

Paper 4, Module 20: Text

Role	Name	Affiliation
Principal Investigator	Prof. Tutun Mukherjee	University of Hyderabad
Paper Coordinator	Prof. Hariharan Balagovindan	Institute of English, University of Kerala
Content Writer/Author (CW)	Dr. Suja Kurup,	Institute of English, University of Kerala
Content Reviewer (CR)	Dr. Jameela Begum	Former Head & Professor, Institute of English, University of Kerala
Language Editor (LE)	Prof. Hariharan Balagovindan	Institute of English, University of Kerala

T.S. Eliot – “The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock”

T. S. Eliot

Life

Thomas Stearns Eliot (26 September 1888 – 4 January 1965), most commonly known as T.S. Eliot, is a towering figure of the twentieth century who has taken up various roles in his literary career as an essayist, playwright, publisher as well as a literary and social critic in English literary field. Eliot was awarded the Order of Merit and the Nobel Prize in Literature in 1948 for his immense innovation and contribution to modern day poetry. When T. S. Eliot died, wrote Robert Giroux, "the world became a lesser place." Certainly the most imposing poet of his time, Eliot was revered by Igor Stravinsky "not only as a great sorcerer of words but as the very key keeper of the language." For Alfred Kazin he was "the *mana* known as 'T. S. Eliot,' the model poet of our time, the most cited poet and incarnation of literary correctness in the English-speaking world." Northrop Frye simply states: "A thorough knowledge of Eliot is compulsory for anyone interested in contemporary literature. Whether he is liked or disliked is of no importance, but he must be read."

In 1945 Eliot wrote: "A poet must take as his material his own language as it is actually spoken around him." Correlatively, the duty of the poet, as Eliot emphasized in a 1943 lecture, "is only indirectly to the people: his direct duty is to his language, first to preserve, and second to extend and improve." Thus he dismisses the so-called "social function" of poetry. The only "method," Eliot once wrote, is "to be very intelligent." As a result, his poetry "has all the advantages of a

highly critical habit of mind," writes A. Alvarez; "there is a coolness in the midst of involvement; he uses texts exactly for his own purpose; he is not carried away. Hence the completeness and inviolability of the poems. What he does in them can be taken no further.... [One gets] the impression that anything he turned his attention to he would perform with equal distinction." Alvarez believes that "the strength of Eliot's intelligence lies in its training; it is the product of a perfectly orthodox academic education." But Jacques Maritain once told Marshall McLuhan that "Eliot knows so much philosophy and theology that I do not see how he can write poetry at all." Eliot, however, never recognized a conflict between academic and creative pursuits.

Of his early work, Eliot has said: "The form in which I began to write, in 1908 or 1909, was directly drawn from the study of Laforgue together with the later Elizabethan drama; and I do not know anyone who started from exactly that point." Elsewhere he said: "The kind of poetry that I needed, to teach me the use of my own voice, did not exist in English at all; it was only found in French," and Leonard Unger concludes that, "insofar as Eliot started from an *exact point*, it was exclusively and emphatically the poetry of Laforgue." To a lesser extent, he was influenced by other Symbolists, by the metaphysical poets, by Donne, Dryden, and Dante. "His appreciation of Shakespeare," writes Sir Herbert Read, "was subject to his moral or religious scruples." With Samuel Johnson, whom, according to Sir Herbert, Eliot "honoured above all other English writers," he shared "a faith in God and the fear of death."

In *After Strange Gods* Eliot wrote: "I should say that in one's prose reflections one may be legitimately occupied with ideals, whereas in the writing of verse one can deal only with actuality." From this Cleanth Brooks elaborates: "Poetry is the medium *par excellence* for rendering a total situation—for letting us know what it feels like to take a particular action or hold a particular belief or simply to look at something with imaginative sympathy." Brook's explains that it is Eliot's notion that the poet is thus "committed 'to turn the unpoetical into

poetry' [and to fuse] 'the matter-of-fact and the fantastic.'" But the meaning of "reality," for Eliot, is especial, existing always "at the edge of nothingness," where, as B. Rajan writes, "the birth of meaning ... takes place in a manner both creative and ancient. Poetry cannot report the event; it must *bethe* event, lived through in a form that can speak about itself while remaining wholly itself. This is a feat at least as difficult as it sounds, and if the poem succeeds in it, it is because, however much it remembers previous deaths by drowning, it creates its own life against its own thrust of questioning."

