ELIOT THROUGH TOLKIEN: ESTRANGEMENT, VERSE DRAMA, AND THE CHRISTIAN PATH IN THE MODERN ERA

BY

HANNAH E. REYNOLDS

A Thesis Submitted to the Graduate Faculty of

WAKE FOREST UNIVERSITY GRADUATE SCHOOL OF ARTS AND SCIENCES

in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements

for the Degree of

MASTER OF ARTS

English

May 2017

Winston-Salem, North Carolina

Approved By:

Philip Kuberski, PhD, Advisor

Eric Wilson, PhD, Chair

Barry Maine, PhD

Acknowledgements

First of all, I would like to thank Dr. Philip Kuberski for sharing his love of T. S. Eliot, for helping me fine-tune my topic, and for advising and reading each draft of this thesis. His insights and guidance were invaluable, and I am thankful for the opportunity to have worked with and learned from him. I am also very grateful to Dr. Eric Wilson and Dr. Barry Maine for serving as readers for this thesis. I would like to thank my English professors at Wake Forest University and North Greenville University for helping me develop my critical reading, research, and writing skills. In particular, I am indebted to NGU professors Dr. April Boone, Dr. Cheryl Collier, Dr. Catherine Sepko, and Dr. Becky Thompson for their commitment to teaching English literature from a Christian perspective with excellence. During my time at NGU and beyond, they prayed for me, encouraged me, challenged me, and inspired me to pursue my graduate degree. It is from them that I learned how to find Truth even in the unlikeliest of places.

In addition, I would like to thank my family for their support, encouragement, and prayers. My mother, my father, and my sister Michaela spent some late nights reading drafts, offering feedback, and encouraging me to persevere. They worked around my writing schedule, stacks of books, and stressful moments with patience and kindness. I could not have done this without them. My Living Way Church family, including Pastors John Held and Sam Cotten, also supported me throughout my graduate school career.

Finally, and most importantly, I would like to thank my Lord and Savior Jesus Christ for opening my eyes to the Gospel twenty years ago, for saving me, for calling me His own, and for planting a love of stories in my heart. I am nothing without Him, and I am humbled to have been given the opportunity to write this thesis.

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Abstract

This thesis explores the function of T. S. Eliot's use of verse drama as an estranging mechanism that enables his exploration of questions of spiritual moment on the Modern stage. J.R.R. Tolkien's theory of fantasy, as outlined in his essay "On Fairy Stories," serves as the framework for my analysis of three of Eliot's major plays: *Murder in the Cathedral* (1935), *The Family Reunion* (1939), and *The Cocktail Party* (1949). I argue that Eliot finds in verse drama the same capabilities that Tolkien extols in fairy-stories. Through a work alienated from the receiver by time, setting, and/or a distinctness from everyday life, the audience can move through the stages of Fantasy, Recovery, Escape, and Consolation that Tolkien explains as occurring in fairy-stories. This reading of Eliot's plays highlights his use of the genre of verse drama (Fantasy) to present to his Modern, largely secular audience the Christian path of Recovery, Escape, and Consolation. This thesis also attends to the expansion and development of Eliot's theology and poetic theory over the course of the plays, tracking especially his gradual acknowledgement of the space for the natural within the supernatural and the supernatural within the natural life.

Introduction

One of the greatest shocks of the early twentieth century was the public conversion of T.S. Eliot, author of *The Waste Land* and voice of the disillusioned Modern era, to Christianity in 1927. Although many held—and some continue to maintain—that his conversion was nominal, the profound difference between his pre- and post-conversion creative and critical writings testifies to its genuineness. As Lyndall Gordon notes in her biography of the great literary figure, "for Eliot there was no dramatic change, only an 'expansion or development of interest'" (192). His early writings indicate a lifelong interest in sin, guilt, and expiation. In the years following his conversion, Eliot turned his keen poetic skill more decisively toward understanding and communicating the mysteries of the Christian Gospel. Other writers of the period professed Christianity; C.S. Lewis would have his own dramatic conversion to the faith just a few years later. An interesting parallel that has yet to be explored, however, is that between Eliot and fellow Anglo-Catholic John Ronald Reuel Tolkien.

Eliot and Tolkien, although they had quite different careers and wrote vastly different works, are united in their theory and in their Christian faith. Both expressed an aim to convey aspects of their Christian faith through their works.[1] While neither can be considered an apologist in the same way that Lewis can, Tolkien and Eliot both articulate a theology through their creative works that is well-suited to their Modern context. In

[1] In his essay "Religion and Literature" (1935), Eliot writes, "[T]he 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: of something which I assume to be our primary concern" (104-5). Similarly, the closing lines of Tolkien's "On Fairy Stories" illustrate the value that Tolkien places on Christian-as-writer: "But in God's kingdom the presence of the greatest does not depress the small. Redeemed Man is still man. Story, fantasy, still go on, and should go on. The Evangelium [Gospel] has not abrogated legends; it has hallowed them, especially in the 'happy ending.' The Christian has still to work, with mind as well as body, to suffer, hope, and die; but he may now perceive that all his bents and faculties have a purpose, which can be redeemed" (24).

particular, their solutions to the problem of evil address the profoundest of the Modern man's version of universal struggles—feelings of isolation and disillusionment, rampant materialism and material-ness, and the need and fear of some sort of revelation or truth greater than everyday existence. These struggles fall under two teleological questions: What is wrong with the world, and how can it be fixed?

In Eliot, the answers to these questions come through an understanding of the timeless moment as a temporary glimpse of eternity that functions as a revelation that relieves loneliness, overshadows disillusionment, and transcends the material world. He does this, of course, through his poetry, most effectively in *Four Quartets*, but he also succeeds in conveying these glimpses of eternity and their effects through his verse drama. Tolkien, on the other hand, finds the solution to these pressing questions in the genre of fantasy, which he terms "fairy-stories" (2). His solution, like Eliot's, is an escape—an escape not *from* reality, but *into* reality through the fantastic. Fantastic escape, like the timeless moment, enables the individual to transcend the mundanities of reality and come into closer contact with eternal truth. In both cases, the authors turn to atypical genres and unfamiliar settings for a fuller presentation of their beliefs. Also in both cases, this choice is intentional.

The following chapters explore the function of genre as an intentional estranging and engaging mechanism that provides a vehicle for theological discussion. Through an analysis of three of Eliot's major verse plays—*Murder in the Cathedral* (1935), *The Family Reunion* (1939), and *The Cocktail Party* (1949)—by way of the framework of Tolkien's theory of fairy-stories, I seek to illustrate the effects of atypical genre on the transmission and reception of a message dealing with teleology from a Christian

perspective. Although the differences in the two authors' genre choice are by no means negligible or coincidental, neither are the similarities in their strategy of indirection. In "Poetry and Drama," Eliot states, "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" (145). For Eliot, there is something that verse drama can do that prose drama cannot quite manage, an area which it can access that remains to regular prose drama unattainable. His meaning is illuminated as he goes on to assert, "For it is ultimately the function of art, in imposing a credible order upon ordinary reality, and thereby eliciting some perception of an order in reality, to bring us to a condition of serenity, stillness, and reconciliation; and then leave us, as Virgil left Dante, to proceed toward a region where that guide can avail us no farther" (146). Art, then, must order reality in such a way that the receiver becomes aware of the actual underlying order of, or truth about, reality, bringing the receiver to the brink of an encounter with the absolute and leaving him there, prepared for the experience. Eliot seeks to achieve these goals through his own recreation of the genre of verse drama.

Similarly, Tolkien's essay "On Fairy Stories" lays out the merits of the genre of fantasy above others. He asserts, "The magic of Faerie is not an end in itself, its virtue is in its operations: among these are the satisfaction of certain primordial human desires. One [. . . .] is [. . .] to hold communion with other living things. A story may thus deal with the satisfaction of these desires, with or without the operation of either machine or

magic, and in proportion as it succeeds it will approach the quality and have the flavor of fairy-story" (Tolkien 5). In other words, Tolkien sees fairy-stories, or the genre of fantasy, as enabling something which lies outside the realm of realistic fiction or other, more common genres. Fantasy is valuable not in and of itself, but because it has a unique capacity to showcase universal human desires and to offer ways of fulfilling those desires. Tolkien goes on to enumerate four things that fairy-stories "offer, in a peculiar degree or mode": "Fantasy, Recovery, Escape, Consolation" (15). For Tolkien, Fantasy is "a word which shall embrace both the Sub-creative Art in itself and a quality of strangeness and wonder in the Expression, derived from the Image" (16). That "quality of strangeness and wonder" allows the receiver to see the ordinary in an extraordinary way. Tolkien continues, "[W]e need recovery. We should look at green again, and be startled anew (but not blinded) by blue and yellow and red. [. . .] Recovery (which includes return and renewal of health) is a regaining—regaining of a clear view" (19). Eliot expressed a similar aim for his verse drama: that, by it, "we should not be transported into an artificial world; on the contrary, our own sordid, dreary daily world would be suddenly illuminated and transfigured" (Eliot, "Poetry" 141). Recovery, then, affords clarity. In addition, Tolkien sees Fantasy as offering an escape from everyday life, justifying the desire for escape: "Why should a man be scorned if, finding himself in prison, he tries to get out and go home? Or if, when he cannot do so, he thinks and talks about other topics than jailers and prison walls?" (20). For Tolkien, a strict adherence to materiality and this world constitutes a prison, one that should be escaped, and Fantasy offers the most effective way to do so.

Finally, the greatest offering of fairy-stories is "the Consolation of the Happy Ending," which Tolkien terms "Eucatastrophe," or "the sudden joyous turn" (22). He explains,

> In its fairy-tale—or otherworld—setting, it is a sudden and miraculous grace, never to be counted on to recur. It does not deny the existence of dyscatastrophe, of sorrow and failure: the possibility of these is necessary to the joy of deliverance; it denies (in the face of much evidence, if you will) universal final defeat and in so far is evangelium, giving a fleeting glimpse of Joy, Joy beyond the walls of the world, poignant as grief. (22)

Human beings long for the happy ending, and Fantasy offers this consolation in an unexpected way. Moreover, such Consolation has significance beyond the story in which it occurs. Tolkien identifies "The Great Eucatastrophe: The Christian joy, the Gloria," as "of the same kind," but "preeminently (infinitely, if our capacity were not finite) high and joyous. But this story is supreme; and it is true. Art has been verified. God is the Lord, of angels, and of men—and of elves. Legend and History have met and fused" (24). Fairy-stories have the capacity to convey the ultimate because they are echoes of the ultimate story, the Christian Gospel. While Tolkien does not explicitly distinguish Fantasy, Recovery, Escape, and Consolation as individual chronological steps, there is a clear progression. Only through Recovery and a desire for Escape can the individual, either within or outside of the story, arrive at Consolation.

I argue that Eliot finds in verse drama the same capabilities that Tolkien extols in fairy-stories. Through a work alienated from the receiver by time, setting, and/or a distinctness from everyday life (a few examples of what I shall term estranging

mechanisms), the audience can move through the stages of Fantasy, Recovery, Escape, and Consolation that Tolkien explains as occurring in fairy-stories. For Tolkien in *The Lord of the Rings*, the Fantasy setting of Middle-Earth offers Escape and Recovery, and the ultimate destruction of the ring and Sauron's power is a tantamount example of Eucatastrophe. For Eliot, the point of interest is an individual's recognition of his sin that results in a revelation of his need for deliverance and ultimately leads him down the road to Consolation. For both, the answers to the problems of the human condition are rooted in the Christian Bible. I have therefore provided a reading of Eliot's plays that highlights his use of the genre of verse drama (Fantasy) to present to his Modern, largely secular audience the Christian path of Recovery, Escape, and Consolation.

My primary approach to the texts under discussion is close-reading. The main framework is Tolkien's theory of fairy-stories, as laid out above. In addition, a historicist angle proves valuable in setting Eliot's plays historically and within an understanding of Modern drama in its larger cultural context. Foremost, Eliot's choice to write verse drama sets him apart from the majority of Modern playwrights; with the exception of Yeats, the successful playwrights of the late nineteenth and early twentieth century wrote exclusively in prose. While some similarity in Eliot's estranging use of verse drama and Bertolt Brecht's "alienation effect" can be observed, their purposes are distinct.[2] In the Modern era, by returning to Christian tradition and orthodoxy, Eliot's work became subversive. He moved backwards to another understanding of history and culture, both

[2] As Philip Glahn writes, "At its core, Brecht's approach constitutes an attempt to show the viewer the relations of power and the mechanisms of reality, to lay bare the device. His method aims to situate both artist and viewer within and in conscious relation to the historical present in order to illuminate a position of active, critical involvement in the knowing and making of the world. Exposing social norms and 'truths' as historically determined and culturally produced shows them to be malleable and thus sheds an emancipatory light on the viewer's own agency" (*Critical Lives: Bertolt Brecht*. Reaktion Books, 2014, p. 8). Eliot, on the other hand, seeks to help his viewers arrive at an appreciation of absolute truth.

similar to and distinct from the Modern "cyclic views of the past" (Williams 2). His utilization of various source texts to ground and structure his plays illustrates his belief in the value of bringing the past into the present. While his poetry and plays acknowledge the universality of human experience and the individual's perception of time as an endlessly repeating pattern, his belief in the eternal, transcendent Christian God offer an ultimate escape from the cycle. My readings of Eliot's plays target the biblical path to Recovery, Escape, and Consolation that they present and the methods of presentation they use for an audience of this particular moment.

In addressing a Modern audience from the stage, Eliot realized the need for indirection; he uses a fairly familiar setting with dangerous ruptures waiting just below the surface. His pre-conversion poetry, illustrative of his personal experience, documents the Modern individual's inability or unwillingness to respond to revelation.[3] That awareness led him to be circuitous in his play's approach to the absolute and divine. Although some, such as Gordon, believe that Eliot's plays, particularly his West End drama, "underrated the popular audience" and "talk[ed] down" to them, such statements run the risk of ignoring the artistic value of the two levels of the play (278). The "dullards' chit-chat" in *The Family Reunion* does not merely reflect Eliot's prejudice against the masses, in spite of his somewhat elitist attitude (278). On the contrary, such dull conversation sets the discussions of matters of life and death in sharp relief. It provides, as it were, the droning background against which the real drama can play out—not only Harry's drama, but also the human drama. The chorus's conversation mirrors "the conversation" that "rises and slowly fades into silence" in the underground train of

[3] See, for example, the experience of the speaker in his encounter with the "hyacinth girl" in Part I of *The Waste Land*, lines 35-42.

"East Coker" (Eliot, *Four Quartets* 126). Their words are a prelude to the absolute. They are accessible in their mundanity; the play offers each audience member the opportunity to recognize the idiocy of the chatter and the need to stop and ponder more pressing issues, such as their need for Recovery and the way to fulfill that need. Given his own experience, Eliot perhaps did not expect many of the audience members to realize the duality of the play's plot and message, but he nevertheless extended the invitation to all.

Much criticism on Eliot's plays has come to focus on biography, and much biography is linked to criticism of his works. While Eliot's life undoubtedly shaped his work, honing in on biographical details often means neglecting larger concerns, such as the integrity of the art as distinct from the artist and the play's message and reception. Other approaches include a detailed study of his source material, particularly for the myth-based *The Family Reunion* and *The Cocktail Party*. The mythical underpinning of these plays is significant and will be addressed briefly, insofar as it serves as an estranging mechanism. Still more studies have linked Eliot's plays to the poetry from around the same time. A few studies have considered his plays in their relationship to one another. Keiko Saeki traces the themes of the common versus the saintly life and the types of characters across Eliot's five plays. The progression of Eliot's ideas across the plays is of interest to me as well; however, I am also concerned with Eliot's use of an evolving theory of verse drama that enables his emphasis on the universality of human experience and a presentation of the stages of the Christian life.

Of the critics who address Eliot's Christianity in any sort of detail, many downplay it as a system of moralism or social conservatism. G. Douglas Atkins is one notable exception. Eliot's work undeniably illustrates his growth into espousing orthodox

Christian beliefs and suffusing his works with those beliefs. Since Eliot professed Christianity, he affirmed the biblical doctrine of salvation. In his letter to the Ephesians, the apostle Paul summarizes the process of salvation, or the Gospel: "But God, who is rich in mercy, for his great love wherewith he loved us, even when we were dead in sins, hath quickened us together with Christ, (by grace ye are saved;) and hath raised us up together, and made us sit together in heavenly places in Christ Jesus: that in the ages to come he might shew the exceeding riches of his grace in his kindness toward us through Christ Jesus. For by grace are ye saved through faith; and that not of yourselves: it is the gift of God" (*King James Version*, Eph. 2.4-8). This understanding of the Gospel informs Eliot's and Tolkien's work, intentionally as well as implicitly, and the dramatization of an individual's encounter with the Gospel through the stages of Recovery (a realization of one's condition), Escape (a desire to avoid death), and Consolation (salvation) form the foundation of my assessment of Eliot's message and presentation.

My first chapter addresses the saint's journey as portrayed in the first of Eliot's major plays, *Murder in the Cathedral*. This play is an important starting place not only in terms of chronology, but also in terms of setting and genre. While Eliot's later plays turned to familiar, modern settings and characters, *Murder in the Cathedral* inhabits a different space: an overlap between the medieval world of Thomas Becket and, with the direct addresses of the knights at the close of the play, a contemporary courtroom. Given the overtly religious subject matter, Eliot's task in conveying Christian ideas within the play may at first glance not seem to offer much of a challenge. As Gordon has noted, Eliot did not anticipate such a play's success beyond the audience for which it was originally commissioned: "Eliot told his brother that, when he wrote the play, he thought

its run would terminate with the Canterbury Festival in June 1935. [. . .] Eliot never expected the popular success that the play at once achieved" (277-78). This unexpected success very well may have been the deciding factor in Eliot's choice to continue to pursue writing verse plays. *Murder in the Cathedral* certainly lays the foundation for Eliot's continued work in the genre. My analysis focuses on such estranging mechanisms as the use of a chorus and allegorical figures (the tempters) in the presence of modern elements (the tempters' costumes, the plain language, and the direct address of the knights as though at an inquest), in addition to the verse of the play and all the corresponding poetic elements. Thematically, I focus on Thomas's movement from his Recovery of clear sight upon his return to England, his ultimate rejection of the temptation to an earthly Escape, and his Consolation in the form of accepting a martyr's death, as well as on the role of the Chorus (and, by extension, the audience) as witnesses of the glory of his Consolation.

Chapter two moves to a reading of Eliot's first completed contemporary play, *The Family Reunion*.[4] Although written for a largely secular audience, Eliot continues his focus on theological issues: "*The Family Reunion* was the first of his attempts to align his underlying spiritual concerns with the conventions of the popular theatre; although the play was not a commercial success, he sustained the endeavour, in the belief that his art should serve a broad social purpose, with *The Cocktail Party* (1950), *The Confidential Clerk* (1954), *and The Elder Statesman* (1959)" ("Eliot" 193). Eliot's aim to reach the audience of the popular theater with his ideas is clear. I discuss the significance of the apparent dichotomy between the spiritual and the natural, which in part arises from his

[4] *Sweeney Agonistes* (fragments published 1932) has the distinction of Eliot's first play in a contemporary setting. Although it was never completed, it has been staged multiple times.

adaptation of his source material. I highlight the correspondences between the action and characters of the play and that of Aeschylus' *Oresteia* that have been well-documented.[5]

Although the mythical context serves as an estranging mechanism, it is only one of many I discuss. Eliot once again incorporated a chorus, adding the disconcerting effect of having four of the aunts and uncles shift from their banal chatter as individuals to an almost prophetic collective when speaking together. While Eliot himself later identified this choice as problematic, Giles Evans offers a challenge to the dramatist's self-criticism in his detailed study of the play's characters in his book *Wishwood Revisited*. The precise effect of the chorus, both as individuals and a collective, is considered, as is the function of the Eumenides. Another strange element that I explore is the variations in verse between the lines of the majority of the characters and the periodical charm-like speeches of Agatha and Mary, Sybil-like characters who seem to exist on the border between the two worlds of the play. In terms of the play's message, the central concern is the fate of Harry, a man who feels haunted by grief and wonders what path is left for him to take. Ultimately, he decides on the exalted, religious path, much as Thomas did in *Murder in the Cathedral*.[6] Although Harry's journey is meant to be the primary focus of the play, the other characters' positioning and growth or stagnancy in relation to the path from Recovery to Consolation demand attention. The differences between the various characters provide an opportunity to go against the grain of Eliot's self-criticism; here, Evans's *Wishwood Revisited* proves particularly helpful.

The third chapter tackles Eliot's most commercially, and arguably most aesthetically, successful play, *The Cocktail Party*, subtitled "A Comedy." Through a less

[5] See Randy Malamud's *T.S. Eliot's Drama*, pp. 100-104.
[6] See Malamud's citations of David Ward and Patrick Roberts, p. 100.

obvious mythical parallel, *The Cocktail Party* nevertheless presents symbolic characters in a more approachable light. The estranging mechanisms here are quite different; no longer does a chorus mediate the audience's access to the story. The lightness of the content and verse of the first act provide a backdrop of normalcy that allows the symbolic characters ("The Guardians") to take on greater significance. The nearly seamless way in which the "guardian" characters Julia, Alex, and Reilly shift between their personal identities and their typological roles leaves the audience unsuspecting; that lack of expectation provides an even greater jolt in the audience during scenes of gravity, such as those in Reilly's office and the revelation of Celia's death at the end. Through a defter joining of the ordinary and the strange than in his previous works, Eliot more fully illustrates two different, equally valuable models of the Christian walk, each with their own versions of the stages of Recovery, Escape, and Consolation.

