

A Million Dollar Hope for the Practical People: Defence Mechanism and T.S Eliot's Pessimism

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ABSTRACT

Most of Eliot's readers look upon his protagonists as somewhat lost in the mire of materialism and sexual passion, swinging in between decision and indecision and groping in utter hopelessness. The belief is so firm that they look upon Eliot as a pessimistic poet and his protagonists as 'hollowmen'- spectres, invalid people or people cut off from the spring of life. Apparently, those characters being lifeless and inactive invent various psychological methods of 'projections' and 'defence mechanisms' to face the tribulations of life. But what we fail to take into account is the fact that those 'projections' and 'defence mechanisms' are kinds of reality checks that are practical and pragmatic and does not merely reveal the pessimistic mind-set of the people.

Key Words: Psychological, projections, defence mechanisms, pessimism, hope.

1. INTRODUCTION

It must be clear in the mind that Eliot's protagonists are not the inhabitants of an absurd world. His Prufrock or Gerontion are not Vladimir, Estrgon or a Davies willing every moment to call it a day. They do not grope in the dark for nothing or wait eternally under a leafless tree .They are rather the product of their own kind with their own inhibitions. They are afraid of failure. That is the reason they procrastinate.

But they are not heroic or tragic like Hamlet. They are rather Polonius- verbose and ostentious.

a) Fear of Failure and Disillusionment:

In "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock" the protagonist Prufrock finds proposing to the lady of his liking as uphill a task as murdering a man or disturbing the universe.

Prufrock wants to open his heart to the lady but he fears that the girls might taunt him and in that case he would be no better than a worm wriggling and pinned onto the wall. Thus the mere action of proposing becomes an 'overwhelming question' of life. Prufrock knows in the heart of his heart that for a bald man like him, there is little chance of success in marital relationship with the women of the higher strata of society. The women, on the other hand, are no better than Prufrock. They are frivolous and lighthearted. That is why they talk like Michaelangelo and are compared to a 'taxi throbbing waiting'. All lack courage and try to substantiate their position by employing various defence mechanisms.

In "The Hollow men" the hollow men are the inactive men who do not want to encounter the eyes of men of action like

Beatrice or Charon. They love to remain in shell, in their own death's dream kingdom. In Gerontion we find a postwar modern man who is totally disillusioned about life. He has achieved nothing in life. That is why he is disillusioned. In Eliot's "The Waste Land" we have a bunch of souls lost in the mire of materialism and sexual perversion. They have "Fear in a handful of dust" ("The Waste Land") all their life. But still they can nurture hope of resurrection only if they can give, sympathize and control:

"Datta Dayadhvam Damayata
Shantih shantih shantih." (Eliot, "The Waste Land")

b) Boredom, Ennui and Paranoia:

If the characters in Eliot's poems seem pessimistic, it is because they suffer from a kind of restlessness that is the product of a devitalized society consumed by the fire of sexual passion. With nothing worthwhile to do, they spend their life in boredom, sterility and frustration. Indeed the waste land is a barren place where there are people whom the contemporary society provides a "heap of broken images" and 'fear in a handful of dust'. The typist girl, the lady of the situation, Lil all suffer from some kind of mental illness or neurosis resulting from the complexities of modern life. If the Eliotean characters seem negative or pessimistic, it is because they are neurotic, schizophrenic or paranoid.

c) Complexities of modern life:

If the characters of Eliot are difficult to understand it is because of the complexities of modern life. The World War, industrialization, rapid urbanization and evolution of a consumer society has rapidly eroded the moral fabrics and value culture of the society. Instead of faith, there is doubt and disbelief. Shorn of faith, they find it difficult to attain to spiritual grace. Disillusioned, they seek sexual gratification to remain in oblivion. Complete detachment from materialism and Renunciation of this

world is the only possible answer to recover lost grace and simplicity. That is the subject matter of most of his poems including "The Waste Land", "Gerontion", and "Ash Wednesday". But in order to climb the spiritual ladder, one has to combat the forces of evil. In "Purgatory", Dante had to struggle to ascend the steps of sincerity, penance and love to reach the spiritual mansion.

In Eliot, the evils are doubt, faithlessness and sexual passion and one has to fight those evils away.

d) Communication Gap:

One of the tragedies of the modern time is that we never have the feeling of empathy in the suffering of others. The reason is perhaps the communication gaps that lie before us. Guided by selfish motives we fail to take others into confidence. Instead of purity and simplicity in relationships, we have ostentations and lust. That results in disease. Prufrock failed in love because he was too much conscious about himself and not the ladylove. The ladies too are misled by their showism and pretensions. They are much more interested in art and fashion than life. We have communication gaps in Albert-Lil relationship, in the relationship between the typist girl and her lover and many relationships in found in Eliot's poems.

e) A Practical set of People:

What may be argued in favour of the Eliotean characters is that they are a practical set of people who know how to live in the modern world. Perhaps their ways they act are the best among the possible ways. All of them know their limitations and strength and accordingly take a forward march or backtrack. This is revealed as much in "A Portrait of a Lady" as in "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock."

f) Rationalism:

Modern people are so scientifically tempered that complete surrender to Faith or

God is not possible. In the poem "Gerontion", the old man feels sorry for his loss of faith in Christianity and God, but he also feels that faith itself has become adulterated and cannot provide any consolation.

g) Life in the Squalor:

The world of Eliot stinks of sex, filth and fishy smell. But we know that life emerges even out of this squalor. In "Rhapsody on a Windy Night" we see a prostitute inviting the drunk night-walker and customers, a cat devouring stale butter and the moon walking like an old prostitute. This not only presents the bleakness or sordidness of the situation, but also presents life as it is and proves that life is not always available in its purest form; that purest love emerges even out of the mire of passion.

h) Sex and the City:

Eliot's world is narrow. His world is confined to city and more precisely to red light areas and brothels. Most of the people are prostitutes, spinsters, pimps or people looking for pay-sex. What the Eliote and heroes seek is not the basic needs for survival like food and clothing, but sex and the sex-stimulant. But this is not the universal human situation. There is a world beyond the brothel-house and sex

i) Aged World:

Eliot presents a bunch of devitalized senile people in most of his poems. There is an elderly woman in "Portrait of a Lady", an old man in "Gerontion" or a bald-headed man in "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock". So their mourning and hopelessness are not of the same as the mourning for the loss of youth of Keats or the war poet Wilfred Owen.

j) Glimmering of Hope:

Eliot is not a visionary poet. He did not even intend to become one. He presented the dismal picture of modern civilization. But in some of his poems for example in "A Cooking Egg" there is an inkling of hope

that straightens up the ruffled feathers. Though the protagonist in the poem finds the present situation sordid and pitiable, it is the past days of childhood and the vision of a better future -a life in Heaven that keeps him loving life.

k) Faith in Religion:

Though Eliot had written poems like "Gerontion" in which we find unmitigated gloom and stifling blackness, he also thundered in "The Waste Land" and rained in "Ash Wednesday". "Ash Wednesday" begins with the enunciation of blessed faith and the voice of his beloved and is ultimately followed by the vision of spiritual birth presided by Virgin Mary.

2. CONCLUSION

We may, therefore, come to the conclusion that all Eliotean characters were not lost souls as are supposed to be. If they ponder a little bit and defer their actions, those are ploys to counter possible failure.

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Bio-note

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