"In effect," writes Herbert Howarth, "Eliot demonstrated that a poet's business is not just reporting feeling, but extending feeling, and creating a shape to convey it." Eliot's poetry, then, is a process of "living by thought," says Rajan, "of seeking to find peace 'through a in St. Louis, Missouri, Eliot declined his citizenship and settled in Britain where he became a British citizen in 1927. He died on 4th January 1965, at his home in Kensington in London. (www.googleweblight.com)

Works

The Waste Land (1922), *The Hollow Men* (1925), *Ash Wednesday* (1930) and *Four Quartets* are some of his well known poems. He has also written seven plays of which *Murder in the Cathedral* deserves special attention.

Eliot's Views on Poetry

Innovator by heart and method, Eliot was a dominant figure of the twentieth century poetry who took bold strides in the poetic field by not compromising his ideals for the general interest of the public as well as with the language he used. He strongly believed that poetry should reflect the

complexities of modern civilization which can at times be difficult in finding expression in poetic language.

“The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock”

Publication

This early major work of Eliot was published in *Poetry* magazine in 1915 though it was completed in 1910 or 1911. The poem was published in the magazine by Eliot’s friend Ezra Pounds persuasion. Later this literary piece was published in *Prufrock and Other Observations* in 1917. The poem was written before the beginning of the First World War when Britain was described and accepted as the most modern country found on the globe.

The Title

Originally the poem was entitled as “Prufrock among the Women” but later before its publication in *Poetry* magazine, the title was changed as “*The love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock.*” This narrative poem deals with an instance of the life of the titular character Mr Prufrock. The name of the character was taken by Eliot from the advertisement of William Prufrock Furniture Company, a business enterprise found in Louis, Eliot’s hometown. The two initials are mere invention of the poet. Eliot used the words “love song” with reference to Rudyard Kipling’s poem “*The Love Song of Har Dyal*” which was published in the collection *Plain Tales from the Hills*.

As a Dramatic Monologue

This modernistic poem appears in the form of a dramatic monologue. Dramatic Monologue is used as a kind of character study that gives an account of an instance where the narrator / speaker relates a topic, thereby throwing light on the speaker's inner feelings intentionally as well as unintentionally to the listeners. The main aim of such kind of narrative is to provide as much personal information of the speaker rather than the topic/ subject that is discussed by the speaker.

Epigraph

Eliot has attached an epigraph to the poem which is taken from the Renaissance Italian Poet Dante Alighieri from Canto 27 of the *Inferno*. The epigraph sums up to a six-line quotation which recounts the story of Dante who has led an unethical life is helped by the good folks from heaven. In order to frighten Dante from committing further sin, heaven seeks the aid of another poet named Virgil to provide Dante a safe tour through the horrors of hell.

The quote of the epigraph is said by Guido da Montefeltro, one of the characters in the eighth circle of the hell. When Dante asks Guido to tell his story , Guido makes this quote which roughly means that Guido would not have told his story to Dante, if he had the opportunity to go out of hell. But since Dante is stuck in Hades, Guido's story as well as his words will remain unarticulated in the world of dead which will always remain as a secret.

Summary

The poem describes a typical modern man in the early 1900s and his emotions which raise questions about his place in society. The action of the poem revolves entirely around the

speaker who is walking aimlessly in the town, with his mind preoccupied with the memories of his past. This urban man is filled with feelings of isolation, fear which had made him incapable to make and take decisions in his life.

