

# The Chorus in T. S. Eliot's Plays: An Analytical Approach

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## Abstract

This study is an analytical approach on T. S. Eliot's complex dramatic development in the use of the chorus in his plays shedding light on how Eliot employs the chorus into his complete successful plays from utter imitation of the ancient Greek style in his early plays to skillfully dispense with it in the latest plays with special reference to: *The Rock*, *Murder in the Cathedral*, *The Family Reunion*, *The Cocktail Party*, *The Confidential Clerk*, and *The Elder Statesman*. The study likewise sheds light on the ancient Greek dramas from which T.S. Eliot borrowed his themes.

**Keywords:** T.S. Eliot, Plays, The Chorus, Antiquity, Analysis, Greek, Modernity, Drama

## Introduction

Thomas Stearns Eliot is a pioneer critic, a poet and a dramatist who considerably influenced English literature and contributed mainly to the revival of English poetry and drama in the twentieth century. He was born in Saint Louis, Missouri in the United States of America in 1888 and died in 1965 at the age of seventy-seven in Britain. He was occupied with writing poetic drama in the modern age but such drama should use a modern language as its means. Drama was first generated in religious invocation, dance, and other services. So, the chorus was an important character which, proved vital to drama. "Early drama drew upon the religious instincts of all peoples. It found its tongue in the chanting of the priests and warriors. It reflected the religions of various countries as they found the power of drama in teaching moral and religious principles. Gradually this art form developed into what we call the play". (The World Book Encyclopedia, 1955, p. 2078)

The chorus in drama, so to speak, is an important mouthpiece of the author. It, largely, accentuates the tragic moments in a play through its comments. The "Chorus: in Greek drama, a group of people who sang and dance, commenting on the action of the play. A chorus was also used to chant odes. The chorus has its origins in an ancient Greek religious

event and was later used in Greek tragedies and roman plays" (Supryia, Ross Murfin. 2009, p. 59). "The chorus also serves a number of other key functions. It gave Eliot a poetic mouthpiece to articulate some of his most powerful lines without having to worry too much about the development of character." (Harding Jason, 2011, p. 129). It is capable of expressing the voice of the dramatist as well as inspiring the heart and liberating the soul and inspires the thoughts of the audience. According to Cuddon, "the Chorus was a group of performers at a religious festival, especially fertility rites. By some process of grafting or symbiosis Greek tragedy acquired (or grew out of) these choral rites. At any rate, the Chorus became an essential and integral part of Greek tragic drama". (Cuddon, J. A. 1999, p. 133)

Eliot, in his essay 'The Three Voices of Poetry', asserts that there are three essential voices of poetry. The second voice is the voice of the poet addressing an audience. They are the second and third voices that can be suitable for the dramatic chorus. In his indication, Eliot confirms the importance of the chorus. They are the voices of the poet addressing the audience. It is clearer in *Murder in the Cathedral* that the "chorus is composed of the women of Canterbury, and as

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Eliot explains the task of applying, in this instance, what he calls the third voice, which is the poet speaking as characters to other characters". (Murphy E. Russell, 2007, p. 168) According to Eliot's critical essays and his practice, he started to imitate the use of the chorus in his first two works but later on he tried to gradually dispense with it in his later plays until he mostly avoided using the chorus as independent character.

### 1. The Rock (1934)

*The Rock* is the second tentative piece of work by Eliot after *Sweeney Agonist*. In this second dramatic piece, Eliot had only to write the words as poetic dialogue. He had only to insert a number of choral episodes. The content of the task was with a proviso that the choruses should involve some significance to the purpose of the carnival and each chorus to be performed in a specific time on the stage. Eliot stated that merely one scene apart from the choruses had been written by him.

The play exhibits the difficulties which differ from one age to another. The chorus, in *The Rock*, signifies the voice of the temple. The chorus is composed of ten women and seven men. They are dressed in half masks to display their impersonality. The importance of *The Rock* is the chorus. In writing about this piece of work, Martin Browne comments that Eliot is great because of being a poet rather than a dramatist. In *The Rock*, Eliot put the best of his writing into the poetry of the choric comments on life and religion. He says; "The chorus ... is magnificently trained. With stone-coloured masks and dresses, standing in a solid and motionless block round about the central figure of the Rock, the chorus ... gives direction to the play. In spite of its physical immobility, it is the chorus that gives the pace to the action of the players". (Browne, M. E. 1969, p. 83).

Eliot confessed that composing the choruses for this experimental play provided him with an important insight into the elementary distinction between verses meant for a single spokesman and verses intended to be chanted by several speakers as a chorus. Commenting on such a case, Eliot says:

I learnt only that verse to be spoken by a choir should be different from verse to be spoken by one person; and that the more voices you have in your choir, the simple and more direct the vocabulary, the syntax, and the content of your lines must be. This chorus of *The Rock* was not a dramatic voice; though many lines were distributed, the personages were unindividuated. (Eliot T. S. 1957, p. 91)

Eliot was aware that the choral chants in this pageant represent a significant level in his advancement towards the accomplishment of great poetry as a medium for this purpose. Choric speaking will lose its sense if it is not forceful. Choric speaking should keep time. The tone and speed of speaking should not be of much variation because the single voice is more reasonable than many voices speaking together.

