

The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock

by T.S. Eliot

The initial reception to *The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock*, by T.S. Eliot, can be summed up in a contemporary review published in *The Times Literary Supplement*, on the 21st of June 1917. The anonymous reviewer wrote: "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." There appears to be a trend among the literary elite of bashing poetry that will later become to be renowned as innovative in its field, or heralding change within the realm of poetry. 'Prufrock', as it is more commonly known, is definitely one of the latter: although initially hated, as can be evidenced by the above comment, it has since gone on to be considered by scholars as the onset of Modernist poetry, replacing the Romantic and the Georgian rhymes that had dominated Europe, and perhaps one of the most exclusively American methods of writing.

J. Alfred Prufrock, a presumably middle-aged, intellectual, indecisive man, invites the reader along with him through the modern city. He describes the street scene and notes a social gathering of women discussing Renaissance artist Michelangelo. He describes yellow smoke and fog outside the house of the gathering, and keeps insisting that there will be time to do many things in the social world.

The title of the poem is Eliot's first hint that this is not a traditional love poem at all. "J. Alfred Prufrock" is a farcical name, and Eliot wanted the subliminal connotation of a "prude" in a "frock." (The original title was "Prufrock Among the Women.") This emasculation contributes to a number of themes Eliot will explore revolving around paralysis and heroism, but the name also has personal meaning for Eliot. He wrote the poem in 1909 while a graduate student at Harvard (though he revised it over the next few years, eventually publishing it in 1915 and in book form in 1917), and at the time he signed his name as "T. Stearns Eliot."

This shifting, repetitive poem is a parody of a love song; it flows then stumbles and hesitates its way through the life of a middle aged male who can't decide where he stands in the world. Will he venture out to find the love of his life? Now is the time to visit that room where *the women come and go/Talking of Michelangelo*.

But Prufrock, the tentative male, envisages being ridiculed for having a bald patch. Time is running out, or is it? Note the reference to the Andrew Marvell poem *To His Coy Mistress* in line 23 and Shakespeare's play *Twelfth Night* in line 52 and Prince Hamlet in line 111.

Eliot also used French poet Jules LaForgue as inspiration for his repeated women who come and go talking of Michelangelo. "*Dans la piece les femmes vont et viennent / En parlant des maîtres de Sienne.*" LaForgue was one of the innovators of the interior monologue and Eliot certainly exploited this technique to the full in Prufrock.

There are fragments of images, gloomy cityscapes, reflective inner thoughts and an uneasy questioning self that is the anti-hero Prufrock. He is both ditherer and dreamer, a split personality who procrastinates, who is caught between fantasy and reality.