

**Twentieth-Century Fiction**  
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**Lecture – 16**  
**Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock – Part 2**

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With a bald spot in the middle of my hair—  
[They will say: "How his hair is growing thin!"]  
My morning coat, my collar mounting firmly to the chin,  
My necktie rich and modest, but asserted by a simple pin—  
[They will say: "But how his arms and legs are thin!"]  
Do I dare  
Disturb the universe?  
In a minute there is time  
For decisions and revisions which a minute will reverse.

For I have known them all already, known them all—  
Have known the evenings, mornings, afternoons,  
I have measured out my life with coffee spoons;  
I know the voices dying with a dying fall  
Beneath the music from a farther room.  
So how should I presume?

And I have known the eyes already, known them all—  
The eyes that fix you in a formulated phrase,  
And when I am formulated, sprawling on a pin,  
When I am pinned and wriggling on the wall,  
Then how should I begin  
To spit out all the butt-ends of my days and ways?  
And how should I presume?



So, hi and welcome to NPTEL course entitled Twentieth Century Fiction. We were looking at T. S Eliot's poem The Love Song of J Alfred Prufrock which we started in last lecture. So, just to reiterate what we have covered already, so, we talked about the entire dimension of time and embodiment and neurosis in this particular poem and how the two different narratives of time in conflict with each other, we have clock time which is standard time and we also have psychological time or mental time and we referred to a philosopher called Henri Bergson the French philosopher of time who was massively influential in terms of the modernist's appropriation of time.

So, just to recap very quickly the last stanza that we did so, when the male speaker the neurotic male speaker in this poem says in a minute there is time for decisions and revisions which a minute can reverse. He is talking about the entire psychological situatedness of time and how does he embody himself and in relation to that. So, embodiment is also among other things temporal in Prufrock. So, it is a spatiotemporal is how we embody yourself in a particular space.

So, we see how the crisis of embodiment in terms of trying to situate himself in a particular space and you know, this very privileged space presumably white, presumably privileged, presumably high culture space and he wants to get access there that is the room where women come and go, talking about Michelangelo. But he cannot really get in there. So, entire poem is about procrastination and is about trying to get in there. So, the embodiment is obviously, very spatial.

But, equally is quite temporal in quality. He is talking about a psychological situatedness of time and he cannot put his psychological time in sync with clock time that is one of the crisis in this particular poem that is completely out of sync psychological time and clock time and that informs that crisis in embodiment to a large extent ok.

So, now, we just move on to the next stanza which is again quite synesthetic; we talked about synesthesia yesterday as this very complex cognitive condition where the different sensory perceptions the normative sensory perceptions get crisscrossed. So, in other words you smell what you see, you hear what you touch etcetera. So, tactility, visuality, orality or olfactory sensations they all combine together to generate a very complex cognitive condition which can be medical, which can be spiritual which can be mystical it can be a combination of all those factors.

Now, we have in this stanza that is on your screen when he says I have known them already, known them all – Have known the evenings, mornings, afternoons, I have measured out my life with coffee spoons. Again, a classic metaphysical conceit something which we spent some time on yesterday as well. So, you know we saw how Eliot was heavily borrowing of the metaphysical quality of poetry. We have two different disparate elements combined together to create a metaphor which has among other things a shocking effect right. So, it conveys a sense of shock, it conveys a sense of shudder which we saw you know in those of you interested in metaphysical poetry remember John Donne and Andrew Marvell they use it quite consistently there.

And, Eliot is obviously appropriating that quality, that tradition of poetry. So, we have over here the speaker is saying For I have known them already, known them all – I have known the evenings, mornings, afternoons, I have measured out my life with coffee spoons; so again, this whole idea of measuring out your life which is mystical, existential abstract with something so banal and material as coffee spoons. It has among other

things a shocking effect and that shock is very deliberately conveyed and constructed to the audience.

