

There will be time:  
loves lack in  
browning and eliot



**ASSIGN  
BUSTER**

There Will Be Time: Love's Lack in Browning and Eliot Browning's "My Last Duchess" and Eliot's "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock" both utilize the personae of men hungry for love, although the speakers in each poem are very different men, with very different ideas of what love is, and varying confidence in expressing their thoughts. Browning employs a dramatic monologue throughout, as the Duke describes to his audience the character of his former wife and, at the same time, pursues her successor. Eliot begins with a similar form, but his character's monologue becomes more intimate, inviting the reader into the interior recesses of his mind as he contemplates the steps he is too afraid to take. The traditional dramatic monologue elements of both poems have the characters speaking to someone else ("you"), but Prufrock, the weaker of the two, has less control over the course of his monologue. Unintentionally, Prufrock and the Duke both reveal their true ability to love through contrasts and discrepancies in their speech. The Duke in "My Last Duchess" gradually proves himself to be egomaniacal and possibly homicidal. He wants to marry, but his idea of love, much like his idea of art, is that it should exist to glorify him above all else. He found his last duchess, whose heart was "too soon made glad" (line 21), "too easily impressed" (line 23). Her smile, he felt, should be reserved solely for him, and in his determination to stop her from experiencing joy from every pleasant thing in life, he commanded her until "all smiles stopped together" (line 46). Now she exists only in a painting "as if alive" (line 47), implying that she is, in fact, alive no longer, and the audience cannot help but suspect her death came at his hands. As the Duke negotiates for the procurement of his next duchess, he exhibits the same attitude as a man today would discuss the purchase of his next car. To the Duke, love is a commodity

inherent in women, something to be bought and sold, and discarded if defective.

In contrast, Prufrock does not have the Duke's power, nor his past. He has known a lonely life filled with " a hundred indecisions" (line 32) and negative answers to a hundred repetitions of the question " Do I dare" (line 38), and still, he wishes for love. Eliot lays out the character's despair in the prologue, implying that it is already too late for Prufrock, but then reveals the depth of his emotions through the desperate verse and interior revelations. Prufrock knows he is old, " with a bald spot in the middle of my hair" (line 39) and says " I have measured out my life with coffee spoons" (line 51), and yet he continues to hunger for that which he knows he cannot have. At the poem's end, we see how love has attained mythic proportions in Prufrock's mind, compared to mermaids, but he concludes, " I do not think that they will sing to me" (line 125) and that his fascination with it will be the end of him. For Prufrock, love is an elusive thing that, like smoke or fog, will always slip from his fingers, and women are ideals too lofty to aspire to.

It is ironic that, in two such eloquent monologues, both characters doubt their ability to communicate with women. Prufrock, in his indecision, wonders " And should I then presume/And how should I begin" (lines 68-9) when he contemplates addressing one, because what follows will never be uttered except in his interior monologue. The Duke also understands that his words cannot move his wife as he wishes, saying, " Even had you skill/In speech- (which I have not)" (lines 35-6), but nonetheless, he " gave commands" (line 45), expressed his purpose first to the Duchess and then to the Count's agent. Neither man can speak to a woman in such a way as to arouse in her a desire to comprehend and fulfill his will. By the end of " My Last Duchess,"

<https://assignbuster.com/there-will-be-time-loves-lack-in-browning-and-eliot/>

both the reader and the agent to whom the Duke speaks begin to recognize the Duke's inhuman side and realize that a man who says the things he says will not change his views on love. By the end of "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock" the reader sees deep into Prufrock's thoughts and knows that it is too late for him, not because he is too old, but because his life has been lived without the boldness he contemplates, but cannot embrace.