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Isolation in the Dramas of T.S. Eliot

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ISOLATION IN THE DRAMAS OF T. S. ELIOT

A Thesis

Presented to

the Faculty of the Department of English
Western Kentucky University
Bowling Green, Kentucky

In Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree
Master of Arts

by

Jean Marie Conway

January 1975

ISOLATION IN THE DRAMAS OF T. S. ELIOT

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PREFACE

Any study of the works of one writer must, in its course of rumination, undergo a process of metamorphosis and mutation. The initial reverence that motivates a student to attempt an investigation is certainly commendable, but it may also be a handicap. At this stage, extravagant admiration frequently strangles the objectivity that distinguishes true scholarship. It is only after truly coming to terms with the works to be examined that a healthy view of the author can emerge.

My initial approach to the plays of T. S. Eliot was tragically interrupted by a serious accident. From time to time I was able to pick up a play or critic and read a little, but circumstances prevented me from doing any concentrated work. Nearly two years passed before I could turn, physically and emotionally, back to Eliot's dramas. I was happy to discover that his work had not lost its vitality; my interest was sustained throughout the tragic detour. But although I at first viewed the interruption as very undesirable, I now realize that it did bear some academic fruit. The very interlude that delayed my progress on this thesis has given me a new perspective towards Eliot's work.

It is not enough to taste of Eliot; his works must be digested in order to comprehend his impact upon his age.

E. Martin Browne, the director who "acted as midwife to all his plays,"¹ said: "His writing has to be absorbed before it can be analyzed."² To evenly sing the praises of all of the plays or to emphasize the earlier more popular plays when assessing the total impact of his drama would be to put Eliotism before scholarship. The thesis that follows is very different, I believe, from the freshman-like eulogy I might have produced two years ago. It is my sincere hope that it is also better.

¹E. Martin Browne, The Making of T. S. Eliot's Plays (Cambridge: University Press, 1969), p. 344.

²"T. S. Eliot in the Theatre: The Director's Memories," in T. S. Eliot: The Man and His Work, ed. by Allen Tate (New York: Delacorte Press, 1966), p. 117.

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ISOLATION IN THE DRAMAS OF T. S. ELIOT

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115 pages

Directed by Dorothy McMahon, James Heldman, and Robert Ward

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T. S. Eliot is a monumental figure in literature. He distinguished himself as a poet in his youth, as a critic in his middle age, and as a dramatist in his later years. Because of the vitality of Eliot's early literary works, his dramas are frequently bypassed by critics when discussing the major themes that interested him as an artist. The purpose of this study is to examine thoroughly Eliot's position on isolation and alienation as revealed in his seven plays: Sweeney Agonistes (1926), The Rock (1934), Murder in the Cathedral (1935), The Family Reunion (1939), The Cocktail Party (1949), The Confidential Clerk (1954), and The Elder Statesman (1959). Only by a consideration of the whole of his dramatic writings can it be seen that the theme of total isolation and alienation which the early plays have in common with his poetry moves through intermediate solutions in the middle plays to be finally abandoned for an affirmation of human relationships in the later plays. This thesis will attempt to reveal the full pattern of the isolation motif, as well as to explore secondary elements in the dramas that directly relate to it.

Ours has been the Age of Eliot, as once there was an Age of Dryden, and an Age of Johnson. . . . We encounter him everywhere in twentieth-century intellectuality and social speculation and literary controversy. . . . It is conceivable that in some distant future time, when the history of the twentieth century seems barbarous and bewildering as the chronicles of Scotland's medieval age, the piercing visions of Eliot may be regarded as the clearest light which endured in that general darkness.³

³Russell Kirk, Eliot and His Age: T. S. Eliot's Moral Imagination in the Twentieth Century (New York: Random House, 1971), pp. 9-10.

INTRODUCTION

"Reviewing my critical output for the last thirty-odd years," Eliot told a Harvard audience in 1951, "I am surprised to find out how constantly I have returned to the drama, whether by examining the work of the contemporaries of Shakespeare or by reflecting on the possibilities of the future."¹ In this Harvard Lecture, Eliot admitted that a retrospective examination of his criticism revealed a strong dramatic thrust, which had come as a surprise. But two years later, in an address to members of the National Book League, Eliot proved that he had at last come to terms with this dramatic impulse. "It may be," he admitted, "that from the beginning I aspired unconsciously to the theatre."²

T. S. Eliot's dramatic career was formally initiated in 1927, the same year that he took out British nationality and announced himself as an "anglo-catholic in religion."³ Eliot was the first modern poet, outside of Yeats, to become a successful playwright. Why should a man who had reached the

¹"Poetry and Drama," in On Poetry and Poets (New York: Farrar, Straus, and Cudahy, 1957), p. 74.

²Kirk, Moral Imagination, p. 403.

³John D. Margolis, T. S. Eliot's Intellectual Development: 1922-1939 (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1972), p. xi.

zenith as a poet and critic suddenly turn to a new genre? The switch to drama appeared spontaneous; many critics even thought it suicidal. But although the change to drama seemed impulsive, its genesis had long been forthcoming. It came as no surprise to serious students of Eliot's works.

Many factors may be cited as to what motivated T. S. Eliot to attempt drama. One of the most obvious, of course, concerns practical circumstances. When E. Martin Browne asked Eliot to dramatize a scenario for one of London's religious pageants, the timing was optimum. Browne's request allowed Eliot's interest in religion and drama to merge at a time when Eliot claimed "to have exhausted my meagre poetic gifts, and to have nothing to say. To be," he continued, "commissioned to write something which, good or bad, must be delivered by a certain date may have had the effect that vigorous cranking sometimes has upon a motor car when the battery is run down."⁴ Eliot fulfilled that timely request with The Rock and subsequently accepted another commission which resulted in Murder in the Cathedral. After the two assigned works, he was motivated to attempt four completely original plays: The Family Reunion, The Cocktail Party, The Confidential Clerk, and The Elder Statesman.

Another factor that must share responsibility for Eliot's dramatic experiments was his growing interest in ritual and tradition. Eliot thought it imperative that contemporary

⁴"The Three Voices of Poetry," in On Poetry and Poets, p. 98.

writers and thinkers acknowledge their debt to tradition, to what he aptly expressed as "an awareness of the presence of the past."⁵ The criticism of T. S. Eliot had explored the permanence and heritage of the past. The poetry of T. S. Eliot had translated the universality of the past into classical allusions and enduring symbols. In drama, Eliot must have reasoned, the past and present could come together in the most effective merger. Drama is deeply rooted in tradition; clothed in verse it could effectively incorporate the past into the present. In an early 1919 essay, "Rhetoric and Poetic Drama," Eliot explored some dramatic theories. Then, in 1928, his "Dialogue on Dramatic Poetry" gave further insight into the potential of dramatic verse. In this essay Character A states:

I say that prose drama is merely a slight by-product of verse drama. The soul in intense emotion strives to express itself in verse. It is not for me, but for the neurologists, to discover why this is so, and why and how feeling and rhythm are related. The tendency, at any rate, of prose drama is to emphasize the ephemeral and superficial; if we want to get at the permanent and universal we tend to express ourselves in verse.⁶

Dramatic verse, for Eliot, was to communication what myth was to plot.⁷ Just as myth gives the plot a permanent framework

⁵Austin Warren, "Eliot's Literary Criticism," Sewanee Review, LXXIV (Winter, 1966), 278.

⁶"A Dialogue on Dramatic Poetry," in Selected Essays (New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, Inc., 1960), p. 34.

⁷In his review of Joyce's *Ulysses* ("Ulysses, Order, and Myth," Dial, LXXV (November, 1923), 481), Eliot wrote: "In using myth in manipulating a continuous parallel between contemporaneity and antiquity, Mr. Joyce is pursuing a method

or scaffolding upon which action turns, so verse gives the speeches the universally common denominator which unites the emotions expressed with the emotions of all mankind. In drama, the verse creates a universality that transcends the immediate, and unites all of the cultural tradition with the drama at hand. Only through verse, Eliot believed, could drama create a sensibility and collective conscience large enough to envelop tradition.

Since Eliot viewed a play as a poem, his transition to drama was a natural development, an extension of his poetry. A careful reading of poems like "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock" and "Portrait of a Lady" reveals many dramatic techniques. But the challenge that subsequently emerged for Eliot, as a playwright and a modern traditionalist, was that of creating a verse drama which would transmit the cultural heritage in a manner palatable to modern ears and hearts. "I laid down for myself," he wrote, "the aesthetic rule to avoid poetry which could not stand the test of strict dramatic utility."⁸ The result was that Eliot cast the idiom of contemporary speech into a dramatic verse so refined that it did not appear to be poetry at all. The audience, for the most part, listened to the play unaware that it was crossing a poetic bridge yoking tradition to the modern world.

which others must pursue after him." This statement proved to be a prophecy, for as Eliot himself became more indebted to tradition, he too pursued Joyce's course in regard to myth. Later this was expanded to include dramatic verse.

⁸"Poetry and Drama," in On Poetry and Poets, p. 91.

A final factor which must be considered to explain what motivated Eliot's transition to drama was his conversion from Unitarianism to Anglicanism. This religious commitment, besides being reflected in poetic themes (e.g. Ash Wednesday), provoked a reexamination of the aims of a literary artist. A Christian writer has the responsibility to use his craft in a social mission. There were not only hearts to warm or to entertain, there were souls to save--and, for Eliot, the theatre was clearly the best place to do it. In the last of his lectures at Harvard on The Use of Poetry and the Use of Criticism, he explained this motivation clearly:

I believe that the poet naturally prefers to write for as large and miscellaneous an audience as possible. . . . The most useful poetry, socially, would be one which could cut across all the present stratifications of public taste--stratifications which are perhaps a sign of social disintegration. The ideal medium for poetry, to my mind, and the most direct means of social 'usefulness' for poetry, is the theatre.⁹

Eliot's personal (and public) commitment to the Church of England--a church, significantly, steeped in tradition and ritual--resulted in a newly-charged social mission. The theatre, which reached an audience wider than that of any other literary genre, clearly offered the best medium for his message.

Why Eliot chose the medium of drama to speak to man seems clear; what he chose to say to man in his drama was the result of his reaction to the age into which he had been cast.

Thomas Sterns Eliot was born in the year 1882, the same

⁹London: Faber and Faber, 1933, p. 153.

year in which Matthew Arnold died. Yeats was then in his early twenties, and the Victorian age had just passed its zenith. The Victorian age--with its enthusiasm, its earnestness, and its will to believe--had spawned a philosophy of rugged individualism. Its egotism refuted the confines of the "traditional" past; the machine age, after all, looked only ahead. Its optimism even masked its shallow spirituality and its exploitation of the earth's human and natural resources. American counterparts developed a parallel confidence. It was into this age that Eliot was born. And he was to denounce it with all of his creative powers for the duration of his life.

Although Eliot began his life in St. Louis, a city of the Western frontier, his roots were Puritan through and through. He had a distinguished family tree, reaching all the way back through his paternal grandfather, William Greenleaf Eliot, an influential Unitarian minister of St. Louis, to Thomas Elyot, whose A Boke Named the Governour expounded moral philosophy in the sixteenth century.

It was not until Eliot entered Harvard, however, that he was groomed to refute the Victorian attitudes and the Victorian frame of mind. At Harvard, Eliot's fascination for the French symbolists soon focused upon the pessimistic vers libre of Jules LaForque. Eliot later claimed that LaForque "was the first to teach me how to speak, to teach me the

poetic possibilities of my own idiom of speech."¹⁰ Later, from Baudelaire, he learned that "the source of the new poetry might be found in what had been regarded hitherto as the impossible, the sterile, the intractably unpoetic."¹¹ Eliot later returned to Harvard for doctoral studies, but even more important than the degree, which he earned but never accepted, were the encounters that his doctoral study initiated: the acquaintance of Irving Babbitt, the poetry of Dante, and the study of the turn-of-the-century British philosopher F. H. Bradley.¹² It was Bradley who caused Eliot to consider the fallacies of Victorian values. Bradley's insistence upon a universal, catholic outlook was the catalyst in Eliot's growing respect for tradition. Bradley's argument for the need of a religious point of view, which snapped at the heels of Hardy and other Victorian agnostics, stimulated Eliot's own spirituality. Finally, Bradley caused Eliot to consider the very meaning of man. Eliot could not share the Victorian view of man as a creature of unlimited potential. To Eliot man was instead an imperfect being, restricted by original sin. Eliot applauded Hulme's definition instead:

¹⁰Christian Smith, Poetry and Belief in the Work of T. S. Eliot (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1961), p. 9.

¹¹Ibid., p. 11.

¹²Eliot's investigation of Bradley culminated in his well-received doctoral thesis--Experience and the Objects of Knowledge in the Philosophy of F. H. Bradley.

"Man is an extraordinarily fixed and limited animal whose nature is absolutely constant. It is only by tradition and organization that anything decent can be got out of him."¹³

The Victorians thus provided the given against which Eliot and his moral imagination reacted. Much was needed to right the Victorian wrongs--discipline, ethical codes, institutions, ritual, and absolute literary and philosophical standards--so that man could cope with the undesirable Victorian legacy of penitence and resignation. The natural reaction of any man of letters would be, in the beginning at least, one of alienation. So Eliot retreated, poetically at first, into the interior of the desolate desert created by Victorian debris. His important poem Waste Land, was published in the first issue of The Criterion in 1922, in the wake of his wife's illness and in the same year as Joyce's Ulysses. Poems that followed--poems like "The Hollow Men" and "Sweeney Among the Nightingales"--further expanded upon the theme of isolation and alienation. And when Eliot at last became a playwright, the theme of alienation was recast into the dramatic mode.

The concept of alienation and isolation in T. S. Eliot's plays ranges over a broad area. It encompasses the isolation of an individual from his God, the isolation of an individual from his true self, the isolation of an individual from his family or loved ones, and the isolation of an individual from

¹³Margolis, Intellectual Development, p. 49.

his society. Eliot sometimes deals with isolation on just one level, and he sometimes deals with it on many levels at once. In some plays it seems to be obscured by more dominant themes, but upon careful investigation, it becomes clear that it is still there, forcing the playwright to either succumb to it or to offer an alternative.

The theme of isolation in Eliot's dramas has not received the attention that it deserves. A few critics have made general statements about it. Katherine Worth, for example, in her essay entitled "Eliot and the Living Theatre," wrote that it is "the feeling for alienation" that "gives Eliot a place, however tentative, in the main stream of drama."¹⁴ D. W. Harding's article in The Kenyon Review takes a similar position: "In Eliot's plays a theme that has appeared in many of his poems is taken further and handled more explicitly: the theme of separation."¹⁵ And finally, in his book entitled T. S. Eliot: Moments and Patterns, Leon Unger maintains that "the isolation of the individual is a theme of Eliot's plays."¹⁶ Unger further explains:

While the theme of estrangement between man and woman is, so to speak, an ultimate subject throughout much of Eliot's work, it also signifies the larger theme of the individual's isolation, his estrangement from other people and from the world.¹⁷

¹⁴Eliot in Perspective: A Symposium, ed. by Graham Martin (London: MacMillan and Co. Ltd., 1970), pp. 148-149.

¹⁵"Progression of Theme in Eliot's Modern Plays," XVIII (Summer, 1956), 338.

¹⁶Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1966, p. 29.

¹⁷Ibid., p. 13.

Out of the volumes of criticism devoted to Eliot, however, remarks such as these are sparse.

Even more discouraging than the failure to give the theme of alienation adequate representation is the misrepresentation it has received. Some writers have understandably succumbed to the temptation to formulate their criticism of Eliot based only upon his most popular poems and plays, his most significant poems and plays, or, even worse, his earlier poems and plays. This seems to especially be the case with those critics touching upon the theme of alienation. To focus upon the early plays as the best examples of Eliot's philosophical position does him a gross injustice. Life presents itself on a continuum; surely the works of life's great thinkers should be viewed in the same way. Nowhere can Coleridge's injunction to consider the relevance of the part to the whole be more fruitfully applied than to Eliot. What meaning, for example, can be drawn from such poetic lines as "Twit Twit Twit/Jug jug jug jug jug jug"¹⁸ unless the entire poem be examined? And, in a larger view, what valid observations can be made about alienation in Eliot's dramas unless all of the plays be examined? Linked by the common denominator of verse and myth, and by the repeated images of "the rose garden," the "shaft of sunlight," and "the moment of illumination," the plays represent a unity. While they can be enjoyed or examined individually, any study

¹⁸T. S. Eliot, "The Waste Land," The Complete Poems and Plays: 1909-1950 (New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, Inc., 1971), 202-203.

concerning Eliot's overall philosophical position must be indebted to them all.

If the temptation to pigeonhole Eliot as an alienated prophet of doom can be resisted until the later dramas are examined, it becomes clear that what emerges in the end is something quite apart from the agitated youth who once roamed a wasteland. A study of all the dramas shows that the initial retreat from an unfulfilling world was only temporary. The statements of total alienation and isolation in the early plays move through intermediate solutions in the middle plays until they are finally abandoned to an affirmation of human relationships in the final plays. It is this full range in Eliot's treatment of the alienation motif that this study intends to make clear.

