

Contemporary Verse Drama

Haybat Abdul Samad

English Department, Faculty of Arts and Human Sciences
Lebanese University, Beirut, Lebanon

Abstract:

The hundred years that passed between 1850 – the year in which *Catalina*, the first verse play of Henrik Ibsen was published – and 1950 – the year in which another verse play appeared, namely T.S. Eliot's *The Cocktail Party*, were very eventful in European drama. In those years, a completely new dramatic movement – the spread of naturalistic prose drama – came into play. On the other hand, verse drama in the twentieth century, and particularly in England and Ireland, came back into the popular theater. At the hands of W.B. Yeats, T.S. Eliot and Christopher Fry, in the main, the dramatists who constituted the chief revolt against naturalism, contemporary verse drama revived against the naturalistic definition of drama, which in a sense considers characterization and action the main ends of drama. The aim of the paper is to compare and contrast the two styles of drama using the criticism of contemporary verse dramatists. The paper delves into the ways these dramatists tried to make verse play and distinguish themselves from naturalists. It continues to prove their failure while showing discontinuity of verse plays' popularity in the temporary audience's mind. The question is whether verse dramatists succeeded in instilling a feeling of suspense and popularity in the inner recesses of the audience's hearts or not; in other words, can verse drama preserve its influence on the audience? The significance of this study is to prove that although the role of verse drama lasted for centuries, its presence nowadays is vanishing as it is losing its power of influence.

Keywords: Contemporary verse drama, mystification, naturalism, poetic drama, prose drama, religious plays, verse drama, and symbolism

Cite as: Abdul Samad, H. (2018). Contemporary Verse Drama. *Arab World English Journal for Translation & Literary Studies*, 2 (2). DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.24093/awejtls/vol2no2.8>

Contemporary Verse Drama

Eliot defines the verse play a kind of art that:

should remove the surface of things; expose the underneath, or the inside, of the natural surface appearance. It may allow the characters to behave inconsistently, but only with respect to a deeper consistency. It must reveal, underneath the vacillating or infirm character, the indomitable unconscious will, and underneath the resolute purpose of the planning animal, the victim of circumstances, and the doomed or sanctified being. (Eliot, as cited in Williams, 1988, 19-20)

Thus, Eliot suggests that real consistency is related to the total work of art rather than to "character". In other words, real consistency lies in the pattern or structure of experience rather than in mere representation or expression. The relation of characters to this pattern is only part of a whole scheme that embodies characters, action, situation and dramatic form simultaneously.

Like Eliot, Yeats criticizes the improper reliance of the naturalist on character; besides, he reminds us of the minor room that characters occupy in the ancient great periods of drama.

if a play does not contain definite character, its constitution is not strong enough for the stage, and that the dramatic moment is always the contest of character with character When we go back a few centuries and enter the great periods of drama, character grows less and sometimes disappears. (Yeats, as cited in Williams, 1988, pp. 207-208)

On the level of language, naturalism plays a serious role in modifying conventional language. In choosing every play contemporary situations and every-day ordinary characters, the naturalists feel it necessary to repudiate the older conventions of dramatic speech. In this respect, Ibsen, as representative of the naturalist attitude, seems to mistake poetry as the language of gods; "My desire was to depict human beings, and, therefore, I would not make them speak the language of the gods (Ibsen, qtd. in Williams, 1988, 22).

Against Ibsen's mistaken belief, Eliot (1969) says:

The human soul, in intense emotion, strives to express itself in verse. It is not for me, but for the neurologists, to discover why this is so, and why and how feeling and rhythm are related. The tendency, at any rate, of prose drama is to emphasize the ephemeral and superficial; if we want to get at the permanent and universal, we tend to express ourselves in verse.
(p.22)

Naturalists

Besides, as the naturalists want to produce “the illusion of reality”. They find it necessary to use the language of a conversational, natural type. They believe that their scale is the small room and not the forum. In brief, the naturalists accept the limitations of normal expression. They do not regard drama as a serious literary form, and it is because of this unjust regard that Yeats, (as cited in Williams, 1988) claims: “I think the theatre must be reformed in its plays, its speaking, its acting and scenery. There is nothing good about it at present” (p.36).

When Yeats called for a reform in the world of the theatre, he had in mind the fact that a verse play could produce a new theatre while the prose play was an outcome of the theatre. Moreover, he declares that the social basis of his work was much related to the existence of a living and organic society of Irish Peasantry. Yeats (qtd in Williams, 1988) wanted the substance of his work to be mainly based on:

conversation of people which is so full of riches because it is so full of leisure, or...those old stories of the folk which were made by men who believed so much in the soul, and so little in anything else, that they were never entirely certain that the earth was solid under the foot-sole. (p.124)

This consciousness of Yeats that manifested itself in the interest of people in spiritual themes that connected this tradition of the old made him evolve a dramatic form capable of restoring “ritual” to the stage. The aim of this evolution is that, for living speech to become impassioned, it should be able to carry a greater weight of experience rather than to be limited to the expression of actuality.

