

ANALYSIS

“The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock” (1915)



T. S. Eliot

(1888-1965)

“The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock” brought into union Eliot’s ironic attitude with all the stimulus that he had received from his initial reading of Laforgue. As a result it possesses a finished mastery both of the material and of the form into which it is cast that puts it far beyond any of the other poems in his first volume of 1917—with the exception of ‘Portrait of a Lady’... ‘Prufrock,’ in the movement of its verse, its repetitions, and echoes, and even in its choice of theme, seems of all Eliot’s poems to have been written most immediately under Laforgue’s stimulus (through brought to a finished perfection of form which Laforgue’s more impromptu verse scarcely attained)... Prufrock’s rankling inability to give himself to life and the kind of frustration embodied in Eliot’s ‘Portrait of a Lady’ find their parallels many times in [Henry] James....

The source of some of the wittiest irony in ‘Prufrock’ would seem to spring from Eliot’s detached ability to mock also the supercultivated fastidiousness young man from Harvard. But the point is that the hero of the poem is not such a figure; and that, as a result, Eliot’s rapier thrusts have full play with no risk of becoming clumsily involved in purely personal associations.... He is not writing in his own person: the situation of Gerontion is even further from his own than that of the middle-aged Prufrock had been when Eliot created him while still in his early twenties....

And where in modern poetry are there characters realized with such convincing definiteness as Prufrock and Sweeney?... On the one hand, he could observe the timid inhibitions of Prufrock, regretting situations unexplored but prevented from giving himself to anything emotionally real by an excessive fastidiousness—his only residue of the Puritan conscience. Such a figure would belong to Eliot’s descriptions of Boston ‘society’ as quite uncivilized, but refined beyond the point of civilization.... The complete difference between Prufrock and Sweeney is significant of the dangerously violent contrast that confronts any sensitive observer of the city: the thin upper-class ‘culture’; the life of the half-educated mass, full-blooded but brutalized....

[An] example of the elaborated conceit in Eliot [like the Metaphysical poets] is his description of the fog in terms of a cat...the conceit exists not just to shock or startle, though that is one of its valuable attributes. It is an integral element of the metaphysical style since it is the most compelling means of making the desired union of emotion and thought by bringing together widely divergent material in a single image. Instead of being ornamental, it is wholly functional: only by its use does the poet feel that he can express the precise curve of his meaning. If the reader objects that the meaning would be much better conveyed in plain speech without resort to such tortuous comparisons, let him bear in mind Hulme's remark that 'Plain speech is essentially inaccurate. It is only by new metaphors...that it can be made precise'...

But in the general texture of his verse Eliot really depends very little upon elaborate conceits: the double description of the cat and the foggy evening, whereby both are present to the reader with a richly heightened acuteness, is by far his most conspicuous use of the device in its expanded form. His usual way of surprising the reader into a new perception of reality is by means of the nuance rather than the conceit, by the rapid associations of his shifting thought, and by the accompanying deft and subtle exactness of his verbal contrasts....

What renders the character of Prufrock not just grotesque or absurd but poignantly real is that as a result of a gradual accumulation of undertones and especially of the final dramatic lines, one can glimpse, beneath the banal surfaces and futile indecisions of his life, his perception of beauty, his understanding of the meaning of love and sympathy, if an utter inability to gain them. From that early poem onward, through the much deeper accents of 'Gerontion' and 'The Waste Land,' the prevailing theme of Eliot's poems is the emptiness of life without belief, an emptiness that finally resounds with sickening fear and desperation in 'The Hollow Men.'... Prufrock can give utterance in soliloquy to his debate with himself only because he knows that no one will overhear him. The point of calling this poem a 'Love Song' lies in the irony that it will never be sung: that Prufrock will never dare to voice what he feels."

F. O. Matthiessen

The Achievement of T. S. Eliot

(1935; Oxford/ Galaxy 1959) 132, 17-18, 70, 59, 104-05, 29-30, 99, 53

"This poem is a dramatic monologue. As in Tennyson's 'Ulysses,' a person utters a speech that implies his story and reveals his character. The implication of the story is fairly clear in the poem by Tennyson and the revelation is fairly simple, but the reader must depend to some extent upon his imagination to fill in what is unsaid. In 'The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock' the reader must assume even more responsibility for filling in the unsaid. For one thing, the events are not as fully indicated in Eliot's poem as in Tennyson's, but for another and more important thing, the continuity is not as clear. In 'Ulysses' the transitions are not strictly logical. One thing suggests another in the flow of consciousness. But the transitions in Prufrock's utterance are more violent, at first glance less justifiable. But can we make sense of them? Is the poem a mere jumble?

It is no mere jumble, for even a superficial reading yields a general impression of Prufrock. He is a middle-aged man, somewhat over-sensitive and timid, yearning and procrastinating, fearful that life has passed him by and yet somehow resigned to the fact, very much a creature of his world of drawing rooms and yet feeling a vague dissatisfaction with that world. But only a closer inspection will give us the full significance of many details in the poem and permit us to realize the implications of the whole poem.... Who is the 'you' of the poem? It is presumably the generalized reader. But in this poem the 'you' is something more—it is the person to whom Prufrock wishes to make his revelation, to tell his secret....

The time is evening, when the 'you' is invited to make the visit, and this evening world becomes more and more important as the poem proceeds. It is a world of neither night nor day. Twilight is the atmosphere of the poem. It is an evening 'Like a patient etherized upon a table,' and with this image the twilight world becomes also the world of twilight in another way, the realm between life and death. Here, too, enters the notion of a sick world, the atmosphere of the operating room: the quiet is not that of natural sleep—it is an ominous hush.

