

HARRY AND HIS MOTHERS, AND OTHERS: A BRIEF ANALYSIS OF THE CHARACTERS AND THEIR RELATIONSHIP WITH HARRY MONECHENSEY OF WISHWOOD IN T.S. ELIOT'S *THE FAMILY REUNION*

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ABSTRACT: Family, the smallest unit of a society, plays a key role in the development of human beings. T. S. Eliot's Modern play *The Family Reunion* covers the crumbling down of a family that was supposedly reuniting. The protagonist Harry, who is the chosen one like J. K. Rowling's Harry Potter, has to bear the responsibility to lift a family curse. This paper seeks to understand familial as well as philosophical relations of the chosen Harry with other members of Monchensey family. His spiritual journey as a redeemer of the family sins is facilitated by some spiritually awakened characters, while the others offer him hindrance. This paper looks at all major and minor characters that play a part in this journey, and how they are associated with Harry. This research work also aims to analyze the phases of past that affect future of the Monchensey family in general, and Harry in particular.

KEYWORDS: Family; Modern Literature; Redemption; Christian Mythology; Family Curse

I. INTRODUCTION

Harry, a scapegoat figure in T. S. Eliot's *The Family Reunion* carries a family curse which occurs due to natural causes but the solution to the curse is supernatural.[1] By sticking to the classical unity of time in his Modernist play, T. S. Eliot has put forth in front of his readers and audience psychological, spiritual, philosophical and familial conflicts in the life of his protagonist, Harry Monchensey. The play is set within the time frame of three hours, between tea and bedtime but the dialogues transcend to past and future, as in a conversation with Harry, his aunt Agatha points out in the play, "I can guess about the past and what you think about the future;/ But a present is missing, needed to connect them." (II.ii.13-14) Harry and his family's past is unpleasant, which tarnishes their future and leaves them with a sense of hopelessness.

There are four phases of past associated with Harry, and mysteries are attached to each. Firstly, Harry's past a year ago, when his wife died in the mid-Atlantic, when she fell off the ship. This past is a mystery to the other characters as well as to Harry, who was present when his wife died. Secondly, the past between the time-span of eight years, when Harry left Wishwood until the day he returned. Thirdly, Harry's childhood and his memories associated with Mary, and the absurdity of the fact "one's only memory of freedom/ Should be a hollow tree in a wood by the river". Last but not the least is the past when Harry's mother Amy conceived him. The aforementioned pasts play a key role in the development of the protagonist. Each past deals with Harry and his association with various characters in the play. In this paper, we'll look at Harry's indulgence with various members of his family, and how they help in the shaping of the character of Harry, and [mis]guide him in his journey to reach the higher truth of his life, which is the spiritual reality.

II. AMY

Amy Monchensey, the matriarch of Wishwood is the „aim“ee” in the play who arranged the family reunion on her sixtieth birthday. She lived to hand over the charge of the dynasty to her son Harry who „would“ not fulfill

Amy's „wish“. [2] The name of Amy's Wishwood is as ironic as „the family reunion“ arranged by her. At Wishwood, nobody's wishes turn into reality, rather they are crushed. The reunion she arranged is rather a crumbling of the family instead of a union or a reunion. Amitava Pal rightly points out in her paper, “It's a tale of a family falling apart”. [3] Pal quotes from W. B. Yeats' poem „The Second Coming“, “The falcon cannot hear the falconer/ Things fall apart, the center cannot hold.” [4] Harry is the center of the play but Amy is the center of Wishwood. She fails to hold the center. Her birthday becomes her death day. Eliot has evoked the Greek myth of Orestes in his play. In Aeschylus' *Oresteia*, Clytemnestra killed her own husband Agamemnon, because of which a curse fell upon the house of Atreus. In order to lift the curse, Agamemnon's son had to kill his mother. In *The Family Reunion* instead of directly killing his mother, Harry indirectly kills her by leaving Wishwood and breaking her weak heart. Dr. Warburton had already informed him about her weak heart but he paid no heed to her medical condition and deliberately chose to ignore the warning. T.S. Eliot, in a letter written to Mr. Hugh Beaumont on 4th July 1995 commented, “I find now that the play is not so much about the comedy of Harry Monchensey as the tragedy of his mother”. [5] Matilda Joslyn Gage, in her book *Woman, Church and State* has written that women's religious and civil rights were taken away from them when the Church came into existence. Matriarchy or mother-rule was in practice before Christianity spread across the world. She further adds, “The word *Veda* signifies “to-know”; the latter from *Vidya* meaning “wise”. The English term widow is traceable to both forms of the word, meaning a wise woman- one who knows man”. [6] However, it would not be wise to assume Eliot to have read the work of Gage, a nineteenth-century American woman suffragist, and to have created the character of Amy on those grounds. Amy in Eliot's play is anything but wise. She is certain about John and Arthur's visit but to her disappointment, Harry is the only son who arrived. Everything she predicts turns out wrong. She does not want the clock to stop in the dark but ultimately it does stop in the dark. She wants to run away from the unpleasant past to create a pleasant future. She “kept” everything the same as it was when Harry left Wishwood. This “unnatural” sameness of things made the change in people more apparent to him and suffocated him.