The conclusion ties all three plays together and traces the evolution of Eliot's use of estranging mechanisms and the corresponding effect on the play's aesthetic success and audience relatability by applying Tolkien's theory to them collectively and analyzing the contemporary reception of each play. I also address some possible reasons for the enduring popularity of Tolkien's works into the twenty-first century and the relative obscurity of most of Eliot's plays. Such a clear disparity demands attention: what makes Tolkien's works outlast Eliot's? Additionally, I trace the development of Eliot's Christian theology throughout the works, bringing in some of his own critical writings from the years surrounding the plays ("Religion and Literature" and "The Idea of a Christian Society"). This aids my ultimate evaluation of the consistency of Eliot's creative and social vision.

Chapter 1 – "all things proceed to a joyful consummation": The Saint's Journey across the Stage in *Murder in the Cathedral*

Eliot wrote his first major play as a commission from the Canterbury Festival (Gordon 271). Although the play targeted primarily a religious audience, it would enjoy popularity and critical acclaim in the secular arena as well. The distinctly medieval Christian tone of *Murder in the Cathedral* (1935) seems at first glance to be quite different from that of Eliot's intentionally-West End dramas such as *The Family Reunion* (1939) and *The Cocktail Party* (1949); however, a more detailed study of the plays and Eliot's own theory illuminates a pattern. In each play, Eliot harkens back both to a specific earlier text and to ancient Greek theatrical tradition. For *Murder in the Cathedral*, the subtext that provides the foundation at least for the language of the play is the medieval allegory *Everyman*; in a lecture that later became the essay "Poetry and Drama," Eliot admits his reliance upon the play: "The rhythm of regular blank verse had become too remote from the movement of modern speech. Therefore what I kept in mind was the versification of *Everyman*, hoping that anything unusual in the sound of it would be, on the whole, advantageous" (139). While the connection between the verse of the two plays is explicit, the allegorical elements of *Murder in the Cathedral* were also undoubtedly influenced by *Everyman*. Martin Kornbluth, among others, recognizes the parallels between the two texts, concluding, "[Eliot] has not merely rewritten an old morality play; he has transposed the elements, adding a complexity of effect here, twisting the motivation there, putting flesh and blood on abstraction [. . .]; the result is a twentieth-century morality, in characterization, tone, moral, structure and style not too far a cry from its fifteenth-century progenitor" (29). Eliot used ancient dramas as subtexts for his next two plays: *The Family Reunion* is based on Aeschylus's *Oresteia* and *The*

Cocktail Party on Euripides's *Alcestis*. In each case, the degree to which the historical parallel is visible and influential varies, but Eliot's use of a subtext from literary history qualifies as what he had earlier termed the "mythic method."

Eliot first identified the mythic method in his 1923 review of James Joyce's *Ulysses*. He wrote, "Mr. Joyce's parallel use of the *Odyssey* has a great importance. It has the importance of a scientific discovery. No one else has built a novel upon such a foundation before: it has never before been necessary" (Eliot, "'Ulysses'" 177). He recognized Joyce as groundbreaking in his use of a mythic text to serve as the underpinning of a contemporary novel. He goes on to explain:

> In using the myth, in manipulating a continuous parallel between contemporaneity and antiquity, Mr. Joyce is pursuing a method which others must pursue after him. They will not be imitators, any more than the scientist who uses the discoveries of an Einstein in pursuing his own, independent, further investigations. It is simply a way of controlling, of ordering, of giving a shape and a significance to the immense panorama of futility and anarchy which is contemporary history. It is a method already adumbrated by Mr. Yeats, and of the need for which I believe Mr. Yeats to have been the first contemporary to be conscious. (177)

Eliot acknowledges the value of a myth as an organizing text, arguably for the same reason that he finds the medieval world so inspiring: for Eliot, at this point in his life, the past represents a time of wholeness, of a culture united around common religion, beliefs, and values that connects art, artist, and receiver within a common experience. Although Eliot's views on the unity of the medieval world would change over the course of his

career, his early writings indicate his longing for a wholeness that he did not perceive in the modern era; for a time, he thought that that wholeness could be found in the past. Here he asserts that modern writers must continue down the path that Joyce and Yeats have trail-blazed, for modern culture has been fragmented beyond possibility of repair into any sort of complete entity.

Eliot's early writings give precedent to the idea that he sees the ancient and even the medieval periods as superior to, and desirable in the place of, the modern. He fleshes these ideas out in more detail in a later work, his review of Dante first published in 1929. In explaining his admiration for Dante, Eliot also clarifies his view of the medieval. He does not oversimplify the complexities of the medieval world; rather, he focuses on the medieval period's capacity for artistic unity. In "Dante," Eliot explains what he means in claiming the great poet's universality: "That does not mean that he is 'the greatest', or that he is the most comprehensive – there is greater variety and detail in Shakespeare. Dante's universality is not solely a personal matter. The Italian language, and especially the Italian language in Dante's age, gains much by being the product of universal Latin" (206). Eliot sees the value in a society largely informed by the same language, recognizing the division of thought that inevitably arises from the growth of nationalism and the particularity of the modern languages. He highlights this difference by writing, "When you read modern philosophy, you must be struck by national or racial differences of thought: modern languages *tend* to separate abstract thought (mathematics is now the only universal language); but mediaeval Latin tended to concentrate on what men of various races and lands could think together" (206). In other words, the medieval world had a greater capacity for sharing ideas with a broader audience, due both to a common

underlying language and common religious beliefs and systems. In pre-Reformation Europe, the Catholic Church was a culturally unifying force, in spite of its run-ins with secular authorities. Eliot states clearly, "in Dante's time Europe, with all its dissensions and dirtiness, was mentally more united than we can now conceive" (206). Eliot does not ignore the difficulties the medieval world faced in regards to the balance of temporal and ecclesiastical power; he merely argues that, in spite of those difficulties, the world was more cohesive then than it has become in the modern era.

The medieval unity of thought, for Eliot, enables a more effective form of artistic communication. In particular, Eliot focuses on the effectiveness of allegory in communicating to a medieval audience due to its considerable cultural capital. He attributes Dante's success to his employment of allegory, asserting, "What is important for my purpose is the fact that the allegorical method was a definite method not confined to Italy; and the fact, apparently paradoxical, that the allegorical method makes for simplicity and intelligibility" (Eliot, "Dante" 209). While to a modern audience allegory may seem strange and stilted, for a medieval audience, allegory was an established mode of communication. Dante's use of allegory, therefore, allows his poetry to be accessible to a wide audience. Eliot further explains Dante's methods in terms of the medieval world's methods of accessing truth:

> Dante's is a visual imagination. . . . visual in the sense that he lived in an age in which men still saw visions. It was a psychological habit, the trick of which we have forgotten, but as good as any of our own. We have nothing but dreams, and we have forgotten that seeing visions – a practice

> now relegated to the aberrant and uneducated – was once a more significant, interesting, and disciplined kind of dreaming. (209)

Eliot here betrays his own fascination with the ascetic and mystical, but his analysis of the medieval world's use of these forms of living and knowing also illustrates the merits of a world where the ascetic and mystical are as viable as the material. Eliot's exploration of the strengths of Dante's poetry serves as an apology for his own view of the past as providing a context and a language for discussions of that which exists beyond the material world. These views also impact his relationship with the present.

Various critics have recognized Eliot's complex view of the medieval period. Krystyna Michael terms Eliot's interpretation of the past not merely a nostalgic medievalism, but rather a neomedieval understanding of the contemporaneity of the past and the present. She highlights Eliot's tendency in his later writings to see the past not as an idealistic Other, as he appears to describe it in his early critical writings, but as an alternative reality that exists contemporaneously with the modern world, insofar as the modern world makes use of the medieval in its own interpretations of history and modernity. She argues "that the unresolved question of the validity of Becket's martyrdom leaves the theological significance of the play indeterminate at the same time as it renders problematic the idea that the play embodies Eliot's nostalgia for the Middle Ages" (Michael 35). She sees Thomas's crisis not as characteristic of the Middle Ages, but as a "fragmented, modern intellectual crisis" that Eliot "embeds in this medieval story" (35). Michael posits Eliot's rejection of nostalgia for the medieval through his representation of Thomas's dilemma.

Furthermore, Michael questions the legitimacy of Thomas's acceptance of martyrdom in a way that not even a pre-conversion Eliot would. She claims, "Both sets of interlocutors [the tempters and the knights] argue that Thomas chose to return to Canterbury for his own benefit and neither scene ends with any kind of resolution" (Michael 36). Michael fails to recognize that the tempters and the knights represent not authorized interpreters of the play's action, but dissenting voices. As James Matthew Wilson notes, the way in which the knights address the audience "underscores Eliot's intention that the speeches of the knights should be to his audience what the tempters are to Becket" (194). The true mediators of the play, the chorus of the women of Canterbury, are the first and the last to speak. They mediate, or negotiate, the audience's relationship to what happens on stage. As witnesses to the play's action, the women have the role that is closest to that of the audience. The chorus provides finality and assurance related to Thomas's martyrdom, ending the play with a sobriety that heightens the power of Thomas's death.

Moreover, moving beyond the world of the play, Eliot's career-long interest in saints and their visions and experiences reveals his acceptance of and even reverence for the ascetic life. As early as his undergraduate days, Eliot studied medieval mystics such as Julian of Norwich and St. John of the Cross (Gordon 87-88). *Murder in the Cathedral* certainly stands as Eliot's most cogent and compelling case for a martyr, but it does not represent the sum of his interest in the subject. The theme, as noted, occurred far earlier in his writing career and returns with undeniable power in the final scene of *The Cocktail Party*. The play and the playwright validate Thomas's martyrdom; Eliot showcases not only the possibility of a valid, even necessary, death through martyrdom but also

Thomas's genuine commitment to God that validates the particular circumstances of his martyrdom.

Furthermore, the validity of Becket's martyrdom need not be questionable in order for Eliot's play to be read as an intersection of the profound similarities between the medieval and the modern. Most critics agree that Becket's martyrdom is valid, but this does not necessitate a nostalgia on Eliot's part. He neither sentimentalizes nor demonizes the medieval. He takes it for what it is—a unique but certainly imperfect period of history—drawing out the commonalities of human experience that resonate with a modern audience. In other words, respect for the medieval period does not constitute nostalgia, and an acute understanding of the modern world does not nullify Thomas's martyrdom. Wilson explains Becket's death as transcending individual experience and pointing to a greater reality beyond himself: "Becket's death is a martyrdom, because it is an act of witness, a purely self-negating acceptance that there is a truth beyond that conceived in the mind of the state and a goodness infinitely more binding and fulfilling than the very best self man can conceive in his individual breast" (197). Becket's end is not only a physical death, but also a spiritual death to self that enables him to become a greater version of himself.

Michael's argument does point out Eliot's neomedieval interpretation of history. She explains, "What is new in these neo- (as opposed to post-) medieval representations is often a shift in the understanding of history itself. A movement away from linear models of historical progression opens up the possibility of a more complicated relationship to the medieval in post-medieval contexts" (Michael 35). Michael sees neomedievalism as perfectly at home with the modernists' tendency to interpret history as

a recurring pattern rather than a linear progression of events. Louise Williams also identifies modern intellectuals' "cyclic views of the past" (2). In particular, she highlights the "sinusoidal," or "alternation view" of history, which "postulates the existence of two sets of phenomena, principles, or traditions that cyclically alternate throughout time" (10). Although her study focuses on the way this view developed in the writings of slightly earlier writers of the Modern period, including W. B. Yeats and Ezra Pound, the sinusoidal or alternation view of history is also apparent in the writings of later Modernists, Eliot and Joyce included. Moreover, Williams's explanation of how this perspective of history appealed to pre-modern (including medieval) intellectuals in part also elucidates its allure for a neomedievalist like Eliot:

> Sinusoidal theories of human history may have been particularly appealing to pre-modern thinkers because they readily accommodate a belief in the existence of a supernatural realm that contains ultimate truth. In fact, cyclic views of history almost always are accompanied by an assumption that behind the temporary changes of the human world a superior reality is present, which is permanent and unchanging, exists outside of time, and in which all things occur simultaneously. (12)

Rather than seeing history as progressing towards secular perfection, Eliot, like the pre-moderns, affirmed the existence of a reality that stands apart from time. His poetry and plays exhibit the desire to approach that timeless, permanent reality.

Part of Eliot's modernist, cyclic view of history involved his understanding of the function of ritual. While *Murder in the Cathedral* obviously makes use of Catholic rituals, Eliot discussed the function of ritual and religion in relation to theater elsewhere.

In his "Dialogue on Dramatic Poetry," written in 1928, Eliot uses seven speakers, named A through G, respectively, to discuss the merits of verse drama and its potential use in the Modern era. During the course of the discussion, two important topics arise: the musical quality that verse uniquely possesses, and the dramatic function of religious ritual. Those musical and ritualistic qualities, as E points out, can be observed in ballet: "A few years ago I [. . .] was delighted by the Russian ballet. Here seemed to be everything that we wanted in drama, except the poetry. [. . .] If there is a future for drama, and particularly for poetic drama, will it not be in the direction indicated by the ballet?" (Eliot, "Dialogue" 33-34). The ballet is not hampered by prose; its intimate connection with music links it to an expression which eludes mere everyday language, and its structure and patterning link it to ritual as well as to music. B elaborates, "[The strength of the ballet] is in a tradition, a training, an askesis, which, to be fair, is not of Russian but of Italian origin, and which ascends for several centuries. Suffice it to say that any efficient dancer has undergone a training which is like a moral training" (34-35). This "askesis," or "[t]he practice of self-discipline," is here linked with something older than the Russian ballet: the Italian moral or religious impulse ("ascesis, n"). This concept of self-discipline, which in Greek means "exercise" or "training," also has profound religious connotations that link it with asceticism ("ascesis, n"). Indeed, as the dialogue progresses, E notes another potential exemplar for drama: "I say that the consummation of the drama, the perfect and ideal drama, is to be found in the ceremony of the Mass. [. . .] drama springs from religious liturgy, and [. . .] it cannot afford to depart from religious liturgy. [. . .] And the only dramatic satisfaction that I find now is in a High Mass well performed" (Eliot, "Dialogue" 35). Although the other speakers quibble over whether a

non-religious person and a religious person will have the same sort of appreciation for the Mass, the dialogue nevertheless comes to rest on the idea of the dramatic resonances of religious ceremony. In other words, Eliot establishes the profound links between the religious and the dramatic—their organization, ceremony, and ability to express something beyond everyday language. For Eliot, drama has always been linked with religious ritual, and the most striking of these rituals is the Catholic Mass.

Various critics have explored Eliot's use of ritual in his poetry, and particularly in *Murder in the Cathedral*. Clifford Davidson, in his exploration of Eliot's use of the saint's play tradition, asserts that Eliot "was clearly influenced very deeply by his understanding of the relationship between the forms of worship and the forms of theatrical display" (156). In particular, Davidson notes, "the rites for the Anglo-Catholic included acts which in some sense not only provide a memory (*anamnesis*) of the past historical events of the Incarnation and Crucifixion, but also somehow bring the events into the present and make the present-day worshippers participants in these events that are made contemporary with them," going on to read Thomas's sermon as one such example (157). In other words, Eliot saw religious ritual—specifically the mass—as bringing the past into the present in such a way that those in the present participate in the past. Davidson goes on to elaborate on the dual nature of the play: "[A] play such as *Murder in the Cathedral* may reflect the secular interests of the viewers and comment directly on the world as normally perceived by ordinary people, while at the same time it looks back at a religiously significant event and presents it imaginatively in a way the breaks the normal mode of verisimilitude" (158-59). The combination of "the world as normally perceived" with "a religiously significant event," which encourages present-

mindedness and retrospection simultaneously, is a hallmark of Eliot's neomedievalism. Michael contrasts this neomedievalism, "bringing the medieval *into* the present in what are often forward-facing politically or socially oriented projects," with "the longing inherent to J.R.R. Tolkien's use of the Middle Ages in his fantasy novels" (36). This distinction between Eliot and Tolkien deserves some comment, particularly in light of the interests of this project.

Perhaps this difference in perspective between the two writers can best be understood in terms of their use of the concept of Escape. As mentioned earlier, Tolkien's theory of fantasy points to the process of Fantasy, Recovery, Escape, and Consolation as the path which every good story and every person must take. For Tolkien, Escape is an evasion of the material world, an evasion that has value in and of itself. Once an individual encounters Fantasy, he recovers a clear sight or vision, reaching Tolkien's state of Recovery. He begins to see that the material world around him is not the sum of existence and meaning. Recovery fills him with longing for that which cannot be found in the material world alone. This leads to the desire to Escape from the material world into the spiritual. Tolkien's fascination with mythology, the medieval, and Fantasy is due to their ability to function as alternate realities that offer something that is at best found only in its diluted form in the material world. For Tolkien, a so-called unrealistic experience through a story of Fantasy actually serves as a gateway to the truly real: the spiritual world. Fantasy is valuable insofar as it serves to remove one's blinders, opening one's eyes to look past the material world and discover that which is truly real. The longing inherent within the human soul for something beyond material, empirical existence is heightened when he encounters a work of Fantasy. That heightened longing enables the

individual to see the material world as a distraction from the spiritual world and encourages him to recognize and embrace the spiritual world. For Tolkien, that embracing of the spiritual world occurs through an acceptance of the truth of the Christian Gospel, the recognition of Christ's sacrifice and atonement as the greatest possible Consolation.

For Eliot, the concept of Escape is similar. His early works, including his groundbreaking "Tradition and the Individual Talent" (1919), note the importance of escaping the self in order to achieve artistic success. In this particular essay, Eliot focuses particularly on the selflessness that is required for a poet to be successful. He calls his approach an "Impersonal theory of poetry," one that moves beyond a preoccupation with the author and toward an appreciation of the work as its own entity (Eliot, "Tradition" 40). "[T]he more perfect the artist," he explains, "the more completely separate in him will be the man who suffers and the mind which creates" (41). The poet must escape from himself: poetry "is not a turning loose of emotion, but an escape from emotion; it is not the expression of personality, but an escape from personality" (43). Poetry, then, offers a needed Escape from the Ego. This concept of Escape undergoes a transformation over Eliot's career, particularly after his conversion in 1927. The aesthetic as escape is no longer enough. Now asceticism, with its harsh self-denial and its promise of mystical revelation, is presented as a valuable form of Escape. In his own life, as well as within his poetry and plays, Eliot travels the path of self-renunciation, which involves a rejection of the self and the pacifying comforts of material subsistence in pursuit of a relationship with the divine. Eliot's asceticism contrasts with Tolkien's lavish enjoyment of the natural and the fantastical, but both authors assert that the unreality of the material world

and, accordingly, humanity's need to Escape from the material world in its various forms (self, society, the empirical) in order to come to a clear understanding of divine reality. Their difference is in their specific prescriptions for the most effective method of escape. For Eliot, that prescription is a denial of self that borders on the saintly.

While Tolkien and Eliot's attitudes toward myth and the medieval differ, they share an enduring interest in its uses for modern writing projects. In particular, Eliot's poetic and critical career reveals a continuity of interest, if not always philosophy. Although Eliot wrote his review of Joyce in 1923, several years before his conversion and some dozen years before *Murder in the Cathedral*, his methodology in writing his most well-known plays attests to his continued interest in subtexts. If anything, his post-conversion work represents an *expansion* of his perception of the usefulness of myth and history. In his essay "Religion and Literature," Eliot laments, "There never was a time, I believe, when those who read at all, read so many more books by living authors than books by dead authors; there never was a time so completely parochial, so shut off from the past" (104). An awareness of the tradition out of which he was writing continued to remain integral to Eliot's work. In *Murder in the Cathedral*, Eliot utilized Greek elements such as the chorus. Davidson, although primarily interested in Eliot's debts to the medieval saint's play, acknowledges, "the narrative of the play is reduced to its essence, the final period of the saint's life following his return to England and continuing until his death at the hands of his murderers—reminding us more of the condensation of the Greek theater than of the extended story normally told in the medieval saint's play which was based on the saint's legend" (156). Eliot did draw heavily on the medieval Catholic Church's mystery and morality plays; Davidson, as noted earlier, and others such as Pike

have identified church liturgy as a source for the play.[7] The goal here is not, however, to focus in any detail upon the sources from which Eliot drew his material, but rather to suggest his intentionality in utilizing various sources as subtexts for his drama.

