



**T. S. ELIOT'S POETIC DRAMAS AS THE ARTISTIC OUTCOME OF HIS
DRAMATIC CAREER EFFECTING A CURIOUS MIXTURE OF RELIGIOUS
BELIEF AND INDIVIDUAL ATTITUDE IN LIFE: AN APPRAISAL**

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ABSTRACT

*It is truly held that T.S.Eliot has been recognised as one of those great poets, whose poetry shows a keen awareness of the ills of contemporary civilization, its modes of living and ways of thought. Being extremely individualistic and idiosyncratic, he wrote for the cultural few and not for the common man. As a profound scholar with a well-stored mind, he loaded his poetry rather heavily with allusions and quotations covering a number of literatures, mythologies, religions and philosophies, both of the East and the West. In the early poetry, he merely criticises and the criticism reaches its apex in **The Waste Land** while in the later poetry, he seeks to formulate a philosophy of religion which finds its completest expression in **The Four Quarters**. Eliot himself declared in 1928 as: “a classicist in literature, a royalist in politics, and an Anglo-Catholic in religion”.*

INTRODUCTION

Eliot's poetry is nothing but a curious mixture of tradition and individual talent. Being a poet of encyclopedic erudition, he did his best to make his poetry almost the outcome of varied influences, too numerous to be recounted. The English Metaphysical tradition, the French Symbolist Movement, the poetry of John Donne, Existential philosophy, the philosophies of the orient, Hindu, Buddhist, Christian Tradition and theology, ancient myths and legends, are supposed to be a few influences which had gone to the making of his poetry. Having developed new effective techniques of communication, he as a great experimenter with verse-forms, increased the expressive power of poetry and forged new measures to express the complexity and intricacy of modern life.

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Eliot's view of life was essentially religious and for its expression, he created 'new poetic forms'. His influence has been complex and varied. No other poet of the 20th century has exercised such a wide and continuing influence. His *The Waste Land* set the tone for a number of contemporary and succeeding poets who found a new thrill in the use of urban imagery and rhythms. Besides being a poet, he established himself to be a great dramatist too. He did commence his career as a practical dramatist by writing a pageant play called *The Rock* so as to encourage the collection of funds for the building of new London churches. His second play *Murder in the Cathedral*, however, is a proper play written to be performed in Canterbury Cathedral at the early Canterbury Festival, commemorating the death of St. Thomas Becket, Canterbury's famous Martyr, who had been murdered in the very Cathedral where Eliot's play was first performed. Obviously the impulse behind this play was also religious rather than a properly theatrical one, as in the case of *The Rock*. But *Murder in the Cathedral*, is closer to being a drama than *The Rock* is. Here T.S. Eliot has made a very effective use of the chorus which is made up of the women of Canterbury, who are presented very realistically. St. Thomas, though a dignified and impressive character, is more a symbol than a person. Other characters in the play are also personifications of various simple, abstract attitudes. The most important 'action' in the play is St. Thomas' triumphing over various temptations which take place in his mind. Thus, "*Murder in the Cathedral* is strictly 'interior' and the outward value of the play is rather that of a spectacle and a commemorative ritual" (Mullik 230).

Murder in the Cathedral is a typical Eliotian poetic drama. Generally speaking, in the twentieth century, there has been a revival of the poetic drama and some of the great poets like Yeats and Eliot have written poetic plays. This was a reaction against the prose plays of show and others which showed a certain loss of emotional touch with the moral issues of the age. The revival of the poetic drama has a much closer connection with the deeper religious beliefs or social attitudes of their authors than had most of the prose drama of the time. His *The Cocktail Party* is considered the most successful of T.S. Eliot's plays from the theatrical point of view. Regarded as one of the greatest literary figures of the twentieth century, Eliot was a poet, dramatist, essayist and critic all rolled in one. Eliot at his best, like Aristotle, substituted scientific inquiry, dispassionate dissection and assessment for subjectivism and vagueness of impressionism. Nor does he favour the sociological or the psychological criticism:

"The psychological and sociological are probably the two advertised varieties of modern criticism; but the number of ways in which the problems of criticism are approached was never before so great or so confusing... criticism seems to have separated into several diverse kinds" (Eliot's use of Poetry, 27).

