

Prufrock's Notes from Purgatory:  
Modernist and Religious Themes in  
"The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock"  
and *Notes From Underground*

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This essay will do an analysis of T.S Eliot's "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock", and is informed by outside texts including Dostoevsky's *Notes From Underground* and Dante's *Inferno*. Prufrock's "tedious argument" can be compared with the underground man's paranoid memoir. Eliot critiques modern urban psychosis in a similar way as Dostoevsky's novella; both authors defamiliarize daily urban life. Their texts describe it as a spiritual journey and one that is towards either resurrection or purgatory. There are parallels between the poem's reference to Dante's purgatory, Prufrock's "chambers of the sea", and the "underground" in the Russian novella. All three correlate to a place of the unconscious and the event of physical death.

Prufrock worries that he will be woken by human voices and drown (139). Dante is spoken to by departed souls because he is considered as good as dead, and the underground man's mind remains figuratively buried as if in a premature funeral for the rest of him. Comparing the figurative hell with Dostoevsky's underground brings out Prufrock's internal psychic drama. This is because in his walking through the city streets Prufrock is walking through his own neurotic purgatory. Sadly, Prufrock lacks the spiritual guidance that is spoken of in the *Inferno*. He can only rely on the modern urban guides he shares "cakes and ices" with, yet whom he despises for their inauthenticity. Prufrock's isolation worsens the central indecision that is shared by the narrator in *Notes From Underground*. Where Prufrock cannot ask his great question, the underground man cannot authentically express his narrative to anyone around him. The threat to both is to reside in isolated purgatory in the modern city. So silenced by indecision as to be functionally dead.

Eliot's poem addresses a habituated reader and one who has become so as a result of the modern world. The poem discusses an urban life where everyone and everything is a *thing*. Experiences are reified and contained things that have been categorized and "pinned" in their

proper spots “on the wall” (56). Scklovsky discusses the technique of poetry as a way to defamiliarize a reader who has fallen into a habitual state. In this state an individual exists automatically and no longer sees the experience around them. Rather the individual sees the low-resolution “silhouettes” of objects and people. In other words, they see what the objects have come to mean rather than what the object is in itself (Scklovsky 54). Prufrock laments how he has been living unconsciously, “as nothing” as Shklovsky says while longing to ask his question. Prufrock wants this even if it shakes up the status quo by defamiliarizing everyone in the salon’s ideas of him.

Consider Prufrock’s critique that he must “prepare a face to meet the faces that you meet” (26). He has begun to see objects and the people around him poetically for what they are. He describes the experience of what it’s like to “prepare a face” rather than simply accepting that everyone is an objectified symbol. He complicates a process that those around him make into an object. Prufrock’s love song uses poetic language to describe the experience of his urban life in a way that is not straightforward but rather strange and unusual. Consider the metaphor and simile that is enhanced by poetry.

“The yellow fog that rubs its back upon the window-panes,  
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,  
And seeing that it was a soft October night,  
Curled once about the house, and fell asleep.”(15-23)

Prufrock describes the fog and pollution in a way that makes the reader experience it in a new way. It is no longer seen as the simplified symbol of *fog*, rather it is described with totally new eyes that see the fog as the actions of an animal. Shklovsky states that poetic language brings the reader back to the experience in itself. In fact, what the object is does not matter, rather what matters is how poetry changes the reader's experience of the object. This is called roughening language by Shklovsky because it "impede[s]" the habituated image of the world that people have become accustomed to (Shklovsky 64). This concept of defamiliarization is important because Prufrock has experienced it and he longs to wake up his interlocutors to the reality they live in (Eliot 44-45/75-80).

This can be compared with the underground man's observations about the experience at work with his fellow clerks. He remarks that everyone around him seemed unaware of the drama and turmoil embedded in the workplace. He assumes that he is solely aware of how others may loathe him despite his universal loathing of others. His description is impeded however by its paradoxes—he is simultaneously "alternated between despising them and thinking them superior to myself." (Dostoevsky II: I). The main obscurity in the underground man is his paradoxical feelings that he assumes everyone around him must also feel but chooses to stay unaware of.

