



T. S. ELIOT: A MAN OF EXTREMES

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"In my beginning is my end."

— Eliot, "East Coker"

Writing about someone who expressly forbid any biographical commemoration is not an easy task. Thomas Stearns Eliot (1888-1965) stated in 1925 that no biography about him should be written upon his death. Despite his wishes, there have been several biographies written about the serious, stern-looking American-turned-British figure with the unusual eyes. Eliot was a person who relished his privacy and whose mask was always carefully worn to hide his inner self and blend with his surroundings. In short, he was inscrutable.

T. S. Eliot was born 26 September 1888 on the banks of the river Mississippi in St. Louis, Missouri. He came from a prominent and long-established family, whose roots were in New England. Eliot's father, Henry Ware Eliot, was an eminent businessman, while his mother, Charlotte Champe Stearns, was a social worker and feminist who also wrote poetry. Eliot began to write poetry at the age of fourteen and he published both poems and short stories during his years as an undergraduate student. In 1906 he began his studies at Harvard University, where he earned a Bachelor of Arts and a Master of Arts in English. After a brief stay in Paris, he was awarded a scholarship to Merton College, Oxford. Amidst the Great War, Eliot moved in 1914 to England, where he would finally settle. There he met Ezra Pound (1885-1972), whose influence was to be everlasting.

One of the greatest poets of the twentieth century and a central figure of Modernism, Eliot wrote some of the most remarkable poems in English literature, as well as several verse plays. His poetry always exhibits a sense of transcendence. Eliot's poetry is metaphysical poetry: poetry related to the earthly matters but at the same



time searching for answers around spiritual questions. His poetry and his views, however, would earn him the reputation of being obscure, but also an anti-Semitic, elitist, and conservative.

The first significant poem that he published, “The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock” (1915), was deeply influenced by Dante Alighieri (1265-1321) and French Symbolism. It is a dramatic monologue in line with the modernist form of stream of consciousness. The narrator tells us about his approaching death. Although “Prufrock” is a poem about maturity, Eliot was in his early twenties when it was written and published it with the help and support of Ezra Pound. A break with the immediate past, scholars have pointed out that its third line would mark the beginning of what we now understand as modern poetry:

Let us go then, you and I,
When the evening is spread out against the sky
Like a patient etherized upon a table; (Eliot 1998, 1)

The year 1915 not only brought the publication of Eliot’s first important poem, but also his first marriage. He married Vivienne Haigh-Wood (1888-1947), but it was a turbulent marriage that promoted periods of depression in Eliot, who had to seek professional help. Due to health problems and mental instability herself, Haigh-Wood was often sent away to improve her health. She was finally committed to an institution a few years after the couple had formally separated in 1933. She would remain there until her death. In 1957, when he was 68, Eliot married Esmé Valerie Fletcher (1926-2012). He had met her at Faber & Faber, a London publishing house he joined in 1925, and of which Eliot became director for the last 40 years of his life. Fletcher would then run Eliot’s estate until she died in 2012 and devoted herself to preserving his legacy.

During his period with Haigh-Wood, Eliot published some of his most important poems. The first would be “The Waste Land” (1922), which was published the same year as Joyce’s *Ulysses*. Eliot completed it during a breakdown at the end of 1921 at a sanatorium in Lausanne. A portrayal of the moral and social malady of his generation, the poem seems to be somewhat autobiographical, but with a universal projection. Later he would publish “The Hollow Men” (1925), a poem that presents a compendium of all the things happening in Eliot’s life at the time: post-war Europe, the excruciating and vain desire for hope, a failed marriage.

His continuous reflections on and pursuit of hope lead Eliot to convert to Anglicanism in 1927, though he identified himself rather as Anglo-Catholic, and later that same year he became a full British citizen. Religion would play an important role in Eliot’s next great poem, *Four Quartets* (1943). Eliot considered this poem to be his masterpiece and it is now a cornerstone of modern poetry. *Four Quartets* features four



long poems (“Burnt Norton,” “East Coker,” “The Dry Salvages,” and “Little Gidding”) with five sections each. Each includes contemplative meditations on time and the human condition, as well as eternity and the divine. Each poem refers to a place of spiritual or emotional importance for Eliot. This poem led to his recognition as the greatest living poet in the English language.

In Eliot’s last decades of writing, he would devote himself to drama. His love for drama can be found even in his early poems, and in the many essays he wrote about drama. His goal was the revitalization of poetic drama in modern society. He experimented with language in his ambition to mirror contemporary speech through verse with an emotional and contemporary resonance. He also wrote verse drama to reach a wider audience and to integrate high art and popular culture, like music-hall performer Marie Lloyd or ballet dancer Léonide Massine, both of whom Eliot admired. Among his verse drama we find *Murder in the Cathedral* (1934), *The Family Reunion* (1939), *The Cocktail Party* (1949), *The Confidential Clerk* (1953), and *The Elder Statesman* (1958).

Interestingly, Eliot’s most successful and popular work is arguably *Old Possum’s Book of Practical Cats* (1939), a collection of light verse, full of humor and wit, written for his godchildren, which would inspire Andrew Lloyd Webber’s megamusical *Cats*. It became a children’s classic and his best-selling work, despite all his great modernist poetry and drama. In any event, this book reveals us a playful and witty side of Eliot. The many revivals of the musical production and adaptations account for its long-lasting popularity, including two films – the 1998 direct-to-video and the 2019 feature film. This, coupled with the multiple illustrated editions of the poetry collection, suggest that *Practical Cats* has definitely outlived its nine lives.

On 4 January 1965, Eliot died of pulmonary emphysema at his home in London. He had successfully accomplished a lifelong career as a poet, playwright, essayist, critic, editor, and publisher. He was awarded the Nobel Prize in Literature as well as the British Order of Merit in 1948. Notwithstanding the shadows in his personality, Eliot’s figure was and continues to be central to the English literary canon, and he remains in the public imagination like no other modern poet.



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