

"The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock" – T.S. Eliot

OK, so you might have heard of a little movement called "modernism." Nobody out there has a great definition of modernism, but here's ours. For most of history, most people lived really far away from one another in small villages. They didn't travel much or interact with one another. This is the pre-modern world. Then, along come all these new technologies – everything from sewer systems to railroads – and suddenly lots of people are living close together in cities, and even those who aren't living close together are able to find out what's going on with the help of (from oldest to most recent) telegrams, newspapers, telephones, cell phones, and the internet. Welcome to the modern world.

Nowadays, we're all used to living in the modern world, but it wasn't always that way. The "modernists" basically include all the artists and writers who were living smack in the middle of the huge, massive transformation from olden days to modern times, which was roughly the end of the 19th century to the middle of the 20th century. In their work, they try to make sense of all these changes, which no one quite understands.

"The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock" is totally a modernist poem. Its author, T.S. Eliot, was an American who moved to Britain in 1914. Eliot wrote most of "Prufrock" when he was 22 years old, in the years before the start of World War I. At that time, Britain was considered the most modern country in the world. The poem is set in a big, dirty city, and its speaker is a very unhappy man who is afraid of living and therefore bored all the time. War, cities, boredom, and fear: these are all classic modernist themes.

It was considered pretty experimental at the time, and a lot of people hated it. The "Literary Supplement" of *The London Times* had this to say: "The fact that these things occurred to the mind of Mr Eliot is surely of the very smallest importance to anyone, even to himself. They certainly have no relation to poetry..." (*Times Literary Supplement* 21 June 1917, no. 805, 299). A lot of people still hate the poem, mostly because they had it pounded into them by overly strict teachers in school, which is the quickest way to suck the fun out of anything. Fortunately, Eliot has fallen a bit out of style lately, so now's the perfect time to pick up the poem and decide for yourself how you feel about it.

After the publication of "Prufrock," Eliot went on to publish some of the most important poems of the 20th century, including "The Wasteland," his best known. He was awarded the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1948.

Why Should I Care?

Garrison Keillor, a humorous newspaper columnist and radio host, has called "Prufrock" "a small, dark mope-fest of a poem." He writes: "This poem pretty much killed off the pleasure of poetry for millions of people who got dragged through it in high school" (source). This is a standard reaction to many of T.S. Eliot's poems. You, too, may be in the process of being dragged through the poem in one of your classes. It would definitely be a chore to have to find all of Eliot's smarty-pants references to classic works of literature, and, read from a certain angle, the poem is pretty dark. BUT...we also think this is one of the funniest works of the century. Come on, it's about a skinny, bald guy who talks in nursery rhymes and wishes he were a crab. Forget Eliot the bookworm; this is Eliot the wicked satirist, poking fun at "the man."

If he had wanted to, Eliot could have written a *really* mopey poem. Considering the time he was writing, it would have made perfect sense. "Prufrock" was published during World War I, one of the most violent conflicts in human history. It was not a time to write about birds and flowers. But instead of crying into his British ale, he wrote a hilariously pointed attack on all the well-dressed, upstanding citizens who loved their material pleasures – their tea and marmalade – more than they loved other people.

Most of all, reading "Prufrock" should make you want to drop everything and go tell your secret crush about your feelings for him or her. It's a warning to all procrastinators: if you put something off once, you'll likely put it off forever. Don't be like Prufrock and focus on the worst-case scenario. And, if you do score a date with your secret crush, whatever you do, don't take him or her to a "sawdust restaurant with oyster shells." We hear the atmosphere leaves something to be desired.

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The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock

*S'io credesse che mia risposta fosse
A persona che mai tornasse al mondo,
Questa fiamma staria senza piu scosse.
Ma perciocche giammai di questo fondo
Non torno vivo alcun, s'i'odo il vero,
Senza tema d'infamia ti rispondo.*

LET us go then, you and I,
When the evening is spread out against the sky
Like a patient etherized upon a table;
Let us go, through certain half-deserted streets,
The muttering retreats 5
Of restless nights in one-night cheap hotels
And sawdust restaurants with oyster-shells:
Streets that follow like a tedious argument
Of insidious intent 10
To lead you to an overwhelming question ...
Oh, do not ask, "What is it?"
Let us go and make our visit.

In the room the women come and go
Talking of Michelangelo.

The yellow fog that rubs its back upon the window-panes, 15
The yellow smoke that rubs its muzzle on the window-panes
Licked its tongue into the corners of the evening,
Lingered upon the pools that stand in drains,
Let fall upon its back the soot that falls from chimneys,
Slipped by the terrace, made a sudden leap, 20
And seeing that it was a soft October night,
Curled once about the house, and fell asleep.

And indeed there will be time
For the yellow smoke that slides along the street, 25
Rubbing its back upon the window-panes;
There will be time, there will be time
To prepare a face to meet the faces that you meet;
There will be time to murder and create,
And time for all the works and days of hands
That lift and drop a question on your plate; 30
Time for you and time for me,
And time yet for a hundred indecisions,
And for a hundred visions and revisions,
Before the taking of a toast and tea.

In the room the women come and go 35
Talking of Michelangelo.

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— 40
[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 45
Disturb the universe?
In a minute there is time
For decisions and revisions which a minute will reverse.

For I have known them all already, known them all:—
Have known the evenings, mornings, afternoons, 50
I have measured out my life with coffee spoons;
I know the voices dying with a dying fall
Beneath the music from a farther room.
So how should I presume?

And I have known the eyes already, known them all— 55
The eyes that fix you in a formulated phrase,
And when I am formulated, sprawling on a pin,
When I am pinned and wriggling on the wall,
Then how should I begin
To spit out all the butt-ends of my days and ways? 60
And how should I presume?

