

**:: STRUCTURE ::****16.0 Objectives****16.1 Background****16.2 Introduction****16.3 About T. S. Eliot****16.4 “Tradition and Individual Talent” Essay Divided Into  
Three Parts****16.5 Let us sum up****16.6 Keywords:**

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**16.0 OBJECTIVES:**

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- This unit aims to discuss how poems should be written and how they should be read and appreciated by critics (from T.S. Eliot's point of view.)
- This unit will present T.S. Eliot's views on Historical Sense, the concept of Tradition, the theory of impersonal poetry and Depersonalisation.
- The unit focuses on the essay is divided into three parts: first, the concept of "Tradition," then the Theory of Impersonal Poetry, and finally, the conclusion.

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**16.1 BACKGROUND**

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T. S. Eliot's essay “Tradition and Individual Talent”, published in *After Strange God*, Eliot maintains: Tradition is not solely the maintenance of certain dogmatic beliefs. On the contrary, these beliefs have come to take their living form in the course of a tradition. Eliot suggests that a sense of tradition is necessary because this sense of tradition enables us to realise our kinship with 'the same people living in the same place'. Nevertheless, at the same time, we are instructed to bear in mind that the prevailing condition of life that produced a particular tradition is not something immovable but rather something that constantly grows and becomes different from what it was previously.

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## 16.2 INTRODUCTION

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T. S. Eliot's best-known essay, "Tradition and Individual Talent", was first published in 1919 and later included in *The Sacred Wood: Essays on Poetry and Criticism* (1920). Eliot attempts to do two things in this essay: he first redefines "tradition" by emphasizing the importance of history to write and understand poetry. After that, he argues that poetry should be fundamentally "impersonal," that is independent and distinct from the personality of its writer, by highlighting the significance of history in producing and comprehending poetry. Eliot's concept of tradition is intricate and peculiar, incorporating what he calls "the historical sense," which is a sense of both the pastness and the presence of the past. Eliot saw earlier works of art as forming an order or "tradition," but this tradition is constantly being changed by a new work that alters the "tradition" to create room for it. According to this viewpoint, "the past should be transformed by the present as much as the past directs the current."

One of Eliot's most well-known and controversial points is that in order to gain this unique consciousness of the past, a poet, according to Eliot, must "self-sacrifice." Once this awareness is attained, it will remove all traces of personality from the poem because the poet will now be merely a vehicle for expression. A "mature" poet's mind functions as a passive "receptacle" of ideas, words, and sentiments that are joined, under intense concentration, into a new "art emotion," according to Eliot, who compares it to a chemical reaction. Eliot believed that true art was simply the outcome of a better capacity for synthesis and combination, a capacity that comes from in-depth research and broad knowledge. In Eliot's view, true art had nothing to do with the artist's personal life.

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## 16.3 ABOUT T. S. ELIOT

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T.S. Eliot, who won the Nobel Prize in Literature in 1948, is renowned as a poet, literary critic, playwright, editor, and publisher. Thomas Stearns Eliot, born in 1888 in St. Louis, in the United States, was descended from a family that had long resided at East Coker in Somerset, whence, in 1670, his puritan ancestors emigrated to Massachusetts. He was educated at Harvard, Paris, and Oxford. While still a college student, *The Waste Land* (1922), *Four Quartets* (1943), and the play *Murder in the Cathedral* are among Eliot's best-known works. Eliot's accolades include the British Order of Merit and the Nobel Prize for Literature. The Tony Award for Best Play in 1950 went to his play *The Cocktail Party*.

T.S. Eliot acquired British citizenship in 1927. He wed Vivienne Haigh-Wood (Vivienne Eliot), his first wife, in 1915. It was believed that Eliot's dark masterwork, *The Waste Land*, was influenced by marriage. Unfortunately, Vivienne had a mental illness after 1933, and the two

lived apart until she died in 1947. Eliot married Esmé Valerie Fletcher (Valerie Eliot), his secretary at Faber & Faber since 1950 when he was 68 years old. She was nearly 40 years his junior. Until she died in 2012 at 86, Valerie Eliot safeguarded her husband's literary legacy.

Eliot's poetic career can be roughly divided into the first, which he wrote, *The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock* in 1911, which was published in Poetry magazine, and other poems that are important in the history of modern literature between the years 1910 and 1911. The second spanned the time he spent studying in Boston and Paris. The second, which culminated in *The Waste Land* in 1922, was contemporaneous with World War 1 and the financial and marital strain of his early years in London.

The third was written at the same time as Eliot's anxiety over the Great Depression and the advent of Nazism, and it culminated in 1943 with the release of the *Four Quartets*. Only a few exercises published in school publications came before the poems of the first period. However, in 1910 and 1911 he composed four poems that presented themes that, with modification and development, he returned to time and time again: *Portrait of a Lady*, *Preludes*, *Rhapsody on a Windy Night* and *The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock*, are some examples of music. Through the first decade of the 1920s, he took centre stage in Eliot's life and creative output.

The quatrains in Poetry, Eliot's subsequent collection of poems, were influenced by Ezra Pound in both form and substance. Unfortunately, Eliot passed away in 1965.

