From Restlessness to Regeneration: Revisiting T S Eliot’s Play

The Family Reunion

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Abstract

T. S. Eliot’s plays are often overshadowed by the brilliance of his poetic creations. However, they are essential to our understanding of the post-conversion phase of Eliot’s creative career. They also deserve attention in their own rights. The objective of this research-paper is a holistic appraisal of Eliot’s second complete play – The Family Reunion. Contrary to what the title suggests, it is a tale of a family falling apart. Rather than the family, the protagonist Harry, his psychological turmoil, and his eventual spiritual regeneration constitute the staple of the play. Eliot here creams an apparent family-drama with a spiritual message. Despite paralleling a Greek myth and using devices of classical drama, the play is rich in Conradian overtones, psychoanalytic potentials, and Eliot’s own biographical implications. Coming out, as it did, in 1939 on the verge of the World War II, the play with its message of love and sympathy is a call to ‘redeem the time’. The play remains worth revisiting to this day.
Introduction

T. S. Eliot's plays have never drawn the huge attention his poetry has attracted and continues to attract. Although Eliot moved to drama in the later part of his creative career with a view to reaching a larger and multifarious readers and audiences, his plays failed to produce the desired enthusiasm. Some obvious reasons might be attributed to this rather placid response to his dramatic corpus. His plays are lacking in sustained dramatic tension; characterization is also weak. The plays often seem to be a string of lyrics, however beautiful many of those lyrics may be. It is true that *Murder in the Cathedral* was a 'hit'. But it was staged in front of a special audience at Canterbury, the very place where the murder of Becket had taken place eight centuries back. *The Family Reunion* and *The Cocktail Party* met with just decent success on the commercial stage of West-end. Eliot's plays may not have done wonders on the theatrical stage. However, we would do well not to brush them off merely as pieces of literary interest. They are rather under-rated as plays and often seen as attempts by Eliot to revive the classical mode of drama. It is not possible to do justice to all Eliotian plays within the small scope of one single paper. Hence, the focus has been here concentrated on Eliot's second complete play *The Family Reunion* with the objective of its holistic appraisal.

The title *The Family Reunion* is rather ironic. It is not a tale of a family coming together in the true sense; it is the tale of a family disintegrating. It is a tale where, to use the oft-quoted Yeatsian expression, ‘things fall apart, the centre cannot hold’. The family under discussion is the Monchensey family and the ‘centre’ is Amy, Lady Monchensey. She says in the opening scene: "I keep Wishwood alive/ To keep the family alive, to keep them together". The name Wishwood is ironic as well. More wishes are thwarted here than fulfilled. In the very opening speech of the play, Amy articulates her premonition: "will the spring never come? I am cold". Even as it is apparently a comment on the prevailing weather, one would not be off the mark to take it in a symbolic sense. Spring and warmth are long-awaited here.

At the opening of the play we find that the members of the Monchensey family have gathered at Wishwood on the occasion of Amy's birthday. They are all awaiting the arrival of Harry, the eldest son of the family, who has been away from home for long eight years. Harry does come. His mother Amy wishes him to marry Mary and settle down at Wishwood as the new lord of the household. However, Harry is being chased -- to put it figuratively -- by 'Banquo's ghost'. He is fresh from a brief and disastrous marriage which ended with the death of his wife. She fell over the rails of a ship and got drowned. Harry's delirious mind cannot...
remember whether he actually pushed her over the rails, or refused to rescue her. In Act 1, Sc. i, he recalls the nightmare in a confused manner. First he says: "That cloudless night in the mid-Atlantic/ When I pushed her over". But the very next moment, he goes on to say: "I expected to find her when I went back to cabin". He makes contradictory statements like 'she was unkillable' and 'You would never imagine anyone could sink so quickly'. Later, in Act 2, Sc. ii, he says: 'Perhaps/ I only dreamt I pushed her.' Whether or not Harry directly caused his wife’s death, one thing is for sure. He cannot escape the moral responsibility for her death and he feels terribly restless. If not anything else, he killed her just 'psychologically', by sheer neglect. The opening lines of Eliot's *Burnt Norton*:

"Time present and time past
Are both perhaps present in time future
And time future contained in time past."

ring ominously true to Harry's life. In the closing speech of Act 1, Sc. i of *The Family Reunion*, the Chorus echoes this thought as it says:

"And whatever happens began in the past, and presses hard on the future
The agony in the curtained bedroom, whether of birth or of dying,
Gathers in to itself all the voices of the past, and projects them into the future."

