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## UNIT 22 T.S. ELIOT

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### 22.1 OBJECTIVES

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After reading this unit you will be able to:

- write about T.S. Eliot's life and work
- understand T.S. Eliot's poetry with special reference to two of his poems:
  - a) The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock and
  - b) Gerontion.

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### 22.2 INTRODUCTION

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T.S. Eliot is one of the most important poets of 20th century. Born on 25th September 1888 in the United States, he died in London on 4th January 1965. His journey between the United States and England was not only a physical movement but also represents his journey of ideas in many ways. His studies at Harvard University can be divided in two phases. In the first phase between 1906 and 1910, he studied languages and literatures of continental Europe along with English literature. This introduced T.S. Eliot to classics of European literature and also to the various literary trends and movements of 19th century French and German literature. The experiments and literary evolution produced by these trends and movements influenced the literary creativity of T.S. Eliot. He was greatly influenced by many French symbolists who evolved a 'new language for

poetry'. To some extent, it can be said that under this influence T.S. Eliot's poetry became a poetry of suggestions using evocative and alluding images and symbols.

In the second phase at Harvard (1911 to 1913), he studied philosophy and also did courses of Sanskrit studies. This further increased the canvas of his poetic suggestions and imagery for creating a poetry with various layers of meaning. In this unit we will try to understand the poetry of T.S. Eliot (with the help of two selected poems) while studying his poetic style and processes of creation of meaning. For a better understanding of his poetry, we will first go for a general overview of T.S. Eliot's life and works. Then we will study one of his early poems entitled 'Love song of J. Alfred Prufrock'. After this we will study 'Gerontion' which was written a few years after the 'Love song of J. Alfred Prufrock'. We hope we will be able to understand & discover the poetic genius of T.S. Eliot in the next few pages.

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## 22.3 THOMAS STEARNS ELIOT

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He was a great poet of the English language. We will first study about his life and work.

### 22.3.1 Life and Work

As mentioned earlier T.S. Eliot was an American citizen by birth who died as an English citizen. He was a brilliant student in school and won a gold medal for Latin. He studied at a boarding school in St. Louis and then at Harvard till 1910. During his studies at Harvard he was influenced by lectures of Irving Babbit and George Santayana. He also studied Arthur Symon's book *The Symbolist Movement in Literature*. This introduced him to the new poetic sensibilities of 19th century Europe. With all these ideas in mind he travelled to Paris and studied for some time at Sorbonne University, Paris in 1910-11. He studied many French poets in France and was so influenced by the French poetic movements that he often wrote French in his poems. Two of his famous poems written in French are – (i) "Lune de Miel" and (ii) "Dans le Restaurant". In his poetic ideas and imagery T.S. Eliot draws heavily from the two famous French poets Charles Baudelaire and Jules Laforgue. In these two French poems of T.S. Eliot the influences of the new language and poetic imagery can be clearly seen.

T.S. Eliot returned to Harvard in 1911 and pursued courses on philosophy. While studying philosophy, he was introduced to the Upanishads of India. This influence can be clearly seen in "the Waste Land" where he uses the 'datta, dayadhvam, damyata' concept borrowed from the *Brhadaranyak Upanisad*. Thus T.S. Eliot had a large canvas on which he drew from original sources in German, French, Italian, Latin, English, Sanskrit and from Greek Classics.

Towards the beginning of the first World War in 1914, T.S. Eliot settled down in London and further studied philosophy in Oxford. By this time he received the intellectual company and patronage of Ezra Pound who recognised his talents and helped him establish as a poet and critic. The poems written before 1912 were already published and Eliot was entering into a different phase of creativity. His earlier poems were published in 1917 in a collection entitled *Prufrock and other Observations*. "The Waste Land" was published in 1922 in the magazine

*The Criterion* which was being edited by T.S. Eliot himself. In 1925 the Collected Poems of T.S. Eliot was published. He continued editing *The Criterion* till 1939 which closed down due to the beginning of second World War. During his stay in England he was drawn to the Anglican church and wrote a lot drawing ideas from Christianity. His poems like “Journey of the Magi” “Ash Wednesday” etc. fall in this category. In 1939 he published *Idea of a Christian Society* which was an essay in prose depicting many of the ideas represented in his poems and plays. He received the Noble Prize for literature in 1948.

**Self-check Exercise I**

1) Which European literary movements influenced T.S. Eliot the most?

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2) Works written in which languages are sources from where T.S. Eliot draws ideas and inspiration? Which are the works source of T.S. Eliot’s ideas and inspiration and in which languages are they written?

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3) Which poem of T.S.Eliot is influenced by a story in *Brhadaranyak Upanisad*?

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4) Which magazine/journal was edited by T.S.Eliot and why did he stop that magazine/journal?

