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Textual Frustration: The Sonnet and Gender Performance in "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock"

Brian Clifton
University of North Texas

Discussions of Eliot's "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock" have focused on alienation and anxiety or the poem's formal elements. However, there seems to be a gap in explaining how these two aspects relate to each other. Throughout the monologue, Prufrock's attempts to assert his (idea of) masculinity seem to be related to how the poem uses and frustrates the sonnet form. If the sonnet is understood as an inherently masculine form and if its appearance (fully or partially) within the poem points toward an attempt to fulfil the social constraints of masculinity, then the poem will allow gender and structure to enter in dialogue, which suggests that Prufrock's inability to perform as masculine is related to his inability to both create and manipulate the sonnet structure.

Keywords: gender performance / "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock" / T.S. Eliot / sonnet / masculinity

"The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock" could be considered a poem that fixates on performance. It explores anxieties regarding a failed masculine performance as revelatory of a larger crisis of meaning. Within the poem, masculine identity is pursued via the speaker's attempts to perform not only sexually but also poetically through complete and partial sonnet forms. These two types of performances succeed and fail to resonate as authoritative to varying degrees throughout the poem. Moreover, Prufrock's attempts to assert his masculinity (or, perhaps more truthfully, to conceal his lack of masculinity) seem to be related to how the poem uses and frustrates the sonnet form. If the sonnet is understood as an inherently masculine form and if its appearance (fully or partially) within "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock" points toward an attempt to

Brian Clifton (bmclftn@gmail.com), a published poet, is a PhD candidate and graduate teaching assistant at the University of North Texas.

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fulfill the social constraints of masculinity, then it follows that the poem allows gender and structure to speak to each other such that Prufrock's inability to perform uniformly as masculine is related to his inability to create and successfully manipulate the sonnet structure throughout the dramatic monologue.

Were gender and sex to be considered continuant and coherent (male is masculine; female is feminine), the performance Prufrock must enact would be far less fraught with anxiety and rupture. However, as Judith Butler explains in *Gender Trouble*, gender is performative strictly because it is "manufactured through a sustained set of acts" (9). Prufrock, accordingly, must sustain his performance of masculinity throughout the dramatic monologue in order to be considered completely masculine—"completely" because, as implied by a set of acts, gender then becomes a continuum on which Prufrock lands (at times more masculine and at others, less so). While there is not a set series of acts that constitute masculinity through time and culture, I will, for this paper, rely on Judith Halberstam's definition in *Female Masculinity*:

> Masculinity in this society inevitably conjures up notions of power and legitimacy and privilege; it often symbolically refers to the power of the state and to uneven distributions of wealth. Masculinity seems to extend outward into patriarchy and inward into the family; masculinity represents the power of inheritance, the consequences of the traffic of women, and the promise of social privilege. (1736)

"The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock" embodies the implications of this definition in several ways. First and foremost, if masculinity represents in part "the consequences of the traffic of women," then Prufrock's ideation of women as objects of his desire is a type of masculine performance. Therefore, masculinity inhabits the instances of Prufrock's male gaze, which are present from the first few lines of the poem to its ending. Secondly, the definition ascribes a sense of wealth and privilege to the masculine. The allusive nature of the poem (and the works alluded to), the speaker's obsession with bourgeois accouterment, and the insistence that performing gender entails paying for "saw dust restaurants," "oyster shells," and "teas and cakes and ices" implies a certain wealth and privilege underscored by Halberstam's definition of masculinity. Finally, the political notion of masculinity, as it "symbolically refers to the power of the state," correlates to the sonnet with respect to the form's relationship to a national poetic identity.