Choric verse should be written in free verse. If variety is necessary, it should be essential in the metrical structure and if the dialogue is close to speech, the choric verse should be close to chant. Martin Browne, has commented saying that: "The verse in *The Rock* is limited to an impersonal Chorus, so characterisation is not called for. But a contemporary speech rhythm is essential". (Tambimuttu and Richard March, 1984, p. 197)

The first chorus talks about the astringent and bitter accusation of the modern age of

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scientific civilization. The second chorus refers to the position of citizenship. It is a strange matter for people converse on the subject of the relations among men and not about the relation between man and God. The third chorus emphasizes that all what they construct is ineffective, worthless, and in vain without the help of God. Nobody can protect himself or his city without the assistance and patronage of God. The fourth and fifth choruses refer to the obstacles and impediments that surround the builders of the temple.

In the sixth chorus, there is an exhibition of harassment and tyranny that missionaries have suffered in past. The seventh chorus tells about the impending advent of Christ. The eighth chorus again introduces the dark days in the past when heathens and pagans corrupted and polluted the sacred places. The ninth chorus depicts the importance and meaning of creation. The Creator gives human beings the power of creation and as a result, man should use his creation to serve God. Serving here means worshipping Him. The last chorus, which is the tenth, elucidates the significance of religious places.

Again, it is with the Chorus that Eliot is poetically most successful. The Chorus owes much to the rhythms of religious verse, with its straightforwardness of syntax, emphatic repetitions and rhythmical variety. It is vital to remark in this connection the divergence between the metres of dialogue and choral metres. If the metre is too regular, choral dialogue will reduce it to the monotony of a singsong style. Moreover, the choric verse should be written in free metres and the variety must be unconscious in metrical structure. Herbert Howarth comments on the occasion saying; "Teaching himself the choric art in *The Rock*, Eliot used it to perfection in *Murder in the Cathedral*. The choruses of *The Rock* are far above

that 'hackwork' which some critics have labelled them, and are often beautiful, but those of *Murder in the Cathedral* are among Eliot's greatest poetry". (Howarth Herbert, 1964, p. 307)

Eliot's use of descriptions is practical and not merely ornamental. They help the dramatist to express his meaning more accurately and to increase the emotions. The principal images in the speeches of the Chorus are drawn from two sources: from nature and from the life of the poor. In this play, Eliot depends on choral verse for two main reasons. The first is that the action of the play is limited which makes him focus on death and martyrdom. The second reason is that writing poetry for the first time for the stage could be perfect in Choral verse than in dramatic dialogue.

Helen Gardner supports this idea, when she says, "The real drama of the play is to be found in fact where its greatest poetry lies-in the choruses." (Gardner Helen, 1968, p. 136) On the other hand, K. S. Misra adds, "An emphasis on the poetry of the Chorus as an essential element makes the play a successful illustration of Eliot's ideal of poetic drama as expressed in 'The Need for Poetic Drama'." (Misra K. S., 1981, p. 118) In this play, the choral verses, with their neat amalgamation of short and long lines, generate an influential emotional variation. The singers progressively move from the mood of fear and anxiety, which was born out of an enormous catastrophe.

Some of the finest verse in this tentative play has been given to the Chorus of the women of Canterbury who also play a vital dramatic role in linking the Greek manner of rituals with the rituals and common life. After writing *The Rock* and before writing *Murder in the Cathedral* Eliot was very much occupied with the question

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of finding a poetic and dramatic technique and language close to the contemporary dialogue.

## 2. Murder in the Cathedral (1935)

*Murder in the Cathedral*, is Eliot's first modern and complete achievement in the field of drama. It is written with a variety of metres in addition to two extended fractions of prose. There is free verse for the conversation with the Priests and Chorus. It is with the Chorus that Eliot is poetically most successful. "In the present century [20<sup>th</sup> Century] the introduction of choric speaking enabled poets to experiment with the use of a fully-fledged chorus, notably by T.S.Eliot in *Murder in the Cathedral*".(Coyle M, Garside P, Kelsall M. and Peck J. 1988, p.373) The play is closer to the Greek tragedy of Aeschylus than to any other model. Eliot has written this play, according to Martin Browne, "in a style closely allied with those of the dramas which sprang, both in Greece and medieval Europe, from liturgy. The purpose of the play was to be the same as that of most Greek tragedies". (Browne Martin E,1969, p. 37)

*Murder in the Cathedral* deals with the misfortune of Thomas Becket, Archbishop of Canterbury. The play proves the ability of Eliot in regaining the use of the chorus, as an old Greek technique, in present language. A suitable structure was obtainable to Eliot to develop the play as an example of common movement. He appropriated the spectacle and the Greek chorus that constitute the core of Greek drama as major points of dramatic reference. Eliot presented the Chorus, the Knights and the Tempters to increase the time limit of the play. The Chorus signifies a powerful speech revealing that it has glimpsed the deeper significance of the murder. "In *Murder in the Cathedral* the poetry of the choruses elicits the dignity of the poor women of Canterbury, betokening the toil and patience of their lives, the

sorrow and privilege of their witness in the play" (Howarth Herbert,1964, p. 305)

This play has a classical body of tragedy as it was shaped by the great artists, Aeschylus and Sophocles, in ancient Greece. Eliot was aware of the traits of Greek tragedy. K. S. Misra has shed light on Eliot's use of certain devices of the old Greek saying that "Eliot has incorporated here, with superb skill, indeed, two of the well-known devices of Greek tragedy used by Aeschylus, the first great exemplar of classical tragedy" (Misra K. S.,1977, p. 24).