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5) Who helped T.S.Eliot in getting established as an important poet?  
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6) Which book of T.S.Eliot was published in 1939 which reflected the ideas most depicted in his poetry.  
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### 22.3.2 T.S. Eliot’s Poetry

Though T.S. Eliot’s poetry evolved over the years, we find some striking features in his poetic style. We always find an epigraph in the beginning of the poems. These epigraphs can be interpreted variously according to the theme and nature of the poem. Mostly these epigraphs provide a context for the poem which helps us understand the poetic idiom and context of the poem. For example, the epigraph of “The Hollow Men” is “Mistah Kurtz he dead/penny for the Old guy”. In this epigraph there are many historical and literary references along with the poetic idiom Eliot wants to create. Mistah Kurtz is a character of “Heart of Darkness” by Joseph Conrad, and the first line of the epigraph refers to that character. In the second line of the epigraph, Eliot (i) refers to a historical event and also to a (ii) popular tradition in England. This is a line often cried out loudly by children on Guy Fawkes Day which falls on November 5. ‘Old guy’ refers to Fawkes who had conspired to blow up both houses of English Parliament in 1605. This event was known as ‘gunpowder’ plot which had failed. So the second line of the epigraph refers the historical event of 1605 and at the same time uses a popular expression from Guy Fawkes Day celebrations.

Another important feature of Eliot’s poetry is the dramatic nature and portrayal of characters in his poetry. We often find Eliot choosing a character like Prufrock, Sweeney, Gerontion and portraying the character with such idiom and diction that he unravels what lies behind the action and beneath the appearance. Eliot enters into the minds and feelings thus creating various layers of meaning in his poems. For this he alludes to many historical and cultural events and characters. Intertextual allusions are often used to achieve a historical sense and for entering into the realm of feelings. For example, in “Love song of J.Alfred Prufrock”, Eliot makes references to Dante, the Bible and Shakespeare among many others. Similarly, you can see “The Waste Land” making allusions and intertextual references to several sources across cultures.

Just like the Symbolist poets of 19th century Europe, T.S. Eliot uses elements of language and nature as symbols and creates special effects often by juxtaposing the grotesque and the normal.

For example look at these lines from “The Hollow Men”:

“The eyes are not here  
There are no eyes here  
In this valley of dying stars  
In this hollow valley.  
This broken jaw of our lost kingdom.”

In the first two lines we find a babbling and repetition of sounds as the lines begin with the similar sounds of ‘The eyes’ and ‘These are’ and then both the lines convey almost similar ideas in such a way as if someone is babbling. This imitation of sound is a feature of symbolists which we find in T.S. Eliot’s poetry.

Then the image of grotesque is created in expression “The broken Jaw” and juxtaposed along with normal poetic expression.

These were some features of T.S. Eliot’s poetry in general. There are some exclusive features of his writing style also. For example, he writes using words and expressions from various languages and literatures and uses them as if they all naturally belong to the English language.

### Self-check Exercise II

- 1) Fill in the blanks:
  - i) In the beginning of T.S.Eliot’s poems there is always an .....taken from some historical or literary sources.
  - ii) Dramatic nature and character portrayal are two important features of T.S.Eliot’s .....
  - iii) T.S. Eliot alludes to many..... in order to achieve a historical sense and for entering into the realm of feelings.
  - iv) T.S. Eliot uses .....as symbols and creates special effects often by juxtaposing the grotesque and the normal.
  - v) Babbling and repetition of sounds are important features of T.S. Eliot’s poetry which shows the influence of .....

## 22.4 THE LOVE SONG OF J. ALFRED PRUFROCK

This is a poem written by T.S. Eliot early in his life.

### 22.4.1 Introduction

This is a poem of about 132 lines and an epigraph of 6 lines taken from the “Inferno” section of Divine Comedy written by the great Italian poet Dante. This is also referred only as “Prufrock” and is one of the earliest poems of T.S. Eliot by which his poetic talent was widely recognised. It was first published in 1915 and is often described as a “drama of literary anguish”. The poem was most probably written in 1910 and 1911.

## 22.4.2 The Text

### 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 torno 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, 20  
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.

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, 40  
 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!") 45

Do I dare  
 Disturb the universe?  
 In a minute there is time  
 For decisions and revisions which a minute will reverse.  
 For I have known them all already, known them all:  
 Have known the evenings, mornings, afternoons, 50  
 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?

And I have known the eyes already, known them all— 55  
 The eyes that fix you in a formulated phrase,  
 And when I am formulated, sprawling on a pin,  
 When I am pinned and wriggling on the wall,  
 Then how should I begin  
 To spit out all the butt-ends of my days and ways? 60  
 And how should I presume?

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!)  
 Is it perfume from a dress 65  
 That makes me so digress?  
 Arms that lie along a table, or wrap about a shawl.  
 And should I then presume?  
 And how should I begin?

Shall I say, I have gone at dusk through narrow streets 70  
 And watched the smoke that rises from the pipes  
 Of lonely men in shirt-sleeves, leaning out of windows?...

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

And the afternoon, the evening, sleeps so peacefully! 75  
 Smoothed by long fingers,  
 Asleep ... tired ...or it malingers,  
 Stretched on the floor, here beside you and me.  
 Should I, after tea and cakes and ices,  
 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 toward some overwhelming question,  
To say: "I am Lazarus, come from the dead,  
Come back to tell you all, I shall tell you all"-  
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, setting 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."

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, 115  
Politic, cautious, and meticulous;  
Full of high sentence, but a bit obtuse;  
At times, indeed, almost ridiculous—  
Almost, at times, the Fool.

I grow old.... I grow old..... 120  
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 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.

125

T.S. Eliot

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.

130

### 22.4.3 Analysis

The title of the poem has two parts “The love song of” and “Prufrock”. The first part “The love Song of “has apparently come from Rudyard Kipling’s poem entitled “The Love Song of Hardyal”.

