

Edexcel Language
and literature: 'The
individual in society'

WJEC: 'Poetry post-1900'

Till human

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One of Charles Dickens's favourite 'party pieces' was to perform a dramatic sketch in which he played all the parts, lending each character an individual voice, a form of entertainment known as a 'monopolylogue', which had been pioneered by comic actor Charles Mathews in the early nineteenth century. In his last completed novel, *Our Mutual Friend*, Dickens gives this ability to one of the characters, an orphan named Sloppy, who delights in reading aloud from the newspaper. His foster mother proclaims with pride, 'He do the police in different voices'.

T. S. Eliot chose this quotation as the working title for a poem that was eventually to become a modernist icon, *The Waste Land*. Indeed, 'He do the police in different voices' remained Eliot's chosen title until, like much else in the first completed draft, Ezra Pound advised change. Eliot was a serious man (and, *Old Possum's Book of Practical Cats* aside, an even more serious artist). His unusual choice of title would not have been mere whimsy, though he appears to have given no explanation for his selection of this quotation from Dickens. In his 1984 biography of Eliot, Peter Ackroyd makes two references to it but fails to develop any further hypothesis.

We must assume that Eliot left no clues, but the answer may lie in Eliot's passion for literary allusion. The quotation is allied to a character renowned for his ability to create voices, while the poem Eliot was working on is also full of different voices. It is a

stylistic device that we can trace back to his earlier poetry and it is manifested in the poem that introduced many of us to the poetic world of T. S. Eliot: 'The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock'.

Misleading self-confidence

At the start of the poem, the narrator speaks in a voice that seems to be confident, assertive, even impatient, perhaps, towards the end of the first stanza: 'Oh, do not ask, "What is it?" / Let us go and make our visit'. That construction, 'Let us go' (which also opens the poem) is significant. Rarely used in colloquial English, it is more a direct translation of *allons*, which in French usage is less a request and more an imperative. The rhythm of the opening line 'Let us go then, you and I', controlled by the caesura placed at its centre, lends our first acquaintance with Prufrock's voice an impression of its being clipped, almost military.

This sense of control is amplified by the next two lines — delivered in a leisurely manner, run on, and incorporating the arresting simile which compares the gathering of twilight with the ether-induced torpor of a patient under anaesthetic. Both what we are shown (the sleazy, Bohemian cityscape) and the peremptory tone in which it is revealed to us suggest that Prufrock is a man of the world, quite capable of carrying his haughty-sounding 'J. Alfred' name. His insistence that the question "What is it?" should not be asked suggests that he is



voices wake us

'The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock'

Rob Worrall explores vocal variety in T. S. Eliot's poem

Sunset, Paris by Konstantin Korovin (1861–1939)

not one to be bothered with philosophical enquiry, nor with introspection. How the rest of the poem belies these initial impressions!

Vocal suggestion

But how are those initial impressions created? By *vocal* suggestion. A man willing to sing his love song in public is, we assume, confident — like a latter-day troubadour, whose purpose in singing of and to the object of his love is conquest. The diction allocated to him in the first stanza and the subjects towards whom it is directed are clearly defined, unambiguous, and given additional power by the careful modulation of sound that Eliot orchestrates. He makes considerable use of consonance and alliteration. Note the proliferation of the hard letter 't' in this first stanza (28 within 12 lines) and of the equally insistent letter 's' (27 in total). A voice is composed of two elements: what it sounds like and what it says. Here, Eliot creates a voice for Prufrock — or rather, he creates the deliberate false impression necessary to the full revelation of truth at the poem's end.

False bravura


With the bravura of a drunkard, Prufrock sets off into the evening. But it is not long before that bravura begins to dissipate. We may have judged his comment about the women coming and going, as they talk of Michelangelo, to be further

testament to his impatience with faddishness or pretension, but the register of the next stanza causes us to question our judgement thus far.

It presents another cityscape, but this time it is less Montmartre and more Thames Embankment; less neon and more nightmare. Fog, smoke, and soot predominate. Black and yellow create a garish, Van Gogh-like vista that ceases to be inanimate — the fog becomes a life-force. It licks its tongue; it lingers; it leaps; it 'Curled once about the house, and fell asleep'. The repetition in the phrases 'yellow fog' and 'yellow smoke', combined with the reference to 'window-panes' twice in two lines, is a verbal obsession. Prufrock is no longer independent, confident, imperious; he is frightened, haunted. Once apparently in control, he is now in thrall — his vocal register has become repetitive and, once the seeming instigator of action, he is now no more than a terrified observer.

The voice of hesitancy

A quite different suggestion emerges as to why in the first stanza he was so insistent on the question "What is it?" not being asked. Such a question opens up too many possibilities. It acknowledges uncertainty; it makes him recognise that there is so much he does not know. (Here, the poem's Italian epigraph from Dante's *Inferno*, concerning the mystery of the afterlife, comes into play.)



