

T.S.Eliot critique of the new world order

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Abstract

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. The publication of *Four Quartets* led to his recognition as the greatest living English poet and man of letters, and in 1948 he was awarded both the Order of Merit and the Nobel Prize for Literature.

With the publication in 1922 of his poem *The Waste Land*, Eliot won an international reputation. *The Waste Land* expresses with great power the disenchantment, disillusionment, and disgust of the period after World War I. In a series of vignettes, loosely linked by the legend of the search for the Grail, it portrays a sterile world of panicky fears and barren lusts, and of human beings waiting for some sign or promise of redemption. The poem's style is highly complex, erudite, and allusive, and the poet provided notes and references to explain the work's many quotations and allusions. This scholarly supplement distracted some readers and critics from perceiving the true originality of the poem, which lay rather in its rendering of the universal human predicament of man desiring salvation, and in its manipulation of language, than in its range of literary references. In his earlier poems Eliot had shown himself to be a master of the poetic phrase.

Keywords: poet, Literature, Eliot. Tradition, critique, Practical Criticism

Introduction

T. S. Eliot was a renowned Anglo-American essayist, publisher, playwright, poet and a literary and social critic of the twentieth century. Aside from his contribution to modernist literature he was also a significant writer of literary criticism. While somewhat introspective and critical of his own work — he once said his criticism was just a "by-product" of his "private poetry-workshop" — Eliot is considered by some to be one of the greatest literary critics of the twentieth century.

In his critical essay "Tradition and the Individual Talent", Eliot argues that art must be understood not in isolation, but in the light of previous works of art. Eliot wrote, "In a peculiar sense [an artist or poet] ... must inevitably be judged by the standards of the past." This essay was an important influence over the New Criticism by introducing

the idea that the value of a work of art must be viewed in the context of the artist's previous works, a "simultaneous order" of works or "tradition". Eliot himself implemented this concept on many of his works, especially on his famous long poem *The Waste Land*.

The New Criticism was a formalist movement in literary theory that dominated American literary criticism in the mid-twentieth century. It emphasized close reading, particularly of poetry, to discover how a work of literature operated as a self-contained, self-referential aesthetic object. The movement derived its name from John Crowe Ransom's 1941 book *The New Criticism*. The work of English scholar I. A. Richards, especially his *Practical Criticism* and *The Meaning of Meaning*, which offered what was claimed to be an empirical, scientific approach, were important to the development of New Critical methodology.

Eliot's evaluative judgments, such as his condemnation of Milton and Shelley, his liking for the so-called metaphysical poets, and his insistence that poetry must be impersonal, greatly influenced the formation of the New Critical canon.

Also important to New Criticism was the idea — as put forward in Eliot's other critical essay "Hamlet and His Problems" — of an "objective correlative", which theorizes a connection among the words of the text and events, states of mind, and experiences. This notion concedes that a poem means what it says, but suggests that there can be a non-subjective judgment based on different readers' different — but perhaps corollary — interpretations of a work.

Objective:

This paper intends to study the importance of Eliot's criticism in the postmodern literature and social fabric

New Criticism

The New Criticism posits that every text is autonomous. History, biography, sociology, psychology, author's intention and reader's private experience are all irrelevant. Any attempt to look at the author's relationship to a work is called "the intentional fallacy." Any attempt to look at the reader's individual response is called "the affective fallacy." New Criticism argues that each text has a central unity. The responsibility of the reader is to discover this unity. The reader's job is to interpret the text, telling in what ways each of its parts contributes to the central unity.

The primary interest is in themes. A text is spoken by a person (narrator or speaker) who expresses an attitude which must be defined and who speaks in a tone which helps define the attitude: ironic, straightforward or ambiguous. Judgments of the value of a text must be based on the richness of the attitude and the complexity and the balance of the text. The key phrases are ambivalence, ambiguity, tension, irony and paradox.

The reader's analysis of these elements leads him to an examination of the themes. A work is good or bad depending on whether the themes are complex and whether or not they contribute to the central, unifying theme. The more complex the themes are and the more closely they contribute to a central theme the better the work. Usually, the New Critics define their themes as oppositions: Life and death, good and evil, love and hate, harmony and strife, order and disorder, eternity and time, reality and appearance, truth and falsehood, emotion and reason, simplicity

and complexity, nature and art. The analysis of a text is an exercise in showing how all of its parts contribute to a complex but single (unified) statement about human problems.

