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## **Drama and Liturgy: A Critical Assessment of T.S. Eliot's *Murder in the Cathedral***

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### **Abstract:**

Drama in Europe has its origin in religious practices and in the 20<sup>th</sup> century the credit goes to Eliot for reviving it in its original form. Before Eliot wrote his full length play *Murder in the Cathedral*, he had already tried his hand at writing dramatic verses in *Sweeney Agonistes* and *The Rock*. In these experimental pieces, Eliot has portrayed the life of spiritually barren people and the stifling impact that materialistic culture has on human soul. The play also exhibits the conflict between religious and secular spheres of human life. The language of the play is highly liturgical with numerous Biblical references with the basic skeleton that enacts the crucifixion. Pride, the greatest sin has been shown in its subtlest sinister form that can entrap even the most ennobled souls. Becket, a replica of the Christ struggles to overcome it with a great epiphanical stroke of understanding. The play is deeply religious in its form as well as content as compared with the later plays of Eliot which verge on secularism.

**Keywords: Christianity, Myth, Ritual, Sin, Martyrdom, Mass, Drama.**

Eliot's career as an enthusiastic dramatist began only in his later phase. Consequently, religious and spiritual preoccupations dominate his early plays. The later plays - *The Cocktail Party*, *The Confidential Clerk* and *The Elder Statesman* - are becoming worldlier, sometimes on the verge of being secular. David E. Chinitz rightly observes:

Eliot's decision to work on *The Rock* marks the end of a phase of his career that had opened up with his public announcement (in 1928) of his religious conversion - a period in which he was generally preoccupied with defining a Christian view of Culture and was more concerned with the gulf between "orthodoxy" and "heterodoxy" than with divide between high culture and the popular. This phase culminates in the grim disputations of *After Strange Gods*, a series of lectures given at the University of Virginia in early 1933 (132).

Furthermore, like his criticism, Eliot's dramatic work springs from his poetry; it is an offshoot of the strong dramatic element in his poetry. His poetry and plays cannot be kept separately in different compartments; the plays grow out of his poetic preoccupations. A piece of external evidence is that one of the sources of "Burnt Norton" was the discarded fragment of *Murder in the Cathedral*. Years later Eliot recollected:

There were lines and fragments that were discarded in the course of the production of *Murder in the Cathedral*. 'Can't get them over on the stage', said the producer, and I humbly bowed to his judgment. However these fragments stayed in my mind and gradually & saw a poem shaping itself round them: in the end it came out as 'Burnt Norton'. (qtd in George Pimpton 190).

Apart from that Eliot again pointed out in an interview, when he turned to the theatre, the experience of "writing plays . . . made a difference to the writing of the Four Quartets" (*Writers at Work* 104). Thus, admittedly there is some interaction between Eliot's poetry and plays. And this interaction was not on the level of style and presentation only. One can see how the themes of the middle and the late poetry, which themselves are modifications of his early themes, overflow into the plays.

As in his early poetry, in his plays also Eliot followed the mythical method about which he had spoken in his review of Joyce's *Ulysses*. The chief advantage of this method was seen to be that "it makes the modern world possible for art" (*Dial* 483). Thus, whether in a historical setting of *Murder in the Cathedral* or in the contemporary setting of the others plays, there is an underlying mythical pattern. *Murder in the Cathedral* is based on the Agamemnon myth, whereas *The Family Reunion* is a modern adaptation of the myth of Orestes. *The Cocktail Party* looks back to Euripides' *Alcestis*. In *The Confidential Clerk* Eliot again goes back to Euripides' play *Ion*, while *The Elder Statesman* is in a way a re-enactment of Sophocles' *Oedipus at Colonus*. Myth and allusion, thus, form the substructure of his dramatic text. So, when Eliot switched from the private realm of poetry to the public medium of drama, he took care to dilute the presence of myth and allusion in his work.

