Albert Einstein once said, “All that is valuable in human society depends upon the opportunity for development accorded the individual.” In other words, it is the multitude of individuals, as pieces of a whole, that give society its value; however, that value only arises if individuals are provided with the opportunity to grow in independence from society. In both *Notes from Underground* by Fyodor Dostoyevsky and “The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock,” by T.S. Eliot, the speakers explore their own values as distinctly separate from that of society. Because he lives underground and away from society, society has very little influence left on the underground man – thus allowing him to write freely. He writes of his past experiences with society and what caused his self-proclaimed social ostracism. On the contrary, Prufrock is hindered by society and cannot even speak his own thoughts to declare his feelings to his true love. Modernist writers, such as Eliot, desired to uproot the traditions of the Victorian era, and express novel ideas through a writing style that was equally original. As a realist, Dostoyevsky writes from a philosophical standpoint to fully delve into the complete being of the human. Combining both conversational and narrative writing styles, Eliot and Dostoyevsky create inconsistent speakers to display the disjunction among the standards of society and internal thoughts.

Narration is the act of telling or recounting a situation. At the center of a narrative is a story, which is supported by a setting, perspective, literary devices, characters, and the structure of the writing. Narrative writing exists in many forms; Not only can a story be told in the form of
a short story or novel, but in a poem as well. “The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock” is one such example that is narrated by Prufrock himself. But the story itself is not what consumes a narrative – rather it is the manner in which the story is told that holds the most value. Often to tell the story in its fullest sense, the narrator may engage in a personal interaction with the dedicated audience. In other words, the narrator instigates a conversation in which the audience can partake in, thus coming to a more personal understanding of the story being told.

*Notes from Underground* takes on a narrative style as told by a fictional speaker who has lived apart from society for the past forty years, ostracizing himself from a society whose standards do not match with his own values. As this underground man recounts the interaction between himself and the police officer, he allows the police officer to symbolize the society which so easily brushes him off as if no importance: “I was a fly in the eyes of society, a disgusting, obscene fly – smarter than the rest, more cultured, even nobler […] who incessantly steps aside, insulted and injured by everyone” (Dostoyevsky 735). As in many formal literary works, Dostoyevsky uses a metaphor as a literary device to relate the speaker to an insignificant insect from the perspective of society, who can easily swat away his conversational interjections. The underground man consistently lets people walk all over him, and take advantage of him, to the point where he begins to ostracize himself. When he does engage in confrontation with others, he does so in a manner that places himself in a position of control: “Once I even had a friend of sorts. But I was already a despot at heart; I wanted to exercise unlimited power over his soul; I wanted to instill in him contempt for his surroundings; and I demanded from him a disdainful and definitive break with those surroundings” (Dostoyevsky 744). The underground man takes advantage of those weaker than himself (perhaps he would have attempted to sway
Prufrock, if given the chance); he attempts to turn them against society, to instill the same contempt for society that he himself feels.

The development of the underground man’s character is a major component of the narration of Notes from Underground: not only is he portrayed as an outcast of society, but as a rebel as well. His character contains many layers, which are revealed throughout a series of stories within the larger story itself. Specifically, Liza exists as a sub-character who is introduced by the underground man in order to demonstrate how controlling society is. When she finally comes to visit him, the underground man replies, “No, Liza, I think you must first learn how to live by yourself, and only afterward blame others” (Dostoyevsky 761). The underground man scolds Liza for not only selling her body to men, but also selling her soul to society to corrupt. By incorporating sub-plots and secondary characters into Notes from Underground, Dostoyevsky forms a system of complementary stories that serve to further signify the divorce between society and its members.

