

Module-2

Unit-1 □ W. B. Yeats: The Second Coming T. S. Eliot: The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock

Structure:

- 2.1.0 Introduction
- 2.1.1 Modernism in English Poetry
- 2.1.2 The Modernist Vision of W.B Yeats and T.S Eliot
- 2.1.3 Brief Literary Biography of W.B Yeats
- 2.1.4 Text of ‘The Second Coming’
- 2.1.5 Glossary and Annotations
- 2.1.6 Paraphrase and Critical Analysis
- 2.1.7 Myth and National History in W. B Yeats’ Poetry
- 2.1.8 Comprehension Exercises
- 2.1.9 Brief Literary Biography of T.S Eliot
- 2.1.10 Text of ‘The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock’
- 2.1.11 Glossary and Annotations
- 2.1.12 Paraphrase and Critical Analysis
- 2.1.13 Treatment of Form and Content
- 2.1.14 Eliot’s Idea of the Modern Man and his Society
- 2.1.15 Comprehension Exercises
- 2.1.16 Activity for the Learner
- 2.1.17 Summing Up
- 2.1.18 Comprehensive Reading List

2.1.0 Introduction

This unit will introduce you to some aspects of Modernism in general and specifically acquaint you with modernism in English Poetry. It is important to

understand such expressions as these terms signify literary concepts and techniques which powerfully characterise the great poems written by the greatest poets of the modern period. The key elements of these poems are experimentation, anti-realism, individualism and a stress on the cerebral rather than emotive aspects. Previous writing was thought to be stereotyped, requiring ceaseless experimentation and rejection of old forms. To a modernist view, poetry should represent itself, or the writer's inner nature, rather than hold up a mirror to nature. Indeed, the poet's vision is all-important, however much it cut him off from society or the scientific concerns of the day. The two poems in this Unit will give you a representative picture of how wide indeed the canvas of Modernism can be.

2.1.1 Modernism in English Poetry

As you must have gathered from your reading of Module 1 of this Paper, the term 'modernism' generally covers the creative output of artists and thinkers who saw traditional' approaches to the arts, architecture, literature, religion, social organization (and even life itself) as being outdated in the light of the new economic, social and political circumstances of a society that was by now fully industrialised. Not that modernism categorically defied religion or shunned all the beliefs and ideas associated with the Enlightenment; it would be more accurate to view modernism as a tendency to question, and strive for alternatives to the convictions of the preceding age. The past was now to be seen and treated as different from the modern era, and its axioms and undisputed authorities held up for revision and enquiry.

Modernism has no precise boundaries. In Anglo-American literature, the period is taken as running from 1890 to 1920 and includes the likes of James Joyce, Ezra Pound, T.S Eliot and Wyndham Lewis among many others. But few of its writers shared common aims, and the term was applied retrospectively. In a broad sense, the themes of Modernism begin well back in the nineteenth century, and many do not even reach full expression until the latter half of the twentieth century. That way, Modernism is perhaps better regarded as part of a broad plexus of concerns which are variably represented in a hundred and twenty years of European writing. Modernism is open to diverse interpretations, and even rife with apparent paradoxes and contradictions, it is perhaps best illustrated by the uneasy juxtaposition of the viewpoints declared by two of modernist poetry's most celebrated and emblematic poets: while Ezra Pound (1885-1972) was making his famous call to "make it new",

his contemporary T. S. Eliot (1888-1965) was stressing the indispensable nature of tradition in art, insisting upon the artist's responsibility to engage in a complex way with tradition. The overtly complex, contradictory character of modernism is summed up by Peter Childs, who identifies "paradoxical if not opposed trends towards revolutionary and reactionary positions, fear of the new and delight at the disappearance of the old, nihilism and fanatical enthusiasm, creativity and despair" (*Modernism*, 2000).

2.1.2 The Modernist Vision of W.B Yeats and T.S Eliot

Yeats started his literary career as a romantic poet and gradually evolved into a modernist poet. You need to understand at the outset that the keyword 'modernist' which is a technical innovation or experimentation, basically epitomizes an addition to 'Modern' which is primarily a matter of quality, attitude and treatment. When Yeats began publishing poetry in the 1880s, his poems had a lyrical sense, romantic style, and they focused primarily on love, longing and loss, and infused with Irish myths. His early writing follows the footsteps of romantic verse, utilizing conventional rhyme schemes, lyrical metric patterns, and poetic structures. Although it lacks the serious note of his later writings, his early poetry is still sophisticated and popular. He evolved as a modernist poet. Now, there are several factors which contributed to his poetic evolution: firstly, his interest in mysticism and the occult urged him to explore spiritually and philosophically complex subjects. Yeats' frustrated romantic relationship with Maud Gonne dashed his hopes, this defeat in love made his poetry become cynical. Thus for Yeats, changes and developments in the private domain primarily played an important part in signaling his evolution as a modernist poet.

Moreover, his concern with Irish subjects evolved as he became more and more involved in nationalist political causes. Yeats therefore shifted his focus from myth and folklore to contemporary Irish politics. He united the personal, political and mystical concerns in an intense and visionary artistic whole. Finally, Yeats was a witness the changing face of literary culture in the early twentieth century. As a result, he picked up some of the styles and conventions of the modernist poets. One such is the apocalyptic or catastrophic vision, which is common among all modernists. The modernists experimented with verse forms, the breakdown of the traditional form, the dislocation of that progression and aggressively engaged with contemporary politics, challenged poetic conventions and the literary tradition at large. The use of

disparate images in modernist poetry builds up an emotional pattern which replaces the form of a traditional poem. The discontinuous syntax gives such a poem the look of a jigsaw puzzle. These influences caused his poetry to become darker, edgier, and more philosophical. His poetry changed its course, there is a shift in style and tone over the course of his long poetic career.

T.S Eliot's short poems show an incremental development of the poet's modernist thought. 'Prufrock' as 'The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock' is more commonly called, was published in June 1915 in *Poetry*; 'Preludes', 'Rhapsody on a Windy Night' in *Blast* July 1915, and 'Portrait of a Lady' in *Others* in September 1915. When he was in London Ezra Pound introduced him to the literary group which included Wyndham Lewis, H.D., Richard Aldington, Harriet Weaves, and Ford Maddox Ford. Further he became acquainted with the 'Bloomsbury group'. The avant-grade artists, grouped, and set out to 'make it new' in accordance with Pound's prescription—a revolution—in the arts took place during this period. This period significantly known as the 'modernist' period saw the break-up of the old patterns. This new poetry is anti-representational, anti-narrative, disjunctive, discontinuous and choppy. Its counterparts are cubist painting and cinematic montage. Eliot was never officially an Imagist, but his poetry is a distillation of imagism. Deliberate discontinuance of the linear narration of any discussion or paraphrasable matter is a distinctive feature of Modernist art. In Eliot's poetry we hear an individual speaking, the whole man speaking and then a century speaking.

2.1.3 Brief Literary Biography of W.B Yeats

William Butler Yeats was born in Dublin in 1865. His father John Butler Yeats was a precariously successful painter, an intellectual, a skeptic, an agnostic, as well as a wit. His mother Susan Pollexfen Yeats was a quiet, religious woman of deep, intuitive feelings who shared a deep bond with nature and peasant life in Sligo. Sligo is a town in North-West Ireland, about 135 miles from the capital city of Dublin and beautifully nestled between rugged mountains and the Atlantic Ocean. It is commonly held that Yeats' poem 'The Lake Isle of Innisfree' talks of Lough Gill, a fresh water lake in Sligo. A look at the poem on the panel beside will tell you what is typical of Yeats' Modernism, that is highly tinged with aspects of Romanticism. For more on Sligo, which was central in shaping the Yeatsian sensibility, you can log on to <http://www.sligo-ireland.com>.

In 1874 the Yeats family moved to London, though Yeats spent his childhood in the Irish countryside with his grandparents in Sligo. He studied at Godolphin School, Hammersmift England and then went to High School at Dublin. During this time, he became acquainted with such leading pre-Raphaelites as William Morris and Burne-Jones. After completing high school, he enrolled in the Metropolitan Art School. In 1885 his first published poems appeared in *The Dublin University Review*. Soon after, he began to come under the influence of John O’Leary, the influential Irish nationalist leader. He also met George Russell, along with whom and a few friends; he founded the *Dublin Hermetic society*. This club was devoted to occult research—magic, theosophy, and spiritualism. In 1888 he joined Madame Blavatsky’s Theosophical Society.

In 1889, his first book, *The Wanderings of Oisín* was published with the help of John O’Leary. He then moved to London and became deeply involved in current literary society. In London he met such literary figures as Lionel Johnson, Ernest Dowson and others. He founded the Rhymers’ Club. He also met the poet-critic Arthur Symons, who was instrumental in introducing him to new aesthetic ideas as well as to towering personalities like the French poet Mallarme, Verlaine and Villiers de L’Isle-Adam. It was in 1889 that Yeats

met the beautiful actress and nationalist Maud Gonne. He fell in love with her and remained so for the rest of his life. Maud Gonne however felt that Yeats was too idealistic, too dreamy to become her husband. In 1903 she married Major John

The Lake Isle of Innisfree

I will arise and go now, and go to
Innisfree,
And a small cabin build there, of
clay and wattles made;
Nine bean-rows will I have there,
a hive for the honey-bee,
And live alone in the bee-loud
glade.

