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INEVITABILITY AND FREE WILL  
IN  
SOME OF T.S. ELIOT'S PLAYS

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One of the dominant preoccupations both in Eliot's poetry and drama is the idea of man's spiritual conflicts and moral dilemmas. In his plays, these concepts are dramatized in characters who are spiritually elected as representatives of the supremacy and perfection of the inevitable divine will as against the characters' individual, free will. The aim of the present study is to shed some light on the essential productive paradox resulting from the clash of these two forms of will. This, consequently, gives Eliot's plays that "unique" universal appeal, integrated . . . into contemporary society,"<sup>1</sup> and into modern man's spiritual, individual dilemmas. An essential aspect of this paradox as dramatized in his plays is the conflict and reconciliation that take place between the characters' individual free will and a higher directing force which may be labelled inevitability.

The action in T. S. Eliot's plays takes its form from the individual's stubborn attempt to assert his free will as the only effective force in life, since this would give him all the selfish satisfaction that his normal human psychology requires. On the other hand, and at a certain critical point of his existence, man is forced to face the challenging presence of an external, seemingly hostile power that contradicts and frustrates his willful actions and decisions. This conflict is more valid in the



cases of certain characters elected for the cause of their spiritual readiness, to be representative evidences of the supremacy of inevitability.

The genuine dramatic value of Eliot's approach to this theme lies in the absence of sharp prejudice to any of those conflicting Wills. Rather, it is a call for a spiritually and physically positive compromise of these two wills as the individual tends towards a paradoxically willful submission to inevitability at the conviction of its perfection. Hence, "in Eliot's plays there runs a sense that everything is going to happen according to a predestined plan"<sup>2</sup>, so that all the endeavours to assert the individual free will go in vain.

The theme is most vividly incarnated in Murder in the Cathedral which is in fact "a dramatization of the human actions [as] subordinated to the divine".<sup>3</sup> In this play, St. Thomas of Canterbury is not merely an individual character in the dramatic sense of the term. His value lies in being a symbol of the spiritual readiness to sacrifice himself willfully for a will higher than his own. Harry, in The Family Reunion, is similarly a personification of the moral idea that a sin, whether old or new must inevitably be expiated for. And in the third play, The Cocktail Party, more than one character epitomize the sense of modern spiritual loss and unbelonging to be ultimately equalized by a higher source of spiritual relief in the submission to the inevitable will. So, those characters are dramatically employed for a purpose higher than themselves and their capabilities. They are actually functioning as mirrors to "reflect



the design of the spiritual world"<sup>4</sup> and hence give the theme its universal dimension.

Still, however, Eliot's aim in the dramatization of this theme is not strictly religious, in the sense of preaching a Christian message as much as to discuss basic spiritual factors in human life in general. Even when Christianity is evidently introduced, it is more of a background or frame for the treatment of the characters' spirituality.

Following Murder in the Cathedral, with its stark religious setting, the theme is given a modernized, contemporary shape as an individualized spiritual conflict within a social context. In The Cocktail Party and The Family Reunion, Eliot intended to manipulate the religious framework of his theme on another plain unlike that of Murder in the Cathedral. These plays, as D. E. Jones quotes T. S. Eliot's assertion in a talk broadcast in 1932, are:

. . . about people who have repeated so many words belonging to Christian theology, and have never heard anything of Christian theology itself.<sup>5</sup>

In the light of such a statement these plays are to be received as a secular presentation of Christian or spiritual values. In this, the aim is to familiarize the modern audience with the ultimate spirituality of all religions. This made it essential for the dramatist to abstract his characters so as to personify landmarks in the modern myth of man's dilemmas. The mythical element, very much like the spiritual, is employed to highlight the universal implications as "the real becomes without being negated or displaced, transparent, and through



the myth, it appears as the immanent meaning . . . an image of human nature being subsumed under the divine."<sup>6</sup>

The idea of inevitability may be a legitimate heir of the old concept of fate as employed in Greek drama. To be closer to the modern mood, Eliot prefers to disguise fate in the form of a final correct decision which is divinely directed and that is contrasted with other free willful decisions taken before being blessed with a sort of vision or spiritual illumination. Celia in The Cocktail Party admits that:

. . . I think I really had a vision of something though I don't know what it is.  
I don't want to forget it.  
I went to live with it. I could do without everything put up with anything if I might cherish it all.

