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# UNIT 1 T.S. ELIOT'S ESSAYS AND OTHER WORKS RELATED TO THE PLAY

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## Structure

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- 1.2 Dramatic Experiments : *Sweeney Agonistes* and *The Rock*
- 1.3 Eliot's essays relevant to his plays
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## 1.0 OBJECTIVES

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This Unit will familiarise you with T.S. Eliot's:

- a. Life and works
- b. Dramatic experiments : *Sweeney Agonistes* and *The Rock*
- c. Essays relevant to his plays; and his
- d. Poetic dramas

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## 1.1 INTRODUCTION: LIFE AND WORKS OF T.S. ELIOT

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Thomas Stearns Eliot was born in St. Louis, Missouri, on 26<sup>th</sup> September, 1888. William GreenLeaf Eliot (Eliot's grandfather from his father's side) was one of the earliest Eliot settlers in St. Louis. He was a Unitarian minister. Unitarianism arose in America in the mid eighteenth century as a wave against Puritanism and its beliefs in man's innate goodness and the doctrine of damnation. Unitarianism perceived God as kind. In 1834 William GreenLeaf Eliot established a Unitarian church in St. Louis. He was also instrumental in setting up Washington University there.

Of the fourteen children born to William GreenLeaf Eliot and his wife, only four survived. Henry Ware Eliot, Eliot's father, was the second of the surviving children. He graduated from Washington University and worked for a grocery business for a short while. Later, he joined a brick making firm of which he eventually became the chairperson.

In 1869 T.S. Eliot's father, Henry Ware Eliot, married Charlotte Champe Stearns who was a school teacher in St. Louis. She was involved in social work and advocated women's rights. T.S. Eliot was the youngest of the six children born to Henry Ware Eliot and Charlotte Champe Stearns. The first four were girls and nine years separated Thomas and his brother, Henry. T.S. Eliot's mother was profoundly influenced by her father-in-law, William GreenLeaf Eliot. She raised her children

according to his values. He was a strong believer in self denial and public service. When T.S. Eliot was sixteen his mother published a biography of William Greenleaf Eliot and dedicated it to her children, "Lest They Forget."

T.S. Eliot started school late – at the age of seven or eight – because he was a sickly child suffering from "congenital hernia." Eliot went to a school in St. Louis until 1905. Later, he went to Miller Academy at Massachusetts for a year. He joined Harvard at the age of eighteen. By the time Eliot was in Harvard he had broken away from the strong Unitarian influence at home and had become indifferent to the church. While at Harvard from 1906-1910 Eliot began writing. In 1908 Eliot read Arthur Symon's book, *The Symbolist Movement in Literature* which introduced him to the poetry of La Forge. From La Forge Eliot learnt to confess through voices and to dramatise irrational thoughts. He was struck by Symon's call for a spiritual vision to eclipse the realistic tradition,

It was in a student magazine, *The Harvard Advocate* that Eliot published his first poems at the age of twenty. Later, Eliot said that the form he adopted in 1908 and 1909 was directly derived from his study of La Forge as well as from Elizabethan drama in its later phase. Between 1909-1912 Eliot wrote a group of poems, later published in the collection, *Prufrock and Other Observations*. These poems dealt with the "New Boston" of Eliot's youth. Unlike the "old Boston" of Puritan values with which Henry James was associated, Eliot's Boston was decadent and corrupt. It was very unhealthy, highly commercialised with an influx of immigrants. Failing to find life among equals Eliot went into slum areas. He deliberately moved in squalid places. His poems pick up the images of "cigarettes butts," "broken glass" "dirty windows" etc. "Preludes" written about 1910 picks up several sordid images. St. Louis had been a peaceful phase in Eliot's life. In a certain way, the move from St. Louis to Boston had changed Eliot.

In his last year at Harvard Eliot wanted, to get away from his life there, and his family's persistent questions about his career. He went to Paris. Through Symons, Eliot had already developed an interest in French poetry. While at Paris, Eliot attended several lectures by the French philosopher Henri Bergson at the College de France. By February 1911, Eliot was disillusioned with Paris. He felt the city was drab like London. Many of his poems pick up the drab appearance of modern cities.

