

## A Short Analysis of T. S. Eliot's 'Tradition and the Individual Talent'. A reading of Eliot's classic essay

'Tradition and the Individual Talent' was first published in 1919 in the literary magazine *The Egoist*. It was published in two parts, in the September and December issues. The essay was written by a young American poet named T. S. Eliot (1888-1965), who had been living in London for the last few years, and who had published his first volume of poems, *Prufrock and Other Observations*, in 1917. You can read 'Tradition and the Individual Talent'

'Tradition and the Individual Talent' (1919) sees Eliot defending the role of tradition in helping new writers to be modern. This is one of the central paradoxes of Eliot's writing – indeed, of much modernism – that in order to move forward it often looks to the past, even more directly and more pointedly than previous poets had. This theory of tradition also highlights Eliot's anti-Romanticism. Unlike the Romantics' idea of original creation and inspiration, Eliot's concept of tradition foregrounds how important older writers are to contemporary writers: Homer and Dante are Eliot's contemporaries because they inform his work as much as those alive in the twentieth century do. James Joyce looked back to ancient Greek myth (the story of Odysseus) for his novel set in modern Dublin, *Ulysses* (1922). Ezra Pound often looked back to the troubadours and poets of the Middle Ages. H. D.'s Imagist poetry was steeped in Greek references and ideas. As Eliot puts it, 'Someone said: "The dead writers are remote from us because we know so much more than they did." Precisely, and they are that which we know.' He goes on to argue that a modern poet should write with the literature of all previous ages 'in his bones', as though Homer and Shakespeare were his (or her) contemporaries: '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. And it is at the same time what makes a writer most acutely conscious of his place in time, of his contemporaneity.'

In short, knowledge of writers of the past makes contemporary writers both part of that tradition and part of the contemporary scene. Eliot's own poetry, for instance, is simultaneously in the tradition of Homer and Dante and the work of a modern poet, and it is because of his debt to Homer and Dante that he is both modern and traditional. If this sounds like a paradox, consider how Shakespeare is often considered both a 'timeless' poet ('Not of an age, but for all time', as his friend Ben Jonson said) whose work is constantly being reinvented, but is also understood in the context of Elizabethan and Jacobean social and political attitudes. Similarly, in using Dante in his own poetry, Eliot at once makes Dante 'modern' and contemporary, and himself – by association – part of the wider poetic tradition.

Eliot's essay goes on to champion impersonality over personality. That is, the poet's personality does not matter, as it's the poetry that s/he produces that is important. Famously, he observes: '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. But, of course, only those who have personality and emotions know what it means to want to escape from these things.'

This is more or less a direct riposte to William Wordsworth's statement (in the 'Preface' to *Lyrical Ballads* in 1800) that 'poetry is the spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings'. Once again, Eliot sets himself apart from such a Romantic notion of poetry. This is in keeping with his earlier argument about the importance of tradition: the poet's personality does not matter, only how their work responds to, and fits into, the poetic tradition.

Eliot's example of Homer is pertinent here: we know nothing of the poet who wrote *The Odyssey* for certain, but we don't need to. *The Odyssey* itself is what matters, not the man (or men – or woman!) who wrote it. Poetry should be timeless and universal, transcending the circumstances out of which it grew, and transcending the poet's own generation and lifetime. (Eliot's argument raises an interesting question: can self-evidently personal poetry – e.g. by confessional poets like Sylvia Plath, or Romantics like Wordsworth – not also be timeless and universal? Evidently it can, as these poets' works have outlived the poets who wrote them.)

We might also bear in mind that Eliot knew that great poets often incorporated part of themselves into their work – he would do it himself, so that, although it would be naive to read *The Waste Land* as being 'about' Eliot's failed marriage to his first wife, we can nevertheless see aspects of his marriage informing the poem. And in 'Shakespeare and the Stoicism of Seneca', Eliot would acknowledge that the poet of poets, Shakespeare, must have done such a thing: the Bard 'was occupied with the struggle – which alone constitutes life for a poet – to transmute his personal and private agonies into something rich and strange, something universal and impersonal'. For Eliot, great poets turn personal experience into impersonal poetry, but this nevertheless means that their poetry often stems from the personal. It is the poet's task to transmute personal feelings into something more universal. Eliot is rather vague about how a poet is to do this – leaving others to ponder it at length.

Adapted from <<https://interestingliterature.com/2017/02/21/a-short-analysis-of-t-s-eliot-s-tradition-and-the-individual-talent/>>