

Fourth Year Poetry

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Digging: Seamus Heaney and the Roots of Craft

A close reading of one of Ireland's most celebrated poems — exploring how memory, labor, and language intertwine to define a poet's purpose.

POETRY ANALYSIS

SEAMUS HEANEY



Made with GAMMA

The Poet at the Desk



Opening Image

The poem opens with the writer at his desk, pen in hand. Heaney describes the **squat pen** as "**snug as a gun**" — a striking simile that fuses comfort with potential force.

A Quiet Preparation

This is not a moment of action, but of readiness. The pen rests. The world outside waits. The act of writing is about to begin — and so is the act of remembering.

The Sound of the Spade

A **sensory shift** pulls the speaker from the page to the window. The *clean, rasping sound* of a spade entering earth breaks the quiet. His father is digging in the flowerbeds below – and in that moment, the **pen in hand and the spade in soil** become one.



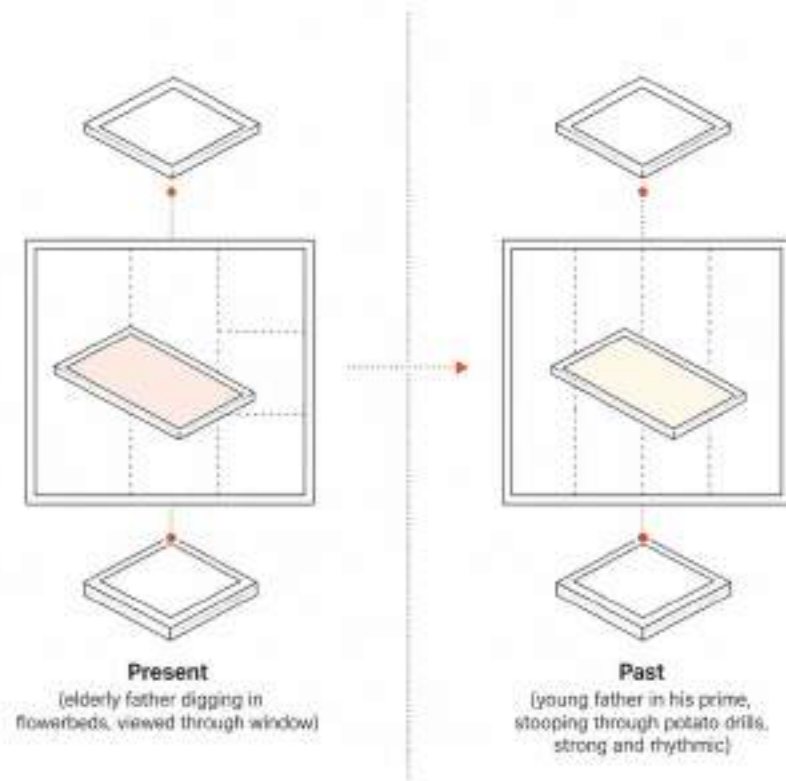
A Flashback in Time

Memory Triggered

The sight of his father's movement unlocks a memory from **twenty years past**. The elderly man at work today becomes the vigorous laborer of the speaker's childhood — stooping in rhythm through the *potato drills*.



Heaney uses the present action as a bridge into the past, collapsing time through the continuity of physical gesture.



The Anatomy of Labor



The Coarse Boot

Heaney catalogs the physical details with precision — the boot planted on the spade's shaft, the levered motion, the **bright edge** slicing through earth.



The Cool Harvest

The sensory reward: the *cool hardness* of new potatoes pulled from the ground. The speaker recalls his childhood role — present at the harvest, intimately involved.



Rhythm & Precision

Labor is not chaos — it is choreography. The father's movements are **measured, practiced, exact**. This is mastery expressed through the body.

Generational Mastery

"By God, the old man could handle a spade."

Heaney pays tribute not just to his father, but to a **lineage of skilled hands**. The father learned from the grandfather — a chain of knowledge passed not through books, but through **observation, imitation, and physical pride**. Manual excellence is its own standard of greatness.



The Legend of the Bog



The Grandfather's Domain

The poem turns further back to the grandfather — **the fastest turf cutter on Toner's bog**. Heaney recalls bringing him milk in a bottle, watching him barely pause to drink before returning to his relentless, rhythmic work.

Efficiency as Poetry

There is no wasted motion. The grandfather's labor is **visceral, tireless, almost mythic** — a standard of human capability that echoes through the generations.

The Weight of Heritage

Sensory Synthesis

The smells of *potato mold* and the *squelch of soggy peat* rise from memory into the present moment. The physical roots of his family **awaken in his head**.

