CHAPTER VI

AN ARTISTIC FAILURE - 'THE FAMILY REUNION'
It is apt that the highly theatrical myth of Orestes should appear on the stage, when theatre is revived after centuries, in the twentieth century. Thus the English, French and American playwrights produced the modern versions of the myth at about the same time. *The Family Reunion*, the English drama, which we are going to deal with, combines another famous myth with the myth of Orestes. In this Christianized drawing-room version, the myths suffer a loss of grandeur and relevance. It depicts the failure of Eliot as a dramatist rather than the inadaptability of the myths to the modern stage.

By the character cast and by the staging of some parallel situations Eliot has succeeded in giving his play a similarity to the myth of Orestes and its first dramatization, *The Orestes*. So critics are generally led to believe that the play is the dramatization of the myth of Orestes. For example, Helen Gardner writes, "What Greek influence there is in this play is to be looked for in the link between the plot and the Orestes myth," though she adds that it "seems to me to be quite superficial."  Similarly D.E. Jones, another major critic on T.S. Eliot takes it for granted that our play is in

the tradition of the myth of Orestes. According to him, "It will be seen from the summary of the Oresteia that the action of The Family Reunion corresponds to the action of Choephoroe more than any other part of the trilogy." David Ward also is one among the many who finds the structure of Aeschylus' tragedy beneath the surface. Carol Smith is going too far when he says that, "In The Family Reunion, the curse of the house of Atreus becomes original sin, and the father revenged becomes the heavenly Father."

The myth of Orestes and the plays that follow the tradition, accepting it as an archetypal pattern, have the essential structure of a revenge plot. It always shows the father being supplanted, and the son avenging the murder of his father. The hero is driven to perform the act of revenge by all earthly and heavenly forces. The question that is invariably found in all the tragedies that take the structure from the Orestes myth is whether the action is right or wrong. If in the play the father is not murdered and no act of retribution is required of the hero, can it be a dramatization of our myth?

Sin and expiation is the theme of *The Family Reunion* as T.S. Eliot himself declares through Agatha:

> What we have written is not a story of detection, 
> Of crime and punishment, but of sin and expiation.\(^5\)

The plot structure followed by Eliot, deliberately or not, is that of another myth and its dramatic version, the *Oedipus Rex*. Thus knowing the true identity of oneself and in the process, the truth is the essence of the play. The action of the play is just the acquiring of knowledge from different quarters, that is, from different characters. But this structure also is not complete in the play for the hero is not allowed to commit a crime before or after the action commences.

The sin that is expiated by the hero is not his own, and thus he also becomes a Christ figure. Harry says:

> It is not my conscience, 
> Not my mind, that is deceased, but the world I have to live in.\(^6\)

Harry also echoes the feelings of Hamlet through almost the same language. When Harry purges the world around him through his suffering he certainly reflects the sacrificial lamb. Thus shifting from one convention to the other, and one structure to the other the playwright confuses himself and the readers.

6. Ibid., p. 67.
When the other dramatists humanize the abstract elements for their plays Eliot dehumanizes the everyday characters to give them a greater relevance and to achieve some correlation between his drama and the myth. All the characters in the play begin as ordinary people but as the play proceeds some of them acquire a symbolic value and the others lose their significance as characters to become a chorus. Amy, Agatha and Harry are the elevated characters while Charles, Gerald, Ivy and Violet are those transformed into a chorus.

In the myth or in the ancient dramas, any decision taken by the hero will affect the future of the state represented in the drama by the chorus and so they are emotionally involved in the action. In The Family Reunion they are "here at Amy's command to play an unread part in some monstrous farce." Whatever Harry does, will not influence the chorus—characters primarily because they are outsiders who go back to their respective dwellings after the action of the play. Being relatives of the hero they are interested in the affairs of him, but they are the least dependent on him. The only use of chorus in the play is to contrast them for whom all the events are "external," with the spiritual agony of the central characters.

