

# The Role of Isolation in T.S Eliot's *The Waste Land* and *Prufrock*

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## ABSTRACT

The expression of modern existence as a disconnected entity with shocking and distressful consequences is reflected in the writings of many modernist writers, but it seems to take centre stage in the poetry of T. S. Eliot. The decline of values and the multifarious problems of the twentieth century have caused modern man to create parentheses that detach them from each other, from society, from nature and even from themselves. This paper examines the horrifying consequences of life in a chaotic and disconnected universe on human existence from the perspectives of frustration, despair, and alienation. The poet explores and employs rhetorical tropes and linguistic codes that present individuals whose lives have been torn apart as a result of political, economic, social and religious crises. Social limitations and individual inadequacies have pushed modern man into hopeless individualistic worlds that are not connected to those of others around them, and the consequences of this are devastating. The present article is an attempt to analyze the role of isolation in T.S Eliot's *The Waste Land* and *Prufrock*.

**Key Words:** *Disconnected existence, Frustration, Despair, Alienation, Isolation and Distressful Consequences*

## INTRODUCTION

Thomas Stearns Eliot is considered as one of the most important modernist poets. The content of his poem as well as his poetic style give elements of the modern movement. Describing as "one of the most daring innovators of 20<sup>th</sup> century poetry" (Horst Frenz), T.S Eliot's influence on literature in general and poetry in particular was considerable. As one of the leading voices reflecting the "disillusionment of the younger post-war-1 generation" (Academy of American Poets), Eliot's works were a profound departure from the more moralistic and idealistic Victorian poetry that preceded them. It turned attention away from the collective group and onto the individual, something T.S Eliot demonstrates thoroughly through his handling of isolation in "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock" and Canto 3 of the "Wasteland": 'The Fire Sermon' creating the ideal model for modern existence. This paper presents insight as to how T.S Eliot critiques the loneliness and misery of modern life.

Eliot's poetry posed questions on the "received ideas and accepted appearance" of everyday existence rather than providing answers for it. (Sharp:34). "we can only live, we cannot even conceive of ourselves as a single clear identity.....our being can only be found amidst the shifting currents of our most immediate experience", observes philosopher Henri Bergson depicting the modern reality, its rootlessness and its dissatisfaction, set in the square of urban metropolises, the literature of modernism manifests, the breakdown of social norms and cultural structures.....the rejection of history, substituting it with a mythic past and the growing sense of alienation, isolation and boredom in a world wherein daily existence is synonymous with "living death". (Ellis)

In both 'The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock' and 'The Wasteland' isolation, boredom, and questions of human existence pervade all throughout and play a vital role. *Prufrock* begins abruptly, with the very first line throwing the notion of isolation into question briefly, as it is an address from one person to another. "Let us go then, you and I," (Eliot) begs the narrator (*I*). The remainder of this stanza actually gives the appearance of personal addresses: "Oh, do not ask," he implores (11), after a couple more "let us go's. However, in the next (two lines) stanza, the reader is introduced to the reality of the situation: that this poem is not a monologue from one person to another, but rather a monologue within one person's head. As he winds his way through the streets, he encounters hotels where meaningless sexual encounters occur only to pass them by, instead continuing his path to a room where "the women come and go / Talking of Michelangelo," narrates Prufrock as he establishes the scene in which the inner monologue takes place (34-35).

We slowly become aware of the type of isolation that is represented by the character of Prufrock and come to recognize his solitude from a roomful of party goers. The famous “Michelangelo” lines quoted above suggest his disconnection from the group at hand. Prufrock, who thinks neither with upper-class censorship nor sensibilities, is clearly not the type to walk around discussing Renaissance painters. Instead, he questions his own place in the society at hand, asking “Do I dare / Disturb the universe. (44-45 ) Thus, Eliot establishes the isolation both socially (Prufrock is not of the class to discuss Michelangelo) and personally (“I am not Prince Hamlet, nor was meant to be; Am an attendant lord, one that will do / To swell a progress, start a scene or two” [111-113]).

Not just Prufrock’s language and observations suggest the isolation he has imposed upon himself in order to ponder these relationships between classes and people, but the images presented as well. “I should have been a pair of ragged claws / Scuttling across the floors of silent seas,” he says after describing himself watching “the smoke that rises from the pipes / Of lonely men in shirt-sleeves, leaning out of windows” (71-74). Such lonely images never leave any room for doubt. He is even more lonely than the lonely men he describes, for all he can do is watch them; he is as the crab on the ocean floor: isolated, silent, waiting to be consumed. In essence, this is the image that lies at the heart of *Prufrock*, because of the pervasiveness of images involving consumption: “sawdust restaurants with oyster-shells” (7), “the taking of toast and tea” (34), “I have measured out my life with coffee spoons” (51), “I have seen my head... brought in upon a platter” (82), “the cups, the marmalade, the tea” (88), “Do I dare to eat a peach?” (121). These are then coupled with the notion of the women talking of Michelangelo, who created art that is to be consumed (with the eyes and mind) and Prufrock, who reflects on being critiqued by unrelenting eyes on each aspect of his appearance:

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!)  
My morning coat, my collar mounting firmly to the chin,  
My necktie rich and modest, but asserted by a simple pin -  
(They will say: “But how his arms and legs are thin!”) [39-44]

Prufrock, then, represents that portion of society that has thrust themselves into solitude in order to contemplate themselves and the nature of things. Especially following the strict period before it, this is a contrast to the “pure” concerns of the controlling Victorian period. Attention was turned inward, onto the self, and took place largely in the head of the thinkers. As with anybody analyzing their own body or ideas, self-doubt and insecurity will play a large role, which is captured beautifully with Prufrock and his self-imposed Isolation. He is just one example of why Eliot is crafting an image of the Modernist in these two poems.

