



# T.S. Eliot

*Peter Ackroyd*

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## **T.S. Eliot** Peter Ackroyd

In the twentieth century, no Anglo-American poet or critic has matched the influence of Thomas Stearns Eliot. Despite his political and religious conservatism, Eliot was among the most innovative of the literary modernists, a figure to be reckoned with by admirers and critics alike. In his Whitbread Prize-winning biography, Peter Ackroyd delves into the work and mind of a man who redefined the very terms of modern poetry.

From his early days in America to his later life as a British citizen, Eliot fought successfully for his work and his privacy. But with careful research and splendid insight into the poet's character, Mr. Ackroyd has tracked Eliot to ground and brought this remarkable figure to light in an authoritative and fascinating study.

"The fullest and most plausible portrait yet achieved." (Frank Kermode, Oxford scholar and literary critic)

## **T.S. Eliot Details**

Date : Published September 2nd 1993 by Penguin Books Ltd (first published 1984)

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Author : Peter Ackroyd

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# **From Reader Review T.S. Eliot for online ebook**

## **Robert Dodds says**

A very convincing portrait of a complex man, well supported by references to letters and other evidence. As in Peter Ackroyd's equally excellent biography of Charles Dickens, the reader is drawn into a compelling narrative. In the case of T.S.Eliot, the narrative has an unexpected - and true - final twist worthy of a novel, which mitigates some of the gloom that the poet seems to have experienced throughout his life.

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## **Caleb Parnin says**

A very researched and impressive summation of one of the great modernist poets. That said, periods were quite hard to maintain interest....

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## **Caoileann says**

A very sensitive and insightful exploration of the live of the great T. S. Eliot. Rich with genuine concern and regard for the subject whilst retaining a modesty in its penmanship. Like having a fascinating and illuminating chat with a more eloquent and intelligent buddy about a mutually loved writer. This Peter Achroyd seems very charming and skilled.

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## **Sydney says**

This book is extremely well written and informative. The subject matter, Eliot and his life, are what is heavy and sad and difficult. But it gives you an excellent sense of what a complicated man he was.

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## **Philip Lane says**

I was fascinated by this biography of T.S.Eliot as I knew very little about him but had enjoyed his poetry as a teenager. I believe that Ackroyd writes in a very straight forward style and occasionally makes his own assumptions but these are clearly marked as his own views. The problem with the book perhaps is not that of the author but that of the subject. It emerges in the book that there are a lot of unanswered questions and contradictions regarding Eliot's feelings, beliefs and emotions. It seems he chose to express himself mostly through poetry precisely because this medium allows him to remain opaque and frequently refused to provide an official meaning for any of the more obscure phrases in his work. So, despite reading this thick and informative tome I still feel Eliot is a remote figure which is probably just how he wanted it to be.

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## **J. Alfred says**

Eliot is an interesting guy and this is a strong biography. Delivers what one asks!

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## **Michael Lineback says**

Biographical details of TS Eliot's life are hard to come by. Ackroyd's biography covers Eliot's life but is a bit dry and tedious.

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## **Maureen says**

I liked his biography of Thomas More a lot, but this one was, well, boring. Good for people seriously interested in the poet, not so good for people interested learning about the culture of a time period through the life of one individual.

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## **Stuart Field says**

I love Eliot and I love Ackroyd, but this is a little flat. Mainly because Eliot's estate placed restrictions on quoting the poetry! Still very interesting, but into as fascinating as it could have been.

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## **Larry says**

About one third of the way into this difficult biography I was about to abandon it due to frustration, but I am very glad that I did not. Let me say at the offset that my frustration arose from the constraints placed on the author (Peter Ackroyd) being forbidden to quote T S Eliot's published works which at times made a good deal of the book, especially the early years when his poetry was more dense, a challenge in that his literary criticism becomes so dense as to be unintelligible without the ability to quote directly. At the best of times literary criticism can be a challenge to the non academic but to add the component of post modernist poetry of Eliot is a recipe for frustration. I am so glad I managed to wade through those sections and while my eyes glazed over I managed to turn the pages and discover an overall good biography of one of the most enigmatic writers of the 20th century.

What strikes one almost immediately after commencement of the biography is that Eliot, overall had a miserable life. One of the primary causes of his ill health was his ill-fated marriage, page after page show physical and mental break-downs, rehabilitations, etc and that's a understatement. I have one major question that the book never answers; why would such a talented highly intelligent man place himself in such a horrendous marriage, which would haunt him for his entire life? My personal theory is it was due to his puritanical religious upbringing in the USA. Finding himself alone in London/Paris mixing with the crème Da la crème of the top artists of the century (including the Bloomsbury group) all very much in free Bohemian lifestyles, his upbringing became a major impediment in finding companionship and intimacy without having to marry his first flirtation in 1915, a rash and tragic decision which he regretted for the rest of his life. While later becoming a high church Anglo-Catholic his fundamentalist religious beliefs was

reflected in a letter of his 20's: "Syphilis... is God's punishment for nastiness" His constant ill-health,(its astounding to read the litany of his complaints) together with mental and physical decline of his wife makes one wonder how he managed to survive never mind write and lecture as he did culminating with his Noble Prize for literature.

