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Sin and Redemption in the Dramatic World of T. S. Eliot with Special Reference to his *The Family Reunion*: A Brief Analysis

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Abstract:

This paper attempts to project T.S. Eliot as a modern dramatist influencing the course of modern drama more than any other modern playwright of the 20th century and as a follower of symbolists and Imagists following some of the patterns set by the pioneers of symbolism and also shows him to be a classicist, traditionalist, a great innovator, a critic, social thinker, philosopher and mystic combined into one, bringing about a revival of English poetic drama both through his practice and critical pronouncements. It shows clearly how Eliot presents Christian doctrine of atonement and the mysterious exchange of sin and suffering in the spiritual world and how man attains salvation by accepting God's will for his wife through the characters like Harry.

Keywords: Symbolist, Imagist, Social thinker, Mystic, sin and redemption, God's Will, Poetic Drama.

T.S. Eliot is said to have enjoyed a long life span of more than seventy – five years and his period of active literary production extended over a period of forty-five years. As he has influenced the course of modern drama more than any other dramatist of the 20th century, he has come to be recognized as one of the greatest of English dramatists. He was born on 26th September, 1898 at St. Louis, Missouri, an industrial city in the centre of the U.S.A. He was first sent to school at St. Louis day school where he studied till 1905. Even at school, he was awarded Gold medal for his proficiency in Latin. He began writing at school and showed marked technical proficiency and sense of humour. Then he was sent to Harvard University where he pursued from 1906 to 1910 a wide-ranging course of studies in language and literature: the classics German, French and English literatures. Well-recognized as a literary crusader, Eliot was found to be at three-folds: a critic, poet and dramatist. According to D.E.Jones, "one trying to understand Eliot may find one self reading anybody from Heraclitus to Bradley in the realm of philosophy, or from Aeschylus to Anouilh in the realm of drama" (P10)

Of the many influences that are easily discernible in Eliot's career as poet, critic and playwright, the influence of the Symbolists is the most outstanding. Eliot, great as he was, had never been a theory-swallower. No doubt, he followed some of the patterns set by the pioneers of Symbolism but he never adhered to their multifarious dogmas. Intellectually, he was a composite product of Harvard, Paris and Oxford. Temperamentally, he was a traditionalist, turning to literature. Theologically, he was a Catholic, yet he was equally influenced by the esoteric philosophy of Zoroaster, Buddha and Lab-Tzu. Academically, he was almost a disciple of Irving Babbit, George Santayana, Ken Rand and Remy de Gourment, he belonged to the class of Dante, Goethe, Bradley and Shakespeare philologically. Philosophically Josiah Royce, F.H. Bradley, T.E. Hulme, Middleton Murry and Henri Bergson exercised considerable influence on his mind. In brief, Eliot, a great force in modern English literature, had a complex and many-sided personality. He was a classicist, traditionalist, a great innovator, a critic, social thinker, a philosopher and mystic, all combined in one. He was born in America, toured through Europe and accepted British citizenship in life. He did much to bring about a revival of English poetic drama, both through his practice and critical pronouncements. He has to his credit publication of such dramatic productions as 1. *The Rock*, a Pageant play (1934), 2. *Murder in the Cathedral* (1935), 3. *The Family Reunion* (1939), 4. *The Cocktail Party* (1950), 5. *The Confidential clerk* (1954), 6. *The Elder Statesman* (1959).

In the second half of the 19th century, there were two major movements in European literature, viz. Realism and Symbolism. The Realists aimed at presenting man as a social creature and in style, they sought simplicity, directness avoiding ornament, whereas symbolist writing on the other hand indirect, allusive often obscure and tended to concentrate on evoking individual moods and elusive states of mind. The Imagists headed by Ezra Pound exercised a profound influence on Eliot. It was from the Imagists that he learned the use of concrete images to capture fleeting emotional experiences and the use of colloquial, everyday language for the purpose of poetry. Pound became an indefatigable helper of Eliot, providing him with encouragement, helpful criticism, new ideas and healthy literary contacts. Eliot saw that modern life could be interpreted and could gain depth of meaning by being allied to paralled patterns of human behavior embodied in myth. This idea he saw projected in the works of the two of the most distinguished contemporary writers, W.B. Yeats and James Joyce. As a critic, falling in the long line of poet critics, Eliot developed neither a systematic body of thought nor an organized theory. Rather he offered insights reflections and pronouncements on a variety of subjects and writers and considered literature as literature of the world, not as a collection of the writings of individuals but as organic wholes, "as systems in relation to which individual artists, have their significance" (Lodge 69)