To reach Prufrock's proper world, the 'you' must pass through a slum section of sinister streets. The suggested walk through the slum points up the triviality of the conversation of the women in the effete

drawing room to which we come. This is not to say that the subject of the women's conversation is trivial. Michelangelo was a man of violent personality, an artist of epic grandeur, and furthermore a typical figure of the great creative period of the Renaissance. But he has nothing to do with Prufrock's world and the bored women who turn his art into chit-chat.

With lines 15 to 22 we find more the twilight atmosphere of the poem. But there is some development here, for the settling down of the smoke and fog tends to emphasize the isolation of the drawing room from the outside world. In addition, the image of the housecat falling asleep accords with the relaxed, aimless quality of Prufrock's world.

In the next section (lines 23-34) two new motifs enter the poem, the motif of time and that of appearance-and-reality. For the first, there will be time for some great, as yet unnamed, decision to settle the 'overwhelming question'—for the 'visions and revisions.' The word *vision* here is important, for it implies the possibility of some fundamental insight, a flash of truth, a glimpse of beauty. Mystics, saints, seers, poets have 'visions.' But this word is played off against *revision*, with its implication of the second thought, the calculated change, etc. For the second motif of this section, we see that Prufrock's prepares a mask for the world. He cannot face the world directly, there is a need for disguise.

What this need is, does not yet emerge, but in the next section (lines 37-48) we see that the disguise is prompted by fear of the mocking, inimical eyes of the world that will avidly note all defects and failings. And here, too, the time motif changes its emphasis. In the section before, there was enough time to allow for postponement of vital decision, but now mixed with that idea is the idea of the closing in of time, of age. With this sense of the closing in of time, and with the fear, does Prufrock dare disturb the universe with the significant question?

The next three sections (lines 49-69) further explain why Prufrock may not disturb the universe. First, he himself belongs to that world, and therefore it would be a presumption for him to criticize it. On what grounds could he, the perfect product of that world, enervated by its sense of fatuity, offer a judgment against it? Second, he fears the world, and again the inimical eyes appear. This fear would prevent him from changing his 'days' and 'ways.'

The last of these three sections (lines 62-69) has the same outline, as it were, as the other two: I have known this world, and so on, therefore, how should I presume? But the content is new, the arms and the perfume, and cannot be accounted for as merely details of the Prufrock world. Now, not a woman, but women enter significantly. Prufrock is attracted by the sight of the bare arms, by the whiff of perfume, but in the midst of the lines recording the romantic attraction, we find the more realistic observation put as a parenthesis: 'But in the lamplight, downed with light brown hair!'

Is this a mere observation, or does it indicate something about Prufrock? The fact that the observation of the 'real' arms is put in contrast with the 'romantic' arms, modifies the attraction: against the attraction there is a hint of revulsion, a hint of neurotic repudiation of the real, the physical. In the face of this situation, how should Prufrock 'begin'? After a brief digression (lines 70-74), we return to the drawing room and the etherized, peaceful twilight world in which Prufrock does not have the strength to force the 'crisis,' the overwhelming question.

The motif that dominates the section is the time motif, the sense of physical decay and impending death, the sense of there being, not too much time, but not enough time. In this sense of time having run out Prufrock's agony now seems of no account; it has led to nothing. He admits that he is no prophet, no announcer of a new dispensation like John the Baptist. And in the reference to John the Baptist we catch also the allusion to the love story, for the prophet's death was demanded by Salome because he had rejected her love: Prufrock, too, has rejected love, but not because he is a prophet with a burning message and faith. He is merely a product of his world, where even Death is a kind of footman who holds the coat and snickers at the slightly ridiculous guest. Even Prufrock's death will lack dignity and meaning.

In the two sections from line 87 to line 110 Prufrock asks would it have been worth it, even if he had forced the crisis. But what would the crisis have been? It seems to involve the love story, it involves some

understanding with a woman. We have an allusion to Marvell's love poem 'To His Coy Mistress' in the line 'To have squeezed the universe into a ball.' Marvell's lovers would squeeze up their strength and sweetness into a supreme moment, but with Prufrock it is the universe which is to be rolled toward the 'overwhelming question.' In other words, with Prufrock it is not merely the personal relationship, but the meaning of the world, of life, that is involved. But the two are to be somehow related: the personal relationship cannot be significant if life is without significance.

Prufrock, if he had been able to force the crisis, would have seemed, he feels, like Lazarus come from the dead. Let us examine what is implied in the allusion. There are two characters by this name in the Bible. One is the beggar (*Luke 16*) who lay at the rich man's gate, and the other is the brother of Mary and Martha who died and was raised by Jesus (*John 11*). When the first Lazarus died he was carried by angels to Abraham's bosom, while the rich man was sent to hell. The rich man, seeing Lazarus happy, asked that Lazarus be sent to give him water. When Abraham replied that this was impossible, the rich man asked that at least Lazarus be sent to warn the rich man's brothers so that they might not come to hell for their lack of charity. Abraham replied that the brothers already had the prophets.

