THE SAINT FIGURE IN THREE PLAYS OF T.S. ELIOT

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INTRODUCTION

Writing in 1932, T.S. Eliot clearly states his desire to write for the theater:

> The ideal medium for poetry, to my mind, and the most direct means of social "usefulness" for poetry, is the theatre . . . . Every poet . . . would like to convey the pleasures of poetry, not only to a larger audience, but to larger groups of people collectively; and the theatre is the best place in which to do it.[1]

At the same time, Eliot was also influenced by his conversion to Anglo-Catholicism, and his art reflects his Christian point of view. It is not surprising, given his desire for a wider, collective audience and his Christian point of view, that for his first three, full-length plays, Eliot poses the saint figure as his most important character.[2] In his first play, Murder in the Cathedral, he presents an historical saint, Thomas Becket, in a stylized, ritualistic re-enactment of Becket's murder and consequent martyrdom. The question of sainthood in his next play, The Family Reunion,

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[1] The Use of Poetry and the Use of Criticism (London: Faber and Faber, 1933), pp. 153-154.

[2] The term "saint figure" is used in this paper to describe those characters whom Eliot sets above and apart from the other characters, in their spiritual perception and in the ultimate decision they make. In each play, the "saint figure" makes a choice, a choice which takes him out of the world of ordinary men and women, into a realm of experience which the other characters may, to one extent or another, understand, but not share. In "The Dry Salvages" Eliot refers to this experience: "But to apprehend/ The point of intersection of the timeless/ With time, is an occupation for the saint --/ No occupation either, but something given/ And taken, in a lifetime's death in love,/ Ardour and selflessness and self-surrender."

as a close look at the play will show, is more puzzling. It appears, however, that Eliot does conceive of Harry as a man capable of religious experience of a higher order than that of the other characters. In "Poetry and Drama," Eliot, in discussing Harry, uses the phrase, "salvation of the son."[1] Moreover, in the play itself, Harry, at the end of scene two, part two says: " . . . Why I have this election/ I do not understand." But he is sure of "this election" and that he "must follow the bright angels" -- those Furies that have formerly plagued him. When his mother asks him where he is going, he answers her in terms associated with an ascetic choice: "worship in the desert," "stony santuary," "A care over the lives of humble people." Celia Coplestone, in The Cocktail Party, chooses to leave the world of London society, joins an "austere nursing order" and is "crucifed/ Very near an anthill." Leoard Unger finds, in tracing the theme of isolation in Eliot, that Becket, Harry and Celia ultimately solve the problem of isolation by a religious choice.[2]

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[1] Selected Prose (Harmondsworth, Middlesex: Penguin Books, 1953), p. 82.

[2] T.S. Eliot (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1961), p. 12. "When we turn to the plays, we find characters either accepting isolation or struggling to escape from it. In Murder in the Cathedral, the saint, Thomas, is by definition set apart from ordinary humanity. Harry, towards the end of The Family Reunion, says,'Where does one go from a world of insanity?'-- and the implication of his subsequent statement is that he goes the way of the saint and the martyr. This is the way, too, that Celia Coplestone goes in The Cocktail Party."

Eliot's interest in sainthood derives naturally from his Christian belief -- saintliness being the highest spiritual condition of a Christian. It is important to point out, however, that the saint is valued, not only for his individual experience, but also for the effect he has on those around him. Eliot is not concerned just with the saint-as-saint, the figure in and by itself, but also with the interaction of the saint with the other characters and his effect on them.

As a dramatist, Eliot's problem in characterizing a saint is three-fold. First he is presenting the saint figure to a modern, largely secular audience, an audience accustomed to psychological realism, and modern psychology reduces sainthood to various categories of psychosis. A modern audience is also used to a presentation of humanist values. Eliot is well aware of this, as this statement from "Religion and Literature" shows:

> What I do wish to affirm is that the whole of modern literature is corrupted by what I call Secularism, that it is simply unaware of, simply cannot understand the meaning of, the primacy of the supernatural over the natural life . . . .[1]

Eliot handles this problem in two ways. In Murder in the Cathedral, he avoids the problem by presenting an historical saint -- one that an audience can believe, since it can "suspend disbelief" by realizing that in the 13th century sainthood was universally accepted.

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[1] The New Orpheus, Nathan A. Scott, Jr., ed. (New York: Sheed and Ward, 1964), p. 232.

It can also witness the direct, dramatic effect, as well as the long term historical effect of Becket's sanctification. In The Family Reunion and in The Cocktail Party, however, Eliot attempts to solve the problem by presenting the saint figure without explicitly stating the experience in Christian terms, and by coming to grips with modern psychology. In the same essay, Eliot says: "What I want is a literature which should be unconsciously, rather than deliberately and defiantly, Christian . . . ."[1] Harry and Celia are saint figures who are not "deliberately and defiantly Christian."

Secondly, and this problem is related to the first, he must present his saint in believable, human terms. The audience must be able to identify with the saint as a human being, so that his decisive choice will be both plausible and convincing. Eliot is aware that the saint, in an age of non-heroes and non-tragedies, will be an alien figure, unless he can be made to relate closely to modern life and its problems.

Thirdly, Eliot must make the saint's effect on the other characters dramatically moving, so that the audience, however sceptical of the reality of a saint figure, may also be affected.

Eliot, well-versed in Christian theology, knows how difficult it is to characterize a man approaching the state of grace. In discussing verse drama, Eliot sees that it is "the function of

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[1] Ibid., pp. 232-233.

art, in imposing a credible order upon reality, . . . to bring us to a condition of serenity, stillness, and reconciliation; and then to leave us, as Virgil left Dante, to proceed toward a region where that guide can avail us no father."[1]

It is the purpose of this paper to study, critically, Eliot's first three full-length plays[2] in order to demonstrate how he characterizes his three saint figures, and how he attempts to make sainthood relevant to a modern audience.

All quotations from Eliot's poetry and plays are taken from The Complete Poems and Plays (New York: Harcourt, Brace and Company, 1952.)

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[1] Selected Prose, pp. 86-87.

[2] Eliot's last two plays, The Confidential Clerk and The Elder Statesman, deal indirectly with the same subject, but there is no saint figure in the sense that there is in his first three plays.

CHAPTER I

BECKET IN MURDER IN THE CATHEDRAL

The characterization of Thomas Becket, is, in many ways, the easiest for Eliot. Becket's experience is historically true, overtly and explicitly Christian, and Eliot's job is to present him as the vital center of the play. Raymond Williams refers to this concentration on Becket as "an inevitable dramatic choice."[1] Though the characterization is accomplished through stylization, and with "no interest in individual psychology,"[2] the martyred Becket emerges as human enough to draw the audience to him, just as he progressively draws the Women of Canterbury into involvement in his ordeal. Since the play was written for the Canterbury Festival, Eliot could count on a largely Christian audience -- or at least one sympathetic to a Christian play.

Becket is everywhere present in the play, either directly or indirectly. His martyrdom, however, is shown as an ordeal, not only for him, but for the other characters as well. Eliot dramatizes Becket's effect on the Women and on the Priests, but they are concerned spectators rather than active participants. This is the

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[1] Drama from Ibsen to Eliot (Harmondsworth, Middlesex: Penguin Books, 1964), p. 253.

[2] The success of such plays as Saint Joan, The Lark, Joan of Lorraine and A Man for All Seasons, attests to the attraction of the dramatization of an historical saints experience.

"dramatic inevitability" of focusing on Becket which Williams refers to. In the later plays, Eliot is concerned with individual portrayal of several characters. In this play, however, only Becket is sharply outlined as an individual; the other characters only react to him. The relevance of this experience to a modern audience is related to its relevance to the Woman and the Priests; as they are involved, so is the audience. Here is a man willing to die for his church -- it is frightening; it is an experience close to Christ's; it is set in heroic terms -- and partly because it is historically true, the dramatization moves the audience.

The play begins with the Chorus of Women tensely awaiting a danger they don't understand. The second part of this chorus ends with:

> who shall
> Stretch out his hand to the fire, and deny his master?
> who shall be warm
> By the fire, and deny his master? (p. 176)

In identifying the allusion in this speech, D.E. Jones says that, "They fear, like Peter, they will not prove equal to the test."[1] The word, "master," is linked immediately with Becket:

> Seven years and the summer is over
> Seven years since the Archbishop left us,
> He who was always kind to his people (p. 176)

The First Priest repeats: "Seven years since the Archbishop left

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[1] The Plays of T.S. Eliot (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1960), p. 69.

us." The Second and Third Priests, however, raise questions about politics and "What does the Archbishop do?" The First Priest reiterates Becket's sympathy with the people in response to the other Priests:

> Shall these things not end
> Until the poor at the gate
> Have forgotten their friend, their Father in God, have forgotten
> That they had a friend? (p. 177)

With the Herald announcing the arrival of Becket, the First Priest introduces the theme of Becket's pride:

> What, is the exile ended, is our Lord Archbishop
> Reunited with the King? What reconciliation
> Of two proud men? what peace can be found
> To grow between the hammer and the anvil? (pp. 177-178)

The play has only just begun, but the character of Becket has been clearly presented. The Herald further clarifies the conflict of politics and salvation, use and value, which is the major conflict in Becket's character.

