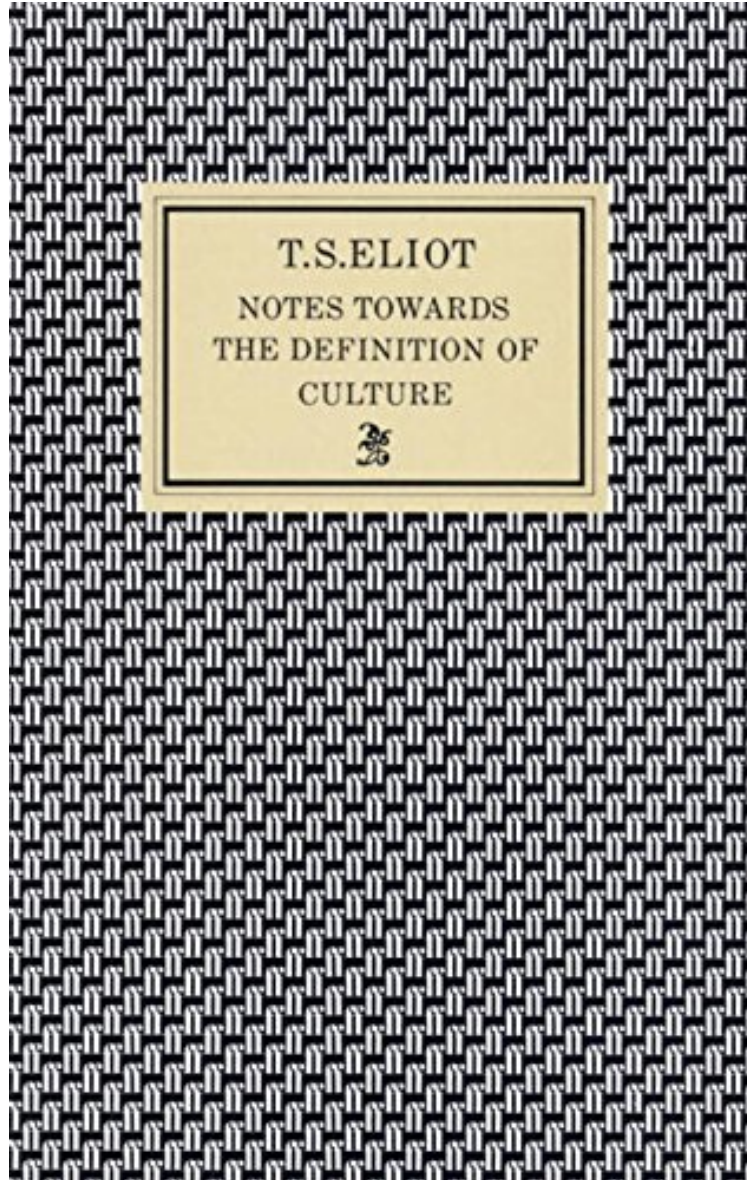


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Notes Towards the Definition of Culture

T. S. Eliot

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T. S. Eliot : Notes Towards the Definition of Culture before purchasing it in order to gage whether or not it would be worth my time, and all praised Notes Towards the Definition of Culture:

21 of 21 people found the following review helpful. Modest and elusive in its rhetoric, but very important in its argumentBy Richard B. SchwartzIt is quite telling that the .com review material includes the line, The book has been viewed as a critique of postwar Europe and a defense of conservatism and Christianity. It is that, of course, but the

