

T.S. Eliot: Children's Poet?

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### Introduction

Well known for his poetic masterpieces *The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock*, and *The Waste Land*, T.S. Eliot is a major canonical author. With dark themes such as death, existence, and human fragility, one thing that is not expected of Eliot is child-focused writing. Perhaps the last thing one would expect would be T.S. Eliot as an author of children's literature. It is not so hard to imagine, in fact. One set of poems Eliot wrote was significantly different from the deeply thoughtful texts of the Modernist age. Eliot's collection entitled *Old Possum's Book of Practical Cats* is a set of fifteen whimsical, artsy, and enlightening poems all centered on some familiar feline friends.

The collection was an inspiration to Andrew Lloyd Webber, who created his award-winning Broadway musical *CATS* from Eliot's poems. Although the influence on Webber was great, there has been little criticism of Eliot's cat poems in general. This thesis seeks to establish Eliot as a thoughtful writer in these cat poems. The themes, styles, and poetical techniques are similar to the ones used in Eliot's better known poetry, thus creating the argument that those in *Old Possum's Book of Practical Cats* should be included in the literary canon alongside *The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock* and *Four Quartets*. For example, although one or two lines of text in a biographical section mention *Old Possum's Book of Practical Cats*, the poems are not usually found in English anthologies.

The reasons for this are numerous, but it should be said that a main one is that Eliot shows another side in these poems. Just as he does in his more serious poems aimed at an adult audience, in these poems Eliot addresses many difficult subjects such as death and life, using cats as characters and a humorous tone to explain life's everyday

occurrences. Eliot, while displaying humor in the poems, includes relatable themes as his other Modernist poems. Although the humor comes through very easily, the deep messages inside are there because he is doing what all writers do: writing what he knows.

The use of cats as characters gives a playful feel to the poetry, while maintaining a clear meaning of the world and humankind in the text. *Old Possum's Book of Practical Cats* should be considered for use in the literary canon because of the similarities between them and his more scholarly texts such as *The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock* and *The Hollow Men*. Having these poems included not only would show the flexibility of a writer like Eliot, but also would showcase his ability to crossover into children's literature, a move that is somewhat hard to accomplish.

This thesis surveys Eliot's abilities and credibility as a poet, including criticism of his most studied works, and biographical information, all highlighted in Chapter One. The second chapter sets up the reader with an insight to children's poetry as a genre in general, including highly esteemed critics like Joseph Thomas. It also shows the features of children's poetry, which shows why it is different from regular poetry and also its difference from other forms of children's literature. The third chapter takes what one has learned from Eliot's work as a poet and the features of children's poetry into practice with some selections from Eliot's work *Old Possum's Book of Practical Cats*. The final chapter discusses the influence Eliot's work had on Andrew Lloyd Webber's Tony-Award Winning musical *CATS*. The thesis also seeks to position Eliot's cat poems within the broader context of his more serious works, justifying study of said poems on the same level as the ones written for adults.

## Chapter 1: Eliot the Poet

One of the best known poets of the twentieth century, T.S. Eliot was a rare breed. He is known for his heavily-studied contributions to the Modernist movement. Born in St. Louis, Missouri, in 1888, Eliot attended Harvard University, where he could practice and work on his passion: writing. After Harvard, he attended the Sorbonne in Paris, eventually enrolling at Oxford as World War I broke out. Eliot met fellow poet Ezra Pound at Harvard and the two started a lifelong friendship. Like Pound, Eliot lived out many of his years in another country, but unlike most expatriates, Eliot gave up his American nationality and became a naturalized British citizen in 1927 at the age of 39. It is believed that he did this because he so enjoyed his life in England whilst at university. All through this time, Eliot rose to fame as a talented writer, producing essays, plays, and his renowned poems. His works not only are reviewed by literary critics and academics alike, but also are studied in literature classes by budding English students. What is it about this poet that makes his work quintessential for studying?

Eliot is regarded as a founding member of the Modernist movement, a trend that dominated Western literature from the turn of the nineteenth century until the mid-1960s. “The period was marked by sudden and unexpected breaks with traditional ways of viewing and interacting with the world. Experimentation and individualism became virtues, where in the past they were often heartily discouraged” (“Modernism”). This experimentation and individualism branched out from personal experiences to literary pursuits. Eliot was no different from other popular Modernist writers of his time such as James Joyce and Ezra Pound in blending the themes of despair and existence that are such an integral part of the age of Modernism.

What is different about Eliot is how he made his poetry stand out compared to other writers at the time. He used forms and styles of the past like rhyming and blank verse, but subject matter from the present, relevant to the time period and the issues going on, giving his work its own unique identity. A. David Moody, in his preface to *The Cambridge Companion to T.S. Eliot* states,

[Eliot] had created as only the greatest writers have done both the really new works of art and the critical taste for them . . . there is too much life in his work for the accepted ideas to contain it; and a new generation of readers, coming to it in the frame of mind of this end of the century, are finding that there is much in it which answers to current preoccupations. (xiii)

Even though like most writers of the time, Eliot exemplified the Modernist movement and its harsh realities, the difference with Eliot was that he stuck true to formal styles, disregarding his colleagues' rejection of said styles.

Another one of the characteristics of Eliot's method is his use of the stream of consciousness technique. Although he did not implement it as much as fellow Modernist writers, he employed the direct internal monologue, a technique in which, according to Richard Nordquist, "the author seems not to exist and the interior self of the character is given directly, as though the reader were overhearing an articulation of the stream of thought and feeling flowing through the character's mind" (Nordquist). Eliot employs this type of the internal monologue in his early poetry, including *The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock* and *The Waste Land*. The second type of internal monologue is the indirect internal monologue. An indirect internal monologue includes the author providing commentary on the actions of the characters (Nordquist) instead of the characters own

stream-of-consciousness thought process. The poems of his later years follow this format of a narrator reading to the audience.

Eliot's poetry, including those written after his religious awakening, is studied by scholars and students. Eliot's religious awakening happened in his late thirties, as soon as he was a naturalized British citizen. Although raised Unitarian, Eliot had a cultural connection to this church instead of a devout belief. "Eliot often criticized his family's Unitarianism" (Sigg 14). After moving, he immersed himself in British life by converting to Anglicanism and following the Church of England. War was still present in his work, but Eliot approached his poetry in a different way after finding Christianity. Instead of explaining the world through the negative qualities of the society around him, Eliot chooses to take an optimistic view. He says to his audience that there is hurt and misfortune in the world, but there is a light at the end of the tunnel. Eliot brings a hopefulness to the world through his poetry, through his newfound religion. This change can be seen through his collection of poems called *Four Quartets*. For example, in "Little Gidding," a poem from the collection, war has destroyed a city, but the way the people in the city respond to God is different from the responses in than Eliot's early poems. Looking to God for assistance and hope became a major theme of his poetry. In regards to religion in his poetry, "This easy and natural association between religion, literature, and society, Eliot argued, had happened when society was moderately healthy and its various discourses in some relation with one another, though necessarily not always perfectly harmonious" (Kearns 77). Eliot shows religion in his poems, but not explicitly. It takes a close reader to identify the use of religion in his poetry.

Critics also study Eliot's ability to change motifs and themes so eloquently. Eliot himself has said, "Genuine poetry can communicate before it is understood" (Crum).

Eliot's poetry communicates a world of calamity that existed during World War I, when his poetry really resonated with the audiences. Although the connotations and topics are not necessarily evident at first glance because of their hidden meanings, studying his poetry reveals his ideas and thoughts about this time in history and in his own life. As Eliot has said about the duty of the poet, "[the duty is] only directly to the people: his direct duty is to his language, first to preserve, and second to extend and improve" ("T.S. Eliot"). In regard to language, Eliot did not follow traditional conventions when it came to his poetry. In fact, he explained, "The kind of poetry that I needed, to teach me the use of my own voice, did not exist in English at all, it was found only in French" ("T.S. Eliot"). Although he was criticized for his style by his own friend Conrad Aiken, who said, "he passes quickly from one detail of analysis to another, he is aggressively aware that he is 'thinking' but he appears to believe that mere fineness of detail will constitute" ("T.S. Eliot"), G. Wilson Knight also noted that "No poet has been so deeply honest" ("T.S. Eliot") as Eliot. Such comments indicate that critics of Eliot's writing have their own ideas and opinions about his literary works from the comments above, regarding his honesty in poems and his attention to detail.