And, then you have this: Another voices dying with a dying fall Beneath the music from a farther room. So, how should I presume? So, again look at the tactility of voices, the tactility of what is normatively the olfactory thing the voices dying you can almost touch it right. So, the entire sense of you know something which is olfactory something which is oral, something which appeals to the sound the sense of hearing is being talked about in terms of something tactile and palpable. So, again this is again a very synesthetic experience right.

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Disturb the universe?  
In a minute there is time  
For decisions and revisions which a minute will reverse.

For I have known them all already, known them all—  
Have known the evenings, mornings, afternoons,  
I have measured out my life with coffee spoons;  
I know the voices dying with a dying fall  
Beneath the music from a farther room.  
So how should I presume?

And I have known the eyes already, known them all—  
The eyes that fix you in a formulated phrase,  
And when I am formulated, sprawling on a pin,  
When I am pinned and wriggling on the wall,  
Then how should I begin  
To spit out all the butt-ends of my days and ways?  
And how should I presume?

And I have known the arms already, known them all—  
Arms that are braceleted and white and bare  
[But in the lamplight, downed with light brown hair!]—  
Is it perfume from a dress  
That makes me so digress?  
Arms that lie along a table, or wrap about a shawl.  
And should I then presume?  
And how should I begin?



And I have known the eyes already, known them all – The eyes that fix you in a formulated phrase, And when I am formulated, sprawling on a on a pin, When I am pinned and wriggling on the wall, and how should I begin To spit out the butt-ends of my days and ways? And, how should I presume? So, again look at the butt-ends in the which is to say the cigarette ends.

So, the entire day is compared to a cigarette. So, the day coming to an end has been compared to the cigarette burning out at the end of the activity of smoking. So, again we have something very abstract the day coming to an end abstract temporal you know intellectual and we have something as banal and material as a butt-end of a cigarette

combined together metaphors come together to create a sense of metaphysical conceit which is obviously, getting a modernist spin in Eliot's poetry.

Now, prior to that if you take a look at the image of the eyes fixing you to a formulated phrase. So, there is like a gaze coming at him and it is very important to notice the gaze in Eliot's early poetry and we talked about yesterday in lecture that we had before how the gaze is very cinematic in quality in Eliot's early poetry it borrows a lot from the contemporary culture of cinema.

So, we have this notion of close up particularly this episode where we have this subject sprawling on a pin. So, which is to say it is like a camera technique it is like a trick camera thing where the human being is situated on a pin. So, it is some kind of a montage technique or magnification and condensation where the human body is put on a pin in some cinematic trick image and that is something which we see in Eliot over here.

And, it also is quite Kafkaesque in quality, the entire idea of the man becoming something like an insect who is being pinned against the wall – When I am formulated, sprawling on a pin and when I am pinned and wriggling on the walls. So, it is a very Kafkaesque image of an insect image the man becoming or metamorphosing into an insect, a spider or whatever which is pinned against the wall. So, we have again the very mystical and the very material coming together a cinematic and a mystical coming together to create a very complex cognitive condition very complex since visual politics in this particular poem.

And, then of course, we have this image of the cigarette butt which is being used to compare and convey the day coming to an end and how should I begin to spit out sorry, all the butt ends of my days and ways. So, again the cigarette butt has been compared the day coming to an end. The entire idea of exhaustion is conveyed to you to us readers as a real material thing it is like a very mechanical material banal thing a cigarette coming to an end after having been smoked at the same way as the day is coming to an end after having been smoked away by the daily mundane activities and how should I presume.

So, if you notice most of the stanza that they end with a question on how should I presume which is often rhetorical in quality. So, the obvious answer is he cannot presume, he cannot have access, he cannot have entrance to that particular space. So,

among other things this poem is also about a narrative crisis which informs the neurosis something which we saw in Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* already which is a text which we just concluded before we began with this one. So, we have this sort of Conradian tradition of narrative crisis informing the neurotic crisis happening in Eliot as well.

A large part of modernist literature is about neurosis and I talked about Georg Simmel's canonical text in *The Metropolis and Mental Life* which is a very nice ethnographic text about looking at the urban city in early modernity and how that informs the nervous condition and it is actually very interesting. Because if you take a look at the book it compares the entire architecture of the modernist city the lanes, the by-lanes, alleys, with a nervous system of the human body right.

