Murder in the Cathedral **by T .S .Eliot (PG 2ND SEM)**

It is a verse drama by T.S. Eliot, first performed in 1935, that portrays the assassination of Archbishop Thomas Becket in Canterbury Cathedral during the reign of Henry II in 1170. Eliot drew heavily on the writing of Edward Grim, a clerk who was an eyewitness to the event. **Thomas Stearns Eliot** (26 September 1888 – 4 January 1965) was a poet, essayist, publisher, playwright, literary critic and editor. Considered one of the 20th century's major poets, he is a central figure in English-language Modernist poetry.

Born in St. Louis, Missouri, to a prominent Boston Brahmin family, he moved to England in 1914 at the age of 25 and went on to settle, work, and marry there. He became a British citizen in 1927 at the age of 39, subsequently renouncing his American citizenship.]

Eliot first attracted widespread attention for his poem "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock" in 1915, which was received as a modernist masterpiece. It was followed by some of the best-known poems in the English language, including "The Waste Land" (1922), "The Hollow Men" (1925), "Ash Wednesday" (1930), and *Four Quartets* (1943).[5] He was also known for his seven plays, particularly *Murder in the Cathedral* (1935) and *The Cocktail Party* (1949). He was awarded the Nobel Prize in Literature in 1948, "for his outstanding, pioneer contribution to present-day poetry".Some material that the producer asked Eliot to remove or replace during the writing was transformed into the poem "Burnt Norton.

Character List

Thomas
Thomas Becket is the Archbishop of Canterbury and former Chancellor of England. Historically, he stood up against Henry II's demands that the Church subsume its authority to Henry's secular power, and ultimately died for the cause. In the play, he is represented as an overly proud and sanctimonious man who nevertheless transcends his weakness to accept martyrdom as God's will.

Chorus
The chorus of *Murder in the Cathedral* comprises the women of Canterbury. Poor, common, and plain, these women have lived a difficult but manageable life since Thomas was sent into exile seven years before the play begins. Though they are Catholic and respect the archbishop, they are also worried that his return will bring them a new level of spiritual burden. The play examines the way they come to accept their spiritual responsibilities through the example of Thomas's martyrdom.

Herald
A messenger who brings word that Thomas Becket has returned to England and will soon arrive in Canterbury. He has a premonition that Thomas's return presages violence.

First Priest
A nameless priest of Canterbury, characterized by his excessive mournfulness and worry. He continually sees the situation of Becket's return as one that can bring trouble for his people and their country.

Second Priest

A nameless priest of Canterbury, characterized by his pragmatism. He examines Becket's return based on its political ramifications and notes how Becket's clash with Henry reflects issues of land ownership and power, rather than spiritual dominion.

Third Priest

A nameless priest of Canterbury, characterized by his patience. Whereas the other priests worry about how Becket's return will change their lives, the Third Priest suggests that, as no human can understand the way the universe works, so should they remain patient and allow God to work his will upon the world.

First Tempter

The first man to tempt Thomas identifies himself as Old Tom. He is a friend from Becket's early, carefree days, and he tempts Thomas with the possibility of relinquishing his responsibilities in favor of a more libertine lifestyle.

Second Tempter

The second man to tempt Thomas identifies himself as a political ally from Thomas's days as Chancellor. He tempts Thomas to resume his role as Chancellor, arguing that Thomas could do more good for the poor through secular power than he ever could as a priest.

Third Tempter

Thomas does not know the third tempter, who identifies himself as a simple baron. He tempts Thomas with the possibility of ruling the country via a coalition that would split control between the nominal ruler and the barons.

Fourth Tempter

The Fourth Tempter is unexpected. Using subtle arguments, he tempts Thomas with the possibility of courting martyrdom for the sake of his reputation and glory. His temptation is powerful because it touches on something Thomas has wished in his private moments. By denying this temptation, Thomas prepares himself to accept martyrdom for the right reason.

First Knight

Though none of the four knights is particularly individualized before Becket's murder, the First Knight gives his name as Reginald Fitz Urse afterward when he addresses the audience. He claims he is a not a man of eloquence, and so mostly serves as a narrator during the knights' speeches.

Second Knight

Though none of the four knights is particularly individualized before Becket's murder, the Second Knight is introduced as William de Traci afterward. He presents an emotional argument, asking for pity on the grounds that, though the knights committed the murder, they were "disinterested" and merely did what was necessary for the English people as ordered by their king.

Third Knight

Though none of the four knights is particularly individualized before Becket's murder, the Third Knight is introduced as Hugh de Morville afterward. He presents a long, detailed argument that Becket was guilty of great offenses against the English people, and hence was it legal to murder him.

Fourth Knight

Though none of the four knights is particularly individualized before Becket's murder, the Fourth Knight is introduced as Richard Brito afterward. He presents the most subtle argument, claiming that Becket essentially committed suicide by facilitating his murder, and hence the knights are innocent of the crime.

Henry
King Henry II, though not a speaking character in the play, is a large influence on the action. Historically, he was an impetuous king who wanted to subsume the various factions of English power under the crown; the most contentious of these was the church, led in England by Thomas Becket. The knights arrive in his name, and he is cited frequently by those in the play who try to understand Becket's past and character.
Pope
Though not a speaking character in the play, Pope Alexander figures prominently. Historically, he was protecting Thomas Becket at the time of this play's action, allowing the archbishop to announce excommunications upon the English church. His protection is one of the many barriers between Thomas and Henry, and it gives Thomas a defense against the knights.

Murder in the Cathedral Summary and Analysis of Part I (up to Becket's entrance)

Summary

The first part of the play is set in the Archbishop's Hall on December 2nd, 1170. The Chorus – which comprises women of Canterbury, all commoners – enter and stand near the cathedral. They are uncertain what has drawn them to this place, but have a sense that something great and terrible will soon occur. They are extremely pessimistic about their lives and their potential for happiness. They explain that they are accustomed to suffering. In extremely poetic tones, they describe how the landscape has wizened as winter has come: "the land became/brown sharp points of death in a waste of water and mud" (175).
They then reflect on Thomas Becket, their Archbishop. It has been seven years since Thomas left in exile, and since then, they "have suffered various oppression,/ But mostly [they] are left to [their] own devices." They live a life that avoids controversy and conflict, since they are thereby left alone by people in power, even if that life has its share of misery. They are particularly concerned about the impending tragedy that they sense is coming, for it will cause them additional and undue challenges. They speak of spring as "ruinous" and summer as "disastrous." Realizing that God controls destiny and that neither they nor "statesman" can influence it, they resign themselves to simply "wait and to witness" (176-177).
Three priests enter the hall. The First Priest repeats the lament that Thomas has been gone seven years, and the Second Priest wonders aloud whether the religious power of Thomas and the Pope has any impact on the political intrigues that exist between the English King Henry and the French King. The Third Priest speaks harshly of worldly political concerns, since they are motivated by greed and personality rather than by justice. The First Priest worries that the "poor at the gate" (the Chorus) will be left behind in their spiritual lives because of such political chaos (177).
A Herald arrives, bringing news that Thomas has returned to England and will soon arrive in Canterbury. The First Priest hopes his return means he has made peace with Henry, but worries it might also mean impending war. The Herald confirms that Thomas has returned not because of a new peace, but from "pride and sorrow," backed by the French King, the Pope, and the legions of English people who celebrate him in the streets. Though no war has been declared, the Herald remembers Thomas's last words to Henry before his exile – "I leave you as a man/Whom in this life I shall not see again" – and worries this means violence will soon follow his return (178).
The Herald then leaves.

The First Priest immediately expresses his worry. He remembers how, when Thomas was Chancellor, he was "flattered by the King" but hated by the barons whose affairs he oversaw. In particular, it was Thomas's excessive virtue that made him both effective as Chancellor and hated by the barons, since that sanctimony left him "always isolated." The Second Priest insists that Thomas will give them political guidance and tell them how they should feel. The Third Priest begs for patience – "let the wheel turn… For who knows the end of good or evil?" (179).

