

## Roger Mitchell: On "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock"

J. Alfred Prufrock is not just the speaker of one of Eliot's poems. He is the Representative Man of early Modernism. Shy, cultivated, oversensitive, sexually retarded (many have said impotent), ruminative, isolated, self-aware to the point of solipsism, as he says, "Am an attendant lord, one that will do / To swell a progress, start a scene or two." Nothing revealed the Victorian upper classes in Western society more accurately, unless it was a novel by Henry James, and nothing better exposed the dreamy, insubstantial center of that consciousness than a half-dozen poems in Eliot's first book. The speakers of all these early poems are trapped inside their own excessive alertness. They look out on the world from deep inside some private cave of feeling, and though they see the world and themselves with unflattering exactness, they cannot or will not do anything about their dilemma and finally fall back on self-serving explanation. They quake before the world, and their only revenge is to be alert. After Prufrock and Other Observations, poetry started coming from the city and from the intellect. It could no longer stand comfortably on its old post-Romantic ground, ecstatic before the natural world.

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### **Publication Status:**

Excerpted Criticism [1]

### **Criticism Target:**

T. S. Eliot [2]

### **Author:**

Roger Mitchell [3]

### **Poem:**

The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock [4]

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