The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock

POEM TEXT

S'io credesse che mia risposta fosse
A persona che mai tornasse al mondo,
Questa fiamma staria senza piu scosse.
Ma percioche giammai di questo fondo
Non torno vivo alcun, s'i'odo il vero,
Senza tema d'infamia ti rispondo.

Let us go then, you and I,
When the evening is spread out against the sky
Like a patient etherized upon a table;
Let us go, through certain half-deserted streets,
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
To lead you to an overwhelming question ...
Oh, do not ask, "What is it?"
Let us go and make our visit.

In the room the women come and go
Talking of Michelangelo.

The yellow fog that rubs its back upon the window-panes,
The yellow smoke that rubs its muzzle on the window-panes,
Licked its tongue into the corners of the evening,
Lingered upon the pools that stand in drains,
Let fall upon its back the soot that falls from chimneys,
Slipped by the terrace, made a sudden leap,
And seeing that it was a soft October night,
Curled once about the house, and fell asleep.

And indeed there will be time
For the yellow smoke that slides along the street,
Rubbing its back upon the window-panes;
There will be time, there will be time
To prepare a face to meet the faces that you meet;
There will be time to murder and create,
And time for all the works and days of hands
That lift and drop a question on your plate;

Time for you and time for me,
And time yet for a hundred indecisions,
And for a hundred visions and revisions,
Before the taking of a toast and tea.

In the room the women come and go
Talking of Michelangelo.

And indeed there will be time
To wonder, "Do I dare?" and, "Do I dare?"
Time to turn back and descend the stair,
With a bald spot in the middle of my hair —
(They will say: "How his hair is growing thin!")
My morning coat, my collar mounting firmly to the chin,
My necktie rich and modest, but asserted by a simple pin —
(They will say: "But how his arms and legs are thin!")
Do I dare
Disturb the universe?
In a minute there is time
For decisions and revisions which a minute will reverse.

For I have known them all already, known them all:
Have known the evenings, mornings, afternoons,
I have measured out my life with coffee spoons;
I know the voices dying with a dying fall
Beneath the music from a farther room.
So how should I presume?

And I have known the eyes already, known them all—
The eyes that fix you in a formulated phrase,
And when I am formulated, sprawling on a pin,
When I am pinned and wriggling on the wall,
Then how should I begin
To spit out all the butt-ends of my days and ways?
And how should I presume?

And I have known the arms already, known them all—
Arms that are braceleted and white and bare
(But in the lamplight, downed with light brown hair!)
Is it perfume from a dress
That makes me so digress?
Arms that lie along a table, or wrap about a shawl.
And should I then presume?

And how should I begin?

Shall I say, I have gone at dusk through narrow streets
And watched the smoke that rises from the pipes
Of lonely men in shirt-sleeves, leaning out of windows?
...

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

And the afternoon, the evening, sleeps so peacefully!
Smoothed by long fingers,
Asleep ... tired ... or it malingers,
Stretched on the floor, here beside you and me.
Should I, after tea and cakes and ices,
Have the strength to force the moment to its crisis?
But though I have wept and fasted, wept and prayed,
Though I have seen my head (grown slightly bald) brought in upon a platter,
I am no prophet — and here's no great matter;
I have seen the moment of my greatness flicker,
And I have seen the eternal Footman hold my coat, and snicker,
And in short, I was afraid.

And would it have been worth it, after all,
After the cups, the marmalade, the tea,
Among the porcelain, among some talk of you and me,
Would it have been worth while,
To have bitten off the matter with a smile,
To have squeezed the universe into a ball
To roll it towards some overwhelming question,
To say: "I am Lazarus, come from the dead,
Come back to tell you all, I shall tell you all"—
If one, settling a pillow by her head
Should say: "That is not what I meant at all;
That is not it, at all."

And would it have been worth it, after all,
Would it have been worth while,
After the sunsets and the dooryards and the sprinkled streets,
After the novels, after the teacups, after the skirts that trail along the floor—
And this, and so much more?—
It is impossible to say just what I mean!
But as if a magic lantern threw the nerves in patterns on a screen:
Would it have been worth while
If one, settling a pillow or throwing off a shawl,
And turning toward the window, should say:
"That is not it at all,
That is not what I meant, at all."

No! I am not Prince Hamlet, nor was meant to be;
Am an attendant lord, one that will do
To swell a progress, start a scene or two,
Advise the prince; no doubt, an easy tool,
Deferential, glad to be of use,
Politic, cautious, and meticulous;
Full of high sentence, but a bit obtuse;
At times, indeed, almost ridiculous—
Almost, at times, the Fool.

I grow old ... I grow old ...
I shall wear the bottoms of my trousers rolled.

Shall I part my hair behind? Do I dare to eat a peach?
I shall wear white flannel trousers, and walk upon the beach.
I have heard the mermaids singing, each to each.

I do not think that they will sing to me.

I have seen them riding seaward on the waves
Combing the white hair of the waves blown back
When the wind blows the water white and black.
We have lingered in the chambers of the sea
By sea-girls wreathed with seaweed red and brown
Till human voices wake us, and we drown.

SUMMARY

"If I thought that my reply would be to someone who would ever return to earth, this flame would remain without further movement; but as no one has ever returned alive from this gulf, if what I hear is true, I can answer you with no fear of infamy."

Let's go then, you and I, when the night sky is spread out like a patient anesthetized on an operating table. Let's walk down half-empty streets, which are marked by sleepless, cheap hotels where people only stay one night, and by shabby, run-down restaurants. The streets follow each other like a boring argument with malicious intentions. They make you think of some urgent question... but don't ask what it is. Let's go and make our visit.

Women enter and exit the room while talking about Michelangelo.

Yellow smoke rubs its back against the windows; it rubs its snout all over the windows, licks the corners of the night with its tongue, lingers above the stagnant water in the drains, mingles with soot from the chimneys, slips by the patio, and suddenly jumps—but seeing that it's a cool autumn night, curls around the house and fades away.

Yes, there will be time to look at the yellow smoke that slides along the street, rubbing itself against the windows. There will be time, there will be time to prepare to meet people; to murder and create; for work and answering questions; time for both of us. And there will be time, still, for a hundred indecisions, to change my mind a hundred times, all before afternoon tea.

Women enter and exit the room while talking about Michelangelo.

Yes, there will be time to ask, “Do I dare?” And again, “Do I dare?” Time to turn around and go back downstairs, worried about the bald spot on the back of my head. (People will say: "His hair is really getting thin!") I'm wearing my morning coat, with my collar buttoned all the way up to my chin, along with an expensive but not overly showy necktie with a simple tie clip. (People will say: "His arms and legs are so skinny!") Do I have it in me, or am I brave enough, to change the world? A single minute contains enough time to make decisions and changes, although I'll just change my mind again a minute later.

That's because I have done it all already. I've seen it all: I've experienced evenings, mornings, and afternoons, and I could measure out my life by the number of coffee spoons I've used. I've already heard the voices singing in the other room. So what gives me the right?

And I already know how people look at me. I've seen all the looks people give—the way people look at me and dismiss me with some clichéd phrase, fixing me in their gaze like I'm an insect specimen pinned and wriggling against the wall. So how should I start to spit out the memories of my life, like the butt-ends of a cigarette? And what gives me the right?

And I already know what women are like. I've known all kinds of women—those whose arms are covered with bracelets and have pale, hairless skin (although in the lamplight I can see that their arms are covered in light brown hair). Is it the smell of perfume from a dress that's making me lose my train of thought? I'm thinking of arms resting on a table, or wrapped up with a shawl. So what gives me the right? And how should I begin?

Should I say: I've walked in the evening through narrow streets and watched lonely men leaning out of windows and smoking in their undershirts?

I should have been a creature with worn-out claws, scurrying across the floors of the silent ocean.

And as it gets later in the day, the night itself seems to sleep so peacefully! It's as if it's been stroked to sleep by long fingers. It's either asleep or tired—or maybe it's just pretending to be asleep, stretched out on the floor beside us. Should I, after afternoon tea, have enough strength left to disturb this moment and cause drama? I cry, refuse to eat, and pray—and like John the Baptist, I've seen my (now slightly bald) head brought in on a plate. But even so, I'm no holy messenger, and I don't have anything very important to say. There was a time when I could have been great, but that moment has passed for good; I've seen death's butler hold my coat, but he just laughed at me. And to put it bluntly, I was scared.

And would it have been worth it anyway? After all the afternoon tea, as we were sitting among the porcelain teacups and talking idly, would it have been worth it to force a smile and bring up the problem I'm thinking about? To have smooshed and simplified this huge, all-encompassing problem into a manageable bit, like a ball, and then have rolled it towards some question that's so big it's hard to articulate or understand? To say: “I am Lazarus, come from the dead, come back to tell you everything, I'll tell you everything”? If someone, fluffing up her pillow, should say: “That is not what I meant at all; That is not what I meant, at all.”

And would it have been worth it anyway? Would it have been worth it, after everything I've seen in life: the sunsets and the dooryards and the streets sprinkled with rain? Would it have been worth it after the novels, after the teacups, after the skirts that graze the floor—and all of this, and so much more? I can't say what I want to! But if a magic lantern could take my nervous thoughts and put them in patterns on a screen that became words: Would it have been worth it—while fussing with a pillow or taking off a shawl, and turning towards the window—to say: “That is not it at all; That is not what I meant, at all.”

No! I'm not Prince Hamlet, and I was never meant to be. I'm just a background character, a lord following the prince who can serve to fill a crowd, begin a scene or two, or give the prince advice. No doubt I'm an easy tool, subservient and happy to be useful. I'm polite, cautious, and careful; full of lots to say, but what I say is obscure and unclear. Sometimes I'm ridiculous—sometimes I'm even almost like a clown.

I'm getting old. I'm getting old. I'll start rolling up the bottoms of my pants.

Should I part my hair in a different place? Can I be bold enough to eat a peach? I'll wear white flannel pants, and walk on the beach. I have heard the mermaids singing to each other.

I don't think those mermaids will sing to me.

I have seen the mermaids riding towards the sea on the waves, the wind whipping up the waves' foam and making the water look like a swirl of black and white. We've been waiting in the rooms underneath the sea, next to mermaids wrapped in red

and brown seaweed—waiting for human voices to wake us up, and then we'll drown.

THEMES

ANXIETY, INDECISION, AND INACTION

The speaker in "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock" is paralyzed by indecision. The poem's momentum is continuously frustrated by digressions—the speaker's thoughts trailing off in seemingly unrelated directions—and by the speaker's sense of his own inadequacy. By depicting the speaker's intense struggle with indecision, the poem suggests that excessive preoccupation with doing the right thing—whether when expressing yourself, forming relationships with others, or simply deciding how to style your hair or what to eat—can actually stop a person from ever venturing forth into the world or, in fact, doing much of anything at all.

From the beginning, the poem sets up a juxtaposition between action and inaction. The first line states "let us go," implying that the poem will move forward in time and space—in other words, that it will *go somewhere*. But that momentum is quickly stalled. These streets "follow like a tedious argument of insidious intent," suggesting that the various paths they offer up feel both boring and threatening—that there is no clearly good path to take. And though the speaker says that the streets "lead you to an overwhelming question," the speaker doesn't actually *pose* that question. Instead, he explicitly says *not* to inquire further: "Oh, do not ask, 'What is it?'" Maybe the question is just which direction is best to walk in or, indeed, where they're going in the first place—simple queries that become hurdles in the speaker's mind.

In any case, the speaker's habitual procrastination seems to be rooted in social anxiety, since, paralyzed with fear about making the wrong choice, he appears to find even basic decisions about what to eat or how to dress overwhelming. In fact, the speaker admits that he finds time for "a hundred indecisions, / And for a hundred visions and revisions," all before sitting down his afternoon tea! He imagines "descending the stair" and greeting people, but in reality he is too timid to do so because he imagines that people will laugh at his bald spot and shabby clothing (which, in turn, suggest that the speaker is getting older—and that he has been wasting his time with all this indecision).

What's more, it's not just that the speaker can't *follow through* on his planned actions. He doesn't even seem to know how to *begin* to ask "the overwhelming question." Instead he asks "how should I begin?" and "how should I presume?"—suggesting that he feels incapable of overcoming the first hurdle to taking action. He repeats those phrases at the end of two different stanzas, giving the impression of a stuttering or repeated failed start.

For the speaker, trying to make the best choice repeatedly results in no choice at all. He is also paralyzed by a feeling of his own inadequacy, as implied by his reluctance to "presume" and his repetition of the phrase "Do I dare?" He doesn't take action, in other words, because he doesn't feel that he has the right to do so. Overcoming indecision requires agency, but the speaker remains trapped in his repeating patterns because he feels that he can't "dare" to do anything.

There are times when the speaker does seem close to doing something, but the poem ultimately indicates that *wanting* to act isn't enough. Taking meaningful action, it suggests, requires that an individual "dare" to make a choice without being certain that it's the *best* choice—a risk that the speaker can't bring himself to take. And while the speaker thinks he'll have plenty of time to do things, this seems like wishful thinking. Given his propensity to waffle about every little decision, he'll likely continue to agonize over his choices until there's no time left—his indecision having stopped him from living a full life.

Where this theme appears in the poem:

- Line 1
- Lines 4-7
- Line 8
- Line 9
- Lines 10-12
- Line 23
- Lines 24-31
- Lines 32-34
- Lines 37-40
- Lines 38-39
- Line 41
- Lines 42-44
- Lines 45-48
- Line 54
- Line 61
- Lines 65-66
- Line 68
- Line 69
- Lines 70-72
- Lines 79-80
- Lines 120-121
- Line 122

DESIRE, COMMUNICATION, AND DISAPPOINTMENT

Although the speaker in "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock" might appear silent and affectless to others, his interior life is alive with hope and desire. In particular, he appears to have a deep longing for romantic connection—but

he struggles to communicate that desire, and so it remains mostly unfulfilled. Indeed, despite being a "love song," the poem never quite manages to discuss love itself; instead, it stays bogged down in the false starts and half-finished thoughts that characterize the speaker's attempts at connecting with other people. The poem makes it clear that people like the speaker can only really experience love by breaking through these communication barriers, but it also embodies just how difficult doing so can be.

There are a few key moments in the poem that suggest the speaker feels romantic or sexual desire for women, but is unable to express those feelings. For example, he asks at one point if it is "perfume from a dress" that distracts him, and he is preoccupied with the image of a woman's "arms that lie along a table, or wrap about a shawl"—a fixation that seems erotic. However, his desires are soon stymied by self-doubt and recrimination. He asks himself: "And should I then presume? And how should I begin?" These repeated questions show that he doesn't know how to begin a conversation with a woman and thinks that it would somehow be presumptuous to do so.