“Prufrock” comes from the name of company of furniture “Prufrock-Litton company” which existed in the area where Eliot lived during early years of his life. “J” and “Alfred” in the title are inventions of the poet. With these inputs the full name “J. Alfred Prufrock” appears to be an attempt to mimick his own name which he spelt in his initial years as T. Stearns Eliot. If we understand the title in this way then to some extent the poem would appear a biographical poem in which T.S. Eliot expresses his own feelings about the “love” or more specifically about the “lack of love” in his own life during the years when he was composing this poem. The use of the words “Love song” in the title is appropriate as a refrain, which has rhymes and particular rhythm. There is a refrain in the poem:

“In the room the women come and go  
Talking of Michelangelo”

Also just like “Love song”, this is a narrative poem in the form of a dramatic monologue. A dramatic monologue is a discourse in which the narrator or the speaker intentionally or unintentionally reveals personal information and feelings. As we have seen earlier, this is a typical feature of T.S. Eliot’s poems.

The epigraph of the poem, originally written by Dante in Italian, can be translated as follows: “If I thought that 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”. (translation taken from SOUTHAM, B.C., 1965, Fourth Edn. 1981, A students’ guide to the selected Poems of T.S. Eliot, Faber & Falws. London-Bost)

In these lines there is pessimism that the narrator will not be able to come out of his present state and in fact is able to speak only because he feels that he can confide in the listener with no fear of being shamed. And then the poet speaks in the style of a dramatic monologue. The mood of pessimism follows in the ensuing lines of the poem. The first two lines create a lovely atmosphere but the third line destroys it with the grotesque imagery of a “patient etherized upon a table”.

Then the poet goes through the town passing by shabby and unkempt streets and hotels. The streets are as lonely as the evening was lifeless. And this is a long drawn situation which continues like an unending argument presented with

unhealthy intentions. In this hopeless situation, the poet does not even question anything. He simply tries to move ahead. But all that he could see further is the aimless movement of women who talk of someone far away in history though very important with his contributions in painting and architecture. This is the refrain in the poem. This refrain refers directly to the lines by Jules Laforgue whose related French lines can be roughly translated as:

“In the room the women go and come  
While talking of the masters of Sienna”  
[The original French lines are:  
“Dans la piece les femmes vont et viennent  
En parlant des maitres de Sienna”]

Sienna is a place in Italy known for its contribution to art and architecture. It is worth noting here that Michelangelo was also an Italian painter and artist. In the lines from 15 to 22 we again find “yellow fog” and “yellow smoke” created as an image to express the hopelessness in the life around him which is stifled in the din and bustle of an industrialised city. It is worth recalling here that T.S. Eliot spent his childhood in an industrial suburban town of St. Louis. This imagery of ‘yellow fog’ and ‘yellow smoke’ behaving like a timid cat finally sleeping outside the house is very much like the symbolists of French literature and further enhances the pessimistic feelings in the poem. In the next stanza (lines from 22 to 34), Prufrock assures himself that there will be time to sit and talk with his beloved but the possibility of this meeting is further postponed as the hope for this time is in future. This is expressed by the use of ‘will’ in the verses. Also the time is for “indecisions”, “visions” and revisions which all delay the meeting. And when there is time, it will be for “murder and create”. So there is simultaneously pessimism and hope.

In these lines there appear to be two allusions also, ‘There will be time’ alludes to the poem “To his Coy Mistress” by Andrew Marvell (a poet of 17th century) but the situation is completely different. While in Andrew Marvell’s poem the speaker asks his beloved not to be shy, Eliot’s Prufrock delays the meeting with combination of hope and despair.

The other allusion is “works and days” (line 29) which is a poem of Hesiod, a Greek poet of 7th century B.C. Hesiod uses these words in order to emphasise hard work, righteous living and being guarded against moral decay. Eliot also appears to use them with the same purpose but in a gloomy mood with pessimistic feelings.

The refrain comes again and this repetition is suggestive of the dullness and repetitive nature of events in life.

Then again in the next stanza Prufrock becomes unsure of himself as contrasted to the faith in future of the previous stanza. Prufrock is not sure if he may dare to approach a woman and if at all he dares to do so, he is unsure and afraid of the consequences.

In the ensuing three stanzas Prufrock again emphasizes on the dull and boring situation. He says that he knows all of them; they are the same people with the same decor and demeanour. And in this boring and dull situation, should he take any initiatives? Even the time which appears to be passing in terms of evenings,

mornings and afternoons is all measured as one unit in the coffee spoons (which are very small in size). Here T.S. Eliot appears to allude to the philosophy of French thinker Henry Bergson (1859-1941) who proposes that though time is calculated in series of measurable units, actually our consciousness perceives them in a continuum without any succession of measurable duration. Thus past and present are equally real and the entire life of Prufrock is one continuum not consisted of disjoint time units. His past, present and future are real before him.

Another allusion in line 52 is “dying fall” which refers to Shakespeare’s *Twelfth Night*.

Shakespeare writes:

“If music be the food of love, play on;  
Give me excess of it, that, surferting,  
The appetite may sicken and so die.  
That strain again! It had a **dying fall**.  
O, it came over my ear like the sweet sound,  
That breathes upon a bank of violets,  
Stealing and giving odour!

T.S. Eliot alludes to the above in the following two lines:

“I know the voices dying with a dying fall  
Beneath the music from a farther room.”

