

The Suffering Motif in Eliot's *Murder in the Cathedral*

Prof. Salih Mahdi Hameed, Ph.D.

Hassan Mohammad Hussein

Abstract

The study tackles T.S. Eliot's greatest and most memorable play *Murder in the Cathedral*. The main focus of the study is to elicit Thomas Becket's experience of suffering throughout the course of the play. It has little to do with the physical suffering of the hero as it is something quite clear but it attempts to reveal the inner side of Becket and the bitter experiences of suffering and conflict that he undergoes until he reaches his tragic end.

تتناول الدراسة مسرحية ت.س. إليوت الخالدة "جريمة قتل في الكاتدرائية" وتتمركز الدراسة على إبراز محنة المعاناة التي مر بها توماس بكت. لا تعنى الدراسة كثيرا بالمعاناة الجسدية التي مر بها البطل بل انها تحاول سبر اغوار العالم الداخلي لبكت وما مر به من تجارب معاناة وصراع داخلي حتى وصل الى نهايته التراجيدية.

A Biographical Perspective:

The life of Thomas Becket of Canterbury is exceptionally well-known. After more than eight centuries, his history stands out so distinctive and minute that is extremely rare among the records of great men.¹ His biographers "write about matters of which they had personal knowledge; and whose personal dignity is above suspicion".² Most of writers have a close relationship with Becket and some of them were present when he was murdered.

There are a lot of stories about the life and the miracles attributed to Becket that spread out as legends. The story of his birth was only one: Thomas was half Arabian and half English. His father; Gilbert, was a crusader. He travelled to the Holy Land and was caught there by the Muslims. Gilbert got a great favor from his master the prince but he got greater favor from the Emir's daughter Matilda or Mahalt. After a year and a half in his prison, Gilbert fled to London, leaving the broken hearted young princess behind him. Although she did not know any English word but London and Becket, Matilda was thought to have followed her lover to England. After great difficulties, she arrived at London where she met Gilbert and married him.³

Matilda gave birth to her son on December 21, 1118. She had a great impact on the Saint as he had affirmed in many of his letters. He admitted that she had taught him two things that shaped his character when he grew up: a great love to the Holy Mother and a great love and compassion for the poor⁴. As for his formal education, Becket joined three schools in London and he also joined a university in Paris but he did not complete his study there, because of his economic status as his father was a moderate merchant and the financial matters of the family did not go very well. Thomas also studied in Italy but after all he owed a lot to his mother for his education.⁵

Because of these financial circumstances, Thomas Becket had to work as a clerk for a while before he was introduced to Theobald, the Archbishop of Canterbury at that time. He became a favored member in the Archbishop's court. He won Theobald's trust who sent him to Italy to accomplish many missions. At that time he got the chance to study the canon law in Italy. Becket had got a good relationship with Rome through which he played a very crucial role in crowning his friend Henry II as the king of England. Afterwards, King Henry made Becket the high chancellor, taking the advice of the Archbishop Theobald who had nominated Becket for this position.⁶

When Theobald died in 1162, the king chose his best friend Becket as the next Archbishop of Canterbury⁷. This decision was not welcomed by many churchmen. One cannot be quite sure about the reason of their objection. The reason might be Becket's nationality or they might simply envy Becket as he had both the divine as well as the secular power in England. It is very important to note that by nominating Becket to be the Archbishop, the king was intending to take control over the church in England. He thought that his personal relationship with Becket would make the task easier for him. The strong personal relationship between Henry and Becket would make Becket's dilemma greater.

After he had been appointed, Becket showed greater concern for the poor. It is said that every morning, thirteen beggars were brought to his home and after washing their feet; Becket served them a meal and gave them some pennies. As a penance for his previous sins, he slept on a cold stone on the floor and wore a hair shirt under his clothes.⁸

Meanwhile, some problems appeared to the surface between the king and Becket. The conflict started when Becket refused the king's decision to judge the men of church in the civil trials.⁹The king decided that clergymen found guilty of serious crimes should be handed over to his courts. At first, the Archbishop agreed with Henry about this issue but after talking to other church leaders, Becket changed his mind.¹⁰ Henry was furious when Becket began to assert that the church should retain control of punishing its own clergy. The king believed that Becket had betrayed him and was determined to obtain revenge.

In 1164, the Archbishop of Canterbury was involved in a dispute over land. Henry ordered Becket to appear before his courts. When Becket refused, the king confiscated his property. Henry also claimed that Becket had stolen £300 from government funds when he had been Chancellor and finally he accused him of treason¹¹. He insisted that Becket should stand in a civil trial in England but Becket refused that, affirming that only the Pope who had greater divine authority than him would be able to judge him; therefore, Becket fled to France where he was hosted by king Louis of France.¹²

The Pope and King Louis VIII of France had made great diplomatic efforts to reconcile Becket and Henry II and they did. Becket returned to England and as he arrived, he excommunicated some churchmen who supported the king when he was away. The excommunicated priests were from the church of London and participated in crowning Henry's son¹³. The king wanted to challenge Becket because crowning the kings in England was one of the proprieties of the Archbishop of Canterbury. Henry got too angry and shouted out his famous words "Will no one rid me of this turbulent priest"¹⁴. Four Knights, Hugh de Morville, William de Tracy, Reginald Fitz Urse, and Richard le Bret decided to travel to Canterbury in order to kill Becket. They arrived at the Cathedral on 29th December 1170¹⁵. They asked Becket to pardon the excommunicated priests but Becket refused. The Knights went out to bring their weapons that they left in the yard. Meanwhile, Becket said "we must all die and the fear of death must not turn us away from justice"¹⁶. The monks realized that it was the end, so they said "Come in father, come in that we may suffer together and glorified together."¹⁷

The monks who were with the Saint tried to shut the doors to prevent the knights from reaching Becket who shouted "let the blind wretches rage. I order you in virtue of obedience, not to shut the doors."¹⁸Fearing that the Archbishop would be rescued by the people in the nave, William de Tracy wounded Becket, cutting off the top of the head by the same blow he wounded the arm of him that tell this story. For he, when the other monks and clerks fled, stuck close to the Archbishop.¹⁹

