In “The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock,” T.S. Eliot explores paralysis and its effect on the unromantic and timid Prufrock. At the root of that paralysis is his inability to connect with women on an emotional or sexual level. His depression and lack of confidence stem from this impotence in such a way as to inspire his questioning of the life he leads and to doubt the merit of his very existence. There are not many types of insecurities that so affect a man. The most fitting “disability” would be erectile dysfunction or a fear of underwhelming performance. Therefore, Prufrock, in part, is an exploration of sexual impotence and its effect on men, especially when compared to more traditional romance.

The first and most important step to understanding impotence in “The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock” is to understand what impotence is and how it usually affects men. An article from Sexual Health Australia concludes, “A man who is currently not in a relationship may feel scared or ashamed of forming new relationships and/or of approaching new sexual partners. He may be afraid having to tell his new partner about his sexual dysfunction and hence may be scared of rejection.”¹ The problem quickly becomes a positive feedback loop, which only worsens with age. Clearly, that is the case with Prufrock. In lines 37 to 41, Prufrock questions his confidence, “Do I dare?” (Eliot, 38) and immediately reasons that he should “turn back” (39) because of his “bald spot in the middle of his hair.” (40) His lack of experience and subsequent lack of confidence have lead him to a point at which he can only make excuses for his inability to act, in other words, his mental impotence. In fact, the “love song” itself is structured in such a way as to mimic performance anxiety.

Prufrock’s sexual insecurity leads to the indecisive nature of the poem. His opening stanza, in which he builds to “an overwhelming question,” (10) simply ends with evasion. Rather than asking his “overwhelming question,” which would presumably be a declaration of his love and a call for reciprocation of some sort, he requests that she “do not ask, ‘What is it?’ / Let us go and make our visit.” (11-12) Nor is this the last time he will stall any brave action. He consistently repeats “there will be time,” (23) in order to justify his inability to act. Eliot seems to make a point of including these lines, as well as “Do I dare?” (38) whenever Prufrock seems to be at a point of resolution. His challenge to life itself is, indeed, “overwhelming,” and makes his inaction seem quite reasonable in his own eyes. Furthermore, these moments are usually precluded by his feelings of insignificance, of impotence, in the eyes of the watching women. For example, as he questions, “Do I dare?” on line 38, twice, he quickly answers his question with, “Time to turn back and descend the stair, / With a bald spot in the middle of my hair-“ (39-40) Prufrock recalls his age, as previously mentioned, and decides that he should not act on account of that. In a similar vein, he asks himself, “How should I begin / To spit out all the butt-ends of my days and ways? / And how should I presume?” (59-61) He completely devotes his mental energy to avoiding the purpose of his love song, and any chance for a break from his cycle of sexual frustration. By avoiding that “overwhelming question” and any sort of confrontation with his alien emotions, he effectively exhibits symptoms of impotence: “Once a man experiences even a single case of Erectile Dysfunction, a vicious cycle may become established whereby anxiety about a repeated episode of unsatisfactory erections is experienced whenever the man commences or even thinks about sexual activity.” ² He has no chance of breaking the cycle of inactivity with the kind of excuses he uses. Indeed, the poem does not end with resolution, but instead with imagery of mermaids, classical objects of sexual desire by

sailors who encountered them only in their wildest dreams. However, where the sailors might have dreamt of sexual encounters with such beautiful creatures, Prufrock does not even “think they will sing to me.” (125) He cannot even imagine that he would have a chance for sexual contact with a sexually tantalizing creature, to him almost identical to any other beautiful woman.

His impotence is further reinforced by Eliot’s imagery in the poem. A recurring refrain: “In the room the women come and go / Talking of Michelangelo.” (13-14) seems to concretely show his relationship with women. He stands back, listening to the women but never joining in, using the frivolity of the conversation as an excuse to simply never start emotional contact with them. His fear of such contact is strong, as shown by perhaps even stronger sexual imagery which occurs in the ninth stanza, when he is “formulated, sprawling on a pin, / When I am pinned and wriggling on the wall, / Then how should I begin” (67-69) In this way, he confirms that he has a problem carrying out his desires, a thought extremely reminiscent of impotence. He asserts that he is completely helpless when he is “formulated” and ready to act concerning women. Very soon thereafter he asserts that “I should have been a pair of ragged claws / Scuttling across the floors of silent seas.” (73-74) He professes how bothered he is by his inability to act, how seriously his impotence affects him on an emotional level. He would like to retreat from the complex world of human relation to one where he can scuttle away from his problems, never looking forward or backward, but moving sideways into the depths of a sea in which his existence will simply exist. Yet, he cannot make such a retreat, but is instead pressured by his society to act on his impulses. He wants to, like his yellow smoke “rub his muzzle on the window-panes, / Lick his tongue into the corners of the evening.” (15-17) Such imagery should have obvious connotations. Yet, what follows is even more fascinating. The
smoke, “seeing that it was a soft October night, / Curled once about the house, and fell asleep.”
(21-22) As if, during foreplay, the smoke, symbolizing a cat, could not muster the courage or the energy to continue, and simply falls into paralysis like his poem so often suggests. In another example, the odd thought he seems to consider beautiful, “a patient etherized upon a table,” (3) further reinforces his performance anxiety. He enjoys the thought of a helpless victim before him, in almost a rape fantasy, in the hopes that he might finally be able to act on his “formulated” plans. Instead, of course, he is doomed to fail in the realm of sexual conquest.

“The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock,” then, must be considered with the realization that Prufrock is both sexually and emotionally impotent. He lacks the confidence to enter into an emotional bond with a woman, and the confidence to act on that bond in a sexual way if he were to achieve it. His dialogue and use of sexual themes primarily serve to reinforce the paralysis that seems to be ubiquitous in the mind and world of Prufrock. His inability to act defines him, but also revolts him. He seems to wish with his deepest longing to actually connect with the woman in question on a deeper level, but fails to on all counts. The poem, because of this, seems more of a tragedy than anything else. There are certainly comedic elements to sexual impotence, but the pathetic struggle of Prufrock would hardly elicit much of a chuckle from an understanding audience. Indeed, his struggle is one that men have faced since they first felt emotion, and therefore should be most easily empathized with (at least for other men). Even if not, it is still important to realize what effect sexual paralysis has on the poem.

- Michael Pasternak