

former students, has translated several of his works into English.

Strenski, Ivan. *Four Theories of Myth in Twentieth Century History: Cassirer, Eliade, Lévi-Strauss, and Malinowski*. Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 1987. Chapters 4 and 5 seek to identify the underlying elements in Eliade's "theory of myth," by which one can grasp the interpretive viewpoint Eliade brought to his analysis of religions and religious experience. Strenski's perspective is critical, and his bibliography is comprehensive.

## T. S. ELIOT

### American-born British poet

*Eliot, perhaps the most significant of the new wave of Symbolists of the 1920's, startled the world of poetry and spoke for a lost generation in The Waste Land, engaged literary critics with his landmark book of criticism, The Sacred Wood, and wrote the most successful verse play of the twentieth century, The Cocktail Party.*

**BORN:** September 26, 1888; St. Louis, Missouri

**DIED:** January 4, 1965; London, England

**ALSO KNOWN AS:** Thomas Stearns Eliot (full name)

**AREAS OF ACHIEVEMENT:** Literature, scholarship

#### EARLY LIFE

Although T. S. Eliot was born in and lived his early life in St. Louis, his family was so "New England" in its outlook that it can hardly be identified as Midwestern. Eliot's grandfather, William Greenleaf Eliot, was a Unitarian clergyman whose religious zeal brought him to St. Louis in 1834, shortly after graduation from Harvard's Divinity School. He founded a Unitarian church in St. Louis and then went on to establish three schools, a poor fund, and a sanitary commission in the city. His crowning triumph, however, was in founding Washington University in 1872.

Eliot was the youngest of seven children, one of whom died in infancy. His sister Abigail was nineteen when Eliot was born, his only brother, Henry, nine. Eliot's parents, Henry Ware and Charlotte Champe Stearns Eliot, were in their forties when their last child was born. They had been married for twenty years. The father was president of the Hydraulic-Press Brick Company. Both of Eliot's parents lived in the shadow of the renowned

\_\_\_\_\_. "Love and Anarchy in Romania: A Critical Review of Mircea Eliade's Autobiography, Volume One, 1907-1937." *Religion* 12 (1982): 391-403. While called a review article, this is a meticulous analysis of Eliade's intellectual development, especially as it contributed to his becoming the major figure within the discipline of the history of religions.

**SEE ALSO:** Ernst Cassirer; Claude Lévi-Strauss; Kitarō Nishida; António de Oliveira Salazar; Paul Tillich; Ernst Troeltsch; Joachim Wach.

grandfather. Eliot's father suffered the guilt of not having become a clergyman. Charlotte Eliot, an accomplished person by most standards, believed that she was a failure because she had not attended college and because her verse, written mostly for friends but occasionally published in local newspapers, had brought her no recognition. Charlotte was not comfortable around infants, so during Eliot's early years, a nurse looked after him.

The family spent summers in Gloucester, Massachusetts, at Eastern Point, the summer home Eliot's father built in 1896. Eliot knew early that regardless of where he lived, he was a New Englander. Although he was a Unitarian as well, his nurse had exposed him to services in the Roman Catholic Church, to which she belonged. In 1927, the year Eliot became a British subject, he was also confirmed in the Anglican Church.

Eliot received a solid classical education at Smith Academy in St. Louis. In preparation for his entrance to Harvard in 1906, Eliot attended Milton Academy in Massachusetts. At Harvard, he finished his bachelor's degree in three years. Eliot stayed on from 1909 to 1914 as a graduate student in English and philosophy. Following the lead of Arthur Symons's *The Symbolist Movement in Literature* (1899), Eliot read the French Symbolists, especially Jules Laforgue, in whose literary tracks he followed.

Awarded a Sheldon Travelling Fellowship in 1914, Eliot planned to travel on the Continent, then to take up residence at Merton College, Oxford, to write his thesis on F. H. Bradley. In July, 1914, he went to Marburg, Germany, for a summer program in philosophy but left after two weeks because war was imminent. He married Vivien Haigh-Wood in 1915. Eliot, five feet eleven inches tall,

was handsome and slender, although stooped, sallow, and sad-eyed. Always meticulously dressed and polished, he fit easily into British life. He visited the United States only occasionally after 1915.

