
Prufrock, Underground: Anonymity in the Face of Desire

In all of modern literature, there are few protagonists as self-effacing, miserable, indecisive, or morally contemptible as Fyodor Dostoevsky's Underground Man. Given the Underground Man's interminable Hamlet-like meanderings, one might surely conjure up the Dostoevsky-influenced likenesses of Kafka's Gregor Samsa or any number of characters by James Joyce, but the Underground Man's truest literary match is not found in the loosely-packed language of prose; rather, the Underground Man can best be seen through the anguished eyes of T. S. Eliot's J. Alfred Prufrock as he sings his infamous love song.

Although Prufrock and the Underground Man were created during fundamentally different literary movements—Prufrock is the universally recognized embodiment of Modernism, whereas the Underground Man represents Russian Realism—their methods of approaching desire are strikingly similar, especially as this understanding relates to anonymity and the desire for recognition.

The reader is first introduced to the Underground Man not with the lyricism that is found alongside Prufrock, but, rather, by a series of grievances. Some of his complaints, such as those involving his work in civil service, are philosophical in nature. Others, most noticeably the pain in his liver, are entirely physical. What unites his grievances, however, is their impermanence. The Underground Man is conflicted with an insatiable appetite for reversals, such as when he sardonically states, "I lied about myself just now when I said I was a wicked official. I lied out of wickedness. I was simply playing around both with the petitioners and with the officer, but as a matter of fact I was never able to become wicked. I was conscious every moment of so very many elements in myself most opposite to that" (5). Although his attitude in this passage indicates cavalier playfulness, the Underground Man remains first and foremost honest in his shortcomings. He repeatedly issues a veneer then a reversal without ever hiding his original thoughts. He is a man at war with both society and himself, never being able to truly separate the two, except for brief moments which are quickly denied. This unity, though recognized by the Underground Man, remains indicative of man's inability to remain autonomous in an increasingly urban world, a common theme among Modernist literature and something fully realized in T. S. Eliot's "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock."

Another element seminal to understanding the paradoxes and insecurity of the Underground Man (and also appearing later in "Prufrock") is an inability to adequately express oneself. Although he remains "conscious [of] every moment of so very many elements," the Underground Man is still unsure of how to convey his understanding of the world. For example, he reveals to his readers that something explosive occurred in his past regarding a superior

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officer, but it is not until forty pages later that the audience discovers the nature of the encounter. This withholding of information, which is foundational to the narrative, appears controlled—that is, the narrator paces out the information—however, given the Underground Man’s inability to speak without personal hindrance—be it the physicality of “catch[ing his] breath” (7) or his philosophical “magnanimity” (9)—it is much more likely that the explosive encounter with a superior officer presented in section II of the novel is withheld from the audience simply due to the narrator’s inability to express himself. His nihilism has become so entrenched into his psyche that it is corporeal, suggesting that he is physically incapable of having a concrete opinion. This lack of cogency is typically representative of an unreliable narrator; however, the Underground Man’s unreliability becomes a literary device used to add depth to his character. Essentially, the Underground Man is indecisive because decisiveness in an age of moral turpitude is an impossibility.

Much like Dostoevsky’s Underground Man, T. S. Eliot’s J. Alfred Prufrock is a font of indecision who prefers withholding information to stating an actual opinion. After introducing his love song with the emotional anesthesia of an “evening” that is analogized to “a patient etherized upon a table” (lines 2-3), Prufrock quickly poses the idea that the ominous nature of the city, including “hotels,” “restaurants,” and “streets” (lines 4, 6-7), will lead the reader to “an overwhelming question” (line 10). Prufrock piques the reader’s interest by suggesting something life-changing, then quickly withdraws the information necessary to achieve pleasure from such a revelation. This absence, which is rivaled in the titillating preface to an encounter with an officer in *Notes from Underground*, reflects Prufrock’s inability to achieve his own desires. The audience understands this notion as they, too, are introduced to something desirable, then, just like Prufrock, stripped of any desirable outcome. That Prufrock’s narration is given so matter-of-factly suggests a commanding breed of misery. Prufrock does not appear to be morose about his endeavors; rather, he speaks of his longing then tells the audience not to “ask, ‘What is it?’” (lines 11) while subsequently and passionately welcoming the audience to join him in making a “visit” (line 12), which suggests the fleeting nature of passion, itself. Prufrock’s fleeting admissions are near perfect parallels to the reflections of the Underground Man, whose constant reversals form myriad philosophical “visits.”

