

ENGL 1500E

Sarah Alexander

Charlie Simons

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### Narrating to Build a Self

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The greatest threat to the self is its confinement, and The *Love Song of J Alfred Prufrock* by T.S Eliot, *The Handmaid's Tale* by Margaret Atwood, and *One Art* by Elizabeth Bishop, each depict a confinement of the self through forces both external and internal. The issue with confining the self, is that in doing so there is an implicit *performance* required. It functions as a feed back loop, where the confinement itself is performative, and the performance is drawn from that confinement. The dissolution of all women into 'one woman' in the Handmaid's tale wrought from totalitarianism; Prufrock's compulsive fixation on the creation and destruction of his 'faces'; the narrowing of experience of the speaker in *One Art*. All of them encapsulate the wooden and hollowed feeling of being something which they are not. While at times the texts can be hopeless, there are at moments in each, where the subject fights their dissolving, an act of resistance, as their confinement itself appears to them as immutable in some way. Although not always successful, through narration, each speaker attempts to rebuild themselves, building a version of the self that can exist in resistance to the pressures that diminish it as well as in cohesion with their actual identity. In each text, the self decays due to its dissonance to the subject's identity, yet each work proves that narration is a means through which that self can be reconstructed.

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Prufrock's identity is fragmented by his social anxiety and performance, and his narration becomes the space where he tries to reconstruct a coherent self. "Let us go then, you and I"

(Eliot 1), Prufrock begins, introducing the love songs two subjects. Who is this "you" whom J. Alfred Prufrock is writing to? One belief is that it is to a rhetorical "love" of Prufrock, another is that it is himself. Expanding on the latter, that it is a dédoublement of the personality. One being the self which he exerts, the actor of his performance, and the second, 'I', the observer and director. He cannot exist as a unified self because the performance demanded by social interaction requires constant self-monitoring, constant internal division (a consequence of his anxiety). The "love song" is sung to no one but himself, it is the internal monologue of a self so fragmented by the demands of performance that he has become his own actor and director; further, the love song to this actor from that director. Prufrock begins, introducing a leitmotif of time throughout the poem:

There will be time to murder and create,  
And time for all the works and days of hands  
That lift and drop a question on your plate;  
Time for you and time for me,  
And time yet for a hundred indecisions,  
And for a hundred visions and revisions, (Eliot 28-33)

In addition to a key theme, time and how it relates to the editing of self , this is also a clear insight into Prufrock's mind. Though it has been hinted to, this shows Prufrock's utter paralysis in the face of the inevitable end, the 'eternal footman' at the door. "And indeed there will be time" he repeats. What reason is there to do anything if he's done it all before and will do it all again? If all changes he made to himself are erased, then why would he change his self at all? If he's doomed to repeat himself why continue moving forward? And so Prufrock is paralyzed, and pedantic. The self becomes riddled by the gap— the gap between each

potential performance and the authentic identity that cannot be performed. This is unfortunately not indicative of a resistance to an oppressive force, as it is in other texts, but instead it is a resistance to living, which is catastrophic to Prufrock. He acknowledges this paralysis:

I am no prophet — and here's no great matter;  
I have seen the moment of my greatness flicker,  
And I have seen the eternal Footman hold my coat, and snicker,  
And in short, I was afraid. (Eliot 83-86)

Yet even in this paralysis, Prufrock's narration itself becomes an act of reconstruction, however incomplete. Prufrock attributes 'greatness' to his heartbeat, in fear of death he opts not to go out and 'seize the day' . The poem exists as his attempt to articulate the fragmented self, to give a unifying voice to the discordant actor and director. Unlike the erasure imposed externally in The Handmaid's Tale or the disciplined management of loss in "One Art," Prufrock's confinement is largely self-imposed, a prison of his own consciousness. His repeated questions—"Do I dare?" and "Do I dare?"—become a recursive performance, where the act of questioning is the first step in preparing another face. This is a step of reconstruction, one Prufrock remains stuck in. His *circular* narration is an expression of self, and it is expressing one which is paralyzed. And so a paralyzed self narrates a self which is paralyzed into being. And that's the key reason why his narration is a failure in reconstruction, and why he continues this self-inflicted torture. The dissolution of self is gradual, like sitting in a bathtub as the water slowly heats, or like the hairs on his balding head falling out. Prufrock's repetitions, his revisions and indecisions, are the incremental degrees rising, hairs falling out, regrowing—or not. Each cycle of paralysis and new mask created makes it harder

to recognize how much of himself has been lost to the performance. He cannot function with the knowledge of his cosmic irrelevance, in the line "For decisions and revisions which a minute will reverse," Prufrock is asking, why live if it will be reversed and then reversed again? He is narrating his nihilism into existence and drawing whatever abstract tools he can use to do so... his cosmic irrelevance, or social anxiety. Finally, He concludes the poem drowning:

We have lingered in the chambers of the sea  
By sea-girls wreathed with seaweed red and brown  
Till human voices wake us, and we drown. (Eliot 129-131)

The fantasy world, the mermaids and chambers of the sea, offers a temporary escape from the performance anxiety of social interaction, and the overall weight of reality. And yet even this escape Prufrock makes for himself, dreaming himself a crab scuttling along the seafloor, is interrupted. Prufrock's narration, while articulate and self-aware, fails to reconstruct a unified self that can exist in his circumstances. His reconstruction remains trapped in the space between actor and director, between the desire to act and the paralysis that prevents action. The love song he sings to himself is beautiful in its honesty about fragmentation, but as a consequence of its circular nature it cannot mend his self, though it tries. And though it fails, the failure of Prufrock's reconstruction does not invalidate narration as a method it reveals the difficulty. The poem itself exists as evidence that narration is the means through which the fragmented self can be addressed and rebuilt.

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In "One Art," the breakdown of the speaker's performed mastery becomes the site where narration reconstructs the self. In the poem, the narrator recounts their accumulated losses.

This loss starts out gradual: 'door keys', 'an hour badly spent' but then through the poem, eventually ends with losing 'cities', and 'names' (Bishop 5, 8, and 13 respectively). Each loss feels small, maybe even imperceptible, but the sum is dramatic. "None of these will bring disaster" (Bishop 9), but that does not mean that the loss does not matter and that disaster will not come. Each loss is akin to a degree of temperature in a bathtub coming to boil, or each hair on a balding head. The villanelle's refrain, "The art of losing isn't hard to master"(Bishop 1) establishes the central performance, that being the speaker performing as someone who has perfected loss. Yet the word "master" reveals the violence of this confinement. To master loss is not to experience it authentically but to dominate it, to force it into a manageable form. The self that can "master" loss is not the self that feels it; it is a constructed and performed self. As such, it is dissonant with the speakers authentic identity.

—Even losing you (the joking voice, a gesture  
 I love) I shan't have lied. It's evident  
 the art of losing's not too hard to master  
 though it may look like (Write it!) like disaster. (Bishop 16-19)

When read using the same schema established in Eliot's poem—"you and I"— the line “—Even losing you (the joking voice, a gesture / I love)...” powerfully establishes the speaker's loss as a loss of themselves. The explicit vagueness in the depiction of the 'you' of this poem lends itself to this interpretation, though with its own nuances. While Eliot seeks distraction from the task of building a stable self through fantasy, the speaker in One Art has moved past this form of escapism, and commands herself to continue her story. This is conveyed in the break in the villanelle. While the prior stanzas have all followed an ABA scheme, this last one is ABAA. And the parenthetical command—a command from the director, in the final line shows how while

Pruferock allows himself to resign to a mismatched identity, the speaker here is actively fighting to forge one that functions in their circumstances. Further, the surrounding repetition of 'like' implies an apprehension to continue writing, with "write it" acting as a spur does a horse. That apprehension means that the performing self does not want to write that this last loss, the loss of 'you'— or the loss of self— is not actual a disaster, only looking like one. And yet the observing self pushes; and the director asserts their influence over the actor in spite of the pain it causes. This poem, though ending *in media res*, depicts a speaker who is cognizant of their erosion, and plays an active role in rebuilding a self. Where Prufrock's circular narration traps him in perpetual indecision, the speaker here breaks the villanelle's pattern in the final stanza, moving from ABA to ABAA. This formal disruption mirrors the collapse of performance, reclaiming the narrative. The parenthetical '(Write it!)' reveals the aspect of reconstruction Prufrock lacks. The recognition that reconstruction requires confronting, not escaping, the gap between performed and authentic self. Where Prufrock drowns in fantasy, this speaker commands herself to name the disaster, and in naming it, begins to integrate loss into a reconstructed self that can endure circumstance. Yet both speakers face confinements largely of their own making—internal anxieties and self-imposed discipline. In *The Handmaid's Tale*, Offred confronts something external.