Eliot emulated Aeschylus in opening the play close the crisis. Moreover, the use of the Messenger who announces the coming of the hero, is one of the techniques of Greek drama which Eliot has used in *Murder in the Cathedral*. Eliot followed Aeschylus in using the chorus as an integral part of his play. In an interview, Eliot declared that the Greek stage has not been completely investigated and studied; only a few of its conventions and principles have been considered and followed. He adds that the use of the chorus does not merely mean the copying and imitating the Greek model but employing it to suit modern theatre.

The chorus is a theatrical means to state on the action. It is a mediator and witness which, from time to time, moves singing odes. Eliot has described the main functions of the Greek chorus in "The Need for Poetic Drama" that "The chorus has always fundamentally the same uses, it mediates between the action and the audience. It intensifies the action by projecting its emotional consequences, so that we as the audience see it doubly, by seeing its effect on other people" (Eliot T. S., 1936, p. 995).

Greek drama provided Eliot with the dramatic possibilities of the function of the

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chorus but Eliot infused such function with Christian thought by concentrating on the spiritual relationship between the chorus and the priests. His first remarkable employment of the choric appearance in dramatic composition is in his experimental carnival, *The Rock*. Despite the fact that it lacks the integrity of his other plays, *The Rock* renders to Eliot the valuable opportunity of discovering the dramatic possibilities of the chorus in modern drama.

Eliot wrote *Murder in the Cathedral* by adapting the device of the chorus of *The Rock* and supplementing the play with a range of a verse form suitable for combined speaking. Though *The Rock* is a play of no concrete action and the choruses do not show any contribution to the action, they communicate in a sort of music resonating with diverse shades of powerful emotions like bliss, joy, reproach anger, and sadness. The chorus of *The Rock* denotes an important milestone in Eliot's design of a new verse structure that associates serious chants with modern speech rhythms and underlines its capacity for a wide range of communication.

In *Murder in the Cathedral*, Eliot has effectively exploited the foundations and sources of the experimental play, *The Rock*. The chorus in *The Rock* shows parallelism, analogy, and comparison between the past and the present. The chorus in Greek drama, after Aeschylus, started losing its significance. It was reduced to an adornment, or a convention of the past. Nevertheless, this old convention was reincarnated and made suitable to the English stage by poets such as John Milton and Swinburne. None of them, however, succeeded as Eliot did in the modern age. He succeeded in re-establishing the chorus to its old dignity accorded by Aeschylus in his tragedies. The exigencies and requirements of a religious play

have caused a closer integration of the chorus with the main action than was possible even in the plays of Aeschylus.

Unlike the later plays of Eliot, the chorus in *Murder in the Cathedral* performs a critical and crucial role in the play. It is clear that the choric tactics which Eliot has employed in this play can be classified into two types - - direct chorus and indirect chorus. The direct chorus is that which consists of the poor charwomen of Canterbury. This may be taken as the central figure of the play and it helps the dramatic action.

The chorus in *Murder in the Cathedral* is indispensable insofar as it demonstrates the steady progress of the action. Moreover, it strengthens the emotional and the religious intensification of the play. "Murder in the Cathedral is not the story of the Beggar, but of the hero, the exceptional man. But the common man has a part in it; the Women of Canterbury speak for the poor, the forgotten and overlooked. Eliot's motif is their justification: suffering, they perform their part in God's play of the world" (Howarth Herbert, 1964, p. 332).

"In *Murder in the Cathedral* (1935) the women of Canterbury, functioning like a Greek chorus, are 'living and partly living'" (Bloom Harold, 2003, p. 76). The women of Canterbury stand as the common people and reveal a type of alteration of the meaning in the play. Eliot says, "The chorus in *Murder in the Cathedral* does, I think, represent some advance in dramatic development: that is to say, I set myself the task of writing lines, not for an anonymous chorus, [like that of *The Rock*] but for a chorus of women of Canterbury - one might almost say, charwomen of Canterbury" (Eliot T. S., 1957, p. 91). In *Murder in the Cathedral*, the chorus becomes a vital part of the drama. It becomes the

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mouth of the char women of Canterbury who appreciated their master, the Archbishop. In addition, the indirect chorus can be seen in diverse instances through the combination of the voices of the tempters, the priests, and the knights when they, in agreement, express some impersonal opinions or some universal feelings.

As Eliot himself declared, he employed the Greek chorus but he introduced it in a religious manner. The chorus in Euripides' drama simply conveys relief or indicates a condition of transition from anxiety to beauty or even music whereas Eliot makes the chorus of the poor women of Canterbury develop a living representation of common humanity. In this play, the chorus speaks about emotions such as sadness, anguish, and pain. It also demonstrates the conquest and forebodings of the future. The chorus works as a commentator as well as a narrator recording the progress of the events.

In this play, the chorus has the forewarning of impending destiny from the very beginning of the play:

Are we drawn by danger?

Is it knowledge of safety, that draws our feet

Towards the cathedral? What danger can be

For us, the poor, the poor women of  
Canterbury? What tribulation

With which we are not already familiar? There  
is no danger

For us, and there is no safety in the cathedral.  
Some presage of an

Act

Which our eyes are compelled to witness, has  
forced our feet

Towards the cathedral. We are forced to bear  
witness. (Eliot T. S., 1969, p. 239)

The chorus has the poor women of Canterbury who signify the common humankind wrapped up in the insignificant concerns of everyday life. They

are compelled by some mysterious powers to witness an event and spontaneously perceive themselves to be part of this event. The meaning of witnessing here is strongly presented through the chants of the chorus: "For us, the poor, there is no action, / But only to wait and witness" (Eliot, T. S., 1969, p. 240). Eliot created certain links with the audience in order to join them in celebrating the triumph of a saint. One link is seen through the sermon and the apology of the four Knights at the end of the play. Another link is provided through the prophecy of the chorus.