This recurring function in the poem is essential to reading urban life as a spiritual journey. Arguably, the entire poem complicates Prufrock's journey through the city streets by making it something spiritual. He is headed either towards resurrection ("I am Lazarus, come back from the dead") or towards a verbally paralyzed death in the "silent seas" where "human voices wake us, and we drown" (94/76/131). Society sees the object of urban life as simply walking through the streets to different social appointments (10-12). However, Prufrock problematizes that assumption by making it the experience of spiritually walking towards an

ultimate “overwhelming question” (10/93). This spiritual landscape is evidenced by the quote from the *Inferno* before the start of the poem and the references to Lazarus’s return from the dead (95). Prufrock also states that he is not a “prophet” though he has “wept and fasted, wept and prayed”. He further equates his objectification by others as similar to John the Baptist’s decapitation (81-84).

In his essay, DiMaggio compares Prufrock to a spiritual pilgrim although he is one who never achieves “spiritual illumination” (DiMaggio 35). He cannot ask his overwhelming question to anyone around him and thus drowns in the rational ambiguity that is meant to prompt trust in God (36). DiMaggio compares Prufrock to the student of spirituality in medieval mysticism.

“[...]it is within this fragmented landscape that “The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock” is written (in 1917). It is also a landscape though, in which a great cloud of uncertainty and despair hovers over, and despite this philosophical darkness, there is still the yearning for some spiritual connection. And the way the poem’s narrator seeks such connection in a world clouded by despair, mirrors the journey (and frustration) that the neophyte religious seeker undergoes in *The Cloud of Unknowing*.” (37)

Arguably, the “crisis” that Prufrock is pushed towards is caused by his defamiliarization with himself (Eliot 80). He is similar to the underground man and his false dialectic that is based on his observation that no man can truly know himself. DiMaggio expresses that there “appears to be a spiritual crisis or sense of dislocation of self taking place within Prufrock, whose great insight about himself amounts to having ‘seen the moment of my greatness flicker’ (6).” (38) Prufrock’s insights are valued paradoxically in the same way as those of the underground man. The underground man writes a self-reflective memoir while saying that his vision of himself is innately flawed. Prufrock has an inner moment where he conceptualizes himself as Lazarus

returned from the dead to forcefully “I shall tell you all” the truth about spirituality (Eliot 95). However, a few stanzas later he relegates himself to the bumbling “fool” who is only usefully to introduce Prince Hamlet (111-119) but never to take on Hamlet’s heroic act of “murder and creati[ion].” (28).

Conflictingly, the underground man continually reifies himself into either a messianic hero or a loathsome insect (Brombert 73). He sees through some of the daily mundane experiences of his bureaucratic life, and this contributes to his bitterness and separation from the world (Dostoevsky I:I). However, he still struggles not to essentialize himself or see others as objects represented by their clothing in the case of the officer he nurses resentment towards (II:I). Interestingly, Prufrock is caught in a similar cognitive dissonance. He too only sees people as represented by parts of themselves or the clothes they wear. Guven points out that Prufrock uses synecdoche to refer to others as “dresses”, “hands”, “eyes”, and “arms” (Guven 85). Both Prufrock and the underground man might be seeing urban life differently than those around them. However, they both still essentialize others and fear being essentialized themselves (Eliot 40-45/55-58, Brombert 76).

This paradoxical idea can be compared to the memoir format of the novella despite the author’s assertion that no man can truly know, or focalize himself (Brombert 70). The underground man begins his monologue in the conventional first-person. However, Brombert notes the contradiction in how the underground man “others” himself by focalizing his own identity in the opening lines. If the opening address in Prufrock reads as if he were speaking to separate parts of himself (“Let us go then, you and I”) then he is also focalizing his own identity (Guven 81).

Brombert argues that this changes the monologue to a “polylogue” between a splintering set of identities. (70) This deep uncertainty leads the underground man to silence himself despite his conviction that he has something to say to the society around him. (70) Similarly, Prufrock is paralyzed into silence by the possibility that his imagined judgment by others would be actualized (Eliot 37-47). Brombert notes the narrator’s resulting self-loathing and demonization of any heroic potential both in himself and others. This loathing also drives the underground man’s inner ruminations with little outward action (Brombert 71).