The Chorus, who has listened to this entire exchange, does not wish to be embroiled in these questions. Instead, they wish for Thomas to return to France, since his return means they will be confronted by difficulty. They wish to simply "perish in quiet." They give a long litany of their daily lives, explaining the many challenges, miseries, and difficulties that have confronted them during the past seven years, and still they have gone on "living and partly living" (180). Though it is not a pleasant life, they understand it, whereas the disaster that might follow Thomas's return is beyond their comprehension. They repeat their desire for him to return to France and leave them to an existence of "living and partly living."

The Second Priest insults them for this attitude and asks them to "put on pleasant faces" to greet Thomas, who is soon to return (182).

Analysis

In telling the Becket story, Eliot drew less upon biographical material than upon classical forms of drama to explore his themes. In this opening section, before the protagonist enters, the play already establishes the dramatic context in which Becket's ultimate question – how will I accept martyrdom? – is staged. Here, Eliot establishes his use of Greek tragedy, medieval theology, and poetic verse as the tools to understanding his version of Becket. Additionally, the play's most central themes are introduced even before Becket enters.

The most notable influence on Eliot's style in *Murder in the Cathedral* is Greek tragedy. As noted below, he is not relying on a pastiche, and so any attempts to deliberately relate his structure to that of a tragedy are imperfect. However, by consciously appropriating some signature elements of tragedy (particularly from the early tragedies written by Aeschylus), Eliot provides some insight into his perspective.

Arguably the most important element of the play is the Chorus. In Greek tragedy, a chorus played a central purpose. Certainly, the heroes of Greek tragedies were 'great' men or women, people of power, prestige, and great ambitions. Even when the heroes were not entirely moral or just, they had big personalities and confronted life with strength and gusto. The chorus was important because it provided a context into which the decisions of these 'great men' were made. Their poetic speeches allowed the playwright to comment on the action, in effect explaining to the audience how he interpreted the myth he was telling. The chorus was also important because it allowed the actual theatre audience to be part of the action. Because a chorus typically comprised common characters, the audience became engaged in the action of the myth. They were given a mouthpiece. As Nietzsche explains in his *Birth of Tragedy*, the chorus both separated the audience and immersed them in the action, since it allowed them characters with whom they could emotionally relate.

From the beginning of *Murder in the Cathedral*, the women of Canterbury function in much the same way. Their speeches are often touted as the most magnificent of the play, and many

scholars believe it is through the chorus that Eliot creates the only lasting drama of the play. These claims rely on the basic question that the women raise – is it better to live a life of acceptable misery, or to challenge the order of life in hope of something better? The former is not pleasant, but it's predictable and easy to understand, even for a common person. The latter can promise some great reward, but requires a passionate refusal to accept the status quo. At the beginning of this play, the women are firmly committed to the former option. They would prefer an existence of "living and partly living" to one of fiery passion and spiritual responsibility. It is useful to understand this perspective at the top, since the play's dramatic momentum will involve not only a change in Thomas, but also a change in the Chorus by the end.
One other effect of using a Greek chorus in the play is to introduce the theme of fate. The Chorus suggests a supernatural sense to the impending events, since they have felt themselves drawn toward the cathedral. In other words, they have not chosen to come but instead feel as though they are being controlled by God's hand. Because the Greek plays were so reliant on an understanding of fate, the use of a chorus implies the same sense. This is extremely important to understand even before Thomas's entrance, since the story of Thomas and Henry is often told in terms of individual personality conflicts. By aligning the events to come with a fate controlled by God, Eliot announces that his intention will be less to explore the psychology of individuals than to explore the forces by which God runs the universe.

There is a certain social commentary in the use of the chorus as well. Their desire to go on living in comfortable misery rather than in passionate conflict comes partly from their belief that they do not control anything in the temporal world. The wars and personality conflicts of kings and archbishops bring torment to their lives, even though they have no hand in shaping these events. Eliot is not overly optimistic about the strength of the common mob, and the extremely violent imagery they use in their speeches proves this. Instead, Eliot reveals how terribly the common mob is affected by the 'great' men of tragedy. His play will not empower the Chorus in the temporal realm, but rather their growth in the play will involve a spiritual purpose, one they do not yet recognize in this opening.

Though they are higher in social stature, the priests are mostly powerless as well in this opening. They are equally reliant on events outside their control – namely, the return of Thomas Becket and what that will mean for the conflict between church and state. By not naming his priests (or any of his characters except for Thomas), Eliot suggests his intention to tell a mythic story rather than an individual one. Again, his story will explore the spiritual weight of Becket's martyrdom rather than its social or psychological factors. However, the priests do delineate the particulars of these social factors in a way that confronts Eliot's audience with the different interpretations of the murder.

The First Priest is defined by his mournfulness and worry. He is supremely concerned about what trouble might come from the Archbishop's return. This perspective conforms to those who think of Becket's story as one of immovable personalities. The world cannot handle these great men at odds. The Second Priest is more pragmatic and focused on the social and political impact of Thomas's return. He interprets the clash with Henry as being about land ownership and political power. This relates to a common reading of Becket's story: at its core, it is about politics, power, and wealth.

The Third Priest offers the philosophy most aligned with Eliot's: he is patient. He recognizes that they should "let the wheel turn." The "wheel" is a common image from medieval theology. Traced to medieval philosopher Boethieus, the wheel suggests that God sits at the center of a wheel so that He understands all action in the world, while we exist on varying spots of the wheel, unaware of what the force turning the wheel means. In other words, understanding is beyond our control as humans. We argue and attempt to understand the import of Becket's personality, politics, and religiosity, and yet we understand nothing. What Becket will soon do – die for a cause – is much greater than its physical and social factors. In fact, the only way to understand it is to approach it from a higher plane, from the center of the wheel. Naturally, such understanding is impossible for mortal humans, but we must acknowledge our own limitations before even attempting the task of transcendence. Eliot has often cited the medieval allegory *Everyman* as his primary influence in *Murder in the Cathedral*, and one can see this influence both in his use of verse and in the expression of this medieval theology.

Both the priests and the Chorus introduce the play's primary thematic conflict in this opening: action vs. suffering. When the Chorus says, "For us, the poor, there is no action,/But only to wait and to witness," they are expressing the main dilemma all humans face in life, according to Eliot (177). Do we attempt to act, to influence things usually beyond our control, or do we simply wait and watch what comes? Both choices have a downside, and Thomas will explore how this theme resonates both in our lives and in his martyrdom in the subsequent sections. Both the Priests and Chorus will learn over the course of the play that to witness something is to be involved in it.

The opening also does important work in establishing Thomas's character, as Eliot sees it. This is done primarily in the First Priest's description of Thomas as Chancellor. What he describes is a man too taken by pride over his own virtue. Thomas's sanctimony left him "always isolated… always insecure." This sanctimony and pride help the audience understand the flaw that Thomas will have to overcome in order to die a true, holy martyr. In effect, this sets up Thomas's dramatic conflict in the play.

Finally, it is worth establishing the various poetic devices Eliot uses in the play. There is a deliberately archaic quality to *Murder in the Cathedral*. In addition to the medieval theology already discussed, Eliot's use of verse marks the play as something non-modern, which is particularly relevant considering the fame he had reached for modernist works like *The Wasteland* earlier in his career. There are two ways to understand this. The first is that the verse links his story to the liturgy of a mass. Many scholars have spent time dissecting the ways that Eliot's structure parallels that of a Catholic or Anglican mass, which has a similar dichotomy to that of Greek tragedy. While the higher figures are on stage dictating a philosophy, the audience is not meant to be passive, but instead is included in the action. Without an audience/congregation to respond to the liturgy, the ritual has no impact. By using verse, Eliot stresses that he considers his play to be less story than ritual action, through which an audience will be transformed much as the Chorus will be transformed.

The verse's shifts can help us understand character. Sometimes, characters will rhyme (it does not happen in this opening section), which indicates a suaveness or confidence. Another example can be found in the "living and partly living" speech that the Chorus gives. Notice how during their litany of misery, the verse uses short lines and the repetition of "living and partly living." This call-and-response structure gives the speech a sense of order. It contrasts with the lines that begin with, "But now a great fear is upon us…" Thomas's return brings the fear of chaos, and the lines therefore grow longer and less structured. Eliot frequently uses verse to such effect.

