



# Notes towards the Definition of Culture

*T. S. Eliot*

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The word *culture*, in recent years, has been widely and erroneously employed in political, educational, and journalistic contexts. In helping to define a word so greatly misused, T. S. Eliot contradicts many of our popular assumptions about culture, reminding us that it is not the possession of a class but of a whole society and yet its preservation may depend on the continuance of a class system, and that a “classless” society may be a society in which culture has ceased to exist.

Surveying the contemporary scene, Mr. Eliot points out that our standards of culture are lower than they were fifty years ago, finds evidence of this decay in every department of human activity, and sees no reason why the decay of culture should not proceed much further. He suggests that culture and religion have a common root and that if one decays the other may die too. He reminds us that “the Russians have been the first modern people to practise the political direction of culture consciously, and to attack at every point the culture of any people whom they wish to dominate.” The appendix includes his broadcasts to Europe, ending with a plea to preserve the legacy of Greece, Rome, and Israel, and Europe’s legacy throughout the last 2,000 years.

*“Behind the urbanity, the modesty, the mere good manners of Mr. Eliot’s exposition, one cannot mistake the force and significance of what he has to say, or ignore that it constitutes a fundamental attack on most of our assumptions on the subject.”*

—THE LONDON SPECTATOR

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