The play commences at the moment Thomas Becket, the Archbishop of Canterbury, arrival after seven years of exile in France under the protection and support of the French King and from the Pope in Rome as well. The hidden danger in the event is spoken by the chorus of the women of Canterbury. The chorus speaks about the dangerous event which is hidden for them and they just feel and expect its happening. The Chorus talks at a time when the year is about to come to an end and it announces the birth of a new year. It is different from any hardship that the chorus has endured. The expected event will disturb the impact of the chorus and upset the rhythm of nature.

After the Chorus finishes, the priests enter. In the discourse of the priests, there is no hint of the deep implication of Becket's coming back. However, the chorus with its intuition envisages his return. The Chorus emphasizes that they will all be safe if Becket travels back to France. Now Thomas is ready for the misfortune, which the Chorus prophesied earlier. The Priests, the Chorus and the Tempters speak in turn about the process of death. The Chorus cries in a great fear of the danger that is creeping towards them all.

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The second part of the play starts with interpretations and comments by the Chorus about peace between Archbishop Thomas and King Henry. The Chorus is not sure if it is a real peace or just pretence. The Chorus feels a sense of threat about it. The Chorus notes that the peace and concord will not bring real peace.

The concept of tragedy in the play is not only restricted to the character Thomas Becket but it is also shared, in a relative allotment, by the rest of the characters. The tragedy starts with the suffering of the Chorus of the women of Canterbury, the prophesiers of the allusions and hints of catastrophe, calamity, and ruin. This includes the suffering of the Chorus, the murder the Archbishop, and the sin of the four Knights.

The Chorus, in *Murder in the Cathedral*, represents common people with their surface knowledge of life. Eliot used the chorus in this play as an imitation of the antique Greek usage of the chorus but he

thereafter, made a fresh experiment with the chorus in *The Family Reunion*... He tried to weave the chorus into the very texture of the play by giving the choric role to some of its characters. But after this play Eliot abandoned the formal use of the chorus in *The Cocktail Party* (1949), *The Confidential Clerk* (1953) and *The Elder Statesman* (1958), but continued to perform the choric function with the help of certain compensatory devices and in this way chorus still formed a part of his plays but appeared with a mask. (Shubha, Tiwari and Maneesha, Tiwari, 2008, p. 36)

*Murder in the Cathedral* paved the way for Eliot to change his technique in dealing with the

chorus in the rest of his four plays. After *Murder in the Cathedral*, came *The Family Reunion*.

### 3. The Family Reunion (1939)

In, *The Family Reunion* as his first modern play of themes, setting, and characters, Eliot succeeded in making the usage of the chorus modern, for the first time, with a new thematic technique. *The Family Reunion* is about the theme of sin of parents and expiation by their successors. Eliot in this situation made use of mixing the Greek style of writing dramas and religion. He changed the old Greek style of chorus but he still attached the ancient conventions.

*The Family Reunion* is the second complete play of T. S. Eliot. While his previous play, *Murder in the Cathedral* is a religious play and the characters are religious and historic, *The Family Reunion* is a contemporary play about family affairs and relationships. It appeared four years after his first play, *Murder in the Cathedral*, and in it, Eliot worked arduously to achieve his objective of writing a modern drama with a modern theme and setting. In 'Poetry and Drama', Eliot comments on the writing of *The Family Reunion* saying: "I was determined, therefore, in my next play to take a theme of contemporary life, with characters of our own time living in our own world. *The Family Reunion* was the result" (Eliot T. S., 1950, p. 27).

The play includes certain speeches which are parts of a conversation or a discussion. Linda Wyman comments on the use of language and style of this play saying, "there are a number of lines in *The Family Reunion* which one can easily conceive of hearing in the drawing room of an actual country house in the North of England" (Brooker, J. S. 1991, p. 164). The follower perceives that the language in the play

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depicts various levels of meaning. The speeches appear generally similar to the discussions of ordinary discourses, interviews, dialogues, and instructions.

In 1937, two years after the production of *Murder in the Cathedral*, Eliot affirmed in a lecture on religious drama that drama should bond the detachment between the two sides of life - religious faith and secular event. Moreover, the audience needs to watch and hear such plays from actors who dress the same style in our time, living in houses of the contemporary age. The characters can use all the facilities, which are used in the ordinary life of the audience such as cars, telephones and live in modern houses.

Although *The Family Reunion* has a modern theme and setting, Eliot went back to the Greek story of *Orestes* by Aeschylus. In *The Family Reunion* and his later plays, Eliot employed a prophetic legendary resource of technique. The conflict of characters provided Eliot with the fundamental argument of the play. Along with the events in Aeschylus's adaptation of the myth, it provided a situation full of dramatic possibilities which Eliot developed in modern terms. In *Choephoroe*, the son, Orestes avenges his father's death by killing his mother. Thereafter, as a murderer of his mother, he is pursued by the Furies. "*The Family Reunion* is divided into two parts, each part consisting of three scenes. Eliot has introduced the Chorus also in this tragedy. Though Eliot followed the classical Greek model of tragedy and so introduced the Chorus yet he has not followed the classical concept of the Chorus."(Sarker, Sunil Kumar, 2008, p. 169)

In *The Family Reunion*, Eliot has added a further element by the use of mythical technique. It consists in using the past for parallelism and contrast with the present, so that one serves to

bring light and the other, to clarify. In the play, Eliot has used Greek myth as exemplified in Aeschylus's play *Orestes*. The subject of the myth is a family curse and the way in which the master of the family suffers and expiates for it. For the first time, Eliot deserted the conventional use of the Chorus, and instead, used four characters of the family with their individual names as members of the family on the one hand, and sometimes collectively as the Chorus, on the other hand.

