



## **T. S. ELIOT'S SIGNIFICANT CONTRIBUTION TO BOTH CRITICISM AND CREATION: AN APPRAISAL**

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### **ABSTRACT**

*This research article at the outset ardently probes on the newfangled and multi-faceted proficient writer T.S.Eliot, who is an erudite 20th century modern writer and leading modern critic, who paved for the constructive contribution to literature and criticism. This research article keenly dives deeply into the thoughts of T.S.Eliot in order to explore the critical terms, ideas and notions that he invoked to the realm of literary criticism. And finally, this research article examines critical works of T.S.Eliot and insists the fact that Eliot had carved a new way and direction in the field of literary theory and criticism.*

**Key Words:** criticism, tradition, past, present, sensibility, association, disassociation, unification, life, critic, correlative

### **Objective**

T. S. Eliot is a versatile prolific writer and he is regarded as a classicist, a traditionalist, a critic, a social thinker and an erudite philosopher. He is a man of complete with many sided personality. He is a man of great force conjoining together with the poet-critics beginning with Ben Johnson and including such names as Dryden, Johnson, Coleridge and Matthew Arnold. The literary span of his life's production actively covers over forty-five years. In this active literary period, he involved himself in writing poems, plays, literary and social essays as well as he also worked as a journalist and served the position of editor. Besides all of these, his project of critical pronouncements got published in the form of articles and essays in numerous periodicals and journals of the day and collected in such notable books as 1. *The Use of Poetry and the Use of Criticism* (1931), 2. *The Idea of a Christian Society* (1939),

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3. *Notes Towards a Definition of Culture* (1948), 4. *Selected Essays* (1951), 5. *On Poetry and Poets* (1957), and 6. *To Criticize the Critic* (1965), *Tradition and Individual Talent*, *Poetry and Drama*, *The Function of Criticism*, *The English Metaphysical Poets* and *The Frontier of Criticism* are the popular essays of T.S. Eliot in the field of literary criticism.

Eliot strenuously accepted, believed and preached everyone that criticism and creation are complementary and harmonious activities and therefore a good poet can only be a good critic. In his essay on "The Perfect Critic" in *The Sacred, Wood*, he says:

*"It is fabulous to say that criticism is for the sake of creation or creation for the sake of criticism. It is also fabulous to assume that there are ages of criticism and ages of creativeness, as if by plunging ourselves into intellectual darkness he were in better hopes of finding spiritual light. The two directions of sensibility are complementary; and as sensibility is rare, unpopular and desirable, it is to expected that the critic and the creative artist should frequently be the same person" (P 192).*

Eliot has expressed and conveyed his views and perceptions on the importance of tradition and poetic process in the essay, *Tradition and the Individual Talent*. There are two divergent directions of literary criticism in the twentieth century – a re-assessment of the achievements of the past writers and creation of new literary ideas. Eliot also firmly trusts that the significance of revaluation of past writers is great. The merit and quality of re-assessment has a momentous significance because of the fact that each generation has its own values and merits of art, judges and the writers in various ways. The most influential critic of the early twentieth century describes T.S Eliot. George Watson, however, thinks that it is not easy to define clearly the reason of his influence. He says: "The question sounds eminently reasonable, but remains unanswerable". According to Eliot, every age should revalue the literature of the past ages according to its own standards. At one place, he says:

*"From time to time, every hundred years or so, it is desirable that some critic shall appear to review the past of our literature, and set the posts and the poems in a new order".*

This is what Eliot has himself tried to achieve in his career and that is why he has given fresh interpretations to the works of Elizabethan dramatists, the Metaphysical poets, the Caroline



poets, Milton, the poets of the Eighteenth century, the Romantics, Arnold and so on. Eliot called himself 'a classicist in literature, a person of Anglo-Catholic in religion, and a royalist in politics'. Eliot strictly believes in the order in literature as a classicist. Coinciding with other classicists, he firmly and definitely believes in the opinion that the writer must have faith in certain system of writing and that a work of art must seek the merits and values of the past tradition. Eliot is one of the greatest of literary critics and it is evidenced through the quality of his critical writings. Eliot's five hundred and one odd essays were published as reviews and articles from time to time, have had a far-reaching influence on the course of literary criticism in the country. Eliot doesn't think his past as nostalgic into which he could escapes the present besides he thinks his vivid picture of past as an energetic force still surviving within the present which could be brought into life and action. The notion and idea of life according to Eliot is not bound either by its pastness or its presentness and he says it is bound being outside any particular time and related to what he called "final facts" and "supernatural" and these notion and idea of life is derived from Dante and Eliot placed this concept in the pivotal axis of his picture of the contemporary world. Eliot achieved this as a fierce analytical critic who guarded the integrity of the past tradition and invoked those past values in new modern literature of contemporary life.

