

PAL: Perspectives in American Literature - A Research and Reference Guide - An Ongoing Project

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Chapter 7: T. S. Eliot (1888-1965)

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T. S. Eliot was the most dominant literary figure between the two world wars. Poet William Carlos Williams describes the effect of *The Waste Land* as that of an atom bomb. As an influential literary critic, Eliot describes his aesthetics in the famous essay "Tradition and the Individual Talent." He conceives a poem as an object, an organic thing in itself, demanding a fusion and concentration of intellect, feeling, and experience. He suggests that, through cultural memory, a poet unconsciously continues the tradition of his culture. His poetry presents difficulties of numerous allusions, use of foreign language, use of metaphysical conceit, and an absence of obvious narrative structure. *The Waste Land*, considered to be a remarkable and extraordinary achievement, deals with the failure of Western civilization as shown by World War I.

Primary Works

Prufrock and Other Observations, 1917; *The Sacred Wood*, 1920; *The Waste Land*, 1922; *Four Quartets*, 1936-43; *Murder in the Cathedral*, 1935; *The Family Reunion*, 1939; *The Cocktail Party*, 1950; *The Confidential Clerk*, 1954; *The Elder Statesman*, 1958.

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| [Top](#) | T. S. Eliot (1888-1965): A Brief Biography

A Student Project by Scott Pope

Thomas Stearns Eliot was born the youngest child in St. Louis Missouri on September 26th, 1888 (Sharpe 12). Eliot was born into a family of prominent citizens. His father was an influential businessman as President of the local brick company. Eliot's mother was once a school teacher that involved herself in social problems once Eliot was born (Sharpe 12). The Eliots were descendants of New England Puritans in the 17th century. The role model that his mother held up to him was his grandfather William Greenleaf Eliot. The sermons of Eliot's grandfather were so well known that Emerson praised them (Bush 7). It was his reknown that convinced his grandfather to use his gifts to come to St. Louis in what was then the frontier to establish his ministry. In St. Louis, William Greenleaf Eliot helped found the local church, school, and college (Bush 7). The grandfather was a constant presence in Eliot's life, despite the fact that the grandfather died before Eliot was born (Sharpe 13). While Eliot was growing up, his mother was trying to make a biography of him (Sharpe 13). T. S. Eliot when later contemplating the influence that his grandfather had on him remarked, "I was brought up to be very much aware of him: so much so, that as a child I thought of him as still head of the family" (Sharpe 14). As a result of his religious background, Eliot at an early age internalized the ideals that his family taught him. Belief in "self denial," "rational prudence," and duty over selfish aims are ideas in which Eliot will be known to struggle with in his life and poetry (Bush 7).

After being raised in a religious family Eliot enrolled at Harvard. His family believed he would have a lot of success in studying philosophy (Sharpe 16). Eliot was a recluse during his stay in college. Despite the fact that he

occasionally got drunk, there was always a serious side to him. In his third year at Harvard he became editor of the college literary magazine The Harvard Advocate (Sharpe 20). Eliot's studiousness was important in allowing him to discover literature (Sharpe 23). A poet he would discover and admire in college and the rest of his life is Dante (Sharpe 21).

In October of 1910, Eliot for the first time tried to do what was not expected of him. Eliot went to France in his first crossing of the Atlantic. Eliot made the crossing despite family disapproval (Sharpe 24). His family thought he was continuing his studies of French and philosophy (Sharpe 24). Eliot did become a graduate student of philosophy during this time (Sharpe 24). However, Paris at the time was an environment that provided a sense of artistic and intellectual discovery and achievements (Sharpe 25). When Eliot went to France because of poetry he composed many verse poems (Sharpe 28). Before he was persuaded by his family to come back to America, Eliot composed all of the important poems in his first volume of poetry such as: "Preludes," "Portrait of a Lady," and "Rhapsody on a Windy Night" (Sharpe 29). After Paris, the next three years of Eliot's life was dedicated to philosophy (Sharpe 29). Although Eliot seemed to be retreating from his artistic side, when he came back to America he was not as reclusive. Eliot had more of a social life with dancing and skating lessons with girls (Sharpe 29). On his return he took courses in Buddhism and Indian philosophy (Sharpe 29). Eliot's trip to a foreign country and his attempt at poetry was the first attempt at what would later become his livelihood.

Tony Sharpe states that when Eliot came back to America, he experienced the "conflicting attractions of philosophy and poetry" (31). His early poetry posed questions and philosophy tried to provide Eliot with answers (Sharpe 35). Many of the writings were published once he returned to America. The first poems published displayed a "vulnerability" and "untrustworthiness of the world" and its appearances (Sharpe 32). The publication of his writings before 1920, helped establish his reputation as both critic and poet (Sharpe 37). After his philosophical dissertation, Eliot left for Oxford (Sharpe 31). Eliot's arrival in London differed from his arrival in Paris because he arrived with a writing style already formed (Sharpe 38). The arrival of Eliot in London, also corresponded with the leaving of Ezra Pound. Before 1920 Pound was an influential and active figure in the London literary scene, but because Pound did not interact with people well, London's literary scene was open to a less abrasive figure that would represent and encourage literature (Sharpe 37).

