

Tradition and the Individual Talent Summary

Writer: T. S. Eliot | Generated: Jan 26, 2026

Background

T.S. Eliot's essay Tradition and the Individual Talent was first published in 1919 in The Egoist. It was written during a time when the world was changing a lot. Eliot talks about how important tradition is for writing new poetry. He says good poetry does not come from personal feelings alone. Instead, poets should learn from past writers and build on their work. This essay is important because it changed how people thought about modern poetry. Eliot's ideas helped shape modern literature by saying poetry should be less personal and more connected to history.

Plot Summary

Tradition and Individual Talent is written by our well-known TS Eliot, i.e., Thomas Sterne Eliot. From the title of this article, we can basically understand a lot about what is discussed here.

The main theme of the essay is about the relationship between tradition and talent. Moreover, the influence of tradition and individual talent on what kind of changes can occur in literature is also discussed.

The article has been discussed mainly in three parts, which are:

- Tradition
- Talent and
- The compatibility and relationship of tradition and individual talent.

The ideas that are developed throughout the article in discussing these three topics are:

1. Idea of Tradition
2. Idea of Individuality / Individual Talent
3. According to Eliot, what would the perfect literary work be like?
4. **Idea of Tradition:**

- **The idea of tradition for Americans**

Eliot discusses the issues here mainly from the perspective of American society of the time. At that time, there was an idea in America that something traditional meant something old or perfect. Literally, when we go to highlight any traditional or old method or old issue in our country, we say that the matter has become traditional.

- **Eliot's concept of tradition**

However, Eliot tries to explain the traditional subject by going beyond the traditional concept. Here, he tries to give an idea of heritage and tradition. What we generally mean by heritage is that which has descended to us successively from our ancestors. For example, if our forefathers were involved in a particular business and if we continue it during our time, then this business will be considered our heritage. Whereas tradition actually means a special habit or cultural existence of a particular race or country that has existed among people from ancient times till now. For example, these can be said to be traditions for Bangladeshi people, such as boating, Charyapad, and the Navanna festival.

But Eliot refuses to accept this. According to him, the tradition will not only include the things of the past, but also everything that is present in the present will fall into the tradition. That is, tradition cannot be described through blind imitation. Tradition consists mainly of past and present existence.

- **Importance of Knowing History**

Here is another reason for Elliott's current drag. What he wants us to understand is that when we talk about tradition, we need to know our history well. Without knowing the history, it is not possible to measure the depth of any tradition. Eliot's main aim was to create a harmony between the traditions of the past and the existence of the present with the help of history. And that is why he did not want to confine the tradition only to the past, but also spread it to the present.

According to Eliot, tradition is not only the past but also a form of perception. That is, when a man talks about tradition, he is not only talking about his own past. Since a knowledge of history is necessary to discuss traditions, he can present everything from the beginning to the end in the light of history. Thus, starting from the past with reference to history, a harmony between the past and the present can be created, which is very important for the present generation.

2. **Individual Talent:** The next thing that comes to us is Individual Talent. In general language, individual talent means the ability of an individual. But the author means individual talent. If a person can present the history and tradition very beautifully in harmony with the present, then this skill will be considered an individual talent.

We have already learned that a successful literary work is defined as one that fully emerges from its past traditions and history, as well as presents some kind of allusion to them. And when a person is able to create a successful literary work, this skill is described by the writer as individual talent. This is how successful literature is created.

For Example, Science Reactions: The author here explains the matter through a reaction of science. When sulfur and oxygen react in the presence of copper, an acid called sulfur dioxide is formed, but there is no copper present. In the same way, when a writer composes a literary work with his own skill on past history and tradition, there is no personal element of his own.

Criticism of William Wordsworth's Definition of Poetry: William Wordsworth gave a definition of poetry, which states that poetry is an idea that flows spontaneously from a person's mind to their subconscious mind. However, Eliot Poetrit calls this definition incomplete. According to Eliot, if the poet writes the poem unconsciously while writing the poem, then he can never write based on his tradition and history. Even if the lines of the poem flow from the mind to the subconscious mind, there will be no need for literature or the acquisition of literary knowledge. But if the literary work does not have the touch of tradition and history, then it can never be a perfect literary work.

3. **According to Eliot, What would the Perfect Literary Work be Like?** Eliot says that when a poet writes a poem, he has a specific theme and knowledge of tradition and literature. He will write literary works based on it. It is not possible to write a perfect literary work without historical knowledge. From this, many people may ask whether we need to acquire knowledge about history to create literary works.

- **The writer should be Aware of History:** In this case, Eliot replied that there is no need to acquire knowledge of history or tradition to create a suitable literary work, but rather to be aware of history.
- **No Personal Feelings:** The biggest thing here is that there can never be any personal opinion or any personal feelings in a literary work. The more a work of literature can be freed from personal opinion, the more likely it is to be perfect. Moreover, when a literary work is composed, wisdom and modesty will come into it only when there are no opinions of one's own, but all references are from literature and tradition. Through this theory, Eliot basically originated the depersonalized theory in literary works.

- **There will be Literary Criticism:** It is regarded as an objective critique in terms of discussion and structure. That is, Eliot here mainly criticizes literature. According to Eliot, if literature is not criticized, it will never reach perfection and will never have life. However, while criticizing, it should be kept in mind that one should never criticize a writer, but the literary work should be criticized.

