



## Poetry and poetic process: A comparative study of words worth's and T.S. Eliot's critical approaches

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### Abstract

The present research is aimed to critically and comparatively analyze the two ground breaking concepts regarding poetry and poetic process by the two literary giants of their respective eras, William Words Worth and T.S. Eliot. The research brings forth that both of them were rebel against the trends and traditions of their preceding ages. Wordsworth endeavored to liberate poetry and poet from the classical and neoclassical slavery while T.S. Eliot strived to bring classicism and objectivity in poetry. In Wordsworth's views poetry is the expression of poet's personal feelings and emotions. While Eliot rejects subjectivism and wants poetry to be impersonal and universal. To him, Poet's personal emotions must be depersonalized and made general. Wordsworth wanted to democratize poetry by using simple themes pertaining to rural life and rural people. His theory of poetic diction and favor for simple, rustic language and simple themes is countered by Eliot who wanted to depict the complexities of his age via poetry. Wordsworth was a non-conformist, he rejects the rules and regulations laid down by ancient masters while Eliot shows classicism when he emphasizes the importance of past and poet's submission to an outside authority that is tradition.

**Keywords:** words worth, Eliot, poetry, poetic process, poet, theory of impersonality

### Introduction

William Wordsworth and Thomas Stearns Eliot both are poet cum critics and have propounded theories and attempted to define poetry and poetic process. Both the literary giants earned fame and glory in their respective ages.

The Romantic Movement heralded by William Wordsworth and Samuel Taylor Coleridge was a revolutionary movement against the literary principles and trends of the previous age. "The

Romantic Revival at the end of 18<sup>th</sup> century and beginning of 19<sup>th</sup> century was a deliberate and sweeping revolt against The Age of Reason" (Trivedi 240). John Dryden and Alexander Pope both were the leaders of Classical or more correctly The Neoclassical age, rejected Elizabethan principle and favored neoclassicism, in the same way William Wordsworth and Coleridge in Lyrical Ballads rejected and attacked their principles in favor of Romantic. "In doing so they were reverting to the Elizabethan age or the first romantic age in English literature (Trivedi 242). Romantics held the poet free, they opined that rules and regulations hamper the imaginative flights of the poet. The rules and regulations unnecessarily restricted the freedom of the poet. Freedom is the key note of the romantics. This is the reason that Wordsworth defined poetry as a spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings and he held poet free to pour down his emotions and experiences in to his poetic compositions. "Imagination is the supreme faculty of the poets, The Lyrical Ballads opened a new chapter in the history of English poetry (Trivedi 240). In order to truly express these feelings, the content of the art must come from the imagination of the artist, with as little interference as possible from "artificial" rules dictating what a work should consist of [8].

The German poet Friedrich Schlegel, who is given credit for

first using the term *romantic* to describe Literature, defined it as "literature depicting emotional matter in an imaginative form."

Theory of Impersonality by T.S. Eliot proved to be a revolutionary theory. It shows a complete break from romantic traditions. He rejects romantic subjectivity and advocates objective standards (Trivedi 301). Eliot shows his classical bent of mind in various aspects, one of which is his Idea of Tradition and his emphasis in following tradition. It is in this sense that he held Past very important. In his critical essay Tradition and Individual Talent., Eliot argues that art must be understood not in a vacuum, but in the context of previous Pieces of art., Eliot has a much more dynamic and progressive conception of the poetic process: Novelty is possible only through tapping into tradition. When a poet engages in the creation of new work, he realizes an aesthetic "ideal order," as it has been established by the literary tradition that has come before him. As such, the act of artistic creation does not take place in a vacuum. The introduction of a new work alters the cohesion of this existing order, and causes a readjustment of the old to accommodate the new. For Eliot Tradition does not mean mere slavish or blind imitation but his conception of tradition is dynamic one. Sense of tradition cannot be inherited or innately acquired but it has to achieve through great and hard labor, through painstaking efforts. To explain the theory, Eliot has brought the analogy of chemical reaction. When oxygen and Sulphur-dioxide are mixed in the presence of a filament of platinum, they form sulphuric acid. This combination takes place only when platinum is presence. Platinum is the catalyst that helps to process of chemical reaction, but it itself is apparently unaffected. The mind of the poet is the shred of platinum. Its presence may be necessary for partly or exclusively to operate for the

combination of the experience in order to give birth to a piece of poetry (Eliot 120)  
 According to Selden, T.S. Eliot was the single most influential figure behind New Criticism. His Essay Tradition and Individual Talent contains the seed for new criticism. His emphasis on Poem not Poet, his declaration of poem as a completely separate entity, his emphasis on Depersonalization of personal emotions in favor of artistic or universal provided base for new criticism. Basically in his writing Eliot emphasized “‘science,’ ‘objectivity,’ impersonality,” and that the poem should be the object of analysis, not the poet he laid down the foundation of new criticism. (Eliot 120)

