Murder in the Cathedral Study Guide

Murder in the Cathedral by T. S. Eliot

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Introduction

In 1163, a quarrel began between the British King Henry II and the Archbishop of Canterbury, Thomas Becket. The men had been good friends, but each felt that his interests should be of primary concern to the nation and that the other should acquiesce to his demands. Becket fled to France in 1164 in order to rally support from the Catholic French for his cause and also sought an audience with the Pope. After being officially (although not personally) reconciled with the King, Becket returned to England in 1170, only to be murdered as he prayed in Canterbury Cathedral by four of Henry's Knights, Three years later, he was canonized and pilgrims—Henry among them—have made their way to his tomb ever since.

The allure of such a story for a dramatist is obvious: there is a great conflict between human and divine power, a strong central character and a number of complicated spiritual issues to be found in his death. In 1935, T. S. Eliot answered this "calling" to compose a play for that year's Canterbury Festival; the result was a work that revitalized verse drama—a form that had not been widely employed for almost three hundred years. Critics praised Eliot's use of verse and ability to invest a past historical event with modern issues and themes, such as the ways in which lay persons react to the intrusion of the supernatural in their daily lives. In part because it is a religious drama which appeared long after such plays were popular, *Murder in the Cathedral* is still performed, studied, and regarded as one of Eliot's major works, a testament to his skill as a poet and dramatist.

Author Biography

T. S. Eliot was born in St. Louis, Missouri, on September 26, 1888, into a family that stressed the importance of education and tradition. His paternal grandfather had moved to St. Louis from Boston and founded Washington University; the young Eliot entered Harvard University in 1906 to study French literature and philosophy (he received a baccalaureate degree in 1909 and a master's degree in 1910). In 1910, Eliot attended the Sorbonne and studied under the philosopher Henri Bergson; he later studied at Oxford and completed his dissertation on philosopher F. H. Bradley in 1916, when he was living in London with his first wife, Vivien Haigh-Wood.

During this phase of his life, Eliot was befriended by die American poet Ezra Pound, who helped him shape and publish his poetry, specifically *"The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock"* which first appeared in the journal *Poetry.* 1917 saw the publication of Eliot's first volume of verse, *Prufrock and Other Observations* which was greeted with enthusiasm by its readers. Eliot's success, however, was not enough to relive the stress he felt from his failing marriage; he suffered an emotional breakdown and sought treatment at a sanitorium in Switzerland. It was there that he completed the first draft of what is regarded as his best—and most difficult to interpret—work, *The Waste Land,* Upon returning to London, Eliot edited the poem (at Pound's request) and published it in the American journal the *Dial.* More and more readers began paying attention to Eliot's new verse forms, which reflected the angst and desperation of people who had just lived through the terror and chaos of World War I.

Eliot renewed himself personally as he had the world of poetry: in 1927, he became a British subject and a confirmed member of the Anglican church. During this same year, he stated his controversial creed of conservatism, describing himself as "Anglo-Catholic in religion, royalist in politics and classicist in literature." In 1930, another of his important poems, *Ash Wednesday,* was published, and in 1932 Eliot returned to the United States to become the Charles Eliot Norton Professor at Harvard. He was almost completely estranged from his wife and remained in the United States to lecture at various universities. In 1934 his first play, *Sweeney Agonistes,* was produced, followed the same year by his second drama, *The Rock.* However, it was 1935's *Murder in the Cathedral* that drew as much attention to Eliot's playwriting as his poetry. His next play, *The Family Reunion,* was produced in 1939, followed in 1943 by the poem *Four Quartets.* Vivien died in 1947 and in 1948 Eliot received the Nobel Prize in Literature and the Order of Merit by George VI. His next play, *The Cocktail Party,* was produced in 1949 and proved to be a critical and commercial success. Two other plays followed: *The Confidential Clerk* (1953) and *The Elder Statesman* (1958). During his playwriting career, Eliot continued to write verse, essays, and volumes of criticism. He was remarried in 1957, this time to Valerie Fletcher, to whom he remained married until his death in 1965. He is buried in Westminster Abbey.

Plot Summary

Part One

The action of *Murder in the Cathedral* occurs in and around Canterbury Cathedral; Part One takes place on December 2,1170, the day that Archbishop Thomas Becket returned to England and twenty-seven days before his murder by four knights of King Henry II. When the play begins, a Chorus comprised of the Women of Canterbury huddle outside the cathedral, certain that something is about to happen but unable to articulate any details: "Some presage of an act Which our eyes are compelled to witness, has forced our feet Towards the cathedral." They then describe their lives to the audience and these descriptions mark them as common people who fear any threat of change:"We try to keep our households in order," they explain, but "Some malady is coming upon us." Ultimately, they decide that"For us, the poor, there is no action,But only to wait and witness."

Three Priests enter and briefly discuss a major issue of the play: the differences between temporal (i.e., worldly) and spiritual power The Third Pnest claims that, "King rules or barons rule" and that politicians "have but one law, to seize the power and keep it." The First Priest hopes that the Chorus has not become too jaded and hopes that they will realize that they have a "friend" in "their Father in God." (Clearly, the populace and their religious leaders are living in spiritually trying times.)

A Messenger then arrives and informs them that their archbishop, Thomas Becket, is returning to England after a seven-year absence. Due to a feud with the King, in part over the degree to which the church would assert its power in the British government, Thomas has been exiled to foreign shores and has been seeking support for his ideas in Catholic France. The Priests' reactions to this news varies: The First Priest comments on Thomas's pride, which makes him "fear for the Archbishop" and "fear for the Church"; the Second Priest looks towards his superior's return in the hope that "He will tell us what we are to do, he will give us our orders, instruct us"; the Third Priest dismisses the very act of predicting what will happen, for, as he says, "who knows the end of good or evil?" Instead, he thinks they must simply "let the wheel turn."

The Chorus expresses its terror at the thought of Thomas's return: although they have endured previous hardships, they are unprepared "To stand to the doom of the house, the doom on the Archbishop, the doom on the world." They are merely "small folk drawn into the pattern of fate" and beg the still-absent Thomas to "leave us, leave us, leave sullen Dover and set sail for France." ,

After the Chorus is scolded by the Second Priest for their "croaking like frogs," Thomas enters, calling for "Peace" and telling the Priests that the Women of Canterbury "speak better than they know, and beyond your understanding." He explains how he managed to arnve safely in Canterbury and remarks that "the hungry hawk" may still strike at any

moment. However, he explains that "End will be simple, sudden, God-given" and that "All things prepare the event." His faith in the divine will is thus asserted.

Thomas is then visited by four Tempters, symbolic characters who approach and attempt to lure Thomas away from his devotion to the Church. The First Tempter offers Thomas the glory of his past friendship with the King. The Second Tempter offers political power in the form of Thomas's former position at Court: the Chancellorship. The Third Tempter tells him to "fight for liberty" and end "the tyrannous jurisdiction Of king's court over bishop's court,Of king's court over baron's court." All three Tempters are easily dismissed by Thomas, who asks, "Shall I, who keep the keys Of heaven and hell, supreme alone in England, Who bind and loose, with power from the Pope, Descend to desire a punier power?" Proclaiming that he "has good cause to trust none but God alone," Thomas refutes all of their enticements with assertions of his faith in God's will.

The Fourth Tempter, however, approaches Thomas from a different angle. Advising Thomas to "Fare forward to the end" and"think of glory after death," this Tempter argues that "Saint and Martyr rule from the tomb" and that Thomas should "Think of pilgrims, standing in line Before the glittering jeweled shrine." Allowing himself to be martyred will, the Tempter promises, eventually see his enemies "in timeless torment." Without martyrdom, Thomas will be only a footnote to future scholars who "Will only try to find the historical fact."

Unlike the first three Tempters, whose offerings are easily mocked and spurned by Thomas, this Tempter causes the Archbishop to experience a crisis of conscience: he asks, "Who are you, tempting me with my own desires?" and asserts that the Tempter offers only "Dreams to damnation" since the very act of courting one's fame through martyrdom is an act of "sinful pride."

After a short passage in which the three Priests and Chorus express their paranoia, fear of "a new terror" and the thought of being abandoned by God, Thomas announces his decision to remain in Canterbury. "Now is my way clear, now is the meaning plain," he begins, explaining that"The last temptation is the greatest treason: To do the right thing for the wrong reason." In other words, allowing himself to be martyred is the "right thing" to do— as long as he does not do so for "the wrong reason"—a desire for fame and retribution. Acknowledging to the Priests and Chorus that "What yet remains to show you of my history Will seem to most of you at best futility, Senseless self-slaughter of a lunatic, Arrogant passion of a fanatic," Thomas concludes, "I shall no longer act or suffer, to the sword's end" and invokes his "good angel" to "hover over the swords' points." The Archbishop will allow himself to be martyred only if it is the will of God, for he will not act in order to hasten his own murder. His own pride must not seduce him into presuming that he can know the mind of God.

Interlude

This short scene depicts Thomas preaching in the cathedral on Christmas morning, 1170. In his sermon, Thomas explores the meaning of a number of paradoxes inherent

in the celebration of Christmas, the first being that, since Christ died to redeem the sins of the world, "we celebrate at once the Birth of Our Lord and His Passion and Death upon the Cross." A similar paradox is then explored in the meaning of the word "peace" as Christ used it when he said to his followers, "My peace I leave with you"; after describing the afflicted lives of the disciples (who suffered "torture, imprisonment, disappointment" and "martyrdom") Thomas concludes that Christ's peace is "not as the world gives"—in the form of, for example, an end to war—but as spiritual solace.

His final paradox lies in the nature of martyrdom: "we both rejoice and mourn at the death of martyrs," he explains, for the "sins of the world" have killed an innocent person who will, nonetheless, be "numbered among the Saints in Heaven." Thomas expands upon this idea by asking his listeners to remember that martyrdom "is never the design of man," for "the true martyr is he who has become the instrument of God, who has lost his will in the will of God, and who no longer desires anything for himself, not even the glory of being a martyr " Obviously considering his own possible martyrdom, Thomas's definition both instructs his listeners and allows him to once again consider his possible fate. "I do not think I will ever preach to you again," Thomas remarks in closing, noting that "in a short time you may have another martyr."

Part Two

Four days have passed since Thomas's sermon in the cathedral, but the Chorus is still fearful and awaiting a sign from God in the form of a cleansing Spring. As Part One saw the entrance of the four Tempters, this Part features four Knights, who enter the Archbishop's Hall, telling the three Priests that they have "urgent business" from the King that they must share with Thomas. Impatient and anxious, the Knights bully the Priests until Thomas appears, remarking,"However certain our expectation, The moment foreseen may be unexpected When it arrives." The Knights charge Thomas with being "in revolt against the King" since he"sowed strife abroad" and "reviled The King to the King of France, to the Pope,Raising up against him false opinions."

After they level other charges and demand that he absolve those bishops that he had previously excommunicated, Thomas refuses, explaining, "It is not Becket who pronounces doom,But the Law of Christ's Church." He exits and the Knights follow, leaving the Chorus to describe the odd harbingers of evil that they have recently witnessed in the natural world. Thomas reenters to comfort the Chorus, telling them that "These things had to come and you had to accept them." The Priests, however, refuse such advice and drag Thomas into the cathedral while he protests, "all things Proceed to a joyful consummation."

The scene then shifts inside the cathedral, where the Priests are barring the doors while Thomas insists,' "I will not have the Church of Christ, This sanctuary, turned into a fortress." "The Church will protect her own," he states, but the Priests argue that the Knights are "maddened beasts." Thomas persists, however, and commands the Priests to open the door. The Knights enter ("slightly tipsy" as Eliot notes in the stage direction), searching for"Becket the faithless priest." After refusing to recant any of his former

convictions or renounce any of his former actions, Thomas prays: "Now to Almighty God... I commend my cause and that of the Church." The Knights then begin to kill him, during which the Chorus laments the curse being placed on their land and their lives. After their cry of "Clean the air! clean the sky! wash the wind!" Thomas is finally dead.

It is at this moment that Eliot surprises everyone in the audience by having the four Kmghts directly address them; "We know that you may be disposed to judge unfavorably of our action," the first Knight explains, adding, "Nevertheless, I appeal to your sense of honor. You are Englishmen, and therefore will not judge anybody without hearing both sides of the case." The other three Knights then take turns justifying their actions, stressing the fact that they acted in a "perfectly disinterested" manner and that Thomas was not the "under dog" as he was presented in the play. Ultimately, they ask the audience to"render a verdict of Suicide while of Unsound Mind." When they exit, the Priests discuss the murder's meaning and eventually leave the Chorus to proclaim to God that "the blood of Thy martyrs and saints Shall enrich the earth, shall create the holy places." Finally, they beg forgiveness of God for doubting his "blessing" and petition their new Heavenly patron: "Blessed Thomas, pray for us."

Act 1

Act 1 Summary

The first act opens with a chorus of women from Canterbury lamenting the fact that the disagreements between King Henry II and Archbishop Thomas a Becket have led their Archbishop to seek safety and assistance in France for seven years. "Seven years," they say, "and the summer is over." They carry on about how peasants do best when left alone, since they are unable to influence politics, and are just out to make a living as a farmer, or a merchant. They say that Becket's absence has not been bad for them when left alone, but that they like him because he was always good to them when he was in Canterbury. Still, they hope that he does not come back because they fear for his safety. They then talk about the cold dark winter ahead.

Following the Chorus, three priests also lament the seven-year absence of Archbishop Becket, and repeat the chorus' refrain, "Seven years, and the summer is over." However, the priests concerns are different from those of the peasants. They are interested in the results of the politics going on between Becket and King Henry, and are somewhat more aware of the players. The priests are unhappy because of the intrusion of political concerns into the spiritual leadership of the church, and are upset at the fact that a disagreement between the king and the Archbishop can remove the spiritual leader of England from them.

The priests worry that the political strategizing required to bring the Archbishop home, including endless meetings, and agreements with kings and the Pope is getting in the way of more important spiritual matters, including the leadership of the Catholic Church in England. Here, the priests also note that the politics of human affairs seem never to have an end. Arguments may reach solutions, but in the process, they always breed new arguments over other matters. The meetings are endless, the intrigue violent and dangerous, and nothing ever really comes of it but more meetings, politics, and danger. They are apathetic about the political wrangling between the barons and the king for power in England, and about the disagreements between the bishops and the Archbishop on the role of the Church and its relationship to the crown in England.

A messenger then appears and tells the priests and the chorus that Archbishop Becket has returned to England, and will arrive shortly at Canterbury Cathedral.

The messenger tells the priests when they ask that the Archbishop clearly has the love of the people behind him, but that there is no love lost between he and King Henry. He goes on to say that there is an agreement between Archbishop Becket and King Henry II, but not a real peace or reconciliation. The Archbishop, he says, knows this, and yet is too proud to concede any points to the king, or to compromise his position in any way, so that both sides expect that no reconciliation will be possible in the end. The subject of the Archbishop's pride, both when he was Chancellor, and as Archbishop, comes up numerous times.