'And he [the rich man] said, Nay, father Abraham: but if one went unto them from the dead, they will repent.' 'And he [Abraham] said unto him, If they hear not Moses and the prophets, neither will they be persuaded, though one rose from the dead.' So both references involve a return from the dead, and we may say that elements of both are suggested by the allusion. To return from the dead would be for Prufrock to awaken from his meaningless existence. To tell all, as related to the raising of Lazarus by Jesus, would be to tell what it is like to be dead, to report the horror. In relation to the other Lazarus story, to tell all would mean to utter the warning to repentance. The story of the beggar Lazarus seems to have a little more weight in the allusion than the story of the other Lazarus. The warning from Prufrock, like that given to the rich men by the beggar Lazarus, would not be heeded by the lady of the drawing room; she simply would not understand what Prufrock was talking about if he should raise the 'overwhelming question.' (Neither of the Biblical stories gives an exact parallel to Prufrock's situation, for in the one from the Gospel of John the importance of the risen Lazarus to the living is not stressed, and in the one from the Gospel of Luke, the dead man, unlike Prufrock, is called back from bliss to the world. But the general import of the allusion is clear, and that is what matters.)

With the realization that even if he had had the strength to raise the question the lady would not have understood him, Prufrock is struck again by his own inadequacy. He is not Prince Hamlet (lines 111-120). Hamlet suffered doubt and despair. Hamlet brought an 'overwhelming question' to Ophelia, who could not understand what he meant. Hamlet postponed decisive action. But there the parallel ends. Hamlet struggled grandly and passionately with his problem. The world he confronted was evil and violent, it was not twilight and relaxed. The play *Hamlet*, like the work of Michelangelo, belongs to a great creative period in history, and the mere reference evokes that world in contrast to Prufrock's world. Prufrock, with sad self-irony, sees all this, and knows that if he corresponds to any character in the play it is to the sententious, empty, old Polonius, the sycophantic Rosenkranz, or the silly, foppish Osric. Perhaps—though there is not fool in *Hamlet*—to the fool, that stock character of many Elizabethan tragedies.

So with line 121 we see Prufrock resigned to his role, resigned to the fact that he will never raise the overwhelming question, resigned to the fact of age which has overtaken his postponements. With this reference to the motif of time, we see him as an aging man on the beach wistfully watching the girls, who have no attention to spare for him. Suddenly this scene is transformed into a vision of beauty and vitality, in contrast to the world Prufrock has inhabited. The girls become mermaids, as it were, riding triumphantly and effortlessly seaward into their natural creative element. (We may notice how this refers also to the sea of the ragged claws: the brute vitality and the vision of beauty are both aspects of the sea, the life-source.)

The concluding reference to the mermaids (lines 129-31) gives us a kind of odd reversion to Prufrock's original situation: he has 'lingered,' not in the drawing-room surrounded by the women talking of Michelangelo, but in the 'chambers of the sea,' surrounded by 'sea-girls.' But such an experience can occur only in dream: 'human voices wake us...' And to wake is to return to the human world—is to suffocate and die: '...and we drown.' The concluding image thus summarizes brilliantly Prufrock's character and his plight: he can immerse himself in the life-giving sea only in dream, and even in that dream, it is essentially

his passive, negative self that is projected: *he* does not ride 'seaward on the waves'; he lingers in the 'chambers'—he is wreathed by the 'sea-girls.' Yet, though he cannot live in the sea, or in a romantic dream of the sea, his desiccated 'human' world suffocates him. He is a fish out of water indeed.

Is this poem merely a character sketch, the ironical self-revelation of a neurotic 'case'? Or does the poem carry more? And if it does carry more, how are we to get at it? For one thing, we notice the sudden use of 'we' in the last three lines of the poem. Prufrock has generalized the situation: not only himself but others are in the same predicament. Further, much is made of Prufrock's world—it is a meaningless world of half-lights and shadows, the world of an ether dream, and it is set in another world, the defeated world of the slum. But there is another indication that a generalized application is involved.

The epigraph with which Eliot introduces the poem, from Dante's *Divine Comedy*, is part of a speech by Guido da Montefeltro, who is one of the damned in the Inferno. He speaks from his flame: 'If I believed that my answer were to someone who might ever go back to the world, this flame would shake no more. But since, if I hear truth, no one ever returned alive from this pit, I respond to you without fear of infamy.' Guido thinks that Dante, to whom the words are addressed, is damned too; therefore, since Dante cannot go back to the world to report it, Guido does not mind telling his own story, exposing his infamy. So the epigraph is but a way of saying that Prufrock is like Guido, the damned man who speaks from his flame; but he speaks to the 'you' of the poem—the reader—only because he takes the reader to be damned too, to belong to the same world and to share the same disease. It is the disease of loss of conviction, of loss of faith in the meaning of life, of loss of creativity of all kinds, of feeble purpose, of neurotic self-absorption. So the poem, in the end, is not about poor Prufrock. He is merely a symbol for a general disease, the same disease that Matthew Arnold has written about in 'Dover Beach' [loss of religious faith].

'Prufrock,' we have suggested, is an ironical poem. It is ironical that Prufrock should expose himself. There is an irony in that he can see his predicament but cannot act to remedy it. There is an irony in his self-depreciation. He cannot claim too much, even for his despair: he is not Prince Hamlet. Irony is an awareness of the limits of response, an understating of response, a refusal to make exaggerations. Sentimentality, as we have said, is the exaggeration of response. This sounds as if irony were a kind of automatic salvation from sentimentality, but things are not that easy and simple. Irony can become a mere mannerism, a mere mechanical juggling of opposites and contrasts. To judge the acceptable limits of response for any situation we must come back, on the one hand, to our own common-sense experience of the world, and on the other hand, to the context in the poem...