The characters are none the less real and distinct, and when they are used as a chorus they are convincing because we already know them as individuals. As chorus, they are free to speak the thoughts of which they are barely conscious as individuals. The propriety of this may not be understood in a stage production, but it is likely to be felt: and it gives the chorus real work to do in the development of the play (Grant Michael, 2006, p. 380).

As many critics assert, the transformation in the use of the Chorus from the singular to the plural is not suitable because it is difficult to achieve an effective departure from a dramatic convention. The chorus here is a new method Eliot uses as a new technique. He does not use the chorus as independent character but the same characters play two roles.

The action of *The Family Reunion* corresponds to the action of *Choephoroe*. The parallel between the two is close. Carol H. Smith states that "All of the Greek sources which Eliot has so far used have been chosen because they have seemed to him particularly rich in religious meaning, ... He converts the Greek plot into Christian terms but keeps these meanings

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concealed in the events of the contemporary situation”(Smith, Carol. H. 1963, p. 133).

There are the Furies or Eumenides, the Greek deities of Revenge. They are the supernatural characters whom Eliot has introduced in imitation of the practice of the Greek dramatists. They symbolize the working of fate on human matters. The Furies also symbolize Harry's progress from unawareness to spiritual insight. There is the Chorus consisting of the uncles and aunts. The Chorus in this play comments on the characters and the action. Eliot introduced the Chorus as an imitation of Greek practice but he has adapted it to his own purposes, giving it an innovative and different role.

All the gathered relatives, uncles and aunts, are just agents of the decadent English aristocracy. They are linked to the conventions and routines of sophisticated life. Ivy, Violet, Gerald and Charles, in their speech as a chorus, are not perceptive of the spiritual quandary of Harry. They speak in confusion, astonishment, shock, and disappointment. Harry's uncles and aunts are bewildered and confused by the speech of Agatha about Harry and his spiritual state. They show their puzzlement in a chorus, talking about their embarrassed feeling and annoyance, anxiety and fear. All of them hope to go into their private rooms to evade the interference of reality.

In the last scene of part one, Harry and Mary join the chorus of the aunts and uncles. The chorus, individually using their names, ask Mary to help them in their task. However, she leaves them silently. The hero of the play, Harry needs to talk about the Eumenides. The Eumenides follow him even in his home. Harry tells Agatha that he should escape to some place to avoid the pursuing of the Eumenides. The scene ends with a statement by the

Chorus. The aunts and uncles now speak as Chorus about the doom hanging over the house.

From her side, Agatha warns Downing not to be upset because of Harry's behaviour which is strange sometimes. Downing understands Agatha's meaning because he has already seen the Eumenides. The other relatives of the family are astonished of the unexpected happening of Amy's death. They speak in a chorus similar to the poor women of Canterbury in *Murder in the Cathedral* to show their passiveness in dealing with things.

Eliot, as he himself said, made a tangible progress in getting rid of the chorus and making the play completely modern in theme, setting and characters. He sheds light on the weakness of *The Family Reunion* when he pays more attention to the use of verse at the expense of the dramatic aspects of character and plot. Besides, his new device of using some of the characters to speak individually or collectively as a chorus is not convincing because the transition of the characters from being themselves into the chorus is a tough task. In addition, a very important flaw in *The Family Reunion*, as Eliot understands, is the failure of adjustment between the employment of the Furies, the 'ill-fated figures,' as an old Greek convention, and the modern condition. Eliot says that in any future play to come, such furies should be obliterated.

*The Family Reunion* represents a turning point for Eliot in writing modern plays with modern characters, plot, and themes. It thus possesses roughly all the fundamentals of modern drama. In this play, he uses the chorus directly for the last time, but in spite of that, the use of the chorus in this play is a new attempt because he uses individual actors at times to represent collectively the chorus, and it is a total

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doing away of this expedient through which his coming plays will be completely modern. Eliot skilfully dispensed with any old fashioned device in his next play, *The Cocktail Party*. He found in the conventions of comedy what he felt to be helpful means of designating the impact of the sacred principle on the life of contemporary people.

#### 4. The Cocktail Party (1949)

*The Cocktail Party* is Eliot's successful play after *The Family Reunion* of a modern theme. It deals with husband-wife mutual misunderstanding. The play shows the misunderstanding of love and family relationship. It is the third developed play of Eliot where he could successfully get rid of the device, which he could not do in his previous two plays, *Murder in the Cathedral* and *The Family Reunion*. First, he could hide the chorus as an archaic means of drama derived from the old Greek plays. However, as in the previous play and the rest of his plays, Eliot annexed the role of the chorus to other real characters.