His physical as well as intellectual inertia has prevented him from seizing various opportunities in his life and lack of spiritual progress has affected his overall well being. Moreover he is also frustrated by the memories of unattained carnal loves. In the poem, the speaker, Prufrock, appears to address a potential lover with whom he want to consummate. But at the same time, he is attacked with the feeling of fear that curbs or prevents him from taking the risk to approach the potential lover. His mind is filled with anxieties as well as obsession and hallucinates that other people are making fun of his inadequacies like his physical appearance. As a result he scolds himself for thinking about such kind of ideas of taking risk.

At this point Eliot makes Prufrock's mind to meander to a series of fairly concrete physical setting like the cityscape to the several interiors at the social gathering like the women's arms in the lamplight, fireplaces, coffee spoon. Again Prufrock's mind travels and shows a series of vague ocean images which explains the speaker's emotional distance from the world. Prufrock feels that this world is looking down upon him as a second – rate status described in the words – “*I am not Prince Hamlet*”.

One of the famous lines in the poem that sums up the very essence of this literary piece is this: “*I've measured out my life in coffee spoons*” which sets the mood of the poem. The image of the *coffee spoons* conveys how the narrator looks back and accesses his life with the least inadequate tool to measure his mundane and unremarkable life. Prufrock is the embodiment of frustration and impotence of the modern man who is described with thwarted desires and modern

disillusionment. Prufrock stands for those voices in modern literature who are the victims of hidden and unexplored feelings of weariness, longing, embarrassment, boredom, sexual frustration, emasculation, a sense of decay as well as an awareness of morality.

Analysis

The poem focuses on revealing Prufrock's sense of insecurity which is not presented directly but is craftily presented, in the form of clues to the readers by adopting literary tool called the dramatic monologue. This throwing of clues to the readers is heightened by using Dante's epigraph which clearly expresses the inability of Prufrock to speak out his feeling directly in life as he does in the poem easily.

Initially the epigraph appears to be a meaningless and a detached piece, but when it is placed along with the context of the rest of the poem, the readers starts to get clues as well as meaning that throws light into the inner feelings of Prufrock. Though Prufrock is unable to articulate his feelings, Eliot creates this poem which effectively reveals the insecurity of the narrator.

As a skilful craftsman, Eliot uses the epigraph as a means to the readers to explain that the poem is spoken not as Prufrock would do but what he would have uttered if he was to come back from another place, like Dante. Prufrock is able to recognize and understand his insecurities as well as drawbacks in this place which is related in this poetic form.

The readers find the poem more as a medium that reveals the narrator's mind and feelings rather than an actual love song. Though Prufrock makes effort in making the poem sound as a romantic one, he fails miserably. The short of romances gives the readers an opportunity or a

window to know more about Prufrock's broken mind. Metaphors, imagery as well as the choice of words are used to provide a view into Prufrock's shy, egoistic and paralyzed nature.

Eliot uses the metaphor of a cat in the poem. By nature, cat is less sociable than dogs which are commonly considered as man's best friend. On the other hand cat keeps to itself most of the time. Therefore the image of the cat runs parallel with the character of Prufrock who has difficulty in socializing with others, particularly the women folk.

Eliot's choice of words also helps in describing Prufrock's nature when he refers to the term, "yellow fog" and "yellow smoke". The colour "yellow" refers to cowardice. Usually smoke and fog is a kind of hindrance that prevents a person from moving ahead. In the poem, this word represents the mind of Prufrock which is filled or is clouded by negative feelings like cowardice, fear, alienation that prevents him from moving ahead in life.

The crab metaphor in the poem reveals the other side of Prufrock his egoistic side which is well explained in the following lines "I should have been a pair of ragged claws / Scuttling across the floors of silent seas." The imagery of the silent sea reveals Prufrock's vast mind that wants to remain alone and wants to escape from the real world. Thus the entire poem us about Prufrock weighing in his head whether or not to speak to the woman. As a result questions abound in this poem: there are overwhelming questions, dropped questions, questions about what the narrator presumes or dares to do.