Yeats’ critical approach towards the creation of a new drama made him reject the fictional theatre as well as the visual one. Rubin (2011), sees that Yeats “creates a fiction and uses the dramatic situation as a point of departure for a poem that comments as much on current events as on Irish history (p.207). Moreover, his rejection of the former springs from his belief that the center of drama is speech and not character; while the rejection of the latter stems from his belief that the purpose of acting is not the projection of reality but the communication of a pattern of speech. In response to his critical views, Yeats finds “the Abbey Theatre” which created the confidence that verse plays could again be written for the public stage. Gwynn (1970) shows the Greek influence on Yeats’ writing as they “bring their personal tribute to William Butler Yeats; and a beautiful, acute and enlightening tribute it is” (p.8).

Yeats is a poet who revolted against the scientific and social thought of the nineteenth century; he also admired the rediscovery of the primitive elements in religion. He tries to indulge poetry with the real complexities of life, “but only insofar as the individual poet's imagination had direct access to experience or thought and only insofar as those materials were transformed by the energy of artistic articulation” (Brower, 1975, 201). Brower adds that Yeats’ rebellion against the Royal Academy, which idealized Raphael, had much to do with the influence of later followers of

the pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood – a movement in art and literature initiated in 1848 by the poet and painter Dante Gabriel Rossetti” (p. 781). The ideal of those followers is vaguely medieval. Their subjects in poetry, for example, are religious or allegorically spiritual, and they seem to be firm believers in the life of imagination, in the ideal dreamy world, which they look for in protest against the materialism of nineteenth century England.

He was, from first to last, a poet who tried to transform the local concerns of his own life by embodying them in the resonantly universal language of his poems. Frazer (1954) asserts that the poetry of Yeats “would be more permanent and enduringly popular than the poetry of either T.S. Eliot or of Ezra Pound, because it is more coherent, and more traditional than that of his two great contemporaries” (p.81). Roughly speaking, Yeats’ eventful life falls into four periods: the period of solitary pre-Raphaelite song (1889 – 1904) – during which he wrote Irish myths and legends; the period of search for a new verse performance in the world of the theatre (1904 – 1916) and for more realistic poetry; the period of symbolic poetry and visionary song (1916 – 1929); and, finally, the period of poetry of madness (1929 – 1939). Taking into consideration the second period, the period that interests us on the level of contemporary verse drama and originality that Yeats generated in this field, we may select *Deirdre*, one of Yeats’ greatest tragic verse plays, as a good case in point.

Yeats’ *Deirdre* Play

Deirdre is a play of four characters: Conchubar – the old king of Uladh, Naisi – a young king, Deirdre – his queen, and Fergus – Conchubar’s friend. This traditional Irish story was written in 1906. Its theme can be summed up in few words. The High-King of Ireland, Conchubar, brings up a young girl called Deirdre to be his queen. Before their marriage, she runs away with a young man called Naisi. They keep wandering in Scotland for seven years. Tempted by the king’s promise of forgiveness, they come back to Ireland where Naisi is killed. As regards the death of Deirdre, she immediately kills herself after the murder of her beloved. Some critics have described Deirdre as a poignant and a feminine play. They are spoken to, and they speak in reply.

Furthermore, they serve to be a kind of chorus in the play. The play opens with a mood of vague apprehension, a mood which is created by the musicians. Though old Fergus has an unshaken confidence in his king, the first musician foretells Conchubar’s threatening danger. This she does as she sees strange-armed men gathered, with a marriage-bed prepared with miracle-working stones, stones that have tremendous power in stir even those at enmity to love:

*Look there — there at the window, those dark men,
With murderous and outlandish-looking arms —
They've been about the house all day
...they are such men
As kings will gather for a murderous task,
That neither bribes, commands, nor promises
Can bring their people to. (Yeats, 1931, 195 – 196)*

As the dishonest intentions of the kings are revealed bit by bit, the feeling of apprehension becomes more intense and rapid. Thus, the play maybe described as a race of emotions from beginning to end. This race is best shown when we imagine the tragic and unrealistic setting of Deirdre – a guesthouse roughly built in the midst of a leafy wood. The house symbolizes a trap, a cage or a net, and the large spaces of the wood that can be seen from inside the house stands for Liberty. We may go as far as to say that the wood image summarizes the single extended metaphor Yeats is playing upon throughout the play.