The speaker's sense of thwarted communication is so strong that it even colors his fantasies. When the speaker imagines expressing his desires and feelings to others, those scenes inevitably dissolve into disheartening moments of misunderstanding. For instance, the speaker imagines posing what he calls "the overwhelming question," saying "I am Lazarus, come from the dead, / Come back to tell you all, I shall tell you all." However, although the speaker compares himself to the Biblical figure and offers the promise of total revelation—"to tell all"—he doesn't actually manage to communicate much of anything. Instead, he imagines his listener falling asleep and needing "a pillow by her head." Even in his fantasies, then, he experiences the disappointment of being unable to communicate, protesting: "That is not what I meant at all; That is not it, at all."

The speaker's attempts at communication only grow less effective as he is overcome by hopelessness and disappointment. By the end of the poem, the speaker's disappointment seems to have hardened to the point that it has become entrenched within him; he doesn't seem to expect that his desires will *ever* be fulfilled. He describes the singing of mermaids in exquisite detail, but admits: "I do not think that they will sing to me." Instead, he remarks that he "[grows] old." Because the speaker's efforts at communication have been unsuccessful, he gives up on trying, instead imagining that his opportunity to share his hopes and dreams has already passed.

The speaker's exclamation partway through the poem that "it is impossible to say just what [he] mean[s]" underscores exactly how interconnected desire, communication, and disappointment are for the speaker. His frustration suggests that romantic fulfillment requires clear communication—something the poem indicates the speaker might not be capable of.

Where this theme appears in the poem:

- Line 1
- Line 10
- Lines 11-12
- Lines 13-14
- Line 31
- Lines 35-36
- Lines 37-44
- Lines 49-53
- Line 54
- Lines 62-67
- Line 68
- Line 69
- Lines 73-74
- Lines 75-86
- Lines 87-91
- Lines 92-98
- Lines 99-101
- Lines 102-103
- Lines 104-105
- Lines 106-108
- Line 109
- Line 110
- Lines 111-116
- Lines 117-119
- Line 120
- Line 121
- Line 124
- Line 125
- Lines 126-131

MODERNITY AND ALIENATION

"The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock" is often regarded as one of the quintessential "modernist" poems, reflecting the social and intellectual conditions of the early 20th century. The poem emphasizes exciting features of modern life—like electricity and new medical technologies—but it also suggests that modernity comes with a persistent sense of alienation and isolation from others. Through the example of the speaker, the poem indicates that the modern condition essentially results in feeling alienated from the world.

The poem refers to several technologies that would have been relatively new in the early 20th century, like lamplight, industrial factories, and anesthesia in hospitals. At the same time, all this new activity and industry seems to have left the speaker behind. He describes how the "yellow fog" slithers through the streets like a cat that "rubs its back upon the window-panes," but he rarely interacts with actual people, as the streets are "half-deserted." The smog seems more alive to him than the people themselves.

The speaker already seems weary of this new world, in which events follow one another in a repetitive, cyclical fashion. He claims: "I have known them all already, known them all; / Have known the evenings, mornings, afternoons, / I have measured out my life with coffee spoons." He suggests that nothing can surprise him anymore or disturb the normal rituals of polite society. For the speaker, taking action would mean "to force the moment to its crisis," which seems an impossible task after the civilized, sedate activity of taking "tea and cake and ices." There is thus something emotionally deadening and alienating about the seemingly empty social rituals that characterize the modern world.

Modernist literature was also often characterized by rejection of traditional figures of authority. In keeping with this tradition, the poem deconstructs the traditionally respected pillars of Western culture, religion, and literature, leaving the speaker feeling isolated and pessimistic about his diminished connection to those traditions. For example, the speaker comments ironically that he is "no prophet," like John the Baptist, and that rather "the eternal Footman hold[s] my coat, and snicker[s]" (basically, death laughs at him).

The poem thus makes its protagonist an object of mockery rather than a figure of greatness. The speaker himself seems to feel an inability to measure up against these literary greats, as when he proclaims that "I am not Prince Hamlet, nor was meant to be," and is simply a nameless, subservient "attendant lord " or even "a Fool." He doesn't draw strength or inspiration from these would-be authority figures of literature and culture; instead, they leave him feeling isolated and disheartened. This reaction suggests that modernist trends in literature may only enhance the alienating experience of living in the modern world.

"The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock" suggests that, for all the wealth and technological comforts of modern life, there is something profoundly alienating about this new way of experiencing the world. The speaker feels unable to participate in the social life of the world around him or to relate to the literary context that has come before him. Modernity doesn't connect him more with others; it just leaves him feeling even more alone.

Where this theme appears in the poem:

- Line 2
- Line 3
- Lines 4-7
- Lines 8-9
- Lines 13-14
- Lines 15-16
- Lines 17-22
- Lines 24-25
- Lines 35-36
- Lines 49-51
- Line 52
- Line 53
- Line 70
- Lines 71-72
- Lines 79-80
- Lines 81-86
- Lines 82-83
- Line 85
- Lines 87-89
- Lines 94-96
- Line 97
- Line 98
- Lines 101-102
- Lines 103-104
- Line 105
- Lines 106-108
- Line 109
- Line 110
- Lines 111-113
- Lines 114-117
- Lines 118-119
- Lines 120-121
- Lines 122-123
- Lines 124-131

LINE-BY-LINE ANALYSIS

BEFORE LINE 1

S'io credesse che mia risposta fosse
A persona che mai tornasse al mondo,
Questa fiamma staria senza piu scosse.
Ma percioche giammai di questo fondo
Non torno vivo alcun, s'i'odo il vero,
Senza tema d'infamia ti rispondo.

The initial six lines of the poem are in fact an epigraph. The lines, written in Italian, come from Canto 27 of Dante's *Inferno*. The *Inferno* is a medieval Italian poem that traces a pilgrim's journey through Hell, where he meets various sinners who narrate their suffering. These lines are spoken by one of the people imprisoned in Hell, a character named Guido da Montefeltro. The pilgrim asks Guido why he has been punished, and Guido responds with these words:

> If I thought that my reply would be to someone who would ever return to earth, this flame would remain without further movement; but as no one has ever returned alive from this gulf, if what I hear is true, I can answer you with no fear of infamy.

On the literal level, Guido is telling the Pilgrim that he feels free to talk about his sins (which include war crimes and atrocities committed in battle) because he knows that no one can ever return from Hell, so the Pilgrim will never be able to tell the story of those sins. But why would Eliot choose these lines as the epigraph for his poem? For one, it is a strikingly direct address that promises secrets told in confidence. Since "Prufrock" is a dramatic monologue, these lines set up the expectation of direct address. The speaker of "Prufrock" will address the reader directly and divulge his secrets, just as Guido addresses the Pilgrim.

The allusion to Dante's *Inferno* is also suggestive because it positions the world of "Prufrock" in dialogue with Dante's Hell. Like the Hell in *Inferno*, the world of "Prufrock" is characterized by stasis (like the flame of Guido's body in Hell, which usually "remain[s] without further movement"). The effect of including this epigraph is to suggest that the speaker of "Prufrock" is also trapped in a kind of Hell from which he can't escape.

LINES 1-7

Let us go then, you and I,
When the evening is spread out against the sky
Like a patient etherized upon a table;
Let us go, through certain half-deserted streets,
The muttering retreats
Of restless nights in one-night cheap hotels
And sawdust restaurants with oyster-shells:

The poem begins with a direct address to someone, though it's never entirely clear who this is; it might be the reader/listener, or, as later lines will suggest, the speaker might be talking to a female lover. In any case, for a poem often characterized by inaction and frustration, it is striking that the opening lines feature such forward momentum. The speaker asks the reader or listener to "go" with him through the streets of the city at night, perhaps on an evening stroll.

From the beginning, however, this scene is more unsettling than welcoming. The evening is described as "spread out ... like a patient etherized upon a table," a disconcertingly medical simile that compares the night sky to an anesthetized patient awaiting surgery. The result is a feeling that nature itself is a cold and unwelcoming place, more characterized by artificiality than natural feeling. The enjambment between "sky" and "like" creates a sense of jolting disorientation, as one line flows seamlessly into the next and the romantic image of the vast evening sky is abruptly juxtaposed by the cold, hard reality of an operating table.

The speaker's description of the city streets further develops this sense that there is something disturbing about the world depicted in the poem. These streets are "half-deserted" and curiously empty of people. Instead, the people remain indoors in disreputable environments, like "one-night cheap hotels" and "sawdust restaurants." The implication is that these places are used for prostitution or seedy, "muttering" transactions. After the opening quotation from Dante, which depicted a medieval Hell, the reader of "Prufrock" might begin to feel in these lines that the poet is describing a modern version of Hell, in this threatening, hostile urban landscape.

These lines are also brimming with consonance, alliteration, sibilance, and assonance—with sounds repeating so much that the lines almost become claustrophobic. Note the sharpness of the /t/, the hiss of the /s/, the nasally /n/, and the /r/ at the back of the throat like a growl in words like "streets," "muttering retreats," "restless nights," and "restaurants." On a purely sonic level, these streets seem decidedly unpleasant.

LINES 8-14

Streets that follow like a tedious argument
Of insidious intent
To lead you to an overwhelming question ...
Oh, do not ask, "What is it?"
Let us go and make our visit.
In the room the women come and go
Talking of Michelangelo.

Seedy as they are, the streets of this city clearly signify *something* to the speaker. He compares them to a "tedious argument" of "insidious" or harmful "intent," suggesting that that there is something malicious or dangerous about these streets. What he calls the "argument" seems to be leading somewhere, to an "overwhelming question." However, just when it seems like the speaker is about to ask the question—the ellipses even building a sensation of suspense—he quickly defers and changes the subject, explicitly prohibiting the reader from inquiring further: "Oh, do not ask, 'What is it?'" This moment of apostrophe gives an impression of frustrated or deferred momentum, in one of the first of the poem's many moments of delayed action.

Instead of asking the question that seems to be bothering him, the speaker invites his interlocutor to "make our visit" to a certain room in the city. Here, in a seeming non sequitur, "the women come and go / Talking of Michaelangelo." This is an allusion to the famous Renaissance painter and sculptor responsible for illustrious works like the Sistine Chapel; perhaps the speaker and his partner are walking to a museum, or simply some sophisticated space where women talk about great artists of history (a group, will be revealed soon enough, to which the speaker bitterly feels he does not belong). Clearly there is a world of conversation and social interaction going on while the speaker remains wrapped in his reverie. However, he seems to show no inclination to participate in the conversation, and the repetition of this refrain serves to indicate his persistent isolation from others.

On a stylistic level, these lines are again brimming with repeated letter sounds, resulting in clear assonance, alliteration, and consonance. Note in particular the sibilant /s/

sounds of lines 8 and 9, punctuated by sharp percussive /t/ sounds:

> Streets that follow like a tedious argument
> Of insidious intent."

The /s/ imbues the line with a hissing quality, while the frequent /nt/ combination makes it sounds as though the speaker is talking through clenched teeth. The sounds of the line betray the speaker's frustration.

LINES 15-22

The yellow fog that rubs its back upon the window-panes,
The yellow smoke that rubs its muzzle on the window-panes,
Licked its tongue into the corners of the evening,
Lingered upon the pools that stand in drains,
Let fall upon its back the soot that falls from chimneys,
Slipped by the terrace, made a sudden leap,
And seeing that it was a soft October night,
Curled once about the house, and fell asleep.

Rather than participating in the conversation described in the previous stanza—"the women come and go / Talking of Michaelangelo"—the speaker instead seems distracted by the "yellow fog" outside the windows of some building (perhaps the same in which the women are "talking"). This is another of the many abrupt digressions that appear in the poem, in which the speaker's mind doesn't seem to be on his immediate social context and instead turns to other, seemingly irrelevant topics—a tendency that indicates his alienation from others.

From the speaker's description, this seems like no ordinary fog. For one, it is yellow, reflecting the light of the streetlights and perhaps the pollution and smog from an industrial city. The yellow color of the fog makes it seem artificial and not natural, a product of human industry rather than natural phenomenon. This reflects the poem's broader connection between modernity and alienation; the technology of the modern world does not make life better, but rather fills the streets with a threatening-looking fog.

The fog is also described in unusual, human terms. According to the speaker, it "rubs its back" and "its muzzle" on the windows, "lick[s] its tongue," and "leaps," and "curls" around the houses. This description doesn't sound like fog at all; it sounds like a cat. The effect of this personification—describing fog as if it were a being with thought and agency—is profoundly unsettling, because it makes it seem as if the fog has a malevolent life of its own, separate from the humans who live in the city.

This passage also makes use of consonance in order to emphasize certain strongly-stressed consonants. The fog is described as "licking," "lingering," and "letting fall," the repetition of the /l/ sound adding a sensation of syrupy decadence to the fog's movement. The subtle sibilance towards the end of the stanza sounds a bit like the low hissing of a cat, and also reflects the hush of the fog falling "asleep":

> Slipped by the terrace, made a sudden leap,
> And seeing that it was a soft October night,
> Curled once about the house, and fell asleep.

In this way, the sonic effect of these lines adds to the sense that this fog is something more than human.

LINES 23-30

And indeed there will be time
For the yellow smoke that slides along the street,
Rubbing its back upon the window-panes;
There will be time, there will be time
To prepare a face to meet the faces that you meet;
There will be time to murder and create,
And time for all the works and days of hands
That lift and drop a question on your plate;

Here the speaker introduces one of the refrains that recurs throughout the poem: "there will be time." In the speaker's telling, his meditation on the yellow fog outside the window is justified because "there is time" for it. It is not, as it might seem, a digression or waste of time. Similarly, he admits that he is anxious about meeting people and it takes him quite a lot of time "to prepare a face" in order "to meet the faces that you meet." His statement that he has to "prepare a face" before he can interact with others suggests an image of hiding behind a mask. The speaker is evidently so anxious about his capacity to interact with others that he feels he has to develop a mask or performance in order to function socially in the world.

The repetition of "face" here—other people are defined by their "faces" as well—suggests that perhaps everyone is hiding their true selves behind a mask. This is more specifically a moment of diacope. And depending on how you read "face," this is also arguably an example of synecdoche (with "faces" standing in for entire people) and/or metonymy (with "faces" standing in for people's outward demeanor).

