

A Detailed Explication  
of T. S. Eliot's  
*The Love Song*  
of J. Alfred Prufrock



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By

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## NOTE ON ILLUSTRATIONS

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Michelangelo, "Moment of Creation," Sistine Chapel

## PREFACE

This is a revision of my previous book, *Seeking God in the Works of T. S. Eliot and Michelangelo*. It focuses on *The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock* as a basis for a wide-ranging exploration of numerous contexts of the poet and his poem. On its way, it delves into the world of Michelangelo and other great thinkers, artists, philosophers, theologians (especially Catholic), political and even economic leaders that have driven the civilization of Europe (and the world) for over two millennia.

*The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock* has garnered a great deal of scholarship. Yet little of it has specifically dealt with the poem as an exploration of cultural, philosophic and religious contexts of *love*. It is, after all, a *love song*, so even if it initially seems more of a satire on such poetry, filled with dark images drawn from the likes of Dante's *Purgatory*, the title immediately demands that it be understood in this context.

Mythologist Joseph Campbell provides an excellent discussion of what he titles the mythology of love. For him, mythology underpins all of life, providing the maps of meaning and value for the highest truths of existence. In terms of love, he focuses on the interaction of three main categories – eros, amour (amor), and agape. There are other categories – maternal and paternal love, philosophical (often referred to as Platonic) love, brotherly love, compassion and empathy. The list goes on. However, the focus for T. S. Eliot's poems and his personal struggles in life is best understood in the context of these three – eros, amour, and agape.

One of the attractions of Eliot's poetry is how much it interacts with his real life desire to sort out the various types of love, whether sexual, romantic, or spiritual. His own shift from the Modernist views of a meaningless world to an embracement of a traditional Christianity is clearly sincere, and the resulting poetry provides fodder for opposing views of the collapse of traditional European civilization during his life.

It would be valuable to delineate how Eliot's life exhibits this conflict. However, while this book suggests the connections, that is not the focus. This study is focused on a single poem and how it expresses this struggle. It is his first major poem, and though *The Waste Land* is more often referred to in his early, Modernist poetry, this is the poem that receives the most analysis and attention. Those wanting to defend his transformation to Christianity immediately highlight his *Four Quartets*, and claim that is the

poem (or collection of poems) that likely garners him his Pulitzer Prize, but his earlier poetry is what attracts the most scholars.

These earlier poems express the world of the time, a world where Europe is literally destroying itself in World War I.

European civilization has been at the forefront for over two millennia, developing a complex interweaving of religion, science, literature, music, art, politics, and economics – a culture, a civilization with ingrained truths so strong, so firmly established that the foundations have become sacred and untouchable, and it has worked hard to convince itself it is superior, God's chosen people.

When its tall ships sailed over the great, mysterious oceans to the dark, unknown worlds of primitive tribes and brought them under its *enlightened* rule, the concerns were not about the rights of these lesser beings, but about how to save them through Christian missionary work and about who gets to plunder and rule which discovered lands.

Certainly, if one is to resist the temptations, the rewards, and the demands to believe, it is possible to see some flaws, possible to realize it is all an artificial construct, perhaps a very clever one, certainly one that has proven valuable in many ways, and not just in promoting and justifying power; but ultimately it is not an absolute, not the unshakable one correct construct.

But why would any of the chosen people choose not to believe? In a world that only promises sickness, death, and all of the hardships of mere survival, the comforts belief brings, the assurances of those in power, supported by the never-ending dialogue of the brilliant minds at the service of them, is easy to accept. Of course, there are those annoying individuals who do not fall in line; but power brings certain rewards, and those not accepting the official views can easily be condemned and silenced.

The real battles are not with those powerless disbelievers or that great mass of ignorant peasants, but with the numerous groups of people in power, whether they be the kings and queens of aristocracy or those religious powers, the pope, and later, the many protestant leaders of Christianity.

The battles are endless. Some are fought on paper, all those ever more complex, confusing interpretations of religious and legal documents, some by forcing those lesser, those ignorant peasants to kill each other on the battlefields, and some with ever more gruesome forms of torture and execution. So, this is Europe's problem -- not what that "primitive" world outside of Europe might want, but how to resolve the conflicts of the powers within Europe, which, by the end of the 1800s still include who gets what pieces of that non-Christian wilderness waiting for salvation.



With but a few dissenting or alerting voices, Europe is blind to its own progeny, America (what becomes The United States of America). When those backward, frontier colonies of transplanted English protestants decide they are going to stand up to the political powers across the ocean, it is annoying, but not seen as overly important. The English are busy fighting the French and Spanish and others over other colonies. Besides, at first, it seems an easy victory over the unorganized, primitive Americans. Revolts by conquered colonies are not new, but they have always been easily put down by the more advanced armies of Europe. England does not even bother to send its best commanders and troops. They are needed elsewhere.

But, as disorganized and ineffective as those Americans are, they will not go away. And not only that, but England's real rival, the French, see an opportunity to use this revolutionary colony against them. And the English decide to give up this very useful group of colonies. It is disappointing, but even so, the English are not overly concerned – King George III laughs it off. England is too busy fighting (and winning) on other fronts.

The French aristocracy are also blind to how they have opened the door to their own demise. As American elementary students still get taught, the American revolution is “the shot heard round the world,” the spark for the French revolution. Centuries of aristocratic rule began tumbling throughout Europe.

