

GENDER AND SEXUALITY CRISIS OF J ALFRED PRUFROCK IN THE POEM “THE LOVE SONG OF J ALFRED PRUFROCK” BY T S ELIOT

Loni Mahesh

Student of Master of Art in English with Computational Linguistics at Garden City University, Bengaluru, India

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.13142752>

Published Date: 31-July-2024

Abstract: This paper aims to explore the gender and sexuality of the hero J Alfred Prufrock of Eliot’s “The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock”. The poem explores themes of self-doubt, alienation, and the fear of aging and identity crisis. Therefore, the identity of the ‘you’ and ‘I’ are not clear and they raise serious arguments. Even the main reason for their quest has never been mentioned in the poem. The poem tells us that something is wrong with Prufrock’s gender and sexuality and the balance of his psyche has been destroyed. The ‘you and I’ have no choice except to find the responsible person for this inner chaos. Critics have employed various approaches to clarify their identities. One of the approaches to the poem is a psychological one which brings us to the hidden layers of the poem. Thus, we seek to address the raised questions, what are the genders and sexualities of ‘you’ and ‘I’, and what is responsible for the loneliness and imbalance of Prufrock’s psyche?

Keywords: Sigmund Freud, Carl Gustav Jung, T. S. Eliot, “The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock”, Michel Foucault, Gender, Sexuality, Queer.

I. INTRODUCTION

There is no doubt, T. S. Eliot (1888-1965) is one of the pioneers of modern poetry who employs his faculty to throw back the chaos and identity crisis in modern life. In the summer of 1915, he published “The Love Song of J Alfred Prufrock” in the collection of Prufrock and Other Observation. Through “The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock” Eliot reached a new style and technique which is now called ‘dramatic monologue’.

In the poem “The love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock” Prufrock is portrayed as a hesitant and introspective character who grapples with his own inadequacies and the complexities of human relationships. He contemplates his own sense of self-worth and his inability to connect with others on a deeper level. Throughout the poem, there are vivid and sometimes surreal images, as well as references to various literary and cultural sources, which contribute to the complexity of the character J. Alfred Prufrock.

Much work has been done on the themes and the imagery in the poems of T.S. Eliot. None the less, the theme of identity crisis in T.S. Eliot's poetry has not received the critical attention it deserves. The aim of the paper is to make a close study of gender and sexual identity crisis in T.S. Eliot's poem “The Love Song of J Alfred Prufrock”.

II. BODY OF ARTICLE

UNCONSCIOUS MIND:

The unconscious mind (or the unconscious) consists of processes in the mind that occur automatically and are not available to introspection. Although these processes exist beneath the surface of conscious awareness, they are thought to exert an effect on conscious thought processes and behavior. Empirical evidence suggests that unconscious phenomena include

International Journal of Novel Research in Humanity and Social SciencesVol. 11, Issue 4, pp: (45-52), Month: July - August 2024, Available at: www.noveltyjournals.com

repressed feelings and desires, memories, automatic skills, subliminal perceptions, and automatic reactions. The term was coined by the 18th-century German Romantic philosopher Friedrich Schelling¹ and later introduced into English by the poet and essayist Samuel Taylor Coleridge².

The emergence of the concept of the unconscious in psychology and general culture:

The emergence of the concept of the Unconscious in psychology and general culture was mainly due to the work of Austrian neurologist and psychoanalyst Sigmund Freud. In psychoanalytic theory, the unconscious mind consists of ideas and drives that have been subject to the mechanism of repression: anxiety-producing impulses in childhood are barred from consciousness, but do not cease to exist, and exert a constant pressure in the direction of consciousness. However, the content of the unconscious is only knowable to consciousness through its representation in a disguised or distorted form, by way of dreams and neurotic symptoms, as well as in slips of the tongue and jokes. The psychoanalyst seeks to interpret these conscious manifestations in order to understand the nature of the repressed.³

Carl Gustav Jung agreed with Freud that the unconscious is a determinant of personality, but he proposed that the unconscious be divided into two layers: the personal unconscious and the collective unconscious. The personal unconscious is a reservoir of material that was once conscious but has been forgotten or suppressed, much like Freud's notion. The collective unconscious, however, is the deepest level of the psyche, containing the accumulation of inherited psychic structures and archetypal experiences. Archetypes are not memories but energy centers or psychological functions that are apparent in the culture's use of symbols. The collective unconscious is therefore said to be inherited and contain material of an entire species rather than of an individual. The collective unconscious is, according to Jung, "[the] whole spiritual heritage of mankind's evolution, born anew in the brain structure of every individual".⁴

THE UNCONSCIOUS PRUFROCK AND HIS ALTER EGO:

According to Sigmund Freud, human's mind is composed of three components. They are conscious, preconscious and unconscious.

