



# The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock

Thomas Stearns Eliot  
*Prufrock and Other Observations*  
 (1917)

## PLOT

The poem opens with an **epigraph** and is made up of **four sections**. The **first part** (lines 1-70) establishes **Prufrock's confinement and isolation in time**; the character is aware of his own situation and feels the emptiness of the social events happening all around him. His succession of desires and fears, his longing for beauty and company, are touched by irony and mingled with a mocking sense that they will never be more than private pain. His hopes, aspirations and fears are separated from his public life. On the one hand, he imagines the possibility of life in heroic terms (line 28: 'time to murder and create'), on the other hand, he recognises the futility of his daily life.

The **second section** is short (lines 70-74) but it contains the **failure of Prufrock's will to change his world**. The **third section** (lines 75-110) emphasises the **contrast between Prufrock's interior and exterior reality** again. He cannot act because he fears that nothing in the outer world will correspond with his perception of reality.

The **fourth and final section** opens with his **acknowledgement of failure**: 'No! I am not Prince Hamlet'; Hamlet, though torn by doubts, made a choice in the end; Prufrock, troubled with social expectations, cannot do so. He cannot escape his life even if it is dreary and mechanical, he can only imagine a different existence: if he sees no actual moment of vivid experience, he seems to hear something strange and lovely, the mermaids' song (line 83), but at the end he is recalled to his social world by human voices (line 90). A sense of drowning, that is the realisation of his own death in life, takes possession of his being.

## MEANING OF THE EPIGRAPH

The epigraph from Dante's *Inferno* (XXVII, lines 61-66) refers to Count Guido da Montefeltro, a false counsellor condemned to live eternally in a flame for his treacherous advice on earth to Pope Boniface. Guido speaks freely because he believes Dante is like himself, one of the dead, who will never return to the earth to report what he says. This **epigraph** is not an essential part of the poem, but it **describes Prufrock's ideal listener**: one who is as lost as the speaker and will never reveal the content of Prufrock's present confessions to the world. Together with the title, it prepares the reader for the experience of the poem whose

leading character embodies the theme of the alienation of modern man.

## CHARACTERS

This poem was published in the volume *Prufrock and Other Observations* in 1917. This early poem is a series of 'observations', as the title of the collection suggests, of particular emotions, human feelings and reactions to a specific kind of world. The **characters are passive and aimless**, they perceive the world around them, but they are powerless to act. However, if the characters are passive, **the world around them is strangely active**, penetrating into their consciousness.

The most distinctive influence on the poems in the 1917 collection is the thought of Henri Bergson (→ 6.3). The world of these poetic compositions, like that presented by the French philosopher, is characterised by the **split between inner and chronological time**, and by the emphasis on memory. **Time is a flux**, an endless repetition of meaningless gestures; what remains is **the record of events in one's memory**, unified and evaluated by the mind, which cannot see beyond it.

## STYLE

The form of this poem is the dramatic monologue (→ 5.7). For Eliot, however, this poetic form is no longer a vehicle for the presentation of an interesting personality, but an **invitation to the reader to experience the dismantling of personality**. The **monologue invites the reader** not simply to observe, but **to participate actively in the poet's creation**, so that Prufrock's agonies become our own in the course of the poem.

The metre employed is the **iambic pentameter** distorted into **free verse** and the tone used is mock-heroic, not only in the author's treatment of the character, but even in Prufrock's evasion from himself.

The juxtaposition of poetic passages, for example the epigraph, with everyday phrases and descriptions, is a device employed to highlight the banality of Prufrock's life and his search for something more lasting and meaningful. The use of objective correlative replaces direct statements: objects become symbols of emotions and personal feelings; therefore, a peculiar kind of imagery becomes the expression of a particular feeling.

**COMPETENCE:** READING AND UNDERSTANDING INFORMATION**1 READ** the text and answer these questions about *The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock*.

