

T. S. Eliot's *The Family Reunion*: Overview

The Family Reunion

The Family Reunion is a play by T. S. Eliot written mostly in blank verse. It incorporates elements from Greek drama and mid-twentieth century detective plays to portray the hero's journey from guilt to redemption.

The play was unsuccessful when first presented in 1939, and was later regarded as unsatisfactory by its author, but has been successfully revived since the 1940s. Some critics have thought aspects of the tormented hero reflect T.S. Eliot's own difficulties with his estrangement from his first wife.

Plot

The play is in two acts set in Wishwood, a stately home in the north of England. At the beginning, the family of Lady Monchensey is assembling for her birthday party. She is, as her doctor later explains, clinging on to life by sheer willpower:

*I keep Wishwood alive/ To keep the family alive,
to keep them together, To keep me alive, and I keep them.*

Lady Monchensey's two brothers and three sisters are present, and a younger relation, Mary, but none of Lady Monchensey's three sons. Among other things they discuss the sudden, and not to them wholly unwelcome, death at sea of the wife of the eldest son Harry, the present Lord Monchensey.

Neither of the younger sons ever appears, both being slightly injured in motoring accidents, but Harry soon arrives, his first appearance at Wishwood for eight years. He is haunted by the belief that he pushed his wife off the ship.

In fact Harry has an alibi for the time, but whether he killed her or not he wished her dead and his feelings of guilt are the driving force in the rest of the play. Lady Monchensey decides that Harry's state warrants the discreet observation of the family doctor, who is invited to join the party, ostensibly as a dinner guest. Mary, who has been earmarked by Amy as a future wife for Harry, wishes to escape from life at Wishwood, but her aunt Agatha tells her that she must wait:

You and I, Mary/ Are only watchers and waiters, not the easiest role.

Agatha reveals to Harry that his father attempted to kill Amy while Harry was in her womb, and that Agatha prevented him. Far from being grateful, Amy resented and still resents Agatha's depriving her of her husband. Harry, with Agatha's encouragement, announces his intention to go away from Wishwood, leaving his steady younger brother John to take over. Amy, despairing at Harry's renunciation of Wishwood, dies (offstage), "An old woman alone in a damned house", and Harry and his faithful servant, Downing, leave.

Structure

The play is partly in blank verse and partly in prose. Eliot had already experimented with verse drama in *Murder in the Cathedral*, and continued to use the form in his post-war stage works.[12] Though the work has superficial resemblances to a conventional 1930s drawing room drama, Eliot uses two devices from ancient Greek drama:

1. Harry's uncles and aunts occasionally detach themselves from the action and chant a commentary on the plot, in the manner of a Greek chorus
2. Harry is pursued by the Eumenides – the avenging Furies who pursue Orestes in the *Oresteia*; they are seen not only by Harry but by his servant and the most perceptive member of his family, Agatha

Despite these Greek themes, Stephen Spender commented that the whole play was "about the hero's discovery of his religious vocation as a result of his sense of guilt.

The play is divided in two parts, each divided in three scenes. The first part takes place in the drawing room, after tea, an afternoon in late March. The first scene is used as an introduction of the persons Amy, Ivy, Violet, Agatha, Gerald, Charles, Mary and Denman. They are talking about tonight, when a dinner is being held with the entire family. They are also talking about Harry, whom they haven't seen for eight years.

Before those years, something terrible had happened to Harry's wife and he thinks he is to blame. His wife was swept off the deck of a boat. Because Harry thinks he has thrown her overboard, his family thinks he is not sane. But now, eight years later, Harry is the only one who acts sane about it, his aunts Ivy, Violet and Agatha are the ones who are making a fuss out of it. And that upsets Harry.

When the others notice Harry sees 'persons' that they don't see, they really begin to think Harry's gone crazy. It appears that these ghosts are from his deceased wife, and he is haunted by them, at least he thinks he is. Scene two describes a conversation between Harry and Mary, they talk about their youth and Harry sees the ghosts again.

Mary doesn't see them and she feels sorry for him. Scene three tells that everyone is preparing for dinner and that the guests are worried about John and Arthur, who haven't arrived yet. Part two takes place in the library, after dinner.

In scene I, Dr. Warburton has a conversation with Harry, at advice of Harry's uncles and aunts. It's about Harry's mother, Warburton explains that Harry's mother gets her strength to live from her determination of keeping the family together, and that she is very feeble at the moment. Then Sergeant Winchell appears with the message that John has had an accident, but that it is nothing serious, just a concussion. Later on, it appears that Arthur has also had an accident.