Becket also received the second blow on his head from Reginald Fitz Urse but he stood firm. At the third blow he fell on his knees and elbows and said in a low voice, "For the name of Jesus and the protection of the Church I am ready to embrace death."²⁰Then the third one, Richard le Bret inflicted a terrible wound as he lay, by which the sword was broken against the pavement. The fourth knight, Hugh de Morville prevented any from interfering so that the others might freely murder the Archbishop.²¹The priest Hugh of Horsea who had entered with the knights put his foot on the neck of the saint and scattered his brains and blood over the pavement.²²

Becket's Murder represented a great shock to the Christian world. The Pope Alexander III canonized the martyr and he became a symbol for Christian resistance to the power of the monarchy. Although Henry admitted that his comments had led to the death of Becket, he argued that he had neither commanded nor wished the man's death.²³ In 1172 Pope Alexander III accepted these arguments and absolved Henry from Becket's murder but Henry had to agree to be whipped by many monks as penance and he also had to supply the church with soldiers and most important of all he had to drop his plans to have criminal priests judged in his courts.²⁴

Dramatic Perspectives:

In England, developments were in the works that would soon permit Eliot to intersect his long standing dramatic talents with his religious impulses. In 1930, George Bell, an Anglican bishop made great efforts to reinvigorate the longstanding relationship between drama and religion in the English church. Eliot met a young artist named E. Martin Brown at the bishop's palace where he asked Eliot's help as a poet to write the choruses and the dialogue of a pageant play to aid a church building fund for the new London suburbs. The resulting play was *The Rock* that deals with the difficulties that the modern church was encountering in the face of new, secular notions of the nation state and of the increasing pressures that a rampant consumerism and materialism were forcing upon an all too willing populace.²⁵

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Throughout his great critical contribution, Eliot deeply discussed the relationship between religion, literature, and society. It could be said that he realized that the major problem of his generation was the lack of belief. The importance of literature in concern to the society as a whole comes from its ability to tackle and treat the social issues. He believed in the necessity of religion for any society; religion in its broader sense that means for Eliot the whole system of beliefs of a given society that represents nothing but its own culture. For Eliot, literature naturally reflects most of the cultural aspects of the society that the author of any piece of literature is brought in.

Regardless of the changing state of his own personal beliefs, Eliot's basic framework for dealing with matters of religion, literature and society remained broadly sociological, anthropological and comparative. Religion meant for him not just and not even primarily a system of beliefs but rather the sum total of the ritual, cultic, and related social practices of a given society, each of them in more or less functional relation to the others. In his definition of what culture is, Eliot, indeed, states that "We may . . . ask whether what we call the culture, and what we call the religion, literature, and society of a people are not different aspects of the same thing: the culture being, essentially, the incarnation (so to speak) of the religion of a people" ²⁶

Kearns affirms that Eliot is deeply influenced by many socialist figures who point out powerful connections between religion and society; he states that: This sociological definition, indebted among other things

to his reading of Levy-Bruhl, Frazer, Durkheim, and others, opening his perspective to plural points of view, yet providing him with a strong stance from which to argue the integral and reciprocal roles of language, belief and culture.

Belief, for Eliot, was a more specific and more limited term, related to religion as part to whole. It meant the more or less conscious and systematic set of views and doctrines held by individuals and shaped by their experiences in communities of interpretation, views and doctrines by which they supported, rationalized and reinforced their various faiths and commitments. ²⁷ Eliot affirms that any work of literature will affect us whether this effect is intended or not on the part of the author. In his "Religion and Literature", he has broached compartmentalization:

And if we, as readers, keep our religious and moral convictions in one compartment, and take our reading merely for entertainment, or on a higher plane, for aesthetic pleasure, I would point out that the author, whatever his conscious intentions in writing, in practice recognizes no such distinctions. The author of a work of imagination is trying to affect us wholly, as human beings, whether he knows it or not; and we are affected by it, as human beings, whether we intend to be or not. ²⁸ It is noted that Eliot's idealization of order is concomitant with the philosophy of action and belief which holds those two categories as not merely parallel in the practice of everyday life but as integrated in a unified ontology. It is this impulse towards integration in our being with respect to our thoughts and deeds, our conviction and agency, which animated Eliot's literary criticism, social criticism, and dramaturgy. Theologically, it animates "Religious Drama," as well. Eliot stood firm against any structure, whether political, ideological, cultural, or dramatic, that would force or coerce human beings into becoming divided selves that have compartmentalized their deepest religious beliefs and their everyday lives:

What I am opposing is not merely a division of religious and secular drama into watertight compartments; what I am proposing is not merely that we need to go to a religious play or to a secular play in much the same spirit. It is an opposition to the compartmentalization of life in general, to the sharp division between our religious and ordinary life. ²⁹

Eliot remarks that "in the world in which we live this compartmentalization is constantly being forced upon us." He even claimed that "The terminus of such a doctrine is of course to put an end to man's private life altogether, for the division cannot be maintained."³⁰

The important point; Irving Babbitt says, is that:

Eliot's desire for order and integration of inner and outer life over and above a compartmentalization of action and belief, in short, his conservatism takes the form of a medievalism that offers an insular alternative, in Eliot's devotional imagination, to pluralism, liberalism and, by extension, a modernity Eliot had, elsewhere, repudiated.³¹

Eliot finds that religion, society and literature are independent and under threat in his own age:

These systems were, he saw, interdependent, and all were increasingly under threat, not only from wars, unregulated market forces and the crudities of industrialism, but perhaps even more from dissolution and anarchy. When he dealt with issues of religion, literature and society, then, it was with a full awareness of their gravity and extent, which entailed the fate of people and nations as well as that of individual souls.³²

Often, literature had been a medium of critical support for such Judeo-Christian religious doctrines as creation, covenant, exile, incarnation and redemption, and a source of relative stability for various moral and social orders based on their premises. This easy and natural association between religion, literature and society, Eliot argued, has happened when society was moderately healthy and its various discourses in some relation with one another, though necessarily not always perfectly harmonious. Just as often, however, or so it seemed, literature had been either a monolithic reflection or a mode of subversion of society and religion, as each discourse set up its own creative and prophetic energies over and against the others, vying for a totalizing hegemony on its own terms".³³