Eliot classified his critical works into three periods and it has a wide difference between the early, the middle and the later periods. He writes as the poet-critic and critic-poet in his early writing, who is concerned with defending poetry against any standards for judging it except those which desire from the study of literature. In modern period of literature, Eliot is the young poet writing polemical essays that clarify his aims as an artist, relating these to the scrupulously examined and analyzed works of the past tradition, and recommending the creative and critical activities of himself and those contemporaries, like Ezra Pound, of whose works he approves. In his criticism of the late twenties and early thirties, when Eliot became part of the English literary scene, his essays and lectured seem less those of the poet who considers criticism an extension of his own innovativeness, the professional critic and lecturer. Eliot as a critic become the man of letters whose values are derived from the analysis of the works of the tradition and of all the truth relevant to them. "At a still later stage, Eliot continues to write literary criticism of general problems of culture, education, sociology and politics" (Spender 13). The significant scope of Eliot which run and revolves through Eliot's criticism as well as his poetry is "that of escaping from the objective self into a world of objective values. He also offered a new range of rhetorical possibilities and confirmed it in its increasing contempt for historical processes and yet reshaped its notion of period by a handful of brilliant intuitions." (Watson 186). This brilliant double resonance of poet and critic has given Eliot's name in a meaningful authority and its place in the roll of English literary dictators which begins with Ben Jonson, follows with Dryden, Pope and Samuel Johnson and carries through the nineteenth century with the careers of those poet-critic-theologians, Coleridge and Arnold. Rene Wellek writes:

*“T.S.Eliot is by far the most important critic of the twentieth century in the English – taste in poetry is 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 .... his concept of ‘impersonal’ poetry, his Description of the creative process which demands a ‘unified sensibility’, his justification of ‘tradition’ his scheme of the history of English poetry as a process that led to the dissociation’ of an originality unified sensibility, his emphasis on the ‘perfection of common speech’ as the language of poetry, his discussion of the relation between ideas and poetry under the term ‘belief’ – all these are important critical matters for which Eliot found memorable formulates” (P 3).*

Eliot as an ardent critic who profoundly stands alone among his contemporaries and his best works deals with “essentials” and not with “accidentals”. Eliot is almost the only critic of his age who has made a constructive contribution to the literature of criticism. He rigidly affirms the need of a strict critical method as opposed to the “inner light” of the impressionistic critics. He has a strong belief in the craftsman-critic, provided that such a critic has a highly devoted “sense of fact” (SE 23). If his prose is compared with his verse, it is found that few critics can say so much, so empty, in so few words. M.C. Bradbrook rightly observes: “His equipment as a critic is congruent with his equipment as a poet; each reanimates the other” (Rajan 126).

Eliot’s criticism brings about both a reaction and a reassessment. His criticism marks a complete break from the 19<sup>th</sup> century tradition thereby offering a new direction to literary criticism. “Eliot made English criticism”, says George Watson, “though not in a simple sense”. Eliot’s criticism has been revolutionary and he has turned the critical tradition of the

whole English speaking world to topsy-turvy circumstances. Eliot's practical criticism brings forward the re-assessment of earlier writers; while his theoretical criticism denotes the reaction to romantic and victorian critical credo. Eliot as a classicist in literature with a sense of tradition, a respect for order and authority is at the core of Eliot's Classicism and in this respect, the essay *Tradition and the Individual Talent* is the manifesto of his critical creed. This way paves his criticism as a corrective to the eccentricity and waywardness of the contemporary impressionistic school of criticism. Correspondingly, he sought to correct the excesses of what he contemptuously called 'the abstract and intellectual' school of criticism represented by Arnold. As per Eliot's critical thinking, the critic must have a highly developed sense of fact and he must judge on the basis of these facts with perfect detachment and impartiality. He thus sought to raise criticism to the basic level of science; in his objectivity and scientific attitude, Eliot is the English critic who almost closely resembles Aristotle. In this stress on facts, on 'comparison and analysis', Eliot has exercised a profound influence on the New critics by starting many new trends in English criticism. It is not possible to confine Eliot's critical writings to purely literary and aesthetic issues. According to Eliot, in our day, literature depends for its existence, even its subsistence upon things" (The Criterion 751).

