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# Traditionalism And Autobiographical Aspects In The Works Of T. S. Eliot

The award-winning, genre-defining poet Thomas Stearns Eliot is known not only for his poetic masterpieces but also for his literary criticism. He spent years of his life studying with Harvard professors “renowned in poetry, philosophy and literary criticism, and the rest of his career [was] shaped by all three.” (biography.com) He earned a living writing literary criticisms for many years, one of which being “Tradition and the Individual Talent,” first published by the London literary magazine *The Egoist* in 1919, then later in a few of Eliot’s own publishings. In this critique, Eliot conceptualized ‘tradition’ as a literary term representative of the inheritance of style and ideas by artists and writers alike; this passing down of style and ideas allows works to transcend time, as they fit into both the past and the present as a timeless yet new and original piece of art. This idea also allows creations so ‘out of the box they don’t fit anywhere in history to have a meaning in relation to tradition because it’s a rebellion against the theory itself. T.S. Eliot’s favorable views on tradition are apparent in his writing through his intricate use of literary devices: allusion, theme, symbol, and autobiographical elements.

Although Eliot is considered to be a classicist poet, strains of other literary movements like romanticism and modernism can be seen throughout his writing. In his essay “Tradition and the Individual Talent,” he conveys that an artist should be able to incorporate the past into their work cohesively while still remaining grounded in the present. He states that a writer should

“neither take the past as a lump, an indiscriminate bolus, nor can he form himself wholly on one or two private admirations, nor can he form himself wholly upon one preferred period”

(Eliot 2)

to ingrain that those who wrote years before, who laid the stepping stones for the writers in the present and those to come, cannot be consolidated into a single category of ‘historical figures’ in the mind of a good writer; intentional allusions to specific artists who influence a creation make the entire artwork so much more special in the eyes of the viewer, especially those who can notice the integrations. This is why Eliot “insist[ed] on abiding by the principles of classicism and drawing inspiration from what has been written in the past, especially in the ancient Greek[,] ... Roman literature[,] and] romanticism.” (Rauf 1) Combining history into original works is so important to Eliot because he believes that “we know so much more than they did ... [because] they are [what] we know.”(Eliot 2) The inclusion of tradition, of repurposing other’s works to create something new, is a respectful way to pay homage to the great writers and artists that have passed while still creating an entirely new and original piece. In the same essay, T.S.Eliot supports his claim by saying that “no poet, no artist of any art, has his complete meaning alone [because] his significance, his appreciation is the appreciation of his relation to the dead poets and artists.”(Eliot 2) His personal way of thanking his predecessors in poetry was to allude to many works of those whose creations he learned from.

First published in 1915, “The Lovesong of J. Alfred Prufrock” is one of the most popular and well-known works of Eliot. In this poem, allusions to historical works like Dante’s *Inferno* and Shakespeare’s *Twelfth Night*, James Cooper’s *The Pioneers*, and a few more are seamlessly

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threaded throughout; these references are used to aid Eliot in setting the timorous and hopeless tone as well as conveying Prufrock's inner conflicts and emotions. The opening epigraph from Dante's *Inferno* relates to the man who resides in the Eighth Circle of Hell; this epigraph is meant to illustrate how Prufrock feels like he is living in his own personal Hell on Earth before Eliot has even written anything original. The shamelessness of the words spoken by Count Guido, the man from Hell, is also representative of how Prufrock speaks shamelessly to the reader in this poem. In addition to the allusion to Dante's *Inferno*, phrases like "overwhelming question" and "dying fall" are borrowed from James Cooper and Shakespeare, respectively, to enhance and carry the message of this poem while also making noticeable references to support his concept of traditionalism. One main allusion alongside the epigraph is a line from Jules LaForgue's work; while describing the atmosphere around Prufrock, Eliot borrowed and slightly altered a quote of hers to "In the room the women come and go / Talking of Michelangelo", giving it an entirely different context and new meaning while still hinting at his admiration of LaForgue's brilliant writing and ability to show Eliot "the essence of poetry [and] how to speak in his own voice." (Soldo 1) Another poem of his, "Portrait of a Lady," alludes to two different works before the poem even begins; Henry James' novel *The Portrait of a Lady* and Ezra Pound's poem "Portrait D'une Femme." Ezra Pound was one of Mr. Eliot's closest friends who inspired him to write poetry, which explains why this allusion was made. In addition to the title, allusions made to Juliet's Tomb in Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet* as well as Shakespeare's *Twelfth Night*. Mentioning other authors or poets in this way is a form of respect for those who came before Eliot; it's also a main aspect in the concept of tradition in as it diverts the attention and praise from a single artist towards past and present artists as a whole community, lessening the individuality and egocentrism that comes with creation.