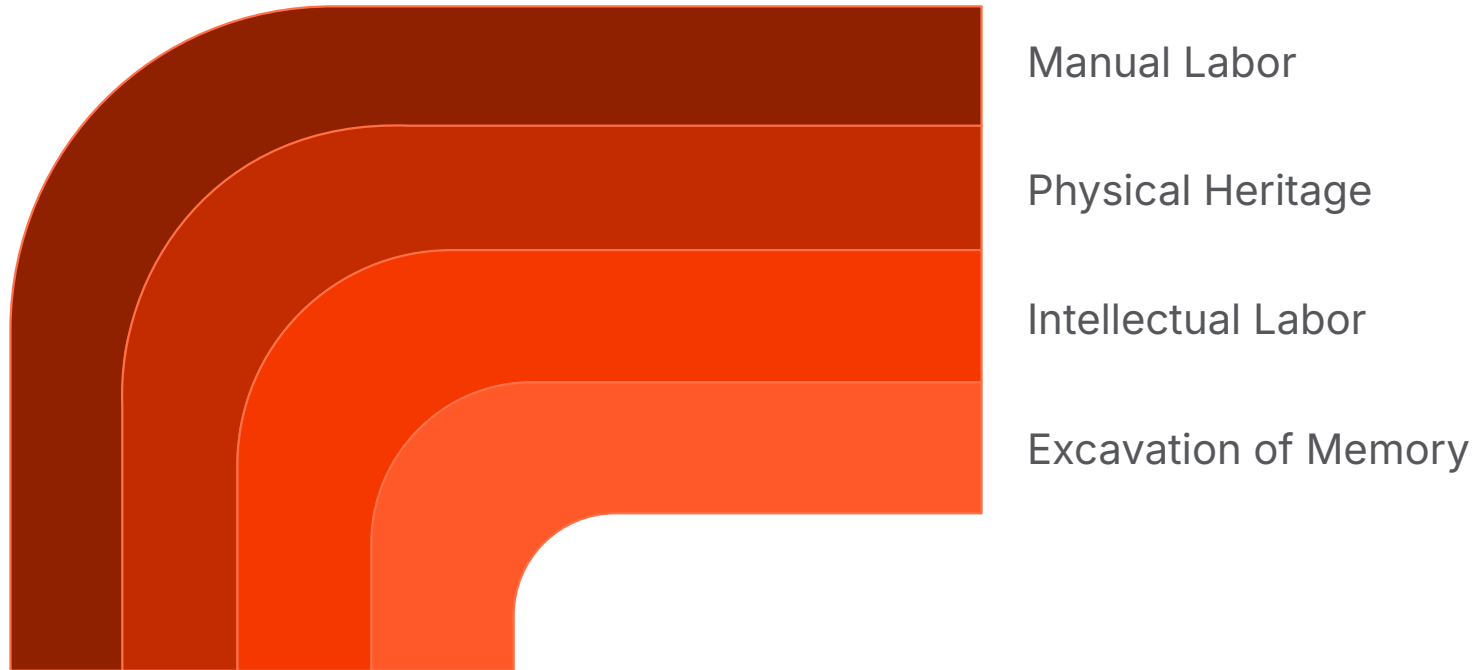
The Turning Point

Heaney reaches a quiet crisis: **he has no spade**. He cannot follow their path into the earth. The lineage of physical labor ends with him.

A Different Inheritance

But heritage is not only physical. The **memory, the rhythm, the precision** – these too can be inherited. The question becomes: what is his tool?

Defining the Modern Spade



Heaney returns to the desk — but the scene has changed. The pen is no longer just a pen. It is **his spade**. Where his father and grandfather dug into soil, he will dig into **memory, language, and identity**. The instrument changes; the act of excavation remains the same.



A Declaration of Intent

"I'll dig with it."

The poem closes not with doubt, but with **resolve**. Heaney's final line is a quiet manifesto: the work of poetry is not lesser than the work of the land. It is a different kind of digging — one that unearths **truth, heritage, and self** with the same precision his ancestors brought to the soil.

Memory

The raw material

Language

The chosen tool

Truth

The thing
unearthed



WORLD WAR.

Dulce et Decorum Est

"The Old Lie: Dulce et decorum est / Pro patria mori."

WILFRED OWEN · 1917



THE POET

Wilfred Owen: From Patriot to Poet

Born in 1893, Owen enlisted with patriotic fervor — only to have it shattered by the brutal reality of the Western Front.

Enlistment

Joined the British Army, initially inspired by duty and national pride.

Disillusionment

The trenches stripped away romantic illusions, replacing them with horror.

Craiglockhart

Treated for shell shock in 1917, where he wrote his most powerful works.

The Context: A World Transformed

Modern Warfare

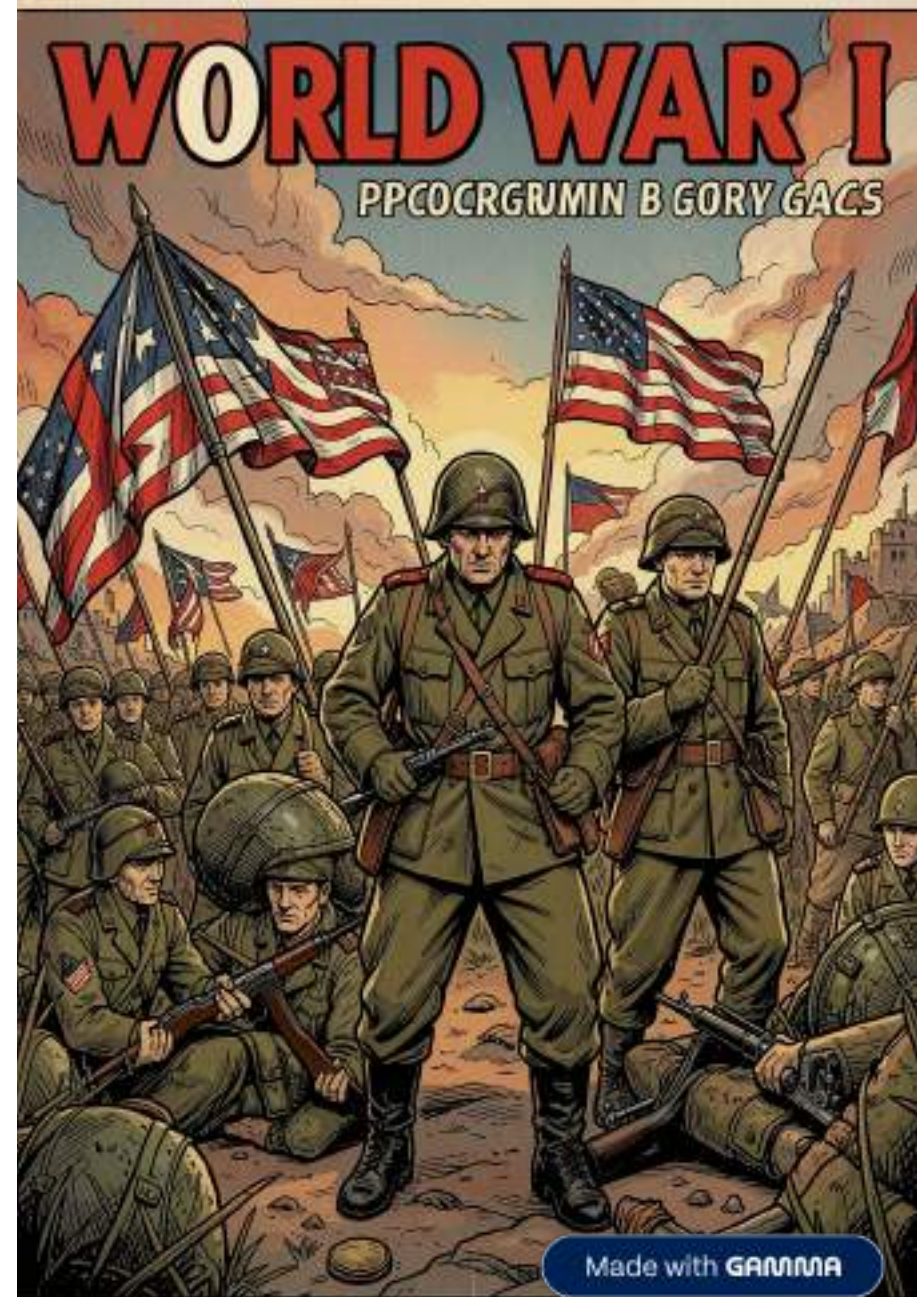
WWI (1914–1918) introduced trenches, machine guns, and chemical gas – weapons of mass slaughter on an unprecedented scale.

