

The Meeting Point of Belief and Skepticism in Eliot's Poetry and Criticism

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ABSTRACT

A recurring conflict between faith and skepticism characterizes T. S. Eliot's literary career and is central to both his poetry and critical prose. After converting to Anglicanism, Eliot is frequently regarded as a poet of religious affirmation, but his writings nonetheless reflect moral disquiet, societal disintegration, and profound epistemological ambiguity. The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock, The Waste Land, The Hollow Men, and Ash-Wednesday are a few of Eliot's poems that are examined in this essay, along with critical works like

Tradition and the Individual Talent, The Idea of a Christian Society, and Notes Towards the Definition of Culture. The study contends that Eliot's religious and cultural claims are never completely stable and are instead plagued by uncertainty, discontinuity, and textual ambiguity, drawing on post-structuralist concepts from Derrida, Barthes, and Foucault. While his critique tries—often nervously—to impose order, tradition, and authority upon a fractured modern reality, his poetry dramatizes the modern subject's oscillation between the longing for transcendental meaning and the realization of its ongoing deferral. The study argues that Eliot's relevance is found in maintaining the tense cohabitation of believing and skepticism rather than in resolving the tension between them. This places Eliot's work at the intersection of postmodern skepticism toward absolute truths and modernist longing for religion. This study demonstrates how belief in Eliot functions less as doctrinal certainty and more as a brittle, contested practice molded by historical, cultural, and discursive influences by reading Eliot's poetry and criticism together.

Keywords: post-structuralism, reader-response, modernism, Anglo-Catholicism, faith, doubt, belief, skepticism, and critique; T. S. Eliot.

INTRODUCTION

Through faith and doubt, T. S. Eliot's literary and critical career develops as an intellectual journey. His latter works attempt to reconcile skepticism and faith, while his early poetry depicts the spiritual aridity of modernity, and his criticism examines the moral and cultural breakdown of the twentieth century. But Eliot's discussion of belief and skepticism is not only theological; it is also profoundly cultural and epistemic. His quest for spiritual unity is representative of a larger modernist need for purpose in a disjointed world.

The intellectual and cultural background of Eliot's thinking, the tension between belief and skepticism in his early poetry, the critic's dual role as believer and skeptic in his prose, the reconciliation of faith and doubt in his later works, and the theoretical discussion of these dynamics through post-structuralist and reader-response frameworks are the five stages through which this paper examines “the meeting point of belief and skepticism” in Eliot's poetry and criticism. Because of this tension between faith and skepticism, Eliot is shown to be a paradoxical thinker who is both steeped in tradition and conscious of contemporary disruption.

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Literature Reviews related to Belief and Skepticism in Eliot's Poetry and Criticism.

1. **Eliot's Early Skepticism and Modernist Disillusionment:** Early critics such as F. R. Leavis and Cleanth Brooks argue that Eliot's early poetry (Prufrock, The Waste Land) embodies modernist skepticism marked