Like his poetry Eliot in his plays is also primarily interested in the condition of people with spiritual awareness and their encounter with those who are indifferent to any transcendental dimension of life. In the discussion of *Sweeney Agonistes*, Carol Smith points out:

He (Eliot) expresses in this fragmentary piece the theme which . . . was to be his throughout virtually of all his dramatic work; the dilemma of the spiritually aware individuals forced to exist in a world unaware of spiritual reality . . . (12).

Eliot had spoken of such spiritually unaware people in various contexts earlier. For instance, he had characterized them as people undone by death in *The Waste Land*, later on they became 'the hollow men'. In his essay 'Baudelaire', Eliot again spoke about them as those who are dehumanized by their moral neutrality. It is in the company of these 'waste-landers' that a sensitive soul is forced to exist. The modern civilization fostered a split in intellect and emotion about which Eliot was profoundly and keenly aware of. Origin of this compartmentalization of life lies in the separation of religion, philosophy and art. Eliot writes, "the artistic sensibility, the religious by its separation from the artistic" (NTDC 26).

Eliot produced his first unfinished work *Sweeney Agonistes: Fragments of an Aristophanic Melodrama* in 1932. This specific experiment in drama is known only in fragments - 'Fragments of a Prologue' and 'Fragments of an Agon' - having Sweeney as one of the characters speaking about life and death and hinting at some of the moral and ethical ideas of its creator. These fragments were not written with actual performance in mind. So *Sweeney Agonistes* simply remains an experiment in speech rather than in form. It is made out of characters supplied by our shallow civilized society. The origin of *Sweeney Agonistes*, (1926-27) as Arnold Bennett has recorded, was in a desire to write a drama of modern life in a rhythmic prose by Eliot.

Like *Sweeney Agonistes*, *The Rock* is also a step for Eliot to enter the world of theatre. *The Rock* is not a drama; it is a pageant written for the stage. The play was performed at Sadler's wells with the immediate object of raising money for the forty five Churches fund of the Diocese of London. The choruses of the pageant play have been included in the collected poems of Eliot.

Having done his experiments in writing drama, Eliot was fully equipped to write a full length play. Some of the audience, who had attended *The Rock*, were convinced that Eliot could write for the stage. George Bell, the supervisor of the Canterbury Festival, requested Eliot to write a play for the occasion. In this way, once the commission was done on the part of Eliot, the choice of subject was of paramount concern. Eliot decided to work on Thomas Becket despite knowing the fact that it would be a repetition because Becket had been the protagonist for the last three times. So, it was a challenging task for Eliot to give a new dimension to the subject that is the martyrdom of Becket. However, Eliot, by his literary practice and preaching, had proved that a writer should be insightful enough to use past in a productive manner. Becket was a representative of the middle ages, so Eliot had to work on discovering or inventing something which should appeal to the twentieth century audience.

Eliot imbibed in his writings the mythical method. He had exploited it successfully in his poetry but now it had to be applied to the plays also. Eliot's sense of tradition enabled him to understand the simultaneity of the past and the present. Elaborating this idea, Eliot asserts.

The historical sense compels a man to write not merely with his own generation in his bones, but with a feeling that the whole of the literature of Europe from Homer and within it the whole of the literature of his own country has a simultaneous existence and composes a simultaneous order (*ECT* 295).

From the beginning Eliot's fundamental demand was to write drama in which "whatever means of communication the dramatist is going to use; the drama . . . must give perception of life" (*The Rock* 135). The pursuit of order related to this growing religious awareness led him to search for such means of artistic communication that would allow him to present the order in his plays. Myth and ritual provided perfect vehicles for affecting this type of presentation. Eliot had firm conviction that poetic drama must provide genuine human emotions and for the same he wanted to have an element of ritual in his plays.

Ritual, cannot account for itself, for it is pre-logical, or even pre-verbal and in a sense pre-human. Ritual links human life to the biological dependence on the natural cycle which plants and animals still have. Rituals cluster around the cyclical movements of the sun, the moon, the seasons, and human life. Every crucial periodicity of experience: dawn, sunset, seed-time, harvest, birth, initiation, marriage and death get rituals attached to them. Northope Frye asserts:

Everything in nature that we think of as having some analogy with works of art like the flower or the bird's song, grows out of synchronization between an organism and the rhythms of its natural environment, especially that of the solar year. With animals some experiences of synchronization, like the mating dances of birds, could almost be called rituals. Myth is more distinctively human, as the most intelligent partridge cannot tell even the most absurd story explaining why it drums in the mating season (107).

