

A THEMATIC STUDY OF T. S. ELIOT'S POEMS AND *THE COCKTAIL PARTY*

by

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Fascinated with the effectiveness and social usefulness of drama for years, T. S. Eliot (1880-1965) at last turned his poetic power to the theatre and produced five verse plays.¹ *The Cocktail Party*,² the third one, was first produced for the Edinburg Festival of 1949, and a year later in New York and London. It was televised in January 1952 and April 1957 with the number of viewers reaching 3,500,000 and 8,000,000 respectively.³ Hailed as a masterpiece of versified comedy of manners,⁴ its popularity rests partly on its artistic skill, and partly on the universality of its themes. While many of the play's incidental details burlesque Eliot's poetic symbols,⁵ it also echoes several of the major themes embodied in Eliot's poems. It is the purpose of this paper to explore

¹Cf. Eliot's remark, "The ideal medium for poetry, to my mind, and the most direct means of social 'usefulness' for poetry, is the theatre," in *The Use of Poetry and the Use of Criticism* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1933), p. 153.

²T. S. Eliot, *The Collected Poems and Plays: 1909-1950* (New York: Harcourt, Brace and Company, Inc., 1952). All page numbers given in parentheses, unless otherwise noted, always refer to this edition.

³Michael Barry, "Televising *The Cocktail Party*," in *T. S. Eliot: A Symposium for His Seventieth Birthday*, ed. Neville Braybrooke (New York: Freeport, 1958), p. 83.

⁴See, for instance, Denis Donoghue, "*The Cocktail Party*," in *T. S. Eliot: A Collection of Critical Essays*, ed. Hugh Kenner (Englewood Cliffs, N. J.: Prentice-Hall, 1962), pp. 174-175.

⁵Grover Smith, *T. S. Eliot's Poetry and Plays: A Study in Sources and Meaning* (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 1966), p. 214.

these themes of *The Cocktail Party* in accordance with those of Eliot's poems so as to show Eliot's creative pre-occupation as a whole.

I

Prominent among the themes of *The Cocktail Party* is the theme of love. The play presents four pairs of lovers involved in all the possible permutations of the triangle situation. Edward Chamberlayne, a barrister, is estranged from his wife, Lavinia, who is in love with Peter Quilpe a young film writer. Peter is in turn infatuated with Celia Coplestone, who writes poetry. Celia is Edward's mistress and in love with him. Edward loves nobody and nobody loves Lavinia. John Russell Brown sums up these triangles as: (1) Celia-Edward-Lavinia; (2) Edward-Lavinia-Peter; (3) Lavinia-Peter-Celia; and (4) Peter-Celia-Edward.⁶ When the play opens, Lavinia, the hostess of the cocktail party, has suddenly and mysteriously disappeared, leaving her husband to act as the solitary host to Peter, Celia and three other people: Julia Shuttlethwaite, an impertinent gossip, Alexander MacColgie Gibbs, an eccentric amateur chef and globetrotter, and Sir Henry Harcourt-Reilly, an unexpected guest known until Act II as a consulting psychiatrist.

Now with Lavinia's unexpected absence, these triangles begin to change or dissolve. Bewildered by his wife's disappearance, Edward decides to find out what has happened during the five years of their marital life. "I must find out who she is, to find out who I am" (p. 308). He confesses to Celia that he was never really in love with Lavinia. Later in Sir Henry's office, he further discovers, to his surprise and consternation, that he has

⁶John Russell Brown, ed., *Contemporary Theatre* (London: Edward Arnold Publishers Ltd., 1962), pp. 46-47.

never really been in love with Lavinia or Celia or anybody, though he likes to think of himself as "a passionate lover." He is, in reality, as incapable of loving as Mr. Prufrock. He may have the romantic idea of love, yet he has no strength to force the moment to its crisis, asking the overwhelming question, "Do I dare?" or "Shall I say?" Or he may agonize, again like Mr. Prufrock, over his own vacillation and timidities because of "the pain of spiritual stagnation and psychic sterility."⁷ His indecision, as Sir Henry reveals, might have ruined three lives. In short, he exhibits torturing conflict plainly, and indulges in a kind of wishful dream of mermaids.

