For J. Alfred Prufrock, words and their categorical definitions demonstrate the power to restrict or confine, locking him into a term which cannot possibly articulate him. Thus, an escape from the regimented order of language, which becomes tied up with sexuality, seems to come from a lack of definitions; but with this escape also comes a sort of perpetual wandering, since Prufrock refuses the definitions that would otherwise ground him. This wandering is insular and internal, so much so that he becomes a permanent nomad, unable to connect to his surroundings. In this way, he embodies Carla Freccero’s notion of queerness in her chapter, “Always Already Queer (French) Theory,” in which queerness, as a sort of Derridean notion, marks the space between heterosexuality and homosexuality, and “rather than occupy one pole (the negatively valorized one) of a binary, as these terms have seemed to do, queer moves in the space between hetero- and homo-” (18).

Recent gender study on T. S. Eliot has mostly focused on his ubiquitous poem, The Waste Land. Scholars such as Cyrena N. Pondrom write that “Eliot’s work contains a play of dramatic voices [which] has long been well-understood, but critics have not fully recognized that a founding part of the drama is the performance of gender” (425). Yet, her article “T. S. Eliot: The Performativity of Gender in The Waste Land,” as the title implies, only focuses on said poem, briefly mentioning the wealth of gender issues in Eliot’s other works, then moving promptly on. Max Nanny writes in “‘Cards Are Queer’: A New Reading of the Tarot in The Waste Land” that he is
“convinced that the Tarot is not only found in the mythical dimensions of the cards but in their reference to Eliot’s own emotionally crucial experiences” (337). Nanny elaborates, saying “Eliot suffered from ‘an absolute and emotional derangement’ which he himself called ‘a life-long affliction,’” alluding to the poet’s possible personal sexual struggles (339). Despite the articles written on queerness in *The Waste Land*, the scarcity of gender-related publications on “The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock” is surprising, considering the poem’s popularity in academia. Some essays on Prufrock and gender studies mention, as Jaime Hovey does in her book *A Thousand Words*, a “thwarted masculinity” that results from ceaseless and meaningless chatter (55). She categorizes him as a homosexual jealous of other homosexuals who “far surpass him in both genius and sex appeal,” thus imprinting on him a located sexuality I look to unravel (57). Suzanne W. Churchill writes her essay “Outing T. S. Eliot” in order “to redirect attention to the poetry and to develop a more complex model of authorial identity” by looking at a large canon of Eliot’s poems, including (but not remotely limited to) Prufrock. She uses the lens of T. S. Eliot’s own sexuality, in her eyes, his homosexuality, to read his poetry.

This sort of queer biographical reading of Eliot is something that many scholars have explored. This is not my objective, however. I investigate the ways in which “The Love Song” demonstrates Prufrock as neither homosexual nor heterosexual, but instead *queer* (as Freccero uses the term). This is the cause of his own exclusion from his community, not his homosexuality, as other critics posit. Prufrock’s exclusion results from his internal resistance to codification, through language but also through gender. His struggle and difficulty articulating his isolation indicate his queerness, an argument I will support primarily using the theories of Freccero in “Always Already Queer (French) Theory.”

Prufrock’s isolation manifests itself through his *perception* of being an outcast, rather than an actual, definitive remoteness. As Eliot’s poem begins, Prufrock wanders through grimy streets which contrast starkly with the sophisticated room in which “the women come and go / Talking of Michelangelo” in the second stanza (ll. 13-14). Prufrock’s embarrassment shifts from his vagrancy to his vanity as he worries about his baldness, the thinness of his arms and legs, and his “necktie rich and modest, but asserted

by a simple pin” (ll. 43). His travel through winding streets, his inevitable aging, and his modest dress (implied by the simple pin) distress Prufrock; however, these discomforts do not logically precede the paralysis that Prufrock experiences. His worry about others’ perceptions prevent him from acting at all, silencing him from asking a question which very well might disturb his universe and allow him to communicate with those around him, those with whom he desperately wants to connect. Yet as the poem concludes, Prufrock’s self-imposed isolation demonstrates itself as he observes the mermaids: “I have heard the mermaids singing, each to each. // I do not think that they will sing to me” (ll. 124-125). One would think that these fantastical creatures, existing in his imagination, could say whatever Prufrock wants. Yet, even in Prufrock’s own imagination, his self-consciousness isolates him.