The First Priest then worries aloud that the Archbishop is in danger, and says that he should leave England again and return to France for his own safety. The Second Priest, however, rejoices at the return of the Archbishop, and is pleased to know that their leader will help them know what to do from now on. He says that they are "tired of waiting from December to December" and now that their leader is in town, despite the danger to his person, things will become better. Here the Third Priest chimes in and says that whatever will happen will happen, and that no one knows what will come of it, whether present actions are for better or for worse.

The chorus then goes into a long explanation of why they want Becket to go back to France. They fell his presence in England brings danger, not only for himself, but for them. While he was gone, they were able to live their lives without disturbance, and while they didn't get rich, and weren't always happy, they were able, they say, to "live, or partly live," without major disaster because they were left alone. They want Becket to go home so that they are not dragged into the problems between Becket and King Henry. They beg him several times to go home, and are admonished by the priests for saying such things.

Archbishop Becket, the central character of the play, arrives early in the act, telling the priests to let the chorus say what they think. He explains to the priests, who are unhappy that they have had no time to prepare for him, that his sudden arrival was designed to avoid his many enemies. He says that he wrote a letter well before he arrived that gave a different date, and a different place for his return, so as to lure away his enemies, whom he is aware want to kill him, and allow for a safe return, and did not notify the priests at the cathedral for the same reason. He goes on to console the chorus and the priests, and says that now he has made it back to Canterbury Cathedral, he doesn't expect an attack to come immediately. Instead he expects his enemies to circle around like birds of prey and watch for the right moment. "Heavier the interval than the consummation," Becket tells his priests, explaining the arrival of the first of four Tempters who will make Becket dwell upon the likely death to come.

Immediately upon his return, and without any further introduction or dialogue from the priests and the chorus, Becket meets four Tempters in quick succession. Each of these tempers tries to appeal to Becket's own personal weaknesses: his former love of pleasure, a weakness for power and luxury, anger at his former friend the king, and his very real desire for historical fame.

The First Tempter tells Becket that he should consider making up with King Henry, and taking life less seriously. The First Tempter reminds him of the days in the past that he spent enjoying the pleasures of life and power. The temptation includes reminders of the things he once did as Henry's friend, and then as the king's Chancellor, when he exercised secular power. He is offered a life of ease, the companionship of women, the end of his solitude with friends surrounding him. The Tempter tells Becket that "Friendship should be more than biting time can sever," and hopes that Becket will join him and the king for a return to good times.

Becket dismisses this First Tempter easily, saying that his carefree days are gone, and cannot be reclaimed. The First tempter ends his visit by saying that Becket is too proud, and takes his leave saying, "I leave you to the pleasure of your higher vices/Which will have to be paid for at higher prices." Becket, though, has chosen his road.

The Second Tempter offers Becket power. He reminds Becket how powerful he was as Chancellor, and says that many would like to see him in that position again. It is not too late, he tells the Archbishop, to follow Henry's plan and unite the offices of Archbishop and Chancellor, and helping the king to further unite England and deepen the legal and social authority of the crown. When Becket asks him how this can be gained, the Second Tempter reminds him that he will have to submit to King Henry.

Becket rejects this temptation. "No!" Says Becket, "shall I who keep the keys/ of heaven and hell, supreme alone in England,/ who bind and loose with power from the Pope, / descend to desire a punier power?" Becket works for a higher authority in God and the Catholic Church, and to accept power under Henry II would be to subordinate God to the King, an idea that he finds unthinkable.

The Third Tempter comes from the barons, and invites Becket to join in the fight against royal privilege to help the barons regain lost power from the crown. The argument he uses is complex and subtle. He first tells Becket that it would be much easier for him to join the barons, who were his adversaries when he was Chancellor, than it would be to go back to a position under the king, whom he had betrayed when he resigned the Chancellorship. To go to the side of the barons would also improve Becket's chances, he says, of convincing the bishops to come back to the fold – solving a major political problem within the English Church.

Becket, however, eventually dismisses this temptation as well, refusing to betray the king, and saying that that assisting the barons would again be subordinating the spiritual power to the secular power.

The greatest temptation that Becket faces, though, is the offer of the Fourth Tempter, who coaxes him with his greatest hopes, and, as the Tempter puts it, with his own thoughts. He tries to convince Becket that the greatest thing he can do in his difficult position is to use it to make himself a martyr – to, in effect, engineer his own death as a means to extend his fame, and especially his power – into generations beyond his own. Fame through death is the greatest temptation for Becket.

Becket is in a quandary, unable to decide what to do, because both ways – that of survival, and that of death, seem to lead to damnation for him. Eventually, Becket decides that, just as he cannot try to escape death by accepting the temptations of the first three tempters, he must not search for the opportunity to become a martyr. To search for fame through martyrdom would be doing "the right thing for the wrong reason" and so would be even worse than falling to the other temptations he has been presented with.

At the end of the act, each of the major characters presents the tension of the act as it has unfolded. The Four Tempters together characterize human life as a cheat and a lie, saying that as we go through life we accumulate achievements, working hard toward goals and for values that we have defined as important, only to become self-important about trivial things in the end. The Three Priests try to persuade Becket to give in to the first three tempters, and do his best to survive by compromising. The Chorus sides with the priests and the tempters as well, telling Becket that they have known awful hardship, but always had some reason to hope. Now, they say, Becket has to compromise, to survive, in order for hope to continue. If he chooses death, then, they fear, God is abandoning them. They refer to demons curling around the Archbishop's feet, but this is clearly a reference to his decisions, not to the king or the tempters.

Act 1 Analysis

This first act is full of references to Becket's pride, and it is clear that while T.S. Eliot has some sympathy with Becket's positions and religious ideals, he sees the inability to compromise as the chief problem. From the very beginning of the play, Becket's pride is a key theme. Early in Act I, the First Priest refers to the King and Becket as "two proud men." The Third Priest says that the disagreement between the King and the Archbishop is impossible. He asks, "what peace can be found / To grow between the hammer and the anvil?" and the Second Priest asks the Messenger if Becket comes "In full assurance, or only secure / In the power of Rome, the spiritual rule, / the assurance of right, and the love of the people," suggesting that such is not enough to end the conflict. Real compromise between the king and Becket is what is needed here, and in the play, Becket is seen as the one most unwilling to compromise.

Becket's pride and unwillingness to compromise is the point of the section with the Four Tempters. They end their speeches with a choral speech in which they say that human life is really just a set of meaningless actions, and yet the problem – what they call a "cheat" is that people take pride in their actions and achievements, however little they may mean in reality, and that pride is what makes compromise more and more impossible.

This idea is reflected by the Chorus of Canterbury Women, as well. In every one of their speeches, they reflect on the essential virtue, as T.S. Eliot apparently saw it, of the lower social classes. The key here is that they have no pride. They say that they have seen some terrible things – "several girls have disappeared" and some not so terrible. They see a more terrible fate in the return of Becket. Becket's pride may bring his undoing, but it also forces them to take a stand on his principles, when they would rather, as they have done in the past seven years, succeed "in avoiding notice," and get on with their lives. Becket's pride draws everyone into the conflict. The Canterbury women, then, who see compromise as the only really useful value, as it allows survival, hope, and continuation, side with the first three tempters and ask Becket to leave for France once again, because his survival, and compromise with the conflict, will allow for hope, and possibly is return in the future with less stark possibilities.

The Three Priests of the Cathedral also agree with the first three tempters, and urge Becket to find a way to compromise with the king and assure his own survival. Near the end of Act 1, they are urging Becket to go back to France, to live to fight (or better yet compromise) another day. His pride has created a situation which is dangerous, as they see it, to the Church as a whole, and not only to Becket or his principles.

The Fourth Tempter, whose ideas are the most attractive to Becket, makes this argument as well, though from a different point of view, when he suggests that as a martyr, Becket will have the fame that he so desires.

In Thomas' own mind, as the Fourth tempter continues to assert (and Becket does not deny) is what Becket sees as real power and real fame: the ability to assert his principles for an eternity, even after mortal death. By sticking to his principles and not compromising, by holding on to his pride even to the detriment of his own corporeal life, and the well-being of those living around him, he will have a power and fame beyond that of even King Henry. Becket will win the argument, ultimately, in this way. Yet, he also realizes that this sin of Pride could be his undoing. "The last temptation (to try to become a martyr) is the greatest treason: / to do the right thing for the wrong reason." Pride leading to martyrdom is not possible. One who destroys himself out of pride, even though ostensibly in the name of God, is really committing suicide – pursuing death in his own name, and thus blaspheming, making the death not martyrdom at all. Becket resolves not to act, but to accept the role God has given him. Still, from the point of view of the Priests and the chorus, not to act, not to pursue resolution with the king, or to flee to France, is in fact pursuing his own death, because his murder seems inevitable.

The Chorus gives the ultimate advice in this Act, saying to Becket near its end, "Oh Thomas Archbishop, save us, save us, save yourself / That we may be saved; / Destroy yourself and we are destroyed."

Becket appears to understand that he is battling with the sin of Pride, and yet, he has a difficult time deciding whether it is pride, or a need to follow God's path, that has set him on the course of no compromise he seems to have chosen. In his last speech, he says, " I know what yet remains to show you of my history / Will seem to most of you at best futility, / Senseless self-slaughter of a lunatic, / Arrogant passion of a fanatic." But, he claims, all of us must be punished for our sins, and since all will be punished, if his act of pride is also helpful to the Church and to God, though he be punished for it, and it cause others to suffer as well, it is still valuable. Yet, he claims, he will no longer act. He will, instead, allow God to determine his fate. "Now my good Angel, whom God appoints / to be my guardian," he says, "hover over the swords' points."

Another theme in Murder in the Cathedral is the conflict between the spiritual and the secular. In Act 1, this conflict is played out eventually in the speeches of the Tempters, the Chorus, and the Priests who all encourage the Archbishop, for survival, to subordinate the spiritual power to the secular, or temporal, power of the king. This is Becket's chief problem, since it is his conviction that the reverse should be true: namely that the king and other temporal powers should bow down before the spiritual power – the Archbishop, the Pope, and the Church who act in the name of God.

The first example of this conflict appears with the first lines of the Three Priests. "I see nothing quite conclusive in the art of temporal government / But violence, duplicity and frequent malversation," says the Third Priest. The First Priest adds, "Shall these things not end / Until the poor at the gate / Have forgotten their friend, their Father in God, have forgotten / That they had a friend?" Clearly here the secular, in the form of temporal government, is being opposed to the caring spiritual Kingdom of God.

Throughout the first act, Becket is faced with the challenge of defining his loyalties. As mentioned above, his struggle with the sin of Pride is one part of the problem he has with the temporal authorities and believes that refusing to give in to the king is the only way to maintain the authority of the Church.

Becket cannot accept the compromise of the values of Catholicism, nor the erosion of the power of the Church, and refuses to put the church in the service of the king, believing instead that the king should be in the service of God, which is embodied by the church. This is clear in his response to the Second Tempter, who asks him to accept his former position as Chancellor. "Those who put their faith in worldly order / Not controlled by the order of God, / In confident ignorance, but arrest disorder / Make it fast, breed fatal disease, / Degrade what they exalt." In other words, the secular power is useless without God and the morality that is the province of the spiritual.

T.S. Eliot does not blame only the Church, or Becket's pride for this conflict. It is also the fault of the quest for absolute power of the secular authority. As the Third Tempter tells Becket, "Kings will allow no power but their own / Church and people have good cause against the throne." The temporal power seeks to control all, even the representatives of God. So Becket is shown by the Third Tempter to be to a degree correct in his assumption that to negotiate with the king would also be to give away the power of the Church. This he simply cannot do – or even imagine. He sees himself as the servant of God, and though he is loyal to the king in secular matters, when it comes to the spiritual, he considers the Church, the Pope, and himself above the secular ruler: "Delegate to deal the doom of damnation, / to condemn kings, not serve among their servants, / Is my open office." Becket sees a clear separation of powers here, where the Church is the supreme leader of society, and God its ultimate goal. King Henry II sees the opposite – a temporal ruler who brings order to society, and uses religion and the church as one of his tools. This disagreement is intractable, and is the reason why Becket cannot find a way out of his dilemma save to subordinate the spiritual power to the secular, or die trying to maintain the superiority of the Church.

The play is very much in the vein of medieval mystery and morality plays, and so is appropriate to the time which it seeks to depict. Characters, with the exception of Archbishop Becket, are all nameless and two-dimensional. Their dialogue serves only to illuminate and deepen the predicament in which Becket finds himself. Again appropriate to the mystery play style, it also deals with the idea that morality and power are frequently incompatible. Becket is tempted by pleasure, power and fame, and finds none of them acceptable in the context of his moral values and the goal he has set himself of furthering the aims of the Catholic Church.

The characters that appear in Act 1 are all two-dimensional archetypes whose purpose is to create the scene within which Becket displays his dilemma and articulate his thoughts about it. The Chorus of Canterbury Women is a group from which no individual characters emerge. When they speak, they speak in a monolithic voice, as if all of the residents of Canterbury are of the same opinion. This emphasizes their representative role – they are the poor and powerless class who are purely observers of politics, although the politics of king and Archbishop affect them immensely. Speaking as one they make it clear that they don't have any political ambitions, and would be glad to get on with their lives without interference from kings or barons, and with the Archbishop's return, they fear that such interference is soon to come.

The priests are similarly disenfranchised, but they have opinions on the relationship between the spiritual and secular realms, and because of their opinions and their position within the church take a certain stand. Still, all of the priests are shown as thinking basically the same thing. They are three voices that speak one part. Still, they speak differently from the Chorus, in that they tend to speak in turn, and to finish each others thoughts – not as if they were reading each others' minds, but as if they share the same mind. A wonderful example of this kind of speech is the section in Act I in which they question the messenger. First Priest: "What, is the exile ended, is our Lord Archbishop / Reunited with the King? What reconciliation / of two proud men?" Third Priest: "What peace can be found / To grow between the hammer and the anvil?" Second Priest: "Are the old disputes at an end, is the wall of pride cast down / That divided them? Is it peace or war?" The three read together sound like the speech of a single person. These three characters, then, serve only to push the plot forward as characters that have a natural sympathy for Becket.

The Four tempters are not a unified group. They do not, however, have individual personalities, either. Each is a person from Becket's past, but not one so well known that he complicates the feelings of the Archbishop. Where some history is necessary, such as in the argument of the first tempter, in which he tries to make Becket recall happier days to remind him of the powerful pull of pleasure. The memory is important to the temptation, but the character's identity is not, because the object of the temptation, and the subject of the memory, is Becket himself. All serves to focus attention on the thoughts and problems that Becket faces. The same is true of the other three tempters. They are there to make Becket, and the audience, focus on his desires and problems, rather than to create new interests or twists in the plot. In fact, their very lack of dimension serves to emphasize the inevitability of the plot.

