Chapter – 5

The Family Reunion: Broadening of the Socio-Religious Vision
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The first significant thing to note about T.S. Eliot’s *The Family Reunion* (1939) is that it was written out of the poet’s experience, inspiration and necessities, and was not a commissioned work meant for a special audience, as was the case with *Murder in the Cathedral*. Convinced that if “the poetic drama is to reconquer its place, it must..... enter into overt competition with prose drama”,1 Eliot ventures in *The Family Reunion* to take upon himself the task of appealing to a secular audience, who was generally antagonistic to religious plays. The vision of reality which Eliot wanted to project was still the Christian one, but he had now to find ways of expressing that vision in secular terms. His challenge was to bring together the ritual of religious experience and the poetry of spiritual understanding with the reality of contemporary life. As such in *The Family Reunion*, he was “determined to take a theme of contemporary life, with characters of our own time, living in our own world”.2 Thus, while *Murder in the Cathedral* dealt with the spiritual struggle and martyrdom of a saint, *The Family Reunion* dramatizes the spiritual awakening of an ordinary man— a man who is one of “us” , in a manner which has greater relevance to the everyday experience of the audience. This is suggestive of the growing social aspect of Eliot’s religious vision, which increasingly strives to integrate the ordinary, everyday reality into the transcendent reality. This is evident from the very goals that Eliot set for himself as a poetic dramatist:

What I should like to do...is this: that the people on the stage should seem to the audience so like themselves that they would find themselves thinking : “I could talk in poetry too!” Then, they are not transported into an unaccustomed, artificial world, but their ordinary sordid, dreary world is suddenly illuminated it is merely a superfluous decoration. What poetry should do in the theatre is a

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2. Ibid, p. 82.
kind of humble shadow or analogy of the Incarnation, whereby the human is
taken up into the divine.\(^3\)

Eliot’s likening of the function of poetry in the theatre to that of the Incarnation, as
evident in the last line of the quoted passage, is very significant. It suggests that just
as the Incarnation represents intersection of the timeless with time leading to the
redemption of time, in the same way, Eliot’s plays aim at integrating the human into
the divine with a view to revitalizing life-in-time rather than rejecting it in favour of
the timeless reality. Eliot hoped to convert his audience so that they would realize
their ability to perceive ways in which supernatural, spiritual experience informs the
natural, secular world. The interplay between the surface and hidden levels of reality
in his plays is devised to shake the audience’s confidence in the validity of the world
of surface reality as a total representation of existence. The inadequacy of life lived
merely on secular plane, without any significant relation to the timeless, is laid bare in
a variety of ways in each of Eliot’s plays. Speaking of some of the Characters of
Dostoevsky, Eliot points out that they are found “living at once on the plane that we
know and on some other plane of reality from which we are shut out”.\(^4\) A study of
Eliot’s plays reveals that some of his own characters contain this trait. The words and
behaviour of these characters distinguish them from the others who are “material,
literal-minded and visionless”. In fact, Eliot’s method of presenting characters of
varying degrees of consciousness, as propounded in connection with \textit{Sweeney
Agonistes}, applies in general to the later plays as well. Critics are of the opinion that
Eliot’s characters can be grouped into three categories. M.K. Naik characterizes these
categories as the blind, the seekers, and the helpers, and points out that the
“Eliot protagonist belongs to the second group and is usually flanked by one or both
of the other types”.\(^5\) Another scholarly critic W.V. Spanos makes a very illuminating
comment in this regard:

3. “The Aims of Poetic Drams”, \textit{Adam International Review}, 200 (November,
The characters of these plays fall into three groups. The first two groups which on the dramatic level constitute the main characters in the action, are the more or less spiritually blind – the ordinary people who "live and partly live" in a world devoid of spiritual significance – and the spiritually aware, those who perceive the imminent irruption of the irrational into their lives and choose to face it whatever the consequences. The third group, whose mysteriousness suggests their possession of a knowledge that transcends that of the main characters, constitutes the agents of the action, ....

In *The Family Reunion*, this pattern of characterization is most clearly perceptible. Amy and the aunts and uncles constitute the spiritually blind group; Harry, Agatha, and less certainly Mary, the spiritually aware group; and the Furies, the agents of the action. What is significant to note about this device of characterization is the fact that it helps Eliot transcend the limitations of the naturalist subject-matter and forms that he employs in his plays written after *Murder in the Cathedral*. Apparently, these plays seem to be imitations of everyday secular actions which are usually met with in the realistic modern drama such as that of Ibsen or Shaw. But by introducing an under pattern carrying a spiritual vision of reality focused through the spiritually aware characters, Eliot transfigures a naturalistic or psychological into a sacramental or religious drama. In this process, his plays tend towards representing a peculiar interrelationship and interdependence of religious belief and social humanistic vision, eternity and time, which seems to be a product of his Incarnational vision of Christianity.

