

FROM THE INSTRUCTOR

To begin, here are a few excerpts from the project's assignment sheet:

Assignment: You have been commissioned by the *National Endowment for the Humanities* to compose a lesson plan for AP Language and Composition on a single modern American poem.... Your lesson plan must be divided into the following sections: (1) Introduction, (2) Learning Objectives (at least three), (3) Lesson Activities (at least two), and (4) Research Reflection. The Introduction and Research Reflection must contain a minimum of 1500 words of prose combined. This project requires at least five sources: one exhibit (the poem under study), one visual, and three additional sources.

Audience: Your primary audience is the teacher of the class described above, though you must also consider the students (high school seniors). This combined audience has read, though not yet *closely read* the poem. You can assume this group's knowledge of our basic glossary of poetry terms, but you cannot assume their knowledge of any additional source material.

Comments

Use the following critical questions to help guide your poem analysis and project composition: (1) How does your chosen exhibit reflect and engage with specific cultural or philosophical issues of the modern era? (2) Based on your responses above, what are your central interpretive claims regarding the poem? (3) What source material is *instrumental* to teaching this interpretation?

This project can be used most effectively as a second or mid-semester project to introduce students to the research process, and to build upon skills of analysis and argument reviewed and learned for a first project. We can teach students how to conduct exploratory and focused research independently, and how to draw upon a wider range of sources (in this case background and theory) to achieve their rhetorical purpose. This project also transitions students to a new genre for a new audience with a visual component, highlighting how a new context calls for different kinds of argument, research, and prose style.

Finally, this project includes a meta-cognitive reflection for both students and teachers, as teaching a lesson plan is also a wonderful reminder for how we can design effective ones (with objectives that are student-centered and observable) for a single class or an entire unit.

Jason Tandon
WR 150: Writing, Research, & Inquiry

FROM THE WRITER

I at first found it quite difficult to find the right way to approach this work of T.S. Eliot's without attempting tackle the whole of the immense body of literature and cultural ideas Eliot involves in his work. However, in exploring contemporary movements to that of Modernist poetry I saw that Eliot was using the same distortion of reality as the Surrealist painters of that time to achieve the same goal, the creation of a new lens through which the audience could observe the world and the scenes these artists were describing. From this idea I explored just a few of the many ways in which Eliot forms this lens, whether that be through literary reference and association or various poetic devices.

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ELIOT'S REALITY



T.S. Eliot by Patrick Heron

Written in 1911 while T.S. Eliot was studying at Oxford University and published in 1915, “The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock” was Eliot’s first professionally published poem and is one of his best remembered today. With its publication Eliot established himself as a key figure in the Modernist movement (O’Clair 460). This movement sought to upset previous poetic traditions and interpretations of society and man, to “make it new,” “make it difficult” and challenge the optimistic and highly structured poetry of the Romantic movement predominant at the time (O’Clair xl–xliii, xxxviii–xl).

In his book *The Philosophy of T.S. Eliot*, William Skaff explains that during the time Eliot spent as a student at Oxford he sought to surround himself with and absorb the knowledge of the great philosophers and poets of his time and of those before him with the ultimate goal of becoming a philosopher himself (O’Clair 460). In doing so Eliot sought to understand his relationship with reality through these teachings and thereby better describe the world around him and explain the way others did (Skaff 22). One of Eliot’s largest influences during these years was English philosopher F.H. Bradley (Skaff, 10). In studying his work, Eliot took on the point of view proposed by Bradley that “reality is dualistic, made up of mind and matter” (Skaff 12). In this philosophy, ‘appearance’ is simply the world as we see it and ‘reality,’ as Bradley defines it, consists of both our experience and interpretation of the world around us (Skaff 12). Another view through which we will explore this poem and this concept of reality is that of surrealist art. According to poet and art historian Gaston Criel, the Surrealist art movement was born out of World War One and sought to “express...the true operations of thought,” to access the creativity of the mind’s subconscious by distorting the appearance of the scenes depicted in there thereby juxtaposing the real and the surreal (Criel 133–134). Through the study of Eliot’s philosophy and its connection to the Surrealist movement students will explore how through his poetry, Eliot attempted to present not the

‘appearance’ of the world but the ‘reality’ of it, consisting of our ideas and preconceptions of our world and examine this presentation is reflected by Prufrock’s view of his life in this poem.