As to the language of the play, it is in the great tradition of English blank verse, and it connotes that of Shakespeare in particular. Besides, it lacks the peasant and Irish dialect. After the performance of Deirdre_which Yeats believed was a great success, he (qtd. in Bushrui, 1965) writes:

We are beginning to get audience... my play Deirdre, after leaving me doubtful for a little, is now certainly a success... the difficulties of holding an audience with verse are ten times greater than with the prose play. Modern audience has lost the habit of careful listening. I think it is certainly my best dramatic poetry and for the first time and verse-play of mine is well played all round. (p. 122)

In reality, the greatness of Deirdre has much to do with the legendary dignity of its characters and their remoteness in time. Yeats was haunted for long by a desire to trace his poetic material to a tradition older than the Christian heritage. Thus, Deirdre might be identified with the Irish Helen, Naisi with Paris and Conchubar with Menelaus, “and the events took place, according to the conventional chronology of the Bards about the time of the Birth of Christ” (Bushrui, 1965, 124).

In addition to the greatness of the play, as far as its legendary theme is concerned, the chorus of it adds much up to this greatness. The chorus in Deirdre_moves toward the functions, which Yeats deemed in later years extremely important. Yeats demands from the chorus to describe place and weather, and at moment's action. He also speaks of “...a chorus which describes the scenes and interprets their (the characters’) thought and never becomes as in the Greek theatre a part of the action (p.125).

It is noteworthy to suggest that Yeats’ tendency to improve certain features of Deidre is not confined to the chorus in as much as it is to certain stylistic features. This tendency manifests itself in two aspects. Because of this tendency, some important chances occur in the speeches of some characters, and Yeats, consequently, finds it necessary to have several revisions of the play as a whole. Yeats makes all these changes in order to reach a definite goal, namely a certain even richness of language. The more he achieves his “even richness”, the more necessary it becomes to remove certain unnecessary parts. This achievement is better shown if we compare two speeches, for example, by the first musician. The following passage, which exists in the 1922 revision, seems to be more elaborate and complicated than its equivalent, as it exists in the 1934 revision.

Some dozen years ago, King Conchubar found
 A house upon a hillside in this wood,
 And there a child with an old witch to nurse her,
 And nobody to say if she were human,
 Or of the gods, or anything at all
 Of who she was or why she was hidden there,
 But that she'd too much beauty for good luck. (p.148)

In the 1934 revision, the passage goes as follows:

Some dozen years ago, King Conchubar found
 A house upon a hillside in this wood,
 And there a child with an old witch to nurse her,
 And nobody to say if she were human,
 Or of the gods, or anything at all
 Of who she was or why she was hidden there,
 But that she'd too much beauty for good luck. (p.148)

In conjunction with the accomplished richness of style, there exists a skillful use of recurrent images throughout the play. The most obvious of these images are two: the hunting imagery and the chess imagery. The former type symbolizes all the hope, conflict and strain, which the theme focuses or presents. This type, moreover, seems to be the more functional and impressive while the latter is useful in the sense that illustrates the way in which the former type is exploited. An example of the hunting imagery is Naisi's description of Deirdre to Fergus:

She has the heart of the wild birds that fear
 The net of the fowler or the wicker cage. (pp. 206-207)

Another example is that drawn by Deirdre between the creatures of the wood and animals:

"Oh, that the creatures of the woods had torn my body with their claws!" (p.210)

After having fallen in the nets of the king, Naisi compares his example to that of a caged bird or a fish:

NAISI: I have been taken like a bird or a fish.

CONCHUBAR: He cried Beast, beast, and in a blind-beast rage

He ran at me and fell into the nets, (p.219)

The most effective of all hunting images is that drawn by Naisi when he likened Conchubar to a crafty hunter.

A prudent hunter, therefore, but no king.
 He'd find if what has fallen in the pit
 Were worth the hunting, but has come too near.
 And I turn hunter. You're not man, but beast.

Go scurry in the bushes, now, beast, beast,
For now, it's topsy-turvey, I upon you. (p.217)

Thanks to the even richness of Deirdre style as well as to the originality that is characteristic of its subject matter as presented in several revisions, critics highly praised its success and popularity. Fay and Carswell (1971) said of it in this respect: "This was the first verse play that gave us the feeling that the audience was with us and really liked it, and there were signs that with time and trouble Frank's scheme for a verse-speaking company was a possibility in the near future" (p.148).

