

ANALYSIS

The Cocktail Party (1949)



T. S. Eliot

(1888-1965)

“At his cocktail party, Edward Chamberlayne tries to conceal the fact that his wife Lavinia has left him, but he is found out by his mistress Celia; talented, lonely Peter Quilpe; and a mysterious stranger, the psychiatrist Sir Henry Harcourt-Reilly. Harcourt-Reilly arranges Lavinia’s return and although Edward still finds her his ‘angel of destruction,’ Sir Henry makes him see that they are bound together by ‘the same isolation,’ as her former lover Quilpe has now fallen in love with Celia, and if Edward is incapable of giving love, Lavinia cannot be loved. Celia too feels alone, and craving ‘the intensity of loving in the spirit’ refuses to be reconciled to the human condition accepted by the others and chooses to journey in quest of faith. Two years later at a cocktail party given by Edward and Lavinia for the same guests, they learn that Celia, having become a nurse in a heathen country, has been crucified and is now worshipped as a goddess. Harcourt-Reilly tells the Chamberlaynes they should not feel guilt since the saintly way was right for Celia and another way is for them, since ‘there are two worlds of life and death’.”

James D. Hart

The Oxford Companion to American Literature, 5th edition
(Oxford 1941-1983) 152

“In adapting the *Ion* Eliot cut out its fulfillment of the wish to have the divine in the human; in his handling of the *Alcestis* he has followed the same course. Euripides keeps the folk-tale sort of plot intact, while treating with troubling realism the human implications for a wife of dying for her husband, and for a husband, of letting his wife die for him. Since Admetus was a king hedged with divinity, Alcestis’ act was after all on one side a religious sacrifice. Eliot’s Celia is a woman who without knowing it had been trying to find, in an affair with an ordinary man, a way to dedicate herself to the divine.

The action of the play, for her, begins with the discovery that Edward is only human, moves through the recognition, in the psychiatrist’s consulting room, that what she has ‘sought for in the wrong place’ can be pursued in a dedicated life, and ends, we learn, in death at the hands of unconverted savages when she is serving as a member of a nursing order, caring for Christian natives in a plague-stricken jungle. So the

action, on her side, moves from the religion of human love to religion—from her trying, in a misconceived way, to do what Alcestis did, to her giving herself to God.

Eliot ‘saw two characters in Alcestis—the ordinary woman and the saint.’ Lavinia ‘dies’ too, in a way designed or at least abetted by her psychiatrist: she clears out, leaving Edward with a cocktail party on his hands (including the psychiatrist, incognito, as an uninvited guest)... The action, for Edward and Lavinia, leads in the opposite direction from Celia’s: it amounts to a process of disentanglement from their search for the divine in the human. Each has been having an affair: in maneuvering Peter Quilpe into a liason that broke up before the play opens, Lavinia had been seeking to capture the love of a sweet, ardent nature, so that she could feel that she was lovable; Edward had accepted Celia’s gift of herself so that he could have the reassurance of feeling that he could love. Lavinia’s departure is enough to make Edward realize that he wants his wife back, that his relation with Celia can lead to nothing. But when Lavinia comes back, a hilarious scene of married bickering shows how each uses the other by blaming him.

Eliot observed in *Notes towards a Definition of Culture*, by way of analogy to misunderstandings among cultures, that ‘It is human, when we cannot understand another human being, and cannot ignore him, to exert an unconscious pressure on that person to turn him into something that we *can* understand: many husbands and wives exert this pressure on each other.’ In the relation of Edward to Lavinia, he shows a man subject to such pressure, and acquiescing in it to make of his wife a kind of supernatural power: ‘And then you can back, you / The angel of destruction... Must I become after all what you would make me?’ Their recognition, in the consulting room, is, as Sir Henry Harcourt-Reilly puts it: ‘How much you have in common. The same isolation. / A man who finds himself incapable of loving / And a woman who finds that no man can love her.’

It is characteristic of Eliot’s method that he only implies the positive statements, which would go: ‘Since I cannot love, you are unlovable—forgive me.’ ‘Since I am unlovable, you cannot love—forgive me.’ But he conveys the change of heart very effectively by dramatic means, especially at the moment when instead of going on talking separately to the doctor, they reach out to each other.... At the second cocktail party, two years later, the condition *has* been altered: the brief last act conveys convincingly, by gestures in themselves banal, that each has learned to love the other and blame himself. The two movements in the play have crossed: Edward and Lavinia have found their way to humanity; Celia has found her way to divinity.

