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## COMPARATIVE STUDY OF “COCKTAIL PARTY” T.S. ELIOT

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### INTRODUCTION

Eliot was no novice at the art of dramatic composition where he attempted *The Cocktail Party*, *Murder in the Cathedral* was Eliot first independent full-length drama, which was written for the Canterbury Festival of June 1935. This play was not meant for the competitive world of the theatre though it captivated audiences everywhere because of its highly successful fusion of theme and form. Religious and spiritual tones blend well with the liturgical pattern of the verse and the play on the whole established Eliot's fame as a writer of verse drama. Encouraged by this success Eliot attempted his second major verse-drama in 1939. *The Family Reunion* however was not a great success it lacked the peculiar advantages which Eliot enjoyed while writing *Murder in the Cathedral*. The theme of spiritual isolation leading to a spiritual quest appears in this play with the twentieth century as the background and modern Englishmen as the dramatic personal. The effort made by Eliot in making the audiences respond to the spiritual message of the play has not been successful. Perhaps realizing his failure Eliot remained inactive as far as dramatic composition was concerned till 1941 when *The Cocktail Party* appeared.

This play was a great success everywhere. Produced for the Edinburgh Festival, it was staged more profitably in New York and London in 1950. The play has many things in common with *The Family Reunion* and *Murder in the Cathedral*. There is the usual indebtedness to Greek drama both in theme and in plot structure, The Greek element in theme is carefully veiled but in plot-structure, the debt to the traditions of ritual drama is obvious.

In *Murder in the Cathedral* and in *The Family Reunion*, there is the element of murder or crime. But in *The Cocktail Party* crime is no longer the point of reference. The reason for this is that the world war coming in between the two plays had changed the public taste and Eliot in *The Cocktail Party* has tried something else. The play captures from the press and the national experience the intrigues that accompany breaking marriages, the appeal for help to the psychologist, and elements that appeal to the contemporary audience. The play is a versified drawing room comedy, the simplicity and humor of which conceal the deep seriousness and spiritual significance of the play. As in the other two plays martyrdom is the most important element of *The Cocktail Party*. But the martyr is neither a medieval saint nor a brooding young man, hampered by a mysterious sense of guilt, but a young woman whose character draws the sympathy and affection of the audience. Much of the charm the play depends upon the delineation of the character of Cordelia and the way in which a personal crisis drives her to make the choice leading to martyrdom.

Eliot has shown great skill and knowledge in exploiting 1949 interest of England and America in psycho-analysis and transactions in the consulting room. The figure of the psychiatrist familiar to the twentieth century audience is fused with that of the Shaman or the witch doctor and also that of the spiritual advisor. This multiple role makes Sir Henry Harcourt-Reilly of *The Cocktail Party* an intriguing and highly fascinating figure.

*The Cocktail Party* has in abundance, an element that is missing in *Murder in the Cathedral* and *The Family Reunion* namely the presence of the element of comedy accounts, among other things for the greater enthusiasm with which this play was received that was shown at the first performance of *The Family Reunion* In *The Cocktail Party* we find, Eliot has perfected his comic art. Comedy appears in diverse forms-in the diverting incidents and buffoonery of Alex and Julia and in their appearance and reappearance at particular moments. Comedy of a more subtle and refined type is present in the conversational and debating threads of the dialogue. As once crises has put it comedy is alive in the metrics of the dialogue this interfusion of comedy and tragedy, present in the crucifixion of Celia is indeed a remarkable achievement and one that called for delicate handling and a great deal of effective theatrical knowledge. *The Cocktail Party* is certainly the supreme result of Eliot's long work with and for the drama and its great popularity is not it has proved Eliot's genius as a playwright writing for the commercial theatre and it has also won the battle for verse drama. The verse of this play has made a great change in the popular attitude to drama and has made a reevaluation of verse as the medium of drama.

## THE COCKTAIL PARTY

"The play is concerned with salvation, not of an individual, but of a group and the elements of this salvation are the guardians Reilly, Alex and Julia". The main themes of all the Eliot's plays are present in *The Cocktail Party* i.e. the protagonist who passes through a spiritual purification to attain a vision of four-words, and remain isolated from others. It would not be irrelevant to quote Eliot's comment on Sweeney which is equally applicable to Celia.

"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..."

In *The Cocktail Party* we are not dealing with the saints but the mundane cocktail party & unlike earlier two plays, there is no explicit suggestion of supernatural. Instead beneath the superficial & frivolous social chatter the spiritual conflict & tension with which the characters are confronted, is more prominent for the playwright's main concern is the religious importance of self-immolation for the sake of others. Accordingly, the characters are grouped in an opposition between common place & racially vital people. As Eliot's post-war drama *The Cocktail Party* is indeed a fascinating experiment in the suitability of poetic drama to modern times in the religious interpretation of modern "Hence the *Cocktail Party* external modern comedy of manners, inwardly a play of spiritual conflict. It is sustained on levels of metaphysical debate and drawing room badinage-levels eternal and evanescent. Eliot brings to the play a new humanity & tolerance of attitude & therefore a lightness & gaiety in his approach to spiritual problems.

