**C6T: British Literature: The Early 20th Century**

**A Discussion of T.S.Eliot’s “The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock”**

This is an e-material intended for the students of English Honours students of 3rd Semester under CBCS syllabus of Vidyasagar University



T. S. Eliot

**Text**

**The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock**

By [T.S.ELIOT](https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poets/t-s-eliot)

*S’io credesse che mia risposta fosse  
A persona che mai tornasse al mondo,  
Questa fiamma staria senza piu scosse.  
Ma percioche giammai di questo fondo  
Non torno vivo alcun, s’i’odo il vero,  
Senza tema d’infamia ti rispondo.*

Let us go then, you and I,

When the evening is spread out against the sky

Like a patient etherized upon a table;

Let us go, through certain half-deserted streets,

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

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.

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,

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

For the yellow smoke that slides along the street,

Rubbing its back upon the window-panes;

There will be time, there will be 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

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.

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,

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!”)

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:

Have known the evenings, mornings, afternoons,

I have measured out my life with coffee spoons;

I know the voices dying with a dying fall

Beneath the music from a farther room.

               So how should I presume?

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

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!)

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?

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.

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,

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,

I am no prophet — and here’s no great matter;

I have seen the moment of my greatness flicker,

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,

Would it have been worth while,

To have bitten off the matter with a smile,

To have squeezed the universe into a ball

To roll it towards some overwhelming question,

To say: “I am Lazarus, come from the dead,

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,

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!

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:

               “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, start a scene or two,

Advise the prince; no doubt, an easy tool,

Deferential, glad to be of use,

Politic, cautious, and meticulous;

Full of high sentence, but a bit obtuse;

At times, indeed, almost ridiculous—

Almost, at times, the Fool.

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.

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.

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.

**Summary of the poem:**

“The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock” has been described by the literary critic Christopher Ricks, the best first poem in a first volume of poems: it opened Eliot’s debut collection, “Prufrock and Other Observations”*,* in 1917. ‘The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock’ had been written by T. S. Eliot, though, back in 1910-11, and made its debut in print in June 1915, when it was published in “Poetry” magazine. Previously, one poetry bookseller had rejected the poem on the grounds that it was ‘absolutely insane’: Harold Monroe, an influential publisher and owner of the Poetry Bookshop in London, was offered the chance to publish ‘The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock’. He flung it back, labelling it ‘insane’, as Peter Ackroyd records in his lucid and informative biography “[T.S.Eliot](https://www.amazon.co.uk/gp/product/0241113490/ref=as_li_tl?ie=UTF8&camp=1634&creative=6738&creativeASIN=0241113490&linkCode=as2&tag=intereslitera-21&linkId=60aadfd3b5ad5dc4ddf58f1eade121e8" \t "_blank)”. This ground-breaking modernist poem has attracted many interpretations, involving everything from psychoanalysis to biographical readings, but it remains an elusive poem.

T. S. Eliot wrote ‘The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock’ while he was still a student at Harvard University, in his early twenties. The images of the modern metropolitan world which we find in ‘The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock’ as well as many of the other poems in Eliot’s first volume of poems – the cigarette ends, the cups of coffee, the ‘vacant lots’ – are partly a result of the influence of the French poet Charles Baudelaire on Eliot. It is partly what helps to make him a modern poet, focusing on urban social alienation and the landscape of the city rather than on nature and the pastoral. He treats his characters and his scenes without sentiment, but nevertheless his poems contain an emotional intensity which Baudelaire had shown the way for: modern poetry did not have to be cold and emotionless. Eliot could speak French fluently (as the French verses included in his “[Collected Poems” 1909-62](https://www.amazon.co.uk/gp/product/0571105483/ref=as_li_tl?ie=UTF8&camp=1634&creative=6738&creativeASIN=0571105483&linkCode=as2&tag=intereslitera-21&linkId=4a00a446976878ccb7a5c5242fabdd1e) attest), and he even spent a short time in Paris after his MA at Harvard, and before he came to England in 1914. His portrayal of modern urban life is heavily influenced by Baudelaire’s depictions of nineteenth-century Paris.