At the time Eliot wrote "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock," the sonnet form was entangled in notions of what it meant to be a "serious" poet in English. As Peter Howarth notes in "The Modern Sonnet," the Victorians and Georgians praised "its compact lyrical perfection" and insisted it was "the critical high-water mark" (225). Further, T.W.H. Crosland, in *The English Sonnet* (1917), "asserted 'when great poetry is being produced, great sonnets are being produced'" (Howarth 225). On the other hand, the modernists saw the sonnet as "the worst of previous generations" and as a marker of "genteel unreality" (Howarth 225). Whether the sonnet was being lauded or reviled, it remained (and perhaps still remains)

ingrained in what it means to write poetry in English—the practice of writing sonnets linking Shakespeare to Milton, Spenser to Shelley, Donne to Keats.

If the sonnet had come to culturally represent a poetic manifestation of English language identity, then in this small way the sonnet became patriarchal, that is to say masculine—if we are to believe Halberstam's definition that masculinity is symbolically represented by the power of the state. The sonnet, for the modernists, had become associated with the state bearing its strength and imposing its ideals upon them. Furthermore, given the proliferation and exuberance with which the generations before the modernists engaged with this form, the sonnet became, in a sense, rhetorical. No longer was the sonnet a whispered song, but it had become in and of itself a rhetoric, or to quote Tony Hoagland, "intrinsically public, civil, civic, and civilizing" (15). In other words, the sonnet would be a part of the patriarchy on an expanded level, moving from the corridor to the courtroom, from bed sheets to news sheets. But this reading of the sonnet as national, part of the state, is not the only way the structure works in a gendered (specifically masculine) way.

Connecting the two poles of public and private life is the male gaze, specifically as it is rendered in the sonnet. While there are sonnets that reach beyond the love song, the majority of sonnets focus on love—specifically explicit heterosexual desire and a "presumed identification with a male subject" (Henderson 18). In this way, by presuming a male subject, the sonnet acts as the poetic display of the male gaze and so becomes definitively masculine. As a love song between two people, the sonnet embodies the facet of Halberstam's definition, namely "the traffic of women." Yet, the sonnet is not merely a love song. Because the sonnet was overused by the generations before the modernists, it became English poetry's de facto lyrical mode, which pushed the sonnet from the personal to the public—thereby gendering desirous (and public) speech as implicitly masculine (Distiller 1). In these ways, both public and private, the sonnet implies a type of masculinity.

Not so surprisingly, "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock" has a tenuous and anxious relationship with the sonnet—much like Prufrock's own relationship with his masculinity. The poem seems so preoccupied with working and reworking its lines into the sonnet structure that there are few moments entirely devoid of the sonnet's influence. And this might very well be the case not only as it pertains to Prufrock's mental machinations but also to the tone of the poem, namely its loving satire of gentility. But the poem has points in which the sonnet structure becomes so obscured, kaleidoscopic, and fragmented that to refer to it in terms of traditional technique and execution becomes problematic. That is not to say that the form's gesture is not there contextually, but that the execution is difficult to tease out in terms of formal techniques such as rhyme schemes, voltas, proportion, and meter.

It is important to ask if the sonnet structure is integral to "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock" or merely a product of the culture within which it was written. Given the sonnet's ubiquity, all English lyric poetry is possibly influenced by the sonnet without that influence being necessary to or an extension of the content.

Yet, the tradition of the sonnet, its form (and the frustration thereof), and who engages with it seems inseparable from this particular poem's content. That Eliot's poem is a love song with a bourgeois masculine speaker points toward the tradition of the sonnet as a love song as well as to the class and gender of those associated with writing this specific form. In addition, there seems to be a relationship between the constraint socially imposed on those performing masculinity and the constraints the sonnet imposes on language in regards to Prufrock's inability to complete both a full, perfect sonnet and a performance of masculinity (or at least his ideation of what that might mean).

The fact that the sonnet structure is only partially fulfilled and that the instances of such appearances are episodic says as much if not more about gender performance than when the form is intact. By looking at instances of full, partial, and absent sonnet structures and their contexts within "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock," we gain a clearer understanding of what it might mean to have a structural component to the performance of masculinity and how this structural component imposes itself on the subject of the poem.

