



# The Creative Launcher

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## T. S. Eliot: His Age and Poetic Drama

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### Abstract

Thomas Stearns Eliot was man of philosophy. He touched and enriched every field of English literature. He championed as a man of new hearing. He was a hard –working, studious and diligent enthusiast after knowledge. He described himself as classicist in literature and Anglo-catholic in religion. Poetic-drama is a great achievement of Eliot. He tried to use poetry and drama as a means of usefulness. He had observed two world wars and its consequences. He advocated religion in literature.

**Keywords:** Philosophy, Religion, Poetic Drama, Absurd Theatre

### Introduction

T. S. Eliot is a well know personality in English literature. He was a versatile writer belonging to modern age. He belonged to a period which witnessed the emergence of new social, political, economic and literary life. The modern age is an age of development and inventions in every field. It is the age of machine, science and commercialisation of art, literature and music. Crompton-Rickett points out the modern age; “Its reiteration of the old revolutionary formula of Liberty, Equality and Fraternity in new settings.”<sup>1</sup> Further adds; “Its worship of power rather than beauty- here it parts company abruptly with the age of Romantic Revival and like Victorian Age.”<sup>2</sup> Again says; “Its challenging attitude of the elder values in Art and Life- this to some extent is true also of the age preceding, but the challenging attitude is more persistent, more searching today.”<sup>3</sup>T.S.Eliot belonged to the age of Democracy, nationalism and socialism but he was in support of hereditary monarchy. Eliot’s early life had a great significance in making him what he was. The greatest influence was his family. He believed that the culture comes to an individual from the family. One cannot completely come out of the culture in which an individual is brought up from childhood.

Modern age was the age of wars. The political mal-adjustments could be seen. There was lack of mankind. Seeing this kind of chaos and disorder T. S. Eliot advocated for the Catholic order. He meant to bring security and progress in the society the things that were

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shattered in various wars. He wanted peace. T. S. Eliot tries to reflect the detachment and disintegration in the society. He tries to reflect the spirit of his time. As Eliot himself admits that writer writes his age, the influence can be seen in his works. Eliot's poetry is very much relevant to the modern human situation and also to human dilemma and corner. His poetry is inspired by the human misery and futility of modern age. The greater persons who influenced Eliot was John Donne, he said about Donne that he has enlarged the possibilities of lyric verse as no other English poet has done. The two great world wars had an important impact on Eliot. Dr. A.G. George says: "T. S. Eliot is hailed as the champion of new hearings in thought and in poetry. The contents as well his thoughts are new. Both thematically and stylistically, Eliot's poetry indicates a break with the Victorian tradition. To interpret his poems and evaluate his achievements, one must get a clear picture of the mental hinterland of modern times of which Eliot is often cited as the typical representative."<sup>4</sup> His writings are about the apprehension and incorrigibility of human mind and soul.

## **Philosophy, Religion and Literature**

Eliot had much faith in philosophy. He went looking for religious life and advocated for Christianity. He wanted the modern age to be age of Reason based on Enlightenment. He saw life in the synthesis between ethics and civilization. Eliot observed the complete collapse of civilization. He also observed that the modern age had complete chaotic religious beliefs. The whole world seems to be in scepticism, doubt and apathy in spiritual field. Church and Christianity were losing its control over the people. Material progress was the chief concern of the people. Man of literary writings started attaching religion. Criticism started against Bible, its sanctity and authority. It was the concern for Eliot as reflected in his works.

Art and literature had a wide spread. It is also an age of literary activity. It observed the growth of education and literacy. The demand and love for books could be seen. It could find New Literature. Drama came into existence once again. Dramatist like Hardy, Galsworthy, Shaw, Eliot, Barker, Ibsen etc. came with their writings. Dramatists liked social problems to be discussed through their writings. Bernard Shaw came with problem plays with new thought and ideas which were never discussed earlier. Novels were base on social purpose. It was meant for sociological studies. They came with psychological problems as well. The poetry as literary form also made an important contribution. T. S. Eliot, W. H. Auden etc made vital contribution. A. C. Ward says; "The demand long before expressed by Yeats, for a new and living political tradition met between the wars in his own work and in that of the new poets- T. S. Eliot, W.H. Auden, Cecil Day Lewis and Louis MacNeice. Poetry again becomes a vital literary form in close touch with life, and if it did not out the novel from its primacy, it certainly outstripped the drama."<sup>5</sup> Thus it is seen that new experiments were done in the fields of literature.



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## Works of Eliot

T. S. Eliot was a versatile figure in literature. He was a dramatist, critic, journalist, essayist, poet etc. He early joined as an assistant editor in the 'The Egoist' and then in 'The Criterion'. His works can be divided into three major categories; (i) poetry (ii) verse-drama (iii) critical essays. His major work in poetry is 'Waste Land' (1992) is an attack on the modern age. It shows the bareness of life. The artificial life it shows the impact of First World War and the coming Second World War. It is an obscure and difficult poem but shows the concern for the peace in the society. The society leaving the truth and reality, moving towards artificiality away from religion. His other poems like, 'Ash Wednesday' are the expression of agony and despair. 'The Four Quarters' is an inquiry in the nature of time and experience. 'The Rock' is another good work where he expresses the desires for hope and faith. His essays came as an important contribution in literature. 'The Sacred Wood' is an important work of Eliot, in which he explains that it is the work of critic to see the best work of time and the best work of twenty years ago with the same eyes. His other works are 'The function of Criticism' 'The Use of Poetry and Criticism', are he explains about poetry and the role of poet and critic.