The role of the Guardians is not only to help the questers in choosing the right way towards spiritual fertility; they help the modern auditors to have a grip on the course of events in the play with their discussions and comments, which perform the same function as the commentaries of the Greek Chorus. (Das, Jolly, 2006, p. 183)

He himself says, "To begin with, no chorus, and no ghosts. 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, and to conceal the origins so well that nobody would identify them until I pointed them out myself." (Eliot, T. S., 1950, p. 31) Nevertheless, he could not dispense with the Greek theme. "Eliot does not assiduously follow any classical story for its own sake; the

Greek myth in *The Cocktail Party*, for instance, has been employed by the playwright as the scaffold for building up a modern poetic play for a naturalistic theatre". (Sarkar, Subhas, 2006, p. 205)

*The Cocktail Party* is a play in three Acts. The First Act is set in the flat of the Barrister Edward Chamberlayne in London, whereas the Second Act takes place in the clinic of the psychiatrist Sir Henry Harcourt Reilly, and the third Act, as the first, takes place in the same flat of Edward Chamberlayne. The play starts with a cocktail party and ends with a cocktail party at the same place attended by the same people with the exception that in the first act, Lavinia is shortly isolated from her husband, Edward, through a prior plan of the three Guardians and in the last act Celia has died. From its title, one can make out that *The Cocktail Party* is a totally modern play with modern setting and characters.

*The Cocktail Party* was written for the Edinburgh Festival and was first staged in 1949 where it obtained great success. Robert Speaight comments that "*The Cocktail Party*, presented last week at the Edinburgh Festival, is the most advanced and original point yet reached in Mr. Eliot's dramatic writing. Yet of his three plays this one will surely prove the most accessible to the ordinary playgoer" (Graham, Clarke. 1990, p. 362). In 1950, the play was encircled by great realization, especially after it was staged in London and New York.

In this play, Eliot significantly dispenses with the use of the chorus which he could not do in the first two plays. He wrote it totally in verse which could be easily read or heard as very near to the regular daily modern speech. In his theories of poetic drama, Eliot confirmed that entertainment is an important feature for a

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successful play and he thrived in making *The Cocktail Party* an entertaining drawing-room comedy. In his conversational essay 'A Dialogue on Dramatic Poetry' Eliot says, "What is the purpose of the theatre except to amuse?" (Eliot, T. S. 1972, p. 44) The play is a humorous comedy of manners. It commences with the customary talking and superficial conversation of a fashionable group of people related to the upper-middle class.

*The Cocktail Party* deals with several themes such as the loss of personality, the failure of mastering natural relation, and the sense of spiritual isolation, but the main theme can be easily realized as the significance of choice. The characters of the play are faced with the importance of making a positive choice.

Eliot himself, in 'Poetry and Drama', remonstrates that many of *The Cocktail Party*'s characters remain outside the action for longer time, "but of all his plays it is *The Cocktail Party* whose characters most thoroughly act upon each other in their dialogue" (Walton, L. A. 1973, p. 167). There is an interaction among the characters although they seem from time to time to have no direct stimulus beyond making themselves understandable. It is the pull and push among characters which makes the dialogue playable. Michael Goldman states, "Eliot's characters do achieve a unique clarity of expression, however, and this is an important source of power and originality" (Walton, L. A. 1973, p.167).

Thus, *The Cocktail Party* comes to an end in a different milieu than the previous plays, *Murder in the Cathedral* and *The Family Reunion*, which end with a Chorus in the first play and a chant to free the evil spirit in the second. As a modern play, *The Cocktail Party* ends with the two Chamberlaynes arranging for the last party at the end of the season.

Eliot, no doubt, has mastered in this play the problem of the old use of the ghosts and chorus. Nevertheless, he goes back again to the Greek dramatist, Euripides, for the purpose of his theme. As mentioned earlier, Eliot says: "To begin with, no chorus, and no ghosts, 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, and to conceal the origins so well that nobody would identify them until I pointed them out myself" (Eliot, T. S. 1950, p. 31). Eliot's intellectualism surfaces in choosing the theme of *Alcestis* for this play. It is so masterfully concealed that none would discover it without being aware of Eliot's declaration. The story of *Alcestis* forms an essential background and source for *The Cocktail Party*. There are some parallels between the two.

Finally, it is worthy to quote Sir Geoffrey Faber who, in a letter to T. S. Eliot, defines *The Cocktail Party* saying: "Invention, simplicity of dialogue and versification – these are what make the play so exceptionally impressive" (Coghill, Nevill. 1974, p. 190). Moreover, as a result of the success which *The Cocktail Party* gained, Eliot was encouraged to proceed in the same avenue and it gave him motivation and inspiration to produce the next play, *The Confidential Clerk*.

### **5. The Confidential Clerk (1953)**

Eliot, in *The Confidential Clerk*, has produced a unique sort of dramatic language, which has a kind of flexibility and a lightly hypnotic and rhythmic influence. In his search for a notable convention to articulate the impediment of modern-day understanding, Eliot deviated from the chorus, the direct influence and interference of the dramatist, and lyrical and rhetorical interruption. He wrote this play for the

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commercial theatre in order to try to get to the bottom of the problems of the lack of public, and moral conventions and teachings that can be shared by modern spectators.

After the success of *The Cocktail Party*, Eliot was encouraged to write another play. As usual, there were several drafts to be hammered out in discussion with his producer, E. Martin Browne. The next play was *The Confidential Clerk* which, was first staged at Edinburgh on July 25, 1953. The play “marks the completion of Eliot’s search for a perfect blend of dramatic form with characters and action” (Chiari, Joseph. 1979, p. 138). The play was, to a certain extent, cordially received before it was transferred to the Lyric Theatre on Shaftsbury Avenue where it was performed for several months.