Mythical element has a power of independent communication; it is obvious not only in the example of *Oedipus*, but in any folktale. Thus ritual is the archetypal aspect of mythos, and the use of mythos in a work of art is a means of ordering experience in the chaos of the modern world. "Using the myth . . . is simply a way of controlling, of ordering, of giving a shape and a significance to the immense panorama of futility and anarchy which is contemporary history" (*Critiques and Essays on Modern Fiction* 426). Myth can give a simple rendering of the human soul by virtue of its long tradition.

Elements of myth and ritual are present in abundance in *Murder in the Cathedral*. Eliot had intentionally chosen the frame work of a Greek myth which implicitly helps the audience in understanding the course of the play. It is not hard to find a parallel between the story of Becket in his cathedral and Oedipus in the sacred wood. The hero of *Murder in the Cathedral* as well as the hero of

Sophocles' *Oedipus at Kolonos*, maintain the same attitude towards life. It is significant to mention the central theme of *Oedipus at Kolonos* as devised by Sophocles. "It begins with the third example of the new technique that he had developed in *Elektra* and *Philoktetes* the arrival of strangers at a place that is terrible and awe-inspiring, and their gradual engagement with the inhabitants of that place" (Ewans XIIV). Becket's course of action is not very different from that of Oedipus. Both of them are made to subject themselves to various kinds of temptations to leave the spot. Both are compelled to recapitulate their past while undergoing these trials. They remain adamant unless they meet with a glorious death - death which redeems their land. And even people surrounding them fail to understand them.

However, this is the underlying pattern of the play. The surface level of the play is a dramatization of the historical extent of the martyrdom of Thomas Becket, and it is both a psychological study of a saint and a portrayal of a contemporary struggle of church and state. *Murder in the Cathedral* was composed for the Canterbury Festival of June 1935. Eliot knew that he was addressing a limited audience of Christian people in the Christian Theatre. Nevil Coghill has aptly observed that Eliot, through this play, "is showing us his vision of the need and nature of sanctity in a politically and materially dominated world, and has found in the life of Thomas Becket, an example that he exactly embodies his vision that he can declare it without factual misrepresentation of history" (17).

Eliot made it clear in his lecture "Poetry and Drama" that in *Murder in the Cathedral* he was not concerned with history but with the experience of martyrdom of the Archbishop Thomas Becket. It is a drama in which "A man comes home, foreseeing that he will be killed. . . . I wanted to concentrate on death and martyrdom" (*OPP* 81-82). Consequently, Eliot leaves out historical details and limits the number of characters to only a few. Except Thomas, Eliot does not mention even the name of other characters. Only towards the end of the play the names of the Knights are made known. This turns the dramatic focus entirely on Becket and the chorus of women. The chorus represents the sense of sin and fate with a modification of dependence on Christ, the saviour. The characterization of Becket embodies the notion of sainthood a crucifixion.

The play opens at the critical moment of the expected arrival of Archbishop Thomas to Canterbury after his seven years in France. The danger latent in the event is voiced by the chorus of the Canterbury women who are drawn towards the Cathedral under the presentiment of an act their eyes are compelled to witness. These humble people are in the grip of a nameless fear which has driven them to church for shelter there against the danger which is apprehended immediately descending upon the church itself like a bolt from the blue. The words are significant because that the Chorus represents common humanity as distinguished from the saint. The chorus therefore concludes: "For us the poor,

there is no action. /But only to wait, and to witness" (*CPP* 240). The Priests are startled to know that the Archbishop has already landed on English soil and they must make haste to welcome him in the Church. The first priest is alarmed about the security of the Church as he recalls the character and career of his master. Becket rose suddenly into power and prosperity, which bred in him pride, a flaw that his subsequent fall and adversity have served only to confirm. The second Priest strikes a more cheerful note that their lord has come back to dispel their dismay and doubt. He is in amity with the Pope and the king of France and can prove for his flock, a rock, a firm foothold against the ever shifting balance of forces of barons and land-holders. So they should rejoice and give a right, royal welcome to their Archbishop.

