



Murder in the Cathedral

Study Guide by Course Hero



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👁 Book Basics

AUTHOR

T. S. Eliot

YEAR PUBLISHED

1935

GENRE

Drama, History, Tragedy

ABOUT THE TITLE

The title *Murder in the Cathedral* references the assassination of Archbishop Thomas Becket (c. 1118–70) in Canterbury Cathedral in 1170, at the behest of King Henry II (1133–89) of England, who is also a subject of the play. The conflict between the two men arises over disagreement regarding the power of the English government versus that of the Catholic

Church.

📍 In Context

Modernist Poetry and Drama

T.S. [Eliot](#) (1888–1965) was one of the premier modernist writers, and *Murder in the Cathedral* is a modernist drama. As an artistic movement, modernism constituted a rejection of the idealistic and artificial constructions of the Romantic period and offered a more critical and realistic look at the psychology of people living in the changing landscape of an increasingly urbanized and industrialized society. English literature and drama began an increasing exploration of psychological realism and the conflicted—sometimes neurotic and contradictory—emotions of flawed and vulnerable subjects. With new academic work reaching writers from subjects like anthropology, political science, psychology and psychoanalysis, this psychological portraiture became a major feature of modernist works. Eliot's first major poem, "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock" (1915), for example, paints a picture of a nervous and overwhelmed man, repeating himself and attempting to find a place of equilibrium.

Modernist poets and playwrights eschewed the formulaic patterns of prior generations and attempted to capture both the accurate rhythms of speech and, as American Modernist poet Ezra Pound (1885–1972) put it, a rhythm that "correspond[s] exactly to the emotion or shade of emotion to be expressed." As a part of this pursuit of interior realism, characters in modernist plays often grapple with the rapidly changing world, the politics of current events, and the alienation from traditions and communities that had been a source of meaning to previous generations. This concern with the individual's relationship to society extended beyond the subjects of the plays, and modernist theater was often

deliberately and provocatively political, with notables such as German dramatist Bertolt Brecht (1898–1956) expressly using theater as a way to disseminate leftist ideology. The horrors of World War I (1914–18) spurred many modernist writers into deep reflection and feelings of helplessness and hopelessness about the world around them. Likewise, while not overtly political, *Murder in the Cathedral* comments on the rise and dangers of fascism (centralized dictatorial government with strict regimentation and suppression of opposition).

A major influence in modernist writing and an early trend within it was the concept of imagism, or the idea that a clear and exact image could encompass an entire poetic statement—not in the sense of conveying a narrative or specific allegory, but rather projecting a precise emotional response. T.S. Eliot wrote frequently about the directed emotional impact of concrete imagery, or what he called the "objective correlative." In the essay "Hamlet and His Problems" (1920) he states that the objective correlative is "a set of objects, a situation, a chain of events which shall be the formula of that particular emotion." In other words, a set of specific external facts can immediately evoke an emotion. In drama modernism was closely associated with the avant-garde, and companies experimented with minimal and symbolic sets and inclusion of the audience as a part of the play. Nobel laureate and Belgian author Maurice Maeterlinck's (1862–1949) work provides a good example of a commitment to psychological realism contrasted with and enhanced by increasingly abstract and symbolic staging. Evidence of the objective correlative in *Murder in the Cathedral* can be seen, for example, in the clear, stark details of geography and climate used by the chorus.

Technological advances also influenced theatrical staging, and next to imagism and symbolism, there was a complementary movement toward naturalism and the rejection of illusions that had been major components of previous generations' productions. Theatrical naturalists introduced increasingly three-dimensional sets that the actors could interact with to replace painted backdrops and created innovative electric lighting to reduce artificial-looking shadows. Their goal was to enhance the impression that the audience was merely looking through a transparent "fourth wall" into a room that could be mistaken for reality.

The Martyrdom of Thomas Becket

[Thomas Becket](#) was born in around 1118 in Cheapside, London, to a merchant family. He worked as a clerk and an accountant before entering the services of Archbishop Theobald (c. 1090–1161), who was impressed by his performance and sent him to study canon and civil law in Italy and France. As a reward for diligent service, in 1154 the archbishop appointed Becket archdeacon of Canterbury and recommended to King Henry II (1133–89) that he be made chancellor.

As chancellor, Becket distinguished himself as an excellent manager of military and financial matters, including the renovation of the Tower of London, and he was a close friend and confidant of the king. During this period he was noted for his loyalty and obedience to the king as well as for the ostentatious luxury of his lifestyle. Contemporary sources criticized him for continuing to occupy his seat as archdeacon despite a complete dereliction of his duties to the Church. When Henry II pushed for more control over the appointment of clerical offices, Becket, as chancellor, supported him.

However, in 1161 Henry II recommended Becket for archbishop of Canterbury, and after being elected to the seat, Becket's politics shifted dramatically. He renounced his chancellorship, adopted an austere lifestyle, and supported Rome against the king. He opposed tax proposals, excommunicated a baron, and advocated for the rights of priests to be tried for crimes exclusively in ecclesiastical (Church) courts. In 1164, in a document known as the Constitution of Clarendon, the king asserted his right to assign offices, levy taxes, assign clerical offices, and collect fees from vacant positions. Becket initially assented but then reversed his position.

Justifiably fearing imprisonment by the king, Becket fled to France, while Henry II confiscated the property of his family and supporters. Between 1164 and 1170 Becket remained in Europe, with English bishops and the king hostile to him. Pope Alexander III (c. 1105–81) attempted to broker a peace between the two parties, and there was a failed attempt to reconcile the two at a summit in Montmirail, France. In 1170 the king increased his declaration of powers over clerical offices and broke with the approved papal tradition of having the archbishop of Canterbury preside over coronations: he had his son crowned co-king by the bishop of York. Becket, and then

the pope, immediately excommunicated all the members of the Church involved.

Fearing further action from Rome, the king reinstated Becket's possessions and allowed him to return to England, to jubilant crowds. Becket refused to lift the excommunications on the English bishops and instead continued to issue excommunications on other allies of the crown. Henry railed against Becket; his complaint is most often remembered as, "Will no one rid me of this turbulent priest?," though various biographers record different versions. Though this was not a direct order, four of the king's knights took the question seriously and rode to Canterbury, where they confronted Becket on December 29, 1170 and murdered him in the cathedral.

Canterbury Cathedral became a site of pilgrimage almost immediately, and Thomas Becket was canonized Saint Thomas Becket in 1173. For almost 400 years Becket's shrine was one of the foremost pilgrimage destinations in Europe, until Henry VIII (1491–1547) broke entirely with the Catholic Church in 1532. He dissolved the monasteries, and in particular he dismantled Becket's shrine in Canterbury, burned and scattered his remains, and removed his name from the prayer books, declaring him an enemy of England. Today he is venerated as a saint by both the Catholic Church and the Anglican Communion.

The Rise of Fascism

Between 1914 and 1918 World War I consumed Europe, resulting in an estimated 37.5 million military casualties. There were as many as 13 million civilian deaths and the destruction of significant portions of European infrastructure. Fascist ideologies began to gain traction in the immediate postwar years, especially in countries that had been on the losing side of World War I. This was exacerbated in the 1930s by a global economic depression and the fear of the spread of communism (totalitarian system of government), especially among elite groups who made up the majority of early fascist supporters. These factors combined with an already popular eugenics movement (which advocated selective breeding practices) and an existing sentiment of backlash against liberal and secular reforms to energize fascist movements. Between 1922 and 1945 fascist factions gained control of the governments of Germany, Italy, Austria, Greece, Croatia, and Japan. Though not in power, fascist parties exerted influence

in Spain, Poland, Finland, Hungary, Romania, Belgium, France, and England.

Fascism is an authoritarian ideology that takes its name from the Latin *fasces*, a symbol composed of a tied bundle of rods, often with an ax, used in Roman times to symbolize power and authority. Fascism is commonly marked by penal authority, control of media, suppression of dissent, a belief in a natural hierarchy, a veneration of national identity often consisting of a racial component (German "*Volksgemeinschaft*"), antipathy to liberalism and democracy, conservative social mores, scapegoating of minorities and political enemies, and opposition to socialism and communism.

