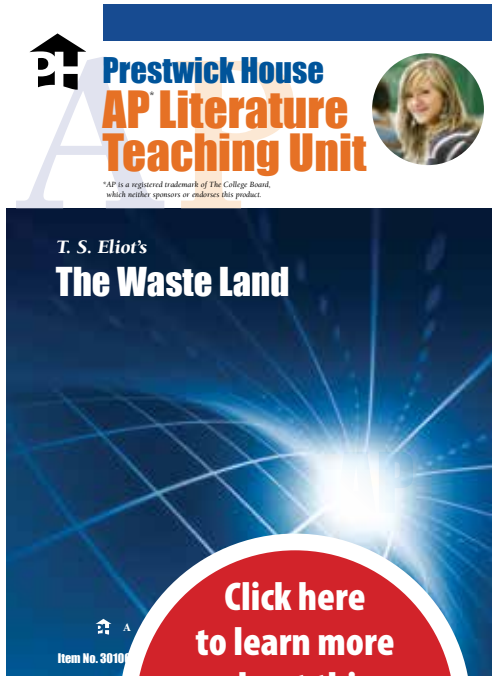




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Teaching Unit

The Waste Land

by T. S. Eliot



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The Waste Land

Note to the Teacher

Naturally the concrete meaning of poetry, especially modern poetry, can be elusive; indeed, T. S. Eliot's friend and editor Ezra Pound once said that modern poetry "must be difficult." However, this study guide takes the position that poetry, like other literature, is first a means of communication. If it fails to communicate effectively, then it will not be popular and will not earn a lasting place in the annals of literature, as "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock" and *The Waste Land* have certainly done. Eliot's poems, while difficult at times and though impossible to nail down firmly, nevertheless communicate with readers, both on a literal and deeply emotional level. One of the main purposes of this guide is to provide students with the knowledge and skills they will need in order to "demystify" these poems and others like them. We have tried to lead readers toward logical interpretations when the meanings may be hazy, and we have tried to explicate the poems as clearly as possible when certain meanings—allusions, for example—are widely accepted.

Modernism as an artistic movement emphasized questions rather than answers, and the focus in poetry tended to be on images and sounds, rather than simplistic messages. To some extent, Eliot went along with the so-called Imagists in their dictum "No ideas but in things" (images should evoke a myriad of meanings; poets should not state ideas). However, he was also a true original: while he borrowed from many styles and agreed with several literary philosophies, he was unafraid when it came to creating his own unique style, which at times does clearly state, or at least show, definite meanings. In fact, to Eliot, his ideas were as important as the images and the feelings in his poems. So while he was unquestionably a "modern" poet, his work pays homage to, and owes a great deal of its effectiveness to, the huge body of traditional literature from which he draws inspiration, certain poetic forms, and a considerable amount of material.

The four "mini-lectures" are provided here as introductions to Eliot and his poems, because a firm grasp of Eliot's life and the era in which the poems were created are both vital to anyone beginning an exploration and reaching for an understanding of these complicated poems. It is recommended that teachers present the first three lectures, with question-and-answer discussions, before the study of "Prufrock," then the fourth one prior to launching into *The Waste Land*. Of course, teachers should familiarize themselves with all the material in the Teaching Unit and the Study Guide before beginning any instruction in the unit.

For further reading, there are many and varied articles and books on both poems. For a straightforward, dependable chronicle of Eliot's life, we recommend *Great Tom* by T. S. Matthews (1974), which also includes some valuable criticism and analysis of the poems.

All references to the texts of the poems come from the Dover Thrift Edition of *T. S. Eliot: The Waste Land, Prufrock and Other Poems*, copyright ©1998.

Objectives

By the end of this Unit, students will be able to:

1. place T. S. Eliot within the overall context of the history and development of literature in the English language;
2. place the two poems within the context of Eliot's career;
3. develop a logical, meaningful interpretation of both poems and offer evidence from the poems to support that reading;
4. recognize and define the following literary terms:
 - dramatic monologue
 - stream-of-consciousness
 - free verse
 - allusion
 - motif
 - alliteration
 - assonance
 - consonance
 - internal and end rhyme
5. identify elements in both poems that can be characterized as “modern;”
6. develop an understanding of Eliot's philosophy of life, as shown in both poems;
7. list major traits of the main characters in the poems;
8. provide informed speculation as to the original audience for the poems and the effects the poems may have had on that audience;
9. identify and understand the historical context for Eliot and his poetry;
10. locate and understand the major allusions in the poems;
11. respond to multiple choice questions similar to those that will appear on the Advanced Placement in English Literature and Composition exam;
12. respond to writing prompts similar to those that will appear on the Advanced Placement in English Literature and Composition exam;
13. offer a close reading of both poems and support all assertions and interpretations with direct evidence from the texts, from authoritative critical knowledge of the genre, or from authoritative criticism of the poems.

Prufrock: Fourth (Final) Section

1. Although the allusion to Hamlet is meant as an ironic contrast, what traits does Prufrock actually share with the Danish prince?

2. What does “Full of high sentence” mean?

3. Eliot ends the poem with a brilliant flash of colorful imagery, as he describes Prufrock’s dreaming of the mermaids. In the final stanza, to whom does “we” refer?

4. In what sense would he “drown” when “human voices” awaken him from his dream?

5. What effect do the internal and external rhymes have in the last two stanzas?

11. How would “Thinking of the key... [confirm] a prison” (line 415)?

12. Why does Eliot allude to Coriolanus, one of Shakespeare’s tragic heroes, who was exiled from Rome, then joined in a battle against Rome?

13. What does setting one’s “lands in order” signify?

14. In lines 428 and 429, Eliot again quotes Dante, but this time from *Purgatorio*: “Then he hid himself in the fire that refines them.” To whom do you think “he” refers, and in what sense is he hiding “himself in the fire”?

15. Line 429 ends with “O swallow swallow,” which is part of an ancient Latin poem (*Pervigilium Veneris*) that refers to the myth of Philomela, as Eliot also does in Sections II and III; plus it is another instance of bird imagery. Cite a couple of other examples. Why are birds important to the theme of this poem?
