

A Freudian Psychoanalytical Interpretation of The Love Song of J.Alfred Prufrock

Kai Xu

Xi'an Peihua University 710100

Abstract: This paper aims to employ Freud's psychoanalysis theory to analyse the protagonist in The Love Song of J.Alfred Prufrock.By studying Prufrock's desire for love and his attempt to break the cage that forced on his id by society.However,his failure is doomed as the repression of his libido causes his regression of life desire.Thus he is to "old" and weak to make his proposal.So he will definitely be "drown" in the sea of disillusionment of modern society.

Keywords: The Love Song of J.Alfred Prufrock;Freud;Libido;Psychological Analysis

1. Introduction

The poet Eliot and his The Love Song of J.Alfred Prufrock have always received lasting attention.This poem depicts the "love song" of a middle-aged man.He has a strong desire for love,but dares not to get it.This man hesitates before his proposal.His dilemma throughout this poem reflects the disillusionment of the modern society.Proposal has been regarded as one form of expressing love throughout the history.But in this special moment,it only concerns Prufrock and his future wife,deciding the future of them.Whether they will get married or not is still in the air.But the result will command forever,for it decides whether they will live together or be separated forever.

Prufrock's sexual desire gives laws for his every judgment.Therefore,all of Prufrock's preparation for proposal is rational and acceptable,for it follows the custom of the modern society.But the problem lies in that he purpose is not pure enough.And the reason why he wants to do it is because it is the only way to satisfy his inner drive for sex and drive to eliminate his loneliness.So it is safe to say that the Prufrock's s libido exposes the complexity of his inner heart activity.Because his id is deeply restrained by himself and the society,he becomes a melancholy figure who hesitates of proposing to his dream lady.This regression of his libido causes his inadequacy of ability and forces him to transform his love of the lady to the dream of the mermaids.

The intention of Eliot is to create an individual who represents the whole society.This poem presents Eliot's psychological change in his way of pursuing love.What matters most in each individual's life is an eternal topic,and it is not difficult for us to find that Eliot is very eager to get love form his life partner,but it eventually turns out to be a huge disappointment for him.At the end,Eliot has no choice but to give up his unrealistic fantasy and indulge himself in the only world that belongs to him,that is the world of literature.As a genius,he just integrates his passion into poetry,preparing a slightly sad love story of a middle-aged man for us,showing the collapse of his inner view of love.This poem can be seen as Eliot's most sincere monologue to love.Initially he has a strong desire for it,then he goes everywhere to find it regardless of everything.Finally it seems on the surface he meets his "Cinderella",but it is just a beautiful fairy tale which can never be realized in his lifetime.

2. The Repression of Id

Freud defines as the biological part of psycho in the personality structure.It is a world of chaos which is filled with unstable instincts suppressed under the unconsciousness.In Freud's view,the id yearns for pleasure and happiness.As he states,"it is filled with energy reaching it from the instincts,but it has no organization,produces no collective will but only a striving to bring about the satisfaction of the instinctual needs subject to observance of the pleasure principle"(Freud 106).In Freud's personality structure,sexual instinct is considered as the most fundamental and influential instinct among all the instincts controlled by the id.In this poem,Prufrock's sexual drive can be felt directly.It is this very drive that puts him into the love matter.Determined to make a proposal to the lady he

loves, Prufrock invites his friends to go with him. But after going through “certain half-deserted streets”, after viewing “one-night cheap hotels” and “saw dust restaurants with oyster-shells”, his initial intention shakes. He begins to doubt himself with the question “Do I dare?” (Eliot 26). Even when he is challenged by his own inner activity, he still forces himself to fulfill his task for his inner self is driven by his id.

According to Eliot, the name Prufrock means “a ‘prude’ in a ‘frock’”. And at the initial creation period, this poet has a subtitle “Prufrock among the Women”. “Frock” and “women” both indicates Prufrock’s sexual desire and his lack of masculinity. In the poem, Prufrock the speaker describes that the evening is “like a patient etherized upon a table”. (Eliot 26) In his mind, the world is sick and dead. This is also a reflection of Prufrock’s psychological paralysis and physical disability.

Avoiding pain and unhappiness also belongs to the spectrum of the id for its sole purpose is to try to gratify the desires of all instincts. If something makes one feel uncomfortable, the id will try every means to help him or her reduce the sense of discomfort and obtain relaxation. To eliminate the tension and anxiety which contribute to painful emotions, the id sometimes will even urge people to distort the reality. As it is shown in the poem, Prufrock is too timid to pursue his dream of love. But though he is trapped by his own personality, he still makes the decision of proposal. He asks himself “Do I dare disturb the universe?” (Eliot 28) So when he listens to the music and watches the ladies talking, he becomes more and more anxious of his inner emotion. He can’t stop forcing himself to face his strong sexual desire. But he is too timid that he continually tells himself “there will be time”. He is torturing himself by repressing his inner self. Through the meta-physical conceit of the poet, we can feel that the world is not normal nor regular for Prufrock. He is no longer able to perform like a normal man. He claims that he is no prophet as he couldn’t get strength even after he has “wept and fasted, wept and prayed” (Eliot 30). These sacred religious rituals couldn’t afford him courage. And he is not surprised about that for he says “I have seen the moment of my greatness flicker.” He knows that he is growing weak and old and he is afraid. This fear is what Freud calls “neurotic anxiety”. Thinking that he may be rejected if he makes his proposal to the lady, Prufrock is tortured by his anxiety. His id is pushing him to the edge of expressing his true desire. But he is afraid of the rejection, or to say, the possible punishment of his actions. So he hesitates and wanders on the streets, torturing himself in his mind.

