



# 'To murder and create': the quotable Eliot

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HELL is oneself.<sup>1</sup> If you haven't the strength to impose your own terms on life, you must accept the terms it offers you.<sup>2</sup> Anxiety is the handmaiden of creativity.<sup>3</sup> Only those who risk going too far can possibly find out how far one can go.<sup>4</sup>

This pastiche of T. S. Eliot quotations is an arresting taster of his citation lexicon. We are familiar with numerous iconic gems of his poetry: 'The yellow fog that rubs its back upon the window-panes;<sup>5</sup> ...the women come and go / Talking of Michelangelo;<sup>6</sup> I will show you fear in a handful of dust;<sup>7</sup> I had not thought death had undone so many;<sup>8</sup> Footfalls echo in the memory.<sup>9</sup> Some lines from his plays have also become especially memorable: 'The last temptation is the greatest treason / To do the right deed for the wrong reason....'<sup>10</sup> 'However certain our expectation / The moment foreseen may be unexpected / when it arrives'.<sup>11</sup> His critical works provide similar treasures: 'Genuine poetry can communicate before it is understood'.<sup>12</sup> 'We know too much and are convinced of too little'.<sup>13</sup>

Eliot has become one of the most quoted writers in English. I encountered 314 different citations from his oeuvre spread across 40 quotation dictionaries and 14 websites. It is common to find sources iterating identical quotations; my total does not include repetitions. In some cases, sources provide particular quotations with variations compared to other sources. In these instances, I considered them the same unless the most substantive part was not in the overlap. There is, of course, some subjectivity in this selection.

Most of the hardcopy sources consulted were general references: Collins *Dictionary of Quotations*; *The International Thesaurus of Quotations*.



Some focused on particular 'eras': The Oxford Dictionary of Modern Quotations; others, broad topics: The Penguin Dictionary of Religious Quotations; The Oxford Dictionary of Literary Quotations. Websites consulted were mostly general: allgreatquotes.com, saidwhat.co.uk. The versatility of Eliot's writings is indicated by this 'small' sample of topics under which his quotations were found: Aging, Education, Feeling, Language, Health, Literature, Women and Literature, Poetry, John Donne, T. S. Eliot (that is, Eliot on Eliot), Mankind, Fear, Nature, Originality, The Bible, Doubt, Reality, Power, Philosophy, Television, Insignificance, The Bourgeoisie and Busts (of women, not sculpture). One does need to be circumspect; often a particular quote found in one source is found in another under a different but similar heading. Nonetheless, many of the citations can be meaningfully placed under substantively different topics. Of course, the longer the quote, the greater the chance it could be placed under multiple headings.

Eliot's quotable quotations are distillations of his skills as an incisive thinker and wordsmith: in poetry, literary criticism, drama, lectures, his correspondence, and in records of interviews conducted with him.

To quote a thinker or writer means we find he or she has something significant to say in succinct form. Penetrating observations are a feature of Eliot:

*Half the harm done in this world is due to people who want to feel important.*<sup>14</sup>

*You will find you survive humiliation.  
And that's an experience of incalculable value.*<sup>15</sup>

Such statements reveal perceptive wisdom. At times, Eliot's dicta are especially thought-provoking:

*Unnatural vices are fathered by our heroism....*<sup>16</sup>  
*Maturing as a poet means maturing as the whole man, experiencing new emotions appropriate to one's age, and with the same intensity as the emotions of youth.*<sup>17</sup>

*Men live by forgetting – women live on memories.*<sup>18</sup>

Many Eliot quotations are pithy aphorisms:



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*Sometimes to be a 'ruined man' is itself a vocation.<sup>19</sup>*

*People exercise an unconscious selection in being influenced.<sup>20</sup>*

*Human kind*

*Cannot bear very much reality.<sup>21</sup>*

Another feature are arresting abstractions:

*A people without history*

*Is not redeemed from time, for history is a pattern*

*Of timeless moments.<sup>22</sup>*

*The death of hope and despair*

*This is the death of air.<sup>23</sup>*

And this 'Einsteinian' mind-twister:

*O dark dark dark. They all go into the dark,*

*The vacant interstellar spaces, the vacant into the vacant.<sup>24</sup>*

It is not often we think of pathos as being iconic, yet many of Eliot's memorable statements are focused on this sentiment:

*I have measured out my life in coffee spoons.<sup>25</sup>*

*I have seen the moment of my greatness flicker,*

*And I have seen the eternal Footman hold my coat, and snicker,*

*And in short, I was afraid.<sup>26</sup>*

As we would expect from a great poet, there are riveting images:

*When the evening is spread out against the sky*

*Like a patient etherised upon a table.<sup>27</sup>*

*The worlds revolve like ancient women*

*Gathering fuel in vacant lots.<sup>28</sup>*

*Paint me the bold anfractuons rocks,*

*Faced by the snarled and yelping seas.<sup>29</sup>*

And captivating metaphors:

*I should have been a pair of ragged claws*

*Scuttling across the floors of silent seas.<sup>30</sup>*



*I think we are in rats' alley  
Where dead men lost their bones.*<sup>31</sup>

*Who is the third who always walks beside you?*<sup>32</sup>

*The human mind, when it comes to a terminus, hastens to look up the next  
train for almost anywhere.*<sup>33</sup>

*Landscape is a passive creature that lends itself to an author's mood.*<sup>34</sup>

Eliot's Christian faith is the focus of many striking reflections:

*It is true to say that the glory of man is his capacity for damnation. The  
worst that can be said of most of our malefactors, from statesman to thieves,  
is that they are not man enough to be damned.*<sup>35</sup>

*I said to my soul, be still, and let the dark come upon you which shall be the  
darkness of God.*<sup>36</sup>

*Those who deny Thee, could not deny, if thou didst not exist, and their  
denial is never complete, for if it were so, they would not exist.*<sup>37</sup>

Any consideration of Eliot as an invaluable 'quotee' would be substantially deficient if his views on creative writing and literature were not included:

*Someone said 'The dead writers are remote from us because we know so  
much more than they did'. Precisely, and they are that which we know.*<sup>38</sup>

*The poet's mind is in fact a receptacle for seizing and storing up numberless  
feelings, phrases, images, which remain there until all the particles which  
can unite to form a new compound are present together.*<sup>39</sup>

*The greatness of literature cannot be determined solely by literary standards  
though we must remember that whether it is literature or not can be  
determined only by literary standards.*<sup>40</sup>

And there is the famous 'objective correlative':

*The only way of expressing emotion in the form of art is by finding an  
'objective correlative': in other words, 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.*<sup>41</sup>

Eliot's incisive wit can be turned on other writers. When asked whether he was American or British, he replied:

*Whichever Mr Auden is, I am not.*<sup>42</sup>

Then:

*I must say Bernard Shaw is greatly improved by music.*<sup>43</sup>

And referring to Henry James:

*He had a mind so fine that no idea could violate it.*<sup>44</sup>

His summation of Shakespeare is playful:

*We can say of Shakespeare, that never has a man turned so little knowledge to so great account.*<sup>45</sup>

Playful quips are typical of his humour:

*All cases are unique, and very similar to others.*<sup>46</sup>

*We like to appear in the newspapers so long as we are in the right column.*<sup>47</sup>

*Some editors are failed writers, but so are most writers.*<sup>48</sup>

The risqué makes a brief appearance:

*Uncorseted, her friendly bust  
Gives promise of pneumatic bliss.*<sup>49</sup>

An Eliot aphorism crystallises a common function of comedy:

*Humour is also a way of saying something serious...*<sup>50</sup>

especially this rib-splitter:

*An election is coming. Universal peace is declared and the foxes have a sincere interest in prolonging the lives of the poultry.*<sup>51</sup>

His comedy reminds me of the first Eliot poem I encountered, from *Old Possum's Book of Practical Cats* – a children's classic that now doubles as a celebrated musical. The quotation typically encountered from it is the one that Macavity's never there. One dictionary quoted from the poem that hooked me as a child:

*When you notice a cat in profound meditation,  
The reason, I tell you, is always the same:  
His mind is engaged in rapt contemplation*

*Of the thought, of the thought, of the thought of his name:  
His ineffable effable  
Effanineffable  
Deep and inscrutable singular Name.*<sup>52</sup>

The first part of the above neologism, 'effen', has one thinking of another word not found in Eliot's public idiom.