Propaganda Machine

Posters and speeches fueled a narrative of "desperate glory" to drive recruitment, masking the true horror awaiting soldiers.

The Old Lie

Horace's Latin phrase – *"It is sweet and fitting to die for one's country"* – became Owen's target.



Stanza 1: The Descent into Hell

Owen opens not with heroism, but with degradation. Soldiers are **beggars, hags, and the crippled** — men broken by exhaustion, marching in a sleepwalking trance.



Physical Ruin

"Blood-shod" and "blind," the men are stripped of dignity and strength.

Sensory Horror

The sound of "disappointed shells" dropping behind them — even the artillery is exhausted.



The Sudden Shock: Gas!

The poem's pacing fractures. From a slow trudge to a frantic "**ecstasy of fumbling**" — soldiers clawing at helmets as shells rain down.

1

The Warning

A single cry shatters the numbness: "*Gas! Gas! Quick, boys!*"

2

The Fumble

Panic. Men struggle to fit clumsy masks while death descends.

3

The Failure

One soldier is too slow — trapped, drowning in a green sea of gas.

STANZA 2

The Drowning Man

Owen transforms a gas attack into something almost mythological — a man **drowning in a thick, green sea.**

"As under a green sea, I saw him
drowning."

The image haunts Owen's dreams: the soldier "*plunging*" and "*guttering*" — a loss of humanity rendered in visceral, unforgettable detail.



Stanza 3: The Unbearable Weight

Owen turns directly to the reader — **"If you could pace behind the wagon"** — forcing us to witness what propaganda conceals.

1

Eyes Writhing

The dying soldier's face contorts in agony, beyond any dignified sacrifice.

2

Blood Gargling

His lungs, corrupted by gas, fill with froth and blood — a death both slow and obscene.

3

Vile Sores

Owen compares the wounds to cancer — incurable, disgusting, and utterly inglorious.

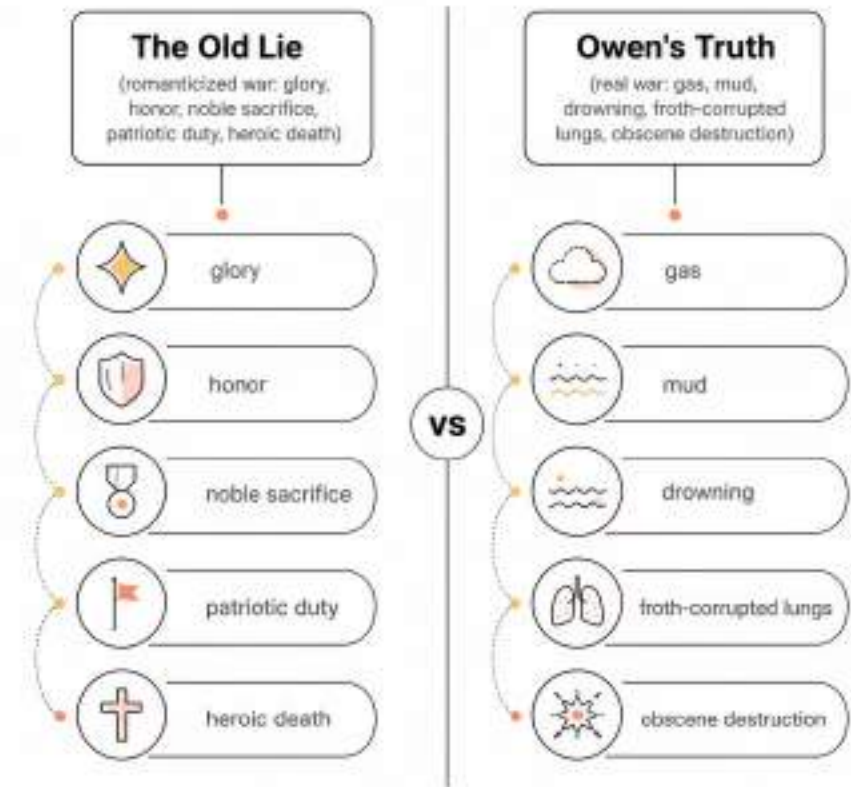


Shattering the Myth

Owen's anger is precise and personal. He addresses **"my friend"** – the armchair patriot, the recruiter, the poet of glory.



The final Latin line is not a tribute – it is an indictment.



The Lie

The "high zest" that drives young men toward war is a cruel deception.

The Truth

War is not noble sacrifice – it is obscene, incurable destruction.

Legacy of the Poet

1918

Year of Death

Killed in action on November 4 — just one week before the Armistice.

