

# T.S. Eliot's 'The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock': Prufrock an Indecisive Man

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## **Abstract:**

Thomas Stearns Eliot (1888-1968) an American of a New England family was educated at Harvard, Paris and oxford. The collected addition of his poems contains Prufrock and other observations (1917). Poems (1920), the waste land (1922), Hollow men (1925), Ash Wednesday fragmentary (1930) Ariel Poems (1927-30) Choruses from 'The Rock' (1934), Four quartets (1935-42), Eliot, a conscious and deliberate classicist, believed that poetry should be impersonal. The poet's personal experience is no doubt there but it is personal experience that has incorporated the experience of the age. The cast of the most of poems is dramatic. The paper deals with the Eliot's masterpiece 'the love song of J. Alfred Prufrock' published in poetry magazine (1915). The poet uses the technique of 'interior monologue' to lay bare the mental landscape of a sick mind Prufrock. In this way Eliot highlights the neurotic nature of Prufrock. What passes within the consciousness of the persona in the substance of the poem. Prufrock is a moral coward. He does not have the courage to propose to his beloved. He is always postponing the movement of action to some future time. Prufrock is actually self conscious of his advancing age, his baldness and his thin body. Prufrock hesitated and fails to come to a conclusion. He thinks that his proposal to the lady will be like disturbing the whole universe. Prufrock becomes the symbol of the moral decay of the contemporary western civilization

**Keywords-** Conscious, Deliberate, Dramatic, Neurotic, Moral Coward, Decay.

## **Introduction:**

Thomas stearns Eliot (26 September 1888- 4 January 1965) better known as T.s. Eliot was an essayist, playwright, published, literary and social critic and "one of the

twentieth century's major poets. TS Eliot's literary production spread over 45 years. He wrote poems, plays, literary and social essays during the long period. He worked as a journalist and editor Eliot's poetry

becomes more earnest and broadly philosophical through *The Waste Land*, certainly a philosophical comment on twentieth century society, still wickedly infested with literary sick jokes and embellished with exaggeratedly learned notes. The spirit of the waste land seems pessimistic, but its message is one of exhortation to better things, and *Ash Wednesday* (1930) and four quartets (1944) are poems firmly based in Christian Faith, though always a somber kind. *Four Quartets*, arguably Eliot's finest work, is easier to understand than the present day poetry ". Earlier poems: The literary allusions have almost disappeared and there is no deliberate cultivation of obscurity. He is also known for his seven plays, particularly *Murder in the Cathedral* (1935). He was awarded the noble prize in literature in 1948, "for his outstanding pioneer.

Eliot attracted widespread attention for his poem *The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock* (1915) which is seen as a masterpiece of the modernist movement. It makes a complete break with the nineteenth century poetic tradition. It is urban in its theme and setting. It reveals the ugliness of modern civilization, the never ending street of modern cities, smoking chimneys, yellow

fog, dirty drains and smell of female bodies. The theme, "The love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock" begins with an epigraph cited from Dante's *Inferno* XXVII, 61/66. It is in Latin. The epigraph is about Count Guido da Montefeltro's experience in the eighth chasm of Hell. In the eighth chasm of Hell Dante finds those sinners who misused their wisdom to deceive others. Count Guido, one of the sinners in the eighth chasm of Hell was punished for his treacherous advice to Pope Boniface. They are imprisoned and burnt in the flames of their consciousness believing Dante as one of the damned souls of Hell, Count Guido reveals his identity to him. A sense of intense pain and torment characterizes Count Guido. This epigraph provides a comparison between Count Guido and Prufrock. As Count Guido does not want to disclose the true story to the entire world Eliot also indicates his ironic view of Prufrock's love song. Like Count Guido, the fraudulent Prufrock is also a self-deceiving man who uses hyperboles to avoid a situation. Eliot through this epigraph tries to show the behavior and psychic state of Prufrock, a representative of present generation.

### **Prufrock As Indecisive Man:**

‘The love song of J.Alfred Prufrock’ is not really a love song through love is the underlying theme. It rewards the indecision hesitation and postponement of the proposal of the lover. The poem is rather psychological, intended to dissect the suppressed feeling of the lover, especially his cowardice and irresolution. Prufrock is an embodiment of split personality a separation of head and heart, a paralysis of the will and too much worry regarding love proposal. The conflict between the two selves of Prufrock makes him indecisive Williamson commented. “The main interest of the poem lies in “what goes within the mind, rather than in the exterior events which provoke the mental activity and play a through and feeling.” Ihab Hassan, one of the postmodern critics sums up the characteristic of postmodernism either with “De” or “Di”. Discontinuity is one of them and postmodern art favors the element of discontinuity. It involves an abrupt beginning or ending of a literary art “The Love Song of J.Alfred Prufrocks” has startling beginning.

