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# Human Relations in the Plays of T. S. Eliot

DORIS BILZ

Although Thomas Stearns Eliot is generally considered to be the leading English poet of the century, and in addition, has been a very influential critic, most of his work of the last decade has been in neither of these areas *per se*, but in the field of poetic drama. The subject of this paper, drawn from these most recent works, will be an examination of certain thematic relationships in Eliot's four major plays. Preliminary to this examination, a few introductory remarks on the nature and goals of poetic drama and a brief over-view of the plays will provide a necessary framework for a discussion of these themes.

The most basic consideration in a discussion of poetic drama, the nature of the genre, is difficult to determine because there is no adequate statement of definition, but rather an array of widely differing partial definitions offered by various critics. The terminology itself is varied—poetic drama, verse drama, verse play, and others. Some critics attempt to differentiate between “poetic drama,” referring to a special structure and organization of action (see Donoghue below), and “verse play,” referring to such works as those of Christopher Fry, wherein “the verse is not the form of the drama, but its polish.”<sup>1</sup> Eliot, however, does not make this distinction. He offers the following:

A verse play is not a play done in verse, but a different kind of play; in a way more realistic than ‘naturalistic drama,’<sup>2</sup> because, instead of clothing nature in poetry, it should remove the surface of things, expose the underneath, or the inside, of the natural surface appearance. It may allow the characters to behave inconsistently, but only with respect to a deeper consistency. It may use any device to show their real feelings and volitions, instead of just what, in actual life, they would normally profess or be conscious of . . . So the poet with ambitions of the theatre must discover the laws, both of another kind of verse and of another kind of drama.<sup>3</sup>

Eliot apparently feels that there is a special kind of poetry in poetic drama that is not dependent on the language alone. This idea is further elaborated by Denis Donoghue:

A play is 'poetic,' then, when its concrete elements (plot, agency, scene, speech, gesture) continuously exhibit in their internal relationships those qualities of mutual coherence and illumination required of the words of a poem.<sup>4</sup>

Francis Fergusson offers a similar statement.<sup>5</sup> Raymond Williams, however, emphasizes the part language plays in the form:

The verse-form of the whole play must be such that it can, when necessary, be intensified into the statement of a complex experience, while retaining its affinity with the verse of ordinary conversation through which the audience is led into the play. It is a form designed to express the interpenetrations of different levels of reality; not merely as a dramatic device, but because his interpenetration is the condition of experience of the play as a whole.<sup>6</sup>

Among at least these selected critics, then, there seems to be agreement on the point that poetic drama is a special kind of drama that is designed in a particular way in order to achieve particular ends, which are different from those of prose drama. This is to be done by means of both language and structure.

A general statement of the distinctiveness of poetic drama would be that it is more capable than prose of expressing inner experiences. Eliot explains it in this way:

It seems to me that beyond the nameable, classifiable, emotions and motives of our conscious life when directed toward 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 . . .<sup>7</sup>

A wholly different type of action is therefore to be expected. The poetic dramatist will deal with conflicts and situations which are placed, by their subjective nature, beyond the reach of prose. Therefore certain themes, and certain ways of handling themes, are likely to recur.

T. S. Eliot's dramatic style has been described as one of "disembodied conflict."<sup>8</sup> He does not concentrate on the traditional devices of characterization and action, but instead attempts to present the conflicts within a person's soul (the

“fringe of feeling”). He therefore approaches a situation not with a view to its potential for action, but as a part of the “search for the mystical center of experience.”<sup>9</sup> Some themes lend themselves more easily than others to this approach. Given Eliot’s analysis of poetic drama, it would seem reasonable to assume that his choice of subject was influenced by the possibilities of the form, but cause and effect relationships of this type are impossible to determine. However, he writes in a medium that is well suited to the expression of subjective experience, and he deals with themes of religion and relationship which are difficult to externalize.

Although **Murder in the Cathedral** is one of Eliot’s significant plays, it has been excluded from consideration in this paper for several reasons. First, it is an occasional play, written for the Canterbury Festival (1935) and thus directed at a special audience. Also it deals with a specific historical situation and is therefore not closely related thematically to Eliot’s later plays. Ties can be found with the development of the religious theme of atonement and vocation, but human relationships are of minor importance and family relationships are not present at all. Since more significant ties exist between them, this paper will be limited to a discussion of Eliot’s four most recent plays: **The Family Reunion**, **The Cocktail Party**, **The Confidential Clerk**, and **The Elder Statesman**.<sup>10</sup>

## II

Although these four plays are individually complete, they also serve as four “acts” of a “super-play.” Thus there are ties between them, each play shedding light on its predecessors and/or successors. Act I of this super-play is **The Family Reunion**. Here the exposition is given—a pessimistic view of man in his shallow, isolated, unhappy existence. The problem of major relevance is man’s inability to establish satisfactory human relationships, with religion offering escape for a few, but no general solution. Complications are built up in Act II, **The Cocktail Party**. Here a bond between people is possible, but not satisfying. **The Confidential Clerk**, Act III, moves toward a resolution. A struggle through acceptance for understanding shows hope of an answer. Act IV, **The Elder Statesman**, presents the resolution and fulfillment—love. This is the way to reality and happiness, the antidote to the barrenness of **The**

**Family Reunion.** Thus the theme threads its way through four plots to find joy "Fixed in the certainty of love unchanging" (ES III p. 132).

