

## Procrastination: A Psychological Study on *the Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock*

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**Abstract.** *The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock* is T.S Eliot's masterwork which reflects his modernism thoughts on the despiritualized world during WWI. Study and analysis of this poem are mainly from the following perspectives: modernism, archetypal criticism and the biblical allusions in the poem. Combined with a new understanding of the character's procrastination, this thesis is to explore the hero—J. Alfred Prufrock by psychological analysis. After a thorough and insightful analysis of the sophisticated figure that is full of contradiction, the disillusionment and frustration of that age can be clearly exposed to the readers, which will help the readers to form a profound understanding of the poem.

### Introduction

In the poem *The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock* (*The Love Song* for short) written by T. S. Eliot, Prufrock is a character full of conflicts and he is dying for love while being terrified of the idea of falling in love, as a result, he is an anxious, hesitant man of cowardice and inaction. He puts off once and again showing his love to the lady whom he loves, and his cowardice makes him constantly avoiding the reality. At the same time, it fails him in meeting his satisfaction of his primal instinct. He is a typical useless modern man who is continuously bothered by procrastination.

### Organization of the Text

#### Procrastination

"There will be time, there will be time", Prufrock tries to be self-satisfied by these repeated monologues, while in terms of action, he postpones doing thing all the time until "human voices wake us, and we drown", which reveals the spiritual paralysis and stagnation of the modern man.

Chu and Choi (2005) suggested that there are two distinct types of procrastination: active and passive. Active procrastinators make intentional decisions to procrastinate, thus applying strong motivation under time pressure, they are able to complete tasks before deadlines, and achieve satisfactory outcomes (Choi & Moran, 2009). In contrast, passive procrastinators are traditional procrastinators who postpone their tasks until the last minute with feelings of guilt and depression and are more likely to fail to complete tasks. And Prufrock is a typical passive procrastinator.

As a typical example of modern procrastinator, Prufrock is trapped into the weird circle of procrastination. His restlessness and entanglement of inner time and implement problem reveal the haunting and unavoidable psychological problems. For example, in *The Love Song*, the short sentence "there will be time" appears ten times (line 23, 26, 28, 29, 31, 32, 37, 47, 119, 120); the question "do I dare?" shows up six times (line 38, 45, 54, 59, 61, 69); "would it have been worthwhile" appears four times (line 88, 91, 100, 107), and one can easily notice some expressions like "time yet for a hundred indecisions" and "for a hundred visions and revisions" in the poem.

The dust is compared to "a patient etherized upon a table". Dispirited atmosphere pervades Prufrock's inner world. It seems that he is in no hurry to carry out his idea according to his plan, on the contrary, he walks on the street like an aimlessly wanderer, and he is unwilling to even think about the destination of his little walk. "Oh, do not ask, 'What is it?'". The fog in the dust scatter

around like a lazy cat, at this time, Alfred is not inclined to move forward, however, he starts to tell lies to himself by making all kinds of excuses for his procrastination. He is tortured inside, so he repeats “there will be time, there will be time” to comfort his cowardice and uneasy. There will be time for “murder” and “create”, and there will always be time for “regret” and “confession”. His timid and overcautious feelings choose endless procrastination for him instead of taking actions. Time is passing rapidly, yet procrastination continues. His mind is filled with fragrant dresses in the gorgeous lounge, and he traps himself in a fond dream. But in the real world, he has the jitters all the time and delays making decisions because “time yet for a hundred indecisions and for a hundred visions and revisions”. At this point, “procrastination” greatly influences his emotions. Anxiety and depression impact his mind, which invite intense self-reproach, and then it leads to endless self-denial and self-depreciation.

### **Pathogenesis Analysis of Prufrock’s Procrastination**

T. S. Eliot shows us the powerless and distressed feelings in this poem, and readers might wonder why the protagonist must put himself in this hesitant situation. However, the poet provides us with the hints for the answer by showing us those moments of flowing consciousness and weird images in Prufrock’s mind. By analyzing the above things, we can see some aspects of his procrastination pathogenesis.

Perfectionism already has been identified as a common correlate and possible precursor of procrastination (Flett, Hewitt, Davis, & Sherry, 2004). As Flett, Blankstein, Hewitt, and Koledin (1992) speculated, “One common belief about the nature of procrastinatory behavior is that it stems from excessively high standards”. In their factor analysis, Solomon and Rothblum (1984) found evaluation anxiety, perfectionism, and low self-confidence represented in a dominant procrastination factor. Egan et al. (2011) stressed the importance of evaluating goal-related behavior with perfectionists and, in particular, exploring whether perfectionists have difficulty meeting goals due to procrastination as a result of fear of failure.