While the medieval tradition and liturgy from which Eliot drew heightened the religious elements of *Murder in the Cathedral*, Eliot is also indebted to the ancient Greek theater. While the combination of Greek and Catholic elements may at first seem strange, in practice the two traditions complement each other quite nicely. In particular, the play's joining of *askesis*, or self-discipline, and *catharsis* serves to unite the play's form and action with the audience's experience. The play highlights Thomas's *askesis*: he has renounced the things of the world, including his friendship with King Henry, in order to remain true to his ecclesiastical vocation. The four tempters test his self-discipline; only after these encounters does Thomas achieve a purification of his motivation, meaning that he is free to proceed to his final consolation of martyrdom. His self-discipline (*askesis*) has brought about his purification. Additionally, the play itself represents a form of *askesis*: its careful liturgical design, as highlighted above, is as disciplined as a ballet. The link between the play and the audience comes from the Greek elements. The Greek theatrical tradition's version of purification involves the purgation of emotions. In his *Poetics*, Aristotle writes, "Tragedy, then, is an imitation of an action that is serious, complete, and of a certain magnitude; in language embellished with each kind of

[7] See Lionel J. Pike, "Liturgy and Time in Counterpoint: A View of T. S. Eliot's *Murder in the Cathedral*" for a compelling reading of the liturgical organization and the musical qualities of the play. He highlights the musical function of the sermon: "The central sermon develops and ties together all the themes of the play, and the obvious parallel with musical Sonata Form recalls Eliot's remark: 'The use of recurrent themes is as natural to poetry as to music. There are possibilities for verse which bear some analogy to the development of a theme by different groups of instruments; there are possibilities of transitions in a poem comparable to the different movements of a symphony or a quartet; there are possibilities of contrapuntal arrangement of subject-matter'" (278).

artistic ornament, the several kinds being found in separate parts of the play; in the form of action, not of narrative; through pity and fear effecting the proper purgation of these emotions" (I.IV). Although Thomas, as a Christian martyr, is not exactly the quintessential tragic hero, Eliot's dramatization of his life could certainly be considered a tragedy—the action is certainly "serious" and momentous, and it elicits pity and fear from the audience. Through a vicarious, ascetic journey with Thomas, the audience is invited to contemplate not only Thomas's life, but their own. The knights' direct appeals at the end of the drama demand that the audience pass judgment on Thomas's choice—and realize what their judgment says about them. Through a combination of liturgical and theatrical, Christian and Greek elements, Eliot brings the past into the present.

While the ancient and medieval underpin much of the play, Thomas is no more medieval than he is modern. In the words of allegory, he can be seen as "everyman." Kornbluth asserts, "It is difficult to imagine the Archbishop Thomas Becket as the traditional sinner of the *Everyman* play, but if we examine his past closely, we shall see that despite his pretensions to holiness and saintliness, he is just that" (26). Thomas is more human than the play seems to acknowledge on the surface. In regards to his more extraordinary aspects, Thomas's story of self-sacrifice reaches back even farther than the medieval period, through the crucifixion of Christ, to the very earliest stages of human history with the myth of the dying god. Eliot's characterization of Thomas is undeniably contextualized in the modern world, but one should not divorce the particularities of the play's temporal moment from the universal truths it seeks to communicate. Thomas can be seen as a product of medievalism, modernism, and even Neomedievalism, but his

significance does not stop there. He is, first and foremost, a product of the human experience as it spans across time.

Eliot's joining of the Greek and medieval theatrical traditions results in a setting somewhat estranged from his audience, whether religious and educated or not. While the audience is distanced from the play, this does not emphasize the artificiality of the theater, as Brecht's use of similar techniques might do. Instead, Eliot's use of estranging elements emphasizes the timelessness of what is being shown on stage, thus connecting the audience members with the story. As Lionel Pike observes, "in liturgical drama no less than in Eliot's play, a modern sense of the dramatic is absent, for, in both, events of greater dramatic possibility (whose impact is upon men of all times) are performed in a ritualistic language which, by its very nature, lacks immediacy. Moreover, since this type of language belongs to no particular era, it creates an impression of timelessness" (277). By setting the action of the play at a distance from his audience, Eliot is enabling them to see the story and characters more objectively. Eliot's primary estranging mechanism is his choice of verse rather than prose. The verse of the play took even some of its original audience members by surprise. As Lyndall Gordon notes in her biography of Eliot, "Henzie Raeburn (an actress with the Pilgrim Players and wife of Martin Browne) recalled that for the first ten or fifteen minutes the form and language of the play seemed strange to the audience; then it became 'one of the most "shared" performances I have ever known'" (279). The unusual nature of the play, while initially estranging, allowed the audience to enter into a "shared" experience, an experience in a third space, neither the players' nor the audience's, neither medieval nor modern, but somewhere in between.

The verse is distinctive, yet the words themselves are plain and uncolored by archaism, inviting the audience to hear and understand.

One of the verse's most simple yet effective techniques is repetition. The words of the women of the chorus often overlap from phrase to phrase or sentence to sentence, a fact emphasized by the meter and lineation. In their opening speech, the women declare, "Destiny waits in the hand of God, shaping the still unshapen: / I have seen these things in a shaft of sunlight. / Destiny waits in the hand of God, not in the hands of statesmen" (Eliot, *Murder* 176). As in a poem, Eliot highlights the phrases that should carry the most weight by repeating them in close proximity to one another. The repetition of words calls to mind the liturgy and various forms of religious ritual. The words have almost a supernatural presence about them, attesting to their supernatural function as a recitation of divinely inspired truth and an invocation of the divine. Repetition also occurs across the speeches of different characters. The women of Canterbury declare, "Seven years and the summer is over / Seven years since the Archbishop left us," and only 31 lines later, the first priest declares the same (176, 177). Time plays an important role both literally and symbolically. That the number of years Thomas has been gone is given and repeated as seven, the biblical number of completeness or perfection, suggests the significance of his time away from England in preparing him for his ultimate destiny. These instances of repetition at the beginning of the play set the tone for the remainder of the show, what some have termed a theatrical representation of the Mass.[8]

Perhaps the most poignant of the repeated phrases is the women of Canterbury's "Living and partly living," reminiscent of the joining of life and death through the

[8] See Davidson and Pike.

Incarnation and, consequently, through the Mass (Eliot, *Murder* 180). The women have been waiting since their archbishop left, and they wait throughout the course of the play for the consummation of their archbishop's fate. During their waiting they, like the audience, have been "Living and partly living." They have not been on the same sort of journey as Thomas has; they have been living in harmony with the natural world, witnessing the endless progression of the seasons, the ravages of sickness and age, and the continual turmoil of world events. They do not possess comprehensive knowledge of all that occurs around them and all that is at stake, but Thomas recognizes that they see more than the priests do. When the priests chastise the women, Thomas declares:

> 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, acting is suffering
>
> And suffering is action. (182)

The women's words have significance beyond what they themselves realize, and they are close to an understanding of the necessity of suffering and action. Thomas's rebuke of the priests here is reminiscent of Jesus' rebuke of his disciples when they tried to send away the little children. The Gospel of Matthew records, "Then were there brought unto him little children, that he should put his hands on them, and pray: and the disciples rebuked them. But Jesus said, Suffer little children, and forbid them not, to come unto me: for of such is the kingdom of heaven" (*King James Version*, Mt. 19.13,14). The women have a childlike understanding, an intuitive faith, and a non-cognitive way of knowing that the priests cannot grasp. The rhythm and obscurity of Thomas's words echo the Scriptures,

setting Thomas apart as a figure of unique authority destined for a consecrated experience.

Another jarring element of the play is Eliot's choice to embed contemporary elements within the historical, sacred setting. The costumes, for example, suggest a link to both the modern and the medieval worlds. As Malamud notes, the first production of the play contained modern props and costumes for the tempters:

> The Tempters' costumes were dominated by bright yellow colors and included a suggestion of a modern-day type of each temptation, combined with the necessary medieval flavor: the First Tempter had striped trousers and "the top hat of the gay 'man about town"'; the Second had "a suggestion of medals on his breast," evoking a politician; the Third carried a stick to evoke a rough-hewn golf club, appropriate for a country lord; and the Fourth, "habited like Becket whose mind he inhabited, bore on his costume the palms and crowns of the martyrdom to which he tempted Becket 'for the wrong reason.'" (71)

The contemporary touches to the tempters' costumes present a strange assimilation of past and present, underscoring yet again the timelessness of Becket's story and both mystifying and demystifying the action of the play. The tempters are real men, but they are also figments of Thomas's imagination, or projections of his psyche. The costuming highlights the in-betweenness of the tempters, allying them with medieval typology and translating them, as it were, into a form more readily comprehended by a twentieth-century audience. Their contemporary touches also connect them with the knights,

seeming to prepare the audience for a far more obvious intrusion of the modern world into the world of the play.

A similar strangeness to that occasioned by the tempters arises when the four knights directly address the audience in the final act. Forsaking verse and symbolic speech, the knights speak as though they are contemporary witnesses or defendants in a courtroom. They speak anachronistically, making direct appeals to the twentieth-century audience. Eliot later explained the purpose of his choice of prose for this scene: "And in the speeches of the knights, who are quite aware that they are addressing an audience of people living eight hundred years after they themselves are dead, the use of platform prose is intended of course to have a special effect: to shock the audience out of their complacency" ("Poetry" 140-41). The audience should be jarred out of the main action of the play and brought to the point of interrogating their own response to what they have seen. Although Eliot deprecates his use of prose in this scene as "a kind of trick," his choice furthers the thematic interests of the play (141). Here, the audience is forced to confront directly the contemporaneity of the play's message. They must either agree or disagree with the knights' presentation of the events of the play; they cannot view the play from a position of neutrality.

The tension between medieval and modern elements matches the tension between time and timelessness with which Thomas struggles throughout the play. The estranging elements of the play bring the message to the forefront. Wilson puts it beautifully: "Just as Eliot's play, with its jarring formal qualities, seeks to shock us out of the stupor induced by a regime of calculated regularity and quantitative measurement, so the martyrdom of Becket is intended to bear witness to a dimension and meaning in reality

that transcends the attainments of even our best selves and summons us to accept it as the final measure of truth and goodness" (199). The play awakens the audience so that they can more fully appreciate the theological significance of Thomas's martyrdom: the need to surrender to a transcendent God and his prescription for the universe (the pattern) rather than to rely on self and avoid questions of ultimate reality. Thomas's struggle with his motives serves as the central concern of the play, and the verse, intersections of medievalism and modernity, and allegorical figures estrange the audience from the subject matter just enough so that they can view it with objective clarity. Thomas's journey is definitively not the audience's journey, yet it offers an example or type of the Christian journey that the audience must reckon with.

The progress of Thomas and the other characters along the Christian path comes to the forefront of the limited external action of the drama. While Thomas's journey is central to the play, the movements of other characters, particularly the women of Canterbury, mirror the halting progression of the protagonist. As many critics have remarked, the play is more contemplative than active. The women and priests await Thomas's arrival and, once he does arrive, he engages in an internal struggle with temptation. When the knights do finally come on the scene, Thomas puts up more resistance to their words than to their physical violence. Without the action, however, Thomas's spiritual journey could not progress. It is not until Thomas's return to England that he reaches a state of Recovery, or a regaining of clear sight. His time in France seems to have blinded him, at least in part, to the dangers and difficulties awaiting him at home. In his first speech upon his arrival, Thomas betrays a growing knowledge of his destiny:

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. (Eliot, *Murder* 182)

Thomas is aware of the divinely-arranged pattern into which his life fits, even if he has not come to a full realization of what that surrender to the pattern will entail for him. He sees his life as still moving and forever still, as a linear progression of human time and a fixed experience in divine time, or outside of time. He recognizes that suffering must play a part in his life, and this clarity of purpose is clear in his responses to the first three tempters. They offer him sensual pleasure and temporal power, vices that have lost their attraction for him.

The first three tempters threaten to turn Thomas back to that from which he has already made his Escape: various empty promises of the world around him. When the first tempter reminds him of the sensual pleasures he used to enjoy, Thomas informs him, "You come twenty years too late" (Eliot, *Murder* 184). With each temptation, however, the resistance seems to come with progressively more difficulty. Thomas's response to the second tempter is punctuated by forceful alliteration that communicates an effort in his rejection:

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?
Delegate to deal the doom of damnation,
To condemn kings, not serve among their servants,
Is my open office. No! Go. (187)

In spite of the effort, Thomas's rejection is decisive. That Thomas has such a cogent defense ready indicates that he has faced this enemy before. He has come to see himself as a servant of God, rather than of the king or any other man. This previous experience allows him to dispense with the third tempter's offer of the opportunity to rise up against the king. He decides, "If the Archbishop cannot trust the Throne, / He has good cause to trust none but God alone" (189). Thomas realizes he cannot trust anyone else, but it is the fourth tempter who makes him mistrust himself. He must confront the appeal of a more subtle Escape from the current difficulties of his life if he is to reach a true Consolation.

The final tempter baits Thomas by calling him to the Consolation of which he has already dreamed: martyrdom. The fourth tempter uses Thomas's own thoughts and words against him. In urging Thomas to "Fare forward to the end," the tempter echoes Thomas's refutation of the previous tempters: "You hold the keys of heaven and hell. / Power to bind and loose: bind, Thomas, bind, / King and bishop under your heel" (Eliot, *Murder* 191). This tempter later affirms, "I am only here, Thomas, to tell you what you know" (191). Thomas's admission that "I have thought of these things"—what the tempter has said—illustrates the profoundness of this final struggle (192). Thomas knows

how easy it would be to do the right thing for the wrong reason. He reacts strongly to the temptation to "Seek the way of martyrdom, make yourself the lowest / On earth, to be high in heaven," crying, "Is there no way, in my soul's sickness, / Does not lead to damnation in pride?" (192-93). Distinct from the previous encounters, the final tempter has the last word, repeating the words about action and suffering that Thomas spoke earlier. Thomas offers no quick refutation of the tempter's offer; his struggle is clear.

It is only after the words of the choruses of women, priests, and tempters that Thomas makes his decision. As the chorus functions as the pulse of the play, their words seem to reflect Thomas's offstage thoughts. The women cry, "The Lords of Hell are here. / They curl round you, lie at your feet, swing and wing through the dark air" (Eliot, *Murder* 196). They recognize that danger is near; although their attention is directed towards more overt threats, their sense of alarm is merited. When Thomas reappears, he states, "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" (196). Thomas, too, finally realizes the danger he is in, but, unlike the women, he rightly identifies the danger as internal rather than external. His resolve is clear; it is as though recognition of the greatest temptation inoculates Thomas against it. Confronting the tendency in himself to act out of the selfish motivation of pride renders that motivation powerless over him. He will "Fare forward," not selfishly, but selflessly (191). The struggle, or confrontation, with the tempter clarifies Thomas's call and path: martyrdom. He cannot Escape it, although he tried for seven years. Only once Thomas accepts his end, not as his choice, but as an inevitable event ordained by God and fitting into the pattern, can Thomas greet martyrdom with salvific faith and joy. He turns to the

audience in a startling direct address in the last fourteen lines of the act, acknowledging, "I know / What yet remains to show you of my history / Will seem to most of you at best futility, / Senseless self-slaughter of a lunatic, / Arrogant passion of a fanatic" (196-97). His realization that no one can understand his decision as fully as he does underscores the play's laser-focus on an individual's destiny, and it is the singularity of Thomas's experience that makes him a compelling character.

Thomas's sermon most fully illustrates his resolve. As an intrusion of prose into verse, the sermon commands the audience's attention. Moreover, as Frances White Fry observes, "With Becket being the only character spotlighted, we feel that we are being addressed more directly, and we can actually become participants in the play, cast as members of Becket's 1170 Christmas congregation" (7). This scene provides a natural context for the instruction of the audience. Thomas's identification of birth with death clearly foreshadows his own fate: "So that at the same moment we rejoice in His coming for the salvation of men, and offer again to God His Body and Blood in sacrifice, oblation and satisfaction for the sins of the whole word. [. . .] at this same time of all the year [. . .] we celebrate at once the Birth of Our Lord and His Passion and Death upon the Cross" (Eliot, *Murder* 198). When it comes to divine time, birth and death can intersect and coexist, as can joy and mourning. Furthermore, Fry identifies Thomas's sermon with the "still point of the turning world" of Eliot's *Four Quartets* (10). In other words, the sermon performs the same function as the incarnation about which Thomas speaks—the linear progression of time is interrupted by an impartation of divine truth, or revelation. Thomas's beautifully worded sermon defends his martyrdom much more eloquently and convincingly than the knights' later brusque prose justifies their murder. Thomas speaks

to the issue at hand—his forthcoming martyrdom—yet he does not cheapen the sermon by resorting to a direct appeal to the audience. Instead, he builds a biblical case for the importance of suffering and death, first through the example of Christ and then, more explicitly, through the example of Stephen, the first Christian martyr. His words towards the end of the sermon illustrate that the most difficult part of Thomas's journey has passed: "the true martyr is he who *has become* the instrument of God, who *has lost* his will in the will of God, not lost it but found it, for he *has found* freedom in submission to God" (Eliot, *Murder* 199, emphasis added). No longer is Thomas struggling with his own motivations and will; the past perfect tense in these lines indicates that he has surrendered his will to God, and his path is now secure. Only in a sermon, only in such perfectly poetic prose could Eliot convey Thomas's resolve and humility. His words illustrate a clearer care for his flock than has yet appeared in the play.

Without the inclusion of the prose sermon, Thomas's anticlimactic martyrdom would not have the necessary foundation to ensure its dramatic poignancy. The sermon, following after Thomas's somewhat dramatic verse in the first act, serves to soften the character while at the same time hardening his resolve. The anticipation of the audience, as twentieth-century people watching a historical play, finds its expression in the final act. The chorus once again voices the apprehension felt by all: "What sign of the spring of the year? / Only the death of the old: not a stir, not a shoot, not a breath. / Do the days begin to lengthen? / Longer and darker the day, shorter and colder the night" (Eliot, *Murder* 201). Thomas defends himself against the knights' accusations, but his allegiance to a higher power is evident in his ultimate disregard of their threats. He will not get in

the way of the working of God in his life; he will not condescend to the knights' level and venerate the temporal by engaging in physical struggle with them.

While it is easy to focus on Thomas's Consolation as a martyr at the expense of all other characters, the women of Canterbury are also moving toward their own Consolation. Their distinctness from the exalted martyr is clear, but so too is their intimate connection with the earth and their growing awareness of the pattern. Although Thomas is the central figure of the drama, the chorus of women comes to their own revelation and Consolation. Thomas tells them,

> 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. (Eliot, *Murder* 208)

Although some see Thomas's struggle as the only one of consequence and thus conclude that Eliot venerates the saint's life as the only way to honor God, Thomas's lines here contradict that interpretation. The chorus, these seemingly lowly women of Canterbury, have their own "share of the eternal burden" to bear. They will continue to live after Thomas; they "shall forget" and "shall remember" what they have received as they go about their relatively normal lives (208). Their fate is different from Thomas's, but it is not lesser. They are awaiting their own Consolation, persevering in their Escape from the temptation to ignore reality. Rasma Virsis labels the women as "witnesses being

instructed to go through a purgatorial experience" (45). She identifies their struggle as one "to witness, to accept, and to consent to the suffering and insecurity the martyrdom of Thomas will bring," granting them respect and value as a main force of the play (45). Thomas's final words to the women represent not a condescending, philosophical statement, but an impartation of truth: "They [the revelations] will seem unreal. / Human kind cannot bear very much reality" (Eliot, *Murder* 209). Thomas knows that the women, like all other humans, will be tempted to ignore the spiritual and the ultimate (i.e., reality) in favor of temporal, earthly concerns and pleasures. That he warns them indicates his faith that they can maintain a connection to ultimate reality, even more than the priests can.

Thomas takes pains to present himself as a Christ-figure to the priests before his death. He tells them, "They shall find the shepherd here; the flock shall be spared" (Eliot, *Murder* 209). In identifying himself with Christ, Thomas aligns his suffering with Christ's. As Davidson notes, the significance of Thomas's self-sacrifice eludes those who witness it, including the perpetrators themselves: "the martyr is modelling his experience of martyrdom on the Passion and Crucifixion of Christ, who also chose a sacrificial death which his executioners did not appreciate or understand" (160). Thomas explains the motivation for his determination to move forward: "I have had a tremor of bliss, a wink of heaven, a whisper, / And I would no longer be denied; all things / Proceed to a joyful consummation" (Eliot, *Murder* 209). Having a foretaste of the Consolation that awaits him, Thomas does not fear what is to come. He has seen what Tolkien identified as the ultimate Consolation, "a fleeting glimpse of Joy, Joy beyond the walls of the world, poignant as grief" (22). Thomas proceeds towards his Consolation with eagerness; the

priests' protests, which may once have tempted him to reconsider, fall now on deaf ears. His submission to God's will brings him to question whether his choice to greet death is a choice at all: "It is not in time that my death shall be known; / It is out of time that my decision is taken / If you call that decision / To which my whole being gives entire consent" (Eliot, *Murder* 212). Thomas has ceased striving to act on his own; he has surrendered to the pattern.

In a way, then, the fourth knight's question "*Who killed the Archbishop?*" is more pertinent than it may at first appear, although not in the way that the knight understands it (Eliot, *Murder* 218). Thomas's affirmation of God's sovereignty seems to dare anyone to claim absolute agency over his own actions. God had predetermined that Thomas's Consolation would be a martyr's death; the knights can then be seen as merely instruments in God's hands. Thomas's triumphant prose as the knights approach to murder him truly can only come from an unshakeable faith in the goodness of God's plan and the beauty of a heavenly reward: "Now to Almighty God, to the Blessed Mary ever Virgin, to the blessed John the Baptist, the holy apostles Peter and Paul, to the blessed martyr Denys, and to all the Saints, I commend my cause and that of the church" (213). In spite of all the knights do to sully Thomas's name, the final chorus of the women, overlaid on the Latin choir's *Te Deum,* encapsulates the audience's final view of the martyr: one of admiration.