Although the four plots are quite different, several basic character types re-appear in a variety of situations. Each play has one young person who is different in some way and does not fit in with the rest. In the first two plays, and also the third to a much lesser degree, this differentiation is on a religious or spiritual basis, distinguishing a person as a "saint." These "saints" feel isolated from the rest because of the inability of the other characters to understand the heights or depths of experience. However, a few characters are gifted with understanding and some insight into the capabilities and destinies of the others. These are the "guardians," whose function it is to point the way. The third group of characters are those who are unfeeling, shallow, and blind. They have no insight or understanding of the people around them, and, with the exception of instances of selfish grasping, vegetate in isolation. These are the three major recurring classes, but within them individual characters pick up traits of a specific predecessor, e.g. Lord Claverton and Lord Monchensey (see below, p. 33). These ties between characters re-inforce the relationships of the individual plays to each other within the super-play.

But the main area of relationship between the plays is theme. The recurring themes of these four plays focus on two basic relationships: Man to God, and Man to Man. The Man-God theme is probably the more basic of the two and has resulted in the description of Eliot as a poet of religion. Atonement and vocation appear in all of the plays and seem to follow a line of development. In the first plays, this theme is carried out primarily through the "saint." For this person, the calling by God to a certain vocation is of paramount importance, taking precedence over all other considerations and relationships. But in the later plays, this idea becomes less pronounced and the increased affirmation of the world and the things of the world brings with it the idea that rejection of human relationships for religious experience may not be necessary or desirable for everyone. Relationships between human beings become increasingly important and seem to come into an equal status with, or even to supersede, the religious theme. Therefore, this paper will be organized to examine the development of the

theme of human relationships and will refer to only a few of the possible ties between the two major themes, treating the religious aspects primarily as a framework for the discussion of human relationships.

In one of their aspects, the human relationships presented can be interpreted as an "objective correlative" of the relationship between God and Man. They demonstrate, to some extent, the rewards and joys of deep mutual bonds and also the frustration in attempting to establish these bonds. But human ties are important in themselves. Particularly in the later plays, a positive attitude is taken toward the possibility of attaining a satisfactory relationship and thereby finding meaning in life.

The basic situation presented in the four plays under consideration is a family at a time of crisis. The relationships of primary concern, therefore, are those within a family. Although deep feelings are expressed concerning family ties, a general impression is conveyed that if a genuine relationship can be attained between members of a family, it might be possible with others as well. Thus the family could be interpreted symbolically to represent all human relationships.

A central problem in the struggle of the various characters to establish relationships with each other is one of communication. An important factor in this struggle is the different levels of awareness. The three basic character types—"saints," "guardians," and shallow people—correspond roughly to three levels of awareness. This awareness involves mainly perceptiveness and the capacity for spiritual and emotional experience. A communication problem arises when a perceptive person attempts to convey a spiritual or emotional experience to someone who does not have the capacity to understand and to share his experience. The resultant misunderstanding may deepen the estrangement. The perceptive ability is important in attempts to reach understanding between people because it enables one to anticipate responses and comprehend motivations as well as communicate experience. This factor of level of awareness is brought out by Eliot in several ways. The problem of communication is illustrated by such scenes as Harry's attempts to explain the Eumenides in **The Family Reunion**. The ability to see the Furies seems to serve as a test of perceptiveness. However, an exception to this distinction is made in the case of Downing, the chauffeur, a minor character who apparently has seen them, but does not demonstrate much

understanding of the situation. Eliot uses darkness and light images throughout this play as well to show degree of perception. **The Cocktail Party** frequently uses sight imagery—"one-eyed Riley," Julia's spectacles, and so on. Indications become more subtle in **The Confidential Clerk** and **The Elder Statesman**, as the distinction in levels of awareness breaks down.

The second major factor in the communication problem is one of language. Characters have difficulty finding adequate words to articulate their feelings and experiences. Here the genre is most influential: when the intensity is greatest, the most poetic speech occurs. The characters "show their real feelings and volitions, instead of just what, in actual life, they would normally profess or be conscious of." In this category, for example, would be such speeches as Colby and Lucasta's discussion of "gardens" in **The Confidential Clerk**, and the choral passages in **The Family Reunion**. The fact that such poetic speech occurs, in which language is pushed to its limit, and communication is still imperfect serves to intensify the problem for the less poetic characters in the play and for the "prosaic" world outside of Eliot's dramas.

Another element in the general problem of communication is that of image, role, and social pressure. For example, in **The Cocktail Party**, Edward confesses his problems to a stranger to avoid losing face with his friends. Later, in **The Elder Statesman**, Lord Claverton discusses the difficulty of being honest with one's child because of the image that has been built of the way one would like to be looked up to. This problem is expressed by many of the characters and is one of the few to which a solution is offered. The answer, as Lord Claverton sees it, is simply to confess and be absolutely honest, especially with oneself. Greater satisfaction will come from honesty than from a carefully preserved image.

This entire problem of communication is a barrier to the achievement of the greater goal—understanding. The purpose of attempting to understand is to be able to make the correct response to the wants and needs of another person and thus deepen the relationship. Lord Claverton attributes his own stagnation and emptiness to a lack of such a relationship: "How open one's heart when one is sure of the wrong response?" (ES III p. 105). Lady Elizabeth, in **The Confidential Clerk**, also refers to the "mistakes" one makes when there is no understanding. Communication is necessary for understanding be-

tween people, but it is not enough in itself. Acceptance is also necessary, and a sincere concern for the other person. Only when selfishness is thus removed can a satisfactory mutual relationship result. When selfishness rather than understanding is dominant (e.g. Lady Amy Monchensey in **The Family Reunion**), all relationships break down and unhappy isolation results.

