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Plath and Prufrock: A Destructive Fantasy

Near the end of T.S. Eliot's "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock," the narrator (presumably Prufrock) asks the question, "...Do I dare to eat a peach?" (122). Though this question may seem trite and rather unremarkable, it begs the reader to fixate upon the phrase in the context of the rest of the poem. By the end of "Prufrock," the narrator enters a fantasy where he feels that he has aged significantly; he reexamines the questions and concepts he struggled with throughout the poem, including that of sexual and unreciprocated desire. This is not necessarily surprising due to the changes in priorities and wisdom one gains as he ages and develops new perceptions because of a larger collection of experiences, but there is a problem with this logic: Prufrock does not actually age. While Prufrock does not age within the poem, Sylvia Plath's confessional "Lady Lazarus" does, as she details her experiences surrounding death occurring every decade by referring to the Biblical figure Lazarus, notable for being raised from the dead. Like Prufrock, Lady Lazarus exists in a sort of in between space of life and fantasy, though more specifically life and the fantasy of death. She exists in life as a figure who is intertwined with death, much like Prufrock exists as a figure who is intertwined with an age-fluid fantasy. By focusing upon these separate realities and projections, it becomes clear that an inner conflict exists within both Prufrock and Lazarus, specifically concerning their similar

reckoning with the painful individual realities they reside in alongside their fantasies of life and death.

Prufrock uses a fantasy unconstrained by age to confront his crises in a more digestible way; he begins to question whether to eat a peach instead of whether to confess his desires to a woman who may not feel the same way. He can repress and transform these desires into unimportant questions that generally have no repercussions, since the inanimate peach cannot seemingly create the emotional pain that another person can. By fast-forwarding to a future where he is no longer at the age which is under a societal pressure to find love, Prufrock creates a world where these existential problems can become the simple question of eating a peach. It is noteworthy that Eliot chooses a peach to be the fruit in challenge; a peach connotes sexuality and desire, leading to an assumption that Prufrock is projecting his fear of indulgence in desires onto the fruit. The peach also is an inherently messy fruit that can create an embarrassing eating situation if done in public, with its juice and the eater's saliva painting the front of its indulger. Disregarding the peach's connotation, the physical fruit itself may not be entirely safe to eat, leading Prufrock to question whether he should consume it. "Do I dare to eat a peach?" could very well be translated to the earlier line, "Do I dare / Disturb the universe?" (Eliot 45-46). Both lines portray Prufrock's craving of approval and are exemplary of the questioning of his own raw judgment and desire. Although the literal object of the question may change, Prufrock still struggles with the role he plays in the world and the results of his actions.

While Prufrock explicitly struggles with the question of what his actions in this reality could result in, Plath's Lazarus has already seemingly made her attempts to "disturb the universe," for she has attempted to take her own life three times over her thirty years (with one

being described as an accident). Both she and Prufrock try to exist in a state that is desperate to be immortal: Lazarus attempting to be unconstrained by death and Prufrock with age. And despite her claims that, “The second time I meant / To last it out and not come back at all” (Plath 37-38), Lazarus makes it clear that she is aware that she will return to life with the previous line, “And like the cat I have nine times to die” (Plath 21). Therefore, she is conscious of what her freeing from death’s grip will put on the reality she is disrupting, as well as not actually gripping with the reality of herself dying. If Lazarus knows that she has multiple times to die and come back, then her first encounters with death do not actually force her to reckon with the permanence of ending her life. Unlike Prufrock, who is aware that he has only one chance to change his entire existence (which causes him a great deal of duress), Lady Lazarus knows that she will come back and garner a reaction from those in her life. She explains that:

It’s the theatrical

Comeback in broad day

To the same place, the same face...

.....