- by spiritual exhaustion, alienation, and loss of metaphysical certainty. These studies emphasize Eliot's representation of a fragmented consciousness unable to sustain belief in a coherent moral or religious order.
2. **The Waste Land as a Text of Faith-in-Crisis:** Scholars like Helen Gardner and Hugh Kenner interpret 'The Waste Land' as dramatizing the collapse of belief systems rather than their complete rejection. The poem's allusive structure reflects skepticism toward stable meaning, while its religious references suggest a yearning for belief that remains unresolved.
3. **Conversion and the Turn Toward Christian Belief:** Eliot's conversion to Anglicanism (1927) has been examined by critics such as Lyndall Gordon, who view this moment as a decisive shift from skepticism to belief. However, Gordon and others caution that Eliot's later poetry does not abandon doubt but internalizes it within a disciplined religious framework.
4. **Ash-Wednesday and the Poetics of Hesitant Faith:** Studies on 'Ash-Wednesday' emphasize the poem's language of renunciation, uncertainty, and spiritual struggle. Critics argue that belief in Eliot's religious poetry is never triumphant; rather, it coexists with skepticism, producing a poetics of submission without full assurance.
5. **Four Quartets: Faith Through Temporal Skepticism:** Scholars such as "George Williamson" and "Frank Kermode" identify 'Four Quartets' as Eliot's most sustained attempt to reconcile belief and skepticism. Time, memory, and language are treated skeptically, while faith is presented as a paradox—accessible only through silence, humility, and negation.
6. **Eliot's Critical Writings and the Anxiety of Belief:** In essays like "Tradition and the Individual Talent" and "The Function of Criticism," Eliot expresses skepticism toward Romantic subjectivity while advocating a disciplined cultural and moral order. Critics argue that his criticism reflects an intellectual struggle to ground belief in tradition rather than personal conviction.
7. **The Idea of a Christian Society and Cultural Skepticism:** Literary and cultural critics note that Eliot's social criticism reveals deep skepticism about modern secular society. While he proposes Christian belief as a stabilizing force, scholars point out that his vision remains idealized and internally conflicted, exposing the tension between cultural authority and lived faith.
8. **Post-Structuralist Readings: Derrida and the Instability of Belief:** Post-structuralist critics apply "Derrida's *différance*" to Eliot's religious language, arguing that belief in his poetry is endlessly deferred. These readings suggest that Eliot's texts undermine their own theological claims through fragmentation, irony, and linguistic instability.
9. **Foucault, Power, and Institutional Belief:** From a Foucauldian perspective, critics examine how Eliot's advocacy of tradition and orthodoxy functions as a discourse of power. His skepticism toward modernity contrasts with his attempt to institutionalize belief, revealing contradictions between poetic openness and critical authority.
10. **Reader-Response and the Ethics of Doubt:** Recent scholarship influenced by "Barthes and reader-response theory" argues that Eliot's belief is not prescriptive but experiential. The reader encounters belief through doubt, silence, and uncertainty, making skepticism an ethical necessity rather than a failure of faith.

Objectives of the Study

1. To examine the coexistence of belief and skepticism in T.S. Eliot's major poems and critical writings, highlighting how faith, doubt, and intellectual uncertainty operate simultaneously rather than as oppositional forces.
2. To analyze Eliot's poetic texts (such as *The Waste Land*, *Prufrock*, *Ash-Wednesday*, and *The Hollow Men*) as sites where spiritual longing intersects with modern skepticism, fragmentation, and cultural disillusionment.
3. To study Eliot's critical prose (including *Tradition and the Individual Talent*, *The Idea of a Christian Society*, and *Notes Towards the Definition of Culture*) to trace how belief is theorized, disciplined, and sometimes destabilized within his critical framework.
4. To explore the tension between modernity and faith in Eliot's work by situating his belief-skepticism dynamic within broader modernist, philosophical, and cultural contexts.
5. To assess how Eliot's negotiation between belief and skepticism complicates fixed interpretations of his religious position, allowing for a reading that accommodates ambiguity, contradiction, and interpretive plurality.

METHODOLOGY OF THE STUDY

This study adopts a qualitative, interpretive methodology grounded in close textual analysis, theoretical criticism, and contextual reading to examine the intersection of belief and skepticism in T.S. Eliot's poetry and critical prose. While existing Eliot scholarship has extensively explored his religious conversion, Christian humanism, and conservative cultural thought, much of this criticism tends to frame belief and skepticism as sequential or oppositional phases in Eliot's intellectual development. This study intervenes by addressing a critical gap: it investigates belief and skepticism not as binaries or chronological stages, but as coexisting and dialogic forces operating simultaneously within Eliot's poetic and critical imagination. The research draws upon selected poems—"The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock," *The Waste Land*, *Ash-Wednesday*, and *The Hollow Men*—alongside Eliot's critical writings such as *The Idea of a Christian Society*, *Notes Towards the Definition of Culture*, and *To Criticize the Critic*. These texts are analyzed comparatively to trace recurring tensions between spiritual yearning and epistemological doubt, revealing how skepticism functions not merely as a negation of belief but as a constitutive element within Eliot's religious and cultural vision.

