

Marriage as Masquerade: Love, Marriage, and the Emotional Estrangement in T.S. Eliot's *The Cocktail Party*

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Abstract: T.S. Eliot's *The Cocktail Party* examines the breakdown and performance of marriage and love in Post-World War II society. The play presents characters trapped in emotional estrangement and superficial relationships, revealing how marriage often serves as a social facade that maintains appearances while hiding inner emptiness. It is a drama about human relationships, struggle, and acceptance, redemption and salvation, and normal, ordinary human life. It focuses on the life of the Chamberlayne couple Edward and Lavinia, their problems and solutions, Peter Quilp and of Celia Coplestone; her realization, redemption, and salvation. It also emphasizes the pressures of keeping up with social appearances. It is a part satire on traditional British drawing-room comedy and part philosophical discourse on the nature of human relations. This article examines how Eliot attacks being stuck in a relationship and breaking out of it, it also focuses on marital discord while exploring themes of divorce, therapy and emotional isolation in the play.

Keywords: T.S. Eliot, *Cocktail Party*, World War II, Love, Marriage, Therapy and Divorce.

Introduction

This article seeks to examine the landscape of love and marriage in Eliot's *The Cocktail Party*. It is the basic foundation upon which the plot is woven. Most of the time, the dramatists use their own social, political, philosophical, and religious thoughts, experience, and perceptions and turn them into the theme of the play. T.S. Eliot, one of the giants of Modern English Literature did the same. This study deeply investigates the love and relationship of the characters of the play, mainly Edward and Lavinia. This study is motivated by two main questions: Were Edward and Lavinia actually in love? Did their marriage actually deserve a second chance? This article also delves a little into the theme of emotional estrangement, void of the time to explore the relationships between people based on affection and desire. It is a fundamental element in many literary works and remains one of the most enduring themes in art. The meaning of love varies from person to person, and no single definition can capture its complexity. While the concept of love has evolved over time, its connection to loyalty has remained constant throughout literary history. Stories of troubled marriages are endless in literature, and T.S. Eliot's *The Cocktail Party* is a notable example. Love sits at the heart of this play, quietly shaping the lives of every major character. Lavinia seeks to be loved, whether by her husband or through an affair. Edward appears incapable of loving, which leads him to search for connection outside his marriage. Celia wants Edward to love her, and Peter hopes to begin a romance with Celia. Love and passion drive all these characters forward. However, love in the play is rarely present as an available emotion. Instead, it appears as something scarce and difficult to attain. Genuine romantic love has little to do with the events that unfold in *The Cocktail Party*. The affairs in the play seem to be motivated by love while they are happening, but once they end and the characters can examine them more clearly, these relationships reveal themselves as illusions. This article explores the nature of love and the relationships between

the characters in detail. The findings from this article illustrate how love is the foundation of healthy marriage and also how societal expectations, lack of communication and understanding leads to the sterility and

decay of marriage. It addresses how marriage is not always a follow up to love, how human relationships and the idea of love keep changing and how its void affects lives.

Textual Study

The Cocktail Party is a miraculous development in the field of literature as it tends to share so many different ideas and philosophies in a single piece of work. It talks of the religious ideals of Christianity, Buddhism, and Hinduism, all at the same time. The themes used by Eliot are vivid and preach life lessons to the readers. In the play, Eliot talks about love, duty, responsibility, martyrdom, struggle, redemption, etc. The landscape of love and marriage is one of the major themes of the play and is deeply dealt with in this study. The play also explores the theme of societal expectations and how it impact relationships. Edward and Lavinia are both products of their upper-class upbringing and this somewhat acted as a hindrance in their ability to connect and communicate properly and effectively. Additionally, the play examines the tension between individual and societal norms, suggesting that these forces can be in conflict with each other.

The first broken relationship that the audience is informed of is the marriage of Edward and Lavinia, they've been married for five years. Their married life has not been a happy one and is marked by infidelity. Each has blamed the other. Lavinia gives no convincing reason for marrying Edward. She gives a flimsy excuse that Edward lies to her by insisting that he loves her. Edward treats his wife as a commodity. Edward has felt that Lavinia was a woman whom nobody could love and Lavinia, on the other hand, was of the opinion that Edward was a man incapable of loving. Therefore, in order to assure himself that he is capable of love, Edward turns to Celia a beautiful young woman, who is deceived by his claims that his wife is uninterested in him and this drives him to start a new serious relationship. He makes her his mistress. In the play we see Lavinia complaining about Edward's sense of humour and Edward complaining about Lavinia's controlling nature, they never understood each other. Lavinia, in order to prove to herself that she could be loved, carries on a clandestine affair with Peter. Conditions deteriorate so much that to live under the same roof becomes impossible. They were on the verge of getting divorce. Lavinia, therefore, in desperation turns to Julia for help. Encouraged and abetted by Sir Reilly, the psychiatrist, she disappears from her home for some time. When Lavinia leaves the house, Edward wants her back - not for love but because he is used to her. As he explains to Reilly in one of their conversations, "Why speak of love? We were used to each other." (Eliot 26). In the play later, we see how Edward regrets his decision to have Lavinia come back. He feels like he is having a nervous breakdown. Both the characters were suffering, even Lavinia, she is such a controlled and controlling person that her husband is entirely surprised by both her mental distress and her secret love life. Sir Henry Harcourt Reilly explains that the end of her affair with Peter caused Lavinia to realize the truth about herself, "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 feel that no one could ever love you" (Encyclopedia).

