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Lecture No. (18)
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English (Hons.)
DIII / ~~DVI~~ / Modern Literature
Topic: J.S. Eliot: The Poet

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In the period of active literary production of more than fortyfive years, Eliot has wielded his pen with considerable authority and influence in almost every genre of literature. Prose, poetry, drama, criticism and even journalism of the period from 1920 to 1965 felt his unmistakable presence. But more than a dramatist or a critic or a prose writer he has come to be known as the poetical voice of the Age.

Eliot's sojourn as a poet began when he was still a school going boy at St. Louis. His juvenile period of poetic writing produced poems of immature calibre but with a promise of poetic talent which was to be realized in his later day poems. The poems were published in his school and college magazines.

In 1917 was published "Prufrock and Other Observations". The collection of poems included, besides the title poem "Love Songs of J. Alfred Prufrock", such poems as "Portrait of a Lady", "Rhapsody on a Windy Night", "The Prelude"

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and "Mr. ~~Alto~~ Apollinaire". These poetical works were produced during 1909 and 1917 in such different surroundings as Boston, Paris and London. During the period Eliot had already imbibed the influence of the French Symbolist poets and these poems certainly show its indebtedness to them — particularly to Lafargue, as far as exercise in technique is concerned.

Now we come to the phase of his career which catapulted him to a position of being acclaimed as a truly great poet with the publication of such poems as "Gerontion", "Sweeney Erect", "Burbank with a Baedeker", "A Cooking Egg", "Sweeney Among the Nightingales" and, of course, "The Waste Land" and "The Hollow Man". "The Waste Land" was acclaimed as a poem of unsurpassed quality and a compressed epic portraying the dismal state of civilization in its entirety.

Though Eliot had been working on the bits and pieces of the poem since 1914, he could complete it while recuperating from illness in Lausanne, Switzerland in the year 1922. The poem was published in October the same year in the "Criterion". Poems of this group are out and out pessimistic in tone and content which

may have resulted from the inner gloom of the poet on account of the nerve-shattering impact of the World War on his sensitive temperament. Other contributing factors were his ill-health, overwork, and continued mental illness of his wife. Such characters of his poems as Sweeney, Burbank etc are not mere individuals but represent the crude, rootless and decaying modern society.

Eliot's joining of the Anglican Church of England in 1927 had a bearing on his poetic writings as we see, from now on, his poems turn more optimistic in their tone and substance. In them the poet seems to be in search of the right, desirable direction using traditional materials and "Christian Imagery". Among the major poems of this Christian period of Eliot are "Ash Wednesday", "Journey of the Magi", "Marina", "Choruses from the Rock", "Consolations" and "Animula".

His "Four Quarters" were published between 1936 to 1942 and comprises the following poems: "Burn Norton", "East Coker", "The Dry Salvages", and "Little Gidding". These are again the poems of religious nature but here the Christian images gave way to eternal problems of man without reference to any particular religious tradition. Thus from all accounts "The Waste Land" holds the centre

place among Eliot's poems. In a sense every poem preceding it is a preparation for "The Waste Land" and every subsequent poem emanate from the spiritual condition delineated and implied in it. About the poem Louis Cazamian declares: "The Waste Land (1922), a powerful allegory in which the enigmatic promises of the spiritual vibrate on the other side of the despair; and the bitter, ~~terrifying~~ terrifying Hollow Man". It is in these poems that T.S. Eliot is at once "original" as well as "reminiscent" at the same time in the fact that we find here "superabundance of quotations from other writers mingle with an aggressiveness wholly personal but tinged with a cosmopolitanism which at that time formed part of fashionable tendency."

Education

Thomas Stearns Eliot was born on 6th September 1888 in St. Louis, Missouri ~~in~~ to a father who was a businessman and mother, a writer and a poetess, H.W. Eliot and Charlotte Stearns by name. They were very proud of their New England connections. Eliot received his early education in the Smith Academy, St. Louis before pursuing Philosophy as his major field of study at Harvard; which he joined in 1906. Among the other academic institutions that he studied in are those of Germany and England (Oxford) before returning to give Charles Eliot Norton Lecture at Harvard again. (to be continued)