But understanding is not a static thing. There is a continuing cycle of understanding and change, thus making perfect understanding elusive and even more difficult to achieve. This problem is expressed by Colby and Lucasta in **The Confidential Clerk**:

- Col: . . . I meant, there's no end to understanding  
a person.  
All one can do is to understand them better,  
To keep up with them; so that as the other  
changes  
You can understand the change as soon as it  
happens,  
Though you couldn't have predicted it.
- Luc: I think I'm changing.  
I've changed quite a lot in the last two hours.
- Col: And I think I'm changing too. But perhaps what  
we call change . . .
- Luc: Is understanding better what one really is.  
And the reason why that comes about,  
perhaps . . .
- Col: Is beginning to understand another person.

(II p. 67)

Thus self-understanding is dependent on understanding another person. This interrelatedness is the motivation behind the struggle for communication and the reason why isolation is inherently meaningless and results in unhappiness.

The problem of understanding leads directly to the question of reality, "what one really is." The search for reality is particularly explicit in **The Confidential Clerk**. Lucasta and Colby discuss "gardens" (the private world where one is happy and secure) at some length, and bring out the idea that only if there is another person involved can one's private world and the public world be reconciled, made acceptable and "real." Apparently reality is discovered through the precept of "Know thyself," which demands a relationship with another person. And a meaningful relationship with another person is possible only where there is understanding, which, in turn, presupposes



communication. And communication is adequate only where both persons involved are capable of perception of themselves, each other, and the situation—in other words, are capable of a deep level of awareness. There is therefore a direct relationship of degree of success between level of awareness, participation in human relationships, and grasp of reality.

Thus human relationships are the key to reality and happiness. But establishing a satisfactory relationship with another person is not easy. It involves unselfish acceptance and concern, understanding, and, finally, the complete relationship—love. The development of this complete relationship is the theme of Eliot's theme as follows: "totally shared love is the supreme road to reality." But let us now turn to the four plays themselves to see this development.

### III

In **The Family Reunion**, Eliot begins the theme of family relationships which is to extend through the next three plays. The title of the play introduces the theme, as it suggests that a family is an institution with at least enough importance and structure to call its members together. The sense of obligation is the principal characteristic of the family that is presented in this first play.

Although there is this shared general sense of obligation, there are different conceptions of the importance of the family. These various views are held by different characters, and are not equally developed, as the characters are not equally drawn. However, they serve to demonstrate various levels of awareness of the characters involved.

Amy, Dowager Lady Monchensey, dominates her family and presents a point of view in which the family is a powerful, definite structure. It is all-important to her, as is shown in her concern and anticipation in the opening scene: "I keep Wishwood alive/To keep the family alive, to keep them together,/To keep me alive, and I live to keep them" (I p. 227). The definiteness of the structure is revealed in her statement that Harry's wife "never would have been one of the family" and Mary's feeling that she was similarly excluded. Amy's conception of the importance of the family is further emphasized by her belief that ". . . a few days at Wishwood/Among his own family, is all that he (Harry) needs" (to regain his mental

balance). Her entire view of life is shaped by her conception of the importance of the family as an institution, and her every act dedicated to its preservation. Her preoccupation with superficial forms is an indication of her shallowness, which, combined with many selfish motivations, suggests that she is incapable of participating in a meaningful relationship with anyone. Unhappy isolation is her destiny.

Amy's dominance in the family has forced her point of view on its other members in varying degrees. In Harry especially she has fostered a sense of obligation. This is suggested in his reminiscences about his childhood and the role his mother played:

When we were children, before we went to school,  
The rule of conduct was simply pleasing mother;  
Misconduct was simply being unkind to mother;  
What was wrong was whatever made her suffer,  
And whatever made her happy was what was virtuous—  
Though never very happy, I remember, That was why  
We all felt like failures, before we had begun.  
When we came back, for the school holidays,  
They were not holidays, but simply a time  
In which we were supposed to make up to mother  
For all the weeks during which she had not seen us . . .  
(II.i.p.258)

and it is later explicitly stated. "Family affection/Was a kind of formal obligation, a duty/Only noticed by its neglect. One had that part to play" (II.ii.p.276). This obligation is also implicit in the general purpose and tone of the reunion itself.

Other members of the family also feel obligation, with a few varying factors. Violet, Ivy, Charles, and Gerald are scarcely distinguished as individual characters, occasionally even speaking as a chorus. They are representatives of the family and feel they are a part of it as a formal institution. Observations such as Charles's, "Violet is afraid her status as Amy's sister will be diminished," reveal a consciousness of this institutional formality. Since they thus deny any personal warmth or concern, this selfish preoccupation with their own status stands as the primary factor in their view of the family. It is modified only by the sense of obligation, with genuine concern still obviously lacking: "Yet we are here at Amy's command, to play an unread part in some monstrous farce" (I.p.231). They, with Amy, are shallow and incapable of spiritual or deep emotional experience. They remain fixed in their

status, content with the measure of security it gives them, rather than risking what little they have in the quest of something more satisfying, a possibility of which they are only dimly aware, if at all.

Agatha (see below) and Mary stand outside this viewpoint, although formally included as members of the family. Mary, a second cousin among brothers and sisters, is the most distant member of the family, both in blood and spirit. She has never felt the family bond, and, therefore, her position as an outsider enables Eliot to use her to judge and comment on the Monchensey family. Since she feels related to no one, she has the perspective to see that the other characters have no real relationship either. She expresses this feeling in these words: "For what is more formal than a family dinner?/An official occasion of uncomfortable people/Who meet very seldom, making conversation" (I.ii.p.244). Mary and Agatha are more perceptive than the other members of the family and therefore find the family relationships exemplified by the Monchenseys quite meaningless.

