

## **T.S. Eliot's Nobel Acceptance: A Critical Reflection**

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### **Abstract**

T. S. Eliot is one of the major twentieth-century writers and Nobel laureates in English literature. As a poet of the first rank in both Britain and America, and as a critic with a sharper literary taste than many of his contemporaries, he deeply appreciated the work of the Swedish Academy. Upon receiving the Nobel Prize in 1948, he expressed his belief that it represented the pinnacle of international honors for a writer, not merely as personal recognition but as an acknowledgement of the universal value of poetry. In his acceptance speech for the Nobel Prize, Eliot incorporated his unique Renaissance spirit, literary criticism, philosophical profundity, and spiritual reflections that spoke to the issues of his day. By suggesting that the Nobel Prize is not only a reward but also a responsibility to uphold the values of truth, art, and cross-cultural dialogue, his comments revealed a careful balancing act between humility and responsibility. Eliot's observations demonstrate how poetry functions as a supra-national language that cuts across boundaries and creates an essential bridge of understanding between nations. As a result, his speech transcends its ceremonial function and turns into a statement of literary philosophy that is still relevant today. Accordingly, this article ventures to critically analyze Eliot's Nobel banquet speech, setting it against the context of other Nobel speeches of his time, while also revisiting his literary significance as assessed by critics across the world.

**Keywords :** T.S. Eliot; Nobel Prize Speech; Modernist Poetry; Literary Criticism; Philosophical Reflections.

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## Introduction

Thomas Stearns Eliot (1888–1965), commonly known as T. S. Eliot, viewed himself in his Nobel Prize banquet speech at City Hall in Stockholm on December 10, 1948, not as an isolated poet but as a representative of all poets from every nation. He regarded poetry as a collective art form that transcends individual expression. He evaluates his being awarded the honor as an emblem signifying the essence of poetry itself, and this, he believes, is essential since poetry solves the language barriers people of the world might encounter while attempting to construe one another. Eliot posits that poetry functions as a meta-linguistic tool, with the potential, albeit limited, to foster a mutual understanding among individuals that language alone may not be able to achieve. Concomitantly, the poet elucidates that poetry acts supra-nationally, helping people understand across borders. He open-heartedly accepts the award only when he is recognized, as he demands, as an emissary of the poets of the world to emphasize the significance of both poetry and poets. Moreover, Eliot assigns higher values to the Nobel Prize by stating that the honor inspires the awardee to take on responsibilities that are greater and more necessary than those they have previously fulfilled through their literary works. Such outlooks secured from T. S. Eliot's Nobel banquet speech makes it scholastically enticing to critically assess it (the speech) so that notable viewpoints, like those of the sublime literary works he has produced, could be reached and academically dissected.

Eliot received the 1948 Nobel Prize in Literature "for his outstanding as well as pioneering contribution to present-day poetry" (NobelPrize.org). At the banquet speech, Eliot, with humility and prudence, could not help appreciating the Swedish Academy for selecting him for the Nobel Prize in Literature since otherwise, he believes, the Academy's sense of judgment would be questioned; simultaneously, he refrains from being effusive regarding his being awarded the prize, for, he reflects, that would put his being a valid literary critic in doubt. Hence, he argues, "To profess my unworthiness would be to cast doubt upon the wisdom of the Academy; to praise the Academy might suggest that I, as a literary critic, approved the recognition given to myself as a poet" (Eliot).

Eliot's banquet speech contains valuable and commendable ideas regarding the significant tasks of poets from his generation and future generations, which this article aims to discuss and present. Eliot views the Nobel Prize as distinct from all other awards, which is why he believes he needs elevated language to convey his thoughts on it (NobelPrize.org). He believes that language does not provide the necessary resources to express the emotions one might feel about such a tremendous honor. Therefore, the poet prefers appraising the import of the award in his own unique understanding to interpreting it in the usually manifested manner. While appraising the significance of the Nobel Prize and the literary or scholastic attributes for which somebody becomes deserving of the prize, Eliot opens up to the world and considers equal each and every poet or literary figure from any corner of the world whose influence or reputation has crossed national boundaries. He says,

If this were simply the recognition of merit, or of the fact that an author's reputation has passed the boundaries of his own country and his own language, we could say

that hardly any one of us at any time is, more than others, worthy of being so distinguished (Eliot).