The speaker justifies this procrastination and insecurity by asserting that "there will be time" for it. His use of the phrase "there will be time" at the beginning of several successive lines—"There will be time, there will be time ... time to murder and create"—is an example of anaphora, and it gives the sentiment a form of emphasis and the ring of truth, since he keeps repeating it in so many contexts. Indeed, he claims that there will be time for a wide range of experiences in life, from murder to creation. But despite all these boasts about how much time he has, the poem will increasingly introduce a sense that the speaker does *not* in fact have time, and that all this delay and deliberation is in fact stopping him from living a full life. The anaphora here thus starts to look increasingly wishful, as if the speaker thinks repeating the phrase will *make* it true.

Note also that "murder" here is not being used literally;

perhaps the speaker is referring to killing one's hopes and dreams. "Create" could be read in a similar manner, and likely is meant with reference to creative works like poetry itself. That is, the speaker is saying there will be time still to write great works (though, again, the speaker's insistence on the idea that there "will be time" makes it seem like this might just be delusional wishful thinking).

LINES 31-36

Time for you and time for me,
And time yet for a hundred indecisions,
And for a hundred visions and revisions,
Before the taking of a toast and tea.
In the room the women come and go
Talking of Michelangelo.

The speaker asserts that there will be "time for you and time for me," but it is unclear to whom the "you" is referring. It may be the "you" in the sense of the reader or interlocutor to his dramatic monologue. However, it might also refer to a particular person from whom the speaker seems to desire something, whether love, connection, or something else. Later lines suggest that the speaker is talking to a female lover, but giving the shifting nature of the poem, we can't say for certain that's the case.

These lines follow an ABBA rhyme scheme, in which "me" rhymes with "tea" and "indecisions" rhymes with "revisions." Notably, these are rather simple and unimaginative rhymes that rely on common word endings. This sense that the rhymes are culminating in expected conclusions mirrors the lines thematically: the poet speaks of coming to a "decision," but them immediately defaults back to his habitual state of indecision and "revision." Similarly, he turns from the hard emotional and relational work of "you and me" to the simple, quotidian ritual of simply: "tea."

Tea is particularly relevant here because the speaker also speaks of "drop[ping] a question on your plate," a surprising metaphor that compares the posing of the aforementioned "overwhelming question" to the serving of a meal. Although the speaker still does not articulate what this question is or why it matters, this metaphor positions the poem in a domestic sphere in which people eat meals and take "toast and tea." The taking of tea was a frequent afternoon ritual in early twentieth-century British culture. Strikingly and even absurdly, however, the speaker of Prufrock is so paralyzed by indecision and anxiety that he finds the time for "a hundred indecisions," "visions," and "revisions" before he has even had his tea. Tea is among the most familiar of domestic rituals, but even this small decision about what to take his tea seems to leave the speaker in the grip of procrastination and indecision.

Once again, the speaker repeats the refrain about the women talking about Michelangelo, exemplifying the way his focus keeps shifting.

LINES 37-44

And indeed there will be time
To wonder, "Do I dare?" and, "Do I dare?"
Time to turn back and descend the stair,
With a bald spot in the middle of my hair —
(They will say: "How his hair is growing thin!")
My morning coat, my collar mounting firmly to the chin,
My necktie rich and modest, but asserted by a simple pin —
(They will say: "But how his arms and legs are thin!")

Although the speaker continues to assert that "there will be time," his protestations that he has all the time in the world are starting to look increasingly incongruous. He is anxious and indecisive even about going up the stairs and appearing in public, constantly asking himself "Do I dare?" The attribution of daring to such a seemingly trivial and meaningless action like going up the stairs might seem excessive, but for the speaker, entrance into social life seems a challenge that nearly defeats him.

One reason for his delay and indecision—he imagines "turning back" just when he is about to enter the room—is his anxiety about his physical appearance, including the "bald spot" in the middle of his "thin hair" and his "thin" arms and legs. The speaker makes use of caesura in these lines, as in the dash after "the middle of my hair," in order to emphasize his own distractibility. Once he is paralyzed with fear about his bald spot or thin limbs, he begins to imagine entirely invented conversations and critiques that interrupt the flow of the poem. Note also the thick alliteration and consonance of these lines, especially of /t/ and /d/ sounds:

> And indeed there will be time
> To wonder, "Do I dare?" and, "Do I dare?"
> Time to turn back and descend the stair,
> With a bald spot in the middle of my hair —

And later of the /m/ and /c/ sound:

> My morning coat, my collar mounting firmly to the chin,
> My necktie rich and modest, but asserted by a simple pin —

Sounds seem to repeat just as often as the speaker's thoughts do, reflecting, even on the most minute level, the obsessive nature of his mind.

These physical descriptors are notably that of a middle-aged or aging man, suggesting that the speaker might not actually have all the time he claims he does. Rather, he is aging and his time is running out. His procrastination thus takes on even more poignancy, because it seems that the speaker is trying to delude himself that he has more time left even as his indecision continues to prevent him from living a full life.

Interesting to note here is that Eliot himself was only in his early 20s when writing "Prufrock." While the poem should not be taken as autobiographical, it does reflect certain broad anxieties about aging and achievement that many—Eliot included—likely felt, especially in the lead up to WWI; it's perhaps poignant, then, that its author was so young at the time of its writing.

LINES 45-48

Do I dare
Disturb the universe?
In a minute there is time
For decisions and revisions which a minute will reverse.

Throughout the poem, the speaker frequently wonders whether he can "dare." In this case, he wonders whether he "dare / Disturb the universe," suggesting that he sees these seemingly trivial decisions—about what to wear, what to eat, and whether to go out—as having high philosophical stakes. His fear that his decisions will disturb the universe in one sense points to his extreme caution and anxiety, in which he is paralyzed by indecision because he is afraid of consequences.

This indecision in mirrored formally in the speaker's use of enjambment, which leaves the second half of the question—that is, exactly *what* the speaker might "dare" to do—hanging. The blank space before the completion of the question—"Disturb the universe?"—could be filled by any number of things; so indecisive is the speaker that, for a moment, he can't even make up his mind about what he may or may not dares to do! This phrase, one of the poem's most recognizable, is also highly alliterative, echoing the frequent /d/ sound that pervaded the first few lines of this stanza. Again, the speaker's mind keeps returning to the same thoughts, sounds, and images.

But in another sense, the speaker here seems like a bolder and less self-effacing version of himself. He sees himself as potentially powerful—so powerful, in fact, that his actions could significantly change the universe, or shake up the world itself.

Even after this moment of potentially claiming power and agency for himself, however, he then retreats back into indecision. He admits that he will engage in more "decisions and revisions," only to change his mind *yet again* in only "a minute." He seems resigned to this stance of perpetual procrastination in which he will never actually "disturb the universe."

LINES 49-54

For I have known them all already, known them all:
Have known the evenings, mornings, afternoons,
I have measured out my life with coffee spoons;
I know the voices dying with a dying fall
Beneath the music from a farther room.
So how should I presume?

Here the speaker's resolve to take action seems to weaken even more. Instead, he adopts a stance of world-weariness, claiming that "I have known them all already." By this, he seems to mean that nothing in the normal passages of life—the "evenings, "mornings," and "afternoons"—can surprise him anymore. In this list of "evenings, mornings, afternoons," the speaker uses asyndeton, a literary device that omits conjunctions and makes for an indifferent, bored tone to the line: the speaker is saying that he has seen it all before, and the fact that he doesn't even bother to use conjunctions suggests that this is indeed the case.

He claims to have "measured out my life with coffee spoons," implying that he has spent most of his life engaged in domestic rituals like drinking tea and coffee. He hears music in another room, where the voices are performing a "dying fall," a musical term for a note that falls in a gradual decrescendo. Instead of enjoying the music, however, he remarks cynically that the voices of those singers are themselves "dying," since all human life will eventually die.

This pessimistic stance leads him to feel that he has no control or agency over his own life, leading him to ask "how should I presume?" The speaker's vision of life emphasizes the indifference and cyclicality of the universe. In his account, events seem to constantly repeat themselves with no possibility for change or redirection. Even more pessimistically, he sees the cycle of life as leading towards only one possible direction—the grave.

LINES 55-61

And I have known the eyes already, known them all—
The eyes that fix you in a formulated phrase,
And when I am formulated, sprawling on a pin,
When I am pinned and wriggling on the wall,
Then how should I begin
To spit out all the butt-ends of my days and ways?
And how should I presume?

The speaker of "Prufrock" is not just pessimistic about his capacity to take action and change the direction of his life. He is also pessimistic about his ability to form relationships with others. He claims that he knows that people will stare at him, evaluate him, and "fix [him] in a formulated phrase." Here the speaker uses synecdoche in referring to "eyes" that stare at him, taking a part of a person—their eyes—for the whole. The use of this device points to the degree of the speaker's alienation, since he can't seem to think about people in their entirety, only as "eyes" intended to "fix" and judge him. This suggests that the speaker struggles to form relationships and fears the judgments of others, who may use clichés or "formulated" phrases in order to dismiss him.

Note also the strong alliteration of "fix you in a formulated phrase," which focuses the listener's attention on these words. The unvoiced /f/ consonant in particular also lends them a sort of stickiness, perhaps reflecting how the speaker cannot shake

the looks from these eyes.

The speaker fears the scrutiny of other people, comparing the experience of being looked at by others to being "pinned and wriggling" against the wall like a bug or scientific specimen. Clearly he fears being judged as he goes forth in the world. At the same time, he also gives the impression that he feels he *deserves* to be judged, as when he derogatorily refers to "the butt-ends of my days and ways." By his "days and ways," he presumably means the small actions that make up his daily life. But he compares those "days and ways" to the "butt-ends" of a cigarette, the part that one spits out and grinds on the ground.

Comparing his life to a used-up cigarette is a disconcerting metaphor that emphasizes the speaker's self-loathing and dark vision of his own life. Indeed, he ends this stanza with a return to the refrain, "And how should I presume?" Again, he doesn't feel he as the right to say or do anything—to even dare to do anything.

LINES 62-69

And I have known the arms already, known them all—
Arms that are braceleted and white and bare
(But in the lamplight, downed with light brown hair!)
Is it perfume from a dress
That makes me so digress?
Arms that lie along a table, or wrap about a shawl.
And should I then presume?
And how should I begin?

The speaker's sense of weariness with the world and with relationships also seems to extend to his experiences with women, as when he claims that he has "known the arms already." This description clearly seems to depict *women's* arms specifically, which are "braceleted and white and bare." This is an oddly disembodied way of describing another human being: rather than describing women's eyes and faces, the speaker fixates on one of their body parts in a way that means he doesn't have to look them in the face.

Here again, as in the last stanza, the speaker makes use of synecdoche in order to make a part of a person—their arms—stand in for the whole. This device becomes yet another way for the speaker to distance himself physically and emotionally from others, focusing on body parts rather than people.

This strange, disembodied description of women—centered on arms, bracelets, and "perfume from a dress"—points to the speaker's lack of connection and engagement with others. The descriptions are sensual and erotic, suggesting that the speaker experiences attraction to women. At the same time, however, he also seems incapable of forming relationships with them or even speaking to them. Here again his habitual procrastination comes in, as he asks whether he can "presume" to speak to them. Indeed, he seems to not even know how to "begin," suggesting that the speaker's anxiety and indecision are preventing him from forming meaningful connections with people.

LINES 70-74

Shall I say, I have gone at dusk through narrow streets
And watched the smoke that rises from the pipes
Of lonely men in shirt-sleeves, leaning out of windows? ...
I should have been a pair of ragged claws
Scuttling across the floors of silent seas.

In these perplexing and rather opaque lines, the speaker narrates a series of experiences that he fears he will be unable to ever share or communicate with others. He imagines telling someone—perhaps the woman with bracelets on her arms described in the previous stanza—that he has walked down narrow streets at night and seen aspects of the city that few others have, like the smoke rising from pipes and "lonely men in shirt-sleeves." These images call back to the first few stanzas of the poem, characterized by descriptions of a dirty, decaying, and seedy city. These lines suggest, too, that the speaker sees a side to the city that others can't see, leading him to view it as a disturbing and troubling place.

However, his impulse to tell someone about his evening walks never comes to fruition. Instead, in another use of caesura, he trails off in an ellipsis. That abrupt break in the stanza and employment of an ellipsis seems to stand in for everything he can't say, as the speaker gives up on trying to narrate nighttime experiences that seem somehow incommunicable. Instead, he begins a new stanza and comments that "I should have been a pair of ragged claws / Scuttling across the floors of silent seas." This disconcerting wish—that he was a scavenging bottom-feeder with "ragged claws" like a crab, scuttling across the floors of the ocean—suggests just how difficult the speaker finds it to express himself. He prefers life as an animal in the "silent seas" to the difficulties of human life and communication.

LINES 75-80

And the afternoon, the evening, sleeps so peacefully!
Smoothed by long fingers,
Asleep ... tired ... or it malingers,
Stretched on the floor, here beside you and me.
Should I, after tea and cakes and ices,
Have the strength to force the moment to its crisis?

Here the speaker engages again in one of the poem's most frequently-used poetic devices: personification. He describes the evening as it were a person, "sleep[ing] peacefully," and smoothed by "long fingers." At first, this seems like a restful image. However, the association of the evening with sleepiness and fatigue is revised, characteristically, into something more insidious.

With two uses of ellipsis, the speaker suggests instead that the evening "malingers," meaning that it is only *pretending* to be ill or tired. The pauses in the flow of the line introduce a sense of

unease into this peaceful scene. But ultimately this accusation of malingering seems like a projection of the speaker's own anxieties, since he of course is the one who constantly procrastinates, puts things off, and malingers instead of facing his fears.

Nevertheless, the sleepy mood of the evening seems to have robbed the speaker of any will he once had to take action. He is "stretched on the floor," physically reclining rather than standing up, and claims that he doesn't "have the strength" to "force a crisis." For the speaker, voicing his unasked questions would be to disturb the staid domestic rituals of "tea and cake and ices," a routine that is seemingly so established that any deviation would be a "crisis."

LINES 82-86

Though I have seen my head (grown slightly bald) brought in upon a platter,
I am no prophet — and here's no great matter;
I have seen the moment of my greatness flicker,
And I have seen the eternal Footman hold my coat, and snicker,
And in short, I was afraid.

Although the speaker seems to desire "greatness," he undercuts those pretensions at every stage. He describes "weeping," "fasting," and "praying," a set of highly emotional and physically extreme actions associated with the behavior of prophets or martyrs in Biblical narratives. A mere few lines later, however, he remarks that "I am no prophet." He describes "see[ing] my head ... brought in upon a platter," an allusion to the narrative of John the Baptist, who was beheaded and had his head served on a platter at the request of Herod's daughter, Salome. The speaker uses anaphora throughout these lines as well, first repeating the word "I" and then the word "A." The use of this device knits the lines closer together formally even as the speaker goes to great lengths to prove just how different his situation is from the life of John the Baptist.

