

Twentieth-Century Fiction
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Lecture - 17
Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock - Part 3

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No! 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,
Advise the prince; no doubt, an easy tool,
Deferential, glad to be of use,
Politic, cautious, and meticulous;
Full of high sentence, but a bit obtuse;
At times, indeed, almost ridiculous—
Almost, at times, the Fool.

I grow old... I grow old...
I shall wear the bottoms of my trousers rolled.

Shall I part my hair behind? Do I dare to eat a peach?
I shall wear white flannel trousers, and walk upon the beach.
I have heard the mermaids singing, each to each.

I do not think that they will sing to me.

I have seen them riding seaward on the waves
Combing the white hair of the waves blown back
When the wind blows the water white and black.

We have lingered in the chambers of the sea
By sea-girls wreathed with seaweed red and brown
Till human voices wake us, and we drown.



So, hello and welcome to this NPTEL Course entitled Twentieth Century Fiction. We are looking at T S Eliot's poem; the Love Song of J Alfred Prufrock. So, in this particular lecture we will finish this poem and we will just wind up with some of the general discussions we have from this poem and Eliot's early poetry in general.

So, we have seen how this poem is among other things a poem about procrastination, it's about this indecision that is inhabiting an indecisive moment, to be or not to be, to go or not to go. He, the speaker, the male speaker in this particular poem is obviously, quite neurotic and he cannot bring himself to go to a particular space that he wants to inhabit, he wants to have access and that space is a social space.

It's a high prestige space, it's got high prestige markers about it and it is a space women come and go talking of Michelangelo. So, again Michelangelo becomes here a metaphor for high art, metaphor for high culture, just consumed by a very privileged clientele a privileged set, a privileged group of consumers right, that is the say that is the space where this male speaker wants to go, but; obviously, he cannot bring himself to visit that

place and that entire the failure to visit the place; like the failure to narrate the experience becomes part of the poetry in this particular poem, the love song of J Alfred Prufrock .

And just if you remember when we ended the last lecture, we talked about how the speaker keeps saying that you know this constant references to that is not what I meant at all, that is not what I meant at all. This difference between what you mean and what you are able to say is something which is dramatized in this particular poem, that difference becomes an epistemic difference, a difference little bit of knowledge.

But, it also becomes a difference which is quite existential in quality you know as a human being as a human subject you know a certain knowledge you have access to certain knowledge and the knowledge can be one of darkness, knowledge could be one of enlightenment, the knowledge could be one of epiphany etcetera. But, he cannot bring himself to tell that knowledge, to convey that knowledge and this failure to convey this failure to narrate becomes a very big part of the narrative politics in this particular poem.

Now those of you who have read renaissance theatre would know that one of the most famous literary examples of this procrastination of this indecision is Shakespeare's Hamlet. Now interestingly Hamlet is brought in in this particular poem as well, as an intertextual reference. So, what is intertextual reference? An intertextual reference or intertextuality is a process through which one particular text; the fictional text refers to another text in order to convey a point, to corroborate a point, to emphasize a certain point.

Now, that reference to another text its like a hyperlink condition that reference to another text becomes part of the narrative politics of this particular that particular you know text. So, let us say if text A is mentioning text B as some kind of a reference in terms of the content that text A carries, then that process through which that reference is made that becomes a part of the narrative politics of text A right. So, you see that in films as well, let us say for instance you can have a film which has a particular scene in which the characters in that scene refer to some other film where there is presumably a similar situation or a different situation.

Now, what that does, is that it makes the connect interesting at the same time it emphasizes the point, either as a comparison or as a contrast. Now there is an intertextual reference to Hamlet in this particular poem, when Prufrock says that you know the

reference to Hamlet is made, but interestingly the reference the comparison is made only to negate it. So, the speaker very say a moment he mentions Hamlet then very quickly, he says that I am not Prince Hamlet, nor was meant to be and I am going to read these terms in a moment, but just before we do that it's important to see how the intertextuality plays out in Prufrock, it's a comparison by contrast.

