

A historical approach
to t.s. eliot and his
theory of tradition in
creative writi...



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To understand T. S. Eliot as a writer, one must look at his own view of creative writing and his passion for tradition. Eliot's idea of tradition can be misinterpreted: "Most often it is perceived as a smug and pompous intransigence to change...backward-looking traditionalism, self-satisfied with the way things have been and oppose to any idea of change"(Shusterman, 156). However, "closer study will reveal that Eliot saw tradition as requiring constant criticism and alteration with the aim of developing it and orienting it toward the future"(Shusterman, 157). This passion for tradition is reflected in a number of his essays and creative works. "Tradition in its ultimate designation, consists in the timeless order that comprehends all the necessary parts and from which each part derives its significance"(Lu, 83). To Eliot, tradition is essential to any poet's work. In Eliot's essay Tradition and the Individual Talent, he outlines a term that will be indispensable in any work of art to follow. He defines "the historical sense" as a connection between the new poet and all the poets to precede him or her; "a sense of the timeless as well as of the temporal and of the timeless and the temporal together, is what makes a writer traditional". There will often be ambivalence on the part of the creative artist towards the artistic past, especially the recent past. This is understandable. On the one hand, there is the desire to be truly creative, to produce something new and not merely a novelty within overused yet understood forms. On the other, there is the pressing need for genius to learn from genius. Eliot's historical sense is not only relevant; it is vital to the interpretation and understanding of art. Eliot's intention in formulating this historical sense is to create a rubric of some sort evaluating the poet's ability to maintain tradition within innovation, or "conformity between the old and the new". Keeping to this trend, <https://assignbuster.com/a-historical-approach-to-ts-eliot-and-his-theory-of-tradition-in-creative-writing/>

Wasteland refuses to let go of the past. To interpret a piece of art one must understand his context and the elements with which he works. For example, a “blind” interpreter would not understand the common poetic tool of allusion. It follows that it may be impossible for the reader to truly conceive the art: “No poet, no artist of any art, has his complete meaning alone”. In this quote Eliot himself uses the tool of allusion. He is making a reference to John Donne’s quote: “No man is an island”. More importantly, however, Eliot explicates his main idea that it is basically impossible to understand a poet without placing him into the context of “the dead”. Eliot’s historical sense can be applied to the poet for the purpose of judgment and therefore evaluation. It is not a judgment that evaluates the new art as better than or worse than the previous art, but a judgment of the poet’s ability to be traditional and be individual simultaneously. “It is a judgment, a comparison, in which two things are measured by each other”. These two things are conformity and individuality. “To identify and value modernity is also to locate a guiding and significant difference between one’s cultural inheritance and the demands of the new moment”(Wood, 18). If the work conforms too much it is not considered art at all. Yet, the art is not necessarily better because it is more innovative and new because its ability to “fit in” is evaluated as well. Therefore, one of Eliot’s intentions with the historical sense is to evaluate the talent of the new poet. “Eliot’s conception of tradition provides room for originality, but originality as he conceives it is a consequence of the individuation of the One”(Lu, 82). There are arguments against Eliot that this simultaneous existence of poetry between the past and the present is unattainable. “There can be no absolute historical knowledge because we can never escape our own contemporary point of view from <https://assignbuster.com/a-historical-approach-to-ts-eliot-and-his-theory-of-tradition-in-creative-writing/>

which we perceive our world and our past. Thus a given period of history will be perceived in a unique way by all other periods”(Skaff, 26). Artists have proclaimed themselves against tradition, meaning the art of the past. But the key difference is between those who have learnt from the past, and need to move beyond it to find new ways of expressing new things and those who, having failed to learn from the past, are doomed either to repeat it or to produce work, which is merely the evidence of a protest movement. Eliot has an account of how he thinks the artist ought to engage with Tradition. He also has a view as to how a Tradition is constituted in a culture and for an audience. The leading idea here is that a living Tradition is one in which new art can alter the meaning, the perception of the monuments of the past. Eliot puts it like this in a key passage of his essay, Tradition and the Individual Talent: The existing monuments form an ideal order among themselves, which is modified by the introduction of the new (the really new) work of art among them. The existing order is complete before the new work arrives; for order to persist after the supervention of novelty, the whole existing order must be, if ever so slightly, altered; and so the relations, proportions, values of each work of art toward the whole are readjusted; and this is conformity between the old and the new. Whoever has approved this idea of order . . . will not find it preposterous that the past should be altered by the present as much as the present is directed by the past. And the poet who is aware of this will be aware of great difficulties and responsibilities. In other words, a living tradition is distinguished from a dead one. In the latter case there is no simultaneous order, no synchrony, for any living person, merely historical (archival, philological) records. English is a living language, the simultaneous order of which is being continuously re - shaped by new speakers. Each