Beginning with a "full" instance of the sonnet, we can see a strong correlation between the sonnet and the personal aspect of masculinity (namely "the traffic of women"). Let us consider the first fourteen lines of the poem:

> 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.
>
> In the room the women come and go
> Talking of Michelangelo. (ll. 1–14)

While these lines nod toward traditional sonnet rhymes and to iambic pentameter, they enact the sonnet more fully through concise argument and, more importantly, the volta. Given the amount of variation among possible rhyme schemes (Petrarchan, Shakespearian, Spenserian, Elizabethan etc.), line numbers (Cutral Sonnet and Caudate Sonnet), and meter (specifically Hopkins's sprung rhythm and the shortened lines in Milton's "On the New Forcers of Conscience under the Long Parliament"), the characteristics that do not change throughout these variations are the concise arguments and the use of a volta. The presence of these two elements seems to be the foundation of the sonnet.

The opening lines of "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock" are as close to propositioning the object of Prufrock's gaze as Eliot allows his speaker to get within the poem. In this anxious and sputtering proposition, Prufrock lays out his argument: "Let us go and make our visit." The ambiguity of the proposition (Is "visit" being used as euphemism for a sexual encounter? Colloquially? What strings are attached to this "visit"?) acts as a counterpoint to the form in which it is presented. By this I mean that because the sonnet acts as a performance of masculinity (if only in Prufrock's subconscious), there is no need for Prufrock to elaborate on the physical ramifications of a "visit." In a sense, Prufrock sees the sonnet as illustrative of his masculine, heterosexual desire and develops his utterance within the constraints of this performative structure. Additionally, that Prufrock couches his libidinous proposition in the argumentative structure of the sonnet further entwines both poetic structure and the performance of masculinity within this poem.

More importantly, however, the volta weds masculine desire, poetic structure, and Prufrock's anxiety about both desire and structure as they relate to the performance of masculinity within the dramatic monologue. In these lines, Prufrock amplifies his masculine performance with a volta and the shade of a volta. First, looking at the volta proper, which manifests in the final couplet (ll. 11–12, as per the Shakespearian model), there is a turn from both the heteronormative desire ("Let's us go you and I …") that colors the sonnet and the subject of Prufrock's gaze. When the lines shift to "In the room, the women come and go / talking of Michaelangelo," Prufrock is signaling that his masculine performance is over. The lines turn from desire to a passing remark on art—turning Prufrock's attention from the object of his gaze and his performance of masculinity.

But there is also the shade of a volta—a slight turn that has more to do with tone and implication than the traditional movement from thesis to antithesis to synthesis. Per the Petrarchan model, the volta occurs in the ninth line. The ninth line in the first fourteen lines of the poem is "Of insidious intent." While not traditionally volta-like, the phrase turns the sonnet structure, refocusing it not on the actions of propositioning a date (dinner, a stroll, etc.) but on the expectation of sex. It betrays Prufrock's feelings on the matter, namely the negative associations he has toward the desire of sexual intercourse ("insidious intent") and his embarrassment at possibly having to express his desire—the "overwhelming question" that he himself is not able to provide nor willing to explain when asked ("Oh, do not ask, 'What is it?'"). In this way, "Of insidious intent" shades the lines that follow it with Prufrock's uncomfortable ideation that masculinity is accomplished only through heteronormative desire and heterosexual intercourse, thus turning these lines slightly in their tone from asking someone on a date to the expectation of sex at the conclusion of the date. Moreover, it is important to note how masculinity is exaggerated by doubling a formal element of the structural performance of gender—a technique that is used again when the poem utilizes fragments of the double sonnet (in lines such as 81–98).

Perhaps, the concise argument and the use of the volta is not enough to justify calling these 14 lines a sonnet. The fact that most of the lines are not in iambic pentameter as well as the lines' decidedly un-sonnet-like rhyme scheme (though they give nods to Spenserian sonnets with their interlocking quatrains and to Elizabethan sonnets through the rhyming end couplet) might vary enough from the traditional sonnet structure to preclude classifying them as such. And yet, these ruptures do call into question the fullness of the sonnet as exemplified in these lines. However, the overarching tonality, formal constraints, and volta usage push the opening of the poem closer to a complete sonnet than not a sonnet at all—especially when considering the variations of rhyme schemes, line number, and meter in the English sonnet's history.