Finally, Eliot constantly uses literary elements. In his essay "Hamlet and His Problems," Eliot introduced a literary concept called the "objective correlative," in which an objective element reflects the interior state of a character. The Chorus shows frequent use of the objective correlative in the way it describes the seasons. They are ironically plagued by summer and comforted by the ravages of winter, which symbolizes their preference of quiet misery over loud conflict. The heat of summer parallels the heat of a passion they would like to avoid, and so it makes sense that the summer is so brutal. Many of their subsequent descriptions of landscapes or weather reflect their fears. Similarly, they tend to personify Earth, to see it as moving beyond their control. It plagues or rewards them as it sees fit, as though the Earth itself were an individual.

Murder in the Cathedral Summary and Analysis of Part I (after Becket's entrance)

Summary

The scene is continuous from the previous section. Thomas Becket enters having heard the priest's admonishment of the Chorus for expressing dread instead of joy over Becket's arrival. He notes that they in fact "speak better than they know," and he lays out an important philosophy for the play:

> They know and do not know, what it is to act or suffer.
>
> They know and do not know, that acting is suffering
>
> And suffering is action. Neither does the actor suffer
>
> Nor the patient act. (182)

The Second Priest apologizes for not preparing more adequately for Thomas's return but assures him that they have prepared his former chambers for him. Thomas thanks him but is unconcerned with it. He tells them how he snuck past the barons who would have stopped his return. He begs them to be patient, since he believes greater things will soon occur.
A man, the First Tempter, enters. He identifies himself as Old Tom, one of Becket's former friends, and speaks nostalgically about "the good times" of the past. Mistaking Becket's return as a sign that the Archbishop and King have resolved their argument, he expresses his anticipation for the "gaiety" to come. Thomas quickly disabuses him of the notion, insisting he is no longer a carefree young man. The First Tempter then warns him that such "proud" sternness will cost him greatly and reminds him that "the easy man lives to eat the best dinners" (183-184). In effect, he is tempting Thomas to drop his sternness and responsibilities so as to enjoy an easier, more luxurious life. Thomas remains firm in his refusal of the temptation and the man leaves.
Thomas considers aloud how the man's offer was tempting even though it would have been impossible to accept. The Second Tempter enters and identifies himself as someone Thomas met years before when the latter was still Chancellor. He tempts Thomas by suggesting Thomas "guide the state again," thereby reclaiming his former power and glory (185). When Thomas points out that he is a man of God, the Second Tempter reminds him that the Chancellor is actually more immediately powerful than the King (since he carries out the laws), and Thomas could therefore do good works like "protect the poor" with more expediency than he does as Archbishop. Thomas is angered by the man's insistence that he can have more power (186).

Thomas argues that he would lose virtue as Chancellor because of compromises he would have to make with corrupt barons and bishops. He then insists his power is greater as Archbishop, since from that vantage he is placed "to condemn kings, not serve among their servants." Bested, the Second Tempter leaves and Thomas reminds himself that worldly power is inherently limited.

A Third Tempter arrives and claims he is "unexpected," a claim Thomas denies (187). The temper identifies himself as "a country-keeping lord" and "rough straightforward Englishman," more interested in his business than in politics. He tells Thomas that there is no chance of reconciliation with Henry, but that he and other barons will help him overthrow the King. Believing that Becket's connection to Rome will give them legitimacy, he wants to create a coalition with Thomas at its head. However, Thomas easily rejects him, remembering how such "wolves" used to sit at his door constantly when he was Chancellor. The man leaves and Thomas tells himself, "if I break, I must break myself alone" (190).

The Fourth Tempter arrives and is genuinely unexpected by Thomas. He is deliberately mysterious about his identity, saying, "I always precede expectation," and "I do not need a name… You know me, but have never seen my face" (190). When Thomas asks him to speak, the tempter briefly agrees with Thomas's replies to the previous tempters and then suggests that Thomas should die for his beliefs. By becoming a martyr, the Fourth Tempter suggests, Thomas will "bind/King and bishop under [his] heel." The tempter's argument is that the world of "temporal power" is transient and unfixed, whereas the prestige of martyrdom is eternal and all-powerful (191). Thomas admits he has considered this path before, and the tempter reveals that he knows the Archbishop's deepest fears: Thomas is afraid he will not only be hated until his death, but also become irrelevant in the face of history. The tempter reminds Thomas that martyrdom will make his enemies irrelevant in the face of history, and Thomas rebukes him as offering nothing but "dreams to damnation" (193). Thomas begins to despair at being faced with his deepest, most shameful fantasies. The tempter throws his philosophy about "acting" and "suffering" back into his face, repeating the speech almost verbatim.

As Thomas is silent in his pain, the Chorus considers how there is "no rest" to be had in this situation. They feel affected by the uncertainty. The Four Tempters then address the audience in verse, suggesting that "all things are unreal," and that Thomas is doomed, "lost in the wonder of [his] own greatness." The priests address Thomas directly, begging him not to fight against "the intractable/tide" (194).

All the characters except for Thomas then give a long address, with lines alternating between the Chorus, the priests, and the tempters. Together, they consider the uncertainty of life and death and the lack of discernible order to the universe. The Chorus breaks from the shared address and begs Thomas for "some reason, some hope." In a reprise of their "living and partly living" speech, they tell him they have known misery and that they feel "The Lords of Hell" in the air, but beg him, "save us, save us, save yourself that we/may be saved;/Destroy yourself and we are destroyed" (195-196).

Thomas has made up his mind. He announces that the "way [is] clear" and "the meaning plain." He acknowledges the danger of the Fourth Tempter, who begged him "to do the right deed for the wrong reason." He tells how he once sought only pleasure and fame in life and never wanted to devote his life to God. In fact, he always feared that by devoting his life to the highest purpose of God, he might be more inclined to use that power and authority corruptly. He acknowledges that by accepting martyrdom, he might be judged harshly by history, but that nobody can control

such things. He announces his decision: he will "no longer act or suffer," and will instead face `his martyrdom not as something he wants, but as something he is willing to accept (196-197). He has accepted his fate.

Analysis

Many critics believe Eliot achieves the sum of his purpose in Act I. Thomas enters the play a hero with a destiny before him, is tempted to hide from that destiny, and ultimately overcomes not only those temptations but even his own weaknesses in deciding to accept martyrdom for what he sees as the right reason. In a sense, the entire play is encapsulated in this second half of Act II.

It is useful to recognize the influence of Greek tragedy on Eliot's creation of Thomas. Part of the Aristotelian conception of tragedy was that a 'great' man would brave challenges that attempted to waylay him from accepting his fate. Even though Greek tragedies ended poorly for their heroes, audiences were meant to respond to the bravery with which these heroes accepted their deaths. While the concept of a 'tragic flaw' is often overstated, it is worth mentioning that these heroes often were defined by a characteristic quality that both aided and hampered their journey toward accepting their fate.