And I shall have some peace there,
for peace comes dropping slow,
Dropping from the veils of the
morning to where the cricket sings;
There midnight’s all a glimmer,
and noon a purple glow,
And evening full of the linnet’s
wings.

I will arise and go now, for always
night and day
I hear lake water lapping with low
sounds by the shore;
While I stand on the roadway, or
on the pavements grey,
I hear it in the deep heart’s core.

Source: The Collected Poems of
W.B Yeats (1989)

MacBride. Yeats was heart-broken. His frustration in love was followed by many catastrophic events on the national as well as international scenario. His poetry lost its old charm and became terser, harder and full of politics and metaphysics.

In 1905 Maud Gonne was separated from her husband. Yeats renewed his marriage proposal and was rejected once again. He became involved with another woman named Olivia Shakespear. The relationship was brief. It made him more sour. In 1899 Yeats along with George Moore, Edward Martyn and Lady Augusta Gregory, founded the Irish theatrical society which later became the Abbey theatre. It was here that the plays of Irish playwrights like Lady Gregory, John Synge, Sean O'Casey were staged. Yeats' plays *The Countess Cathleen* and *Cathleen ni Houlihan* were also staged. After being turned down again by Maud Gonne, he proposed to her beautiful adopted daughter, Iseult, who was almost thirty years his junior. He was rejected. Frustrated and defeated in love, he finally married Miss Georgie Hyde-Lees. He was obsessed with the thought of creating some kind of unity in his life. His wife's power of automatic writing spurred him to write *A Vision*. In 1925 he published *A Vision*. *The Tower* was published in 1928 and *The Winding Stair* in 1933. He was also appointed as a senator of the Irish Free State and served in that capacity till 1928. In 1924 he was awarded the Nobel Prize for literature. During the last years Yeats suffered from heart and lung conditions and a nervous breakdown. In 1939, just five months before his death he composed 'Under Ben Bulbin', one of the greatest poems of his career.

The poem that we are going to study in this unit was composed in 1919 and first appeared in *The Dial* in 1920. It was finally included in the 1921 collection *Michael Robartes and the Dancer*. "The Second Coming" is one of Yeats' most famous and anthologized poems

2.1.4. Text of 'The Second Coming'

*Turning and turning in the widening gyre
The falcon cannot hear the falconer;
Things fall apart; the centre cannot hold;
Mere anarchy is loosed upon the world,
The blood-dimmed tide is loosed, and everywhere
The ceremony of innocence is drowned;*

*The best lack all conviction, while the worst
Are full of passionate intensity.*

*Surely some revelation is at hand;
Surely the Second Coming is at hand.
The Second Coming! Hardly are those words out
When a vast image out of Spiritus Mundi
Troubles my sight: somewhere in sands of the desert
A shape with lion body and the head of a man,
A gaze blank and pitiless as the sun,
Is moving its slow thighs, while all about it
Reel shadows of the indignant desert birds.
The darkness drops again; but now I know
That twenty centuries of stony sleep
Were vexed to nightmare by a rocking cradle,
And what rough beast, its hour come round at last,
Slouches towards Bethlehem to be born?*

(Source: W. B. Yeats. *Selected Poetry*. London. Pan Books Ltd. 1974).

2.1.5 Glossary and Annotations

The gyre, a circular or conical shape. The image of interlocking gyres—visually represented as two intersecting conical spirals—symbolize Yeats’ essential belief that all things could be described in terms of cycles and patterns. The soul (or the civilization, the era, and so on) would move from the smallest point of the spiral to the largest before moving along to the other gyre. Yeats describes the current historical moment in terms of these gyres. Yeats believed that this image captured the contrary motions inherent within the historical process, and he divided each gyre into particular regions that represented particular kinds of historical periods (and could also represent the psychological phases of an individual’s development). The image is therefore applied to the waxing and waning of a particular historical age or the evolution of an individual from youth to adulthood to old age. The symbol of the interlocking gyres reveals Yeats’ belief in fate and historical determinism as well as his spiritual attitudes toward the development of the human soul. Yeats believed that the world was on the threshold of an apocalyptic revelation, as history reached the

end of the outer gyre (to speak in plain terms) and began moving along the inner gyre. With the image of the gyre, Yeats created a symbol in his poetry that stood for his entire philosophy of history as well as spirituality.

Falcon: A bird of Prey. Falconing was an activity that was popular in medieval times. The feudal landowners in the middle ages often built aviaries where they kept birds to use for hunting. The most common were falcons and hawks. The bird was tightly controlled by its master.

There is also a Biblical reference to a falcon in Job 28:7 which refers to it's eye."That path no bird knows, Nor has the falcon's eye seen it". Their eye's are constantly watching for prey. And in the poem the falcon did not return to the falconer. The falcon represents humanity and brings in the image of ferocity.

Spiritus Mundi: is literally the "Soul of the Universe", "Spirit of the World", "Collective spirit of the mankind". *Spiritus Mundi* brings an image of the sphinx to the poet's mind. Yeats sees the sphinx rising up to bring forth the end of the world. The sphinx slept in a world of nightmares for two thousand years.

A rocking cradle: The birth of the Anti-Christ (literal and figuratively), and Bethlehem was the birth place of Jesus Christ. The "beast" is slouching toward it's aim (Bethlehem) to wreak havoc (the spirit of this world hates humans) on this earth.

The lion is a beast that is mentioned in the Bible, Revelations 4 but it is not as an ominous sign. Jesus was also called the lion of the tribe of Judah. However, there are several scriptures that mention the lion's predatory might.

Anarchy: The reference is to chapter 13, Book of St. Mark. calls to mind the reign of terror on Earth before Christ comes back. It is related to the futility and anarchy of the present times.

2.1.6 Paraphrase and Critical Analysis

➤ The Paraphrase

The speaker describes a nightmarish scene: the falcon, turning in a widening "gyre" (spiral), cannot hear the falconer; "Things fall apart; the center cannot hold"; anarchy is let loose upon the world; "The blood-dimmed tide is loosed, and everywhere / The ceremony of innocence is drowned." The best people, the speaker says, lack all conviction, but the worst "are full of passionate intensity." Surely, the

speaker asserts, the world is near a revelation; “Surely the Second Coming is at hand.” But definitely, this is nothing like the benevolence of the First Coming. No sooner does he think of “the Second Coming,” that he is troubled by “a vast image of the *Spiritus Mundi*, or the collective spirit of mankind: somewhere in the desert, a giant sphinx (“A shape with lion body and the head of a man, / A gaze as blank and pitiless as the sun”) is moving, while the shadows of desert birds reel about it. The darkness drops again over the speaker’s sight, but he knows that the sphinx’s twenty centuries of “stony sleep” have been made a nightmare by the motions of “a rocking cradle.” And what “rough beast,” he wonders, “its hour come round at last, / Slouches towards Bethlehem to be born?”

➤ Critical Analysis

Yeats begins the poem with the image of a falcon wheeling about in the sky, far away from the falconer who released it. The bird continues to wheel and gyre further and further away from the falconer. This metaphor stands for the young people of Ireland who have given up the standards of their age old tradition, for the new art, the new literature, the new music, and the other novelties during Yeats’ time. There is yet another interpretation of the falcon-falconer image, and that is the image of the head or intellect as the falcon and the rest of the body and the sensations of the body and feelings and emotions as the falconer. The last two lines of the first stanza are simply a commentary on the present times. Yeats says “The best lack all conviction, while the worst are full of passionate intensity.” This also suggests a dissociation between the best, which Yeats identifies as the intellectuals, and the worst, whom Yeats associates with the common people, the mob who react with passionate intensity not with conscious intellectual study and expression. The first part of the poem also illustrates by reference not only to the contemporary events but also to Yeats’ fundamental belief — the fusion of mythology and history. The central belief or idea around which our civilization (falcon) had revolved (Christianity) has lost its stronghold. It can no more hold society in an orderly structure like a wheel around it (gyres or outward-spiraling circles). Things are falling apart. The present civilization is disintegrating.

In the first stanza of the poem Yeats gives us the first bird metaphor. In the second part of the poem Yeats gives us the second bird metaphor in the form of

“indignant desert birds.” These creatures appear to have been roosting on the Sphinx, but when the mammoth creature began to move its “slow thighs” the birds became agitated and took off. The poet shows us the image a little later. The birds are flying around above the slowly moving Sphinx.

At the start of the second stanza Yeats calls for a revelation, saying “Surely a revelation is at hand.” In terms of the Christian myth, the poem prophesies the arrival of a new God. It incorporates Christ’s prediction of His second coming in Matthew XXIV and St. John’s description of the beast of the Apocalypse in Revelations. Falcon, darkness and blood accentuate the horror that is closing in upon Mankind. Yeats was influenced by the theosophical notion as well as by the view of comparative mythologists that a new God comes at regular intervals to replace the old God. The contemporary scene will be followed soon by another. The “rough beast” slouching toward Bethlehem is the symbol of this new age; the speaker’s vision of the rising sphinx is his vision of the character of the new world.