At the time *Murder in the Cathedral* was written in the mid 1930s, Italian dictator Benito Mussolini (1883–1945) had been in power in Italy for over a decade after helping organize paramilitary squads to violently suppress Italian leftists. German dictator Adolf Hitler (1889–1945) was already *führer* in Germany, having successfully purged all competing political elements and ordering the murder of hundreds of his political enemies in what was known as "the Night of the Long Knives." Given the political climate of Europe, a play in which a single individual stands by his convictions against the power of a government and the threats of death would have struck a timely chord. Throughout the play there are echoes of the populism and nationalism that would have been common fascist talking points. Eliot himself was critical of fascism, in contrast with other noted modernist poet Ezra Pound.

Eliot's View on Art and Drama

During his lifetime Eliot was respected as much for his criticism as for his poetry and wrote extensively about the mechanisms of art and drama. Of particular relevance to understanding *Murder in the Cathedral* is his assertion that all art exists in a mutual dialogue with all previous works of art and can be understood only by its relationship to the whole. As he writes in the essay "Tradition and the Individual Talent" (1920), "No poet, no artist of any art, has his complete meaning alone. His significance, his appreciation is the appreciation of his relation to the dead poets and artists ... what happens when a new work of art is created is something that happens simultaneously to all the works of art which preceded it. The existing monuments form an ideal order among themselves, which is modified by the introduction of the new (the really new) work of art among them."

Eliot argued that working within an artistic tradition entitled—even obligated—an artist to knowingly reference earlier works and art forms and to reincorporate elements of past artistic works to maximize the impact of newer works. His use of references and allusions is notable in poems like *The Waste Land* (1922). *Murder in the Cathedral* is a modern adaptation of a medieval miracle play and features a chorus heavily influenced by ancient Greek drama.

In his later life a deeply religious Eliot concluded that the attraction of secular theater was an unconscious desire for a spiritual experience. He focused intensively on verse drama, using elevated language to heighten the emotional impact of stage production. In the *Aims of Poetic Drama*, he wrote: "What I should like to do ... is this: that the people on the stage should seem to the audience so like themselves that they would find themselves thinking: 'I could talk in poetry too!' Then they are not transported into an unaccustomed, artificial world; but their ordinary, sordid, dreary world is suddenly illuminated and transfigured. And if poetry cannot do that for people, then it is merely a superfluous decoration." However, with the exception of *Murder in the Cathedral*, his plays largely failed to gain popularity and are generally regarded as inferior works.

Author Biography

Early Life and Education

Thomas Stearns Eliot was born September 26, 1888 in St. Louis, Missouri, to an aristocratic, New England family. His parents provided him with an excellent education. Eliot prepared at Smith Academy in St. Louis and then the Milton Academy in Massachusetts before enrolling at Harvard in 1906. There, some of his rather conventional poetry was published in the Harvard literary magazine. He also wrote some of his first important poem, "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock" (1915), around this time, since parts of the poem appeared in the *Harvard Advocate* in 1906. It took Eliot only three years to complete college, and for a year after graduating he worked as an assistant in Harvard's philosophy department while studying for his master's degree.

Eliot moved to Paris in 1910 and enrolled at the Sorbonne, where he studied philosophy and literature, including the works of Dante Alighieri (1265–1321), John Donne (1572–1631), and

the French Symbolist poet Jules Laforgue (1860–87). Eliot also wrote additional parts of "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock" in 1910.

In 1911 Eliot returned to Harvard for three years to work on a PhD, this time focusing on Sanskrit and Indian philosophy. He then returned to Europe to write his doctoral dissertation. He finished writing the dissertation in 1916, but the outbreak of World War I kept him from traveling back to Harvard for his oral examinations, and so he never completed his doctorate.

While writing his dissertation, Eliot also worked on poems and literary criticism. The "Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock" was arranged as it is now by Eliot in 1911 and published in 1915 when Eliot was 26. It first appeared toward the back of the June 1915 issue of *Poetry* magazine. The magazine's editor was Harriet Monroe. Correspondence between Monroe and Eliot's friend and fellow poet Ezra Pound (1885–1972), who urged her to publish the poem, suggests that the editor was not very impressed by it.

After "Prufrock"

In the same month that "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock" was published, Eliot married Vivien (born Vivienne) Haigh-Wood. They had not known each other long, and their sudden elopement surprised their families and friends. Eliot confessed later that he hadn't exactly wanted to marry Haigh-Wood: "I came to persuade myself that I was in love with her simply because I wanted to burn my boats and commit myself to staying in England." This inauspicious beginning was made even worse by the fact that Vivien Eliot was mentally unstable. Later that summer she wrote to the philosopher Bertrand Russell (1872–1970)—a former professor of Eliot's—who reported that she had conveyed her depressed and suicidal state. Russell's response was to begin a private campaign to seduce her. In the midst of this domestic chaos, Eliot was trying hard to earn a living and to continue his writing. Unable to find work suited to his talents, he took a job as a clerk at Lloyd's Bank of London; he would remain there for eight years. At Lloyd's he was uninspired; at home his marriage continued to founder. Another setback occurred when Eliot's father died in 1919, believing his son had failed to live up to his potential.

These troubles formed part of the backdrop for the poem that was to become *The Waste Land*. They may also have contributed to Eliot's own mental breakdown in 1921. He went

to Lausanne, Switzerland, for three months' treatment at a psychiatric clinic. Eliot brought drafts of several sections of *The Waste Land* with him. At that point the poem's working title was "He Do the Police in Different Voices." From Lausanne he began a correspondence with his good friend and fellow poet Ezra Pound, who helped him complete a final version of the poem.

The Waste Land was published in 1922, against a now-familiar backdrop of domestic unhappiness, illness, and money worries in the Eliot household. Eliot kept his day job at the bank, but he found time to establish a well-received literary review called *The Criterion*—and to publish *The Waste Land* in the first issue. For part of its early life the magazine was funded by the publishing company Faber and Gwyer, just before Eliot joined that firm as its director in 1925. The company, which published Eliot's *Poems 1909–25* as one of its first titles, later changed its name to Faber & Faber.

Eliot was now director of a noted publishing house, editor of a respected literary review, a well-known critic, and author of the world's most celebrated modern poem, but he was increasingly troubled about the state of modern culture. His solution was to embrace Christianity. In 1927 he was received into the Church of England. His first overtly Christian poem, "Ash Wednesday," was published in 1930.

Having become a Christian and a British citizen, Eliot now added playwriting to his credentials while continuing to write poetry and criticism. His first serious play, about the martyrdom of St. Thomas Becket (c. 1118–70), was commissioned by a major British arts festival in 1935. The play was called *Murder in the Cathedral*, and unlike many first attempts at playwriting, it was a substantial success. The British Broadcasting Company featured the play in one of its earliest broadcasts in 1936. It was later adapted into an experimental film and received the Grand Prix at the 1951 Venice Film Festival. His subsequent plays were also well received, particularly *The Cocktail Party*, a drawing-room comedy combined with a morality play and first produced in 1949.

Eliot was nominated every year from 1945 to 1948 for the Nobel Prize in Literature, which he finally won in 1948 for his "outstanding, pioneer contribution to present-day poetry."

Domestic Life

Eliot's marriage to Vivien Haigh-Wood was never a happy one. At the time he was received into the Church of England, divorce was not permissible, but he found one way out of his marital troubles by taking a vow of chastity in 1928. In 1933, during a trip to the United States, Eliot told Vivien he wanted a separation. Back in England, he tried to stay out of her sight; she never found out where he lived, and he left his office by a back exit whenever she tried to see him at Faber & Faber. Not surprisingly, this subterfuge created his wife to become more unstable, and in 1938 her brother had her committed to a mental institution that she never left. She had been found wandering the London streets, and when her brother came to pick her up, she asked if Eliot had been beheaded. In 1947 she died, possibly by suicide.

Two platonic women friends of Eliot's—one American, one British—pursued him for almost two decades, though Eliot told both he would not marry them. Both women were moderately content with this arrangement until 1957, when Eliot—then 68—married his much younger secretary, Valerie Fletcher. His second marriage was happy but lasted only until Eliot's death on January 4, 1965.

Eliot was a cat lover all his life, and 1939 saw the publication of *Old Possum's Book of Practical Cats*, his gently satirical collection of cat poems. Long after his death, the book was turned into the musical *Cats*. The play became an immense, long-running success on both in London's West End and New York's Broadway and in dozens of touring productions worldwide. *Cats* won many awards, including seven Tonys, and has made almost \$400 million.