For example, the speaker makes the reference to the John the Baptist's head on a platter seem irreverent by describing his own head as "now slightly bald," turning this iconic image into something ludicrous. Similarly, he describes the "eternal Footman" (perhaps a reference to death itself) holding his coat—but then "snickering," putting an ironic cast on what would be an otherwise tragic moment.

Here the speaker again makes use of rhyme, but his rhymes have a comical, deflationary tone. For instance, he rhymes the "flicker" of his greatness with the amusement and "snicker" of the footman. This is again a fairly simple and unimaginative rhyme, perhaps suggesting that the poet sees rhyme itself as something a bit out-moded or simple-minded. He summarizes that "in short, I was afraid," suggesting that all these moments of self-deprecation are a way of avoiding the real and serious implications of his desire to change his life and achieve "greatness."

LINES 88-93

After the cups, the marmalade, the tea,
Among the porcelain, among some talk of you and me,
Would it have been worth while,
To have bitten off the matter with a smile,
To have squeezed the universe into a ball
To roll it towards some overwhelming question,

By this point in the poem, the speaker seems resigned to the fact that he will not be able to escape the domestic rituals of "cups," "marmalade," and "tea" and say what's really on his mind. He uses the device of asyndeton in this list of domestic objects, which gives the impression that the ritual is endless and those items are barely differentiated from each other: every day features an ongoing cycle of "the cups, the marmalade, the tea," rinse and repeat. He wonders whether it "would have been worth it" to even *try* to do something different. He compares the voicing of this "overwhelming question" to "biting off the matter," just as he bites into pieces of toast with marmalade.

Strikingly, the speaker is seemingly so used to the ritual of tea that he even conceives of his own thoughts and feelings using the metaphors of tea-drinking and eating. He suggests that voicing his "overwhelming question" would be like "squeezing the universe into a ball," meaning that the question is so vast that to ask it in this setting would scale it down to a much smaller and incongruous size. This difficulty seems to defeat the speaker. His questions about the universe are so much bigger than the matter of his daily life that it seems impossible to ever reconcile his inner thoughts and feelings with the small, domestic scale of the world around him.

LINES 94-98

To say: "I am Lazarus, come from the dead,
Come back to tell you all, I shall tell you all"—
If one, settling a pillow by her head
Should say: "That is not what I meant at all;
That is not it, at all."

Even when the speaker *does* imagine voicing his feelings, the results are disappointing. He imagines beginning with a grand pronouncement, telling his listener—seemingly a woman or person with whom he is sleeping in the same bed—that "I am Lazarus, come back from the dead." This is an allusion to the Biblical figure Lazarus, who was restored to life by Jesus four days after his death.

The speaker is thus depicting himself as a figure who, like Lazarus, can report back about things outside the sphere of human life, since he has seen the world after death. In this sense, Lazarus is a figure like Dante's Pilgrim in the quotation from the *Inferno* that serves as the epigraph to the poem. Dante's Pilgrim goes to Hell and returns to tell the tale, and like Lazarus is able to tell the living about the world beyond our

own.

However, in practice this attempt to recount what he has seen ends in failure. The speaker imagines his interlocutor falling asleep as he speaks, seemingly bored and puzzled by what he has to say. Hence the line after "I shall tell you all" is broken and cut off in a caesura. Disheartened, the speaker—or perhaps his companion; it's unclear—protests:

> That is not what I meant at all,
> That is not it, all."

He lapses into something close to epizeuxis as he vainly repeats "not it, at all," the repetition affirming the scale of his communication failure and lack of ability to describe and articulate his feelings. Even in the speaker's fantasies, his attempts to connect with and communicate with others are never successful. His protestation that "that is not what I meant" suggest the difficulty of ever fully conveying the reality of one's inner life and experiences to others, emphasizing the speaker's sense of his isolation and inability to communicate.

LINES 99-104

> *And would it have been worth it, after all,*
> *Would it have been worth while,*
> *After the sunsets and the dooryards and the sprinkled streets,*
> *After the novels, after the teacups, after the skirts that trail along the floor—*
> *And this, and so much more?—*
> *It is impossible to say just what I mean!*

In this stanza, the speaker continues to wonder if "it [would] have been worth it." It is still unclear to what "it" necessarily refers, but the speaker seems to be wondering whether a real attempt at communication could ever be justified, given the ever-present possibility of misunderstanding and miscommunication.

He is caught up in the minor details of everyday life—"sunsets," "dooryards," "sprinkled streets," "novels," "teacups," and "skirts"—and finds it difficult to imagine anything beyond the everyday. This time, rather than using asyndeton—lists of objects without a conjunction—the speaker uses polysyndeton, the use of a conjunction between every word (as in "the sunsets and the dooryards and the sprinkled streets"). This gives the lines a sense of momentum, as if they're rushing into each other, a formal device that mirrors the poem's depiction of the passage of time in an endless cycle of the same activities.

Notably, the speaker's list of everyday objects mixes in quotidian, domestic items like teacups and dooryards with more poetic or artistic experiences, like watching sunsets or reading novels. This suggests a rather pessimistic view of the role of art in human life: rather than seeing it as something that offers a form of elevation or ennoblement (i.e., something that essentially makes people *better*), the speaker seems to see it as just another everyday object.

At the same time, however, he also seems incapable of articulating just what it is that he wants *beyond* the everyday. He exclaims that "It is impossible to say just what I mean," interposing a level of miscommunication even between himself and the speaker. It is not just that the speaker can't communicate with others in the poem itself; there also seems to be a rupture in his ability to communicate even with the *reader*, who until now has had privileged access to the speaker's thoughts and feelings.

LINES 105-110

> *But as if a magic lantern threw the nerves in patterns on a screen:*
> *Would it have been worth while*
> *If one, settling a pillow or throwing off a shawl,*
> *And turning toward the window, should say:*
> *"That is not it at all,*
> *That is not what I meant, at all."*

In the previous line, the speaker expressed frustration with being unable to articulate his thoughts and feelings. Here, he imagines using "a magic lantern" to throw his "nerves in patterns on a screen"—essentially, to outwardly project his anxieties so that his companion can read them and get a better sense of what he's feeling.

A "magic lantern" is a reference to what would now be thought of as an old-fashioned slide projector (but at the time would have been seen as impressive technology). A transparent plate featuring a painting or photograph would be placed over a light source, which would then project a larger version of that image onto a screen. Magic lanterns thus magnified their source images, and their mention here suggests that the speaker is looking for a way to zoom in on what he's feeling in the hopes of making sense of it.

Yet, even so, and even with such technology at his disposal, the speaker is pretty pessimistic about his chances of being understood. He repeats the phrase "Would it have been worth while," revealing that it might not actually *matter* whether or not he bares his thoughts and feelings. Perhaps the image projected on that screen would still fail to capture what troubles him, perhaps he'd find whatever he sees there to be disappointing, or perhaps his companion wouldn't care.

The next few lines, from line 107-110, can be interpreted a couple of different ways. In one reading, the speaker (referring to himself in the third person as the "one" who is taking off his companion's shawl and fluffing her pillow) finds the magic lantern display insufficient, and so his quick repetition of the phrase, "That is not it, That is not what I meant, all," reveals a despair that he *still* cannot say what he wants.

Alternatively, the "one" might instead be taken as referring to

the companion, who is implied to be a woman from the context of the previous stanza as well as the word "shawl." In this reading, the speaker fears that, were he to expose the pattern of his nerves, his viewer might simply turn away from the exhibition, might simply not care or not want to know. What would be the point, then, the speaker wonders, of making himself vulnerable, of revealing his inner thoughts?

In either case—whether the speaker is unable to make himself clear or his companions do not want to know what the speaker is trying to communicate, or both— the speaker remains totally unable to connect with those around him, isolated once again by an inability to communicate.

LINES 111-119

No! I am not Prince Hamlet, nor was meant to be;
Am an attendant lord, one that will do
To swell a progress, start a scene or two,
Advise the prince; no doubt, an easy tool,
Deferential, glad to be of use,
Politic, cautious, and meticulous;
Full of high sentence, but a bit obtuse;
At times, indeed, almost ridiculous—
Almost, at times, the Fool.

The speaker continues to compare himself to the canonical figures of Western literature and culture—Hamlet—and finds himself lacking in the comparison. Before, he compared himself to a second-rate John the Baptist or Lazarus. Now he compares himself to Shakespeare's Hamlet, remarking that he is no prince and is instead just an "attendant lord" who appears in a scene or two. In other words, he is a nameless and insignificant character in the drama, not a protagonist. He describes himself as "deferential" and an "easy tool," adding to the sense that the speaker feels little sense of control or agency over his own life.

Indeed, he then downgrades himself even further, suggesting that he isn't just a servant but is even a "Fool"—a "ridiculous" character who serves mostly as comic relief. These self-deprecating characterizations suggest that the speaker doesn't see himself as a particularly noble and heroic character, but instead as someone deserving of mockery.

The fact that he feels so alienated and isolated from the canonical works of Western culture suggests that he feels unsure that the categories of "greatness" can even exist in the modern world. Instead of seeing authority and prestige, the speaker sees a world characterized by failure and mediocrity. The rhyme scheme in this passage rhymes words that connote usefulness and purpose, like "tool" and use," with words like "Fool" and "obtuse," suggesting that the speaker is constantly downgrading himself into someone debased and a bit ridiculous.

LINES 120-124

I grow old ... I grow old ...
I shall wear the bottoms of my trousers rolled.
Shall I part my hair behind? Do I dare to eat a peach?
I shall wear white flannel trousers, and walk upon the beach.
I have heard the mermaids singing, each to each.

After many stanzas of declaring that "there will be time" for all his procrastinations, the speaker admits that he in fact is running out of time. He states twice that "I grow old" (a moment of epizeuxis), seemingly coming to accept the narrowing of the window of time in which he can make changes in his life.

Nevertheless, he imagines a few changes, like "wear[ing] the bottom of my trousers rolled," parting his hair in a different place, or even daring "to eat a peach." However, these resolutions have a comic tenor, since trying a different hair part or eating a peach are in fact highly insignificant changes. However, for the speaker, paralyzed by anxiety and indecision, even these changes seem charged with great significance.

The weight that he attaches to small changes in his clothing and habits indicate just how mired he is in convention, even though he imagines trying to do something different as his life comes to an end. This adherence to convention even in a moment of rebellion is mirrored in the rhyme scheme, in which "old" is rhymed with "rolled" and "peach" is rhymed with "beach" and "each." These simple, rather nursery rhymes-like sounds give the speaker's ambitions a childish and belated quality. All those protestations that "there will be time" now look like wishful thinking, as the speaker faces the fact that, in truth, he "grows old" and faces a future of increasingly limited possibilities. However, he still imagines that something unexpected and even magical might happen: that, walking on the beach, he might "hear the mermaids singing."

LINES 125-131

I do not think that they will sing to me.
I have seen them riding seaward on the waves
Combing the white hair of the waves blown back
When the wind blows the water white and black.
We have lingered in the chambers of the sea
By sea-girls wreathed with seaweed red and brown
Till human voices wake us, and we drown.

The image of mermaids singing might end the poem on a hopeful and optimistic note. However, this scene soon takes on a darker resonance. The speaker admits that "I do not think that they will sing for me," indicating his low self-esteem and sense of himself as undeserving of inclusion in the world of social and erotic encounters. Even worse, however, it turns out that the speaker *has* in fact gone into the sea and "lingers" there in underground "chambers," hearing the voices of the mermaids.

The intense use of consonance in the lines "Combing the white hair of the waves blown back / When the wind blows the water white and black" gives the lines an almost "beachy" sonic quality, since you need to let out air to form the /w/

sound—subtly echoing the sound of waves and wind on the water. The heavy implication is that the speaker has drowned himself beneath the lulling sound of these waves.

The voices of the mermaids then take on a more sinister quality, alluding to the myth of mermaids who lure sailors out to sea in order to seduce and kill them. In this sense, the speaker's desire for connection and romance leads to his ruin. The final image of the speaker trapped in an underground cavern, listening to melodic voices, calls back to that odd image midway through the poem in which the speaker wishes that he could be a lobster or crab instead of a human being. Perversely, the poem ends with the speaker getting his wish: he has become a bottom-feeder, just as he desired.

If the speaker has drowned, then he is in a kind of Hell. The poem thus ends by circling back to where it began, with the epigraph from Dante's *Inferno* that depicts the Pilgrim's experiences in Hell. It turns out that the speaker, having perhaps drowned himself, has been in a kind of underworld all along.

SYMBOLS

YELLOW FOG

When the speaker of "Prufrock" invites his listener to go on a walk with him, he imaginatively walks through a city filled with fog. This fog is described as "yellow," since it reflects the electric light that powers the lamps and streetlights—and, implicitly, the pollution and smog of a modern industrial city. The yellow color of the fog is thus symbolic of the condition of modern life, which is shaped by technology and industrial production.

This fog seems to pervade the streets and homes of the people who live there. It is described as "rubbing," "licking," and "lingering" along the windows of houses and among the city streets. The inescapable quality of the fog suggests the difficulty of evading the ills of pollution in a modern city. It also gives the poem a more abstract but still pervasive sense of unease, as if the entire city is colored by the seediness, corruption, and darkness with which the speaker characterizes the world around him. With the language of rubbing and licking, the fog is also likened imaginatively to a cat, a comparison that adds to the sense of unease. It is as if the fog is a living organism that takes on more life than the humans around it, symbolizing the speaker's sense of alienation and isolation in a modern and literally and figuratively "foggy" world.

Where this symbol appears in the poem:

- **Lines 15-19:** "The yellow fog that rubs its back upon the window-panes, / The yellow smoke that rubs its muzzle on the window-panes, / Licked its tongue into the corners of the evening, / Lingered upon the pools that stand in drains, / Let fall upon its back the soot that falls from chimneys,"
- **Lines 24-25:** "For the yellow smoke that slides along the street, / Rubbing its back upon the window-panes;"

TOAST AND TEA

The poem is markedly, even oddly preoccupied with tea. In one sense, this reflects the cultural dominance of tea in early 20th century British culture, in which tea and the consumption of sandwiches and toast was a common, almost universal afternoon ritual. But in the poem, the seemingly quotidian and everyday objects of toast and tea also take on a symbolic function. For the speaker, they come to symbolize the banal and suffocating qualities of modern life, in which the same rituals proceed day after day. The speaker feels constrained by these rituals, and yet he also seems incapable of breaking free of them. He asks "do I dare to eat a peach?" but even the simple decision of changing his eating and drinking routine seems to be too much for him. His anxiety makes it nearly impossible for him to take decisive action, leading him to proclaim that he goes through "a hundred visions and revisions" before taking his tea. In this sense, tea represents both the stifling force of social convention and the speaker's inability to claim the agency to make different choices.

