

# **The Cocktail Party Study Guide**

## **The Cocktail Party by T. S. Eliot**

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# Plot Summary

“The Cocktail Party”, first performed in 1949, is a play by T.S. Eliot that is often considered one of his best works, and was his most popular play during the author's life. Though the author called it a comedy, the play is more accurately considered a morality play or a drama, with hints of comic relief provided from time to time. However, even the humor employed is dark rather than light-hearted. Parallels have been drawn between “The Cocktail Party” and the Ancient Greek play by Euripides called “Alcestis”, as both involve the idea of bringing a spouse back from the dead; however, the resurrection in Eliot's play is figurative, or, at least, not clearly delineated.

The play mainly follows the story of Edward and Lavinia Chamberlayne, a British couple who have been married for five years. The story opens in the drawing room of the Chamberlaynes' apartment, where Edward is entertaining a group of friends. Lavinia is absent, and he explains that she is away tending a sick aunt. As the guests leave, one man named Peter remains behind to ask Edward to intervene for him with a woman named Celia, for whom he has feelings. Edward agrees. He asks one man—the “unidentified guest”—to remain behind, and reveals to the stranger that his wife has left him. The stranger says that he can bring Lavinia back to Edward if Edward will promise that he will ask her no questions and expect no explanations. Edward agrees and the unidentified guest leaves, though not before the conversation is interrupted a few times by returning party guests, most of whom the audience will later discover have ulterior motives.

The doorbell rings again, and it is Celia, the party guest whom Peter confessed his feelings for in the first scene. Through her conversation with Edward, it is clear that she is his mistress, and that she believes that now that Edward is free, he will want to be with her. Edward tells her that he wants his wife back, and this confession and his explanation for it leads Celia to see him differently. She leaves, saying that she wishes him well, but adds that her feelings for him are gone.

The next day, Lavinia arrives at the flat and she and Edward speak about their marriage. For the first time, they are honest with each other about their feelings for each other and their thoughts about their marriage. After an exchange that is rather intense and somewhat brutal, Edward begins to speak as if he is having a nervous breakdown. Lavinia suggests that he see a doctor, though no clear plans are made and Lavinia, in an abrupt return to normal routine, suggests they go out to dinner.

Act 2 opens in the office of Sir Henry Harcourt-Reilly, who is now clearly the unidentified guest from the Chamberlaynes' cocktail party. Throughout the act, he sees and consults with Edward, Lavinia and Celia. Edward asks to be sent to a sanatorium, though Reilly refuses, suggesting that as another treatment, he bring in another patient to speak to Edward. The patient turns out to be Lavinia. Reilly then chastises them both for lying about the causes of their upset. He reveals that Edward has been having an affair with Celia, but that he has realized he didn't love her, making him worry that he is incapable of love and so will be alone forever. Reilly then reveals that Lavinia has been having an



affair with Peter. He goes on to say that it was not discovering Edward's affair that upset Lavinia, as she proclaimed, but instead it was the end of her own affair with Peter due to his falling in love with Celia. This made her feel that perhaps she was unlovable, and it was that fear that sent her into her own dilemma. He suggests that Lavinia and Edward are more suited for each other than they thought, and after some further discussion, the couple leaves. Celia then enters, saying that something is wrong with her because she suddenly feels more aware of her solitude and a sense of sin for her failures than she has ever felt before. Reilly tells her that she can go back to her old life and learn to forget these realizations, or she can engage on a challenging, terrifying journey and face and engage with these realizations. She chooses the latter, and Reilly agrees to help her. Finally, the conversations Reilly has with Julia and Alex before and after these consultations show that the three of them have been manipulating the actions of the other characters for some purpose, though it is not clear what it is.

In the final act, the scene once again occurs in the Chamberlaynes' drawing room again as they prepare for another cocktail party. The couple is noticeably different, being congenial and even tender with each other. The same guests from the first cocktail party stop in, with the exception of Celia, though the reason is soon revealed by Alex. When Peter says he would like to have her be in a movie he is working on, Alex says that Celia has died. She had gone to Africa to work as a nurse for a plague-ridden village of "heathen natives," and in the midst of social and political unrest, she was abducted and killed. Edward, Lavinia, and the others help Peter put her death in perspective and he soon takes his leave. Reilly says that he isn't surprised by the news of her death because he has seen a "shadow" of the dead Celia at the first cocktail party, and that this was inevitable. The guests all leave to go to a party thrown by another couple that same evening and the action ends as Lavinia and Edward prepare to receive their guests.



# Act 1, Scene 1

## Summary

The first scene of the play opens in the drawing room of the Chamberlaynes' London flat in the early evening. Edward Chamberlayne, Julia Shuttlethwaite, Celia Coplestone, Peter Quilpe, Alexander MacColgie, Gibbs, and an unidentified guest, who is later revealed as Sir Henry Harcourt-Reilly, are all in the room. Alex has been telling a story but Julia has not understood it. The group tries to get Julia to tell a story that they all like about a wedding where a butler found a woman in the pantry rinsing her mouth out with champagne after trying the wedding cake, but the conversation keeps circling around as the group talks about the woman involved in the story, Lady Klootz, and other people that they know. Edward leaves the room, and Julia wants to wait until he returns to tell the story. She laments that without his wife, Lavinia there, he is a horrible host, but it seems she is not serious about the accusation. He returns with a tray of food. The guests continue talking about whether or not they know the people involved in the story, though the story still isn't told. The reader learns details about the lives of the characters from the conversation, such as that Peter went to Oxford and that he spent time in California trying to make a film that he had written. Julia, still not having told the story, tells Peter she wants to sit down with him and ask him several questions, and claims that she never has the chance because he is always with Lavinia. With her absence tonight, she has the perfect opportunity. As the conversation continues, the reader learns that Lavinia has gone away to visit an aunt in the country who is ill and needs Lavinia to nurse her. The guests all leave, though Edward asks the unidentified guest to remain for a cocktail.

Edward apologizes to the uninvited guest for the party, saying that he tried to put it off but couldn't get notice to people in time. He complains about Julia, calling her a "dreadful old woman," and saying that she always turns up when she's not wanted. Julia returns right then saying it is raining and she left her umbrella, then exits again. Alone again with the unidentified guest, Edward admits that Lavinia has left him and he wants to talk to the unidentified guest about it because he says it would be easier to talk to someone he doesn't know. The two sit and talk about Edward and Lavinia's marriage, and the unidentified guest says that Edward is lucky that his wife has left him and is unlikely to come back. Edward is upset by this reaction, claiming he wants his wife back. The unidentified guest gives several long speeches, claiming that, when Edward asks his name, he should remain a stranger so that Edward gets the relief of having told his secret to a stranger. He says that part of Edward's distress is that Lavinia acted first and that now Edward feels like an object in a role — that Lavinia has upset their habitual normalcy. He advises Edward to wait and see what happens. Edward wants to get her back because he needs to know what has happened to make her leave and because he hates the mystery of the situation. The unidentified guest claims that he can bring her back, but only on the condition that Edward not ask her any questions about where she has been. Edward agrees and the unidentified guest says that she will be back here in twenty-four hours.



