T.S. Eliot's *the Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock* and Andrew Marvell's *To His Coy Mistress*: A Comparative Critical Analysis

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Abstract

The present paper is a comparative and contrastive study of Andrew Marvell’s *To His Coy Mistress* and TS Eliot's *The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock*. These two poems show similarities as well as contrasting features. They have similar themes, similar situations but differ in attitudes of the persona in the poem. Marvell's poem features a self confident, bold and straightforward lover who tries to convince his beloved to accept his love proposal. In Eliot's poem, on the other hand, the persona is a timid, indecisive procrastinating lover who is very much aware of his limitations. In contrast with Marvell’s poem, there is a tendency of postponement of action in Eliot's poem. There is echoing of different elements of Marvell’s poem in Eliot’s poem in similar as opposite ways.
The Study

In literature, it has not been uncommon for literary works to echo in following literary works. This relationship of impression of one literary work on another can be conformity or of opposition. Andrew Marvell's (1621–1678) *To His Coy Mistress* (1650 ca.) is reflected both in comparison and in contrast in T. S. Eliot’s (1888 –1965) *The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock* (1915). This comparison and contrast can be seen in both thematic and structural aspects.

Marvell’s poem is aligned on Carpe Diem theme that life is too short to postpone love and so ‘Day’ should be seized. Opposite to this, Eliot’s poem, focusing on the eternal and primeval dilemma of ‘to be or not to be’, highlights deferment of action.

Both of the poems are spoken by singer speakers. Both of them are monologues revealing their speakers' character both entail a crucial and almost similar dramatic situation: a lover's expression of love for his beloved and thus involve a critical moment - of declaration of love. But the poems have an equivalent amount of contrastive element as well. Marvell’s poem has a clear declaration of love whereas in Eliot’s poem, the lover just thinks of doing so.

In Marvell's Poem, the narrator is a lover full of enthusiasm of youth and expresses his love for his beloved in a straightforward manner, and tries to convince this ‘coy’ beloved to give in to his wishes. In Eliot's poem, by contrast, the narrator, J. Alfred Prufrock, is a middle aged balding man who is also in love with a woman and wants to express his love for her. But instead of speaking it up clearly, he just meditates whether he should do so or not. Whereas Marvell's lover says, Eliot's lover thinks.

Would it have been worthwhile...?

and

Do I dare...?

Marvell's poem opens with an announcement of the lover’s intention: to go for an outing with the beloved if there were no shortage of time, he would take her, or let her go, to several far and romantic locations like 'Indian Ganges side" or ‘by tide of Humber’ . Contrastively, Eliot's poem opens with the lover's suggestion to his own other self - to go out to spend the evening together; an evening that is calm and placid yet dull, like 'a patient etherised upon a table'. The lover, being unable to unwind his heart to his beloved, is content to talk to his other self only. Here, Prufrock - the lover- does intend to have an excursion but unfortunately his choice is limited. All he can do is to pass through 'certain half deserted streets' which
follow one like a ‘tedious argument of insidious intent’ to lead one to ‘an overwhelming question’ which he himself avoids; streets where there is smoke rising from chimneys and where there are ‘lonely men in shirt sleeves’.

The subject ‘we’ in Marvell’s poem gets split up into ‘You and I’ indicating the distance. In Marvell’s case the lover associates and identifies the beloved with himself and considers both as one (We). Two different individuals -the lover and the beloved - become one as ‘we’ but quite ironically, in Eliot’s poem the subject – one individual - gets easily distinguished into two distinct entities ‘You’ and ‘I’ dependant on a formal conjunction for their association and dissociation.

Then the time. Marvell’s lover is worried over the shortage of time as he feels that life is too short to be wasted in feeling shy in the matters of love. But there is no problem of time for Prufrock and so time is not a constraining factor. There is a lot of time for him to procrastinate, to postpone his action of declaration of love for some more time. What in Marvell's poem is

Had we but world enough and time
This coyness Lady were no crime...

and

Let us...

Rather at once our Time devour,
Than languish in his slow -chapt pow'r.

becomes

There will be time, time you and time for me
Time for a hundred decisions and revisions...

In Eliot's poem.

