

Tradition and the Individual Talent



INTRODUCTION

BRIEF BIOGRAPHY OF T. S. ELIOT

T.S. Eliot was born the youngest of six siblings in St. Louis, Missouri. Due to several health problems that prevented him from much physical activity while he was young, Eliot was a voracious reader. When he was 17, he published several poems and short stories, but it wasn't until later, in 1917 and 1922, that he published his famous poems "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock" and "The Waste Land." After leaving St. Louis, Eliot studied at Harvard and then stayed on as a philosophy assistant. From there he moved to Paris to study philosophy, meeting several distinguished philosophers, and then to Oxford during the outbreak of the First World War. He later left Oxford because it felt lifeless to him. While there, however, he met Ezra Pound, who was impressed by Eliot and later helped him to publish his work. Eliot remained in England, teaching and working at a bank. He also married Vivienne Haigh-Wood, whose mental and physical instability led to their eventual separation. Eventually, in 1925, Eliot became the director of the publishing company Faber and Gwyer, where he would go on to publish many famous English poets, such as W.H. Auden and Ted Hughes. Eight years before his death, Eliot married Esme Valerie Fletcher. After his death from emphysema in 1965, Esme annotated and edited many of Eliot's works and letters in order to preserve his legacy. Eliot left behind some of the greatest masterpieces in English poetry, as well as many plays and distinguished works of literary criticism.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

T.S. Eliot was prolific when the Modernist literary period was just beginning. Modernism was reflected in new and innovative writing structures—such as free verse and stream-of-consciousness—that resonated with the chaos of the post-war period. Meanwhile, in the field of literary criticism, a new approach called the New Criticism took hold. Prior to the New Criticism, works of literature were often examined within the contexts of the writer's life and events contemporary with it. The New Criticism proposed to take literary works out of this context and examine them as if they were self-contained. Eliot's "Tradition and the Individual Talent" made huge strides towards establishing the New Criticism by proposing that poetry should be an impersonal and objective practice. In Eliot's words, "art may be said to approach the condition of science," a statement for which he received many objections.

RELATED LITERARY WORKS

"Tradition and the Individual Talent" can be categorized along

with Eliot's other works in the field of literary criticism. In "Tradition and the Individual Talent," Eliot discusses not only how poems should be written but also how they should be read and appreciated by critics. He more closely discusses criticism in his essays "The Perfect Critic" and "Imperfect Critics." A consequence of "Tradition and the Individual Talent" was that critics began to view a given poet's works within the context not only of the past but also of the poet's other works. Eliot's emphasis on close reading of a poet's works was especially formative for the so-called New Criticism, a group including such critics as William Empson (*Seven Types of Ambiguity*, 1930), John Crowe Ransom (*The New Criticism*, 1941), and Robert Penn Warren and Cleanth Brooks (coauthored *Understanding Poetry*, 1938). Eliot himself applied this principle to his own works, viewing poems such as "The Waste Land" and "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock" as parts of a simultaneous whole. Eliot's respect for the seventeenth-century metaphysical poets, including such figures as John Donne and George Herbert, led to a twentieth-century revival of interest in these writers.

KEY FACTS

- **Full Title:** Tradition and the Individual Talent
- **When Written:** 1919
- **Where Written:** London
- **When Published:** 1919
- **Literary Period:** Modernist Period
- **Genre:** Non-fiction Essay, Literary Criticism
- **Point of View:** First person

EXTRA CREDIT

First Love. While a student at Harvard, Eliot met and fell in love with Emily Hale, whom he never forgot. After his separation from his first wife Vivienne, whom Eliot later commented that he married in order to "burn his boats and commit to staying in England," Eliot and Emily corresponded with letters. Later, Eliot burned these letters.

Unlikely Friendship. Eliot was good friends with James Joyce, author of *Ulysses*. Even though Eliot thought Joyce was pompous, and Joyce doubted Eliot's abilities, the two visited each other in Paris regularly.



PLOT SUMMARY

Eliot states that the word traditional is rarely talked about in terms of writing, except in a derogatory sense. At least, the

word is seldom used to praise writers, either living or dead ones. This is because readers often look for the way a writer stands out from their predecessors before appreciating their work. Eliot seeks to remove this prejudice, claiming that the best parts of a poem are actually the ones that are alive with the past.

However, by “following tradition,” Eliot does not mean imitating one’s most recent ancestors. Instead, he means that a traditional poet has a “historical sense” which makes them conscious of the whole past as if it were the present. Together, all poetry makes up a simultaneous whole that is changed by new poetry and guided by old poetry. Eliot goes on to claim that a critic cannot value contemporary poetry without setting it in relation to poetry of the past. The past and the present works measure each other, the new conforming to the old and the old adjusting itself to include the new.

Eliot states that the traditional poet is aware of the entire flow of time, which is always developing but never abandoning anything or improving. Art never improves but only develops. The present is only different from the past in that it understands the past in a way that the past can’t understand itself. The immature poet won’t understand this.

Eliot next addresses some objections that say his vision of poetry involves too much learning that gets in the way of a poet’s intuition and spontaneity. Eliot explains that it doesn’t matter how much material the poet uses to obtain their knowledge, only that the poet develops a consciousness of the past throughout their life. In this process, the poet surrenders constantly to the greater value of their work.

Eliot opens Part II of his essay by stating that true criticism criticizes the poem, not the poet. A poet is accomplished not because of how much personality they have, but because of how perfect a medium they are for combining feelings in new ways. This is like when a piece of **platinum** causes **sulphur dioxide and oxygen** to transform into sulphurous acid without itself being involved in or affected by the result.

To illustrate this, Eliot argues that artistic experience is different than any other kind of experience. Artistic emotion is complex, whereas personal emotion need not be. Poets create new feelings out of complex combinations of detail, and the effect is always intense, even if the emotions are different. Eliot claims that what the poet expresses is not their personality, but the “medium” in which these combinations of detail occur. Eliot demonstrates that the overall tone of a passage is not just the result of the situation the passage comes from. Rather, it’s the result of its new combination of feelings.

Lastly, Eliot claims that the poet is not remarkable because of their own personal experiences. In fact, the poet may even have a boring life while still being a good poet. What’s more, seeking new experiences does not help the poet enrich their poetry because artistic emotion is of an entirely different form than

personal emotion. Poetry is not an expression of emotion and personality, but rather an escape from both.

In summary, Eliot dedicates his conclusions to anyone genuinely interested in poetry. The poet’s work must be impersonal, and they only achieve this depersonalization if they develop a consciousness of the past as if it were alive in the present.