Eliot's poetry can be divided into two categories: early atheist modern poetry and late modern poetry Eliot wrote after finding Christianity. One can place his four key works into these two classifications evenly. *The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock* and *The Waste Land* are included in the first category. Two of the poems he created after he converted to Christianity are *The Hollow Men* and *Four Quartets*, whereas *Ash Wednesday* is a bit different. It is a transitional poem for Eliot because it shows the ending of his atheist feelings and the beginning of his religious awakening. These five main poems convey all the elements of writing for which Eliot is known; he uses these

elements in different ways. The poems are about the same subjects and including the same rhyme scheme, stanza form, and style; the difference is that Eliot portrays the subject in a different light. *Prufrock* and *The Waste Land* take an existentialist view of the world, presenting a narrator who is wondering “what is out there.” Once Eliot found Christianity, his poems take a different turn. No longer is the wonder and concern about a higher power, but instead he shows his own belief in God.

In *Words Alone*, Denis Donoghue examines how Eliot’s use of syntax and language such as style, blank verse, and conventional rhyme scheme. Donoghue says, “*Prufrock* seems to have started as a bundle of unrelated fragments, bits of verse he wrote under the force of impulses amounting to inspiration and put aside till one day a certain loose affiliation among them might suggest a possible poem” (5). *Prufrock* is a mystery to Donoghue: the subject matter is hard to understand. Eliot seems to throw together words that had meaning, but he does it with no real theme in mind or direction. Donoghue states, “Why he attempted it at all is an insoluble puzzle; under compulsion of what experience he attempted to express the inexpressibly horrible, we cannot ever know. I don’t understand what Eliot means by intensifying the world “to his emotions” (13) Donoghue argues that it is the words that make all the difference when discussing the poetry of Eliot. Eliot’s word choice is impeccable to his craft. His use of deliberately ambiguous language brings his thought process into everyone’s minds. Eliot’s use of stream of consciousness is relatable to all readers. Words that are usually associated with certain phrases and terms are not so in the mind of J. Alfred Prufrock. His mind distorts them and thinks of seemingly unrelated topics, but a reader can make sense of this when taking stream of consciousness into consideration. “Lines don’t say that the fog and the smoke were like a cat. Nor do they quite describe a city under fog. This scene

is internal to Prufrock's state of mind" (Donoghue 7). The only way to help describe Prufrock's state of mind is to include him and his sporadic thoughts throughout the poem itself.

Like Donoghue points out of Prufrock's mind, people's minds work quite the same way as Eliot's poem. Our minds go from thinking about one ill-conceived notion to the next, all while recalling our plans for the day or some childhood memory. *Prufrock* shows the way the technique of stream of consciousness was a large part of the Modernism movement.

*The Waste Land* is similar to *Prufrock* in its Modernist themes. It is another of Eliot's early poems, in which he used his personal views of existentialism for an explanation of God. Just like *Prufrock*, *The Waste Land* has a narrator's thoughts in verse. This poem, though, experiments with different language and linguistic elements. Not only does Eliot include Latin and Greek epithets, but he also includes a repetition of a Sanskrit word 'shantih' meaning a call to prayer in Hinduism. The entire poem brings the subject of religion to light in Post-World War I times. One can see this poem as having ties to Eliot's own life, from his early atheistic beliefs to becoming a Christian man. Included is a dynamic change from one dramatic belief to another, much like Eliot's life himself. *The Waste Land* can be seen as a transitional poem, including all the religions Eliot consulted whilst attempting to find a religion.

Another term coined as important is the "Unreal City." Because of its descriptions of architecture in the Unreal City, Eliot is describing London. Donoghue says this passage is extremely important in the world of poetry because of the various figures of speech and how eloquently he uses them. These various figures of speech Donoghue addresses include syllables, internal rhyme, adjectival and prepositional phrases,

assonance, end-rhyming, changes to passive voice and iambic pentameter, and this is just in the one passage. Donoghue brings to light the passion Eliot brings to poetry and why he should be studied in the field.

The subject matter of *The Waste Land* often misplaces as a poem concerning the “alleged breakdown of Western civilization” (Donoghue 110). The poem resembles *Prufrock* because the despair and existence is also occurring, but the mind of Eliot himself is exposed and the reader gets to see stream of consciousness and Modernist themes from a truly personal point.

Eliot uses many things in his life to create his poetry, including his relationships with women. Eliot was married twice. His first to a duchess Vivienne Haigh-Wood, was a strained relationship. She had many health problems that brought struggles to their relationship. Critic Robert Canary says his first marriage to Vivienne was “a kind of heaven sent trial to spur Eliot to poetry and faith” (22). The feelings and emotions brought on by the marriage are showcased in his poetry, including *The Waste Land*. “Eliot freely indulges in stereotypes of women as mindless, the basic forms being the dark and dangerous enchantress and the pale, spiritual ideal” (22). His love and trust in women is tarnished because he is not able to have a lasting intimate relationship with his wife.

After experiencing his obviously strained marriage, Eliot turned his attention to a woman named Emily Hale. The relationship was not a physical one, and Eliot was only an admirer of hers. He used Hale in his poetry also, but in a different way. Instead of being a dangerous enchantress, she was a symbol of purity and loveliness. She was featured in both *The Waste Land* and *Ash Wednesday*, in which she is portrayed as both a pure lady and a hyacinth girl or “adolescent mistress” (Canary 25). Canary believes Eliot

used his poetry to relieve himself of his wants and desires he longed for in his marriage. Eliot felt such a personal meaning in his poems, thus another reason why his poems have such credibility in the world of literature.

Some critics believed that Eliot's work was too cryptic. Critics that Eliot faced, like William Empson, believed poems like *The Waste Land* were hard to read because of their symbolism. Although Empson was an anti-symbolism advocate, he could understand Eliot's issues in *The Waste Land* and it had everything he believed should be in verse: "A good story, characters, themes, and enough motive to keep these going" (Donoghue 132). A dissolved marriage, complete with autobiographical material made for a meaningful poem.

Eliot's own letters reveal the reasoning for *The Waste Land* as a way to pour out his feelings of "rage and disgust" (Donoghue 133) following the break of his marriage. As a critic himself, Eliot wrote to fellow writer Mary Hutchinson that she must learn to detach herself from a text. Eliot states, "I like to feel that a writer is perfectly cool and detached, regarding other people's feelings or his own, like a God who has got beyond them; or a person who has dived very deep and comes up holding firmly some hitherto unseen submarine creature" (qtd in Donoghue 133). Eliot goes on to say that finding this amount of detachment is very unusual and that many writers cannot achieve this level of skill. To achieve, one must step inside a view of the world, full of all the troubles and torment, which can be easy. The difficult part is stepping back outside that circle into the omniscient narrator role. Donoghue demonstrates this ability of Eliot's with, "Those are pearls that were his eyes" (1.48). This passage from *The Waste Land* shows the view of a man who is seemingly normal, except he can no longer see the world justly through his "pearl" eyes. It also explains the Modernist movement of which Eliot was so much a part.

A man looks like any other person in the world, but it is the way he himself sees the world is what has changed.

Other critics, like Robert Canary have called *The Waste Land* “A classic modern poem” (324). In his collection of criticisms, *T.S. Eliot: A Poet and his Critics*, Canary takes Eliot as a poet into six different directions. The last section is about Eliot as a Modern poet, and includes a spot where Canary states that Eliot should be considered a “Modernist” rather than “Modern” poet (324). Eliot is far from contemporary. Canary calls Eliot “The Craftsman” (325) and believes he is a master at his craft of writing. Canary heavily disregards Eliot’s essays because they do not deal with “the matter of craft or interpretation” (325). Canary even goes on to say that Eliot makes such generalizations in his texts that it is hard to determine exactly a category to fit him in, which in turn brings many different critical approaches to the work of T.S. Eliot. Writers have been “determined to find [some more] systematic approach” (325) but have not been successful.

