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SCHOOL

**ENGLISH B**  
**EXTENDED ESSAY**

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**RESEARCH QUESTION:** *The examination of how modern, overeducated and intellectual men are alienated from their environment of materialistic values of the Modern Era, with regard to the poem "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock" by T.S. Elliot.*

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## **Abstract**

An intellectual man eventually questions the deviations in his society and he is usually astounded by how he is obliged to stand alone in that society. This work specifically focuses on how the shattered values of Modern World lead the intellectual individual to alienation and suffering, with regard to the poem “The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock” by T.S. Elliot. The given imageries, stylistic devices, meanings and some certain references are examined as well, as indications of the suffering of the individual.

The essay also includes the historical and social background of American Literature of twentieth century and stresses the relation between the mentioned factors and the attitude of modern men. After World War I, the artistic approach of some certain writers of the mentioned era has been mainly affected by the social changes. The main aim is to study how these changes influenced the poetry of T.S. Elliot; more specifically investigate the indications of that certain state of mind embedded in “The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock”.

As a focus, the research question of this essay suggests concentrating on the topic by taking major themes, linguistics, structures, tone, atmosphere and setting of the poem into consideration. All the mentioned points are discussed in a detailed way in order to determine and comprehend the state of endurance and alienation of modern man. With the help of stylistic devices, language and themes he uses, Elliot demonstrates how he is distressful about the materialistic values of the Modern Era, as well as his personal suffering.

*(260 words)*

*S'io credesse che mia risposta fosse  
A persona che mia tornasse al mondo,  
Questa fiamma staria senza piu scosse.  
Ma perciocche giammai di questa fondo  
Non torno vivo alcun, s'i'odo il vero,  
Senza tema d'infamia ti rispondo.*

*(Dante Alighieri La Commedia Divina: Inferno, Canto XXVII. 61-66)*

## **I. Introduction:**

*“The further you go in writing, the more alone you are”* (Applebee 994) once said Ernest Hemingway, indicating the cramped situation of the intellectual individual almost exactly. As a considerable poet of the twentieth century American literature, T.S Elliot, depicted the same situation in his poems, as well. More specifically, *“The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock”* has indications of an alienated modern man inside a world of shattered values. As overeducated individuals, Elliot and many others suffer from lack of proper relationships and solid individualities in the society they live in. The poem is mainly influenced by the social and historical characteristics of the twentieth century; more specifically the American society of post-war environment.

As to mention the historical and social background of the era, mostly 1920s are taken into account. After the World War I, the unsettled environment of the whole world has found reflections in America as well. *“But the senses of a great civilization being destroyed or destroying itself, of social breakdown, and of individual powerlessness became part of American experience”* (Baym 911). The values of idealism were being replaced by materialistic ideas, economic growth of the individual and self-reliance. Especially with the sudden integration of radio and jazz music into social life in 1920s, a new understanding of entertainment rose and *“the age of corruption”* began by illegal movements.

The idea of the alienation and suffering of modern man, which is also mentioned in the poem, is taken into consideration from various aspects. The thematic structure is mainly based on the ideas that are specifically emphasized in the poem. For instance; the fact that the individual knows too much for the society to understand, is depicted. Therefore, the individual is unable to take action and is cramped inside certain rules of the society. His unhealthy relationships and

alienation within the community, are, as well, reflected. Various references and stylistic devices are used by the poet in order to strengthen the meaning of an enduring persona.

Modernism, “*a term that critics have developed for literature produced under the influence of the modern temper*” (Baym 915) and which is also followed by T.S Elliot, is strongly against these social and cultural deviations in the society. “*Disillusioned by the war and appalled by the materialism of the age, the new generation of writers searched for different literary forms to express what they understood as the modern consciousness.*” (Applebee 993) The modernists are known to use some certain themes of alienation and isolation. In addition to repeated themes, such writers frequently use the technique of stream of consciousness, imageries, and pieces of dreams, literary allusions and references. These indications of how the individual is alienated from the modern society will be investigated in this specific poem.

