Chapter I

Introduction

If I had to draw a picture of the person of Comedy it is so I should like to draw it; the tears of laughter running down the face, one hand still lying on the tragic page which so nearly contained the answer, the lips about to frame the great revelation, only to find it gone as disconcertingly as a chair twitched away when we want to sit down.

- Christopher Fry

Christopher Fry’s approach to comedy is essentially one that is aware of tragedy. His verse drama caters to the Horatian dictum of dulce et utile, delighting with its humour and instructing with its deeper levels of meaning. The criticism directed at Fry’s work has mainly been that most of his plays, with their accent on words, are dull on stage. His comedies were theatrical fashion especially from the late ‘40s to the early ‘50s, but gradually gave place to the popularity of the political drama and that which featured the angry young man. However it must be accepted that looked at from the point of view of literature, Fry’s plays retain relevance “as an example of one way in which the idea of a poetic drama was understood” (206). Their worth also lies in the truths of life which Fry conveys through the depiction of human actions and situations.

Fry’s literary career, when he wrote plays for the theatre, spans a period of more than thirty-three years. His involvement with play writing and the theatre continues till the time of the writing of this thesis. Fry wrote The Boy with a Cart in 1937, The Firstborn in 1945, A Phoenix Too Frequent in 1946, Thor, with Angels in 1948 and The Lady’s Not for Burning in 1949. The 1950s brought three plays Venus Observed (1950), A Sleep of Prisoners (1951) and The Dark is Light Enough (1955). Curtmantle was
written in 1961 and *A Yard of Sun* in 1970. Besides these, Fry translated Anouilh’s plays *L’invitation au Chateau* as *Ring Round the Moon* in 1950, and *L’alouette* as *The Lark* in 1955. He also translated Jean Giraudoux’s *La querre de Troie n’aura pas lieu* as *Tiger at the Gates* (1955) and *Pour Lucrece* as *Duel of Angels* (1958) as well as Ibsen’s *Peer Gynt*. Fry’s earlier works include *Youth and Peregrines* written in 1924 and produced in 1934, and the words and music for the Andre Charlot Revue *She Shall have Music* produced in 1935 at Saville Theatre, London. He also produced in 1939, three pageants, *The Tower* at Tewkesbury, *Thursday’s Child* in London and *The Town* in Tewkesbury Abbey. Fry wrote the screenplay for the documentary *The Queen is Crowned* in 1953, the films *The Beggar’s Opera* in 1953, *Ben Hur* in 1959, *Barabbas* in 1962 and *The Bible* in 1966. His television plays include *The Canary* (1950), *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall* (1968) and *The Brontes of Haworth* (4 plays) (1973). In 1986 he wrote *One Thing More or Caedmon Construed* for the BBC. Fry’s plays still retain their popularity. In July 1988 *Ring Round the Moon* was staged followed closely by a revival of *A Phoenix Too Frequent*. *One Thing More* was produced in London at the beginning of November 1988 and went well. The continued interest in Fry’s plays recall J. C. Trewin’s words “He can be a very serious writer indeed; posterity will recognise this… and when the transients have faded into the dark he will still remain” (102).

