

# Imagery in "the love song of j. alfred prufrock"



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When it came to modernist poetry, imagery was important to flesh out the lavish artistic style said poets loved to express, which in turn allowed them to declare themes and concepts clearer. T. S. Eliot, consider among the great poetic modernists, masterfully utilizes imagery through his poem "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock" to illustrate the superficiality and weakness of its protagonist representative of society as a whole, and serve as a warning to any potential male readers of Eliot to not make a Prufrock of themselves.

T. S. Eliot uses imagery in his modernist poem "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock" throughout the poem in a strange and unconventional way. Rather than build meaning, as typical with imagery, Eliot sets out to utilize imagery to take real meaning away. Over the course of the poem, the narrator, J. Alfred Prufrock, struggles to tell the reader his overwhelming question. He instead diverts attention to images or ideas that are ultimately meaningless to the grand scheme promised in the poem. One of the most left field and significant of these is when he remarks he "should have been a pair of ragged claws scuttling across the floors of silent seas." This line has no real meaning and does not connect to anything going on in the rest of it. The reason for his diversion is to deflect focus from his serious thoughts into empty wonders. Ragged claws suggest a crustacean creature, which is significant for Prufrock's character as these creatures are built around self-defense and keeping their sensitive being hidden away through a hard exterior. Prufrock wants to keep to himself and shed off any serious concerns with his defense of a wandering and unfocused mind. This stream of consciousness, while revealing of who Prufrock is on the inside to a degree, does nothing with its promise of some sort of life-altering overarching theme

or question. Prufrock is afraid to reveal anything that could be taken as not as grand as he wants to be, so he keeps it inside of his shell. The thought of him wanting to be a crab may be random, but the image of a crab is significant, even if for the wrong reasons.

Prufrock's self-image is also crucial for understanding what the poem offers to say about the emasculation and growing pessimism that plagues men as Eliot saw. This comes from the imagery of Prufrock himself.

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!"] (Eliot 40-44)

Prufrock is a self-deprecator, a man afraid and unaccepting of his own masculinity. On multiple occasions, he draws attention to his bald spot. Balding in men is caused due to the male hormone dihydrotestosterone and while it is tough to say that this knowledge was common sense in Eliot's time, it is still interesting to note with a contemporary perspective that Prufrock is, in a way, afraid of his own masculinity through his balding. Prufrock's fickleness regarding his being makes him appear more as a feline than a man, obsessively grooming. It is important to note that no one in the poem actually says to his face that his limbs are thin and weak. Prufrock hypothesizes that people will say that, showing his low self-esteem and image. His necktie is simultaneously " rich and modest" and this juxtaposition compliments Prufrock's scatterbrained and unfocused state of being; he cannot make up his own mind as to whether he is well off or just

standard. Prufrock can be related to many males reading this poem, so Eliot uses him as an example of what a man should not be. In his own poem, Prufrock is a weak and spineless man who is too afraid of any notion of accepting responsibility or venturing out of his comfort zone, too afraid that he will instead insult and then be insulted in retaliation. Again, Prufrock further signals his alienation and insecurities with those around him with the line "to prepare a face to meet the faces that you meet," which implies that he is afraid of showing his true self to people that he does not hold close to him, writing them all off as simply faces one meets (line 27). This idea of wearing a face is perhaps a direct allusion to Swiss psychiatrist Carl Jung and his idea of a "persona." Jung describes a persona as being "a kind of mask, designed on the one hand to make a definite impression upon others, and on the other to conceal the true nature of the individual" (Jung, 190). This perfectly falls in line with what Prufrock is setting out to accomplish through this line. He is being self-defensive about his true self, hiding his real thoughts and weak personality behind a façade to not come off as cowardly, to make a more desirable impression on those around him, and those he feels attraction towards. After all, what sort of man is one worth taking notice of when he measures his life with coffee spoons, an image that signifies that he does not think far into the future and is more concerned with the materialistic entities surrounding him.

