

JRF SPECIAL PDF

T.S. Eliot



1 Eliot's Biography

1.1 Who He Was

Thomas Stearns Eliot was the most influential **poet-critic** of the **Modernist** movement in English. He was a poet, essayist, playwright, literary critic, and publisher. His verse broke with the smooth, decorative poetry of the **Victorians** and gave the 20th century a new language: fragmented, allusive, and rooted in the **complex realities of modern urban life**. He was awarded the **Nobel Prize in Literature** in

1948 "for his outstanding, pioneer contribution to present-day poetry."

CONCEPT

What is Modernism? The early-20th-century movement that rejected old forms and certainties. After the First World War, writers felt the modern world was broken and meaningless. They answered with experimental techniques — **fragmentation**, multiple voices, dense allusion, and **stream of consciousness** (writing that follows the unbroken flow of a character's thoughts). Eliot in poetry, and **Virginia Woolf** and **James Joyce** in fiction, are its central English figures.

1.2 Birth, Family, and Key Facts

Detail	Information
Born	1888 , in St. Louis, Missouri , USA
Died	1965
Nationality	American-born , became a naturalised British subject in 1927
Religion	Converted to Anglicanism (Church of England) in 1927
Publishing	Director of the famous house Faber & Faber
Nickname	"Old Possum"
Major prize	Nobel Prize in Literature, 1948

Eliot was born in America but moved to **Europe for his studies**. When the **First World War** broke out he could not return home and settled in **England**, taking odd jobs — teaching, and famously working as a **bank clerk** — to make

a living. He rose to become a director of **Faber & Faber**, the publishing house that later printed books such as *Lord of the Flies*. He gave up his American passport and became British in **1927**, the same year he was received into the Church of England.

1.3 His Age: Anxiety and Disintegration

Eliot arrived in England in **1914**, into a tense atmosphere that writers called the **age of anxiety and disintegration**. Old values were collapsing while new ideas surged: **Marxism** rose in Russia, **Albert Einstein** announced the theory of relativity, and Woolf and Joyce were experimenting with stream of consciousness. A boom in mass media – magazines, cinema, radio – chased quantity over quality. Eliot's great poems absorb this sense of a civilisation in crisis.

CONCEPT

Why he matters: Eliot found **spiritual support in Christianity**, and after his 1927 conversion his poetry turned toward faith and redemption. He reshaped both poetry and criticism: his verse made fragmentation and allusion the marks of the modern, and his essays – "Tradition and the Individual Talent," "The Metaphysical Poets," "Hamlet and His Problems" – set the terms of 20th-century literary debate.

1.4 His Themes and His Influences

Eliot **refused to praise** trees, flowers, and fields in the Romantic manner. Instead he wrote about the **streets, houses, and people of London**, which he called an "**unreal**

city," dwelling on its ugliness and the complex realities of modern life. He used **metaphysical images** borrowed from **John Donne**, difficult **myths from ancient cultures**, and a deliberately fragmented structure.

His chief influences were **Ezra Pound** (whom he met during the First World War), the **Metaphysical poets** (especially **John Donne**), **Dante** (whom Eliot called a universal figure and from whose *Divine Comedy* he learned to polish his words), the **French Symbolists**, and **Indian literature and philosophy**, traces of which appear in *The Waste Land*.

CONCEPT

Who was Ezra Pound? An American poet and a major force in Modernism. He was Eliot's closest literary ally: he insisted that *The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock* be published, and he edited and cut *The Waste Land* drastically. In gratitude Eliot dedicated *The Waste Land* to Pound with the Italian phrase "**il miglior fabbro**" ("the better craftsman").

2 Important Works

Work	Approx. Date	Genre	Significance
<i>The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock</i>	1915	Poem (dramatic monologue)	Often called the first modernist poem ; published at Pound's insistence
<i>Preludes</i>	1917	Poem (four parts)	Bleak portrait of modern urban life

Work	Approx. Date	Genre	Significance
<i>Gerontion</i>	1920	Poem (dramatic monologue)	An old man's view of post-war Europe; "History has many cunning passages"
<i>The Waste Land</i>	1922	Poem	His magnum opus ; the landmark Modernist poem
<i>The Hollow Men</i>	1925	Poem	"This is the way the world ends / Not with a bang but a whimper"
<i>Journey of the Magi</i>	1927	Poem	The Magi's journey to the infant Christ; a conversion-era poem
<i>Ash-Wednesday</i>	1930	Poem	His " conversion poem "; the move toward spiritual salvation
<i>Murder in the Cathedral</i>	1935	Verse drama	On the martyrdom of Thomas Becket
<i>Old Possum's Book of Practical Cats</i>	1939	Light verse	Comic cat poems; basis of the musical <i>Cats</i>
<i>The Family Reunion</i>	1939	Verse drama	Guilt to redemption; draws on Greek drama
<i>Four Quartets</i>	1936–1942	Poem (four parts)	His major later work; time and the divine
<i>The Cocktail Party</i>	1949	Verse drama	Comedy on a troubled marriage
"Tradition and the Individual Talent"	1919	Critical essay	Impersonality of poetry