Another praise, but in a different way, is given by Moore (1978), a critic and poet, who said "how I should like to see it adequately rendered! I think it would produce the effect of a religious mystery by the perfections of its seclusion from the world and the rare distinction of its self-decreed limitations" (p.148). However, some critics have judged Yeats as a failure in the field of poetic drama, his failure in reality does not spring from his failings as a dramatist, but rather from the taste of public as a whole. We must confess that the very small audience who used to attend Yeats's verse plays are also very small in all other modern theatres where verse plays have been performed. In short, we cannot claim that there is a large audience in English-speaking countries for the verse plays.

To sum up, Yeats was not very flexible with the naturalistic staging; and as Grodon (1961) explains, "it would be part of his reaction against the naturalism that he found his father and friends practicing their painting, and against the science and positivism of the age: the general reaction, in fact, which turned him to the symbol" (p. 59).

T.S. Eliot and Prose Drama

Gillespie claims that "Fry's dialogue in his verse plays includes a mixture of poetic devices, strikingly appropriate heightened language and poetry-prose combination" (p.288), and did not juxtapose verse with prose as Eliot or Yeats did, or even as Shakespeare did. Like Yeats, Eliot looks beyond the naturalist theatre for a new kind of dramatic form though his later plays seem to be more naturalistic than his earlier ones. Nevertheless, unlike Yeats' verse drama, Eliot's verse drama has its distinctive features the most significant of which are: experiment in an action that is capable of dramatizing consciousness rather than behavior, and the distinction one must see between authentic experience and a familiar commonplace reality.

Eliot, who is much influenced by educational philosophy, as Bantock (1965) sees and refers to as "one of two twentieth century writers who says something of value about education" (p.354), invited dramatists to express all that they want to say in an intensely natural verse rather than in prose. In this concern, Eliot (1999) says:

Today, however, because of the handicap under which verse drama suffers, I believe that prose should be used very sparingly indeed; that we should aim at a form of verse in which everything can be said that has to be said; and that when we find a situation

which is intractable in verse, it is merely because our *form of verse* is inelastic. *If our verse is to have so wide a range that it can say anything* that has to be said, it follows that it *will* not be "poetry" all the time. It *will only* be "poetry" when the dramatic situation has reached such a point of intensity that poetry becomes the natural utterance, because then it is the *only* language in which the emotions *can* be expressed at all." (pp. 14-15)

In his essay entitled "A Dialogue on Dramatic Poetry", Eliot (1999) expresses his belief that prose drama cannot compete with verse drama in its expression of intensely emotional situations; he goes as far as to say that prose drama is a mere outcome of verse drama and that the human soul, in its crucial moments, can best be expressed in verse. He says that "prose drama is merely a slight by-production of verse drama. The human soul, in intense emotion, strives to express itself in verse (p.1).

Besides, Eliot holds the view that the unconscious effect that verse leaves upon the audience must not be felt only people who like poetry, but also by those who go to the theatre for the sake of the play. Bradbrook (1970) comments on Eliot and says that "his early poetry published during the war of 1914-18, depicts in ironic and epigrammatic terseness the little anxieties, social embarrassments" (p.61). Eliot writes his first verse play, *Murder in the Cathedral* (1964), and has in mind that verse plays should be popular and successful by either deriving their subject matter from old myths and legends or by dealing with some remote historical period. He says, "far enough away from the present for the characters not to need to be recognizable as human beings, and therefore for them to be licensed to talk in verse. Picturesque period costume renders verse much more acceptable" (pp. 22-23). He also feels the need for the production of a religious play, the audience of which would be religiously serious people, people who go to religious festivals and attend religious plays with the expectation that there they could satisfy themselves with the feeling that they had succeeded in doing something praise-worthy.

As to the language, Eliot decides that it should not be in the fashion of the twelfth century idioms, nor should it be in that of modern conversation, for he has to take his audience back to an old historical event. Eliot insists that the style should not be archaic, for he wants to bring home to the audience the contemporary relevance of the situation. In other words, the style should be a sort of compromise between the past and the present. E. Martin Brown (1969) assisted T. S. Eliot in his effort "to bring renewed life to the verse drama of the Twentieth Century Theater" (p. 345).

Unlike Yeasts, Eliot finds that, first, he has to avoid the echo of Shakespeare, and he attributes the primary failure of the nineteenth century poets who were much concerned with writing for the theatre, to their dramatic language. He also believes that this failure springs from their limitation to a strict blank verse. It is because of this belief that Eliot considers *Murder in the Cathedral* not only a mere success, but also a dead end. It *succeeds* in *getting rid of* what had get rid of, "but it arrived at no positive novelty; in short, in so far as it solved the problem of speech in

verse for writing today, it *solved* it for this play only, and provided me with no clue to the *verse* I should use in another kind of play" (1964, 24-25).