Eliot was very enthusiastic to write *Murder in the Cathedral* which was first performed in the Chapter House of Canterbury Cathedral before an opening night audience of 700 as a part of the Canterbury Festival. The idea for the drama was originally proposed to him, after the success achieved by *The Rock*, by Bishop Bell while Eliot was again staying as a weekend guest at Bell's episcopal palace. After Browne and Eliot's successful collaboration on *The Rock*, it seemed inevitable that, when Bell suggested to Eliot that he prepares an original work for that next year's Canterbury Festival, Eliot should again turn to Browne for his expertise with staging and directing. Thus began a collaborative effort between Browne and Eliot that would continue for nearly another quarter century.³⁴

Craig Raine admits that *The Rock* and *Murder in the Cathedral* were received well by the audience as well as by the critics for many reasons:

They are now of interest largely because they show Eliot addressing the problem of contemporary poetic drama and how it might be successfully achieved. The plays are also read as covert autobiography, alluding to Eliot's unhappy marriage—as they do, though not perhaps so literally as hostile critics like to think. As Eliot becomes a mature writer, his themes become clearer—to us, and to him. So the plays address Eliot's lifelong preoccupation with discovering what we really feel under the carapace of convention. They attempt to access the buried lives of their protagonists.³⁵ The stage and the scenery are certainly suitable for the theme of the play and its nature. Making every allowance for the extreme impressiveness of the surroundings, the hall of the Chapter House is, of course, magnificent—and for the extraordinary associational aid in the fact that a play about Thomas Becket's martyrdom was being performed on the very spot where the martyrdom itself had been enacted a combination of circumstances which must remain unique.³⁶

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Murder in the cathedral is T.S. Eliot's first full length play to which The Chorus in the Greek tragedies was closely linked. It was commissioned to the Canterbury Cathedral Festival of 1935 with the only proviso that the play has some link with the city of Canterbury. Eliot chose the story of the return Thomas Becket to England and his martyrdom in Canterbury Cathedral. The first performance of the play was given in the Chapter House of Canterbury Cathedral In June, 8, 1935 which was close to the scene of the actual murder of Beckett.³⁷

There is little physical action in the play, for Eliot's primary purpose is to define martyrdom and its meaning both at a specific time and for all time. Martyrdom is seen as a sacrifice made in submission of the personal will to God's will and made for the redemption of human sins.³⁸

The First Act focuses on the various attitudes of the women, priests, and Thomas himself toward the imminent Martyrdom. The play, is like a Greek tragedy, a poem; with a Chorus. It begins on 2 Dec .1 170, the day of Thomas's return from his seven year exile.³⁹ The Chorus, the poor women of Canterbury, feel the disturbance which will occur with Thomas's appearance. The immediate emphasis is obvious:

Are we drawn by danger? Is it knowledge of safety, that
draws our feet

towards the cathedral? (Act I, 11)⁴⁰.

The audience is aware at once that there is *both* danger and safety and the Chorus knows that the danger only indirectly threatens them:

There is no danger

For us, and there is no safety in the cathedral. (Act I, 11)

'For us' is twice emphasized at the beginning of line. The Chorus is initially presented merely as lookers-on and they put an accent on their own impotence by speaking of their limbs and organs as if these were their direct control:

Some presage of an act

Which our eyes are compelled to witness, has forced our feet

Towards the cathedral. We are forced to bear witness. (Act I,19)

Quickly the atmosphere of strain and expectancy is evoked, simple visual image being loaded from line to line with more and more significance:

While the laborer kicks off a muddy boot and stretches his

Hand to the fire,

The New Year waits, destiny waits for the coming.

Who has stretched out his hand to the fire and remembered

The Saints at all Hallows,

Remembered the martyrs and saints who wait? And who shall stretch

Out his hand to the fire, and deny his master? who shall be warm.

(Act I, 11-12)

The interest shifts to Thomas. The audience is told that "he was always Kind to his people" but that "it would not be well if he should return" (Act I, 12). It becomes clear that it is he whom the danger threatens, and with this knowledge the position of the Chorus also clarifies.

At one level, they are simply the poor women of Canterbury, who are afraid that anything will occur to upset that routine of their lives. They prefer, like the laborers "to pass unobserved". (Act I, 12). It is in terms of the modification of this attitude, that much of the significance of the 'murder' is embodied and expressed. At another level, the Chorus is transparently more than their natural selves. They could be like their equivalents in Greek tragedy, they present a commentary on the action; they speak of moments of vision in a shaft of sunlight by implying December:

Shall the Son of Man be born again in the litter of scorn? (Act I, 13).

Meantime the Chorus fall silent-and the priests enter upon the stage:

For us, the poor, there is no action,

But only to wait and to witness (Act I, 13)

Almost at once the tone of the verse changes. This is emphasized by the First Priest's use of two of the Chorus lines:

Seven years the summer is over.

Seven years since the Archbishop left us (Act I, 13)

However, the next line of the Chorus "He who was always kind to his

People" is not given by the First Priest. And the Priests start discussing the temporal effects of Thomas's return with the messenger. The Priests are presented as being capable of taking care of themselves. They know that the present is perilous and a change for the better is hardly possible:

Ill the wind, ill the time, uncertain the profit, certain the danger.

O late late, is the time, late too late, and rotten the year;

Evil the wind, and bitter the sea, and grey the sky, grey greygrey.

(Act I, 18) They appeal to Thomas to return to France:

You come with applause, you come with rejoicing, but you come bringing death into Canterbury.