As for 'Prufrock,' first, the irony is in keeping with the character. Prufrock is intelligent; he does see around and beyond himself; he sees his own failure in a perspective. Furthermore, Eliot the poet, as distinguished from the dramatic character in the poem, wants to make the point that the modern damnation is not a grand damnation: Prufrock is not to be taken too seriously, he is comic as well as tragic. It is easy to be self-pitying...

If we do not have already at our disposal the necessary information, we are inclined to think that the poet is willful or perverse or proud of his learning. It is perfectly true that poets sometimes are willful and perverse and proud of their learning. But can we, on the other hand, take our own ignorance at any given moment to be the norm of poetry? If we are not willing to make that rather conceited assumption, then it is our responsibility to try to remedy our ignorance."

Cleanth Brooks and Robert Penn Warren, eds.
Understanding Poetry
(Holt 1938, 1950, 1960) 390-99

"J. Alfred Prufrock is the symbol of a wealthy young man, blasé, intellectual, sensitive, but completely incapable of action. The poem is a fragment of his soliloquy as he walks the streets at evening, reluctant to come to a decision about love—or, for that matter, about anything. He imagines bits of typical conversation, typical drawing-room scenes; he thinks of death. And with death forever in mind, love and intellectual inquiry grow empty; life is an ironic picture, a meaningless pattern endlessly repeated everywhere. The epigraph indicates Eliot's view of life's futility, since death is inevitable. Since man no longer imagines he can conquer death, no longer believes he can bend the universe to his will, he is, for all

his contemplations of death (as in the Lazarus symbol)) or of life, mediocre, and his actions and decisions are therefore inconsequential.”

George K. Anderson & Eda Lou Walton, eds.

This Generation: A Selection of British and American Literature from 1914 to the Present
(Scott, Foresman 1939) 234

“In the form of a dramatic monologue it presents with irony and pathos the musings of an aging young man, uncertain, uneasy, and unable to commit himself to the love he desires or to life at all, a figure representative of frustration in modern life and of the aridity of a sterile upper-class culture.”

James D. Hart

The Oxford Companion to American Literature, 5th edition
(Oxford 1941-83)

“Mr. Prufrock is an unromantic and unprincely Hamlet in a ‘tragical-comical-historical’ urban drama where ‘Denmark’s a prison’—the prison of a divided self in the tortures of neurotic conflict. His ‘love song,’ as the epigraph implies, will never be uttered outside the inferno of his own mind, and the ‘you and I’ of his soliloquy are the impulses within him ‘to murder and create’ or ‘to be or not to be,’ concluding neither in suicide nor in the release of chosen action, but in the death-in-life of the abdication of the will.

As in ‘Mr. Apollinax,’ the method of presentation is that of dramatic opposition, but here it is expanded and subtletized and demands more literary background and imaginative agility on the part of the reader. The social environment in which Mr. Prufrock is ‘drowned’ is as inane and stifling and self-satisfied as that which Mr. Apollinax dominates so easily, and it is evoked with the same brilliant sensuous embodiment in image, word and rhythm. But it is the ‘universe’ of Mr. Prufrock himself which is the centre of interest. And in creating that, Eliot is already expanding the possibilities of the ‘mythical method’ as a way of ordering and controlling his material.

Mr. Prufrock’s retreat into the world of despairing introspective day-dream, and his mingled self-pity and self-disgust, are not only brought home to us through the images of the tortuous streets and the fog-cat, the pictures of his life as measured out with coffee spoons, and the symbols of his terror of social and sexual failure. The shrunken universe of his own nature and will is set beside a series of suggestions and allusions which take us to worlds of action and expression which are very different. John the Baptist, Lazarus, Hesiod’s *Works and Days*, Michelangelo and Shakespeare all ‘disturb’ Mr. Prufrock’s pitifully enclosed universe. Most of all, the sustained parallel with the concepts of time and space and love in Marvell’s ‘To His Coy Mistress’ provides a melody in counterpoint to his own ‘dying fall.’ They haunt his own dickerings with his ‘world’ and ‘time,’ and mock ironically his own impotence to ‘force the moment to its crisis.’

Finally his psychological plight reveals itself in the identification of both the positive and negative elements of his conflict with images of the sea, primordial symbol of both creation and destruction. At the end of the poem, he hears the mermaids singing and has a vision of them ‘riding seaward on the waves....’ That glimpse of a life-rhythm where living creatures delight spontaneously in their natural environment, mastering it and being carried along with its vital energies, is what Mr. Prufrock’s ‘I’ yearns for and will never achieve. All that his ‘we’ has done is to capitulate. He has withdrawn into passive day-dream, where the ‘arms that are braceleted and white and bare’ caress and crown him as he lies catlike ‘smoothed by long fingers’ in a peaceful sleep. The inevitable future awakening will be only to suffocate in the human scene, again a part of the living death of the patient on the operating table.

His outburst in the middle of the poem where he accepts the hopelessness of struggle the same compulsive infantile and primitive craving: ‘I should have been a pair of ragged claws / Scuttling across the floors of silent seas.’ Here on one level, the claws suggest the longing for uncomplicated animal existence. They can clutch their prey and make off with it, without any preface of ‘Do I dare?’ or ‘Shall I say?’ They, like the mermaids, are at home and free in the ‘silent seas’ and can scuttle as they desire. But at the same time, they cannot go forward. As Hamlet says to Polonius: ‘Yourself, sir, shall grow old as I am, if like a crab you could go backward.’ Mr. Prufrock laments ‘I grow old...I grow old...’ but like Hamlet, his secret

wish is only to regress to a safe haven where his inner universe is no longer disturbed by any tormenting human problems.”

