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THE CONSTRUCTION OF FRAGMENTED IDENTITY THROUGH REIFICATION, HEGEMONY, AND DISCOURSE: A POST-MARXIST ANALYSIS OF SELF-ALIENATION IN T. S. ELIOT'S THE LOVE SONG OF J. ALFRED PRUFROCK

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Abstract
This article investigates the construction of fragmented identity and self-alienation in T. S. Eliot's The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock through a post-Marxist framework centred on Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe's concepts of discourse, hegemony, and identity construction. It argues that Prufrock's alienation is not adequately explained as private anxiety or individual weakness: it is produced through his relation to socially established meanings and the standards by which identity, appearance, behaviour, and belonging become intelligible. Hegel's concept of recognition and Georg Lukács 'theory of reification are used as supporting perspectives. Recognition illuminates Prufrock's dependence on acknowledgement from others, while reification helps explain how socially produced expectations become internalized and experienced as fixed realities. The study adopts a qualitative, interpretive design based on close reading and theoretically informed textual analysis of selected passages concerning the prepared face, the judging gaze, hesitation, failed communication, routine, age, and appearance. The analysis develops three connected findings. First, discourse and hegemonic meanings position Prufrock within socially recognizable identity categories, making self-presentation a condition of social participation. Second, his desire for recognition is contradictory: he seeks acceptance from others while fearing that their judgement will reduce him to a restrictive formulation. Third, reification helps explain how these social standards are reproduced within his own consciousness and become measures through which he evaluates his life and identity. These processes reinforce one another, producing a subject who remains oriented towards belonging but struggles to imagine a self outside dominant meanings. The article therefore reads the poem's fragmented subjectivity as socially mediated, without reducing its psychological and formal complexity to a single sociological explanation.
Keywords: *T. S. Eliot; *The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock*; post-Marxism; discourse; hegemony; identity construction; recognition; reification; alienation*

1. Introduction

T. S. Eliot's *The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock* is a significant work of literary modernism in which the speaker's consciousness is presented through hesitation, self-questioning, fragmented reflection, and an acute awareness of other people. The poem does not offer a stable narrative of personal development. Instead, it moves through a series of impressions, imagined encounters, repeated questions, memories, and anticipated judgements. Prufrock's voice reveals a subject who is deeply conscious of himself but unable to translate that consciousness into confident action or meaningful communication. His difficulty is not merely that he feels separated from others; it is also that he understands himself through the standards by which he imagines others will assess him.

Critical discussion of Eliot's poem has often situated Prufrock within the wider concerns of modernism, including fragmentation, uncertainty, psychological conflict, and social isolation. Studies of modernist literature have emphasized the instability of experience and the formal and cultural

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changes associated with modernity (Bradbury & McFarlane, 1976). Eliot's poetry has also been discussed in relation to the poet's intellectual and literary development and to the cultural conditions surrounding his work (Moody, 1994; Ricks, 1988). Such approaches provide important contexts for understanding the poem's representation of modern consciousness. The present article builds on this critical background but shifts the emphasis from alienation as an experience to the social and discursive processes through which an alienated subject is formed.

The central argument is that Prufrock's fragmented identity is constructed through his encounter with dominant social meanings. He repeatedly anticipates how he will appear to others, how his actions will be interpreted, and whether his words will be understood. His self-consciousness therefore operates within a social field that supplies standards of appearance, behaviour, age, value, and acceptability. These standards are not simply external pressures. They become part of the way Prufrock evaluates himself. His alienation emerges from the tension between his desire to participate in social life and his inability to secure a form of recognition that would allow him to experience himself as an accepted subject.

Laclau and Mouffe's post-Marxist theory provides the primary framework for examining this relationship. In *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy*, they challenge essentialist accounts of social identity and emphasize the contingent construction of identities through discourse and hegemonic practices (Laclau & Mouffe, 1985). From this perspective, identity is not a complete or self-sufficient essence that exists prior to social relations. It is formed through systems of meaning that make particular subject positions intelligible and legitimate. Discourse does not merely describe an already completed social reality; it participates in organizing the meanings through which individuals understand themselves and the world around them.

The article supplements this framework with Hegel's account of recognition and Lukács 'theory of reification. Hegel's *Phenomenology of Spirit* presents self-consciousness in relation to recognition by another consciousness (Hegel, 1977). This perspective is useful for interpreting Prufrock's concern with the judgement and acknowledgement of others. Lukács '*History and Class Consciousness* examines the process through which social relations and human products can take on the appearance of objective, independent things (Lukács, 1971). Applied cautiously to the poem, reification helps explain how socially produced expectations become internalized and experienced by Prufrock as fixed standards rather than as meanings that could be questioned or changed.

The combination of these perspectives allows the poem to be read through three connected dimensions. First, discourse and hegemony shape the identity positions available to Prufrock. Second, recognition explains why he remains oriented toward the social gaze even when he fears its judgement. Third, reification illuminates how the standards of that social world become embedded in his self-perception. These dimensions do not operate independently. The social meanings that define acceptable identity also establish the conditions under which recognition is sought, while their internalization makes them appear natural and unavoidable.

To develop this argument systematically, the article states its research questions, objectives, significance, and delimitations in a separate section before reviewing the relevant critical and theoretical literature.