CHARACTERS

T.S. Eliot T.S. Eliot is the author and narrator of “Tradition and the Individual Talent.” As a poet himself, he expresses his conception of the ideal poet and the ideal poem. He puts the notion of tradition in writing in a favorable light. In Part 1 of his essay, he seeks to remove the common opinion’s prejudice that the best parts of a poet’s work are the ones that bear no resemblance to any other poem. Eliot claims instead that the parts of a poem that resemble the past in fact *are* the most individual parts of a poet’s work. In Part 2, he seeks to remove the prejudice that the poet is renowned for their personality and their unique experiences. Eliot’s claim is that the poet is not necessarily remarkable personally, but that the poet is an excellent craftsman of feelings. He urges critics and readers of poetry to appreciate the poem and not the poet, because the poem displays ingenuity whereas the poet’s personal life does not. Eliot creates the character of the traditional poet as the ideal poet—one who, unlike the immature poet, works selflessly and diligently to emulate the dead poets. With this essay, Eliot hopes to help people seriously interested in pursuing poetry.

Traditional Poet – The traditional poet is Eliot’s conception of the ideal poet. Eliot explains that, due to certain prejudices, tradition in writing is often given a bad name. Readers tend to think that the traditional poet’s poetry is derivative and lacks individuality because they only want to appreciate poetry that is different. However, Eliot maintains that traditional poetry is superior and that its best parts are the ones in which “the dead poets assert their immortality.” The traditional poet, therefore, is someone who appreciates and emulates the past. However, the traditional poet also differs from their ancestors in that they are able, from their position in the present, to know the dead poets better than the dead poets could know themselves. The traditional poet has more responsibility than an immature poet because the traditional poet must obtain “the consciousness of the past [...] and continue to develop this consciousness throughout his career.” The entire history of writing is alive in the traditional poet’s work, because they know that art never improves, it only adjusts slightly. The traditional poet has this “historical sense” which makes them aware “of the timeless and of the temporal together.” The traditional poet surrenders to the past and, in so doing, depersonalizes their poetry. In making their poetry impersonal, the traditional poet crafts new feelings out of common

emotions. All in all, the traditional poet is not, as they may first seem, an unoriginal imitator of the past. Although they revere and preserve the past, they also pioneer all new and valuable poetry. Eliot's claim is that new, valuable, and individual poetry is the emulation of the past, but in a new form in the present.

Dead Poet – The dead poets are the traditional poet's ancestors. Many people tend to view the dead poets as truly dead in the sense that they should not be emulated in the present. Instead of looking for signs of the dead poet's immortality in contemporary poetry, people look instead for marks of the new poet's difference from the dead poet. Eliot claims not only that the dead poets should be revered in the present, but also that their poetry is alive in contemporary poetry. Therefore, the dead poets guide contemporary poetry. In discussing his Impersonal Theory, Eliot claims that contemporary poets reuse feelings and experiences that the dead poets used, combining them in new ways to produce new effects. In order to be a successful and traditional poet, one must develop a "consciousness of the past" and carry on the conversation, so to speak, of the dead poets as if they were still alive.

Immature Poet – Throughout "Tradition and the Individual Talent," Eliot refers to the immature poet. The immature poet is someone who never gets beyond a certain stage, never becoming a traditional poet and never adopting the Impersonal Theory. In Part I, Eliot says that, when talking about a poet's being traditional, he does not mean "the impressionable period of adolescence, but the period of full maturity." Eliot says that, if a poet wants to keep writing after their 25th year, they will need to develop a mature and deep consciousness of the past, and of the *entire* past, not just of notable periods or of people they youthfully admire. In Part II, Eliot implies that an immature poet would approach poetry too egotistically. They would pursue poetry in order to express their own emotions and experiences, and they would seek thrills in order to have new things to write about. In contrast, a mature poet would understand that poetry writing is an impersonal experience and therefore wouldn't involve their personal lives in it at all.

TERMS

Criticism – In the context of "Tradition and the Individual Talent," criticism means the examination and assessment of a literary work. In the beginning of his essay, Eliot states that criticism has been given a bad name, because being "critical" connotes a lack of spontaneity. However, Eliot claims that criticism is "as inevitable as breathing," because it is—simply put—what passes through a reader's mind naturally when they are reading anything. Later on, at the beginning of Part II, Eliot mentions "honest criticism." He says that, if someone were to honestly criticize poetry, they would praise the poem rather than the author of it. In this way, Eliot tries to remove literary

criticism from prejudices that prevent writers and readers from recognizing truly praiseworthy poetry.

Depersonalization – Depersonalization is the action of detaching the personal self from something. In the context of "Tradition and the Individual Talent," depersonalization is the process the **traditional poet** goes through to make their poetry less personal and more in keeping with Eliot's Impersonal Theory instead. The poet depersonalizes their poetry by working up complex arrangements of common emotions instead of their personal emotions. The poet further depersonalizes their work by not using it to express their own feelings and by remaining neutral in the entire writing process. In depersonalizing their poetry, they become more traditional, because they are conscious not of themselves but of the whole history of poetry.

Traditional – Traditional means adopting the customs or ways that have been handed down from one generation to the next. In "Tradition and the Individual Talent," Eliot says that a poet is traditional when they receive what is handed down from the **dead poets** and keep the entire past of poetry alive in the present moment of their own work. To be traditional, the poet must develop the "consciousness of the past" throughout their entire life. What is more, traditional means self-sacrificial in Eliot's vision. The **traditional poet** sacrifices their individuality and personality in order to fashion new feelings out of the usual emotions, thereby keeping the past alive in their work. Thus the traditional poet depersonalizes their work as much as possible. By the end of the essay, therefore, impersonal and traditional are one and the same: the poet is better able to make their art impersonal and of "significant emotion" if they surrender themselves to the past.



THEMES

In LitCharts literature guides, each theme gets its own color-coded icon. These icons make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. If you don't have a color printer, you can still use the icons to track themes in black and white.



THE PAST, PRESENT, AND TRADITION

In Part 1 of "Tradition and the Individual Talent," Eliot points out that most people only appreciate a poet if the poet is different from their predecessors. In this difference, readers "pretend to find what is individual." However, Eliot claims that the best parts of a poem are actually the ones in which the dead poets "assert their immortality." In other words, the best parts of a poet's work resemble the poetry of the past. At the same time, the present *also* plays an important role in great poetry in Eliot's vision. He suggests that what makes the poet great is the

“historical sense,” a sense that enables the poet to see not only the “pastness of the past, but [...] its presence” and to understand both the timelessness and temporality of art. He describes the past and the present as having a reciprocal relationship in art in which the present changes the past while the past guides the present. Ultimately, the poet’s position in the present is important, because from it the poet can understand the past better than the past could understand itself. Therefore, the poet lives “in the present moment of the past.” With this claim, Eliot asserts that the past is not really the past, but that it lives in the present, and that it is the traditional poet’s job to keep the past alive through their work.

