



T. S. ELIOT AS AN INNOVATOR OF THE NEW FORM OF DRAMATIC VERSE AND THEMATIC STRUCTURE : A BRIEF NOTE

DR. C. RAMYA

M.B.A, M.A, M.Phil, Ph.D

Assistant Professor,

Department of English

E. M. G. Yadava College for Women,

MADURAI – 625 014.

(TN) INDIA

ABSTRACT

T. S. Eliot may best be called a literary crusader. The impact of the various theories he has expounded in poetry, drama and criticism has been remarkable. Numerous monographs, critiques and profiles published on Eliot during the last four decades speak amply of his legendary reputation. Eliot's interest in and preoccupation with socio-literary activities was as much the result of his birth and breeding as of the intellectual climate of the times in which he grew and matured. His work and personality as a whole have their full meaning only in the larger context of the cultural traditions of Europe. Eliot is both Westerner and New Englander. In fact, to follow the growth of the literary artist in Eliot is to follow the core of Western as well as Eastern cultures. As D.E.Jones puts it, "one trying to understand Eliot may find oneself reading anybody from Heraclitus to Bradley in the realm of philosophy or from Aeschylus to Anouilh in the realm of drama" (P 10).

INTRODUCTION

T. S. Eliot was born on September 26, 1888 in St.Louis, Missouri, a large industrial city. His parents exerted strong influence in him. They happened to be descendants of New England families of the early settlements. Their distinguished scholarship, outstanding commercial enterprise and a puritan earnestness had deeply touched the mental proclivities of Eliot. The atmosphere in the family included an extreme form of Protestant rationalism, known as

DR. C. RAMYA

1 Page



“Unitarianism” which Eliot himself calls Boston doubt: a skepticism difficult to explain ... not destructive but dissolvent” (Smidt 2). His poems as well as his plays are marked with the memories and desires he nourished in his adolescent days. What is really striking in his approach towards life and literature is an ever-increasing concern, he displays, for discovering the “true meaning or meaningless” hidden under the exterior aspect of things” (Lucy 142).

Eliot’s literary interests were stimulated by his mother, Charlotte C. Eliot, who herself was a distinguished poetess. She was a woman of high moral ideals and strove continuously to prove the value of women to society. Besides her passion for social work, she was devoted to creative literature. It is apparent that many of his poetic and dramatic gifts came to Eliot directly from his mother. Some of the characteristic features of Eliot’s poetry – the love of form, the habit of innovation and the skill for dramatization – show the extent to which the mother had influenced her son in the technique of his poetry. Eliot shot to fame with his incredible literary talent. The first significant poem, “The Love Song of J.Alfred Prufrock” appeared in 1915 and was included in the collection of 1917. A second volume entitled ‘Poems’ appeared in 1919 and a third in 1920. The same year witnessed the publication of a book of essays “The Sacred Wood”. In 1922, his magnum opus, “The Waste Land” was out and was followed by the major two poems of religious affirmation.” Ash Wednesday (1930) and “Four Quarters” (1948). The mature Eliot took to dramas and his first complete play *Murder in the Cathedral* appeared in 1935 and was followed by *The family Reunion* (1939), *The Cocktail Party* (1950), *The Confidential Clerk* (1955) and *The Elder Statesman* (1959). As early as 1932, Eliot had achieved sufficient eminence to be appointed Professor of Poetry at Harvard and he was awarded the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1948. In his hands, poetry was a mighty weapon and it provided what the stage lacked. “What he longed for was to revive the Elizabethan tradition in verse drama” (Madapally 3). It was in T.S.Eliot initiated a serious discussion on ‘the possibility of a poetic drama’. Since then, he had been expounding his dramatic theories, which virtually deal with every facet if the drama as a form of art and literature. After W.B.Yeats, he was, perhaps, the only critic, poet and playwright who had endeavoured so hard for the re-orientation of the drama in the present century.

It is true, Eliot was a poet who turned dramatist. His poems display his dramatic genius; he therefore decided to devote his energy to the cause of drama. He attempted to use poetry and drama as socio-religious communication; drama in particular “the integral part of contemporary tradition in art and literature” (Sharma 162). Eliot was very careful in reflecting his age. According to him, a man must be ready to unravel the mystery behind his soul, and must be ready for a spiritual salvation. Religion, he strongly believed, which is allied with discipline can alone help a man achieve this. His plays, religious in every sense of the term do not of course teach any religious dogmas as such. They create an awareness in the minds of the listener. Since he felt that in the modern world, religious and ethical values are

DR. C. RAMYA

2 Page



fast fading out, drama cannot help but prove a religious liturgy. Religion and literature complement each other as far as Eliot is concerned. In this context, Eliot's plays are,

*"Subtle demonstrations of the relevance
of religion to every field of human activity" (Jones 214)*

Hence he approached the theme of sin and expiation with a religious zeal. His poetic themes, no less than their forms are dramatic. He was careful that the use of poetry in drama.

