

T.s. eliot's unoptimistic portrayal of society essay sample

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As one of the foremost men of English literature, American-born writer and 1948 Nobel Prize for Literature awardee Thomas Stearns may be described as a profound thinker. To understand his works, one must investigate and learn something about his childhood and upbringing, mainly through published sources, particularly contemporaries and men of letters who have encountered him on a personal level while he was still alive, or have studied him intently. Only then can it be ascertained, to some degree, if his unoptimistic portrayals of society were a reflection of his psyche or more to be taken as real social commentaries. T. S. Eliot, as a social anatomist and poet, highlighted human disillusionment or fragility. He has also been described as being a soul in torment, and references have been made to the nervous disorder he experienced at some point in his life. People have also constantly written about his sufferings caused by a failed marriage along with some other external events, like his sentiments during the outbreak of the war. As such, it can be inferred that he was influenced by his own psyche or conceptions, but this did not deter him from writing about society from a social critic's independent point of view.

1. S. Eliot's ideals of society may be considered then to have sprung from his psyche, to a certain degree, but many of his works did serve as compelling social commentaries of his time.

Frank Kermode, in an online article entitled " Bearing Eliot's Reality" which expressed writer-biographer Peter Ackroyd's descriptions of T. S. Eliot in The Guardian, described T. S. Eliot as having " a determination to make his life on his own terms, in spite of all the breakdowns, alarming illnesses and deep loneliness of his whole life except for the last happy years." He also noted <https://assignbuster.com/ts-eliot-unoptimistic-portrayal-of-society-essay-sample/>

that “ our understanding of his poetry will benefit from knowledge of his suffering, or at any rate of his life in general. And indeed Eliot himself probably came to think this plausible...”

Indeed, it can be deduced that Eliot was a man of independent thinking and character, even if he actually went through moments of anguish in his adult life, and way before that, a “ somewhat lost and lonely childhood” (as expressed in an online article written by psychoanalytic psychotherapist Anna Dartington and posted by The British Psychoanalytical Society, who referred to a letter Eliot wrote to Herbert Read in 1928). His negative portrayals of society, in effect, were more intended to be stirring social commentaries.

Dartington, in the same online article posted in 2003 by The British Psychoanalytical Society, quoted English poet and essayist Stephen Spender that although England (Eliot decided to live officially as citizen in 1927) provided T. S. Eliot, in some way, with “ an extremely good setting for the development of his poetry,- just enough encouragement, just enough resistance and the entertaining companionship of people who after all cared deeply for literature, underneath he was too shy, too little cynical, too serious, too dedicated and too devout for them.”

Dartington also referred to Eliot not only as a poet and playwright but a literary critic and essayist, as well as a lecturer and “ something of a social commentator... He was always concerned with the relationship between traditional spiritual values and contemporary culture. He lacked faith in modern civilisation, perceiving it as tawdry, materialistic, dehumanising and

ultimately self-destructive. As a deeply religious man (he became a member of the Anglican Church in 1927) he struggled with a tendency simply to dismiss what he regarded as a 'pagan' world of corrupt values."

The March 1950 special edition of TIME featured an article entitled "Mr. Eliot" which quoted T. S. Eliot, himself, as stating that "the poet must... make us from time to time a little more aware . . ." It can be gleaned that Eliot himself desired and intended that his works serve as social commentaries that are not so much bitter acts or instruments to spur rebellion against government, but more, as Eliot puts it, as something to make people "a little more aware."

