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The Concept of Paradox as a Poetic Technique in T. S. Eliot's *Four Quartets*

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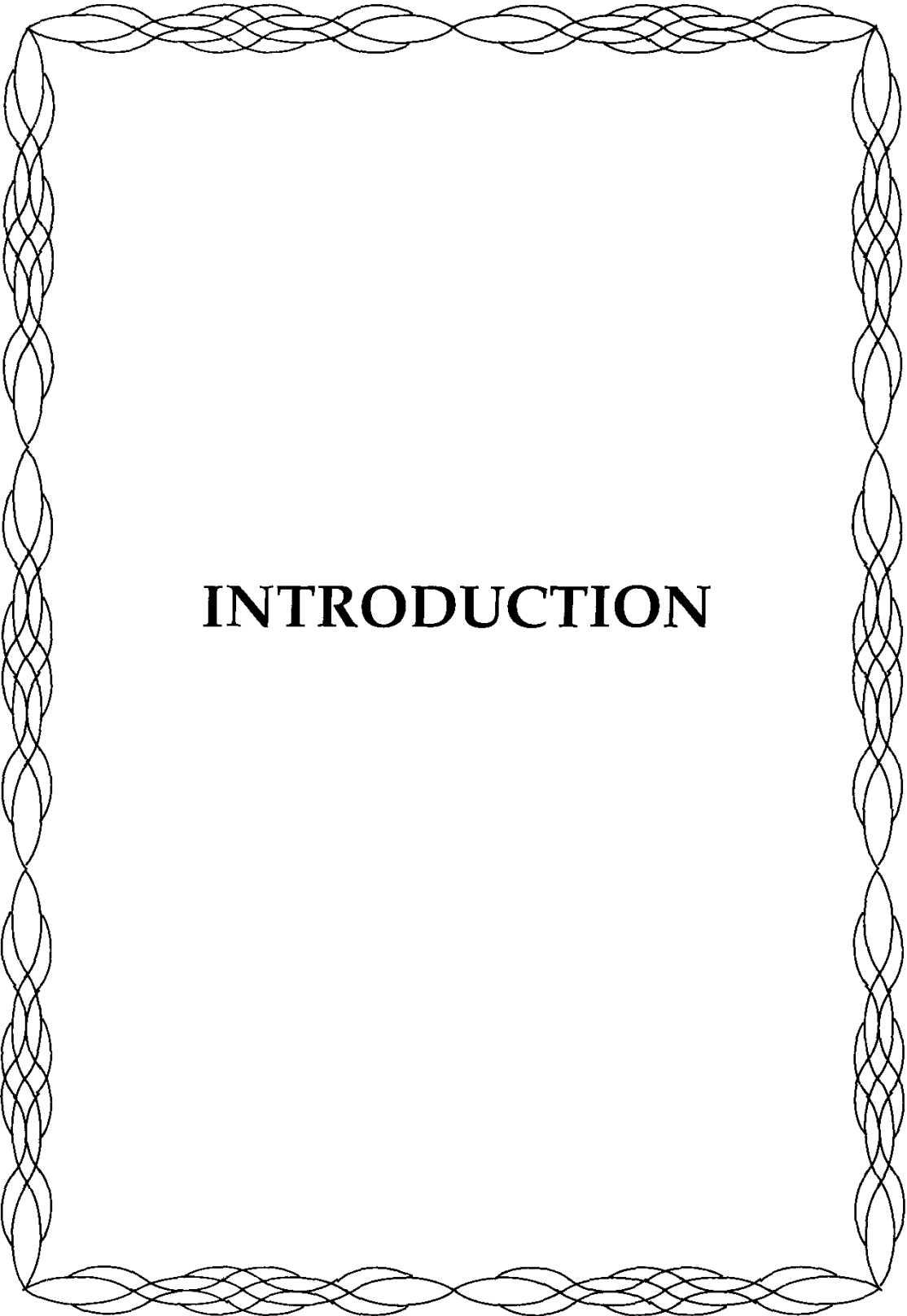
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INTRODUCTION

Thomas Stearns Eliot (1888 - 1965) is considered one of the most prominent figures in English literature since the 1920s. He was born in St. Louis, Missouri, U.S.A. and was educated in various academic institutions: Harvard, the Sorbonne and Merton College, Oxford.

