

Eliot's Views on Verse Drama

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Abstract

T. S. Eliot is considered a great poet, critic and dramatist of modern age of America. He has written the most useful poetry and become a great poet. Putting his views on drama he says, "The effect of a play on the audience is instantaneous because their qualities of mind and sensibility are different. Eliot makes a very important statement regarding the relationship between the emotion of the dramatist and the drama through which he communicates that emotion. Eliot's problem is also to find an appropriate Verse form for the theatre. Verse drama has not been since the restoration period. Eliot says that the only way of expressing emotion in the form of art is by finding an objective correlative; in other words a set of objects, a situation, a chain of events which shall be the formula of that particular emotion.

Keywords- Verse drama, Objective Correlative, Elizabethan audience

Introduction

So far as social utility is concerned, the best kind of poetry is found in drama. In the theatre, poetry is heard by the audience as dramatic action is observed. The effect of a play on the audience is instantaneous, but the different sections of the audience are not affected in the same way because their qualities of mind and sensibility are different. If a playwright wants to be successful, he must write plays which will satisfy all the different sections of the audience. In other words, every theatre-goer must receive some sort of satisfaction from every play that is staged. It is just possible that the man whose sensibility is highly developed will grasp all the levels of meaning of play, but very ordinary people may only appreciate the action or plot while some slightly superior people may appreciate the art of characterization. It does not matter if a member of the audience appreciates the play only on one level without being conscious of the other level of meaning embodied in the play. All the different sections of the audience may thus feel satisfied with a play which is meant to offer various levels of meaning to various kinds of people. This fact is in the mind of T.S. Eliot when he starts his career as a dramatist.

As he says:

The most useful poetry, socially, would be one which could cut across all the present stratifications of public taste – stratifications which are perhaps a sign of social disintegration. The ideal medium for poetry, to my mind, and the most direct means of social ‘usefulness’ for poetry, is theatre. In a play of Shakespeare, you get several levels of significance. For the simplest auditors there is the plot, for the more thoughtful the character, for the more literary the words and phrasing, for the more musically sensitive the rhythm, and for auditors of greater sensitiveness and understanding a meaning which reveals itself gradually. And I don’t believe that the classification of audience is so clear cut as this; but rather that the sensitiveness of every auditor is acted upon by all these elements at once, though in different degree of consciousness. At none of these levels is the auditor bothered by the presence of that which he does not understand, or by the presence of that which he is not interested.

The point of view expressed here is that a good play ought to give different kinds of satisfaction to people of different capacities, and strata. It does not mean that such a play is not an organic whole. In fact, it is an artistic whole capable of supplying different sorts of people with different kinds of enjoyment. About a Shakespearean play, Eliot says that it had five levels of appeal to five sections of the audience of the Elizabethan age. The most ordinary people were interested in the plot while more thoughtful people thought of character and their interaction whereas those who were interested in literature appreciated the rhythm of Shakespeare’s poetry. Only a few persons having the right kind of sensibility would gradually appreciate the meaning of a play as whole. The modern society is different from the Elizabethan society and so a modern audience does not react to a modern play, as an Elizabethan audience would do. According to Eliot the modern society is disintegrated in such a way that very different kinds of demands are made on a play, particularly a verse-play. It is for this reason that Eliot introduces several levels of meaning in each of his plays. He is conscious of the fact that the majority of the theatre- goers are interested in the surface meaning of the play while some people of higher sensibility try to discover an inner meaning and those who are highly educated feel delighted with the play which reminds them of some classical play. Eliot has these levels of significance or meaning in his mind while producing in verse plays.

Eliot makes a very important statement regarding the relationship between the emotions. He considered the character and the story to be the objective correlative of the dramatist’s emotion. The action of the drama should be such that it can evoke the emotion the dramatist wants to present. If the emotion of a play is not justified by the situation or action of the play, the critic may say that the objective correlative chosen by the dramatist is inadequate or faulty. In the case of *Macbeth* the sleep-walking of Lady Macbeth is justified by the dramatic context. Macbeth’s speech delivered after the death of Lady Macbeth is appropriate and right in the context. In *Hamlet* emotions seem to overflow. Situations do not

justify emotional reactions. That is way Eliot considers *Hamlet* to be a defective play. In his essay on *Hamlet*, we find him passing the following comment:

The only way of expressing emotion in the form of art is by finding an 'objective correlative; in other words, a set of objects, a situation, a chain of events which shall be the formula of that particular emotion, such that when the external facts, which must terminate in sensory experience, are given, the emotion is immediately evoked. If we examine any of Shakespeare's more successful tragedies, you will find this exact equivalence, you will find that the state of mind of Lady Macbeth walking in her sleep has been communicated to you by a skilful accumulation of imagined sensory impression, the words of Macbeth on hearing of his wife's death strike us as if, given the sequence of events, these words were automatically released by the last event in the series. The artistic 'inevitability' lies in this complete adequacy of the external to the emotion; and then is precisely what is deficient in *Hamlet*.²

W.B. Yeats also talks about a link between the personal experience of the poet and the artistic product, in "The Circus Animal's Desertion" he tell us how his own love for Maud Gonne, the political revolutionary activists gave to his plays "The countless Cathleen" and his relationship with his own father was turned into the relationship between Cuchulian and his son in the play "On Bail's Strand". Finally he says that poet climbs form his personal experience to the drama along some ladder. The finished artistic product bears no trace of the original personal experience.