The doorbell rings again and Julie and Peter are back. Julia now says she has lost her glasses and, after dragging Peter around town with her looking for them, she believes she must have left them there. The unidentified guest begins to sing a silly song and, after getting Edward's reassurance that he will be there to receive Lavinia, he exits.

Julia, Peter, and Edward talk about the unidentified guest and the fact that no one knows his name. They look for Julia's glasses, but when Edward asks if they could be in her bag, she finds them there. Julia leaves but Peter stays behind, claiming there is something he wants to talk to Edward about. Peter tells Edward that he is interested in Celia. There is a brief interruption from Alex, who thought Edward might be alone and want to have dinner with him, but Edward says he wants to be alone. Despite this, Alex exits the room to cook them dinner in Edward's kitchen. Edward and Peter continue to talk about Celia, and Peter says that he is distraught because after seeing each other for some time, Celia now wants nothing to do with him. Edward tells Peter he is lucky to have escaped what could have been a difficult affair. The conversation is interrupted by Alex, asking about where things are in the kitchen, and a phone call from someone Edward says he can't talk to at the moment. Then Peter asks Edward to intervene with Celia for him, and Edward agrees. Alex enters to tell Edward dinner is ready and Peter leaves. Alex returns to the kitchen and Edward picks up the phone to call Celia, but is told she has gone out.

## Analysis

In the opening scene of the play, the reader is introduced to the main characters and their relationships to each other. The members of the group seem comfortable with each other, though it also seems as if they are trying hard to impress each other with funny stories. They also want to know who is connected to whom within society, as if they are constantly reassessing each other and their respective places. The fact that they all want Julia to tell the same story again seems to suggest that she is the matriarch, and this is affirmed in later conversations and actions, as they all cater to her.

The reader learns that Edward is reluctantly entertaining on his own, though at first it seems that he wants to be doing so. The reader later learns that he is lying to his guests about where his wife is and that he is putting up with people that he doesn't actually like. When it is clear that this is a man who has continued to host a party despite the devastating situation that he is going through on a personal level, it is an obvious indication of the importance of maintaining appearance in his social group. In fact, it is only to the unidentified guest, who is a stranger to him, that he actually feels comfortable telling the truth. This is a man who is so concerned with what his friends will think and what the news of his wife's leaving him might do to his position and status that he can't even share with them the personal pain that he is in.

Then, when the unidentified stranger agrees to listen to him, it seems that the author's voice is coming through in what he tells Edward about the marriage. He suggests that Edward is lucky in his situation because, without adultery as the cause for her departure, Edward is likely to actually be rid of her. As he questions Edward, he asserts



that Edward doesn't really love her, but that he is only interested in getting her back because being with her has become part of his routine and self-image. Without her there, he has become aware of the fact that he is just a puppet going through the motions of life; while she was with him, he was able to ignore the sad-seeming pointlessness of his life. In fact, he believes that Edward is really only upset because he will look bad for being the one left rather than being the one doing the leaving, and for the scandal that a divorce would cause.

However, Edward is insistent that he wants his wife back. It is not because he loves her, as he never says this, but because he cannot stand the mystery of what motivated her to leave. It is ironic, then, that he doesn't seem at all bothered by the mysterious promise of the unidentified guest, who says that he can have Lavinia back in the apartment twenty-four hours later. Then, Eliot creates a juxtaposition of Lavinia and Edward's relationship by having Peter describe his relationship with Celia. His feelings for her seem strong and he claims to have a great deal in common with her, but Edward only responds that Peter is lucky to have gotten out of the relationship when he did. This response shows his level of resignation about relationships, and the fact that he still doesn't share his situation with Lavinia with Peter even after his own disclosure is evidence of how closed off he really is about his emotions.

Alex is used as a comic relief in the scene as he interrupts the action several times with his ridiculous questions and his insistence on making dinner for Edward. Eliot then continues the mysterious circumstances with the scene's two phone calls: the one that Edward takes but quickly ends, and then the one he makes to try to reach Celia. The suggestion is that Edward may have more of a relationship with Celia than he has let on, once again suggesting that the people in the play, and Edward in particular, are not what they seem.

## Vocabulary

maharaja, wrangling, lavatory, annuity, disclosure, replenish, incalculable, obsolete, delirium, camphor



# Act 1, Scene 2

## Summary

The second scene of the play takes fifteen minutes after the previous scene ended. The doorbell rings and Edward goes to answer, returning to the stage with Celia. The reader learns that it was Celia who called Edward in the last scene, and she says that it was his strange behavior on the phone that made her come back; she wants to make sure he is all right. She tells him that his story about Lavinia's aunt wasn't believable, and he is upset to think that no one believed it. It is now clear to the reader that the two of them have been having an affair. Celia now believes that they will be able to be together since Lavinia has left. However, Edward tells her that Lavinia is coming back.

Before Celia can react, Alex interrupts again, this time by phone. Only Edward's side of the conversation is heard, and Edward mentions that, although the dinner was interesting, it might have been "indigestible." He convinces Alex not to bring him anything else to settle his stomach and hangs up. Celia asks him what the phone call was about and Edward admits that he didn't eat the dinner yet — it is still on the stove. Celia goes to check on it, but Edward protests, asking what someone would think if they found her in his kitchen.

At that moment, the doorbell rings again and Celia comes back, tells Edward to answer it, and says she will not hide. She will tell people that she left her umbrella, which turns out to be true, and that she simply stayed because she found him hungry and helpless when it came to the kitchen. Edward answers the door and it is Julia again. Celia enters, telling Edward the dinner is ruined, and Julia tells Celia that it seems they both had the same idea, that Edward would need someone to cook for him. Julia offers to fix something else and heads to the kitchen.

Celia and Edward are alone again and Edward tells her about the unidentified guest and that he promised to bring Lavinia back. Celia says that she was frightened of him, that he had some sort of power, and she asks why he would bring Lavinia back. Edward tells her it was because he asked her to do so. Celia is angry, but before she can get more information from Edward, Julia reenters with champagne, claiming there is no food to eat. She proposes a toast to the health of Lavinia's aunt, then suggests that they go to supper. Edward refuses and Celia agrees to follow in ten minutes, after she talks to Edward alone. Julia leaves and Celia again asks Edward why he would want Lavinia back.