Ezra Pound would be an important and pivotal person in Eliot's life. When Eliot arrived in London, Eliot was still not sure if his heart was in academics or poetry. Pound's role was pivotal to Eliot not only because he helped organize and edit Eliot's famous poem "The Waste Land," but he also "encouraged Eliot in his choice of career, country to live in, and wife to marry" (Sharpe 46). The meeting of these two literary figures was arranged through a friend of Eliot's (Sharpe 44). Eliot knew the importance of finding an outlet for his art and Eliot knew Pound was a good source for contacts and knowledge of London's literary scene. Eliot was sure that Pound and London would give him the best chance in allowing him to do what he wanted to do (Sharpe 44). On September 22, 1914 Eliot arrived on Pound's doorstep (Sharpe 44). Poems were given to Pound. Pound's response was instant and positive. In a letter to a friend, Pound wrote of Eliot's writing talents, "He has sent in the best poem I have yet had or seen from an American. PRAY GOD IT BE NOT A SINGLE AND UNIQUE SUCCESS" (Sharpe 44).

A second person who would become influential in Eliot's life at this time was Bertrand Russell, a famous philosopher, who was a teacher of Eliot at Harvard. When Eliot came to Oxford, Russell bumped into him on the street and was surprised to see one of his former students (Sharpe 49). Like Pound, Russell quickly introduced Eliot to his intellectual circles; however, Russell's circles were not the same in which Pound was traveling in. Russell expanded Eliot's base of support and gave him access to people not known to Pound (Sharpe 55). The important role of Russell in Eliot's life during this time was offering financial help when the poet needed it the most. For a while Eliot and his new wife lived with Russell, whose help Eliot could not have been a poet without (Bush 54).

The third influential person to enter Eliot's life during this time was Vivien Haigh-Wood (Bush 53). In 1915 Eliot got married to her with the encouragement of Pound (Sharpe 49). At the beginning of 1915, it is believed that Eliot was still a virgin at the age of twenty seven (Sharpe 50). It is believed that the "unorthodox" Vivien possibly offered Eliot a "sense of passion" and feelings in a time when he was feeling extreme dissatisfaction (Sharpe 50). Bertrand Russell, who provided the couple housing during this period, described Vivien as showing "[. . .] impulses of [. . .] a Dostojevsky type of cruelty"-she "lives on a knife edge and will end as a criminal or a saint" (Bush 54). Intense passions provided by Vivien and feeling dissatisfaction with the world is believed to inspire many of the contradictions in his poetry, most notably in the "Waste Land." There was hardly a time in their marriage when Vivien was not a problem in Eliot's life (Bush 53).

Eliot was making progress in his writing career. Many of his pieces were published. In 1916 after seeing a copy of one of Eliot's poems, his father thought that there could not be enough insane people in the world to support such work. His father soon died and it was always

a source of regret to Eliot that his father died thinking of him as a failure (Sharpe 15). During this stressful time, Eliot

was constructing what would be his most famous poem the "Waste Land." It was in the context of "estrangement from family, country, and a sense of disillusionment with the world" that Eliot would finish his poem in 1921 (Bush 56). Harry Trusman, a psychiatrist who did a case study of Eliot links the fragmentation and raw energy in the "Waste Land" to Eliot's personal travails:

[. . .] he found himself empty, fragmented, and lacking in a sense of self-cohesion. As he began to reintegrate, he turned his previous adversity to poetic advantage. In a highly original manner, and perhaps for the first time in literature, he made narcissistic fragmentation a basis for poetic form and alienation of self legitimate poetic content. The idealitional and effective content of his psychic restitution, the expression of his attempt to reconstitute the fragmented elements of the split in his self became the new voice of the "Waste Land". (Bush 68-69)

| [Top](#) | The long poem would be the work he is most known for and it would exhibit many of his traits as a writer. Eliot in the "Waste Land" and in other poems borrows images from other writers to fill the poem with feelings that may not otherwise be able to be written in Eliot's writing style (Bush 58). The poem draws images from Dostoevsky, Shakespeare, Ovid, Verlaine, and other poets and writers (Bush 57-59). Eliot's poetry offered scholars the opportunity to hunt the sources of his phrases, which came to be seen as a necessary beginning to understanding his work (Sharpe 71). Besides offering quotation, the "Waste Land" presents many of the motifs found in other writings of Eliot. "Emotional, cultural, and spiritual decay" are habitual themes in the works of Eliot (Sharpe 71). Eliot's poem moves from an inclination towards literature combined with a fear of poetry; a striving for the "common life combined with a disgust from its vulgarity" (Bush 61). "Waste Land" moves from the cultured life to a revulsion of the common life, facing a continuous fear that all ways of approaching and perceiving life are just appearances that cover an empty void (Bush 67). The focal point of the poem is a sense of worthlessness in everything past, present, and future (Bush 67). The poem is both a move towards conservatism and an "act of revolution" (Sharpe 96). This contradiction in feelings and thought are best expressed in Eliot's words describing how one is to write:

Great simplicity is only won by an intense moment or by years of intelligent effort, or by both. It represents one of the most arduous conquests of the human spirit: the triumph of feeling and thought over the natural sin of language. (Bush 6)

The greatness of the "Waste Land" is that Eliot made it by making "incoherence coherent" (Sharpe 93). The finale of the poem is a hallucination that Russell told him about the London Bridge collapsing and the city vanishing like the "morning mist" (Bush 57).