The chorus of the humble women cannot endure this doom. For seven years they have been living a life full of hardships. This living, a living on the physical plane merely, but they have been content with it. They have had their fears, but they were private shadows of past regrets and future uncertainties. They, therefore, implore the Archbishop to leave them alone in their obscurity and not implicate them in his doom. These poor women are rebuked by the second priest for striking a rude, discordant and whining note in the midst of the general rejoicing in honour of the home coming of their Archbishop, who may arrive any moment. Thomas appears at the juncture and reprimands the ignorant priest for his harshness towards the pious women, who, in their exaltation, are uttering truths they do not know, and which he (the priest) cannot understand. The core of Thomas's experience is contained in his highly paradoxical and philosophical speech on action and suffering in which he refers to the predicament of the Chorus:

They know and do not know, what is to act or suffer  
They know and do not know, that action is suffering,  
And suffering is 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 may will it.  
That the pattern may subsist, for the pattern is action  
And the suffering, that the wheel may turn and still  
Be forever still (*CPP* 245).

It prefigures the entire drama of martyrdom that takes place in the soul of the protagonist. Grover Smith in his work *T.S. Eliot's Poetry and Plays* analyses the paradox of action and suffering in terms of causality:

That every cause predicates an effect, and every effect a cause; they cannot occur independently. . . He must only consent to the divine will, so that he shall suffer and shall become for suffering in others the involuntary agent. Both action and suffering come from God as the unsuffering "first agent" or first cause of action. Aristotle, in speaking of the nature of movement (analogous to action), which it is moved, to the unmoved center which in a wheel imparts motion to the rim. For everything is moved by pushing and pulling. Hence just as in the case of a wheel, so here there must be a point which remains at rest, and from that point the movement must originate (188).

The second priest is little enlightened by the lofty speech but humbly welcomes his master and assures him that he has kept his things in proper order. Thomas, however, hints that Canterbury is no more a haven of rest and security; the birds of prey are already hovering over his head. There is "little rest in Canterbury". The course of future action is clearly outlined by Thomas himself:

End will be simple, sudden, God-given  
 Meanwhile the substance of our first act  
 Will be shadows, and the strife with shadow  
 Heavier the interval, than the consummation  
 All things prepare the event (*CPP* 246).

The shadows are embodied in the four tempters who appear before the Archbishop one after another. The first Tempter who comes to match his "levity" with Thomas's youth, when he was "a gay Tom" and feasted himself full on the delights of the senses, spending the days in pleasure and the nights with "wit, wine and wisdom". The second tempter, representing the lust for political power which Thomas once tasted to the full, now makes his appearance before the Ex-chancellor. He advises him to make capital out of his amity with the King, resume his chancellorship, guide the state again, attain to the height of glory in his life and secure a magnificent movement after his death. As the tempter quits him with a muttered prediction about the doom which will soon overtake his soaring pride, Thomas meditates upon the failure of temporal to build order in the world. As soon as he has convinced himself, the third Tempter puts in his appearance as a country gentleman, representative of the barons, a Norman of true breed, a rough, straightforward Englishman. He says that reconciliation with the King is no more

possible and Thomas cannot oppose the king single handed. He, therefore, invites Thomas to join hands with the barons, procure the blessing and protection of the Pope for the barons, companionship of liberty, and thus serve the interest of both England and the Church of Rome. Thomas bluntly tells him that if he cannot trust the King, he has less reason to trust his enemies.

