

Core 311 History of English Literature 1890-1939

UNIT 02 Poems

02. The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock

- by *T. S. Eliot*

(1) About the Poet:

Δ *Born: 26 September 1888,* St. Louis, Missouri, United States

Δ *Died: 4 January 1965,* London, United Kingdom

Δ Thomas Stearns Eliot OM (26 September 1888 – 4 January 1965) was a poet, essayist, publisher, playwright, literary critic and editor.

Δ He is considered to be one of the 20th century's greatest poets, as well as a central figure in English-language Modernist poetry.

Δ His trials in language, writing style, and verse structure reinvigorated English poetry.

Δ He is also noted for his critical essays, which often reevaluated long-held cultural beliefs.

Δ Born in St. Louis, Missouri, to a prominent Boston Brahmin family, he moved to England in 1914 at the age of 25 and went on to settle, work, and marry there.

Δ He became a British subject in 1927 at the age of 39 and renounced his American citizenship.

Δ Notable works:

- The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock (1915)

- The Waste Land (1922)

- The Hollow Men (1925)
- Murder in the Cathedral (1935)
- Four Quartets (1943)

Δ Notable awards:

- Nobel Prize in Literature (1948)
- Order of Merit (1948)

****02. About the Poem:****

Δ The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock”, commonly known as “Prufrock”, is the first professionally published poem by American-born British poet T. S. Eliot (1888–1965).

Δ The poem relates the varying thoughts of its title character in a stream of consciousness.

Δ Eliot began writing “Prufrock” in February 1910, and it was first published in the June 1915 issue of Poetry: A Magazine of Verse at the instigation of fellow American expatriate Ezra Pound.

Δ It was later printed as part of a twelve-poem chapbook entitled Prufrock and Other Observations in 1917.

Δ At the time of its publication, “Prufrock” was considered outlandish, but the poem is now seen as heralding a paradigmatic shift in poetry from late 19th-century Romanticism and Georgian lyrics to Modernism.

Δ Eliot wrote “The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock” between February 1910 and July or August 1911.

03. Theme:

One of the poem’s central themes is ***social anxiety and how it affects Prufrock’s ability to interact with those around him.***

“The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock” contains several themes. Among the themes of the poem are aging, ***love, regret, embarrassment, and failure.***

04. Setting:

The fog suggests that the poem’s setting is London, but Eliot wrote the poem a few years before he moved to London. ***The setting is likely Eliot’s home town of St. Louis.***

05. Rhyme Scheme:

Eliot uses ***careful end rhyme, though intermittently and inconsistently.*** At various times, the poem includes ***rhyming couplets, ABAB schemes, as well as unrhymed passages.*** There are instances in which two rhyming lines are separated by three non-rhyming lines. The stanza structures vary as well.

Eliot uses the ***distinctly modernist style of Imagism to construct his poem,*** “The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock.”

The tone of the love song is ***quite depressing.***

****04. Critical Appreciation:****

The poem begins with an epigraph from Dante’s *Inferno* in which Guido da Montefeltro, a resident of hell, explains he is willing to share his story with his interlocutor because he knows that person will never be able to return to the world and relay it to someone else.

The poem follows the fragmented consciousness of a middle-aged male speaker, J. Alfred Prufrock, as he navigates fears and concerns about his life and reflects upon his impotency and inability to create meaning for himself in the modern world. The poem dips in and out of Prufrock’s reflections and scenes of social anxiety he imagines for the reader.

In the first stanza, Prufrock begins with an invitation, asking the reader—or perhaps addressing a different part of his own psyche—to go out “through certain half-deserted streets” that “follow like a tedious argument / of insidious intent/to lead you to an overwhelming question” (Lines 4, 8, 10). The “overwhelming question” crops up in later sections of the poem, and Prufrock never satisfactorily answers it.

The Images in the first four stanzas describe a seedy, urban scene, with an eerie “yellow fog” permeating the entire setting (Line 15). The speaker exhibits concern about the “overwhelming question” and anxiety about interacting with other humans. He describes scenes of fashionable women going about the room, “talking of Michelangelo” and other fashionable, elite topics, and expresses worry over how to present himself to other “faces that you meet” (Lines 14, 27).

Prufrock is painfully self-aware, describing his aging body, and his sense that others constantly watch and judge him. Disembodied voices enter the poem, commenting on Prufrock’s thinning hair and physical

appearance, and these judgments paralyze him and prevent him from acting on any of his desires. He recalls the banal details of his life, one that has been “measured out [...] with coffee spoons” (Line 51) in which nothing big or meaningful has ever happened. He is “pinned and wriggling on the wall” (Line 58) like a trapped insect, unable to escape his discomfort and unable to move or act.

Halfway through the poem, the speaker imagines a romantic, sexualized other, describing her “arms that are braceleted and white and bare” (Line 63). Prufrock is impotent in his approach to this figure, and to all female figures in the poem, seized by not knowing “how [he should] begin” (Line 69). He acknowledges his inability to communicate with this love interest, claiming it would have been better for him to have been “a pair of ragged claws / scuttling across the floors of silent seas” (Lines 73-74) as he is incapable of forming a connection with her.

Prufrock spends several stanzas reflecting further on the meaninglessness he experiences, drawing on Biblical allusions to John the Baptist and Lazarus to emphasize his lowliness in comparison. Even the “eternal Footman” (Line 85), or Death himself, snickers at Prufrock, finding him pitiful.

Prufrock desperately desires to connect with the female love interest, or with any human figure, but finds it impossible. He describes an effort to tell her a personal story, to approach once more the “overwhelming question,” only to hear her say “[t]hat is not what I meant at all; / that is not it, at all” (Lines 97-98). Communication breaks down to the point where Prufrock claims “It is impossible to say just what I mean!” (Line 104).

In the final movements of the poem, Prufrock compares himself not with Hamlet—a literary figure famous for his indecision—but rather the Fool in Hamlet’s court. Prufrock describes his aging, and reframes his earlier question from “Do I dare disturb the universe?” to the measly “Do I dare to eat a peach?” (Line 122) He imagines himself walking on a beach with mermaids singing to each other but ignoring him. In the final stanza, Prufrock describes these distant mermaids, drawing him out into the “chambers of the sea” (Line 129), which become his deathbed when “human voices wake us, and we drown” (Line 131).

07. Conclusion:

****In conclusion, it is quite clear that Prufrock's character is marked by fears of old age.**** While he is aware that he should participate in social events, another personality tells him that the people will judge him based on his looks and age.

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