The ruptures in the rhyme scheme, as well as the monologue's continuance after these lines have reached their "crisis," likewise mirrors the failed performance of gender, further entwining structure and gender in this poem. Given that gender is performed as a "sustained set of acts," it would follow that there would be moments of discontinuity, moments in which masculinity would not be performed, or in which masculinity performance was paused. These instances in which the poem temporarily breaks from the rigid sonnet form point to the structure as performative insomuch as Prufrock is not able to enact the performance fully and completely. The fact that Eliot's speaker cannot complete the proposition (and the masculinity it implies) is echoed by the poem's lack of formal perfection.

In addition to the full sonnet in the poem's opening lines, there are moments throughout the poem in which fragmented parts of sonnet patterns ebb and flow into each other or the sonnet structure is completely absent. It seems the instances in which partial sonnet structures are used coincide with moments in which Prufrock is performing the ideation of gender exhibited in the opening fourteen lines. Looking specifically at lines 49–54 and 75–110, one can see the partial sonnet denotes not only what it means to perform masculinity but also the anxiety that it causes and the inability for the speaker to perform comfortably the set of acts required of this gender. Let us consider lines 49–54:

> For I have known them all already, known them all;
> Have known the evenings, mornings, afternoons,
> I have measured out my life with coffee spoons;
> I know the voices dying with a dying fall
> Beneath the music from a farther room.
> So how should I presume?

These lines act as a sestet to a missing octave. The rhyme scheme nods toward the envelope rhymes of the octave while concluding with the rhyming couplet per an Elizabethan sestet. Also, these lines seem to be loosely structured around the iamb and pentameter (with slight promotions here and there, "Have **known** the **eve**nings, **morn**ings, **af**ter**noons**"). The scene depicted in these lines illustrates Prufrock's superficial knowledge of what it means to perform masculinity. The scene also acts as an example of performed masculinity, as defined within the

poem, because it implies a heteronormative sex act ("the voices dying with a dying fall") occurring in a space separate from Prufrock's location ("Beneath the music from farther room."); I will explain this idea more fully in the coming paragraphs. The gap between Prufrock's knowledge of how to perform masculinity and the actuality of performing masculinity is exhibited in the volta in line 53—"Beneath the music from a farther room."—which shifts the focus of these lines away from Prufrock's mind to another locale. At first, Prufrock seems to claim a firsthand knowledge of performing masculinity ("For I have known them all already . . ."), but at the volta it becomes apparent that this knowledge is secondhand as it happens in "a farther room." The volta's turning causes Prufrock to question his presumed knowledge of what it means to perform masculinity ("So how should I presume?").

This passage is as ambiguous regarding sex and sexuality as the opening of the poem. Just as Prufrock is unable to provide his "overwhelming question," in this scene, sexual intercourse is obscured through allusion and euphemism rather than being stated explicitly. The words "know" and "dying" work as double entendre to paint the scene as it is and to imply a level of heterosexual, masculine desire that makes Prufrock so uncomfortable he can only confront it obliquely. In "knowing," there are echoes of "knowing someone Biblically," since in Biblical Hebrew, one definition of "knowing" is sexual intercourse. When Prufrock claims "I have known them all," there is the surface level meaning that he understands performing masculinity as requiring the acts of heterosexual desire; there is also the double entendre of "knowing." Through the pun on "knowing" and the ambiguity of the plural "them all," it seems that Prufrock wants to imply that he is, in fact, having sexual intercourse and lots of it.

Furthermore, "dying" implies *la petite mort* ('the little death'—a French colloquialism for orgasm), and "dying fall" alludes to a "lovesick" character in *Twelfth Night*, Orsino. These references in the line "I know the voices dying with a dying fall" obliquely describe sexual intercourse. The action ("voices dying with a dying fall") implies both the cessation of speech as the voices begin their sexual encounter as well as an orgasm. The orgasm works as a dying fall, literally a fading cadence, as it might signal the end of sexual intercourse that could be heard outside of the room in which occurs. Since the content of this passage drips with sexual desire, namely heterosexual masculine desire, it follows that it would be structured so as to echo its masculine performance.