This shift in political power does not mean Europe has lost its prominent place in the development of civilization. It still sees itself as leading the world in all senses – political, economic, military, social, religious, artistic, and scientific. It still assumes it is the superior civilization, the leader on all fronts. In fact, if one bothers to think about it, this new United States of America consists of those very same superior people from England (they are, after all, Christians – even if they do tend to misunderstand the way the Bible should be interpreted). Furthermore, if one is to give these rebellious Americans much thought, it is impossible to see them as civilized and cultured as their parent countries. If anything, what civilization exists in these former colonies comes from Europe. Even their acclaimed democracy is little more than a restatement of such *European* writers as John Locke.

If anything, The United States, rather than condemning Europe's thirst for colonies, joins in the scramble, as evidenced by its own expansion across the continent, conquering the natives (American Indians) in a manner based on the same religious and philosophical concepts as Europe (even calling itself the New Eden). It also develops a huge industry and culture based on slavery, bringing in some of the non-Christian “savages” from Africa. Indeed, its wonderful proclamation that all men are created equal is not as egalitarian as it seems.

The world is changing, and by the nineteenth century it is starting to change rapidly. But even as the change is happening, the powers of Europe fail to grasp what it means. In terms of war, it means that their superior weapons, which, let's face it, were largely the reason they had been able to so easily conquer other people, are becoming obsolete, and the civilized rules of war, once having some logic (as incredibly silly as that gentlemanly code of war might seem today), no longer work.

But Europeans still see themselves as fighting battles in large fields (even with the arrival of guns and cannons employing gun powder). At first these weapons are so crude, that, even though they are a step up from swords and arrows, they can only shoot one bullet or cannon ball at a time, are not rifled, so those bullets are not accurate, and it is a mess reloading them for the next shot, so, perhaps (not really), it still makes sense to have men line up in a field and march towards each other through the volleys of bullets. Besides, there is a tradition about the proper, civilized way to engage in conflict that goes all the way back to the now romanticized battles of knights (and further). Sure, some of those primitive cultures, and even those crude Americans, bend the civilized rules a bit (though not too dramatically, as battles of the American Civil War attest), but the cultured countries of Europe are not about to stoop that low. They have their civilized rules of combat, and they are going to continue to be civilized!

Then it happens. The delicate balance of alliances and counter-alliances is tripped, and the spark that sets off World War I comes on June 28, 1914, when a young Serbian patriot shoots and kills Archduke Franz Ferdinand, the heir to the Austro-Hungarian Empire (Austria). Within a month, the Austrian army invades Serbia. Suddenly, before the self-assured political structures can stop themselves, all of Europe is in a war it is not prepared to control. Those old proprieties of battle do not work when the sides are using machine guns and other weapons designed to kill hundreds in one quick burst. It does not work to send a troupe of men charging into instant death, and though it is done, soon the sides settle into quickly dug, muddy trenches to see who can out-endure the other (perfect breeding conditions for the huge influenza pandemic that follows).

As the war winds down to a weary conclusion, that crude, pioneer colony across the Atlantic that has itself transformed with little more than smirking amusement from Europe decides to join in the carnage and stake its own claims to the throne.

When it is over, Europe is a bloodied wasteland. The civilization it has spent centuries creating in shambles.

This is when William Butler Yeats writes his signature poem. We can only guess at his thoughts and particular meanings, can only imagine him

looking out over a battlefield of dead and dying men, the random unrolled remains of barbed wire, and the leftover weapons of a war, a civilization gone wrong. Certainly, a poetic mind such as his would see the invisible truths within the broken landscape, would sadly realize and cry out: "Things fall apart; the centre cannot hold; / Mere anarchy is loosed upon the world, / The blood-dimmed tide is loosed, and everywhere / The ceremony of innocence is drowned." (*The Second Coming*, 1919)

T. S. Eliot has already published *The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock* and a few years later will offer his own feelings about the war and state of civilization in *The Waste Land*. *The Hollow Men* will soon follow.

Europe is injured and bleeding. But even in its weakened state, the powers that be are far from dead, and the century old desires for political and economic power that triggered the first wave of mass destruction are still not satisfied. Furthermore, if the powers of Europe have not been able to stem the initial rush to destruction that became the Great War, what is left of them is even less equipped to deal with the dangerous forces war has unleashed that now circle like mechanical, man made wolves to ravish the dying carcasses of its weakened political, religious and ethical structures.

Somewhere in the middle of all this darkness, T. S. Eliot makes an about-face, deciding to embrace, rather than condemn, Europe's traditional Christianity. His *Ash-Wednesday* poem is hard to imagine after studying *The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock*. Perhaps, it is best to provide it first, because it offers an arching context, a frame for the dark despair of the man and his poems that come before it.

I

Because I do not hope to turn again  
Because I do not hope  
Because I do not hope to turn  
Desiring this man's gift and that man's scope  
I no longer strive to strive towards such things  
(Why should the aged eagle stretch its wings?)  
Why should I mourn  
The vanished power of the usual reign?