The aim of this thesis is to make a study of the ten original stage plays, excluding the translations and the television and radio plays. The plays that will be studied are *The Boy with a Cart* (1937), *The Firstborn* (1945), *A Phoenix Too Frequent* (1946), *Thor, with Angels* (1948), *The Lady’s Not for Burning* (1949), *Venus Observed* (1950), *A Sleep
Christopher Fry was born on 18\textsuperscript{th} December 1907 at 65 Sussex Place, Bristol to Charles John Harris and Emma Marguerite Hammond. Fry later used the surname Fry which was his grandmother’s maiden name. Charles Harris was builder’s clerk and later, builder. But he found his true calling as a lay reader, serving first at Marwood and then at Bristol. Both Fry’s parents, especially his father, influenced Fry in his faith and his attitude towards man. Though his father died in 1911 when Fry was four, he left a lasting impression on his mind. Fry recalls the words from one of his father’s early sermons. Fry states in \textit{Can You Find Me: A Family History}, “We are most Christian when we look around for the wounds and miseries of our friends and neighbours and do our best to heal them (2), as well as “without love a man has no moral worth” (192). The emphasis is on acts of Christianity rather than dogma as well as the need for love. This was later to find expression in Fry’s plays. Another influence in his life was his spinster aunt Ada Louise who taught him as a child, (53) but whose adherence to the dogmas of Christianity Fry moved away from. Fry observes that he thought of God in terms of space and light rather than as one who had interest in routine worship. Though he had an uneasy respect of his aunt’s mode of worship, he was impatient of the airless text-ridden nature of her belief which was much removed from the concept of worshipping God in spirit and truth. The supportive roles which the women very naturally assume in Fry’s plays have their roots in the constructive influence of the women in Fry’s own life. They were his mother, his aunt, Ellen Earle-maid at his grandparents Harris’ home and whom he loved dearly,
Miss Walmsley, Principal of Modern School, Miss Spence who brought words into vivid life for him\textsuperscript{18} and Miss Coleman his elocution teacher.

When Fry left Bedford Modern School in 1926, he taught at the Bedford Froebel Kindergarten for a year. He later took up acting and also worked in an office at Bath. From 1928 to 1931 he was schoolmaster at Hazelwood School in Surrey. For a year he worked as secretary to Rodney Bennet. He was the founding Director, Tunbridge Wells Repertory Players from 1932 to 1935 and lecturer and editor of School magazines, Dr. Barnardo’s Homes from 1934 to 1939. From 1940 to 1944 he served in the Non-Combatant Corps clearing bomb debris. He was Visiting Director of Oxford Playhouse from 1945 to 1946 and Staff Dramatist in 1947, of the Arts Theatre Club, London. Fry’s reputation as a dramatist was firmly established with the popularity of *The Lady’s Not for Burning* in 1949. He has also won a number of awards. He was the recipient of the Shaw Prize Fund Award in 1948, The Foyle Poetry Prize in 1951, The New York Drama Critics Circle Award in 1951, 1952 and 1956, the Queen’s Gold Medal for Poetry in 1962 and the Heinemann Award in 1962. Fry who married Phyllis Marjorie Hart in 1936, survives his wife who died in 1987.

Lascelles Abercrombie observes that the object of the poetic drama is to give an exhibition of life intensified or “life supposed at a higher pressure than actuality” (157). Poetic drama aims at forcing us into astonishment which makes us aware of the splendid fact that we are alive.

The poetic drama had been attempted as early as The Romantics. Shelley wrote *The Cenci*. In the Victorian Age Tennyson wrote *Queen Mary* and Browning, *Strafford*. Yeats revived poetic drama with *The Land of Heart’s Desire* and *Deidre*. In the early
twentieth century Stephen Phillips produced *Herod* in the manner of Dryden’s heroic plays. Other verse dramatists were John Masefield with *The Tragedy of Nan* and *The Trial of Jesus*, Gibson with *Stonefields*, Drinkwater with *X=O* and Gordon Bottomley with *Midsummer’s Eve*. These plays did not create a very great impact. Genuine interest in poetic drama was evoked with the arrival of T. S. Eliot’s *Murder in the Cathedral* in 1935.