With these various conceptions of the family all in operation, a surprisingly uniform view of relationships between persons is presented. Any inter-personal relations are subordinate to an "I-It" relationship with the family as a unit. Each person more keenly feels his bond with the family unit than any personal feelings for individuals within the family. Obligation thus becomes a substitute for genuine human relationships.

The result of this void in the basic level of personal relationships is insufficient understanding and a near absence of love. To attempt to compensate for these deeper feelings, "consideration" is substituted. In contrast, Agatha, Amy's sister, comes close to breaking through this lack of understanding and love which is the family norm (first with Harry's father and later with Harry). The perceptiveness and ability to participate in human relationships which she demonstrates set her apart as capable of a deeper level of awareness than most of the rest of the family. Understanding and communication are therefore very difficult and she is virtually excluded from the family. To avoid a lengthy digression into either a detailed character study of Amy or a review of the plot, let it be sufficient to say that Amy's jealousy of Agatha's power—"Thirty-five years ago you took my husband from me/And now you take my son" (I.iii.p.282 and p.283)—was the cause of Agatha's exclusion. The

fact that Agatha's exclusion was tied to her breaking the shallow norm serves to discourage the other characters from risking their security in search of deeper meaning. Amy's lack of understanding also increased her determination to maintain a position of great power for herself, which she fulfills through that control she exerts over the family. This gives her a sense of security, but not satisfaction, as it re-enforces her shallowness and isolation.

A major cause of the absence of meaningful relationships is the lack of communication. This is most clearly seen in Harry's failure to get the others to understand him in his first scene—"But how can I explain, how can I explain to you?/You will understand less after I have explained it." Agatha encourages him ("Talk in your own language, without stopping to debate/Whether it may be too far beyond our understanding") and he continues, but meets with total incomprehension. Part of the problem is the difficulty in finding adequate language to articulate a spiritual experience. ("But how can I explain," "Your own language") and part is the extreme conservatism and shallowness of the rest of the family, which renders them nearly impervious to new experience ("explain to you?", "beyond our understanding"). The family attitude toward new experiences is clearly expressed in one of the speeches of the chorus: "Hold tight, hold tight, we must insist that the world is what we have always taken it to be" (I.i.p.243). Later Harry achieves a degree of understanding with Agatha and a little with Mary. But this is of minor significance to the total problem because Agatha (one of "the suburban Pallas Athenas to which Mr. Eliot is addicted") and Mary are two of the select few (i.e. the "guardians") who have a special gift for understanding and thus occupy the "neutral territory between two worlds." However, even they do not comprehend fully, and communication remains a stumbling-block.

This root problem of communication difficulty not only leads to lack of understanding, but also is a cause of the absence of affection. Harry emphasizes the important tie between understanding and love when he says, "Now I see/I might even become fonder of my mother—More compassionate at least—by understanding. Thus a sequence is suggested whereby one must first establish a relationship which has the potential of leading to understanding, then understanding itself, and then "fondness" or love. This first step of "concern,"

perhaps, is vague in **The Family Reunion**, which contributes to the pessimistic view of the possibility of human relationships. The solution is left to the later plays.

The only significant positive element in the play is Amy's partial realization of her mistakes and shortcomings. She admits, "I always wanted too much for my children." But this is too little, too late; and, failing to establish any communication or relationship, she dies in darkness. In the fact of these developments, Violet expresses the general feeling, "I do not understand a single thing that has happened."

The underlying spiritual theme is definitely related to the theme of human relationships. Harry is not the same as the rest; he is called to be a "saint," Agatha tells him, "You are the consciousness of your unhappy family." He is aware of an unexplained compulsion to atone for his family, and through the tragedy of non-communication he is destined to aloneness and isolation. Harry presents a problem as an impersonal tragic hero, but the main tie between the spiritual theme and the theme of human relationships is that Harry is called to leave this sterile group of un-related persons in order to seek the meaning and purpose of his life.

Thus **The Family Reunion** presents a pessimistic view of the possibility of genuine human relationships. Love is unknown; understanding is poor; isolation seems inevitable; and obligation stands as the only demonstrated bond between people.

In **The Cocktail Party** one of these factors is significantly changed. Love and understanding are still only an imagined possibility, far from realization, but Edward and Lavinia Chamberlayne are inescapably dependent on each other. This emotional involvement is an attempt at the first step of building a meaningful relationship, though ultimately it proves less adequate than "acceptance," the answer to be presented in the next play.

No matter what else they may feel toward each other, the Chamberlaynes feel incomplete without each other. Such lines as "I must find out who she is to find out who I am," and "I cannot live without her, for she has made me incapable/Of having any existence of my own," are particularly significant. But the strangest aspect of their relationship is that they are unable to describe or account for the bond which holds them together. They want and need each other without knowing why. The fact that these feelings are mutual minimizes the problem

of communication—they have nothing to communicate. Neither is capable of a deep spiritual or emotional experience which would be difficult to express and beyond the other's comprehension. But even with no communication barrier, they lack understanding.

This lack of understanding is caused by an unwillingness to accept each other and a selfish desire for dominance, which leads to friction and pressure, as Eliot has expressed elsewhere:

It is human, when we cannot understand another human being and cannot ignore him, to exert an unconscious pressure on that person to turn him into something we can understand: many husbands and wives exert this pressure on each other."

