

"in memory of wb  
yeats" essay sample



**ASSIGN  
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## **“ In Memory of WB Yeats” Essay Sample**

Eliot has said that the poet/critic must inevitably write “ programmatic criticism”- criticism that expresses the writer’s own interests as a poet, and places him in his background. Consciously intended or not, this kind of criticism creates an atmosphere in which the poet/critics own poetry will be better understood and appreciated than if it had to appear in a literary milieu dominated by the standards of the preceding age.

He has further elucidated this view in the essay “ Tradition and the Individual Talent”, which appeared in his first critical volume, “ The Sacred Wood”. Eliot stresses the importance of both ‘ tradition’- the works of the poet’s literary predecessors, inclusive of the grand output of the Roman and Grecian civilizations, along with the doctrines of Christianity, and of the ‘ individual talent’- the factors inherent in the writer, that combine in the creation of the new works of art.

The correlation and the coexistence of both the present and the past are, according to Eliot, the components of the formula for writing poetry successfully. Though criticism is as “ inevitable as breathing”, Eliot stresses that when we criticize a poet, we attempt to recognize the most “ individual” or unique parts of the work- we thus concentrate upon how the work moves away from the tradition. We feel falsely that this “ novelty” is where the greatness of a fledging poet lies; we feel that that which is isolated from previous successes can be enjoyed by us to the fullest.

Yet Eliot comments that it is in this that we err, the individual parts of the work can be identified by seeing how deeply a poet has been impressed by

the past masters, and in how deeply the dead poet's "assert their immortality" in his work. The poet however, should not produce a "blind and timid" imitation- he should select and modify that which he feels is most relevant to his artistic endeavours, thus carrying forward that tradition whose foundation has been laid eons ago.

This tradition cannot be "inherited"- the poet must have a "historical sense", the knowledge of the greatness of his past in its relevant context, as being not only real, but also "living". He should incorporate with the present, the greatness of the past, its presence in the present and should be able to discern this "simultaneous order" shared by the past and the present. In this manner, the poet will be able to realize his place in time, and of his relation to the tradition. For Eliot, the word tradition implies growth, and so change is an absolutely necessary element of a living literary tradition.

The true test of the value of a work lies not in the degree to which it conforms to the standards of the "existing monuments", but in the fact that it does. These characteristics of conformity and individuality are rarely separated from one another. The work thus affixes itself onto the past- the poet contributing not only to the literary output of his generation, but also helping in understanding the art of his ancestors, from a modern perspective. This process of cohesion is not one-sided; the monoliths too have to readjust to the new introduction.

The existing order is already integrated without it, and in accepting it, has to modify and alter even so slightly, so as to be brought back into the balance.

Each work of art thus realigns itself to the new entry, and to themselves, in this "pantheon of art". The poet should realize that the present can be altered by the past, and should also have the conscious belief that the present, represented by his work, affects the past in equal measure. The past and the present works are thus co-dependant, each drawing strength and grandeur from the other.

The poet should be aware that art never improves, but that the medium through which he writes should be different from those used earlier on. Hence the mind of the poet, as an individual entity, ceases to exist independently, and becomes a 'melting pot' of all that is, and all that has gone before. More over, for the writer, the present is a vantage point, for it provides for a awareness of the past could not have had of itself in its own time- a result of the fact that the past is a part of what we are.

Refuting the claim that poetry requires an inordinately large amount of learning, Eliot suggests that a surfeit of knowledge "deadens... the poetic sensibilities". He does suggest though, that the knowledge of the poet must be used in a proper manner, while simultaneously developing a poet a consciousness of the past. As a result, the poet experiences a "continual surrender" of all that he is at the present, into something that develops with time, and has been doing so since the conception of time, something more "valuable".

This process of "depersonalisation" constitutes Eliot's Impersonal Theory of Art. According to Eliot, the poet has to disregard both his own personal experiences as a man, and those emotions, which are dominant at the time

of creation. The creation, the work of art, should thus reflect only the experience of the work that which he has created. Eliot crafts his theory around a scientific experiment in which sulphurous acid is produced by combining sulphurous dioxide and oxygen, in the presence of platinum. The platinum, he says, is the mind of the poet.

Though the mind works upon the creation, there should be no trace of the poet's " private mind" in it, just as there is no trace of the platinum in the sulphurous acid, it acts merely as a catalyst. Thus, there should be artistic distancing between " the man who suffers and the mind which creates"- the poet will be able, as a result, effectively transform these experiences into language, though still remaining personally aloof. The poet's mind is a receptacle that receives and stores a large host of emotions, feelings, phrases and images.

These remain there until a correct combination is achieved, and then the poet is able to create the experience. It is not the intensity of the experience; rather it is the artistic process that creates this successful fusion on paper that is of importance. The poet does not express his own personality, but a " more finely perfected medium"- his creation, the poem. Poetry for Eliot is not the Wordsworthian ideal of " emotion recollected in tranquillity", rather it is a " concentration" consisting of a large number of experiences that are incomprehensible to the logical mind, it is not conscious, and it is thus not " recollected in tranquillity".

However he does state that there is a lot in poetry that is deliberate, the " bad" poet being one who is conscious where he ought not to be, or he

ignores that upon which he should focus, thus rendering a "personal" touch to his creation. More over, it is not escapist, not a cathartic effect through which the poet can release his own personality. Thus, though the work of art arises from within the depths of the poet's imaginative processes, it is far removed from his own personal experience as a man- "the emotion of art is impersonal".

In conclusion, Eliot observes that the poet must be able to fuse his present with the past tradition, while keeping in mind the bearing that the past has upon his contemporary condition. He should also show that the emotion in poetry is just that- it is not his own. Thus both the tradition and the individual talent are integral to the creative process. Eliot was probably impelled towards this view on the conscious cultivation of the sense of tradition by the danger of literary anarchy which was present in the extreme individualism of the "spirit of revolt" which infected so much of European art and thought of the 1920's.

Discipline is one of the first needs of art, and at a time when all chains and bonds on artistic activity were being condemned and flouted, his emphasis on the need to respects the past as the life giving tree on which the branch of the preset was putting forth fruit was fully justified. Eliot's unified vision of literature has not altered, although his suspicion of individualism in art as a danger to tradition was considerably lessened by time.

A major problem with his theory is, rather than conform to the art of the past, it is necessary for an artist to have a more forward vision, and he should try and be innovative. It has also come under the attack of many

critics- Yvor Winters has said that Eliot reduces the poet to an " automaton". Wimsatt and Brooks have said that Eliot's theory represents a return to something like Aristotelian theory- "... hardly since the 17th century has a critic... so resolutely transposed poetic theory from the axis of pleasure versus pain to that of unity versus multiplicity... "