Canary describes Eliot as traditional in some ways with his poetry, but also modern. As Canary puts it, using traditional rhetoric is essential for identifying and classifying Eliot’s use of language (329). However, it is not always useful in determining the meter, stanza patterns, and even rhythm. In fact, Canary believes rhetoric is only useful for Eliot’s figures of speech, the poetical form cannot be deciphered using words. While Eliot did use some traditional forms of meter, especially in the poems in which he wrote about Shakespeare, there is a sense of irony.

The early poetry works much like that. Eliot used anything from iambic pentameter to tetrameter quatrains. After his later works like *Ash Wednesday*, “Eliot’s verse is primarily accentual, with syllabic sequences as occasional variants” (Canary

330). As time went on, the meanings of his poems became more noticeable, but the forms they took became more obscure. Even the syllabic patterns could not be measured accurately by Sister Mary Martin Berry, who was a critic of Eliot's *Analysis of the Prosodic Structure of Selected Poems*. Berry had created two groups of syllables in which patterns of stressed and unstressed differed. In this experiment, Berry placed one of Eliot's poems with each of the groups and in fact, the poem was entwined with both patterns. It broke the mold for the two different kinds of groups and took its own pattern. This splitting of form is an example of Eliot's typical writing style.

Eliot's legacy has been important in many other fields as well, including art and music. A critic, Helen Gardner, believes that "Eliot used the musical analogy to help himself work out a literary solution to an essentially literary problem" (334). Eliot also used imagery of music in his collection of poems, *Four Quartets*. Even the field of Arts and Music thinks of Eliot as a rare breed. He dabbled in all aspects of life to create his works, and they triumphed because of it.

Eliot though, remains a Modernist in many critics' eyes. When studied in schools, he is a part of the Modernist group. And like the other members of the Modernist group, Eliot worked alongside and drew from James Joyce, William Butler Yeats, and Ezra Pound. Eliot had a lot of the same ideas as these writers, and Eliot was highly influenced by all of them. He created his works with theirs in mind, which Canary says, "Our critics seem far more comfortable than our poets in echoing the ideas of their masters. Because of this ability to echo his ancestors and his or her works, Eliot is credited for being the father of American "New Criticism." Critic Kenneth Asher writes, "Typically, it will be pointed out that Eliot's theory of impersonality paved the way for the formalism of the New Critics and that his elevation of Donne and the metaphysical poets led to the New

Critical valorization of wit and irony” (292). It is a puzzling concept for many critics, because his practice does not closely align with the New Critics in the ways other writers’ craft does. In early poems, critics believe Eliot is “perfectly aware of the spiritual significance of his themes and is merely parodying the wicked modern world, which observes the rites and has lost the meaning” (Canary 117). This in contrast to earlier critics who believe that Eliot’s early verse have no religious meaning behind them. It can be inferred that Eliot is fooling all his critics, making parodies so critics will question his belief system to the present day, which he seems to have achieved, for there is still a large debate at hand.

Eliot had received much criticism for his “literary dictatorship” (357) relationship with Ezra Pound. Many critics have accused Eliot of relying too heavily on Pound’s editing and help. Among the fiercest comments is “Eliot and Pound are attacked precisely because they are said to be the sacred cows of a bland, formalist orthodoxy which threatened to strangle the development of American poetry” (Canary 357-8). The criticism is not a direct hit at his own work, but rather an attack on the idea of New Criticism which Eliot is credited for creating. In regards to New Criticism, Eliot is placed in the awkward spot because he relates to the field of Modernism because of his style of writing and themes, yet he is credited with New Criticism. And according to critics like Canary, “As one of the idols of that establishment, Eliot was the natural enemy of those for whom Modernism meant permanent revolution” (358).

Eliot himself also was influential for many writers. Canary writes, “Eliot’s poetry has found echoes in a number of novels and in a multitude of tongues” (344). Among the writers influenced by Eliot include Conrad Aiken and Hart Crane. Aiken used *Prufrock* as a guide when writing his *The Jig of Forslin*, and Crane noted many of Eliot’s essays in

his poetry. However, some critics may see Eliot's earlier works as a predecessor for his better works later on in life.

In the year of 1927, Eliot converted to Christianity. After this finding, he poured out his emotions into his poetry, much like he had with his atheistic views the years previously. *Ash Wednesday* especially was his poem that showed his views on religion. Canary thinks of *Ash Wednesday* as a poem about the finding of religion, and shows Eliot's changing views. Canary calls the change "self-transcendence" (66). It is a realization that goes on inside of Eliot, which is brought through his medium: his poetry. Some critics believe Eliot uses religion in an imaginative way. His writing approach takes an imaginative direction, and using Christianity as a familiar yet unreachable source is one of those directions.

*Ash Wednesday* has been referred to as musical because of its language and use of symbolism. Some critics Denis Donoghue consulted believe it was so musical because of the help of Ezra Pound's poetical skills. Eliot's colleague and co-writer/editor was highly influential. It is easy for critics to distinguish the two's writings. One critic states:

As compared with Pound, Eliot presents himself as pre-eminently a rhetorician, a man who serves language, who waits for language to present him with its revelations, Pound by contrast would master language, instead of serving language he would make it serve- it must serve the shining and sounding world which continually throws up new forms which language must strain itself to register. (qtd in Donoghue 140-1)

From this selection, it is evident that Pound was highly influential in Eliot's works, especially because of their close bond and writing connections.

In regard to the relationship between the older and newer poems, Thomas McGreery, one of Canary's contemporaries, sees religion in both *The Waste Land* and *Ash Wednesday*, and prefers the religion shown in *Ash Wednesday* (91). Canary thinks they both use the same symbols, but with different meanings. Canary remarks, "Noting that Christ is present only by indirection in both [*The Waste Land*] and *Ash Wednesday*" suggests that Eliot is closer in spirit to those who see all religions as variations on one truth than Eliot will admit to in his prose" (190). This suggests that there is a slight untruth to Eliot's religious poems and leads some to believe that Eliot is not always serious about his religion, and perhaps it is still a pondering idea in his mind about existence.

In the article, "The Waste Land as Work in Progress," critic Glauco Cambon discusses the various ways in which the early work of Eliot, especially *The Waste Land*, is a blemished work. All of the words, phrases, and styles in the poem show Eliot's true writing skill, but ultimately get better as Eliot embarks on his journey throughout writing poetry. Cambon agrees with most critics that *The Waste Land* shows Eliot's "late self-judgment" (192), but Cambon sees Eliot's *Four Quartets* as his magnum opus. He also remarks that after creating such an excellent work, Eliot figuratively looks back on his older work *The Waste Land* and sees no "sense of identification" (192). The work creates a starting point of his true poetry, but provides no longer a sense of identity for Eliot. Perhaps because at the time of *Four Quartets*, Eliot was separated from his wife and many of the problems and anger he felt ceased to exist. Cambon sees *The Waste Land* as an attempt to capture and portray all the Modernist ideas Eliot's colleagues write about. For example, James Joyce includes many of the same styles and ideas in his famed novel *Ulysses*, and Eliot's poem parodies these ideals, but falls short (Cambon 193). In fact,

Cambon says Eliot parodies all of Joyce's techniques, including stream-of-consciousness. Another critic who is quoted in Cambon's piece calls this stream of consciousness attempt of Eliot's "poetry of experience" (194). Among this experience Eliot uses in his poems, he also learns from his mentor, Ezra Pound. Cambon remarks on much of the editing Pound did on Eliot's work. He also includes whether or not it helped or hurt Eliot in his writing career.

