

ANALYSIS

“Portrait of a Lady” (1917)

T. S. Eliot

(1888-1965)

“After ‘Prufrock’ the ‘Portrait of a Lady’ seems to be only another poem similar in form and theme. But it has a social malice which makes it more objective in attitude and more conversational in tone. Under a sophisticated surface Eliot develops a conflict of feelings which weaves its sensuous imagery into patterns of changing mood and significance. Yet it is not so much the portrait of a lady as the portrait of another uncertain Prufrock, adolescent rather than prematurely aged, suspended between feelings of attraction and repulsion. The epigraph from Marlowe’s *Jew of Malta* (IV.i) suggests the situation, in which the dash after ‘committed’ is important, for it indicates the moral uncertainty in the poem that parallels the uncertainty of accusation in the play. What this youth has committed is less certain than what Barabas committed.

This affair runs through a year, and the seasons are important to the development of its tone and theme.... The youth passes from a feeling of superiority to a feeling of uneasiness and uncertainty, which threatens altogether to displace the earlier feeling. In the first section, after the concert, the lady’s approach and the youth’s response are both developed in musical terms, which provide metaphors of malicious innuendo. These metaphors give polite expression to the lady and indicate the quality of reception in the youth. The implications of the lady’s ‘music’ set up a prelude in the youth’s mind that is at least a definite false note, after which there is only one escape—the masculine escape to externals. The bathetic character of these externals of course mocks the confusion in his mind. It will be noticed how Eliot employs the dash to indicate a hiatus or sudden transition. So the section ends with the youth’s attempt to escape the intimate atmosphere established by the lady, and the ‘tobacco trance’ is his counter for the one she sought to induce. Of course the ‘atmosphere of Juliet’s tomb’ becomes ironic in the love tryst prepared for this Romeo by an older Juliet.

In the next section, now spring, the poet appropriately adds flower imagery to the musical imagery in developing the relationship which the lady calls ‘friendship.’ This new imagery serves to intensify the feeling of the lady and to make more intolerable the tension of the youth. He still manages to smile and treat the situation objectively, but it is proving more and more disturbing.... As her ‘buried life’ becomes more and more obtrusive he becomes more and more uncomfortable, until flight again is the only escape. But as the imagery of his revulsion mounts so does her power to disturb him. Thus he takes his hat rather than make ‘a cowardly amends.’

But what does he mean? Does he mean, take advantage of her? Or has he done that already? Or does he mean, to pretend what he does not feel? Either means a cowardly escape from an awkward position; and whatever his motive, his attention has given her some claim. Certainly this section ends on the note of moral perturbation. But the speaker has posed the problem of cowardly amends, and the poet does not change the subject: What follows is a development of that problem. If what the speaker reads in the paper characterizes the young man who first sought to escape, it also focuses his problem. The sensational items represent various kinds of desire and offense which do not disturb him. What does bother him returns in the musical and floral imagery which represents the lady and now combines in its qualities revulsion and attraction. Finally he poses the question whether his reactions to these things are right or wrong.

The third section answers the question by decision. His flight is no longer going to be temporary. But while his action is decisive enough, his reaction is shadowed with doubt. This time the imagery of his return involves mounting the stairs; and, as in ‘Prufrock,’ it is a tensional imagery of effort and awkwardness. Now his ‘self-possession gutters’ in the candle imagery of the opening situation, and his smiles are really forced; he takes refuge in the objectively conventional, but his discomfiture is projected by

his feeling of having to borrow the imitative actions of animals to find expression. And it all ends on the original theme of escape.

In imagined retrospect he contemplates her death after his going away—an event which would consummate the situation of the epigraph. But the issue is by no means certain, either in the rightness of his action or the quality of his feeling. The perplexity of his feelings is not resolved by this event, which seems to give her the emotional advantage and ironically to make her music successful. His final discomfiture is to become doubtful of ‘the right to smile.’

What has he committed? Has he been tempted but inhibited? Did he run away from a problem rather than solve it? Essentially the break between ‘committed’ and ‘fornication’ has developed into a theme of emotional frustration. He has been disturbed but baffled by the situation, and has been able to deal with it only by flight. Fornication is insufficient to characterize the action unless it includes the attraction and repulsion of sex complicated by moral feeling.

The form of this verse, Eliot tells us, was drawn from Laforgue and later Elizabethan drama, assimilating their conversational modes; its use of the half-line also reminds us of Spenser or Milton. It stretches, contracts, and distorts iambic pentameter and alexandrine verse; uses rhyme freely, functionally, not according to any set patterns. It develops verse as speech rather than verse as song, but the lyric note becomes insistent at times. It has the loose, repetitive, emergent syntax of speech, by which it becomes both reticent and insinuating.

Note the syntax of the lady’s speech when she is being most direct in her indirection, especially the anticipatory pronouns or loose reference which she clarifies as she seems to hesitate or feel her way along. These repetitive hesitations become part not only of the psychology but also of the speech as verse; they are imitations of speech that also function in the movement of the verse. And the verse usually quickens or beats more obviously when the youth is moved by the impulse to escape. The tonal quality of Eliot’s verse is no less a part of the suppressed feeling of this poem, which is given a setting almost Whistleresque in its elegance of color. All of these elements contribute to the atmosphere or mood of the poem, which belongs to a world of revealing reticences.”

George Williamson
A Reader’s Guide to T. S. Eliot: A Poem-by-Poem Analysis
(1949; Farrar, Straus/Noonday 1957-63) 70-75

“‘Portrait of a Lady’ is laid in a similar setting [to ‘Prufrock’]. The speaker is a young man; his companion is a lady, somewhat older who wishes to hold him although she realizes their affair cannot hope to be permanent. For his part the young man is torn between sympathy and a longing for freedom. Perhaps a little too refined and sensitive, the lady leads a highly artificial life among her flowers, her Chopin recitals, and her ‘few friends.’ In the penultimate stanza (11.102-08) the lady, in spite of her sophisticated manner, scarcely conceals her anguish at the parting; yet the young man realizes this last separation to be a permanent one. The poem symbolically covers a cycle of time from winter to winter. Section I takes place in December; in Section II it is April and the lilacs are in bloom. In the final section October completes the circle and accentuates the young man’s restlessness, nostalgia, and boredom. The last stanza in Section II (11.71-83) is the chief expression of the young man’s attitude toward the lady, an attitude dominated by sympathy but lacking real passion. Like ‘Prufrock,’ this poem is a character study intended to communicate the mood of a certain social environment.”

Donald Heiney
Recent American Literature 4
(Barron’s Educational Series 1958) 484-85

“The ‘Lady’ whose ‘Portrait’ Eliot draws is like someone out of E. A. Robinson; but there is in this poem none of the precision and self-defeating honesty of Robinson’s best portraits. Observing his Lady, listening to her, meditating her fate, the poet concludes: ‘Well and what if she should die some afternoon...’ This is honest enough, but really not very clear. Indeed, such clarity as the poem has resides in its epigraph, from *The Jew of Malta*: ‘Thou hast committed -- / Fornication; but that was in another country, / And besides, the wench is dead.’ We gather that it is that other country which the poet cannot understand. Obviously lacking in ‘Portrait of a Lady’ is the motivating force, the sense of the human

situation, which will make for continuity and integral, not to say organic, form. Eliot could not (would not?) endow the speaker with such insight into motivation as would make of the poem that sort of whole composition in which one part leads to and demands the next. In short, from the very beginning the autobiographical mode, much less the narrative, has simply not been Eliot's *metier*."

Roy Harvey Pearce
The Continuity of American Poetry
(Princeton 1961) 296-97

Michael Hollister (2015)