Eliot embarked on his poetic career by writing a volume of verse, *Prufrock and Other Observations* which was published in 1917. This was followed by *poems* in 1919. In 1922, he founded and edited the *Criterion*, an influential quarterly in which *The Waste Land* was first published.⁽¹⁾ This poem is the masterpiece of Eliot's early

(1) The *Criterion* continued to enjoy immense literary prestige in England and the Continent until it closed down in 1939. It was published by Virginia and Leonard Woolf at their Hogarth Press where they published new and experimental work.

poetic manner. Through the use of ancient myths, modified into contemporary social life, the poem depicts man's spiritual degradation and his urgent need for salvation. The poem is considered a manifestation of man's disillusionment in the post-war world.

In 1927, Eliot became a British subject and a member of the Anglican Church. His experience of the discovery of faith was dealt with in *Ash Wednesday* and the series of Ariel Poems. But the masterpiece of his new style was the *Four Quartets* which was first published as a whole in New York in 1943, the different parts having been published separately from 1936.

Four Quartets is Eliot's last major poem in which his poetic powers reached the zenith of maturity. It is a highly controversial poem and thus, by general consent, it is the one most widely read and discussed among Eliot's poetry. It has gradually come to replace *The Waste Land* in common popularity and academic preference because of the wide range of subjects it tackles and the mature poetic style with which it is

written. The panoramic scenes of the poem include meditations on time and eternity, the personal and the general, man's place in history and in nature, religious faith, capturing the moment of illumination, the impact of the Second World War, the nature of language and the difficulties which the poet faces during the act of composition.

The *Four Quartets* consists primarily of four separate poems: "Burnt Norton", "East Coker", "The Dry Salvages" and "Little Gidding", and each one is divided into five movements. These poems, it is important to mention, can each be read independently and separately from the other three, yet they form at the same time one complete and organic whole. Most of the themes are developed throughout the course of the four poems and hardly any is restricted to one individual poem. It is, thus, generally advised that they be read as one long poem and criticized accordingly. This research considers the *Four Quartets* as one smooth continuum and the themes which the concept of paradox tackles are shown to be developed from one separate poem to another until they reach their ultimate poetic culmination either in the

third or fourth poem. The organicity of the *Four Quartets* is vital to the understanding of the development of its different themes and especially of the development of paradox in the poem as a whole.

The main concern of this research is to provide an application of the concept of paradox in the *Four Quartets*. Throughout the enormous bulk of criticism attached to the poem, not one complete study of the use of the concept of paradox as a poetic technique has been applied to it although its construction and, therefore, understanding rests primarily on the concept of paradox. It is true that one or two brief papers have tackled the use of paradox in the *Four Quartets*, but they are fragmentary.⁽¹⁾ They merely take a couple of examples of paradoxical excerpts from the poem and analyse them

(1) Only two brief papers deal with the concept of paradox in the *Four Quartets* :

- a. Herman Servotte, "The Poetry of Paradox : 'Incarnation' in T.S. Eliot's *Four Quartets*," *English Studies : A Journal of English Language and Literature*, Vol. LXXII, No. 4 (1991).
- b. Doris T. Wight, "Metaphysics through Paradox in Eliot's Four Quartets", *Philosophy and Rhetoric*, Vol. XXIII, No. 1 (1990).

separately without reference to their development throughout the course of the entire poem. This research, however, will tackle the use of the concept of paradox in the *Four Quartets* both comprehensively and intensively. It will trace the development of paradox in its different forms throughout the course of the poem. It also intends to locate, analyse and draw conclusions on each paradoxical expression until finally a paradoxical thematic pattern is hoped to be reached

The concept of paradox has been particularly assigned for this research as a poetic technique to be applied to the poem for many reasons. First, the *Four Quartets* is a poem whose construction and understanding rests primarily on the concept of paradox. A very large portion of the poem is composed through the language of paradox and, therefore, understanding the development of this concept through the course of the poem will provide the key to grasping its full impact. Second, paradoxical language is difficult to understand because it rests primarily upon contradiction in meaning which must be resolved in order to reach at

the underlying truth. For this reason, this research will take on the burden of unravelling these contradictions which in reality are only apparent in order to provide the reader with valid solutions and analysis for the concept of paradox in the *Quartets*. Without a thorough analysis of the concept of paradox in the poem the reader will undoubtedly face numerous hardships in following its development of thought.