Secondly, the fact that the play deals directly with the problem of morality, temptation, and power also makes it an analog for medieval morality plays. The primary discussion that Becket has with the tempters and with himself concerns the dilemma he faces. As he puts it after talking to the Fourth Tempter, "Is there no way, in my soul's sickness, / Does not lead to damnation in pride . . .Can I neither act nor suffer without perdition?" Becket has come to a Gordian knot in the Christian faith. Occasionally to do what is right involves causing pain or suffering to others, or to oneself in ways that are at least nominally unacceptable to God. In such a situation, how does one make the correct choice? The medieval morality play will require the protagonist to follow the law of God,

regardless of the immediate outcome. Becket, with the modern sensibility given him by Eliot, cannot so easily make that choice. Act 1 already shows the play to be a morality play turned on its head.

With its characterization, and the pivot set at a moral impasse, this play is very carefully crafted to resemble a morality play. However, its production in the 1930's, and theme, obvious from the end of Act I, as that of the necessity to subordinate legitimate religious authority to the secular authority of society, this morality play is turned upside down.

Interlude

Interlude Summary

In this prose interlude, Archbishop Thomas Becket, gives a brief sermon in which he claims that the gifts of God are not the same kind of gifts, or even the result of the same kind of giving, as those given by people in the temporal world. Instead, he claims, the gifts given by heaven are real, eternal, unequivocal, and most important, preordained. He says carefully that if one wishes, for example, to be a martyr, one cannot just choose to be so. Instead, if one is chosen to be a martyr, the gift of martyrdom will find you. If you seek it out, and even if you eventually are successful in engineering your own death in the name of God, you will not have become a martyr. Instead, martyrdom can only come to those who don't actually seek it, as with all other heavenly gifts.

Interlude Analysis

T.S. Eliot has turned the Christmas Day sermon into a prose apology for Becket's choice of martyrdom over any of his other options. The conspicuous absence of a desire not to be a martyr is the point here. Becket cannot avoid the fact that his ambition is to be martyred for the Church, and for God. He sees the other martyrs he discusses in the sermon as having been chosen by God, and he clearly wishes for his own martyrdom as a sign of his having been chosen as well. Yet, he has already, in Act 1, made it clear that to pursue martyrdom is to be unable to achieve it. It must be chosen for one by God, not the product of ambition. In Act 1, Becket resolved to neither act, nor suffer. In other words, he consigned his future to God. Nevertheless, the sermon makes it clear that he is unable to completely expunge his ambition. Becket's, and humanity's, essential pride, are highlighted here, as much as in any discussion in the play of the arrogance of the temporal authorities (the barons and King Henry II). So rather than resolve anything, the Christmas Day Sermon reopens the question of Becket's motives, and perhaps adds strength to the pleas of the Chorus, the Priests, and the Tempters in Act 1, who ask him not to sacrifice himself, but to accept the secular power of the king. However, this is Humility talking to Pride, and is not well received.

For Becket, Human weakness exists in the clergy as much as in the laity. To return to the theme of the spiritual versus the secular, this sermon shows that the world is itself essentially temporal, and so neither the spiritual nor the secular is superior here. Instead, the spiritual is inescapably secular in the hands of mortal human beings, just as the secular is inescapably spiritual because of the mortality and innate spirituality of humans.

Act 2

Act 2 Summary

The second act of the play begins with the Priests narrating each holy day following Christmas. The day after Christmas is the Day of St. Stephen, the first martyr. The next day is the Day of St. John the Apostle. The day following that is the Day of the Holy Innocents. The priests note the events of each day, and seem to linger on the fact that Becket has always specially honored St. Stephen's day, and that at one point following Christmas, the Archbishop knelt in prayer that asked God not to visit the penalty for a specific sin on "them" – perhaps a reference to a sin of his own.

Finally on the fourth day after Christmas, four knights arrive who are determined to meet with the Archbishop. The Priests offer them the Hospitality of Archbishop Becket before they talk business, including places at the Archbishop's table for dinner, but they rudely reject the invitation, saying they have traveled all night on the King's business, and insist on meeting Becket immediately.

Becket insists that if the knights have accusations to make, they make them in public, so that he can refute them in public. The knights, however, insist on talking with him in private, and when they get their wish, they abuse Becket, saying, "You are the Archbishop in revolt against the King; in rebellion to the King and the law of the land." They go further, asserting that as Archbishop, and so nominated by the King, Becket is the King's servant. They insult him by bringing up his less than noble ancestry.

Becket protests his innocence, saying, "this is not true. / Both before and after I received the ring / I have been a loyal subject to the King."

Refusing to accept any of his explanations of his actions as Archbishop, the knights accuse Becket of being a traitor to the king, and will not change their opinions. Becket, in a tone that warns of casting the first stone, warns the knights not to do anything rash that might jeopardize their "new coat of loyalty."

The knights, however, disregard Becket's warning, and continue to make specific accusations, taking the side of the King. They claim that the King has been generous, allowing Becket back into England, providing everything he asked for in the negotiations, and that Becket ungratefully repaid the King's gestures of peace by betraying him again, denying the crown to the King's chose heir by suspending the bishops who had confirmed the boy. Clearly, they are angry that Becket continues to place his own spiritual authority over the temporal authority of the King.

Becket claims he had no desire to defy the King in his actions, and claims that he does not understand why the King would try to strip him of his authority in the Catholic Church in England, and make him essentially a powerless incumbent.

Eventually, the knights become so abusive, clearly intending to kill Becket then and there (Second Knight: "Enough of words." All Four Knights: "We come for the King's justice, we come with swords"), that the priests intercede.

The tension mounts as the Chorus of Canterbury women claim they can now smell the would-be killers, and liken the knights to animals in a myriad of ways. They bemoan what they are sure will be Becket's death, and dark times in England. They claim to feel the foreboding in their bowels, and liken it to tapeworms. In the end, though, the Chorus recognizes that with the presence of the knights in Canterbury, there is no more chance to prevent what will happen, and yet God's purpose is not yet clear. So they resign themselves to whatever course God has chosen for the Archbishop and themselves.

Finally, in the Cathedral, the priests try to get Becket to retreat as far into the interior as possible, but Becket claims a sense of destiny. As the knights approach, the priests, hearing them coming, and continue to try to convince Becket to run. They ask him to consider what will happen to them, but Becket refuses to go. The priests literally drag Becket into the Cathedral as vespers begins.

The Chorus chimes in here, and once again talks about their certainty of Becket's death, but here their discussion is full of imagery of a suicide, as if the death of Becket will not create a Saint, but a void, and where the saint might intercede for them with God when necessary, the suicide will be lost in the void. The Chorus is clearly not happy with Becket's choice.

Finally, the priests insist on locking the doors of the Cathedral against attack, but Becket refuses. Becket's reasoning is that the Church has already defeated evil, and there is no need to hide from mere death.

The door is unbarred, and the four knights rush in, drunk, shouting demands and abuse: "Absolve all those you have excommunicated . . . Renew the obedience you have violated." Becket throws the word traitor back at the knights, claiming they are traitors against God, and as Becket defends himself, his loyalty to the king, and his faith, the knights fall upon him and kill him.

The chorus then discusses the fact that the killing of the Archbishop sullies the entire world, creating a dark day that is not bounded by sleep, work, or any temporal reality, but instead transcends life and time itself, creating a collecting stain on humanity as a whole. The knights, they claim, can run, but they can never escape the horrible act they have committed against a man, humanity, and God.

The knights, after committing the murder, move forward and try to explain themselves. The first, Reginald Fitz Urse becomes their spokesman, and while he makes no argument himself, he appeals to the audience's sense of fairness, and asks that they hear out the knights' reasons before passing judgment. He then introduces each of the other three, who give a different set of reasons for committing the act they have. Each of these, curiously, returns to the name of the first knight, Reginald Fitz Urse, as their

leader, emphasizing again and again his name and its connection with the act they have just committed.

The Third Knight, William de Traci, argues that the four knights did not have anything personally to gain from the act of murdering the Archbishop. On the contrary, he says, he liked the Archbishop tremendously, and committed the murder only out of loyalty to the King, and duty to England, because the Archbishop was in the way and had to be removed. He also asks forgiveness for their drunkenness, saying that, as they liked the man, and respected his position, the need to get drunk was obvious. He asks for the audience's sympathy by noting that, gaining nothing personally, the knights would now have to leave England, the King would have to disavow their act, and they would live forever on the run.

The Second Knight, Hugh de Morville, argues that while the goals of King Henry II have been consistent throughout his rule, Becket, who helped Henry rule, unite England, and bring some social justice to the law, betrayed the king and England when he refused to join the offices of Chancellor and Archbishop. To have done this would, he said, have been immensely helpful to English society, and thus to resign the Chancellorship and took the position of the Church when he became Archbishop. This caused policy conflicts between the King and the Archbishop and so, though he liked the Archbishop immensely, he also knew that the Archbishop had to be got rid of. He clearly favors the subordination of the Church to the needs of society.

The Fourth Knight argues the point that Becket himself had to consider when he was tempted by the Fourth Tempter – that is, that in his desire to gain power through martyrdom, he became, in a sense, self-destructive. He accuses Becket of committing suicide for self-aggrandizing ends, and so not really being a martyr, or even a man of God, at all.

The play ends as the priests, then the Chorus, bemoan the death of Thomas Becket, and invoke Becket-the-saint to pray for and protect them in the difficult and evil times ahead.

Act 2 Analysis

The primary theme in the second act of the play is the question as to who will really be the beneficiary in the death of Becket. It is unclear whether he has actually sought to become a martyr, or was chosen for the privilege by God (a problem that was key in Part I, and in the Interlude). However, that problem question is irrelevant after Becket's death. The key question is what, and whose, interest has best been served.

In the first act, the argument for secular primacy over the church is clear by the time that Becket decides to let God's Will decide his fate. By the end of the second act, it is not clear that the murder carried out by the knights is, in fact, the will of God, nor that Becket has given up his ambition to be martyred. Not only Becket perceives a conundrum here. The Chorus cannot see at this point a way out of the murder, but is

also is convinced that Becket, despite his good words, continues to seek martyrdom – continues to act in his own best interest while ignoring the best interests of the Church itself and those connected with him. Becket's choice is not pragmatic, but a decision from a moral high ground from which he can barely see the real and important needs of the people of Canterbury and his priests. Both of these groups require leadership, pragmatic attention to their economic and social well-being, careful administration of the law, which Becket did well when he was Chancellor, and as Archbishop in Canterbury. Becket has now chosen the higher road, which, as the First Tempter says in Act 1, and "higher vices, which must be paid for at higher prices." The price, not perceived by the Priests or the chorus as reasonable at all, is the removal of a great power for social good in a world full of social wrongs, in the name of petty upper class politics.

This is not the only place where Becket's high spiritual sacrifice and the more pragmatic choice clash. If it were, Becket's own argument that though the present will suffer, over time a greater good will come from his death would make some sense. By the end of the play, neither the murderers' arguments, nor the prayers of Becket the martyr seem to hold much hope that anything real and lasting has been gained by his act. This seems to be emphasized by the attempts of the three knights who have murdered Becket to justify their actions to the audience, who now sits in judgment of both sides. The arguments of the knights, though, very much reiterate the themes of the play up to this point.

The Third Knight claims that the killing was a selfless act. He lets the audience know (and the other knights echo his point) that he seems himself, ironically, as a kind of martyr as well. He tells us that "King Henry, God bless him, will have to say, for reasons of state, that he never meant this to happen," and that the knights themselves, in committing the murder, have not personally gained, but lost from the act. Yet in their minds it still was the right thing to do, because it gets Becket out of the way of a state whose power and ability to create social justice in the temporal world is on the rise. They have sacrificed themselves for the temporal ruler, just as Becket has sacrificed himself for the spiritual ruler. Yet, the sacrifice of the knights, however much they are reviled, is shown as at once more humane (they do not, in fact, lose their lives, though they must constantly be on the run) and more forgettable. Because of this, they can be set in contrast to Becket, as there is no way to construe the knights' act as self-serving. Their martyrdom, those less burdensome, is also more pure because of the fact that they have no fame, no influence beyond the act itself, and thus cannot have sacrificed themselves out of pride, but only out of service.

The Second Knight's point is as important as that of the first, and again echoes a major theme through the rest of the play: the conflict between the spiritual and the secular, and the corresponding tension between their goals and methods. The second knight claims that the King has never been interested in creating discord, but has consistently been trying "to restore order: to curb the excessive powers of local government, which were usually exercised for selfish and often seditious ends," after the death of the usurper King Stephen. Like Becket, then, King Henry's goal is to restore order (although a temporal order in this case) and bring law and prosperity back to and England driven by discord and chaos. The Second Knight's alleges that as soon as Becket was made

Archbishop, he became a selfish and seditious lord, just like the local governments that King Henry has been trying to get under control.

Becket throughout the play has argued that he was not seditious at all, but simply following the higher loyalty to God, while being loyal to the King in every way possible. Becket recognizes that there is a realm in which the secular cannot rule. The King, and the knights who serve him, see only the secular government of the Archbishop. "Restore the powers you have arrogated . . . Renew the obedience you have violated," they demand. Thus, in carrying out matters of spiritual governance, Becket sees himself purely within his jurisdiction, while King Henry and the knights see him as setting up roadblocks to their own mission of creating order – an order that they believe will be socially just, and in line with Christian ideals. Thus, they feel that Becket should support their goals (and he does) while Becket sees a higher responsibility which forces him to act even when it is contrary to the good of secular society.

The Third Knight, at the end, brings us back to the theme of whether Becket is acting out of pride and self-interest, rather than out of a sense of what is good for the Christians under his care. He in fact goes so far in the beginning of his speech as to question "Who killed the Archbishop?" and makes the concealed claim that it was not the knights, though they rammed the blades home, but Becket himself, through his intransigence. He then goes on to suggest that the Archbishop sought out his own death, and that this amounts to suicide, not to martyrdom: "from his conduct, step by step, there can be no inference except that he had determined upon a death by martyrdom." The knight asks the audience to "render a verdict of Suicide while of Unsound Mind." In this, he says, he is trying to be charitable, but it does open up the question again, as to the motives of Becket in his own death.

The Third Knight is correct when he says that the Archbishop could have not ordered the doors to the church unbarred, and waited out the anger of the knights (and by extension, of Henry II, though his intentions are not described at all in this play). In refusing to do so, Becket hastened his own death – and may even have caused it. He did act, even though in the end of Act 1 he had promised neither to act nor to suffer. By ordering his priests to unbar the door to the Cathedral, Becket certainly was a major factor in his own death. Did he succeed in having God choose, or is everything that happens to us our own choice, consciously or not? In bending to God's will, are we really just creating a refuge from responsibility? If that is the case, is it better to recognize our temporal nature – the fact that we are mortal beings, on this earth, and separated from God by that fact? To subordinate the spiritual to the temporal in this case might have avoided not only a murder, but many of the wrenching problems and questions that went with it, and affected many others beyond the primary actors.

The murder of the Archbishop also brings back into question the ultimate argument of the Church for its position of primacy in the ordering of human affairs, since in the end, the temporal authority was able to remove the roadblocks set in its way by the Church. The Second Knight makes this point when he says to the audience, "But, if you have now arrived at a just subordination of the pretensions of the Church to the welfare of the

State, remember that it is we who took the first step." Here is the taming of the spiritual by the temporal.