- 1 How does the poem open?
- 2 What sort of life does Prufrock lead?
- 3 What happens at the end of the poem?
- 4 What is the meaning of the epigraph?
- 5 What is the most distinctive influence on this poem?
- 6 How does Eliot modernise the dramatic monologue?
- 7 What is the metre employed?
- 8 What replaces direct statements?

**The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock**

*In the following lines, time and self-consciousness are closely related and that relationship underlies Prufrock's desperation, a Hell of inner isolation and outer routine, equally unbearable.*

*S'io credessi che mia risposta fosse  
A persona che mai tornasse al mondo,  
Questa fiamma staria senza più scosse.  
Ma per ciò che giammai di questo fondo  
Non tornò vivo alcun, s'è il vero,  
Senza tema d'infamia ti rispondo<sup>1</sup>.*

Let us go then, you and I,  
When the evening is spread out<sup>2</sup> against the sky  
Like a patient etherised<sup>3</sup> upon a table;  
Let us go, through certain half-deserted streets,  
5 The muttering retreats<sup>4</sup>  
Of restless nights<sup>5</sup> in one-night cheap hotels<sup>6</sup>  
And sawdust restaurants with oyster-shells<sup>7</sup>:  
Streets that follow like a tedious argument<sup>8</sup>  
Of insidious intent  
10 To lead you to an overwhelming question<sup>9</sup>...  
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.  
15 The yellow fog that rubs its back<sup>10</sup> upon the window-panes,  
The yellow smoke that rubs its muzzle<sup>11</sup> on the window-panes  
Licked its tongue<sup>12</sup> into the corners of the evening  
Lingered upon the pools<sup>13</sup> that stand in drains<sup>14</sup>,  
Let fall upon its back the soot<sup>15</sup> that falls from chimneys,  
20 Slipped<sup>16</sup> by the terrace, made a sudden leap<sup>17</sup>,  
And seeing that it was a soft October night  
Curled<sup>18</sup> once about the house, and fell asleep.

Thomas Stearns Eliot  
***Prufrock and Other  
Observations***  
**(1917)**

Lines 1-69, 111-131

- 1 *S'io credessi ... rispondo.*  
*Inferno* di Dante, Canto XXVII, versi 61-66.
- 2 **spread out.** Distesa, allargata.
- 3 **etherised.** Anestetizzato.
- 4 **muttering retreats.**  
Nascondigli mormoranti.
- 5 **restless nights.** Notti agitate.
- 6 **one-night cheap hotels.**  
Alberghi a buon mercato dove si trascorre una sola notte.
- 7 **sawdust ... oyster-shells.**  
Ristoranti con segatura per terra e gusci di ostriche.
- 8 **tedious argument.**  
Discussione noiosa.
- 9 **overwhelming question.**  
Opprimente domanda.
- 10 **rub its back.** Si strofina la schiena.
- 11 **muzzle.** Muso.
- 12 **Licked its tongue.** Passò la lingua.
- 13 **Lingered upon the pools.** Si soffermò sulle pozzanghere.
- 14 **drains.** Scarichi, tombini.
- 15 **soot.** Fuliggine.
- 16 **Slipped.** Passò furtivamente.
- 17 **made ... leap.** Fece un salto improvviso.
- 18 **Curled.** Si attorcigliò.



And indeed there will be time<sup>19</sup>  
 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<sup>20</sup>;  
 There will be time to murder and create,  
 And time for all the works and days of hands<sup>21</sup>  
 30 That lift and drop a question on your plate<sup>22</sup>;  
 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<sup>23</sup>?' and, 'Do I dare?'  
 Time to turn back and descend the stair,  
 40 With a bald spot<sup>24</sup> 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<sup>25</sup> –  
 [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<sup>26</sup>.

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<sup>27</sup>;  
 I know the voices dying with a dying fall  
 Beneath the music from a farther room.  
 So how should I presume<sup>28</sup>?