It was Amy's surveillance that suffocated Harry and made him to decide to leave Wishwood eight years ago.

“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-
 Though never very happy, I remember. That was why
 We all felt like failures, before we had begun.” (II.i.21-26)

Amy never punished them but made them feel guilty, which suffocated the boys and their cousin, Mary. They misbehaved at school “in order to be punished,/ For punishment made us feel less guilty.” (II.i.34-35) Harry became punishment loving Christian in the childhood itself. Harry inherited the traits of his father who was a sensitive person, rather than his mother. His mother Amy had a sense of possession that she transferred from Harry's father to the estate, Wishwood.

III. AGATHA

Agatha, the “efficient principal of a woman's college-” (II.ii.54) on the “surface”, has a deeper layer of truth in her character. She is Amy's youngster sister but she is simply „Agatha“ to Harry and not „Aunt Agatha“, as Coghill points out. Various critics argue that Agatha is perhaps a mother-figure to Harry, while the others believe her to be Harry's lover. A Freudian critic would agree with both. Agatha, the spiritual mother of Harry, whom he assumed to be “liberated from the human wheel” is the spokesperson of Eliot in the play. (II.ii.61) She discloses the divine dimensions of the play and guides Harry towards the spiritual path. The conflict between Agatha and Amy is the conflict between the spiritual world and the material world respectively. The former governed a women's college, while the latter governed an estate. (Coghill, 1963) Both the sisters have natural ruling qualities. Agatha helps her half-son, half-lover Harry in his reunion with past, i.e. with his family truths. She makes it known to Harry that the knowledge of the sins must precede the expiation. It is interesting to note that Agatha, who discourages Mary to leave Wishwood encourages Harry to leave it. [7] Both Mary and Harry come to her to seek advice. She was the only one in the family who did not pretend that the past did not exist. She knows-

“...everything is irrevocable,

Because the past irremediable,

Because future can only be built

Upon the real past.”

(I.i.111-114)

She understands Harry better than any other character, including his own mother. She knows that adaptation would be difficult for him. “The man who returns will have to meet/ The boy who left.” (I.i.27-28) Perhaps, this was the reason why Harry invited only Agatha to his marriage. She is the only one in the family to have met his wife. She facilitates Harry’s spiritual journey by paving a way for his expiation. Agatha compares curse with a child, and how it grows and becomes mature. Harry’s conception itself was a curse. She saved Harry’s life by stopping the father from killing Amy when she was pregnant with Harry. She considered him her own child. After the father left, she transferred her love for him to Harry. When Harry starts believing it to be an end, she corrects him by saying that it’s a beginning. She becomes the reason for Harry’s change of emotion and path.

As Amy points out, “Only Agatha seems to discover some meaning in death/ Which I cannot find”. (I.i.89-90) Agatha’s poetic dialogue with Harry is both philosophical and symbolic. It is loaded with religious and spiritual undertones and overtones respectively. She enters a hypnotic state in the second segment of the play, stepping into the place previously occupied by the Eumenides, and delivers a speech on family curse as a child and the need to unknot the knots and to make crooked straight. After conversing with Agatha, Harry realizes that perhaps he was only dreaming of pushing his wife off the ship.

“Perhaps my life has only been a dream

Dreamt through me by the minds of others. Perhaps

I only dreamt I pushed her.”

(II.ii.126-127)

It comes to Amy as a shock that Harry decides to leave Wishwood again. It is Agatha who tells her,

“In a world of fugitives

The person taking the opposite direction

Will appear to run away.”

(II.ii.319-321)

Harry also points it out to his mother, adding on to Agatha’s statement that when a person recovers sanity, he begins to appear the maddest to other people. He takes Agatha’s advice and leaves Wishwood, following the Eumenides.