Thus the second coming here is not really a second coming of Christ himself, but a new figure. A cruel, bestial, pitiless creature who will represent the new era as Christ symbolized the old civilization. The second coming of such a fierce spirit after two thousand years will be a new nightmare. For Yeats believed that history moves in vast two thousand year cycles. Each cycle representing a civilization—such as the Greco-Roman era (200-0 B.C.) which had begun with the annunciation of Leda and birth of Helen. The Christian era (0-200 A.D.) which marked the annunciation of Mary and the birth of Christ. This new dark beginning of a subjective civilization will usher in no hope. No Christ like figure but a rough beast, “a vast image out of *Spiritus Mundi*” is going to take place the cradle of Bethlehem.” Twenty centuries of stony sleep/ Were vexed to nightmare by a rocking cradle”. There will be no pity, no mercy but the rough beast will “vex” man’s old sleep and turn it not to a dream but a nightmare. Yeats modifies the well-known image of the sphinx to embody the poem’s vision of the climactic coming. By rendering the terrifying prospect of disruption and change into an easily imagined horrifying monster, thus Yeats makes an abstract fear become tangible and real. The “rough beast” slouching toward Bethlehem is the symbol of this new age; the speaker’s vision of the rising sphinx is his vision of the character of the new world.

2.1.7 Myth and National History in W. B Yeats' Poetry

Myths enable man to reach what he misses in life: they thus, lend completion and unity in life. The poetry and plays of W.B. Yeats often take subject matter from traditional Celtic folklore and myth. You must remember having read of the Celts in Paper 1. So you can well understand how far back in time Yeats travels to source his myths. By incorporating into his work the stories and characters of Celtic origin, Yeats endeavoured to encapsulate something of the national character of his beloved Ireland. The reasons and motivations for Yeats' use of Celtic themes can be understood in terms of the authors own sense of nationalism as well as an overriding personal interest in mythology and the oral traditions of folklore.

'The Second Coming' illustrates by reference to the essential oneness of world's mythologies and the close correspondence between mythology and national history. The poem prophesies the arrival of a new God, in terms of Christian faith. The poet successfully blends Christ's prediction of His second coming in Matthew XXIV and St. John's description of the beast of the Apocalypse in Revelations. In the poem another related imagery which stresses the Christian connection is the mention of Bethlehem with its suggestion of the idea of innocence. The Christian myth that a new God comes at regular intervals to replace the old God is an integral part of the symbolic structure of the poem.

The Christian era to which Yeats himself belongs, is coming to an end. So he is trying to interpret the contemporary scene in terms of the philosophy of national history. He essentially believes that the horror of the subjective era will surely replace the present objective era of which he himself is a part. He, therefore, picks from the Christian myth the image of Christ and that of the beast of Apocalypse to emphasize the contrast between the present objective era and the one that is to follow.

The falcon represents man out of touch with Christ. Anarchy and the worst men dominate the present world as it is drowned in a blood-dimmed tide. Out of this chaos must emerge another cone of civilization. The place of birth of this civilization will again be Bethlehem, but this vision of the Second Coming turns into a nightmare as Yeats sees a rough beast with " A shape with lion body and the head of a man/

A Gaze blank and pitiless as the sun” slouching towards Bethlehem to replace the Christian era. Blood, darkness, Falcon all accentuate the horror that is coming upon mankind. Thus the Christian myths, theosophical and anthropological notions of rebirth, Yeats’s own theory of national history of Ireland are fused in the poem.

2.1.8 Comprehension Exercises

● Long Answer Type Questions-20 Marks

1. Critically examine the thematic aspects of Yeats ‘The Second Coming’.
2. Discuss Yeats use of symbolism in ‘The Second Coming’.

Show how ‘The Second Coming’ becomes a condemnation of degenerate times.

● Medium Length Answer Type Questions-12 Marks

1. How does Yeats depict his time in ‘The Second Coming’?
2. Is ‘The Second Coming’ a conflict between the modern and ancient world?
3. What is the “vast image” he sees in ‘The Second Coming’?
4. Is the poem a commentary on the weakening of Christian values?

● Short Questions: 6 marks

1. What is gyre in ‘The Second Coming’?
2. What drowns the “ceremony of innocence” in ‘The Second Coming’?
3. What vision of future is described in the second half of the poem ‘The Second Coming’?

2.1.9 Brief Literary Biography of T.S Eliot

Thomas Stearns Eliot was born on 26 September 1888 in St. Louis, Missouri. Eliot's grandfather William Greenleaf Eliot was a Unitarian minister and founded the first Unitarian Church in St. Louis. Hence the entire family of Eliot was devoted to the tenets of Unitarianism. Eliot's father Henry Ware Eliot (1814-1919) was a successful businessman and a painter too. His mother Charlotte Champe Stearns (1843-1930) exercised a deep, complex and life-long influence on her son.

The Unitarian Church believes that God is just one entity, and this may be seen as counter to Trinitarianism which looks upon God as three persons in one being. The Unitarians perceive Christ not as God but as 'son of God', hence the Saviour, because he was inspired by God in his moral teachings.

Right from his early childhood Eliot trained to become a poet. At the age of ten he brought out eight issues of his own magazine *Fireside*. It contained 'Fiction, Gossip, Theatre, Jokes and all interesting things, including verses (loose imitations of Lewis Carroll), adventure stories, and a "Kook's Korner"'. Even while studying at Smith Academy (1898 to 1905), he contributed short stories and poems for the *Smith Academy Record*. In 1905, he went to Milton Academy, to prepare for his entrance to Harvard University. He entered Harvard in 1906. At Harvard, teachers like Irving Babbitt and George Santayana deeply influenced him. Under their influence he started advocating classicism and tradition as opposed to romanticism, liberalism and the notion of progress. He began to study Sanskrit, Pali and Indian Philosophy.

He drew inspiration from late-nineteenth-century English poets - John Davidson and Ernest Dowson. The Scottish poet James Thomson's poem *The City of Dreadful Night* left an indelible mark on Eliot's poetic career. During his second year at Harvard Eliot began to read Baudelaire and learnt the possibility of the art of juxtaposition of the matter-of-fact and the fantastic. From 1908 Eliot started reading Arthur Symonds's *The Symbolist Movement in Literature*. He was also introduced to the French poets of the nineteenth century. It was a new feeling and a sort of revelation for Eliot. The poetry of Stephane Mallarme and Jules Laforgue taught him an economy of expression and an uncompromising effort to find his own poetic voice. Above all, it was Dante who exercised the most persistent and deepest influence on Eliot's poetry. From Dante, Eliot came to know that the poet should be 'the servant of his language, rather than the master of it.'

Eliot received his BA in 1909 and in 1910 he received his MA. In October 1910 he left for Paris to read French literature and philosophy for a year. Eliot wrote his dissertation on F.H. Bradley (1864-1924). In 1914 Eliot was awarded a Sheldon travelling fellowship. In July he went to the University of Marburg in Germany to attend a summer course. The First World War was imminent, which made Eliot move to London. In London he met Pound in September 1914 and showed him the manuscript of 'Prufrock'. In June 1915 Eliot married Vivien (or Vivienne) Haigh-Wood. Soon after marriage the couple faced financial constraints; it was during this time that Eliot took up the job as a schoolmaster at High Wycombe Grammar School. After some time he found it very boring. In 1917 he gave it up for a post in the foreign department at Lloyds' Bank in the City of London. To supplement his income, he also started giving extension lectures on Modern French Literature, Victorian Literature and also on Elizabethan Literature. Some of these lectures formed a substantial part of *The Sacred Wood*. He died in 1965.

2.1.10 The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock

*S'io credesse che mia risposta fosse
 A persona che mai tornasse al mondo,
 Questa fiamma staria senza piu scosse.
 Ma perciocche giammai di questo fondo
 Non toruo vivo alcun, s'i'odo il vero,
 Senza tema d'infamia ti rispondo.*

*Let us go then, you and I,
 When the evening is spread out against the sky
 Like a patient etherized upon a table;
 Let us go, through certain half-deserted streets,*

The muttering retreats

5

*Of restless nights in one-night cheap hotels
 And sawdust restaurants with oyster-shells:
 Streets that follow like a tedious argument
 Of insidious intent*

To lead you to an overwhelming question ...

