

T. S. Eliot
(1888–1965)

Biography of T. S. Eliot

Thomas Stearns Eliot (1888–1965) was born in St. Louis, Missouri, of an old New England family. He was educated at Harvard and did graduate work in philosophy at the Sorbonne, Harvard, and Merton College, Oxford. He settled in England, where he was for a time a schoolmaster and a bank clerk, and eventually literary editor for the publishing house Faber & Faber, of which he later became a director. He founded and, during the seventeen years of its publication (1922–1939), edited the exclusive and influential literary journal *Criterion*. In 1927, Eliot became a British citizen and about the same time entered the Anglican Church.

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

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I am an Anglo-Catholic in religion, a classicist in literature, and a royalist in politics." T.S. Eliot so defined, and even exaggerated, his own conservatism. The ideas of this stimulating writer were perhaps traditional, but the way in which he expressed them was extremely modern. Eliot was one of the first to reject conventional verse forms and language. His experiments with free expression contributed to his reputation as one of the most influential writers of his time.

Thomas Stearns Eliot was born in St. Louis, Mo., on Sept. 26, 1888. His family had produced distinguished Americans since colonial days. He entered Harvard University in 1906, completed his course in three years, and earned a master's degree the next year. After a year at the Sorbonne in Paris, he returned to Harvard. Further study led him to Merton College, Oxford, and he decided to stay in England. He worked first as a teacher and then in a bank. Precise and moderate in his habits, he devoted his evenings to study and writing. He liked cats and wrote a book about them 'Old Possum's Book of Practical Cats', published in 1939. It was the basis for 'Cats', a spectacular musical comedy of the 1980s.

In 1915 the verse magazine *Poetry* published Eliot's first notable piece, 'The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock'. This was followed by other short poems such as 'Portrait of a Lady'. 'The Waste Land', which appeared in 1922, is considered by many to be his most challenging work (see *American Literature*).

In 1927 Eliot became a British subject and was confirmed in the Church of England. His essays ('For Lancelot Andrewes', 1928) and his poetry ('Four Quartets', 1943) increasingly reflected this association with a

traditional culture.

His first drama was 'The Rock' (1934), a pageant play. This was followed by 'Murder in the Cathedral' (1935), a play dealing with the assassination of Archbishop Thomas a Becket, who was later canonized (see Becket). 'The Family Reunion' appeared in 1939. 'The Cocktail Party', based upon the ancient Greek drama 'Alcestis' by Euripides, came out in 1950 and 'The Confidential Clerk' in 1953. The dialogue in his plays is written in a free, rhythmical verse pattern. Eliot won the Nobel prize for literature in 1948 and other major literary awards. The author was married twice. He died on Jan. 4, 1965, in London. 1

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T. S. ELIOT

American-English poet, playwright, and literary critic, a leader of the modernist movement in literature. Eliot was awarded the Nobel Prize for literature in 1948. His most famous work is *THE WASTE LAND*, written when he was 34. On one level it describes cultural and spiritual crisis, reflected in its use of fragmentation and discontinuity.

"The point of view which I am struggling to attack is perhaps related to the metaphysical theory of the substantial unity of the soul: for my meaning is, that the poet has, not a 'personality' to express, but a particular medium, which is only a medium and not a personality, in which impressions and experiences combine in peculiar and unexpected ways." (from 'Tradition and the Individual Talent,' 1920)

Thomas Stearns Eliot was born in St. Louis, Missouri, the seventh and youngest child of a distinguished family of New England origin. His forebears included the Reverend William Greenleaf Eliot, founder of Washington University in St. Louis, and on his mother's side, Isaac Stearns, one of the original settlers of Massachusetts Bay Colony. Eliot's father was a prosperous industrialist and his mother wrote among others a biography of William Greenleaf Eliot.