The same TIME article succinctly articulated that:

In an age that equals optimism with faith, it is fashionable to call Eliot a pessimist. Eliot is a Christian and therefore in a sense a "pessimist" about the nature of man. Yet in his "pessimism" Eliot is far more hopeful about man's future than most of the more secular prophets...Eliot believes that there is only one way out of the waste land—and that is not the middle way. He believes that the Western nations must choose between a pagan society and a truly Christian society. By a Christian society he does not mean rule by the church, but a society that really lives by Christian principles, with what he calls the "Community of Christians" (a kind of spiritual elite) forming "the conscious mind and the conscience of the nation." In his play *Murder in the Cathedral* (1935), a dramatization of the murder of Archbishop Thomas à Becket in Canterbury Cathedral, Eliot reminded his audience that a faith can live only if the faithful are ready, in the extreme of need, to die for it.

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TIME went on to mention Eliot's assertion that " culture means knowing a few things well rather than knowing many things a little." The feature article cited, as example, The Rock (1934), a piece of work in which T. S. Eliot admonished his fellowmen in the most striking manner. The excerpt, obtained from an online site entitled " Stories of the Human Spirit," reads:

Where is the wisdom we have lost in knowledge?

Where is the knowledge we have lost in information?

The cycles of Heaven in twenty centuries
Bring us farther from GOD and
nearer to the Dust

The Word of the Lord came unto me, saying:

O miserable cities of designing men,

O wretched generation of enlightened men,

Betrayed in the mazes of your ingenuities,

Sold by the proceeds of your proper inventions:

I have given you hands which you turn from worship,

I have given you speech, for endless palaver,

I have given you my Law, and you set up commissions,

I have given you lips, to express friendly sentiments,

I have given you hearts, for reciprocal distrust . . .

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In the land of lobelias and tennis flannels

The rabbit shall burrow and the thorn revisit,

The nettle shall flourish on the gravel court,

And the wind shall say: “ Here were decent godless people:

Their only monument the asphalt road And a thousand lost golf balls . . .”

Another significant work of T. S. Eliot that was published in 1922 is the modernist poem, *The Wasteland*, regarded as a commentary on post-war social order which, at the same time, derived much of its essence from T. S. Eliot's personal circumstances.

As a political writer, T. S. Eliot has been described as one who has “ never been deficient in candour and the courage to criticize himself” (Cameron 138). As such, he cannot be said to have been writing based on his psyche alone. There is also reference to T. S. Eliot as a deep thinker who analyzed the workings of society, as stated in *T. S. Eliot: A Symposium for his Seventieth Birthday* :

Ten years ago he remarked somewhat acidly on ‘the tendency. . . . for those who have acquired some reputation, to write books outside the subject on which they have made their reputation’ , and did not hesitate to instance his own work. Even if he had never written a word about politics, it would still be evident that the author of *Coriolan* and *Murder in the Cathedral* had reflected much upon the life of our society and upon the relations of Church and State (Cameron 138).

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From his works published in the early 1900s, from *Prufrock* to *The Wasteland* to the *Four Quartets* (a critically acclaimed work which was published in 1943), it has been noted that the nerve of T. S. Eliot's work has been "his feeling and his concern for the human good" (Cameron 138). The book *T. S. Eliot: A Symposium for his Seventieth Birthday*, went on to say that "this feeling and this concern give strength and passion to the most remarkable English verse of our time... to recognize this is not to fall into the error, often noticed by Mr. Eliot.

While it can be said that many great works have been inspired by a nurturing environment or spirit of approval, the reality is, many more masterpieces have been churned out even amidst the critical glare of society and trying personal circumstances. In other words, T. S, Eliot is one of those gifted writers who was flawed as an individual, but he was able to go beyond himself to give others relevant social commentaries that even present generation of thinkers tend to analyze.

As psychotherapist Anna Dartington opined, "Eliot held strong and critical views of the world in which he lived. He was however continuously at pains to discriminate between poetry and propaganda. He regarded the creating of a poem as a mainly unconscious process which aimed to express and articulate the emotional intensity aroused by thinking about, and experiencing the world."

In essence, his unoptimistic portrayals of an ideal society, while tinged with his own personal conceptions, mirror society at large, and he was motivated

to create greater awareness in the general public to do something to make the world a better place to live in.

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