Eliot, in this play as it was in *The Cocktail Party*, applies a new practice of writing. He adopts the convention of social comedy because “He believes that drama is the most socially relevant of the arts” (Visweswara, C. R. 1989, p. 137). He avoids the use of soliloquy and direct chorus but the chorus is implicitly there. The chorus is indirectly attributed to Eggerson. “Eggerson combines in his person the roles of the priest and chorus of Greek drama” (Das, Jolly. 2006, p. 201). Eliot definitely brings verse closer to modern speech. He navigates beyond the tragic mood to incorporating both the tragic and comic images of existence.

In a press conference after the first performance of *The Confidential Clerk* held in Edinburgh, Eliot said “If one wanted to say something serious nowadays it was easier to say it in comedy” (Jones, D. E. 1963, p. 155). *The Confidential Clerk* was generally welcomed as an entertaining, interesting and competently constructed piece of artificial comedy. The play shows Eliot as a successful comic writer. Eliot

leaves the comic responsibility in this play to the two characters, Lucasta, the illegitimate daughter of Sir Claude, and the foundling B. Kaghan, who is later to realize that he is the misplaced son of Lady Elizabeth. Carol H. Smith comments on the purpose of making the play a comedy saying: “In using the comic form to suit his own ends, Eliot took certain existing aspects of the high-comedy tradition and used them to point up his own set of spiritual meanings... In addition, he used the improbability of farce to create a dramatic situation.” (Smith, Carol. H. 1963, p. 188)

*The Confidential Clerk* deals with the story of mislaid children, searching parents, and mistaken identities. It is a play with modern characters but it, from its title, is ‘neutral’ because Eliot did not use words like ‘personal secretary’ or ‘private secretary’ which were the natural idioms for the age. In this play, Eliot again went back to the Greek dramatist Euripides’s *Ion* for his theme. “For the bases of the plots of his next two plays, [*The Cocktail Party* and *The Confidential Clerk*] Eliot turned to the tragi-comedies of Euripides and, taking pains to ‘conceal the origins’, transformed them into modern comedy.” (Jones, D. E. 1963, p. 155)

“From Eggerson, who more or less, acts as a chorus in the play, the audience comes to know about Lady Elizabeth’s financial prospects as well as his genial humour” (Sarkar, Subhas. 2006, p. 231). As it is the nature of life in western society, the play presents a weak relationship between the aged parents and the young offsprings. There are no passionate ties between them. The garden in this play, just like the guardians of *The Cocktail Party* and the sanatorium of *The Elder Statesman*, is one of the devices that Eliot has employed in his dramas to

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show his originality, inventiveness, and literary knowledge. Eliot used the word “garden” to mean a secret place for a person to express his own desire that nobody knows and all the gardens of the characters in this play are imaginative except the garden of Eggerston which is a real garden.

### 6. The Elder Statesman (1958)

*The Elder Statesman* is the last production of Eliot in the field of drama. Again, Eliot could achieve in this play a modern poetic play almost dispensing with the chorus and avoiding any prose. “In this play, however, there is no formal use of the chorus, which Eliot had abandoned for good. However as already noted, the Hamlet-like soliloquies of Claverton and the incorporation of a novel machinery in the form of ghosts, the chorus almost peeps from behind the curtain” (Tiwari, Maneesha and Tiwari, Shubha. 2007, p. 167). The idea is supported by Tiwari Maneesha and Tiwari Shubha in *The Plays of T.S. Eliot* saying:

Eliot’s endeavor to create a new genre which would be both dramatically compelling and spiritually profound in terms and meaningful to the modern age is a goal which must be endorsed, especially when it has been espoused by one of the major poetic talents of the 20<sup>th</sup> century ... the chorus has never been completely absent. ... Monica [is] playing the role of the auxiliary chorus” (Tiwari, Maneesha and Tiwari, Shubha. 2007, p. 169).

It appeared out of experience and practice. The play shows his knowledge, inventiveness and creativity in combining Greek drama with contemporary society and modernity. It was first suggested to be titled *The Rest Cure*, then *The Man Who Changed His Name*, but finally the title was settled as *The Elder Statesman*. It deals with the problem of self-recognition. As in the previous

four plays, here also Eliot has to resort to relying on Greek drama. In this play, Eliot borrows the theme of Sophocles’s *Oedipus at Colonus*. “The points of similarity between the Elder Statesman and its Greek counterpart, Sophocles’s *Oedipus at Colonus*, are obvious in the portrait of Lord Claverton, a retired statesman in search of a resting place, accompanied by his daughter and visited by his son” (Haldar, Santwana. 2005, p. 143).

The idea is supported by B. N. Chaturvedi pointing out that

in *The Elder Statesman* he takes as his model Sophocles’ *Oedipus at Colonus* which is a sequel to *Oedipus the king*. Lord Claverton is a modernized version of *Oedipus* whose retirement corresponds to the self-imposed exile of the latter. His daughter Monica and his son Michael are the counterparts of *Antigone* and *Polyneices* in *Oedipus*. The dead man whom Claverton runs over corresponds to the father whom *Oedipus* had killed in ignorance (Chaturvedi, B. N. 1963, p. 68).

