

THE ELEMENTS OF SIN AND PURGATION IN ELIOT'S *THE FAMILY REUNION*

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Abstract—*The Family Reunion* was Eliot's first successful play in contemporary setting, characters and speech in which he tried to compete with naturalistic prose drama. This play is nothing but the story of two generations in which Eliot presents the vision of boredom and horror of modern man in dramatic terms. It was designed to be a crypto-Christian play with unfamiliar religious symbols and pagan overtones to convey his veiled Christian message. On a deeper plane, *The Family Reunion* is a play embodying the Christian myth of sin, suffering and redemption through suffering. Suffering does not mean physical suffering alone but also spiritual suffering. The plot is very complex. He takes a family cursed with double murder as his central image. The curse seems to arise from natural causes and yet lead towards a supernatural solution. The play is full of ideas and Eliot worked on them for more than twenty years. Thus, the play shows a purgatorial struggle where the struggle ends with redemption of not only Harry, but also with the family of Monchensey from the sin.

Keywords—Suffering, Redemption, Curse, Crypto-Christian, Purgatorial, Sin.

I. INTRODUCTION

The Family Reunion is a drama of sin and expiation, and his expiation is made possible by the drama of love's revelation' which is conducted and stage-managed by Agatha. It is she who tells Harry of the past, and thus make him aware of the true nature of his sin. Thus Agatha plays the role not only of the "spiritual mother," but also of the spiritual guide and mentor who guides Harry to make the "right choice" and thus become the saviour and redeemer of his family. He is freed from the bond of Amy's selfish love when he comes to know that Amy thrust upon his unwilling father the child who should have been borne by Agatha, that his father wanted to put an end to Amy's life who was bearing (the child, and that it was only through Agatha's intervention that the murder was prevented). Thus Harry, being Agatha's spiritual issue, is a "curse" of unrealized love which must be "fulfilled" through the severance of Harry's relation with Amy, who does not understand love. From Agatha Harry receive the final advice and guidance:

Love compels cruelty to those who do not understand

Love what you have wished to know, what you have

Learned mean the end of a relation, make it impossible. (Tilak, 71)

It is through the guidance provided by her that the “crooked knot” of loveless relation between Harry and Amy is knotted, and Harry is launched on his spiritual journey.

II. THEME & CHARACTERISATION

The characters in the play may be divided into two groups (a) those who live a commonplace life on the physical plane, and (b) characters who live on the spiritual plane. Agatha is a character with “spiritual insight”, with an understanding of the true nature of things, and it is she who provides spiritual guidance both to Harry and Mary. Harry’s spiritual awakening, his right ‘spiritual election’, would not have been possible without the spiritual guardianship of Agatha. There is the theme of sin and expiation and atonement for that sin through suffering. Secondly, there is the theme of the oneness of time, the continuity of the past, and present, and the future, a theme which constantly recurs in the works of Eliot. Thirdly, there is the theme of spiritual loneliness and isolation and the difficulty of communicating these spiritual states. The three themes have been closely inter-related and merged and fused.

The central theme of the play is the theme of sin and expiation. Harry, Lord Monchensey, kills his wife (or at least he imagines that he has killed her) by throwing her over the rails into the sea. Ever since he has suffered from a haunting sense of guilt, and has not known even a moment’s rest or peace of mind either by day or night. He is ever conscious of being followed or pursued. He feels that certain unknown eyes ever watch him and pursue him. He returns to Wishwood in the hope of escaping the eyes, and finding some rest and mental peace there.

Through Agatha, his spiritual mother and guardian, he comes to know of the real nature of his sin. It is an inherited sin, and not his sin alone. His father had made various attempts at killing his mother when she was child with him. It was Agatha who saved the life of his mother, and his own life. Harry now realizes that the family is under a curse, and he must suffer and expiate, and thus redeem his family.

The spiritual change and progress in Harry is symbolized by the transformation of the Furies from the goddesses of revenge into kind and benevolent angels. Harry decides to go out and expiate for his own sin, as well as for the sin of his father. He would no longer run away from the Furies; rather he would follow them and seek guidance from them. His decision to leave Wishwood comes as a shock to his mother, and it kills her. But Harry goes out to some unknown destination to be a martyr-saint for the good of his family.

