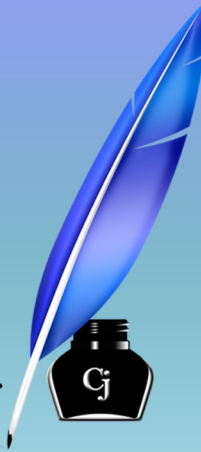


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The Christian, Hindu and Buddhist Philosophy in *The Cocktail Party*

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Thomas Stearns Eliot [1888-1965] is a well-known literary figure. He without doubt is amongst one of the most learned poets, playwrights and the critics. American born English poet has made great achievements in owning the literature that holds impact on both the eastern and the western readers of English Literature. The reason can be that he himself was a strong Christian with a huge knowledge of Hindu Philosophy. It was his inclination towards eastern philosophy that made him study philosophy at Harvard from 1906 to 1909, earning his bachelor's degree after three years, instead of the usual four. Stephen Spender, in the Standard Literary Biography of T.S. Eliot tells us that after visiting Paris in 1911, Eliot joined Charles Lanman's Philology Course, at Harvard. Lanman was a distinguished Sanskrit Scholar and Orientalist. Eliot was with him for two whole years and then went on to study the metaphysics of Patanjali for another two years. Eliot summed up this whole experience rather cleverly by saying that it left him in a state of 'enlightened mystification', but there is no doubt that he had gained a thorough intellectual grasp of Advaita Vedanta. He was enthused by early Buddhist Scriptures also. He said, 'it affected him as much as the Old Testament'. He described the *Bhagavad-Gita* as the next greatest philosophical poem to the *Divine Comedy* within his experience. However, Eliot never left his vital essential Christian faith while imbibing and enjoying these Eastern influences. This blend of the religious philosophies is seen in most of his works. This paper will analyze how Eliot employed the Christian martyrdom, sacrifice and penance, the Buddhist view point of 'suffering is life' and 'the still point-the Bindu' described in Hinduism, where we find that everything is beyond human reach in the crisis-ridden society of his play *The Cocktail Party*. Eliot applied his knowledge of religion and philosophy of the east and the west in framing the plot of this play.

Introduction

Thomas Stearns Eliot [1888-1965] is a well-known literary figure. He without doubt is amongst one of the most learned poets, playwrights and the critics. American born English poet has made great achievements in owning the literature that holds impact on both the eastern and the western readers of English Literature. He himself was a strong Christian with a huge knowledge of Hindu Philosophy. It was his inclination towards

eastern philosophy that made him study philosophy at Harvard from 1906 to 1909, earning his bachelor's degree after three years, instead of the usual four. ^[1]

Frank Kermode writes that the most important moment of Eliot's undergraduate career was in 1908, when he discovered Arthur Symons's *The Symbolist Movement in Literature* (1899). This introduced him to Jules Laforgue, Arthur Rimbaud, and Paul Verlaine. Without Verlaine, Eliot wrote, he might never have heard of Tristan Corbière and his book *Les amours jaunes*, a work that affected the course of Eliot's life. ^[2] The *Harvard Advocate* published some of his poems, and he became lifelong friends with Conrad Aiken, the American novelist. After working as a philosophy assistant at Harvard from 1909–1910, Eliot moved to Paris, where from 1910–1911, he studied philosophy at the Sorbonne. He attended lectures by Henri Bergson and read poetry with Alain-Fournier. ^[3] From 1911–1914, he was back at Harvard studying Indian philosophy and Sanskrit. ^[4]

Stephen Spender in the Standard Literary Biography of T.S. Eliot says that after visiting Paris in 1911, Eliot joined Charles Lanman's Philology Course, at Harvard. Lanman was a distinguished Sanskrit Scholar and Orientalist. Eliot was with him for two whole years and then went on to study the metaphysics of Patanjali for another two years. Eliot summed up this whole experience rather cleverly by saying that it left him in a state of 'enlightened mystification', he gained a thorough intellectual grasp of Advaita Vedanta. He was also very much moved by early Buddhist Scriptures, which he said, 'affected him as much as many parts of the Old Testament'. He also described the *Bhagavad-Gita* as 'the next greatest philosophical poem to the *Divine Comedy* within his experiences. However, Eliot never left his vital essential Christian faith while applying and enjoying these Eastern influences. As a result, we can see the Christian social scenario imbibing the teachings of the Bible and the *Bhagavad-Gita* in his plays.