On the surface level, *The Family Reunion* "explores the peculiarly modern psyche of a man who had murderous designs on his wife". The protagonist of the play, Harry, is a neurotic who is obsessed by a murderous impulse that lurks in his subconscious and perpetually haunts him. He suffer from a psychological malaise, and tries to find out ways to get rid of it. In the course of the play he is made to discover that the real source of his malaise is not his guilt -stricken conscience but the

original sin. This discovery enables him to acknowledge his true identity and work accordingly for his salvation. In this way, though Harry’s problem is one raised on the psychological level, the solutions that Eliot gives at the end are spiritual. In doing so, Eliot demonstrates that, contrary to the notion of Freud, a psychological illness can also be reconciled to a spiritual solution. The way Eliot views the psychological maladies of the modern individual from the standpoint of his religious belief speaks highly of his Christian humanism. In this connection the following comment of Christopher Gillic is both perceptive and pertinent:

Religiously, his method was to use the concept of the ‘problem play’ which Shaw had stamped on serious modern drama, but to change the problem from a social one into a psychological one, and then to show that the psychological problem was really spiritual. 8

In fact, Eliot considered psychology incapable of offering any positive solutions to the dilemma of modern existence. In a letter to Eleanor Hinkley, dated 13 September, 1939, he is reported to have written that psychology “may help us to distinguish between disease and sin, but does not abolish either”. 9 Psychology seemed to him “to ignore the more intense, profound and satisfying emotion of religion”. 10 In his essay “Religion without Humanism”, Eliot clearly states that the “need of the modern world is the discipline and training of the emotions”, and this could never be accomplished by “the negative instruction of psychology.” 11 This should not, however, lead one to conclude that Eliot rejected psychology as worthless. Actually he was well aware of recent advances in psychology and psychoanalysis, and was wise enough to make full use of his knowledge in projecting his own Christian vision in his

8. Movements in English Literature 1900-1940, p.179,

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works. Like many other things, therefore, psychology too is assimilated in the structural pattern of his plays, and is given a Christian dimension. A careful scrutiny of his plays reveals how “the psychological process of discovering and acknowledging the true identity is transfigured into a process of discovering and acknowledging sin and the concomitant personal reintegration into a recognition of Incarnation which redeems sin” \(^{12}\). Thus, just as in *Murder in the Cathedral*, murder become martyrdom, so in *The Family Reunion*, crime and punishment become sin and expiation. In *The Cocktail Party*, the social gathering becomes the spiritual community, and in *The Confidential Clerk*, the search for literal identity becomes the search for spiritual identity. Even in Eliot’s last play, *The Elder Statesman*, which is considered the most human of his plays, the progress towards death becomes a progress towards transfiguration.

Eliot’s use of the Orestes myth in *The Family Reunion* is also marked by a similar process of Christianisation. He has handled the Greek story so as to suit his own ideas of sin and expiation. The story of the curse on the house of Atreus in Argos, as found in Aeschylus’ *Oresteia*, is fashioned by Eliot “to correspond to the human situation, as seen in the Christian doctrine of the Fall of Man, that we are sinners in a world of sin, and that this sin calls for expiation” \(^{12}\). Generally speaking, the curse story symbolises the idea of a pervasive, hereditary evil that corrupts all human society, whereas in Christian terms, it stands for what is known as original sin. D.E. Jones has discussed in detail how Eliot has given a Christian dimension to the Greek myth in *The Family Reunion*. In this context, Jones also underlines the significant difference between Eliot and the modern French dramatists. For the French dramatists, the process of adapting the ancient myths “ends in an image of modern man; for Eliot it ends in an image of permanent human nature being subsumed under the divine” \(^{14}\). Thus, the Eumenides of Aeschylus are changed by Eliot from avenging Furies to the instrument of Divine Grace. Moreover, they do not evince any change in Eliot, as they do in Aeschylus; it is Harry who changes in the course of the play as he is led by the

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Eumenides into an awareness of sin and the concomitant expiation that is called for. Evidently, Eliot’s social humanistic imagination, directs him to the Greek parallels of the contemporary human predicament, while his Christian faith impels and enables him to find out solutions which are religious and spiritual in character. Thus, in his handling of the Greek story, in his analysis and exposure of the banality of life without belief, and, above all, in his method of turning the psychological tribulations of Harry into a spiritual want, Eliot emerges in The Family Reunion as a dramatist of religio-social vision advocating in dramatic terms the necessity of upholding spiritual values in life for a meaningful social existence.

As D.E. Jones puts it, the play “is built around Harry’s discovery of spiritual election. The significance of the other characters depends upon their relationship to this central experience.”  

Harry’s spiritual progression towards this discovery constitutes the main action of the play. This is worked out through Harry’s relationships to Amy, his mother; to Mary, his childhood playmate and possible wife; and to Agatha, his spiritual mother. “These are the stages”, as A.D. Moody writes, “in his progression from sin and alienation to reconciliation and expiation. The first is the immediate cause of his predicament; the third releases him from it; and the second enables him to move from the one to the other.”  

