CHAPTER-2

THE LOVE SONG OF J. ALDRED PRUFROCK
Introduction The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock was published in the 1917 volume of poems Prufrock and Other Observations. It is one of the best known of Eliot’s poems. The setting and the theme is urban, which reveals the ugliness of modern civilization. The poem is neither a love song nor a spontaneous outburst of the feeling of a lover for his beloved, rather it is an analysis of the mind of the lover who is unable to take a decision about making the proposal to the lady he loves. In a series of paragraphs, the lover analyses the reason for a resolution and re-decision and tried to justify his cowardice and lack of nerves, which make him completely incapable of formulating a proposal of love to his lady. Behind this mental state, is a disease of modern routine—the aimless life of the city dwellers and the monotonous sound of social parties? As F.R. Levis tell us that The Love Song

“Represents a complete break with the nineteenth-century tradition, and a new start. It must indeed have been difficult to take
seriously in 1917, for it defies the traditional
canon of seriousness.”

There is exploitation of the symbolist and the “stream of
consciousness” techniques, as well as of the manner of the
Metaphysically. Its hero is the cultured society of a modern city
which may be London, Boston or any other. The title is ironic,
for it makes the readers expect some love-making, but the
protagonist is entirely ‘numeric,’ a bundle of hesitations and
indecisions, a neurotic, one who has not even the courage
enough to approach his lady and propose to her, not to mention
any love-making or seduction which is obviously beyond his
reach. The poem portrays his hesitancy and indecision as also
brings out the triviality the hypocrisy, the emptiness, etc., of
contemporary urban life. The poem is in the nature of an
‘interior monologue’. It probes deep into the sub-conscious of
the protagonist, renders his actual thought process and in this
way highlights his neurotic nature and moral cowardice.
Stephen Spender writes:
“The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock is the dramatic monologue of a man of uncertain age who speaks out of a life whose centre is a society drawing-room approached through streets, the description of which provides metaphors for the squalor (and also the mystery and beauty) of a city, unnamed, which nevertheless seems representative of other great cities.”

Prufrock is an embodiment of split personality—a separation of head and heart, a paralysis of the will and too much worry regarding a love proposal. Prufrock refers to Hamlet and this enables us to understand Prufrock’s psychological malady. This introspection is the result of emotional frustration. His irresolution is complicated by the fact that though he is middle-aged, bald in the head, he is not hot-blooded. He dresses smartly, smiles to ladies but he is unable to express her inner state. The poem highlights the dilemma and indecisiveness as
well as the squalor and barrenness of modern urban civilization. F.R. Levis says:

“Prufrock... ... is concerned with the directly personal embarrassments, disillusions and distresses of a sophisticated young man.”

Eliot’s epigraphs are not merely decorative, they are functional. They suggest the underlying idea of the poem. The epigraph reads:

“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 on infamy.”

These words are spoken by Count Guido in Dante’s Inferno. Dante recounts his visit to the underworld. In the Eighth chasm of Hell he meets Guido, punished here, with other
false and deceitful counselors, in a single prison of flame for his treacherous advice on earth to Pope Boniface. When the damned speak from this flame, the voice sounds from the tip, which trembles, Guido refers to this, and goes on to explain that he speaks freely only because he believes that Dante is like himself, one of the dead who will never return to earth to report what he says.

The first line of the poem

“Let us go then you and I”

May suggest that it is a dialogue between two persons but it is not so. When the evening spreads out in the sky, like a patient under anesthesia on a table, you and he (Prufrock and his beloved) go out together. Prufrock is also like an etherized patient, conscious but conscious of nothing. The image is in the manner of a metaphysical conceit, suggesting the mental vacuity of the speaker. Stephen Spender says:

“The combination of the clinical and the romantic connotations suggest the state of
suspended consciousness of the ‘patient’ and
the head of the dreamer full of the night sky
and stars.”

