

# Transgression of Privacy in reference to T.S. Eliot's *The love song of J. Alfred Prufrock*

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## Abstract

*This research aims to shed light on the transgression of privacy in TS Eliot's The love song of J. Alfred Prufrock. Through the works of Erving Goffman and Michel Foucault we see how constant surveillance shapes individuals; in this case Prufrock. We further draw from the ideas of Carl Jung and John Stuart Mill to analyse how judgement is internalised. We explore Prufrock's anxieties and hesitation which stems from the transgression of private spaces ultimately revealing the cost of modern visibility.*

**Keywords:** The Love song of J. Alfred Prufrock, Privacy, TS Eliot, Panopticism, Surveillance, Modernism

## I. INTRODUCTION

In the last decade discussions around privacy have gained renewed traction, due to the immense technological development and the skepticism surrounding capitalism. Contemporary discourses increasingly suggest that privacy has become largely illusory. Though people have shown concerns surrounding the whole right to privacy, the reasoning indicates skepticism. While the need for privacy is acknowledged, its underlying importance remains insufficiently examined. It is also important to note the difference between privacy and secrecy which are often used interchangeably. While secrecy is something that is looked at with suspicion as an act of actively hiding something, privacy is more complex and nuanced. Privacy comes from a space that allows individuals to be authentic, genuine and experimental without fearing judgement. Private spaces are essential for individuals to try out new things, rethink old beliefs and evolve constantly.

## II. ANALYSIS

Erving Goffman in this well-known book *The presentation of self in everyday life* differentiates between front-stage and back-stage behaviour. He believed that the back-stage or the moments where audiences aren't watching are the moments, one gets to make errors, try new things, essentially do things without feeling judged. According to him, without this private stage, if assuming

we're always on display, our ability to experiment and grow will be hindered beyond repair. Michel Foucault conceptualised this phenomenon, calling it "Panopticism" which fundamentally means that constant surveillance prevents people from engaging in unsanctioned behaviour. He of course meant this in a more legal way, but it also could be interpreted as a consequence of constant invasion of one's privacy leading to a lingering permanent uneasiness. Together these theories suggest how privacy isn't just a matter of comfort, but essential for growth.

Any discussion around privacy almost always evokes George Orwell and his *1984*. In the famous novel, the people of Oceania, especially Winston, are always vigilant, afraid to even think, which is an extreme case of what permanent removal of privacy can do to people. This is the angle we're going to take while re-visiting T.S. Eliot's

*The love song of J. Alfred Prufrock*. A poem published in 1915, amid a chaotic geo-political climate. The poem, often read for the exploration of modern loneliness, also touches upon some nuanced issues.

T.S. Eliot is indeed a modernist genius, the way his poems dive into the nuances of human existence combined with the contemporary geo-political events. Prufrock for example is the representation of man during WW1, but the vision of Eliot remains relevant to this date. We see throughout the poem the self-doubt that goes on in Prufrock's mind, the self-pity and judgement he feels when in public. The visibility that Prufrock has in the poem is what causes the self-doubt. The repetition of lines "Do I dare" reflects this self-doubt, a distinctly human hesitation, but keeping in mind that this fear of being rejected can also be seen from the theories around privacy. Renowned psychiatrist Carl Jung gave the concept of "persona" which is essentially the mask we wear in order to hide our reality from the world. This, in Prufrock's case, can be understood as the private self vs the socially performed self.

Moving further in the poem, Eliot makes it more clear what Prufrock fears:

"They will say: "How his hair is growing thin!"

They will say: "But how his arms and legs are thin!"

This fear of judgement, of being seen, being on display, being watched is what makes the work more relevant. Prufrock here exhibits Foucault's Panopticism, where he is censoring himself so no one else has the opportunity to do it.

The hesitation evident in the language of the poem can be further understood through the works of John Mill. In his seminal work *On Liberty* he highlighted how privacy is important for one to experiment with one's thoughts and emotions with no fear of consequences. The hesitation Prufrock constantly feels, evident in lines such as, "Do I dare" or "There will be time", stems from the fact that he always feels like he's being watched and judged. Individuality fades when social opinions become dominant. Prufrock highlights the psychological cost that comes with the lack of privacy.