The same idea is traceable in being saved from a life-time state of loss in illusions, by a supreme caring power as in the minor cases of Edward, Lavinia and Paul in The Cocktail Party or Amy and May in The Family Reunion.

The clash of two wills necessitates the dramatization of the idea in the form of an inner conflict that might take the form of a religious order as in Murder in the Cathedral or a psychological/social problem as in the other two plays. It is a conflict between what man's will and limited mentality drives him to and what he spiritually feels as an elevated power mastering his decisions and hence re-shaping his life anew.

This may explain the reason behind the almost static dramatic action in these plays. They include much talk about what has happened and what should happen without taking



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drastically suggestive steps until the end when the ultimate inevitability is asserted. This procedure is typically psychological, it is a chance for talking and thinking to bring the patient into a final, significant realization that would free him from his psychic ailment.

Since the conflict is basically internal, each of Eliot's characters, especially the major ones, lives in a state of isolation, to which they are driven by external factors, as in the case of St. Thomas Becket who is "in a deep trance of self communion for most of the play,"<sup>7</sup> because of the four tempters who represent his own willful, mistaken view of his expected martyrdom. This sense of loss and isolation is ultimately overcome by an ultimate realization of the inevitability of his death that should be serenely accepted as an act of readiness to give back his soul to its creator to deliver his lesson to people. This happens to St. Thomas when he no more feels influenced by the four tempters.

The roots of the dilemma can be traced to the characters' blind submission to their personal wills which may go astray unless re-directed. This may be Eliot's message to all people who must learn how to bring about a harmony between these two wills.

St. Thomas's will goes astray when, as suggested in the comments of the tempters, he is about to accept martyrdom for purely selfish reasons. Harry Monchensey's free will tends to make him escape from the Eumenides who offer salvation from the inherited curse. His escape, however, proves destructive as it practically submerges him in another sin,



namely; the doubtful murder of his wife. For Harry, the final spiritual resolution is arrived at in his final choice "to follow rather than flee from the furies that have been vaguely christianized as 'bright angels'."<sup>8</sup> In The Cocktail Party, Celia's will takes her in the direction of seeking false selfish happiness on the ruins of another family only to be elected later for a higher sort of happiness in the selfless endeavours for a better, more constructive role in life.

The idea may be variably approached from a psychological point of view, by considering that each of these major characters is psychologically obsessed with a heavy burden of conscience. Harry lives a double sense of guilt, that of his doubt to be actually sinful and the sinful feeling initiated in him by the old family curse. In coming back home, Harry has to face all the images and figures that revive his childhood in a typical psychological therapy. This paves the way to the resolution of his psychological complexity, but it doesn't give the repose of innocence and security until he admits the inevitable outlet that is initiated in the form of a hereditary fateful sin that must be expiated. He was ironically expecting "to start again as if nothing has happened, only to find a new beginning that depends on facing rather than repressing what has happened, as he seeks a false outlet in a far luxurious life to hush down the sense of guilt. The idea is more nakedly dramatized in The Cocktail Party, in the psychiatrist who is the sound of conscience for the other characters. This psychological aspect of the idea is technically supported by the employment of flashbacks that dig out the old roots of the



to decide anything in the full sense of the word, except to accept God's inevitable will. He says:

It is out of time, that my decision is taken  
IF you call that decision,  
To which my whole being gives entire consent  
I give my life  
To the law of God above the law of man

This may be equally true to the other plays as well. The final decision

. . . is always the design of God. For his love of man, to warn and to lead them, to bring them back to his ways. It is never the design of man.

Similarly, Harry Monchensey in The Family Reunion who takes once and for all the saving decision of being led by the Eumenides in this mood as he says

I am still befouled,  
But I know there is only one way out of defilement  
Which leads in the end to reconciliation  
And I know that I must go.