Let us walk through some half-deserted streets which provide places of rest, for poor people. In the evening time the people leave the streets and go to their homes. Prufrock imagines that they are passing through the poorer part of the town. There are cheap hotels where rooms are rented out for each night. There the poor pass sleepless nights. They mutter in their sleep. The people who can’t afford paying for good hotels, spend their nights in cheap hotels, but they do not get adequate rest and sleep. The floors of cheap and dirty restaurant are covered with sawdust. Streets which follow one another are like the never ending argument, because the destination is unknown.

“To lead you to an overwhelming question............

Oh, do not ask, ‘What is it?’

Let us go and make our visit.”
This “overwhelming question” refers to his intended proposal to the lady he loves. He avoids discussing this question. Prufrock does not wish to tell anyone the purpose of his visit. Let us go and make a visit. Does he actually make the visit, or he merely imagines the experience? Prufrock speaks of the hotel room. The room is the saloon of a fashionable restaurant. Michelangelo was a great Italian painter and sculptor of the early 16th century. The ladies talk of the painter, but they do not know much about him. It is only an artistic pretension. Thus the hypocrisy of modern society is ironically treated. It is a fashion to talk about the paintings of great masters; they discuss the works of this talented Italian painter.

“The yellow fog that rubs its back upon the window-

Panes,

The yellow smoke that rubs its muzzle on the window-

Panes”
Prufrock describes the scene in the evening. There is no movement of the air. The fog is spreading all over the streets. The fog is compared to a cat which rubs its back upon the window panes. It contains a lot of smoke which too covers the window panes. The inactivity of the fog symbolizes Prufrock’s own inactivity, indecision and mental fogginess. It spreads all over. It licks its tongue into the corners of the evening. The fog spreads widely so as to cover all the things visible in the evening. The fog hung upon the pools in the drains. It allows the particles of smoke and dust which come from the chimney of the factories, to settle on its back. The smog missed the terrace the suddenly jumped up in the soft October night, curled over the house and stayed there. Prufrock reflects his own mental fogginess in not being able to pursue the course of the fog. He does not wish to take any decision. He easily postpones the issue before him and is in no hurry to make his marriage proposal. This task is as difficult as the committing of murder and creating something new:

“And time for all the works and days of hands
Those lift and drop a question on your plate;

Time for you and time for me,

And time yet for a hundred indecisions”"9

The words echo closely the title “work and days”, of the poem by an ancient Greek writer Hesiod. In this poem the Greek poet has glorified the life of a farmer. The effect is ironical, because a farmer’s hard life of physical labor is in sharp contrast with the life of the neurotic and unmanly Prufrock. We are reminded of the story of John the Baptist who rejected the love of Salome. She pleased Herod by her dancing, and as a reward his (of John the Baptist) head was severed and brought to her on a plate. There will be enough time even for a murder and act of creation, as also for all the daily routine of work, there will also be time to prepare, question and put it on your plate. There will be time for you as well as time for him and yet enough time for a hundred indecision, a hundred visions and revisions, before taking a cup of tea and a toast. In the room women come and go out talking of Michelangelo.
Prufrock is only to ask a question, but is not prepared to answer it. This shows his great indecision. He must muster up his courage in order to be able to make his proposal. This may take quiet some time. He wants time and opportunity to screw his courage up. At the right moment he may lose his courage and simply turn back and descend the stair. There will be enough time to wonder and ask him, if he has the courage to express his desire. People will observe the bald spot in the middle of his hair. In spite of his smart and modern dress, namely his morning coats, his stiff collar, his necktie, his pin, people will observe his thin arms and legs. Prufrock is growing old and even so he is becoming more and more indecisive and timid. He is conscious of his old age. Stephen Spender comments:

“Prufrock’s recital defines his characteristics, but as narration is negative; he sees himself as existing passively in the minds of those whose
society he frequents. It is they who remark that his arms and legs are growing thin.”

Do I dare?

Disturb the Universe?

In a minute there is time

For decisions and revisions which a minute will reverse.”