Bamber Gascoigne commenting on the movement in the theatre says that the 1920’s reflected the disillusionment of the war with its amazed, disapproving yet unconstructive ‘why’. He also notes that the theatre of the 1930’s called for action, that of the 1940’s concentrated on the individual caught up in the action and the post war theatre was left with presenting the problem of the individual, which was that of inaction. It is to Fry’s credit that through the years from 1935 to 1970, he wrote in verse producing ten plays for the theatre, maintaining a fair amount of popularity and his position as an acknowledged dramatist. This was during a time which brought out diverse plays as *The Dog Beneath The Skin* (Auden and Isherwood, 1935), *Murder in the Cathedral* (T. S. Eliot, 1935), *In The Frontier* (Auden and Isherwood, 1938), *The Cocktail Party* (T. S. Eliot, 1949), *Look Back in Anger* (John Osborne, 1956), *A Man for All Seasons* (Robert Bolt, 1960), *Chicken Soup with Barley* (Arnold Wesker, 1958) and *The Caretaker* (Harold Pinter, 1960). *One Thing More* written for the B. B. C. in 1986 has a poetic prose with Caedmon’s songs in verse. Fry’s response to the question as to why he writes in verse is: “It happens that only poetry is for me, and I’ve never written a prose piece of my own” (134).
Writing on the nature of Fry’s plays, Raymond Williams observes that Fry’s drama has descended from Wilde and Shaw. Fry himself notes.

It is never really possible to know how much one has been affected by authors of the past. When I directed plays in the theatre, I was having to do with a great many different dramatists, from the Elizabethans, through the Restoration comedies, to Ibsen and Shaw. Any or all of these may have left their mark. As T. S. Eliot certainly did. (7)

Fry’s intention in the use of verse in drama is very akin to that of Eliot. They both use a form of orthodox Christian belief to provide the metaphysical basis for their drama which centers on man’s spiritual alienation arising from estrangement from God. Eliot felt that Cathedral drama and West end drama could to be regarded with different attitudes, but that drama should strive towards a reintegration of life. He further believed that poetry in the theatre should be “a humble shadow or analogy of the Incarnation whereby the human is taken up in the divine.” He emphasized that if we want to get at the permanent and universal, we tend to express ourselves in verse. For Fry comedy is “the comment on the human dilemma”. The world for Fry had deeps and shadows of mystery and what he seeks to show is not reality, the false God, the dull eye of custom, but the inner reality. He justifies the use of poetry in these words, “Well, if we have to be born into a world as wildly unprosaic as this one, what else can be done, if we are to be realistic.”

The criticism leveled at Fry has been largely on his emphasis on words. J. Chiari observes that Fry uses poetry for poetry’s sake and sometimes as decoration and virtuosity. According to him the words seem to hover above the characters while the characters themselves lack emotion at times. But Fry counters this charge by his words.
But we know that words and actions are not unrelated to each other. One illuminates the other; and the full significance of action can be explored only by word. Poetry in the theatre is the action of listening. It is an unrolling exploration. So the general lines of the play, the shape of the story, the disposition of the characters should point and implicate by their actions and their wide uses, the texture of the poetry.

Denis Donoghue is undoubtedly Fry’s severest critic, pronouncing his verse to be the “wanton prancing of words” and his plays marked by “mere whimsy and spurious joviality” (232). More harsh is his criticism that one of the most disquieting facts about contemporary theatre is that Christopher Fry had acquired some reputation as a dramatist on the strength of such plays as _Venus Observed_ and _The Lady’s Not for Burning_. Raymond Williams in his evaluation observes that “the drama is not in the verse as verse; its root in moods and phrases, which the verse bears but does not embody” (208). He however qualifies that it is admissible though it is different kind of dramatic verse lacking reference to some orthodox canon.

Fry has an answer to these judgements when he says:

>The words are (often) an ornament on the meaning… though almost as often I have meant the ornament to be, dramatically or comedically, an essential part of the meaning, and in my more sanguine moments I think the words are as exact to my purpose, as I could make them at the time of writing. (29)

John Russell Brown’s praise is rather tongue-in-cheek as he says that though Fry’s verse plays, especially the seasonal plays _Venus Observed_ and _The Dark is Light Enough_ showed were not hampered by the presence of luminaries such as John Gielgud, Laurence Olivier and Edith Evans. Though Brown declares that Fry’s verse is weak, decorating romantic action, rather than touching new dramatic experience, he concedes
that the plays have the dominating themes of restlessness and a loss of direction. John
Elsom remarks that the moralizing of all poetic drama in general tended to be pious than
stimulating. He calls Fry “a flamboyant phrasemaker” (67) but adds that for Fry, art
implies the expression of fundaments and timeless values. Benedict Nightingale while
of opinion that Fry’s verbal effects are merely frolicsome and the poetic effects appear
unrelated to the character of the speaker and the nature of his feeling, grants that the
poetic effects are sometime good and functional, reflecting Fry’s absorption with the
world’s incongruities. Nightingale also acknowledges that Fry is capable of an infectious
exuberance that successfully affirms his belief in the essential goodness of things.

