

Ts eliot prufrock essay sample

[Literature](#), [Poetry](#)



In what ways is Eliot's 'The Lovesong of J. Alfred Prufrock', an example of modernist writing? Discuss this in relationship to form as well as content. Although TS Eliot's *The Lovesong of J. Alfred Prufrock* contains many of the stylistic conventions that are now associated with modernist poetry, TS Eliot's position on the established art forms and religious hierarchy that many writers of his generation rejected, and how this influenced Eliot's composition of *Prufrock*, is highly debatable. In *Modernism: The New Critical Idiom* Peter Childs of the University of Gloucestershire writes that these stylistic conventions were: 'moves to break from the iambic pentameter as the basic unit of verse, to introduce Vers Libre, symbolism, and other new forms of writing' (Childs, 2008, pg. 3).

In the composition of *Prufrock* TS Eliot utilized a form of symbolism ostensibly very similar to that outlined by the Imagist movement in the *Imagists Manifesto* (Imagists, 1915, pg. 269). Instead of simply telling the reader *Prufrock's* emotions, Eliot relied on the 'objects' within the poem to convey *Prufrock's* thoughts and feelings. The most vivid example of imagist inspired symbolism within *The Lovesong of J. Alfred Prufrock* is the image of the yellow smoke which occurs several times throughout the poem: The yellow fog that rubs its back upon the window-panes

The yellow smoke that rubs its muzzle on the window-panes (Eliot, 1915, line 16-17)

Here the yellow fog, evocative of the smog that was common to most industrial cities, is the personification of Death in 'Prufrock'. Death takes the form of a cat like predator, a carefree and yet malicious animal than can

appear none-threatening, even playful. By saying that the yellow fog rubs its back and muzzle on the window panes is implying that it cannot leave the confines of the city streets and that it cannot enter houses or places of business. This indicates that Prufrock feels in most danger when he's out in the city streets.

Eliot's use of vers libre was most likely inspired by American poet Walt Whitman, and more specifically his 1855 poetry collection *Leaves of Grass*. The style of meter, which Marianne Moore said to be "in sequence of the musical phrase, not in the sequence of a metronome" (Moore, 1926, pg. 429) reflected Whitman's view of the beauty of the chaos of the natural world (Whitman, 1855, pg. 94) whilst for the modernists it captured the 'panorama of futility and anarchy which is contemporary history' (Eliot, 1923). TS Eliot made heavy use of vers libre in the composition of *Prufrock*, in order to better use the page space and to add gravitas to the poem's individual components:

Do I dare

Disturb the universe?

In a minute there is time

For decisions and revisions which a minute will reverse

(Eliot, 1915, line 45-49)

Here it can be seen that the lines which have greatest 'gravitas of connotation' to *Prufrock* are given the most room. *Prufrock's* question is separated into two lines as for him it has two different parts. As the top line: 'Do I dare', directly addressed *Prufrock* himself it is given its own line. To

Prufrock the question of whether or not he should 'Disturb the universe' has equal gravitas to the act itself and so has its own line. By saying that "In a minute there is time/For decisions and revisions which a minute will reverse" Prufrock is admitting that in a moment he would have made the decision, but soon enough after he would have gone back on that decision.

It has been often claimed that the modernist poets used verse libre to step away from the iambic pentameter and other popular poetic forms that had previously defined popular poetry (Eliot, 1917). TS Eliot however refused to see the difference between vers libre and traditionally written poetry. In his essay *Reflections on Vers Libre* TS Eliot wrote two years after the publication of *Prufrock* that:

Vers libre [...] is a battle-cry of freedom, and there is no freedom in art. And as the so-called vers libre, which is good is anything but 'free', it can better be defended under some other label. Particular types of vers libre may be supported on the choice of content, or on the method of handling the content. I am aware that many writers of vers libre have introduced such innovations, and that the novelty of their choice and manipulation of material is confused—if not in their own minds, in the minds of many of their readers—with the novelty of the form [...]. If vers libre is a genuine verse-form it will have a positive definition. And I can define it only in negatives: (1) absence of pattern, (2) absence of rhyme, (3) absence of metre. (Eliot, 1917).

