“Do I Dare Disturb the Universe?”

A Dantean Quest for Meaning in Prufrock’s Liminal World: A Hermeneutical Reading of T.S. Eliot’s “The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock”

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Introduction

For groups, as well as for individuals, life itself means to separate and to be reunited, to change form and condition, to die and to be reborn. ...the transition from one state to another is literally equivalent to giving up the old life and "turning over a new leaf."  

(van Gennep)

The horizon of understanding cannot be limited either by what the writer originally had in his mind or by the horizon of the person to whom the text was originally addressed.

(Gadamer)

Transforming stages like birth, puberty and death are part and parcel of the human condition and everyone is faced with these transitions. The process of transition from one stage of life into another, as mentioned in the quotation above, means “giving up the old life and ‘turning over a new leaf,’” often leading to a feeling of alienation from the previous state of being. These transitions naturally differ between individuals, depending on the surrounding circumstances and personal understanding of what is happening. T.S. Eliot in his poem, “The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock,” illustrates a character who wishes to find someone to share his understanding of life, but firstly, he has to come to terms with his own identity and find a place where he belongs.

This paper will trace Prufrock’s journey for love and thus, as we will see, meaning as a Dantesque journey to ultimate meaning. Just as Dante tries to reach his goal, heaven, where his love Beatrice can be found, Prufrock sets out in his own hell and travels towards what presumably will lead him to harmony with others and consequently, within himself. Prufrock’s longing for love, though he is convinced that he is not meant to be one of women’s chosen, and his inability to act will be perceived as the results of him not finding the strength to leave his own world of inbetweenness, his liminal world. He is a typical representative of the modern man, who is lost in the fragments of the surrounding material world, in the “smoke that rises from the pipes.” German philosopher Hans Georg Gadamer’s idea that all
“human thought and action are determined by a particular historical context” (Höchsmann 128) underpins the idea that Prufrock’s sense of loss and his alienated state of living are influenced by the modern state of his time.¹ Prufrock is not isolated physically; he exists among the others but does not live his own life and dares not share it with others.

This paper will look at Prufrock’s state of being and his dilemma in terms of Arnold van Gennep’s concept of liminality, the three-step liminal process.² This theory will be used as a tool to explain how Prufrock’s quest for meaning leads him to the liminal space of inbetweeness, between the dead and the living. Spiritually, Eliot’s character is dead: the only sign of him is his body and his wanderings through the “half-deserted streets,” in which he tries to find his last hope, love, to keep him alive. Therefore, the role of women in his life seems to be crucial in his quest for meaning, a meaning which is as fragmented as the image of females in the poem. An attempt to illustrate the ways in which the speaker’s search for love is mingled with his quest for meaning will be made in this study. In this way, the notion of ren,³ which essentially stands for harmony with others and consequently within the individual, is helpful for our understanding of “The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock.” Assuming love as a fundamental unifying activity that forms a human being as a coherent whole, the speaker of T.S. Eliot’s poem looks for this important component in his fragmented life. Undoubtedly, Prufrock’s understanding of his own meaning of life does not equal any other’s, not even the reader’s.

Hence, this study will pay special attention to the importance of the reader in the creation of meaning, presenting how T.S. Eliot, in the bringing together contradictory

¹ The modernist state and thought represent an attempt to restore a sense of order to human experience under the often chaotic conditions of contemporary existence. Modernists believed that we must constantly seek to coalesce the varied fragments of our existence but we should be aware that we will never succeed (Singal 8-11).

² The liminal process derives from his anthropological studies of rites of passage that “may be subdivided into rites of separation [preliminal rites], transition rites [liminal rites], and rites of incorporation [or postliminal rites]” (Gennep 11).

³ Benevolence or love. “In Confucian thought, ren is the foundation of relations with others and creates harmony among individuals. Chung-Ying Cheng explains that ren is at the foundation of cultivation of the moral self” (Höchsmann 141).
undercurrents of meaning in metaphors and allusions of death, life and love, leads the speaker together with the reader to a deeper understanding of Prufrock’s understanding of meaning. In this way, the concept of reader response theory overlaps partially with Gadamer’s idea of understanding as “an ontological structure or dynamic process,” (R. Palmer 217) that occurs not only for Prufrock but also for the reader. Hence, the reader’s role in the process of interpretation is crucial to this paper.