In *Murder in the Cathedral,* Eliot achieved a play that resonated with audiences inside and outside the church. The humanity of the women of Canterbury and the universality of Thomas's struggles do much to explain the play's popularity beyond its original audience. The clarity of these aspects of the play is due in large part to the

estranging mechanisms Eliot used—the medieval setting, allegorical characters, unusual versification, and the Greek chorus. The tension between the medieval and the modern in the play heightens, rather than lessens, a sense of relatability. Through a neomedieval understanding of history and a reliance on the power of church liturgy and ritual, Eliot brings the past into the present in a fresh way. The audience, like the chorus, is invited to watch, to bear witness to, a remarkable life that nevertheless serves as an example for the masses. Although not all critics gave the play raving reviews, most of them treat it favorably as a successful use of verse on the stage. Eliot's next theatrical attempt, *The Family Reunion*, although a continuation of his stylistic and thematic interests, would enjoy less critical acclaim and a shorter lifespan in the public's mind.

Chapter 2 – "a different vision": The Clarity of Destiny in *The Family Reunion*

In spite of its short run on the popular stage[9] and its less-than-congenial treatment in criticism, Eliot's 1939 *The Family Reunion* is successful in its own right. In translating the Christian journey of redemption from a medieval church to a contemporary drawing room, Eliot made strides in the direction of engaging the modern audience in spiritual matters. The progression of Eliot as a playwright, from *Murder in the Cathedral* through *The Family Reunion* to *The Cocktail Party* and beyond, is the source of much scholarship and will not delay us here, apart from the acknowledgement that *The Family Reunion* is significant as a bridge between Eliot's earlier and later successful plays. In other words, he likely could not have achieved the success of *The Cocktail Party* without the construction of *The Family Reunion*. Indeed, in his article analyzing the play in light of the earlier *Sweeney Agonistes*, Peter Lowe highlights the importance of *The Family Reunion* in Eliot's career. He "suggest[s] that *The Family Reunion* is the artistic embodiment of a harsh but equally necessary and useful stage of Eliot's Christian journey, one in which, far from being filled with spiritual calm, he was more doubt-ridden than ever and sought relief from his spiritual anxieties in an increasingly ascetic worldview" (Lowe 65). Eliot's religious path was fraught with suffering and tragedy; however, just as Harry cannot arrive at his Consolation without the experience of losing his wife and being chased by the Furies, so Eliot cannot achieve the peace and unity of his later life without his own crucible of difficulties. As Lowe asserts, "If we bear this trajectory in mind as we read we can see *The Family Reunion* not so much as a work of unnecessary and unmitigated asceticism but rather as the missing link that makes the

[9] According to Lyndall Gordon, the play's "first production at the Westminster Theatre closed after five weeks" (336).

more fully realised faith of Eliot's later drama possible" (65). Eventually, Eliot indicates that an extreme calling like Harry's, the almost-violent self-deprivation that Eliot identified as necessary for purgation, is not the only way to live a Christian life, nor the never-ending task even for those who have undertaken it. For Eliot, as for Harry, it seems to have been a necessary stage in life, but not an interminable one.

The Family Reunion, then, can be acknowledged as serving both an artistic and a personal role in Eliot's career and life, respectively. However, the present project hopes to, at least in part, redeem Eliot's second major play from the negative criticism it has incurred, and to do so on the merits of the play itself rather than simply on its crucial role in Eliot's timeline. The tendency to elevate the Harry-as-Eliot identification as the most important aspect of the play, coupled with Eliot's own criticism of his work in his later essay "Poetry and Drama," trivializes the play, shifting the focus off of its larger themes and message. While biographical details about Eliot can certainly provide illumination regarding certain aspects of the play—particularly Harry's desire to kill his wife and his relationship with Mary and his family—they by no means serve as a complete justification of the play's existence, any more than the plays which precede and follow it do. *The Family Reunion*, as a work of modern verse drama, succeeds in communicating, albeit imperfectly, the Christian message of redemption that Eliot found so important.

The biographical details that influenced the play, although often overblown, cannot be ignored. While Eliot was writing the play, he had already been separated from his wife for years and was in the process of having her put away in an asylum.[10] Meanwhile, his relationship with Emily Hale, the woman he had loved before he moved

[10] See Lyndall Gordon, pp. 312-37, for a detailed account of these biographical details.

to England, was in a complicated state. As Lyndall Gordon acknowledges in her biography of Eliot, "The autobiographic basis of the earliest fragments give to this play the emotional intimacy of Eliot's earlier work, as though we were looking at a man with his back to us, who abruptly turns and speaks with low, confessional urgency, and then, as abruptly, turns away once more" (324). For Gordon, Harry-as-confessor is unsuited to the role of an English lord, but this basis for Harry, although somewhat revised in later drafts, does much to explain the difficulties of his personality in the play.[11] Harry certainly expresses disdain for his family but, as I shall demonstrate later, he overcomes his elitist attitudes in the end. Gordon also takes issue with the other characters of the play, asserting, "The weakness [with the play], as with *Sweeney Agonistes*, lies rather in Eliot's naturalistic cover: the idle chatter of people he despises, who in this play are the obtuse members of the family" (324). Although many members of the family do display a certain lack of understanding, to use that fact, and Eliot's admission of the failures of the play, as grounds to dismiss the play from serious consideration in the critical discourse is to miss the point. These shortcomings aside, the play, taken as a whole, effectively dramatizes the human interactions and spiritual journeys of the members of a broken family.

One study that has contributed significantly to the conversation about the play's merits is Giles Evans's *Wishwood Revisited*. In his character-driven analysis, Evans warns against the dangers of schematizing the play, or of focusing on the deeper spiritual questions at the expense of losing sight of the play's human aspect. Relying on the power

[11] Steven Matthews notes, "As Eliot gained a clearer articulation of his underlying 'pattern' across his drafts of *The Family Reunion*, he lost something of the immediacy with which Harry was originally treated" (*T. S. Eliot and Early Modern Literature*, 186).

of performance, he reveals each character, especially those traditionally perceived as flat, to be complex and sympathetic, to one degree or another. Evans notes the positive effects of Ibsen and Chekhov on Eliot in general and this play in particular.[12] Specifically, Evans points to earlier studies that examine Ibsen's techniques of "recognition" and "the 'confessional duologue'" as elements of characterization that also they appear in *The Family Reunion* (Evans 17,18). Regarding Chekhov's influence, Evans records Eliot's observation to Mrs. Faber: "The tragedy, as with my Master Chekhov, is as much for the people who have to go on living, as for those who die" (qtd. in Evans 19-20). Both prose dramatists, then, have remarkable influences on the poet, yet Eliot, as was his custom, transforms the authorities and his sources until they are barely recognizable.

With remarkable insight, Evans also targets many of the chief criticisms levied at the play—including Eliot's own. Casting aspersions on the assumption that Harry gets the final say, Evans writes, "[I]f the apparent supremacy of Harry is seen to be qualified within the drama itself, the way is open to challenge those who find Eliot inhumane" (16). For Evans, Harry's humanity is more compelling than his sainthood, and he takes interest in the effects of Harry's decision on the members of his family. He concludes, "The play is about the difficulty of following a calling; it sees the human consequences even more sharply than the spiritual ones" (23). According to Evans, Eliot's drama succeeds because it provides us with realistic characters who allow the audience to make sense of the spiritual aspects of the play. Evans's study of the play cautions against an overly spiritual or archetypal reading of the play, and this warning is worth heeding.

[12] According to Evans, "[Kristian] Smidt records a personal conversation in 1948 when Eliot said, 'I read Ibsen's plays consecutively to work myself up before writing *The Family Reunion*, but reading them all together I cannot tell what impressions have subconsciously affected me'" (*Wishwood Revisited*, 17).

Certainly, an exclusively allegorical or didactic interpretation of the play robs it of its rich emotion and personal appeal. We need not ignore, however, the profoundly symbolic register of the drama. The task before us now is to read the play on both the spiritual, schematized level and the human, psychological level. However, as discussed in the previous chapter, it is precisely the archetypal foundation—the symbolic backdrop—of Eliot's play that allows the audience to appreciate the play's action. The characters are dual creatures: both living, breathing human beings with hopes and fears, and symbolic figures who play a part in the universal human drama of sin, redemption, and consolation.

Eliot's humaneness can certainly be defended by a detailed analysis of his psychologically complex characters; so, too, can it be defended by a willingness to understand the importance of the supernatural to Eliot. At this point in the poet's life, he still tended to view the natural and the spiritual as distinct entities. His writing and his personal life at this time indicate a skepticism that anything other than religious asceticism could be considered to honor God.[13] As mentioned above, Eliot's relationship with Emily Hale was strained. In spite of their mutual affection for one another, Eliot, like Harry, does not choose the path of romantic love. As Gordon observes: "Harry must translate his isolation into the deliberate solitude of a special destiny: he must cross some frontier into another world. This brings Harry into line with Eliot's own states of extremity and religious trial" (323-24). The dichotomy Eliot perceives between the spiritual and the natural leads to an elevation of the spiritual, although not to the total neglect of the natural. Within the play, the spiritual reality affects all the characters, dwelling beneath the natural surface of petty concerns and relational tension. Eliot's

[13] See Peter Lowe, "'Doing a Girl In': Re-Reading the Asceticism of T. S. Eliot's 'The Family Reunion.'" *Religion & Literature*, vol. 38, no. 4, 2006, pp. 63-85.

poems, as well as his plays, chronicle his personal struggle with spirituality, his search for answers and peace.[14] Although he still venerates the spiritual over the natural, he does not mock the struggles of the seemingly vapid from a place of pious superiority, nor does he reduce his portrayal of humanity to a mere psychological drama. Instead, he infuses the play with his own experience of struggle. Yes, Eliot may identify with Harry, but he has also been in the place of most of the other characters. As he wrote the play, over a decade after his public conversion to Christianity, Eliot was still grappling with the profound mystery of the Christian Gospel and its bearing on his life, as the progression of *Four Quartets* attests. In the case of *The Family Reunion*, we will not be able fully to appreciate the brilliance and poignancy of the drama unless we see the symbolic and the naturalistic meanings and understand how they work together, and the gaps between them. In other words, the estranging mechanisms set off the spiritual and psychological dramas of the characters so that they, and their connections to one another, can be more clearly observed.

The most well-known of Eliot's estranging mechanisms in *The Family Reunion* is his use of Aeschylus's *Eumenides* as the subtext of his play—since he actually includes the Eumenides, or Furies, in the character list. The previous chapter's discussion of the connections between the *catharsis* of Greek drama and the Christian understanding of *askesis* is also relevant for Eliot's subsequent plays, particularly *The Family Reunion*. With its raw portrayal of Harry's mental anguish and resulting crisis, this play offers us

[14] Eliot's poetry can be and has been divided into pre-conversion, conversion, and post-conversion periods. His conversion poetry, especially the Ariel poems ("Journey of the Magi" and "A Song for Simeon") and *Ash-Wednesday* explore the struggle undergone by those who approach an understanding of salvation through Jesus. Eliot's personal spiritual journey has been studied in-depth by G. Douglas Atkins. See especially his *T. S. Eliot: The Poet as Christian*. Palgrave Macmillan, 2014.

an even more intimate look into Harry's tragic life than *Murder in the Cathedral* does Thomas's. Whereas Thomas's wilder days are long past by the time his play commences, Harry is still in the thick of his struggle at the beginning of his play. Harry's suffering is linked to an unhappy marriage and strained family relationships, causes much more relatable to a twentieth century audience than questions of martyrdom and ecclesiastical power.

Built on Aeschylus's Orestes as much as on Eliot, Harry finds himself haunted by guilt over his unloved wife's mysterious death, much as Orestes is hunted by the Furies, or Erinyes, after killing the mother who had killed his father. Much scholarship has traced the links between Aeschylus's and Eliot's dramas.[15] Some of the most notable similarities include the demand for atonement and the transformation of the Furies (Erinyes) to the Eumenides, or "kindly ones." Martha Carpentier points out the significance of women in both dramas: "in both a man's destiny is first dominated and blighted, then resolved by women" (19). Clytemnestra has, in effect, maintained control over her son's life even beyond the grave due to the fact that Orestes is hunted by the Erinyes for killing his mother to avenge her murder of his father. Similarly, Amy continues her control over Harry's life even after he has married and moved out of the family home. Like Athena does for Orestes, Agatha serves as an advocate and guide for Harry, helping him come to terms with what he has done and helping him determine what he will do. After being pursued by the Furies to the temple of Athena, Orestes achieves redemption at the mercy of Athena and Apollo, who cleanse him from the bloodguilt that resulted from the murder of his mother. Harry's redemption also requires a journey, both to and from Wishwood,

[15] See especially Martha C. Carpentier's "Orestes in the Drawing Room: Aeschylean Parallels in T. S. Eliot's 'The Family Reunion,'" *Twentieth Century Literature*, vol. 35, no. 1, 1989, pp. 17-42.

but his guilt is less visible. He does not appear on the doorstep stained with blood; it is his desire to kill his wife that must be atoned for by a life of self-renunciation and penance. Moreover, both plays arrange themselves around a character who raises a question far larger than himself.[16] For Orestes, that question is the role of the Erinyes in the new divine order under Zeus and his progeny. For Harry, that question is the way a broken human soul can achieve redemption.

The differences between the subtext and supertext prove just as significant as the similarities. In her article about the role genre plays in *The Family Reunion*, Theresa Towner points out "a crucial distinction between Harry and his prototype: it is not for Harry to rule the house, as must Orestes; Harry must abandon Wishwood, leave the house in order to save both it and himself" (63). This difference between the two protagonists highlights, in Towner's reading, the Christian tone of the play: the material duty, no matter how important it seems, cannot take precedence over the spiritual. Indeed, Eliot makes particular changes in his adaptation of the myth. Although Eliot himself would later claim his play's failure to choose whether to adhere more closely to or to distance itself from the *Oresteia*, the play's curious transformation of Aeschylus is, in fact, one of its chief strengths. For Eliot faced a dilemma that he did not encounter when writing *Murder in the Cathedral*: how could he use Greek theater and myth to facilitate an exploration of Christian orthodoxy in a modern setting? Rather than seeing Eliot trying to use the Greek text to correct any deficiencies in the Christian worldview, as some critics have hinted, I identify Eliot as once again tapping into the rich tradition that preceded

[16] See Gilbert Murray's notes on his translation of *The Eumenides*, p. 61, in which he writes the following of Orestes: "However, after this one passionate speech [Orestes's vow to Athena], we almost forget Orestes. His case has raised an issue so much greater than itself."

him by choosing various archetypal motifs and characters that are particularly well-suited to his task of reintroducing the modern audience to the spiritual. In this case, that spirituality is Christian, but the problem facing Eliot is not a problem limited to Christianity. Any modern writer who desires to treat spiritual matters seriously wrestles with the same dilemma. One answer is to look to the past and accommodate its schemas and language to the present occasion and need. Eliot finds a power in ancient myth, similar to the power of liturgy as explored in the previous chapter, to express that for which modern man has inadequate language.

Beyond the ancient Greek is the universally human, the archetypal, or what Jung termed the collective unconscious. In the introduction to her study of Eliot's poetry, Elizabeth Drew presents her rationale for considering Eliot in light of Jung by tracing his interest in Joyce's use of the "mythic method" in *Ulysses*. Once she has illustrated both Eliot's interest in and the psychological significance of myth, Drew shifts her focus to Eliot's own views of psychology. She cites an interesting passage from one of Eliot's pieces that appeared in *The Listener*: "Psychology has very great utility in two ways. It can revive, and has already to some extent revived, truths long since known to Christianity, but mostly forgotten and ignored, and it can put them in a form and a language understandable by modern people to whom the language of Christianity is not only dead but undecipherable" (Eliot, qtd. in Drew 14). For Eliot, then, psychology serves as another language in which to express to the modern world truths about human existence. Eliot was not the only Christian to find aspects of psychology—particularly Jungian psychology—attractive. Jung's affirmation of a reality far greater than the

individual human, yet also intimately connected to each individual human, has obvious parallels with the Christian view of God and ultimate reality.

Furthermore, Drew sees in Eliot's poetry "a confirmation of [Eliot's] belief that certain archetypal patterns of imagery that recur and interfuse in the myths of the human race are of great significance in the problem of the nature of the symbolizing process, as well as that of the nature of life in general" (14). Eliot certainly makes use of "archetypal patterns of imagery" in his poetry as well as in his plays. Moreover, Drew's explanation of Jung's "process of Individuation or the Integration of the Personality" as an understanding in the individual of his connection to another dimension of the world in which he may live links clearly to Eliot's own understanding of the individual in relationship to the divine pattern of existence (18). In other words, Individuation is the Jungian form of redemption; it is a clear understanding and acceptance of one's place in the larger world. Drew's focus on birth and death and birth-in-death, "of course, inseparably intertwined with the whole symbolic content of Christianity," provides further confirmation of the distinctly Christian nature of Eliot's understanding of what he termed the pattern (18). Drew writes, "The central experience that informs most of the poetry of Eliot is this same age-old pattern of symbolic death and birth, lived through as an intense personal experience and accepted as the central truth of a religious faith" (19). She identifies the progression of Eliot's use of symbols with Jung's outline of the "archetype of transformation" (19). In other words, Eliot's poetic career progresses away from the self and toward an acknowledgement of the self as merely one small part of a much larger schema. Eliot's personal religious experience, in the form of his conversion

to Christianity, serves as a major turning point for him, and his works echo that experience through the personae of his poems and the characters of his plays.

Drew just touches on the link between Jungian and Christian ideas of reality. Orthodox Christian thinkers would agree with Eliot's assertion that "Psychology is an indispensable handmaid to theology; but I think a very poor housekeeper" (qtd. in Drew 14). In other words, Eliot may have been influenced by psychology, even Jungian thought, but he did not allow that to overshadow his theology. In Eliot and elsewhere, the Christian understanding of what is universally and innately human is depravity: the original sin of Adam's disobedience in the Garden of Eden that dwells within his descendants. While Orestes, much like Hamlet, has inherited the duty of setting right the death of his father, Harry has inherited his father's sin, his family's curse. Like his father before him, Harry discovers within himself a desire to kill his wife. The reason that the desire is punishable is due not solely to Eliot's obsession with the need for the purification of the motive; it is primarily due to the fact that this desire serves as evidence of mankind's innate sinfulness. As Gordon puts it, "Deeper than individual, psychological drama lies this universal drama of innate depravity" (331). In addition to being a complex character, Harry serves as a physical illustration of the Christian doctrine of original sin.

As Thomas can be seen as a type of everyman, so can Harry, in spite of his sense of singularity. That his dilemma is not relegated to his individual experience is evidenced in Harry's own words. At the beginning of the play, he states, "It is not my conscience, / Not my mind, that is diseased, but the world I have to live in" (Eliot, *Family* 236). Even before he has confronted his sin, Harry realizes that there is something wrong in the

world, but his understanding is imperfect. At this point in the drama, he does not locate any of what is wrong with the world inside himself. Only after his conversations with Mary and Agatha, as he comes to a realization of the path he must take, does Harry say, "The things I thought were real are shadows, and the real / Are what I thought were private shadows" (Eliot, *Family* 276). These lines illustrate the shift in Harry's understanding. He still affirms the depravity of the world around him, but he realizes that his "private shadows" are not unique to himself; they are in fact present within all humanity, including himself. Harry eventually comes to terms with his own depravity, acknowledging it and his inability to redeem himself by submitting to the undertaking of a journey of expiation. That journey stands out against a contemporary backdrop due to Eliot's inclusion of various estranging mechanisms, including the Aeschylean elements, that lend a gravity to what appears on the surface a mundane drawing room drama.

As in *Murder in the Cathedral*, Eliot's decisions regarding verse in *The Family Reunion* have a significant impact on the drama and on the audience's reception of it. In "Poetry and Drama," Eliot explains the type of verse he devised for use in *The Family Reunion*. He writes, "Here [in writing *The Family Reunion*] my first concern was the problem of versification, to find a rhythm close to contemporary speech, in which the stresses could be made to come wherever we should naturally put them, in uttering the particular phrase on the particular occasion" (Eliot, "Poetry" 141). He goes on to specify, "What I worked out is substantially what I have continued to employ: a line of varying length and varying number of syllables, with a caesura and three stresses" (141). This verse affords Eliot a good deal of flexibility, meaning that the lines can sound as natural as drawing room conversation, or as strange and stilted as a trance. In addition to

allowing for elasticity of language, the verse of *The Family Reunion* serves a purpose that the verse of *Murder in the Cathedral* does not: a source of delineation between the characters. While *Murder in the Cathedral*'s shifts from verse to prose indicated shifts in the nature of the message, the verse itself did not shift noticeably between particular characters or sets of characters, nor did the shifts present between verse and prose serve a purpose as regards characterization. In *The Family Reunion*, what can be termed the verse of ordinary, everyday speech occurs only during conversations about ordinary, everyday things. For example, the first scene of the play, in which Amy and the aunts and uncles discuss the weather and the state of the modern world, contains relatively natural verse, simulating normal speech patterns in spite of some of the exalted language. In Amy's opening speech, her language is brisk and simple: "Not yet! I will ring for you. It is still quite light. / I have nothing to do but watch the days draw out, / Now that I sit in the house from October to June / . . . / O Sun, that was once so warm, O Light that was taken for granted" (Eliot, *Family* 225). The regularity of the lines melds together the commonplace (addressing Denman, a servant) and the poetic (lamenting lost youth) in such a way that the lines temporarily lull the audience into the mindset that the play's message is less exalted than it actually is. This understatement is particularly effective when used in conjunction with other distinctive shifts in the verse; such juxtapositions jar the audience out of their complacency, forcing them to take notice of the meanings waiting beneath the surface of the lines.

