Matthew Arnold And T.s. Elliot’s Assessment Of The Repressed Self

Matthew Arnold’s poem “The Buried Life” and T.S. Eliot’s poem “The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock,” offer an interpretation of the modern world that has caused people to repress their feelings as they are forced to a state of the divided self. “The Buried Life” demonstrates how people are encouraged to conform to normal societal structures and suppress their true feelings, but presents love as a hopeful solution to overcome the alienation and disguise. “The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock” provides a bleak presentation of life in the modern world, as people are forced to live in a continuous cycle with lack of meaning and belonging. Eliot implies that disaffection has been created by urbanization.

Throughout this essay, I wish to show that both texts present an interpretation of life in an urban setting by identifying that people are predisposed to lead a life of alienation and meaninglessness. However, Eliot presents a more negative assessment as the poem portrays bleak imagery and an insight into the mind of a man that struggled to grasp any meaning in life. By contrast, Arnold poses the issue of loneliness and lack of freedom to express their true life but remains hopeful as he suggests that love can overcome suffering.

Literature influences society’s perceptions by often challenging existing social structures that control our ingrained beliefs about how one should act or feel. In Arnold's and then Eliot's period, one of the most discussed topics in literature was how society changed from a state of openness and connectedness to living in isolation. In the modern-day, we continue to live in a society that isolates individuals as we exist in crowded areas but remain alienated from one another. By examining works such as “The Buried Life” and “The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock,” we can assess how literature has described a meaningless life. Although 'The Buried Life' and 'The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock' were written sixty-three years apart, we can assess whether Arnold offers an assessment of the urban world that encourages future writers, such as Eliot, to delve further into the issue.

The industrial revolution gained momentum throughout Britain in the late 1700s to the early 1800s, with advancements in transportation such as the steam train, physically transforming the modern world in which we live. Arnold’s poem “The Buried Life” was written in 1852, suggesting that he had primary knowledge of the early stages of urbanization. In comparison, Eliot was writing around the early 1900’s and published “The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock” in 1915. During this period, more people had moved from the countryside to live an urban life in large crowded cities. The countryside can be described as giving a sense of freedom from the urban world's oppressive limits as one is surrounded by nature and organic beings. By contrast, the urban life can be characterized as offering superficial relationships, lack of belonging, loneliness, and a routine-driven existence. The urban world became the condition of modern life and was mainly seen in large cities across Britain and Europe. A French sociologist Émile Durkheim coined the term anomie that can be understood and applied to the urban world as a state of living in which things that once brought meaning to life are no longer accepted or sought, which leads to a state of despair (174). The move from community country life to the disconnected cities can be seen as giving rise to a state of anomie, as one is left feeling lost and alone. Similarly, sociologist Louis Wirth in his work, “Urbanism as a Way of Life,”

comments on the rapid shift from rural to urban life, noting that this new urban lifestyle categorizing the modern world had profoundly altered people's way of life. Relationships are drastically different to how people lived before widespread urbanization, as we become disconnected and the sense of community value weakens (21).

'The Buried Life' is a free verse poem in which the speaker addresses his lover and shares his fears about the unexpressed self and the buried life to which many people have become accustomed. The poem begins with the speaker implying that he and his lover have been speaking and joking with one another, but noting a change in his physical well-being, "mine eyes are wet!" (2). The speaker reduces the tone to a state of sadness when he states, "I feel a nameless sadness o'er me roll" (3). There is something he has to say that cannot be silenced, and joking with his lover will not help him express how he really feels. However, there is a sense of optimism within the speaker as he hopes that by reading his lover's soul, he can express his true self "And let me read there, love! thy inmost soul" (11).

The second stanza addresses the reoccurring theme conveyed throughout the poem, the power of love. Arnold questions the power of love by asking what is one to do if even love cannot overcome the alienation of the urban world: "Alas! is even love too weak / To unlock the heart, and let it speak? / Are even lovers powerless to reveal / To one another what indeed they feel?" (12-15). Arnold implies that the issue of the repressed self is not an individual isolated problem: "the mass of men concealed" (16). Through presenting the repressed self as a systematic issue, Arnold indicates this is a social issue that has emerged as a result of urban development. Therefore, there is an apparent sense of anomie across the entire society as all men fail to find any purpose in their lives. Arnold examines this issue further by suggesting that men do not express their emotions, "for fear that if revealed / They would be met / With blank indifference" (17-19). Because men repress their emotions, they become "Tricked in disguises, alien to the rest," and lead a life they don't want to live, and become alienated to others and even to themselves. (21). Some would argue this is a criticism of the rigid society that suggests we must live and express ourselves in a way that fits in with certain norms, leading people to play a role and live in a constant 'disguise' (21). Arnold offers an insight into the hectic lifestyle of an urban society: "But often, in the world's most crowded streets, / But often, in the din of strife, / There rises an unspeakable desire / After the knowledge of our buried life;" (45-48). This subtle hint of the "crowded" life suggests that the basis of the poem and the struggles the speaker and society encounters is rooted in the alienation within modern society.

