

# Religion and Literature

Essay by T. S. Eliot

1. T. S. Eliot's Biography
2. Religion and Literature Summary
3. The aesthetic point of view
4. Ethical and theological point of view
5. Three types of religious literature
6. Secularization and Three phases
7. Literature and Behaviour
8. Modern reader
9. Eliot's message to the modern reader.
10. Religion and Literature Analysis

In Urdu and Hindi

Summary  
Critical Analysis

# Thomas Stearns Eliot:

Thomas Stearns Eliot OM was a poet, essayist, publisher, playwright, literary critic and editor. Considered one of the 20th century's major poets, he is a central figure in English-language Modernist poetry.

Born: September 26, 1888, St. Louis, Missouri, United States

Died: January 4, 1965, London, United Kingdom

Full name: Thomas Stearns Eliot

He is well known as a writer in a number of areas: poetry, prose and drama. He was awarded the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1948.

T.S. Eliot was an American-English poet, playwright, literary critic, and editor. He is best known as a leader of the Modernist movement in poetry and as the author of such works as *The Waste Land* (1922) and *Four Quartets* (1943).



# Religion and Literature

In 1935 Eliot wrote a remarkable essay titled 'Religion and Literature'. This essay is a fresh, vibrant and illuminating as it must have been some seventy-seven years ago. There is a two-fold purpose in this piece, to expound on the state of religion as he found it in his day, and to parlay his thoughts on this topic into a practical analysis of necessities facing mankind in exposing themselves to worldly pressures exerted insidiously through choices made in the field of literature.

*“we fail to realize how completely, and yet how irrationally, we separate our literary from our religious judgements.”*



## Summary of the Essay:

"The essay 'Religion and Literature' written by T.S. Eliot can be viewed as a **reaction against the tradition of viewing a literary work from purely aesthetic point of view**. Many critics, especially the New Critics, believed that literature is not to be valued for its ethical and theological significance. But T.S. Eliot held the opinion that only literary criticism was not sufficient. **After a literary work has been viewed as a work of imagination**, it should also be considered from ethical and theological point of view. It is all the more important in our age when there is no agreement on ethical and theological values. **For ascertaining the greatness of a literary work, that work of imagination should be appreciated from ethical and theological angles.**

Although **literature has been judged from moral standards**, yet it has been believed for a long time that there is **no relationship between religion and literature**. T.S. Eliot believes that there is and should be a relationship between the two. **In his essay 'Religion and Literature' he has discussed the application of religion to literary criticism**. According to Eliot the essay is not about religious literature, but he as a degression, mentions **three types of religious literature**. First, is the **religious literature**, which has literary qualities in it. For instance, the authorized version of the Bible or the works of Jeremy Taylor. Those persons, **who describe Bible only as a literary work** and talk of its influence on English literature, have been referred to as 'parasites'. According to Eliot, Bible is to be considered as 'word of God'. Secondly, he mentions **devotional poetry**. A devotional poet he says is not the one who treats the subject matter in the religious spirit, but the one who treats a part of the subject matter. Eliot considers poets like Spencer, Hopkins, Vaughan and Southwell as minor poets while Dante, Corneille and Racine as major poets. Thirdly, he states, are the **works of authors who want to forward the cause of religion**. These types of works come under propaganda, for instance, Chesterton's 'Man who was Thursday' and 'Father Brown'.



Eliot laments over the irrationality behind the separation of our literary and religious judgment. Exemplifying literature by the way of novel (as it has the effect upon the greatest numbers), he says this **secularization** has been a gradual process for the last three hundred years. Since Defoe the process has been continuous. **The process can be divided into three phases.** In the first phase fall the novels in which **Faith is taken for granted and omitted from its picture of life.** The author belonging to this phase are: Fielding and Thackeray. In the second phase novels, **Faith is doubted, worried about and contested.** It includes authors like George Eliot, George Meredith and Thomas Hardy. The **third phase is the age in which we are living and authors** included are all contemporary novelists except James Joyce.

This secularization is evident in the way a reader reads a novel – without caring for the effect it has upon one's behavior. **The common factor between religion and literature is behavior.** Our religion imposes upon us ethics, judgment and criticism of ourselves, and our behavior with our fellow men. **Literature too has an effect on our behavior.** Whatever the intentions of the author, his works affect us wholly as human beings. **Even if we read a literary work purely for aesthetic purposes (keeping our ethics and morality in a separate compartment), it affects us as human beings, whether we intend it or not.**



**Modern readers have lost their religious values.** They don't have the wisdom to be able to obtain knowledge of life, comparing one view against the other. Moreover, the knowledge of life that we obtain from fiction is not of life itself but is knowledge of other people's knowledge of life. What adds to the problem is that there are too many books and the reader is confused. Only modern writers of eminence have an improving effect, otherwise the contemporary writers have an effect that is degrading. **The reader must keep in mind two things – 'what we like',** that is, what we really feel; and **'what we ought to like',** that is, understanding our shortcomings. As honest men we must not assume that what we like is what we ought to like; and as honest Christians we should assume that we do like what we ought to like.

