



The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock

by T.S. Eliot

In a Nutshell

"The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock" is totally a modernist poem.

Whoa, whoa, hold on there a sec - what's this all about?

OK, so you might have heard of a little movement called "modernism." Nobody out there has a great definition of modernism, but here's ours. For most of history, most people lived really far away from one another in small villages. They didn't travel much or interact with one another. This is the pre-modern world. Then, along come all these new technologies - everything from sewer systems to railroads - and suddenly lots of people are living close together in cities, and even those who aren't living close together are able to find out what's going on with the help of (from oldest to most recent) telegrams, newspapers, telephones, cell phones, and the internet. Welcome to the modern world - but, of course, you were here already, Mr. or Mrs. Internet User.

Nowadays, we're all used to living in the modern world, but it wasn't always that way. The "modernists" basically include all the artists and writers who were living smack in the middle of the huge, massive transformation from olden days to modern times, which was roughly the end of the 19th century to the middle of the 20th century. In their work, they try to make sense of all these changes, which no one quite understands. Got it?

So "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock" is totally a modernist poem. Its author, [T.S. Eliot](#), was an American who moved to Britain in 1914. Eliot wrote most of "Prufrock" when he was 22 years old (!), in the years before the start of [World War I](#). At that time, Britain was considered the most modern country in the world. The poem is set in a big, dirty city, and its speaker is a very unhappy man who is afraid of living and therefore bored all the time. War, cities, boredom, and fear: these are all classic modernist themes.

Eliot got "Prufrock" published in [Poetry](#) magazine in 1915 with the help of his buddy Ezra Pound, who was like a friendly uncle-figure to a lot of the European modernists. In 1917 it was published as part of a small book called [Prufrock and Other Observations](#).

It was considered pretty experimental at the time, and a lot of people hated it. The "Literary Supplement" of [The London Times](#) had this to say: "The fact that these things occurred to the mind of Mr Eliot is surely of the very smallest importance to anyone, even to himself. They certainly have no relation to poetry..." (*Times Literary Supplement* 21 June 1917, no. 805, 299). A lot of people still hate the poem, mostly because they had it pounded into them by overly strict teachers in school, which is the quickest way to suck the fun out of anything. Fortunately, Eliot has fallen a bit out of style lately, so now's the perfect time to pick up the poem and decide for yourself how you feel about it.

After the publication of "Prufrock," Eliot went on to publish some of the most important

poems of the 20th century, including "The Wasteland," his best known. He was awarded the [Nobel Prize for Literature](#) in 1948.

Why Should I Care?

First off, we've got to address the haters.

[Garrison Keillor](#), a humorous newspaper columnist and radio host, has called "Prufrock" "a small, dark mope-fest of a poem." He writes: "This poem pretty much killed off the pleasure of poetry for millions of people who got dragged through it in high school" ([source](#)).

This is a standard reaction to many of [T.S. Eliot](#)'s poems. You, too, may be in the process of being dragged through the poem in one of your classes. It would definitely be a chore to have to find all of Eliot's smarty-pants references to classic works of literature, and, read from a certain angle, the poem is pretty dark. BUT...we also think this is one of the funniest works of the century. Come on, it's about a skinny, bald guy who talks in nursery rhymes and wishes he were a crab. Forget Eliot the bookworm; this is Eliot the wicked satirist, poking fun at "the man."

If he had wanted to, Eliot could have written a *really* mopey poem. Considering the time he was writing, it would have made perfect sense. "Prufrock" was published during [World War I](#), one of the most violent conflicts in human history. It was not a time to write about birds and flowers. But instead of crying into his British ale, he wrote a hilariously pointed attack on all the well-dressed, upstanding citizens who loved their material pleasures - their tea and marmalade - more than they loved other people.

Most of all, reading "Prufrock" should make you want to drop everything and go tell your secret crush about your feelings for him or her. It's a warning to all procrastinators: if you put something off once, you'll likely put it off forever. Don't be like Prufrock and focus on the worst-case scenario. And, if you do score a date with your secret crush, whatever you do, don't take him or her to a "sawdust restaurant with oyster shells." We hear the atmosphere leaves something to be desired.