

**T. S. Eliot as a Social Critic -  
Bringing Some Order into the Modern Intellectual and  
Ideological Chaos with His Impact  
Felt in Religious Thought, Social Thought and Art:  
An Appraisal**

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T.S. Eliot (1888-1965)

Courtesy: [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/T. S. Eliot](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/T._S._Eliot)

**Abstract**

This article examines T. S. Eliot as a universally acknowledged writer who established himself not only as a poet but also as a penetrating analytic critic. Eliot's practical and theoretical criticism is widely admired by many critics in the English-speaking world and they use his criticism as a corrective of the eccentricity and waywardness of the contemporary impressionistic school of criticism. The paper also explores the philosophical traits reflected profoundly in Eliot's criticism leading to a religious philosophy of life with a clearly formulated message for humankind by understanding the present-day human situation in all circles at all levels.

**Key words:** T.S. Eliot, social critic, intellectual and ideological chaos, religious philosophy

### **T.S. Eliot**

Universally acknowledged as the most notable and most important critic of the twentieth century in the English-speaking world, T.S. Eliot established himself not as a poet but also as a penetrating analytic critic both of the past and of the present, guarding the integrity of the past tradition by making it co-relate with the contemporary life. A deep study and analysis of his critical essays and writings will bring home the point that Eliot is a poet-cum-critic *par excellence* among the greatest literary critics of England.

### **Eliot's Criticism**

In his early criticism, Eliot wrote as a poet-critic and critic-poet with a deep concern for defending poetry against any standards framed for judging its meritorious quality. As a young poet-critic, he wrote polemical essays so as to clarify his aims as an artist, relating these to the scrupulously examined and analysed works of the past tradition and recommending the creative and critical activities of himself and those contemporaries, like Ezra Pound.

Becoming part of the English literary scene in the late twenties and early thirties, Eliot was found writing literary essays of great interest and placed them “on par with discussion of general problems of culture, education, sociology and politics” says Stephen Spender. (P. 13)

### **Escape from the Subjective Self**

The first and foremost aim running through Eliot's criticism as well as his poetry is nothing but the aim of escaping from the subjective self into a world of objective values. He offered it “a new range of rhetorical possibilities confirmed it in its increasing contempt for historical processes and yet reshaped its notion of period by a handful of brilliant intuitions” said George Watson (p 186-87). This double resonance of poet and critic is said to have given Eliot's name its authority, its place in the role of English literary dictators beginning with Ben Johnson and carrying through the nineteenth century with the careers of those poet-critic-theologians. In the words of Rene Wellek,

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“T. S. Eliot is by far the most important critic of the twentieth century in the English-speaking world. His influence on contemporary taste in poetry is the most conspicuous; he has done more than anybody else to promote the ‘shift of sensibility’ away from the taste of the ‘Georgians’ and to reevaluate the major figures and periods in the history of English poetry. He reacted strongly against Romanticism he criticized Milton and the Miltonic tradition he exalted Dante, the Jacobean dramatists, the metaphysical poets, Dryden and the French symbolists as ‘the tradition of great poetry’ (P 3)

### **Dealing with “Essentials and Not with Accidentals”**

As a critic, Eliot stands alone among his contemporaries, because in his best works, he deals with ‘essentials and not with accidentals’. Perhaps he might be almost the only critic of his age who made a constructive contribution to the literature of criticism. He did affirm the need of a strict critical method as opposed to the “inner light” of the impressionistic critics belief in the craftsman-critic, provided that such a critic has a highly developed “sense of fact” (Selected Essays 23). As M. C. Bradbrook has rightly put it, “His equipment as a poet; each reanimates the other” (P 126).

### **A Reaction and a Reassessment**

Eliot’s criticism offers both a reaction and a reassessment making a complete break from the 19<sup>th</sup>, century tradition so as to give a new direction to literary criticism and his critical concepts got scattered all over his five hundred and odd essays and reviews. He has coined a number of memorable phrases like ‘concept of impersonal poetry’ dissociation of sensibility’, ‘perfection of common speech’ ‘final facts’ etc., which have gained wide currency. Whatever may be the ultimate value of his criticism, there can be no denying the fact that he is a great irritant in thought. In the words of George Watson, “Eliot made English criticism look different”. His criticism has been revolutionary, for he has turned the critical tradition of the whole English speaking world upside down.

