

# The (modernist) love song of j. alfred prufrock



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T. S. Eliot's *The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock* demonstrates several Modernist ideas. In particular, by frequently employing imagery, repetition, alliteration, assonance, rhetorical questions and references, creatively shaping lines and sentences and weaving in ambiguity and uncertainty in his words, Eliot includes Modernist characteristics in his work. Thematically, there is also a focus on the individual and its clash with society and social pressures, the city and modern living and a rejection of Romanticism and Victorianism that leads the poem towards the discordant. Nearly a century later, these innovative themes still find relevance. Through his Modernist images, discontinuous free verse, classical and literary allusions and repetition, Eliot exposes the conflict between the individual and society and the emphasis on the individual. For example, the opening line of the poem, "Let us go then, you and I" (Eliot line 1) encompasses "a self-aware contentiousness and questioning." The intentional ambiguity of "you and I" is repeated regularly throughout the poem. The phrase is especially important in showing that Prufrock, the persona and the "I", is surrendering himself to the guidance of the objective "you", presumably his lover. His passivity, considering the context of the Eurocentric, male-dominated early 20th century, is the first indication of Prufrock's reticence. This inkling is confirmed a few lines later when images of "the etherised patient...reflect his paralysis while the images of the city depict a certain lost loneliness." Prufrock finds it difficult to connect with the "women who come and go" talking about high culture. This idea is further explored in the following stanza: 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,

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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 dareDisturb the universe? In a minute there is timeFor decisions and revisions which a minute will reverse.(Eliot lines 37-48)Eliot's imagery and repetition is effortlessly polished and successful. Prufrock is afraid to encounter the unidentified people he needs to see. He lacks self-confidence and is minutely perceptive to all his physical imperfections. His imagination runs wild with hesitancy and agitation as he visualises the criticism " they" will maliciously point out. Even products of his relative wealth such as his morning coat and necktie fail to please him as he swelters in analytical self-scrutiny and self-doubt by asking himself constantly parenthetical rhetorical questions. He even likens the simple meeting he is about to have to disturbing the universe. For example, Prufrock has:...known them all already, known them all- Have known the evenings, mornings, afternoons, I have measured out my life with coffee spoons(Eliot lines 49-51)Even so, he cannot embrace society or intimacy, nor make decisions without delay. These lines, laced with repetition and deliberately irregular rhymes, suggest Prufrock is a man who is bored and exhausted with his vast experience in life. Prufrock's memorable metaphoric observation, " I have measured out my life with coffee spoons," is unambiguous about whether it is one " of a lonely, desolate person or of an over social one." Eliot's next significant metaphor reads: I should have been a pair of ragged clawsScuttling across the floors of silent seas.(Eliot lines 73-74)Thus, Eliot emphatically points to the latter by comparing Prufrock to a rough pair of crab-like claws, detached from their owner, scuttling across the extensive, soundless ocean floor, forlorn and incomplete. However, Prufrock's comment that he is " pinned and wriggling

on the wall” suggests otherwise by figuratively invoking the idea that he is a tiny, inconspicuous object pinned to a society he is struggling to free himself from. Later, Prufrock draws allusion to himself and Shakespeare’s Hamlet and Polunios and concludes he is neither a prince nor “ an attendant lord” but “ at times, the Fool.” In line 120, Eliot uses ellipses behind the two consecutive “ I grow old” to create discontinuity in the lines and weary misery for Prufrock. The repetitive “ I” s in this stanza emphasizes Prufrock the individual and his lonely existence filled with constant self-questioning and indecisiveness. By using various literary techniques, therefore, Eliot manages to portray J. Alfred Prufrock as a solitary middle-aged man inharmonious with his surroundings, his society and himself. Eliot also exploits descriptive language, extended metaphors, rhyme and repetition to set “ The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock” in a metropolitan context. The poem opens with a quote from Dante’s Inferno, spoken by the character Count Guido da Montefeltro, who is incarcerated in the fires of Hell. The poem itself begins in the poor section of a city, possibly London or Paris, where Prufrock’s earthly hell exists. In fragmented sentences and with unpatterned rhyme, Eliot describes “ muttering retreats,” “ cheap hotels,” “ sawdust restaurants” and “ half-deserted streets.” The application of enjambment conveys the tortuous spatiality of the metropolis and the meaningless routine and negativity of city life. The images created are of an abandoned, unfeeling and austere city. This seedy and disenchanting atmosphere is lifeless, rootless and barren. In the second stanza, the yellow smoke and fog that drifts towards drains, soot-filled chimneys and windowpanes as well as the fog’s correlation with the shifty, pathetic movements of a feline remind readers of the dirty and miserable

manufacturing part of the city. This representation of factory smoke, industrial waste, stench and poverty is how Eliot and Prufrock view the city. However, Eliot gives city life another perspective by directing Prufrock to approach “ parties and drawing-rooms...through the streets which provide metaphors for the squalor, the dangers, the mystery and the beauty of the unnamed city.” Furthermore, the irregularity in rhythm, fragmentation in lines, coldness in society and fragility in Prufrock’s personality gives the poem the Modernist tendency towards chaos. Eliot’s unique manipulation of language and poetic techniques marches in unison with Prufrock’s social eccentricity (or perhaps lack of it). The rhythm of the poem follows no specific guidelines. Eliot mostly paints irregularly rhymed free verse on the page but occasionally blots in unrhymed free verse that gives the poem a prose like quality. The lines are also irregular, often composing of an incomplete phrase that finishes in the next line. Sentences are thus splattered all over a stanza giving the poem and the persona a messy and disorienting effect. The two inserts of the refrain, for example, read: In the room the women come and go Talking of Michelangelo.(Eliot, lines 13-14 and 35-36)They appear disjointed from the main stanzas, especially without several readings, and are reflections of Modernist ideas. Content-wise, “ The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock,” like much of Eliot’s poetry, is set in the cold and darkness of evening, itself a disordered scene. Eliot’s simile comparing the evening sky to “ a patient etherised upon a table” generates an image of a surgery or a morgue that drains any sign of life or lightness out of it. The adjectives splashes throughout the poem are “ the language of disordered experience, of imprecision and aimlessness, abounds in modifiers and plurals: restless nights, one-night cheap hotels, visions and revisions, the

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sunsets and the dooryards, and the sprinkled streets.” The odd order in Eliot’s phrase, “ Have known the evenings, mornings, afternoons,” shows Prufrock has a perplexed sense of time. The figure of Prufrock himself is disorderly and pernickety. His constant self-rhetorical questioning of “ Do I dare?” and “ How should I presume?” shows he is unable to function in a society that relies on socializing, action and decisiveness. The city and its society are also disjointed and futile. The yellow fog and Prufrock’s introversion casts a shadow over drawing room English teas that represent tradition, values and morals. Eliot’s treatment of language and poetic techniques thus reveals the futile and tangled characteristics of Modernism. In summary, Eliot’s “ The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock” reveals modernist ideas through various literary and poetic techniques. It employs rhyme, repetition, figurative language, allusions, fragmented sentences and bizarre choices in language to convey desolation in cities, individuals’ struggles against society and their significance in society and disorderliness and futility in life. Eliot’s exemplary usage of these themes makes “ The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock” one of the greatest examples of Modernist poetry in existence.