Thus, this study is a hermeneutical reading of the poem employing not only van Gennep’s theory of liminality, but also, in particular, Gadamer’s model of the “fusion of horizons,” which describes how contrasting forces find a balancing in the merging with each other, and his view that “all understanding occurs not through sympathy or even reconstruction but through the medium of language” (Weinsheimer 65). Applying these notions, this essay will argue that Prufrock’s search for love, and thus for meaning, takes place when one state of awareness merges into another, where they intermingle and new understanding is being created, in the “fusion of horizons.” It will be depicted how Prufrock’s state of awareness does not merge with anyone else’s; he stays in his liminal world. Additionally, the reader’s and Prufrock’s understandings of meaning will be perceived in terms of Gadamer’s dialectical hermeneutics which is presented in his work *Truth and Method*. He views the process of understanding not only as some event that takes place for a moment, but rather as an individual act of becoming.

This paper will attempt to show how meaning can be generated in the tension within the very title of the poem, in the tension between contrasting forces. Since love is assumed to be an overwhelming force in Prufrock’s life, it will be demonstrated how Prufrock, searching for love and thus for meaning, follows Dante’s journey in *The Divine Comedy*. On this journey Prufrock compares himself with other characters who also in their own way search and find, through the liminal process and their own Dantean journeys, their own meanings and thus
strength to act. These characters are, specifically, John the Baptist and his life in the biblical context as well as in Oscar Wilde’s *Salome*, and also Shakespeare’s Hamlet and his overwhelming question. This paper will make an attempt to illustrate that both of these characters, Hamlet and John the Baptist, make a Dantean journey, like Prufrock, in order to find their meanings of life. All of them, Dante, Hamlet and John the Baptist - except Prufrock, who dares not move on - go further through the liminal world of inbetweeness. So, let us take Prufrock’s invitation: “Let us go then, you and I” and follow him on his Dantean journey, starting with the poem’s title.

**Binary Oppositions in the Title**

*I think that a writer is a perfect case of split personality [...] he is one thing when he is a writer and he is something else while he is denizen of the world.*

(Faulkner)

The choice of words in the poem’s title, “The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock,” creates a specific atmosphere that helps Eliot to convey the main aspect of his “song,” the subject of love. The author opens the text for discussion with this particular title which can be interpreted as a joke. There are no explicit connections between the title itself and the rest of the text, but in introducing the text as a love song, T.S. Eliot opens it up to certain expectations, which are followed by the further conversation between the speaker and the reader, as this essay has chosen to see “you:” “Let us go then, you and I.” Undoubtedly, it does not mean that the reader is able to provide the true, definite answers to Prufrock’s questions, which are mostly open questions, like if he dares “[d]isturb the universe” by talking to others and “how [he] should begin” his communication with women. These questions lie behind his overwhelming quest for meaning of existence and his quest for love as the vehicle for that question.
To enter the conversation, in terms of Gadamer’s dialectical hermeneutics, can be understood as the reader’s attempt to find the answers to these open questions and at the same time, the recognition of the fact that the text itself tries to find the answers too. Thus, the very title of the poem invites the reader to find out, or rather to begin to think about, what the author means by introducing his work as the love song; the title prompts the reader to a specific reading and specific expectations. Is this only a question of Prufrock’s non-answered sexual desires or a part of his quest for meaning? The question about the importance of love in his life and the ways in which love is mingled with his search for meaning is a matter of interpretation on the part of the reader. To “open a conversation with a text,” Weinsheimer writes, “means to understand the question to which the text is an answer as an open question” (210).

It can be suggested that the main idea of presenting the poem with this specific title is to convey effects rather than meanings. These effects place both the speaker and the reader in the mental landscape of love, which is partly placed among the living, when, for example, the speaker invites the reader to “the room [where] the women come and go/Talking of Michelangelo,” and partly among the dead, where “human voices wake [him], and [he] drown[s].” Prufrock finds his meaning neither among the living nor among the dead; his meaning is somewhere else, in the liminal world of inbetweenness where the “mermaids [sing only] each to each.” Looking at the title, the reader expects to find some thoughts of love in the following reading, but in order to understand what love means for Prufrock and where the answers can be found, the reader is supposed to find his own space of understanding, a new area is being created, where his/her understanding fuses with Prufrock’s, in a “fusion of horizons.” This is the space where, on the one hand, the reader’s and the speaker’s insight may mingle with each other and, on the other hand, where Prufrock’s horizon of understanding may find an opportunity to merge with other’s.
The name J. Alfred Prufrock is mentioned only in the poem’s title. On the one hand, this name seems to be a noble one with the initial “J.” but on the other hand, “Alfred” is a very common name and as Palmer points out, the name of “Prufrock […] used to appear in an advertisement in St. Louis, Missouri, Eliot’s home town” (M. Palmer 19-20). It can be assumed that behind the surface of his name, in the tension between the noble-ness suggested by the use of the “J” and the common, Alfred Prufrock, the image of the speaker’s self is hidden, in some place of inbetweeness. Somehow, it presents the picture of the speaker’s self which is lost in the surrounding environment. Again, the reader’s understanding of Prufrock’s self is caught in the space between his noble name and quite commonplace one, in the liminal space.