Thomas is easily analyzed according to these terms. Eliot was not interested in creating a realistic, psychological depiction of the saint. As some critics have noted, the play was intended to be performed in the expansive cathedral of Canterbury, which would have made any audience connection with an individual almost impossible, since the human form would be dwarfed in those surroundings. Instead, Eliot depicts Thomas more as a myth, in the same way that Orestes or Oedipus would have been seen by a Greek audience. The Easter audience for whom Eliot wrote would have known the end of this story from the moment the play started, much as Greek audiences would have know the basic plot of their myths. So the experience of *Murder in the Cathedral* is about relating to a hero who has to accept his fate as a martyr. The dramatic struggle is not whether Thomas will die, but rather how he will accept that death.
The primary challenge that confronts Thomas in accepting this fate is his version of a 'tragic flaw' – his pride and moral superiority. These are the very qualities that made Thomas an effective Chancellor and now empower him to so passionately defend his Church. However, this pride is also his biggest obstacle. As we learn from the Fourth Tempter, Thomas is more than willing to die for the Church. The issue – a *moral* issue, not a practical one – is whether he will die "for the wrong reason." To die for the sake of glory, to feed his pride and grant himself immortality, would be to compromise the death. Instead, Thomas has to die for the right reason: because God wills it. He must rid himself of a 'self,' ignore his own feelings and totally subsume himself to the will of God. It is this acceptance that constitutes the dramatic momentum of Part I. Like a Greek tragedy or a medieval allegory like *Everyman*, the structure of *Murder in the Cathedral* is quite simple in its episodic shape. Thomas confronts Four Tempters, who offer various challenges to his ultimate goal of accepting martyrdom for the right reason. By tracing through their offers, one can understand the various challenges that Thomas must overcome. The first three tempters do not offer much in terms of dramatic tension. Not only has Thomas already rejected what they have to offer in his life, but the audience would also know he has already rejected them. Their effect is largely expositional: by revealing what Thomas has rejected, they can remind the audience of Becket's past. The First Tempter offers Thomas the carefree dalliance

of youth, a past Thomas historically would have known as far back as his time studying in Paris. Thomas was known for his high taste in fine things, and this tempter reminds him that those things still exist. The Second Tempter offers earthly power. He promises to have Thomas reinstated as Chancellor and appeals to Thomas's pride and virtue by suggesting that a Chancellor can do more with laws than a priest can with pronouncements. He also reminds the audience of how effective Thomas was as Chancellor. The Third Tempter offers a vision of the future in which Thomas will not only rule, but rule via a new system of government. This tempter's evocation of a 'coalition,' a political concept that would have been impossible in the feudal era in which Becket and Henry lived, is a nod to Eliot's modern era.
Again, these tempters can be seen as superfluous to the drama, since there is never truly any chance that Thomas will accept their temptations. And yet they still do much to enrich the play. The first purpose they achieve is a stress on Becket's pride, the flaw he must overcome in order to peacefully accept martyrdom for the right reason. All three appeal to that quality, albeit in different ways. The first appeals to Becket's love of his body (physical pleasures), the second appeals to his love of control (Chancellorship), and the third appeals to his ambition to be greater, a quality that defines Becket's rise from a middle-class boy to one of the most powerful people in England. For all these reasons, it is possible to see the tempters as versions of Thomas himself. Considering that Thomas's ultimate dramatic goal is to rid himself of a 'self,' of his personality, it is important that the audience see him confront all of these variations of that personality, even if he has already repudiated those temptations.

The three tempters also have something else in common: they all speak to alterations in time. The first two tempters offer Thomas the possibility of going back, of changing what has already happened. They play to his potential regrets and his desire to live a simpler life, one in which he has already found success without the complications he faced ever since clashing with Henry. The third tempter offers a vision of the future, a promise of a world in which Becket's ambition could be realized. Certainly, any reader or audience member can relate to the desire to escape into the past or future from a tumultuous present. So when Becket refuses both possibilities, it is a sign of his fortitude; he will not turn away from the challenges before him.

The Fourth Tempter raises the stakes considerably by indicating that the greatest challenge Thomas faces is from himself. In terms of time, he offers neither a past nor a future, but immortality. He argues that not only will Thomas's name last throughout history if he allows himself to die, but he will also exist beyond the limits of time. He will be at the center of the proverbial wheel, more a myth than a man. Suddenly, the challenge of repudiating the temptations of the past and future seem simple. The Fourth Tempter does not offer Thomas a different existence – he offers him a *greater* existence, a more pronounced and incredible version of the holy existence and reputation he now has. Like the first three, the Fourth Tempter is a version of Thomas himself, but one less superficial, one far more hidden in the shadows. He indicates as much in his addresses to Thomas, noting that the Archbishop entertains the temptation for martyrdom only at private times, "between sleep and waking, early in the morning" (192). This is the voice Thomas least wants to hear from himself and as such, it is the most difficult to defeat. The Fourth Tempter is both mysterious – he never gives his identity and instead uses phrases like "I do not need a name" that evoke Mephistopheles or other versions of Satan – and subtle. He is not incorrect in arguing that Thomas will do great good for his church by dying, and so Thomas would not be rejecting his holy duty by giving in to the man's temptation.

However, Thomas would be rejecting his own moral integrity, and the play argues implicitly that this would have compromised his martyrdom. Even though Eliot gives Thomas a realistic flaw, he does so in the vein of the great Greek heroes, and therefore does not totally avoid hagiography in his depiction of Thomas. Consider that Thomas's first word is "Peace." Eliot knows the audience for whom he is creating his Thomas Becket, and he is certain that Thomas will not die for impure or selfish reasons.

In understanding the crux of Thomas's transformation, it is important to consider the play's central themes of acting and suffering, which were introduced by the Chorus before Thomas entered. Firstly, it helps to define "to suffer" as "to endure pain or distress patiently" rather than as "to undergo pain or distress." The suffering Thomas and the Chorus evoke certainly involves pain, but it is more akin to patience than to sensation. This makes it align cohesively within the play and frames it as a stark contrast to action. The question Thomas asks in his important acting/suffering speech (which is repeated to him by the Fourth Tempter) is whether there is a distinction between action (aggressively attempting to make change) and suffering (patiently and passively receiving what comes). He chides the Second Priest for insulting the Chorus, suggesting that they do not realize that acting and suffering are two sides of a coin, or, to use the medieval symbolism, on opposite sides of a wheel that turns. To act is to wait, and to wait is to act. We never fully do one or the other, though from our limited perspective on the proverbial wheel of the universe, we do attempt to choose one side or the other.

Thomas is guilty of the same misunderstanding that he claims the Chorus is. The Fourth Tempter, in repeating the speech, points out that Thomas is falling into the same despair that the Chorus was. He is uncertain whether he should act in pursuing martyrdom or suffer through his life, since his reasons for seeking martyrdom are impure. The tempter's words are interesting in that at first, they seem to be mocking in tone, but an attempt to read the full speech as mockery makes it quite ineffective. Instead, the Fourth Tempter plants the seed for Thomas's final decision: he must accept martyrdom, but he must accept it as his fate willed by God, not as an effect of his own will. His martyrdom exists outside of time, and so is not engendered by the cause/effect of his decision-making. He must be patient, but *actively* patient. He must choose to accept what comes independent of his own decision. He must rid himself of personality so he will be ready to accept what God intends. He must wait and understand that he does not live in the middle of the wheel, but this requires active and difficult vigilance.
The climax of Part I, therefore, is Thomas's realization that neither acting nor suffering exists independently of the other. The play is often criticized because this crucial climactic decision is decidedly undramatic. It is an entirely internal shift that happens for the protagonist during his long silence following the Fourth Tempter's reprise of the acting/suffering speech. On stage, the actor playing Thomas has no language following this speech until he decides to accept it. The fact that the audience does not hear his thought process is fitting, since Eliot is not interested in psychology, but it does rob the audience of the climax.

But Eliot works overtime to keep the play theatrical during this silent climax. The Tempters, Chorus, and Priests all have speeches that overlap until they all speak as one voice. The tempters address the audience, suggesting the pessimistic voice that Thomas must be hearing in his own mind. He must be considering that he is "obstinate, blind, intent/On self-destruction," and hence incapable of reaching the serenity required by holy and proper martyrdom (194). The Priests speak the more optimistic voice in reminding him that there is an "untractable tide," although

even this voice suggests simple patience, not active patience. The Chorus is miserable as usual, until all three voices become different shades of the same perspective. In the speech where the voices overlap, they all accept that no man can know what is to happen. No man is at the center of the proverbial wheel. These voices are distinct for the audience, but they are all the same for Thomas. They are all shades of himself, the 'self' he needs to repudiate if he is going to accept martyrdom. His decision is not to make a decision, but to rid himself of decision-making and become joyfully ready to accept God's will.

