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THE ROLE OF MODERN POETIC DRAMA IN THE EXPANSION  
OF HUMAN SENSIBILITY WITH SPECIAL REFERENCE  
TO T S ELIOT



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**ABSTRACT**

The Modern poetic drama represented by T. S. Eliot is a significant development for the theatre in terms of expansion of human sensibility. Eliot has declared that modern playwrights were hampered by the limitations of prose. His theory of poetic drama he feels helps us to discover a pattern beneath, the pattern of drama at the surface and in this discovery verse plays a crucial role.

**KEYWORDS** :Poetic Drama, Modern Sensibility, Tragedy. Comedy, Tragi-comedy,



**INTRODUCTION:**

The Modern poetic drama represented by T. S. Eliot is a significant development for the theatre in terms of expansion of human sensibility. Eliot expressed his ideas on the need of poetic drama in various essays right from "Rhetoric and Poetic Drama"(1919), a "Dialogue on Dramatic Poetry"(1928) to "The Aims of Poetic Drama (1949), "Poetry and Drama (1950), "The Three Voices of Poetry"(1953). The main thrust of his argument is that the human soul in intense emotion strives to express itself in verse\* Eliot feels verse adds an extra dimension to the language of drama. He has declared that Ibsen, Strindberg and Chekhov were hampered by the limitations of prose. Eliot maintains everything that prose can do in the theatre, verse can do also, he argues and it is the privilege of dramatic verse to show us several planes of reality at once. Eliot feels, "the poetry of great verse drama is not merely a decoration of a dialogue which could, as drama, be as well put in prose; it makes the drama itself different— and more dramatic."

In Eliot a deeper pattern is sought to discover through the use of verse beneath the pattern of drama at the surface.

The deeper pattern is discovered by the spectators in what we may call expansion of human sensibility. For detailed discussion we are taking *The Cocktail Party* and *The Confidential Clerk* by Eliot.

In these plays we see that the dramatic effect takes us towards affirmation of life, towards the need of linking human beings with each other and leaving the hard cover of their own selves. The thrust of the plays is a forward humane thrust. For this impact the medium of poetic drama is significant as the verse helps the dramatist to show several planes of reality at once and expand human sensibility by unfolding the drama at a level where tragedy expands into comedy and comedy is

qualified by its tragic burden.

*The Cocktail Party* is a good example of showing the levels and complexity which poetic drama can acquire. The comedy of everyday life is dramatized in the play along with the little tragic details of human relationships in day to day life. We see that various characters are enclosed within themselves and the movement is towards their own self discovery and recognition of others self. An unidentified guest Reilly acts as a Catalyst in the drama of self discovery and the discovery of the need of other human beings. Edward, who loves Celia, is made to discover by Reilly that the departure of his wife has caused him a "loss of personality" (p.369) and without her, he is "reduced to the status of an object. Reilly notes the humiliation of Edward and finds it an "experience of incalculable value" (p.363)\* Edward realises that he and his wife took each other for granted and didn't know each other, "the five years that we've been married. I must find out who she is, to find out who I am" (p.364). The departure of his wife has aroused in him a need to get her back in order to fill the tragic vacancy within himself. These unimportant tragic facts of life contribute to the design of larger comedy of life itself. This is what poetic drama is trying to achieve. We see with Reilly that Edward's humiliation is a movement towards his opening up in both secular and Christian terms. Here Denis Donoghue's charge, that Eliot's plays tend to be Christian, does not hold. Donoghue argues that in Eliot's plays it is shown that only Christian can act and the plays do not share our conviction that this day-to-day world is the glowing locus of value, We see from the action of the play that the capability to act is shown by all the characters at different levels and the movement in the play is towards endorsement of life and a faith in human beings which can be possible in any religion. Celia comes to realize that the man she loved was her own dream and need. She feels her dream was a "projection" of "something that I wanted." She asks Edward to "forgive" (p.382) her. She feels humiliated to find the unreality of their relationship. Edward tells her his need as a middle aged lonely man for his wife and Celia suddenly discovers the reality of Edward "as if I had unwrapped a mummy" (p.382).

Edward was Celia's dream and Celia is Peter's dream. Edward asks Peter to preserve "the Celia you remember" because in reality one discovers that she was "another woman" and "you were another man". But for Peter the moments he shared with Celia are his "first experience of reality. And perhaps it is the last" (p.371) and he is going to preserve his reality till it is shattered by Celia's death. He was living for Celia, "he wanted to do something for Celia (p.435) but he is made to realize by Lavinia who can see that he has been living on an "image of Celia" (p.435). Celia's death makes him discover "That I've only been interested in myself:/ And that isn't good enough for Celia" (p.436) and Peter opens up towards everybody and he promises Edward the next time he comes to England "I really do want to use you both, very much" (p.439).

Lavinia realises, what she has been telling Peter about his love for Celia, holds true for herself. While Peter has also reached a stage where he can feel himself responsible for Celia's death but here Lavinia has so much come out of herself that she tries to comfort Edward by sharing his feeling "Doesn't it help you, that I feel guilty too?" (p.438). These little rhythms of poetic drama are moving towards the final affirmation of life.