As is the case with other plays of Eliot, the dramatic conflict in The Family Reunion is between two conceptions of reality—the secular and the spiritual. The first is represented by Amy and the Chorus consisting of the uncles and aunts, and the second, by Harry and Agatha. In other words, the conflict takes place between the spiritually blind characters and those who are spiritually aware. This conflict is developed and resolved in such a way as to lead the former to a new perception of the meaning of life through the example of the latter.

The play opens with a picture of Wishwood, the ancestral home of Harry, Lord Monchenssey, where his family members, except Agatha, are “living and partly living”, reminding us of the unawakened women of Canterbury in Eliot’s previous

play. Their conversation reveals that they are somehow passing their lives under the proud and indomitable will of Amy, who herself has "nothing to do but watch the days draw out".\textsuperscript{17} Ivy's suggestion that Amy should "go south in the winter" to avoid cold is reminiscent of the similar attitude of Marie in \textit{The Waste Land}. In fact, the entire opening chat of the uncles and aunts, and of Amy herself, is intended to underline the triviality of life lived merely on physical plane. Agatha rightly says that Wishwood has always been "a cold place"\textsuperscript{18} completely devoid of the genuine warmth of love and life.

The sole concern of Amy's life, in her own words is "to keep Wishwood alive/to keep the family alive, to keep them together",\textsuperscript{19} and when at last she fails in her efforts, she loses her life. She suffers from the mistaken notion that she can have things go as she intends. She thinks that she can arrest "the normal change of things", and "contrive" the future happiness of her son by making him sever all connections with the past, and start life afresh as if "nothing had happened." She gives instructions to this effect to her brothers and sisters who have gathered to celebrate her birth day as well as Harry's home coming after eight years of wanderings abroad. Only Agatha with her perceptive mind is able to see that Harry's return is going to be painful: "Because the past is irremediable./Because the future can only be built upon the real past."\textsuperscript{20} Inspite of Amy's claim that nothing has changed at Wishwood, Agatha believes that the "man who returns will have to meet/the boy who left."\textsuperscript{21} She is of the conviction that: "when the loop in time comes.../the hidden is revealed, and the spectres show themselves".\textsuperscript{22} Amy and the aunts and uncles do not agree with Agatha and adhere to their view-point. This clash between the mechanistic time concept of Amy and the sacramental time concept of Agatha and Harry forms one of the major concerns and interests of the play. In fact, acceptance of one's past in order to build a meaningful future is an important theme of the play. It is to be noted that this theme is as much appealing on the secular, psychological level as on the spiritual.

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The opening scene also reveals how Amy wished and planned to get Harry married to a girl who could pose no problem in the fulfillment of her (Amy’s) family design. For this purpose, she kept Mary, a cousin and Harry, under her guardianship right from her childhood. This is evident from Mary’s own statement to Agatha:

She only wanted

To have a tame daughter-in-law with very little money,

A housekeeper-companion for her and Harry.\(^{23}\)

Harry’s decision to marry a different woman, reported now to have died in mysterious conditions, might have been prompted by his natural reaction against the possessiveness of his mother. Amy did not like the woman because the latter had her own will and “never wished to be one of the family. Moreover, “She never wanted to fit herself to Harry/but only to bring Harry down to her own level.”\(^{24}\) But the way she died must have shocked Harry. As Ivy says, Harry’s wife was “swept off the deck in the middle of a storm”\(^{25}\) Amy, however, thinks that one can call it nothing but “a blessed relief”\(^{26}\) and Gerald says that Harry should forget the past, marry again, and carry on at Wishwood. Amy, who cannot “bear to let any project go,”\(^{27}\) agrees with Gerald and holds on Mary with the hope that Harry would marry her and “take command at Wishwood”. However, Agatha, with her deeper awareness, is able to see the futility of Amy’s attempts and hopes. She knows that “neglecting all the admonitions/From the world around the corner”, Amy is “interfering preparation of that which is already prepared.”\(^{28}\) The remarkable point of this remark is that Amy’s human effort to impose her design on events and an identity on her son is vain. There is no escaping into the safety of the past for Harry; he must rather descend into it and acknowledge its reality if he is to discover a meaningful order in time and in life. However, Harry’s own words and behaviour on his arrival at Wishwood indicate that he has been trying to evade the spectres of the past, which have been pursuing him everywhere. He hoped that by coming back to his hometown, he could escape the

\(^{23}\) Ibid., p. 304.  \(^{24}\) Ibid., p. 290.
\(^{25}\) Ibid., p. 289.  \(^{26}\) Ibid.
\(^{27}\) Ibid., p. 304.  \(^{28}\) Ibid., p. 290.

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guilt by leaping over the immediate past into his childhood. But his “instinct to return to the point of departure/And start again as if nothing had happened” is futile. Ironically, it is after his arrival at Wishwood that the guilt assumes physical proportions. He encounters the Furies now in visible forms. Speaking to Gerald who cannot see any such things, he explains his peculiar predicament:

Can’t you see them? You don’t see them, but I see them,
And they see me. This is the first time that I have seen them.
In the Java Straits, in the Sunda Sea,
In the sweet sickly tropical night, I knew they were coming.30

The tormenting question before Harry is:
Why should they wait until I came back to Wishwood?
There were a thousand places where I might have met them!
Why here? Why here?31

And in the answer to this question lies the key to Harry’s dilemma, and also to his redemption. In his quest for the answer, he is considerably helped by Mary, Dr. Warburton, and, of course, Agatha.