The gloomy mood in Shakespeare’s line, “The appetite may sicken, and so die” reverberates in the above two lines of T.S. Eliot.

In the line 70 to 73, there is a description of people who resemble Prufrock in terms of dullness and boredom in life. This is further depicted in lines 74 & 75 as he feels like a “pair of ragged claws” sunken in the sea.

In the lines from 75 to 80, the time passes peacefully and then Prufrock becomes unsure of himself again as he questions “Should I ..... Have the strength to force the moment to its crisis”.

In lines 80 to 85, there is an allusion to John the Baptist by “head brought in upon a platter”. Prufrock imagines that he has lived to a mature age and grown bald and his life remains dull. Then he is dead and that is again of no consequence because he is not a prophet like John the Baptist.

The use of the word “Footman” alludes to death as “Footman” is supposed to be a servant who helps us in the afterlife.

T.S. Eliot continues in the same style depicting the gloominess and dullness in the life of Prufrock whose love song will never be sung as there will hardly be any love in his life. The title of the poem is very satirical in this way and T.S. Eliot continues to describe the life of Prufrock in a style which is characteristically typical to his poetry. We also may draw our attention to the music and babbling in “And how should I presume “(line 61) and “And should I then presume? And how should I begin?” (line 68 & 69). It appears as if the narrator of the dramatic monologue is muttering and babbling to himself. We notice, thus, that in the very first significant poem of his career T.S. Eliot exhibits the stylistic maturity and depth of content which continue to be prominent features of his later poems.

In the stanza lines 87 to 98, the poet questions whether it would be worth interacting with the women of his choice. In the process he again alludes to Marvell's poem "To his coy Mistress" in the line 92 – "To have squeezed the universe into a ball". The second allusion is in line 94. The poet mentions Lazarus who according to the story of the Bible, had come back from the dead. There are two Biblical references alluded here. First, from the Gospel of John chapter 11- according to this Lazarus was raised from the dead by Jesus. The other Biblical reference is from the Gospel of Luke, Chapter 16. According to this, Lazarus, a leprous beggar, went to the heaven after his death whereas Dives, a rich man, was taken to hell. Dives requested that Lazarus be sent to the earth to tell his brothers about the horror of hell and the consequences of their deeds. The request of Dives was denied. Eliot alludes to the Biblical story and conveys his uncertainties in the situation.

The next stanza (line 99 to 110) conveys the same uncertainties while describing the settings around and the movements of women. Then farther in the next stanza, the poet alludes to Shakespeare's *Hamlet* to convey Prufrock's coyness and uncertainties and indecisiveness. Prufrock is afraid of being considered a 'Fool' – here 'F' is in capital as the poet means a 'court jester' by this word. Prufrock is compared to the character in *Hamlet* named Polonius who speaks high language. Prufrock, by using similar language, may be considered a joker like the 'Fool' of the English royal court.

In the lines 120 to 132, the poet expresses the realization of the character Prufrock that he is growing old and accordingly there will be changes in his life. There is an allusion to Homer's *Odyssey* in which Odysseus heard the songs of Sirens who are not singing to him. By this allusion again Eliot refers to Prufrock's situation in which he hears the women and pays attention to them but the women are not talking to him. Towards the end, the poet refers to the satire in the title. The 'Love Song' is being sung but not for Prufrock. This meaning is conveyed by alluding to the Sirens (the mythical women who sing to the sailors in the Greek mythology) who are singing but not for Prufrock.

#### 22.4.4 Style in the Poem

Throughout the poem Eliot uses the conversational language with variation in the length of verses and a lot of repetitions. There are continuous shifts in the train of thoughts, with the help of allusions and varied expressions of feelings. The metaphors used are often novel and show the influence of symbolists.

#### Glossary

- i) Etherized (in line 3): The old way of putting a patient on anesthesia was called 'etherization'. 'Etherized' means a person who has been made unconscious by this method.
- ii) Tedious (argument) (in line 9): 'Tedious' is used for something which is not interesting and continues for long.
- iii) Insidious (intent) (in line 10): It is an adjective which means something which spreads gradually and causes great harm.
- iv) Sprinkled streets (in line 101): refers to a practice of sprinkling the streets so that the dust of the streets remains settled down.

- v) Sea girls (in line 130): refers to Sirens who, according to the Greek mythology, are women living on mysterious islands singing to lure the sailors.

**Self-check Exercise III**

- 1) Identify the important stylistic features of T.S.Eliot’s poetry by giving examples from “Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock”.

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- 2) Identify 5 references from the poem studied above taken from various sources in history and literature.

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- 3) In which year was published the poem above? Do you think it is important information for understanding the poem above.

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- 4) Identify one example of grotesque in the poem.

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- 5) What is the main theme of the poem studied above.

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## 22.5 GERONTION

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It is an important poem of T.S. Eliot representing his feelings and the contemporary disgust over World War I.

### 22.5.1 Introduction

Gerontion is a poem by T.S. Eliot written with the background of the first World War. This poem was first published in 1920. This is a dramatic monologue of an elderly man through which Eliot views the first World War in the perspective of the 19<sup>th</sup> century and other developments before World War-I in 20<sup>th</sup> century. The Title 'Gerontion' comes from a Greek word which means 'a little old man'. Like Prufrock in the poem discussed earlier, Gerontion is a character. Through this character, the poet reveals the psychological dilemma of being unable to make efforts towards change for betterment. The last line of the poem aptly sums up this dilemma of the apparent futility of our existence and struggle for existence. This feeling represents the hopelessness of the World War years and their aftermath.

