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Making T. S. Eliot Relevant.

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Able 11th- and 12th-grade students can enjoy the imagery, direct language, and indirect thought of T. S. Eliot. Eliot's treatment of the apathetic society and the isolated individual, his concern for spirituality over sensuality, and his plea for collective responsibility for evil are themes that can be traced in his major works through formalistic and historical criticism. Simon and Garfunkel's "Dangling Conversation" can introduce students to the isolation and ineffectuality of "The Hollow Men." A comparison between what students expect to find in a love song and what they find in "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock" can lead the students into the message of the poem. An in-depth study of the relationship of "Murder in the Cathedral" to Greek drama and medieval morality plays, as well as intensive work in diction and prosody, can be rewarding. Oral reading of Eliot's works can illustrate one of his recurring ideas--modern man's apathy because of a need for spiritual values. Once the central themes have been established, students can broaden their understanding by reading thematically similar works by other writers, such as Camus, Kafka, and Yeats. (LH)

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Making T. S. Eliot Relevant

PARTICIPANTS in the 1968 NDEA Institute on Literary Criticism and the Teaching of American Literature, held at Loyola College in Baltimore, were encouraged to translate theory into practice by developing short units emphasizing the applicability of a particular type of critical approach to a high school student's enjoyment and understanding of a commonly used literary theme, a period of American literature, or a major writer. Most of these units were the result of group effort, demonstrating the principle of curriculum construction, viz., the pooling of two or more teachers' ideas rather than the imposition of one teacher's plan on an entire department or system.

This article describes the unit developed by Sister Aloysia, Sister Corinne, and Sister Mary John. Intended for above-average senior high school students, it utilizes several types of critical approaches to the works of Eliot that have proved most relevant for use in secondary schools.

It is important for the readers of this article to keep in mind that the teachers planning this unit had not as yet taught Eliot. As they projected their tentative plans, the teachers had students of superior abilities in mind. The teachers assumed they would adapt their plans to the realities of the teaching-learning situations they would face back in their schools.

JEAN C. SISK, Reporter*

T. S. Eliot's works seldom appear on recommended reading lists for the average student—and with reason. Eliot's intellectuality, sometimes ponderous seriousness, and essential difficulty of his attitude and style make him a truly "adult" writer. Yet though his erudite allusions and "square" demeanor might be expected to ostracize him completely from the secondary school English program, able eleventh or twelfth grade students enjoy his imagery and his directness of language coupled with the indirectness of thought. Students' rebellion against society, impelled by an idealism as intense as Eliot's—though its manifestations are not always so subdued—make him seem one of their own. The major aims of the unit, capitalizing on these points of relevance to contemporary students, are

- to assist students in arriving at an understanding of Eliot's major themes, as stated in "The Hollow Men," "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock," "Murder in the Cathedral," and several choruses from "The Rock" and "The Family Reunion"

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- to test the relevancy of these themes to contemporary life
- to help students develop abilities leading to an appreciation of Eliot's poetic and dramatic techniques
- to indicate some of the reasons that Eliot is considered a major writer.

The themes to receive major attention are Eliot's treatment of the apathetic society and the isolated individual, his concern for the spiritual value over the sensual one, and his plea for collective acceptance of the responsibility for the evil in the world. The treatment of these same themes by other writers and in other media than literature is a method of indicating their contemporaneity. The aspects of Eliot's poetic style to emphasize are his diction, the kind of imagery he uses to get at his "objective correlative" of experience, his unique use of allusions, and his prosodic patterning. His great contribution to drama, technically, is of course his attempt to revive the tradition of *poetic* drama—more in the steps of the Greeks, however, than in the Elizabethan manner. The two critical approaches most fruitful for arriving at a deeper understanding are the formalistic and the historical.

"The Hollow Men"

Begin by playing a recording of Simon and Garfunkel's "Dangling Conversation." Let the students react to the music and the message—two persons who cannot reach each other, who live with their private symbols, and who exist for each other only in their "dangling" conversations—words and voices out of tune and touch with one another and the world.