Legacy

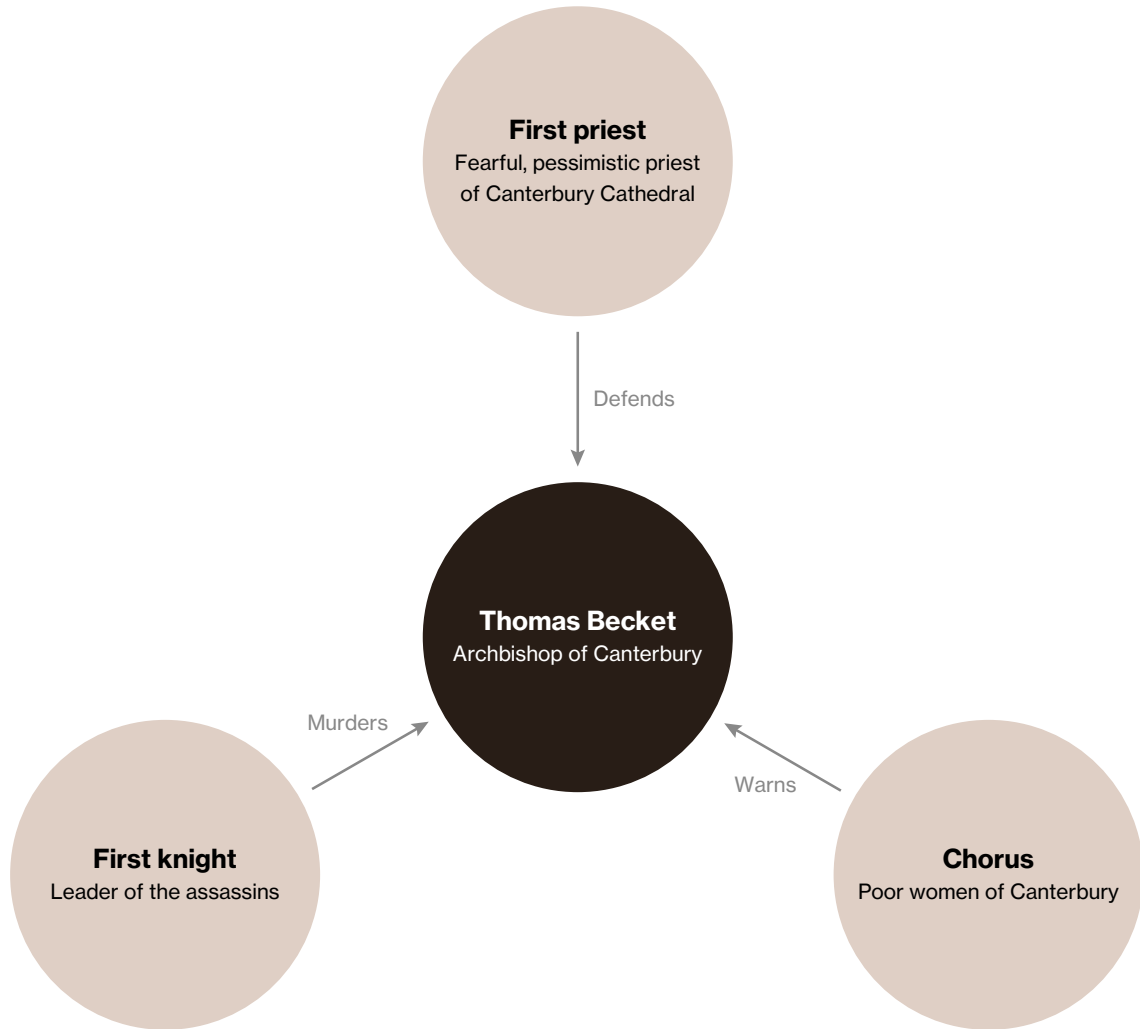
Eliot's literary influence has never waned. His body of work has received more critical study than that of any other 20th-century poet, though with the exception of *Murder in the Cathedral*, his dramatic endeavors are less well remembered. In 2009 Eliot was named the Nation's Favorite Poet in an online poll by the BBC—an honor that might have surprised him had he lived to see it.

Characters

Thomas Becket

Thomas Becket is former chancellor of England and friend of the king. After his appointment as archbishop he advocates for the Church against the king's wishes. When the play begins he has returned from exile, expecting retribution. Becket struggles with his own pride and his desire for martyrdom. He must confront that he wants the glory of sainthood and make peace with his death. He accepts God's will and is murdered by four knights inside the cathedral.

Character Map



- Main Character
- Other Major Character
- Minor Character

Full Character List

Character	Description
Thomas Becket	Thomas Becket is the archbishop of Canterbury, who is in conflict with King Henry II of England. He is murdered in the cathedral on the king's command.
Chorus	The chorus comprises the poor women of Canterbury, who love Becket and fear for his safety.
First knight	The first knight is the leader of the knights who murder Becket. His name is Reginald Fitz Urse, and he introduces the other speakers.
First priest	The unnamed first priest of Canterbury Cathedral is fearful and pessimistic.
First tempter	The first tempter offers Becket the pleasures of wealth, comfort, and friendship.
Fourth knight	The fourth knight argues that Becket provoked them, and his death is essentially a suicide. His name is Richard Brito.
Fourth tempter	The fourth tempter never gives a name or explains how Becket knows him but lays bare Becket's secret desire for sainthood.
Second knight	The second knight argues that they were right in defending the authority and supremacy of the state. His name is Sir Hugh de Morville.
Second priest	The unnamed second priest is optimistic.
Second tempter	The second tempter offers Becket worldly power.
Third knight	The third knight reiterates to the audience that they were a disinterested party who did not benefit by Becket's murder. His name is Baron William de Traci.

Third priest The third priest is focused on the holy mysteries of martyrdom.

Third tempter The third tempter attempts to entice Becket to stand with the barons against the king.

Plot Summary

Part 1

The chorus expresses their fear, misery, and unease. Archbishop of Canterbury [Thomas Becket](#) has been in exile seven years, and they feel a sense of doom in the air. Three priests further discuss the situation, wondering if Becket has made peace with the king. A messenger arrives and tells them Becket has returned to England and will be back shortly, and Becket follows shortly after the messenger. While the priests prepare, the chorus urges Becket to flee to France where he will be safe. Becket arrives and tells the priests to be kind to the chorus, who know better than they understand.

The first tempter arrives and says Becket could have a comfortable, sensuous life again as the king's friend, but Becket rejects him, saying he is offering this temptation 20 years too late.

The second tempter tells Becket if he would submit to the king he could have earthly political power that would allow him to do much more good in the world than his ecclesiastical offices. Becket rejects this claim, saying the exercise of earthly power without spiritual authority is a delay of evil, at best, and, at worst, a creeping sickness.

The third tempter tries to convince Becket to side with the bishops against the king and increase the power and glory of Rome by overthrowing the monarch. Becket is offended by the offer.

The fourth tempter is a surprise to Becket, who had expected only three. The fourth tempter seems to have a supernatural ability to perceive Becket's inner thoughts and fears, as well as events in the future. He offers Becket his desire: the glory and power of sainthood, and he addresses Becket's fear that even that will not last. Becket is shaken by the revelation that he was

seeking the right action for reasons of selfishness and pride.

Interlude

Resigned to accept God's plan and will, Becket preaches a farewell sermon to his congregation in which he addresses the duality of salvation and suffering and says no martyr is made a saint except by God's design. Unlike most of the rest of the play, this section is delivered in prose.