And respectively, he put up personality tripartition. Id is the dark side of human being; it is like a beast in one's mind who doesn't obey the moral rules. Ego is reflected by the daily behavior of a human being, it relates to the external world, operates via the reality principle, such as rules of society, seeing the outside world as it actually is: one shouldn't behave like a beast. In addition, the superego is the opposite of id, the highest standard of human beings. It is related to the good aspect of human being. The superego is the conscience and ego ideal. If a person does something which is acceptable to the superego, he experiences pride and self-satisfaction.

In this poem, Eliot uses the dramatic monologue. From the beginning to the end, the narrator Prufrock speaks to another person. He says,

Let us go then, you and I,
When the evening is spread out against the sky
Like a patient etherized upon a table; (1-3)

Who is that person and what is the gender of that person? Prufrock regards that person as the one who can share his secrets, even though the dark side of his thought. In fact, the narrator is the ego of Prufrock, who is timid and limited by many so-called rules. He knows that some people are ridiculous, such as the women talking of Michelangelo, and the seeming

¹ Von, Schelling Friedrich Wilhelm Joseph, and Peter Heath. System of Transcendental Idealism (1800). University Press of Virginia, 2001.

² Roberts, Adam. "CHAPTER 8. Biographia Literaria by Samuel Taylor Coleridge, Edinburgh University Press Ltd, pp. 83–90.

³ Freud, S. An outline of psycho-analysis. The International Journal of Psychoanalysis, 21, 1940, pp. 27–84

⁴ Jung, Carl Gustav." The Columbia encyclopedia. 6th. ed. Columbia: Columbia University Press, 2000. p. 1490.

ambitious men who are taking toast and tea. What's more, he is one of these men. They are repressed by social rules and pretend to be elegant and educated. However, the person Prufrock speaking to is one who can reveal all those vanities. The narrator confesses everything to that person. In the beginning, Prufrock says: "Like a patient etherized upon a table", from which a mood of inability, hesitancy and helplessness is established. Next, he also confesses his contempt for those self-important guys. He doesn't disguise himself. A real Prufrock is presented. From this point, the person Prufrock speaks to is just his alter ego, his id. His thought is unconscious and free as a spirit. He is known about his isolation, his weakness and his hesitation.

DEVELOPMENT OF GENDER:

Freud's psychoanalytic theory of gender development suggests that gender development takes place during the third stage of his psychosexual theory of personality development. He called this the phallic stage, which occurs between three and six years old. During this stage, the child's libido is focused on his or her genitals. Development of gender in psychoanalytic theory is different for boys and for girls: boys experience the Oedipus complex and identify with their father and take on a male gender role; girls experience the Electra complex (see Jung) and identify with their mother and take on a female gender role.⁵

Sabina Spielrein, a Russian psychoanalyst believed there is a man in a woman and there is a woman in a man and Carl Jung called them as animus and anima. Jung described the animus as the unconscious masculine side of a woman, and the anima as the unconscious feminine side of a man, each transcending the personal psyche. Jung's theory states that the anima and animus are the two primary anthropomorphic archetypes of the unconscious mind, as opposed to the theriomorphic and inferior function of the shadow archetypes. He believed they are the abstract symbol sets that formulate the archetype of the Self.⁶

In Jung's theory, the anima makes up the totality of the unconscious feminine psychological qualities that a man possesses and the animus the masculine ones possessed by a woman. He did not believe they were an aggregate of father or mother, brothers, sisters, aunts, uncles, or teachers, though these aspects of the personal unconscious can influence a person's anima or animus.

Jung believed a male's sensitivity is often lesser or repressed, and therefore considered the anima one of the most significant autonomous complexes.

