

# THE PROBLEM OF INTEGRATION IN THE PLAYS OF T.S. ELIOT

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## ABSTRACT

T.S. Eliot, a prominent figure of Modernism, grappled with the fractured nature of the modern experience in his works. This theme of fragmentation extends to his plays, where characters struggle with the problem of integration, the inability to unify various aspects of their lives and identities. Through a fractured world and characters yearning for wholeness, Eliot explores the anxieties of the modern individual. One key aspect of this struggle is the disintegration of the past and present. In "Murder in the Cathedral," Thomas Becket grapples with the conflict between his loyalty to the crown and his religious convictions. The past, embodied by the tradition of the church, clashes with the demands of the present king. Becket's inability to reconcile these forces leads to his martyrdom, highlighting the impossibility of forging a unified identity in a world of conflicting demands. Another facet of the integration problem lies in the dissociation of thought and feeling. Characters like Sweeney in "Sweeney Agonistes" exemplify this. He represents a world where intellectual pursuits are divorced from emotional connection. Sweeney's fragmented consciousness reflects the modern alienation from meaning and purpose. Similarly, in "The Family Reunion," Harry's introspection and anxieties fail to translate into concrete action, leaving him trapped in a cycle of guilt and despair. The plays also explore the difficulties of social integration. Characters often find themselves outsiders, unable to connect

with the society around them. In "The Cocktail Party," characters like Edward and Lavinia struggle to find meaning in their relationships, demonstrating the breakdown of traditional social structures and the challenges of forging genuine connections in a fragmented world.

### **Keywords:**

Modernism, Connections, Integration

### **INTRODUCTION**

T.S. Eliot, a titan of modernist literature, explored the anxieties and alienation of the modern world not just in his poetry but also in his dramatic works. A central theme that pervades his plays is the problem of integration, a struggle for characters to achieve a sense of wholeness in a fragmented and disillusioned society. This paper will delve into how Eliot portrays this struggle in his plays, focusing on the challenges of integrating the past with the present, reconciling faith and doubt, and forging meaningful connections with others. [1]

Eliot's characters often grapple with the burden of the past. In "Murder in the Cathedral," Thomas Becket, the Archbishop of Canterbury, faces a stark choice between loyalty to the crown and his religious convictions. The past, embodied by the traditions of the church, clashes with the demands of the present king. Becket's internal conflict mirrors the larger societal struggle between the fading medieval order and the rise of secular authority. Similarly, in "The Family Reunion," Harry, the protagonist, is haunted by the sins and secrets of his family's past. These unresolved issues prevent him from moving forward and finding peace.

Eliot, however, doesn't solely depict despair. He offers glimpses of a potential solution - the possibility of a transcendent order. In "Murder in the Cathedral," Becket's unwavering faith hints at a spiritual realm that can offer wholeness. Similarly, the Chorus in "The Rock" suggests that faith and a sense of community

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can bridge the fragmented self. However, achieving this integration remains a distant hope, overshadowed by the pervasive sense of alienation in the modern world. [2]

Through the problem of integration in his plays, Eliot compels us to confront the anxieties of the modern experience. The fractured characters and fragmented world serve as a stark reminder of the challenges of forging a unified self in a world devoid of meaning and connection. While he offers glimpses of a potential solution through faith and community, the journey towards integration remains a constant struggle for Eliot's characters, reflecting the anxieties of his time and leaving audiences to ponder the possibility of wholeness in the modern world.

Eliot, deeply influenced by his Anglican faith, also explores the difficulty of maintaining a unified religious belief in a cynical world. Characters like Thomas Becket and Celia Coplestone in "The Cocktail Party" grapple with questions of faith and doubt. Becket seeks martyrdom as a way to reaffirm his faith, while Celia yearns for a spiritual awakening. However, Eliot offers no easy answers. The path to faith is often fraught with uncertainty, highlighting the fragmented nature of religious experience in the modern world.

