Thomas Stearns Eliot
(1888-1965)
1. Life

**1888**
He was born in St Louis, Missouri.

**1910**
He studied in Paris at the Sorbonne (but also at Harvard and Oxford)

**1915**
He married the British ballet dancer Vivienne Haigh-Wood, but his unhappy marriage led him to a nervous breakdown

**1917**
He established himself as an important avant-garde poet.

**1922**
He published *The Waste Land*. 
1925
He became a director for the publishers Faber & Faber, London.

1927
He acquired British citizenship and converted to Anglicanism. Faith gave him the answer to his own uncertainties.

1930
For the next thirty years he was considered ‘the most dominant figure in poetry and literary criticism in the English-speaking world’.

1948
He received the Nobel Prize for literature.

1965
He died in London.
2. Works

1917 **Prufrock and Other Observations.**

1922 **The Waste Land.** It is said to be ‘the single most influential poetic work of the twentieth century’. (He wrote it while he was recovering in a sanatorium in Switzerland)

1925 **The Hollow Men.** (a sequel)
2. Works

After the conversion

1930 ➔ Ash-Wednesday.

1935-1942 ➔ Four Quartets.

1935 ➔ Murder in the Cathedral, a drama in verse.

1939 ➔ Family Reunion.

Besides, he was an influential literary critic and wrote important essays.

A contemporary edition of Murder in the Cathedral.
### 3. T.S. Eliot’s world and the 19th-century world

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Modern/T.S. Eliot’s world</th>
<th>19th-century world</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Chaotic</td>
<td>Ordered</td>
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<tr>
<td>Futile</td>
<td>Meaningful</td>
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<tr>
<td>Pessimistic</td>
<td>Optimistic</td>
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<tr>
<td>Unstable</td>
<td>Stable</td>
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<tr>
<td>Loss of faith</td>
<td>Faith</td>
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<tr>
<td>Collapse of moral values</td>
<td>Morality/Values</td>
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<tr>
<td>Confused sense of identity</td>
<td>Clear sense of identity</td>
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- It is an autobiography written in a moment of crisis in the poet’s life.

- The main theme is the contrast between *past fertility* and *present sterility*.

- It consists of **five sections**; it reflects the fragmented experience of the 20th-century sensibility of the great modern cities of the West and it emphasizes the lack of values in the modern world.
There are a lot of references to historical narratives (the Bible, Dante, Shakespeare). He uses a technique of **fragmentation and reassembly** of these historical narratives.

- **Quotations** from literary works belonging to different traditions and cultures.

- The mythical past linked to a **new concept of history repetition of the same events**. Thus the present and past exist simultaneously in the *Waste Land* (continuous shifts in time and space, reflecting free associations of the mind).
T.S. Eliot


- The **breakdown of a historical, social and cultural order** destroyed by World War I.

- He contrasts the meaningless of modern life to a mythical past.

- **Spring Symbols**: different from Chaucer ➔ absence of rebirth.

A detail of *The Triumph of Death* by Pieter Bruegel (the Elder), ca 1562. Oil on panel.
6. The Waste Land: style

- **Mixture of different poetic styles.**

- **Association of ideas** ➔ past and present are simultaneous.

- **Mythical method** ➔ to give significance to present futility (old myths have lost their deep meaning).

- **Subjective** experiences made universal.

First draft of *The Waste Land*, third section.

- **Quotations** from different languages and literary works.
- **Technique of implication**: the active participation of the reader is required.
- Use of the **objective correlative**.
- **Repetition** of words, images and phrases used to increase musicality.

First draft of *The Waste Land*, first section.
9. The objective correlative: T.S. Eliot and Montale

For Eliot, the ‘objective correlative’ → a pattern of objects, events, actions, or a situation that can serve effectively to awaken in the reader an emotional response without being a direct statement of that subjective emotion.
Here is no water but only rock
Rock and no water and the sandy road

If there were only water amongst the rock
Dead mountain mouth of carious teeth that cannot spit
There is not even solitude in the mountains
But red sullen faces sneer and snarl
From doors of mudcracked houses
If there were water
And no rock
If there were rock
And also water
And water
A spring
A pool among the rock
If there were the sound of water only
Not the cicada
And dry grass singing
But sound of water over a rock
Where the hermit-thrush sings in the pine trees
Drip drop drip drop drop drop drop drop
But there is no water

(from The Waste Land by TS Eliot)
The objective correlative: T.S. Eliot and Montale

### The Waste Land

- The American desert
- A desolate landscape: the cracked earth, the scorching sun, no water, only rocks. The desire of water gradually vanishes
- Unfriendly presence (*red sullen faces*)
- Sound of cicada singing
- Solitude

### Meriggiare pallido e assorto

- A hot summer afternoon in Liguria
- Hot, desolate landscape, but domestic.
- Unfriendly presence (*file di rosse formiche*)
- Sound of cicada
- Solitude

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<th>Meriggiare pallido e assorto</th>
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</tr>
<tr>
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<td>Sound of cicada</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Solitude</td>
<td>Solitude</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Use of onomatopeia (<em>drip drop…</em>)</td>
<td>Use of onomatopeia (<em>schiocchi, frusci, scricchi</em>)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Use of alliteration</td>
<td>Use of rhymes and assonances</td>
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<td>Use of repetition of keywords</td>
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- Both Eliot and Montale depict a desolate landscape.
- They both refer to a waste land of the spirit.
- This landscape is cosmopolitan in Eliot.
- It is a domestic landscape in Montale.