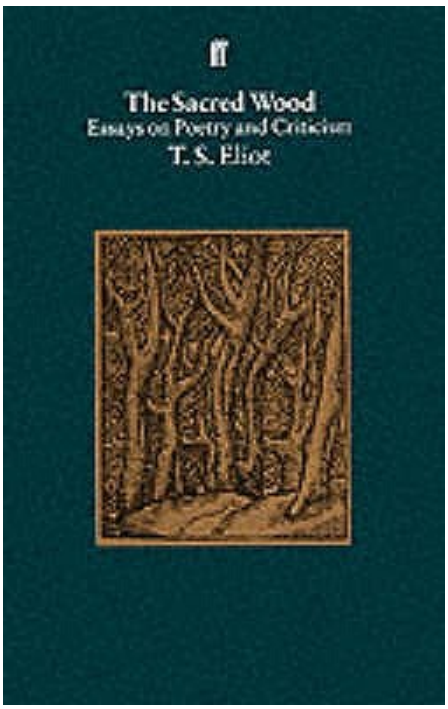

The Sacred Wood

T.S. Eliot

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This seminal book, Eliot's first collection of literary criticism, appeared in London in 1920, two years before **The Waste Land**. It contains some of his most influential early essays and reviews, among them 'Tradition and the Individual Talent', 'Hamlet and his Problems', and Eliot's thoughts on Marlowe, Jonson and Massinger, as well as his first tribute to Dante. Many of his most famous critical pronouncements come from the pages of **The Sacred Wood**.

Reviewing his career as a critic in 1961 Eliot wrote that 'in my earlier criticism, both in my general affirmations about poetry and in writing about authors who influenced me, I was implicitly defending the sort of poetry that I and my friends wrote. This gave my essays a kind of urgency, the warmth of appeal of the advocate, which my later, more detached and I hope more judicial essays cannot claim.' This urgency is still apparent more than eighty years after the essays first appeared.

The Sacred Wood Details

Date	:	Published April 21st 1997 by Faber Faber (first published November 4th 1920)
ISBN	:	9780571190898
Author	:	T.S. Eliot
Format	:	Paperback 176 pages
Genre	:	Criticism, Literary Criticism, Writing, Essays, Poetry, Nonfiction

From Reader Review The Sacred Wood for online ebook

max says

Everyone should read the essay "Hamlet and His Problems", which discusses the Objective Correlative, Eliot's preferred critical wedge to attack those poets whose literary moods surpass their ability to embody them in dramatic action. Oh wait, that describes most of Eliot's corpus quite succinctly.

Perhaps, inadvertently, Eliot defines exactly that rare artistic accomplishment which ought to fail but does not, whose elan vital outperforms its plot and soil.

Hate his conclusions if you like and label his arguments as hypercritical like me, but there's no ignoring the machinery of his rhetoric, which advances with all the grace and quickness of stealth tank.

Jake says

This is a collection of Eliot's critisism. No one will ever accuse T.S. of being a page turner, and without a doubt he can be padantic and dull, but there is enough good things in this book to recommend reading. Now, you have to be as sharp as a library to understand the many literary references he makes, but if I takes the attitude of learning something new, then this is pretty good. Also a lot of good one liners.

Lesliemae says

I went to E.J. Pratt Library. I was preparing for my very first university lecture. Not to attend, but to give one. I was caught in nothing less than an aura of magic and absurdity. Who was I to teach the new undergraduates about T.S. Eliot? What did I know? and yet thoughts about life as a professor - the tweed jacket and gentle the late afternoon sunlight streaming through the window as I make subtle and powerful gestures.

I heard my name called from the circulation desk and was taken into a locked room and the book was given to me. I first read Sacred Wood in a locked room in a library because it was the personal edition of Northrop Frye, complete with his marginal notes of his thoughts on the text. I prepared for my first lecture with Frye's sacred wood - greeted by the first work of theory I ever read: "Tradition and the Individual Talent".

This is the way to prepare for a lecture.

J. Alfred says

Eliot accomplishes a few things with this, but foremost among the things that he accomplishes is forcefully reminding his reader that he is unbelievably erudite. Some of us didn't need convincing! Other than some interesting quips on isolated authors (interesting only to parties who know and care about those authors- Blake and Dante, for me) there is nothing in this book lost by only reading the central essay "Tradition and

the Individual Talent." That, however, is important for anyone interested in literature.