In 1911, Eliot returned to Harvard and entered graduate school in Philosophy. In 1913 he had become the President of the Philosophy Club. A year later, in 1914, while Eliot's doctoral thesis was still incomplete he went to Oxford on a travelling fellowship to study Aristotle for a year under Harold Joachim, at Merton College. The first world war broke out in 1914. Eliot took up a school teacher's job at High Wycombe Grammar School at Oxford to supplement his income.

Eliot met several important literary personalities in England. An introduction from Conrad Aiken had led him to meet Ezra Pound. In 1916, Eliot met Clive Bell and through him the Bloomsbury group. Eliot's stay in London was important in his life for another reason too. It was here that he met Vivienne Haigh-Wood whom he later married. They were both twenty six when they met.

In 1917 Eliot gave up teaching and entered the foreign department of Lloyd's Bank where he worked until 1925. In 1921, Eliot wrote the draft of his most famous poem *The Waste Land*. The poem was edited by Pound and published in *The Criterion* in 1922.

The year 1927 was a turning point in Eliot's life, in that, it was in this year that he became a British citizen and also joined the Anglican Church of England. He was drawn to the Church of England because Anglicanism acknowledges that the truth of the scriptures is only dimly traced and must be verified by individual judgement. Of course, Eliot's growing attachment to the English past was yet another reason for

joining the Church. At the time of Eliot's conversion he was 39 years of age. In his preface to *For Lancelot Andrewes* Eliot stated that he was "a Classicist in literature, Royalist in Politics and Anglo-Catholic in religion."

After 1927 Eliot's poetry was different. Although the first phase of his poetry also talked of the spiritual world implicitly, in the second phase – after his conversion – his poetry became more religious. Poems like "Journey of the Magi," "A Song for Simeon" and "Ash Wednesday" express this. In this same group of religious writings also fall *Murder in the Cathedral* and *The Rock*. Much Later, in 1939, Eliot published his essay on the idea of a Christian Society to communicate his views on the subject of religion.

Eliot returned to America in 1932 for the first time (since a brief visit in 1915) to lecture at Harvard and Virginia. These lectures were later published in *The Use of Poetry and The Use of Criticism* and *After Strange Gods*. Around this time Eliot was also developing an interest in drama. Of course, he had earlier helped in publishing his mother's long dramatic poem, *Savonarola* and in 1920 was persuaded by Pound to translate the *Agamemnon* by Aeschylus.

The year 1933 was a difficult year for Eliot. He left his wife Vivienne Haigh-Wood. Her neurotic, sickly condition which started a few months after their marriage made it impossible for Eliot to continue with the marriage. Vivienne died in 1947 in an asylum. Several years later in 1957, Eliot met Valerie Fletcher and married her. Eliot was happy in this marriage.

In 1936, three years after Eliot left Vivienne, his second collected poems appeared containing the first of the Four Quartets "Burnt Norton." With *The Four Quartets* (1935-1942) Eliot reached the peak of his historical, spiritual works. Since then, he seems to have devoted himself above all to dramatic poems and to essays in Social and Christian philosophy.

Five plays followed *Four Quartets*: *Murder in the Cathedral* (1935), *The Family Reunion* (1939), *The Cocktail Party* (1949), *The Confidential Clerk* (1953) and *The Elder Statesman* (1957)

In 1948 Eliot was awarded the order of merit and the Nobel Prize for literature. He died in London in 1965 and as desired by him, his ashes were buried in the village of East Coker in England from where his ancestor Andrew Eliot had emigrated to America. On his grave is a plaque saying, "In my End is my Beginning."

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## 1.2 ELIOT'S EARLY DRAMATIC EXPERIMENTS : *SWEENEY AGONISTES AND THE ROCK*

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### **Sweeney Agonistes : Fragments of an Aristophanic Melodrama**

*Sweeney Agonistes* is a long poem in dramatic form. It was first published as two fragments. The first, "Fragments of a Prologue" was published in the *New Criterion* of October 1926 and the "Fragment of an Agon" in January, 1927 under the general title of *Wanna Go Home Baby?*. The title picks up the language of the English pubs in the 1920s. *Sweeney Agonistes* contained two epigraphs from Aeschylus' *Choephoroi* and St. John of the *Cross* pointing to the Greek and Christian focus of the work. The first one dramatises the hero's haunting by the furies. The second refers to the soul's need to divest itself of the love of created beings. Both these themes appear in *Murder in the Cathedral*. When the fragments were published in 1932 in a book form, the two epigraphs were retained but the title had changed into, *Sweeney Agonistes : Fragments of an Aristophanic Drama*,

By combining *Sweeney* with *Agonistes* Eliot was trying to interface Milton's *Samson Agonistes* with *Sweeney's* situation in modern times. *Samson Agonistes* is in exile in an alien world, who brings that world down around his own head to destroy evil. *Sweeney* is also a spiritual exile in an alien world and he too destroys part of himself in attacking the world. Eliot's readers are familiar with *Sweeney* who has been used in several contexts to suggest man at his most elemental level.

