

The Significance of Symbolic Devices in Thomas Stearns Eliot's *Murder in the Cathedral*

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Abstract

Thomas Stearns Eliot (1888-1965) was born in St. Louis, Missouri. His family on both sides originally descended from the New England settlers of the seventeenth century. He studied at Harvard University in Massachusetts. He went to Europe in 1910 after he had finished his education. In 1915, he settled in England and earned his living as a schoolmaster and then as a banker at Lloyd's Bank in London. He got the British citizenship in 1927. He got a big reputation when he was awarded the Nobel Prize for literature in 1948. He was one of the most important figures in 20th century literature. He was a poet, a dramatist, and a professional critic. He was a classic in literature, catholic in religion and royalist in politics. He was a man who respected traditions, rules and values. Eliot was traditional and conservative. *Murder in the Cathedral* speaks about the great martyrdom which is always the design of God to the loyal men to lead them to the ways of God. It is never the design of Man who has lost his will in the will of God. That is why, Thomas a Becket tries to do his best to wear the crown of martyrdom to be a saint in heaven through his personal will but not through God's will. This is the main problem in the play for which T. S. Eliot wants to find a solution by depriving Thomas of his human qualities and presenting him as a creature with saintly virtues. The action of the play is only restricted to Thomas' last days.

1. INTRODUCTION

Murder in the Cathedral was first staged in 1935 in the Chapter House of Canterbury Cathedral commemorating the martyrdom of Thomas a Becket, Archbishop of Canterbury. This event happened in the same Cathedral eight hundred years ago. It was "an occasion which will be remembered in theatrical history" (Frederick Lumley 1965, 84). Then, the play got some respect in the commercial theatres through which it ran for more than a year at the Mercury Theatre in London.

The first hint of martyrdom is given in the interlude which is regarded by T. S. Eliot a central part in the drama. It is a direct message containing Thomas' sermon in the Cathedral on Christmas morning. The play is written in prose to show Thomas' Christian qualities of Sainthood that cannot be reached by Man's will, but through God's will: "It is never the design of man; for the true martyr is he who has become the instruction of God, who has lost his will in the will of God, and who no longer desires anything for himself, not even the glory of being a martyr" (Cohn & Dukore, ed. 1965, 198). The play begins with the Interlude that prepares

for martyrdom that paradoxically includes both mourning and enjoyment beside dying and immortality as Francis Fergusson states that: " *Thomas's Christmass sermon ... sets forth the timeless theory of the paradox of martyrdom: morning and rejoicing, living and dying in one: the bloody seed of the Church* " (Francis Fergusson 1968, 212). This shows that martyrdom and sainthood should be impersonal and unselfish. It must not be a personal desire for everlasting glory.

The language of the play is mainly written in verse except for the Interlude and the Knights' speeches after the murder, they are rendered in prose. Yet, the verse is adapted to modern use to some extent although the play refers to medieval historical values as Haskell M. Block and Robert G. Shedd remarked: " *T. S. Eliot's Murder in the Cathedral (1935) revives the mystery and spirituality of the drama of the medieval church in the accent of the twentieth century* " (Block & Shedd 1962, 6). *Murder in the Cathedral* is regarded as a serious play as S. Martin Tucker and Alan S. Downer believed: " *no serious play of our century has been played so often in such diverse settings, from theatre to boys' club, from cathedral to air-raid shelter* " (Tucker & Downer 1953, 881). Generally speaking the verse in the play is suitable for emotional expressions. Eliot uses a variety of issues depending on the situation. There are a lot of repetitions of words and even lines besides presenting numerous images and poetic descriptions.

2. 2. Symbolic Devices in *Murder in the Cathedral*

T. S. Eliot uses symbolic devices in this play to illustrate the psychological conflicts of the hero, Thomas a Becket. These devices include the special use of the Chorus, Tempters, Priests, Knights and Messenger. They also include the alternative passages of verse and prose. The play is well-known for the employment of positive symbols, devices and metaphorical descriptions.