These ordinary scenes are aurally distinct from, say, the chorus's collective and individual recitations. When George, Charles, Violet, and Ivy speak together, the verse takes on a chant-like quality. The lines run on to become significantly longer. In the first

chorus, the lengthy rhetorical questions clash against the surrounding conversations: "Why do we feel embarrassed, impatient, fretful, ill at ease, / Assembled like amateur actors who have not been assigned their parts? / Like amateur actors in a dream when the curtain rises, to find themselves dressed for a different play, or having rehearsed the wrong parts, / Waiting for the rustling in the stalls, the titter in the dress circle, the laughter and catcalls in the gallery?" (Eliot, *Family* 231). The lists in these lines give the listener a sense of being propelled forward anxiously and uncomfortably. Moreover, this scene represents merely one of many moments of metatheatricality within the play. Steven Matthews comments on the metatheatrical elements of Eliot's plays: "That sense of actors appearing in a drama which has been authored outside themselves, so much a theme of Eliot's favourite Early Modern tragedies and Shakespearean late plays, including *The Tempest*, figures in each of Eliot's own mature plays. But it is perhaps most pronounced within the unresolved 'mystery', the literal and personal hauntedness, of *The Family Reunion*" (185). More than his other plays, *The Family Reunion* gives viewers the sense that something fundamental is "off"; the aunts and uncles here voice the fear that the audience itself has no doubt entertained: the play does not make sense—it does not work. The juxtaposition of the English drawing room and Greek supernatural figures is a severely jarring one, and it is not until later in the play that the two aspects of the drama converge.

The chorus's observations, here and elsewhere, prove unsettling in their lack of perception. In other words, unlike the chorus of the women of Canterbury in *Murder in the Cathedral*, whose partial knowledge facilitates their own and the audience's understanding, this chorus's partial knowledge serves merely to highlight the futility of

their thinking. Instead of being a motivation to learn more, their embarrassment at their own lack of understanding causes them to retreat behind masks of the material and mundane. In effect, each of them becomes a cliché, a stock character. Rather than being a sign of Eliot's disdain for "ordinary" people, the stereotypical side of the aunts and uncles illustrates the dangers that await all those who do not welcome revelation, who do not press on to know more. Gerald, Charles, Ivy, and Violet are not contemptible because they are naturally inane, but because they reject every opportunity to understand something beyond themselves.

The hybridity of the chorus serves a purpose other than illuminating the aunts' and uncles' refusal to accept truth. The shifts that Ivy, Violet, Gerald, and Charles make between their individual selves and their collective selves force the audience to take notice of the two levels upon which the play is operating. United, the aunts and uncles show more awareness of ultimate reality than they do as individuals, but that awareness is still limited. The chorus comes dangerously close to an understanding of the truth on several occasions, only to tiptoe away from the precipice every time. When the chorus speaks as a collective, the audience's attention is grasped once more. Although it is clear that the members of the chorus do not fully or consciously understand the implications of what they are saying, the audience is invited to do what they will with the chorus's admissions. At the end of scene one, the chorus states, "We all of us make the pretension / To be the uncommon exception / To the universal bondage," and the "we" is conspicuously inclusive (Eliot, *Family* 242). They go on to specify, "We only ask to be reassured / About the noises in the cellar / And the window that should not have been open" (243). In other words, endemic to the human condition is the desire to avoid

potentially unpleasant truths about existence. People do not like what they cannot explain.

Harry, for a time, falls under the same category as the members of the chorus, as do all members of the human race. Harry is not inherently any better—or worse—than his family members, or anyone else, although Eliot would later term him "an insufferable prig" ("Poetry" 144). Harry's attitude does grate on the audience's nerves. At first, his dismissal of his relatives and Mary seems unnecessarily self-centered and harsh. By the end of the play, however, the audience realizes that Harry's insistence that no one can understand his journey underlies the larger truth that *no one* can understand *another's* journey. One can understand another to a certain extent, but the type of mystical experience of revelation that Harry has undergone cannot be translated. That is something that each person must experience firsthand for himself. Although Harry does not always express himself kindly, the truth of his words is verified. As such an imperfect protagonist, Harry represents both the corruption and the potential of the human race. All are offered the opportunity to accept the divine revelation of their innate need for redemption, but not all take that opportunity. Ultimately, Harry differs from the others only in his eventual acceptance of revelation. And Harry accepts that revelation only by the intervention of three other characters: Agatha, Mary, and Amy.

Agatha, whose name can be traced back to Greek and means "good," and Mary, perhaps a slightly obvious type of the Virgin Mary, represent two positive influences on Harry, with a nod to both the ancient Greek underpinning and the Christian context of the play. Moreover, one notable Agatha of history is Saint Agatha, a third-century Christian woman who was martyred for her refusal to yield to the advances of a Roman official

("Saint Agatha"). Eliot's interest in saints makes coincidence in the choice of this particular character's name unlikely, particularly considering that Eliot's Agatha also faced sexual temptation. Although clearly adulterous, the exact nature of Agatha's relationship with Harry's father is never specified; Evans explains, "It is appropriate that Agatha never states explicitly what happened between her and Lord Monchensey, but continues to allude to the passion in terms of the season and climate" (92). Partly because of the intensely personal nature of Agatha's experience, partly because of the power of suggestion and mystery, Eliot's choice to leave the details unspoken is a dramatically effective one.

Although Agatha is a flesh-and-blood woman, she also stands as a type of prophetess, separated from the other members of the family by her often cryptic knowledge. When Harry later questions her about his father, Agatha explains her detachment: "I had to fight for many years to win my dispossession, / And many years to keep it. What people know me as, / The efficient principal of a women's college— / That is the surface. There is a deeper / Organisation, which your question disturbs" (Eliot, *Family* 273). Her "dispossession," or deprivation of the normal comforts of existence, has been hard-won; she is not naturally cold and distant, but she has had to become so. She once loved—her sister's husband—but she has since learned how to do without love and passion. Even in the presence of such a humbling revelation, Agatha's symbolic role as wise prophetess or priestess remains intact. Although not completely detached from the situation, she illustrates remarkable foresight and wisdom. She is the only one who comes close to fully understanding Harry's need and his journey, a journey "of sin and expiation" (275). Moreover, it seems that her fate is not to journey. Towards the end of

her conversation with Harry, she reflects, "It is as if / I had been living all these years upon my capital, / Instead of earning my spiritual income daily: / And I am old, to start again to make my living" (276). She recognizes that, perhaps, she has not done all that she could, but now is not the time for her to begin anew. Now is the time for Agatha to continue in her role as helper to those who voyage.

While Agatha seems to have become comfortable with her position on the fringe, Mary has not yet reached that point. In the first scene, when Gerald asks Mary about the younger generation, she answers, "I'm afraid that I don't deserve the compliment: / I don't belong to any generation" (Eliot, *Family* 227). The others scold Gerald after Mary leaves the room, interpreting Mary's discomfiture as embarrassment at being nearly thirty and unmarried. However, a deeper meaning is also present. Mary, like Agatha, to some degree exists outside of time. She does not have a place in the material world around her. This is reaffirmed by Agatha's later words to Mary, "You and I, / My dear, may very likely meet again / In our wanderings in the neutral territory / Between two worlds" (285). Agatha and Mary are united in their in-between-ness; they belong neither to the world of everyday unknowing, nor to the world of exalted journey-making. They are those who speed others along their way, who serve as sources of clarification and inspiration, similar to the "guardian" figures Eliot developed more fully in *The Cocktail Party*.

In spite of Mary's in-between-ness and her ultimate role as one who assists travelers, she also represents a source of temptation for Harry: the temptation to find fulfillment in romantic love rather than in the difficult and solitary journey of purification. Mary is far from a typical temptress, but Harry must nevertheless face her,

leaving thoughts of romantic love behind him if he is to take the path set out for him. Mary, too, must come to terms with that which she has undoubtedly known for a long time: she and Harry will never marry. He is not the answer to her problems any more than she is the answer to his. In their private conversation, Harry remembers details from their childhood, including how they used to sneak from the house into the woods to escape his mother's design. Although the memories of their escapades in the "wilderness" are pleasant ones, Harry reflects, "It's absurd that one's only memory of freedom / Should be a hollow tree in a wood by the river" (Eliot, *Family* 248). Although freedom was extremely desirable to them as children, Harry now recognizes that freedom is hollow, or empty. His mother's design may have been flawed and futile, but running away from all design is the wrong answer. Harry has to learn to accept the design—or divine pattern—of the world and his place within it. Living for himself has not worked for him thus far, for he is still haunted by guilt. Only by surrendering himself to the future prepared for him can he find peace.

For the moment, however, Harry is stuck in his own sense of hopelessness. Mary does not contradict Harry's avowal of his own loss of hope, but she points him beyond that experience: "That is an experience / I have not had. Nevertheless, however real, / However cruel, it may be a deception" (Eliot, *Family* 249). Mary serves instrumentally in clarifying Harry's vision. With startling insight, she responds to his lament that he will not find what he is seeking at Wishwood:

> But surely, what you say
> Only proves that you expected Wishwood
> To be your real self, to do something for you

That you can only do for yourself.

What you need to alter is something inside you

Which you can change anywhere—here, as well as elsewhere. (249-50)

Mary diagnoses the root of Harry's problem: he is looking outside both for the disease and the cure. He must first realize the nature of his problem—not the Eumenides who chase him, but the sin within him—before he can go about fixing it. Mary brings clarity to Harry, although he does not yet fully accept her wisdom. When she tries to reassure Harry that she can understand his experience if he will be patient in explaining it to her, Harry responds arrogantly, disparaging her ability to understand. His words, however, succeed in bringing up the uncomfortable truth of the limitations of language. Harry says, "Explaining would only make a worse misunderstanding; / Explaining would only set me farther away from you. / There is only one way for you to understand / And that is by seeing" (250). There are some experiences that defy language, quantification, direct expression. Harry's words here recall a passage from "East Coker" (1940), the second of Eliot's *Four Quartets*. One stanza of the poem begins with the following lines: "That was a way of putting it—not very satisfactory: / A periphrastic study in a worn-out poetical fashion, / Leaving one still with the intolerable wrestle / With words and meanings" (*Four Quartets* 125). Much like Harry's objection to explaining, these lines highlight the "periphrastic" nature of language; in explaining something, one is forced to put it into a form of expression that is not inherent to that thing. Harry's declaration in this scene paves the way for the poetic, nearly trancelike lines that follow.

Eliot later criticized this trancelike conversation between Mary and Harry, and the following one between Agatha and Harry, in "Poetry and Drama." He writes:

> Furthermore, I had in two passages used the device of a lyrical duet further isolated from the rest of the dialogue by being written in shorter lines with only two stresses. These passages are in a sense 'beyond character', the speakers have to be presented as falling into a kind of trance-like state in order to speak them. But they are so remote from the necessity of the action that they are hardly more than passages of poetry which might be spoken by anybody; they are too much like operatic arias. The member of the audience, if he enjoys this sort of thing, is putting up with a suspension of the action in order to enjoy a poetic fantasia: these passages are really less related to the action than are the choruses in *Murder in the Cathedral.* (Eliot, "Poetry" 142)

Here, I take issue with Eliot's self-assessment. These passages are supremely important in the action of the play. It is precisely these non-discursive passages of trancelike revelation, mirroring certain passages of *Four Quartets*, that provide the impetus for the action. Only once Harry comes to a point of knowledge, through an experience which he cannot explain, of which he may only be dimly conscious, can he make the decision to move forward, to set out on his journey of expiation. In the very inexplicability of these passages lies their strength; they represent a divine revelation, outside the human's ability to quantify or fully understand. These realizations, couched as mystical experiences, illuminate for Harry his own situation and need. To put it in terms of Tolkien's approach, these Fantastical moments experienced by Harry, through his communion with Mary and Agatha, bring him to a place of Recovery, a regaining of clear sight.

The first such passage occurs at the end of the previously discussed conversation between Harry and Mary. Mary tells Harry, "But I see something now which doesn't come from tutors / Or from books, or from thinking, or from observation: / Something which I did not know I knew" (Eliot, *Family* 250). That something is that "it's *all* a delusion, / Everything you feel—" (250). This revelation of the inadequacy of discursive knowledge and the deceptiveness of emotion ushers in the "lyrical duet." In alternating stanzas, Mary and Harry speak poetic lines about the seasons and time, joy and pain. Mary states, "The cold spring now is the time / For the ache in the moving root / The agony in the dark / . . . / The pain of the breaking bud" (251). As in the first stanza of *The Waste Land*, spring is a painful time because things are growing, stirring, moving. Life and people, including Harry, change in the spring. Harry continues, "Spring is an issue of blood / A season of sacrifice" (251). Spring is the season of Passover and Easter, of the greatest sacrifice ever made. Harry's coming journey of expiation is calling him to make his own sacrifice, to share in the sufferings of Christ and so find eternal joy. Mary's next two lines succinctly convey the paradox: "Pain is the opposite of joy / But joy is a kind of pain" (251). Mary finally asks, "And what of the terrified spirit / Compelled to be reborn / To rise toward the violent sun / Wet wings into the rain cloud / Harefoot over the moon?" (252). By including the "terrified spirit" in the same list as the tree, beast, and fish who participate in sacrifice, Mary paints spiritual rebirth as both natural and involuntary. There is something both terrifying and comforting in her imagery.

After this question, Harry comes to himself suddenly, as though a spell has broken. He asks, "What have we been saying?" thus turning the conversation back to their discussion before the trance breaks their train of thought (Eliot, *Family* 252). For the

trance is just that—a disruption of conscious thought, the interposition of communication that goes beyond language and reason. And, although Harry has progressed farther on in his journey toward recovery, he has not arrived at the point of true Escape. He realizes, "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" (252). While this realization of the open door before him is significant, Harry does not yet step over the threshold. He becomes distracted by an awareness of the Eumenides' presence. He fixates on them rather than ending his internal struggle by acceptance of the "Singing and light" Mary's words made audible and visible to him (252). For the moment, he is incapable of moving forward.

Harry is propelled along his path later that evening when Agatha tells him the truth about his father and his plan to kill Harry's mother. Only once he realizes the sin embedded in his family line can Harry clearly see his own actions. He reflects, "Perhaps my life has only been a dream / Dreamt through me by the minds of others. Perhaps / I only dreamt I pushed her" (Eliot, *Family* 275). Harry recognizes that he is guilty only of the desire to kill his wife, rather than the actual deed. Agatha replies, "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" (275). The task before Harry is not to be convicted of and punished for any particular misdeed, but rather to recognize the sin that dwells within him and to have it atoned for. Agatha goes on to explain, "It is certain / That the knowledge of it [the sin] must precede the expiation" (275). Only now that Harry has come to full knowledge of the nature of his sin can he expiate it. Moreover, his bondage to sin extends beyond himself. Agatha says, "It is possible / You are the consciousness of

your unhappy family, / Its bird sent flying through the purgatorial flame" (275). Like all of Adam's descendants, Harry has inherited his sin nature. That nature has also worked itself out in his life to bear the fruit of particular sins. And, although he is called to account for those sins, he is incapable of atoning for them himself. He must submit himself to "the purgatorial flame," which is the will and the working of God in his life for salvation and sanctification. Harry confirms his clarity by saying. "It is quite irrational, but now / I feel quite happy, as if happiness / Did not consist in getting what one wanted / Or in getting rid of what can't be got rid of / But in a different vision" (275). Human rationality cannot fully explain divine revelation. Only once Harry's mind is opened can he see that revelation plainly.

Even still, it is not until the lyrical lines that pass between Harry and Agatha that he is able to recognize the Eumenides for what they truly are—what they have been over the course of the play, the kindly ones. In language similar to Mary's, Agatha states, "I only looked through the little door / When the sun was shining on the rose-garden" (Eliot, *Family* 276). This time, however, the figure moves through the door. Harry uses wasteland imagery with the clarity of one who has long been in exile, finally declaring, "The chain breaks. / The wheel stops, and the noise of machinery, / And the desert is cleared, under the judicial sun / Of the final eye, and the awful evacuation / Cleanses" (277). Cleansing will come when Harry makes his Escape. That Escape will not be *to* Wishwood, but *from* it; not *from* the Eumenides, but *towards* them. When he sees them now, it is not with surprise: "And you shall not think that I am afraid to see you. / This time, you are real, this time, you are outside me, / And just endurable. I know that you are ready, / Ready to leave Wishwood, and I am going with you" (278). Once Harry realizes

that the Eumenides are real and external, he has no reason to fear them. The Eumenides are not a symptom of mental illness, but an external sign. They are a reminder of his brokenness and need, but they are a necessary part of his life. This time, it is Agatha who seems to break out of a trance. She gives a spell-like recitation, ending with the pronouncement, "O my child, my curse, / You shall be fulfilled: / The knot shall be unknotted / And the crooked made straight" (279). She knows that Harry will benefit from his journey, and she instructs him to go. Harry's reply indicates his ever-growing awareness of his fate and his determination to follow the path laid before him: "I am still befouled, / But I know there is only one way out of defilement— / Which leads in the end to reconciliation. / And I know that I must go" (279). Now that he has come to terms with his sin and reconciled himself to his journey, Harry's final task is to extricate himself from his mother's grasp. Only after that final Escape can he proceed to his Consolation.

While Mary and Agatha have been instrumental in Harry's decision to leave, Amy has been playing her own part in Harry's fate. That part is remarkably difficult to isolate and identify. Eliot's reflection some fifteen years after he wrote the play, that his "sympathies have come to be all with the mother," complicates any surface-level reading of Amy as merely an obstacle in Harry's path to redemption ("Poetry" 143). She, like Agatha and Mary, occupies a symbolic role. Much like the women of Canterbury, Amy illustrates a sense of communion with and an awareness of the natural world. The first words she speaks onstage deal with the seasons. Her relationship with time is also apparent. Rather than existing outside time, she is bound by and bound up in time, reiterating several times, "I do not want the clock to stop in the dark" (*Family* 227). She elaborates, "If you want to know why I never leave Wishwood / That is the reason. I keep

Wishwood alive / To keep the family alive, to keep them together, / To keep me alive, and I live to keep them" (227). She is acutely aware of her place in and relationship to time, yet she continues to resist its progression.

Amy's interference with the natural order is at once her primary offense and an integral part of her role to play. As Mary observes to Harry, Amy planned out every detail of her children's lives: "Well, it all seemed to be imposed upon us; / Even the nice things were laid out ready, / And the treats were always so carefully prepared; / There was never any time to invent your own enjoyments" (Eliot, *Family* 248). Rather than leaving some things up to chance or nature, Amy has scripted her family's lives. This is an offense, not because total freedom of choice is something to be desired, but because Amy does not have the authority to determine even her own fate, let alone anyone else's. She is resisting the pattern instead of submitting herself to it. Before Harry can surrender to the pattern himself, he must Escape from his mother's control, from the life she has planned for him.

The main way Harry succeeds in breaking away from his mother and the rest of his family is through his refusal to speak their language of platitude and distraction. He deals in direct terms, stating bluntly, "I never said that I was going to be a missionary. / I would explain, but you would none of you believe it; / If you believed it, still you would not understand. / You can't know why I'm going" (Eliot, *Family* 287). To put his experience into words would oversimplify and cheapen it; instead, he acknowledges to his family that there are some things beyond explanation. Once Harry has announced his decision, Amy is offered the opportunity to accept it. She could seek to understand the significance of Harry's choice, if not the circumstances or state of mind surrounding it.

Instead, however, she misses the point. She laments, "I always wanted too much for my children, / More than life can give. And now I am punished for it" (287). Like Harry, Amy has lost everything, but unlike her son, Amy has not gained any knowledge from her experience, and her end proves to be a tragic one.