Still, there are two main problems that could impossibly be solved for him, as he believes; they are the idiom and the metrical form of speech. Eliot ascribes the use of the chorus in the play to two reasons: the first is the limitation of the action of the play, and the second is that when a poet writes for the first time for the stage, he feels much more at home in choral verse than in dramatic dialogue. As regards the use of prose in the play, Eliot employs it only in two situations, and that he does against his will and choice. The Archbishop, Thomas Becket, and the other by the knights deliver one of the two prose speeches. The former speech is a sermon cast in verse would be too unusual an experience for even the most ordinary churchgoers. As to the speech delivered by the knights, it is employed deliberately to have its own effect of shocking the audience out of their complacency, for the knights in this speech are addressing an audience of people living 800 years after their own death.

Feeling that people have been habituated to appreciate verse in definite circumstances, especially from the lips of characters dressed in the fashion of very remote ages, Eliot finds the need to have audience prepared for hearing verse from characters dressed like themselves, living in houses and apartments like theirs and using telephones, motorcars and radio sets. In other words, Eliot discovers that his role as a dramatist living in the twentieth century lay in bringing poetry into a world in which the audience lives, a world to which poetry will come back after it has left the theatre. He wants his audience, while listening to poetry, to feel that they themselves could talk in poetry. This view he holds so that audience will not be transported into an unreal world; he wants them to see in the world of the theatre their sordid, dreary and daily world.

To reach his aim, Eliot chooses in *The Family Reunion* a theme of contemporary life, with characters of his own time living in his own world. His first concern in this play is the problem of finding the rhythm employing a line of verse he has already employed, a line of varying length, with a varying number of syllables, a caesura and three stresses. Fearing that by going to extremes in paying too much attention to versification the plot and character would be disturbed; Eliot made some progress in eliminating the chorus from his late plays.

However, Eliot himself is not satisfied with the production of *The Family Reunion*. He considers that the deepest weakness of all was his failure to adjust between the Greek story and modern situation. To be clearer, he shall either have been close to Aeschylus or else gets more liberty with his myth. As evidence of this weakness, in his opinion, is the appearance of the Furies- the ill-fated figures hovering throughout the play. Consequently, Eliot decides to have them omitted from his later plays because in the unnecessary use of the chorus, in *The Cocktail Party*, he introduces no ghosts and no chorus.

Common Themes in T.S. Eliot Plays

Out of the themes of the three mentioned plays there seems to be a common denominator. This denominator, which is the use of the ritual element, proves that drama has come full circle. Drama,

which began with the ritual element as an integral part of its whole structure, can make the audience of the twentieth century hear the echo of this element in the plays of T.S. Eliot. McGuire (2010) believes that in the twentieth century drama “T. S. Eliot’s *Murder in the Cathedral*”, Eliot pits the temptations presented to Thomas in the guise of knights who seek to entice Thomas to follow worldly sinful pursuits in order to regain the favor of King Henry II, king of England” (p.2). However, the ritual as presented in Eliot’s plays is different from that tackled by other dramatists and especially Shakespeare. Eliot’s characters and situations are portrayed in such a way that the reality of the soil and religious experience seems to be paramount. Eliot is concerned with occupying the mind of his contemporary audience with divine problems that touch the spirit of their human lives. Speaking of Eliot’s plays in this respect, Ronal Peacock (1986) says that they are “at once intensely human and more than human, inhering in life and surpassing it in a divine plan” (p. 168).

Nothing grips one so much in these plays as the compelling sense of spiritual powers that have a real operation above life and in it. Here occurs quite a remarkable originality. The originality of *Murder in the Cathedral*, for instance, is best shown when compared with Tennyson’s *Becket*. Tennyson in this play follows the tradition of the Elizabethans and emphasizes the humanity of Becket rather than his sainthood, Eliot, on the contrary, sacrifices the human element for the sake of giving a clearly religious conception of pure sainthood and martyrdom. He is mainly concerned with the twelfth century but also in the twentieth. To that aim, he relates the life and death of Thomas Becket. The ritual in *Murder in the Cathedral* is part of its inner structure and performance, for Eliot can successfully create an air of familiarity and sympathy with his audience through Becket’s sermon, the knight’s apology, the priests and the chorus.

The ritual element is less emphasized, however, in *The Family Reunion* than in *Murder in the Cathedral*. This is because Eliot in the former play mingles the Christian and ritual values with a modern atmosphere of country house, racing cars, newspaper reports, doctors, aunts and servants. He seems to be discussing the theme of evil that has spread since the birth of humanity at all times, in all religions and with all races.

Like *The Family Reunion*, *The Cocktail Party* is an endeavor to discuss religious subjects in theatrical terms and through contemporary background. The historical setting of these two plays is not only distinct from but also more difficult than that of *Murder in the Cathedral*. *The Family Reunion* and *The Cocktail Party* integrate religious themes into a worldly world, a world of taxis, liners, psychiatry, and cinema pictures.