After an informal statement of these themes, read aloud "The Hollow Men." If you feel you do not read aloud effectively, select one of your students who can. Let him read the poem silently before he reads it aloud to the group. This will enable him to determine how to use his voice to bring out the poet's meaning and style.

The reading may be followed by discussing any of the listed questions which seem relevant to the listening students. Parts of the poem may be reread aloud to support the students' answers or to redirect their attention to the passages that do answer the question.

- What are some of the images Eliot uses to describe the hollow men? Cite images showing where the hollow men have no purpose, will, or even destiny.
- Sections III and IV treat of "the dead land." Cite lines that best express the hopelessness of this land; note who lives there.
- Section V introduces the "Our Father"; the refrain is "Falls the Shadow." What is the shadow? Does the prayer in the poem express belief or disbelief? Are the speakers able to express faith through this prayer?

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- Discuss the meaning(s) of the world of "The Hollow Men" as ending with a whimper. Is it a reference to the Guy Fawkes gunpowder plot which was foiled? Is there any hope in "The Hollow Men"? What does whimper mean here?
- The five parts of the poem were not originally published as a unit. Does the poem, nevertheless, possess unity? Does the rhythm support the unity? Explain why or why not. Is there any contrasting rhythm in the poem?
- Note the repetition in the poem. What kind of word is repeated? How do these words help to demonstrate the theme of "The Hollow Men"?
- Try to find linking lines of this poem with Simon and Garfunkel's "Dangling Conversation."

Irony in "Prufrock"

Open the study of "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock" by encouraging students to discuss what they expect in a love song, and then follow this discussion immediately by an oral reading, recorded or "live," to introduce immediately the central tone of the poem. The opening comprehension questions following the reading might be: "In what ways is this poem different from the usual love song? How is the tone of the poem anticipated in the title?"

Because the message of the poem is conveyed by indirection, image, and allusion rather than by narration and direct statement, questions to help students clarify these elements may be used. Here are such questions:

- What does the image in the first stanza, comparing the evening to a patient etherized upon a table, suggest to you? Should you expect much action in the poem? Do you think the tea party Prufrock is attending will be a lively one?
- Eliot also speaks of "an overwhelming question" in this stanza. See how many times he will refer to this question in the poem. Is it ever asked explicitly? Can you suggest what it might be?
- Is the comparison of the fog with the cat a good one? What verbs does Eliot use that carry out this comparison?
- Prufrock says that he has measured out his life with coffee spoons. What does this tell us about him?
- Is Prufrock suggesting that an unconscious form of life is preferable in the lines, "I should have been a pair of ragged claws? Scuttling across the floors of silent seas"? Why would he shun conscious existence?
- Prufrock makes allusions to John the Baptist, to Lazarus, and to Hamlet. Have these persons anything in common with Prufrock? What relationships is he suggesting?

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- What decision does Prufrock make in the poem? What clues in the work prepare you for this decision?
- Eliot closes the poem with Prufrock's "dream" of mermaids. What does he mean when he says ". . . human voices wake us, and we drown"? Does the word "drown" suggest "suffocate"? From what might Prufrock be suffocating?
- Is there any connection between Prufrock and the "patient etherized upon the table"?

Once the central themes of alienation and estrangement, as treated in "The Hollow Men" and "Prufrock," are clearly understood, suggest that each student read at least one of the following works (or others with similar thematic interest), to be discussed in a panel which addresses itself to the similarities and differences in the treatment of the same theme by different writers. (Many others will occur to the teacher.)