The beginning of the play, when all the characters eagerly wait for the arrival of the saviour of the house of Monchensey closely resembles the waiting of Argives for the coming of Orestes. "The opening scene of the play provides abundant examples of the correspondences the playwright wished to establish. The time of the action is late March, the time of the spring fertility ceremonies and, in corresponding Christian terms, of Easter." Eliot has made a deliberate attempt to give the birth-day celebrations of Amy, a colour of the rites of spring. This birth-day party is even more than the ordinary spring festival. Amy says,

"It will be the first time
For eight years that we have all been together"

implying the expectation of a new man to take charges of the things at Wishwood in correspondence with the arrival of the new king at the end of eight years in a country where octennial kingship prevails. Orestes' return after eight years was not stressed in the other plays, but is revived by Eliot.

Amy is the old principle keeping the memory of her prime by maintaining the place "changeless" and at the same time nursing a desire that a new principle should come. She is convinced that her end is near as she says:

"I am an old woman.
They can give no further advice when I'm dead,"
and is impatient that the successor has not yet come:
Will the spring never come? I am cold.\textsuperscript{11}

In stature and in her position as a value to be destroyed
she is Clytaemnestra, but not in the essence. She kept her
husband, inspite of the disharmony in the nuptial life, and
forced children upon him.

As a woman who had fallen in love with the dead lord,
Agatha is made the Cassandra of the myth. But, unlike
Cassandra, the modern version of her is not killed; she is,
instead, invited for the family reunion. By guiding the
hero to the truth she is also playing the role of Athena in
the Aeschylian play. Mary "getting on for thirty" without
being married is the successor of Electra in that respect. Amy is
keeping her as a would be wife for Harry which both the young
people loathe. Once being loved by the hero, she is also the
modern copy of Ophelia, the other predecessor in the same line.
Anyhow, it is by introducing the Eumenides that Eliot declares
his play as the modern version of the myth.

The hero, who appears shortly after the commencement
of the play, is suffering from an intolerable guilty
consciousness:

\textsuperscript{11} Ibid., pp. 65 and 57.
It goes a good deal deeper
Than what people call their conscience; it is just the cancer
That eats away the self. 12

Harry thinks that it is the guilt of his wife's murder that
haunts him:

It was only reversing the senseless direction
For a momentary rest on the burning wheel
That cloudless night in the mid-Atlantic
When I pushed her over. 13

But after some time when he is closer to the truth Harry says:

Perhaps my life has only been a dream
Dreamt through me by the minds of others. Perhaps
I only dreamt I pushed her. 14

What Eliot himself says about the event makes it clear that
Harry is not directly responsible for the murder:

Suppose that the desire for her death was strong in
his mind, out of touch with reality in her company,
He is standing on the deck, perhaps a few feet away,
and she is leaning over the rail. She has sometimes
talked of suicide. The whole scene of pushing her

12, Ibid., p. 67.
13, Ibid., p. 66.
14, Ibid., p. 105.
over — or giving her just a little tip — passes through his mind. She is trying to play one of her comedies with him — to arouse any emotion in him is better than to feel that he is noticing her — and she over does it, and just at the moment, plump, she goes in. Harry thinks he has pushed her; and certainly, he has not called for help, or behaved in any normal way, to say nothing of jumping in after her. 15

Evidently the cause for the suffering is not the murder of his wife by Harry as imagined by him. But it is a fact that their married life was not happy and he had meditated upon the murder of his wife:

I had always supposed, wherever I went
That she would be with me; whatever I did
That she was unkillable. 16

From Agatha, the only one who has seen both the husband and the wife, we know that it was not the wife who was at fault in the failure of the conjugal life. According to her,


"It could not have been easy
Living with Harry. It's not what she did to Harry;
That's important, I think, but what he did to himself."\(^{17}\)

Something in his mind prevented him from loving his wife;
that something was haunting him all his life, hindering him
from leading a healthy and successful social life as complained
by Harry,

In the Java Straits, in the Sunda Sea,
In the sweet sickly tropical night, I knew they were
coming
In Italy, from behind the nightingale's thicket,
The eyes started at me, and corrupted that song;
Behind the palm trees in the Grand Hotel
They were always there. But did not see them.\(^{18}\)

