“The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock”
Paper Assignment – Close Reading

Overview – This assignment is essentially trying to get you to focus in on the importance of the synecdochal moment – that is, the importance of the part to the whole. You will be given a choice of quotes from “Prufrock,” and what you’ll basically be doing is dissecting them: explaining why these words were chosen above all other words, why that word order (or repetition) is significant, what that figure of speech implies, and how these parts all relate to the whole of the poem. You will, in short, be examining the whole through the “keyhole” of one part.

Directions:

1. From the list below, choose a significant quote from “Prufrock.”
2. In your brainstorming, ask (and answer) questions such as the following:
   - Why that word?
   - Why that image?
   - Why that word order?
   - What tone or emotion does this evoke?
   - Most of all, what does this moment reveal about Prufrock? Does it make me sympathize with him? Pity him? Be frustrated with him? Understand him?
3. You will be answering two major questions in your paper:
   a. What does this moment reveal about the soul and self of J. Alfred Prufrock?
   b. What is the message Prufrock is delivering to us through the words of this poem?
4. Organize your thoughts into a coherent pattern. Address the quote chronologically – that is, in the order of the words.
5. Make sure you explain the overall “picture” of the poem for the reader. What happens before your quote? What happens after? Where are we in our “journey” with Prufrock? Though you will be focusing most of your time analyzing the specific quote you have been given, you absolutely must “locate” the quote in the poem, giving us a sense of where it fits into the poem as a whole. Please look at how this is done in the example below.
6. Spend most of your paragraph in analysis, bringing out the ideas you developed during brainstorming.
7. As always, you are to turn in work which is entirely the product of your own mind working alone. Please adhere to the CCSD Honor Code.

Choice of Quotations from “Prufrock”

1. In the room the women come and go
   Talking of Michelangelo.

2. There will be time, there will be time
   To prepare a face to meet the faces that you meet;
   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…

3. Time for you and time for me.
   And time yet for a hundred indecisions,
   And for a hundred visions and revisions,
   Before the taking of a toast and tea.

4. For I have known them all already, known them all:
   Have known the evenings, mornings, afternoons,
   I have measured out my life with coffee spoons…

5. Shall I say, I have gone at dusk through narrow streets
   And watched the smoke that rises from the pipes
   Of lonely men in shirt-sleeves, leaning out of windows? . . .
6. But though I have wept and fasted, wept and prayed,
Though I have seen my head [grown slightly bald] brought in upon a platter,
I am no prophet—and here's no great matter…

7. 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.

8. And would it have been worth it, after all,
After the cups, the marmalade, the tea,
Among the porcelain, among some talk of you and me,
Would it have been worthwhile,
To have bitten off the matter with a smile,
To have squeezed the universe into a ball
To roll it toward some overwhelming question,
To say: "I am Lazarus, come from the dead,
Come back to tell you all, I shall tell you all"--
If one, settling a pillow by her head,
Should say: "That is not what I meant at all.
That is not it, at all."

9. No! I am not Prince Hamlet, nor was meant to be;
Am an attendant lord, one that will do
To swell a progress, start a scene or two,
Advise the prince; no doubt, an easy tool,
Deferential, glad to be of use,
Politic, cautious, and meticulous;
Full of high sentence, but a bit obtuse--
Almost, at times, the Fool.

10. I shall wear white flannel trousers, and walk upon the beach.
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
Combing the white hair of the waves blown back
When the wind blows the water white and black.

11. 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.
Example of Close Reading – “anyone lived in a pretty how town.”

**Quote:**
when by now and tree by leaf
she laughed his joy she cried his grief
bird by snow and stir by still
anyone's any was all to her

**Introduction and Thesis**

On a first reading, it may surprise many readers of American modernist e.e. cummings' poem “anyone lived in a pretty how town” to learn that this work celebrates a lyrical, even joyous love story, a love story revealed only gradually through the poem’s use of pronouns: its seemingly artless (and secretly artful) use of deceptively simple words. In the end, the poet shows us, love does not merely bring joy or a sense of completion. Love does even more: it gives us identity in a world that otherwise remains not hostile, but unconsciously indifferent to our presence. We blossom into reality, cummings suggests, only in the love of others for us, and of ours for them.