The common thread of brevity in *Notes from Underground* and “The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock” does not present itself negatively. Instead, brevity only comes retrospectively, as though experience, in hindset, is something overly “beautiful and lofty” (7) and submissive to the more refined conscious mind. Brevity, in the form of visits or philosophical musings, also refers to life and aging in the context of each narrative. The Underground Man states the “romantic” occupies himself with “lyrical verses, [while] at the same time [trying] also to preserve ‘the beautiful and lofty’ [...] till his dying day” (46). The romantic attempts to “preserve himself [...] in cotton wool, like some little piece of jewelry” (46). The Underground Man attributes this artificial preservation of beauty to the intelligence necessary to be a modern romantic, and

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the audience sees the same attributes play out in “Prufrock,” even if in a much different manner.

Rather than preserving any physical or emotional beauty, Prufrock spends his days callously contemplating his age. His mortality, however, is not something that is anticipated; rather, it is something violently thrust upon him through the recognition of clothing-related social conventions. This sudden realization is evident when he writes that the “eternal Footman hold[s] his coat and snickers” (line 85). Additionally, at the end of the poem, he says, “I grow old...I grow old... / I shall wear the bottoms of my trousers rolled” (lines 120-121). His trousers, which might otherwise indicate movement, life, and a general sense of action, are now merely a facet of his dying “face,” which must always be “prepare[d] to meet the faces that [he] meets” (line 27). This preparation is not limited to his mortality (and therefor his trousers); Prufrock mentions the implications of one’s wardrobe throughout “The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock.” In line 42, he mentions his “morning coat” and his “collar mounting firmly to the chin.” In line 72, he muses about the “lonely men in shirt-sleeves” who watch smoke rising from pipes. The significances of these two wardrobe-related observations pale in comparison, however, to “perfume from a dress” (line 65), the “arms that lie along a table, or wrap about a shawl” (line 67), or “one, settling a pillow or throwing off a shawl” (line 107), the latter of which appearing to be at the height of all of Prufrock’s desires. Because everything around him—the fog, streets, pipes, etc.—is indicative of an industrial urban environment, his entire universe is governed by the idea of transition and change. Clothing, to Prufrock, is something determinate, and thus decisive. One’s wardrobe is a perfect m?lange of the indecision-induced voyeurism that plagues his existence and the physicality of experience, two ideas heavily present throughout *Notes from Underground*.

Though the Underground Man, discussing the intelligent romantic, remains derisive toward those who are keen on preserving the “lofty and the beautiful” through their clothing, he, like Prufrock, also uses clothing to “prepare a face” before the explosive encounter with the superior officer. Rather than confront the superior officer on the street in a coat that features raccoon, the Underground Man attains a loan so as to purchase “a handsome beaver” (54), for “at the time of the performance one had to look as decent as possible and see to one’s attire” (53). That one must see to one’s attire in the face of a social encounter could be considered perfectly acceptable, even in relation to the Underground Man’s aforementioned philosophies against the artificial preservation of beauty; however, that he considers it a “performance” suggests artifice and anonymity. It is not, after all, the Underground Man who is set to have the encounter; rather, it is the Underground Man playing the social role of someone who is truly vindictive and seeking retribution. As in “The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock,” faces must be artificially prepared not only to remain socially acceptable in the presence of other, more venerable persons, but also to shield the reality of one’s existence, which, in both texts, is anonymity.