Methodologically, the study is informed by post-structuralist critical frameworks, particularly the theories of Jacques Derrida, Michel Foucault, and Roland Barthes. Derrida's concept of undecidability is employed to read moments where belief remains suspended rather than resolved; Foucault's insights into discourse and power illuminate Eliot's cultural authority and normative claims; and Barthes' notion of textual plurality allows for a reading of Eliot's works as sites of multiple, often conflicting, meanings. These theoretical tools enable a critical reassessment of Eliot's claims to moral and spiritual coherence by foregrounding instability, fragmentation, and contradiction within his texts.

In addition, the study incorporates a historical-contextual approach, situating Eliot's work within the intellectual climate of modernity marked by secularization, disillusionment, and cultural crisis. This contextualization does not serve to stabilize meaning but to highlight how Eliot's articulation of belief emerges through sustained engagement with modern skepticism.

By integrating close reading with post-structuralist theory and contextual analysis, this methodology strengthens analytical clarity while offering a distinct critical intervention into Eliot studies—one that reframes belief and skepticism as mutually constitutive forces rather than resolved opposites.

The Cultural and Intellectual Background of Eliot's Ideas

Eliot's intellectual development spans cultural criticism, philosophy, and theology. F. H. Bradley influenced Eliot's education at Harvard, where he came into contact with idealism that taught him the relational nature of knowledge and the boundaries of subjective experience. His early interest in spiritual transcendence beyond Western rationalism was sparked by his later study of Sanskrit, Buddhism, and Indian philosophy. Eliot's lifelong dialectic between faith and doubt was shaped by his early exposure to "Eastern religious thought and Western philosophical skepticism," as David Naugle notes (Naugle 3). This contradiction was reaffirmed by the modernist cultural milieu. Following World War I, disappointment weakened faith in Christian unity and Enlightenment reason. Eliot saw a culture that had lost its spiritual core, just like his peers. According to Stephen Weidner, Eliot's 1927 conversion to Anglo-Catholicism was an effort to rediscover meaning inside modernity rather than a retreat from it (Weidner 7). Therefore, his conversion was an intellectual exercise seeking coherence in the midst of chaos rather than a simple act of defiance or complete obedience.

Religion and culture are inextricably linked, according to Eliot's cultural theory, which is expressed in "The Idea of a Christian Society" and "Notes Towards the Definition of Culture". According to his well-known claim that "no culture has appeared or developed except together with a religion," belief is not just personal but civilizational (Eliot, 'Notes' 31). Eliot, however, is cautious of dogmatic certainty even while he upholds Christian orthodoxy. His mistrust of unthinking piety coexists with his mistrust of contemporary secular humanism. Thus, from the beginning, Eliot's ideas are shaped in the furnace of belief, which is challenged by skepticism and doubt and maintained by a need for conviction.

Eliot's Early Poetry: Belief and Skepticism

Eliot's early poems, especially "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock," "Gerontion," and "The Waste Land," capture the awareness of a contemporary person cut off from religion, culture, and purpose. These poems portray skepticism as an existential state rather than a philosophical position.

The speaker in "Prufrock" (1915) represents paralysis and self-doubt. He pauses, mulls over, and avoids making a choice: "Do I dare / Disturb the universe?" 'Prufrock' 46–47; Eliot. The modern ego is stuck in a never-ending state of self-consciousness when transcendent belief is absent. Beyond religion, Prufrock is skeptical of language and meaning in general; his speech becomes jumbled, sardonic, and ambiguous.

