The Fog Comes on Little Cat Feet

This prude, rambling man has been gesturing you to follow him into one of the sketchiest parts of London where the dense fog is starting to prowl along the sinister streets that seem to lead nowhere at all. He, J. Alfred Prufrock, keeps promising you that he is going to address this big, important question, but he, like the insidious streets laden by fog, seems to be going nowhere. T.S. Eliot was one of the most well-read poets of the twentieth century. He loved to use allusions from other famous pieces of literature in almost all of his works. Not only did he use allusions, but he also had amazing imagery in his poems that, for an intuitive reader, can tie into the overall theme and direction of the poem. In “The Lovesong of J. Alfred Prufrock”, one of the leading images is the mysterious cat-like fog. We can compare this fog to the direction that both this poem and the character are traveling and, knowing Mr. Prufrock, that direction is quite unpredictable. Also, the symbolism behind both the cat and the fog has significant meaning that we can relate to the allusions provided by Eliot in his writing. I believe the stanza about the fog, though brief, adds tremendous depth to this dramatic monologue and it also furthers the meaning of it as well.

Eliot uses the extended metaphor of the cat-like yellow fog rather briefly, but it still captures the motions of the poem and Mr. Prufrock. This is how Eliot described the cat: “The yellow fog that rubs its back upon the window-panes,/ The yellow smoke that rubs its muzzle on the window-panes” (Eliot l.15-16). The “cat” is rubbing on the window from the outside. Who does this remind you of? Prufrock is always looking at things from the outside in because he is too afraid of confrontation, not unlike a stray cat. “Licked its tongue into the corners of the evening,/ Lingered upon the pools that stand in
drains” (1.17-18). This also can be related to Prufrock because he is lingering in the stagnancy of his own life. Anyone who can “measure out (his) life with coffee spoons” (l.51) is living from one cup of coffee to another with nothing interesting in-between. “Slipped by the terrace, made a sudden leap” (l.20). This, I believe, can be compared to the way Prufrock randomly talks about “the women (that) come and go/Talking of Michelangelo” (l.13-14). Like a cat suddenly jumps, this line that repeats itself comes randomly and does not stylistically match the rest of the poem. When the cat “curled once about the house, and fell asleep” (l.22), it was similar to the end of the poem where the entire story is dream-like.

Not only does the movement of the cat have significance, but the symbolic meaning of the cat does as well. Early in their religious development, the Ancient Egyptians worshiped a god called Aker, who was associated with lions. “He was believed to be guardian and the gatekeeper of the Underworld” (“Egyptian”). All cats, because Aker was associated with lions, became symbolic of Underworld guardians. Silent and mysterious, felines fit the bill of Underworld guardians quite well. But, wait a second. Didn’t Eliot put something in his poem about the Underworld? Eliot begins the poem with a quotation from Canto 27 in Dante’s Inferno which was spoken by Guido da Montefeltro who said,

If I thought that my reply would be to someone who would ever return
to earth, this flame would remain without further movement; but as no
one has ever returned alive from this gulf, if what I hear is true, I can
answer you with no fear of infamy. (Dante 27)

This quotation, the setting, and the symbolism of the cat has caused many analysts to believe that Prufrock is stuck in his own sort of hell and he believes he can tell us his problems because we won’t have a chance to repeat them to other people. Meanwhile, this “guardian of the underworld” is scuttling
close behind him.

The fog that takes on the qualities of the cat also has some intricate meaning of its own. Fog has always been used as a symbol for confusion or even isolation and a retreat into oneself. Prufrock is definitely a confused and isolated person. He is always asking, "Do I dare?" and, "Do I dare?" (Eliot 1.37). He is so very indecisive and, because of his indecisiveness, he often ends up eating his peach and drinking his coffee all by himself. The reason he is so indecisive could be the fact that he cares too much about what others think about him and this gives him the fear of rejection. The yellow color of the fog is significant in the fact that, in American culture, being called “yellow” means you are “cowardly” (“yellow”). If anyone has courage issues, it would be Prufrock. He is always making excuses like, "There will be time..." and, "Do I dare disturb the Universe?"(1.28-46). Prufrock clearly admires these women and longs for their company, but he is afraid that he won't impress them by "spitting out all the butt-ends of (his) days and ways" (1.60). Eliot uses a perfect extended metaphor comparing the qualities of our dear Mr. Prufrock with that of the fog.

“The Lovesong of J. Alfred Prufrock” is definitely not the easiest poem to read or digest. It’s filled with little treasures that make it a very special work. Though the mention of the fog is brief, the underlying meaning of it is vast and encompasses the meaning of the entire poem. Just through the little details of the color and animalistic features of this fog, T.S. Eliot was able to display an entirely different message than what one would read at a first glance. This is why it takes an intuitive reader to understand Eliot's works because he adds the slightest descriptions that, for the educated reader, can mean so much more! I believe he added the cat-like fog because of its intense underlying meaning that aids the rest of the poem and reveals the nature of Prufrock.


