball. Perhaps he constantly compares himself to these virile figures of grand masculinity, only to find himself belittled and insignificant.

# 4. Prufrock’s Escapism

Prufrock’s sensitivity and his disgust with the real world around him make him wish to escape. He manages to have these episodes or digressions where he transports himself to the world of fantasy, away from the world of human formulations. Sometimes he yearns to be the lonely crab immersed in silent seas, sometimes he dreams of swimming with the mermaids, sometimes he looks at the evening fog and becomes one with it. These moments show the romantic side of Prufrock which desperately seeks to escape human interaction. However, he is brought back to reality soon through human voices:

Till human voices wake us, and we drown.

# 5. Dilemma of Modern Man

Prufrock’s dilemma is typical of every modern man who is devoid of any grand idealism. He resides in an infernal universe and is always conscious of his shortcomings. It is as if he is living in a metropolitan inferno where human beings do not exhibit any sensitivity, compassion or uniqueness. He is caught in a cyclic dystopia where every action is undone the next moment. The lines from Inferno, quoted in the beginning of the poem, is an indicator of this crisis. The flickering tongue of flame, Guido, speaking to Dante, is ready to confess and tell everything only because he is certain that Dante would never escape hell to reveal the story to the people of the world. Prufrock is hesitant to express himself likewise. However, he ends up baring his soul to us probably because he knows that we too will never leave this infernal universe just like him. “Human voices” become for Prufrock a trigger of waking up from his dream of mermaids. This dilemma, of oscillating between the world of dreams and the world of reality makes Prufrock a representative of every ordinary sensitive human being.

# 5. Is Prufrock heroic?

Prufrock never claims to be a hero. All he ever asserts is his ordinariness. However, when we compare him to the people he describes in the poem, the women speaking of lofty cultural figures disconnected from reality, people who make him feel scrutinised and exposed, we understand that he is not ordinary at all. Heroism in modern context is far removed from classical convention of heroism. A modern hero is intellectually sound, he is aware of his limitations and is capable of admitting them. Prufrock has these qualities. However, within the world of conventional trope of heroism, he can only be an insignificant sidekick like Polonius. Eliot creates the complex persona of J. Alfred Prufrock to show the dualities inherent in a modern man, negotiating with the crisis of a world which retains no value for reality or humanity.