For him, the proposal is a very important matter and its reception or response is as important as a disturbance in the universe. On account of his ever-changing mind, his decisions are reversed in a minute and therefore it is much better postponing the making of a decision. He has known all the decisions and revision and has also known what happens in the evenings, mornings and afternoons. He admits that his life is full of trivialities. He has wasted a good deal of time in taking coffee. Here the triviality of modern city life is disclosed. Modern civilization includes a succession of tea parties and coffee
sessions. His life is measured not in terms of actions or resolution but by the number of coffee spoons. Prufrock knows the nature and activities of ladies. He has known people singing in the restaurants and their voices becoming faint on account of a highly vocal music coming from another room. The question is: How can he therefore speak out his mind. He has known the eyes (of ladies or of critics)-the eyes that size him up in a definite phrase, and after that he is labeled. He sprawls on a pin and is afterwards pinned and left wriggling on the wall. Prufrock recognizes the voices of the ladies who were singing in the restaurant but he can’t dare to speak out his mind. He does not know how to make the proposal or to disclose his love to his lady. He knows the women in room. He knows their likes and dislikes and their value system. He knows that they will look at him with searching eyes and he will not be able to stand their staring. His situation will be similar to that of a poor worm fixed on a wall with the help of a sharp pin. The worm will be struggling helplessly; as such he has no mind to face the ladies.

“To spit out all the butt-ends of my days and ways?
And how should I presume?"12

His life is made up of trivialities which make us his days and ways, his life is as useless as the butt-ends of smoked cigarettes which are thrown away. Williamson Remarks:

“The violence of the metaphor has an appropriate indecorum for the social scene which intensifies the conflict within him”13

It refers to his indecision and hesitation. He does not know how to make his proposal to his lady-love.

“And I have known the arms already, known them all-

Arms those are bracelet and white and bare.”14

He has known the arms of women (Prufrock is very familiar with the society women of the day). Their arms are bracelet, white and uncover when seen against the lamp light, the arms are covered with brown hair. Is it the fragrance
of perfume coming from her dress which makes him give up his intention to speak out his love? He should be bold enough to speak out his mind. The main problem with Prufrock is how to start his conversation with the lady and make her know his proposal of love. He is an embodiment of mental cowardice and indecision. He wishes to introduce the subject of his love to his lady in a suitable manner. Perhaps he may make a beginning by mentioning his loneliness. He wishes to tell his lady that he has seen lonely men leaning out of the windows of their houses and smoking their pipes in the evening. This would emphasise his own loneliness and need for company. He does not like to take a decision. He wants to delay and to postpone his declaration. He wishes to be some see-fish with rough claws moving quickly across the floors of silent seas. Stephen Spender writes:

“In his surroundings Prufrock is like an eel at the bottom of a tank. He knows the depths and the darkness which the deceived creatures who swim around in
their artificial light do not know. This self-knowledge becomes realization of what physically he is:

“I should have been a pair of ragged claws scuttling across the floors of silent seas.”

Surrounded by the peace and quiet of the evening, he does not feel the necessity of making the decision. The evening is compared to a child or a cat lulled to sleep. He pretends to be sick to avoid performance of duty and action. Prufrock thinks that perhaps after taking tea and snacks he will get enough strength and courage to take a decision in this matter. Though he has wept, fasted and prayed, he imagined that his head has been cut and brought in a platter. He is no prophet, though he has suffered a lot of persecution but that is a different matter. He has observed his hesitation at the moment of his achievement. He has seen g...eath laugh at his cowardice but what could he do. He was different and nervous and could not speak out.
Even if it were possible for him to speak out, would it have been worth-while. Would it have been proper after the drinks and snacks served in the fine China-ware, Prufrock thinks that the declaration of his love will require a very great effort like the effort needed to squeeze the universe into a ball, a task which is impossible for him?

