5.10: T.S. Eliot (1888-1965)

T.S. Eliot (1888-1965) Selected Poems Tradition and the Individual Talent American/British Modernism Eliot was born in St. Louis, the youngest of seven children. He attended Smith Academy in St. Louis, and went on to study at Harvard. After finishing his bachelor's degree, he began his graduate studies. During this time, he focused on Symbolist poetry. He tried to study abroad in Germany in 1914, but left the country early due to the threat of war. Instead, he went to England, where he met Ezra Pound, who would have a profound influence on Eliot's work. While Eliot did occasionally return to the United States, he settled in England and eventually became a citizen of the country. It was Pound who helped Eliot publish "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock" (1915) in Poetry. The poem established Eliot's reputation as an experimental, intellectual writer. Eliot possessed an amazing versatility. By the time he was 40, he had published over 20 books, which included volumes of poetry, criticism, and plays. His most notable work is The Waste Land (1922), which explores the disenfranchisement and ennui felt by the post-World War I, Lost Generation. The work is experimental in its fracture perspectives, play with tone and language, and disrupted narrative. His criticism, most specifically works from The Sacred Wood, such as "Tradition and the Individual Talent" (1920), constructs a comprehensive literary theory, where the poet is not merely repeating popular ideas, but is interacting with an entire body of literary history, starting with Homer. By the time he won the Nobel Prize in 1948, he was considered one of the most influential writers in the English language. Consider while reading:

1. In The Waste Land, how does Eliot portray time in relation to war? What larger point is he trying to make?
2. How does Eliot break with traditional forms and content? What is the significance of these breaks?
3. How does Eliot reimagine classic stories and figures (such as Tristen and Isolde and Tiresias) in his work? What is his purpose in this rewriting?
4. What does Eliot's work reveal about the effects of historical events, such as World War I, on the poet?
5. Eliot uses allusion to enhance his poetry. How do the lines from Dante's Inferno set the tone for "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock? What do the two figures have in common?
6. In "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock," Eliot uses a refrain, what is he trying to emphasis?
7. Eliot experiments with conceptions of time in both "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock" and *The Waste Land*. How does he express time in each work? How do these expressions of time underscore his meanings?

8. In his essay, "Tradition and Individual Talent," Eliot's conception of art emphasizes the idea of art being impersonal? How does the structure of his argument both uphold and undercut that idea?

9. Eliot discusses what a poet must sacrifice in "Tradition and Individual Talent." What does this sacrifice comprise? What does he suggest is the relationship between the poet, history, and society?

Written by Laura Ng