So, the lanes and streets are compared and mapped like a nervous system which flow in information, flow out information and there is a block of information somewhere. So, heart attack is compared to a traffic jam it is actually quite funny, you should read it. So, you know the entire idea of modernity being a nervous condition is something which recurs over and over again in some of the high modernist works and we will look at Mrs. Dalloway and Joyce's *Ulysses* later in this course which corroborate this theory.

So, just to carry on with the poem which is quite cinematic in quality and then we have the next stanza which again focuses on arms and we talked about the metonymic quality of representation in Eliot's early poetry which is again quite cinematic. It takes certain broken images and focuses on that in terms to talk about something which is bigger. So, the arms represent the body, the windowpanes represent the buildings, a street corner represent the entire metropolis and so on.

And, then we have something like – And I have known the arms already, known them all – Arms that are braceleted and white and bare, look at the continuation of conjunctions over here. So, arms were braceleted and white and bare, But in the lamplight, downed with light brown hair. Is it the perfume from a dress That makes me so digress? Arms that lie along a table, or wrap about a shawl. And should I then presume? And how should I begin? So, again if we take a look at the arms which are braceleted and white and bare it often has it almost has a skeletal image to it and remember this is the time where the x-ray was a big thing in modernity.

So, people were frightened of the x-ray at the same time they were fascinated by the x-ray in terms of what it could show you, your skeletal self which was material which was something which is medical, but it also belonged to you to a certain extent. A lot of very funny stories about a very privileged New York woman who actually had the x-rayed arms put up in the walls as some kind of an exhibit of themselves which was obviously, a signifier of white privilege at that point of time.

So, this entire idea of arms being braceleted and white and bare it seems to have a skeletal image of the human self. So, again the human self is reduced to a skeletal image which is part of the reduction politics in this poetry and this particular poem the bearing away the liquidation so to say of the human self into something quite bare and minimalist and metonymic and material in quality right.

So, I have known the arms already, known them all – Arms that are braceleted and white and bare But in the lamplight, downed with light brown hair. So, again it's almost like a Ophelia image of something which is downing with light brown hair, it is like a drowning sinking image which comes back at the end of the point by the way it ends with the sinking image a sinking movement.

But, the next couple of lines are very interesting is often quoted in any research in neuroscience in literature where the speaker says is it a perfume from a dress that makes me so digress. So, again the whole idea of digression which is a narrative activity is equated with the sense of smell, the sense of you know awareness of a particular smell. So, I smell a particular perfume from my dress which makes me digress you know very Proustian and very synesthetic. So, one particular smell takes me to a particular memory which makes me digress from this particular narrative.

So, again look at the way in which the sense, the self and the narrative all combine together in very complex combinations in this particular poem. And, then of course, we come back to the image of the arm – Arms that lie along a table, or wrap about a shawl. And should I then presume? And how should I begin? So, again the question of how should I begin, how should I presume, how should I ask the question, how should I get access to that particular space these are questions which are rhetorical in quality which keep coming up at the end of each stanza some kind of a futile questioning which never

have any answer to it which is part of the procrastination politics that this poem so dramatically depicts.

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Shall I say, I have gone at dusk through narrow streets  
And watched the smoke that rises from the pipes  
Of lonely men in shirt-sleeves, leaning out of windows? ...

I should have been a pair of ragged claws  
Scuttling across the floors of silent seas.

.....

And the afternoon, the evening, sleeps so peacefully!  
Smoothed by long fingers,  
Asleep... tired... or it malingers,  
Stretched on the floor, here beside you and me.  
Should I, after tea and cakes and ices,  
Have the strength to force the moment to its crisis?  
But though I have wept and fasted, wept and prayed,  
Though I have seen my head [grown slightly bald] brought in upon a platter,  
I am no prophet—and here's no great matter;  
I have seen the moment of my greatness flicker,  
And I have seen the eternal Footman hold my coat, and snicker,  
And in short, I was afraid.



