

## **T.S. Eliot's "Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock" — On the Artistry of Sonnets**

By Catrina Kelly

One central theme at the center of T.S. Eliot's "Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock" is an easily overlooked commentary on artistry within the early twentieth century from the perspective of Prufrock's character. Within the text, Prufrock fails to write a sonnet using traditional form and structure, which is perceptible as a failure of a masculine artist's role, and therefore emasculates Prufrock, causing him no shortage of anxiety. The artistry-associated word choice describing Prufrock's plight and the literary references throughout the text further paint the picture of Prufrock as a struggling poet. This is all contextualized by the title, which tells us that this is the titular character's attempt at a love song. By acknowledging that the poem is written entirely from Prufrock's perspective, we can then examine how the fictional author's insecurities affect, and are affected by, the text in form and content, and what it tells us about the character and life of Prufrock himself.

In T.S. Eliot's essay, "Tradition and the Individual Talent," Eliot states that a truly great poet must understand literary history in order to understand where their piece fits within that tradition, which would later become a fundamental argument of the structuralist movement. Eliot's second argument in the essay is that when writing poetry, one must "self-sacrifice" by excluding the self from the work and instead letting the structuralist context and conversation surrounding the work perform the piece through the author, excluding the authorial voice entirely.

In “Love Song,” J. Alfred Prufrock himself is struggling to uphold his idea of a poetic tradition in the form of a love sonnet, which quickly devolves away from romanticist language and into self-indulgent references, framed through Prufrock’s own flawed outlook on the world. “Love Song” is written from the perspective of the speaker, and the repeated literary references and quotations evoke the literary history that Prufrock is attempting to build upon with his sonnet. However, Prufrock fails at separating himself from his work, and explicitly includes no shortage of himself and his lamentations. Knowing that T.S. Eliot had such strong thoughts on depersonalization in poetry may help us explain why Prufrock cannot succeed in the second and most contentious step outlined in “Tradition and the Individual Talent,” which emphasizes the importance of a poet maintaining impersonality in their work.

In the tradition that “Love Song” responds to, sonnets as a form are characterized by fourteen lines of iambic pentameter, connected by rhyme schemes throughout. In the first stanza of “Love Song,” a basic end-rhyme scheme starts as Prufrock begins his poem by ebbing romanticism: “Let us go then, you and I / When the evening is spread out against the sky.” Yet, this rhyming scheme immediately falls flat with the first contradictory and eccentric image of a “patient etherized upon a table,” which lacks any rhyme match and shatters the romanticist imagery established by the sonnet’s opening. Yet, Prufrock continues to attempt rhyme schemes that end up broken: “cheap hotels” and “oyster-shells,” followed by the rhymeless “tedious argument.” This use of form demonstrates Prufrock’s desire to write a sonnet, but the inability to self-sacrifice in his work. Instead, he sees the romanticist rhymes being taken over by his obsession for his own feelings of being an isolated outcast. This use of sparse end-rhyme continues throughout, failing to

find footing in any regular rhythm and being utterly unsatisfying as a love sonnet. Further continuing the failed sonnet form, no stanza is a complete fourteen lines, each going slightly over or slightly under and utterly failing to deliver on a regular form within the text.

Continuing the venture through the concept of literary tradition, “Love Song” is rich with literary references, which should not be discounted as perhaps the most important through-line in the piece. The poem starting with a quote from *Inferno*, spoken by the incarcerated man Guido from that story, sees Prufrock join the ranks of important storytellers. In *Inferno*, Guido only tells his story with the understanding it will never be heard, just as Prufrock too doesn't think his own story will be heard by the world around him. We could further say that this comparison implies that Prufrock feels as though he is incarcerated, either by himself or by the surrounding society.

The world of “Love Song” is further shown to have an absolute lack of interest in its titular character, and by contextualizing the poem within the idea that Prufrock himself is writing a sonnet, which devolves conceptually into being about the futility of sonnet writing, it's clear that Prufrock himself earnestly disbelieves that his work will ever be seen or taken seriously. Schneider states that T.S. Eliot is using the modernist form and language of “Love Song” to comment on the absurdity of the post-industrial world, in response to the romantic poets coming before him (Schneider, p. 80). By doing so, both “Love Song” and Prufrock himself are joining the larger conversation of literature in the early twentieth century and forming the foundations of modernist imagery as a rejection of romanticism and of the platonic ideal of a love sonnet. Schneider further states that by referencing *Inferno* in the opening quotation, “Love Song” is likening the sterile society

that surrounds Prufrock as an isolating sort of I. By doing this, early twentieth century Boston is compared to a biblically hellish underworld. (Schneider).

