

Name: _____ Class: _____

The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock

By T.S. Eliot
1915

T. S. Eliot (1888-1965) was an essayist, publisher, playwright, critic, and one of the major poets of the twentieth century. He was born in St. Louis, Missouri, but eventually emigrated to Britain and became a naturalized British citizen. "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock" is considered one of the foremost poems of the Modernist literary movement. Written in stream-of-consciousness, the poem follows the lamentations of J. Alfred Prufrock. As you read, take notes on how Prufrock describes himself.

*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.¹*



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- [1] Let us go then, you and I,
When the evening is spread out against the sky
Like a patient etherized² upon a table;
Let us go, through certain half-deserted streets,
[5] The muttering retreats
Of restless nights in one-night cheap hotels
And sawdust restaurants with oyster-shells:
Streets that follow like a tedious³ argument
Of insidious⁴ 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.

1. This epigraph is a quote from Dante's *Inferno*, written in Italian. It is the beginning of a confession to Dante by Guido da Montefeltro, who believes Dante is also dead and thus cannot return to the living, (which gives him the confidence that his confession will remain safe). One translation reads: "If I believed that my response was heard / By anyone returning to the world, / This flame would stand and never stir again, / But since no man has ever come alive / Out of this gulf of Hell, if I hear true, / I'll answer, with no fear of infamy."
2. "Etherize" is to treat with ether, a type of anesthetic; to make numb or unconscious – ether, it should be noted, also means void, as in space or the night sky.
3. **Tedious (adjective):** frustrating or tiresome because of length or dullness
4. **Insidious (adjective):** treacherous or crafty with harmful intent

- [15] The yellow fog that rubs its back upon the window-panes,
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,
[20] Slipped by the terrace, made a sudden leap,
And seeing that it was a soft October night,
Curled once about the house, and fell asleep.

- And indeed there will be time⁵
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
[30] That lift and drop a question on your plate;
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.

- [35] In the room the women come and go
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,
[40] 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!")
[45] Do I dare
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:
[50] Have known the evenings, mornings, afternoons,
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?

5. An allusion to Ecclesiastes 3:1-8; it may also be an allusion to Andrew Marvell's "To His Coy Mistress"

[55] And I have known the eyes already, known them all —
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

[60] To spit out all the butt-ends of my days and ways?
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!)

[65] Is it perfume from a dress
That makes me so digress?⁶
Arms that lie along a table, or wrap about a shawl.
And should I then presume?
And how should I begin?

[70] Shall I say, I have gone at dusk through narrow streets
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.

[75] And the afternoon, the evening, sleeps so peacefully!
Smoothed by long fingers,
Asleep... tired... or it malingers,⁷
Stretched on the floor, here beside you and me.
Should I, after tea and cakes and ices,

[80] Have the strength to force the moment to its crisis?
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 prophet⁸ — and here's no great matter;
I have seen the moment of my greatness flicker,

[85] And I have seen the eternal Footman hold my coat, and snicker,
And in short, I was afraid.

6. **Digress (verb):** to deviate or wander away from the main topic

7. **Malingering (verb):** to pretend or exaggerate incapacity or illness

8. This is a reference to the beheading of John the Baptist, the Jewish priest who baptized Jesus. The ruler Herod (known for executing Jesus) reluctantly executed John when his daughter requested the popular priest's head served on a platter.

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,
[90] Would it have been worth while,
To have bitten off the matter with a smile,
To have squeezed the universe into a ball
To roll it towards some overwhelming question,
To say: "I am Lazarus,⁹ come from the dead,
[95] Come back to tell you all, I shall tell you all" —
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,
[100] Would it have been worth while,
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!
[105] But as if a magic lantern¹⁰ threw the nerves in patterns on a screen:
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,
[110] That is not what I meant, at all."

No! I am not Prince Hamlet,¹¹ 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,
[115] Deferential,¹² glad to be of use,
Politic, cautious, and meticulous;¹³
Full of high sentence, but a bit obtuse;¹⁴
At times, indeed, almost ridiculous —
Almost, at times, the Fool.

[120] I grow old... I grow old...
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.

9. Reference to the Bible: Jesus raises Lazarus from the dead as one of his miracles.

10. An early image projector developed in the 17th century

11. A reference to the title character of Shakespeare's tragedy Hamlet, who is indecisive but eventually takes action to avenge his father's death.