> He comes in pride and sorrow, affirming all his claims,
> Assured, beyond doubt, of the devotion of the people,
> Who receive him with scenes of frenzied enthusiasm. (p. 178)

Throughout the first scene, the Priests, the Herald and Chorus reflect anxiety about what Becket's arrival will mean to them, to the Church and to him.

Becket's entrance, his defense of the Women in their anxiety, and his answer to their uneasiness is a crucial, and often-quoted passage. It is an "out-of-time" speech, in the sense that most of Becket's other speeches are not. Usually,

he is matter of fact and talks to the other characters on their own level. His opening speech, however, is a thematic statement of what the play is about. The Fourth Tempter repeats it back to him at the climax of the play, and it is in terms of this speech that Becket's martyrdom must be seen.

> Peace. And let them be, in their exaltation.
> They speak better than they know, and beyond your understanding.
> They know and do not know, what it is to act or suffer.
> They know and do not know, that acting is suffering
> And suffering is action. Neither does the actor suffer
> Nor the patient act. But both are fixed
> In an eternal action, an eternal patience
> To which all must consent that it may be willed
> And which all must suffer that they may will it,
> That the pattern may subsist, for the pattern is the action
> And the suffering, that the wheel may turn and still
> Be forever still. (p. 182)

The wheel image is used repeatedly by Eliot in this play, in "Burnt Norton" and in The Family Reunion, all of which he wrote within four years.[1] It is obviously related to Eliot's idea of the saint figure -- that unusual person who, "At the still point of the turning world . . ." finds "the inner freedom from the practical desire."[2] D.E. Jones has a very perceptive discussion

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[1] For a detailed discussion of Eliot's use of the wheel image in Murder in the Cathedral and how it relates to his poetry, see Louis Martz, "The Wheel and the Point: Aspects of Imagery and Theme in Eliot's Later Poetry," T.S. Eliot: A Selected Critique, Leonard Unger, ed. (New York: Rinehart and Co., 1948), pp. 444-462.

[2] "Burnt Norton," p. 119.

of the wheel image as it is used in Becket's opening speech:

> For the fulfillment of the "eternal design," however,
> for the realization of the pattern, it is necessary
> for those on the circumference of the wheel to turn
> towards the center, to "consent that it may be willed"
> and "suffer that they may will it."[1]

Becket has made his statement of faith, but he has yet to experience the Four Tempters before the statement becomes reality.

The First Tempter does not seriously tempt Becket. "Fluting in the meadows, viols in the hall" are "of seasons that are past." Becket, in fact, sternly turns on the Tempter:

> Look to your behavior. You were safer.
> Think of penitence and follow your master. (p. 184)

At this point, Becket is so sure of himself that the audience can secretly agree with the First Tempter's: "Your Lordship is too proud!"

The Second Tempter shakes Becket's composure. Becket has known "Real Power" and his four "No's!" are in a higher key than are his replies to the First Tempter. His last negation, however is strong in confidence and in characteristic pride -- pride in the massiveness of the Church's power and structure and of his place in that structure.

> No! 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. 187)

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[1] Jones, pp. 64-65.

Before the entrance of the Third Tempter, Becket again flares with the memory of what, for him, is past:

> Power with the king --
> I <u>was</u> the King, his arm, his better reason.
> But what was once exaltation
> Would now be only mean descent. (p. 187)

With the Third Tempter, "a rough straightforward Englishman," Eliot allows Becket his only humor in the play. It is a brief touch, but serves to humanize Becket further. (And to give Eliot a chance to make a private joke on language). "Proceed straight forward," says Becket to the blunt Englishman,

> For a countryman
> You wrap your meaning in as dark generality
> As any courtier. (p. 188)

The play with language is brief. The Third Tempter comes to the point:

> This is the simple fact!
> You have no hope of reconciliation
> With Henry the King. You look only
> To blind assertion in isolation.
> That is a mistake. (p. 188)

And this wrings from Becket his most personal cry: "O Henry, O my King!" That one line evokes the rich personal relationship Becket has had. And it helps make real Becket's struggle to "consent that it may be willed." But the hint of temptation is as short-lived as the humor, and Becket easily answers the Third Tempter:

> And if the Archbishop cannot trust the King,
> How can he trust those who work for King's undoing?
> . . . . . .
> I ruled once as Chancellor
> And men like you were glad to wait at my door.
> Not only in the court, but in the field
> And in the tilt-yard I made many yield.
> Shall I who ruled like an eagle over doves
> Now take the shape of a wolf among wolves?
> Pursue your treacheries as you have done before:
> No one shall say that I betrayed a king. (p. 189-190)

The pride ("Shall I who ruled . . .") and concern about worldly opinion ("No one shall say . . .") are still conflicts which the Third Tempter has brought to the surface.

The Fourth Tempter brings the play to its climax. Eliot,

> by making the Fourth Tempter penetrate to the
> same deep level of understanding [as Becket],
> Eliot dramatizes Becket's chief peril, the
> temptation to the proud mind to become so
> confident in its wisdom that it seeks -- and
> takes for granted -- a martyr's crown as its
> reward.[1]

This Tempter is unexpected, and he challenges Becket as a human being to examine his motives. The Fourth Tempter first repeats the words Becket had so confidently used to the Second Tempter, ". . . Shall I, who keep the keys / of heaven and hell . . . ," but he adds to them the temptation to ". . . bind, Thomas, bind, / King and Bishop under your heel." (p. 191) The Tempter (replying to Becket's tortured question, "But what is there to do?")

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[1] F.O. Matthiesson, The Achievement of T.S. Eliot (New York: Oxford University Press, A Galaxy Book, 1959), p. 164.

answers him in a speech which has two functions. It reiterates the theme of Becket's pride, and it rouses Becket to a full understanding of the nature of the temptation and of the danger (spiritual, not physical) he is in.

> Yes, Thomas, yes; you have thought of that too.
> What can compare with glory of Saints
> Dwelling forever in presence of God?
> What earthly glory, of king or emperor,
> What earthly pride, that is not poverty
> Compared with richness of heavenly grandeur?
> Seek the way of martyrdom, make yourself the lowest
> On earth, to be high in heaven.
> And see far off below you, where the gulf is fixed,
> Your persecutors, in timeless torment,
> Parched passion, beyond expiation. (pp. 192-193)

Becket, "he who was always kind to his people," shouts "No!" to the last, vindictive idea raised by the Tempter. Now Becket must subject his will to God, the alternative is his and his "persecutors'" damnation.

> Is there no way, in my soul's sickness,
> Does not lead to damnation in pride?
> I well know that these temptations
> Mean present vanity and future torment.
> Can sinful pride be driven out
> Only by more sinful? Can I neither act nor suffer
> Without perdition? (p. 193)

Again, the Fourth Tempter answers Becket in his own words -- the opening words he had used to the Women of Canterbury. But now Becket understands the true meaning of his words. And his temptation is ended. Becket is silent, now, and the play becomes a polyphonic chorus, reflecting the reactions of the Chorus, the Priests and the Tempters. The Women end with:

O Thomas Archbishop, save us, save us, save yourself that
we may be saved;
Destroy yourself and we are destroyed. (p. 196)

But Becket is quiet and sure. He takes the center of the stage and again dominates the play.

Now is my way clear, now is the meaning plain:
Temptation shall not come in this kind again.
The last temptation is the greatest treason:
To do the right deed for the wrong reason.
. . . . . .
I shall no longer act or suffer, to the sword's end.
Now my good Angel, whom God appoints
To be my guardian, hover over the sword's points. (pp. 196-197)

The Sermon, the Interlude, which follows, gives "expression to the self-knowledge that Becket has gained in Part I and shows him beginning to 'make perfect his will.'"[1] Becket justifies martyrdom in general, and hence his own, to the congregation, and to the audience. Though the language is straight-forward, the procedure is subtle and complex. It is here that Eliot brings together the two levels of the play: the crucifixion of Christ and the parallel in Becket's approaching martyrdom. Carol Smith has a lengthy discussion of these two levels in the play. She says: "The levels of the play are intrinsically unified by the skillful interweaving of Thomas' story with the imagery of Christ's Temptation and Passion and with the prototype formula of all religion and drama."[2] The

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[1] Jones, p. 60.