### 22.5.2 The Text

Thou hast nor youth nor age  
But as it were an after dinner sleep  
Dreaming of both.

HERE I am, an old man in a day month,  
Being read to by a boy, waiting for rain.  
I was neither at the gates  
Nor fought in the warm rain  
Nor knee deep in the salt marsh, heaving a cutlass, 5  
Bitten by flies, fought.  
My house is a decayed house,  
And the Jew squats on the window sill, the owner,  
Spawned in some estaminet of Antwerp,  
Blistered in Brussels, patched and peeled in London. 10  
The goat coughs at night in the field overhead;  
Rocks, moss, stonecrop, iron, merds.  
The woman keeps the kitchen, makes tea,  
Sneezes at evening, poking the peevish gutter.

I an old man, 15  
A dull head among windy spaces.  
Signs are taken for wonders. "We would see a sign":  
The word within a word, unable to speak a word,  
Swaddled with darkness. In the juvenescence of the year  
Came Christ the tiger 20

In depraved May, dogwood and chestnut, flowering Judas,  
To be eaten, to be divided, to be drunk  
Among whispers; by Mr. Silvero  
With caressing hands, at Limoges

Who walked all night in the next room; 25  
 By Hakagawa, bowing among the Titians;  
 By Madame de Tornquist, in the dark room  
 Shifting the candles; Fraulein von Kulp  
 Who turned in the hall, one hand on the door. Vacant shuttles  
 Weave the wind. I have no ghosts, 30  
 An old man in a draughty house  
 Under a windy knob.  
 After such knowledge, what forgiveness? Think now  
 History has many cunning passages, contrived corridors  
 And issues, deceives with whispering ambitions, 35  
 Guides us by vanities, Think now  
 She gives when our attention is distracted  
 And what she gives, gives with such supple confusions  
 That the giving famishes the craving. Gives too late  
 What's not believed in, or if still believed, 40  
 In memory only, reconsidered passion. Gives too soon  
 Into weak hands, what's thought can be dispensed with  
 Till the refusal propagates a fear. Think  
 Neither fear nor courage saves us. Unnatural vices  
 Are fathered by our heroism. Virtues 45  
 Are forced upon us by our impudent crimes.  
 These tears are shaken from the wrath-bearing tree.  
 The tiger springs in the new year. Us he devours. Think at last  
 We have not reached conclusion, when I  
 Stiffen in a rented house. Think at last 50  
 I have not made this show purposelessly  
 And it is not by any concitation  
 Of the backward devils  
 I would meet you upon this honestly.  
 I that was near your heart was removed therefrom 55  
 To lose beauty in terror, terror in inquisition.  
 I have lost my passion: why should I need to keep it  
 Since what is kept must be adulterated?  
 I have lost my sight, smell, hearing, taste and touch:  
 How should I use it for your closer contact? 60  
 These with a thousand small deliberations  
 Protract the profit of their chilled delirium,  
 Excite the membrane, when the sense has cooled,  
 With pungent sauces, multiply variety  
 In a wilderness of mirrors. What will the spider do, 65  
 Suspend its operations, will the weevil  
 Delay? De Bailhache, Fresca, Mr. Cammel, whirled  
 Beyond the circuit of the shuddering Bear  
 In fractured atoms. Gull against the wind, in the windy straits  
 Of Belle Isle, or running on the Horn, 70  
 White feathers in the snow, The Gulf claims,  
 And an old man driven by the Trades  
 To a sleepy corner.  
 Tenants of the house,  
 Thoughts of a dry brain in a dry season. 75

### 22.5.3 Analysis

Typical to T.S. Eliot's style the poem begins with an epigraph taken from Shakespeare's play *Measure for Measure*, Act III, Scene I:

"Thou hast no youth nor age  
But as it were an after dinner sleep  
Dreaming of both".

The Duke speaks these lines to **Claudio** who is a young man sentenced to death. The Duke advises **Claudio** not to value life highly because life is only conflict, insecurity and cowardice. Eliot uses these lines to describe the feelings of disgust due to the World War. Gerontion exists in a civilisation which is bereft of all human values and is constituted only by conflict and valueless rationalism. The world around Gerontion has no sense of community and is spiritually dry. And death is only a sleep after dinner which will rejuvenate us.

The first two lines of the poem depict the stage of Gerontion. These lines are supposed to have been taken from A.C. Benson's biography of Edward **Fitzgerald**. The third line refers to 'hot gates' which is a literal translation of the name of a place in ancient Greece-Thermopylae. This place was a strategically important place in ancient Greece which was the scene of many battles. This is a reference to the World War again and till line six, the warlike situation has been described.

The disgust over the contemporary situation in Europe continues in the following lines as the poet talks of the "decayed house" and talks of the important towns of Belgium and England. Brussels and Antwerp are two important towns which had trade relation with London. '**Estaminet**' is a French word for café –used in English by soldiers who came back from France and Belgium during the first World War.

The poet describes the life during the War years and expresses his disgust again through words like '**peevish gutter**' (lines 11 to 15). 'Gutter' is a splattering fire-this imagery evokes the situation of war.