Evans questions the wisdom of Harry's decision to leave his family, and the manner of his leaving, based on the pain and anguish it causes them. He writes, "Harry's treatment of his mother, tragically unable to let her into any understanding of his experience, is not required by providence; treating his mother hard is the only way by which Harry at this stage in his progress is able to handle the human situation" (Evans 144). He attributes Harry's lack of communication with uncertainty: "Harry is still young in understanding his new direction, and is unclear what it will mean in practical terms, apart from the necessity of leaving home. He fails to communicate properly with his mother at their farewell partly because he does not yet fully grasp what he is to do" (144). While it is certainly true that Harry is still getting used to his calling and decision, uncertainty is not something that he will overcome in time. Harry never will fully grasp what he is to do. Like Thomas Becket, like the persona of "The Dry Salvages," he must "fare forward" until the end (Eliot, *Murder* 191; *Four Quartets* 135). The first step, for Harry, is to leave Wishwood—he will know what to do next only when he needs to know. A crucial part of his calling is the inherent uncertainty of his voyage. And that inherent uncertainty makes it difficult for Harry to communicate clearly with his family, now or at any time in the future. He tells them not only all that he can at the moment, but also all that any human being can tell another about his calling. Harry's so-called failure to communicate with his mother is not due to a selfish reticence on his part, but rather to

the limitations of human communication and relationships. In identifying the manner of Harry's departure as a decision with primarily human motivations and repercussions, Evans neglects to account for the spiritual reason such a task is necessary for Harry. Although Harry may not have fully counted the cost, he certainly realized what was at stake in his decision to submit to a life of purgation, of dying to self. Though painful, Harry's realization that human relationships—whether familial or romantic—will never fully satisfy is necessary before he can move on in his life.

In trying further to understand Harry and his decisions, Evans notes the undeniable biographical link between Harry and Eliot. In analyzing the significance of Eliot's conversion, Evans comments, "Also the privacy of the ceremony [baptism and confirmation], without even his wife there, suggests an intense need for a private relationship with God outside marriage" (130). By stating it this way, Evans criticizes the radically personal nature of a Christian's relationship with God. In reality, however, this radically personal relationship is foundational to the Christian Gospel. A person comes to faith in Christ as an individual, becoming adopted into the family of God. This has significant repercussions for familial and other human relationships, but not in such a way that the Christian becomes heartless. The Gospel of Luke records Jesus' words regarding discipleship: "If any man come to me, and hate not his father, and mother, and wife, and children, and brethren, and sisters, yea, and his own life also, he cannot be my disciple" (*King James Version*, Luke 14.26). In other words, love for God must outweigh all other affections, even good ones. Harry must not allow concerns for his family to overwhelm his commitment to God. This concept is by no means unique to Eliot, or to Harry; it is the call placed upon every disciple of Jesus. The costs of discipleship are

quite steep. However, as illustrated earlier, Harry is not offered anything that the remainder of his family has not been. All of them have been given the opportunity to receive revelation, but few of them take it. Perhaps Harry could have been more honest with his mother, but he cannot make her see what he sees. His manner towards her, and towards his family, softens in the end, but he will not allow anything to stand in the way of the path set out before him. He is willing to sacrifice familial relationships and comfort in order to follow the calling on his life.

In the end, Amy's death is not some form of punishment, but rather the inevitable result of hoping in her own designs and watching those designs fail. Since she has been living solely for the preservation of her family, when she believes that her family order has disintegrated, she no longer possesses the will to live. What she has most feared has happened: "The clock has stopped in the dark!" (Eliot, *Family* 290). For Amy as for Harry, this is not about "crime and punishment," but "sin and expiation" (275). By the same token, Harry's end is not a reward for his actions, but the unavoidable outcome of a man who has surrendered himself to the pattern. For Harry has done just that; although he denies his family's assumption that he will become a missionary, he does not know what, exactly, his future holds. What Harry does know is that he must Escape from the material world, with all its artificiality and idle chatter. Only through that Escape will he arrive at his Consolation, the joy that comes through pain when that pain is viewed rightly as a method of purification. In a way, then, the play is neither solely "the tragedy of the mother" nor "the salvation of the son," but both of those at once (Eliot, "Poetry" 143). The tragedy of the mother is her refusal to surrender to the pattern; the salvation, the Consolation, of the son is his very surrender.

The Family Reunion constitutes one of Eliot's major achievements. He succeeded in developing a form of verse that serves the modern stage and crafted a play that, if not universally liked, is consistent and harmonious. His use of Aeschylus links Harry's struggle and the play's action to a more universal context; his perpetuation of the portrayal of a saint's life and his intentional use of Christian terminology such as "sin" and "purgatorial" compel the audience to consider the drama of a modern life in the context of a Christian worldview (Eliot, *Family* 275). Although, as in *Murder in the Cathedral*, the external action is somewhat limited, Harry's drama is no less significant or universal than Thomas's. What the popular reaction to *The Family Reunion* does indicate, however, is the validity of Eliot's own apprehension: removed from a definite historical and ecclesiastical context, a modern stage production must work harder in order to interest its audience in spiritual matters. As Evans observed, few productions of *The Family Reunion* have succeeded in making the spiritual realm feel as real as the material, although the text itself maintains a consistent if precarious balance between the two. Eliot's next play, his greatest critical success, would prove that the odd task of achieving a likeable, spiritually-minded modern verse drama is not impossible.

Chapter 3: "a piece of furniture in a repair shop": The Consolation of Self-Surrender in *The Cocktail Party*

Even within the first scene of Eliot's third major play, the authority of the subtitle—"A Comedy"—comes under question. On the surface, the witty badinage and trendy setting and costumes of *The Cocktail Party* set up a rather lighthearted, amusing storyline about social life in the West End, as the title suggests. As Randy Malamud notes, "Eliot had demanded a purely realistic set: he forbade anything apparently symbolic in the set design, anything that might evoke experimental theatre [. . .]; what he tentatively called the supernatural element of the play must not be literally evident" (115). The setting itself gives the audience no hint of anything unusual. Within this familiar milieu, however, is an "unidentified guest"; his incongruous presence in the first scene casts a more serious shadow on the play's proceedings. As the action unfolds, the gravity suggested by this guest proves to outweigh the comical surface aspects: Edward and Lavinia's marriage has disintegrated, beset by unfaithfulness on both sides. By even the second scene, we recognize a play about the difficulty of human relationships, suffering, and destiny. At the end of the drama, however, another definition of comedy does come into play: Edward and Lavinia's relationship is restored, following the classical tradition of a comedy ending in a marriage, while Celia has become united with Christ in her martyr's death, echoing the classical tradition of marriage and also harkening back to Dante's *Divine Comedy*. The ending is a happy one, both for Edward and Lavinia in a literal sense, and for Celia in a more figurative, spiritual sense.

Given Eliot's harmonious balancing of the more human and the more spiritual aspects of the play, it is not too surprising that *The Cocktail Party* won numerous awards,

including three Tony awards, immediately following its opening.[17] The timing of the play may, of course, have something to do with its success: since *The Cocktail Party* was first staged in 1949, its long, successful runs in London's West End and on Broadway are no doubt to some degree indebted to the end of World War II. The end of the war made entertainment once again feasible and desirable; the revelation of the atrocities committed against humanity prepared audiences for a serious consideration of the world and its problems. These assertions could also speak to the fact that, while quite popular in its own day, *The Cocktail Party* has not remained so. This question of the play's endurance will be addressed in detail in the conclusion. Considerations of the play's immediate historical context aside, the primary question is exactly how Eliot succeeded in conveying the unity of the material and spiritual worlds or points of view. More specifically, what does *The Cocktail Party* do effectively that *Murder in the Cathedral* and *The Family Reunion* did not? While each of those plays achieves its own balance between material and spiritual concerns, they do not arrive at the same convincing peacefulness that *The Cocktail Party* does.

Having established that Eliot's achievement in *The Cocktail Party* is the illustration of the harmony that can exist between the supernatural and the natural, the next step is to consider how he succeeds in joining the two realities that he once portrayed as distinct. As noted in the previous chapter, *The Family Reunion* does not entirely break away from Eliot's earlier assertion that the best way to achieve redemption is through a saint-like self-renunciation and asceticism that allows no place for human relationships. Although Celia's choice certainly qualifies as saint-like and ascetic, she is

[17] See Randy Malamud, p. 116. The play won Tony awards for "play, author of a dramatic play, and producer of a dramatic play."

quite different from Thomas and Harry, as will be discussed in more detail later. Moreover, *The Cocktail Party* offers us the first glimpse of a restored marriage in Eliot's work. Rather than going off on their own, Edward and Lavinia each make the choice to stay in their marriage and work things out. They do not turn away from romantic love; they embrace it. In Celia, then, as well as in Edward and Lavinia, Eliot portrays the redemption that comes from the surrender of the self to the Other. As he wrote much earlier in *The Waste Land*, "My friend, blood shaking my heart / The awful daring of a moment's surrender / Which an age of prudence can never retract / By this, and this only, we have existed" (Eliot, *The Waste Land* 49). Living is opening the self to the Other, and that can happen through romantic or family relationships as well as through a relationship with God. Moreover, choosing a romantic relationship does not mean that one cannot also have a relationship with God. In *The Cocktail Party*, the path of redemption does not always lead to martyrdom or sainthood, but it does always require self-surrender.

Several scholars have focused not on its dramatic predecessors, but Eliot's poetry, including "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock" and his later *Four Quartets*, as more influential on *The Cocktail Party*.[18] Specific echoes of Eliot's poetry that appear in *The Cocktail Party* will be addressed in more detail later, but here a general overview of the connections between his poetry and his drama will suffice. In particular, Eliot's *Four Quartets* arrive at an understanding of the world that clearly influences the action and themes of *The Cocktail Party*, particularly in the necessity of self-surrender. In *Four Quartets*, Eliot figured this surrender of the self as a surrender to the timeless moment, or the moment of revelation. In "Burnt Norton," the first of the quartets, the timeless

[18] See Malamud, p. 125, for a discussion of Eliot's early poetry in relation to *The Cocktail Party*.

moment depicted is both beautiful and overwhelming: "And the pool was filled with water out of sunlight, / And the lotos rose, quietly, quietly, / The surface glittered out of heart of light, / And they were behind us, reflected in the pool" (Eliot, *Four Quartets* 118). The speaker and his companion witness a moment of transcendent beauty, the "heart of light" glittering on the surface of the pool, the lotos (a symbol of divine revelation) clearly visible, and time stands still. But the moment ends as abruptly as it began: "Then a cloud passed, and the pool was empty" (118). Moreover, the speaker and his companion are urged to leave: "Go, go, go, said the bird: human kind / Cannot bear very much reality" (118). The reality that human kind can stand only so much of is not material, but spiritual. For Eliot, the spiritual breaks into the material in the form of revelation; timeless moments temporarily suspend the ordinary, linear progression of human time. Eliot termed the form created from the various interactions of linear time with the intrusions of timeless moments "the pattern."

Throughout the remainder of "Burnt Norton," the speaker figures "the pattern" as a dance, as the chase of "the boarhound and the boar," and as the ever-moving stillness of a Chinese jar (Eliot, *Four Quartets* 119). Each image serves to capture the stillness that results from the repetition of a continual pattern. But, as the speaker of "East Coker" clarifies, "For the pattern is new in every moment / And every moment is a new and shocking / Valuation of all we have been" (125). The pattern is not merely a deterministic cycle; rather, the pattern is a way of understanding time from both a temporal and a timeless perspective, through its differences and its similarities. Section V of "Dry Salvages" captures the elusiveness of the pattern:

[. . .] 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. (136)

Only the saints, those who devote their entire lives to dying to self, can reach a full appreciation of the pattern. The experience of ordinary mortals is somewhat different:

For most of us, there is only the unattended

Moment, the moment in and out of time,

The distraction fit, lost in a shaft of sunlight,

The wild thyme unseen, or the winter lightning

Or the waterfall, or music heard so deeply

That it is not heard at all, but you are the music

While the music lasts. These are only hints and guesses,

Hints followed by guesses; and the rest

Is prayer, observance, discipline, thought and action. (136)

Those who are not saints come at an understanding of the intersection of time and timelessness only in bits and pieces, distractedly, fitfully, incompletely. Yet even ordinary people can hear the music so deeply that they become part of the music, while it lasts. These insights come in momentary flashes, interspersing the life of "prayer, observance, discipline, thought and action" (136). The paths of both the saint and the layperson who desire to see the pattern require submission. For the saint, that submission

is a surrender of the self through death in love; for the layperson, that submission occurs through a disciplined life. The idea of self-surrender, or of dying to the self, is prominent in both Buddhist and Christian thought; Buddhism identifies self-renunciation as necessary for enlightenment, while Christianity presents self-surrender as a means of obedience to and fellowship with Christ. The next lines in "Dry Salvages" point to the Christian understanding of the pattern and humanity's place in it: "The hint half guessed, the gift / half understood, is Incarnation. / Here the impossible union / Of spheres of existence is actual, / Here the past and future / Are conquered, and reconciled" (136). For Eliot, the ultimate timeless moment is Christ's incarnation, in which the eternal Word became flesh and thus entered into time. Other timeless moments are iterations of the incarnation, pointing those who witness those moments to the incarnation. Surrendering to "the pattern" involves surrender of the self, and *The Cocktail Party* clearly illustrates and validates two paths of self-surrender: the way of the saint and the way of the layperson.

In addition to his own philosophy of time and "the pattern," and the influences of both Buddhist and Christian understandings of the world, Eliot made use of another source for *The Cocktail Party*. Although more obscure than the Greek parallels in *The Family Reunion*, the correspondences of *The Cocktail Party* to *Alcestis* permit another way of understanding one of the main issues of the play: Edward and Lavinia's marriage. In *The Cocktail Party*, *Alcestis* serves merely as an inspiration. As Eliot himself explained in "Poetry and Drama," "I was still inclined to go to a Greek dramatist for my theme, but I was determined to do so merely as a point of departure" (144). In other words, Eliot's use of the Greek play here can be seen as a starting point; Robert Heilman

identifies Eliot's method as follows: "*The Cocktail Party* seizes upon thematic material latent in *Alcestis* and dramatically explores it further" (106). He extends his explanation: "Eliot is taking the literal story and uncovering its symbolic possibilities, or, in other terms, both naturalizing and universalizing the folk mystery" (108). In other words, Eliot takes a tale of a wife's literal return from the afterlife and molds it into a story of relational tension and reconciliation.

Heilman goes on to identify many of the similarities between the two plays, especially the fact that "both husbands [Admetus and Edward], of course, want their wives back, and in each story the wife is brought back by the tormentor [Heracles/Reilly]" (107). One of Heilman's more interesting arguments is that Eliot derives both Lavinia and Celia from the same source: the character of Alcestis. Even in his identification of Celia as saint and Lavinia as wife, however, Heilman notes, "Eliot is very careful to leave neither wife nor saint at a level of allegorical simplicity" (110). Moreover, Heilman identifies a foundational aspect of Eliot's own philosophy: the distinctness of the material and the spiritual worlds. He writes, "The fact that he makes the split shows the influence of his belief upon the form of the materials in which his play originates; world and spirit are different realities, and must be represented in different dramatic actions" (110). Identifying Eliot as a strict dualist by this point in his career misses the mark, but Heilman does illustrate on the way that an understanding of the spiritual allows a clear view of the natural. Ultimately, Eliot's application of his own philosophy to *Alcestis* makes a detailed understanding of the Greek text superfluous, and his philosophy can be best apprehended in his poetry, particularly in *Four Quartets*.

Given Eliot's approach to *Alcestis*, it is hardly surprising that the most recognizable undertones of *The Cocktail Party* are not Greek, but Christian. He makes careful use of Christian concepts and terminology to convey the spiritual aspects of the drama. Although, as Malamud notes, Eliot's holding off on the use of those terms until later in the drama was intentional, he nevertheless uses terms such as "sin" and "atone" strategically during the second act, as the root of the main characters' problems is being revealed (115). Moreover, Celia's death by crucifixion is unequivocally Christian in its resonance, ending the play on a distinctly Christian note. More important than these individual instances of Christian thought, however, is the way in which Eliot's negotiation of Greek and Christian elements here clarifies the connections between the Greek and the Christian in *Murder in the Cathedral* and *The Family Reunion*. In each case, the central concern is the portrayal of the main character's, or characters', journeys toward redemption. While Greek texts and theatrical traditions serve as the inspiration for and inform particular aspects of his plays, the primary arc of each drama is not that of Greek tragedy, but that of spiritual biography. The focus is not on a hero who falls, but rather on a sinner who rises to the position of saint and martyr. As he did in his earlier poetry, particularly *The Waste Land*, Eliot takes source material and transforms it for his own purposes in his plays. Keiko Saeki notes that Eliot "published the two major cultural studies, *The Idea of a Christian Society* (1939) and *Notes towards the Definition of Culture* (1948) on a parallel with writing his plays" (28). Saeki therefore concludes, "It would seem, then, that the base of his poetic dramas was established from the points of view of a Christian and an intellectual person seeking to connect with more ordinary people as well as of a poet ambitious for a poetic drama" (28). In other words, while

Eliot's source material may be eclectic and varied, his main thematic purpose does not vary: an exploration of the Christian path (which, for the purposes of this study, we have narrowed down to the stages of Fantasy, Recovery, Escape, and Consolation).

While the ideology behind the three plays, as also explored in the *Four Quartets*, remains the same, its expression differs. Consider, for instance, the protagonists of the plays: Thomas Becket, a martyr; Harry, Lord Monchensey; and Celia Coplestone, a socialite. As a historical martyr, Eliot's Thomas has the advantage of English sympathy and a saintly calling to recommend him to the audience. While his journey is clearly portrayed as beyond that of most mortals, his sincere surrender to God's will in his beautifully moving sermon sways the audience to side with him over the rough-and-tumble knights, in spite of the knights' appeals to humanity. Eliot gave himself much more of a challenge in putting Harry at the center of his next play. Harry, like Thomas, seems to have a saintly calling, but the audience is less certain why such a difficult man should be given that calling. Some of Harry's elitist attitude dissipates over the course of the play, as we are privileged to see beyond the façade of his angry words and into the depths of the anguish his situation has created. By the end of the play, the audience is capable of, perhaps somewhat warily, accepting Harry's calling as a journey of expiation and fulfillment.

In Celia, however, Eliot creates a more human, arguably more likeable, hero. Lyndall Gordon asserts, "Never did he create so lovable a woman, assured and sensitive" (414). She describes Celia as "a woman who acts in her own right, not as a foil or prop to a man's realisation as artist, convert, or sinner. Celia is not a bodiless Virgin or a Lady of silences" (414). Celia experiences her own journey: her divine realization of the inherent

solitude of the human experience comes out of personal tragedy (the loss of the man she thought she had loved) and humility. She appeals to Reilly for his help; she does not, as Harry did, fancy herself incapable of being understood by anyone, but rather realizes that she herself needs help to understand her condition and what she can do next. Her submission to the pattern, or to divine will, is not glorious like Thomas's or tinged with self-righteousness like Harry's: it is a true, hopeful, searching submission.[19] Her humanity and likeability make her own martyrdom that much more poignant and, while shocking, also satisfying. She accomplished what she set out to do; although she did not know at the time of her departure what her life would look like, her selfless death represents a total surrender to the Other, both the divine and the human Other.

Looking at *The Cocktail Party* from the vantage point of its success, we find it more difficult to isolate, and so identify, the estranging mechanisms that Eliot employed so effectively. As mentioned above, Eliot's marriage of the natural and the supernatural is more harmonious than in his previous dramas. Several aspects of *The Cocktail Party*, however, do stand out as distancing the audience by reminding them that they are not merely watching a contemporary comedy. As Sarah Bay-Cheng notes, "Th[e] juxtaposition [of performativity and realism] encourages the audience to see through the performance as illusion, and indeed, to see beyond the theatre as the apparatus for illusion, to a larger reality that cannot be articulated on stage" (10). In combining both

[19] Lyndall Gordon also distinguishes Celia from Harry and Thomas, identifying her as a more relatable and, thus, more compelling character: "[W]here Harry remains mysterious to the audience, Celia does clarify her discovery of her surprising vocation. Eliot achieves this clarity by distancing himself, to some degree, from the saint in the making. Celia is not tormented by the tempters and Furies of Eliot's heroes with their flawed pasts. Celia also has the advantage of genuine humility. She is the victim of Edward's change of heart but has no high sense of her own drama. She has a woman's modest expectations – assuming quite ordinary needs for love, marriage, friendship – so that her transition, in one scene, from ordinary to extraordinary is absorbing" (420).

realistic and self-consciously theatrical elements, Eliot succeeds in keeping his audience's attention. One of these self-consciously theatrical elements that estranges the play from the audience is the archetypal nature of the guardian characters.

One of Julia's lines in the final act of the play, in which she begs Peter to cast them in his film, perfectly illustrates the double register of *The Cocktail Party*: "Couldn't you persuade your casting director / To take us all over? We're all very typical" (Eliot, *Cocktail* 378). Of course, the line makes sense in the context, but it also hints at a deeper meaning: Julia and the others are typical in the sense that they represent various usual English types, but they are also typical in the sense that they are archetypal or symbolic. Julia, Alex, and Reilly are the "guardians," the not-quite-human beings who dwell within the world and yet apart from it, helping to direct the lives of others. While Hildegard Hammerschmidt sees the guardians as magicians with questionable motives, an interpretation keeping more in line with the previously discussed Christian elements would identify the guardians as angelic. They all evidently answer to a higher power; they look and speak like humans, but they distinguish themselves from the other characters in that they do not face a choice themselves. Whatever their precise identity, the guardians prove to be something other than human. The other characters, however, are convincingly, even poignantly, human.

