Advanced Placement in English Literature and Composition

Individual Learning Packet

Teaching Unit

The Waste Land

by T. S. Eliot
The Waste Land

Note to the Teacher

Naturally the concrete meaning of poetry, especially modern poetry, can be elusive; indeed, T. S. Eliot’s friend and editor Ezra Pound once said that modern poetry “must be difficult.” However, this study guide takes the position that poetry, like other literature, is first a means of communication. If it fails to communicate effectively, then it will not be popular and will not earn a lasting place in the annals of literature, as “The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock” and The Waste Land have certainly done. Eliot’s poems, while difficult at times and though impossible to nail down firmly, nevertheless communicate with readers, both on a literal and deeply emotional level. One of the main purposes of this guide is to provide students with the knowledge and skills they will need in order to “demystify” these poems and others like them. We have tried to lead readers toward logical interpretations when the meanings may be hazy, and we have tried to explicate the poems as clearly as possible when certain meanings—allusions, for example—are widely accepted.

Modernism as an artistic movement emphasized questions rather than answers, and the focus in poetry tended to be on images and sounds, rather than simplistic messages. To some extent, Eliot went along with the so-called Imagists in their dictum “No ideas but in things” (images should evoke a myriad of meanings; poets should not state ideas). However, he was also a true original: while he borrowed from many styles and agreed with several literary philosophies, he was unafraid when it came to creating his own unique style, which at times does clearly state, or at least show, definite meanings. In fact, to Eliot, his ideas were as important as the images and the feelings in his poems. So while he was unquestionably a “modern” poet, his work pays homage to, and owes a great deal of its effectiveness to, the huge body of traditional literature from which he draws inspiration, certain poetic forms, and a considerable amount of material.

The four “mini-lectures” are provided here as introductions to Eliot and his poems, because a firm grasp of Eliot’s life and the era in which the poems were created are both vital to anyone beginning an exploration and reaching for an understanding of these complicated poems. It is recommended that teachers present the first three lectures, with question-and-answer discussions, before the study of “Prufrock,” then the fourth one prior to launching into The Waste Land. Of course, teachers should familiarize themselves with all the material in the Teaching Unit and the Study Guide before beginning any instruction in the unit.

For further reading, there are many and varied articles and books on both poems. For a straightforward, dependable chronicle of Eliot’s life, we recommend Great Tom by T. S. Matthews (1974), which also includes some valuable criticism and analysis of the poems.

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Objectives

By the end of this Unit, students will be able to:

1. place T. S. Eliot within the overall context of the history and development of literature in the English language;

2. place the two poems within the context of Eliot’s career;

3. develop a logical, meaningful interpretation of both poems and offer evidence from the poems to support that reading;

4. recognize and define the following literary terms:
   - dramatic monologue
   - stream-of-consciousness
   - free verse
   - allusion
   - motif
   - alliteration
   - assonance
   - consonance
   - internal and end rhyme

5. identify elements in both poems that can be characterized as “modern;”

6. develop an understanding of Eliot’s philosophy of life, as shown in both poems;

7. list major traits of the main characters in the poems;

8. provide informed speculation as to the original audience for the poems and the effects the poems may have had on that audience;

9. identify and understand the historical context for Eliot and his poetry;

10. locate and understand the major allusions in the poems;

11. respond to multiple choice questions similar to those that will appear on the Advanced Placement in English Literature and Composition exam;

12. respond to writing prompts similar to those that will appear on the Advanced Placement in English Literature and Composition exam;

13. offer a close reading of both poems and support all assertions and interpretations with direct evidence from the texts, from authoritative critical knowledge of the genre, or from authoritative criticism of the poems.
Born into a prosperous family on September 26, 1888, in St. Louis, Missouri, Thomas Stearns Eliot was the grandson of a Unitarian minister. As a young man, he studied at Harvard with another poet who was to gain fame: E. E. Cummings. But Eliot, who went on to study at Oxford, became more attracted to England than to America, especially after he married an Englishwoman. He then moved to London and later gave up his American citizenship. Thus, Eliot can be classified as both an American and an English poet.

Eliot’s first major poem was published in 1915 (“The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock,” in the well-known Chicago-based magazine Poetry), but he was not considered a major poet until the publication of The Waste Land in 1922. In between those publications, Eliot made his living as a schoolteacher, a banker, and finally as one of the most influential literary critics in England. As of 1919, he was the leading critic at the Times Literary Supplement in London, so he spent most of his life creating powerful poetry and writing important commentary on the works of others. He was truly a literary giant.

As both poet and critic, Eliot led the way in popularizing the modernist style of thinking and writing. In fiction, modernism was represented by the stark realism and formal experimentation of such writers as Ernest Hemingway. In poetry, this new sensibility was more strictly defined by the Imagists, including Eliot’s close friend Ezra Pound, who believed in their motto, “No ideas but in things” (the image is vital; the meaning is secondary). Generally modernism embraced free verse, with no regular rhyme scheme or meter, and freedom of thought, often questioning accepted ideas and social norms. This form and content had been popularized in the late 1800s by the French Symbolists, who were a strong influence on Eliot and who were criticized for including morbid and grotesque imagery in their works. Although this anti-traditional, anti-romantic trend had thus begun before World War I, the mechanized slaughter and unprecedented loss of life during that horrific war caused many to reexamine their previous, comfortable beliefs in religion and the innate goodness of humankind. The leaders of one radical branch of modernism, known as Dada, claimed that the only legitimate emotion left was disgust.