As previously stated, T.S. Eliot frequently incorporated differing literary periods into his works like romanticism and twentieth-century modernism. His inclusion of modernist themes or motifs like misdirection and fragmentation make his work stand out significantly. Misdirection was most commonly used by Eliot in the titles of his works. The title of 'The Lovesong of J. Alfred Prufrock', for example, suggests that the poem will carry some romantic notion throughout, however, the opposite is true; this poem is riddled with almost anti-romantic themes of social and sexual paralysis, fragmentation, and the feeling of being lost, alone, and incapable of love or affection. In addition, the poem 'Portrait of a Lady', too, has a romantic-sounding title that is deceiving. It makes the reader assume the main character or subject of the poem would be this young, beautiful woman when in actuality the lady mentioned is similar to Prufrock in how old, miserable, and lonely she is.

The modernist movement also brought about fragmentation, which is prominent in "The Lovesong of J. Alfred Prufrock." The fragmentation of the society that surrounds the main character in this poem is used to represent the chaos occurring during World War I. The intermittent rhymes found throughout the poem only to be broken by an intrusive thought by Prufrock fragments the main flow of the poem, leaving the reader with the pieces of an intricate puzzle they must put together themselves. The use of fragmentation in this poem shows how shattered Prufrock's psychological state is in addition to illustrating how he views the world around him. Another example of fragmentation in Eliot's work is later on when Prufrock transitions from describing a realistic scene of "tea and cakes and ices" to a depressing moment where Prufrock has "wept and fasted, wept and prayed" to a mystical one of "mermaids singing ... riding seaward on the waves/combing [their] white hair." This is not only modernist because of the fragmentation and massive divide in tone, but also representative of the romanticism movement of the nineteenth century.

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Romanticism is also intertwined into the works of Eliot, most noticeably in the quote where Prufrock compares himself to “a pair of ragged claws / scuttling across the floors of the silent seas.” The imagery that accompanies this quote is so romantic and delicate when the sadness of the intended message is taken into account. Eliot is trying, and succeeding, to eloquently share how lonely, depressed, and depersonalized Prufrock is feeling. In addition to this, “such romantic imagery as “sea-girls wreathed with seaweed” is exploited in the poem, not adopted.” (Sultan 80) Romanticism is more prominent in the poem “Portrait of a Lady,” however, and it “is nevertheless considered one of the most advanced poems in terms of an exposure of a “bloated” Romanticism.” (Ang 12) Eliot treats romanticism strangely, however, as his “expression of Romanticism [in this poem is actually] a “failure” to satisfy.” (Ang 12) The utilization of literary movements that Eliot did not take part in makes his works seem more cohesive and fluid, conveying layers of meaning with every word. It also acts as proof of his concept of tradition, as the inclusion of these modernist and romanticist themes, no matter how he twisted them, honors the artists who inspired him to write these pieces.

Just like with themes, Eliot employed traditional symbols used by his predecessors in his own works. The recurrence of these symbols throughout time means that readers already understand the connotations associated with them, like animals, flowers, time, and color, for example. In the third stanza of “The Lovesong of J. Alfred Prufrock,” “yellow smoke [begins to slide] along the street, rubbing its back upon the window panes” of houses in France’s Red Light district; the yellow hue connotes the cowardice that Prufrock feels, and the smoke itself has an almost feline quality to it -- slinking along, “[licking] its tongue ... [lingering] ... [falling] upon its back ... [making] a sudden leap ... and [falling] asleep.” The cat-like figure that the smoke formulates is representative of Prufrock himself, alone and completely ridden with fear of rejection and judgement. More zoologism is found in this poem when Prufrock compares himself to a crab with “a pair of ragged claws scuttling across the floors of silent seas.” Prufrock and this sea crab are connected by their scavenger-like traits, the crab for food at the bottom of the ocean, and Prufrock for a woman’s affection, love, and attention. This crustacean imagery is also an homage to *The Tragedy of Hamlet* by William Shakespeare. The frequent comparison between Prufrock and animals is dehumanizing and shows how cowardly he is as a man. Another significant symbol in “The Lovesong of J. Alfred Prufrock” is time; time is always on Prufrock’s mind because he fears that he may not have enough of it. He’s mentally stuck on the fact that he will die one day and that he doesn’t have enough ‘tomorrows’ left. He hates the idea of dying an unchanged man. The constant repetition of the word time, specifically in one stanza it is said twelve-time, is meant to show the reader that he is trying to convince himself that there is time left for him to change his ways and make a difference in the world; he has despaired as he knows that there is no way he will be able to change himself in time before he dies.