Eliot shows acceptance of humanity in his sympathetic treatment Edward Lavinia and he avoids clear cut division of human beings into saint and sinner or spiritually conscious & unconscious. So the basic theme of the play shows how ordinary life can be established on secular foundations & how they are benefited from a saint's sacrifice. While *Murder in the Cathedral* is a play about England's most famous saint, *The Cocktail Party* is concerned with the making of a new saint in the person of Celia. To achieve his aim Eliot has utilized ancient myths to point out the significance of a modern situation of a confessor priest. Though the playwright honestly substitutes a psychiatrist for a priest a religious element is too strong to overlook in the background & religion is translated off-stage. Though Eliot mostly excluded religious terminology, the virtues that the chamberlains are to practise & the martyr's death that Celia accepts constitute a spiritual discipline.

One of the mottos of Sweeney Agonists: "the soul cannot be possessed of the divine union until it has divested itself of love of created beings" is still the pattern, but to a chosen social mode with an emphasis on attachment. Again, in an interview Eliot expresses: For the Christian, he explains there is perpetual living in paradox. You must lose your life in order to save it. One has to be otherworldly and yet deeply responsible for the affairs of this world

With regard to the above concept, is pertinent to state the views of Norman Nicholson in *Man and Literature*: "Predominant themes in Eliot's later work is the relation of time to eternity, or the apprehension of y through time, especially in so far as this may be incarnation and similarly, in the Mass. This theme occurs in three forms firstly, the need for the purgation of the will; secondly, the need for the soul to divest itself of the love of created beings Thirdly, the aim to arrive at the experience of the Divine by the junction of images, be the Negative Way" Though this was published in 1944 before the last three plays-*The Cocktail Party*, *The Confidential Clerk*, & *The Elder Statesman*, all the three forms, as mentioned by Nicholson, are interrelated. The two Ways of life as the Christian mystics twofold ways of reaching God the Negative Way, as interpreted by Nicholson A method of arriving at truth a systematic rejection of the false by which the soul comes to be united with God by divesting itself of the love throated Beings, & the Affirmative Way by which it accepts all creatures as images of the Divine The concept of Affirmative & Negative Way of life helps Eliot to create a meaningful structure corresponding to different levels of understanding & sensibility in the audience. This also helps him to obtain a kind of doubleness in the action, as if it took place on two planes at once". Here we have two words--the secular & the spiritual - which Eliot named them the common routine & the way of illumination. Eliot's adoption of this two "Ways of life in drama, however, subjected to severe criticism Critics his essay "Wordsworth and the Rabbit attack Eliot's representation of the two ways exemplifies how we are drawn to the violence of extremity.

## SUMMARY

The play opens with a cocktail party in drawing room of London flat owned by Edward Chamberlain. Lavinia wife of Edward arranged a cock tail party but disappeared heart party began, leaving behind a note to her husband about her sudden going away to some place undisclosed. Edward tried to seal the party but was unable to contact the entire guest as a result floor of the guests arrive at the party and a stranger also comes to the cocktail party and later he is described as an unidentified guest.. The four guests are Julia, Shuttlethwait, Alexander MacColgie Gibbs, Peter Quilpe, and Celia Coplestone. The guests indulge in talks and there is a demand of a tale about Lady Klootz and the wedding cake, which is known to all, and Julia is requested to narrate the story but she is not interested in the story and rather teases Edward to explain the absence of his wife. Edward explains the absence of Lavinia but fails to convince the guests. Julia does not press him to confess the truth and she invites him to dinner at her house instead. She then leaves the flat along with other guests except Unidentified Guest.

The second act takes place in the consulting room of Sir Heary Harcourt Reilly after several weeks of the first act. Sir Henry the psychiatrist gives last minute instructions to his nurse story about some of the patients whom he is to see immediately. First to appear in his room is Alex who is not a patient but a person come to announce the arrival of Edward. Edward Chamberlyrne happens to be the first patient and is taken aback to see that Sir Henry Bacoort Reilly is none other than the Unidentified Guest of the cocktail party. He feels that a trap has been laid for him so in a fit of anger he wants to go away but Sir Henry consoles him and asks him to discuss his case. Edward realizes that it is better to discuss his problem than to run away as he has come on a professional visit. He complains that he possesses lack of confidence and therefore has ceased to believe in his own personality. He explains in clear words how Lavinia has ruined his life and therefore begs Reilly to send him to sanitorium where he could be alone.