In the lines 17 -20 there is a reference to the Bible. In **Matthew XII, 38, Pharissess** cry to Jesus Christ, "Master, we would see a sign from thee" and Jesus Christ replies, "An evil and adulterous generation **seeketh** after a sign". The poet says that only in 'the present evil situation, "Signs are taken for wonders". Here 'signs' means 'miracles' as found in the Biblical story and Eliot uses the word 'wonders' with the same meaning. He wishes in these lines that religious humane values prevailed in society. Compare the lines 18 & 19 with the following text from the Bible: "And this shall be a sign unto you; ye shall find the Baby wrapped in swaddling clothes, lying in a manger....."

The use of the 'word' in the line 18 is also in reference to the Biblical use of 'word' which means 'logos'. This is a logocentric world and yet there is no 'word' to represent God. The Bible says: "In the beginning was the word, and the word was with God, and the Word was God".

In the lines 21-25, the poet expresses the degradation of human values in society. 'Depraved' means corrupted. 'May' represents the resurgence of life as happens after the winter. The 'dogwood' and 'chestnut' are flowers which convey the idea



of sensuality. 'Judas' is a name of plant which has the same name as the Biblical character Judas who is known for 'treachery'. So the expression 'flowering Judas' **symbolises** the increased treacherous situation in society. Thus the line 21 expresses that in the civilisation created as a consequence of Renaissance (represented by 'May'), there is only corruption and treachery. Here the idea of 'Renaissance' is evoked in order to express the disgust for the Renaissance and Modernist ideas which resulted in the World War.

In the lines 22 and 22, we have to first take the following:

'To be eaten, to be divided, to be drunk

Among whispers;'

The words which follow in the 22<sup>rd</sup> line are 'by Mr. Silvero'. These three words will have to be read with the next line till the end of line 25 which ends with a semi-colon.

Line 22 along with half of line 22 alludes to the Christian ceremony of Eucharist in which the people at the ceremony eat pieces of bread which symbolise Christ's body and drink wine which symbolises Christ's blood. Thus people are supposed to draw nourishment from Christ. In the context of the poem, people in contemporary society are taking nourishment from the corruption and treachery in society.

Mr. Silvero is an imagined man from the surroundings who gets nourishment from vulgarity and treachery in society. Even if Mr. Silvero **visits** a place like **Limoges**, a French town known for its porcelain ware, enamels on copper and oak barrels for the production of cognac, he fails to appreciate the beauty and with his 'caressing hands' only feels the sensuality of the objects around.

In the line 26, there is another imagined foreign figure named Hakagawa who is amidst the Titians. Here the word 'Titians' refers to an Italian painter. Titian is a famous Italian painter who is known for his 'idealised portraits' of beautiful women. Thus Titian symbolises the portrayal of sensual beauty and Hakagawa is among the likes of Titian (the plural form of 'Titians' would symbolise the 'likes of Titian'). Hakagawa is among those who portray beauty but Hakagawa seems only to **bow** to them thus socialising with them without any appreciation for the beauty and its portrayal.

Madame de Tornquist is another imagined character in the line 26. She is only shifting candles in the dark room thus not getting anything from the 'illumination' of the candle light nor getting involved in a churchlike religious surrounding where one lights and places the candles for receiving the Grace (lines 26-27). In the line 27, Fraulein von Kulp is another imagined female character with a Germanic name who rejects faith. 'Who turned in the hall' in the line 22 represents turning away from the faith of religion. Further, 'vacant shuttles weave the wind' means that nothing productive is happening and there is no substance in anything that is happening around.

In line 30 the words 'I have no ghosts' signify the disbelief in everything that is supernatural. It symbolises the establishment of rationalism with no space for religious faith and values. But this situation leaves Gerontion in a 'house' with no protection as the poet describes in the lines 31-32. 'Draught' means here 'a gust of wind' and the 'draughty house' is the one that is exposed to the 'gust of wind'.

And even the knob of the door is 'windy', that means, the door also is exposed and does not stop the **rushing** wind.

In the lines from 21 to 31, four characters are introduced Mr. Silvero appears to be a man from **Portuguese** or Spanish or Italian descent. Hakagawa may be a man or a woman from Japanese origin- certainly a foreigner. Madame de Tornquist appears to be a woman of **French** origin according to the name. And **Fraulien** Von Kulp is a woman from Germanic origins. All these characters of foreign origin represent an isolated identity and appear to be inheritors of desolation. All these characters are stuck in such a social and historical situation in which they have nothing to communicate and they seem to be vulnerable like Gerontion who is living in a house which has no protection from the winds. These four characters from various lands appear to symbolise the isolation and desolation in the American land where people from various origins live. They have lost their faith and tradition. And they have no protection from values and tradition in a society which is rational but so bereft of values that the entire rationalism resulted in the World War. And then in the line 33 the poet questions the rationalism and all the knowledge gained in the process by saying , "After such knowledge what forgiveness?". And with all this rationalist knowledge, man has turned away from God and so cannot expect any mercy. And the poet mocks at the knowledge gained from history as history is nothing but a record of all that guides our vanities. The poet expresses these ideas in the lines 33 to 36. Then in the line 36 the poet again starts expressing his disbelief in the knowledge given to us by history. Finally history leaves us in a confused state starving for solutions to our problems. The word 'she' in the line 38 stands for history. This disgust for the rationalist knowledge gained through historical processes and their study continues all through till line 46. In the line 47, the poet alludes to the tree from which Adam and Eve ate an apple by the words 'the wrath bearing tree'. As a consequence of eating the apple, Adam and Eve were expelled from paradise. So the attempt to get knowledge is similar to that attempt to eat fruit from that tree. Knowledge results in tears, wars and suffering.