The biography has some gaps which I found a little confounding as an example his relationship with James Joyce. Early in his stay in Europe his meeting with Joyce wasn't very memorable with a clash of polar opposite personalities. Time elapses and he is corresponding with some intimacy with Joyce (what happened to allow this to occur?) and later they appear to have a solid friendship? I realize that the writer has not had access to what must be consider the pot of gold of documentation being the letters between Eliot and his second wife which supposedly may reveal more of the man. Ackroyd says in one the final pages of the book which may be his "mea culpa" for the "good" biography that could have been "great": "We cannot reach into the mystery of Eliot's solitude".

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## Andrew says

I hardly ever read poetry, but for some reason T.S. Eliot's poetry speaks to me. Perhaps it's because, like Eliot, I used to work at a bank in the City of London, and the feeling of his poems is the exact feeling I had as a 'Hollow Man' looking at the masses of other Hollow Men crossing London Bridge to the Waste Land of the City. "I had not thought death had undone so many" - lines like that just express so much for me.

So I was happy to be able to borrow this biography of T.S. Eliot from my neighbours. It was quite a depressing read, but fascinating. Eliot was apparently very cold and detached from his emotions, sexually repressed, withholding of emotion, distrustful of the passionate side of him, and stuck for much of his life in a disastrous marriage with Vivien, who was perpetually ill and mentally unstable.

His writing depended a lot on other literature, feeding on others' work, adapting it and using it in hiw own. "His was an imagination which went to literature for that which life could not give - a sense of order and significance, and the possibility of dramatic intensity."

I was struck by how much of a record we have of people's lives and thoughts in those days, through letters and other paper archives - there's even a record of what books Eliot borrowed from his local library in 1917. Today, how much will there be for future historians to draw on? Nobody writes letters any more. Emails and blogs and websites could theoretically be retained forever, but are in practice deleted frequently. Not to mention tweets, texts, instant messages, etc.

I was also interested in how small and accessible 'literary' society seemed in those days. Even before Eliot was famous, he was mixing quite easily with the likes of Ezra Pound (who mentored him and edited the Waste Land), the Woolfs, James Joyce, etc etc. Eliot came from a privileged background so clearly that was important, but I was interested in how easily he seemed to get 'in', and how everybody seemed to know everybody.

His poetry was written sproadically, partly due to other commitments - his work at the bank and then as a publisher at Faber & Faber, his own poor health and that of his wife, their eventual breakup (Eliot split from her in a very cowardly way, going to America for a year and then just avoiding her when he got back to London and getting his lawyer to write to her and explain everything). For some years, there's almost nothing in the biography apart from a catalogue of worries and difficulties and ailments.

His conversion to Anglo-Catholicism surprised many, given his scepticism and ironic distance from any idea. But his sister Ada thought that it was a way for him to withdraw from the world even further, seeing it as unreal and merely "acting" in it while maintaining a separate, inner world of mysticism. He was also seeking some kind of order and tradition to cling to. He became increasingly preoccupied with the absurdity of most activities and the deceitfulness of human affections. Even his writing didn't seem to give him much pleasure - in his letters there are repeated references to poetry as something dark and viscous that clogs him up and has to be evacuated.

At the end of his life, however, he did seem to find happiness. He married his secretary Valerie Fletcher in 1957 and lived a simple, domestic life of semi-retirement with her until his death in 1965. After he died, Valerie said, "He felt he had paid too high a price to be a poet, that he had suffered too much."

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### **Noah says**

Ackroyd's was the first comprehensive account of Eliot's life. Though it has been largely surpassed by Gordon's biography, it was quite a revelation when it first came out, as it offered the first clear glimpse behind Eliot's carefully constructed and maintained facade.

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### **Steve says**

Mid 2. Given the obstacles Ackroyd faced with having access to the Eliot estate denied, this is an admirable attempt to exploit secondary sources to reveal the poet as an individual man. However, what this reader sought was a greater link between the man and his body of work, and true analysis of the latter was sadly absent.

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### **Andrew Darling says**

Superb. Makes sense of so much that was opaque. Beautifully written, too.

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### **Suzanne says**

A polished account of a sad and mostly lonely life. Although this is definitely a literary biography with a sustained effort to link the works and the life, it remains unclear why Eliot wrote what he did when he did. While there is clearly respect and even sympathy from the biographer, one has a sneaking feeling that Ackroyd cannot bring himself to empathize with his subject. The end result is a comprehensive but rather clinical account of the man and his works.

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