

**T. S ELIOT'S 'THE DISSOCIATION OF SENSIBILITY' AND
IMPERSONALITY: A RESPONSE TO THE 17TH-CENTURY POETRY
DIVIDE**

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Abstract:

This research paper explores T.S. Eliot's profound concept of "Impersonality" in poetry as a direct response to what he famously termed the "Dissociation of Sensibility" in 17th-century English poetry. Eliot's critical essay, "The Metaphysical Poets" (1921), introduced this division between thought and feeling that he believed characterized a historical shift in literary sensibility. This research attempts to explore the Dissociation of Sensibility, delving into Eliot's analysis of metaphysical poetry and the reasons behind the division between thought and feeling during the 17th century. To better understand the historical and cultural context of the 17th century, it is examined the emergence of scientific, philosophical, and intellectual developments that contributed to the separation of thought and feeling in literature. This contextualization highlights the impact of empiricism, rationalism, and the Enlightenment era on poetry. Eliot's response to the Dissociation of Sensibility takes center stage in the paper, and discuss how he championed the concept of impersonality as a means of reconciling the divide. By analyzing select poems such as "*The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock*" and "*The Waste Land*," it is illustrated how Eliot applied impersonality to his own work, seeking to bridge the gap between intellect and emotion. This research paper sheds light on the enduring relevance of Eliot's ideas, demonstrating how his concept of impersonality in poetry emerged as a compelling response to the Dissociation of Sensibility.

(Key Words: T.S Eliot, Dissociation of Sensibility, Impersonality, thought and feeling)

Introduction: T.S. Eliot, one of the most influential literary figures of the 20th century, is celebrated for his profound insights into the art of poetry and the intricate relationship between tradition and innovation. His critical essays have left an indelible mark on the landscape of modern literary thought. Among his many critical concepts, "Impersonality" stands as a cornerstone, intricately tied to his observations on the "Dissociation of Sensibility" in English poetry. In the 17th century, a seismic shift occurred in the world of English poetry, a shift that Eliot keenly observed and defined as the "Dissociation of Sensibility." Prior to this period, poetry had seamlessly woven together the intellectual and emotional aspects of human experience. However, as the 17th century unfolded, a growing

chasm seemed to emerge between these essential elements of human expression. This divide, as Eliot argued, marked a critical turning point in literary history.

Dissociation of Sensibility: Eliot's inquiry into this historical division becomes a focal point of this research, which aims to explore the Dissociation of Sensibility, its historical and cultural context, and Eliot's notion of "Impersonality" as a deliberate response to this division. By understanding the Dissociation of Sensibility in the 17th century, we can grasp the intellectual and emotional milieu that set the stage for the subsequent developments in English poetry. Eliot's concept of "Impersonality" emerges as a creative and intellectual response to the perceived separation of thought and feeling in poetry. Through a meticulous examination of Eliot's critical works and poetic compositions, particularly "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock" and "The Waste Land," this research seeks to elucidate how Impersonality was employed by the poet to reconcile this divide.

And the afternoon, the evening, sleeps so peacefully!
Smoothed by long fingers,
Asleep ... tired ... or it malingers,
Stretched on the floor, here beside you and me.
Should I, after tea and cakes and ices,
Have the strength to force the moment to its crisis?
But though I have wept and fasted, wept and prayed,
Though I have seen my head (grown slightly bald) brought in upon a platter,
I am no prophet — and here's no great matter;
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.
(From The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock)

The stanza begins with a vivid and emotional description of the peaceful afternoon and evening. The use of words like "peacefully," "smoothed by long fingers," and the image of something "asleep... tired... or it malingers" evoke a sense of tranquillity and lull. The atmosphere is rich with emotional and sensory details. The speaker contemplates whether he should have the strength to "force the moment to its crisis." This question reveals a hesitation and self-doubt, highlighting the intellectual deliberation that disconnects the speaker from taking immediate action. The speaker mentions that he has "wept and fasted, wept and prayed." These actions suggest a certain emotional intensity, but they are juxtaposed with the speaker's continued hesitancy and self-awareness. He has experienced emotional turmoil, yet he remains unable to act decisively. The reference to the "eternal Footman" holding the speaker's coat and snickering introduces a surreal and almost supernatural element. This figure, perhaps a symbol of death or fate, is juxtaposed with the speaker's sense of fear and inadequacy. This juxtaposition emphasizes the divide between the emotional, the symbolic,

and the intellectual realms. There's a clear separation between the emotional and imaginative elements (e.g., the peaceful evening and the emotional turmoil) and the intellectual and analytical elements (e.g., the self-doubt and contemplation of action). This separation of emotional and intellectual experiences creates a sense of disconnection and inner conflict within the speaker, which is a key feature of the modernist poetic style Eliot was known for.

