
The Idea Of Masculinity In The Works My Last Duchess And The Lovesong Of J.Alfred Prufrock

Robert Browning's *My Last Duchess* and T.S Eliot's *The Love Song of J.Alfred Prufrock* are monologues that are similar in presenting middle-aged, unmarried men who are suffering from insecurities. Eliot's 20th century *The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock* is the story of a man searching for love and acceptance whereas *My Last Duchess* is set in the 17th century and focuses on a Duke searching for power. Both of these stories focus on the role men have within society, and how they are not achieving their desires. Prufrock is a feminine man whereas the Duke is a hegemonic man. Both *My Last Duchess* and *The Love Song of J.Alfred Prufrock* are both interested in the idea of masculinity yet their approaches to masculinity are quite different. Despite their characters being complete opposites, they are both unsuccessful in obtaining their desires due to their insecurity with manhood. Through the connection of the narrators, I will examine how their desires cause them to feel insecure in their manhood.

Considering the narrators have the same outcome, it is important to analyze their differences, to see why they both have the same result. First, *My Last Duchess* is a dramatic monologue where the Duke unintentionally reveals himself; when trying to criticize his last duchess he reveals his detestable nature. The Duke first reveals himself to be a man of jealousy, and arrogance. This is shown when the Duke has the portrait of his last duchess painted by Fra Pandolf a man of chastity and honour yet the Duke's jealousy is so strong that he observes the painter with his wife in order to oversee his wife actions. The duke is so insecure within his relationship he feels he needs to supervise his duchess and Fra even though Fra is a man of faith and would not pursue the duchess. The duke never says that his wife cheated on him however, it is insinuated in the quotation "The bough of cherries some officious fool/ Broke in the orchard for her" (Browning 27-28). This gives the impression that men often gave her gifts and it made the Duke furious because he thought that men were attracted to her. Later, the duke implies that the duchess was the kind of woman who had to be watched, for she had a heart "too easily impressed" and "her looks went everywhere" (Browning 23-24). The duke is revealing his jealousy because he believes that his duchess was unloyal and seeking the attention of others.

An interesting passage that concludes the poem is when the Duke directs his attention to a sculpture of Neptune taming a seahorse. It is an ironic metaphor for the Duke's relationship with the duchess. Like the seahorse, the Duchess was a free spirit and rather than improve himself to 'tame' her, he simply killed her.

Unlike *My Last Duchess*, *The Love Song for J.Alfred Prufrock* is an interior monologue. Prufrock is an anxious man who lacks self- confidence. His anxiety and self-consciousness are highlighted when he is descending the stairs. His emotions overwhelm him and he becomes indecisive. He asks himself " Do I dare? Do I dare?" he fears that he will "disturb the universe" (Eliot 46). Prufrock fears so much of what others are thinking of him that he continuously doubts himself. He continues to ask himself questions on how to comfort himself but admits he will be unsuccessful. Prufrock worries that the conversation does not apply to him " women come and go/ Talking of Michelangelo" (Eliot 35-36). Despite that, he does not need to join the conversation he still worries about what others are doing. He fears the judgment of others.

His anxiety is continued to be seen when he asks "Should I, after tea and cakes and ices, / Have the strength to force the moment to its crisis?" (Eliot 79-80) This shows the absurdity of Prufrock's worries due to the fact that the order does not matter. Prufrock's insecurity is shown when he continues to worry and references his balding head twice. A significant quotation that expresses Prufrock's emasculating anxiety is when he says

"And I have known the arms already, known them all—

Arms that are braceleted and white and bare

(But in the lamplight, downed with light brown hair!)

Is it perfume from a dress

That makes me so digress?

Arms that lie along a table, or wrap about a shawl.

And should I then presume?

And how should I begin? (Eliot 55-59)

Prufrock's distress over the woman is evident here he cannot approach her. Prufrock is aware that if he does not approach her he will remain unhappy, but he has no confidence in where to begin with the woman. He is terrified to speak to her because he feels he will not be able to explain his feelings well enough, and he does not think that they will be interested in him, therefore, holding him back.