Part 2

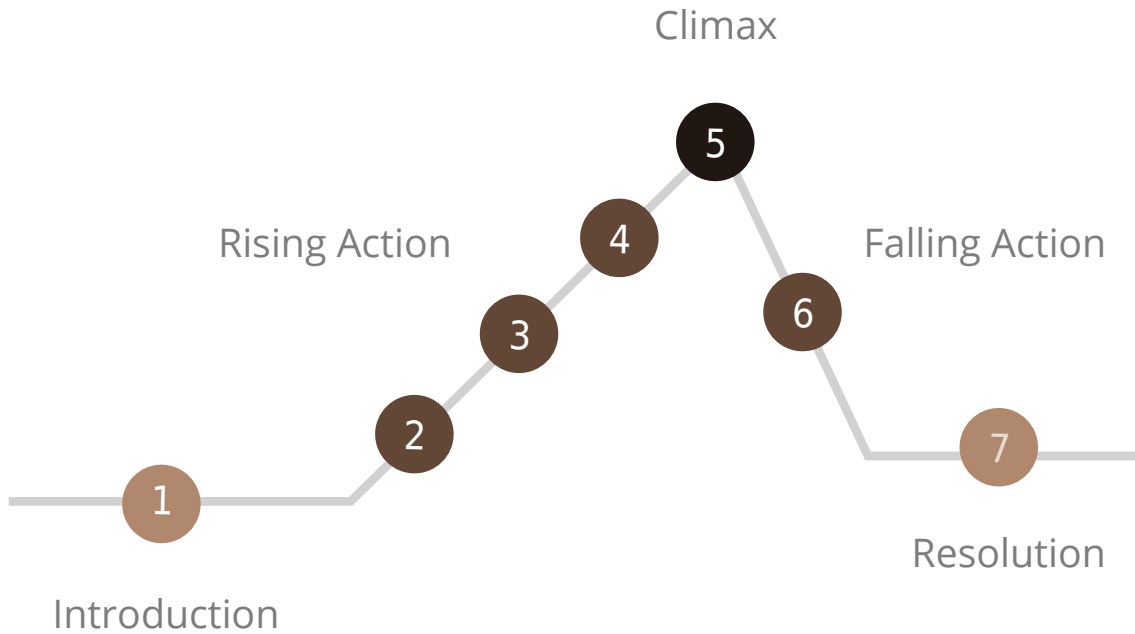
The chorus reiterates their fear and foreboding as four knights enter and demand to speak to Becket, claiming they have come by order of the king. When the priests try to offer them hospitality, they react with threats. Becket arrives and the knights accuse him of betraying the king and demand he recant his excommunications. When he does not, they declare their intent to murder him.

The priests attempt to drag Becket to safety, but he pauses to reassure the chorus as well as to declare that he is ready to accept whatever comes as is right for a servant of God and a genuine believer in Christ's sacrifice. He opens the door for the knights, and they close in on him. As he is being murdered, the chorus takes over, wailing that a curtain of blood has defiled the world.

In a second prose section the knights address the audience directly and make excuses for their actions, saying in turn that they abhor the necessary violence of their act but that no one can say they got anything out of it. They maintain they were disinterested parties, loyal to the king and acting in the interest of a strong state, which they know the audience agrees with. In the end, remarks the fourth knight, they were provoked, and Becket's death is rightly viewed as a suicide. They order the audience to disperse and make no trouble.

The priests eulogize Becket but acknowledge that Canterbury has received a saint. The chorus prays, apologizing to God that they are more afraid of temporal and earthly injustice than they are of God's power and love. They acknowledge their part in the state of the world because of it. They ask for God to forgive them and Becket to bless them.

Plot Diagram



Introduction

1. Thomas Becket returns to Canterbury.

Rising Action

2. Becket is confronted by four tempters.
3. Becket submits to God and delivers his final sermon.
4. Four knights confront and accuse Becket.

Climax

5. Becket faces death with a martyr's serenity.

Falling Action

6. The knights make excuses for the murder.

Resolution

7. The priests and chorus mourn Becket.

Timeline of Events

December 2, 1170

Four tempters attempt to corrupt Becket.

December 29, 1170

Four knights arrive and threaten Becket and the priests.

After they get drunk

The four knights murder Becket in the cathedral.

December 2, 1170

Becket returns to Canterbury.

December 25, 1170

Becket preaches on martyrdom.

A few moments later

The priests attempt to drag Becket to safety and barricade themselves inside the church.

🔍 Section Summaries

T.S. Eliot divides *Murder in the Cathedral* into two parts with an interlude between them. For the purpose of summary and analysis, this study guide further breaks down the two parts by character in Part 1, and action in Part 2.

Part 1, Section 1 (Chorus Exposition)

Summary

The poor women of Canterbury join together to form a chorus in the style of Greek drama. They speak their lines as one and provide exposition for the play. They claim that despite the hardships of their life, they are drawn to the cathedral by "some presage [foreknowledge] of an act" they are compelled to witness.

The women remark on the cold barrenness of winter and the ominous new year, evoking an image of laborers denied a warm fire by their master. They then explain to the audience that Archbishop Thomas Becket, who was always kind to them, has been absent from his seat at Canterbury for seven years, but they do not wish him to return because he is in danger from the king and the barons. The women say their lives are hard, but they get by. The winter is full of death, and the summer is no better: barren and burning. The women wait, as the saints and martyrs wait, for God to act according to His plan. "For us, the poor," they exclaim, "there is no action / But only to wait and to witness."

The three priests enter and discuss the exposition in more detail. They reiterate that Archbishop Becket left seven years ago, and that the English and French kings have been in a state of constant intrigue. They complain that the governments are full of violence and duplicity, and the powerful care only about keeping power. A messenger arrives to let them know that Archbishop Becket is coming back to Canterbury and will be there shortly. The priests ask if this means he has made peace with the king of England or if he is coming with only the backing of Rome. The messenger explains that Becket is zealously beloved by the people and has the backing of the

pope and the king of France but not the king of England. When the archbishop last saw the king, he said he would never see him again in life. The messenger says opinions are divided on what he meant, but there's really no happy answer.

The messenger leaves and the priests argue about what will happen. The first fears Becket's pride. The second is optimistic, however, because Becket is back to fulfill his office as appointed by God. The third priest says they cannot know the future: it will be as it will be. The chorus returns and reiterates their misery and suffering. They want Becket to return to France and warn that he brings doom they do not wish to witness. The second priest addresses the chorus directly, shooing them away and demanding they at least try to be pleasant to welcome the archbishop. Becket arrives and tells the priest to be kind to the women because they understand more than they know. The priest apologizes for not having prepared better for Becket, but Becket says he could not have told the priests he was coming without alerting his enemies, who are still circling like hawks.

Analysis

A particular characteristic of modernism as an artistic movement is an ironic self-awareness with regards to the forms of previous works of art. T.S. Eliot (1888–1965), in particular, in his works of literary criticism, argued that modern poetry and drama needed to be understood in the context of all poetry and drama that had come before them.

Murder in the Cathedral is noteworthy for its use of several elements from disparate forms of drama across the ages. While the play itself is a modern take on a medieval miracle play (a semi-religious dramatization of a saint's life, martyrdom, and works) it also includes a Greek drama-style chorus: a group of actors who speak and move as one in order to deliver exposition and insight about the characters and events of the play. However, these elements are self-consciously incorporated, and rather than attempting to be true-to-life, the play draws attention to itself as a work of art in several ways. First, much of the dialogue is written in verse: most of its characters speak in a rhythmic meter and occasionally in rhyme. Additionally, the dialogue of the chorus reads closer to the image-heavy unrhymed verse of Eliot's poetic works and utilizes poetic devices like repetition, allusion, and alliteration. However, both Becket's sermon and the knights' arguments in defense of their actions are written in prose, and the contrast

with the poetic dialogue sets a different tone for the scenes and characters.

Additionally, characters within the play interact with elements of the play as an art form in ways that were not common in the theater of previous periods. In the first act one of the priests directly addresses and chides the chorus, then he and Becket discuss the chorus and how they do not understand the pain of action. Traditionally, the chorus only comments on the events of the play and is neither spoken to nor spoken about. Becket also makes an ambiguous remark that "the substance of our first act / Will be shadows and the strife with shadows." While this could be interpreted as his first act as a returning archbishop, it also refers directly to the events that constitute the play's first dramatic act. Later in the play, the knights who have murdered Becket make their appeals directly to the audience, in language contemporary to 1935 rather than 1170. In theatrical terms this is referred to as "breaking the fourth wall" or disregarding the invisible barrier between characters and audience.

The dialogue of the chorus both heavily foreshadows the death that is the subject of the play and establishes some of its central themes. The chorus's primary character, as befits their dramatic role, is one of fear and inaction. They wait and witness, count the seasons, and live an earthly life. They can be content, despite the poverty of their situation—except that they fear to lose Becket, through whom they have glimpsed charity and spirituality. They talk about saints and martyrs and the will of God, but their principal concerns are with the here and now, and they do not understand God's design or how Becket's death might serve a higher purpose.

The symbol of the wheel appears several times in this section. The wheel represents the inevitability of time moving forward; it also represents fate, over which the characters in the play have no control. This is a more refined and abstract image than the concrete seasons the chorus uses to mark time as it talks about the months, the holidays, the weather, and the crops.