Since the publication of *The Sacred Wood* in 1920, his critical authority has steadily increased. As John Hayward has put it, “I cannot think of a critic who has made widely read and discussed in his own life-time; not only in English but in almost every language except Russian throughout the civilized world” (P 31)

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Eliot's practical criticism offers a re-assessment of earlier writers, whereas his theoretical criticism represents a reaction to romantic and Victorian critical credo. He called himself 'a classicist in literature'. The reaction was started by T. B. Hulme but Eliot carried it on, made it a force in literature thus bringing about a classical revival both in art and criticism. He did vehemently reject the romantic view of the perfectibility of the individual, stressed the doctrine of the original sin and exposed the hollowness of the romantic faith in the 'inner voice'. According to Eliot, a critic is one who must follow objective standards; instead of following merely his 'inner voice' he must conform to tradition. His classical bent of mind is rooted in a sense of tradition, a respect for order and authority. To attest to this as a proof of evidence, the essay of his "Tradition and Individual Talent" was written as the manifesto of his critical creed. In this respect, his criticism is nothing but a corrective to the eccentricity and waywardness of the contemporary impressionistic school of criticism, No doubt, he is the critic who ought to correct the excesses of what he contemptuously called 'the abstract and intellectual school of criticism represented by Arnold.

### **A Sense of Fact**

Eliot is of the view that a critic is to have a highly developed sense of fact and he has to judge on the basis of facts with perfect detachment and impartiality. Keeping this in mind, he sought to raise criticism to the level of science; in his objectivity and scientific attitude, he is the English critic who almost closely resembles Aristotle. In his stress on facts, on comparison and analysis, Eliot has exercised a profound influence on the new critics, setting up many new trends in English criticism. Eliot writes:

"The significance of the term critic has varied indefinitely; in our time, the most vigorous critical minds are philosophical minds, are in short, creative of values" (The Criterion 51)

### **Indebtedness to Other Writers**

Eliot acknowledges his indebtedness to Mr. John Middleton for pointing out to him the complex and contentious character of a problem. It is thus that Eliot gets involved in the discussions of the fundamental problems of life and thought in his critical essays. The

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philosophical elements in Eliot's criticism in his endeavor to create values in terms of which "the relation of the work of art to art, of the work, of literature to literature' of criticism to criticism' and of 'literature to religion' can be assessed" (Selected Essays 25). According to A. G. George, "The most important contribution of his criticism to modern thought consists not in introducing "traditionalism", nor in exploding Romanticism and bringing about a classical revival of letters, but in the philosophy of life implicit in it. The 'vigour' of his literary mind is the "vigour" of his philosophical mind" (P 241).

