Chapter 11

Make It New!

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Preparing to Read

The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock

by T. S. Eliot

LITERARY SKILLS FOCUS: DRAMATIC MONOLOGUE

A dramatic monologue is a poem in which one character speaks directly to one or more listeners. In Eliot’s poem, the words are spoken by a man named Prufrock. In a dramatic monologue, you learn everything about the setting, the situation, other characters, and even the speaker’s own personality through the speaker’s words. Like people in real life, speakers in dramatic monologues give their own spin to the events and circumstances around them. As you read, you will begin to see the world as Prufrock sees it. Sometimes Prufrock’s line of reasoning is interrupted by an unexpected thought. You will have to supply any missing connections in the speaker’s stream of thoughts.

READING SKILLS FOCUS: SYNTHESIZING IMPORTANT IDEAS IN A POEM

The speaker in a dramatic monologue often reveals his or her inner longings and deepest fears—all of which can reflect ideas about the period during which the poem is set. As you read, synthesize important ideas, or find a connection among different ideas.

Use the Skill  Use a chart like the one below to list Prufrock’s longings and fears in each stanza (a group of lines in a poem set apart from other lines). Later, you will use what you have written in the chart to synthesize ideas in the poem.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Prufrock’s longings</th>
<th>Prufrock’s fears</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Stanza 1: He wants to take an evening walk through the city with somebody. He does not want to talk about the “overwhelming question.”</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

Reading Standard 3.4
Analyze ways in which poets use imagery, personification, figures of speech, and sounds to evoke readers’ emotions.

3.5c
Evaluate the philosophical, political, religious, ethical, and social influences of the historical period that shaped the characters, plots, and settings.

3.6
Analyze the way in which authors through the centuries have used archetypes drawn from myth and tradition in literature, film, political speeches, and religious writings (e.g., how the archetypes of banishment from an ideal world may be used to interpret Shakespeare’s tragedy Macbeth).
The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock

SELECTION VOCABULARY

**tedious** (TEE DEE UHS) adj.: long and boring.

*Prufrock thinks his private thoughts would probably seem tedious to others.*

**digress** (DY GREHS) v.: get off the main subject.

*The rambling narrative style of the poem allows the speaker to digress easily from the topic.*

**overwhelming** (OH VUHR HWEHLM IHNG) adj.: overpowering.

*The idea of communicating intimately with another person is overwhelming and frightening to Prufrock.*

**obtuse** (UHB TOOS) adj.: slow to understand; stupid.

*Prufrock feels that he is obtuse when it comes to relating to others.*

**WORD STUDY**

**DIRECTIONS:** After each sentence below, write the vocabulary word from the list above that could best replace each underlined word.

1. Our class discussion tended to **stray** from the matter at hand whenever someone asked an off-topic question. ___________________________

2. The amount of homework that I have is **overpowering**—there is no way I can finish all of it tonight. ___________________________

3. When everyone else began laughing, I pretended to understand the joke to avoid looking **foolish**. ___________________________

4. My grandmother shared the most **tiresome** details about her trip. ___________________________
The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock

by T. S. Eliot

BACKGROUND

Thomas Stearns Eliot—known to readers as T. S. Eliot—was born in St. Louis to an intellectual family with New England roots. After graduating from Harvard, Eliot studied for a time in Paris and then moved to London to begin his career as a poet. In 1915, just a year after the outbreak of World War I, Eliot published “The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock,” the poem that made him famous.

During this time, many Europeans and Americans felt a sense of helpless paralysis in the face of the modern forces of technology and industrialism. The individual no longer seemed to count for anything; the war in Europe had quickly turned into a mechanized slaughter in which millions of young men were losing their lives, it seemed to some, for nothing.