Guiding Questions

<p>How does “The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock” reveal Eliot’s core philosophy about reality?</p>	<p>How can the analysis and understanding of the Surrealist art of this time aid in our study of this poem?</p>
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Learning Objectives

After completing this lesson, students should be able to...

- Explain how Eliot places his work on a continuum of the great literary works of history such as Dante's *Inferno* and support the idea that the speaker of this poem views himself as a Lazarus-like voice from the dead, speaking to the reader and explain how, through this voice, the speaker describes his reality.
- Argue that Eliot's viewed 'reality' as separate from appearance and made up entirely of our ideas and conceptions of the world around us.
- Present how Eliot's philosophy about reality revealed in the previous lessons is reflected in the Surrealist art movement.

Activities

Activity I: Eliot's Tradition

1. Students will begin the lesson by dividing into small groups and reading the poem in its entirety, once silently, once aloud. The students will then discuss their initial reactions to the piece in order to prepare them to further explore the poem and address amongst themselves any questions they may have.

2. After their brief discussion, students will read aloud within their groups this section from Russell Kirk's *Eliot and His Age* (1971):

In "Tradition and the Individual Talent," Eliot argued that the true poet, restraining private emotions, almost extinguishing visible personality, immerses himself in a profound continuity of literature; he may add to the body of great literature (indeed, he ought to innovate if he had the power, that he may renew the vitality of tradition), but only if he has absorbed great literature. Tradition has life; we contribute to it and are nurtured by it. (Kirk 60)

Have the students discuss what this section implies about how Eliot viewed his work in the context of the history of literature.

Reading "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock," students should be able to argue that the idea of Eliot's work existing on a continuum with this "body of great literature" (Kirk 60) is evident in his consistent use of direct and indirect references to many of these great works. For this activity we will only be working with the references made within this poem to Dante's *Inferno* and the Biblical figure of Lazarus.

3. Present the students with the following background on these references:

- Dante's *Divina Commedia* was an epic poem describing Dante's journey through Hell, Purgatory, and Heaven as he was led by the poet Virgil (Dinsmore 292). The quotation at the start of "Prufrock" (Eliot 0) is taken from the first section of Dante's poem, *Inferno*, in which the poet Dante travels through Hell and in this quote the poet is addressed by a damned man who tells him that he would not speak to him if he thought the poet could ever leave Hell and return to the world again (O'Clair 463n.1).
- Lazarus is a Biblical figure, a beggar who is told by God that even if he were to return from the dead, no one would heed his "warning about Hell" (O'Clair 465n.7).

4. To finish this activity, ask the students to write a short response to the following questions:

Eliot thought that a well-educated writer may "add to the body of great literature" as is discussed by Kirk above (60). What does the association of Dante's *Inferno* and the story of Lazarus tell the reader about the poem and the perspective from which this story is being related by the speaker?

The students should be able to explain using the provided passage from Kirk and any close reading of “The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock” they have done so far that Eliot believes that, by immersing himself in this “continuity of literature” his works, such as this poem, are being added to it, placed in this collection of great works with all others in a continuum of ideas and thought (Kirk 60). In the case of “Prufrock,” we see Eliot both directly referencing these works but also more subtly mirroring subject matter to illicit thematic associations. Prufrock’s description of the night is exceedingly morbid, perhaps hellish, describing the night sky as a “patient etherized upon a table” (Eliot 3) and detailing a “yellow fog” that seeps through the evening, curling itself about the buildings (Eliot 15–23). Prufrock is a man grown old with “a bald spot” (Eliot 40) and thinning limbs (Eliot 44) and has seen death, “the eternal Footman” come for him, holding his coat to lead him away (Eliot 85). By connecting his poem through direct references and through the subjects of death and Hell to these other works Eliot has thus told the reader the perspective from which this story is being told. Eliot reveals to the reader that the speaker, Prufrock, looking back upon his life, is speaking to us as a Lazarus or Virgil-like figure, our guide through Hell, telling us this message from the grave.

Activity II: Eliot’s Reality

1. Before beginning this lesson, ask the students the following question so they may keep it in mind throughout the exercise:

What does Prufrock’s perception of his life tell us about the presentation of reality in this poem?