Becket's kindness to the chorus, in contrast to the priests' chastisement, marks him already as a saintly character and shows his greater understanding of fate and the will of God. "They speak better than they know," he says to the priest, "and beyond your understanding." However, he still has some distance to go, and the priest's remark about "His pride always feeding upon his own virtues, / Pride drawing sustenance from impartiality, / Pride drawing sustenance from generosity," will

become important during his temptations.

Part 1, Section 2 (First Tempter)

Summary

The first tempter enters unceremoniously. He claims to be an old friend of Becket's and the king's from their time in London, and he reminds Becket of all the pleasures of the court and of good friendship. He urges Becket to consider a new season of mirth and happiness like the old. Becket replies that no one knows the future and only a fool thinks he has the power to determine what the next season will hold. The tempter says he can make the good times come again, but Becket tells him to think of penitence and obedience. The tempter chides that he hadn't been so hard on sinners in his better life as chancellor. Becket says he is 20 years too late to be making this argument. The tempter withdraws but does not depart, saying he is leaving Becket to his "higher vices, / Which will have to be paid for at higher prices." Becket marvels at how things that are not even possible to have again may still be a temptation that distracts the mind from present work.

Analysis

In the New Testament of the Bible, Satan offers Jesus three temptations: to turn the stones into bread to feed himself, to order angels to catch him when he falls, and to ally himself with the devil to rule the world. In some Christian sects, corresponding temptations—the flesh, the world, and the devil—are renounced at baptism. The first three tempters in the play loosely fulfill these roles, offering Becket worldly comfort and pleasure, earthly power, and alliances with the barons to overthrow the king.

The first tempter represents the pleasures of the flesh and an indifference to the fate of the world so long as one's own needs are met. Although these are relatively easy for Becket to resist, he makes the point that the temptation draws his mind away from the present. Within Christian doctrine impure thoughts are still sinful even if not acted upon, and to imagine a sin is still a sin. By extension, the temptation is still dangerous

even if he has no intention of acting on it.

Part 1, Section 3 (Second Tempter)

Summary

The second tempter enters and reminds Becket that he was with him at Clarendon (where Becket initially supported the king's decision about his power over church offices) and again at Montmirail (where Becket submitted himself to negotiations with the kings of England and France). However, he says the two should not dwell on those unpleasant memories but talk about Becket's chancellorship, and how he should have it again. Becket asks what power is to the man of God, and the tempter replies that earthly power would allow him to do much more good than purely spiritual power. He argues that holding to his present, stubborn, spiritual course will trap him powerless in Canterbury, but if Becket submits to the king he will be able to outmaneuver his enemies and bring more of God's will to earth. Becket rebukes him, saying that his spiritual office holds the keys to heaven and hell and that it is greater than earthly powers, including those of the king, whom he has the power to spiritually condemn. Becket is noticeably more upset and flustered by the second tempter. He muses to himself that those who try to do God's will with earthly power rather than spiritual power only delay chaos and damnation—they cannot truly stop it.

Analysis

The second tempter strongly represents the theme of the contrast between the earthly and the spiritual. In contrast to the first tempter's position that Becket should think of himself, he urges Becket to think of the world and the good he could do for all people if he has political rather than spiritual power. While Becket acknowledges the desire to do good, his position is that earthly good without a spiritual grounding is a false economy. It may arrest the spread of chaos momentarily, but it has in it the seeds of a more serious disease: the idea that humans can act well without the guidance of God.

Eliot converted to Anglicanism in 1927 and took his spirituality

very seriously. He believed that secularism was the root of a number of problems in modern society, and the unfulfilled yearning for religion drove people into neurosis and into pseudo-faiths such as fascism.

Part 1, Section 4 (Third Tempter)

Summary

The third tempter arrives and declares that he is unexpected, but Becket points out that he expected him. The tempter counters that he was not expected in this guise or for this purpose. He explains that he's merely a simple country lord, not polished like a courtier, but he knows what's best for the country and what the country needs. He says Becket's friendship with the king can never be mended, and the path he's chosen leaves him isolated, but there is another option: allying himself with the barons, the people, to overthrow the king. The tempter points out that both he and Becket are Normans and England is a Norman country. The blessing of the church and the pope would greatly help his party, which speaks for the people. Becket says he will not betray the king, and the tempter replies sardonically that he hopes the king will appreciate Becket's loyalty. Becket confesses he has thought about his power to strike a blow against the monarchy, but ultimately he is only willing to sacrifice himself.

Analysis

The third tempter offers a devil's bargain, comparable to the temptation offered to Jesus to side with Satan to overthrow God. Throughout the play Eliot's version of Becket claims a loyalty to the king and maintains he never betrayed him, that he only followed the higher authority of God. The third tempter offers Becket the chance to side with the barons and remove the king and to use this maneuver to strengthen the power of the church. He is not only offering Becket his life, but a chance to realize his clerical ambitions.

The language used by the third tempter is strikingly similar to the language used to justify fascism. The tempter presents himself as a plainspoken Englishman who knows "what the

country needs ... We are the backbone of the nation. / We, not the plotting parasites." He says that he and Becket are both Normans, "and England is a land for Norman / Sovereignty," evoking both the idea of a racially pure homeland and the sort of anti-intellectual nationalism associated with fascist movements across Europe.

Norman refers to the subset of Vikings who settled in present-day northern France, and from there conquered the British isles, southern Italy, and Sicily.

In his reflection on the temptation, Becket mentions the biblical character of Samson from the book of Judges, whom God put onto the earth as a punishment for the Philistines. After Samson was betrayed by Delilah, he was blinded and enslaved and forced to build a pagan temple. At the end, when his divine strength was returned, he pulled the temple down around himself, killing himself and all the Philistines inside. Becket confesses he has thought about his power to destroy with the last of his political strength but rejects the idea.

Part 1, Section 5 (Fourth Tempter)

Summary

The fourth tempter enters, complimenting Becket on his resolve. Becket is surprised: he expected three temptations, not four. The tempter tells him not to be surprised, and Becket asks who he is. The tempter replies that he doesn't need to provide a name. Though they have never met before, Becket knows him, and throughout their conversation the tempter refers to him familiarly as "Thomas." He proceeds to agree with Becket in dismissing the previous three tempters.

Becket asks what he would counsel. The tempter replies that he should go forward with his planned martyrdom. All other ways are closed to him now, but Becket has a chance at power and glory much, much greater than anything he could achieve in life, second only to the power of God. He points out that Becket already knows what he is talking about: the power, glory, and fame of sainthood and generations of supplicant pilgrims before his bejeweled shrine. Becket confesses he has thought these things, and the tempter says he knows Becket has also feared even this won't be an enduring power—that the

shrine would be pillaged and forgotten, and, worst of all, that in the end he won't even be considered a religious figure, but merely a historical one.

Becket asks if there is anything to be done, and the tempter advises him to make himself the lowest on earth so he can be the highest in heaven, exulting the glory of God and watching his enemies burn in Hell. Becket is shaken and asks what the tempter is offering and at what price. The tempter replies that he is offering what Becket wants in exchange for what he has to give. Becket says this temptation leads to damnation, and he wonders if there is anything he can do, either action or inaction, that does not forfeit his soul in pride.

The tempter quotes back to him word for word what Becket said about the chorus: that he knows and does not know what it is to act and suffer, that the wheel turns, with eternal action and eternal patience.

The chorus speaks ominously in unison that there is no rest and recites disjointed and foreboding imagery. The four tempters, speaking in unison, say that life is a disappointment and a series of lies, and Becket is "obstinate, blind, intent / On self-destruction ... Lost in the wonder of his own greatness, / The enemy of society, enemy of himself." The three priests, in unison, ask Becket not to fight the intractable tide that will lead to his martyrdom. Then, sharing their lines alternately, the chorus, the priests, and the tempters all talk about how many ways there are to die and how often death is just around the corner. The chorus speaks of their misery and how they were granted brief hope by the return of the archbishop, only to see that hope on the verge of destruction as well. They urge him to save himself.

Becket muses that his course is set, and the temptations will not come again, though the fourth was the worst because it tempted him to do the right thing for the wrong reason. He explains that in his life he has succumbed to these temptations before: the pleasures of the flesh as a young man, political ambition after, and political maneuvering after that. He addresses the audience, saying he knows what he is doing will look like fanatical suicide but that all evils must be punished. He asks his guardian angel to watch over the sword points coming for him.