The poems and plays that Eliot published in his lifetime fill a single volume; his prose works are collections of talks and occasional journalism. The project to which he committed most of the latter part of his career, the revival of verse drama, was a failure. He was dismissive of grand theories of poetry, or anything else, and he never held a regular academic appointment. During his most productive years as a writer, from 1917 to 1925, he worked in a bank. His place in the curriculum is established, but he is hardly popular as a subject of teaching or scholarship.

Yet he was a true avant-gardist, and he made a revolution. He changed the way poetry in English is written; he reset the paradigm for literary criticism; and his work laid down the principles on which the modern English department is built. He is the most important figure in twentieth-century English-language literary culture, a position he achieved with a relatively small amount of writing produced in a relatively brief amount of time and in unpromising circumstances. And all the time he was conquering the world of letters. “There is a small and select public which regards me as the best living critic, as well as the best living poet, in England,” he wrote to his mother in 1919. “I really think that I have far more influence on English letters than any other American has ever had, unless it be Henry James. I know a great many people, but there are many more who would like to know me, and I can remain isolated and detached.”

Waste Land

The literary scene in England was highly factionalized. Eliot’s strategy was to avoid taking sides by showing up on every side. He wrote for tiny modernist magazines, like *The Egoist*, which Pound had commandeered and turned into the flagship of free verse, and which had a circulation of a hundred and eighty-five. He reviewed for papers hostile to modernism, like *The New Statesman*, and for Bloomsbury-dominated journals, like *The Athenaeum*, edited by the critic John Middleton Murry. And he wrote lead articles for the *Times Literary Supplement*, where most of the pieces were unsigned—“the highest honour possible in the critical world of literature,” he informed his mother. He did it all at home after a day at the bank, and on weekends.

It’s one of the most remarkable runs in literary journalism. All of Eliot’s intellectual bristles are on display in these pieces.

He was a foreigner in a society, literary London, that is almost as incestuous and xenophobic as intellectual Paris. The writers he counted as comrades were looked upon by most of the literary establishment with distaste: Ezra Pound, an American; Wyndham Lewis, whose father was an American; and an Irishman, James Joyce. (There was not much love lost on their parts, either.) He was cut off from his family by the war; he was married to an unhealthy,

demanding, and unstable woman; and he had troubles all his own. At the height of his creative and critical output, he had a nervous breakdown and diagnosed his condition as *aboulie*—lack of will. While he was recovering, he wrote “The Waste Land.”

Word as image

It's particularly relevant to remember him in this, our age of ceaseless image-making, when life is lived with the lens always switched on, with selves shrunk to selfies and all experience annulled unless incarcerated in pixels.

As human communication has morphed from speech to text to images, it seems almost ironic to remember today a man whose words were images. “You tossed a blanket from the bed,/ You lay upon your back, and waited;/ You dozed, and watched the night revealing/ The thousand sordid images...”

For students in the early 80s, still being thrust insensately into an ever-alien, ever-Wordsworthian England, it was Eliot's Julian Peters' illustrated ‘Prufrock’.

Julian Peters' illustrated ‘Prufrock’.

wordscape and the cityscape it evoked that was the first dunk into the cold water of life. You trembled with recognition. Suddenly, dead words and dead images were replaced by “an open field, or a factory, or a by-pass./ Old stone to new building...”

From unfamiliar brooks and birds and pediments you were catapulted into the arms of the present, with all its hopelessness and weary cynicism. Here was a poet who made music from the here and now — the gusty shower, the grimy scraps, the yellow fog, the faint stale smells of beer.

“A poet,” Eliot said, “must take as his material his own language as it is actually spoken around him.” And Eliot used this to fashion poetry from life as it was actually lived around him.

Even then, when the tumult of the millennium was still far away and lives were lived in a quietude innocent of mobile phones and the Internet and the noise of image-making, even then Eliot broke the repose, forced one to ask if the ‘wisdom’ we were force-fed was “only the knowledge of dead secrets”; the serenity “only a deliberate hebetude.” Today, his poetry reads like rap: immediate, energetic, quick, visual. See this passage from ‘Four Quartets’:

‘I said to my soul, be still, and

wait without hope

For hope would be hope for the

wrong thing; wait without love,

For love would be love of the

wrong thing; there is yet faith

But the faith and the love and

the hope are all in the waiting.'

This is music, raw and young and bleeding. As the critic A.R. Scott-James said, Eliot excelled “by introducing us to our own generation.” In this he did to poetry what Salinger did to the novel, breaking it down and recasting it in a tortured forge of his own, creating something that was simultaneously lucid and obscure but always singingly alive.