10

*Oh, do not ask, "What is it?"
 Let us go and make our visit.*

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

*The yellow fog that rubs its back upon the window-panes, 15
The yellow smoke that rubs its muzzle on the window-panes,
Licked its tongue into the corners of the evening,
Lingered upon the pools that stand in drains,
Let fall upon its back the soot that falls from chimneys,
Slipped by the terrace, made a sudden leap, 20
And seeing that it was a soft October night,
Curled once about the house, and fell asleep.
And indeed there will be time
For the yellow smoke that slides along the street,
Rubbing its back upon the window-panes; 25
There will be time, there will be time
To prepare a face to meet the faces that you meet;
There will be time to murder and create,
And time for all the works and days of hands
That lift and drop a question on your plate; 30
Time for you and time for me,
And time yet for a hundred indecisions,
And for a hundred visions and revisions,
Before the taking of a toast and tea.*

*In the room the women come and go 35
Talking of Michelangelo.
And indeed there will be time
To wonder, "Do I dare?" and, "Do I dare?"
Time to turn back and descend the stair,
With a bald spot in the middle of my hair — 40
(They will say: "How his hair is growing thin!")
My morning coat, my collar mounting firmly to the chin,
My necktie rich and modest, but asserted by a simple pin —
(They will say: "But how his arms and legs are thin!")*

<i>Do I dare</i>	45
<i>Disturb the universe?</i>	
<i>In a minute there is time</i>	
<i>For decisions and revisions which a minute will reverse.</i>	
<i>For I have known them all already, known them all:</i>	
<i>Have known the evenings, mornings, afternoons,</i>	50
<i>I have measured out my life with coffee spoons;</i>	
<i>I know the voices dying with a dying fall</i>	
<i>Beneath the music from a farther room.</i>	
<i>So how should I presume?</i>	
<i>And I have known the eyes already, known them all—</i>	55
<i>The eyes that fix you in a formulated phrase,</i>	
<i>And when I am formulated, sprawling on a pin,</i>	
<i>When I am pinned and wriggling on the wall,</i>	
<i>Then how should I begin</i>	
<i>To spit out all the butt-ends of my days and ways?</i>	60
<i>And how should I presume?</i>	
<i>And I have known the arms already, known them all—</i>	
<i>Arms that are braceleted and white and bare</i>	
<i>(But in the lamplight, downed with light brown hair!)</i>	
<i>Is it perfume from a dress</i>	65
<i>That makes me so digress?</i>	
<i>Arms that lie along a table, or wrap about a shawl.</i>	
<i>And should I then presume?</i>	
<i>And how should I begin?</i>	
<i>Shall I say, I have gone at dusk through narrow streets</i>	70
<i>And watched the smoke that rises from the pipes</i>	
<i>Of lonely men in shirt-sleeves, leaning out of windows? ...</i>	
<i>I should have been a pair of ragged claws</i>	
<i>Scuttling across the floors of silent seas.</i>	
<i>And the afternoon, the evening, sleeps so peacefully!</i>	75
<i>Smoothed by long fingers,</i>	
<i>Asleep ... tired ... or it malingers,</i>	
<i>Stretched on the floor, here beside you and me.</i>	
<i>Should I, after tea and cakes and ices,</i>	

Have the strength to force the moment to its crisis? 80
But though I have wept and fasted, wept and prayed,
Though I have seen my head (grown slightly bald) brought in upon a platter,
I am no prophet — and here's no great matter;
I have seen the moment of my greatness flicker,
And I have seen the eternal Footman hold my coat, and snicker, 85
And in short, I was afraid.
And would it have been worth it, after all,
After the cups, the marmalade, the tea,
Among the porcelain, among some talk of you and me,
Would it have been worth while, 90
To have bitten off the matter with a smile,
To have squeezed the universe into a ball
To roll it towards some overwhelming question,
To say: "I am Lazarus, come from the dead,
Come back to tell you all, I shall tell you all"— 95
If one, settling a pillow by her head
Should say: "That is not what I meant at all;
That is not it, at all."
And would it have been worth it, after all,
Would it have been worth while, 100
After the sunsets and the dooryards and the sprinkled streets,
After the novels, after the teacups, after the skirts that trail along the floor—
And this, and so much more?—
It is impossible to say just what I mean!
But as if a magic lantern threw the nerves in patterns on a screen: 105
Would it have been worth while
If one, settling a pillow or throwing off a shawl,
And turning toward the window, should say:
"That is not it at all,
That is not what I meant, at all." 110
No! I am not Prince Hamlet, nor was meant to be;
Am an attendant lord, one that will do
To swell a progress, start a scene or two,
Advise the prince; no doubt, an easy tool,

<i>Deferential, glad to be of use, Politic, cautious, and meticulous; Full of high sentence, but a bit obtuse; At times, indeed, almost ridiculous— Almost, at times, the Fool.</i>	115
<i>I grow old ... I grow old ... I shall wear the bottoms of my trousers rolled. Shall I part my hair behind? Do I dare to eat a peach? I shall wear white flannel trousers, and walk upon the beach. I have heard the mermaids singing, each to each.</i>	120
<i>I do not think that they will sing to me. I have seen them riding seaward on the waves Combing the white hair of the waves blown back When the wind blows the water white and black. We have lingered in the chambers of the sea</i>	125
<i>By sea-girls wreathed with seaweed red and brown Till human voices wake us, and we drown.</i>	130

(Source: T. S. Eliot. *Selected Poems*. India. Rupa & Co. 1992)

‘The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock’ was begun at Harvard in February 1910, and the final version was assembled in Munich in July-August 1911 from a number of fragments written over the past year. It was published in the Chicago magazine *Poetry* in June 1915 through the mediation of Ezra Pound. Eliot met Pound in London in September 1914 and later sent him *Prufrock* and *Portrait of a Lady* along with some of his other poems. It was later printed as a 12 book pamphlet in 1917 titled *Prufrock and Other Observations*.

2.1.11 Glossary and Annotations

Etherized: It has clinical as well as romantic connotations. ‘Ether’ was used for anesthetics, and ‘ethereal’ has romantic associations. Notice the strange juxtaposition of meanings that Modernism can do.

An overwhelming question: Prufrock’s intended proposal to the lady he is to visit, also a question concerning the actual meaning of Prufrock’s life.

Michelangelo: Great Italian sculptor, painter and poet.

Works and days; A poem by Greek writer Hesiod (8th century B.C) a contrast between the world of the peasant and the corrupted society in which Prufrock lives.

A dying fall: an echo of Duke Orsino's words in Shakespeare's *Twelfth Night* I, i. The voices of Prufrock and the women are submerged beneath the music and repetitive conversation.

Butt-ends: The butts or ends of smoked cigarettes.

The eternal footman: A parodic allusion to John Bunyan's (1622-88) *The Pilgrim's Progress* where Christian hopes to receive God's recognition of his goodness.

Nor was meant to be: Here is an echo of the opening line of Hamlet's soliloquy when he contemplates suicide: 'To be, or not to be'. (III,i). An echo of Dante's words: 'I am not Aeneas am not Paul'.

Full of high sentence: A reference to the Clerk of Oxford in the General Prologue (line 306) of *The Canterbury Tales* by Geoffrey Chaucer (1343? -1400). It means full of sentiments and talks.

Fool: A court jester in Elizabethan drama. Eliot here refers to Yorick, the court jester in *Hamlet*.

Shall I part my hair behind?: A reference to the autobiography *Ushant* (1952), by Conrad Aiken, where he speaks of a fellow friend at Harvard who dressed unconventionally with his hair parted behind. In Prufrock's context, it implies his tussle between the desire to flaunt a personality in dress and appearance, and

Do I dare to eat a peach?: Peaches were considered indigestible, according to Elizabeth Schneider (1910). Here it probably refers to the solitary pleasures of the experience of taste

2.1.12. Paraphrase and Critical Analysis

□ PARAPHRASE

➤ EPIGRAPH

The Epigraph is an answer by Count Guido da Montefeltro (1223-98) in Dante's *Inferno* xxvii, 61-6,. 'If I thought my answer to one who ever could return to the

world, this flame should shake no more; but since none ever did return alive from this depth, if what I hear be true, without fear of infamy I answer thee'. Guido was punished for his treacherous advice on earth to Pope Boniface. When Dante requests Guido to reveal his identity, 'so may thy name on earth maintain its front', he does so because he firmly believes that like him Dante is also eternally damned and has no possibility of returning to earth.

Lines 1-3

*LET us go then, you and I,
When the evening is spread out against the sky
Like a patient etherised upon a table;*

- It's not clear who Prufrock is singing to, but the title gives us a hint. Love songs are usually sung to people you're in love with, so it's a safe bet that Prufrock is addressing someone he loves.
- Because these were more traditional times, we'll assume this "someone" is a woman. Also, just to liven things up a bit, let's pretend that we, the readers of the poem, are the woman he loves. Feel free to giggle now if you want.
- Prufrock tells us the time of day that we're taking this trip: evening. But, this is not your ordinary evening: this "evening" is "spread out against the sky like a patient etherised upon the table."
- The image compares the evening sky to a patient strapped to an operating table and given ether, a kind of anesthetic, to numb the pain of the surgery that is about to happen.

Lines 4-7

*Let us go, through certain half-deserted streets,
The muttering retreats
Of restless nights in one-night cheap hotels
And sawdust restaurants with oyster-shells:*

- Prufrock repeats his invitation for us to come along with him. Now, usually when we go on a walk with someone, especially someone we love, we try to pick someplace romantic – a moonlit beach, a tree-lined avenue, that sort of thing. Not Prufrock. He's going to take us through "half-deserted streets," where people walk around "muttering" to themselves.
- These are the kind of streets that are filled with "cheap hotels" where one might stay for one night only as a last resort.

- Actually, these are the kind of restaurants that have “sawdust” on the floor to clear up all the liquor that people are spilling as they start to get drunk. It’s also littered with oyster-shells that no one bothers to clean up. It is dirty.
- Eliot is sending us a lot of small signals in the first section. “Half-deserted” makes the streets sound pretty sketchy, and “one-night cheap hotels” only adds to this impression. “Oysters” are an aphrodisiac, which hints at the lust and sexual affinity of the modern people. Prufrock has taken us on a stroll through the seedy red-light district, where prostitutes and vagrants hang out.
- The epigraph, which comes from Dante’s *Inferno* shows, we’re in a different kind of hell – the underbelly of a modern city.