IV. THE UNNAMED FATHER

Harry’s father, Lord Monchensey of Wishwood entered into a “loveless marriage” with Amy, which “bred unhappiness and evil”, as Nevill Coghill has mentioned in his “Introduction” to *The Family Reunion*. (Coghill 23) “There was no ecstasy.” (II.ii.72) The father, though unnamed, plays a key role in the development of Harry’s psyche. Apart from the estate, Harry inherited the loveless marriage of his parents and the father’s inclination to kill the wife. Like the father, Harry also suffered because of the act of murder committed by him in thought. As per Christian theology, intention is as sinful as the crime committed, therefore the father and the son faced the consequences of the sin. Following the footsteps of his father, Harry leaves Wishwood for good to an unknown place. A parallel can be drawn between Adam, the father of mankind, due to whose actions Original Sin came into being, and Harry’s father, who is the source of Original Sin of adultery and uxoricide in Monchensey family. As Christ was crucified to redeem humanity from the sin, Harry had to expiate for the sin committed by his father which he inherited from him. Even Harry’s physical appearance is no different from his father’s except that Harry is clean shaved and differs in terms of sartorial appearance, as Dr. Warburton describes in a private conversation with the former. Harry was kept away from his father till he went away. Harry mentions, “I never saw a photograph. There is no portrait.” Harry’s father was-

“An exceptionally cultivated country squire,

Reading, sketching, playing on the flute,

Something of an oddity to his country neighbours,

But not neglecting his public duties.

He hid his strength beneath unusual weakness,

The difference of a solitary man.”

(II.ii.65-67)

Unlike Harry, the father did not neglect his public duties. However, later realizing the strength of his wife he left the dynasty to her and left Wishwood. Harry learns about his father's past from Agatha, another spiritually awakened member in the family, apart from Mary and himself. It seems, perhaps the father too was spiritually awakened.

V. THE UNNAMED WIFE

Harry's unconventional, non-White, unnamed wife, who perhaps belonged to the South, plays a major role in Harry's life in the last eight years. South for Monchensey family is the place of “the vulgarest people”, who “bathe all day” and “dance all night/ In the absolute of minimum clothes”. (I.i.39-44) Eliot here attracts criticism for his Eurocentric approach. In his description of the people of South, orient-occident relationship is apparent. The people of South are exoticized by the Monchenseys. Just like the forbidden topic of Harry's unnamed father, his unnamed wife is not to be mentioned in front of Harry. The absence of the father and wife is a presence in itself as the family does nothing but talks about not mentioning them. For her mother-in-law, her getting “[S]wept off the dark in the middle of the storm” is “a blessed relief” (I.i.53-57) because Amy has chosen Mary for Harry and not the exotic wife Harry got married to without her consent. Inheriting the family curse, Harry and his wife's marriage also turned out to be a loveless one. One can draw a parallel between the Monchenseys in *The Family Reunion* and the Fawleys in *Jude the Obscure*. “The Fawleys were not made for wedlock”, just like Monchenseys. [8] Some of them do not marry and some of them cannot marry, and the ones who marry get separated.

Harry's wife, a “Well Known Peeress Vanishes from Limer”, to quote Harry's uncle, Charles, who himself quoted a newspaper headline. Amy is glad she died as-

“She only wanted to keep him to herself

To satisfy her vanity. That's why she dragged him

All over Europe and half round the world”

(I.i.169-171)

Various critics believe that there is an autobiographical touch in the description of the protagonist's wife and Eliot's wife Vivienne. Lynda Gordon writes,

“The description of the wife in *The Family Reunion* is an accurate picture of Vivienne as others saw her at this time: an excited, irresponsible woman who would never leave her husband alone. A student called Wynyard Browne, who came to see Eliot in 1930 had the door slammed in his face: „Why, oh why, do they all want to see my husband”, Vivienne wailed.” [9]

Even after the death of his wife, Harry does not feel that he is free from her. Her presence becomes more apparent after her death. He dreams of having murdered her, as he has inherited his father's wish of wife killing which they both could not execute. The wife serves in the development of the family motif in the play.

One can also draw a parallel between Harry Monchensey of Wishwood and contemporary day Prince Harry, the grandson of Queen Elizabeth II. Harry Monchensey's marriage to a woman of south was not acceptable to the members of his family. On 19 May, 2018, Royal Wedding took place at Windsor Castle, London between Prince Harry and Meghan Markle. In the twenty first century this much has changed that the member of royal family got married to Markle, a biracial black woman and no one objected to their marriage.

