

# The Protagonist's Predicament and Image Schemas of Time and Space in "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock"

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**Abstract:** *The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock* is a vital piece of poetry written by T.S. Eliot. The space and time image schema in this poem reveal the reason why the protagonist is always in the hesitation state. The image schema of time shows a time views without future. The image schema of "streets", "room" and "sea" exhibit the constrained state of the protagonist. Prufrock has lost in the time and space at that time, which hints the spirits predicament of the whole society at the beginning of 20 century.

**Keywords:** *Space and Time; Image Schema; Predicament*

## 1. Introduction

"The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock" was written in 1925, when T.S. Eliot was 37, the medium period in his writing life. At the same year, Eliot also published the famous poetry-the hollow man, which has a similar theme with The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock. Within the plentiful and varied poetry written by Eliot, however, The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock is the relatively simple and concrete one.

Many essays have studied this poem from different perspectives. These essays could be divided into two types. Firstly, some researchers explore this poem's deep meaning from various aspects. Fang (1998) believes that this poem shows a kind of realism in the modernism area.[1] Zhang (2004) studies this poem's rhetoric, such as repetition and quoting, and thinks this poem shows the seeking for soul's redemption and life meaning.[2] Zhu (2004) focuses on the space and time writing in this poem and thinks that the mixed space and time and the reverse between real world and the imagined world bring about the key theme that the anxiety, despair and alienation is spreading in the western world.[3] Secondly, other researchers find more important themes beyond this piece of poem. Wang (1994) concludes that this poem reflects the overall poetry art of T.S. Eliot, which includes 'objective counterpart', 'the combination of sensibility and reasonability' and 'escaping of personality'.[4] Wu & Bo (2021) reveals that the love story of Prufrock shows the cultural anxiety in western world.[5] These studies largely enrich people's understanding to this poem. However, when researchers illustrate their views, they don't cover every part of this poem. Some parts of their conclusions are similar to each other. This poem's other aspects are still waiting to be explored.

This paper uses textual close reading to analyze this poem, and mainly concentrates on the space and time views of this poem from the perspective of Image Schema. This paper wants to understand how Prufrock's space and time views are built through verses and why is the protagonist unable to express himself and is always in a state of hesitation?

## 2. The Image Schemas in This Poem

### 2.1. The Cognitive Models of Time

Language contains people's cognition of time. This paper uses cognitive models of time generally recognized in cognitive linguistics to analyze the overall time concept of this poem. "Cross-linguistic evidence suggests that there are three main cognitive models for TIME. While the first two are ego-based and typically involve reference to the present or 'now', the third kind is time-based and makes no intrinsic reference to the concept of 'now'. The three models are the moving time model, the moving ego model and the temporal sequence model." [6] This poem is based on the moving ego model to construct an overall view of time. "In this model, TIME is a landscape over which the ego moves, and time is

understood by virtue of the motion of the ego across this landscape, towards specific temporal moments and events that are conceptualised as locations." [6] It is through the motion of the ego that time's passage is understood.

The first sentence puts "you and I" as "figure". The second sentence uses the word-"evening" to point the current point of a day and then uses a metaphor "Like a patient etherized upon a table"[7] to modify "evening", conveying a dark and oppressive tone. The first stanza is written in the present tense, conveying a time frame to the readers, as if all the descriptions in the first stanza are happening in front of readers. It lets the reader feel a current feeling in the first stanza. In the third stanza, the past tense is used to bring the reader back to the past time, and the "night" in "And seeing that it was a soft October night"[7] marks the end of the day again. This is the time when the sun sets, and this sentence especially points out that it is "a soft October night".[7]

The fourth and sixth stanzas are very similar in that they both start with "And indeed there will be time"[7], and use "to" and "for" to describe what to do in the future, such as "There will be time, there will be time; To prepare a face to meet the faces that you meet"[7] and "Time for you and time for me, And time yet for a hundred indecisions, And for a hundred visions and revisions".[7] The word "time" is indicated by the future tense as a moment far away, and the actions and things to be taken by Prufrock are all set in the future. That is to say, Prufrock takes his "ego" as the present time point and thinks about what needs to be done in the future but cannot take action. Therefore, in the sixth stanza, whether to take action is pushed to the psychological level again, so that readers can experience the thinking flow of the protagonist's hesitation. In the sixth stanza, the protagonist still thinks that "And indeed there will be time /To wonder, "Do I dare?" and, "Do I dare? /"Do I dare /Disturb the universe? /In a minute there is time /For decisions and revisions which a minute will reverse." [7] Prufrock thinks about whether he has the courage to take action, and constantly question himself in a mental space. The word "a minute" has been elongated into a future eternity, a time period that the protagonist can never reach to.