According to this interpretation, the speaker’s self can be depicted as being lost or stretched out between opposing forces: he does not belong to the noble nor to the ordinary people who work in “the yellow smoke that slides along the street/Rubbing its back upon the window-panes.” In a way, the idea of presenting the speaker as an impersonal human being brings about a sense of uncanny-ness supporting Gadamer’s view of understanding, which occurs in spoken language, “in the exchange of conversation and dialogue, in question and answer rather than assertion” (Weinsheimer 250). This impersonality can be seen as something incomprehensible and strange for the reader, but it also contributes to the construction of a particular atmosphere of uncertainty about everything that is illustrated in the poem: about Prufrock’s overwhelming question, about the role of women in his life, the women who are illustrated only as fragments, synecdoches,⁴ (“the arms,” “light brown hair,” “a shawl”). Thus, both the reader’s and Prufrock’s purposes are to find their own meanings (which are not equal) within the frames of this mental landscape of uncertainty, the liminal world, where Prufrock stays. The title of the poem, which prepares the reader to hear the love

⁴ A term referring to a part of something and which is used to refer to the whole.
song, is followed by an epigraph, taken from the first part of Dante’s *The Divine Comedy*, entitled *Inferno*.

**Prufrock’s Dantesian Journey**

Knowing the context of *The Divine Comedy* and paying attention to the poem’s epigraph make it easier, for the reader and T.S. Eliot, to agree on the common object, namely the subject of love. Here, it is important to note another of Gadamer’s ideas, namely, that language and ontology are inseparable, where words refer to the real world and where “the understanding a text and reaching an understanding in a conversation […] are concerned with a subject matter that is placed before them” (Gadamer 370). In other words, the purpose of any conversation is to find an agreement about the object of their conversation or “the coming-into-language of the thing itself” (371). Both Dante and Eliot depict characters who make their life journey through hell. For Prufrock, hell can be seen as the modern world, which is covered by “the yellow fog that rubs from its back upon the window-panes” and “the yellow smoke that rubs its muzzle on the window-panes,” where Prufrock tries to find love, and thus meaning and ultimately himself. Everything and everyone disappear in this smoky environment. Hence, there is nobody who is capable of seeing him, even the mermaids “will [not] sing to [him].” The speaker, like Guido de Montefeltro, who says: “If I believed that my

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*S’io credese che mia risposta fosse
A persona che mai tornasse al mondo
Questa fiamma staria senza più scosse.
Ma perciò che giammai di questo fondo
Non torna vivo alcun, s’io oso il vero,
Senza tema d’infamia ti rispondo

(*Inferno*, XXVII, 61-66)*

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*If I believed that my reply were made
To one who to the world would e’er return,
This flame without more flickering would stand till
But inasmuch as never from this depth
Did any one return, if I hear true,
Without the fear of infamy I answer*
reply were made/To one who to the world would e’er return” does not believe that his questions will be answered either; he is lost in these city landscapes of the modern world, where his alienated state is a condition of being human.

It can be argued that both characters, Dante and Prufrock, make their journeys through hell and later place themselves in the liminal stage - for Dante, it is Purgatory, which becomes the transitional stage too - in order to find their second part, their loved ones, and the harmony within themselves. Both of them go through hell, which is here linked with Gennep’s preliminal stage or a period of segregation, to be able to achieve the state of ren, “the symbol for man combined with the symbol for two, succinctly the origin and the goal of human relations” (Höchsmann 142). Dante idealises his perfect woman Beatrice who together with Virgil, Dante’s guide through Inferno, leads Dante towards Paradiso, heaven. Thus, Dante’s ultimate goal is to reach this third and final stage, heaven or, according to van Gennep’s theory, incorporation, the postliminal phase, and to find and be re-united with his beloved there. Therefore, his purpose of journey, to be together with Beatrice, becomes his meaning of life. In other words, Dante’s journey towards his love can be equalled his journey towards his understanding of his own being.

Prufrock rather idealises the image of women, the image that is as fragmented as his existence. Women are presented only as parts, as synecdoches: “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!).” It can be assumed that Prufrock’s goal is to unify all these parts (the braceleted arms, the brown light hair, the perfumed dress) and bring them into a coherent whole. Only when the speaker succeeds in this task of making them into a whole, will he be able to achieve this state of ren: firstly, as a unifying activity among the individuals, between him and the women and secondly, as a unifying activity within himself.
Following this line of thought, without harmony with women Prufrock will not find his meaning of existence or himself.