7

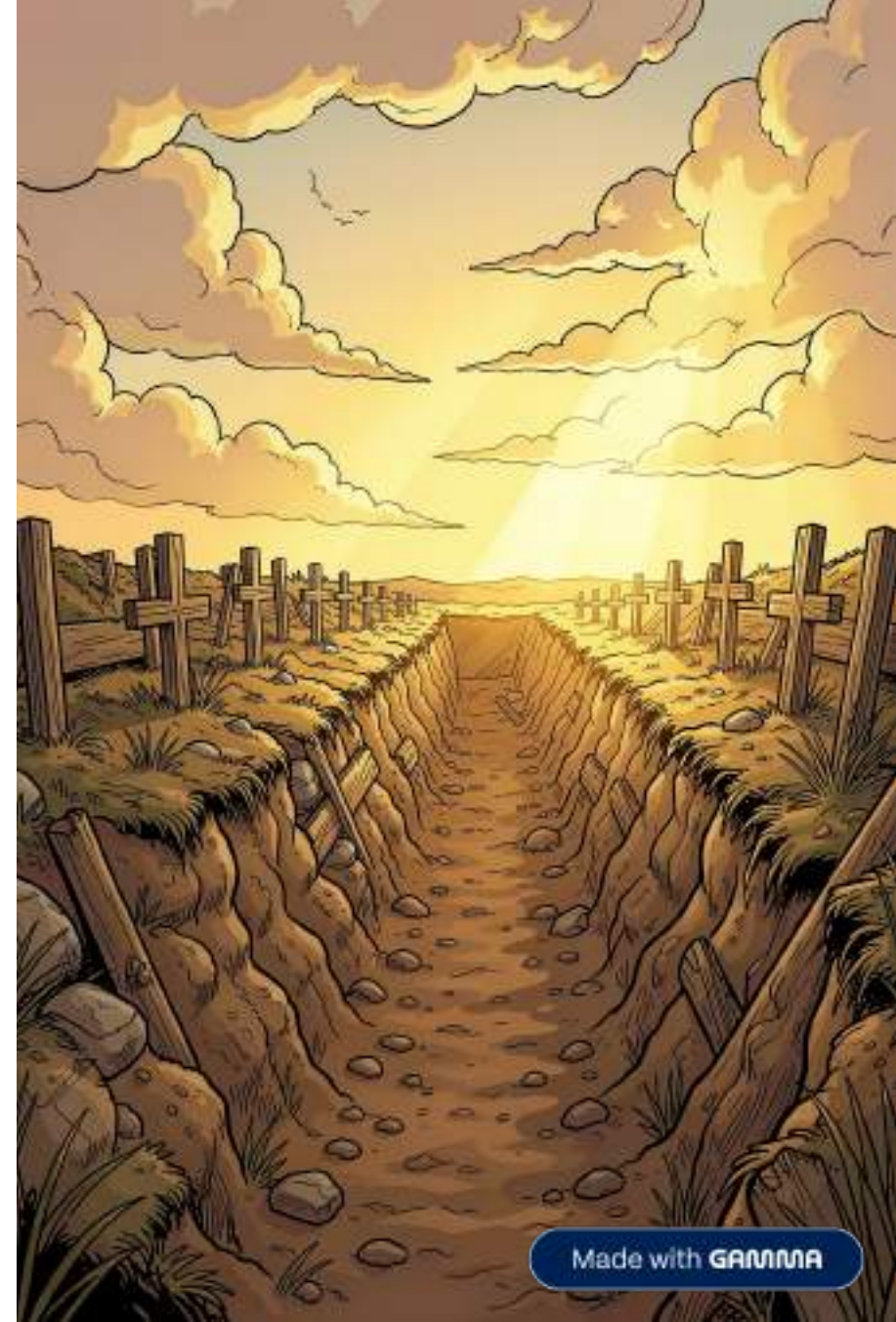
Days Before Peace

His family received the death notice as church bells rang to celebrate the end of the war.

100+

Years of Influence

His work remains the definitive challenge to war propaganda and romanticization.





CONCLUSION

The Pity of War

"My subject is War and the Pity of War.
The Poetry is in the Pity." — Wilfred
Owen

Owen's challenge endures: move beyond the **"old lies"** to honor the reality of those who served. War is not sweet. It is not fitting. It is only pitiful — and that pity is where the truth lives.

Remember

The soldiers, not the slogans.

Question

The narratives of glory.



Porphyria's Lover

A Study in Obsession — Robert Browning's 1836 dramatic monologue explores the darkest corners of possessive love, social transgression, and the terrifying logic of a fractured mind.

VICTORIAN POETRY

DRAMATIC MONOLOGUE

ROBERT BROWNING



The Stormy Setting

Pathetic Fallacy

The wind and rain mirror the speaker's internal turmoil – nature itself reflects his emotional chaos.

A Solitary Cottage

Isolation dissolves social boundaries. The private space becomes a stage for transgression.

Vulnerability

The speaker sits alone, listening with *"a heart fit to break"* – fragile, waiting, emotionally exposed.



PORPHYRIA ARRIVES

Light Against the Storm

Porphyria enters and *shuts the storm out* – she brings warmth, light, and agency. Her act of kneeling to stir the fire is tender, yet transgressive: a woman of high social standing visiting a lover beneath her class.

She brings warmth

Her presence transforms the cold, dark room.

She breaks the code

Her visit defies Victorian social hierarchy.

The Shift in Power

Porphyria takes the initiative – but the speaker remains dangerously still.

Her Initiative

She undresses, lays her cheek on his shoulder – she seeks intimacy on her own terms.

His Silence

He refuses to respond. Pride, jealousy, or wounded ego keeps him passive and calculating.

Unspoken Tension

Their relationship is defined by social pressure and expectations neither dares name aloud.

❏ Porphyria holds all the agency – until the moment the speaker decides to take it back.



The Moment of Realization

"Porphyria worshipped me; surprise / Made my heart swell, and still it grew / While I debated what to do."

When Porphyria murmurs that she belongs to him, the speaker experiences a surge of pride — and a sudden, chilling clarity. He believes he has finally captured her completely. In that fleeting moment of perfection, he makes his decision.

The Act of Violence

The speaker's logic is cold and precise: if he preserves this perfect moment, she can never leave. He strangles her with **her own golden hair** — the very symbol of her beauty becomes the instrument of her death.



→ Calculated choice

He determines to freeze time permanently.

→ No remorse

He insists she felt no pain — a claim that reveals his delusion.

The Disturbing Aftermath



The Doll-Like Transformation

He opens her eyes and describes her with clinical, detached precision — she has become an object.