55 And I have known the eyes already, known them all –  
 The eyes that fix in a formulated phrase<sup>29</sup>,  
 and when I am formulated, sprawling<sup>30</sup> on a pin,  
 When I am pinned and wriggling<sup>31</sup> on the wall,  
 Then how I should begin  
 60 To spit out all the butt-ends<sup>32</sup> 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<sup>33</sup> with light brown hair!]  
 65 Is it perfume from a dress  
 That makes me so digress<sup>34</sup>?  
 Arms that lie along a table, or wrap about a shawl.  
 And should I then presume?  
 And how should I begin?

[...]

19 **there will be time.** Ci sarà tempo. Questo verso è ispirato al testo biblico Ecclesiaste 3, 1-8, che inizia così 'Per ogni cosa c'è il suo momento, il suo tempo per ogni faccenda sotto il cielo'.

20 **To prepare ... meet.** Per indossare una maschera sociale, per essere pronti a incontrare le persone.

21 **the works ... hands.** Le opere e i giorni di lavori manuali. Riferimento a un poema sull'anno agricolo del poeta greco Esiodo (VIII secolo a.C.); Eliot usa questo riferimento per porre a contrasto l'utile lavoro del passato e l'inutile attività di Prufrock.

22 **a question ... plate.** Una domanda sul tuo piatto. Allusione a Giovanni Battista, che fu ucciso per aver rifiutato l'amore di Salomè. La donna ordinò che le fosse portata la sua testa su un piatto.

23 **Do I dare.** Oso.

24 **bald spot.** Chiazza senza capelli.

25 **asserted ... pin.** Fissata con un semplice spillo.

26 **will reverse.** Inverterà.

27 **I ... coffee spoons.** Ho misurato la mia vita con cucchiaini da caffè.

28 **how should I presume.** Come dovrei avere la presunzione.

29 **formulated phrase.** Domanda.

30 **sprawling.** Disteso.

31 **wriggling.** Mi contorco.

32 **butt-ends.** Mozziconi di sigarette.

33 **downed.** Rese soffici.

34 **digress.** Divagare.



- 70 No! I am not Prince Hamlet<sup>35</sup>, nor was meant to be;  
Am an attendant lord<sup>36</sup>, one that will do  
To swell a progress<sup>37</sup>, start a scene or two,  
Advise the prince; no doubt, an easy tool<sup>38</sup>,  
Deferential, glad to be of use.
- 75 Politic, cautious, and meticulous;  
Full of high sentence<sup>39</sup>, but a bit obtuse;  
At times, indeed, almost ridiculous –  
Almost, at time, the Fool<sup>40</sup>.
- I grow old... I grow old...
- 80 I shall wear the bottoms of my trousers rolled<sup>41</sup>.
- 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<sup>42</sup>, each to each.
- I do not think that they will sing to me.
- 85 I have seen them riding seaward on the waves  
Combing the white hair of the waves blown back<sup>43</sup>  
When the wind blows the water white and black.  
We have lingered in the chambers of the sea  
By sea-girls wreathed with seaweed<sup>44</sup> red and brown
- 90 Till human voices wake us, and we drown<sup>45</sup>.

- 35 **Hamlet**. Allusione ad Amleto di Shakespeare.
- 36 **attendant lord**. Cortigiano.
- 37 **one ... progress**. Uno che servirà ad aumentare il numero di persone in scena.
- 38 **easy tool**. Facile strumento.
- 39 **Full of a high sentence**. Pieno di retorica.
- 40 **Fool**. Giullare.
- 41 **the ... rolled**. Pantaloni con il risvolto.
- 42 **mermaids singing**. Le sirene che cantano. Allusione a una poesia di John Donne *Go and Catch a Falling Star*, dove il poeta chiede qualche cosa al di là della sua portata.
- 43 **blown back**. Sospinte indietro.
- 44 **wreathed with seaweed**. Avvolte nelle alghe.
- 45 **we drown**. Affoghiamo.

## READING COMPETENCE

### 1 READ the text up to line 22 and match the highlighted words with their Italian translation.

- 1 lastre di vetro .....
- 2 intenzione .....