[2] T.S. Eliot's Dramatic Theory and Practice (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1963), p. 110. The full discussion appears on pp. 104-111.

Sermon reflects the same mood as Becket's speech at the close of Part I: the saint has gained a spiritual strength and power which will see him through the ordeal of the "sword's points" which is to come. Becket's sanctity has been established in Part I.

The dramatic effectiveness of Part II comes chiefly from Becket's qualities of courage, strength and conviction.[1] The contrast between his anxious replies to the four Tempters and his masterful handling of the Knights reinforces the fact of his acceptance of martyrdom. Hugh Kenner has criticized Eliot's handling of "the changed orientation of Becket's will":

> The second act . . . so impresses us with Becket's human force, his energetic fortitude before death, that the interchange with the Fourth Tempter is obliterated from memory.[2]

Kenner's reading seems to be just that, a reading, rather than an understanding of the dramatic value of the acted play. Eliot underlines Becket's change of will by presenting him as now showing "fortitude against death." It is this contrast between Becket in Part I and Becket in Part II which renders his decision dramatic.

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[1] The prose speeches of the knights in Part II are an unfortunate deviation from the form and mood of the rest of the play. Williams feels that "there is a distinctly Shavian element of 'knowing comedy' which seems to me essentially sentimental." (p. 252)

[2] The Invisible Poet: T.S. Eliot (London: University Paperbacks, Methuen, 1965), pp. 241-242.

The "action" of the play is language -- the words which Becket speaks and the way he speaks them are the events which give significance to the play. It is in terms of his anguished "interchange" with the Fourth Tempter that his ultimate confidence in Part II is seen.[1]

The Knights are brusque and vulgar. They insult and mock Becket, only to be answered with propriety and cool intelligence:

First Knight: Saving your order! let your order save you --

As I do not think it is like to do.
Saving your ambition is what you mean,
Saving your pride, envy and spleen.

Second Knight: Saving your insolence and greed.
Won't you ask us to pray to God for you,
in your need?

Third Knight: Yes, we'll pray for you!

Fourth Knight: Yes, we'll pray for you!

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[1] See Jones, Appendix I, pp. 216-218, for a discussion of Helen Gardner's criticism of the portrayal of Becket. Jones summarizes his objections to Miss Gardner's criticism: "I have no difficulty in taking Thomas at his word when he tells me that 'Temptation shall not come in this kind again', and nothing in his action from then on contravenes this." Miss Gardner has, presumably, judged the portrayal in terms of realistic, psychological character development. Jones makes the point that Eliot was taking a risk in trusting "the convention of depersonalization in an age dominated by naturalism," but that he has found that audiences have no difficulty in adjusting to a non-naturalistic theater. This, perhaps, is more and more true as audiences experience Brecht, Becket and Marat/Sade.

The Four Knights: Yes, we'll pray that God may help you!

Thomas: But, gentlemen, your business
Which you said so urgent, is it only
Scolding and blaspheming? (pp. 203-204)

He continues to answer their accusations bluntly and calmly. Their final message hardens his will, and in stern language he gives them his final answer.

First Knight: Be that as it may, here is the King's command:
That you and your servants depart from this land.

Thomas: If that <u>is</u> the King's command, I will be bold
To say: seven years were my people without
My presence; seven years of misery and pain.
Seven years a mendicant on foreign charity
I lingered abroad: seven years is no brevity.
I shall not get those seven years back again.
Never again, you must make no doubt,
Shall the sea run between the shepherd and his fold.
(p. 206)

In these eight masterful lines, Eliot again makes Becket's experience pointedly real. Here is a man who has made the ultimate, spiritual choice. He is willing to die for what he sees as God's will for him. He is out of the world -- yet he remains human enough to remember and to defend his "fold." In the twentieth century, as well as in the thirteenth, an audience can only respond positively to a man who will not be threatened, frightened or bought. The ordinary man, whether Christian or not, can only be moved by this rock-bed conviction which Becket shows. The events of this century provide ample examples of situations in which an ordinary man could have used a Becket. It must be remembered

that Eliot wrote this play in 1935 when Hitler was beginning to threaten Europe. In a discussion of Murder in the Cathedral, Eliot points out his desire "to bring home to the audience the contemporary relevance of the situation."[1]

The play builds to its conclusion with the great "death bringers" chorus of the Women. Their anguished fear of the Knights quiets to an acknowledgement of their part in the guilt of Thomas' death:

> Oh Lord Archbishop, O Thomas Archbishop, forgive us,
> forgive us, pray for us that we may pray for you,
> out of our shame. (p. 208)

Thomas comforts them and assures them of a different kind of "moment" which will come. His first word, "peace,"evokes his first reassuring speech of the play:

> Peace, and be at peace with your thoughts and visions.
> These things had to come to you and you to accept them.
> This is your share of the eternal burden.
> The perpetual glory. This is one moment,
> But know that another
> Shall pierce you with a sudden painful joy
> When the figure of God's purpose is made complete. (p. 208)

With the Priests, he is with friends, but friends who cannot accept what is happening to their Archbishop. In their fear for him, they work to keep him from the death which he knows is coming. He tries to explain:

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[1] Selected Prose, p. 77.

All my life they have been coming, these feet. All my life
I have waited. Death will come only when I am worthy,
And if I am worthy, there is no danger.
I have therefore only to make perfect my will. (p. 209)

But the Priests, beside themselves with fear and concern, do not hear him. When they again try to urge him into the church, out of danger, he sternly rebukes them with the episcopal authority which does not leave him, even at such a moment. Again, he begins with "Peace," another reminder of what is being sought throughout the play, and of the "peace" preached in the Sermon, "Not as the world gives, give I unto you."

Peace! be quiet! remember where you are, and what is happening;
No life here is sought for but mine,
And I am not in danger: only near to death. (p. 209)

Becket does not forget where he is; Eliot again employs contrast to underline Becket's serenity and courage. The Priests frantically drag Becket off to the altar of the Cathedral; the Chorus of Women chant the Dies Irae; Becket then takes charge, once more:

Unbar the doors! throw open the doors!
I will not have the house of prayer, the church of Christ,
The sanctuary, turned into a fortress.
The church shall protect her own, in her own way, not
As oak and stone; stone and oak decay
Give no stay, but the Church shall endure.
The church shall be open, even to our enemies.
Open the door! (p. 211)

Becket remembers what the Church is, and in the end, he remembers what his earthly responsibility has been:

For my Lord I am now ready to die,
That His Church may have peace and liberty.
Do with me what you will, to your hurt and shame;
But none of my people, in God's name,
Whether layman or clerk, shall you touch.
This I forbid. (p. 213)

So to the moment of his death, he remains the center of the play, commanding and warmly human. He retains his personal strength, and his concern for his "fold" and for the Church. The change is in the first line -- he is now "ready to die," "that the wheel may turn and still/Be forever still."

With Becket's murder, the Priests and Women finally understand his "action and suffering." Though for them the wheel still turns, they can give thanks "To God, who has given us another saint in Canterbury." The Women end the play with "Blessed Thomas, pray for us" -- Becket dominates the play to its end. The audience has witnessed him as a human being working out his temptation and as a martyr, submitting to death for his faith.

CHAPTER II

HARRY IN THE FAMILY REUNION

In Murder in the Cathedral, Eliot uses an accepted saint in an acceptable milieu. In his next play, however, Eliot experiments with a saint figure in a modern milieu, one alien to saintliness as it is ordinarily understood. This fact may help to account for Eliot's failure and the extreme puzzlement on the part of most critics in discussing Harry, Lord Monchensey, the central character in The Family Reunion. It is generally accepted that Harry seeks "spiritual election,"[1] or "redemption,"[2] but there is less agreement about the specific nature of Harry's experience. It may be helpful to see Harry in terms of Becket and of Celia Coplestone, in The Cocktail Party. While these two are obvious "saint figures," in that they die martyrs' deaths after choosing to follow God rather than man, Harry seems to fall short. The answer, perhaps, can be found in looking at what Eliot's idea of Harry is.

Harry is clearly related to Sweeney, the main character

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[1] Carol Smith, p. 113; Jones, p. 92; Helen Gardiner, The Art of T.S. Eliot (London: Cresset Press, 1949), p. 156.

