I have encountered "The Love Song of J. Alfred Poofrock" in three different college English classes taught by three different teachers. They all agree that T. S. Eliot wrote the poem. On everything else they disagree. From what I can piece together, the analysis goes something like this:

The poem is an interior monologue revealing the thoughts and questions of a man named J. Alfred Poofrock, a scrawny, balding fellow who is also "politic, cautious, and meticulous, full of high sentence, but a bit obtuse, at times, indeed, almost ridiculous—almost, at times, the Fool." Poofrock is going to a party—I think it's a birthday party for some guy named Michelangelo. Anyway, Poofrock feels he has to give a play-by-play report of everything he thinks, with instant replay of some of the "best ones" ("In the room the women come and go. . . . "). Poofrock rambles on for over a hundred lines and probably would have gone on for another hundred if Eliot hadn't drowned him. It is a terrible thing to drown in one's own stream of consciousness—especially for a guy like Poofrock, who never did anything to harm anyone, who never, as a matter of fact, did anything.

Before starting in on the poem, I should warn you that the title is disappointingly misleading. There is no romance in this "love song," no tender affection, no torrid affair—nah. The poem never fulfills the promise created by the first lines (one-night cheap hotels) and just when Poofrock decides to "linger in the chambers of the sea by sea-girls wreathed with seaweed red and brown," he drowns. I guess it rhymed with "brown," so there was no other way.
Proofrock starts out by saying "Let us go then, you and I." Seven words into the poem and already he has obscured his meaning. The debate rages: is he talking to me? or to himself? or to whom? I guess with the fog so dense he couldn't tell whom he was inviting. Anyway, there's this fantastic image: "when the evening is spread out against the sky like a patient etherized upon a table." Now that's got class. In fact, the first ten lines are pretty good, and interpreting them is as easy as falling off a monologue. Eliot must have had an attack of clarity—but he soon recovers.

Now we are introduced to a motif of the poem: questions. There are over 15 questions asked and none of them answered. (Maybe that's because no one can figure out whom Poofrock is addressing.) Poofrock has the problem of too many questions; people even drop them on his plate. There is no escape. By the end of the poem, he's so sick of the stupid questions that he's ready to roll the whole universe into a ball and throw it at the next question that comes along! Not only does Poofrock ask questions without answers, but he also gives answers without questions. For instance, who ever asked him if he were Prince Hamlet? I didn't. I thought he was Lazarus.

Poofrock is concerned with the fact that he is growing old. At his next birthday he will be 47, 362 coffee spoons, the melancholy age of forced retirement and rolled trouser-legs. He is embarrassed about his thin hair and his thin arms and legs. Actually, a close analysis of the poem reveals that Poofrock is hung up on the body. He specializes in eyes and arms, and he's had some kind of mystic experience with nerves. Yes, Poofrock is an imaginative interpreter of "body language," but once in a while he gets his priorities muddled. For example, seeing his head brought in upon a platter elicits only the comment "there's no great matter," while the mere possibility of rejection by his prospective sweetheart sends him into a fit of panic. I guess that's love. More than one man has lost his head for a woman.

Another inconsistency: he has "known the evenings, mornings, afternoons," but somehow one gets the impression he has never thought too deeply about the situation. One would assume that with the afternoon sacked out on the floor beside him and the evening etherized upon that great operating table in the sky he'd be a little judicious about the time that's left. So does he clasp his lover to his bosom
and say “Now let us sport us while we may”? Oh, no. Not this time-killer. He stops to wonder “Do I dare?” and “Do I dare?” which is redundant and a waste of time besides, but it fills the line out nicely. Of course, we must remember that this guy can make decisions and revisions and reverse them all in one minute flat, or so he says—and I, for one, tend to believe him. After all, he had only written six lines of the poem before he decided not to write the poem in Italian. Next he spent over 100 lines trying to tell us something and then suddenly decided “It is impossible to say just what I mean.” (I had previously arrived at the same conclusion.)

Do you realize that in the entire poem Poofrock never really does anything? He just wonders. But he does that a lot. He wonders, “Shall I part my hair behind?” and “Do I dare disturb the universe?” But it’s all kept inside his balding pate, because he’s obviously not much of a conversationalist.

Picture this: a chick at a party—Poofrock’s interested, so he checks her out: “arms that are braceletied and white and bare (but in the lamplight, downed with light brown hair!)” (Poofrock has a fetish for hairy arms.) And she’s wearing this wild sexy perfume that’s making Poofrock—“digress,” which is pretty powerful stuff for a guy like Poofrock. (I can see it now—a new perfume that advertises: “One whiff and your man digresses!”) But to return to our scene, what does Poofrock do? What can he say to this hairy-armed goddess? I can just see him leaning over and whispering sweet nothings in her ear in typical Poofrockean. He nibbles her ear a little and coos, “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.” If that doesn’t make her digress, I ask you, what will? (In the next lines he says, “I should have been a pair of ragged claws scuttling across the floors of silent seas.” I can’t help but wonder if he got the suggestion from her.)

I’ve been trying to figure out why Poofrock is so nervous. At first, I thought he was just hungry. After all, here’s a guy with an appetite that craves cake and marmalade and toast—you know, solid stuff—and all he gets is questions dropped on his plate. But I decided that wasn’t it. He says he’s wept and fasted—sure, “after the tea and cake and ices.”
So then I decided his problem was due to the fact that he had to go to the men's room. (This conclusion required a deeper analysis of the poem, and I think it proves I am well on my way toward a career in professional literary criticism.) The motif of water was my first clue. Then, of course, we must bear in mind that he's been drinking all that tea. But it would be rude for him to just get up and leave—so he hesitates and talks the matter over with himself. (I guess it's himself—I decided he wasn't talking to me.) It is a conflict of interest and he must decide. The conflict is finally resolved (as far as Poofrock ever resolves anything): “Oh, do not ask ‘What is it?’ Let us go and make our visit.”

As Poofrock himself admits, the poem does have a “ragged clause” here and there; but taking the work as a whole, there is a great deal of practical wisdom to be gleaned from this poem. For instance, when you go to a tea party, keep your hairy arms out of the lamp-light. Also, if it seems “impossible to say just what you mean,” don't. There are too many people who will not understand. They will distort what you say. They will laugh.

For some odd reason, as I write claiming to “tell you all, I shall tell you all,” I can hear Eliot reproaching me—subtly, ever so faintly—“a bit obtuse,” he says. And I hear him chuckling sadly, “That is not it at all. That is not what I meant at all.”