So, you know the comparison is made just to emphasize the contrast, just to underline the contrast and that underlining the contrast becomes an important thing right. So, that is something which the male speaker does quite interestingly in this poem right. So, again among other things the reference to Hamlet is also a marker of high art right, like Michelangelo right. So, we just saw how Michelangelo becomes a metaphor for high art and its consumption, you know high culture and its consumption.

So, culture; obviously, over here becomes an activity of consumption, a process of consumption right and that is something which we need to keep in mind very very consistently; the culture in Prufrock culture in Eliot's early poetry is always a process of consumption, a process through which certain artefacts are consumed, a process through which certain ideas are consumed, a process through which certain artworks are consumed etcetera right.

Now, Hamlet again corroborates the consumption process, it continues that process of consumption. Now this is what the speaker says in terms of reference to Hamlet. And this is right after the speaker has made multiple references to the inability to tell what he actually means and also he has foregrounded the fact that what he is saying is not exactly what he meant at all. So, right that is not what I meant at all, that is not it at all. These are the lines with which the stanza ended the stanza which we looked at the last lecture ended right.

So, again the difference between the schism between meaning and narrating, this schism between what you mean and what you are able to narrate, that that schism becomes quite dramatic in Prufrock and that schism is an epistemic, that schism is also existential right. It becomes almost like an existential crisis and this is something which we saw also in Joseph Conrad's Heart of Darkness as I mentioned, you know there is a lot of references. There is a lot of connect that could be made between Prufrock and Heart of Darkness, because even there as we know by now we have just finished the text.

Marlow when he comes back from Congo, he is not able to convey what took place in Congo, is not able to put that into a narrative which is solid and consistent and robust and which can be consumed consistently and therein lies the slight absurdity, the danger of absurdity in Marlow's narrative in *Heart to Darkness* ok. So, that narrative politics in mind, let us come to what the speaker is saying and this should be on your screen, where he is saying no I am not Prince Hamlet, nor was meant to be. I am an attendant lord, one that will do to swell a progress, start a scene or two.

Advise the prince, no doubt an easy tool, deferential, glad to be of use, politic, cautious and meticulous, full of high sentence, but a bit obtuse. At times indeed almost ridiculous, almost at times the fool. So, the look at the bracket over here, it starts with Hamlet and ends with a fool right. So, Hamlet; obviously, is just melancholic, is an embodiment of melancholic masculinity which is, which has been glamorized in theatre you know that that image, it is you know melancholic prince standing in the middle of the theatre and delivering very profound lines that has always become a very glamorous, that has always carried a lot of glamour quotient in theatre in a way theatre has been consumed and produced right.

So, Hamlet becomes a marker of the glamour, marker of that glamorous masculine melancholia which is princely royal, profound, philosophical etcetera. So, the reference to prince Hamlet is made and again the word prince is interesting, because that is what is being conveyed to us that this belongs to a higher pedestal of masculinity, this belongs to a higher pedestal of melancholia. So, melancholia or the self-absorbed man is something which Hamlet represents or embodies you know in culture in high culture.

So, the reference made to Hamlet only to undercut it immediately, because the speaker is saying over here; I am not Prince Hamlet, nor was meant to be and I was never meant to be a Prince. And then of course, we have a series of adjectives, series of epithets, series of you know descriptions about what he actually is. So, what is he? He is an attendant lord. So, I am very much a secondary person, a very much a second fiddle, I am very much a person who is not really, who is unequipped to be in the foreground, who is unequipped to be the centre of attention. One that will do to swell a progress start a scene or two. So, I can at best start a scene or two, I can at best swell a progress .

I can advise the prince, advise the prince no doubt an easier tool right. So, I can advise the prince. So, my job, my position, my location over here is primarily that of an adviser. I am someone who is a second fiddle, I am someone who is in the background, I can always blend in the background, but I can never be the prince Hamlet, I can I can never be the centre stage of attention, because if I were that that I could have easily have access or have had access to that room where women come and go talking of Michelangelo. Then fact that I cannot go there it means I am someone who is always relegated to the background, that relegation is also part of the existential alienation that the speaker says over here, the speaker experiences over here.

