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**THE THEME OF THE FAILURE OF  
HUMAN COMMUNICATION IN  
THOMAS STEARNS ELIOT'S WORK**

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**INTRODUCTION**

When the twentieth century dawned, the mainstream of English verse still flowed from the Romantic wellspring. T.S. Eliot's Romantic contemporaries Alfred Edward Housman, Rudyard Kipling, William Henry Davies, Ralph Edwin Hodgson, Gordon Bottomley, John Masefield, and a host of other self-styled Georgians (after King George V, 1865-1936) were rather pale and weak shadows of their forbears. In the main, they wrote about nature, youth, patriotism, love, and beauty, using accepted forms and clichés. One trouble was that it had all been said before, and much more powerfully. Another was that shady groves and nightingales and the like had ceased to mean much to Western man, who had moved out of the countryside into the metropolis, into the world of time clocks, skyscrapers, machines, and the threat of bigger, more devastating, and more meaningless wars. What men needed to be told about themselves was not being said by the poets. One of the best-known figures in the second quarter of the twentieth century was T.S. Eliot, who was born in America but spent most of his adult life in England. He wrote as a man living through the years after the First World War in which men's lives had been lost or damaged, their hopes destroyed and promises broken, and he saw his writings as forces that could give meanings to the emptiness and confusion of the modern world. One of the themes Eliot explored most was the lack of communication among men. In this article I discuss some of the features of what the poet and playwright saw as the decay of the modern age that hindered human communication in the depressing interwar period in Europe.

In many of his poems, T.S. Eliot has portrayed as hero that man who feels a sense of his own inadequacy and impotence, and

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who is painfully aware of the banality and futility of his own life as well as of life in general. This anti-hero struggles against his situation, but he is predestined to fail, partially as a result of what he is, partially as a result of inadequate striving – a further sign of his inherent inadequacy which springs from his loneliness. The theme of the failure of human communication, of a positive relationship between men is already present in *The Love Song of H. Alfred Prufrock*. The poem opens with the promise “To lead you to an overwhelming question...” (L.10) and this question is not so much an interrogation as a problem. The problem of communication between a man and a woman:

*And would it have been worth it, after all,  
After the cups, the marmalade, the tea,  
Among the porcelain, among some talk of you and me,  
Would it have been worth while,  
To have bitten off the matter with a smile,  
To have squeezed the universe into a ball  
To roll it toward some overwhelming question,  
To say : “I am lazarus, come from the dead,  
Come back to tell you all, I shall tell you all”  
If one, settling a pillow by her head,  
Should say: “That is not what I meant at all.  
That is not it, at all (LL 87-98)*

It is found again in the other early poems *Hysteria* and *La Figlia che Piange*, and it is a major theme of the whole body of Eliot's work. It appears early in *The Waste Land* with the image of the “hyacinth girl”:

*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 (LL 37-41)*

This theme is developed by various means throughout Eliot's poetry and plays. It becomes related to other emerging themes, especially to religious meanings – for example, in the symbolic imagery of the “rose-garden” which appears in *Ash Wednesday*, *Four Quarters*, *The Family Reunion*, and the *Confidential Clerk*.

One of the most familiar aspects of Eliot's poetry is its complex echoing of multiple sources. In the early poems, those of the “Prufrock” period, this aspect is not very noticeable, but it is

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nonetheless already present to some extent. The title "Portrait of a Lady" immediately suggests Henry James, and there is indeed much about this poetry which is Jamesian. For one thing, the theme of the man-woman relationship frustrated or imperfectly realised is a common one in James's fiction. Commentators have noticed particularly a resemblance of situations between T.S. Eliot's poem and the short story *The Beast in the Jungly* – in which the protagonist becomes poignantly and devastatingly aware of a woman's love for him only after her death. Besides the specific similarity, there is a general Jamesian atmosphere which permeates the early poems. The man and woman of the "Portrait", Prufrock himself, the readers of the "*Boston Evening Transcript*", Aunt Helen, Cousin Nancy, the foreign Mr Appolinax and his American hosts, all are Jamesian personae. T.S. Eliot, like Henry James, presents a world of genteel society. Significantly enough, a specific Jamesian note is most strongly sounded at the opening of the earliest plays. In the very first minute of *The Family Reunion* Ivy echoes *The Waste Land* with rather emphasis:

*I have already told Amy we should go south in the winter.  
Were I in Amy's position, I would go south in the winter...  
I would go south in the winter, if I could afford it ...*

In the same scene, only a few minutes later, Agatha is commenting on Harry's return to his parental home, and she speaks the phrase "it will not be a very jolly corner", thus invoking Henry James, who had written a story called "The Jolly Corner", also about a man's homecoming and his search for an earlier identity.