Work	Approx. Date	Genre	Significance
"Hamlet and His Problems"	1919	Critical essay	Source of the "objective correlative"
"The Metaphysical Poets"	1921	Critical essay	Dissociation of sensibility

CONCEPT**The chronology of his major poems and**

plays: Poems: *Prufrock* (1915) → *Preludes* (1917) → *Gerontion* (1920) → *The Waste Land* (1922) → *The Hollow Men* (1925) → *Journey of the Magi* (1927) → *Ash-Wednesday* (1930) → *Four Quartets* (1936–42). His plays in order: *Murder in the Cathedral* (1935) → *The Family Reunion* (1939) → *The Cocktail Party* (1949) → *The Confidential Clerk* (1953) → *The Elder Statesman* (1959).

3 Important Works in Detail

The Waste Land, his masterpiece, is covered on its own in Section 4.

3.1 The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock (1915)

In one line: a shy, ageing man walks to a social gathering, agonising over whether he dares to speak to a woman — and never does.

This is often called the **first modernist poem**. It is a **dramatic monologue** in the **stream of consciousness** style:

we follow the unspoken, drifting thoughts of **J. Alfred Prufrock**, a timid, self-conscious man paralysed by **indecision and self-doubt**. It was published at the **insistence of Ezra Pound** and later collected in ***Prufrock and Other Observations*** (12 poems).

The action is tiny — Prufrock walks through dingy city streets toward a room where he might meet a woman and perhaps ask "an overwhelming question," possibly of marriage. But he cannot act. He frets about his thinning hair and ageing body, imagines being judged, and keeps putting the moment off. The poem moves through his anxieties rather than through events, ending as he pictures himself ignored by mermaids — a daydream broken only when "human voices wake us, and we drown."

Prufrock measures his hesitation against great figures and finds himself small. The women at the party talk of **Michelangelo**, the Renaissance master, and beside such greatness he feels insignificant. He compares himself to **Hamlet** and admits he is no tragic hero: "I am no Prince Hamlet, nor was meant to be" — a **Hamlet-like dilemma** of a man who cannot bring himself to act.

CONCEPT

The key line "Do I dare?" Prufrock's repeated question — "Do I dare?" and "Do I dare / Disturb the universe?" — is the heart of his character. It captures his terror of taking any decisive step. The line "I have measured out my life with coffee spoons" sums up a life frittered away in trivial social routine. The opening line is "Let us go then, you and I"; the closing line is "Till human voices wake us, and we drown."

EXAM ESSENTIAL

- Published **1915**, at the insistence of **Ezra Pound**; collected in *Prufrock and Other Observations*; often called the **first modernist poem**.
- Uses **stream of consciousness**; the speaker is **J. Alfred Prufrock**, a man paralysed by indecision.
- The two named figures in the poem are **Michelangelo** (whom the women at the party discuss) and **Hamlet** (with whom Prufrock unfavourably compares himself).
- The character-defining question is "**Do I dare?**"; other key lines: "I am no Prince Hamlet," "I have measured out my life with coffee spoons."
- Opening line: "Let us go then, you and I"; opening simile: the evening "spread out against the sky / Like a patient etherized upon a table."

3.2 Gerontion (1920)

In one line: a withered old man broods over a Europe spiritually exhausted after the First World War.

Published in the collection **Ara Vos Prec**, *Gerontion* is a **dramatic monologue**. The Greek title means "**little old man**," and the speaker is an old man who has spent most of his life in the 19th century and now surveys the decay of **Europe after the First World War**. Its themes are **religion** and **sexuality**, and its epigraph is taken from Shakespeare's *Measure for Measure*.

CONCEPT

What is Eliot's subject in the famous lines?

The poem's best-known passage — "**History** has many

cunning passages, contrived corridors / And issues, deceives with whispering ambitions, / Guides us by vanities" — has **history** as its subject. History is pictured as a deceptive maze that misleads and disappoints, mirroring the disillusionment of the age.