Jonfaith says

And probably more people have thought Hamlet a work of art because they found it interesting, than have found it interesting because it is a work of art. It is the “Mona Lisa “ of literature.

I harbor a tone of mixed response about this tome, much as I do towards the literary theory of Ezra Pound. There is much in these essays about the state of criticism, fuelled perhaps by optimism or hubris, the utility of the enterprise is something Eliot appears skeptical towards.

I really enjoyed the attention given to Shakespeare and his contemporaries Marlowe and Jonson. Eliot makes the curious remark that Marlowe's Jew of Malta need be understood as a farce otherwise the conclusion is incomprehensible. I felt like I did when I encountered Richard Rorty saying that Derrida has to be regarded as a comic author. Exhaling slowly I attempted to imagine what Eliot would've thought of Derrida himself.

Immature poets imitate; mature poets steal; bad poets deface what they take, and good poets make it into something better, or at least something different.

I appreciate the innocence in these terms but I imagine they are equipped with a resilience

I am on holiday this week and it will be spent in part on criticism, following Nathan's lead as it is time for such.

H says

"Marlowe's Mephistopheles is a simpler creature than Goethe's. But at least Marlowe has, in a few words, concentrated him into a statement. He is there, and (incidentally) he renders Milton's Satan superfluous. He embodies a philosophy. A creation of art should not do that : he should *replace* the philosophy. Goethe has not, that is to say, sacrificed to consecrated his thought to make the drama ; the drama is still a means. And this type of mixed art has been repeated by men incomparably smaller than Goethe. ....

"... For Tragedy is is an imitation, not of men, but of an action and of life, and life consists in action, and its end is a mode of action, not a quality. ....

"Both philosophies [Shavian and Maeterlinckian, "idea" and "poetic":] are popularizations : the moment an idea has been transferred from its pure state in order that it may become comprehensible to the inferior intelligence it has lost contact with art. It can remain pure only by being stated simply in the form of general truth, or by being transmuted, as the attitude of Flaubert toward the small bourgeois is transformed in *Education Sentimentale*. It has there become so identified with the reality that you can no longer say what the idea is."

from "The Possibility of a Poetic Drama"

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pjr8888 says

1969, "Price net 21S: £1.05"

"Poetry is a superior amusement: I do not mean an amusement for superior people. I call it an amusement, an amusement *pour distraire les honnêtes gens* not because that is a true definition, but because if you call it anything else you are likely to call it something still more false." TSE

Ellen says

I was a comp. lit concentrator, yet no one forced me to read this book? Something does not add up. P.S. you're all fired.

Blair says

While I admit that some of the concepts Eliot touches upon are outdated, his views on the role of the artist and critic are very apt and hold up over time. If you have to, focus on "The Perfect Critic" and "Hamlet and His Problems"

Lysergius says

Some of the essays were quite insightful, others Eliot seemed to spend more time decrying the criticism of others and little on the work under review. Seem a bit dated too. No denying his erudition though...

Johnny says

The Sacred Wood and Major Early Essays has been in my library for a long time. I finally read it yesterday. There are numerous sarcastic phrases that authors have made about critics, two are “pigs at a pastry cart” or “eunuchs in a harem,” but most of them amount to “those who can do and those who cannot, critique.” Of course, this little volume on literary criticism was written by Thomas Stearns Eliot. When he dissects a poet’s work, it has the voice of authority.

Of course, there is a certain danger in having those who “can do” provide the criticism. Some critics may have an egoistic “designeritis,” reviewing the subject from the perspective of what they might do. Eliot doesn’t succumb to that in these essays. He grounds them all in the current of the century in which they were written, though he does make comparisons with literature in other tongues and eras. Indeed, the most recurring criticism that Eliot makes is that both poetic drama and certain poetry often lack *emotion* transformed into artistic form by infinite variation (“…the more perfect the artist, the more completely separate in him will be the man who suffers and the mind which creates; …” (p. 31); “…the emotion of art is impersonal. And the poet cannot reach this impersonality without surrendering himself wholly to the work to be done.” (p. 33); “It must take genuine and substantial human emotions, such emotions as observation can

