



DC English IV

World/British Literature

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T. S. Eliot, “Prufrock”

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 percioche giammai di questo fondo
Non torno vivo alcun, s'i'odo il vero,
Senza tema d'infamia ti rispondo.*

*This poem is the main reason I chose to write poetry.
Eliot sets up a complex running metaphor throughout the
full work which forces the reader to sit back and pause.*

*Consider the poem as a complex symphony.
It is meant to invoke reflection and meditation.*

*<http://danteworlds.laits.utexas.edu/textpopup/inf2701.html>

The poem's title sets up expectations and then the **epigraph** breaks expectations.

The material here is a quote is from Dante's *Inferno*, which is the first book of his classic epic, *The Divine Comedy*.

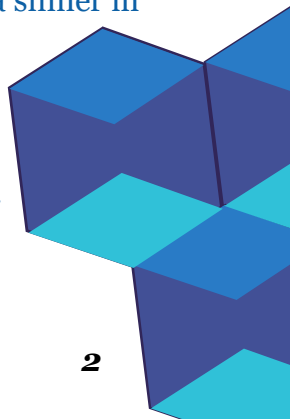
If I thought my answer was
to someone who might return to the world,
this flame would move no more;
but since from this depth it never happened
that anyone alive returned (if I hear right),
without fear of infamy, I'll answer you.*

*The **epigraph** is immediately setting up a major theme within Eliot's long poem.*

- classical literature
- hellish scene / sinner in torment
- general topic of love

The speaker, Count Guido da Montefeltro, is a sinner in Hell, trapped in eternal flame on the seventh layer, due to fraudulent counsel.

This builds a connection to line 1 of the poem.



T. S. Eliot, “Prufrock”

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,
5 The muttering retreats
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**.

It is best to visualize the full poem as a museum or mansion in the country with many rooms, filled with antiques and eccentric artwork. The reader is trapped in a labyrinth of Prufrock’s mind, wandering between many rooms.

Each stanza could stand on its own, establishing a different outlook on the overall topic of Prufrock’s obsessions. “Stanza” in Italian means “room.”

line 1.

in other words: me, myself, and I
(Prufrock is talking to *himself*.)

2.

Early morning is traditional time for love songs, with a sunrise— evenings are a time for crime, murder.

3.

Who then is in control?

6.

What happens in “one-night” hotels?

7.

Sawdust restaurants are a sign of class divisions.
Oyster-shells are used here as a yonic symbol.
Sets up a running **motif** of ocean or sea imagery.

10.

The overwhelming question is *never* asked.
Ellipses carry heavy meaning.

- occasionally uses rhyme
- no standard meter; **free verse**

T. S. Eliot, “Prufrock”

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

- 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.

Throughout the work T. S. Eliot builds a connection between high art and low life. Human ideals do not always match human actions. See Hamlet’s soliloquy regarding human nature: Act 2, scene 2.

Likewise, the logic of every naughty school boy joke can be seen in this poem. Every image can serve dual symbolisms within his extended metaphor.

lines 13-14.

This couplet begins a chain of logic which explains Prufrock’s relationships with women.

It will act as a refrain, repeating later.

Michelangelo was a major artist of the Italian Renaissance.

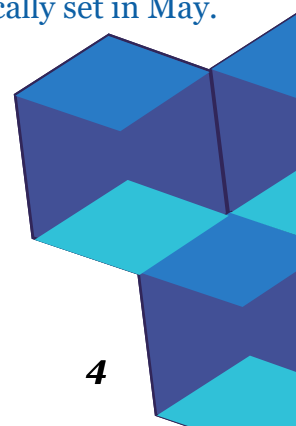
15.

The fact that the fog is **yellow** sets up a new expectation: it is polluted, dirty. Notice other relevant imagery.

Notice the fog represents a cat-like creature. Another yonic symbol.

21.

October is a month of cold autumn. Love songs are typically set in May.



T. S. Eliot, “Prufrock”

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
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.

line 23.

A running motif in the poem relates to imagery of time. At the end of the work the reader should detect the strategy for this.

28.

It is important to realize, Prufrock is too weak and intimidated to actually murder anyone.

32-33.

An aspect of Prufrock’s personality: he cannot make a decision, he is too meek, stammering.

34.

The ritual of English tea time is referred to many times in many forms throughout the work.

35.

What could be Prufrock’s obsession with Michelangelo?

T. S. Eliot, “Prufrock”

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

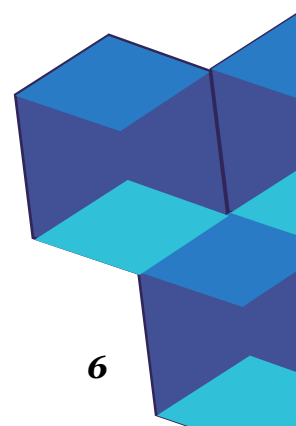
For decisions and revisions which a minute will reverse.

Line 41.

They= women

45-46.

This is **not** the overwhelming question.



T. S. Eliot, “Prufrock”

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?

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?

line 49.

Eliot sets you up with the expectation that “them” refers to women. However, Prufrock is actually meandering and wandering in his personal conversation, discussing elements of time.

52.

A wonderful example of intertextuality. The line is from William Shakespeare’s comedy *Twelfth Night*, Act 1, scene 1. In the play the line is referring to music. However, for Prufrock...