In scene II, Harry asks Agatha for the truth behind his parents and she is strong enough to tell him. She tells Harry that his father was going to kill his mother while she was pregnant of him. Agatha stopped Harry's father just in time. When she is finished telling she sighs with relief and says that Harry is now the one who has to carry the burden.

Scene III describes an argument between Amy and Agatha, Amy is very angry with Agatha for taking away her son, saying she first took her husband and now her son. Agatha explains that it was inevitable and that they have to start their lives over again and leave the past behind them.

Harry realises he has to follow the ghosts and that they will lead him. I'm not sure, but I think Amy dies at the end because she can take no more. That is when Ivy says: "I shall have to stay till after the funeral: will my ticket to London still be valid?" The play ends with Agatha, saying that the knot is unknotted, the cross is uncrossed and the crooked is made straight as a conclusion of what she said before:

*"The eye is on this house
The eye covers it
There are three together
May the three be separated
May the knot that was tied
Become unknotted
May the crossed bones
In the filled-up well
Be at last straightened
May the weasel and the otter
Be about their proper business
The eye of the day time
And the eye of the night time
Be diverted from this house
Till the knot is unknotted
The cross is uncrossed
And the crooked is made straight."*

T.S. Elliott's "The Family Reunion" is a play about the return to home, and the looking back at ghosts of the past. The play starts with Harry returning to his boyhood home for his mother's birthday. The plot centers around Harry's return, the mystery surrounding his wife's death, and his family's desire to have Harry take over the role as head of the household. It's an anticipated return, one that they all have been waiting for.

There are concurrent plots threading through the work, such as the mystery involving his own father's death and disappearance, Harry's schizophrenia and Mary's return to the family as well as her inability to leave.

In Scene II of "The Family Reunion", Mary and Harry meet in the drawing room, waiting for the family dinner (reunion) to begin. Mary & Harry are second cousins, both growing up in Wishwood. Harry has returned after an absence of eight years, and mysterious death of his wife at sea.

There's a recurring thread of "waiting" that runs through the play: waiting for Harry's return, waiting for dinner to begin, waiting for Harry's brothers to appear, waiting for the other guests. In waiting for Harry's return to Wishwood, everything in the house has been kept the way it was when he left. "I had only just noticed that this room is quite unchanged: The same hangings...the same pictures...even the table, the chairs, the sofa...all in the same positions. I was looking to see if anything was changed, but if it is so, I can't find it."

The unchanged room symbolizes the Harry of his youth, and the person that Harry is hoping to find when he returns. It also symbolizes his family's inability to accept the fact that Harry has moved on. Their longing to keep life the same. In this scene Mary and

Agatha have been waiting for Harry to appear for dinner. Agatha exits and Mary alone says, "Waiting, waiting, always waiting, I think this house means to keep us waiting."

Harry, returning from Wishwood after eight years discusses his longing to return back to his childhood home. (The home theme this semester.) His return to Wishwood is actually his need to make peace with his past, his loss of his father and the confines of his childhood.

By returning to Wishwood he also is looking to escape his recent past, and his inability to live in the present. "But I thought I might escape from one life to another, and it may be all one life, with no escape." He speaks about returning home for the school holidays as a young man and escaping the family gatherings to go down to the river, their only place of freedom. "I made my escape as soon as I could, and slipped down to the river to find the old hiding place."

T.S.Eliot has a poetic and descriptive voice. He uses the metaphors of nature and the senses to describe Harry & Mary's constricted and contrived upbringing at Wishwood. They describe the hollow tree in the wilderness as their place of escape. "It's absurd that one's only memory of freedom should be a hollow tree in a wood by the river."

In a speech between Mary and Harry, he describes his lost hope "Where the dead stone is seen to batrachian, the aphyllous branch of ophidian." Mary tells Harry that "You bring your own landscape, no more real than the other. And in a way you contradict yourself." "You deceive yourself like the man who believes that he is blind while he still sees the sunlight."

Harry rebukes her by saying "You have staid in England, yet you seem like someone who comes from a very long distance, or the distant waterfall in the forest, inaccessible, half-heard. And I hear your voice as in silence between two storms, one hears the moderate usual noises in the grass and leaves, of life persisting, which ordinary pass unnoticed. Perhaps you are right, though I do not know how you should know it. Is the cold spring is the spring not an evil time, that excites us with lyric voices? "That apprehension deeper than all sense, deeper than the sense of smell, but like a smell in that it is indescribably, a sweet and bitter smell from another world."