The Chorus is the first symbolic device employed by the playwright to expose and comment on the actions of the play. This device does not take part in the episodes but only makes remarks and recommendations. As a narrator, the chorus sometimes tells the readers some events that took place in the past. Moreover, it is used as a link between many incidents in the play and helps to keep its parts related to each other. Its function is also extended to tell the readers of things that might happen in future. Thus, Thomas' murder is predicted by the chorus from the very beginning of the play even before his return to Canterbury; and accordingly, the chorus says: " *And there is no safety in the Cathedral. Some passages of an act which our eyes are compelled to witness, has forced our feet towards the Cathedral. We are forced to bear witness* " (I. p. 177).

As an expository device, the chorus narrates something that happened before the play starts, which is the departure of Thomas from England to exile; and also it foretells again that something sad will happen if he comes back to England:

*" Seven years and the summer is over,
Seven years since the archbishop left us,
He who was always kind to his people.
But it would not be well if he should return " (I.,p.178).*

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When the messenger, who is another expository device, carries the news of Thomas' entrance to England, the Chorus confirms the tragic consequences of the Archbishop's arrival and gives this warning:

*" O Thomas, return, Archbishop; return, return to France.
Return. Quickly. Quietly. Leave us to perish in quiet.
You come with applause, you come with rejoicing, but you
Come bringing death into Canterbury:
A dome on the house, a doom on yourself, a doom on the world "*
(I.,p.181).

Thomas' murder is not only predicted by the chorus but also by the first and third priests who doubt whether there would be any understanding between Henry II and Thomas, particularly when the king and the Archbishop are associated by the third Priest to "*the hammer and the anvil*" adding "*what peace can be found / To grow between the hammer and the anvil?*" (I., p.179). The first Priest is also anxious about Thomas' return from France saying:

*" I fear for the Archbishop, I fear for the church,
I know that the pride bred of sudden prosperity
Was but confirmed by bitter adversity "* (I., p.180).

The Chorus signifies "*the poor women of Canterbury*" (I., p. 177), whose attitudes towards Thomas' imminent murder are versatile because they wish that he could go back to France so that they would not be "*forced to bear witness*" (I., p.177) of his murder which they cannot stop. It is an evil deed if they observe murder and stand by without stopping it. Thus, they address him before his murder asking for his forgiveness saying: "*O Lord Archbishop, O Thomas Archbishop, forgive us, forgive us, pray for us that we pray for you, out of our shame*" (II., p.206). Yet while Thomas is being murdered by the knights, the women of the chorus feel that his murder will defile the world: "*The land is foul, the water is foul, our beasts and we defiled with blood / A rain of blood has blinded my eyes. Where is England? Where is Kent? Where is Canterbury*" (II, pp.210-211). The Chorus goes further in describing the murder which is done without having been able to stop it by reflecting their incapability and weakness.

Anyhow, the chorus seems more passive than active participants in the play. They are content with the routine of life and do not look forward for any change. They do not want to get involved in defending Thomas, and they believe it will be better if Thomas goes back to France after his return to England. Their attitudes can be looked from another perspective to see how selfish, cowardly and hypocritical they are. They are more worried about their interests than Thomas' end. They are worried about themselves because they think Thomas' end is not only his end but also theirs. Thus, they unanimously remark: "*O Thomas Archbishop, save us, save us, save yourself that we may be saved; / Destroy yourself and we are destroyed*" (I., p.195). Throughout the whole play, they have not uttered a word in praise of Thomas' heroic deeds, except at the end when the murder is done by the Knights.

The use of priests is another symbolic device used by Eliot for the sake of exposition because they foretell the unpleasant consequences of Thomas' return from his exile to England. The second priest is contrasted with the other two priests since it is so happy and prepared to welcome the Archbishop without reservations:

*" Let us meet the Archbishop with cordial thanksgiving:
Our Lord, our Archbishop returns. And when the Archbishop returns
Our doubts are dispelled. Let us therefore rejoice,
I say rejoice, and show a glad face for his welcome.
I am the Archbishop's man. Let us give the Archbishop welcome! "*
(I,p.181).