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In *The Handmaid's Tale*, Offred's identity is dismantled and replaced by Gilead's political confinement, yet through her storytelling she reconstructs a self; a self which the regime attempts (with ambiguous success) to erase. The dissolution of self in Handmaids tale is indisputable, as it is in the other texts. Yet the unique feature of Atwood's text is that the performer is no longer subject to the masks crafted by the observer— an observer which though separate, is still a part of the self— but instead subject to one imposed by others, like Gilead.

Notably, Gilead strikes Offred with similar limitations to those Prufrock places upon himself, the key similarity being a narrowing of experience. Offred writes,

Given our wings, ours blinkers, it's hard to look up, hard to get the full view, of the sky, of anything. But we can do it, a little at a time, a quick move of the head, up and down, to the side and back. We have learned to see the world in gasps.

(Atwood 30)

The word "gasps" carries linguistic weight, echoing the theme of drowning or dissolution present throughout the three texts. While at first glance it seems to only be referring to the feeling of a super old projector flipping through slides, the word simultaneously evokes the desperate struggle for air and survival. This connects Offred's experience to Prufrock's conclusion, where "human voices wake us, and we drown" (Eliot 131). Unlike Prufrock, who is paralyzed and succumbs to the crushing weight of his own consciousness, Offred is actively fighting for her life in these "gasps." Her narration, therefore, becomes the attempt to breathe, the only means by which the authentic self can surface and resist the drowning force of the totalitarian state. A force which fundamentally and inarguably relies on forcing an identity onto women, a devastatingly reductive one. Through the language of struggle used (and the context), the text proves that even when political forces impose a performing self onto people, the observing self instinctively fights for survival, making the narration itself an act of self-resuscitation. This dissolution, like the others, is gradual. Offred observes that 'Nothing changes instantaneously: in a gradually heating bathtub you'd be boiled to death before you knew it' (Atwood 56). Yet where Gilead attempts to boil her down to a single role, Offred writes herself back into existence *literally* in the margins of (what is revealed to be) historical consciousness.

Offred stated this herself, "We were the people who were not in the papers. We lived in the blank white spaces at the edges of print. It gave us more freedom. We lived in the gaps between the stories"(Atwood 57). This reclaiming of anonymity as the final frontier of identity allows Offred to assert a specific form of freedom in the gaps where Gilead's script cannot touch. Further, Offred's narration reveals an awareness that neither Prufrock nor the speaker of 'One Art' fully possess. She knows her narrative is imperfect, MacGyvered from scraps:

I wish this story were different. I wish it were more civilized. I wish it showed me in a better light, if not happier, than at least more active, less hesitant, less distracted by trivia. I wish it had more shape. I wish it were about love, or about sudden realizations important to one's life, or even about sunsets, birds, rainstorms, or snow. I'm sorry there is so much pain in this story. I'm sorry it's in fragments, like a body caught in crossfire or pulled apart by force. But there is nothing I can do to change it. (Atwood 267)

This apology separates Offred from Prufrock in particular: the complete acceptance of the things which are outside of her control. Offred's fragmented narration succeeds because the fragments themselves become the reconstructed self. Prufrock obsesses with the aspects of identity he lacks control over, stunting him; Offred, however obsesses with the aspects which she does have control over. While Prufrock cannot do anything in the face of insurmountable choice, Offred does whatever she can with the little she is allotted. Her apology, 'I'm sorry it's in fragments, like a body caught in crossfire or pulled apart by force', acknowledges that the self she rebuilds through narration cannot be whole under Gilead. And still, Offred recognizes that a self which

forms like a moss— in the cracks of the mask Gilead placed over her— is still a coherent living self, one capable of moving forward.