This concept of a subjective reality such as that proposed by Bradley is apparent as Eliot presents Prufrock as our guide as he takes us through his life. In this poem the ‘reality’ presented to us is not one of ‘appearance’ or fact but made up only of Prufrock’s perception, the sum of his ideas, experiences, and conceptions. Because he perceives his world as hellish, the ‘reality’ of this poem, and thereby Prufrock’s ‘reality,’ becomes Hell itself.

2. In order to cement this concept in their minds, have the students pick out spots in the poem which they find to be particularly surreal and explain what these moments reveal about Prufrock’s view of them.

Example Response:

I have heard the mermaids singing each to each/I do not think that they will sing to me.
(Eliot 125)

The mermaids in this passage seem to be a reference to the Sirens of Greek Mythology, described by historian Robin Hard in *The Routledge Handbook of Greek Mythology* as the “enchanted singers” of the sea “who lured sailors to their death through the beauty of their songs” (Hard 395). In this passage, through the description of women as these Siren-like creatures, we understand Prufrock’s perception of women as a powerful and seductive force. His disappointment with love in his life is also evinced in these mermaids do not “sing” to him and he is left without the love of a woman (Eliot 125).

Activity III: Eliot and Surrealism

One contemporary and acquaintance of Eliot who, as discussed by Professor of English Erik Svarny, had a significant influence upon Eliot around the time he spent at Oxford was Wyndham

Lewis (Svarny 2). Lewis was a modernist poet, WWI officer, and avant-garde painter (Einhaus 49) and below is one of his surrealist works made shortly after the end of the Great War entitled *A Battery Shelled* (Lewis).



A Battery Shelled (1919) by Wyndham Lewis

1. Have the students read the following passage from Gaston Criel's 1952 article on Surrealism:

Andre Breton defines Surrealism as follows: "Surrealism, masculine noun. Psychic pure automatism by which one proposes to express, either verbally or in writing, or in any other manner the true operations of thought. A dictation of thought, in the absence of any control exercised by reason or ethics...Surrealism depends upon the belief in the higher reality of certain forms of associations previously neglected, in the total power of the dream, in the unprejudiced thought process." (Criel 134)

2. Bring up the Lewis painting on a projector or screen or hand out color copies to each group of students.

3. Ask the students to discuss within their groups any initial thoughts they have about the picture and any information they can infer from it (When could this have been made? What scene is this image describing? Etc.).

4. After the students have had a moment to discuss this piece, ask them to briefly consider the analysis work they have done in this lesson and how it might connect to this painting, then ask them the following questions, having them answer with short, written responses:

i. The world presented in this image is clearly does not describe the 'appearance' of the world as we have defined in previous parts of this lesson. What does the 'reality' of this situation as it is presented tell us about Lewis' perception of it? Give an example.

Example Response:

By warping the 'appearance' of this scene, Lewis is able to better convey a dark and grim view of the war. One way in which Lewis perpetuates this view is by making all of the non-officers

in this scene almost completely featureless and nondescript (Lewis). Through this Lewis expresses the idea that these soldiers were not viewed as human, even by their own officers who look upon the scene from the same perspective as we do.

ii. How is this idea and presentation of reality similar to that which we saw in Eliot's work?

Example Response:

This Surrealist art piece illustrates the same concept of reality as that shown in "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock." The unreal imagery used in Eliot's work, such as the dark and dreamlike presentation of Prufrock's world, is, as William Skaff points out in his book *The Philosophy of T.S. Eliot*, similar to the "nightmarish quality" of many paintings made during the Surrealist art period (Skaff 198). Just as Eliot uses this surreal presentation to reveal Prufrock's 'reality' as a sort of living Hell for him, in this painting we see that same dramatic distortion of the appearance of the world in this painting to show how Lewis perceives it and show the "nightmarish" 'reality' this war scene is for him (Skaff 198).

Project 2: Research Reflection
WR 150; Section M2

1. Explain your central thematic interpretation of the poem, the thematic focus of your lesson plan. This section should demonstrate your ability to compose clear, coherent claims, supported by close readings of the poem. Present any requisite source material that supports or contextualizes these claims.

I decided, after my initial readings and research, to focus my analysis of “The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock upon the philosophy of Eliot. In particular I wanted to explore his thoughts about reality versus appearance as inspired by F.H. Bradley (Skaff 20) and their relationship to the Surrealist art movement and to then analyze the poem through this lens.