He explains that, by trying to convince him that he was lucky she was gone, the unidentified guest actually made him want her back. Celia attempts to understand, wondering if he was simply trying to avoid trouble and panicked at the thought of the fallout of Lavinia leaving him. Then she asks if it is his vanity at being left for another man, promising she will make him feel better by being with him when he is legally free.





He denies that is the reason. Celia wants him to see a psychologist but Edward refuses, saying “It would need someone greater than the greatest doctor to cure this illness.”

Celia tries to get him to assure her that all is well and that he won’t ask Lavinia to come back, but he refuses. She tells him that she had been fine in their relationship before, knowing that there could never be anything else between them because he was married. But when she realized at the party that evening that Lavinia had left him and that he would now be free, she discovered that she wanted more. She is humiliated by wanting more, but blames herself for her situation, claiming that she knew he was only using her for a “passing diversion.” He denies that accusation, then accuses her of doing the same thing with Peter. She is shocked to hear that Peter thought there was anything between the two of them; she claims that she only spent time with him because she thought that he was lonely and she could help him.

Edward then says that he isn’t in love with Lavinia and that he never has been. He says that if he has ever loved anyone, it is her, Celia, but that he should have never let their relationship go on because she needs someone nearer her own age. Celia asks why he wants Lavinia back if he doesn’t love her, and opines that he only wants her back because without her, he suddenly feels old. He says that he can live with his life only because he accepted the fact that it would be uneventful and tedious a long time ago as his reality, but to try to change it now is something he is not capable of doing. Celia is still trying to understand, but not because she loves him any longer; she claims that as she has been listening to him, her feelings have changed. She now feels sorry for him and thinks him a small, whining insect of a man rather than the person she thought he was. She believes that what she saw in him before never really existed.

The phone rings again, interrupting them, and this time it is Julia. She thinks she has left her spectacles there for certain this time. Edward puts the phone down and goes into the kitchen to look and finds them. He comes back, surprised that they were actually there, and comments that Julia must have opened and consumed half the bottle of champagne before bringing it in earlier, as he had no bottles that were already half-consumed. The two propose a toast to The Guardians, and Edward muses that Julia might be one of his guardians. Celia takes the spectacles and leaves. Suddenly, Edward realizes the phone is still off the hook. He picks it up, horrified, and apologizes to Julia for keeping her waiting, assures her Celia is bringing her the spectacles, and hangs up.

## Analysis

In this scene, Edward’s facade is shown to have multiple layers. He has been having an affair with Celia, so the reader now knows that he lied to the unidentified guest when he denied that there was anyone for Lavinia to be jealous of or worried about. Incidentally, this can also be construed as Edward having convinced himself that Celia truly is nothing to him apart from a passing diversion, which is humiliating to Celia, and injurious to Edward’s character as a man. Then, as Celia hears his excuses for wanting Lavinia back, she begins to see him change right before her eyes, suggesting that he



had fooled her into believing that he loved her and would want to be with her if he ever got the chance. Instead, she learns that he is not the person that she believed him to be. She compares him to a mummy, withered and old, and then an insect, whining and small.

Edward tries to convince her that it is for the best if they part, and Celia tells him that he does not get to give her advice any longer. Instead, she blames herself for her humiliation. She is admitting that she bought into his façade, and that she only has herself to blame now that it is falling apart. At the same time, she learns that she has given the wrong appearance of her feelings to Peter. She is confused by this turn of events, believing that she has not given him any reason to believe that there was anything serious between them. Eliot is exploring another side of the appearance that a person gives to others, but this time he is demonstrating the ways in which people can be oblivious to the way they appear to others. Edward is not aware of how strongly Celia felt about him, and then doesn't realize how his appearance is changing in her eyes as he speaks. Celia is also guilty of not realizing how she appears to others. Eliot seems to be suggesting that people really never have control over how they appear to others, and that any attempt to construct a façade is pointless; people will see you as they want to see you.

The comic intervention in this scene comes from Julia, who interrupts the two during their conversation. She seems to suspect that there is something going on between them, as she insists that Celia leave with her. Her matronly appearance is slightly questioned when Edward discovers that she drinks half a bottle of champagne and tries to pretend she found it that way; yet again, a character's attempt to project an appearance is unsuccessful. Unfortunately, Edward makes a large social faux pas when Julia is made aware of the fact that others know she was lying when Edward forgets that the phone is off the hook. In this society, pretending that you believe another person's projection of himself is part of the social order.

## Vocabulary

invention, Good Samaritans, degraded, diversion, bewildered, subterfuge, conceited, competent, entitled, loathe, implacable, indomitable, mediocrity, contrive, flourish



# Act 1, Scene 3

## Summary

Scene III takes place in the same room on the next afternoon. Edward answers the door to the unidentified guest. He says he has come to remind Edward that by agreeing to the terms of their agreement, he has made a decision and he is no longer free. He knows Edward will want to change his mind but it is too late. He says that it is a serious thing to be bringing someone back from the dead. Edward questions this phrasing, and the unidentified guest says that we all die to each other every day and that we are actually strangers to each other, and that he and Lavinia are strangers to each other. He advises Edward that he must face all of the people that he would rather forget, yet face them all as strangers, including Lavinia. He then reminds Edward that he must not ask his wife any questions or “strangle each other with knotted memories,” and that he must not mention to her that he, the unidentified guest, was ever there either. He tells Edward to await his visitors and goes to leave. Edward asks if he will tell him who he is, but the unidentified guest simply says he is also a stranger. He leaves by the servants’ staircase.

The doorbell rings and it is Celia. Edward asks why she is there and she says that Lavinia sent a telegram to Julia asking that she come and bring Celia with her. Edward is very uncomfortable with the idea, wondering what they will talk about. Celia is amused, seeing him look like a schoolboy waiting for the headmaster to find out what he has done wrong. The doorbell rings again and Edward thinks it will be Lavinia, but it is Peter. He says that Lavinia sent a telegram to Alex asking that he come and bring Peter with him. Peter says it seems that Lavinia is going to have yesterday’s cocktail party today, and so her aunt must be fine. Edward’s response shows that he has forgotten about the story he made up about Lavinia’s sick aunt. Peter then asks if Edward has done anything about their conversation about Celia and is glad that he hasn’t because he has decided to move to California to take a job that Alex helped arrange for him. Celia says she will miss him and says she is going away too. Lavinia lets herself in and is surprised to find everyone there. She says she didn’t send any telegrams and believes it must be Julia who sent them. They sit to wait for Julia and talk about both Peter and Celia going away and Lavinia mistakenly thinks that they are going to California together. Celia corrects her, and asks if she and Lavinia can part as friends and says she wishes happiness for Lavinia and Edward.

