Thomas Stearns Eliot (1888-1965) was an essayist, editor, playwright, poet, and publisher. He was awarded the Nobel Prize in Literature in 1948. He is perhaps best-known for his long poem *The Waste Land*.

Eliot was born in St. Louis, Missouri and attended Harvard University, where he earned his bachelor’s degree in philosophy. Eliot’s post-graduate studies in philosophy took him to the Sorbonne from 1910-11 and to Oxford in 1914. Once he arrived in England, however, he spent much of his time in London. There he met two of the most influential people of his literary life: the American poet Ezra Pound and a young Englishwoman named Vivienne Haigh-Wood, whom Eliot would marry in 1915 after a four-month courtship. Pound encouraged Eliot, who had been planning for an academic career, to keep writing poetry and to submit “The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock” to *Poetry* magazine for publication. In addition to writing poetry, Eliot also took a position with Lloyd’s Bank in 1917 managing foreign accounts. Pound and Eliot frequently collaborated and critiqued each other’s work throughout the 1920s and ‘30s and remained friends until Eliot’s death, despite divergent political and religious paths. The most famous of these collaborations, *The Waste Land*, has been documented in a published facsimile edition of the poem (1972) that reveals Pound’s numerous comments on Eliot’s manuscript. *The Waste Land* is revolutionary both in its form, free verse, and its subject matter,which links urbanization, technology, sexuality, and post-war alienation to dozens of classical allusions in seven languages. The poem is a pastiche of voices and fragments linked both thematically and tonally.

The stresses of his marriage, long hours at the bank, and trying to maintain his writing, combined with health issues, led Eliot to seek a rest-cure in Lausanne, Switzerland in 1921.

After *The Waste Land,* Eliot became more invested in exploring traditional Christianity, and his poetry of the latter 1920s reflects this shift. While both *The Waste Land* and *The Hollow Men* (1925) grapple with the fragmentation of a post-war Europe, *The Waste Land* explores both Eastern and Western belief systems as possible sites for salvation while *The Hollow Men* is more markedly Christian. By 1927, the Eliots’ marriage, strained by various illnesses both physical and emotional, was failing. The poet converted from Unitarianism to Anglicanism, and in November was naturalized as a British citizen. His next poem, *Ash Wednesday* (1930), reflects the deepening of Eliot’s religious convictions.

In 1932, Eliot returned to the United States as the Charles Eliot Norton professor, a prestigious one-year appointment at Harvard. In taking the post, Eliot left his wife behind in London. The marriage had been troubled for years by this time, and after Eliot returned to England in 1933, the separation became permanent. The Eliots did not divorce, but they maintained separate residences and had no virtually no contact. Vivienne Eliot’s health, which had never been stable, continued to decline, and her behavior grew increasingly eccentric until she was committed to Northumberland House in 1938. She remained there until her death in 1947.

T. S. Eliot turned to drama when he had completed *Ash Wednesday*, and he wrote several verse plays over his remaining years. Eliot was heavily influenced by Restoration comedy, and several of his own plays, such as *The Cocktail Party* (1949), which was performed on Broadway and won the Tony Award for Best Play in 1950, share this satiric sensibility. Others, such as *Murder in the Cathedral* (1935), which explored the death of martyr Thomas Becket, tended to have a more serious focus and provided Eliot with occasion to further explore his interest in Christianity.

Eliot regarded his final poetic composition, *The Four Quartets*, as his greatest work. It was published in four installments: “Burnt Norton” (1936), “East Coker” (1940), “The Dry Salvages” (1941), and “Little Gidding” (1942), each of which has five sections. Like the rest of Eliot’s poetic *oeuvre*, *The Four Quartets* is highly allusive verse that engages philosophical questions about the nature of time and its role in shaping human experience. The titles of each section center the verse that follows on a particular location in London, but the poetry resists easy characterization of place or period. Each section is also associated with a specific classical element – earth, air, water, and fire – and the entire poem juxtaposes these categories of Greek antiquity with Christian theology spanning from Julian of Norwich and Dante to Anglican ceremony and ritual.

In addition to writing poetry and drama, Eliot was an important literary critic and editor. He got his start on the editorial staff of a London literary magazine titled *The Egoist* in 1917. In 1922, he founded and became the editor of a new London-based literary magazine titled *The Criterion*, which published *The Waste Land* in its inaugural issue. 1922 also saw the American publication of *The Waste Land* in an influential American little magazine, *The Dial.* As part of his magazine writing, Eliot published several influential essays of literary criticism, including “Tradition and the Individual Talent” (1919), “Ulysses, Order, Myth” (1923), and “Hamlet and His Problems” (1921), which introduced the concept of the objective correlative.

