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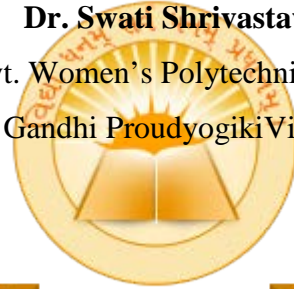
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Dramatic element in the Poetry of T.S. Eliot

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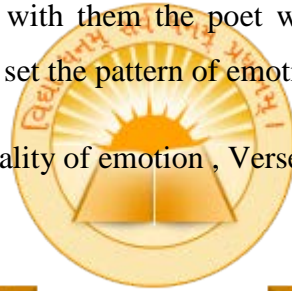
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Abstract

Eliot has been acclaimed as a major poet and critic of our time, but his dramatic genius has, so far, received tardy recognition. Within its limited scope, the present paper aims at an assessment of the essentially dramatic nature of Eliot's poetry. It is impossible to separate his work as a critic from his work as a poet and a playwright. Edmund Wilson emphasizes "the essentially dramatic character of his imagination. Eliot's early poems are novel experiments in dramatic situation - kind of poetry. Here the poet employs the method of dramatic monologue by which he presents a number of personae or characters, who act as the central link or as the unifying force in series of disparate experiences that are recounted in these poems. Mostly these personae are flat or static. They are caught in certain attitudes and have hardly any individual quality. But by urging us to sympathize with them the poet wants to help us in obtaining a superficial understanding of the events or actions that set the pattern of emotions in the poems.

Keywords: Quasi-Dramatic , Impersonality of emotion , Verse play , Greek myths , Ritual drama



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Eliot's burgeoning as a dramatist is no abrupt development but a consummation of his poetic career, that his poetry is essentially dramatic and that his emergence as a dramatic artist illustrates his progressive understanding of the dramatic structure. Prufrock, the young lover in Portrait of a Lady, the old man in Gerontion and Tiresias in The Waste Land almost play archetypal roles in a kind of ritual drama. They seem to be in quest of satisfactory terms on which they can live with the cosmos in the decayed conventional society. In fact, they solve Eliot's problem of articulation of the feeling of boredom, squalor and horror without involving their creator in any risk of being clumsily involved in them. Speaking of the important role played by these personae George T. Wright Says : "As a rule Eliot holds his personae firmly to a conversational level, but because of this firm base can allow him to explore an assessment of other audience-defining tones-prophecy, lyric apostrophe, formal lamentation – so long as he always returns to his base. The result is a richness and variety of tone rare in any melodramatic verse and indeed, seldom achieved in traditional drama".

As Eliot maintains the conversational tone for his personae there are, at times, an approximation of verse to dramatic speech which later turns to account in the verse dramas. However, in writing a verse play a poet also has to approach his subject in an altogether different frame of mind from that to which he has been accustomed while writing verse. A poet speaks in terms of one's own voice, whereas the dramatist is concerned with the question of communication to an unknown audience. Hence the verse of his early poems does not strictly conform to any dramatic dialogue or speech, although there are enough evidences of conversational ease in it. A brief study of the early poems reveals that Eliot is true to his idea that as a poet wishes to give pleasure and entertain his people, he will be glad to entertain as large and as various an audience as possible.

In Prufrock and other observations, Eliot chooses to convey the feeling of boredom, squalor and horror of life in its present state of depravity. While presenting an array of images that play upon the underlying dramatic situations, he is able to articulate the peculiar frustration and longing of modern men who suffer from a sense of weariness due to the drying up of the springs of emotions. The personae of these poems help the poet to objectify the emotions with an element of intellectual detachment. But the externalization of emotions through a series of situations or actions as visualized in the images does not produce any sense of development. It nearly produces a sense of fragmentariness, which is rather antithetical to drama. So the early poems, no doubt, produce an illusion of dramatic movement but no sense of dramatic



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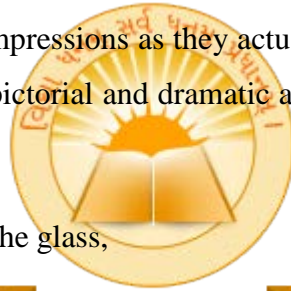
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structure or concentration, which is so vital to drama.

Eliot's first significant experiment in dramatic structure is to be found in *The Waste Land*. An element of dramatic intensity is established in the poem in the externalized framework of parallel myths. Eliot also introduces here a sense of variety of tone by the violent contrasts between the "dead luxury of the upper class, the vast uninspired bourgeois existence, the broken fragments of the talk of the poor overheard in the bar". In *The Game of Chess* a sharp dramatic effect is produced by the clever shift from a sensuous style to one of the cadences of cockney speech. But there is no advancement in action, in fact, there is no dramatic climax or crisis, only the action in various parts is constituted of certain single impressions as in the early poems. Mr. Matthiessen sums up Eliot's method of dramatic presentation of human action and attitudes in his poems as follows : "He sets out to make his characters actual by confining his description of them to a perceived significant detail or characteristic gesture".