Eliot did much to bring about a revival of English poetic drama, both through his practice and critical pronouncements. His interest in drama is co-extensive with his interest in poetry and criticism, the only difference is that during the early phase of his poetic career, he was

preoccupied with the dramatic element in poetry, while in the later years he was more concerned with poetic drama as a medium of mass appeal. He found this medium best fitted to the propagation of certain Christian and spiritual themes and ideas aimed at producing a new insight in the secular audience of the modern industrial age. Eliot is said to have always advocated a revival of poetic drama in the modern age, for he was convinced that poetic drama could offer much more to play goers than prose drama. But Eliot was against the method of using poetry as a mere decoration to the drama. *The Rock* and *Sweeney Agonistes* were both Eliot's experimental plays. *The Rock* is an uneven piece dealing with a number of topics in a variety of styles and tones. The central topic is the building of the church. In *Murder in the Cathedral*, the spiritual action is Becket's martyrdom. Becket represents the order of mind caught up in the order of charity and the tempters and knights represent the order of nature. Eliot borrowed the public language of Christian liturgy, hymns and the sermon. But after *Murder in the Cathedral*, he found that formal liturgy, an exhausted language and so, "he moved towards various compromising languages with a peculiar form of allusiveness: echoes of the former language in a residual liturgy" (Kennedy 94). *The Family Reunion* is a play about modern life. For this play, Eliot worked out a versification close to the rhythm of modern life using chorus while in *The Cocktail Party* he sought to avoid chorus and ghost. In *The Confidential Clerk*, there is greater development of character all round'. The homogeneity and dramatic unity of *The Confidential Clerk* are steps forward in the developing process of Eliot's process of Eliot's contemporary drama "(Pinion 247) His last plays especially *The Family Reunion* and *The Elder Statesman* are closely related to his own spiritual and philosophical speculations" (P 251)

Christianity can be defined as "the ethical, historical, universal, monotheistic, redemptive religion in which the relation of God and man is mediated by the person and work of the Lord Jesus Christ" (ERE 583). Conscious of himself as son, he revealed God as Father. The revelation of God in Christ possesses Characteristics which give to Christian monotheism a wider appeal to reason, conscience and affections of men. No other ancient religious book treats sin so seriously as The Bible does and no other religious system has so much to say about it as has Christianity. The Bible directs a calm, objective and realistic look at the whole of human existence and recognizes the power of evil as everywhere present in it. The origin of sin can be traced to God's perfect universe. The Apostle Paul calls it the "mystery of iniquity." (The Holy Bible 2:7) Thus, the greatest Catastrophe in the history of the universal creation was Lucifer's defiance of God. Lucifer was the creator of sin. He was the most beautiful and most brilliant of all the created beings in Heaven. He began a war that was raging in heaven from the moment he sinned and was brought to earth shortly after the dawn of human history under Satan's pride lurked the deadliest of all sins, the sin of covetousness, Satan, the fallen prince of heaven, started his war with God. In his warfare against God, Satan used the human race which was created and loved by God. Lucifer became Satan, the devil, the author of sin; and it is sin that has always deceived, disturbed, betrayed, depraved and destroyed all that it touched.

In Christian theology, the state in which human kind has been held captive since the fall is called 'original sin'. Catholic theologians hold that its essential element is the loss of sanctifying grace. The scriptural foundation for this doctrine is the teachings of St. Paul, "through one man i.e. Adam, Sin entered into the world so that by the trespass of the one the many died" (Bible: "Romans" 5:12). The sin of Adam was the sin of the whole human race. St. Augustine agreed with St. Paul that sin entered into the world through one man. Like Augustine, Calvin too conceived of mankind as a mass of perditions. All men stand condemned and convicted before God, because through Adam's transgression, all have become entangled in the curse. The nature of sin is unfaithfulness, the root of the fall. From it arose ambition, pride, ungratefulness and disobedience. The whole man lies under the power of sin, yet the chief seat of sin is the will of man. The fall stripped man of all such supernatural gifts as faith, love of God, charity towards neighbor and zeal for holiness and righteousness.