Because I do not hope to know  
The infirm glory of the positive hour  
Because I do not think  
Because I know I shall not know  
The one veritable transitory power  
Because I cannot drink  
There, where trees flower, and springs flow, for there is  
nothing again

Because I know that time is always time  
 And place is always and only place  
 And what is actual is actual only for one time  
 And only for one place  
 I rejoice that things are as they are and  
 I renounce the blessed face  
 And renounce the voice  
 Because I cannot hope to turn again  
 Consequently I rejoice, having to construct something  
 Upon which to rejoice

And pray to God to have mercy upon us  
 And pray that I may forget  
 These matters that with myself I too much discuss  
 Too much explain  
 Because I do not hope to turn again  
 Let these words answer  
 For what is done, not to be done again  
 May the judgement not be too heavy upon us

Because these wings are no longer wings to fly  
 But merely vans to beat the air  
 The air which is now thoroughly small and dry  
 Smaller and dryer than the will  
 Teach us to care and not to care Teach us to sit still.

Pray for us sinners now and at the hour of our death  
 Pray for us now and at the hour of our death.

## II

Lady, three white leopards sat under a juniper-tree  
 In the cool of the day, having fed to satiety  
 On my legs my heart my liver and that which had been contained  
 In the hollow round of my skull. And God said  
 Shall these bones live? shall these  
 Bones live? And that which had been contained  
 In the bones (which were already dry) said chirping:  
 Because of the goodness of this Lady  
 And because of her loveliness, and because  
 She honours the Virgin in meditation,  
 We shine with brightness. And I who am here dissembled  
 Proffer my deeds to oblivion, and my love  
 To the posterity of the desert and the fruit of the gourd.  
 It is this which recovers  
 My guts the strings of my eyes and the indigestible portions

Which the leopards reject. The Lady is withdrawn  
In a white gown, to contemplation, in a white gown.  
Let the whiteness of bones atone to forgetfulness.  
There is no life in them. As I am forgotten  
And would be forgotten, so I would forget  
Thus devoted, concentrated in purpose. And God said  
Prophecy to the wind, to the wind only for only  
The wind will listen. And the bones sang chirping  
With the burden of the grasshopper, saying

Lady of silences  
Calm and distressed  
Torn and most whole  
Rose of memory  
Rose of forgetfulness  
Exhausted and life-giving  
Worried reposeful  
The single Rose  
Is now the Garden  
Where all loves end  
Terminate torment  
Of love unsatisfied  
The greater torment  
Of love satisfied  
End of the endless  
Journey to no end  
Conclusion of all that  
Is inconclusible  
Speech without word and  
Word of no speech  
Grace to the Mother  
For the Garden  
Where all love ends.

Under a juniper-tree the bones sang, scattered and shining  
We are glad to be scattered, we did little good to each  
other,  
Under a tree in the cool of day, with the blessing of sand,  
Forgetting themselves and each other, united  
In the quiet of the desert. This is the land which ye  
Shall divide by lot. And neither division nor unity  
Matters. This is the land. We have our inheritance.

## III

At the first turning of the second stair  
I turned and saw below  
The same shape twisted on the banister  
Under the vapour in the fetid air  
Struggling with the devil of the stairs who wears  
The deceitful face of hope and of despair.

At the second turning of the second stair  
I left them twisting, turning below;  
There were no more faces and the stair was dark,  
Damp, jagged, like an old man's mouth drivelling, beyond  
repair,  
Or the toothed gullet of an aged shark.

At the first turning of the third stair  
Was a slotted window bellied like the figs' fruit  
And beyond the hawthorn blossom and a pasture scene  
The broadbacked figure drest in blue and green  
Enchanted the Maytime with an antique flute.  
Blown hair is sweet, brown hair over the mouth blown,  
Lilac and brown hair;  
Distraction, music of the flute, stops and steps of the mind  
over the third stair,  
Fading, fading; strength beyond hope and despair  
Climbing the third stair.

Lord, I am not worthy  
Lord, I am not worthy

but speak the word only.

## IV

Who walked between the violet and the violet  
Who walked between  
The various ranks of varied green  
Going in white and blue, in Mary's colour,  
Talking of trivial things  
In ignorance and knowledge of eternal dolour  
Who moved among the others as they walked,  
Who then made strong the fountains and made fresh the springs

Made cool the dry rock and made firm the sand  
In blue of larkspur, blue of Mary's colour,  
Sovegna vos

Here are the years that walk between, bearing  
Away the fiddles and the flutes, restoring  
One who moves in the time between sleep and waking, wearing

White light folded, sheathing about her, folded.  
The new years walk, restoring  
Through a bright cloud of tears, the years, restoring  
With a new verse the ancient rhyme. Redeem  
The time. Redeem  
The unread vision in the higher dream  
While jeweled unicorns draw by the gilded hearse.

The silent sister veiled in white and blue  
Between the yews, behind the garden god,  
Whose flute is breathless, bent her head and signed but spoke  
no word

But the fountain sprang up and the bird sang down  
Redeem the time, redeem the dream  
The token of the word unheard, unspoken

Till the wind shake a thousand whispers from the yew

And after this our exile

V  
If the lost word is lost, if the spent word is spent  
If the unheard, unspoken  
Word is unspoken, unheard;  
Still is the unspoken word, the Word unheard,  
The Word without a word, the Word within  
The world and for the world;  
And the light shone in darkness and  
Against the Word the unstilled world still whirled  
About the centre of the silent Word.

O my people, what have I done unto thee.