The doorbell rings again and it is Julia, who says she was surprised by Lavinia’s telegram. Lavinia asks her about the telegram, which came from Essex, which she assumes meant Lavinia was in Essex. Lavinia says she doesn’t know where she was, which Julia thinks must be a lapse of memory due to stress. Alex arrives and says his telegram came from Dedham, in Essex, but Lavinia still can’t explain the telegrams. Julia says that Lavinia must be exhausted and needs to rest and eat. Alex is about to volunteer to cook but Julia stops him, telling Peter to get a taxi and they can all go to her house. Celia says goodbye and exits. Lavinia asks Julia and Alex to explain the



telegrams, but they say that Lavinia must find out for herself. They exit, leaving Lavinia and Edward alone.

Edward and Lavinia begin by reiterating that they are not allowed to ask questions or give explanations. Lavinia says she forgot about the cocktail party and asks who was there. Edward tells her it was all the same people who were just here, plus an unidentified man that he says she must know. She admits she does and then says that Julia is the devil — that she always shows up when there is mischief. Edward tells her the story he gave everyone about the aunt and Lavinia says he should have told her the truth, that she can't be easily fooled. Lavinia says she will always tell the truth from now on. She then begins to tell Edward that she has taken him much too seriously in the past and that in living with him, she somehow lost her sense of humor. She says that what she thought was consideration on his part was really just passivity. Edward accuses her of wanting him to be a lawyer but then being upset when he was too busy to be part of her social plans. They both ask each other why they wanted to come back but can't answer. Edward then tells her he will no longer be the successful husband backdrop for her social life and Lavinia is pleased that he seems to have found some backbone. They argue over who has changed more. Edward says that at least now in their marriage they can say what they think and feel. Lavinia questions whether Edward was ever in love with her; he says he thought he must have been because everyone kept telling him that he was. Lavinia says she is sorry for him, and that she thought that if she had gone away that he might have had some freedom to find himself again. Edward begins talking strangely about Hell and that one is always alone. Lavinia asks if he is upset because of Celia going to California with Peter. Edward seems surprised by the news, then says he wishes he could go back to yesterday, before he made the decision to have her back.

## Analysis

In this scene, the audience learns that there is yet again more mystery going on in the situation than at first meets the eye. When Celia and Peter arrive, it is clear that someone else is orchestrating what is happening. First, Celia arrives, making Edward think that Lavinia must be planning to confront the two of them about their affair. Edward's fear makes Celia laugh, and it is clear that she truly has gotten past her feelings for him. In fact, when Peter arrives, she says that she plans to go away. Peter is also planning to go away to California, and when Lavinia arrives, she seems to believe that Peter and Celia are going away together. From her comment to the two of them and her later comment to Edward where she asks if he is upset that Celia and Peter are going away together, it seems that she knows about the affair.

Eliot uses the scene to continue developing the idea that people are rarely what they seem and are not what they believe themselves to be, either. First, the unidentified guest says that all men are strangers to one another, even those that they believe to know well. Then, Celia again says that Edward has changed from the person that she thought him to be, and the difference is so strong that it makes her laugh. Next, the mystery of the telegrams makes it clear that there are some machinations going on that



are not yet known; in other words, someone is being deceptive by sending telegrams in Lavinia's name. It seems that Julia and Alex are probably the culprits, or at least that they know who did it, but they say they cannot explain what is going on. Instead, they tell Lavinia she must figure it out for herself.

When Edward and Lavinia are alone together, they find themselves constrained because they cannot ask each other questions or give explanations. But in a way, this frees them to be more honest with each other than they have been in the past. They tell each other the truths that they have been denying about their marriage and about each other. For the first time in the play, two characters are being direct and straightforward — there is no longer a façade. Edward's character is further revealed when he says that he believed he loved Lavinia because others told him he did; he is someone who doesn't seem to have his own opinions. However, he is becoming aware of who he has been and claims that he will be different going forward. Then, Edward speaks in Eliot's voice, directly stating one of the themes of the play — that other people are just projections of what we think they are or what we want them to be. He has come to a realization that his life and relationships are not based in reality but rather on what others told him about them, and that realizing this is a kind of hell. Edward and Lavinia are back together, but they are no longer the same and the audience is left wondering what will happen now that they are being honest with each other.

## Vocabulary

consideration, convention, bachelor, beloved, enfolded, mirth, obliterate, ludicrous, exhibitions, latch-key, lapse, abducted, inquisitive, famished, absurd, exasperating, passivity, bolstered, infuriating, novelty, placid, gramophone



## Act 2

### Summary

Act II is one continuous scene, with no divisions. It takes place in Sir Henry Harcourt-Reilly's consulting room. The audience realizes that this is the unidentified guest from the earlier scenes. He calls in his nurse-secretary and reviews his instructions that he has three appointments this morning and that it is imperative that none of the patients meet each other. She tells him that Alex is there and he tells her to show him in.

Alex enters and in his conversation with Reilly, it is clear that the two of them have been manipulating Edward into the appointment for some reason yet to be revealed. Alex says that Edward has been enjoying his mental illness and that he believes that when the doctor sends him to a sanatorium, it will punish his wife. In the meantime, he has been staying at his club. The nurse rings to tell Reilly that Edward is there and Alex leaves out through the back.

Edward enters and says he is not surprised to learn that Reilly is the unidentified guest but questions him on why he was there at the party that night. Reilly admits that he had seen Lavinia before and that he came to the party to see Edward even though he had not been invited. Edward wants to know more about the situation but Reilly puts him off, asking that they deal with Edward's symptoms first. Edward asks if he can go to a sanatorium because he has what he believes is a very rare case: he has ceased to believe in his own personality and is obsessed with his own insignificance. He says he realizes now why he wanted Lavinia back — that she had made him into a person who could not live unless it was on her terms; he only exists because she made him into the person he is. He asks again to be put in a sanatorium where he can be alone, as he has nowhere else to go.