**Discussion / Analysis**

**Wordsworth versus T.S. Eliot (Concept of Poetry)**

**Table 1**

<b>Wordsworth’s concept of poetic process and poetry</b>	<b>T.S. Eliot’s theory of impersonality and concept of poetry</b>
1. Reaction against Classicism	1. Reaction against romanticism and humanism
2. Subjective	2. Objective
3. Expression of Personality	3. An Escape from personality
4. Individual	4. Universal
5. Liberty to express personal emotions.	5. Personal emotions must be transformed in to generalized emotions
6. Non-Conformist (Freedom and liberty from Past)	6. Conformist (gives importance to tradition)
7. Poetry should be simple	7. Poetry should depict complexity
8. Poet is a man	8. Poet is a craftsman

**Eliot’s Rejection of Wordsworth’s Poetic Process**

T.S. Eliot reacted against romanticism and romantic definition of self-expression in poetry. He completely discarded the poetry of personal experiences and emotions. He reacted against the Romantic definition in a way that “Poetry is not turning loose of emotions but an escape from emotion. It is not the expression of personality but an escape from personality” (Eliot 12) T.S Eliot opines that the poet must keep his personal emotions in control and not let it overflow (as in Romantics). Eliot attacks Wordsworth’s theory of poetry on the ground that poet’s mind just provide a medium where different feelings and experiences are free to combine and write to from new combinations (Eliot 18)  
 Eliot compares poet’s mind with a catalyst which is necessary to start and speedup the reaction but remains unchanged, and unaffected. Poet’s importance in poetic process is just that his mind provides a medium and works as a catalyst. New combination and product are formed in presence of a catalyst but catalyst does not participate or experience any change. Same is the case with the poet. He remains unaffected Eliot calls poet’s mind a depot a depository where are present different feelings, experience emotions, images and impressions and poetic process gives a new combination. The man who experiences feelings, emotions or images in entirely different from the artist who give all the experiences, a new look and a new identity.

**Freedom versus Tradition**

William Wordsworth’s concept of poetry and poetic process show a complete rejection of the past He held the poet free and liberal from all the bends of slavery for him all genuine and true poetry is spontaneous spontaneity is the keynote

William Wordsworth for the very first time, endeavors to define poetry and poetic process. It is a revolutionary work which attempts to free the poet and poetry from the slavish bonds of ancients and exhibits freedom and liberty. It was a response or reaction against the preceding neoclassical age. On the other hand T.S. Eliot’s concept of poetry and poetic process is a reaction against romanticism and humanism. To him, poetry is not spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings. For words worth poetry is self-expression, feelings and emotions aroused by the experiences that the poet undergoes but for Eliot personal expenses and expression of sole personal experience does not have any poetic significance. The concept of poetry and poetic process differs of Wordsworth and T.S Eliot differ on many grounds which are discussed as under:-

poetry ought not to be composed with preconceived notions or pre occupied mind nor it should be written in the following the footsteps of the preceding generation. A poet is free to choose themes and subject matter of his poetry. He is all free to communicate his own intensely felt emotions. “Sometimes it suits me better to invent, A tale from my own heart” (Words Worth 182)  
 On the other hand Eliot rejects this sort of freedom he opines that a poet must constrain his individuality and keep subjectivity under control and surrender himself to tradition poet must bow himself down to something more significant and valuable than his own personality and the this which possesses higher value and worth is tradition the poet must work not within his personal framework but within the frame work of tradition “what happens is a continual surrender of himself as he is at the moment to something which is more valuable” (Eliot 18)  
 Eliot’s idea of surrenders to tradition is an attack on Wordsworth’s concept of individuality, liberty and freedom in poetry.

**Individuality versus Universality**

Words worth’s poetry is the poetry of personal experiences and emotions. His poems like The Prelude, Tin tern abbey, solitary reaper, daffodils etc. are all his poetic descriptions of his own personal self. His poetry is replete with “I” and “My” “The music in My heart I bore” solitary reaper. In Prelude when he recalls his childhood period he says. That, musing on them, often do, I seem Two consciousness, conscious of myself (Words Worth 212)  
 Wordsworth’s poetry is the poetry of self-expression while on the hand Eliot refutes this subjectivity. According to him

poetry must not solely deal with subjectivity but it must be universal. Wordsworth's *The Prelude* is written in first person narrative and is an autobiographical poem that deals with the spiritual development of the poet. On the other hand T.S. Eliot's "The Wasteland" contains the experience of the whole age. According to Eliot, a work of art must not be used as a means of expression of personal emotions and ideas but the writer or the poet must curb or keep his individuality under control in order to make the work of art not personal but universal.

### **Subjective Emotions versus Artistic Emotions**

Wordsworth's definition of poetry conveys a clear idea about his conception of poetry that is poetry is a means of self-expression or personal expression while Eliot rejects this romantic definition of poetry. What he talks about is not poet's personal emotions but artistic emotions which are not poet's very own but in those emotions are immersed the general or universal appeal. What makes poetry great is not poet's own personal experience but artistic experience.