American sociologist and professor Nancy Chodorow argues that each person's gender identity is developed through a combination of both personal and cultural meaning. She argues that "an individual, personal creation and a projective emotional and fantasy animation of cultural categories create the meaning of gender and gender identity for any individual."⁷

Judith Butler, an American philosopher and gender studies writer and is influenced by Lacanian (emphasised the idea that if we can only know ourselves through language, thus we can never fully know ourselves. As one signifier leads to another and it continues to be an unending chain. Lacan believed there cannot be a single identity that can be referred to via language.)⁸ Butler is influenced by psychoanalysis, phenomenology, structural anthropologists and speech-act theory in her understanding of the "performativity" of our identities. All of these theories explore the ways that social reality is not a given but is continually created as an illusion "through language, gesture, and all manner of symbolic social sign". A good example in speech-act theory is illocutionary speech acts, those speech acts that actually do something rather than merely represent something. The classic example is the "I pronounce you man and wife" of the marriage ceremony. In making that statement, a person of authority changes the status of a couple within an intersubjective community; those words actively

⁵ C.L. Martin, L. Dinella, Gender-related Development, Editor(s): Neil J. Smelser, Paul B. Baltes, International Encyclopedia of the Social & Behavioral Sciences, Pergamon, 2001, pp. 6020-6027.

⁶ Jung, Carl Gustav. Aion: Researches into the Phenomenology of the Self. Routledge, 2014, pp.11-35

⁷ Chodorow, Nancy J. The Power of Feelings: Personal Meaning in Psychoanalysis, Gender, and Culture. Yale Univ. Press, 1999. P. 106

⁸ Lacan, Jacques, and Jacques-Alain Miller. Le sminaire. Seuil, 1973, p. 75

change the existence of that couple by establishing a new marital reality: the words do what they say (this can be compared to Jung's archetypes of collective unconscious). As Butler explains, "Within speech act theory, a performative is that discursive practice that enacts or produces that which it names".⁹ A speech act can produce that which it names, however, only by reference to the law (or the accepted norm, code, or contract), which is cited or repeated (and thus performed) in the pronouncement.

Butler takes this formulation further by exploring the ways that linguistic constructions create our reality in general through the speech acts we participate in every day. By endlessly citing the conventions and ideologies of the social world around us, we enact that reality; in the performative act of speaking, we "incorporate" that reality by enacting it with our bodies, but that "reality" nonetheless remains a social construction (at one step removed from what Lacan distinguishes from reality by the term, "the Real"). In the act of performing the conventions of reality, by embodying those fictions in our actions, we make those artificial conventions appear to be natural and necessary. Butler concerns with "gender acts" that similarly lead to material changes in one's existence and even in one's bodily self: "One is not simply a body, but, in some very key sense, one does one's body and, indeed, one does one's body differently from one's contemporaries and from one's embodied predecessors and successors as well".

We may believe that our subjectivity is the source of our actions but Butler contends that our sense of independent, self-willed subjectivity is really a retroactive construction that comes about only through the enactment of social conventions: "gender cannot be understood as a role which either expresses or disguises an interior 'self,' whether that 'self' is conceived as sexed or not. As performance which is performative, gender is an 'act,' broadly construed, which constructs the social fiction of its own psychological interiority".

Butler therefore understands gender to be "a corporeal style, an 'act,' as it were". That style has no relation to essential "truths" about the body but is strictly ideological. It has a history that exists beyond the subject who enacts those conventions.

The act that one does, the act that one performs, is, in a sense, an act that has been going on before one arrived on the scene. Hence, gender is an act which has been rehearsed, much as a script survives the particular actors who make use of it, but which requires individual actors in order to be actualized and reproduced as reality once again.

What is required for the hegemony of heteronormative standards to maintain power is our continual repetition of such gender acts in the most mundane of daily activities (the way we walk, talk, gesticulate, etc.). For Butler, the distinction between the personal and the political or between private and public is itself a fiction designed to support an oppressive status quo: our most personal acts are, in fact, continually being scripted by hegemonic social conventions and ideologies.