confirm, typical emotions, and give them artistic form; …" (p. 47); "The artistic 'inevitability' lies in this complete adequacy of the external to the emotion; … (p. 58); "The structure of emotions, for which the allegory is the necessary scaffold, is complete from the most sensuous to the most intellectual and the most spiritual. Dante gives a concrete presentation of the most elusive:…" (p. 99); and even, "The effect of Morris's charming poem depends upon the mistiness of the feeling and the vagueness of its object; the effect of Marvell's upon its bright, hard precision." (p. 107)). It might surprise one that Eliot even deems it necessary to castigate what might be concerned one of Shakespeare's finest works (*Hamlet*) on this basis.

That is another factor in this volume. Eliot isn't afraid to declare poets considered great or important to be mediocre, or at least lacking. Christopher Marlowe is declared to be "caricature" (p. 54) and the metaphysical poets are reduced to "analytic" (p. 126). Professor Murray's translations of Greek plays are inadequate: "..it is because Professor Murray has no creative instinct that he leaves Euripides quite dead." (p. 43) He describes Ben Jonson's *Catiline* as: "…that dreary Pyrrhic victory of tragedy." (p. 62)

Perhaps, however, the most important line in the book is so obvious that it needs no repetition. However, I shall quote it because it affirms my experience in terms of any creative endeavor: "When a poet's mind is perfectly equipped for its work, it is constantly amalgamating disparate experience; the ordinary man's experience is chaotic, irregular, fragmentary." (p. 127) Yet, in spite of the all the insights I gleaned from the work, Eliot's polyglot quotations (using the original Greek, Latin, Italian, and French) made this slow-going for me. Plus, his exhaustive knowledge of earlier literature, part of the secret of his own success, filled me with wonder as to how a former English Literature major could be so ignorant. In final analysis, that may be the most important gift of this volume.

Simon Mcleish says

Originally published on my blog here in December 2001.

The poetry of the past was extremely important to T.S. Eliot, and he wrote a fair amount of criticism. This is quite an early collection of essays, mainly about Elizabethan and Jacobean poetic drama. In most of them, the emphasis is on where earlier critics had gone wrong in their assessments of the significance and stature of the poets. While Eliot's writing is (unsurprisingly) insightful, this theme of re-examination and the tone in which it is carried out does make him seem very arrogant. (In the introduction to the second edition, he did say that some of his opinions had changed, without going into details about which, precisely.)

Generally, what Eliot has to say is interesting if rather academic. (Apart from anything else, there are untranslated quotations in at least three different languages.) He is particularly scathing about Gilbert Murray as a populariser of ancient literature - comparing a Greek actor speaking Euripides to an English one in his translation of Medea, he says that at least the original performer had the advantage of lines in his own language. With the concentration of the essays in general on the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, though, it is the essays on Marlowe and Jonson which are the most illuminating.

Margaret Langstaff says

I read this first as a know-nothing English major, highlighted the devil out of it, scribbled mad marginalia

throughout bristling and with exclamation points (and arrows, astrices) and swallowed in gulps every bit of Eliot hagiography my profs dished up, without reserve, uncritically.

I found my old undergraduate copy a few days ago and was alternately appalled and entertained by my personal reactions recorded there. Also as I re-read it, the actual text of the book itself, those "priceless" essays, Eliot's supposed 24K thoughts and criticisms about literature qua literature, without recourse to my sophmoric comments and elucidations, a really terrible thing happened: It turned to dross before my now much older, far better read eyes--eyes which are also now, today, the red bloodshot eyes of a writer (novelist, poet, critic, reviewer) herself.

This is a nice irony that Eliot himself might have appreciated (he did love his daily dose of irony)because while in school I detested (tho I didn't dare admit it!) his footnote-heavy, obstruse quotes-- in Sanscrit, ancient Greek, Latin, French, Italian, etc. ad nauseum-- poetry--while today I deeply enjoy it, take the books out now and then just to re-read, say, "Ash Wednesday," or the "Hollow Men, or the "Wasteland." Lines such as "I will show you fear in a handful of dust," or "April is the cruelest month," or "not with a bang but whimper" ring in my ears unbidden with the tolling of truth.