I want to extend this analysis of his isolation, showing how Prufrock’s queerness results in an ungrounding that springs from his resistance to containment in any part of a binary. In Carla Freccero’s chapter, “Always Already Queer (French) Theory,” as I mentioned earlier, she begins by positing that the field of queer theory emphasizes the immateriality of ‘queerness’ as a replacement for more material arguments or identities (13), mentioning “queer” as “occupying an interstitial space between binary oppositions” (18). This is because it resists being isolated as one, immutable term; instead, “Queer takes, as its inverted privileged terms, homosexual or gay or lesbian, but rather than occupy one pole (the negatively valorized one) of a binary, as these terms have seemed to do, queer moves in the space between hetero-and homo-…in order to reinscribe… heteronormative phallogocentric logic” (18). This fluidity allows it to be applied more widely, never being characterized as the negative part of a binary. In this way, queer becomes useful in bridging gaps rather than causing separations through categorization, not aligning itself entirely with one side or another and “resisting the urge to turn queer into a substantive category” (17). This, then, allows queer to identify the overlap between labels like “gay” and “straight,” exploring their interconnections (18). The complexity of this theory applies especially well to T.S. Eliot’s “The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock,” where, at first, certain images are used to materialize Prufrock’s (and other

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2 She posits that if queer, the term, becomes chained to any one definition, it loses an important part of its functionality, since “it risks losing its force as critique [of categorizations like ‘queer studies’] and realigning itself with humanism” (17). Elsewhere, she identifies ways in which scholars attempt to “institutionalize, consolidate, and totalize the queer as a field of inquiry and an object of knowledge in the academy,” mentioning materiality/immateriality and positive/negative binaries, which attempt to lock queer into a fixed term (17).
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characters’) heterosexuality, but these markers soon deconstruct, leaving Prufrock in a realm of fluidity, perceived by the narrator as instability.

The poem’s title identifies a masculine figure, J. Alfred Prufrock, the narrator, as the one who sings the love song. At the start, the poem asserts his masculinity, describing his collared shirt “mounting firmly to the chin” and his “necktie rich and modest,” both conventionally male adornments (ll.42-43). Prufrock is also sure to identify himself as distinct from the women who “…come and go / Talking of Michelangelo” (ll.13-14). He genders them as different from the “I” who silently walks towards his destination; the women instead chat amongst each other. The women are characterized as well through physical markers, such as their jewelry and clothing. He speaks of “Arms that are braceleted and white and bare” or wrapped up in a shawl (ll. 63; 67). In the same stanza, he refers to the smell of “perfume from a dress” which distracts him (ll. 65). In this way, since the object of the desire is a woman, and since the object of desire shapes the sexuality of the desirer, it is assumed (at least initially) that the allure of the women makes Prufrock straight (Freccero 21). Since the relationship between the object and the subject rarely work out that easily, though, the relation is more like “a split subject, a subject whose object is the creation of that subject” (21). In this way, the object of desire both shapes and is shaped by the desirer.

This complex identity causes the poem’s identifying markers break to down, and as the love interest’s feminine characteristics fade as the poem develops, a queer interpretation emerges. This reading allows the relationship between the characters to extend beyond either homosexual or heterosexual, instead exhibiting it as a combination. The poem “show[s] how the two, gay and straight, are inter-implicated and how they differ from themselves from within” (Freccero 18). In a parenthetical comment after the mentioning of his attraction to the love interest’s white, bare, arms, Prufrock exclaims, “(But in the lamplight, downed with light brown hair!)” with what seems to be admiration for a conventionally masculine physical feature: the hairiness of her arms (ll. 64). Later in the poem, the narrator mentions the love interest as “…one, settling a pillow by her head” (emphasis added, ll. 96), thus using an identifying feminine pronoun, but then paralleling these lines in the stanza that follows: “…one, settling a pillow or throwing off a shawl” (emphasis added, ll. 107). Only this time, the feminine pronoun is removed, and another marker of femininity, the shawl, is cast off as well, obscuring the love interest’s gender and complicating Prufrock’s attraction.
Prufrock mentions his own resistance to being characterized so readily. While imagining himself unfairly typified by others, he speaks of “The eyes that fix you in a formulated phrase, / 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 of the butt-ends of my days and ways? / And how should I presume?” (ll. 55-61). In this central quote from the poem, he identifies his discomfort with forced definitions: he feels “formulated” when others characterize him, since he himself cannot mention the “butt-ends of [his] days and ways,” a life of wandering down sawdust-strewn avenues and “one night cheap hotels” (ll. 60; 6). He resists the lyrical exchange Freccero posits regarding Petrarch, saying that the difference “between an ‘I’ and a ‘you’ is a relation both of desire and identification” (22). The gendered love interest serves to give the lover an inaccurate identification and vice versa. Yet, by resisting such clear markers, Prufrock can avoid locking his identity with his sexuality, at least ideally.