Analysis

Becket, conversant in narrative convention and Christian doctrine, anticipated the first three tempters, but not the fourth, who breaks from the traditional pattern. Here the play shows its modernist self-awareness as well as providing extra-dramatic anticipation to the fourth tempter, who has an uncanny awareness of both Becket's inner thoughts and the future, which is known to the audience but not the characters. Indeed, the tempter references Henry VIII's (1491–1547) creation of the Anglican church in 1534 and dissolution of the monasteries. On the one hand, this evokes the omniscience of God, but on the other, it also draws attention to the artifice of the play, which is set in 1170 but exists in the 20th century.

Becket has come to Canterbury with the desire to be a martyr and a saint as well as with the fear that even this holy station and power will be temporary. Though he is acting in accordance with God's plan, he is acting based on his own desires and attempting to manipulate the wheel of fate to the end he has chosen. As he puts it, "The last temptation is the greatest treason: / To do the right deed for the wrong reason." The tempters mock his pride and ambition, evoking the image of the Catherine wheel, an instrument of torture and death, named after St. Catherine of Alexandria (c. 287–c.305), who was supposedly subjected to it. The confrontation of this final temptation, and the tempter repeating his own words back to him, helps Becket see that his understanding was imperfect and that he must place his faith fully in God against the wishes of the priests and the chorus.

Interlude

Summary

The play's interlude is a prose sermon delivered by Thomas Becket on Christmas morning. He talks about the duality of celebrating, at one Mass, both Christ's birth on earth as an infant and his passion and death. Becket also speaks of the promise of peace on earth. It cannot, he concludes, be a temporal peace because war and suffering are evident in every direction. He points out that Christ explained to his apostles that he brought peace not as the world gives; indeed, he sent them into torture and imprisonment. However, Becket concludes, they received not an earthly peace but a spiritual

peace, which was faith in God's design and the power to endure the temporal suffering they endured in the world. He says that the creation of a martyr—like, for instance, St. Stephen, the first martyr, whose feast is December 26—must be both mourned and rejoiced. It deserves both sentiments, elevated by spiritual wisdom. The creation of a martyr is never an accident, nor is sainthood achieved by a human's will to become a saint. It is entirely the work of God's design, and only by abandoning himself to be the pure instrument of God can a man attain it.

Becket ends his sermon with a farewell. He does not think he will ever preach to them again.

Analysis

Becket's sermon represents his turning point as a character. Wiser for his struggle with his pride and temptations, he has submitted himself humbly to the will of God. Whether he will be a saint or not is no longer in his hands.

This sermon is one of two sections delivered in prose, without artificial rhyme or rhythm. In contrast to the knight's address to the audience, Becket's sermon to his congregation reads as intimate and genuine. In both sections the characters are speaking with the intent of conveying a message and affecting the emotions of their listeners. In this case the listeners are an unseen and unnamed congregation, which is fictional and within the fiction of the play but which—in real spatial and staging terms—ends up being the members of the audience. The audience may feel it is included, but Becket does not break the fourth wall and maintains his character within the context of the historical events.

Part 2, Section 1 (Knights Confront Becket)

Summary

The chorus notes that at the turn of the year there are no hopeful signs of spring life, and the birds are still rehearsing the sounds of death. The world is at war, but death in winter clears the way for spring.

The priests enter. It is St. Stephen's day (December 26), the feast of the first Christian martyr, and the liturgy is interspersed with thematically relevant passages. The first priest talks about how St. Stephen is a Christian martyr against whom princes bore false witness. The second priest announces the beginning of December 27, the feast of St. John the Apostle, and recites Scripture passage pertinent to the Mass for that day. The third priest announces the beginning of the next day, December 28 and the celebration of the Holy Innocents ("Childermas"), the children who died by order of King Herod of Judea (78–4 BCE). The first priest then announces the beginning of the next day, December 29. The priests wonder together what this day will bring. Together they chant about the sacrifice of Jesus, who laid down his life, and about the march of time toward God's eternal design.

The four knights enter, and the banners disappear. The priests welcome the knights, who say they have urgent business from the king, by the king's order. The priests invite the knights to dinner, but they say they will have business before dinner and threaten the priests. Becket arrives and remarks how even what is expected can come as a surprise. He tells the priests his papers are in order and on his desk. The knights demand to speak to Becket alone, and he dismisses the priests. The knights in unison accuse Becket of being an ungrateful parasite on the king, who raised him up from low station; they say he has lied, cheated, swindled, and broken his oath to the king. The knights menace Becket, and he chastises them for blasphemy. They say they come on the king's business. Becket tells them to make their accusations in public so that he may publicly refute them, but the knights move to attack him. The priests return and put themselves between Becket and the knights.

The first three knights, speaking one after another, accuse Becket of fleeing to France to stir political sentiment against the king and then, when all his honors and privileges were restored, displaying his ingratitude by excommunicating the bishops who had crowned the prince, rendering his coronation illegal. They say he has been working at every turn against the king's servants. Becket replies that he never wanted to uncrown the prince and says that the bishops may take their case before the pope, since he was the one who excommunicated them. The knights reply that Becket instituted the excommunication and can undo it, but Becket will not. They say it is the king's command that he leave England, but Becket refuses. The knights claim he is insulting the king, and Becket responds that he serves a higher authority: that of

the Church. The knights threaten him with their blades, and Becket responds that he is under Rome's jurisdiction, but if they kill him now, he will be a martyr making his case directly to God. He exits, and the knights demand the priests help them detain Becket or they will kill them too. All exit, the knights pursuing Becket with swords.

Analysis

This section contains some religious allusions that may be unknown to modern readers:

- Saint Stephen was an early Christian who was stoned to death by order of a rabbinical court in 36 CE and is considered the first Christian martyr. His purported last words, like those of Jesus, were a prayer for the forgiveness of his executioners.
- The Feast of the Holy Innocents commemorates the children killed in the purge ordered by Herod, the king of Judea at the time of Jesus's birth, in his attempt to kill Jesus.
- The allusion to the weeping in Rama references Matthew 2:18—"A voice is heard in Ramah, weeping and great mourning, Rachel weeping for her children and refusing to be comforted, because they are no more"—which in turn quotes the book of Jeremiah the prophet, making the same statement. While the passage in Jeremiah explicitly refers to the capture of Judah by Babylon, Matthew reinterprets it as a prophecy for the death of the Holy Innocents, which was fulfilled in the lifetime of Jesus.

Throughout the play there are several times at which multiple characters speak together. The chorus is a single character comprising many, and when the final tempter is rebuked, the priests, tempters, and chorus all speak in a round. The knights speaking over each other, in chorus, in repetition, and in completion of each other's sentences is another variation on this dramatic tool, but in the case of the knights it makes them seem more brutish and ineloquent. The same command of language Eliot uses to elevate the chorus to poetry renders the knights as speakers incapable of finishing their thoughts and relying on each other for the force and courage necessary for the murder.

Part 2, Section 2 (Pursuit and Murder)

Summary

The chorus bemoans the death-bringers in Canterbury and the fact that the chorus can do nothing. They beg Becket to forgive them. He enters and tells them to be at peace. Things are unpleasant now, and that is their burden, but in time the fullness of God's plan will be revealed to them, and that will make the memory of these moments sweeter in retrospect. The priests enter and urge Becket to keep running inside to the altar. Becket replies that death has been coming for him all his life, and when he is worthy it will happen, so all that remains is to perfect God's will. They try to urge him on, but he is ready to die. They tell him he must go to Vespers, and he replies that they should go and keep him in their prayers. He will remain outside so no one else will be hurt. They drag him into the cathedral while the chorus exclaims that death is near.

Inside, the priests bar the door and Becket demands they open it. They are in a church, not a fortress. The priests protest that these knights are not even men but beasts, and Becket replies that what happens now is God's decision, that death has already been triumphed over and they need only to have faith. Becket opens the door. The knights enter, drunk, and the priests try to force Becket to the roof. The knights mockingly invoke Daniel in the lions' den, but Becket stands firm and declares he is ready to die for Christ who died for him. The knights demand he reverse his excommunications and swear allegiance. Becket says they may kill him but commands they shall not touch anyone else in the church. The knights call him a traitor, and Becket calls out the first by name as three times a traitor: a traitor to Becket as his temporal vassal, a traitor to him as his spiritual subordinate, and a traitor to God for doing violence in the church. The knights murder Becket and the chorus speaks over the act. They say the whole world is defiled by the blood of this act and call for all of it to be washed clean.