J. Alfred Prufrock as Narrator/ Speaker

This monologue piece revolves around Prufrock who appears to be a bald, insecure man living an unremarkable life in his middle age. The insecurity of Prufrock is well described through his thoughts that are basically dull, uneventful resulting in living a bored mediocre life

which has affected him in even taking decisions in life thereby questioning his very existence in the society. His insecurity has failed him to grab opportunities or taking risk (particularly the women) where upon he is leading a life where there is no events except the progress of days which remains always the same. His timidity as well as sense of fear of failure has always pulled him back from taking up action to move ahead in life.

Setting

The setting of this modern poem is in a big, dirty city in the evening where we readers find our speaker as an unhappy man who is torn between conflicting feelings of fear in living and the boredom that has enveloped everywhere during that time in society before the First World War took the world in its storm.

Characters

The Narrator, J. Alfred Prufrock, is the main character in this narrative poem whom Eliot presents as a timid, overcautious middle- aged man. His evening walk in the smoky city takes the reader to the shabby streets in the city, cheap hotels, as well as restaurants which finally come to an end at a social gathering. In the social gathering we find women participants whom Prufrock has interest in talking, but his timidity as well as sense of fear prevents him from fulfilling his desire.

The Listener is the omnipresent and unidentified companion of Prufrock. The listeners are able to get a slice of his character without taking part in his action.

The Women present at the social gathering are the ones that Prufrock wants to make acquaintance with, but is worried about their reaction towards him, if he initiates a conversation with one of the women in the group.

The Lonely Men in Shirtsleeves are other characters who are found leaning out of the window smoking their pipes. These men have a similarity with the speaker because both of them are there in the scene but at the same time not a part of the scene.

Themes

The recurrent themes in the poem are

- Loneliness and a sense of alienation which make Prufrock a pathetic man who is always isolated due to his anxieties and obsessions.
- Inadequacy – The speaker's sense of fear has created anxieties and worry in his mind that he will definitely make him a laughing stock before the public who will rebuke him for his sense of clothing and his physical appearance including his bald head.
- Pessimism is a theme that is found in most of the modern literary work. Here Eliot shows us another typical modern man who only views his life as well as others's lives from a negative perspective
- Indecision – His fear has always prevented him from taking actions as well as risk which has resulted in resisting him from taking and making important decision in his life.

Style

Since it is a modernistic poem, the title character's inner feelings are revealed through conversational language combined with the stylized language of poetry. Though the tone of the

poem is in a conversational mode, Eliot also combines other features of poetry in the narrative. Figures of speech like simile, personification, metaphor, alliteration, Anaphora, hyperbole are used to make the poem appear to be complex. These techniques are adopted by the poet to reflect the very complexities of a typical modern man who is surrounded by feelings of alienation, isolation and boredom of life.

Variation in Line length and Meter is another feature of this poem. Some of the lines in the poem just move upto three words but at the same time, other lines in the narrative also extend and contain nearly fourteen word which alters the meter of the poem in total.

Continuity in thoughts is yet another feature in “The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock”. The transfer or train of thoughts is a technique adopted by Eliot to exhibit the very nature of how human mind works when it dreams, daydreams or react to surrounding stimulus.

References to oblique allusions or references is another device used by Eliot. Prufrock uses paraphrase, quotes as well as to cite historical and fictional characters, ideas, place as well as things to showcase that the narrator is a well read man. Certain uses of allusion are easy to comprehend like the use of Michelangelo, Prince Hamlet. But at the same time, Prufrock also uses references that cannot be comprehended by a common man like the lines “*To have squeezed the Universe into a Ball*” (line 92), a variation of the line written by another famous poet Andrew Marvell.

The readers might feel that Eliot has used the character Prufrock to pen down his emotion, his alter ego. By employing the technique of dramatic monologue, Eliot is not only revealing the inner feelings of the narrator but is also unraveling the human psyche which is

characterized by many negative feelings like loneliness, boredom, frustration, insecurity fear and many more. Though the poem appears to be difficult to comprehend, it is more fruitful to derive and understand ideas from these kinds of poems rather than from poems which are simple in nature. Therefore Eliot's complex poem is all about the simple observations of the modern man which he describes by using an assortment of techniques both subtly as well as effectively in conjuring the interest of the readers.