[2] Williams, p. 258.

in the unfinished fragments Sweeney Agonistes. One of the epigraphs to the fragments is a quote from the Oresteia, the Greek play on which Eliot bases The Family Reunion. Though Sweeney is not overtly pursued by the Furies, Harry is. And both Harry and Sweeney feel guilty about drowning a woman. There is a negative quality about both characters since their unrest seems to stem from murderous impulses. In 1933, Eliot explains the idea he had for Sweeney, and it seems to fit Harry:

> My intention was to have one character whose sensibility and intelligence would be on the plane of the most sensitive and intelligent members of the audience; his speeches should be addressed to them as much as to the other personages in the play -- or rather, should be addressed to the latter, who were to be material, literal-minded and visionless, with the consciousness of being overheard by the former.[1]

The significant difference between Harry and Sweeney is that Harry is convinced of his "election" at the end of the play. Sweeney is left in his "private horror."[2] It seems clear that Eliot viewed Harry as a character of heightened spiritual perception, surrounded by "material" and "visionless" characters. Eliot goes on to say that "perhaps this is all too deliberate, but one must experiment as one can."[3] Though the experiment that Eliot

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[1] The Use of Poetry, p. 153.

[2] Kenner, p. 284.

[3] The Use of Poetry, p. 154.

refers to is Sweeney, the statement can be readily applied to Harry.[1] He is Eliot's first, modern "saint figure," and the first to be dealt with in secular rather than in Christian terms. When Eliot comes to portray Celia, he has learned a great deal about how to present saintliness to a modern audience.

Eliot, in "schemetizing"[2] the characters, presents Harry as set apart from the other characters, Agatha as the first of the "guardian" figures,[3] and the rest of Harry's family as more or less the same in their inability to understand Harry. In the first part of Scene One, Harry's family, his mother, Amy, his aunts, Agatha, Violet and Ivy, his uncles, Gerald and Charles, and a cousin, Mary, await the arrival of Harry, and his brothers, John and Arthur. The reunion, at the family home, ironically called Wishwood, is the first in eight years, and celebrates Amy's birthday.

The first scene, following Eliot's plan for the play, presents Harry as somehow different from the rest of the family. He has disappointed them by not marrying Mary. Amy remarks,

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[1] Kenner, p. 284, shows how on various levels, The Family Reunion is expanded and developed from Sweeney.

[2] Jones, p. 109.

[3] The term "guardian" is used by Edward in The Cocktail Party and refers to those characters who help others find answers to their problems.

"Harry's return does not make things easy for her. . . ." (p. 227) He is the one, as Violet points out, who "was always the most likely to be late." But Amy further suggests some mystery about Harry in her answer: "This time, it will not be his fault. / We are very lucky to have Harry at all." (p. 228) Agatha sees that Harry's return will be "painful," because "He will find a new Wishwood. Adaptation is hard." (p. 228) The conflict between Amy and Agatha which figures so largely in Harry's life is here touched upon, as Amy snaps: "Nothing is changed, Agatha, at Wishwood." (p. 228)

Agatha, in her answer to Amy, mysteriously hints at what she seems to know about Harry's problems and also hints at the presence of the Furies which,in the course of the play, symbolize Harry's spiritual quest.

> ... I mean that at Wishwood he will find another Harry.
> The man who returns will have to meet
> The boy who left. Round by the stables,
> In the coach-house, in the orchard,
> In the plantation, down the corridor
> That led to the nursery, round the corner
> Of the new wing, he will have to face him --
> And it will not be a very <u>jolly</u> corner.
> When the loop in time comes -- and it does not come for everybody --
> The hidden is revealed, and the spectres show themselves. (p. 229)

Gerald's response to this speech, "I don't in the least know what you're talking about," (p. 229) is, at this point, the reaction, too, of the audience. Eliot soon reveals, however, what it is that the family feels is wrong with him. His wife is dead,

"Swept off the deck in the middle of a storm." Amy has never liked her, "A restless shivering painted shadow / In life, she is less than a shadow in death." (p. 230) Again, Eliot points up the obvious psychological conflict of the mother and the daughter-in-law. It is in these passages that Eliot tries to give Harry a reality in terms of modern psychology. Amy then vainly cautions the others, ". . . Please behave only/ As if nothing had happened in the last eight years." (p. 230) Agatha, in a speech set apart from the preceding speeches by a stricter verse form, crystallizes what is to be Harry's experience with his family:

> Thus with most careful devotion
> Thus with precise attention
> To detail, interfering preparation
> Of that which is already prepared
> Men tighten the knot of confusion
> Into perfect misunderstanding . . . (p. 230)

Until Harry's entrance, then, Eliot darkly suggests that Harry has serious problems and that the members of his family react to him on various levels. Agatha has some knowledge that the others don't have, Amy is strong, and there is a suggestion of the psychological struggle Harry has had with his mother. The rest of the family seems embarrassed and uncomprehending. On his entrance, Harry exclaims:

> How can you sit in this blaze of light for all the world
> to look at?
> If you knew how you looked, when I saw you through the window!
> Do you like to be stared at by eyes through a window? (p. 232)

This is the first of a long series of reproaches which Harry levels

at the family, and it is this rudeness and lack of warmth which makes Harry such a confusing character. Eliot, presumably, wishes to show Harry's distress as strongly as possible, so that his later decision will be more dramatic. Part of Harry's problem is his inability to communicate, except with a few "sensitive and intelligent" people, and Eliot seeks to show this in Harry's tortured language. In this speech, for instance, he refers to the Furies who peer at him through those very windows.

Though he has not been home for eight years, he can speak only of his pursuers when he enters the drawing room. His speech is full of tension and pain:

> They were always there. But I did not <u>see</u> them.
> Why should they wait until I came back to Wishwood?
> There were a thousand places where I might have met them!
> Why here? why here? (p. 232)

Curiously, at the end of this speech, which is crucial in that it suggests that it is, in fact, his home that causes his misery, Harry ironically wishes his mother "many happy returns of the day," Whatever concern an audience might have felt, vanishes in laughter.[1]

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[1] Jones, p. 120, criticizes this "transition through laughter," which runs throughout the play." . . . this betrays an uneasiness of tone, as if the author was not sure of the way audiences would take his profundities and provided a kind of defence-mechanism in laughter." Williams, p. 256, also criticizes this technique: "This play for laughter as a smooth transition from what is deemed too great an intensity is of the same order as Mr. Granville-Barker's 'New shall we finish the conversation in prose?'" Eliot's "transition through laughter" is very different from "comic relief." The latter device is generally used after a serious scene and does not interrupt it. This is true of Shakespeare, though an exception may be cited -- the heath scenes in <u>King Lear</u>. Shakespeare, however, in these scenes, is closer to the Theater of the Absurd than to traditional theater.

Amy attempts to bring him back to Wishwood, on her terms, by discussing servants and taxes and by observing again that "nothing has changed." Harry answers her with another peevish exclamation:

> Changed? nothing changed? How can you say that nothing is changed?
> You all look so withered and young. (p. 233)

Agatha, aware of Harry's distance from the family, challenges him to try to share his experience:

> And you must try at once to make us understand,
> And we must try to understand you. (p. 234)

At this, Harry angrily asks, "But how can I explain, how can I explain to <u>you</u> . . . people to whom nothing has ever happened/ Cannot understand the unimportance of events." (p. 234) Here Harry is perhaps justified in his impatience with his other aunts and uncles, and his mother. But he is also including Agatha, whom he had trusted and loved as a child, and whom, we are to learn, he "ran to meet in the rose garden." (p. 277)

Agatha, not put off by his impatience, again urges him to try to explain "without stopping to debate," (p. 235) and there follows the first of three speeches in which Harry tries to express his feeling of alienation, guilt and sin. The family seems to think that Harry's troubles result from his wife's death, yet in this first speech he indicates that he had felt a "slow stain" before she died. Eliot is suggesting that it is his

early experience that plagues him, as well as his feeling of guilt about his wife.

The speech ends with these remarkable lines:

> One thinks to escape
> By violence, but one is still alone
> In an over-crowded desert, jostled by ghosts.
> It was only reversing the senseless direction
> For a momentary rest on the burning wheel
> That cloudless night in the mid-Atlantic
> When I pushed her over. (p. 235)

This is Harry at his most callous. "Senseless direction" for him, perhaps, but what about his wife? If Harry's problem is one of guilt and sin, an audience may well feel at this point that humility and contrition are lacking. So far, Harry's spiritual development is not clear.[1] He goes on to say "You would never imagine any could sink so quickly." And, "That night I slept heavily, alone."

Harry's part in this first, expository scene ends with his puzzled reiteration that he "had not expected" the Furies to be nearer at Wishwood. After his exit, the remaining characters try to discover what is wrong with him. None of them, except Agatha, has any understanding of his feeling of guilt, and she couches her perceptions in vague statements. "It seems a necessary move / In an unnecessary action," is her answer to whether Dr. Warburton, the old family doctor should be consulted. Downing,

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[1] Jones, p. 99.