Early on, Eliot establishes that, contrary to common opinion, the best poems conform to the past. Eliot claims that common opinion is prejudiced in its criticism of poetry because it “dwell[s] with satisfaction upon [a] poet’s difference from [their] predecessors.” In the absence of this prejudice, Eliot claims that the reader naturally appreciates the traditional aspects of poetry. Not only should a poem display aspects of the past, but it should conform to the past’s standards. Eliot claims that a poem’s fitting in with the poems of the past is a “test of its value.” The poem isn’t judged as to its being better or worse than those of the past, but rather the poem’s value is measured based on how well it belongs with what came before it. Eliot points out, however, that conforming doesn’t mean imitating one’s immediate predecessors; conforming to one aspect or period of the past is unacceptable and immature. Rather, the poet should be conscious of “the main current” of art’s history, being aware that “art never improves, but that the material of art is never quite the same.” Although poetry is always evolving, this change does not necessarily mean improvement. The traditional poet knows that they don’t increase the value of poetry in general when they write, but only add to its development. Furthermore, the poet must develop this “consciousness of the past” throughout their entire life. Therefore, the poet has a huge responsibility to the past.

As important as it is for the poet to develop the consciousness of the past, their position in the present is of equal importance. First of all, Eliot cautions against imitation. He says that a poet should never blindly imitate predecessors because this would be tiresome, and “novelty is better than repetition.” This shows that even the traditional writer must incorporate the present—something new—into their work. Also, the poet’s consciousness of the past, instead of making them antiquated, makes them actually more aware of their modernity. Even the traditional writer’s “historical sense,” although it causes them to “write with the whole of the literature of Europe” in their bones, also causes them to become conscious of “[their] contemporaneity.” The poet becomes aware of their contemporaneity when they keep in mind the entire scope of the past that came before them, and, when they write, they are

keeping the past alive in the present moment they are in. What is more, the poet’s consciousness of the past is not of something dead. According to Eliot, the traditional poet sees “not only the pastness of the past, but also its presence.” Therefore, to the traditional poet, the past is actually the present.

The past and the present have a reciprocal relationship which is necessary for the traditional poet’s work. When it comes to a poem’s conformity with the past, the past also conforms with it. In fact, “the past [is] altered by the present as much as the present is directed by the past.” When a new work of art is created, the whole past of art is adjusted slightly to make room for it. Moreover, the new work fits in *because* it is new. Eliot notes that a work of art must always be new, or else it would “therefore not be a work of art.” In order for a poem to conform to the past at all, it must be new in some way—a new take on the past—or else it would not be art at all, and would not belong with all art as a whole. Finally, Eliot claims that in order to know the past, one must be in the present. He says that the present is “an awareness of the past in a way [...] which the past’s awareness of itself cannot show.” This suggests that the present is a necessary vantage point for viewing the past as it truly is. In other words, without the present, there would *be* no past.

At the beginning of his essay, Eliot sought to remove prejudices from the word “traditional.” Prior to his essay, “traditional” had a negative connotation and meant “archaic” or “derivative.” In Part 1, however, Eliot redefines “traditional” to describe the writer who is conscious of both the past *and* the present. In fact, he connects the present and the past so closely within the word traditional that it seems one can’t exist without the other: in order for the traditional poet to “develop a consciousness of the past,” they must live in the present, and in order to write contemporary poetry, they must be conscious of the past.



EMOTION, ART, AND IMPERSONALITY

In Part 2 of “Tradition and the Individual Talent,” Eliot depicts the perfect poet as completely separate from their work. To do this, he argues for a difference between personal and artistic emotion. Although we might think that the intensity of an emotion in a poem comes directly from the intensity of the poet’s experience of the emotion, this is actually not the case. In fact, Eliot claims that the poet’s emotions may even be “simple, or crude, or flat.” What is more, the poet might remain unaffected by their own poems. Instead of expressing personal emotions in poetry, the poet uses their artistic strength to bring feelings—perhaps not even their own—together into a new effect of an emotion. Therefore, the poet is remarkable because they are a “medium” for this transmutation of feelings, not because of individual personality or depth of experience. In making this claim, Eliot transfers greatness from the poet’s personality to the poems

themselves and asserts that poetry writing should actually be an extremely *impersonal* experience.

From the outset of Part 2, Eliot argues that artistic emotion is not at all like personal emotion. First, the experience of a piece of art is essentially unlike any experience of life. Eliot claims that the effect of a piece of art does not develop simply out of a situation but is obtained “by a considerable complexity of detail.” Even though art creates a single effect, it always comes from a complex combination. What is more, the intensity of a poem always comes from the combination, not the emotion. Eliot illustrates this by pointing out that the episode of Paolo and Francesca—a tragic love story—is as poetically intense as the voyage of Ulysses as depicted in Dante’s *Inferno*, even though the two episodes do not stem from the same emotion. Therefore, the particular emotion has nothing to do with the poem’s intensity. To drive this point home, Eliot quotes a passage from an anonymous source. He shows that the power of the passage comes not from the situation—beauty set up against ugliness—but from the unique combination of feelings, images, and phrases that evoke the situation’s emotion in a fresh way. All this shows that art is always something more than what might have inspired it.

Furthermore, the poet’s personal emotions do not assist them at all in writing poetry. First, a poet who is inexperienced in their personal life can still be a talented writer. The poet’s own emotions might be “simple, or crude, or flat” while the emotions in their poetry are complex, which shows that the ability to write poetry can exist without the writer’s having had many experiences. Moreover, when the poet seeks new, more complex experiences, they will still not necessarily achieve complex poetry. They will only achieve complexity by using “the ordinary [emotions]”—ones which the poet may not even have had—in their poems, and in so doing express new feelings “which are not in actual emotions at all.” The poet’s artistic ability, not their experiences, is responsible for their poetry. All in all, the very act of writing poetry is not for the purpose of expressing one’s personal emotions. Eliot claims that poetry is impersonal because it “is not a turning loose of emotion, but an escape from emotion.” The poet does not use their poetry for self-expression, nor would it be any better if they did.

The ideal poetic process—recombining usual emotions and experiences to create new feelings—is best done if the poet’s work is impersonal. Early on, Eliot boldly claims that the perfect artist is entirely separate from their work. The more separate they keep their personal lives from their art, “the more easily will [they] digest and transmute the passions which are [their] material.” In other words, to be a good writer, the poet has to write impersonal poems. To illustrate this, Eliot compares the poet to a piece of **platinum** and the effect it has on **sulphur dioxide and oxygen**. In the example, the platinum causes the other two elements to fuse together and transform into sulphurous acid. Meanwhile, the platinum, like the ideal poet,

leaves no trace in the sulphurous acid and is not itself changed by the process. The poet’s artistic process is responsible for their poetry, not their personality. Also like the piece of platinum, the poet “is a medium and not a personality, in which impressions and experiences combine in peculiar and unexpected ways.” The poet makes external experiences and emotions combine and unite with their artistic process alone and not with their personality.

Not only does Eliot claim that writing poetry should be an impersonal experience, but he also claims that we should not admire poets so much for their unique lives. The intense emotional effect that art creates has “its life in the poem and not in the history of the poet.” In order to achieve this effect, the poet must undertake “a continual extinction of [their] personality” while writing. Therefore, their poetry is impersonal to the point of effacing the poet who wrote it. Their poetry is admired with no reference to its author.