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Comparison and analysis, as Eliot puts it, are the chief tools of criticism. Being a great critic, he established himself to be a critic of comprehensive taste showing his readiness to look at a work of art from a different angle. In his essay “The Metaphysical Poets”, Eliot extends “much praise to John Donne’s poetry for its speech rhythm, elaboration of a figure of speech to the furthest stage, the telescoping of images and multiplied associations” (Hanif 3).

The age of Eliot was essentially an age of realism and rationalism. There was the rapid growth of scientific advancement. The theological doctrines of the previous age came to be questioned. As for literature, new experiments were tried in all branches of literature. Eliot was the seventh and the last child of Henry Ware Eliot, a flourishing business man in bricks and Charlottle C. Eliot, a woman of fine literary taste. His birth and growth and observation in America, his exposure to European culture and his citizenry in England, his erudition and his literary contents have had contributory effects in shaping him into an outstanding poet-critic. When in 1955, the friends of Canterbury Cathedral requested Eliot to write a play for the annual festival, he chose a religious play, which combined liturgical forms and elements of morality plays, thereby introducing a new technique of making some of the dramatic personae step out and speak to a twentieth century audience. This he did because he wanted his message to reach a larger audience for his concern was self-perception ‘with an eye on perfection of society’.

Eliot was found to be a puzzle to his contemporaries, a puzzle which none could neglect because “he is original in content and concept, ‘daring in approach and extremely effective in execution” (Madappally 1). As a result, his contemporaries failed to understand him but when they began to follow, he had become already famous. In a word, he treated the English poetry as it belonged to him and he not to it. The year 1886 Eliot was born saw the death of Arnold, subsequently marking the beginning of a new era in English literature. Ronald Peacock in his famous book *The Art of Drama* proclaims that the greatest plays of the world, have been written in verse. This is true of the classical dramas of any language. It was because those dramas were written by poets. The essential part of a play is the words and words raised to their higher power are poetic. This justifies Eliot’s view on poetic drama that, “the human soul, in intense emotion, strives to express itself in verse If we want to get at the permanent and universal we tend to express in verse” A Dialogue on Dramatic Poetry 2). So it is true with the English dramas also. Poetic drama did reach its summit with the Board of Avon. Marlowe’s mighty lines found the full vigour and life on the lines blotted by the immortal Bard. With the magic wand of poetry, the dramatist created fortress or forest, bowler or battlefield on the stage. Since Shakespeare, the verse form fall into the hands of the Jacobean writers. Dryden and others essayed at the ‘dramatic poetry’. The twentieth century dramatist found prose a much more effective medium to discuss the burning social problems on the stage. Eminent dramatic geniuses like Granville Barker, Galsworthy and Shaw were advocates of introducing prose in plays. Stephen Phillips (1804-1915) is perhaps the earliest of the modern champions of verse drama. Between 1900 and 1908, he wrote five poetic

dramas like *Herald*, *Ulysses* and *Nero*. What he longed for was to revive the Elizabethan tradition in verse drama. John Drinkwater (1882-1932) set poetic drama on a surer footing with his plays like *Abraham Lincoln*, *The Storm* and *X=O* (1915). Yeats and the Irish Theatre Movement contributed much to the revival of the poetic drama in the present century and with Eliot it took a new turn and shape, a new mystery and meaning and thanks to his efforts, the poetic form established itself in the modern context.

Eliot's dramas are the artist outcome of the last phrase of his poetic career, sober and serious. He was a poet-dramatist, as his dramas are intimately related to his poetry. He conceived everything as poetry but expressed it rather dramatically. In other words, he is intensely dramatic in all his poems. Even the Sweeney poems breathe the fire of poetry and vigour of drama. Eliot was in fact, an original poet-dramatist with whom English drama took a new mould and meaning. Sweeney Agonists Fragments of our Aristophanic melodrama (1932) was his maiden attempt at the art of drama. It was followed by *Rock*, a Pageant Play (1934), *Murder in the Cathedral* (1935), *The family Reunion* (1939), *The Cocktail Party* (1950), *The Confidential Clerk* (1955) and *The Elder Statesman* (1959). Almost all his plays are classical in cast and romantic in content. One can find a happy marriage of the tradition and the individual talent in all his plays. Eliot advocated an ideal Christian way of life in all his plays. They are, in fact, the dramatic presentation of his "idea of a Christian Society".