In the line 48, the poet hopes that 'Christ the tiger' will come and devour us all, as all of us are sinners. Gerontion further says in the lines 49 to 54 that he has not yet completed his understanding of the situation while living in the 'rented accommodation' owned by the Jew. Earlier in line 8, the poet has informed about it through the words, "And the Jew squats on the window sill, the owner .....". And the poet, through Gerontion, continues to question the contemporary knowledge and historical processes through which we have got this knowledge which has led to the decay of faith and loss of fear to God. This feeling continues till the line 59 and then in the line 60, the poet expresses his uncertainty over the use of all this knowledge to establish faith and the order of Christ. In the lines 61 to 66 and till the first word of the line 67, the poet, through various images, expresses that there appears to be no way out of this disgusting situation. The pessimism seems to have engulfed us world wide- and that is the pessimism which was a consequence of the World War. The proper names used in the line 67 represent the world - almost in the same way as happened earlier in the poem between the lines 21 to 30. And the same pessimistic feeling continues from lines 67 till 73 as the poet refers to various geographical places which contributed a lot in world history since the times of the Great Discoveries by the Europeans. But finally Gerontion, as an old man representing faith and human values, is driven to a corner and lies there in a sleepy **sombre** state. In the line

74, Gerontion is put along with all the tenants of the 'house' i.e. the world. And in the last line, the poet, through Gerontion expresses his pessimism as the 'thoughts of a dry brain in a dry season'.

### 22.5.4 Style and Theme

Characteristic to his style, Eliot begins with an epigraph and continues in free verse which has rhythm. He keeps alluding to various thoughts and writings that appeared earlier in his writings. In Gerontion, we can easily identify all the characteristics of Eliot's poetic style as we have studied earlier in this unit.

The central theme of the poem is the pessimism arising out of the World War which happened as a consequence of all the knowledge man acquired since the Renaissance period. In the context the poet desires that the humane religious faith and values which have been lost in historical process of acquiring material wealth and mundane knowledge be established again.

### Glossary

- 1) hot gates: symbolises the Greek place Thermopylae. The name of this city literally means 'hot gates'. Many wars were fought in this place.
- 2) cutlass: a small sword
- 3) spawned: conceived and born
- 4) estaminet: a word of French language meaning a café
- 5) stonecrop: a moss-like plant (supposed to evoke disgust)
- 6) Merds: a French word which means 'human or animal excreta'
- 7) Gutter: Spluttering fire
- 8) Depraved: Morally unacceptable; Evil
- 9) Dogwood: Name of a flower
- 10) Chestnut: Name of a flower (also a tree known for its tasty nuts)
- 11) Judas: Name of a flower and also a character in the Bible
- 12) Draughty: 'Draught' is a gust of wind. 'Draughty' is the adjective from this word.
- 13) Weevil: An insect which damages the crops
- 14) Bear: Here it means a constellation of stars also known as The Great Bear
- 15) gull: Name of a sea-bird
- 16) Belle Isle: Name of an island in North Atlantic
- 17) Horn: refers to Cape Horn or Horn of Africa.
- 18) Gulf: A system of currents in the North Atlantic
- 19) Trades: Trade winds

**Self-check Exercise IV**

- 1) Identify some important stylistic features of T.S.Eliot’s poetry by giving examples from “Gerontion”.

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- 2) Identify 5 references from the poem studied above taken from various sources in history and literature.

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- 3) Study the significance of the title of the poem above.

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- 4) Identify one example of babbling in the poem.

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- 5) What is the central theme of the poem studied above.

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## 22.6 LET US SUM UP

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In this unit we have read about an important poet in the English language who was born in the U.S. and died in England. He is equally an American and English poet who evolved his own poetic style while amalgamating stylistic features, thoughts and imagery from various sources in French, German, English, Indian and Greek among many others.

We studied two of his poems entitled “The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock” and “Gerontion” and have identified the stylistic and the thematic characteristics of Eliot’s poetry in these two poems. This has helped us understand the work and contribution of T.S. Eliot in the English literature with concrete references and examples. We should be now able to study and appreciate Eliot’s poetry in general in terms of theme and style very specific to Eliot’s poetic canvass.

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## 22.7 ANSWERS TO SELF-CHECK EXERCISES

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### Self-check Exercise 1

- 1) Symbolism
- 2) German, French, Italian, Latin, English, Sanskrit and from Greek Classics.
- 3) The Waste Land
- 4) The Criterion. This journal was closed down in 1939 by T.S.Eliot himself due to the problems created by the Second World War.
- 5) Ezra Pound
- 6) Idea of a Christian Society

### Self-check Exercise 2

- 1) Epigraph
- 2) Poetry
- 3) Historical and cultural events and characters
- 4) Elements of language and nature
- 5) French Symbolists

### Self-check Exercise 3

**(Kindly note that the answers provided here are merely points for the sake of better comprehension. You can elaborate each point and add upon them on the basis of the Analysis of the poem and your own reading of the poem. Discuss your points during the Counselling sessions.):**

- 1) Identify the important stylistic features of T.S.Eliot’s poetry by giving examples from “Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock”.

