

WORKING WITH ELIOT

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THE EUMENIDES

FROM ELIOT'S "THE FAMILY REUNION"

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Prefatory Remarks

THE FAMILY REUNION is a play written by T. S. Eliot. It was published and first performed in 1939. Eliot's play had three unusual aspects to it, things we would not normally expect to find today. These are:

- The manner of writing (in **verse**).
- The use of a **chorus**.
- The appearance of the **Eumenides**.

It is the **appearance of the Eumenides** that I will be considering in this essay; its purpose, use and effect on the play and connected characters. This essay is a small part of my full review which will appear on **xiv lines** later.

"The Family Reunion"

Eliot proposed to use a more classical form for this play which he hoped would follow from the success of his **MURDER IN THE CATHEDRAL**. However, this was not the case and there were many negative reviews of the play mainly because people did not understand what he was attempting.

In part, the idea of the Eumenides was borrowed from Aeschylus' **THE ORESTEIA**, consisting of **AGAMEMNON**, **THE LIBATION BEARERS** and the third part being **THE EUMENIDES**. In this third part, Orestes is pursued by the **Furies** (Greek deities of vengeance also known as the Eumenides) for murdering his mother Clytemnestra after she had murdered his father. There are several similarities between Eliot's **THE FAMILY REUNION** and Aeschylus' **THE EUMENIDES** which I go into more detail in my full review.

Eliot's play centers around a family reunion orchestrated by the Dowager Lady Monchensey (Amy) on her birthday. Harry is Amy's eldest son and has returned after eight years with his wife having died by falling overboard a year before his return. There is confusion among the family gathering

concerning Harry's mental state, especially when he abruptly announces that he pushed his wife overboard. Did he, or didn't he? The family members prefer to accept this statement as coming from a troubled mind and do not believe it. Instead, they insist that with rest and taking on his responsibilities in the family home of Wishwood that he would become more settled and happier. In short, Harry does not agree.

Throughout the play, there are three instances when the Eumenides appear to Harry. The first is shortly after his arrival at Wishwood, the second during a discussion with Mary and the third during a discussion with Agatha. Mary is a cousin which Amy had hoped Harry would marry, and Agatha is one of Amy's younger sisters. Agatha also had or hints at an affair with Harry's father. However, Agatha has great sympathy and understanding for Harry and has a close connection with him on a spiritual basis, understanding much of what he attempts to explain to other family members.

The Appearances of the Eumenides

The First Instance

The first allusion to the Eumenides is in **Part I, Scene I** (pp 24, 25 of the **Faber and Faber** 1956 publication).

HARRY

Look there, look there: do you see them?

GERALD

No, I don't see anyone about.

HARRY

No, no not there. Look there!

Can't you see them? *You* don't see them, but I see them,

And they see me. This is the first time that I have seen them.

In the Java Straits, in the Sunda Sea,

In the sweet sickly tropical night, I knew they were coming.

In Italy, from behind the nightingale's thicket,

The eyes stared at me, and corrupted that song.

Behind the palm trees in the Grand Hotel

They were always there. But I did not *see* them.

Why should they wait until I came back to Wishwood?

There were a thousand places where I might have met them!

Why here? why here?

From here the conversation abruptly changes as if nothing has occurred. It is almost as if the rest of the family has ignored his strange and unexpected outburst. There is clearly something else happening

here or being hinted at, we may say there is some ambiguity regarding the reason for the appearance Eumenides themselves.

The Second Instance

The second time there is reference to the Eumenides is in **Part I, Scene II** (pp 62, 63 *ibid.*)

HARRY

Come out!

*[The curtains part, revealing the Eumenides in the
window embrasure.]*

Why do you show yourselves now for the first time?

When I knew her, I was not the same person.

I was not any person. Nothing that I did

Has to do with me. The accident of a dreaming moment,

Of a dreaming age, when I was someone else

Thinking of something else, puts me among you.

I tell you, it is not me you are looking at,

Not me you are grinning at, not me your confidential looks

Incriminate, but that other person, if person

You thought I was: let your necrophily

Feed upon that carcase¹. They will not go.

During Harry's discussion with Mary, this was the first and only time that the Eumenides are said to have appeared on stage in some way (by direction). I will discuss this aspect of the play later.

The Third Instance

The third and last time there is reference to the Eumenides (and they may have appeared on stage) is in **Part II, Scene II** (p 109 *ibid.*)

HARRY

Not yet! not yet! this is the first time that I have been free

From the ring of ghosts with joined hands, from the pursuers,

And come into a quiet place.

Why is it so quiet?

¹ **Carcase** and **Carcass** are generally considered the same with the first being a British spelling. In other English-speaking countries, the words are used interchangeably. In specialist papers, the first is the body of an animal that has been slaughtered for meat, the second being the body of an animal that has died from natural causes, including disease or injury.

Do you feel a kind of stirring underneath the air?
Do you? don't you? a communication, a scent
Direct to the brain ... but not just as before,
Not quite like, not the same ...

[*The EUMENIDES appear.*]

and this time

You cannot think that I am surprised to see you.
And you shall not think that I am afraid to see you.
This time, you are real, this time, you are outside me,
And just endurable. I know that you are ready,
Ready to leave Wishwood, and I am going with you.
You followed me here, where I thought I should escape you—
No! you were already here before I arrived.
And I know that there can be only one itinerary
And one destination. Let us lose no time. I will follow.

[*The curtain close. AGATHA goes to the window, in a
somnambular fashion, and opens the curtains, dis-
closing the empty embrasure. She steps into the
place which the EUMENIDES had occupied.*]

Once again, we know that the Eumenides appear to Harry, but it is not clear that the audience should see them. We could take the stage direction either way, the effect is the same. However, in this case, their appearance comes more as the result of a disturbed mind. After this appearance of the Eumenides, Agatha speaks but then wonders what she has been saying when returning to the room. Finally, she tells Harry he must leave Wishwood.