Elizabeth Drew
T. S. Eliot: The Design of His Poetry
(Scribner's 1949) 34-36

“He transposes his epigraph from the serious context of Dante's *Inferno* to the lighter context of Prufrock's love song.... The speaker is, we know, submissive—if we cannot say reluctant. Now he sees the evening in the aspect of etherization, and the metaphor of etherization suggests the desire for inactivity to the point of enforced release from pain.... The abrupt break after the mention of the question suggests an emotional block, which is emphasized by the refusal to identify the question. The urge seems to belong to the ‘you’ and the block to the ‘I’....

With the image of the fog as cat we have another reflection of his mental state: desire which ends in inertia. If the cat image suggests sex, it also suggests the greater desire of inactivity. The speaker sees the evening in aspects of somnolence, or of action lapsing into inaction, both artificial and natural—sleep and etherization.... The tensional image of climbing stairs, with its implication of effort, only exposes his weakness in the self-conscious disabilities proper to unromantic middle-age. Again there is the mock-heroic touch in his ‘collar mounting firmly,’ and the ‘assertion’ simple pin. His fear has now mounted to the image of daring to ‘disturb the universe’.... In this projection of a psychological drama it will be noticed that Prufrock is coming ever nearer to ‘the room’....

The images progress in intimacy as he approaches the climax: voices, eyes, arms. Now the eyes fix him, give him his place in the accepted order, with a formulated phrase. When he has been classified like an insect, how can he deny this classification and break with his past? How can he begin ‘to spit out all the butt-ends’—the violence of the metaphor has an appropriate indecorum for the social scene which intensifies the conflict within him....

After the preamble following ‘Shall I say,’ his psychological block sets in, and he concludes by observing the kind of creature he should have been—‘a pair of ragged claws’ in ‘silent seas,’ not Prufrock in a drawing room. It is noteworthy that his beginning about ‘lonely men’ recalls the streets which he took on his way to the room. And the sea imagery should be kept in mind at the end of the poem. Eliot has indicated the crisis by typographical breaks in the text, but the transition is as simple as from ‘how I begin’ to ‘shall I say’...

After this crisis the somnolent imagery is resumed and decreasing tension is at once marked.... Now the evening sleeps, or malingers, catlike, ‘here beside you and me’—both of whom, we must conclude, are Prufrock. For the lady is never ‘you’ in the poem; she is ‘one.’ The rhyme of ‘ices’ with ‘crisis’ mocks their chime by their antithesis, and is characteristic of the way in which Eliot makes his rhyme functional. Now a series of heroic parallels, first suggested in Michelangelo, is begun in a self-justification which thereby becomes mock-heroic. Though he has prepared for his trial of strength, he is no prophet like John the Baptist...and the ‘eternal Footman’ of social fate—as inexorable as John's death—has snickered as he held his coat, dismissing him with the shame of inferiority added to defeat. Timidity has conquered his amorous self—the suppressed ‘you.’ In excusing himself he has seized on a parallel which both exposes and mocks his weakness.

Henceforth he looks back upon the event and rationalizes his failure: ‘would it have been worth it?’ And always his fear of misunderstanding the lady and exposing himself to ridicule settles the question.... Here even the sententious, choppy verse suggests the prudent character, as he takes refuge in self-mockery. The long, heavy sounds of weariness are heard in the line ‘I grow old... I grow old...’ while he asserts the unromantic character to which he resigns himself, resolving, however, to be a little sportive in dress (by wearing his trousers cuffed)....

The imagery of the sea, begun with ‘oyster-shells,’ again emerges at this point; it is the imagery of his suppressed self. And the voice takes on a lyric or singing character where it has been talking verse before. The lyric note comes with the erotic imagery of the mermaids, and the hair of the waves recalls the down

on the lady's arms. This watery, floating imagery involves the relaxation of all effort, offers a submerged fulfillment. It is ended when 'human voices wake us, and we drown'—with the intrusion of reality, which drowns the inner life, the 'us' in Prufrock. If this is a sublimation of the amorous Prufrock, it is a release of the timid Prufrock from the polite world which overcomes him. But reality returns, and the divided self is submerged again, not resolved.

Now we can see how Eliot has transposed his epigraph to a modern psychological context. Prufrock answers his suppressed self because 'none ever did return alive from this depth'; hence he can answer without fear of being exposed. The reasons for this suppression, however, involve other fears. The 'you' is the amorous self, the sex instinct, direct and forthright; but now suppressed by the timid self, finding at best evasive expression; always opposed by fear of the carnal, which motivates the defensive analogies. It is to this buried self that Prufrock addresses himself and excuses himself. His love song is the song of a being divided between passion and timidity; it is never sung in the real world....

Many connections in the poem are associative relations, not logical relations, and are established by the feeling, in which the association of images is an important factor. To put this method another way, it is psychological reference rather than grammatical.... Incongruous elements are explained by the larger context of the poem.... In general, metaphor and symbol replace direct statement in Eliot. In 'Prufrock' we have what comes to be a familiar compound, observation, memory, and reflection, in which observation becomes symbol. The doctrine of the objective correlative means not only that the subjective is projected into the objective, or by means of it, but that is expressed in other terms—metaphor; objects become symbols, and personal feeling is set apart from the poet.

