

# Superficial standards in t.s. eliot's "the love song of j. alfred prufrock"



**ASSIGN  
BUSTER**

In concert with the Modernism movement of literature in the early decades of the 20th century, T. S. Eliot was a British writer whose works functioned as social commentary. In reaction to the superfluous and lush styles of preceding Victorian and Romantic literature, Eliot challenged traditional writing techniques and subjects with a more experimental approach. Eliot was greatly influenced by American writer, Ezra Pound, whose focus on imagistic writing inspired much of Eliot's visually-charged works.

Eliot's modernist poem, "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock," illustrates the trivial pursuits of a superficial society. Prufrock, the speaker, invites the reader on a journey through a modern city in which he contemplates social anxieties. Additionally, Prufrock reveals his personal anxieties that have emerged from frivolous societal standards. Throughout the poem, such petty concerns are depicted by images and scenes of shallow human interactions throughout the city. Specifically, Prufrock reveals his own vain insecurities as he examines images of masculinity and beauty within various social settings. In these various scenes, Prufrock considers the female idea of masculinity as normative standards of desirability. This notion reveals Prufrock's flawed belief that acceptance and desirability in society are synonymous. Further, Prufrock maintains a faulty perception of beauty as he equates it with youthfulness. Consequently, Prufrock's attempt to achieve such beauty precipitates his loss of authentic identity. These themes are cleverly conveyed by Eliot's treatment of ideas about masculinity, his demonstration of personal insecurities regarding his physical attributes, and his constant comparison of himself against more prominent figures.

Throughout the poem, Prufrock centers his idea of masculinity around female discussion thereof. Early in his observational journey, his fixation on women's opinions is revealed as he repeats: "In the room the women come and go talking of Michelangelo" (ll. 13-14). The women's conversations regarding "Michelangelo" suggest that they are referring to and intrigued by one of Michelangelo's sculptural masterpieces, "David." This allusion to "David" implies a rigid definition of masculinity as the sculpture provides a daunting image of a physically robust, nude male icon. Such intimidating standards of masculinity breeds in Prufrock a sense of deficiency and insecurity that guides his anxious manner throughout the poem. Further, the repetition of this reference to "women... talking of Michelangelo" in lines 35 and 36 conveys a sense of inevitability that plagues Prufrock. This suggests that Prufrock must eventually face his social fears, one of which involves facing the superficial judgments of women.

In addition, Prufrock further expresses his low self-esteem as he assumes people's displeased reactions to his physical appearance in a social setting. First, he claims that in public, he should wear some type of mask when meeting people: "There will be time, there will be time/To prepare a face to meet the faces that you meet" (ll. 26-27). Here, Prufrock believes he must "prepare a face," or a façade, that makes him presentable when meeting other "faces," and thus, accepted by society. His repetition of "there will be time" in these lines hints at the fact that Prufrock is not ready to perform this act in the present moment. This repetition also suggests a looming sense of anxiety as this act of meeting people seems to be inevitable.

In another instance, as Prufrock briefly considers facing society, he quickly discourages the idea by presenting hypothetical dialogue of scrutiny regarding his physical appearance: "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!')" (ll. 40-44). Prufrock's "bald spot" and "thin" figure can be observed as indicators of his aging and deteriorating body, which contributes to his feelings of deficiency. His "morning coat," "mount[ed]" collar, and "rich and modest" necktie depicts Prufrock's attempt to appear well-dressed and respectable, further conveying his desire to be pleasantly accepted by society. His constant concern for what people "will say" about his physique shows his lack of autonomy. Prufrock's lack of autonomy places him in an indecisive state of mind in which he contemplates his role, or lack thereof, in society.

Later, Prufrock refers back to his "balding" head and meager features as he assesses his lack of self-worth: "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" (ll. 82-84). Prufrock's admission of having "wept," "fasted," and "prayed" implies a meek and unremarkable quality about him. The repetition of the image of him weeping in these lines further amplifies his lack of masculinity as defined by societal standards. The notion of crying and praying reveals in Prufrock a sense of helplessness, and ironically, an almost feminine quality. The second segment of these lines

suggests that he has in fact, suffered societal scrutiny as he has seen his head “ brought in upon a platter.” This image of his head “ grown slightly bald” on a “ platter” demonstrates society’s tendency to superficially and brutally assess people. It is such magnified judgments made by society that incites insecurities in Prufrock regarding his external appearance.