Writing in 1940 of *The Idea of a Christian Society*, Eliot spoke of ‘the natural end of man—virtue and well-being in community...for all, and the supernatural end—beatitude—for those who have the eyes to see it’.... *The Cocktail Party* is the first play of Eliot’s to present the natural end of man as a valid consideration; in *The Family Reunion* the audience was asked to adopt the perspective of a protagonist for whom the natural has become a nightmare unreality. The difference comes out neatly if we contrast the way Harry and Celia use the cricket as a symbol for such unreality.... Celia moves past then nightmare vision to a point of vantage beyond Harry’s, from which she can see Edward as a human being again, divested of her illusion *and* her disillusion. For her, too, as well as Edward and Lavinia, it is only by giving up the search for the supernatural *in* the natural that the natural can be seen and respected for what it is.

The last act, in which this process of separating the human from the divine is completed, has been much criticized. Eliot has observed that it ‘only just escapes, if it does escape, the accusation of being not a last act but an epilogue.’ Others have objected that Celia’s death off in ‘Kinkanja’ is too remote to be made real by a report, and that the report itself is wantonly shocking in the way it shifts from Colonial-office humor about monkeys and cannibals to Celia ‘crucified / Very near an ant hill.’ My own response, when I saw it on the stage, was mixed: I saw relatively little point in Alex’s chatter about his colonial mission; I was moved by the news of Celia, but with a sense that I was somehow being imposed on. I now find the act much more satisfactory: it seems to me that something *does* happen, not just in the report, but to those hearing it. On reflection, Celia’s mission does not seem irrelevant or arbitrary: Eliot has imagined her working in the sort of area where an English Christian might find the most challenging responsibility.

He observes in *Notes towards a Definition of Culture* that it is a reversal of values to ‘offer another people your culture first, and your religion second,’ yet he sees how factitious it is to be prescriptive about

the problems of the colonial regions, and concludes that it is only when 'we give our attention to...the limited area that we know best, and within which we have the most frequent opportunities for right action, that we can combat the feeling of hopelessness that invades us, when we linger too long upon perplexities so far beyond our measure.' Celia, speaking of ordinary love between a man and woman, says, 'If there's no other way...then I feel just hopeless.' Her dedication to another kind of love permits her to embrace and master in her nursing mission 'the hopelessness that invades us,' and by doing so she brings to the natives her religion first, her culture second. 'We found that the natives...had erected a sort of shrine for Celia.'

Alex's witty talk skates on very thin ice as he tells about the monkeys multiplying and so ruining the pagan natives who hold them in veneration, while the Christian native converts eat the monkeys and so prosper—until the pagan natives rebel and 'instead of eating monkeys / They are eating Christians....' Under Alex's sangfroid we feel the precariousness of the general European situation. Of course, when we know the story, we think all this time of Celia: even hearing it for the first time, we are cued to wonder whether she was eaten as soon as we hear she was taken.... The cannibal impulse, as it is encountered in *The Cocktail Party*, is still relevant to love and worship—as it is, of course, in the Lord's Supper, which in a Christian view is what the several sorts of primitive and primitivist aberrations point to.

The pagan natives, worshiping monkeys and eating people, look for the divine in the animal as the Europeans tend to look for it in the human. Their taboos reverse ours, but after Julia's talk about a pet monkey we feel a Swiftian shock when Alex says blandly, 'The young monkeys are extremely palatable: 'I've cooked them myself...'' (This, from Alex, connects the taboo feeling with the concern with eating, and for drinking ceremonially together, which runs through the play: everybody tries to feed Edward after Lavinia leaves him; Celia, after their break-up, looks 'absolutely famished.') Edward did not, however, 'gobble up' Celia; she found a way to give herself that did mean becoming his 'missionary stew.' Alex's talk, by bringing alive for us the cannibal impulse and the dread of it, sets up a field of force, a tension, which the spiritual communion with Celia sublimates and resolves.

The disappointing effect of the last act in the phonograph recording, where almost everything is left out but the report and Sir Henry's comments on Celia's destiny, makes one realize how much the meaning of her death depends on our experiencing its sudden impact on a lively group taken up with life. We get something similar to the realization of the presence of a dead person which Joyce expresses at the end of 'The Dead' (a passage Eliot very much admires). But where Joyce shows Nora Conroy held back from the adulterated possibilities of ordinary married life by her memory of the unrealized capacity for love in the boy who died for her, Eliot shows how the fulfillment in her death for God of Celia's capacity for love *frees* those she might have attached.