But the process of quest begins with Harry’s disillusioning encounter with his mother and his aunts and uncles who are unable to understand his spiritual depression. They interpret his malady purely in psychological terms, considering it a “delusion” or, at most, a matter of “conscience”, which can be set right with the help of “a hot bath” and “rest” and involvement in the family affairs. Thus, Harry’s “spiritual agony is juxtaposed against his family’s lack of spiritual insight”32 Living merely on the plane of surface reality, and having “never woken to the nightmare”, the family members cannot understand “the unimportance of events.” They can understand the mere event of Harry’s wife’s death which is of little importance as compared to the

29. Ibid., p. 308.
30. Ibid., p. 292.
31. Ibid.
coming into operation of the curse on the family, manifested to Harry in the form of his pursuit by the Furies. Harry is aware, though only dimly, that the roots of his dilemma lie deeper in the past than that "cloudless night in the mid-Atlantic" when he allegedly "pushed" his wife overboard:

I am the old house
With the noxious smell and the sorrow before morning,
In which all past is present, all degradation
Is unredeemable. As for what happens,
Of the past you can only see what is past,
Not what is always present. That is what matters.\textsuperscript{34}

Thus, the saving point with Harry is that he has "woken to the nightmare" and is therefore able to accept the alienated vision of human existence--"one is still alone/In an overcrowded desert"\textsuperscript{35}--as the truth. In accepting the nightmare as reality, he is, at least in a state to face it. His awareness that it is "not my conscience,/Not my mind, that is diseased, but the world I have to live in"\textsuperscript{36} shows that he is already living on another plane from his mother. But, as Agatha puts it, he has more to understand if he wants to attain liberation. The other family members, however, try to find out in their own way, what is wrong with Harry. They question Downing, Harry's servant and chauffeur, to know the reality about Harry's malady. Downing tells that the death of Harry's wife is "likely to have been an accident"\textsuperscript{37} and not a case of suicide or murder. At the same time, he also tells that Harry was "psychic" and suffered from "a kind of repression". He also suggests that this repression might have been a result of

\begin{itemize}
\item 33. CPP, p. 294.
\item 34. Ibid.
\item 35. Ibid.
\item 36. Ibid., p. 295.
\item 37. Ibid., p. 299.
\end{itemize}
the unnatural possessiveness of Harry’s wife who “would never leave him alone”.

38. Ibid., p. 300.
39. Ibid., p. 301.
40. Ibid., p. 302.
41. Ibid., p. 307.
42. Ibid., p. 306.
43. W.V. Spanos, op. cit., p. 199.
44. CPP, p.307.
wrongly attaches himself to “loathing/As others do to loving”\textsuperscript{46}. To Harry’s question: “Is the spring not an evil time, that excites us with lying voices?”\textsuperscript{47} Mary replies in words that point towards a deeper reality:

The cold spring now is the time
For the ache in the moving root
The agony in the dark\textsuperscript{48}

Harry senses that this is a call for spiritual birth: “Spring is an issue of blood/A Season of sacrifice”\textsuperscript{49}, but he seems reluctant as yet to face it. Mary tries to bring home to him the necessity of sacrifice:

Pain is the opposite of joy
But joy is a kind of pain
I believe the moment of birth
Is when we have knowledge of death
I believe the season of birth
Is the season of sacrifice\textsuperscript{50}

At this juncture, Harry appears to reach a true understanding, as he suddenly exclaims:

You bring me news
Of a door that opens at the end of a corridor,
Sunlight and singing; when I had felt sure
That every corridor only led to another,
Or to a blank wall;...\textsuperscript{51}

D.E. Jones rightly observes that the “sunlight and singing symbolize the warmth and harmony of the human love he might have shared with Mary”\textsuperscript{52}.

\textsuperscript{45} Ibid., p.308.
\textsuperscript{46} Ibid., p. 309
\textsuperscript{47} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{48} Ibid. p. 310.
\textsuperscript{49} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{50} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{51} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{52} Op. cit., p. 94.
This implies that instead of responding to the content of Mary’s insight, Harry has responded to Mary physically. Therefore the Eumenides appear to warn him against this evasion. As Eliot has said, “This is the first time since his marriage... that he has been attracted towards any woman. The attraction glimmers for a moment in his mind, half consciously as a possible ‘way of escape’”. Harry’s response is thus another effort to disengage himself from the past. He mistakenly believes that his past self is completely separated from his present self. This becomes clear in his remonstration with the Furies:

When I knew her, I was not the same person
I was not any person. Nothing that I did
Has to do with me.54

But, the Furies, “the sleepless hunters”, will not let Harry escape the past. He must acknowledge its presence, for as Agatha has hinted, “the future can only be built/Upon the real past”. They seek to turn Harry away from Mary because they wish that “he must move on, into the form of love appropriate to the moral plane upon which he now exists”.55 On the whole, the encounter with Mary makes him realize that he “must face”56 the Furies.

