**100 Years: T.S. Eliot and The Waste Land**

Templeman Exhibitions

Templeman Gallery, A Block, Floor 1 | Templeman Library | University of Kent

Open from 12 December 2022 to 30 April 2023

**Introductory Panel to the Exhibition:**

**Miguel Santos,** Research Postgraduate in the School of English, introduces T.S. Eliot and further explores the experimental poetry of T.S. Eliot, Gertrude Stein, and John Ashbery.

**Panel 1: Who Was T.S. Eliot?** – Miguel Santos, Research Postgraduate, School of English

**Thomas Stearns Eliot** (1888-1965) was a ground-breaking American-born poet, writer, essayist, and editor, who is a pioneer in English Modernism. His masterpiece, ‘The Waste Land’ (1922) is a dense, allusive poem that celebrates its centenary this year.

For his poetic innovations and contributions, Eliot was awarded the Nobel Prize in Literature in 1948.

**Early Life**

T.S. Eliot was born in St. Louis, Missouri in 1888, to a prominent family of ministers, educators, and businessmen. He loved literature as a child, partly encouraged by his mother who wrote poetry herself, and partly due to his congenital hernia, which fuelled his love of literary adventure and thrills.

He attended Harvard University in 1906 where he found important influences on his poetry in Dante’s *Divine Comedy*, the Symbolist Poets, and Eastern philosophy.

While at Harvard, Eliot published poetry in the *Harvard Advocate*, eventually becoming an editor for the journal. Afterwards, he studied at the Sorbonne in Paris for a year. He then returned to Harvard to pursue a PhD on philosopher F.H. Bradley – another influence on Eliot with Bradley’s view on the impersonal self.

**Moving to London**

He returned to Europe on a fellowship to Oxford. In London, he met fellow American poet and critic Ezra Pound, who encouraged him to settle in England. Eliot preferred the literary scene in London to the vapidity of academic life. Further, Pound assisted in the publication of Eliot’s poetry, including ‘The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock’ in 1915.

While Eliot did complete his dissertation, he failed to return for the viva voce in the US. Eliot began working first as a teacher and then for Lloyd’s Bank where he stayed for nine years.

While working at Lloyd’s, he furthered his literary prominence by becoming assistant editor of *The Egotist* and then founding a new journal in 1922, *Criterion*.

During this time, Eliot married an English-woman, Vivienne Haigh-Wood, who displayed symptoms of physical and mental illnesses that would affect her and their marriage. As time went on, Eliot became increasingly detached from her, further exacerbating her health problems.

In 1921, when juggling his work with the bank, his editorial responsibilities, and his relationship with Vivienne, Eliot struggled with depression and had a physical and mental breakdown. It was suggested he take three months off work, and Eliot went to recover in Margate and in Switzerland. It was during his recovery that Eliot completed ‘The Waste Land’ in 1922.

**Life in England**

In 1925, Eliot left Lloyd’s Bank to join the Board of Directors of Faber & Faber until his death, where he was a generous patron of young poets, such as W.H. Auden.

He became a British citizen in 1927, adopting the religious beliefs of the Church of England whose links with tradition and the monarchy appealed to Eliot. His marriage with Vivienne, however, was growing strained, and due to his Anglican conversion, he could not divorce her.

In 1932, he instead prepared a deed of separation; years later, she was committed to Northumberland House Mental Hospital in Woodberry Down until her death in 1947.

**Following World War II**

After the War, Eliot continued gaining awards as an acclaimed poet. He later married his secretary, Valerie Fletcher in 1957, which proved to be a happy marriage.

His physical health weakened and in 1965, he died of a heart attack. The memorial tablet in the Church where he is buried is a quote from *The Four Quartets* (1943): ‘In my beginning is my end. In my end is my beginning.’

**Panel 2: Vivienne and Valerie** – Miguel Santos, Research Postgraduate, School of English

**Vivienne Haigh-Wood (1888-1947)**

While Eliot’s reputation as a poet and literary figure is undeniable, it is important to note the flaws and the difficulties in Eliot’s life, especially the impact of his marriage to his first wife, Vivienne.

Eliot did not visit Vivienne after their separation, and his relationship with her is fraught with questions about his treatment towards her, a vulnerable woman living with mental health problems.

While Eliot admits that the marriage brought Vivienne no joy, readers of ‘The Waste Land’ can see her vital role in pushing Eliot to complete his poetry, in contributing lines and phrases to ‘The Waste Land’ and in encouraging him to express himself through the poem even if that meant reflecting a difficult view of their relationship.

**Panel 3: T.S. Eliot, Stein, and Ashbery** – Miguel Santos, Research Postgraduate, School of English

T.S. Eliot’s prominence in literature extends not only as a writer but as an editor and founder of the literary journal, *Criterion*. Similarly, American poet John Ashbery (1927-2017) co-founded *Locus Solus* in 1961, a journal of new experimental mid-20th century poetics.

This experimental poetics ushered in by Ashbery and fellow New York poets has resonances with ‘The Waste Land’. Indeed, ‘The Waste Land’ was preceded by another highly experimental, difficult text, ‘Tender Buttons’ in 1914 by Gertrude Stein (1874-1946).

What the poetry of T.S. Eliot, John Ashbery, and Gertrude Stein shares is a dense and difficult reading experience, with a bombardment of references, playfulness with language, and ricocheting allusions.

Our conventional ways of reading poetry is attacked by the different languages, detailed notes, and dense juxtapositions. These overwhelm a reader in their search for meaning and coherence.

Approaching these writers’ poetry often feels like a complex labyrinth from which there is no way out. Once we as readers allow ourselves to be taken in by the references in *The Waste Land*, for instance, we can see that reading the text jumps between the poem and Eliot’s notes. The poem’s disconnected reading experience mirrors the fragmented nature of modern life.

Once we allow ourselves not to get caught up in this search for meaning in the poetry of Eliot, Ashbery, and Stein, we can open up spaces of pleasure and playfulness in reading.

Particularly with these poets, once we allow our imagination to be at play, we as readers are active in creating spaces that reclaim the gaps of meaning from the density of their writings.

The difficulty of making one singular, coherent meaning out of their texts enables us to instead enjoy their poetry, not as a puzzle to be solved, but as a story to be experienced.