Lavinia's problem is the exact opposite of her husband's. As Edward is a man who finds himself incapable of loving, so Lavinia is a woman who fears no man could love her. Sometimes she takes a fancy for Peter. "Lavinia was awfully kind to me," Peter reflects with gratitude. "And I owe her a great deal" (p. 314). At Lavinia's amateur Thursdays, his role, as Edward sarcastically observes, "was to be one of her discoveries" (p. 314). Taciturn as an "oyster," however, she never utters her "love song" openly outside the inferno of her mind. Consequently, her infatuation remains unobserved. When in Sir Henry's office, her symptom is exposed:

When you discovered that your young friend
 (Though you knew, in your heart, that he was not in love
 with you,
 And were always humiliated by the awareness
 That you had forced him into this position) —
 When, I say, you discovered that your young friend
 Had actually fallen in love with Miss Coplestone,..
 You pretended to yourself,
 I suspect, and for as long as you could,
 That he was aiming at a higher social distinction
 Than the honour conferred by being *your* lover.

⁷Elizabeth Drew, *T.S. Eliot: The Design of His Poetry* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1949), p. 31.

When you had to face the fact that his feelings towards her
Were different from any you had aroused in him —
It was a shock. You had wanted to be loved;
You had come to see that no one had ever loved you.
Then you began to fear that no one *could* love you. [p. 355]

Lavinia is as barren as the Lady of the Rocks, or the Lady of Situations. Just as the girl mentioned in "The Burial of Dead," she has probably never experienced any passionate love affairs. She would be the object of mechanical love on the part of the man around her, for unlike the typist described in "The Fire Sermon," she is capable of passion.

In a word, the five-year marriage of the Chamberlaynes proves to be the very example of the modern waste land. Their sterility and impotence suggest very much the disability of the Fisher King. Fortunately, this unloving and unlovable couple is rescued in time with the help of Sir Henry, who makes them honestly face their true natures and their relations with each other, strips away their illusions, makes their decisions and gives them prescriptions. Unlike Prufrock, accordingly, they are cured. And as they have in common the some self-love and self-deception, "the same isolation," they are quite suited to each other. All they can do, as Edward realizes, is to "make the best of a bad job," and as the doctor suggests, to work reciprocally toward "a good life."

Diametrically opposed to the case of Edward and Lavinia is Celia's capability of loving and being loved. She has loved Edward, and has been loved by Peter. She is most willing to give herself to Edward when he has gained his freedom to re-marry. Yet in her *tête-à-tête* with Edward on the occasion of Lavinia's unexpected absence, she is at last brought to a realization that she has been living in a "dream." What she has loved was a projection of her own desires. This awareness leads

her to see the painful reality that both she and Edward are "strangers," who have merely made use of each other. For a moment, she discovers Edward transformed into a hollow man, a stuffed man, a non-human being:

I am not sure, Edward, that I understand you;
 And yet I understand as I never did before.
 I think — I believe — you are being yourself
 As you never were before, with me.
 Twice you have changed since I have been looking at you.
 I looked at your face: and I thought that I knew
 And loved every contour, and as I looked
 It withered, as if I had unwrapped a mummy.
 I listened to your voice, that had always thrilled me,
 And it became another voice — no, not a voice:
 What I heard was only the noise of an insect,
 Dry, endless, meaningless, inhuman —
 You might have made it by scraping your legs together —
 Or however grasshoppers do it. I looked,
 And listened for your heart, your blood;
 And saw only a beetle the size of a man
 With nothing more inside it than what comes out
 When you tread on a beetle. [pp. 326-327]

A little earlier, Edward has also discovered himself to be a middle-aged Prufrock:

I am not sure
 The one thing of which I am relatively certain
 Is, that only since this morning
 I have met myself as a middle-aged man
 That is the worst moment, when you feel that you have lost
 The desire for all that was most desirable,
 And before you are contented with what you can desire;
 Before you know what is left to be desired
 And you go on wishing that you could desire
 What desire has left behind. But you cannot understand.
 [p. 325]

In fact, Edward is modeled on an unassured and disen-
 charmed character with "the dull, the implacable, the
 indomitable spirit of mediocrity" (p. 326).

