

# The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock

Poem by T. S. Eliot

T.S., Eliot 1888-1965

*When he was alive, T.S. Eliot was one of the most influential poets in the English-speaking world. His invention of new poetic rhythms, forms, and themes had an enormous impact on other writers and helped usher in a new era in poetry. Eliot, remarked the composer Igor Stravinsky, was "not only a great sorcerer of words, but the very key keeper of the language."*

**A Lover of Philosophy** *Eliot grew up in St. Louis, Missouri in a household steeped in culture and tradition. His mother, Charlotte Champe Stearns, was an amateur poet, and his father, Henry Ware Eliot, was a successful businessman with New England roots. Eliot received a broad education studying at Milton Academy and Harvard University. After earning both bachelor's and master's degrees from Harvard, Eliot continued his studies in philosophy at the Sorbonne in Paris and then back at Harvard. However, he never completed those studies. While on a traveling fellowship in Europe, he met the poet Ezra Pound, who encouraged Eliot's poetic ambitions.*

**Literary Success** *Pound helped Eliot gain entry into London's avant-garde circle of writers, and he introduced Eliot's poetry to Harriet Monroe of 'Poetry' magazine. In 1915, Eliot's masterpiece "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock" appeared in 'Poetry'. That same year, Eliot married Vivien Haigh-Wood, an Englishwoman. Struggling to make a living as a writer, Eliot worked as a teacher, a bank clerk, and finally as an editor.*

**Breakthroughs in Poetry** *The 1917 publication of Eliot's first book, "Prufrock and Other Observations", signaled a distinct break with the past. Using colloquial speech laced with slang, Eliot created a new, highly original poetic diction. He also explored new poetic themes, such as the splendors and horrors of modern life and the effects of alienation. With the appearance of "The Waste Land" in 1922, Eliot's reputation was solidified. In this poem, Eliot articulated the disgust and disillusionment felt by his generation in the wake of World War I, as well as its longing for meaning in a chaotic, sometimes frightening, world.*

**Inspired by Religion** *Though a pioneer in poetry, Eliot became increasingly conservative in his personal views. Struggling with anxiety over his domestic troubles, he joined the Church of England in 1927 and embraced its traditional pieties. In his later collections, "Ash Wednesday" (1930) and "Four Quartets" (1943), he used poetry to stress the significance of accepting*

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

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**S'io credesso...ti rispondo:** These lines are from the *Inferno*, written in the early 14<sup>th</sup> century by Italian poet Dante Alighieri. As Dante visits hell, one of the damned agrees to speak of his torment only because he believes that Dante cannot return to the living world to repeat the tale.

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,  
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  
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.

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,  
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 time  
For the yellow smoke that slides along the street,  
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  
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.

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

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**etherized:** given ether, a liquid used as an anesthetic  
**insidious:** more dangerous than it seems

And indeed there will be time  
To wonder, “Do I dare?” and, “Do I dare?”  
Time to turn back and descend the stair,  
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!”]  
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:—  
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?

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  
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!]  
It is 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?

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**morning coat:** a type of formal suit jacket with coattails

**presume:** act overconfidently, dare

**formulated:** reduce to a formula

**And I have...on the walls:** Proffrock recalls being scrutinized by women at other parties. He portrays himself as a live insect that has been classified, labeled, and mounted for display.

**digress:** wander away from the main topic; ramble

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.

\* \* \* \*

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

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,  
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 toward some overwhelming question,  
To say: "I am Lazarus, come from the dead,  
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."

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**I should...silent seas:** Here Profrock presents an image of himself as a crayfish

**malingers:** pretends illness in order to avoid duty or work

**But through...prophets:** an allusion to the biblical story of John the Baptist, who is imprisoned by King Herod (Matthew 14; Mark 6). At the request of his wife, Herod had the Baptist's head cut off and brought to him on a platter.

**Lazarus:** In the biblical story (John 11:17-44) Lazarus lay dead in his tomb for four days before Jesus brought him back to life

And would it have been worth it, after all,  
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!  
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,  
That is not what I meant, at all.”

\* \* \* \*

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,  
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.

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.

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

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**magic lantern:** a forerunner of the slide projector  
**deferential:** yielding to someone else's opinion  
**meticulous:** extremely careful and precise about details  
**obtuse:** slow to understand; dull