Let us go then, you and I.

When the evening is spread out against the  
sky

Like a patient etherized upon a table;(1-3)

The first line of the poem suggests that it is a dialogue but it is not so. The darkness of evening which spreads over the sky is compared with a patient who is made unconscious with anesthetics while lying on a table. The word ‘etherized’ suggests the suspended state of Prufrock’s mind. The image of an etherized patient opposes the image of the intended activity to be performed by Prufrock in the first line of the poem. So there occurs a sudden transition in Prufrock’s mental stratum which is clearly evident from the images mentioned by Eliot.

J. Alfred Prufrock is not just the speaker of one of Eliot’s poems. He is the representative man of early modernism.

And I have known the eyes already, known  
them all-

The eyes that fix you in a formulated phrase,  
And when I am formulated, sprouting 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?

And how should I presume?

Prufrock does not know how to presume to begin to speak, both because he

knows “all ready” this is the burden of his lament-and because he is already known formulated. Prufrock knows the women in the room. He knows their likings and dislikes and their value system. He knows that they will look at him with searching eyes and he will not be able to stand their staring. His situation will be similar to that of a poor worm fixed on a wall with the help of a sharp pin. The worm will be struggling helplessly; as such he has no mind to face the ladies. Prufrock’s life is made up of his life is as useless as the butt-ends of smoked cigarettes which are thrown away. Pinto commented here is a poet who has thoroughly immersed himself in the destructive elements, the sordidness, the stupidity and the ugliness of modern urban life, without surrendering to its values, which he treats with the curiosity of an artist and the irony of a keenly calculating intellect. Prufrock thinks that the declaration of his love will require a very great effort like the effort needed to squeeze the universe into a ball, a task which is impossible for him.

To say: “I am Lazarus, come from the dead  
Come back to tell you all, I shall tell you  
all”

Prufrock briefly fancies himself a heroic character; a beheaded John the Baptist, Lazarus in the Bible, Lazarus was sent to Hell and he wanted to come back to the earth for a short while in order to tell his friends about his experience in hell. John the Baptist, was beheaded on Herod’s orders and his head was brought upon a platter before assemblies of mass as a reward for Salome dance. He was decapitated as he declared that Herod’s marriage to the king, Salome’s mother was unlawful. Prufrock draws a mock-heroic parallel between himself and John, the Baptist; he thinks that he lacks the courage to disclose the truth unlike John the Baptist. Prufrock has wept, prayed and fasted to prepare himself for the final movement. But all his preparation fails to give him the courage to propose to his lady friend. The moment of greatness is gone. He desires to dress himself in the latest fashion:

“I grow old..... I grow old.....  
I shall wear the bottoms of my trousers  
rolled.”

It suggests the pitiable plight of Prufrock. Earlier, he was able to indulge in day dreams. Now he feels that such romantic visions will not come to him

“I have heard the mermaids singing, each to each

I do not think they will sing to me”

The allusion is to the famous Greek hero Ulysses who had heard the song of the mermaid and returned alive. The romantic vision of beauty is gone. Prufrock has been a romantic lover who has been unable to face the realities of life. He has gone deep into his sub conscious in order to find out some excuse for delay in inaction. Prufrock and his friends have stayed long in the layers of the sub-conscious. They had visions of sea girls garlanding them, but such happy dreams are few and far between. The reality of human voices brings them back into this world and when the reality dawns on them, they become melancholy and frustrated. The poem ends where it began. The song is never sung and the journey is never undertaken.

### **Conclusion:**

In conclude, *The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock* is definite departure from the English romantic poetry and may be taken as a land mark for modern English poetry. Eliot has been successful in probing the consciousness of a neurotic. The entire poem echoes the barrenness and futility of

love-experience in the modern age. That is why Prufrock is ultimately unable to sing him love song. The variety and freshness of Eliot’s images in poem add to the literary and artistic qualities of the poem. Prufrock’s life already full of barrenness and failure; he is fed up with the triviality and boredom of the routine of the city life. Life is a hollow Sham; it is measured and judged, not in terms of tasks done, but in terms of coffee spoons drunk at social parties. Any further failure will add to his mental confusion and depression. The failure of Prufrock is an example of the universal tragedy of man- his failure to translate his thoughts into action. He becomes the symbol of the moral decay of the Contemporary Western Civilization.

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