Dante travels through degradation more consciously: he knows why he has to go down to the bottom of hell this and at the same time, he knows, or hopes, that he can start a new life when he does it. By contrast, Prufrock is not aware of what he is going through and why: he realises that he has to go through it, but he drowns in his own attempts of self-discovery and self-denial. Rather than assertion he is seen as choosing to stay in the liminal stage, whereas Dante succeeds in escaping *Inferno* and goes through *Purgatory* to reach his ultimate goal, his Beatrice.

Prufrock does not dare leave this liminal space, which is supposed to be a transitional stage. His fear to be rejected by his beloved woman is much stronger than his desire to find harmony with her. He rather prefers not to know her answer being “pinned and wriggling on the wall.” A “no” would mean waking and drowning for him. Prufrock disappears within himself in his dream-like liminal state. So, he places himself in a state of inbetweeness, where he is neither asleep nor awake, where the awakening of his self-consciousness equals death, when he drowns in “the chambers of the sea.” In other words, his meaning cannot be found in the “room where the women come and go,” nor in “the narrow streets” or “chambers of the sea,” in the darkness of the modern society. Perhaps, in some place where the streets interact with the sea, when he “walk[s] upon the beach [and hears] the mermaids singing each to each,” the meaning exists and can be discovered by him. Victor Turner underlines that “the transitional being or ‘liminal persona’ is defined by a name and by a set of symbols” (95). Thus, the beach, which is neither land nor sea, can be interpreted, on the one hand, as such a symbol of Prufrock’s liminal condition, and on the other hand as such a place that Gadamer calls the “fusion of horizons,” some space which can have meaning, at least for the speaker, where his horizon of understanding merges with the horizon of the modern society.
Besides, the image of mermaids can also contribute to a better understanding of Prufrock’s search for love. The mermaids, being mythical figures, do not exist in the physical world but nevertheless they, in contrast to Prufrock, are accepted in people’s minds. The image of them can be also interpreted as a symbol of the speaker’s dream-like state of inbetweeness, to which nobody else, except the speaker and, presumably, partially the reader, has access to. vi On his journey towards understanding Prufrock can be compared not only with the mermaids, but also with John the Baptist, who makes his life journey too.

**Prufrock is “no prophet—and here’s no great matter”**

You are not here to verify,
Instruct yourself, or inform curiosity
Or carry report. You have been here to kneel
Where prayer has been valid.

(T.S. Eliot, “Little Gidding”)

Names, once they are in common use, quickly
become mere sounds, their etymology being
buried, like so many of the earth’s marvels,
beneath the dust of habit.

(S. Rushdie, *The Satanic Verses*)

Prufrock is not a prophet who, like John the Baptist, believes in his higher mission to make “straight the way of the Lord” (John 1:23). He is another kind of man, whose mission is not to “verify […] or carry report;” he does not even kneel because of his unbelief in himself and the time he lives in. His mission is to find his own meaning, to be heard by others and to be accepted by a woman, whose rejection he fears.

To go further in the reader’s understanding of Eliot’s character in terms of John the Baptist’s life it is important to take in account the following of Gadamer’s ideas: “if the work of art can be understood, it does not exist in itself. It exists rather as understood and what the work is […] cannot be divided from the way it presents itself in its reproductions and 

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vi A further illustration of the image of mermaids will be made later in this study.
interpretations” (Weinsheimer 215). In other words, interpretations of the text in relation to the context are necessary to make the reader’s understanding deeper. Thus, in order to explain in which ways Prufrock can be compared with John the Baptist, the prophet who was sent ahead of Jesus and who was killed by the wish of Herod’s wife through her daughter, we will study the allusion Eliot makes not only to the Bible but also to Oscar Wilde’s *Salome*. This play contributes to a wider understanding of the ways in which the theme of love mingles with Prufrock’s quest for meaning. Does Prufrock dare “[d]isturb the universe” and reject a woman, or rather reject her “no,” like John the Baptist rejects Salome in Wilde’s play, or is his fear of being rejected stronger than his desire to find meaning?

Prufrock does not find the courage to speak out like John the Baptist, who was not afraid of people’s rejection, even the king’s. For example, when he says to Herod: “It is not lawful for you to have your brother’s wife” (Mark 6:18). In this case, John the Baptist proved that he did have “the strength to force the moment to its crisis.” He is a holy man, whose aim is to transfer a belief in the higher power of God. He believes that he is a prophet and this fact separates him from the rest of the society; John the Baptist begins his own liminal Dantean journey towards his understanding of being. He is totally aware of his mission and there is nothing and nobody who can hinder him, not even women and more specifically, Salome or her mother, as Marja Palmer states: “John rejected the love of Salome and resisted her” (35). Interestingly, the name Salome does not appear in the Bible, whereas Wilde takes up an old tradition of this name, starting with the biblical description of Herodias’ daughter. The picture

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*vii* “But when Her’od’s birthday came, the daughter of Heroidas danced before the company, and she pleased Her’od so much that he promised on oath to grant her whatever she might ask. Prompted by her mother, she said ‘Give me head of John the Baptist here on a platter’” (Matthew 14:6-8).