Connection through imagery is characteristic of Eliot...witness in 'Prufrock' the sea imagery, hair imagery, sartorial imagery, that of polite versus crude society, that of bare sensitivity versus the protective shell, images of relaxation or concentration of effort or will, and finally the heroic parallels which both magnify and mock the overwhelming question. Such a method of indirection is appropriate to a character who never really faces his inner conflict or his frustrated self, and hence is incapable of a direct expression of it, to say nothing of a solution.... The title suggests the question for this song of indirection, made such by repression. The mock-heroic tone is not merely in the author's treatment or in his character's conception of the problem, but finally even in Prufrock's evasion of himself."

George Williamson
A Reader's Guide to T. S. Eliot: A Poem-by-Poem Analysis
(1949; Farrar, Straus 1957) 57, 59-69

"Written while Eliot was still an undergraduate at Harvard, 'The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock' has attained the rank of an American classic. Prufrock is a modern Hamlet, that is, a Hamlet without the capacity for heroic action. The poem is a consummate portrait of the modern intellectual who is inhibited and bewildered by his intellectualism."

Walter Blair
The Literature of the United States II, 3rd edition
(Scott, Foresman 1953, 61, 66) 1046

"The style is free verse broken by occasional rhymes, the medium of most of Eliot's early poems. The epigraph from Dante, translated, reads, 'If I thought my answer were to one who could ever return to the world, this flame would shake no more; but since none ever did return alive from this abyss [Inferno], if what I hear be true, without fear of infamy I answer you.' In a parallel manner Prufrock, the 'I' of the poem, speaks his thoughts within the abyss of his own soul; he lacks the courage to rebel, and his love song is one he never voices aloud.

Prufrock (his name suggests a dull and slightly pretentious respectability) is an ineffectual gentleman, no longer young, who is growing weary of the artificial London society in which he monotonously passes his days. He yearns for a more vital and adventurous existence, but he lacks the courage to embark upon it. Since he is living in a puritanical Anglo-Saxon society, his rebellious thoughts turn first to erotic adventure. The first section (11.1-12) is an invitation to an unknown and perhaps as yet unchosen partner to embark upon such an adventure: an expedition into the less savory quarters of the city is implied. The refrain

(11.13-14, 35-36) ironically typifies the shallow aestheticism of tea-party society, the life Prufrock wishes to escape. Lines 15-34 extend the image of urban squalor, suggesting a clandestine adventure, and end with a temporizing compromise. Afraid of ridicule, from line 36 onward Prufrock seems to grow increasingly uncertain; he asks, 'Do I dare disturb the universe?'

In 1.82 and again in 11.110ff he confesses his own inadequacy, admitting that he is after all no prophet or tragic hero. In the closing lines (119-130) his abortive revolt against convention is symbolized in several sea-images; the mermaids who sing 'each to each' are uninhibited creatures luxuriating in their natural setting and producing exquisite unpremeditated song. Prufrock overhears the beckoning song of the mermaids, but realizes this invitation to adventure is not meant for him. The final three lines reveal the reason: although escape into the nirvana of sensualism, both physical and intellectual, is temporarily successful, 'human voices wake us, and we drown'--mundane affairs press in upon us and we are recalled to conventional life. This closing passage, like the previous descriptions of fog and slums, is typical of the Imagist technique and if taken out of context might well be treated as a short Imagist poem...

Prufrock is a type of character that Eliot knew well from first-hand acquaintance: the cultured, sensitive, but bored gentleman of Cambridge or London society, the literary man or professor, whose sense of decorum and fear of ridicule prevent him from seizing life and savoring it in a more virile manner. In the wider context the poem describes the human conflict between sensual desires and longings and the restrictions of civilization. Each human being longs for a nirvana where social censure will be forgotten in a passionate enjoyment of the senses; but most people, like Prufrock, are deterred by fear of ridicule and feelings of inadequacy."

Donald Heiney
Recent American Literature
(Barron's Educational Series 1958) 483-84

"The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock"—this is probably Eliot's best poem and is a little masterpiece of its kind. It is highly unoriginal in content and in style, based as it is on the rhythms, the attitudes, and sometimes the very lines of minor Symbolist poets like Corbiere and Laforgue. Rhythmically it is the most successful of Eliot's poems, possibly because it was conceived as a dramatic unit. The meter is varied within the conventional English line, and the rhyming is superb. There is every indication that at the time of composition (age twenty-three) Eliot still took seriously the customs of English prosody and was trying in earnest (i.e., without irony) to develop this technical side of our poetry. The general tone of the poem is that of polite sophisticated ennui, an essay in self-mockery....

The epigraph from Dante purportedly throws a special light on the meaning of the poem; it is the epigraph which critics talk about most and which teachers teach. This quotation is gratuitous, a meaningless decoration; later it becomes the actual method of the Eliot poem... 'Prufrock' is a poem *about* self-consciousness. The split personality of Prufrock creates the chief obstacle to a first understanding of the poem. The other primary difficulty is imagistic, but this is also the main virtue of the poem. The famous opening image of the evening prostrate 'like a patient etherized upon a table' is one of the most brilliant examples of the poetry of exhaustion; very possibly it is a variation of Baudelaire's statement that the sexual act is like a surgical operation. Eliot's poem, however, is humorous rather than vicious and develops a kindly pathos to the very end. The imagery of the poem is all related to suggestion, a watering-down of the extreme suggestiveness of 'effect' of poets like Mallarmé and Poe, and is, in fact, a retreat from official Symbolism. (Eliot would already be conscious of all the 'historical' possibilities of his 'position.')