Creation of *The Cocktail Party*

T. S. Eliot was at Princeton in 1948, during the days he received the letter of winning that year's Nobel Prize for literature. At that time, he was working on the play *One-Eye Riley*, which eventually developed into *The Cocktail Party* [CP] ^[5]. His literary reputation was built mainly on his proficiency as a poet and a critical theorist. In the later years of his life most of Eliot's work was concentrated on writing drama that would display his Christian sensibilities combined with eastern philosophy like that of a much mature and secular literary icon who evolved out of a strong anglican man. The AIM of this paper is to analyze his Play *The Cocktail Party* in the light of the Christian and the Hindu and Buddhist Philosophy, which he studied during his graduation, and its influence is seen in most of his poems and plays in his latter years' works.

The allusions in *The Cocktail Party*

1. The Christian martyrdom of the mistress character Celia is seen as a sacrifice that permits the predominantly secular life of the community to continue. In his 1949 Spencer Lecture, T. S. Eliot admitted to trying to conceal the source of the main theme of *The*

Cocktail Party. He confessed that he took his theme of a wife who chooses to die for her husband from the *Alcestis* of Euripides. He said, "I was still inclined to go a Greek dramatist for my theme, but I was determined to do so merely as a point of departure, and to conceal the origins so well that nobody would identify them until I pointed them out myself. In this at least I have been successful; for no one of my acquaintance recognized the source of my story in the *Alcestis* of Euripides".^[6]

2. The impermanence and sufferings in the lives of all the leading characters and Celia working for her own Nirvana reflect the Buddhist philosophy that says, "Life is suffering". According to other interpretations by Buddhist teachers and scholars, lately recognized by some Western non-Buddhist scholars, the "truths" do not represent mere statements, but are categories or aspects that most worldly phenomena fall into are grouped in two: (i) Suffering and causes of suffering (ii) Cessation and the paths towards liberation from suffering.^[7] Celia's decision to work for the missionary and getting herself killed was the only path she could choose to liberate her physical being from the sufferings.

3. The attainment of still point--**the Bindu** where nothing can be altered by human hands and everything seems to be out of human reach. Henry Harcourt Reilly explains this to the chamberlaynes when they were worried on getting the news of Celia's killing, thus reflecting the Hindu philosophy. It also contains the message of Shree Gita, which tells that we will get the fruit of our actions so one should not worry or regret for any happening on the earth. It is all planned and executed by the almighty.

The plot of the play reflects the contemporary society of Eliot

In the play *The Cocktail Party*, a married couple, Edward and Lavinia Chamberlayne, organizes the party. They suffer impermanence and separation after five years of marriage due to their infidelity. Their marital problems are aggravated by the pressure of having to keep up social appearances, portraying the modern society where the structure lacks in sincerity and lives in mere showbiz where we find partially satire on the traditional British drawing-room comedy and partially philosophical discourse on the nature of human relations. Any how the play explores the modern human conditions of love, marriage, post marital affair ,desire, infidelity and choosing of the right path after the intervention of a spiritual advisor who can be a psychiatrist too in this modern urban society thereby leading to realization, guilt, sacrifice and penance in search of salvation. All these seem to have the impact of Eliot's relation with his first wife Vivienne who showed infidelity in their relation. He wanted to uplift the spirituality of such women and men who lack loyalty in their relation, through his play.

Eliot had pointed out that this play owes to *Alcestis* by the Greek playwright Euripides (480-406 B c). In the Greek tragedy, the title character sacrifices her life for her husband, King Admetus of Thessaly, but is rescued from Hades by Hercules. In Eliot's version, a mysterious Unidentified Guest Sir Henry Harcourt Reilly brings Lavinia back in the same manner.

The spiritual advisor Reilly

In Eliot's literature, we find that he always preaches to his readers taking allusions from the Bible, the Bhagavad-Gita and the Buddhist philosophy. This can be seen in his *Wasteland*, *Murder in the Cathedral*, and *Ash Wednesday* along with *The Cocktail Party*. We can always find some advice to uplift the spirituality by reading his literature. Let us now analyze the role of Reilly in *The Cocktail Party* as the spiritual advisor. Sir Harcourt Reilly - a psychiatrist at the party, turns out in true twentieth-century form. Edward and Lavinia both consult him. They learn that their life together, though hollow and superficial, is preferable to life apart; a lesson that is rejected by the play's third main character, Edward's mistress, who, with the psychiatrist's urging, sets out to experience a life of honesty and uncertainty. Edward's mistress Celia is filled with guilt and chooses to go for penance and reconciliation with God through her services to the missionary. It reflects the Christian elements of penance, sacrifice and martyrdom and the Buddhist element of choosing the path of liberation through self-extinction. All this happens only after every leading character of the play consults Reilly and chooses to follow the path of righteousness.