So, that experiential and existential alienation speak up is something which is constantly foregrounded, and you know and that becomes part of the self-effacing manoeuvre over here. So, he is, obviously, being very self effacious and he is effacing himself completely he is not saying that I am I am a big prince. In fact, he is just cutting himself down, he is just making his alienation more and more prominent right. So, he says that you know I am deferential, I am glad to be of use.

So, I am a very usable person, but then I am also very deferential, I am very respectful, I am not someone who is haughty or arrogant or pompous and proud. I am definitely not someone who is in the centre of attention, I do not belong there right. Some someone who is just you know you know a second fiddle I am an attendant lord one that can start a scene swell a progress, advise a prince, but that is about it.

Deferential glad to be of use, politic, cautious and meticulous. I am politically correct, I am parliamentary, I am cautious, I am guarded, I am very meticulous I am also very very I pay attention to details, full of high sentence, I can be pompous, but a bit obtuse, I can also be obtuse, I can also be you know esoteric and pompous in a very very negative way. At times indeed almost ridiculous, almost at times the fool. Now this whole idea of this ridiculous and the fool is interesting, because a fool in Shakespeare is very a conflict character as I am I am sure most of you aware of it.

The fool is not really a jester in Shakespeare, the fool is also a philosopher in Shakespeare, but the only difference is unlike Hamlet who is also a philosopher, who is a philosopher prince and that is how it was perceived and consumed in popular culture. The fool in Shakespeare is not taken seriously, is not someone who is taken seriously, is

not someone who is paid attention to, but oftentimes you find it is a fool who has access to maximum information, it is a fool who has access to maximum insight right.

And this combination of insight and information that the fool has is often a very futile combination, because you know it ends up being nothing. It ends up being just a very meaningless and purposeless kind of a combination. So, the fool over here becomes the metaphor of purposelessness, the fool over here becomes the metaphor of impotence, you know someone who is completely powerless, despite the prophetic quality that he or she may have.

And you know this is what the state of Prufrock is, that Prufrock is at best a fool, someone who probably knows things, someone who probably has a knowledge of reality, probably has a knowledge of what is the darkness around, what is the deception around, what is the pretence around.

But then he cannot really bring himself to utter it or to articulate it or narrativize it, not least because you will not be taken seriously right. And this sort of lack of seriousness with which he is perceived, the lack of seriousness with which he is which he is being received, is something which gnaws at his personality, something which cuts into his personality is, something which alienates him further right.

And this alienation is interesting in terms of how this you know this whole narrative drama plays out, and this narrative drama is also psychological drama as you know, it's something which he is experiencing, it's experiential, it's psychological, it's existential, but what it does essentially in terms of all coming in together, it alienates him, it alienates him socially, it alienates him psychologically and it just makes him more and more self-effacing.

So, the self-effacement that we see over here is part of the alienation in a process, is part of the process through which the speaker or the human subject gets more and more disconnected to the reality around him right. So, it is a lack of desire, it is a lack of connect, it is a lack of warmth, it is a lack of cognition. And all that all those lacks all those crises are combined together and inform the narrative crisis of the speaker right. So, again like heart of darkness we have the narrative crisis and a cognitive crisis coming together to generate a very unique and dark existential crisis ok.

And now we have this image of senility which is depicted to us; an old age creeping and I grow old, I grow old, I shall wear the bottoms of my trousers rolled. So, again the whole idea look at the way in which something as profound an existential senility is described with some sartorial markers right. So, the bottoms of trousers rolled becomes the marker of old age. So, when an old age comes, it cannot in order to be a straight person, you know straight in a sense not to be really strong, you do not really have a very strong gait, you do not really have a very very strong features anymore, so you have to roll your trousers right.

