SYNOPSIS

OF THESIS TO BE SUBMITTED
FOR THE DEGREE OF DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY
IN THE FACULTY OF ARTS
OF
KARNATAK UNIVERSITY—DHARMAK.

BY

S. SUBRAMANIA SARMA

SUPERVISOR

DR. U. K. NAIR
SENIOR PROFESSOR AND HEAD
DEPARTMENT OF ENGLISH
KARNATAK UNIVERSITY
DHARMAK.

May 1981.
This thesis, *Christopher Fry: A Study in Themes and Technique* aims at evaluating Christopher Fry's contribution to British drama and in doing so, it also tries to dispel certain popular misconceptions about him such as that he is only a juggler with words or that he is merely a minor practitioner of religious drama.


Christopher Fry has often been misjudged as a 'word-smith' and his plays have been relegated to the genre of religious drama. But a close study of Fry's drama reveals that he is a thinker and a dramatist with a serious and coherent world-view and that he is vitally interested in man and life, so much so he can be considered primarily a secular dramatist. Of his celebration of life and its potentialities in his plays the several facets are his quest for life, his celebration of life (of various types), his joy in faith, his enjoyment of nature, his interest in human nature and its oddities and finally his joy in handling the language.

Fry's Quaker background and at a later stage his own experience as an actor and director have influenced his art. Eliot, Charles Williams, the Elizabethan dramatists in general and Shakespeare in particular, the Romantics and Bernard Shaw are the
few writers that seem to have influenced his work. Apart from this, modern existential philosophy also has a bearing on his themes.

The themes in Fry's plays can be broadly divided into three categories, as 'religious', existential and secular. The themes in his plays written for certain religious occasions glorify the Christian virtues of mercy and compassion and the values of sacrifice and stress the powers of good. A contemporary colouring is secured in order to assert through them the necessity of faith in the modern world. Fry gives expression to the modern man's experience of the existential dilemma. Ideas like the death-wish, the rejection of the world, angst and loneliness recur in his plays. But he goes beyond existentialism in that he stresses the value of life and its sway over the powers of death-wish and anxiety. His exuberant assertion of life and its glorification can be seen in all these plays. Fry's view of life is born out of his minute observation of it, nourished on his own upbringing, sustained through faith, and re-lived in his own expression of it in his own plays. He explores legend, history, religion, science and myth to express his vision of life.

Fry's Technique.

Fry's technique can be studied under three heads, namely, the structure and setting of the plays, his characterisation, and his dialogue. A close study of the plays reveals that plays like *The Boy with a Cart*, *Thor, with Angels*, *A Phoenix too Frequent*, *The Dark Is Light Enough* and *The Firstborn* are simple in structure.
The structure in The Lady's not for Burning, Venus Observed and A Yard of Sun is complex owing to the weaving together of a main and sub-plot, whereas A Sleep of Prisoners and Curtainlink are experimental in structure. A study of the setting of plays reveals that six of his plays are set in England and the other four are set in other countries (two in Europe, one in Ephesus in Asia Minor and the other in Egypt), and the time of action ranges from Anglo-Saxon to modern times. The extensive range of the social setting which includes all the classes namely Aristocratic, middle and working classes again underscores Fry's commitment to life at all levels of existence. The plays set in the four seasons of the year symbolically suggest the cyclic pattern of the life of man.

The Characters in Fry's Plays.

Fry has his own conception of the type of characters that he introduces in his plays. He feels that the characters must be fit enough for both tragedy and comedy. Every protagonist of his plays stands as a testimony to this statement, for he/she achieves certitude and peace only after undergoing certain emotional trials. The characters in his plays can be considered under three categories: Comic Stereotypes, Symbolic characters and Sound or Living characters. Each category after a careful study, further can be analysed into a few more sub-divisions. Among Comic stereotypes, one sees in his plays pompous and corrupt officials, simple and ineffectual persons and also old and garrulous type of people. In some plays the ansas
of the characters: symbolise their role in the plays and also symbolically represent certain values. Among the round and living characters one sees a three-fold pattern. All these characters arrive at an awareness through love, or through an encounter with a strong personality and sometimes through an experience of God.

Eliot's dialogue.