Eliot's quotable humour is sometimes corny:

*You shouldn't interrupt me interrupting.  
That's worse than interrupting.*<sup>53</sup>

And he can be a sophist:

*It is not enough to understand what we ought to be, unless we know what we are; and we do not understand what we are, unless we know what we ought to be.*<sup>54</sup>

Many quotations from Eliot are provocative:

*The majority of mankind is lazyminded, incurious, absorbed in vanities and tepid in emotion, and is therefore incapable of either much doubt or much faith.*<sup>55</sup>

Although feminism (as we understand it) had not much influenced broader society in the 1930s, we could reasonably expect someone of Eliot's experience to be fully aware of women's substantive contribution to literature. Yet, surprisingly, he announced that

*I struggle to keep the writing as much as possible in male hands, as I distrust the feminine in literature.*<sup>56</sup>

More notoriously, Eliot has been accused of anti-Semitism and, accordingly, the debate this accusation has engendered has focused on several quotations of apparently anti-Semitic provenance:

*The rats are underneath the piles.  
The Jew is underneath the lot. Money in furs.*<sup>57</sup>

*(Chicago Semite Viennese.)*<sup>58</sup>

*A lustreless protrusive eye  
Stares from the protozoic slime.*<sup>59</sup>

*What is still more important is unity of religious background; and reasons*

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*of race and religion combine to make any large number of free-thinking Jews undesirable.*<sup>60</sup>

Without entering this ongoing dispute, we may note that, in such debates, quotations gather a life of their own which is often different from the original intent and context.

Then there are quotations from others about Eliot. The late Queen Mother had this to say:

*...we had this rather lugubrious man in a suit, and he read a poem... I think it was called The Desert. And first the girls [the present Queen and the late Princess Margaret] got the giggles and then I did and then even the king.*<sup>61</sup>

Harold Nicholson paints an expanded picture:

*He is without pose and full of poise. He makes one feel that all cleverness is an excuse for thinking hard.*<sup>62</sup>

*He is yellow and glum. Perfect manners. Dyspeptic, ascetic, eclectic. Inhibitions. Yet obviously a nice man and a great poet.*<sup>63</sup>

John Carey makes comparisons:

*Even the greatest poets need something to cling to. Keats had Beauty; Milton had God. T. S. Eliot's standby was worry.*<sup>64</sup>

Envy appears to be the driver for Eliot's former colleague, Ezra Pound:

*Mr Eliot... has arrived at the supreme Eminence among English critics largely through disguising himself as a corpse.*<sup>65</sup>

Tall poppies attract spleen, but it seems surprising that even a critic such as F. R. Leavis who spent so much time discussing Eliot and often praising him in the highest terms should curtly observe of him:

*Self-contempt; well-grounded.*<sup>66</sup>

Edmund Wilson was affectionate in caricature:

*'Mr Eliot' was a fictional character and Tom himself helped create him. Among the roles the poet deftly played were the Anglican Clergyman, The Formidable Professor, Dr Johnson and the Genteel Bostonian.*<sup>67</sup>

Alan Bennett (son of a butcher in Leeds) laughs at himself in reference

to Valerie Eliot's mother:

*There was a time when I thought my only connection with the literary world would be that I had once delivered meat to T. S. Eliot's mother-in-law.*<sup>68</sup>

Perhaps Eliot himself has the last laugh:

*How unpleasant to meet Mr Eliot!  
With his features of clerical cut,  
And his brow so grim  
And his mouth so prim  
And his conversation, so nicely  
Restricted to What precisely  
And If and Perhaps and But.*<sup>69</sup>

Why Eliot is so quotable and quoted has to do with penetrating observations, thought-provoking dicta, pithy aphorisms, insights into our foibles and weaknesses, incisive wit and acerbic sarcasm, the craft of succinct writing. And in addition to the 300-plus dictionary and website quotations there are, I believe, pearls awaiting the spotlight:

*The only cure for Romanticism is to analyse it.*<sup>70</sup>  
*...unperceived evasion of monotony is the very life of verse.*<sup>71</sup>  
*Blake's poetry has the unpleasantness of great poetry.*<sup>72</sup>  
*Why have principles when one has the inner voice?*<sup>73</sup>

And he comments that critical works may lead to

*a vicious taste for reading about works of art instead of reading the works themselves.*<sup>74</sup>

It seems certain that 'Eliotisms' will, as with Shakespeare and the English Bible, so permeate our parlance, *les mots de la tribu*, that his time past will be present in our collective time future.<sup>75</sup>

## Notes

- 1 *The Cocktail Party*, Act One, Sc. 3, *The Oxford Dictionary of Modern Quotations*, T. Augarde, ed. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1991), p.73.
- 2 [www.saidwhat.co.uk/quotes/famous/t\\_s\\_eliot](http://www.saidwhat.co.uk/quotes/famous/t_s_eliot)
- 3 [www.quotatio.com/e/eliot-t-s-quotes.html](http://www.quotatio.com/e/eliot-t-s-quotes.html)
- 4 H. Crosby, 'Introduction', *Transit of Venus* [www.saidwhat.co.uk/quotes/famous/t\\_s\\_eliot](http://www.saidwhat.co.uk/quotes/famous/t_s_eliot)

- 5 'The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock', *Prufrock and Other Observations, Collected Poems 1909-1962*, p.13. Sources in this paragraph of 'iconic' lines are, when known, direct from Eliot.
- 6 *Ibid.*
- 7 'The Burial of the Dead', *Collected Poems*, p. 64.
- 8 *Ibid.*, p.65.
- 9 'Burnt Norton' I, *ibid.*, p.189.
- 10 *Murder in the Cathedral*, Part I, *The Complete Poems and Plays*.
- 11 *Ibid.*, Part II.
- 12 'Dante', in *For Lancelot Andrews: Essays on Style and Order*, [www.e-scoala.ro/desperado/ts\\_eliot\\_literary\\_criticism\\_the\\_quicksands\\_of\\_criticism.html](http://www.e-scoala.ro/desperado/ts_eliot_literary_criticism_the_quicksands_of_criticism.html)
- 13 'Dialogue on Dramatic Poetry' (*ibid.*), G. Seldes, ed., *The Great Quotations*, p.230.
- 14 *The Cocktail Party*, Act II, E. Erlich & M. De Bruhl, eds., *The International Thesaurus of Quotations*, p.615.
- 15 *Ibid.*, Act I, sc.I, R. Andrews, ed., *The New Penguin Dictionary of Modern Quotations*, p.165.
- 16 'Gerontion', A. N. Jeffares & M. Gray, eds., *Collins Dictionary of Quotations*, p.240.
- 17 'Yeats', Erlich & De Bruhl, *op. cit.*, pp.512-13.
- 18 *The Elder Statesman*, Act Two, *ibid.*, p. 425.
- 19 *The Use of Poetry and the Use of Criticism*, J. B. Simpson, ed., *Simpson's Contemporary Quotations*, p.479.
- 20 R. Fitzhenry, ed., *The Book of Quotations*, p.293
- 21 'Burnt Norton' I, Augarde, *op. cit.*, p74.
- 22 'Little Gidding' I, E. Knowles, ed., *The Oxford Dictionary of Twentieth Century Quotations*, p.99.
- 23 *Ibid.*, p.98.
- 24 'East Coker' III, Augarde, *op. cit.*, p.74.
- 25 'The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock', J. M. & M. J. Cohen, eds., *The Penguin Dictionary of Quotations*, p.152.
- 26 *Ibid.*, Augarde, *op. cit.*, p.75.
- 27 *Ibid.*, Cohen, *loc cit.*
- 28 'Preludes' (*Prufrock and Other Observations*), Jeffares & Gray, *op. cit.*, p.240.
- 29 'Sweeney Erect' (*Poems by T.S. Eliot*), *ibid.*, p..241.
- 30 'The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock', Augarde, *op. cit.*, p.75.
- 31 'II. A Game of Chess', *The Waste Land*, *ibid.*, p.76.
- 32 'V. What the Thunder said', *The Waste Land*, *ibid.*, p.77..
- 33 'The Varieties of Metaphysical Poetry' (*The Varieties of Metaphysical Poetry*), Simpson, *op. cit.*, p.480.
- 34 'Thomas Hardy', *After Strange Gods* (the 'Virginia' / 'Page-Barbour Lectures'), P. Kemp, ed., *The Oxford Dictionary of Literary Quotations*, p.192.
- 35 'Introduction', C. Baudelaire, *Intimate Journals*, Seldes, *loc cit.*
- 36 'The Virginia Lectures' (*After Strange Gods*), M. Miner & H. Rawson, eds., *Dictionary of American Quotations*, p.327.
- 37 *Murder in the Cathedral*, F. S. Pepper, ed., *The Wit and Wisdom of the Twentieth Century*, p.16.
- 38 'Tradition and Individual Talent', *The Sacred Wood*, S. Ratcliffe, ed., *The Concise Oxford Dictionary of Quotations*, p.130.
- 39 *Ibid.*, Erlich & De Bruhl, *op. cit.*, p.513.
- 40 'Religion and Literature', *ibid.*, p.386.
- 41 'Hamlet and His Problems', *The Sacred Wood*, Augarde, *op. cit.*, p.76.
- 42 Interview (reprint), *New York Times*, 23 June 1994.
- 43 *New York Times*, 21 December 1984, [www.bartleby.com/63/61/9161.html](http://www.bartleby.com/63/61/9161.html)
- 44 'Henry James', E. Wilson, ed., *The Shock of Recognition*, [www.amusingquotes.com/h/e/T\\_S\\_Eliot\\_1.htm](http://www.amusingquotes.com/h/e/T_S_Eliot_1.htm)