INDIVIDUALITY, NOVELTY, AND CONFORMITY

Throughout Eliot’s “Tradition and the Individual Talent,” the great poet makes sacrifices for the greater good of their work. In Part 1 of the essay, Eliot suggests that the poet sacrifices novelty and individuality for the sake of adhering to tradition; their poetry, instead of being totally new, is “a living whole” of all poetry. In Part 2, Eliot argues that the poet makes poetry effective by depersonalizing it. All in all, the poet is undertaking a “continual surrender of himself [...] to something which is more valuable.” However, although it may seem that the poet is sacrificing both originality and individuality, Eliot seems to be arguing that, through this surrender, the poet actually achieves both. When examining the poet’s conformity with the past, Eliot claims that, in order to conform, the work must not only be new but also individual. Likewise, the poet achieves “significant emotion” in a poem by extinguishing personal emotions. Through these paradoxical claims, Eliot suggests that readers tend to recognize individuality and novelty incorrectly, arguing that the poet actually attains them most while actually appearing to conform.

Throughout his essay, Eliot presents the ideal poet as someone who makes many sacrifices. First of all, the poet sacrifices individuality. Eliot claims that “no artist of any art has [their] complete meaning alone.” A poem is only valuable if it is set in relation to other poems, which means that the poet isn’t appreciated for the way they stand out, but for the way they fit in. Furthermore, the poet must give up seeking what is new and novel. Eliot claims that the poet goes about their job wrongly when they seek new experiences to inform their work. Rather, they should “use the ordinary ones,” and in so doing keep their work traditional and impersonal. Lastly, the poet cannot hope to express their own emotions or personality in their poems. Eliot claims that poetry is not an expression at all, but “an

escape from emotion, [...] an escape from personality." All in all, the ideal poet sacrifices individuality, novelty, and personality when they write.

These sacrifices are all made in order to serve art—a much greater cause than the poet's personal aims. First of all, Eliot claims that the entire history of art is more significant than the individual artist. He calls the entire history of literature in Europe a "mind" and compares this to the mind of the poet. He states that, over time, the poet will come to understand that this "mind" of the history of art in Europe is "more important than [their] own private mind," suggesting that the poet relinquish their personal aims. In order to be more aware of this "mind" of art history, the artist must continually "surrender [themselves] as [they are] at the moment to something more valuable." It seems as though Eliot is suggesting that the poet is a martyr to their own work, and that the act of writing is the act of self-sacrifice. This self-sacrifice leads the poet to be overlooked in the act of appreciating poetry. Eliot says that "honest criticism and sensitive appreciation is directed not upon the poet but upon the poetry." This suggests that, when the poet surrenders to the greater good of their work, they lose all part in the final product, and the poem stands alone in its glory.

Ironically, however, Eliot claims that the poet, in surrendering to their work, actually gains all they thought they were sacrificing. Their work becomes newer, more individual, and more emotional as a result. First, when a poem conforms to the past, it actually has to be new to do so. Eliot makes the claim that "to conform merely would be for the new work not really to conform at all." For if it did merely conform, "it would not be new, and would therefore not be a work of art." Eliot's claim is that only a true work of art belongs with other past works of art, and art is only true if it is new. Therefore, in Eliot's vision, conforming and being new are the same. Likewise, being individual and conforming are also in some sense the same. Eliot claims that, when examining either a piece of art's individuality or its conformity with the past, "we are hardly likely to find that it is one and not the other." Furthermore, Eliot claims that the act of depersonalizing poetry can only be done by someone who *has* personality. Writing poetry is not an expression of one's personality but an escape from it, but at the same time, Eliot maintains that "only those who have personality and emotions knows what it means to want to escape from these things." This shows that a person has to *have* personality in order to make the necessary escape from it in their poetry. Ultimately, the poet with personality who makes this escape will achieve "significant emotion" in their poetry. That emotion might even be more significant than the "boring, or crude, or flat" emotions the poet personally experiences. The poet achieves more personality, it seems, by forgoing their own. Although the poet gains individuality, novelty, and significant personality in their poetry, they cannot do so without seeming

to do the opposite. Eliot's paradoxical statements show that the poet must first sacrifice all individuality, novelty, and personality in themselves before they can find those things multiplied in their poetry. While the poet seems to be self-sacrificing and conforming to the past, what they are really doing is transferring all value from themselves to their poetry. The result is that the poet's work gains all the significance the poet had to initially sacrifice.



SYMBOLS

Symbols appear in **teal text** throughout the Summary and Analysis sections of this LitChart.



PLATINUM

Eliot uses platinum to symbolize the traditional poet. Near the end of Part I of "Tradition and the Individual Talent," Eliot asks the reader to consider a phenomenon in which **sulphur dioxide and oxygen** combine to form sulphurous acid in the presence of a piece of platinum. In Part II, he describes the phenomenon in more detail. Significantly, nothing happens to these two elements when the platinum is not present; moreover, no trace of the platinum appears in the sulphurous acid. Even though it is essential to the transformation, the platinum itself remains unaffected by the process; it is only a catalyst.

The role of the piece of platinum in this phenomenon resembles the role of the traditional poet. First of all, Eliot claims that the poet's role is to combine experiences and feelings in new ways so as to form new emotional effects in their poetry. While doing this, the poet keeps their personal experiences out of their poetry entirely, just like the platinum makes up no part of the sulphurous acid. Finally, the traditional poet's personal life remains unaffected by their own poetry—like the platinum remains unaffected—because their poetry has nothing to do with their personal experiences and emotions. The traditional poet depersonalizes their poetry by remaining entirely separate from it, in the same way that the platinum is responsible for the creation of sulphurous acid but is itself not a part of its composition.

The platinum is a symbol for visualizing all the things that Eliot says a traditional poet does: the traditional poet makes use of timeless emotions and feelings (sulphur dioxide and oxygen) and transmutes them. Also, the traditional poet keeps their work impersonal: the poet doesn't get emotionally involved in it or become changed by it.



SULPHUR DIOXIDE AND OXYGEN

Sulphur dioxide and oxygen symbolize the experiences that the traditional poet transforms.

Sulphur dioxide and oxygen require **platinum** in order to become sulphurous acid. Before the transmutation process, sulphur dioxide and oxygen are stable and do not combine. After the intervention of platinum, the two elements become something new: sulphurous acid.

The role of sulphur dioxide and oxygen in Eliot's analogy of the sulphurous acid transformation helps the reader visualize the traditional poet's work. According to Eliot, traditional poets do not use their own emotions and experiences; rather, they use elements outside of themselves that have always existed. These emotions and experiences are elemental in the sense that they have been used before in other combinations. In addition, the traditional poet does not seek new emotions or experiences. Instead, they use fundamental emotions and bring them into a new combination by means of their artistic process. The result is a new effect of old emotions—like the sulphurous acid which only exists because platinum combines and transmutes its constituent elements (sulphur dioxide and oxygen).