2. Research Questions, Objectives, Significance, and Delimitation

2.1 Research Questions

1. How do Laclau and Mouffe's concepts of discourse, hegemony, and identity construction illuminate the formation of fragmented identity and self-alienation in T. S. Eliot's The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock?
2. How does Hegel's concept of recognition explain Prufrock's desire for acknowledgement and social belonging, as well as his fear of judgement by others?
3. How does Lukács 'concept of reification help explain the internalization of social expectations and their role in shaping Prufrock's self-perception?

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2.2 Research Objectives

1. To examine the construction of Prufrock's fragmented identity through Laclau and Mouffe's post-Marxist concepts of discourse, hegemony, and identity formation.
2. To analyse how the desire for recognition and the fear of social judgement shape Prufrock's relationship with others and contribute to his sense of alienation.
3. To investigate how socially produced expectations become internalized, through the supporting concept of reification, and influence Prufrock's evaluation of his appearance, behaviour, age, and everyday life.

2.3 Significance of the Study

This study is significant because it offers a theoretically integrated interpretation of self-alienation in The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock. Rather than treating Prufrock's hesitation and anxiety exclusively as private psychological conditions, it examines how his self-understanding is mediated by social meanings, expectations, and the desire for recognition. By placing Laclau and Mouffe's concepts of discourse, hegemony, and identity construction at the centre of the analysis, the study foregrounds the social processes through which the speaker's identity becomes fragmented. Hegel's concept of recognition and Lukács 'theory of reification provide supporting perspectives that clarify, respectively, the speaker's dependence on acknowledgement and the internalization of apparently fixed social standards.

The study also contributes to literary discussion by bringing post-Marxist theory into close textual engagement with a canonical modernist poem. Its value lies not in claiming that the poem can be reduced to a sociological model, but in showing how formal and psychological features—such as the dramatic monologue, repeated questioning, imagined social encounters, and images of judgement—can be interpreted in relation to the construction of subjectivity. The analysis may therefore be useful to students and researchers interested in modernist literature, literary theory, identity, alienation, and interdisciplinary approaches to textual interpretation.

2.4 Delimitation of the Study

The study is delimited to a qualitative, interpretive analysis of T. S. Eliot's poem The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock. It focuses on selected lines and recurring textual patterns that are directly relevant to the construction of fragmented identity and self-alienation, particularly the prepared social face, the judging gaze, hesitation, failed communication, routine, age, and appearance. The analysis does not attempt to examine Eliot's complete poetic works or to provide a comprehensive account of the entire modernist movement.

The theoretical scope is centred on Laclau and Mouffe's post-Marxist concepts of discourse, hegemony, and identity construction. Hegel's concept of recognition and Lukács 'theory of reification are employed only as supporting perspectives; they do not replace the primary framework. The study is further limited to close reading and textual interpretation. It does not include interviews, surveys, reader-response data, historical or biographical investigation, or quantitative analysis. Accordingly, its conclusions concern the meanings that can be supported through the poem's language and the selected theoretical concepts; they are not presented as empirical claims about all individuals or as definitive statements about Eliot's personal intentions.

3. Literature Review and Critical Context

The critical context for this study has two related dimensions: scholarship on modernism and Eliot, and theoretical discussions of identity, alienation, recognition, discourse, and reification. The sources used in the underlying thesis establish the basis for connecting these dimensions, although they do not constitute an exhaustive account of all scholarship on the poem.

Modernist writing is frequently associated with formal experimentation and the representation of fractured or unstable experience. Bradbury and McFarlane's collection *Modernism: A Guide to European Literature 1890–1930* provides a broad account of the literary movement and its historical and aesthetic concerns (Bradbury & McFarlane, 1976). Within this context, *Prufrock* can be approached as a poem in which consciousness is represented not as a unified sequence but as a

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movement among impressions, anxieties, memories, and anticipated situations. Its dramatic-monologue form gives access to the speaker's self-consciousness while also exposing the limitations of his perspective. The poem's fragmented movement is therefore not only a formal feature; it is also central to the representation of a subject who struggles to establish a coherent relation between inner experience and social life.

Moody's study of Eliot's poetic development provides a substantial critical context for reading the poem within the larger trajectory of Eliot's work (Moody, 1994). Ricks 'discussion of Eliot similarly situates the poet's writing within broader questions of language, culture, and prejudice (Ricks, 1988). These works are important to the present study because they demonstrate the depth of critical engagement with Eliot's poetry and the range of contexts in which his writing has been examined. The present article does not dismiss psychological or modernist interpretations. Instead, it extends the discussion by asking how the speaker's anxiety is related to socially available meanings and forms of recognition.

The theoretical discussion of identity is informed by Stuart Hall's account of the question of identity. Hall (1996) challenges the assumption that identity is a fixed and transparent essence and draws attention to the processes through which identities are produced and positioned. This understanding is compatible with the present article's use of Laclau and Mouffe, for whom social identities are contingent and articulated through discourse. Identity is consequently understood as relational: it develops through the meanings, distinctions, and subject positions available within a particular social formation.

The concept of alienation has a longer intellectual history. Marx's early writings examine alienation in relation to human activity and social relations, while Capital provides an analysis of the social forms through which relations among people can appear as relations among things (Marx, 1975, 1976). Lukács develops the concept of reification by examining how the commodity form and the organization of social life can make historically produced relations appear objective and autonomous (Lukács, 1971). Although the present study does not treat Prufrock's experience as a direct representation of industrial labour or commodity production, Lukács 'account offers a way to consider how social values may be experienced as external facts and internalized as standards of self-evaluation.