S’io credessi che mia risposta fosse
a persona che mai tornasse al mondo,
questa fiamma staria senza più scosse.
Ma per ciò che giammai di questo fondo
non tornò vivo alcun, s’io do il vero,
senza tema d’infamia ti rispondo.¹

Let us go then, you and I, A
When the evening is spread out against the sky
Like a patient etherized² upon a table; B
Let us go, through certain half-deserted streets,

¹ This quotation is from Dante’s epic poem The Divine Comedy (1321). The speaker is Guido da Montefeltro, a man sent to Hell for dispensing evil advice. He speaks from a flame that quivers when he talks: “If I thought my answer were to one who ever could return to the world, this flame should shake no more; but since none ever did return alive from this depth, if what I hear be true, without fear of infamy I answer this” (Inferno, Canto 27, lines 61–66). Think of Prufrock as speaking from his own personal hell.

² etherized: anesthetized; paralyzed.
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. B

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,4 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. C

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;

4. morning coat: formal daytime dress for men.
I know the voices dying with a dying fall\(^5\)
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\(^6\) 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? \(\textsf{A}\)

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? \(\textsf{B}\)
Arms that lie along a table, or wrap about a shawl.
   
   And should I then presume?

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\(5.\) dying fall: in music, notes that fade away.

\(6.\) formulated: reduced to a formula and made insignificant.
And how should I begin?

. . . . .

70 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. C

. . . . .

75 And the afternoon, the evening, sleeps so peacefully!
Smoothed by long fingers,
Asleep . . . tired . . . or it malingers,7
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,8
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,

85 and snicker,
And in short, I was afraid. D

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,

90 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,

7. malingers: pretends to be sick to get out of work or duty.
8. my head . . . a platter: biblical allusion to the execution of John the Baptist (Mark 6:17–28; Matthew 14:3–11). The dancing of Salome so pleased Herod Antipas, ruler of ancient Galilee, that he offered her any reward she desired. Encouraged by her mother, who hated John, Salome asked for John's head. Herod ordered the man beheaded and his head delivered on a serving plate.
To say: “I am Lazarus,\(^9\) 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.” \(^A\)

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\(^10\) 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,\(^11\) start a scene or two,

Advise the prince; no doubt, an easy tool,

Deferential, glad to be of use, \(^B\)

Politic, cautious, and meticulous;

Full of high sentence,\(^12\) but a bit obtuse;

At times, indeed, almost ridiculous—

Almost, at times, the Fool. \(^C\)

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9. Lazarus: In the Bible, a man that Jesus brought back from the dead (John 11:38–44).

10. magic lantern: early type of projector that could magnify and project images.

11. swell a progress: fill out a scene in a play or pageant by serving as an extra.

12. high sentence: pompous talk.
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.

**Word Study**

*Lingered* means “remained longer than is usual or expected.” Write a synonym (word with a similar meaning) for * lingered*. Use a thesaurus to help you.

**VOCABULARY**

**LITERARY ANALYSIS**

During the time this was written, it was fashionable for young men to turn up the cuffs of their pants. How do you think Prufrock feels about growing old?
The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock

VOCABULARY DEVELOPMENT

DIRECTIONS: Write “Yes” after each sentence if the vocabulary word is being used correctly. Write “No” if it is being used incorrectly, and rewrite the sentence so that the word is used correctly.

1. Prufrock worries that women will find his conversation tedious or uninteresting. ____________________________

2. Prufrock tends to digress in trousers with the bottoms rolled up. _______

3. Because he is uncomfortable in social situations, Prufrock considers the idea of approaching strangers at parties overwhelming. _____________

4. T. S. Eliot’s poem has taken some obtuse from critics. ______________

LITERARY SKILLS FOCUS: DRAMATIC MONOLOGUE

DIRECTIONS: Complete the chart below by writing what you learn about J. Alfred Prufrock’s personality from the following lines of Eliot’s dramatic monologue:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Quotation</th>
<th>What I learn about J. Alfred Prufrock</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>“Do I dare / Disturb the universe?” (lines 45–46)</td>
<td>1.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“And in short, I was afraid. / And would it have been worth it, after all . . .” (lines 86–87)</td>
<td>2.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

READING SKILLS FOCUS: SYNTHESIZING IMPORTANT IDEAS IN A POEM

DIRECTIONS: Using the chart you completed while reading the poem, write a brief paragraph on a separate sheet of paper synthesizing important ideas in “The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock.” What do the phrases from your chart have in common?