In this way we see that a plays as an artistic product has a personal level of experience which becomes obtrusive if the objective correlative is faulty. Even if it is not obtrusive, a play can be treated as the objective correlative of the personal experience of the poet. We may study every play be T.S. Eliot to discover this personal level of experience also which may offer a new level of meaning in addition to levels embodied in the structure of the play.

Eliot's problem is also to find an appropriate verse form for the theatre. Verse drama has not been popular since the Restoration period. The audience has been habituated to listening just talk or speeches in prose. In the modern age the popularity of Galsworthy and Shaw is immense. It is obvious that the theatergoers cannot but frown at a verse drama simply because it is written in verse. The problem of Eliot is to find a kind of verse which is not obtrusive enough to make the audience conscious of the fact that verse is being spoken on the stage. In his essay entitled "poetry – and Drama" Eliot remarks: "The chief effect of style and rhythm in dramatic speech, wether in prose or verse, should be unconscious."³

In a modern theatre, the audience habituated to the plays of Shaw, Rattigan and Osborne expect to hear natural speeches which are neither prose not poetry. So Eliot feels that a modern verse play should be at once speech and verse. When the characters talk on the stage, the audience should be convinced that common speech is being heard. The underlined rhythm and metre should never become obtrusive enough to make the audience feel that verse

is being spoken. According to Eliot, the effect of rhythm and metre should be largely unconscious. In other words, rhythm and metre must produce their effects on the audience although no one will be conscious of them.

Moreover, Eliot shows that in the musical scenes Shakespeare ranges freely from common talk to purple poetry in such a way that the shifts are never noticed by the audience. In the first scene of Hamlet, soldiers talk in such a way that it cannot be called either prose or poetry. This talk gradually rises to the height of purple poetry when Horatio describes the Don in russet mantle clad walking in the eastwards hills. Such a musical scene produces the right kind of effect on the audience because the pattern of speech in this scene coincides with the musical pattern, each strengthening the other. A highly sophisticated audience may be simultaneously aware of both the patterns, but a mixed audience, though every-one will be affected by both the patterns, will not all be aware of the musical pattern. In this way, Eliot wants that even on the levels of versification different people should be affected differently. The common man should be able to enjoy a modern verse play as he enjoys a play by Shaw or Osborne. For him, there will be no difference because the kind of verse play Eliot wants to write will offer the common man common conversation while the underlying musical pattern will affect him without his being conscious of it.

About these two patterns, Eliot himself writes in his essay “Poetry and Drama”:

It would be interesting to pursue, by a similar analysis, this problem of the double pattern in great poetic drama the pattern which may be examined from the point of view of stagecraft or from that of the music. But I think that the examination of this one scene is enough to show us that verse is not merely formalization, or an added decoration, but that it intensifies the drama. It should indicate also the importance of the unconscious effect of the verse upon us. And lastly, I do not think that this effect is felt only by those members of an audience who ‘likely poetry’ but also by those who go for the play alone.⁴

In Elizabethan drama we often come across dialogues, in prose in verse plays. In the early play Shakespeare the quantity or prose is equal to that of verse but in his mature plays prose is rarely used. According to Eliot, a short scene in prose in a verse play indicates a change in the plane. So far as the Elizabethan audience was concerned, the suggestion of a change in the plane of action was certainly effective because the audience was habituated to plays in prose. The problem, with a modern playwright is that the audience must not be made conscious of the medium because of the fact that what is being listened to his verse the whole effect of the play may be spoilt. So Eliot suggests that in a modern verse play there should not be able to develop a kind of verse that is capable of living on various diets ranging from the richest to poorest. Eliot clearly says that the verse of a modern verse play should be able to do the work of prose also so that a change in plane of action will not be suggested by the use of formal prose. In “Poetry and Drama” Eliot makes this point with a remarkable clarity:

To-day, however, because of the handicap under which verse drama suffers, I believe that in verse drama prose should be used very sparingly indeed, that we would aim at a form of verse in which everything can be said that has to be said, and that when we find some situation which is intractable in verse, it is merely because our form of verse is inelastic. And if there prove to be scenes which we can't put in verse, we must either develop our verse, or avoid having to introduce such scenes.⁵

It is one of the poet orthodox is of T.S. Eliot that verse is the right medium of a play. His argument is that verse can express more than prose and so a verse drama can express complexities and suggestions that prose drama cannot hope to express. He admits that some of the plays of Ibsen and Chekhov, though in prose, are remarkably complex and suggestive even then his viewpoint is that prose cannot hope to attain the height that verse can reach. As he says:

It seems to me that beyond the nameable, classifiable emotions and motives of our conscious life when directed towards action -the part of life which prose drama is wholly adequate to express ---- there is a fringe of indefinite extent, of feeling which we can only detect, so to speak, out of the corner of the eye and can never completely focus; of feeling of which we are only aware in a kind of temporary detachment from action. There are great prose dramatists -- such as Ibsen and Chekhov -- who have at times done things of which I would not otherwise have supposed prose to be capable, but who seem to me, in spite of their success, to have been hampered in expression by writing in prose.⁶

Eliot view is that poetry can capture and convey to the readers or the listener flitting gleaming qualities of experience which elude the hold of everyday prose and so it is the right medium of a play which seeks to presents different levels of meaning without losing the sense of unity.

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