Dwelling on the opening lines of *The Waste Land*, Grover Smith observes:


A biographical reading would suggest that Harry's agony might well reflect Eliot's own anguish. After all, Eliot himself, in a sense, let down his first wife, Vivienne. He did not take good care of his wife, and even partially blamed himself for Vivienne's tragic and untimely death. However, as for literature, this theme of guilt is nothing unprecedented. The memory of past dereliction of duty coming to haunt the protagonist is often shown by Joseph Conrad. In Conrad's novel *Lord Jim*, the protagonist abandons the sinking ship Patna and suffers from

Eliot uses the Furies on the stage as visual embodiments of the pangs of guilt that are eating into Harry every moment. Eliot here revives the role played by Eumenides in classical Greek plays. Whether this device is found effective by the modern audiences is, of course, a legitimate question. In any case, this device appears pertinent when one remembers that the play *The Family Reunion* itself is based by Eliot on the Greek myth of Orestes. Eliot draws a parallel between Harry and Orestes of the *Oresteia* trilogy by Aeschylus. In *Oresteia*, a curse falls on the house of Atreus because Clytemnestra murdered her husband Agamemnon. Orestes, Agamemnon's son, has to kill his mother to lift the curse and redeem the family. Shakespeare's Hamlet shares affinity with Orestes, just as Eliot's Harry does. In Eliot's play, although Harry does not directly kill his mother, his departure at the end of the play leaves her heart-broken and dead. However, Eliot makes his play more complex by adding to the Greek Orestes myth the Christian myth of the Original Sin whereby Christ has to undergo crucifixion to redeem humanity. Harry also 'chooses' to suffer to expiate the guilt committed by others. Harry's misery has a lineage; even his own father had wanted to kill his mother. To a modern reader, this sounds pretty much genetic; however, Eliot presents it as a curse hanging over the Monchensey family.

For Eliot’s Harry, it is a journey from anguish to self-illumination. He returns to Wishwood with the hope that the new environment would assuage his inner torture. However, once he arrives at Wishwood, the reality strikes him on the face. In Act I, Sc. ii, he says: "But I thought I might escape from one life to another, / and it may be all one life, with no escape.” True change can come only from within. Mere change of place serves nothing. Mary reminds him: 'What you need to alter is something inside you'. Like Becket in *Murder in the Cathedral*, Harry also chooses the path of renunciation: "Where does one go from a world of insanity? / Somewhere on the other side of despair". Harry makes his mind to follow 'the bright angels'. Once Harry extricates himself out of his narrow self, the Furies turn into bright angels and become his guiding forces. Harry realises that his true calling does not lie in leading a conjugal life. Psychoanalysis would, however, suggest that a previous derailed marriage has rendered him psychologically incapable of ever reposing faith in the possibility of a happy and healthy marriage.
Noticeably, the same Monchensey family that wishes Harry to settle at Wishwood as the new lord, has always been sceptical and guarded against Harry's deceased wife. In the opening scene, Amy tells other family-members about Harry’s first wife: 'I am very glad that none of you ever met her'. About her death by drowning, Ivy comments: 'She may have done it in a fit of temper', and Violate speculates: 'Had she been drinking?' Soon Amy goes on to say: "She never wanted to fit herself to Harry, / But only to bring Harry down to her own level.” Now that Harry's first wife is dead, Amy pins her hope on Mary as the prospective wife of Harry. Harry, of course, is reluctant to marry a second time. In Act 1, Sc. i, Mary herself vents her grievance against Amy:

".... She only wanted me for Harry --
Not such a compliment: she only wanted
To have a tame daughter-in-law with very little money,
A house-keeper companion for her and Harry."

