

Incoherence in reasoning is a fairly serious flaw in the math department and charity there does not extend to promulgating work founded on mistaken principles. In the English department the views of the body politic seem to hold more sway. The assertion that “Prufrock” is incoherent is formally unprovable and that can be proven. That comment surfaced in my first contact with the head of the English department. Risks here in interpretation are twofold. An improper poem can be given a proper interpretation founded on the poem’s internal unity and coherence even if the reading is at variance with the accepted canon or convention, or the poem can be assumed to be incoherent with a proper atmosphere in the reading preserved and promulgated by a coterie of backers: software and non-software alike. A separate kind of reading surfaced early in the attempt to preserve charity and fight fire with fire. And this involved interpreting other people’s proper interpretations improperly and proving a point at their expense. This vantage point does not promulgate easily but it can work if the poem under scrutiny possesses sufficient unity and coherence to support it. Hence, we’ve come to the parable of “The Blind Men and the Elephant.” It’s a fairly easy task to read the body of “Prufrock” criticism in this manner with fresh eyes and this was done early on to push back on the English department’s pathological impulses when confronted with a coherent reading. A few examples are provided herein. Can you provide a similar instance of someone not knowing what they’re saying and dismantling their thesis on their own in the course of a rereading?

### Published Criticism on “Prufrock”

One of the puzzles of the poem is the question as to whether Prufrock ever leaves his room. It appears that he does not, ... (J. Hillis Miller)

The poem’s linguistic and thematic strategy consistently opposes active verbs to the passive voice which causes things to be spread out, etherized, smoothed, and stretched. (David Spurr)

For Eliot, poetic representation of a powerful female presence created difficulty in embodying the male. In order to do so, Eliot avoids envisioning the female, indeed, avoids attaching gender to bodies. (Carol Christ)

Prufrock’s acute consciousness of his age is thus the classic symptom of Eliot’s philosophical and literary problem. Prufrock’s body is presented as a text, for he literally carries the burden of the past on his body ... (Mutlu Konuk Blasing)

... the reader who tries to pin down the indeterminate identities and locations of ‘you and I’ in the poem will always be mistaken. (John Paul Riquelme)

The general fragmentation of “The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock” is obvious and notorious. (Michael North)

J. Alfred Prufrock is not just the speaker of one of Eliot’s poems. He is the Representative Man of early Modernism. ... 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, ... (Roger Mitchell)

Prufrock seemed to me a poem about a man’s dread of being no good. (Denis Donoghue, *Words Alone: The Poet T. S. Eliot*)

... I tried to catch my sense of this catching, even catchy, yet uncatchable poem. We should all do our best, not least because Eliot truly did his. (Christopher Ricks, *Prufrock, J. Alfred Prufrock*, Atlantic Unbound, April 11, 2001)

The purpose of the visit is to relieve him, through ordeal by embarrassment, of any remaining thought of an overwhelming question. (David Trotter, Prof. of English Literature, Univ. of Cambridge, *T. S. Eliot and the Cinema*, The Johns Hopkins Univ. Press., 2006)

... and the way to read it is to move with its movement, ride its little shocks, and, in a sense, live along its lines. The point is worth dwelling on here, since that is also the way to handle the much tougher poems that follow Prufrock. (Frank Kermode, *The Oxford Anthology of English Literature Volume II: 1800 to the Present*, Oxford Univ. Press, 1973, p. 1972.)

I was jolly well right about Eliot. He has sent in the best poem I have yet had or seen from an American. (Ezra Pound in a letter to Harriet Monroe, publisher of *Poetry*, Sept. 30, 1914.)

‘I have tried to write of a few things that really have moved me’ is so far as I know, the sum of Mr. Eliot’s ‘poetic theory.’ (Ezra Pound, *Drunken Helots and Mr. Eliot*, *Egoist*. June 1917, vol. iv, 72-4.)

I must admit that I am, on one conspicuous occasion, not guiltless of having led critics into temptation. (T. S. Eliot, *The Frontiers of Criticism*, 1956.)

Yet when Eliot died, an ailing Pound rallied his forces to produce a late tribute to a memorial volume. "Who is there now for me to share a joke

with?" asked Pound. (The Cambridge Companion to Ezra Pound, 1999, Cambridge University Press)

Come to lunch on Sunday. Tom is coming, and, what is more, is coming with a four-piece suit. (Virginia Woolf recounted by Clive Bell in "How Pleasant to know Mr Eliot")