The structuralist lens of the conversation of literature surrounding “Love Song” at the time can help lead us to the idea that the piece is a greater commentary on poetry. One alternative theory, however, is that of Wang, who uses a chronotopal analysis to describe that “Love Song” has used a mixed approach to time-and-space, divided into realistic spacetime and psychological spacetime (Wang, 2021). Wang argues with this understanding that “Love Song” is, in form, reflecting a greater loneliness with the society that it paints, as well as the fragmentation of Prufrock’s mind and his own isolation, using techniques such as narrowing of form (Wang). This interpretation can go hand-in-hand with the idea of Prufrock as a struggling artist. The fragmentation of Prufrock’s mind is the result of his struggle to find a place in society, represented by the failing of the sonnet form, which itself is fragmented.

As Clifton writes, Prufrock is attempting to assert his masculinity through use of a sonnet (Clifton, p. 65, 2018). Contextually to the time and world of “Love Song,” a sonnet would have been asserted as an inherently masculine form, and typically written from men to women as expressions of affection, and therefore by failing to grasp its form in either rhyme or shape, Prufrock is emasculated by his own work. Within the text, we can see an expansion on this in the form of Prufrock's anxiety regarding his failed masculine duties within the changing post-industrial society around him. We can see his frustration as he tries and fails to perform a sonnet, failing his duty in the masculine role of his much-desired relationship.

These ideas can be contrasted with the idea of “Love Song” as a reflection on T.S. Eliot’s Puritan background, as Eliot’s own family has a long and well documented history with American Puritanism. This idea can be used as a lens to judge the world of early twentieth century Boston, which Zhou argues makes “Love Song” an anti-jeremiad piece as a result (Zhou 50). In “Love Song,” Zhou argues that by referencing John the Baptist in relation to Prufrock as a character, Prufrock is satirized to explicitly deny the errand of Puritanism (Zhou). The language used in “Love Song” also reflects the Puritan worldview of Eliot and his family, expressing a spiritual dryness in the world and comparing the inhabitants of New England to sinners through the metaphor of patients, a common idea in Puritan doctrine.

While this context can enhance understanding of the piece as it relates to Eliot as a writer, it can also relate to Prufrock as a character. This context paints the character of Prufrock as inspired by Puritan ideas, and shows us that he is experiencing disenfranchisement from the changing, spiritually starving world. The language in “Love Song,” however, is serving more than that purpose; For example, “Like a patient etherized upon a table” is not only referential to puritan ideas of sinners as patients, but instead serves the aforementioned deconstruction of romanticist language and breaking of the sonnet form.

The insecurities of Prufrock in sonnet writing are further emphasized in artistic language, such as “And time yet for a hundred indecision / And for a hundred visions and revisions,” which is telling of Prufrock’s true depth of insecurity and how it affects his creative process. Revisions and visions are traditionally used in reference to the artistic process, which in this context speaks to Prufrock’s own insecurity as a creative person.

The recurring statement of “In the room the women come and go, Talking of Michelangelo,” tells us that Prufrock feels that artistry has been reduced to mere coffee-table talk and gossip among women, which Prufrock distinguishes himself from.

The "you" referenced in the poem is left ambiguous, yet as a sonnet writer, Prufrock is likely writing with a female reader in mind. The poem starts as a love sonnet, but following his near immediate failure, broadly begins to discuss his insecurities and avoidance of the question of purpose. In failing to discuss his art with “you,” he refuses to “force the moment to its crisis” by addressing the art's meaning, instead choosing to isolate himself from the reader, and as a result, he sees “the moment of [his] greatness flicker.” After all the pleasant tea times with “you,” he fears misinterpretation of himself and his work, especially in intimacy, painted here as a potentially romantic exchange with a more casual, female reader who Prufrock assumes will not get it — “That is not what I meant at all.” All of this indicates that Prufrock cannot reconcile the existence of art within the environment of women and casual readership as anything more than coffee table talk, and so he avoids the “overwhelming question”.

In the poem, women are treated linguistically as the recipient of masculine performance. By referencing women as “the women,” or even as “you”, it uses isolating language to treat Prufrock as an “other” in the affairs of women, despite his explicit desire for female intimacy. Prufrock sees women from afar and as something different to himself; “I have heard the mermaids singing, each to each. I do not think that they will sing to me.” That separation from male and female, even treating them as a different mythological species in characterizing as mermaids, further emphasizes his psychological isolation from the women he desires in his “Love Song”. He has mythologized the

women in his life, yet he presumes, based on his own insecurities, that they will not sing to him.