Though this section employs a partial sonnet structure, these lines are not a perfectly rendered sestet. The rhyme scheme varies, the meter shrinks and grows, and at the end it is just six lines. Part of what makes a sonnet is the proportion between octave and sestet and the tension between these two elements. That said, as the first few lines diverged from the idealized sonnet form, this passage's variances on the structure illustrate Prufrock's performance of masculinity. In these six lines, Prufrock claims "to know" what it means to perform masculinity. But in the scene (specifically the volta and the missing octave), it becomes apparent that his knowledge of masculinity is not only incomplete but also superficial—much

how it seems to him that structuring his ideas in the form of a sonnet/partial sonnet would necessarily gender them as masculine.

The missing octave as well as the present volta work in tandem to illustrate Prufrock's failure to sustain the acts necessary to perform masculinity completely. The volta shifts the tone of the knowledge Prufrock says he has. Earlier in the poem, it seems as though Eliot's speaker pontificates with firsthand knowledge—he "knows them all." Yet when he arrives at the volta, it becomes apparent that his knowledge is merely hearsay, gathered from watching or listening to another perform heterosexual masculinity in a "farther room." This volta turns the utterance spatially, from Prufrock to this other place where performing masculinity happens, as well as formally, through the form's rupture. The volta cues the reader to the missing octave. Revealing Prufrock's knowledge is "presumed," Eliot draws the reader's attention to the missing octave, the first the argument of the sonnet. Skipping over the octave, Prufrock puts his conclusion—that he knows what it is to perform masculinity—before his claim and evidence (perhaps, because he has none). In this way, it is impossible to say what he means, because he himself hasn't fully understood what masculinity means in his situation.

This rupturing of the sonnet structure reinforces the notion that Prufrock's ideation of how to perform masculinity is not fully formed. On the one hand, he might understand what sustained acts might be necessary to perform a gender and the formal constraints imposed upon those who choose to perform masculinity. Yet, on the other hand, there is the "actual" failure of completing these actions, of performing masculinity. This idea of structural rupture and the rupture of gender performance becomes more apparent in other examples of the partial sonnet in "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock," specifically lines 75–110, which begin:

> 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?
> 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. (ll. 75–86)

Here, Prufrock begins an utterance with the abba rhyme scheme of the traditional sonnet. But as soon as the moment forces him to his crisis of performing masculinity through heterosexual desire, the form breaks into un-sonnet-like structures, signaling both an uncomfortable relationship to the form and the embodiment of the masculinity to which Prufrock subscribes. This passage and the lines that

follow illustrate Prufrock's inability to work and exist within the established gendered and poetic constraints socially imposed upon him.

The following lines (88–110) work and rework similar images and repeated phrases, as if Eliot was attempting to revise Prufrock's lines into a perfected sonnet form, which in the end is not produced, prompting Prufrock to give up, stating through the mouth of his imagined paramour, "That is not what I meant, at all." These 23 lines show a speaker who is not only (theoretically) aware of the actions one must take in order to perform masculine desire but also versed in how those actions must be structured. However aware he may be of the gender's structure and actions, Prufrock in these moments of self-conscious editing and revision ultimately fails in his attempt to perform the masculinity ascribed to him.

All this self-conscious revision and acute self-awareness of his own actions seem to fade when Prufrock does not force himself to adhere to the structural constraints of the sonnet and perhaps subsequently the constraints of masculinity as he sees it. While there are moments throughout the poem in which Prufrock seems less agitated if not partially comfortable, the most illustrative of these lines seem to be 69–74:

> Shall I say, I have gone at dusk through narrow streets
> And watched the smoke that rises from the pipes
> Of lonely men in shirt-sleeves, leaning out of windows? …
>
> I should have been a pair of ragged claws
> Scuttling across the floors of silent seas.