### Literature Review

According to the Nobel Prize Committee's website, Eliot was given the 1948 Nobel Prize for Literature "for his outstanding, pioneering contribution to present-day poetry" ("The Nobel Prize in Literature 1948"). From the inception of his writing venture, Eliot demonstrated distinct poetic features in his poems. Eliot gained widespread recognition in 1915 for his poem "*The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock*," which was considered a masterpiece of the modernist movement ("T. S. Eliot—Biographical"). "*The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock*" is also deemed one of the exemplary works to represent modernism, which focused on themes of frustration, divided souls, procrastination, alienation, isolation, and the waning influence of the conventional sources of authority. It was a literary movement at the turn of the 20th century. Subsequently, Eliot brought into the world of poetry some other groundbreaking poems like *The Waste Land* (1932), *The Hollow Men* (1925), and *Ash Wednesday* (1930). He turned out to be one of the most undaunted visionaries of the poetry of the 20th century, mostly due to his firm conviction that poetry should seek to display and scrutinize the convolutions of modern civilization ("T. S. Eliot – Facts").

*The life-in-death desolate world depicted in The Waste Land* is characterized by a predominance of inactivity, morbidity, and apathy, which reminds us of the present time with the coronavirus disease. In that sense, Eliot is a visionary poet. His speech was also visionary. Rabindranath Tagore, in his poem *আজী হতে শতবর্ষ পরে*, also reflected our present time with different images of our expectations.

Of the most fearless thinkers and creators of twentieth-century poetry, one has been Eliot, who never compromises with language itself nor with people and nurtures as well as disseminates robust faith that poetry should indicate the intricacies of modern society in terms of language and popular issues ("T. S. Eliot – Banquet Speech"). Although such a demonstration of the complexities of modern civilization gives birth to poetry of the onerous kind, Eliot's contribution and inspiration to the diction and making of modern poetry have been massive and effective. From *Prufrock* (1917) to *Four Quartets* (1943), his poetry reflects the development of a Christian author: the first work, especially *The Waste Land* (1922), essentially portrays the world's darker side, the manifestation of that fear from which the search for a more honorable world arises ("T. S. Eliot – Facts"). His nobler as well as more expected universe becomes more obvious in his thought; Eliot has always remained careful and alert not to be marked as a religious entity, and occasionally, he depreciated the sinew of poetry as a spiritual strength ("T. S. Eliot – Banquet Speech"). However, his dramas, *Murder in the Cathedral* (1935) and *The Family Reunion* (1939), appear to be more overt Christian confessions and are different ("T.S. Eliot – Banquet Speech"). His essays, specifically the advanced ones, champion a conventionalism in religion, society, and literature, which stands in contrast with his innovative contributions as a poet. Notwithstanding, Eliot sounds like an older person in his essay, *Notes towards the Definition of Culture* (1948), than in his poem, *The Waste Land*; his stance regarding

tradition is that it is an existing entity that comprises the constant reciprocal interaction of both the past and the present (“T.S. Eliot – Facts”).

The Swedish Academy's permanent secretary, Anders Österling, in the 1948 Nobel Prize in Literature Award Ceremony Speech, says that Eliot, in the remarkable continuance of Nobel Prize awardees in literature, proves to be completely different from those who have gained the usual distinction in the paradigms of winning such recognitions. While most of the renowned authors engender the kind of literature that deals with natural phenomena, people's psychic aspects, and the relationship between nature and its beneficiaries, utilizing prominent media and thereby seeking to attain desired goals, Eliot appears to be disregarding the traditional ways of literary manifestation, investigating the contemporary generation in terms of its unexplored predicaments (Österling). Regarding Eliot's generation of poets, he asserts that they must be critical and forward-thinking in their ability to discern people, civilization, and the underlying issues. Accordingly, they are to be capable of apprehending wide multiplicities and prevalent complexities, caring for the social as well as cultural sensibilities, and, as such, creating a wide range of intricate results. Hence, just before the banquet speech, Gustaf Hellström, a member of the Swedish Academy at the time, says, “... Humility is also the characteristic that you, Mr. Eliot, have come to regard as man's virtue.” The only wisdom we can hope to acquire is the wisdom of humility...” (“Banquet Speech”). Reflecting on Eliot's birth, upbringing, education, and literary pursuit, Hellström argues that his poetry infiltrates the layers of civilization, lets its corrupt secrets out in public, and scathingly criticizes them so as to offer those prospective emendations (“Banquet Speech”).