Lines 8-12

Streets that follow like a tedious argument

Of insidious intent

To lead you to an overwhelming question ...

Oh, do not ask, “What is it?”

Let us go and make our visit.

- The streets twist and turn like a “tedious argument.” It’s an argument with “insidious intent” – the streets are so confusing it’s as if they were trying to trick us into getting lost.
- Prufrock is also being “insidious” by trying to trick us into taking a walk through the seedy part of town.
- We could even go a step further and say that both the streets and Prufrock resemble Guido da Montefeltro, who tried to fool God (see “Epigraph”).
- The streets are leading somewhere, however. They lead “to an overwhelming question,” a question of huge and possibly life-altering significance.

Lines 13-14

In the room the women come and go

Talking of Michelangelo.

- Women are entering and leaving a room talking about the Italian Renaissance painter Michelangelo. For one thing, the women must be pretty high-class to be talking about Renaissance art, but their repeated action of “coming and going” seems surprisingly pointless.
- Eliot loves those Italians. The quote is adopted from a poem the 19th century

French writer Jules Laforgue, but that doesn't really help us figure out what it means here.

- Eliot includes sneaky references to Dante *everywhere*? Well, Dante's Hell features a lot of really smart people who repeat utterly pointless physical gestures over and over again in small, cramped spaces.

Finally, these lines have an incredibly simple, singsong rhyme that could get really annoying if one had to listen to it for a long time. It sounds like a nursery rhyme, which totally does not fit with the intellectual subject of famous painters.

Lines 15-22

*The yellow fog that rubs its back upon the window-panes,
The yellow smoke that rubs its muzzle on the window-panes
Licked its tongue into the corners of the evening,
Lingered upon the pools that stand in drains,
Let fall upon its back the soot that falls from chimneys,
Slipped by the terrace, made a sudden leap,
And seeing that it was a soft October night,
Curled once about the house, and fell asleep.*

- It appears that the poem is back to talking about the “half-deserted streets” from stanza I.
- The streets are filled with a “yellow fog,” which sounds really nasty, actually. This detail might allow us to take a look at the location of the poem.
- Eliot was really interested in England, and he moved there before this poem was published. The capital of England is London, which gets really foggy. So maybe we're in London. Around the beginning of the 20th century, London was a really modern city that also had some of the roughest, seediest neighbourhoods anywhere.
- This fog seems pretty acrobatic. It has a “back” and a “muzzle,” which sounds like either a dog or a cat. Also, it “licks” things and makes “sudden leaps.” The poet is comparing the quiet, sneaky, and athletic movement of the fog to a common housecat. The fog is wandering around the streets like a cat wanders around a house.
- Finally, the fog gets tired and “curls” around the city houses to “fall asleep” like a cat would curl around something smaller, maybe the leg of a table or chair.

- It is a “soft October night,” which means the poem is set in autumn.

Lines 23-25

*And indeed there will be time
For the yellow smoke that slides along the street,
Rubbing its back upon the window-panes;*

- Here, the phrase “there will be time” refers to a poem called “To His Coy Mistress” by the seventeenth century English poet Andrew Marvell.
- Prufrock, however, uses the reference to “time” in exactly the opposite way. He thinks there’s plenty of time for delays and dwindling.
- Just like in Marvell’s poem, Prufrock addresses himself to a “mistress,” someone he “loves,” but here it is Prufrock, and not the mistress, who is being “coy.”

Lines 26-34

*There will be time, there will be time
To prepare a face to meet the faces that you meet;
There will be time to murder and create,
And time for all the works and days of hands
That lift and drop a question on your plate;
Time for you and time for me,
And time yet for a hundred indecisions,
And for a hundred visions and revisions,
Before the taking of a toast and tea.*

- He keeps repeating that “There will be time,” as if he hasn’t quite convinced himself, or his lover.
- In the next line, he says there’s “time for all the works and days of hands.” Here is an allusion. *Works and Days* was the name of the name of a work written by the Greek poet Hesiod. It’s poem about the importance of working for a living and not living a lazy a pointless existence.
- Prufrock seems to refer to individual body parts instead of whole. So far we have “faces” and “hands.”
- But no, we still do not understand what the question is.
- There’s also time for “indecisions,” for not deciding things.

Lines 35-36

In the room the women come and go

Talking of Michelangelo.

- These lines seem to “come and go” from the poem just like the women they describe.

Lines 37-39

And indeed there will be time

To wonder, “Do I dare?” and, “Do I dare?”

Time to turn back and descend the stair,

- There’s still plenty of time to do all the important things Prufrock wants to do, except now he is second-guessing himself.
- The setting gets more specific, too. We might imagine him standing outside the upstairs room his “love” is in. He paces back and forth and tries to decide whether to ask his big question. “Do I dare?” he wonders. But no, he does not dare. He turns around and heads back downstairs.

Lines 40-44

With a bald spot in the middle of my hair—

[They will say: “How his hair is growing thin!”]

My morning coat, my collar mounting firmly to the chin,

My necktie rich and modest, but asserted by a simple pin—

[They will say: “But how his arms and legs are thin!”]

- Prufrock has a big bald spot. He’s probably a middle-aged man, or at least close to it.
- Also, he seems worried about what others will say about him and his bald spot and his thin arms and legs.
- His only attractive features, are his clothes. He has a nice coat and necktie, which he wears according to the fashion of the time. He is not a trend-setter, rather, he’s a trend-follower.
- One can recall that Guido da Montefeltro was also worried about his reputation, even though it didn’t matter because he was already in hell.

Lines 45-48

Do I dare

Disturb the universe?

In a minute there is time

For decisions and revisions which a minute will reverse.

- Prufrock does not want to rock the boat or “disturb the universe.” That would involve taking a risk, and Prufrock will never take risks.
- But he still insists (again) that he has plenty of time. In other words he has starting to sound pretty kooky, like a broken record. He insists that everything could change “in a minute” – if only he could make a decision.
- But things can also change back again in another “minute,” once he “revises” the decision he made.

Lines 49-54

For I have known them all already, known them all:—

Have known the evenings, mornings, afternoons,

I have measured out my life with coffee spoons;

I know the voices dying with a dying fall

Beneath the music from a farther room.

So how should I presume?

- Prufrock says he has heard voices “dying” or fading away when music starts to play in a “farther room.” He lives through other people.
- The phrase “dying fall” is, another literary reference, this time to Shakespeare’s famous play, *Twelfth Night*. In the first scene of the play, a lovesick count named Orsino is listening to music that has a “dying fall.” The music reminds him of his love for one of the other characters.
- In this poem, however, it is as if Prufrock were overhearing the “voices” of another couple – maybe Orsino and his love? – in another room, which get covered up by yet another room even “farther” away.
- It is a tricky image, we know, but the point is that Prufrock can only experience love at second- and third-hand. If Orsino’s love is the real thing, then Prufrock’s is just a copy of a copy of a copy.
- Finally, he asks, “So how should I presume?” To “presume” is to take for granted that something is the case. The speaker of Andrew Marvell’s *To His Coy Mistress* presumes that his mistress wants to be with him. Prufrock too assumes too much.

Lines 55-56

*And I have known the eyes already, known them all—
The eyes that fix you in a formulated phrase,*

- Here Prufrock goes with the body parts again – this time it is “the eyes. He is trying to cover up his fear. However he is not very successful.

Lines 57-61

*And when I am formulated, sprawling on a pin,
When I am pinned and wriggling on the wall,
Then how should I begin
To spit out all the butt-ends of my days and ways?
And how should I presume?*

- He has started to confuse his sense of language. He just told us that he has “already” known the eyes that would formulate him, but now he talks as if this event has not happened yet. He imagines himself “sprawling on a pin” and put, “wriggling,” on a wall.
- He’s referring to the practice, in his time, where insects that were collected by scientists were “pinned” inside a glass frame and hung on a wall so they could be preserved and inspected.
- The image of a man tied down and “wriggling” might also remind you of the very first lines of the poem, when the evening was “spread out” like a patient on the operating table.
- The “butt-ends” could refer to any kind of end – the little odds and ends of his daily life, the evenings he spent, etc. But it is also the word people use for the end of a cigarette, the part that does not get smoked. Prufrock is comparing his life to a used-up cigarette.

Lines 62-64

*And I have known the arms already, known them all—
Arms that are braceleted and white and bare
[But in the lamplight, downed with light brown hair!]*

- Prufrock here sees women merely as “arms,” and he uses the same repetitive phrase about how he has “known them all.”
- He sounds tired and bored, but he seems pretty excited about the arm in line sixty-four. This is probably the arm of the woman he invited on a walk (the “you” of the poem).

- If they did go for a walk through half-deserted streets, it would make sense to see her arm under the “lamplight.” The soft, “light brown hair” makes this arm different from all the other ones and would seem to contradict his claim to have seen *all* the arms. These lines show Prufrock’s essential contradictory nature.

Lines 65-66

*It is perfume from a dress
That makes me so digress?*

- Prufrock admits that he has been “digressing,” or wandering away from the main point.
- He blames his digression on the scent of a woman’s perfume. For a man that claims to have known all the women, he is still fairly preoccupied with all things feminine.

