



“THE LOVE SONG OF  
J. ALFRED PRUFROCK”

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# “The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock”

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The poem centers on the feelings and thoughts of the persona, J. Alfred Prufrock, as he walks to meet a woman for tea and considers a question he feels compelled to ask her (something along the lines of “Will you marry me?”).

# lines 1-3

3

- Prufrock, the persona of the poem, issues his invitation to an unspecified “you” to go with him to an as yet unspecified place.
- Prufrock, looking up at the sky, perceives it pressing back down upon him in such a way that he would feel like he was “spread out” “upon a table.” The word “etherised” indicates a sense of helplessness.

# line 10

4

- “an overwhelming question”?
- The use of the ellipsis (. . .) indicates that the “you” who accompanies Prufrock has asked what that question would be.
- rhymed couplets:
  - I – sky
  - streets – retreats
  - hotels – shells
  - argument – intent
  - What is it? – visit

# lines 13-14

5

Prufrock looks forward in his mind's eye to the room he is walking toward, where he imagines women preparing the tea and talking of some intellectual subject.

# lines 15-22

6

- It is evening, foggy, and Prufrock's attention focuses on the fog mixed with chimney smoke.
- He equates the movement of the fog with the movement of some seemingly cat-like creature.

# lines 23-34

7

- Prufrock determines that just as there is time for the fog and smoke, there is time to get himself adjusted to what he is about to do.
- However, at the fourth repetition of “There will be time” he is once more focusing on where he is going and what he is about to do there.
- Eliot exaggerates Prufrock’s emotional state by paralleling it to those associated with acts of murder and creation.

# lines 37-44

- Prufrock pictures himself losing his resolve, turning and walking back down the stairs before even knocking on the door.
- Prufrock begins to be aware of how others might see him, even to the point of including in the stream of his own thoughts disparaging comments that he imagines these others might make about him.

# lines 45-48

- Prufrock's third repetition of "Do I Dare?" is exaggerated to reflect the depth of his own dread.
- He repeats that while there *is* time for all these thoughts, the situation is still hopeless: as long as it takes to make a decision is as long as it takes to reverse that decision.

# lines 49-54

- Prufrock tries to explain *why* he is indecisive about his feelings toward the woman he is meeting for tea. It is because he knows the kind of social life he is moving toward.
- The visual image of the coffee spoons indicates that he himself has had innumerable cups of coffee in unbearable social situations.

# lines 55-61

- Prufrock indicates that he is familiar with people who appraise him according to some set of standards that have nothing to do with who he considers himself to be.
- He feels as if he is as insignificant and helpless as a bug stuck by a pin for collection and examination.

# lines 70-72

- Eliot brings Prufrock and the reader back to the idea of how Prufrock might begin to talk to the woman he is going to meet. The image of “lonely men” symbolizes the loneliness of Prufrock.

# lines 73-74

13

- The image of the “ragged claws” in the “silent seas” suggests that Prufrock’s brain is doing him no good at all.
- He feels that his ability to speak is so inferior that he should be relegated to a world of silence.

# lines 75-86

- There is a shift in tone here, in keeping with the image of evening made peaceful by “long fingers” caressing it into sleep.
- Evening is cat-like “beside you and me.”
- This peacefulness is disrupted as Prufrock wonders if he “has the strength” to ask this woman the “overwhelming question.”
- He is frightened at the image of the derision of the “eternal Footman”—which is death as a doorman holding Prufrock’s coat.

# lines 87-98

- Prufrock considers whether he could ask his “overwhelming question” within the context of the social trivialities of having tea.
- His imaginings carry him off to the point where he sees her casually asserting that his “overwhelming question” has nothing to do with anything that she said.

# lines 99-110

16

- Prufrock's thinking begins to fragment as a result of his frustration and dread.
- In line 104 he acknowledges that he cannot say what he means.
- The ellipsis emphasizes the sense of futility Prufrock experiences in the face of the impossibility of saying "just what I mean."

# lines 111-119

- Prufrock describes himself in a self-satiric way, noting that his unimportant presence will help to fill out a crowd scene.
- He determines that he will never be the main character in his own play, although he might have a function as “the Fool,” or court jester, who can provide light entertainment. The word “Fool” also alludes to how foolish he is in his inaction.

# lines 126-128

- Prufrock as an old man walking along the beach and remembering that he had at one time seen the mermaids, as well as heard their singing, is especially poignant.
- The use of the first person plural might be confirmation of the reading of the poem as a soliloquy or interior monologue of a divided self.

# Commentary

- Eliot created in the character of J. Alfred Prufrock the quintessential antihero in modernist literature.
- Prufrock's overwhelming question embodies the drama of the modern man whose quest for love leads to total failure.
- In the end, it becomes clear that the title of the poem is ironic, since the text is not a love song but Prufrock's failure to find love.