The term 'redemption' is derived from the Latin word 'red-emere', meaning 'to buy back' which literally means liberation by payment of a price or ransom. The meaning of 'redemption' in New Testament is chiefly that of the deliverance of man from sin, death and God's anger through the death and resurrection of Christ. Man is destined to participate in the execution of God's plan. Man is always influenced by the unchanging and unchangeable human will which is defective. He is harassed and debased by the powers of evil in this world. Though man tries various ways to alter them, there is no escape from them. But for God's redemptive activity, man's plight is hopeless. Man's life is constantly threatened and weakened by all kinds of corroding and disintegrating influences. As a result, human life is not fully satisfactory. All great religions of the world are agreed on this fact. Christian makes man's unbelief the focus of the mystery of redemption.

Eliot's genius was essentially dramatic and there is a strong sense of drama even in his poetry. A typical Eliot play is the presentation of the 'mystery of suffering'. *The Family Reunion* was Eliot's first successful play in contemporary setting, characters and speech in which he tried to compete with naturalistic prose drama. This play is nothing but the story of two generations in which Eliot presents the vision of boredom and horror of modern man in dramatic terms. It was designed to be a crypto-Christian play with unfamiliar religious symbols and pagan overtones to convey his veiled Christian message. On a deeper plane, *The Family Reunion* is a play embodying the Christian myth of sin, suffering and redemption through suffering. Suffering does not mean physical suffering alone but also spiritual suffering. Eliot, in order to emphasize the concept of sin, fashions the story of *The Family Reunion* with meticulous care. The plot is very complex. He takes a family cursed with double murder as his central image. The curse seems to arise from natural causes and yet lead towards a supernatural solution. The play is full of ideas and Eliot worked on them for more than twenty years. Chief among them are Eliot's intensifying sense of the spiritual suffocation and death. By the time, Eliot tried his hands at drama, "he was already out of the waste land" (Smith 196)

The Family Reunion like The Murder in the Cathedral depicts two different worlds namely the worldly and the spiritual. The worldly “See only events; they cannot interpret motives except by the selfish standards of profit and loss expediency, private satisfaction” (P 167) Eliot himself is critical of the amoral world, which Ivy, Gerald, Violet and Charles represent. The chorus of these people is static. They speak together at moments to reveal their bewilderment. They do not change, like the women of canter bury in The Murder in the Cathedral. The chorus expresses a Prufrockian sentiment.

“We like to be thought of well by others
So that we may think well of ourselves” (I.i. 586-587)

The dominant character among these is Any Monchenscy, the mother of the hero. The spiritual world has only one representative and it is Agatha, Amy’s youngest sister. Agatha is really the mouthpiece of Eliot and it is she who unfolds the spiritual dimension of the play. Agatha, though she stands for divine love, is not free from sin. Her sin is adultery and she indulges in adultery with her own sister’s husband. The old Testament says, “Thou shall not commit adultery” (The Bible 20:14). Though Agatha has not done it purposely, she is guilty of it. She is conscious of this and she is expiating for this, by her lovely life. Her sorrow is revealed in her sudden outburst to Amy,

“. thirty years of solitude,
Alone, among women, in a women’s college,
Trying not to hate women” (IT-iii 6-7)

Though Agatha is not exactly an inhabitant of the world of vital spirituality, she is the guardian of its door, and it is she who guides Harry towards his spiritual path. Amy, the counterpart of Agatha in the worldly sense, has an extraordinary will power. She dominates everyone in the play except Agatha. Amy’s pride is similar to Satan’s pride. She plans and dictates things for others. She is the personification of pride and throughout the play, she is presented as a dominating woman, who dominates not only her, sisters and sons, but also her brothers in law. Her marriage is a loveless one and this makes her shift her love to material things. She never bothers to accept God’s will. The hostility between Amy and Agatha can be taken as the conflict between the spiritual and the material. There is always a gulf between the spiritual and the material. This conflict between the two aspects of life is clearly brought out by the dramatist, by his presentation of the characters of Agatha and Amy. The one personality that “demands and rebels, the other a personality that accepts and recognizes facts” (Gardner 144). The victory of the spiritual against the material aspect of life is clearly revealed through the drama of Amy. In the main drama, she always tries to project her own will against God’s will. But due to the departure of Harry at the end of the play, she dies. As she says,