**Eliot is mainly concerned with secularization of literature.** It does not concern itself with things of spirit. It is simply oblivious or ignorant of the primacy of the supernatural over the natural world. Most of the books are written by people who have no real belief in supernatural order. Moreover, they are ignorant of the fact that the world has still many believers. **It is the duty of the Christians to use certain standards in addition to those used by the rest of the world.** If a Christian is conscious of the gulf between him and contemporary literature, he won't be harmed by it.

**Majority of the people consider economic ills as cause of all the problems and call for drastic economic changes, while others want more or less drastic social changes.** Both types of changes are opposed to each other but a common point is that they hold the assumption of secularization. Some want the individual to subordinate his interests to those of the state. But Eliot does not agree with these people. Eliot does not complain about modern literature because it is immoral or even amoral but because it instigates people to try out every kind of experience and not to stay back or miss any. **A Christian reader should add to the literary criticism followed by the rest of the world. He should, in addition, apply ethical and theological standards to it."**





## Critical Analysis:

In the first paragraph of his essay, Eliot makes the point "it is more necessary for Christian readers to scrutinize their reading, especially of works of imagination, with explicit ethical and theological standards." His point here is that literary works cannot be left on their own terms to be judged solely by the moral standards of the day. He argued, "moral judgments of literary works are made only according to the moral code accepted by each generation...when the common code is detached from its theological background...it is exposed both to prejudice and to change." In other words, moral codes change from generation to generation. He goes on to elaborate that "I am concerned with what should be the relation between Religion and all Literature...What I want is a literature which should be unconsciously, rather than deliberately and defiantly, Christian". Anything less than this, Eliot asserts, leaves people with a false sense of security. The point is, "The author of a work of imagination is trying to affect us wholly, as human beings, whether he knows it or not; and we affected by it, as human beings".

Eliot argues that "Contemporary literature as a whole tends to be degrading". He feels that one guard against the dangers of much of the contemporary literature at our disposal is through an approach of wide-reading. "It is valuable because in the process of being affected by one powerful personality after another, we cease to be dominated by any one, or by a small number." Delving into the problem with contemporary literature more deeply, he surmises that "the liberal-minded...are convinced that if everybody says what he thinks, and does what he likes, things will somehow, by some automatic compensation and adjustment, come out right in the end...These liberals are convinced that only by what is called unrestrained individualism will truth ever emerge...Anyone who dissents from this view must be either a mediaevalist, wishful only to set back the clock, or else a fascist, and probably both."



Eliot believes that what sets modern day society apart from what has transpired in the past is that "There never was a time, I believe, when those who read at all, read so many more books by living authors than books by dead authors; there never was a time so completely parochial, so shut off from the past...it is more difficult today to be an individual than it ever was before." He sees a great vice prevalent in contemporary literature and society. He says, "the whole of modern literature is corrupted by what I call Secularism, that it is simply unaware of, simply cannot understand the meaning of, the primacy of the supernatural over natural life".

Eliot says that readers today, particularly Christians, need to be acutely aware of two things - what they like, and what they 'ought' to like. "The two forms of self-consciousness, knowing what we are and what we ought to be, must go together. What I believe to incumbent upon all Christians is the duty of maintaining consciously certain standards and criteria of criticism over and above those applied by the rest of the world; and that by these criteria and standards everything that we read must be tested...the greater part of our current reading matter is written for us by people who have no real belief in a supernatural order...And a greater part of our reading matter is coming to be written by people who not only have no such belief, but are even ignorant of the fact that there are still people in the world so 'backward' or so 'eccentric' as to continue to believe." He feels that by applying Christian principles and standards to our literary choices (and I add in here musical, theatrical, tv and movies), we are in the advantageous position of being able to extract from it all what good it has to offer us. A great problem that a Christian should have with those who promote Secularism is, "they concern themselves only with changes of a temporal, material, and external nature; they concern themselves with morals only of a collective nature...but I think that we should all repudiate a morality which has no higher ideal to set before us than that." Secularism is a gospel of this world and of this world alone...It is simply that it repudiates, or is wholly ignorant of, our most fundamental and important beliefs."





# Subscribe to our **You** **Tube** Channel

Thank you For Watching!

Kindly Share this Video with your class.

Ask me your Questions in Comment Box.

Subscribe for more videos.





