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A Perfect Storm: Prufrock and the Pandemic

2020. The year that changed everything. The onset of the Covid-19 pandemic was an event so unprecedented that it uprooted even the most fundamental aspects of modern society. Nothing could have prepared the world for what it was about to experience. Social distancing, working from home, and canceling family gatherings caused many to experience isolation like they never had before. To make matters worse, countless conspiracy theories created even more uncertainty in an already polarized society. Medical professionals were targeted and slandered for supporting safety protocols. People of Asian heritage were vilified as being responsible for creating and spreading the virus. Ordinary citizens were attacked for wearing masks in public. Anxiety and fear were at an all-time high. As the weeks turned into months and then into years, many people began to question if the pandemic would ever end and if life would ever return to normal.

The uncertainty and fear that defined the years of the Covid-19 pandemic are paralleled in the speaker of T.S. Eliot’s “The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock.” Although there is no global event driving his mental anguish, Prufrock shares many of the same fears and emotions as those who lived through the pandemic, including feelings of loneliness, hopelessness, and uncertainty. If Prufrock were to be transported to the year 2020, his debilitating anxiety, insecurity, and social isolation would have been amplified, making him susceptible to believing the conspiracy theories that emerged during the pandemic; however, he would have also had more opportunities to connect with others in ways that were not available to him a century earlier.

From the very beginning of T.S. Eliot’s poem, it is evident that Prufrock is a highly insecure, indecisive, and lonesome individual. Too unsure of himself to make even the simplest of decisions, Prufrock constantly attempts to ease his qualms by assuring himself that “there will be time / […] yet for a hundred indecisions” (Eliot lines 26, 32). During the Covid-19 pandemic, many individuals, especially those who were sent home from work or school, experienced similar feelings. Some felt as though they had nothing but time on their hands and, therefore, picked up new hobbies. They used their time during quarantine as an opportunity to acquire new interests, such as playing a musical instrument or experimenting in the kitchen. However, if Prufrock had experienced the Covid-19 pandemic, he would not have reacted in this way. Rather than seeing this time as an opportunity to learn something new, Prufrock would have been overwhelmed by the multitude of possibilities facing him. He would have second-guessed his decisions and asked himself, “‘Do I dare?’ and, ‘Do I dare?’” (Eliot 38), so many times that he likely would not have learned anything new at all.

In several instances throughout the poem, Prufrock conveys the bleak, desolate conditions in which he lives. He describes the “certain half-deserted streets” on which he walks and the “lonely men in shirt-sleeves” who inhabit the town in which he lives (Eliot 4, 72). If Prufrock would have experienced the height of the Covid-19 pandemic, he would have been stunned by the empty streets and businesses that suddenly replaced once bustling ones. The bare shelves in grocery stores, closed dining rooms in restaurants, and eerie emptiness in other public places would have caused him to retreat into a state of sheer panic and total desolation.

Prufrock would have also experienced intense paranoia related to the mask mandates instituted during the pandemic. Due to his insecurity about several aspects of his physical appearance, including his thinning hair (Eliot 41), and his skinny arms and legs (Eliot 44), he would have been pleased to hide his aging face behind a mask. However, he would not have been keen of other individuals wearing masks. As demonstrated throughout the poem, Prufrock felt as though the people around him were constantly judging his appearance. If he could not have seen others’ facial expressions behind their masks, he would have felt even more paranoid. He would have assumed that they were scrutinizing his appearance and wearing masks only to conceal their glares. He would have wondered if people were laughing at him or whispering about him, which would have intensified his fear of rejection and caused him to become even more riddled with self-doubt.

Throughout the pandemic, Prufrock would have been terrified of contracting the virus because of his intense fears of aging and death. He always believed that death was near, for he “[had] seen the eternal Footman hold [his] coat, and snicker” (Eliot 85). Therefore, he likely would have followed medical professionals’ mask recommendations and social distancing guidelines. However, Prufrock would have been easily deceived by the numerous conspiracy theories that plagued society during the Covid-19 pandemic. He almost certainly would have refused to receive the Covid-19 vaccine, which was the target of perhaps the most dangerous rumors that circulated throughout the United States during this time. According to a study conducted for the National Library of Medicine, one popular conspiracy theory suggested that the Covid-19 vaccine allowed for the introduction of a microchip into each recipient. Conspirators suggested that the “world elite” could operate these microchips by sending different signals to them and, thus, take control of all of humanity (Islam et al.). Because Prufrock always felt like the target of others’ scrutiny, he likely would have believed that the Covid-19 vaccines were created to allow those in authority to take over his life. However, as before, Prufrock would have certainly been overwhelmed with indecision when determining whether to receive the vaccine.

While the pandemic would have undoubtedly resulted in heightened feelings of anxiety and uncertainty for Prufrock, technology would have also offered him opportunities to connect with others in ways that were not possible during the early twentieth century. Social media, which played a significant role in keeping people connected during quarantine, would have served as a way for Prufrock to interact with others behind a veil of anonymity. Prufrock, like many others on social media platforms, would have felt emboldened to create an online counter persona. His alter ego would not have been hindered by his perceived physical inadequacies and lack of interpersonal skills. Perhaps social media would have allowed Prufrock to develop a meaningful relationship with a woman, which he desperately longed for but was too afraid to pursue in-person. Being able to communicate with others without the added vulnerability of a personal encounter would have helped to alleviate Prufrock’s loneliness, diffidence, and debilitating social anxiety.

To conclude, if the speaker of T.S. Eliot’s “The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock” would have experienced the Covid-19 pandemic, his already incapacitating insecurity, loneliness, and overall mental anguish would have only been exacerbated. Existing technologies, such as various social media platforms, could have provided Prufrock with the human connections that he desired. However, his declining mental stability, the widespread fear and uncertainty that accompany a global pandemic, and the preposterous conspiracy theories of the time would have combined to create a perfect storm that would have driven him to *complete* madness.

Works Cited

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