Edward wonders if Reilly is paying attention because he takes a brief phone call, but Reilly assures him that he is learning a great deal just by observing Edward. Edward says that he is suffering a death of the spirit, and that coming to see Reilly was the last thing he is capable of doing for himself; he is now at the mercy of Reilly. Reilly says that before he can send Edward to the sanatorium he must learn more, and he proposes an unusual procedure. He wants to bring in another patient. He presses the bell on his desk, and the nurse-secretary brings in Lavinia.

Both Edward and Lavinia are surprised, but Reilly says that whether Edward goes to a sanatorium also concerns Lavinia. Lavinia asks if it will be the same sanatorium where Reilly sent her, but Reilly says she never went to his sanatorium. She went to a hotel where he sends people who believe they need to escape from everyday life, though it is not a sanatorium. Lavinia is irritated by this news, and Edward says Lavinia is too mentally well for a sanatorium. Reilly agrees, and adds that Edward is too ill for his sanatorium. Lavinia recommends another hotel for Edward, which annoys him, and the two bicker. Reilly interrupts to tell them that they are both ill, but on different levels.





What they have in common is that they are both self-deceivers and that they have both tried to lie to him and tell him what is wrong with them; however, their deceptions have not worked.

Reilly accuses Edward of lying by concealing his relationship with Celia, and Edward is outraged, saying Lavinia didn't know about it until now. Lavinia says that she did know, and that finding out is what brought about her nervous breakdown. Reilly says this is not true, that it was her own lover turning to someone else that caused her breakdown. Edward is shocked to learn that Lavinia had been having an affair with Peter until Peter fell for Celia. They laugh at the irony of Peter coming to Edward for help with Celia, and Reilly says that showing a sense of humor is a good sign. They ask Reilly how he knew about their relationships but he will not reveal the source.

Reilly says that Edward realized he didn't love Celia only when he had the chance to be with her when Lavinia left, and that he doubted whether he had ever loved anyone. Believing he might be incapable of love is what disturbed him. In Lavinia's case, Reilly says that when she discovered Peter was in love with Celia, she realized that he, like Edward never loved her. It made her worry that no one could actually love her. He points out that they basically have the opposite ends of the same problem, and that is what has kept them together. They decide to go home together and leave Reilly's office.

Julia comes in next, they discuss the fact that Celia is downstairs waiting to see Reilly next, and the reader learns that the two have manipulated Celia into coming there. Julia goes out the back and Celia enters. She says she isn't sure what is wrong with her, but she wants to believe she is sick because otherwise it means there is something wrong with the world. She says there are two things bothering her. The first is that she has become aware of how alone she actually is — that in every relationship, she is still alone. The second symptom is that she feels a sense of sin for the mistake she made in her relationship with Edward. She explains it is not a sense of moral sin, but a sin of failure, and she feels she must atone for it. She goes on to describe her relationship with Edward and that she thought it was a good, giving relationship but that now she realizes they had been using each other for their own reasons, and that what they thought they loved in each other was never real. She is now troubled with the thought that the love she thought she found might not actually exist, and she wants Reilly to help cure her of wanting it.

Reilly says the condition is curable but that she must choose the cure. He can help her forget what she has learned so she can return to life and function. Celia says she would feel she was betraying herself if she forgot what she has seen and learned. Reilly says that she can choose between two ways of living: in both she will be lonely, but in one she will forget the loneliness while in the second, more challenging way of living, she can stay aware of her loneliness and commune with it. She chooses the second option and Reilly says she will need to go to his special sanatorium, where she will be able to make a choice about how to live in the future. She leaves to make preparations to go.

Reilly picks up the in-house phone and tells Julia she can come in now. They discuss the results of the morning's meetings and Reilly expresses doubt about whether he has



done the right thing, sending Edward and Lavinia back to their life together. Julia says that they are now stripped naked of their façades and that now they have the chance to choose whether to remain open and honest or to adopt new costumes and disguises with one another. She says that she is more worried about Celia and the journey he has sent her on, that she is going to be transhumanised, and that she and Reilly don't know what that really encompasses. It becomes clear in the conversation that Julia is in charge and has been directing the action. The two call Alex in and they review the results of the meetings, with Reilly saying that the Chamberlaynes have accepted their destiny and that Celia is about to start the journey. They give a toast, which is more like a prayer to the protector of travelers. The last thing they note is that Peter has not yet been blessed by them, but that he is not in a place yet where they can speak the words and have them mean anything. Alex suggests that his connections in California might be able to help.

## Analysis

In this act, the identity of the unidentified guest is revealed to be Sir Henry Harcourt-Reilly, a psychologist or psychiatrist. It is also now confirmed that that he, Julia and Alex have been manipulating the other characters from the cocktail party, though their motives are not clear.

When Reilly and Edward talk, Edward has decided that he needs to go to a sanatorium and he wants Reilly to send him there. However, even in this decision he seems to waffle, saying that maybe he will go to a hotel instead. It appears that now that Edward is stripped of the pretenses that surrounded his life. He is content with being considered mentally ill and would actually like to be committed so that he can be alone. He seems to have realized that he is alone anyway, so going to the sanatorium to be alone would just be a way of accepting reality. When Lavinia comes in, Reilly reveals that both Edward and Lavinia have not only been living a life together that was dishonest, but they are even being dishonest about what caused their mental distress and illness. So even though they have learned that they were deceiving themselves in their lives together, they continue to deceive themselves about the root of their problems. Reilly summarizes the true root of their issues for each of them, making them realize that they are actually a very good match for each other; Edward is a man who believes he cannot love anyone while Lavinia is a woman who believes she is unlovable. Now that they know their true problems, they can live together more happily because they will not expect love from each other and be unhappy that they are not giving or receiving it. Eliot seems to be saying that the only way to find happiness in life is to be honest about who you are and what your faults are, and then to look for others with whom your faults are a good match. You will still, ultimately, be alone, but at least you will not be living under the delusion that you should expect or have something different. The Chamberlaynes accept this situation and seem to have found a way to go on living, despite the clarity they have gained about the nature of life and the human condition.

When Edward and Lavinia exit and Reilly and Celia talk, the play's tone shifts somewhat, becoming more mystical and even religious in nature. This is evident in the





phrase he uses to dismiss both Edward and Celia — “Work out your salvation with diligence” — and with the discussion of sin with Celia. She is also experiencing the problems that come from realizing that she is alone, but she is not content with going back to a life where she accepts this but manages to forget it most of the time. Eliot is suggesting that there is another option — that people can go through a spiritual journey, which he calls becoming “transhumanised,” but that the journey is dangerous and risky. The act concludes with another religious element, a prayer of sorts for the benefit of all three of the characters whose lives Reilly, Julia and Alex have intervened in. This strange moment gives the audience the sensation that the three of them have acted in the name of some higher power or spirit, and that they haven’t been doing it for their own motives.