In a sense the play is a commentary on the postponement of religious awakening in modern times. The world to which the audience of *Samson Agonistes* would return to was world war shocked London but seen through the eyes of the "sensational press." The view of humanity is like reading *News of the World*, a Sunday weekly, which catered to popular taste. In the early twenties, *News of the World* specialised in graphic accounts of crimes in Britain at that time.

*Sweeney Agonistes* has been called "Aristophanic" in the sense that it combines comic surface satire with the ritualistic celebration of birth and death. It is melodramatic in the sense that it uses music hall tradition and flat characters, inflated emotions and overdramatised situations,

Interestingly, although the *Sweeney* fragments had a title of their own, Eliot felt that they could not really stand alone, When he gathered his poems together for the *Collected Poems* volume 1936, he placed *Samson Agonistes* in a section called "Unfinished Poems" and it still remains in that state today.

*Sweeney Agonistes* is based on life in modern times. Doris and Dusty are two lower middle class London prostitutes. When the dramatic poem begins Doris and Dusty are debating about whether they should invite Pereira – the one who pays the rent for the apartment – to the card party that they are giving that night. They decide not to invite him, because he can't be trusted, When the phone rings Doris and Dusty panic because they know who the caller is, Dusty informs the caller Pereira, that Doris is sick and can't attend to the phone. Pereira insists, I-is insistence in meeting Doris and Dusty suggests his identity as a spiritual pursuer. These people are viewed negatively in Eliot's works because they can't accept the agony of purgation.

At the party two other characters show up "Cap" Horsfall and "Loot," Sam Wauchope with their former war friends Klipstein and Krumpacker – American business men visiting London. The party is fraught with doubt and distrust as the card game continues. We get a foreboding of death and violence, The party guests decide to go to a nearby pub. *Sweeney Agonistes* is the pub keeper. Unlike the other characters, *Sweeney* is not a flat character, He introduces the dimension of tragic horror into the world of Dusty and Doris and others. He heightens their feelings of distrust by narrating a story about the murder of a girl. Slowly all leave the pub with the exception of Doris and *Sweeney* asks her "Wanna Go Home Baby?" She goes back home with him and is later found murdered in a bath fulfilling the forebodings of the card game. Later, *Sweeney* too is discovered murdered.

*Sweeney Agonistes* may have been the first dramatic venture by Eliot but it is an important experiment:

- a. It is the first dramatic version of the theme of spiritual pilgrimage, a recurrent theme in his plays,
- b. It introduces contemporary rhythms and diction into poetic drama. Jazz and telephonic conversations are used. This is in keeping with Eliot's beliefs that the new drama should combine poetry with entertainment. In the 1920s in England, a popular mode of entertainment was the vaudeville. It was here that Jazz was heard. He also felt that Jazz was an important art because it still kept a social unity in the relationship between the performers and the audience that had disappeared in other forms of dramatic art.

Jazz had a special appeal to Eliot because it not only symbolised the superficial elements of a modern materialistic society but it also touched the primitive side of man's nature in its throbbing rhythms.,

- c. It stresses the agony of saints.
- d. It introduces a chorus to voice communal feeling and deals with one of his central themes – that of spiritual conflict; and growth in an exceptional human being and its relations and repercussions in the lives of ordinary people. Relationships are worked out in terms of spiritual awareness.

## The Rock

This was a pageant play which opened on May 28<sup>th</sup>, 1934 at Saddler's Wells Theatre, London, It was written to raise funds to build new Anglican churches for the growing suburbs. The theme of the pageant is the building of the church. Eliot was writing under the direction of E. Martin Browne whom he had already met in 1930 when he was staying with Bishop George Bell at Chichester. The play's versification is modelled on the medieval English play *Everyman*. For form he was indebted to Greek tragedy.