Therefore, Becket's martyrdom has an ironic effect, too. His death actually makes it clear that despite the sin involved, ultimately in the temporal world, kings and governments with armies, police forces, laws, and a monopoly on temporal, human means of keeping order have the advantage. Regardless of the righteousness of the spiritual argument, if the temporal power is willing to go to the extremes, it can eliminate the spiritual roadblocks put in its way by Church and archbishop. In a sense, this story is that of an anti-miracle, because what is unclear here is the position of the primary religious character. Becket's convictions that he is right, and his moral arguments, are sound, but his ambition to become a martyr makes it unclear whether he is really acting on his moral convictions, or on his pride. In the play, God never makes it clear. No miraculous intercession occurs, and no angel or other spiritual spokesperson appears to confirm Becket's righteousness. Instead, we are left to wonder. Meanwhile, the king, guilty or not of murder, has removed the roadblock that stood in the way of his unifying and centralizing England – creating a temporal order.

This does not mean, to Eliot, that the church is corrupt or irrelevant. Rather, it means that all humans are ultimately of the temporal realm, and so in this world, the temporal power is the ultimate power, providing that a miraculous intercession does not occur. Since in this play it does not, Eliot's point is that the battle between secular/temporal government and spiritual leadership is futile. Ultimately, the temporal will prevail on earth. The Chorus, near the end of the play, after praising God and giving thanks for Becket and his sacrifice, also begs for forgiveness.

Humans will react to human actions, temporal provocations and injustices, but are unable to find the strength to move in the name of God. Put God, the Church, under government, however, and you can have a powerful tool for social justice – and one that can potentially prevent the damage that the conflicts between the spiritual and the secular, pride and the will of God, temptation and holiness can lead to.

Finally, does the power of the Church, and of the spiritual as a whole, lie only in the death of individuals? In Becket's final speech, he tells the knights, "I am a priest, / A Christian, saved by the blood of Christ, / Ready to suffer with my blood. / This is the sign of the Church always, / The sign of blood. Blood for blood. / His blood given to buy my life, / my blood given to pay for His death, / My death for His death." Becket, so concerned with making his point by death, through martyrdom, still fails to heed the arguments of the Chorus and the Priests in the first act: that by dying, he is wasting the possibilities of the future by dying in the name of his beliefs.

The key question, which is not really answered by Eliot in the play, is whether or not to be effective, the spiritual leader must rely on death – the death of others or his own death. Becket clearly believes it to be so, but the Chorus, and the Priests, seem to think that to live until another day opens up possibilities that may not be obvious immediately. Over time, things change. It is this endless negotiating, that, as the Priests note at the very beginning of the play, characterizes temporal government, rather than the sense of

ultimate truth and final solutions that characterizes spiritual ideologies, that make possible changes and improvements in the temporal world.

Of course, the question remains unsettled in the theological and philosophical sense of the ultimate ends of human actions. Becket's belief is that, next to the goals of God and the Church, his own life is really a very small sacrifice. Thus his martyrdom sets the ethical bar very high, and lays down a challenge for the temporal authorities as they work for the "welfare of the State," (as was happening increasingly in the England of 1935. The morality underlying political actions will remain a critical factor in judging their ultimate benefit to human kind.

T.S. Eliot has here, then, effectively reversed the order of authority in European political and theological tradition. For Eliot, the death of Becket rings in the "just subordination of the. . .Church to the welfare of the State," a theme that was critical in Eliot's own time. The play was written and first produced in 1935, as the Nazis were beginning their rise to power in Germany, and as Mussolini's Italy was regarded as the most powerful state in Europe. Nations were the order of the day, and the question was whether the Fascist version of the nation-state, which subordinated all human activity to the good of the nation, or the democratic nation-state, which organized people in national structures designed to serve the interests of the members of the state. The question in 1935, as it is in Eliot's morality play about 1170, is the role in which morals play in the power structure of the state.

Characters

Thomas Becket

Thomas Becket is the Archbishop of Canterbury and hero of the play. When the play opens, the viewer learns that he has not been in England for the last seven years because of a power struggle with King Henry n, who wants the church to serve the state. His return from France provokes a variety of reactions from the Chorus, the Priests, and the four Knights who serve the King; as the play progresses, Thomas responds to a number of these reactions with the calm, measured voice of one who believes "there is higher than I or the King."

Although he is repeatedly tempted away from his desire to lead his people and threatened with death by the four Knights, Thomas becomes convinced that only "The fool, fixed in his folly, may think He can turn the wheel on which he turns" and places the question of whether or not he will be martyred into the hands of God He accepts his martyrdom as part of a larger pattern that he, with his human limitations, cannot fully understand.

Richard Brito (Fourth Knight)

See The Four Knights

Chorus

Similar to those found in ancient Greek drama, the Chorus in *Murder in the Cathedral* serves as a mediator between the play and the audience. Composed of women of Canterbury, this group originally fears the unknown act that their "eyes are compelled to witness" and begs Thomas to return to France; they have accepted their common and often miserable lives (where"King rules or barons rule") and do not wish to "stand on the doom" of then-church. At the play's conclusion, however, they have been enlightened to the fact that there is a higher power at work in the world other than that found in politics and they sing praises to the wisdom of God: "We thank thee for Thy mercies of blood, for Thy redemption by blood," they proclaim, for "the blood of Thy martyrs and saints shall enrich the earth, shall create holy places."

Sir Hugh de Morville (Second Knight)

See The Four Knights

Baron William de Trad (Third Knight)

See The Four Knights

The Four Knights

Sent by King Henry to kill Thomas, the Four Knights parallel the Four Tempters of Part One. While the Tempters offer intellectual and spiritual trickery, the Knights threaten Thomas with physical violence, ultimately following through on their threat when they kill him near the end of the play. When they arrive at the cathedral and demand that Thomas acquiesce to the King's demands, he refuses. They murder him and then "present their case" to the audience in the form of a mock inquest in which they assert their blamelessness in the entire affair. Although their names are mentioned during their speeches to the audience, the Knights are not as different from each other as are the Three Priests.

The Four Tempters

During Part One, Thomas is visited by four Tempters who promise him a number of rewards in return for recanting his former judgments against the King and his minions. The First Tempter tells him that "Friendship is more than biting Time can sever" and asks Thomas to befriend the King (as he did once before) so that there will be"Fluting in the meadow" and "Singing at nightfall." The Second Tempter suggests that Thomas should reclaim the Chancellorship (from which he resigned after his feud with King Henry); doing so would, the Tempter assures him, let Thomas "set down the great" and "protect the poor." The Third Tempter, dubbing himself "A country-keeping Lord who minds his own business," attempts to seduce Thomas into representing the barons at court in order to "fight a good stroke At once, for England and for Rome, Ending the tyrannous jurisdiction" of Henry's reign.

All three Tempters are easily deflated by Thomas, who is unaffected by their empty promises: "Shall I," he asks, "who ruled like an eagle over doves, Now take the shape of a wolf among wolves?" The Fourth Tempter, however, is more difficult for Thomas to dismiss, since he tempts him with his "own desires" of becoming a saint and martyred leader of his people. Eventually, the Fourth Tempter teaches Thomas about the degree to which his own pride stands between him and the will of God.

The Messenger

The Messenger arrives in Part One to announce to the Priests that Thomas is returning to Canterbury. He peppers his news with his own thoughts on Thomas, remarking that "He is at one with the Pope" and that his new"peace" with the King is, at best, a "patched-up affair."

The Three Priests

As a unit, the three Priests provide a context for Thomas's religious speculations and offer the audience different opinions of him before he enters the play. Throughout *Murder in the Cathedral,* the Priests express their desire to help Thomas guide his people and remain safely in Canterbury. Although they may seem interchangeable by virtue of their names ("First Priest," "Second Priest," and "Third Priest"), they are distinguished at times by Eliot according to the way in which they approach the danger of Thomas's return. The First Priest, for example, is uneasy and remarks, "I fear for the Archbishop, I fear for the Church," before concluding that Thomas's troubles began when he wished for "subjection to God alone."

The Second Priest, less world-weary than the First, voices the hope that Thomas will dispel"dismay and doubt," for"He will tell us what we are to do, he will give us our orders, instruct us." The Third Priest expresses neither the doubts of the First nor the optimism of the Second; his only certainty is that fate will unwind as it must: "For good or ill, let the wheel turn," he remarks, "For who knows the end of good or evil?" These differences, however, fade in Part Two, when the Priests act as a group in order to convince Thomas to flee the cathedral.

Reginald Fitz Urse (First Knight)

See The Four Knights

Themes

Flesh vs. Spirit

Throughout *Murder in the Cathedral,* Thomas is warned about the danger of his remaining in Canterbury and the threat of danger from his enemies, who seek to please King Henry by murdering him. Before he enters, the Chorus begs,"0 Thomas return, Archbishop; return, return to France," for he comes "bringing death into Canterbury"; when he does arrive, Thomas tells them and the three Priests that none should fear his possible death, for "the hungry hawk Will only soar and hover" until there is an "End" that will be "simple, sudden, God-given." The very fact of his return suggests Thomas's refusal to fear death and belief that God will decide whether he will live or die: as he tells the Priests, "All things prepare the event."

Thomas's disregard for earthly pleasures and power is heightened during his conversations with the first three Tempters. When the First Tempter offers him "wit and wine and wisdom" if he will only "Be easy" in his condemnation of King Henry, Thomas calls his temptations a mere "springtime fancy" belonging to "seasons of the past." When the next Tempter urges him to take up again the Chancellorship and "guide the state again," Thomas argues that "what was once exaltation Would now only mean descent" to a "punier power," since, as an Archbishop, he is able to "keep the keys Of heaven and hell." "To condemn kings, not serve among their servants," he explains, is his "open office."

Clearly, Thomas is not interested in any form of temporal power. The Third Tempter attempts to appeal to Thomas's political and religious faith, stating that Thomas could help the barons fight for the"liberty" of England and Rome; still dismissive of man's law, however, Thomas asserts that if he "break" the tyranny of the King, he must not do so for promises of power but must "break myself alone." The fact that Thomas is able to so easily refuse these Tempters reflects his desire to serve divine—rather than human—law; this also accounts for his turmoil when facing the Fourth Tempter, who questions Thomas's desire to become a martyr for purely spiritual (as opposed to temporal) reasons. Once Thomas considers his own heart and concludes that he must not be tricked by his own pride into coveting his martyrdom, he is assured that even if he is killed, his "good Angel, whom God appoints" will "hover over the swords' points."

Thomas's unshaken devotion to his spiritual life is seen throughout the Interlude and Part Two. When preaching to his congregation on Christmas Day, he tells them that martyrdom is "never the design of man," for"the true martyr is he who has become the instrument of God" and "who no longer desires anything for himself." He then bluntly acknowledges his acceptance of his possible fate by saying,"I do not think I shall ever preach to you again" and "it is possible that in a short time you may have another martyr."

In Part Two, when faced with the menace of the four Knights, Thomas refuses to flee (as the Priests beg him to do), since he is "not in danger: only nearer to death." Believing that "all things Proceed to ajoyful consummation," Thomas orders a Priest who has bolted the Cathedral door to open it. He then proclaims, "I give my life To the Law of God above the Law of Man." As the Knights kill him, Thomas does not beg for any mercy or postponement; instead, he begins a prayer in which he "commends [his] cause and that of the Church" to "Almighty God." Although tempted with physical pleasures and threatened with physical violence, Thomas remains true to what he sees as the "pattern" of God's will in his life.

Obedience

Closely allied with the theme of flesh vs. spirit is that of obedience, an issue of the play that is seen in Thomas's unflagging devotion to God. The very nature of the argument between Thomas and King Henry, occurring before the play begins, is centered on this issue: Henry wants Thomas to obey his (and thus the state's) commands, but Thomas is a man described by the First Priest as one "Loathing power given by temporal devolution, Wishing subjection to God alone." Convinced that God is his only judge and ruler with any authority, Thomas mocks those who view themselves as sources of power in a worldly sense:"Only The fool, fixed in his folly, may think He can turn the wheel on which he turns." Another example of Thomas's belief in the power of divine law is found in his rebuttal of the Second Tempter, who offers him his previous power as Chancellor:

Temporal power, to build a good world, To keep order, as the world knows order Those who put their faith in worldly order Not controlled by the Order of God, In confident ignorance, but arrest disorder, Make it fast, breed fatal disease, Degrade what they exalt.

Here, Thomas asserts that the only order is that found in the will of God and that any attempt to stray from one's obedience to it can only result in the "fatal disease" of chaos. Only God can provide any sort of harmony between one's temporal and spiritual lives and Thomas chooses to remain in the "confident ignorance" of one who does not know — but who nevertheless trusts—the force of Providence.

While Thomas's refusal to flee the cathedral certainly proves his obedience to God, it is in an earlier conversation that Eliot dramatizes the conflicting forces within Thomas that solicit his obedience. After speaking to the Fourth Tempter, who asks,"What can compare with the glory of Saints Swelling forever in presence of God?" Thomas must examine his own conscience to determine whether or not his pride is encouraging him to (as the Tempter commands), "Seek the way of martyrdom." Thomas's problem lies not in dying, but in determining if he is doing so out of an obedience to his pride or his God. Eventually, he reaches the enlightenment for which he searches:

Now is my way clear, now is the meaning plain: Temptation shall not come in this kind again The last temptation is the greatest treason To do the right deed for the wrong reason.

Thomas has learned that the "right deed" (martyrdom) must not be performed for the "wrong reason": his self-interest. To allow his desire for glory to interfere with the will of God—which is, ultimately, what will determine his fate—would be like"treason" in its attempt to subvert the authority of an all-powerful ruler. Only by remaining obedient to God can he ever hope to "do the right deed" and become a martyr for his church and his people. He will remain God's obedient servant, living in "confident ignorance" of God's eternal plan.

Style

Tragedy

"Tragedy" as a dramatic form is usually defined as the story of a noble individual who struggles against himself or his fate in the face of almost certain defeat. Perhaps the ideal example of tragedy is Sophocles's *Oedipus the King* (5th century BC) in which Oedipus, the King of Thebes, attempts to cleanse his city against an evil that is plaguing it, only to learn that this evil is found in himself. Eliot's play does employ several classical tragic conventions, such as the use of a Chorus to comment on the action, the characters' speech written in verse, and a plot which culminates in the hero's death.

Thomas is a tragic figure in his larger-than-life passion and search for what can be done to solve the problem with which he is faced. Unlike many tragic heroes, however, Thomas's character harbors no "flaw" or (as Hamlet called it) "mole of nature": he is not blind to his fate (like Oedipus), he is not the slave of passion (like Othello) and he is not a man destroyed by the promises of his own imagination (like Willy Loman).