But--go figure--his criticism to me today sounds pompous, supercilious, self-consciously erudite, deliberately aimed at impressing the professorial sorts who controlled the lit. mags. that published his poems at the outset. Talk about a weird kind of (perhaps) self-promotion or publicity campaign. Maybe I'm wrong (I often am), but he sounds like an old poop in THE SACRED WOOD and his "famous" essay "Tradition and the Individual Talent" just doesn't do a thing for me, quite the opposite. His hyperventilating essay on Blake actually made me laugh; his presumption to understand a poet wholly indifferent to Eliot's own concerns, perhaps even hostile to Eliot's notions of poetry and what makes a poem "great." I might have to eat these words some day, but then words have been my steady diet for a long time, and re-cycling is a good thing, right? So interesting how a mind expands, contracts, eddies and flows, rises and falls in the course of a lifetime of reading. And so rich.

Stacy Nyikos says

Eliot is widely credited with creating the term, objective correlative, which he uses first in this piece to discuss some of the shortcomings of Shakespeare’s Hamlet. He defines objective correlative as: “…a set of objects, a situation, a chain of events which shall be the formula of that particular emotion; such that when the external facts, which must terminate in sensory experience, are given, the emotion is immediately evoked” (Eliot para. 7). In working to become more familiar with literary terms and how they are used, I retrieved the article and read through it. Basically, Eliot poses that the emotion Hamlet experiences doesn’t come across in a believable way because it exceeds “the facts as they appear” (Ibid).

Merry says

I do know it's time now for me to read this dusty old hardback properly.
I do like T S Eliot. He has moments of pinpointing a thought in words so clearly.

And now, at this time in my life, I am very interested to hear what he thought about literature and criticism - long before Structuralism and the Marxists and the Feminists (to name but a few) arrived and interfered with

everything that happens between a text and a reader -

Joe1207 says

Feels encouraging, and edifying, to hear your thoughts on art argued back at you.

"When there is so much to be known, when there are so many fields of knowledge in which the same words are used with different meanings, when every one knows a little about a great many things, it becomes increasingly difficult for anyone to know whether he knows what he is talking about or not. And when we do not know, or when we do not know enough, we tend always to substitute emotions for thoughts." (pg. 10)

"[Mr. Whibley] has no dissociative faculty. There were very definite vices and definite shortcomings and immaturities in the literature he admires; and as he is not the person to tell us of the vices and shortcomings, he is not the person to lay before us the work of absolutely the finest quality. He exercises neither of the tools of the critic: comparison and analysis. He has not the austerity of passion which can detect unerringly the transition from work of eternal intensity to work that is merely beautiful, and from work that is beautiful to work that is merely charming. For the critic needs to be able not only to saturate himself in the spirit and the fashion of the time--the local flavour--but also to separate himself suddenly from it in appreciation of the highest creative work.
And he needs something else that Mr. Whibley lacks: a creative interest, a focus upon the immediate future. The important critic is the person who is absorbed in the present problems of art, and who wishes to bring the forces of the past to bear upon the solution of these problems." (37-8)

The entire essay "Tradition and Individual Talent." Seriously, read it. Then reread it. (47-59)

"Some writers appear to believe that emotions gain in intensity through being inarticulate. Perhaps the emotions are not significant enough to endure full daylight." (84)

"We are not here studying the philosophy, we *see* it, as part of the ordered world. The aim of the poet is to state a vision, and no vision of life can be complete which does not include the articulate formulation of life which human minds make...
It is one of the greatest merits of Dante's poem that the vision is so nearly complete; it is evidence of this greatness that the significance of any single passage, of any of the passages that are selected as "poetry," is incomplete unless we ourselves apprehend the whole.
And Dante helps us to provide a criticism of M. Valery's "modern poet" who attempts "to produce in us a *state*." A state, in itself, is nothing whatever.
...The mystical experience is supposed to be valuable because it is a pleasant state of unique intensity. But the true mystic is not satisfied merely by feeling, he must pretend at least that he *sees*, and the absorption into the divine is only the necessary, if paradoxical, limit of this contemplation. The poet does not aim to excite--that is not even a test of his success--but to set something down; the state of the reader is merely that reader's particular mode of perceiving what the poet has caught in words... When most of our modern poets confine themselves to what they had perceived, they produce for us, usually, only odds and ends of still life and stage properties..." (170-1)