Gerontion (1920) carries on this theme of spiritual aridity. In his description of "an old man in a draughty house / Under a windy knob," the elderly man conveys a sense of both spiritual weariness and bodily deterioration (Eliot, 'Gerontion' 1–2). The fragmented structure of the poem and its unresolved biblical references point to a world devoid of spiritual unity. "Gerontion's voice becomes the echo of Western skepticism, unable to reconcile history, faith, and self," as one reviewer puts it (Weidner 12). 'The Waste Land' (1922), Eliot's masterwork, perfectly captures the contemporary crisis of belief. The poem's disjointed form, polyphonic voices, and intertextual layering reflect a spiritually desolate society, plagued by religious memory. Eliot's 'Waste Land' 30 refrain, "I will show you fear in a handful of dust," captures both revelation and despair—the echo of biblical faith and the dust of death. Although the poem's final line, "Shantih shantih shantih," which is taken from the 'Upanishads, alludes to transcendence, it is still linguistic and not experiential. Thus, skepticism—about oneself, language, and culture—defines Eliot's early poetry, yet it never gives up on the pursuit of believing. Ronald Bush contends that Eliot's early poetry "embodies a tension between the modern impossibility of belief and the yearning for the sacred" (Bush 89). Eliot's poetic power is found in this tension, where skepticism and belief coexist in restless dialogue rather than destroying one another.

Eliot's Critical Prose: The Critic as Skeptic and Believer

The dialectic of Eliot's poetry is reflected in his analytical prose. Eliot vacillates between faith in tradition and cynicism about contemporary relativism in articles like "Tradition and the Individual Talent" (1919), "The Function of Criticism" (1923), and "The Frontiers of Criticism" (1956). He makes the following argument in "Tradition and the Individual Talent": "The progress of an artist is a continual self-sacrifice, a continual extinction of personality" (Eliot, 'Selected Essays' 15). This means that the poet must give up personal feelings to preserve the literary tradition. This is an act of faith in cultural authority. However, Eliot permits critical skepticism by insisting on a continual reassessment of tradition. Tradition is dynamic and open to reinterpretation; it is not a set of fixed dogmas.

Eliot challenges the Romantic idea of inspiration in "The Function of Criticism, arguing that criticism needs to be "a development of sensibility by intelligence" (Eliot, 'Selected Essays' 30). Once more, mistrust of unexamined subjectivity coexists with conviction in the worth of intelligence. "Eliot's criticism enacts the double movement of modernity: seeking authority in tradition while questioning the very grounds of authority," as literary historian Kenneth Asher observes (Asher 57).

Eliot expressly recognizes the diversity of meaning later on in "The Frontiers of Criticism": "There is always more than one interpretation of a poem that may be justified." 'On Poetry and Poets' 118 (Eliot). This admission foreshadows the demise of authorial authority and is consistent with post-structuralist philosophy. Eliot's skepticism is nevertheless restrained by his faith in the text's integrity; he does not abandon his belief in order or value.

A skeptic about the sufficiency of human reason or the infallibility of critical systems, but a believer in the need for order, culture, and religious foundation, the Eliotian critic thus occupies the middle ground between believing and skepticism. His writing demonstrates that genuine critique necessitates both conviction and skepticism.

Faith and Doubt's Reconciliation in Later Works

A shift toward reconciling faith and doubt is evident in Eliot's later poetry, particularly in 'Ash Wednesday' (1930) and 'Four Quartets' (1935–1942). Despite the abundance of Christian imagery, these pieces maintain the skeptic's intellectual humility.