Eliot was educated at Smith Academy in St. Louis, Milton Academy in Massachusetts. He graduated from Harvard, where he contributed poetry to *Harvard Advocate*. He spent a year in France, attending lectures at the Sorbonne. After Eliot returned to Harvard, he completed a dissertation on the English idealist philosopher F.H. Bradley, and studied Sanskrit and Buddhism.

In 1914 he moved in England and started to reform poetic diction with Ezra Pound, who was largely responsible for getting Eliot's early poems into print – among them *THE LOVE SONG OF J. ALFRED PRUFROCK* in the Chicago magazine *Poetry* in 1915. The title character is tormented by the difficulty of articulating his complex feelings. Prufrock is a perfect gentleman and tragic in his conventionality. He has heard "the mermaids singing" but is paralyzed by self-consciousness – "I do not think that they will sing to me." Denis Donoghue has pointed out in *Words Alone* (2000) that in his early poems Eliot didn't start with a theme but with a fragment of rhythm, or motif. Prufrock has not the qualities of a person, he is a fragmented voice with a name. "Eliot's language here and in the early poems generally refers to things and simultaneously works free from the reference. He seems always to be saying: "That is not what I meant at all. / That is not it, at all." When he gives a voice a name Prufrock, Gerontion he makes no commitment beyond the naming." (from *Words Alone*)

Pound also introduced Eliot to Harriet Weaver, who published Eliot's first volume of verse, *PRUFROCK AND OTHER OBSERVATIONS*, in 1917. Eliot taught for a year at Highgate Junior School in London, and then worked as a clerk at Lloyds Bank. A physical condition prevented his entering in 1918 the US Navy. In 1919 appeared Eliot's second book, *ARA VOS PREC* (published in the U.S. as *POEMS*), hand-printed by Virginia and Leonard Woolf at the Hogarth Press.

In an early essay, 'Tradition and the Individual Talent' (1919), Eliot propounded the doctrine that poetry

should be impersonal and free itself from Romantic practices. "The progress of an artist is a continual self-sacrifice, a continual extinction of personality." Eliot sees that in this depersonalization the art approaches science. With his collection of essays, *THE SACRED WOOD* (1920), and later published *THE USE OF POETRY AND THE USE OF CRITICISM* (1933) and *THE CLASSICS AND THE MAN OF LETTERS* (1942), Eliot established his reputation as a critic and had an enormous impact on contemporary literary taste. In 1922 Eliot founded the *Criterion*, a quarterly review that he edited until he halted its publication at the beginning of World War II. In 1925 he joined the publishing house of Faber and Gwyer (later Faber and Faber), becoming eventually one of the firm's directors. Between the years 1917 and 1919 Eliot was an assistant editor of the journal the *Egoist* and from 1919 onward he was a regular contributor to the *Times Literary Supplement*.

In the 60 years from 1905 to his death, Eliot published some 600 articles and reviews. Eliot's principal purpose in his literary-critical essays was "the elucidation of works of art and the correction of taste." He wanted to revive the appreciation of the 17th-century "Metaphysical poets," referring to such writers as Donne, Crashaw, Vaughan, Lord Herbert, and Cowley. He admitted that it is extremely difficult to define metaphysical poetry and decide what poets practiced it, but praised the complex mixture of intellect and passion that characterized their work. In the essay 'Religion and literature' (1935) Eliot stated that "literary criticism should be completed by criticism from a definite ethical and theological standpoint."

Eliot's first marriage from 1915 with the ballet-dancer Vivienne Haigh-Wood turned out to be unhappy. She was temperamental, full of life, restless. Her arrival at menstruation brought extreme mood swings, pains and cramps; her condition was diagnosed as hysteria. From 1930 until her death in 1947 she was confined in mental institutions. Later Eliot married his secretary, Valerie Fletcher. Carole Seymour-Jones has argued in *Painted Shadow: A Life of Vivienne Eliot* (2001) that Eliot's sexual orientation was fundamentally gay. Eliot avoided sharing bed with Vivienne, who started an affair with Bertrand Russell. Virginia Woolf once said: "He was one of those poets who live by scratching, and his wife was his itch."