Based on the above findings from the available literature, one thing is obvious, and that is the multilayered implications of Eliot's scholasticism revealed in his creations as well as his Nobel acceptance speech.

### **Critical Reflection**

For the Nobel Prize, Eliot has a different sort of appraisal, which puts more importance on the Swedish Academy's endowing an artist with greater, newer responsibilities than on the worth-mentioning feats the artist has already achieved. He, in a seemingly novel perspective, weighs up, “It seems to me more the election of an individual, chosen from time to time from one nation or another, and selected by something like an act of grace, to fill a peculiar role and to become a peculiar symbol” (Eliot). Eliot believes the bestowal of the Nobel Prize emphasizes more what the awardee is to perform in the days to come than what he/she has accomplished already. Thus, according to the poet, the prize comes with newer and greater responsibilities, which the world looks to the winner of the honor to perform with elevated stimulus and accountability. As Eliot deliberates the inimitable implication of the Nobel Prize in his cognition, he, concurrently, offers an exclusive contrast between poetry and the language of poetry. He says,

Poetry is usually considered the most local of all the arts. Painting, sculpture, architecture, music, can be enjoyed by all who see or hear. But language, especially

the language of poetry, is a different matter. Poetry, it might seem, separates peoples instead of uniting them (T. S. Eliot – Banquet Speech).

Eliot regarded poetry as a universal phenomenon having equal values and recognition. He offers an explanation of his mindset for accepting the Nobel Prize as such: “And I take the award of the Nobel Prize in Literature, when it is given to a poet, to be primarily an assertion of the supra-national value of poetry” (“T. S. Eliot – Banquet Speech”). After all, what Eliot says in the banquet speech of the Nobel Prize in 1948 can be divided into some smaller sections, of which the first section demonstrates the poet’s appreciation to the Swedish Academy for bestowing the highest honor in the world to poetry and what evaluations he has for being honored with such an enormous award (ERabino, no. pag.). Simultaneously, the first section of the speech gives hints to Eliot’s trouble with language to give an appropriate expression to what he really intends to say on being honored with such an honor (ERabino, no. pag.).

Eliot clarifies the dissimilarity between language and poetry. To him, in terms of understanding one another in a subtler way on many understated issues, language very often acts as a barrier for people, while poetry gives a reason to try to destroy the barrier. His speech also emphasizes the prestige of other poets' poetry and underlines the significance of customs. By this, he implies that all of the poets from other languages who have impacted him are also speaking (ERabino, no. pag.). The third and final section of the speech, more importantly, offers the core philosophy that Eliot believes in: “Poetry, it might seem, separates peoples instead of uniting them.” This, in fact, seems as though the speaker was attempting to create confusion in the reader's mind. However, he immediately comes up with a convincing deconstruction of the idea he wants to get understood (ERabino, no. pag.). Hence, T. S. Eliot's acceptance speech is an effective literary piece to reflect on the role of the poet in contemporary society and his role “toward understanding between peoples” (ERabino, no. pag.).

Despite Eliot’s recognition as a distinguished poet, his appreciation as being deserving of the Nobel Prize in literature, and the widespread acknowledgement of the peerless contribution he added to world literature, he goes through rigorous criticism. Klein says,

The news that Mr. T.S. Eliot had been awarded the Nobel Prize did not, it must be admitted, fill any of the members of the Klein clan, esquire or sir, with the same feeling of elation which it seems to have aroused in other quarters (Klein, 268).

It is a fact that any author finding himself a recognized one, all of a sudden, would surely feel immensely gratified, whereas it is also a predictable fact that one selected to be an awardee of a heightened honor would be one of His Majesty's subjects (Klein 268). Nevertheless, Klein contends that Eliot has produced, to a considerable extent, abstruse literature and, with the lapse of time, has felt clichéd (Klein 268). Arguably, Klein remarks that the Nobel Committee should have been more conspicuous in seeking as well as finding worthy candidates more spectacular in terms of ingraining quality additions in the field of literary accomplishments applicable to timeless truths and lives (Klein 268).