The influence of philosophers like F.H. Bradley is evident in T.S. Eliot’s “The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock” as Eliot presents Prufrock’s ‘reality’ as the sum of his perception and interpretation of his world and not its literal ‘appearance.’

Eliot presents the speaker as a voice from the dead, describing to the reader the reality of his life, by connecting this work to other great works of the past that present a similar speaker. As Russell Kirk writes in his book *Eliot and His Age*, Eliot believed that a writer could, as he does in this poem, through the study of these works, place his or her works on the great continuum of literature, this continuum making up what Eliot refers to as “tradition” (Kirk 60). Two of the works on this continuum which Eliot connects his poem to through subject, perspective, and direct reference are Dante’s *Inferno* and the biblical story of Lazarus. Dante’s *Inferno* was an epic poem in which the speaker ventures through Hell lead by his guide, the poet Virgil (Dinsmore 292). Eliot first connects to this work by opening his poem with a direct quote taken from *Inferno* (Eliot 0) in which a damned man tells the poet Dante, the speaker of *Inferno*, that he only talks to him because he believes Dante will never return from Hell, damned like himself (O’Clair 463n.1). The idea of a voice speaking from the dead is repeated in this poem when Eliot refers to Prufrock as “Lazarus, come from the dead,” the story of Lazarus being one in which a beggar warned by God that even if he were to return from death to warn people about Hell they would not believe him (Eliot 94). Through these connections, we may view Prufrock’s description of his life as his description or warning of Hell. However, he does not speak of Hell in a literal sense as in this poem he simply reflects upon his life and it is through the dark and depressive descriptions of Prufrock’s world that Eliot evokes a hellish image. When Prufrock is describing the nights he has spent, he compares the evening sky to “a patient etherized upon a table” (Eliot 3) and the streets as infested with a gross “yellow fog,” winding its way between the buildings (Eliot 15–22). Here the speaker does not illustrate for the reader the ‘appearance’ of his world but the ‘reality’ of it, as Bradley defines it. Because Prufrock viewed these parts of his life as hellish, the ‘reality’ of his world became Hell itself and Eliot presents it to the reader as such.

Similarly to Surrealist artists’ use of distortion of the ‘appearance’ of the images they depict, Eliot uses surreal imagery and descriptions of Prufrock’s life to better display Prufrock’s perception of his world to the reader. In the closing stanzas the speaker describes hearing mermaids sing as he walks along the beach (Eliot 122, 124). These mermaids are likely a reference to the Sirens of Greek mythology who Robin Hard describes in his book *The Routledge Handbook of Greek Mythology* as the “enchanted singers” of the sea who would sing to the sailors passing by, luring them to their deaths

(Hard 395). By using this reference to describe Prufrock's view of the women in his life, Eliot explains to us that in Prufrock's 'reality' the women in his life were these powerful, seductive, and dangerous figures like the Sirens of myth. We can better understand Eliot's use of Bradley's 'reality' in observing a piece of Surrealist art such as Wyndham Lewis' 1919 artwork, *A Battery Shelled* (Lewis). In this painting, Lewis presents the non-officer, British soldiers as small, nondescript figures working the broken land, looking more like tools than men. Viewing the painting, we look over the torn field from the same perspective as the officers standing above it. Through the technique of distorting the 'appearance' of the scene, as Eliot has done in "Prufrock," Lewis illustrates for the reader a 'reality' which displays the officers' view of these men as inhuman, tools to be used for the advance of war.

2. Describe your research process for this project, both exploratory and focused (researching specific background or theory sources to enrich your analysis of the poem). Please also describe the challenges or problems you faced while conducting research and how you solved them. In this section, you should also demonstrate relevant knowledge of the B.E.A.T. taxonomy.

