

Ts Eliot

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T. S. Eliot — Poetry (ENH 402: Twentieth Century Poetry)

Set texts: *The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock*; *The Waste Land*

Overview — the story in simple English

T. S. Eliot is the great poet of the *modern* (আধুনিক) world after the First World War, and both of his set poems paint the same sad picture: modern life looks busy and polite on the outside, but inside it is empty, sick and lonely. In **The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock**, we hear the private thoughts of a shy, middle-aged man named Prufrock as he walks through a dull city in the evening. He wants to go to a party and speak to a woman, maybe ask her an important question about love, but he is too afraid (দ্বিধাগ্রস্ত). He worries about his bald head, his thin arms, and what people will say, so he keeps delaying and finally does nothing. The whole poem happens inside his head — it is his sad, nervous "love song" that never becomes real love. In **The Waste Land**, Eliot makes the picture much bigger: a whole civilization (সভ্যতা) has become a dry, barren (অনুর্বর) desert with no faith, no love and no meaning. The poem jumps between many voices, places and time periods, mixing modern London with ancient myths and holy books. People have sex without love, cities feel like hell, and everyone seems spiritually dead. But at the very end Eliot offers a little hope: through *giving*, *sympathy* and *self-control*, the dead land might one day be reborn (পুনর্জন্ম). Both poems use difficult, broken, jumping style on purpose, because Eliot believed a broken world needs a broken kind of poetry to show it truly.

 **One-line meaning: Eliot shows that modern civilization is a spiritual "waste land" — outwardly busy but inwardly empty, sick and lonely — while quietly hoping it can be reborn through giving, sympathy and self-control.**

Feature	The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock	The Waste Land
Published	Written c. 1910–11; printed 1915 (magazine <i>Poetry</i>); collected 1917 in <i>Prufrock and Other Observations</i>	1922 (in <i>The Criterion</i> and <i>The Dial</i> ; book form with Eliot's own Notes)
Genre	Modernist dramatic monologue (নাটকীয় স্বগতোক্তি)	Modernist long poem in five parts; a fragmented collage
Setting	An unnamed, foggy modern city in the evening — streets and drawing-rooms	Modern London and many other places, mixed with the mythic past
Narration-Form	One split consciousness ("you and I"); interior monologue	Many voices, unified by the blind prophet Tiresias
Famous author remark	—	Eliot later called the poem "a piece of rhythmical grumbling"

Themes & Technique

1. **Spiritual sterility and decay of modern civilization.** This is Eliot's biggest theme and the most repeated exam question. The modern world has lost faith, love and purpose; it is a dry, dead land where nothing grows. In *The Waste Land* even spring becomes cruel, and in *Prufrock* social life is reduced to empty small talk. Eliot presents modern man as spiritually dead, cut off from tradition and from God.
2. **Isolation, alienation and the failure of communication.** Prufrock is desperately lonely; he longs to connect with others but cannot speak his true feelings. The women "come and go" around him and he stays invisible to them. In *The Waste Land*, people are crowded together in the "Unreal City" yet completely alone, unable to reach one another emotionally.
3. **Paralysis and indecision of the modern man.** Prufrock repeatedly asks "Do I dare?" but never acts. He measures his life in tiny, timid amounts and lets every chance slip away. This inner paralysis (অসাড়তা) — the inability to decide, love or live fully — is Eliot's portrait of the weak, self-conscious modern individual.
4. **Love, sex and broken relationships.** Real love is missing from both poems. Prufrock cannot even approach the woman he desires. In *The Waste Land*, sex is loveless and mechanical (the typist and the clerk, the nervous couple in "A Game of Chess"). This sterility (বঞ্চন্যতা) of love mirrors the barrenness of the whole civilization.
5. **Myth, tradition and the past against the present.** Eliot constantly compares the glorious, meaningful past with the shabby, meaningless present. Using ancient fertility myths, the Grail legend, the Bible, Dante, Shakespeare and Hindu scripture, he shows how far the modern world has fallen. This "mythical method" gives shape and depth to the chaos.
6. **Time, memory and mortality.** Both poems are haunted by passing time and death. Prufrock feels old and imagines drowning; *The Waste Land* opens by "mixing / Memory and desire" and is full of death, dry bones and drowned men. The fear of death sits under everything.
7. **The search for salvation and spiritual regeneration.** Beneath the despair, Eliot looks for a cure. *The Waste Land* ends with the thunder's threefold command and a Hindu blessing of peace, hinting that the dead land can be reborn if humanity learns to give, feel and control itself.