From the seventh stanza to the twelfth stanza, most of the verses contain the present perfect tense, and it is the protagonist who is describing what he has already understood and experienced daily. "For I have known them all already, known them all: Have known the evenings, mornings, afternoons"[7], the protagonist takes his ego as the current time point, looks to the past, and tells us the scenes that he is familiar with every day. The reader learns that his daily life is so monotonous and plain, as if a note to his inability to act. "should have been" indicates that the protagonist is imagining what he should do in the future, and if he had acted, everything would have been different. In the last verse, "We have lingered in the chambers of the sea/By sea-girls wreathed with seaweed red and brown/Till human voices wake us, and we drown." [7] It leaves a suspense for the reader. "To lead you to an overwhelming question" at the very beginning of the poem.../ Oh, do not ask, "What is it?".[7] There is plenty of room for imagination, arousing readers' thinking.

In the whole, the protagonist takes his ego as the present time point and sets all his actions at a moment in the future that can never be reached. Prufrock always looks back to his past. It is his past that makes up his present. The unchanging every day makes up his future, because the actions or changes he really envisions are set in the distant future. There will always be an unreachable distance between him and such a future. That future, that moment of change, is in his imagination, in his planning, and could never be implemented. The moving ego model could be used to represent the time concept expressed by the protagonist in the whole poem. It can be seen that there is always a distance between the protagonist and the decisive moment in the future, and this future action exists only in the protagonist's thinking time and space.

## 2.2. *The Image Schemas of Space*

Space is generally considered to be what is located around us. According to the "spatial configuration" theory of Talmy, there are three kinds of relationships between things with spatial characteristics and their spatial frames: one is the spatial characteristics of the thing itself, such as shape, size, whether it is bounded, etc.; The second is the spatial relationship between two things, for example, X is above Y, X and Y are in contact, etc.; the third is the spatial relationship formed by a combination of things, including a potential "Gestalt" shape and their "Arrangement Relations".[8] This paper analyzes the main spaces in this poem according to Talmy's theoretical framework.

The recurring spaces throughout the poem are streets, room, and sea. First of all, the spatial image of streets appears in the first stanza- "Let us go, through certain half-deserted streets". The streets become the ground for the action of "us" (figure), using self-referencing form to view from one's own point.

"streets" and the people ("us") form a dynamic displacement relationship, and the protagonist "goes through" this space. The preposition "through" here abstracts the streets into a three-dimensional spatial structure, and "go" indicates that the protagonist needs to go from one side to the other through the path, and the next seven verses describes the streets, without specifying the destination. The protagonist seems not to know where to go or what to do, which gives readers a sense of hesitation that they can't reach the end. These seven verses write about a specific kind of streets for readers. The streets are "half-deserted" and "tedious", which have "cheap hotels" and "sawdust restaurants". This allows readers to experience the depressed environment in which the protagonist lives through the description of time and space in the first stanza. Until the last verse of the first stanza, the reader does not know that the protagonist is going to "make our visit". At the end, the destination is still unclear, but finally the action of "go" is given a definite meaning.