City streets

With Eliot, one could confidently say that one had gone “at dusk through narrow streets/ And watched the smoke that rises from the pipes/ Of lonely men in shirt-sleeves” and own the words and the lived moment intimately, with the familiarity of an old photograph, the ease of a memory.

He was, as it were, introducing us to the back roads of our cities, and it was an important reason why he became so much an embodiment of the modern. The city for Eliot was a “monument to humanity,” its “half-deserted streets” always a metaphor for modern life, tentative, seeking, empty, too afraid to ask because too afraid to believe, and so forever leading up to but never asking the “overwhelming question”. Leonard Unger compared ‘Prufrock’ to a series of slides, each “an isolated, fragmentary image” but producing together the suggestion of a larger story. Reading Eliot is indeed like entering the photo gallery on your smartphone: images stream by, father reading newspaper, cat on window, rain on trees, streets, sunsets, flowers, your own face mirrored back again and again, wearing all the

faces you wear “to meet the faces that you meet.” Eliot spun these images around and around, like those old bioscope-walas, and you peered inside spellbound by the glimpses of a world on the edges of your own.

There’s another reason his poetry rings with particular resonance in these times. He was speaking to a generation desperately disillusioned by one world war but watching the rise of a new monster in Europe. His poetic landscape of spiritual aridity, of sterile passions that birth nothing spoke as powerfully then as they do today. “After such knowledge, what forgiveness?”

New Criticism in Eliot’s “Tradition and the Individual Talent”

Eliot in his critical essay advocates some principles and techniques that must be followed while judging and making any work of art. He highlights the importance of tradition, its meaning and literary significance. He emphasizes on depersonalization of the artist and an objective outlook of art. When the English praise a poet, they praise him for those parts of his work which are ‘individual’ and unique. It is supposed that his main merit lies in those parts. This undue emphasis on individuality shows that the English have an uncritical state of mind. They praise the poet for the wrong thing. If they examine the matter critically with an unprejudiced mind, they will realize that the best and the most individual part of a poet’s work is that which shows the maximum influence of the writers of the past. Eliot says:

“Whereas if we approach a poet without this prejudice, we shall often find that not only the best, but the most individual part of his work may be those in which the dead poets, his ancestors, assert their immortality most vigorously.”

This is in line with the point of view of New Critics who hold that an artist’s value cannot and should not be judged by examining his writing style and background but by autonomously observing the work along with other established great works of art. Criticism must be done with a critical mind and one should not be prejudiced with pre-conceived notions.

Tradition in the sense of passive repetition is to be discouraged. For Eliot, Tradition is a matter of much wider significance. Tradition in the true sense of the term cannot be inherited; it can only be obtained by hard labor. This labor is the labor of knowing the past writers. It is the critical labor of sifting the good from the bad, and of knowing what is good and useful. This is the opinion that New Criticism holds for literature that only the black and white parts of art should be evident and all the impacts of the past should be irrelevant.

The poet must also realize that art never improves, though its material is never the same. The mind of Europe may change, but this change does not mean that great writers like Shakespeare and Homer have grown outdated and

lost their significance. The great works of art never lose their significance, for there is no qualitative improvement in art. There may be refinement, there may be development, but from the point of view of the artist there is no improvement.

New Criticism developed as a reaction to the older philological and literary history schools of the American north, which, influenced by nineteenth-century German scholarship, focused on the history and meaning of individual words and their relation to foreign and ancient languages, comparative sources, and the biographical circumstances of the authors. These approaches, it was felt, tended to distract from the text and meaning of a poem and entirely neglect its aesthetic qualities in favor of teaching about external factors. On the other hand, the literary appreciation school, which limited itself to pointing out the "beauties" and morally elevating qualities of the text, was disparaged by the New Critics as too subjective and emotional. Condemning this as a version of Romanticism, they aimed for newer, systematic and objective method.

The poet must acquire greater and greater objectivity. His emotions and passions must be depersonalized; he must be as impersonal and objective. The personality of the artist is not important; the important thing is his sense of tradition. He must forget his personal emotions, and be absorbed in acquiring a sense of tradition and expressing it in his poetry. That is why Eliot holds that, "Honest criticism and sensitive appreciation is directed not upon the poet but upon the poetry." New Critics believed the structure and meaning of the text were intimately connected and should not be analyzed separately. In order to bring the focus of literary studies back to analysis of the texts, they aimed to exclude the reader's response, the author's intention, historical and cultural contexts, and moralistic bias from their analysis.