Hegel's theory of recognition provides another important dimension. In Hegel's account, self-consciousness is not simply achieved through private introspection; it is mediated by a relation with another self-consciousness (Hegel, 1977). Recognition is therefore relevant to Prufrock's repeated concern with how he appears to others and whether his intended meaning will be acknowledged. The poem dramatizes a subject who wants to be understood but anticipates that others will reduce him to a limited and inadequate image.

Laclau and Mouffe's post-Marxist theory brings these concerns into a framework centred on discourse and hegemony. They reject the idea that social identities can be explained through a single predetermined foundation and instead emphasize the contingent articulation of social relations and meanings (Laclau & Mouffe, 1985). Hegemony concerns the establishment of particular meanings as dominant, while discourse provides the relational field through which identities and social positions become intelligible. This framework is particularly useful for reading the social world that Prufrock imagines: the standards he fears are not presented as purely personal inventions but as meanings that have acquired authority through social repetition and acceptance.

The research gap addressed here is therefore interpretive rather than a claim that the poem has never been studied in relation to alienation or identity. Existing modernist and Eliot criticism provides substantial discussion of fragmentation, uncertainty, and psychological conflict. The present analysis asks a more specific question: how do the social meanings that define acceptable identity shape Prufrock's self-understanding, and how does his desire for recognition make him dependent on those meanings? By integrating discourse, recognition, and reification, the article offers a reading in which

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alienation is both experienced inwardly and produced through the subject's relation to social structures.

4. Theoretical Framework

4.1 Laclau and Mouffe: Discourse, Hegemony, and Identity

Laclau and Mouffe's post-Marxist approach is the principal theoretical foundation of this study. Their work reconsiders Marxist analysis by challenging economic reductionism and essentialist explanations of social identity. Rather than assuming that identities follow automatically from fixed social positions, they understand them as contingent constructions formed through relations of meaning and political articulation (Laclau & Mouffe, 1985).

Discourse, in this framework, should not be restricted to spoken or written language. It refers more broadly to the relational systems through which objects, practices, and identities acquire meaning. A subject becomes intelligible within a field of social meanings that distinguishes acceptable from unacceptable, familiar from unfamiliar, and legitimate from illegitimate positions. These meanings are never entirely closed or permanent, but some become dominant and organize the way social reality is understood.

Hegemony describes the process through which particular meanings and articulations achieve a position of dominance. Such meanings may come to appear universal or natural even though they are historically and socially produced. The relevance of this concept to *Prufrock* lies in the speaker's awareness of standards that appear to determine social value. He imagines himself through the expectations of others and repeatedly measures his conduct against what he assumes the social world will accept. The poem does not provide a detailed sociological map of that world; nevertheless, its representation of judgement, appearance, and social performance makes it possible to examine how dominant meanings shape the speaker's subjectivity.

Identity, from this perspective, is relational and incomplete. Prufrock's identity is not simply an inner truth concealed beneath a social mask. His sense of self is formed through the very social categories and judgements from which he seeks distance. The tension between his inner intentions and his imagined public image is therefore central to the construction of his fragmented subjectivity.

4.2 Hegel: Recognition and Self-Consciousness

Hegel's concept of recognition is used as a supporting theoretical perspective. In *Phenomenology of Spirit*, self-consciousness is developed through a relation in which one consciousness encounters and seeks recognition from another (Hegel, 1977). Recognition is not merely praise or approval; it concerns the social mediation of selfhood. The subject's sense of itself is bound up with the possibility of being acknowledged by another.

This concept helps explain why Prufrock remains preoccupied with the reactions of others. He does not simply withdraw from social life. He imagines social encounters, anticipates judgement, and worries about whether his words and actions will be interpreted as he intends. His desire for acceptance is inseparable from his fear that others will define him in ways he cannot control. The social gaze thus becomes both a possible source of recognition and a source of alienation.

The article does not equate every instance of social anxiety with Hegelian recognition. Rather, recognition is used to illuminate the structure of Prufrock's desire: he wants acknowledgement from others, yet he experiences the social conditions of acknowledgement as restrictive.

4.3 Lukács: Reification and the Internalization of Social Meaning

Lukács 'concept of reification provides a further supporting perspective. Reification describes the process through which relations and products of human social activity take on the appearance of independent, objective, and thing-like realities (Lukács, 1971). Socially produced arrangements can consequently seem natural and unchangeable. The subject may come to experience historically formed standards as facts that must simply be accepted.

In the present reading, reification is applied to Prufrock's internalization of social expectations. His concerns about age, clothing, appearance, routine, and social judgement suggest that he evaluates himself through standards that seem already established. The point is not that each object or routine

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in the poem is automatically reified. Rather, the analysis considers how the speaker's relation to these details reveals the power of social meanings once they have been internalized. What begins as an external standard becomes part of his own self-assessment.

4.4 Integrating the Three Perspectives

The three theoretical perspectives are related but not interchangeable. Laclau and Mouffe provide the primary account of how identities and meanings are socially articulated and how some meanings become dominant. Hegel helps explain the subject's desire for acknowledgement within a social relation. Lukács clarifies how social meanings may acquire the appearance of fixed realities and become internalized. Together, these concepts make it possible to examine alienation as a process rather than as a single emotional state.