So, because he cannot, you know you're always you know bending down, you are not really straight and arrogant and pompous and strong anymore. So, that again that becomes part of the you know the masculinity crisis in this particular poem. The fact that he has to roll the bottoms of his trousers now he has to roll it down in order to fit in because his body is shrinking. And again you know that could be connected to Shakespeare's Seven Stages of Man and that stage where the human being, the human limbs, the human body begins to shrink, because of old age, is something which has been referred to over here.

So, I grow old, I grow old, I shall wear the bottoms of my trousers rolled and then speaker goes on to say shall I part my hair behind, do I dare to eat a peach, I shall wear white flannel trousers and walk upon the beach, I have heard the Mermaids singing each to each right. So, again the whole idea of rhetorical question, shall I part my hair behind? do I dare to eat a peach? the peach is interesting over here, because you know the peach is also reminiscent of the forbidden fruit you know and there is a.

If you take a look at different versions of the original sin story you will find there are certain versions which talk about the fruit as a peach and not really apple the way it is popularly perceived that Adam and Eve they ate an apple, but in certain versions which are sometimes considered more authentic, the forbidden fruit is actually a peach.

So, do I dare to eat a peach? So, that becomes as a moment of as a marker of transgression. The peach over here becomes the marker of transgression, the speakers ask himself do I dare transgress, do I dare be subversive, so shall I part my hair behind. So, something very domestic and mundane, something related to appearance so at that very mundane level and immediately that is related to that is equated with something

almost cosmic in quality in terms of dimension. Do I dare to eat a peach, do I dare to transgress, do I dare to part my hair behind and do I dare to transgress it all put together in a very interesting curious combination of opposites, and it also has a sort of a bathetic quality and I talked about Bathos I suppose already, Bathos as an anticlimactic thing.

So, we have a pitch towards which you are progressing and suddenly there is a dip and it falls into something which is flat and funny and flippant and then it rises again into something which is profound and almost cosmic in qualities. So there is no consistency in terms of significance, it just goes up and down, it dips up and down, and there is a reference to white flannel trousers. I shall wear white flannel trousers and walk upon beach, I have heard the Mermaids singing each to each. So, again this whole idea of Mermaids over here becomes interesting, because if you take a look at the poem at the end it becomes increasingly a dead song, song of death right. So, it is like a death knell right.

So, the Mermaids are singing each to each and this whole idea of the male speaker walking upon a beach, wearing white flannel trousers, hearing Mermaids, it becomes a very dreamlike. Again very cinematic sequence, if you take a look at some of the expressionist cinema at that time you find these are, those films have scenes full of these full of these types, where suddenly this dreamer human subject this dreaming human subject finds himself on a beach surrounded by fairies and Mermaids and sometimes people would from real life and then they find themselves rolling and sometimes flowing along the beach.

So, the beach, the sea they become metaphors or instruments of endlessness against which, the human the limited human frame, the finite frame of the human body is situated in order to create a contrast as limitlessness of the sea with the finitude of the of the human frame. So, I have heard the Mermaids singing each to each, I do not think that they will sing to me. So, again this is the death of desire that has been described over here. So, I do not think the Mermaids will ever sing to me, because I am not desired as a person, and this inability to hear the Mermaids singing to him and his inability to believe that the Mermaids can sing to him, becomes part of the death of desire process or the you know the Thanatos process if you will.

So, if you take a look at this you know two very broad divisions Eros and Thanatos; Eros being life you know sexuality, productivity, fertility and Thanatos being just the opposite death you know lack of productivity, lack of sexuality, lack of fertility. So, the speaker over here is moving more and more towards a Thanatos zone.

In other words, this poem now begins to become a death poem. So, it's not really a love song, it's a poem about lovelessness all right. So, the lovelessness becomes a foregrounded over and over again and it as a dramatic category as an experiential category. So, the speaker becomes acutely aware of the lovelessness that he is experiencing over here. So, that is why the line; I do not think that they will sing to me. So, again it's a whole idea of existential alienation, the fact that he is cut off from all you know all desire, all attention more human warmth, that becomes part of the existential problem that he is experiencing over here.