Lines 67-69

*Arms that lie along a table, or wrap about a shawl.
And should I then presume?
And how should I begin?*

- Lots of arms. It reminds us of Dr. Seuss’s “Green Eggs and Ham.” He still has not told us what that something is. He does not even know where to “begin” talking about it.

Lines 70-72

*Shall I say, I have gone at dusk through narrow streets
And watched the smoke that rises from the pipes
Of lonely men in shirt-sleeves, leaning out of windows?*

- Here Prufrock wonders how to “begin” to talk about that difficult subject. This is the story of his “days and ways” from line 60, and it begins “I have gone at dusk through narrow streets.”
- He is basically taking us back to the beginning of the poem. The most interesting new detail he has to offer us is that he saw “lonely men” smoking pipes out of their windows.
- Some people bring the party with them wherever they go; Prufrock brings loneliness with him.

Lines 73-74

*I should have been a pair of ragged claws
Scuttling across the floors of silent seas.*

- Here is another image of Prufrock himself. It might also be the most accurate self-evaluation that Prufrock offers in the entire poem.
- The crab is the perfect image of Prufrock, because it seems suited to a single over-riding goal: self-protection.

Lines 75-78

*And the afternoon, the evening, sleeps so peacefully!
Smoothed by long fingers,
Asleep ... tired ... or it malingers,
Stretched on the floor, here beside you and me.*

- Prufrock continues to confuse the past, present, and future. He winds the clock back to the afternoon and then plays it forward to the evening, which is when we started reading the poem.
- The afternoon and evening are “sleeping,” much as the cat-like fog was asleep outside the house in line 22. He is wondering if he should “wake” the day up somehow, say, by asking (cough, cough) a certain question? But he is hesitant because the day seems so peacefully asleep, as if it were being “smoothed by long fingers.”
- This image of the fingers makes us think of petting a cat, but it may remind one of something different. The evening is “asleep” and “tired” – nothing is happening. But it might also be “malingering,” or pretending to be tired.

Lines 79-80

*Should I, after tea and cakes and ices,
Have the strength to force the moment to its crisis?*

- Now “tea” is over. In line 34, he hadn’t had tea yet, but now he’s digesting all the sweet and tasty things he consumed.
- Prufrock is feeling so lazy, in fact, he is not sure he has the “strength” to ask the “overwhelming question,” which would produce a big decision or a “crisis.”

Lines 81-83

*But though I have wept and fasted, wept and prayed,
Though I have seen my head [grown slightly bald] brought in upon a platter,
I am no prophet—and here's no great matter;*

- Prufrock does not want to be confused with a prophet.
- In the Bible, the prophet John the Baptist, who baptized Jesus, dies after the stepdaughter (Salome) of King Herod asks for his head on a platter.
- Prufrock is not sure what he is trying to say – he may just be feeling sorry for himself.

Lines 84-86

*I have seen the moment of my greatness flicker,
And I have seen the eternal Footman hold my coat, and snicker,
And in short, I was afraid.*

- He continues to mope around and feel sorry for himself. He already feels as if his best days are behind him, like a candle that flickers and goes out.
- In the old days (even older than Eliot's poem), a "footman" was like a butler who would help rich people do things. One of the things a footman would do is to hold the coat as one got in a carriage or entered a house.
- But this footman is not so friendly. He is the eternal Footman – "death" – and if he is holding your coat, it means you are probably about to enter some place that you won't come out of again.
- Prufrock has another rare moment of honesty when he admits to being afraid.

Lines 87-93

*And would it have been worth it, after all,
After the cups, the marmalade, the tea,
Among the porcelain, among some talk of you and me,
Would it have been worth while,
To have bitten off the matter with a smile,
To have squeezed the universe into a ball
To roll it toward some overwhelming question,*

- Time in the poem continues to play tricks on us. Now Prufrock talks as if he has already passed up on his opportunity to do that important thing.

- He starts this big long thought about whether “it would have been worth it,” which he won’t finish until the end of the stanza.
- It seems that even more eating and drinking have been going on, as well as “some talk of you and me”.
- He talks about “biting off the matter,” as if it were something he could eat, like his precious marmalade (a kind of jam). “The matter,” we assume, is the important thing that he meant to discuss so many lines ago.
- He compares the effort it would require to take on “some overwhelming question” to squeezing the entire universe into a ball.

Lines 94-95

*To say: “I am Lazarus, come from the dead,
Come back to tell you all, I shall tell you all”–*

- Prufrock compares his task of asking the question to Lazarus coming back from the dead.
- In the Bible, a rich man named Dives dies and is sent to Hell. Around the same time, a poor man named Lazarus dies and is sent to Heaven. Dives asks the prophet Abraham to please send Lazarus back to earth to warn his brothers to mend their ways or they’ll end up in Hell. But Abraham refused: ‘if they hear not Moses and the prophets, neither will they be persuaded, though one rose from the dead’.
- The epigraph comes from a poem about another man who, unlike Dives, *did* make it back from Hell to tell warn people about sin. His name was Dante Alighieri, the poet.
- But Prufrock is no Lazarus, nor is he a Dante. He is more like Dives, the man who never escapes from his terrible situation.

Lines 96-98

*If one, settling a pillow by her head,
Should say: “That is not what I meant at all.
That is not it, at all.”*

- Prufrock finally completes the sentence, “Would it have been worth it, after all,” from the beginning of the stanza. Clearly Prufrock thinks that, no, it would not have been worth it. So, he thinks, it is a good thing he never tried or risked anything.
- He never asked the question, because he was too afraid of getting rejected. So he will never know if that’s what she “meant”.

Lines 99-104

*And would it have been worth it, after all,
Would it have been worth while,
After the sunsets and the dooryards and the sprinkled streets,
After the novels, after the teacups, after the skirts that trail along the floor –
And this, and so much more? –
It is impossible to say just what I mean!*

- He wonders if it would have been worth it if after him and his love have experienced all of these nice but trivial pleasures of everyday, middle-class life, including “sunsets,” “novels,” and “teacups” – but he can not finish his thought.
- Prufrock is right about one thing: he is totally incapable of saying what he means.

Lines 105-110

*But as if a magic lantern threw the nerves in patterns on a screen:
Would it have been worth while
If one, settling a pillow or throwing off a shawl,
And turning toward the window, should say:
“That is not it at all,
That is not what I meant, at all.”*

- Ah, now he comes up with the right words to say what he means. It is as if the words locked in his “nerves” were being projected by a “magic lantern” onto a screen for him to read.
- In a typical Prufrock-fashion, even the right words are disappointing. It is just another image of a woman sitting on a couch or a bed and saying she has been misunderstood.
- Once again, it is implied that he does not think asking her would have been worth the risk of rejection.
- But, once again, he will never know.

Lines 111-119

*No! I am not Prince Hamlet, nor was meant to be;
Am an attendant lord, one that will do
To swell a progress, start a scene or two,
Advise the prince; no doubt, an easy tool,
Deferential, glad to be of use,*

*Politic, cautious, and meticulous;
Full of high sentence, but a bit obtuse;
At times, indeed, almost ridiculous –
Almost, at times, the Fool.*

- Here is a reference from Shakespeare.
- In *Hamlet*, the title character is an indecisive man, much like Prufrock has been for most of the poem. Hamlet vacillates. Like Prufrock, Hamlet is a coward who talks too much. But now Prufrock says he is not like Hamlet, after all.
- Prufrock compares himself to a minor character in the play, one of the “attendants” who serve the king. We think he’s talking about Polonius.
- In *Hamlet*, Polonius is the father of Ophelia, the heroine, and everyone respects him because he always takes the cautious route and acts like “an easy tool.”
- Polonius talks a lot– he uses fancy words (“high sentence”) and proverbs – but in the end, he is kind of a dullard. As Prufrock so cautiously puts it, he is “almost ridiculous” and almost like “the Fool.”
- With this recognition, Prufrock has finally arrived at a pretty honest assessment of himself.

Lines 120-121

*I grow old ... I grow old ...
I shall wear the bottoms of my trousers rolled.*

- Prufrock has disguised the passage of time, he can no longer hide the fact that he’s getting older and older. He blew his chance to ask the question, and now he is like the man who stays at a party too long, except that the party is his own poem.
- Because he already failed to make one big decision, he is going to pretend he is an assertive, confident man by making a bunch of comically minor decisions. Rolling up the trouser is a major marker of his minor decision.

Lines 122-123

*Shall I part my hair behind? Do I dare to eat a peach?
I shall wear white flannel trousers, and walk upon the beach.*

- Parting one’s hair behind was considered “daringly bohemian” at the time.
- Prufrock is still trying to make all kinds of tiny decisions, now that he has

missed his big chance. As always, he is interested in the small pleasures of food and fashion, like the peach and the white flannel trousers.

Line 124

I have heard the mermaids singing, each to each.

- Prufrock sees some mermaids.

Line 125

I do not think that they will sing to me.

- Even the mermaids won't sing to him. Prufrock lacks self-confidence.

Lines 126-128

*I have seen them riding seaward on the waves
Combing the white hair of the waves blown back
When the wind blows the water white and black.*

- Of all the things Prufrock claims to have seen, are the mermaids.
- These mermaids look like they are surfing on the waves with their tails. The only troubling sign is that the waves have "white hair," which makes us think of old people.