QUOTES

Note: all page numbers for the quotes below refer to the Modern Library edition of *The Waste Land and Other Writings* published in 2002.

Part 1 Quotes

☞ We endeavor to find something that can be isolated in order to be enjoyed. Whereas if we approach a poet without this 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.

Related Characters: T.S. Eliot (speaker), Traditional Poet, Dead Poet

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 100

Explanation and Analysis

This passage occurs near the beginning of the essay when Eliot is identifying the common reader's prejudices in tradition and in criticism. This passage expresses Eliot's opinion that, at some point, readers and critics started to only appreciate poetry if it was completely different from anything else. They started to conflate uniqueness with value. Eliot claims that this is a prejudice and suggests that without this prejudice, readers and critics would naturally be drawn to "the best parts" of a work.

In this passage, Eliot implies that the author of a poem is not fully responsible for the poem. A good poem, in Eliot's view, is essentially written by the immortal "dead poets." He establishes that the dead poets are immortal and then claims that they reveal their immortality by appearing in the best parts of new poetry. Moreover, when the dead poets assert their immortality in a poem, this poem is individual. In this way, Eliot transforms the meaning of "individual." Instead of meaning isolated, "individual" now means alive with the past. A poem's ability to revitalize the past is somehow an individual trait, perhaps because the immortalization of the past in the midst of contemporary conditions never happens the same way twice.

☞ This historical sense, which is a sense of the timeless as well as of the temporal and of the timeless and of the temporal together, is what makes a writer traditional. And it is at the same time what makes a writer most acutely conscious of his place in time, of his contemporaneity.

Related Characters: T.S. Eliot (speaker), Traditional Poet

Related Themes: 

Page Number: 101

Explanation and Analysis



This passage occurs after Eliot explains that by "tradition," he doesn't mean the imitation of one's most recent ancestors. Rather, he means something much broader and harder to achieve which involves the poet having a "historical sense." Eliot describes the "historical sense" like a sixth sense which allows the poet to see something that is not usually seen. The poet with the historical sense, while they differentiate the past and the contemporary moment in time, also sees that the past and the present moment exist simultaneously.

Eliot calls tradition a "consciousness," an awareness of the past and of contemporaneity. In doing this, it seems that he differentiates tradition from mere knowledge of the past. The traditional poet should not just accumulate facts about the past. Furthermore, learning about the past as much as possible may not be enough for a poet to achieve the historical sense. It seems that the poet has to have their eyes opened, so to speak, to the truth about the way the past and the present relate and exist together. The traditional poet is mentally aware of the past, not just knowledgeable about it. A poet who is an expert about the past might simply imitate it in their work; on the other hand,

the poet who is *conscious* of the past brings it alive in their work in an individual way.

☞ To conform merely would be for the new work not really to conform at all; it would not be new, and would therefore not be a work of art. And we do not quite say that the new is more valuable because it fits in; but its fitting in is a test of its value.

Related Characters: T.S. Eliot (speaker), Traditional Poet, Dead Poet

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 101

Explanation and Analysis

This passage occurs just after Eliot has made the claim that poetry should be appreciated in relation to the poetry of the past and should conform with it. In this passage, Eliot makes some very subtle distinctions in what he means by “conforming” and “fitting in.” The word “conform” tends to mean the complete sacrifice of individuality for the sake of blending into a group. However, Eliot points out that, when it comes to art, taking away novelty and individuality from a work of art would make it unfit to belong to art as a group. Eliot’s claim is that newness is an essential quality of a true work of art. Therefore, to fit in with true works of art, the contemporary work of art must be new in some way. All in all, conforming, when it comes to art, is a complicated process in which the piece must be individual, but not to the point of standing out from the rest.

Along the same lines, “fitting in” with the past does not make the work of art more valuable; it only “tests its value.” Eliot means that the poem must not be written so as to fit into a slot in the past; rather, it must be written on its own, and then its value must be tested by seeing if it fits in with the rest of poetry. This again emphasizes the individuality of the new work, but also stresses the importance of its belonging with the works of the past.

☞ The poet must be very conscious of the main current, which does not at all flow invariably through the most distinguished reputations. He must be quite aware of the obvious fact that art never improves, but that the material of art is never quite the same.

Related Characters: T.S. Eliot (speaker), Traditional Poet, Immature Poet

Related Themes: 

Page Number: 102

Explanation and Analysis

This passage occurs after Eliot has noted that an immature poet views poetry’s past in sections or with preference to certain periods. Instead, Eliot says that the past should be viewed as one continuous stream. Visualizing the past as a continuous stream, like a river, helps to understand Eliot’s emphasis on the difference between development and improvement. He says that poetry develops over time—that its material changes—but that it never improves. In the same way that a river isn’t the same in any two places, poetry is constantly changing as it moves through time. It gathers new additions and changes direction. Also like a continuous stream, poetry leaves behind none of its developments.

However, this development does not mean improvement. Eliot seems to be saying that there is no way to compare and contrast poems as to their value, and that there is no way to say one poem is better than another. Since all of poetry forms one continuous stream, there is no way to break off one part and say that it is better than the other parts. Instead, the whole stream changes and varies as new poems are made. When one examines a work of art, the whole stream is always in question, because every poem is part of “a living whole” of all poetry ever written.

☞ But the difference between the present and the past is that the conscious present is an awareness of the past in a way and to an extent which the past’s awareness of itself cannot show.

Related Characters: T.S. Eliot (speaker), Traditional Poet, Dead Poet

Related Themes: 

Page Number: 102

Explanation and Analysis



In this passage, Eliot clearly articulates the difference between the past and the present and the relationship that they have to one another. He shows that the past and present each require the other in order to be what they are.

Earlier in the essay, Eliot mentions how a contemporary piece of poetry is comprised of the immortal past, as if the present itself is a unified moment of all time before it. In this passage, Eliot shows that this also works the other way: the past is only truly the past because of the present moment that looks back on it. Without the vantage point of the present moment, the past is uncemented in time and unaware of itself—it is only the present.

Therefore, because of the present, the past becomes the past. However, Eliot also says that, through the present's awareness of the past, the past comes alive in all its immortality in the present moment. This reciprocal relationship between the past and the present explains why the traditional poet's historical sense involves an awareness of both timelessness and temporality. The artist needs temporality in order to comprehend and reawaken timelessness.

☛ What happens is a continual surrender of himself as he is at the moment to something which is more valuable. The progress of an artist is a continual self-sacrifice, a continual extinction of personality.

Related Characters: T.S. Eliot (speaker), Traditional Poet

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 103

Explanation and Analysis

This passage occurs at the end of the first part of the essay, where Eliot introduces his concept of Impersonal poetry that he goes on to describe in the second part. Eliot describes the writer's process as that of a martyr who sacrifices the self for a greater cause. This passage describes the writer's process in negative terms—poetry coming into existence out of the negation of something else. Writing poetry is not an act of setting oneself to the challenge of self-expression or articulation. Rather, it is the act of sacrificing and extinguishing oneself at every moment to something of larger significance. The terms Eliot uses to describe this process—extinguishing and sacrificing—make the process sound unpleasant for the writer.