Ultimately, he comes to the proper decision and is worthy of martyrdom. It is arguable that the final impulse comes not from his own strength but from the Chorus, who gives the last speech before Thomas accepts his fate. In many ways, the Chorus provides the only real dramatic tension in this section, for they, too, have changed. Whereas they earlier begged Thomas to leave them to a comfortable misery, they now beg him to die, to "save us, save us, save yourself that we may be saved." In both the Greek tragedy tradition and the Catholic liturgical tradition, the audience/congregation is crucial to the ritual. If only the characters go through a transformation, then the ritual or play is meaningless. The audience must change as well; indeed, the Chorus has realized that they are involved. They cannot personally take any path that will enact immediate change, but they are crucial toward convincing Thomas; likewise, their decision to accept their own fate is equally important. The saint/priest/tragic hero needs his Chorus to journey with him. Without this, the ritual and transformation is individual. What matters to Eliot is the community that is affected by Becket's martyrdom, the very community celebrating that martyrdom as they celebrate the death centuries later through Eliot's play. As the Chorus changes its mind, Thomas's martyrdom is complete. Dramatically, the protagonist has reached his serenity, and through his strength led his people to do the same. Now, all that is left is for him to die.

Murder in the Cathedral Summary and Analysis of Interlude

Summary

In the Interlude, the Archbishop preaches in the cathedral on Christmas morning, 1170. He delivers the entire speech, and there are no stage directions. The Interlude begins with a verse from Luke praising God, after which Thomas promises his sermon will be short. He announces that his intention in the sermon will be to explore the "deep meaning and mystery of our masses of Christmas Day." He notes how there is a contradiction in these masses – they exist both to celebrate Christ's birth and to celebrate his death. It is strange, Thomas notes, "for who in the World will both mourn and rejoice at once and for the same reason?" (198).
Thomas wishes to reflect on the meaning of the word "peace." He notes how Christ told his disciples, "My peace I leave with you, my peace I give unto you" (198). By analyzing the context of both Christ and his disciples, Thomas reveals that Christ did not mean the peace of the world, but rather a greater peace. Certainly, he did not mean peace between barons, bishops, and kings in the country of England not yet invented, and considering that the disciples lived lives of misery in service of Christ, it is unlikely Christ meant peace in the sense of worldly comfort free of strife.

Thomas reminds the congregation that the day after Christmas is a day of celebration for Christ's "first martyr, the blessed Stephen." Thomas does not believe this proximity is an accident – rather, he believes that the mystery of Christmas is paralleled on a smaller scale in the

celebration of martyrs, since we engage in the contradiction of celebrating death for them. For martyrs, "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 for the salvation of men" (199).

Thomas then analyzes the concept of martyrdom, insisting that a martyr is not merely one who dies for Christ, since these things can happen by accident and "Saints are not made by accident" (199). Worldly ambition, which can often lead to martyrdom, has no place in heaven. It is a human creation, and therefore martyrs who die through ambition will not reach the full extent of glorious death. Instead, "the true martyr is he who has become the instrument of God, who has lost his will in the will of God, not lost it but found it, for he has found freedom in his submission to God" (199). It is a profound and mysterious concept, Thomas notes, and accounts for the mystery of its celebration.

Thomas closes his sermon by sharing, "I do not think I shall ever preach to you again" (200). He alludes to the potential of his impending death and martyrdom and begs the congregation to remember his words.

Analysis

The Interlude, one of the only two prose sections in the play, is a fascinating interjection into the drama for several reasons. It sums up the play's basic philosophy/theology, reveals how fully Thomas has been altered in Act I, and connects the play to the rituals of both tragedy and the mass.

The sermon explicitly spells out the play's theology. In no uncertain terms, Thomas explains that a true martyr is one who dies without ambition. Coming so soon after the episode with the Fourth Tempter, this reminds the audience of his response that closed Part I. He restates with the clarity of prose that a true martyr is one who has vanquished his 'self' - his personality, ambition, and will - and has accepted that he is God's instrument. He basically preaches the philosophy of active patience as described in the Analysis to Part I, although he does not use the words "action" or "suffering" here.

Becket posits himself as parallel to Christ by suggesting that Christians ought to celebrate martyrdom in the same way (albeit on a lower scale) as they celebrate Christ's sacrifice by death. This enforces the holiness of martyrdom. What both deaths have in common is a sense of opposites, an important theme in the play that is manifest both in the story and in the language of the Chorus in Part II. Holy events contain opposites – in this case, the death of a martyr and the death of Christ are simultaneously worthy of mourning and joy. That a human cannot fully comprehend this mysterious contradiction matters little, as long as the human accepts the contradiction as a fact.

Dramatically, the sermon has little impact. It does reveal to the audience that Thomas has firmly accepted his place as God's instrument; he has vanquished his ambition and is ready to die for the right reason. However, nothing has happened since his final speech of Part I to make us think that he might have changed his mind. The character undergoes no transformation here and does not add much to the ideas presented in Part I. Perhaps Eliot wanted to make certain his audience understood his themes, and perhaps he wanted to announce that Thomas's crisis of faith would not extend into Part II. But this raises an interesting question when reading or viewing the play

for the first time: if our protagonist has already reached the apex of his personal journey, where else is there for him to go? How can the play only be half over if there is nowhere left to journey? Compounded with the fact that the audience knows how it will end (Thomas will be murdered in the cathedral), Eliot poses an interesting dramatic challenge he will have to address in Part II.

It's worth considering the theatrical effect of this sermon for Eliot's intended audience. In the expansive Canterbury cathedral, the actor playing Thomas would have taken the pulpit and then preached, the only figure on stage, and with very little indication that this was part of a play rather than an actual sermon. Listening to a sermon drawn somewhat from the historical record of Thomas's final sermon on Christmas Day, 1170 must have been a rich, profound theatrical experience, complicating the lines of fiction, myth, and reality for audience members.

This effect is in line with Eliot's intent to structure the experience of his play alongside that of a mass. Again, he is interested more in ritual than storytelling, and both the theatricality and the substance of this sermon reinforce that intention. In terms of theatricality, his play has explicitly become a mass. In terms of substance, Thomas preaches about the mystery and contradiction of celebrating and mourning at the same time. This is an experience that transcends intellectualism. It is about visceral connection and faith, a community whose shared passions are made manifest through a ritual. By putting these ideas into the play, Eliot sets himself up to make Thomas's murder in Act II not a climax (again, the protagonist in many ways reaches his climax in Part I, and will not falter from his resolve), but rather a ritual.

Some of the ideas in the sermon also echo those of Greek tragedy. At its core, Greek tragedy embodies a similar contradiction as that of saint celebration. It looks mournfully and honestly on the unfortunate forces of the world that destroyed individuals, while simultaneously celebrating those individuals who stayed strong in the face in those forces. In many ways, this is the message of the sermon. We celebrate those individuals who were strong enough to die for God and vanquish their personalities for God, but we also mourn that the iniquity of the world required their death. What Eliot's play has that Greek tragedy lacks is the lynchpin of faith. Greeks did not celebrate in the promise of afterlife in their tragedies, while the Christians for whom Eliot writes celebrate someone like Becket not only for his strength, but because he reminds them that they will be rewarded for their own strength in heaven.

Murder in the Cathedral Summary and Analysis of Part II

Summary

The first scene of Part II takes place in the Archbishop's Hall on December 29th, 1170. It has been four days since the sermon of the Interlude, and 27 days since Part I. The Chorus of women gives an ominous address about the arrival of deep winter, noting how the winter brings momentary peace from man's aggressive wars: "The world must be cleaned in the winter" (201). Four knights enter. All four are excitable – they have just come from France with business from King Henry, who was in France at the time of Becket's assassination. The priests recognize the knights and try to distract them with dinner before they bring them to the Archbishop. The knights insist that Thomas appear right away, and the First Priest sends an attendant. Thomas arrives immediately. When he sees the knights, he privately tells the priests that he recognizes

"the moment" has come, but that he is embroiled in "matters of other urgency" (203). He tells them where to find his business and then addresses the knights. They insist their audience be private and Thomas dismisses the priests.
Immediately, the knights lay out their grievances. They insist that Thomas remains Henry's "servant, his tool, and his jack," and that he is revealing deep disloyalty. They remind him he was born a simple, middle-class "tradesman's son," a "backstairs brat" whom the King favored but who "broke his oath and betrayed his King" (203). Thomas denies their claims and insists that he remains the King's "most faithful vassal" but that he has a higher master (probably meaning both God *and* the Pope). They mock him and suggest he is driven less by love of God than by love of himself, derisively pretending they will pray for him.
Thomas stops them to ask whether their business is simply "scolding and blaspheming?" They prepare themselves to deliver the King's message, and Thomas demands that if their message is "by the King's command," then it should be "said in public" so he can "refute them" (204). They move to attack him, but the attempt is interrupted by the entrance of the priests and attendants.