3.3 The Hollow Men (1925)

In one line: a desolate vision of spiritually empty modern people, ending in a whisper rather than an explosion.

A short poem about **spiritual emptiness**. The "hollow men" are stuffed figures with no inner substance — Eliot's image for modern people who have lost faith and meaning. Its title draws on **William Morris's** *The Hollow Land* and **Rudyard Kipling's** "The Broken Men." Eliot layers in epigraphs and allusions from **Joseph Conrad's** *Heart of Darkness*, the **Gunpowder Plot of 1605**, Shakespeare's *Julius Caesar*, and **Dante's** *Divine Comedy*. From the Gunpowder Plot he takes the **straw man** as a symbol of emptiness; from Conrad, the character **Kurtz** as an emblem of moral collapse.

CONCEPT **The famous closing lines:** The poem ends:

"This is the way the world ends / **Not with a bang but a whimper.**" It pictures the end of civilisation not as a dramatic catastrophe but as a feeble fading-out. Another key passage runs "Between the idea / And the reality ... Falls the Shadow."

3.4 Ash-wednesday (1930)

In one line: a long religious poem in which the speaker turns from spiritual despair toward surrender to God.

This is Eliot's "**conversion poem**," written during his conversion to **Anglicanism**. Its title names the first of the **forty days of Lent**, the Christian season of fasting and self-reflection before Easter. The poem is built on **Dante's Purgatorio** (the second part of the *Divine Comedy*) and is divided into **six sections**. The speaker, finding the world full of darkness and emptiness, rejects worldly things and slowly accepts that to reach salvation he must **surrender completely to God**.

3.5 Murder in the Cathedral (1935)

In one line: a verse drama on the martyrdom of Archbishop Thomas Becket, killed for defying the king.

A **verse drama** first performed in **1935**, dramatising the assassination of **Archbishop Thomas Becket** in **Canterbury Cathedral** during the reign of **King Henry II** in **1170**. The play's central conflict is between **Church and State** and the individual's stand against worldly power. Becket faces four temptations; the most dangerous is the temptation to seek **martyrdom for personal glory**. Eliot uses a **Chorus** of common people — in the manner of Greek tragedy — to voice their fear and moral confusion.

CONCEPT "The last temptation is the greatest treason."

Becket's lines — "The last temptation is the greatest treason: / To do the right deed for the wrong reason" —

mean that even accepting martyrdom becomes a **betrayal** if it is done out of **pride**, for self-glory. The "treason" is that the act would be **self-serving** rather than truly faithful.

3.6 Four Quartets (1936–1942)

In one line: four linked meditations on time, eternity, and the soul's relation to the divine.

A set of **four poems** published over six years and regarded as Eliot's major later work. Composed largely during the Second World War, they are interlinked meditations on **man's relationship with time, the universe, and the divine**, written in a calmer, more reflective style than his early verse. Each is tied to a place and, traditionally, to a season and an element.

The four poems, in their **order of publication**, are: **Burnt Norton** (1936), **East Coker** (1940), **The Dry Salvages** (1941), and **Little Gidding** (1942).

CONCEPT

The line tested from "Burnt Norton." The passage "While the world moves / In appetency, on its metallated ways / Of time past and time future" comes from **Burnt Norton**, the first quartet. "East Coker" supplies the line "**In my beginning is my end.**"

EXAM ESSENTIAL

- A set of **four poems**, written **1936–1942**; themes = **time, the universe, and the divine**.
- Chronological order of publication: **Burnt Norton → East Coker → The Dry Salvages → Little Gidding**.

- "While the world moves / In appetency, on its metalled ways" is from **Burnt Norton**.
- "In my beginning is my end" (from "**East Coker**") is the epigraph of **Anita Desai's** novel *Baumgartner's Bombay*.

3.7 Other Works to Know

Eliot wrote steadily for the stage and in lighter forms. The key facts:

- **Old Possum's Book of Practical Cats (1939)**: a collection of **light, playful poems** about the psychology and sociology of cats. It became the basis of **Andrew Lloyd Webber's** 1981 musical **Cats**.
- **Whispers of Immortality**: a poem praising two **Jacobean masters** for their obsession with mortality — the dramatist **John Webster**, who "saw the skull beneath the skin," and the poet **John Donne**.
- **Preludes (1917)**: four short poems giving a grim picture of modern city life.
- **Journey of the Magi (1927)**: a conversion-era poem in the voice of one of the Magi travelling to the newborn Christ; it opens "A cold coming we had of it."
- **The later plays**: *The Family Reunion* (1939), drawing on Greek drama to trace a hero from guilt to redemption; *The Cocktail Party* (1949), based partly on Euripides' *Alcestis*; *The Confidential Clerk* (1953), a drawing-room comedy; and *The Elder Statesman* (1959), his last play.