Shortly after Eliot arrived in England from Marburg, his Harvard classmate, Conrad Aiken, introduced him to Ezra Pound, who became the most influential literary influence in Eliot's life. Pound identified "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock," written on Eliot's first trip to Europe in 1910-1911, as the poem most likely to establish Eliot's literary reputation. Pound persuaded Harriet Monroe to publish the poem in *Poetry*, which she did, in June, 1915. Subsequently, Eliot's poems appeared often in *Poetry*. In 1917, his first book, *Prufrock and Other Observations*, was published in London.

### LIFE'S WORK

At age thirty, Eliot had two books in print: *Prufrock and Other Observations* and *Ezra Pound: His Metric and*



T. S. Eliot. (© The Nobel Foundation)

*Poetry* (1917). By his fortieth birthday, he had twenty-three more books in print, including collections of his poetry, several books of criticism that dislocated many entrenched ideas about literature, and three dramatic works, *Sweeney Agonistes* (1932; verse play), *The Rock* (1934), and *Murder in the Cathedral* (1935).

The most influential of his books was *The Waste Land* (1922), a long poem dedicated to Pound, who suggested the extensive revisions Eliot made in the manuscript. The poem, which deals largely with the question of human alienation and estrangement in the post-World War I era, is a series of closely related sections whose unifying allegorical thread is the search for the Holy Grail. It depicts pessimistically humankind's greed and lust, its need and desire for redemption. No poem could have been more right for its time.

*The Waste Land* was unique in that Eliot supplied extensive notes and references for it, leading readers to view it as a more formidable document than it actually is. Eliot later confessed that he added the documentation, much of which is misleading, to fill space. The poem is more important for its fresh and vigorous use of language and for its control of metrics than early critics, misled by the documentation, credited it.

*The Waste Land* broke totally from the post-Romantic literary tradition, and it had obvious roots in such French Symbolists as Paul Verlaine and Arthur Rimbaud, in the philosophical quest for salvation found in the works of Dante and Vergil, and in the English metaphysical poetry of John Donne and John Dryden. *The Waste Land* is the first truly modern poem in English in the twentieth century.

It is remarkable that during Eliot's most productive period he was variously a teacher, a bank employee, and, for more than thirty years, a member of the publishing house of Faber and Gwyer, after 1929 known as Faber & Faber. Eliot could write for no more than three hours a day, usually composing directly to his typewriter as he stood at a lectern. He continued his work in publishing because he was never convinced that his writing was of sufficient quality that he should give over his life to it. As an editor, he was generous with his time and advice to young writers.

Religiously orthodox, Eliot declared himself to be also a neoclassicist and a royalist, stands that were uncommon among many intellectuals of his day. Viewed against the backdrop of the late twentieth century, Eliot, despite the heterodoxy of his poetic style and of his critical judgments, seems conservative, often to the point of being reactionary.

Religious identity was a continuing theme in Eliot's poetry and drama, reflecting the personal religious conflicts he experienced. Eliot's Ariel poems and *Ash Wednesday* (1930) express some of the concerns he had about the acceptance of religious belief and about the discipline such belief requires. His early dramas, most notably *Murder in the Cathedral*, a play in the Greek tradition that uses a chorus, reflect his own religious search.

Eliot's philosophical stance and literary methodology were antithetical to Romanticism, which emphasizes emotion over intellect. Eliot's artistic aim was to be as objective as possible but to produce writing that would serve a social function. This aim led him to experiment with drama in the 1930's, a decade in which *Murder in the Cathedral* was his greatest triumph. His Orestian *The Family Reunion* (1939), although it contains some superb writing, confused audiences and enjoyed little popular success.