The emergence of the real past into Harry’s consciousness begins in his interview with Warburton, the family doctor, who has been called in to diagnose his strange behaviour. Harry is already excited by his conversation with Mary, and feels “an overwhelming need for explanation”57 of his unhappy boyhood at Wishwood, where “the rule of conduct was simply pleasing mother”.58 Harry wants Warburton to tell him something about his father. Warburton reluctantly hints that the parents of

54. CPP, p.311.
56. CPP, p.312.
57. Ibid., p. 318.
58. Ibid., p. 317.
Harry were “never very happy together.”59 This triggers Harry’s memory and he remembers an all-important event in his childhood—the kiss that his mother gave him when news of his father’s death came, a kiss that marked the beginning of her possessive domination of Wishwood and her sons. This, in turn, evokes from Harry a faint anticipation of his identification with his father. W.V.Spanos perceptively remarks: “with this intimation of the identity of father and son, of past and present, Harry has come, despite his efforts to the contrary, to the verge of discovering the real source of his anguish and to acknowledging his helplessness before it”.60 What seemed a “casual bit of waste in an orderly universe” now begins to seem “just part of some huge disaster./Some monstrous mistake and aberration/of all men, of the world, which I cannot put in order”.61 D.E. Jones suggests that this “‘monstrous mistake and aberration/of all men’ is, of course, the Fall of Man, and its result is Original Sin,”62 that has continued to afflict the human family. Within the world of the play, this sin is symbolized by the curse on the Monchensey family. What is important to note is that Harry has come quite close to acknowledging the reality of the pervasive sin, the “filthiness, that lies a little deeper...”63

The understanding of the subjective aspect of this universal “filthiness”, in the context of the Monchensey family, is given to Harry through his crucial encounter with Agatha, his spiritual mother. In this encounter, Harry learns from Agatha of the lovelessness of his parents’ marriage and of the “Summer day of unusual heat” when Agatha and his father fell in love, and of the father’s desperate decision to take his wife’s life which Agatha prevented because of her maternal love for the unborn child. All this confirms his earlier identification of himself with his father. He achieves the saving insight that in desiring the death of his wife he shares, indeed, the sin of his father which he has inherited. But this does not bring any surprise or shock to Harry, rather he feels a sense of liberation, and begins to see things in a new light:

59. Ibid., p. 319.
61. CPP, p.326.
63. CPP, p.327.
Everything is true in a different sense. Everything tends towards reconciliation. Perhaps my life has only been a dream. Dreamt through me by the minds of others. Perhaps I only dreamt I pushed her.

Agatha helps him, and by implication the audience, understand the symbolic meaning of events, and also put his sense of sin into perspective:

What we have written is not a story of detection, Of crime and punishment, but of sin and expiation. It is possible that you have not known what sin You shall expiate, or whose, or why. It is certain That the knowledge of it must precede the expiation. It is possible that sin may strain and struggle In its dark instinctive birth, to come to consciousness. And so find expurgation. It is possible You are the consciousness of your unhappy family, Its bird sent flying through the purgatorial flame.

This illuminating speech of Agatha makes Harry feel happy for a moment, as if he “had come home.” And herein lies the real family reunion, the implied significance of the title of the play. Harry says that “this is like an end” of his spiritual quest. But Agatha reminds him that his arrival is also “a beginning,” for the recognition of sin, of human limitation, brings with it the discovery of Incarnation and the consequent birth of the new, the redeemed self. Harry, with his new vision, can now see that his problem has been his inability to reach outside of himself, to relate himself to the reality that exists outside of time and of human self, which is necessary for the

64. Ibid., p.332. 65. Ibid., p.333. 66. Ibid. 67. Ibid. 68. Ibid., p.334. 69. Ibid.
liberation of the self from the “awful privacy of the insane mind!”\textsuperscript{70} The moment in the rose-garden, referred to in the lyrical duet of Harry and Agatha, represents the moment of illumination which human love can give: It is a worldly counterpart of the mystical element and should be taken as something which “leads towards the fruition of love in beatitude”.\textsuperscript{71} Hence Agatha says that it is a beginning, and has to be followed by “a long journey”\textsuperscript{72} to be undertaken by Harry to expiate the sin. Harry, however, is not yet in a state to start the journey. He wants to enjoy the experience of liberation that he has achieved through the undemanding love of Agatha. Therefore the Eumenides reappear to recall him to the way of expiation. However, now his newly acquired spiritual maturity enables him to see them differently:

This time you are real, this time you are outside me,
And just endurable. I know that you are ready,
Ready to leave Wishwood, and I am going with you\textsuperscript{73}

As Eliot has himself observed, this time the Furies appear “in their role of divine messengers, to let him know clearly that the only way out is purgation and holiness. They become exactly ‘hounds of heaven’. And Agatha understands this clearly, though Harry only understands it yet in flashes”.\textsuperscript{74} In fact, the moments of illumination are short-lived, and after they are over, one feels dull again. This is what happens with Harry:

I am still befouled,
But I know there is only one way out of defilement
Which leads in the end to reconciliation.
And I know I must go.\textsuperscript{75}

In this context, Helen Gardner has made a very pertinent remark:

\textsuperscript{70} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{71} 71. D.E. Jones, op.cit. p.98.
\textsuperscript{72} CPP, p.336.
\textsuperscript{73} 73. Ibid.
\textsuperscript{74} Letter to E. Martin Browne, quoted in F.O. Matthiessen, \textit{The Achievement of T.S. Eliot}, p.167.
\textsuperscript{75} CPP, p.337.
Conceived and brought out in hatred, not in love, he bears the sin of his parents, at once their victim and their perpetuator, for he has been himself incapable of love....He has to learn to love. He must go away into solitude and silence, like the scapegoat, laden with sin, driven out into the wilderness, so that years later, or months,...he may find what ways of love are possible for him.76

The conversation with Agatha wakes Harry to the fact that his pursuers are paradoxically “bright angels”77 whom he must follow. In his effort to escape the past, his whole life, not only the years since his wife’s death, “had been a flight.”78 But now he knows that “The last apparent refuge, the safe shelter,/That is where one meets them.”79 He also comes to perceive that his business is “not to run away, but to pursue,/Not to avoid being found, but to seek”.80 Harry is painfully aware of the fact that his mother as well as other family members are unable to understand the step he is going to take. In utter bewilderment, Amy wants to know the destination of Harry’s departure, but he himself is to learn about it, though he has in his mind an image of the nature of his duties:

Where does one go from the world of insanity?
Somewhere on the other side of despair.
To the worship in the desert, the thirst and deprivation,
A stony sanctuary and a primitive altar,
The heat of the sun and the icy vigil,
A care over lives of humble people,
The lesson of ignorance, of incurable diseases.81

This leads Amy to conclude that Harry is going to be a missionary, and the uncles and aunts offer practical advice about the climate and the natives. But Harry, exasperated at having only his words taken up and his inner meaning missed, declares:

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77. CPP, p.339.
78. Ibid., p.338.
79. Ibid.
80. Ibid.
81. Ibid., p.339.
“I never said that I was going to be a missionary.”\textsuperscript{82} In fact, the play mocks at any curiosity about where Harry is going or what he will do because, on the spiritual plane, he has reached his destination in his moment of illumination. Now he has only to perfect his vision. Eliot told Michael Redgrave, who was having problems with the part of Harry, “I think he and the chauffeur go off and get jobs in the East End”.\textsuperscript{83} Actually, the substance of Harry’s statements is contained in the following lines:

It is love and terror/Of what waits me, and will not let me fall.\textsuperscript{84}

The reference is obviously to the divine pattern symbolized by the Furies, who have been constantly trying to draw Harry into that pattern. It is to be emphasized that Harry’s state of loss of hope was due to not understanding his proper relationship to the divine pattern. In this connection, the remark of Robert J. Andreach is worth mentioning. He observes:

Harry’s failure to understand the divine assistance given to him accounts for his failures to understand why he must sacrifice, and his inability to actively redeem his personal past by trying to love accounts for his failure to understand the divine assistance.\textsuperscript{85}

Therefore, once Harry has understood the divine assistance in accepting the Eumenides as “bright angels”, he has inevitably to undertake an action that involves sacrifice and suffering. This explains his decision to sacrifice the possibility of happiness offered by Agatha, and take up the ascetic way that involves “the worship in the desert, the thirst and deprivation”. In fact, as pointed out earlier, Eliot has given a Christian dimension to the Greek myth of the Furies, with the result that the psychological element in the play is synthesized with the spiritual. William V. Spanos has rightly observed that the Furies “represent the sacramental principle that operates in the created world, perpetually redeeming time and reordering its “broken

\textsuperscript{82} Ibid., p.344.
\textsuperscript{84} CPP., p.339.
\textsuperscript{85} \textit{Studies in Structure: The Stages of the Spiritual Life of Four Modern Authors}, Fordhan University Press, 1964,p.97
structures”. As such, they play... a major role in transmuting the ephemeral contemporary human event into quest for redemption..."86 Thus, with the aid of the myth of the Furies, Eliot weaves the structure of a spiritual drama out of the story of a modern individual’s diseased psychology. This is indicative of the broadening of Eliot’s religio-social vision within the framework of drama.

It is interesting to note that Eliot’s treatment of the Furies presents a revealing contrast with that of Jean-Paul Sartre in The Flies, where, as C.H. Smith tells, they are portrayed as swarming insects representing remorse sent by the avenging gods as a means of holding men in intellectual bondage. “This difference in treatment”, Smith observes, “emphasizes the fundamental difference of attitude toward remorse and purgation in the two writers, one espousing Christianity and the other atheistic existentialism. Sartre sees remorse and religion in general as standing in the way of man’s freedom, while in Eliot’s view Christian freedom...means the denial of personal will in order to accept the will of God”.87 In fact, Eliot’s concept of human existence falls into line with that of the Christian existentialists such as Kierkegaard who believed that the tensions of human existence could be resolved only by complete commitment of the human will to the will of God.