Further, Prufrock continues to submit his depleted self-value by presenting all the things that he is not. Prufrock’s claims of not being a “ prophet” and that this is “ no great matter” implies that his role is devoid of any relevance. As he admits that the “ moment of [his] greatness has flickered,” Prufrock maintains the image of his fading and diminishing presence. The “ moment of greatness” to which he refers to, can be observed as his youth. His frequent remarks about his “ balding” head suggests that he is aging, and therefore, Prufrock believes that he has become undesirable and unworthy by societal standards.

Prufrock continues to degrade his self-image as he positions himself below prominent figures: “ 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” (ll. 111-114). By ironically stating that he is not “ Prince Hamlet,” Prufrock implies that although he is indecisive like Hamlet, he does not identify with Hamlet’s impulsive traits, which would in turn, redeem or add value to his identity. He further reduces his value as he deems himself a mere “ attendant lord” who simply operates as a figure of service to Hamlet. Prufrock continues this image of

worthlessness in the subsequent lines: “ Deferential, glad to be of use,

Politic, cautious, and meticulous; Full of high sentence, but a bit obtuse; At <https://assignbuster.com/superficial-standards-in-ts-eliot-the-love-song-of-j-alfred-prufrock/>

times, indeed, almost ridiculous— Almost, at times, the Fool” (ll. 115-119).

Here, Prufrock’s admission that he is “ glad to be of use” further illustrates his unambitious demeanor and lack of confidence. His “ cautious” and “ meticulous” conduct conveys his doubtful and insecure mentality.

Additionally, Prufrock’s claims of being “ ridiculous” and at times, “ the Fool,” demonstrates detrimental self-shaming that is caused by his inability to fulfill superficial standards of beauty. Moreover, in Margaret Blum’s journal article, “ The Fool in ‘ The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock,” Prufrock’s “ Fool” allusion is examined as a parallel to the character, Yorick, in Shakespeare’s Hamlet. This Yorick figure, like Prufrock, mocked the meaningless of his world (Blum 425). Similarly, Prufrock grapples with the futility of human existence as he questions whether partaking into society’s superficial standards is even “ worth it at all” (line 87).

Towards the end of the poem, Prufrock submits to superficial standards of beauty in hopes of being accepted and desired by society. As he acknowledges his aging self, he attempts to mimic youthful traits: “ 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” (ll. 120-123). This scene of him rolling his “ white flannel” trousers and parting his hair displays his obsession with maintaining a youthful image. Prufrock dares to “ eat a peach” and “ walk upon the beach” because he wishes to simulate an artificial youthful quality that he no longer holds. Nonetheless, Prufrock fails to assimilate and reverts back to his self-shaming state of mind: “ I have heard the mermaids singing, each to each. I do not think that they will sing to me” (ll. 124-125). Here, Prufrock’s

lack of confidence is revived as he realizes that his miserable efforts to imitate youthful beauty is unsuccessful. His claim that the “mermaids” will not “sing” to him represents his apprehensive belief that society will see through his façade and reject his true unattractive identity.

The examination of various images related to masculinity in T. S. Eliot's “The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock” demonstrates the speaker's trivial insecurities that have been instilled in him by superficial societal standards. Prufrock's frequent consideration of physical beauty and bodily features is detailed in his allusions to Michelangelo's “David,” an image of rigid masculinity, as well as, upon his reflection of his own identity and build. As he surveys his “bald spot” and “thin” arms and legs, Prufrock acknowledges his diminishing youth and reveals his self-consciousness and anxious sense of deficiency. To be desired by society, Prufrock would have to alter and enhance his “bald” and “thinning” self, as such traits are deemed unattractive by the women in the poem, which would consequently compromise his unique and individual identity. Further, Prufrock's high regard for female discussion and perception of masculinity reveals his lack of autonomy. In this way, Prufrock displays a fear of rejection that leads him to question whether attempting to assimilate into society would even be “worth it at all.” This question extends to and critiques the individual's pursuit of fulfilling normative or desired standards that are imposed by society.