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Eliot's Aims & Achievements as A Poetic Dramatist

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Abstract

From the beginning of his poetic carrier, Eliot was seriously interested in poetic drama. However, he was quite aware of many problems in making it relevant and viable, He had various options such as Greek plays of Pre- Christian era, Elizabethan- Jacobean plays of England, Problem plays of 19th century and naturalistic and symbolic plays of Ibsen, Chekhov, Maeterlinck etc.

He knew the weakness of closet plays of the 19th century and problem plays of the same period, followed by Ibsen, Galsworthy and Shaw. He knew that great poetry in at once dramatic and evocative. Hence, He tried to be at once relevant and imaginative and produce a new kind of dramatic language and idiom which could blend the music poetry with evocative prose. He turned to great mythical plays for their hidden meanings and treatment of basic issues of human existence. His poetic career was replaced by his dramatic career after *Four Quartets* but he had started exploring the new poetic drama during his poetic career itself. Thus, *Sweeney Agonistes* etc. suggest his skill and competence in making poetic drama, a viable alternative to naturalistic Prose drama. However, he was not always up to the mark and he was aware of his limitations. His prose addresses those concerns.

The present paper is a modest attempt to treat his dramatic career objectively and critically.

Keywords: Music of poetry, Poetic drama, Problem play, Moral allegory, Mythical play, Martyrdom, Psychotherapy, Free association, tougher self, seekers, Dreams of protest, Absurd drama

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Eliot's Aims & Achievements as A Poetic Dramatist

Eliot's poetic plays have many significant features (Eliot's *Poetry and Poets* Pp-89-95) to consider. Firstly, he was trying to be relevant to his contemporary admirers but, at the same time, he was interested in addressing basic issues of human existence across the immediate present. Secondly, he was trying to create a new kind of dramatic language which could combine the 'music of poetry' and 'prose of suppleness' (Eliot's *Poetry and Drama*-Pp-72-74). He did not go back to the age of Shakespeare nor to the lyrical beauty of Tennyson's poetic images. He had other options of various English playwrights of Restoration Era and the recent European Plays of Ibsen and Chekov. He was also aware of other attempts at revival of poetic drama by some English and Irish dramatists (Eliot's *Selected Essays*, Pp-229) before him. Moreover, his classical background made him aware of the early Greek plays of pre-Christian Era. Eliot knew that he did not have the lyrical gift of previous English Playwrights. Similarly, he did not like to follow the 'problem plays' written by Galsworthy and Shaw.

Hence, Eliot proceeded cautiously and chose his themes which come in the category of 'moral allegories'. Thus, he turned to the 'Greek Mythical Plays' (Bradbrook Pp-172-77) dealing with stories of Alcestis, Icon, Oedipus etc. and modernised them in terms of a set pattern of various kinds of sins or guilts in the form of vanity, hypocrisy and self-deception. He gradually worked out his problems with 'dramatic language', proper technique and rhythm which were appreciated by the Twentieth Century audiences. In his initial plays, he created a 'poetic theatre' (Bradbrook PP-38-42) which sometimes worked very well but, at other times, he had to work hard in presenting his vision in a proper Dramatic verse.

Both from thematic and dramatic points of view, Eliot's dramatic fragment viz. *Sweeney Agonistes* is an 'important land mark' because it shows his keen interest in using an old myth (Bradbrook-PP-35-38) in the contemporary situation for the purpose of Universal appeal. In fact, Milton had already tried this theme in *Samson Agonistes* Eliot skilfully altered the character of Samson and introduced a parallel contemporary character whose name suggests spiritual blindness and indulgence in mindless pleasures. The play partially succeeds but it is an early experiment where the theme was important but the treatment lacked sophistication. However, it shows Eliot's interest in the classical Greek drama, presently *The Oresteia* by Aeschylus (Bradbrook-P-10).

His next attempt was much better and it was meant for a religious purpose and event. The play is named 'Rock' and it was written for raising fund for a Church in London. In this play, Eliot represents an advancement over the previous play. Here the Rock itself becomes a symbolic character and shows the role of Church in shaping and controlling human life and solving various dilemmas of our lives. In this play, there are various uses of the Chorus where Seven men and Ten women jointly represent the voice of the Church. The invisible voice of the Church is also made clear and articulated in the play which is also about a message revealed in the Church. Indirectly, the importance of the Church is hinted at in these very important lines- "We build, meaning/A Church for all/and a job of each/ Each man to his work". Thus, the Rock indicates the direction of Eliot's poetic plays in the spiritual community presented by the Church.

His next play *The Murder in the Cathedral* is an acknowledged classic and is free from dramatic blemishes. This is because Eliot had learnt from his past experiments and, like Yeats, he was convinced that great poetic drama must deal with genuine human concerns inherent in the rituals of our daily life. As everyone knows, *The Murder in the Cathedral* was the 'culmination of Eliot's Ten-Year effort (Bradbrook P-31). All critics of Eliot are agreed that this play was an eye opener and it showed that English poetic drama could succeed in modern terms. Suddenly, Eliot became an icon for young and promising English Poets and dramatists. In this play, Eliot once again turned to an early English legend namely the martyrdom of