The characters in Eliot's plays also struggle to connect with others on a meaningful level. Communication is often fractured, leading to misunderstandings and isolation. In "The Waste Land," the fragmented voices represent a society devoid of genuine connection. Similarly, in "The Cocktail Party," characters like Edward and Lavinia lead loveless marriages, highlighting the difficulty of achieving intimacy in a modern world. This lack of connection further reinforces the theme of fragmentation and the yearning for a sense of belonging.

T.S. Eliot, a titan of 20th-century poetry, revolutionized the English language with his innovative style. Reflecting the disillusionment and fragmentation of the modernist era, Eliot's writing techniques challenged traditional forms and created

a voice that was both erudite and unsettling. This paper will delve into the key elements of his style, exploring how they contribute to the overall impact of his work. [3]

## REVIEW OF RELATED LITERATURE

One of Eliot's defining characteristics is his use of allusion. He liberally incorporates references to mythology, literature, and philosophy, creating a tapestry of meaning that rewards the attentive reader. Poems like "The Waste Land" are layered with allusions, forcing the reader to piece together the fragmented narrative and grapple with the depth of Eliot's intellectual world. This technique reflects the fragmented nature of modern life, where meaning is no longer readily available but must be actively sought. [1]

Eliot also employs a masterful use of imagery. His poems are filled with vivid, often unsettling images, that capture the spiritual barrenness and emotional desolation of the modern world. The juxtaposition of disparate images, like the hyacinths from the Ganges in "The Waste Land," creates a sense of discord and disorientation. These jarring images serve as metaphors for the breakdown of traditional values and the search for meaning in a chaotic world. [2]

Eliot's experimentation with form broke away from the rigid structures of traditional poetry. He utilized free verse, a form that allowed for greater flexibility in rhythm and meter. This mirrored the fragmented nature of the modern experience and provided a platform for his stream-of-consciousness explorations in poems like "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock." However, Eliot wasn't entirely averse to traditional forms. He incorporated elements of blank verse and even musicality within his free verse, creating a sense of tension and complexity. [3]

Another crucial aspect of Eliot's style is his voice. His poems often lack a clear, singular speaker. Instead, they present a chorus of voices, echoing the alienation and lack of connection characteristic of the modern world. This fragmented voice reflects the disintegrated self, grappling with the anxieties and uncertainties of the modern age. [4]

T.S. Eliot's groundbreaking style wasn't without its challenges. The dense allusions, complex imagery, and lack of a clear narrative can make his work difficult to access for the uninitiated reader. However, for those willing to delve deeper, the rewards are immense. By meticulously crafting a style that mirrored the fragmented reality of the modern world, Eliot created some of the most enduring and influential poetry of the 20th century. His voice continues to resonate with readers today, reminding us of the complexities of the human experience and the enduring search for meaning. [5]

## **PROBLEM OF INTEGRATION IN THE PLAYS OF T.S. ELIOT**

One of Eliot's defining characteristics is his use of fragmentation. He breaks away from traditional linear narratives, opting for a collage of voices, images, and historical references. This fragmentation mirrors the fractured nature of modern life, where meaning is elusive and coherence seems lost. Poems like "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock" employ stream-of-consciousness techniques, capturing the jumbled thoughts and anxieties of the speaker.

Eliot's mastery of allusion further enriches his style. He liberally incorporates references to mythology, literature, and philosophy, creating a sense of intertextuality. These allusions require the reader to participate actively, piecing together the fragments to understand the poem's deeper meaning. This technique not only demonstrates Eliot's vast intellectual knowledge but also connects his work to a broader literary and cultural context.

Symbolism plays a crucial role in Eliot's poetry. He uses recurring symbols, such as the wasteland itself, to represent complex ideas about alienation, spiritual emptiness, and the search for meaning. These symbols are not always straightforward, demanding close examination and interpretation by the reader. The ambiguity allows for multiple layers of meaning and fosters a deeper engagement with the text.