### **Eliot's Celebrated Conceptual Notions**

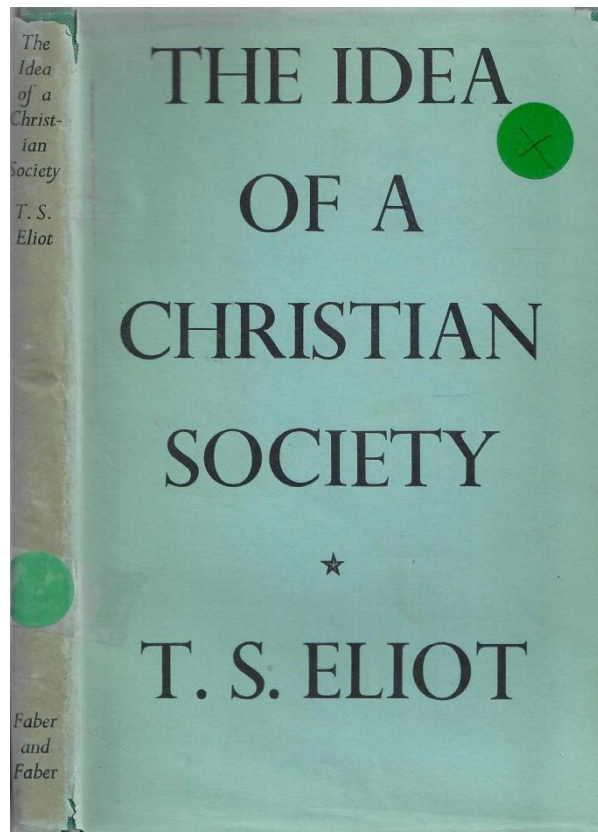
The most such celebrated conceptual notions advanced by Eliot as those of "objective correlative", "dissociation of sensibility" "separation of intellect from emotion", "impersonality in art", "tradition", "orthodoxy" and "original sin" are all formulated not merely from the standpoint of literary criticism but from a philosophical standpoint, for Eliot wrote the best part of his criticism during the inter-war decades during which period European and American thinkers were chiefly pre-occupied with the attempt to create new philosophical systems to take the place of the Christian philosophy of life which they felt had lost its cogency for the modern man. Eliot did not offer his contemporaries a synthesis for he has tried to create a tradition or a synthesis. Instead he did point out a particular Christian tradition in art and thought. He had chosen to be on the Catholic side of the protestant Anglian High Church rather than on the protestant side of the Roman Catholic Church. He pointed to the need for modern man of such a tradition of Christian Catholicism as that one which produced great heroes of religious faith in the past. One had to commit oneself in faith to this tradition. Writing in 1926, Eliot stated his principal aim as a literary critic by stating, "... We must find our own faith, and having found it, fight for it against all others" (The Criterion 5). To fight for a faith was the most urgent task of criticism in the inter-war periods.

### **An Analyst of Social Forces**

Eliot advances the Catholic social order as the most feasible form of social institution. In advocating the Catholic order, he was not speaking either explicitly or implicitly as a Public Christian apologist but as an analyst of social forces. It is obviously stated by Eliot as;

“one can assert that the only possibility of control and balance is a religious control and balance; that the only hopeful course for a society which would thrive and continue its creative activity in the art of civilization is to become Christian” (PP 23-24)

### Value and Impact of Religion



Eliot has firm belief in the view that international concord and amity can only be realized by “a religious unification”, i.e., “cultural unity in religion”. While examining the implications of this phrase “cultural unity” in religion in “Notes towards the definition of culture”, Eliot himself quotes a number of wrong uses of these words “culture” and “civilization” ‘culture’ is “a way of life” (Eliot 47). It may “even be described simply as that which makes life worth living” (P 27), and he defines religion as the whole way of life of a people from birth to the grave from morning to night and even in sleep and “that way of life is also its culture” (P 31). This at once presupposes a relation between religion and culture.

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Matthew Arnold discovers the meaning and sense of the past by examining the past so that he might obtain guidance for the future of mankind but for Eliot, the past and future are contained in the present, in the “here and now”. In Eliot’s thought, time is related to eternity and history to God. Consequently there is a sense in which one can rightly speak of a relation between culture and religion. It is Eliot’s firm conviction that without faith in God, no scheme for social improvement can function. This springs from his doctrine of human nature. In Arnold’s view, anarchy can be prevented through culture but to Eliot, even culture is not possible without faith. A society with faith disintegrates and this fear of social insecurity and the analysis of its causes are seen to be closely related to his essential outlook Eliot sees no escape from the nemesis of artificial culture. Man’s only freedom lies in discipline, both personal and social.

Thus, Eliot’s social criticism leads to a religious philosophy of life with a clearly formulated message for mankind. Eliot’s special achievement lies in that he had brought some order into the modern intellectual and ideological chaos. Through this achievement of his, he has enabled himself as well as his contemporaries to understand the present-day human situation fully. It was Eliot who made his impact felt in religious thought, in social thought and in art.