- **Sweeney Agonistes** and **The Rock** (1934, a pageant play, words by Eliot and music by Martin Shaw) are minor dramatic works.

4 The Waste Land

This is Eliot's most important and most widely studied work.

4.1 The Big Idea

In one line: a fragmented, multi-voiced poem that maps the spiritual desolation of Europe after the First World War — and hints, faintly, at the possibility of renewal.

The Waste Land (1922) is the landmark poem of **Modernism**. It pictures a civilisation that has lost its meaning and vitality: a barren, "wasted" world of decay, broken relationships, and spiritual emptiness in the aftermath of the **First World War**. It is famous for its **fragmentation**, its **many voices and languages**, and its dense web of **allusions** to mythology, religion, and literature — drawing on Dante, the Bible, the **Upanishads**, Shakespeare, and more.

The poem was first published in Eliot's own journal **The Criterion**, and its final version runs to **433 lines**. **Ezra Pound** edited it heavily, and Eliot dedicated it to him as "**il miglior fabbro**." Among its many sources, Eliot drew on **James George Frazer's** *The Golden Bough* (1890), a study of

myth and fertility ritual that shaped the poem's pattern of death and rebirth.

CONCEPT

The opening line: "April is the cruellest month, breeding / Lilacs out of the dead land." Spring, normally a season of joy, is "cruellest" here because new life painfully stirs a world that would rather stay dead. The line deliberately echoes — and inverts — the celebration of sweet April rains that opens **Chaucer's** *The Canterbury Tales*.

4.2 The Five Sections

The poem is divided into **five sections**. In order of appearance they are:

- **The Burial of the Dead:** sets the theme of spiritual drought. It opens with "April is the cruellest month," recalls a happier love in the **hyacinth garden**, introduces the fortune-teller **Madame Sosostris** and her tarot cards, and shows London as an "**unreal city**" thronged with the walking dead.
- **A Game of Chess:** contrasts a wealthy, nervous woman's world with a working-class **pub scene**. The title comes from a play by **Thomas Middleton**. The pub talk, about a woman named **Lil** and her husband **Albert**, is the one place the poem leaves **Standard English** for **Cockney** dialect, and the bartender's call "HURRY UP PLEASE IT'S TIME" leads into Ophelia's words from *Hamlet*, "Good night, ladies."

- **The Fire Sermon:** named after the **Buddha's** sermon on renouncing desire. It shows a degraded **River Thames**, the mechanical, joyless encounter of the **typist** and the clerk, and the merchant **Mr. Eugenides**. Here the blind prophet **Tiresias** watches over the scene.
- **Death by Water:** the shortest section (just eight lines), describing the drowned **Phlebas the Phoenician** and the dissolution of his body — a meditation on death.
- **What the Thunder Said:** moves toward the hope of renewal. A desperate land cries for rain; the **thunder** speaks the three commands of the **Upanishads** — **Datta** (give), **Dayadhvam** (sympathise), **Damyata** (control). It closes with the nursery rhyme "**London Bridge is falling down**," a string of fragments, and the Sanskrit blessing "**Shantih shantih shantih**."

4.3

Key Facts and Numbers

Item	Detail
Published	1922 , first in the journal The Criterion
Length	433 lines ; divided into five sections
Dedication	To Ezra Pound , " il miglior fabbro " (the better craftsman)
Key influence	James George Frazer's <i>The Golden Bough</i> (myth and ritual)
Central figure	Tiresias , the blind prophet
Shakespeare plays referred to	<i>Hamlet</i> , <i>Coriolanus</i> , <i>The Tempest</i>
London locales named	St. Magnus Martyr , St. Mary Woolnoth , Lower Thames Street

Item	Detail
Nursery rhyme	" London Bridge is falling down "
Closing word	" Shantih shantih shantih " (from the Upanishads)

4.4 The Figures and Voices

Tiresias

- The **blind prophet** of Greek myth who has lived as both **man and woman** and can see across time
- Eliot called him **the most important figure** in the poem: he watches the separate scenes and **binds them together**, connecting past and present

Madame Sosostris

- A **fortune-teller** in "The Burial of the Dead" who reads **tarot cards**
- Stands for the shallow, false spirituality of the modern world; she warns one client to "fear death by water"