However, the narrator vacillates between this rigidly defined dialectic of being. He can only see himself as the superhuman hero or a loathed insect. Interestingly, Prufrock uses similar imagery in “I am formulated, sprawling on a pin/When I am pinned and wriggling on the wall” or “scuttling across the floors of silent seas” (56-57/76). Brombert explains that this false dichotomy leaves no room for real humanity. The result is the underground man’s loathing of self and others.

This loathing extends to culture and its productions. Brombert cites the narrator’s dislike of books and “bookish” people who prop up a false intellectual front (79). Again, Prufrock shares in the underground man’s disillusionment with “cultured” people who compartmentalize art referring to it merely by name-dropping rather than letting that art change them (Eliot 13-14). Both Prufrock and the underground man despise those around them because essentialization makes all their interactions seem ingenuine. This results in their existential separation from others and fragmentation in both narrators. Both the poem and the novella critique modern life for producing cities full of fragmented and isolated “underground” people. No one in this city actually sees each other, rather they see the shorthand signifier for the real human that it refers to.

And that's why Prufrock has no spiritual teachers in the salons where "such a religious pursuit is awkward in his shattered civilization that still tries to maintain its decorum in "novels...teacup...skirts that trail along the floor" (DiMaggio 39). He fears that if he returns from his spiritual underworld and imitates Lazarus then the women in the salon would merely say "that's not what I meant at all." (Eliot 97). Dante had Virgil as DiMaggio points out, but Prufrock has no one who can conceptualize the world in a non-empirical, or non-modernist way. DiMaggio continues,

"Eliot's narrator Prufrock exists in a world of decaying senses and philosophical wordplay. Yet these "salon games" do not appease Prufrock's spiritual emptiness, and thus he sets off on a journey away from this decadent world, and a journey that only finds some hope in the religious figure of Lazarus. Prufrock too, wishes there was a Christ who could raise him from the dead. Unfortunately there is no redemption for him in this shattered and decaying early 20th century Western landscape." (40)

Here lies Eliot's critique of modernist thought. It does not satisfy the real religious journey that Prufrock is undergoing. Prufrock acts as an analog for the ultimate urban socialite. However, he harbors paralyzing inner conflict and self-dislocation amidst a city full of others where he cannot find any person to guide him to spiritual illumination. The underground man experiences similar toxic neurosis despite his stable embedded spot in culture as a bureaucrat.

It is important that this underground can manifest in waking life and not just in Dante's hell. The modernist empirical view would relegate hell to a figurative concept. However, Prufrock's poetry and the underground man's prose demonstrate that hell is present in the urban center. Not only is it present, but it is also prevalent and exacerbated by urban life. Part of this exacerbation is that while Dante had guides Prufrock and the underground man have no guides.



As a result, they must engage in their own tedious argument within their fractured psyches. If they had a spiritual guide or authentic human relationship then perhaps they would not need to develop into such neurotic and divided people. This illustrates the modern self's disconnect from its deeper questions. This disconnect leads to isolated and paralyzed ruminations predicated on a fractured psyche.

To read Eliot through the lens of the *Inferno* and *Notes from Underground* helps demonstrate the deep spiritual vacuum beneath the urban soul. Prufrock is searching for spiritual redemption from his deadened state. He is figuratively already dead in his salons because he cannot speak. And he fears this will be made complete upon his literal death when he is forced to realize he no longer has time for “a hundred visions and revisions” (33). Even more compelling is his realization that even if he were to return from the dead, like Lazarus or Dante, then people would still not listen (95-99). Similarly, the underground man's memoir will not redeem him because he “is not expressing remorse[...] or asking your forgiveness”, and more importantly it will not describe him truthfully (Dostoevsky I:I). Resultingly, he will not speak but rather hide his meaning “out of fear” (Brombert, 71). Additionally, Prufrock's descriptions cause the reader of the poem to see the object of urban cities as the process of a foiled spiritual journey. In this way, the reified city and its inhabitants become defamiliarized for the reader and wakes them up to Eliot's critique of modernist thought.

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