Third, the general consensus of critics like Cleanth Brooks and of Eliot himself as regards the importance of the concept of paradox and the inevitability of its use as a poetic medium has provided, in part, the green light for the endeavour to trace its development in the poem. Eliot's preoccupation in his criticism with finding a new mode of expression which can escape the common and the linear led him to the exploitation of the language of paradox in the *Quartets*. It proved to be the most suitable medium to break the monotonous and trite construction of language and provide newer, more vivid

expressions capable of carrying profounder levels of meanings to the reader.

In order to accommodate for the importance of the concept of paradox as a poetic technique and its invaluable relevance to the *Four Quartets*, this research will be divided into three chapters. The first chapter focuses on the concept of paradox in general as a mode of expression. It discusses the different definitions of paradox and the one most relevant for the purpose of this research i.e. the type of paradox on which Eliot relies most and which is capable of conveying his meanings to the reader as accurately and as concisely as possible. The various functions of the concept of paradox are also presented in order to emphasize its importance as a poetic medium and justify its basic use in the poem. This chapter also discusses the importance of the concept of paradox in modern poetry and criticism with due emphasis on Eliot's case. It is Eliot's dissatisfaction with conventional modes of expression which urges him to seek the language of paradox as a means of expressing inherent thoughts and ideas in the *Quartets*.

The first chapter also gives a brief account of the *Four Quartets*: its background, divisions and importance in Eliot's poetic career. There is a wide range of themes in the *Quartets*, both personal and general. This, in turn, necessitates the matching of the form of the poem to its diverse subject matter. Thus, the form varies from the long metrically-consistent poetry to the colloquially conversational style. Form-content complementation is essential in the poem. Difficulty will also be shown to be a characteristic feature of the poem. It is Eliot's belief that modern poetry is by nature difficult because the circumstances of modern life and the conditions under which poets work are becoming more and more difficult. The complexity of the subject matter along with the complexity of the concept of paradox have increased the difficulty of the poem. Because of this obscurity which envelops the *Quartets* the poem has, thus, been regarded as highly philosophical. A difficult, philosophical style is not, however, intentional on the part of Eliot. Complex themes necessitate a complex poetic style which can at times be quite ambiguous.

The second chapter deals mainly with the development of the concept of paradox in the first two poems of the *Quartets*: "Burnt Norton" and "East Coker". In these two poems, the theme of the moment of illumination is first introduced and developed. It is presented in the opening lines of "Burnt Norton" through a complex and confusing series of paradoxes. This is the prime theme of the *Four Quartets* which keeps on recurring through the entire course of the poem, but particularly in these two successive poems. The impact of the somewhat mystical notion that an individual can transcend his temporal existence and experience a visionary insight must have had an enormous impact on Eliot. His condensed use of paradoxical expressions in order to investigate the nature of this moment testifies to his preoccupation with the realization of such a moment.

There is also a series of paradoxes related to the negative impact of the Second World War and especially of the London blitz. The paradoxes, here, testify to the horror and the death-in-life state of the people who experienced this devastating war.

Eliot also embarks, especially in "East Coker", on a series of paradoxes related to religious faith and the road to salvation. These paradoxes stress the idea of redemptive suffering: one must endure the suffering of this world in order to enjoy heavenly bliss.

The third and last chapter continues to trace the development of the concept of paradox in the last two poems of the *Quartets*: "The dry Salvages" and "Little Gidding". In these two poems, the poet continues to trace the theme of the moment of illumination, but to a lesser degree. The number of paradoxes related to this theme become fewer as the poet brings the theme to a conclusion. The same is true of the paradoxes related to religion and the Second World War. They too become fewer because the poet gives vent to them in the first two poems and gradually reaches a resigned state of mind as he reaches the end of the poem.

However, there is in these two poems, particularly in "The Dry Salvages", a series of paradoxes which probe the theme of death and man's inability to obstruct his