The Shifting Tone

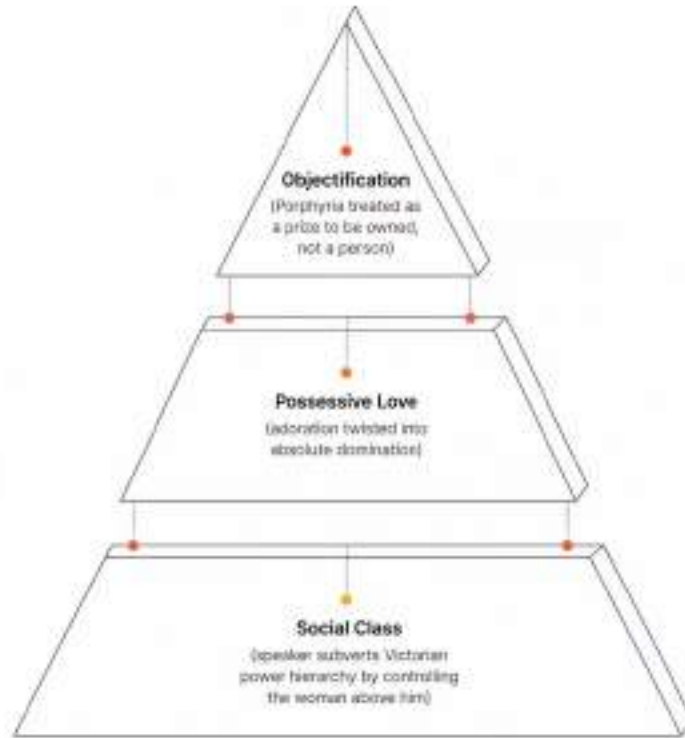
From chaotic passion to terrifying stillness. The storm outside has passed; the storm inside has not.



Permanent Possession

By removing her agency, he ensures she is his alone — forever, and without choice.

Themes of Control



Browning exposes how love, when fused with the desire for control, becomes indistinguishable from violence. The speaker's obsession is not romantic — it is the logic of ownership applied to a human being.



The poem asks: when does devotion become destruction?

Analyzing the Monologue

1

Is He Sane?

The speaker's calm, rational tone contradicts the horror of his act – a hallmark of the unreliable narrator.

2

Poetic Technique

The steady ABABB rhyme scheme mirrors his composure. The form itself denies the chaos of murder.

3

Feminist Reading

Porphyria is silenced – literally and figuratively. She becomes a victim of patriarchal possession.



Conclusion: The Silence of God

"And thus we sit together now, / And all night long we have not stirred, / And yet God has not said a word!"

The final image — Porphyria's head on his shoulder, perfectly still — is Browning's most devastating stroke. The speaker interprets God's silence as absolution. But the reader knows better.

The Cost of Obsession

The destruction of the beloved.

The Cautionary Tale

Unchecked power, even in love, is lethal.

The Modernist Mirror

T.S. Eliot & Prufrock

An introduction to the poem that shattered Victorian poetry and gave voice to modern alienation.





ORIGINS

The Birth of a Modern Icon

Written 1910–1911

Composed by a 22-year-old T.S. Eliot in Europe, before he had published anything.

Published 1915

Printed in *Poetry* magazine – a revolutionary break from Victorian tradition.

First Modernist Masterpiece

Captured the alienation and fragmentation of the 20th century before the world had a name for it.

Who is J. Alfred Prufrock?



Prufrock is **over-educated, eloquent, and emotionally paralyzed** – a man who measures out his life in coffee spoons.