The Life in the Play

The first act of *The Cocktail Party* is the only one divided into three separate scenes. The first scene opens on a party in the drawing room of the Chamberlayne home in London with all of the play's major characters—Edward, Julia, Celia, Peter, Alex, and the Unidentified Guest—present. There is witty bantering about people not present, making this seem like many British drawing-room comedies. Lavinia Chamberlayne is missing, and her husband, Edward, a lawyer, makes up a feeble excuse for the absence of his wife, who has invited the guests. He tells them that she has gone to visit an aunt in the country, but most of the party guests are skeptical. They had never heard of any such aunt of hers. They all leave except for the Unidentified Guest, whom Edward asks to stay and talk with him. As always, Eliot introduces a spiritual guide who shows the way towards virtues and tells how to depart from the guilt as Amy does in *The Family Reunion* and Eggerson does in *The Confidential Clerk*.

Edward confesses the stranger that Lavinia left him the day before, and that he tried to cancel the party but could not reach the people who did attend. During the conversation, he expresses his concern over what his life will be like without her, and the stranger tells him that he will arrange for Lavinia to return the following day reflecting the Greek element. Although Edward speaks alone with Celia Coplestone, his mistress, and we learn that they planned to be together pending the breakup of his marriage. Yet Edward now seems uncertain about Celia, as if he has a mind to return to his wife after he talks to the unidentified guest. The next day the Unidentified Guest indeed brings Lavinia home, and she and Edward discuss their marital problems, and especially Edward's indecisiveness. Edward becomes convinced that his indecision is a mental illness, and he seeks treatment. One day ending up in the office of the Unidentified Guest, he finally identified Sir Henry Harcourt-Reilly, as a psychologist. Lavinia joins the session, and reveals her own affair with Peter Quilpe - another frequent cocktail party guest. Through

indirect means, including vague talk about a sanitarium, Reilly convinces the Chamberlaynes to resume their marriage. Then Celia comes in to see Reilly, and she later decides to do missionary work. In the final act, set two years later, the Chamberlaynes are depicted as having a more tranquil marriage, and we learn that Celia has been killed violently in Kinkanja, where she was doing her missionary work. In spite of some characters' shock on hearing the news, most accept her death as natural, perhaps even noble.

This penance and suffering and the concept of self-extinction of Celia is drawn from the Christian, the Hindu and the Buddhist philosophy. Everyone makes a choice, of one kind or another. / And then must take the consequences. Celia chose / A way of which the consequence was crucifixion (CP187). Clearly, this is the main idea of the play. Despite Eliot's own well-known Christianity, *The Cocktail Party* does not argue specifically for Christian solutions to the human condition. Celia, endowed by her creator (Eliot) with such characteristics as having been a poet and a nurse, is something of a martyr for Christian ideals, as is made clear by her death being characterized as a crucifixion. However, this is seen as one of several paths towards solution. *The Cocktail Party* is simply an idea play, dramatizing the condition of man as a moral agent, a chooser.

Celia participated in an affair with Edward consequently committing adultery. Edward too was guilty of cheating his wife. Then he finds himself alone with the astute and slippery Unidentified Guest, who is a master of reverse psychology, and has the mysterious power to bring his wife back. Had the Unidentified Guest not intervened, Edward might simply have chosen to marry Celia. However, as usual Eliot wanted to uplift spirituality amongst his crisis-ridden characters so he introduced a spiritual advisor in the form of a psychiatrist reflecting the mood and temperament of the modern waste landers. The Unidentified Guest's pronouncements about Edward's indecision stack the deck against Edward choosing for himself. Edward is utterly criticized for his lack of choice but soon he realizes his moral duty. Eliot fulfills his purpose to preach the society lacking in religion and conduct. Julia, Alex, and Reilly form a bizarre conspiracy, whose entire existence seems devoted to making people see that they must live with their choices. Surely, few of us have encountered such benevolence as theirs. Julia sends nearly all the characters mysterious telegrams to meet at the Chamberlayne's, where she has planted a *de facto* spy in Reilly. Reilly as psychologist freely discusses his patients' problems with Julia and Alex, his co-conspirators. Because these three show human motives, these characters exist as device in the machinery of the play, to show the other characters their ultimate fates.

Eliot tries to show the illegitimate relationships as the hell in the modern society. He writes, "And other people bring no comfort or companionship. Edward echoes Sartre's formula when he says, "What is hell? Hell is oneself, / Hell is alone, the other figures in it / Merely projections" (CP98). One senses that Eliot has a whole philosophy of choice and selfhood lurking under here somewhere, one which he may have been better off writing as a philosophical treatise but he employed these philosophies to show the fate of wrong doings on earth. Eliot was always firm to philosophize his literature. Eliot owns masterpieces such as the long poem *The Wasteland* - a poem that uses multiple languages

along the way, the Biblical allusions and the Hindu philosophy and *The Hollow Men*, which paints a dark vision of man as "broken" because of his lack of faith in God. There are religious overtones in *The Cocktail Party* too that tells that religion is the right path.