In the poem, dominant meanings establish standards of social acceptability; Prufrock seeks recognition within the field structured by those standards; and the standards become embedded in his consciousness, shaping how he judges himself. His alienation is produced through this circular relation. He feels inadequate because he imagines himself through social expectations, yet he continues to desire recognition from the social world that sustains those expectations.

5. Methodology

This study adopts a qualitative research methodology and a theoretically informed design of textual analysis. Qualitative inquiry is appropriate when the purpose is to interpret meanings, representations, and experiences rather than to measure numerical relationships (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). Literary texts are complex structures in which language, imagery, form, and repetition contribute to the production of meaning. A qualitative approach therefore enables close examination of the poem's representation of identity and alienation.

The primary source is T. S. Eliot's *The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock*. The poem is examined through repeated close reading, with attention to passages that represent social performance, the gaze of others, hesitation, communication, routine, age, and appearance. Secondary sources include theoretical works by Laclau and Mouffe, Hegel, and Lukács, together with scholarship on identity, modernism, Eliot, and qualitative textual analysis. Belsey's account of textual analysis informs the procedure of grounding interpretation in textual details rather than relying on unsupported personal impressions (Belsey, 2013).

The analysis proceeds through three thematic dimensions. The first examines discourse and identity construction, focusing on the social face and the speaker's experience of being observed and categorized. The second examines recognition and social belonging, focusing on Prufrock's hesitation, his fear of judgement, and his concern that his meaning will not be understood. The third examines reification and internalized social meanings, focusing on routine, age, and appearance. These dimensions are then considered together to explain how fragmented identity and self-alienation emerge through the relationship between the individual and the social order.

The study is interpretive and text-based. It does not involve interviews, surveys, experiments, or statistical analysis. Its claims are therefore limited to the poem and to the theoretical interpretation developed through close reading. It does not claim to establish Eliot's personal intention or to provide empirical conclusions about all modern individuals. The purpose is to demonstrate how the poem's language and images can be understood through the selected theoretical framework.

6. Analysis and Discussion

6.1 Discourse and the Construction of a Social Identity

A central feature of Prufrock's consciousness is his awareness that social interaction requires a form of self-presentation. This is evident in the lines:

"There will be time, there will be time
To prepare a face to meet the faces that you meet" (Eliot, 1915).

The repetition of "face" makes identity appear as something prepared for social encounter. The speaker does not describe simply meeting other people as an already secure self. Instead, he imagines the preparation of a face that can be presented to other faces. The distinction between "a face" and

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"the faces" suggests a relationship between individual self-presentation and a collective social environment. The individual anticipates the expectations of others and adjusts the self accordingly.

Through Laclau and Mouffe's framework, the face can be read as a socially intelligible identity position. Prufrock's public self is not represented as entirely spontaneous or independent; it is prepared in relation to meanings that already circulate within the social world. The need to prepare a face implies that the subject understands social acceptance as dependent on presenting an identity that can be recognized. The poem therefore dramatizes the formation of identity through social expectations rather than presenting identity as a stable essence.

The line also exposes the instability of this performance. If a face must be prepared, then the identity presented in social life is not simply identical with an unmediated inner self. Yet the poem does not offer a secure inner identity that could be recovered once the social mask is removed. Prufrock's self-consciousness is already shaped by his anticipation of others. The social world is not merely outside him; its expectations have entered the way he imagines himself.

A second passage develops the pressure of social observation:

"When I am pinned and wriggling on the wall,
Then how should I begin?" (Eliot, 1915).

The image of being "pinned" suggests immobilization and exposure. Prufrock imagines himself as an object displayed for observation, unable to control the position from which he is seen. The verb "pinned" carries a sense of being fixed, while "wriggling" conveys an attempted movement that cannot overcome the condition of exposure. The question that follows—"how should I begin?"—links this imagined judgement to the difficulty of action and speech.

The passage can be interpreted through the concept of hegemony because the speaker's imagined observers appear to possess the authority to assess him. The standards through which he expects to be judged are not individually invented at the moment of encounter. They appear as established expectations that determine what counts as an acceptable appearance or response. Prufrock's fear is therefore not only the fear of a particular person's opinion; it is the fear of being positioned within a social system of meanings that he cannot control.

The image of the gaze becomes more explicit in the phrase:

"The eyes that fix you in a formulated phrase" (Eliot, 1915).

The verb "fix" suggests the reduction of a complex subject to a stable description. The "eyes" stand for the observing presence of others, while the "formulated phrase" suggests that social perception may convert a person into a recognizable but restrictive category. Prufrock fears that he will be interpreted through a formulation that cannot contain the complexity of his inner experience.

From a post-Marxist perspective, this passage reveals the power of discourse to position subjects. The individual is not simply seen; he is made intelligible through available categories and descriptions. The phrase "fix you" captures the tension between the fluidity of identity and the pressure of social definition. Prufrock's identity is vulnerable to meanings that circulate beyond his control, and his awareness of this vulnerability intensifies his self-consciousness.

These passages suggest that Prufrock's alienation is not adequately explained as simple withdrawal from society. He is intensely oriented toward the social world. He prepares for its encounters, imagines its gaze, and anticipates its descriptions. His difficulty arises because the meanings through which he seeks acceptance also threaten to reduce him. Identity construction and alienation are therefore closely connected: the subject seeks a recognizable position but experiences the available positions as restrictive.