If at all there is an action in the play it is the
finding out of the root of the sterility, the "contamination"
that eats away the person of Harry. Like Oedipus Harry also
is helped to find out the truth about himself by three charac-
ters. From Mary he understands that even in his childhood
he was possessed by Amy and that her will was imposed upon
him. He also realizes that he cannot have a normal relation-

\(^{17}\) Ibid., p. 76.
\(^{18}\) Ibid., p. 64
ship with any woman. Eliot says, "The scene with Mary is meant to bring out, as I am aware it fails to, the conflict inside him between (the) repulsion for Mary as a woman and the attraction which the normal part of him that is still left, feels towards her personally for the first time." He is on the verge of escaping from the suffering through the love of her, when the Furies interfere to disrupt the communication, and now he knows that he is incapable of a healthy love-life.

Doctor Warburton is summoned to see through the sickness of Harry, as Teiresias is sent for in the Oedipus Rex. With Warburton, Harry is shocked into the awareness that he was very much attached to the mother from his childhood:

Everything has always been referred back to mother.
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.

In response to this he tells Harry that his parents' married life was disharmonious:

You know that your mother
And your father were never happy together;
They separated by mutual consent.
And he went to live abroad. You were only a boy
When he died. 21

The words of Warburton remind Harry of a kiss by which Amy
took him for her love-object:

Yes, I see now, That night, when she kissed me,
I felt the trap close. 22

Probably why he was selected as the proper substitute for his
father also is there when Warburton tells Harry that the
father was "very much like you." 23 Now he understands why
his married life was a failure and why he is unable to love
a woman.

In the scene with Warburton, Harry remembers that
Agatha never visited Wishwood, whereas Ivy and Violet were
found there, and guesses that Agatha might have had a hand
in the disharmony of his parents' life. As a result of this,
his demand for explanation from Agatha is more a command
than a request:

You know what I want to know, and that is enough:
Warburton told me that, though he did not mean to.

21. Ibid., p. 91.
22. Ibid., p. 91.
23. Ibid., p. 93.
What I want to know is something I need to know,
And only you can tell me. I know that much. 24

Agatha tells him that she was in love with his father but adds that the love was not the cause but the fruit of the disharmony.

You see your mother as identified with this house —
It was not always so. There were many years
Before she succeeded in making terms with Wishwood,
Until she took your father's place, and reached the point where

Wishwood supported her and she supported Wishwood.
At first it was vacancy. A man and a woman
Married, alone in a lonely country house together,
For three years childless, learning the meaning of loneliness. 25

After finding out the cause for the bad time that has befallen the house and for his own agony Harry asks the central question that is taken directly from the mouth of Oedipus:

Tell me, who were my parents? 26

24. Ibid., p. 103.
25. Ibid., p. 104.
26. Ibid.
Knowing that from Agatha Harry finds himself in the position of Oedipus, less the murder of his father. He abandons his mother and goes to expiate the sin, and the mother dies in an inner room.

The simple and powerful structure and theme of Oedipus Rex is weakened and complicated by making Harry the consciousness and saviour of the family. Agatha tells Harry:

You are the consciousness of your unhappy family, Its bird sent flying through the purgatorial flame. Indeed it is possible. You may learn hereafter, Moving alone through flames of ice, chosen To resolve the enchantment under which we suffer. 27

If Harry is saving the house from a curse, what is the curse? D.E. Jones and Carol Smith are of the opinion that the curse expiated by Harry, is the Original Sin. 28 But do they forget that Christ has expiated it already? In his letter to Martin Browne, Eliot himself has cleared the doubt. "Harry (———) is really expiating the crime of having wanted to kill his wife, like his father before him. Only, his father did not succeed; he only dragged out a miserable existence first at Wishwood and then abroad. So the crime and

27. Ibid., p. 105.
necessity for expiation repeat themselves. Even if we take it for granted that the wished murder is the sin that is expiated the problems do not end there. In the drama we have observed that the wish "to kill the wife" was created by the situation. In a drama nothing happens without a reason. So we can safely say that Eliot has failed to give a beginning to the narrative past of the drama and to answer the question of motivation in the play.