April is the cruellest month, breeding
Lilacs out of the dead land, mixing
Memory and desire, stirring
Dull roots with spring rain.
Winter kept us warm, covering
Earth in forgetful snow, feeding
A little life with dried tubers.
Summer surprised us, coming over the Starnbergersee
With a shower of rain; we stopped in the colonnade,
And went on in sunlight, into the Hofgarten,
And drank coffee, and talked for an hour.

(From The Wasteland)

The lines describe the changing seasons, including April's cruelty, the warmth of winter, and the surprise of summer. Eliot presents these observations in an objective and disinterested manner, not directly expressing personal emotions or experiences. This detachment from personal sentiment reflects the Impersonality theory. Even when describing the mixing of memory and desire, Eliot portrays this as a universal human experience rather than his personal one. He doesn't delve into his own memories and desires but instead presents this phenomenon as a common aspect of the human condition. The stanza touches on universal themes such as the cyclical nature of seasons, the passage of time, and the shared human experience of enjoying a simple moment in a garden. These themes are presented in a way that emphasizes their universality rather than the poet's personal perspective. The language used is relatively neutral and devoid of strong personal emotions. The poet adopts a tone of dispassionate observation, in line with the Impersonality theory's call for a more objective and detached approach to poetry.

Eliot's somewhat loosely defined distinction gained significant popularity, particularly among American New Critics. The concept of the dissociation of sensibility was widely regarded as a factor that weakened poetry from the time of Milton up to the later works of W. B. Yeats. It was often attributed to the intellectual developments of the seventeenth century, which embraced a scientific view of reality characterized by a material universe devoid of human values and emotions. (For example, Basil Willey's "The Seventeenth Century Background" from 1934 explores this perspective.) However, especially since 1950, Eliot's notion of a

sudden yet enduring dissociation of sensibility has faced strong criticism. Critics argue that it represents an invalid historical assertion, constructed to justify Eliot's disapproval of the intellectual, political, and religious developments in English history after the Civil War of 1642. Some also suggest that it served to rationalize Eliot's specific poetic preferences, influenced by his conservative political and social leanings.

An in-depth journey into the concept of "The Dissociation of Sensibility" as articulated by T.S. Eliot in his seminal essay, "The Metaphysical Poets." This journey is integral to unraveling the historical and literary phenomenon that marks a significant shift in poetic sensibility. Eliot's work spotlights the distinctive characteristics of metaphysical poetry, particularly those of renowned poets like John Donne, Andrew Marvell, and George Herbert. Metaphysical poets were celebrated for their remarkable ability to seamlessly intertwine profound intellectual concepts with rich, raw emotional experiences. Through their employment of intricate conceits and metaphors, they masterfully conveyed profound emotions while engaging in intellectually stimulating discourse. Eliot's contention that metaphysical poetry experienced a decline as the 17th century unfolded warrants a critical examination. While his perspective holds merit, it is equally important to consider poets of the era who continued to navigate the delicate balance between thought and feeling in their works. By evaluating their contributions, a more nuanced understanding of this supposed decline can be achieved. The 17th century witnessed the ascendancy of reason, empiricism, and a fervent pursuit of scientific knowledge. This intellectual transformation undoubtedly played a significant role in the perceived dissociation of sensibility. However, it is crucial to assess the extent of this influence and whether all poets of the era were uniformly affected. The political and religious backdrop of the 17th century also demands attention. The English Civil War and its aftermath contributed to a turbulent period in history. Political and religious conflicts influenced the sensibilities of poets, potentially compelling them to prioritize reason and rationality over unbridled emotion in their poetic expressions.