As soon as Thomas refuses him, the Fourth, and the sole unexpected, Tempter appears with "well done Thomas", you are "hard to bend". He says to the surprised Archbishop, "you know me, but have never seen my face" (*CPP* 253). He symbolizes Thomas's secret wish for glory which martyrdom may bring to him, but which even Thomas has only half-perceived in fitful glimpses. He says that other tempters have sought to seduce him with pleasure of the senses and political power, exercises which are futile because his breach with the king can never be healed. Temporal glory is uncertain and the height attained through force and policy is slippery and can be only precariously maintained amid wars, conspiracies and misfortunes. But the Archbishop has in his hand, power of unlimited possibilities:

Saint and Martyr rule from the tomb.  
Think, Thomas, think of enemies dismayed,  
Creeping in penance frightened of a shade;  
Think of pilgrims, standing in line  
Before the glittering Jewelled shrine,  
.....  
.....  
Think of the miracles, by God's grace,  
And think of your enemies, in another place (*CPP* 254).

These words have a startling effect on the soul of Thomas. He realizes that these thoughts have often come to his mind. But these thoughts have often been crossed by doubts and misgivings arising from the certainty of mutation in the world under which a time may come when his shrine is pillaged and destroyed and all its gold distributed among the King's concubines. The saint may be deserted by the faithful and forgotten by the people, or if remembered at all, remembered only as a relic of the dead past. Thomas is moved to explain "is there no enduring crown to be won?" (*CPP* 255), and the Tempter is quick to reply: "Yes, Thomas yes, you have thought of that too," and throws the last trap to catch Thomas:

Seek the way of martyrdom, make yourself the Lowest

On earth to be high in heaven  
And see far off below you, where the gulf is fixed.  
Your persecutors in timeless torment  
Parched passion, beyond expiation (*CPP* 255)

Thomas suddenly wakes up in the horror and realizes the sinister significance of his dream of heavenly glory, which is really a dream of damnation.

This Tempter is also conquered but with great difficulty and doubt. In the beginning Thomas regarded himself as the actor and the Chorus as the sufferer. But now he realizes that the only actor or compulsive will is God himself, and that the saint is a sufferer under God, just as the women of Canterbury are sufferers as witnesses to his martyrdom. Thomas is silent for seventy four lines when the Tempters, the Priests, and the Chorus speak alternately to project the futility and chaos that threaten to engulf the whole world. At the end of his silence Thomas comes out with the statement:

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 (*CPP* 258).

He concludes his speech with a resolution: "I shall no longer act or suffer to the sword's end" (*CPP* 258). But what went on in Thomas's soul during the silence is a matter of speculation. It is possible that he went through the "Dark Night of the Soul" which is a state of complete desirelessness, passivity and inactivity. Thomas is now prepared for the crisis and the Chorus utters its premonition of approaching danger in frenzied cry. So the characterization of Becket embodies the notion of sainthood and crucifixion. Further, pride is considered to be the greatest sin in Christianity and Becket struggles to get over his pride. So far as the language of the play is concerned it verges on liturgy. Biblical phrases and sentences are in abundance. F.O. Matthiessen aptly observes:

The varied movement of its long lines seems often to have sprung from the response of the poet's ear to the cadences of the Bible and the Catholic Mass. As a result it demonstrates at last the fruitfulness of the belief that Eliot voiced in his "Dialogue on Dramatic Poetry" in 1928, that the essentially dramatic quality a Church ritual might again furnish a stimulation and release for poetic drama (309).

At the end of the first part the Saint has developed the right attitude towards martyrdom, an attitude which is explained by the Archbishop in the Sermon, which comes in the interlude and forms the crux of theme. The subject of the Sermon is the Christian view of martyrdom, and it is quite appropriately preached by the saint on Christmas morning, 1170.