By themselves, Edward and Lavinia do not have sufficient awareness to remedy this impasse. Furthermore, Edward pointedly states his basic inability to love—"I don't think I was ever really in love with her (Lavinia)" while feeling no desire to continue a relationship with Celia, a young woman with whom he has been having an affair. Lavinia, in turn, feels no love for Edward. Upon her return after having left Edward to consider the possibility of a divorce, they renew their long-standing incompatibility and misunderstanding. They are obviously unhappy together and yet miserable when apart.

Thus the only solution to their dilemma is to come to a realization and acceptance of their situation. Under the guidance of a psychiatrist, Reilly, they agree to "make the best of a bad job." Lavinia has come to a degree of realization before her first appearance on stage, so she begins with the philosophy of "We shall manage somehow." They learn to avoid excessive expectation and to be contented with their lot, realizing that they have a very limited potential. This is reflected in Reilly's description:

· Become tolerant of themselves and others,  
Giving and taking, in the usual actions  
What there is to give and take. They do not repine;  
And contented with the morning that separates  
And the evening that brings together  
For casual talk before the fire  
Two people who know they do not understand each  
other,  
Breeding children whom they do not understand  
And who will never understand them. (II.p.364)

Although this is far short of happiness, they are at least beginning to understand the bond which holds them together—

their inability to love and to be loved in the way they had deluded themselves into thinking they could. This understanding helps to deepen both their level of awareness and their relationship. Julia, an old friend who is quite perceptive, sees their realization of their potential: "And now the consequence of the Chamberlaynes' choice is a cocktail party" (III.p.386). The superficial banality of a cocktail party, the Chamberlaynes realize, is the level on which they operate best.

The third act shows the Chamberlaynes after they have learned to live without great expectations. They demonstrate tenderness and consideration for each other. When Lavinia says that she shares Edward's feelings of guilt, one gets the impression that this is as close to understanding and love as they can come. It is as far as dependence alone can go.

Edward and Lavinia are the major characters involved in the theme of family relationships, but the religious theme is carried out by people outside the family, as, in contrast to the other plays, the majority of the characters are not blood relatives. Celia Copplestone is a "saint" very like Harry Monchensey. At the beginning, she is in love, as are many of the other characters, and is not distinguished from them in respect to spiritual potentiality and level of awareness. Being hurt in love seems to give her an unusual degree of insight, however, and she is set apart as someone special. This insight, though never clearly defined, puts her attitude in sharp contrast to Edward's in particular:

Cel: . . . I couldn't have laughed at anything yesterday;  
But I've learned a lot in twenty-four hours.  
It wasn't a very 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?

Edw: I wish I could. I wish I understood anything.  
I'm completely in the dark. (I.iii.p.331)

Here is potentially a serious problem in communication. It does not materialize, however, as Celia does not feel a need to communicate further with Edward. Later she says that she feels a sense of isolation and sin (which Reilly describes as "unusual"), and a need to atone, all of which were true of Harry in **The Family Reunion**. Also like Harry, she chooses her destiny without knowledge or understanding and agrees to follow

a mysterious guide and remove herself from the society she has known.

Unlike its effect in **The Family Reunion**, however, here the religious theme does not negate human relationships and dismiss them as meaningless. The concept is introduced that each person has his own role to play and it is useless to try to play someone else's role. The "saints" are a different type of person spiritually from the rest. Reilly, Julia, and Alex, another friend, are the "guardians" (cf.) Agatha in "the neutral territory between two worlds") who help each person to realize his role. The saints are therefore not to be looked up to as models, above the rest of the characters. Julia seems to indicate that the choices of Celia, Peter, and the Chamberlaynes concerning their respective futures are equally valid for the individuals involved.

Generally, **The Cocktail Party** presents a more positive attitude than **The Family Reunion**. A major change is the assertion of the possibility of relationships between people. Human ties are acknowledged to be important and a greater effort is made to achieve them. Some meaning and happiness can be found in the world. The family is also viewed differently: the obligation imposed by custom is minimized and a greater emotional impact is present in family relationships, with less emphasis on empty, formal externals.

**The Confidential Clerk**, in contrast to **The Family Reunion** and **The Cocktail Party**, assumes emotional ties between members of a family and presents a search for mutual understanding between people. Also unlike **The Cocktail Party**, which deals essentially with a husband-wife relationship, and **The Family Reunion**, which deals primarily with parent-child relationships, **The Confidential Clerk** presents both these ties and also introduces the brother-sister aspect. The variety of attitudes in all these relationships make this play the most complex.

The husband-wife relationship is the most basic in the plays and therefore will be discussed first. In this play, three different husband-wife pairs are presented, the most central being Sir Claude and Lady Elizabeth Mulhammer. Theirs is a developing relationship. At the beginning of the play, Claude has little respect for Elizabeth's mentality and appears merely to tolerate her. Eggerson, Claude's former clerk, implies that theirs was a marriage of convenience and there is no evidence to the contrary. Their inability to understand each other is



symbolized by the illegible postcards which Elizabeth sends to Claude when traveling. Two factors, however, hold possibility for a happier future—they have one important thing in common (a desire for children) and Claude, at least, has potential for loving (he describes his love for his former mistress). Gradually such lines as “I’ve always loathed keeping such a thing from you” indicate that there is an emotional tie between them. The crisis concerning Colby, whom they both claim as a long-lost illegitimate son, has the effect of bringing them closer together, as they frankly admit by the beginning of Act III. They express their feelings for each other by each wishing happiness for the other (which at this point means having Colby). The climax of this development comes when Claude and Elizabeth confess their dreams to each other and really talk for the first time. They see hope: “But you and I, Claude, can understand each other,/No matter how late. And perhaps that will help us/To understand other people. I hope so” (III.p.119). This is a key concept, the most positive thus far—the possibility of understanding in this central relationship radiating to others in the family, and perhaps beyond.