Harry's chauffeur, is consulted, but the family (and audience) learns nothing more about the death of Harry's wife or why Harry feels as he does.

The first scene establishes that Harry is pursued by his guilt. He has shown himself to be incapable of discussing his experience in language his family can understand. And, as Grover Smith points out:

> When Eliot's characters turn away from their fellow creatures, they sometimes show a disagreeable tendency to do so out of contempt and pride, a surfeit of smug arrogance.[1]

Though Eliot fails in his first scene to make Harry understandable or sympathetic to the audience, he succeeds to a great extent in the scene between Harry and Mary which follows. Eliot, in this scene, and in the scene between Harry and Agatha, suggests through various images, the Freudian basis of Harry's guilt. It is significant that Harry is closely involved with three women, his mother, Mary and Agatha, and that he has either murdered or had murderous impulses toward a fourth, his wife. Grover Smith has a long discussion of the psychological problems in the play. He sees that Amy and Agatha are "projected" as the Furies, and that it is, in fact, Amy's death which Harry has desired. Only in turning to Agatha for help, are the Furies transformed into the Eumenides. Hence, "domineering motherhood"

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[1] T.S. Eliot's Poetry and Plays (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1956), p. 117.

gives way to "liberating motherhood." But the Eumenides are more than that, "they are the spiritual discipline guiding him to some sort of religious consummation."[1] Though this level of the play is heavily concealed from a audience which does not know the play, it can be seen as Eliot's attempt to come to terms with modern psychology, while at the same time presenting the higher Christian principle in which he believes.

Harry and Mary discuss their shared childhood, and it becomes apparent that Amy "carefully prepared" (p. 248) their amusements and that only in "the hollow tree in what we called the wilderness" did they escape from her. Mary helps him begin his search into his past, but she is not to be his salvation. Eliot's "elected" must find it elsewhere.

Just as Harry, through Mary's kindness and concern for him, turns to her

> You bring me news
> Of a door that opens at the end of a corridor,
> Sunlight and singing; when I had felt sure
> That every corridor only led to another,
> Or to a blank wall; that I kept moving
> Only so as not to stay still. Singing and light. (p. 252)

the Furies are upon him, and he turns on her with characteristic anger:

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[1] Grover Smith, pp. 209-212.

> Are you so imperceptive, have you such dull senses
> That you cannot see them? (p. 253)

And of course, she cannot. Eliot suggests here, through the "open door" image and the physical warmth of "sunlight and singing" that Harry is tempted by and yearns for physical love. But the reappearance of the Furies reminds him that this is no answer for him. He cannot have the world of warm human relationships -- and his search continues. Just as Becket rejects "laughter and apple-blossoms," (p. 183) Harry must reject the love that Mary offers him. Harry's problem is no closer to solution. But he begins to know where he will have to look for a solution. Ivy, innocent of the irony of her words, says in a discussion of Harry's childhood measles: "It <u>was</u> unpleasant, coming home to have an illness." (p. 255)

In the next scene, with Harry and Dr. Warburton, Harry, in a long speech about his childhood begins to understand the root of his problem. His mother had made him feel guilty, but he never knew of what. The theme of non-cummunication persists in this scene: Warburton tries to tell Harry of his mother's weak heart, while Harry is desperately in search for some answer to his own problems.

> Harry: You must let me explain, and then you can talk.
> I don't know why, but just this evening
> I feel an overwhelming need for explanation --
> But perhaps I only dream that I am talking

And shall wake to find that I have been silent
Or talked to the stone deaf: and the others
Seem to hear something else than what I am saying.
But if you want to talk, at least you can tell me
Something useful. Do you remember my father?

Warburton: Why, yes, of course, Harry, but I really don't see
What that has to do with the present occasion
Or with what I have to tell you.

Harry: What you have to tell me
Is either something that I know already
Or unimportant, or else untrue. (pp. 259-260)

This exchange provides a good example of Eliot's characterization of Harry breaking down. Obviously, Eliot, here, wants to show that Harry is finally approaching the truth about his feeling of guilt -- he wants to know about his father. He also is trying to communicate. But his persistent rudeness and petulance diverts to Warburton the sympathy that should go to him. One wonders why Warburton continues talking with him at all.

The discussion ends as Sergeant Winchell is ushered in to announce news of an accident. Harry's reaction is typical: "Nothing can have happened / to either of my brothers . . . ." (p. 262) He is so withdrawn into himself at this point that he confuses the purpose of the Sergeant's visit and fears that he has come to discuss the death of Harry's wife.

He emerges from his confusion and has this to say about his brother's accident:

I don't think the matter can be very serious.
A minor trouble like a concussion
Cannot make very much difference to John.

A brief vacation from the kind of consciousness
That John enjoys, can't make very much difference
To him or to anyone else. (pp. 265-266)

His aunts object to his callousness, and he answers them in a key speech. It summarizes the idea which Eliot has for Harry: Harry is sensitively aware of the meaninglessness of everyday life; his brother, apparently, is so lacking in significant "consciousness" that a physical accident is of no importance. Harry may be correct, but his lack of identification with anyone else or concern about them, leaves him sterile and removed from the audience.

It's only when they see nothing
That people can always show the suitable emotions --
And so far as they feel at all, their emotions are suitable.
They don't understand what it is to be awake,
To be living on several planes at once
Though one cannot speak with several voices at once.
I have all the rightminded feeling about John
That you consider appropriate. Only, that's not the language
That I choose to be talking. I will not talk yours. (p. 266)

The tension created by lack of communication and different levels of concern continues to the end of Scene One, Part Two. The "unaware" members of the family are worried about John, and about Arthur, who, also, has had an accident. Harry and Agatha, on a very different level continue to probe Harry's problem. Harry begins to see that it is not only he who is troubled, but that it is "some monstrous mistake and aberration / Of all men, of the world, which I cannot put in order." (p. 268) Agatha, putting her finger on what is so lacking in Harry, answers him:

. . . we cannot rest in being
The impatient spectators of malice or stupidity.
We must try to penetrate the other private worlds
Of make-believe and fear. To rest in our own suffering
Is evasion of suffering. We must learn to suffer more. (p. 268)

The meaning here is perhaps that Harry must learn to love, must go outside of his own misery, to see others' misery, if he is to be "saved." But for the time, Harry remains locked in his private world of misery.

The climactic scene of the play, Scene Two, Part Two, is a dialogue between Agatha and Harry. This scene, like the earlier scene between Mary and Harry, presents Harry at his best. If Harry came close to some kind of communication with Mary, in this later scene he finally achieves complete communication, and with it, awareness of what his long-standing feeling of guilt arises from. A good deal of the difficulty in accepting Harry's final decision is the fact that it comes so late in the play, and so abruptly.[1]

His opening, caustic remarks are again directed at his brother, John, but Agatha cuts him short; she forces him to try to explain "What is in his mind. . . ." (p. 272) Harry must know what the meaning of the Furies is. He had hoped that when he returned to Wishwood, "Everything would fall into place. But they prevent it." (p. 272) He suspects that they show him "The shadow of something behind our meagre childhood, / Some origin of wretchedness." (p. 273) And he pleads with Agatha to tell

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[1] Jones, p. 99.

him about his father.

Agatha, reluctant to raise memories which Harry's Question disturbs," slowly unfolds the story of the cursed family. Agatha and Harry's father had loved each other, briefly. She remembers

> ... a summer day of unusual heat
> ... hours when there seems to be no past or future,
> Only a present moment of pointed light
> When you want to burn. When you stretch out your hand
> To the flames. (p. 274)

As a result of this attachment to Agatha, Harry's father had planned to murder his pregnant wife. Feeling that the unborn child, Harry, was somehow hers, Agatha prevented the murder.[1] Harry now begins to see the pattern -- his father, too, wanted to get rid of his wife. And Harry can now see that "... Perhaps / I only dreamt I pushed her." Agatha's reply to him provides a key to many puzzles in the play:

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[1] In a curious "out of character" speech, at this point Agatha tells Harry that his father, in considering methods for murdering his wife, had had "a dozen foolish ways, each one abandoned / For something more ingenious." (p. 274) Eliot's characters in this play have a strange proclivity to making fun out of murder. Here is another example of Eliot introducing humor where it is inappropriate. This is, after all, the moment when Harry is freed from his nightmare and is given a chance for salvation through expiation.

