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“T.S. ELIOT AS A POET”

INTRODUCTION

- **T.S. Eliot**, in full Thomas Stearns Eliot (born September 26, 1888, St. Louis, Missouri, U.S.—died January 4, 1965, London, England), American-English poet, playwright, literary critic, and editor, a leader of the modernist movement in poetry in such works as *The Waste Land* (1922) and *Four Quartets* (1943).
- Eliot exercised a strong influence on Anglo-American culture from the 1920s until late in the century. His experiments in diction, style, and versification revitalized English poetry, and in a series of critical essays he shattered old orthodoxies and erected new ones.

- As a poet and critic Eliot, came to define the modernist movement and still dominates the literary landscape of the last century. He was born in St. Louis, Missouri to a prominent local family.
- He attended Harvard where his eclectic course of studies introduced him to Hindu and Buddhist philosophy and a working knowledge of Sanskrit (he already knew Latin, Greek, French and German). After a year in Paris, Eliot began work at Harvard on his doctoral thesis on the philosophy of F. H. Bradley.
- A career in academia beckoned, but whilst studying for his PhD Eliot had a revelatory encounter with the work of the French Symbolist poets, in particular Jules Laforgue, and began composing poetry under their influence.
- The war years in the capital were formative for Eliot's career, particularly with regard to his friendship with Ezra Pound which connected him to leading figures in the international avant garde.

ELIOT AS A POET

- It was Pound, in his role as a friend, editor and promoter, who did most to establish Eliot as the pre-eminent figure in the modernist movement, particularly through his decisive editorial intervention in '**The Waste Land**'. Eliot's literary career now gained momentum: Prufrock and Other Observations appeared in 1917 and made a strong impact.
- However, growing professional success masked personal suffering as the Eliots' marriage disintegrated, prompting a nervous

breakdown in Eliot which resulted in three months' enforced rest. It was during this period that 'The Waste Land' was composed, his bleak masterpiece of psychic fragmentation.

- With its collage of voices, its violent disjunctions in tone and wealth of cultural allusion, '**The Waste Land**' also resonated as a depiction of the ruins of post-war European civilisation. It was published in **The Criterion**, a quarterly cultural that Eliot edited until 1939. This role, along with his involvement with another important journal, *The Egoist*, and his position from 1925 as one of the Directors of Faber & Faber established Eliot as the leading literary critic of his time, as well as its most famous poet.
- His essay on the impersonality of the poet and his concept of the "**objective correlative**", to name but two of his best known ideas, have been part of the critical currency ever since. However, the 1920s also saw Eliot become increasingly conservative in outlook, particularly following his conversion to the Anglican Church in 1927, the same year he became a British Citizen.
- His religious conversion was to have a far-reaching impact on the rest of his career, culminating in the Christian meditations of *Four Quartets* (1943), his last major poetic achievement and the work which secured him the 1948 Nobel Prize for Literature.
- From the 1930s, inspired by his love of Shakespeare and the Jacobean dramatists, Eliot poured much of his creative energy into attempting to revive the verse drama to varying success, with **Murder in the Cathedral** and **The Cocktail Party** usually considered the most effective of these experiments. By then he'd affected a separation from Vivien who died in a private mental hospital in 1947.

- A decade later Eliot married Valerie Fletcher and enjoyed a measure of personal happiness which had previously eluded him. He died, of emphysema, in 1965 and was buried at East Coker, the Somerset village which gave its name to one of the '**Four Quartets**' and from where his ancestors had emigrated to America in the 17th Century.
- For the man who wrote "in my end is my beginning" this circularity was profoundly resonant. Aspects of Eliot's reputation have been debated since, but he remains a pervasive presence in poetry in English.
- He was actually an American who lived much of his life in England, and he is classified in anthologies and libraries as both an American poet and a British poet.
- He was also an important literary critic, editing a literary magazine and writing extensively on poetry, notably with essays on the metaphysical poets, whose work resembles his in some respects-- Eliot wrote of this type of poetry that "[n]ot only is it extremely difficult to define metaphysical poetry, but difficult to decide what poets practice it and in which of their verses" (Eliot 23).
- Like most poets, Eliot assumed a mask as narrator, a mask through which he concealed much about himself while expressing certain philosophical and aesthetic ideas.
- Eliot's more intellectually stringent poetry places a great distance between the poet and the reader, expressing ideas more readily than emotions and structuring connections between images that are more

intellectual than emotional. To understand Eliot, it is essential that the reader look to a good deal of external material.

- Many of the references are obscure--"**The Waste Land**" begins with a quotation partially in Latin and partially in Greek and contains Biblical references, mythological references, a German quotation, and other material that needs to be explained to understand what the poet has in mind.
- In 1915 Ezra Pound, overseas editor of Poetry magazine, recommended to Harriet Monroe, the magazine's founder, that she publish "**The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock**". Although the character Prufrock seems to be middle-aged, Eliot wrote most of the poem when he was only 22.
- Its now-famous opening lines, comparing the evening sky to "a patient etherised upon a table," were considered shocking and offensive, especially at a time when Georgian Poetry was hailed for its derivations of the 19th century Romantic Poets.
- The poem follows the conscious experience of a man, Prufrock (relayed in the "stream of consciousness" form characteristic of the Modernists), lamenting his physical and intellectual inertia, the lost opportunities in his life and lack of spiritual progress, with the recurrent theme of carnal love unattained.
- Critical opinion is divided as to whether the narrator leaves his residence during the course of the narration. The locations described can be interpreted either as actual physical experiences, mental recollections, or as symbolic images from the sub-conscious mind, as, for example, in the refrain "In the room the women come and go."

- The poem's structure was heavily influenced by Eliot's extensive reading of Dante Alighieri, in the Italian, and refers to a number of literary works, including Hamlet and those of the French Symbolists.
- The poem "The Waste Land" is known for its obscure nature—its slippage between satire and prophecy; its abrupt changes of speaker, location, and time.

CONCLUSION

- Despite this, it has become a touchstone of modern literature, a poetic counterpart to a novel published in the same year, James Joyce's Ulysses. Among its best-known phrases are "April is the cruellest month", "I will show you fear in a handful of dust"; and "Shantih shantih shantih," the Sanskrit mantra that ends the poem.
- Eliot's poetry was first criticized as not being poetry at all. Many critics attacked his practice of widespread interweaving of quotations from other authors into his work. "Notes on the Waste Land," which follows the poem, gives the source of many of these, but not all. Eliot defended this as a necessary salvaging of tradition in an age of fragmentation, and completely integral to the work, adding richness through unexpected juxtaposition.
- It has been said that Eliot never lost his charm. Analyses of the poetry, the plays, the criticism, will be added for years to come to the many shelves of existing Eliot criticism.

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