Closely integrated with this theme of sin and expiation is the theme of the continuity of time, the oneness of the past and present. Time is a continuous flow and the division of Time into past and the present is artificial. The present is the moment of interaction of the past and the future. The present is determined by the past, and the future is constantly with us in the present in the form of our hopes and aspirations.

Isolation and spiritual loneliness and difficulty of communication has also been closely integrated with the main theme. Most of the people live on an ordinary material plane, and they can easily share and communicate their thoughts and feelings. But there are a few with a highly developed, emotional sensibility, and with deep

spiritual insights, and they find it impossible to communicate their experience to others. They remain lonely and isolated. This isolation and loneliness is most marked in the case of Harry. He suffers from a haunting sense of guilt, but he finds it impossible to communicate his feeling to others. His emotional state, his deep spiritual anguish, is incommunicable by its very nature, and neither is it likely to be understood by people living a commonplace, material existence.

Harry has to bear the burden not only of the sins of his family but also of the Original Sin of Adam and the Fall of Man. His life does not seem to him to be,

An isolated ruin,

a casual bit of waste in an orderly universe.

But it begins to seem just part of some huge disaster,

some monstrous mistake and aberration of all men, of the world, which I cannot put in order. (Tilak, 58)

The theme of universal sin is also suggested by Agatha's remarks:

It is possible that you have not known what sin you shall expiate, or whose, or why. (58)

Harry has developed an awareness of the predicament of the sinful man. He interprets the doctor's comment with the aid of his new vision: man, being a sinner, is responsible for the murder of Christ, though he considers himself to be an innocent victim of evil; sin is ingrained in him," something real" like cancer which is incurable. Wishwood is "always cold place, but healthy" where Harry will catch spiritual chill and his soul will grow healthy. Warburton fulfills his mission by telling Harry that his father and mother never had cordial relations, that they separated by mutual consent and his father left Wishwood never to come

back. Physical relation without emotional appeal – is it an ordinary sin?

We can imagine the mental torture of Harry who must have felt that he is a child born of animal passion rather than of human love. Agatha is the most potential spiritual agent working her influence on Harry. She is in many respects a spokesman of Eliot. Harry's burning in his personal suffering is not sufficient for him to learn the real nature of suffering, she tells him. He should learn to suffer more by penetrating into "the other private worlds/ of make believe and fear. To rest in our own suffering / is evasion of suffering." Yet Harry's agony is not assuaged either by his "taking" in abstractions" or her answering in "abstraction."

Agatha knows the nature of Harry's ailment: he is stricken with remorse born of his sinful past and is worried for the future, but "a present is missing to connect them." He talks to her as if she were his confessor and he were baring his lacerated soul to her. Eight year ago, when he was in Wishwood, he says, he suffered from unredeemable eternal isolation which had made his existence hellish; his senses were benumbed and he felt that he was separated from his own self, from benumbed and he felt that he was separated from his own self, from the "self which persisted only as an eye, seeing", his spiritual eye. Then he developed emotionless and began to loathe himself and all these persons whom he found around him – they were merely "contaminating presences." In the outer world he found nothing which he could identify himself, though nothing else was real to him.

Here I have been finding a

A misery long forgotten, and a new torture,

The shadow of something behind our meagre childhood,

Some origin of wretchedness. (Roy, 103)

Harry's character becomes very sublime indeed, but it brings a particular weakness in the motivation of the play. If he is merely a scapegoat, a bird of sacrifice, we have only to witness his suffering for actions for which he is not responsible. However, the sublimity of Harry's character is undeniable. In thus starting to expiate not his sin, but the sin of another, he starts to become "sanity, even perhaps Christ like." His action, continues Grover Smith, "is in the best Puritan tradition of "woman, what have I to do with there?"

III. DEVELOPMENT OF PLAY

In *The Family Reunion* Harry smells his personal sin as well as the world's sin:

I was like that in a way, so long as I could think even of my own life as an isolated ruin, a casual bit of waste in an orderly universe but it begin to seem just part of some huge disaster, some monstrous mistake and aberration of all men, of the world, which I cannot put in order.(282)

Eliot has explored the possibility of making spiritual elements of Christianity palatable and digestible. For his design he has given the shape of the dramas from *The Family Reunion* in the contemporary setting. As people are essentially irreligious although they retain many vestiges of Christianity, but they tend to dismiss the Christian view of life as outmoded without attempting to understand it fully.