Josephus (approx. 37-100 CE) was the first Jewish historian who wrote Jewish and Roman history in Greek, Josephus who names the dancing daughter: “Herodias was married to Herod […] they had a daughter Salome, after birth Herodias, taking it into her head to flout the way of our fathers, married the Tetrarch her husband’s brother by the same father, who was tetrarch of Galilee; to do this she parted from a living husband. *(Antiquities* 18.5.3.136 Josephus, 60 CE) (http://billcasselman.com/whats in a canadian name/abbot mcnab.htm)
of Salome’s love to Iokanaan\textsuperscript{viii} is illustrated in Wilde’s work. Salome is mostly in love with his body: “I am athirst for thy beauty; I am hungry for thy body; and neither wine nor apples can appease my desire” (Wilde 66). In the biblical context she is not in love with him at all: she dances at Herod’s feast and obeys her mother’s will to “give [her] the head of John the Baptist here on a platter” (Matthew 14:5).

It can be assumed that in Wilde’s play, John the Baptist experiences a kind of doubt and temptation of the body, presumably being in his liminal state, but he rejects Salome’s love, being aware that he can be killed for that. He, in contrast to Prufrock, who has “seen the moment of [his] greatness flicker,” is not afraid of women and death; he knows that his belief is greater than the mystery of Love and Death. For Salome, it is not so obvious: she prefers to see him dead recognising that “the mystery of Love is greater than the mystery of Death” (Wilde 66). Another fact underpins the idea that John the Baptist goes through his transitional liminal state, Gennep’s \textit{limen}, the Dantinean \textit{Purgatory}, when he, being placed in prison, hesitates about his mission and sends messengers to Jesus to ask if he is “the one who is to come,” (Luke 7:18)or if they are to wait for another.” Receiving a positive answer soon and thus believing only in God, John the Baptist proves another belief: he finds harmony within himself, as it is suggested, his state of \textit{ren}, even in his present condition, among the living and, undoubtly, he feels secure among the dead, when his head is brought on a platter to Salome and her mother. Presumably, finding harmony within himself he created the basis for harmony with others. Therefore, he does not fear anyone, not even the king. After a very short period of doubt about his mission in life, his transitional stage, he finally finds strength and, thus, harmony not as some “unifying activity” with a female but rather with God and, mostly, within himself. It can be suggested that this harmony can be found in the third step of van Gennep’s liminal process, incorporation, which, for John the Baptist, became death, but death

\textsuperscript{viii} John the Baptist
for him is only a physical transformation of his body, which has led his soul to the final phase of his life cycle, the Dantean Paradiso, where his meaning continued living.

Prufrock is “no prophet - and here’s no great matter:” he does not believe in himself and hence cannot find his place among the living. He, like John the Baptist, has met women, “in the room [they] come and go,” but he recalls them only as some fragments (“the eyes,” the [braceleted] arms,” the “perfume from a dress”) which have emasculated him and have made him measure out his “life with coffee spoons.” It can be suggested that women in Prufrock’s life have given rise to a disbelief in himself. In his present condition, he does not see any meaning to explain what he wishes, as when he states “this, and so much more/It is impossible to say just what I mean!”

John the Baptist believed in what he said but Prufrock seems to lose his hope: he speaks into the emptiness, into the darkness where he cannot find any light and harmony, as Lamos states: “by placing him among the dead [meaning spiritual death], he also made a place among the living”(56). The speaker travels through this darkness and he is afraid of it because he does not believe in anything and, perhaps, as a result he is not accepted by the modern society. Hence, Prufrock’s liminal dream-like state, the state of inbetweeness, alienates him from the living and the dead; he finds himself completely alone, where he tries to convince himself that “there will be time […] for a hundred indecisions/ And for a hundred visions and revisions.” Obviously, he is not sure about what he says. For him, God is dead: God disappears in the modernity of the time, in the “yellow fog” and the “yellow smoke” like the fragments of women, withdrawing in the atmosphere of spiritual decay and neglect.

He fails to believe that he can be chosen by a woman, whose “eyes […] fix [him] in a formulated phrase,” he is not sure about how to begin and if there is any point in doing it; as Strandberg points out “the metaphor transposes the derision and scorn he [the speaker] senses in the eyes of the women who watch him” (87). There is nobody in his liminal space, except
probably, the reader, who is, perhaps, able to understand Prufrock’s wishes and his quest for meaning. Both the reader and the speaker accept the fact that there is no possibility to change life in the present.