Narrative / classroom techniques (learn these terms):

- **Dramatic monologue** — one speaker reveals his mind and character while talking (Prufrock).
- **Stream of consciousness / interior monologue** — following the natural, jumping flow of a character's thoughts.
- **The mythical method** — placing modern life beside ancient myth to give it order and meaning.
- **Allusion (পরোক্ষ উল্লেখ) and intertextuality** — constant references to Dante, Shakespeare, the Bible, the Upanishads and older poets.
- **Fragmentation and collage** — broken pieces, many voices and languages joined together like a mosaic.
- **Objective correlative** — using an outer object or image to express an inner emotion (the etherized patient, the handful of dust).
- **Free verse, irony, juxtaposition and symbolism** — no fixed metre; sharp contrasts; symbols of water, dryness, fire and stone.
- **Epigraph** — a quotation at the start (from Dante in *Prufrock*, from the Sibyl of Cumae in *The Waste Land*) that hints at the theme.

Key Quotations — memorize

- "Let us go then, you and I, / When the evening is spread out against the sky / Like a patient etherized upon a table;" — *Prufrock*, opening lines. The sick, numb image sets the modern mood.

- "In the room the women come and go / Talking of Michelangelo." — *Prufrock*. Empty, repeated small talk of shallow social life.
- "I have measured out my life with coffee spoons;" — *Prufrock*. A life shrunk to tiny, trivial, boring routines.
- "Do I dare / Disturb the universe?" — *Prufrock*. His fear and total inability to act.
- "I am not Prince Hamlet, nor was meant to be;" — *Prufrock*. He admits he is no hero, only a minor, hesitant figure.
- "I grow old ... I grow old ... / I shall wear the bottoms of my trousers rolled." — *Prufrock*. Ageing, defeat and pathetic surrender.
- "Till human voices wake us, and we drown." — *Prufrock*, closing line. His dream world collapses into spiritual death.
- "April is the cruellest month, breeding / Lilacs out of the dead land, mixing / Memory and desire, stirring / Dull roots with spring rain." — *The Waste Land*, opening. Rebirth is painful for a spiritually dead people.
- "I will show you fear in a handful of dust." — *The Waste Land*, Part I. The terror of death and emptiness.
- "A crowd flowed over London Bridge, so many, / I had not thought death had undone so many." — *The Waste Land*, Part I. The "Unreal City" crowd as living dead (echoing Dante).
- "These fragments I have shored against my ruins" — *The Waste Land*, Part V. Broken bits of culture held up against total collapse.
- "Datta. Dayadhvam. Damyata." ... "Shantih shantih shantih" — *The Waste Land*, ending. Give, sympathize, control — then the peace that offers salvation.

Critics' Views (safe to cite)