Analysis

Though the idea of faith in God is spoken of at multiple points within the play, it is most strongly in action in Becket's lines and

deeds within this scene. He pauses to reassure the chorus that although things are dark now, it is God's plan. He demands that the openness of the church be respected, although he knows it will mean his death. His speech evokes a cornerstone of Christian theology: the redemptive sacrifice of God has defeated death, and all that remains at the end of life is the assumption of the righteous souls into heaven. Within the context of the play, it is clear that Becket genuinely believes in this and has submitted himself to God's plan. He is without fear of death.

The chorus, by contrast, is pleading and terrified. They talk about being defiled with blood, which stands in stark contrast to the Christian concept of being washed with and purified by blood: that the sacrifice of Jesus negates the sins and impurities of the world, which is a central doctrine within the faith. The chorus's horror at blood and belief that it defiles the world stands in contrast to Becket's willingness to die without fear. The chorus is representing a purely earthly interpretation of the world and its events, while Becket has embraced the spiritual in the end.

Part 2, Section 3 (Knights Defend Their Actions)

Summary

The murder accomplished, the knights move to the front of the stage and address the audience in plain prose rather than the verse of the rest of the play. The first knight says that as Englishmen, the audience's sympathies surely rest with Becket as the apparent underdog, but he is sure they will hear both sides. He doesn't consider himself equal to the task of presenting their case, so he recommends the audience to his colleague, Baron William de Traci, the third knight.

The third knight reminds the audience that the knights are a disinterested party and that they gain nothing by Becket's murder. They are "four plain Englishmen who put our country first" and had to work themselves up to the act by drinking because they knew it was their duty. He knows the king will disavow their actions, but reasonable people will see it had to be done. The first knight agrees and calls on Hugh de Morville (the second knight) to speak, as he has made a study of

statecraft.

The second knight compliments the audience on their innate English sense of fair play but begs them to consider that Becket was never, in fact, the underdog. Rather, they should consider that the king was only trying to bring about an orderly and lawful state and curb the excesses and seditious behavior of local governments. If Becket had only complied, England could have been an ideal state, with the Church a subordinate arm of power. Obviously, he says, everyone regrets that there had to be a murder, but sometimes violence is necessary. In another time he says, Parliament could condemn an archbishop and execute him, and no one would have to bear the shame of being called a murderer. Later, even that would not be necessary, and it was these four knights who took the first steps. Since the audience approves of their ends, they should applaud their means as well, and if there is any guilt, they should share in it. The first knight says he's given them all a lot to think about and introduces the final speaker, Richard Brito (the fourth knight).

The fourth knight asks the audience the question "Who killed the Archbishop?" He sets, as evidence for his point, that Becket was a fanatic who knew it was dangerous to return to England and failed to submit to any reasonable demand they made of him, that indeed he provoked them to murder. In reality, he insists "the only charitable verdict" that can be given is that Becket's death was a suicide while of unsound mind.

The first knight thanks the fourth and tells the audience there is no more to be said and they should disperse quietly to their homes and do nothing that might provoke a public outbreak. The knights exit.

Analysis

The knights make their case directly to the audience not only in blank prose, but in language contemporary to the time of the audience, rather than of the characters. They are often bland and less articulate with their points, an effect that is only heightened when compared to the verse that constitutes the bulk of the play, especially the image-rich and emotional dialogue of the chorus. The knights sound hollow in contrast to Becket's sermon, also delivered in prose.

With the murder done the knights attempt to ingratiate themselves to the sympathies of the audience through their

shared ethnicity and culture by describing how emotionally difficult the act was for them, by appealing to the authority of the state, and by shifting blame onto Becket himself. All of these read as excuses more than genuine contrition and, more ominously, as arguments for why the audience ought to approve of the murder. After all, everyone approves of a strong and orderly state, and the knights in their own way are victims of a prideful and deranged man; they were only doing what was necessary.

At the time the play was written, fascist paramilitaries were a regular feature of European politics, violently silencing critics of right-wing factions and governments. The knights constantly invoke their shared culture with the audience and profess themselves to be loyal Englishmen, evoking a nationalism and ethnocentrism that would have been at the heart of fascist rhetoric. Eliot's anti-fascist stance was in part inspired by his religious convictions, and he wrote on his conviction that fascism grew from a misguided longing for a role previously filled more healthily by the church. When the second knight alludes to a future in which the clergy may be executed after a trial and then later when "even such temperate measures as these would become unnecessary," he is speaking to Eliot's fears of both over-secularization and authoritarianism.

Part 2, Section 4 (Conclusion)

Summary

The priests return and talk among themselves. The first priest despairs at the loss of Becket. The third priest says the church is always stronger for martyrs and mocks the knights as weaving fictions and unworthy of further concern. The priests pray and give thanks for a new saint. As the Te Deum is sung in Latin, the chorus prays to God. They thank God for the actions taken in his infinite wisdom, no matter how painful they seem at the time, and give thanks for the blood that blesses and redeems. They acknowledge themselves to be weak and fearful, hesitant to take action for fear of the consequences. They ask Christ to have mercy on them and for Saint Thomas to pray for them.

Analysis

The British philosopher and economist John Stuart Mill (1806–73) said, "Bad men need nothing more to compass their ends, than that good men should look on and do nothing." In his own way Eliot echoes this sentiment with the chorus's final stanza, which begins, "Forgive us, O Lord, we acknowledge ourselves as type of the common man." The chorus laments their inaction, the fear that keeps them from doing what is right, and the meanness that keeps them from becoming saints.

In their words is the inverse of both the knights' evocation of fascism and state-sponsored violence as well as Becket's calmness and faith. The language they use positions them as people who might become victims if they acted. The chorus acknowledges they themselves lack Becket's conviction in the grand design and that they are capable of finding comfort in a world full of human injustice even when they know it is the less righteous course. They share in the guilt for the state of the world. Because they have not attained the spiritual peace Becket preached about in his sermon, they suffer without the balm of purpose and connection to God's plan.

In traditional Greek drama the chorus was often an emotional stand-in for the audience, reflecting the reactions of the common person rather than the actions of the tragic hero. In this scene Eliot continues that tradition.

“” Quotes

"What peace can be found / To grow between the hammer and the anvil?"

– Third priest, Part 1, Section 1 (Chorus Exposition)

The priest is dubious that there can be any peace between the king and Archbishop Becket, both of whom are stubborn, intractable, and constantly against one another.

"Real power / Is purchased at

price of a certain submission. / Your spiritual power is earthly perdition."

– Second tempter, Part 1, Section 3 (Second Tempter)

The second tempter tells Becket he could exert a greater influence, and for greater good, if he submitted to the king and forsook the otherworldly aims of the Church.

"Descend to desire a punier power? / Delegate to deal the doom of damnation."

– Thomas Becket, Part 1, Section 3 (Second Tempter)

Murder in the Cathedral is a verse drama, and rather than following the rhythms of natural speech, the characters speak in poetry. These lines, in particular, in which Becket rebukes the second tempter for proposing such an inferior power to his spiritual authority, are full of alliteration.

"King is forgotten, when another shall come: Saint and Martyr rule from the tomb."

– Fourth tempter, Part 1, Section 5 (Fourth Tempter)

Traditionally, there are three tempters. Becket's fourth tempter presents him with precisely what he hopes to accomplish by allowing himself to be killed: that he will serve his cause better as a martyr than as a living man. The tempter presents this as Becket's arrogance rather than the humble service of a Christian priest.

"The last temptation is the greatest treason: / To do the right

deed for the wrong reason."

— Thomas Becket, Part 1, Section 5 (Fourth Tempter)

Becket struggles with his own pride and in particular his desire for the spiritual power of martyrdom. Ultimately, the confrontation with the fourth tempter allows him to give up his ambition to control his spiritual fate and submit to God's will.

"[Is] it not ... strange ... that the angels should have announced Peace, when ceaselessly the world has been [at] War?"

— Thomas Becket, Interlude

Becket is building to the point that faith in Christ gives an unearthly, spiritual peace, rather than a cessation of war and pain. This line would also have resonated with Eliot's audiences, who had lived through World War I (1914–18) and were fast approaching World War II (1939–45).

"A Christian martyrdom is never an accident, for Saints are not made by accident."