### **Aesthetic Evaluation of Eliot's Speech**

The majority of scholars in the field of literature inspecting Eliot's writings generally consider his poetry and literary criticism and, more often than not, disregard or leave untouched his educational ideology. But Eliot has vigorous contributions to the reformation of the aims of education (Simpson 303). Although Eliot is frequently criticized as cruel and indifferent to readers' feelings, a thorough and unbiased scrutiny of his poetry does not incite such a view (Thormählen 444). In his speech, Eliot emphasizes the urgency of emotional attributes in the creation of literary works, both prose and poetry, and he disregards detachment from human aspects even if it is associated with a heightened level of erudition, for it deprives literary creation of human connectedness (Thormählen 445). Eliot's view in terms of emotional affiliation on the writer's part as well as reflective, sensitive consideration on the readers' part is vivid in his speech (Thormählen 445).

The problems and challenges people face in their daily lives today happen because, as Eliot suggests, they often lack self-awareness, are not in touch with their own experiences, feel disconnected from their spiritual beliefs and actions, and, most importantly, are generally morally corrupt (Thormählen 446).

Swedish novelist and Swedish Academy member Gustaf Hellström, prior to the banquet speech of 1948, appreciates Eliot's stand regarding humility as one of the vital human virtues and as the only wisdom humans should acquire. Hellström reflects on Eliot's birth, upbringing, arrival in Europe, and his experience of pre-war civilization:

Born in the Middle West, where the pioneer mentality was still alive, brought up in Boston, the stronghold of Puritan tradition, you came to Europe in your youth and were there confronted with the pre-war type of civilization in the Old World: the Europe of Edward VII, Kaiser Wilhelm, the Third Republic, and *The Merry Widow* (Hellström).

The 1947 Nobel Prize in Literature was awarded to French writer André Gide (1869–1951), who is obviously one of Eliot's significant European contemporaries, emphasizing the recognition of the issues of his time, the rights of the tormented ones, the voice of the unheard ones, and above all, the acknowledgment of the significance of literature, which raises voices for humanity and against anything otherwise ("Banquet Speech").

In his acceptance speech for the Nobel Prize in Literature (1949), William Faulkner (1897-1962), one of Eliot's most well-known contemporary writers, expresses his clear-headed ideas and literary convictions in a way that is both ageless and amazingly relevant to the times (Popova). Faulkner's banquet speech sounds eternally inspiring, reflecting on the tension of the Atomic Age, the intimidations, and the dystopian atmosphere, which seemingly hastened a time logically called an Age of Anxiety in the realm of literary creativity. In contrast to a place of calm and hope for the human heart, Faulkner feels that writing in an anxious environment full of confusion and terror is more captivating and creatively destructive (Popova). Faulkner declines to accept the end of man, for he, deep in his literary soul, carries

that even when the world will definitely be put in dire circumstances, when the whole universe will collapse, when man will stand on destruction and debris, he will nevertheless survive and prevail by dint of his writing (“William Faulkner – Banquet Speech”).

Among Eliot’s contemporary authors, another remarkably influential figure, Bertrand Russell, in his Nobel Prize in Literature (1950) acceptance speech, reveals four fundamental human desires, namely, acquisitiveness, rivalry, vanity, and love of power, which he thinks together constitute the world (Jones).

### Conclusion

Eliot exhibits the core predicaments of humanity. He just does not lengthen the saga of modern people’s undecided deeds and resulting quandaries; rather, he comes up with the methods and tasks through which they can attain salvation and a meaningful existence. Even when Eliot receives the Nobel Prize in literature, he does not just accept it because he deserves it, but he takes the prize, the honor, as a bestowment of greater responsibility as a writer whose role, he believes, should be to plunge into humans’ phenomena, emerge with the untold truth, and make an aesthetic display of it to have the most desired corrective effect (“T. S. Eliot – Banquet Speech”). To him, a writer, a poet, is not narrowed into his society or people but expanded into a cosmopolitan figure imparting truth and justice to all societies and nations. Eliot boldly speaks the truth, elevating the therapeutic role of poetry. As he receives the Nobel Prize in literature, he feels himself transcending time and geographical boundaries to reach and serve generations (“T. S. Eliot – Banquet Speech”). Thus, as of today, Eliot’s Nobel acceptance and speech are significant parts of literature.

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