Another big influence on early Eliot, alongside Baudelaire, was Jules Laforgue (1860-1887), a Franco-Uruguayan Symbolist poet. Eliot’s early poetry leading up to, and including, ‘Prufrock’, was heavily influenced by the French Symbolists: in 1908 Eliot had read Arthur Symons’ manifesto, “The Symbolist Movement in Literature” (1899), which argued that the poet should go in search of the perfect symbol that would help to illuminate life – poetry is talked up by Symons as being almost a new religion. In Symons’ book, Eliot underlined the passages that addressed the method of one particular Symbolist writer, Jules Laforgue.

It was Laforgue’s poems that would have a profound influence on ‘Prufrock’ and Eliot’s other early poems. In 1882, Laforgue had had the idea of ‘a new kind of poetry which would be psychology in the form of dream … with flowers and scents and wind … complex symphonies with certain phrases (motifs) returning from time to time’. This new technique was what helped Eliot to create the [stream-of-consciousness style](https://interestingliterature.com/2020/02/what-is-stream-consciousness-introduction-examples/) of Prufrock’s interior monologue.

It’s difficult to summarise what happens in Eliot’s poem, since it’s not a narrative poem and more a collage of thoughts, wishes, fears, meditations, and images – spoken to us by Prufrock himself – than it is a coherent speech, as we find in earlier dramatic monologues or in Shakespeare’s soliloquies (where characters often mull over a situation, debating the various aspects of it with themselves, before deciding upon a course of action).

Instead, in ‘The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock’, Eliot offers us a portrait of a middle-aged man, named J. Alfred Prufrock, who is attending social events (almost certainly in New England, such as in the Massachusetts area which Eliot knew well from his time studying at Harvard), probably in the hopes of finding a woman he can court and then marry. Prufrock talks of an ‘overwhelming question’ but does not state what this is (he tells us, or his unseen companion, not to ask ‘What is it?’, so we’re left to ponder what this ‘question’ might be – perhaps ‘popping the question’, i.e. asking a woman to marry him). He is indecisive, anxious, self-conscious (he worries that the women are muttering behind his back about his thinning hair) – perhaps a bit like the famously indecisive and delaying Prince Hamlet from Shakespeare’s play, except that Prufrock doesn’t consider himself important enough to be compared to Hamlet (‘No! I am not Prince Hamlet …’). He’s a bit-part actor or walk-on part … even in his own life.

He also dreams of escaping the suffocating social world he inhabits, of tea parties and pretentious chatter about art (‘Talking of Michelangelo’). See the metaphors he uses to describe himself: he doesn’t just wish he’d been born someone else, but that he’d been born a completely different species, a crab or pair of ragged claws that roams the ocean bed. At the end of the poem, this oceanic imagery returns, with Prufrock hearing the song of the mermaids but thinking that they would not sing to him, only to each other. Even in his fantasies he sees himself as inadequate, such is the crippling social anxiety of the early twentieth-century New England world (somewhat prudish and even puritanical in its attitudes). He lingers in this ‘happy place’, the chambers of the sea, until the human voices chattering around him in some drawing-room return him to the less pleasant reality of his life, and he ‘drowns’ again in the social pressures of those tea parties and the knowledge that society expects him to follow convention, marry one of the women he seems to find so intimidating, and settle down.

Curiously, many biographers of T. S. Eliot, including Lyndall Gordon, have located the origins of this poem in Eliot’s own shyness around women as a student at Harvard. But if the poem did have a personal root, ‘The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock’  transcends this and becomes a much more universal statement about not fitting in, and about feeling social pressures to behave in a way we find uncomfortable.

Who is Prufrock? Middle-aged, perhaps around 40 (his head has ‘grown slightly bald’ and Eliot himself said he had this age roughly in mind), socially awkward, living in a world he considers stifling and unsatisfying, his own place in that world not clearly defined (he is not a prophet like John the Baptist; nor is he Prince Hamlet, but ‘an attendant lord’ or ‘the Fool’ – in other words, a bit-part actor rather than the starring role, even in his own life). He is perhaps slightly pretentious and affected, given the styling of his name in the title as J. Alfred Prufrock (rather than, for instance, John Prufrock or James Prufrock). He has perhaps been tempted to approach prostitutes (see the reference to bare, braceleted arms in ‘the lamplight’, suggesting women he encounters in the street), but how much experience he’s ever had with women is doubtful.