Instead, Thomas is steadfast and assured; even when he questions his own motives for seeking martyrdom, he summons enough strength in himself to determine that he will allow himself to be the "instrument" of God. While Thomas is eventually killed, something more wonderful than terrible occurs when the Chorus finally understands the will of God and praises Him for His wisdom and power. Unlike Hamlet, who dies amongst a litter of corpses and evokes the audience's pity and fear, Thomas dies as he describes Christ as having done: bringing the "peace" of God to the world. *Murder in the Cathedral* makes use of the tragic form, but the tragic outcome is to be found in its *physical* plot only—the spiritual life of its hero is stronger than death.

Setting

Murder in the Cathedral was written especially for performance at the 1935 Canterbury Festival and was performed in the Chapter House of the cathedral, only fifty yards away from the very spot on which Becket was killed. Aside from its being written for the Festival, Eliot must have had other artistic aims in having it be performed in a non-traditional theater space.

Foremost among these is the fact that anyone in the original audience would be conscious of the fact that he was not in a theater as he viewed the play; instead, he was in a place resonant with the history of the play' s protagonist. The effect of such a setting is obvious: by having the action take place in the Chapter House, Eliot stressed the relationship between the past and present. While the action of the play occurs in 1170, a 1935 audience member would become more aware of the fact that the play's issues are as contemporary as its audience. As the cathedral still stands, so are the issues explored by the play still relevant to modern life.

Rhetoric and Oratory

There are only two sections in the play in which characters do not speak in verse: Thomas's sermon on Christmas Day and the "apologies" by the Knights to the audience. Both of these sections feature a speaker (or speakers) attempting to manipulate language in order to convince their listeners of a certain point (rhetoric) and trying to deliver the words in a way that gives them the greatest impact (oratory). In Thomas's sermon, he attempts to engage the congregation in the same mental processes which he himself has been experiencing, specifically, to consider the paradoxical nature of martyrdom. To do so, he offers a number of paradoxes for them to consider, such as the idea that "at the same moment we rejoice" at the birth of Christ, we do so because we know that he would eventually "offer again to God His Body and Blood in sacrifice."

He similarly attempts to convince his followers that God creates martyrs upon a similar paradoxical principle:"We mourn, for the sins of the world that has martyred them; we rejoice, that another soul is numbered among the Saints in Heaven, for the glory of God and the salvation of men." Because he suspects that his people will soon "have yet another martyr," Thomas wishes to convince them to consider the reasons for—and bounties of—martyrdom, which they do at the very end of the play.

When directly addressing the audience, however, the Four Knights prove themselves to be more adept at cliched political hustling than sincere attempts at public speaking. The First Knight attempts to ingratiate himself to the audience by addressing its members as "Englishmen" who "believe in fair play" and will certainly "not judge anybody without hearing both sides of the case." The Third Knight stresses the point that the four of them "have been perfectly disinterested" in the murder; they are not lackeys of the King, but "four plain Englishmen who put our country first." The Second Knight promises that, while defending their actions, he will"appeal not to your emotions but to your reason," since "You are hard-headed, sensible people ... and not to be taken in by emotional clap-trap."

Again the viewer sees another example of a Knight attempting to ingratiate himself to the audience through hollow rhetonc and .flattery. Following this lead, the Fourth Knight then employs the language of pseudo-psychology in an attempt to offer a "logical" and "scientific" view of Thomas's actions: he calls him "a monster of egoism" and explains that "This egoism grew upon him, until it at last became an undoubted mama," as found in the "unimpeachable evidence" that the Fourth Knight has gathered. He concludes his speech (and the Knights' presentation of their"case") with the aplomb of a trial lawyer: "I think, with these facts before you, you will unhesitatingly render a verdict of Suicide while of Unsound Mind. It is the only charitable verdict you can give, upon one who was, after all, a great man." Despite these attempts at sounding logical ("with these facts before you")? proclaiming their confidence in the audience's judgment ("you will unhesitatingly render" a "charitable verdict"), use of jargon ("Suicide while of Unsound Mind") and attempt to seem dispassionate and logical about the murder ("who was, after all, a great man"), the Fourth Knight, like his companions, stands as an example of

one who uses language to defend his temporal action and fulfill a political agenda—unlike Thomas, who uses his rhetorical skills to help his listeners understand the will of God.

Historical Context

World War I and Modernism

The ravages of World War I (1914-1918) brought about the deaths of millions of soldiers and civilians and caused many artists and intellectuals to question the values and assumptions of their worlds and the permanence of civilization. The growth of Modernism, a literary and artistic movement, attested to this newfound refusal to apply old-world values to contemporary life Writers such as Ezra Pound (1885-1972), Wyndham Lewis (1882-1957), Virginia Woolf (1882-1941), James Joyce (1882-1941) and Eliot himself attempted to create new forms of prose, drama, and verse which they thought would reflect what they saw as the often fragmented and hollow nature of their world.

As William Butler Yeats's 1920 poem "The Second Coming" explains, "Things fall apart; the center cannot hold; Mere anarchy is loosed upon the world." Eliot's long, bitter and complicated poem,' *'The Waste Land"* (1922) is regarded as one of the most perfect examples of modernist attitudes in verse. Other notable modernist works include Joyce's *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* (1916) whose protagonist rejects the previous generation's religious and patriotic faith and Samuel Beckett's *Waiting for Godot* (1952), a play without any apparent plot concerning two tramps seeking a meaning to their lives which is never bestowed upon them.

Ironically, it was only after many of his own groundbreaking experiments in literary form that Eliot composed *Murder in the Cathedral,* which has more in common with the drama of the Middle Ages than it does with modernist, experimental pieces. However, the very use of such an antiquated form assists Eliot in exploring one of his chief ideas, specifically, that the values of Becket—who believes in a "pattern" of life that culminates in a meaningful act—are exactly what is lacking in the chaos of modern experience Seen in this light, *Murder in the Cathedral is* modern in its attitudes and longing for a "center" that will "hold" the world together—something which many writers could not locate in modern life

Drama between the Wars

Drama in both Europe and the United States flourished between the wars and playwrights offered audiences a number of experimental plays that now stand as landmarks in the attempt to revolutionize the dramatic form. Foremost among these was the American playwright Eugene O'Neill (1888-1953), who wrote a number of plays that accomplished this goal, among them *Desire under the Elms* (1924) which used Freudian psychology to explore a New England infanticide, *The Great God Brown* (1926) in which the actors use masks to present their "personalities" to each other, *Strange Interlude* (1928) a long play where characters frequently "step outside of themselves" to reveal their thoughts directly to the audience and *Mourning Becomes*

Electra (1931), a trilogy of plays in which O'Neill appropriates the Orestes myth into the era of Civil War America

Another notable dramatic revisionist was Luigi Pirandello (1867-1936), whose *Six Characters in Search of an Author* (1921) follows the exploits of six roughly-drawn fictional characters as they attempt to describe their existence to a group of rehearsing actors.

Eliot's chief contribution to the rethinking of dramatic forms was his use of verse. While the verse play found its greatest practitioner in William Shakespeare (1564-1616), the use of verse on stage had dwindled over time. As a poet, Eliot was able to successfully employ verse as dramatic language while still allowing his characters to speak in a "realistic" fashion. In his 1951 book *On Poetry and Poets,* Eliot explained that the problem with many nmeteenth-century verse plays was "their limitation to a strict blank verse [lines of ten syllables with alternating stresses] which, after extensive use for non-dramatic poetry, had lost the flexibility which blank verse is to have if it is to give the effect of conversation."

Therefore, the versification in *Murder in the Cathedral* avoids any set metrical pattern which, as Eliot said, "helped to distinguish the versification from that of the nineteenth century." The use of verse was a crucial decision for Eliot, who defended it (in his 1928 *"Dialogue on Dramatic Poetry")* with the remark,' "The tendency... of prose drama is to emphasize the ephemeral and superficial; if we want to get at the permanent and universal we need to express ourselves in verse." While verse plays are still not as popular as those written in prose, Eliot's work did renew audiences' interest in this dramatic form.

Critical Overview

Since the publication of his first book of verse, *Pmfrock and Other Observations* in 1917 and *The Waste Land* in 1922, Eliot has been regarded as an important, if not crucial, figure in twentieth-century literature. When *Murder in the Cathedral* premiered on June 15, 1935, Eliot found yet another of his works greeted with enthusiastic and glowing reviews. Writing in the *London Mercury* in July of that year, poet Edwin Muir called it a "unified work, and one of great beauty." The *Christian Century's* Edward Shillito praised the play's force, stating (in the October 2, 1935 issue), "Not since [George Bernard Shaw's] *Saint Joan* has there been any play on the English stage in which such tremendous issues as this have been treated with such mastery of thought, as well as dramatic power/' Echoing the thoughts of many other critics, the American poet Mark Van Doren, in the October 9, 1935 issue of *The Nation,* stated that"Mr. Eliot has written no better poem than this."

Many critics were particularly impressed by Eliot's ability to compose a play almost entirely in verse and to make its sound as interesting as its subject. Writing for the July 11,1935 edition of *New English Weekly,* James Laughlm stated that the play proves Eliot to be "still a great master of metric" and continued his praise with, "Mr, Eliot has been to school and knows his language-tones and sound-lengths as few others do. .. The craftsmanship of the verse is so unostentatious that you must look closely to see all the richness of detail."

Frederick A Pottle concurred with this judgment, writing (in the December, 1935, *Yale Review)* that the play "shows Eliot's curious and inexhaustible resourcefulness in both rhymed and unrhymed" verse. Such admiration for Eliot's "resourcefulness" with the intricacies of poetic language was also found in I. M. Parson's review for the *Spectator* (June 28, 1935): "Its main quality is bound up inexorably with the written word, which cannot be paraphrased. And if one were to start quoting it would be hard to know where to begin or where to stop. For the play is a dramatic poem, and has an imaginative quality which does not lend itself to brief quotation."

Perhaps the strongest endorsement for Eliot's use of the verse-play form was found in a review by the poet Conrad Aiken (writing in the July 13,1935 *New Yorker* under the pseudonym Samuel Jeake, Jr.), who called the play "a turning point in English drama" because, while watching it, "One's feeling was that here at last was the English language literally being *used,* itself becoming the stuff of drama, turning alive with its own natural poetry."

While most reviews and essays on *Murder in the Cathedral* laud Eliot's ability to suit his verse to his subject, not everyone has been impressed. John Crowe Ransom, writing in the 1935-36 *Southern Review,* called the play "a drama that starts religious but reverts, declines, very distinctly towards snappiness." F. O. Matthiessen, in the December, 1938, *Harvard Advocate,* faulted the play's "relative lack of density" when compared to *The Waste Land* and remarked that "the life represented is lacking something in immediacy and urgency."

And unlike those critics quoted above who praised Eliot's versification, Dems Donoghue, in his book *The Third Voice: Modern British and American Verse Drama* (1959), states that"the text evades, rather than solves, the problems of dramatic verse" and that the play's overall structure is marred by the absence of any "unity of drama and metaphor." Harold Bloom (in the introduction to his anthology, *Modern Critical Interpretations of Murder in the Cathedral)* faults what he sees as the play's evasion of its central issue: "How can you represent, dramatically, a potential saint's refusal to yield to his own lust for martyrdom? Eliot did not know how to solve that dilemma, and evaded it, with some skill."

Criticism this harsh, however, is not as abundant as that which favors Eliot's daring in (as the June 13, 1935 *Time Literary Supplement* called it) moving drama "farther from the theatre" in order to "come nearer to the church." Regardless of any one critic's censure or praise, the play still evokes commentary and interest due to the fact that, as described by Peter Ackroyd in his 1984 biography *T. S. Eliot,* "The play is typical of Eliot's work in the sense that it is concerned with a figure, not unconnected with the author himself, who has some special awareness of which others are deprived and yet whose great strengths are allied with serious weaknesses."

Criticism

- Critical Essay #1
- Critical Essay #2

Critical Essay #1

Daniel Moran, Moron is an educator specializing in literature and drama. In this essay, he examines the ways in which Eliot's play explores the processes an individual must undergo if he is to give his life for his faith and how such a gift affects the martyr's world.

In Eliot's *"TheLove Song ofJ. AlfredPrufrock"* (1917) he presents a man on the verge of an emotional crisis who finds that his fear of humiliation and of committing a social *faux pas* prevent him from revealing to a woman the depth of his love for her. "There will be time," he remarks, "For a hundred indecisions, And For a hundred visions and revisions," since he knows that he will change his mind a hundred times before doing anything so brave. He asks, "Do I dare Disturb the universe" with his desire to be frank; since he is ""no prophet—and here's no great matter," since he is "not Prince Hamlet, nor was meant to be," he sees himself as insignificant, "an attendant lord, one that will do To swell a progress, start a scene or two." Terrified of acting, yet dissatisfied with the results of inaction, fearful of revealing himself, yet dying to "say just what I mean," Prufrock stands in sharp contrast to a later Eliot hero, Thomas Becket, as seen in *Murder in the Cathedral* (1935).

Becket is a man who *does* "dare Disturb the universe" with his arrival in Canterbury and refusal to concede to King Henry's demands; he needs no time for a "hundred indecisions" since he sees that the path chosen for him by God is clear. He is "like a prophet"' and Prince Hamlet in that he serves the aims of a supreme, supernatural figure and sees himself as one faced with a task that can only culminate in his own death; unlike Hamlet, however, this knowledge causes him no great suffering of mind. While Prufrock's fear of rejection inhibits him from taking action, Thomas's determination to serve God prevents him from seeking asylum in a world governed by human law. Throughout the play, Eliot explores the ways in which Thomas's lack of "Prufrockian" fear allows him to answer his calling from God and how one who accepts such a call must do so at the expense of any and all temporal comforts. Rejecting this world in favor of the next may seem to Henry's Knights like the ultimate faux pas, but in doing so. Thomas renews his own spiritual life as well as the spiritual lives of the common people and the very world that martyrs him.

Eliot's original title for the play was *Fear in the Way,* and it is evident from the opening Choral ode that fear is a constant in the world of the play. The "poor women" huddle near the cathedral not for spiritual comfort but because "Some presage of an act Which our eyes are compelled to witness, has forced our feet Toward the cathedral. We are forced to bear witness." Already God is at work, "compelling" the women (and the audience) to attend to the drama at hand. Unlike the audience, who by virtue of its position is intrigued, the women are terrified of any change in their lives: although they have "suffered various oppression" such as "various scandals," "taxes," and "private terrors," they have "Succeeded in avoiding notice, Living and partly living."

While a viewer might think that the intrusion of God into their lives would be welcomed as a form of deliverance from the "poverty and license" they describe, the women wish

to maintain the status quo, which may be rife with "minor injustice" but which is also predictable and, more importantly, *understandable.* To be called by God to do anything —even to "witness"—is too terrifying a task, especially when they learn that their Archbishop is returning:

O Thomas our Lord, leave us and leave us be, in our humble and tarnished frame of existence, lea ve us, do not ask us To stand to the doom on the house, the doom on the Archbishop, the doom on the world Archbishop, secure and assured of your fate, unaffrayed among the shades, do you realise what you ask, do you realize what it means To the smaE folk drawn into the pattern of fate, the small folk who hve among small things, The strain on the brain of the small folk who stand to the doom of the house, the doom of their lord, the doom of the world'

The Chorus has accepted the world's indifference to them and all of its concomitant troubles and wishes to "live among small things" rather than answer the call of God, who will obviously make greater demands. Only through Thomas's death (which is his own answer to *his* calling) will they come to understand the greatness and glory of God.