The Archbishop dwells on the paradox of Christmas celebrations by the Church. It is the birthday of the saviour, whose coming to the earth was announced by heavenly angels to the Shepherds at Bethlehem, as a symbol of God's glory in heaven, and of peace to all good men. It is naturally a day of rejoicing. But on this very day people also participate in the ritual of Mass's which is an enactment of Christ's crucifixion and of his passion which preceded it. The celebration of the birth and death of the Saviour together on the same day is a matching of joy and sorrow in a bond of union. The Archbishop asks them to probe more closely into the heart of the paradox. Thomas ends his speech with the hint that people of Canterbury may have another martyr in a short time

The audience can find the expression of their anxiety in the chorus of the women of Canterbury. Through the Chorus the audience can participate in the celebration of the act of martyrdom. Becket's Christmas Sermon provides an opportunity for direct participation in the act of worship and spiritual communion. In the second part of the play the audience almost turns into a congregation. It assumes an aura of the ceremony of the mass. Eliot expressed an ideal for a relationship between theatre and religious ceremony, between dramatic experience and religious experience in his essay on "A Dialogue on Dramatic Poetry" (1928). One of the speakers (E), at one point, asserts:

I say that the consummation of the drama, the perfect and ideal drama, is to be found in the ceremony of the Mass. I say . . . that drama springs from religious liturgy. . . . But when drama has hanged as far as it has in our own day, is not the only solution to return to religious liturgy? And the only dramatic satisfaction I find now is in a High Mass well performed. Have you not there everything necessary? And indeed, if you consider the ritual of the Church during the cycle of the year, you have the complete drama represented. The Mass is a small drama, having all the unities; but in the church year you have represented the full drama of creation (SE 35).

Through this dialogue form Eliot intends to establish that drama has an essential relation to religious liturgy. So, such a drama that is rooted in religion should echo the liturgical rhythms of the Mass and the Church years. Consequently, *Murder in the Cathedral* abounds in liturgical rhythms. In the central part of the play there is a sermon at a Christmas Mass. There are obvious references to Reverend Saints and celebrations of their lives according to the Christian calendar.

In this way drama and Mass are structurally identified in the Interlude sermon. The sermon can be said to have a parallel with the Christ addressing the congregation on the Mount which immediately followed his temptation in the desert, as Becket's sermon is followed by his temptation. About the liturgical aspect of the play David Jones opines:

He (Eliot) has shown how drama can still be an instrument of community in two senses corresponding to its original function as an extension of the liturgy and as an interpretation of God's word in terms of flesh and blood. For the purpose of his play, the audience becomes a congregation, having interpreted to it the significance of martyrdom and being invited to participate in the celebration of an act of martyrdom (79).

Since a liturgical act intends to celebrate the glory of God, Eliot incorporates dramatic form into liturgical form. This purpose is accomplished here by a virtual incorporation of the liturgy through a multitude of liturgical texts and allusions, a comprehensive liturgical patterning of the action and the conversion of the audience of the drama into a worshipping congregation. One must be aware of this transformation if one understands the structure, the dominant theme, and the purpose of the drama which expresses more directly than any other the seriousness of Eliot's mind, the depth of his religious scholarship, and the quality and precision of his verse.

However, before contemplating over the relationship between *Murder in the Cathedral* and the liturgy, we must look into the fundamental issues of form and purpose. According to Jungmann a play intends to entertain and edify the audience but the Mass as a liturgical action, with a fixed and familiar structure, directed not to human audience but to God, an action performed for the glory of God, and affecting the will of the audience. Therefore, a tension between two forms - dramatic and liturgical/ritual - occurs at the very centre of *Murder in the Cathedral*. This tension is discernible in Eliot's decision to write a drama on the subject of martyrdom. As Thomas suggests in the Interlude, the death of a martyr is a "smaller figure" of the death of Christ; a drama on that subject is therefore likely to be a "smaller figure" of the Mass, the re-enactment of Christ's sacrifice. Undoubtedly, the subject attracts liturgical treatment but a drama has to be different from a Mass. About the conformity of the structure of the play and the Mass Robert W. Ayers Observes:

In this drama as in a Mass, of course, there are two parts separated by a sermon. The first of the Mass, called the Mass of Catechumens or the Liturgy of the Word, is instructional and preparational in character, and confession and repentance are dominant themes as the priests and the congregation examines their

consciences in order to determine whether their attitude is worthy of participation in the sacrifice to come (580).