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The texts prove that the greatest threat to the self is the gap between the role performed and the actual identity it's tied to, and narration becomes the space where that distance is finally faced. Prufrock speaks from within his own confinement, repeating the same fears yet making no progress in growing. In “One Art,” the speaker tries to defend herself from loss through discipline, yet the villanelle’s eventual break and the command to “Write it!” mark the point where narration stops pretending and she begins to pursue her healing. Offred lives under a regime that has already renamed and tried to conceal her, cover her in red— an attempt to literally reduce her to a living sin. And yet she still manages to find methods of expression between the pages. For all of them, narration functions as a means of *control*, as it tends to, but additionally it allows them to mend their self . None of these acts of telling returns the self to an earlier state or cancels the damage confinement has done. And yet still, In each case, narration is where dissolution is named and where reconstruction begins.

*Works Cited*

- Atwood, Margaret. *The Handmaid's Tale*. Anchor books, Penguin, 1998.
- Bishop, Elizabeth. *One Art, 1976, Accessed through Poetry Foundation*. December 2025.
- Eliot, T. S. "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock." *Collected Poems 1909–1962*. Faber and Faber, 1963.

## Workshop materials

Thesis:

Across all three texts, the self appears riddled, in decay, due to its dissonance to the subject's identity, yet each work argues that narration is the means through which that self can be reconstructed.

Introduction:

The greatest threat to the self is its confinement. The Love Song of J Alfred Prufrock by T.S Eliot, The Handmaid's Tale by Margaret Atwood, and One Art by Elizabeth Bishop, each depict a confinement of the self through forces both external and internal. The issue with confining the self, is that in doing so there is an implicit performance required. It functions as a feed back loop, where the confinement itself is performative, and the performance is drawn from that confinement. The dissolution of all women into 'one woman' in the Handmaid's tale wrought from totalitarianism; Prufrock's compulsive fixation on the creation and destruction of his 'faces'; the narrowing of experience of the speaker in One Art, the disciplined pattern of loss a self-imposed confinement. All of them encapsulate the dreadful, wooden hollowed and strung-up feeling of becoming something which they are not. While at times in the texts, the hopelessness is gruesome, there are at the least moments in each, where the subject fights their dissolving, an act of resistance, as their confinement itself is immutable in some way. Although not always successful, through narration, each speaker attempts to rebuild themselves, building a version of the self that can exist in resistance to the pressures that diminish it. **Thesis here**

### Conclusion:

Across these texts, the narrators all stand in the same problem: a self worn down by the distance between the role it performs and the identity it recognizes as its own. Prufrock speaks from insides that wear, his love song circles the same room until his telling turns one mask to another mask and he sinks back into the waters, waters he fears. The speaker of One Art pushes against the discipline she has built around herself, letting the villanelle break form so she can admit the loss that threatens to unmake her, and in that small break the work of reconstruction starts.

Offred writes after her name and body have already been claimed by Gilead, so her story gathers what survives in gasps, in margins, in the fragments that grow like moss in the cracks of the mask laid over her. None of these narrations restores an earlier self or cancels the damage confinement has done. Prufrock's love song records the moment he goes under, preserving the outline of a self that cannot move beyond its own fear. In "One Art" and *The Handmaid's Tale*, the continued effort to speak, to write it and to apologize for the fragments while still going on, becomes the small proof that the self can still act inside the roles that constrain it. In each case, narration is the point where dissolution is seen clearly, and where reconstruction, however limited, begins.

Maybe do something with this sentence, doesn't fit neatly anywhere though??

In every instance the performance is a defense; where Prufrock's is defending from his own anxieties, One Art's Speaker from the pain of loss, and Offred's from the consequences of going against an oppressive regime.

Original Outline:

## Introduction

The greatest threat to the self is its confinement. The *Love Song of J Alfred Prufrock* by T.S Eliot, *The Handmaid's Tale* by Margaret Atwood, and *One Art* by Elizabeth Bishop, each depict a confinement of the self through forces both external and internal. The issue with confining the self, is that in doing so there is an implicit *performance* required. It functions as a feed back loop, where the confinement itself is performative, and the performance is drawn from that confinement. The dissolution of all women into 'one woman' in the Handmaid's tale wrought from totalitarianism; Prufrock's compulsive fixation on the creation and destruction of his 'faces'; the narrowing of experience of the speaker in *One Art*, the disciplined pattern of loss a self-imposed confinement. All of them encapsulate the experience of becoming something which they are not, and the negativity that this brings. While at times in the texts, the hopelessness is apparent, there are at the least moments in each where the subject fights their erosion. Although not always successful, through narration, each speaker attempts to rebuild themselves, building a version of the self that can exist despite the pressures that diminish it. Across all three texts, the self appears fractured, in decay, and dissonant yet each work argues that narration is the means through which that self can be reconstructed.

