

The Cocktail Party
By T.S. Eliot
Caffeine Theatre
Dramaturgy by Dan Smith

T.S. Eliot

More on Eliot later, but for now the thing that interests me most:

In 1921, Eliot traveled to Switzerland where he was treated for a nervous breakdown by Dr. Roger Vittoz.

If you're planning to read more of Eliot, try to get one of his collected volumes. *Complete Poems and Plays* is probably the best one. Some of the poems are available online. The best thing to read would be *Four Quartets*, because it takes up similar themes.

Verse

According to Nevill Coghill, Eliot wrote his plays in verse in order to indicate rhythms of speaking. His goal was to achieve intensity. He tried to avoid using too much iambic pentameter, though there are a few lines in that meter. In 1950, Eliot wrote, "the essential was to avoid any echo of Shakespeare...The rhythm of regular blank verse had become too remote from the movement of modern speech. Therefore what I kept in mind was the versification of *Everyman*." (He leaves us to infer that *Everyman* also has thematic resonance with *The Cocktail Party*. The only worldly thing that accompanies *Everyman* to Death is "Good Deeds.")

Notes

Names

Some interesting references:

Edward Chaberlayne (1616-1703) was a prolific writer who published a sort of "current events" description of England each year.

Henry Harcourt is a character in Anthony Trollope's novel *The Bertrams* (1859). The character is a greedy and ambitious lawyer who marries a woman for her money, then leaves her when it turns out she doesn't really have any.

Coplestone is a very old aristocratic English name, going back at least to the fourteenth century. Shuttlethwaite seems to be made-up, but the ending is very British.

In the gospel of Mark, Peter denies Christ three times but goes on to become the founder of the Church. Perhaps Peter Quilpe's name is intended to reflect a certain optimism, though he remains at the denial phase during the play.

Act I

The discussion of tigers, which recurs later in the play, may refer to William Blake's poem, "The Tyger." Eliot called Blake a great poet, though not a "classic" one. The first stanza of "The Tyger" (which repeats at the end of the poem) is:

Tyger, tyger, burning bright
In the forests of the night,
What immortal hand or eye
Did frame thy fearful symmetry?

Lady Greta Klootz and the wedding cake—Perhaps Lady Klootz (or her husband) is a descendant of Anacharsis Klootz (1755-1794), a supporter of the French Revolution who brought an "embassy of mankind" to the National Assembly and advocated a "Universal Republic." The cake may recall Marie Antoinette's infamous quotation, "Let them eat cake."

Delia Verinder: The protagonist of *The Moonstone* by Wilkie Collins is named Verinder, though her first name is not Delia.

"To approach the **stranger**..." The word "stranger" comes up a number of times. It is likely that Eliot refers to Camus' novel *The Stranger* and/or Charles Baudelaire's prose-poem "The Stranger." Baudelaire's poem (trans. Cat Nilan):

-- Tell me, enigmatic man, whom do you love the best? Your father, or your mother, or your sister, or your brother?

-- I have neither father, nor mother, nor sister, nor brother.

-- Your friends?

-- You are using a word whose meaning remains unknown to me to this very day.

-- Your country?

-- I do not know under what latitude it lies.

-- Beauty?

-- I would love her gladly, goddess and immortal.

-- Gold?

-- I hate it as much as you hate God.

-- Well then! What do you love, extraordinary stranger?

-- I love the clouds ... the passing clouds ... over there ... over there ... the marvelous clouds!

St. Anthony (p. 311) is the patron saint of lost items. He also went through a spiritual trial in which he was tempted by demons (the Guardians pray for Celia to be protected from the Visions and the Voices). For a fascinating portrayal of this, check out Gustave Flaubert's *The Temptation of Saint Anthony*.

318-320: Edward's game of Patience (Solitaire) reflects the theme of solitude and isolation.

321: Good Samaritans. The parable of the Good Samaritan is in the gospel of Luke 10:25-37. Jesus tells this story in response to the question, "Who is my neighbor?" That question was preceded by "What must I do to inherit eternal life?" (The answer: Love God and your neighbor.)

Dedham: Coghill points out the aural connection to "dead," which he argues should remind us of *Alcestis*. Eliot cited *Alcestis* by Euripides as his inspiration for this play. Alcestis, wife of Admetus, dies in his place. A drunken Hercules brings her back from the underworld.

336: "I started some machine." Possibly a reference to Cocteau's play *The Infernal Machine*, a retelling of Oedipus. The play begins with a description of how tragedy works as a machine set in motion, unable to be stopped. A similar description appears in Jean Anouilh's *Antigone*.

338: Peacehaven is in the south of England, near Brighton. It does not seem to be a very interesting place to go for a honeymoon.

342: "Hell is oneself." This is the opposite of the viewpoint expressed by Sartre in *No Exit*: "L'enfer, c'est les autres"—"Hell is other people."

343: Python and octopus are forces of destruction. This may refer to Marianne Moore's poem "An Octopus," in which she uses both images to describe a mountain and the brutality of nature.

Act II

362: lover and beloved—This language is reminiscent of Plato's dialogues about love, the *Symposium* and the *Phaedrus*.

The idea of choice is influenced by the philosophy of Soren Kierkegaard. According to Kierkegaard, individuals create their own nature through their choices, which must be made in the absence of objective standards. He proposed that there are three possibly ways of life: aesthetic (hedonistic), ethical (submission to duty), and religious (by submitting to the will of God, one finds true freedom). It's quite possible to put the characters on this continuum, with Peter living an aesthetic life, the Chamberlaynes ultimately choosing an ethical life, and Celia clearly choosing a religious life.

366: "It is finished." These are the last words of Christ on the cross, possibly foreshadowing Celia's crucifixion. Notably, "work out your salvation with diligence" were the last words of Buddha. He said to his followers, "Decay is inherent in all component things. Work out,

therefore, your emancipation with diligence.” I’m not sure whether emancipation/salvation is just a translation issue, or whether Eliot chose the word “salvation” in order to Christianize the Buddha’s words.

The rhythms of the libation ritual are adapted from hymns and incantations in Scottish Gaelic, as collected by Alexander Carmichael and translated by G.R.D. McLean.

Act III

Kinkanja is not, as far as I can tell, a real place. It may come from the word Kinkajou, which is a kind of lemur.

Bela Szogody is a Hungarian name. This person may be modeled on Michael Curtiz, who directed such films as *Casablanca* and *Mildred Pierce*.

V.A.D. stands for Voluntary Aid Detachment. These were nurses during World War I.

Reilly explains Celia’s death using a passage from Shelley’s play *Prometheus Unbound* in which Prometheus is being told to look for his shadow. The connection is to the apparition he saw hovering around Celia when he met her.