The prepared face also introduces a distinction between the self who experiences and the self who is presented. The wording does not establish that one is authentic and the other false. Rather, it suggests that Prufrock anticipates the conditions under which a self can become socially legible. The face is prepared because the encounter is already imagined as governed by expectations. Before another person responds, the speaker has begun to regulate his own presentation. Social power therefore

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operates prospectively: it shapes conduct before judgement arrives, and the individual participates in reproducing the norm by trying to meet it.

The image of being pinned extends this pressure from self-presentation to the loss of control over representation. A pinned object cannot determine how it will be viewed or what description will be attached to it. The contrast between being pinned and wriggling is revealing: movement remains possible, but it takes place within a condition of constraint. The question of how to begin follows from this condition. Beginning requires an act of self-definition, yet Prufrock imagines that this act will occur under the scrutiny of observers who may already have fixed his meaning.

The phrase "formulated phrase" links seeing with naming. The problem is not only that Prufrock may be looked at critically; the look may become a description that fixes him in a limited identity. A formulation can make a person recognizable, but it can also exclude complexity and contradiction. This is where fragmented identity becomes clear: Prufrock experiences himself as more complicated than the social description he anticipates, but he cannot secure an alternative description that others will accept. His conflict is between the open-endedness of subjectivity and the social demand for recognizable identities.

The poem does not name a single institution or provide a complete map of its social rules, so the analysis should not claim more than the evidence permits. It does, however, represent standards of appearance and conduct as sufficiently established for Prufrock to anticipate them and judge himself in their terms. Their authority lies partly in their apparent normality. They operate as taken-for-granted measures of acceptability. In this sense, the hegemonic dimension is visible in the speaker's relation to standards that seem already legitimate. His awareness of performance does not free him from these standards; it may make him more attentive to them.

6.2 Recognition and the Desire for Social Belonging

Prufrock's repeated hesitation can be read in relation to his desire for recognition. The question "Do I dare / Disturb the universe?" (Eliot, 1915) presents action as a problem that exceeds the speaker's private decision. The word "dare" suggests that the possibility of acting is measured against an anticipated response. The scale of "the universe" is strikingly disproportionate to the act under consideration, making the speaker's uncertainty appear both dramatic and paralyzing.

Through Hegel's concept of recognition, the question reveals a subject whose self-confidence is bound up with the possibility of acknowledgement by others. Prufrock does not experience himself as wholly independent of the social world. Even before he acts, he imagines how the act may be received. The anticipated response becomes part of the decision itself. His hesitation thus reflects the difficulty of entering a social relation in which recognition is desired but cannot be guaranteed.

The earlier image of "the eyes that fix you in a formulated phrase" also belongs to this problem of recognition. Prufrock wants to be acknowledged, but he fears that acknowledgement will take the form of reduction. The social gaze may recognize him only by assigning him a limited identity. This creates a contradiction: he needs others in order to secure a meaningful sense of self, yet he fears the terms through which others may recognize him.

The tension becomes particularly clear in the lines:

"That is not what I meant at all;
That is not it, at all" (Eliot, 1915).

The repetition conveys a failure of communication and an inability to make intended meaning coincide with what is received. The speaker's insistence that his words have not conveyed what he meant suggests a gap between inward intention and social interpretation. Communication does not guarantee recognition. A person may speak and still feel that the self being presented has not been understood.

This moment is important because it connects the poem's communicative difficulty with its broader concern about identity. Prufrock's problem is not only that he cannot find the right words. It is that the meaning attributed to him by others may not correspond to the meaning he wishes to

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communicate. The possibility of being misunderstood threatens the relationship between inner experience and social identity.

Hegel's concept of recognition helps clarify why this failure matters. If self-consciousness is mediated through acknowledgement, then the inability to secure meaningful recognition leaves the subject in an unstable relation to itself. Prufrock's desire to be understood is therefore not a minor social preference; it is bound up with his attempt to establish a coherent sense of self. Yet the poem repeatedly presents the conditions of recognition as uncertain or restrictive.

The result is a form of alienation that cannot be described simply as exclusion. Prufrock is not indifferent to society, nor does he appear to have escaped its influence. He remains attached to the possibility of acceptance. His alienation develops because the social world is both the place where recognition might occur and the source of the judgements he fears. The desire for belonging keeps him oriented toward the very structures that make belonging difficult.

The question "Do I dare" frames action as a test of legitimacy. Prufrock does not ask only what he wants to do; he asks whether he can authorize himself to do it. The verb "dare" carries an awareness of consequences and of an audience before whom the action may have to be justified. The imagined scale of disturbing "the universe" makes a personal decision appear overwhelming. His hesitation is thus a conflict between the wish to act and the anticipated judgement that may follow.

Hegel's account of recognition helps explain why the anticipated response matters. Self-consciousness is not presented as a self-sufficient possession secured in isolation; the subject seeks acknowledgement from another consciousness. Applied to the poem, this does not mean that every imagined person literally refuses Prufrock recognition. Rather, his reflections show that he experiences others as essential to the confirmation of identity. He wants to be seen and understood, but being seen also exposes him to evaluation. Recognition appears as both a condition he needs and a risk he fears.

