

## Treatment of Modern Relationships in Eliot's *Cocktail Party*

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### Abstract

In this paper I would like to highlight the treatment given by T. S. Eliot in his most popular play *The Cocktail Party* which was written in the year 1948. It was the most popular play among the seven plays he has written the other one being *The Murder in the Cathedral*. I would like to bring its relevance of this play in today's modern context.

**Keywords:** Absurdism, Isolation, Marital Discord, Repentance, Symbolism, Catalyst

Thomas Stearns Eliot was a poet, dramatist and a Nobel laureate. The Nobel prize which he received in 1948 the year he has written the play. It became quite popular in the London and Broadway Theatre. I choose this play as the topic for my research considering it's relevant in today's times, as it was set in the ancient Greek Mythological. By Eliot's confession it has been derived from the story of "Alcestis" written by Euripides. In this story the wife sacrifices herself and saves her husband Admetus the king of Pharae from death. Great Heracles who comes to know of the sorrow of Admetus restores Alcestis from death and unites them. *The Cocktail Party* is based on the same lines but with a contemporary set up affected and driven by despair and depression after the world wars.

The play is classical in nature and conception. Set in the threatening hopelessness of the post modern world lurking in the shadows desperation. *Cocktail Party* is a play essentially about human condition within the framework of marriage inside and outside it. The story surrounds a failing marriage at a crossroads. It tries to find meaning and solution to the troubled couples. It starts out to be a light satire which looks like the British Drawing Room Comedy, but as it progresses it turns out to be a Dark Philosophical Treatment of Human Relations. Even though it is labelled a comedy and the dialogue is very funny but it also has melancholic undertones. The story speaks of modern man's disillusionment, apathy and isolation in midst of material wealth and society.

The main characters are the disturbed couple Edward Chamber layne a barrister and his wife Lavinia Chamber layne. The Act I open of their London House in their drawing room the couple host a cock tail party but Lavania is missing. A stranger introduces himself to Edward and starts a

# The Creative Launcher

An International Peer Reviewed & Refereed E-Journal in English

Vol. I & Issue V

conversation with him. Later he admits to the stranger that his wife has left him. The stranger promises to get his wife back if he Edward promises not to ask any questions to her. The stranger is later introduced as Sir Henry Harcourt Reilly. We also come to know in this act that Edward had an affair with Celia but is keen to get back with his wife Lavinia. Celia who expects Edward to love and live with her gets upset on hearing this. We are also introduced to two characters Julia and Alex who try to know what's happening in the couple's life.

In the Act 2 which opens in the office of Sir Reilly we come to know that Lavania has also cheated in the marriage and she had an affair with Peter Quilpe but Peter does not love Lavania and loves Celia, which causes a lot of depression to her. The play begins as a comedy of misdirected love affairs and love triangles.

In the Act 3 which takes place after two years the couple now better adjusted to each other host another cocktail party, we also see Peter Quilpe's acceptance of all entangled relationships which unknots the complexities relationships and brings to their original form Eliot portrays seemingly real characters. He explains man's basic nature of change and instability in the narrative. "That at every meeting we are meeting a stranger".

He also truly depicts the total failure in the failing family structure in his words "Two people who they do not understand each other. Breeding children whom they do not understand .And who will never understand them."

He depicts Emotional Isolation in these lines. "Everyone is alone or so it seems to me." In this morality play the Psychiatrist Sir Henry plays the catalyst in bringing the true feeling of the couple and guides them back to lead a meaningful martial life.

Celia the mistress of Edward is seen as the most progressing character in the play .She begins as a happy and lively socialite involved in an adulterous relationship who had no qualms in breaking a marriage transcends the mediocre life to reach out of herself and works for a self-satisfying future into a state of sublimation. By becoming a Christian martyr in Africa for the pagans. She takes the advice of Sir Reilly, realises her solitude and sins. She decides to enter a new life chooses willing to become a martyr. Here we can see the symbolism of a sinner transforming into a martyr.

The couple realise their folly and realise that they are both alike in their nature and temperament. They realise that they were searching their happiness and drive away their isolation in other people rather than in each other. Sir Reilly's practical advice to the couple which holds the key to all couples even today. I Quote: "Learn to avoid excessive expectation. Become tolerant of themselves and others and do not strangle each other with knotted memories"

Eliot uses the figurative or symbolic signs in this play prominently. Symbolism becomes highly figurative and powerful in the play in the form of Guardianship which is the chief machinery of the plot. The three guardians Sir Henry, Julia and Alex figuratively play the role of GOD, Son and The Holy spirit the holy trinity.

The play with satire and light comedy with triangular misdirected love affairs is crafted into transformation of characters and exposition of the multiple meaning of life and the true Christian love that culminates with Celia's sacrifice and in a marriage where the couples acceptance of each other's

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love and faults of one another. The play ends on a positive note with “every moment is a fresh beginning”.

T.S Eliot is a master craftsman, a master dramatist, we see a remarkable insight of modern life, existential angst, humour and richly painted characters in the script. The fact that *The Cocktail Party* has stood the test of time in depicting human relationship so convincingly itself states the classic act and stature of Sir T S Eliot.

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