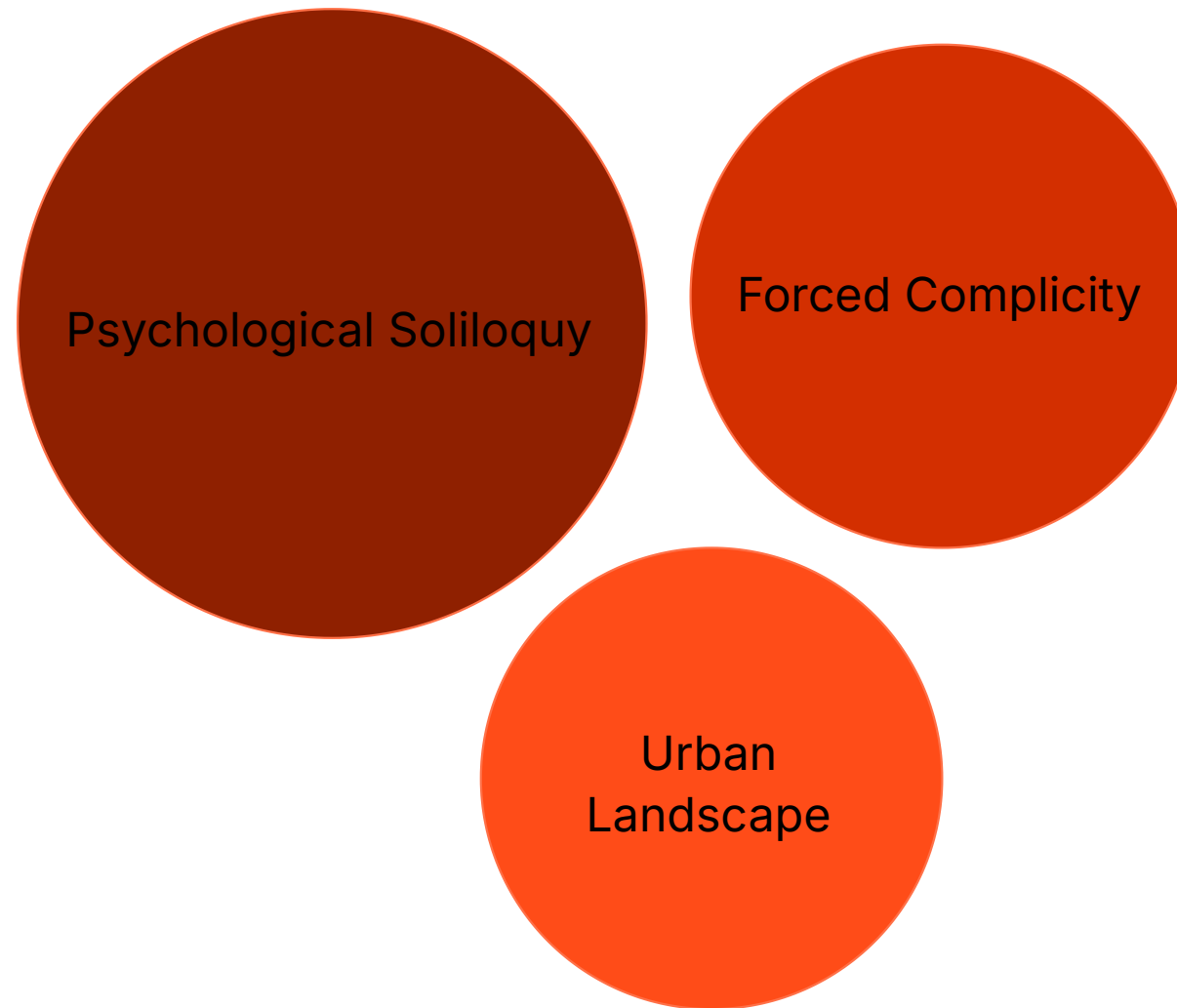
The Hesitator

Caught in an endless cycle of doubt: *"Do I dare to eat a peach?"*

The Observer

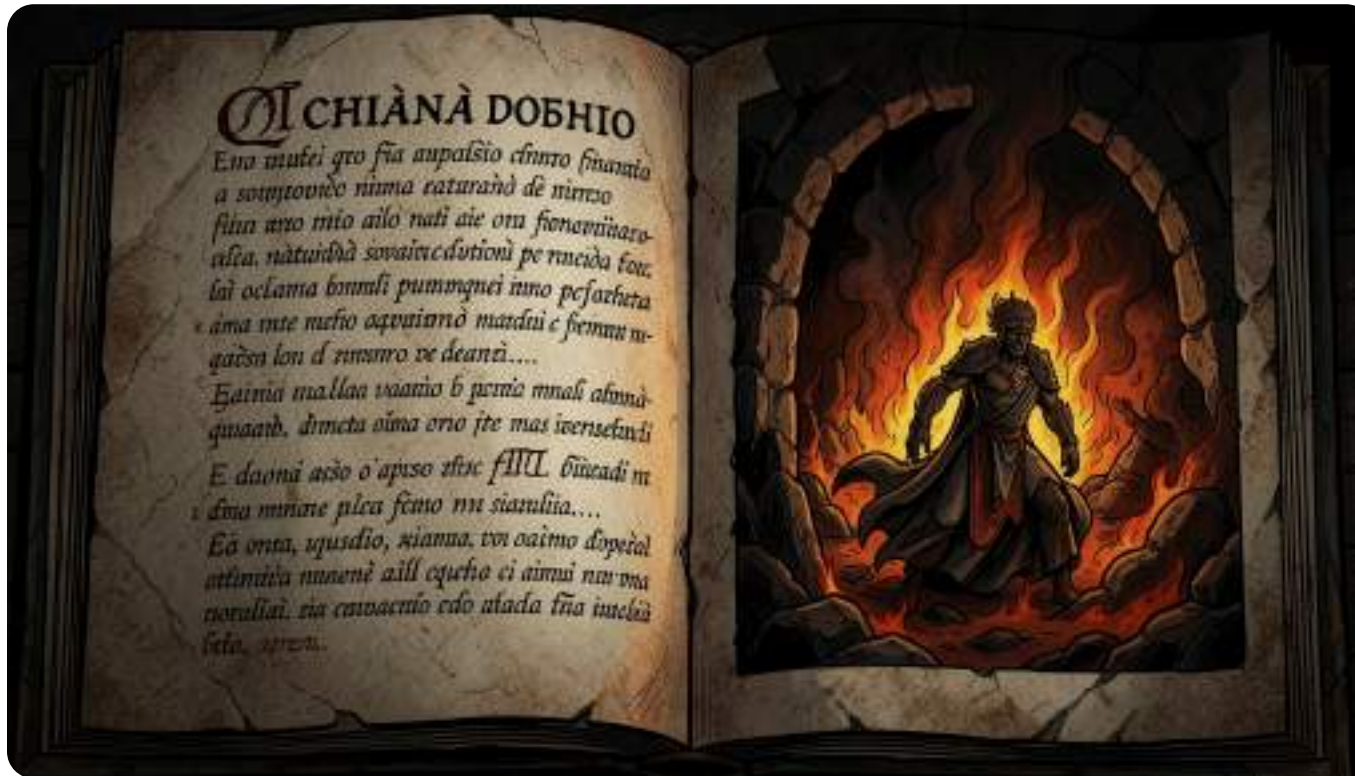
He watches life from the margins, never fully participating – always preparing, never arriving.

The Dramatic Monologue as a Weapon



Eliot weaponizes the dramatic monologue, trapping the reader inside Prufrock's mind — we are not observers of his anxiety, we are its unwilling accomplices.

Dante and the Echoes of Hell



*"If I thought my reply were to someone
who could ever return to the world,
this flame would cease to flicker."*

— Dante's *Inferno*, Canto XXVII

The epigraph frames Prufrock's confession as a **speech from the damned** — spoken only to someone who will never judge, never repeat, and never return. The stakes are set: this is a confession from the bottom of a personal abyss.

Why Modernism Baffled Readers



Shattered Meter

Eliot abandoned regular rhyme and rhythm, mirroring the chaos of modern consciousness rather than comforting readers with order.



"Unpoetic" Subject Matter

Yellow fog, coffee spoons, and thinning hair — mundane imagery that Victorian poetry would have deemed unworthy.



Fragmented Imagery

Disjointed scenes and shifting perspectives forced readers to assemble meaning — a radical demand for active engagement.

TECHNIQUE

The Objective Correlative

Eliot's Defining Theory

Rather than stating an emotion directly, the poet creates a **set of objects, situations, or events** that evoke that emotion objectively in the reader.

❏ The emotion must be *triggered*, not *described*.

The Fog

Yellow smoke that rubs
its back upon window-
panes — languid, feline,
evading.

The Evening

"Spread out against the
sky / Like a patient
etherized upon a table" —
paralysis made visual.



KEY MOTIF

Michelangelo and the Social Void

"In the room the women come and go, / Talking of Michelangelo."

The recurring refrain is **stinging irony**: Prufrock is surrounded by high culture yet utterly excluded from it. He is obsessed with meaning while trapped in trivial social performance. The poem's cruel verdict: *"That is not what I meant at all."*

No Hero, Just a Ghost



Prufrock explicitly rejects the heroic: **he is not Prince Hamlet**, but "an attendant lord" — the insignificant extra, useful for a scene or two.