The final piece of the Eliot puzzle is the famed *Four Quartets*. One of the poems, "Burnt Norton" contains a symbol that is used often in Eliot's poetry. The symbol of a rose garden is memorable, for critic John Carey says, "[The rose garden is] the key to the *Quartets* and that this moment, and much else in the sequence presents us with a mystical union with God (qtd in Canary 220). The rose garden experience in "Burnt Norton" reminds critics of the hyacinth garden in *The Waste Land*. The rose garden is a puzzling passage for many critics, for the lines do not always match and seem "to lack progression" (220), but it has been suggested by Robert Canary himself that "Eliot was making use in this passage of a recurring image with personal emotional significance for him" (221). For Eliot, the personal touch he brings to his poetry is the key to deciphering his meanings.

In "Burnt Norton," "it is conceivable that the voices of the children, startling when first encountered, are eventually meant to remind us of Christ" (Canary 222). Although Eliot brings many religious elements to his poetry, the critic R.W. Flint sees "Eliot's religious position as poetically nonsectarian . . . [and] it speaks more of the intrusion of the timeless into time than of traditional teachings of Christ (229). In regard to the religious aspects of the poems, Canary writes, "In his religious poetry, religious experience is the object of imitation and not the desired end" (Canary 245). Whether

Eliot's poetry is truly religious, or just parodying the idea of religion, is still up for debate. All of his poetry contains a religious element, whether it was written in his atheist years, or when he embraced Christianity. He mocks religion in his early years, according to some critics, while others believe he used all of his poetry to ponder God in an existentialist way, from his early Atheist ways all the way to the religious *Four Quartets*.

Critics hoped *Four Quartets* would bring the symbolism Eliot was so known for to an end. Critics wished for Eliot to bring a realism element to his texts, rather than provide innuendos and euphemisms for what he was alluding to. What critics received was far from realism. *Four Quartets* brought intensity and much discussion of the afterlife. The final poem in the collection, "Little Gidding," gives readers a decision to make: follow God and the religion of Christianity, or suffer the hellfire below. It is a big abandonment from his previous collections, for religion is the supreme purpose.

Eliot does not waver from mysterious and tricky language in *Four Quartets*, but the subject matter and purpose seems quite different. "Little Gidding" can be likened to the message to the Israelites to become one with God and to not waver from the truth, or else their own option would be hell. To convey this message, Eliot uses many cryptic verses,

Water and fire succeed / The town, the pasture and the weed. / Water and fire  
deride / The sacrifice that we denied. / Water and fire shall rot / The marred  
foundations we forgot, / Of sanctuary and choir, / This is the death of water and  
fire. (ll. 72-9)

These lines bring together the idea of two opposites: water and fire. They are to be thought of as life and death. Water equals creation and fire equals destruction, so it can be

thought of as life itself. The death of water and fire is the leaving of the earth as a human and entering either heaven or hell with one's soul.

Eliot's mind, then, travels to the places of afterlife that are attainable based on life choices. He writes,

Let me disclose the gifts reserved for age / To set a crown upon your lifetime's  
effort. / First, the cold friction of expiring sense / Without enchantment, offering  
no promise / But bitter tastelessness of shadow fruit / As body and soul begin to  
fall asunder. / Second, the conscious impotence of rage / At human folly, and the  
laceration / Of laughter at what ceases to amuse. / And last, the rending pain of re-  
enactment / Of all that you have done, and been; the shame / Of motives late  
revealed, and the awareness / Which once you took for exercise of virtue. (ll. 131-  
44)

Eliot writes of some of the ways that our futures can be chosen. The crown he tells of is a symbol for all the achievements and/or failures one has made in their life. The crown placed upon the dying person can be a crown made of gold and good deeds, or it can be made of thorns and suffering.

The first of the Eliot's chosen ways include the body and soul beginning to crumble from their constant use. Death comes near and the people's bodies are becoming more and more fragile, so their "expiring sense" begins to fall away. Eliot's point is to ask what one will do when their body becomes too fragile to move and get themselves around. What happens when control remains lost and becomes controlled by a higher power?

The second part of the verse shows the world as falling from beneath one's feet. The things a person once enjoyed and looked forward to are gone and are no longer

meaningful. There is an “impotence of rage,” so nothing can even upset the person anymore, there is no meaning. The person experiences a numb world, away from the world he used to know with laughter and love; it now “ceases to amuse” him.

The third and final section reveals a reflection on one’s life. Did they do everything they set out to achieve? Did they make many mistakes and wished they had not? Eliot seems to think that most of the events that happened were that of mistakes, for he says “the pain of re-enactment” and “shame,” rather than words like “joyful memories” and “pride.” He states that we learn these mistakes are mistakes rather than good choices too late in life, perhaps too late for it to count when one dies. He takes a benevolent role in the next line by saying, “Which once you took for exercise of virtue” (l. 144), meaning that the wrong choices one has made in his or her life was a mistake from the beginning, the person just thought that at the time, the choice was essential to his or her life.

## Chapter 2:

### The World of Children's Poetry

Although children's poetry did not necessarily start in the twentieth century, that is the time scholar Joseph Thomas believes that American children's poetry included a massive shift, with famous adult poets (Gwendolyn Brooks, Sylvia Plath, and our subject at hand himself, T.S. Eliot, to name a few) crossing the bridge between adult poetry and children's. Thomas says about this shift: "That these respected poets began to believe that writing for children was an aesthetically rewarding and professionally acceptable enterprise suggests that children's poetry was beginning to be taken seriously as literature in the United States" (xiv). Thomas goes on to say that post-World War II became a prominent time in children's poetry, for there was an "unprecedented interest in childhood and children's poetry in the United States" (xiv). Thomas contributes popularity of children's poetry to the baby boomer generation, with more children came more of an awareness and appreciation for children's literature, poetry especially.

Children's poetry has always seemed to create a divide between children's literature scholars. Thomas produced his study of the genre, *Poetry's Playground*, to outline the importance of poetry in children's literature. At the same time, he recognizes that not all critics feel the same about his ideas of poetry included in the canon of children's literature. One he points out is Myra Cohn Livingston, who disagrees with the argument that "children are natural poets" (xv). Thomas also wrote that "throughout the next two decades books would provoke much debate on how poetry should be taught to children" (xv). Children cannot be successful analysts of the literary works themselves if they are not exposed to poetry.

British children's poetry critic Morag Styles considered children's poetry to be: "[poetry that] has been specifically written with young readers in mind (aged between about 5 and 12), but also includes poetry shared with the adult canon which editors have selected for children or which children have found, liked, borrowed, and hoarded for themselves" (xv).

Thomas believes Robert Frost is one of the great poets, one who might not be considered in the genre of children's poetry, but became one over time. Frost wrote about current events and present situations. One such example noted is the election of John F. Kennedy, who was appreciated by many young people for he was such a young leader himself. Kennedy invited Frost to speak at his inauguration and said these words about him: "I felt he had something important to say to those of us who are occupied with the business of Government, that he would remind us that we were dealing with life, the hopes and fears of millions of people, and also to tell us that our own deep convictions must be the ultimate guide of our actions" (2). Kennedy included Frost in his work because "it is no coincidence that the poet Kennedy chose to speak to and for the nation is the same one that teachers, educators, and anthologists select to speak to and shape children" (2).

Morag Styles puts forth a different idea from others about the time frame of children's poetry. Her text, entitled *From the Garden to the Street: Three Hundred Years of Poetry for Children* speaks for itself; she sees the past of children's poetry as starting at least three centuries ago. Her aim with this book is to show the ways in which children's poetry evolved during those three centuries, and also highlight the consistencies between time periods.

Similar to ones for adults, children's poems contain figures of speech and interesting themes. Creating poetry can pose a challenge for some, but creating poems for children to understand and comprehend can be even more difficult to accomplish. According to critic Mary Gallagher, poets have to be concise, and have to have a "less is more" (7) mentality. Along with brevity, children's poets must convey the theme and message in a simple and childlike yet clever way. The job can be hard for many.