And, then there is an image again of narrow streets and urban metropolis which is quite vein-like in quality. So, again look at the correlation to be made between the urban space and a human body where the speaker says – Shall I say, I have gone at dusk through narrow streets And watched the smoke that rises from the pipes Of lonely men in shirt-sleeves, leaning from the windows? So, again the image of lonely man in shirt-sleeves leaning from the windows it becomes a classic iconic image very cinematic of modernist's alienation, the alienation in the metropolis.

And, if we take a look at some of the early cinema of let us say Walter Richmond or Fritz Lang any of the German expressionist filmmakers Eliot was aware of, we find this image of men leaning out of windows in order to depict alienation was very classic image, a very classic iconic early cinema image which Eliot is obviously, appropriating. And, as I mention if you are interested in that kind of research in modernism and cinema David Trotter's book on cinema and modernism is a very good starting point.

But, again the point over here is look at the metonymic representation – the narrow streets, the pipes of lonely men in shirt sleeves. So, the focus is on shirtsleeves, the pipes leaning out of windows is never really a whole image. In lacking in wholeness or fragmentation that is used to metonymize the representation it is interesting because that

becomes part of the alienation problem that you know is so fragmented and alienated that it even cannot be represented except in fragments right and that becomes a compulsory condition of representation. You can only represent through fragments through a metonymic form and that is obviously, reflective of the broader spiritual and existential alienation faced by the human subject in the metropolis.

The next image is very interesting it goes back again to water body image. I should have been a pair of ragged claws Scuttling across the floors of silent seas. So, again look at the very easy transportation between the banal and the spiritual between the almost cosmic and the very mundane metropolis right. So, we have this image of lonely men in shirtsleeves leaning out of windows smoking pipes which was used to depict alienation and immediately we cut into another image which is almost cosmic in quality Aquarian in quality definitely where the speaker says I should have been a pair of ragged claws.

So, I should have been a sea animal a sea a sea fish, a turtle perhaps scuttling across the floors of silent seas. So, again the sinking image I wish, there is a fantasy of being situated in the flow of a silent sea away from the hustle and bustle of metropolis, away from any economy of expectations, away from any politics of procrastination, away from any necessity to conform and be accepted as a human subject in a social space. So, that fantasy of being a very silent animal in the bed of a silent sea is of an escape image over here which is being depicted.

And, then again we have the idea of time becoming tactile, the idea of time becoming organic in quality almost as the body of its own. When the speaker says, And the afternoon, the evening, sleeps so peacefully! Smoothed by long fingers, Asleep tired or at malingers, Stretched on the floor, here beside you and me. So, again the afternoon the evening which are temporal situations, temporal windows they are given organic qualities. They are sleeping peacefully, they are smoothing out the long fingers they are malingering they are stretching on the floor.

So, you know everything which is non-human are given human attributes and paradoxically the human beings over here they have mechanical attributes and we will take a look at The Wasteland later we will find that the typist in the Wasteland is someone who actually becomes the typewriter and this image of a gramophone and the typist, and the gramophone becomes organic in quality and the typist becomes inorganic



in quality. So, the human machine interface and modernism is very complex, the human almost becomes machine and the machine becomes human. That is why those of you interested in post humanism should start with modernism in terms of the starting point of literature for something which actually deals with this man machine interface quite interestingly.

But, over here we have little temporal constructs afternoon evenings they are said to be sleeping peacefully malingering across flows stretching on a particular space like human beings. And, then of course, we have the image of another procrastination through very genteel metaphors where a speaker says Should I, after tea and cakes and ices, Have the strength to force the moment to its crisis? So, tea and cakes and ices very English genteel metaphors of high tea high culture you know high culture conversations after consuming that cultural conversation should we have the strength to force a moment to its crisis.

So, again the moment becomes very important in Prufrock and the moment is not just a space of time not just a spot of time, it is also spot of space. The moment is very spatiotemporal in quality and entire crisis in Prufrock is about this subject's inability to inhabit that moment to actually appropriate that moment to appropriate the moment which is passing him very quickly. So, in that sense it is about timelessness not in a good way, but in a very negative way it is being left by time, it is being abandoned by time. So, that sense of the abandoned subject is something which modernism keeps foregrounding through its different forms of characterization and we see that more medically in Mrs. Dalloway by Virginia Woolf which we will take up right after this right the abandoned human subject.