In this he finds a liberating illumination of his illusions and loss. In The Cocktail Party, such ultimate decisions a glimpse of light considering this as the only vital decision in her life. She says:

But I know it is I who made the decision  
I must tell you that

That step proves great in leading her to grant glory and to give meaning and value to her existence.

These decisions, not to decide but to accept the divine decisions, involve a determination to fling free from all the



common bounds of existence that transcend time in the sense of its implied divinity. Thomas Becket says:

I give my life  
To the law of God above the law of Man

This is actually a step towards the purgation offered to those elected figures. This purgation, however, is not cheaply offered. It must be bought by suffering. Inevitability performs the direction and the achievement is left to the characters' power to endure:

... we have fought the beast  
And have conquered. We have only to conquer  
Now, by suffering. This is the easier victory

Even though each of the major characters is divinely elected and saved, this is not to be taken as a sort of distinction favouring certain figures with salvation and ignoring or depriving others. In fact, the divine justice must offer equal chances and the divine wisdom elects few to throw on them the burdensome task of saving others at least by giving them as examples to be followed. In this, even the modernized plays come to have a religious or at least a spiritual message.

In Murder in the Cathedral, Thomas Becket is a Christ figure to be taken as a saviour and as an example by all Christians represented in the chorus. This idea is "linked with the Christian paradox of death and rebirth in the martyr's expiation for the sins of the world."<sup>15</sup> The ultimate state of peace reached by St. Thomas is described in his central sermon and this evidently is his message as a saviour figure. It



is an almost non-descript state of tranquility described in abstract terms as

. . . something given  
And taken, in a lifetime's death in love  
Ardour and selflessness and selflessness and self-  
surrender

The chorus call Thomas frankly as they recognize him as a saviour figure, "Thomas Archbishop, save us, save us". In this cry they simultaneously transmit to Thomas the inevitability of his performance of the inevitable will. This cry and the sense of responsibility it imposes on Thomas comes to "penetrate his heart and enables him to gain freedom ironically from the effect of free will."<sup>16</sup> As the spiritual salvation takes place in Thomas Becket's character, the priests also come to accept what happens patiently, otherwise they will be sinners. They encourage him by saying:

These things had to come to you and you to accept them  
This is your share of the eternal burden . . .  
The perpetual glory.

The lesson will be taught by the priests in turn to save them.

The idea which is magnified in Murder in the Cathedral fits, with some variation to the other two plays. Celia, in The Cocktail Party, by sacrificing his free will, she frees a whole community from sin and misfortune. In subjecting her body to physical torture, many souls are saved. So she is a saviour on two levels, that which the citizens in the village she went to recognize; and the higher level which will affect them even though it may be beyond their primitive perception. Similarly, Harry's obedience to the Eumenides' call saves him and cleans



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the whole family from the old curse and lets them enjoy their life anew.

The minor characters in these plays are hardly given an identity beyond a name. They are created by the dramatist to manifest the reaction to the hero's conflict. In Murder in the Cathedral, the minor characters are the women of Canterbury and the priests whose attitude is contrasted with that of Thomas' final submission; the chorus of relatives in The Family Reunion and in The Cocktail Party all the attendants of the party other than Celia and Doctor Reilly are always there as witnesses and commentators on the action. They live the conflict on a minor level and have their own simple and less elevated form of submission to inevitability. The chorus in these plays, unlike those in Greek plays, do not stand for the all knowing reformers. Rather, they are reflective of the major characters' success as collective figures.

In The Cocktail Party, Edward and Lavinia learn a lesson of love and submission from Celia and hence submit to their inevitable union. Also, though supposed to provide the comic element in the play becomes for a moment the announcer of its message.

There are things beyond one's powers,  
Which must be left to the mystery and the mercy.

Moreover, the minor characters magnify the spiritual conflict. Mary, in The Family Reunion stands for the instinctive female attraction to Harry and his opposite repulsive feeling from her as being his mother's choice. This attraction glimmers for a moment in his mind, half-consciously as a possible "way of



escape from the sense of guilt."<sup>17</sup> She is an aspect of his conflict to Celia when she was clinging to Edward's love in The Cocktail Party in a last, though failing, attempt to escape unconsciously from her divine inevitability.