The second poem worth looking at requires volumes to adequately explicate. However, after Ezra Pound’s strikingly brilliant critical move to break the poem up into five parts, the larger narrative is broken up into much easier digested sections. The one under the glass in this case is Section III: The Fire Sermon. Right away, with just the title of the section, it becomes abundantly clear how it pertains to Modernists, and to the idea of Isolation. The Fire Sermon was a sermon given by the Buddha urging the monks who were listening to purge themselves from the passions of the world and to free themselves from earthly things. However, if Prufrock was an example of isolation because of introspection or insecurity, this section automatically bears the connotation of religious fervor and isolation to escape from the wickedness of the world around.

It opens on a scene of a fisherman in a boat on a river surrounded by rats and trash, “Musing upon the king [his] brother’s wreck” (*Wasteland* 191). He is weeping and singing sorrowful songs as he notices that the only other living thing surrounding him is the rats dragging their slimy bodies through the vegetation. The description given of the river Thames is, for all intents and purposes, the first solidified image that does not come in the form of nightmarish, fragmented visions (see the third section of I. “The Burial of the Dead”) to describe the “Waste Land” about which Eliot writes. It is cold, despicable, and devoid of hope, the only company being rats rattling bones behind the boatman and the occasional horn or motor bringing people to their impending doom. It is a dreadfully lonely image, but not in the same way as *Prufrock* was, for this is filled with wickedness and filth. It becomes revealed later that the narrator of this section is the blind Tiresias, who will be the figure of isolation represented in this portion of the text. As his nature suggests, he is naturally isolated in several different ways: being blind, he is alone in that he cannot form visual pictures of the world around him. Being somewhat of a hermaphrodite (“throbbing between two lives, / Old man with wrinkled female breasts” [218-219]), he is separated from the normal classifications of sex. Being a seer, he is disconnected from

the realm of reality as it is commonly experienced, because for the rest of the section, he goes in and out of visions, transporting him to different parts of the world.

However, all of these isolations, although he seems to have a pathetic, miserable existence (“By the waters of Leman I sat down and wept” [182]), he is free from the depraved world he detachedly sees in his visions and in memories of the past. One such encounter that Tiresias can only witness in his mind’s eye is with Mr. Eugenide, who proposes the blind Tiresias for “lunch” at the hip Cannon Street Hotel followed by “a weekend at the Metropole” (213-14), both places known for their overt worldliness and for their association homosexual tryst. It is the first reference to twisted sensuality in this section, one of the passions which Buddha describes a burning fire, and which Eliot is, in turn, criticize harshly on the behalf of the world in which he lives.

The blind Tiresias then relates a vision he has of a typist’s forced sexual encounter with a clerk who takes advantage of her being “bored and tired, / Endeavour to engage her in caresses / Which still are unproved, if undesired” (236-38). Tiresias claims how he has suffered with her, because of his foreknowing the scene and being helpless and unable to do anything about it. Not only is he separated by space, but he is separated by physical ability to be able to abate any of the events he witnesses. His isolation is physical, mental, and emotional, as he is able to perceive the scenes at hand and participate in them emotionally, but is unable to do a single thing about them.

Tiresias is one of the most perfect models for modern existence: He is neither male nor female, he is blind to the things immediately around him, but can still see with ultimate clarity through his visions and prophecies, and he is unable/unwilling to act, all of which are attributed to isolation in every sense of the word. In a manner of speaking, there is a great parallel between him and Prufrock, who has “seen it all,” even though unlike Prufrock he feels no motivation to action.

The final image presented in this section is onset and surrounded by fragmented language, with an almost tranquil description of the river. In this scene, Elizabeth, the woman of royalty, who was required to constantly appear ready for marriage (hence her being referred to as “The Virgin Queen”) is described in her tryst with Leicester. Now, in order to have a full grasp on the weight of this image, a brief parallel to the legend of the Fisher King is necessary: where the Fisher King’s land is renewed with the renewal of his sexual potency. The Queen’s land is renewed, by the opposite hand, with her appearance of sexual restraint, despite where “Richmond and Kew / Undid me. By Richmond I raised my knees / Supine on the floor of a narrow canoe” (293-95). Her situation distorts the possibility for sexual renewal in such a twisted modern world.

The section ends with a religious incantation in reference to the Buddha’s sermon, calling for a ritual and holy cleansing through separation from the world at hand. It ends, aptly both for the whole picture of the Waste Land, for the sermon, and for the metaphors of twisted, lurid sexuality, with burning. Through it all, Tiresias is situated alone on a river of filth in a boat, able to perceive all and ponder it, like Prufrock, but too isolated to make a difference. He can only observe the wasteland around him with the means he possesses and deal with them it as it comes.

## **CONCLUSION**

In both of these poems, Eliot presents two vastly different “protagonists” with separate and individual cause isolation. However, when put side by side, Prufrock and Tiresias form quite the complete picture of the ideal Modernist: sexually null, all-seeing, ever-processing and interpreting, and cripplingly isolated.

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