CHAPTER I

SWEENEY AGONISTES AND THE ROCK

Eliot's first experiment in drama, now known as Sweeney Agonistes, was initially published in the New Criterion; the first part, "Fragment of a Prologue," appeared in the October 1926 issue, and the last part, "Fragment of an Agon," appeared in the January 1927 issue. Both were originally grouped under the title of "Wanna Go Home, Baby?" but in 1932 the two fragments were combined and the title was changed to Sweeney Agonistes: Fragments of an Aristophanic Melodrama.

Sweeney Agonistes is short. Even spaciouly printed it can be contained by eleven pages. Its short length, however, does not detract from its importance for any student of Eliot's dramas. It is notable, first of all, because it is totally original, unlike The Rock and Murder in the Cathedral which immediately followed. It is also important because it contains all of the important innovations Eliot was later to perfect. Besides being the first dramatic showing of the now-familiar theme of the spiritual pilgrimage, the play contains colloquial poetic rhythms, a Greek heritage, and levels of meaning uniquely handled by Eliot.

The vitality of its lines, a vitality perhaps never reproduced in subsequent plays, springs from the creation of a jazz rhythm constructed from everyday speech. The play flows along with such rhythmic force that it even denies a slow reading. George Cautau, in his T. S. Eliot, quoted Ian Bevin as claiming that "T. S. Eliot spent hours at a time beating a drum . . . seeking rhythms for his poems."¹ This seems to have been in Eliot's mind, for later, when he instructed Hallie Flanagan concerning her reading of Sweeney at Vassar in 1933, he wrote: "I had intended the whole play to be accompanied by light drum taps to accentuate the beats."²

The Greek heritage of Eliot's play is clearly evident. The fragments resemble their Greek prototypes in form. David Jones notes that the songs can be cited as the equivalents of the strophe and epirrheme and that further material can be found to stand for the antistrophe, the antipirrheme, and the antipignos.³ Another reference to Sweeney's Greek roots is found in Eliot's same letter to Hallie Flanagan. He suggests that F. M. Cornford's Origins of Attic Comedy be "read before you do this play."⁴ Cornford maintains that the masks

¹New York: Funk and Wagnalls, 1966, p. 86.

²Carol Smith, T. S. Eliot's Dramatic Theory and Practice From Sweeney Argonistes to The Elder Statesman (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1963), p. 52.

³The Plays of T. S. Eliot (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1960), p. 27.

⁴Smith, Dramatic Theory and Practice, p. 52.

of the old seasonal rituals were later differentiated into the stock masks of comedy roles with their ritual framework being preserved in the plots. His book thus sheds light on the Aristophanic structure of Eliot's play. The "Fragment of a Prologue" is the first part of the preparation for a forthcoming ritual sacrifice, whereas the "Fragment of an Agon" represents the contest which ultimately results in the beginning of the actual sacrifice.

There can be no doubt that the creation of various levels of meaning in Sweeney, as well as in the later plays, was a deliberate action on Eliot's part. In The Use of Poetry and the Use of Criticism he writes:

My intention was to have one character whose sensibility and intelligence should be on the plane of the most sensitive and intelligent members of the audience; his speeches should be addressed to them as much as to the other personages in the play. . . . There was to be an understanding between this protagonist and a small number of the audience, while the rest of the audience would share the responses of the other characters in the play.⁵

This statement enlightens a student regarding the handling of Eliot's principal characters. In attempting to discover the true nature of Sweeney, however, a problem arises. Sweeney Agonistes is so short, "scarce half made up" Eliot claimed;⁶ there is not enough material in the play to positively reveal Sweeney's identity. It is no accident that the bulk of criticism about Sweeney Agonistes has been directed at the poet's craft rather than at his theme. With such meagre

⁵London: Faber and Faber, 1933, p. 153.

⁶Grover Smith, T. S. Eliot's Poetry and Plays: A Study in Sources and Meaning (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press), p. 114.

material available, a discussion about Sweeney's identity must be classified as speculation.

The character of Sweeney appears in four other poems: "Sweeney Erect," "Mr. Eliot's Sunday Morning Service," "Sweeney Among the Nightingales," and The Waste Land. But is it fair to assume that this is the same character from poem to poem? Although Eliot admitted that he enjoyed "doing things separately and then seeing the possibility of fusing them together . . . and making a kind of whole of them,"⁷ this admission does not directly relate to Sweeney.⁸ More important and more concrete is the bearing that the first "Eeldrop and Appleplex" sketch, contributed by Eliot to the Little Review in 1917, has on the character of Sweeney:

In Gopsom Street a man murders his mistress. The important fact is that for the man the act is eternal, and that for the brief space he has to live, he is already dead. He is already in a different world from ours. He has crossed the frontier.⁹

This sketch presents a real basis for Sweeney's personality and statements in both the poems and the play. Even when accepting Grover Smith's injunction not to push Sweeney "into a criminal's role,"¹⁰ something can now be said about

⁷Unger, Moments, p. 26.

⁸There are many interesting studies compiling a poetic identity for Sweeney from the poems. One of the most thorough is T. H. Thompson's "The Bloody Wood," in T. S. Eliot: A Selected Critique, ed. by Leon Unger (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1967).

⁹Smith, Poetry and Plays, pp. 117-118.

¹⁰Ibid., p. 118.

Sweeney's alienation. For whether Sweeney was the man who committed the murder and was not "pinched" or whether he was a witness to it, the end result is the same: his terror is incommunicable and his alienation is total.

The new title of the play gives the first clue to the importance of the alienation theme in this drama. In the title, Sweeney is linked to the spiritual character of Milton's Samson Agonistes, presenting an immediate parallel. Carol Smith sums this up aptly:

Samson's dilemma is that of the exile in an alien world who feels compelled by divine will to pull down that world around his head in order to destroy its iniquities. Sweeney is another spiritual exile in an alien world and he too must destroy part of himself in his attack on the world.¹¹

The minute Sweeney faces the spiritual question he has crossed a frontier. Whether or not he comes to terms with it, he can no longer be the happy, carefree man he once was, freely exploring the sensual world with fellow human beings.

Another clue for the extent of isolation in this play is found in the two quotations which make up the famous epigraph before the first fragment:

Orestes: You don't see them, you don't--but I see them: they are hunting me down. I must move on.
Choephorei

Hence the soul cannot be possessed of the divine union until it has divested itself of the love of created beings.

St. John of the Cross¹²

¹¹Dramatic Theory and Practice, p. 57.

¹²T. S. Eliot, Complete Poems and Plays, p. 74. All future page references to the play refer to this source.

Although these quotes seem at first unrelated, they are closely associated with each other--and with the alienation theme. The first is an exit line spoken by Orestes in the Choephorei. In it Orestes acknowledges the Furies, the divine agents who hound him into purgation after the murder of his mother and her lover. In the second quotation, taken from The Ascent of Mount Carmel, St. John, a sixteenth-century visionary, stresses that the only sure way to religious peace is through the mystic path, a path that requires the denial of human desires before the divine union can occur. The combined epigraphs thus set the context of isolation: in both cases a human acts apart from the rest of humanity. Whether by acknowledging the Furies or by traveling the mystic path, one must sever himself from the common lot of humanity and pursue a lonely course.

In the first fragment of this incomplete play, the conversation of Doris and Dusty, two London prostitutes, is interrupted by an unwelcome telephone call from Pereira, the man "who pays the rent" (p. 74). The two women put him off with lies, delaying the immediate crisis of paying the rent as well as the real crisis Pereira's insistence foreshadows--that of a spiritual reckoning. Like the Furies or the Guardians who haunt the principal characters of later plays, Pereira will one day have to be dealt with. Carol Smith speaks to this point:

His name is significant; Pereira is a medicine made from the bark of a Brazilian tree and used to

mitigate or remove fever.¹³

Although the recognition of Sweeney's spiritual fever can be tempered with distractions from the sensual world, he cannot forever put off the pursuit of the spiritual force, of the "Hound of Heaven." The card game that concludes the first fragment is full of symbols that--like Pereira's call--foreshadow the inevitable spiritual confrontation. The coffin and the wedding cards reveal more about forthcoming events than the characters do; in Cornford's rituals a coffin and wedding are the respective symbols of death and resurrection.¹⁴ The stage has indeed been set for a sacrifice.

In the "Fragment of an Agon," Eliot explicitly reveals the awesome sense of alienation that tortures Sweeney. When Sweeney states that he wants to take Doris off "To a cannibal isle" where there are "no telephones . . . gramophones . . . or motor cars," where life is reduced to "Nothing at all but three things . . . Birth, and copulation, and death," Doris complains that she would surely "be bored" (p. 80). Doris has nothing from which to run as Sweeney does. She is at home in the social world. Sweeney believes that physical isolation will get him out of Pereira's reach, but he is mistaken. He then tries to find release through catharsis by sharing some of the secret horror with his friends:

I knew a man once did a girl in
Any man might do a girl in
Any man has to, needs to, wants to
Once in a lifetime, do a girl in.

¹³Smith, Dramatic Theory, p. 65.

¹⁴Ibid., p. 67.

Well he kept her there in a bath
 With a gallon of lysol in a bath. (p. 83)

But Sweeney's agony has isolated him so totally that it defies
 being reduced to words. He tries to express it, and then
 gives up:

For when you're alone
 When you're alone like he was alone
 You're either or neither
 I tell you again it don't apply
 Death or life or life or death
 Death is life and life is death
 I gotta use words when I talk to you
 But if you understand or if you don't
 That's nothing to me and nothing to you. (p. 84)

The spiritual confrontation cannot be denied for Pereira's
 insistence triumphs in the end. Sweeney, as the symbolic
 lamb, finally accepts his destiny. After all,

We all gotta do what we gotta do
 And somebody's gotta pay the rent. (p. 123)

Eliot makes it clear, however, that the payment will be very
 painful. Sweeney is totally alone--isolated from his unaware
 companions, not yet worthy of the divine union, and even
 unable to communicate the purgatorial process he faces. The
 chorus puts Sweeney's emotions into inadequate words:

When you're alone in the middle of the night
 And you wake in a sweat and a hell of a fright
 When you're alone in the middle of the bed
 And you wake like someone hit you in the head
 You've had a dream of a nightmare dream
 And you've got the hoo-ha's coming to you.
 Hoo hoo hoo. (p. 84)

But at the end of the play, the indefinite and fearsome "Hoo-
 ha's" take a more concrete form. The play concludes with:

KNOCK KNOCK KNOCK
 KNOCK KNOCK KNOCK
 KNOCK
 KNOCK. (p. 85)

It is easy to visualize Pereira at the door, calling for the rent. The crime has to be expiated and only Sweeney can take that solitary journey. Eliot's prose description of this state in "Literature and The Modern World" is even more provocative:

A man may be crushed by the terrible awareness of his isolation from every other human being . . . alone with himself and his meanness and futility, alone without God.¹⁵

In March of 1933, E. Martin Browne was asked by the Diocese of London to prepare a pageant to assist in raising funds for the construction of forty-five churches in the London suburbs. The scenario Browne prepared chronologically celebrated the history of the church as a religious institution.¹⁶ Browne then approached Eliot and asked him to write the script. Eliot's acceptance of Browne's commission initiated a deep friendship and a mutually profitable relationship that was to endure throughout the remainder of Eliot's career as a playwright. Besides their frequent correspondence and social contacts, Browne subsequently directed all of Eliot's plays.

Although any Eliot work should not be totally neglected, The Rock is the least significant of Eliot's dramatic writings. It was written to order, tailored to a specific scenario and for a specific purpose, and the final product was the result

¹⁵Smith, Poetry and Plays, p. 117.

¹⁶During an interview with Burke Wilkinson for the New York Times, Browne later claimed that the structure of the play was based on a G. B. Cochran revue (Jones, Plays, p. 39).

of much collaboration. The special genesis of The Rock even prompted Eliot to decline credit for the warm reception it later received. In a Prefatory Note to the published work, Eliot wrote:

I cannot consider myself the author of the 'play,' but only of the words which are printed here. The scenario, incorporating some historical scenes suggested by the Rev. Webb-Odell, is by E. M. Browne, under whose direction I wrote the choruses and dialogues, and submissive to whose expert criticism I rewrote most of them. Of only one scene am I literally the author: for this scene and of course for the sentiments expressed in the choruses I must assume the responsibility.¹⁷

The pageant of The Rock shows London workmen building a church. The difficulties they must overcome are interspersed with flashback scenes of former historical events that bear on the success of the modern church. The Rock is a character in a hooded costume who speaks for the perfection of the will and universally represents all the historical witnesses and martyrs. The episodic scenes are united by a chorus of seven men and ten women who appear in half-masks as an impersonal and undifferentiated symbol of "the church in action."¹⁸ In a letter to The Spectator in June, 1934, Eliot wrote that in composing The Rock, "My only serious dramatic aim was to show

¹⁷The Rock (London: Faber and Faber, 1934), p. 5. All future page references to the pageant refer to this source. According to Jones (Plays, p. 39), the scene Eliot referred to in this preface was "the last scene in Part I, the one scene entirely in verse."

¹⁸Smith, Dramatic Theory, p. 87.

that there is a possible role for the Chorus."¹⁹ The chorus contains the finest poetry in the play. It was important to Eliot; he retained it in two of the four plays he was yet to write and, as Margolis notes, the choruses "were all that Eliot chose to salvage from the pageant for his Collected Poems."²⁰

The play opens with a statement of cyclical seasonal imagery:

The Eagle soars in the summit of Heaven
 The Hunter with his dogs pursues his circuit.
 O perpetual revolution of configured stars,
 O perpetual recurrence of determined seasons,
 O world of spring and autumn, birth and dying. (p. 7)

Only five lines into the play, the concept of spiritual rebirth is foreshadowed. A judgement against the antispiritual society quickly follows. The city is concerned with "too few chop-houses" rather than with too few churches; with Sunday "picnics at Hindhead, or Maidenhead" rather than with Sunday worship (p. 8). The concept of alienation is then clearly presented in the one scene that Eliot claimed he authored. In it the church relentlessly pursues mankind, in the manner of Pereira and the Furies, demanding recognition of the spiritual realm. Men, in return,

Constantly try to escape
 From the darkness outside and within
 By dreaming of systems so perfect that no one
 will need to be good.
 But the man that is will shadow
 The man that pretends to be. (p. 42)

¹⁹Jones, Plays, p. 39.

²⁰Intellectual Development, p. 186.

Escape, of course, is impossible. Man is alone, isolated by "the darkness outside and within," and his only recourse is to reach upwards towards the community of God. Eliot is fully aware that in doing this, total alienation from worldly society may result. The following lines present the concept of alienation in the form that was to be more fully explored

in Murder in the Cathedral--martyrdom:

And there shall be Martyrs and Saints.
And if the blood of Martyrs is to flow
 on the steps
We must first build the steps;
And if the Temple is to be cast down
We must first build the Temple. (p. 42)

By completely forsaking human interaction for spiritual action, martyrdom involves total alienation. And it is the theme that Eliot chose to treat in his next play.

CHAPTER II

MURDER IN THE CATHEDRAL

Encouraged by the reception of The Rock, Eliot accepted a commission from the Canterbury Festival Committee to write a play for the June 1935 Festival of Music and Drama. The annual series of festivals, sponsored by the Friends of Canterbury Cathedral, had begun in 1928 with Masfield's The Coming of Christ. Eliot accepted the commission, according to E. Martin Browne, because he "really wanted to see the Church and the Arts return to a closer alliance."¹ The commission was accepted, moreover, on the condition that Browne produce the play.²

Given a free choice of subject matter, Eliot immediately chose the life and death of Thomas a Becket, the archetypal martyr who was Archbishop of Canterbury from 1162 to 1170.³

¹Making of Plays, p. 37.

²*Ibid.*, p. 35.

³According to the historical facts, Henry II's reign was troubled by the question of whether the clergy was under the domination of the State. Henry believed, when his friend Thomas was consecrated Archbishop in 1162, that their previous fellowship would be an asset in soothing the friction between Church and State. Rather than easing the dissension between Henry and the Church, Thomas became a thorn in his side. He assumed a life of virtue and humility, resisting social changes. After a seven-year exile in France, Thomas returned expecting peace at last between Church and State. But

It was a logical choice since Becket was the outstanding Canterbury saint and since the play was to be staged "only fifty yards from the place where Becket died."⁴ In addition, the subject of martyrdom was especially suitable for Eliot, given his family background. His grandfather, William Greenleaf Eliot, praised martyrdom in his Unitarian sermons: "The blood of the martyr is the seed not only of the church but of truth and liberty."⁵ It must be remembered that Reverend Eliot's ideals made a strong impression on his family. This is clearly reflected in this statement by T. S. Eliot:

The standards of conduct were those which my grandfather set: our moral judgements, our decisions between duty and self-indulgence, were taken as if, like Moses, he had brought down the tables of the Law, any deviation from which would be sinful.⁶

Eliot's mother had also explored the subject of martyrdom. Her poem Savonarola, published in 1926 with an introduction by T. S. Eliot, was about a martyr who died for the belief that the law of God supersedes the law of man. Eliot's grandfather and mother, therefore, had groomed him to undertake a study of the martyrdom of Thomas a Becket, a theme

when Henry wanted excommunicated Church members to acknowledge his authority, Thomas refused to endorse Henry's position. Four barons subsequently stabbed Thomas to death in Canterbury Cathedral. The four men later repented. Thomas was canonized a saint two years after his death.