This passage raises the question, why would a poet choose to write? If writing poetry is not for the purpose of expressing oneself, and one has to extinguish oneself in order to accomplish it, what satisfaction does it offer for the writer? In describing the writing process in these terms, Eliot makes the poet sound like a laborer whose job is to

produce valuable poems. The poet's poetry is work that is separate from their personal self. Perhaps this is why Eliot later calls his essay "practical" and poetry writing a "profession"; poetry is not written for the sake of the poet's self-expression, but because the poet is good at writing poems.

Part 2 Quotes

☛ The mind of the mature poet differs from that of the immature one not precisely in any valuation of "personality," not being necessarily more interesting, or having "more to say," but rather by being a more finely perfected medium in which special, or very varied, feelings are at liberty to enter into new combinations.

Related Characters: T.S. Eliot (speaker), Traditional Poet, Immature Poet

Related Themes: 

Related Symbols:  

Page Number: 104

Explanation and Analysis



This passage occurs near the beginning of Part II of the essay when Eliot is beginning to describe his Impersonal Theory in more detail. Eliot calls the poet a medium for poetry. Often, a reader or critic might think that a poet is successful because they have a particularly poetic mind or soul, and that their poetry is a reflection or expression of this. However, this would actually be the mark of someone immature—someone too self-interested and self-involved in their poetry. Eliot's claim is that poetry is a composition made from materials entirely external to the poet that merely unify *through* the poet as medium.

Therefore, it seems that the poet only enables a process that is already ready to occur. Eliot says that, in the medium of the poet, varied feelings are "at liberty" to enter into new combinations. This suggests that varied and special feelings are only waiting for the poet to provide them the opportunity to combine and unify into a poem. This depicts poetry as a stream that flows on its own, only needing the poet to provide new space for its development.

☛ The more perfect the artist, the more completely separate in him will be the man who suffers and the man who creates; the more perfectly will the mind digest and transmute the passions which are its material.

Related Characters: T.S. Eliot (speaker), Traditional Poet

Related Themes: 

Related Symbols:  

Page Number: 104

Explanation and Analysis

This passage occurs just after Eliot has presented his analogy for the traditional poet in which platinum catalyzes sulphur dioxide and oxygen to combine into sulphurous acid. Just like the platinum in the analogy, the traditional poet remains separate from their work. In this passage, Eliot shows that this separation makes the writing process easier. By keeping their personal emotions and experiences out of their work, the traditional poet can stand at a distance from the ordinary passions that are their material. This way, the poet can better comprehend the material and can apply their artistic pressure to it in order to transform it. With separation, the traditional poet can view the material objectively and therefore have a clearer idea of how to sculpt it.

If there were no separation between the poet and their work, they would not be able to view their material objectively. Their material would be too wrapped up in their personal aims and goals for them to see it clearly. Also, their material would be too close for them to apply their creativity to it. It seems that the poet who is *not* separate from the material in their work only focuses on self-expression and doesn't create anything. Perhaps Eliot stresses this separation in the poet because, without it, creativity seems to fall out of the picture and only self-expression remains.

☛ [The traditional poet's] emotions may be simple, or crude, or flat. The emotion in his poetry will be a very complex thing, but not with the complexity of the emotions of people who have very complex or unusual emotions in life.

Related Characters: T.S. Eliot (speaker), Traditional Poet

Related Themes: 

Page Number: 106-107



Explanation and Analysis

This passage occurs after Eliot has demonstrated that artistic emotion is different in kind from personal emotion. Here, Eliot claims that the complexity of emotion in poetry is still different from the complexity of emotion experienced in life. The traditional poet doesn't even have to understand what it is like to experience complex feelings. All they have to be able to do is create complex structures of feeling in their poetry, patching together collected phrases and conventional feelings, that result in a profound emotional effect. Even the person with complex feelings in life would not understand this, because their experience would not be created in the same way.

Eliot is saying that, since the emotion in poetry is crafted, poetry can be written by the inexperienced person. The poet's job is to create the feeling; therefore, it is not necessary that the poet *experience* the feeling before they start writing. With this distinction, Eliot implies that poetry is not meant to mimic life's emotions or to recreate the way life experiences feel. Rather, poems are their own realms of experience that evoke feelings of a different order in the reader than those present in the poet's life.

☛ Poetry is not a turning loose of emotion, but an escape from emotion; it is not the expression of personality, but an escape from personality. But of course, only those who have personality and emotions know what it means to want to escape from these things.

Related Characters: T.S. Eliot (speaker), Traditional Poet

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 107

Explanation and Analysis

This passage follows Eliot's statement that the emotion of art should be impersonal and concludes Part 2 of the essay. Not only does Eliot believe that poetry should not be an expression of one's own experience, but he believes that it is a solace from the torments of personality and emotion. On the face of it, poetry appears like an expression of the poet's feelings and experiences. However, Eliot points out that the poet really has to sacrifice both emotion and personality in order to write good poetry. This also changes the way poetry is viewed: it is not an expression but rather a reprieve from expression.

This extinction of one's emotion and personality initially sounds like an unpleasant and laborious thing to do. In this final line, however, Eliot states the writer's process in a way that shows that, to anyone with both personality and true emotion, making this sacrifice is the obvious and desirable thing to do. This last line claims that someone with personality and emotion is not drawn to express these, but

rather to sacrifice them in the manner of the traditional poet. In this light, self-expressive poems are not always written by emotional, experienced people, but rather by people who are likely chasing after experience and emotion in their poetry because they do not have either of these things within themselves.



SUMMARY AND ANALYSIS

The color-coded icons under each analysis entry make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. Each icon corresponds to one of the themes explained in the Themes section of this LitChart.

PART 1

Eliot remarks that the English often don't speak of tradition. Occasionally they will speak of the absence of tradition in writing; more often they will use it as an adjective to say that something is "traditional." And, when it is used like this, it is often negative, or at least gently critical. It is only a pleasing word when it refers to an "archeological reconstruction."

Eliot wants to give the word "traditional" new meaning. When "traditional" is used positively, it's only to praise the act of resuscitating the past. It is used to refer to "an archeological reconstruction" which conjures the image of the poet picking apart the past and putting it back together just as it was. In contrast to this, Eliot will go on to assert that to write traditionally means neither to imitate nor to improve the past, but to develop it.



Eliot points out that the English never use the word "tradition" to praise either living or dead writers. Every group of people has its own distinct way of criticizing. Every group is blind to the prejudices of its way of criticizing in the same way that it is blind to the flaws in its way of being creative. For instance, the French have produced so much critical writing that the English tend to think the French are more critical than themselves, and "less spontaneous." However, Eliot points out that being critical is "as inevitable as breathing," and that it would be beneficial for a reader to put into words the feelings and thoughts they naturally have while reading anything.