Where shall the word be found, where will the word  
Resound? Not here, there is not enough silence  
Not on the sea or on the islands, not

On the mainland, in the desert or the rain land,  
 For those who walk in darkness  
 Both in the day time and in the night time  
 The right time and the right place are not here  
 No place of grace for those who avoid the face  
 No time to rejoice for those who walk among noise and deny  
 the voice

Will the veiled sister pray for  
 Those who walk in darkness, who chose thee and oppose thee,  
 Those who are torn on the horn between season and season,  
 time and time, between  
 Hour and hour, word and word, power and power, those who wait  
 In darkness? Will the veiled sister pray  
 For children at the gate  
 Who will not go away and cannot pray:  
 Pray for those who chose and oppose

O my people, what have I done unto thee.

Will the veiled sister between the slender  
 Yew trees pray for those who offend her  
 And are terrified and cannot surrender  
 And affirm before the world and deny between the rocks  
 In the last desert before the last blue rocks  
 The desert in the garden the garden in the desert  
 Of drouth, spitting from the mouth the withered apple-seed.

O my people.

VI  
 Although I do not hope to turn again  
 Although I do not hope  
 Although I do not hope to turn

Wavering between the profit and the loss  
 In this brief transit where the dreams cross  
 The dream-crossed twilight between birth and dying  
 (Bless me father) though I do not wish to wish these things  
 From the wide window towards the granite shore  
 The white sails still fly seaward, seaward flying  
 Unbroken wings

And the lost heart stiffens and rejoices



In the lost lilac and the lost sea voices  
And the weak spirit quickens to rebel  
For the bent golden-rod and the lost sea smell  
Quickens to recover  
The cry of quail and the whirling plover  
And the blind eye creates  
The empty forms between the ivory gates  
And smell renews the salt savour of the sandy earth

This is the time of tension between dying and birth  
The place of solitude where three dreams cross  
Between blue rocks  
But when the voices shaken from the yew-tree drift away  
Let the other yew be shaken and reply.

Blessèd sister, holy mother, spirit of the fountain, spirit  
of the garden,  
Suffer us not to mock ourselves with falsehood  
Teach us to care and not to care  
Teach us to sit still  
Even among these rocks,  
Our peace in His will  
And even among these rocks  
Sister, mother  
And spirit of the river, spirit of the sea,  
Suffer me not to be separated

And let my cry come unto Thee.

This is a strong embracement of agape, a spiritual love, a sacrifice of oneself to the Christian God. Apparently, it is his answer, at least at this moment where he claims he does not want to turn again, to the huge question raised in his first major poem: *Do I dare disturb the universe?*



## CHAPTER ONE

### A LOVE SONG

In its title the poem establishes the context of it being a love song, *The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock*.<sup>1</sup>

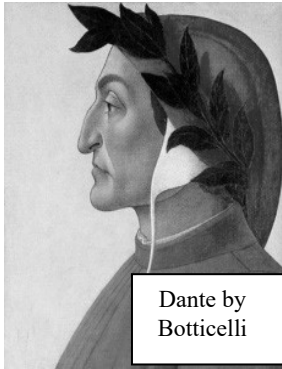
It is important to put this in context. What does Eliot mean by a *love song*?

The epigram in the original Italian from Dante Alighieri's *Divina Commedia* immediately establishes a specific Christian context. It needs to be translated. Critics have debated this. Is it positive or negative that Eliot keeps the quote in its original Italian? Certainly, each word, each phrase, each syntactic twist has numerous connotations and textures that get lost as the original contexts disappear. Are such subtleties important for this poem? Probably not. Eliot did not grow up in Dante's world where this particular form of Italian is spoken, written and lived. His use of the passage has to be for its meanings beyond such refined timbres. Nevertheless, he *does* know Dante's work, its theological and philosophical contexts, and the recorded histories of that world well, often referring to them in his poems, and it is clear that he means this epigram in these contexts, especially in the context of the *Divina Commedia* and the views of Christianity expressed there. Furthermore, leaving the passage in its original language adds a certain gravitas to the poem, that learned, intellectual elitism Eliot obviously desires (in both his poetry and life). At the very least, a solemn tone is justified because the poem is dealing with the most serious, the *overwhelming* question.

Dante's quote is spoken by Guido da Montefeltro, a man condemned to the eighth level of Hell:

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.

If I thought that I was replying  
 To someone who would ever return to the world,  
 This flame would cease to flicker.  
 But since from these depths  
 No one ever returns alive, if what I've heard is true  
 I will answer you without fear of infamy.<sup>2</sup>



This is a sophisticated context for a *love song*. J. Alfred Prufrock must be a complex man. His evening journey to a cheap hotel room in the red light district and his fear of exposure and guilt over his sexual trysts are not as easily dismissed when Dante's important work is emphasized before the journey even begins (especially, when given in the original language, thus, indicating immediately that a high level of literary sophistication and knowledge is expected of the reader).

Dante completed *The Divina Commedia* in 1320. It is considered the pre-eminent work of Italian literature and one of the greatest works of world literature of all time.