This lack of a permanent locus coincides with what Freccero writes regarding queerness’s ability to resist a permanent definition, as “The special valence of queer would have to be spatio-temporal, as différance is3, and its emplacement would be deferred indefinitely. It would be a nomadism of sorts” (19). And this is precisely where the poem starts, with the narrator, the titular J. Alfred Prufrock, wandering around the streets, moving from place to place without any mentionable grounding. He identifies “one-night cheap hotels” instead of permanent homes (ll. 6), and “Streets that follow like a tedious argument / Of insidious intent,” implying something non-physical or impermanent about them (ll. 8-9). Later he wants to ask the love interest a question (presumably a confession of love), yet mentions also the time left “…for a hundred indecisions, / And for a hundred visions and revisions / Before the taking of a toast and tea,” showing an internal struggle, perhaps with his own sexuality, which evades a simple categorization (ll. 32-35). This is the sexuality that Freccero attributes to queerness: that which “is what is and is not there,” and that which evades simple characterization (18).

This reinforces Freccero’s notion that the characters are doing little else except performing normaley with the conventional expectations of a female lover and heterosexual love (20). Since sexuality receives its label by its

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3 Freccero mentions Derrida’s notion of différance elsewhere in her paper, calling “Queer, it its deconstructive sense,…a kind of Derridean différance, occupying an interstitial space between binary oppositions” (18). This is largely why the term queer should not be easily identified with a singular field of study, she says.
surroundings and its use, it has no inherent meaning. Thus, the characters try to behave heterosexually, but their actions are still “performativ” which Freccero defines as “a reiterated doing, not a being” (emphasis added, 20). In this way, Prufrock’s passion for his love object is an attempt at heterosexuality, and he must consciously and actively transfer any homosexual feelings (like his admiration of the hair on her arms) into the margins or parentheses, which he does in this poem. Yet, this feeling never really leaves Prufrock; he just performs heterosexuality, because it is the norm. As Freccero writes, “Each repeated instance of the norm, in other words, demonstrates both a will to generality or ‘appropriation’ (because what is repeated is asserted as the same) and the impossibility of achieving it” (20). Here, it is an imposed differentiation between sexualities that must be visibly (or grammatically) manifested, as Freccero asserts, in the difference between the “you” and the “I” that love songs use (22). Prufrock’s love song, which opens with the line, “Let us go then, you and I,” shows the narrator’s participation in the construction of sexuality that continues throughout the poem, since he identifies a self as separate from the desired “you” (ll. 1).

Even if Prufrock were to assert his desire as heterosexual, or if all the love interest’s feminine characteristics became masculinized and Prufrock asserts his desire as homosexual, it would still lock him into an ill-fitting category (or two). The terms “heterosexual” and “homosexual” are “safe,” since their organizational functions force Prufrock away from the fluidity of being queer, yet these definitive terms describe him inaccurately. Freccero says this is because queerness’s very troubled or elusive relation to materiality also does not allow it to settle into commodity fetishism as the thing-ification of a social relation. Once ‘she’ comes out, identifying her self - ‘she’s a lesbian’- what was queer is commodified… and settles back ideologically into the undisturbing divide of an identitarian difference that is really not much of one at all. We can perhaps again ‘safely’ say, ‘Ah, that’s hetero,’ ‘Ah, that’s homo.’ But the subversion that occurs at the level of the letter is more unsettling, ghostly, queer (29).

Thus, the fluidity that nomadism instigates in gender identity disturbs the order and organization (and perhaps the universe) of strict definitions. Positivism imposes categories where they are unnecessary for sake of a “safer,” more ordered world.

The poem’s form as well as content echoes the lack of order and
organization. The epigram, a stanza taken from Dante’s *Inferno*, is six lines of Italian, all of roughly equal length and with a regular rhyme and meter. This order falls apart in the opening stanza of Eliot’s poem, where the first line is nearly half the length of the second, and the rhyme is first stalled, then buried: “Let us go then, you and I / When the evening is spread out against the sky / Like a patient etherized upon a table” (emphasis added, ll.1-3). The first line, in trochaic tetrameter, contrasts with the second, in trochaic hexameter, so that the stress of the rhyme leaves the listener waiting uncomfortably for two beats until it drops, only to be re-emphasized in the third line on the fourth trochee again. Eliot similarly uses this uncomfortable rhyme scheme in the second stanza, where “In the room the women come and go / Talking of Michelangelo” (ll. 13-14). Here, the cadence of the first line’s perfect trochaic pentameter is undermined by the second line’s not-quite-trochaic tetrameter, thus undermining not only the number of beats in the line (its regular meter) but also the rhythm of the words: “Talking of Michelangelo” cannot be said with the same smooth, trochaic rhythm of the preceding line without mashing the first three syllables into two.