'Prufrock' is a masterpiece of a 'period,' the high point of Eliot's poetry. It is a true poem and also an experiment in criticism. It is a true poem by virtue of a personal content, which we can only guess at, for Eliot is always more sensitive about the autobiographical than any other writer I know of. But many things in the poem point to the so-called objectification of experience; even after Eliot airs to the public his problem of the personal and the impersonal, Life versus Art. The figure of Hamlet in 'Prufrock' he finds particularly expressive of his own dilemma, even though Prufrock disclaims a true identity with the Prince. But Hamlet is the figure who makes an art of indecision. Indecision leads to thinking things over, soliloquizing, becoming an intellectual. Eliot's poetry all turns to talk.

As it goes on through the years it becomes nothing but talk, and talk about the kind of poetry that comes closer and closer to talk. Technically, the poem prefigures all the criticism, with its debates about the personal and the impersonal, the more and more 'objective,' the great struggle toward 'unified sensibility' and what not. Eliot's failure as a poet is his success as a critic. Prufrock as a character is of no intrinsic interest but he is of high *literary* interest to all. In this poem Eliot has remained close enough to a human footing to make poetry out of a personal complex of crises, private, social, and intellectual. Had he written nothing else he would be remembered for this masterly little poem."

Karl Shapiro
In Defense of Ignorance
(Random House 1960) 45-46

"As 'The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock' is in every way the other side of the coin from 'Portrait of a Lady,' it manifests the fact that the counter-current was moving even before Pound began to have his influence on Eliot. The epigraph from Dante defines the limiting situation of the poem. From the beginning we are given the self-portrait of a man who knows his own inadequacy to draw it and suffers accordingly. The 'metaphysical' conceits in the poem are appropriate to this man for whom formal ratiocination must take the place of simple, spontaneous thought, analysis the place of the exercise of the sensibility. Prufrock's is yet another exhausted ego, able to celebrate, in pathetic irony, only its own exhaustion. Choosing such a one for his protagonist, Eliot can in bitter pity reveal to us Prufrock's abject inferiority to even 'the women [who] come and go / Talking of Michelangelo,' not to say the Hamlet who, in so far as he can bring himself to have one, is his ego ideal.

The poet surely is not Prufrock; yet Prufrock is surely an aspect of the poet's sensibility, one which must carry its self-exhaustion to the end, so that there will be achieved that spiritual vacuum which only a greater spirit can fill. The formal achievement of this poem, since it has come to be archetypal for the formal achievement of so many other poems, is one which we too easily fail to see: In 'Prufrock' Eliot measures the failure of a modern sensibility in the very terms which, so he believes, will, after the failure has been measured and faced up to, constitute its means to success. One's residual impression is neither of a protagonist, a poem, nor a poet, but of a force which teaches the last to care enough for the first so that he can destroy him in the second. As early as 'Prufrock,' then, Eliot knew how to care and not to care."

Roy Harvey Pearce
The Continuity of American Poetry
(Princeton 1961) 297-98

"Said to have been written when Eliot was still an undergraduate at Harvard, this poem was not published until he had become an expatriate in England. It is a dramatic monologue which presents, with somewhat Browningsque irony, the musings of a young man whose youth is beginning to slip away from him and who is still unable to bring himself to the point of speaking frankly to the lady of his choice. The poem can be read as a study in neurotic impotence and at the same time as a contrived specimen of the cultural decay which Eliot ascribed to the controlling bourgeois classes of the Edwardian period. Except for a few scraps of juvenilia, this was Eliot's first published work, and it is doubtful that any other poet in modern times has won such admiration with his first poem. In it Eliot used many of the devices—associative progressions, precisely controlled free verse, indirect allusions, etc.—which he developed more fully in his later work. It is a brilliant example of symbolist technique and remains one of Eliot's most effective poems."

Max J. Herzberg & staff
The Reader's Encyclopedia of American Literature
(Crowell 1962)

"The title, which splits up the middle, warns us what to expect. Its first half suggests something traditional, romantic. Then we are brought up short by the respectable, 'proper' name. The two halves seem incongruous—as indeed they are. Prufrock's name offers an ironic comment on the nature of the 'love song' with which the poem will be concerned.

The poem presents the internal struggle involved in a near-declaration of love by a timid, self-conscious, middle-aged man. Prufrock is talking, or thinking, to himself. The 'you' and 'I' of the first line are the divided parts of his nature, one part wishing to make the declaration, the other reluctant to do so. He is apparently on the way to a fashionable party, where he will see the lady to whom he wishes, or partly wishes, to declare himself. But making such a declaration is for him a momentous act. It means breaking with his past, reordering his life, exposing himself to possible misunderstanding or ridicule. He doesn't know how to go about it. And so he keeps postponing the decision to make the declaration--postpones it until he knows he won't.

The climax of the poem comes when Prufrock thinks,

I should have been a pair of ragged claws
Scuttling across the floors of silent seas.

Up to this point he has been trying to work up his resolution to make the declaration. At this point he realizes he never will. He thus impatiently breaks off his train of thought to form this wish, partly a wish, partly an expression of self-contempt. I ought to have been, he thinks, some subhuman form of life, a crab with huge claws and a hard shell, living instinctively, simply seizing what it wants, untroubled by inhibitions and sensitive feelings and the necessity to make decisions.

