

Negotiating Contexts of Modernism in Eliot's Early Poetry: A Strategic Introduction for Undergraduate Learners in India

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Abstract

This article outlines a strategy for introducing students of B.A. (Honours) English in India to T. S. Eliot's early poetry vis-à-vis contexts of Modernism. The strategy's pedagogical relevance is two-fold. It addresses the issue of learner-resistance to Eliot's poetry, which is perceived as difficult. It also responds to the teacher's dilemma in needing to explicate Eliot's poems without a full-fledged discussion of their historical-cultural frames of reference. The latter is precluded by time constraints of the semester schedule. These factors render the command-style text analysis, usually employed to teach poetry to undergraduates, ineffectual. The proposed strategy modifies the lecture method with a guided discovery component. It incorporates into the reading of a representative poem, those key issues which derive from its Modernist contexts and are integral to its meaning. It employs audio-visual teaching aids, keeping in mind the logistics of the Indian classroom.

Keywords: T.S. Eliot, modernism, contexts, "Preludes", undergraduate teaching

Introduction

T.S. Eliot features ubiquitously as a representative Modernist poet in undergraduate English Honours syllabi for "Twentieth-century English Literature" paper in most Indian universities. He represents a challenge both for the learner and the teacher. Learners often find Eliot's poetry difficult, and among other things, find the eclectic references a challenge.

Plus, Eliot's poetry is unamenable to paraphrase, besides being grounded in the historical-cultural contexts of High Modernism¹. Therefore, the teacher finds that analyzing the text without initiating learners into the contexts, is ineffectual. Additionally, the syllabus is text-intensive. Typically, it comprises early poems by Eliot² alongside poems by multiple 20th Century poets. Time constraints preclude a 'background' lecture on Modernism. Moreover, such stand-alone lectures usually offer general background information, without specifying their particular relevance to the text.

These circumstances constitute the rationale for devising alternatives to the conventional, teacher-centric methods of teaching Eliot. This article outlines a three-part strategy to introduce undergraduates to the contexts of Modernism with regard to Eliot's early poetry. It entails identifying the Modernist features of theme and style in a representative poem by Eliot; situating these themes within the historical-cultural frameworks of Modernism; and explicating key aspects of Eliot's style with reference to the poem. It uses audio-visual teaching material and ensures learner participation.

Additionally, the proposed strategy has the following advantages. First, it makes allowances for the varying levels of proficiency in English and aptitude for literature in and across classrooms. It has a component of guided discovery, which could be adjusted (with more/less teacher intervention), according to learner-needs. Second, it optimally equips learners for undergraduate-level examinations, where questions reflect the assumption that learners are acquainted with the Modernist contexts of Eliot's poems (e.g., 'Analyze "Preludes"/"Prufrock" as a Modernist poem'). Third, while audio-visual presentations would be easier in a smart classroom, where such infrastructure is lacking, the presentations could be uploaded onto the learners' smartphones via virtual platforms such as Google Classroom. Finally, in the undergraduate semester system, teaching must be time-effective. Executing this strategy would require three one-hour sessions.

Session 1: Identifying Markers of Modernism in Eliot's Poetry

Learners would be required to read, parallelly, Eliot's "Preludes"³ (1915/1963), Section I, and Wordsworth's poem, "It is a beauteous Evening, calm and free" (1807/2004). Both poems are evocations of the

day's end, but in antithetical Modernist and Romantic modes. Thus, a comparative reading would highlight the distinct Modernist aspects of theme and style in "Preludes". This session demonstrates how such a reading could be effected by a guided-discovery activity wherein learners engage independently with texts, but are guided by preset questions which draw attention to differences between the two poems. Along with the texts, a questionnaire (like the one given below in Table 1) might be shared in the Google Classroom, or handouts distributed.

Table 1: *Questionnaire on poems by Eliot and Wordsworth*

1. What is the setting of each poem?
2. What thoughts does each setting evoke?
3. What are the emotional associations with each setting? How are these evoked?
4. What does each text tell us about its speaker?
5. Which text has a more difficult diction?
6. Which text has a more uniform structure (line-length, metre, and rhyme)?

Following a discussion on these questions, the elicited learner responses might be charted via Powerpoint, the responses to "Preludes" and "It is a beautiful Evening, calm and free" are given in Table 2 and Table 3 respectively.