That knocks me out. (Plath 51-53, 56)

This sentiment is noteworthy due to Lazarus’ being blown away by becoming a spectacle for her return to life after attempted suicide. This feeling can be attributed to either her failure to die (or success in returning) and/or her becoming overwhelmed by the voyeuristic crowd of doctors, strangers, and loved ones. Her language here, as well as when comparing herself to the cat, is full of confidence and nonchalance. It forces the reader to wonder whether she revels in or despises the reaction to her suicide attempt, which Plath chooses to portray as a sort-of

performance with the language, “The peanut-crunching crowd” (Plath 26) and her barker-like addressing of the audience as, “Gentleman, ladies” (Plath 30). In his essay on the matter, Paul Breslin suggests that Lazarus is choosing to take on the role of this strip-tease barker in order to draw in her audience to shamefully become voyeurs of her pain and destruction. It is as if she is choosing to project herself, and those around her, into a circus-like performative fantasy. But in true reality, is she disappointed that instead of empathizing with the pain that drove her to be suicidal, the general reaction was that of an audience in awe, of being amazed that she is alive? With her skill to exist between living and dead, Lazarus has no need to feel grateful to survive, because she, unlike those around her, knew that her return was imminent. Thus, she becomes a performer. She, like Prufrock, struggles to make her mind up of whether to live or die (or in Prufrock’s case, stay still or act) and both speakers currently attempt to settle in a middle-ground of two options that are mutually exclusive. And despite both of their efforts to try and achieve the unachievable feat of existing in two realities, if neither make a hard decision, they will both perish.

While both Prufrock and Lazarus struggle to exist in two separate realities, Prufrock seems to choose the path of action when he states, “I shall wear white flannel trousers, and walk upon the beach. / I have heard the mermaids singing, each to each” (Eliot 123-124). This is a remarkable line from Prufrock due to its seemingly declarative nature; he finally decides to act, not question, nor put off, nor wonder. Although we are not aware of whether he actually acts on his decision, it is still important that he has taken the step towards acting. While he previously expressed that time allows the procrastination of action, specifically uttering the phrase, “There will be time, there will be time” (Eliot 26), in this elderly state, time no longer acts as a friend to

an indecisive man. The imagined passing of time forces Prufrock to act on his impulses, to make a decision, to think as if time is working against him, not with him. Furthermore, his mention of the mermaids singing can quickly be deemed a new rendering of the women Prufrock fantasizes about, giving even more weight to the case that his age directly impacts his mindset. His acknowledgement that there isn't time to focus on every little decision implies that he knows that there isn't time. Prufrock knows he must act if he wants to pursue a relationship with the women he admires, or in this new translation, to have the mermaids sing to him. In these last lines of the poem, he essentially acknowledges the fallacies in his previous train of thought; sometimes one must take measures without the fear of backfire or rejection.

Though Prufrock's matured fantasy does force him to face his previous fears and thought process, his current state of mind still interjects itself in the form of his insecurities. While describing the mermaids who sing to each other, he wistfully adds, "I do not think that they will sing to me" (Eliot 125). To further examine this statement, it is imperative to understand the parallels from the earlier lines, "In the room the women come and go / Talking of Michelangelo" (Eliot 13-14), to the later "I have heard the mermaids singing, each to each" (Eliot 124). Eliot is drawing a clear image of mermaids that is directly related to the women who Prufrock desires to accept and embrace him; it is fair to assume that these mermaids are a projection of the women who Prufrock pines after. Both the mermaids and the women in the room converse among themselves and do not invite Prufrock to join, allowing him to revel in introspection and unsettledness. Drawing back to his assumption that the mermaids will not sing to him, a revelation is made regarding why Prufrock struggles with indecisiveness. Despite the fact that he blindly assumes time is his friend and holds legitimate fears of rejection, this line

reveals that Prufrock holds some feeling of unworthiness that inhibits him and trumps all thought-process. By outwardly stating that the mermaids will not sing to him, he demonstrates a lack of self-esteem regarding women. Unlike Lazarus and her air of confidence and performance, Prufrock deems himself lowly and unimportant. Why should he join the conversation of Michelangelo if his perception is that the women are not interested in speaking to him? It doesn't matter that there is time to further his life, it matters that there is time for him to believe in his worth. His fears of rejection don't stem from ideations of worst-case scenarios but from his real thoughts on how things will play out. Prufrock doesn't just think there is a chance that women will reject him, he truly believes they will.