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#### **16.4 “TRADITION AND INDIVIDUAL TALENT” ESSAY DIVIDED INTO THREE PARTS**

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Because it covers all of Eliot's critical tenets, the essay "Tradition and Individual Talent" can be seen as an unofficial manifesto of Eliot's critical faith.

Thus, “Tradition and Individual Talent” divided into three parts

- Part: 1 - The Concept of Tradition
- Part:2 - Theory of Impersonal Poetry and Depersonalisation
- Part:3 - Conclusion

Eliot describes himself as "A Classicist in Literature, an Anglo-Catholic in religion, and a royalist in politics". *Tradition and Individual Talent*, first published (anonymously) in *The Egoist* in 1919. In this essay, Eliot argues that tradition can aid emerging writers in becoming contemporary. One of the fundamental paradoxes of Eliot's writing—and, in fact, of much modernism—is that it frequently looks backwards, even more sharply and explicitly than earlier poets did, to move forward.

### **Part:1 The Concept of Tradition:**

According to the Dictionary of Literary Terms & Literary Theory, the term 'Tradition' denotes the inherited past available for the writer to study and learn from. Thus, the writer's native language, literary forms, codes, devices, conventions, and culture are from the past. All writers begin with some tradition behind them (even if only that provided by their language), and every writer in some way modifies or influences that tradition, even when being imitative. Though Milton might have written some poems by Keats, some by Dylan Thomas are almost indistinguishable from work by G.M. Hopkins.

Thomas Sterns Eliot writes in *Tradition and Individual Talent*,

“In English writing we seldom speak of tradition, though we occasionally apply its name in deploring its absence. We cannot refer to ‘the tradition’ or to ‘a tradition’; at most, we employ the adjective in saying that the poetry of So-and so is ‘traditional’ or even ‘too traditional.’ Certainly, the word is not likely to appear in our appreciations of living or dead writers. Every nation, every race has not only its own creative, but its own critical mind.”

T.S. Eliot claims that the word "tradition" sounds unpleasant to English ears. The most “unique” and “original” features of a poet’s work are those that the English laud. They believe that these are his main strengths. This excessive emphasis on uniqueness reveals the uncritical mindset of the English. They give the poet the wrong kind of adulation.

They will realise that the best and most distinctive portion of a poet's work is that which exhibits the most impact on the writers of the past if they attentively and impartially investigate the subject. He says:

"If we approach a poet without prejudice, we shall often find that not only the best, but the most individual parts of his work may be those in which the dead poets, his ancestors, assert their immortality most vigorously."

Eliot turns his attention to the importance and value of tradition. In Eliot's view, tradition does not imply slavish devotion to the practices of the past. This would be simple replication of what has already been accomplished, mere slavish imitation, he believes that "Novelty is better than repetition".

The poet should have a historical sense, not simply resembling traditional works, but an awareness and understanding. Shakespeare may have been traditional when he adopted the revenge theme for Hamlet from Thomas Kyd's Spanish tragedy. Nevertheless, Shakespeare was partially imitating. He used his talent and also remained impersonal.

### **Historical Sense:**

Tradition is not something that can be inherited. It can be obtained only by Hard work. Gaining a historical sense makes a poet traditional. Understanding the past should be more comprehensive than the

immediate past, which is insufficient and immature. A poet should be familiar with even the distant past, i.e. literature of 'the whole of Literature of Europe.' To value him, a poet should compare and contrast him with the deceased. This is an aesthetic ideal, not just a historical criticism. He says the sense of mindless repetition should be avoided. Eliot views tradition as having a far more significant value. This work entails getting to know the earlier authors. It is essential to know what was beneficial and valuable in the past. Only those with a sense of history can acquire tradition.

The historical sense involves a perception, "Not only of the pastness of the past, but also of its presence. One who has the historic sense feels that the whole of the literature of Europe from Homer down to his own day, including the literature of his own country, forms one continuous 'literary tradition'."

### **Past and Present:**

Eliot says the past should be altered by the present as much as the past directs the present. New work will be inevitably judged by the standard of the past- a comparison in which two things are measured by each other. Therefore, the poet must develop a consciousness of the past, which should be continued throughout his career.

At the beginning of *Tradition and the Individual Talent*, Eliot claims that the measure of a poet's talent is how they handle their position within the historical framework of literature. The essay argues that the poet should let their familiarity with earlier authors impact their writing.

A piece of art or literature must be compared to earlier works to be judged. He thinks adding new works to the canon of literature causes tradition to change continuously. He contends that while the author should adhere to literary tradition and draw inspiration from the past, doing so will result in the author's work being altered by the works from which they have drawn inspiration. Therefore, the poet must be conscious of both their place in the present and their significance connected to earlier literary works.

### **Ideal Order:**

The past works have already formed an 'ideal order'-this is complete. When a new work is added, the order is slightly altered. Then there is conformity between old and new.

### **Part:2 -Theory of Impersonal Poetry**

According to the theory of impersonality,

a poet can only develop tradition/historical sense through objective sensibility, and one would think that the poet's identity and subjectivity are less significant.

When the poet excludes his personality and feelings from the writing of his poetry, he can deepen his sense of tradition and history.

