Analysis Of Allen Ginsberg’s A Supermarket In California And T. S. Eliot's The Love Song Of J. Alfred Prufrock

How must it feel that you don’t belong somewhere? Maybe that place is life. With the societal change that has developed us culturally and socially, there must be some consequences for our current generation. Curious individuals tend to struggle the most. With the constant struggle we face, these people seem to think out of the ordinary. “A Supermarket in California”, and “The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock” are two well-known poems that show the social anxiety that people face in society. “A Supermarket in California” is about a man’s curiosities to a life more suited for him. The man wants to escape his life and into a place where his words will not be heard anymore. “The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock” describes a man’s feelings towards the current society. By being pressured to marry and fit the standards of modern stereotypes, he feels lost in his world. Both poems seem to be quite different at first glance, though they share a common deep meaning.

“A Supermarket in California” is a free-verse poem written by Allen Ginsberg. Allen Ginsberg is a prominent poet who lived in the 20th century. His poems are mostly known, though he has created a greater impact with his poems, “Howl” and “Kaddish.” In “A Supermarket in California”, Allen Ginsberg has created a speaker who walks into a supermarket. The speaker identifies families shopping and imagines various situations in which he finds intriguing. He imagines his idol, Walt Whitman and asks him for advice regarding the speaker's books. The speaker feels as if he doesn’t belong in the world that he lives in and escapes into his imagination. He constantly utilizes visual imagery to describe what he envisions. An example of imagery in the poem is, “Will we stroll dreaming of the lost America of love past blue automobiles in driveways, home to our silent cottage?” The tone of the speaker throughout the poem is contemplative because he is constantly careful and focused. By the end of the poem, the speaker gets confused about where Walt Whitman is going in his imagination. The poem ends with the speaker asking Whitman on where they are going next, though his curiosities remain within himself. At this moment the tone of the speaker becomes uncertain. I think that this is nostalgic. In reality, the speaker is losing his freedom of speech due to industrialization and societal change. It also shows the unpredictability of where society will take him. This feeling of the speaker losing his speech is similar to his uncertainty toward where they are going in his imagination. Throughout the poem, the speaker wants to compare the supermarket to a farmers market. In a farmers market, the food is natural. However, in a supermarket the food is artificial. This is symbolic due to the farmers market representing the natural world and the supermarket symbolizing the artificial society. For this reason, the speaker is not confident in this manmade society and reveals his social anxiety by escaping it.

“The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock” is a remarkable narrative poem by T. S. Eliot. “T.S. Eliot was a groundbreaking 20th-century poet known widely for his work 'The Waste Land” ('T.S. Eliot', 2014). “The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock” shows the anxieties and worries of a young man with a desire to find love. J. Alfred Prufrock feels pressured by society that has changed through time. He struggles to reveal his feelings to women. Due to his lack of communication, Prufrock is not only sad, but is frustrated as well. He feels as if he should not be the one to admit his feelings. Also, Prufrock is self-conscious and feels as if every person constantly talks about his weaknesses. His fragility and lack of motivation represent the dry tone of the poem.

Prufrock despairs modern culture and shows a disinterested tone. This further shows his social anxiety and loneliness. In contrast, the title seems to show that the poem is going to be joyful. However, the title is ironic. The “song” that the title mentions will never be sung, similar to Prufrock never admitting his feelings to women. At the end of the poem, he hears the mermaids singing. That sound is something he will never perceive. T.S. Eliot has indicated the message of the poem through a variety of elements. For instance, he employs many symbols to convey the profound meaning of the poem. In the third stanza, a yellow fog appears and is most likely shown as a cat. There are many ways in which the fog can be interpreted. Due to the color of the fog, I believe that it symbolizes the loneliness and fear of Prufrock. It could also symbolize the artificial society that he lives in. When Prufrock describes himself through his internal monologue, he mentions a bald spot in the middle of his hair. This symbolizes his constant anxiety in being unlikable by others. There are many more symbols that are present in the poem including the mermaids, Toast and Tea, and the cat. Similar to “A Supermarket in California”, “The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock” uses visual imagery by frequently mentioning his appearance and alludes to it as well. He imagines his baldness over four times throughout the poem. This shows his loneliness and frustration towards his actions and the society.