## II. Major Themes

As a major indication of the specified themes in the poem, the contradiction within the name of the poem is important to mention in the beginning. The name of the persona is given as “J. Alfred Prufrock” which has a strict sound that truly contradicts with his “Love Song”. In spite of the fact that Alfred Prufrock has a connotation of a strong and “prudent” man, his inability to have proper relationships within the community is depicted with the heading “Love Song”, which contributes to the indication of the dilemma of the modern man in the poem.

To start with, to emphasize his endurance, specifically the fact that the persona is overeducated and too intellectual for the society is depicted. For instance, in line 49 (see appendix 1), the persona’s highly valuable knowledge is going through a phase which starts with darkness and leaves itself to a brighter image with enlightenment. However, now, the persona is facing the “afternoons”, which are nearly as dark as the night and which point out the fact that knowledge eventually has to fade. This may be an indication of how invaluable the knowledge becomes after a long process of interaction within the community. Furthermore, the inability to take action despite his high level of intellectual accumulation is reflected through various lines. For instance, line 31 (see appendix 1), clearly shows that the persona is quite apprehensive and indecisive about the change. As an approach, the change that is suggested here may be considered as the reaction to the deviations in the society. Persona’s questioning of his strength to change things, is also present in lines 38-39 (see appendix 1). The reference to Hamlet shows the procrastinating character of the persona. This indicates the fact that, in spite of the power which the persona holds, he lacks courage to suggest change; which is seen in lines 111-114 (see appendix 1). Here, the poet conveys the fact that modern men cannot possibly have the courage to tell the truth to humanity yet instead; they become alienated, isolated and are misunderstood.

In fact, the persona secretly fears to be a “Hamlet” and he strictly refuses the idea of even being mistaken to be him. In addition, in several striking parts, the pursuit of inner strength for a change is indicated such as in lines 79-86 (see appendix 1). The persona tries to reflect that he basically lacks the courage and will for a major change. He questions his ability to “force the moment to its crisis” and reflects the sense that he is simply “afraid”.

The social inquiry, which is another factor that made the modern man question, is also reflected in the poem. However, as mentioned before, the persona does have an anxiety about the possible change. Due to this, a reference to laborers<sup>1</sup> is made in lines 28-29 (see appendix 1), in order to show the social anxiety of the persona, who is definitely alarmed by the deviated concepts of the insensitive society.

The discrepancy between intellectuality and education level of modern men and the society, eventually leads them to be alienated from the society. Furthermore not only is endurance a problem of modern men, but they also have the obligation to fill in the specific forms of the society which is another major theme as well. Especially, the sense that there are certain rules and forms to be filled in is also manifested in the poem through the persona. For instance, the lines 55-58 (see appendix 1) directly pinpoint the fact that the persona had to regulate his life upon the rules of the society but was never satisfied. As an indication of the necessity to fill in the frames of a society which he does not belong to, yet he criticizes; the persona stresses out his agony.

Consequently, because of the aforementioned problem regarding alienation, modern men eventually have become lonely, which is specifically mentioned all through the poem. The image of a lonely man is clearly depicted in several parts of the poem, such as the lines 72 or 123-124 (see appendix 1). Persona’s feelings about his alienation in the society, is clearly present in these

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<sup>1</sup> Works and Days is a didactic poem about farming by the Greek poet Hesiod (8th century B.C.) (Baym 1371).



lines. Especially, the word “lonely” shows that the persona is aware of the cruel fact as well. More specifically, he means that he isolates himself from the materialistic approach of the era. In addition, he accepts that there is no permanent place in which he can be accepted, and he can join, by making a reference to mermaids.