I have seen them riding seaward on the waves, combing the hair, white hair the waves blown back when the wind blows the water white and black. We have lingered in the chambers of the sea, by sea girls wreathed with sea seaweed red and brown till human voices wake us and we drown. So, again this whole idea of a dream sequence being interrupted, being cut by human voices, and interestingly see how waking up is also an act of drowning, because prior to that we have you know the whole idea of the dream elevating you right.

So, riding seaward on the waves and then the whole idea of the, the human subject lingering in the chambers of the sea and if you go back in the beginning of the poem where the image of the sea animal, you know I should be in a pair of rugged claws scuttling over the floors of silent seas.

So, again the floors of silent seas, the chambers of the sea they all come back over here. So, all these different fluid images, they have sometimes an amniotic quality in which you know it can contain the human subject. So, someone's like a womb like quality in which the human subject seeks solace, the human subject seeks situatedness or seeks comfort right. So, the chambers of the sea becomes over here an amniotic space, where the human subject you know desires comfort, the human subject desires protection right, but that is denied to him very very quickly, because human voices wake him now, wake

him up and as soon as he wakes up he drowns. So, saying human voices wake us and we drown.

So, we have lingered in the chambers of the sea by sea girls wreathed with seaweed red and brown till human voices wake us and we drown. So, rather this whole idea of waking up and then drowning. The drowning becoming an image of helpless sinking or passive surrender becomes interesting over here, because while the fluidity of the sea is amniotic, while the dreams are sequence of you know Mermaids singing each to each becomes liberating, human voices waking up can only entail drowning.

Now, what that does and this is going back to something we discussed already; human voices waking you up into clock time right. So, this becomes a departure from real time or psychological time. So, if you remember I mentioned Henri Bergson, H e n r I Henri Bergson B e r g s o n and Henri Bergson had two dimensions of time that he theorized; one is clock time and one is psychological time or clock time, or real time. So, real time or psychological time is the time that we situate that, in which you we are situated as human subjects as feeling human subjects right and that, the whole idea of inhabiting a time in which you can feel and experience, gives you a sense of agency right. So, that becomes a unique time, that becomes time just uniquely available to you and hence this psychological time, hence this real time according to Bergson.

Now, if you contrast that to clock time; clock time is standard, clock time is standardized, clock time is uniform, clock time is democratic, clock time is equally accessible by everyone. So, clock time does not make a difference in terms of the phenomenal feeling of the human subject. So, the only way in which you can convert a feeling into time is by inhabiting real time or psychological time. Now this bit at the end where the human subject is saying till human voices wake us and we drown. So, when you when you wake up we cut back into clock time, when you wake up we cease to be in real time or psychological time.

Because, then we wake up in a world where everything is the same, where everything is uniform, where everything is standard and this whole idea of standardization and uniformity it undercuts any idea of clocked, of any idea of real time any idea of psychological time which can be liberating and elevating. So, at the end of the poem we find this is actually about time, is actually about procrastination, this is actually about a

spatialization of time, where time becomes space and in the process the desire to inhabit that space time, the desire to inhabit that time, so desire to move into time right. And of course, the whole idea of you know the crisis over here is the crisis which comes where we get more and more alienated from time.

So, that space where women come and go talking of Michelangelo. Again, look at the spatiotemporal quality, the women are coming and going which is so spatial as well as temporal they are coming and going in certain times which is periodic in quality that movement, and the speaker wants to have access to that space time. So, that spatio-temporality becomes a very interesting phenomena in Eliot's early poetry especially in this particular poem right.

And, so the last image is important human voices waking us you know the human subjects are waking up by human voices and then you wake up into reality, you wake up into standardized routine existence or routine rituals which are very far removed are very far departure from the elevation and the romance of psychological time and real time. The speaker had briefly experienced and enjoyed in his dreamlike sequence with the Mermaids right.