Where this symbol appears in the poem:

- **Lines 33-34:** "And for a hundred visions and revisions, / Before the taking of a toast and tea."
- **Line 51:** "I have measured out my life with coffee spoons;"
- **Lines 79-80:** "Should I, after tea and cakes and ices, / Have the strength to force the moment to its crisis?"
- **Lines 88-89:** "After the cups, the marmalade, the tea, / Among the porcelain, among some talk of you and me,"
- **Line 122:** " Do I dare to eat a peach?"

POETIC DEVICES

ALLUSION

"The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock" is filled with allusions. The poem makes very frequent references to other authors—beginning with the epigraph, which is a quotation from Canto 27 of Dante's *Inferno*. These lines are spoken by Guido da Montefeltro, a man condemned to hell who promises to tell the *Inferno*'s speaker about the sins that have landed him in Hell. "Prufrock," like these lines from Dante, is also a direct address from the speaker to the reader. Like Guido, Prufrock

promises to tell the reader his sins and explain how he has been confined to a hellish, modern urban landscape. From the beginning of the poem, then, literary allusion helps set the stage and highlight important themes.

This is far from the only allusion in the poem, however. The speaker also alludes to Biblical figures including Lazarus and John the Baptist. Other literary works cited or quoted include Shakespeare's *Hamlet*, when the speaker laments that "I am not Prince Hamlet." Although this is the most explicit allusion to Shakespeare, there is also an allusion to Shakespeare's *Twelfth Night* in the line about the "dying fall," which alludes to Duke Orsino's famous words as he listens to music: "that strain again, it had a dying fall."

In its final depiction of singing mermaids who lead the speaker to his doom, the poem also alludes to Homer's *The Odyssey* and the classical trope of the "siren," beautiful women who lure sailors out to sea in order to kill them. Finally, the repetition of the phrase "the overwhelming question" alludes to James Fenimore Cooper's novel *The Pioneers* (1823), one of Eliot's favorite books as a child, and the place in which that phrase first appears.

The effect of these very frequent allusions is often to give the impression of a negative comparison. The speaker feels that he is inadequate and diminished in comparison with the "greatness" of figures like John the Baptist or Hamlet. His own head, if served on a platter like John the Baptist, would be "slightly bald"; he asserts that if he appeared in *Hamlet*, he would be a petty "attendant lord" or even a "Fool." These self-deprecations serve to deflate the literary traditions to which the poem alludes. The speaker feels alienated from these literary greats even as he alludes to them, suggesting that the speaker's sense of isolation from the world also extends to his sense of his place in the Western literary canon.

Where Allusion appears in the poem:

- **Before Line 1:** " S'io credesse che mia risposta fosse / A persona che mai tornasse al mondo, / Questa fiamma staria senza piu scosse. / Ma percioche giammai di questo fondo / Non torno vivo alcun, s'i'odo il vero, / Senza tema d'infamia ti rispondo."
- **Line 10:** "overwhelming question"
- **Line 14:** "Michelangelo"
- **Line 36:** "Michelangelo"
- **Line 52:** "a dying fall"
- **Line 82:** "Though I have seen my head (grown slightly bald) brought in upon a platter,"
- **Lines 94-95:** ""I am Lazarus, come from the dead, / Come back to tell you all, I shall tell you all"—"
- **Line 111:** "I am not Prince Hamlet, nor was meant to be;"
- **Line 124:** "I have heard the mermaids singing, each to each."

CAESURA

The poem makes frequent use of caesura, a literary device that mirrors the speaker's indecisiveness and propensity for what he calls "decisions and revisions." Just when it seems as if the speaker is about to say something or take some decisive action, he breaks off and "revises" his speech in a new direction. Take this example:

> And indeed there will be time
> To wonder, "Do I dare?" and, "Do I dare?"
> Time to turn back and descend the stair...

Here the caesura occurs after "Do I dare?" The question marks create a pause in the momentum of the poem. Instead of going into the room and mingling with other people, the speaker imagines "turn[ing] back" and "descend[ing] the stair," too worried about what other people will think of him to be able to continue. The speaker also frequently uses commas, dashes, and ellipses in this way, to accommodate digression and re-direction. For example, he describes the evening as "asleep ... tired ... or it malingers," in a series of descriptors that have mutually exclusive meanings. Either the evening is "asleep" or it is merely "malingering," *pretending* to be asleep. Here, however, the caesura allows the speaker to revise himself and propose multiple possibilities. His use of this literary device is fitting given his habitual indecisiveness and inability to commit to a single option. The caesura gives him space in the poem for "decision and revision."

Where Caesura appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "",
- **Line 4:** "",
- **Line 11:** "," "",
- **Line 20:** "",
- **Line 22:** "",
- **Line 26:** "",
- **Line 38:** "," "?," "",
- **Line 41:** ":"
- **Line 42:** "",
- **Line 43:** "",
- **Line 44:** ":"
- **Line 49:** "",
- **Line 50:** "," "",
- **Line 55:** "",
- **Line 57:** "",
- **Line 62:** "",
- **Line 64:** "",
- **Line 67:** "",
- **Line 70:** "",
- **Line 72:** "",
- **Line 75:** "," "",
- **Line 77:** "...," "..."

- **Line 78:** “,”
- **Line 79:** “,”
- **Line 81:** “,”
- **Line 82:** “(,” “)”
- **Line 83:** “—”
- **Line 86:** “,”
- **Line 87:** “,”
- **Line 88:** “„” “,”
- **Line 89:** “,”
- **Line 94:** “:”
- **Line 95:** “,”
- **Line 96:** “,”
- **Line 97:** “:”
- **Line 98:** “,”
- **Line 99:** “,”
- **Line 102:** “„” “,”
- **Line 103:** “,”
- **Line 107:** “,”
- **Line 108:** “,”
- **Line 110:** “,”
- **Line 111:** “!,” “,”
- **Line 112:** “,”
- **Line 113:** “,”
- **Line 114:** “:,” “,”
- **Line 115:** “,”
- **Line 116:** “„” “,”
- **Line 117:** “,”
- **Line 118:** “„” “,”
- **Line 119:** “„” “,”
- **Line 120:** “...”
- **Line 122:** “?”
- **Line 123:** “,”
- **Line 124:** “,”
- **Line 131:** “,”

END-STOPPED LINE

"The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock" is a meandering poem filled with lists and sentences that seem to run-on endlessly. Many of the lines here could be classified as *either* end-stopped or enjambed because, despite the frequent punctuation, the poem overall feels almost like stream of consciousness, with ideas rarely being contained by a single line.

That said, we've chosen to mark the majority of the poem as end-stopped. This is because, even as the speaker's thoughts wander all over the place, each thought itself is relatively whole feeling. More often than not, an image or thought will be introduced in a line, and subsequent lines will then flesh out this thought or image; subsequent lines don't *complete* these images, as they would with enjambment, as much as they *add to* or *build on* them.

There are also some striking moments of inarguably end-stopped lines, which usually appear at the end of each stanza (as in "let us go and make our visit" in the first stanza). Often a period gives a sense of finality and decisiveness. In “Prufrock,” however, ironically, the end-stop gives a formal sense of an ending without any actual decisions or conclusions. For example, the speaker uses end-stops in many of the short, two-line stanzas, which feature obscure and enigmatic pronouncements like these:

> In the room the women come and go
> Talking of Michelangelo.
>
> I should have been a pair of ragged claws
> Scuttling across the floors of silent seas.

In both these cases, the speaker isn't actually giving much away. He doesn't tell readers anything more about what the women are discussing or who they are, nor does he elaborate on the self-effacing and even disturbing pronouncement that he would prefer to be a crustacean or bottom-feeder instead of a human. The period gives an impression of grammatical shape to these lines, but they don't actually make much sense when the reader tries to understand what the speaker really means.

This, of course, is precisely the problem, as when the speaker exclaims that “It is impossible to say just what I mean!” There is a gap, then, between the finality of the end-stop and the mysterious and open-ended nature of the speaker's assertions. End-stops appear more frequently as the poem comes to a conclusion; the third-to-last stanza, for instance, entirely consists of end-stopped lines. And yet end-stops don't actually make things any clearer, even though at first they make it seem as if the speaker has come to a conclusion. In fact, the speaker seems to be using the end-stop as a way of cutting off further questions and discussion.

Where End-Stopped Line appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** “I,”
- **Line 3:** “table;”
- **Line 7:** “oyster-shells:”
- **Line 10:** “question ...”
- **Line 11:** ““What is it?””
- **Line 12:** “visit.”
- **Line 14:** “Michelangelo.”
- **Line 15:** “window-panes,”
- **Line 16:** “window-panes,”
- **Line 17:** “evening,”
- **Line 18:** “drains,”
- **Line 19:** “chimneys,”
- **Line 20:** “leap,”
- **Line 21:** “night,”
- **Line 22:** “asleep.”
- **Line 24:** “the street,”
- **Line 25:** “window-panes;”

- **Line 27:** "meet;"
- **Line 28:** "create,"
- **Line 30:** "plate;"
- **Line 31:** "me,"
- **Line 32:** "indecisions,"
- **Line 33:** "revisions,"
- **Line 34:** "tea."
- **Line 36:** "Michelangelo."
- **Line 38:** "dare?""
- **Line 39:** "stair,"
- **Line 40:** "hair —"
- **Line 41:** "thin!")"
- **Line 42:** "chin,"
- **Line 43:** "pin —"
- **Line 44:** "thin!")"
- **Line 46:** "universe?"
- **Line 48:** "reverse."
- **Line 49:** "all:"
- **Line 50:** "afternoons,"
- **Line 51:** "spoons;"
- **Line 53:** "room."
- **Line 54:** "presume?"
- **Line 55:** "all—"
- **Line 56:** "phrase,"
- **Line 57:** "pin,"
- **Line 58:** "wall,"
- **Line 60:** "ways?"
- **Line 61:** "presume?"
- **Line 62:** "all—"
- **Line 64:** "hair!)"
- **Line 66:** "digress?"
- **Line 67:** "shawl."
- **Line 68:** "presume?"
- **Line 69:** "begin?"
- **Line 72:** "windows? ..."
- **Line 74:** "seas."
- **Line 75:** "peacefully!"
- **Line 76:** "fingers,"
- **Line 77:** "malingers,"
- **Line 78:** "me."
- **Line 80:** "crisis?"
- **Line 81:** "prayed,"
- **Line 82:** "platter,"
- **Line 83:** "matter;"
- **Line 84:** "flicker,"
- **Line 85:** "snicker,"
- **Line 86:** "afraid."
- **Line 87:** "after all,"
- **Line 88:** "tea,"
- **Line 89:** "me,"
- **Line 91:** "smile,"
- **Line 93:** "question,"
- **Line 94:** "dead,"
- **Line 95:** "all"—"
- **Line 97:** "all;"
- **Line 98:** "all.""
- **Line 99:** "after all,"
- **Line 100:** "while,"
- **Line 101:** "streets,"
- **Line 102:** "floor—"
- **Line 103:** "more?—"
- **Line 104:** "mean!"
- **Line 105:** "screen:"
- **Line 108:** "say:"
- **Line 109:** "all,"
- **Line 110:** "all.""
- **Line 111:** "be;"
- **Line 113:** "two,"
- **Line 114:** "tool,"
- **Line 115:** "use,"
- **Line 116:** "meticulous;"
- **Line 117:** "obtuse;"
- **Line 118:** "ridiculous—"
- **Line 119:** "Fool."
- **Line 120:** "old ..."
- **Line 121:** "rolled."
- **Line 122:** "peach?"
- **Line 123:** "beach."
- **Line 124:** "each."
- **Line 125:** "me."
- **Line 128:** "black."
- **Line 131:** "drown."

REFRAIN

The poem features many refrains to which the speaker frequently returns. This gives the poem a somewhat musical quality—unsurprisingly, for a poem which is titled "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock." Indeed, the speaker ends the poem by remarking that he "hear[s] the mermaids singing, each to each," suggesting that perhaps this poem has been a song of the mermaids all along. One refrain is:

> In the room the women come and go
> Talking of Michelangelo.

These lines recur with haunting regularity. Because the speaker keeps repeating these lines, it gives the impression that the buzz of conversation—the women "talking of Michaelangelo"—is a persistent background noise throughout the poem. In one sense, it is a sophisticated and cultured conversation centering on art. On the other hand, however, it is devoid of content: the speaker only remarks that they are "talking of Michaelangelo" but makes no effort to join in the conversation, indicating his alienation and isolation from others.

Other refrains appear in slightly modified forms throughout the poem. He frequently asks "do I dare?" and "how should I presume?" The repetition of these phrases indicates that he is trapped in an endless cycle of indecision: his posing of the question never leads to resolution. Similarly, when he repeats the phrase "that is not what I meant, at all," the recycling and repetition of these words foreground the problem of expression. He is only able to express his frustration at his inability to communicate rather than actually forming connections with others.

Where Refrain appears in the poem:

- **Lines 13-14:** "In the room the women come and go / Talking of Michelangelo."
- **Lines 35-36:** "In the room the women come and go / Talking of Michelangelo."
- **Line 54:** "So how should I presume?"
- **Line 61:** "And how should I presume?"
- **Line 68:** "And should I then presume?"
- **Line 69:** "And how should I begin?"
- **Line 97:** "Should say: "That is not what I meant at all;"
- **Line 98:** "That is not it, at all.""
- **Line 109:** ""That is not it at all,"
- **Line 110:** "That is not what I meant, at all.""

ALLITERATION

"The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock" is an extremely alliterative poem, which sounds repeating in close succession in almost every line. and we've highlighted some particular evocative examples of this alliteration here.

The poem's first stanza features the repetition of the initial /l/ sound in three out of the first four lines:

> Let us go then, you and I,
> When the evening is spread out against the sky
> Like a patient etherized upon a table;
> Let us go, through certain half-deserted streets...

The alliterative and repetitive sound of these lines gives an impression of forcefulness, impressing upon the reader the necessity of going out and exploring the streets. This is ironic, since the speaker is in fact mired in indecision. The next stanza features three more "l" words in quick succession: "licked," "lingered," and "let," suggesting a sense of luxuriousness as the fog fills the streets. Later, the strong, sharp /t/ sounds of "Before the taking of a toast and tea" makes this phrase feeling biting and dismissive (note that there is also consonance here with the final /t/ of "toast").