### **Eliot’s Worldview**

Eliot is said to have created a world-view based on a few distinctive principles and his philosophy of life is in all respects extracted out of Buddhism, Indian Upanishadic thought and Greek philosophy, Christian mysticism. Despite all these, he is highly indebted to the essential tradition so as to assimilate all diversified materials and bring forth a consistent theory of life and art as a significant achievement worthy of a great literary and critical mind. It is , no doubt, this marvelous capacity that brought him the wide popularity he now enjoys not only in the English-speaking world but also on the European continent. The intellectual climate into which he entered was one of total confusion with every philosophical and critical thinker apprehending the approach of the end of an age. In such an age of rapidity and variety of changes and opposing beliefs coupled with clashes and conflicts leading to the din and noise of ideological conflicts, the reality of human life got terribly ignored or bypassed. Critics like T. S. Eliot endeavoured to set right everything by restoring to man his true moral

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and spiritual dignity. In Eliot's words, romanticism became a heresy and in the nineteenth century, a new kind of materialism started threatening to rob man of his individual freedom. At the dawn of this century, man remained "dehumanized", a plaything for politicians and object of curious investigation for scientific research. Eliot's did his best through his writings to reinstate the dignity, glory and liberty of man, thus defending "the category of the individual" in thought. No doubt, he pleaded for a realistic and correct appraisal of human nature in all respects. The so called idealists and the romanticists, while they spoke for man, did not analyse human nature correctly. But Eliot advanced a realistic doctrine of human nature. He brought attention to bear upon the dualism inherent at the heart of man as a battlefield of good and evil and viewed life as a conflict between good and evil. The reason for his stress on the religious plane of life is for great discipline. Only by religious discipline, by prayer, and by divine grace, man can keep the forces of evil under control. In his matured view, "society is for the individual and the individual must be sacrificed for the society" (Matthiessen 148). Thus, human dignity does spring up from the fact that man is a compact of the finite and the infinite, of good and evil, of freedom and necessity, the natural and the supernatural, the contingent and the eternal, of matter and spirit. Eliot's achievement lies in recognition and dissemination of this idea of man.

### **Spokesman of His Age**

T. S. Eliot can, no doubt, be considered as the spokesman of his age and yet one of his great contributions consists in having given expression to dominant anxieties and feelings of his age. Through the medium of his poetry especially, he has rather objectified the inner struggle of man. Without comment or criticism, the poems communicate the anguish of the soul and his great claim to originality consists in his recognizing the artistic possibilities of the belief that anguish and sinfulness are intrinsic to human nature. He is said to have found appropriate methods of expressing the tragedy of the modern predicament through the use of conversational rhythm and everyday imagery in poetry, the objective correlatives, the use of symbols and by the method of juxtaposing passages from great works of the past and the present side by side with his own, giving a new direction to literature and presenting a coherent philosophy of life. Just like Shakespeare, Eliot's oeuvre is also a precise way of thinking and feeling. His philosophical ideas, his capacity for subtle analysis, his widely admired lucidity and severity of his prose style, his communicative power of poetry and his

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power synthesizing opposites made him one of the most distinguished among the contemporary critics, that too, with a social critical notion rooted in his thought, mind and art in all respects.

### **To Conclude**

To conclude, it may be said that through his practical criticism, Eliot has brought a reevaluation of the great literary names of the past three centuries. His recognition of the greatness of Donne and the other metaphysical of the 17<sup>th</sup> century has resulted in the revival of metaphysical poetry today. The credit for the renewal of interest in the metaphysicals and Jacobean dramatists goes to Eliot alone and none else. Likewise, it is Eliot who restored Dryden and the other Augustan poets to their rightful place in the hierarchy of the English men of letters. According to Eliot, the end of criticism is to bring about a readjustment between the old and the new and his own criticism performs this function to nicety. With his assertion, “Honest Criticism and Sensitive appreciation is directed not upon the poet but upon poetry” (Selected Essays 17), modern critical method reaches its anti-Romantic extreme. Eliot opposes Romantic bias of the personal and the emotional by his theory of impersonality in art. In a word, the essay “Tradition and the Individual Talent” is nothing but the manifesto of his critical creed, i.e., a critic must follow objective standards; instead of following merely his inner voice, he must conform to tradition – a sense of tradition, a respect for order and authority, is at the core of Eliot’s critical classicism. Thus, his criticism is nothing but “a corrective of the eccentricity and way-wardness of the contemporary impressionistic school of Criticism.

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