Critic	View	Use for
Ezra Pound	Edited and heavily cut the drafts of <i>The Waste Land</i> ; Eliot dedicated the poem to him as "il miglior fabbro" (the better craftsman)	Facts on the poem's composition; Eliot's modernist circle
T. S. Eliot (own criticism)	Good poetry is impersonal — an "escape from personality" ("Tradition and the Individual Talent"); emotion is conveyed through an "objective correlative"	Explaining Eliot's method and impersonality
T. S. Eliot (Notes to the poem)	Called Tiresias "the most important personage in the poem, uniting all the rest," and said "What Tiresias sees ... is the substance of the poem"	Tiresias / unity of <i>The Waste Land</i> questions
I. A. Richards	Praised the poem's organization as "a music of ideas" and defended poetry not tied to fixed beliefs	Defending the poem's difficult, broken form
F. R. Leavis (<i>New Bearings in English Poetry</i> , 1932)	Saw Eliot as re-orienting modern English poetry and giving voice to the "disintegration" of modern civilization	Disorder-and-decay essays; Eliot's importance
Edmund Wilson (<i>Axel's Castle</i> , 1931)	Read <i>The Waste Land</i> as the spiritual "drouth" and sterility of the modern world, and the disillusion of the post-war generation	Decay / futility / barrenness essays
Cleanth Brooks	New Critical reading: the poem is built on the contrast between the fertility of the past and the sterility of the present, unified by the fertility/Graill myth	Myths-and-legends and structure essays
Hugh Kenner (<i>The Invisible Poet</i> , 1959)	Read <i>Prufrock</i> as the dramatization of a divided, paralyzed modern consciousness	<i>Prufrock</i> / conflict-of-modern-man essays

Part A — Reference to Context (5 marks)

RTC 1 🔥 Very likely

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

These are the opening lines of **The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock** by **T. S. Eliot**. Here the timid speaker, Prufrock, invites us — really his own divided self ("you and I") — to walk with him through a dreary evening city toward a social gathering where he hopes to speak to a woman. The striking simile compares the evening sky to a patient "etherized" (অজ্ঞান করা) on an operating table. Instead of a romantic, beautiful sunset, we get an image of sickness, numbness and helplessness.

Significance: these lines announce the birth of modern poetry, breaking sharply from romantic tradition. The comparison sets the whole mood of paralysis and spiritual illness, showing both the modern world and Prufrock's own will as lifeless. The split "you and I" also hints at his divided, self-watching mind.

RTC 2 🔥 Very likely

April is the cruellest month, breeding Lilacs out of the dead land, mixing Memory and desire, stirring Dull roots with spring rain.

This is the opening of **The Waste Land** by **T. S. Eliot**, from Part I, "The Burial of the Dead." Eliot deliberately inverts (উল্টে দেওয়া) the usual joyful welcome of spring. **Explanation:** normally April brings new life and happiness, but here it is "cruellest," because rebirth is painful for a spiritually dead people who prefer the forgetful numbness of winter. Spring stirs up "memory and desire" that they can neither satisfy nor escape. **Significance:** these lines set the central theme of the whole poem — a barren land and a barren civilization that actually *fears* regeneration (পুনর্জন্ম). They echo ancient fertility myths and reverse the cheerful spring opening of Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales*, immediately establishing the tone of sterility, decay and reluctant longing that runs through the poem.

Part B — Short Notes (5 marks)

Note 1 — Significance / irony of the title "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock" 🔥 Very likely

The title is deeply ironic (বিদ্রোপাত্মক). A "love song" promises romance, music and passion — but the poem gives us no love and no song, only the anxious, hesitant thoughts of a lonely man who never even speaks to the woman he desires. The stiff, pompous name "J. Alfred Prufrock" (with hints of "prude" and "frock") sounds respectable but comic, the opposite of a bold romantic hero. Prufrock is timid, ageing and painfully self-conscious about his thinning hair and thin limbs; he keeps asking "Do I dare?" and never dares. The wide gap between the grand title and the small, paralyzed reality perfectly mirrors the poem's theme: modern man's failure to act, love or connect. The "song" is really an inward monologue of fear, delay and regret that ends in imagined drowning. Thus the ironic title exposes the emptiness of modern romance and the spiritual paralysis hiding beneath polite society.

