

"**Tradition and the Individual Talent**" (1919) is an essay written by poet and literary critic [T. S. Eliot](#). The essay was first published in *The Egoist* (1919) and later in Eliot's first book of criticism, *"The Sacred Wood"* (1920).<sup>[1]</sup> The essay is also available in Eliot's "Selected Prose" and "[Selected Essays](#)".

While Eliot is most often known for his poetry, he also contributed to the field of literary criticism. In this dual role, he acted as a cultural critic, comparable to [Sir Philip Sidney](#) and [Samuel Taylor Coleridge](#). "Tradition and the Individual Talent" is one of the more well known works that Eliot produced in his critic capacity. It formulates Eliot's influential conception of the relationship between the poet and preceding literary traditions.

### Content of the essay

---

This essay is divided into three parts: first the concept of "Tradition," then the Theory of Impersonal Poetry, and finally the conclusion.

Eliot presents his conception of tradition and the definition of the poet and poetry in relation to it. He wishes to correct the fact that, as he perceives it, "in English writing we seldom speak of tradition, though we occasionally apply its name in deploring its absence." Eliot posits that, though the English tradition generally upholds the belief that art progresses through change – a separation from tradition, literary advancements are instead recognised only when they conform to the tradition. Eliot, a [classicist](#), felt that the true incorporation of tradition into literature was unrecognised, that tradition, a word that "seldom... appear[s] except in a phrase of censure," was actually a thus-far unrealised element of literary criticism.

For Eliot, the term "tradition" is imbued with a special and complex character. It represents a "simultaneous order," by which Eliot means a historical timelessness – a fusion of past and present – and, at the same time, a sense of present temporality. A poet must embody "the whole of the literature of Europe from [Homer](#)," while, simultaneously, expressing their contemporary environment. Eliot challenges the common perception that a poet's greatness and individuality lie in their departure from their predecessors; he argues that "the most individual parts of his [the poet's] work may be those in which the dead poets, his ancestors, assert their immortality most vigorously." Eliot claims that this "historical sense" is not only a resemblance to traditional works but an awareness and understanding of their relation to his poetry.

This fidelity to tradition, however, does not require the great poet to forfeit novelty in an act of surrender to repetition. Rather, Eliot has a much more dynamic and progressive conception of the poetic process: novelty is possible only through tapping into tradition. When a poet engages in the creation of new work, they realise an aesthetic "ideal order," as it has been established by the literary tradition that has come before them. As such, the act of artistic creation does not take place in a vacuum. The introduction of a new work alters the cohesion of this existing order, and causes a readjustment of the old to accommodate the new. The inclusion of the new work alters the way in which the past is seen; elements of the past that are noted and realised. In Eliot's own words, "What happens when a new work of art is created is something that happens simultaneously to all the works of art that preceded it." Eliot refers to this organic tradition, this developing canon, as the "mind of Europe." The private mind is subsumed by this more massive one.

This leads to Eliot's so-called "Impersonal Theory" of poetry. Since the poet engages in a "continual surrender of himself" to the vast order of tradition, artistic creation is a process of depersonalisation. The mature poet is viewed as a medium, through which tradition is channelled and elaborated. He compares the poet to a catalyst in a chemical reaction, in which the reactants are feelings and emotions that are synthesised to create an artistic image that captures and relays these same feelings and emotions. While the mind of the poet is necessary for the production, it emerges unaffected by the process. The artist stores feelings and emotions and properly unites them into a specific combination, which is the artistic product. What lends greatness to a work of art are not the feelings and emotions themselves, but the nature of the artistic process by which they are synthesised. The artist is responsible for creating "the pressure, so to speak, under which the fusion takes place." And, it is the intensity of fusion that renders art great. In this view, Eliot rejects the theory that art expresses metaphysical unity in the soul of the poet. The poet is a depersonalised vessel, a mere medium.