In it Dante travels through the Inferno, Purgatory and Paradiso in an allegory of the soul's journey towards God, as represented in the Western Church of the time (The Roman Catholic Church), especially as put forth by St. Thomas Aquinas in *Summa Theologica*, such that *Divina Commedia* is referred to as "the *Summa* in verse."<sup>3</sup>

It is important that Aquinas does not reject the views of non-Christian theology and philosophy. Just the opposite, he embraces them, claiming that truth should be accepted no matter where it is found. This allows him to access the truths of Greeks, Romans, Jews, Muslims and numerous other theologians and philosophers. His main source is Aristotle, whom he thinks so highly of he refers to simply as The Philosopher. He employs Aristotle's terminology and metaphysics, writes lengthy commentaries on Aristotle, and affirms Aristotle's claims with his own independent arguments. He also embraces a number of Plato's principles, including that "It is absolutely true that there is first something which is essentially being and essentially good, which we call God . . . [and that] everything can be called good and a being inasmuch as it *participates* in it by way of assimilation."<sup>4</sup>

In Dante's allegorical expression of these views, he assumes the role of the main character. The journey begins the night before Good Friday and lasts to the Wednesday after Easter in 1300. His guide through Hell and Purgatory is the great Roman poet Virgil. His guide through Paradiso is

Beatrice, a Florentine woman he knew from childhood and admired from afar in the tradition of *amour*.

The work is carefully structured. The three large sections (*canticas*) each consist of thirty-three cantos. An initial canto, serving as an introduction to the poem, brings the total number of cantos to one hundred. In addition to the use of three *canticas* and their lengths, the verse employs three (and other mathematical constructs) throughout its structure. It is a *terza rima*, hendecasyllabic (eleven syllables), with lines composing *tercets* in the rhyme scheme aba, bcb, cdc, ded . . .

The three realms have a common numerical pattern of nine plus one for a total of ten. There are nine circles of the Inferno, followed by Lucifer contained at its bottom; nine rings of Mount Purgatory, followed by the Garden of Eden at its summit; and nine celestial bodies of Paradiso, followed by the Empyrean containing the essence of God. Within each group of nine, there are seven elements corresponding to a specific moral scheme, subdivided into three subcategories, and two others of greater particularity to total nine. Thus, the seven deadly sins of the Catholic Church that are cleansed in Purgatory are joined by special realms for the late repentant and those excommunicated by the church. The core seven sins within Purgatory correspond to a moral scheme of love perverted, subdivided into three groups corresponding to excessive love (Lust, Gluttony, Greed), deficient love (Sloth), and malicious love (Wrath, Envy, Pride).

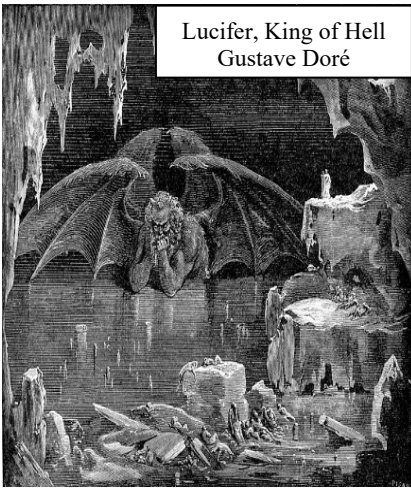
In the spirit of Aquinas, it is noteworthy that Dante clearly mixes Classical Roman literature into his version of Christianity. As noted above, his wise guide for the first two sections is Virgil, author of the great epic of the Roman Empire, *The Aeneid*.

Since *Divina Commedia* is an allegory, everything in it is meant to be understood both literally and as a symbolic representation of Christianity. With this in mind, it begins when Dante, as the main character, is thirty-five, exactly half the biblical lifespan of seventy, as stated in Psalms 89:10. He is lost in a dark wood (a place of sin), assailed by beasts (a lion, a leopard, and a she-wolf), unable to find the right path to salvation (the sun that would light up this path is behind a mountain) and realizes that he is ruining himself and falling into a low place where the sun is silent (an intellectual and thus spiritual darkness).

Dante believes man must always *intellectually* be aware of his own need to perform the righteous act. In this sense, *sin is a perversion of the intellect*. When Dante finds himself in a *dark wood*, he is speaking allegorically for any man who is not constantly conscious of the *right path*. If every waking moment is not consciously devoted to *morality*, man will find himself in a

dark wood. (This is also central to both Eliot and Michelangelo, who is highlighted in *Prufrock*.)

Virgil appears and the two of them begin their journey through the levels of the underworld of the Inferno, encountering people who are being punished for the sins based on *contrapasso*, symbolic forms of poetic justice. For example, fortune-tellers and soothsayers must walk with their heads on backwards, unable to see what is ahead, because foreseeing the future was what they had claimed to do in life.



Lucifer, King of Hell  
Gustave Doré

Dante depicts Virgil as a *shade* residing in the Limbo section of Hell, also known as the first circle. Since Dante admires Virgil as the great poet of antiquity who wrote the pre-Christian epic of the founding of Rome, including a visit to Hell (Hades) in the person of Aeneas, he is the perfect choice as a guide for the character of Dante in the allegory. As such, he represents human reason and wisdom, and he performs as a strong and competent guide. However, since Virgil lived prior to Christ, Dante needs divine intervention to complete the journey safely.

In standard amour tradition, there are numerous times during his travels through Hell and Purgatory that Dante suffers doubts, believing he can go no further, but the promise of meeting Beatrice inspires him to continue. In the end, his devotion to and love for Beatrice is rewarded when she meets him and leads him into Heaven, which grows in radiance and beauty as they ascend toward God.