⁴Margolis, Intellectual Development, p. 188.

⁵Herbert Howarth, Notes on Some Figures Behind T. S. Eliot (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1964), p. 6.

⁶American Literature and the American Language (St. Louis: Washington University Press, 1953), p. 29.

especially suited for a stage which stood in the shadow of Canterbury Cathedral itself.

As Eliot's first full-length drama, Murder in the Cathedral has commanded enduring interest. It has been widely performed--from its initial London run to the special production in 1970 which marked the 800th anniversary of the death of Becket. (The latter was again produced by E. Martin Browne and was also performed on the stage of Canterbury Cathedral.) The play has been published six times and a film version was made in 1952. It is held, by many critics, to be Eliot's leading dramatic work, and it is frequently cited as the drama which will prove to be most enduring. David Clark, for example, writes in his Introduction to Twentieth Century Interpretations: Murder in the Cathedral that "it will probably prove to be the play that best withstands the test of time."⁷

There are many valid reasons why this play, Eliot's only tragedy, has attracted such sustained attention. First of all, the play achieves a universal scope through its theme of martyrdom. The Canterbury setting presents a microcosmic view of the world, and the enacted drama is applicable to the twentieth century as well as to the twelfth. Standing outside of time, the universal theme spans all centuries. The timeless subject is illuminated by Eliot's familiar imagery of seasonal renewal, of the cycle of death and rebirth. The play begins in autumn, and, when Thomas has made his commitment to

⁷New York: Harcourt, Brace and Company, 1935, p. 7.

the ritual of sacrifice which takes place near the winter equinox, the bystanders then speak of the coming spring. Related to this theme of martyrdom is the Christian motif of the glorious loser--a motif that further expands the universality of Thomas' action. Besides the catholicity of the martyrdom, the chorus reappears in this play, this time made up of the Women of Canterbury. The chorus specifically represents all the people of Canterbury but, in reality, symbolizes all of the people of the world. Eliot, in addition, returned to verse as the medium for the theme. He claimed that he modeled the lines of the play on "the versification of Everyman."⁸ The verse reaches notable highlights, especially in the choral speeches. Jones, in fact, states that the choral speeches are "the greatest thing in a great play" and that "we have to go back to Greek Tragedy to find choral writing with which to compare to the best of them."⁹

The plan of Eliot's tragedy is simple. It is divided into two parts, separated by a prose sermon. In Part I, Eliot creates the setting for the significant act to follow. The chorus tells the audience about previous action:

Seven years and the summer is over
Seven years since the Archbishop left.¹⁰

Besides agreeing with the historical facts, the number seven is stressed because in the Christian view it is the Biblical

⁸"Poetry and Drama," Atlantic Monthly, February, 1951, p. 34.

⁹Plays, p. 56.

¹⁰Murder in the Cathedral (New York: Harcourt, Brace and Company, 1935), p. 12. All future page references to the play refer to this edition.

number that signifies completeness. Just as the drama begins with a fall setting and passes through the throes of winter giving way to the rebirth of spring, so the unit of earthly time is about to end for Thomas, giving way to a heavenly rebirth. A conversation between Three Priests next emphasizes that Thomas' return from exile will set the clock of fate into motion. The Third Priest says:

For good or ill, let the wheel turn.
The wheel has been still, these seven years,
and no good.
For ill or good, let the wheel turn. (p. 18)

Eliot next takes some liberty with the actual historical facts. Although the play's title calls attention to Thomas' act of martyrdom and to the actual murder, the play, especially the first part, is not so much about a martyrdom as it is about the formation of a martyr and his spiritual states of consciousness. To elucidate this, Eliot personifies four Tempters who represent the temptations of life, power, reason, and glory. The Fourth Tempter is greeted with surprise:

Who are you? I expected
Three visitors, not four. (p. 35)

The last Tempter encourages Thomas to become a martyr for the glory he would win. This temptation proves to be the most difficult for Thomas to overcome. The Tempter asks,

What glory can compare with the glory of Saints
Dwelling forever in presence of God? (p. 39)

Thomas admits:

The last temptation is the greatest treason:
To do the right deed for the wrong reason. (p. 44)

But despite the fact that he comes close to giving in to pride and seeking the glory, Thomas ultimately repels this Tempter, as he did the others.

After a prose sermon interlude delivered on Christmas Morning, Part II resumes on December 29th, the day of the actual murder. Three priests enter bearing banners celebrating the martyrdom of St. Stephen, St. John, and the Holy Innocents. Four nameless knights appear next, present accusations against Thomas, and then leave to arm themselves. When it becomes evident that Thomas is in danger, the priests urge him to bar the door and flee or hide, betraying their lack of understanding concerning the will of God. Thomas responds forcefully:

Unbar the doors! Throw open the doors!
 I will not have the house of prayer,
 the church of Christ,
 The sanctuary, turned into a fortress

 I give my life
 To the Law of God above the Law of Man
 Unbar the door! unbar the door! (p. 74)

After the actual murder takes place on stage, the Knights come forward and address the audience in prose, identifying themselves. Browne notes that "Eliot made a careful study of the voluminous contemporary records of Thomas' confrontations with the Knights."¹¹ Their names in the play are the authentic names of the actual murderers. After comments by the priests and chorus, the play then ends.

The isolation of Thomas occurs on more than one level

¹¹Making of Plays, p. 49.

in this play. He is isolated, first of all, by the cast that surrounds him. As in other dramas, Eliot stratified the characters into levels of spiritual awareness. Thomas, at the top of this spiritual scale, is the only fully-developed character in the play. He has achieved a level of spirituality that isolates him totally from the rest of the cast; he is a saint among sinners. Robert N. Shorter, in his article "Becket As Job," points out that Thomas is as isolated as the figure of Job because of his integrity in the spiritual cause.¹² Similarly, Francis Fergusson, in his article "Murder in the Cathedral: The Theological Scene," writes:

The *dramatis personae* (essences of discontinuous worlds of experience) have nothing in common but the blank and meaningless fact of the killing--except Thomas.¹³

Apart from Thomas, the other characters move in the "dark night"--at least initially. They remain almost allegorically distant. The priests, as representatives of God's viewpoint, cannot even comprehend Thomas' act, let alone understand its implications. The Knights are unable to see Thomas as anything except the King's enemy. In the reality of the London world, as interpreted on Canterbury's stage by Eliot, Thomas stands alone--isolated from the characters that surround him because of his spiritual consciousness.

¹²In Twentieth Century Interpretations: Murder in the Cathedral, ed. by David R. Clark (New Jersey: Prentice Hall, Inc., 1971), p. 88.

¹³*Ibid.*, p. 35.

Thomas also stands alienated and isolated in Murder in the Cathedral in that his impending act is of a solitary nature, creating a relationship between God and man rather than between men. After his commitment to martyrdom but before the actual murder, Thomas is in a netherworld, neither world-centered nor God-centered. The waiting is thus lonely and presents a great burden, and it is something he must endure alone. He admits that it is very difficult: "Heavier the interval than the consummation" (p. 23). The self-examination that Thomas undergoes as to his motivation is an isolated endeavor. When the Knights later stand accusing Thomas, Eliot uses physical imagery to represent this sense of isolation. The First Knight suggests that Thomas return to his exile. Thomas, responding that he had known "seven years of misery and pain" in exile, then says:

Never again, you must make no doubt
 Shall the sea run between the shepherd
 and his fold. (p. 65)

The physical separation alluded to here mirrors the greater mental isolation Thomas experiences when physically standing amid his flock--yet so far apart from it. The high point of Thomas' isolation occurs just prior to the actual murder. At this point Thomas is totally alone. He is alienated from the London community; his contemporaries have cast him off and condemned him to death. He cannot, however, claim to have earned God's companionship until the act of martyrdom. He describes his anguish:

Emptiness, absence, separation from God;

The horror of the effortless journey, to
 the empty land
 which is no land, only emptiness, absence
 the Void. (p. 71)

Just prior to the murder itself, Thomas is a man who stands apart from everything, totally alone. But if one takes a retrospective view of the protagonists in Sweeney Agonistes and Murder in the Cathedral, is it not apparent that a difference is evident? Whereas Sweeney merely confronted the hounds of heaven, Thomas a Becket has heard and has followed them.

The chorus also plays an important role in heightening the alienation in the play and, more importantly, in showing movement away from it. Besides giving the play a traditional framework, the chorus provides a close-knit foil by which the isolated spirituality of Thomas can be more clearly perceived by the viewer. Eliot explained its specific function in a talk given one year after the production of the play:

The chorus . . . mediates between the action and the audience; it intensifies the action by projecting its emotional consequences, so that we as the audience see it doubly, by seeing its effect on other people.¹⁴

The chorus thus illuminates the action in the traditional Greek sense; however, in addition, it serves to present the spiritual temperament of the common lot of humanity. As a bystander looking upon the action, it reveals the feelings of the London populace.

The Women of Canterbury that make up the chorus cannot

¹⁴Jones, Plays, p. 52.

begin to comprehend the timeless moment of martyrdom that Thomas approaches. They are content to hide behind nameless anonymity and to reside in the status quo. They prefer the neutral progression of the material and sensual life, a life reduced to the ordinary ends of "birth, copulation, and death." The chorus feels it has been "forced to bear witness" (p. 11).

It claims,

We are content if we are left alone.
 We try to keep our households in order;

 Preferring to pass unobserved. (p. 12)

After Thomas returns and the impending action is foreshadowed ("Ill the wind, ill the time, uncertain the profit, certain the danger" p. 18), the women show real fear. They implore Thomas to return to his exile:

Return. Quickly. Quickly. Leave us to
 perish in quiet.

 We do not wish anything to happen.
 Seven years we have lived quietly,
 Succeeded in avoiding notice
 Living and partly living. (p. 19)

The chorus here reflects the Renaissance concept of order in its attitude regarding Thomas' return. The impending violence could only result in discord, disturbing the music of the spheres. The chorus is afraid of any confrontation with spiritual elements. The significance of this fear is reflected in the fact that the original title Eliot gave to this play was Fear In The Way.¹⁵ This title emphasizes the reaction of the chorus to Thomas' return--heightening the importance of

¹⁵Browne, Making of Plays, p. 55.

its loss of fear in the end of the play. When the murder has taken place, the chorus is suddenly willing to confront and even to embrace the fruits of Thomas' act. Thomas prophesied that this might occur:

This is one moment,
But know that another
Shall pierce you with a sudden painful joy
When the figure of God's purpose is made
complete. (p. 69)

And he proves to be correct, for in the last choral speech, a slender ray of hope emerges concerning the spiritual condition of the chorus, foreshadowing the changes to occur in future plays. The chorus suddenly embraces the spirituality of Thomas' act. It praises God and recognizes Thomas as a saint:

Wherever a saint has dwelt, wherever a martyr
has given his blood for the blood of Christ,
There is holy ground, and the sanctity shall
not depart from it. (p. 87)

Thus the chorus, the common folk of London, profits from the pattern of fate into which it has been involuntarily drawn. Thanking God for giving "such blessing to Canterbury" (p. 87), it is ultimately able to acknowledge its own "trespass," "weakness," and "sin" (p. 88).

Even if the audience resists identifying with Sweeney and his prostitute friends or with the sainted Thomas a Becket, it can identify with a chorus made up of common folk. In future plays Eliot explores the potential for spiritual fulfillment in such common folk, in the lives of ordinary men and women in the contemporary world--a fulfillment hinted at by the Women of Canterbury.

CHAPTER III

THE FAMILY REUNION

In a humorous letter to Ezra Pound, written after the completion of Murder in the Cathedral, Eliot offered the following "Five Points on Dramatic Writing":

1. You got to keep the audience's attention all the time.
2. If you lose it you got to get it back QUICK.
3. Everything about the plot and character and all else what Aristotle and others say is secondary to the forgoin.
4. But IF you can keep the bloody audience's attention engaged, then you can perform any monkey tricks you like when they ain't looking, and it's what you do behind the audience's back so to speak that makes your play IMMORTAL for a while. If the audience gets its strip tease it will swallow the poetry.
5. If you write a play in verse, then the verse ought to be a medium to look THROUGH and not a pretty decoration to look AT.¹

There is an inherent challenge for the modern playwright in these facetious remarks--and it was a challenge Eliot received with enthusiasm. The Rock and Murder in the Cathedral, the works he had been commissioned to write, had caused him to drift away from the exciting direction he had taken in the Sweeney fragments--that of creating a religious verse drama with contemporary relevance. E. Martin Browne notes that Eliot was, upon the completion of Murder in the Cathedral, "quite

¹Smith, Dramatic Theory, p. 53.

determined to refuse invitations to undertake further work for the church."² Free at last from the commissions which demanded prefabricated historical themes and settings, Eliot was now able to focus his creative powers on the writing of his first full-length original drama.

Besides wanting to "keep the bloody audience's attention engaged," Eliot approached the writing of this next play with concrete dramatic goals in mind. Chief among them was the union of the secular and religious visions. In a 1937 lecture, given after the publication of Murder in the Cathedral but prior to the completion of The Family Reunion, he made the following assertion:

The creation of a living religious drama in our time is not to be conceived of as a problem entirely isolated from that of the secular theatre. . . . We need to strive towards a reintegration of both kinds of drama, just as we need to strive towards a reintegration of life.³

In theory, then, Eliot wanted to fuse the religious and secular visions into one drama. But in actuality this was a difficult challenge. As Barber succinctly summarized, Eliot intended to present "the action of redemption to audiences for the most part unaware that such an action exists."⁴ It was a goal to try the talents of any playwright.

To make the spiritual message palatable for the audience

²Making of Plays, p. 124.

³Jones, Plays, p. 81.

⁴"T. S. Eliot: After Strange Gods," The Southern Review, VI (n. m., 1940-41), 387.

of today's commercial stage, Eliot once again returned to the urban setting he had employed in the Sweeney fragments, testing (and proving) Baudelaire's contention that enduring poetry could be precipitated from the chaotic urban scene. The modern audience would have been repelled by the priests, organ music, and stained glass which were essential in the previous commissioned plays. Eliot thus evolved a Christian comedy in the vein of closet drama which contained verse and religious themes yet entertained a contemporary audience. The sacerdotal landscapes of The Rock and Murder in the Cathedral were replaced by a modern drawing room peopled with modern characters whose cocktail party chatter disguised both the poetry and the deeper meanings of their lines. This setting, which was to lie at the heart of the next four plays, would serve as the framework within which Eliot could show that the desanctification and deculturalization of modern man were as universal as the myths upon which he built each play.

The drawing room that dominates the stage for The Family Reunion is located at Wishwood, the estate of the Monchensey family, English people of substantial means. The reunion is occasioned by a celebration of the birthday of Amy, the matriarch of the family. Members are journeying from divergent areas to attend the reunion. The expectation of their arrival is skillfully used by Eliot to build interest: Arthur and John, in fact, never do arrive. The conversation that occurs in the Monchensey drawing room is thus light and gay--about the weather, shared childhood memories, and adult

successes. This setting, however, takes on new overtones with the arrival of Harry, the protagonist of the play. It soon becomes clear that for Harry the family's reunion will have a deeper significance. His seven year absence should have generated a joyous return. Harry comes, however, pursued by the Furies and tortured by an obscure and baffling guilt which, he believes, results from the possibility that he caused the death of his wife in a mysterious shipboard accident. Aunt Agatha later reveals to Harry that the guilt he feels is really an inherited family guilt, derived from his deceased father's wish to kill Harry's mother, who was then pregnant with him. Like the character's in Ibsen's Ghosts, Harry learns that the sins of a father can be visited upon the head of his children. After learning the truth, Harry leaves to carry out the expiation of the family curse, guided by the same spirits which formerly pursued him. And the drawing room which was to have contained a joyous family reunion becomes the scene of Harry's unwelcome departure and Amy's death.

To universalize the English drawing room setting, Eliot again invoked the superstructure of Greek myth and ritual. The Family Reunion is based upon the Oresteia of Aeschylus.⁵ In these plays, the Erinyes (or Furies) pursue Orestes because of the guilt he carries from the murder of his mother. After they force him to purge the curse on the house of Atreus,

⁵The Oresteia is a trilogy composed of Agamemnon, Choephoroe, and Eumenides.

they are declared by the court of Athens to be henceforth known as the Eumenides, honored spirits of mercy and good will. Eliot's chorus of Furies, similarly, is at first interpreted by Harry as evil. After he acknowledges the necessity of expiating the curse his father brought upon the house of Monchensey, Harry recognizes the Furies as beneficial forces and allows them to lead him away.