The First Knight lectures Thomas on his ingratitude, suggesting he fled England with the goal of "stirring up trouble" for King Henry with the Pope and Louis, the king of France. The other knights add that even after the King kindly offered him clemency, Thomas remained an antagonist, contesting Henry's desire to crown his son king and causing unrest among some of the King's advisors in England. They ask if he will meet the King to answer these charges, and identify that as their purpose.
Thomas insists he bears Henry no ill-will and has no reason to contest the prince's coronation, but that it was the Pope who excommunicated them. The knights insist that the interdiction was engineered through Thomas, who could have them absolved. Thomas admits he was the impulse behind it, but says he cannot "loose whom the Pope has bound." The First Knight insists Thomas and his servants leave England immediately and Thomas replies that, after being separated from his people for seven years, causing them spiritual pain, he will not leave again. He insists that it is not he with whom they should be angry, but Rome. He calls them "petty politicians" and is openly contemptuous of their cause (206).

They threaten his life, and he promises that he would hold his ground not just to Rome on Earth, but to God in heaven. The knights warn the priests that they will be held accountable "with [their] bodies" if they let Thomas escape again before they return, and then they leave. Thomas announces that he is "ready for martyrdom" as they exit (207).

The Chorus gives a brutal, evocative speech in which they claim to have "smelt the death-bringers." They use violent imagery to describe the horror of the world to come and lament that this fate awaits everyone, from "councils of princes" to themselves, the "women of Canterbury." However, they assure the Lord Archbishop that they "have consented" and are prepared (208). Thomas begs them to "be at peace" and acknowledges that their "share of the eternal burden" is to accept things they cannot control. He assures them that their remembrance of this event will stay with them the rest of their lives until the memories "seem unreal. Human kind cannot bear very much reality" (209).

Together, the priests beg Thomas to flee before the knights come back to kill him. Thomas remains calm and insists he is ready and worthy to receive martyrdom. The priests hear the

knights approaching and forcefully suggest Thomas fulfill his duty of vespers. When he still denies their request, they force him off stage against his will.

The Chorus gives a speech as the setting is changed to the cathedral. A Latin chant, the Dies Irae, is sung in the background. In their speech, the women emotionally steel themselves for the death soon to follow. In the cathedral, the priests bar the door despite Thomas's insistence that he will not be locked up and have the cathedral turned to a "fortress." The priests argue that the knights are not like men, but like "beasts" who must be kept out. Thomas chides them for arguing "by results, as this world does," which confuses the distinction between good and evil. He insists he has made his decision "out of time" and that he must "conquer… by suffering" (211-212).

The priests open the doors at his command, and the knights, whom Eliot describes as "slightly tipsy," enter. The priests try to force Thomas to the crypt to hide while the knights tauntingly call out to Becket as they search for him. Thomas confronts them and declares he is "without fear... ready to suffer with [his] blood" (213). The knights insist he absolve those he has excommunicated and declare his obedience to the King, but Thomas ignores their requests and insists they do with him as they like but leave his people untouched. They begin to chant "traitor" at him, and Thomas reminds the First Knight, Reginald, that he himself has been a traitor to Thomas. The First Knight denies he owes anything to a "renegade" (213). Thomas commends his cause and life to God, and the knights murder him.

As the knights kill him, the Chorus gives an address in which they beg someone "clear the air!" They feel lost and see the return of peace as impossible. They realize that life will grow harder now that they can no longer go on "living and partly living," since now they must bear some of the weight for the miserable world. They now see a life "out of time," but that awareness brings extra responsibility, guilt, and suffering.

When the murder is over, the First Knight – whose name is Reginald Fitz Urse - walks downstage and directly addresses the audience. In a prose speech, he begs the audience to give him a chance to explain his and the other knights' behavior. He stipulates that his English audience believes "in fair play" and will sympathize with "the under dog." However, he equally expects them to allow a "Trial by Jury" in which the knights might defend themselves. Not being an eloquent man, he wishes for the Second Knight – William de Traci – to present their case (215).

The Second Knight presents as their defense the fact that they are personally "perfectly disinterested" in the murder. They do not stand to profit from the murder but instead did it because they "put country first." He apologizes for their boorish behavior earlier, noting that they were all a bit drunk. However, he indicates that their drunkenness was their way of coping with the impending murder, which they personally were not motivated to commit. He points out that they in fact stand to lose something by the murder, since they will have to flee and will be maligned by history, even after the English eventually accept Becket's murder as necessary (215-216). When the Second Knight finishes, the First Knight briefly sums up his "disinterested" argument and then introduces the Third Knight, Hugh de Morville.

The Third Knight provides a different and much longer defense. He believes Becket had committed an offense against his King *and* the people of England, and therefore the execution was just. He wonders whether Becket should actually be considered the under dog, and suggests he will appeal to his audience's "reason" rather than their "emotions." The first stage of his

argument is that the King's aim was always to unite his judiciary so as to engender justice. The judiciary was split into three courts: those of the King, those of the bishops, and those of the baronage. Thomas, as Chancellor, supported this campaign and was in fact named to the Archbishopric specifically for the purpose of uniting those courts. Though he acknowledges that Becket was qualified for the post, the Third Knight attacks Becket for having immediately resigned the Chancellorship and grown "ascetic." With his new attitude, Thomas withdrew from the King's counsel and was no longer interested in compromise. The knight believes his audience views such behavior as contrary to their interests, since Thomas's refusal to compromise kept the legal system unjust and corrupt. Hence, the Third Knight believes the only problem is with the "method" the knights employed, and not their "issue." In fact, he argues, under other circumstances Thomas might have been found guilty by courts for these offenses and killed by the state, without garnering any controversy. Because the knights have taken the first important step toward securing the interests of the people, they represent the people, and hence all people must be somewhat guilty of the crime if it is called a crime (216-218). The First Knight commends Morville for his subtle reasoning and then introduces the Fourth Knight, whose name is Richard Brito, to provide a final argument.

The Fourth Knight gives the most subtle argument. His argument is that the knights are not guilty of murder because Thomas is guilty of suicide. He briefly repeats a history of Thomas's life, saying that Thomas pursued "unity" and "justice" while he was Chancellor, but "reversed his policy" when he was named Archbishop. Thomas then revealed his primary instinct was "egotism" that grew into an "undoubted mania" that showed no concern for the people of England. The Fourth Knight provides evidence that Thomas had spoken in France of his impending murder in England, which proves that he was "determined upon a death by martyrdom" (218). He points to Thomas's refusal to answer their charges in his final moments as further proof of his guilt in facilitating his own death. Knowing the knights were "inflamed with wrath," Thomas nevertheless had the doors opened instead of letting the knights cool off. For all these reasons, the Fourth Knight asks that the audience "hesitatingly render a verdict of Suicide while of Unsound Mind" (219). The First Knight closes the proceedings and suggests the audience head home without doing anything "that might provoke any public outbreak" (219). The knights leave.

The First Priest laments Thomas's death and fears the "world without God" that he predicts will now come (219). The Third Priest insists that "the Church is stronger for this action," since it will be fortified for having survived the tragedy. He addresses the absent knights, suggesting they will forever justify their actions while God creates a "new state" that is stronger because of its new martyr (220).

The Chorus gives the final speech while a Latin song, the *Te Deum*, is sung in the background. They give praise and thanks to God and acknowledge Canterbury as holy ground that will engender more holiness throughout the world. In their final stanza, the women ask God to forgive them as weak, representative examples of "the men and women" who "fear of injustice of men less than the justice of God," and who want a comfortable misery rather than a challenging spirituality. They acknowledge they wish to fear and love God more than they fear and love the physical world. They are thankful that "the blood of the martyrs and the agony of the saints" help them to transcend their weakness. They ask God, Christ, and Thomas to have mercy and pray for them.