Throughout the essay, Eliot blames contemporary poets for not being traditional enough and poetry readers for not being critical enough. Here, he seems to be saying that, as critics, English readers have become too lenient. What they regard as spontaneity in their reading, Eliot contends, is actually a lack of honesty. Eliot says that criticism is "as inevitable as breathing," which suggests that, if everyone were being honest with themselves when they read, they would naturally know what a good poem is.



Eliot remarks that, when the English praise some poet, they tend to base their praise on the ways in which the poet is totally unique. They look for the poet's individuality, and the ways in which the poet stands out from ancestors. In this way they only allow themselves to enjoy something when it is isolated. However, Eliot claims that, if readers remove this prejudice, they'll find that the best parts of a poet's work are the ones that emulate ancestors. In these parts where readers find the immortality of the dead poets, the current poet actually appears to be individual and mature.

Eliot is not asking the reader to stop liking what is new and only appreciate what is old. Rather, he is saying that if the reader looks honestly and unbiasedly at a poem, they will naturally find the best parts to be the traditional ones. Eliot claims that the past is immortal. This seems to mean that nothing in poetry is either new or old. Eliot makes one of his first paradoxical claims here, stating that what is traditional is also individual.



However, Eliot cautions that tradition would be discouraged if it simply meant imitating the successes of one's immediate ancestors. He still asserts that something new is much better than something imitated. No, the kind of tradition he's talking about is much broader, cannot be inherited, and is only achieved through great effort. For anyone who wishes to be a lifelong poet, it is necessary for them to have what Eliot calls the "historical sense."

Eliot makes an important distinction between tradition and imitation. He implies that imitation is insufficient and lazy. When he says tradition "cannot be inherited," he also downplays the role of natural talent. Rather, drawing on tradition—and therefore poetry writing in general—is a huge task that demands hard work.



By “historical sense,” Eliot means the sense that conceives of the past as in the past but also present. The poet who has this sense writes with the entire history of writing—from Homer to modern writers—in mind and believes that ancient writing and contemporary writing have a “simultaneous existence” and a “simultaneous order.” Eliot here defines a traditional writer as someone able to sense the temporal and the timeless together; the traditional writer is also aware of their contemporary place in time.

Eliot asserts that no poet has any meaning in isolation. Readers can only appreciate a poet when comparing and contrasting them historically and aesthetically to the dead poets. This conforming of a poet’s work to the past goes both ways: when new art is made, the order of the whole is slightly modified. As a result, the relationships of individual pieces of art to the whole history of art are modified, because the whole has been modified by the new piece. The poet is aware of their responsibility when they know that the past conforms to the present in the same way that the past directs the present.

Eliot says that the poet also knows that they are judged by the past. Again, this goes both ways: the past and the present works are “measured by each other.” However, to really conform, the work must be new—must be a work of art. Readers test the work’s value by seeing if it fits in, but they must do this cautiously, because no one can really identify conformity. However, if a work seems to conform, it is probably new and individual too, and vice versa.

Eliot instructs the traditional poet, when keeping the past in mind, not to view it indiscriminately, or with preference to certain people or periods. Instead, the poet must keep in mind the whole flow of history. While the traditional poet knows that Europe’s “mind” is constantly changing, yet leaving behind none of its past developments—neither Shakespeare nor Homer—he also knows that this development is not the same thing as improvement, either artistically or psychologically. The present is different from the past because the present knows the past in a way that the past wouldn’t be able to know itself.

Eliot calls the poet’s historical tradition a “sense.” This “historical sense” seems to be something like a sixth sense which allows the poet to see two things together which are usually regarded as separate: the past and the present. Through this special sense, the poet views all the past as existing simultaneously with the present. At the same time, however, the poet is aware of the contemporary moment they are in because it is that current moment that brings the past into existence.



Here, Eliot illustrates the reciprocal relationship that the past and present have and refers to all poetry of the past as one whole. When the contemporary poet writes, this entire whole is brought alive in their new work. When the new work is added to the whole of poetry, the whole changes. This does not mean that all other poems are now obsolete, but rather that their relation to the whole of poetry has changed. In this model, poems never go out of style, but their meaning evolves over time as more poetry is written.



Eliot makes the paradoxical claim that what conforms is actually what is new. Although it seems contradictory that a new and individual poem would conform with the past, Eliot points out that, in order for a poem to belong with the poems of the past, it must be a true work of art like those before it. And in order to be a true work of art, it must be new.



Eliot calls the whole of poetry in Europe a “mind” in order to show its behavior. The “mind” of poetry is always alive and moving forward like the human mind. However, it also has a memory which stores all of its past. Eliot makes an important distinction between development and improvement. Although the “mind” of poetry changes and grows, all poetry now is just as great as it ever was. The only privilege that the present has is the perspective which allows it to better understand the past.



Eliot acknowledges that many people object to his idea of a poetic profession, saying that it involves too much learning. Many believe that too much learning limits the poet's instincts. Eliot admits that knowledge should not get in the way of the poet's necessary "laziness" and spontaneity. But he also doesn't want knowledge to be boiled down into easily accessible forms. Some people can absorb knowledge, but other people must work for it. Either way, the poet must obtain the "consciousness of the past" and must develop it throughout life.

Eliot asserts that writing poetry always involves knowledge to some extent. People become knowledgeable in different ways—learning comes more easily to some people than to others—but, no matter what, knowledge should not eclipse the poet's spontaneity. Eliot says the poet should be "conscious" of the past, not just knowledgeable about the past. The work the poet does maintains this mindfulness of the past, which seems different from simply learning. Rather, it seems that the poet labors to perfect a certain mental state.



To do this, Eliot says the traditional poet must always sacrifice self and personal interests for something of greater value. This process is a "continual extinction of personality" and resembles a science. In order to visualize this, Eliot asks readers to think about what happens to **oxygen and sulphur dioxide** when they are in the presence of **platinum**.

Eliot describes the poet as a martyr of sorts. Furthermore, he says that the process of extinguishing one's personality resembles a science, implying that it can be done through a clear method that has objective results. As if to prove this, he asks the reader to imagine it like a scientific experiment with a predictable result.



PART 2

Eliot asserts that readers should criticize and appreciate poems, not the poets who wrote them. One hears of lots of poets, but rarely finds a true poem. In Eliot's "Impersonal" theory, every poem is a "living whole" of all the poetry ever written; in this theory, it's also important to note the relation of the poem to its author. In the case of a mature poet, the poet's mind is not profound because they are more interesting or have a greater "personality," but because they are able to combine feelings in new ways.

Eliot introduces his Impersonal Theory, which depicts the poet as an instrument for a cause that is separate from their own personal causes. Since poetry is a "living whole" of all poetry, the poet is simply a tool well-designed for recombining old feelings into new ones. Eliot suggests that the mature poet doesn't have a high opinion of themselves. A poet who thought they were great because of their personality would more likely be immature and full of themselves.