The religious themes Eliot sought to disguise in contemporary settings are thus seen to be universal spiritual problems. Although Kirk may be right when he notes that "there is more of Baudelaire than Aeschylus in this drama,"⁶ (referring to Baudelaire's emphasis on original sin), the play nonetheless blends the Christian and Greek visions. The true Christian ideal, for Eliot, was not solely confined to church rituals. He was religious in the sense that the Greeks were religious--as the spiritual relates to the whole of life. By combining the Oresteia with a contemporary setting and overlaying that with the force of Christianity, the guilt of the Greek legends merges meaningfully and effectively with the doctrine of original sin.

The Family Reunion first became public on November 14, 1937. Eliot went to supper at the home of Henzie and E. Martin Browne and read the first draft of it aloud after the dinner. Browne records that his emotions were mixed:

Of all his plays, this one was, and is, the most difficult to apprehend. It is also the one which,

⁶Moral Imagination, p. 265.

to me at least, has over the years yielded the most in fresh insight and repeated contact.⁷

The draft read at the supper party was far from finished. The revisions proved to be tedious; they continued for over a year.⁸ Some critics imply that Eliot was, even then, commandeered by Browne. It is clear that, although Eliot respected Browne's opinions, he was by no means the puppet of his director. This quotation from a letter concerning a subsequent script of The Family Reunion shows that Eliot indeed maintained sole authorship:

Your examination of the play was no more painful than I had anticipated--I had been looking forward to the moment with dread. I shall try to do some work on it before I see you; but first I have to sort out, of course, the criticism I can accept from those I can't!⁹

By the time the final revisions were completed months later, the play had been assigned to London's Westminster Theatre. The part of Harry was entrusted to Michael Redgrave, with Helen Hayes playing Amy and, by Eliot's specific request, Henzie Raeburn, E. Martin Browne's wife, playing Ivy. It finally opened in March of 1939, two months after the publication of the final issue of The Criterion. In that same month Faber and Faber published the first edition. Eliot himself desired that the play be released simultaneously with the play's opening; he subsequently recognized the wisdom of

⁷Making of Plays, p. 90.

⁸The textual revisions and correspondence related to this play's problems are carefully detailed in Browne's chapter on The Family Reunion in Making of Plays, pp. 90-151.

⁹Browne, Making of Plays, p. 90.

delaying publication until after he had the benefit of audience reaction to the drama.

The reactions to the innovations in The Family Reunion are so varied that they deserve to be noted. Critical appraisals range between the extremes represented by Muriel C. Bradbock, who called the play "Mr. Eliot's worst failure,"¹⁰ and that of the actor Robert Speaight, who called it "his best."¹¹ Besides the diversified comment on the stage production, there has been much argument as to the categorization of the play itself. It has been termed "a psychological tragedy" by Helen Gardner,¹² "a realist drama" by Sean Lucy,¹³ a "tragic comic verse melodrama" by Grover Cleveland Smith,¹⁴ and simply a play that is "neither tragedy nor comedy" by J. L. Styan.¹⁵

If the comic closet-drama setting cannot alone claim the smiling mask as the emblem of the play, then the more serious religious themes can support comedy's claim upon The Family Reunion. The play is about Harry, and when Harry goes

¹⁰Russell Hope Robbins, The T. S. Eliot Myth (New York: Henry Schuman, 1951), p. 97.

¹¹"Interpreting Becket and Other Parts," in T. S. Eliot: A Symposium For His 70th Birthday, ed. by Neville Braybrooke (New York: Farrar, Straus & Cudahy, 1958), p. 75.

¹²"The Comedies of T. S. Eliot," in T. S. Eliot: The Man and His Work, ed. by Allen Tate (New York: Delacorte Press, 1966), p. 161.

¹³T. S. Eliot: The Idea of Tradition (London: Cohen & West, 1960), p. 193.

¹⁴Poetry and Plays, p. 196.

¹⁵The Dark Comedy: The Development of Modern Comic Tragedy (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1962), p. 3.

off in the end "to follow the bright angels,"¹⁶ his problem is resolved without the element of waste that characterizes tragedy. The question of whether any play encompassing the Christian vision can be a tragedy then must be raised. While the Bible asks what fellowship light has with darkness, in this case, it is only under the cover of darkness that the light can be seen. And the subsequent examination of Harry's isolation reveals that indeed the light shines bright and clear in the end.

When Harry returns to his family's reunion, accompanied by his faithful chauffeur, Downing, it quickly becomes clear that he is an alien among his family. Harry arrives at Wishwood just after his first visual encounter with the Furies. Since he is unable to comprehend their significance at this point, he reacts to their appearance with terror. Entering the play en media res, Harry's first act is to close the window. He hopes to take refuge within his family and shut out future encounters with the Furies. "Can't you see them?" he asks,

You don't see them, but I see them
 And they see me. This is the first time that I
 have seen them.
 In the Java Straits, in the Sunda Sea,
 In the sweet sickly tropical night, I knew they
 were coming.
 In Italy, from behind the nightingale's thicket,
 The eyes stared at me, and corrupted that song.
 They were always there. But I did not see them.

¹⁶T. S. Eliot, The Family Reunion (New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, Inc., 1939), p. 111. All future citations from this play will be from this source. Pages only can be given since lines are not numbered.

Why should they wait until I came back to Wishwood?
There were a thousand places where I might have
met them;

Why here? why here? (p. 24)

The pain in these lines results from Harry's inability to comprehend the purpose of the Furies and the resultant reaction of fear, but it also results from his realization that he alone is haunted by the Furies and that he alone must come to terms with them.

The initial isolation Harry feels is similar to that of Sweeney, who endured a spiritual confrontation alone and could not communicate the experience to those around him. Thomas, likewise, stood apart from those surrounding him, unable even to make his martyrdom understood until it bore fruit after his death. Unlike the first two protagonists, Harry needs his family to come to an understanding of the Furies and to help him penetrate the veil of mystery surrounding his guilt. During the course of his visit at Wishwood, three confrontations with family members assist Harry along the spiritual path. The first is with Mary, his childhood playmate and sweetheart. In talking with Mary he comes to understand that Amy's domination of his childhood is possibly related to his present guilt. In the second confrontation between Harry and Dr. Warburton, Harry is alerted to the fact that Aunt Agatha may have important information. The final confrontation is, of course, with Aunt Agatha herself. During this discussion Harry finally learns the truth. The scope of Harry's alienation and isolation can thus be appraised by a

closer look at these three confrontations.

The scene between Harry and Mary opens with an exchange of polite reminiscences; however, when Mary excuses herself to dress for dinner, Harry detains her: "No, don't go just yet" (p. 51). A moment later he repeats this plea more urgently:

No, no, don't go! Please don't leave me
Just at this moment. I feel it is important
Something should have come of this conversation. (p. 56)

But Mary is unaware of the deeper problems Harry is wrestling with, and she is unprepared for the intense emotion he displays in the conversation to come.

Harry begins by asking Mary if she was ever "happy here, as a child at Wishwood" (p. 51). Mary's answers reveal that she, like Harry, suffered from Amy's domination. The result was a restrictive childhood that, she says,

. . . seemed to be imposed upon us;
Even the nice things were laid out ready,
And the treats were always so carefully prepared;
There was never any time to invent our own
enjoyments. (p. 52)

One happy memory stands out though--a "hollow tree in a wood by the river" (p. 53), a microcosmic symbol of the richest world of childhood. When Mary responds with understanding, Harry interprets it as a response to the brief attraction he feels for her. In sudden hopes of recapturing his childhood peace through a new relationship with Mary, Harry impulsively shares his haunting fears with her. His description of his experience with the Furies also portrays his isolation:

One thing you cannot know:
 The sudden extinction of every alternative,
 The unexpected crash of the iron cataract.

 I have felt them near me,
 Here and here and here--whenever I am not looking,
 Always flickering at the corner of my eye
 You do not know,
 You cannot know, you cannot understand,

 There is only one way for you to understand
 And that is by seeing. They are much too clever
 To admit you into our world. Yours is no better.
 They have seen to that: it is part of the torment.
 (pp. 54-56)

The Furies have set Harry apart from the rest of his family. The isolation underscores his fear and the result is an "apprehension deeper than all sense" (p. 59). The apprehension that they might come, however, soon swells into the frightening intuitive sense that they are truly near. Terrified almost into incoherency, Harry screams,

Oh why now? Come out!
 Come out! Where are you? Let me see you,
 Since I know you are there, I know you are
 spying on me.
 Why do you play with me, why do you let me go
 Only to surround me? When I remember them
 They leave me alone: when I forget them
 Only for an instant of inattention
 They are roused again, the sleepless hunters
 That will not let me sleep. (p. 60)

But when the Eumenides finally do appear in the window embrace, Harry is unable to interpret their purpose. That purpose was clearly described in a letter Eliot wrote to Browne in answer to Browne's suggestion that Eliot rewrite the play so that Harry and Mary wed:

This is the first time since his marriage ("there was no ecstasy") that he has been attracted towards any woman. This attraction glimmers for a moment

in his mind, half-consciously as a possible "way of escape"; and the Furies (for the Furies are di-
vine instruments, not simple hell-hounds) come in
the nick of time to warn him away from this evasion--
though at that moment he misunderstands their
function.¹⁷

But although Harry interprets the Furies as hostile spirits, he does learn that Mary cannot become a buffer between the Furies and him. Mary goes to the window and draws the curtains: "Harry! There is no one here" (p. 61). But Harry has seen the Furies. He sadly addresses Mary:

You're of no use to me. I must face them.
I must fight them. (p. 61)

And at this point, Harry must fight them alone.

Harry's conversation with Dr. Warburton has the fruitful outcome of alerting Harry to the importance his Aunt Agatha may have for the resolution of his problem. Eliot accomplishes this in an interesting round-about manner whereby Dr. Warburton betrays himself. Although Dr. Warburton, as an old family friend and family doctor,¹⁸ initiated the conversation to alert Harry to the possibility of his mother's ill health, Harry's probing eventually traps him. After Harry describes his own vague childhood memories surrounding his father's death, Warburton replies:

¹⁷Making of Plays, p. 107.

¹⁸Carole Smith (in Dramatic Theory and Practice, p. 139) makes this interesting comment regarding Dr. Warburton's role in the play: "He fulfills, I am convinced, the ritual role of the cook-doctor which Cornford described and takes his place as one in a long series of serio-comic, symbolic, cook-doctors in T. S. Eliot's plays, beginning with Pereira in Sweeney Agonistes and including Sir Henry Harcourt-Reilly in The

You overinterpret.
 I am sure that your mother always loved him;
 There was never the slightest suspicion of
 scandal. (p. 75)

Harry's alertness to his spiritual problem causes him to pick up the subtle meaning that Dr. Warburton's reference to a scandal contains:

Scandal? who said scandal? I did not.
 Yes, I see now. That night, when she kissed me,
 I felt the trap close. If you won't tell me,
 I must ask Agatha. I never dared before. (p. 75)

And Dr. Warburton's reaction is strange:

I advise you strongly, not to ask your aunt--
 I mean, there is nothing she could tell you. (p. 75)

His reply convinces Harry that there is something he could learn from Agatha, something which might enable him to escape from his isolation into the peace of understanding.

Harry's isolation reaches its height just prior to his conversation with Amy. Before coming to Wishwood, he had been haunted by the unseen Furies around the globe. The fears resulting from this are suddenly greatly intensified at Wishwood when Harry actually sees them. The tension of the play thus builds to a climax as Harry begins to talk with his Aunt Agatha; at this point Harry, like Sweeney, knows the torment of incommunicable isolation:

At the beginning, eight years ago,
 I felt at first, that sense of separation,
 Of isolation, unredeemable, irrevocable--

Cocktail Party, Eggerson in The Confidential Clerk, and the doctor who orders Lord Claverton to the sanatorium in The Elder Statesman." This unexplored hypothesis suggests a fascinating investigation of Eliot's dramas.

It's eternal, or gives a knowledge of eternity,
Because it feels eternal while it lasts. That is
one hell.

Then the numbness came to cover it--that is another--
The second hell of not being there,

The degradation of being parted from myself
. . . I thought foolishly

That when I got back to Wishwood, as I had left it,
Everything would fall into place. But they prevent it.
I have to find out what their meaning is. (p. 96)

Knowing that he is close to understanding the meaning of the
Furies, Harry initiates the denouement of the play with the
simple request: "And now I want you to tell me about my
father" (p. 97).

Agatha, the "efficient principal of a women's college"
(p. 97), has carried the burden of the family's secret alone
until this moment. She can now tell Harry because he has
matured enough to take the burden from her and, like Christ,
expiate the curse upon his human family. Agatha recognizes
that Harry has been spiritually elected to his mission:

. . . It is possible
You are the consciousness of your unhappy family.
Its bird sent flying through the purgatorial flame.
Indeed it is possible. You may learn hereafter,
Moving alone through flames of ice, chosen
To resolve the enchantment under which we suffer.
(pp. 101-102)

So Agatha passes Harry "the burden of all the family" (p. 102)
and reveals the simple truth: she and Harry's father fell in
love and his father subsequently plotted to kill Harry's mother,
then pregnant with Harry. Agatha admits that she interceded
on Harry's behalf:

I did not want to kill you
You to be killed! What were you then? only a
thing called 'life'--
Something that should have been mine, as I felt then.
(p. 100)

When the truth is finally revealed, Harry's relief is immediate. The vague guilt that he believed to be grounded in the ship-board accident involving his wife has now been defined and clarified. Given concrete roots, the unfounded guilt about his wife dissipates: "Perhaps, I only dreamt I pushed her" (p. 101).

The moment of truth is suspended in time. In it "the chain breaks, the wheel stops" (p. 104); all time converges upon one moment with eternal consequences. Harry's relief and joy are revealed with Eliot's most famous symbol:

Oh my dear, and you walked through the little door
And I ran to meet you in the rose-garden. (p. 105)

But at that moment the Eumenides appear again to Harry. Why? The answer is that Harry has begun to misinterpret his gratitude to Agatha as he did his gratitude for Mary: he channels it into a sexual response. The Eumenides are needed to warn him away from this direction. Leon Unger's reference to "Harry's need for the sexual experience"¹⁹ is even more credible in the light of Eliot's comments about Harry in a letter to E. Martin Browne:

. . . he finds refuge in an ambiguous relation-- the attraction, half of a son and half of a lover, to Agatha, who reciprocates in somewhat the same way. And this gives the cue for the second appearance of the Furies, more patiently in their role of divine messengers, to let him know clearly that the only way out is the way of purgation and holiness.²⁰

¹⁹Moments and Patterns, p. 83.

²⁰Making of Plays, p. 107.

And the Furies win. Harry "must follow the bright angels" (p. 111); he leaves "not to run away, but to pursue/ Not to avoid being found, but to seek: (p. 110). Eliot's famous reply to Michael Redgrave's query about Harry's fate--"I think he and the chauffeur go off and get jobs in the East End"²¹--was a dismissal of subsequent events; the important thing is that Harry comes to understand his guilt and accepts the guidance of the Furies in the end. Eliot's own words explain Harry best of all:

At the beginning of the play he is aware of the past only as pollution. . . . Only after the second visit of the Furies does he begin to understand what the way of Liberation is; and he follows the Furies as immediately as the Disciples dropping their nets.²²

The Family Reunion represents a milestone in Eliot's dramatic career in many ways: it is his first totally original play, it is his first comedy, and it represents concrete movement from the alienated anti-Victorian position evidenced in earlier plays.

One of the significant changes in Eliot's treatment of alienation is shown in the use of the chorus. In Sweeney Agonistes, the chorus remains undifferentiated and unnamed. The chorus of The Rock is masked, at Eliot's instruction, to disguise identities. In Murder in the Cathedral, the chorus consists of the Women of Canterbury; this identification is

²¹In Katherine Worth's "Eliot in the Living Theatre," in Eliot in Perspective: A Symposium, ed. by Graham Martin (London: MacMillan and Company, Ltd., 1970), p. 160.

²²E. Martin Browne, Making of Plays, p. 108.

a bit more concrete but the members are still undifferentiated. It is in The Family Reunion that Eliot, for the first time, composes the chorus out of the cast of the play. This chorus is made up of four characters: Amy's two sisters, Violet and Ivy, and the two brothers of Amy's deceased husband, Gerald and Charles. Besides being members of the chorus, these characters have identities of their own. The separate lines they speak provide insight into their personalities. In The Family Reunion, then, Eliot moves away from the mystical, remote, undefined chorus towards one that is personalized and tangible. It is a movement towards realism.