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innovation, which takes hold subtly, changes the language inherited from the past. For a living language, change is always present. In contrast, Latin is a dead language because there are no new speakers to re - shape it. There is no change present, just dictionaries and grammars that are essentially set in stone. In this perspective a large part of active arts education must be concerned with keeping alive the past, and that implies deciding what to keep alive and how. Many other poets, besides Eliot himself, make examples of Eliot's belief in tradition. A poet that makes an example of Eliot's historical sense is Walt Whitman. Whitman has managed to take one structure of English poetry and transfer it into a different form while somehow remaining within the original format to a certain degree. One poet from whom Walt Whitman has taken the classic form of the elegy and created his own guidelines is John Milton. John Milton wrote *Lycidas*, which has come to be known as an archetype for the classic elegiac form. After the death of Abraham Lincoln, a bereaved Walt Whitman wrote *When Lilacs Last in the Dooryard Bloom'd*. This modern elegy stayed within the guidelines set by Milton's elegy in some areas; however, it also contains certain characteristics that stray creating an entirely new form of the elegy to be observed. The classic elegy characteristics that Whitman abandons are repetition of the dead tone, pastoral theme, a desire to control nature, and questioning. However, Whitman does use traditional techniques such as the technique of weaving and substitution, both are found in Milton's elegy. The main three themes are woven in and out of the procession that goes cross-country in Whitman's essay. The subject of Whitman's poem is an abstract national hero. Through this abandonment of naming the dead it is possible for the subject to not only represent Lincoln but the fallen soldiers of the union as <https://assignbuster.com/a-historical-approach-to-ts-eliot-and-his-theory-of-tradition-in-creative-writing/>

well, "Coffin carrying a corpse to where it shall rest in its grave". This anonymity allows for the "corpse" to represent Lincoln and all the wars unknown dead. In contrast, Milton's classic elegy proclaims, "For Lycidas is dead". In Whitman's poem the martyred president is never directly described, never is he named and never is he directly addressed. Therefore, Whitman uses Milton's traditional techniques to create a well-respected and understood elegy; however, he uses new techniques to keep his elegy unique and appropriate to the situation. Through Whitman's historical sense he created a poem to be revered for its traditional and individualistic values. As Tradition and the Individual Talent asks the reader to remember the dead so does The Wasteland. In The Wasteland, The "Burial of the Dead" is opened with the disturbing image of lilacs growing out of dead land. It closes with an image of a dog digging up human bones in a garden. This scene alludes to Eliot's essay. In the essay he writes about not forgetting those dead poets that have written before us. That one must look back to them and remember them just as the dog makes one remember the dead by digging up their physical remains. It is ironic that Eliot uses new innovative styles when writing a poem that mocks the modern age as a "wasteland". "There is a longing for death, what underlies it is a weary continuation of mere existence when health, activity, joy, and sensation have gone" (Gish, 41). Eliot does embrace innovation and change. In The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock he is innovative and strays from tradition all together, "it is individual to a degree. Mr. Eliot uses free rhyme very effectively" (Brooker, 3). The speaker of this ironic monologue is a modern, urban man who, like many of his kind, feels isolated and incapable of decisive action. The speaker of this ironic monologue is a modern, urban man who, like many of his kind,

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feels isolated and incapable of decisive action. The refrain in The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock is: " In the room the women come and go/ Talking of Michelangelo." These lines are obviously poking fun at the Victorian bourgeois. This is then a poem of rebellion against tradition. " At the heart of his work lies a rigorous critique of economic modernity, linking material causes and ideological effects, locating the ruins of capitol in everything from sex to art to science and religion"(Comentale, 70). Misunderstanding Eliot's idea of tradition can create problems in interpreting Eliot's work. " With the label ' conservative' readers forget his innovative achievements in poetry and criticism, and his advocacy of the need for change and continuous development in these fields"(Shusterman, 156). The poet and his time are relevant when observing the past that preceded any individual poet. T. S. Eliot, " The task of the poet will differ, not only according to his personal constitution, but according to the time in which he finds himself. " Eliot proceeded to reconsider the saints of his mother's poetry and their mysticism from a historical perspective, keeping in mind that the documentary value of her poetry resides in it's ' rendering of a state of mind contemporary with the author,' evident in both subject and treatment"(Skaff, 26). T. S. Eliot challenged tradition in society and then reinforced it. T. S Eliot has a firm view on aesthetic values. " He relies heavily on the father tongues of Greek and Latin that was known by those who could read in the middle Ages as well as the great writers of his time. According to Eliot people with knowledge in this father tongue were the educated as well as the upper class. Also, it was mostly men that were familiar with the father tongue because women did not gain the privilege to be educated until modern times. Any women who did have knowledge in the father tongue had to do so

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secretly" (Lu, 23-26). Eliot predetermines that one knows the great writers of his time and that one is familiar with English literary tradition. In the essay Tradition and the Individual Talent, Eliot says, " ... the historical sense compels a man to write not merely with his own generation in his bones, but with a feeling that the whole of the literature of his own country has a simultaneous existence and composes a simultaneous order." He mostly talks to the educated male and beauty for him is found in these great writers of his time. He also says, " In a peculiar sense he will be aware also that he must inevitably be judged by the standards of the past. I say judged, not amputated, by them; not judged to be good as, or worse or better than, the dead; and certainly not judged by the canons of dead critics. It is a judgment, a comparison, in which two things are measured by each other." Customs and traditions are said to be the two main things that make a society prosper. In his essay, Tradition and the Individual Talent, Eliot explores the role that tradition plays in humans, Particularly writers. He declares that the dictionary meaning of tradition should be discouraged and that tradition is something being earned rather than passed down. Eliot said, " Tradition is a matter of much wider significance. It can not be inherited and if you want it you must obtain it by great labor"