As an allegory of Christianity, the Inferno represents the soul seeing sin for what it really is. The three beasts there represent three categories of sin: the self-indulgent, the violent, and the malicious. As such they are the three main divisions of Hell: Upper Hell, outside the city of Dis, for the four sins of indulgence (lust, gluttony, avarice and anger); circle one for the sins of violence; and circles eight and nine for the sins of malice (fraud and treachery). Added to these are the two unlike categories that are specifically spiritual: Limbo, in circle one, contains the virtuous pagans who were not sinful but were ignorant of Christ, and circle six contains the heretics who contradicted the doctrine and confused the spirit of Christ. As noted above,

the circles total nine, with the addition of Satan's realm completing the total of ten.

The quote Eliot uses as the poem's epigram comes from Guido da Montefeltro, one of the characters in the eighth circle, where some of the worst of the worst are stuck for eternity. Guido is one of many characters in the *Inferno* taken from a real person. In this case, he is a military leader who falls out of favor with the Catholic Church. In the end, Pope Boniface VIII admits him back in, restoring his position as lord of Montefeltro, and he enters the Franciscan order, dying two years later in the monastery of Assisi.

As Dante tells it in *The Inferno*, Guido overhears Virgil and Dante talking, recognizes Dante's Lombard dialect of Italian and asks for news of his homeland. Dante tells him that Romagna endures violence and tyranny but not war. In turn, Dante asks him his name, and that is when he states the quoted passage. *If I thought that my reply would be to someone who would ever return to earth, this flame would remain without further movement; but as no one has ever returned alive from this gulf, if what I hear is true, I can answer you with no fear of infamy.*

Guido does not have a body – part of the punishment. Instead, he is a flame that moves when he speaks, so when he says “*this flame would remain without further movement,*” he means “*I would not talk anymore.*”

Convinced he need not fear exposure, he introduces himself and says that he was originally a member of the Ghibellines. After a time, he had a religious conversion and joined a Franciscan monastery. Later, he was persuaded by Pope Boniface VIII to re-enter politics on the opposing side. At one point, Boniface asked him for advice on how to conquer Palestrina, the fortress of the Ghibelline Colonna family. Guido claims he was reluctant to betray his family, but Boniface promised him absolution in advance, even if his counsel were to prove wrong. With this assurance, he agreed to give his advice, which turned out to be incorrect.

When he died, St. Francis came for him, but a devil in the form of a cherub pulled him away, saying that a man could not receive absolution before sinning, for absolution cannot precede repentance and repentance cannot precede the sin. Preemptive absolution he deemed “contradictory” and thus invalid. He took Guido da Montefeltro to Minos, who judged him guilty of fraudulent counsel and assigned him to the Eighth Pouch of the Eighth Circle of Hell.

Unfortunately for Guido, who expects his words to remain secret, Dante becomes the first human ever to be allowed to pass through Hell and return to earth. Not only that, but Dante is a writer and exposes Guido to the entire world.

While the connections of *The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock* with *Divina Commedia* are important and complex, it is unlikely Guido's personal story has much relevance for Eliot's love song beyond its rejection of preemptive absolution and the connections with revealing oneself as a sinner. Prufrock is going to reveal his own sins in his love song, but as with Guido, he does it because he believes the person he is telling them to will not expose him.

On one level, this can be taken as Prufrock saying to the woman that their illicit sexual encounter in the cheap hotel room must be kept a secret from others in his social world. However, it is clear this is not what he means when he refers to the overwhelming question.

It is important that these words are embedded in Christian doctrine. Having them spoken by a sinner in *Divina Commedia* connects them to that. Keeping them in the original Italian language emphasizes it.

The rejection of preemptive absolution in Guido's story applies to the extent Prufrock does or does not satisfy his desires. This is even more complicated if *lusting in the heart* is a sin.



*Map of Inferno* by Sandro Botticelli, one of 92 drawings included in Dante's *Divine Comedy* commissioned by Lorenzo di Pierfrancesco de' Medici, circa 1485.

Immediately after the epigram, the poem begins: *Let us go then, you and I*. Who is the speaker? While it is possible the I is the poet, Eliot himself, it seems almost certain, since it is his love song, *The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock*, that J. Alfred Prufrock is the narrator, the I in the poem.



Who is the audience being invited to join him? Is it the reader? Or, is there a reason to believe it is someone other than the reader? Established norms for poetry help untangle these possibilities.

In the language of literary criticism, *The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock* is featured as an example of a *dramatic monologue*.

According to *The Bedford Glossary of Critical and Literary Terms*, a “*dramatic monologue* is a *lyric poem* [a brief expression of an individual’s thoughts, as opposed to a narrative poem that tells a story], in which the speaker addresses a silent listener, revealing himself or herself in the context of a dramatic situation. The speaker provides information not only about his or her personality but also about the time, the setting, key events, and any other characters involved in the situation at hand.”<sup>5</sup>

M. H. Abrams lists three defining characteristics of a *dramatic monologue* as it applies to poetry: 1. The poem consists of the speech of a single narrator (who may or may not be the poet) in a specific situation at a critical moment. 2. This speaker addresses and interacts with one or more other people; but their responses can only be guessed at from the speaker’s discourse. 3. The main principle that controls the poem is what the speaker reveals about his or her temperament and character. It is the psychology of the speaker that interests the reader.