So I had supposed. What of it?
What we have written is not a story of detection,
Of crime and punishment, but of sin and expiation.
It is possible that you have not known what sin
You shall expiate, or whose, or why. It is certain
That the knowledge of it must precede the expiation.
It is possible that sin may strain and struggle
In its dark instinctive birth, to come to consciousness
And so find expurgation. It is possible
You are the consciousness of your unhappy family,
Its bird sent flying through the purgatorial flame.
Indeed it is possible. You may learn hereafter,
Moving alone through flames of ice, chosen
To resolve the enchantment under which we suffer. (p. 275)

Harry, it seems, must expiate a sin -- the nature of which he must discover while "moving alone." Once again, the audience is reminded that Harry feels no remorse for his murderous thoughts about his wife. Agatha dismisses the whole question with: "What of it?" The guilt and sin have to do with his father and the hatred in the family, not with his own life. Grover Smith, in a long and very perceptive analysis of Harry, makes this comment on Agatha's speech:

> The play . . . curiously asks the audience to sentimentalize Harry's own crime, for which he is not repentant, and to approve of Harry's expiating the curse in order to atone for his father's crime, for which he is not to blame. If he has been guilty of original sin, like the rest of the human race, that fact has nothing to do with the plot.[1]

Eliot, in this scene, attempts to combine various levels of meaning -- the sexual level involving the relationship between Agatha and Harry, the religious levels in the suggestion of "a

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[1] p. 202.

father's sins being visited on the sons," and the mythical level of the curse on Harry's family. The attempt produces confusion. What is wrong with Harry? Presumably, Eliot tries to say that all these levels of existence are significant. But that for Harry, who is aware of all these levels, at last there is only one choice for him to make. It is the ultimate Christian choice, though expressed in non-Christian terms.

Harry's moment of truth has come. He experiences a feeling of "happiness," and he knows that the Furies have liberated him.

> O that awful privacy
> Of the insane mind! Now I can live in public.
> Liberty is a different kind of pain from prison. (p. 276)

The "lyrical duet"[1] which follows, employs many familiar Eliot images, the "little door," the "rose garden" and the "wheel." Louis Martz relates these images to Harry's experience in the play. The sudden moment of ecstasy, which Harry and Agatha enjoy,

> May be . . . an experience only desired, never achieved . . . . But the desire for this still point where all desires end is the saving grace; the unredeemable or unconsummated moment in the worldly garden is related to and indeed leads on to the Rose of Paradise, for the object of desire is a moment of timeless reality, apprehended in the world of time."[2]

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[1] Eliot, Selected Prose, p. 80.

[2] pp. 450-451.

To the Furies, now the Eumenides, he can say:

> Now I see at last that I am following you,
> And I know that there can be only one itinerary
> And one destination. Let us lose no time. I will follow. (p. 278)

And to his mother:

> Why I have this election
> I do not understand. It must have been preparing always,
> And I see it was what I always wanted. Strength demanded
> That seems too much, is just strength enough given.
> I must follow the bright angels. (p. 281)

Eliot allows one Christian term, "elected," a world associated with Calvinist doctrines. The fact that Harry is sure of his election, however, puts a new cast to the word. The usual concept of predestination is that only God knows who is elected. Eliot, is attempting, apparently, to make clear that, in fact, a modern, alienated man can come, at the end of his search, to a Christian conversion. All other doors are closed. The "bright angels" which he must follow are, presumably, the wishes of God -- however unsure Harry may be of where they will take him.

Eliot's "elected" is ready for whatever comes. But he returns to the outside world with several unfortunate speeches. He gets off a few more remarks about John:

> But, mother, you will always have Arthur and John
> To worry about: not that John is any worry --
> The destined and the perfect master of Wishwood,
> The satisfactory son. (p. 286)

Harry still seems angry and resentful, full of his own concerns.

And though he knows that his mother may die of any shock, he

leaves her without any warm comfort. His last words to her seem almost a parody:

> My address, Mother,
> Will be care of the bank in London until you hear from me. (p. 287)

The last one hears of Harry is from Downing, his chauffeur. Eliot brings him back to search for Harry's cigarette case. One wonders whether this is the milieu of the "elected."[1] Eliot seems to have used upper class accessories, in an unfortunate manner, to try to make Harry seem real.

The failure of Harry as a character, in fact, comes from Eliot's dealing with him on at least two separate levels. On the one hand, he is an isolated, desperate man, searching for an answer to what he sees as his hellish existence. On the other hand, he is presented as a petulant, rude, ungracious member of a family which is trying to help him. It is possible to see the true saints as those more humble characters in the play who are placed so far beneath Harry. But from what Eliot has said, it seems unlikely that Eliot intended this interpretation.

In conclusion, given the evidence of the play itself, as complex as it, and what Eliot says about the play, it is an attempt to portray a sensitive, modern man, plagued with all the woes of modern man, who yet can make a choice for Christian salvation. In modern dress, a Becket would seem saccharine

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[1] Matthiessen, p. 170.

or unbelievable to a modern audience which is bereft of the divine if not even of the heroic. Eliot approaches the problem of characterizing Harry negatively, in terms of lack rather than of fulfillment. Harry is a potential saint who lives negatively in his sense of alienation, in his awareness of the superficiality of the world around him and in his feeling of guilt which nothing in his life can help him with. Though he is mean, rude and selfish, Eliot tries at several points in the play to temper these qualities and to make Harry sympathetic. Eliot, apparently, hopes to move the audience to an awareness of its own spiritual need by making Harry's need so striking.

Eliot also attempts to show that Harry's choice affects the other characters. It has a negative effect in Amy's death -- but, as Carol Smith has pointed out, Amy's death is the death of the human will: "The old principle is defeated so that the new may be reborn."[1] Mary is seen as liberated from the family curse; no one will try to murder <u>her</u>. And though most of the family is not shown as greatly changed, Charles feels that he is "beginning to feel / That here is something I <u>could</u> understand, if I were told it." (p. 288) (A reference, perhaps, to hearing the word of God.) The accidents of the two brothers may be Eliot's way of indicating the possibility of "shocking" them into a

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[1] p. 138.

spiritual awareness.

Eliot, himself, finally saw Harry as an "insufferable prig,"[1] and in spite of the richness of much of the play, it is this that mars Harry's characterization. A modern audience can, perhaps, see much of itself in Harry. But his lack of humaneness and warmth makes him an alien figure. In Eliot's next attempt to present a "saint figure" to a modern audience, he presents a character with more understandable, human qualities.

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[1] Selected Prose, p. 82.

CHAPTER III

CELIA IN THE COCKTAIL PARTY

Several changes in Eliot's treatment of the "saint figure" are immediately apparent in Eliot's presentation of Celia Coplestone in The Cocktail Party. First, Eliot moves directly into comedy. Carol Smith has acutely analyzed the importance of this fact.

> The surfaces of Eliot's plays are intended . . . to provide fables which carry the attention of the audience to the deeper level of interpretation . . . . It is my conjecture that one of the reasons behind Eliot's change to a comic surface . . . in the Cocktail Party was the greater tolerance of audiences for "abstraction" in comedy than in other dramatic forms.[1]

In a later passage she adds that, ". . . the audience's attention to the poet's themes and meaning would not be obscured by involvement in the surface events."[2] Eliot, in effect, tries "to infiltrate rather than make a frontal attack."[3] What this

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[1] p. 131, n.

[2] Ibid., p. 150.

[3] Jones, p. 124. Eliot, in a humorous letter to Ezra Pound, (Five Points on Dramatic Writing, Townsmen, 1 (July, 1938), p. 10, as quoted by Carol Smith, p. 53, n.), summarizes this technique: "1. You got to keep the audience's attention all the time. 2. If you lose it you got to get it back QUICK. 3. Everything about plot and character and all else what Aristotle and others say is secondary to the forgoin'. 4. But IF you can keep the bloody audience's attention engaged, then you can perform any monkey tricks you like when they ain't looking, and it's what you do behind the audience's back so to speak that makes your play IMMORTAL for a while. 5. If you write a play in verse, then the verse ought to be a medium to look THROUGH and not a pretty decoration to look AT."

means in terms of Celia is that her experience takes on an almost fairy-tale quality. For modern audiences, it is perhaps easier to accept her Christian decision if it is not boldly thurst upon them as Harry's is. Her experience, ultimately, is similar to Becket's, but tailor-made for twentieth-century, West End audiences. Secondly, and related to the first change, is the fact that Celia is not in the center of the stage; she "has been moved to one side of the composition and the social group is in the center."[1] Her importance is not only her own spiritual development, but her effect on the other characters as well. She is presented as an example and an inspiration, and unlike Harry, she can communicate with the other characters. This is true because they are given "some awareness of the depths of spiritual development and some appreciation and respect for those more exceptional people [e.g. Celia] who can proceed further than most of us can."[2] Eliot does not surround Celia with witless aunts and uncles -- all the other characters are greatly affected by her experience, though they, themselves, are incapable of the same experience. Before her final decision, she has been closely and humanly involved with Edward, as a lover, with Peter,

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[1] Jones, p. 124.