Prufrock recognizes that he is unlike Prince Hamlet and compares himself to a Fool and an attendant lord. In Shakespearean theater, an attendant lord is one who starts a scene for the more important characters, an unflattering comparison for Prufrock's character. That lack of desire to take the main role further shows the insecurities of Prufrock and emasculates him as a timid background character, even within his own sonnet.

The overwhelming question that is never explicitly stated could be taken to refer to the question of the locus of meaning. This question bears special relevance to the historical moment of the poem in the early twentieth century, during a time of great changes in literary theory and the birth of the modernist style. This idea of more "modern" thinking is in line with the New Criticism movement, which sees the locus of meaning moved away from the biographical details of an author and instead being purely text based. This movement in literary analysis would significantly impact Prufrock as an aging author, struggling to adapt to that "overwhelming question," especially from the point of view that he takes on the female target for his sonnet, the "you" in question, as a part of the crowd of coffee-table talking women of the art scene. The refusal to ask that overwhelming question could be further evidence of this perspective, as he places so much focus on himself that he can't recognize alternate perspectives on the nature of artistry; The poem clearly outlines this as a flaw of Prufrock: "I have seen the moment of my greatness flicker."

Despite his age, Prufrock is portrayed as insecure, indecisive, and immature about nearly every aspect of his own character, especially surface level appearance, wondering aloud, “Shall I part my hair behind? Do I dare to eat a peach?” This further paints the picture of an insecure artist, who doesn’t quite understand how to carry himself or his work. He wonders of a potential moment where he descends a staircase to a room of others in a Shakespearean scene, wearing a collar and necktie, but is immediately mocked for his weaknesses, as “They will say: ‘But how his arms and legs are thin!’” From the lens of Prufrock as an artist struggling with confidence, it could be seen that he is here projecting his insecurities onto potential viewers of both his art and himself, and reflects the aging idea of Prufrock himself placing the locus of meaning in the author’s hands. He has no legitimate evidence to back up that this is something that would be said. These are purely Prufrock’s assumptions, in response to wondering if he should “dare” to “turn back and descend the stair” as a way to preemptively assume the negative reaction he would get, potentially as a way of protecting his frail, if not nonexistent, sense of confidence.

There is further poetic language used to describe the metaphorical eyes of others, “The eyes that fix you in a formulated phrase,” speaking in reference to formulated prose and phrases, and then likening himself to being formulated. The idea of a “formula” of prose refers back to the way the poem breaks apart the idea of the sonnet formula, with broken rhymes and uneven stanza lengths. From Prufrock’s perspective, he rejects the idea of that formula but still feels its pressure to conform to its expectations, to the “eyes” that watch his work. Dissatisfaction with his work rules the piece, as he asks, “And how should I presume?”



When describing the self however, Prufrock uses dehumanizing and self-aggrandizing language. He describes himself as “an easy tool,” “a bit obtuse,” and “almost ridiculous,” speaking ill of himself within his own sonnet. He recognizes that he is without artistic merit and talent, oblivious to his own strong modernist imagery, but does not fully sink into lamentation; rather he accepts it, as he is “Deferential, glad to be of use.” He describes that “it is impossible to say what I mean!”, disparaging the restrictions of the sonnet form. Further, Prufrock also recognizes that “I have measured out my life with coffee spoons,” in reference to the mundanity of Prufrock’s life, as many analysts are quick to point out, but also potentially from a historicist angle, in reference to the status of coffee shops in early twentieth century collegiate culture as a gathering place of poets.

In conclusion, T.S. Eliot’s “Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock” can be interpreted as the story of an aging man in the early twentieth century, lamenting his failure to write an appreciated love sonnet in a world that increasingly rejects his potentially Puritan ideals and mission. He views art as coffee table talk within broader culture, isolated from it; and he sees women as separate from his artist’s experience, which is formally postured as masculine. His failure to write a sonnet in traditional form emasculates him, stripping him away from the possibilities of love and his role as a man in society, which he likens to drowning in the ending lines of the poem. All of this is reflected in the poem's history, form, and language, and is an undiscovered side of J. Alfred Prufrock’s character, and Eliot’s greater statement with the piece, congruent with his own beliefs on poetry and the role of an artist.

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