The *silent listener* (indicating a second point of view) is what distinguishes a *dramatic monologue* from a *soliloquy*, a speech revealing the speaker’s thoughts to the audience, not to anyone else in the scene or poem (e.g., Hamlet’s famous *To Be or Not To Be* soliloquy reveals his thoughts to the audience, not to any other person in the scene. He ends it when he hears Ophelia, another person in the drama, approaching).

M. H. Abrams creates a similar category he designates *dramatic lyric*, which he distinguishes from an *ode* and defines as an *extended lyric poem* of description and serious meditation common in the poems of numerous English Romantic poets, (e.g., Coleridge, Wordsworth, Shelley, and Keats). He elaborates, “In the course of this meditation the lyric speaker achieves an insight, faces up to a tragic loss, comes to a moral decision, or resolves an emotional problem.”<sup>6</sup> While this designation consists of two terms that are associated with *dramatic monologue*, neither *dramatic lyric* nor *ode* fits a *dramatic monologue*, which requires an assumed silent listener within the poem.

If *The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock* is read as a *dramatic monologue*, it is a *lyric poem* to a woman for the purpose of revealing Prufrock’s private thoughts. As convention dictates, when the narrator begins *Let us go then, you and I*, he is not directing his words to the reader, but to a silent listener in the poem, who clearly is responding, even though the reader is not privy to her

words or actions, except as they are revealed by Prufrock, as Eliot makes clear in the line: *Oh do not ask, "What is it?" Let us go and make our visit.*

If the reader expects a *love song* as the expression of the love of a man for a woman on the level of the heart, those expectations quickly fall apart. The epigram from Dante's *Inferno* and the immediate passages that follow describing the suggested visit are *not* the language of love used in contemporary love poems, nor are they *romantic* in either the *amour* or *agape* sense of the term. Instead, they offer a journey through a seedy, red-light district of prostitutes and vagrants, the world of erotic, sexual drives, the landscape of *eros* and *lust*. *One-night cheap hotels* are where impersonal encounters take place between strangers with no interest in one-another beyond sex, that physical drive of the libido or, as Joseph Campbell states, *the zeal of the organs*, certainly not the kinds of love that the troubadours of Dante's time or current popular vocalists sing about.<sup>7</sup>

*Sawdust* on the floor of a restaurant is there to absorb spilled drinks and food, evocative of crude, rough taverns. The purpose of *oysters* (certainly the literary, symbolic purpose) is to increase sexual desire and performance. *Muttering retreats* and *restless nights* are suggestive of furtive, unsavory activities. If this is a romantic once-upon-a-time world of *love on the level of the heart*, it is going to be a dark, dangerous one, one not likely to end happily ever after or lead to *agape*. These are images of *erotic*, *furtive encounters*, not *amour*, and certainly not the means to the numinous or spiritual experience of Rudolf Otto's *mysterium tremendum*.<sup>8</sup>

The love song's invitation becomes even more ominous when some of the other phrases are woven into the fabric. *Like a patient etherized upon a table* jumps off the page, a jarring image inconsistent with a love song. A careful read connects this with the evening. It is the *evening spread out against the sky* that is like *a patient etherized upon a table*. Prufrock is inviting the woman to a *world* as mentally, emotionally and physically sterile as an etherized, desensitized, unresponsive patient:

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

The *streets that follow like a tedious argument of insidious intent* are both literal and figurative streets of *insidious intent* that lead to the kind of love that takes place in *one-night cheap hotels*, in simple terms, the satisfaction of sexual desires. Put into the established frames of a love song and Dante's *Divina Commedia*, the *tedious argument*, though Prufrock refuses to say, *seems* to be whether a visit to the world of *eros* (for the purpose of satisfying the desires of the flesh) is a sin. After all, its *intent* is *insidious* (certainly a sin in the magisterium of the Catholic Church).

Not only has the *love song* quickly established that it is more than a traditional or contemporary expression of *love at the level of the heart*, it immediately connects this *insidious intent* . . . to an *overwhelming question*. Prufrock waits – the ellipsis is a clear indication he has paused. The next line suggests the woman he is speaking to has interrupted him, asked him to explain, to which he responds: *Oh, do not ask, "What is it?" / Let us go and make our visit*.

Apparently, the woman also understands this love song as a straightforward invitation to satisfy the desires of the flesh. The only aspect that she does not grasp is why he claims it will lead her to an *overwhelming question*. Most likely realizing she will not understand and certainly not wanting to delay matters trying to explain, he dismisses her question and quickly initiates the visit.

It will begin at twilight, as the conscious *world* of the day intersects the unconscious *world* of the night, similar to being in an etherized state, neither alive nor dead (perhaps in limbo). It is the *world* that is in this state.

In 1978, Pink Floyd includes *Comfortably Numb*, a song expressing this *etherized* state of existence, on its album *The Wall* (music by David Gilmour, lyrics by Roger Waters).<sup>9</sup> The song begins; a voice, little more than a whisper, breaks the silence:

Hello  
Is there anybody in there?  
Just nod if you can hear me  
Is there anyone home?

The dual meanings of *anybody in there* refer both to the person who has physically withdrawn from the outside world (passed out or nearly so) and to his psychological withdrawal.

Also, it immediately alerts the reader to the lack of communication.

This questioning voice is that of the doctor who finds the sick protagonist so unresponsive he wonders if the man is conscious and alert to the outside world or has completely disappeared into himself.