Arnold instills a sense of hope and optimism that is not apparent in Eliot's work "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock." The speaker clings onto the hope that their love will set them free from the oppressive world: "Ah! well for us, if even we, / Even for a moment, can get free / Our heart, and have our lips unchained" (26-28). The speaker does not want to suffer like the rest of the world, but hopes for a moment of liberation from the repressive state in which society has forced them to live. Although most of people's lives remain in a repressive state, the speaker claims that their inner self sometimes comes to the surface: "Yet still, from time to time, vague and forlorn, / From the soul's subterranean depth upborne / As from an infinitely distant land, / Come airs, and floating echoes, and convey / A melancholy into all our day" (72-76). There are moments when people act upon the buried life, which provides a sense of fulfillment as it influences their whole outlook. Arnold's depiction of the ability to break free from the boundaries of the repressed self indicates the optimism that is echoed throughout the poem, offering a positive outlook on the possibility of staying happy in a punishing urban society.

Arnold’s depictions of nature and the environment in 'The Buried Life' offers a more positive representation of urban life compared to “The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock.” The image of water throughout the poem is reiterated by Arnold: “The unregarded river of our life / Pursue with indiscernible flow its way;” (39-40). Water is used to describe how within each individual there is a river that replicates lives and experiences. The term “unregarded” signifies how people ignore their innate desires, as they conceal the true life that we want to live. Arnold explains that life will take us on several different paths because it does not follow a defined course, while we remain unknown about what the future holds, as demonstrated by the “indiscernible flow” (40). Arnold implies that our quest to find and liberate our true self reflects the stream within people: “And that we should not see / The buried stream, and seem to be / Eddying at large blind uncertainty” (41-43). Yet people are embarking on this journey of trying to find themselves with “blind uncertainty” as they are unsure about what they are trying to find and because people were unable to express their true selves. This also serves as a metaphor because people are stuck in the process of trying to escape the modern world's constraints, as shown by the term 'eddying.' In both the title of the poem and throughout, the word 'buried' represents that our true desires and self are hidden under the disguised life that we have pursued in the evolving modern world.

Arnold concludes the poem by communicating the speaker’s sense of freedom and relaxation, “And then he thinks he knows / The hills where his life rose, / And the sea where it all goes,” (96-98). He has surrounded himself with a sense of understanding as his life's vision and awareness grows, giving him a sense of direction and calmness.

Arnold’s “The Buried Life” and Eliot’s “The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock” are both great works that initiate the intellectual examinations of how people lived their lives during the urbanization of the evolving modern world. As with Arnold’s poem, Prufrock begins with an address to another person: “let us go then, you and I” (1). Unlike Arnold, it is unclear who Prufrock is speaking to which emphasizes the lack of fluidity of the poem, alongside the use of strange juxtapositions and repetition. Prufrock wants to take this unidentified person on a journey through the city: “When the evening is spread out against the sky / Like a patient etherized upon a table; / Let us go, through certain half-desert streets, / The muttering retreats / Of restless nights in one-night cheap hotels” (2-6). Eliot represents a modernist poet who focuses on writing about the gritty realism of modern life, as shown by the negative descriptions of the places Prufrock will take this person. Eliot alters the rhyme scheme throughout the poem as demonstrated in stanza one, by having irregular lengths of lines, but keeps some rhyme. In stanza one, Prufrock's indecisiveness and failure to commit to any action is shown when he is not clear about what he is doing, but he does not want to answer any questions: “Oh, do no ask, ‘What is it?’” (11).

“The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock” presents a series of intellectual considerations for the reader to contemplate, as they are presented with a description of the mind's consciousness as Prufrock struggles to find meaning in his life. While Arnold provides an optimistic perspective that the suffering can be overcome by love, Eliot presents a character that has been unable to commit to anything that can solve the problem, such as approaching a woman. Prufrock repeats the same phrase several times throughout the poem, “To wonder, ‘Do I dare?’ and, ‘Do I dare?’ / Time to turn back and descend the stair, / With a bald spot in the middle of my hair – / (They will say: How his hair is growing thin!’)” (38-41). There is an abject failure to even attempt to approach this woman, as he contemplates “Do I dare?” The thought of deciding would paralyze him. Prufrock is portrayed as a man of great self-consciousness as he wonders

if he turns away people will see his bald spot and thereby expose his imperfections.