Historical and Cultural Context of the 17th Century: The 17th century was a period of profound transformation and intellectual upheaval, marked by seismic shifts in philosophy, science, and politics. These shifts had a significant impact on the literary sensibilities of the era, ultimately contributing to the Dissociation of Sensibility in English poetry. This era witnessed the emergence of empiricism, a philosophical approach that emphasized the primacy of sensory experience and observation in the acquisition of knowledge. Thinkers like John Locke championed empiricism, advocating for the idea that all human knowledge is derived from sensory perception. This philosophical perspective had a profound influence on

the prevailing intellectual climate, favoring reason, empiricism, and rationality over emotional and metaphysical expressions. In parallel, the 17th century bore witness to the rise of rationalism, an intellectual movement that upheld reason as the primary source of knowledge and the key to unlocking the mysteries of the universe. Figures like René Descartes championed this rationalistic approach, further emphasizing the importance of intellectual rigor and logical thought. The Enlightenment era, which began in the late 17th century and continued into the 18th century, further accelerated the ascendancy of reason and intellectualism. The Enlightenment emphasized human reason, science, and secularism, challenging traditional religious and emotional modes of understanding the world. It was a period marked by a quest for knowledge and a deepening engagement with the empirical and rational.

The profound influence of these philosophical and intellectual developments on the literary landscape is integral to understanding the Dissociation of Sensibility. The era's preoccupation with reason, empiricism, and the pursuit of knowledge left an indelible mark on the literary sensibilities of the time. Poets and writers began to grapple with the challenge of balancing the demands of reason and intellect with the expression of raw, unmediated emotions in their works. T.S. Eliot's concept of Impersonality, emerging in response to this historical backdrop, sought to address this dilemma. By advocating for a poetry that sublimated the personal self and emotions, Eliot aimed to reconcile the intellectual and emotional elements in poetry, thus bridging the divide that had emerged during the 17th century.

Impersonality as a Response: Eliot's exploration of impersonality serves as a deliberate strategy to bridge the perceived gap between intellect and emotion, a gap that had widened during the 17th century due to the ascendancy of reason and empiricism. Eliot proposed that an impersonal poet could harmonize intellect and emotion by sublimating personal experiences and emotions within the framework of the poem. This sublimation allowed the poet to transcend the limitations of the individual self, enabling a more universal expression that resonated beyond personal confines. By adopting this impersonal stance, poets could engage with profound intellectual ideas while invoking deep emotions, achieving a delicate balance between thought and feeling.

To illustrate his theory in practice, Eliot turned to his own poetic creations, notably "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock" and "The Waste Land." In these iconic works, Eliot adeptly applied the concept of impersonality. In "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock," the introspective musings of the persona are elevated to a universal scale, capturing the anxieties and uncertainties of the modern individual. The poem's deeply personal themes are

transmuted into a broader commentary on the human condition, achieved through the technique of impersonality. "The Waste Land," a magnum opus of modernist poetry, exemplifies Eliot's mastery of impersonality. Through a fragmented narrative and a plethora of voices, Eliot weaves a tapestry of cultural allusions and emotional dissonance. Despite its complexity, the poem resonates with readers on a profound level, transcending individual experiences to evoke shared human struggles and disillusionment. Eliot's use of impersonality here allows him to explore the disintegrating societal norms and spiritual desolation of the post-World War I era while maintaining a universal appeal.

T.S. Eliot's notion of the artist's relationship with tradition and the imperative of impersonality is a central theme in his literary criticism. Eliot contends that the artist must subordinate their individuality to the grander entity of literary tradition. Over the course of their career, the poet should progressively relinquish their self, embracing greater objectivity and depersonalization. A profound poem, Eliot argues, embodies the entirety of poetry that has come before it, making the poet's immersion in tradition paramount. He emphasizes that the artist's journey involves a continuous self-sacrifice and an ever-increasing annihilation of personality.