Table 2: *Learner responses to "Preludes"*

"Preludes"	
Setting	a dingy urban locality on a wet winter evening
Thoughts	the drab mundaneness of quotidian routine; the disjointedness of things (suggested by the fragmentary images)
Emotions	enervated exhaustion, loneliness and despondency; "lighting of the lamps" suggests hope for something better; emotions are evoked indirectly by images
Speaker	a clinical, third-person account without personal information about the speaker
Vocabulary	a colloquial idiom; the line, "burnt-out-ends of smoky days", is difficult
Form	lines, metre and rhyme scheme are irregular

Table 3: Learner responses to "It is a beauteous evening, calm and free"

"It is a beauteous Evening, calm and free"	
Setting	the quiet and beautiful environs of a sea-side at sunset
Thoughts	the beauty of nature; the presence of God in nature; childhood as a blessed state of proximity to God; the harmony in creation
Emotions	tranquility, joy, companionship, fulfillment; emotions are conveyed by direct description or explicit comparison
Speaker	intimate self-disclosure (of spiritual faith, love of nature and affection towards the companion) in the first person
Vocabulary	ornate poeticisms (e.g., "beauteous evening", "Abraham's bosom") which are easily paraphrased
Form	regular (a sonnet)

From the particularities of theme and style in "Preludes", generalized markers of Modernism might be induced, thus:

- Portrayal of urban squalor and the spiritual sterility of human existence in such sites
- Emphasis on the disconnect from one's milieu and self-alienation; the former translates into the weary loneliness implicit in the setting, the latter is evinced in the speaker's refusal to self-manifest in the first-person
- Avoidance of religious values
- Use of images to suggest complex emotions
- Impersonality
- Difficulty in meaning-making despite a colloquial idiom
- Free verse

Here, it would be useful to distinguish between the terms 'Modernism'/'Modernist' and 'modern'. 'Modern' pertains to the present time. It is a synonym for current or contemporary. 'Modernism' (from which 'Modernist' derives) is a "misleadingly singular rubric" for a "diverse synchrony" of artistic movements in Europe between the late-19th Century and World War II (Mahaffey, 1997, p. 100). Modernism's twin impetuses are the perception of a radically altered experience of existence in the wake of industrial urbanization, the findings of empirical science and philosophical conjectures on human nature, technological

advances, mass consumerism, and the Great War; and experiments in form and style to communicate such experiences.

Session 2: Framing the Modernist Contexts of Eliot's Themes

As opposed to a generalized and, often, tedious background lecture on Modernism, this session relates the themes in "Preludes" with specific historical and cultural conditions (organized under 'Locale', 'Milieu' and 'Mood'), definitive of Modernism. It demonstrates how this could be done through an interactive discussion, stimulated by audio-visual aids. At this point, learners would be required to read the full text of "Preludes".

Locale: A slide-show of photographs representing picturesque nature, e.g., English gardens or the Lake District; and 19th Century industrialized cityscapes, e.g., East London or Birmingham, would help learners recognize that while the former recurs in 19th Century British poetry, the latter are markedly absent. It might be pointed out that such absence is surprising because cities like London, Birmingham, Manchester etc. had undergone extraordinary morphological and demographic changes following industrialization in the 18th Century. For labour, factories uprooted families from the countryside and placed them in city slums. Workers were paid a pittance for long hours. Drudgery was also the lot of the office clerks who lived in cramped tenements. Such shabby, urban locales constitute the backdrop in Eliot's early poems like "Preludes" (1915/1963), evinced in the details about unventilated "passageways" "with smell of steak", "broken blinds" (p. 13), "dingy shades/In a thousand furnished rooms" (p. 14) and poor women scavenging for "fuel in vacant lots" (p. 15).

Further, learners should note that Eliot learned from the French poets, Charles Baudelaire and Jules Laforgue (whom he read as an undergraduate at Harvard), how to transform details of urban squalor into poetic evocations of circumscribed urban lives. "Laforgue, with his masks and irony, his scorn for sentimentality, and his breezy, colloquial style" shaped Eliot's early manner (Ardis, 2009, p. 109). Baudelaire, who wrote about the rapidly industrializing 19th Century Paris, showed Eliot "the poetical possibilities of ... the more sordid aspects of the modern metropolis" (Eliot, 1978, p. 126). "Preludes" draws upon Eliot's childhood memories of St. Louis, notorious for its urban decay in the early 1900s

and his 1910-11 sojourn in Paris when he “wandered the streets of less reputable quarters of the city, areas frequented by prostitutes, small-time criminals and the wretched poor” (Cooper, 2006, p. 24).