The first step I took in my research process was simply to look at the annotations and close reading of the poem I had done and decide which terms and references used by Eliot in this poem I needed more information on. I decided to focus on his references to Dante's *Inferno* and looked through Mugar's online database for a concise reader's guide to this epic poem. My next step was to research more about Modernism to figure out what different approaches to or lenses through which I could view the poem that would be appropriate to this artistic movement. The guides to Modernism and Eliot's earlier life provided in Norton proved to be very helpful for providing general background on Eliot as well as information on the general theory of Modernism. Originally, thinking I was going to explore the poem through a historical perspective, I searched the Mugar website for resources on the culture of the post-Romantic and post-Victorian period Eliot would have been writing in. In looking for these books in the stacks, however, I also found a number of books on the philosophy behind Eliot's work which I saw as much more compelling and relevant to this time in Eliot's life because, as explained by Erik Svarny in his book *The Men of 1914: T.S. Eliot and Modernism*, when he had written this poem he was studying philosophy at Oxford with the intent of teaching philosophy himself (Svarny 44, 45). These books provided my project both with Background and Theory sources as many of them began with background information on Eliot's life at Oxford, his biggest influences at the time, and so on before delving into what exactly these influential philosophies were, providing the theory. The books I picked up from my trips to the stacks at Mugar proved to be my main sources outside of the Exhibit sources used for this project. I gathered other sources as needed for smaller details such as information on the Sirens of Greek mythology online from Mugar-linked resources. For my visual sources I decided to use a portrait of Eliot that was somewhat avant-garde to give my readers background on what Eliot looked like as well as preview some of the aspects of his art I would be discussing, specifically its connection to the Surrealism. I wanted to find a Surrealist painting to use as an exhibit source to display this connection directly and while reading *The Men of 1914* I found that Eliot had been close to the Modernist poet Wyndham Lewis who later became a Surrealist painter (Svarny, 2, 23, 148, 149). After deciding to find a painting by Lewis and being dissatisfied with the ones provided by Svarny I decided to work with his 1919 painting "A Battery Shelled" (Lewis). I found these visual sources via a series of simple web searches but made sure to chose an image source taken from the website of the museum where the painting hangs.

The biggest problem I faced in my research process was that of honing in all of the information I had collected into a main theme to explore. I found that the most helpful step to deciding exactly the direction I wanted to take my paper in and seeing what parts of my research would support this was writing the guiding questions and learning objectives. In doing so I had to give my paper a definite focus and this allowed me to, from that point forward, easily decide whether my sources had anything to do with this goal or were concerned with a different aspect of his work.

Another, smaller problem I faced particularly during the start of my research was that much of the writing about Eliot's philosophy and how it affected his writing was written working with and analyzing specific poems of Eliot's, making these pieces Argument sources. I found that the simplest solution to this problem was to look at the table of contents and see if they were referencing specific poem titles, then to simply avoid these chapters or that book altogether.

3. Identify the background or theory source you are most proud of finding, and explain its importance to the idea you are trying to teach about the poem.

The source I am most proud of finding was William Skaff's 1986 book, *The Philosophy of T.S. Eliot: From Skepticism to a Surrealist Poetic, 1909–1927*. Though I was originally interested in looking into the historical and cultural influences upon Eliot's work finding this book while browsing the stacks made me reconsider this approach and instead focus on Eliot's philosophy. This book was the most important of all the sources about the philosophy of Eliot's work as its chapters on Eliot's influences during his years at Oxford when he was writing "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock" (O'Clair 460) gave me the idea to write more in depth about this poem's connections to Dante's *Inferno* and to explore the ideas presented by F.H. Bradley in his book *Appearance and Reality* which were massive influences upon Eliot's beliefs about the interpretation and presentation of reality in his poetry (Skaff 10–12). Skaff's discussion of Eliot's artistic connection to the Surrealist movement (Skaff 131–204) was also helpful though this section focused less on Surrealist art and more on surrealism in Eliot's work in a broader sense. In these ways this source acted both as a Background source, providing information on what philosophers and other great thinkers and poets Eliot would have been studying as well as a Theory source, explaining their philosophies.

4. Conclude your reflection with a response to the following: during the course of this project, what have you learned about the research process and about how to use source material as a writer? How **specifically** might you change or improve upon your research process for the final paper?

In doing research for future projects I think that the most helpful step I could take to improve the quality of my researching experience and of the sources I collect during this process would be to decide much earlier on in the process exactly what questions I will be answering or what argument I would like to be making. Of course, these objectives would be subject to revision or reconsideration over the course of my project but this would allow me to better economize my time spent researching and make sure that the sources I am looking into are in fact relevant to my central questions. This would mean as soon as I am done analyzing and annotating the poem and done the research to understand all terms and references used by the poet that are essential to understanding the poem as best I could at this stage, drafting a series of central questions about the poem, hopefully all connected to one central theme or idea, which I would like to explore further.

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