He projects this fear of commitment to his real world and those living within it and his favoring of nonsensical nothings outwards when he states he has known the arms already, known them all" of the people he always passes by (Eliot, line 62). His life is so mundane and his mind so single focused that he

does not view the people around him as whole, just body parts. This image of floating body parts adds to his isolation and is rooted in Prufrock's fear of women, or rather, of making any sort of impression on a woman. There is a brief moment in line 64 where he sees an arm "in the lamplight, downed with light brown hair!" (line 64) The exclamation mark following this observation builds an image that Prufrock is fascinated by this woman, and her presence has left an impact on him so great that he truly emotes in the poem, and it is the only time that an exclamation in the poem is delivered due to the action of someone outside of Prufrock. However, this is not enough for him to come out of his emasculated shell, as he immediately forgets about this and slips back into his sterile monotonous tone describing the various objects about him.

J. Alfred Prufrock is a man who, in his modern times, has become complacent and passive, letting himself go to be taken by the powers that be through a trivial life on no true substance. Prufrock makes a point in saying there is "time yet for a hundred indecisions, and for a hundred visions and revisions" and this line perfectly sums up Prufrock's decision making, or rather lack thereof (lines 22-23). Prufrock values his time, but only when it's spent, ironically, doing nothing. Throughout the whole poem, Prufrock is making indecisions and is constantly revising his own vision of himself through preparing "masks" for others. This is a man who does not take action, but rather action takes him to nowhere in particular. Prufrock is afraid to make any real decisions that could remotely leave an unsatisfactory impact on the world, so he attempts to justify himself on multiple occasions at holding out on asking his important question by question how he should presume. (line

54). This is a man who has been emotionally castrated, and with that comes the associated post-complacency with the theoretical removal of the primary source of testosterone. Prufrock is too afraid to make any significant contact with a female because he's afraid he will somehow offend her with his presence accidentally. Prufrock's refusal of action and passivity is signaled most clearly when he declares he is "not Prince Hamlet, nor was meant to be" (line 111). Hamlet is, of course, the protagonist of William Shakespeare's play Hamlet and he is a character whose sole defining trait is his inability to act. The entire play is Hamlet musing over whether he should or should not commit various acts, most significantly murder his uncle. By saying that he is not deserving to be Hamlet, Prufrock is affirming himself as even less decisive than a character whose sole purpose is to be indecisive. It also shows that Prufrock believes that he should never be considered the protagonist of even his own poem, and as such the poem does not really follow him but rather he follows various occurrences around him. Prufrock as a character does not really grow or change and him not wanting to be a protagonist and rather be a minor role who starts a couple of scenes ties into how he dresses moderately and wishes to not be noticed. Prufrock is so complacent that he describes mermaids as ignoring to sing to him. The singing of mermaids is often associated with using femininity to draw masculine men seeking pleasure to their dooms, but Prufrock is so emotionally sterile that his lack of masculinity offers nothing to the mermaids; he is not even worthy of being killed. Prufrock will remain walking through the fog, ever so passive and disregarding anything around him. At the end of the poem, Prufrock completely slips away into the ocean imagery that he had been alluding to for the whole poem. It appears he finally got his

wish of becoming a crab, at least in his mind, which represents that he has successfully shelled himself away from the world. He ends the poem by saying that he, and the reader, have both drowned together, that Prufrock's toxic self-pitying has gone on to infect the reader, and he is pulling the reader down into the dark ocean with him. This is what happens when we indulge in the life of someone as worthless as Prufrock, Eliot says.

Overall, T. S. Eliot utilizes all sorts of various images and descriptions to develop his character of J. Alfred Prufrock, who actually is not much of a character at all. Rather than develop Prufrock to be a compelling and interesting figure, Eliot does the exact opposite and draws him as pathetic and unremarkable through Prufrock's own personal self-image and the way he views the world around him. Eliot's purpose for doing this to poor Prufrock is to set him up as a figure representative of the detrimental effect that the modern age to Eliot has had on men such as Prufrock. Prufrock is an extreme case of emasculation and complacency, showing the weakening of pompous men and their crippling self-doubting that causes them to be weak and engage in inaction, bringing down the world and people around them in an ill fog of depression and unsureness. "The Love Song of J Alfred Prufrock" on the surface is a run of the mill stream of consciousness about a man going for a walk, but Eliot fleshes the world and subject through rich imagery to deliver a point about superficiality in his modern day, delivering a cautionary tale to his male contemporary reader to not fall into the same pitfalls that Prufrock has vested onto himself.

## **Works Cited**

Jung, Carl, *Two Essays on Analytical Psychology* (London 1953) p. 190

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