Milieu: A clipping of the “Conveyer Belt Scene” from Chaplin’s *Modern Times* (1936) would be shown to illustrate how the values of advanced capitalism, namely, automated efficiency and commodification, impacted the individual and engendered alienation, boredom and cynicism. Learners would be alerted that “Preludes” explores such psychological states in its personae by dissecting the minutiae of their mundane lives. Thus, Section II of “Preludes” evokes the daily grind of the metropolis, where morning sees tired people, nursing hangovers, trudge through slush to the coffee stands; Section III anatomizes the prostitute’s debilitating sense of degradation after her nightly self-abasement; in Section IV, the complacent metropolitan man relaxes with “evening newspapers” and a pipe, inured to the loneliness and sterile materialism of a predatory, capitalist society.

Mood: The mood of despondency in “Preludes” would be related to the erosion of traditional Christian beliefs under the onslaught of Darwin, Marx, Nietzsche, and Freud. To illustrate the contradictions between Christianity and late 19th Century science (e.g., regarding the origination of man) slides of Michelangelo’s “Creation of Adam” and the evolutionary stages from Dryopithecus to Homo Sapiens would be shown. Learner-responses to the images, elicited via preset questions (e.g., How are the human forms in the two images different? What is the reference point of each image?), might be charted in Powerpoint, as shown in Table 4.

Table 4: Learner responses to paintings

<i>Issues</i>	<i>Slide A</i>	<i>Slide B</i>
Intellectual reference	Christian dogma (Genesis 1.27)	empirical science (Darwin’s theory of natural selection)
Nature of the creator	a male, Caucasian God	unknown
Ontology of creation	Metaphysical, God imparts the Divine Spark to Adam	biological, via evolution
The human form	the idealized perfection of Adam’s physique emphasizes his inherent divinity	the animal antecedents of man are self-evident

This exercise clarifies how Darwin's *The Origin of Species* (1859/2017) challenged the Christian view that God created every species individually and made man in his own image. Darwin posited that all species had originated from a common single-celled organism by natural selection; man had evolved from ape, and there is no scientific evidence of a sovereign creator. In the fifth edition of *The Origin of Species*, Darwin used the phrase "survival of the fittest", coined by Herbert Spencer (1864/2019), as a synonym for his concept of "natural selection". This borrowed phrase, particularly, implied that nature does not embody a harmonious hierarchy (as "It is a beauteous Evening, calm and free" would suggest), but is engaged in a ruthless struggle to avert extinction.

Nietzsche (1892/1974) diagnosed the "will-to-power" in human individuals. He claimed that science had precipitated the death of God and a crisis for Western ethics, which drew their sanction from Christianity. Rejecting the Christian ideals of compassion and charity, Nietzsche asserted that human actions are driven by power lust. This suggested that man is, by nature, aggressive and self-serving. Learners would be asked to connect these ideas with the cynical dismissal in "Preludes" of compassion at the spectacle of an "infinitely suffering" humanity. Further, they should consider the possibility that "an infinitely suffering thing" refers to Christ, who is evoked only to be rejected.

The zeitgeist was shaped, also, by Freud's theory that human actions are impelled by unconscious impetuses. A slide of the "Iceberg Diagram"⁴ would illustrate his argument that Consciousness is only the tip of the iceberg, which represents the mind; its greater part is constituted by the Unconscious, a reservoir of socially unacceptable ideas, desires, repressed fears etc., which govern the individual's behaviour. Freud subverted the post-Enlightenment rationalist model of an integrated self, communicable coherently via speech and action. Learners should note that "Preludes" communicates the sense of a fragmented self in its piecemeal representation of the individual in terms of "feet", "hands", "fingers", "eyes" etc. Further, a conflict between the Conscious and Unconscious selves permeates the text, wherein the former dispassionately observes its milieu and represses the latter (the "I") which confesses to instinctive pity at human suffering.

At another level, Marx and Engels (1848/2017) concluded that conflict was innate in the dialectics of a capitalist society, and its exploitative,

competitive economic system would inevitably lead to wars. These disturbing premises about human nature and Western civilization gained ground around 1910 as Europe hurtled towards World War I. "Preludes" was written between 1909 and 1911, by then, the general mood in Europe was that of apprehensive pessimism. In "Preludes", despite intermittent suggestions of some imminent positive change (e.g., in "the lighting of the lamps" and the connotations of the title), the final impression is of "unrelieved bleakness and misery". The four sections, which depict evening, morning, night, dawn and, again, evening, suggest "a purposeless circling that leads nowhere" (Mendilow, 1968, p. 321).