Eliot proceeded towards a nervous breakdown. The dilemma that the "Waste Land" presented was one that Eliot would not be able to solve through philosophy or poetry. Despite his many associates while writing, Eliot was a loner (Sharpe 69). According to a close friend of Eliot's, Eliot did not trust appearances or friends, most notably in his remark to his friend that, "[. . .] literary people are shits" (Sharpe 69). The poem exhibited the thoughts of a man that would eventually cause Eliot to turn towards Christianity (Sharpe 94). In the early twenties after writing the "Waste Land," Eliot would be the editor of the Criterion, a magazine whose influence outnumbered its subscription of a thousand (Sharpe 98). Creative writing and critical essays were contributed by famous literary figures such as: Herman Hesse, Virginia Woolf, Paul Valery, W.B. Yeats, and E.M. Forster (Sharpe 48). Besides the burden of being an editor, poet, and critic in 1923, his wife was very ill (Sharpe 99). The stresses of his life and disillusionment with the world would push Eliot towards Christianity. Christianity offered Eliot a resolution for his feelings about the emptiness of life (Sharpe 123). While people were getting used to the "Waste Land," Eliot was already moving towards Christianity (Sharpe 103). In the years 1926 to 1934, Eliot made many important steps in his life. Eliot was baptized and confirmed by the Church of England, he became a British citizen, and he finally separated from his stressful wife (Sharpe 103). "Ash Wednesday," published in 1930, is Eliot's most unambiguous pronouncement of his new faith and his most introverted poem (Sharpe 124). Eliot with his new faith seemed to have found the fullness of life that he suspected was never there.

In the latter years of Eliot's life, his interest in drama dominated his career (Sharpe 101). Eliot's standing was still considerable, yet it became one of respected senior, not one as innovator and creator (Sharpe 128). Eliot eventually started moving in upper middle class circles, instead of the exciting literary circles he traveled in during the twenties (Sharpe 29). Eliot's greatness was in differentiating himself from others. Eliot in explaining how he became great, writes advice on how to be different from the typical critic and poet:

Whatever you think, be sure that it is what you think; whatever you want, be sure that it is what you want; whatever you feel, be that it is what you feel. It is bad enough to think and want the things that your elders want you to think and want, but it is still worse to think and want just like all your contemporaries. (Bush 5)

Eliot would be distinguished for his individual achievements in 1948 when he won the Nobel Prize for Literature and was

acknowledge in the "conferral of the Order of Merit by King George VI" (Sharpe 167). Eliot later remarried in a secret marriage to Valerie Fletcher (Sharpe 169). Eliot was able to experience the human love he was skeptical about for so long (Sharpe 169). On January 4, 1965 Eliot died. His memorial service was at Westminster Abbey with representatives from the Queen, the British Prime Minister, and the President of the United States present (Sharpe 169).

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Study Questions

1. In "The Love Song ...," how does Prufrock deal with the world around him? What does he mean when he asks, "Do I dare / Disturb the universe?" and "How should I begin?" Discuss the recurrent phrase, "decisions and revisions", in relation to Prufrock's nature?
2. How is the city portrayed in "The Love Song ...,"? Does this sense of the city bear any relation to Prufrock's character and his dilemma? What is the picture of modern life given in the poem?
3. What distinctions between tradition and individuality does Eliot make in the opening paragraphs of "Tradition and the Individual Talent"? Discuss Eliot's comments on the relation of the past to the present. What does he mean by conformity? What does he mean when he says that a really new work of art changes all the works that have preceded it? What does he mean by saying that tradition "cannot be inherited, and if you want it you must obtain it by great labour"?
4. "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock" is an interior, dramatic monologue. Is it a love song in any traditional sense? In any modern sense? Also comment on the use of "we" in the last three lines. Do they suggest an attempt by Eliot to demonstrate the universal quality of Prufrock's existence, to suggest that all live lives without meaning and confront death without dignity?
5. Eliot writes, in "Tradition and the Individual Talent," that the individual personality and emotions of the poet recede in importance and his meaning emerges from his place in cultural tradition. He writes that "no poet . . . has his complete meaning alone." Examine his use of classical allusions in "Sweeney among the Nightingales." What does a modern reader need to know to understand the allusions and how does that understanding enhance our meaning of the poem?

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