Wordsworth wrote whenever he feels and experiences. The emotions and feelings in his poetry are his own. His 'Sonnet Composed upon Westminster Bridge' is an example of his subjectivity. He was standing over the bridge and enjoying the beautiful morning scene. His sonnet is nothing else but an account of his soothing personal experience. The peace, serenity and soothe which he was enjoying and the beauty he was beholding, he poured that in to verses. Senses are used as a vehicle for self-expression. "Though the eyes and senses of man are it is true, his few guides, let him follow where so ever he can find an atmosphere of sensation in which to move his wings" (Wordsworth 143) Eliot opposed this approach. For him, the man who experiences anything and the man who produces out of the experience are different the fusion of disparate emotions forms artistic emotion which are different from poet's own subjective emotions.

### **Wordsworth Wants Poetry to Be Simple While Eliot Wants to Depict Complexity**

Wordsworth and Eliot's conception of poetry contrast and this ground as well that William Wordsworth's aim was to make poetry more simple, natural, spontaneous and rustic. While Eliot wanted to depict the complexity. Wordsworth chose common people and incidents taken from common life and to present them in a way that they appear unusual and captivating by the help of his imaginative faculty while. Eliot says. "Our civilization comprehends great variety and complexity playing upon a refined sensibility, must produce various and complex results.

The poet must become more and more comprehensive, more allusive, more indirect (Eliot 123)

### **Domination of Feelings versus Unified Sensibility**

William Wordsworth's poetry was a revolt against the logical, witty and intellectual poetry of this preceding age, his poetry displays feeling in dominion. Feeling has been given prime importance than action and situation. "Poems from the popular poetry of the day, it is this that the feeling there in developed gives importance to the action and situation and not action and situation to the feeling" (Wordsworth 123) In *Solitary Reaper* as well, the poem is the product of emotions and feelings stirred up in the heart of the poet by the music and song of the highland girl.

In "I wander lovely as a cloud", the feeling of joy is dominant, it is not the thought of the poet that appeals but the feeling of joy that is present in the poem captivates the heart of the reader.

And then my heart with the pleasure fills,  
And dances with the daffodils (Wordsworth 13)

Eliot opposes such sort of dominance of one thing over other what he preaches is "A complete equilibrium and harmony between thought and feeling, between intellect and emotion" For Eliot, sensibility is not only an ability to respond but it is an ability to fuse and unite thought and feelings. By this ability contradictory elements can be fused to form new compound. Eliot has described this term in his critical essay "The Metaphysical Poets" in which he favors John Donne's poetry because in his compositions he found and amalgamation of wit and emotions, intellect and feelings.

Eliot rejects romantic poetry on the ground that he found the harmony of intellect and emotions lacking in them. He says that after John Donne, poet's loss of that unification, after him. The poet could either think or feel. None of the poet could feel and think simultaneously "Tennyson and Browning are poets, and they think; but they do not feel their thought as immediately as the odour of a rose. (Eliot 120) A thought to Donne was an experience" (Eliot 117). He was of the opinion that unification is necessary to make poetry a whole a complete entity.

### **Poet Is a Man versus Poet Is a Craftsman**

Wordsworth describes a poet as "He is a man, speaking to men" (Wordsworth 120). Wordsworth's poet is essentially a man and what he talks about and pours down in his poetry is human emotions and feelings. In this way he draws a similarity between a poet and a reader so that the reader can relate himself with poet Wordsworth.

For Eliot, a poet is not only the one who observes, contemplates, recollects and composes but a craftsman, a skilled worker who brings proper pattern and organization on the disordered, jumbled and confused experiences of life. Poet brings harmony. He sees the mode of transmission is through words. The words are arranged in that proper order in which they can convey the desired meaning. All this requires craftsmanship and skill from poet's part.

### **Findings**

The comparative study of the poetic process and concept of poetry of William Wordsworth and T.S. Eliot brings forth the fact that the poetry of both the poets were reaction against their preceding ages. Wordsworth endeavored to democratize poetry by bringing rural people and life in his poetry. He wants poetry to be free from the chains of rules and regulations laid down by ancient masters. He wants poetry to be spontaneous, natural, imaginative and subjective. On the other hand, T.S. Eliot's concept of poetry is total rejection of Romantic Age and Humanism Where Wordsworth wants poetry to be the self-expression of the poet's experiences T.S. Eliot emphasizes impersonality or curbing of self-expression in poetry. Eliot's appreciation of John Donne and other Metaphysical poets is also very significant in relation to his own concept of poetry. He wants poetry to be a harmonious whole of thought and feeling, intellect and emotions. Wordsworth preaches freedom and free play of imagination he is a non-conformist while Eliot shows his classicism in his emphasis on

Tradition (though his conception of obedience to the past is different). Wordsworth's poetry depicts expression of poet's experiences like the Prelude which is an autobiographical poem exhibiting the spiritual development of the poet while Eliot's The Wasteland depicts the experience of the whole age. Eliot wants universality and generalized emotion instead of personal or subjective. Wordsworth's conception that poetry is spontaneous overflow of Powerful feelings is that of T.S. Eliot who opines that "Poetry is not turning loose of emotions but an escape from emotions". The research unfolds the fact that both of them were rebel against their preceding ages and their conception of poetry is contrary and entirely different to each other.

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