“To have squeezed the universe into a ball
To roll it toward some overwhelming question”\textsuperscript{16}

He makes a reference to the story of Lazarus in the Bible. Lazarus was sent to Hell and he wanted to come back to the earth for a short while in order to tell his friends about his experiences in hell. Perhaps the lady whom he loves may tell him that he has misunderstood her gentleness and politeness. She has no love for him. He has only misunderstood courtesies. This is another reason for postponing his proposal to his lady love.

Prufrock refers to his activities during the day and in the evening, particularly the social formalities namely, taking tea in
the club, and dancing with the ladies. After these formalities he
has no strength left to declare his love in suitable words to his
lady. Prufrock compares the eyes of the ladies to the x-ray
machines, which can disclose the picture of things lying hidden
inside the body. The ladies would be able to read his inner
feelings—his cowardice, his indecision and lack of courage and
so they would laugh at him. Perhaps the lady whom he loves
would tell him that she knows his weaknesses and has,
therefore, nothing to do with him. If a magic lantern could give
picture of his inner feelings on a screen, for the lady to see,
would it have been worthwhile doing all this. Perhaps the lady
would rest herself on a pillow or throw off a shawl and turning
towards him would say that she did not mean anything, i.e. she
has no love for him.

“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,

Advice the prince; no doubt, an easy tool”\textsuperscript{17}
Prufrock compares his indecision and lack of courage to that of Prince Hamlet in Shakespeare. He, however, realizes that his problem is not so difficult and tragic as that of Prince Hamlet and so he gives up the comparison. He certainly hesitates and wavers like the Prince of Denmark. “To be or not to be” is as good a description of Prufrock as of Hamlet. Prufrock is conscious of his own limitations. He is self-depreciating. The lines constitute an admirable piece of self-analysis.

Prufrock remembers Polonius, a courtier of King Claudius. Prufrock feels that he can fit into that role. Like a courtier, he can attend on some prince, walk in his retinue, may initiate action in small matters or advice the prince or place himself at his disposal. He may be respectable, serviceable, wise, vigilant, and precise full of maxims, though a bit thick-headed and sometimes ridiculous like a court jester. Prufrock analyses his own character and thinks rather low of him. Williamson remarks:

“The poem turns again, this time to a note of decision, marking the resumption of his
dominant role. He is not Prince Hamlet, though indecision might suggest it; rather the cautious attendant. Here even the sententious, choppy verse suggests the prudent character, as he takes refuge in self-mockery.”

Prufrock is old like Polonius but he is some-what different. He dresses himself like a modern dandy. He wears the trousers with rolled bottoms. He dresses his hair in a fashionable manner parting them from behind, (perhaps to cover his baldness). Can he dare to eat a peach while walking on the beach? He wears fashionable white flannel trousers. In fact, he wants to look young and fashionable and to hide his old age in order to be acceptable to his lady love.

“I have heard the mermaids singing, each to each.

I do not think that they will sing to me.

I have seen them riding sea ward on the waves

Combing the white hair of the waves blown back.”
He wants to escape from the routine of civilized social life; while walking on a beach, he remembers the story of mermaids who sang to Ulysses and his companions voyaging on the high seas. He feels that the mermaids will not sing for him because he is not brave and adventurous like Ulysses. He is timid and cowardly.

“His love song is being divided between passion and timidity; it is never sung in the real world. For this poem develops a theme of frustration, of emotional conflict, dramatized by you and I.”

Therefore, he is unfit to listen to the music of mermaids. He says that he has seen the mermaid riding on the waves towards the sea and as they move, they comb the foam of the waves thrown back by the strong wind, which makes the water appear white and black.

This is the song of mermaids. They sing about their living deep in the bottom of the sea and being garlanded by sea-girls...
with red and brown sea-weeds. He is awakened from his romantic vision (day-dreaming) when he hears the human voices around him. He realizes that the must face the problems of the life and must take his decisions.

“If this is a sublimation of the amorous Prufrock, it is a release of the timid Prufrock from the polite world which overcomes him. But reality returns, and the divided self is submerged again, not resolved.”²¹
REFERENCES