[2] J.P. Hodin, "The Condition of Man Today. An Interview with T.S. Eliot," Horizon, Vol. XII, No. 68 (August, 1945), p. 88. Taken from Jones, p. 123.

as a friend, and with Lavinia in a complicated friend-rival relationship. Thirdly, Eliot presents Celia in terms which a modern audience can understand. She is given enough psychological reality that an audience can follow her development. And she is warm enough and human enough that she does not evoke the puzzlement and irritation which Harry evokes.

The "comic surface," which Carol Smith refers to, is a tidy, well-constructed situation comedy: Edward, married to Lavinia, is having an affair with Celia, who is loved by Peter, with whom Lavinia is having an affair. Lavinia, who has left Edward, decides to return to him; Peter goes off to California to work on movies; the Guardians, Reilly, Alex and Julia, who have helped to bring about these events, go off to the Gunnings' cocktail party, presumably to straighten out their affairs. By the end of Act Three, everything is worked out very neatly. Except that Celia has been "crucified/ Very near an ant-hill." (p. 381)

The "deeper level" is very near the surface; Celia, though closely involved with the other characters in comedy, is, in the end, the lone, isolated figure carried over from the earlier plays -- like Becket she is martyred -- like Harry she makes a choice which takes her away from the society in which she lives.

Her relationship with Edward is shown, early, to be unsatisfactory. Celia has thought that Edward loves her, and she him. She has lived in their "private world." (p. 324) But Edward, after Lavinia leaves him, wavers and is willing to have Lavinia return to him. Celia is puzzled and hurt. She has been willing to risk everything in her relationship with Edward. But she now sees that there is no hope for them. Eliot is careful, in this first scene between Edward and Celia, to have Celia emerge as a person who can love -- but who is not revengeful in the face of disappointment.

> And, Edward, please believe that whatever happens
> I shall not loathe you. I shall only feel sorry for you.
> It's only myself I am in danger of hating. (p. 326)

This speech also hints at her feeling of "sin" which is so important in her later discoveries about herself. At the end of this scene, when she no longer sees Edward as her lover, she begins to realize that her problem is not <u>only</u> that of a rejected woman. Eliot tries to show that her uneasiness may be quickened by her disappointment with human relationships, but that it is not <u>caused</u> by this disappointment. The real basis of her disaffection is her feeling of distance from God. She does not know this, yet, but she is struggling toward an apprehension of this knowledge.

In her next scene with Edward, the next day, she is

greatly changed. Though she is no closer to knowing what "the something" is which she "aspired to," she can, at least see Edward with humor.

> I'm not really laughing at <u>you</u>, Edward.
> I couldn't have laughed at anything, yesterday;
> But I've learnt a lot in twenty-four hours.
> It wasn't a very pleasant experience.
> Oh, I'm glad I came!
> I can see you at last as a human being.
> Can't you see me that way too, and laugh about it? (p. 331)

As E. Martin Browne observes:

> This [her changed attitude toward Edward] is the beginning of spiritual health. One of Eliot's recurring themes is the danger we all run of making use of people by seeing them as "projections" of our own desires; no true relationship can exist unless we see them as they are, as a "human being." Having learnt so much, Celia goes to Reilly in the effort to discover what is the "something" that she "desperately wants to exist" and how she can find it.[1]

Eliot's problem, with Celia, is to make real her uneasiness -- if he fails in this, her later choice will seem to result only from her rebuff by Edward. Eliot, in dealing with Celia, must constantly maintain two levels. She must be given "real" motives, and must interact with the other characters. Yet, at the same time, Celia must have a clearer and deeper vision than the other characters. Eliot must suggest this vision in his portrayal of her.

If the play is to be properly understood, Celia must

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[1] <u>The Making of a Play</u> (Cambridge: University Press, 1966), p. 42.

be present, even if only referentially, throughout the play.

Eliot first conceived the play in terms of Edward and Lavinia:

> Those two people were the center of the thing when I started and the other characters only developed out of it. The character of Celia, who came to be really the most important character in the play, was originally an appendage to a domestic situation.[1]

Edward and Lavinia, with Reilly, occupy the stage more than Celia, but it is she who gives the play its deeper core.

In the last part of Act One, Celia tells the others that she is going away, though she doesn't know where. (There is a hint, here, of her final decision in Reilly's office). She tries to make her peace with Lavinia, and their exchange underscores Celia's innocence and warmth:

Celia: But now that I may be going away -- somewhere --
I should like to say good-bye -- as friends.

Lavinia: Why, Celia, but haven't we always been friends?
I thought you were one of my dearest friends --
At least, in so far as a girl <u>can</u> be a friend
Of a woman so much older than herself.

Celia: Lavinia,
Don't put me off. I may not see you again.
What I want to say is this: I should like you
to remember me
As someone who wants you and Edward to be happy.

Lavinia: You are very kind, but very mysterious.
I'm sure that we shall manage somehow, thank you.
As we have in the past.

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[1] "The Art of Poetry I: T.S. Eliot," an interview by Donald Hall, <u>The Paris Review</u>, No. 21 (Spring-Summer, 1959), p. 61. Taken from Carol Smith, p. 177.

Celia: Oh, not as in the past!
Oh, I'm afraid that all this sounds rather silly!
(p. 334)

Celia, on Julia's advice, goes to see Reilly, and it is in this scene that she realizes what troubles her and what her destiny must be. There is great economy in the scene: in it, Eliot succeeds in character presentation, development and change -- a success he did not manage with Harry in the whole course of The Family Reunion.[1]

Celia consults with Reilly just after Edward and Lavinia have left his office. Their interview is stormy and amusing, and it culminates in Reilly's "The best of a bad job is all any of us make of it -- / Except of course, the saints --" (p. 356) And in Lavinia's prosaic, "Then we can share a taxi, and be economical." (p. 357)

Celia is humble and seems almost child-like in her attitude to Reilly and to her own problems. The contrast between Celia's and Edward's attitude to Reilly is crucial. Edward, when he first talks with Reilly in the consulting room, seems almost a parody of the "mental" patient talking to his psychiatrist:

You talk as if I was capable of action:
If I were, I should not need to consult you
Or anyone else. I came here as a patient.
If you take no interest in my case, I can go elsewhere. (p. 347)

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[1] E. Martin Browne, p. 42, sees the scene as "the high point of the play. Alec Guinness and Irene Worth played it... without moving from the psychiatrist's desk for the whole fourteen minutes (an eternity in the theatre), and held their audiences riveted."

Celia, on the other hand, apologizes for coming and wasting Reilly's time.

> I suppose most people, when they come to see you,
> Are obviously ill, or can give good reasons
> For wanting to see you. Well, I can't.
> I just came in desperation. And I shan't be offended
> If you simply tell me to go away again. (pp. 358-359)

Reilly urges her to talk and gradually she tries to verbalize her unhappiness. Reilly is presented as a psychiatrist -- and in this one can see Eliot's attempt to express Celia's experience in modern terms. But as many critics have noted, Reilly is the only person in the play to lie on the couch. He is obviously more than a psychiatrist -- he is Eliot's chief "guardian" -- and the help he gives his patients is spiritual help. The language used in this scene is full of images which can be interpreted as Freudian, and as appropriate to the psychiatrist's office. The images, however, are used by Eliot to show Celia reaching for a far different experience from what might be called "mental health." As has been pointed out, most modern psychologists would see Celia's final decision as unbalanced, and caused by neurosis. Eliot, however, sees her experience as possible only for the "saint." "Mental health" can be achieved by the other characters.

Her private world, her inner experience, cannot be effectively expressed. In this, she is like Harry, but Eliot keeps the petulance out of Celia's speeches.

. . . I should really <u>like</u> to think there's something wrong
with me --
Because, if there isn't, then there's something wrong,
Or at least, very different from what it seemed to be,
With the world itself -- and that's much more frightening!
That would be terrible. So I'd rather believe
There is something wrong with me, that could be put right.
(p. 359)

There is something wrong with her, and there is something wrong with the world, and the two are inextricably related. She feels a "sense of sin" (p. 360) and that she "must . . . atone." (p. 362) Eliot keeps the dialogue in a fine tension. After "sin" and "atone," they go back to Celia's relationship with Edward -- back to the mundane after they have touched on the spiritual. Celia's discovery of the road she must take is slowly revealed. Reilly asks her how she now sees Edward, and her reply supplies an image which runs through the rest of the scene and culminates in Celia's self-knowledge and in ultimate decision:

Celia: Like a child who has wandered into a forest
Playing with an imaginary playmate
And suddenly discovers he is only a child
Lost in a forest, wanting to go home.

