

## T. S. Eliot: “The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock”

### I. Background

- A. Thomas Stearns Eliot is claimed by both British and American literary canons
  - 1. He was born in St. Louis and graduated from Harvard
  - 2. He later became a British citizen and member of the Church of England
- B. Eliot wrote nearly a hundred literary essays and reviews
- C. He helped establish the literary movement known as “New Criticism”
- D. New Criticism was prominent in America until about the 1960s
  - 1. It sees literary works as embodying paradoxes and ironies held together in tension
  - 2. New Criticism emphasizes organic unity of a work
  - 3. It focuses on the literary work by itself, without regard to the author, the culture, or other contexts

### II. “The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock”

- A. It dates from about 1910-11, when Eliot was about 22 years old
- B. Its form is the dramatic monologue
- C. As in Browning’s monologues, the speaker reveals his character through a soliloquy
- D. Irony
  - 1. It features much ironic self-examination
  - 2. A fairly recent example of this is the television show *Seinfeld*
  - 3. *Seinfeld* features a similarly detached voice, and endless worrying about trite details,
  - 4. Other examples include some of Woody Allen’s films, whose characters are reminiscent of Eliot’s Prufrock
- E. The character of J. Alfred Prufrock
  - 1. He overthinks everything
  - 2. He fears to be misunderstood
  - 3. He agonizes over whether to ask questions or not
  - 4. He is indecisive (note the *Hamlet* references)
  - 5. He is concerned with appearances—whether people will see his bald spot, or what face to put on
  - 6. He’s constantly worried about disturbing the universe
  - 7. He is obsessed with trivia and social rituals that pin you to the wall like a bug
  - 8. He wanders aimlessly like the women who “come and go / Talking of Michelangelo”
  - 9. He even second guesses himself, wondering whether it “would . . . have been worth it” to have said something or done something (almost anything)
  - 10. In the final imagery, he is fascinated by the mermaids, who hold an erotic attraction for him
  - 11. He worries about being only a minor character in a play, much as Rosencrantz and Guildenstern in *Hamlet*
  - 12. These are the attendant lords who “swell a progress, start a scene or two, / Advise the prince.”

### III. The poem’s modernity

- A. The poem wonderfully depicts the modern sense of purposelessness and existential angst, ironic detachment and sense of indecision

- B. He imagines himself to be John the Baptist, but concludes “I am no prophet — and here’s no great matter”
- C. He fears he will be misunderstood, yet his monologue is so articulate that we understand him very well