

**T. S. Eliot**  
**1888-1965**

Thomas Stearns Eliot was born September 26, 1888, into a family who traced its ancestry to the Massachusetts Bay Colony. His predecessors were prominent clergymen and educators and included Charles William Eliot, president of Harvard University, and three U.S. presidents, John Adams, John Quincy Adams, and Rutherford B. Hayes. Eliot grew up in St. Louis, Missouri where his grandfather had relocated the family from Boston. William Greenleaf Eliot was a Unitarian minister and educator and established the first Unitarian church in St. Louis as well as founded Smith Academy and Washington University. T. S. Eliot was educated first at Smith Academy and then sent back to Massachusetts for further studies.

He attended Milton Academy and Harvard University. He also studied a year at the University of Paris, and following his Ph.D. courses at Harvard, did an additional year at Oxford University from 1914-1915. A further year was spent at Oxford working on a doctoral dissertation on the Philosophy of F. H. Bradley, and although World War I prevented his return to Oxford to defend his dissertation, the philosophy department accepted it. Eliot's undergraduate studies emphasized language, including Latin, Greek, German, and French, while his graduate work was centered on philosophy. By all accounts he was an outstanding student. Although Eliot's family expected him to return to America, he elected, after his studies, to remain in England and follow a literary career. In 1927 he became a British citizen and joined the Church of England. Eliot went on to become a modern literary giant receiving countless acknowledgements and awards including the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1948.

Eliot's credits include great works in poetry, criticism, drama, and editing/publishing. While he was still a student he wrote poems that remain milestones in literature. The first was "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock," written 1910-1911. In 1922 he wrote *The Waste Land* which became one of the most famous poems of that century. Eliot's poetry expressed modern themes in a form that was a striking departure from that of the 19<sup>th</sup> century Victorian era. His career as a poet concluded when he wrote *Four Quartets* 1936-1942.

An ability to write literary criticism won Eliot great respect, too. He began writing it in the mid-1900s at night to supplement his salary first as a teacher, then as a bank clerk. By the late 1920s his criticisms had expanded to include religious and social criticism. An example of this was *The Idea of a Christian Society*, which he wrote in 1939. Additionally in the 1920s Eliot began writing drama. His early poems were dramatic, and many of his essays were on drama or dramatists, so that writing his own plays seemed a natural progression. One of his most famous, and still a very popular drama, was *The Cocktail Party* written in 1949.

From 1922 to 1939 Eliot served as the editor and publisher for the *Criterion*, an intellectual journal. In 1925 he left his banking job at Lloyd's Bank and joined the publishing firm of Faber and Gwyer (Faber and Faber) where he remained until 1965. In these positions Eliot also made significant contributions working enthusiastically to promote the intellectuals of his time.

While Eliot's literary life seemed bound for success from the beginning, his personal life was not always so. In June 1915 he married Vivien Haigh-Wood, but it was troubled nearly from the outset. It was Bertrand Russell who noted shortly after the marriage, "She is a person who lives on a knife-edge and will end as a criminal or a saint." (DLB 45, p.159) In fact, she was mentally ill and ended in madness. The stress of dealing with this took a toll on Eliot, and he collapsed himself in 1921. Additionally his decision to be a literary man had estranged him from his family; he always regretted the separation from his father. Financially, he was left struggling, too, trying to earn enough to care for his wife's illness and to support himself. However, Eliot persevered and in 1957, ten years after Vivien's death, when he was sixty-nine, he married Esme Valerie Fletcher. She had been his secretary since 1949 and was nearly forty years younger than he. However, it proved to be a happy union, and Eliot found contentment in his later years. He died in London of emphysema January 4, 1965. Perhaps excerpts from two of his obituaries sum up the influence of T. S. Eliot as well as can be done:

"The Most Influential English Poet of His Time." *The London Times*

"Our age beyond any doubt has been, and will continue to be, The Age of Eliot." *Life magazine*

--L. Margaret Pomeroy

**Sources Used:**

Broker, Jewel Spears. "T. S. Eliot," *Dictionary of Literary Biography* (1986 ed.) XXXIV, 150-181.

Hargrove, Nancy Duvall, "T. S. Eliot," *Dictionary of Literary Biography* (1981 ed.) VII, 151-172.