

Q. Comment on the significance of the title of the poem "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock".

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Q. Explain the irony inherent in the title of the poem "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock".

Answer: TS Eliot, once a subversive outsider, became the most celebrated poet of the 20th century. "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock" and "The Waste Land" are among the most widely taught and studied poems in English literature. In his poem "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock", Eliot shows the sordid and aimless modern life. He shows the inner conflict, duality, disintegration and irresolution of the modern man. Eliot seems to say that modern life has been devoid of purpose and there is no spiritual direction.

Thus although the title of the poem indicates a romantic love situation, it is used ironically by the Poet. Eliot does not sing any romantic love song in this poem. Rather his notion is quite anti-romantic. The ridiculous name 'Prufrock' is not entirely whimsical, it is said to have been derived from the name of a furniture dealer in St. Louis. Prufrock would like to speak of love to a woman, but he does not dare. A critical examination of the poem would reveal that it records Prufrock's recoil from love rather than his engagement in love. The opening of the poem reveals the irony of title. Here Prufrock says,

"Let us go then, you and I,
When the evening is spread out against the sky
Like a patient etherised upon a table;
At first, such a proposal to a companion to go outside in a fine peaceful evening seems very romantic. But the comparison of evening with an etherized patient waiting to be operated is very striking. The image brings with it a sense of sickness, morbidity and gloom. In fact, it effectively conveys the state of Prufrock's mind. The poet mentions the sky and the evening to embody the inner psychology of the protagonist. Later in the poem we will come to know that the evening is a foggy evening which does not offer a romantic atmosphere to go to a walk. Prufrock is a middle-aged dandy who has seen much of the city life with its meaningless socializing and decadent values. He wants to make love with a lady but he does not have the mental courage to disclose it. He is indecisive and passive, unable to take any initiative. His personal failure, together with his experience about life and society, makes him totally frustrated. He wants to get relief from such a situation by taking a walk in the city.

Prufrock is not going to the lap of nature to breathe fresh air. Rather, his journey would be in a half deserted street in the foggy evening. The street is half-deserted street people leave the street in the evening and go to their home. Again the streets are surrounded by cheap hotels and dirty restaurants. People pass their night there but do not get proper rest and sleep. The description of the surroundings does not reveal a healthy atmosphere. Moreover, the streets run in a winding course leading people to no destination. He is in a restless situation and he feels lonely and isolated. Prufrock suffers from lack of will and hesitation. He takes decision which is immediately postponed and revised. Various thoughts criss-cross his mind like the winding streets.

Further, Prufrock is timid and nervous, lacking boldness enough to propose a lady. He is so paralysed of his will that he himself does not dare to utter the "overwhelming question" of proposing a lady. He equates such a proposal with the tact of disturbing the universe. He hesitates to propose his heart's desire to the lady because he thinks that whatever he says to the lady will be answered by, "That is not it, at all". Prufrock feels like a pinned worm, who cannot face the eager eyes of the ladies. Prufrock is depicted not as a young handsome hero of a love lyric. He is a middle-aged dandy with some physical limitations. Besides, he is morally weak and his tragedy is that he is not able to give his love proposal to a lady. He is conscious that he is being aged, as he says, "I grow old . . . I grow old . . . /

All through the poem Prufrock remains in his room. He is so infirm in his will that he is ready "for a hundred indecisions, / and for a hundred visions and revisions, / before the taking of a toast and tea. It seems that while remaining in his room, he is content to imagine himself going through the streets, ascending the lady's stair, and telling her "all," like Lazarus back from the dead. Ironically, Prufrock cannot color his imagination with the touch of reality. He wears clothes of latest fashion to hide his age and to cover his baldness, yet he cannot gather courage to offer his love.

Prufrock's timidity results from his experience about the society in which he lives. Prufrock is in "life-in death" existence. He has already known the hollowness and meaninglessness of his own life. He has gathered much idea about the monotony and trivialities of social life. He has also known the frivolity and artificiality of the women. Although he feels an attraction to the lady, he is aware of their worthlessness. In this sense too, the poem is no praising song of love.

Thus, the title of "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock" neatly undermines the romantic associations of 'Love Song' by the ridiculous name "PrufroCk". The poem records the love wish of a man who has neither the physical vigour nor the mental courage to propose love. Instead of depicting the joy, bliss and hope of love, the poem reveals the helplessness and pathos of the protagonist. In this poem, Eliot very effectively portrays the pollution and shabbiness that are associated with modern city life. People are in decayed and sordid surroundings and leading a hopeless life. The poet aptly reveals the boredom, loneliness and frustration of modern society. Significantly, he expresses his great theme through the anti-romantic love song of J. Alfred Prufrock. Here the condition of Prufrock is symbolic of the condition of modern urbanized civilization. Thus the title of the poem seems quite justified.