Hugh Selwyn Mauberley (1920)

Ezra Pound

Context:

Ezra Pound is generally considered the poet most responsible for defining and promoting a modernist aesthetic in poetry

His contemporaries included W.B. Yeats, Robert Frost, William Carlos Williams, Marianne Moore, H.D., James Joyce, Ernest Hemingway, and, especially, T.S. Eliot

His contributions to poetry begin with his imagism – a classical Chinese and Japanese technique which stresses clarity, precision, and economy of language – and foregoing traditional rhyme and metre in order to “compose in the sequence of the musical phrase, not in the sequence of the metronome”

Born in Hailey, Idaho, on the 30th of October, 1885

Completed two years of college at the University of Pennsylvania, and earned a degree from Hamilton College in 1905

Taught at Wabash College for two years, then travelled abroad to Spain, Italy, and London

Married Dorothy Shakespear in 1914, and became the London editor of the Little Review in 1917

Moved to Italy in 1924 as a voluntary exile; became involved in Fascist politics and didn’t return to the U.S. until 1945, when he was arrested on charges of treason for broadcasting Fascist propaganda by radio to the U.S. during World War II

In 1946, he was acquitted but declared mentally ill

His political career was overlooked in the interest of recognising his poetic achievements, and awarded him the prize for the Pisan Cantos in 1948

Was released from hospital in 1958 and returned to Italy where he died on the 1st of November 1972

Summary:

The poem is made up of eighteen short poems, and grouped into two sections

The first section is essentially Pound’s autobiography from the perspective of his third-person alter ego

It details his struggles to re-emphasise the importance of aesthetics and poetry in society; paying particular attention to the classical Greek myths to illustrate his point

He describes America as a “half-savage land” where his art could not flourish

Pound goes on to criticise artists and publishers for caring only about sales instead of the craft

He does this by creating a fictional conversation between his alter ego and a bestselling novelist who cares only about the reviews of his work

This encompasses one of the main messages of the poem: that mass culture will never be able to produce great art because of corrupt motivations

In the second section of the poem, Pound introduces the titular character, Hugh Selwyn Mauberley, who is still interchangeable with Pound

Mauberley is a minor poet struggling to perfect his work, but society deems him irrelevant

Mauberley fails at romance; he can observe beauty but cannot act in time to seize it

Pounds ends the collection with Medallion, a farewell poem that celebrates beauty

Pound, once again, reminds the reader to celebrate beauty, aesthetics, and poetry as those values are receding from society’s collective consciousness

Analysis:

Hugh Selwyn Mauberley is seen as the turning point in Pound’s career

A strong statement, as he describes the first stage of his career when his primary concerns were aesthetics, literary traditions, and criticising post-World War I society; this concern decreased after he moved to Paris, and then to Italy
Pound combined a bit of classical poetic organisation with more contemporary styles when he was designing the poems form and meter; the poem uses quatrains and employs an ABAB rhyme scheme with no meter within the lines.

Each line has a different number of syllables making it difficult to find a steady rhythm when reading.

This choice fits with Pound’s views on poetry; he believed it should sound musical, like conversation, rather than a beating drum.

Pound utilises a lot of allusion, particularly to classical mythology: Venus, the Greek island of Cos, etc.

These allusions strengthen his argument that commerce has corrupted contemporary expressions of art and beauty.

Pound interweaves lines in different languages throughout the poem – Ancient Greek, French, Italian, and Latin.

As an American expatriate in Europe, Pound experienced many different cultures.

The titular character, Hugh, is Pound’s literary alter-ego; the poem even starts with his initials E.P.

Many readers question why chose to write the poem in the third person rather than speak for himself in the first person.

Pound wanted to maximise relatability and writing in third-person increases this.

Extra Notes:
The first section of *HSM*, the speaker reveals the reasons E.P. fails to heighten poetry by describing his efforts to write poems which his society will find as beautiful as he finds classical works.

Compares this search to Ulysses’ search for his Greek homeland/Penelope.

“The lilies from the acorn” metaphor is meant in terms of his comments in two prose works which link the acorn with Pound’s definition of the artist’s role.

Also a parallel with Ulysses: his friends turned swine are fed acorns and he uses a magical herb, Moly, to overcome Circe’s magic; Moly is a species of lily; E.P. must produce a lily to end the disillusionment of art for consumerism as opposed to beauty.