53.

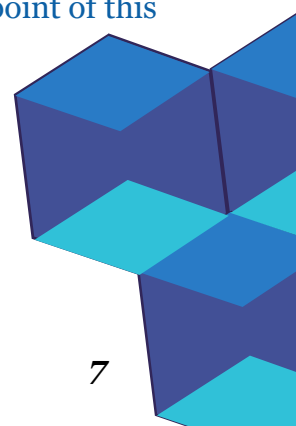
Notice the music is not in the room with Prufrock.

54.

This line will repeat more than once. Presumption is a major point of this poem.

57-58

—like an insect in a display case.



T. S. Eliot, “Prufrock”

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?

Arms that lie along a table, or wrap about a shawl.

And should I then presume?

And how should I begin?

line 62.

In the previous stanza, Prufrock was wandering in his topics thinking about women’s eyes. Now he is visualizing their arms.

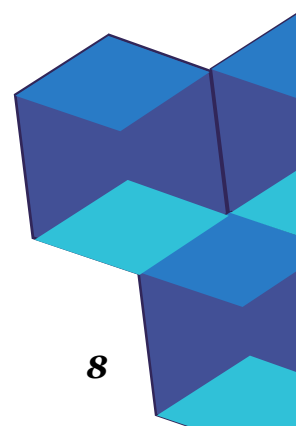
Why can’t he visualize the whole women?

67.

In this case, a **phallic** symbol. This images foreshadows the upcoming stanzas.

68-69.

These questions will be resolved, **once we reach lines 75-85.**



T. S. Eliot, “Prufrock”

•••••

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**.

•••••

line 70.

This stanza shifts from Prufrock’s alienation and obsession of women, to his alienation from *men*.

Another example of **class divisions**.

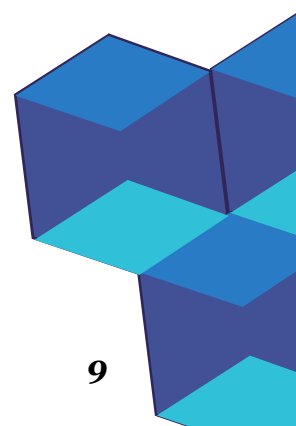
Why does he ask himself “shall I say”?

73-74.

This couplet confirms the sea motif established earlier in the poem.

Notice he does not compare himself as a lobster or crab, but rather, he compares himself merely to their claws.

Another example of his self image as a dehumanized individual.



T. S. Eliot, “Prufrock”

75 And the afternoon, the evening, sleeps so peacefully!

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,

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 prophet — 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.

lines 79-80.

Referencing back to his presumptions from earlier stanzas.

Notice he is dealing with one *specific* moment in time that could raise a crisis.

line 78.

Time appears as a domestic, indoor cat.

In this case the pronoun “you” actually could refer to an actual woman beside him. However, she could be only a figment of his imagination, so in the end, he is only talking with himself.

line 82-83. Allusion to Saint John the Baptist

line 85. Personification of Death or Fate as a servant.

T. S. Eliot, “Prufrock”

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**, 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.”

line 87.

“It” refers to Prufrock’s presumption, his hesitations and inactions.

89.

Again, the woman of his imagination, his dream date. See lines 97-98.

93.

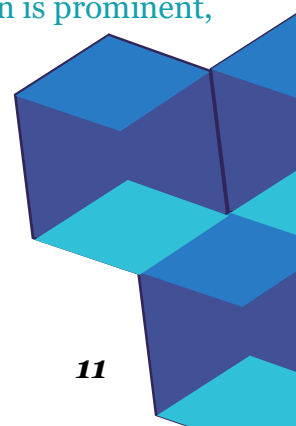
Again, the unasked overwhelming question.

94.

There are *two* instances regarding a biblical character named Lazarus in the New Testament. Both cases can relate to this allusion.

97-98.

Here his greatest fear is confirmed. Despite his fear of women is prominent, his fear of rejection by women is a greater fear.



T. S. Eliot, “Prufrock”

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 lantern 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.”

line 102.

Long skirts that were in fashion resulted in collected dirt and stains along the bottom hems if a woman was not careful.

104.

Why would Prufrock seem to have trouble talking with himself? How damaged/flawed is he really?

109-110.

Final repetition from previous stanzas, revealing his methods of *over* obsessing regarding rejection.

T. S. Eliot, “Prufrock”

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**,
115 Deferential, glad to be of use,
Politic, cautious, and meticulous;
Full of high sentence, but a bit obtuse;
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.

line 111.

One would expect Prufrock to be able to be a protagonist in his own play.

What is the line from Hamlet most often repeated by the average person?

114.

This is not a compliment.

119.

Another example of Eliot using dual symbols.

In the play *Hamlet*, the Fool is dead.

In the play *King Lear*, the Fool represents high intellect and obscured reality.

120.

In actuality, Prufrock is only in his early to middle thirties.

T. S. Eliot, “Prufrock”

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.**

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.**

line 122.

—as in a comb over.

peach: another yonic symbol

124.

NOT the little mermaid, but an object of fantasy.

Notice they sing to each other.

What could the mermaids represent in this dream? What could Prufrock have been trying to accomplish this whole wandering in his head?

129.

A shift from individuality to a collective, plural pronoun.

131.

—as in *all* mankind?

—or just Prufrock?