With the onset of World War II, Eliot wrote more poetry than drama, resurrecting "Burnt Norton" (1936) as the first poem of *Four Quartets* (1943), which also contained "East Coker" (1940), "The Dry Salvages" (1941), and "Little Gidding" (1942), poems that deeply reflect his own past and, by extension, the collective human past. Each of the four poems is autonomous, but taken collectively, they make a statement about humankind that has an encompassing philosophical and anthropological impact.

Eliot received the Nobel Prize in Literature in 1948, the same year in which he received the Order of Merit from King George VI. By that time, Eliot was generally considered the most important poet writing in English. He heard of his selection for the Nobel Prize while he was in Princeton as a fellow at the Institute for Advanced Study. There, he worked on *The Cocktail Party* (1949), which he had begun before he left England.

The play, which enjoyed enormous popular acceptance, was followed by *The Confidential Clerk* (1953) and *The Elder Statesman* (1958). The later plays were concerned with the philosophical and moral issues with which Eliot had long been grappling, but they avoided the pitfalls of *The Family Reunion* and delivered their didactic message indirectly.

*The Cocktail Party*, witty and delightfully farcical, was Eliot's greatest commercial success, although the musical extravaganza, Andrew Lloyd Webber's *Cats*

## FIRE SERMON

*The third part of T. S. Eliot's The Waste Land (1922), "The Fire Sermon," opens with images that support one of the poem's main themes: the destruction of civilization. Eliot wrote the poem shortly after the end of World War I, the Great War that devastated both the physical and psychic landscapes of Europe.*

The river's tent is broken; the last fingers of leaf  
Clutch and sink into the wet bank. The wind  
Crosses the brown land, unheard. The nymphs are departed.  
Sweet Thames, run softly, till I end my song.  
The river bears no empty bottles, sandwich papers,  
Silk handkerchiefs, cardboard boxes, cigarette ends  
Or other testimony of summer nights. The nymphs are departed.  
And their friends, the loitering heirs of City directors;  
Departed, have left no addresses.  
By the waters of Leman I sat down and wept . . .  
Sweet Thames, run softly, till I end my song,  
Sweet Thames, run softly, for I speak not loud or long.  
But at my back in a cold blast I hear  
The rattle of bones, and chuckle spread from ear to ear.

(1981), based on Eliot's *Old Possum's Book of Practical Cats* (1939), has become one of the most commercially successful shows of the twentieth century, having far surpassed *The Cocktail Party* in popular appeal.

Eliot, ever the gentleman in appearance and actions, was clearly an elitist. This austere posture, however, did not prevent his helping young writers of promise throughout his life, which was neither easy nor happy. His first wife, Vivien, from whom he was separated in 1932, suffered from mental illness and was institutionalized for much of their married life. She died in 1947.

On January 10, 1957, Eliot married Valerie Fletcher, who had worked for him at Faber & Faber for eight years. In their nearly eight years together before Eliot's death, Valerie, who keenly understood and appreciated Eliot's work, brought more light and joy into his life than he had experienced since he reached adulthood.

### SIGNIFICANCE

History will probably treat Eliot's poetry with more interest than it treats his plays or, perhaps, his literary criticism, both of which will likely be read more for their ability to elucidate his enigmatic poetry than for their not inconsiderable merits. Clearly, Eliot was not only one of the most prolific writers of his age but also a man of immense social conscience and artistic integrity. Like his grandfather, Eliot was convinced that one's purpose in

life is to build enduring structures and institutions that serve humanity.

The Eliot of the 1920's spoke directly to the intellectuals of the so-called Lost Generation, who also heeded the call of writers such as Ernest Hemingway, Ford Madox Ford, James Joyce, and Pound. Eliot, however, was made of different stuff than the expatriates who flocked to Paris and its environs after World War I. Eliot constructed his castles of the mind while he led the routine existence of a young, newly married businessman struggling hard in a quite humdrum bank job to sustain himself and his wife. If the indecisive prewar J. Alfred Prufrock was essentially the early Eliot, as surely this self-caricature was, the later poetry, especially *The Waste Land*, is a depersonalized commentary on a generation that seems truly lost socially, religiously, and ethically, a world of displaced and shadowy figures.