*"should not be transported into an artificial world,
on the contrary our own sordid dreamy daily world
be suddenly illuminated and transfigured" (Eliot 12)*

In the nineteenth century, all the Romantic poets wrote verse plays but none proved successful. The verse sounded artificial and people felt some sort of uneasiness about it. Eliot attempted to revive verse-dramas. "This kind of play required more than the mere presentation of a surface appearance of actual life" (C 33). His decision to revive poetic drama was inspired more by his socio-religious concerns than by anything else. He himself said in an interview published in *The Listener* thus:

*To work out a play in verse is to be
working like a musician as well as
like a prose dramatist; it is to see
a thing as a whole musical pattern" (P 994)*

Poetic drama is one in which poetry and drama are fused perfectly together. In the place of everyday speech state, flat and unprofitable, poetry is used. The modern poetic drama is the combination of the tradition and the experiment; a creative mixture of the ancient and the new. In the words of Ronald Peawack,

*"It indicates a text in verse which meaning derived
ultimately from classical times. It means secondly the
romantically poetic and this refers rather to certain themes
and attitudes irrespective of verse or prose forms,
as we observe in fairy tales and in an author like
Maeterlinck, whose plays are intensely romantic through
in prose. Thirdly, it means lyrical and musical style
primarily in verse, but also in prose" (P 127).*

Writing poetic drama demands strenuous work from the writer because

DR. C. RAMYA

3 Page



*it ought to be medium, to look through
and not a pretty decoration to look at”*

(Townsmen 10)

Again Eliot emphasizes,

*“The writer of poetic drama is not merely a man
Skilled in two arts, and skilful to weave them
together, he is not a writer who can decorate a
play with poetic language and metre”*

(The Wheel of Fire xix)

A poetic dramatic has to create a pattern different from that of the prose dramatist. All the elements have to be woven organically to express the permanent and the universal” (Eliot 229). In the words of Marius Bewley, “Eliot’s dramas have dialectical unity, comprising myth, religion and history” (Marius 925). Leonard Unger detects more than one pattern in Eliot’s work. “The patterns are interwoven and there is “the entire work” (P 107). Eliot himself stated that a poetic dramatist should present the pattern at two levels – the structural and linguistic. He contends that underneath the play’s action there must exist “a musical pattern” deeper and less articulate level” (The Listener 994). As far as the dramatic levels of ***Murder in the Cathedral*** are concerned, the play follows the categories of Pascal – “the order of religion, the order of the mind, the order of charity” (Fergusson 229). ***Murder in the Cathedral*** has a completeness which springs from its dramatic pattern. It was Eliot’s assured success in drama. In his essay on ***John Marston*** which appeared just before ***Murder in the Cathedral*** Eliot wrote that there is a kind of doubleness in the action, as if it took place on two planes at once. This doubleness or what he calls “sense of something behind” – The pattern behind the pattern is something which he attempted to exploit as a method in his own plays.

The play ***Murder in the Cathedral*** exists on more than one level. On the one hand, it is the martyrdom; and on the other hand, it is an act of redemption. It insists that man without a sacrifice in almost one animal. There is yet another dramatic level. It has two separate levels. One is the psychological or the inner struggle and in the second it is the physical struggle. Even in characterization, two levels can be detected. Thomas Becket, women of Canterbury and priests all appear to be static and rigid. But as the play develops, they show a remarkable sense of flexibility. Becket is full of pride initially but gains a new realization later. The women of Canterbury do not understand the implication of action through suffering; but later on they realise what they should realise. The priests advise Becket to avert action first. But when the “murder” is over, they accept, The Third Priest pays a tribute;

“Let our thanks ascend

DR. C. RAMYA

4 Page



*To God, who has given us another
saint in Canterbury” (Murder 614)*

Raymond Williams and D.E. Jones note “a level of consciousness”. At the religious level, it conveys a feeling of recognition in the Christian terms and there is of course the intensity to arouse excitement and this is the result of

*“ramification of meaning at all the planes of
Awareness that man is capable of intellectual,
sensuous and spiritual” (P 15).*

In form, the play is something between a morality and chronicle play. Eliot has restored the chorus of Greek tragedies in his *Murder in the Cathedral*. He has used the chorus to open out the action to its full significance. A Ronald Peacock observes:

*“Technically the chorus in Murder in the Cathedral
is very close to the Aeschylus pattern. The chorus
acts as a spokesman of a whole community” (P 4).*

Eliot carefully avoided the Shakespearean echo in his writing. He was an innovator of the new form of dramatic verse. The language of poetry, he felt, must be “related to everyday speech” (Eliot on Poetry & Drama 80). Through his use of rhythm, rhymes, image and symbols. Eliot is said to have intensified the form and the content simultaneously. Thus, Eliot’s form of dramatology deserves appreciation from all literary circles.

WORKS CITED:

1. Eliot, T.S. *The Listener*, 25 Nov. 1936, P.994.
2. ___ “Five Points on Dramatic Writing”
Townsmen, July 1938, P.10.
3. ___ *Poetry and Drama*
London: Faber and Faber, 1950.
4. ___ *Selected Essays*
London: Faber and Faber, 1951.
5. ___ *On Poetry and Drama*.
London : Faber and Faber, 1965.
6. Jones, D.E. *The Plays of T.S.Eliot*.
London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1963.

DR. C. RAMYA

5 Page



7. _ _ _ *The Plays of Eliot*
London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1960.
8. Lucy, Sean. *T.S.Eliot and the Idea of Tradition*
London: Cohen & West, 1960.
9. Madapally, T.J. *T.S.Eliot's Murder in the Cathedral*
Bareilly: PBD, 1976.
10. Peawck, Ronald. *The Art of Drama*
London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1957.
11. Sharma, H.L (Ed.) *Introduction to S.L. Bethel's
Shakespeare and the Popular Dramatic Tradition.*
12. Smidt, Kristian. *Poetry and belief in the work of T.S.Eliot*
London: Routledge & KeganPaul, 1962.