Maybe because of the influence of Christianity and consciousness, there is no action in the play. Harry's father wished the killing of his wife and her child in the womb. Amy, we should assume, wished the death of her husband and his paramour. Harry wished the death of his wife and now wishes or causes the death of his mother. According to Christian concept this murderous desire may be a sin to be expiated. But if there is no character - situation interaction there cannot be drama. It is probably keeping this in mind that Eric Bentley says, "Eliot has never yet created a drama." 30

To use Eliot's own words which he used to criticize Hamlet, Harry is "dominated by an emotion which is inexpressible, because it is in excess of the facts as they appear." 31


From the very beginning of the play Harry appears to be tormented and behaves abnormally which leads the other characters to believe that he is mentally distracted, but his emotion is not properly defined or expressed. The hero who finds no way to express his emotion says:

*You are all people who® nothing has happened, at most a continual impact of external events. You have gone through life in sleep, Never woken to the nightmare. I tell you, life would be unendurable if you were wide awake.*

Failing to express himself he says "You do not know" which he repeats for times at different places. "The only way of expressing emotion in the form of art is by finding an "objective correlative;" in other words a set of objects, a situation, a chain of events which shall be the formula of that particular emotion; such that when the external facts, which might terminate in sensory experience, are given, the emotion is immediately evoked." T.S. Eliot does not succeed in finding an objective correlative to express the agony of the hero in *The Family Reunion.*

33. Ibid., pp. 65, 66, 79 and 80.
The greatest shock in the modern play is the presentation of the Eumenides. Unable to bring the rational, drawing-room version of the myth to a sufficient pitch of terror, he has drawn the curtains of the modern window to show beyond it the ancient daughters of the night. "He performs a sleight-of-hand, shifting from one convention to another, in the hope of creating by association the tragic shock when he could not elicit from his own play." It can be viewed as a "stuff" taken from the myth of Orestes "that the writer could not drag into light, contemplate or manipulate into art," as T.S. Eliot says about the Hamlet.

Material that Eliot swallowed from the Hamlet also is vomited out in the play without being digested, together with similar stuff from The Cretels and the Oedipus Rex. Harry's mental distraction closely resembles the "madness" of Hamlet. The recognition of Providence by Ivy when she says "I call it providential" and the words of Agatha that "The decision will be made by powers beyond us" can be traced in Hamlet's own words. The presentation of a rash Arthur and a mellow John is clearly parallel to that of Laertes and Fortinbras in the older play. Similarly, when Harry says,

"John shall be the master.
All I have is his. No harm can come to him.
What would destroy me will be life for John;
I am responsible for him. Why I have this election
I do not understand."

he is merely repeating Hamlet's dying words about Fortinbras, in a different syntax. The interesting thing is that the idea of great significance to the Hamlet is irrelevant in this play. In the same way Harry's decision that "I must follow the bright angels" is another way of presenting Horatio's prayer after the death of Hamlet.

The play fails to give us a tragic experience, because it is not a tragedy but a carpentry work. The Family Reunion almost ceases to exist when the contributions of the three great tragedians are removed from the play altogether.

We have already seen that Eliot fails to give a beginning, and to give a unity of experience; his attempt to give an end to the play proves equally unsuccessful. In a tragedy, it is through the fall of the hero that the sin is expiated and "pity and terror" are created in us. But in Eliot's play the hero expiates the sin without the fall.

"We can use psychological terms and say that Harry's departure

38. Ibid., p. 111.
39. Ibid.
is an act by which he expresses the end of his mother-fixation, or we can use religious terms and say that Harry's departure expresses his discovery that his obligation is not to his mother, but to God; that he is one of those who are called to 'leave all and follow.' Neither conception gives us a true ending to a play. When confronted with the question, where Harry follows "the bright angels" Eliot answered: "I think he and the chauffeur go off and get jobs in the East End." From this we can understand where Eliot's play stands when compared to the great tragedies.

The Family Reunion is undoubtedly "an artistic failure."

41. E. Martin Browne, op. cit. p. 136.