

The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock

- Prufrock talks as if he has already passed up on his opportunity to do that important thing.
- He starts this big long thought about whether "it would have been worth it," which he won't finish until the end of the stanza, so just keep this thought in mind.
- It seems that even more eating and drinking have been going on, as well as "some talk of you and me..."
- He talks about "biting off the matter," as if it were something he could eat, like his precious marmalade (a kind of jam). "The matter," we assume, is the important thing that he meant to discuss so many lines ago.
- He compares the effort it would required to take on "some overwhelming question" to squeezing the entire universe into a ball.

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- Prufrock compares his task of asking the question to Lazarus coming back from the dead.
- In the Bible, a rich man named Dives dies and goes to Hell. Around the same time, a poor man named Lazarus dies and goes to Heaven. Dives asks the prophet Abraham to send Lazarus back to earth to warn his brothers to mend their ways or they'll end up in Hell.
- Again Prufrock refers to death, Heavens and adds resurrection to his list of impossibilities. He is making things more difficult for himself if he keeps comparing himself with prophets, saints and poets.

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- He wonders if it would have been worth it if after him and his love have experienced all of these nice but trivial pleasures of everyday, middle-class life, including "sunsets," "novels," and "teacups" - but he can't finish his thought.
- He is afraid of disappointments because the more expectation he has about love and romance and reading novels feed and stoke, the more hurt and disappointed he feels when his lover, probably a female Prufrock, expresses dissatisfaction or even rejects his advances.

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- But when he comes up with the right words to say what he means, it feels as if the words locked in his "nerves" were being projected by a "magic lantern" onto a screen for him to read.
- But, in typical Prufrock-fashion, even the right words are disappointing. It's just another image of a woman sitting on a couch or a bed and saying she has been misunderstood and rejected.

Aside from Dante, Eliot Shakespeare. In *Hamlet*, the title character is also indecisive, much like Prufrock has been for most of the poem. Hamlet can't decide whether or not to kill his uncle, even though his uncle has committed some really awful crimes. Like Prufrock, Hamlet can seem like a coward who talks too much. But now Prufrock says he's not like Hamlet, after all.

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- In the play, Hamlet begins his most famous speech: "To be or not to be, that is the question." You might even say it's an "overwhelming question." But Prufrock has already made a decision on that question: he was not "meant to be."
- Prufrock compares himself to a minor character in the play, one of the "attendants" who serve the king. We think he's talking about Polonius.
- He is a tool and an instrument.

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- Though Prufrock has done a pretty good job so far at disguising the passage of time, he can no longer hide the fact that he's getting older and older.
- Because he already failed to make one big decision, he's going to pretend he's an assertive, confident guy by making a bunch of comically minor decisions like rolling up his trousers.
- Parting hair behind was considered "daringly bohemian" at the time.
- Prufrock is still trying to make all kinds of tiny decisions, now that he has missed his big chance. As always, he's interested in the small pleasures of food and fashion, like the peach and the white flannel trousers.

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Speaking of oceans and seas culminates in mermaids and seaweeds.

- Prufrock can't keep track of what time it is, so he says he has "heard" the mermaids singing to each other, as if this event were already in the past.
- But they don't sing to a mediocre guy like him. He has no self-confidence at all.
- These mermaids look like they're surfing on the waves with their tails. The only troubling sign is that the waves have "white hair," which makes us think of old people.

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- Prufrock brings "us" back into the picture, saying that we have been hanging out in the ocean with him.
- The word "chambers" has two meanings here: it can refer to small cramped spaces, or it can refer to rooms, especially bedrooms.

Prufrock has spent significant amounts of time lurking outside of rooms and imagining women who are wrapped in shawls and laying on pillows.

The "human voices" may remind us of the "voices with a dying fall" from line 52.

- The ending sounds like an awakening from a dream. It could signal that Prufrock has truly grown insane, or that his "true self" is really more crab-like than human, or that, yes, he has been dreaming the whole time.