A doom on the house, a doom on yourself, a doom on the world. (Act I, 19). To them, who 'do not wish anything to happen,' who go on "living and partly living" (Act I, 19)

Thomas, entering, reproves him in turn and speaks of his crossing and its political significance. And at this stage, the last utterance of Thomas's speech "ALL things prepare the event. Watch." (Act I, 23)

The audience is prepared for the First Tempter, who enters at once. He is the first of three who offer sensual pleasures, the second and third tempter, offer temporal power as chancellor and as an ally of the barons against the king. Since the temptations of these three offer only temporal and material benefits, Thomas finds it fairly easy to resist. They are introduced partly to show the truth of Thomas's saying: The impossible is still temptation. (Act I, 27) The Fourth Tempter, entering with congratulations, is at once endowed with a more sinister import 'Who are you?' Thomas asks. "I expected three visitors, not four". (Act I, 37) Thomas meets with no answer more definite than "I always precede expectation". (Act I, 37)

Thomas is forced to ask the question again since he is suspicious. The Fourth Tempter advises him to think of pilgrims:

Think of pilgrims, standing in line
Before the glittering jewelled shrine (Act I, p.40).

The Fourth Tempter after confusing Thomas with obliquities, of such kind, then his advice becomes more explicit:

Seek the way of martyrdom, make yourself the lowest
On earth, to be high in heaven.
And see far off below you, where gulfs are fixed,
Your persecutors, in timeless torment,
Parched passion, beyond expiation. (Act I, 41-42).

With this, Thomas begins to see the temptation involve an ultimate vitiation of his martyrdom through hypocrisy and he bursts out:

Who are you, tempting with my own desires?
Others have come, temporal tempters
... others offered real goods, worthless
But real. You only offer
Dreams to damnation (Act I, p.42).

Tempter's answer is "you have often dreamt them", (Act I, p.42) makes the audience aware of the fact that Thomas has indeed considered the following possibilities. His martyrdom will bring him eternal glory as a venerated saint, spiritual pleasure in being high in heaven, spiritual power over men who will

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worship him, and revenge on his enemies as well. Then, in an integral struggle which is not portrayed, he cleanses his soul of these impure motives, after a long period during which the other characters speak and he is silent, apparently searching his conscience, he asserts:

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 thing for the wrong reason. (Act I, p.47).

Thomas, his decision achieved, addresses the audience briefly with the following words implying his necessary purpose;

Now my good Angel, whom God appoints
To be my guardian, hover over the swords' points (Act I, p.48).

And the curtain falls. By the end of act I the play is virtually over. The fundamental implications of the action are now clearly before the audience and it only remains for the dramatist to show Thomas' visible death and its effects. In the Interlude that separates Parts I and II, the audience finds an Archbishop preaching a sermon. This short scene is enriched by a sort of duality, Thomas' remarks being addressed both to a hypothetical congregation (the Chorus) and to the audience. His sermon insists briefly upon two appropriate fundamentals: the Christian conceptions of 'rejoicing' and 'peace'; and the idea of martyrdom. The relevance of the Crucifixion to any other martyrdom here becomes specific:

Just as we rejoice and mourn at once, in the Birth and in the Passion of our Lord; so also, in a smaller figure, we both rejoice and mourn in the death of martyrs (Interlude, 52-53).

And the whole meaning of Thomas' self-abnegation and of the fourth temptation is explained:

A Christian martyrdom is never an accident, for Saints are not made by accident. Still less is A Christian martyrdom the effect of a man's will to become a Saint, as a man by willing and contriving may become a ruler of men. A Martyrdom is always the design of God, for His love of men, to warn them and to lead them, to bring them back to His ways.
(Interlude, 53)

After this personal note, the scene comes to its conclusion.

Part II again opens with the Chorus. First, there is "the sea-bird driven inland" (Act II, 57) convenient symbol for the Chorus themselves, driven from their wonted security. Then, mentioning spring which is more like death than birth "not a stir, not a shoot, not a breath" (Act II, 57) - an image for the context generally. There is insistence on naturalness of the season:

Longer and darker the day, shorter and colder the night
And on the sense of potentiality:
But a wind is stored up to the East (Act II, 57).

The crow and the owl supply two quick contributory effects. The reader hears the note of anxiety and mistrust:

Between Christmas and Easter what work shall be done? (Act II, 57)

And the Chorus anticipates;

.... We wait, and the time is short
But waiting is long. (Act II, 58)

There follows (pp.58-60) speeches said by the priests, alternative to the Chorus (though not necessarily, but probably) to show the passage of time. They are chanting phrases from the Epistle's for the feast days of St. Stephen, St. John the Apostle and the Holy Innocents; Perhaps these are appropriate to the situation at this point.

Then, with this interest fixed upon the fourth day after Christians, the Knights enter for the first time, and this is the climax of events. The Knights, having been ordered to kill Thomas, describe the various political charges against him and give a history of the conflict between the archbishop and the king. They leave with warnings that they will return to kill Thomas if he does not "depart from this land" (Act II, 70). The terrified Chorus cry out that death and corruption cover the earth. Thomas consoles them by saying that the pain of his death will later be transformed:

.... This is one moment,
But know that another
Shall pierce you with a sudden painful joy
When the figure of God's purpose is made complete. (Act II, 74).

The Knights return and murder Becket as the Chorus passionately describes the evil of the world. The women proclaim the identity of their flesh with the worms of the soil and the living creatures of the deep. The chorus which follow immediately after the murder
Clear the air! clean the sky! wash the wind! take stone from
stone and wash them
The land is foul, the water is foul, our beasts and ourselves
(defiled with blood. (Act II, 82-83

This intensely moving climax is followed by the prose speeches of the Knights who advance to the front they were disinterested agents, who will receive no personal pain; that the king had to restore order; "and that Thomas' death was really his own insane choice, a kind of suicide"⁴¹. After an affirmation by the third priest that the church has been strengthened rather than weakened by Thomas's martyrdom. The play closes with the Chorus praising God for the blessing of a new martyr whose blood has redemptive qualities:

We thank Thee for Thy mercies of blood, for Thy redemption by blood. For the blood of Thy Martyrs and saints
Shall enrich the earth, shall create the holy places. (Act II, 93).