Having found out the truth, Celia becomes sadder and wiser. Her disillusionment has in turn produced a double bewilderment: an awareness of solitude and a sense of sin. The urgency of her anguish presses her to forsake the world of delusions. After her interview with Sir Henry, she decides to enter his "sanatorium," that is, to join an austere nursing order and go to a far-off isle called Kinkanja. During a native rebellion, she is captured and crucified near an ant-hill. Thus, through the unknown, remembered Gate of the Garden, she joins the fire of love and the rose of desire into one with Christ and purges away her sense of sin and guilt. Her violent death is what Sir Henry has intuitively visualized:

That was her destiny. The only question
 Then was, what sort of death? *I* could not know;
 Because it was for her to choose the way of life
 To lead to death, and, without knowing the end
 Yet choose the form of death. We know the death she chose.
 I did not know. So all that I could do
 Was to direct her in the way of preparation.
 That way, which she accepted, led to this death.
 And if that is not a happy death, what death is happy?

[p. 384]

Peter, like Edward, Lavinia and Celia, also experiences a moment of understanding. He has always had a passion for Celia. As Celia loves the story of Lady Klootz and the wedding cake, he also takes an interest in it and urges Julia to tell it. He feels that he and Celia, as artists, have a great deal in common. He often accompanied Celia to picture exhibits or to concerts. They talked, sometimes had tea, and once or twice dined together. "She was different from any girl I'd ever known" (p. 314). To be with her was an experience of ecstasy and peacefulness at the same time:

And I was so happy when we were together —
 So...contented, so...at peace: I can't express it;
 I had never imagined such quiet happiness.
 I had only experienced excitement, delirium,
 Desire for possession. It was not like that at all.
 It was something very strange. There was such...tranquillity
 ...[p. 315]

In short, his experience in being with Celia is the "first," and perhaps the "last," experience of reality. Later, however, he finds himself unable to share "some secret excitement" with Celia. And Celia seems to have lost interest in him. Disappointed, he goes to California. Two years later, he comes back as a fairly successful film-writer. At the second cocktail party at the Chamberlaynes, he learns from Alex of Celia's martyrdom. As Edward points out, he never "knew" Celia. "What you've been living on is an image of Celia/Which you made for yourself to meet your own needs" (p. 382). What Edward means is that Peter is a self-deceiver. However, this remark is, incidentally, also valid for Celia, Lavinia and Edward himself. Though Peter still does not believe himself to be taken in, he admits at least that he is a self-centered man: "I've only been interested in myself" (p. 382). Celia's selflessness thus provides a touchstone for Peter to discover his selfishness.

II

It must be noted that the scenes of *The Cocktail Party* are located in London, the Unreal City of *The Waste Land*. The City is "unreal" not only because its brown fog darkens and distorts reality, but also because "it is cut off from both natural and spiritual sources of life."⁸ With the loss of the life-giving fountain, its inhabitants are those of the death-in-life of the waste land. The Chamberlaynes, moreover, live in a "flat,"

⁸*Ibid.*, p. 73.

and their daily life is also "flat." Their marriage is by no means a fruitful union. Together with Peter and Celia, they all live under the brown mantle of fog and consequently cannot see reality. Only when, with proper advice, they cross the "bridge" of time can they secure a renewal of life.