- 45 'The Classics and the Man of Letters' (Lecture 1942), Jeffares & Gray, *op. cit.*, p.244.  
46 *The Cocktail Party*, Act II, Erhlich & De Bruhl, *op. cit.*, p. 553.  
47 *The Family Reunion*, Act I) [www.allgreatquotes.com/eliot.shtml](http://www.allgreatquotes.com/eliot.shtml)  
48 [www.saidwhat.co.uk/quotes/famous/t\\_s\\_eliot](http://www.saidwhat.co.uk/quotes/famous/t_s_eliot)  
49 'Whispers of Immortality' (*Poems by T. S. Eliot*), Knowles, *op. cit.*, p.101.  
50 [www.quotatio.com/e/eliot/-t-s-quotes.html](http://www.quotatio.com/e/eliot/-t-s-quotes.html)  
51 *Ibid.*  
52 'The Naming of Cats', *Old Possum's Book of Practical Cats*, Jeffares & Gray, *op. cit.*, p.243.  
53 *The Cocktail Party*, Act III, *ibid.*  
54 'Religion and Literature', *op. cit.*, p.617.  
55 'Introduction', B. Pascal, *Pascal's Pensees*, *ibid.*, p.407.  
56 Letter, 31 October, 1917 (not cited as to whom addressed), Kemp, *op. cit.*, p.324.  
57 'Burbank with a Baedeker: Bleistein with a Cigar' (*Poems by T. S. Eliot*), C. Raine, *T. S. Eliot*, pp.168-69.  
58 *Ibid.*, *Collected Poems*, p.42.  
59 *Ibid.*, Raine, p.169.  
60 'Virginia Lectures', *ibid.*, p.157.  
61 Kemp, *op. cit.*, p.88.  
62 *Ibid.*  
63 *The Macmillan Dictionary of Quotations*, p.181  
64 Kemp, *op. cit.*, p.89.  
65 *Ibid.*, p.88.  
66 *Ibid.*  
67 *Ibid.*  
68 *Ibid.* p.18.  
69 'Five Finger Exercises', Augarde, p.74.  
70 'Imperfect Critics', *The Sacred Wood*, p.26.  
71 'Reflections on *Verse Libre*', *Poems and Prose*, p.109.  
72 'Blake', *The Sacred Wood*, p.128.  
73 'The Function of Criticism', *Poems and Prose*, p. 183  
74 *Ibid.*, p.190.  
75 phrases from 'Burnt Norton'.