A policeman directs traffic in London (c. 1910–20). Fog, smoke and soot predominate in T. S. Eliot's presentation of the London cityscape

The world of concrete absolutes, in the opening stanza, becomes one of abstractions; the firm statements become doubts to be considered over a period of time. Again, in the fourth stanza Eliot employs the power of repetition: 'time' is repeated eight times within ten lines. Certainty has become its own converse. Faces are not natural, familiar and trustworthy signifiers; they have become things to 'prepare', artifices, and thus untrustworthy, even dangerous. There has developed 'time yet for a hundred indecisions, / And for a hundred visions and revisions'.

Prufrock, initially the embodiment of verbal stability, is now the voice of hesitancy. That voice, once trenchant, has become almost breathless with anxiety.

Self-doubt

Of course, the dramatic monologue has always been a close cousin of the soliloquy, and here we can see that relationship clearly. Eliot is melding the internal debate that is typical of the latter with the wider dramatic possibilities of the former. Prufrock steps in and out of his narrative role, occasionally giving himself an imagined script: "Do I dare?" and, "Do I dare?" he contemplates, as he simultaneously works himself up into near hysteria about his middle-aged, slightly effete appearance. And then other voices start to intrude, or at least he imagines them doing so. Eliot takes the risk of bringing his subject to the point of becoming ridiculous, as he flusters about the thinness of his hair, the olde-worlde formality of his dress, the appearance of his arms and legs.

But at this point, the poet puts on the brakes. Out of all this commotion emerges an arresting question: 'Do I dare / Disturb the universe?' The precision of the line-form Eliot adopts in order to frame this question, combined with the emphatically alliterated 'd', breaks us free from Prufrock's self-dramatising. This is a voice akin to those found in the Elizabethan and Jacobean tragedies in which Eliot took such a keen critical

interest. These nine magnificent syllables reverberate and linger in our ears — only to be followed by 'In a minute there is time / For decisions and revisions which a minute will reverse.' This is no longer self-indulgent hysteria, but an unavoidable truth, articulating the answer to that searching question. Does he dare disturb the universe? Briefly and in his imagination, yes; in truth, no.

Self-knowledge

It is now time for Prufrock to find yet another voice: that of honest, if painful, self-knowledge. His has been a lifetime of 'butt-ends' — how should he begin to spit them out? There is something vulgar (in the true sense of common/everyday) about this image. Whatever voices Prufrock may have tried for size so far, this one is genuine. It is the one that prompts him to acknowledge that he is 'not Prince Hamlet, nor was meant to be'. He feels that he 'should have been a pair of ragged claws / Scuttling across the floors of silent seas'. He is, in truth, nothing more than

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

This is Prufrock's actual Shakespearean identity and voice — a Polonius figure. And yet, paradoxically, it is this pathetic admission that lends him dignity and cloaks him in true humanity. While it remains self-dramatising, it is the voice of sincerity — measured, beautifully modulated, resonant, yet unsparring in its self-criticism. It will come as no surprise to

note that here Eliot adopts iambic pentameter, the metre of Shakespearean blank verse.

Human disappointment

Quite different from the boastful timbre of the poem's title and opening stanza, J. Alfred Prufrock's final voice is the piping of premature old age, lost opportunities, aborted prospects and faded dreams: 'I have heard the mermaids singing, each to each.' It is an image from high romance. In a single line, physically isolated from what comes both before and after it, he is forced to admit 'I do not think that they will sing to me'. Ten bleak monosyllables, enunciated by a voice cracked with disappointed self-recognition.

Yet, shard-like and shattered though this recognition is, Prufrock holds firm to an aspect of himself that has lent his paltry existence meaning: for he *has* seen the mermaids, riding on the waves, 'sea-girls wreathed with seaweed red and brown'. It may not have amounted to much, in the end, but he has had his moments. But hold on: *he* has had *his* moments? In the final three lines of the poem, Eliot initiates a devastating change of personal pronoun (announced already but probably forgotten by us, in the 'you and I' of the opening line). 'I'/'my'/'me' are used 48 times and then, quite suddenly, they become 'we'/'us'.

Like that of someone under close interrogation, the once-confident voice of Prufrock has eventually cracked into self-admission. But we are forced to recognise that Prufrock's voice is also ours. His is a truly human voice; it is, like that defined by Wordsworth, 'the still, sad music of humanity'. We witness

not only Prufrock's drowning, but our own as well; we can only linger with the 'sea-girls...Till human voices wake us, and we drown'. It is a realisation of failure that will help us to understand *The Waste Land*, when we come to it.

Eliot's orchestration of vocal register in *Prufrock* is a stylistic device that he goes on to develop in his poetry. It is central to the success of the masterpiece he once entitled 'He do the police in different voices'. It replicates the effect achieved by the orphan Sloppy, as he reads from the newspaper in Dickens's *Our Mutual Friend*, injecting a fundamentally human register into the printed word.

Online archive



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- Bradshaw, D. (1996) 'Prufrock's muttering retreats', Vol. 7, No. 1
- Green, A. (2001) 'T. S. Eliot's use of allusion in *The Waste Land*', Vol. 11, No. 4
- McCulloch, A. (2001) 'The use of allusion in "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock"', Vol. 12, No. 2
- Morden, B. (2010) '*The Waste Land*', Vol. 21, No. 2

Rob Worrall taught English for 35 years, and still maintains an interest in the subject and how it may best be presented in the classroom.



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