Difficulties with the Appearance of the Eumenides

With such things supernatural, it is difficult to convey their presence on stage. The difficulty lies in that they appear as an apparition and then vanish as quickly as they appear without any other change on the stage. It is due to this that Eliot himself said that this was a major failing of the play. We need to remember that it is difficult to employ such special effects in a stage play and as a result the audience may be left wanting or at least confused by not knowing what it is they should have observed. It is the skill of the actor to impart this information by means of facial expressions, gestures and voice command.

Ambiguities concerning the Eumenides

The Eumenides are the **Furies** who pursue their victim relentlessly to make them accountable for what they have done. They champion the victim's rights and should not necessarily be considered evil. As for the one they follow, they would have a different opinion. The **Furies** are a trio of goddesses known to be instruments of justice and are also known as the **Gracious Ones**. In **THE ORESTEIA**, Athena changes their name from **Furies** to **Eumenides** (Gracious Ones). Unlike in **THE ORESTEIA**, the Eumenides play a silent rôle. It is left to the imagination of both character and audience as to how they interact.

In Eliot's play there is no indication that the Eumenides are bent on vengeance as Furies but act more like their name implies—Gracious Ones.

There is nothing mentioned in the play why the Eumenides have appeared to Harry. We are left to make assumptions which may not be correct. The fact that the Eumenides are following and have followed Harry prior to his return to Wishwood would imply that he is responsible for his wife's death. However, they have not appeared to him on any previous occasion although he is aware of them as we find out in the **first instance**.

If we liken Harry to Orestes and Amy to Clytemnestra, then the Furies would have followed Harry at the end of **THE FAMILY REUNION** after Amy's death rather than before. We could say that Harry leaving Wishwood is the cause of Amy's death because she realized that everything she worked for has now failed. However, Harry has neither physically attacked his mother, nor has he made any comment as to wishing or wanting her dead. Following this train of thought, we conclude that Harry was responsible for his wife's death and what he told the family may well be correct in that he pushed her overboard.

Now our interpretation may come from some ambiguity regarding the Eumenides. Are they following Harry because of his wife's death, something he has done or something that has been inflicted upon him? Perhaps this is the family curse that Agatha speaks about. It is clear from the **second instance** that he is not sure why they follow him and why they suddenly make their appearance at Wishwood, but something at Wishwood clearly holds the key.

We are led to believe in the **third instance** that he has been following them, and they have brought him back to Wishwood to deal with the past, present and now future. This whole idea is something that Harry has had great difficulty relaying to the rest of the family. What is the significance of them appearing now? Is he to leave Wishwood for a specific reason? If so, what is it?

The Significance of Amy's Death

Another point of concern is the sudden if not unexpected death of Amy at the end of the play. Amy, for the most, lives in the **past**. This is confirmed by there being very little, if anything has changed since Harry left to go overseas with his wife. There are some references to the **present** but only hopes for the **future** and these hopes are extinguished by Harry's sudden departure from Wishwood. Amy herself believes that Agatha is the cause of all problems relating not only to Harry but also to her late husband. Married life for her was not a happy one and she recalls it all too easily when talking to Agatha.

Essentially, Amy's death has put the **past** behind everyone even though Harry is not aware of her death at this point. We may wonder if this would come as a surprise to Harry, or if he knew this would happen.

It is interesting to consider the presence of the Eumenides at Wishwood. Why did they make their first appearance here, and why now to Harry?

The similarity of Clytemnestra and Agamemnon to Amy and her husband becomes apparent. Although Agamemnon may not have suspected Clytemnestra, so too Amy's husband her. Was Amy, in some manner, responsible for her husband's death? According to Agatha, Amy's husband had thoughts of killing Amy but was unable to go through with the act. All these facts create more questions than answers, none which have been a great deal of help to Harry.

Amy is the controlling matriarch of the family and makes every endeavor to have things her way regardless of what others may think or desire. She has no concern for what other members of the family think. Her concern is for her long-absent son as Clytemnestra for Orestes. Harry has very little knowledge of his father, but has Harry unknowingly avenged his father with the death of Amy, and is this the purpose for the Eumenides?

Other Comparisons to “The Oresteia”

We must be careful not to go looking for things that may not necessarily have any relationship to **THE ORESTEIA**. This is very easy to do considering Eliot’s similarity to a classical drama and notable entities in it such as the Eumenides.

I have often thought that Agatha may represent Athena in the way that she could converse with Harry, but I am thinking that she is more like **Cassandra** due to her relationship with Harry’s father—a comparison with Agamemnon. Mary too has a close relationship with Harry and I would liken her to Orestes’ sister **Electra**. Wishwood too becomes the **House of Atreus**. There are many comparisons we can make, whether Eliot thought the same is open to conjecture.

The fact remains that there is confusion, or at least ambiguity with Eliot’s use of the Eumenides. In the final scenes of his plays, the Eumenides serve a different purpose to those in **THE ORESTEIA**, albeit there are similarities.

Conclusion

This essay does not consider the entire play, but Eliot’s use of the Eumenides is very different from **THE ORESTEIA**. Harry’s leaving of Wishwood and following the Eumenides portrays the meaning that Athena gave them. They are the **Gracious Ones**, and being so, are leading Harry to a place where he can reconcile not only his own problems but also those of his family. Considering this, we would say that Harry was not responsible for his wife’s death. The Eumenides appear because of the curse of his family, something Agatha constantly refers to, and it is his journey into the unknown that will result in his freedom, freedom from his past, freedom from Wishwood and freedom from his mother’s influence. As a result, he gains more knowledge and understanding of his father and family.