Throughout the rest of the poem, the speaker makes the decision to use artful alliterative language even when his decisions about his own life are far from assured. Note the repetitive /d/ sound in one of the poem's most famous repeated lines: "Do I dare disturb the universe?" The alliteration of the phrase "Do I dare?" might give the lines a sense of strength or forcefulness in that hard repetitive /d/, and yet this belied by the fact that the speaker does *not* in fact "dare."

With their repeated /m/ and /c/ sounds, lines 42-43 are also characterized by strong alliteration:

> My morning coat, my collar mounting firmly to the chin,
> My necktie rich and modest, but asserted by a simple pin —

The appearances of the /m/ sound in quick succession emphasize the speaker's self-obsession and self-constellation: it is "*my* morning coat" and "*my* collar." He is so wrapped up in himself—and in anxieties about what others think of him—that he finds it difficult to communicate with others.

Similarly, in lines 62-63, note the insistence on the /a/ sound (which is bolstered by the assonance of /a/ sounds here as well, in words like "have," "braceleted," and "bare"). This suggests that the speaker doesn't really see others as individuals: rather, he thinks that he's seen it all before:

> And I have known the arms already, known them all—
> Arms that are braceleted and white and bare

These uses of alliterative language have a melodic, lulling quality. But by the end of the poem, the pleasing nature of alliterative phrases like this take on a more disturbing valence:

> Combing the white hair of the waves blown back
> When the wind blows the water white and black.

It turns out that the speaker has been lured into the water by the seductive song of mermaids and drowned himself. The alliterative and pleasing sound of these lines describing the ocean thus start to look more insidious, as if their beauty hides possibly harmful or dangerous intent.

Where Alliteration appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "L"
- **Line 3:** "L"
- **Line 4:** "L"
- **Line 17:** "L"
- **Line 18:** "L"
- **Line 19:** "L"
- **Line 34:** "t," "t," "t"
- **Line 38:** "D," "d," "D," "d"
- **Line 42:** "M," "m," "c," "m," "c," "m"
- **Line 43:** "M," "m"
- **Line 45:** "D," "d"

- **Line 46:** "D"
- **Line 62:** "A," "a," "a," "a"
- **Line 63:** "A," "a," "a"
- **Line 122:** "D," "d"
- **Line 126:** "w"
- **Line 127:** "w," "w," "b," "l," "b"
- **Line 128:** "W," "w," "bl," "w," "w," "b," "l"

CONSONANCE

The poem makes frequent use not just of alliteration but also of more general consonance. This again adds to the musicality of the poem, elevating its language—which is generally, relatively clear and simple—beyond the mundanity of the things being described. The sound of the poem gives it an epic feel that raises the stakes of the decisions throughout, even though they're mostly minor dilemmas. This reflects the speaker's extreme tendency toward indecision, the way every little decision seems to send him into a tailspin of self doubt.

Because nearly every line in the poem features such sonic repetition, and we've plucked out a few especially strong examples to discuss here. For instance, the first stanza of the poem is overflowing with /s/, /t/, /r/, and /n/ sounds, especially from lines 4 to 10. The specific nature of these sounds—the sharp, percussive /t/, hissing /s/, growling /r/, and nasally /n/—adds to the hellish feeling of the streets in question, while the sheer intensity of the repetition here is claustrophobic; it's as if there is no escaping from these sounds, nor from the dismal world they're describing.

Also note how frequently the /s/ consonant sound appears in the first three stanzas of the poem. This happens particularly in the description of the yellow fog that pervades the city streets, which, in the speaker's account, sounds disturbingly like a live animal:

> Slipped by the terrace, made a sudden leap,
> And seeing that it was a soft October night,
> Curled once about the house, and fell asleep.

Here the repetition of /s/ sounds—specifically an example of sibilance—gives the impression of a soft hissing like the sounds made by a cat. In this sense, the poem formally mirrors what is going on the rest of the poem: the speaker is metaphorically comparing the yellow fog to a cat, and the use of consonance makes the lines sound, quite literally, like a cat as it "leap[s]" and "curl[s] once about the house." There is a similar relationship between sound and sense in the lines describing the mermaids at the end of the poem:

> Combing the white hair of the waves blown back
> When the wind blows the water white and black.

Here the pervasive /w/ sound feels like a bit like the blowing of the wind across the waves of the ocean. Because it requires an expulsion of air from the mouth to produce the /w/ sound, the sound of the lines provides a sonic match for the scene described.

Where Consonance appears in the poem:

- **Line 4:** "rt," "s," "r," "t," "st," "ts"
- **Line 5:** "tt," "r," "r," "t," "r," "ts"
- **Line 6:** "r," "st," "ss," "n," "ts," "n," "n," "t," "t," "s"
- **Line 7:** "s," "st," "r," "st," "r," "nts," "st," "r," "s"
- **Line 8:** "Str," "ts," "t," "t," "s," "r," "nt"
- **Line 9:** "n," "s," "s," "nt," "nt"
- **Line 10:** "T," "t," "n," "st," "n"
- **Line 20:** "S," "c," "s"
- **Line 21:** "s," "s"
- **Line 22:** "c," "s," "s"
- **Line 127:** "w," "w," "w"
- **Line 128:** "W," "w," "w," "w," "w"

ENJAMBMENT

"The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock" makes frequent use of enjambment. Many verse sentences in the poem carry across from one line to the next (and recall that marking enjambment is not an exact science, and that enjambed lines can at times be punctuated if the full grammatical gist of the phrase straddles two lines). This gives an impression of fluidity and momentum that is in fact diametrically opposed to the stasis and indecision that characterizes the speaker's state of mind. For example, he asks:

> Do I dare
> Disturb the universe?
> In a minute there is time
> For decisions and revisions which a minute will
> reverse.

These lines about "daring" to "disturb the universe" are enjambed, meaning that the reader's eyes run across the line break to get to the next phrase. But while this movement is quick and eager, the speaker's own momentum is anything but speedy. He doesn't actually manage to "dare" to do anything, and instead remains mired in his own anxieties and fear about what others will think of him. What's more, the enjambment of "Do I dare" leaves the question hanging, creating a moment of blank, white space that could be filled with any number of finishing thoughts; in a sense, then, the enjambment reflects the extent of the speaker's indecision and anxiety. You could fill *anything* in that blank, essentially, because the speaker is hesitant to do anything at all.

At other moments, enjambment introduces a sense of unease. The speaker's description of "muttering retreats / Of restless

nights in one-night cheap hotels," for example, becomes much more unsettling because the phrase "muttering retreats" is forced to stand on its own before it is grammatically completed and attached to the phrase "restlessness nights." The reader is left wondering about the nature of these "muttering retreats," since it is unclear to what, exactly, the speaker is referring.

The speaker also often uses enjambment after the phrase "there will be time," which recurs frequently throughout the poem. The phrase seems to float above the rest of the poem, attaching itself through enjambment to a broad range of activities and objects. The speaker asserts that "there will be time" for "the yellow smoke that slides along the street," to "prepare a face to meet the faces that you meet," "for a hundred indecisions," and "for the taking of a toast and tea," among many others. Enjambment provides a way for the speaker to assert that he will have time for all the things he wants to do.

At the same time, however, this starts to look like wishful thinking and just a bit of formal or poetic trickery, as it emerges that in fact the speaker "grows old" and soon won't have much time left for the things he wants to accomplish or change in his life.

Where Enjambment appears in the poem:

- **Line 2:** "sky"
- **Line 3:** "Like"
- **Line 5:** "retreats"
- **Line 6:** "Of," "hotels"
- **Line 7:** "And"
- **Line 8:** "argument"
- **Line 9:** "Of," "intent"
- **Line 10:** "To"
- **Line 13:** "go"
- **Line 14:** "Talking"
- **Line 23:** "time"
- **Line 24:** "For"
- **Line 26:** "time"
- **Line 27:** "To"
- **Line 29:** "hands"
- **Line 30:** "That"
- **Line 35:** "go"
- **Line 36:** "Talking"
- **Line 37:** "time"
- **Line 38:** "To"
- **Line 45:** "dare"
- **Line 46:** "Disturb"
- **Line 47:** "time"
- **Line 48:** "For"
- **Line 52:** "fall"
- **Line 53:** "Beneath"
- **Line 59:** "begin"
- **Line 60:** "To"
- **Line 63:** "bare"
- **Line 64:** "(But"
- **Line 65:** "dress"
- **Line 66:** "That"
- **Line 70:** "streets"
- **Line 71:** "And," "pipes"
- **Line 72:** "Of"
- **Line 73:** "claws"
- **Line 74:** "Scuttling"
- **Line 79:** "ices,"
- **Line 80:** "Have"
- **Lines 90-91:** "while, / To"
- **Line 92:** "ball"
- **Line 93:** "To"
- **Line 96:** "head"
- **Line 97:** "Should"
- **Line 106:** "while"
- **Line 107:** "If," "shawl,"
- **Line 108:** "And"
- **Line 112:** "do"
- **Line 113:** "To"
- **Line 126:** "waves"
- **Line 127:** "Combing," "back"
- **Line 128:** "When"
- **Line 129:** "sea"
- **Line 130:** "By," "brown"
- **Line 131:** "Till"

METAPHOR

"The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock" is highly metaphorical and even at times obscure, since the figurative language employed by the speaker is sometimes incongruous or unexpected. For example, the speaker fears social interaction with others because he is anxious about their judgments and assessments of him. In lines 57 to 58, he compares having their eyes on him to the feeling of a bug examined under a magnifying class, "pinned and wriggling" and "sprawling on a pin." The comparison of himself to an insect specimen is a use of metaphor that emphasizes the speaker's low self-esteem and tendency to assume the worst of others.

Similarly, he speaks of "spit[ting] out all the butt-ends of my days and ways" in line 60. By "days and ways," he presumably means his daily actions and routines. But he compares them to the "butt-ends" of a cigarette, which is to say the unsmoked ends that are ground up and thrown away. Here again an unexpected bit of figurative language—comparing his life to a used-up cigarette—suggests just how pessimistic the speaker is about the course of his own life.

To that end, the metaphor in lines 111 to 119 sees the speaker compare himself to an "attendant lord" or and "at times, the Fool." This comparison makes sense within the context of the line's allusion to *Hamlet*, the famous Shakespeare play. The

speaker is saying he is *not* Hamlet—in other words, that he is no prince or leading man; instead, he is only fit to play a minor and inconsequential supporting role, or perhaps even to become the "Fool"—a clown like character. The speaker clearly does not view himself as a great or important figure.

His metaphors also often take the form of digressions. For example, towards the end of the poem, he suddenly breaks off his train of thought and asserts that "I should have been a pair of ragged claws / Scuttling across the floors of silent seas." This metaphor sees the speaker imagining himself as a bottom-feeder like a crab or lobster. Disturbingly, the speaker seems to prefer the isolation and degradation of the life of a crab to his own life, in which he is unable to cope with the demands of social interchange and self-expression.

Where Metaphor appears in the poem:

- **Lines 29-30:** "hands / That lift and drop a question on your plate;"
- **Lines 57-58:** "And when I am formulated, sprawling on a pin, / When I am pinned and wriggling on the wall,"
- **Line 60:** "To spit out all the butt-ends of my days and ways?"
- **Lines 73-74:** "I should have been a pair of ragged claws / Scuttling across the floors of silent seas."
- **Line 82:** "Though I have seen my head (grown slightly bald) brought in upon a platter,"
- **Line 85:** "And I have seen the eternal Footman hold my coat, and snicker,"
- **Lines 91-93:** "To have bitten off the matter with a smile, / To have squeezed the universe into a ball / To roll it towards some overwhelming question,"
- **Line 111:** "No! I am not Prince Hamlet, nor was meant to be;"
- **Lines 112-119:** "Am an attendant lord, one that will do / To swell a progress, start a scene or two, / Advise the prince; no doubt, an easy tool, / Deferential, glad to be of use, / Politic, cautious, and meticulous; / Full of high sentence, but a bit obtuse; / At times, indeed, almost ridiculous— / Almost, at times, the Fool."
- **Line 127:** "Combing the white hair of the waves blown back"

PERSONIFICATION

The poem's most extended use of personification occurs in the third stanza, when the speaker describes the yellow fog that pervades the city. In his description, a non-sentient entity, the fog, behaves curiously like an animal: it "rubs its back upon the window-panes," "rubs its muzzle on the window-panes," "lick[s] its tongue," and "leap[s]" on terraces.

In a sense, these are normal, endearing cat-like behaviors. But the attribution of these cat-like behaviors to the yellow fog has more disturbing implications. In the speaker's account, the fog seems to have a life of its own. Unlike normal fog, it doesn't dissipate; instead it merely "falls asleep" and waits to come to life again. There is no way to get rid of this fog, which seems to have infiltrated the heart of the city. Indeed, it seems like this fog might be more alive than the humans who live in the city. The streets are oddly deserted, and the yellow fog prowls the city streets unimpeded, "slid[ing] along" and "rubbing its back" on every building.

The personification is unsettling, in other words, because it makes it seem as if something alive but not quite human is living in the streets, "crouching" and waiting with possibly malign intent. The overall impression is one of unnamed but pervasive unease. This anxiety, like the fog, seems to linger everywhere throughout the poem.

Where Personification appears in the poem:

- **Lines 16-22:** "The yellow smoke that rubs its muzzle on the window-panes, / Licked its tongue into the corners of the evening, / Lingered upon the pools that stand in drains, / Let fall upon its back the soot that falls from chimneys, / Slipped by the terrace, made a sudden leap, / And seeing that it was a soft October night, / Curled once about the house, and fell asleep."
- **Lines 24-25:** "For the yellow smoke that slides along the street, / Rubbing its back upon the window-panes;"

SIMILE

In the poem, the speaker's use of simile is frequent and often unsettling. For instance, in the first stanza, the speaker observes that the evening is "spread out against the sky / Like a patient etherized upon a table." This takes what could be a pleasant scene—a walk on a mild autumn evening—and turns it into something vaguely sinister. The comparison of the sky to a patient under anesthesia and awaiting surgery introduces an element of sterility and artificiality to what should be a moment of appreciating the natural beauty of the evening. It looks like the world of the poem is never free from this sense of unease, even on a calm evening walk.

