

4.0. Objectives

- Generating awareness amongst the learners about T. S. Eliot's position as a Critic
- Enabling the learners to understand in detail the essay "*Tradition and the Individual Talent*" as one of his most famous critical outputs

4.1. Introduction: T. S. Eliot as a Critic

Besides being a poet, playwright and publisher, T. S. Eliot (1888-1965) was one of the most seminal critics of his time. Carlo Linati, his Italian critic, found his poetry to be 'irrational, incomprehensible... a magnificent puzzle', and in his poetic endeavors 'a deliberate critical purpose'. Also in his literary criticism Eliot's personality has found its full expression. Thus Eliot's literary criticism can be seen as expression of his poetic credo. As one of the seminal critics of the twentieth century; Eliot shows a disinterested endeavour of critical faculty and intelligence in analyzing a work of art. For the sake a systematic discussion, his critical works may be grouped under the following headings:

- a) theoretical criticism dealing with the principles of literature,
- b) descriptive and practical criticism dealing with the works of individual writers and evaluation of their achievements, and
- c) theological essays.

'Tradition and Individual Talent' has been one of his extraordinarily influential critical works. It was first published in 1922 in *Sacred Woods*, and was subsequently included in the 'Selected Essays' (1917-1932). In this essay, Eliot has primarily dealt with his concepts of

1. Historical Sense, and Tradition

2. Interdependence of the past and the present
3. Impersonality in art in general and poetry in particular



4.2.2. Concept of ‘Individual Talent’

Although Eliot attaches greater importance to the idea of tradition, he rejects the idea of tradition in the name of ‘Blind or Timid Adherence’ to successful compositions of the past. By subscribing to the idea of tradition, Eliot does not mean sacrificing novelty nor does he mean slavish repetitions of stylistic and structural features. By the term ‘Tradition’, he comes up with something ‘of much wider significance’. By ‘Tradition’, he does not refer to a legacy of writers which can be handed down from a generation to another generation. It has nothing to do with the idea of inheritance; rather it regrets a great deal of endeavour. He further argues, “It involves... The historical sense... and the historical sense involves a perception, not only of the pastness of the past but its presence; ... This historical sense, which is a sense of the timeless as well as of the temporal and of the timeless and of the temporal together, is what makes a writer traditional.” By this statement, Eliot wants to emphasize that the writer or the poet must develop a sense of the pastness of the past and always seeks to examine the poem or the work in its relation to the works of the dead writers or the poets. To substantiate his point of view, Eliot says, “No poet, no artist of any art, has his complete meaning alone. His significance, his appreciation is the appreciation of his relation to the dead poets and the artists.” As he says this, he is perfectly aware of Matthew Arnold’s notion of historical criticism and therefore distances himself from such the Arnoldian critical stance. He identifies his approach to literary appreciation “as a principle of aesthetics and thereby distinguishes it from Arnold’s “Historical Criticism”. Thus, Eliot offers an organic theory and practice of literary criticism. In this, he treats tradition not as a

legacy but as an invention of anyone who is ready to create his or her literary pantheon, depending on his literary tastes and positions. This means that the development of the writer will depend on his or her ability to build such private spaces for continual negotiation and even struggle with illustrious antecedents, and strong influences. Harold Bloom terms the state of struggle as “The anxiety of influence”, and he derides Eliot for suggesting a complex, an elusive relationship between the tradition and the individual, and goes on to develop his own theory of influence.

4.2.3. Impersonality

In the second part of the essay Eliot argues that “Honest Criticism and sensitive appreciation are directed not upon the poet but upon the poetry”. This hints at the actual beginning of ‘New Criticism’ where the focus will shift from author to the text. Eliot here defines the poet’s responsibility. The poet is not supposed to compose poetry which is full of his personal emotions. He must subscribe himself to something more valuable, i.e., what others have composed in the past. Thus, Eliot emphasizes objectivity in poetry. Eliot believes that some sort of ‘physical distancing’, to use Bullough’s term, is necessary for successful composition. He also mentions that the poet has to merge his personality with the tradition: “The progress of the artist is a continual self-sacrifice, a continual extinction of personality.” The mind of the poet is a medium in which experiences can enter new combinations. He exemplifies this process as when oxygen and sulphur dioxide are mixed in the presence of a filament of platinum, they form sulphuric acid. This combination takes place only in the presence of platinum, which acts as the catalyst. But the sulphuric acid shows no trace of platinum, and remains unaffected. The catalyst facilitates the chemical change, but does not participate in the chemical reaction, and remains unchanged. Eliot compares the mind of the poet to the shred of platinum, which

will "digest and transmute the passions which are its material". He suggests the analogy of a catalyst's role in a chemical process in a scientific laboratory for this process of depersonalization.

Eliot sees the poet's mind as "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." He says that concepts like "sublimity", "greatness" or "intensity" of emotion are irrelevant. It is not the greatness of the emotion that matters, but the intensity of the artistic process, the pressure under which the artistic process takes place, that is important. In this way he dissociates the notion on the artistic process from an added emphasis on 'genius' and the exceptional mind. Eliot refutes the idea that poetry is the expression of poet's personality. Experiences in the life of the man may have no place in his poems, and vice-versa. The emotions occasioned by events in the personal life of the poet are not important. What matters is the emotion transmuted into poetry, the feelings expressed in the poetry. "Emotions which he has never experienced will serve his turn as well as those familiar to him". Eliot critiques Wordsworth's definition of poetry in the Preface to the Lyrical Ballads: "Poetry is the spontaneous overflow of powerful feeling: it takes its origins from emotion recollected in tranquility." For Eliot, poetry is not recollection of feeling, "it is a new thing resulting from the concentration of a very great number of experiences . . . it is a concentration which does not happen consciously or of deliberation." Eliot defines that "Poetry is not a turning loose of emotion, but an escape from emotion; it is not the expression of personality, but an escape from personality." For him, the emotion of art is

impersonal, and the artist can achieve this impersonality only by and being conscious of the tradition, He is talking about the poetic tradition and neglects the fact that even the poetic tradition is a complex mixture of written and oral poetry and the elements that go into them. It was only in his later writings that he realized that in poetic composition many elements are involved. In his poetic dramas, he sought to broaden his scope. Eliot has also ignored other traditions that go into social formations. In 'Religion and Literature', he has dealt with the non-poetic elements of tradition at length. He kept on developing his notion of tradition right up to the time he wrote 'Notes towards a definition on culture'.

4.3. Let's Sum up

Thus Eliot denounces the romantic criticism of the nineteenth century (particularly Wordsworth's theory of poetry); second, it underlines the importance of 'tradition' and examines the correlation between 'tradition' and 'individual talent' and finally, it announces the death of the author (i.e., the empirical author, the author in the biographical sense of term) and shifts the focus from the author to the text.