It is crucial that those who hear the news together are a *group*: Eliot is presenting the curious moment of atonement and communion which comes when people share the experience of a death, especially when it is the death of a noble or devoted person, a death encountered through devotion. Peter Quilpe's response is particularly effective in showing how such a moment moves a person past self-concern. He thought his concern was all for Celia: he had planned to get her into films, now that he has had a success himself in them. But without his realizing it, his talk in telling of his grief for her is all about his plans, about himself.... Celia's selflessness provides a touchstone by which each is carried beyond his own egotism; or better, what they hear about her death forms a presence among them which makes them feel that their limitations matter less—a presence that frees them to acknowledge their limitations. To spell this out in moral terms makes the scene sound like moralistic highfalutin. But in fact the moral and religious insights spill over, so to speak, as an overflow from the dramatic development—they express new human relations developing before our eyes, including relations to Celia....

Out of context, such speeches may sound like a competition in being pollyanna; but they function not primarily to make moral points, but to convey a movement. It is a very beautiful scene, not for the residue of ideas...but for the movement, which approaches 'a condition of serenity, stillness, and reconciliation'—and then comes back again to the beginning of a new cocktail party, conducted as cocktail parties are, but with a new relation established between that sort of moment and 'other kinds of experience which are possible.'

In our encounter with a new work of art, we are conscious at first of its materials as we have come to see them in other contexts. But if the work has form, has meaning of its own, the derivation of its materials comes to matter less and less. Many people whose judgment I respect are still put off by the materials of *The Cocktail Party*, especially the materials that derive from British parlor comedy. The standard practices of actors tend to suggest that what matters most about the West End world is the glamour of top-drawer exclusiveness. But this snobbery, though it can be distracting in a performance, chiefly on first encounter, largely disappears with the 'the development or expansion of enjoyment' as one studies the play. So too with the objection many people felt to Eliot's 'smuggling in a priest in psychiatrist's clothing.' As we come to know the play, Sir Henry's role acquires its own identity, beyond its materials. In using the figure of the psychiatrist, complete with the glamour of the receiving room, the mystery of the closing office door, the excitement of conspiratorial advising with friends, Eliot took hold of materials which are highly charged for many people. But he developed the role so as to bring out the potentialities that concerned his whole purpose.

When we consider Sir Henry's part, along with his attendant spirits, Julia and Alex, we realize that *The Cocktail Party* is partly a fantasy. It is like *The Tempest* in presenting people who undergo events that are manipulated without their knowing it so as to bring about spiritual changes in them. Like Prospero, Sir Henry is a version of the immemorial magic doctor who can bring people back to life—Dr. Ball or whoever in the St. George plays, Hercules in the *Alcestis*. Of course Sir Henry goes beyond the doctor's proper sphere... But if his conduct is sometimes unprofessional—or para-professional—his attitude towards himself and his powers is more human, more humble, than that of many an actual professional man on whom we force the role of medicine man. One can add that there are in fact psychiatrists who go far outside the office situation to help people on a catch-as-catch-can basis...the role of a devoted mental doctor inevitably approaches in some respects the role of a priest...

The comedy of manipulation in *The Cocktail Party* gives a feeling of things opening up, of something at work more than meets the eye, of limits dissolving. In the first act, the conspirators are spying on Edward without his knowing it—a comic version of the horror of being watched dramatized in *The Family Reunion*... The several invasions of Edward's privacy, telephone, doorbell, telephone, etc., are perhaps a little too deliberately good theater craftsmanship, but they do express comically, in the large, the process of opening up Edward when his whole instinct is to resist.... A self-constituted missionary team like the 'Guardians' might be poisonous in real life. But so might Prospero be poisonous in real life. In the play, the manipulators are justified by the comic action over which they preside, an action which makes distinctions that set loose energies otherwise frustrated, energies that at bottom, after all, *are* mysterious. Eliot has, moreover, included sufficient traits of mere humanity in Julia, Alex, and even Sir Henry, to signify that apart from their role, they are not magical: Sir Henry comes, like Prospero, to a moment when he must say in effect: 'Bear with my weakness. My old brain is troubled.'