### ***Hidden Perfectionism***

Most of procrastinators never notice being a perfectionist themselves. A large amount of ironies and images in the monologues of this poem prove that timid Prufrock has hidden perfectionism tendency inside his mind, which aggravates his depression and self-denial, and takes his procrastination to the next level.

For Prufrock, his mediocrity is intolerable. The ideal image inside his head makes him look down upon his usual behaviors, so as to examine himself in a disdainful manner. For example, he imagines some women walking around in the room and talking about Michelangelo. When Prufrock is trapped in hesitation, surprisingly, those imaginary women in his head are talking about Michelangelo, who is a courageous, young and perfect male feature with great energy. In his sub-consciousness, he begins to compare himself with the perfect image of Michelangelo, and then comes to realize that the huge distance between them is in no way to narrow down, which intensifies his anxiety, then he moves to next level of self-denial and uneasy. In the line 111, Prufrock compares himself with Prince Hamlet. “No! I am not Prince Hamlet, nor was meant to be”. Although Hamlet is hesitant in the process of revenge, he sticks to his own determination and enthusiasm while fighting with all the difficulties and obstacles. Prufrock is not Hamlet, he is not perfect, and on the contrary, he leads a vacuous life, which in turn aggravates his self-doubt, self-abasement and procrastination.

### ***Fear towards Failure***

By means of a checklist of reasons for procrastination, Solomon and Rothblum (1984) made a first systematic attempt to investigate the self-perceived backgrounds of students’ procrastinatory behavior. Factor analysis showed a first factor that could be labeled clearly as fear of failure. In a partial replication, Schouwenburg (1991) obtained a very similar factor structure also including a first factor of fear of failure.

Many procrastinators are afraid of being judged by others or self-judgment and they worry that

their shortcomings may be noticed or they cannot make it after paying out the best efforts. Their worried feelings reflect their fear towards failure, and to some extent, procrastination is a psychological strategy to deal with it. In *The Love Song*, Prufrock is a fainthearted person who is terrified of failure. In his fantasy, his court journey is full of scathing mockeries, which makes his procrastination becomes more and more severe. He seems to hear those ladies in the lounge mocking his bald spot in his hair and thin hair. He constantly asks himself “do I dare?” At the same time, he is fearful of the disastrous result. He would rather bear the painful consequence than suffer from the humiliation of achieving nothing after some efforts.

After Prufrock’s mind goes back to the asleep and tired evening from the fantasy, he notices that the desultory fog “stretched on the floor”, he asks himself, “Should I, after tea and cakes and ices, have the strength to force the moment to its crisis?” Then he seems to see his slightly bald head “bought in upon a platter”, thus at once he begins to console himself, “I am no prophet—and here’s no great matter”—he fantasizes himself as John the Baptist, and in this way he tries to make a point that if he makes confession, he would make some sacrifices, but actually he does not have the prophet like John, which means he is not strong enough. And all these things are served as his excuses. After seeing “the eternal Footman” holds his coat, he finally admits, “I was afraid.” In his imaginations, he is pinned and wriggling on the wall like an insect when the cold and arrogant hostess comments him from head to feet scornfully. He continues to suggest that the reality is unmerciful, and all his passions can never be satisfied. The rehearsal of these catastrophic consequences of his courtship in his own mind gives him a “descent” reason to insist on his procrastination.

### **The Unconscious Prufrock and His Alter Ego**

According to Sigmund Freud, human’s mind is composed of three components. They are conscious, preconscious and unconscious. And respectively, he put up personality tripartition. It is the dark side of human being. It is like a beast in one’s mind who doesn’t obey the moral rules. Ego is reflected by the daily behavior of a human being. It relates to the external world, operates via the reality principle, such as rules of society, seeing the outside world as it actually is: one shouldn’t behave like a beast. In addition, the superego is the opposite of id, the highest standard of human beings. It is related to the good aspect of human being. The superego is the conscience and ego ideal. If a person does something which is acceptable to the superego, he experiences pride and self-satisfaction.