According to Gadamer, our own horizon of understanding of “the present cannot be formed without the past [and] [...] the individual is never simply an individual because he is always in understanding with others” (303-5). These ideas can bring some light on the reader’s understanding of John the Baptist and Prufrock’s quests for meaning. Both these characters are prophets of their time but in quite different ways. Similarly, they both set out on a Dantesque journey towards their ultimate goal, meaning of life. The Dantesque hell, or the process of segregation, begins in prison for John the Baptist, where he doubts about his mission but after receiving the answer that he is “the one who is to come,” (Luke 7:18) his doubting self develops into the final stage of his being, incorporation, where he accepts his death and finds harmony with God, achieving his state of ren.

John the Baptist, unlike Prufrock, believed in himself and his mission but his historical context differs from Prufrock’s. One critic underlines that “John the Baptist lived in an age of belief: he felt a privileged claim to transcendent his knowledge that assures the victory, even in death, of his holy prophecy over the vicissitudes of worldly evil” (Ledbetter 4). By contrast, Prufrock exists in an age of unbelief, where all moral values and human feelings, as love, compassion and understanding of each other, are denied by society and hidden under the surface of material success. Perhaps, this age of unbelief contributes to his feeling of alienation, making him think that he “should have been a pair of ragged claws,” and thus to his inability to escape from his liminal dream-like space.

Eliot’s character is a silent “prophet”, who has also “wept and fasted, wept and prayed, [and] have seen [his] head (grown slightly bald) brought upon a platter” but who has never been recognised or honoured, like John the Baptist, in his modern world and who has not had
enough strength to “force the moment to its crisis,” the moment of the encounter with a woman, perhaps, the decisive encounter in his search for love and thus for meaning. Presumably, he will never be able to find his beloved because his image of women does not correspond to the reality of his time; his image of women is placed within his own horizon of understanding, which nobody else, except the reader, at least partially, is capable to comprehend. If the speaker’s horizon of the past and the reader’s horizon of the present intermingle in some space of inbetweeness, the understanding (of the quest for meaning), which is “always the fusion of these horizons supposedly existing by themselves” (Gadamer 305) will take place not only within Prufrock but also within the reader. The reader’s horizon of understanding partially merges with Prufrock’s when he, as we will see, compares himself with Hamlet, a character from the past.

**Prufrock is “not Prince Hamlet, nor was meant to be”**

*Understanding is to be thought of less as a subjective act than as participating in an event of tradition, a process of transmission in which past and present are constantly mediated.*

(Gadamer)

Prufrock is not supposed to be a prophet as John the Baptist or a hero like Hamlet, who seeks to answer his overwhelming question: To be or not to be? Eliot’s character rather tries to find an explanation and a reason for his own meaning of life. For him, to be among the living or the dead does not play a decisive role; the only thing he wishes to obtain is harmony within himself, the state of *ren*, which can be achieved through the harmony with women, assuming this harmony as a “need,” a basis for his search for love. To understand what this harmony means for Prufrock, it is helpful for the reader to analyse Prufrock’s state of being in terms of the context of *Hamlet*, paying attention to the role of women in Hamlet’s life and how these
women, Ophelia, his beloved, and Gertrude, Hamlet’s mother, have influenced him in his attempt to answer his overwhelming question.

Hamlet and his experiences contribute to a deeper comprehension of Prufrock’s quest for meaning. Since, in the words of Gadamer, the reader’s own understanding involves “more than merely historically reconstructing of the past ‘world,’” (290) it suggests that the reader’s understanding includes a recognition of the fact that Eliot’s poem belongs not only to the past but also to the present. In other words, “The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock” belongs to the reader and to the present world as much as it belongs to the author and the past. Hence, the reader’s understanding of Prufrock’s quest for meaning is seen as “a process of transmission, in which past and present are constantly mediated.” In terms of van Gennep’s theory of liminality, this process of transition occurs in the liminal phase, which is neither past nor present, where past and present fuse in the reader’s mind creating a new area of understanding, which is available only for the reader.

Surely, an interpretation of Eliot’s poem in the context of Hamlet can cause some prejudice, but prejudice “certainly does not mean a false judgment […] it can have either a positive or a negative value” (Gadamer 273). To decide what value Hamlet has on the interpretation of Eliot’s poem, the reader is directed to the character of Hamlet himself in the poem: “No! I am not Prince Hamlet, nor was meant to be.” Prufrock is not meant to be a prince or a hero; he is rather “an attendant lord,” who is supposed to serve someone, to “[a]dvise the prince” and to “swell a progress.” He serves his own time of spiritual decay and unbelief becoming a mirror of the surrounding physical environment, which is in a process of becoming, like Prufrock, who tries to re-unite and somehow to re-discover his self in this new modern world.