Time is also prominent in “Portrait of a Lady,” but in a different context than in Prufrock. In this poem, time is symbolic because of its links to the lady’s age and how the young man makes her feel so much younger than she’s felt in a long time. In the beginning of the second part of the poem, Eliot uses floral symbolism, specifically lilacs. The lilac that the woman twirls between her fingers is representative of the turning back of time -- blossoming love, innocence, and youth -- it is symbolic of her want to pursue a relationship with the narrator of the poem. Another important symbol is that this poem takes place in October, the beginning of Autumn. Autumn is symbolic of death since all of the leaves fall from the trees and the flowers die; a reader who picks up on this will understand that it acts as foreshadowing as well. Each of these symbols used by Eliot have been used by writers before him, and his utilization of such symbols conform

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to the traditionalist theory he conceptualized.

When writing a poem that purposefully references and involves other artists' works, it is difficult to not include a bit of self into what is being written. Often, writing is best when it comes from personal experiences and emotions, as it comes from the heart and can be elaborated on with such detail that a reader can understand and connect with what they are reading. Eliot agrees with this claim, stating "in writing poetry, we begin from our own immediate experience." (Eliot) In Nicholas B. Mayer's article "Catalyzing Prufrock," he argues that the patient in "The Lovesong of J. Alfred Prufrock" is actually T.S. Eliot himself, and he has subconsciously incorporated his emotions and his experiences into the character of Prufrock. He supposes that there is a catalyst, or a precipitating event, in the text that commenced the introduction of Eliot's self into Prufrock's character. Mayer poses questions like "did the events actually happen, or were they merely imagined? ... is it just Prufrock or also Eliot who is involved in the events?" (Mayer 3) Mayer uses many sources to back his argument, including Eliot's essay "Tradition and the Individual Talent." The main point of Mayer's literary article suggests that

"the poem can be read as either about Prufrock or by Prufrock or as [Mayer] prefer[s], about [T.S. Eliot] because [the poem is written] by him. More specifically, it is about the process of depersonalization because it is the result of the process of depersonalization. As I want to suggest, Prufrock becomes depersonalized ... which results in the creation of "Prufrock.""

(Mayer 9-10)

Mayer proposes that the poet discovered his 'poetic consciousness' while writing this poem, and while Prufrock is re-encountering or re-evaluating his life as he walks down the streets of France, Eliot is taking a mental stroll down memory lane to revisit the moments where he felt a similar way to his character. Meyer suggests that Eliot reached a 'catalysis [of] depersonalization' while writing this poem, which is why so many parallels can be drawn between the lives of the poet and his character, as they became one in many ways. This claim that "The Lovesong of J. Alfred Prufrock" is actually somewhat autobiographical is both supported and opposed by literary critics around the world, but it relates back to Eliot's theory of traditionalism since it brings the aspect of self into the story alongside the allusions to former authors and artists who have inspired the creation of the poem.

One person in opposition to Mayer's claim that this brilliant poem is autobiographical is Elisabeth Schneider. In her article "Prufrock and After: The Theme of Change" Schneider states that she does not believe this poem to be a representation of Eliot's life - she believes that this poem isn't autobiographical at all seeing as Prufrock is fearing a loveless life where he doesn't get married, meanwhile, this poem was published in Eliot's first year of marriage. She does, however, make an interesting statement that

"What every poet starts from... is his own emotions, and ... [their own] personal experience,' a statement that, under the circumstances, must be equally applicable to Prufrock; Prufrock was Eliot, though Eliot was much more than Prufrock."

(Schneider 1105)

The idea that Prufrock was Eliot, as the character is an amalgamation of emotions and personal experiences of the poet, is an interesting take on Mayer's idea as it poses Prufrock as a

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reconstruction of Eliot rather than a poetic consciousness. Either way, it relates back to Eliot's theory of traditionalism by uniting a community of self and former authors and artists who were inspiration for the poem.

To conclude, Thomas Stearns Eliot's concept of tradition as a literary term is apparent in his poems "The Lovesong of J. Alfred Prufrock" and "Portrait of a Lady" through his use of allusion, theme, symbol, and the autobiographical lense. The repurposing of styles and ideas of writers who came before Eliot allowed him to write such cohesive and intricate texts with so many layers for a reader to discover. This inheritance of ideas and techniques through hard work and studying allows creators to make new, original, timeless, and transcendent works of art.

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