Detailed Summary

Part - 1: The Role of Tradition and the Historical Sense in Poetry:

Eliot says that English people don't talk much about tradition. Sometimes, they talk about the lack of tradition in writing. Other times, they use "traditional" to describe something in a critical way. It is usually negative, except when talking about things like old reconstructions. Eliot explains that English people don't use "tradition" to praise writers, living or dead. Every group of people has its own way of judging things. They don't see the problems in their own way of being creative or critical. For example, the English think that French people are more critical, but Eliot says being critical is as natural as breathing. He says it is good to share the thoughts and feelings we have when reading.

When English people praise a poet, they focus on what makes the poet unique. They like how different the poet is from those who came before. Eliot says this is not the best way. He believes the best parts of a poet's work come from copying the good things of older poets. When poets follow this tradition, they also become unique and mature. But Eliot warns that tradition doesn't mean copying the past. It's better to create something new. The tradition he talks about is bigger and harder to get. You can't just inherit it. A poet needs to work hard and have what Eliot calls a "historical sense."

By "historical sense," Eliot means knowing that the past is both in the past and in the present. A poet with this sense writes with all of history in mind, from Homer to modern writers. They see ancient and modern writing as existing together. A traditional poet knows they belong to both the present and the past. Eliot says no poet stands alone. Readers can only understand a poet by comparing them to older poets. When new art is created, the whole history of art changes a little. Each new work affects the past works because the past is always connected to the present.

The poet knows they are judged by the past, and the past is judged by them too. A good work of art must be new, and its value is tested by how it fits into history. If a work seems to fit in, then it's likely new and individual, too. Eliot advises poets to look at the past as a whole

without showing favoritism to certain times or people. They should see how history flows and changes, knowing that this change is not always the same as improvement. The present knows the past in ways that the past couldn't know itself.

Some people think Eliot's ideas about being a poet require too much learning, and that this will hurt creativity. Eliot agrees that knowledge shouldn't stop a poet from being lazy or spontaneous. However, he also believes that some people need to work hard to gain knowledge. Either way, the poet needs to understand the past. Eliot says that poets must sacrifice their own interests for something bigger. This process is like science, where the poet's personality disappears. He compares this to how oxygen and sulfur dioxide react when they are with platinum.

Part - 2: Impersonal Poetry and the Poet's Mind:

Eliot says readers should focus on poems, not the poets who write them. We often hear about many poets but rarely find a truly great poem. In Eliot's "Impersonal" theory, each poem is part of all the poetry ever written. It is also important to think about how the poem connects to the poet. A good poet's mind is special, not because of their personality, but because they can mix feelings in new ways.

Eliot uses the example of platinum again. When platinum is present, oxygen and sulfur dioxide combine to make sulfurous acid. Without platinum, this can't happen. But platinum doesn't change or mix into the acid. In this example, the poet is like the platinum. The poet's creative mind must stay separate from their emotions to create better art.

The poet's experiences are like the elements that change in the presence of platinum. But the feeling we get from a work of art is unique. The art may create one strong feeling or several different feelings. Eliot says the last part of Canto XV in *The Inferno* gives a special feeling that could only come from the perfect combination of details that led up to it. The poet collects feelings and images, waiting until they can make something new from them.

Eliot explains that there are many ways to mix feelings in poems. Some people think the mix depends on the strength of emotions, but Eliot says it is really about how carefully the poet works. A poem's intensity is not the same as the intensity of the emotion it describes. Poems can be powerful even if the emotion in them is not. There is always a difference between real emotion and artistic emotion. The way emotions are mixed in art is always complex.

Eliot says the poet is not a person with a big personality. Instead, the poet's mind is like a space where experiences come together in new ways. The poet's personal life may not affect their poetry, and their poetry may not change their personal life. Eliot looks at a poem that

mixes both good and bad emotions. It talks about love for beauty, but also love for something ugly that takes away the beauty. The poem's effect doesn't come only from the situation in the story but from how the feelings are mixed together in a new way.

Eliot says that the poet's personal experiences don't make them special. A poet's personal emotions might be boring, but the emotions in their poetry will be complex. A poet should not look for new, exciting experiences to make their poetry better. Instead, they should use simple, old emotions and create something new. The poet can use both feelings they have felt and feelings they have not felt.

Eliot says poetry doesn't come from emotion, memory, or peace. It comes from the poet putting together many experiences until they form something new. Most of this happens without the poet thinking about it. But writing also needs to be done with care. Bad poets either don't think enough or think too much. In both cases, they put too much of themselves into the poem. Poetry should not show the poet's emotions or personality. Instead, it should help the poet escape from them. Oddly, people with a lot of emotions and personalities want this escape the most.

Part - 3: Judging Poetry and the Poet's Self-Sacrifice:

Eliot doesn't want to make a deep philosophical statement. He just wants to be helpful to poets who care about poetry. He sums up what he said earlier. First, if someone focuses on the poem, not the poet, they will judge poetry better. He reminds us that many people say they love poetry, but only a few can truly see "important emotion." This emotion is in the poem, not in the poet. Finally, Eliot says the emotions in poems should not be personal. To write poems like this, the poet must give themselves up to their work. A Traditional poet knows their job only when they live in the present but feel connected to the past as if the dead poets are still alive.