The repeated correction—"That is not what I meant at all; / That is not it, at all"—brings the problem into communication. The speaker's insistence that his meaning has not been conveyed suggests a gap between intention and interpretation. The repetition does not close that gap; it dramatizes his inability to do so. Once expressed, words are available to interpretation by others. The crisis is therefore one of recognition: Prufrock cannot be certain that the self he intends to communicate is the self that will be received.

The Hegelian perspective is used as an interpretive lens, not as a claim that the poem stages the full philosophical sequence of self-consciousness in Hegel. It clarifies why acknowledgement matters to Prufrock's sense of self. His alienation is not simply exclusion: he remains oriented towards society, rehearses encounters, and measures possible actions against anticipated responses. He feels estranged within a relationship that remains important to him.

6.3 Reification and the Internalization of Social Expectations

The poem's representation of routine provides a significant point of entry into the concept of reification. Prufrock declares:

"I have measured out my life with coffee spoons" (Eliot, 1915).

The image reduces the scale of human life to a small and repetitive unit. The verb "measured" suggests calculation and limitation, while "coffee spoons" evokes the ordinary repetitions of social routine. The line presents life as something divided into manageable, almost interchangeable measures rather than as an open field of possibility.

Through Lukács 'concept of reification, the image can be read as suggesting that the speaker experiences life through routines and standards that have become taken for granted. The point is not that coffee spoons themselves symbolize a specific economic relation. Rather, the metaphor conveys a consciousness in which experience has been reduced to repetitive units and the possibilities of life seem constrained by established patterns. The social organization of everyday existence appears as a structure within which Prufrock moves without being able to transform his relation to it.

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The image also connects with the article's broader argument about internalization. Prufrock does not merely encounter external expectations; he measures his own life through a restricted scale. The language of measurement suggests that the standards of evaluation have become part of his own consciousness. Social meanings are powerful partly because they are no longer experienced only as demands imposed from outside. They become the terms through which the subject understands personal value and possibility.

The poem's treatment of age and appearance further develops this process:

"I grow old … I grow old …
I shall wear the bottoms of my trousers rolled" (Eliot, 1915).

The repetition of "I grow old" gives the passage a self-conscious rhythm. The speaker's attention moves from the passage of time to the visible signs through which age and appearance may be read. The reference to clothing makes identity legible through external details. Prufrock does not describe ageing only as a biological process; he imagines how his body and dress will appear within a social field of observation.

From the perspective of reification, the passage suggests that standards of appearance and age have acquired the force of objective measures. Prufrock evaluates himself through visible signs that seem to carry established meanings. His concern is not simply that he is ageing; it is that ageing will position him in the eyes of others and alter the identity available to him. The social meaning attached to appearance becomes part of his self-perception.

The "eyes" that "fix" the individual in a "formulated phrase" can also be reconsidered here. The social gaze does not remain external. Prufrock has become so familiar with the possibility of judgement that he anticipates and reproduces it within his own consciousness. He sees himself through the evaluative standards he fears. This is one way in which reification and discourse intersect: dominant meanings become internalized and appear to the subject as natural truths.

The relationship between routine, age, and appearance demonstrates how alienation is produced through ordinary details as well as moments of explicit anxiety. The speaker's self-alienation is not limited to a dramatic crisis. It is woven into the way he measures time, imagines his appearance, and anticipates the reactions of others. Social expectations become powerful because they shape the smallest acts of self-evaluation.

The coffee-spoon metaphor compresses time and experience into a small, repetitive scale. Its force depends on the contrast between the magnitude of a human life and the modest instrument used to measure it. Life appears divided into units that can be counted but not transformed. The metaphor suggests a restricted relation to possibility: existence is apprehended through routine rather than through an active sense of development.

Lukács 'concept of reification is relevant because it examines how social relations can appear as objective things, independent of the human activity that produces them. The line should not be treated as a literal illustration of commodity fetishism or as proof of a specific economic position. Its significance here is more limited: it represents a consciousness in which everyday patterns have become the measure of existence. Reification helps name the process through which a socially formed way of living may appear self-evident and unavoidable.

The concern with age and clothing makes the internalization of social meanings concrete. The repeated declaration "I grow old" turns time into an object of self-observation, while the reference to clothing connects the body with visible signs through which it may be read socially. Prufrock's concern is not limited to physical ageing; he imagines age as socially legible and potentially evaluative. He begins to judge himself through the anticipated meanings attached to his appearance before another person comments on it.

Reification should not become a loose synonym for anxiety or routine. Its analytical value depends on identifying how humanly produced meanings appear fixed and independent. In this reading, routine, age, and appearance matter because Prufrock treats them as standards with authority over his self-image. He is both the person being evaluated and the person who performs the evaluation. The

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social gaze has been carried into his own consciousness, blurring the boundary between external constraint and internal self-regulation.

6.4 The Interrelationship of Discourse, Recognition, and Reification

The three analytical dimensions are most significant when considered together. Discourse establishes the meanings through which Prufrock's identity becomes socially intelligible. Hegemonic meanings provide standards of acceptability and value. Recognition explains why Prufrock seeks acknowledgement within this social field, while reification helps explain how its standards become internalized and appear fixed.