“A supermarket in California” and “The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock” predominantly have a common theme. Both poems seem to discuss social anxiety in modern society. They show that as a society develops, different social barriers will evolve as well. In “A supermarket in California”, the speaker compares modern society to Walt Whitman’s vision of the natural world. He is intrigued in the natural world and constantly expresses his opinion on the artificial society. His escape from the natural world and hatred towards modern society provides clues to his social anxiety. The speaker places himself in a comfortable and pleasant environment. By opening an imagination where his words will be heard, he resists to socialize and interact with others. Moreover, J. Alfred Prufrock in “The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock” feels the same as the speaker in “A supermarket in California.” Prufrock believes that his generation is closed-minded, by constantly pressuring him to fit the standards that the society has set. Likewise, the speaker in “A supermarket in California” appears to give out the same message in a less apparent manner.

In terms of structure, the poems are distinctly different from each other. To begin with, “A supermarket in California” has an “open” form. This means that it is very unpredictable and unique. Therefore, it is a Prose Poem. This means that it does not have stanzas or lines and includes paragraphs and blocks. A perceptible element is this poem's form is the allusion to the style of Walt Whitman. Likewise, Allen Ginsberg’s poem has challenging sentence structures and lines. Following, “The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock” doesn’t have a traditional form by having stanzas and lines that differ throughout the poem. I believe that it follows the form of a dramatic monologue. This means that the speaker has a direct address with the reader. In contrast, Allen Ginsberg’s poem is addressed towards Walt Whitman, not the reader. Next, both poems do not have a consistent rhyme scheme and meter. As previously mentioned, “A supermarket in California” is a free-verse poem. This means that it automatically will not have a uniform meter and rhyme scheme. Although “The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock” does not have a rhyme scheme and meter, it moves in and out of them. For instance, the meter becomes irregular when Prufrock is insecure. Finally, there are far more line breaks in “A supermarket in California” than the other. “The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock” only has two line breaks which are in lines 45 and 46 where the speaker is making a decision.

“A supermarket in California” does not contain many poet devices, making it simple and easy to

comprehend. Other than the use of imagery and symbols, the poem does not include as many figurative languages and sound devices as “The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock”. However, it is written in the form of an allusion. This is because Allen Ginsberg constantly makes references to Walt Whitman and Garcia Lorca’s poems. The speaker admires these poets because he sees a reflection of himself in them. Also, the supermarket is an extended metaphor for the poet's mind. In his mind, he can select the images, similar to selecting items on a grocery list. On the other hand, “The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock” comprises numerous poetic devices. It uses figurative language techniques of simile, metaphor, personification, repetition, and hyperbole. There are many similes used in the poem. “While streets the evening is spread out against the sky, Like a patient etherized upon a table” is an example of a simile in the poem that compares the evening to death. In addition, there are countless metaphors like “I have measured out my life with coffee spoons” where the speaker says his life has always been controlled and predictable. The poem also personifies many objects. For example, In lines 24-25, “For the yellow smoke that slides along the street, Rubbing its back upon the window-panes” the yellow fog is personified as cat or dog. Repetition occurs frequently in the poem. Phrases like “let us go” and “do I dare” have been repeated numerous times. Furthermore, some hyperbole is used with most using simile as well as hyperbole. “Like a tedious argument of insidious intent” is an example of a commonly familiar phrase from the poem that implements exaggeration, making it notorious and memorable. Lastly, the poem uses the sound device of Alliteration. “When the wind blows the water white and black” is an example of alliteration by having many words starting with “w”.

It is clear that our society has changed over time. Due to this societal change, more people become self-conscious and develop social anxiety. Poets like Allen Ginsberg and T.S Eliot seem to remark on this topic within their poems. The speaker of “A supermarket in California” has found a method in which he can escape society through his imagination. Nevertheless, J. Alfred Prufrock in “The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock” continues to struggle with encountering society. Both poets have included various poetic devices to send their message to their readers. With T.S Eliot's poem using a variety of poetic elements, and Allen Ginsberg’s poem having irregular stanzas and lines, they both convey the message through traditional poetry. Accordingly, social anxiety is not frequently incorporated in many poems, and it is outstanding that T.S Eliot and Allen Ginsberg were able to utilize this theme through their poems.