

# T.S. Eliot as a critic ( BA Part3 Eng Hons 2017-20)

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Dr. Vishnulok Bihari Srivastava  
Asso. Prof.  
Deptt. Of English  
Rohtas Mahila College  
Sasaram, VKSU, Ara

T.S. Eliot is by far the most influential critic of our time. Unlike contemporary English critics like I.A. Richards, F.R. Leavis and William Empson he has not compiled independent books rather his ideas are spread over in his astray essays. He doesn't claim to have pioneered any critical school although the modern New Critics owe their allegiance to him for his invaluable contributions. Eliot was fed up with the existing critical scenario .In his essay Function of Criticism Eliot has compared modern criticism to a "Sunday park full of contending and contentious orators". He was the most condescending of all critics and had readily accepted his faults whenever it was brought to his notice. He called modern critics idolatrous and unyielding who are not ready to accept their faults. He had written two essays on Milton. In his first essay on Milton he criticized both Milton and Dryden for corrupting English language. When the critic named E. M. W. Tillyard reminded him of his mistakes in his book Miltonic Setting saying that degeneration in English language had set in prior to Milton and he should not be held responsible for the charges labelled against him. Eliot readily accepted his mistakes showing his solidarity with the arguments of Tillyard and praised Milton in high flown words in his second essay on Milton.

Actually Eliot was a classicist .He called himself anti-romantic and opposed tooth and nail the romantic approach that personal ideas must find an outlet through poetry. He was a die-hard critic of subjectivity in poetry and insisted that poetry should not be

treated as a platform to express personal feelings and emotions and strongly advocated objectivity in poetry. He outright rejected Wordsworth's definition of poetry that it is a spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings recollected in tranquillity. In his essay Tradition and Individual Talent (1914) which is considered as the manifesto of modern criticism, he developed the theory of impersonality and insisted that poetry is not a turning loose of emotion; it is an escape from emotion. It is not an expression of personality but it is an escape from personality. He further added that the more perfect the artist is the more perfect will be in him the man who suffers and the mind which creates. Eliot has referred to scientific analogy of a catalyst to substantiate his views on impersonality. Eliot observes that at the time of creation the mind of the poet works as a catalyst. By catalyst, he means the material the presence of which causes change in other chemicals but which itself remains unaffected. Eliot observes that if a gas chamber containing oxygen and sulphur dioxide a platinum filament is placed, it gives birth to a new chemical named sulphuric acid. In this process the platinum filament remains unaffected it is the presence of catalyst that brings about a sudden change in other chemicals. By this illustration Eliot means to suggest that the mind or a personality of a poet works as a catalyst although it is an aid to poetical creation but it remains unaffected.

Eliot craved for objectivity in poetry and discarded romantic poetry for using poetry as the platform to portray of personal experiences. He rejected Shelley's poetry in which he found nothing but bad jingling. There is a gradual march from concrete to abstract and from real to ideal in Shelley's poetry. He lacks a steady track of mind and is just like a butterfly moving from one flower to another. Eliot levelled serious charges against Shelley saying that he is a poet of muddled thinking. His poetry is also vague and obscure. There is

intellectual incoherence in his poetry. Eliot on the contrary insisted that there should be an amalgamation between mind and heart, metre and music and emotion and intellect in poetry and in his essay *Metaphysical Poets* praised the 17<sup>th</sup> century metaphysical poets led by John Donne for maintaining unification of sensibilities meaning that by striking a balance between mind and heart in their metrical compositions.

Eliot has used several catchwords to bring home his ideas. Prominent among them being objective correlative and dissociation of sensibilities. Eliot puts forward the theory of Objective Correlative in the context of Shakespeare's tragedy *Hamlet*. In his essay on *Hamlet* he has insisted that *Hamlet* is an artistic failure. Eliot argues that there is no compatibility between prince Hamlet emotion and the stimulus or excitant which arouse the emotion. Hamlet had not seen even the face of his father. Whatever he learnt about his father came through the lips of Horatio who suggested him to see the ghost of his father king Hamlet on the tomb at dead of night. When the ghost of hamlet's father appeared before him he was stunned to note that he did not die of snake bite as the rumour was a float but he was killed by his younger brother Claudius who poured poison in his ear. The ghost also asked Hamlet to take revenge upon his uncle and forgive his mother and leave her to the mercy of god. This lack of incompatibility between emotion and object lead Eliot to think that despite all dramatic craftsmanship.

Eliot has criticise contemporary schools of criticism for failing to fulfil their responsibilities which include the archetypal school of criticism led by Maud Bodkin, impressionistic school of criticism led by Middleton Murray and the new critics which he calls Lemon squeezer school of criticism. Eliot in his essay function of

criticism stated that the function of criticism is correction of tests  
elucidation of a work of art.