As if God were presenting the Chorus with an example of one who rejects the very fears they vocalize, Thomas enters the play as one who knows he may die but who accepts this as part of a larger scheme. He tells the Chorus and the Three Priests that there is an"eternal action, an eternal patience To which all must consent" and that the "End will be simple, sudden, God-given." Already he is prepared to die for his return—but if he already knows this, why would Eliot write the play? In his *The Third Voice: Modern British and American Drama,* Denis Donoghue argues that an audience's knowledge of Thomas's death eliminates the dramatic force that his death may have. However, he seems to be missing the point that Ehot can use an audience's knowledge of Thomas's impending death as a way to refocus its attention. The viewer then becomes more attuned to the issue of *how* Thomas will meet his death instead of whether or not this death will occur—-and how Thomas struggles with the weight of martyrdom is Eliot's subject here.

Because a viewer knows Thomas will die, his thoughts on death and martyrdom take on an added significance, like when Henry Fonda's character in John Ford's film *Young Mr. Lincoln* walks into the sunset with "The Battle Hymn of the Republic" playing on the soundtrack. As Thomas explains to the Priests, "Heavier the interval than the consummation." The mental and spiritual processes *leading* to an acceptance of martyrdom and the means by which an individual gives himself completely to his faith are Eliot's concern here, and by having the audience know the end of the play before it begins (a function of its title), he is able to prod the viewer into becoming interested in the same things as himself.

Thomas's interaction with the Four Tempters allows Eliot to dramatize these very processes of denial and self-examination that a martyr must undergo if he is to remain true to his calling. The First, Second, and Third Tempters are easily spurned by Thomas, who knows that their promises of temporal power and comfort are "puny" when compared to those offered by God: "Shall I," he asks, "who ruled like an eagle

over doves, Now take the shape of a wolf among wolves?" Rejecting their insinuations that he can set right the world and its temporal problems, Thomas remarks, "Only The fool, fixed in his folly, may think He can turn the wheel on which he turns." Like Hamlet, Thomas believes "There's a divinity that shapes our ends" and will (again like Hamlet) "Let be," making the rejection of the Three Tempters a matter of course.

The Fourth Tempter, however, challenges Thomas on a much different—and more difficult— level. The strict meter of his verse attests to his potential bewitching of the future martyr.

As you do not know me, I do not need a name, And, as you know me, that is why I come. You know me, but have never seen my face To meet before was never time or place.

These figures have never met before because the "time or place" were not ripe with such a spiritual crisis, and it is the crisis of self-examination that this Tempter forces on Thomas. The Tempter asks, "But what is pleasure, Kingly rule" compared to "general grasp of spiritual power" and tells him that "Saint and Martyr rule from'the tomb"; Thomas should "think of pilgrims, standing in line Before the glittering jeweled shrine" and "Seek the way of martyrdom." If he refuses, he will become a footnote and "men shall declare that there was no mystery About this man who played a certain part in history." As Thomas admits, the Fourth Tempter has exposed his "own desires"; like Prufrock, who imagines himself "pinned and wriggling on the wall" with a "magic lantern" throwing his "nerves in patterns on a screen," Thomas must now discern his own motives in seeking martyrdom:

Is there no way, in my soul's sickness, Does not lead to damnation in pride' I well know that these temptations Mean present vanity and future torment. Can sinful pnde be driven out Only by more sinful? Can I neither act nor suffer Without perdition"

The Tempter's answer to this question is an almost word-for-word recitation of Thomas's opening speech to the Chorus:

You know and do not know, what it is to act or suffer. You know and do not know, that achon is suffering, And the suffering action. Neither does the agent suffer Nor the patient act. But both are fixed In an eternal action, an eternal patience To which all must consent that it may be willed And which all must suffer that they may will it, That the pattern may subsist, that the wheel may turn and still Be forever still.

For what reason does the Fourth Tempter answer Thomas with his own words? The answer becomes more clear if the audience considers this Tempter—like his three counterparts—as not an external figure but a part of Thomas himself. Finding no allure in physical pleasure and certainly no use (after his split with the King) for temporal government, Thomas can reject these ideas quite easily. This part of himself, however—the part of his soul that *does,* to some ambiguous degree, covet fame and glory—is more difficult to resist. If he is to be martyred, he must look deep within himself, listening to his own voice, in order to be sure that he is not the slave of vanity. Seen in this light,

the Fourth Tempter is unlike Satan, who tempted Christ, but like a mirror into which Thomas must gaze if he is to know himself. The Forth Tempter is a counselor more than an enemy.

Because of the Fourth Tempter's "friendly advice," Thomas is able to determine that"The last temptation is the greatest treason: To do the right deed for the wrong reason." But what has Thomas decided? To let himself be killed? This is decided by him before the play even begins. To reject martyrdom" This is never an issue or possibility; Thomas wants to know if he seeks the "right thing" for the "wrong reason" of his own pride, not whether or not martyrdom itself is "right" or "wrong." What Thomas learns here *from his own words being thrown back at him* is that"action is suffering "

It is worthwhile to pause here and consider the implications of these words. For Thomas, who earlier in the play says that the women "know and do not know, what it is to act or suffer," to "act" would entail *inaction,* i.e., not protesting his death by sword when it finds him. To "suffer" would entail physical suffering (in his time of dying) but the word also carries the more important sense of "to allow" or "to be the object of some action." *This* is the key to Thomas's decision, he will "act" (through inaction) not because of his own pride, but by allowing himself to "suffer" the presence and workings of God. Only by seeking a martyrdom grounded in spiritual obedience (rather than temporal fame) will Thomas remain undefiled and avoid the "damnation in pride" that he fears. He now "knows" that "action is suffering" but "does not know" the actual experience of it yet. When this time does come, however, he will "no longer act or suffer, to the sword's end," obeying temporal commands and threats, but will instead "act and suffer" to obey the will of God.

Thomas's newfound enlightenment is offered to his congregation when he preaches to them on Christmas Day. Besides providing a dramatic fulcrum to the two halves of his play, the sermon allows Eliot to demonstrate the depth of Thomas's understanding of the nature of martyrdom. Christmas is, of course, the birthday of the ultimate martyr and Thomas uses this fact as a way to present the paradoxes inherent in martyrdom. For example, he speaks of the fact that they rej oice in the birth of one who died for their sins, explaining that"only in our Christian mysteries" can they "rejoice and mourn at once for the same reason." He also addresses the meaning of the word "peace" in Christ's statement to His apostles, "My peace I leave with you, my peace I give unto you," concluding that Christ "gave to His disciples peace, but not peace as the world gives."

A viewer can see the extent to which Thomas' s sermon here is self-reflexive, since he too will soon find spiritual-—rather than physical—peace. A final example of how the sermon reveals the working-through of the mysteries in Thomas's mind is found in his discussion of God's "first martyr, the blessed Stephen" Thomas states that"by no means" is it an "accident" that"the day of the first martyr follows immediately the day of the birth of Christ," so urging the congregation to ponder the "pattern" of God's will as he has done. He concludes by indirectly asserting his own triumph over the thoughts presented to him by the Fourth Tempter, saying, "Still less is a Christian martyrdom the

effect of a man's will to become a Saint, as a man by willing and contriving may become a ruler of men."

The true martyr has "lost his will in the will of God" and does not even desire"the glory of being a martyr." Knowing that he is balanced on the knife's edge of divinity, Thomas pleads with the people to adopt his course of allowing God's will to work in their lives and to "suffer" His presence in Canterbury.

Part Two of the play presents the martyrdom that "Thomas awaits. As Part One examines the processes involved in the individual's acceptance of martyrdom, Part Two examines the ways in which others may view and consider the same. The nervous First and Second Priests speak of the possibility of God acting through Thomas "To-day," but the Third Priest knows that such anticipation is pointless:

What is the day that we know that we hope for or fear for? Every day is the day we should fear from or hope from One moment Weighs like another Only in retrospection, selection, We say, that was the day. The critical moment That is always now, and here, Even now, in sordid particulars The eternal design may appear

Time is the mother of meaning (an issue raised in Eliot's poem *"Journey of the Magi")* and the Third Priest is now certain, like Thomas, that the "critical moment" may arise even in "sordid particulars." As if to respond to this statement, the Four Knights enter the play, much like Thomas's perfectly timed entrance in Part One. God's will is now hard at work, a fact acknowledged by Thomas when he enters and states, "However certain our expectanon The moment foreseen may be unexpected When it arrives." The Four Knights, however, have no interest in any discussion of"the pattern" or "the wheel" and demand that Thomas recant his former judgments to appease "The King's Justice" and "the King's majesty." Thomas's refusal to do so reveals the extent to which he has (as he stated in his sermon), "lost his will in the will of God": it is not "Becket who pronounces doom," he explains, "But the Law of Christ's Church." Theory has been converted into practice and no threat can weaken Thomas's resolve: he is "not in danger" but "only nearer to death."

The Chorus's reaction to Thomas's fearlessness marks their gradual understanding of what they were "compelled to witness" in the opening of the play. Stating that they have seen "subtle forebodings" of the "death-bringers" in such natural signs as "The horn of the beetle, the scale of the viper" and the smell of"incense in the latrine," the women beg Thomas for forgiveness for voicing their original fears. Thomas's cult of personality is growing stronger with each moment he remains alive. Naturally, Thomas forgives them with the command "Peace" and explains, "Human kind cannot bear very much reality," an insight that is proven by the actions of the Four Knights and the previous lamentations of the Chorus: to Thomas, the only "reality" is that of God's will—all else is the vanity of temporal power and "toiling in the household "

The Priests, however, are still fearful and plead with Thomas to hide in the cloister. Thomas refuses, stating, "I have therefore only to make perfect my will." It is at this point that Eliot again highlights the mental process of martyrdom by making Thomas's

actions here slightly ambiguous and hinting—but only hinting—at his previously rejected desire for fame. Thomas commands the Priests to "Unbar the doors! Throw open the doors!" because he"will not have the house of prayer" turned "into a fortress": "The Church shall protect her own, in her own way, not As oak and stone." This train of thought is in perfect keeping with Thomas's earlier rejection of human law in favor of God's. When the Priests still insist on his hiding, however, Thomas flies into a rage less easily explained by a desire to remain solely an "instrument" of God:

I give my life To the Law of God above the Law of Man Unbar the door unbar the door We are not to triumph by fighting, by stratagem, or by resistance, Not to fight with beasts as men We have fought the beast And have conquered. We have only to conquer Now, by suffering. This is the easier victory. Now is the triumph of the Cross, now Open the door I command it OPEN THE DOOR'

Thomas's logic here posits that only by self-sacrifice ("I give my life") and allowing God to work his will through the Knights ("suffering") will God's will be made complete. But why must God work today? At this moment? (Recall the Third Priest's explanation of how only "retrospection" yields meaning.) Thomas never considers this point and Eliot never addresses it, making this rallying of the Priests' faith one of the most ambiguous moments in the play. A viewer could easily understand this speech to imply that Thomas fears his *not* being martyred and that there are still some remnants of worldly pride clinging to his vestments.

While this may be a more cynical way to read the play, the point nonetheless seems valid—but only if that same viewer forgets a simple fact about Thomas: for all his wisdom and strength, *he is still a man* and still subject to the same apprehensions and doubts as everybody else. It is not surprising, then, that the very human Thomas fears the Knights will be prohibited from entering, for he has already completed a grueling process by which he has prepared himself for martyrdom. "For my Lord I am ready to die," he states,' "That His Church may have peace and liberty." His resolve is stronger than any audience's doubts.

Thomas is killed onstage, so that the audience—like the Chorus—will be appalled by the event which God and Eliot have forced them to "witness." The women long for a time when the land was free from the "filth" they "cannot clean," found in the murdering Knights:

A rain of blood has blinded my eyes Where is England" Where is Kent' Where is Canterbury' O far far far far in the past; and I wander in a land of barren boughs: if I break them, they bleed, I wander in a land of dry stones: if I touch them, they bleed. How can I ever return, to the soft quiet seasons?

Although they are terrified by the murder of their Archbishop, the women still do not understand that God's will is at work here: "We did not wish anything to happen," they cry, since their usual hardships "marked a limit to our suffering." Only later will they "know what it is to act and suffer."

As they finish their ode and Becket dies, Eliot engages the viewer in the greatest surprise of the play: the Four Knights' direct address to the audience. In *On Poetry and Poets,* Eliot describes this device as "a kind of trick" added to "shock the audience out of their complacency," and the mock-inquest performed by the Knights serves several purposes in the total design of the play. First, the viewer sees the trivial nature of temporal power in The Second, Third, and Fourth Knights' sycophantic praise of the First Knight: "I am not anything like such an experienced speaker as my old friend Reginald Fitz Urse," states the Third Knight, while the Second Knight praises Fitz Urse for making his point "very well" and the Fourth Knight remarks that their"leader, Reginald Fitz Urse," has "spoken very much to the point."

The hollow rhetoric of the Knights, with their appeals to the "hard-hearted, sensible" people in the audience, heighten the sincerity and honesty that Thomas has displayed throughout the play. More importantly, the Knights' defense "shocks" the audience into understanding the degree to which the issues of the play are still relevant to modern life, as when the Second Knight explains,

No one regrets the necessity for violence more than we do. Unhappily, there are times when violence is the only way in which social justice may be secured. At another time, you would condemn an Archbishop by vote of Parliament and execute him formally as a traitor, and no one would have to bear the burden of being called murderer And at a later time still, even such temperate measures as these would become unnecessary But, if you have now arrived at a just subordination of the pretensions of the Church to the welfare of the State, remember that it is we who took the first step. We have been instrumental in bringing about the state of affairs that you approve We have served your interests, we merit your applause; and if there is any guilt whatever in the matter, you must share it with us

The Second Knight looks forward to a future in which the Church's "pretensions" are subordinate to the State—a world very much like that of contemporary Western societies. But this is not a "message" play and Eliot is too clever to allow all the previous action to congeal into a tidy set of remarks. Instead, the Second Knight raises the question of how much the Church—or spirituality in general—affects the political lives of a nation's citizenry and the extent to which those who put their faith in temporal power (like Henry and his Knights) will go to ensure that the State is always in charge.

In *The Plays of T .S. Eliot* (1960), David E. Jones calls the Knights' apology "the temptation of the audience," and the Second Knight's remarks may seem tempting to one who wishes for no spiritual stake in the life of a nation. But who could be tempted by these "slightly tipsy" assassins with their fawning over earthly leaders and vocabulary of psychobabble ("render a verdict of Suicide while of Unsound Mind") that they use to cloud the issues? At most, they are like the first three Tempters in Part One: easily dismissable. Eliot has included their prose defense in order to show the gulf between men of politics and men of God—a contest in which Eliot never avoids revealing the side for whom he is rooting.

