The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock

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**Questions for Discussion**

**1. How does the epigraph from Dante’s *Inferno* help Eliot comment on the modern world in**

**“The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock”? What does it tell us about the setting of this poem? How**

**is Montefeltro’s miscalculation related to the poem?**

**2. We can assume that the speaker of the poem is Prufrock, a character Eliot creates through the**

**use of dramatic monologue—a technique in which a speaker addresses a silent listener, often**

**revealing qualities he or she might wish to keep hidden. What kind of person is Prufrock? What**

**does he unknowingly reveal?**

**3. Whom is the speaker addressing? This question is more complicated than it seems and likely**

**has several answers. Consider all of the possibilities. What does each possible listener suggest**

**about the development of Prufrock as a character? How does each possibility develop another**

**level of meaning for the poem?**

**4. One of the most demanding aspects of this poem is its allusions, as Eliot expected his readers**

**to be as well educated as he was. Some allusions are fairly accessible. The allusions to Michelangelo—an artist most people are familiar with—in line 14 and again in line 36 help us imagine the women Prufrock is talking about. The function of the less accessible allusions—such as**

**“works and days of hands” (l. 29)—may serve a different purpose. Why might Eliot have**

**included such esoteric allusions? How do they affect your reading of the poem?**

**5. Consider the title of the poem. How is it ironic? In what ways is the poem a love song?**

**6. Eliot began writing this poem in 1909, when he was in college at Harvard. He continued to**

**revise it until it was published in 1917. Some critics have commented that it is the poem of a**

**young man, even though its narrator is middle aged. What qualities reveal the poem as a young**

**man’s work?**

**7. An early review of the poem in the *Times Literary Supplement* (London) stated, “The fact that**

**these things occurred to the mind of Mr. Eliot is surely of the very smallest importance to**

**anyone, even to himself. They certainly have no relation to *poetry*” (June 21, 1917). Do you**

**agree?**

**8. Eliot was in the avant-garde as a young poet, but he considered himself a traditionalist as he**

**got older. What are the innovative aspects of this poem? Look for evidence of the traditionalism**

**that would get stronger as Eliot aged.**

**9. In what ways is “The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock” a poem about time? Read through the**

**poem and look for references to time, including aging, the meaning of time, and the word *time***

**itself. What conclusions can you draw about the way Eliot thinks about time?**

**10. In what ways is this poem a poem about art?**

**Questions on Style and Structure**

**1. How does Eliot set the tone in the poem’s first stanza? Look carefully at both the figurative**

**language and the concrete details.**

**2. Eliot depends on the emotional associations of his images, what he called the “objective**

**correlative,” to reveal aspects of Prufrock’s personality. In the first stanza, what emotions do**

**you associate with images such as “patient etherized upon a table” (l. 3) or “one-night cheap**

**hotels” (l. 6)?**

**3. The “yellow fog” that is the subject of the poem’s third stanza has the qualities of a cat. Is this**

**association threatening, comforting, or both? How does your interpretation of the fog affect**

**your reading of the poem as a whole?**

**4. You may notice that the images are arranged from top to bottom—the sky to the streets in the**

**first stanza, and the windowpanes to the drains in the third. What is the effect of the way Eliot**

**has Prufrock guide the reader’s eye and imagination?**

**5. Eliot uses the technique of enjambment, or run-on lines. An example is in lines 5–9: “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.” How does this**

**technique help create the alienating quality of the city scene that’s set in the first 22 lines?**

**6. “The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock” is like a collage, a work of visual art created by materials**

**and objects glued to a flat surface. In poetry this technique is called fragmentation, a favorite**

**technique of the modernists. The fragments come together—or don’t—in a way that mirrors**

**the fragmented, chaotic modern world. In the fourth stanza, for example, what is the effect of**

**fragments such as “yellow smoke,” “murder and create,” “visions and revisions,” and “toast and**

**tea” appearing together? Do they form a new picture, or are their effects fragmentary? How do**

**the fragments communicate Eliot’s vision of a modern man in a modern city?**

**7. What do you make of the occasional rhyming in the midst of unrhymed free verse? Note especially the two repeated stanzas: “In the room the women come and go / Talking of Michelangelo.” How does this irregular rhyme scheme reflect and reveal the character of the speaker and**

**the setting of the poem?**

**8. The middle section (ll. 37–86) of this poem moves from the chaotic city setting into the fragmented,**

**anxiety-ridden mind of the speaker. How is Prufrock’s physical description developed**

**in lines 37–44? How do Prufrock’s physical characteristics connect to emotional states?**

**9. Prufrock is a deeply self-conscious character. Explain the various ways that characteristic is**

**developed in lines 37–72. Consider especially lines 55–58, in which Prufrock imagines himself**

**pinned like a specimen to a wall.**

**10. From line 37 to line 87, twelve lines begin with “And.” What does the repetition of that conjunction suggest about Prufrock’s mental state?**

**11. “The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock” makes several allusions to metaphysical poet Andrew**

**Marvell’s “To His Coy Mistress”. “And indeed there will be time” (ll. 23, 37) alludes to**

**that poem’s first lines, in which the speaker urges his lady friend to consummate their relationship**

**by reminding her how fast time flies: “Had we but world enough, and time / This coyness,**

**lady, were no crime.” Later, “To have squeezed the universe into a ball” (l. 92) alludes to the end**

**of Marvell’s poem, in which the speaker makes one last pitch: “Let us roll all our strength and**

**all / Our sweetness up into one ball.” How do we know that Prufrock’s purpose is different?**

**What is the effect of alluding to Marvell’s flirtatious, self-confident poem?**

**12. Prufrock claims to have seen “Arms that are braceleted and white and bare” (l. 63), an allusion**

**to metaphysical poet John Donne’s “The Relic,” in which the speaker imagines that when**

**his grave and the grave of his beloved are dug up, the gravedigger will see the bracelet of his**

**beloved’s hair encircling the bones of his arm, and will leave them alone. Critics have said that**

**Donne invented the idea of modern love as private, as opposed to the feudal idea of love being**

**social. How does this allusion, and the concrete image itself, help develop the character of**

**Prufrock? What do you think is Eliot’s take on the idea of modern, private love?**

**13. In line 111, Prufrock readily admits he is no Hamlet. What might have led the reader to**

**believe that Prufrock and Hamlet share characteristics? What characteristics of Hamlet does**

**Prufrock claim not to have?**

**14. What is the effect of the semicolons and ellipses in lines 111–21? What do they tell you about**

**Prufrock’s state of mind?**

**15. Details such as Prufrock’s assertion that he will “wear the bottom of [his] trousers rolled”**

**(l. 121) or his question about whether he should “dare to eat a peach” (l. 122) have been interpreted**

**in many ways. One is that they reveal his anxieties about aging—he may be too old for**

**the bohemian style of rolled trousers or he may break a tooth on a peach pit. Another interpretation**

**is that they are related to his nervousness around women. Consider several possibilities.**

**How does each add to the portrait of Prufrock and the multiple meanings of Eliot’s poem?**

**16. The last six lines of this poem form a sestet (6 lines), the form that both ends the traditional**

**Petrarchan sonnet and offers a solution for the problem or conflict set out in the first eight lines**

**(the octave). The poet Petrarch wrote about his unrequited love for Laura, but Prufrock doesn’t**

**even have an unrequited love. Do these last six lines offer any solutions? How does the image of**

**mermaids continue some of the poem’s motifs? What does it mean that Prufrock invites the**

**reader to drown with him at the end of the poem?**