## Vocabulary

implicitly, sanatorium, plausible, blunderer, redeeming, impetuous, oppression, obstinate, sub-human, barrister, lunatic, insuperably, precipitated, prostrated, defection, consternation, impotence, unenlightenment, plenitude, diligence, perplexing, prologue, atone, exalted, repine, phantasmal, mouldering, larder, meanness, derision, libation



## Act 3

### Summary

Act III is one continuous scene with no divisions. It takes place once again in the drawing room of the Chamberlaynes' London flat, though it is two years later. Lavinia is preparing for a party when Edward comes in. They joke with each other and Edward compliments her on her dress. They discuss how large the party will be and that they hope another party will keep some of their guests from coming. They talk about how much they are looking forward to going away to their vacation house and being alone together.

Julia arrives early, apologizing but claiming she has to go to the other party, but they are unlikely to have food so she wanted to stop here and eat. She says she has Alex with her, and he comes up a moment later. He tells them about his trip to Kinkanja and the problems the monkeys are causing in the country. Though the people revere the monkeys and don't want them killed, the people blame the government for the damage the monkeys cause. He then says that the natives who have converted to Christianity compound the problem because they like to trap and eat the monkeys. By doing so, their crops grow better than the other natives', who let the monkeys roam, and so the Christians prosper, which is causing friction between the people. The friction is worsened by foreigners who try to convince the heathen natives that they need to slaughter the Christians to solve the problem — so now the heathen natives are eating the Christian natives. He is about to tell the group about someone they know when Julia interrupts, asking for a cocktail, and then Peter is announced.

Peter has just come in from America, has heard about the party, and has decided to crash it to say hello. He talks about his new life in the movie business and seems to enjoy dropping names and bragging a bit about socializing with aristocrats. He is there to make a movie about Boltwell, a decaying old mansion. Reilly is announced and enters, and the conversation shortly resumes about Peter's film. Julia says that Peter is going to find parts for them all in it, but he explains he cannot. He adds that he wants to see if Celia would like a part in the film, as she had wanted to be an actress, but he can't find her and asks if anyone knows where she is.

At this point, Julia tells Alex to tell them the truth about Celia, and Alex rather abruptly announces that she is dead. He says she had joined a nursing staff going to Kinkanja, where she was helping some of the heathen natives infected with the plague. An insurrection occurred and she was kidnapped and crucified. Lavinia tells Edward she is sorry, which confuses Peter. They lament her passing as a waste, and Peter says that he never really knew her and that leaving her for California was a waste. He thought if he could make himself a success in the movies, he could win her back, and now he believes it was all for nothing.



Lavinia argues that Peter hasn't really lost what he think he has — that what he lost was only the image of Celia that he created in his own mind to satisfy his own needs. Edward agrees, saying that Peter is lucky to be learning things about himself now rather than later, when he is older and it's harder to recover from the discovery. Peter is a bit confused by the statement, but admits that his interest in Celia has been selfish. Julia says that he must have developed the ability to look at people objectively when filming them, and that someday he'll be able to see Celia that way and will understand her.

Lavinia then asks Reilly why his face showed no horror or shock over the news of Celia's death or how she died. She says his face expressed satisfaction. Julia notes that Lavinia is observant, and that Reilly is now forced to explain himself. He uses poetry to respond, describing a shadow world that exists beyond death. He then says that at the night of the first cocktail party, he had seen a sort of ghost Celia standing behind the real Celia, and that on the face of that image was the shock of a violent death. So he knew from that moment that Celia would die but he didn't know how. He says that because she accepted the path that she had been on, and had consciously chosen it, her death was a happy one, despite the fact that she would have suffered more in dying than the average, less aware person. He then describes the journey she had been on prior to death as being full of fear and agony.

Lavinia responds by saying that if that was the right path and form of death for Celia, then there must be something very wrong with the way the rest of them are living. Both she and Edward express guilt, feeling as if they had a hand in what happened to her. Reilly responds by saying that if we were all held accountable for what our words and deeds caused beyond what we intended them to do, we would all be condemned. He then tells them that they will have to accept the past and the consequences of it and Julia agrees. Peter says that he will come see them next time he is England so that they may talk about Celia's memory and then he takes his leave. The group all note that Edward and Lavinia now have to throw a party, which they are not looking forward to, but is their duty. Edward says he understands what Reilly and Julia have been saying — that every moment in life is a chance to begin again and that life requires that you keep on going, no matter what. He seems comforted by the thoughts. Julia, Reilly and Alex leave for the other party. Edward and Lavinia have a moment alone, Edward compliments Lavinia, and they steel themselves for the party. The doorbell rings and the play ends.

## Analysis

From the first lines of this act, it is clear that something is different between Edward and Lavinia. They are nice to each other, showing concern for each other, with Lavinia asking how his day was and Edward complimenting her dress and then insisting that she rest before the party begins. As the act continues, they demonstrate that they are attentive to each other and are paying attention to what the other one thinks, and they even support each other in what they say to the others. It seems that they have a new level of intimacy with each other and have even enjoyed throwing parties together. Yet it is also clear that they have picked back up the "mask" that they had previously put down



during the last act. Edward has attended all the parties they have been giving over the last two years despite the fact that, when he was being honest before, he felt Lavinia only wanted him there to show her status as the wife of the barrister. And Lavinia is concerned about her appearance, the appearance of the food, and even though neither of them seems to want to throw this party — particularly after hearing of Celia's death — they do it anyway. However, while their masks may be on show for the outside world, they do not use masks for each other.

Once again, Alex provides some comic relief, though it is with a very dark story. He tells the tale of the cannibals, the Christians and the monkeys without seeming to realize how disturbing the tale will be. However, through the tale, Eliot is making a few comments on current society and people in general. He says that men are unreasonable, often blaming government for problems that they are causing themselves. Then, with the story of the Christians, he is suggesting that they have less of a conscience about killing the monkeys because it will lead to their own prosperity. With the details about the foreigners intervening, he is making the point that people are susceptible to the influences of others, even to the point of committing murder. Of course, the way in which Alex tells his story becomes more disturbing when the reader learns in the next lines that these are the same cannibals responsible for Celia's death.