Another aspect that should be considered is the fact that the values of the society are completely different from those of the modern men and eventually, it becomes more arduous to understand and comprehend the modern men. Thus, the intellectual individual is cramped by the fact that he does not form proper communication with the other members of the society. This point is mentioned several times throughout the poem by various statements, such as lines 109-110 (see appendix 1). These statements are repeated in different parts which raise the question of misunderstanding and lack of interaction. As it is obvious, the persona is having utmost tribulation to express his ideas, yet he is trying to make himself understood. Moreover, the clear statement of the persona, which demonstrates the situation, has taken part in the poem in line 105 (see appendix 1). The persona is highly aware that neither can he form the sentences the society can understand; nor the society can possibly get to the deeper meaning of what he says. In the last bits, the line 117 (see appendix 1), is one of the most obvious examples which prove his inability to be understood. Expressing the fact that he is overeducated and too much for the society’s needs, the persona cannot help but admit being obtuse. Lines 118-119 (see appendix 1), depict that the ideas of the persona which are highly intellectual, yet are not respected in the society. He is thought to be “ridiculous”, and “the Fool”, which shows that he is completely misunderstood.

Another feature which modern men are tortured by is the fact that, there are no healthy romantic relationships between the individuals of the society because of the lack of

communication. A certain example of this is in lines 35-36 (see appendix 1). It is repeated several times and it conveys the meaning that modern men generally do not have healthy emotional relationships yet more worldly and pretentious ones, depending on the intellectual purposes of women.

### III. Structure and Linguistics

The poem may as well be analyzed for its structure and linguistics. To start with, throughout the poem, stylistic devices are effectively used. For instance, the first part, lines 2-3 (see appendix 1), reflects the sense that the persona is waiting for something that is painful due to the fact that an image of a medical operation is given. Moreover, motionlessness is deeply reflected. In the following lines, the use of the words “*sky*”-“*streets*”-“*hotels*” and “*restaurants*” in a series is very significant to mention. This stylistic device of debasement creates the image of a spacious city. In the poem various uses of personifications, such as it is seen in lines 15-16 (see appendix 1), directly reflecting the pessimistic setting. The yellow fog and the yellow smoke reflect the image of a disturbed and unsettled person. Furthermore, the disturbance and anxiety of the persona is emphasized with reference to illness, with regard to the word “yellow”. As a personified element, the fog and smoke do not only convey the negative connotation of an image, but also emphasize that all the elements included in the setting are disturbed by a cruel fact. Another personification that points out the atmosphere is: in line 75 (see appendix 1), which clarifies the fact that the atmosphere which the poet has tried to reflect to the reader is rather stagnant and calm. This may also refer to the powerlessness of the persona, who also sleeps and refuses to take action. In the following lines, there is an art of alliteration with the use of “s” sound in lines 32-33 (see appendix 1). These lines also consist of repeated phrases, which are used to strengthen the meaning. Another repetition that is used is present in lines 38 and 45-46 (see appendix 1). This one also points out a very significant meaning which is the inner conflict of the persona whether to have the audacity to take action; or maintain calmness and restful and not disturb the universe. Furthermore, the fact that the persona considers his own efforts as a “disturbance to universe” is as well a demonstration of how he

becomes passive. In the following lines of this part, a series of rhetorical questions are also another indication of persona's hesitation which can be observed in lines 59-61 (see appendix 1). Another significance of these lines is that, while the first series of questions start with the word "begin" and continue with the word "presume"; the following series go vice versa. The poet may have wanted to give the feeling that the persona is cramped in the fact that he can not acknowledge the time and is unable to act according to that lack of understanding of time. This again reflects how lost modern men has become in a world that they do not belong. One of the most striking parts which show the reader the mood of the persona is in lines 101-102 (see appendix 1). With the "s" sound again, the image of a silent and calm life is given. These lines can well be associated with the attitude of the persona which lacks action. However, even retirement or death can be referred to. Furthermore, the word "*novel*" may refer to the former successes of the persona, while "*skirts that trail along*" may be an indication of ended relationships. All of these point out that the persona is having a difficulty in facing that lonely life after all the success he has been through.

Secondly, the poem has a construction which is strengthened by the references it bears. These references are taken from a few most outstanding heroes of the history of literature or religion, such as: The Divine Comedy, Lazarus and Hamlet. To start with, the poem starts with a part from Dante's Divine Comedy, whose meaning is given below:

*"If I thought that my reply would be one who would ever return to the world, this flame would stand without further movement; but since none has ever returned alive from its depth, if what I hear is true I answer you without a fear of infamy." (Baym 1370)*

This is a clear statement of what the persona considers. He is surely conflicted about the fact that no one will be pleased to listen to the truth that he knows. In addition, since the given reference

is from the section of Hell, it may also mean that the persona is likely to experience hell on earth while he is struggling with various conflicts within himself and with the society.