Although, following the lines of Greek tragedy, Eliot underscores the 'curse' on the family, one is tempted to ask whether there is something wrong in the attitude of Amy towards her actual and potential daughter-in-laws that makes their lives difficult, and also puts Harry on a tight spot.

Harry's family-members are keen on getting Harry treated by a psychiatrist. However, Harry has started seeing things in a different sense, in a different light altogether: "It is not my conscience, / Not my mind, that is diseased, but the world I have to live in". He is not a deranged person in the ordinary sense. He is the 'elect'; he is invested with extra-ordinary possibilities and destined to dedicate his life to the cause of humanity. It is Agatha, who as a guardian guides Harry out of the moral turmoil into the destined trajectory. Amy may be Harry's biological mother. But Agatha, invested with a mystic power, becomes more of a 'real' mother to Harry. She acts as a catalyst behind Harry's self-realisation. In Act II, Sc.i, she tells Harry: "To rest in our own suffering / Is evasion of suffering. We must learn to suffer more." She sets Harry's spiritual goals in perspective: "In a world of fugitives, /The person taking the opposite direction/Will appear to run away". She convinces Harry that it is only by serving humanity and forming meaningful bonds with fellow human beings that Harry can
fertilize the spiritual waste-land that is his mind. And befittingly enough, the play ends with Agatha's speech where she says:

"So the knot be unknotted
The cross be uncrossed
The crooked be made straight
And the curse be ended".

Maneesha Tiwari aptly observes in *The Plays of T. S. Eliot*: "*The Family Reunion* is a play of sin and expiation. Eliot reflects, in this play, on the absurdities of life and dramatizes the struggle of a penitent to cross the boundary line of the filthy world of disbelief and enter into 'the rose garden' of his soul's dream. While *Murder in the Cathedral* depicts the spiritual life and quest of a saint, *The Family Reunion* dramatizes the spiritual rebirth of an ordinary man, who is one of *us*.

The theme of spiritual regeneration runs as a thread through all of Eliot's plays. After all, all Eliot’s complete plays come after his conversion to Anglo-Catholicism in 1927. *The Family Reunion* does not tell us what exactly Harry does to redeem himself or attain sainthood. In Eliot's play *The Cocktail Party*, Celia does become a missionary and serves plague-ridden people in Kinkanja, embracing a tragic death. However, what is important is that Harry recognizes the need to change, and this is the first step towards spiritual regeneration. This recognition or 'anagnorisis' comes in *The Confidential Clerk* as Colby realises the need to devote himself to the real father - God - instead of being over-anxious about the identity of his biological father. In *The Elder Statesman*, Lord Claverton comes to accept moral responsibility for his earlier wicked deeds and leaves the stage with the healing recognition of his need to love and to be loved.

**Conclusion:**

Harry's is thus a tale of transcendence. One would be wrong if one thinks that Harry in the play runs away from his familial duty just as he had earlier shirked his duty towards his wife. J X Cooper writes in *T. S. Eliot and the Ideology of Four Quartets*: "His defection from assuming the management of the family seat seems, at first, irresponsible...[But] We soon come to realize that Harry's actions are not a shirking of his duty at all, but responses to higher responsibilities." The message is loud and clear -- 'only connect', to borrow the
epigraph from E M Forster's novel *Howards End*. Significantly enough, Eliot conveys this message in *The Family Reunion* in 1939 -- when the world was standing on the verge of yet another devastating World War and had all but forgotten the message of love and sympathy. With its message of self-illumination and humaneness, its delineation of psychological entrapment and subsequent release, revival of classical theatrical devices, *The Family Reunion* remains a play worth revisiting.
References