

Dramatic Monologue: “The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock”

A **dramatic monologue** is a poem or speech in a play or novel in which a character speaks his or her thought aloud about a crucial event or feeling in the character’s life. In “The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock,” Prufrock is speaking to a silent companion – perhaps a part of himself. What Prufrock says reveals a deep split between what he desires and his ability to achieve his desires. Several times in the poem, Prufrock repeats these questions: “Do I dare?” and “How should I presume?” These repeated lines may suggest that Prufrock wishes to act but is deeply afraid of failure and rejection.

An **allusion** is a reference to a well-known person, place, event, literary work, or work of art. Eliot and other writers use allusions as a kind of shorthand to suggest complex ideas in just a few words. The allusions in “Prufrock” build a complex web of meaning.

Directions: *Read the lines from the poem and answer the questions.*

1. In the following lines, what kind of women does Prufrock see? How does the allusion to Michelangelo contribute to your interpretation?

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

2. In the following lines, what might Prufrock wish he could dare to do?

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?

3. What could these lines show Prufrock is afraid of? To what does he compare himself Why is this an apt comparison?

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?

4. What might Prufrock want to do at this point? Why is he unable to do it?

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.

5. What themes of literature from the Modern period come through in this poem?

T.S. Eliot (1888–1965). *Prufrock and Other Observations*. 1917.

1. The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock

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

us go then, you and I,
in the evening is spread out against the sky
a patient etherised upon a table;
as go, through certain half-deserted streets,
muttering retreats
restless nights in one-night cheap hotels
sawdust restaurants with oyster-shells:
ets that follow like a tedious argument
insidious intent
ead you to an overwhelming question ...
do not ask, "What is it?"
as go and make our visit.
e room the women come and go
ing of Michelangelo.

yellow fog that rubs its back upon the window-panes,
yellow smoke that rubs its muzzle on the window-panes
ed its tongue into the corners of the evening,
gered upon the pools that stand in drains,
fall upon its back the soot that falls from chimneys,

ped by the terrace, made a sudden leap,
seeing that it was a soft October night,
ed once about the house, and fell asleep.

indeed there will be time
the yellow smoke that slides along the street,
bing its back upon the window-panes;
e will be time, there will be time
repare a face to meet the faces that you meet;
e will be time to murder and create,
time for all the works and days of hands
: lift and drop a question on your plate;
e for you and time for me,
time yet for a hundred indecisions,
for a hundred visions and revisions,
re the taking of a toast and tea.

ie room the women come and go
ing of Michelangelo.

indeed there will be time
onder, “Do I dare?” and, “Do I dare?”
e to turn back and descend the stair,
i a bald spot in the middle of my hair—
y will say: “How his hair is growing thin!”]
morning coat, my collar mounting firmly to the chin,
necktie rich and modest, but asserted by a simple pin—
y will say: “But how his arms and legs are thin!”]

dare
urb the universe?
minute there is time
decisions and revisions which a minute will reverse.

I have known them all already, known them all:—
e known the evenings, mornings, afternoons,
re measured out my life with coffee spoons;
ow the voices dying with a dying fall
eath the music from a farther room.
how should I presume?

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

I have known the arms already, known them all—
s that are braceleted and white and bare
in the lamplight, downed with light brown hair!]
perfume from a dress
: makes me so digress?
s that lie along a table, or wrap about a shawl.
d should I then presume?
d how should I begin?

. . . .
I I say, I have gone at dusk through narrow streets

watched the smoke that rises from the pipes
lonely men in shirt-sleeves, leaning out of windows?...

ould have been a pair of ragged claws
tling across the floors of silent seas.

the afternoon, the evening, sleeps so peacefully!
othed by long fingers,
ep ... tired ... or it malingers,
ched on the floor, here beside you and me.
uld I, after tea and cakes and ices,
e the strength to force the moment to its crisis?
though I have wept and fasted, wept and prayed,
ugh I have seen my head [grown slightly bald] brought in upon a platter,
no prophet—and here's no great matter;
ve seen the moment of my greatness flicker,
I have seen the eternal Footman hold my coat, and snicker,
in short, I was afraid.

would it have been worth it, after all,
r the cups, the marmalade, the tea,
ng the porcelain, among some talk of you and me,

uld it have been worth while,
ave bitten off the matter with a smile,
ave squeezed the universe into a ball
oll it toward some overwhelming question,
ay: "I am Lazarus, come from the dead,

ie back to tell you all, I shall tell you all"—
ie, settling a pillow by her head,

ould say: “That is not what I meant at all.

at is not it, at all.”

would it have been worth it, after all,

ld it have been worth while,

r the sunsets and the dooryards and the sprinkled streets,

r the novels, after the teacups, after the skirts that trail along the floor—

this, and so much more?—

impossible to say just what I mean!

as if a magic lantern threw the nerves in patterns on a screen:

ld it have been worth while

ie, settling a pillow or throwing off a shawl,

turning toward the window, should say:

at is not it at all,

at is not what I meant, at all.”

I am not Prince Hamlet, nor was meant to be;

an attendant lord, one that will do

well a progress, start a scene or two,

ise the prince; no doubt, an easy tool,

rential, glad to be of use,

ic, cautious, and meticulous;

of high sentence, but a bit obtuse;

mes, indeed, almost ridiculous—

ost, at times, the Fool.

ow old ... I grow old ...

ll wear the bottoms of my trousers rolled.

l I part my hair behind? Do I dare to eat a peach?

ll wear white flannel trousers, and walk upon the beach.

ve heard the mermaids singing, each to each.

not think that they will sing to me.

ve seen them riding seaward on the waves

bbing the white hair of the waves blown back

n the wind blows the water white and black.

ave lingered in the chambers of the sea

ea-girls wreathed with seaweed red and brown

human voices wake us, and we drown.