Prufrock also seems reluctant to grasp the nettle and proposition any of the women he meets at the social functions he attends – those women who talk of Michelangelo, for instance. But we cannot advance much more than this with real confidence. These gaps are deliberate on Eliot’s part. Many of the utterances in the poem remain enigmatic (why does Prufrock think he ‘should have been a pair of ragged claws’, for instance?), which is a key part of its effectiveness: we cannot ever arrive at a final analysis of the poem. Like all great works of art, it remains open to new interpretations and can mean lots of different things to different readers.

\***From Michael North, The Political Aesthetic of Yeats, Eliot, and Pound. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991.**

“The general fragmentation of "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock" is obvious and notorious. The poem seems a perfect example of what Terry Eagleton calls the modern "transition from metaphor to metonymy: unable any longer to totalize his experience in some heroic figure, the bourgeois is forced to let it trickle away into objects related to him by sheer contiguity." Everything in "Prufrock" trickles away into parts related to one another only by contiguity. Spatial progress in the poem is diffident or deferred, a "scuttling" accomplished by a pair of claws disembodied so violently they remain "ragged." In the famous opening, "the evening is spread out against the sky / Like a patient etherised upon a table," and the simile makes an equation between being spread out and being etherised that continues elsewhere in the poem when the evening, now a bad patient, "malingers, / Stretched on the floor, here beside you and me." There it "sleeps so peacefully! / Smoothed by long fingers . . . ." This suspension is a rhetorical as well as a spatial and emotional condition. The "streets that follow like a tedious argument / Of insidious intent" lead not to a conclusion but to a question, a question too "overwhelming" even to ask. Phrases like the "muttering retreats / Of restless nights" combine physical blockage, emotional unrest, and rhetorical maundering in an equation that seems to make the human being a combination not of angel and beast but of road-map and Roberts' Rules of Order.

In certain lines, metaphor dissolves into metonymy before the reader's eyes. "The yellow fog that rubs its back upon the window-panes" appears clearly to every reader as a cat, but the cat itself is absent, represented explicitly only in parts -- back, muzzle, tongue -- and by its actions -- licking, slipping, leaping, curling. The metaphor has in a sense been hollowed out to be replaced by a series of metonyms, and thus it stands as a rhetorical introduction to what follows. The people in the poem also appear as disembodied parts or ghostly actions. They are "the faces that you meet," the "hands / That lift and drop a question on your plate," the "Arms that are braceleted and white and bare," the "eyes that fix you in a formulated phrase." Prufrock himself fears such a reduction, to use Kenneth Burke's term for the effect of metonymy. The dread questions "How his hair is growing thin!" and "But how his arms and legs are thin" reduce Prufrock to certain body parts, the thinness of which stands in for the diminution caused by the rhetorical figures. What Prufrock fears has already been accomplished by his own rhetoric.

In this poem the horror of sex seems to come in part from its power to metonymize. Like Augustine, Eliot sees sex as the tyranny of one part of the body over the whole. Though Eliot is far too circumspect to name this part, he figures its power in his poetry by the rebelliousness of mere members: hands, arms, eyes. Sexual desire pulls the body apart, so that to give in to it is to suffer permanent dismemberment. This may account for the odd combination in Eliot's work of sexual ennui and libidinous violence. The tyranny of one part scatters all the others, reducing the whole to impotence. In this way, the violence of sex robs the individual of the integrity necessary to action.

An oddly similar relationship of part to whole governs Prufrock's conception of time. In a burst of confidence he asserts, "In a minute there is time / For decisions and revisions which a minute will reverse." Yet he seems to quail before the very amplitude of possibility contained in time, so that all these decisions and revisions are foreclosed before they can be made. Thus Prufrock's prospective confidence in the fullness of time becomes a retrospective conviction that "I have known them an already, known them all: -- / Have known the evenings, mornings, afternoons. . . ." To know "all" already is to be paralyzed, disabled, because "all" is not full of possibility but paradoxically empty, constituted as it is by pure repetition, part on part on part. In a figure that exactly parallels the bodily metonymies, time becomes a collection of individual parts, just as the poem's human denizens had been little more than parts: "And I have known the eyes already, known them all"; "And I have known the arms already known them all." The instantaneous movement from part to whole, from eyes, arms, evenings, mornings, to "all," expresses the emptiness between, the gap between dispersed parts and an oppressive whole made of purely serial repetition. The very reduction of human beings to parts of themselves and of time to episodes makes it impossible to conceive of any whole different from this empty, repetitious "an." As Burke says, metonymy substitutes quantity for quality, so that instead of living life Prufrock feels "I have measured out my life with coffee spoons.”