The speaker also introduces complicated similes as a way of conveying his tortured relationship to language and expression. For example, he imagines saying what's on his mind, "as if a magic lantern threw the nerves in patterns on a screen." This seems to mean that he imagines his anxious thoughts—his "nerves"—being projected into a "pattern" of words "on a screen." This is perhaps a reference to the film technology that was new at the time when Eliot was writing this poem, once again introducing a layer of mediation or distance between the speaker and his own words. The speaker longs for a tool—a "magic lantern"—that could allow him to express himself. At the same time, however, the convoluted nature of this simile and its multiple layers of mediation (thoughts become projections, which become words) demonstrate the speaker's lack of ability

to clearly articulate what he means.

Where Simile appears in the poem:

- **Lines 2-3:** "When the evening is spread out against the sky / Like a patient etherized upon a table;"
- **Lines 8-10:** "Streets that follow like a tedious argument / Of insidious intent / To lead you to an overwhelming question ..."
- **Lines 104-105:** "It is impossible to say just what I mean! / But as if a magic lantern threw the nerves in patterns on a screen:"

ANAPHORA

Anaphora appears frequently in "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock." It is so important to the poem's literary effects, in fact, that it appears in the very first lines of the poem (after the epigraph), in the repetition of the phrase "let us go" at the beginning of lines 1, 4, and 12 in the first stanza:

> Let us go then, you and I,
> ...
> Let us go, through certain half-deserted streets,
> ...
> Let us go and make our visit.

Given the repetition of this phrase three times at the beginning of the poem, the reader might naturally assume that the poem is, indeed, going somewhere. But although the phrase "let us go" implies movement, the speaker in fact remains mired in stasis and indecision. He invites the reader on an evening walk with him, through "half-deserted streets," but he never actually gets to voicing the "overwhelming question" that seems to be tormenting him.

Similarly, the poem's use of anaphora elsewhere implies a momentum or belief in change—even as it never actually follows through on that promise. The speaker repeatedly claims that "there will be time," in a use of anaphora that recurs hauntingly throughout the poem:

> There will be time, there will be time
> To prepare a face to meet the faces that you meet;
> There will be time to murder and create,
> And time for all the works and days of hands
> That lift and drop a question on your plate;
> Time for you and time for me,
> And time yet for a hundred indecisions,

Anaphora here might give the phrase "there will be time" the ring of truth—and yet the speaker's anxious insistence that he has much time for his procrastination only succeeds in suggesting the hollowness of that assertion, as proven later when he admits that "I grow old."

In fact, anaphora comes to illustrate that the speaker is stuck in his ways. The repetition of phrases like "I have known" and "I am" suggest that the speaker is convinced that things are a certain way and can't be changed.

One of the most frequent employments of anaphora in the poem is simply the repetition of the word "and," as in lines 68-69: "And should I then presume? And how should I begin?" This is also an example of polysyndeton, the repetition of conjunctions. Unable to follow through on any decision, the speaker continually pivots to digressions and what he calls new "revisions" of his ideas. Here, for example, the speaker seems to be accumulating a list of reasons why he can't voice his "overwhelming question" and connect with the people in his life.

In this sense, the poem's initial use of anaphora proves misleading. The repetition of the phrase "let us go" implies that the speaker and the reader might be able to escape the hellish urban landscape and confinement in which the speaker seems trapped. In the end, however, it turns out that the possibility of egress has always been an illusion, since the speaker has in fact drowned himself and closed off all means of escape.

Where Anaphora appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "Let us go"
- **Line 4:** "Let us go"
- **Line 12:** "Let us go"
- **Line 15:** "The yellow fog"
- **Line 16:** "The yellow smoke"
- **Line 23:** "And indeed there will be time"
- **Line 26:** "There will be time, there will be time"
- **Line 28:** "There will be time"
- **Line 29:** "And time," " for"
- **Line 31:** "Time," " for"
- **Line 32:** "And time yet," " for"
- **Line 37:** "And indeed there will be time"
- **Line 39:** "Time to"
- **Line 49:** "For I have known," "known"
- **Line 50:** "Have known"
- **Line 52:** "I know"
- **Line 55:** "And I have known"
- **Line 57:** "And when I am"
- **Line 58:** "When I am"
- **Line 62:** "And I have known," "known them all—"
- **Line 63:** "Arms that"
- **Line 67:** "Arms that"
- **Line 68:** "And"
- **Line 69:** "And"
- **Line 81:** "But though I have"
- **Line 82:** "Though I have"
- **Line 84:** "I have seen"
- **Line 85:** "And I have seen"
- **Line 86:** "And"

- **Line 87:** "And," " would it have been worth it"
- **Line 90:** "Would it have been worth"
- **Line 91:** "To"
- **Line 92:** "To"
- **Line 93:** "To"
- **Line 94:** "To"
- **Line 99:** "And would it have been worth"
- **Line 100:** "Would it have been worth"
- **Line 101:** "After the"
- **Line 102:** "After the," "after the," "after the"
- **Line 106:** "Would it have been worth"
- **Line 120:** "I"
- **Line 121:** "I"
- **Line 123:** "I"
- **Line 124:** "I"
- **Line 125:** "I"
- **Line 126:** "I"

APOSTROPHE

From the beginning, "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock" positions itself as a direct address, or apostrophe, between the speaker and the reader. The epigraph from Dante's *Inferno* is taken from a scene in which a character in Hell promises to reveal his sins to the Pilgrim, swearing him to secrecy. Even before the poem has begun, then, the poet sets up the expectation that the speaker will reveal something to the reader in confidence. This impression continues throughout the poem, when the speaker addresses a "you," as in "let us go then, you and I." This direct address has the effect of drawing the reader into the speaker's confidence. As the poem continues, however, the "you" of the direct address seems to shift, curiously, from the reader to other people. Elsewhere in the poem, the "you" seems to apostrophize a particular person rather than just the general "you" of the reader:

> And would it have been worth it, after all,
> After the cups, the marmalade, the tea,
> Among the porcelain, among some talk of you and me,
> Would it have been worth while…

Here, the "talk of you and me" suggests the speaker is having a conversation with someone—perhaps a woman with whom he is romantically involved?—about their relationship. The instability of the "you" makes it difficult to know who, exactly, the speaker is addressing. This adds to the sense of the speaker's isolation and difficulty communicating with others. Although the apostrophe "you" gives an impression of intimacy, it is not always clear who the speaker is talking to, which also creates a distancing effect.

Where Apostrophe appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "Let us go then, you and I,"
- **Line 4:** "Let us go"
- **Line 11:** "Oh, do not ask, "What is it?""
- **Line 12:** "Let us go"
- **Lines 87-89:** "And would it have been worth it, after all, / After the cups, the marmalade, the tea, / Among the porcelain, among some talk of you and me,"

EPIZEUXIS

In the poem, the repetition of "there will be time" in the fourth stanza is an example of epizeuxis. Indeed, the speaker reiterates this phrase with what might seem excessive repetition (though only the instances directly in succession are true epizeuxis):

> And indeed there will be time
> For the yellow smoke that slides along the street,
> Rubbing its back upon the window panes;
> There will be time, there will be time
> To prepare a face to meet the faces that you meet;
> There will be time to murder and create

This phrase is repeated, word-for-word, four times in a row, in the space only six lines. The fact that this phrase re-appears again and again might suggest conviction—that the speaker really believes that "there will be time" for everything he wants to do in his life, despite his procrastination. He asserts that "there will be time" for all of his digressions and distractions, like gazing out at the "yellow fog" in the street and "prepar[ing] a face" to meet people. In reality, however, the speaker later admits—in another moment of epizeuxis, that "I grow old... I grow old..." In this sense, his repeated assertions about how much time he has start to look like wishful thinking. The speaker doesn't have much time left to stop dithering and actually take decisive action. Epizeuxis thus becomes a formal device for the speaker to try to convince himself that he has time left. It's as if he thinks that by repeating it, he can make it true—even though the poem later exposes this pretense.

Where Epizeuxis appears in the poem:

- **Line 23:** "And indeed there will be time"
- **Line 26:** "There will be time, there will be time"
- **Line 120:** "I grow old ... I grow old ..."

ASYNDETON

Throughout the poem, the speaker sometimes uses asyndeton when he lists objects or groups of things. The omission of the conjunction often gives the lines a more colloquial or casual tone, as if the speaker's grammatical constructions are becoming more lax and indifferent. For example, when he

claims that "I have known the evenings, mornings, afternoons," the commission of the "and" adds to the sense of world-weariness in these lines. The speaker claims that he has seen it all and nothing can surprise him anymore, a resignation that is formally mirrored in the line's enumeration of "evenings, morning, afternoons" as if there is little distinction between these different times of day.

The sense of indifference in his list-making also pervades the description of "the cups, the marmalade, the tea" later on, as the speaker asks if something would have been "worth while." The speaker feels deadened by the unending procession of domestic rituals like tea-drinking and eating. For him, the day proceeds in endless monotony, with little potential for surprise and variation. By using asyndeton, the speaker finds a formal literary device that mirrors his state of mind, in which objects and actions blend into each other and don't have much to differentiate one from the other.

Where Asyndeton appears in the poem:

- **Lines 42-43:** "My morning coat, my collar mounting firmly to the chin, / My necktie rich and modest"
- **Line 50:** "the evenings, mornings, afternoons,"
- **Line 75:** "the afternoon, the evening,"
- **Line 88:** "the cups, the marmalade, the tea,"

POLYSYNDETON

Since "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock" features many lists, it isn't surprising that some of these lists use the device of polysyndeton. The speaker uses the conjunction "and" to link together groups of sometimes dissimilar objects. One rather straightforward example occurs when the speaker asks:

> Should I, after tea and cakes and ices,
> Have the strength to force the moment to its crisis?

Here the inclusion of the double conjunction "and" (rather than simply writing "tea, cake, and ices") lengthens the phrase and makes it fit the meter. The physical lengthening of the line matches the speaker's sense that this afternoon tea has dragged on into the evening, making him feel lethargic and purposeless. "Tea, cake, and ices" make a fair amount of sense together, but in other moments the speaker uses the device to link together new pieces of information, as here:

> And I have known the arms already, known them all—
> Arms that are braceleted and white and bare

The series of descriptors in this list aren't necessarily intuitively ordered. He notes first, not the color of the woman's arms, but that she is wearing bracelets. He then notices, perhaps surprisingly, that the arms are also "bare," meaning that she isn't wearing sleeves (although, of course, she is wearing bracelets). This description is stitched together by the repetition of the "and" conjunction, which makes it seem as if the speaker is noticing things about the woman's arms (and indeed, the woman herself) in a piecemeal way, rather than taking her all in at once as a whole description and a whole person. This rather curiously disembodied way of looking at someone reflects the speaker's isolation and difficulty connecting with others.

Where Polysyndeton appears in the poem:

- **Line 32:** "And"
- **Line 33:** "And"
- **Line 63:** "and," "and"
- **Line 79:** "and," "and"

ASSONANCE

"The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock" is a poem characterized by repetition: repetition of words, phrases, the sounds of consonants, and the sounds of vowels (this last is called assonance). We're highlighted assonance in the first stanza plus some of the particularly evocative moments throughout the poem.

For example, in lines 8 and 9, the vowel sound of /ious/ in "tedious" and "insidious" mirror one another, as do the short /i/ sounds of "insidious" and "intent," and the short /e/ of "argument" and "intent":

> Streets that follow like a tedious argument
> Of insidious intent

The image here is disturbing: the speaker imagines the streets twisting around each other like a boring and insidious (or harmful) argument. The use of assonance, however, gives the lines a melodic and even beautiful sonic quality.

This habit of describing mundane or even actively troubling images in melodious language continues throughout the poem. Note how the description of the cat-like fog that curls about the streets and houses makes repeated use of the /o/ and /ou/ vowel sounds:

> And seeing that it was a soft October night,
> Curled once about the house, and fell asleep.

The assonance of phrases like "soft October" and "about the house" make for a figuratively and sonically "soft" and appealingly melodious series of lines, even though the actual image—of a creeping fog that spreads throughout the city—is less than pleasant. Similarly, the assonance (plus consonance) of "visions and revisions" disguises the speaker's cynicism and sense of exhaustion with the world in a lulling melody.

Indeed, perhaps the linkage of melodic assonance with cynicism

and depression is no accident. Assonance mirrors what indecision feels like to the speaker, for whom the world is a series of cyclical and endless repetition that lulls him into a metaphorical (and sometimes literal) sleep. At the end of the poem, pleasant melodies don't look so appealing, since the singing of the mermaids turns out to be the fatal tune that leads the speaker to his death. The poem's use of assonance may be beautiful, then, but it is also ultimately more harmful than it looks.

Where Assonance appears in the poem:

- **Line 2:** "e," "ea," "y"
- **Line 3:** "i," "i"
- **Line 4:** "e," "e," "ee"
- **Line 5:** "ea"
- **Line 6:** "e," "e," "i," "i," "ea," "e"
- **Line 7:** "e," "e"
- **Line 8:** "iou," "e"
- **Line 9:** "i," "i," "iou," "i," "e"
- **Line 10:** "o," "ou," "o"
- **Line 11:** "O," "i," "i"
- **Line 12:** "o," "i," "i"
- **Line 21:** "o," "O," "o"
- **Line 22:** "ou," "ou"
- **Line 32:** "i," "io"
- **Line 33:** "i," "io," "i," "ion"

VOCABULARY

Etherized (Line 3) - A patient that is "etherized" has been put to sleep with anesthesia using ether fumes. (This was an early form of anesthesia).

Insidious (Line 9) - Something with "insidious" intent is harmful or malicious, but in a subtle way—often it is impossible to realize that something is insidious until it is too late.

Michaelangelo (Line 14, Line 36) - Michaelangelo was an Italian Renaissance sculptor and painter. The fact that the women are "talking of Michelangelo" thus suggests a knowledge of art and high culture.

Muzzle (Line 16) - The "muzzle" is the part of an animal's face that sticks out—like the nose of a cat or dog. By describing the fog as having a "muzzle," the speaker is comparing it to an animal.

Presume (Line 54, Line 61, Line 68) - To "presume" in this context means to assume that one has the right to do something—even when that is not the case. The speaker fears that to express himself would be to "presume" more than he has the right to do.

Butt-ends (Line 60) - The speaker compares his life to the "butt-end" of a cigarette, or the part of the cigarette that is ground into the ashtray and thrown away.

Digress (Line 66) - To "digress" means to be distracted from one's main subject—as when the speaker turns to new topics when he has been speaking about something else.

Ragged (Line 73) - Something "ragged" is old, ratty, or torn. The speaker imagines that, as a sea creature, he would have "ragged" claws—perhaps because he thinks that he too is old or torn.

