

The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock Summary

Writer: T. S. Eliot | Generated: Jan 26, 2026

Summary

Introduction: T. S. Eliot's "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock" is not a true love song but a cry of fear and loneliness. Prufrock is a shy, aging man who wishes to express love but cannot. His thoughts move through dark city streets filled with fog and empty rooms. He hesitates, asks, "Do I dare?" and worries about time, age, and people's judgment. He dreams of being brave like Lazarus or Hamlet, yet feels weak and unworthy. The poem's title is ironic because his "love song" has no love. It is full of only hesitation and self-doubt. In the end, he hears mermaids singing but knows they will not sing to him. The poem portrays a modern man's struggle with fear, failure, and a loss of emotion.

Invitation and Overwhelming Question: The poem opens with an epigraph from Dante. It signals a private confession. Prufrock invites a companion: "Let us go." Evening lies across the sky like an etherized patient. The image is shocking and lifeless. They move through half-empty streets, cheap hotels, and sawdust restaurants. The streets feel like a long, sly argument. They seem to lead toward one "overwhelming question." He stops the question at once. He says, 'Do not ask what it is.' He only suggests a visit. Inside, elegant women come and go. They talk about Michelangelo. The scene sounds social but distant.

Fog, Time, and Delay: A yellow fog moves like a cat. It rubs at window-panes, licks corners, gathers soot, and curls to sleep. This soft October night invites delay, not action. Prufrock promises "there will be time." He repeats the phrase many times. Time seems endless, yet empty. He will prepare a face to meet the faces of others. He will "murder and create," then hesitate again. He imagines countless indecisions, visions, and revisions before "toast and tea." The refrain returns: women talk of Michelangelo. Culture keeps moving, while he holds back.

Self-Consciousness and the Question of "Daring": Prufrock asks, "Do I dare?" He imagines turning back down the stairs. He notices a bald spot. He hears voices judging his thin hair and thin limbs. He lists his proper clothes and modest tie. Still, he wonders, "Do I dare disturb the universe?" He admits how quickly decisions reverse. He claims he already knows these patterns of life. He knows mornings, afternoons, and evenings. He has "measured out" life with coffee spoons. He hears faint voices behind the music in another room. He asks, "So

how should I presume?"

Social Gaze, Desire, and Paralysis: He "has known the eyes." People fix him with phrases that define him. He feels pinned like an insect on a wall. In that state, he cannot begin to speak honestly. He has "known the arms," pale, braceleted, and bare. In lamplight, they have light brown hair. Perfume distracts him. He digresses and loses focus. He sees arms on tables or wrapped in shawls. He asks again if he should presume. He cannot find a starting point. He pictures narrow streets at dusk. Lonely men smoke at windows. He wishes he were only "a pair of ragged claws." Then he could scuttle across silent seas and avoid pain.

Tea-Table Crisis and Fear of Death: Afternoon and evening lie like a tired body, smoothed by fingers. The moment is peaceful, almost false. After "tea and cakes and ices," should he push the moment to a crisis? He has wept, fasted, and prayed. He imagines his head on a platter, like John the Baptist. Yet he is "no prophet," and the matter is small. He has seen his greatness flicker and fade. He has seen the "eternal Footman" (death) hold his coat and snicker. The admission is direct: "I was afraid."

The Failed Confession and the Limits of Speech: He asks if speech would have been worth it. After cups, marmalade, and talk, should he "bite off" the matter? Should he squeeze the universe into a ball and roll it to the question? He imagines declaring, "I am Lazarus... I shall tell you all." But he hears the likely reply: "That is not what I meant at all." The fear repeats. He cannot "say just what I mean." He imagines a magic lantern showing his nerves in patterns. Even then, the answer would be the same. A woman by a window would still deny his meaning.

Not Hamlet, but an Aging "Attendant Lord": He rejects the role of Prince Hamlet. He sees himself as an attendant lord. He swells a procession, starts a scene, and gives cautious advice. He is politic, meticulous, and somewhat obtuse. At times, he is almost ridiculous, almost the Fool. He repeats: "I grow old." He will roll his trouser bottoms. He asks if he dares to eat a peach. He pictures white flannel trousers and a beach walk. He hears mermaids singing to each other. He does not think they will sing to him. He sees them riding waves and combing the "white hair" of the sea. Finally, "we" linger in sea-chambers with sea-girls. Human voices wake "us," and "we drown." The love song ends in private defeat. Desire meets hesitation, and vision meets water and silence.