**Answer:** Characteristic to the style of T.S.Eliot, in this poem there is:

- i) an Epigraph taken from Dante’s *Divine Comedy*.
- ii) Allusions from various historical and literary sources.
- iii) The use of metaphors and imagery which help explain the feelings of the character of Prufrock.

- iv) Selection of a character, Prufrock, for describing the feelings of the poet. This is the dramatic style of narration in the poetry of T.S. Eliot.
  - v) A sequence of events in the narration but there is no time sequence in the narration of events.
  - vi) Use of irony in the poem for depicting the pessimism of the theme.
  - vii) Uncertainty of action amidst the mood of hope and despair.
- 2) Identify 5 references from the poem studied above taken from various sources in history and literature. We can identify the following five references in the poem:
- i) The epigraph is from Dante's *Divine Comedy*.
  - ii) The refrain is taken from Jule Laforgue.
  - iii) Michelangelo is an important painter from Italy who is mentioned in the poem. This is a reference from history.
  - iv) "There will be time" (between lines 24 to 30) alludes to Andrew Marvell's poem "To His Coy Mistress".
  - v) "Dying fall" in line 52 alludes to Shakespeare's *Twelfth Night*.
- 3) In which year was the poem above published? Do you think it is important information for understanding the poem above.

The poem entitled "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock" was first published in a *Poetry* magazine in 1915 and then later in a collection of his poems *Prufrock and Other Observations* in 1917.

This date is important as by this we know this poem was written in the formative years of the poet and thus describes his feelings during his growing years. This helps us understand the feelings and imagery in the poem. Even the word "Prufrock" in the title represents a company in the surroundings of the poet. So, the date of the poem helps us locate the poem in specific contexts thus helping us understand the feelings in the poem.

- 4) Identify one example of grotesque in the poem.
- The third line 'like a patient etherized upon the table' for an 'evening spread out against the sky' is an example of the grotesque imagery which describes the disgust in the poem.
- 5) What is the main theme of the poem studied above.
- The main themes of the poem are as follows:
- i) Feeling of loneliness and alienation from the surroundings
  - ii) Indecision, uncertainty in the mind of Prufrock and disgust
  - iii) Pessimism (Prufrock can only see the negative aspect of himself as well of others around him)

#### Self-check Exercise 4

**(Kindly note that the answers provided here are merely points for the sake of better comprehension. You can elaborate each point and add upon them on the basis of the Analysis and your own reading of the poem. Discuss your points during the Counselling sessions.) :**

- 1) Identify some important stylistic features of T.S. Eliot's poetry by giving examples from "Gerontion".

**Answer:** We can identify:

- i) Epigraph of Gerontion. We have seen that this type of epigraph which has been taken from Shakespeare's play *Measure for Measure* is typical in T.S. Eliot's style.
  - ii) Use of French words like 'estaminet' and 'merds'. T.S. Eliot often uses words from foreign origin, especially French, in his poems. There are many names of foreign origin in the poem.
  - iii) Lots of references from historical sources, though these references have been used often in an obscure way. As for example, 'hot gates' refers to Thermopylae. [There are many other references of this type as explained while analysing this poem. Kindly collect them here and present them in a systematic manner.] There are many references from texts like the Bible. This is also very typical of T.S. Eliot's style as he alludes to the historical and literary sources to convey his ideas and feelings.
  - iv) The blank verse which is taken from the earlier writings of European and English poets. He often breaks the flow of ideas in the line by putting semi-colons. For example, in the line 28, we can see that the semi-colon breaks the verse in the line. [Find out similar other examples in the text – in lines 41, 43, 44, 45 and many others]. Discuss this technique during your counselling sessions.
  - v) The flow of language through the obscure imageries and intertextual imagery in a narrative to describe the feelings of Gerontion in the poem.
- 2) Identify 5 references from the poem studied above taken from various sources in history and literature. Collect information on the following references and systematically present them:
- i) Hot gates
  - ii) Estaminet of Antwerp
  - iii) 'We would see a sign'
  - iv) Judas
  - v) Wrath-bearing tree

[There are many such references. Study them systematically.]

- 3) Study the significance of the title of the above poem.

The title 'Gerontion' is a Greek word which literally means 'a little old man'. The title signifies the main theme of the poem. The poem describes the disgust in Europe after World War I through the eyes of an old man who symbolises the knowledge acquired through centuries since the Renaissance.

- 4) Identify one example of babbling in the poem.

Look at this line (line no. 40): 'What's not believed in, or if still believed'. There is an expression of uncertainty and confusion in this line. This is an example of the kind of 'babbling' which is typical in T.S. Eliot's style.

5) What is the central theme of the poem studied above?

The central theme of the poem is the description of the pessimism resulting from the situation created by the first World War. The entire story of scientific and rationalist growth since the Renaissance period in Europe has resulted in this valueless society which has resulted in the inhuman World War. The poet expresses his feelings of disgust, pessimism and cynicism through the narrative of Gerontion in the poem. [You can find many examples in the poem to elaborate these ideas. Elaborate these ideas by citing appropriate examples from the text of 'Gerontion'. Discuss them during your Counselling sessions with your peers.]