As for the characters in general, Thomas is a heroic figure on the scale of leading characters in Greek tragedy. He is meant to be an extraordinary person; sensitive, intelligent, courageous, and committed irrevocably to God. These features and his martyrdom isolate him from the other characters. For these reasons he appears slightly remote, though not unconvincing. His awareness of and admission to the temptations of spiritual power and glory make him both more human and more admirable.⁴²

Becket is a representative of what Eliot said in 1949, with the magisterial diffidence of a reluctant oracle, "that we should turn away from the Theatre of Ideas to the Theatre of Character. The essential poetic play should be made with human beings rather than with ideas."⁴³

Moreover, Horace Gregory states that:

Eliot's grasp of characterization has never been of great variety: Gerontion shades into Prufrock, Prufrock into Tiresias, Tiresias into the speaker of Ash Wednesday and from this voice into the voice of Becket answering four tempters in the play. I agree with Mr. F. O. Matthiessen that we must not identify this character too closely with Eliot himself. He represents, I would say, merely the

symbol of the poet's indecision, moving toward and away from its objects of desire. It is significant, I think, that the fourth and last tempter in *Murder in the Cathedral* offers martyrdom and everlasting fame; that is, the actual martyrdom is the decision to become a martyr—the difficulty of deciding anything is more important than the final action.⁴⁴

The Chorus is made up of definite characters, the poor women of Canterbury who represent the reaction of ordinary human beings to martyrdom. "Their reactions change from fear to understanding to acceptance and thanksgiving."⁴⁵ As the play progresses they become aware, not only of the sin and death in the world, but also of their part in it. Finally, they realize that they are recipients of the redeeming effects of his sacrifice.⁴⁶ Their closing passage:

Forgive us, O Lord, we acknowledge ourselves as
Type of the common man,
.....Blessed Thomas, pray us. (Act II, p. 94).

clearly presents their important discovery and the main point of the play that mankind is sinful but that the suffering of martyrs is shed for its redemption. This understanding might recall the third view of suffering discussed in the first chapter above.

Richard Badenhause states that:

Not only was the Chorus the first part of the play to take shape, according to Eliot's July 1934 letter to Rupert Doone, but in essays like "The Three Voices of Poetry" and "The Aims of Poetic Drama," respectively, Eliot spoke of identifying the Chorus with himself and remarked upon how easy he found writing choral poetry compared to dramatic dialogue.⁴⁷

And he continues:

In accord with Irigaray's model, the Chorus's language, which is the most open, elusive, and "fluid," provides the basic structure for the play. That fluidity is actually advanced by the collective makeup of the choral body. No longer a threat, the group is celebrated for the power that derives from an alliance of individuals. Far from fearing engulfment by the feminine, as illustrated in "Hysteria," by 1935 Eliot is seeking it, embracing it, and even writing it.⁴⁸

Infact, the Chorus of *Murder in the Cathedral* becomes the drama's most fully developed character, a coherent personality that articulates Eliot's "first voice" as defined in his "The Three Voices of Poetry."⁴⁹ The collective makeup of the Chorus validates their position aurally

For in speaking together the women of Canterbury create a powerful wall of sound that will have the most pronounced effect upon the audience and will be what theatergoers remember about the performance. It offers an effective counterpoint to the long-winded Knight-murderers who address the audience one-by-one in prose.⁵⁰

Despite the Priests' earlier attempts to minimize the presence of the Chorus because they see the women as inconsequential peasants with little knowledge of the intricate workings of the Church, it is the Chorus's very engagement with the physical world that gives their words so much weight in the audience's eyes as well as in Becket's. The women's experiential language anticipates Cixous's claims

that the “flesh speaks true and woman physically materializes what she’s thinking; she signifies it with her body.”⁵¹

The poor women of Canterbury understand the world through bodily sensation and seasonal cycles: “winter shall come bringing death from the sea,” (Act I, 12) worry the women. After the passing of that season, they fear that “ruinous spring shall beat at our doors, / Root and shoot shall eat our eyes and our ears, / Disastrous summer burns up the beds of our streams.” (Act I, 12) All they have to look forward to at the conclusion of the destructive sequence is “another decaying October” (Act I, 12). The startling final image, with its evaporation of boundaries between the body and the physical world, is reminiscent of the dematerialization of the self at the end of Whitman’s *Song of Myself*.⁵² In both cases, identity vanishes as a means to transcendent expansion. Speech, characterizing such moments, is never linear or objectified, according to Cixous. Thus the Chorus’s lines are the least controlled of the play, the least reined in, the most syntactically complex and oblique, and the longest.⁵³

The Chorus embodies an instinctual drive, not only in its “breathlessness” but also in its penchant for open-ended discourse and experience. This “open-endedness” serves as the antithesis of the type of closure the drama associates with the male, whether it be through murder (by the Knights) or election to heaven (of Becket), for male speech and action is always tied to specific outcomes. Eliot’s male characters are incessantly preoccupied with telos.⁵⁴

The Chorus, on the other hand, offers impressionistic visions of its surroundings, for its members are content to wait and to witness. Some of its odes evolve into poetic, almost preverbal, stuttering: O late late late, late is the time, late too late, and rotten the year; Evil the wind, and bitter the (sea, and grey the sky, grey grey grey. (Act I, 18)

The lines continue to press forward, not because they are driving to an end but because they represent immediate responses to experience. As such the poetry can simply sputter to a halt, as it does here, without reaching a formal end beyond the line break. On the contrary, there is Becket’s response to a physical threat, as when he faces the Four Tempters and ponders his next move. The result is a rational, controlled, concise, and balanced rhetoric: “Can I neither act nor suffer / Without perdition?” (Act I, 43).

The Chorus delivers its alternative version of these fears in stark language that places those conceptual ideas in terms of physical, worldly images, as when its members complain: “Thick and heavy the sky. And the earth presses up against our feet,” (Act I, p.43) or when they ask: “What is the sickly smell, the vapour? The dark green light from a cloud on a withered tree? The earth is heaving to parturition of (issue of hell. What is the sticky dew that forms on the back of my hand?” (Act I, p. 43)

The Chorus insistently views and articulates experience through its own body and repeatedly returns to rhetorical devices – like the question – that emphasize open-endedness over closure. In fact, Eliot often pairs the discourses of Thomas and the Chorus to achieve the effect of rhetorical contrast. This pairing occurs when Becket concludes Part I of the drama with a couplet – implying closure, balance, reason – and the Chorus opens Part II with a series of questions about the seasons – signaling open-endedness.⁵⁵