12. **Deferential (adjective):** expressing respect or submission to another based on their superior status

13. **Meticulous (adjective):** marked by excessive care in the treatment of details

14. **Obtuse (adjective):** lacking sharpness or quickness of intelligence; stupid

[125] I do not think that they will sing to me.

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

[130] By sea-girls wreathed with seaweed red and brown
Till human voices wake us, and we drown.

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Text-Dependent Questions

Directions: For the following questions, choose the best answer or respond in complete sentences.

1. PART A: In lines 2-3, the narrator describes the evening “spread out against the sky / Like a patient etherized upon a table.” What effect does this image have on the poem’s meaning?
 - A. The unnatural image shows that, even though the poem is a “love song,” Prufrock has little capacity to love.
 - B. The quote shows that Prufrock needs to be healed spiritually, like a patient needs to be healed physically.
 - C. The image represents the unconscious mind, invoking the journey Prufrock takes to discover his deepest secrets.
 - D. The quote evokes a sense of numbness or paralysis, mimicking Prufrock’s weariness and powerlessness in the face of making decisions.

2. PART B: Which of the following passages best supports the answer to Part A?
 - A. Lines 10-12
 - B. Lines 15-22
 - C. Lines 45-48
 - D. Lines 82-86

3. PART A: Which of the following best describes how Prufrock, the speaker, portrays himself in the poem?
 - A. He considers himself a failure in all aspects of life except for love.
 - B. He portrays himself as imaginative yet unappreciated as an artist.
 - C. He sees himself as a fallen hero and sacrificial martyr.
 - D. He portrays himself as lowly, unsure, and unimpressive.

4. PART B: Which TWO of the following quotes best supports the answer to Part A?
 - A. “In the room the women come and go / Talking of Michelangelo.” (Lines 13-14)
 - B. “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” (Lines 56-58)
 - C. “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!)” (Lines 62-64)
 - D. “I should have been a pair of ragged claws / Scuttling across the floors of silent seas.” (Lines 73-74)
 - E. “I am Lazarus, come from the dead, / Come back to tell you all, I shall tell you all” (Lines 94-95)
 - F. “Am an attendant lord, one that will do / To swell a progress, start a scene or two” (Lines 112-113)

5. PART A: Which of the following statements best summarizes the relationship between Prufrock and women?
- A. Prufrock despises women because he thinks they are shallow for engaging in gossip.
 - B. Prufrock has a complicated relationship with women because he wants connection but he is unable to approach them.
 - C. Women show obvious pity for Prufrock due to his timidity, loneliness, and shabby appearance.
 - D. Prufrock used to be able to socialize with women easily, but over the years he has lost this talent to woo women.
6. PART B: Which TWO of the following stanzas best support the answer to Part A?
- A. Stanza 2
 - B. Stanza 4
 - C. Stanza 6
 - D. Stanza 9
 - E. Stanza 13
 - F. Stanza 19
7. In lines 111-119, Prufrock references Shakespeare's Hamlet. How does this allusion serve to develop the overall meaning of the text?
- A. Though Prufrock says he is "not Prince Hamlet," they actually shares some similarities, like Hamlet's prolonged inaction, which makes Prufrock's indecisiveness seem nobler.
 - B. Though Prufrock says he is "not Prince Hamlet," he and Hamlet both have tragic love lives, thus framing the poem as a tragedy.
 - C. Prufrock stresses how different he is from Hamlet in order to highlight himself as braver and more heroic.
 - D. Prufrock stresses how different he is from Hamlet in order to highlight how he cannot overcome his indecisiveness and thus remains a supporting character in his own life.
8. Why does Eliot most likely include the epigraph quoting Dante's Inferno at the beginning of the poem?

9. How does the repetition throughout the poem contribute to the poem's meaning? Cite at least two pieces of evidence in your answer.

10. Consider the last 3 stanzas of the poem. What effect does this conclusion produce in the overall poem?

Discussion Questions

Directions: *Brainstorm your answers to the following questions in the space provided. Be prepared to share your original ideas in a class discussion.*

1. Why is this poem called a "love song"? Cite evidence from the text while explaining your answer.

2. What is Prufrock's relationship with love? How does he discuss it? Cite evidence from this text, your own experience, and other literature, art, or history in your answer.

3. How are we changed by love? Cite evidence from this text, your own experience, and other literature, art, or history in your answer.

4. "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock" is often considered a poem not only about love, but about isolation. In the context of this poem, what does it mean to feel alone? Cite evidence from this text, your own experience, and other literature or art in your answer.