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Both the Underground Man and Prufrock develop physical and philosophical disguises to make their anonymity more palatable toward reaching some seemingly indefinite goal. In “The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock,” the audience is never told what his goal is; however, through the context of the situation, readers can piece together that he is in a place frequented by people of a similar disposition. His social environment features “women [that] come and go” (line 13, 35) and “skirts that trail along the floor” (line 102), suggesting a milieu at once both sexual and sophisticated. Although his “overwhelming question” (line 10, 93) might be something as serious or “universe-disturbing” as a marriage proposal or general affair, it is just as plausible that his love song takes place in a brothel or other social environment, and the “overwhelming question” plaguing his existence is regarding a meaningless and anonymous sexual encounter. The thrown-off shawl from line 107 might suggest the fruition of this sexual exploit, and the reader—along with Prufrock—remains entirely void of resolution, which is paralleled in the similarly anti-climactic encounter of the Underground Man in Book II of *Notes from Underground*.

The principal difference between the Underground Man and J. Alfred Prufrock is that the Underground Man successfully accomplishes his chief desire, whereas Prufrock’s situation remains static and unfulfilling. In Book I of *Notes from Underground*, the reader learns about something life-altering for the Underground Man: an insulting encounter with a superior officer. The audience is given little information until Book II, where the Underground Man reveals that he was simply moved by a superior officer. The Underground Man, preferring a quarrel to the passive aggression demonstrated by the officer, furiously says, “I simply could not forgive his moving me and in the end just not noticing me” (49). The frivolity of the encounter—a simple movement so that the officer could pass—is heightened to the level of an existential crisis by the Underground Man, who so fears his status in society that any gesture proclaiming his anonymity is an insult the very idea of existence. Such a feigned sense of importance is also present throughout the entirety of “The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock” as Prufrock continually wonders what others think of him, such as when he voices the opinions of anonymous women proclaiming “How his hair is growing thin!” (line 41) and “How his arms and legs are thin!” (line 44). The Underground Man, unlike Prufrock, does not appear to be worried that people think negatively of him; however, he is frightened by the idea that people might not notice him altogether.

That the Underground Man values his existence above the opinions of others is his sole redeeming attribute and the catalyst that sets him apart from the more squeamish Prufrock. Unlike J. Alfred Prufrock, who is physically incapable of making a decision based on what others think—he’s constantly wondering, “Do I dare?” and “Do I dare?” (line 38), as well as “And should I then presume? / And how should I begin?” (lines 68-69)—the Underground Man is able to make a decision upon the matter. After another series of reversals about exacting revenge upon the superior officer, he “unexpectedly decide[s]” to bump into the officer “shoulder against

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shoulder" (55). The wording of "unexpectedly decided" suggests two important distinctions about the Underground Man. The first distinction is that his ability to act upon a matter is unexpected, implying an innate determination to fulfill his desires. The second distinction is that his actions, no matter how rushed or unexpected, are still decisions. Unlike Prufrock and his Modernist persona, the Underground Man is in control of his fate, however feeble that fate might be.

Even though Prufrock and the Underground Man each deliver interminable lamentations on the morality of their respective ages, the Underground Man is still able to act upon his grievances with society. Instead of continually addressing an *inability* to achieve a goal, such as with Prufrock, the Underground Man issues a series of philosophical reversals and paradoxes that ultimately end in the fulfilment of his desire. The Underground Man, unlike Prufrock, attributes his initial appetite for meandering philosophy merely to "boredom" (17). Each protagonist naively believes he can "see everything, and [...] see often incomparably more clearly than [their] very most positive minds do" (46) through a clear conscience of their surroundings. They believe such a cognizance approaches greatness, or, as Prufrock so aptly summarizes, each protagonist wonders whether or not he dares to "disturb the universe" (line 46). Unbeknownst to the Underground Man and Prufrock, such a universal disturbance is well beyond their capacity. They are undoubtedly destined to live in misery until "human voices wake [them]" (line 131) from the shackles of anonymity.

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