The Prufrock Makeover
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S. Eliot is a serious poet, and “The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock” is a serious poem. In some ways it is a strange choice for inclusion in a young adult English literature curriculum, since it concerns the insecurities of a middle-aged man who is too afraid to ask a woman the “overwhelming question” because he thinks she will reject him and thereby completely destroy his already fragile self-esteem. It has become a modern classic, however, and often appears in literature anthologies designed for use in high school and college English classes. To engage students in the poem; to help them understand, and even identify with, its remarkable title character; and to help them understand the poem’s themes, I ask students to give J. Alfred Prufrock a “makeover” so he can acquire more self-confidence and be better able to handle rejection.

Most students are familiar with the “makeover.” It’s a staple of the television talk show, wherein an image consultant identifies a member of the audience who needs a new look; takes her backstage; and gives her a new wardrobe, new makeup, and a new hairstyle. At the end of the show, the makeover audience member walks out on stage and dazzles the audience with her new sophisticated image. Students have fun with the challenge of transforming Prufrock, and, in the process of doing so, they gain insight into Prufrock’s character. This leads, in turn, to an understanding of the theme of the poem and its wonderfully ironic tone.

“Prufrock” is not an easy poem to study, so I begin with a mini-lesson to review the action of the poem and to explain Eliot’s allusions to Dante, Michelangelo, John the Baptist, Polonius, and Lazarus. “Prufrock” is usually the first dramatic monologue we study, so I also spend some time explaining the conventions of the genre. I follow the mini-lesson with whole class discussion, focusing on Prufrock’s character. This discussion typically leads to a consensus that J. Alfred Prufrock needs help. His monologue reveals that he is insecure in his relationships with women, self-conscious about his personal appearance, and afraid no one will like him. Students then assemble in their small groups to discuss ways of transforming Prufrock so that he can acquire the self-confidence and optimism he so desperately needs. In the course of their discussion, students usually agree that poor Prufrock needs a better name, better role models, better clothes, a fitness regimen, a better “rap,” and, to quote one student, “a personality transplant,” if he is ever to acquire the confidence he needs to communicate openly with the woman he is interested in. After the small group discussion, I ask students to write in their response journals a character analysis of Prufrock. They often use humor and satire as they analyze Prufrock’s character, explain why he is so socially inept, and offer advice on what he needs to do to acquire some self-confidence.

“Let’s start with the name,” writes Jerrod. “Go up to a girl and introduce yourself as J. Alfred Prufrock, and you will see a puff of smoke the Roadrunner would envy as she makes her exit.” “Your name is important,” agrees Tina. “Look what
Students pick up, too, on Prufrock's self-consciousness about his physical appearance. "J. Alfred has a problem with his skinny arms and legs and the bald spot in the middle of his head," notes Sean. "He's going to have to learn to live with his thinning hair, though he seems like the type to try Hair Club for Men or even, God forbid, the comb-over. I'm sure the lady he's after would prefer his hair the way it is. As for his skinny arms and legs—a month or so at the gym would help." Geri writes:

"Just ask the question, man," advises Ray. "The worst that will happen is that she will say no and you can get on with your life, such as it is."

Prufrock's self-pity and despair, combined with the setting and the imagery, create the tone of the poem, a dreary combination of pessimism and hopelessness. Students recognize how Prufrock's character influences and is influenced by the tone of the poem. "Cheer up, Mr. Prufrock," Dawn writes. "You want this woman to like you but you carry this big gloomy cloud wherever you go. All this talk of etherized patients, and yellow fog, and measuring your life out with coffee spoons, and ragged claws scuttling across the floors of silent seas—I'm surprised she went out with you in the first place." Kim suggests Prufrock keep singing over and over again the Bobby McFerrin song, "Don't Worry, Be Happy." And Doug has, perhaps, the last word on Prufrock's personality: "This guy," he writes, "could be the poster boy for an assertiveness training seminar."

Clearly, teenage readers show little mercy as they analyze Prufrock's character and offer advice on how the poor man might improve his personality and appearance. And yet they understand—even empathize with him. Middle-aged and old-fashioned though he may be, Prufrock's insecurity about his physical appearance and his fear that he won't be accepted by a member of the opposite sex are completely human qualities students can relate to. Geri again: "I know it's really hard to get into a meaning-
ful relationship. But you have to take the plunge. No question could be that overwhelming. Hey, no guts no glory. “This girl wouldn’t dance with me once,” Dion writes, “and shook her head no when I asked her without saying a word, as if I was completely insignificant. I know exactly how Prufrock feels and what he means when he talks about being ‘pinned and wriggling on the wall.’ I’ve felt those ‘eyes that fix you in a formulated phrase.’ But I guess if you let it get to you, you’ll just stop asking.”

There is always a lot of laughter in the classroom as students read from their journals their advice to J. Alfred Prufrock. The Prufrock makeover project engages students in Eliot’s poem and gives them insight into the poem’s central character, which, in turn, leads to an understanding of the poem’s main theme. Karen put it well: “Wait until she rejects you before you shoot your self-esteem all to hell. Prufrock expects to be rejected. It’s written in everything he says—his body language, his attitude. His rejection is a self-fulfilling possibility [sic]. If I ever met this man, I would give him the advice my grandma gave to me once: ‘Be prepared for the worst but strive for the best.’”

I have not tried this activity using other fictional characters, but I believe it would work well in many cases. It might especially help students understand and appreciate other dramatic monologues, a form young adult readers enjoy but often find rather inaccessible. Character is at the center of the dramatic monologue, but, because character is revealed through speech rather than through action, students often need a concrete activity to help them fully understand the personality the speaking voice reveals. The makeover project activates the schema (see Pearson and Anderson), which facilitates comprehension. If, for example, we asked students to make over the Duke who narrates “My Last Duchess,” they would likely achieve a good general understanding of the poem and recognize, specifically, Ferrar’s paranoia and perverted sense of justice. The possibilities do extend beyond poetry, however. Consider the challenge of making over one of Poe’s protagonists, one of Shakespeare’s tragic heroes, Melville’s Bartleby, or Irving’s Ichabod Crane.

These are complex literary characters whose motives and actions are often puzzling, at first, to young adult readers. The makeover exercise can clarify personality, motive, and action, which can, in turn, lead students to a deeper general understanding and appreciation of the poem, story, or play. If the exercise can engage students in a poem like “The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock,” it can work effectively with other literary works as well. An added bonus is that it’s a fun and amusing way to interest and engage students in literature. It reminds us, also, of the validity of the old adage that in humor there is truth.

Work Cited


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