Although these narrators have different character traits they stem from the same place of insecurity. Together the characters demonstrate the wide scale of masculinity. The Duke being hegemonic and Prufrock leaning towards more feminine masculinity. The significance of the narrator's being polar opposites is that it shows the interests the poets had in creating particular social constructs of masculinity within different eras. According to Butler's article, she explains that Prufrock embodies Judith Halberstam's definition of female masculinity,

Masculinity in this society inevitably conjures up notions of power and legitimacy

and privilege; it often symbolically refers to the power of the state and to uneven distributions of wealth. Masculinity seems to extend outward into patriarchy and inward into the family; masculinity represents the power of inheritance, the consequences of the traffic of women, and the promise of social privilege. (1736) "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock" embodies the implications of this definition in several ways. First and foremost, if masculinity represents in part "the consequences of the traffic of women," then Prufrock's ideation of women as objects of his desire is a type of masculine performance. Therefore, masculinity inhabits the instances of Prufrock's male gaze, which are present from the first few lines of the poem to its ending (Halberstam 1736).

With that being said Prufrock in multiple ways truly embodies the definition of female masculinity. Especially due to Prufrock's idea of a woman being an object of his desire. The

significance of Eliot focusing on female masculinity is that it demonstrates the complex array of men during the 20th century.

Looking at the character traits and differences of the narrators the desires of the narrators are understandable. The Duke wants to feel powerful because it makes him feel like a "true man". Whereas, Prufrock desires a sense of belonging within his subconscious. The Duke's lack of power is demonstrated through his last duchess. To further understand why the Duke desires power we need to analyze the duchess. The last duchess was a beautiful woman which is evident since he wanted to have a painting of her. When he speaks of the painting, he mentions her blushing "spot of joy". This suggests that she was easily embarrassed by a compliment. The Duke, however, seems irritated that she was easily pleased "She had/ A heart—how shall I say?—too soon made glad (Browning 23-25). With the Duke reacting in such manner, it demonstrates his need to feel powerful especially compared to his wife. Although Prufrock desires to have a sense of belonging within his subconscious is shown through in a sense a woman as well. When Prufrock is at the party he wishes he could speak to a woman but continues to ask himself questions, yearning for a response. According to an article, it concludes that "the male character's anxieties and conflicts all the results of a past unsatisfactory mothering situation during his childhood. Hence, the male character, strives perpetually to relinquish and abandon the female characters and his whole life is an endless search for his idealized loved object" (Sistani). Furthermore, in *My Last Duchess* the duke reveals himself to be powerless and emasculated because his last duchess was willing to put herself before him, causing him to earn for power and according to Efirid "the duke becomes" the limit case of the practice of reserve as sexual inhibition that defines normative bourgeois masculinity" (78). "In his confrontation with the Duchess," Sussman argues, "the Duke confronts a crisis of manhood in that the Duchess challenges both the formation of manliness as reserve as well as, the Duke's use of such manliness to justify his social position. The female here refuses to recognize the class position that, with clear reference to the Victorian bourgeoisie, is ostensibly validated by sexual and emotional constraint". Efirid's insight demonstrates that the duke tries to uphold his manhood yet the Duchess makes him feel less than because she does not care that he is a duke.

Coincidentally the duchess is why the Duke is unsuccessful in obtaining power. Prufrock is unsuccessful in his search for obtaining a sense of belonging within his subconscious because of fear. One of the reasons that the duchess causes the Duke to be unsuccessful in his search for power is because she makes him feel emasculated. The duke is unsuccessful in his desires because he is not seen by others in the way he wishes to be seen. He continues to show that he is unsuccessful with power because he has to kill his wife in order to feel powerful. This is seen when he has to hide her smile because even though she is dead he still feels powerless in comparison to her. When the duke sees her smile he feels weak and emasculated. Prufrock is afraid, he fears rejection not only from the woman but from himself, he overthinks everything he does. This, in turn, causes him in the end to fail.

T.S Eliot and Robert Browning write poems that tackle the idea of masculinity yet they go with opposite approaches. Despite the narrators being on opposite sides of the masculinity spectrum, their endings are the same. In the end, both characters are unsuccessful in obtaining their desires. Prufrock is incapable of achieving a sense of belonging within his subconscious because he is fearful and anxious. The duke fails to achieve power because of his character traits but as well as his last duchess. Thus, by looking at both, they create a message