Critics have often questioned the necessity and credibility of the third act. As Philip R. Headings points out, this act provides an opportunity for observing "the changed quality of behavior — the changed psychic focus — of the various characters."⁹ It seems to me that the lapse of two years between Act II and Act III may symbolically be taken as a "bridge" of time. Before they are advised, Edward, Lavinia and Celia are at one end of the time-bridge. Bearing Sir Henry's advice in mind, they cross the "bridge," and arrive at its other end. The Chamberlaynes continue their mundane existence, whereas Celia, who leaves the Unreal City behind, has reached the Celestial City. Peter is a problem. He asks no advice, and no words can yet be spoken for him. Nevertheless, Sir Henry is confident that somebody in California will give him guidance. In this way, it seems that he has also crossed a time-bridge with advice though quite differently. At any rate, each of them, crossing a "bridge" of time, gradually undergoes a change of behavior, and becomes a changed person at the other end. When the final act opens, each of them has assumed his proper costume and accepted his destiny. The time-bridge of *The Cocktail Party* can thus be compared to London Bridge of *The Waste Land* with the flowing crowd facing "the cruel breeding that could bring life."¹⁰ It is closely associated with the themes of death, journey and time which will be explored.

⁹See Philip R. Headings, *T. S. Eliot* (New York: Twayne Publishers, Inc., 1964), p. 159.

¹⁰Drew, *op. cit.*, p. 75.

According to Eliot, *The Cocktail Party* takes its immediate source from Euripides' *Alcestis*.¹¹ While the action of *Alcestis* takes place on the day Alcestis dies for Admetus, the action of *The Cocktail Party* begins on the day Lavinia leaves Edward. Alcestis goes to the underworld just as Lavinia visits Dedham or Essex ostensibly. Just as Heracles promises to bring back Alcestis to Admetus, so the Unidentified Guest assures Edward, "In twenty-four hours/She will come to you" (p. 309). Before Lavinia's return, the Unidentified Guest comes back to advise Edward that Lavinia must be treated as a "stranger." And Edward must realize that

We die to each other daily.
 What we know of other people
 Is only our memory of the moments
 During which we knew them. And they have changed since
 then.
 To pretend that they and we are the same
 Is a useful and convenient social convention
 Which must sometimes be broken. We must also remember
 That at every meeting we are meeting a stranger. [p. 329]

In this changing world, nothing is permanent. People are changing all the time. Their old selves being dead, they are "strangers" to themselves and to others. Yet this is not to say that they should try to "forget." Any attempt merely to forget, as the Unidentified Guest remarks, is in effect suspicious of concealment. They must face all their acquaintances, and meet them as "strangers." Lavinia and Edward are thus "strangers." For them, the past is already dead. Accordingly, they must not strangle each other with "knotted memories." Only with this kept in mind can they begin a new life together. If Lavinia's unexpected absence represents the

¹¹Eliot acknowledges the source of *The Cocktail Party* in "Poetry and Drama," in *Playwrights on Playwriting*, ed. Toby Cole (New York: Hill and Wang, 1965), pp. 250-260.

death of their former married life, the achievement of mutual understanding in their interview with Sir Henry may symbolize the spiritual death of a broken marriage and the birth of the harmonious future.

As Robert B. Heilman observes, Eliot "has boldly split Alcestis into Lavinia and Celia."¹² Lavinia appears in a dramatic movement quite in consistence with that of Alcestis. Celia, on the other hand, moves in an exactly reverse direction. While Alcestis has already performed her act of sacrifice before the play opens, Celia's attempt to sainthood is achieved in the action of the play. Since Admetus is a king hedged with divinity, Alcestis' act is a religious sacrifice.¹³ She gradually dwindles into a worldly wife, whereas Celia grows as the action progresses. The discovery that Edward is only human leads her to resign her hope in this world, and ultimately accept the Negative Way, through which she is reborn in Christ. "In her martyrdom she suffers physical death but achieves eternal life, just as she achieves another kind of Christian marriage in the union of the saint with God."¹⁴ She thus moves from the abandonment of human love to the achievement of religious love.

As has been mentioned above, each of the four characters discussed in *The Cocktail Party* crosses the "bridge" of time. Each of them, moving from this end of the "bridge" toward the other, undertakes a journey literally and symbolically. Finding himself unable to win Celia's heart, Peter goes abroad for a time to realize

¹²Robert B. Heilman, "Alcestis and *The Cocktail Party*," in *Twentieth Century Interpretation of Euripides' Alcestis*, ed. John R. Wilson (Englewood Cliffs, N. J.: Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1968), p. 98.