When Peter appears, he is confident bordering on arrogant. But when he learns of Celia's death, his façade falls, revealing to the reader that, like the other characters, he has been dishonest about his own feelings and motivations. Now all of the characters in the play have been exposed to their own self-deception. There is also the explanation of Reilly's reaction to Celia's death that brings the mystical element back to the play. Reilly reveals that he was able to see a specter of Celia's death the night he met her, so that he always knew that her death would come in a violent way; he just didn't know how. He accepted that fact, and only helped her the best he could, equipping her to make the choices that would lead her there. However, from the poem he read and the comments around the circumstance of her death, there is also the suggestion that Celia might not actually be dead, but rather has moved on to another plane or form of existence.

Peter gets some advice from the other characters to help him with the realization that he has not been honest with himself or with his perception of Celia. Edward and Lavinia seem to now be able to share what they have learned, so that they have moved into a level of understanding they didn't have before. The characters all tell Peter that he has a choice in how he deals with the news and how he moves forward from it. From Julia and Reilly's comments, Eliot is delivering the main messages of his play regarding the continuous nature of life and the fact that people have the chance to make a different choice on the path their life takes every moment. However, every choice leads to consequences, both good and bad, that must be accepted. As the play ends, each of the characters moves on to their next moment, each one a result of the choices they have already made.



## Vocabulary

trolley, ravenous, pretext, couchette, veneration, heathen, palatable, agitators, interim, austere, endemic, pestilence, métier, magus, Zoroaster, credulity, labyrinth, Minotaur, impediment



# Characters

## Edward Chamberlayne

Edward Chamberlayne is a lawyer and the husband of Lavinia Chamberlayne. The majority of the play focuses on his relationships with his wife and with his mistress, Celia Coplestone.

## Lavinia Chamberlayne

Lavinia Chamberlayne is a socialite and the wife of Edward. At the beginning of the play, she has left her husband, though she returns the next day. Later in the play, it is revealed that she has just ended an affair with Peter Quilpe.

## Celia Coplestone

Celia Coplestone is a young woman, socialite, and the mistress of Edward Chamberlayne. She says she would like to be an actress, but leaves England to work as a nurse in Africa when her affair with Edward ends. In the final act, it is reported that she has been abducted and killed by the natives in Africa.

## Sir Henry Harcourt-Reilly

Known also as the Unidentified Guest, Doctor, and the Stranger, Sir Henry Harcourt-Reilly is a psychiatrist or psychologist who treats Edward, Lavinia and Celia. The audience learns that, together with Alex and Julia, he has been manipulating the other characters.

## Peter Quilpe

Peter Quilpe is a young man who works in the film business. He is in love with Celia, but has been having an affair with Lavinia.

## Alexander MacColgie Gibbs

Alex is a friend of the Chamberlaynes who, it turns out, is one of the people manipulating them into seeing Reilly. In Acts I and III, he serves the role of comic relief as well.



## Julia Shuttlethwaite

Julia is the matriarch of the social group. Though she attempts to appear harmless and rather bumbling, she is actually intrusive and manipulative, and in the second act it is made clear that she is one of the people pulling the strings of the other characters.

## Objects/Places

No objects available for The Cocktail Party.





# Themes

## Outward Façades and Self Identity

Throughout the work, Eliot explores the theme of self-identity, which becomes central to the plot. He demonstrates that all people put up a front or façade that they want others to believe. Those constructing false appearances may even come to believe in them so thoroughly that they ultimately even lie to themselves about that facade. In particular, Edward and Lavinia each have been telling others, and themselves, stories about what they believed to be true, only to discover during the play that they were not fooling anyone.

Edward was living a life where he believed he was in a satisfying, if boring, marriage, and that he was in love with Celia. However, he soon realizes that he doesn't love Celia, and that although he doesn't love Lavinia either, he is reliant upon her. He also discovers that the two major lies he told to others were ones that no one believed; his wife and Reilly both knew of his affair with Celia and none of the other party guests believed his story about Lavinia being with a sick aunt instead of at the party. Lavinia believed that she was in love with Peter and he with her. However, when Peter falls in love with Celia, she comes to realize that she sees herself as unlovable. Despite the fact that she told Reilly that it was her discovery of Edward's affair that sent her on her "nervous breakdown," she then learns that Reilly didn't believe her or her level of mental illness. He sent her to a hotel, telling her it was a sanatorium.

In a final twist, Eliot takes the newly acquired self-identities of the couple and turns them around again. At the end of Act II, Edward now believes that he is a man incapable of loving anyone, and Lavinia believes that she is a woman who is unlovable. Yet in the final act, the characters both show their tenderness and caring for one another, so that it seems they have changed identities again. This change aligns with another of Eliot's themes, that people have the ability to choose their actions, ways of being, and the consequences that come with those choices.

## Choice and Consequence

Part of Eliot's message in the play is the idea of choice and consequence, and this becomes a strong theme throughout the course of the play. He contemplates the notion of whether or not a person is ever really free in the decisions that they make, but is very clear about the fact that every person will have to pay the consequences for their actions. Starting with Edward, Eliot creates a character who seems to have given up all conscious choice. He says that he is only a product of the life that his wife has molded around him. Yet this is not entirely true; he has chosen to have an affair and he has chosen to stay in a marriage that has been unhappy. Then, he chooses to speak to the unidentified guest, a stranger, about his problems with his wife, and the consequences of this choice lead to the rest of the action in the play. He is next given a clear choice by the unidentified



guests; he must choose to let his wife go or to have her back, but if he chooses to bring her back, he must again accept the consequences. This cycle of choice and consequence repeats with the other characters of the play, from Lavinia's choice to come back to Celia's choice to take the more difficult path to recovery from her "illness," to Peter's choice to leave Celia for California.

On the other hand, Eliot suggests that in many cases, we have no choice. Several times during the play, Reilly tells characters that they are not free to choose; the decision is made already. Also, characters act under the influence of others as well, such as when Edward says that he married Lavinia because other people told him that he loved her. Then, the cannibals start cooking and eating the Christian natives because foreigners told them they should. Eliot seems to be saying that we often act as if we have a choice when we don't and act as if we have no choice when we do, and that we cause and endure a great deal of suffering as a result. Perhaps most interestingly of all, Eliot is talking about freedom and choice inside a play where three characters are controlling, or at least heavily influencing, the actions of the other characters, all while telling them that they have a choice.

## Mysticism and the Supernatural

Mysticism and the supernatural form an important, underlying theme and motif in "The Cocktail Party". Through the play, Eliot slowly reveals that there are three individuals that seem to have a level of control over what is happening to the other characters, though the level of control or the source of control is never made clear, giving it a mystical or supernatural feeling. There are also direct suggestions that they have a mystic or supernatural power, such as when the unidentified guest tells Edward that if he brings Lavinia back, he will be bringing her back from the dead. His "power" is felt by others as well, and in fact, both Celia and Lavinia mention that he seemed forbidding or scary to them.