“The clock has stopped in the dark” (IT-iii 268)

“Wishwood the family, the whole complex, clock – like organization has stopped in the dark” (Peter 65)

Amy and her husband have broken the love commandment of God. The Christian marriage, any marriage for that matter, is a bond of love. Harry, the hero of the play, has inherited all the vices of his parents. The tendency to murder his wife is there in Harry. Harry’s father commits adultery and plans to murder his legal partner. Though Harry’s father never commits murder, in Christian view, intention is as treacherous as the deed itself. Hatred and lack of love between the marital partners is the curse upon the Monchensey family, for Harry experiences the same kind of things years later in his married life. Harry’s plight symbolizes the Biblical concept of the visitation of the sins of the fathers, upon the children unto the fourth generation of them that hate God.

Eliot in order to reveal the intensity of the family curse brings in the Aeschylan Parallel. Eliot has assigned an important part to the Eumenides, who figure side by side the human characters. They are borrowed from the *Oresteia* of Aeschylus. Eliot has used the Eumanides to bring in spiritual awakening in Harry. They make their appearance in certain crucial moments and turn the course of the play. The Eumenides appear physically only at Wishwood, though their presence was felt by Harry even before that. They are visible to those who are spiritually alert or alive.

The Eumenides exert influence on the spiritual and not in the physical world. They try to influence and prompt Harry to accept the spiritual calling he has received. They make their presence at crucial moments when Harry gets tempted to accept the human love, whether it is from Mary or his spiritual godmother Agatha. Harry has got his mother’s pride as well as his father’s instinct to murder his wife. Harry born in a house where there is no love between the parents is incapable of loving others. The result of this is his own loveless marriage. Harry’s inward conflict arises out of strange events. Though he has not killed his wife, he suffers, because in Christian theology, the sin committed in the thought is equal to the deed itself. Harry who wanted to get rid of his wife feels her presence more intolerable after her death. Now he is not only haunted by his wife but also his sense of guilt, which drives him mad. The seeds for Harry’s crime are sown earlier by his father’s desire to kill his mother. The sin meditated by his father set the course in action just like Adam’s fall in paradise loaded his posterity with original sin.

Amy is like the Puritan attitude of Christ, who addresses his mother as woman. Harry’s consciousness drives him to holiness. The spiritual action of the play is worked out by the sequence of Harry’s relationships. First is Amy his mother in the flesh and secondly it is to Mary whom he could almost love in the flesh and finally to Agatha, who proves to be a spiritual mother and lover. These are the three stages of Harry’s spiritual progression. It is the third one

which releases him from his human ties. Agatha tells Harry about his past and makes him aware of the nature of his sin. She is responsible for Harry's right decision in his spiritual quest. She tells him of his spiritual life as.

“You are the consciousness of your happy family
It's bird sent flying through the
Purgatorial flame” - (IT,ii 137-138)

She tells Harry that the knowledge about sin is essential before expiating for it. Harry often says that the past is unredeemable. For one cannot redeem the past. In Christian theology, if a person confesses his past, God blots it out and He will bury man's sins and He will never think about man's transgressions. Harry is a sick soul in the play. He understands that he is sick, and the knowledge of his spiritual sickness brings him salvation. Harry is like the “Old Testament” scapegoat. After the sin offerings are offered on the altar, the priest drives the scapegoat into the forest. Harry leaves Wishwood and goes away to an unknown destination for the sake of redemption. In opposition to God's will for Harry, there is the presence of human will designed to Amy. Harry's “I must go”, and Agatha's “you must go” (II-ii 281,282) run Amy's self-designed drama. It is the true drama of sin and redemption where “a dead man and a dead woman; the unhappy father who died alone away from home, and the unhappy, wife, drowned at sea, have been involved with the living Harry, Agatha, Mary and Amy” (Gardner 144)

To conclude Eliot presents at the heart of the play Christian doctrine of atonement and the mysterious exchange of sin and suffering in the spiritual world, through which mankind partakes in that mystery. Harry not only perceives it, but he yields to it totally. Harry the proud, wife-murderer, attains salvation by accepting God's will for his life. He is chosen by God to leave everything and follow the footsteps of Christ. It is only in God's will lies in man's peace and Eliot has presented this profound philosophy through the hero of the play *The Family Reunion*.

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