It may be said that Fry’s plays can be categorized as verse drama where the verse
is an arrangement of ideas in metrical form with or without rhyme and similar devices,
which generally involves more than one principal meaning. That Fry means more than
he says is evident from his plays which stress that the problems of life have to be worked
out rather than be answered with a willing submission to death. Arnold Hinchliffe agrees
with Derek Stanford who says that Fry offered mystery instead of deterministic universe.
Hinchliffe also points out that it is to Fry’s credit that “he bridged the gap between realist
plays of commercial theatre and literary verse drama, as few other writers have done”
(54). Raymond Williams, though cautious in his approbation, does allow that A Sleep of
Prisoners is an interesting experiment, a more serious design and rooted in an authentic
crisis of feeling. It is interesting to note that Williams observes that the sense of loss of
rootedness, though offered diffidently as an element of drama, is nonetheless genuine.
This is an important aspect of Fry’s plays, as he is indeed concerned with the problem of
good and evil. In a note on Shakespeare’s Hamlet Fry writes:
Perhaps it is curious, but I believe it to be true, that to a man innerly dead the problem of good and evil comes particularly poignantly. To the man who has no very discernible hint of death in him, good and evil are dealt with straightly and according to his lights; for him they’re no problem. But let a man’s being withdraw from life, ever so little, and he begins to be walled up in this ubiquitous riddle. (19)

In the same extract is found Fry’s experience with the severe sheel-shock cases in the hospital where he stayed. The devastation of war on men physically, mentally and worse, spiritually, is recorded by Fry…” … a good many men were there who had attempted suicide. They could see no particular reason for any life they might lead in the future, or no outcome for mankind generally, unless some clear outlines could be put to the inextricably wrestling muscles of good and evil” (19).

Fry means that in this age so conscious of doom we are all Hamlet in part. It is this concern with the awareness of good and evil and of the essential goodness of things and men that find voice in his verse plays. Fry exposes through a variety of characters man’s sense of being alien, apart or isolated when he is confronted with the illogical, the absurd or irrational. Cymen of Thor, with Angels expresses his anguish “You make us to be the eternal alien/In our own world. ” (TWA 94)

The Duke of Altair in Venus Observed sees the world as “this great orphanage where no one knows his origin and no one comes to claim him. (VO 237). Life is a perplexing problem where … the question is a man’s Estrangement in a world where everything else conforms. (VO 201).

Fry pinpoints the cause of this sense of alienation and anguish as the spiritual void that man experiences. The devaluation of human life after the two world wars with their mass slaughter and destruction was the result of man moving away from good towards evil, seen in the desire for aggrandizement of territory, wealth and power. When man
feeds the self or the ego and submits to baser passions, he sins against his maker. As Ray Orley puts it: “The Christian idea of sin involves man’s voluntary alienation of himself from his God” (5). Fry believes in providential will, and that fragmentation is the result of man’s voluntary separation from goodness and god. But he is also convinced that man is essentially good and hence can strive to return to a state of blessedness. Fry believes, with Hegel, that this experience of alienation is a necessary step in spiritual growth. Like Kierkegaard who was convinced that the “leap of faith” could be made, Fry demonstrates that alienation, though inevitable, is temporary and can be overcome provided man makes a conscious effort. The individual may be reintegrated as a person, as well as into society. It is this persuasion that determines the nature of Fry’s comedy which is one that affirms the vital continuity of life. Fry notes that the difference between tragedy and comedy is the difference between experience and intuition, adding that. In the experience we strive against every condition of our animal life; against death, against the frustration of ambition, against the instability of human love. In the intuition we trust the arduous eccentricities we’re born to, and see the oddness of a creature who has never got acclimatized to being created. John Mander observes that “Any writer is committed in the sense that his writing seeks value in a valueless world. Commitment is universal and the poet of subjectivity chooses to explore its inner rather than outer face”(4).