In Act 2, Reilly takes a role with Celia that is almost like a spiritual guide. His description of what he is offering to her at his sanatorium sounds like a vision quest, where she will be tested, feel as if she is going through hell, perhaps coming back better off than before. At the end of the act, Julia, Alex and Reilly all say a toast for the "travelers," wishing them a safe journey. The toast has the feel of an incantation or a ritual. The three characters make comments that make it seem they are acting for reasons other than their own personal desires, suggesting that they are agents of some other higher power.

Eliot makes it clear that Reilly does have some unusual powers in Act 3, or at least that Reilly wants the others to believe that he does. He claims that he could see a ghost or specter of a dead Celia standing behind the living Celia at the first cocktail party, which is why he doesn't show any shock over her death. There are even hints that Celia might not actually be dead. Similarly to how he explores the theme of choice in the work, Eliot is yet again challenging his readers to consider what forces might be working in the universe beyond what can be seen.



# Style

## Point of View

As a play, *The Cocktail Party* is written in the third person, omniscient point of view. The three Acts mainly follow the stories of Edward and Lavinia Chamberlayne, and one or both of those two characters are in most every scene, with the exception of portions of the second act. In that act, the point of view involves a sort of behind-the-scenes look at what Reilly, Julia, and Alex are actually up to when it comes to the other characters. This means that the audience is often privy to information that some of the characters do not know. The result is an elevated level of tension as the audience waits to see if the plans of the three controlling characters will work out, and what the result might be.

## Setting

The play is set in the late 1940s in London, England. The first and second acts both take place entirely in the drawing room of the Chamberlaynes' flat, though characters go offstage, purportedly into other rooms of the flat. The room is the location where the couples entertain and "present" themselves to society, making it an appropriate setting for a play about the masks and identities that people wear. The second act takes place in Reilly's consulting room. The change in setting is also symbolic of the changes that the characters go through between their appearances in the drawing room.

## Language and Meaning

The play is written in contemporary English of the middle to upper classes of 1940s London. This means that there are certain words the characters use that will likely not be familiar to modern audiences, such as using the word "trolley" to mean "cart." There are also instances of songs, poetry, and Biblical and mythological references which may need explanation, but which help paint the characters as well-educated, well-rounded people of the era.

## Structure

The play is broken into three acts. The first act is subdivided into three scenes, though the action remains in the same setting, merely separated by time intervals of 15 minutes and approximately 24 hours, respectively. The second act is one scene, taking place a few weeks after the first act. Despite the lack of scene divisions, the action does shift by the author introducing different patients into Reilly's office: first Edward, then Lavinia (though Edward remains), and then Celia. The final act is also one scene, taking place in the same location as the first scene, though two years later.



## Quotes

Don't go yet. I very much want to talk to somebody. And it's easier to talk to a person you don't know. The fact is, Lavinia has left me.

-- Edward (Act 1, Scene 1)

But let me tell you, that to approach the stranger is to invite the unexpected, release a new force, or let the genie out of the bottle.

-- Act 1, Scene 1 (Unidentified Guest)

You are nothing but a set of obsolete responses.

-- Unidentified Guest (Act 1, Scene 1)

Celia: "Lavinia coming back! Do you mean to say that she's laid a trap for us?" Edward: "No, if there is a trap, we are all in the trap, we have set it for ourselves. But I do not know what kind of trap it is.

-- Celia and Edward (Act 1, Scene 2)

So the one thing you care about is to avoid a break — anything unpleasant! No it can't be that. I won't think it's that. I think it is just a moment of surrender to fatigue. And panic. You can't take the trouble.

-- Celia (Act 1, Scene 2)

I see you as a person whom I never saw before. The man I saw before, he was only a projection — I see that now — of something that I wanted — no, not wanted — something I aspired to — something that I desperately wanted to exist.

-- Celia (Act 1, Scene 2)

Ah, but we die to each other daily. What we know of other people is only our memory of the moments during which we know them.

-- Unidentified Guest (Act 1, Scene 3)

I shall always tell the truth now. We have wasted such a lot of time in lying.

-- Lavinia (Act I, Scene 3)

What is hell? Hell is oneself. Hell is alone, the other figures in it merely projections. There is nothing to escape from and nothing to escape to. One is always alone.

-- Edward (Act 1, Scene 3)

So here we are again. Back in the trap, with only one difference, perhaps — we can fight each other, instead of each taking his corner of the cage.

-- Edward (Act 1, Scene 3)

Half of the harm that is done in this world is due to people who want to feel important.

-- Reilly (Act 2)



Can we only love something created in our own imagination? Are we all in fact unloving and unlovable? Then one is alone, and if one is alone then lover and beloved are equally unreal and the dreamer is no more real than his dreams.

-- Celia (Act 2)

It's not the knowledge of the mutual treachery but the knowledge that the other understands the motive — mirror to mirror, reflecting vanity.

-- Reilly (Act 2)

And now, when they are stripped naked to their souls and can choose, whether to put on proper costumes or huddle quickly into new disguises, they have, for the first time, somewhere to start from. Of course, they might just murder each other!

-- Julia (Act 2)

If we all were judged according to the consequences of all our words and deeds, beyond the intention and beyond our limited understanding of ourselves and others, we should all be condemned.

-- Reilly (Act 3)

More and more at first I did not want to know about Celia and so I never asked. Then I wanted to know and did not dare to ask. It took all my courage to ask you about her just now; but I never thought of anything like this. I suppose I didn't know her, didn't understand her. I understand nothing.

-- Peter (Act 3)



# Topics for Discussion

## Topic 1

What Christian symbolism is used in the play? What do you think Eliot thinks about Christianity and about religion in general?

## Topic 2

Who is more in the wrong in the play, Edward or Lavinia? Why?

## Topic 3

Which character is the most innocent in the play? Why do you think so?

## Topic 4

Who are Reilly, Julia and Alex? What are their motivations for manipulating the other characters? Do they represent any powers in society or in the human experience of life in general? If so, which ones?

## Topic 5

Examine the times that Julia and Alex interrupted the other characters. Were their actions intentional? What were they trying to prevent?

## Topic 6

Compare and contrast Edward and Lavinia's behavior towards each other in Acts I and II with their behavior towards each other in Act III. What is different? What is the same?

## Topic 7

Do you believe Reilly's explanation of why he was not surprised by the story and conditions of Celia's death? Why or why not?

## Topic 8

Do you believe Celia is dead? If she is not, how does that change the message that Eliot wanted audiences to get from his play?