

T. S. Eliot

## The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock (1915)

5           *S o'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.*<sup>1</sup>

10           Let us go then, you and I,  
When the evening is spread out against the sky  
Like a patient etherised 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  
15           Of insidious intent  
To lead you to an overwhelming question ...  
Oh, do not ask, "What is it?"  
Let us go and make our visit.

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

25           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.

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

<sup>1</sup>"If I believed that my reply were made / to one who could ever climb to the world again / this flame would shake me no more. But since no shade / ever returned—if what I am told is true— / from this blind world into the living light, / without fear of dishonor I answer you." *Dante Alighieri, The Inferno*, trans. Henry Wadsworth Longfellow (*The Divine Comedy of Dante Translated by Henry Wadsworth Longfellow*, August 1997) (27:61–66):c:ext.

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 35  
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. 40

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, 45  
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!"] 50  
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:— 55  
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? 60

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 65  
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!] 70  
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?  
 75 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? ...

80

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.  
 85 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,

90

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.

95

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 toward some overwhelming question,  
 100 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,

100

Should say: "That is not what I meant at all.  
 That is not it, at all."

105

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—

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CRITICAL THINKING

1. In presenting the argument about claim for this arg
2. What specific e wrote in questio

And this, and so much more?—  
It is impossible to say just what I mean! 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, 115  
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, 120  
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. 125

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. 130

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 135  
By sea-girls wreathed with seaweed red and brown  
Till human voices wake us, and we drown.

#### CRITICAL THINKING QUESTIONS

1. In presenting the reader with J. Alfred Prufrock, Eliot is also presenting an argument about an individual's sense of self in modern society. Articulate a claim for this argument.
2. What specific evidence is offered in the poem to support the claim you wrote in question 1?

Answer this question →

3. Add your voice to the vast array of interpretations for the poem's closing three lines. In doing so, apply your creative thinking skills: Think boldly and freely and without censoring your thinking.

WRITING TOPIC

Does the claim you articulated apply exclusively to Prufrock, or would you extend it to apply generally to persons today? Write your own argument that either limits or extends the poem's claim; use evidence from the poem and your own experience to support your claim.

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Jack Gilbert

Trying to Sleep (2005)

5 The girl shepherd on the farm beyond has been  
taken from school now she is twelve, and her life is over.  
I got my genius brother a summer job in the mills  
and he stayed all his life. I lived with a woman four  
years who went crazy later, escaped from the hospital,  
hitchhiked across America terrified and in the snow  
without a coat, and was raped by most men who gave her  
a ride. I crank my heart even so and it turns over.  
10 Ranges high in the sun over continents and eruptions  
of mortality, through winds and immensities of rain  
falling for miles. Until all the world is overcome  
by what goes up and up in us, singing and dancing  
and throwing down flowers as we continue north taking  
the maimed with us, keeping the sad parts carefully.

CRITICAL THINKING QUESTIONS

1. Gilbert lists examples of events that should be very discouraging, if not depressing, to anyone. However, he tells us, "I crank my heart even so and it turns over." What idea is he expressing through this metaphorical language? What does Gilbert mean by "crank" and "turn over"?
2. In a single sentence, state a claim the poet seems to be making about the human spirit. What are your thoughts about this perspective?