Camus, *The Strangers*
Kafka, *Metamorphosis*
Arnold, "Dover Beach"
Yeats, "The Fisherman"
Tolstoy, "Death of Ivan Ilyitch"

Betjeman, "Death in Leamington"
Andreyev, "Laughter"
Pirandello, "War"
Greene, "Across the Bridge"
Chekhov, "The Three Sisters"

A Modern "Everyman": Murder in the Cathedral

Murder in the Cathedral, like any serious work of some stature, might be studied, read, discussed, acted out—for a period of two or three weeks. It can be understood and enjoyed by students of superior ability, however, in five or six periods. The play should be assigned for reading outside class before the initial discussions begin. A five-day outline of topics to be considered would be something like this, dependent upon the students' previous or current reading.

- Observe the language in first chorus, to set remoteness, festival idea of drama
 - Find characteristics of Greek tragedy
 - Find characteristics of morality play
 - Distinguish differences between Greek hero and Thomas' role, greater importance of Eliot's Chorus, individualized characters of tragedy and symbolic characters of morality
- Complete action
 - Place of the sermon

The catastrophe: Part II
Knights' speeches after murder
Final choral ode

- Study changing tone: tragic poetry, sermon prose, musical background, satire of Knights' speeches, final ode of praise
- Analyze language and rhythms: strong one-syllable words, varying verse forms, shifts of rhythm for meaning
Tempters: triple alliteration, feminine rhythm
Knights: "Daniel Jazz"
Themes in answer to Knights
Chorus
repetition
imagery
- Discuss meaning obtained by Eliot's dramatic mode, language and rhythm, martyrdom/suffering-acting
God's will/man's responsibility
- Listen to recording as a way of summarizing the play as a unit

If more than six lessons can be devoted to the play, in-depth study of the relationships to Greek drama and to the medieval morality play, as well as intensive work in diction or prosody, can be attempted—either as a class or by delegating specific studies to various groups of students who will report their conclusions or observations to the class.

Connection can readily be made with Greek tragedy: *Antigone*, *Oedipus*. Serious tone and "certain magnitude" are evident; other similarities are found in here, a chorus, one action, catastrophe. Like the medieval morality play *Everyman*, however, the characters are symbolic representations rather than individualized Antigone and Ismene, or Gertrude and Ophelia that tragedy presents. *Murder's* characters stand for roles in society, ideas, or virtue, just as *Everyman's* characters did. Eliot has adapted both tragedy and morality to serve his needs in modern verse drama.

Eliot's diction is remarkable for its alignment with character. When an unusual number of one-syllable words of complex sound character (stretched, point, scorn), are countered by the Tempters' multisyllabic words, many of which have alliteration or feminine rhythm, Eliot gains double effectiveness. Since he was definitely avoiding iambs and any "Shakespearean tone," scansion for classic meters is not profitable. If pupils are interested in the rhythm of free verse, analyze with them the cadenced structure of the final ode particularly for the climactic build to "praise Thee" (line 601) when all lines are paired in shorter-to-longer waves; then the falling inflection of positive assertion begins with the second half shorter until just before the matched cadences of the prayer: 1-6//7; 1-6//7; 1-6//7; 4-3//7. In Part I, lines 44-50 the pleasing variety and duplication of short secondary cadences and contrasting primary cadences could effectively be

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shown on an overhead projector but show a "syllable" scansion rather than the usual division into poetic feet:

Destiny waits in the hand of God¹/not in the hands of statesmen¹/
Who do,²/some well,²/some ill,²/planning and guessing,⁵/
Having their aims which turn in their hands in the pattern of
time.¹⁵//

Come,¹/happy December,⁵/who shall observe you,⁵/who shall
preserve you?⁵/

Shall the Son of Man be born again in the litter of scorn?¹⁵//

For us the poor,⁴/there is no action,⁵/

Since *Hollow Men* and *Prufrock*, preceding this part of the unit, will develop concepts of imagery, it is suggested that time be given here only to Eliot's wheel and the peace Thomas finds in martyrdom at the wheel's center where acting and suffering meet in God's will. If the students wish to investigate more thoroughly Eliot's paradoxes of acting-suffering, they might consult Smith's *T. S. Eliot's Dramatic Theory and Practice*.