Christopher Fry is a committed writer and a subjective one who explores the inner reality as his words on the theatre and drama show. If the theatre can help us to see ourselves and the world freshly, as though we had just rounded the corner into life, it will be what entertainment should be, a holiday which sets us up to continue living at the top
of our bent, and worth I think, any amount of admonition and prophecy or the photographic likeness of how we appear by custom.

For the purpose of the study of Fry’s plays, the researcher has related Fry’s Providential vision to Brian Baxter’s theory of the three forms of ontological life which regards god as the other. Fry’s conviction is the Christian one which sees man as having voluntarily distanced himself from God. Estrangement from God brings alienation. Man has to move back to his original state of oneness with God. The first of the three ontological forms of life sees man in non-autonomous existence. God is all powerful and all man’s actions are other directed. There is willing submission to, or adoration of God. In the autonomous existence the attitude to God as the Other is that of hostility or indifference, and all actions are aimed at self-gratification. In the semi-autonomous existence the relationship of man towards God is one of love and respect. Man’s actions are attempted with God’s help or support. Man regards God as Father and Friends. Fry has a firm belief that man needs God’s support, and should look to God as a father and partner in his journey through life. This is as seen in the semi-autonomous existence. In some of Fry’s plays can be traced the movement of the individual from the autonomous existence to the semi-autonomous state of existence.

Fry’s conviction that alienation can be overcome necessarily implies a replacement in the state of being of the individual who has transcended alienation. This can be linked to Kenneth Keniston’s categories concerning alienation as Focus, Mode, agent and Replacement, that is, what one is alienated from, the manifestation of alienation, the agent that causes alienation and the replacement, after alienation. In Fry’s
plays the characters who undergo alienation can be seen to have a focus, mode and agent and the majority of them, who overcome fragmentation have replacement.

The plays demonstrate Fry’s persuasion that love is a power that can counter and destroy feelings of alienation, bringing about a replacement or new relationship into the life of the alienated individual. This is not mere conjecture or preaching. Fry sees love as a constructive cosmic force capable of integrating individuals and society. This finds a sociological basis in Erich Fromm’s statement, “There is only one passion which satisfies man’s need to unite himself with the world, and to acquire at the same time a sense of integrity and individuality, and this is love” (32).

Fromm says that love is union with somebody or something outside oneself under the condition of retaining the separateness and integrity of one’s own self. He also emphasizes that love is the only sane and satisfactory answer to the problem of human existence and any society which excludes the growth and development of love will perish in the long run. Fromm emphatically believes: “Indeed to speak of love is not ‘preaching’ for the simple reason that it means to speak of the ultimate and real need in every human” (34). Like Fry, Fromm feels that the obscuring of the need for love does not mean that it is absent, adding that. To analyse the nature of love is to discover its general absence today and to criticize the social conditions which are responsible for this absence. To have faith in the possibility of love as a social and not only exceptional individual phenomenon is a rational faith based on the insight into the very nature of man.
These words are pertinent to the understanding of Fry’s plays. Through the plays Fry shows that love is the vital power which works individual and social reintegration. It is the helper in “the struggle out of the dark into light, out of chaos into creation.

This thesis intends establishing that there is progress from alienation to de-alienation in the lives of the characters portrayed. Fry is conscious of the duality of man’s nature as well as his paradoxical situation. He seeks to show that alienation is indeed a part of man’s life but man can transcend it. Fry is no glib optimist seeking to blinker man against reality. He acknowledges the phenomenon of fragmentation. But he also believes that love is the force that can destroy fragmentation. In the majority of his plays women epitomize love and act as instruments of de-alienation. The Bible has great influence on Fry in his belief in the possibility of de-alienation. The structure of the plays and the language and imagery used also convey this theme. Perceiving that man is nothing, Fry exposes through his characters that man can persevere and be everything, through self-realization, self-acceptance, acceptance of others and the act of fidelity. Through the vehicle of comedy, Fry enjoins man to make a double recovery in re-discovering the self and acknowledging the love of God.