As a final way to illustrate the Knights' lack of understanding and as a way to illustrate the effect that Thomas's martyrdom has had on his world, Eliot closes the play with a Choral ode in which the women "Praise Thee, O God, for Thy glory" and describe their new understanding of the "pattern" and the "wheel":

For all things exist only as seen by Thee, only as known by Thee, all things exist Only in Thy light, and Thy glory is declared even in that which denies Thee; the darkness declares the glory of light Those who deny Thee could not deny, if Thou didst not exist; and their denial is never complete, for if it were so, they would not exist

The Knights' sophistry or twentieth century cynicism are no match for devotion of this depth. The Chorus has moved millions of spiritual miles since the beginning of the play: where they formerly asked God to let them "perish in quiet," they now beg Him to forgive them for their former blindness. They describe their former selves as "the men and women who shut the door" and sat "by the fire"— seeking physical comfort— instead of as those who "fear the blessing of God." Any previous arguments raised about the depth of Thomas's devotion and spurning of pride are put to rest here, for the Chorus has been served by its Archbishop, regardless of the motives he may have had:

We now acknowledge our trespass, our weakness, our fault; we acknowledge That the sin of the world is upon our heads; that the blood of the martyrs and the agony of the saints Is upon our heads Lord, have mercy on us. Christ, have mercy on us Lord, have mercy on us. Blessed Thomas, pray for us.

The women now fully "know that action is suffering" and will allow God's will to work through them. They have moved from Prufrockian doubts to BecketHan certainty and find solace in the presence of a Being that many moderns may be missing. Whether the modern age will produce more Beckets to assuage the doubts of the Prufrocks remains to be seen, but, as Hamlet says and Becket enacts, "The readiness is all."

Source: Daniel Moran, for *Drama for Students,* Gale, 1998.

In this review, Holloway examines why Eliot composed his chorus entirely of women. The critic theorizes that, like many martyrs, women represent birth, new life, and renewal She cites several examples of language and imagery that support this assertion.

When Carole M. Beckett observes that "the dramatic function of the women of the Chorus (in *Murder in the Cathedral]* is to comment upon the events which they witness," she, like others, skirts the perplexing critical question of why the chorus is composed solely of women What, in the design of the play, would necessitate an all female chorus?

The second priest in the play sees little use for the chorus of women:

You are foolish, immodest and babbling women, You go on croaking like frogs in the treetops: But frogs at least can be cooked and eaten.

These women, however, do perform a vital function- they expand our understanding of martyrdom through a metaphor of birth. The female chorus reminds us that both women and martyrs give birth to new life. For a woman, it is the life of her child; for a martyr, it is the life of his belief. In the play, the women's chorus shows us how before giving birth, a martyr, like an expectant mother, must wait and suffer.

To introduce his metaphor of birth, Eliot first shows us that both the women in the chorus and the martyr are waiting. The women open the play waiting "close by the cathedral" where they acknowledge they "are forced to bear witness." As it turns out, they will bear witness to the birth of a martyr. At this point in the play, even though they are not consciously aware of waiting, intuitively they are expectant; they wait and wait. In fact, they repeat the word"wait" eleven times in just this first passage. This repetition, as well as words such as "bear" and "barren," suggests a metaphor of birth. Similarly, Thomas' diction also points to a birth metaphor when he notes soon after he enters the play:

Heavier the interval than the consummation. All things prepare the event

Like the expectant women, he too is waiting for the birth of the martyr. Ironically, that birth will come only with the "event" of his death.

The women in the chorus, however, do not refer literally to Thomas' death. Instead, they speak metaphorically about an unminent, ominous birth:

the air is heavy and thick. Thick and heavy the sky. And the earth presses up against our feet.. The earth is heaving to parturition of issue of hell

The image of a round earth pressing up and the words "heavy" and "thick" suggest the physical appearance of women about to give birth. The word "parturition" itself literally depicts the act of childbirth. Later in the play, the women will repeat the image of a "heaving earth" as they again convey the metaphor of birth: "I have felt the heaving of earth at nightfall, restless, absurd."

Both the women and Thomas await the "absurd" birth described by the chorus, and as they wait, they suffer. The women agonize when they realize they await the death of Thomas. They fear the birth of which they speak because it will be a "parturition ... of hell"—the hell of their suffering when they experience the physical loss of their beloved Thomas. Like the expectant women, Thomas, too, suffers as he awaits his delivery. He suffers not only mentally through the temptations to his pride and power, but also physically through the pain of his death—the death that will deliver him into his heavenly birth.

Eliot uses the symbol of blood to link the suffering of the martyr and the suffering of the women. Just before he sheds his own blood, Thomas notes:

I am... ready to suffer with my blood This is the sign of the Church always The sign of blood

Blood is not only a sign for martyrdom, it is also a sign for motherhood. The shedding of Thomas' blood frightens the women, who would naturally associate it with the pain of childbeanng, and their first reaction is to rid themselves of this sign of suffering:

Clean the air clean the sky wash the wind take stone from stone and wash them.

They echo the birth metaphor a last time when, in the same speech, they refer to themselves as wandering "in a land of *barren* boughs."

If, as seems to be the case, Eliot wants to show the similarities between giving birth and the making of a martyr, then a chorus composed of women makes sense not only thematically, but also structurally. After all, it is women who know best how to wait, suffer, and give birth.

Source: Patricia Mosco Holloway, review of *Murder in the Cathedral* m the *Exphcator,* Volume 43, no. 2, Winter, 1985, pp. 35-36

Critical Essay #2

McGill explicates the role of the chorus in Eliot's play, discussing how their choral speeches enhance the poet/playwright's language and the overall tone of the drama. The critic dissects several of the speeches to prove his point.

In staging T. S. Eliot's poetic drama *Murder in the Cathedral,* one of the principal technical and artistic-interpretive problems involves the presentation of the choral speeches. Textually they appear as odes with no specific instructions to indicate differentiation of voices. But the first staging of the play set the precedent for assigning parts within the choral odes to individual voices or varying ensembles. The decision is in part a musical one, involving an assessment of the voices available and an orchestration of those voices to produce a pattern of sound that enhances the aural effect of the language. Obviously, however, the arrangement of voices must also relate to the thematic development of the odes as well. We cannot separate sound and meaning. Thus, while the individual director has some freedom in designating parts of the choral speeches, the poetry itself places strictures on that freedom. What I seek to do here is to provide a reading of the choral odes which identifies the principal thematic and dramatic voices in them.

The choral ode which opens the play serves as prelude not only to the drama which follows, but also to the varying functions of the chorus and to the different voices which articulate aspects of those functions. The initial stanza is a full-voiced statement of the entire chorus speaking as "the poor women of Canterbury" and outlining their roles as harbingers of some danger which diey cannot comprehend and which they can neither impede nor hasten, and as reluctant witnesses to whatever consequences that danger may bring. "Some presage of an act Which our eyes are compelled to witness, has forced our feet Towards the cathedral. We are forced to bear witness."

The second stanza takes up the theme of helpless waiting in a somber, yet strong, mellifluous voice (hereafter the first voice). The decline of "golden October" into winter, but not yet the wondrous winter of fresh snow and crystalline frost, rather the dead season of stubbled, muddy fields, sets the image of time suspended while "..The New Year waits, destiny waits for the coming." In the chill of that mordant time the poor laborer from the fields seeks refuge before the fire, yet even in that refuge is not free: "and who shall Stretch out his hand to the fire, and deny his master? who shall be warm By the fire, and deny his master"

The question points up the reluctance with which the women are drawn to their witness The long third stanza opens with a querulous, almost whining voice which gives substance to that reluctance. Recognizing that the Archbishop Thomas had always been a gracious master, this second voice nonetheless regrets the possibility of his return. For the poor, what difference does it make who rules so long as things are quiet for them?—"we are left to our own devices, And we are content if we are left alone." Left alone, they go about their business, keeping then: households in order, trying to accumulate what they can, working their bit of land, "... Preferring to pass unobserved,"

leading colorless lives. But that hope diminishes. A third voice, dark and husky, Cassandra-like, dispels it with a vision to match the voice: "... Winter shall come bringing death from the sea, Ruinous spring shall beat at our doors, Root and shoot shall eat our eyes and our ears... " The full chorus now returns, and in the wake of this sequence of voices, the women are more fearful, more pessimistic. They have absorbed the qualities of the separate voices and their sense of premonition sharpens: "Some malady is coming upon us. We wait, we wait, And the saints and martyrs wait, for those who shall be martyrs and saints." As before, the first voice intervenes to give resonance to the choral cry, while also developing its particular motif—all that happens depends on destiny which "waits in the hand of God, shaping the still unshapen...." Confronted by that forceful affirmation of their own helplessness, the women conclude:"For us, the poor, there is no action, But only to wait and to witness."

In the opening ode, then, we have three distinct voices standing out from the general chorus, each stressing a particular dimension of the choral function. The first with its recurrent .appeal to destiny emphasizes that the women are but passive witnesses; the second with its recitation of the mundane preoccupations of the poor emphasizes that they are drawn unwillingly to fulfill the role of witness; and the third with its darksome, surreal vision emphasizes the fatalism, the pessimism of their witness. The reiteration of these voices develops the tone and consciousness of the full choral voice toward the final revelation.

Thus, in the second choral ode which occurs following the arrival of the messenger who announces the return of Thomas to England, an interchange between the second and third voices impels the women to a sorrowful plea to Thomas to go back to France. The third voice opens with a vivid invocation of the evil that is in the air and an intimation of its consequences: "You come with applause, you come with rejoicing, but you come bringing death into Canterbury: A doom on the house, a doom on yourself, a doom on the world." Then the plaintive second voice breaks in with a long recitation which, in effect, expands by specifics its earlier theme, though now in a more fretful, less certain fashion: "We do not wish anything to happen. Seven years we have lived quietly, Succeeded in avoiding notice, Living and partly living." That refrain persists, a recognition that the life of the poor, even when they succeed in avoiding notice, is tenuous and drab. The voice finally takes on some of the darksome quality of the others:"We have all had our private terrors, Our particular shadows, our secret fears." The third voice picks up this admission and intensifies it: "But now a great fear is upon us, a fear not of one but of many___"

That fear is a vivid intimation of the doom foretold in the opening stanza of this ode, and indeed it concludes with the refrain,"the doom on the house, the doom on the Archbishop, the doom on the world." This "dialogue" closes with the full voice of the chorus which now echoes the rhetoric of the third voice in a petition, partly a whimper, partly a prayer:"do you realise what you ask, do you realise what it means To the small folk drawn into the pattern of fate___/ O Thomas, Archbishop, leave us, leave us, leave sullen Dover, and set sail for France,"

The third voice returns in a brief speech which follows the appearance of the four tempters. The premonitory sense now assumes graphic physical form—a sickly smell, a dark green cloud, the earth heaving, sticky dew—engaging all the senses. Then the full chorus joins the priests and the tempters in an alternating sequence which, with mounting anxiety, reports the omens and portents that now multiply.

A choral ode follows. The second voice opens, now readier to admit the drabness and sorrow of the life of the poor which seems more partly living than living. A wiser streak of fatalism has diluted the querulous tone of this voice. The third voice follows, and the physical details of the portents become even more distinct, more surrealistic: "... The forms take shape in the dark air: Puss-purr of leopard, footfall of padding bear, Palm-pat of nodding ape, square hyaena waiting For laughter, laughter, laughter. The Lords of Hell are here". With the atmosphere now charged with premonition, a sense of foreboding in every voice, the poor women of Canterbury cry out, "O Thomas Archbishop, save us, save us, save yourself that we may be saved; /Destroy yourself and we are destroyed." They have now realized, driven by the consciousness of fate and of their helplessness and of the impending violence, that they cannot be mere witnesses. However reluctant they are to watch, they must; however much they yearn to plow their fields, to tend their hearths, to let the princes and nobles rule, they know that the very act of witnessing draws them into the maelstrom.

The increasing anxiety of the poor women of Canterbury, which develops toward the final unison cry of fear that concludes part one, begins part two of the drama unabated, the interlude of Becket's Christmas sermon having done nothing to alleviate it. The full choral voice poses a series of questions which reiterates the pattern of part one, moving from mere anticipation ("Does the bird sing in the South?") to anxious expectation ("What signs of a bitter spring?"). Hopefulness rapidly gives way to despair as, in response to each question, the resonant first voice consistently replies in gloomy tones, invoking the sense of destiny. This exchange concludes with a long rhetorical question that reaches the level of pain that tormented the last choral speech of the first part. This dialogue then is a reprise of the chorus's developing consciousness.

Having set the tone for part two, the chorus withdraws into the role of silent witness to the first encounter between Thomas and the four knights. When the knights depart with the threat to return armed, the dark and despairing third voice takes up the burden of the chorus in a long and gruesome ode. The shift from psychic to physical portents which characterized that voice earlier culminates here in orgiastic horror. The "savour of putrid flesh ...", "Smooth creatures still living...", "Corruption in the dish ..." are no longer signs beheld but immediate experiences, horrors not merely seen but ingested. The "death-bringers" are here. Thomas's refusal to heed the cathedral priests' harried pleas to escape brings death itself into full view: "... The white fiat face of Death, God's silent servant, And behind the face of death the Judgement And behind the Judgement the Void, more homd than active shapes of hell; Emptiness, absence, separation from God"

And so death comes to Thomas. As the knights murder him, the full chorus screams in agony, "Clear the air! Clean the sky! wash the wind! take stone from stone and wash them!" In frenzied succession the three distinct voices declare the maturation of their

motifs. The first voice declares the desecration of England, of life itself, in blood: "Can I look again at the day and its common things, and see them all smeared with blood, through a curtain of falling blood?" The working out of destiny changes forever the world. The second voice, now perhaps older and wiser, yet retains its plaintive edge: the poor have known private catastrophe, have known suffering: "Every horror had its definition, Every sorrow had a kind of end: In life there is not time to grieve long. But this,... this is out of time, An instant eternity of evil and wrong." And the third voice proclaims the final agony and helplessness of the poor: "We are soiled by a filth that we cannot clean, united to supernatural vermin, It is not we alone, it is not the house, it is not the city that is defiled, But the world that is wholly foul." Again, the agonized full cry of the chorus: "Cleartheair! clean the sky! wash the wind!"

But man's avowal of helplessness and despair, calling from the depths, opens the way to the movement of God's grace. From the existence of evil comes the possibility of good, and from the violent death of the Archbishop comes a new saint, another saint for Canterbury, a source of solace and comfort to the poor. The concluding choral ode, delivered in procession while a choir sings a Latin Te Deum in the distance, is itself a Te Deum, a hymn of praise to God from those who, having watched, waited, and suffered, now celebrate the rebirth of hope through the martyr's blood. The ode is antiphonal with the strong vibrant first voice, now proclaiming like a celebrant the joy of God's destiny, while the full chorus responds, the interchange mounting in vigor and intensity until the concluding Kyrie.