Lucasta and B. Kaghan, the second pair, have a relationship which develops into what seems to be a satisfactory basis for marriage. The main factor is their realization that they need each other. They also have the same goal in life (security) and thereby achieve a measure of understanding. Their relationship is not fully drawn, but it has a good beginning in understanding and common experience.

The Eggersons are presented as a different type of couple. Although analysis is difficult because the characterization is slight, their relationship seems to be very conventional. The main point made is that they want to please each other. They do not have a great deal of understanding—Eggerson admits this—but it doesn’t seem to bother them. This leaves the implication that they are less sensitive and perceptive than Sir Claude and Lady Elizabeth.

All three couples appear superficially to have similar relationships, but actually they demonstrate three levels of awareness. After their struggle to understand each other, Claude and Elizabeth will eventually achieve a deeper relationship than the Eggersons, whose mutual sense of obligation and demonstrations of consideration are not significantly more meaningful than the relationships presented in **The Family Reunion**.

Lucasta and B. appear destined for a middle ground, with greater depth of understanding than the Eggersons, but without the sensitivities of Claude and Elizabeth. All three couples will be contented because they have found the answers to all the questions they are capable of asking—each level of awareness is developed to its full potential. Communication is not a significant problem in these relationships, as everyone has someone on his own level with whom to share thoughts and experiences. The deeper the relationship, the more real effort this involves, however.

Another type of relationship that is sketched briefly is the brother-sister feelings of Lucasta and Colby. They feel an attraction toward each other from the start, but don't know how it will develop. They "just accept" each other before they really make an effort to reach an understanding. When they both discover that brother-sister relationship is the only possible one for them they feel an even greater obligation to understand each other. Thus acceptance and understanding are the characteristics of a brother-sister relationship which they emphasize. The fact that Colby removes himself from the family prevents us from seeing the development of this relationship, but the direction is clear.

By far the most complex relationship demonstrated in **The Confidential Clerk** is that between a parent and child, real or supposed. The relationships presented clearly illustrate both the importance of acceptance and the lack of understanding which results from attempts to force a person to fit a preconceived image. This lack of understanding dooms Sir Claude and Colby to disappointment in attempting to establish a meaningful father-son relationship. Sir Claude believes he is Colby's father and tries to force their relationship in the discussion of the experience he feels they share, that of disappointment at being incapable of fulfilling their artistic ambitions. In addition, Claude feels that he has been the victim of family pressure and lack of understanding in the past, and is aware that he may have repeated the same mistake in his relationship with Colby. He is at a loss, however, to remedy the situation and can only say, "We must simply wait to learn/What new conditions life will impose on us." In contrast to Claude's concern and efforts, Colby does not feel a real father-son relationship, because of their separation during his childhood years. Thus their relationship is not satisfactory from the start. The final break comes

when the discovery is made that they are actually not relatives, and Colby rejects Sir Claude as even a substitute, voluntary father. This rejection is emphasized by the voluntary or semi-voluntary character of the other parent-child relationships in the play. Colby refuses to be molded into the son Claude wants, and thus their relationship breaks down.

Similar difficulties are experienced by Elizabeth and Colby. Sir Claude predicts that Elizabeth will convince herself that Colby is her son, but certainly does not anticipate the force and suddenness with which his prophecy comes true. Elizabeth tries desperately to find a tie with Colby. She describes her family life to him, attempting to discover or establish a bond ("I wonder if **you** had the same obsessions") in the same way that Sir Claude had discussed his artistic frustration with Colby. But nothing significant develops between them. In Colby's eyes, Elizabeth chose not to be his mother and therefore, "it is a dead fact, and out of dead facts/Nothing living can spring" (II. p.98). No relationship is possible. The attempt to substitute a forced relationship for genuine acceptance and understanding recalls a similar situation in **The Cocktail Party**, where friction was also the result of trying to force another person to be what he wasn't.

In contrast, Sir Claude and Lucasta have greater potential for a satisfactory relationship. At first, they apparently have no deep feelings for each other. In Eggerson's words, Claude had "behaved like a father . . . responsible . . . generous" (echoing the formal obligation of **The Family Reunion**). As the play progresses, one gets the vague impression that they, like Edward and Lavinia Chamberlayne, are happier for having avoided the expectation of a deep relationship, such as Claude wished to share with Colby. However, a desire to "mean something" and to understand each other is brought out at the end of the play, indicating the possibility of a deepening relationship in the future. Lady Elizabeth has similar success and satisfaction with her real son, B. Kaghan. Although their relationship had not been cordial in the past, when they realize their true kinship they accept each other. Like Claude and Lucasta, they feel an obligation to "mean something" and to understand. They also eliminate expectations and agree to the voluntary appellation of "Aunt." In both cases, acceptance is the foundation on which understanding and a mutual emotional tie can be built.

Mrs. Guzzard, Colby's real mother and the key to a very involved plot of mistaken identity, baby-switching, and coincidence, abides by her original decision. She had chosen not to be his mother (as had Elizabeth with B.) and does not try to force this relationship on him after he indicates that he does not want it. Her motivations at this point are not clear, and her sudden revelation of Colby's true parentage seems strange after her long years of sacrifice to keep the secret. At any rate, their closeness seems to be largely a thing of the past, with a voluntary arrangement taking precedence over blood ties. Each has built such a strong image of the other in their assumed roles that any genuine communication and understanding are impossible in their real relationship. Realizing this, neither attempts to force the other to pretend a relationship that can never be.