Lines 129-131

*We have lingered in the chambers of the sea
By sea-girls wreathed with seaweed red and brown
Till human voices wake us, and we drown.*

- This is kind of an "it was all a dream" ending, but even weirder.
- Prufrock brings "us" back into the picture, saying that we have been hanging out in the ocean with him.
- The word "chambers" has two meaning here: it can refer to small cramped spaces, or it can refer to rooms, especially bedrooms.
- Prufrock has spent significant amounts of time lurking outside of rooms and imagining women who are wrapped in shawls and laying on pillows. We do not know who the "sea-girls" are, but they do not seem quite as majestic as the mermaids.
- The "human voices" may remind us of the "voices with a dying fall" from line 52.

- It could signal that Prufrock has truly grown insane, or that his “true self” is really more crab-like than human, or that, yes, he has been dreaming the whole time.

➤ CRITICAL ANALYSIS

The landscape of the poem may be the neurotic modern Boston city which resembles Dante’s medieval *Inferno*. The lines comprising the dedication at the beginning of the poem are from *The Divine Comedy (Purgatorio XXI, 133-6)* by Dante Alighieri (1265-1321). Eliot here pays tribute to his friend Jean Verdenal, who was Eliot’s fellow lodger in Paris in 1910-11. Dante is being conducted through the Inferno and Purgatory by the spirit of the Roman poet Virgil, where they meet another poet Statius, in the fifth circle of the Purgatory. Statius pays his homage to Virgil. Virgil then reminds him that both of them have no existence, they are but empty shades. In answer to that Statius says: ‘Now canst thou comprehend the measure of the love which warms me toward thee, when I forget our nothingness, and treat shades as a solid thing’. Eliot quotes Statius’ answer in the dedication.

“Prufrock” displays the two most important characteristics of Eliot’s early poetry. First, it is strongly influenced by the French Symbolists, like Mallarmé, Rimbaud, and Baudelaire. Following the footsteps of the Symbolists, Eliot is here schematic, insistent on the conscious use of hard, direct, and precise imagery (the yellow smoke and the hair-covered arms of the women are two good examples of this). Eliot creates Prufrock: with the intention to assimilate the fragmentary and the contingent which Baudelaire had identified as the sign of modernity into a tradition. He creates Prufrock as the moody, urban, isolated-yet-sensitive thinker. In the poem he is a bundle of voices rather than a character. Eliot makes Prufrock engaged in role-playing like a ventriloquist. Voices crop up sometimes from within himself, sometimes, as it were, out of nowhere.

The second defining characteristic of this poem is its use of fragmentation and juxtaposition. Eliot sustained his interest in fragmentation and its applications throughout his career, and his use of the technique changes in important ways across his body of work. The detached, apparently disconnected images are only emotionally and psychologically (rather than logically) linked and look-like film-montage. Eliot’s use of bits and pieces of formal structure suggests that fragmentation of the implicit framework dissolves into images which in their turn, are refracted into a spectrum of levels, media or hallucinations of multiple meaning. The cultivated discourse of the

upper-class drawing room [Talking of Michelangelo] represents a homogeneous world rather than a particular woman—we are introduced to the world of tea, cakes, ices, bracelets, skirts, small talks, tall talks, various kind of talks, eyes, arms, voices, novels. The women’s cultured language is so formidable that Prufrock never gets an opportunity to sing his song. The ‘room’ in which women talk suggests monologism, while the ‘streets’ suggests dialogism.

The poem ends with the Prufrock assigning himself a role in one of Shakespeare’s plays: he is no Hamlet, but he may yet be useful and important as “an attendant lord, one that will do / To swell a progress, start a scene or two...” By wearing the bottoms of his trousers rolled and by parting his hair behind, Prufrock is denying the conventional role in society. He is dramatizing himself and still playing the role of a dandy. “Prufrock” ends with a devaluation of its hero, although it exalts its creator. Or does it? The last line of the poem is rather ambivalent in nature—that when the world intrudes, when “human voices wake us,” the dream is shattered: “we drown.” With this single line, Eliot dismantles the romantic notion of Prufrock’s reverie. We feel rather disturbed as mermaids usually drown their lovers, and Prufrock remains silent about it. Is it a reverie of escape or a sincere articulation of the modern man’s buried life? It remains as a jigsaw puzzle. It offers only a temporary respite. There are ambivalent suggestions of both drowning and waking. For the modern man and for the modern century there is no possible escape, either way he is drowned, while dreaming of escape or while trying to be awoken listening to the human voices.

➤ **THE TITLE**

Eliot was greatly influenced by Kipling’s title “The Love Song of Har Dyal”. He had seen the name Prufrock-Littau, furniture wholesalers on advertisements in St. Louis. Eliot was struck by this rather absurd name. Hence the title ‘The love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock’ is a kind of mockery of an individual possessing this unromantic, absurd name who should want to sing of love. This suggests that the poem is not a conventional love song in the Elizabethan or Romantic tradition. The name compounded of ‘prude’ and ‘frock’ brings with it connotations of prudishness, prudence, prurience, primness and dandyism. The title also suggests Prufrock’s social class.

➤ **Significance of the Epigraph**

You have already gathered the literal meaning of the Epigraph in the earlier section. What exactly do you think is its significance in the context of the poem? The

Epigraph in Prufrock gives hints of the central meaning or the message of the poem. There is a contrast between the serious epigraph from Dante's *Inferno* and the lighter tone of Prufrock's love song announced in the title. This mixture of levity and seriousness is to be found in the entire poem that follows. What strikes is that we have just been told that the poem is a love song of a character called Prufrock, in the epigraph we are given the words of another character, Guido da Montefeltro, a man condemned to hell in a prison of flame for his treacherous advice on earth to Pope Boniface. Guido confides the shame of his miserable life to Dante only because he believes that Dante will never return to earth to report what he says. You should at once be hard set in thinking about the nature of the so-called love song in the present poem. You will soon discover the similarity of the situations in which Prufrock and Guido are cast by their respective authors. Both are in hell. Prufrock finds himself in a situation, in a society, which is like hell for him and believes, like Guido, that there is no way out. Here lies the significance of the epigraph at an ideational level - the instant shock it registers in the reader's mind as one approaches Eliot's poem, is a deliberate effect.

2.1.13 Treatment of Form and Content

Prufrock" is a variation on the dramatic monologue, a type of poem popular with Eliot's predecessors. Dramatic monologues are similar to soliloquies in plays. Robert Browning made it a popular art form. In the poem we notice the three essential characteristics of a dramatic monologue. Firstly, they are the utterances of a specific individual (not the poet) at a specific moment in time. Secondly, the monologue is specifically directed at a listener or listeners whose presence is not directly referenced but is merely suggested in the speaker's words. Lastly, the primary focus of a dramatic monologue is the development and revelation of the speaker's character. Eliot modernizes the form by removing the implied listeners and focusing on Prufrock's fragmented and elusive role, one who is unsure of his selfhood.

2.1.14 Eliot's Idea of the Modern Man and his Society

Modern man suffers from an impoverishment of emotional vivacity. He lives according to the rules of the empty social conventions of a modern society and those of a debauched culture. Modern man's life is sordid as well as sensual. He is to some extent aware of his isolation and depravation. He is entangled in a corrupt, decaying,

modern society. All of these features, however, could be categorized into three major groups. Each group, in turn, would show a series of subsidiary relating problems which then would make a whole entity. The duplicity of man, lack of communication among men, and man's isolation are three basic predicaments of modern man, making him more and more alienated, isolated and unhappy, although, these motifs are common to Eliot's poetry. Let us now look at them closely in the context of the poem that we have taken up in this unit.

The sense of duplicity within the modern man is a major motif in Eliot's *The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock*. In this poem the protagonist Prufrock is helplessly caught in a ceaseless web between his own desire to live by himself and the obligation to submit to the social conventions. In his book, *The American T. S. Eliot*, Eric Sigg affirms that Eliot depicts the duplicity between the "warning elements within a single soul". This duplicity makes Prufrock suffer helplessly. The two selves, that is, the personal and the social, have to tolerate each other (188-9). Prufrock, the representative of the modern Man, has a different self to put forward. This self as Eliot expresses is not real but artificial that should be prepared in order to meet the people of this debauched society:

There will be time, there will be time to prepare
a face to meet the faces that you meet (Lines 26-27).

Modern man, in order to be accepted by others, tries to mould himself according to the hollow norms of the modern society. Joseph Conrad says: "We can at times be compelled into a mysterious recognition of our opposite as our true self"¹⁹. Modern man is nevertheless, instinctively and naturally a creature different from what he appears in the public. It is palpable, for example, in his getting bored with his fellowmen as soon as they try to penetrate to his personal life. In this sense modern man is a hypocrite, a trickster. Man again has a sense of duplicity regarding his own self. He suffers in the society yet he is reluctant, actually incapable, to do something about it. Modern man is therefore psychologically handicapped. He is unable to take the much needed actions.

The idea of duplicity in its both aspects, within the man and between the man and society, has a general impact on him. Hugh Kenner in his *The Invisible Poet* specifies that the conflict between Prufrock, who stands for the modern man, and himself and also his conflict with the society "condemns him to boredom and passivity". He considers man's role in the society no more than that of a fool. The fact is expressed, explicitly, in the poem where Prufrock is analyzing himself as:

“At times, indeed, almost ridiculous
Almost, at times, the Fool” (lines 118-119).