The dual significance of Julia's words as well as other lines in the play highlight the value of verse drama. Arthur Oberg illustrates how "*The Cocktail Party* reveals a mind that plays upon surfaces—at ease and at will—in an attempt to intimate the tentative, elusive nature of things" (189). Eliot recognizes the inadequacies of a language that expresses itself too freely. In *The Cocktail Party*, Eliot's verse most closely

approaches the "unattainable ideal" of conveying a "peculiar range of sensibility" that exists "beyond the nameable, classifiable emotions and motives of our conscious life when directed towards action": "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" (Eliot, "Poetry" 145). That detachment from action comes both from the audience's distance from the action of the drama and the pull of the dramatic verse, and from the audience's expectation of dramatic action that outweighs the actual dramatic action that occurs on stage.

In his article analyzing Eliot's use of language, Michael Selmon notes of the verse of *The Cocktail Party*: "[I]t differentiates itself from normal speech, using rhythm to remind its audience that they are listening to verse" (496). The self-consciousness of the verse has an effect on the audience through rhythm, forcing them to remember that they are watching a play, a stylized representation of life. Moreover, as Oberg asserts, "What *The Cocktail Party* lost in textured poetry it gained in modulation and inflection. Eliot reaches for the right or 'valid' word, the turn of thought or phrase reflected in an increasingly stylized verse. Words give the impression of being self-creating, spoken by characters in search of a more precise speech" (187). This means that the focus of the play is not external action, but the act of speech-as-creation. As in *Four Quartets*, the poetry of *The Cocktail Party* communicates most clearly when it takes the most circuitous route. The timeless experiences that both works seek to communicate defy linguistic categorization; thus, *The Cocktail Party* is most successful in its conscious evasion of direct action and direct speech.

The Cocktail Party cultivates the audience's peripheral vision in its most powerful scenes: Celia's conversation with Reilly in his office and the revelation of her martyrdom in the final scene. In both instances, the language becomes at once less adequate and more moving. Celia's struggle to find the words to quantify her revelations adds poignancy to her experience and conveys the limitations of linguistic expression. She identifies her first realization for Reilly: "An awareness of solitude. / But that sounds so flat. I don't mean simply / That there's been a crash [. . .] / [. . .] / I mean that what has happened has made me aware / That I've always been alone. That one always is alone" (Eliot, *Cocktail* 359-60). These lines signify that Celia's experience is one that transcends typical ways of knowing and instead lies in the realm beyond action and reason. If she were capable of stating outright what she is feeling and why, the effect would be much less convincing. As it is, the audience is invited to identify with her on a deeper level than merely a woman who has been rejected by her lover. Moreover, the entire scene in Reilly's office temporarily suspends action. It is not for Celia or the others to act yet, but rather first to come to terms with that which they have learned but have not yet found ways to express. Celia's uncertainty reflects not a confusion or slowness on her part, but rather the profoundness of the truths with which she is reckoning.

Similarly, the final scene communicates the fact and significance of Celia's death through both what is said and what remains unsaid—indeed, unsayable. In bits and pieces, Alex reveals Celia's fate, at last explaining, "It was difficult to tell. / But from what we know of local practices / It would seem that she must have been crucified / Very near an ant-hill" (Eliot, *Cocktail* 381). He does not describe her death in any sort of graphic detail, merely explaining the evidence and the deductions he and others with him

made.[20] But even his mild expressions shock the listeners; Edward, Lavinia, and the others try to accept the reality of Celia's suffering and death. When Lavinia remarks that she knows nothing of the depths of the suffering Celia endured even before her death, Reilly acknowledges her statement. However, he underscores the inexplicability of Celia's journey: "But such experience [as Celia's] can only be hinted at / In myths and images. To speak about it / We talk of darkness, labyrinths, Minotaur terrors. / But that world does not take the place of this one" (384). In other words, Celia's experience can at best be communicated indirectly, through intimations and symbols. Her personal mystical (spiritual) experience is essentially unknowable to others. In addition to her spiritual journey, however, is her physical one, as Reilly points out. She was not subjected merely to spiritual difficulties, but also to physical ones, as were the martyrs and saints before her.

The lighthearted backdrop set up in the first act of the play allows the humanity of the characters to establish itself, providing a foundation for the later, more serious revelations and action. Rather than beginning with grave pronouncements, as he had in his previous two plays, Eliot opens with a wild story *in medias res*. The characters' interactions are comical and believable, drawing the audience in from the start. In particular, Julia and Alex, later revealed as two of the "guardians," or the orchestrators of the other characters' actions, are presented inconspicuously as a fluttering, nosy old woman and a somewhat obtuse man-of-the-world, respectively. Alex chides Julia in the first lines of the play: "You've missed the point completely, Julia: / There *were* no tigers.

[20] In an earlier draft of the play, Eliot's description of Celia's death was more graphic, but he was urged to change this. Gordon, as other more recent critics, takes issue with the graphic nature of Celia's death. (See Lyndall Gordon, pp. 417-18.)

That was the point" (Eliot, *Cocktail* 297). Between her incomprehension of Alex's story, and her inability to tell her own story "about Lady Klootz and the wedding cake," Julia convinces the other characters, not to mention the audience, that she is the quintessential scatterbrained old woman (297). Later in the act, Alex returns and insists on cooking for Edward. When Edward objects, Alex says, "Any scraps you have will do. I learned that in the East. / With a handful of rice and a little dried fish / I can make half a dozen dishes. Don't say a word. I shall begin at once" (313). Alex does not seem capable of resisting the temptation to talk about his travels in out-of-the-way places and his resulting experience and knowledge. During Edward's conversation with Peter, Alex's constant questions and interruptions make him seem a nuisance. Both Alex and Julia appear to be amusing distractions from the apparent focus of the play: Edward and Lavinia's relationship.

Alex and Julia do not reveal their true colors until later in the play, but even within the first act, certain lines contradict the stereotypes these two characters apparently reinforce. Although Julia cannot keep track of the stories—hers or anyone else's—the other characters seem to recognize in her a particular knowledge. Peter tells her, "You never miss anything" (Eliot, *Cocktail* 298). Celia later declares, "There isn't much that Julia doesn't know" (299). While these remarks fit within the idea of Julia as a gossip or busybody, there is also a second resonance in them. The other characters may laugh at Julia, but they cannot dismiss her entirely. Edward laments to the still-unidentified Reilly, "But she always turns up when she's least wanted" (304). Edward knows that Julia has seen through his fabricated story as to why Lavinia was not at the party, and he sees her nosiness as an impertinence. Later in the evening, during his conversation with Edward,

Peter expresses relief that Edward did not notice the strangeness of his manner: "If you didn't notice, I don't suppose the others did, / Though I'm rather afraid of Julia Shuttlethwaite" (312). Peter, perhaps only instinctively or subconsciously, also recognizes Julia's peculiar perceptiveness.

Alex's reputation identifies him not as a particularly intelligent or observant fellow, but as one who is well-connected. His own explanation of Edward's trust in his judgment summarizes others' perceptions of him well: "It's not that he regards me as very intelligent, / But he thinks I'm well informed: the sort of person / Who would know the right doctor, as well as the right shops" (Eliot, *The Cocktail Party* 345). Alex's knowledge encompasses the right people and the right places, making him at once both more believable and more mysterious. He provides colorful, exotic stories; his statement that "I never tell the same story twice" at the outset of the play may cast some aspersions on the strict veracity of his tales, but he also has knowledge about the family histories of Lady Klootz and Delia Verinder (297). Moreover, his various travels mark him as more than a mere man-of-the-world. They have allowed him to make connections with a great deal of people, not merely in order to stand out in fashionable society, but to help guide those around him. In addition to inducing Edward to trust his recommendations, Alex's connections also assist Peter in his pursuit of a film career in Hollywood. At the end of act two, when the guardians speak words, or pray, over Edward, Lavinia, and Celia, Julia wonders if they will ever speak the words over Peter. Alex answers, "Others, perhaps, will speak them. / You know, I have connections—even in California" (369). Peter's trip to California is not merely a whim, but a step in his own spiritual journey carefully orchestrated by the guardians, and it is Alex who assures the others that Peter will come

to his own point of decision. Alex's travels are also responsible for bringing back news of Celia at the end of the play. The significance of his role is underscored when Lavinia attempts to introduce him to Reilly. When Alex says, "Indeed, yes, we have met," Reilly replies, "On several commissions," indicating the official nature of their work (379). Alex, along with Reilly and Julia, has a specific part to play in guiding the other characters down the paths they have chosen.

The humanity of the main characters is especially clear in Edward and Lavinia's complicated relationship, a relationship which affects the other characters as well. While Celia is arguably the protagonist of the play, Eliot illuminates the journeys of both Edward and Lavinia with detail and pathos. In his self-consciousness and self-aggrandizement, Edward most resembles the typical Eliot hero. Like Prufrock, Edward seems paralyzed by indecision; he blames Lavinia for the annihilation of his personality, but in reality he has become so blind to his own faults and failures that he simply does not know who he is anymore. Unlike the earlier hero, however, Edward eventually regains his personality through confronting those faults and failures honestly. Edward's similarities to Harry are also interesting to note. Like Harry, Edward feels trapped within a marriage to a woman he does not love. As Harry does, Edward has a somewhat inflated view of himself and his struggles. He fancies himself unique in the suffering he has experienced as a result of his marriage, and he pities himself. It takes Lavinia's abrupt, unexpected disappearance to jolt Edward out of his complacency and to help him begin to see that things are not as he thought they were, least of all himself. Whereas Harry is haunted by the guilt of wishing his wife dead, Edward must come to terms with the guilt of his affair with Celia. His path does not lead down a lonely journey of expiation, but

rather the hard course of repairing his broken marriage. Like Harry, Edward must renounce himself, but he must also embrace the Other through his marriage.

It is only when Reilly tries to persuade Edward that Lavinia's leaving is all for the best that Edward realizes he wants Lavinia back. The shock of the experience begins to restore clarity to his sight. Once he has made his decision, Reilly warns, there is no turning back: "But let me tell you, that to approach the stranger / Is to invite the unexpected, release a new force, / Or let the genie out of the bottle. / It is to start a train of events / Beyond your control" (Eliot, *Cocktail* 306). In declaring his wish, Edward initiates a series of events that will follow a pattern he cannot yet comprehend. He will be forced to confront his problems, no longer able to evade them or the truth. Like a good doctor, Reilly diagnoses Edward's problem, declaring:

> But there's more to it than that [the mystery]. There's a loss of personality;
> Or rather, you've lost touch with the person
> You thought you were. You no longer feel quite human.
> You're suddenly reduced to the status of an object—
> A living object, but no longer a person.
> It's always happening, because one is an object
> As well as a person. But we forget about it
> As quickly as we can. (307)

Edward is bothered not merely by the fact that he does not understand why Lavinia has left, but also because his feeling of lost-ness at her disappearance hints at an even greater lost-ness he does not want to confront—indeed, a lost-ness that few human beings willingly confront. He feels that he has lost control of his life, and that bothers him

deeply. So far, he has been able to avoid contemplation of this idea, but the disappearance of his wife and disintegration of his marriage require him to realize that he cannot keep everything in his life under his control. Thus begins what Tolkien would term his state of Recovery, or an experience of seeing the world and his life more clearly that motivates him to desire change.

Reilly extends his analysis by asking Edward to consider his role in a hypothetical "surgical operation" (Eliot, *The Cocktail Party* 307). He explains, "In talking to the matron, you are still the subject, / The centre of reality. But, stretched on the table, / You are a piece of furniture in a repair shop / For those who surround you, the masked actors" (307). He suggests that Edward's view of himself as "[t]he centre of reality" is at best only circumstantially true—at worst, an illusion altogether. Reilly's words recall lines from section III of "East Coker," in which the speaker, who is attempting to understand how his life fits in the grand pattern of time, says, "I said to my soul, be still, and let the dark come upon you / Which shall be the darkness of God" (*Four Quartets* 126). He continues with several examples of being still, ending with the following illustration and explanation:

> [As] when, under ether, the mind is conscious but conscious of nothing—
> I said to my soul, be still, and wait without hope
> For hope would be hope for the wrong thing; wait without love
> For love would be love of the wrong thing; there is yet faith
> But the faith and the love and the hope are all in the waiting.
> Wait without thought, for you are not ready for thought:
> So the darkness shall be the light, and the stillness the dancing. (126-27)

Like the "object" in Reilly's illustration, this patient under ether is "conscious of nothing," meaning that he is also in control of nothing. He is entirely passive, completely at the mercy of the surgeons. For the speaker of "East Coker," that place of stillness and waiting is a good place to be. If he were hoping, he would be hoping in the wrong thing; if he were loving, he would be loving the wrong thing. The best thing he can do, then, is to wait. For the speaker, waiting requires faith in something beyond himself. He has come to the place where he admits that he cannot do what he needs to do on his own, so he will wait "in the darkness of God." He realizes his need for God, and he is willing to surrender to God, to wait for God to do what he has planned to do. The darkness of not knowing becomes as comforting as the light, and the stillness of waiting becomes the speaker's part in the dance.

Similar to the speaker of "East Coker," Edward is forced to realize his lack of control. Edward has not come to the point of relinquishing his hope in the wrong thing; his question to Reilly—"To what does this lead?"—confirms his misplaced hope (Eliot, *Cocktail* 307). Edward wants to know what will happen next; he does not like feeling that his life is out of control. Reilly instructs him, "The one thing to do / Is to do nothing. Wait" (308). Edward's response, compared with that of the speaker of "East Coker," is refreshingly human: "Wait! / But waiting is the one thing impossible. / Besides, don't you see that it makes me ridiculous?" (308). Reilly notes, "You will find that you survive humiliation. / And that's an experience of incalculable value" (308). Edward needs to acknowledge that the world revolves neither around him nor around his good opinion of himself. He must recognize his own faults—particularly his selfishness—in order to redeem his life and his marriage, which requires a great deal of humility. His interactions

with Reilly, as well as with Peter and Celia, further clarify what needs to be changed about him.

Ironically, it is Peter—later revealed as Lavinia's lover—who first puts into words the lesson that Edward must learn. Unaware of Edward and Celia's affair, Peter confides his feelings for Celia to Edward, seeking the older man's wisdom. Edward's questions and half-hearted advice communicate his inability to understand a genuine connection between two people. Peter tries to explain his feelings: "It is not her interest in *me* that I miss— / But those moments in which we seemed to share some perception, / Some feeling, some indefinable experience / In which we were both unaware of ourselves" (Eliot, *The Cocktail Party* 315). Peter, in spite of his loveless affair with Lavinia, has had the genuine experience of connecting with another person in such a way that he has escaped the self. Peter realizes, if only dimly, that it is outside of oneself that one can most fully experience reality; freed from the lies of one's self and perception, one has the capacity to connect with the Other and thus find fulfillment. Peter tells Edward, "And I have been telling you of something real— / My first experience of reality / And perhaps it is the last. And you don't understand" (316). Reality is not merely everyday, material existence; it is the rare authenticity of connecting with the Other, both divine and human.

Although Peter's experience is illuminating for the audience, Edward is not so easily enlightened. Even when Celia returns to see him, he does not realize why he wants Lavinia back. He tells Celia, "I see that my life was determined long ago / And that the struggle to escape from it / Is only a make-believe, a pretence / That what is, is not, or could be changed" (Eliot, *The Cocktail Party* 326). Although his words contain echoes of truth, his response is more of a lament than a revelation. He does not yet understand what

it means to "fare forward" (*Murder* 191); he views the pre-determined nature of his life not calmly but fatalistically. He prefers to escape his life, instead of persevering in it, so the realization that he cannot escape it disheartens him. As he continues in this line of thought, Edward also identifies the weakness that accompanies desire, but his attitude remains dismal:

> The self that wills—he is a feeble creature;
> He has to come to terms in the end
> With the obstinate, the tougher self; who does not speak,
> Who never talks, who cannot argue;
> And who in some men may be the *guardian*—
> But in men like me, the dull, the implacable,
> The indomitable spirit of mediocrity. (*Cocktail* 326)

Once again, Edward indulges in self-pity. His self-awareness is growing but incomplete. He acknowledges that, ultimately, wanting things to be different makes no difference: desire, or will, must bow to the other self, the self that is committed to the predetermined pattern of life. Celia is honest with Edward, admitting, "I am not sure, Edward, that I understand you; / And yet I understand you as I never did before. / I think—I believe you are being yourself / As you never were before, with me" (326). In fact, she sees Edward more clearly than he sees himself. She recognizes his inability to do what he once thought himself capable of: loving her and having a future with her. Moreover, during their conversation, she learns to see him not as she wishes him to be, or as he sees himself, but as he actually is. Edward cannot yet see himself, or anyone else, objectively. And, until

he can do that, he cannot effect an Escape from his particular prison: the prison of the self. His path to Recovery is a long, difficult one.

Edward's path of Recovery, Escape, and Consolation is inextricably linked to Lavinia's. And, rather atypically for Eliot, *The Cocktail Party* devotes nearly as much attention to Lavinia's point of view as it does to Edward's. In fact, the audience may find Lavinia a more sympathetic character than her husband. Like Edward, she realizes that events are spiraling out of her control: "But it seems to me that yesterday / I started some machine, that goes on working, / And I cannot stop it; no, it's not like a machine— / Or if it's a machine, someone else is running it. / But who? Somebody is always interfering . . . / I don't feel free . . . and yet I started it . . ." (Eliot, *Cocktail* 336). However, her attitude is one of confusion more than resignation. Moreover, she sees beyond the fact that she is not in control; she knows that "someone else is running" the machine. In attributing the direction of her life to "[s]omebody," Lavinia has moved beyond her husband in recognizing some kind of purpose in her life. Once she and Edward are alone, she declares, "Well, I shall have to tell Julia the truth. / I shall always tell the truth now. / We have wasted such a lot of time in lying" (337). Her determination to stop lying, to others as well as to herself, marks her as well on the road to Recovery. Both she and Edward prove themselves still to be embroiled in marital conflict, but Lavinia's more positive attitude reveals itself particularly clearly against Edward's self-pity and complaining. Discussing their method for choosing their honeymoon destination, Edward says, "But I wanted *you* to make that decision," only for Lavinia to reply, "But how could I tell where I wanted to go / Unless you suggested some other place first?" (338). The constant back-and-forth of the dialogue highlights their marital discord. Both have a long way to go in

terms of communication and selfishness, but Lavinia's ability to discuss things without becoming upset illustrates the objectivity that grows as she confronts herself and her situation head-on.

Edward and Lavinia's true commitment to the road of Escaping the self occurs in Reilly's office. Upon Edward's arrival, Reilly informs him, "[Things] might be much worse. You might have ruined three lives / By your indecision. Now there are only two— / Which you still have the chance of redeeming from ruin" (Eliot, *Cocktail* 347). Although Edward's affair had the potential to wreck his life and the lives of Lavinia and Celia, his choice to have Lavinia back means that Celia can pursue her own path. Moreover, his agreeing to see Reilly means there is hope that he and Lavinia will be able to work things out. Rather than serving as a psychiatrist or a marriage counselor, Reilly instead proves himself to be a spiritual guide or, as Heilman puts it, a "soul healer" (115). Reilly determines that Edward and Lavinia "are both too ill" for his sanatorium; they lack one of the most significant symptoms—"an honest mind" (Eliot, *Cocktail* 352). When each of them immediately recognizes the dishonesty of the other, Reilly diagnoses the root of their problem: "My patients such as you are the self-deceivers / Taking infinite pains, exhausting their energy, / Yet never quite successful" (353). In concealing parts of themselves from each other and from Reilly, both Edward and Lavinia are also lying to themselves. They must be honest before they can move forward.

The revelations that Reilly provides serve to break Edward and Lavinia of the pride and dishonesty that have prevented them from connecting with each other. As Selmon notes, "Harcourt-Reilly now destroys the self-centeredness of Edward's speech" (501). The couple's honesty in "[t]he awful daring of a moment's surrender" allows them

to begin the painful process of Escaping the prison of the self (Eliot, *The Waste Land* 49). Focusing on their differences has estranged Edward and Lavinia from each other: as the speaker of *The Waste Land* notes, "I have heard the key / Turn in the door once and turn once only / We think of the key, each in his prison / Thinking of the key, each confirms a prison" (49). A navel-gazing focus on oneself makes the self a kind of prison. Edward's earlier words to Lavinia echo these lines: "There was a door / And I could not open it. I could not touch the handle. / Why could I not walk out of my prison? / What is hell? Hell is oneself, / Hell is alone, the other figures in it / Merely projections" (*Cocktail* 342). Edward identifies his problem after Lavinia returns, but he cannot see any solution. His focus on a door that cannot be opened also recalls a passage from "Burnt Norton": "Footfalls echo in the memory / Down the passage which we did not take / Towards the door we never opened / Into the rose-garden" (117).[21] Although Edward feels incapable of opening the door, he once had the opportunity to do so. But since he did not open himself up to his wife, he now feels trapped. The solution for Edward and Lavinia's imprisonment is not to use a key to unlock the prison, but rather to forget the existence of the lock. In ceasing to focus on the lock and key, one ceases to focus solely on the self, thus enabling an awareness of and connection with the Other. Connecting with the Other is not easy, but it is possible. As Edward puts it, "Lavinia, we must make the best of a bad job" (Eliot, *Cocktail* 356). Reilly confirms "The best of a bad job is all any of us make of it" (356). Now that they have recovered clarity in their honest understanding of themselves, Edward and Lavinia have all they need to Escape the prison of the self and pursue the Consolation of a harmonious human relationship through an understanding of

[21]For an interpretation of these "door" passages that focuses on Eliot's relationship with Emily Hale, see Gordon, p. 415.

each other. They cannot worry if the end will be good, or if it will meet their expectations; like the patient under ether, they must trust the surgeon's hand.