### 2 READ lines 1-22 again and do the following activities.

- 1 Who could the 'you and I' be?
- 2 What does the 'I' do?
- 3 Underline all the references to the setting in time and place. Then say where and when the scene takes place.
- 4 What disturbs the character?
- 5 Why does not Prufrock want to be asked what the 'overwhelming question' is?
- 6 What emphasises the abrupt break after the mention of the question in lines 10-11?
- 7 What place do the characters visit?
- 8 What are the women at the social gathering speaking about?
- 9 What other details about the weather are given in lines 15-22?
- 10 Concentrate on how the lines are organised and say if
  - they have a regular rhyme scheme;
  - they are of the same length;
  - the metre is traditional;
  - there is a classical division in stanzas;
  - there are alliterations;
  - a particular type of verse is used.
- 11 Underline examples of repetitions of words and phrases. What impression do they convey?



12 State what theme the opening sentence with the 'you and I' suggests. Tick as appropriate.

- ☐ An escape from a terrifying reality.
- ☐ Prufrock's interior quest.
- ☐ A simple invitation made by a man to a woman.

13 Read through these lines again and find all the personal pronouns. What do they convey?

14 Underline words and phrases belonging to the semantic areas of the modern town, daily events and characters using different colours or line-shapes and collect your data in the following table.

Town	Daily events	Characters

15 Look at the language of the extract and say

- what feelings the simile in lines 2-3 conveys;
- what the simile in lines 8-9 points out;
- what adjectives you would choose to depict this town;
- what the fog is compared to in lines 15-22;
- what the dominant semantic area used for the fog is;
- what atmosphere is created.

**3 READ lines 23-69 and do the following activities.**

1 Note down

- what there will be in the future;
- what Prufrock repeats in line 38;
- what he wonders about;
- how he is dressed;
- what sort of comments other people make about him;
- what Prufrock expresses speaking about the social world around him in lines 50-60;
- who/what distracts him in line 64;
- what the real meaning of the questions in lines 68 and 69 is.

2 Focus on lines 23-49 and explain what the incessant repetition of 'there will be time' implies.

3 How does Prufrock measure the passing of time? Is he speaking about chronological time or his inner time?

4 Find examples of objective correlative in lines 49-66 and say what emotions are conveyed.

5 What has caused the digression in line 64?

6 Why is it possible to consider the question in line 69 also an answer? Tick as appropriate.

- ☐ It points out the fear of acting.
- ☐ It expresses the wish of a repentance.
- ☐ It exalts an aimless existence.

**4 READ the last section of the poem and do the following activities.**

1 Say if the following statements are true or false. Correct the false ones.

- 1 Prufrock is like Prince Hamlet.
- 2 He is only a minor character.
- 3 He does not understand that he is growing old.
- 4 He presents himself as an unromantic character.
- 5 He has a dreamlike vision of mermaids.
- 6 He has seen them in waves breaking on the shore, when the wind carries the tops of the waves out to the sea again.
- 7 He refuses the beauty and the sweetness of the scene.
- 8 The intrusion of reality destroys and drowns his inner life.



**2** Read the whole poem again and focus on the character of Prufrock.

- 1 What does he look like?
- 2 What kind of man is he? Say as much as you can about his character.
- 3 What parallel does he make in line 70 to describe himself? What aspect of his character does he want to emphasise?
- 4 What does his image contrast with in the last section of the poem? What does he reveal about his character?

**3** State the tone of the whole poem. Tick as appropriate.

- ☐ Ironic.
- ☐ Angry.
- ☐ Annoyed.
- ☐ Mock-heroic.
- ☐ Resentful.
- ☐ Sympathetic.

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➤ **COMPETENCE: PRODUCING A WRITTEN TEXT ON A GIVEN SUBJECT**

**5** **WRITE** a 10/12-line paragraph about the differences between T.S. Eliot's dramatic monologue *The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock* and *Porphyria's Lover* (→ 5.7) by Robert Browning.