Analysis

Part II begins with a strange theatrical challenge. The play's protagonist has already gone through the entirety of his personal journey, as he stresses in the Interlude. He has faced his temptations and now is ready to accept martyrdom for the right reason. Since the audience knows what will happen – Thomas will be murdered by knights in the Cathedral – the second half of the play runs the risk of being overlong and undramatic. Indeed, from a purely dramatic standpoint, Part II is static. Thomas knows that his end has come immediately upon seeing the knights early in the act; there is no suspense. Even the altercations with the priests, in which they argue vehemently and then force Thomas to hide, lack much momentum. Certainly, these scenes in performance would be physically exciting, but nevertheless would lack any suspense.

However, the value of Part II is less about drama and more about confrontation and ritual. Because Eliot wishes to involve his community so fully in the experience, along the lines of Greek theater or a mass, the ritual must be enacted. In the same way that a mass without the communion (which represents the body of Christ, sacrificed for mankind) is not considered complete, so would the play not fulfill Eliot's purpose if the ritual of the murder were not dramatized. Eliot emphasizes this purpose through his masterful use of the Chorus in Part II. In many ways, Thomas is rather absent in Part II. Aside from the speeches that the knights give the audience, the Chorus is given the most stage presence as well as the most magnificent poetry in this second half of the play.

The Chorus undergoes its own journey throughout *Murder in the Cathedral*, and it is this journey that is most important to the play's intention. Eliot does not add much to the Becket story, but he does add a new perspective by integrating the idea of community into Becket's murder. The Chorus in Part I learns to accept that they are involved in Becket's sacrifice and must recognize their choice: they may stay passive in a life of suffering untroubled by spiritual turmoil, or they can act as Thomas does and engage the wickedness of the world directly. This second option is more spiritually fulfilling and honest, but requires more struggle.
Thomas enters Part II having reached serenity in terms of this struggle. He has accepted his fate and is active in his patience. He is ready to be God's instrument. The Chorus realizes that they, too, face this challenge, but are not yet at peace with it. Instead, their language grows significantly harsher throughout Part II. They have heard Becket's Christmas sermon, in which he explored the idea of opposites in Christianity – Christians celebrate martyrdom as they celebrate Christ's death, simultaneously mourning the world that forces such death while celebrating the sacrifice that validates existence - but they are not yet ready to accept the peace that comes with accepting the contradiction. This transformation happens through the act. They must learn to accept their "share of the eternal burden," which is to force their own spiritual growth by imitation and reflection of Becket's martyrdom (208).

Their opening speech in Part II reveals their persistent pessimism. They reflect on how "the peace of the world is always uncertain" because "man defiles this world" (201). Ironically, they find peace in the harshness of winter because that harshness cleanses the world of the violence that comes with the warmth of spring. The warmth correlates to human passion, which they professed to reject in Part I, since passion brings with it hope and greater dissatisfaction. The life they propose in Part I is one of "living and partly living," not one that challenges the social and spiritual order as Becket does. Here, we see that though they realize the necessity of Becket's sacrifice, they are mired in a pessimism which evokes Eliot's earlier poetry. In a sense, they are the Eliot of *The Wasteland* and "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock," chained to a pessimistic

perspective that sees mankind as doomed by their own failures, and reticent to hope for any better, since hope leads to disappointment. Eliot had since that time converted to Christianity, but he clearly can still relate to a pessimistic perspective. As Eliot found Christianity to brighten his perspective, so will this Chorus find their Becket through Part II and learn to accept their spiritual, Christian responsibilities for the world.
Their second speech, which begins with "I have smelt them, the death-bringers," is significantly harsher in its imagery and perspective. It's important to remember that these speeches are primarily defined by their poetry, not their philosophy. To read the speeches aloud is to recognize the linguistic mastery and emotional power at work. But the philosophy is implicit and worth exploring. In the "death-bringer" speech, the Chorus is particularly obsessed with the nature of opposites, which parallels the message of Thomas's sermon. For instance, they note how there is "corruption in the dish, incense in the latrine, the sewer in the incense," and a multitude of other such images (207). They have realized more fully how the degradation of man infects the world. Thomas knows this as well – he has only just moments before confronted the boorish knights on their first visit – but he has found peace in accepting the possibility of a greater existence in submission to God. The Chorus cannot yet bring themselves to accept these contradictions so easily; they still see what is to come in terms of physical death brought by the "death-bringers," and not in terms of its spiritual import. They realize that his sacrifice is meaningless unless they make it manifest in their own lives, noting that everything that is "woven on the loom of fate" and "woven in the councils of princes" is also "woven like a pattern of living worms/In the guts of the women of Canterbury" (208). They are part of the wheel, and the ritual of Thomas's sacrifice needs a congregation to give it meaning. However, they are too distracted by their violent pessimism, and they therefore end this speech by asking Thomas to forgive them. They are not yet strong enough to do service to what he is about to give.

As Thomas is dragged forcefully to the cathedral by the priests, the Chorus gives a speech that begins "Numb the hand and dry the eyelid," which reveals a burgeoning strength in the women while still reflecting their refusal to accept what is happening. They confess the depth of their fear, which is less of God than of the nothingness they will face if they cannot accept God's plan. They fear "the face of Death the Judgment/And behind the Judgment the Void.. Emptiness, absence, separation from God" (210). They are beginning to understand that there is a greater death than physical, earthly death. The "death-bringers" are no longer the greatest threat, which is instead the eternal existence of nothingness. However, they are still not quite ready – they end their speech asking the Lord for help.

As Thomas is being murdered, the Chorus gives a speech that begins "Clear the air! Clean the sky!" This speech allows the murder to theatrically take a long time without drawing full focus to its horror; the chorus acts as incidental music might in a film. However, they transcend their functional purpose through the poetic intensity of their language. The imagery is harsher here than in either of the previous two speeches – "the land is foul," "a rain of blood has blinded [their] eyes," they are "soiled by a filth that [they] cannot clean" – because they realize how terrible their burden will be in accepting their share of Thomas's sacrifice. They see more clearly than ever before how depraved and foul the world truly is.

It is telling that while Eliot wrote *Murder in the Cathedral* with a powerful, positive message – we all have the opportunity through our rituals to transcend the limits of our physical suffering – he does not sugar-coat it. This speech reveals that the sacrifice of someone like Becket, and the

way that a congregation must endeavor to live up to that sacrifice in their own lives, is difficult. It requires that congregation to open their eyes and discover how terrible and cruel the world can be. The sufferings the Chorus listed in their opening speech of Part I, which were about physical difficulties of seasons and daily toil, are nothing compared to the imagery of blindness through blood or a "terror by day that ends in sleep" (214). In many ways, this is the moment before the climax of the Chorus's journey. The moment has come, and Becket dies. Their realization of how intense their own existence will become parallels his as the worst moment of the journey. What they want more than anything is for the air to be cleared and the world to be cleaned. It's a futile and impossible request, but they make it from desperation.
Their final speech, which closes the play, shows that they have overcome this obstacle. Gone are the intense, horrific images. Instead, they praise and thank the Lord. They have not forgotten how difficult the world is, but they have come to peace with it. They are prepared to attempt the active patience that Thomas modeled for them in his sacrifice. They want a greater life and recognize that even in a terrible world, "all things affirm [God]." They ask for forgiveness, admitting that their insistence on seeing the world in physical terms is a weakness that they must struggle to overcome. They "fear the injustice of men less than the justice of God," which is how they felt at the beginning of the play. The difference is that they now recognize the iniquity and failure of such a perspective. They might not have Thomas's strength and persistence, but that is what makes him a saint. They promise to endeavor to follow his lead and they beg proactive forgiveness and mercy as they prepare to do service to his martyrdom through their lives.