And I have known the arms already, known them all—
Arms that are braceleted and white and bare
[But in the lamplight, downed with light brown hair!]
It is perfume from a dress 65
That makes me so digress?
Arms that lie along a table, or wrap about a shawl.
And should I then presume?
And how should I begin?

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Shall I say, I have gone at dusk through narrow streets 70
And watched the smoke that rises from the pipes
Of lonely men in shirt-sleeves, leaning out of windows?...

I should have been a pair of ragged claws
Scuttling across the floors of silent seas.

.
And the afternoon, the evening, sleeps so peacefully! 75
Smoothed by long fingers,
Asleep ... tired ... or it malingers,

Stretched on the floor, here beside you and me.
Should I, after tea and cakes and ices,
Have the strength to force the moment to its crisis? 80
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,
And I have seen the eternal Footman hold my coat, and snicker, 85
And in short, I was afraid.

And would it have been worth it, after all,
After the cups, the marmalade, the tea,
Among the porcelain, among some talk of you and me,
Would it have been worth while, 90
To have bitten off the matter with a smile,
To have squeezed the universe into a ball
To roll it toward some overwhelming question,
To say: "I am Lazarus, come from the dead,
Come back to tell you all, I shall tell you all"— 95
If one, settling a pillow by her head,
Should say: "That is not what I meant at all.
That is not it, at all."

And would it have been worth it, after all,
Would it have been worth while, 100
After the sunsets and the dooryards and the sprinkled streets,
After the novels, after the teacups, after the skirts that trail along the floor—
And this, and so much more?—
It is impossible to say just what I mean!
But as if a magic lantern threw the nerves in patterns on a screen: 105
Would it have been worth while
If one, settling a pillow or throwing off a shawl,
And turning toward the window, should say:
"That is not it at all,
That is not what I meant, at all." 110

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,
Deferential, glad to be of use, 115
Politic, cautious, and meticulous;
Full of high sentence, but a bit obtuse;
At times, indeed, almost ridiculous—
Almost, at times, the Fool.

I grow old ... I grow old ... 120
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.

I have heard the mermaids singing, each to each.

I do not think that they will sing to me.

125

I have seen them riding seaward on the waves
Combing the white hair of the waves blown back
When the wind blows the water white and black.

We have lingered in the chambers of the sea
By sea-girls wreathed with seaweed red and brown
Till human voices wake us, and we drown.

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NOTES:

S'io credesso...ti rispondo: These lines are from the *Inferno*, written in the early 14th century by Italian poet Dante Alighieri. As Dante visits hell, one of the damned agrees to speak of his torment only because he believes that Dante cannot return to the living world to repeat the tale.

etherized: given ether, a liquid used as an anesthetic

insidious: more dangerous than it seems

morning coat: a type of formal suit jacket with coattails

presume: act overconfidently, dare

formulated: reduce to a formula

And I have...on the walls: Profrock recalls being scrutinized by women at other parties. He portrays himself as a live insect that has been classified, labeled, and mounted for display.

digress: wander away from the main topic; ramble

I should...silent seas: Here Profrock presents an image of himself as a crayfish

malingers: pretends illness in order to avoid duty or work

But through...prophets: an allusion to the biblical story of John the Baptist, who is imprisoned by King Herod (Matthew 14; Mark 6). At the request of his wife, Herod had the Baptist's head cut off and brought to him on a platter.

Lazarus: In the biblical story (John 11:17-44) Lazarus lay dead in his tomb for four days before Jesus brought him back to life

magic lantern: a forerunner of the slide projector

deferential: yielding to someone else's opinion

meticulous: extremely careful and precise about details

obtuse: slow to understand; dull

DIRECTIONS: As you re-read the poem, identify the following MODERNIST aspects Eliot employs. For each number, find a quotation or excerpt from the poem (followed by the line #) which illustrates these MODERNIST aspects. HERE IS THE THESIS FOR WHICH YOU ARE GATHERING SUPPORT: *T.S. Eliot's poem, "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock" is a quintessential example of Modernist poetry both in format and content.*

- "Fragmented" Images:

- 1.
- 2.
- 3.
- 4.

- Allusions (type i.e. literary, Biblical, classical)

1. TYPE: _____ QUOTE:
2. TYPE: _____ QUOTE:
3. TYPE: _____ QUOTE:

- Tropes/Figurative Language

- 1.
- 2.

- Prufrock's negative self-image (these may repeat the "fragmented images" or allusions)

- 1.
- 2.
- 3.
- 4.

- Modernist Theme(s) – in a complete sentence

1. THEME:

Questions for Critical Thinking and Writing

1. One of the most famous images of the poem compares the evening to “a patient etherized upon a table” (lines 2-3). Does the image also suggest that individuals- for instance, Prufrock- may not be fully conscious and therefore are not responsible for his/her actions or inactions?

2. Are lines 57-60 meant to evoke the reader’s pity for the speaker? If not, what (if any) response are these lines intended to evoke?

3. The speaker admits he is “At times, indeed, .../ Almost ...the Fool” (lines 118-19). Where, if at all, in the poem do we see him not at all as a fool?

4. Do you take the poem to be a criticism of an individual, a society, neither, or both? Why?

5. “The poem is obscure- it begins in Italian, and it includes references that most readers can’t know- and is not at all uplifting. In fact, in so far as it is comprehensible, it is depressing. These are not the characteristics of a great poem.” Evaluate this critical judgment, offering evidence to support your view.

6. The poem is chiefly concerned with the thoughts of a man, J. Alfred Prufrock. Do you think it therefore is of more interest to men than to women? Explain.

7. The speaker describes the streets he walks as “follow[ing] like a tedious argument” (line 8). Is the simile apt? When do you think an argument becomes tedious?