

The rejection of
structure in "the love
song of j. alfred
prufrock" and
"preludes..."



**ASSIGN
BUSTER**

Human nature is inherently chaotic, and one of the few ways in which we can attempt to order our lives is by sharing our grievances and concerns with others—hence, our need for art. Inevitably, poetry such as T. S. Eliot's *The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock* (Prufrock) and *Preludes*, that explore this notion of rejecting structure both conceptually and thematically is what makes it so appealing. In fact, though these poems investigate the human condition through the lens of Eliot's Modernist context—which, in itself, is a rejection of the strict attitudes of the preceding eras—the concept of our fractured existence from our identities, purpose and time is one that is universal and ongoing. It is thus to a great extent that this exploration of the lack of structure in our lives and, by extension, in art, contributes to the appeal of Eliot's work.

Intrinsic to Eliot's exploration of humanity's unstructured and fractured existence is how that leads to a deepened questioning of our purpose, agency and autonomy. In fact, it is because of his complex explorations of these notions within his work that it has an ongoing appeal. In *Prufrock*, this aspect of the human psyche actually manifests in the external world that serves as a backdrop for the eponymous persona's actions. "How should I begin // To spit out the butt-ends of my days and ways?" *Prufrock* asks, the metaphoric language likening his alienated sense of identity to a distinct feature of the cityscape—no doubt a reflection of Eliot's Modernist roots. More significantly, however, is the use of the stream of consciousness displayed through this profound rhetorical question. Eliot rejects the structured paradigms of Enlightenment art by doing so, revealing to his immediate readers a different portrayal of the human psyche. Indeed, the

irony lies in Prufrock's awareness that he can metaphorically "measure out [his] life in coffee spoons," with Eliot mocking how the persona, who represents Modern Man, cannot bring himself to shift away from the structure and, hence, comfort that the monotonous daily routine gives him. This notion of rejecting humanity's persistent search for purpose is also what makes Preludes so captivating for readers of a broad variety. In fact, Eliot similarly utilises irony and humour—albeit quite dark—criticise the futility of existence in a jarring and, therefore, intriguing way. "Wipe your hand across your mouth and laugh," he states, the black humour and assertive tone revealing to readers that our incessant attempts to find cohesion in our identity is ultimately pitiful, and the only way one can overcome such dreadful realisations is to accept that existence is inherently fractured. As such, it is a notion that is artfully explored in such a way that captivates a universal, ongoing audience.

Time is, indeed, a universal experience that all humans undergo, and seeing it reflected and explored in masterfully crafted art is inevitably rewarding for readers. However, it is specifically Eliot's portrayal of the lack of time or, at least, the meaninglessness of it, that makes his work so intriguing—both conceptually and stylistically, he rejects the notion that, as much as we tell ourselves that "there will be time," the structure that it provides is rendered irrelevant. In this recurring motif throughout Prufrock, the euphony of the refrain created through the long vowels—an example of Eliot's clear mastery over poetic language—lulls the responders into a sense of security and structure before realising that it is a façade, as with everything in the persona's hesitant existence. There is, in fact, not enough time at all to

justify our existences and ask “overwhelming questions” that humanity desires. This outright rejection and criticism of meaning challenges and creates a prolonged interest in Eliot’s work. Similarly, in *Preludes*, Eliot alludes to time being nought more than a façade rather than an inevitable structure in our lives, a surprising exploration of the notion that artfully engages with a broad variety of readers, as it is one that we all experience. “[One thinks of the] masquerades // That time resumes,” he states, the metaphor criticising society as they perpetually exist in a meaningless pretence. That is, Eliot rejects the “grimy,” monotonous routines of the Modern man in their pitiful attempts to pass the time, the mocking tone confronting both immediate and eventual responders and, hence, intriguing them. Thus, the rejection of the structure that time provides to our existence is one that Eliot masterfully explores.

Moreover, Eliot rejects the structure of time by portraying it in an innovative and intricately crafted way—he, as a direct reflection of his role as a pioneer in the Symbolist movement, explores the notion metaphorically rather than literally, an unfamiliar element to his immediate audience that would have inevitably been found interesting. After all, the Symbolist movement was very much defined by the notion that truths of our existence, including time, must be explored indirectly and without structure and, indeed, in *Preludes*, this is the case. Eliot subverts the idealistic, Romanticised notions of the morning as a symbol of hope and states that, when it “comes to consciousness,” it is only with “faint stale smells of beer.” The personification of time melds it with humanity—that is, the recurring notion in his poetry of the fractured, external world embodying the internal psyche

—to show that, as much as we rely on time to provide us structure and meaning, this is ultimately fallible as it can only give us another hazy, fatigued and “ hungover” day. In Prufrock, however, the converse occurs. Eliot breaks the structured, literal approaches to poetry by instead aligning humans with their external world. “ I should have been a pair of ragged claws,” the persona states, zoomorphising himself to reveal just how stagnant humanity remains, despite their desperate attempts to find structure and meaning in the passage of time. That is, like a crab, Prufrock can only move sideways, never progressing forward. The sombre statement further reveals Eliot’s intriguing exploration and rejection of structure, as Prufrock can only understand the chaotic, external world in terms of its fractured, dissected parts—much like the “ patient etherised on the table.” Thus, this masterful exploration of time and, more specifically, how Eliot rejects its façade of structure and meaning, is one that audiences find intriguing due to how there is an artful manipulation of poetic language in various levels and, ultimately, is what makes him a pioneer of the Symbolist movement.

Eliot is able to engage with his specific, immediate audience at the turn of the twentieth century by appealing to their growing rejection of the meaning of existence and the façade of time with the backdrop of the Modern world. However, these are concerns that are similarly experienced by a universal audience and, as such, allows Prufrock and Preludes to have an ongoing appeal. The masterful exploration of our fractured existence through questioning of our purpose and of time through metaphoric Symbols, is what makes him such a revered artist even in today’s world.