Without this transformation, the play would be incomplete. Eliot did not write this play to tell us historical facts about Becket's life – again, he adds little to the central story - but rather to draw attention to the congregation who would watch his play. The play reminds them that they, too, are responsible for the sacrifice Becket made, since it was made for the community they share. In the same way that all Christians endeavor to justify Christ's sacrifice, so must they endeavor to justify the deaths of their martyrs on a smaller scale.

However, Thomas is not entirely irrelevant in Part II. Thomas is busy at work when the knights finally arrive, and his first words are to the priests, to tell them how to continue that work. This conforms to the historical depiction of Thomas as an obsessed and vigilant worker. The one area in which Thomas cannot help but engage his attackers is politics. This drive towards political and legal wrangling certainly conforms to the real Becket, who was equally adept at Chancellorship as at priestly matters. Here, Eliot proposes another way to delineate the Becket story from the political framework in which it was and continues to be frequently considered. Thomas proposes a dichotomy of ways to think of the world in Part II. On way is through the lens of ritual and myth. He comforts the Chorus at one point, saying that their memories of this day will turn to myth in their minds, until the memories "will seem unreal" (209). He does not posit this as a negative thing, instead suggesting that "humankind cannot bear very much reality" (209). In the context of the play, this is almost a virtue. "Reality" is not painted in a positive light in *Murder in the Cathedral*. People are described as essentially warlike, the knights and even the priests are defined by their self-interest as much as anything else, and death is an easy answer to political problems. By reflecting on our world as myth, to recognize that it is "unreal" and not the highest realm of existence, people can find comfort. On the other hand, he suggests that most humans see the world from a polarized, political framework that serves self-interest and moral justifications:

You argue by results, as this world does,

To settle if an act be good or bad.

You defer to the fact. For every life and every act

Consequence of good and evil can be shown.

And as in time results of many deeds are blended

So good and evil in the end become confounded.

It is a philosophy obsessed with worldly gain and justifications, rather than spiritual transcendence. This philosophy is manifest in the political arguments of the knights. In the Middle Ages, the Catholic Church was its own political entity and often warred with secular regimes. While it did sometimes battle physically, it more often worked by excommunicating opponents. In a solely Catholic society, the threat of excommunication from the church was devastating, since it meant one no longer had the opportunity to go to heaven after death. It also carried great social stigma. On the other side of the struggle, many secular regimes resented the independence of the church, which compromised secular rule. Henry had long attempted to force the church courts under his control (as the knights describe), and in fact likely hoped his right-hand man and Chancellor Thomas Becket would help in that purpose when the latter was named Archbishop. When Becket immediately found a new, greater allegiance to the church, Henry, a notorious hot-head, was politically thwarted and personally offended. During their long struggle, which forced Becket to flee England in exile, Becket suggested that Pope Alexander not recognize the legitimacy of the young Prince Henry's coronation. Finally, excommunications could be easily lifted when a person acquiesced to or overpowered church demands, and so often only added political complication to situations.

The knights – whose names in the play are the same as the names of the murderous knights in history - are clearly boors by nature and are drunk, as well. Historically, they were not explicitly ordered to murder Becket, but were acting from the intensity of Henry's anger. What they want more than anything, though, is to defeat Becket in political argument. They insist he has betrayed the king on a personal and legal level, and that he is hiding behind a smokescreen in blaming the prince's excommunication on the Pope. In many ways, their arguments are justifiable. However, though Becket is momentarily drawn into the nuances of political argument, he mostly expresses his serenity, his active patience in awaiting death. This infuriates them – it is a philosophy "out of time," whereas all they want is the political argument of cause and effect. Eliot intended the Four Tempters to be double-cast with the Four Knights, which stresses their purpose. They are meant to tempt Becket into returning to a physical, earthly means of discourse.

Though they fail on that front, they *do* serve as tempters to the audience through their direct address speeches, again showing how important the congregation is to Eliot's intention. Thus far, he has meant for the Chorus to represent the audience. However, in a wonderful and hilarious theatrical shift, Eliot directly confronts and tempts the audience of his play. The question posed by the knights' speeches is whether we will be drawn into the cause-and-effect political discourse that defines our own world. Have we realized the spiritual nature of Becket's sacrifice, which exists out of time? Or will we be led again to consider his story as a political one, one which should be judged by cause and effect?

Eliot's purpose is to deliberately confront a physical realm and then to suggest the possibility of transcendence. He does not sugar-coat the transcendence offered by martyrdom – the violent murder happens on stage, and the Chorus reflects on how this martyrdom will add more responsibility to Christians in its aftermath. However, to think of Becket's death in terms of its effect is to remain tethered to the physical world, which sees things in terms of cause-and-effect. Our lives have the potential to reach a greater existence if we accept that we can never understand them. We are placed throughout the "wheel" and can never understand its movement because we are not at its center, as God is. Thus, what Becket teaches is neither acting nor suffering (waiting), but rather a mixture of the two: an active patience, a submission to God's will. It is not happiness or comfort that such submission brings, but greater spiritual fulfillment. It is for this wisdom that Becket died, and it is this wisdom which Eliot wishes to impart by dramatizing the ritual of this mythic martyrdom.

A brief overview of the action of the play

The action occurs between 2 and 29 December 1170, chronicling the days leading up to the martyrdom of Thomas Becket following his absence of seven years in France. Becket's internal struggle is a central focus of the play.

The book is divided into two parts. Part one takes place in the Archbishop Thomas Becket's hall on 2 December 1170. The play begins with a Chorus singing, foreshadowing the coming violence. The Chorus is a key part of the drama, with its voice changing and developing during the play, offering comments about the action and providing a link between the audience and the characters and action, as in Greek drama. Three priests are present, and they reflect on the absence of Becket and the rise of temporal power. A herald announces Becket’s arrival. Becket is immediately reflective about his coming martyrdom, which he embraces, and which is understood to be a sign of his own selfishness—his fatal weakness. The tempters arrive, three of whom parallel the Temptations of Christ.

The first tempter offers the prospect of physical safety.

> Take a friend's advice. Leave well alone,
> Or your goose may be cooked and eaten to the bone.

The second offers power, riches, and fame in serving the King.

> To set down the great, protect the poor,
> Beneath the throne of God can man do more?

The third tempter suggests a coalition with the barons and a chance to resist the King.

> For us, Church favour would be an advantage,
> Blessing of Pope powerful protection

In the fight for liberty. You, my Lord,
In being with us, would fight a good stroke

Finally, a fourth tempter urges him to seek the glory of martyrdom.

You hold the keys of heaven and hell.
Power to bind and loose: bind, Thomas, bind,
King and bishop under your heel.
King, emperor, bishop, baron, king:

Becket responds to all of the tempters and specifically addresses the immoral suggestions of the fourth tempter at the end of the first act:

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.

The Interlude of the play is a sermon given by Becket on Christmas morning 1170. It is about the strange contradiction that Christmas is a day both of mourning and rejoicing, which Christians also do for martyrs. He announces at the end of his sermon, "it is possible that in a short time you may have yet another martyr". We see in the sermon something of Becket's ultimate peace of mind, as he elects not to seek sainthood, but to accept his death as inevitable and part of a better whole.

Part II of the play takes place in the Archbishop's Hall and in the Cathedral, 29 December 1170. Four knights arrive with "Urgent business" from the king. These knights had heard the king speak of his frustration with Becket and had interpreted this as an order to kill Becket. They accuse him of betrayal, and he claims to be loyal. He tells them to accuse him in public, and they make to

attack him, but priests intervene. The priests insist that he leave and protect himself, but he refuses. The knights leave and Becket again says he is ready to die. The chorus sings that they knew this conflict was coming, that it had long been in the fabric of their lives, both temporal and spiritual. The chorus again reflects on the coming devastation. Thomas is taken to the Cathedral, where the knights break in and kill him. The chorus laments: “Clean the air! Clean the sky!", and "The land is foul, the water is foul, our beasts and ourselves defiled with blood." At the close of the play, the knights step up, address the audience, and defend their actions. The murder was all right and for the best: it was in the right spirit, sober, and justified so that the church's power would not undermine stability and state power.

Collected and Prepared from different Eresources Jstore, Academia, Wikipedia etc by Bholanath Das, Faculty Member , Dept of English Debra College.