The masterful second act, in Sir Henry's consulting room, does not depend, and could not, on his being absolutely master; his art is only to *assist* Nature, as Eliot remarked in an interview. By a classic comic mechanism, he deftly switches Edward and Lavinia into a head-on collision; it is like the encounter in *The Jew of Malta* where Barabas, master puppeteer, arranges for his daughter's suitors to cut each other down.... They cut down each other's false pretenses: our hilarity we watch the process is an experience of the weakness of such pretenses, blown away in laughter—after which Edward and Lavinia can start to make a new beginning. Because the process is positive, conveying the comic sense that life is larger than personalities, their encounter and change of heart makes an effective preliminary and foil to Celia's interview. The reversals of expectation in Celia's case are not for the most part laughable, but some of them are.... But her interview belongs to comedy, even when we are moved, perhaps to tears, by her expression of her plight, because it presents her situation being opened up by Reilly's redefinition of it—there is a turning of the tables which makes way for fulfillment....

It is nothing new in Eliot to turn the tables on psychiatry by redefining what is 'normal': 'The Waste Land,' written after treatment for a nervous crisis, comes to mind. In the 1956 lecture on 'The Frontiers of Criticism,' he went rather far out of his way to quote Aldous Huxley: 'The aim of Western psychiatry is to help the troubled individual to adjust himself to the society of less troubled individuals—individuals who are observed to be well adjusted to one another and the local institutions, but about whose adjustment to the

fundamental Order of Things no inquiry is made...’ Mr. Huxley ought really to say ‘the aim of *most* Western psychiatry,’ for ‘adjustment’ as a goal is widely replaced by various conceptions of creativity, some of them inclusive enough to accommodate Celia’s work in Kinkanja. One should also observe that when Sir Henry makes game of Edward’s notions of a ‘nervous breakdown’ and his expectations about his treatment, Eliot’s psychiatrist is only saying what is quite commonly recognized by many in the profession. Nevertheless, the reversals of expectation about the normal which Eliot presents in Celia’s interview do not go stale, because they are drama, not journalism. Celia’s account of her perplexity is very moving.... So too she is very moving in her descriptions of what she had hoped for in her relation with Edward, and her recognition ‘that we had merely made use of each other / Each for his purpose. That’s horrible. Can we only love / Something created by our own imagination? / Are we all in fact unloving and unlovable? / Then one is alone...’

We have just seen Edward and Lavinia discover that they were ‘unloving and unlovable,’ and yet go back to the human condition. Eliot has constructed a dramatic situation which permits him to make crucial distinctions without imposing them.... Sir Henry’s part, in its interplay with Celia’s, is a fine achievement of simplicity without oversimplification; the scene develops in a strong two-way rhythm: ‘Neither way is better. / Both ways are necessary.’ Celia’s lines, eager, plangent, flow out to his decisive lines. By dividing the person who feels her way from the person who thinks his way, Eliot gives himself scope for a very beautiful ‘design of human action and of words.’

Nowhere in *The Cocktail Party* or *The Confidential Clerk* do we hear a voice which has the urgency of anguish verging on anarchy, the pressure toward ‘Hieronymo’s mad againe’ which was the deepest excitement of the poetry of ‘The Waste Land’ period, and which was still present in the hero’s role in *The Family Reunion*, striving toward an apocalyptic, inhumane domination. Nor do the recent plays have anything like the early range of materials, including the vulgar, the shocking, the sensual and perverse caught in a variety of social classes and types. But to condemn Eliot’s late work because it is not like his earlier, as [some] have done with gusto, is to be left behind by the poet’s extraordinary power of development. The essay on Johnson remarks that in ‘the perfection of any style it can be observed as in the maturing of an individual, that some potentialities have been brought to fruition only by the surrender of others.’

It may be that in the poetry which Eliot wrote in his first two decades in England, the rhythms conveying the disruptive pressure of an unfulfilled need embody an interaction of American and British speech rhythms. At least one can say that when he found his way at last to writing for the ‘third Voice’ and creating entirely independence characters, their speech was entirely British. There are some speeches in the recent plays where I feel that the imitation of the cadences of English types verges on mimicry as opposed to full creation. These speeches are only occasional, limiting cases; but there are no speeches where we are swept wholly into the stream of passionate expression, or pressure for expression, as we are by passages in the poems. This is a real limitation: the plays lack one kind of intensity. They also lack the wonder and joy in the physical world and the physical powers which keeps returning in the poems, expressed in passages of lyric beauty that make the spiritual anguish the more poignant.

But the recent plays have intensity of another sort. Their force derives from the whole design, as the design develops, and contains, the parts of the several characters, and points beyond them. It is certainly true that the plays would be greater art if they realized natural life more fully in presenting the logic of sacrifice. But Eliot does realize the part of natural life that is essential to his purpose—the *humanness* of his people. Because he has caught, in the accents of each character, an individual humanity, ordinary yet unique, reaching out beyond itself as best it can, he can make dramatic designs which bring out ‘a credible order’ in ‘ordinary reality.’