comment suggests that Eliot's intentions are somewhat elusive or underplayed, as if he wished to hover about the surface and allow deeper meanings to emerge upon later reflection. The book (a mere 120+ pp.) is indeed elusive in its argument. It is not a detailed, reasoned, sequential summoning of evidence. It is more of a phenomenology of culture, a set of observations, with a few desultory footnotes and an occasional reference to a local report. The outlines of his thought are, however, clear. First and foremost, culture is inextricable from religion. If religion disappears utterly the culture is lost and we must proceed through an era or eras of barbarism before we can somehow begin again. We talk about culture in many ways and in many contexts. There is the panoply of material culture, e.g. our foods, our dress, our signage; there is the pivotal role played by our language and religion; the culture of the individual, the group and the society. There are the contributory elements to our culture: the culture of other nations, the counterculture within our own culture, and so on. Eliot takes a Blakean stance, arguing that we need a certain amount of friction to sustain our culture. We must be challenged by alternative thought and alternative traditions. We must constantly renew our culture through these challenges. There is a good bit of golden mean rhetoric. We should avoid a monolithic culture just as we should avoid a splintering and leveling of all cultural elements. We should be wary of planning a culture, something that is impossible anyway, because the culture that would undergird a plan is already there, even if it is not immediately apparent. Eliot feels most strongly the traditional cultures of the Greeks, Romans and Jews which intertwine with Christianity to produce the cultures of Europe in general and England, specifically (though England is always in need of the contributions and challenges offered by the Irish, the Scots, and the Welsh). Clearly, in his heart of hearts, he hopes for the perpetuation of a Christian culture and an established social order, but he understands the modern threats to faith and he thinks of the social order as a fluid entity in which some will excel and others not, but one which permits and encourages the success of the previously marginalized. Basically, we have a great poet and intellectual who is fundamentally Christian and conservative making the best case that he can for a culture and social order which will avoid some of the grand mistakes of the past but not succumb to the significant threats that were so apparent just after the war. Many of these threats continue today and there are moments in which Eliot's argument becomes quite explicit and quite prescient. For example: the ideal of an educational system which would automatically sort out everyone according to his native capacities is unattainable in practice; and if we made it our chief aim, would disorganise society and debase education. It would disorganise society, by substituting for classes, lites of brains, or perhaps only of sharp wits. Any educational system aiming at a complete adjustment between education and society will tend both to restrict education to what will lead to success in the world, and to restrict success in the world to those persons who have been good pupils of the system. The prospect of a society ruled and directed only by those who have passed certain examinations or satisfied tests devised by psychologists is not reassuring . . . (p. 101). Bottom line: this is a trenchant discussion by a great poet and significant thinker, but a discussion that is a bit elusive in its modesty and in its awareness of the weight of contrary opinion represented by national socialism, communism, secularism and the general weariness with class and unearned hierarchy.

4 of 5 people found the following review helpful. Shedding light on an abstruse subject matter

By John M. Balouziyeh

Eliot begins by conceding that the subject of his study involves the risk of error at every moment and is so difficult that I am not sure I grasp it myself except in flashes, or that I comprehend all its implications. He defines culture as not merely the sum of several activities, but a way of life of people living together in one place. It is made visible in their arts, in their social system, in their habits and customs, in their religion. He warns the reader about the danger of committing two errors: that of regarding religion and culture as separate things between which there is a relation, and that of identifying [equating] religion and culture. Culture and religion are separate and distinct, but they are intricately interwoven. Eliot breaks culture down into three classes: the individual, the group and whole society. The culture of the individual is dependent upon the culture of a group or class and that the culture of the group or class is dependent upon the culture of the whole society to which that group or class belongs. He begins his study with culture at the whole society level, setting out to avoid

The material organization of a nation is inextricably linked with its spiritual life. In the context of Europe, if the spiritual organization dies, then what you will organize will not be Europe, but merely a mass of human beings speaking several different languages. In the most primitive societies no clear distinction is visible between religious and non-religious activities; and that as we proceed to examine the more developed societies, we perceive a greater distinction and finally contrast and opposition, between these activities. The culture of the West has been formed through common conceptions that have been handed down from the ancient civilizations of Greece, Rome and Israel. These legacies have given way to common conceptions of private and public morality, a conception of Roman law and common standards of art and literature. It is the duty of men of letters throughout Europe to pass on this culture, unadulterated by political motives, to future generations by producing those excellent works which mark a superior civilization.

3 of 4 people found the following review helpful. Should Be Required Reading

By J. Johnson

Indispensable little book on culture nothing has come close to since. Read this and you can begin to unravel one's real relationship to society in part and as a whole. No high school student should be able to graduate without having this on the curriculum.

'The term culture ... includes all the characteristic activities and interests of a people; Derby Day, Henley Regatta, Cowes, the twelfth of August, a cup final, the dog races, the pin table, the dart board, Wensleydale cheese, boiled

cabbage cut into sections, beetroot in vinegar, 19th-century Gothic churches and the music of Elgar. The reader can make his own list ...'In this famous essay T. S. Eliot examines the principal uses of the word, and the conditions in which culture itself can flourish.'So rich in ideas that it is difficult to select two or three of them for comment ... it is a natural history of culture.' Sunday Times

Critical treatise by T.S. Eliot, originally appearing as a series of articles in *New England Weekly* in 1943, and published in book form in 1948. In the *Notes*, Eliot presents culture as an organic, shared system of beliefs that cannot be planned or artificially induced. Its chief means of transmission, he holds, is the family. The book has been viewed as a critique of postwar Europe and a defense of conservatism and Christianity. -- *The Merriam-Webster Encyclopedia of Literature*About the AuthorThomas Stearns Eliot was born in St Louis, Missouri, in 1888. He came to England in 1914 and published his first book of poems in 1917. He received the Nobel Prize in Literature in 1948. Eliot died in 1965.