Butler underscores gender's constructed nature in order to fight for the rights of oppressed identities, those identities that do not conform to the artificial—though strictly enforced—rules that govern normative heterosexuality. If those rules are not natural or essential, Butler argues, then they do not have any claim to justice or necessity. Since those rules are historical and rely on their continual citation or enactment by subjects, then they can also be challenged and changed through alternative performative acts. As Butler puts it, "If the 'reality' of gender is constituted by the performance itself, then there is no recourse to an essential and unrealized 'sex' or 'gender' which gender performances ostensibly express". For this reason, "the transvestite's or drag queen or king's gender is as fully real as anyone whose performance complies with social expectations".¹⁰

DEVELOPMENT OF SEXUALITY:

Human sexuality is the way people experience and express themselves sexually. According to Freud the mind seeks pleasure and avoids pain.¹¹ Before Freud Indian medieval scholar Basava wrote it in this way 'Can a snake be killed by beating the

⁹ Butler, Judith. *Bodies that Matter: On the Discursive Limits of 'Sex'*. New York: Routledge, 1993, p. 13.

¹⁰ Butler, Judith. "Performative Acts and Gender Constitution: An Essay in Phenomenology and Feminist Theory." *Performing Feminisms: Feminist Critical Theory and Theatre*. Ed. Sue-Ellen Case. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins UP, 1990, pp. 270-279.

¹¹ Freud, Sigmund. *On Metapsychology: The Theory of Psychoanalysis: Beyond the Pleasure Principle, the Ego and the ID and Other Works*. Penguin Books, 1991, p. 36.

mole hill?'¹² According to him snake represents mind whereas mole hill represents body and all the desires are originated in the mind and enacted through body.

Freud believed that all humans were bisexual, by which he primarily meant that everyone incorporates aspects of both sexes, and that everyone is sexually attracted to both sexes. In his view, this was true anatomically and therefore also mentally and psychologically. Heterosexuality and homosexuality both developed from this original bisexual disposition.¹³

According to Foucault history plays significant role in sexuality, as he says, in order to uncover the roots of present day thinking, we need to study history, but studying history isn't enough. We need to study history with particular eye of the details and accidents that accompany the beginning of a certain concept, or a certain way of being. So, we need to study source materials. We need the body. And we need to study the lowly conditions of everybody folks, rather than just the sort of ruling powers of given time.¹⁴

He claims about sexuality and identity politics in the interview "Sex, Power, and the Politics of Identity" 'resistance is a part of the strategic relationship of which power consists. Resistance really always relies upon the situation against which it struggles. For instance, in the gay movement the medical definition of homosexuality was a very important tool against the oppression of homosexuality in the last part of the 19th century and in the early 20th century.

This medicalization, which was a means of oppression, has always been a means of resistance as well—since people could say, "If we are sick, then why do you condemn us, why do you despise us?" and so on. Of course, this discourse now sounds rather naïve to us, but at the time it was very important. In the lesbian movement, the fact that women have been, for centuries and centuries, isolated in society, frustrated, despised in many ways and so on, has given them the real possibility of constituting a society, of creating a kind of social relation between themselves, outside the social world that was dominated by males.

Lillian Faderman's book, *Surpassing the Love of Men*, is very interesting in this regard. It raises the question: what kind of emotional experience, what kind of relationships, were possible in a world where women in society had no social, no legal and no political power? And she argues that women used that isolation and lack of power.¹⁵ This can also be related to transgender folks, especially with trans queers.

GENDER AND SEXUALITY OF J ALFRED PRUFROCK:

Western culture is too reliant on binaries: Dark/light, passion/apathy, action/inaction, and especially man/woman among others and this binary leads to the gap in understanding. People are different from each other and people are fundamentally unique. Human's, particularly western culture's tendency to put each other into strict categories of binary has become archetypal collective unconscious over the time.

Even people who exist in all of the same categories of the binary can be widely different from one another, therefore act of putting people in the binary is fundamentally flawed. What people view as a sexual act, how much their sexuality matters to their cultural identity, how much sex people want, why they find sexual acts pleasurable and how much their sexuality matters to their gender identity are all factors that can vary widely person to person. Essentially because of this variety and the complexity of humanity's relationship to sex, and the idea of trying to create small section of homosexual and heterosexual is a fundamentally flawed action and trying to fit sexuality into categories does more harm than good because it is flawed.