Eliot gives the scientific chemical process of catalyst platinum, under which the chemical process of sulphur dioxide and oxygen gives sulphuric acid where the platinum does not change. The theory of Impersonal Poetry is about the poem's relation to its author.

The poet's mind is a medium in which feelings are at liberty to enter new combinations (similar to metaphysical).

**For Example:**

The analogy of catalyst:                   (catalyst – Platinum)  
Sulphur Dioxide + Oxygen -----  
Sulphureous acid

This combination takes place only if platinum is present.

Newly formed acid contains no trace of platinum.

Platinum remained unaffected, neutral, and unchanged.

Catalyst- Mind of the poet  
Elements – Expression (Emotions + feelings)

**Depersonalization:**

The poet's mind is a receptacle. It contains a lot of feelings, phrases and images. These are stored until they can be combined- a combination of experiences that do not seem like experiences for the ordinary person. According to Eliot, Depersonalization means Poetry is not turning loose of emotion but an escape from emotion. It is not the expression of the personality but an escape from personality.

Eliot dismisses the romantic theory of self-expression.

**Part:3 - Conclusion:**

Romantic writers felt that their poetry ought to be intimate and emotional. According to Eliot, poetry is about "escaping from emotions" and "escaping from personality" to avoid having the emotions run amok and come to an end, like in Romantic poetry. “

When the poet can remove his or her feelings from the writing of his or her poetry, criticism will be directed at the text rather than the author. Critically, Eliot proclaims the idea of art for art's sake, where the text has its own life and should be able to live without the presence of a writer.

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**16.5 LET US SUM UP**

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In his Essay, *Tradition and Individual Talent*, Thomas Stern Eliot says that art's emotion is impersonal. The poet can only reach this impersonality by surrendering himself to work. However, of course, he is not likely to know what is to be done unless he lives in what is not merely the present, but the present moment of the past, unless he is conscious about the things, what is dead, and what is already living. In this unit, we have discussed Thomas Stern Eliot. We have also discussed three

sections of the essay. Eliot's notion of tradition is presented in the first section, while his theory of the impersonality of the poet is covered in the second. The brief third section serves as the discussion conclusion.

So, in conclusion, T.S. Eliot mentions these points:

- ❖ First, focus on poetry, not the poet.
- ❖ Art is impersonal.
- ❖ Poet can reach impersonality by surrendering himself entirely to work done.
- ❖ To surrender, he should understand tradition and have a historical sense.

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## 16.6 KEYWORDS

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<b>Adulation</b>	excessive admiration or praise
<b>Anonymously</b>	in a way that prevents a person from being identified by name.
<b>Analogy</b>	a comparison between one thing and another, typically for explanation
<b>Catalyst</b>	a substance that increases the rate of a chemical reaction without itself undergoing any permanent chemical change
<b>Catalyst</b>	a substance that increases the rate of a chemical reaction without itself undergoing any permanent chemical change
<b>Conformity</b>	behavior in accordance with socially accepted conventions
<b>Impersonality</b>	absence or reduction of concern for individual needs or desires.
<b>Paradox</b>	a seemingly absurd or contradictory statement
<b>Proclaim</b>	announce officially or publicly
<b>Receptacle</b>	a hollow object used to contain something
<b>Synthesis</b>	the combination of components or elements to form a connected whole

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## 16.7 CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

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**(A) fill in the blanks in the following sentences from the words given below:**

(Three, Four Quartets, 1922, 1919, T.S. Eliot, personality and feeling, repetition, Shakespeare, receptacle)

- 1) Novelty is better than\_\_\_\_\_.
- 2) When the poet excludes his own \_\_\_\_\_ from the writing of his poetry, he can deepen his sense of tradition and history.
- 3) T.S. Eliot's best-known essay, *Tradition and Individual Talent*, was first Published in \_\_\_\_\_.

- 4) \_\_\_\_\_ won the Nobel Prize in Literature in 1948.
- 5) "The Waste Land" published in \_\_\_\_\_.
- 6) Eliot's anxiety over the Great Depression and the advent of Nazism culminated in 1943 with the release of the \_\_\_\_\_.
- 7) The poet's mind is \_\_\_\_\_.
- 8) "Tradition and Individual Talent" is divided into \_\_\_\_\_ parts.

**(B) Answer in brief:**

- 1) What is depersonalisation?

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- 2) What is an ideal order? Explain it.

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- 3) What is the third part of the essay, *Tradition and Individual Talent*? Discuss it.

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**(C) Write short notes:**

- 1) The concept of tradition.
- 2) Theory of impersonality.
- 3) T.S. Eliot as a poet and critic

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## 16.7 BOOKS SUGGESTED

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- Badenhausen, Richard. *T.S. Eliot and the Art of Collaboration*. Cambridge University Press, 2009.
- Beasley, Rebecca. *Theorists of Modernist Poetry: T.S. Eliot, T.E. Hulme, Ezra Pound*. Routledge, 2008.
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- McIntire, Gabrielle. *Modernism, Memory, and Desire: T.S. Eliot and Virginia Woolf*. Cambridge University Press, 2010.