Harry’s departure towards the end of the play in order to expiate the sin, his leaving Wishwood in pursuit of the higher order of existence, is often interpreted as his rejection of the temporal world and its demands in favour of the transcendent world—a world which exists outside of and in opposition to time. Ronald Bush for example, observes that Harry’s departure “takes place amid the gloom of an unreconciled mother’s death and a deserted sweetheart’s concern”88. Similarly Jennifer I. Isaacs thinks that Harry’s act of following the Furies is “a passive acceptance and an from involvement in time.”89

Again, Miss Anne Ward maintains that Harry "acknowledges the existence of an absolute realm, beyond time", and that there is "no possibility of his returning to the superficial stability of Amy's world".\(^90\)

A close and unbiased scrutiny of the play, however, reveals that these interpretations are invalid and misleading, for they seem to conceive man's purpose as a struggle to escape from the bondage of time into eternity. Eliot's Incarnational vision, on the contrary, strives to integrate the two spheres of existence—the secular social sphere and the religious one. It is true that the realm into which the protagonist enters is absolute, but one must bear in mind that Eliot's Absolute, the Logos, is outside of time, and yet "He has chosen to fulfill and reveal his purpose in time"\(^91\). As Elizabeth Drew observes, Eliot's final world is "the point of intersection between time and the timeless, between stillness and movement, and partakes of the qualities of both the eternal unmoving Logos and the inescapable world of time and movement: 'only through time time is conquered'".\(^92\)

As such, Harry's "liberation" should be interpreted not in the sense of an escape from time but in the sense of a release from a chaotic and patternless time-world, or as Harry puts it, from the "awful privacy/of the insane mind."\(^93\) Though the way of negation appears inhuman from a naturalistic point of view "Love compels cruelty/To those who do not understand love"\(^94\), its purpose is to develop a deeper vision of the meaning of love, so that the knowledge that Harry has to gain out of his pilgrimage may redeem the past and fructify in the lives of others. Harry is aware that the "way out of defilement", which he has chosen, "leads in the end to reconciliation". As in St. John's way of renunciation, "detachment from the images


\(^91\) W.V. Spanos, op. cit., p.211


\(^93\) CPP, p.334.

\(^94\) Ibid., p.337.
of the created order is a high strategy to repossess them, as they really are.  
So in the case of the Eliot protagonist, departure from the family is ultimately to lead to a more meaningful reunion.

It has to be admitted, however, that Eliot has not been able to fully work out the redemptive pattern which ends in reconciliation. He himself indicates an awareness of this fact when he writes that the audience is “left in a divided frame of mind, not knowing whether to consider the play the tragedy of the mother or the salvation of the son”, and elsewhere, that “Harry’s career needs to be completed by an Orestes or an Oedipus at Colonus”. But, in spite of this weakness, the theme of spiritual election and effect on the secular social world is very much evident in the play. The significant feature of The Family Reunion is, in the words of A.D. Moody, “the effort to relate the private experience to a society, and to give it a public value.” The learned critic goes on to add:

Harry finds that he is not an isolated victim with a merely private problem, but representative of a common experience of disappointment in love or of lovelessness. It is implied then that his following the way of purgation and reconciliation will be the saving of others, that it will be an act of Incarnation valid for the human family.

The closing scene of the play reveals that just as Harry’s departure is a kind of beginning for himself, so, in another sense, it is for the family also. With Harry’s discovery of direction, Agatha is relieved of the burden of the family’s sin, and Mary is freed from the role imposed on her by Amy to assume her own identity and pursue a new life. Even the spiritually blind quartet of the aunts and uncles perceive, even faintly, the spiritual dimension of life. Amy herself realizes her limitations and arrives


96. “Poetry and Drama,” On Poetry and Poets, p.84.


99. Ibid.
at a perceptible understanding:

At my age, I only just begin to apprehend the truth
About things too late to mend:...

I always wanted too much for my children
More than life can give.\(^{100}\)

Similarly, Charles too has vague intimations of understanding:

It's very odd,
But I am beginning to feel, just beginning to feel
That there is something I could understand, if I were told it.
But I am not sure that I want to know:...

And now I don’t feel safe. As if the earth should open
Right to the centre, as I was about to cross Pall Mall.

What if every moment were like that, if one were awake?\(^{101}\)

As if to show that spiritual awareness is not a matter of education or social position, Eliot has endowed Downing, the ordinary man, with extra-ordinary awareness. Like Agatha, and perhaps Mary, he too has been able to see the Furies. Only a man of understanding can make the following observation:

I’ve always said, whatever happened to his Lordship
Was just a kind of preparation for something else.
I’ve no gift of language, but I’m sure of what I mean.
We most of us seem to live according to circumstance,
But with people like him, there is something inside them
That accounts for what happens to them.\(^{102}\)

Eliot’s endowing an ordinary man like Downing with spiritual perception marks,

\(^{100}\) CPP, p.345.
\(^{101}\) Ibid., pp.345-346.
\(^{102}\) Ibid., p.346
according to David Ward, the beginning of "the humanizing of Eliot's drama"\textsuperscript{103}, which went on to acquire an increasing force in his later plays. More significantly, the chorus of the aunts and uncles who, as Harry says, never "awakened to the nightmare" come to acknowledge, by the time of Harry's departure, the labyrinth in which they are lost. This is evident in the final chorus in which their existential anguish is most clearly revealed:

We do not like the maze in the garden, because it too closely resembles the maze in the brain.