So, with that we come to the end of the poem. So, it is among other things a poem about time, a poem about procrastination, a poem about exhaustion, a poem about melancholia and it's also a poem about culture and its consumption right. So, how do you become, how culture is inequally consumed right? So, culture becomes an act of consumption fair enough, but then the act of consumption is very unequal in quality. There is there are privilege consumption consumptions, the privilege markers of consumption and equally it is also inadequate consumption or markers of inadequate consumption. And; obviously, the speaker in this particular poem J Alfred Prufrock, he becomes an embodiment of inadequate consumption.

He in a way gets consumed because of his inadequate consumption. So, he is being looked at, he is being gazed at. So, if you take a look, if you remember the some of the old lines which we read with some details, how certain parts of the body, certain parts of the dresses are so scrutinized and zoomed in using almost a magnifying glass and this magnification is a very cinematic process. where certain object is magnified, where certain objects are sort of blown out of proportion, just to convey a particular image, just

to convey a particular point and we find how the necktie, the hair brushed back, the trousers rolled are sort of these different sartorial embodied markers.

They actually they are reflective of the speaker's embodiment or rather the crisis in embodiment and as you remember embodiment is an entanglement of the neural and the discursive negotiations of the human subject makes with the world around him or her right. So, the neural and the discursive. So, it is psychological, it is embedded, but equally it is extended right. So, this embedded extended quality of embodiment becomes a very important quality and we find over here, the speaker is trying to corroborate this lack of embodiment by looking at how the embedded as well as the extended qualities are compromised.

So, the embedded qualities are compromised because he is psychologically confused, he is procrastinating all the time, he does not quite know how to convert an experience into a language, understandable language and there is also a problem with extended embodiment, because he cannot inhabit the space, the privileged space women come and go talking of Michelangelo, the space of high culture, the space of privilege right.

So, these are some of the salient and fundamental points that this particular poem looks at in great details. So, as you know by now as you are in agreement hopefully, these are some of the most important pieces of literature written in modernist periods, because it ticks all the modernist boxes as we read it today. It has stream of consciousness, it has clock time and psychological time, it has neurosis, modernism is also often about neurosis. It also has moments of epiphany where he had this light bulb moment, where you realize something which you remember something and that elevates you and liberates you as a superior human being right. So, that that those epiphanic moments are also there in this particular poem.

Although it all ends in futility and purposelessness. And the last image of the human subjects drowning in a sea of voices is interesting, because you know and again if you take a look at it more literally these human voices which are waking them up are standardized voices and they drown their voices, they drown the unique subjectivity, they drown the unique agency and this drowning of the agency is important over here. And, that is something which the speaker is fearing, that is when the threats of modernism, the complete annihilation of agency, the drowning of agency.

They follow the human body, the human subject, the human mind, the human feeling frame. They are all drowned by different instruments of standardization, by different instruments of utility, by means of different instruments of uniformity. So, uniformity and utility those become the biggest torch bearers of modernist achievements of modernity, the achievements of modernity, against which we have the human subject which is ambivalence which is procrastination which is melancholia was not insufficient to situate himself in that uniform standardized space, and this whole poem is about the failure to situate yourself spatio-temporally.

So, you know situating yourself, it entails a spatiotemporal situation, it has to be in particular space, it has to be in a particular time and it has to be a combination of space and time. And, that combination that combined quality of spatio-temporality is something which the speaker can never inhabit fully or adequately and that is what the poem is all about, its about inadequate embodiment.

And that accounts for procrastination, that accounts for indecision, that accounts for the narrative crisis and that accounts also for the cognitive crisis. So, some of these are some of the issues which we will take up when I read the next poem that we will study in this particular course, which is also from Eliot's *Prufrock* and other observations, but that would be a poem called *Preludes*, but with this we come to an end of the *Love Song of J Alfred Prufrock*. We will move on to *Preludes* in the next lecture.

Thank you for your attention.