T. S. Eliot, though, was more levelheaded and had never fully broken free from his strongly Protestant roots. While his poetry shows a definite sadness for what has been lost and a bitterness toward modern sensibilities, it also shows the dignity that people can achieve and maintain in the face of disaster and disintegration (although “Prufrock” and The Waste Land are mostly pessimistic, even nihilistic). Eliot believed, however, that one generation bears a great responsibility to pass along to the next generation the best art and the best ideas possible, rising above the easy tendency to embrace only the negative aspects of life. When he grew older, Eliot once again embraced religion, eventually becoming an elder in the Anglican church. Long before then, however, his poetry often focused on religion and occasionally sounded like religious incantations or mantras (words repeated to invoke a religious experience). This is especially true in The Waste Land, though the use of religion there is often sardonic or an ironic contrast to modern reality.
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Questions for Essay and Discussion

1. Why was the openly, sometimes radically, intellectual Eliot more comfortable and his brash, groundbreaking poetry more readily accepted in England than in the U.S.? Discuss some differences between the two cultures that could account for these facts.

2. How is Prufrock a realistic representative of modern man—or at least of a modern intellectual? What traits did he share with many readers of the early twentieth century?

3. Is the epigraph from Dante's Inferno appropriate as a kind of introduction to “Prufrock”? Why or why not? Use details from the poem to back up your opinion.

4. Yellow has long been associated with cowardice and caution. What could also be symbolized by the yellow fog and yellow smoke that curls around Prufrock's house? Why do you think Eliot describes the fog as a cat? Does Prufrock have any catlike characteristics?

5. What does it say about Prufrock's character that he is overly concerned about his appearance, especially the fact that he is middle aged and beginning to show signs of aging? Do you think he is superficial? Why or why not?

6. Why does Eliot use so many allusions to other works of literature? What does this practice say about the writer and his intended audience?

7. If The Waste Land were published today, how do you think it would be received and reviewed? Would it become as popular and well known throughout the world as it was in the 1920s? Why or why not?

8. Despite the anti-religious tendencies in much modern literature, The Waste Land includes many religious references, especially to ancient religions such as Hinduism. What do you think Eliot is trying to say with such references? Moreover, does religion belong in modern poetry? If so, why? If not, why not?

9. Many critics have noticed that The Waste Land is structured in a five-part form resembling a symphony. What other characteristics does the poem share with the music of serious composers, such as Beethoven and Bach?

10. The epigraph to The Waste Land features the Sybil, a mythical prophetess, who expresses a death wish. How does this feeling fit into the style and substance of the poem itself? It soon becomes a motif. Cite some instances of this death fixation in the poem. What is the overall effect?
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Prufrock: Epigraph

1. In Dante’s *Inferno*, a character called Count Guido da Montefelltro, who is in the eighth (next-to-lowest) circle of hell, thinks that Dante is one of the dead. The count says to him, “If I thought my reply would be to someone who would ever return to earth, this flame would remain without further movement; but as no one has ever returned alive from this gulf, if what I hear is true, I can answer you with no fear of infamy.” What does this epigraph mean in terms of Prufrock himself?

2. What could the epigraph mean in terms of Eliot’s opinion of his audience?
Prufrock: First Section (down to the first line of dots)

1. Since this poem is an interior monologue, who is the “you” in “you and I”?

2. What do you think the “overwhelming question” is?

3. What is the significance of the Michelangelo refrain to the overall poem?

4. In the stanza about “yellow fog,” Eliot makes the setting fairly clear. Where and when does the “action” of the poem probably occur?
The Waste Land: Epigraph

1. From Satyricon by Petronius, the epigraph is translated as follows: “For with my own eyes I saw the Sibyl hanging in a jar at Cumae, and when the boys said to her, ‘Sibyl, what do you want?’ she replied, ‘I want to die.’” The Sibyl was a mythical fortune-teller who was immortal but still grew older. How does her desire to end her suffering set the tone for the poem?
The Waste Land: Section III

1. Based on Buddha’s sermon that urges a forsaking of earthly passions and possessions, how does this section thematically connect to the previous two?

2. What is the irony in Eliot’s use of the refrain from Edmund Spenser’s Prothalamion, a 16th-century poem in celebration of marriage (“Sweet Thames, run softly till I end my song”)?

3. Rats are often featured in The Waste Land, and Prufrock wishes he had been a crab. What do these creatures have in common, and what characteristics do they share with Eliot as a writer?

4. How do Actaeon and Diana (in Eliot’s note for line 197) compare to Sweeney and Mrs. Porter? What is the purpose of this implicit comparison?

5. The last line of the first stanza is a quote from French Symbolist poet Paul Verlaine: “And O those children’s voices singing in the dome.” This resembles the ending of section I (line 76), where Eliot quotes another Symbolist poet, Charles Baudelaire. In addition to paying tribute to these poets, whom Eliot admired, what is the significance of Symbolist poetry to The Waste Land?
The Waste Land: Section V

1. “What the Thunder Said” is a Hindu fable from the Upanishads. Thus, within the space of fifteen lines (going back to line 309), Eliot has referred to four different religions. What are they and why would he include them in a modernist poem?

2. In this section, we have moved deeply into the “territory” of the “Waste Land,” a place where “one can neither stand nor lie nor sit.” What would such a place necessarily have to be?

3. In line 349, what is the “Dead mountain mouth of carious teeth that cannot spit”?

4. From line 331 – 359, Eliot presents a heavily repetitious mantra, or meditation, on the lack of water in this imaginary land. What does water normally symbolize?

5. In both “Prufrock” and The Waste Land, Eliot employs the internal monologue, seen here, for example, in lines 360 – 366, where the speaker seems to address his alter ego in asking, “Who is the third who walks always beside you?” The third creature or person is “wrapt in a brown mantle, hooded.” Who could it be?