3. The Regression of Libido

That is when the libido comes into affection. “Libido, analogous to hunger, is the force through which the instinct, here the sexual instinct expresses itself” (Freud 326). Freud points out that libido goes through an extensive development before it enters the stage of reproduction in a way which can be regarded as normal. However, this development does not always proceed well. This development involves two dangers, inhibition and regression, which are great cautions for perverted desire. Based on his analysis, Freud verifies that every single impulse is possible to be held back in the earlier stage of development and this arrest of a partial impulse in an early stage is called as a fixation of the instinct.

It is clear enough that Prufrock’s impulse is not satisfied. Social activities and interactions with women make him nervous. He keeps thinking of the arms and perfume of the ladies. But in the meantime, he also couldn’t stop wondering how will they think of him. Afraid of the discussion of “a bold spot in the middle of his hair” and his thin legs and arms, he tries to hide himself in the narrow streets. He wastes his time and lives a meaningless and tedious life as he “measured my life with coffee spoons”. He can feel that he is formulated by the eyes of the women.

The eyes that fix you in a formulated phrase,
And when I am formulated, sprawling on a pin,
When I am pinned and wriggling on the wall,
Then how should I begin
To spit out all the butt-ends of my days and ways?
And how should I presume? (Eliot 26)

Prufrock is fixed on the wall like insect specimens and studied by people. By using another conceit, Eliot unravels the rigid definition that forced on Prufrock by the society. This is the regression from the society that fixed and formulated Prufrock. He is controlled by the society and is more difficult to satisfy his libido. He does not long for life or death. He has no impulse of destruction and aggression. His libido is severely restrained which leads to his sexual inadequacy. For he asks himself: “Shall I part my hair behind? Do I dare to eat a peach?” (Eliot 27) The reason why he wants to “part his hair” is because his boldness. The regression of his desire will restrain the growth of hair. The regression of Prufrock’s libido makes his life move backwards. He has little power of fighting for his love and life. His instincts of aggression and destruction are buried deeply in his mind. So all we can see is a middle-aged man, wandering on the narrow streets, half-dead and half-alive.

4. Displacement

Not being able to satisfy his desire, Prufrock unconsciously use a method which is called “displacement” by Freud. Prufrock questions himself and hesitates about his proposal. He is too afraid of being rejected so he tries to eliminate his burden of proposal in the last part of the poem. As his desire is not satisfied and is far from being satisfied, he is struggling in his mind. His id is being restrained but he still desires to complete his dream. But he feels that he is old and his action may be ridiculous. Till the end of this poem, Prufrock is still hesitating and is not able to make his proposal. So he has to transform his desire to another object. He fancies himself walking on the beach and listening to the voices of the mermaids. He “lingered in the chambers of the sea by sea-girls wreathed with seaweed red and brown”. Here his desire is once again indicated.

In Greek mythology, a mermaid always sits on the rocks and seduces the sea crew with her song to cause the shipwreck. They are given the characteristics such as temptation, vanity, beauty, cruelty and desperate love, and are usually depicted as symbols of vanity and voluptuousness. The mermaids have no gender. Their beauty is their weapon to kill. The ladies in this poem are siren-like temptations. They are full of danger and their image is a symbol of desire. For Prufrock, the ladies are just like mermaids. The mermaids’ liveliness, youthful vitality and voluptuousness are in contrast to the weakness and sexual incompetence of the aging Prufrock. It also implies that his attempt to courtship will eventually fail. He is aware that this sexual desire is hard to fulfill. So he says: “I do not think that they will sing for me.” (Eliot 30) He realizes that once the dream is awakened by human voice, he will be forced to return to reality, drowned by the sea, and went to destruction.

Conclusion

Trying to release his libido, Prufrock constantly forces himself to go for his proposal. But obviously he has not finished his task till the end of the poem. Although Prufrock is the only person in the poem who wants to rebel against the despair in the modern society by trying hard to sing his “love song”. But it is very unfortunate that he can not have it, therefore he can never sing the love song.

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About the author:

Kai Xu (1998.1-), female, Nanyang City, Henan Province, Master Degree Candidate, title: Teaching assistant, research Direction: English education.