Prufrock’s weakness is more and more to be caught in the liminal space of inbetweeness. He “[has] gone at dusk,” which is no longer a day and still is not a night,
through “certain half-deserted streets,” which are neither empty nor crowded and, finally, he “[has walked] upon the beach,” the in-between place between sea and land, perhaps, the only place where his meaning has an opportunity to be found. Obviously, there is nobody else, in this liminal space, who is capable to understand him because nobody is there. It seems that Prufrock wishes to find a woman to understand him, but, at the same time, he passes “the women [who] come and go/talking to Michelangelo,” without any attempt to talk to them. He doubts if it “would have been worthwhile.” Perhaps; he does not talk to them because he does not see them as a coherent whole, rather as the synecdoches, fragments, which should be put together in order to merge with Prufrock’s horizon (of understanding). He is quite sure that he will be misunderstood by them: “That is not what I meant at all;/That is not it, at all.” For this reason, any effort to change his situation and, thus, challenge the surrounding world seems to be meaningless for him. However, Eliot’s character is not the only character who is placed in this liminal space of inbetweeness.

It can be suggested that Hamlet, in his search for an answer to his overwhelming question, “to be or not to be?” goes trough this liminal stage too. In contrast to Prufrock, he dares speak to the women, Queen Gertrude, his mother, and Ophelia, his beloved, and act, but nevertheless he hesitates all the time until he has gone through the transforming stage, when he finally finds courage to kill. Perhaps, this hesitation comes from his mother’s will to make him a king, influencing him in his decisions, rather than preparing to “meet the faces that” he met before, namely the ghost of his father. The phenomena of ghosts, according to G. Hansen, together with spirits and near-death experiences “challenge[s] the all-too-simple distinction between life and death” (2). Thus, the ghost of Hamlet’s father can be identified as a liminal phenomenon which is “neither solid nor stable:” (4) it is in the liminal world, like the character of Hamlet at the time of their encounter.
The fact that Hamlet meets the ghost of his father and speaks to him makes the reader believe that both of them are in this place of inbetweeness. It can be also assumed that Hamlet’s horizon of understanding, unlike Prufrock’s (who is totally lost and lonely), may fuse with his father’s, meaning that Hamlet has at least a possibility to be understood by others. There is one more fact which supports the belief that Hamlet is caught in this liminal space: talking to the ghost, it is only him who has been able to see him. His mother, Queen Gertrude, is also in the same room, but she cannot see and hear old Hamlet, the ghost:

“HAMLET: Do you see nothing there? QUEEN: Nothing at all” (III. IV.131). She believes that Hamlet, her son, becomes mad: “Alas, he’s mad!” Consequently, his madness can be illustrated as a characteristic of his transitional liminal phase, a period of hesitation in his life.

Certainly, the fact that Hamlet communicates not only with the ghost, but also with the other characters in this play creates other possibilities for him to be understood, to find other horizons of understanding, which, in some way, can intermingle with his own. Hence, he, comparing to Prufrock, who does not have a single opportunity to share his understanding with anyone, creates, by his ability to speak out, several possibilities to come across other horizons of understanding. Among those who may understand Hamlet is Ophelia, his beloved, who finally rejects him and dies. Thus, he has had at least a chance to reach a state of ren, harmony with a woman. Prufrock does not even know how to begin to talk to women: “When I am pinned and wriggling on the wall, / Then how should I begin.” He does not dare come out from his liminal space in order to be heard by them. Therefore, to reach harmony within himself becomes impossible.

HAMLET: A king of shreds and patches—
    Save me, and hover o’er me with your wings,
    You heavenly guards! What would your gracious figure? (III.IV.103)

GHOST: Do not forget! This visitation
    Is but to whet thy almost blunted purpose
    But look, amazement on thy mother sits,
    O, step between her and her fighting soul (III. IV. 110).
Prufrock prefers to stay in his liminal space: he “leaves the party to walk alone upon the beach,” (Blythe 2) where he “[hears] the mermaids singing.” Still, he does not dare believe that even the sea-girls, who are in this liminal dream-like space, just like him, “will sing to” him. They only “sing each to each.” So, if he cannot not find courage to talk to the mermaids, who can be identified as a liminal phenomenon (like the ghost of Hamlet’s father), and believe that he can be heard by them, he will never be able even to talk to women. Therefore, he will never find harmony within himself and, surely, his quest for meaning will remain unclear and unresolved for him.