Styles writes of the underground genre of children's poetry, "What do we mean by children's poetry? Can we identify such a thing as a child's poem? The answer is 'not easily,' except for the negation; that is to say, I can show you poems are not for children because they are about things children do not understand or are written in language that is too complex for young readers to take in" (xv). The idea of a children's poetry genre is still unheard of to many literary critics in general. There just has not been much criticism to support the argument in favor of children's poetry as a genre. Styles helps to change that in her text. She wishes to break stereotypes surrounding children's poetry, like that of what is supposed to be considered in the "canon" or not. She says, "A large part of what has come to be known as children's poetry was actually written for adults and has either been adopted by children themselves or apparently colonized on their behalf for the juvenile canon" (xvi).

One of the controversies regarding children's poetry is how to define children's poetry and what should and should not be included in the canon. This is controversial because some critics include poetry that is adult poetry read to a children's audience as well as poetry that is written specifically for children. Another controversy is whether poetry written for children is *good* poetry, or poetry worth studying. Styles believes there is a way to successfully add specific-for-children poems to the canon without tarnishing

the reputation of previous poems. She introduces us to the “golden staircase metaphor: start with easy accessible things on the lower rungs and gradually progress to the higher steps where you will encounter ‘real poetry’ (187). By following the golden staircase metaphor one can become introduced gradually into poetry, instead of all at once. When a child is introduced to all types of poetry at once, it can sometimes create an overwhelming feel to poetry, in turn creating a dislike of poetry in children. Styles believes the best way to achieve a love of poetry is to take small steps and begin children with simple poetry, working their way to the next challenging text. Styles takes a great interest in the golden staircase metaphor.

Styles agree that a solid base of poetry whilst a child can help with an individual’s reading comprehension, stating “[one] can manage quite sophisticated texts from writers such as Shakespeare, Gerard Manley Hopkins, or Emily Dickinson, especially if the verse is musical, lyrical, or tells a good tale” (xv).

Gallagher and other critics believe that poetry is the best tool of language for children. It allows them to embrace their imagination and express themselves in ways they are not able to with more serious subjects. As Gallagher puts it, “[Children] are innovators of language, mimicking favourite phrases with wonder and delight” (7). She compares these innovations with the famed children’s author Dr. Seuss. Children are drawn to his works because there are no boundaries to the creative process. The less it makes sense, the better. Children find poetry to be fun because it gives them a way to express themselves freely, while still making use of their language.

In a world of curriculum and deadlines, poetry is the part of learning the English language that provides children with creativity and flexibility, which is something children always enjoy and look forward to. If creativity and the ideas brought on by

poetry were stressed more upon children rather than guidelines, a love of the English language and poetry in general would be expressed by children. Furthermore, their writing skills would improve if they were allowed to go outside the box and explore different facets of the language.

One of the most challenging parts of literature is poetry. It is set apart from prose and drama for its abstraction and lyrical quality, which are not used in everyday language. Poetry can be difficult to understand for adults, let alone children. Children's poetry scholar Joseph Thomas states, "Children's poetry is usually treated in isolation, as something wholly apart from the poetic traditions of adult poetry" and "When it comes to poetry criticism, stark lines are drawn between the child world and its adult counterpart" (xiii). Thomas wrote the book *Poetry's Playground* to break down these issues in American children's poetry.

According to Lee Galda, "Generally [children] enjoy contemporary poems that are humorous and are about familiar experiences, animals, or people" (107). It seems plausible that more children may listen to a poem if it rhymes and has goofy characters. "They prefer narrative or limerick forms and enjoy rhyme, rhythm, repetition, and elements of sound such as alliteration and onomatopoeia" (107). Authors like Shel Silverstein or Dr. Seuss make children's poetry amusing and fun for their audience. "Many kids who read poetry, I suspect, are looking for laughs" (107). But to prepare themselves for future reads, Galda believes children need to experience some lyrical writings that are not too humorous. He says, "[Kids] also need to read poetry that is serious, uses lyric or free verse forms, and that is rich in figurative language" (107). This is good for the child because when he or she gets further along in his or her readings, he

or she will not feel as though the poetry sounds awkward with syntax and non-rhyming words.

A factor that may play into parents and teachers inciting a later introduction of poetry is that many believe children cannot decipher the messages inside. Critic Rachel Conrad has stated this belief as, “Less commonly acknowledged is the fact that children can be critical readers” (Conrad 125). Perhaps it is not even the factor of children as critical readers of poetry that is the problem at hand. Instead, the critic Myra Cohn Livingston believes that the problem is not finding critical readers, it is finding an audience in general.

Livingston’s piece, entitled “The Trouble Isn’t Making Poems, the Trouble’s Finding Somebody That will Listen to Them,” provides an insight into the world of the near-unknown subject of children’s poetry. The relatively recent article reveals that it has not been since the 1980’s that the famed children’s literature quarterly, *The Lion and the Unicorn* has produced an issue about children’s poetry exclusively.

It does provide a light at the end of the tunnel, though. The now defunct journal *Signal* at one time gave out an award for children’s poetry. It may take an award to make writers provide children with poetry, but at least it is being somewhat created. It does show the difference in regional status however. The article states, “While it is true that *Signal* sets an example we can aspire to, it is also true that it reflects the higher status and attention given to poetry in Great Britain—a difference acutely felt by children’s poetry scholars in the United States” (Tarr, Flynn 2). Even nowadays, the British seem to value children’s poetry more than American scholars.

Angela Sorby’s article, “Poetry is Poetry is Poetry” takes inspiration from *Poetry’s Playground*. Sorby says of this book: “As [Thomas] points out, most prior

studies of twentieth century American children's poetry have been undertaken by children's literature specialists who have not always drawn on the much broader archive of literary and critical work available to scholars of adult poetry" (Sorby). Thomas states in his book, "Although children's poetry has been a part of the field of children's literature since its beginnings, very little crucial or historical attention has been to the genre" (Thomas xiii). "She described the presentation as a reading of a wide range of poems by a wide variety of poets who addressed various aspects and dimensions of children's growth and evolving sense of self" (Taxel 1). The exploration of the self starts very early on in life and continues through adolescence into early adulthood. The concept of Poetry and the Self is an excellent idea brought by Myra Cohn Livingston in *Fanfare: Children's Literature Annual*. Livingston believes this question of "Who am I?" will continue to be omnipresent in our lives forever. She is skeptical about ways we are supposed to teach children about identity. "I am a believer in how the world of poetry can make a difference to a boy and a girl, sometimes in spirit as in body" (6). This exposure to a sense of self provides children the age old question of "Who am I?" but exposure early can lead to a better awareness of the world around them. It is just one of the many ways poetry is so beneficial to children, especially young ones.

Thomas writes in *Poetry's Playground* that a common device in children's poetry is the use of parody. Parody allows for children to have fun and be creative about everyday items. Thomas cites William Carlos Williams' *The Red Wheelbarrow* as one such example as a poem that is parodied often. Using few words to understand the meaning easily is another part of the poem, and is another reason why the poem is "often anthologized for children and commonly taught in the classroom" (51). Author Sharon Creech parodies this poem, creating a whole new way to look at the poem itself. The

narrator in her text does not understand the poem, which “leads him to wonder just what makes a poem a poem, asking, finally if “any words” can make a poem, as long as the poet

make[s]

short

lines (qtd. by Thomas).

Thomas includes parodies of all sorts in his chapters, from jump rope rhymes to song parodies of well-known tunes. Not all are appropriate in their lyrical quality, but they show the effect of the child-poet at work. “Even Roethke’s teasing poems seems to be not so much “invective” as surrealist insights into the child’s world with its fears and anxieties, a conception of the child’s world emerging from the folk traditions of nursery and playground rhymes” (Thomas 75).