As Prufrock eventually faces the fallacies and reality of his situation, Lazarus chooses to stay in her performative fantasy that doesn't actively choose life or death. This is evident in the last stanza, which proclaims, "Out of the ash / I rise with my red hair / And I eat men like air" (Plath 81-83). Here, she no longer is addressing an audience of voyeurs but instead the powerful, "Herr God, Herr Lucifer" (Plath 78). Before this, Lazarus used her barker-like language to create a fantasy of performance that allowed her to reconsider and rewrite the pain that led her to suicide, much like Prufrock used his aging fantasy to force himself to reconsider his present existence. With her provoking, "Beware" (Plath 79), a shift occurs: now taunting such eternal beings, Lazarus is choosing to make herself mythological and immortal, much like the phoenix who continuously rises from its own ashes, and the resurrected Lazarus she is named after. She chooses to exist as someone not affected by mortal concepts of life and death. She chooses her own reality and is not frightened by any almighty God or Lucifer, instead suggesting that they should beware her.

Breslin also details that this taunting of God and Lucifer can be projected onto Plath's own personal life, making Lazarus a persona. God and Lucifer then are representative of, "the father and husband who have driven her to attempt suicide" (Breslin). Therefore, Plath is using the mythical Lazarus to project her vengeance on the men in her life who have caused great enough pain to drive her to ideating death. This idea can be strengthened by examining Plath's "Daddy," which also utilizes Holocaust and Nazi metaphors present in "Lazarus" that seemingly, "convict her father and her husband of Hitlerian monstrosities in order to justify the anger she nonetheless felt" (Breslin). Plath's Lazarus is a, "...featureless, fine / Jew linen" (8-9), similar to the Jew that she proclaims herself to be in comparison to the Nazi father she addresses in "Daddy." This historically horrendous and loaded use of metaphor establishes a power imbalance that both speakers struggle with. The label of "Jew" in terms of the Holocaust connotes that Plath's speakers are targeted and destined towards an atrocious ending. She is establishing that at one point, these characters are unjustly and fatally forced towards this demise by the men who created this pain.

The speaker in "Daddy" then goes onto declare, "I made a model of you, /And I said I do, I do" (Plath 64, 67), painting her marriage as another vow to the father that haunts her. Both the speaker's husband and father are portrayed to be key players in the causation of the speaker's pain, and (if we speculate biographically) Plath's pain. If the God and Lucifer that Lazarus taunt are actually the men in life who strike her the most pain, then her fantasy of myth is realized. She has immortalized herself by confronting these men with her jeers in "Lady Lazarus" and her finite, "Daddy, daddy, you bastard, I'm through" (Plath 80). She is no longer the victim of their hauntings, but now the ghost that haunts them, who will never be defeated or killed; instead, she

will “eat men like air” and consciously choose and participate in the fantastical reality she created. For Plath, it is a reality that eternalizes her voice in the words that she writes, and thus she, like her Lady Lazarus, will have (and has) outlived her own demise.

As Plath’s speculative persona Lazarus has chosen her realized fantasy of immortality, Eliot’s fictional Prufrock remains indeterminate to his fate. The final line Prufrock declares is, “Till human voices wake us, and we drown” (Eliot 131). It implies that Prufrock is often awoken from his fantastical mind, filled with insecurities and fears, and into reality. This reality doesn’t allow him to skip ahead and benefit from hindsight, but instead forces him to make a move and he is helpless. The prior fantasies of peaches, hair loss, and mermaids must be abandoned and that terrifies him, since he believes the real experience of humanity will drown him. In order to thrive, he must take advantage of what his projections imply and begin to productively exist; he cannot hide behind a fantasy of aging to protect his insecurities and vulnerabilities, nor can he project these fears onto imaginative images. Prufrock doesn’t indicate whether this expelling of thought will allow him to swim above the experiential aversions that hold him down but perhaps this is purposeful. His struggles with decision-making and taking advantage of the present act as driving forces within his inner monologue. Grappling with them may allow him freedom from the rut of a racing mind, but submitting to them will just facilitate a life burdened with purposelessness.