Eliot comes to combine description and event in such a way as to reproduce a character's individual association through a series of observed impressions as they actually associate themselves in the mind. Here is, for instance, something, undoubtedly, pictorial and dramatic about the description of the typist collecting herself after her lover's departure :



"She turns and looks a moment in the glass,

Hardly aware of her departed Lover;

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Her brain allows, one half-formed thought to pass;

Well now that's done; and I am glad its over".

or about the hyacinth girl returning from the hyacinth garden :

"Yet when we came back, Late from the hyacinth garden:

Your arms full, and your hair wet, I could not

Speak, and my eyes failed, I was neither

Living nor dead, and I knew nothing.



Looking into the heart of light, the silence."

Gerontion which comes between *The Waste Land* and the early poems illustrates Eliot's sense of detachment and progressive awareness of the significant gestures or attitudes by which the characters can be made alive, even though they may not be organic enough to fit into the larger pattern of drama. The old man to whom the young boy reads out history is sufficiently removed from Eliot's immediate experience to allow him a fitting medium through which, they can present the moral problem of a modern man's alienation from faith and his spiritual desolation with all the freedom of an artist's concentration on the work of art. This intellectual detachment, as attained in the poem helps him to advance towards the solution of the problem of communication.

We have pointed out in course of our discussion how Eliot's poetic creations have gradually tended towards drama in an effort to entertain as large a body of audience as possible. This development can be properly analyzed into two different stages : quasi - dramatic and dramatic poetry. In Eliot's own terms they can be described as the voice of the poet speaking to the audience and the voice of the characters speaking to other characters or to the audience. In his essay "Three voices of poetry" he himself classified poetry into three distinct kinds : non-dramatic, quasi dramatic and dramatic. In Eliot's poetry, however, we do not find any non-dramatic poetry, in the strict sense of the term. There is scarcely any poem in which the voice of the poet speaks to himself. Eliot always tries to reach out to an audience in his poetry. Hence, his poetry is never any outpouring of his personal emotions.

Eliot's early poems are quasi-dramatic in the sense that the poet offers in them a gallery of dramatic portraits or characters who are represented in action but without any direct participation in life. Hence these characters are sketched lightly and are observed from the outside. Through them Eliot seeks to represent objectively the feeling of boredom and horror of life - a life devoid of any faith closely allied to this sense of boredom and horror is a sense of sin that Eliot often wants to convey to his generation. As the poet is fully aware of the limitations of his poetic medium, he tries to create adequate situations in *Gerontion*, *The Waste Land* and *Ash Wednesday* through which, he might objectify the emotion without being personally drawn into it. In fact, he tries to maintain the impersonality of emotion in all these poems. But dramatic situations by themselves are inadequate to convey this burden of complex emotion. Hence there is a definite step forward, in Eliot's experiment with the dramatic form in *Sweeney Agonistes*. Here he tries to present, in the two fragments - 'Fragment of a prologue' and 'Fragment of an Agon' a treatment of the Christian sense of sin that Eliot's faithless generation is so prone to eschew. But since drama is concerned with presentation of



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human action, rather than with spiritual attitude involved in it, and the sense of sin hardly comes to be a fitting subject for it. Helen Gardner has posed the problem whether drama can deal with sin and still retain its dramatic quality: "The problem is whether drama can deal with sin, and still be drama, or whether like the law, it can any deal with crime". There are quite a number of dramatic moments and also enough dramatic verse in Sweeney Agonistes but there is scarcely any true drama. Neither the dramatic situations nor the verse actually lead upto any dramatic inevitability.

The structure of The Rock is very loose, and its pattern is quite diffuse – something antithetical to drama while in his full-fledged plays Eliot provides a parallelism between the past and the present by adapting Greek myths to modern setting, here he illustrates it by parallels drawn between hardships experienced by the contemporary builders of the church and the Israelites rebuilding Jerusalem and between the destructive nature of the Modern agitators plan and that of the Danish invasion. Thus the two fragments of Sweeney Agonistes and the religious pageant , The Rock may be considered as germinal to Eliot's development as a dramatist.

Eliot's interest in drama is closely related to his notion of the poet as a popular entertainer. Unlike the romantic poets of the nineteenth century who carried out a number of fashionable experiments in verse-drama, or unlike the fellow Modern poets who have tentatively explored the possibilities of verse in drama, he has firm convictions about the direct social utility of the poet in the theatre. In his eagerness to prove the organic relation between poetry and drama Eliot has ventured to conclude that all great poetry is drama and "All poetry tends towards drama, and all drama towards poetry". His conclusions are based on his knowledge of the great tradition of poetry in the theatre. From its very inception drama was linked with poetry, rather integrated into it. Poetry, as a form of 'Imitation' of life (as suggested by Aristotle) achieves its perfection in drama, since it represents human action and character in all their multifarious modes of manifestation.

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