¹³See F. O. Matthiessen, *The Achievement of T. S. Eliot: An Essay on the Nature of Poetry* (New York & London: Oxford University Press, 1958), pp. 226-227.

¹⁴Carol H. Smith, *T. S. Eliot's Dramatic Theory and Practice: From Sweeney Agonistes to the Elder Statesman* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1963), p. 178.

his ambition. In two years, he has made a journey from a failure (death of his past) to a fairly successful film-writer (rebirth). Though he experiences no physical suffering, his creative agony on the way to success presents a real challenge. He must have wrestled, as Eliot has done in the final section of "East Coker," with the medium of expression on the one hand, and yoked the general mess of imprecise feeling or undisciplined squads of emotion on the other. A much dissimilar way of living is that of the Chamberlaynes. Since their marital crisis, they have led a humdrum existence of common routine. They have continued giving and attending cocktail parties. The kind of "salvation" they work out for themselves is an ordinary, secular way of life:

They may remember
 The vision they have had, but they cease to regret it,
 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. They do not repine;
 Are contented with the morning that separates
 And with the evening that brings together
 For casual talk before the fire
 Two people who know they do not understand each other,
 Breeding children whom they do not understand
 And who will never understand them. [pp. 363-364]

In Act One when Lavinia returns, she complains that Edward was so feeble-minded and unsympathetic that her encouragement always came to nothing. She often felt slighted and neglected. But Edward retorts that Lavinia always tried to invent a "personality" for him and always made him feel as insignificant and humiliated as a "butler." Later, in Sir Henry's office, Edward accuses Lavinia of "perfect assurance," and Lavinia in turn charges her husband with "placid assumption." After

their marital crisis, neither of them takes the "corner of cage," and neither of them listens to the "gramophone" as an escape to pass the evening. They have no longer taken each other for granted. At the second cocktail party held two years later, each has learned to treat the other with genuine warmth and consideration. Lavinia asks Edward if he is too tired. And Edward in turn compliments his wife on the dress she puts on. They do come to some understanding, though this understanding may not necessarily be a profound one.

On the other hand, as the possessor of a rare capacity for spiritual achievement, Celia has chosen the "second way" proposed by the psychiatrist:

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 toward possession
 Of what you have sought for in the wrong place. [pp. 364-365]

It can be imagined that on this unknown, mysterious way, she must have endured all the shocking horrors and sufferings possible. With her confidence and determination, however, she must have undergone the process of transhumanization, and passed between the "scolding hills," through the "valley of derision," the desert, the mountain, the labyrinth and the temptations of the Voices and the Visions. Her hardship en route is comparable with that of the Magus and the protagonist of *The Waste Land*. The Magus remembers that they endured all the hostility of cities, the unfriendliness of towns and the dirtiness of villages. As an alien among his own people, he would be glad to die, even though "this Birth was/Hard and bitter agony" (p. 69). What the protagonist of "What the Thunder Said" undergoes on his journey is also a bitter experience. He journeys

through a parching and agonizing drought to the Chapel Perilous. There is not only no water and no sound of water but also no silence. There is not even solitude. But hostile faces "sneer and snarl" from "doors of mudcracked hourses." All he hears is "dry sterile thunder without rain," as he struggles up the sandy road winding above among the mountains. Out of the agony and doubt, he sees the Vision, probably the desert mirage. On his arrival at the Chapel, he finds there nothing but the "decayed hole," the "tumbled graves," and "dry bones." But now hope emerges with the living bird saluting the dawn. The quest for life-giving water ultimately leads the protagonist to Ganga, the sacred river.