Another significant allusion that carries a specific meaning is written in lines 94-95 (see appendix 1). Since, this may either refer to “*the resurrection of Lazarus is recounted in John 11.1-44.*” (Baym 1372) there is a similar theme between them and the aforementioned part of the Divine Comedy. This allusion again proves that the persona is powerless and “not permitted” to go back and amend things. In addition, the persona cannot explain a significant truth to the people around him even though he is aware of the fact that he shall.

In the following parts, the reference to Hamlet is given which in lines 111-114 (see appendix 1) specifies persona’s point of view, as Hamlet is the hero of a Shakespearean tragedy who is unable to take action despite his will in the play, as well. Here, the persona is reflected to be an attendant lord, whose duty is to counsel the prince and tell the truth at all times. Instead, he stays calm and advises the “prince” to have no doubts. However, he is not a hero to save all; but an alienated individual who refuses to speak. This refers to the fact that the intellectual man, whose duty is to inform and influence the public in an educative way, prefers to pretend that there is no loopholes in the order of the society. All of these allusions show the procrastinating character and anxious attitude of the persona.

Last reference that should be considered as significant is made to Michelangelo. In the earlier bits, repetition of two statements, specifically in lines 35-36 (see appendix 1) is used. This may be interpreted as the reflection of a personal conflict. The persona has met many women and had many relationships which were only based on intellectual purposes of women. Surely, this may as well be an indication of, either the shattered relationships between people in the society;

or the impossibility of the persona to join the society and have normal relationships which is desired by most of the people, in that era. This idea is enforced by the repetition of these lines.

Last but not least, the vocabulary and the punctuation, which affects the conveyance of the meaning, have a special significance in the poem. To start with, a very striking point that takes the reader's attention all through the poem is the frequent use of question marks, for instance in lines 38-39 or 60 (see appendix 1). All the mentioned punctuations may specifically convey that the persona is having a monologue, in which he questions himself upon his environment. On the other hand, this may be an indication of the technique of stream of consciousness in which the persona reflects his flow of ideas without a restriction. Furthermore, line 72 (see appendix 1) which contains both a question mark and ellipsis should be taken into consideration. Not only is the question mark but the ellipsis has a significance as well. It may indicate the speechlessness of the persona, despite the degree of his knowledge and things he wants to say. In addition to this, in the first part of the poem, the use of vocabulary bears a contradicting meaning. In lines 8-9 (see appendix 1), the lexical choice of the unusual combination words reflect both the inner conflicts of the persona and the conflicts he has with the society. For instance an argument that is described to be "tedious", conveys the fact that the persona lacks motivation for any kind of communication. Besides, an "insidious intent" may refer to the shattered purposes of other members of the society. One point that is important to mention is that, all through the poem, there are several parts where the poet used: "you and I", such as in lines 1, 31 or 87 (see appendix 1). This may refer to the conflicts of the persona himself: his dilemma of whether to take action or to stay still in formulated frames of a society in which he does not belong is as well depicted. On the other hand another approach may be that it may refer to a potential lover. Finally, the lines 115-119 (see appendix 1) are also necessary to

mention. The diction gives the sense that each word in the lines describes the persona quite satisfactorily. For instance, the word “deferential” means respectful; where “politic” can also be used for someone who is old and mature. Similarly, the words “cautious” and “meticulous” have the meaning of being careful to avoid potential problems or dangers; while “obtuse” can mean annoyingly insensitive or slow to understand. All of these words make the reference to an old and wise, but unaccepted man in the society. Furthermore, “full of high sentence” indicates his intellectuality, which is shattered by the image of a “Fool”, in lines 117-119 (see appendix 1).

