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The Love song of J. Alfred Michelangelo

T.S. Elliot and Michelangelo were born forty-three years apart. An artist and a writer, what could they possibly have in common? Their association comes from T.S. Elliot’s poem, “The Song of J. Alfred Prufrock” when Elliot constantly repeats the phrase “In the women come and go/ Talking of Michelangelo”(Elliot 13-14). But, what significance does Michelangelo hold in this poem? Elliot uses Michelangelo for three reasons: to show forged intelligence in society, to display the ironic contrast of the theme of the poem and Michelangelo’s work, and as a flawless way to add the rhyme scheme.

First off, the obvious reason of Michelangelo’s name being placed into this poem is because Michelangelo is a very household name. Elliot uses this reference to show how people speak of art to come off as more intelligent, but know nothing about it so they use a very mainstream artist to discuss to appear more enlightened. An interpretation of this poem from the Cummings study guide website stated, “Prufrock may wonder how they could possibly be interested in him when they are discussing someone as illustrious as Michelango.” (para. 4). The word illustrious is key here, meaning respected. This quote reinstates the fact that the main reason Michelangelo is used in this poem is to show how people attempt to exemplify intelligence by speaking of something abstract, like art. Their strategy works, and causes Prufrock to feel even more inferior to what he already does. So, by using Michelangelo as a
reference Elliot displays to his readers that everyone is wearing a mask and wishes to cast out a more enlightened persona by discussing common things, such as Michelangelo.

Now, there is a more in depth reason behind Elliot’s use of Michelangelo in his poem. The ideas and inspiration that come from Michelangelo’s art contrast heavily with the ideas that Elliot is trying to convey in his poem. Elliot’s poem is more about being uncomfortable in one’s own skin, and the fears that society forces onto us. In contrast, a writer for the Florida University website, Caroline Shin, states “…but the works of Michelangelo that portray an idealized, completely nude male figure reflect this Neoplatonic belief in "pure love" not infiltrated with sin and shame” (Shin). Michelangelo shows his belief in the beauty of nudity throughout his paintings and sculptures. While Elliot gives his readers a character that is very uncomfortable in his own skin. For example, Elliot writes “With a bald spot in the middle of my hair—/[They will say: ‘How his hair is growing thin!’]/ My morning coat, my collar mounting firmly to the chin./ My necktie rich and modest, but asserted by a simple pin—/[They will say: ‘But how his arms and legs are thin!’]”(40-44). The idea of a very uncomfortable man is casted onto the reader’s thoughts. In this sense, Prufrock and “David” would not get along whatsoever. With Michelangelo’s idea of how magnificent the human body is and Elliot’s idea of a man who is ashamed of his own body are two very contrasting ideas. With this awareness of ironic referencing the reader can see the idea of hypocrisy in society. They speak of Michelangelo, but do not embrace his openness and freedom from social shackles.

The final reason Elliot uses Michelangelo is to complete his rhyme scheme. While this seems like a very shallow idea, it is very important. “The Lovesong of J. Alfred Prufrock” would not be the great poem that it truly is without the clever rhyme scheme placed by Elliot. The Line that Elliot references Michelangelo in is the one line that keeps Elliot’s scheme together. Elliot
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repeats “In the women come and go/ Talking of Michelangelo” (Prufrock 13-14) throughout the poem. This repetition keeps the poem’s flow, and makes it fun and easy to read aloud. Without this line Elliot’s rhyme scheme would have been sporadic and not flown as nicely as it does. So, Elliot uses Michelangelo for the simple reason to help his rhyme scheme.

So, whether one decides that Michelangelo’s placement in T.S. Elliot’s poem “The Lovesong of J. Alfred Prufrock” is one of deeper meaning or shallow, it is still genius. Elliot’s idea of using Michelangelo as a reference to point out how obsessed with intelligence society is even by discussing household names to come off as more genius than the next guy, and to give his audience a contrasting view of the theme of his poem and Michelangelo’s work provides a very fluid movement of words in his poem and is a clever way to portray his message. All these ideas convey Elliot’s theme of being uncomfortable in society. So, which is better, to be a J. Alfred Prufrock, or a perfectly nude and sculpted “David”?

Works Cited

Shin, Caroline. “Neoplatonism and its Influence on Michelangelo's Artwork”.