The second stanza, which describes the aforementioned women, is also visually isolated as a couplet, but there is nothing heroic about this couplet. In this way, Prufrock, the narrator, questions the regular order of such a structured form and wonders if there is any room for abandon in such a regimented style. By playing with the rhythm and styles of historically famous forms of poetry, Eliot questions their regularity. In such a system, he seems to say, there is no room for the chaos of multiple meters or off-rhymes.

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4 Again, the paucity of scholarship on Prufrock and form is surprising. However, David Trotter writes that “For Eliot, regular meter and rhyme were neither an encumbrance nor an expressive support, but precisely a frame” (241). In regard to Prufrock, “The intensity of Prufrock’s arousal produces or is produced by an intensification in the verse,” which includes descriptions of the internal rhymes and the semi-colons (243). Still, Trotter spent most of the essay describing Eliot’s form in *The Waste Land*, which seems to be the popular thing to do among scholars. John Hughes, for example, spends only two sentences in “Sex Wars in Moon Deluxe” describing pronoun usage in Prufrock before moving away from the poem (both its content and its form) entirely (406).

5 A trochee is a beat in poetry where the stress falls on the first syllable, then lifts on the second, falls on the third, lifts on the fourth, etc.: “Let us go then, you and I.” An iamb is a beat where the stress lifts on the first syllable, falls on the second, etc.: “And sawdust restaurants with oyster-shells.”

The meter refers to how many beats (whether trochees, iambs, or otherwise) are in each line. The first example (“Let us go…”) is trochaic tetrameter, since it is four beats, which each beat being a trochee. The second example (“And sawdust…”) is iambic pentameter, since it contains five beats, with each beat being an iamb.

6 A heroic couplet is two lines of poetry, done in iambic pentameter, with the rhyme falling on the last syllable.
Much poetry that precedes Eliot utilizes one form of meter and rhyme and exercises only that single style, with the occasional variation. However, by breaking from such a tradition in this poem, Eliot insists that one style, just like one definition or one limiting term, formulates the ideas of the poem into an unnatural, imposed category in which it does not fit.

The visual function of the stanzas, though, stresses not the divergence from the norm but the isolation that results from such an action. Certain lines stress Prufrock’s loneliness, being that he stands out as both visibly and invisibly, materially and immaterially, different from his surroundings. There are three places where a set of six periods mark breaks in the text, serving to indicate to the reader a shift in time, place or mood. The stanzas are not completely separated from each other—since the periods take the place of a line break, the visual space between stanzas is actually smaller—and the stanza before and after the break still hearken to each other. Here, the reader can quickly move between time, place or mood along with Prufrock, paralleling the mobility his queerness offers. However, when the line breaks isolate only one or two lines, which happens most often toward the end of the poem, the visual remoteness calls attention to the disadvantages to his queerness’s fluidity; a single line of text floats between two full stanzas, appearing lonely and out of place. This is especially true at the poem’s final few stanzas: “I have heard the mermaids singing, each to each. // I do not think that they will sing to me. // I have seen them riding seaward on the waves” (ll. 124-126). The isolated line, “I do not think that they will sing to me,” clearly indicates the speaker’s isolation. Mermaids, as I mentioned earlier, as fictitious elements of the speaker’s imagination, still refuse him an opportunity for a community. Prufrock’s loneliness embeds itself so deeply onto his character that he cannot communicate with real people around him anymore than he can speak to the creatures in his own mind.

Just before finishing her chapter, Freccero asks whether we should “conclude that the Western love song is always already queer and that we have only to deconstruct heteronormative culture for these differences within to appear” which she answers herself in the affirmative (29). In much the same way, “The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock” resists being chained with

7 Churchill dismisses the argument “if J. Alfred Prufrock can't talk to women, he must be gay” as homophobic, although I disagree (10). His inability to communicate with anyone, his struggle at being always separate can be reinforced by the fact that he clearly sees himself as not fitting with heteronormativity. By making sexuality a cause for his isolation, Eliot calls attention to the disruption that results from realizing the constrainedness, constructedness, and ill-fittedness of imposing heterosexuality.
“formulated phrase[s]” (l. 55), both in its content and in its form, since fluidity allows for a greater variety of interpretations, “open[ing] the possibility of another meaning…a differently imaginable future, a figure whose imaginability is figured by the utopian designation of ‘queer’” (Freccero 29). Yet, this utopia is fraught with the constant nomadism connected to queerness, making it, as it was for Prufrock, a refuge but a refuge apart, one that floats alone, making him unable to participate in the conversations that surround him.
Works Cited