In a collection of children’s favorites entitled, *Pass the Poetry, Please!*, one writer explains her experience with poetry as “having a special place in [her] life” (91). She had such a pleasant time with poetry that she hopes to fathom that understanding to children of the next generation. She writes,

One of the reasons I write for children is to entice some of them into sharing my lifelong enjoyment of reading and writing as my parents and teachers did when they communicated their own love of words to me. Instead of building a fence of formality around poetry, I want to emphasize its accessibility, the sound, rhythm, humor, the inherent simplicity. Poetry can be as natural and effective a form of self-expression as singing and shouting. (91-2)

This amount of love for language is outstanding, for the writer presents the hurdles poetry contains to the everyday reader. Her writing also expands these hurdles and promotes a way for children to become fans of the language. She also gives her own success story, which paves the way for more success stories to be written. Those who take this position of fostering a love for learning, especially one of the hardest parts of literature, have a truly rewarding position.

Helping children in the world of poetry is an honorable position, for there can be many hurdles to face. Children are raised in a world of prose. The story book is usually of prosaic form, with complete sentences. The greatest movements of our time and the times before came from speeches, which contain thoughtfully placed words and rhetoric, words that convince the listener and/or reader that a change is needed, and a change is coming. One can think of Martin Luther King Jr., “I Have a Dream Speech,” or Mahatma Gandhi’s “An eye for an eye makes the whole world blind.” Words have lasting effects on humankind.

Poetry is much like a speech. The words are fewer than of a prosaic piece, and the careful layout must be able to convey meaning eloquently and simply. Verse form is usually considered more beautiful than that of prose, because the words can display emotions and feelings in an embellished way. Poetry gives a more pleasant aural feeling than prose, and it gives the exact same meaning. It may be harder to achieve, but it is more pleasant to the ear.

There are many facets to children’s poetry that are of great interest to study. From the subject material to the authors who create such outstanding works, children’s poetry is a field that is not extremely well-studied because of its seemingly juvenile subject matter. The genre of children’s poetry includes everyday rhymes like jump-rope songs to

nursery rhymes. Children have an entirely open mind to many subjects that adults may have clouded judgment about. Scholars should see children as some of the best critical readers because of their innocence and green mentality, for they can provide what is needed in our canon of literature: truth. Children can be great analysts because they have blank-slate minds; they are free to imagine and dream, a key component in children's literature.

### Chapter 3

#### *Old Possum's Book of Practical Cats*

According to Morag Styles, "Eliot was known to love cats and was a keen observer of their habits" (218). Combining the criticism of his well-known poetry and the findings of the previous chapter on children's poetry will show not only Eliot as a phenomenal writer of poetry, but also will show his versatile writing abilities, to go from serious Modernist to witty and playful children's poet. Eliot brings forward a message in his poetry: children's literature is just as important in the canon of literature as other,

more scholarly and meaningful texts. Eliot's clues to this message appear in his whimsical and witty *Old Possum's Book of Practical Cats*, a collection of fifteen poems all about the feline friends. There are similarities between Eliot's famous works *The Hollow Men* and *The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock* and the cat poems. In these selections, Eliot is able to include many epic themes such as death, love, and life itself in a clever and coy way, highlighting his many abilities as a writer. Not only does Eliot bring the elements of his classic Modernist poetry to the surface in his Old Possum poems, but he also brings key elements of children's poetry into his darkly-tinted magnificent poems. He reveals that he is a true master of his craft.

The collection in itself contains fifteen poems with many real ideas about life's pleasures and struggles, all told by an omniscient narrator. The difference is that these poems are all about cats, especially about cats experiencing life much like humans would, but with a witty twist on it.

The first of these poems is "The Naming of Cats," a witty and cute verse about the hard task of naming a cat. It is a common theme for us when we all adopt a new pet—what will we name this animal that we will cherish and love for years to come? Eliot is not only explaining the naming of cats, but he is alluding to the self-discovery found in all Modernist texts. Who am I? Where am I going? The use of the name is immersed with identity, which is an important element found in the poetry of T.S. Eliot. With this poem, critic Dorothy Lindemann shows the importance Eliot makes that the cats are named biblically and that they reflect the seasonal renewal that occurs in the spring. She writes, "From Eliot's viewpoint, renewal in springtime is also a renewal of spirit, embodied in the celebration of Christ's Resurrection at Easter. Eliot takes their names from the bible, from literature, and from culture, seeking the particular name that will fit each cat's

personality” (29). Lindemann believes there is a large amount of biblical imagery and themes behind Eliot’s *Old Possum’s* poems, and her reasoning is Eliot’s religious awakening not too long before the poems’ genesis.

Lindemann also believes that the following section of the naming of cats is concerned with Freudian theory, another large movement at hand while Eliot wrote these poems:

The name that no human research can discover-but the cat himself knows, and will never confess. When you notice a cat in profound meditation, the reason I tell you, is always the same: “His mind is engaged in a rapt contemplation of the thought, of the thought, of the thought of his name: His ineffable effable Effanineffable / Deep and inscrutable singular Name. (6)

According to Lindemann:

The influence of Freud permeated all facets of modern thought and culture in Eliot’s time. Freud had formulated various ideas about human nature and about development and structure of the human personality. This is what Eliot is also dealing with in *Old Possum’s Book of Practical Cats*. He shows men as engaged in a quest, as by various activities, as they try to find a way to exist in the flux. (28)

Lindemann sees not only biblical imagery in the poems but also facets of Freudian theory and also Modernism. Let’s employ these views in another of Eliot’s poems.

In “Growltiger’s Last Stand,” the subject at hand is the fractured psychological state. The cat imagines and relives his past as a “war general.” The fractured psychological state is shown with the line “And he scowled upon a hostile world from one forbidding eye” (8). It shows the untrustworthiness in humanity after war is seen

through the eyes of a soldier. He has seen hurt and pain, devastation and loss in combat and his life is changed toward the country he used to proudly serve.

The fractured psychological state is further examined with the “cursing” to every species that comes into contact with him; everyone suffers because no one can be trusted:

Woe to the weak canary, that fluttered from its cage; Woe to the pampied  
Pekinese, that faced Growltiger’s rage; Woe to the bristly Bandicoot, that lurks on  
foreign ships, And woe to any Cat with whom Growliger came to grips! (9)

The poem of Eliot’s that Growltiger most accurately represents is *The Hollow Men*. As noted in Chapter 1, this poem reveals the fractured psychological state of a man after returning from war. The title says it all, for the man is completely empty and removed from life; he is hollow. Growltiger is not necessarily abstract in his thinking, but he is a character that has been removed from the infamy war brings about. Eliot makes this war-affected man into a cat, which removes his identity as a person, and shows the ultimate defeat he faced internally—the loss of identity is strong. Growltiger is the man brought to war, who becomes beaten and broken from everything he has seen, and upon returning, has become disaffected from humanity: his identity is now a cat.

Instead of brooding about his anger and sadness, Growltiger projects his feelings into a war of his own: his “Last Stand.” He turns his brooding into hate and committing crimes:

Growltiger was a Bravo Cat, who travelled on a barge: / In fact he was the  
roughest cat that ever roamed at large. / From Gravesend up to Oxford he pursued  
his evil aims, / Rejoicing in his title of ‘The Terror of the Thames.’ (9)

Eliot playfully presents Growltiger in a seemingly evil way. He feels lost in the world and his way of defending himself is to present anger toward everyone he knows. No one is

necessarily safe. The only one who Growltiger loves and appreciates the company of is his beloved Griddlebone:

Growltiger had no eye or ear for aught but Griddlebone, / And the Lady seemed enraptured by his manly baritone, / Disposed to relaxation, and awaiting no surprise-- / But the moonlight shone reflected from a hundred bright blue eyes.

(10)

Growltiger has love for this girl, but she is trapped by the “Siamese,” who, of course, are regarded as an evil breed in the eyes of Growltiger.

Growltiger meets a terrible end, without his love and without his life. The other crews on the water take over his ship and his crew, then make him walk the plank. In the eyes and mind of a disaffected, war-ridden young man, the enemy always wins. The mind cannot forsake the atrocities brought about by war and devastation, much like *The Hollow Men* brings about as well. Growltiger’s bandit days come to an end, but along with the cheating, lying and stealing, the painful memories of war are left behind as well.

