

T S ELIOT:
THE SEARCH FOR HAPPINESS



“In my end is my beginning.”

T S Eliot: The Search for Happiness is the story of how one of the 20th century's greatest poets rather surprisingly came to find love and contentment towards the end of his life with a woman 38 years younger than himself.

*“Not even death can dismay or amaze me
Fixed in the certainty of love unchanging.”*

This is the further story of how the happiness that T S Eliot experienced with his second wife Valerie led decades later after his death to the creation of the musical *Cats*, which was based on Eliot's book of poetry *Old Possum's Book of Practical Cats*. It is one of the most successful musicals ever written and one which includes perhaps the most performed song of all time *Memory*, with lyrics based on the poem by T S Eliot's *Rhapsody on a Winter Night* adapted by Trevor Nunn. Valerie Eliot gave permission for the creation of the musical to go ahead because she knew two things – her husband like cats and he liked musicals! *Cats* made Faber & Faber and the Eliot Estate more money than they had ever dreamt possible

The programme sets the late marital happiness of Eliot against the unhappiness of much of the rest of his life. He felt that he “had paid too high a price to be a poet”. Despite a happy childhood, he made a disastrous and sudden first marriage to Vivienne Haigh-Wood, who committed adultery with Bertrand Russell three months after her marriage to Eliot. Not approving of the marriage, Eliot had previously been disinherited by his parents.

The marriage to Vivienne was not just deeply unhappy; it was actually unbearable for both of them. Despite receiving great encouragement in his poetry from Vivienne, they were unable to be together. Vivienne Eliot slowly became increasingly disturbed and was finally committed by her brother to an asylum in 1937, dying in 1948. Though they were still married, Eliot never visited. Of his first wife he wrote:

*“To her, the marriage brought no happiness.
To me, it brought the state of mind out of which came The Waste Land.”*

Thomas Stearns Eliot was born in St Louis USA in 1888. He moved to England in 1914 at the age of 25 and became a British subject in 1927. Remembered as a poet, a playwright, literary critic, and an editor, Eliot was at the forefront of the Modernist movement in poetry. In 1948, for his lifetime of poetic innovation, he was appointed to the Order of Merit and awarded the Nobel Prize in Literature. Two years after his death a memorial stone was laid to Eliot in the floor at Poets' Corner in Westminster Abbey.

Eliot lived as a celibate for much of his life, adopting the mask of a businessman, first as a banker and then as a publisher at Faber & Faber, always needing to work and have a structured life. The programme portrays the deep power of Eliot's poetry. A leader of the Modernist movement in poetry, his most important works include *The Waste Land* (1922) and *Four Quartets* (1943). It also touches on Eliot's cultural conservatism, his fear of women and the accusation of anti-Semitism.

*“A poet writes always of his personal life, in his finest work out of its tragedy,
whatever it be, remorse, lost love, or mere loneliness”.*

At 6.15am on the 10th January 1957 and in complete secrecy, Eliot married his secretary Valerie Fletcher. The only people present were Valerie's parents and Eliot's solicitor who acted as best man. No one knew of the marriage, no friends, relations, not even his work colleagues at Faber & Faber. In a letter sent to Geoffrey Faber the next day Eliot wrote.

*"I am marrying Valerie Fletcher whom you know only as my secretary
for nearly eight years. We are utterly devoted to each other, and
I know that I am very fortunate."*

T S Eliot and Valerie Eliot shared in their marriage a great – and for Eliot a new – love of life, travelling the world with a simple and complete enjoyment in each other's company. They were, quite simply, inseparable, vividly and touchingly seen in the scrapbooks they kept of their life together, which include restaurant menus, travel tickets, theatre programmes – a simple record of everything they did together.

The *Cats* musical came about when Andrew Lloyd Webber rang up Faber & Faber to ask if T S Eliot's *Old Possum's Book of Practical Cats* could be set to music. Rather dismissively a non-committal answer was given but it was agreed that the request would be passed on to T S Eliot's widow, Valerie. When Andrew Lloyd Webber met Valerie Eliot, he played her some music. She instantly said "Yes!" In their married life together Eliot and Valerie had particularly shared a love of musicals. In the scrapbooks they kept of their life there are several programmes of musicals including *My Fair Lady*.

T S Eliot: *The Search for Happiness* reveals the contrast between a previously unhappy and sexually divided man with the overwhelming and deeply fulfilling love he felt for Valerie Eliot after their unexpected marriage in what became the last happy years of his life. How far this happiness was from the unrelenting deserts of *The Waste Land* with its "fear in a handful of dust" and unrelenting "stony rubbish".

*"To whom I owe the leaping delight
That quickens my senses in our wakingtime
And the rhythm that governs the repose of our sleepingtime,
The breathing in unison
Of lovers whose bodies smell of each other
Who think the same thoughts without need of speech
And babble the same speech without need of meaning."*

ENDS





ADRIAN MUNSEY, ODYSSEY TELEVISION,
PINWOOD STUDIOS,
PINWOOD ROAD, IVER HEATH.
BUCKINGHAMSHIRE SL0 0NH
TEL: +4479 800 11535
E-MAIL: ADRIAN@ADRIANMUNSEY.COM
WEB-STE: WWW.ADRIANMUNSEY.COM