Edward was incapable of giving Celia the moral support she needed. He himself, very much like Harry is repressed by still another individual will which is that of Lavinia. For this minor character, the matter is purely psychological. This long oppression by Lavinia's dominant will leads Edward to suffer a state of "death of the spirit".<sup>18</sup> He even stops belonging to the wider human group and this is the problem of alienation and estrangement that Doctor Reilly cured by making Edward "reconciled to the human condition."<sup>19</sup> In his acceptance of the human condition there is an implied acceptance of inevitability and hence of his married life.

Julia and Alex, on the other hand, play the part of the guardians who have a certain directing effect on those elected by the divine will. The guardians here are members of the select group which "Eliot calls the community of Christians."<sup>20</sup>

In The Family Reunion, Agatha is the cause of the original sin that Harry has been suffering and consequently of his attempt, whether fulfilled or not, to kill his wife. Moreover, she is the surrogate mother figure as she used to feel towards Harry even before his birth as a result of her attachment to his father. The real mother, Amy, echoes the conflict between free will as against the inevitable divine will. She is naturally a selfish woman with a very strong will that she tried to impose on all surrounding her, yet finally she is overcome by inevitability



when she is morally killed by her son's departure though she has once escaped being physically killed by her husband. T. S. Eliot describes his play by saying that "the tragedy is the tragedy of Amy, of a person living on will alone"<sup>21</sup>, and by this elevates the role of this character. So, her death is the announcement of the failure of her life principle which is the belief in the superiority of the individual free will.

In considering the fact that Eliot's themes mostly "spring from the world of the spirit"<sup>22</sup>, it might not be easy to reconcile this with the dominant modern and contemporary dramatic concerns. In bringing his characters to lose their own wills in the will of God, "he achieves the reconciliation of all irreconcilables."<sup>23</sup> This is the idea of the paradoxical theme, in these plays, of the conflict between the two wills and their ultimate presentation as being complementary so all those who start as being proudly blinded by their own wills as against the divine will, they come then to "consent that it may be willed [and] suffer that they may will it."<sup>24</sup> it is the feeling that the divine will is not an imposition equal to dictatorship but as an act of life and merciful guidance. It is a sort of spiritual law that mercifully guides man to the peace of mind and soul that in spite of his attempt to achieve by following personal wills, he ultimately fails.

### NOTES

- (1) Abdulla A. Metwalli, Modern Drama (Beirut: Bouhairy Brothers, 1971) p. 61.
- (2) Ibid., p. 88.
- (3) Martin Browne, The Making of T. S. Eliot's Plays (Cambridge: The University Press, 1970) p. 42.
- (4) Op. Cit., p. 81.



- (5) D. E. Jones, The Plays of T. S. Eliot (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1960) p.
- (6) Ronald Peacock quoted in Jones, pp. 88-89.
- (7) Metwalli, p. 62.
- (8) Bernard Bergonzi, T. S. Eliot (London: Macmillan, 1972) p. 147.
- (9) J. L. Styan, The Dark Comedy (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1979) p. 164.
- (10) Jones, p. 99.
- (11) Ibid., p. 60.
- (12) Ibid., p. 108.
- (13) Ibid., p. 59.
- (14) Ibid., p. 6.
- (15) Metwalli, p. 63.
- (16) Browne, p. 43.
- (17) F. O. Matthiessen, The Achievement of T. S. Eliot (New York : Oxford University Press, 1959) pp. 167-8.
- (18) Jones, p. 136.
- (19) Ibid.
- (20) Ibid., p. 150.
- (21) Browne, p. 107.
- (22) Metwalli, p. 62.
- (23) Jones, p. 64.
- (24) Ibid.

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- (1) Bergonzi, Bernard. T. S. Eliot. London: Macmillan, 1972.
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- (10) Williams, Raymond. Drama from Ibsen to Eliot. London: Chatto and Windus, 1971.