In this poem, Eliot uses the dramatic monologue. From the beginning to the end, the narrator Mr Prufrock speaks to another man. He says “Let us go”. Who is the other man? Mr Prufrock regards him as the one who can share his secrets, even though the dark side of his thought. In fact, the narrator is the ego of Mr Prufrock, who is timid and limited by many so-called rules. He knows that some people are ridiculous, such as the women talking of Michelangelo, and the seeming ambitious men who are taking toast and tea. What’s more, he is one of these men. They are repressed by social rules and pretend to be elegant and educated. However, the man Mr Prufrock speaking to is one who can reveal all those vanity. The narrator confesses everything to him. In the beginning, Mr prufrock says: “Like a patient etherised upon a table”, from which a mood of inability, hesitancy and helplessness is established. Next, he also confesses his contempt for those self-important guys. He doesn’t disguise himself. A real Mr Prufrock is presented. From this point, the man Mr Prufrock speaks to is just his alter ego, his id. His thought is unconscious and free as a spirit. He is unknown about his procrastination, his weakness and his hesitation. He confesses those phenomenon, but he doesn’t realize they are defects.

### **Possible Treatments of Procrastination**

Procrastination which means the endless delay of things one intends to do is a phenomenon that has accompanied humankind at least since the times of Cicero (Steel, 2007), and it is a well-known phenomenon in everyday life. Procrastination is actually about how to get along with oneself, and it reflects ones self-esteem. From the analysis of Prufrock’s procrastination, we can see that Prufrock is a lost, indecisive, mournful, helpless and lonely human being. He is nobody wandering about in

the spiritual wasteland of the twentieth century, yet his instinctive desire makes him fall into a dreamy world to search for comfort. Doubt and distrust towards himself make him always hold the thought that “there will be time”, and he even doubts all his “actions”, “would it have been worthwhile”. As a result, Prufrock’s procrastination cannot be cured on his own, and he can drown in his spiritual wonderland. In real life, his over-cautiousness and hesitation defers him taking actions according to his own will and idea. He is deeply trapped in the broken perfectionism, as he is dying to be satisfied, but has no idea about what his desire really is. The procrastination of him makes this poem in no way a love song, which in fact is a crazy somniloquy about desire impulse, so Prufrock is tortured in hell by his procrastination. Procrastination can be seen in everyday life, and some possible ways to deal with procrastination:

First, get rid of perfectionism. Individuals who too much pursue the so called perfectionism take little pride or pleasure in their work and often feel inadequate or evaluate themselves negatively. One should learn to realize that nothing can be real perfect, just like the arms of Venus. One can constantly improve oneself, but can never reach perfection. So we should have a correct evaluation towards our potentials, and try to avoid much higher expectations as well as self-abasement. We can always set a short term goal, and then try our best to do it well.

Second, work out a specific plan. Many people cannot carry out their plans all along because their plans are too much abstract. In *The Love Song*, Prufrock never makes specific plans about how to achieve his goal, and he only holds the thought that “let us go and make our visit” without any specific steps. He imagines women mocking his appearance and talking about Michelangelo while never takes real actions.

Third, cut down the leisure time. In *The Love Song*, Prufrock always thinks about his time, “Time yet for a hundred indecisions and for a hundred visions and revisions”. In his thesis, Li Weimin (2009) analyzed Prufrock’s “one minute”. This particular one minute disturbs him a lot, and this minute is not clock time or abstract concept but an extension of his personal experience, so it is a minute only belongs to Prufrock. He spends every minute of his life in this way, and there are a large amount of possibilities in these minutes, but finally he accomplishes nothing. “Prufrock’s one minute” lasts forever. Most procrastinators get too much spare time for them to procrastinate. If we set shorter time period for one particular task and try keeping a control of our leisure time, we can finish the task as soon as possible under self-supervision.

Fourth, enhance self-confidence. Sometimes one is afraid to do something because of lacking of confidence. Prufrock views himself as “my necktie rich and modest, but asserted by a simple pin”, while in his imagination, those ladies in the living room are mocking him, “How his hair is growing thin!” These two points of view contrast with each other, and then he loses his confidence. We should keep an open mind, do not think too much before taking actions, and try to insist on doing it once we have made up our mind.

## Summary

Prufrock, whose pursuit, pain, predicament and dissatisfaction end up in frustration because of his procrastination, is a typical modern man of Eliot’s style. He has no choice but give up in his relentless struggle. His wish to live a meaningful life turns out to be a vision. He is deprived of happiness and finally overwhelmed by his weakness—procrastination. He lives in a self-made fantasy, so reality seems to be far away from him. In the end, he keeps on his life in procrastination like an invisible man.

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