The rest of the poem, except for one brief recrudescence of the impulse to speak out, is mostly rationalization ('would it have been worth it, after all'), acceptance of his failure, and relaxation of tension. The mermaids at the end of the poem are symbols of romance and vitality, which, he realizes, will not belong to him. In the scene with sea-girls 'in the chambers of the sea' he has retreated into dreams, until brought back by the voices around him to a consciousness of social reality in which he 'drowns.'

Few poems have made a greater impact on the modern imagination than this one. When first published, in 1917, it seemed in its method, its images, its symbols, its use of allusion, and its subject matter something entirely new. The simile in lines 2-3, less descriptive of the sunset than of Prufrock's own paralyzed will, struck a new note in English poetry. Throughout the poem, in fact, description of the outer world is used to symbolize the condition of Prufrock's inner world. The circuitous streets which Prufrock follows are like the circuitous nature of his own thoughts. The yellow fog that curls itself like a cat around the house is the image of Prufrock's spiritual lethargy. The light brown hair on the women's arms, the disturbing perfume from a dress suggest the erotic component of Prufrock's yearnings. His thoughts about the smoke arising from the pipes of lonely men in shirt sleeves reflect his own loneliness as well as show his ignorance of a suitable way to begin his declaration.

Literary allusions, of which the poem is full, are also used in a new and striking way. The epigraph, an excerpt from Dante's *Inferno*, reveals to us that Prufrock is in hell, a living hell. The references to John the Baptist, Lazarus, and Hamlet, though used to exploit fleeting resemblances, are mainly expressions by Prufrock of his inadequacy. He is not in the heroic tradition. Though he shares Prince Hamlet's indecision and habit of self-scrutiny, he is not a tragic hero, and knows he is not. He is more like Polonius,

Politic, cautious, and meticulous;
Full of high sentence, but a bit obtuse;
At times, indeed, almost ridiculous--

Seeing himself in this image, he is indeed ridiculous, but also pitiable. For Prufrock, unlike Polonius, has insight into his own futility. 'I have measured out my life,' he says, 'with coffee spoons.' Though not a tragic hero, he is more tragic than comic.

'The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock' is a dramatic revelation of character, utilizing a stream-of-consciousness technique. For many readers it is also something more. They see Prufrock not just as an individual but as the representative of a culture. In the superficial and sterile quality of his life, in his vacillation and inertia, in the exhaustion of his energy on self-analysis, he is the modern antihero, the representative of modern man. The 'overwhelming question' which he wishes to ask would expose to his

society its emptiness. But he doesn't. Prufrock's problem, says one critic, Hyatt Waggoner, is not to save his soul but to find it. Some readers see this as the problem of modern man."

Laurence Perrine
100 American Poems of the Twentieth Century
(Harcourt 1966)
with James M. Reid

"At this time he was much under the influence of the French poet Jules Laforgue (1860-87), whose methods of fantastic irony, free association, and deliberate bathos are here adopted. 'Prufrock' is a dramatic monologue, and owes an obvious debt to Browning also, but has developed a new obloquy and reticence; there is not attempt to give the persona of Prufrock the interiority or solidity of a Browning persona. This is in part due to Eliot's current study of the philosopher F. H. Bradley (1846-1924), who treated personality as a delusion, holding that the 'finite center' of the perceiving person is unknowable by other such centers.... The strength of the poem lies in its apparently random transitions, its rhetorical and poetic flights, interrupted by bathos or irrelevance; its echoes of other poems.... The way to read it is to move with its movement, ride its little shocks, and, in a sense, live along its lines. The point is worth dwelling on here, since that is also the way to handle the much tougher poems that follow 'Prufrock'."

Frank Kermode & John Hollander, eds.
Modern British Literature
(Oxford 1973) 463-64

"In 'The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock' the French influence is brilliantly crossed with a Tennysonian music and a Browningsque dramatic monologue. Eliot's surrealism, combining the etherized patient, the catlike fog, the butt-ends of days, and the impaled Prufrock wriggling on the wall, was something altogether new in American poetry, far from the inert Imagism of Amy Lowell and equally far from the pieties of the nineteenth-century 'fireside poets.' *Prufrock and Other Observations* (1917) is, like Wallace Stevens's *Harmonium* (1923) and Marianne Moore's *Observations* (1924), one of the landmarks of American modernism."

Helen Vendler
The Harper American Literature 2
(Harper & Row 1987) 1636

"Although some early readers were confused, even outraged, by Eliot's fracture of accepted poetic conventions, 'Prufrock' is now recognized as the first full-fledged modernist poem, adding to the traditions of symbolism and imagism the principle of aggregation of images, thus freeing the reader's imagination within the space of the poem. 'Prufrock' is remarkable not only as an individual imaginative experience expressed with 'magical rightness,' but also for its historical significance. In it, Eliot may be said to have invented modernism. The poem is also noteworthy in foreshadowing the principle elements of the figure in the tapestry of Eliot's total work: major symbols including the waste land, water, city, stairs, journey, the themes of time, death, rebirth, love; the quest motif on psychological, metaphysical, and esthetic levels; extensive use of juxtaposition and literary allusion; and the poet's admiration of Dante."

Sam S. Bassett
The Heath Anthology of American Literature 2
(D. C. Heath 1990) 1299

Michael Hollister (2014)