“The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock” follows the narrative of a man who feels so restricted by the opinions of society that his own values and desires are compromised. The repeated phrase “In the room the women come and go/Talking of Michelangelo” (Eliot 13-14) serves as a stylistic choice that reminds readers of a change in time in the world around Prufrock, yet there is no simultaneous change in action by Prufrock himself. As the members of society pass by Prufrock, they take no notice of him nor his remorse for his long-lost true love. Instead, they speak of those members of society who stand out as high-achieving individuals. Prufrock, on the other hand, feels insignificant and burdened by the eyes of society that uphold him to specific standards: “And I have known the eyes already, known them all - /The eyes that fix you in a formulated phrase, /And when I am formulated, sprawling on a pin/When I am pinned and
wriggling on the wall” (Eliot 54-57). Prufrock deems society as the author of his “character,” whom he must portray accordingly. He feels trapped in the body of a character determined by society, one which does not align to his true self. At the conclusion of the poem, Prufrock wonders if he might have been able to change the course of his own narrative, rather than letting its course be subject to the influences of society: “After the sunsets and the dooryards and the sprinkled streets, /After the novels, after the teacups, after the skirts that trail along the floor –” (Eliot 101-102). Eliot uses imagery as a literary device to insult society for being superficial in its thoughts, way of life, and even in its literature – all of which hinder him from not only acting on his gut feeling, but of even asking the question which he has thus far failed to ask. Though told in first-person perspective, the voice of Prufrock’s so called “Love Song” is predominantly a reflection of society’s values, instead of that of his own.

The mostly rigid structure of the poem reflects the rigid lifecycle that Prufrock feels is imposed by society. Almost the entirety of the poem is written in the AABB rhyme scheme. However, he does interrupt this pattern on two occasions with the phrase “Would if have been worth while” (Eliot 100, 106). Breaking his rhyme which has thus far guided the poem ever so smoothly, Prufrock poses the beginning of a question. This disrupts not only the rhythm of the poem, but also the rhythm of a routine society. However, Prufrock quickly picks back up his rhyme pattern, just as he quickly resumes the backseat status of his own life.

Amidst the narrative, *Notes from Underground* directs attention to specific pieces of discussion in a conversational style. The conversational style of the underground man’s writing is unique in that he speaks to an imaginary audience in order to confront his true beliefs without direct attack from society. At the conclusion of his notes the underground man explains his reasoning behind his writing, claiming, “At least, I was ashamed all the time I was writing this
**tale:** consequently, it’s not really literature, but corrective punishment” (Dostoyevsky 779).

Though in conversation with his imaginary audience, the underground man writes for himself, to come to know himself better, to dissect his past, and to give reasoning for being a hermit. After pouring so much of himself and his story into his notes, he believes it too personal to be shared. The underground man approaches topics in an argumentative manner, in order to dissect his views in stark contrast with the views of society: “Wait, gentlemen, I myself wanted to begin like that. I must confess that even I got frightened. I was just about to declare that the devil only knows what desire depends on […] but then I remembered about science and I stopped short. But now you’ve gone and brought it up again” (Dostoyevsky 721). Respectfully regarding his audience as “gentlemen,” the underground man forces himself to answer this question which he so desired to avoid. By admitting that he is scared of his own internal desires, the underground man suggests that perhaps the expectations of society are purposeful in keeping unjust human desires in line.

Prufrock addresses both his audience and himself in a conversational style as he questions his past, present, and future actions towards the woman he loves. In the first stanza, Prufrock extends an invitation to the reader to join him on a journey towards answering a question, saying, “Oh, do not ask, ‘What is it [the question]?’/Let us go and make our visit” (Eliot 11-12). Prufrock emphasizes that it is not the question that matters most, but the build-up to the question, the trek that develops the seeker along the way in search of an answer. Though he never actually asks the question for fear of society’s response, his poem is influential in that it expresses an examination of the interaction between himself and what he considers to be society’s ultimatum. Prufrock attempts to work up the nerve to act as an individual, but fails due to his perspective of the world around him as static with a predestined fate that he mustn’t
tamper with. He asks, “Do I dare/Disturb the universe?” (Eliot 44-45). Prufrock is fearful of breaking the trend that has fallen so rhythmically upon society, where everyone knows their place.

The societies represented in Notes from Underground and “The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock” have very little value when examined from the standpoint of Albert Einstein. With minimal opportunity for members of society to develop on an individual level, individuality is lost not only in the pieces of the whole, but also in the society as a unit. In a battle of the forces between the speakers and the society to which they belong, the speakers use conversational styles as a supplement to the narrative in order to build a relationship with the audience; The narratives serve as informative expressions of the corruption of society. Perhaps due to the alternating styles of writing, Notes from Underground and “The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock” serve as an expression of internal conflicts that are caused by external factors.

Works Cited