In 1948, T. S. Eliot was awarded the Nobel Prize in Literature “for his outstanding, pioneer contribution to present-day poetry.” In his acceptance speech, Eliot remarked on the importance of poetry, saying “Poetry is usually considered the most local of all the arts. . . . Poetry, it might seem, separates peoples instead of uniting them. But on the other hand we must remember, that while language constitutes a barrier, poetry itself gives us a reason for trying to overcome the barrier. To enjoy poetry belonging to another language, is to enjoy an understanding of the people to whom that language belongs, an understanding we can get in no other way.”

Eliot remarried in 1957. His second wife, Esme Valerie Fletcher, had worked with Eliot at Faber and Faber since 1949. He was 68; she was 30, and the marriage lasted until Eliot’s death from emphysema in 1965. After a memorial service in Westminster Abbey, he was honored with a memorial there in the famous “Poets’ Corner” alongside other British literati such as William Shakespeare, John Milton, Alexander Pope, Samuel Taylor Coleridge, and W. H. Auden. He was awarded two posthumous Tony Awards in 1983 for *Cats*, the Andrew Lloyd Webber musical based on Eliot’s collection *Old Possum’s Book of Practical Cats*.

**List of Major Works**:

**Essays and Nonfiction**

Tradition and the Individual Talent (1920)

Hamlet and His Problems (1920)

The Use of Poetry and the Use of Criticism (1933)

*After Strange Gods* (1934)

*The Frontiers of Criticism* (1954)

**Poetry**

“The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock”(1917)

*The Waste Land* (1922)

*The Hollow Men* (1925)

*Ash Wednesday* (1930)

*Old Possum’s Book of Practical Cats* (1939)

*The Four Quartets* (1945)

**Plays**

*Murder in the Cathedral* (1935)

*The Family Reunion* (1939)

*The Cocktail Party* (1949)

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---------. *The Collected Letters of T. S. Eliot* v. 2 (2011) Valerie Eliot, Ed. Yale UP: New Haven.

**References and Further Reading:**

Ackroyd, Peter. *T. S. Eliot: A Life* (1985) Simon and Schuster: New York. The definitive biography of T. S. Eliot.

Eliot, T. S. *The Collected Letters of T. S. Eliot,* Vol. 1 1898-1922 (Revised Edition 2011); Vol. 2 1923-25 (Revised 2011); Vol. 3 1926-27 (2012); Vol. 4 1928-29 (2013). Valerie Eliot, Ed. Faber and Faber: New York. Selected correspondence between Eliot and the major figures in his life including his brother and his parents, his first wife Vivien, Ezra Pound, John Quinn, and more.

Gordon, Lyndall. *T. S. Eliot: An Imperfect Life* (1999). W. W. Norton: New York. A longer, more recent, and more detailed biography of Eliot that draws upon newly discovered correspondence to address issues of anti-Semitism and misogyny.

Moody, A. David, Ed. *The Cambridge Companion to T. S. Eliot*. (1995). Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press. This collection of academic essays from noted Eliot scholars provides a good introduction to critical issues in Eliot’s work: drama, poetry, and prose.

Southern, B. C. *A Guide to the Selected Poems of T. S. Eliot* (1996). Harcourt, Brace, Jovanovich: New York. Southern provides annotations to *The Selected Poems*; note that the poems themselves are not included.

Paratextual:

1) Photo of Eliot: <http://tranceworldnow.wordpress.com/winners-of-the-nobel-prize-in-literature/t-s-eliot-1888-1965/>

2) Audio of Eliot reading "What the Thunder Said" from *The Waste Land.*

[http://www.poetryarchive.org/poetryarchive/singlePoet.do?poetId=7069#](http://www.poetryarchive.org/poetryarchive/singlePoet.do?poetId=7069)

I had hoped to find a recording of Eliot reading "Prufrock," but it seems that the Eliot estate is more restrictive than many other authors. I did find a YouTube video of Eliot reading "JAP," though the video does not list the provenance of the recording. Here is the YouTube: <http://youtu.be/JAO3QTU4PzY>

3) Link to a piece by Andrew Lloyd Webber on *Cats* <http://www.reallyuseful.com/show-blogs/t-s-eliot-and-the-inspiration-behind-cats/>