# Sources

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- *A Study Guide for T. S. Eliot's "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock,"* Gale, 2015. (Slides 2-18)
- James Persoon and Robert R. Watson, *The Facts on File Companion to British Poetry: 1900 to the Present*, Facts on File, 2009. (Slide 19)

on a whole generation of poets, critics, and intellectuals was enormous. His range as a poet is limited, and his interest in the great middle ground of human experience (as distinct from the extremes of saint and sinner) deficient; but when in 1948 he was awarded the rare honor of the Order of Merit by King George VI and also gained the Nobel Prize in literature, his positive qualities were widely and fully recognized—his poetic cunning, his fine craftsmanship, his original accent, his historical importance as the poet of the modern symbolist-Metaphysical tradition.

### The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock<sup>1</sup>

*S'io credesse che mia risposta fosse  
a persona che mai tornasse al mondo,  
questa fiamma staria senza più scosse.  
Ma per cio cche giammai di questo fondo  
non torno vivo alcun, s'i'odo il vero,  
senza tema d'infamia ti rispondo.<sup>2</sup>*

Let us go then, you and I,  
When the evening is spread out against the sky  
Like a patient etherised upon a table;  
Let us go, through certain half-deserted streets,  
5 The muttering retreats  
Of restless nights in one-night cheap hotels  
And sawdust restaurants with oyster shells:  
Streets that follow like a tedious argument  
Of insidious intent  
10 To lead you to an overwhelming question . . .  
Oh, do not ask, 'What is it?'  
Let us go and make our visit.

In the room the women come and go  
Talking of Michelangelo.

15 The yellow fog that rubs its back upon the window-panes,  
The yellow smoke that rubs its muzzle on the window-panes  
Licked its tongue into the corners of the evening,  
Lingered upon the pools that stand in drains,  
Let fall upon its back the soot that falls from chimneys,  
20 Slipped by the terrace, made a sudden leap,  
And seeing that it was a soft October night,  
Curled once about the house, and fell asleep.

And indeed there will be time<sup>3</sup>  
For the yellow smoke that slides along the street,  
25 Rubbing its back upon the window-panes;  
There will be time, there will be time

1. The title implies an ironic contrast between the romantic suggestions of "love song" and the dully prosaic name "J. Alfred Prufrock."  
2. "If I thought that my reply would be to one who would ever return to the world, this flame would stay without further movement; but since none has ever returned alive from this depth, if what I hear is true, I answer you without fear of

infamy" (Dante, *Inferno* 27.61–66). Guido da Montefeltro, shut up in his flame (the punishment given to false counselors), tells the shame of his evil life to Dante because he believes Dante will never return to earth to report it.  
3. Cf. Andrew Marvell, "To His Coy Mistress," line 1: "Had we but world enough, and time."

To prepare a face to meet the faces that you meet;  
There will be time to murder and create,  
And time for all the works and days of hands<sup>4</sup>  
30 That lift and drop a question on your plate;  
Time for you and time for me,  
And time yet for a hundred indecisions,  
And for a hundred visions and revisions,  
Before the taking of a toast and tea.

35 In the room the women come and go  
Talking of Michelangelo.

And indeed there will be time  
To wonder, 'Do I dare?' and, 'Do I dare?'  
Time to turn back and descend the stair,  
40 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!')  
45 Do I dare  
Disturb the universe?  
In a minute there is time  
For decisions and revisions which a minute will reverse.

For I have known them all already, known them all—  
50 Have known the evenings, mornings, afternoons,  
I have measured out my life with coffee spoons;  
I know the voices dying with a dying fall<sup>5</sup>  
Beneath the music from a farther room.  
So how should I presume?

55 And I have known the eyes already, known them all—  
The eyes that fix you in a formulated phrase,  
And when I am formulated, sprawling on a pin,  
When I am pinned and wriggling on the wall,  
Then how should I begin  
60 To spit out all the butt-ends of my days and ways?  
And how should I presume?

And I have known the arms already, known them all—  
Arms that are braceleted and white and bare  
(But in the lamplight, downed with light brown hair!)  
65 Is it perfume from a dress  
That makes me so digress?  
Arms that lie along a table, or wrap about a shawl.  
And should I then presume?  
And how should I begin?

4. *Works and Days* is a poem about the farming year by the Greek poet Hesiod (8th century B.C.E.). Eliot contrasts useful agricultural labor with the futile "works and days of hands"

engaged in meaningless social gesturing.  
5. Cf. Shakespeare's *Twelfth Night* 1.1.4: "That strain again, it had a dying fall."