Great works do not express the personal emotion of the poet. The poet does not reveal their own unique and novel emotions, but rather, by drawing on ordinary ones and channelling them through the intensity of poetry, they express feelings that surpass, altogether, experienced emotion. This is what Eliot intends when he discusses poetry as an "escape from emotion." Since successful poetry is impersonal and, therefore, exists independent of its poet, it outlives the poet and can incorporate into the timeless "ideal order" of the "living" literary tradition.

Another essay found in *Selected Essays* relates to this notion of the impersonal poet. In "[Hamlet and His Problems](#)" Eliot presents the phrase "[objective correlative](#)." The theory is that the expression of emotion in art can be achieved by a specific, and almost formulaic, prescription of a set of objects, including events and situations. A particular emotion is created by presenting its correlated objective sign. The author is depersonalised in this conception, since he is the mere effector of the sign. And, it is the sign, and not the poet, which creates emotion.

The implications here separate Eliot's idea of talent from the conventional definition (just as his idea of Tradition is separate from the conventional definition), one so far from it, perhaps, that he chooses never to directly label it as talent. The conventional definition of talent, especially in the arts, is a genius that one is born with. Not so for Eliot. Instead, talent is acquired through a careful study of poetry, claiming that Tradition, "cannot be inherited, and if you want it, you must obtain it by great labour." Eliot asserts that it is absolutely necessary for the poet to study, to have an understanding of the poets before them, and to be well versed enough that they can understand and incorporate the "mind of Europe" into their poetry. But the poet's study is unique – it is knowledge that "does not encroach," and that does not "deaden or pervert poetic sensibility." It is, to put it most simply, a poetic knowledge – knowledge observed through a poetic lens. This ideal implies that knowledge gleaned by a poet is not knowledge of facts, but knowledge which leads to a greater understanding of the mind of Europe. As Eliot explains, "[Shakespeare](#) acquired more essential history from [Plutarch](#) than most men could from the whole [British Museum](#)."

## Eliot and New Criticism

---

Unwittingly, Eliot inspired and informed the movement of [New Criticism](#). This is somewhat ironic, since he later criticised their intensely detailed analysis of texts as unnecessarily tedious. Yet, he does share with them the same focus on the aesthetic and stylistic qualities of

poetry, rather than on its ideological content. The New Critics resemble Eliot in their close analysis of particular passages and poems.

### Criticism of Eliot

---

Eliot's theory of literary tradition has been criticised for its limited definition of what constitutes the canon of that tradition. He assumes the authority to choose what represents great poetry, and his choices have been criticised on several fronts. For example, [Harold Bloom](#) disagrees with Eliot's condescension towards Romantic poetry, which, in *The Metaphysical Poets* (1921) he criticises for its "dissociation of sensibility." Moreover, many believe Eliot's discussion of the literary tradition as the "mind of Europe" reeks of Eurocentrism. However, it should be recognized that Eliot supported many Eastern and thus non-European works of literature such as the *Mahabharata*. Eliot was arguing the importance of a complete sensibility: he didn't particularly care what it was at the time of tradition and the individual talent. His own work is heavily influenced by non-Western traditions. In his broadcast talk "The Unity of European Culture," he said, "Long ago I studied the ancient Indian languages and while I was chiefly interested at that time in Philosophy, I read a little poetry too; and I know that my own poetry shows the influence of Indian thought and sensibility." His self-evaluation was confirmed by B. P. N. Sinha, who writes that Eliot went beyond Indian ideas to Indian form: "The West has preoccupied itself almost exclusively with the philosophy and thoughts of India. One consequence of this has been a total neglect of Indian forms of expression, i.e. of its literature. T. S. Eliot is the one major poet whose work bears evidence of intercourse with this aspect of Indian culture" (qtd. in *The Composition of The Four Quartets*). He does not account for a non-white and non-masculine tradition. As such, his notion of tradition stands at odds with feminist, post-colonial and minority theories.