The great moments are not climaxes of passion, but still points when we experience ‘feeling which we can only detect, so to speak, out of the corner of the eye and can never completely focus...feeling of which we are only aware in a kind of temporary detachment from action.’ Such experience is delicate, almost fugitive; yet we are brought to it by an action grounded in much common sense, in disillusion which has not destroyed wit and zest, in knowledge of the heart at once worldly and generous. The designs, as one

comes to understand them, emerge as extraordinarily self-consistent and meaningful—expressions of wisdom. So what is delicate is also strong.”

F. O. Matthiessen
The Achievement of T. S. Eliot, 3rd edition
(1935,1947; Oxford/Galaxy 1959) 226-42

“T. S. Eliot’s three tragicomedies, *The Cocktail Party* (1950), *The Confidential Clerk* (1954), and *The Elder Statesman* (1959) are so British in theme and mode as to have no place here except to complete the record of their author’s career.” [Liberal academics still use any excuse to ignore Eliot.]

Willard Thorp & Robert E. Spiller
Literary History of the United States, 3rd edition
(Macmillan 1946-1963) 1406

“*The Cocktail Party*, laid in a modern setting and written in an informal and vernacular free-verse style, has proved the most successful of Eliot’s plays in the theatre. As the action opens four of the chief characters have become involved in a banal sexual impasse: Edward Chamberlayne, a successful solicitor, is having a clandestine affair with Celia Copleston; his wife Lavinia is in love with Peter Quilpe, and Peter himself is courting Celia.

Edward and Lavinia plan a cocktail party, but on the day it is to take place Lavinia leaves her husband, and he is forced to entertain the guests himself and make lame excuses for her absence. The most important guests at the party are Julia Shuttlewaite, outwardly a silly woman dominated by her affected mannerisms, and an ‘Unidentified Guest’ to whom Edward impulsively reveals his domestic troubles. The ‘Unidentified Guest’ is actually Sir Henry Harcourt-Reilly, a kind of psychiatrist who is as much a spiritual practitioner as a medical one.

The action gradually reveals that he has been called in on the case by Julia, who underneath her giddy silliness is actually a wise and intuitive woman. Dr. Reilly persuades Edward and Lavinia that they must break out of the shells of egotism which have isolated them from each other; realizing the seriousness of the situation, they do so, and their marriage continues on a new and firmer basis. As for Celia, who suffers from the sense of isolation from her fellow beings as well as from a ‘consciousness of sin,’ Reilly recognizes in her a true Saintry personality; he sends her to a sanatorium, and then advises her to follow her own destiny as her heart guides her. She becomes a member of a religious order, goes off as a nurse to a remote tropical island, and there is martyred by the natives in a particularly horrible manner. Peter, also following his destiny, becomes a screenwriter, thus finding contentment at his own level of ability; Reilly tells him, ‘You understand your metier, Mr. Quilpe—which is the most that any of us can ask for.’

Underneath this comedy-of-manners plot, which might have been written by a Sidney Howard or a Philip Barry, is a metaphysical undercurrent which is wholly Eliot’s. Reilly, Julia, and her playboy friend Alex are beneath their superficial appearances deeply religious persons; the toast (actually an incantation) which they recite at the end of Act II clearly shows them to be members of some kind of spiritual cult—or perhaps they are Divinities masquerading under human form. Although Reilly at first appears to dominate the plot, it is Julia who is the real power behind him; she is evidently a kind of priestess or an earth-mother figure who knows all and who controls the latent instincts and impulses of her friends. Unlike *Murder in the Cathedral*, however, the play does not arrive at a neat theological conclusion; its philosophical meaning is latent and suggested rather than specific.”

Donald Heiney
Recent American Literature 4
(Barron’s Educational Series 1958) 491-92

“This often witty and sometimes powerful play begins and ends at a cocktail party, the representative modern gathering. Its principal characters suffer from radical loneliness and a lack of self-knowledge. Through the mediation of an uninvited guest who is ostensibly a psychoanalyst, but partly a sort of mysterious father-confessor, three of them attain ‘salvation.’ A married couple achieve a modest degree of enlightenment which enables them to save their marriage, a young woman becomes a nursing sister and is

martyred in Africa. The verse of the play is generally colloquial and unobtrusive, preserving the cadences and vocabulary of ordinary cultured speech, but has moments of intensity and eloquence.”

Max J. Herzberg & staff
The Reader's Encyclopedia of American Literature
(Crowell 1962) 188

Michael Hollister (2016)