As a result of this view, Prufrock retreats to his own self which would result in two other problems: his inability to communicate to others and also his isolation.

Lack of communication among men is another basic theme functioning in “The Love Song”. The idea is presented by Martin Scofield in *T.S. Eliot: The Poems*. He, however, puts an emphasis on “a positive relationship between a man and a woman. Nevertheless, Prufrock seems to be unable to communicate with all of those who are around him, both men and women. It is interesting, in the same manner that others are equally unable to have a positive relation with him. Thus, the idea of isolation can be studied from a communal point of view. Inability to communicate is common to the modern generation. Yet, the problem with Prufrock is that he is aware of this fact; others are not. Although it seems that others are having conversations as

“In the room the women come and go
Talking Michelangelo” (Lines 13-14/35-36).

Talking about Michelangelo would be a kind of escape each speaker resorts to not to be touched by the other person’s real words about real life situation. The Michelangelo talk, in other words, is not a genuine way of communication since it does not penetrate to real alive people’s life. Tangible communication infiltrates the communicators’ mind and makes a way to their inner selves. Thus defined, there appears no sign of communication in the Michelangelo talk where some women would presumably maneuver over some already-known, stereotyped talk about Michelangelo who, in his turn, being an artist, is deliberately chosen by Eliot as a source of attraction to women. Thus he acts as an entertaining subject to talk about. Nevertheless, the women would, as the nature of such talks importunes, concentrate on out witting each other by putting across deeper familiarity with the artist and his works. They do not, however, get into real conversation about their real alive fellow people. This might have the same cause as Prufrock’s being reticent.

With the repetition of two lines, all in all, there are three places in the poem where Eliot refers to the lack of communication. Line 97 is repeated in line 110. Here one can observe that Prufrock is uncommunicative because he fears to be misinterpreted.

The fear of being misinterpreted is basic to Prufrock’s preference to be silent. This fear, as expressed in lines 97 and 110, results from the consciousness on the part

of Prufrock of the idea of lack of communication. In the two lines Prufrock imagines that he would be able to break the ice and talk to someone, a woman in this case, what would be the outcome of that? Prufrock believes it as being misinterpreted by the lady. She would say:

“That is not what I meant at all.
That is not at all” (lines 97-98,109-110).

In this way Prufrock never tries a conversation and he remains silent.

There is also another cause for Prufrock’s silence. In lines 103 and 117 he explicitly alludes to the fact. Line 103 reads: “It is impossible to say just what I mean”! He seems to be willing to express what he has in his mind. Yet, he seems devoid of the means, hence words. Eliot carries on with this idea to line 117 where he briefly and beautifully summarizes Prufrock: “full of sentence, but a bit obtuse” (13). Lack of communication as a theme of modern man’s, Prufrock’s life, in turn, brings up the problem of isolation. As a result, he becomes more and more alienated; hence the affliction of the modern man.

The theme of isolation of the modern man is also central to Eliot’s “The Love Song”. Here, Eliot tries to show the fate of modern man as a creature isolated from the entire community. This man is unable to go to the public. As it was discussed earlier in the unit that man is struggling between two selves: Social self, that is, what he puts forward in community, and his own self, a being living by himself. In “The Love Song” these two seem to be at odds with each other. This oddity, by itself, implies that human relations are futile and useless as well. Man should retreat to the remote distances of his mind. The poem, as a whole, affirms the idea. The poem is a thus monologue not a conversation. “The Love Song”, being a monologue, is again a symptom of Prufrock’s isolation. In this sense, all of the actions take place in the speaker’s mind. There is no actual action. “Walking at dust through narrow streets”, “coming from the dead”, “disturbing the universe”, even such minute actions of “scuttling across the floors of silent seas” and other references to action, interspersed throughout the poem, are fake and false actions taking place in the remote corners of Prufrock’s imagination. He does nothing. He is far removed from the actual world to perform an action. He is isolated. He cannot enjoy being with others or if he can, it’s so painful to him. Others’ experience is no better. G.B. Harrison in his book *Major British Writers*, describe these people as “people whose pleasures are so sordid and so feeble that they seem almost sadder than their pains”.

In “The Love Song” Prufrock’s isolation is reported in different ways. In a series of lines one can observe that Prufrock considers himself a man who stands out of the community. He fails to put forward his thoughts. He looks at people from outside of their groups. This can be traced in lines 42, 44, 49, 55 and 63. Except for the lines 42 and 44 in the remaining lines Prufrock is addressing the people. He alludes to different parts of their bodies.

“For I have known them all already, known them all” (Line 49)

“And I have known the eyes already, known them all” (Line 55)

“And I have known the arms already, known them all” (Line 62)

A close study shows that Prufrock, through naming the parts of the body, emphasizes that neither of them appeal to him as a whole. Neither could compensate for his isolation. Sexual connotations are evident. The idea of isolation, however, finds a new dimension in lines 42 and 44. In these lines Prufrock shows himself conscious of the people around him. He believes that they look at him questioningly. They are fault finding. The most terrible scene takes place when they, Prufrock imagines it, begin to talk about him physical deficiencies. His hair and his arms as well as his legs are the targets of their criticism.

“They will say: ‘How his hair growing thin!’” (Line 42)

“They will say: ‘How his arms and legs are thin!’” (Line 44)

This sense of consciousness about the surroundings is described as a hindrance to coming to an understanding of the surroundings. *The McGraw-Hill Guide to English Literature* affirms the idea “The consciousness presented in the poem is an intensely anxious and important one in that the speaker is unable to draw conclusions about anything”. He is nervous about that. He thinks that he is under their scrutiny. Thus, he feels more isolated from them. He, consequently, gets to the point that finds “the chambers of the see” the only suitable place for him to dwell in (line 129). D.E.S. Maxwell in an essay, entitled “The Early Poem,” in the book *Critics On T.S. Eliot* states that, “Prufrock... never penetrates beyond ‘the cups, the marmalade, the tea’ to a conclusion either with the ladies in the poem or with his surroundings.

Duplicity, lack of communication, and isolation are three major predicaments from which Prufrock suffers in “The Love Song”. The society seems to have a share in that. Yet, Prufrock, the representative of the modern man, himself, seems to be responsible for his sufferings. That is because everything happens As a result, he becomes more and more alienated; hence the affliction of the modern man.

2.1.15 Comprehension Exercises

● Long Answer Type Questions-20 Marks

1. How is 'The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock' a modernist poem?
2. What specific images does Eliot use to communicate the speaker's isolation and frustration in 'The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock'?
3. Describe 'The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock' as a Dramatic Monologue.
4. Comment on the use of irony in 'The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock'.

● Medium Length Answer Type Questions-12 Marks

1. How do Guido da Montefeltro and the epigraph from Dante's *Inferno* fit with the rest of the poem? How is Prufrock like Guido? How are they different?
2. The poem ends with Prufrock drowning with his love in the ocean. Is this ending real or some kind of dream? How does it relate to the rest of the poem?
3. Who does Prufrock address his song to? How much do we know about this person?

● Short Questions: 6 marks

1. In the opening line, the speaker states, "Let us go then, you and I." Who is the *you* here?
2. The speaker (Prufrock) compares the sunset to a "patient etherised upon a table." Why is the sunset compared to some hospital patient who has been anesthetized and is waiting for an operation?
3. What are "one-night cheap hotels" and "sawdust restaurants." ?
4. Who was Michelangelo?

2.1.16 Activity for the Learner

Modernism as you understand, is a very embracing phenomenon, the crux of which is extremely difficult to comprehend within a single Unit. For catering to your deeper reading interests, you may look up the following books:

Davies's, Alistair. *An Annotated Critical Bibliography of Modernism*. Harvester Press.1982.

Levin, Harry. *What Was Modernism? repr in Refractions: Essays in Comparative Literature*. London. Oxford University Press. 1966.

Yeats, W.B. *Autobiographies*. Papermac. 1980.

2.1.17 Summing Up

Both the poems we have discussed in this unit are examples of deviation from the norm, or from usual reader expectations, both are ruthless in their rejection of the past, and are iconoclastic in nature. The world is seen through the artist's inner feelings and mental states. The themes and vantage points are chosen to question the conventional view use of myth and unconscious forces rather than motivations of conventional plot. The poems are open-ended works, not finished, nor aiming at formal perfection. The subject is often an act of writing itself and not the ostensible referent. In that sense, you need to be on your guard while reading such poetry, so that you distinguish between the ruptures and parallelisms both, of form and content, to use terms from conventional artistry.

2.1.18. Comprehensive Reading List

- Ackroyd, Peter, *T. S. Eliot*. London: Hamish Hamilton, 1984.
- Bergonzi, Bernard. *T. S. Eliot*. New York: Macmillan, 1972.
- Donoghue, Denis. *Yeats*. Fontana/Collins, 1971.
- Ellmann, Richard and Feidelson, Charles, jr, (eds), *The Modern Tradition: Background of Modern literature*. New York and London, 1965.
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- Southam, B. C., *A Student's Guide to the Selected Poems Of T. S. Eliot*, 4th ed., London: Faber 7 Faber, 1981.
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- Wilson, F.A.C. *W. B. Yeats and Tradition*. New York: Macmillan, 1958.