Note 2 — Significance of the three "Da's" in The Waste Land 🔥 Very likely

In the final section, "What the Thunder Said," Eliot uses a fable from the *Brihadaranyaka Upanishad* (a Hindu scripture). When gods, men and demons ask the Creator for guidance, the thunder speaks one sound — "DA" — which each group understands differently. Eliot gives the three meanings: "**Datta**" (give / দান করা), "**Dayadhvam**" (sympathize, be compassionate / সহানুভূতি) and "**Damyata**" (control / আত্মনিয়ন্ত্রণ). These three commands are the moral cure Eliot offers for the waste land: the sterile modern world can be regenerated only through generosity, compassion and self-discipline. The passage turns the poem away from Western despair toward Eastern spiritual wisdom, and leads into the closing blessing "Shantih shantih shantih" — the peace that passes understanding. So the three Da's give the poem its one clear note of

possible salvation (পরিব্রাণ), suggesting that spiritual renewal, though hard, is available if humanity learns to give, to feel and to restrain itself.

Part C — Essays (15 marks)

🔥 "Discuss how T. S. Eliot reflects the disorder and decay of modern civilization."

T. S. Eliot is, above all, the poet of the modern breakdown. Writing in the shadow of the First World War, he saw a civilization that had lost its faith, its love and its meaning, and both his set poems diagnose the same disease. *The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock* studies decay at the level of the individual, while *The Waste Land* enlarges it into the collapse of an entire culture. Together they present modern life as spiritually dead — outwardly busy and polite, but inwardly barren (অনুর্বর), sterile and afraid.

The decay is first shown through Eliot's picture of the modern man in *Prufrock*. Prufrock is intelligent but hopelessly weak: he cannot act, cannot love and cannot even speak. His world is reduced to trivial social ritual, where "In the room the women come and go / Talking of Michelangelo." Real culture has shrunk into empty small talk. He confesses, "I have measured out my life with coffee spoons," admitting that his whole existence is a series of tiny, meaningless routines. The famous opening image of the evening "Like a patient etherized upon a table" turns the modern world into an unconscious, sick body — the perfect "objective correlative" for a paralyzed age.

In *The Waste Land*, this personal decay becomes universal. Eliot inverts the natural order so that even rebirth hurts: "April is the cruellest month." The land is dry and dead, and the poet warns, "I will show you fear in a handful of dust," reducing all human hope to a pinch of lifeless earth. The modern city itself becomes a kind of hell. Watching the office crowd, the poet says, "A crowd flowed over London Bridge, so many, / I had not thought death had undone so many" — echoing Dante's underworld and turning living Londoners into walking corpses.

The decay is moral and sexual as well as spiritual. Love has died into loveless, mechanical sex, seen in the joyless meeting of the typist and the clerk in "The Fire Sermon" and in the tense, empty marriage of "A Game of Chess." The sterility of love mirrors the sterility of the whole civilization: without genuine feeling, nothing new can grow. Culture itself lies in pieces, and near the close the speaker gathers "These fragments I have shored against my ruins," desperately holding broken bits of tradition against total collapse.

Eliot's very technique enacts this disorder. He abandons smooth story and regular metre for fragmentation, sudden shifts of voice, and a flood of allusions to Dante, Shakespeare and scripture — the "mythical method" that measures the shabby present against a nobler past. As **Edmund Wilson** argued in *Axel's Castle*, the poem gives us the spiritual "drouth" of the modern world and the disillusion of a whole generation, while **F. R. Leavis** saw Eliot voicing the very "disintegration" of modern civilization.

Yet Eliot does not stop at despair. The scattered fragments, and the closing turn toward the thunder's commands and the blessing "Shantih shantih shantih," suggest that the dead land might still be healed. But the dominant impression remains one of decay: a numbed, faithless, loveless society staring into a handful of dust. In diagnosing that sickness so honestly, Eliot became the defining poet of the modern condition.

🔥 "Discuss the myths and legends of the poem 'The Waste Land'."

One of the most striking features of *The Waste Land* is its constant use of ancient myths and legends. Far from being mere decoration, these old stories form the hidden skeleton of the poem. Eliot's method — placing modern life beside ancient myth — gives shape and depth to what would otherwise be pure chaos. In his own critical writing he called this the "mythical method," a way of "manipulating a continuous parallel between contemporaneity and antiquity." Two books, Jessie Weston's *From Ritual to Romance* and Frazer's *The Golden Bough*, gave Eliot the mythic material he acknowledges in his Notes.