While the theme of estrangement between man and woman is an ultimate subject throughout much of Eliot's work, it also signifies the larger theme of the individual's isolation, his estrangement from other people and from the world. There are intimations of this larger theme even in "Portrait of a Lady", where the young man's twice mentioned "self-possession" means not only his aplomb but, in the Eliotic context, his isolation, his inability to give himself to or to possess others.

In "Prufrock" the theme of isolation is pervasive and represented in various ways, from the "patient etherised upon a table", at the start, to the mermaids, at the end, who will not "sing to me" – but especially in the well-known lines: "I should have been a pair of ragged claws / & cuttling across the floors of silent seas."

In a sense, all of Eliot's works in verse are variations on the theme of isolation. The *Waste Land* presents a procession of

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characters locked within themselves at the end of the poem: “We think of the key, each in his prison / Thinking of the key, each confirms a prison...”

When we turn to the plays, we find characters either accepting isolation or trying very hard to escape from it. In *Murder in the Cathedral*, the saint, Thomas, is by definition set apart from ordinary humanity. Harry, towards the end of *The Family Reunion*, says, “where does one go from a world of insanity?” – and the implication of his subsequent and final statement is that he goes the way of the saint and the martyr. This is the way, too, that Celia Coplestone goes in *The Cocktail Party*, while the estranged Edward and Lavinia Chamberlayne are reconciled, not to love, or even to understanding, but merely to mutual toleration, making “the best of a bad job”. The theme of isolation is in focus throughout the play, and with special clarity in such words as these of Celia to the psychiatrist, Sir Henry Harcourt-Reilly:

No... it isn't that I want to be alone,  
But that everyone's alone –or so it seems to me.  
They make noises, and think they understand each other  
And I'm sure that they don't.

Unlike the earlier plays, *The Confidential Clerk* contains no suggestion of the martyred saint, but nonetheless the central character, Colby Simpkins, like Harry and Celia before him, goes his own way.

Finally indifferent as to who are his earthly parents, he turns to religion, first to be a church organist. *The Cocktail Party* and *The Confidential Clerk* are each in turn departures from the extreme and intense isolation represented in *The Family Reunion*. In *The Cocktail Party* marriage is regarded as a way of life, though cheerless, yet necessary and acceptable, “the common routine”. *The Confidential Clerk* offers a brighter perspective on marriage and on the possibilities of mutual sympathy and understanding among human beings.

Then, with *The Elder Statesman*, there is the most marked departure of all from the theme of isolation. Lord Claverton, invalided and retired statesman and business executive of hollow success, has been a failure as friend, lover, husband, and father. His frustrations and anxieties are dramatized by the return of the man and woman whom, in his youth, he had abused. But his daughter Monica and her fiancé Charles encourage him to explain his problems, and in explaining he confesses all the pretences of his life, while they listen with an understanding and sympathy which restore him to himself and thus release him from his isolation. He discovers not only the love

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which Monica and Charles have for him, but also the love which they have for each other.

In *The Elder Statesman*, T.S. Eliot has for the first time depicted with enthusiasm and exaltation real and normal relations between a man and a woman. Towards the end of the play, Charles tells Monica that he loves her "to the limits of speech, and beyond". And she replies that she has loved him "from the beginnings of the world", that this love which has brought them together "was always there", before either of them was born. As compared to Eliot's other plays, there is no apparent religious dimension in *The Elder Statesman* – except for the intimations of these words of Monica. The play is an affirmation of human relations, a drama of escape from isolation within the limits of those relations.

The idea of isolation, of the impossibility of communication and understanding, has a direct bearing on Eliot's style, composition, and the structure of his poems, for the thematic problem is not only that of communication between one person and another but, in the end, that of articulation itself. Prufrock, towards the end of his soliloquy, declares:

*It is impossible to say just what I mean!  
But as if a magic lantern threw the nerves in patterns  
on a screen... (LL 104-105).*

This statement has a multiplicity of implications which are appropriate to T.S. Eliot's work. The statement is Prufrock's, and also Eliot's, spoken through the mask of Prufrock. The form of the soliloquy may have been borrowed from Robert Browning (*Men and Women*), while the plot of the poem may be derived from Henry James's *Crapy Cornelia*, a story published in 1909, in which a middle-aged bachelor named White-Mason visits a younger widow named Cordelia Worthington in order to propose marriage, but reconsiders because of the difference in their ages and their worlds. Beyond these more apparent debts, the poem employs the self-irony of Jules Laforgue, but adapted to a serious purpose.