The scenario for the pageant was outlined for Eliot by Browne and Webb-Odell. In his essay, *The Three Voices of Poetry* Eliot states that he merely filled in the words. When Eliot published his poetic collections, he included only the choral passages of *The Rock*.

The play opens with the Chorus lamenting the temporal order gaining ascendancy over the spiritual. In modern times, the church is seen as having a limited value. A group of workers enter and point out that building a church is a different experience from building a bank, There is a certain commitment that is emotional which goes with the former. The Saxons enter at this point and explain the history of Christianity and its introduction into England, The Chorus reminds the congregation of contemporary times to keep the flag of Christianity up by building churches,

Soon we come to know of the various challenges facing the church. For one, the land given for church building is not good. For another, a Marxist comes and creates an uproar by stating that the funds given for Church building should go into building homes for the needy. We are also reminded about the Danish invasion of England and the persecution of early Christians. Hearing about all this the Chorus almost falls into despair but the character, Rock, brings them out of it by pointing to the power of the eternal over the temporal.

In the final scene, the construction of the church is shown as completed, throwing light upon darkness.

Eliot was involved with some aspects of this play's production as he was with all his later plays.

## Importance of *The Rock* as a Dramatic Experiment

Although, in his *Three Voices of Poetry*, Eliot stated that the Chorus in *The Rock* did not have any voice of its own, the Chorus in this work is important,

- a. The Chorus consists of seven men and ten women wearing half masks to emphasize their "impersonality," The "Rock" is a character. The Chorus was trained and coordinated by Elsie Fogerty, principal of the Central School of Speech and Drama, and her colleague, Gwynneth Thurburn.

- b. The Chorus is both a vehicle of social commentary and a dramatic instrument for piercing through the level of philosophic and theological implications of the actions.
- c. The idea of suffering of the person who acts, the need to perfect one's will, and the conflict between eternal and temporal orders, are things seen in *Murder in the Cathedral* which was written a year later in 1935.

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### 1.3 ELIOT'S ESSAYS RELEVANT TO HIS PLAYS

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T.S. Eliot's essays on drama can be divided into three parts: First, the Elizabethan essays which discuss the criteria for drama. Second, his assessment of the situation in contemporary theatre and third, Eliot's statements about his ideal of poetic drama. It is important to remember that most of Eliot's essays were written before the first performance of his first play. Only a few were written after he had established a reputation as a dramatist.

Shakespeare is a central focus in Eliot's essays on the Elizabethans. He recognised Shakespeare's genius and he found his use of the blank verse particularly innovative. Shakespeare's verse rhythms picked up the colloquial speech of his age. In *The Music of Poetry* (Glasgow: Jackson, 1942), Eliot states that "Shakespeare did more for English language than any other poet adapting drama to colloquial speech." Shakespeare's verse rhythms, he argues, reflected a world in which reality was not fragmented. But, Eliot remarks, that in the formless nature of modern age, Shakespeare's verse rhythms do not apply. In *The Waste Land* Eliot had stated that writers after Shakespeare should evolve their own verse styles instead of imitating Shakespeare. The failure of verse drama in the nineteenth century, Eliot argues, was because their verse rhythms were not tied to colloquial speech of the time. His views on this subject are expressed in his book *Poetry and Drama* (Cambridge, MA : HUP, 1951). About Eliot's own struggles to get away from Shakespeare he discusses in his essay, "The Need for Poetic Drama." (Listener 16-411, 25 Nov. 1936 : 994-995).

Apart from his comments about the Elizabethans, Eliot also wrote several essays assessing the state of contemporary theatre. One of the major problems in contemporary theatre Eliot states in "A Dialogue on Poetic Drama," (Eliot Selected Essays 31-45) was the fact that unlike the Elizabethan and Restoration periods (or even earlier), where there was a moral code that the dramatist shared with the audience, in the modern age there was no such moral code. This distanced the modern dramatists from their audience's sensibilities. Moreover, the fact that the standard modern plays were made for the actors, Eliot felt, made it difficult for poetic drama to be effective. In his essay on "The Duchess of Malfi : and Poetic Drama," (*Art and Letters* 3.1 Winter 1919/20 : 36-39), he says, "the successful presentation of a poetic play like Webster's or Shakespeare's demands that the actor not try to improve or interpret the script – rather, that he efface his personal vanity.