The urban spaces in the poem are also some elements that provide a sense of constant visibility and overstimulation- the staircase, the streets, the room all collectively make Prufrock uneasy. The idea that while strolling in public spaces Prufrock felt no sense of privacy anticipates a condition later intensified in postmodern technological societies, where public spaces increasingly lack privacy. The anxiety Prufrock feels is not just psychological but also spatial, where every space feels like a judgement ground. Lines like "The muttering retreats" points to the fact that people are muttering so as not to be heard, which again hints to the fact that there seems to be no privacy, compelling individuals to speak in hush hush tones.

In another such line:

"For I have known them all already, known them all:

Have known the evenings, mornings,  
afternoons,"

We see how the act of wearing a mask, not  
letting oneself be vulnerable and meet  
someone in privacy has made it hard for  
individuals to connect with one another.

Prufrock believes that he has seen  
everything; there is nothing new about the  
things people are doing in this space

Similarly in

"And I have known the eyes

already, known them all –

The eyes that fix you in a formulated  
phrase,”

It is suggested that people’s eyes are on him and there is a feeling of being exposed and vulnerable. He does not like the sensation of all eyes upon him, The imagery of being “pinned” and “wriggling” reduces Prufrock to a mere creature, suggesting a violent loss of bodily and psychological privacy. As he says:

“And when I am formulated, sprawling on a pin,  
When I am pinned and wriggling on the wall,  
Then how should I begin  
To spit out all the butt-ends of my days and ways?

And how should I presume?”

Prufrock feels that the world is exposing him and judging him publicly. He’s unable to articulate his real self and thoughts due to a belief that none of the people are interested, they’ve already judged him. He feels the eyes upon him, watching his every move, his every mistake. The embarrassment one feels when making a mistake while anticipating judgement is something that Prufrock is familiar with and hates the glares that are always upon him. Prufrock’s acute awareness of others’ gaze rendered him "etherized". Again we see the absence of refuge both physical and psychological, as Prufrock is not able to let go of himself. In the following lines of the poem we come across an acute irony.

“And I have known the arms already, known them all –  
Arms that are braceleted and white and bare  
(But in the lamplight, downed with light brown hair!)”

For someone who is resentful of others for invading his private space literally and mentally, Prufrock himself seems to be stuck in the same loop. He too is noticing and judging the people around just like he thinks other people are, making it a chain reaction.

The irony of the title itself points to the fact that love is absent, when everything is evaluated on one’s social standing. Ideally love grows in private moments and one is loved for a face that the rest of the world doesn't see, Prufrock has a hard time finding love which is also the result of having minimal moments where one is not pretending to be someone else, instead being carefree and genuine. In one such line, Eliot mentions women talking about Michaelangelo, which is the perfect representation of superficial conversation and dignified faces people are keeping due to a belief that they’re under the public eye and scrutiny. Similarly in: “To prepare a face to meet the faces that you meet;” we get a sense of gloom and dejectedness that Prufrock feels, a tiredness that comes from constantly being in an act where one has to pretend to be someone else which again stems from the belief that one is being graded on how they behave. This constant act becomes normalised so swiftly as Foucault mentions and there comes a time where even in private spaces one does not let go of this act.

Throughout the poem we see two Prufrocks, one that seeks conformity and validation, and another that remains concealed and unexpressed. In the following lines: “I shall wear white flannel trousers, and walk upon the beach.

I have heard the mermaids singing, each to  
each.”

We see the second Prufrock and who he  
wants to be, the freedom he yearns for, who  
he would be if he was allowed some  
moments of privacy. However this quickly

changes in the next line where the other

Prufrock again self-censors his desires.

*I do not think that they will sing to me.*

### CONCLUSION

This paper examined TS Eliot's *The Love song of J. Alfred Prufrock* drawing theories from the works of Goffman, Foucault, Jung and Mill. The analysis revealed how surveillance in the poem led to self censorship. We also came to the conclusion that the hesitation and self doubt that Prufrock is filled with, is the result of long term lack and transgression of privacy. Eliot's poem anticipates a modern condition of existence where the boundaries between private and public have collapsed. Prufrock's inability to love and express reflects the cost of a society where individuals are evaluated. As the theme foregrounds the relationship between surveillance and self, the poem remains relevant modernist text resonating with contemporary discussions around privacy.

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