→ Haunted by Aging

Receding hair, thinning arms — the body betrays the mind's grand ambitions.

→ The Final Drowning

"Until human voices wake us, and we drown." Fantasy collapses under the weight of the real.



LEGACY

The Legacy of the Unspoken

1

The Ultimate Human Statement

Prufrock's failure to ask his question is the poem's most enduring truth – inaction as identity.

2

A Challenge to the Reader

Eliot forces us to ask: *What questions are **you** failing to ask?*

3

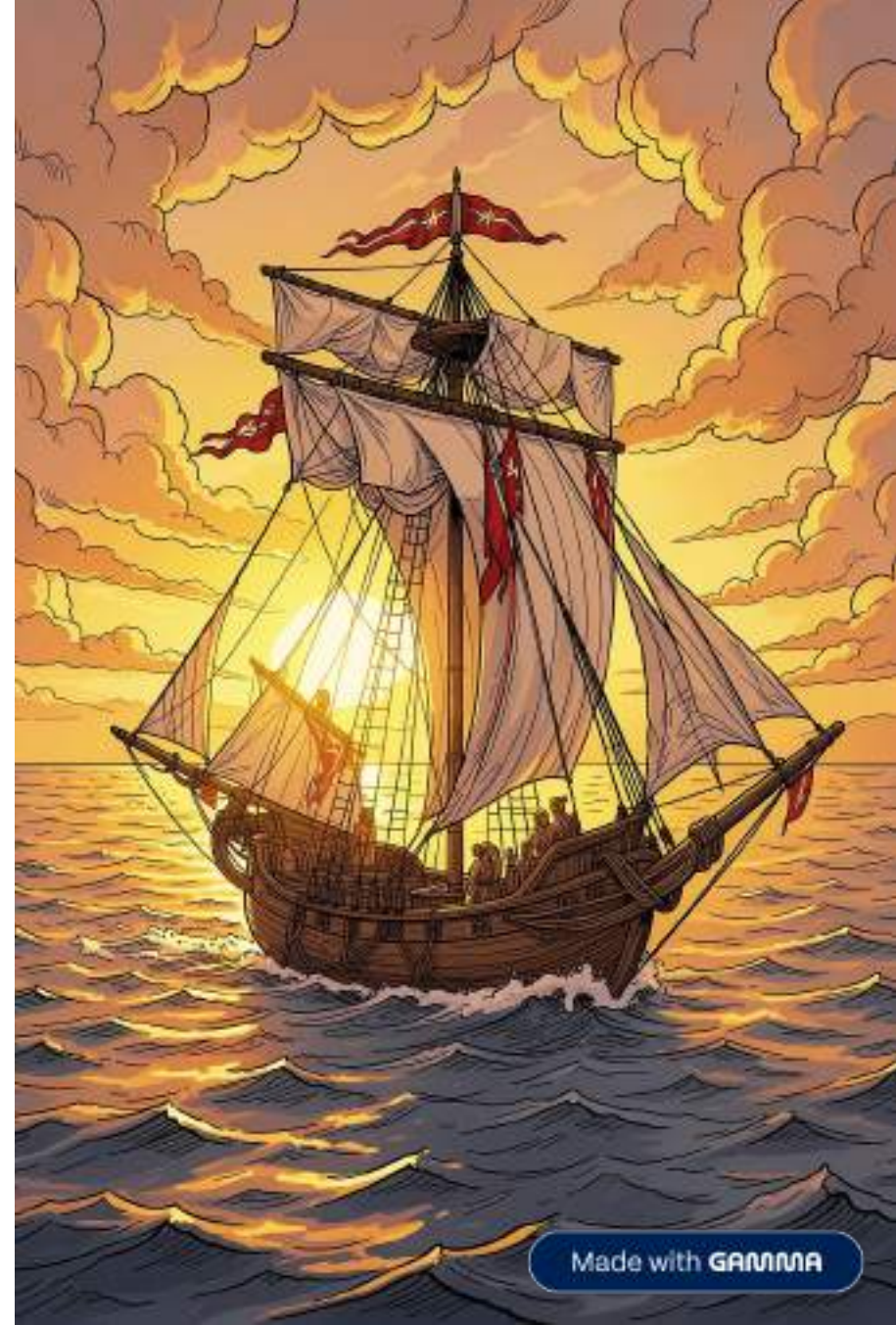
Living Tradition

History and tradition live only through our current engagement – the poem demands we participate, not just observe.

Ulysses

The Restless Spirit of Alfred, Lord Tennyson

A Victorian masterpiece about the refusal to stop seeking — even when the world says you should.





WRITTEN 1833 · PUBLISHED 1842

The Backdrop of 1833

A Poem Born of Grief

Tennyson wrote *Ulysses* in the immediate aftermath of Arthur Hallam's sudden death — his closest friend and intellectual companion. The poem became a vessel for mourning and the struggle to move forward.

A Landmark Publication

Though written in 1833, it appeared in Tennyson's celebrated 1842 volume — a collection that cemented his reputation as the defining poetic voice of the Victorian age.

MYTHIC ROOTS

The Mythic Foundation



Tennyson drew from two towering sources to forge his Ulysses:

Together, these sources transformed a Greek hero into a **universal symbol of Victorian ambition**: duty, honor, and the relentless drive for progress.

Homer's *Odyssey*

The Greek hero of cunning and endurance, defined by his journey home.

Dante's *Inferno*

Dante reimagined Ulysses as a restless explorer who sailed beyond the known world — a figure Tennyson found irresistible.

THE SETTING

The Idle King in Ithaca



The Domestic Trap

Ulysses rules an "ungoverned" people — a king in title only, suffocated by the smallness of domestic administration.



Barren Crag vs. the Open Sea

Ithaca's "barren crags" represent everything that confines him — a stark contrast to the wide, beckoning horizon of the sea.



Rusting Unburnished

"How dull it is to pause, to make an end, / To rust unburnished, not to shine in use!" — the agony of a spirit denied its purpose.