That psychologists such as Reilly have taken the role of father confessors from priests is a well-known twentieth century development. Eliot had spent a good time with priests and Bishops during his conflicts with his wife Vivienne so he reflects those priestly sermons in his preaching. Celia, the martyr of the play, describes her plight to Reilly as having a "sense of sin," and believing that something is wrong with the world itself, and that she must "atone" for it. (CP137) Here Eliot reflects the Christian atonement.

"During Celia's confession to Reilly, they converse about the meaninglessness of the human condition, and it is here that Eliot is at his eloquent best. Celia: "Everyone's alone...They make noises, and think they are talking to each other" (CP134) Reilly: "Both ways avoid the final desolation / of solitude in the phantasmal world / of imagination, shuffling memories and desires" (CP142) is an echo of the first lines of *The Wasteland*, "April is the cruelest month ...mixing /Memory and desire." Here he reflects the Buddhist philosophy that desire is the cause of sufferings.

Perhaps Eliot's distilled eloquence about mankind's quandary is best offered in poetry, where the reader is expected to pat every word in search of meaning. As a drama, the characters in *The Cocktail Party* feel like props for Eliot's idea - Celia the martyr. Edward is Eliot's stand-in--the existentialist man. Reilly - the Freudian father confessor. Julia - the busybody, who seems to have no life of her own other than to help the Chamberlaynes conceivably, seeks out their "salvation" through Reilly. And Alex --- the world traveler with mysterious global connections, always speaking with a knowing air. Peter exists to square off the Edward/Lavinia/Celia love triangle. The characters all speak with intelligence; they just sound too much like Eliot.^[8] Thomas Stearns Eliot has deep interest in Indian philosophical systems following his studies in Sanskrit, and the Upanishads at Harvard University, and his poetry and plays often showed the influence of Hindu thought and sensibility. 'Impermanence and Suffering'; 'The Wheel'; 'Craving and Maya'; and 'The Still Point' are the elements that formulate the major part of the allusions Eliot took from the Hindu and the Buddhist philosophies. In Act II of his verse play *The Cocktail Party*, there is an exact reference to the *Mahaparinibbana-sutta* of the *Digha-nikaya*.^[9]

Go in peace, my daughter.

Work out your salvation with diligence...

And when I say to one like her

Work out your salvation with diligence, I do not understand What I myself am saying...And now O priests, I take my leave of you: All the constituents of being are transitory: Work out your salvation with diligence (CP)

In general, we may say from these and very many other passages, which Eliot quotes that he was obviously influenced by Hindu and Buddhist thought without sacrificing his personal High Anglican faith. Eliot's references to recurrence, reincarnation and destiny,

or karma typify the attitude that conforms with both Hindu and Buddhist ideas. In *The Cocktail Party*, we find the lines:

The man I saw before, he was only a

Projection-

I see that now- of something I wanted-

No, not wanted-something I aspired to-

Something I desperately wanted to exist (CP)

It is with the metaphor of the still point or bindu that fascinated Eliot perhaps the most. Bradley's magnum opus *Appearance and Reality*, which also draws heavily on Eastern thought, was a major influence on young Eliot. He has fused Indian philosophical themes and symbols with the western worldview in a macrobiotic entirety. He examines in various aspect: the symbolism of the wheel of time, maya – the desire, and the bindu – the still point, along with the problems rose by world suffering, impermanence, and facade and reality. He used quotations from the Upanishads and the *Bhagavad-Gita* in his major works with his Anglican sermons and dogmas. His universally enlightened mind took shape in the form the literature that is universally appealing.

Conclusion

As an idea play, *The Cocktail Party* has a few things going for it. It is a “well-made” play in the sense that the conflicts spawned from Edward's infidelity are introduced at the beginning and resolved by the end of the play. There is a plot that develops. The characters also speak a dry verse, the meter of which helps suggest the lifeless custom of their lives, which was the aim of Eliot. He has a gift for this sort of dialogue, many of the characters sound like the defeated narrator of Eliot's early *Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock*. The dialogue sparkles with intelligence, and is what keeps the play going. As usual, he picks up the themes of sin, guilt, penance, renunciation, suffering and search for salvation. However, in *The Cocktail Party* he does not remain just an Anglican rather he explains it through the Hindu and the Buddhist philosophy too as analyzed earlier in this article.

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