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SURPRISE AND SUSPENSE IN T.S. ELIOT'S THE COCKTAIL PARTY

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ABSTRACT

Among the plays of T.S. Eliot, *The Cocktail Party* is given a unique place for its theatrical success than the other plays. The Christian theme and spiritual message are carefully synthesized that interest the audience. The contemporary London society, the drawing-room atmosphere and familiar characters and the humorous tone contribute to the success of the play. Along with such interesting factors, suspense and surprise take the readers to the height of curiosity.

**Key words:** Christian theme, curiosity, surprise and suspense

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Discussion on Surprise and Suspense

The element of surprise operates on different levels. First there is the thorough change of tone that comes unexpectedly. The tone of levity with which the play opens does not remain till the end of the play. It gives way to the most serious theme and before knowing where the gossip takes place, the smart drawing room disappears. There is the anguish of broken hopes, dreams and sigh of disillusion along with the serious voice of spiritual counseling. *The Cocktail Party* is in the house of the Chamberlaynes with which the play opens, introduces with empty shallow talk about characters like Lady Klootz. Alex is called upon to talk about shooting tigers with the Maharaja and Julia recalls a mad man who was distressed by the cry of bats.

The same unexpectedness is found in the unfolding of character. Julia and Alex direct the audiences as very frivolous social figures. Alex seems to be a happy-go-lucky man-of the world without much intelligence or seriousness. And Julia the interfering, funny old woman seems to be quite a busybody. It is very much surprised when later they emerge as serious Guardians keeping a loving and vigilant eye on the other characters of the play. That these jabbering interfering persons could be the custodians of the spiritual affairs of the Chamberlaynes and of Celia Copplestone and Peter Quilpe is certainly an utter surprise for the audience. Even in the characterization of Reilly the element of surprise is not altogether ruled out. He is introduced as a person with a marked fondness for gin and water, drinking and singing in an improper manner in a house where the air of uneasy domestic relations prevails. The unidentified guest in a rather comic vein sings a ballad about the one-eyed Reilly later plays a grave and venerable role of the psychiatrist and spiritual guide. There is a wide gulf between the garb of levity that Reilly puts on at first and the air of deep seriousness and spiritual

loftiness of him. This, like the characterization of Julia is a very good theater satisfying the audience unexpected and the unpredictable events. But there are critics who feel that the introduction of this theatrical stuff, especially in the characterization of Julia is rather a defect of the play.

At every turn there is a surprise of some sort in the course of the play. The Cocktail Party given by the Chamberlaynes affords a string of surprises. The hostess has disappeared and Edward's feeble attempts at creating the aunt in the country are inadequate and unconvincing. So an air of suspense prevails as to what could have happened to her. The mystery is solved when Edward announces to the unidentified Guest "My wife has left me". The presence of the stranger at the party is itself a surprise, at least to Edward Chamberlayne. When left alone with him Edward confesses.

I thought that Lavinia had told me the names  
Of all the people she said she'd invited.  
But it's only that dreadful old woman who mattered  
I shouldn't have minded anyone else.

These words obviously refer to Julia and he goes to the door, hearing the door-bell ring and continues his comment on Julia. "But she always turns up when she's least wanted". He opens the door, Julia returns to take her umbrella. When she has left Edward is left once more with the unidentified guest who is quite to the surprise of Edward. The stranger informs Edward that in a short span of time, he meets a woman.

Immediately a number of puzzling questions arise in the mind of audiences as well as Edward—questions such as who is this man. What has he to do with Lavinia's whereabouts? What are his mysterious powers? Will Lavinia come back to Edward and what chances do they have to resume their life together? All this naturally creates an atmosphere of suspense.

Surprise however is not limited to the Edward-Lavinia aspect of the plot. A significant source of surprise in the play is the fact that many characters remain in the dark as to their relationship to one another.

An early example of this occurs where Peter Quilpe comes in to seek the advice of Edward. "It's about Celia. Myself and Celia", he stammers. Surprised Edward asks:

Why, what could there be about yourself and Celia?  
Have you anything is common, do you think?

When Edward agrees to Celia the younger man is filled with gratitude. The audiences too do not realize that Edward and Celia are already drawn together in an intimate affair.

The disclosure of Edward and Celia's love is made when Celia comes to Edward and talks of building their life together from this point of Lavinia's departure. The veil is torn now from the past and it is revealed that Edward and Celia have bothered to conceal their affair for the sake of Edward's career. But the scene witnesses an unpredicted turn of events. Celia is baffled by Edward's response to be situation that is actually so convenient for them. She is shocked and surprised to note that Edward does not show an enthusiasm for marrying her.

But what comes as a greater shock to Celia is the realization that her relationship with Edward had lacked reality, and that Edward has been only a projection of her own desire for loving.

Audience are told by the unidentified Guest that Edward in wanting his wife back has set in motion strange forces. Nobody knows what these forces are. But the audience keeps eagerly awaiting the return of Lavinia. What is to be the consequence of Lavinia's coming back.

The note of mystery associated with the return of Lavinia. Celia, Peter, Alex and Julia are in the house of the Chamberlaynes to witness the coming back of Lavinia. And avowedly they come in answer to the telegrams that they have received from Lavinia. Lavinia is surprised at this as she never sent anyone any telegram. Julia concludes: 'Well, it's all delightfully mysterious'. This sense of mystery is so oppressive that Lavinia feels she must come to the bottom of it. Yet she can't. Before Julia and Alex leave Lavinia asks them to stop and explain the telegram.

It is not till the last scene of the play that the answer is disclosed. Celia's fate is revealed suddenly and unexpectedly by Alex. Peter Quilpe, the Chamberlaynes and the audience are taken aback when the announcement comes that Celia is crucified near an ant-hill in Kinkanja. But the sense of shock soon gives way

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to an understanding of the glory of her death and the audience as well as the characters pass on to “a calm of mind” sensing the mysterious ways of Providence.

**Summary**

Thus through a highly dramatic and skilful use of the elements of suspense, and surprise Eliot engages the audience which never letting their interest down. The play ends with another cocktail party given by the Chamberlaynes and this time the tone has changed completely. The talk now is all about the death of Martyr and how it enriches the lives of others.

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