Sexuality does not necessarily impact gender. Sex and gender do not refer to the same thing. Sex is the biological arrangement of chromosomes either XX or XY chromosomes and these affect physical characteristics which we call sex

¹² T.R. Mahadevayya, (Editor). Basava's Vachana. Basava Samiti Bangalore, 2012, Vachana. 1382, p. 386

¹³ Freud, Sigmund. On Sexuality. Penguin, 1991.

¹⁴ Foucault, Michel. Language, counter-memory, practice: Selected essays and interviews. Cornell University Press, 1980, p. 78 .

¹⁵ Foucault, Michel. "Foucault live: Collected interviews, 1961-1984." (1996), p. 387

International Journal of Novel Research in Humanity and Social Sciences

 Vol. 11, Issue 4, pp: (45-52), Month: July - August 2024, Available at: www.noveltyjournals.com

and whereas gender is a psychological identity the way someone feels about themselves that is not impacted by their biology and does not have an impact on their biology. ‘Male’ and ‘Female’ gender identities have been impacted by culture. Even though gender and sex are different, they have become intertwined because of the society’s collective unconsciousness. We shouldn’t try to fit people into strict binary boxes and this goes for the characters we read too.

There is no question that T. S. Eliot was extremely interested in the interaction and intersection of masculinity and femininity and the blurred spaces that transcend them. J. Alfred Prufrock is a character who experiences gender dysphoria and transgresses rigid, socially-constructed concepts of sex and gender identity. To fully connect with this character “requires that we go beyond the limited homo/hetero binary...

“The Love Song of J Alfred Prufrock” can be read as “queering” the experiences, although it is written before second-wave feminism or Queer theory. A brief synopsis of queer theory: “To “queer” becomes an act by which stable boundaries of sexual identity are transgressed, reversed, mimicked, or otherwise critiqued. “Queering” can be enacted on behalf of all non-normative sexualities and identities as well, all that is considered by the dominant paradigms of culture to be alien, strange, unfamiliar, transgressive, odd — in short, queer”.

The cisgender women around Prufrock catch Prufrock’s attention not because Prufrock desires these figures sexually, but because Prufrock may, to a certain degree, desire the sexuality. Prufrock admire, even covet the feminine and may experience something we call “gender dysphoria,” which can be defined as “unhappiness or discomfort about one’s gender role assigned by society based on one’s physical sex”. At no point within this work is Prufrock comfortable with his assigned gender.

We see the genderqueer in the very first line:

“Let us go then, you and I”.

Some genderqueer individuals find the societal gender structures extremely limiting, and so orient themselves as though orbiting two suns: bouncing back and forth at will, identifying as both or neither binary gender as they feel is appropriate. Prufrock is having a conversation throughout this poem with Prufrock’s own gender identity, struggling with external forces and the inner self. “You and I” may represent the gender forces within Prufrock, the binary and the non-binary and crashing against the existential questions that confront every genderqueer or questioning person.

Prufrock is a psychosexually conflicted person, torn and tormented by conventional demands of masculinity and the poem clearly reflects this:

There will be time, there will be time
To prepare a face to meet the faces that you meet;
There will be time to murder and create (26-28)

Genderqueer individuals often experience a process of manual self-creation. Many, in response to absurdly rigid gender constructs, satirize with “a hundred visions and revisions”. Drag kings and queens are examples of this experience, murdering, in a way, some gender performances and creating new ones. They may feel an overwhelming pressure to appear in accordance with or in rebellion against their assigned genders. Gender, already a performance, is now treated intentionally as such.

We see this assertion that gender is socially constructed. Nowhere in “Prufrock” we see the social aspect of gender more clearly than in the sixth through eighth stanzas. In these we witness Prufrock imagine the judgements of the peers:

They will say: “How his hair is growing thin!” (41)
They will say: “But how his arms and legs are thin!” (44)

Genderqueer individuals almost always meet resistance in their friends and family. Alienation from those who should accept often leads to self-loathing and despair:

The eyes that fix you in a formulated phrase
And when I am formulated, sprawling on a pin (56-57)
I should have been a pair of ragged claws
Scuttling across the floors of silent seas. (73-74)

International Journal of Novel Research in Humanity and Social Sciences

Vol. 11, Issue 4, pp: (45-52), Month: July - August 2024, Available at: www.noveltyjournals.com

These lines tell us Prufrock is not comfortable with his illusionary gender the society has constructed.