The most important contribution of Eliot's criticism to modern thought consists "not only in introducing 'traditionalism', but also in exploding Romanticism and also 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" (George 241). Most of the brilliant celebrated conceptual notions advanced by Eliot such as the notions of "objective correlative", "dissociation of sensibility", "separation of intellect from emotion", "impersonality in art" "tradition", "orthodoxy" and "original sin" are all formulated from the critical standpoint. The phrase 'objective correlative' occurs in Eliot's essay on "Hamlet and His Problems" in *The Sacred Wood*. The phrase 'objective Correlative' is used by Eliot to describe how emotions are best expressed in poetry and it is a part of his theory of impersonality concentrating not on the poet but on the poetry. Eliot through his theory of impersonal art implies that greater emphasis should be laid upon the work of art itself as a structure. Though Eliot's poems are an expression of mental and emotional status, he firmly believes that in great poetry, thoughts and feelings are presented "by a statement of events in human action, of objects in the external world" (198). The concept of 'objective correlative' is fully applicable to the poems of Eliot himself. He does not express the emotions directly; he evokes emotions by means of appropriate images and objects. The images in *The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock* and fine specimens of his doctrine of the 'objective correlative' – the poet himself stands at an 'impersonal' distance and lets the images and objects reflect the emotions of the hero. Eliot's theory of the objective correlative and the impersonality of art from the most significant aspects of his classicism.



The phrase ‘dissociation of sensibility’ occurs in Eliot’s essay on *The Metaphysical Poets*. He uses this phrase to describe and express the characteristic fault of the later seventeenth century poetry. The antonym of this phrase which Eliot has used is ‘unification of sensibility’. According to T.S.Eliot, ‘unification of sensibility’ evokes good poetry and the cause of bad poetry is ‘dissociation of sensibility’. By the phrase, unification of sensibility, Eliot means “direct sensuous apprehension of thought, a recreation of thought into feeling”. It has to be kept in mind that in the criticism of Eliot, the relation of intellect and emotion in art and poetry is a fundamental value. The excellence of the artistic performance of the poet is mainly depends on the intensity of his sensibility. According to him a poem is ‘the emotional equivalent of thought’. Thus, the fusion of thought and emotion is essential to poet’s creativity. Edgar Stanley Hyman, writing on the literary criticism of Eliot, begins by annotating his (Eliot’s) essay “Tradition and the Individual Talent” ... which is the key to all his later work” (P 79) and by following such a method, he arrives at the conclusion thus:

*“The personality which emerges finally is  
..... that of a sick, defeated and suffering  
man; the descriptive and impersonality  
of the poetry, the “tradition” of the criticism,  
chiefly props sustain him” (P 105).*

Eliot’s special achievement in the field of literary criticism paved way for some order into the modern intellectual and ideological chaos. Through this, Eliot has enabled himself as well as his contemporaries to understand the present day human situation fully. Eliot has made his aim’s impact surround in religious thought, in social thought and in art. Eliot’s attempt was to reinstate the dignity, glory and freedom of man. Eliot was thus defending and initiating the “category of the individual” in thought. Eliot firmly believes in the opinion that “society is for the individual and the individual must be sacrificed for the society” (Matthiessen 148). Thus, according to Eliot, human dignity springs 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. To ignore any one of the opposing elements is to misrepresent man. The recognition and the dissemination of this idea of man is one of Eliot’s major achievements as a critic.

The concept of tradition and orthodoxy are advanced by Eliot seriously to be considered by the modern mind as alternatives to imply the concept of liberalism. The word tradition does not mean ‘standing still’. The etymology of the word ‘tradition’ itself indicates the dynamic characteristic of the concept. Tradition implies more than anything else, value-judgements and value-judgements are based not only on the human intellect but on the complete personality of man:

*“What is really a tradition therefore is not the institution but the belief in its value .... A certain way of acting is regarded as right; a certain order or arrangement is held desirable. The maintenance of the tradition is the assertion of this judgement” (Radin 63).*

Tradition is thus inextricably related to orthodoxy, the belief in and the knowledge of what is right:

*“Tradition may be conceived as a by-product of right living, not to be aimed at directly. It is of the blood, so to speak, rather than of the brain; it is the means by which the vitality of the past enriches the present. In the co-operation of both is the reconciliation of thought and feeling”  
(After Strange Gods 30)*

In essays of Eliot’s on the subject tradition, Eliot is critical of a sentimental attitude towards the past. The sense of tradition in Eliot’s point of view, is a life-line that keeps the poet in touch with order and reality which he is submerged in the dark waters of the creative imagination.

To conclude, Eliot as a critic and his criticism is a corrective to the excesses of the biographical and sociological school of criticism. He thus changed the entire model of critical theory and practice which was followed through centuries. In a word, it is to be said that T.S.Eliot through his criticism, marked a complete break from the 19<sup>th</sup> century tradition and said to have given a new direction and carved a way to literary criticism.

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