In this scene, Prufrock is a type of voyeur, just as he was in lines 49–54, but the difference between these two scenes stems from his supposed reasons for voyeurism. In lines 49–54, Prufrock looks to compile an example of what it is to perform masculinity. In lines 69–74, however, Prufrock is not looking to develop a definition of masculinity that he then could attempt to fulfill. His gaze has shifted.

These lines show a speaker devoid of the inclination to perform heterosexual desire in an attempt to be perceived as masculine. In the process, his speech act drops the pretense of the sonnet structure and instead expresses himself in a genuine way. It is a moment in "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock" in which Eliot's speaker seems concerned neither with expressing himself in the structures passed down to him nor using allusion to deepen his argument. Dispensing with the rhyme, meter, proportion, and the other accouterment of the sonnet form, Prufrock also ceases his failing attempts to perform as masculine. In doing so, he creates an original—albeit disturbingly inhuman—image that resonates with his specific circumstances, "a pair of ragged claws / scuttling across the floors of silent seas." The development of unique imagery and distinctive expressions of that imagery occurs in other places in which the poem at least partially foregoes the sonnet structure (lines 15–34 and 120–131).

The difference between lines 15–34 / 120–131 and lines 69–74 is the desire and anxiety exhibited. In lines 15–34 and 120–131, the specter of heterosexual,

masculine desire looms over the images. In addition, these lines focus on Prufrock's anxiety about his own performance of masculinity. Lines 69–74, being set apart by section breaks, are also removed from heterosexual desire and its usual requirements concerning the performance of masculinity. Furthermore, the anxiety shown is less about failing a masculine performance and more about the consequences of abandoning this performance. While there is still desire in this section—both in terms of fulfillment and frustration—it is a desire that is less fraught with anxiety. On the one hand, Prufrock's gaze shifts from the heteronormative object of his desire to the men leaning out of windows and not how they exhibit masculinity as Prufrock sees it. He looks at these men with both envy at how comfortable they are and, perhaps, an implied desire. On the other hand, the men are "lonely," and immediately after gazing upon them, Prufrock expresses an image of loneliness and isolation ("a pair of ragged claws / scuttling across the floors of silent seas")—and that he himself "should have been" this image of loneliness and isolation.

While Prufrock's "ragged claws" could be considered one of the most strikingly original images in the poem, it is still just that, an image. With poetic images comes a wide breadth of ambiguity. The ragged claws could be a symbol of masculinity made powerless or the extreme isolation Prufrock feels when his attempts at performing masculinity fail; they could externalize Prufrock's own feelings of alienation from humanity through his failures; they could do all of this and more. Whatever the case may be, this image reveals the speaker's anxiety and fear that the performance of masculinity merely obscures his lack of any substantive connection to the outside world. Throughout the poem, Prufrock shows a desire for connection, specifically a physical connection, whether or not he understands exactly how to achieve it. His attempts to realize his desires articulate a worldview in which this connection is only possible through the performance of masculinity via the sonnet structure, so when he momentarily drops his attempts at performing masculinity, the absence of a meaningful connection between himself and another (any other) is revealed.

This revelatory moment allows the final lines of the poem (120–131) to engage with both the sonnet form and the performance of masculinity in a deeper, more nuanced way. These twelve lines abound in rhyming couplets, the closing element of the Shakespearian and Spenserian sonnet: "I grow old … I grow old … / I shall wear the bottoms of my trousers rolled," "Combing the white hair of the waves blown back / When the wind blows the water white and black," and "By seagirls wreathed with seaweed red and brown / Till human voices wake us and we drown." Much like how Prufrock doubles certain features of the sonnet (the two voltas in the first 14 lines and the fragmented double sonnet of lines 81–98) in an attempt to exaggerate the performance of masculinity implied in the form, the tripling of the concluding rhyming couplet not only exaggerates a formal element of the sonnet and the masculinity it implies for him but also shows a speaker who has only a superficial knowledge of the performance of masculinity and its constraints despite his engagement with it over the course of the monologue. "The Love Song

of J. Alfred Prufrock" does not show a speaker who has progressed past his initial failings. The reader leaves Prufrock mired in his own doomed attempts to fulfill an ideal he has made for himself and from which he has barred his own entry.