Harry' Character

A contemporary review described Harry as "an unresolved amalgam of Orestes and Hamlet" and Eliot himself had vetoed the casting of John Gielgud because he thought him "not religious enough to understand the character's motivation." Some modern critics see in Harry a parallel with Eliot's own emotional difficulties of the time, with his estrangement from his first wife.

When Eliot was asked , "What happens to Harry after he leaves?" Eliot responded with an additional fifty lines to Harry's scene with Amy and Agatha (Part II, scene 2) in which his destination is said to be "somewhere on the other side of despair".

Greek Models in T. S. Eliot's 'The Family Reunion'

With the demise of T. S. Eliot, the world of English literature lost a staunch and resolute advocate of the Greek tradition in modern literature. The precise interaction between

this tradition in which the poet believed so firmly and his own five verse dramas proves it amply.

Murder in the Cathedral, written for the Canterbury Festival of 1935 and *The Family Reunion* are case in point. No wonder, in 1941 Eliot was invited to become the president of the Classical Association and his presidential address delivered at Easter 1942 was also entitled *The Classics and the Man of Letters*.

In the course of his lecture Eliot remarked: "It should be apparent that our prime concern in considering the education of the man of letters is not the amount of learning which a man acquires, or the degree of scholastic distinction which he attains-what is of prime importance is the type of education within which his schooling falls... Shakespeare's education, what he had of it, belongs in the same tradition as that of Milton: it was essentially a classical education."

Eliot goes on to observe: "Without knowing any Latin you may write English poetry; I am not sure whether without Latin you can wholly understand it " Same may be said about his views on the knowledge of Greek Classic literature.

The eminent Liberal statesman Lord Samuel chose to discuss Eliot's plays in the course of his Presidential Address to the Classical Association in 1953. He remarked, "Mr. Eliot tells us, in his published lecture on *Poetry and Drama*, that his play *The Family Reunion* was founded on the Orestes myth in Aeschylus and *The Cocktail Party* on the *Alcestis* of Euripides ... For all their literary skill and dramatic interest, both plays leave a feeling of disappointment. The climaxes do not grip.

The Greeks were genuinely interested in the Eumenides, Ananke, and the like; but we are not ready to believe they have anything to do with what may be going on today at a family gathering in a country-house in the north of England or at a lively cocktail party in London. It is noteworthy, however, and perhaps significant as a sign of the times, that precisely the same tendency is to be found simultaneously among some of the principal dramatists in France."

T S Eliot observed, "I do not know whether it is pertinent for your purpose to call attention to the uses made of Greek drama on the contemporary French stage. The first important example within my memory was Jean Cocteau's *La Machine Infernale*, a new version in contemporary French idiom of *Oedipus Tyrannus*. He was followed by other dramatists, notably Giraudoux, and more recently, Anouilh in *Antigone*, as well as Sartre in *Les Mouches*, but the method of all these French dramatists is in some ways diametrically the opposite of mine. They have retained the names of the original characters and stuck rather more closely to the plots of the original dramatists, the innovation being merely that the characters talk as if they were contemporary French people, and in some cases employ what one might call anachronistic allusions to modern life.

The method that has appealed to me has been rather to take merely the situation of a Greek play as a starting point, with wholly modern characters, and develop it according to the workings of my own mind. The chief aim of this piece is to observe precisely how these workings of Eliot's mind in fact developed with each one of his themes in his plays

including *The Family Reunion* and to show that how he used Greek plays as a starting-point.

In *The Family Reunion*, we have an elaboration of the plot of Aeschylus' *Choephoroe*. A full analysis scene by scene will not be necessary for this comparison: it will be sufficient to compare the outline of the two plots. The reader will recall that in the *Choephoroe* Clytemnestra has had a bad dream and therefore is sending offerings to appease the ghost of Agamemnon, the husband she had murdered with the aid of her lover Aegisthus.

Whilst Electra, her daughter prays that Agamemnon may be avenged, Orestes and Pylades are waiting to introduce themselves. Electra and Orestes recognize one another, and brother and sister at once concert a plan to avenge their father. Orestes then calls on Clytemnestra, pretending to be a stranger from Daulis sent by Strophius to Argos on the errand of reporting Orestes' death in a chariot race.