The "room" appears in the second stanza, which makes the reader have to associate the room with the one that the protagonist wants to visit before, and the two verses- "In the room the women come and go / Talking of Michelangelo." [7] are repeated again in the fifth stanza. The room is used as the overall background, which is a kind of overall reference, describing the various activities in the room. The author does not explicitly write about the various activities in the room but mobilizes the readers to frame the room. "The women in the room are talking of Michelangelo." [7] Obviously, this room is very similar to a salon, or a space for friends to gather and chat. Then the reader forms an overall image of this room in the verses scattered in the following chapters, such as in the seventh stanza, "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." [7] Protagonist's thinking process all happen in the room, such as "So how should I presume? / And I have known the eyes already, known them all-- / The eyes that fix you in a formulated phrase". [7]

The Room seems to constrain the protagonist and everyone inside. The protagonist goes to such a room every day, doing the same thing, listening to the women talking about distant classical art, feeling his spiritual and action imprisoned. The protagonist spends most of his time in such a room. It can be said that his life is built on such a space and his life is attached to such a space. The scenes in the room actually represent "The day-to-day lifestyle of the middle class at that time". [7] For example, "After the sunsets and the dooryards and the sprinkled streets, / After the novels, after the teacups, after the skirts that trail / along the floor--." [7] The "novels", "teacups" and "skirts" are very typical symbols of the middle class.

After the long thinking flow, the protagonist says that "I should have been a pair of ragged claws / Scuttling across the floors of silent seas." [7] and in the last stanza: "We have lingered in the chambers of the sea / By sea -girls wreathed with seaweed red and brown / Till human voices wake us, and we drown." [7] Here comes the third important spatial image - sea. At first, the protagonist imagines himself to be a crab, able to run rampant on the surface of the sea. The protagonist uses the sea as the overall background, and the sea becomes a container, embracing "we" in it, and "we" constantly wander in the sea. In the end, "we" are engulfed by the sea. Although there is no way to break through the personal spiritual predicament at present, it is clear that a "human voice" will eventually emerge, and this "human voice" will break this spiritual predicament. This verse "Till human voices wake us, and we drown." [7] is actually telling about the spiritual death of the protagonist, the depression and helplessness of being unable to break through the current spiritual predicament. It is also a monologue of the author's worries about the times.

### 3. Prufrock Lost in The Image Schemas of Time and Space

Prufrock has already lost in the present time and daily space. He couldn't reach to the future time and also couldn't break through the constrained space. Herbert Marcuse believed that People are a kind of social animal but also need their own private space. [9] When people step into the society and are surrounded by other people, they abide by the social customs and try to present their social aspects in the front of other people. The ideal state is that social customs can make people enjoy the relationships with others and devote themselves to the work that can benefit the whole society. Social customs organize the society effectively and satisfy people's instinct in a constricted and prolonged way. People's instinct has to give away to the social customs and only is released in specific occasion. Social customs consume people's energy and true instinct largely, which leads to the mental confusion sometimes. Once people find that social customs can be broke and expose their instincts, the society may get into the danger of disruption, so the balance between proper social customs and satisfying the instinct is necessary. However, social customs are set to maintain the whole society and limit every one's instinct in some way, so people are constrained and limited by social customs in a way. Some people use work, art and other methods to

content their instinct in a realistic way, while some people don't find the proper methods to meet their instinct in the contemporary world and slip into the mental confusion and vacancy.

In the public space, Social customs can smooth the relationship between people but sometimes may become the hinder of the communication between people. People are not themselves in the front of other people or they cannot present the true themselves before the eyes of others or people can only present a small part of true self. This becomes a very important social pressure to every person, which Prufrock is affected seriously. Prufrock tries to make relations to the world or the society, but he almost kills his true self in front of others. He fails to present the true self completely in social space and is 'fixed' by others' eyes.

When people throw themselves into the social space, they are creating the connection to the society or the world. In public space, the most general social activities are work, family life and leisure activities. The leisure time people are left with is allocated by the individual and some people choose to spend their time in various kinds of entertainment activities, like traveling or meeting with friends and so on, and other people prefer to spend spare time alone. Something about the true self or the true instinct is revealed in this kind of secular time. To know a person deeply, it is important to know the things the person does in his or her own secular time. Although in real life, other people can never know what that person has done in her or his own secular time, people can know the things person has done in his or her secular time in literature. And Prufrock apparently is a modern man with a job or with abundant money, so he can have enough leisure time to meeting others and to think so many trivial things again and again. Zhou, T. T. & Wang, J said that he is a representation of middle-class in that time through the meeting and the talking content and the thinking reflected by monologue.[10] Prufrock chooses to spend his leisure time in this "room" and the monologue reveals his real thoughts during the meeting.