Reilly: Compassion may be already a clue
Towards finding your own way out of the forest.

Celia: But even if I find my way out of the forest
I shall be left with the inconsolable memory
Of the treasure I went into the forest to find
And never found . . .

. . . . . .

I have thoughtat moments that the ecstasy is real
Although those who experience it may have no reality.
For what happened is remembered like a dream

In which one is exalted by intensity of loving
In the spirit, a vibration of delight
Without desire, for desire is fulfilled
In the delight of loving. A state one does not know
When awake. But what, or whom I loved,
Or what in me was loving, I do not know. (p. 362-363)[1]

Reilly describes one solution for her. She may choose the life of

> Two people who know they do not understand each other,
> Breeding children whom they do not understand
> And who will never understand them. (p. 364)

But it is too late for her to make that choice. Apparently, she has had a vision of nearness to God which makes other relationships impossible.

> You see, I think I really had a vision of something
> Though I don't know what it is. I don't want to forget it. (p. 364)

Reilly describes for her a way that ". . . leads towards possession / Of what you have sought for in the wrong place." (p. 365) She, like Harry, cannot find the answer in human relationships. She must take the way of "faith" -- "the kind of faith that issues from despair." (p. 364)

She accepts the "terrifying journey" of the second choice, though she cannot say why:

> I don't in the least know what I am doing
> Or why I am doing it. There is nothing else to do;
> That is the only reason. (p. 366)

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[1] With this compare Harry's: "It is not my conscience, / Not my mind, that is diseased, but the world I have to live in." (p. 236)

After Celia is ushered out of Reilly's consulting room, Reilly acknowledges to Julia that he does not understand what he is saying to Celia when he says: "Work out your salvation with diligence." (p. 366) The saint, in Julia's words has been "transhumanized"; she is removed from the stage as she is removed from the world of ordinary people. Celia has made her choice -- a choice which can only mean choosing God over man. Eliot does not use Christian terms, but the fact is obvious. What else, in Eliot's Christian view, can "transhumanized" mean? Eliot takes Celia off the stage; the other aspect of her choice, the effect of her choice on the other characters is done by report.

The center of the stage is again occupied by Edward and Lavinia. The audience finds them preparing for another cocktail party, reunited and at ease with each other. Two years have elapsed since the earlier party, and, according to at least one critic's reading, their reconciliation will bear fruit.[1]

The comic surface is maintained until the moment when Celia's death is made known. The "guardians," Julia and Alex, enter and banter about Kinkanja and the restless natives there. Eliot indulges, here, in what might be called "sick" humor. The heathen natives, who revere the monkeys, are angry at the Chris-

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[1] Herbert Howarth in Notes on Some Figures Behind T.S. Eliot (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1964), p. 328. ". . . 'You do need to rest now,' says Edward to Lavinia as they prepare their party in the Union days of the last act."

tian natives, who have slaughtered the monkeys. So, naturally, the heathens retaliate by eating the Christians. In light of the nature of Celia's death, Eliot dares a great deal in this humor.

Just as Alex comes to the point of telling about "someone you know -- or knew . . .," (p. 376) Peter Quilpe arrives. Eliot skillfully builds the scene. He lengthens the suspense by having each character enter and take the subject of conversation away from Alex's news about Celia. Peter mentions Celia, brightly, and with the hope that she will be part of his life as a moviemaker. Reilly is silent. Alex tells of her death, and the rest of the last act is taken up with the other characters' reaction to it. In the course of the scene, the audience learns that Celia had joined an "austere nursing order" and had been "directed" to Africa. She has been crucified because she ". . . would not leave/ A few dying natives." (p. 383)

Celia can be seen as some kind of fanatic, her death as ridiculous -- but the other characters are moved by her death. Eliot is saying, here, perhaps, that the ways of God are absurd in the eyes of men, but that Celia has, in deep sincerity, followed what she sees as God's will for her. The macabre humor of the revelation of her death is Eliot's way of relating the outmoded notion of martyrdom to the twentieth century.

C.L. Barber summarizes the effect of Celia's death on

the other characters:

> Celia's selflessness provides a touchstone by which each is carried beyond his own egotism; or better, what they hear about her death forms a presence among them which makes them feel that their limitations matter less -- a presence that frees them to acknowledge their limitations.[1]

Reilly, after describing the vision he had of Celia when he first saw her, goes on to explain:

> So it was obvious
> That here was a woman under sentence of death,
> That was her destiny. The only question
> Then was, what sort of death? I could not know;
> Because it was for her to choose the way of life
> To lead to death, and, without knowing the end
> Yet choose the form of death. We know the death she chose.
> I did not know that she would die in this way,
> She did not know. So all that I could do
> Was to direct her in the way of preparation.
> That way, which she accepted, led to this death.
> And if that is not a happy death, what death is happy? (p. 384)

D.E. Jones thinks that "one might almost call the news "good news," a 'gospel,'"[2] and in Eliot's terms this is true. Only the saint, in a pale imitation of Christ, can claim complete spiritual realization. What Celia does as a result of her choice is more important that what she says. This is true because of the difficulty of dramatizing the moment of "sanctification."

Though, in Eliot's view, the saint is qualitatively different from the other characters, in The Cocktail Party,

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[1] "The Power of Development," in Matthiessen, p. 234.

[2] p. 141.

Eliot allows more possibilities for sanctity than he did in his earlier plays. The married couple, the man with a metier, and the "guardians" are seen as part of what Reilly calls "a good life," (p. 364) a life which, in Eliot's view is Christian. Eliot suggests in Reilly's speech to Celia, that there is, indeed, a ". . . world of lunacy,/ Violence, stupidity and greed. . . ." (p. 364) But Edward and Lavinia are included in the "good life" because they choose to be reconciled "to the human condition." (p. 363) They seek help from the "guardians," are forced to face each other, honestly, and to continue "Giving and taking, in the usual actions/ What there is to give and take." (p. 364)

Eliot does not explicitly deal with Peter Quilpe's destiny. Though it is left unresolved, the "guardians" allow for the possibility of his metier being his "fresh beginning." (p. 387) Reilly consoles him about Celia's death with:

> You understand your metier, Mr. Quilpe --
> Which is the most any of us can ask for. (p. 382)

Peter answers that without Celia his work seems impossible. Lavinia gently suggests to him that he has created an image of Celia -- an image which suits Peter. Edward continues this idea and urges Peter to "make a new beginning" (p. 382) while he is young. Peter admits that he has been interested only in himself, and that ". . . that isn't good enough for Celia." (p. 382) The sympathy with which Eliot presents Peter suggests that he is

included in the "good life."

As to the "guardian," on one level, they cannot be thought of as "people." They are vividly theatrical; they supply most of the humor of the play, and they are easily recognized types. But they are not meant to act or change in the sense that the other characters are. They pull the strings and the others act and change. On another level, however, the "guardians" surely suggest that aspect of a mature person who is capable of helping other people in a disinterested manner. Philip Readings sees the three "guardians" as related to the "'charismatic personalities' referred to in Eliot's 1939 essay, The Idea of a Christian Society."[1] In any case, Eliot surely includes them in the "good life." Spiritual attainment is given a broader scope. From the earlier view of the character whose "sensibility and intelligence" were on a different plane from the other characters, Eliot moves to a position where the planes are still present, but the "saint" can communicate. To make Celia's experience relevant, Eliot combines this ability of Celia's to relate to others with her basic humanity, and uses comedy as a means of making persuasive his serious meaning.

In the three plays discussed, in each of which Eliot

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[1] T.S. Eliot (New York: Twayne Publishers, 1964), p. 150.

sought to portray a "saint" to a modern audience, he is most successful with Becket. The reason is that he placed him at a distance, in an historical era which his audience could accept as having produced saints. More difficult is his effort to persuade his audience of the possibility of and the appeal of "sainthood" in the contemporary world. In his first effort, Harry fails because he is so alien -- so separated from the ordinary world. The play is strongest perhaps as a negative vision, in making its audience sense its own distance from God. With Celia, Eliot is more successful because his character is portrayed with warmth, related to, not divorced from ordinary humanity. To a secular audience, Celia is compelling where Harry is repelling. Through amusing and charming his audience, Eliot evokes a sympathy for a person who at least has the appeal of a doomed creature; and perhaps, taken this far, the audience may consider a profounder significance to what Celia represents and, in her martyrdom, attains.

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