The Chorus’s verbal representations of Becket’s quest for sainthood is also central to the success of the play as a whole. Through their discourse, the women measure and articulate the suffering of Canterbury’s martyr, “a role that corresponds to the conception of the chorus in Attic drama as reflector of onstage action.”⁵⁶ Yet this status embodies not the negative, but a positive model that allows the Chorus to sift through the stage action, interpret it, and finally present, in the communal format of a group, what it takes to be the most meaningful message of the events that make up the drama

The language used by the Chorus to describe its situation could also represent the tenuous female position in medieval England. Full of violent metaphors and images of stasis, paralysis, and dryness, the women’s discourse betrays a resignation over their banishment to an environment marked by its lack of fertility. They are doomed to “wait for another decaying October” (Act I, p. 12). The violent discourse reflects a physical pain that seems quite remote from Becket’s more cerebral existence, thus enacting thematically Eliot’s separation of the theatrical experience into two levels. “The play balances discussions of history, theology, philosophy, and ethics with an emotionally charged poetry of the body expressed by the Women of Canterbury.”⁵⁷

While the Archbishop pontificates in dry, dispassionate language “that the pattern may subsist, for the pattern is the action / And the suffering, that the wheel may turn and still / Be forever still” (Act I, p.22), the Chorus cries out that “our hearts are torn from us, our brains unskinned like the layers of an onion” (Act I, p. 20) and fears that “a new terror has soiled us, which none can avert . . . flowing in at the ear and

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the mouth and the eye" (Act I, p.46). "Becket may talk cerebrally about suffering, but it is the Chorus that is living that burden."⁵⁸

In the Christian universe of *Murder in the Cathedral* and in Eliot's post conversion mind, the experience of suffering can be understood as a positive trait. The physical pain of the Chorus substantiates its mission and elevates its role as a Christian model for other characters, for readers, and for Eliot. In a book on witnessing called *Testimony*, Shoshanna Felman points out that legitimate witnessing is validated only through the physical: the experience "requires one to live through one's own death, and paradoxically bear witness to that living through one's dying."⁵⁹

The Chorus's seeing privileges their knowing. So when the women were speaking their final ode before Becket's sermon by explaining that they "know of oppression and torture", and they "know of extortion and violence, / Destitution, disease The old without fire in winter" (Act I, p.45), we are meant to understand that, in Eliot's world, such suffering certifies their point of view as meaningful, authentic, and compelling. And this may also remind us again of the third view of suffering which is mentioned in this study. "This contextualization helps broaden readings by feminist critics such as Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar that perceive female physical suffering solely in negative terms."⁶⁰

Laura Severin's discussion of *The Cocktail Party's* misogynist social agenda, for example, observes that "Celia, the story's Circe, is the most dangerous threat and therefore receives the most violent sentences. Not only is she killed but her story of martyrdom is erased . . . Alex, who possesses her story, tells only the barest of details."⁶¹ Indeed, textual evidence reveals that Eliot had intended to share more of those details, with references to decomposing flesh and the body's juices, but early audiences found the graphic language too distasteful, and Eliot was persuaded by his director, Martin Browne, to tone down the account.⁶² As in "The Love Song of St. Sebastian," violence here serves not as a punishment, but as a vehicle allowing Eliot to identify and ultimately sympathize with its victim. Celia, like the Chorus, is the character on whom Eliot pinned his hopes and fears. Rather than feeling threatened by Celia's tragic story, Eliot embraces it.

As far as the first three Tempters, they convey facets of Thomas's past life while the fourth Tempter represents a present inner conflict of impure motives which Thomas overcomes before his death. Despite Day-Lewis's assertion that literature must become more concerned with the relations between classes and less with the relations between individuals, the greatest drama always has been, and always will be, concerned with the individual, for the individual is the unit from which life takes meaning: he is the center to which relates the intelligibility of the universe. For the purposes of action, the dramatic conflict in the individual must be with other individuals, but in so far as that conflict has meaning it is less a matter of the relation of man to man and more a matter of man's relation to things beyond him.⁶³ Thus what moves us most in the drama of Oedipus is not his relations with Jocasta or the people of Thebes but with something less easily named; Hamlet's questions are not to be answered by Gertrude or Ophelia, since in the end they are reduced to the question of "to be or not to be" and the manner of that being.⁶⁴ And Thomas's concern is as to what his aspiration to goodness will actually be in God's sight; he finds the way to holiness no easier in being chosen than in being traversed:

The last temptation is the greatest treason:
To do the right deed for the wrong reason. (Act I, 47)

This is fundamental because it asks: "Do we do good for good's sake? It is dramatic because it uncovers a conflict within the individual"⁶⁵

Although he is a poet, Eliot succeeds in reflecting the conflict of the hero in a very professional way that is no less than what the great masters of the art of conflict have done in their masterpieces. Thus, "The dramatic conflict in the first part of the work is an inner one, of a sort that shows Eliot even more clearly than ever in the tradition of Henry James, and, more especially here, of Hawthorne."⁶⁶ For the conflict is

Becket's struggle against pride and his final transcendence over it. The last Tempter speaks to him insidiously in words that had often been Becket's own thoughts, luring him on to martyrdom not as a result of losing his will in God's, but as an act of self-aggrandizement, as a final overweening of his pride. Tortured by a dilemma in which it seems to him that he can 'neither act nor suffer without perdition,' (Act I, 43) and where all existence consequently seems unreal, he fights his way through to
:his final resolve

.Now is my way clear, now is the meaning plain
(Temptation shall not come in this kind again. (Act I, 47

Thus fortified, his will at last is made perfect in the acceptance of God's will, he continues to maintain the supremacy of the law of God above the law of man, and goes forward, in the second part, to his death at the hands of the Knights. "It is upon his consecration to perseverance in his career and the world's denial of its value that the dramatic conflict of the second part hinges."⁶⁷ Immediately after the murder, in the most effectively unexpected passage of the play, the Knights themselves turn to the audience, and, speaking in prose, "conduct a systematic defense of their act. The writing of their speeches is masterly in its wit and irony."⁶⁸