Rachel Wezsteon would later summarise Eliot's essay as because the English ear was used to a certain sound within poetry, it would invariably return to

that sound even if trying to write in vers libre. So to Eliot there was no such thing as vers libre because the verse was no freer than traditional written poetry. Instead, there is only subjectively ' Good', ' Bad' and ' chaotic' poetry. (Wezsteon, 2009).

Prufrock's feelings of existential angst were not unique to him, nor are they unique to the poem. These feelings were common to most modernist literature - both poetry and prose, since the beginning of the twentieth century. Prufrock is unique amongst Modernist Writing in that here Eliot has managed so perfectly to summarise an entire generations feelings of existential angst and nihilism in the thoughts of one man - Prufrock himself. Prufrock's nihilistic feelings are best summarised when he muses that ' I have measured out my life with coffee spoons...' (TS Eliot, 1915). These iconic lines are both Eliot's snide comment on the modern world and his celebration of it at the same time. Ultimately Prufrock's nihilistic psyche decides that he cannot change and that he has wasted his life:

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.

[...] (TS Eliot, 1915, line 37-49)

In this part of the monologue Prufrock is expressing his belief that, if he does venture out into the world he will invariably meet with ridicule. He dreads what people will think of his appearance.

As modernist writing 'reveals a breaking away from [...]traditions[...]fresh ways of looking at man's position and function in the universe...' (JA Cuddon, 1997, pg. 517) many modernist writers, such as TS Eliot became opponents of both the Realist and Romantic movements that had held artistic monopoly since the early 19th century, and the philosophies that had become entwined with them, such as Naturalism. As the narrative of the lovesong of J. Alfred Prufrock is the celebration of the city, about a man going out into the night into the city, and taking charge of his life it is a fundamental rejection of the naturalism's idea of the dystopia of the cityscape. Modernism is naturally entwined with the growth of the modern city however the lovesong of J. Alfred Prufrock embraces the city to a point in which almost creates its own sublime - 'Sublime of the City'.

With the rejection of the various pre-modern literary forms also came a rejection of conventional theism and the spiritual themes that had inspired them. Because of this modernism is now largely considered a secular movement (Roston, 2000, pg. 43). However TS Eliot made heavy use of religious theme, reference and symbolism within The Lovesong of J. Alfred

Prufrock., an example of which can be seen when Prufrock thinks to himself that:

And would it have been worth it, after all
Among the porcelain, among some talk of you and me
Would it have been worthwhile,
To have bitten off the matter with a smile
To have squeezed the universe into a ball
To say ' I am Lazarus, come from the dead,
Come back to tell you all, I shall tell you ; -
If one, settling a pillow by her head,
Should say: ' that is not what I meant at all.
That is not it, at all'

(Eliot, 1915, line 87-99)

Here Prufrock has turned to contemplation. By saying, " I am Lazarus, come from the dead," Prufrock is comparing his situation to the death, and the resurrection of the biblical Lazarus. However Eliot is subverting expectations once again, but in this example he is subverting two traditional expectations. Although Prufrock's monologue makes use of Judeo-Christian references it is only a monologue; Prufrock, like the modernist movement as a whole is secular and is only using these things as comparisons. Eliot on the other hand is using them them in order to provide a larger reference to society as a whole. Unlike the other modernists Eliot couldn't pretend that his work was completely new (Eliot, 1919, pg. 366), and so he embraced the religious

thematic material that was familiar to the public, and was common in so many of his favourite works and so dear to him.

In summary in the composition of the Lovesong of J. Alfred Prufrock TS Eliot made use of all the stylistic conventions that are now commonly associated with Modernistic poetry including vers libre and imagist symbolism. Like many pieces of modernist writing existential angst is a key theme of the Lovesong of J. Alfred Prufrock. Eliot's composition style was much more traditional than his contemporaries, but for the composition of Prufrock Eliot took what he needed from older forms of literature, and common religious imagery and subvert them in such a way that both the modernists and the public would understand Prufrock's problem.

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