THE SPEAKER'S VOICE

A Life Piled on Life

"I am a part of all that I have met"

Ulysses is not merely recounting adventures — he is confessing that every experience has **become part of his identity**. The Trojan War, the "battle's delight," the strange lands and peoples: all have shaped him.

His hunger for experience does not diminish with age. It **grows with every new horizon** — each encounter opens the appetite for the next.

The Core Tension

Memory fuels longing. The more Ulysses has lived, the more he **needs** to live — and the harder it becomes to stand still.

FATHER & SON

Passing the Torch: Telemachus



Ulysses addresses his son with cool detachment — not cruelty, but a recognition of **fundamentally different natures**.

Telemachus

Gifted for "common duties" — patient, measured, suited to governing a "savage race" with "slow prudence."

Ulysses

Unsuited to stillness. His kingdom is the horizon. He hands Ithaca over not with regret, but relief.

THE CENTRAL PHILOSOPHY

The Philosophy of Striving

"To follow knowledge like a sinking star"

Reject Passivity

Old age is not an excuse for withdrawal. Tennyson's Ulysses refuses to let decline define him.

Expand Constantly

Life is measured not in years, but in the **expansion of wisdom and reach** — every moment is a chance to learn more.

Seek Without End

The "sinking star" is always just out of reach — and that is precisely the point. The pursuit *is* the purpose.



Made with GAMMA

THE TURNING POINT

The Final Call to Adventure

"Come, my friends"

Ulysses rallies his aging mariners — men who have "toiled, and wrought, and thought" alongside him. They are old, but not finished.

He acknowledges death openly — yet chooses to ignore its certainty in favor of the chance of discovery.

"to sail beyond the sunset"



THE FINALE

Pushing Off: A Defiant Finale

☐ Facing the Unknown

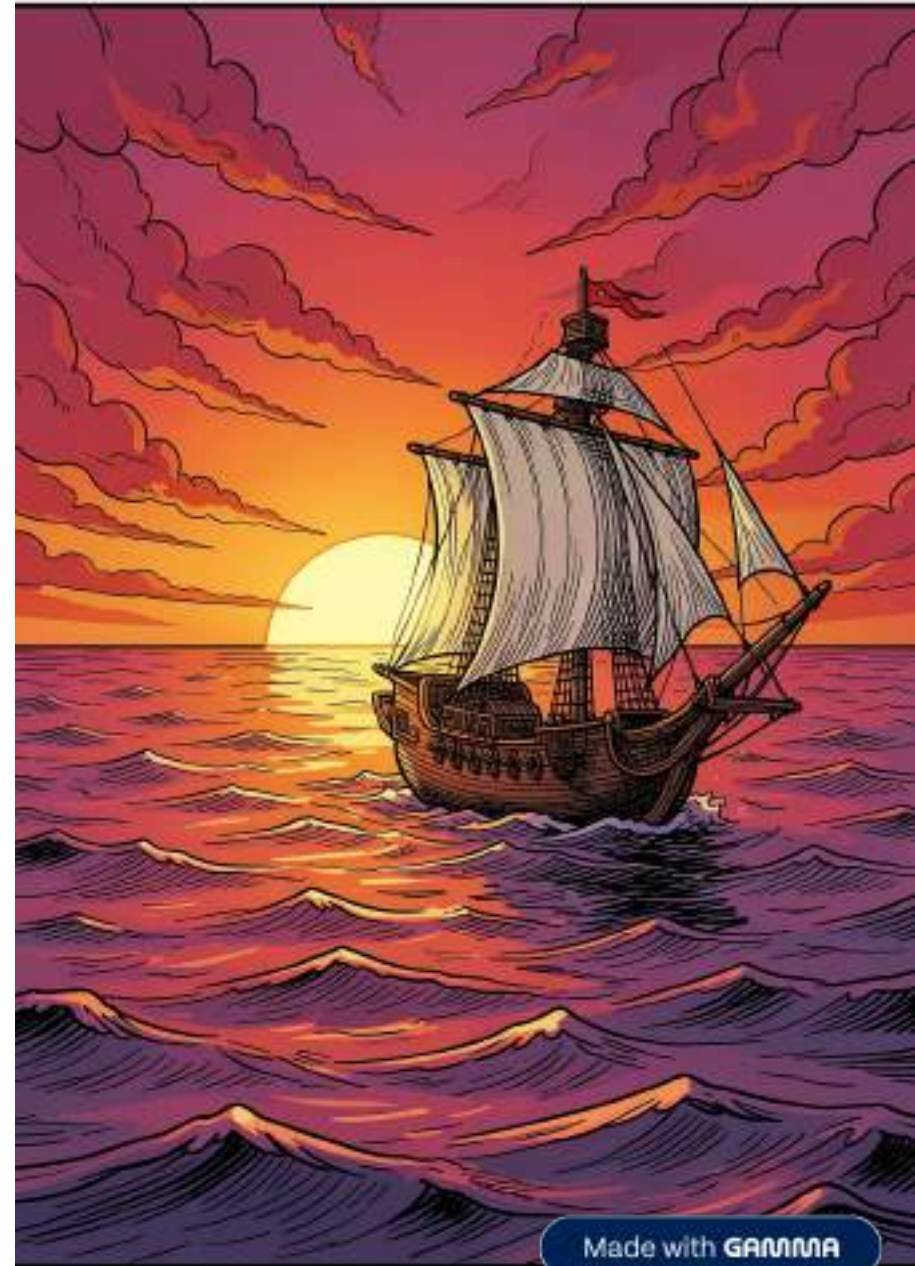
They will face "the gulfs" that may swallow them — fully aware of the danger, fully committed nonetheless.

☐ The Happy Isles

A slim, poetic hope: to reach the mythical "Happy Isles" and speak with Achilles — a final communion with greatness.

☐ "To strive, to seek, to find, and not to yield."

The ultimate Victorian declaration — and one of the most enduring lines in English poetry. Not victory, but **the refusal to stop**.



CONCLUSION

The Call to Action

Ulysses endures because it is not merely about a Greek hero — it is a **blueprint for the human condition**. Every reader carries their own Ithaca: the familiar, the comfortable, the known.

Tennyson asks: Will you rust in the familiar — or sail into the unknown?



The poem does not promise success. It promises only that the striving itself is what makes us fully alive.