[Harold Bloom](#) presents a conception of tradition that differs from that of Eliot. Whereas Eliot believes that the great poet is faithful to his predecessors and evolves in a concordant manner, Bloom (according to his theory of "[anxiety of influence](#)") envisions the "strong poet" to engage in a much more aggressive and tumultuous rebellion against tradition.

In 1964, his last year, Eliot published in a reprint of *The Use of Poetry and the Use of Criticism*, a series of lectures he gave at [Harvard University](#) in 1932 and 1933, a new preface in which he called "Tradition and the Individual Talent" the most juvenile of his essays (although he also indicated that he did not repudiate it.)<sup>[2]</sup>

### **Eliot's impersonal theory of poetry**

Thomas Stearns Eliot is the most influential poet-critic of the modern era. In his famous essay [Tradition and the Individual Talent](#), Eliot propounds his anti-Romantic conception of the theory of poetry which makes him a classicist. According to the Romantics, poetry is an expression of the emotions and the personality of the poet. Wordsworth says, Poetry is the spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings; it takes its origin from emotion recollected in tranquillity.

According to Wordsworth, there are four stages through which poetic composition takes place:

1. Observation
2. Recollection
3. Contemplation
4. Imaginative excitement of the emotions which were experienced earlier.

But in Tradition and the Individual Talent, Eliot opposes the Romantic conception by advancing his theory of the impersonality in art and opines that the artistic process is a process of depersonalization and that the artist will surrender himself totally to the creative work. Eliot says,

The progress of an artist is a continual self-sacrifice, a continual extinction of personality. Eliot holds that the poet and the poem are two separate things and that the feelings or the emotion, or vision, resulting from the is something different from the feeling or emotion or vision in the poem the mind of the poet. Hence, T.S Eliot elucidates his theory of impersonality by examining, Firstly the relation of the poet to the past and Secondly the relation of the poem to its author.

Eliot realises that the past exists in the present. So, he points out that no writer has his value and significance in isolation. To judge the work of a poet, we must compare and contrast his work with the works of the poets of the past. Such comparison and contrast is essential for forming an idea of the real worth and significance of a new writer and his work.

Eliot points out the relation of the poem to its author and says that relation to the poet. There is detachment or alienation the poet and his poem. The poem once created is no longer his. The poet uses ordinary emotions to create new poetry.

According to T.S Eliot, the poet is a medium, not a personality. T.S Eliot compares the mind of the poet to a catalyst and the process of poetic creation to the process of a chemical reaction. Eliot has cited example by saying that when oxygen and sulphur-di-oxide are mixed in the presence of a filament of platinum, they form sulphurous acid.

Platinum is the catalyst that helps the process of chemical reaction, but the metal does not undergo any change. The mind of the poet is like the catalytic agent. It is necessary for the new combination of emotions and experiences to take place, but it itself does not undergo any change during the process of poetic creation.

The personality of the poet does not find expression in his poetry; it acts as a catalytic agent. Here, the mind of the poet is the platinum; and the emotions and feelings are the gases- oxygen and sulphur-di- oxide. Just as the platinum remains unchanged, in the chemical reaction, the poet remains separate from his creation, though his feelings and emotions form something new.

Eliot next compares the poet's mind to a receptacle in which are stored numberless feelings, images, phrases, emotion etc., which remain there in an unorganised and chaotic form till all the particles which can unite to form a new compound are present together.

Thus, poetry is an organisation rather than an inspiration. And the greatness of a poem does not depend upon the greatness or the intensity of the emotions, but upon the intensity of the process of poetic composition. The more intense the poetic process, the greater the poem.

According to T.S Eliot, the emotion of poetry is different from personal emotion of the poet. T.S Eliot personal emotions may be simple or crude, but the emotion of his poetry may be complex and refined. Eliot says that there is no need for the poet to try to express new human emotions in poetry. It's not the business of the poet to find new emotions.