Strangest of all, though, are Colby's feelings for Mr. Guzzard. In contrast to the other parent-child relationships in the play, here there is a great emphasis on the destined, involuntary aspect. But Colby wants an image, not a father, which sets him off as different from the rest (Lucasta explicitly states that he is different). Others do not understand him and he does not understand himself, characteristics exhibited by the "saints," Celia and Harry. His renunciation of human relationships, and Eggerson's remark that perhaps someday Colby will be "reading for orders," also follow the pattern. But there are important modifications. Colby does not completely deny all ties and vanish to the uttermost parts of the earth, but merely takes a job in the suburbs, thereby indicating an increased affirmation of the world and of human existence and relationships. The problem of his final relationship with Eggerson, and with God, is unresolved, but there seems to be hope that he will find meaning in life. However, as with Celia and Harry in the preceding plays, he is not set up as a model for others to follow.

Thus Eliot uses family relationships to demonstrate the importance of understanding and acceptance. The central problem in all the unsatisfactory relationships is a lack of understanding, which can be established only through acceptance. The crucialness of acceptance is demonstrated by the rapid deepening of the relationship between Lucasta and Colby once they "just accept" each other. Acceptance is really an embryonic form of love. It must precede understanding and is the only

foundation for a satisfactory relationship. It is articulation of the vague first step of relationship hinted at in **The Family Reunion**. Colby does not really accept either Claude or Elizabeth; whereas Lucasta and B. do. Hence the difference in the potential of their respective relationships. "Mean something" is apparently a hesitant expression of love. This type of love ("accept" and "mean something") is expressed basically in family relationships, but is not strictly bound by blood, as seen in the voluntary aspect of the family relationship presented. Furthermore, it is not selfish, but has mutual happiness as its goal.

Thus **The Confidential Clerk** goes one step further than **The Cocktail Party**. To dependence and mutual need are added genuine attempts to attain understanding, and a degree of success. And relations between people are often deeper and more meaningful.

**The Elder Statesman** stands as the logical extension of the theme development as it presents the possibility of love. There are many points of similarity between this play and **The Family Reunion**. A family group is held together by obligation, dominated by a parent who demands the absolute loyalty of his children. A son is dissatisfied and decides to leave home. (There is added significance to this decision, as both sons are heirs to both title and fortune.) Here the similarity ends—those in **The Family Reunion** are left in meaninglessness, while those in **The Elder Statesman** go on to grow into new insights and understanding of meaningful relationships. The Monchenseys are thus given a second chance in the person of Lord Claverton. Just before her death, Amy Monchensey realized, "I always wanted too much for my children;" Lord Claverton comes to a similar realization, but has the time and capacity to find a remedy. But the way to this remedy—love—is not an easy one. As in the other plays, the difficulty has its roots in understanding. Lady Elizabeth's statement about understanding and its importance ("But you and I, Claude, can understand each other/No matter how late. And perhaps that will help us to understand other people. I hope so"—CC.III.p.119) is echoed by Lord Claverton: "I see that your mother and I, in our failure/To understand each other, both misunderstood you/In our divergent ways" (ES.III.p.105). Thus again understanding is seen as the essential basis for all successful relationships, and it is still elusive.

At first, the lack of understanding is compensated for by a sense of obligation, as in **The Family Reunion**. Lord Claverton gets jobs for his son Michael and takes care of him financially, and thus feels he had done his duty. Monica "belongs" to her father, but also is aware that this relationship based on obligation may be inadequate: "Can't you bear to be alone with me?" They realize that the image they have of each other makes communication extremely difficult between a parent and child. As in **The Cocktail Party**, there is a deep tie without necessarily any understanding. Thus Monica acts as a mediator between her father and Michael, understanding nothing more than that a "fondness" must be preserved.

But love is the antidote to this barren obligation and lack of understanding. Love comes to its fullest expression in Monica and Charles, her fiance. It seems to have an involuntary aspect ("It crept so softly/On silent feet, and stood behind my back/ Quietly a long long time/Before I felt its presence"—I.p.15). But it does not fully develop without a sense of need. (Similarities can be seen here between Monica and Charles and the relationship of B. and Lucasta.) To express their relationship, Monica and Charles use virtually the same metaphor: "I feel utterly secure/In you; I am a part of you" and "We are conscious of a new person/Who is you and me together." When love is thus complete, it has the same power of multiplying as does understanding: "And I love you (her father) the more because I love Charles" (III.p.128). Participation in this deepest human relationship, involving understanding and unselfishness, greatly deepens one's level of awareness. Therefore, insight into other people is less difficult, and more satisfactory relationships can be established. As a result of her relationship with Charles, coupled with greater effort by Lord Claverton to communicate with her, Monica develops a sincere feeling for her father in place of the sense of duty she previously demonstrated.

But not everyone can reach the full understanding and expression of love that Charles and Monica have. Lord Claverton just begins to know love. In the past, both with Maisie (his first mistress) and his wife, he felt nothing. As he comes to understand himself better, he blames his own selfishness for his failure to love. Now, however, he realizes love's importance and begins to learn to love. He accepts Monica and Charles and responds to their love for him. And he does not repudiate

Michael. He encourages Monica and Charles and tries to communicate to them his understanding of the power of love: "If a man has one person, just one in his life,/To whom he is willing to confess everything/. . . Then he loves that person, and his love will save him" (III.p.102). This happiness and meaning in life cannot result from mere emotional involvement, but requires a basis of acceptance, and a struggle for mutual understanding; only then can real love be found.