We understand the ordinary business of living,
We know how to work the machine,
We can usually avoid accidents,
We are insured against fire,

But not against the act of God.

We have suffered far more than a personal loss
We have lost our way in the dark.\textsuperscript{104}

Like the women and priests in \textit{Murder in the Cathedral}, the aunts and uncles have attained at least limited enlightenment as a result of Harry's struggle. The last line spoken by the chorus--"But we must adjust ourselves to the moment: we must do the right thing"\textsuperscript{105}--is itself a positive act. It should also be kept in mind that Harry's words to his mother--"Until I come again"\textsuperscript{106}, suggest that he will eventually come back to Wishwood, and that his perfected vision will have a fructifying effect on the lives of the community. Thus, as William V. Spanos has observed, "Harry's "liberation" must be seen as the discovery of sanity and order in the time world, of a harmony in which

\textsuperscript{103} \textit{T.S. Eliot: Between Two Worlds}, p.219  \hspace{1cm} \textsuperscript{104} CPP, pp.348-349.
\textsuperscript{105} Ibid., p.349  \hspace{1cm} \textsuperscript{106} Ibid., p.343.
the radical contradictions of human life—evil and good, change and permanence, motion
and stillness—are resolved; in short, in the discovery that the Incarnation, the supreme
act of Love, redeems fallen time and absorbs it into the divine economy.107

The foregoing analysis of *The Family Reunion* reveals that Eliot’s religio-
social vision enables him to use the Greek myth in such a manner as to render it an
organic part of the reality imitated. The under pattern of redemption in the play
artistically assimilates the modern psychological problem into the Christian design.
Harry is a neurotic, but his neurosis has its source in original sin; his moment of
illumination brings sanity, but sanity is the awareness of Incarnation, of an apprehension
of the temporal and the timeless together. In this way, Eliot has tried to achieve a
synthesis of his religious belief and his social vision. It is to be noted, however that in
this effort, some of his own devices have turned out to be detrimental. For example, the
device of “lyrical duet” went against his ideal of fusing the poetic and the dramatic
patterns and produced passages that can be called “hardly more than passages of
poetry” 108 In the same way, the element of ritual visibly present at a number of places,
the communal choruses, and the overt symbolizing prevents Eliot from achieving a
complete synthesis of the natural and the supernatural. Hence, in the plays to come, Eliot
was to overcome these faults so that the meaning and the dramatic action, in other
words, belief and social vision, could be more fully integrated.

This should, however, not lead us to minimize the achievement of *The Family
Reunion*. In fact, it registers a significant advance upon the earlier play, *Murder in the
cathedral* in terms of Eliot’s religio-social vision. Part of its power lies in the fact that it
grew out of the poet’s own experiences in life. Lyndall Gordon considers it the “most
autobiographical” of Eliot’s plays, and discovers striking similarities between Harry’s
and Eliot’s predicaments—“a family who had disapproved of the hero’s marriage, who
had not attended it, and were glad it was over; a marriage linked with exile; a wife
possessive, shivering with nerves, doomed, closely modeled on Vivienne; and a waiting
woman, no longer young, with close ties to the hero’s family, who would have been the

legitimate choice". Gordon further points out that the "problem for Harry, as for Eliot himself, was how to cope with two separate lives: the stained years abroad and the distant past at home".

These facts of the poet's life are assimilated and given a universal dimension in the play which "renders intelligible, self-complete, in the sunlight, the conviction of what is wrong with the world, together with what is needed to set it right". Robert J. Andreach seems perfectly right when he observes that in *The Family Reunion*, "Eliot is drawing the audience, who has lost not merely the humility to admit sin but even the belief in sin, into the discovery that the way to break out of the sterility of contemporary life's endless cycles of drugs is the spiritual life." This endeavour of Eliot, it should be emphasized, is suggestive of his religio-social vision. One tends to agree with D.E. Jones that as "a profound exploration of a complex spiritual state, and an attempt to communicate with the audience on the level of spiritual experience, *The Family Reunion* is unique in our drama". Despite his recognition of the play's flaws, Eliot himself commented that "*The Family Reunion* is still the best of my plays in the way of potry". As a matter of fact, the play embodies a unique combination of psychological intensity, poetic beauty, and spiritual insight, and successfully presents it in a dramatic form. The two worlds of psychic bondage and spiritual liberation are interwoven in such a way that Eliot's religio-social vision is brought out in a sharp dramatic focus.

110. Ibid., p.81.