Furthermore, Eliot’s psychological treatment of his spiritual themes is of major importance, in the discussion of contemporary verse drama. The tempters in *Murder in the Cathedral* stand for worldly temptations and spiritual desires that flash into Becket’s mind. The knights rationalize their performance of murder, and rationalization is a psychological phenomenon.

The adherence of the chorus to Becket, their apprehension and desire to continue living are all treated psychologically. In *The Family Reunion*, the change of Harry’s character through self-

discovery and self-knowledge is likewise discussed psychologically. Psychological Treatment is best exploited in *The Cocktail Party*, for it is characteristic of the whole structure of the whole play. Reilly is a psychiatrist who treats nervous breakdowns and mental sickness. He treats Edward and his wife, thus helping them to recover their health and rebuild their life.

The dramatic effect of these plays is distinct from that of traditional drama. The Aristotelian standard of criticism implies that a perfect tragedy should imitate actions that arouse pity and fear. This standard cannot be applied to *Murder in the Cathedral*. For example, Becket does not need our pity, but commands our admiration and reverence. Even the chorus appeals to our religious experience rather than to our humanity. Thus, we feel inclined to identify ourselves with the chorus as they plead for forgiveness and confess their sin. The chorus ends the play with the following plea of mercy:

*We acknowledge our trespass, our weakness, our fault; we acknowledge
That the sin of the world is upon our heads; that the blood of the martyrs and
the agony of the saints
Is upon our heads.
Lord, have mercy upon us.
Christ, have mercy upon us.
Lord, have mercy upon us.
Blessed Thomas, pray for us. (p.88)*

Similarly, *The Family Reunion* fills us with the religious experience of submitting our fates to God; it does not excite our pity or fear. It urges us to expiate for our sins as well as for those of our parents. In *The Cocktail Party*, we feel admiration and reverence for Celia. This play shakes us out of our complacency through the spiritual and realistic view Eliot presents.

Thus, Eliot has offered a great service to the revival of poetic drama. This he could do through creating a new form modeled on conversational speech, through appealing to contemporary consciousness and themes of permanent appeal, and finally through integrating all these means into the organic structure of his plays.

Modern Verse Drama

Gascoigne (1962) claims that “underlying the variety in contemporary drama is an ordered development, and that, over the last forty years, there have been peaks in playwriting as well as shallow, unenticing valleys” (p. 93). In the late nineteenth forties and early nineteenth fifty verse-dramas is better represented by Christopher Fry than by T.S. Eliot. After the fashion of Wilde and Shaw, he introduces the comedy of manners in its weakened modern meaning. Unlike Eliot, Fry does not provide the modern verse drama with a critical comedy or contemporary ideals based on a public tone; he rather provides it with a form full of bombastic puns, burlesque, conceits and extended metaphors. It is a sophisticated form, delightful as long as it lasts but burning itself out the moment its fashion expires. The whole success of Fry’s plays may be summed up by what Stanford (1962) claims:

In a *universe often viewed as mechanistic, he has posited the principle of mystery*; in an *age of necessitation of ethics, he has stood unequivocally for ideas of free will*. In theatre technique, he has ignored the sacrosanct conventions of naturalistic drama; and in terms of speech, *he has brought back poetry onto the stage with undistorted abandon*. (pp. 7-8)

Before the emergency of Fry as a playwright, the English stage had offered two opposite trends in modern drama “the slick but wooden and short-breathed dialogue of the naturalist school; and the heavier, reflective, and literary syntax of the poetic drama”(Stanford, 10). Fry’s verbal contribution to the modern theatre lurks in his immediacy of expression. What helps him acquire and develop this immediacy is the first-hand expression of the theater; for unlike most poetic dramatists Fry’s training ground is the stage and not the library on the study.

During the period between the Two Treat Wars, literature seemed to view man’s life through either of the two perspectives: possibility and necessity. In his plays, Fry accents necessity as much as he does possibility. This equilibrium between possibility and necessity is best shown in the comedy *Venus Observed*.