In addition to this expression of love between two people, Monica recognizes another important kind of love—family love:

But there's no vocabulary  
For love within a family, love that's lived in  
But not looked at, love within the light of which  
All else is seen, the love within which  
All other love finds speech.  
This love is silent . . .  
You must forgive each other, you must love each other.  
(II.p.88)

Family love here is something special. It is closely related to the concept of "just accept" in **The Confidential Clerk** in that Monica feels it forms a basis for other relationships. Therefore it is another possible way of expressing the vague first step missing in **The Family Reunion**. Although the same word, "love," is used, this relationship should not be confused with the fuller expression of love which Charles and Monica have achieved; "family love" is the basis, not the highest expression of human relationships. The Claverton-Ferry family has difficulty expressing it, but certain positive signs are present. Lord Claverton attempts to warn Michael of the consequences of leaving home and understands him quite well ("So you want me to help you escape from your father?"). Michael repudiates his father, but indicates that he could have loved his father, had his father been able to accept love earlier. However, physical removal and the superficial rejection of family does not negate family love. Monica and Charles will continue to try to "make him feel he is not estranged."

The human relationships shown in **The Elder Statesman** are developments of those in the earlier plays. The formal obligation of **The Family Reunion** has been replaced by deeper and more mutually satisfying ties. The breakdown in understanding in **The Cocktail Party** has a solution. The reserve has been removed from the "mean something" of **The Confidential Clerk**. Worldly life and human relationships now have been

affirmed so that it is no longer for a "saint" to leave all in order to find meaning and salvation. There is no inevitable dichotomy, "no urge to deny the integrity of the human world."<sup>13</sup> Human love is possible. The "saint" has been replaced by a concern for ordinary people.

**The Elder Statesman** presents the thematic fruition. Love is sufficiently realized to demonstrate its possibility and its power. And there are indications that love can be extended beyond the immediate family. Obligation has been superseded by dependence, dependence by understanding, and understanding by love.

#### IV

Now that we have seen the development of human relationships to the fullest extent, let us see how this theme sheds light on the other ideas. As deeper levels of awareness are reached and more satisfactory human relationships develop, reality and meaning come into sharper focus. Throughout the struggle for more satisfactory relationships between people, there are indications that when a deeper level of relationship is reached, a grasp of reality will follow (e.g. "I must find out who she is to find out who I am"—CP.I.i.p.308). But only on a few occasions are the characters aware of this, and the striving is only for more adequate relationships. Only when a deep bond has been demonstrated can one look back and see the full implications and inadequacies of the shallow pseudo-relationships demonstrated in the earlier plays. In their world of isolation and semi-illusion ("We must insist that the world is what we have always taken it to be"—FR.I.p.243), many of Eliot's characters literally don't know what they're missing. But through a sincere, honest effort to build a relationship, another person may enter the "garden" of one's private world, and thereby "make the world outside it real/And acceptable" (CC.II.p.65). Love is, therefore, the way to happiness and meaning.

But what of religion? Eliot's early "saints" left society in search of meaning, with no indication that this answer was not a fruitful one—it is presented as a possible solution for a few. This idea is never contradicted, but rather, the number of potential "saints" being as small, a solution is sought that will have greater relevance for the majority of humanity. In **The Confidential Clerk**, Sir Claude virtually ends Eliot's religious theme when he says:



. . . an agonizing ecstasy  
Which makes life bearable. It's all I have.  
I suppose it takes the place of religion:  
Just as my wife's investigations  
Into what she calls the life of the spirit  
Are a kind of substitute for religion.  
I dare say truly religious people—  
I've never known any—can find some unity.  
Then there are also the men of genius.  
There are others, it seems to me, who have at best  
to live  
In two worlds—each a kind of make-believe.  
That's you and me . . . (I.p.50)

As is shown later in the same play, this isolation can be overcome and both worlds made "real" through participation in a meaningful relationship with another person.

The "saints" have made a valid choice, but for the rest of the world, meaning lies in human relationships and "Hell is alone" (CP.I.iii.p.342).

## FOOTNOTES

1. Raymond Williams, **Drama from Ibsen to Eliot** (New York, 1953), p. 263.
2. Thus eliminating what Francis Fergusson calls "commercially profitable shadows on the cave wall."—**The Idea of a Theatre** (Princeton, 1949), p. 224.
3. Introduction to S. L. Bethell's "Shakespeare and the Popular Dramatic Tradition," quoted in F. O. Matthiessen, **The Achievement of T. S. Eliot** (New York, 1958), p. 155.
4. **The Third Voice** (Princeton, 1959), p. 10.
5. **The Idea of a Theatre**, p. 224.
6. **Drama from Ibsen to Eliot**, p. 234.
7. **Poetry and Drama** (Cambridge, Mass., 1951), pp. 42-43.
8. Robert Richman, "The Quiet Conflict: The Plays of T. S. Eliot," **The New Republic**, December 8, 1952, p. 17.
9. Karl Shapiro, "The Death of Literary Judgment," **Saturday Review**, February 27, 1960, p. 36.
10. "The Family Reunion," "The Cocktail Party," **The Complete Poems and Plays 1909-1950** (New York), pp. 225-388. **The Confidential Clerk** (New York, 1954). **The Elder Statesman** (New York, 1959). (Hereafter referred to as FR, CP, CC, and ES, respectively.)
11. Richard Hayes, "The Stage: The Voice of This Calling," **Commonweal**, November 28, 1958, p. 233.
12. **Notes Toward a Definition of Culture** (New York, 1949), pp. 64-65.
13. Denis Donoghue, **The Third Voice**, p. 161.

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