The appearance of *The Waste Land* (1922), a poetic exploration of soul's – or civilization's – struggle for regeneration, made Eliot world famous. Following Pound's suggestion, Eliot reduced *The Waste Land* to about half its original length. The first version, with Pound's revisions, was published in 1971. The long poem caught the mood of confusion after World War I, when everything in society seemed to be changing and many felt that pre-war values were lost.

Divided into five sections, *The Waste Land* is a series of fragmentary dramatic monologues, a dense chorus of voices and culture historical quotations, that fade one into another. Moreover, Eliot didn't hesitate to combine slang with scholarly language. The waste land, an image of Spenglerian magnitude, is contrasted with sources of regeneration, such as fertility rituals and Christian and Eastern religious practices. Material for the work Eliot drew from several sources, among them the Grail story, the legend of the Fisher King, Sir James George Frazer's *Golden Bough*, and Dante's *Commedia*, but when Dante finally is reunited with Beatrice in 'Heaven', *The Waste Land* ends ambiguously with a few words of Sanskrit. In a way the work fulfilled Eliot's "impersonal theory of poetry": "The poet's mind is in fact a receptacle for seizing and storing up numberless feelings, phrases, images, which remain there until all the particles which can unite to form a new compound are present together."

In 1927 Eliot became a British citizen and member of the Church of England. His pilgrimage towards his own particular brand of High Anglicanism may be charted in his poetry, starting from 'The Hollow Men' (1925) to visions in *FOUR QUARTETS* (135–42), consisting of 'Burnt Norton', 'East Coker', 'The Dry Salvages', and 'Little Gidding,' into which he integrated his experiences in World War II as a watchman checking for fires during bombing raids. These quartets represent the four seasons and four elements. Helen Gardner has described the whole work as an 'austere and rigorously philosophic poem on time and time's losses and gains.' (*The Composition of Four Quarters*, 1978)

Eliot's other works include poetic dramas, in which his dramatic verse became gradually indistinguishable from prose. *MURDER IN THE CATHEDRAL* (1935) was written for a church performance and treated the martyrdom of St. Thomas à Beckett. In *THE FAMILY REUNION* (1939) Eliot took a theme of contemporary life, and tried to find a rhythm close to contemporary speech. *THE COCTAIL PARTY* (1950) was partly based on *Alcestis* of Euripides. Eliot took in it greater liberties with ordinary colloquial speech.

"What we have to do is to bring poetry into the world in which the audience lives and to which it returns when it leaves the theatre; not to transport the audience into some imaginary world totally unlike their own, an unreal world in which poetry can be spoken. What I should hope might be achieved, by a generation of dramatists having the benefit of our experience, is that the audience should find, at the moment of awareness that it is hearing poetry, that it is saying to itself: "I could talk in poetry too!" Then we should not be transported into an artificial world; on the contrary, our own sordid, dreary, daily world would be suddenly illuminated and transfigured." (from *Poetry and Drama*, 1951)

Eliot was an incurable joker and among his many pranks was to seat visiting authors in chairs with whoopee cushions and offer them exploding cigars. To the poet's pleasure, the American comedian Groucho Marx was his great fan. In 1964 he wrote to Groucho: "The picture of you in the newspaper saying that, amongst other reasons, you have come to London to see me has greatly enchanted my credit line in the neighborhood, and particularly with the greengrocer across the street." *OLD POSSUM'S BOOK OF PRACTICAL CATS* (1939), Eliot's classical book of verse for children, has achieved a considerable world success in a musical adaptation. His most influential exercise in social criticism was *NOTES TOWARD A DEFINITION OF CULTURE* (1948).