The chorus opens the second part with comments upon the meaning of the peace proclaimed by the hosts of heaven at the time of Christ's birth, in terms of the actual conditions prevailing upon the earth at that juncture. It is the season of the Saviour's birth, but there is no peace on the earth or good will among men. The peace of the world will be precarious unless men keep the peace of God.

The priests now enter in a procession each with a flag of a martyr saint, chanting lines from their accounts in the Bible. The first priest has the flag of saint Stephen. The first martyr (December 26) and chants the lines about the circumstances of the saint's martyrdom to which the kings were silent and false witnesses, but the man of God prayed for divine forgiveness for their sin. The second appears with the flag of St. John, martyred on December 27, and chant the words of the Apostle to the congregation. John was the Apostle who had seen the divine descending to the earth in concrete human form uttering human speech. So the priests carrying "a series of Introits and banners celebrating the Church year moving on from Christmas through the feast days of St. Stephen, St. John and Holy Innocents preparing for the feast day of St. Thomas himself . . ." (Robinson 32).

Hence, the day of martyrdom appears to be like other days in the calendar. But every day may be the day of crisis, the day when the glory of God manifests itself and the divine pattern is revealed by the "sordid particulars" of which the four knights, who appear before the Priests, are the most single example for out of their evil good will come by the grace of God. The Four knights are duplication of the four Tempters of Thomas. As the Priests depart, the knights reach and three of them start abusing and insulting Thomas, as the Roman soldiers are said to have done before crucifying Christ. Then they begin to impeach him publicly with accusations of treason against the king of England. The Knights, then, present him with the command of the King to leave the kingdom with his servants. This long, acrimonious debate is dramatically important. It builds the historical background to lend a plausible justification to the murder of Thomas; it throws light on the change in Thomas's character.

The beastliness is seen everywhere; on the farms and in the market places, in the veins and skulls of men, in the plotting and councils of Kings and statesmen. The agony of the women here comes from recognizing the degradation of humanity into the animal. Elsewhere also Eliot has stressed the community of sin so long we attach ourselves to worldly objects and surrender our wills to temporal ends. It is relevant to quote the illuminating analysis of these "death bringers", Chorus by Martz:

Eliot is creating here the visions of a universe without order, a vision given in the only way in which "the type of common man

can realize it, by All the "quickened senses". The order of time is Abolished: the merry fluting of a summer's after Noon is heard at night "the owl" shallow note of death. Bats with the huge scaly wings of Lucifer slant over the noon sky. . . . The threat of death exists even in the most delicate flowers. And with this disorder humanity feels its involvement . . . (21).

But, as Thomas explains to them, out of this confusion the glory of God will suddenly burst forth and overpower them with ecstasy. The Priests now come rushing in a panic and implore the Archbishop to take shelter at the altar, for the "death bringers" are coming back armed. But Thomas replies to them in a calm, unperturbed tone "I have therefore only to perfect my will" (*CPP* 271).

The perfection of will lies in the complete surrender of the human will to the will of God, which learns the soul detached from desire. But the Priests are unable to understand it. They seize Thomas and drag him into the Cathedral. They seek after security by shutting the doors. But Thomas sternly commands them to fling the doors open, for he does not want the holy place turned into a baron's fortress. At last the cowering priests unbar the door and the Knights enter and advance towards Becket. They threaten Becket calling him a traitor. Becket's biblical retort is historical: "It is the just man who, like, the bold lion, should be without fear" (*CPP* 274). He is no Traitor to the king but a Christian, saved by the blood of Christ and ready to shed his own blood and to suffer martyrdom like him in repayment of that debt. This is the way of Church, redemption through one's blood, a paying back for Christ's blood in kind. Every martyr is a witness, as the word itself signifies, to the efficacy of Christ's sacrifice, a gesture of love in response to the Divine love revealed in Christ.

The last chorus represents the final resolution of the conflict, a jubilant celebration of the order that has been restored by the sacrifice of the saint. Thus, Eliot's religion rests on the fundamental humanitarian ideals and values. The purpose of life should transcend the material and superficial level of existence. Over all the play has very strong Christian complexion on both levels - content and language.

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