Prufrock is described as trying to escape from the stagnant isolation that the sterile routine of urban life has reinforced: “For I have known them all already, known them all –” (49). The repetition of the words represents the recurrence of his life as he performs the same actions every day, and the caesura indicates the longing for the routine to stop and release him from the worthless action he is compelled to perform. Prufrock furthers his explanation of the sterile life, “I have known the evenings, mornings, afternoons, / I have measured out my life with coffee spoons” (49-51). The metaphor of him counting out his life with coffee spoons represents the meaningless view that he holds of his life, as he can count the events of his life with items that have no other value than serving food. Eliot presents a series of negative descriptions of urban life to the reader that depict the overall struggle for survival in the alienating urban life. Prufrock describes himself walking the streets at night in search of a way out of sterile life: “And watched the smoke that rises from the pipes / Of lonely men in shirt-sleeves, leaning out of windows?” (71-72). The images of men described as isolated suggest that they are searching for meaning as they reach out from their windows to fill their lives with some belonging. Prufrock claims that his life failures and lack of belonging led him to believe that, “I should have been a pair of ragged claws / Scuttling across the floors of silent seas” (73-74). The preference to live a life as an isolated crab (not seen as the most elegant and appreciated creature) on the ocean floor without any connection to the human world highlights the extent of Prufrock's misery and the isolation he feels while living in the modern urban world.

Prufrock is the embodiment of men living in urban societies who have found no meaning in life and have turned to small trivial decisions to grasp any sense of fulfillment in their lives. He has come to realize that he's grown old, and the repetition of 'I grow old' emphasizes that he is getting older and it won't end (121). Prufrock's time in his life has passed and he no longer can ask important questions and make the big decision in his life to find love. Nevertheless, Prufrock has made the small decision to “wear the bottoms of my trousers rolled” (121). He is unable to control those things that are considered important to him, yet he takes pleasure in making decisions on how to dress himself. Then, Prufrock becomes hesitant and returns to his undecisive ways as any decision becomes too much for him as he seems afraid to commit to comb his hair a particular way or to 'eat a peach?' (122). By turning to the small trivial choices in life to find meaning, Prufrock mocks himself as he has failed to make any important choices in his life, such as choosing to find love.

Furthermore, Arnold describes a condition about city life which Eliot represents in an even darker way. Eliot wrote “The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock” in a later period when the conditions of modern life had become more pervasive, which could explain the difference in writing style and the imagery depicted in the poems. Both devote a significant portion of the poem to describe nature, especially water. While Arnold maintains a positive representation of water throughout the poem by signifying it as the true self that has become hidden due to the circumstances of urban life, Eliot takes a gloomier view of water and nature. At the end of the poem, Eliot refers to mermaids to reiterate that women are as unattainable as mystical beings for Prufrock: “I had the mermaids, singing, each to each, / I do not think that they will sing to me” (124-125). The mermaids represent the society of women who have alienated Prufrock by failing to recognize him and give him the love he so desired. Like the women in society, the mermaids move away from Prufrock while he is on the beach waiting for them to join him: “I have seen them riding seaward on the waves” (126). The water is represented as dull and bleak: “When the wind blows the water white and black” (128). A beautiful ocean scenery is

often described as crystal calm water, but Eliot symbolizes the water as stark and stormy. Eliot’s description of the water represents his overall negative perspective on life in the urban world. Eliot may also refer to water and mermaids as a sense of freedom from the constraints of the modern world as he escapes to live in his dreams and to fulfill his desires: “We have lingered in the chambers of the sea” (129). Prufrock remains in his imagination of mythical creatures until he is awakened by the ruthlessness of the modern world. Eliot has intentionally brought about a marked change to the first-person plural subject 'we' to indicate that Prufrock is addressing society as a whole, as the inability to find meaning in life and express the repressed self is a collective societal issue rather than an individual issue. Such a feature of addressing the state of anomie to the entire society is also apparent in Arnold’s poem “The Buried Life.” The last line of the poem suggests that urban life controls peoples’ lives to the point we cannot survive: “Till human voices wake us, and we drown” (131). Prufrock emphasizes that the stagnant daily forms of modern existence have led people to a state of isolation and meaninglessness.

To conclude, Arnold's 'The Buried Life' and Eliot's 'The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock's' reflect the misery and meaninglessness of modern society by embodying the actions and feelings of the speakers. “The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock” provides a bleaker interpretation by evoking the reader to consider their suffering and lack of purpose in the modern world, which continues to regulate people’s daily actions. Eliot pioneers his work by describing a man's stream of consciousness which remains disconnected from the modern world by failing to act or find meaning. Arnold's 'The Buried Life' demonstrates the suffering that people experience in urban settings as they fear to reveal their true selves and emotions, but remains hopeful as the speaker communicates that love will conquer their misery. Thus, there is an apparent difference in the delivery of both poems as one remains optimistic, possibly because of the earlier period that had not experienced the intensity of modern urbanization and other historical events such as the war that changed people's lives and the ability to stay connected. Overall, Eliot's 'The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock' remains the most negative in terms of portraying the fragmented and repressed self in the modern world, but it is important to note that writers like Arnold provided the initial framework for discussion of life in urban societies.