A final theme which will be treated here as an echo of Eliot's poems is the theme of time. Preoccupied with the importance of tradition, Eliot expresses his concern with time principally in *Four Quartets*. "Burnt Norton" opens with a general meditation on time as continuous and progressive:

Time present and time past
Are both perhaps present in time future,
And time future contained in time past. [p. 117]

For the Chamberlaynes, time past and time present and probably time future point to one single repeated activity, namely, the giving of cocktail parties as a measure of their social standing. In this sense, they resemble Mr. Prufrock in measuring out his life with coffee spoons. Peter was simply an amateur film-writer in time past. At the end of the play, he enjoys money and reknown of a sort. Unlike the monotonous existence of the Chamberlaynes and also unlike Peter's material success, Celia ultimately reaches "the still point of the turning world." Just as the movements of words and music cannot live eternally in time, so the Chamberlaynes and

Peter will reach into the "silence" some day in time future. This fate, however, is not for Celia. Having suffered physical death, she gains spiritual rebirth in Christ and reaches the "still point," where past and future are gathered. Her quest for divine love is thus a quest for permanence in the midst of change. The realization of invariance amid all the mutations of the world has ever been at once the supreme desire and the supreme striving of men. And of all the characters in *The Cocktail Party*, only Celia achieves this end through the terrifying journey she has undertaken.

In *The Cocktail Party*, Edward suggests the concept of time's continuity by observing that "life is only keeping on," and that "every moment is a fresh beginning" (p. 387). With Lavinia's absence, Edward may, according to the Unidentified Guest, begin to enjoy his independence, and find his life becoming cosier and cosier. The beginning of his independence, however, is also the beginning of his anxious wish to have his wife back. His independence and anxiety end when his wife returns to begin a new life with him. The beginning of Lavinia's sudden departure is the end of her former married life, whereas her return is the beginning of her new relation with Edward. Again, the moment of mutual understanding between Edward and Lavinia is the beginning of their tolerance of each other in the future, and the end of their former life. As far as Celia is concerned, her discovery of the inadequacy of human love is the beginning of her quest for divine love. Her death, which indicates the end of her physical life, is not a waste, but the very beginning of her spiritual rebirth. In the pattern of stillness, she is granted the happy reconciliation of the end and the beginning. As regards Peter, his disappointment in love proves to be the real beginning of the gradual realization of his ambition, and accidentally the end of his affair with Celia.

Finally when informed of Celia's death, he realizes for the first time that what he has loved is in fact an absurd image he has created for himself. As naked truth or reality is very hard to bear, the discovery made by each of the four characters in *The Cocktail Party* becomes a new and shocking valuation. For them, each venture is a fresh beginning, and each fresh beginning also points to the end. In a world of perpetual change, the beginning is implied in the end, and the end in the beginning. In the succession of events, every action is at once a step toward death and a step toward redemption. In the realm of abiding reality, "the point of of stillness," however, "the end precedes the beginning,/ And the end the beginning were always there/Before the beginning and after the end" (p. 121).

In a way, *The Cocktail Party* is a dramatization of Eliot's poetry. A thematic interpretation of the play shows that each of the characters — Edward, Lavinia, Peter and Celia — shows the progress of Eliot's poetry. The Chamberlaynes find their way to humanity; they remain in, and perhaps a little further than, the phase of "Prufrock," "Gerontion," and "The Hollow Men." Celia moves past the nightmare vision on her way to the divine; she follows closely the whole progress of Eliot's poetry from "Prufrock" to "Little Gidding." Peter's case is rather difficult to define. He does go beyond the Chamberlaynes, and like Celia reach the phase of *Four Quartets*. However, his destiny is quite different from that of Celia: he still enjoys his mundane existence though not without agony in his quest for successful artistic creation, whereas Celia has triumphantly reached a state of spiritual union with God. They all start out as deceivers, crusted over with illusions about themselves and others. They all undergo a process of recognition and achieve a certain type of resurrection. The difference of their progress lies in the quality of the new life

they experience. Their progress, moreover, is manifested most clearly in the four major themes of the play — love, death, journey and time. Though separately explored, they are in effect closely related. Taken together they have formed with their universality and perenniality an uncanny force, touching the deepest chord of the human mind and eliciting a common psychological response. Whether consciously or unconsciously, they reveal the main concern of Eliot's creative activity.