But, the point in Prufrock over here is he does not, he cannot he never really captures the moment, he never articulates the moment he never really inhabits that moment and that lack of that the crisis of inhabitation that crisis of capturing the moment is something which becomes almost medical in terms of making him procrastinate, in terms of making him neurotic, in terms of making him you know the language crisis in the entire poem is entirely about this he cannot inhabit and capture the moment and convey it through the proper language which is something which we saw already in Conrad's Heart of Darkness. When Marlow comes back from Congo he cannot really tell about the story, he cannot really convey what really happened to him in that non-European space to

European audience. It is just too dark too dark altogether which is the last line of Marlow in that particular novel.

And, then the speaker goes on to say, But though I have wept and fasted, wept and prayed, Though I have seen my head grown slightly bald brought in upon a platter, I am no prophet – and here is no great matter, I have seen the moment of my greatness flicker, And I have seen the eternal Footman hold my coat, and snicker, And in short, I was afraid right.

So, again the whole idea of the prophet the prophet image which is represented over and over again in this particular poem. You know the speaker makes it very clear that I am no prophet and here is no great matter and there is a sense of antimatter in this particular poem because the speaker is an exhausted human subject who is exhausted physically spiritually existentially and also at the level of narration he cannot bring himself to deliver the narrative. So, he is hardly a prophet, this is hardly a great matter. This is a very shallow matter, this is a very superficial matter and the speaker is essentially a hollow man which becomes subject of one of Eliot's later poems the Hollow Men right.

So, again those of you who can make the connection can go back to Conrad's Heart of Darkness and remember how Marlow in that particular novel is intensely aware of the shallowness of his narrative compared to the depth of his experience right. So, he just had a deep experience which is very horrifying which is full of horror, but when it comes back and once he has narrated he realizes the narration that he delivers in the end is a very shallow narration compared to the depth of his experience. So, that dichotomy that out of sync, that complete incompatibility between experience and the narrative, is what informs the neurosis in Prufrock as well right.

So, he says I have seen my head brought in upon a platter and then of course, the image of the eternal footman which is a death image from medieval times – the eternal footman holding my coat and snicker. So, this entire morbid image of being held by death or the messenger of death is something which makes the speaker more aware of his mortality and that awareness is something which informs his crisis. He wants to get a story told, but he realizes he is not really capturing time he is not really inhabiting time rather he is moving close towards death, he is moving close towards exhaustion and annihilation symbolically as well as metabolically .

So, the final stanza that I will do deal with today it has the image of Lazarus which is this classical image of someone who comes back from the world of the dead to tell a story of what happens in that world, but it is not believed by anyone. And, if you remember the poem opens with an epigram from Dante's inferno which is again about someone coming back to tell the story of what happens in inferno, but with the knowledge no one would believe him.

So, again the whole idea of the futility of narration is being conveyed through different signifiers classical signifiers you know biblical signifiers Lazarus over here becomes obviously, one of those signifiers.

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And would it have been worth it, after all,  
After the cups, the marmalade, the tea,  
Among the porcelain, among some talk of you and me,  
Would it have been worth while,  
To have bitten off the matter with a smile,  
To have squeezed the universe into a ball  
To roll it toward some overwhelming question,  
To say: "I am Lazarus, come from the dead,  
Come back to tell you all, I shall tell you all"—  
If one, settling a pillow by her head,  
Should say: "That is not what I meant at all.  
That is not it, at all."

And would it have been worth it, after all,  
Would it have been worth while,  
After the sunsets and the dooryards and the sprinkled streets,  
After the novels, after the teacups, after the skirts that trail along the floor—  
And this, and so much more?—  
It is impossible to say just what I mean!  
But as if a magic lantern threw the nerves in patterns on a screen:  
Would it have been worth while  
If one, settling a pillow or throwing off a shawl,  
And turning toward the window, should say:  
"That is not it at all,  
That is not what I meant, at all."