The point is plainly made that if Thomas suffered death for the sake of power and glory he was not holy; and there is abundant evidence, both before and after the catastrophe at the altar, that most of England felt a fanaticism in his final act. But the point is as plainly made that this particular martyrdom may have been designed in heaven, where 'the Saints are most high, having made themselves most low.' (Act I, 53) "As for an earthly solution to the problem, there is and can be none; nor can Thomas's own words to himself be taken as testimony, since he dies a man and not a saint, and speaks accordingly—as one, that is to say, who desires to know rather than knows."⁶⁹

:In the same discourse, Edward Shillito argues that Thomas Becket will die; but how will he die? The question has a curiously modern value. In India, Mahatma Gandhi believes in martyrdom; but he believes in seeking it as a way of winning the dull and listless children of men to his cause. This is not martyrdom in the Christian use of the word. A Christian must be ready to die for his faith, and he must die gladly, for this is the only way in which under certain conditions he can serve. But he must not seek death to win spiritual glory, nor must he die as a deliberate way of serving a cause. He must suffer in pure love to God. If I give my body to be burned and have not love, I am

nothing.⁷⁰

Thus, the spiritual conflicts of the play have not been finally solved, Edward Shillito continues; although the play is:

Strictly historical and yet while all the time the reader is in the Canterbury of 1170, he is haunted by the thought that the conflict is still taking place. All the great spiritual conflicts are never finally answered. It belongs to the greatness of a play that, even when the modern scene is not mentioned, it should be before the reader's inner eye. While he thinks of Canterbury 1170, he may be in Moscow or any other city.⁷¹ The Knights represent:

The animalistic, violent, and evil side of humanity. They are the tempters of the audience. Even more audacious is that of having the four knights, after the murder, step forward in turn and justify their deed in Shavian prose—a device for bringing various modern historical judgments of Thomas into the framework of the play. But to my mind the most impressive of all Eliot's feats are his liturgical adaptations in the second part of the play: the three intonations at the beginning; the parody of the Dies Irae spoken by the Chorus outside the cathedral against the singing of the hymn inside; the concentration of blasphemy achieved just before the murder by having

the four knights slightly tipsy, speak.⁷² Ashley Duke stressed the simplicity of the approach that makes it possible to create four mystical figures as tempters of Becket, perfectly defined in character and distinguished in utterance, who materialize later in the four assassin-knights and still retain their individual salt of mind and humor.

He claimed that it is a dream of every actor to stand before a hushed audience as these actors stand, creating a drama of their own within the drama. As for the figure of Becket, it is the creation of a

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mind that stands above every device of dramatic convention and every special pleading of intellectualism, and employs the art of poetry consciously to achieve a spiritual fusion.⁷³

The Priests give necessary background information, attempt to protect Thomas from the Knights, and suggest varied reactions to his death. In Act I, they are individuals while in Act II they speak for the most part as a group. However, they do not comprehend the fuller meaning of Becket's martyrdom and suffering as the chorus has done. They do not attain the stage of witnessing that the chorus have attained. They are merely watchers but not witnesses.⁷⁴

Murder in the Cathedral, except *The Rock*, is the play in which Eliot attempts a mixture of verse and Prose. This, in the end, is what gives the play its energy and its surprising universality. It is "his most unified writing. He has admirably brought to maturity his long experimenting for a dramatic style, the chief merit of which lies in his writing for the chorus."⁷⁵

The mixture of verse and prose which gives the play its energy and its surprisingly universality is one of its most dominant characteristics. The chorus, being presented as a character, aims at making a connection between audience and the play. Then, this play is celebrated as a very successful cooperation of the verse and prose. The first addresses the human heart - the function of the Chorus- and the latter to human consciousness.⁷⁶

The rhythm changes according to the mood of the play and this what makes the play very effective; in addition to the masterful adaptation of the poetic styles from the part of Eliot, as Peter Monro

Jack affirms: The verse throughout is plain and direct, so diversified in rhythm that it appears to be constantly changing with the

dramatic mood: there is a remarkable passage in alliterative stress; others are in odic style, others in set stanzas. Such resources as Mr. Eliot's have probably never before been brought to liturgical drama. But it seems to us that the theatre as well as the church is enriched by this poetic play of grave beauty and momentous decision, and that if our stage were capable of presenting and speaking it, it would be a

memorable thing to hear.⁷⁷ "It is a triumph of poetic genius that out of such actionless material—the mere conflict of a mind with itself—a play so deeply moving, and so exciting, should have been written; and so rich, moreover in the various language of humanity." That is perhaps the greatest surprise about it—in the play Eliot has become human, and tender, with tenderness and a humanity which have nowhere else in our time found such beauty of form.⁷⁸ Muriel Bradbrook asserts that Eliot's dramatic abilities can best be showed in his portraying of an immortal moment; he says, "*Murder in the Cathedral* shows one of those moments, in and out of time, when a saint is created, a moment in the pattern of time which has significance beyond time."⁷⁹ Technically speaking, the chorus and the tempters are very essential to structural framework of the play. Both of them are presented as characters in the play but they also serve as dramatic techniques. It is possible to say that without the chorus and the tempters, there would be no play at all. It is also possible to say that the play mainly depicts two human experiences: suffering and conflict.

Suffering is not only experienced by the hero of the play but also by the audience or the readers of the play. Eliot needs a technique to make the sought contact between the hero and the audience or the readers. This technique is the chorus who serves as a linkage between the two as it was argued before in discussing the function of the chorus. Eliot uses his poetic skills to make the lines that are said by the chorus the most effective lines in the play. They know what the meaning of suffering is because they have experienced it in their real life as they told us at the beginning of the play

However, their understanding of suffering at the beginning of the play differs completely from their understanding at the end of the play. Now they comprehend that suffering might not be only positive but so necessary too. They realized that the suffering and the martyrdom of Becket is the only mean for their own redemption and salvation. The words of the chorus which are the most poetic in the play have successfully delivered Eliot's message to the audience that suffering and even dying for a right cause might be the noblest thing in this world. People should thank God because he gave them another martyr as the chorus finally declare

The tempters are also quite important and essential to the structure of the play. The real conflict of the play is between Becket and his tempters who represent nothing but his own desires and wishes and the

knights who appear in the second part of the play might represent the tempters themselves; and strikingly there are four tempters in the first act and four knights in the second part. Thus, Becket experienced an austere inner conflict but he succeeds in overcoming it