The chapters that follow work out the hypothesis stated above. Chapter II sets forth that there is a movement from alienation to de-alienation in the plays of Fry. The phenomenon of alienation is first explained. The origins of alienation, its nature and its inevitable presence in the life of man are discussed. Various definitions and opinions regarding alienation are also presented. The twentieth century concern with alienation due to mechanization and war is mentioned. Kierkegaard’s view that commitment can overcome alienation, as well as Erich Fromm’s definition of fragmentation and the
remedy he offers through the practice of love are emphasized on. Fry’s view is that the transcending of alienation is possibility, and this, Fry demonstrates through comedy. The Absurdists’ and Existentialists’ view of alienation and the phenomenon of self-alienation are touched upon. Fry’s belief which is in accord with Christian existentialism is reinforced by the concurring views of various philosophers and men of religion. Fry’s conviction that the sense of wonder and acceptance of life can take man beyond fragmentation is shown. The progression from alienation to de-alienation in the characters is traced, linking Fry’s idea of Providential will with Brian Baxter’s theory of the three forms of ontological life and Kenneth Keniston’s categories of focus, mode, agent and replacement. It is demonstrated that the number of the men characters who undergo alienation in Fry’s plays, and their degree of alienation are greater than the number of women characters who experience the same. The characters are studied in the decreasing order of the degree or intensity of alienation suffered. The women characters who undergo alienation are then studied. Mention is also made of those characters who do not emerge from isolation. The first part of the hypothesis, that there is a progress from alienation to de-alienation in the lives of the characters portrayed, is thus proved.

Chapter III deals with love and women as instruments of de-alienation and seeks to prove the second part of the hypothesis that Fry depicts love as the force that can counter alienation and women as epitomes of love who act as instruments of de-alienation. The definition of love is given. It is presented as a creative force in concurrence with the views of various religious, philosophical, social and psychological writers of the East and the west. Mention is made and a definition given of the ‘involved spectator’ a characteristic feature of Fry’s plays. The women characters are studied
according to the types of love they embody. For this purpose it has been sought to group them into different categories which overlap in some instances. Comparisons and contrasts with characters of other plays are also made where relevant. This is followed by a presentation of women characters who undergo alienation, the degree to which this affects their actions and their final reintegration. It is also pointed out how and to what extent they differ from the men characters who experience fragmentation.

Chapter IV seeks to prove that the Bible has had a strong influence on Fry as a dramatist. It evinces that Fry’s approach is fundamentally a moral one without being overly moral. The plays are explained in the light of their affinity to the Bible. The plays are grouped in the following order –the religious plays *The Firstborn*, *A Sleep of Prisoner*, *The Boy with a Cart* and *Thor, with Angels*; the secular play with its underlying religious theme *A Phoenix Too Frequent*, the seasonal plays *The Dark is Light Enough*, *The Lady's Not for Burning*, *A Yard of Sun* and *Venus Observed* and the historical play *Curtmantle*. Each play is explained with the emphasis on the Biblical theme, if present. Fry’s use of Biblical quotations, allusions, images, cadences and echoes is pointed out. Through the explication of the texts of the plays it is established that Fry is aware of and acknowledges man’s experience of existential alienation. But his belief in the working of God’s will and the providential vision of the universe is pertinent to the evolution from fragmentation to reintegration seen in his plays. That the Bible has great influence on Fry in his belief in the possibility of de-alienation is thus proved.

The conclusion presents a brief summing up of each chapter. It demonstrates how Fry differs from the Absurdists in his belief in the possibility of overcoming alienation as well as his use of language as a means to emerge from isolation. The concluding chapter
also emphasizes that Fry is a writer whose works, which depict inner reality and the mystery of life, are relevant to the twentieth century and for all time.