As long as Edward and Lavinia treat each other as a duty, instead of lovers, their relationship works just fine. They were just living together, their marriage was devoid of love, they struggled to communicate and understand each other's needs and desires. They were the product of their upper-class upbringing and societal expectations, living together, tolerating each other and throwing and attending parties to keep their reputation. Their marriage did not deserve a second chance, it wasn't love to begin with, it was just acceptance and toleration, Edward wanted to fulfill his needs and feel important while Lavinia wanted to feel loved and

both ventured for this outside their marriage. For most of the part their actions were about them individually and barely about each other as partners. Edward even says that “There’s something wrong in our lives, but we pretend not to notice.” This line reveals their mutual denial and the marriage-as-mask dynamic. They both engage in external performances, hiding the internal disintegration of their relationship. Towards the finale of the play they are seen together, Edward is a little more sympathetic toward Lavinia in the end, but their relationship is still cold and rational. Their private and public were different and conflicting, they were slaves of their social image. It was not love but the societal expectations, acceptance and Reilly’s advice that kept them together, “Maintain themselves by the common routine. Learn to avoid excessive expectation.” Harcourt-Reilly tells them to stay together, to be responsible for each other. They complement each other in social matters: as Lavinia points out, Edward has a practical mind for tasks like filling out an income tax form, but she herself is practical in the things that really matter. They were offered a choice, they have chosen ordinary, human life. Estranges Edward and Lavinia Chamberlayne are reconciled, not to love, but merely to mutual toleration. In short, they have to make the best of a bad bargain. The last Act shows them living the ordinary life of give and take, just as a formality, for the sake of social appearance and society. It was a facade, a mask was put on, a marriage that lacks love but was mask was kept on because divorce was not common at that time and societal expectations and appearance were highly valued. It was just like Edward said that there’s something wrong in their lives, but they pretend not to notice.

The relationship of Edward and Celia is also not of what one may say is a genuine love. Celia Coplestone is a young woman of considerable charm who belongs to the Chamberlaynes' social circle. She becomes Edward's mistress, and through this relationship, she attempts to find something transcendent or meaningful, she hopes to find the divine in him but Edward, however, only sees her like an assurance to make him feel that he is capable of love and he is trying to fulfill himself with things lacking in his marriage through her. Edward never truly loves Celia, despite once claiming otherwise, which explains why he quickly ends the affair after Lavinia leaves and he realizes he wants her back. He had simply grown accustomed to his wife. Edward expresses a cynical view of love when he tells Peter that Peter is fortunate to have avoided the affair he had hoped to pursue with Celia, since such relationships inevitably become dull after a few months. When Edward ends their relationship, Celia experiences a painful but clarifying revelation. She realizes that their affair was built on avoiding any thought of the future. The shock of their breakup forces her to see clearly for the first time. She recognizes that Edward was merely a symbol of something vague she had been searching for, not something she genuinely wanted. As she states: “The man I saw before/ he was only a projection/ I see that now-of something that I wanted/ No, not wanted-something that I aspired to/ Something that I desperately wanted to exist.” (Eliot 67).

In the play, Lavinia and Peter are also involved in an affair. Lavinia seeks love and validation, whether from her husband or through extramarital relationships, which leads her to Peter. Meanwhile, Peter is in love with Celia, the same woman with whom Lavinia's husband, Edward, is having an affair. Despite Peter's professed love for Celia, he becomes involved with Lavinia. This tangled web of relationships reflects the play's title metaphor—like ingredients in a cocktail, these connections are mixed together but lack genuine substance.

Lavinia and Peter were just temporary partners, who tried to fill the void they had, they tried to fulfill their desires through each other. There was no scene of love involved just like Eliot mentioned in one of his earlier poems *The Wasteland*,

The river bears no empty bottles, sandwich papers,
Silk handkerchiefs, cardboard boxes, cigarette ends

Or other testimony of summer nights. The nymphs are departed.

And their friends, the loitering heirs of city directors;

Departed, have left no addresses (Eliot 177-180)

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Peter falls in love with Celia after spending considerable time with her following their meeting at Lavinia's party. He misinterprets Celia's sense of isolation—which she later describes to the psychiatrist as a symptom of her deeper spiritual crisis—as a need for companionship from someone who shares her artistic interests. Throughout the time they spend together attending films, concerts, and dinners, Peter believes a romance is developing between them. However, Celia later explains to Edward that she never viewed their relationship romantically. Peter desires and pursues Celia's love and attention despite her complete lack of romantic interest in him.