The conclusion of the poem at best shows a stasis in Prufrock's understanding of the intersection of masculinity and the sonnet and at worst a regression in his own performances thereof. On the one hand, just as in the first fourteen lines the speaker assumes the formal arrangement performs masculinity completely (and so allows him to remain ambiguous about his desires), these concluding rhymes use imagistic ambiguities as a counterpoint to the form in which masculinity is presented—note that the rhymes in these lines (and in the triple rhyme in 122–124) are all one-syllable "masculine rhyme." Prufrock's preoccupation, at this point in the poem, with age, death, the unpopulated strand, and his imaginary mermaids (those impossible projections of masculine imagination that they are) betrays his feelings that by not succeeding in his attempts to perform as masculine through the sonnet his only future is that of isolation and death. In Prufrock's mind, the sonnet form allows him to acknowledge his failures of performing masculinity while still allowing him to attempt this performance. On the other hand, through his anxious observations, Prufrock regresses in his understanding of both masculinity and poetic structure, moving from a completed sonnet to merely a formal element deployed seemingly without consideration to its purpose. Much how the sestet in lines 49–54 show Prufrock's performance as only posturing, the use of rhyming couplets, taken out of the context of the sonnet, reveals the speaker's ignorance regarding performative masculinity as it relates to poetic structure.

In either case (stasis or regression), the final section of "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock" completes the dialectic structure found in most traditional sonnets and so allows the performance of masculinity and the poetic structure to speak to each other over the course of the poem rather than in merely isolated incidents. The first fourteen lines act as a thesis: the sonnet structure performs masculinity so by arranging his utterances to be in sonnets Prufrock has performed masculinity. From line 15 to the final section of the poem acts as an antithesis: Prufrock's utterances are not perfect sonnets, therefore he has not completely performed as masculine. The final section, lines 120–131, acts as a synthesis: Prufrock has attempted and failed to perform as completely masculine, so his fate is isolation and death. Prufrock begins his monologue impassioned (at least as impassioned as he allows himself to be), but slowly he drifts into self-doubt and ultimately self-condemnation. By the end, while he still attempts the sonnet structure, he knows he is doomed to failure.

So why does Prufrock continue to attempt this performance? It could be that he understands the consequence of his failures as a partial isolation and that giving up even the attempt would result in full isolation. He would indeed become the "pair of ragged claws scuttling across the floors of silent seas" that he fears and intimately knows, a fate far more fraught with anxiety than his present state.

It seems, then, that Eliot's speaker throughout "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock" attempts to structure his monologue with the sonnet as he simultaneously

attempts to perform masculinity. Prufrock's small successes and the larger failures of his performance of masculinity in terms of his actions (the poem's content) and how he codifies his actions (the poem's structure) point to the overlapping and intertwining nature of gender and poetic structure in the poem. The two seem so entangled throughout Prufrock's monologue that each relies on the other for expression: by attempting to incorporate the sonnet structure Prufrock believes he performs masculinity and in an attempt to perform masculinity Prufrock thinks he must use the sonnet (one does not necessitate the other, instead they constantly feed into and off of each other).

In this way, the sonnet structure acts as means by which the speaker is (un)able to perform gender in a way he sees as permissible. Consequently, poetic structure also becomes an expression of gender performance—in this case, the sonnet becomes a marker of masculinity (if only in an implied or stylized way). As seen throughout the poem, Prufrock performs masculinity (as well as composes sonnets) on a continuum between fully, partially, and not at all. Thus, his increasing anxiety is due to a fallacy in the identification of performance as resolving a core conflict, namely his ineptness at performing his idealized form of masculinity. What can be concluded is that neither poetic structure nor gendered performance can be considered as either-or conditions, but much more as occurrences that should be considered in degrees.

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