As to the time in public space, it means everyone's age. As a middle-age man, he surely feels the pressure of getting married from the social customs. Even as a man, when this man is getting to certain age, and the pressure of finding a wife will get heavier. That's the biggest reason that Prufrock wants to sing a love song to find a wife and there is no love in this song and there is no love but only sexual gazing to some women. Social customs and the sexual desire cause Prufrock to sing a love song which is obviously irrelevant about love. In order to preserve its own benefits, human society often controls the population, sometimes by means of reducing the population, and sometimes by creating an atmosphere to increase population. In any case, getting married and having children is a deep-rooted part of social customs, and the pressure to urge marriage has always existed in society.

In this poem, as Prufrock enters into the "room", he is constrained by the social customs. Social customs are everywhere. These social customs are the interpersonal pressure and the pressure of getting married. Since the people society was formed, the former and the latter exist and are created by the society and people have to comply with the society customs, otherwise, the people who doesn't observe this custom may be regarded as heresy.

Readers can find the concrete efforts that Prufrock made to connect with the world and realize his instinct in the world, which was failed in the end. At the first stanza, Prufrock was about to "make our visit" with "you" (there are controversies about the identity of "you"). He decided to go to a meeting in his leisure time and readers can infer that this meeting didn't only have the female members but also have male members, but Prufrock only focused on the female ones, which is clear through the following stanza ("In the room the women come and go / Talking of Michelangelo")[7]. In this "room", women were talking of Michelangelo who is a sculptor living in 15~16 century's Italia. Michelangelo represents the classic elegant taste, which has a slight distance from the world the women lived at that time. This was not the first time that he went to this kind meeting. ("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?"[7]) Prufrock had gone to this kind meeting so many times and was very familiar to all members, especially female members. His "familiarity" is superficial because he couldn't express his true thoughts-his affection to some woman and other people couldn't understand him either. One of the reasons is the social pressure of interpersonal relationship mentioned above. Even Prufrock himself said that There will be time, there will be time to prepare a face to meet the faces that you meet. It shows that Prufrock was constrained by the social customs and it is possible that Prufrock thought that other people also wore a social disguise. In another word, everyone is Prufrock in this way, even the women talking about Michelangelo. ("In the room the women come and go Talking of Michelangelo."[7]) When others were talking Michelangelo, Prufrock was struggling to express his true thoughts. His true thoughts that wanted to express his love stems from social custom, that is to say, the pressure of getting married, and his own normal sexual desire. When he tried to choose his words, he thought that if it was proper that he

started with the scenes he saw at the streets. ("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? ..."[7]) The scenes of street are contrasted to the works of Michelangelo, which these women talked about. At the first glance, Prufrock couldn't continue his talking because he didn't possess the same taste with these women and the courage to confess his feelings. However, it is not sure that whether these women really understand the works of Michelangelo or they just put on the social disguise to pretend the understanding about Michelangelo. The social disguise hinders the communication between Prufrock and these women. Furthermore, Prufrock just abides by the social customs and his own desire instead of knowing what love is. Prufrock is confused about love and never know the essence of love so it is no wonder why he couldn't sing the love song for so many times. In the following stanzas-If one, settling a pillow by her head, should say, "That is not what I meant at all. That is not it, at all." [7], which is another prove of the incommunicability. So Prufrock at last admitted that it is impossible to say just what I mean, which is brought from the social disguise and the modern people's confusion to the love-the most crucial core of every life.