Eliot himself once explains that what he writes is verse or sliced-prose or a bastard offspring of the two. But he makes an attempt to bring it nearer to the common speech of the people, because the success of his drama depends more on the speech approximating to the contemporary idiom. He makes use of prose also in some plays like The Dark Is Light Enough, Curtain Tie and The Boy with a Cart.

Eliot gave serious thought to the problem of language in his plays and observed the 'ascetic rule' of keeping the language on a 'thin diet' instead of floating the plays on Elizabethan cadences which would have taken the audience far away from the Twentieth Century atmosphere. Similarly Pry tries to bring his verse nearer to the spoken idiom of the people, but at the same time as a lover of words, he employs language with a flourish.

The dialogue in Pry's plays serves to reveal character, to further the action, to describe a setting, to comment on themes and also to refer symbolically to things.
Fry's plays are filled with wit and humour. Humour in his plays is of different types—humour of action, humour of characters and humour of words especially high-sounding words and strange terms of abuse. His wit mostly takes the form of intelligent play upon words, comic comparisons and imaginative flights.

Imagery in Fry's plays:

Imagery is used by dramatists as a most effective instrument of expression for driving home themes and revealing character. Imagery, one can say, is the backbone of Fry's drama because his characters mostly talk in highly colourful imagery. Fry's body of images falls into four major groups, namely Nature (seasonal), Religious, Metaphysical and Symbolic images. His fondness for Nature imagery in special, is of particular significance. Since he glorifies life and its powers, one sees him always drawing images from Nature, for Nature is the main sustenance for life and is the very foundation on which human life is built.

Fry and his poets:

Eliot, Fry, Yeats, and Auden and Isherwood—all try their hand at the same genre, poetic drama. The plays of Fry when compared with those of the other dramatists bring out striking differences which reflect his individual conception of life and the world. Eliot remains a major figure in poetic drama because of his successful experiments with language and his attempt to wed classical myth to
contemporary reality. The plays of Yeats mainly deal with Irish legends, the Cuchulain myth and symbolic plots using the Japanese Noh technique. The plays of Auden and Isherwood are essentially political and present particularly the ills of the European society riddled with ugly fascist and capitalist realities.

Charges against Fry.

Fry has been unlucky in his critics. They have complained that his imagery is decorative rather than functional; he is merely a verbal juggler, his plots are loose, his lines are unconvincing and he lacks seriousness. But a close study of the plays reveals that Fry is a master of comedy with a coherent world-view which is expressed with conviction and colour in his plays.

Certain limitations like prolixity, sentimentality and a certain narrowness of range and scope are certainly perceptible in Fry's plays; but his total achievement is impressive in spite of all these shortcomings.

Fry's achievement.

When one thinks of Fry's achievement as a dramatist one has to consider the following facts: Fry brought back poetry to the theatre and with it all: the authentic melody and colour which verse drama appeared to be starved of, for a long time. Secondly, Fry is basically a poet with wit; Thirdly, he is a dramatist with
a coherent world-view which is of great significance to the modern man, for Fry is a high-priest of an affirmative reading of life in a world cursed with a death-wish. Lastly, he is a master of comedy and when compared to the other writers like Wilde and Shaw, one perceives how Fry is essentially different from them. The plays of Wilde sparkle with superficial brilliance but they have a thin thematic content, Shaw's theory of life is restricted and narrow and appears dreamy-eyed today, though his wit sparkles still. Fry's wit is allied to a comedy of values which have a special relevance to our age.

Fry's zeal and zest for life asserted so forcefully against the background of two devastating world wars—establish his primarily as a secular dramatist though religion provides the subject-matter for some of his plays. His celebration of the joyous affirmation of life with 'maze and cellerage of honey' strikes a new note of hope in an 'age of anxiety'. This is exactly the message, needed for the modern man who is forced to think of his life and civilisation in terms of Eliot's "Hollow Men":

"This is the dead land
This is the cactus land
Here the stone images
Are raised, here they receive
The supplication of a dead man's hand
Under the twinkle of a fading star.\(^1\)
Fry on the other hand believes with Browning's *Fra Lippo Lippi* that
"This world's no blot for us
Nor blank, it remains intensely and means good."\(^2\)