Eliot returns to his analogy of the **platinum**. When platinum is present, **oxygen and sulphur dioxide** combine to form sulphurous acid. Without the platinum, this process would not occur, but the resulting sulphurous acid has no platinum in it. Also, the platinum itself doesn't change. In Eliot's analogy, the platinum is the poet. In the perfect poet, the creative part of the mind is entirely separate from the part that experiences and feels. If these are separate, the creative mind will better be able to craft the passions (its material) into works of art.

The platinum catalyzes sulphur dioxide and oxygen to combine into sulfuric acid, and platinum is not present in the resulting acid. By analogy, the poet causes new arrangements of feelings to occur in their poems without involving their personal lives. Eliot argues that a kind of compartmentalizing in the artist is desirable. With this separation, the artist can apply their creative mind to passions, instead of having their passions and creativity all mixed up together.



In Eliot's analogy, experiences are the elements that transform in the presence of the **platinum**. But the experience one has of a work of art is not at all like any other experiences. The effect of a piece of art could be made up of one emotion or several, or of various feelings. The last quatrain of Canto XV in the [Inferno](#) creates an effect—a feeling—which was only appropriate for the poet to add after the perfect combination of detail he constructed leading up to it. The poet's mind collects images and feelings and keeps them until they have all the components for a new combination.

Eliot points out that there are countless of these combinations. Contrary to what some believe, the combination's effectiveness has nothing to do with the intensity of the emotions in the combination. Rather, it is due to the intensity of the artist's process. The intensity of a poem is different from the intensity of the experience it is about. Poems can be equally intense even when the emotion they depend on is not equally so, or they can produce different effects even when they are based on the same emotion. There is an absolute difference between the emotion and the artistic emotion, and the combination used to create the artistic emotion is always complex.

Eliot says that the poet is not a personality, but that their mind is a medium in which experiences cohere in new ways. This is like the idea that the human soul is a "substantial unity." Sometimes, the poet's personal experiences will have no bearing on their poetry; likewise, their poetry might have very little effect on their personal self.

Eliot examines a passage that combines negative and positive emotions. On the one hand, the poem expresses attraction to beauty; on the other hand, it expresses an attraction to an ugliness that negates that beauty. Eliot shows that the situation (the events of the play the passage is an excerpt of) that called for this combination of emotions is not enough to explain its full effect. Rather, the poem's full effect results from the feelings related to the emotion being combined in a new way.

Eliot claims that the poet's personal experiences and emotions do not make the poet notable. The emotions in the traditional poet's personal life might be boring, but the emotions in their poetry will be complex. It is wrong for the poet to look for new complex experiences in order to enrich their poetry. That would not be novelty; rather, novelty comes from working simple, old emotions into poetry that expresses new feelings. To do this, the traditional poet can use emotions they haven't had as well as ones they do have.

Eliot imagines the emotional effects of poetry as fabrics made up of many threads of detail and feeling. These poetic emotions are inherently different from life's emotions because life's emotions aren't complex constructions in the same way. With his example from Dante's [Inferno](#), Eliot shows that feelings can actually be created by poetry and thereby suggests that the poet is not someone who has unusual feelings but is someone who is a good craftsman of new ones.



In a poem, the intensity is created by the way feelings are combined, not by the feelings themselves. Again, this is unlike the intensity of life in which a person feels the intensity of the feeling, not its creation. Eliot seems to be implying that poetry should not attempt to mimic or express experience but rather it should create an experience. It does this by taking feelings and phrases and recombining them to create new effects of standard emotions.



Eliot likens the poet's mind to the "substantial unity" of the human soul. This illustrates the poet's mind as somehow cohering feelings into a unity. They only have the ability to perform this coherence; poets are not themselves a unity of unique feelings.



When Eliot proves that this excerpt's intensity does not come from the situation of the play, he shows again that artistic experience is of a different kind than life experience. In life, a person responds emotionally to situations. In poems, the reader responds to the poet's combination of feelings that put the obvious, situational emotion in a new light.



The poet is an admirable craftsman but not necessarily a remarkable person. Eliot even says that the poet could be boring and inexperienced. This is because poetry, in Eliot's vision, is not a mouthpiece for life. Rather, it constantly unearths and reconfigures what is old. A poem makes the common feelings exist again in a new form. This takes artistic skill, but not necessarily personal depth.



Eliot says that poetry comes neither from emotion, nor recollection, nor tranquility. Rather, it is the result of concentration: The poet concentrates many experiences until they finally unite. Mostly, the poet does this unconsciously. However, much of writing is deliberate; bad poets are not deliberate when they should be, or they are too deliberate when they shouldn't be. In both cases, the poet is too personal. Poetry shouldn't express emotion and personality but rather escape from them. Ironically, however, it is those *with* personality and emotion who want this escape.

Eliot says that poetry does not passively come into being, but through concentration, an action that suggests hard work. It's as if the poet applies heavy pressure to material in order to fuse it into a poem. Eliot repeatedly says that the poet should not be renowned for their personality, but right at the end, he says only those with personality want to escape it. This emphasizes how important it is for the poet to renounce their personality. The surrender of themselves to their work is a key part of the traditional poet's process.



PART 3

Eliot does not intend to make a metaphysical claim, but only to be practical and to help the poet interested in poetry. He sums up the two previous chapters, first stating that if one puts their interest in the poem, not the poet, they will be a better judge of poetry's quality. He reminds readers that, although many people claim to appreciate poetry, very few can actually recognize a "significant emotion." This emotion would be found living in the poem, not in the poet.

Eliot's statements are intended to be useful to the aspiring poet. They are also intended to instruct the poetry critic. It seems that Eliot hopes these two purposes will serve one another: if the poetry critic turns away from poets and towards poems, the poet will also stop receiving admiration for their personal life and will have to inspire admiration instead through their poems.



Lastly, Eliot reminds readers that the emotions in poems should be impersonal. In order to write impersonal poems, the poet must sacrifice themselves to their work. Furthermore, the traditional poet only knows the work they must do when they live in the "present moment of the past," aware of the dead as if they were alive.

Eliot shows that depersonalizing a poem requires a traditional approach: when the poet surrenders their self to the past, they necessarily relinquish their personal aims and emotions and dedicate themselves to re-expressing the common emotions in new ways.





HOW TO CITE

To cite this LitChart:

MLA

Clark, Cora. "Tradition and the Individual Talent." *LitCharts*. LitCharts LLC, 22 Oct 2021. Web. 22 Oct 2021.

CHICAGO MANUAL

Clark, Cora. "Tradition and the Individual Talent." LitCharts LLC, October 22, 2021. Retrieved October 22, 2021.
<https://www.litcharts.com/lit/tradition-and-the-individual-talent>.

To cite any of the quotes from *Tradition and the Individual Talent* covered in the Quotes section of this LitChart:

MLA

Eliot, T. S.. *Tradition and the Individual Talent*. Modern Library. 2002.

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Eliot, T. S.. *Tradition and the Individual Talent*. New York: Modern Library. 2002.