## Poetic-Drama and his plays

The poetic-drama is a great achievement of modern age. Poetic drama had a bright future in modern age. The important contribution of Eliot can be seen in form of plays. He was interested in poetic drama. The best way to use poetry in literature was through drama. According to Eliot poetic drama is "It should remove the surface of things, expose the underneath, or the inside, of the natural surface appearance. It may allow the characters to behave inconsistently, but only with respect to a deeper consistency. It may use any device to show their real feelings and violations instead of just what, in actual life, they would normally profess to be a conscious of; it must reveal underneath the vacillating or infirm character, the indomitable unconscious will and underneath the resolute purpose of the planning animal the victim of circumstances, and the doomed or sanctified being"<sup>6</sup>. Poetic drama has a fusion of intellect and imagination, work and play, design and scenery, life and art, poetry and drama. Eliot realised poetry has the best method of expression. It is where the reality is expressed in a profound way. Imagery used in poetry held the best in poetic-drama. It enables the writer to say more than he can do. Rhythm, images, myths and symbols play vital role in enhancing the poetic- Drama. Poetry is flexible and its subtlety helps in better way to express drama. It is better than prose. There are more emotions. As Eliot himself says; "to work out a play in verse is to be working like a musician as well as like a prose dramatist: it is to see a thing as a whole musical pattern."<sup>7</sup> Poetic-Drama is not a top dressing of a prose. It is naturally poetic from inner beauty. The task of the poetic dramatist is difficult. He has to work like a poet as well seen that he follows all the qualities of a dramatist. According to Eliot: "The writer of poetic drama is not merely a man skilled in two arts and skilfully to



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weave them together, he is not a writer who can decorate a play with a poetic language and metre”<sup>8</sup> Poetic dramatists has to express things with action with real happening within limited number of words. Eliot further adds that; “poetry is not mere decoration or an added embellishment, it ought to be a medium to look through and not merely decoration to look at”.<sup>9</sup> Poetry and drama run simultaneously what makes it poetry is what make it drama. Both grow from within. Both have to justify their role in creativity. The writer who can effectively handle both the tools efficiently should attempt at writing poetic drama otherwise prose form is most adequate.

T. S. Eliot has always used drama and poetry as a means of usefulness. His plays are written in verse form. ‘The rock’ is a meditative kind of poetry. ‘Murder in the Cathedral’ is a temptation poetic-drama. Becket proves himself superior to the tempters. One of the best thing found in T. S. Eliot’s ‘Murder in The Cathedral’ is the women of Canterbury were made to play the chorus. It helped in the projection of action and emotion. Even critics were surprised to find the success of verse drama. It is a good example for those who were seeking poetry on stage. This poetic play won the hearts and minds of the people of the world. The aim of Eliot in regard to poetic drama was fulfilled. As F. O. Matthiessen says; “Murder in the Cathedral” like many of the morality plays is a drama of temptation, but Becket proves himself superior to the tempters. One of the most conspicuous technical triumphs in all Eliot’s poetry is in the choruses that were designed to be spoken by the working women of Canterbury. Here he carried further his experiments in finding verse forms suitable for ritualistic drama. He had no living stage tradition upon which to draw, but he believed that a chorus could still perform something fundamental function that it had for Greeks..... It could intensify the action by projecting its emotional consequences so that we as audience see it doubly, by seeing its effect on other people.”<sup>10</sup>

T. S. Eliot’s next play *The Family Union*. It based on sin and expiation. The play deals with Furies who provoked the Orestes to commit the crime. It is based on everyday characters. As A.C. Ward remarks; “Family Reunion is an example of material pressed into an alien mould, and showing-up of the fallacy that poetic drama could be forced into existence”.<sup>11</sup> Eliot well understood the poetic drama and its requirement. He started using prose in least form in drama and aimed at verse by which he cold display everything into drama. He further tried to eliminate everything that would carry audience towards poetry. He made them feel the mark of prose with the intensity of poetry.

The *Cocktail Party* came as drama after ten years of Eliot’s previous work. It is based on the idea of atonement which was the conception of certain catholic. It is s tragic play with comedy. It is a humanity of despair. His next play “The Confidential Clerk” deals with the choice not willing to be done in this world. It has nothing to with life-death. T. S. Eliot lived as a hard-working, studious and diligent enthusiast for knowledge. He was seen against educated- intellectual having puritanic religious background. He was a well read having



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knowledge about ancient and modern writers and writings. He said for himself that he was a classicist in literature and Anglo-catholic in religion.

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