His liminal space becomes a place of habitation, rather than transformation, as it is for Hamlet. According to van Gennep’s theory, the liminal space characterises a transitional phase of an individual’s life, a period that leads a person into the third stage, incorporation. However, Gennep underlines: “transitional periods […] sometimes acquire a certain autonomy” (191-192). Presumably, for Prufrock this “certain autonomy” develops into a total autonomy of the transitional period in his life, where he prefers to stay rather than to explore the landscape of the surrounding modern world; he does not find the strength to “[squeeze] the universe into a ball.” He chooses to explore his own space of understanding (where “human voices wake [him], and [he] drown[s]”), whereas Hamlet goes further in his life. In that way, I can agree with Mc Cormick’s belief that “Prufrock is a smaller prince than Hamlet” (McCormick 45). For Hamlet, in contrast to Prufrock, this transitional phase leads to a transformation of his personality from his doubting, hesitating self to a persona who dares act and “disturb the universe.”

At the same time, Prufrock’s desire and ability to explore his world and the fact that he does not fear the “undiscovered country,” x a symbol of physical death for Hamlet, make the

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x But that the dread of something after death, The undiscovered country from whose born No traveller returns, puzzles the will, And makes us rather bear those ills we have / Than fly to others that we know not of? (III. I. 77)
reader believe that he is not a “smaller prince” rather a much stronger character, who dares disturb his own inner world rather than others.

**Conclusion**

*The understanding and the interpretation of texts is nor merely a concern of science, but obviously belongs to human experience of the world in general.*

(Weinsheimer, Marshall)

This essay, applying van Gennep’s concept of liminality and Gadamer’s model of “fusion of horizons,” compares Prufrock’s wanderings through the city with a Dantean journey from hell to heaven towards an understanding of his being, where his search for love equals his quest for meaning.

Prufrock attempts to find harmony, the state of *ren*, within himself and see meaning, wholeness, in the confusing fragments, synecdoches, of the modern world and women, that he meets on his quest. Nevertheless, he never finds love as a coherent whole, not in the surrounding environment nor within himself, because he never finds the “strength to force the moment to its crisis,” to depart from his own liminal world. The three-step liminal process, separation, transition and incorporation, is applied to three other characters in this paper, Dante, Hamlet and John the Baptist, who make their own Dantinean journeys and go through the liminal periods in their lives. These periods become transitional stages of their existences, followed by a process of growth and transformation, rather than a place of habitation, as it turns out to be for Prufrock.

Eliot’s character chooses to stay in his own world of inbetweenness in fear of being rejected by others, especially by a woman. His horizon of understanding never gets a chance to merge with the horizons of others in order to generate new understanding. He, in contrast to
other characters, has none who can understand him; he is totally lost in his own liminal world. Somehow he is forced to go below the zero-point of his existence.

This study shows that, for example, Hamlet and John the Baptist have succeeded in leaving their liminal worlds, as Dante has gone through *Purgatory* towards *Paradiso*, where Beatrice, his love and meaning of life, waits for him. These characters, except Prufrock, reach van Gennep’s third phase, incorporation, as transformed individuals, where they have found harmony with the others and consequently within themselves. Their ability to pass the transitional stage shows their belief in themselves. Surely, the fact that they have never been by themselves in their liminal world, as for example when Hamlet encounters and talks with the ghost of his father and at the same time is capable of communicating with Gertrude, makes the reader believe that Hamlet, in contrast to Prufrock, at least has had a possibility to find a new arena, where his understanding may merge with the understanding of others and thus, a new meaning can be created.

This essay argues that “The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock” can evoke meaning on the part of the reader, when contrasting forces of the past and the present intermingle with each other and create a new transformed meaning for the reader, which is not the same as Prufrock’s and the author’s understandings. Thus, the reader’s meaning is formed, on the one hand, in the “fusion of horizons” of past and present and, on the other hand, in the “fusion of horizons” between the author’s, Prufrock’s and his own understanding, as for example, in the binary oppositions of the poem’s title. Hence, this paper supports Gadamer’s idea that interpretation is needed to deepen our understanding of Prufrock’s quest for meaning. The understanding of a text and meaning occurs in some invisible space of meetings, where one state of consciousness partially fuses with the one of the other and constantly re-makes itself.

Every time we read this poem, new understanding is established, underpinning the idea that “understanding, as an application, is [...] always a challenge” (Dostal 43). Accordingly,
this hermeneutical attempt to read the poem is not the only one, just as there is no final and full understanding that may disturb Prufrock’s universe; the hermeneutical process of interpretation always moves between contrasting forces as an ongoing Dantean journey.
Works Cited


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