Eliot found a better medium, "a new pasture", in dramatic verse, instead of black verse that reached its perfection with Shakespeare. He found the dramatic verse, miraculously suitable to bring out the smoke complexities of theme. In his words, poetic drama is not merely a drama done into verse but altogether a different type of drama and the poetic pattern and the dramatic pattern should be so consonant that both are the complementary aspects of a creative imagination. All these go to make Eliot the dramatist both original and individual. As stated by critics, *Murder in the Cathedral* is the greatest dramatic achievement of Eliot as it has all the elements of a successful poetic drama. To quote Bamber Gascoigne, "In *Murder in the Cathedral*, Eliot admirably fulfilled his own demands for poetic drama" (P 14). In his plays, Eliot is mainly concerned with an attitude to a way of life. This attitude is made clear by presenting various levels of approach towards that ideal. Even the innermost experiences of the characters go to vivify this attitude and hence the plays deal with man's endeavour to achieve this idea. This is exemplified even in his first religious play, *The Rock*. It is the rock of St. Peter upon which Christ built the church. It is in fact, the rock. The church stands for a way of life. The anemic and spiritually barren modern world may find the salvation only through such a way of life, an adamant-like asceticism, the purgatorial fire. Eliot prescribes the same remedy in all his plays and poems, for the morally degraded modern world. The plot of *The Confidential Clerk* centres on the mistaken identity of illegitimate children as in *Ion* of Euripides. *The Elder Statesman* is a modernised version of Oedipus, Eliot peeps into the mysteries of the mind of modern man in his drama, *The Cocktail Party*.

Eliot set out to re-establish poetic drama since he felt that verse play can give something intensely. In such a verse drama, there is the revelation of one person's experience to be acknowledged by all the people. He changed his original title "Fear in the Way" to the present one, as he wanted the play to appeal to all kinds of people. He wanted to present a study of the problems of modern people since he knew the people were losing faith in God. Therefore, he chose a Christian theme and analysed the mystery of life and suffering in the life of a martyr. The influence of the Symbolist Movement is the most outstanding in his career as a poet, critic and dramatist. Though Royce, Eliot took an interest in F.H.Bradley. Huge Kennes is of the opinion that excessive caution on Eliot's part in dealing with the "problems of individual consciousness and reality are the direct outcome of Bradleyan logic" (Hugh 35). T.E. Hume, a disciplinarian and classicist too had such an impact on Eliot that Eliot came to assert facts such as "the extinction of personality in art" (The Sacred wood 53) and "the primacy of the supernatural over the natural life" (Hayward 42).

The word 'religion' forms an integral part of Eliot's world. His ancestors were puritans; his father was a missionary for the Unitarian. But Eliot adopted the established religion of England in 1927. Religious questions preoccupied Eliot during most of his life. Personally he felt that it means "an instinctive adherence to the Christian dogmas" (P 146). Virtually he means a passionate concern for man's spiritual salvation. He implies "that primacy of the supernatural over the natural life" (P 140). He chose dramatic writing because he believed that it is the most effective medium of social and religious transformation. Even in his criticism, he talks of literature and culture in terms of religious actuality. In the words of G.L.Barber, Eliot has increasingly chosen as his ground,

*"not religion itself but what
leads towards it, goes with it
and comes from it..." (P 202)*

Since his purpose is to awaken a sense and strengthen the religious faith, Eliot holds sway because of his experiments done in verse drama. He emphasized the ability and vitality of poetic drama to capture the elusive in life and make it delightful. ***Murder in the Cathedral*** was his first complete poetic play. Arnold P. Hinchliff's comment is worth noting here:

*"The English verse dramatists sought
to restore verse plays to their central
place in the English theatre. T.S.Eliot
began with certain advantages over poets
like Clander and Yeats because he had
already brought back ordinary words and
situations into poetry.... Eliot saw his
task two fold: to overcome the prejudice*