While advocating the need for a poetic drama in modern times, Eliot stated that "A new dramatic literature cannot come about until audiences and producers can help poets write for the theatre ("Audiences, Producers, Plays, Poets" *New Verse* 18 Dec. 1935 : 3-4). The actor, Eliot said, should be selected and trained early for the purpose of speaking verse drama. Similarly, "Poets who write for the stage cannot simply learn about the theatre and fill scripts with poetry: they must learn to write a different kind of poetry, in which the implicit speaker is not the poet himself – as is the case with ordinary poetry – but someone else" ("The Future of Poetic Drama." [Journal of British Drama League, London] 17, Oct. 1938 : 3-5). Eliot was at pains to point out that poetry should not be merely ornamental in drama and that style and matter should be suited to each other in poetic drama. He says : "Good poetic drama is not

simply a play translated into verse but rather a play wholly conceived and coinposed in terms of poetry, embodying a pattern like that of music" (*Poetry and Drama* Cambridge, MA : HUP, 1951). For Eliot the highest aim of poetic drama is to bring us to the border of those feelings which can be expressed only in music without leaving the everyday world of dramatic action.

The reason why Eliot found poetic drama important was because he believed that "Poetry is the natural medium for drama, providing the intense excitement that the abstractions of a prose play cannot offer" ("The Need for Poetic Drama," *Listener* 16-411, 25 Nov. 1936 : 994-995). Eliot credits Yeats and the Abbey Theatre for the revival of the genre. In Eliot's view, Ibsen, Strindberg, and Chekov were good poets who were constrained by the limits of prose. He also believed that if modern dramatists used verse for their works the mundane world would be transformed, giving meaning and order to its chaos.

### Eliot's Other Essays Relevant to his Plays

a. "Tradition and the Individual Talent"

This essay has raised great debate and controversy. In it, Eliot says, that the contemporary reader praises "a poet, upon those aspects of his work in which he least resembles any one else." Eliot protests against such an approach to literature. He argues that it arises from a misunderstanding of the concept of originality. For Eliot, the best part of a poet are those parts where his predecessors "assert their immortality most vigorously." What Eliot means here is that when a poet goes by a past tradition, his individuality is shown more through the unique manner in which he incorporates something which is of the past tradition to his work which is of contemporary value. Hence his statement, "[a new work of art is not] merely valuable because it fits in; but its fitting in is a test of its value.

b. "The Three Voices of Poetry"

Eliot describes the three voices of poetry as follows:

1. "The first voice is the voice of the poet talking to himself – or to nobody."
2. "The second voice is the voice of the poet addressing an audience, whether large or small."
3. "The third voice is the voice of the poet when he attempts to create a dramatic character speaking in verse; when he is saying, not what he would say in his own person, but only what he can say within the limits of one imaginary character addressing another imaginary character."

Eliot adds that "The distinction between the first and the second voices ... points to the problem of poetic communication; the distinction between the poet addressing other people in either his own voice or an assumed voice ... points to the problem of the difference between dramatic, quasi-dramatic and non-dramatic verse."

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## 1.4 ELIOT'S POETIC DRAMAS

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- a. **The Family Reunion** was published in 1939. This play is based on the Greek myth of **Orestes**, but transformed into a contemporary setting. Orestes was pursued by the furies for the murder of his mother. Here there is no real

murder, only the suggestion that for the Christian to contemplate a curse was to commit it.

- b. **The Cocktail Party** published in 1949 was written for the Edinburgh festival. The play may appear to be a comedy but beneath its humour lies the decadence of any large city in a disillusioned age, like the modern age.
- c. **The Confidential Clerk** written in 1954 was inspired by Euripides' **ION**. The story has a complicated plot and is set in modern times.
- d. **The Elder Statesman** (1958). In this some of the themes of Sophocles' **Oedipus at Colonus** are transformed into a modern setting. The play was performed at the 1958 Edinburgh festival.

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## 1.5 EXERCISES

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- a. What were the important influences on Eliot's life that had an impact on his works?
- b. Give an account of Eliot's views on Poetic Drama.
- c. Understanding key concepts:
  - What is Eliot's notion of Tradition and the Individual talent.
  - What are the three voices of poetry that Eliot talks about in his essay by the same name?
- d. What are the titles of the plays written by Eliot? What strikes you as significant in these titles?
- e. Write a note on the significance of Eliot's early dramatic experiments: *Sweeney Agonistes* and *The Rock*.