By the final act, which takes place two years after their visit to Reilly's office, Edward and Lavinia have clearly redeemed their marriage. Before the others arrive, Edward tells Lavinia, "I like the dress you're wearing: / I'm glad you put on that one," and her response illustrates their growing understanding of one another: "Well, Edward! / Do you know it's the first time you've paid me a compliment / *Before* a party? And that's when one needs them" (Eliot, *Cocktail* 371). Their conversation also reveals their plans to go off and spend time together now that the social season has drawn to a close. Although the Chamberlaynes have not taken the saint's path, they have done what all must do who hope to live a good life: choose the path of self-surrender. The news of Celia's suffering and martyrdom at first appears to diminish the value of Edward and Lavinia's own chosen path. Edward expresses his qualms: "But if this was right—if this was right for Celia— / There must be something else that is terribly wrong, / And the rest of us are somehow involved in the wrong. / I should only speak for myself. I'm sure that *I* am" (385). Reilly does not deny that their choices are intertwined, but his advice is to move forward: "You will have to live with these memories and make them / Into something new. Only by acceptance / Of the past will you alter its meaning" (385). Julia's explanation is a little less cryptic: "Everyone makes a choice, of one kind or another, / And then must take the consequences. Celia chose / A way of which the consequence was Kinkanja. / Peter chose a way that leads him to Boltwell: / And he's got to go there" (386). Each individual is responsible for the choice he has made; none of the choices is better than the others, but each individual must accept the consequences of his

choice. For Edward and Lavinia, their consequence is hosting a cocktail party. The play ends in anticipation of the party and of the continual work of loving one another and maintaining their marriage beyond the final curtain.

Though Edward and Lavinia's relationship is integral to the play's action and the lives of the other characters, Celia's performance in the second act brings her to center stage. While Edward and Lavinia are still lying to themselves and each other, Celia comes to see herself and her situation clearly. Even before her visit to Reilly, Celia's vision has begun to clear. When she discovers that Edward does not want to pursue a future with her after Lavinia's disappearance, Celia recognizes the subjectivity with which she has viewed him. She tries to explain to Edward:

> The man I saw before, he was only a projection—
>
> I see that now—of something that I wanted—
>
> No, not *wanted*—something I aspired to—
>
> Something that I desperately wanted to exist.
>
> It must happen somewhere—but what, and where is it?
>
> And I ask you to forgive me. (Eliot, *Cocktail* 327)

In expecting Edward to be the fulfillment of all her desires, she has been unfair to him. Because she has viewed Edward idealistically, she has failed to treat him as a human being. Immediately, she asks for his forgiveness. Her willingness to admit her own failure begins her road of Recovery. Upon her return the following afternoon, she says to Edward, "But I've learnt a lot in twenty-four hours. / It wasn't a 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?" (331). The version of Edward she built up has been stripped

away, and she sees him as another person. She is able to leave Edward and honestly say to Lavinia, "I should like you to remember me / As someone who wants you and Edward to be happy" (334). In viewing Edward from her new, detached perspective, she is able to wish him and Lavinia success and happiness.

Her own fate, however, remains undetermined until she meets with Reilly. She admits candidly, "I just came in desperation" (Eliot, *Cocktail* 358). Celia is as humble as she is honest: she does not presume that she knows the answer and, she acknowledges, "I at least have no one to blame but myself" (359). She no longer deceives herself; she possesses the "honest mind" that Reilly spoke of, which is in fact "one of the causes of [her] suffering" (352). Having entered the state of Recovery, Celia begins to search for an Escape from herself and her old way of viewing the world. She cannot ignore the force of her realizations, nor can she push aside her troubling emotions. Through the course of her conversation with Reilly, Celia reveals her disquietude over two things: "[a]n awareness of solitude" and "[a] sense of sin" (359, 360). When she asks Reilly if he thinks this idea is a delusion, he replies, "A delusion is something we must return from. / There are other states of mind, which we take to be delusion, / But which we have to accept and go on from" (360). In other words, now that Celia has realized the truth, she cannot turn away from it. She must learn to come to terms with the truth and move on or, to put it in the terms of *Murder in the Cathedral*, she must "Fare forward to the end" (191).

When Reilly directs the conversation to her relationship with Edward, deeper issues surface. Through her broken relationship with Edward, Celia awakens both to her own culpability and the universal tragedy of human disconnection:

> And then I found we were only strangers

And that there had been neither giving nor taking

But that we had merely made use of each other

Each for his purpose. That's horrible. Can we only love

Something created by our own imagination?

Are we all in fact unloving and unlovable?

Then one *is* alone, and if one is alone

Then lover and beloved are equally unreal

And the dreamer is no more real than his dreams. (Eliot, *Cocktail* 362)

Celia's realization of the utilitarian nature of her affair causes her to question not merely her own experience, but also human experience on a larger scale. If she and Edward could so deceive themselves about their relationship, can any human relationship be sincere? What Celia does not recognize is that her very ability to see this indicates her shift towards the type of understanding that makes sincere relationships possible. Her sympathy for Edward colors her description of him: "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" (363). Reilly offers her a clue to one type of Consolation: human love, or "compassion" (363). For Celia, however, compassion is not enough. She is determined to find that for which she has longed and searched but not yet discovered. Reilly offers to "reconcile [her] to the human condition," but she protests: "But I feel it would be a kind of surrender— / No, not a surrender—more like a betrayal" (363, 364). That path, the path of ordinary life and love that leads to the Consolation of a harmonious human relationship, no longer holds any appeal for Celia.

In trying to recover the good memories of her relationship, Celia resorts to the language and sense of dreams. She muses, "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" (Eliot, *Cocktail* 363). The love without desire that she describes here represents not human love, but divine love. The act of loving, not hope of Consolation or affection for the beloved itself, becomes the focus and purpose of the love. Likewise, in "Burnt Norton," the speaker distinguishes between love and desire:

> Desire itself is movement
>
> Not in itself desirable;
>
> Love is itself unmoving,
>
> Only the cause and end of movement,
>
> Timeless, and undesiring
>
> Except in the aspect of time
>
> Caught in the form of limitation
>
> Between un-being and being. (*Four Quartets* 122)

Both Celia and the speaker of these lines realize that true love, in its fixity and its liberation from time, is actually an absence of desire. Seeing true love as timeless highlights its eternity, its independence of the natural order of the material world. While humans are limited, they can approach this divine concept of love by renouncing desire. As the speaker of "East Coker" puts it, "Love is most nearly itself / When here and now cease to matter" (129). Celia recognizes the power of such love, untethered to time and place and transcending selfish desire. She feels that she has had a taste of this love, if

only in a memory or a dream, but she wonders if it can ever be fully realized. She knows she cannot find it in human relationships.

Since she has now tasted the intensity of divine love, Celia admits her diminished desire for romantic love: "I think it would really be dishonest / For me, now, to try to make a life with *any*body! / I couldn't give anyone the kind of love— / I wish I could— which belongs to that life" (Eliot, *Cocktail* 364). She cannot abandon what she has glimpsed. She cries out, "If there's no other way . . . then I feel just hopeless" (364). Reilly's solution for her involves not romantic love, but divinely self-sacrificing love. He tells her, "The second [way] is unknown, and so requires faith— / The kind of faith that issues from despair" (364). He cannot explain the second way in detail, not only because she has no concept of it, but also because that way defies precise linguistic expression. He goes on to warn her, "You will journey blind. But the way leads towards possession / Of what you have sought for in the wrong place" (365). One crucial part of this second way is the blindness of the journeyer. Celia will not know where she is going or what she will face until she arrives. But she does have Reilly's assurance that she will eventually come to possess that which she has been seeking.

Although Reilly emphasizes the uniqueness and selectiveness of the second way, he maintains the necessity and goodness of both ways: "Each way means loneliness—and communion. Both ways avoid the final desolation / Of solitude in the phantasmal world / Of imagination, shuffling memories and desires" (Eliot, *Cocktail* 365). Both the ordinary 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" and the "unknown" way avoid desolation, thus ending in the Consolation of communion (364). Various

critics have taken issue with Eliot for Reilly's condescending description of the ordinary way, the type of life that most people live or aspire to. Reilly's statements that husbands, wives, and children will never understand each other are admittedly harsh, but the play itself validates both the normal life of romantic love and family and the extreme life of self-denial and martyrdom. While Celia's death has quite an impact in the last act of the play, the final moments of the play reinforce a sympathetic understanding of Edward and Lavinia. Moreover, Celia is no Harry; as demonstrated above, she is humble in her choice of the second way, accepting it as the potential answer for what she feels is missing in her own life. She shows no contempt for the first way; she merely knows that the first way is not for her.

Once Celia has made her decision, she and Reilly discuss logistics. When she asked what she needs to bring with her to the sanatorium, Reilly replies, "Nothing. / Everything you need will be provided for you. / And you will have no expenses at the sanatorium" (Eliot, *Cocktail* 366). His answer suggests an understanding of grace. Celia has nothing to bring; she must accept the meeting of her needs and give nothing in return. Her Consolation is a free gift, not something that she can merit or earn on her own. Similarly, when the question of money is brought up, Reilly tells her, "For a case like yours / There is no fee" (366). Again, she must receive a gift rather than pay for goods and services. Reilly's final charge to her echoes that given to Edward and Lavinia: "Go in peace, my daughter. / Work out your salvation with diligence" (366). Criticism often links this charge with Eastern religion—particularly with the Buddha's instructions to his followers.[22] Another source, however, is also available and plausible. Reilly's words

[22] See Sarah Bay-Cheng, "Reality and Its Double in T. S. Eliot's *The Cocktail Party*," p. 6.

mirror those given by the apostle Paul to the church at Philippi: "Wherefore, my beloved, as ye have always obeyed, not as in my presence only, but now much more in my absence, work out your own salvation with fear and trembling" (*King James Version*, Phil. 2.12). In both the scripture and the play, the meaning is clear: the disciple must walk the way of salvation with diligence and the fear of the Lord. The line which immediately follows Reilly's admonition strengthens this association with the Bible. Reilly says, "It is finished," words which Jesus famously uttered on the cross in the last moments of his life (Eliot, *Cocktail* 366; John 19.30). Reilly's role in Celia's drama is finished. So, too, is Celia's role, in a sense: she has committed herself to the pursuit of divine love, and in surrendering her Ego to the call of the divine Other, she submits to whatever fate meets her on her journey. Although she does not know her end, she has faith that she will achieve Consolation.

Here, as in other places throughout the play, Reilly's character proves somewhat difficult to pin down. His conversation with Julia after Celia has left indicates both a knowledge of what he has done and apprehension about the fates of the others. He knows much about the others and what is best for them but, as Julia admonishes him, "[he] must accept [his] limitations" (Eliot, *Cocktail* 368). Reilly's limitations are clear in the fact that he ponders the end of Edward and Lavinia's fate. He admits, "I have taken a great risk" (367). Julia reminds him, "We must always take risks. / That is *our* destiny," linking them together as guardians (367, emphasis added). She continues, "But what do *we* know of the terrors of the journey? *You* and *I* don't know the process by which the *human* is / Transhumanised: what do *we* know / Of the kind of suffering *they* must undergo / On the way of illumination?" (367, emphasis added). Here the distinction between the guardians

and the others is further clarified; the guardians seem now more than ever to be something other than human. Again, Julia's language links her with Reilly in their inability to understand the human journey.

Yet Reilly does not play quite the same role as does Julia or Alex, who joins them moments later. Reilly seems to have a more authoritative, professional position in the fates of the others. As Heilman notes, Reilly "has remarkable insight and exercises a special power affecting human destiny" (115). Reilly shows up at the first cocktail party not as a humorous acquaintance but as the "unidentified guest." Each of the main characters comes to take him seriously as a guide. They each understand and accept their destiny in his office, and he exhibits great knowledge of human nature. But Reilly's various conversations with Julia and Alex indicate that their knowledge outstrips his in some cases. In this particular conversation, Julia tells him, "Henry, you simply do not understand innocence. / [Celia] will be afraid of nothing; she will not even know / That there is anything to be afraid of" (Eliot, *Cocktail* 368). Julia exhibits a different type of understanding than Reilly possesses. So, too, does Alex. When Reilly says, "There is one for whom the words cannot be spoken," Alex is quick to rejoin, "They cannot be spoken yet" (369). Reilly's role, then, can be understood in conjunctions with those of the other guardians. Although Reilly is the leader, all three of the guardians function as indispensable guides for the others. Their roles complement one another.

The last moments of act two are described by Malamud as "a ceremonious libation tinged with both Christian and mythically archetypal benedictions for their three charges" (114). The guardians' prayers for Edward, Lavinia, and Celia certainly resonate with multiple religions. The play's exploration of the suffering born of desire and

selfishness is not uniquely Christian, as acknowledged earlier. Buddhist undertones lie in the insistence on the surrender of the self and the concept of purgation through a renouncing of desire. Certain Christian terminology, such as the use of the words "atone" and "sin," does link the play more overtly to Christian influence, and the final act of the play establishes a primarily Christian view of spiritual reality (Eliot, *Cocktail* 362, 360). A full appreciation of Celia's fate as a triumph rather than a tragedy requires a Christian understanding. Celia's death links her directly to Christ: she was "crucified" (381). As Reilly notes, "She paid the highest price / In suffering. That is part of the design" (384). Celia's suffering was not merely a means of purification; it was also a part of a greater design, or pattern. The result lay outside of Celia's control, yet in her submission to the pattern, she found peace. Reilly says simply, "That way, which she accepted, led to this death. / And if that is not a happy death, what death is happy?" (384). Celia gave her life for a cause greater than herself. Her impact, in earthly terms and figures, is of little importance; her determination to follow the pattern, to pursue divine love, makes her death a cause of exultation rather than sorrow. In its echoes of Christ's death, Celia's own Consolation suggests joy in spite of tragedy.

Eliot's third endeavor in the commercial theater proved successful on a number of fronts. He engaged the immediate popular audience and satisfied many critics through his entertaining yet earnest exploration of the human need for love and fulfillment. More successfully than he had in the past, Eliot laid out an apology for both the ordinary and the extraordinary life, granting each one dignity. In Edward and Lavinia, Eliot illustrated the possibility of happiness and redemption for a marriage that seems broken beyond repair. In Celia, he crafted an entirely sympathetic yet rare woman whose submission to a

greater calling leads to a simultaneously tragic and exalted end. Eliot's choices to regulate the verse and minimize the visibility of Greek influences allows a focus on the characters' development and struggles, while the archetypal roles of the guardian figures make it impossible for the audience to forget the deeper register in which the play operates. As in *Four Quartets*, the spiritual breaks into the material, the timeless intrudes into time, and *The Cocktail Party* affirms the capacity not only of saints, but of all people, to recognize these intersections and the duty to make of them what they will.

Conclusion

Over the course of fifteen years, Eliot's drama travels from a cathedral to a London flat, from the twelfth century to the twentieth, from the ascetic to the relational. Although *Murder in the Cathedral*, *The Family Reunion*, and *The Cocktail Party* contain remarkable differences in terms of setting, character, and inspiration, the common thread of redemption ties them together. In each play, the main character or characters learn to surrender themselves to the Other, illustrating the power of self-sacrifice. Although the fundamentals remain constant, the plays nevertheless effect a crescendo of theological understanding. In *Murder in the Cathedral*, Eliot puts flesh-and-blood to his spiritual search in the form of Thomas Becket. Through a highly stylized drama, he succeeds in conveying the internal struggle required of those who would take the saint's path and the freedom that results in a submission of the individual will to God's will. In *The Family Reunion*, Eliot's hero is not a saint but an English lord. He must overcome personal and familial guilt; his Consolation comes from admitting his culpability in desiring his wife's death and choosing to follow the Eumenides instead of fleeing from them. *The Cocktail Party* presents two separate paths: that of the martyr and that of the reconciled husband and wife, conveying the place for familial and relational love alongside divine love.

This progression illustrates Eliot's recognition that there is, in fact, space in the natural for the supernatural. Rather than requiring a complete renunciation of the natural world, the religious life can illuminate the natural world. Although the material world is broken, restoration and redemption are possible, even apart from a life of isolation and martyrdom. A correct understanding and acknowledgement of spiritual truth imbues the natural world with meaning and life. The journeys that Eliot's characters successively

take represent his own journey: a recursive return to and deepening of his understanding of the Christian life. He travels with his characters, searching for a type of life that is spiritually fulfilling as well as livable. Through the process of writing his plays, Eliot learns that the Christian life does not always require a rejection of personal attachments. As Lyndall Gordon notes:

> Reilly, the authoritative voice of [*The Cocktail Party*], explains that knowledge of love might be used by the saint but equally by those who must reconcile themselves to the human condition. This second course is the one that Eliot chose at the end of the *Quartets* and attempts to realise in this play. [. . .] This programme is the antithesis of the solitary journeys of Eliot's earlier years, the pilgrimage into the mountains, the journey of the Magi, the reckless voyages. As the dream of purity receded over Eliot's horizon, he turned to confront common life which the theatre must reflect if it is to gain the wider audience to whom he hoped to speak. (420-21)

Although Gordon's analysis of Eliot's shift sounds somewhat pragmatic, she notes the fundamental difference between his early asceticism and his later determination to look within ordinary life for meaning. This certainly makes Eliot's work more relatable, but it does more: it provides him with the fulfilling yet attainable life for which he had so long searched. Human relationships can be enjoyed rather than eschewed. Eliot realized that, while no affection should overshadow an individual's devotion to God, in their rightful place natural affections can deepen an individual's joy while at the same time honoring God. Eliot's later plays [*The Confidential Clerk* (1954) and *The Elder Statesman* (1959)]

proceed even farther down the road of relational reconciliation, testaments to Eliot's maturing view of Christian life as well as, perhaps, to his happiness with his second wife Valerie, whom he married in 1957. Eliot's verse drama succeeds in conveying the Christian path to its audience as well as to its creator.

Like Eliot, Tolkien turned to an unusual genre for a way to convey the most basic yet universal truths of existence. Tolkien's fantasy novels earned him a loyal and enduring popular audience, while Eliot's verse dramas, at times, barely seemed to placate the critics. Even the success of *The Cocktail Party* was relatively short-lived. Half a century later, most people are not aware that Eliot even wrote plays, much less familiar with the works themselves. The plays are rarely performed; perhaps this is due in part to the difficulties in staging the supernatural elements. Moreover, verse drama as a phenomenon did not catch on as Eliot had hoped. Contemporary theater is not by nature averse to deep, complex questions, but explorations of those questions generally occur in prose. Although not unproblematic, Eliot's plays nevertheless offer a fresh perspective that proves valuable in pursuing a deeper understanding of the poet and his age. His plays draw the audience in farther than his poetry in their direct, narrative portrayal of human emotions and struggles. While the plays do not enjoy widespread acclaim, they made their mark on their original audiences—particularly *Murder in the Cathedral* and *The Cocktail Party*, as outlined above—and they provide one more means of tracking Eliot's growth as a poet and as a philosopher.

Eliot's critical writings from this period provide further insight into his purpose and, consequently, help us evaluate the success of the plays. In "The Idea of a Christian Society," Eliot writes, "We need to know how to see the world as the Christian Fathers

saw it; and the purpose of reascending to origins is that we should be able to return, with greater spiritual knowledge, to our own situation. We need to recover the sense of religious fear, so that it may be overcome by religious hope" (49-50). Here Eliot asserts the need to examine the past in order to adjust one's view of the present. As this thesis has demonstrated, Eliot succeeded in bringing the past into the present within the plays, offering a unique framework and language for discussing spiritual matters in the Modern era. Eliot's plays may not have sparked any widespread revival of interest in verse drama or Christianity, but they serve as touchstones of the past and as reminders of the human capacity for redemption and joy that results from surrendering the self and faring forward.

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Curriculum Vitae

Education:

Master of Arts in English, May 2017
Wake Forest University, Winston-Salem, NC

Bachelor of Arts in Secondary Education—English Language Arts, May 2013
North Greenville University, Tigerville, SC

Teaching Experience:

Graduate Assistant & Peer Tutor, WFU Writing Center, Winston-Salem, NC
August 2015 – May 2017

Mentor for College Preparatory Writing, EMMA Resource Classes, Greensboro, NC
August 2016 – May 2017

English Teacher, Blue Ridge High School, Greer, SC
August 2013 – June 2015

Selected Honors and Awards:

Semifinalist in the Athanatos Christian Ministries 2016 – 2017 Novel Contest

North Greenville University Honors Scholar Graduate, Summa cum Laude, 2013

President, Sigma Tau Delta English Honor Society, fall 2012 – spring 2013

Secretary, Beta Delta Chapter of Alpha Upsilon Alpha (Honor Society of the International Reading Association), fall 2010 – fall 2012