The typist and the clerk

- In "The Fire Sermon," their **loveless, mechanical** sexual encounter shows the sterility of modern relationships
- When the clerk leaves, the typist feels only relief: "I am glad it's over"

Belladonna

- "The Lady of the Rocks, the Lady of Situations" — one of Madame Sosostris's tarot figures; her name means "beautiful lady" and also a poisonous plant

Phlebas the Phoenician

- The drowned sailor of "Death by Water," whose decaying body is the poem's image of mortality

Other named figures include **Marie** (whose memory opens the poem), the merchant **Mr. Eugenides**, and the shallow, materialist **Young Man Carbuncular**. (The phrase the "**ruin-bibber**" is not a character — it is only a description, "one who drinks in ruin.")

CONCEPT

The famous lines: "I will show you fear in a handful of dust" (from "The Burial of the Dead") became a symbol of modern emptiness — and supplied the title of **Evelyn Waugh's** bleak novel *A Handful of Dust* (1934). "The awful daring of a moment's surrender" comes from "What the Thunder Said." The poem also echoes, with heavy irony, the refrain of **Spenser's** *Prothalamion*: "Sweet Thames, run softly, till I end my song."

EXAM ESSENTIAL

- Published **1922** in **The Criterion**; **433 lines**; dedicated to **Ezra Pound** as "**il miglior fabbro**."
- The **five sections in order**: The Burial of the Dead → A Game of Chess → The Fire Sermon → Death by Water → What the Thunder Said.
- **Frazer's** *The Golden Bough* is a major influence; **Tiresias** is the central, unifying figure.
- The **pub scene** (in "A Game of Chess") departs from Standard English into **Cockney**.

- Shakespeare plays directly referred to: **Hamlet**, **Coriolanus**, and **The Tempest**. The lines on Ariel's music in *The Tempest* — "This music crept by me upon the waters" — reappear in an altered, ironic version.
- London locales named in the poem: **St. Magnus Martyr**, **St. Mary Woolnoth**, and **Lower Thames Street**.
- The nursery rhyme near the end is "**London Bridge is falling down**"; the closing word is "**Shantih shantih shantih**."
- The lines about Ganga, Himavant, and the waiting jungle ("Ganga was sunken... over Himavant") are from "**What the Thunder Said**," showing the Indian/Upanishadic influence.

5 Criticism

Eliot was as important a **critic** as he was a poet. His essays gave modern criticism several of its central ideas, and his judgements on earlier writers carried great weight.

Critic / Source	What they said
T.S. Eliot , "Tradition and the Individual Talent" (1919)	Argued for the impersonality of poetry and the living weight of tradition on the individual writer.
T.S. Eliot , "Hamlet and His Problems" (1919)	Introduced the term " objective correlative ."
T.S. Eliot , "The Metaphysical Poets" (1921)	Coinced the phrase " dissociation of sensibility ."

Critic / Source	What they said
T.S. Eliot (on Shelley)	Discerned in the Shelleyan lyric the "signs of adolescence."
Ezra Pound	The "better craftsman" who edited <i>The Waste Land</i> ; honoured by Eliot as "il miglior fabbro."
Peter Ackroyd	Wrote the major biography <i>T.S. Eliot</i> (1984).

CONCEPT

What is the "objective correlative"? Eliot's idea, from "**Hamlet and His Problems**" (1919), that the only way to express an emotion in art is to find an "**objective correlative**" — a set of objects, a situation, or a chain of events that will automatically call up that emotion in the reader. Emotion should be conveyed through external, concrete things, not stated directly.

What is "dissociation of sensibility"? Eliot's idea, from "**The Metaphysical Poets**" (1921), that English poetry suffered a split after the early 17th century. The **Metaphysical poets** like **Donne** could fuse thought and feeling — they "felt their thought." Later poets lost this unity, separating intellect from emotion. He called that loss the "**dissociation of sensibility**."

The impersonal theory of poetry: In "**Tradition and the Individual Talent**" (1919) Eliot argued that good poetry is **impersonal**: the poet does not pour out personal feelings but acts as a medium, surrendering to the larger order of **tradition** — the whole "ideal order" of past literature, which every new work subtly alters.

Eliot among the moderns: Eliot stands beside **Virginia Woolf** and **James Joyce** as a defining voice of British Modernism, whose works are marked by uncertainty,

disillusionment, and despair. He won the **Nobel Prize in 1948**; fellow Modernist **W.H. Auden**, by contrast, never received it.