Prufrock is an interesting tragic figure. He is a man caught in a sense of defeated idealism and tortured by unsatisfied desire. He is unimportant to others, and aware of his own despair. He does not dare to seek love because he is afraid of disappointment, partially because he is afraid that he could not find love to begin with, and partially because even if he could find it, it would not satisfy his needs. For T.S. Eliot, Prufrock's position is an image of the sensitive man caught

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in a stupid world; he is too inhibited to seek it, too hesitant to reach for it, and too surrounded by the sordid to achieve it:

*I grow old... I grow old...  
I shall wear the bottoms of my trousers rolled.  
Shall I part my hair behind? Do I dare to eat a peach  
I shall wear white flannel trousers, and walk upon the  
beach  
I have heard the mermaids singing, each to each.  
I do not think that they will sing to me. (LL120-125)*

*I have seen them riding seaward on the waves  
Combing the white hair of the waves blown back  
Till human voices wake us, and we drown. (LL 120-131)*

To add to his problems, Prufrock also has a tragic flaw. As a result of his timidity he has become incapable of action of any sort. These problems, combined with his tragic flaw, unite to destroy him. His values derive from the traditions of romantic love, as shown by the reference to the “sea-girls”. Prufrock lives in a world of fantasy and daydreams of which the soliloquy itself is a symptom. In this unreal world, he has allowed his ideal conception (of women, for example, as indicated by the sea-girls) to overshadow his real life. Thus he has neither accepted nor rejected love. Rather he has created a false notion of it which has prevented him from taking any kind of action. Through the course of the poem, he has grown past sentimentality, but he has found nothing to replace it. And this tragedy is merely that he is a man driven by desire for something that he cannot achieve. Thus, while he cannot abandon the illusions of his fantasy world, he cannot accept the realities of the other world in which the women talk about Michelangelo.

As already noted, the isolation of the individual is also a theme of Eliot’s plays, and closely related to it is the problem of articulation and mutual understanding. In *The Cocktail Party*, two ways of life are set in contrast, the way of the saint and the way of ordinary experience. While it is allowed that “Both ways are necessary”, that a choice must be made of one or the other, and that the ordinary way is not inferior, it is nonetheless presented unattractively. Husband and wife, representing the ordinary one, are described as:

*Two people who know they do not understand each other,  
Breeding children whom they do not understand  
And who will never understand them.*



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If in *The Cocktail Party* there is an affirmation of the ordinary way, this affirmation includes the attitude of being resigned to isolation. With *The Confidential Clerk*, however, the polarities of absolute isolation and absolute understanding are resolved by the acceptance of intermediate possibilities, of partial understanding. Colby Simpkins, the young confidential clerk, speaks of the limitations of mutual understanding not as a negative aspect of human relation but as a ground for mutual respect:

*I meant, there's no end to understanding a person  
All one can do is to understand them better,  
To keep up with them; so that as the other changes  
You can understand the change as soon as it happens,  
Though you couldn't have predicted it.*

*The Confidential Clerk* ends on the theme of understanding between husband and wife and between parents and children. The ageing couple, Sir Claude and Lady Elisabeth, have finally achieved a degree of understanding with each other. When she says, "Claude, we've got to try to understand our children", her illegitimate son (who is engaged to his illegitimate daughter) says – as the final words of the play- "And we should like to understand you". *The Elder Statesman* similarly finds dramatic resolution in the understanding achieved between the generations, between the father on the one side and the daughter and her fiancé on the other. Towards the end of the play the familiar problem of articulation arises between the lovers, when Charles tells Monica that he loves her beyond "the limits of speech", and that the lover, despite the inadequacy of words, must still struggle for them. Not the measure of communication achieved, but the will and effort to communicate receive the emphasis here. In short, T.S. Eliot depicts human relationships which are in themselves totally unsatisfactory

Those who think they are in love are unable to marry, while those who are married are not in love, but merely endure with each other. This quest is an archetypal western expression of the search for value, self-knowledge and redemption against a background of war and social disintegration.

## **CONCLUSION**

Much of the picture of human unhappiness in the work of Thomas Stearns Eliot comes from the fact that the characters cannot

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understand the meanings of their own experiences nor communicate them. Modern life itself has greatly contributed to these barriers. In an age of rapid change that has seen the collapse of traditional beliefs about the universe and man's place in it, and the nature of man himself; an age of breakdown, disorder, and tension; an age in which knowledge has increased so hugely that no one person can come to grips with more than sections of it. Eliot sees the root of the modern world's unhappiness and confusion as the fact that people today are not in a position to bring together the different areas of their experience – cultural, sexual, and religious as well as the everyday physical world – to make a complete and healthy whole. His picture of life is one in which the forces of darkness and light are fighting for the world; true Christian feeling can bring light, but modern man more often chooses darkness. Eliot's work relates the decay of the modern world to man's concern throughout history, for material and sensual rewards at the expense of spiritual ones. Unless man's concern for his fellow man is restored, the spiritual waste land of the modern world may never be salvaged.

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