He may express only ordinary emotions, but he must impart to them a new significance and a new meaning. And it is not necessary that they should be his personal emotions. Even emotions which he has never personally experienced can serve the purpose of poetry.

That is why, Eliot rejects Wordsworth's theory of poetry, having its origin in emotion recollected in tranquillity and points out that within the method of poetic composition there's the only concentration of a number of experiences, and a new thing results from this concentration. According to Eliot,

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.

Being an anti-Romantic, Eliot has no faith in subjectivity which he rejects and tries to route out to finality. In reaction to Wordsworth's romantic creed, Eliot as a youth with post-Romantic inheritance engages himself with no delay to formulate his new poetics of depersonalization which was revolutionary in that sense that he introduces new thinking regarding the conception of poetry and its creation.

### What is Objective Correlative?

Objective Correlative is a term popularized by T.S. Eliot in his essay on 'Hamlet and His Problems' to refer to an image, action, or situation – usually a pattern of images, actions, or situations – that somehow evokes a particular emotion from the reader without stating what that emotion should be.

Explaining his view Eliot says, "The only way of expressing emotion in the form of art is by finding an 'objective correlative'; in other words, a set of objects, a situation, a chain of events which shall be the formula of that particular emotion; such that when the external facts, which must terminate in sensory experience, are given, the emotion is immediately evoked' it is from this point of view that he finds *Hamlet* defective and “an artistic failure.” He also says that in *Macbeth* Shakespeare is successful in finding an 'objective correlative' to express the emotions of Macbeth and Lady Macbeth. Eliot says: “If you examine any of Shakespeare’s more successful tragedies, you will find this exact equivalence; you will find that the state of mind of Lady Macbeth walking in her sleep has been communicated to you by a skilful accumulation of imagined sensory impressions; the words of Macbeth on hearing his wife’s death strike us as if given the sequence of events, these were automatically released by the last even in the series. The artistic “inevitability” lies in this complete adequacy of the external to the emotion; and this is precisely what is deficient in *Hamlet*. *Hamlet* (the man) is dominated by an emotion which is inexpressible because it is in excess of the facts as they appear . . . . .*Hamlet* is up against the difficulty that his disgust is occasioned by his mother but that his mother is not an adequate equivalent for it; his disgust envelops and exceeds her.

It is thus a feeling which he cannot understand; he cannot objectify it, therefore remains to poison life and abstract action. None of the possible actions can satisfy it: and nothing that Shakespeare can do with the plot can express Hamlet for him.

According to Eliot, when writer fails to find objective correlatives for the emotions they wish to convey, readers or audiences are left unconvinced, unmoved, or even confused. Eliot applied his theory of 'Objective Correlative' to Shakespeare's play *Hamlet* (1602), arguing that it is an "artistic failure" because occurrences in the play do not justify Hamlet's depth of feeling and thus fail to provide convincing motivation.

Objective Correlative was the term first used in a mid-nineteenth-century art lecture given by the American poet and painter Washington Allston, but later it was redefined by T.S. Eliot and became widespread among the critical circles specially the New Critics.

The phrase 'Objective Correlative' and the concept lying there in have gained great currency since then. It has become so popular with the people that critics like Wimsatt and Brooke have gone to the extent of saying that "the phrase objective correlative has gained a currency probably far beyond anything that the author could have expected or intended." The phrase has been used by Eliot to express how emotion can be best expressed in poetry and it is a part of his impersonal theory of poetry concentrating not on the poet but on the poetry. The theory of impersonal art implies that greater emphasis should be laid upon the work of art itself as a structure. Eliot has learnt from the French symbolists that emotion can only be evoked; it cannot be expressed directly. Eliot's theory was also anticipated by Ezra Pound in 'The Spirit of Romance.' Pound admitted that in the ideographic process of using material images to suggest immaterial relations, the poet has to be as impersonal as the scientists: "Poetry is a sort of inspired mathematics, which gives us equations, not for abstract figures, triangles, spheres, and the like, but equations for the human emotion."

