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Medical Humanities and the Prufrock Syndrome: An Analysis of T.S. Eliot's *The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock*

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Abstract: If health is a heavenly experience, then sickness is everyone's hellish nightmare. In his celebrated poem 'The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock', T. S. Eliot exudes this idea of health and sickness through his juxtaposition of heavenly world of yesterdays and the Hellish modern times. Through the employment of symbols, dramatic monologue and depiction of a fragmented and decadent modern world through the character Prufrock, Eliot construes many grounds to correlate health and humanities. Besides several interpretations of the poem in question here, the application of medical humanities would be yet another perspective into it. This paper, therefore, intends to engage with a new interdisciplinary understanding of the poem from the perspective of health and sickness.

Keywords: *Medical Humanities, Prufrock Syndrome, Gerontology*

Medical Humanities:

There has been a recent upsurge in thinking about medical humanities. Though there is no clear definition of what it is, it is however considered that medical humanities is an interdisciplinary approach to revisit and reimagine of newer attitudes and approaches in order to look and treat health and diseases of the people in our time; and how it is a novel way to debunk the earlier idea of impossibility of convergence between medical science and other disciplines. Medical Humanities has the potential to tackle the complexities of modern physical and mental health. Stories and books of patients and doctors or

hospitals can enable us to understand diseases, symptoms, patients, body and health better. It can help us to understand how sickness or diseases can make or break our identity in a society, and after all medical humanities can teach us how to treat our body while living and dead.

Medical narratives also foreground the relationship between doctors, patients, drugs and care. How empathy, care and diligence can recover a patient from his deadly disease. Memoirs, graphic novels, narratives of the patient are therefore great sources for the common man to understand the connection between literatures and health.

Similarly, it teaches us how medicine is not chemical only; rather it too is a social construction. The history of medicine is not of medicine only but of society too. It has been a part of the society and has been constructing what is health, hygiene and development. Finally, medical humanities can influence and remodel the care, prescriptions and general welfare of the patients as well as the doctors.

Foregrounding Literary Texts in Medical Humanities:

The increasing health hazards and depleting moral order during the twentieth century gave rise to many schools of thoughts and many creative works to deal with human health and psychology. The confessional school of writing is just one example which considered writing as therapeutic. Margaret Atwood, Adrienne Rich, Robert Lowell, Sylvia Plath, Anne Sexton, and W. D. Snodgrass etc. are some of the examples to remember. Their poems orchestrated the new way in which one can live through the turbulent time of war and depressions. Death, dream, suicide, frustration, drugs, sexual remorse, etc. constituted some of the prominent themes of their engagement with life, health and social survival. Take for example how Margaret Atwood seems to be compelled to take an arduous mental journey in order to understand herself thus:

that this is a poor country;
that a cliff is not known
as rough except by hand, and is
therefore inaccessible. (Atwood n.p.)

Or recall how Sylvia Plath draws our attention to suicide.

Dying
Is an art, like everything else,
I do it exceptionally well.

I do it so it feels like hell.

I do it so it feels real.

I guess you could say I've a call. (Plath n.p.)

Even after them, we have a plethora of creative writings dealing with health and humanities. Some of them are: Thomas Mann's *The Black Swan* (1954); Philip Roth's *Patrimony* (1991); Sharon Olds's *The Father* (1992); Alice Walker "To Hell With Dying"; Ethan Canin, "We are Nighttime Traveller". The significant contribution of them through their creative writings was to combine literature and experience to address the question of health and social psychology.

The Prufrock Syndrome:

T.S. Eliot's 'The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock' predates in decades to all these writers. The poem is about an ageing man who intends to pace with the contemporary trends of his time but too confused and scared to express his intentions into actions. This intentional anxiety and existential paradox are what constitutes the central theme of the poem. Primarily the poem can be understood through three prominent points of view: the employment of philosophies of French symbolists, particularly that of Mallarme, Rimbaud and Baudelaire; secondly, through his employment of Dramatic Monologue that seeks to connect Prufrock with the readers, and finally through the brilliant depiction of fragmented and juxtaposed world of modernity, particularly through decadent imageries and binaries.

The interpretations so far have been from literary, theological, and philosophical perspectives. And in most of these interpretations, the grave questions of Prufrock's physical and mental health has been idealized through literary and cultural images and symptoms. Let's say, how Prufrock is an impotent man, how he is a forlorn romantic, or how he has grown old enough to propose the women in the poem. But the question is Eliot the author himself was not very old to think of his gerontological concerns. Rather, in my opinion, he has combined the gerontological status of Prufrock with that of the medical environment of his time. Remember, how industries, world wars, environmental problems, food hazards and also the economic depression had brought in havocs on the western world.