*HSM* pits the odds against poetic transformation due to the contentment of society to have mere journalistic superficialities – denoted by the catch phrases like “the age demanded”.

With a superficial and cheap society, even democracy is reduced to a farce – “All men, in law, are equals / Free of Pisistratus / We choose a knave or an eunuch / To rule over us”.

The interest in art to “catch the Lady Jane’s attention” is reminiscent of Eliot’s women who come and go talking of Michelangelo; Mauberley waits for Lady Valentine’s (the patron of artists) commandments.

Mr. Nixon represents crass commercialism; advises Mauberley to renounce Flaubertian ideals of art and appease the newspaper man instead – “Butter the reviewers”.

The measurement of literary merit is the royalty in generates.

Mauberley bids farewell to England to go to “some other mouth” (France); resembles Joyce’s *A Portrait of the Artist*.

Like Prufrock, Mauberley’s inability to come to grips with the world for the sake of art is symbolised in an inability to meet the sexual challenge, to force the moment to its crisis.

The poem is significant not only for its theme but also for its textual strategies:
- Dramatisation of utterance – enables the poet to present his experience in a less emotionally involved and more critical manner.
- Allusiveness – or intertextuality.
- Sculptured rhyme – as opposed to free verse.
THE LOVE SONG OF J ALFRED PRUFROCK (1915)

T.S. Eliot

Context:
→ Born in St. Louis, Missouri, on the 26th September 1888
→ Attended Harvard University; contributed several poems to the Harvard Advocate
→ In 1910, left the US for Sorbonne
→ After a year in Paris attempted a doctorate in philosophy; returned to Europe and settled in England in 1914
→ Married Vivienne Haigh-Wood and worked, firstly as a teacher, and later for Lloyd’s Bank
→ In London Eliot came under the influence of his contemporary Ezra Pound; who assisted him in the publication of a number of works including The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock in 1915
→ First book of poems, Prufrock and Other Observations, in 1917
→ Published The Waste Land in 1922 which is considered as the most influential poetic work of the 20th century
→ By 1930, and for the next thirty years, he was the most dominant figure in poetry and literary criticism in the English speaking world
→ Describes himself as Classist in literature, Royalist in politics, and Anglo-Catholic in religion
→ His poems articulated the disillusionment of a post-World War I generation with the values and conventions of the Victorian era
→ As a critic he had an enormous impact on contemporary literary taste – after he converted to Orthodox Christianity in the late 1930s, these became based in social and religious conservatism
→ He became a British citizen in 1927; he separated from his wife in 1933 and remarried Valerie Fletcher in 1956
→ Received the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1948
→ Died in London on 4th of January 1965

Summary:
→ The Love Song of J Alfred Prufrock was written in 1910-11 and published in 1915
→ Examination of the tortured psyche of the prototypical modern man; that is, overeducated, eloquent, neurotic, and emotionally stilted
→ Prufrock is the poem’s speaker who seems to address a potential lover with whom he would like to “force the moment to its crisis” by consummating their relationship
→ Prufrock knows too much of life to “dare” an approach to the woman – he hears the comments others make about his inadequacies and he chides himself for “presuming” that emotional interaction could even be possible
→ The poem moves from a series of fairly concrete physical settings (a cityscape and several interiors) to a series of vague ocean images conveying Prufrock’s emotional distance from the world as he comes to recognise his second-rate status: “I am not Prince Hamlet”
→ Prufrock is powerful for its range of intellectual references and the vividness of character achieved

Form:
→ Prufrock is a variation on the dramatic monologue, a type of poem popular with Eliot’s predecessors
→ Dramatic monologues are similar to soliloquies in plays; they are characterised by three things:
  - They are the utterances of a specific individual (not the poet) at a specific moment in time
  - The monologue is specifically directed at a listener(s) whose presence is not directly referenced but is suggested in the speaker’s words
  - The primary focus is the development and revelation of the speaker’s character
→ Eliot modernises the form by removing the implied listeners and focusing on Prufrock’s interiority and isolation
→ The epigraph to this poem, from Dante’s Inferno, describes Prufrock’s ideal listener – one who is as lost as the speaker and will never betray to the world the content of Prufrock’s present confessions
→ In Prufrock’s world, however, such a character doesn’t exist and he is content with silent reflection