This confirmation of an awakening also brings attention to the dichotomy of internal and external existence for Prufrock. It is without a doubt that his mind is flowing with projections, insecurities, fantasies, and desires, but what does his internal thought have in relation to the established, external reality that he wakes to? Prufrock describes the city he walks through to be

sickly and seedy, with, "...half-deserted streets" (Eliot 4), and, "The yellow smoke that rubs its muzzle on the window-panes/ ...[which] Lingered upon the pools that stand in drains" (Eliot 16, 18). This descriptive language allows the reader to understand what Prufrock actually sees. He is in a setting that is bleak and deathly, which may very well be the stimulant that prompts him to begin his existential monologue of what his story and potential life entails. Lazarus similarly (and more explicitly) explores this question of internality versus externality when she invites her enemy to, "Peel off the napkin/The nose, the eye pits, the full set of teeth?" (Plath 10, 13). Instead of addressing her bodily setting, like Prufrock, she instead chooses to investigate what the exterior of her body portrays in contrast to what lies right below the surface. Her grim language of peeling the external layer of skin off to reveal a ghastly image provides a concept that runs alongside the pain that she feels. Both the underlying of her face and the pain she feels within are unpleasant and frightening; she may have a pleasant exterior (though this isn't entirely established) but what lies beneath is unsavory and forces her to issue a warning to those that want to see her inner self. Perhaps she is even in fear of what is inside of her. Both Plath and Eliot use this exploration of what lies inside in relation to the surface to further add to the overall theme of reality by forcing their speakers to contrast the material against the internal being.

Prufrock's newfound use of inclusive language of "us" and "we" when describing his awakening also seems to suggest that the story of Prufrock is not singular, but universal. Perhaps his words are merely a rallying cry to live freely and conquer one's fears and vulnerabilities. Prufrock may not be able to overcome them, but his indulgence in thought can be used as a warning call for the still to finally act. This parallels the immortality that Plath conveys in "Lady

Lazarus,” which controls the narrative of a speaker’s multiple demises, and directly addresses the men that led to them. Both Prufrock and Lazarus warn their audiences to beware them. Prufrock advises to not fall into the pits that he was trapped in, while Lazarus declares that after every death she endures, she will rise with a vengeance. Prufrock attempts to learn from and react to the fantasy he has created in order to positively affect his reality. Lazarus alternatively chooses to engulf herself into her fantasy, allowing existence as mythical legend and brushing aside her mortality in order to finally control the mortal reality she once resided in. She creates fantasy of performance and myth that allows her to cope with and shed the pain endured, and she floats in an ecstatic self-righteousness once she embraces it.

It is additionally worth noting that Eliot’s Prufrock exists as a seemingly more fictitious being, as Plath’s Lazarus and “Daddy” speaker are speculative projections. The irony is that the one who seems to be more bound to the traditional concept of reality is the less biographically read character of Prufrock. In light of this concept of Lazarus being a persona of Plath, it is interesting to explore what exactly Eliot tries to represent with the character of Prufrock. In his essay regarding the broader implications of the poem, Roger Mitchell suggests that Prufrock, “is the Representative Man of early Modernism. Shy, cultivated, oversensitive, sexually retarded (many have said impotent), ruminative, isolated, self-aware to the point of solipsism.” This interpretation of the character offers a perspective that illustrates a glimpse of what Eliot strove to create with Prufrock: an archetype that provides a glimpse of honesty in looking towards the reality Eliot and his art was approaching. In contrast with the more personal persona of Lazarus, Eliot instead uses “Prufrock” to create a character who embodies and responds to a literary movement that is gaining popularity and momentum.

Both poems and their speakers exist in a center between fantasy and reality, and advise readers to carefully consider the results of their respective choices. As Plath and Eliot utilize themes of reality and mortality, the personas that they create allow for a world of internality to become realized. “Lazarus” and “Prufrock” push themes of internal exploration alongside fantasy, while also addressing realities that both the poets and their speakers are apart of. Lazarus’ reckoning with ideations of suicide and confronting the causations of pain (which also occurs in “Daddy”) allows for rampant speculation of her being an indirect voice of Plath herself. Eliot similarly can be accused of using Prufrock as a response to the cultural period he existed within because of Prufrock’s alleged embodiment of modernism. Though we will never be able to confirm these speculations and theories, they provide a real-life understanding of what speculations and interpretations mean in regard to differentiating between the real and fantasy, and issue structural personas that explore this unbounded realm. And much like the Biblical Lazarus both Plath and Eliot reference, these poems offer a real insight and warning that only a hindsight created by fantasy allows.

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