Eliot's break from the Romantic poets and his conscious experiments with new poetic rhythms that conform to normal speech patterns established him as a pioneering poet who dared to turn from established conventions in both the style and substance of poetry. In doing so, he led the way for poets such as W. H. Auden and Robert Lowell, whose work has close affinities to that of Eliot. At the same time, *The Waste Land* forged the way for the long, modernist poem, comparable in scope to Walt Whitman's *Leaves of Grass* (1855). William Carlos Williams's *Paterson* (1946-1958), Hart Crane's *The Bridge* (1930), and Pound's *The Cantos* (1925-1969) are notable among the long poems that owe a considerable debt to *The Waste Land*.

—R. Baird Shuman

#### FURTHER READING

Ackroyd, Peter. *T. S. Eliot*. London: Hamilton, 1984. An engrossing and accurate biography of Eliot, with sensitive comments about his artistic genesis. Ackroyd knows his subject well and presents it engagingly.

Canary, Robert H. *T. S. Eliot: The Poet and His Critics*. Chicago: American Library Association, 1982. A striking, comprehensive consideration of Eliot's critical standing based on half a century of criticism. Canary presents opposing points of view fairly. His approach reflects Eliot's dictum that the writer must be objective.

Cooper, John Xiros. *The Cambridge Introduction to T. S. Eliot*. New York: Cambridge University Press, 2006. Designed as an introduction for students and others who wish to gain a basic understanding of Eliot and his work. Cooper examines Eliot's life and the central concepts of his poetry within the wider context

of modernism in Great Britain and the United States.

Gardner, Helen. *The Art of T. S. Eliot*. New York: E. P. Dutton, 1950. Despite its age, this book remains a mainstay of Eliot criticism, especially penetrating in its discussion of *Four Quartets*. Exceptionally knowledgeable about Eliot's use of images and metrical experimentation.

Litz, A. Walton, ed. *Eliot in His Time*. Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1973. An excellent collection of critical essays on Eliot's work. Better balanced than other collections that concentrate on one or two of Eliot's works.

Matthiessen, Francis O. *The Achievement of T. S. Eliot: An Essay on the Nature of Poetry*. 3d ed. New York: Oxford University Press, 1958. This remains the quintessential book on Eliot. This edition contains a valuable chapter by C. L. Barber on Eliot's later work.

Raine, Craig. *T. S. Eliot*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2006. Raine, also a poet, examines Eliot's poetry and finds a unified and coherent body of work dealing with a common theme—the buried life, or the failure of feeling.

Schneider, Elisabeth. *T. S. Eliot: The Pattern in the Carpet*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1975. Schneider succeeds well in her attempt to show that Eliot's work seen collectively represents a consistent, coherent philosophical statement. She gives more attention to Eliot's poetry than to his plays and criticism and shows the development of his thought and the conscious building of his philosophical and aesthetic viewpoints.

Smith, Grover C., Jr. *T. S. Eliot's Poetry and Plays: A Study in Sources and Meaning*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1956. This seminal book presents a complete survey of Eliot's major sources and interprets them in terms of his writing.

**SEE ALSO:** W. H. Auden; Djuna Barnes; Hart Crane; E. E. Cummings; Ernest Hemingway; James Joyce; Jack Kerouac; Sir Andrew Lloyd Webber; Eugenio Montale.

**RELATED ARTICLES** in *Great Events from History: The Twentieth Century*:

**1901-1940:** 1917-1970: Pound's *Cantos* Is Published; 1922: Eliot Publishes *The Waste Land*; February, 1930: Crane Publishes *The Bridge*; September, 1930: Auden's Poems Speak for a Generation.

**1941-1970:** 1941: New Criticism Arises in American Universities; February 20, 1949: Pound Wins the Bollingen Prize.