Prufrock has struggled with internal acceptance of this gender truth and sexuality, but one of the unfortunate facts about the coming out process is that you must not only come out to yourself, but to the world, over and over again to every person you have known and will meet. Regrettably, it seems that Prufrock does not begin the process at this time, perhaps for fear of the often-fatal persecution that queer individuals meet upon coming out:

And I have seen the eternal Footman hold my coat, and snicker,
And in short, I was afraid. (85-86)

Prufrock asks

“Do I dare
Disturb the universe?” (45-46)

and this happens because of religious tendencies of putting everything into natural and unnatural phenomena. Prufrock might have heard peers saying that God creates one as a man and one as a woman and going against it is unnatural or unethical. This tendency is developed in human’s mind because of hearing mythological stories in our childhood. Jung called mythological stories as collective unconscious and in almost all the culture in the world, there is tendency of telling stories and religion is preached through these stories.

The final stanzas of “The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock” relate a sense that if Prufrock cannot overcome the fear and admit the truth,

“Shall I part my hair behind? Do I dare to eat a peach?” (122)

Finally, we reach the conclusion of the poem, where Prufrock dreams of mermaids and the sea. We can witness hauntingly beautiful image here, a collage of dark waters with sea-women navigating or congregating together in the dim places of the deep. These ethereal creatures are safe in their femininity. Prufrock does not feel that he will sing to them: The sirens of mythology lure only male sailors, which hints once again towards Prufrock’s gender dysphoria. The lines

By sea-girls wreathed with seaweed red and brown
Till human voices wake us, and we drown. (130-131)

concludes the poem. Prufrock is dragged out of his reverie, and returns to a reality in which he is drowning in feelings of anxiety, inadequacy and alienation.

Natalie Krill, following her role in the erotic lesbian drama *Below her Mouth*, Krill anticipated questions about her sexuality, and it should be considered extremely rude to attempt to use our own perspective to try to guess someone’s sexual identity. So, the purpose here is not to pin down Eliot’s sexual orientation. As Roland Barthes pointed in his essay “The death of the Author”, writing is where multiplicity is collected, not by the author, but by the reader. The unity of the text is not its origin but its destination. According to Barthes, “The birth of the reader must be required by the death of the author”.¹⁶ So, the author must die in order to allow a space for the reader. The analysis is made through the lens of the reader. Prufrock’s inner trouble may be somewhat relatable to queer or non-confirmed readers. Whether Eliot intended it or not, queer or non-confirmed readers may relate to the themes of identity displacement, the scorn of peers, and the fear of love.

III. CONCLUSION

Prufrock, whose pursuit, pain, predicament and dissatisfaction end up in frustration because of gender dysphoria. He has no choice but give up in his relentless struggle for sexuality and gender. His wish to live a meaningful life turns out to be a vision and he is deprived of happiness. He lives in a self-made fantasy, so reality seems to be far away from him. In the end,

¹⁶ Roland Barthes, *Death of the Author*. *Modern Criticism and Theory*, ed. David Lodge (London and New York: Longman, 1988) p.171.

International Journal of Novel Research in Humanity and Social Sciences

Vol. 11, Issue 4, pp: (45-52), Month: July - August 2024, Available at: www.noveltyjournals.com

he keeps on his life in isolation like an invisible person. The plight of Prufrock, the paralyzing fear that inhibits one from truly living is a struggle that queer people endure every day. Prufrock can be, no matter Eliot's intention, read as a vivid queer literary protagonist.

REFERENCES

- [1] Dan-Qiu QIAO, Li-Yao MIAO, Procrastination: A Psychological Study on the Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock. Rocket Force University of Engineering, Xi'an, China, 2018.
- [2] Eliot, T. S. The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock. 1915. In *The Complete Poems and Plays, 1909-1950*. Harcourt, Brace & World, 1952, pp. 3-7.
- [3] Stevens, Lóre. "Beyond Consequence: Prufrock as a Transgender Character in T.S. Eliot's 'The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock'." *EMJournal*, vol. 23, 2011, pp. 45-58.