Venus Observed is the story of a Duke-a middle aging amorous lover-who through marriage tries to escape amorous affairs that have no end. Perpetua, the daughter of his agent Reedbeck, a young and beautiful girl, makes the Duke and his son contend for her. In this struggle, Edgar asks his father to put an end to his amorous behavior:

I’m sorry, too, but it is this time. You’ve had
A long innings, and a summer of splendid outings,
And now I must ask you, father, not to monopolize
Every heart in the world any longer. (Fry, 1970, p. 199)

At the end, however, age gives way to youth, trying to discover in an ancient love matrimonial peace and calmness with the most attractive mistresses in his past. We notice that the sense of possibility asserts itself in the Duke’s character, the Duke who discovers at the end of the play that his amorous adventures are over. He becomes aware of the fact that his middle age is beginning to decline, and the boasts of his virility and vigor can serve no more. Out of the knowledge of the limitations of his age comes a sense of necessity in his deep inner self. He can no longer expect to capture the hearts of young women because the unlimited possibility of running after the young has become limited by necessity. The Duke decides to marry an older woman than he used to expect. Yet, he decides that old age in itself is a risk. Therefore, he imagines his future in terms of some attractive scenes of an autumn landscape. This is well shown in the Duke’s following speech that is dedicated to Perpetua:

...We have only autumn
To offer you, England's moist and misty devotion,
But spring may come in time to reconcile you If you'll wait so long. (Fry, P. 173)

Though necessity and possibility are shown as opposites, nonetheless they are interwoven in such a way that each gives rise to the other. Perpetua, speaking of pain and liberty to Edgar says:

No one is separate from another; how difficult
That is. i move, and the movement goes from life
To life all round me. And yet I have to be
Myself. And what is my freedom becomes
Another person's compulsion. What are we to make
Of this dilemma? (Fry, pp. 243-244)

Character portrayal in *Venus Observed* is fuller than in Fry's other comedies. This is because in this play Fry has plunged deep into the inner recesses of the characters in order to describe the unoccupied spaces of their hearts or minds. In this respect, he says, "there is a space of the heart, or the mind, unsatisfied, and through this space men are always reaching towards something which will complete them. The Duke had always hoped to find its sexual love... The butler, Reddleman, has filled the restless space in himself by the heroic method of lion taming..." (pp.29-30). All the characters in the play lead a real life of their own, with the exception of two stock humorous characters, namely the cockney footman, Bates, and the bombastic Irish butler, Reddleman.

Fry's fundamental contribution to the vocabulary of dramatic construction is the comedy of seasons. *Venus Observed*, in Fry's opinion:

was planned as one of a series of four comedies, a comedy of the seasons of the year, four comedies of mood. It means that the scene, the season, and the characters, are bound together in one climate. In *Venus Observed* the season is autumn, the scene is a house beginning to fall into decay, the characters, most of them, are in the middle life." (p.24)

The interpretation of seasonal effect is also present in Fry's earlier comedy, *The Lady's not for Burning* (1949). Here a spring mood is presented. Fry's first comedy, *A Phoenix Too Frequent* (1946), is suggestive of summer while in his last one, *The Dark is Light Enough*, a winter mood is evoked.

This idea of seasonal mood is best expressed and developed in *Venus Observed*. Every page of the play is related in one way or another to autumn: the old, decaying house of the Duke; the eclipse of the sun; the presence of the Duke's former sweet hearts. The most effective of these images is the description of the Duke who – once handsome and virile but now a middle-aging man-fears a possible lonely old age. When the Duke speaks of the swallows and other migratory birds, he is referring to the fact that women no more make so much of him.

"... The swallows and other such
Migratory birds have left me months ago. (p.159)

The swallows are traditionally considered the bird of love, and the other migratory birds are suggestive of light-of-love affairs. This decorative language is characteristic of Fry's style in general. However, within the outward decoration of the language there lies profound imagery. The terms referring to the Duke's figure are psychologically functional. Likewise, while the Duke is teaching the beautiful Perpetua how to shoot with a bow and an arrow, he tells her a double-edged speech that:

Daylight is short, and becoming always shorter.
But there's the space for an arrow or two between
Now and the sunset. (p.187)

Here, he is referring to the short years left to him as a lover and to the convenient condition of visibility for the archery exercises. Perpetua's double-edged reply evoked a sense of humor, "I've never handed a bow" (Fry, 187). In this reply, Perpetua is referring to her in-experience of men and to her virginity. The Duke answers her that all will be well if she does what he tells her. All of the scene may be considered a single well-sustained metaphor.

The figurative language, which Fry use abundantly throughout the play makes him feel a sense of mystery in the world. To him, the universe has not been strictly filed, as some people tend to believe. Fry finds the process of mystery working as its best in other meaning hidden at the back of a statement. Thus vagueness, to him, constitutes a rich field for poetical, psychological exploration. However, the sense of vagueness that governs Fry's play is different from the scholarly mystification, which some members of the modern school recommend. In other words, Fry's sense of ambiguity does not depend upon literary or classical allusion. His poetry looks for a representation of the natural workings of the human mind; it is not poetry of knowledge and culture. However, Fry's unusual power over words provides us with a feeling of buoyancy and gaiety.