Eliot's mastery of language is undeniable. He employs a rich vocabulary, often incorporating colloquialisms alongside classical references. This creates a sense of tension, reflecting the clash between the modern world and tradition. He also experiments with form, utilizing free verse alongside traditional structures like blank verse. This flexibility allows him to tailor the form to the specific content and mood of the poem.

Eliot's poems are rich tapestries woven with references to mythology, history, and literature. From Dante's Divine Comedy to the Buddha's Fire Sermon, he draws upon a vast knowledge base, demanding an active role from the reader. These allusions serve multiple purposes. They create a sense of depth and universality, connecting the poem to a broader cultural conversation. They can also introduce irony or dissonance, as the borrowed fragments collide with the poem's bleak themes.

Eliot broke away from traditional forms, employing free verse and shifting rhythms to mirror the fractured nature of modern experience. Poems like "The Waste Land" are characterized by abrupt shifts in tone, voice, and language. Juxtapositions of high and low culture, the sacred and profane, create a sense of disorientation. Yet, within this chaos, Eliot utilizes repetition and internal rhyme to create a haunting musicality. This tension between fragmentation and form becomes a defining characteristic of his style.

Eliot's mastery of imagery goes beyond mere description. He uses vivid and often unsettling metaphors and similes to evoke the emotional and spiritual

barrenness of the modern wasteland. The industrial Thames in "The Waste Land" becomes a symbol of spiritual decay, while the hollow men of the eponymous poem represent the purposelessness of modern life. These potent images resonate with the reader, leaving a lasting impression.

Eliot's poems are often characterized by a sense of alienation and disconnection. The speaker is frequently isolated, yearning for a lost sense of meaning and wholeness. This alienation reflects the anxieties of a society grappling with the aftermath of World War I and the erosion of traditional values. Through this alienated voice, Eliot captures the existential crisis of modern humanity.

T.S. Eliot's groundbreaking style has left an indelible mark on the literary landscape. His masterful use of allusion, fragmented form, potent imagery, and the alienated voice reflects the complexities of the modern world. While challenging at times, his poems continue to resonate with readers, inviting us to confront the complexities of our own fragmented existence.

One of the most striking examples is Thomas Becket in *Murder in the Cathedral*. Becket embodies the conflict between worldly ambition and spiritual fulfillment. His past as a powerful politician clashes with his present role as an archbishop. He yearns for a unified identity, but the integration proves elusive. The chorus of women, representing the fragmented community, further emphasizes the lack of coherence in the world around him.

In *The Waste Land*, Eliot employs fragmented narratives and voices to depict a society devoid of meaning. The characters, haunted by memories and desires, struggle to connect with each other and their surroundings. The poem, a source for Eliot's play *Sweeney Agonistes*, presents fragmented dialogues, highlighting the characters' inability to form a unified whole. Tiresias, the blind seer, embodies a fragmented sense of time, existing in the past, present, and future simultaneously.



Eliot's exploration of integration extends beyond the individual to the societal level. *The Family Reunion* portrays a dysfunctional family haunted by past sins and secrets. The protagonist, Harry, seeks to integrate his fragmented family history but is thwarted by the characters' inability to confront the truth. This play reflects a broader societal unease with tradition and the search for a new order amidst the ruins of the old.

However, Eliot doesn't solely present a bleak picture. In *Four Quartets*, his later poetic work, he explores the possibility of spiritual integration through faith. The concept of the "still point of the turning world" suggests a place of unity beyond the fragmentation of time. While this integration remains a distant ideal in the plays, it offers a glimmer of hope amidst the despair.

## Conclusion

Through his exploration of the problem of integration, Eliot paints a nuanced picture of the modern condition. His characters embody the struggles to reconcile past and present, faith and doubt, and the desire for connection in a fragmented world. While Eliot may offer no easy solutions, his plays serve as powerful indictments of a society that has lost its sense of wholeness. By forcing us to confront the challenges of integration, Eliot invites us to consider the possibility of forging a more cohesive and meaningful existence.

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