The "face" prepared for social encounters illustrates the discursive construction of identity. Prufrock's self-presentation is shaped by the expectation that he must appear in a form others can recognize. The image of being "pinned" and the "eyes" that "fix" him reveal the power of social judgement to position the subject. His desire for recognition is visible in his concern with how others receive him and whether his words convey his intended meaning. Finally, the coffee spoons and the repeated concern with age and clothing show how the standards of social life become part of his self-assessment.

These processes create a reinforcing structure. Because Prufrock desires recognition, he remains attentive to the meanings and expectations that govern social acceptance. Because those meanings are experienced as authoritative, he evaluates himself through them. Because he internalizes them, he finds it difficult to imagine an identity outside their terms. His alienation is therefore neither wholly external nor wholly internal. It emerges in the relation between the social order and the subject who seeks recognition within it.

This interpretation also clarifies the meaning of fragmentation in the poem. Prufrock's fragmented consciousness is not simply a collection of disconnected thoughts. It reflects the difficulty of reconciling inner intention with social identity. He is divided between the self he wishes to express and the self he imagines others will recognize. The gap between these positions produces hesitation, repetition, self-correction, and communicative uncertainty. Fragmentation becomes a formal expression of an unstable relation between subjectivity and social meaning.

The article therefore does not replace psychological interpretations with a purely social explanation. Prufrock's anxiety remains central to the poem. The argument is that this anxiety is socially mediated. His inner conflict is shaped by the standards through which he understands appearance, behaviour, value, and belonging. A post-Marxist reading makes visible the social processes that participate in the production of what appears to be an individual psychological condition.

The three concepts describe different but connected moments. Discourse makes particular identities and meanings available; hegemony helps explain why some meanings acquire authority; recognition illuminates the subject's desire to be acknowledged; and reification explains how established meanings may appear natural and unchangeable. Their explanatory value is strongest when their differences are maintained. Discourse concerns the production of meaning, recognition concerns the relational conditions of self-consciousness, and reification concerns the appearance of social products as fixed realities.

Prufrock's prepared face brings these dimensions together. It is discursive because it becomes meaningful through shared conventions of presentation; hegemonic because the speaker anticipates authoritative standards; recognitive because the face is prepared for an encounter with others whose acknowledgement matters; and reifying because those standards are experienced as requirements rather than conventions open to negotiation. The image condenses the central argument: identity is formed in relation to social meanings that the subject seeks to satisfy and experiences as restrictive.

The gaze provides another point of convergence. The eyes represent judgement, while the formulated phrase suggests that judgement can fix a person within a limited description. The discursive process produces a category; the recognitive problem concerns whether the subject can be acknowledged beyond it; and the reifying effect is the apparent permanence of the description once it has been

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internalized. Prufrock's anxiety emerges from the possibility that a partial interpretation will become the dominant account of who he is.

The coffee spoons and the concern with age and clothing extend the argument from encounters to everyday life. Social meanings shape identity not only when another person is physically present but also when time, routine, the body, and personal value are experienced through established standards. Prufrock's alienation is reproduced through habitual self-measurement as well as through imagined public judgement.

This integrated account gives a more precise meaning to fragmentation. Prufrock's divided consciousness reflects competing demands: he wants to express himself, wants recognition, fears reduction by the gaze of others, and evaluates himself through the standards he finds oppressive. These demands do not settle into a stable identity. They produce hesitation, repetition, correction, and self-surveillance. The poem's movement of thought corresponds to a subject whose relation to social meaning remains unresolved.

The reading does not make the poem's psychological dimensions secondary. Anxiety, embarrassment, and uncertainty remain central to Prufrock's experience. The argument is that these experiences are socially mediated rather than sealed within an isolated psyche. Nor does the analysis claim that Prufrock represents every modern subject or that the poem provides a complete sociological description of its historical moment. It offers a focused interpretation of one speaker and one poem. Within that scope, the interaction of discourse, recognition, and reification explains why the desire for belonging repeatedly becomes a source of alienation.

An additional implication of this synthesis concerns the limits of individual agency. Prufrock is not represented as entirely passive: he reflects on his circumstances, recognizes the pressure of judgement, and imagines the possibility of acting. Yet awareness alone does not dissolve the structures through which he understands himself. His capacity to choose is mediated by the social meanings that make some actions appear appropriate and others risky. This does not mean that agency is absent; rather, the poem presents agency as constrained and uncertain. Prufrock can question the standards governing his identity, but he struggles to translate that questioning into a new form of social participation. His hesitation therefore marks the gap between recognizing the constructed nature of social expectations and being able to act beyond them.

The combined framework also helps distinguish alienation from simple nonconformity. A subject may reject a particular expectation without necessarily experiencing alienation, while Prufrock's difficulty is that he remains invested in the social order whose standards trouble him. He does not confidently replace its categories with an alternative system of meaning. Instead, he continues to seek recognition within the same field that makes him feel exposed and inadequate. This unresolved attachment explains why the poem's speaker is not presented as a straightforward rebel against society. His alienation is more complex: he is implicated in the meanings that constrain him, and his desire for belonging makes those meanings difficult to abandon.

7. Findings

7.1 Finding One: Identity Is Constructed through Discourse and Hegemonic Meaning

The first finding is that Prufrock's identity is represented as relational and socially mediated rather than as a complete essence existing independently of others. Preparing a face for social encounters shows that self-presentation is shaped before interaction begins. The face is prepared in response to an anticipated social environment. The images of being pinned and of eyes fixing the speaker in a formulated phrase further show that social perception can position an individual through categories that may not capture personal complexity. Laclau and Mouffe's framework clarifies how discourse supplies the meanings through which such positions become intelligible, while hegemony helps explain why some standards appear authoritative. Prufrock's alienation follows from his attempt to secure a recognizable identity within a field of meanings that also restricts the forms his identity can take.