This poem is much like the others in the collection, especially “The Naming of Cats,” for it contains the removal of the self from poetry. This is a common theme of Modernist poetry, especially Eliot’s own *The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock*. These creatures dealing with many life changing events are cats. Eliot removes the sense of humans dealing with their own issues. Instead, he shows despair and dissociative patterns and a complete removal of the self.

Eliot is known for including many historical literature references in his poetry. He felt that literary history was important, for writers drew from the forerunners of literature as influence for their own work. One of the most important ones was Shakespeare. Shakespeare was deemed very highly in Eliot’s work, from Prufrock referring to Prince

Hamlet: “No! I am not Prince Hamlet, nor was meant to be; / Am an attendant lord, one that will do / To swell a progress, start a scene or two” (ll. 111-3) to a simple poem about cats who are actors in “Gus: The Theatre Cat.” In this silly tale, a group of cats collect together like a troop of actors at the (presumably) Globe Theater. The cat has had seventy-some roles in the theatre and has acted all parts imaginable. There is a performance of a Shakespeare work while the poem unfolds, and one can think of this like the play within a play from Shakespeare’s most notable work, *Hamlet*.

Like “The Naming of Cats,” this poem features the removal of identity through acting. The actors assume new identities as a way of escaping their identity—which is an important movement that started with Modernist literature. The roles in which they play, they can escape from the everyday and enter into a different life with just a role in the play. This is another way the poem fits the mold of Modernist works: to remove from the self, the cats are actors with many faces.

Much like *The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock*, the stress of the poem is about all the person has done in life. For the narrator in *Prufrock*, he has seen it all, done it all, and carries a large amount of conceit. For Gus the Theatre cat, he has performed in dozens of plays, performed every part, and knows the ins and outs of it all.

Perhaps one of the most interesting comparisons is one of “Old Deuteronomy.” The poem is pretty straightforward with its title: the piece is going to be about something biblical. One can relate this poem to the collection Eliot wrote after his turn to Christianity, *Four Quartets*. The collection is all about time, perception, mortality, and redemption. It contains images of fire, especially the Pentecostal fire of biblical themes. There is a presence of the need for purification and cleansing to receive redemption. This common theme is found in many places in the Bible, but very memorably in the book of

Deuteronomy. For salvation in *Four Quartets*, there is constant calling for unity in not only the present, but the past and future as well. And for new life to begin successfully, suffering is needed.

Enter *Old Possum's Book of Practical Cats*. In "Old Deuteronomy," the sleeping cat Old Deuteronomy represents havoc and fear. "What we call the beginning is often the end" (29). There are many bad things that happen as a result of his sleeping- car wrecks and anger ensue, but when it comes to, all the village stay connected because of Old Deuteronomy, their oldest resident. This is much like the book of the bible that connects a church. This book is the connection of Old Deuteronomy to "Little Gidding," the section of *Four Quartets* that highlights these ideals.

This book of the bible, Deuteronomy, highlights the need for allegiance to God and that with unfaithfulness, the Israelites will lose their land forever. It shows the connection of the book of the bible as the words needed for connection and salvation to a cat that creates havoc, yet allows the people to see their connections to each other. They might want to rid their community of a pest like Old Deuteronomy, but they can see how valuable he is to their village and existence:

The digestive repose of that feline's gastronomy / Must never be broken,  
whatever befall: / And the Oldest Inhabitant croaks: 'Well, of all. . . / Things . . .  
Can it be . . . really! . . . Yes! . . . No! . . . / Ho! hi! / Oh, my eye! / My legs may be  
tottery, I must go slow / And be careful of Old Deuteronomy!' (30)

One can see the connection to "Little Gidding," because of the use of verse to describe a healthy fear of someone. The Book of Deuteronomy instills a healthy fear into the Israelites to always follow their leader, for the wrath is coming. The language involved is more intense in the biblical text than in this seemingly simple poem about a really old cat.

In Deuteronomy 31:12, the instilling of fear is made known outright, “Gather the people together, men, and women, and children, and thy stranger that *is* within thy gates, that they may hear, and that they may learn, and fear the LORD your God, and observe to do all the words of this law” (King James Bible Online). One can liken this to the part in “Old Deuteronomy,” when the cat has once again fallen asleep. This time, it is in the middle of the streets, where he causes ruckus and strife amongst the village’s residents. It is only in these moments of annoyance and anger towards the sleeping feline do the residents begin to gather together and become united.

Old Deuteronomy brings this same message to his people in a very different approach. Yes, he does assemble the people from the towns, but rather than send a sermon or preach to the town about the dangers of sin, the cat gives the people the power to figure out their problems themselves. They become a united front against the cat, all ready to rid the town of him and their problems. It is only at the end that they have a fear of Old Deuteronomy because they realize it was the cat himself that brought them together and created a united community, just what they always needed.

Eliot’s other poetry contains messages similar to the one brought forward in “Old Deuteronomy.” “Little Gidding” contains many images of hellfire and wrath. The final section of the poem begins, “What we call the beginning is often the end / And to make an end is to make a beginning” (ll. 216-7). He provides a seemingly optimistic tone with the final lines of the entire poem as well:

And all shall be well and / All manner of thing shall be well / When the tongues  
of flame are in-folded / Into the crowned knot of fire / And the fire and rose are  
one (ll. 257-61).

We can see the light at the end of the tunnel, but Eliot makes it aware that it is a hard thing to achieve.

Old Deuteronomy himself creates many problems in the village, like in the following passage:

And the villagers put up a notice: ROAD CLOSED-- /So that nothing untoward  
mat chance to disturb / Deuteronomy's rest when he feels so disposed / Or when  
he's engaged in domestic economy: / And the Oldest Inhabitant croaks: 'Well, of  
all . . . /Things . . . Can it be . . . really! . . . No! . . . Yes! . . . / Ho! hi! / Oh, my  
eye! / I'm deaf of an ear now, but yet I can guess / That the cause of the trouble is  
Old Deuteronomy!' (28)

In an illustration in the book, everything in the streets is completely in disarray. Trucks have driven up on sidewalks, farm animals are stopped in the middle of streets, pedestrians are almost run over, and men are putting up the 'Road Closed' signs, all while Old Deuteronomy takes a nap in the middle of the street.

It is certain that Old Deuteronomy does not create bliss and order in his town, but without him, there would not be a camaraderie and unity in the town, much like the book of the bible warns of. The cat does provide stress to the residents, but he is the reason they are able to move on and become a connected community.

The poems shown may be a bit different than what we as readers of Eliot's poems are used to. These selections show a different side of Eliot, but many critics, like Marion Hodge, suggest that Eliot's poems are different, yet the same. She suggests that for the normal Eliot, subtlety and consciousness are key. In *Old Possum's Book*, there is an unusual amount of action and excitement. There are "many characters in these poems, several of whom are criminals, and there is a great deal of violence, although Eliot here is

less serious than in his other work: sometimes he is downright playful” (129). This seems like a shock to readers of Eliot’s more serious poetry, but there is one belief of Hodge’s that stands true: Eliot’s morality. This idea of morality is essential in not only his well-studied verse, but in *Old Possum’s Book of Practical Cats* as well. Hodge states,

But even when writing for children, the moralist in Eliot cannot be suppressed. Just as he is drawn to the symbol in his "serious" poems, he is drawn to the fable in these poems for children. In *Prufrock*, in *The Waste Land*, in *Four Quartets*, he preaches to adults. In *Old Possum's Book of Practical Cats*, he preaches to children (and adults). He dispels any doubts about his intentions, any doubts that the cats he describes are not symbols for human beings, in the concluding poem of the series, "The Ad-dressing of Cats”:

You now have learned enough to see  
That Cats are much like you and me  
And other people whom we find  
Possessed of various types of mind.  
For some are sane and some are mad  
And some are good and some are bad. . . (129)

This verse shows the ways that Eliot gives his characters, even the ones of the feline variety, a sense of judgment and ethics. Hodge also adds to the already stated premise of fragility in the human mind. She calls this “imperfectability of catkind/mankind” in regard to his work on the cat poems.