#### **IV. Tone, Atmosphere and Setting**

The other weighty aspects of the poem are the tone, atmosphere and the setting, which quite affect the conveyance of the meaning. All through the poem, a very motionless and gloomy setting is depicted. The tone is anxious and desperate. In the first part, the setting is pointed out as a deserted city. For instance, the lines 4-9 (see appendix 1) create the image of a cloudy night, which conveys the pessimistic attitude of the persona. The streets being half-deserted, conveys a vacant setting. On the other hand, the lines 62-63 (see appendix 1) change the setting into a place for classic upper-class lifestyle, where the tone is observed to be apprehensive and desperate. This may indicate that the persona is in an environment where the shattered and corrupted beliefs of the upper-class are accepted. Surely, he is not satisfied with this fact. Lastly, the last part of the poem clearly reflects a setting of a seaside, where the persona can finally have rest and be disentangled from all those conflicts that he had been struggling with. Especially the lines 124-131 (see appendix 1) reinforce the meaning that the persona is seeking for relief, which may also be interpreted as the desire for a proper relationship, by reference to mermaids. However, the last line suggests that the persona will always have the discomfort which is created by the society. The diction used is not only another aspect of examination, since it gives a very negative connotation to death, but also a way of reinforcing the social anxiety that the persona is in, as his last remarks.



## **V. Conclusion:**

“The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock” has significance in the sense that it reflects the ideas of an individual who is strictly alienated in his environment. A world in which every kind of settlement is falling apart and each aspect of human life including relationships and cultural improvements are corrupted; intellectual men would eventually question the situation. As a considerable name of the modernist literature which was formed during the post-war era in the United States’ twentieth century, T.S. Elliot felt the necessity to stress how the basis of the society falls apart, how surprisingly the values of humankind dissolves and how he is inevitably alienated in such an environment.

The shattered values of the Modern Era and post-war environment are well reflected through the poet’s approach and persona’s situation. Major themes such as alienation, isolation, lack of self-confidence to improve the intellectual accumulation in the society, being cramped inside a cultural and social form of rules actually bothers the poet. The work focuses on how the persona finds it impossible to act upon his thoughts and he becomes isolated instead of taking action. In fact, the persona deeply feels sorrow and loneliness because he cannot possibly adapt to such an environment. As a part of the minority of such a society, this overeducated and intellectual man eventually suffers from lack of interaction.

The agony of the persona is reflected through the poet’s filter of ideas and techniques. As examined in the essay, the techniques, imageries, references and other stylistic devices that are used are influential to convey the cramped situation and loneliness of modern man. All in all, “The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock” profoundly shows how modern individuals isolate themselves from their environment, through the respected words of T.S. Elliot.

## APPENDIX 1

### Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock

*S'io credesse che mia risposta fosse  
A persona che mia tornasse al mondo,  
Questa fiamma staria senza piu scosse.  
Ma perciocche giammai di questa fondo  
Non torno vivo alcun, s'i'odo il vero,  
Senza tema d'infamia ti rispondo.*

*(Dante Alighieri La Commedia Divina: Inferno, Canto XXVII. 61-66)*

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. . . 10  
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, 20

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; 30  
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.

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— 40  
[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!"]  
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;  
Have known the evenings, mornings, afternoons,                   50  
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?

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  
To spit out all the butt-ends of my days and ways?               60  
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!]  
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?  
    And how should I begin?

. . . . .

Shall I say, I have gone at dusk through narrow streets           70  
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.

. . . . .

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.  
Should I, after tea and cakes and ices,  
Have the strength to force the moment to its crisis?                   80  
But though I have wept and fasted, wept and prayed,  
Though I have seen my head (grown slightly bald) brought in upon a platter,  
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.

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,   90  
To have bitten off the matter with a smile,  
To have squeezed the universe into a ball  
To roll it toward some overwhelming question,  
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,  
Should say, "That is not what I meant at all.  
That is not it, at all."

And would it have been worth it, after all,  
Would it have been worth while,   100

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 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." 110

. . . . .

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,  
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.

I grow old . . . I grow old . . . 120  
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 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      130  
Till human voices wake us, and we drown.

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