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7.2 Finding Two: Recognition Is Desired but Experienced as Restrictive

The second finding is that Prufrock's relationship with society is structured by a contradictory desire for recognition. His hesitation about whether he dares to act measures possible action against an anticipated response. His concern about being fixed by the gaze of others and his repeated correction of what he meant reveal that acknowledgement is not simply a matter of being noticed. He wants his meaning and identity to be understood, but fears that the terms of social recognition will reduce him to a limited image. Hegel's concept of recognition helps explain why this contradiction matters for selfhood. Prufrock remains dependent on acknowledgement even as he experiences its social conditions as threatening. His alienation is not equivalent to complete exclusion or indifference: he is attached to the social world because it is where recognition might be obtained, but that attachment exposes him to the judgements that undermine his confidence.

7.3 Finding Three: Reification Turns Social Expectations into Internal Measures

The third finding is that socially produced expectations become powerful when they are internalized and experienced as fixed realities. The coffee-spoon metaphor represents a life apprehended through repetitive, restricted measures. The speaker's concern with ageing and clothing shows that external signs acquire social meanings and become standards through which he evaluates himself. Lukács ' concept of reification illuminates this process, provided it is applied carefully. The poem does not offer a direct representation of commodity production or a complete account of economic relations. Rather, the relevant pattern is the apparent objectivity of standards that are socially produced. Routine, age, and appearance are treated as if they carry settled meanings that the individual must accept. Reification therefore helps explain how social values become embedded in consciousness and contribute to alienation.

7.4 Integrated Finding: Fragmented Identity Emerges from the Interaction of the Three Processes

The most important overall finding is that discourse, recognition, and reification operate in a mutually reinforcing relationship. Discourse provides the categories through which identity is understood; hegemonic processes give particular meanings authority; recognition makes the subject dependent on acknowledgement within the social field; and reification makes the field's standards appear natural and difficult to change. Prufrock's self-alienation emerges through this interaction. He wants to belong, anticipates judgement, and internalizes the standards by which he imagines he will be judged. His fragmented consciousness reflects the tension between the self he wishes to communicate and the identity he expects others to recognize. His hesitations and repetitions register the difficulty of acting and speaking under the pressure of anticipated interpretation. Alienation in the poem is therefore psychological in experience and social-discursive in formation.

7.5 Contribution and Scope of the Findings

The findings contribute an integrated post-Marxist interpretation by bringing together three theoretical dimensions that illuminate different aspects of subject formation. Laclau and Mouffe remain the primary framework, while Hegel and Lukács provide supporting concepts rather than competing master explanations. The study's central concern is the discursive and hegemonic construction of identity, with recognition and reification clarifying the subject's dependence on social acknowledgement and the internalization of social meanings. The conclusions are limited to the selected poem and textual evidence examined. They do not establish Eliot's personal intention, prove a universal theory of modern identity, or reduce the poem to a sociological case study. Their contribution is interpretive: they demonstrate how a post-Marxist framework can illuminate the social production of a literary subject while preserving the poem's psychological and formal complexity.

8. Conclusion

This article has examined the construction of fragmented identity and self-alienation in T. S. Eliot's *The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock* through a post-Marxist framework. Drawing primarily on Laclau and Mouffe's concepts of discourse, hegemony, and identity construction, and supported by Hegel's theory of recognition and Lukács 'concept of reification, it has argued that Prufrock's alienation is

socially mediated. His condition cannot be understood solely as an individual psychological weakness because the poem repeatedly connects his self-perception with the meanings and standards through which he imagines society will judge him.

The analysis of discourse demonstrated that Prufrock's identity is formed in relation to social expectations. The "face" prepared for social encounters and the fear of being fixed in a "formulated phrase" reveal the pressure to occupy recognizable identity positions. The discussion of recognition showed that Prufrock's desire for acceptance remains active even as he anticipates judgement and misunderstanding. His alienation therefore emerges from a contradiction: he seeks acknowledgement from a social order whose standards also produce his sense of inadequacy. The analysis of reification further demonstrated how these standards become internalized. Routine, age, and appearance are experienced through meanings that seem fixed and authoritative, shaping the speaker's self-evaluation.

The article's central contribution is to bring these dimensions together. Discourse explains how social meanings construct identity positions; recognition explains the subject's dependence on acknowledgement; and reification explains how socially produced meanings can appear natural and become part of individual consciousness. Their interaction produces a subject who remains attached to the possibility of belonging while struggling to imagine himself beyond the standards that define it.

The study is limited to a qualitative interpretation of one poem and does not claim to establish a universal model of modern alienation. Its conclusions are grounded in selected textual passages and in the theoretical framework identified above. Future research may apply similar questions to other modernist texts, compare different literary representations of recognition and alienation, or examine how different historical and cultural contexts shape the relationship between discourse and identity. Within its scope, however, the present reading demonstrates that *Prufrock* can be understood not only as a poem of individual uncertainty but also as an exploration of the social construction of subjectivity and the difficult pursuit of recognition within dominant structures of meaning.

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