Edward and Lavinia have outgrown that stage when they were strangers to each other, when Edward felt Lavinia dominated him while Lavinia felt "That I wasn't worth the trouble of understanding" (p.395). At that time "isolation" was their common bond. Edward was suffering under the feeling of finding himself "incapable of loving" and Lavinia finding herself a woman whom "no man can love" (p.410). Reilly makes them face their own self enclosures and leaves them to discover that they were prey to "The shadow of desires of desires" (p.410). But now they have come out of their selves and are participating in the comedy of life by sharing little things of day-to-day life. Edward

admires Lavinia's dress and Lavinia realises the value of his compliment. Now they plan and manage their cocktail parties together, now they anxiously wait for the parties to be over so that they can sit together and "relax" (p.426). They look towards the end of the season when, as Lavinia says, "And we can be alone". Edward also realises the need of his wife for rest.

If the opening up of Edward and Lavinia's selves has brought them closer, then Celia's realization of her loneliness and of her sin of being a failure "Towards someone, or something, outside of myself" (p.416), leads her to move towards a "faith" which as Reilly says "issues from despair" (p.418). She finds meaning of her life in working for tribals, in linking herself not with one person but with the entire suffering creation of God. In fact it is guessed she is crucified by the natives as she chose to stay for the plague-stricken natives. Her martyrdom affects almost all the members of The Cocktail Party, it opens up Peter to see his own limitation and it leads Edward and Lavinia to what Reilly calls "something new" (p.439). Here personal tragedy becomes a part in the design of the larger comedy of life itself. Celia being the most conscious paid the highest price but Edward along with Lavinia comes to understand what Sir Henry has been saying "that every moment is a fresh beginning" and what Julia has been saying "that life is only keeping on." Edward realizes that "the two ideas seem to fit together." This expansion of human sensibility and discovery of an additional dimension of life is the achievement of poetic drama. Poetic language was essential not only for the high example of Celia but also for the tragic awareness and opening up of other characters. The affirmation of life is complete and the final experience is not limited by being a Christian one rather what is established is faith among human beings and life as a comedy with tragic reliefs.

The experience of *The Cocktail Party* and as we shall see, of *The Confidential Clerk* refutes Donoghue's contention that Eliot's plays form essays in drama rather than drama itself. It is true that Eliot is not dealing with what Donoghue calls the perfect image of man but through the partial images of man, Eliot is trying to comprehend several planes of reality at once. His drama is not cut off from life rather it is emerging from a humanized scene. This focus of the life or awareness of its time is seen by Francis Fergusson as the basis of a genuine drama. Eliot's play *The Confidential Clerk* has a conventional modern setting. To this play of confusing identities, Eliot has added the theme of finding one's vocation in the play. Eliot's design of the play removes alienation through shocking discoveries which shake people out of their selves and prepare them to live as better human beings. As the play opens, we see Sir Claude, who wants to present Mr. Colby, whom he thinks his son, to his wife in a way that it pleases her. Sir Claude needs his son for the continuation of his business. He wants Mr. Colby to sustain the make-belief world of lady Elizabeth by presenting himself as "her son" (p.462). Mr. Colby reveals a different person within himself—a self of the "disappointed organist." Music still seems to him "the one thing worth doing." Mr. Colby's revelation of his inner personality establishes a sense of identification with Sir Claude. Sir Claude reveals his inner self as a disappointed potter. Sir Claude realises, for his father vocation and success were one but for him they are two different worlds. Now for Sir Claude as well as Mr. Colby, their inner worlds are their personal retreats, as Sir Claude says, "You shall play to yourself. And as for me I keep my pieces in a private room" (p.466). Sir Claude and Mr. Colby come to understand each other better but something in Mr. Colby rebels against accepting the make-belief conditions of life.

Mr. Colby doesn't want to separate his two worlds. He is passing through a phase of insecurity where he feels his life has collapsed. This brings him nearer to Lueasta, who is also passing through the same phase who hates her childhood and her father, Sir Claude, who is responsible for her and her mother's suffering. Lueasta feels Colby can still go into his "inner world—a world that is more real" (p.472), while she feels her garden is a "dirty public square" and her life, "nothing but a bit of living

matter floating on the surface of the Regents Canal" (p.473). If Lueasta finds in herself to be dirty then Colby finds his garden "unreal" or insufficient because Colby feels he is alone in his garden. He feels Eggerson's garden is more real because it is related to the concrete world of reality, "But he doesn't feel alone there and when he comes out/ He has marrows, or beetroot, or peas. ... for Mrs. Eggerson (p.473). Colby feels that he lives in two worlds while for Eggerson "his garden is a part of one single world"(p.474). The torture in Golby's mind is to link his inner-self with the outer world. This is what Eliot has been capitalizing for dramatic effect. We know that towards the end Colby turns out to be the son of a disappointed musician and on learning it he has a sense of "freedom" (p.515). Towards the end Sir Claude has also become a man without illusions and he wants to keep his relation with Colby but Colby, while appreciating Sir Claude's position, has himself "abandoned my illusions and ambitions/ All that's left is love." He wants to pursue his vocation and the relation he wants with Sir Claude is the relation of humanity. In the final drama Sir Claude, who has been manipulating the make-belief worlds of his wife and others, discovers that he has been himself living in one such world. Lucasta, whom Sir Claude despised, and who has now found her world with Kaghan comes to her father and in a symbolic gesture puts her arms around him.

In this play also we have seen that poetic drama helps to dramatise various planes of reality and to create a cumulative effect of the assertion of life and human spirit. Here the personal tragedies and disillusionments merge into the larger pattern of the comedy of life. There is a definite pressure forward, which Susanne Langer says springs from past, is dramatised in the present and aims towards the future and this movement is towards what Kenneth Burke would call "fulfillment of theoretical form".

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