Conclusion

Conclusively, each of these three great verse dramatists could for a time make the audience think that a new age of drama has come into play, none of them could win the recognition that verse drama has become a popular dramatic form of perpetual appeal.

The absence of this perpetual appeal and the inability of verse dramatists to instill a feeling of suspense and popularity in the inner recesses of the audience's hearts may be ascribed to two main reasons.

The first reason is that verse is not a language of the common man, the man of the street and every-day life. When such a man goes to the theatre to enjoy himself, after having had a lot of exhausting work by day, his expectation is not satisfied as he hears the characters utter verse form beginning to end.

The second reason is that modern audience, in general, have lost the sense of listening carefully, and this may be attributed to the failure of modern verse dramatists in making their audience feel unconscious of verse as the only dependable medium of communication.

It remains to say that what Eliot offers at the end of his article on poetry and drama can also be regarded as a fundamental reason in this respect. Eliot (1999) suggests that, for verse drama to be popular, it must strive towards a supreme ideal, an ideal which only music can attain. This ideal verse drama cannot express because verse cannot compete with music at certain moments, especially at the moments of great intensity of feelings.

This peculiar range of sensibility can be expressed by dramatic poetry, at its moments of great intensity. At such moments, we touch the border of those feelings which only music can express. We can never emulate music, because to arrive at the condition of music would be the annihilation of poetry, and especially of dramatic poetry. Nevertheless, I have before my eyes a kind of mirage of the perfection of verse drama, which would be a design of human action and of words, such as to present at once the two aspects of dramatic and of musical order... (pp. 33-34)

About the Author:

Haybat Abdul Samad is an English Language and Literature assistant professor who teaches Diploma and Masters programs at the Lebanese University. She holds two PhD certificates in English Literature; one from Rutherford University and another from the Lebanese University. She holds an MA degree in Comparative Literature from the Lebanese American University, and two BAs from the Lebanese university; one in English Language and Literature, and one in Arabic Philosophy.

References

- Bantock, G.H. (1969). *T.S. Eliot and education*. New York: Random House.
- Bradbrook, M.C. (1970). *T.S. Eliot*. London: Longman
- Browne, E.M. (1969). *The making of a play*. London: Cambridge University Press.
- Brower, R. A. (1975). William Butler Yeats, in *Major British writer*, vol.2, ed. by G.B. Harrison, New York: Harcourt., Brace and World, Inc.
- Bushrui, (1967) *Yeats's verse-plays: The revisions 1900-1910*. Oxford: Clarendon Press.
- Carswell, C. and Fay, W.G. (1971). *The Days of the abbey theater; an autobiographical record*. New York: B. Blom.
- Eliot, T.S. (1964). *Murder in the cathedral*. London: Faber and Faber.
- Eliot, T.S. (1999). *Selected essays*. London: Faber and Faber.
- Eliot, T.S. (1950). *The Cocktail party*. London: Faber and Faber.
- Eliot, T.S. (1963). *The Family reunion*. London: Faber and Faber.
- Fraser, G.S. 1954). *W.B. Yeats*. London: Longman, Green and Co. Ltd.
- Fry, Ch.C. (1970). *Collected plays*. London: Cambridge University Press.

- Gascoigne, B.B. (1962). *Twentieth Century Drama*. London: Hutchinson and Co. Ltd.
- Gillespie, D.F. (1978). *Language as life: Fry's early plays" in Modern Drama*, Governmental Press, Bangalore.
- Grodon, D.J. (1961). W. B. *Yeats Images of a Poet*. London: Manchester University Press.
- Gwynn, S. ed. (1970). *A garland of tributes to Yeats; scattering branches: tributes to the memory of W.B. Yeats*. New York: Macmillan Company.
- Jones, D. E. (1960). *The Plays of T.S. Eliot*. London: Routledge and Kegan Paul.
- McGuire, T.B. (2010). *Imagining the other: Essays on diversity*. "The spiritual in the tangible", University press of America.
- Moore, J. R. (1978). *Masks of Love and Death: Yeats as Dramatist*, Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press,
- Rubin, R.A. (2011). "Some Heroic Discipline: William Bulter Yeats and the Oxford book of modern verse". Chapel Hill.
- Stanford, D. Christopher F. (1962.) *Writers and their work*. London: Longmans, Green and Co. Study-Aid Series. (1962). *Murder in the Cathedral*. London: Methuen and Co.
- Williams, R. (1988). *Drama from Ibsen to Brecht, Harmonds-Worth*: Penguin.
- Williams, R (1965). *Drama from Ibsen to Eliot*. London: Chatoo and Windus,
- Yeats, W.B. (1931). *Plays in prose and verse*, London: MacMillan and Co., Limited.