"Teach us to care and not to care / Teach us to sit still," the speaker in 'Ash Wednesday' prays (Eliot, 'Ash Wednesday' 77–78). Eliot's mature spirituality is encapsulated in the contradiction, which acknowledges both human limitations and the mystery of religion. "Eliot's conversion did not erase his doubt; it transformed doubt into a form of spiritual discipline," notes Naugle (Naugle 14). This reconciliation is strengthened by 'Four Quartets'. Eliot connects the finite with the eternal, the doubting mind and the trusting soul, in its reflections on time, suffering, and salvation. "The wisdom of humility is the only wisdom we can hope to acquire: humility is endless" (Eliot, 'Little Gidding' 97–98). This humility is both theological and epistemological, acknowledging that faith and understanding collide with human limitations. According to Eliot, doubt is a condition of believing rather than its enemy. Question without faith is hopelessness; faith without question is blind dogma. 'Four Quartets' expresses a reconciliation in which "the fire and the rose are one," a belief tempered by skepticism (Eliot 123). "Eliot's late poetry achieves a synthesis of intellect and spirit, in which skepticism itself becomes a vehicle of belief," according to critic Grover Smith (Smith 204).

Theoretical Thoughts: Reader-Response and Post-Structuralist Aspects

Despite coming before the post-structuralist movement, Eliot's writings significantly align with its tenets. His poetry's fragmentation, intertextuality, and diversity of voices foreshadow Roland Barthes's concept of the "writerly text," in which readers create meaning rather than receiving it. Eliot's impersonal conception of poetry, in which "the poet's mind is a catalyst" rather than a source of meaning, is comparable to Barthes's assertion of the "death of the author" (Eliot, 'Selected Essays' 17). From a post-structuralist perspective, Eliot's work is a dance of signifiers where belief and doubt collide. Instead of being an ontological certainty, belief becomes a literary impact. The structure of 'The Waste Land' can be explained by Derrida's concept of 'différance', or the perpetual deferral of meaning: pieces point toward wholeness but never reach it. Religious symbols are both present and absent in the poem, indicating faith and its impossibility at the same time. In this way, Eliot's work performs deconstruction before the phrase was coined: belief is plagued by skepticism, and meaning is constantly delayed. Eliot's writings require active engagement from a reader-response perspective. Eliot's use of poetry clearly reflects Wolfgang Iser's thesis of the "implied reader." The reader must fill in the blanks, create coherence, and balance faith and skepticism in both 'The Waste Land's' disjunctive story and 'Four Quartets' contemplative rhythm. By going through the same oscillation that characterizes Eliot's own awareness, the reader becomes a co-creator of meaning. Furthermore, Foucault's theories on discourse and power shed light on Eliot's cultural criticism. In line with Foucault's assertion that power and knowledge are interwoven, Eliot saw tradition as an authority system that molds knowledge and value. Eliot, in contrast to Foucault, sought to sanctify power—to re-root it in a transcendent order—rather than to destroy it. As a result, the point where belief and doubt converge becomes both political and spiritual: a conflict over who determines modernity's meaning.

When combined, reader-response and post-structuralist readings demonstrate Eliot's ongoing significance. His writings emphasize the ambiguity of meaning, oppose closure, and present the reader as an active participant in the ongoing struggle between skepticism and conviction. Instead of resolving this conflict, Eliot turns it into the core of contemporary religion.

CONCLUSION

Eliot's writings provide a thorough analysis of the boundaries of skepticism and the contemporary crisis of faith. His critique embodies the coexistence of conviction and inquiry; his later works achieve a tentative synthesis in which faith coexists with doubt, and his early poetry conveys the desolation of unbelief. From fragmentation to integration, from despair to humility, the intellectual path from Prufrock to Four Quartets reflects a spiritual journey.

Read using reader-response and post-structuralist perspectives. Eliot emerges as a poet of tension rather than a dogmatic believer, one who rejects the nihilism of pure skepticism while exposing the frailty of conviction. His doubt is fruitful because it seeks the truth, and his faith is contemporary because it is reflexive. Eliot's poetry and

criticism are driven by the interaction between believing and skepticism, which he views as interlocutors rather than enemies. Resonance—a place where the contemporary soul may still hope, question, and believe—is where they come together rather than resolution.

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