When she sends out Aegisthus for further details, Orestes slays him. He then slays his mother too, urged on by Pylades his friend. However, once his mother is slain, the young prince beholds the Eumenides, who constrain him to depart, though remaining invisible to the chorus. This chorus is composed of women of Argos, while the remaining characters are Orestes' old nurse, who is sent to tell Aegisthus the supposed news, and the servant who first admits the supposed Daulian messenger to the palace and then runs to tell Clytemnestra that Orestes has slain Aegisthus.

How does Eliot use this plot as his starting-point for *The Family Reunion*? Believing that the Furies have caused the hero to murder his mother as much as they enforce his departure, Eliot determines to treat each aspect separately in his Orestes, Harry, Earl Monchensey. He is returning after years abroad for the birthday of his mother, Amy, Dowager Countess Monchensey.

The false accident of Aeschylus' tale becomes two real motor accidents which prevent Harry's brothers Arthur and John from reaching Wishwood for the occasion. Harry himself had murdered his wife by pushing her overboard in mid Atlantic, and is thus pursued by Furies visible only to him and his faithful chauffeur Downing. Unlike Clytemnestra, Amy wishes her son to come home, and his departure at the urging of the Furies occasions her fatal seizure.

Again, Eliot divides the fixations of Electra on her dead father and her absent brother between two characters. The latter duty is given Harry's cousin Mary, his childhood playmate, who now lives with Amy as a companion poor relation. The former function is discharged by Agatha, Amy's younger sister, a retired headmistress who was Monchensey's beloved before Amy's mental cruelty finally caused his death when Harry was still a small boy.

Aegisthus is replaced by the more innocuous figure of Amy's medical adviser and confidant, Dr. Warburton, whom she asks to dinner in the hope that he can prescribe for Harry's unsettled nerves.

The role of the Aeschylean chorus is shared by Harry's two uncles Gerald and Charles Piper and his aunts Violet and Ivy. Denman the parlor maid replaces Clytemnestra's manservant, while the old policeman whom Harry knew as a boy, Sergeant Winchell, has the function of the old nurse of Orestes.

Finally the chauffeur Downing, who takes Harry away in the last act, replaces some of the functions of the faithful friend Pylades in Aeschylus. So it is that in *The Family Reunion* the model for the plot is obscured from immediate view by the combined effect of the doubling of several roles and incidents, the division of the choral duties between four characters, and exchange of sex between two of the minor parts. Again, the motive for such modification is the desire to work out implications in the original tale which are of no concern to Aeschylus.

The general method of Eliot's dramatic adaptations from the Greek is to begin by asking some questions implicit in the play and then revise and develop the plot in modern terms in order to raise these issues. In consequence, some roles are rendered two or threefold to survey their different implications, while others which become less important in the new structure are combined or merged.

For the same reason there is a tendency to double the events or situations of the original play. Further, as gods, kings, and heroes walk the Greek tragic stage, Eliot takes care that his main characters are similarly well-bred and well-connected in their modern contexts. Finally, though in *The Family Reunion* the Greek unities of time and place are carefully observed, the later plays allow more latitude.

Lastly, Greek drama frequently embodied comment on current affairs. Though this function is most evident in Comedy, its presence in Tragedy cannot wholly be ignored. Therefore it is probable that Eliot would also have wished to redevelop this aspect of his Greek models; and his plays seem susceptible of such interpretation.

The speeches of the Knights in 1935 are also the speeches of the Age of Appeasement, of that 'National' Government which abetted Franco's Fascists and countenanced the invasion of Abyssinia under the Hoare-Laval pact. *Murder in the Cathedral* criticizes such things by implication, and finds them displeasing to God.

Again, *The Family Reunion* does not merely express the workings of the family curse of Wishwood: it is the guilt of the depression, of the abdication crisis, and, above all, of Munich which haunts the conscience of Harry's generation. In 1949 *The Cocktail Party* offers the choices of the days of post-war austerity. Does a man run away or does he face the call of duty, whether it bring routine tasks or martyrdom? *The Confidential Clerk* is the play of Coronation Year, full of hope and of a reconciliation brightened by richer understanding of life and experience.

Finally, *The Elder Statesman* is the post-Suez play, belonging to a day when Britain, like Claverton, has retired from active leadership and can only escape the unhappy legacies of the past by a similar total honesty. The play ends with a mood of peaceful acceptance and a serenity which the poet perhaps desired both for himself and his adopted country.