Back to the first stanza, the distressed streets to lead you to an overwhelming question, but readers couldn't ask what it is. The similar words appear at the ninth stanza. ("To have bitten off the matter with a smile, / To have squeezed the universe into a ball/ To roll it toward some overwhelming question." [7]) Readers maybe wonder to know what the overwhelming question is. The overwhelming question is a symbol of the struggle of Prufrock's consciousness and it implies that this question probably can solve Prufrock's predicament and this question must be related with the value of life. The mask of answer should be draw by Prufrock himself and by every modern men or women. The fact is that Prufrock failed to lift the mask of this question, not mention the answer. Through the whole poetry, modern people's predicaments are mainly presented in two aspect. One is that how to connect with the society, how to get along with the world. The other is that how to understand the love. The overwhelming question is also a sign that Prufrock started to realize the mental predicament and tried to find a way to solve his mental hollowness and meaninglessness. His hesitation comes from his lack of courage but in the end rises from his unknown of love and his mental meaninglessness. Moreover, his hesitation stems from his fixed social disguise. People's social disguise is not formed suddenly but take shape day by day and constrained by the social customs. Once the social disguise is formed, it is not easy to change.

The description of "streets" reflects the polluted environment in that modern society. Western society was going through the industrial revolution. It only passed a few years after the First World War in 1920s. The whole world was rapidly changing and this kind of changing has already spread into the life of every person. The polluted environment was only one aspect of this changing. This horrible environment certainly effected people's feeling, including Prufrock's and becomes a new kind of pressure to people (Prufrock). Behind the new changes and new things is the passing of time. The new changes and the passing of time make people feel scared and hesitant.

England is the first country in the world which starts the industrialization and also become the first country to endure the negative effect from the industry, which especially leads to the serious environmental pollution. The invention of the steam engine gives the factory a stronger power and also makes the consumption of coal reach a startling high-level. The terrible air envelops many cities in the England. The yellow, brown and dark air are often visible, endangering people's health and influencing people's mental condition. The appalling environment can be seen in many literatures at that time. The external environment is experienced by the writers and always reflected in their works, so in this poetry it is no wonder that Eliot wrote a very gloomy street scene. The streets are half-deserted with one-night cheap hotels and sawdust restaurants and streets follow like a tedious argument of insidious intent. Streets are very important living scenery, which see many people come and go every day and streets are the path connecting people and the world, people going and returning to somewhere through streets. If this living scenery is in such a blurred and unpleased atmosphere, then the people walking along streets won't have a good feeling. In the following stanza, writer depicted the "yellow fog" and "the yellow smoke" in detail. "the yellow smoke" is apparently the usual scene at that time.

What really matters is to say the words from his heart and to reconcile with social customs, not to part his hair behind or eat a peach. ("Shall I part my hair behind? Do I dare to eat a peach? / I shall wear white flannel trousers, / and walk upon the beach." [7]) These actions are a kind of escape on contrary. Prufrock finally couldn't shake off pressures' shackles and he only lingered along the sea remaining his unknown state. The last stanza drops the hint that Prufrock won't find the answer to that overwhelming question and Prufrock can do nothing about his mental predicament. ("Till human voices wake us, and we drown." [7]) Human voices symbol the voices that can save Prufrock, every modern man, but when the voices wake Prufrock and others, they drown. It condemns the social customs' imprisonment to

Prufrock's mental struggling. Prufrock's mental struggling will be played every day but will never have an end or produce some real actions.

Prufrock is not the only one that felt the constraint from the "time" and "space" and so did other modern men or women. Even the wheels of history have driven into the 21st century, now people also feel constraints from "time" and "space" in other forms. Space is shaped by the social customs. As long as people live in the social space, people will constantly afflict the conflict between society customs and individual instinct. Like Prufrock, nowadays, people also ask themselves the overwhelming question, trying to find various solutions to their mental predicaments. It is important to break down the constraints of "space" and "time". It is important to make a balance between the social customs and individual. That solution and answer leave to every man or woman and may need one's whole life to pursue.

#### 4. Conclusion

Prufrock is stuck in a space which doesn't have the future time and is built by all kinds of social customs. He tries to break the space and rescue his spirits but only finds that his spirits have already drown in the sea. He is always going through an endless and deserted "streets". He goes inside the "room" and spends most of his life in this "room". He finally realizes that his spirits have already died in the "chamber of sea" and there is no way to rescue his spirits, which symbolizes the death of the whole western spirits world. In this poem, time couldn't reach to the future and there only exists the repeats of unchangeable present. "streets" and "room" constraint Prufrock and other modern people. The "sea" signifies the western civilization at that time, which couldn't give energy to who come near it but just drown everyone.

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