Scuttling (Line 74) - To "scuttle" means to walk with short, hurried steps, much like a crab might rush across the seafloor. Here, it is not presented as a particularly dignified means of movement.

Malingers (Line 77) - To "malinger" is to pretend to be ill or incapacitated—as when the speaker speculates that the evening is only "malingering" or pretending to be asleep.

Marmalade (Line 88) - A type of jam or fruit preserve.

Lazarus (Line 94) - Lazarus is a Biblical figure who was raised from the dead by Jesus. According to the Bible, he is thus one of the few people ever to have seen the afterlife and come back to tell the tale.

Prince Hamlet (Line 111) - Hamlet is the protagonist of Shakespeare's *Hamlet*, one of the most famous plays in the English literary canon. The play tells the story of a prince who tries to avenge the death of his father, who has been murdered by Hamlet's uncle.

Deferential (Line 115) - Someone who is "deferential" is polite and respectful to their superiors. The speaker imagines that he would be "deferential" to the prince, rather than being a protagonist in his own right.

Politic (Line 116) - Someone who is "politic" is always cautious and careful to suit their speech and actions to the circumstances. The speaker imagines that he would be this kind of person in a play, rather than the hero.

Meticulous (Line 116) - To be meticulous is to pay attention to details—to be very careful and painstaking in whatever it is you're doing.

High sentence (Line 117) - Lofty speech. Essentially the speaker is saying, were he to play a part in *Hamlet*, he would be an advisor whose words *sound* wise yet are a bit obtuse, or hard to actually understand.

Obtuse (Line 117) - Difficult to understand.

The Fool (Line 119) - The speaker suggests that he would be the "Fool" if he appeared in Shakespeare's *Hamlet*. Around the time that Shakespeare was writing, the Fool was a stock character who appeared in plays as comic relief.

Trousers (Line 121, Line 123) - The British English word for "pants."

Seaward (Line 126) - Towards the sea.

Sea-girls (Line 130) - Mermaids.

Wreathed (Line 130) - To be wrapped up with or circled by something; the speaker is saying the mermaids are wrapped in seaweed.

FORM, METER, & RHYME

FORM

"The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock" doesn't follow a traditional form; its line and stanza lengths vary dramatically throughout. However, one literary form that it definitely does follow is the dramatic monologue—a direct address between the speaker and the reader. This is a highly intimate form that emphasizes the close connection between the speaker and the listener or reader to whom he has chosen to reveal his secrets.

This expectation of revelation is established very early on in the poem through its epigraph, taken from Canto 27 of Dante's *Inferno* (a poem that narrates a Pilgrim's journey through Hell). Translated, the lines read as follows:

> If I thought that my reply would be to someone who would ever return to earth, this flame would remain without further movement; but as no one has ever returned alive from this gulf, if what I hear is true, I can answer you with no fear of infamy.

The lines are spoken by Guido da Montefeltro, a sinner confined in Hell. Feeling confident that the Pilgrim will not be able to return to earth to tell his story, he promises to confess all his sins. These lines thus set up the expectation that the speaker of the poem, like Guido, is about to confess his sins in the form of a direct address, a private conversation between himself and the reader. Since these lines are set in Dante's Hell, it also implies that the world of "Prufrock" is also a kind of Hell from which the speaker cannot escape. In a further twist, however, Dante's Pilgrim *does* eventually escape Hell and return to earth. This turns the reader of "Prufrock" into a Dante-esque figure who can go to Hell and live to tell the tale.

The poem's status as a dramatic monologue explains the speaker's continuing digressions and shifts to other seemingly, unrelated topics. The form allows the poet to experiment with a stream-of-consciousness style of narration—in which the reader is given access to the speaker's thoughts exactly as they cross his mind. This gives the poem an immediacy that is arguably lacking in other, more traditional literary forms of narration.

METER

"The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock" at first might look like it has no discernible meter. Its patterns of stresses often significantly diverge in the course of even a few lines, and it can't be said to fit many of the traditional meters. However, although the poem doesn't follow any one particular meter all the way through, it does move in and out of different meters. This formal flexibility allows the poet to experiment with and interrogate different metrical forms, just as he experiments with and questions many of the traditional assumptions of the Western literary and cultural tradition.

Much of the poem is written simply in "free verse"—verse with no meter to speak of, as in lines like 120 and 121:

> I grow old ... I grow old ...
> I shall wear the bottoms of my trousers rolled.

These lines don't follow any discernible meter, in a formal laxity that mirrors the speaker's own sense of lack of direction and meaning. At other moments, however, the speaker employs blank verse in iambic pentameter, with its alternating pattern of five stressed and five unstressed syllables. Note lines 73 and 74:

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

This is not perfect—there is a trochee opening line 74—but it is still quite regular compared to other lines of the poem. It might seem odd that the speaker should employ one of the most traditional and respected meters in English literature in a poem generally noted for its anarchic and innovative "free verse." However, the speaker frequently uses these traditional meters in order to question and deconstruct them. For example, he sometimes also uses hexameter (in both iambic and trochaic forms), the traditional six-foot unit of heroic classical poetry, (seen, for example, in *The Odyssey*). However, these uses are rarely "heroic" in the conventional sense, and instead often contribute to descriptions of unsettling or disturbing images, as in lines 2 and 3:

> When the evening is spread out against the sky
> Like a patient etherized upon a table;

It is startling to see this trochaic hexameter used for descriptions of surgery and anesthesia. Even when the poet does use traditional metrical forms, the subject matter focuses on the conditions of modern life. In this way, the poet is inaugurating a new form of poetry that uses traditional meters for untraditional purposes.

RHYME SCHEME

"The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock" is written largely in blank verse, meaning that it doesn't rhyme. However, this is not to say that the poem makes no use of rhyme . On the contrary, rhyme makes frequent—albeit inconsistent—appearances in the poem. For example, the first two lines feature an AA rhyme:

Let us go then, you and I,
When the evening is spread out against the sky

Such AA rhymes appear at various places in the poem.

Other lines use an AABB pattern, which also appears in the first stanza:

Let us go, through certain half-deserted streets,
The muttering retreats
Of restless nights in one-night cheap hotels
And sawdust restaurants with oyster-shells:

Rhyme thus has an oddly prominent role at the beginning of a poem that generally does not use end-rhymes. Clearly the poet is still making a significant use of rhyme, even when he seems to turn away from it. Rhyme is given similar prominence in the poem's most frequently-used refrain, the rhyming couplet, which also follows an AA rhyme scheme:

In the room the women come and go
Talking of Michelangelo,

The poem also features use of *rime riche*, the repetition of the exact same word at the end of the line. This appears in lines 15-16, which rhyme "window-panes" and "window-panes."

Often, though, the speaker's rhyme pairings seem comical or deflationary, as in lines like these:

Should I, after tea and cakes and ices,
Have the strength to force the moment to its crisis?

I have seen the moment of my greatness flicker,
And I have seen the eternal Footman hold my coat,
and snicker

"Flicker" is paired with "snicker" and "ices" is paired with "crisis," in two incongruous associations. The pairing is "crisis" with "ices" makes the speaker's predicament seem less serious and even comical. Similarly, "snicker" is a deflation of the speaker's sense of his possible "moment of greatness."

Rhyme, then, has an ambiguous function in the poem. It is seemingly not, as it would have been for 19th-century poets, an opportunity for the poet to show off his virtuosic skill with language. Instead, at the turn of the 20th century, when "Prufrock" was written, rhyme starts to look in this poem like something a bit silly and out-dated—an opportunity to show what is absurd about the world, rather than a performance of artistic accomplishment.

SPEAKER

The speaker of "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock" is an aging man confronting his increasing sense of isolation and alienation from the world around him. He may be the man—"J. Alfred Prufrock"—named in the title, although the poem never confirms or denies this, since the speaker's name is not mentioned again. Indeed, even this name itself is rather unclear, since what the "J" stands for never gets revealed. There is something about the speaker, then, that always remains mysterious.

In his physical appearance, he is not particularly distinctive; he describes himself as "slightly bald," with "thin" arms and legs. His inner life, however, is a mass of contradictions and indecisions. He is so anxious about making the wrong choice that he can barely make any decisions at all. It is challenging for him to contemplate even leaving his room to go out and meet others in the world, since he admits that he always feels the need to "prepare a face" and fears that people are judging him. He has strong and deep feelings, and frequently expresses the desire to voice an "overwhelming question" to a person (possibly a woman) who he cares about. However, he never manages to take that decisive step and "force the moment to its crisis," since he is too worried that he will be misunderstood. In this sense, although the speaker shares his intimate thoughts and feelings with the reader, he is unable to express himself to the people around him.

SETTING

The poem is set in what often appears to be a desolate and hostile urban landscape. The speaker describes "half-deserted streets," "cheap hotels," and a city clogged with "yellow fog" that rubs against "window-panes," "drains," and "chimneys." The overall impression is that of a city suffering from pollution, and that there is a persistent divide between the poor, who live in these hostile streets, and the middle-class, who sit in drawing rooms drinking tea and "talking of Michelangelo."

But although the modern city is the most immediate and obvious setting for the poem, it takes in other settings as well. The speaker at various points appears to be both outside, prowling the city at night, and indoors, "stretched on the floor" after his afternoon tea. The most dramatic metamorphosis of the setting occurs at the end of the poem, when the speaker claims that he is confined in an underground cavern, listening to the sounds of mermaids singing. This ambiguous, dreamlike ending suggests that perhaps it is the city that has been the mirage all along, and the reality is that the speaker has drowned himself beneath the waves.

CONTEXT

LITERARY CONTEXT

"The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock" is considered a landmark in 20th-century English literary history. Written by T.S. Eliot in 1910 and published in 1915, it shocked many contemporary critics when it was first published, with its irregular metrical and rhyme patterns, sometimes disturbing subject matter, and depiction of the alienating conditions of modern life. In this sense, "Prufrock" represents a decisive break with Victorian poets and writers like Samuel Taylor Coleridge, William Wordsworth, and John Ruskin, as well as the literary modes that dominated the late 19th and early-20th centuries. It rejects the rigid meter and sometimes sing-song rhymes of Victorian poetry, opting instead for a mix of verse forms and the novel form of "free verse," poetry with no discernible meter.

This is not to say, however, that Eliot entirely rejects all prior poetic models. On the contrary, the poem frequently alludes to older poets and poetic forms. First and foremost, it reflects his deep reading of Dante, one of Eliot's favorite poets—the poem opens with an epigraph from the *Inferno* and arguably transforms and updates Dante's vision of Hell into a modern urban landscape. Eliot also explicitly alludes to Shakespeare, when the speaker notes ironically that "I am not Prince Hamlet," and makes implicit allusions to Homer, Andrew Marvell, and Robert Browning.

Far from turning away from the canon that has come before him, then, the poet takes these traditions and re-frames them—as in the *Hamlet* passage, when the speaker compares himself negatively to the protagonist of Shakespeare's play. "Prufrock" alludes to the "greats" of the Western literary canon, but it also seems profoundly ambivalent about what greatness even means anymore in the modern world.

Ironically, "Prufrock" has become a "great" of another kind—the first great modernist poem. Modernism was a literary movement of the early 20th century that emphasized a sense of large-scale social and aesthetic change in the wake of significant disruptions to European life (namely, World War I). With its revision of traditional forms and haunting depiction of isolation and ennui in the modern world, "Prufrock" was an inspiration for later modernist poets like William Butler Yeats and W.H. Auden, who dealt with similar themes.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

"Prufrock" is considered one of the defining texts of modernism because it speaks to many of the social and historical conditions that characterized that era in English literary history. At the beginning of the 20th century, European and American life had undergone significant and irrevocable changes. Industrialization had transformed society and the workforce, creating both new economic opportunities as well as a sharper division between rich and poor. The speaker of "Prufrock" registers these changes in society with his sense of the sharp class divisions between middle-class drawing rooms where "women come and go / Talking of Michelangelo" and the "half-deserted streets" with "one-night cheap hotels." New technologies and industries improved quality of life for many people—bringing in, for example, wider access to electricity—while also creating the new problems of pollution and unsafe working conditions. The speaker is also alive to these contradictions when he describes the "yellow fog" of polluted smoke that seems to choke the city, pervading every corner of the streets.

When "Prufrock" was published, in 1915, World War I had just begun. This "Great War" continued and in many ways finalized the break-down of traditional social divisions and ways of life that had begun at the turn of the century. Many young men were killed and the traditional English aristocracy fell into decay. For writers like Eliot, destruction of an old way of life brought new artistic opportunities, as well as an attitude of skepticism and questioning of authority. In "Prufrock," this spirit is felt in the poem's ambiguous and sometimes mocking attitude to convention and the traditional sources of cultural authority.

MORE RESOURCES

EXTERNAL RESOURCES

- Critical Reception of "Prufrock" — This overview of critical responses to the poem focuses particularly on the period between 1917-1919, when many people were shocked by the poem's "free verse" style and disturbing subject matter. (http://www.usask.ca/english/prufrock/recstart.htm)
- A Close Reading of the Poem — This article from the British Library provides an accessible introduction to the poem's themes and some of its formal features, with special attention to the distinctive voice of the speaker. (https://www.bl.uk/20th-century-literature/articles/a-close-reading-of-the-love-song-of-j-alfred-prufrock)
- Audio Recording of the Poem — Hear the poem read by T.S. Eliot himself! (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JAO3QTU4PzY)
- Fragmentation, Interruption, and Fog — Another scholarly but accessible article from the British Library analyzes the poem with attention to its use of symbols, particularly the pervasiveness of fog and smoke. The author also makes sense of the poem's characteristic and perplexing fragmentation. (https://www.bl.uk/20th-century-literature/articles/the-love-song-of-j-alfred-prufrock-fragmentation-interruption-and-fog)

- Annotated Version of the Poem — This is an annotated version of the poem with commentary and explanations of the poem's allusions. (http://www.usask.ca/english/prufrock/prustart.htm)

LITCHARTS ON OTHER T. S. ELIOT POEMS

- Journey of the Magi
- Preludes
- Rhapsody on a Windy Night
- The Hollow Men

HOW TO CITE

MLA

Houghton, Eve. "*The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock.*" *LitCharts*. LitCharts LLC, 23 Jan 2019. Web. 22 Apr 2020.

CHICAGO MANUAL

Houghton, Eve. "*The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock.*" LitCharts LLC, January 23, 2019. Retrieved April 22, 2020. https://www.litcharts.com/poetry/t-s-eliot/the-love-song-of-j-alfred-prufrock.