T.S. Eliot’s poem “The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock” is a true monologue of literature’s modern man. Prufrock fills the role of the anticlimactic anti-hero as he attempts to confess his inner secrets to the reader. His life is measured in the mundane activities of the everyday, but underneath this veil of societal norms lurks an unsatisfied desire for more. Eliot plays with Prufrock’s contrasting desire to both fit the expectations of society and to brave the taboo, exposing his inevitable loneliness and indecisive nature.

Eliot uses distinctive language to give an intriguing and dynamic portrayal of Prufrock’s inescapable solitude. He opens with unique imagery that sets the mood of the poem by saying “When the evening is spread out against the sky/ Like a patient etherised upon the table,” (Eliot line 2-3). It is the setting being described here, but it also applies to Prufrock and the tone of what he is about to confess. He, like the patient, feels numb and spread out for examination before an audience. Anthony Cuda argues in his article “T. S. Eliot's Etherized Patient” that “the tragedy of the poem consists in Prufrock's fear of and failure to risk vulnerability, these lines configure that fear with a precise correlative for paralysis. For Eliot, the etherized patient is a body whose dulled awareness remains but who cannot move to protect itself.” Eliot’s comparison of the patient paralyzed foreshadows Prufrock’s end. As a mere exposed observer to his own life, he hopes of getting off the table and doing something, but his body stays weighted down and his mind numb. This position of a vulnerable patient laid out also expresses Prufrock’s insecurity as he portrays how he feels viewed by others in society. He believes “They will say: how his hair is growing thin!” and later, “...but how his arms and legs are thin!” (Eliot 41, 44).
Prufrock feels he is always being judged and examined by the community around him. He feels inadequate and incapable of reaching the standards set by society. These feelings of insignificance lead him to compare being in society to being an insect on a pin, “My necktie rich and modest, but asserted by a simple pin-” he continues, “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,” (Eliot 43, 56-58). The pin that holds his necktie pins him on display, squirming for the “eyes” of public inspection just like a bug. He is surrounded by people and wears all the right things to fit in, yet he still feels isolated and detached from them. This relationship echoes that of the doctor and anesthetized patient from the beginning of the poem. Both analogies are cold, sterile, and calculatedly unfeeling. The warmth of love and connection are absent from Prufrock’s relationships.

Because he feels this way he describes others by their single parts and not as a whole; for example, “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!” (Eliot 61-63). Prufrock has segregated and dissected those around him to reflect his own feelings of isolation. Although he himself is part of the community, he feels unincluded from the whole. This is like the arms he describes. He focuses on a single, independently moving limb instead of on the entire person, showing how he is unavoidably embodied in the whole of society, but also is distinctly separate. Because of Prufrock’s intense insecurities he feels almost as if he should not have existed as a person. He says “I should have been a pair of ragged claws/ Scuttling across the floors of silent seas,” (Eliot 73-74). Valentin Videnov, author of “Human Voices in Silent Seas: A Reading of Eliot’s ‘Love Song,” believes this quote implies that Prufrock is off center and “seems to long
for a withdrawal into the inner silence of balance.” Prufrock does indeed feel a disorientating pull between two different realms of society causing him to create such a lonely life for himself that in this moment he feels he might as well be in the dark, vast empty sea where the pressures of society can dissolve into the pressures of the ocean. His unyielding desire to fit in has had a counter effect, where he is constantly feeling judged, and therefore overwhelmed by insecurity unable to achieve acceptance in society.

Eliot brings more depth to the poem and Prufrock’s character by interweaving a hesitant yearning to step away from the expectations of society and indulge in the taboo. He creates a contrast of evenings in disreputable neighborhoods and mornings of tea and toast. Prufrock begins his song in “...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” (Eliot 4-9). This setting paints a lasciviously sulky atmosphere that would not be decently discussed at the morning tea table, yet Prufrock persists in wandering through it, even inviting the reader to join. It is in this environment that Prufrock feels free to test out his desire questioning “Do I dare?’ and, ‘Do I dare?” (Eliot 38). He tells the reader that this place will “lead you to an overwhelming question.../Oh, do not ask, ‘What is it?’/ Let us go and make our visit,” (Eliot 10-12). The backdrop of back alleys in seedy neighborhoods empowers Prufrock to be more playful and inquisitive than he was in respectable society. Although Prufrock is more explorative in this setting, ultimately all it leads to is questioning and wandering.

In his anticlimactic exploration he lures himself into believing that he has the luxury of time, saying “There will be time to murder and create./ And time for all the works and days of
hands/Time for you and time for me,/ And time yet for a hundred indecisions,/ And time for a hundred visions and revisions” (Eliot 28-29, 31-33). It seems to Prufrock there is an infinite supply of time to allow him to accomplish every fleeting desire he has. However, he feels the pull of reputable society and cannot commit himself to either world. Consequently, time does pass and in the end Prufrock’s indecisiveness leaves him alone and unremarkable. He explains, “I have seen the moment of my greatness flicker,/ I have seen the eternal Footman hold my coat, and snicker,/ And in short I was afraid,” (Eliot 84-86). Margaret Blum poignantly argues in "The Fool in 'The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock," that Prufrock’s earlier hopes of confidence have turned on him, saying “He mocks His world and himself as part of it. But now it is too late for him to change either himself or his world.” Prufrock’s fickle nature and fear of being encompassed in either environment has hindered him from becoming or doing anything. He has deluded himself with reassuring illusions of having endless time to become the hero, but was too unsure of himself to ever take action, and instead became nothing at all.

Eliot closes the poem with Prufrock struggling with never having decided to act. Prufrock comes to this realization and says “No! I am not Prince Hamlet, nor was meant to be;/ Am an attendant lord,.../ Politic, cautious, and meticulous;/ Full of high sentence, but a bit obtuse;/ At times, indeed, almost ridiculous-/ Almost, at times, the Fool,” (Eliot 11-112, 115-118). Prufrock knows that his time has run out and he is not the champion or hero of his own life. In fact he can’t even claim to be a complete fool because he was too cautious to accomplish the glorious failure of attempting to achieve anything. He has sojourned passively through his life unaware until the fateful hour reached its end, he says, “We have lingered in the chambers of the sea/ Till human voices wake us, and we drown,” (Eliot 129, 131). Prufrock has lingered unconsciously
through life just as one would float directionless in an endless sea, but unfortunately, for
Prufrock, life is not endless and when the time came for him to awake from his ineffectual
dreams the realities of his bleak indecisive life overwhelmed him.

Eliot has created Prufrock trapped in the liminal space of an upstanding society and
disreputable nightlife, lacking all courage and commitment, Prufrock flails between the two
unable to grasp contentment. He talks, questions, and presumes but is incapable of real action.
He has undermined all opportunities for felicity in life by indulging every insecurity and ignoring
every notion to act. Consequently, the only development produced by Prufrock’s stagnancy has
been a world built up of regret and isolation.

Works Cited