No! I am not Prince Hamlet, nor was meant to be;  
Am an attendant lord, one that will do



And, then again look at the way in which the banal material markers they use to convey something more spiritual something non-banal something existential in quality where the speaker says – And would it have been worth it, after all, After the cups, the marmalade, the tea, Among the porcelain, among some talk of you me. So, again porcelain, marmalade, tea are very important material signifiers of a certain class, the class of gentility, the class of urban bourgeoisie maybe which the speaker wants to inhabit and have access to right.

So, these markers keep coming back in this particular poem because that is the society that the subject is trying to situate himself in and hence failing every time right. And, in a more biographical note I am not a big fan of biographical readings I mean those of you

interested Eliot's life would know a large part of his early life was spent as an American trying to get access to the British high society right. So, he was he ended up being more British than the British and these whole markers the material markers of Englishness, high culture Englishness is something which became a signifier of anxiety to Eliot. The young American who came in to be accepted in this high British society that is white male a genteel society of art and culture. So, this is something which may be extended into some biographical readings as well.

And, then he goes on to say the speaker, Would it have been worthwhile, To have bitten off the matter with the smiles; again look at the way in which matter is something which keeps coming up. The matter is about the question, the matter is about the anxiety, the matter is about the existential crisis and it has a tactile quality to it you know it is possible to bite it off right. So, again something which is abstract the problem the crisis is given a material shape over here and the speaker says would it have been worthwhile to have bitten off the matter with a smile.

To have squeezed the universe into a ball To roll it toward some overwhelming question, To say, I am Lazarus, come from the dead, Come back to tell you all, I shall tell you all – If one, settling a pillow by her head, Should say: That is not what I meant at all. That is not it, at all. So, again this whole dichotomy the whole crisis of meaning something and telling something else is something which keeps coming up in Eliot's poetry. So, the speaker saying that is not what I meant at all that is not it at all.

And, then the continuation on this is just a corroboration of this crisis where the speaker says, Would it have been worth it, after all, Would it have been worthwhile, After the sunsets and the dooryards and the sprinkled streets, After the novels, after the teacups, after the skirts that trail along the floor – And this, and so much more? It is impossible to say just what I mean! But as if a magic lantern threw the nerves in patterns on a screen: Would it have been worthwhile If one, settling a pillow or throwing off a shawl, And turning towards the window, should say: That is not it at all, That is not what I meant, at all.

So, I end this particular session on this stanza because this requires a bit of an unpacking, but let us take a look at this magic lantern image which is obviously, the archetype or the visual image which had which informed cinema at that point as well. So, the magic

lantern throwing the nerves and patterns on a screen that becomes a more potent form of representation than anything the speaker can appropriate. So, it is looked at with some degree of admiration as well as envy right.

The magic lantern which control the nerves on a screen is something which is far more superior, far superior, far more potent compared to the language crisis that this particular human subject is experiencing. He cannot really tell about what happened to him, he cannot really express what it means and he acknowledges that it's impossible to say just what I mean and this acknowledgment this admission of failure this admission of narrative crisis which is obviously, becomes a nervous crisis in a neurotic situation is something which we saw in Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* as well where the speaker Marlow keeps saying that I realized the speaker the narrative I am telling you is absurd it appears meaningless, but this is the best I can deliver at this point of time.

And, the same image the same crisis of narration the same crisis of cognition is something which we see in Eliot's early poetry as well particularly this image of the speaker admitting the impossibility of acknowledging the impossibility to say just what he means, but instead looking at the magic lantern something a machine which is throwing the nerves and patterns on a screen and then of course, the final image of the human being settling a pillow or throwing off a shawl again a very domestic images; just turning towards the speaker to the window and saying that is not it at all that is not what I meant at all. So, again this break between meaning and narration is something which this poem does over and over again and something which we spend some time with in the next lectures to come.

So, I stop at this point today and will continue with this in the next lecture.

Thank you for your attention.