The play shows the conflict between human love and divine love. Harry has been selected by the Higher Powers to become the instruments of divine

love, which alone will rectify the curse, hatred and lovelessness, which has become the characteristics of his family. He first of all tries to gain human love with Mary, and when the Furies appear, he tells them that when he hated his wife, he was not the same person, in fact he was not any person. He believes that his wife's death was the 'accident of a dreaming moment', but the Furies do not go. They do not accept his explanation.

It is perhaps her unnatural possessiveness that drives Harry to marry a girl with whom he does not succeed in developing real conjugal relationship. Though we do not know how his wife dies, we only learn that he is obsessed by the feeling of the sin of killing her pushing her overboard in mind-Atlantic. Amy has a grudge against her that

She only wanted to keep him to herself
To satisfy her vanity. That's why she dragged him
All over Europe and half round the world
To expensive hotels and undesirable society
Which she could choose herself. She never wanted
Harry's relation or Harry's old friends;
She never wanted to fit herself to Harry,
But only to bring Harry down to her own level.
(Eliot, 310)

IV. PURGATION/REDUMPTION

Harry is now having a glimpse of the mystery of his sinful life – he is the inheritor of the sin and ecstasy, the dream of his parents and Agatha; one thing more is also clear in his mind: he, perhaps, only dreamt that he pushed his wife. The legacy of his father's sinful intention of killing his wife is inherited by him – the archetypal sin of Adam being carried by man. Agatha's discourse is now concentrated on "sin and redemption". She shares

the consciousness of the sin of the Monchenseys with Harry so that both of them may expiate it; she calls him “the consciousness of your unhappy family” burning in the purgatorial flame and appeals to him to resolve the crisis.

He thus symbolizes the spiritually rich man in quest of belief who has met another fellow quester who has gained insight into the meaning of his quest and his family symbolizes the whole of humanity in spiritual travail. Agatha is happy over Harry’s crossing the “frontier” and getting rid of the world of “birth and life”, though it is true that in his new world he will have to go through agony and renunciation, yet it will be the period of his purification which will be followed by the period of paradise experience of the Eternal. Mary, the third spiritual agent of the divine principle in the life of Harry, is herself a victim of Amy.

It is really a divine message received by Harry through Mary, a communication from “another world” which is emitting “sweet and bitter” smell of spiritual fragrance, sweet because of its divine happiness and bitter because of its demand of spiritual discipline and of the sacrifice of the sensual pleasure.

The Family Reunion like *Murder in the Cathedral* depicts two different worlds namely the worldly and the spiritual. The worldly “See only events; they cannot interpret motives except by the selfish standards of profit and loss expediency, private satisfaction”. Eliot himself is critical of the amoral world, which Ivy, Gerald, Violet and Charles represent. The chorus of these people is static. They speak together at moments to reveal their bewilderment. They do not change, like the women of *Canterbury* in *Murder in the Cathedral*. The chorus expresses a Prufrockian sentiment:

We like to be thought of well by others

So that we may think well of ourselves (586-587)

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The shadow of something behind our meager
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And in at least one scene he uses the imaginary of the ritual sacrifice of rejuvenation. In his 'beyond character' dialogue with Mary he says:

Spring is an issue of blood
A season of sakrifice
And the wail of the new full tide
Returning the ghosts of the dead
Those whom the winter drowned
Return to the land in the spring? (240)

V. CONCLUSION

Eliot asserts that there are so many factors to pave the path of enlightenment. Spiritual teacher is the most significant aspect whose direct and indirect will always works behind the wayfarer. Agatha helps Harry, even from his mother's womb, and Harry is the spiritual child of Agatha. The spiritual teacher's spiritual current always flows to the disciple to illumine his being and that affects him even at his unconscious and unknown stage. When the disciple knows his guru and his powerful will, his whole being is ablaze in spiritual light and he knows the ultimate reality of life soon, for which he had been hankering for years. Harry accepts and is inspired with wisdom that lights all his complications and Agatha wills.

The centrality of Harry in the thematic structure of the play is viewed by Maxwell too. He opines

that when Harry "makes a decision and accepts the Eumenides as friendly, he affects the lives of other members of family. *The Family Reunion* is the tragedy of a lonely individual Harry and of the spiritual struggle which he faces in his life and from which he longs to escape. Thus, the play shows a purgatorial struggle where the struggle ends with redemption of not only Harry, but the family of Monchensey from the sin.

VI. REFERENCES

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