The poem begins somewhat puzzlingly with what seems almost a story: a narrative of an ambiguous (or at least anonymous) “anyone” who “lived in a pretty how town” (1). The pronoun “anyone” seems stark and unrevealing, rendering this protagonist - if he is a protagonist -- utterly without identity, without self. Not even an “Everyman,” our “anyone” hardly seems like a man at all; he could be “anyone.” As the poem progresses, we learn that “anyone” lives among people largely indifferent to his existence: the poet explains that “women and men, both little and small/cared for anyone not at all” (4-5), and as if in response to “anyone’s” silent questions, others around him “sowed their isn’t” and “reaped their same,” (6-7), words that suggest bored, half-hearted responses to “anyone’s” pleas for acceptance or recognition. Refusal, sameness, disinterest: “anyone” seems to teeter on the verge of disappearing into nonexistence. Indeed, in the very next stanza, the poet seems to suggest that this utter erasure of “anyone’s” fundamental self has occurred: the author observes that “no one loved him more by more” (12). To be unloved is to be erased, cummings implies, to live as a person without value to anyone, a person whose life or death leaves others coldly indifferent.

Reading on, however, readers discover the error in this first reading: “no one,” like the eponymous “anyone,” is another, another human who, rather than feeling indifference, “loved him more by more” as the seasons of “autumn, winter, spring, summer” (11) pass in their cyclical rounds throughout the poem. At this point, the pronouns—and protagonists—experience a startling transformation: they blossom into being. Love works a metamorphosis, transforming the anonymous, nearly nonexistent pair of “no one” and “anyone” to “someones” and “everyone” (17), a transformation cummings suggests takes place in the presence of joy shared with another human being during those moments — those “whens” and “nows” — when two people “laugh” each other’s “joy,” “cry” each other’s “grief,” do each other’s “dance” (14-18) or — in more familiar words -- join together for better or worse, in sickness and in health. Can there, the poet asks, exist a more complete expression of love than the idea that “anyone’s any” — his essential self — “was all to her” (16)? The imagery of springtime, with its “tree by leaf,” its “birds” singing in the presence of an otherwise sterile, wintry “snow,” signaling that what once lay “still” will now “stir” (13-15) only reinforces the poet’s essential idea: love gives us identity, essence, life.

If any doubt as to the poem’s meaning still existed in the minds of the readers, cummings underscores his point even further when he bluntly states that “anyone died” — a statement made more painful not only by its simplicity, but by the casual, tossoff tone implied in the following words “i guess” (25) as if “anyone’s” death — and by extension, anyone’s death — existed only as an event of minor, passing importance to the world outside our own selves — which it usually is, save to the ones who love us most. The poet adds, “no one stopped to kiss his face,” (25) but readers remain unfooled this time: we know now that the poet describes a painful, mournful, final gesture of love for what “was” (28), not one of refusal or indifference. Cummings reveals the painful truth in his return to the earlier pronoun: just as love of others for us and of ours for them gives us identity and life, their death makes us less, makes us half, makes us “no one.”

**Conclusion**

Ultimately concluding with simple language evoking the natural rhythm of the seasons, the poem ends on a note that, while elegiac, feels oddly reassuring. Through the passage of time, the seasons, the periodic return and departure of “summer, autumn, winter, spring” (34) the coming and going (and reaping and sowing) of “women and men” (33), and the permanence of
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“sun, moon, stars, rain” (36), the poet suggests that life will continue, that “women and men” will find each other, and in doing so, will transform from “no one” into “someone,” and ultimately, from “anyone” into “everyone.”