Another change that study of this play reveals is in Eliot's treatment of protagonists. Sweeney Agonistes is about a confrontation which occurs between Sweeney and the Furies. It represents a significant spiritual step for Sweeney, but nothing else happens. The play ends with Sweeney's lonely confrontation. In Murder in the Cathedral, Eliot goes a step farther. Although Thomas remains as isolated as Sweeney, he does progress farther along the spiritual path. Confronted with a spiritual choice, he chooses to act, and his martyrdom is the result of his commitment to action. Like Sweeney, however, Thomas is still isolated from the human world around him. No one comforts him, and it is only the impersonal chorus, after his martyrdom, that shows any promise of comprehending the significance of his action. In The Family Reunion, Harry, on the other hand, is in a different situation. Instead of being unable to communicate with those about him, Harry

seeks out the help of other characters so he can come to terms with his guilt. Only by confronting people in his past can he understand the ghosts of his past. Besides the chorus, which emerges as an ally, Harry is supported by three other members of the cast: Mary, Agatha, and Downing. Although it is essentially true, as J. L. Styan states, that the other actors "negatively enhance our sense of Harry's solitude and suffering."²³ it is these three characters that also relieve Harry's isolation. Even the uneducated but loyal Downing, the chauffeur who drives Harry away in the end, has the potential to help his employer cope with the guilt he must expiate. Just before Harry departs, Agatha tells Downing that she and Mary have seen the Furies also. Downing responds:

You mean them ghosts, Miss!
I wondered when his Lordship would get round to
seeing them--

.....
Of course, I knew they was to do with his Lordship,
And not with me, so I could see them cheerful-like,
In a manner of speaking. There's no harm in them,
I'll take my oath. (p. 125)

Not only had Downing seen the Furies, he knew intuitively what Harry so painfully found out at the end of his family reunion-- that the Furies were truly Eumenides in the Greek sense, healing spirits of mercy and good will. The lines of demarcation between characters are thus less stringent in this play. Whereas Sweeney and Thomas stood against the rest of the world, Harry's isolation is eased in the end by Mary, Agatha, and

²³Dark Comedy, p. 185.

Downing. These three characters in The Family Reunion represent an emerging middle ground that figures even more prominently in the next play.

CHAPTER IV

THE COCKTAIL PARTY

The greatest of living poets has been trying to storm the drama for a long time, but at last he has mastered it, and his new work, which is technically in verse, but hardly seems to be, is an authentic modern masterpiece, one of the two or three finest plays of the post-war English-speaking stage.¹

These words, written by Richard Watts, Jr. for the London Daily Post, accurately reflect the unanimously positive critical responses to the production of Eliot's next play, The Cocktail Party. The critical judgements, furthermore, were not limited to a comparison of the Eliot plays that preceded it. Robert Coleman, for example, called it "one of the great plays of our time."² Philip Headings labeled it as "the most successful verse play of the twentieth century."³ At any rate, the reputation of this unique drama was instantly golden--and in the years since Alec Guinness headed the initial London cast and Rex Harrison led the stage version for New York audiences, interest in and acclaim for The Cocktail Party has continued.

¹Browne, Making of Plays, p. 243.

²Ibid.

³T. S. Eliot (New York: Twayne Publishers, Inc., 1964), p. 14.

The first significant fact that must be confronted when attention is turned to The Cocktail Party is that, unlike The Family Reunion, whose structure and meanings seemed to walk a middle line between comedy and tragedy, The Cocktail Party is, without argument, a comedy. Eliot's gentle wit, previously concealed behind the pen names of "Gus Krutzsch," the "Aged Eagle," and the "Old Possum," was finally to flower and mature in a comic drama, a drama so successful that it became the first of three comedies he would henceforth write.

Eliot's total commitment to comedy was, first of all, a logical outcome of his public commitment to Christianity--specifically to the Church of England. Tragedy is characterized by hopelessness and waste. Death in tragedy is a dissipation of life; the loss is total and irredeemable. In the Christian context, however, life does not stop with the grave. The vista of Christianity reduces the impact of death; the reward of an afterlife negates the loss and waste that is at the very heart of tragedy. Walter Kerr, in his Tragedy and Comedy, paraphrases George Steiner's views on this point:

True tragedy is dead nowadays because Christianity, with its promise of salvation for any and all sinners who repent, has broken the back of the tragic assumption. . . . in the norm of tragedy there can be no compensation.⁴

Eliot's Christian vision, as noted previously, also prompted him to be concerned with the stage as a forte for the presentation of Christian concepts. Among the forms of drama

⁴New York: Simon and Schuster, 1967, p. 37.

comedy stands out for social usefulness. One of the tenets at the heart of Northrup Frye's The Anatomy of Criticism is this social usefulness of comedy. It must also be remembered that Eliot was writing for an audience that had recently emerged from direct contact with the horrors of the Second World War. Just as the Theatre Closing Act of 1642 was the springboard for the genesis of Restoration Drama, the emotional and spiritual oppression of the Second World War had created a predisposition for the reception of modern comedy. After all, as Herbert Howarth notes, "the public didn't love Ibsen but songs."⁵

It does drama injustice, however, to persist in the view that comedy can only deal with the superficial things of life. The audience of a comedy may rightly forsake the "belly-laugh" for the detached amusement that comes when tribulation becomes universal, a reaction symbolized by the nodding, knowing smile instead of the hearty giggle. Eliot knew that comedy can ask the same questions that tragedy asks--but in a manner more palatable to the modern audience. In some instances, Eliot believed, comedy could even ask better:

To those who have experienced the full horror of life, tragedy is still inadequate. . . . In the end, horror and laughter may be one--only when horror and laughter have become as horrible and laughable as they can be, . . . do you perceive the aim of the comic and the tragic dramatists is the same: they are equally serious.⁶

⁵Notes on Some Figures Behind T. S. Eliot (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1964), p. 149.

⁶"Shakespearian Criticism: I. From Dryden to Coleridge," in A Companion to Shakespeare Studies, ed. by Harley Granville-

To Eliot comedy was the best way to present meaningful human problems. The seriousness in The Cocktail Party is thus not incongruous with the light and humorous stichomythia that captivates the audience's attention. Both the comic and the serious modes can effectively walk hand in hand, one enhancing the other. The characters can entertain while probing the great themes of life. As Neville Braybrooke points out, "beneath the marvelous speakability of their cocktail party chatter and small talk is the question facing each character--Who Am I?"⁷ The result in The Cocktail Party, then, is a heavy comedy--a comedy that sees the joys and incongruities and laughs at them but that also sees that, underneath the humorous struggles man makes to assert his presence in a complex world, man is still seeking after the permanent religious and spiritual visions that give meaning to life.

Eliot sent the first draft of The Cocktail Party to Browne on July 18, 1948, just five months before he received the Nobel Prize for Literature. After the usual process of revising, it was produced for the Edinburgh Festival of 1949. Eleven years had passed since the completion of The Family Reunion.

The Cocktail Party takes place in a London flat and spans a two-year interval. It is concerned with two separate but

Barker and George B. Harrison (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1934), p. 299.

⁷T. S. Eliot: A Critical Essay (n. p.: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1967), p. 36.

parallel stories: the growth of the modern martyrdom of Celia Coplestone and the reviving of the dead marriage of Edward and Lavinia Chamberlayne. The form of the play is circular; it begins and ends with a cocktail party. Act I reveals that Lavinia has just left Edward and that Celia has been having an unfulfilling affair with Edward. Act II is dominated by the figure of Sir Henry Harcourt-Reilly, the psychologist-father-confessor who acts as the catalyst who provokes a solution to the personal problems of the other characters. With his assistants Julia Shuttlethwaite and Alex Gibbs, Sir Henry first encourages Edward and Lavinia to give their marriage another chance, and then he aids Celia to realize that fulfillment in her life will be found in the spiritual realm. Act III takes place two years later. The Chamberlaynes are about to host another cocktail party. When some of the other characters drop in unexpectedly, it is revealed that the Chamberlaynes have been reconciled and their marital problems healed. It is also announced that Celia has met her death by crucifixion during a heathen insurrection at her missionary post in remote Kinkanja.

Although words are always the building blocks of drama, their effect is usually supplemented by significant action. In this play, however, an inverse relationship exists between words and action: because the plot admits very little physical action, the words spoken by the characters are of greater consequence. It is only through the medium of words that the audience learns of the important actions that have

taken place off stage: that Lavinia has left Edward, that Lavinia and Edward have been reconciled, that Peter has gone to join the American film industry, and that Celia has been killed.

To ground his comedy in the common terra firma, Eliot once again embraced Greek universals. The Cocktail Party is patterned on Euripides' Alcestis. It is, however, less obviously based on its Greek prototype than the former plays. Eliot himself admitted that "I was determined . . . to conceal the origins so well that nobody would identify them until I pointed them out myself."⁸ In Euripides' story, Heracles arrives at the home of a man whose wife, Alcestis, recently sacrificed herself to spare her husband's life. Unaware of his host's bereavement, Heracles drinks himself into a stupor without ever learning the truth. After he later becomes aware of the situation, he redeems himself by fighting with and conquering death, thus restoring Alcestis to her husband. The significance of the Greek story, however, does not lie in the fact that Alcestis was resurrected, but rather that she, like her counterpart, Celia, took on the sins of others when she died.

The impersonal Greek chorus of Guardians is represented in The Cocktail Party by three characters the audience can relate to individually--Alex Gibbs, Julia Shuttlethwaite, and Sir Henry Harcourt-Reilly. Sir Henry, like Heracles, is the

⁸"Poetry and Drama," Atlantic Monthly, CLXXXVII, No. 2, 36.

semi-divine restorer of woman to man; he appropriately forms the godhead of the guardianship trinity in Eliot's play. Eliot intended to symbolize the spiritual insight the trio clearly possesses in the original title of the play: One-eyed Reilly. Although the title was subsequently changed to The Cocktail Party, humorous undercurrents in the play would have given the original title substance. Julia, for example, was constantly losing her unique glasses which had only one lense. The original title reflected the fact that the three guardians could all see life uniquely. In varying degrees, they had the upward vision that the rest of the cast, save Celia, were denied.

It is significant that the Guardians in The Cocktail Party do not exist for Celia's sake only. Until this play Eliot's choruses have functioned only in relationship to the protagonist in each play. In Murder in the Cathedral the chorus speaks mainly to Thomas. The Furies of The Family Reunion likewise direct their efforts towards Harry alone. The Guardians of The Cocktail Party, however, are integrated into the fabric of the play more than ever before. On a personal and warmly human level, they try to aid the disintegrating Chamberlayne marriage as well as to give assistance to Celia. The traditional chorus, then--the chorus that represented the conscience of a heroic character and mediated between that Greek hero and the audience--is in this play dissolved into Eliot's cast. The chorus is less prominent and less selective than ever before. It is not surprising that the chorus itself disappears in the two remaining plays.

The cast of The Cocktail Party is, typically, polarized into two groups. Celia stands at one end of the scale, representing mankind in the spiritual realm. Edward and Lavinia abide at the other end of the scale; they are part of the immediate, material world. The Guardians, of course, are the intermediaries--helping the polarities to understand themselves and to understand those with other visions.

Despite the movement The Cocktail Party represented for Eliot, its meanings are still permeated by familiar echoes of alienation and isolation. According to D. W. Harding in his article entitled "Progression of Theme in Eliot's Modern Plays," the theme of this play is "again the loneliness of human beings, with the emphasis on the choice they must make of the sort of loneliness and the sort of social communion they will have."⁹ But while it is true that loneliness is the prominent motif of the play, the meanings of The Cocktail Party go beyond loneliness and isolation in the end. This is the best illustrated in a consideration of Celia.

In an interview with Donald Hally of the Paris Review, Eliot stated that Celia was "the most important person in the play."¹⁰ And indeed she is--not because of her stage presence but because of the growth she exhibits as the play unfolds. In the beginning of the play Celia is caught up with Edward, Lavinia, and Peter in the cocktail party chatter that camouflages empty, vapid lives. With Sir Henry's help, Celia then comes to recognize that her potential fulfillment lies

⁹The Kenyon Review, XVIII (Summer, 1956), 345.

¹⁰Braybrooke, A Critical Essay, p. 35.

beyond the drawing room environment that had defined her world. Her misplaced passion, when diverted from the outlet of an affair with Edward, eventually comes to rest in the spiritual realm. Even though her capacity for growth exceeds the capacities of the other characters, she deserves credit for the quick, decisive action that follows her interview with Reilly. Stylan summarizes this aptly:

Before long, Celia has outstripped the rest of the field; even in the last scene when she is dead, her unseen presence dwarfs the merely banal plodders.¹¹

And her sacrifice, in the end, becomes a yardstick by which the audience can measure the growth of the remaining characters.

Celia's sense of isolation reaches the highest level just after she realizes that her affair with Edward was not what she thought it to be. She is a passionate woman, capable of deep feeling; Edward cannot even comprehend the depth of feeling of which she is capable, let alone respond in kind or permanently commit himself. Celia finally perceives that her affair was shallow and empty:

And then I found we were only strangers
And that there had been neither giving nor taking
But that we had merely made use of each other
Each for his purpose.¹²

She realizes that her search for meaning in life was in vain

¹¹Dark Comedy, p. 185.

¹²T. S. Eliot, *The Cocktail Party* (New York: Harcourt, Brace and Company, 1950), pp. 137-138. All future citations from this play will be from this source. Pages only can be given since lines are not numbered.

when focused upon Edward, as was Harry's when he looked to Mary; the revelation is very painful. At this point Celia is just as alienated from her world as Thomas or Harry were from theirs. She senses intuitively that she no longer belongs with her cocktail party crowd, but at this point she has no other focus for her energies and no other world to call her own. She is a total alien in her environment, a misfit who does not know which road will lead her home.

When Celia goes to Sir Henry for help, she complains that she suffers from two oppressing emotions. The first is "an awareness of solitude" (p. 133). She describes these intense feelings to Sir Henry:

I mean that what has happened has made me aware
That I've always been alone. That one always is alone.
Not simply the ending of one relationship,
Not even simply finding that it never existed--
But a revelation about my relationship
With everybody. Do you know--
It no longer seems worth while to speak to anyone!¹³
(p. 133)

After speaking of her sense of solitude, Celia then reveals that she suffers from feelings of guilt:

That's stranger still.
It sounds ridiculous--but the only word for it
That I can find, is a sense of sin. (p. 134)

¹³Celia's statement here--"that it no longer seems worth while to speak to anyone"--neatly illustrates a concept presented by Michael Goldman. In his essay entitled "Fear In The Way: The Design of Eliot's Drama," in Eliot In His Time, ed. by A. Walton Litz (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1973), pp. 164-175, Goldman suggests that Eliot's characters often approach schizophrenia. Goldman recommends that all Eliot students read about schizophrenia in Laing's The Divided Self, and then he states: "The schizophrenic, we learn, is convinced he has no identity. . . . He can take no pleasure in the world. . . . He constructs false self systems . . . which only serve

Her guilt, however, clearly does not stem from the fact that her affair with Edward was adulterous. It develops instead when she realizes that she has spent herself on a human relationship that was vulnerable to self-delusion and instability. After her shallow relationship with Edward is unmasked and the affair is ended, the guilt still persists; it does so because her energies persist, driving her to find a relationship worthy of her passion, one that can offer permanence and stability. At first she tries to deny the longing and begs Sir Henry to help:

I want to be cured
Of a craving for something I cannot find
And the shame of never finding it.
Can you cure me? (p. 139)

But instead of stemming Celia's passionate longing, Sir Henry subtly shows her that it should be put to good use. He presents two options to Celia. The first lies in a return to the immediate material world: "I can reconcile you to the human condition" (P. 139). He then speaks of the other option:

There is another way, if you have the courage.
The first I could describe in familiar terms
Because you have seen it, as we all have seen it
.
The second is unknown, and so requires faith--
The kind of faith that issues from despair.
The destination cannot be described;
You will know very little until you get there;
You will journey blind. But the way leads towards

to plunge him into a deeper sense of isolation, fragmentation, and worthlessness. . . . We might do well to consider whether Eliot's vision does not suggest--as, in their own way Laing and others in the field are beginning to suggest--that schizophrenia is a spiritual as well as a mental disorder, an affliction of our culture."

possession
 Of what you have sought for in the wrong place.
 (p. 141)

Celia's immediate response is a total commitment: "I want your second way" (p. 142). And finally, through the medium of the "sanitarium," Sir Henry helps Celia transfer her passions from the human world into the spiritual realm--from an impermanent, unfulfilling relationship with her lover to a permanent, fulfilling relationship with her God. Her choice transcends time and space: the truth has indeed set her free. Although totally isolated from her cocktail party friends, she becomes a happy traveler into the land where spiritual comforters will never desert her. And, ultimately, she surrenders her life on behalf of the people she left behind. She dies as a glorious loser for the guilt of all.

While Celia is, by Eliot's own admission, the most important character, it is an error to think of The Cocktail Party as a play that deals only with her. For the first time, Eliot has written a drama that also deals with the problems of other characters--in this case, Edward and Lavinia Chamberlayne, and, to a lesser degree, Peter Quilpe. Of course these secondary characters are not as important as Celia or the choice that Celia makes. Eliot never wholeheartedly endorses life on the lower level in The Cocktail Party (it always remains second best), but there is nonetheless a significant meaning in Edward and Lavinia's agreement to salvage their failing marriage and in Peter's dedication of his talents to the aesthetic life of a film producer. Helen

Gardner writes that this play "is concerned with choices; but in the end there is only one choice, choose yourself or choose not to be."¹⁴ In the end Edward and Lavinia do choose themselves, electing to work out their own destinies within their own potentials. Edward and Lavinia see that adultery and separation will never satisfy their needs and turn back to each other. Just as Alex comes to prepare Edward's dinner and, finding the larder empty, is thrilled by the challenge "to make something out of nothing" (p. 48), so Edward sees the challenge and reward of trying to make "the best of a bad job" (p. 126). Reilly helps them see the wisdom of making a new commitment to each other. They choose to keep on keeping on. There may be a life without the horizons presented by Celia's choice--but it nonetheless does have its compensations. They will:

Maintain themselves by the common routine,
Learn to avoid excessive expectation,
Become tolerant of themselves and others,
Giving and taking, in the usual actions,
What there is to give and take. (p. 139)

Unlike the judgement in former plays, this life is not totally discredited in The Cocktail Party. When Celia asks Sir Henry, "Is that the best life?" (p. 140), he replies that although it may not be best for her, still "It is a good life" (p. 140). Like the Chamberlaynes, Peter Quilpe comes to realize in the end that "I've only been interested in myself" (p. 179). He chooses to come to the United States and make films. When Sir

¹⁴Comedies of T. S. Eliot, p. 168.