Eliot’s collection was considered to be incomplete at first, for he wanted to include another section entitled “Pollicle Dogs” to discuss the canine counterparts. He

quickly recanted this choice, for he believed “that it would be impolite to wrap cats up with dogs and the book became only about cats” (Spotlight on T.S. Eliot). Thus, he created a witty and amusing collection of fifteen poems about the cats he favored so much. Eliot’s collection provides many themes prevalent in his other “more serious” poetry but presents it in a fun, idyllic way that is suitable for children.

## Chapter 4

### Eliot’s Influence on Webber’s Broadway Show *CATS*

The influence of *Old Possum’s Book of Practical Cats* on Andrew Lloyd

Webber’s Broadway musical *CATS* has been great. The musical is the second-longest running musical on Broadway, and held the top title until 2006 when *Phantom of the Opera* surpassed it. Webber created the musical after a close reading of Eliot’s poems. It opened on the West End stage in 1981 and has since grossed over £1 billion (Background). *CATS* is the story of the Jellicle cats who spend their time preparing for the most important night of their lives: Old Deuteronomy’s decision of who will become reincarnated and spend his or her life in the heavenly realm. “On just one special night of the year, all Jellicle cats meet at the Jellicle Ball where Old Deuteronomy, their wise and benevolent leader, makes the Jellicle choice and announces which of them will go up to The Heaviside Layer and be reborn into a whole new Jellicle life” (About the Show). Grizabella is the star of the musical, for she is the fallen glamour feline. She was at once beautiful and the most revered cat of the Jellicles. Now she is old and grey with tattered fur and the rest of the Jellicles avoid her because of her lost beauty. It is Grizabella who shines through in Old Deuteronomy’s eyes though because of her kind heart and selfless

personality. She does not fake who she is, nor is artificial like some of the cats behave around Old Deuteronomy. He sees her for who she really is, which brings her to be the chosen one to the Heaviside Layer, a position she so well deserves.

Webber changes his adaptation from Eliot's work in this way: only one poem of Eliot's collection is about the so-called "Jellicle Cats," whereas the cats in the play are all of this variety. In Eliot's work, Jellicle cats are black and white cats only; in *CATS* they are of all colors and fur types. The addition of songs to a play like *CATS* proved to be quite an excellent choice. The most memorable of the songs is "Memory," which is heard around the world as a beautiful ballad about the feline former starlet Grizabella's shattered life. The lyrics actually come from poems by Eliot as well. Webber was quite true to Eliot's poetry as he wrote for this play. One can see the many connections he kept while creating the award-winning Broadway play. "Most of the poems were written between 1936 and 1938. Some poems Eliot wrote with music in mind (The Marching Song of the Pollicle Dogs was written to the tune of 'The Elliots of Minto'). Grizabella, the glamour cat remained incomplete and unpublished as Eliot felt it was becoming too sad for his intended youthful audience" (Spotlight on T.S. Eliot). Webber fulfilled this idea Eliot had, of writing lyric and song about these feline friends.

About the songs' influence on T.S. Eliot's poetry, Morag Styles states, "The poems are close to songs, so it is not surprising that Andrew Lloyd Webber should feature them in a musical which opened in London in 1981. 'Cats' is still drawing huge audiences 16 years later, which will not do the original poems any harm. It also shows that *Old Possum* is for adults rather than children" (218). Even highly reputable critics in children's poetry like Morag Styles realize the importance of *Old Possum* in the canon of literature. She also realizes the themes and seriousness behind the seemingly childlike

poems. While they are playful and innocent in nature, there is a deep meaning to them as well.

Webber saw this same meaning behind the poems and saw the opportunity to update them and adapt them for a different type of audience. Thus, the poems were taken from their 1930s beginning and converted into songs representative of the 1980s in which they were performed. *CATS* takes the well-known characters of Eliot's poems like Grumblebone, Growltiger, and Old Deuteronomy and tells the story of their life, much the same as the book itself.

Even the role of Old Deuteronomy is similar to that in the criticism given in the previous chapter. He shows his biblical name roots because he is the feared patriarch of all the Jellicle cats (much like a vengeful god), and he chooses which cats will go through to the "Heaviside Layer" (much like the celestial being heaven itself). Old Deuteronomy mirrors a Jove or Zeus type of creature in this sense for he boasts of the many wives he has had, "buried nine wives (And more, I am tempted to say—ninety-nine)" (29). The character of Old Deuteronomy is the decider of life and death obviously in this play, much like the poems where he basically runs the entire town and makes many of the citizens' fates.

All the rest of the characters in *Old Possum's Book of Practical Cats* make a return in Webber's musical. There is an addition of new characters, like Grizabella, who becomes the main character. Webber takes the names of his cats from the first poem in the collection: "The Naming of Cats." All the names inside, even the most obscure are used for the Jellicles of *CATS*. Webber is able to create a new adaptation for the Jellicles, while still honoring Eliot's whimsical work.

Eliot's fun and lighthearted work inspired Andrew Lloyd Webber to create an exciting, spontaneous, and dramatic musical that has been enjoyed for several years. The musical has been performed in thirty countries and more than three hundred cities, translated into fifteen languages where fans celebrate their favorite *KATZEN* in Germany, *GATOS* in Spain, and *MACSKAK* in Hungary. The play lasted on Broadway and West End for 21 years, and celebrated its birthday with the final performance in 2002 after presenting the beloved tale 8,950 times throughout its run. (CATS Facts). Webber combines elements of the traditional musical in his adaptation, but still honors many of the elements of Eliot's imaginative collection. Without Eliot's sole work of children's poetry, musical fans would not be able to imagine themselves as dancing felines or be able to belt out "Memory" at the top of their lungs. *Old Possum's Book of Practical Cats* is a true inspiration to the magical and exciting world of Andrew Lloyd Webber's *CATS*.



## Conclusion

### Eliot as Imaginative Children's Poet

It has been presented that Eliot is not only a revered Modernist writer with insightful looks at a disillusioned world, but also as a witty and charming children's poet. His work, although intended for a children's audience, has proved to be just as compelling for adults. Although not studied as in-depth as some of his other works like *The Waste Land* and *Four Quartets*, the poems in *Old Possum's Book of Practical Cats* provide a look into the same themes of life, death, and love through an imaginative lens.

An introduction to the genre of children's poetry shows the techniques and methods used to appeal to children on a literary level. Esteemed critics like Joseph Thomas and Morag Styles show that although highly undocumented, children's poetry (both American and British) has thrived throughout literature for centuries. We have seen the styles, form, and representation of various children's poems and their attribution to the children's literary canon. We have seen the ways in which children are introduced to poetry and how it fosters an imaginative growth in their minds, all while learning a lifelong love of verse.

Eliot's own children's poems, collected in *Old Possum's Book of Practical Cats*, show the similar themes, styles, and ideas all present in his adult texts. The poems have a childlike quality to them, but their words speak volumes. We read of biblical themes in "Old Deuteronomy," war and despair in "Growltiger's Last Stand," and identity issues in "The Naming of Cats," all common subjects in Eliot's well known texts like *The Waste Land*, *The Hollow Men*, and *The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock*. Eliot's ability to mask these deep themes in fun and lighthearted verses show the flexibility he sustained as a writer.

The influence of Eliot on Andrew Lloyd Webber's second-longest running Broadway show, *CATS* has been monumental. With a value of over £1 billion, the musical has moved audiences for over twenty years. It has been performed all throughout the world, on six continents, and thirty countries. Without the imaginative verses of Eliot's *Old Possum's Book of Practical Cats*, Webber would not have this Tony-award winning musical in his list of great works.

The canon of literature should be open to considering *Old Possum's Book of Practical Cats* in its collection of Eliot's works. It showcases the same themes and forms his well-studied works contain and he shows flexibility as a writer by dabbling in the genre of children's literature. This underrated work has been the sole influence of one of Broadway's hottest musicals, and still has a league of fans to this day. By acknowledging these imaginative poems by T.S. Eliot, our friend "Old Possum," we as literary critics are able to see the versatility and ambition of one of our very best British (and American) writers.

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