Eliot concludes: "Poetry is not a turning loose of emotion, but an escape from emotion; it is not the expression of personality, but an escape from personality." Thus Eliot does not deny personality or emotion to the poet. Only, he must depersonalize his emotions. There should be an extinction of his personality. This impersonality can be achieved only when poet surrenders himself completely to the work that is to be done. And the poet can know what is to be done, only if he acquires a sense of tradition, the historic sense, which makes him conscious, not only of the present, but also of the present moment of the past, not only of what is dead, but of what is already living. This is what New Critics want from literature. They want to appreciate good literature and do not want their opinion of the poet to cloud their judgment.

Eliot has been one of the most daring innovators of twentieth-century poetry. Never compromising either with the public or indeed with language itself, he has followed his belief that poetry should aim at a representation of the complexities of modern civilization in language and that such representation necessarily leads to difficult poetry. Despite this difficulty his influence on modern poetic diction has been immense. Eliot's poetry from *Prufrock* (1917) to the *Four Quartets* (1943) reflects the development of a Christian writer: the early work, especially *The Waste Land* (1922), is essentially negative, the expression of that horror from which the search for a higher world arises. In *Ash Wednesday* (1930) and the *Four Quartets* this higher world becomes more visible; nonetheless Eliot has always taken care not to become a «religious poet». and often belittled the power of poetry as a religious force.

However, his dramas *Murder in the Cathedral* (1935) and *The Family Reunion* (1939) are more openly Christian apologies. In his essays, especially the later ones, Eliot advocates a traditionalism in religion, society, and literature that seems at odds with his pioneer activity as a poet. But although the Eliot of *Notes towards the Definition of Culture* (1948) is an older man than the poet of *The Waste Land*, it should not be forgotten that for Eliot tradition is a living organism comprising past and present in constant mutual interaction. Eliot's plays *Murder in the Cathedral* (1935), *The Family Reunion* (1939), *The Cocktail Party* (1949), *The Confidential Clerk* (1954), and *The Elder Statesman* (1959) were published in one volume in 1962; *Collected Poems 1909-62* appeared in 1963.

Later Poetry And Plays

Eliot's masterpiece is *Four Quartets*, which was issued as a book in 1943, though each "quartet" is a complete poem. "Burnt Norton" was the first of the quartets; it had appeared in the *Collected Poems* of 1936. It is a subtle meditation on the nature of time and its relation to eternity. On the model of this, Eliot wrote three more poems—"East Coker" (1940), "The Dry Salvages" (1941), and "Little Gidding" (1942)—in which he explored through images of great beauty and haunting power his own past, the past of the human race, and the meaning of human history. Each of the poems was self-subsistent, but when published together they were seen to make up a single work, in which themes and images recurred and were developed in a musical manner and brought to a final resolution. This work made a deep impression on the reading public, and even those who were unable to accept the poems' Christian beliefs recognized the intellectual integrity with which Eliot pursued his high theme, the originality of the form he had devised, and the technical mastery of his verse. This work led to the award to Eliot, in 1948, of the Nobel Prize for Literature.

Conclusion

From the 1920s onward, Eliot's influence as a poet and as a critic—in both Great Britain and the United States—was immense, not least among those establishing the study of English literature as an autonomous academic discipline. He also had his detractors, ranging from avant-garde American poets who believed that he had abandoned the attempt to write about contemporary America to traditional English poets who maintained that he had broken the links between poetry and a large popular audience. During his lifetime, however, his work was the subject of much sympathetic exegesis. Since his death (and coinciding with a wider challenge to the academic study of English literature that his critical precepts did much to establish), interpreters have been markedly more critical, focusing on his complex relationship to his American origins, his elitist cultural and social views, and his exclusivist notions of tradition and of race. Nevertheless, Eliot was unequalled by any other 20th-century poet in the ways in which he commanded the attention of his audience.

New Critics took a hint from Eliot in regard to his "'classical' ideals and his religious thought; his attention to the poetry and drama of the early seventeenth century; his deprecation of the Romantics, especially Shelley; his proposition that good poems constitute 'not a turning loose of emotion but an escape from emotion'; and his insistence that 'poets... at present must be difficult'." He had argued that a poet must write "programmatic criticism", that is, a

poet should write to advance his own interests rather than to advance "historical scholarship". Unwittingly, Eliot inspired and informed the movement of New Criticism. This is somewhat ironic, since he later criticized their intensely detailed analysis of texts as unnecessarily tedious. Yet, he does share with them the same focus on the aesthetic and stylistic qualities of poetry, rather than on its ideological content. The New Critics resemble Eliot in their close analysis of passages and poems.

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