## Body one

### *THE LOVE SONG OF J ALFRED PRUFROCK*

Topic sentence: Prufrock's identity is fragmented by social anxiety, performance, self-surveillance, and his narration becomes the space where he tries to reconstruct a coherent self.

There will be time to murder and create,  
 And time for all the works and days of hands  
 That lift and drop a question on your plate;  
 Time for you and time for me,  
 And time yet for a hundred indecisions,  
 And for a hundred visions and revisions,

"For decisions and revisions which a minute will reverse."

## Body two

### *ONE ART*

In “One Art,” the speaker responds to the emotional confinement produced by loss through writing. This loss starts out gradually, but then through the poem, eventually ends up losing cities and people.

Though definitely not the authors intent (death of the author schpiel) , we can interpret

“—Even losing you (the joking voice, a gesture / I love)…” as losing herself?

The application of the next quote is probably most important. The repetition of the word like after the parenthetical is interesting and I should read way too far into it. The parenthetical itself is also encouraging someone (herself? the reader?)

if it's the reader i'll just say 'others' or people working through similar maladies???

"though it may look like (Write it!) like disaster."(Bishop 19)

**Flesh out interpretation of this!!!!!!**

“None of these will bring disaster.”

This quote is less necessary, but can be used to extend the above as continues the idea of 'disaster'. The dissolution of self is not combustive, it's sitting in a bathtub gradually coming to boil.

### **Body three**

#### *HANDMAIDS TALE*

##### *Topic sentence*

In The Handmaid’s Tale, Offred’s identity is dismantled by Gilead’s political confinement, yet through her storytelling she reconstructs a self; a self which the regime attempts (with ambiguous success) to erase.

##### *Ideas and Quotes*

The actual dissolution of self in Handmaids tale is indisputable so only have to really prove that briefly, all other space should be used to prove the narration as a means of reconstruction which is less clear (but well supported).

"We were the people who were not in the papers. We lived in the blank white spaces at the edges of print. It gave us more freedom. We lived in the gaps between the stories."

"I wish this story were different. I wish it were more civilized. I wish it showed me in a better light, if not happier, than at least more active, less hesitant, less distracted by trivia. I wish it had more shape. I wish it were about love, or about sudden realizations important to one's life, or even about sunsets, birds, rainstorms, or snow. I'm sorry there is so much pain in this story. I'm sorry it's in fragments, like a body caught in crossfire or pulled apart by force. But there is nothing I can do to change it."

"Nothing changes instantaneously: in a gradually heating bathtub you'd be boiled to death before you knew it."

## Conclusion

Write over break, need to organize thoughts.

### *Thoughts*

Performing Self / Observering Self

Actor/Director

Masks

Puppets? (Can just make the intro more vague)

**Do not bring Freud into this class under any circumstances, it fits well but there's really just no point.**

Success vs failure of rebuilding:

Offred is successful

One Art ambiguous

Prufie failed

**ULTIMATELY THIS IS ALSO NOT RELEVANT TO THE THESIS, BUT NEED TO ESTABLISH IT TO SHOW ITS IRRELEVANCE;**

Bathtub – borrowed from Atwood

Drowning – borrowed from Prufrock

**Reverse outline:**

**Thesis:** Across all three texts, the self appears riddled, in decay, due to its dissonance to the subject's identity, yet each work argues that narration is the means through which that self can be reconstructed.

**Topic sentence 1:** Prufrock's identity is fragmented by social anxiety, performance, self-surveillance, and his narration becomes the space where he tries to reconstruct a coherent self.

**Topic sentence 2:** In "One Art," the speaker responds to the emotional confinement produced by loss through writing.

**Topic sentence 3:** In The Handmaid's Tale, Offred's identity is dismantled by Gilead's political confinement, yet through her storytelling she reconstructs a self; a self which the regime attempts (with ambiguous success) to erase.