70 Shall I say, I have gone at dusk through narrow streets  
And watched the smoke that rises from the pipes  
Of lonely men in shirt-sleeves, leaning out of windows? . . .  
I should have been a pair of ragged claws  
Scuttling across the floors of silent seas,<sup>6</sup>

. . . . .

75 And the afternoon, the evening, sleeps so peacefully!  
Smoothed by long fingers,  
Asleep . . . tired . . . or it malingers,  
Stretched on the floor, here beside you and me.  
Should I, after tea and cakes and ices,  
80 Have the strength to force the moment to its crisis?  
But though I have wept and fasted, wept and prayed,  
Though I have seen my head (grown slightly bald) brought in upon a  
platter,<sup>7</sup>  
I am no prophet—and here's no great matter;  
I have seen the moment of my greatness flicker,  
85 And I have seen the eternal Footman hold my coat, and snicker,  
And in short, I was afraid.

And would it have been worth it, after all,  
After the cups, the marmalade, the tea,  
Among the porcelain, among some talk of you and me,  
90 Would it have been worth while,  
To have bitten off the matter with a smile,  
To have squeezed the universe into a ball<sup>8</sup>  
To roll it toward some overwhelming question,  
To say: 'I am Lazarus,<sup>9</sup> come from the dead,  
95 Come back to tell you all, I shall tell you all'—  
If one, settling a pillow by her head,  
Should say: 'That is not what I meant at all.  
That is not it, at all.'

And would it have been worth it, after all,  
100 Would it have been worth while,  
After the sunsets and the dooryards and the sprinkled streets,  
After the novels, after the teacups, after the skirts that trail along the  
floor—  
And this, and so much more?—  
It is impossible to say just what I mean!  
105 But as if a magic lantern threw the nerves in patterns on a screen:  
Would it have been worth while  
If one, settling a pillow or throwing off a shawl,  
And turning toward the window, should say:

6. I.e., he would have been better as a crab on the ocean bed. Perhaps, too, the motion of a crab suggests futility and growing old. Cf. Shakespeare's *Hamlet* 2.2.201–02: "for you yourself, sir, should be old as I am—if, like a crab, you could go backward."  
7. Like that of John the Baptist. See Mark 6.17–

28 and Matthew 14.3–11.

8. Cf. "To His Coy Mistress," lines 41–44: "Let us roll all our strength and all / Our sweetness up into one ball, / And tear our pleasures with rough strife / Thorough the iron gates of life."

9. Raised by Jesus from the dead (Luke 16.19–31 and John 11.1–44).

110 'That is not it at all,  
That is not what I meant, at all.'

. . . . .

No! I am not Prince Hamlet, nor was meant to be;  
Am an attendant lord, one that will do  
To swell a progress,<sup>1</sup> start a scene or two,  
Advise the prince; no doubt, an easy tool,  
115 Deferential, glad to be of use,  
Politic, cautious, and meticulous;  
Full of high sentence,<sup>2</sup> but a bit obtuse;  
At times, indeed, almost ridiculous—  
Almost, at times, the Fool.

120 I grow old . . . I grow old . . .  
I shall wear the bottoms of my trousers rolled.

Shall I part my hair behind? Do I dare to eat a peach?  
I shall wear white flannel trousers, and walk upon the beach.  
I have heard the mermaids, singing, each to each.

125 I do not think that they will sing to me.

I have seen them riding seaward on the waves  
Combing the white hair of the waves blown back  
When the wind blows the water white and black.

130 We have lingered in the chambers of the sea  
By sea-girls wreathed with seaweed red and brown  
Till human voices wake us, and we drown.

1910–11

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### Sweeney among the Nightingales

ὦμοι, πέπληγμαι κουρίαν πληγὴν ἔσω!

Apeneck Sweeney spreads his knees  
Letting his arms hang down to laugh,  
The zebra stripes along his jaw  
Swelling to maculate<sup>o</sup> giraffe.

*spotted, stained*

5 The circles of the stormy moon  
Slide westward toward the River Plate,<sup>2</sup>

1. In the Elizabethan sense of a state journey made by a royal or noble person. Elizabethan plays sometimes showed such "progresses" crossing the stage. Cf. Chaucer's *General Prologue* to *The Canterbury Tales*, line 308.  
2. In its older meanings: "opinions," "sententiousness."

1. "Alas, I am struck with a mortal blow within" (Aeschylus, *Agamemnon*, line 1343); the voice of Agamemnon heard crying out from the palace as he is murdered by his wife, Clytemnestra.  
2. Or Rio de la Plata, an estuary on the South American coast between Argentina and Uruguay, formed by the Uruguay and Paraná rivers.