VI. MARY

Though unimportant to Amy and the other Monchenseys, Mary is important in the life of Harry. Mary can be seen as a spiritual partner of Harry. They both created happy memories together at the hollow tree in their

childhood. She too wants to escape from Wishwood. Mary, who does not belong to either generation, feels out of place in Wishwood. Gerald fails to draw her into the conversation. She is almost thirty years old, yet

unmarried. There could be religious connotations attached to Mary's name. She could be linked with Virgin Mary. Mary's conversation with Harry is highly philosophical. She cheats him into believing that she does not see the Furies. Harry can find only momentary solace in her love but the Eumenides appear when his heart softens for her, and he is reminded of his spiritual path. Mary herself points it out to Harry-

“Pain is the opposite of joy

But joy is a kind of pain

I believe the moment of birth

Is when we have knowledge of death”

(I.ii.266-269)

Mary compares herself with a hired servant for Amy. She believes that she has been kept at Wishwood to serve as a tame daughter-in-law to her. She tells Agatha that they both do not belong to Wishwood to which Agatha replies, “You and I Mary, / Are watchers and waiters: not the easiest role.” (I.ii.81-82) Like Eliphaz, Bildad and Zophar in the *Book of Job*, Mary and Agatha serve Harry as his psychiatrists. (Coghill) Psychology and psychoanalysis had observed advances in Eliot's age. In Eliot's next play *The Cocktail Party*, psychologist's couch is a key feature. Perhaps, a psychological reading could be applied to *The Family Reunion* too, if we look at Harry as a psychological patient, and Mary and Agatha as his comforters and doctors.

VII. AUNTS AND UNCLES

Ivy, Violet, Charles and Gerald, Harry's aunts and uncles, express their discontent with „Modern Young People“, who have “lost their sense of taste and smell”. (I.i.50) They represent the materiality in the world, and Harry fails to make them understand what he is going through. For them reality is what gets reported in the newspapers, as Charles says, “of course we know what really happened, we read it in the newspapers”. (I.i.351) The closest they reach to interpret Harry's internal conflict is when Charles says-

“I am beginning to feel, just beginning to feel

That there is something I could understand, if I were told it.

But I am not sure I want to know.”

(II.iii.197-199)

Though insignificant flat characters individually, the aunts and uncles have something to say collectively as Chorus in the play. Eliot uses them in a double capacity. They lose their individual identities and merge in a collective expression of their emotional and spiritual experience. As Merrillyn L. Graham points out in her essay, they feel like they are amateur actors who have not been assigned their parts, or as if they are dressed for a different play altogether or rehearsed the wrong parts. They are placed as Chorus to infer the actions of Harry which they cannot comprehend. [10]

VIII. THE EUMENIDES

Mentioned in the Dramatis Personae and stage directions, the Eumenides appear in front of Harry and other spiritually awakened members including Agatha, Mary and Downing are aware of their presence. They are addressed as only „eyes“, „ghosts“ and „spectors“ in the speeches. Harry could feel their existence for very long but when he entered Wishwood, he could see the „eyes“ which were set on him, which were only felt by him earlier. There is no escape from them. They appear again when he gets distracted from his spiritual goal while conversing with Mary and save him from the worldly notion of love. They reappear when Harry is in a conversation with Agatha, when he realizes that it would be a vain attempt to run away from them. They would follow him everywhere.

They help Harry in his journey from woe to enlightenment. From Furies they become his guiding powers. Eliot has employed the Greek myth of Orestes in the play. In Aeschylus' *Oresteia*, Orestes says, “you don't see them, you don't see them- but I see them:/ They are haunting me down, I must move on”. Eliot's hero Harry seems to be echoing Orestes' speech, “Can't you see them? You don't see them, but I see them/ And they see me”, as Nevill Coghill has pointed out in his “Introduction” to *The Family Reunion*. (Coghill 18) In a letter written to his cousin Eleanor Hinkley on 13 September 1939, Eliot wrote that it would have been better to have had the

Eumenides invisible. He considered employing them in his Modernist play a failure and would not use them again. They are a failed „objective correlateives“ for spiritual forces, as various critics suggest. With the guidance of his spiritual mother Agatha, Harry comes to terms with their existence and acknowledges them as his guiding angels. Instead of running away from them, he accepts them and follows them to reach his spiritual goal. They are with Harry in his journey from sin to expiation from beginning till the end.

IX. HARRY AND HIS PROBLEMS [SOLUTIONS]

Like J. K. Rowling's Harry Potter, Harry Monchensey is the chosen one. He is predestined to redeem his family from the curse. While some members of the family obstruct his spiritual journey, the other few help him to expiate the family sin. Through the help of Agatha and the Eumenides, Harry, who was unaware of the reasons for his sufferings, reunites with past, present and the future. Unlike William Shakespeare's Hamlet, on whom Eliot wrote an essay, "Hamlet and His Problems", Harry Monchensey finds a solution to his problem with the help of his guiding angels. One doesn't know where Harry went away after leaving Wishwood. Unlike, Christ, Harry leaves in a motor car, with his chauffeur Downing, which shows how Eliot has merged the old age Christian myth with his contemporaneous Modernist setting.

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