The poem too uses the imagery to depict these health hazards, particularly through the symbolic use of the yellow fog and yellow

smoke, where the colour yellow is suggestive of jaundice. In fact, this jaundice seems to be epidemical, like the influenza pandemic of 1918 or Diabetes mellitus in America, as the yellow smoke keeps on spreading itself on window-panes, on pools, on drains, on chimneys, and houses too. As influenced by the symbolists, Eliot is primarily speaking about the sick environment which includes both physical and mental. If the word ‘murder’ represents war, ‘dusk’ describes the impending gloominess, ‘faces’ represent helpless people, ‘revisions’ depict public amnesia and anxieties. The retreat of Mermaid into the ocean is the ultimate warning of impossibility health and happiness in the modern world. Like Prufrock, disturbing the mermaids we disturb our own health and happiness, or at least our desire to stay happy and healthy. Thus the poem is a composite response to the medical sensitiveness of modern people. Remember how he refers to the innovations in the field of medical science around that time: “But as if a magic lantern threw the nerves in patterns on a screen”. He refers to an X-ray machine here that could give the pictures of every minute detail of our body and its structural components. From 1900 to 1913 till the time the poem was published we find many major path-breaking inventions in the field of health, hygiene, nutrition, sanitation, drug abuse, vaccination, human psychology, medical instruments, etc. :**January 2, 1900** The direction of the Chicago River is reversed so that it flows into the Chicago Sanitary and Ship Canal, thereby cleansing the city's Lake Michigan drinking water of waste and sewage; **1901** The American Medical Association (A.M.A.) reorganizes as the national organization of state and local associations. Membership increases from about 8,000 physicians in 1900 to 70,000 in 1910-about half the physicians in the country; **April 12, 1901** New York City's tenement house law dictates improved light and sanitary facilities for tenements; **September 24, 1901** The Flint Vehicle Factories Mutual Benefit Association is created, providing workers in the automobile industry with industrial, medical and accident insurance, issued by the workers' own mutual company. This association provides benefits to General Motors workers in Flint until 1928, when the company switched to group health insurance; **1904** The University of Chicago Hospital conducts the first organ transplant in the U.S.; **1904** The National Tuberculosis Association (now the American Lung Association) is founded to encourage the prevention and cure of

tuberculosis; **1906** Upton Sinclair publishes his novel *The Jungle*, a shocking exposé of unsanitary conditions in the American meatpacking industry that helps win support for federal oversight of food processing industries, resulting in the Meat Inspection Act of 1906; **1907** Indiana becomes the first state to enact a sterilization law; **1908** Milk pasteurization becomes mandatory for all milk sold in the city of Chicago; **1909** Sigmund Freud (1856-1939) of Vienna is invited to lecture at Clark University (MA). His new theories and treatment approaches will be adopted by prominent psychiatrists and psychoanalysis will become a leading therapy throughout the 20th century; **1913** The University of Michigan Medical Center pioneers the use of the electrocardiograph (EKG) machine. (Milestone for Health in America: n.p.)

The above examples of medical developments corroborate to the humanistic concerns of Eliot's time. In *Prufrock* therefore, this tendency of medical understanding of hygiene, sanitation, pollution and mental health is conveyed. The medieval Catholicism is subverted with the new world of tea-cups, cigarettes, coffee spoons, collar pins, perfumes etc. and are symbolically treated in the poem. In fact, the room in the cheap hotels with fashionable women and the decadent space that Eliot narrates becomes symptomatic of Hell from where the return is impossible. The impossibility of return is depicted in the impossibility of recovery from health and insanity much revealed through Prufrock himself. The hesitation in him is the result of his physical weakness and mental anxiety. The arbitrariness of his decisions and indecisions, morality and immoral intentions can be considered as the best clinical symptoms of modern men. And that's why Prufrock is hesitant to explore his own ailments when he says:

Streets that follow like a tedious argument
Of insidious intent
To lead you to an overwhelming question...
Oh, do not ask, "What is it?" (Eliot 1979: 185)

Similarly, his awareness of his physical health is best expressed:

To wonder, "Do I dare?" and, "Do I dare?"
Time to turn back and descend the stair,
With a bald spot in the middle of my hair —
(They will say: "How his hair is growing thin!")
(Eliot 1979: 186)

Prufrock thus is the best example to ponder over how medical conditions can be socially constructed; and therefore how speaking about it, as he intends to do now and then, can render relief to our ignorant anxieties and worries concerning health. His repeated remembrance of society and people around him makes him sicker than sickness itself; his weakness is the result of his weak submission to the wills of the people but not his own. Prufrock's physical weakness and mental ailments cannot be reduced to his old age only. They should rather be understood from the perspective of a modern man caught in the cauldron of health, sickness and medical concerns. Eliot's concerns for medical humanities can thus be seen in the poem when he uses the poem as a literary laboratory adorned with the paintings of Michelangelo (much like our modern hospitals) to expose and accentuate the necessity of singing of not only the decadent culture and religion, but also the general health of the modern society. Prufrock is like a medical messenger of the author who too had a witness to the medical conditions of his own wife. And his poem here is definitely a poetic composition of a medical condition, a mentality, a syndrome of sickness, impotency, unawareness and fear which can very well be called as 'Prufrock Syndrome'.

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