Eliot employs a chemical analogy to illustrate this concept: the poet's mind acts as a catalyst in the process of poetic creation. Like platinum in a chemical reaction, the poet's mind remains unchanged, while emotions and feelings become the reagents. The poet's mind is instrumental in forging new emotional and experiential combinations, yet it remains detached from the transformation. The pinnacle of artistic achievement, according to Eliot, is a complete separation between the suffering individual and the creative intellect. A state of impersonality is the goal, where poetry is not an outpouring of raw emotion but an escape from it, a transcendence of personal subjectivity. This level of impersonality can only be realized when the poet internalizes a sense of tradition, recognizing both the present and the past as active influences. Eliot underscores the disparity between the emotions experienced in everyday life and the complex, refined emotions conveyed in poetry. Even emotions never directly encountered by the poet can be harnessed to serve the purpose of artistic expression. Eliot's theory champions the poet's transformation from a subjectivity-driven individual to an objective artist who draws from the collective reservoir of literary tradition, creating works that transcend personal emotion and offer new layers of significance and meaning. Impersonality, in Eliot's view, is the path to achieving this artistic transcendence.

Implications for Modern Poetry: Eliot's contemporaries, profoundly influenced by his theories, embarked on a poetic journey that embraced the principles of impersonality. Poets

such as Ezra Pound, W.B. Yeats, and H.D. found inspiration in Eliot's fusion of intellect and emotion, adopting similar techniques to craft their verses. Their works mirrored Eliot's commitment to transcending personal boundaries, resulting in poetry that resonated universally, capturing the zeitgeist of their respective eras. As the 20th century unfolded, Eliot's influence endured, permeating the works of poets belonging to various literary movements. The modernist poets, enamoured with Eliot's innovative approach, experimented with fragmented narratives, intertextuality, and multifaceted voices, all hallmarks of impersonality. Notably, poets of the Beat Generation, such as Allen Ginsberg, embraced the concept of impersonality in their spontaneous, raw verse, channelling personal experiences into a broader societal critique.

In subsequent decades, the echoes of Eliot's impersonality reverberated through the works of confessional poets like Sylvia Plath and Anne Sexton. These poets, while delving into intensely personal subject matter, skilfully utilized impersonality to universalize their themes, transcending mere self-expression to evoke collective human experiences. Contemporary poets continue to grapple with the tension between intellect and emotion, drawing upon Eliot's legacy to navigate this delicate balance. In an era marked by diverse poetic voices and styles, Eliot's concept of impersonality remains a touchstone, offering poets a nuanced approach to engage with complex themes and emotions while maintaining a universal resonance. By advocating for impersonality, Eliot not only bridged the gap between intellect and emotion in his own time but also laid the foundation for future generations of poets. Through their collective exploration and adaptation of his concepts, poets have continued to evolve the landscape of English poetry, enriching it with depth, complexity, and a timeless universality. Eliot's legacy, therefore, endures as a testament to the enduring dialogue between past and present, shaping the poetic expression of generations to come.

Conclusion: T.S. Eliot's exploration of "The Dissociation of Sensibility" and his advocacy for impersonality in poetry represent a profound response to the 17th-century poetry divide. Eliot's emphasis on surrendering the self to the enduring literary tradition echoes through his works, illuminating the path for poets to transcend their personal emotions and embrace a broader, collective consciousness. The notion of the artist as a catalyst, influencing but remaining untouched by the creative process, underscores the necessity for depersonalization in poetic expression. Eliot's theories highlight the artist's continual self-sacrifice, culminating in the extinction of personality and the emergence of a more objective, impersonal voice. Through meticulous engagement with tradition, poets can imbue ordinary emotions with new depth, lending significance to experiences they may not have personally encountered. This

detachment from raw emotion enriches poetry, transforming it into an escape from subjectivity rather than its direct expression. Eliot's vision of poetry as a synthesis of all that came before, a living amalgamation of literary heritage, challenges poets to immerse themselves in the vast ocean of human experience. By reconciling intellect and emotion, poets can craft verses that resonate universally, transcending temporal and cultural boundaries. In the contemporary landscape, Eliot's ideas continue to influence poets, urging them to grapple with tradition, balance intellect and emotion, and achieve the delicate art of impersonality. As a response to the 17th-century poetry divide, Eliot's concepts remain a testament to the enduring dialogue between past and present, shaping the evolution of poetic expression and reaffirming the timeless relevance of tradition in the ever-changing world of literature. Through Eliot's lens, poets find not just a methodology, but a profound philosophy—one that bridges the chasm between centuries and fosters a poetic continuum that enriches the very essence of human experience.

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