Henry says of Peter, "He should go far" (p. 180), it is said with the knowledge that he is finally seeking meanings for life in something beyond himself. On their own levels, therefore, the Chamberlaynes and Peter redirect their human energies to ends as worthwhile as their circumstances allow. This represents a great step for Eliot. Until The Cocktail Party, the protagonists--Sweeney, Thomas, and Harry--were the only ones to act meaningfully. Even in the preceding play, The Family Reunion, Mary, Agatha, and Downing have no hope of finding a fulfilling life for themselves; they exist only as the means to Harry's end. In the new play, however, there are some lesser characters besides Celia whose lives have redeeming qualities.

Many facets of The Cocktail Party contribute to the alienation pattern but certain modifications must be noted. The tie with a Greek prototype has been lessened. The chorus has been personalized and integrated into the cast of characters. The domination of a saintly protagonist has also been considerably reduced. Eliot's original view of man as a solitary figure alienated in a spiritual wasteland has undergone a movement towards a more realistic and social view--a movement paralleled by his total commitment to comedy and its focus upon man in society. For the first time, furthermore, the commonplace petites gens receive sympathetic attention. There is a movement away from an isolated figure to characters within the structure of a family. Two paths are presented

instead of only one, and in The Cocktail Party, the second path also has definite merit. But will the second way ever be equal in value to the way taken by Thomas and Harry and Celia? Helen Gardner reminds us that "a cocktail party," after all, is "not one of the higher forms of hospitality. It is not a meal, but a prelude to a meal. The symposium, the banquet of love, will come after."¹⁵ And so it does-- in the final plays.

¹⁵Comedies of T. S. Eliot, p. 171.

CHAPTER V

THE CONFIDENTIAL CLERK

During a visit to New York, Eliot called at the home of his life-long friend, William Turner Levy. In answer to Levy's inquiry about a forthcoming play, The Confidential Clerk, Eliot replied:

I think it is my best play so far. At least at this moment it is good. Later will come the doubts. The Confidential Clerk is less complicated on the surface than The Cocktail Party, but it has much more in layers to be meditated on and thought of as meanings of life.¹

Unfortunately, this play--first performed at the Edinburgh Festival in August of 1953, five years after the production of The Cocktail Party--has not upheld Eliot's prophetic judgement. Although it has had many supporters, most critiques were directed at its internal design. E. Martin Browne, for example, felt that "The Clerk is the best constructed of all the modern plays."² W. A. Darlington, dramatic reviewer for the Sunday New York Times, made a similar statement: "From the point of view of technical achievement The Confidential

¹Levy and Victor Scherle, Affectionately, T. S. Eliot (New York: J. B. Lippencott Company, 1968), p. 40.

²"T. S. Eliot In The Theatre: The Director's Memories," in T. S. Eliot: The Man and His Work, ed. by Allen Tate (New York: Delacorte Press, 1966), p. 131.

Clerk is his best play."³ General interest in this play, however, has not detracted from the enduring attention received by The Family Reunion and The Cocktail Party. As a dramatic work it is less important than the other plays. Browne perhaps summarizes the public's reaction well when he writes Eliot that "it does not grow on my affections as the others do."⁴

The theme, tone, and language of The Confidential Clerk bear many Eliotic characteristics. The theme develops on two parallel levels, both dealing with the problem of mistaken identity. On the surface, there is a confusion about the identities of children, giving rise to the element of cosmic farce. On a deeper level, however, it is a play about the search for true self-identity. Not only have children been estranged from their true parents, but individuals have been estranged from their true natures. The play, then, ultimately deals with the reconciliation of children to parents and with the reconciliation of inner longings and talents to individual natures. The tone of The Confidential Clerk is melodramatic; it almost descends to farce on occasion (in the tradition of The Importance of Being Earnest). The language is less memorable than in other plays. Eliot has refined his verse to the point that it seems to dissolve in the air before it reaches

³Browne, Making of Plays, p. 288.

⁴Ibid., p. 294.

the ears; it is apparent only upon close examination. Grover Smith is correct when he describes it as "verse in topography but prose in cadence."⁵ David Jones, similarly, notes that it is "just across the border from prose."⁶

The surface plot of The Confidential Clerk, though complex, is adaptable to a brief summary. Sir Claude Mulhammer, a prominent London financier, and his wife, Lady Elizabeth, a somewhat eccentric woman fascinated by occult religions, have no children of their own, but both have formerly "mislaid" children. Lucasta Angel, a charming but "rather flighty" girl, is the illegitimate daughter of Sir Claude. Both Sir Claude and his wife believe that Colby Simpkins, the young man who is about to replace the faithful Eggerson as Sir Claude's confidential clerk, is the son they had and lost during previous marriages. The problem of mistaken identities is finally resolved in the third act when Mrs. Guzzard, a former nurse for the children involved, is summoned to reveal the truth. She explains that Sir Claude's son was never born due to the death of the mother during the pregnancy, that Lady Elizabeth's true son is B. Kaghan, the bold fiancee of Lucasta, and that Colby Simpkins, whom both Sir Claude and Lady Elizabeth claim, is in truth Mrs. Guzzard's own son.

Beneath these superficial conflicts of the identity of children lies the deeper problem of individual identities. It

⁵Poetry and Plays, p. 228.

⁶Plays of T. S. Eliot, p. 178.

is a problem involving almost every character. Russell Kirk speaks to this point:

Everyone in this play (except, possibly, old Egger-son, the retiring clerk with his wife and garden and simple virtues) is haunted by loneliness and by regret for talents frustrated.⁷

The lives of principal characters clearly illustrate this. Sir Claude, for example, has led a life of hypocritical deception. He concealed his illegitimate son from his wife, denied his great artistic interest in pottery, and feigned his interest in finance. He lived with his inner and outer life in conflict, doing what he felt he should do rather than what he wanted to do. Instead of following his artistic longings and becoming a "second-rate" potter, he chose to protect the family name and become a financier, enduring the frustration that inevitably came from his thwarted artistic ambitions. Lady Elizabeth, also, lives with deception. She is able to construct fantasies so real that she truly believes them. When she decides she likes Colby, for example, she persuades herself that she even interveived him and recommended him to Sir Claude. Sir Claude tells Colby:

Why, it wouldn't surprise me if she came to believe
That you are really her son, instead of being mine
She has always lived in a world of make-believe.⁸

Colby is also tortured by internal conflicts. He relinquishes his ideals to become a confidential clerk to Sir Claude.

⁷Eliot and His Age, p. 371.

⁸T. S. Eliot, The Confidential Clerk (New York: Harcourt, Brace and Company, 1954), p. 43. All future citations from this play will be from this source. Pages only can be given because the lines are not numbered.

Like his supposed father, the younger Colby denied artistic interests--this time in music--to devote himself to the world of finance. He knows he has a brilliant future, and he tries to appreciate the opportunity, but he still finds the life unfulfilling. Colby tells Sir Claude:

I'm not at all sure that I like the other person
That I feel myself becoming--though he fascinates me.
And yet from time to time, when I least expect it,
When my mind is cleared and empty, walking in the street
Or waking in the night, then the former person,
The person that I used to be, returns to take possession:
And I am again the disappointed organist,
And for a moment the thing I cannot do,
The art that I could never excel in,
Seems the one thing worth doing, the one thing
That I want to do. (p. 45)

Sir Claude is sympathetic. He replies:

I understand what you are saying
Much better than you think. It's my own experience
That you are repeating. (p. 46)

But the only consolation Sir Claude will offer Colby is the weak hope that time will make the inner conflicts more endurable:

The life changed me, as it is changing you:
It begins as a kind of make believe
And the make-believing makes it real. (p. 47)

These words, however, are themselves part of Sir Claude's self-deception. Just as time did not ease or reconcile his inner personality to his outer personality, it cannot be expected to resolve Colby's conflict.

The only happy person in the play is the only character that is true to himself--Eggerson, the trusted, retiring, confidential clerk that Colby is replacing. While all the other characters try to change Colby into what they want him

to be, the simple Eggerson is the only one to see that Colby's life must follow the desires of Colby's heart. Eggerson's life stands out as the only one with a unity between his career and his ambitions; he is at peace with himself, and he wishes that for others. At the end of the play Mrs. Guzzard reveals that Colby's father is not Sir Claude but rather Herbert Guzzard, a "dead obscure man" who was "a disappointed musician" (p. 148). Colby is suddenly released from the obligation to model his life on Sir Claude's career and he is ecstatic. He states that he wanted to be the son of "an ordinary man/whose life I could in some way perpetuate" (p. 147). Colby accepts a position as an organist in a church in Joshua Park, where Eggerson, who resides close by, will be able to encourage and guide him.

The Confidential Clerk is based on the Ion of Euripides, a story of a misplaced child and of the conflicts between the parents who claimed him. In the play, Ion is the semi-divine son of the godly Apollo and of Creusa, an earthly Athenian princess. In Euripides' play, the plot stems from a situation that takes place years later, when the childless marriage of Creusa and Xuthus motivates the couple to journey to a temple to ask for aid. The plot unwinds through complications involving jealousy and mistaken identities until, in the end, Creusa learns that Ion is her son by Apollo. Ion is finally accepted by Xuthus as a son and claims his birthright of the kingdom of Athens.

Like Shakespeare in The Comedy of Errors, Eliot creates

two sons of unknown parentage, although Colby clearly represents Ion. Eliot further complicates the Greek prototype by inventing the illegitimate daughter Lucasta. The chorus, very prominent and important in the plot of the Greek play, is completely forsaken in The Confidential Clerk. Although individual characters act in concert in The Cocktail Party to form a type of chorus, in this play that modification is no longer sustained; there is nothing even remotely to suggest a chorus. It is Mrs. Guzzard, like Pallas Athene in Ion, who acts as the Deus Ex Machina of the play and effects its denouement.

Because Eliot reduces the level of poetry in the play (and thus the level of communication) as well as foregoes the unifying Greek motifs, the importance of symbols is increased. The recurring symbols of the garden that pervades the play is significant. Throughout the other plays and poems, the rose garden symbolizes spiritual fulfillment primarily with sexual fulfillment as a muted support. In The Confidential Clerk Eliot alters the symbol to a vegetable garden and alters its meaning also; the vegetable garden symbolizes the identity at peace with itself. Uniting the play because it is common to all characters, the development of this symbol is a beautiful testimony to Eliot's artistry. The degree to which each character has recognized his inner personality in his outer life is literally represented by his garden. Eggerson, for example, has a large and productive garden, yielding "marrows, or beetroot, or peas . . . for

Mrs. Eggerson" (p. 64), as well as much satisfaction for Eggerson, who cultivates it tenderly. Colby understands that Eggerson's garden is prolific because it represents the harmony in Eggerson's life. Colby tells Lucasta:

What I mean is, my garden's no less unreal to me
Than the world outside it. If you have two lives
Which have nothing whatever to do with each other--
Well, they're both unreal. But for Eggerson
His garden is part of one single world. (p. 64)

In contrast to Eggerson, Lucasta has no garden at all. At this point in the play she has not come to terms with her illegitimacy or with her love for B. Kaghan. She thus states:

No, my garden is . . . a dirty public square
In a shabby part of London--like the one where I lived
For a time, with my mother. I've no garden.
I hardly feel that I'm even a person. (p. 63)

Colby knows better though; he has faith in Lucasta's future. He reassures her:

You're very much a person.
I'm sure that there is a garden somewhere for you--
For anyone who wants one as much as you do. (p. 63)

And in the end, when Lucasta integrates the discrepancy between her inner desires and outer life--coming to terms with her illegitimacy and announcing her engagement to B. Kaghan it is obvious that her garden will soon be fruitful. Colby's garden, in the beginning of the play, is a lonely, secretive one where he can hear a "music that no one else can hear" (p. 63). But Colby envies Eggerson for his productive garden. His own barren retreat is repugnant. He knows it might be bearable if love could bridge the gap between his inner and

outer life. He states:

If I were religious, God would walk in my garden
And that would make the world outside it real
And acceptable, I think. (p. 65)

Colby's reference to the spiritual realm in these lines is revealing. When Colby is finally told that Sir Claude is not his father and is thus freed from the obligation to enter the world of finance, the play strongly hints that Colby will then come to know God. In this vein, Leon Unger points out that "There may be a deliberate significance" in the name of Joshua Park--"for Joshua--Yehoshua--is the Hebrew of which the Hellenized form is Jesus. Hence Jesus Park: God in the Garden."⁹ Taking this a step further than Unger did, it might be also noted that the translation of the Hebrew word for garden (gan) is usually rendered in Greek by the word paradeises, meaning "park" or "pleasure ground." Therefore when Colby takes the position of church organist, agreeing to live in a spare room at Eggerson's home, Joshua Park becomes a garden of God for Colby. This is given substantial credibility when Eggerson says:

We worked together every day, you know,
For quite a little time, and I've watched you
pretty closely.
Mr. Simpkins! You'll be thinking of reading for
orders.
And you'll still have your music. Why, Mr.
Simpkins,
Joshua Park may only be a stepping-stone
To a precentorship! And a cancanry! (p. 156)

Colby's reply does not negate this suggestion: "We'll cross

⁹Moments and Patterns, p. 138.

that bridge when we come to it, Eggers" (p. 156). And there is no doubt that one day Colby's garden will rival Eggerson's.

Closely related to the use of the garden symbol is another relevant point often ignored by critics. Central to The Confidential Clerk is Colby's desire to follow in the footsteps of Sir Claude, the man he supposes to be his real father. The hints at the end of the play about Colby reading for orders show that, as in the drama by Euripides, Eliot's play is not only about earthly fathers and sons but about heavenly fathers and sons as well. Surely it can be no accident that Sir Claude's avocation is the production of pottery. He is a creator in clay, an earthly potter in contrast to God, the heavenly potter.¹⁰ Sir Claude was a substitute father to Colby for a time, but he also pictured the Heavenly Father Colby will meet after he moves to Joshua Park.

The loneliness and alienation intensely present in the earlier plays is considerably dissipated in The Confidential Clerk. Leon Unger correctly notes that "If most of Eliot's work has been an expression of alienation from the world, the last two plays show that the lonely pilgrimage has eventually turned him back toward it."¹¹ But whereas the alienation in later plays has been reduced, it still demands consideration.

¹⁰This is easily supported with scriptural references. For example, Isaiah 64:8 reads: "But now, O LORD, thou art our father; we are the clay, and thou our potter; and we all are the work of thy hand." Also note Jeremiah 18:6: "O house of Israel, cannot I do with you as this potter? saith the LORD. Behold, as the clay is in the potter's hand, so are ye in mine hand, O house of Israel." In The Holy Bible, King James Version.

¹¹Moments and Patterns, p. 134.

The sense of isolation is strong in a personality whose inner and outer life have nothing in common. The face such a character presents to the world is false; no one can know his true self. Sir Claude, for example, can say to Eggerson, "You don't know me" (p. 19) even though Eggerson has served him for decades. Lucasta shows the same to be true of Colby. She attacks his isolation:

Why don't you shut yourself up in that garden
Where you like to be alone with yourself? (p. 73)

But Lucasta herself also knows the sense of estrangement that pervades any individual whose inner life is secretive. She intuitively perceives that she must acknowledge her love for B. Kahgan in her outer life; though momentarily attracted to Colby, she realizes that he cannot help her. She revealingly states:

Just when you are on the point of release
From loneliness, then loneliness swoops down upon you;
When you think you're getting out you're getting
 further in,
And you know at last that there's no escape. (p. 73)

The foregoing degrees of isolation, however, never reach the heights that isolation reaches in previous plays. The Confidential Clerk is permeated by the optimistic view that the isolation can ultimately be dealt with. This is clearly shown by taking some important lines from The Cocktail Party and The Confidential Clerk and contrasting them. In The Cocktail Party, a marriage is healed physically, but an emotional and intellectual gap clearly remains. Reilly explains what married life within the cocktail party set, at best,

involves:

Two people who know they do not understand each other
Breeding children whom they do not understand
And who will never understand them. (p. 140)

In The Confidential Clerk, however, a more optimistic picture is presented. Lady Elizabeth says to her husband:

I suppose that's true of you and me, Claude.
Between not knowing what other people want of one,
And not knowing what one should ask of other people,
One does make mistakes! But I mean to do better.
Claude, we've got to try to understand our children.
(p. 158)

Thus, in The Cocktail Party parents can "never understand" children, but in The Confidential Clerk, parents can "try to understand" children. Even B. Kahgan, soon to be a son by his approaching marriage to Lucasta, wishes to make an effort towards understanding. He tells Lucasta's parents:

And we should like to understand you . . .
I mean, I'm including both of you,
Claude . . . and Aunt Elizabeth. (p. 158)

These words are not merely shallow wishes either. There is concrete evidence that understanding between characters in this play can be achieved because they are learning to communicate. Lady Elizabeth tells her husband:

It's very strange, Claude, but this is the first time
I have talked to you, without feeling very stupid.
You always made me feel that I wasn't worth talking to.
(p. 108)

It is obvious that Lady Elizabeth is learning to communicate. And it is also obvious that Sir Claude is learning to listen. The communication will result in understanding, and the originally lonely individuals in The Confidential Clerk will effectively learn to move towards each other. Whereas Sweeney

found words inadequate for any communication, Sir Claude and Lady Elizabeth and their children find words capable of conveying important meanings. In The Confidential Clerk a family thus emerges in the real sense of the word--not just on the level of blood relationships and the location of "mis-laid" children--but on the level of communication and love.

