The Love Songs of T.S. Eliot:

The Scope of His Works

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Abstract

This paper utilizes various primary and secondary sources mostly found online to examine one of T.S. Eliot's greatest works, literary critics' views of them, and the background that supported his successes.

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Biography and Modernism

Like nearly all reputable artists, and particularly writers of the time, T.S. Eliot's work was often either a direct translation of his inner struggles or heavily influenced by them, all spiced with his general interests. He would become known invariably as the "Classicist in literature" he claimed to be—throwbacks to Dante, cuts at Milton, and the like were standard in his pieces, clearly a result from his Harvard Master's in English Literature and personal discoveries. While the wars he saw surely had something to say in his pieces, his history can often tell differing stories, and the origins of many of pieces are still up for debate today. Without doubt, Eliot enjoyed a quick start to interest in his published works, escalating until he became somewhat of a god in his time (despite various personal trials) and finally managed to find what many saw as a true happiness, only to have his popularity decline posthumously as skeptics and critics slowly turn against him.

Pre-Waste Land

Eliot was born in St. Louis, Missouri, to a family rooting from Old and New England, the youngest of seven. Known to be fairly interested in literature and serious thinking from a young age, Eliot eventually went to study philosophy at Harvard University, quickly earning a pass-degree Bachelor's in 1909, and eventually a Master's in English Literature after a reset from academic probation. He briefly worked jobs at Harvard related to philosophy before travelling to France for one year, settling near the Sorbonne, a conglomerate of universities and an intellectual center in France. While there, Eliot visited lectures by Henri Bergson and others, yet widening the breadth of Eliot's thoughts on reality. His discoveries were eventually so inspiring that Eliot

decided to pursue a doctorate in philosophy back in Harvard, where he would participate in the "golden age of Harvard philosophy" and begin his work—though he would never finish his degree by defending his dissertation. Eliot returned to Europe in the summer of 1914, initially studying in Germany, then moving to London, where a mutual friend impressed Ezra Pound with Eliot's writing, who then used his reach to bring Eliot to the forefront of avant-garde writing in London by publishing "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock" in 1915. Eliot and Pound would soon become natural collaborators; this, and Eliot's uncharacteristically quick marriage to Vivien Haigh-Wood (who refused to leave England during the war), cemented his new place in England. He took up several jobs (one of which took advantage of his knowledge of several languages from Harvard), eventually maintaining a livable income on which he could continue writing. He published his first book, *Prufrock and Other Observations*, in 1917, to more success. Throughout the next few years, Eliot learned more from all England's intellectuals had to offer, while his father died and his wife struggled with everyday life. This emotional combination, after a nervous collapse and recovery, resulted in what may be Eliot's magnum opus: "The Waste Land."

Later Work and Modernism

"The Waste Land" was the poem that made Eliot a premier Modernist writer. Other proponents of the movement such as Ezra Pound, Virginia Woolf, and even James Joyce seemingly "founded" it with their tendencies to move away from the fantasy and traditional assumptions of Romanticism and times before, and instead explore the less desirable human qualities illuminated by urbanization and war through new techniques like Stream of Consciousness; in the mid 1910s and early 1920s, Eliot comfortably fit into this definition, adding his own favorite classic allusions where desired. However, as revolutionary as Eliot was, age brought on yet

another skepticism, but this time with his own previous work: in 1930, he released "Ash Wednesday", a long poem heavily reflecting his conversion in 1927 to Anglicanism. Criticism of Eliot in this era begins to split between those who saw his earlier works as fantastic, a refreshing step away from the assumptions of Romanticism, and a voice for post-war despondents, and those who welcomed Eliot into the arms of a more traditional style that he had seemingly rejected. From this point on, Eliot's works largely focused on or were derived from his now-adamant faith, exhibiting much less of the Modernist sentiment that made him famous. Due to this faith, he refused to divorce his wife, though they'd been separated for years at this point. She died in 1947, allowing him to marry Valerie Fletcher, who was 38 years his junior; at this point in 1957, it is generally agreed on that Eliot seemed *truly* contented. He died on January 4th, 1965 at 76.

Criticism of Eliot

In Life

In his time, Eliot was indeed controversial, but nonetheless highly respected by many. As aforementioned, he rather astonishingly impressed Ezra Pound and was being compared to recent legends such as James Joyce; in response to "The Waste Land," seasoned critic Edmund Wilson, Jr. wrote in the December 1922 edition of *The Dial* (a paper which often sought to spread Eliot's notoriety), "Mr. Eliot…is one of our only authentic poets…it has already been charged that…the emotions of disgust which he does have belong essentially to a delayed adolescence…but they are out-weighed by one major fact…[he] is a poet" (Wilson, 1922). Both in Eliot's criticism and poetry, Wilson could admit faults, but the parts of a poet which he found to be essential were always observable in Eliot; what more did he need?