Source: William J. McGill, "Voices in the Cathedral. The Chorus in Eliot's *Murder in the Cathedral"* m *Modern Drama,* Volume XXXm, no. 3, September, 1980, pp 292-96.

Adaptations

Murder in the Cathedral was adapted as a British film in 1952, directed by George Hoellenng. Paul Rodgers and Leo McKern are featured in the cast and Eliot provided the voice of the Fourth Tempter

A recording of the 1953 Old Vic cast performing the play was recorded by Angel Records.

A recording of the play, starring Paul Scofield, was produced in 1968. It is available through Caedmon Recordings.

Topics for Further Study

Research the historical Thomas Becket and his reasons for quarreling with King Henry II To what degree does Eliot's version of these events accord with that found in historical sources?

The British poet Alfred, Lord Tennyson also composed a verse play on the life of Thomas Becket, *Becket* (1884). Read Tennyson's version of Becket's martyrdom and compare and contrast it with Eliot's. How, for example, does each poet present Becket's decision to remain in the cathedral when threatened by the knights?

Renaissance artists frequently painted saints in symbolic settings. Locate some paintings of Becket and explain the ways in which their artists have manipulated color, light, and form in order to present their subject Whataspects of Becket's personality do they wish to stress?

Eliot admired the morality play *Everyman* (1500) for its versification, i.e., for its author's use of sound and meter in creating certain effects. Compare the nature of *Everyman's* verse to Eliot's: are there any patterns of rhythm or sound that can be found in both works? "Why would Eliot appropriate the patterns he did"?

In Part Two of the play, several musical cues are mentioned, such as ' *'a* Dies Irae is *sung in Latin by a choir in the distance."* Look in an encyclopedia of music to learn what a Dies Irae is and how it and the other types of songs mentioned by Eliot are used in the Catholic Mass. Then explain why Eliot would use them in his play: how do certain types of hymns suit certain dramatic situations?

Compare and Contrast

1170: King Henry II and Archbishop Thomas Becket begin to quarrel over the growing strength of the Catholic Church, marking the first hints of an anti-Catholic sentiment lasting until the Catholic Emancipation Act of 1829, which permitted Roman Catholics to sit in Parliament and hold almost any public office.

1935: Belfast is ravaged by anti-Catholic riots. Northern Ireland expels Catholic families and Catholics in the Irish Free State retaliate.

Today: Although their British counterparts generally live in peace, tensions between Irish Catholics and Protestants are still seen in the number of bombings and acts of terrorism in Northern Ireland. British Prime Minister Tony Blair holds talks with Irish representatives in an effort to end these and other problems, collectively referred to as the "troubles."

12th-14th Centuries: "Miracle" and "Morality" plays grow in popularity. These plays present the lives of Christ or the saints in dramatic form, often performed in a church as part of religious holidays or festivals.

1935: Eliot's *Murder in the Cathedral* is written for the year's Canterbury Festival and is performed in the Chapter House of the cathedral. Eliot's play makes use of conventions and "stock" characters similar to those found in medieval morality plays.

Today: While morality plays are not common commercial fare, long-respected titles such as *Everyman* are frequently studied and revived. Many churches perform "passion plays"—morality plays based on the crucifixion and resurrection of Christ—as part of their Easter celebrations.

1170: The feud between King Henry II and Thomas Becket—who defended the political rights of the church without any compromise-marks one of the first times in European history where the church and state are fiercely opposed to each other's workings.

1935: In the most notorious attempt of a government to control the religious practices of its people, the Nazi Party congress, meeting at Nuremberg, deprives Jews of German citizenship and makes intercourse between "Aryans" and Jews punishable by death.

Today: While the separation between church and state is taken for granted by Americans, the debate can still be seen in battles over school curricula, such as school districts prohibiting the teaching of Darwin's theory of evolution because it conflicts with the Creationist views found in the Bible or groups protesting the Pledge of Allegiance's use of the phrase, "One nation, under God."

What Do I Read Next?

The sixteenth-century morality play *Everyman* (1500) was admired by Eliot for its versification, which he imitated in his play. A reader *of Murder in the Cathedral* will also immediately note the ways in which Eliot appropriated this play's use of symbolic characters (such as Death, Kindred, and Beauty) as the Three Tempters in his own work.

John Milton's *Samson Agonistes* (1671) is, like Eliot's play, a religious drama in verse. The play examines the captivity of Samson (the Biblical hero) among the Philistines and his desire to strengthen his faith in God.

Barry Unsworth's 1995 novel *Morality Play* offers a look at the performers of such medieval dramatic fare and raises questions similar to those found in Eliot's play, specifically, the ways in which the law of man—as opposed to the law of God—can he corrupted and suited to the desires of those in power.

Sophocles's *Antigone,* a tragedy written in the 5th century B .C, is very much like *Murder in the Cathedral* in its exploration of a conflict between human and divine law. The play also features a Chorus much like that found in Eliot's play.

Eliot's verse, particularly *"The Love Song ofJ. Alfred Prufrock,"' 'Journey of the Magi"* and *The Waste Land* shares many themes found in *Murder in the Cathedral,* such as individual spiritual decay, the desire to be led by a higher authority than man and fear of the unknown.

Further Study

Ackroyd, Peter *T. S. ElwfA Life,* Simon and Schuster, 1984, p 227

Although Ackroyd's book is an unauthorized biography, it does offer a general study of Eliot's growth as a poet and dramatist

Eliot, T. S *Selected Poems,* Harcourt Brace, 1964. This is a compact edition of Ehot's verse, containing such famous poems as "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock," "The Hollow Men," and "The Waste Land " Reading these poems will give a student of *Murder in the Cathedral* a glimpse at how similar thematic concerns are explored in different forms

Grant, Michael, Editor. *T S. Eliot The Critical Heritage,* Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1982, pp 313-34

This book collects a number of reviews of the original Canterbury Festival production of the play.

Hinchchffe, Arnold P. *T. S Eliot. Plays. A Casebook,* Macmillan, 1985.

This book contains a long introductory collection of essays titled "Ehot's Aims and Achievements" and then devotes a chapter to each play. There are many excerpts in this book by Eliot himself.

Malamud, Randy. *T. S Ehot's Drama. A Research and Production Sourcebook,* Greenwood Press, 1992.

This is an invaluable book for any student of Ehot's plays. It contains a long introduction explonng Ehot's aims in writing verse drama, chapters on the production history of each play and a full annotated bibliography.

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BOOKRAGS

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Introduction

Purpose of the Book

The purpose of Drama for Students (DfS) is to provide readers with a guide to understanding, enjoying, and studying novels by giving them easy access to information about the work. Part of Gale's□For Students□ Literature line, DfS is specifically designed to meet the curricular needs of high school and undergraduate college students and their teachers, as well as the interests of general readers and researchers considering specific novels. While each volume contains entries on □classic□ novels

frequently studied in classrooms, there are also entries containing hard-to-find information on contemporary novels, including works by multicultural, international, and women novelists.

The information covered in each entry includes an introduction to the novel and the novel's author; a plot summary, to help readers unravel and understand the events in a novel; descriptions of important characters, including explanation of a given character's role in the novel as well as discussion about that character's relationship to other characters in the novel; analysis of important themes in the novel; and an explanation of important literary techniques and movements as they are demonstrated in the novel.

In addition to this material, which helps the readers analyze the novel itself, students are also provided with important information on the literary and historical background informing each work. This includes a historical context essay, a box comparing the time or place the novel was written to modern Western culture, a critical overview essay, and excerpts from critical essays on the novel. A unique feature of DfS is a specially commissioned critical essay on each novel, targeted toward the student reader.

To further aid the student in studying and enjoying each novel, information on media adaptations is provided, as well as reading suggestions for works of fiction and nonfiction on similar themes and topics. Classroom aids include ideas for research papers and lists of critical sources that provide additional material on the novel.

Selection Criteria

The titles for each volume of DfS were selected by surveying numerous sources on teaching literature and analyzing course curricula for various school districts. Some of the sources surveyed included: literature anthologies; Reading Lists for College-Bound Students: The Books Most Recommended by America's Top Colleges; textbooks on teaching the novel; a College Board survey of novels commonly studied in high schools; a National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE) survey of novels commonly studied in high schools; the NCTE's Teaching Literature in High School: The Novel;and the Young Adult Library Services Association (YALSA) list of best books for young adults of the past twenty-five years. Input was also solicited from our advisory board, as well as educators from various areas. From these discussions, it was determined that each volume should have a mix of □classic□ novels (those works commonly taught in literature classes) and contemporary novels for which information is often hard to find. Because of the interest in expanding the canon of literature, an emphasis was also placed on including works by international, multicultural, and women authors. Our advisory board members□educational professionals□ helped pare down the list for each volume. If a work was not selected for the present volume, it was often noted as a possibility for a future volume. As always, the editor welcomes suggestions for titles to be included in future volumes.

How Each Entry Is Organized

Each entry, or chapter, in DfS focuses on one novel. Each entry heading lists the full name of the novel, the author's name, and the date of the novel's publication. The following elements are contained in each entry:

- Introduction: a brief overview of the novel which provides information about its first appearance, its literary standing, any controversies surrounding the work, and major conflicts or themes within the work.
- Author Biography: this section includes basic facts about the author's life, and focuses on events and times in the author's life that inspired the novel in question.
- Plot Summary: a factual description of the major events in the novel. Lengthy summaries are broken down with subheads.
- Characters: an alphabetical listing of major characters in the novel. Each character name is followed by a brief to an extensive description of the character's role in the novel, as well as discussion of the character's actions, relationships, and possible motivation. Characters are listed alphabetically by last name. If a character is unnamed□for instance, the narrator in Invisible Man-the character is listed as □The Narrator□ and alphabetized as □Narrator.□ If a character's first name is the only one given, the name will appear alphabetically by that name. □ Variant names are also included for each character. Thus, the full name □Jean Louise Finch□ would head the listing for the narrator of To Kill a Mockingbird, but listed in a separate cross-reference would be the nickname □Scout Finch.□
- Themes: a thorough overview of how the major topics, themes, and issues are addressed within the novel. Each theme discussed appears in a separate subhead, and is easily accessed through the boldface entries in the Subject/Theme Index.
- Style: this section addresses important style elements of the novel, such as setting, point of view, and narration; important literary devices used, such as imagery, foreshadowing, symbolism; and, if applicable, genres to which the work might have belonged, such as Gothicism or Romanticism. Literary terms are explained within the entry, but can also be found in the Glossary.
- Historical Context: This section outlines the social, political, and cultural climate in which the author lived and the novel was created. This section may include descriptions of related historical events, pertinent aspects of daily life in the culture, and the artistic and literary sensibilities of the time in which the work was written. If the novel is a historical work, information regarding the time in which the novel is set is also included. Each section is broken down with helpful subheads.
- Critical Overview: this section provides background on the critical reputation of the novel, including bannings or any other public controversies surrounding the work. For older works, this section includes a history of how the novel was first received and how perceptions of it may have changed over the years; for more recent novels, direct quotes from early reviews may also be included.
- Criticism: an essay commissioned by DfS which specifically deals with the novel and is written specifically for the student audience, as well as excerpts from previously published criticism on the work (if available).

- Sources: an alphabetical list of critical material quoted in the entry, with full bibliographical information.
- Further Reading: an alphabetical list of other critical sources which may prove useful for the student. Includes full bibliographical information and a brief annotation.

In addition, each entry contains the following highlighted sections, set apart from the main text as sidebars:

- Media Adaptations: a list of important film and television adaptations of the novel, including source information. The list also includes stage adaptations, audio recordings, musical adaptations, etc.
- Topics for Further Study: a list of potential study questions or research topics dealing with the novel. This section includes questions related to other disciplines the student may be studying, such as American history, world history, science, math, government, business, geography, economics, psychology, etc.
- Compare and Contrast Box: an □at-a-glance□ comparison of the cultural and historical differences between the author's time and culture and late twentieth century/early twenty-first century Western culture. This box includes pertinent parallels between the major scientific, political, and cultural movements of the time or place the novel was written, the time or place the novel was set (if a historical work), and modern Western culture. Works written after 1990 may not have this box.
- What Do I Read Next?: a list of works that might complement the featured novel or serve as a contrast to it. This includes works by the same author and others, works of fiction and nonfiction, and works from various genres, cultures, and eras.

Other Features

DfS includes □The Informed Dialogue: Interacting with Literature,□ a foreword by Anne Devereaux Jordan, Senior Editor for Teaching and Learning Literature (TALL), and a founder of the Children's Literature Association. This essay provides an enlightening look at how readers interact with literature and how Drama for Students can help teachers show students how to enrich their own reading experiences.

A Cumulative Author/Title Index lists the authors and titles covered in each volume of the DfS series.

A Cumulative Nationality/Ethnicity Index breaks down the authors and titles covered in each volume of the DfS series by nationality and ethnicity.

A Subject/Theme Index, specific to each volume, provides easy reference for users who may be studying a particular subject or theme rather than a single work. Significant subjects from events to broad themes are included, and the entries pointing to the specific theme discussions in each entry are indicated in boldface.

Each entry has several illustrations, including photos of the author, stills from film adaptations (if available), maps, and/or photos of key historical events.

Citing Drama for Students

When writing papers, students who quote directly from any volume of Drama for Students may use the following general forms. These examples are based on MLA style; teachers may request that students adhere to a different style, so the following examples may be adapted as needed. When citing text from DfS that is not attributed to a particular author (i.e., the Themes, Style, Historical Context sections, etc.), the following format should be used in the bibliography section:

□Night.□ Drama for Students. Ed. Marie Rose Napierkowski. Vol. 4. Detroit: Gale, 1998. 234-35.

When quoting the specially commissioned essay from DfS (usually the first piece under the □Criticism□ subhead), the following format should be used:

Miller, Tyrus. Critical Essay on □Winesburg, Ohio.□ Drama for Students. Ed. Marie Rose Napierkowski. Vol. 4. Detroit: Gale, 1998. 335-39.

When quoting a journal or newspaper essay that is reprinted in a volume of DfS, the following form may be used:

Malak, Amin. □Margaret Atwood's □The Handmaid's Tale and the Dystopian Tradition,□ Canadian Literature No. 112 (Spring, 1987), 9-16; excerpted and reprinted in Drama for Students, Vol. 4, ed. Marie Rose Napierkowski (Detroit: Gale, 1998), pp. 133-36.

When quoting material reprinted from a book that appears in a volume of DfS, the following form may be used:

Adams, Timothy Dow. □Richard Wright: □Wearing the Mask,□ in Telling Lies in Modern American Autobiography (University of North Carolina Press, 1990), 69-83; excerpted and reprinted in Novels for Students, Vol. 1, ed. Diane Telgen (Detroit: Gale, 1997), pp. 59-61.

We Welcome Your Suggestions

The editor of Drama for Students welcomes your comments and ideas. Readers who wish to suggest novels to appear in future volumes, or who have other suggestions, are cordially invited to contact the editor. You may contact the editor via email at: ForStudentsEditors@gale.com. Or write to the editor at:

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