Besides being more realistic and less indebted to a Greek prototype than previous plays, The Confidential Clerk is the first play in which the entire cast is composed of undistinctive, commonplace characters. It is a play about everyday people working out their salvations. Instead of the Furies or the Guardians or the cook-doctor Sir Henry, this play has the humble Eggerson, a common man, with a wife, a garden, and a non-descript job. Unger writes that "It is a mild irony of the play that it is Eggerson . . . who is the humble hero . . . for Eggerson is one of the les petites gens, a commonplace Christian, both ordinary and extraordinary at once."¹² Colby is similarly unspectacular. He has none of the heroic attributes of Thomas, Harry, or even Celia; he is a simple man with a need to be himself and to create music. Whether or not he succeeds as an organist at Joshua Park is not even important; he will succeed as a man. The remainder of the cast of The Confidential Clerk also find fulfillment in ordinary spheres: Lady Elizabeth and her husband achieve communication, and Lucasta and B. Kahgan become engaged. In this play, therefore,

¹²Moments and Patterns, p. 138.

the spotlight is on everyday people in the everyday world. Howarth sums this up aptly when he writes that "in The Confidential Clerk, every character emerges with his essential dignity discovered."¹³ It is an important step for Eliot; he has traveled a long way from the early plays.

A second notable feature of The Confidential Clerk is that it places a new emphasis on the value of family relationships. The closest Eliot previously came to sanctioning family relationships was in The Cocktail Party when the Chamberlaynes begin living with each other again. In The Confidential Clerk, however, Eliot goes much farther. This play includes many positive references to the relationship of Eggerston and his wife. The play ends with Sir Claude and his wife resolving to not only play the roles of husband and wife but to try to understand each other and to communicate with each other. Also, whereas the Chamberlaynes remain childless, this play ends with the discovery of real children, children that are immediately drawn into a family circle. The play also ends with the declaration of love between Lucasta and B. Kahgan and the promise of their forthcoming marriage. Previously Eliot emphasized only spiritual relationships as a solution for isolation; he now places great value on family relationships. Kirk speaks to this point when he notes that "this is a play that touches movingly upon the sources of

¹³Figures Behind, p. 305.

longing and the need for enduring love."¹⁴ But where does Eliot go from here? The last chapter will show that his dramatic vision comes to rest within a fully-developed family love. For if The Family Reunion is about the disintegration of family members that could not understand each other and if The Confidential Clerk is about the birth of family members that are attempting to understand each other, The Elder Statesman is about the achievement of a family that succeeds in understanding.

¹⁴Moral Imagination, p. 373.

CHAPTER VI

THE ELDER STATESMAN

In a letter to Browne, Eliot writes: "Harry's career needs to be completed by an Orestes or an Oedipus at Colonus."¹ It was in his last play, begun in 1954 and completed in 1958, that Eliot finally made good this intention. The Elder Statesman, which is based on the situation Sophocles outlined in Oedipus at Colonus, is Eliot's final statement on the enduring theme of spiritual quest and of the healing power of human love.

The hero of Sophocles' play is Oedipus Rex, the Greek figure whose sins of patricide and incest have made him as famous with twentieth-century psychologists as with literary scholars. In Oedipus at Colonus, the aged, blind king returns to the sacred grove of the Eumenides at Colonus to die, on the arm of his faithful daughter Antigone. Since an oracle declared that Thebes would prosper if Oedipus were to die there, his son Creon comes to persuade his father to journey to Thebes. Oedipus resists Creon's urgings. He further resists the pressures of another son, Polynices, who, interested

¹Francis O. Matthiessen, The Achievement of T. S. Eliot: An Essay on the Nature of Poetry (New York: The Oxford University Press, 1958), pp. 167-168.

only in revenge and material gain, asks for a blessing on his war against Thebes. When a clap of thunder announces the hour of his death, Oedipus retires to the sacred grove to die.

The parallels with the Greek play and Eliot's The Elder Statesman are obvious on the level of setting and situation. Lord Claverton, said to be seriously ill by his doctor, retires to a nursing home called Bagley Court on the arm of his faithful daughter Monica. There he is visited by his son Michael, who, like Polynices, is an outcast in the spiritual world, concerned only with worldly power and material wealth. In the end of the play, Lord Claverton--like Oedipus--dies peacefully. Although many critics offer labored accounts of further resemblances to the Greek prototype, it is here that the parallel ends. Eliot explained this clearly himself in an interview with Donald Hall for the Paris Review:

The play in the background is Oedipus at Colonus. But I wouldn't like to refer to my Greek originals as models. I have always regarded them more as points of departure. . . . I have tried to take the Greek myth as a sort of springboard, you see. After all, what one gets essential and permanent, I think, in the old plays, is a situation.²

Although the end results of both plays are the same, i.e., a peaceful death, the means to the end are vastly different. Browne supports this point when he states, "However many correspondences there are, and however much Eliot has been 'sparked off' by the Greek masterpiece, the intentions of the

²"The Art of Poetry, I: T. S. Eliot," n. v. (Spring-Summer, 1959), p. 61.

two are totally different.*] And this is true because the basic difference is one of theme. Eliot did not simply recast a Greek play; he wrote an original Christian play.

When Oedipus goes to Colonus, he is autonomous and whole, a man at peace with himself. Lord Claverton, however, seeks the environment at Bagley Court out of need. His medical doctor (in reality a cook-doctor in the tradition of Sir Henry Harcourt-Reilly) sends Lord Claverton to the rest home for a "cure."⁴ This cure ultimately proves to be a spiritual one. Lord Claverton is haunted by guilt stemming from errors he committed when he was a young man, errors he concealed in his public life and never confessed to his family. The guilt festers to the point of eruption when two people out of his past appear on the stage--Fred Culverwell, alias Frederico Gomez, and Mrs. Carhill, alias Mazie Montjoy. Frederico Gomez causes Claverton to recall the time when he was driving a car with Gomez as a passenger and ran over the already dead body of a man in the road. Mrs. Carhill, herself a patient at the rest home, represents another youthful indiscretion. Young Claverton was once romantically involved with her. When the affair turned sour, his father "bought him off" to avoid a breach of promise suit. The appearance of these two people out of Lord Claverton's past is thus significant not so much for the errors they represent but because they symbolize the

³Making of Plays, p. 311.

⁴This purpose was highlighted in the original title of this play: The Rest Cure.

horrible deception that has characterized Lord Claverton's life. The two individuals present no real threat themselves. Helen Gardner notes that the people "have not, in one sense, been ruined by him at all. They therefore cannot be bought off. And the things that they know about him are not seriously discreditable."⁵ They reappear not to call attention to Lord Claverton's youthful sins⁶ but rather to point out the effect that the errors have had upon the rest of his life. When Lord Claverton goes to the rest home, therefore, he is burdened with guilt from his lifelong deception. Unlike Oedipus, who sought redemption immediately after his accidental errors were exposed, Lord Claverton has hidden his guilt for most of his life. The most significant purgation of his life still lies before him. Oedipus went to the sacred grove at peace with himself; when Lord Claverton goes he is very ill spiritually. Thus, whereas the plays are similar in setting, they are vastly different in theme. Oedipus at Colonus is about the death of a distinguished, autonomous man, but The Elder Statesman is about a man who has yet to come to terms with himself.

⁵The Comedies of T. S. Eliot," in T. S. Eliot: The Man and His Work, ed. by Allen Tate (New York: Delacorte Press, 1966), p. 179.

⁶The true definition of sin (of the Hebrew hhat ta 'th or the Greek hamartane) is "to miss," meaning literally to miss the mark of perfection. It is in this sense that Claverton has really sinned. By concealing his indiscretions he was prevented from reaching the perfection in his personal life that can only exist for a person who is true to his inner self.

The meanings of The Elder Statesman cannot be fully appreciated without giving attention to an event in Eliot's private life which greatly shaped the writing of this play. Eliot himself revealed its importance in a letter to William Turner Levy:

I have managed to finish off the first draft of the play on which I have been working--its future is still uncertain, and I never yield to the persuasion to be sure that a play of mine is to be produced, until the curtain goes up on the first act. I can only say that it is a very different play (and I believe a better one) for so much of it having been written during this year, than it would have been if I had finished it before our marriage.⁷

The marriage Eliot referred to occurred in January, 1957, when ten years after the death of his first wife, he married his private secretary, Valerie Fletcher.⁸ He was 68; she was 30. By coincidence, the marriage took place in the same church in which Jules LaForgue, the Parisian poet who influenced Eliot's youth, was married earlier. This coincidence pleased Eliot greatly.⁹

Just as there can be no doubt that the tragedy of Eliot's unhappy first marriage and his wife's illness influenced his poetry and early dramatic works, there can also be no doubt that the happiness his second marriage brought to his life

⁷Affectionately, T. S. Eliot, p. 100.

⁸The first marriage was notably unhappy. The illness of his first wife, Vivienne Haigh Haigh-Wood, progressed until she had to be committed to an asylum. She remained there until her death in January, 1947.

⁹Robert Sencourt, T. S. Eliot: A Memoir (New York: Dodd, Mead, and Company, 1971), p. 216.

equally framed his final literary testimony in The Elder Statesman. The marriage, according to E. Martin Browne, "brought him a happiness which he had never experienced and found almost unbelievable."¹⁰ Browne explains how it affected the play:

His new-found happiness was already reflecting itself in the play. The relationship between Charles and Monica had hardly been defined; their only scene in The Rest Cure play's original title had concerned itself solely with Claverton. Now they were to have a series of scenes in the first and last acts, in which their love for each other was to be dramatized.¹¹

When the play was completed and ready to be published by Faber and Faber, Eliot dedicated it to his wife with this prefatory poem:

TO MY WIFE

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 . . .
Who think the same thoughts without need of speech
And babble the same speech without need of meaning:

To you I dedicate this book, to return as best I can
With words a little part of what you have given me.
The words mean what they say, but some have a further
 meaning
For you and me only.¹²

It was love, therefore, experienced on a real and personal level in his own life, that finally penetrated the vision of Prufrock

¹⁰Making of Plays, pp. 316-317.

¹¹Ibid., p. 317.

¹²The Elder Statesman (New York: Farrar, Straus and Cudahy, 1959), p. 5. All future citations from this play will be from this source. Pages only can be given since lines are not numbered.

and Sweeney. Oedipus' final utterance to his daughters concerned love:

One word
Makes all these difficulties disappear:
That word is love.¹³

So too the same universal motif spanned the centuries to shape the meanings of The Elder Statesman. Of this joyful marriage Russell Kirk comments: "And now he had attained the crown of life: he having meditated long on love, love had been given to him."¹⁴ Noting that Eliot's final use of the rose-garden symbol occurs in this play, Kirk adds: "at last, someone walked with him."¹⁵

The isolation present in this last play is clearly revealed by a consideration of Lord Claverton. The loneliness Lord Claverton first experiences is due to the let-down of activity that has naturally followed his retirement. After a full life of a career in public service, and after the customary fanfare that accompanies the retirement of a distinguished person, his life suddenly seems empty. He represents his daily existence as an act of "contemplating nothingness" (p. 23). In a vivid description, he defines the prospect of a future that seems to offer nothing:

I've not the slightest longing for the life I've left--
Only the fear of emptiness before me
.
A fear of the vacuum, and no desire to fill it.

¹³Sophocles, Oedipus at Colonus: An English Version by Robert Fitzgerald (New York: Harcourt, Brace and Co., 1941), p. 130.

¹⁴Moral Imagination, p. 412.

¹⁵Ibid.

It's just like sitting in an empty waiting room
 In a railway station on a branch line,
 After the last train, after all the other passengers
 Have left, and the booking office is closed
 And the porters have gone. What am I waiting for
 In a cold and empty room before an empty grate?
 For no one. For nothing. (p. 24)

Lord Claverton's loneliness takes on another quality when people from his past appear. Even more penetrating than the loneliness of retirement is the loneliness of self-estrangement. The first character to present himself is Gomez, a man who was forced to hide his identity behind a false name and make his residence in a foreign country. Gomez speaks of his own feelings of alienation:

Oh God, Dick, you don't know what it's like
 To be so cut off! Homesickness!
 Homesickness is a sickly word.
 You don't understand such isolation. (p. 36)

But Lord Claverton does understand what Gomez means by isolation. His reply, "I've always been alone" (p. 36), encompasses the entire scope of his life. Despite his public career, he too was estranged from his true identity. To conceal his youthful crimes he took an alias like Gomez. Gomez notes this:

You've changed your name too since I saw you.
 When we were at Oxford, you were plain Dick Perry.
 Then, when you married, you took up your wife's name
 And finally became Mr. Richard Claverton-Ferry
 And finally, Lord Claverton. (pp. 29-30)

At this point, Lord Claverton stands alone against the world. The diversion that his career temporarily afforded has been stripped away by his retirement. Not even his family can offer comfort; he is a stranger in their midst. Even though,

like Oedipus, he goes to his rest cure on the arm of his devoted daughter, Monica, he goes very much alone. No one knows him at all. The gap between the pretence and the reality seems immense:

I've spent my life in trying to forget myself,
 In trying to identify myself with the part
 I had chosen to play. And the longer we pretend
 The harder it becomes to drop the pretence,
 Walk off the stage, change into our own clothes
 And speak as ourselves. (p. 102)

It takes a great deal of courage for Lord Claverton to finally try to bridge that gap and emerge from behind the facade that has hid his identity for so many years. He risks the love of his daughter and son to gain self-acceptance and relief from his utter isolation. In a moving scene, he finally tells Monica the truth about himself. Monica's response to her father's confession displays loving forgiveness. She also shows the immediate perception of the isolation that his lies created. She exclaims:

Poor Father! All your life! And no one to share it
 with!
 I never knew how lonely you were
 Or why you were so lonely. (p. 108)

Thus, in a realistic manner, without the need or intervention of Guardians or Furies, Lord Claverton heals the great fissure that has divided him into two people for most of his life. His loneliness ends when he comes to terms with himself and exposes his real personality to his family.

Death was a lifelong shadow that pursued Lord Claverton; he knew it would ultimately strip away the masks and disguises and expose his secrets to others. He feared death. Until his

confession to Monica, Prufrock's cry might have been Lord Claverton's: "I have seen the eternal Footman hold my coat, and snicker? And in short, I was afraid."¹⁶ But in the end, Lord Claverton is no longer afraid. Having resolved the discrepancy between his inner and outer life, between appearance and reality,¹⁷ Lord Claverton has no fear of the Footman.

In the last of the Four Quartets, "Little Gidding," Eliot explored the reconciliation of a personality to his existence as death nears:

Let me disclose the gifts reserved for age
To set a crown upon your lifetime's effort.

According to the poet, there are three gifts. The last is:

And last, the rending pain of re-enactment
Of all that you have done, and been: the shame
Of motives late revealed, and the awareness
Of things ill done and done to others' harm
.....
From wrong to wrong the exasperated spirit
Proceeds, unless restored by the refining fire,
Where you must move in measure, like a dancer.¹⁸

These lines are a capsule of the play's theme--which involves a man finally confessing things "ill done." It is just before Lord Claverton dies that Dick Ferry is reborn. The epitaph on Eliot's own gravestone would be just as applicable to the gravestone of The Elder Statesman: "In my end is my beginning."

In contrast to the intense isolation Lord Claverton experiences in The Elder Statesman, love, the fruitage of the

¹⁶Eliot, Complete Poems and Plays, p. 6.

¹⁷The most notable work of F. H. Bradley is entitled Appearance and Reality. His influence is certainly evident in this play.