Peter expresses his feelings in idealistic, romantic terms, telling her: "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" (Eliot 38). Yet despite the depth of emotion he claims to feel, Peter never directly pursues a romantic relationship with Celia. More revealing still, he is romantically involved with Lavinia during this same period, only disclosing his feelings for Celia later. This inconsistency between his professed devotion and his actual behavior further illustrates the gap between romantic ideals and reality that characterizes the play's portrayal of love.

The rise of modernism and the aftermath of World War II brought profound challenges to individuals and society. People experienced existential crises, spiritual emptiness, and a sense of sterility in their lives. The rapidly changing world of the post-war period did not always bring positive transformation. Traditional values and social structures that had once provided meaning and stability were collapsing, leaving individuals adrift in search of purpose and authentic connection. Temporary physical relationships, superficial social interactions, and the maintenance of social appearances through parties and gatherings became increasingly common as substitutes for genuine intimacy. These cultural patterns are vividly reflected in Eliot's *The Cocktail Party*, where characters navigate a world defined by emotional disconnection and performative social rituals. The play's setting—a series of cocktail parties and social gatherings serves as a metaphor for this superficiality. Characters wear social masks, engaging in polite conversation while concealing their inner turmoil and dissatisfaction. The very structure of their lives revolves around maintaining appearances rather than cultivating meaningful relationships. Marriage itself becomes another social institution stripped of its deeper significance, reduced to a convenient arrangement that provides respectability but little emotional fulfillment. Eliot captures how post-war society prioritized surface-level propriety over authentic human connection, creating a world where individuals felt increasingly isolated despite being surrounded by others. What ought to provide emotional support and intimacy has turned into just another duty, something that appears to be appropriate on the outside but is hollow on the inside, hence marriage as masquerade as seen in the play.

Conclusion

T.S. Eliot's *The Cocktail Party* offers a profound examination of love and relationships in the post-World War II era, revealing the deep emotional and spiritual crises that characterized modern society. Through the intertwined lives of Edward, Lavinia, Celia, and Peter, Eliot demonstrates how love had become a scarce and misunderstood emotion, often mistaken for temporary passion or used as a means to fulfill unmet needs. The play exposes the gap between what characters believe to be love and what love actually requires—honesty, loyalty, and genuine connection. The affairs and relationships depicted in the play ultimately reveal

themselves as illusions, built on self-deception and the avoidance of deeper truths. Edward and Lavinia's marriage, though initially appearing as a failure, becomes a study in acceptance and the recognition of human limitations. Celia's journey from romantic disillusionment to spiritual awakening represents an alternative path, one that seeks transcendence beyond the superficial connections that dominate the social world. Peter's unrequited love for Celia further illustrates the confusion between genuine affection and projected desire. Eliot's work reflects the broader cultural malaise of the twentieth century, where the collapse of traditional values and the trauma of war left individuals searching for meaning in increasingly hollow social rituals. The cocktail party itself becomes a symbol of this emptiness, a gathering where people come together yet remain fundamentally alone, where conversation flows but communication fails, where love is discussed but rarely experienced. Through Sir Henry Harcourt-Reilly's guidance, the play suggests that redemption lies not in finding perfect romantic love, but in accepting reality, understanding oneself, and perhaps discovering a different kind of love altogether—one rooted in spiritual awareness rather than romantic fantasy. *The Cocktail Party* remains relevant today as it challenges readers to examine their own relationships and question whether they are built on genuine connection or mere convenience. Eliot's exploration of love, marriage, and human connection continues to resonate, reminding us that authentic relationships require more than social performance—they demand self-awareness, acceptance, and the courage to face uncomfortable truths about ourselves and others. This idea of marriage as a performance is not just something from Eliot's time. It is still happening today, which shows how well Eliot understood human relationships and how little has really changed. The problems he wrote about like couples pretending to be happy, staying together out of habit rather than love, being too afraid of change to pursue something better are just as common now as they were in the 1940s.

Many couples today stay married for reasons that have nothing to do with actually loving each other. They stay for money, for the kids, because of what people might think, or simply because leaving feels too hard. The performance looks different now, but it is the same underneath. In fact, social media might have made things worse. Couples post happy pictures online while feeling disconnected in private, just like Edward and Lavinia keeping up appearances at their cocktail parties. What makes this even more striking is that we talk so much more openly about relationships and mental health now than people did in Eliot's time. Yet the same patterns continue. People still choose unhappiness they know over uncertainty they do not. They still care more about how things look than how things feel. They still find themselves stuck in marriages that work on paper but feel hollow in reality. Eliot saw this clearly decades ago, and the fact that his observations still ring true today says something important about how difficult these patterns are to break.

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