Come on now  
 I hear you're feeling down  
 Well I can ease your pain  
 Get you on your feet again  
 Relax  
 I'll need some information first  
 Just the basic facts  
 Can you show me where it hurts?

*I hear you're feeling down* alerts the reader to dual meanings, both physical and mental, and *get you on your feet again* extends these allusions.

Roger Waters claims the song was sparked by a real life incident. Before a concert in Philadelphia, he felt sick, had a bad stomach ache, likely caused by nerves. A doctor gave him a sedative. When he went onstage, his hands were numb and his vision blurred, but none of the audience noticed, and it struck him that there was a “disconnect between the public and the band,” a *wall*.<sup>10</sup>

The band is performing on stage, acting out its roles in a musical narrative about there being a wall separating their protagonist from the outside world, an inability for him to communicate and connect with others, and the audience is screaming so loud and in such a frenzy that it does not even know if one of the performers is playing the correct notes, does not notice that one of the performers is so drugged he is numb and has blurred vision. Is this not a concrete example of Shakespeare's claims expressed by Macbeth that life is nothing more than a play told by an idiot, filled with sound and fury, signifying nothing?

The doctor continues to talk to the patient as he administers the anesthesia:

There is no pain  
 You are receding  
 A distant ship's smoke on the horizon  
 You are only coming through in waves  
 Your lips move but I can't hear what you're sayin'

Clearly, the patient and the doctor are unable to communicate. There is an increasing separation (isolation), and all that remains of the fire of life is smoke on the horizon. (The meanings of fire and smoke are important and will be discussed later in the chapter.)

The protagonist speaks for himself:

When I was a child I had a fever  
 My hands felt just like two balloons

Now I got that feeling once again  
 I can't explain  
 You would not understand  
 This is not how I am  
 I have become comfortably numb

Again, the lack of communication is emphasized (*I can't explain, you would not understand. This is not how I am*). This is similar to Prufrock's dilemma and refusal to answer the woman's question about the overwhelming question. It is clear in this case, the solution is to use a drug:

Just a little pinprick  
 There'll be no more  
 But you may feel a little sick  
 Can you stand up?  
 I do believe its working, good  
 That'll keep you going for the show  
 Come on, it's time to go

This is a variation and extension of the previous motif/refrain. *There'll be no more* has suggestions of the literal, physical sickness, the psychological struggle with facing the audience (representative of the human community), and the means to maintain one's public persona (also important in Prufrock). The literal *show* can also represent life, as in Shakespeare's famous line: "All the world's a stage, / And all the men and women merely players."<sup>11</sup>

Shakespeare uses the stage as the place where humans play out their lives. This particular line precedes his famous depiction of the seven stages of life. In his view, all humans are living these stages as if acting out roles in a drama. In this sense, literal life is merely a matter of posturing, performing assigned roles (meaningless). After hearing of his wife's death, Macbeth states:

*She should have died hereafter;* [has several possible meanings, including dying later or passage into death]  
*There would have been a time for such a word.* [ambiguous, though the passage of time is central]  
*Tomorrow, and tomorrow, and tomorrow,*  
*Creeps in this petty pace from day to day* [stresses the slow, meaningless passage of time]  
*To the last syllable of recorded time.* [the end of literal, historical, chronological time]  
*And all our yesterdays have lighted fools*

*The way to dusty death. Out, out brief candle!* [suggests that life is meaningless; dusty refers to the biblical dust to dust passage, and candle refers to life as a brief, burning experience – both of these metaphors are discussed in detail later in the chapter]

*Life's but a walking shadow, a poor player  
That struts and frets his hour upon the stage  
And then is heard no more: it is a tale  
Told by an idiot, full of sound and fury  
Signifying nothing.* (Macbeth, act 5, scene 5, lines 17-28).

The final lines bring the entire soliloquy to a dark conclusion. Not only is life a minor, meaningless actor, but even worse, life is an absurd, meaningless play authored by an *idiot* and filled with pointless *sound and fury*. Humans pontificate and philosophize and fuss over themselves and the importance of life, but, in the end, they discover there is no meaning at all.

William Faulkner uses the phrase, *Sound and Fury*, as the title of his book, narrated in part by Benjy Compson, an intellectually disabled man, an *idiot*, and other narrators equally as *idiotic* and difficult to follow. It is a confusing four-part narrative, partially told as stream of consciousness, depicting *the way to dusty death* of a traditional upper-class Southern family, an elaborate, intellectual application of Macbeth's words to a novel format.

After *Comfortably Numb* goes through an exact repetition of the chorus (*There is no pain, you are receding*, etc.), the song offers a variation in the final chorus, where the protagonist again tries to clarify his memories of childhood:

When I was a child  
I caught a fleeting glimpse  
Out of the corner of my eye  
I turned to look but it was gone  
I cannot put my finger on it now  
The child is grown  
The dream is gone

It concludes with him repeating and emphasizing: *I have become comfortably numb*.

The fleeting glimpse he caught as a child does not refer to the views of Jean Jacques Rousseau or the Romantic Movement that a child's views are closer to God, more angelic (as evidenced in such 19<sup>th</sup> century works as Charles Dickens' *A Christmas Carol*, i.e., Tiny Tim). Rather, the previous sickness as a child should be seen as either a reference to neurological damage the result of an illness, a reference to psychological theories (especially Freud's) that bad experiences as a child will affect humans