Some critics may misunderstand the accurate function of the knights believing that the play is virtually over in the first act as Becket takes his decision and overcomes the temptations. As it is said before that both experiences: suffering and conflict, are deeply manifested in this play in concern to the hero as well as to the audience or the readers of the play. Thus, if Becket fights his tempters in the first act, the audience should wait the second part to face their tempters who are the knights. It is left to the audience or the readers to judge; whether Thomas has committed suicide or not; or he might die for his own personal glory or any other justification given by knights at the end of the play. The knights or one can say the tempters in their second manifestation; create the play of their own arousing the conflict to its peak within the audience. The play ends by this climax and the spiritual as well as the moral conflicts of the play could not be finally answered; and this is part of the greatness of this play

As far as the formal side of the play, Eliot has insisted on the importance of the poetic drama in expressing the society and its needs. In his "The Possibility of Poetic drama", Eliot argues that from many forms of literature, drama is the best way to bring back that easy and natural connection between religion and society, thus he says: The forms of Ovid, Catullus, Propertius, served a society different, and in some respects more civilized, than any of these; and in the society of Ovid the drama as a form of art was comparatively insignificant. Nevertheless, the drama is perhaps the most permanent, is capable of greater variation and of expressing more varied types of society, than any other. It varied considerably in England alone.⁸⁰ Frederick A. Pottle has noticed that drama was changing. Drama in those days was struggling towards a new birth; the change could best be described by saying that their most gifted authors were deeply dissatisfied with drama of character and were turning to drama of plot. Their lively interest in Greek tragedy was symptomatic. MacLeish studied Sophocles and O'Neill referred to Aeschylus. But to write genuine drama of plot, of action, in those days was not altogether a matter of choice. The essence of Greek drama was religious certainty; an unshaken conviction that there is an order of things in the universe more real and more important than the individual hero. The difficulty which most modern playwrights face is that, lacking religious certainty, they have to invent an equivalent—to set up deliberately the external sanctions by which alone drama or plot can be organized. They started with a considerable—perhaps an insuperable—handicap. An artist, like Eliot; who really feels dogmatic Christianity will have the advantage.⁸¹ Although he had this advantage to write poetic plays but Eliot had realized the difficulty of his task. He discussed that by referring to the golden age of drama saying that: The *framework* which was provided for the Elizabethan dramatist was not merely blank verse and the five-act play and the Elizabethan playhouse; it was not merely the plot—for the poets incorporated, remodeled, adapted or invented, as occasion suggested. It was also the half-formed, the "temper of the age", a preparedness, a habit on the part of the public, to respond to particular stimuli.⁸² And he also added "When there is this economy of effort it is possible to have several, even many, good poets at once. The great ages did not perhaps produce much more talents than ours; but less talent was wasted."⁸ Eliot succeeds in making the form of the play quietly fit to its content. The poetic language of the play is certainly appropriate to the seriousness and the eminency of the subject which is the martyrdom of Thomas Becket. The images are genuinely portrayed to give the play its dynamic movement. The structural framework is properly employed to give the subject of the play the magnificence it deserves as we have in the insertion of the interlude between the two acts to explain the exact meaning of martyrdom.

There is no doubt that dramatizing the story of Becket and showing his bitter suffering and conflict to intensify his glory is almost one of the greatest accomplishments of T.S. Eliot for it is a trait of great authors to write about the great figures of their own cultures. Similarly, Abdul Razaq Abdul Wahid does the same thing when he writes a fantastic play about Al-Hur, a famous figure in the history of Islam. As

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Eliot, he also reflects the sufferings and the conflicts of Al-Hur as those experiences tend to be universal traits of great heroes in all cultures

Notes

¹John Morris, *The Life and Martyrdom of Saint Thomas Becket*

.London: Burns and Oates, 1985) xiii)

Here are some of Becket's biographers cited in the previous source: Benedict: he was a monk. It is² said that he was one of the most intimate friends of Becket who was present at his martyrdom. William Fitz Stephen: he was Becket's clerk and one of his households. He was also present at his martyrdom in Canterbury. John of Salisbury: he was close friend of Becket and an honest and trusted admonitor. Edward Grim: he was a secular clerk at Cambridge and was present at Becket martyrdom

³Ibid.1

Ibid. 5⁴

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⁹ W. L. Warren, *Henry II* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1973).221

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²⁸ T.S. Eliot, "Religion and Literature," in *Selected Essays* (London: Faber and Faber, 1951) 394.

²⁹ Ibid.

³⁰ Ibid.

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³² A. David Moody, *The Cambridge Companion to T.S. Eliot* (Cambridge,: Cambridge University press,1994)77.

³³ Ibid., p.78

³⁴Craig Raine, *T.S. Eliot* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006) 117.

³⁵Ibid. p. 118

³⁶Craig Raine, *T.S. Eliot* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006) 119

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A Literary Reference to His Life and Work (New York: Facts On File, Inc 2007) 24.

³⁸Ibid.p.26

³⁹ Craig Raine, *T.S. Eliot* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006)120.

⁴⁰ Henceforth, all references to the play are taken from this edition, with Act and page numbers cited within the text. T.S. Eliot, *Murder in the Cathedral* (London: Faber and Faber, 1979).

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⁴²Russell Elliott Murphy, *The Critical Companion T. S. Eliot*, 26

⁴³ Richard Findlater, "The Camouflaged Drama" in *T.S. Eliot: The Critical Heritage*, vol.2, Michael Granted. (London: Taylor & Francis e-Library, 2005) 673.

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⁶⁴ Leonard Ungar, *T.S. Eliot: A Selected Critique* (New York: Russell, 1966)135.

⁶⁵Ibid.138.

⁶⁶ F.O. Mathiessen, *The Achievement of T. S. Eliot* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1959)182.

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⁶⁸ Edward Shillito, "Murder in theCathedral." in *T.S. Eliot: The Contemporary Reviews*, Jewel Spears Brookered. (Cambridge: Cambridge University press, 2004)335.

⁶⁹Ibid.336

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