Tie the three works the students have considered into a unified whole by means of the panel discussion comparing works with similar themes by other writers, or by a panel of three students selected to represent the ways in which the three works are similar and contrastive. Good culminating discussion questions are:

- Do you agree with Eliot's quotation "To understand a poem comes to the same thing as to like it for the right reasons"?
Is it too restrictive? Does his subsequent comment "One might say that it means getting from the poem such enjoyment as it is capable of giving," help you to decide?
- Neville Braybrooke in "T. S. Eliot, a Critical Essay" says, "Borrowing can bring an old text to life in a new context; tradition is recast by individual talent." Other authors (Chaucer, Shakespeare, Anouilh) prove this; how would *Murder* prove his statement? If you were to choose an "old text" for recasting, which one would you select?
- F. O. Matthiessen in *The Achievement of T. S. Eliot*, writes "Eliot has learned from his own experience that the distinguishing feature of a human life consists in the occasions on which the individual most fully reveals his character, and that these are the moments of intense 'moral and spiritual struggle.' It is in such moments, rather than in the 'bewildering minutes' of passion in which we are all very much alike, that men and women come nearest to being real." (p. 20) Do you believe this? How would you prove it?
- How does Eliot's idea of responsibility of the Chorus for social evils fit the 1968 scene in the United States?

An interesting optional assignment might be the writing of a choral ode of between 20 and 30 lines, delivered by a specified group

of Americans (teen-agers, adult citizens, soldiers or women) within a specified context. The purpose of the assignment would be to help students relate the themes in Eliot to contemporary American moral problems.

Oral Presentation of Recurrent Idea

To illustrate one of Eliot's recurring ideas—modern man's apathy because of a need for spiritual values—select for study four of Eliot's works.

Divide students into four groups, each group to study for oral presentation one of the following selections:

"Hollow Men"

Chorus from "Family Reunion," II3, 1-33

Chorus 3 from "The Rock"

Chorus from "Murder," II, 398-423

Encourage the students to consider simple staging.

Sit in with each group to listen alertly to the interpretation and emphasize the students are giving Eliot's words. If the students are misinterpreting Eliot, you, the listening teacher, through appropriate questions, can redirect the students' attention.

Devote one period to showing that these speeches in themselves present something of a drama:

- *The Hollow Men* sets the theme of barrenness and waste. The characters of the drama are hollow, stuffed men, alone, sightless, unable to make worship anything more than a game of make-believe.

Suggestion: In preparing presentation of this poem, students should consider the nursery rhyme rhythm and emphasize it. Perhaps the references to the Our Father could be sung or chanted.

- The Chorus speech from *Family Reunion* establishes the modern scene: man knowing the answers to the "ordinary business of living," manipulating his world, avoiding pain. Except for the mundane automatic practices of living, man does not know himself nor what he is doing.

Thus part two of the drama makes *The Hollow Men* real people and not abstractions, real people "who have lost their way in the dark."

- Chorus from *The Rock* introduces the antagonist: the Stranger, the "one who knows how to ask questions," the one who expects worship in life or exacts recompense in death.

- Speech from *Murder in the Cathedral*: acknowledgment of guilt for "living and partly living."

Suggestion: students should hear the recording, especially of the Chorus speeches. If this has not been included in the unit on *Murder*, have them listen to the recording here.

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- Make tape recording of choral readings for replay before next choric verse project or the introduction of thesis play writing.

If possible provide musical bridges for scenes from Simon and Garfunkel, Varese's "Ionication," Antheil's "Ballet Mechanique," or other music that will demonstrate Eliot's theme. Display posters or prints of De Chirico, Giacometti, Graham Sutherland, Gerald Scarfe (especially Time's cover "assemblage") or of other moderns who have presented the theme visually. The film *Loneliness of the Long Distance Runner* would be an excellent follow-up for stimulating discussion.