But middle aged Prufrock does have a realization that time is in fact fleeting.

I grow old, I grow old...

A similar feeling torments the mind of Marvells lover

But at my back I alwaies hear
Times winged Chariot hurrying near...

Whereas Marvell's Lover is bold and frank in his expression of love and is decisive too, Prufrock is timid and indecisive. Whereas the former does, the latter only thinks about doing. If at all he reaches a decision, there are chances of its revision -and descending of stairs, that is of its cancellation.
Time to turn back and descend the stair…
Not only this, he admits that he is unable to say clearly what he wants to say.

It is impossible to say just what I mean!

Despite Prufrock’s claim that he is not Prince Hamlet, he is no less indecisive than the Prince is.

In the speech of Marvell’s lover, there echoes an intensity of emotions, of youth, which is replaced by too much of intellectual element in Prufrock’s speech. The spontaneity, vigour and movement in Marvell’s speakers speech can easily be contrasted with inertia in Prufrock’s monologue. Marvell’s lover is all set to play a lead role in the process of love, Eliot’s Prufrock on the other hand timidly admits that he not a Prince Hamlet to play the central character; he is merely an attendant lord who will ‘swell a progress’, or ‘start a scene or two’.

Marvell's lover wants to enjoy his youth and his love fully.

Let us roll all our strength, and all
Our sweetness, up into one ball
And tear our pleasures with rough strife
Through the iron gates of life.

But poor Prufrock only has an idea which has not been expressed so far. He rather wonders if it had been worthwhile

To have bitten off the matter with a smile,
To have squeezed the universe into a ball
To roll it towards some overwhelming question…

Both of these lovers differ in one more regard. Marvell's lover, who wants to devour at his time at once like 'amorous birds of prey', can be contrasted with Prufrock who is cultured and sophisticated with his 'rich and modest' necktie and the 'collar mounted firmly to the chin'. The basic and animal instincts that are very strong in Marvell's lover, have been made dull in Prufrock by a joint effort of his conscience and the effect of an ever-present powerful society. In Marvell's excited lover, passion dominates. The spontaneity in the speech of Marvell’s lover is accompanied, as well as forced, by underlying strong emotions whereas in Prufrock, it is reason that the edge. The emotion has a say but only in undertones, always dominated by an effort to be socially correct, to keep intact his social position and to be at low risk. Fear is also a dominating factor in Prufrock. Marvell’s lover on the other hand seems to be free from it. Another thing that
colours the lover’s speech in Marvell’s poem is sensuality. The speaker is rational in his
own ways but his speech does bear a touch of sensuality. Prufrock, on the other hand is
controlled by reason, has a sense of growing old, and rarely coming close to sensuality.
Whenever he appears to be getting sensual, he is actually breaking the dream of
sensuality, as in

   And I have known the arms already, known them all—
   Arms that arebraceleted 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?

In contrast to the 'Coy Mistress' in Marvell's poem, we have a 'possibly unwilling mistress' in
Eliot's poem. Whereas the Mistress is really coy in Marvell's poem, she is only possibly
unwilling as Prufrock fears. In fact we never come to know her reactions to Prufrock’s love
proposal because the love proposal is never made. Her reactions are only anticipated- by
Prufrock in his imagination. Marvell’s poem is an address to a mistress who is a present
listener whereas prufrock’s poem is an address to his other self, not to his mistress. Whereas
the Mistress in Marvell’s poem is the second person, very much present in the poem,
prufrock’s mistress is a third person present only in the thought process of Prufrock.
Since the speaker in Marvell’s poem says, the poem assumes the form of a dramatic
monologue. Eliot's poem is more of an interior monologue as the speaker (or the thinker) says
the things to himself.
We can clearly notice that both of these poems move on parallel yet contrasting lines. It is
quite likely that Eliot was having Marvell's poem in his mind when he wrote this poem. Eliot,
as we know, was an admirer of Metaphysical school of poetry and influence always remains.
Whatever the relation between the two poets, it can be easily concluded that Marvell’s poem
represents a culture more open in laying bare its instincts. But Eliot’s poem represents a
world determined by social norms and codes of so called propriety.
Bibliography