¹⁸Complete Poems and Plays, pp. 141-142.

reconciled spirit, emerges as the integrating life force. Eliot deals with love directly in this play; he explores it, confesses it, and gives it a great deal of weight. This can be seen, first of all, in Monica's fresh and youthful love for her father. Monica's love issues forth without any qualifications or any demands. After Lord Claverton confesses his past to her, she says simply:

It's the real you I love, the man you are,
Not the man I thought you were. (p. 128)

Monica knows, perhaps intuitively, that love for another has an expanding effect. She later tells Lord Claverton:

Oh Father, I've always loved you
But I love you more since I have come to know you
Here at Bagley Court. And I love you the more
Because I love Charles. (p. 128)

Her view of love reflects her honest, integrated personality. The summit of her expression of this feeling is reached in the following speech on family love--words which Eliot could at last write with understanding:

Father! You know that I would give my life for you.
Oh how silly that phrase sounds! But there's no
vocabulary,
For love within a family, love that's lived in
But not looked at, love within the light of which
All else is seen, the love within which
All other love finds speech.
This love is silent. (p. 88)

In contrast to Monica's immediate and total commitment to love, Lord Claverton's view of love slowly emerges as the play progresses. At first he misunderstands love--believing that the concealment of the truth is in the best interests of his family. After he accepts himself and confesses his

deceptions, his view of love grows until it encompasses all the beings his life touched. He reflects, for example, on his earlier abandonment of Mazie:¹⁹

For loving she had--self-centered and foolish--
 But we should respect love always when we meet it;
 Even when it's vain and selfish, we must not abuse it.
 This is where I failed. And the memory frets me.
 (p. 107)

In the end, the view of love which Lord Claverton represents is closely akin to that presented in The Dry Salvages where

Eliot quotes from the Baghavad-Gita:

You can receive this: 'on whatever sphere of being
 The mind of a man may be intent
 At the time of death'--that is the one action
 (and the time of death is every moment)
 Which shall fructify in the lives of others:
 And do not think of the fruit of action.
 Fare forward.²⁰

If Lord Claverton had considered every moment of his life as the moment of his death, he would have moved towards honesty much sooner. But he was not a saint like Thomas; he was human. He needed the appearance of those in the past to motivate him towards finding the fruits that are the by-product of a soul seeking reconciliation with the heart. But in the end of the play, Lord Claverton does "Fare forward" in love. Whereas he earlier selfishly frustrated Monica and Charles' relationship, he now magnanimously gives her to Charles and gives their love his blessing:

And I am happy Monica that you have found a man
 Whom you can love for the man he really is. (p. 128)

¹⁹The song that Mazie claims to have made her reputation is, significantly, "It's Not Too Late For You To Love Me!" (p. 68).

²⁰Complete Poems and Plays, p. 134.

He then tells Charles:

I leave Monica to you. Look after her, Charles.
Now and always. (p. 129)

Lord Claverton's last words picture the thoughts "which shall fructify in the lives of others" and, like the last words of Oedipus, are words of love:

It is worth dying, to find out what life is.
And I love you, my daughter, the more truly for knowing
That there is someone you love more than your father--
That you love and are loved. (p. 129)

Monica's inheritance is thus a legacy of love.

The Elder Statesman has not been acclaimed by drama critics. It is, in general, considered to be a lesser Eliot drama. Katherine Worth writes that "Few would be found, of course, to place the last plays, The Confidential Clerk and The Elder Statesman, at the summit of his achievement."²¹ In addition, Carole Smith notes: "In giving up the intellectual appeal of the early plays, and by substituting none of the compelling effects of naturalism, Eliot has lost the best of both theatres."²² Finally, Helen Gardner simply states: "I cannot believe it will have a future on the stage."²³ But despite its dim future in the commercial theatre, The Elder Statesman still deserves the interest of a student of Eliot's drama for the philosophical statement it makes about life and love.

²¹"Eliot and the Living Theatre," in Eliot in Perspective: A Symposium, ed. by Graham Martin (Great Britain: Macmillan and Co., 1970), p. 149.

²²Dramatic Theory and Practice, p. 238.

²³Comedies of T. S. Eliot, p. 180.

The theme of The Elder Statesman represents the culmination of Eliot's journey across the wasteland. Its affirmation of the value of human beings and of human love stands as a rebuttal to those who would pigeonhole Eliot as a poet of complete alienation. Unlike the less convincing relationship of Lucasta and B. Kahgan (the lovers in The Confidential Clerk) the romantic relationship of Monica and Charles in The Elder Statesman is fully developed. It passes through courtship, teasing, and flirting to the final serious and important declarations of love. The play emerges as a private testament to the reality of the joyous marriage which brought spring to Eliot in the fall of his years. The love between a parent and child also receives candid development and total affirmation. Love, treated on all levels, is thus presented as the healer which soothes the pain of living. Although Dick Ferry knows that he must ultimately "Fare forward" alone, he also knows that the journey can be made easier by the love of his family. He finds salvation in the end, not by rejecting family life and earthly values, but by seeking them.

The Elder Statesman is a play that achieves the ultimate harmony of love without artificial structures. Gone are the chorus, the Deus Ex Machina, and the mystic rituals. This last play is more realistic than any of the others. What Jones says is essentially true:

The tendency in the course of the plays for the exceptional person to be pushed further and further from the centre of the picture here reaches

its logical conclusion. . . . Everyman has taken
the centre of the stage.²⁴

This is a play about everyday people with everyday problems; it is a play about a world permeated with the fragrance of real roses from real rose gardens. Eliot has moved away from the "still point" experiences out of time. He has also retreated from the view that the spiritual experience is the only means to human fulfillment. The Elder Statesman is based in temporal reality and is populated by les petites gens. But Eliot does not negate the spiritual path entirely. Human and divine love are not opposites. Different people must choose different paths--but the soul who can come to terms with both knows that they will enhance each other in the final vision.

²⁴Plays, pp. 192-194.

CHAPTER VII

SUMMARY AND CONCLUSION

Four centuries ago, Blaise Pascal, the French philosopher and mathematician, made the following assertion: "Our nature is one of movement; to be completely still is to be dead."¹ Pascal's statement very aptly summarizes the literary career of T. S. Eliot. The artistic process, by definition, embodies movement. As the artist tests his convictions and view in his creative medium, his position is necessarily reshaped and redefined through the years. Most of Eliot's poems were poems of his youth. His criticism explored his artistic values and those of other writers. But the movement that Eliot's world view undergoes (and the intellectual convictions which represent its final resting place) is discernible in the study of his dramatic works.

Only by a consideration of the total body of Eliot's dramas can it be shown that the alienation and isolation in the early poems and plays progresses through intermediate alternatives in the middle plays until it is finally abandoned for the affirmation of human relationships in the final plays. By setting the plays alongside each other, the contrast is

¹Arnold Goldman, The Joyce Paradox: Form and Freedom In His Fiction (Wisconsin: Northwestern University Press, 1966), p. 1.

immediately evident. Sweeney is completely isolated to the end of the first play. He cannot even communicate his feelings to others. Thomas, isolated by his saintliness, does not struggle against the alienation either; he, like Sweeney, has no ties with this world. Thomas comes from a physical exile to become a spiritual exile. Celia, in The Cocktail Party, resembles Thomas; she chooses to leave the society which contained her. And she leaves behind people who, though they technically move within society's boundaries, nonetheless pursue lives that will never meaningfully touch each other. They are people resigned to the bleak prospect of "making the best of a bad job."² These early plays are thus all dominated by their alienation and isolation. Harry, in the next play, is also much like Celia. In The Family Reunion he leaves his family unit despite serious consequences because he alone can come to terms with the Monchesney heritage of sin. He faces a solitary journey to redemption. Despite the earlier vague hints of Eliot's changing position on alienation (foreshadowed by the comments of the Women of Canterbury or by the reunion of Edward and Lavinia Chamberlayne), the real change occurs in the last two plays. In The Confidential Clerk, the unpretentious Colby Simpkins leaves one society--but he leaves it, not for martyrdom or a singular purgation, but for another society--a simple room at the Eggerson residence and a life of music in the church. And Colby leaves behind a family,

²The Cocktail Party, p. 126.

moreover, that has achieved partial understanding and has attempted communication. Finally, The Elder Statesman, Lord Claverton completes the journey initiated by Sweeney years earlier. Eliot's epigraph to the Sweeney fragments had used St. John of the Cross to state his original ideal: "Hence, the soul cannot be possessed of the divine union until it has divested itself of the love of created beings,"³ but this ideal is unrecognizable in the final play. Lord Claverton pursues a completely different path to spiritual fulfillment. Instead of deserting the temporal world for the spiritual realm, Lord Claverton plunges into the land of the living. Without the help of Furies or Guardians, he reestablishes the strong ties of parental and romantic love between family members. In contrast to the early plays, this final play is, as Leon Unger claims, "an affirmation of human relations, a drama of escape from isolation."⁴

The movement within the plays from the spiritual realm to the human realm parallels Eliot's dramatic progression towards realism. This is obvious, on one level, by the diminishing poetic effects of the later plays. Critics frequently refer to the lackluster poetry that characterizes The Confidential Clerk and The Elder Statesman yet few explain this as a natural consequence of the movement towards realism.

³Collected Poems, p. 111.

⁴Moments and Patterns, p. 15.

In the final view, Eliot created a stage dominated by Everyman--and the speech of the common man, the speech of family members, is prose rather than high poetry. The increasing realism is also reflected in a comparison of the dramatic use of the chorus. In Murder in the Cathedral, the chorus is composed of the nameless Women of Canterbury. In The Family Reunion and The Cocktail Party, an intermediate handling is achieved; the chorus in these plays is made up of a small group of identifiable characters, people with names and stage personalities. The role of the chorus lessens in these plays. In The Confidential Clerk the chorus is altogether gone, its function replaced by the consciences of everyday people. The dependence upon mystical devices is also important. No counterparts to the chants of the characters in The Family Reunion or the mystical speeches of Sir Henry Harcourt-Reilly can be found in the later plays. In the final dramas, the stage is dominated by human beings talking with each other, finding solutions to their problems from within their own resources and from within their temporal worlds.

Dramatic movement is shown, in addition, by a diminishing importance of character. The earlier dramas are dominated by a single spiritually-elect hero. Eliot at first embraces a single, saintly protagonist as the poetic spokesman for spirituality. The rest of the cast is typically stratified to contrast with this hero, dividing the characters of the early plays sharply into the spiritual haves and have nots. This view of characterization emerges as an English sense of class-

consciousness, an outlook reflected in English literature for the past three centuries. It is understandable that Eliot, given his Puritan background and upbringing, his royalist politics, and his classical, traditional views, would write dramas that echo class-consciousness. In the later plays, however, his view radically changes. Just as the Victorians found that the truth did not reside in their poet-gods, Eliot's plays also display a disenchantment with the singular hero. This disillusionment was prophetically forecast in these lines from "Little Gidding":

Last season's fruit is eaten
And the fulfed beast shall kick the empty pail
For last year's words belong to last year's language
And next year's words await another voice.⁵

The saintly dramatic heroes thus had to give up their voice to characters that were more human. In the end, a family dominates the stage: instead of one hero reacting only to God, Eliot presents humans interacting with each other.

As an artist who was deeply in touch with the tradition and literary heritage bequeathed by former ages, Eliot was surely aware of how the pendulum of history moves back and forth between poles, using one age as a springboard for the next. This larger universal movement in literature, especially in the humanities, is frequently microcosmically reflected in the individual artist. Eliot, as a critic concerned with an overview of one author's lifetime effort, excelled in the interpretation of the development of a single writer.

⁵Complete Poems and Plays, p. 141.

There can be no doubt that he was also reconciled to the process of movement and change which would inevitably touch his own work. As early as 1917, for example, during a discussion of Ezra Pound's writings, Eliot made this perceptive remark-- illustrating that he had prepared himself for the ineluctability of his own change as well as for the risks inherent in that movement:

When a poet alters or develops, many of his admirers are sure to drop off. Any poet, if he is to survive as a writer beyond his twenty-fifth year, must alter; he must seek new literary influences; he will have different emotions to express. This is disconcerting to the public which likes a poet to spin his whole work out of the feeling of his youth; which likes to be able to open a new volume of his poems with the assurance that they will be able to approach it exactly as they approached the preceeding.⁶

Later, when Eliot was fifty-two years old, he called further attention to his awareness of change in a memorial lecture on Yeats:

It is my experience that towards middle age a man has three choices; to stop writing altogether, to repeat himself with perhaps an increasing skill of virtuosity, or, by taking thought to adapt himself to middle age and find a different way of working. . . . In fact, very few poets have shown this capacity of adaptation to the years. It requires, indeed, an exceptional honesty and courage to face the change.⁷

Finally, nine years later, Eliot once more discussed his awareness of a writer's development. While reviewing the writings of Joyce, he made a plea for the critics to understand Joyce's internal development--a plea that is just as applicable to his

⁶Margolis, Intellectual Development, p. xii.

⁷Ibid., p. ix.

own writing:

Joyce's writings form a whole; we can neither reject the early work as stages, of no intrinsic interest, of his progress towards the latter, nor reject the later work as the outcome of decline. As with Shakespeare, his later work must be understood through the earlier, and the first through the last; it is the whole journey, not any one stage of it, that assures him his place among the great.⁸

The very plea that Eliot made on behalf of Joyce and other writers applies directly to his own works. This change and development, however, came to his own art slowly. It arrived late in his life, too late to even be acknowledged by some critics. The change is foreshadowed in his poetry by his recurring focus upon such words as pattern and cycle. Over and over lines such as these from "East Coker" explore his awareness of the concept of change:

The knowledge imposes a pattern, and falsifies
For the pattern is new in every moment
And every moment is a new and shocking
Valuation of all we have been.⁹

But even these poetic references to change are permeated by a mood of patient resignation. In the same tone, Eliot made the following reflective comment in an essay entitled "Second Thoughts About Humanism":

Rational assent may arrive late, intellectual conviction may come slowly, but they come inevitably without violence to honesty and nature. To put the sentiments in order is a later and immensely difficult task.¹⁰

⁹Complete Poems and Plays, p. 125.

¹⁰Selected Works, p. 453.

This "difficult task" of putting "the sentiments in order" was finally accomplished by Eliot in his mature years and the result is fully revealed in the whole of his dramatic writings.

The development in the themes of isolation and alienation in Eliot's drama must, ultimately, be seen as the natural progression of Christian thought. It must be remembered that Eliot's work as a dramatic artist is a testimony to the Christian vision. The Waste Land and "The Love Song of Alfred J. Prufrock" were produced before Eliot's public commitment to Christianity. Later poems, such as "Ash Wednesday," explored the emerging values on a theoretical level. In the Four Quartets and in the later dramas, however, Eliot applied the theoretical fruits of Christianity to the practical world. Sweeney, Becket, Harry and Celia represent the first step for the Christian, the striving upward that emerges as spiritual election and severs all ties with the real and tangible world. It is one way--perhaps the only way--for the intellectually gifted to approach the divine. In the later plays, however, the scene changes. Whereas Becket's first word in Murder in the Cathedral--"Peace"--was achieved through divorcing himself from the world by the act of martyrdom, Colby Simpkins and Lord Claverton make their peace totally in the world. Eliot's Christianity, in the final view, is not the exclusive domain of saints; Christ reached out to sinners too. Eliot's perception of the fertile field for Christian concepts expands to Everyman. And for the common man, religion is tangible and

real on the personal level--in the search for personal meanings and in the cultivation of personal integrity. Eliot's later protagonists demonstrate that one strives upward by turning inward, by seeking to conquer pride and hypocrisy and by cultivating and sharing truth and love. In the end, therefore, the spiritual vision merges with the earthly vision. Smith succinctly states Eliot's mature view of spirituality when he writes that in the end, Eliot "came to portray, not the awakened versus the unawakened, but instead the awakened leading the unawakened to a new perception of the meaning of life."¹¹

The significance of Eliot's Christianity to his dramatic themes in general, and the theme of isolation and alienation in particular, is further affirmed by his movement from tragedy to comedy. The tragic hero's singular flaw effects a denouement that is characterized by the waste of talent, skill, and life. The loss is irredeemable and irrevocable; whether a principle or a country is saved, compensation is never adequate for the loss. This is the tragedy. But as Eliot's own spirituality matured, he came to a more realistic point of view. Tragedy was, in the end, preempted by the Christian vision. Man was imperfect, mantled with original sin, and blemished with many faults. The tragic hero thus had to relinquish the stage to characters who, though far from being saints, were nonetheless trying to work out their

¹¹Complete Poems and Plays, p. 26.

"salvation with diligence." The comic protagonist is ultimately compensated by spiritual redemption. This promise of eternal salvation is always present in the Christian play. No matter how much pain and suffering darken the path of the protagonists on a Christian stage, there is always one light in the heavens to make the trials fruitful in the end.

A study of all of Eliot's dramas thus clearly reveals that his treatment of alienation and isolation undergoes significant change. Although the journey through the plays begins in a lonely wasteland where human love and human communication are clearly impossible, it comes to rest in a fully-developed Christian vision manifested by the strong affirmation of human interaction and human love. This unique movement in the plays must stand to contradict the customary image of Eliot as a prophet of doom; in the dramas he emerges as a poet of love. The dramatic progression of the theme of isolation is perhaps best summarized by Eliot himself in the lines which conclude "Burnt Norton":

The detail of the pattern is movement
 As in the figure of the ten stairs,
 Desire itself is movement
 Not in itself desirable;
 Love is itself unmoving
 Only the cause and end of movement.¹²

¹²Complete Poems and Plays, p. 122.

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