Further, as Denis Donoghue points out *Oedipus at Colonus* supplies *The Elder Statesman* with a fitting skeleton. The central outline of the two plays is the relationship of father-daughter. Moreover, Eliot in a letter to E Martin Browne states, “Harry’s career needs to be completed by an *Orestes* or an *Oedipus at Colonus*.” (Browne, M. E. 1969, p. 107)

*The Elder Statesman* is, as *The Family Reunion*, a social play copes with the relationship of a pensioned political leader, Lord Claverton, and his past identities. Lord Claverton, like Harry, is also haunted by ghosts but of different kind. Claverton’s ghosts are personalized. They pursue him for his own past sins. “When Claverton is approached by Gomez, the sharper, and by Mrs. Carghill, the retired Shaftsbury

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Avenue nightingale, he is jolted into self-judgment, much as Harry in *The Family Reunion* is jolted by the Eumenides into adopting, with Agatha's help, a new attitude toward his suffering" (Grover, Smith. 2000, p. 246).

In this last play, Eliot makes the characters completely human and modern without intrusion of any supernatural or inhuman agency. In writing this last play, Eliot comes closer to the conventions and standards that he longed to bring to life. Eliot succeeded in this aim in *The Elder Statesman* where modern, ordinary language is transmuted to music. Eliot, in this play and the four previous ones, tied himself to the community and to social problems which overwhelm families and society. Western society in the twentieth century faced social problems emanating from different classes, especially the aristocratic upper middle class.

*The Elder Statesman* closes, as it began, with scene of love between the two lovers, Monica and Charles, in which they together cope with the meaning of Lord Claverton's death. They realize that the love both of them share will be their salvation. As it is one of Eliot's objectives, the play ends in serenity. Stillness is the most skilled distinction of mood and atmosphere. Carol H. Smith comments that "Only in Eliot's latest play, *The Elder Statesman*, does human love become the earthly reflection of divine love and thus a positive value." (Smith, Carol. H. 1963, p. 26) *The Elder Statesman* is the last play of Eliot, which means that he wrote it after acquiring enough knowledge and skill to help him to reach his objective of writing a modern play and to broadcast through it his thoughts.

The sequence of events in a dramatic plot does not need to be severely logical. Part of the action may be symbolical, and even the abnormal and irrational are allowed in the body of action. Eliot,

in 'Poetry and Drama', has appropriately noticed: "From time to time something should happen; the audience should be kept in the constant expectation that something is going to happen; and when it does happen, it should be different, but not too different, from what the audience had been led to expect." (Eliot, T. S, 1950, p. 32)

### **Findings**

This last play and the previous comedies of the fifties, in particular, denote Eliot's career as a creative, ingenious, and ingenuous writer, as a poet-playwright, and a social commentator. All his plays together, with his critical essays on drama, proffer the readers with a valuable documentation of the competing demands of technique on the modern stage. His modern comedies bring to an end his life-long preoccupation and concern with the problem of writing modern social plays.

He started when he was commissioned to deal with the choruses of *The Rock*, a piece that has a religious motif. After that, he wrote *Murder in the Cathedral*, a ritual drama which found its original audience in a religious setting totally applying the old Greek techniques. Then came *The Family Reunion* wherein Eliot endeavoured to authenticate an Aeschylean theme in a modern setting. Here, he started gradually to dispense with the chorus but not completely. The last four plays Eliot wrote are all modern plays with modern themes, settings, and characters even though Eliot had intangibly gone back to Greek dramatists for their themes. They represent the zenith of Eliot's experience and practice which he confirmed in his critical essays and theories.

In short, the drama of T. S. Eliot has found a permanent location in the repertory of English dramas for the modern platform. The skill of the usage of the choruses from complete applying of ancient style to escaping them gradually in the last play is evident in his choice of language. Eliot has shown convincingly that drama is possible in the modern age through modern language, characters and themes. Through both his critical essays and his practical social plays, T. S. Eliot has greatly succeeded in creating and making the choruses for his plays and developed them from old style to modernity in the drama of the twentieth century. As such, we comprehend that all of Eliot's plays are important landmarks in the development of drama in the twentieth century and Eliot has greatly contributed to create drama of contemporary language, decreasing the ancient convention and use of the chorus to be modern in a modern age.

Eliot started with a tentative play, *The Rock*, where the characters are just choruses. His first complete successful play is *Murder in the Cathedral* in which he used the chorus as it is used in ancient Greek drama. After *Murder in the Cathedral*, Eliot detoured to modern themes in his next four plays. In all these plays, *The Family Reunion*, *The Cocktail Party*, *The Confidential Clerk*, and *The Elder Statesman*, Eliot masterfully and gradually could abolish the antique usage of the Greek chorus irrespective of hints and allusions of implicit usage to match his theories and criticism to make drama modern in all its components.

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## **الجوقة في مسرحيات تي إس إليوت: نهج تحليلي**

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## المُلخَص

تعتبر هذه الدراسة عبارة عن نَحج تحليلي للتطور المسرحي المعقد عند تي إس إليوت من خلال استخدام الجوقة في مسرحياته والقاء الضوء على كيفية توظيف إليوت للجوقة في مسرحياته الناجحة من مجرد التقليد الكامل للجوقة الاغريقية في مسرحياته الاول والتحول بمهارة الى الاستغناء عنها في مسرحياته الاخيرة والتي تشمل المسرحيات التالية: "الصخرة"، "اغتيال في كنيسة"، "إعادة توحيد العائلة"، "حفلة كوكتيل"، "الكاتب السري" مختتما بمسرحيته الاخيرة "رجل الدولة المهم" . إضافة إلى ذلك، البحث يلقي الضوء على المسرح الاغريقي القديم الذي استقى منه إليوت مواضيعه.

الكلمات المفتاحية: تي إس إليوت، مسرحيات، القدم، اغريقي، الجوقة، تحليلي، عصري، مسرح