— Thomas Becket, Interlude

This quote acts as both a foreshadowing of events to come and a confirmation that Becket has submitted himself to God's will and accepted that he has no control over God's plan.

"The starved crow sits in the field ... and ... The owl rehearses the hollow note of death."

— Chorus, Part 2, Section 1 (Knights Confront Becket)

The chorus use very concrete imagery to establish mood and to foreshadow. They call out the names of specific plants and animals, months and holidays and describe them in such ways to evoke mood.

"This is the creature that crawled upon the King; swollen with blood and swollen with pride."

— First knight, Part 2, Section 1 (Knights Confront Becket)

The first knight, together with the second and third knights, accuses Becket of being an ungrateful parasite on the king. They speak of him as less than human.

"Never again, you must make no doubt, / Shall the sea run between the shepherd and his fold."

— Thomas Becket, Part 2, Section 1 (Knights Confront Becket)

Becket refuses to run. Like many statements in the play, it ambiguously acknowledges his death to come. He will die before he flees again.

"If you kill me, I shall rise from my tomb / To submit my cause before God's throne."

— Thomas Becket, Part 2, Section 1 (Knights Confront Becket)

In this case Becket is not bragging but reminding them he will not just go away if they kill him. He is reminding the knights that martyrdom has long-lasting effects. He remains firm in his service to God and his Church.

"We come for the King's justice,

we come with swords."

— First knight, Part 2, Section 1 (Knights Confront Becket)

The first knight finally declares, in chorus with the other three knights, in plain terms, their intention to murder Becket.

"I am not in danger: only near to death."

— Thomas Becket, Part 2, Section 2 (Pursuit and Murder)

Becket's calm and simple statement is a clear indicator he is not afraid of his impending death.

"I think ... you will unhesitatingly render a verdict of Suicide while of Unsound Mind."

— Fourth knight, Part 2, Section 3 (Knights Defend Their Actions)

The knights' defenses for their actions are all offered in plain prose, without the artifice of the verse focusing their emotional content. The third knight's defense revolves around what little they had to gain, the second knight's defense is nationalistic, and the fourth knight's defense is purely legalistic. The form heightens the impression that they exist in a different reality from the rest of the play, one divorced from the passion and spirituality informing the character of Becket.

"[We] who fear the injustice of men less than the justice of God."

— Chorus, Part 2, Section 4 (Conclusion)

The chorus, standing in for the audience, laments their own lack of spiritual fortitude in being more afraid of the violence of

mankind than they are of God's justice. God offers blessings but also demands the surrender of those who love him.

Symbols

The Wheel

Multiple characters mention the wheel, which is generally understood to be the wheel of fortune, which turns eternally for as long as time progresses, sometimes bringing good, sometimes evil, but outside the control of human actors. In medieval depictions, God sits at the center of the wheel and understands its rotations, while humans can only see the portion to which they are affixed. The wheel symbolizes inevitability, change, and fate, and its turning may bring things that seem good or evil but are ultimately God's design. As the priest says in Part 1, "For good or ill, let the wheel turn. / The wheel has been still, these seven years, and no good." When characters evoke the wheel they acknowledge that their fate is out of their hands and in God's.

In his speech about the chorus in Part 1, Becket comments (and the fourth tempter later restates), "That the pattern may subsist ... that the wheel may turn and still / Be forever still." Because God's design and the future are already known to God, the experience of the turning wheel—the suffering and the action that humans experience—is ultimately an illusion.

In their final words to Becket the four tempters reincorporate the symbol of the wheel as ominous foreshadowing by citing the Catherine wheel, a torture implement associated with the martyrdom of St. Catherine of Alexandria (c. 287–c.305).

Seasons

Related to the symbol of the wheel, the chorus several times speaks of life in terms of seasons and the march of time. In contrast to the wheel, the seasons symbolize the passing of time as viewed and understood from a human perspective, or

"earthly orientation." They remark on the cold dead of winter and the barren heat of summer. They name months and holidays consistently throughout the play, and talk in terms of what crops will be harvested and what fields plowed. The chorus's imagery is always concrete and specific, in the manner of modernist poetry, and the affectations of specific seasons, crops, holidays, weather, and activities ground them deeply in a very earthly mindset and understanding of time. Because of their earthly concerns, the chorus, although they love Becket and fear God, is never able to completely comprehend the mystery of his martyrdom.

Themes

God's Plan

Throughout the play the question of how much control any person has over their destiny surfaces multiple times. [Thomas Becket](#) and the priests allude to the wheel, which spins and brings good or evil out of the control of the humans it turns. Becket even talks about how things that seem evil at first, because they are part of God's divine plan, will be softened in retrospect, or so entangled with good that one is difficult to tell from another. The ideal state for a Christian, within the context of the play, is perfect submission to God's will and a readiness to accept whatever it brings as part of the grand design of a benevolent deity. The chorus, comprising the poor women of Canterbury and representing the audience, struggle most with this submission, and throughout the play, although they have no power to affect their situation, they suffer and fear. They protest that they can bear it, but they dread the future and especially the martyrdom of Becket, in whom they take a sort of spiritual solace.

Becket, by contrast, embraces what he sees to be God's plan, but initially he does so for selfish reasons. He takes pride in his virtue and craves the power and the honor of sainthood. When he is shown this about himself, it shakes him deeply. On Christmas Day he preaches his farewell sermon, in which he expresses that no man can will himself to become a saint: it is either in God's plan or it is not. He also talks about the peace that God promised the world through Jesus, saying that it is

not a freedom from strife or earthly suffering but the spiritual peace that allows one to endure these things with faith and confidence.

Pride

Becket's pride is a major source of conflict within the play. His first introduction is in the report given by a priest who says, "I fear for the archbishop ... His pride always feeding upon his own virtues, / Pride drawing sustenance from impartiality, / Pride drawing sustenance from generosity." The context of the quote is in relation to his time as chancellor, but this early characterization sets up the temptations that will cause him to question his path, as well as the accusations against him. [Thomas Becket](#) takes pride in his goodness as a priest and in his repudiation of his earlier lifestyle. He comes to Canterbury desiring martyrdom and the spiritual power and recognition attendant to that honor. He takes pride in his office as a servant of the pope, and although he is technically refusing temptation with his first three offers, his replies have a telling note of pride in the office he does hold and is being asked to sacrifice.

This is the reason the fourth tempter is so vexing to him. The fourth tempter urges him on his current course of action and asks nothing from him he was not already prepared to do. However, the fourth tempter frames his martyrdom in such a way that he is unable to deny he wants it for his own purposes—not for God's glory. This tempter also addresses Becket's fear that, in time, all the spiritual aspects of his struggle will be forgotten, and he will be regarded as nothing more than a historical figure. In the end Becket accepts the correction and assents humbly to whatever is the will of God.

Earthly versus Spiritual Orientation

Throughout the play the spiritual orientation displayed by Becket at his best—that of accepting God's will—is portrayed as the ideal state for any Christian. Within spiritual orientation,

joy and suffering are united. Without it they exist independently and in conflict with each other; this is an earthly orientation.

The chorus provides an example of this earthly orientation in practice. Although they talk about saints and martyrs and take joy in Becket's presence, they admit to finding their happiness even more upsetting because without it keeps them conscious of how much they have to lose. A total earthly orientation would allow them to continue existing in a prosaic but predictable and stable sort of drudgery. The fact that they are moved by Becket and by horror at the violence of the story speaks well of them; as Becket says "they speak better than they know." However, they are unable to reconcile either their earthly fears and troubles, or their earthly comforts with the divine plan. They endure but are unable to rejoice in the larger picture. Their joys are fleeting and easily destroyed because they do not have the peace offered by a spiritual orientation and submission to God's plan. However, there is hope for them through the inspiration of the martyrs' stories.

Becket in the first act has a mostly spiritual orientation but maintains a level of earthly pride that makes him imperfect for his purpose. Because he wants martyrdom for his own glory, he is not qualified to be a martyr. It is only after he renounces his spiritual ambitions as well as his earthly ones that he can be at one with God's plan.

The knights, by contrast, seem to lack any spiritual orientation. Instead, they support a state in which, where the church exists at all, it exists to support the will of the government. They casually blaspheme before murdering Becket inside the church, and afterward their defenses proceed from purely secular rationales. Their prose defenses stand in stark contrast to the emotional poetry employed by the other characters.