Thomas a Becket, murdered by King Henry II, a personal friend and admirer, for political reasons. Tennyson had tried the same theme but could not succeed in making it a viable stage play (Gardner P-94). Eliot detected in the story of Becket's murder immense dramatic potential and his play showed that 'patience' is the only reward of suffering and faith is the hall mark of Martyrdom (Gardner P-94). He found a parallel case in the story of Oedipus and he exploited it in his own plays without being unfair to the story of Becket. Critics have called it "A full scale study of martyrdom" (Gardner P-94). In fact, the Play shows that by preparing himself for supreme sacrifice to the cause of religion, Thomas has released a 'new spiritual force' in the world as revealed by the Chorus. In fact, in this play, Eliot has succeeded in telling a story faithfully. In keeping with its symbolic significance in his play, Becket has to contend with various temptations, voices and echoes which actually refer to his 'inner conflicts'. At the simple level, (Gardner P-94) the play also presents the conflict between the State and the Church. However, at the deeper level, the three priests refer to different aspects of religious trial and preparation for inner strength and wisdom. The three Tempters are similarly individualized and the voice of Chorus of Women of Canterbury is also presented very intelligently. Only towards the end, the theme of the play is presented in a paradoxical manner- "A Martyrdom is never the design of man, for the true Martyr is one who has become an instrument of God....." (Eliot's *Murder in the Cathedral*). In other words, the play shows within the frame work of stage drama that the power of the State can never match the glory of the Church. This is brought home through the character of Thomas Becket who gradually achieves the height of glory without caring for 'name, fame, fear or reward' (Gardner PP-96-99). In fact, after *Murder in the Cathedral*, Eliot could not repeat his complete success but he came near it in the next few plays like *The Cocktail Party* and *The Family Reunion*. *The Cocktail Party* appeared ten-years after the completion of the Family reunion. As everyone knows, *The Family Reunion* was not well-received because it contained 'certain matters' which could not be accommodated in terms of the requirements of poetic drama (Peter PP-131-132). There were also problems of versification, imagery and proper poetic language. Eliot's *The Cocktail Party*, however, received success after an adverse criticism of *The Family Reunion*. Eliot this time returned to naturalistic drama namely *The Cocktail Party* and presented it as Comedy of Manners in the Contemporary setting but the play was equally serious like *Murder in the Cathedral* or *The Family Reunion*. In this play, Eliot turned to the pattern of a Problem Comedy but he did not give up his interest in the Greek myths and, this time, he returned to the story of Alcestis by Euripides (Eliot). In this play, Eliot also introduced the technique of 'Psychotherapy, Free association' and 'auto suggestion'(Eliot). Moreover, he also used the devices of 'illusion, disillusion and hallucination'. In this play, Eliot also used the device of Confession as a mode of healing in curing various illusions and guilts. In this context, the character of Sir Henry Harcourt Reilly, Eliot's mouthpiece, is quite important. He also relied on the Greek myth but he used it in a very creative manner. This play of Three Acts, opens with a Cocktail Party in the flat of a lawyer named Edward Chamberlayne but his wife Lavinia is absent at the time of Party and guests are naturally awaiting the hostess. The guests include two women, Celia and Julia and Two men, Alexander and Peter. The host is disturbed because the hostess Lavinia is missing. One of the guests, who is later known as to be a psychiatrist, can easily guess that the hostess is not going to come. The host, however, tells a lie to Save his face that Lavinia has gone out suddenly to visit her aunt in the countryside. Thus, the party is called off but the mysterious guest stays on and he can read the mind-set of the host and Edward also asks him to stay. In course of conversation, one of the ladies comes back looking for her glasses or umbrella but she goes back. Other characters also try to help Edward but Celia comes and Edward seems to have some kind of illicit relation with her, Julia returns for the third time. Meanwhile, the characters keep on talking and Lavinia finally returns but Edward and Lavinia find themselves quite uneasy. The party is thus postponed for an obvious reason.

In the next act, the unidentified guest Reilly is known to be a kind of extraordinary man with super natural vision representing the voice of Conscience but, in truth, he is known to be a practising psychiatrist of London who diagnoses the failure of marriage of Edward and Lavinia. He finds out that Edward is a smart man but suffers from inferiority complex. Moreover, he is guilty of self-love. All these things are revealed gradually and there is also a problem in Celia's life who is closer to Reilly than to her own husband. In the third and last act, all the guests reappear except Celia who is reported to be dead in a mysterious way in an unknown Island.

In the third act, the guilty couples realize their mistakes and try to be sincere and forget their past errors and the party finally takes place. Thus, this comic play with happy ending is a typical Eliot play where the Characters realize that a meaningful relationship in a marriage can be worked out through trial and error and by avoiding deception and ignoring limitation (Eliot). In this play, Eliot uses suggestive words like 'tougher self', 'Guardians', 'Seekers and healers' (Eliot). The Seekers are those who try to make amends but need helpers or healers like Reilly, a kind of guardian. In fact, the play also was quite successful and popular with the audience because they found a proper dramatic framework and poetic language. Eliot was not deviating from his main theme or basic concern but he was using the right kind of versification and dramatic devices for writing a realistic play with moral significance. The audience could easily communicate with the scenes and spectators could at once gather the hidden meaning simultaneously. However, Eliot could not get the same kind of success in other plays like *The Confidential Clerk* and *The Elder Statesman* because he could not recapture the creative energy and skill of his earlier plays when he tried the theme of reunion or home coming & value of meaningful relationship (Eliot). However, nobody can deny that Eliot's interest in poetic drama was quite genuine and serious. He rightly believed that the serious topics of human concern could be presented through the medium of poetry but he also realized that the co-operation of the audience and proper environment was equally important. In the late 1950s, poetic drama lost its appeal and was gradually being replaced by prose drama dealing with the burning topics of the time in a different dramatic prose and convention viz. 'Drama of protest' and 'Absurd drama'.

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