Session 3: Explicating Eliot's Modernist Style

Eliot believed that Modernism's radical perceptions demanded a new poetics. In his poetry, he consciously broke from the conventions of 19th Century Romanticism, and, in his essays he clarified the definitive aspects of his poetic style. Session 3 refers to some of these seminal formulations in order to explicate key aspects of Eliot's early style as illustrated in "Preludes". It also demonstrates how Eliot's style is shaped by the intellectual perspectives of Modernism.

Regarding the latter, learners would be required to dwell on the following two points. First, post-Freud, the rationalist sense of the world, as a uniform and stable reality mirrored by language, collapsed. This engendered scepticism of the Romantic mode of directly describing subjective experience in poetry. On this issue, Eliot was influenced by F.H. Bradley's philosophy. Bradley (1883/2011) contradistinguished the unity of immediate experience (wherein the experiencing-subject and experienced-object are at one) from analytical ideas and judgements (in which the ego-self is separated from superego-manifestations, e.g., society, God, etc.). According to Mallinson (2012), Eliot concurs that "reality can only be intuited as an undivided whole" (p. 8), thus, accepting subjective experience as the basis of non-narrative poetry. But he insists that merely describing such experience would preserve its subjectivity and restrict relevance to the immediate particulars. Therefore, communication of subjective experience in poetry must necessarily be mediated by analytical reflection, which transforms particular experiences into general ideas. Eliot's early poems "reveal resonant epiphanic moments... which are consistently scrutinized and deconstructed to be reworked as conscious structural devices"

(ibid, p. 2). This means that Eliot ‘reworked’ intuitive experiences into images, rhetorical figures etc., so that readers could enter into these experiences aesthetically and feel their truth; insofar as the reader enters into the emotions in Eliot’s poetry via ratiocination (by reasoning out the ‘structural devices’), his poetry demands proactive cerebration as opposed to passive reading.

Second, Eliot asserted that a Modernist perception of reality must take into cognizance its complex heterogeneity:

Poets in our civilization, as it exists at present, must be *difficult*. Our civilization comprehends great variety and complexity, and this variety and complexity, playing upon a refined sensibility, must produce various and complex results. The poet must become more and more comprehensive, more allusive, more indirect, in order to force, to dislocate, if necessary, language into his meaning (Eliot, 1969, p. 288).

Eliot’s poetry aims at startling readers out of their conventional habits of reading and initiating them into new protocols of meaning-making.

Four key aspects of Eliot’s style

Four key aspects of Eliot’s style would now be defined and illustrated, as shown below. Depending on the level of learner-proficiency, these aspects could be discussed and learners asked to locate instances of each in “Preludes”. Alternatively, both definitions and illustrations could be presented and explained via Powerpoint.

Use of Objective Correlatives: Expressing his views about expression of emotions, Eliot writes,

The only way of expressing emotion in the form of art is by finding an “objective correlative”; in other words, a set of objects, a situation, a chain of events which shall be the formula of that *particular* emotion; such that when the external facts, which must terminate in sensory experience, are given, the emotion is immediately evoked. (Eliot, 1928, p. 100)

The objective correlative is an image/image-cluster which suggests emotions that are too complex and fleeting to be conveyed by conventional symbols. Also, it distances the experiencing self from the emotions.

The concluding lines of “Preludes” comprise an objective correlative.

The image of old women searching in "vacant lots" for litter to burn for warmth on a cold night, climactically reiterates the sense of abject suffering in "Preludes". Here, the connotations of impoverishment and desperate endeavour acquire intensity from the image's repudiation of Bergson's theory of "Elan Vital"⁵ (1907/2003), the vital force (and Bergson's version of the evolutionary instinct) which drives the human species towards self-perfection.

Allusiveness: Eliot's poetry makes eclectic references to literary, philosophical, and religious texts, musical compositions etc. in order to communicate a thought or emotion. As title of a self-consciously anti-Romantic poem, "Preludes" bears a recognizable ironic counterpoint in its allusion to the title of Wordsworth's quintessentially Romantic poem, "The Prelude". But one might miss the title's equally ironic allusion to Chopin's piano pieces, entitled "Preludes". This second reference underscores, by contrast with Chopin's Romantic music, the un-Romantic urban squalor, monotony and despair in Eliot's poem.