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*against verse in the theatre and to prevent
the enjoyment of verse for itself... “ (195)*

Eliot is said to have expressed his concern with poetic drama in his literary criticism over a long period. One of his earliest attempts is *Rhetoric and Poetic Drama*. In *Murder in the Cathedral*, he made more successful use of forms and effects tried in *The Rock*. It conforms with the classical unities, makes use of a chorus and like Greek tragedy has the character of ritualistic pageant. His four more plays were set in contemporary England and were concerned with spiritual struggle. He tries to present traditional Christian issues and values in contemporary terms and locates religious meaning and experience in a secularised society. In *Family Reunion*, there are ritual scenes, developing out of the theme of sin. In *Cocktail Party*, there is a note on unhappy affairs and unhappy marriages. *The Confidential Clerk* moves through entertaining action and witty statement towards religious affirmation. But his play *Murder in the Cathedral* forms a distinct milestone in the journey towards the resuscitation of a modern poetic drama. More than in any other play in *Murder in the Cathedral* the dramatic intensity is combined with poetic inspiration. Baber Gascoigne observes in *Twentieth Century Drama* that *Murder in the Cathedral* admirably fulfils his demands for poetic drama. Here in this play, one is made to think not of what happened to a particular individual at a certain point of time but of all the time and the religious experience of all men. Ronald Peacock is right when he says,

*“The play does not show clearly the historical
context. The real conflict between king and
Archbishop. But he is writing the problems of
Sainthood and the eternal experience of martyrdom.
Becket the Saint is seen, more than Becket the
Man ...” (P 87)*

Thomas Becket is the “holy blissful martyr” of Chaucer’s Tales. Eliot’s aim was to show the universal nature of conflict between the servants of God and the servants of king. Eliot himself summed up the very action very precisely,

*“A man comes home, foreseeing that he
will be killed and he is killed” (P 80)*

Becket is a spiritual as well as a temporal leader and that this death is connected with a supreme act of religious sacrifice. Becket in his preaching defines a martyr.

*“A true martyr is he who has become
the instrument of God, who has lost
his will in the will of God” (Murder in the Cathedral 67)*

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Becket overcomes each temptation. He replies sharply to each temper,

*"You come twenty years too late
shall I who keep the keys
of heaven and hell, supreme alone in England.
Who bind and loose, with power from the Pope,
Descend to desire a punier power?" (P 376).*

Incarnation becomes the very theme of the play-uniting birth and death looking at the same time backwards, to Part-I and forwards to martyrdom. This is essentially a Christian idea. He reiterates that in ***Murder in the Cathedral***, there is a drama within the limitations of art. He accepts the relevance of religion to all spheres of artistic activity including drama. Sharma concludes,

*"... it is religion which has largely
determined the theme and treatment
of his play" (P 2).*

In the words of C.L. Barber, Eliot's ground

*"is not religion itself, but what leads
towards it, goes with it and comes
from it" (P 202).*

Eliot makes the play ***Murder in the Cathedral*** project the relevance of Christianity in the daily life and stresses its value by way of offering religious solutions to the problems of the individual. In the words of H.L.Sharma,

*"***Murder in the Cathedral*** portrays the
sacrifice of a saint, a means of salvation,
not only for Becket, but also for the
ordinary women of Canterbury" (P 31).*

The whole body of Eliot's plays has both the surface action and a dramatic fable with some religious significance. The stories of orates and the juries in ***Sweeney Agonists*** and ***The Family Reunion*** lend these plays a religious significance. ***The Confidential Clerk*** produces a religious drama which includes religion and poetry within its frame work. ***The Elder Statesman*** wears a thin mask for religious meaning. In ***The Cocktail Party***, there is the theme of a spiritual quest under the shade of satire; ritual drama forms the basis of the structure. In ***Elder Statesman***, the essential supremacy of the Divine will is ascertained through human love. In ***The Rock***, man is advised indirectly to concentrate on his present life and leave the

rest to God. There is the social as well as the spiritual impulse of the community. To conclude, *Sweeney Agonists*, *The Rock*, *The Cocktail Party* and *Murder in the Cathedral* are remarkable plays in his onward march towards a perfect dramatic art.

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