Peter Monro Jack wrote in the January 1933 New York Times that although "Eliot is better…at demonstrating the vitality of tradition than at defining it" and his "theoretical essays…are overcautious and hesitant," his "direction can do nothing but good. [Eliot's] classicism is healthy, supple and, in the coarsest sense, tough" (Jack, 1933). In his time, many critics adored Eliot's dark, dramatic, allusionary style and were excited for his continuation of the burgeoning Modernist flood that he had headlined, despite what seemed like a bit of an "old soul" in him sometimes overcomplicating things. It is also fair to say that Jack had not yet seen Eliot's later tendencies—that is, his transition away from what others saw as a fiery march toward Modernist thinking toward a characteristically *ritualistic*, but uncharacteristically *traditional* mood in his writing.

In Death

The sheer difficulty in finding a focused critical essay on the whole of Eliot's work written after the 1960s is itself a testament to the decline in interest of his pieces. Gregory Wolfe may have summarized Eliot's decline best in lecture: "…[he became] an expatriate writer in London…and you can't get more conservative as an American…than to call yourself a monarchist. So Eliot, in some ways, in our aggressive, liberal, secular era, has seemingly been left behind and discredited as an important figure" (Wolfe, 2012). It's all too easy to blame the decline in what has become the new "classic" on the new thoughts of a coming age, but it's not entirely wrong: the notion of an older writer, content with semi-freedom under his monarch, set deep in his religion, frequently referring to 600-year-old wisdom to adorn his work now sounds to the contemporary reader as dated a man as Dante was to Eliot in his time.

A Look at Eliot's Work: Analysis of "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock"

Mr. Eliot's first officially published poem that gained ground was absolutely *Eliot* in nature: beginning with an untranslated epigraph from Dante's own *Inferno*, sprinkled with Shakespearean references, teeming with metaphors reducing Romantic images to sad states of humanity, all part of a confusing Stream of Consciousness…no one else could have claimed poor Prufrock. Prufrock as an archetype—not only Eliot, or Eliot's subject, or you, or I—is an entire class of dejected beings, Eliot possibly one of them.

By his own refusal to interact with the outside world—his "subjectivizing of everything", as J. Hillis Miller puts it—Prufrock jails himself like the speaker in the epigraph: "if I believed my answer were for someone returning to the world, this flame would remain without movement." He dances around this idea, insisting that there *is* time (so he has surely spent some) for "evenings, mornings, afternoons," and the "taking of tea," but simply not for carrying out the main task of the poem—asking an "overwhelming question," and maybe answering it. The reader cannot know how much of Prufrock's frolicking in an industrial quarter is reality, but we know that regardless he is held back by his own fearful psyche, "imprisoned in his own subjective space" (Miller, 1965). David Spurr well spots evidence of this self-destructive tendency in the speaker: "The speaker's failure to master language…reflects upon the speaker's own impotence…the integration of the psyche remains at best incomplete [by the end of the poem]" (Spurr, 1984). John Paul Riquelme focuses specifically on the ambiguity of the speaker's use of "You" and "I": "'Prufrock' depends on the character of the pronouns 'you' and 'I', which linguists call 'shifters' because they are mutually defining and depend for their meanings on the pragmatic context of the discourses in which they occur" (Riquelme, 1991). These subtleties as well as various meticulous choices in rhyme, line breaks, repetition (or lack thereof; where do

the women go?), indentation, punctuation (the dashes?), and point-of-view (whose consciousness?) all cooperate to make Eliot's piece more a mystery than anything—but perhaps then it is best fit as a description for the "Representative Man of early Modernism," as Roger Mitchell would call him (Mitchel, 1991).

From this, it might follow that Prufrock is indeed the disheartened masses of the post-war era—in response to tragedy, slow, maybe even allowing himself to waddle toward a watery death. But it is equally hard to ignore the hope in resolving finally to "walk upon the beach," hearing mermaids singing, "each to each," as it is easy to fall victim to the despairing tone in many of Eliot's pieces. Even if we are each ourselves a potential Prufrock, struggling against a tendency to be latent, to seek shelter and to insist we have enough time to forgo living, there may yet be a horizon; for Eliot, perhaps religion, remarriage, a sense of place in Britain. For others, it is theirs to find; such is the everlasting quality of good literature, classicist or not, which does allow Eliot's work to survive.

References

Bush, Ronald. (1999). *American National Biography.* T.S. Eliot's Life and Career. New York: Oxford University Press.

Ronald Bush's detailed, yet concise biography is cited constantly by contemporary critics pulling on events in Eliot's life to support their analyses with respect to their context.

Jack, Peter Monro. (1933). *The Cream of T.S. Eliot's Literary Criticism.* New York: The New York Times Company.

Peter Jack's New York Times piece of moderate length provided a useful look into the thoughts of a critic while Eliot was still living—easier to find than now, but nonetheless articulate points are still sometimes scarce.

Miller, J. Hillis. (1965). *Poets of Reality: Six Twentieth Century Writer.* Cambridge: The Belknap Press of Harvard.

J. Miller's piece donates a specific aspect of "Prufrock" to analyze and quickly reduces the poem's point to Prufrock's tendency to separate himself from reality, sealing himself in a personal prison which he does not oppose.

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Gregory Wolfe's lecture at Everett Community College was a unique chance to experience enthusiasm over and justification for the contemporary study of Eliot, including a straight-forward explanation of why his popularity ballooned in the 30s and has since declined, especially following his death.