Phantasmagoric Imagery: This refers to the dreamlike quality of particular images which fuse the real and the imaginary. Baudelaire taught Eliot "the possibility of the juxtaposition of the matter-of-fact and the fantastic" (Eliot, 1978, p. 126) in transforming scenes of urban squalor into evocations of the sickly state of being, concomitant with living in these conditions.

In "Preludes", "Burnt-out ends of smoky days" (p. 13) is a phantasmagoric image. It envisions a smoggy sundown in the city in terms of a smoking cigarette butt and evokes the feelings of weariness, waste and irrevocable self-damage that follow a day of drudgery. The 'matter-of-fact' details of cityscape are transformed into a dreamlike and 'fantastic' image by the aesthetics of the epithet "smoky" (which connotes a particular colour and flavour, besides literally referring to urban pollution) and the alliterative sibilants.

Free Verse: Poetry, which has no regular metre, line length, and rhymes, but follows the rhythms of natural speech is free verse. Free verse offers Eliot the flexibility required "to dislocate, if necessary, language into his meaning" (Eliot, 1969, p. 288).

In "Preludes" I, the free verse subverts conventional metre and rhyme. The first two lines and the fourth line are in iambic tetrameter. But the double-syllabled third line thwarts the expectation of a regular iambic

tetrameter quartet. This and the irregular rhymes reinforce, through their off-key effects, the sense of a fractured consciousness and the poem's moods of anxiety and uneasiness.

Conclusion

Rationalizing the need for "introductions" to contemporary critical thought, Beasley writes: "The study of literature ... is also the study of ideas, issues and difficulties which arise in any literary text and in its interpretation" (Beasley, 2007, p. viii). She recommends reading literary texts with in-depth knowledge of their contexts and the "ideas and issues" deriving therefrom. This article renders Beasley's principle into a feasible classroom-strategy. It introduces the High Modernist contexts of Eliot's early poetry as "ideas and issues" which one can "simply 'add on' to the text one reads" (ibid). It does so by methods that make learning an active, constructive and collaborative activity.

Current pedagogical perspectives encourage approaches which stimulate self-learning as opposed to a command style (Mosston & Ashworth, 2008). However, Gibbs (1981) argues that student-centric approaches turn the teacher's focus away from ensuring that all learners are taught the core of academic knowledge, while inculcating creativity and problem-solving are prioritized. Teaching Eliot's poetry through problem-solving exercises, alone, would not be effective since appreciation of the text is attendant on comprehending the contexts of Modernism. Therefore, a teacher-centric dissemination of knowledge cannot be entirely discarded. On the other hand, Eliot's poetry, which avoids plain statement of meaning, demands proactive negotiation with its linguistic structures in acts of meaning-making. The outlined strategy balances a teacher-led approach with independent learner engagement, while initiating learners into the overarching narratives integral to understanding the text.

Notes

1. High Modernism is the core phase of literary Modernism. It is associated with canonical works by Eliot, Pound, Joyce, Woolf, Proust, Gide, etc., written between 1910 and World War II. These works are formally self-conscious, experimental and anti-representational. Scholars use 'high' as a periodizing tool to distinguish these relatively mainstream works of Modernism from the avant-garde, pre-dating World War I, or such later

- avant-garde as Dada and surrealism (Felski, 1995; Lewis, 2007; Kavaloski, 2014).
2. The dividing line in Eliot's literary career is his affirmation of Anglicanism in 1927, post which his poetry has overtly religious themes. By contrast, his earlier poems deal with themes of self-alienation, intellectual scepticism, and existential despair.
 3. "Preludes" has been chosen because a) it features commonly in the syllabi; b) its four sections can be read as individual poems; so, Section I can be initially read in isolation.
 4. Freud does not mention the "Iceberg" analogy in his writings. Its association with Freudian theory derives from a passage in Ernest Jones' biography of Freud, which mentions G.T. Fechner's use of the metaphor. G.T. Fechner, a psychologist, heavily influenced Freud's early work.
 5. While living in Paris in 1910-11, Eliot was influenced for a brief period by Henri Bergson's belief in the workings of an *Élan Vital*. By end of 1911, Eliot had become a decided anti-Bergsonian.

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