Eliot died in London on January 4, 1965. His fame has been shadowed by accusations of racism, misogyny, fascism, emotional coldness, and anti-Semitism, which has made him unpleasant for many readers. However, he has not been regarded as a Communist. Hints of Eliot's anti-Semitism, like in the poem 'Burbank With a Baedeker: Bleistein With a Cigar,' has been considered a questionable outgrowth of his theology, or due to a class prejudice, but never the center of his thought. The poem's reputation, however, is notorious, but the possibility that Eliot perhaps was parodying antisemitism or made a statement on misreading Dante, also offers an alternative way of reading it. (see Patricia Sloane's work *T.S. Eliot's Bleistein Poems*, 2000)

For Thine is
Life is
For Thine is the

This is the way the world ends
This is the way the world ends
This is the way the world ends
Not with a bang but a whimper

(from *The Hollow Men*)

For further reading: *Painted Shadow: A Life of Vivienne Eliot* by Carole Seymour-Jones (2001); *T.S. Eliot's Bleistein Poems: Uses of Literary Allusion in "Burbank with a Baedeker: Bleistein with a Cigar" and "Dirge"* by Patricia Sloane (2000); *Words Alone* by Dennis Donoghue (2000); *Eliot's Dark Angel* by Ronald Schuchard (1999); *Guide to the Secular Poetry of T.S. Eliot* by Susan E. Blalock (1996); *A Guide to the Selected Poems of T.S. Eliot* by B.C. Southam (1996); *The Birth of Modernism: Ezra Pound, T.S. Eliot, W.B. Yeats and the Occult* by Leon Surette (1993); *T.S. Eliot: A Life* by P. Acroyd (1985); *T.S. Eliot: The Critic as Philosopher* by L. Freed (1979); *The Composition of Four Quarters* by Helen Gardner (1978); *T.S. Eliot* by B. Bergonzi (1973); *T.S. Eliot: Poet and Dramatist* by J. Chiari (1973); *T.S. Eliot: The Man and His Work*, ed. by A. Tate (1967); *T.S. Eliot's Dramatic Theory and Practice* by C.H. Smith (1963); *T.S. Eliot's Poetry and Plays* by G. Smith (1956); *T.S. Eliot: The Design of His Poetry* by E. Drew (1949); *The Achievement of*

T.S. Eliot by F.O. Matthiessen (1935) – See also: George Seferis, Eugenio Montale, Saint-John Perse: *Anabasis*, 1924, translated by T.S. Eliot. – Eliot's writings also influenced Conrad Aiken's early poems – Note: Film *Tom and Viv* (1994), directed by Brian Gilbert, based on the plays by Michael Hastings and starring Willem Dafoe and Miranda Richardson, chronicled the details of Eliot's marriage to socialite Vivien Haigh-Wood. – For further information: *Pun and Games: A New Approach to Five Early Poems by T. S. Eliot* by Patricia Sloane

Murder in the Cathedral

T.S. Eliot

Review date: 12/1/2001

Publisher: Faber & Faber, 1969

Published: 1938

The best known of Eliot's five plays, *Murder in the Cathedral* is about the killing of Thomas a Beckett in 1170 in Canterbury cathedral. Really part of the long concluded struggle between secular and religious authority, aspects of Beckett's death have conspired to make it seem more important than it really was: the dramatic way in which the murder took place; the vague connection with one of the most important developments in medieval England, the concept that not even the king was above the law; and the massive cult which developed quickly around Beckett and which survived until the Reformation.

The short play has two scenes, one about a month before the murder, when Beckett returned to Canterbury from exile in France, and the actual murder itself. As an interlude between them stands Beckett's Christmas Day sermon from that year, and the second scene also includes an interlude in which the four knights who killed Beckett plead their case to the audience. These interludes are in prose, and the rest of the play is blank verse.

Murder in the Cathedral is a very intellectual play, though apparently compelling on stage. Much of the dialogue is more like philosophy than drama, and much of the structure is related to medieval mystery and miracle plays. This is particularly apparent with the four tempters who come to Beckett in the first act, trying to persuade him (for example) to renew his friendship with the king. In no sense is Eliot attempting to be historically accurate or even convincing; in real life people would never speak the way they do in this play. Nevertheless, it is interesting to read