The central legend is the Grail story and the figure of the **Fisher King**. In this legend the king is wounded and impotent, and because of his sickness his whole land becomes a barren waste; only the quest for the Holy Grail can heal him and restore fertility. Eliot uses this directly: the modern world is a spiritually wounded kingdom, and the search for meaning is the search for the Grail. The dry, cracked landscape of the poem is the sick land of the Fisher King transferred to the twentieth century.

Behind the Grail lie the older **fertility myths** studied by Frazer — the vegetation gods such as Adonis and Osiris who die each year and are reborn, and whose death and rebirth guarantee the return of crops. This is why *The Waste Land* is full of death by water and hoped-for renewal. The clairvoyant Madame Sosostris draws the card of the drowned Phoenician sailor and warns, "Fear death by water"; Part IV then shows Phlebas dead in the sea. The line "Those are pearls that were his eyes," borrowed from Shakespeare's *The Tempest*, turns drowning into a "sea-change," a mysterious transformation that hints death might lead to rebirth.

The most important mythic figure is **Tiresias**, the blind prophet of Greek legend who had lived as both man and woman. Eliot's Note famously calls him "the most important personage in the poem, uniting all the rest," adding that "What Tiresias sees ... is the substance of the poem." Because Tiresias has experienced all times, both sexes and all suffering, his consciousness holds the poem's scattered voices together and lets us see modern sterility as one continuous human story.

Finally, Eliot reaches beyond Europe to **Eastern myth and religion**. The title of Part III, "The Fire Sermon," comes from the Buddha's sermon against burning desire. The ending draws on a fable from the Hindu Upanishads, where the thunder speaks the syllable "DA," and Eliot translates it as "Datta. Dayadhvam. Damyata." — give, sympathize, control. The poem closes on the Sanskrit blessing "Shantih shantih shantih." Thus Eliot fuses Western and Eastern myth into a single vision of possible salvation.

As **Cleanth Brooks** showed, these myths are not random: the poem is unified by the contrast between the fertility of the mythic past and the sterility of the present. The legends of dying-and-reviving gods transform a picture of hopeless decay into a buried quest for regeneration. By weaving Grail romance, fertility ritual, Greek prophecy and Hindu scripture into modern London, Eliot gives his fragmented poem both structure and a deep, timeless meaning — suggesting that the waste land, like the old myths, may yet be reborn.

⚡ One-Page Revision Sheet

Item	Content
Story in 3 lines	(1) <i>Prufrock</i> : a shy, ageing man's inner monologue as he fails to speak to a woman or act — modern paralysis. (2) <i>The Waste Land</i> : a fragmented vision of a spiritually dead civilization, mixing modern London with ancient myths. (3) Both end with a faint hope of rebirth through spiritual renewal.
2 must-quotes	"Like a patient etherized upon a table;" (<i>Prufrock</i>) · "April is the cruellest month" (<i>The Waste Land</i>)
2 backup quotes	"I have measured out my life with coffee spoons;" (<i>Prufrock</i>) · "Datta. Dayadhvam. Damyata." ... "Shantih shantih shantih" (<i>The Waste Land</i>)
2 critics	Edmund Wilson (<i>Axel's Castle</i>): the "drouth"/sterility of the modern world · Eliot's own Note: Tiresias is "the most important personage in the poem, uniting all the rest"
Technique words	Dramatic monologue · stream of consciousness · mythical method · allusion / intertextuality · fragmentation / collage · objective correlative · free verse · irony
Top 3 likely essays	(1) 🔥 Disorder and decay of modern civilization · (2) 🔥 Myths and legends of <i>The Waste Land</i> · (3) 🔥 Theme of salvation in <i>The Waste Land</i> / ★ conflict of modern man in <i>Prufrock</i>

Exam-timing tip: In a 4-hour paper, spend about 45 minutes on each 15-mark essay — plan for 5 minutes (thesis + 4 points + 2 quotes + 1 critic), write for 35, and leave 5 to check; do the short notes and RTCs in 12–15 minutes each so you always finish the full paper.