Reilly knows only too well that Edward in describing his symptoms is concealing a lot so he takes the unusual step of introducing Edward to another patient of the same kind. Lavinia is brought in to face Edward in the form of second patient. Both of them protest against the unprofessional conduct of Sir Henry and they begin, gradually, to level charges against each other. The psychiatrist, inter verses and points out that Edward and Lavinia both have been telling lies to him-Edward by concealing his affair with Celia and Lavinia by concealing her love for Peter Quilpe, Lavinia's breakdown was the result of her discovery that Peter had suddenly fallen in love with Celia and Edward's breakdown was the outcome of the realization of emptiness of his relationship with Celia. These love-affairs according to Sir Henry

show that they are suited to each other and he points out that the best way open before them is to live together in peace. Edward and Lavinia are thus reconciled to their fate and readily follow the advice of Sir Henry.

## CONCLUSION

‘Self at the Crossroads’ has to make choices regarding the path to follow: All the protagonists of Eliot are confronted with choices. The choice lies between two kinds of actions choosing either the way of the Saint or the second best way of acceptance. A brief discussion of Eliot’s plays proves that surrender of the very self to the Highest God is a psychological necessity, a life necessity as well as a religious and spiritual necessity. There is therapeutic value of self-surrender. The characters in surrendering to God and co-operating with Him and His laws, align themselves with supreme power, love and wisdom by surrender. Their surrender to God helps them in setting up a close human relationship. Self keeps problems and issues from piling up and making them tensed and burdened. It is a continual catharsis. Self-surrender not only takes away loneliness, it takes away fear of death. Their self has been crucified with Christ: according to the verse “I am crucified with Christ (Gal 2:20). They become new persons with new resources, new direction, a new attitude, a new faith, not in themselves but in Him. They regain faith and see the “dead end” disappear from their pathway. They regain love for their fellow men and see joy in giving their lives in service to others. They regain love for God and watch the doubts and speculations vanish when they move from self to surrender. The Introduction is the first chapter which introduces and explains the title of the dissertation. It further deals with the life and works of T.S. Eliot and gives the scope of the thesis.

‘Sinner to Sainthood’ deals with Murder in the Cathedral. Cocktail party and Family reunion. Eliot dramatises the way of the Saint in these plays. Murder in the Cathedral revolves around Becket’s apprehending the truth that the true martyr is the one who has become the instrument of God, and who has lost his will in the will of God. It is a play about England’s most famous Saint. It is a heroic study of Martyrdom. What happens through him is important rather than what happens to him. The first part of the play depicts the inward conflict and the second the outward. Eliot has portrayed the most subtle and scrupulous self analysis which enables Becket to overcome the spiritual pride that lurks deep within his personality. His pride always feeds upon his own virtues, drawing sustenance from impartiality, from generosity, loathing power given by temporal devolution, and wishing subjection to God alone. After his return from France Becket confronts temptations which serve to revive the past. This confrontation with the Tempters crystallizes the self within Becket. Standing alone Becket launches on a moral quest which can be seen as ‘the spiritual conflict’. His sensitivity and sensibility to the ineffable truths lead him to understand the essence of true martyrdom which is the annihilation of his will and his yielding to the will of God. By doing it he attains perfect freedom. He yields to God’s mastering of the soul. In the beginning of the play The Family Reunion Harry is isolated from the rest of the family because of his sense of guilt. Mary helps him to recognize his guilt, and Agatha acts as the spiritual agent enabling him to accept the guilt and thereby attain a sense of liberation. Harry is the modern man who experiences a sense of loneliness, guilt and disgust. The play is built around his discovery of spiritual election. Harry’s search for identity is mainly his search for the real past. He returns to Wishwood to seek his real self, but he only meets his own deceptive self. This sense of not belonging and hence of having no significance and no security, makes Sfe inwardly disrupted and outwardly disruptive. Aunt Agatha suggests that he should divert himself from the call of the world and choose the way which is taken by those who seek to unite their wills with the will of God. She reiterates that the pursuit of austerity by self-denial and service to others is a puritan road, as it may seem to some as a long, dark, night of the soul. There is no promise of joy held out by her, only the surrender of the will, and in that surrender, peace. He chooses the ascetic life, submitting to the call of greater love. It is the way of dispossession, of detachment, of divesting oneself of the love of created beings. Harry goes away to become a missionary. The most sensible moment of his life and the most

sensible thing he ever does is the moment when he says yes to God, and surrenders to Him. His self-surrender leads him to a blessed deliverance and transformation.

In Cocktail Party Celia the heroine chooses the way of the Saint like Harry and Becket. Celia is in 'love' with Edward, and is 'loved' by Peter.