The second Priest satirizes the Chorus who has misgivings about Thomas' reappearance. Thus, he tells the Archbishop directly after his coming into Canterbury:

*" O my Lord, forgive me, I did not see you coming,
Engrossed by the chatter of these foolish women.
Forgive us, my Lord, you would have had a better welcome
If we had been sooner prepared for the event "* (I., p.183).

Each priest speaks singly or jointly with the other priests. They sometimes give alternative speeches concerning a special subject. When each priest speaks singly, he of course, expresses his internal views which are, to some extent, not completely in full agreement with the views of other priests. Moreover, the priests sing chorally the hymn: "*Rejoice we all keeping holy day*" (II., p.200) inside the Cathedral while they are carrying the banners of the previous martyrs. When the priests speak with the tempters and the chorus, they again confirm that it is impossible to prevent death whatever advance precautions are taken:

" Chorus: Is it the owl that calls, or a signal between the trees? "
*" Priests: Is the window-bar made fast, is the door under lock and
bolt? "*
*" Tempters: Is it rain that taps at the window, is it wind that pokes at the
door? "*
" Priests: Does the watchman walk by the wall? " (I., p. 194).

Eliot also includes the use of tempters in his *Murder in the Cathedral* who are four in number just like the knights, and both of them represent temporal life. The tempters represent different views and attitudes which many people may face during life. The first tempter is a courtier whose main interest is in the sensual pleasure he finds in "*kissing-time below the stairs*" (I., p.185). He tells Thomas that since he is on good terms with the king, he must seize the opportunity and let everybody enjoys licentious life through comparing contrasted concepts: "*laity may return to gaiety*" (I.,p.187).

The second tempter is a Royalist politician who is trying to tempt Thomas to get back his secular power as Chancellor:

*" The Chancellorship that you resigned
When you were made Archbishop_that was a mistake
On your still may be regained. Think, my Lord,
Power obtained grows to glory,
Dife lasting, a permanent possession "* (I.,P.186).

The third tempter is a Baron, who is against the king, trying to tempt Thomas to be allied to his faction:

" We are for England. We are in England.

*You and I, my Lord, are Normans.
England is a land for Norman
Sovereignty. Let the Angevin
Destroy himself, fighting in Anjou.
He does not understand us, the English Barons
We are people " (I.,P.189).*

The fourth tempter symbolizes the Devil as he tempts Thomas to spiritual pride by attaining martyrdom through suffering and personal will:

*" But think, Thomas, think of glory after death.
When king is dead, there's another king,
And one more king is another reign.
King is forgotten, when another shall come:
Saint and martyr rule from the tomb " (I.,p.191).*

He keeps tempting the Archbishop by asking him to look for immortality through martyrdom saying: "*Seek the way of martyrdom...too high in heaven*" (I.,p.192). Therefore, Thomas refused all the foregoing temptations, especially the last one because: "*The last temptations is the greatest reason / To do the right deed for the wrong reason*" (I., p.195).

The four tempters show the main psychological problem for which Thomas wants to find a solution. They could also be influenced by the role of the Bad angel in Christopher Marlowe's Dr. Faustus, while Thomas himself stands for the Good angel in Marlowe's play. Yet, Ruby Cohn and Bernard Dukore go further by comparing Thomas' temptations to those of Christ in the desert: "*Thomas became like Christ in the desert...sensual appetite, divinity, and martyrdom*" (Cohn & Dukore, 1965. 173).

The tempters and priests are anonymous characters. The reason why Eliot uses anonymity on the part of the characters is because he wants to shed a central light on Thomas, the hero, in order to let the readers understand his conflict. S. Martin Tucker and Alan S. Downer go with this opinion and appreciate the anonymity of some characters because this will give the play a spiritual aspect and depriving them from the human boundaries: "*the necessary anonymity is an expressionistic device that casts a chill over the play, to abstract its human appeal in favor of intellectual debate*" (Tucker & S. Downer 1953, 884).

Eliot uses the four knights and makes them speak either singly or jointly like the Chorus. The knights, whether, they speak singly or jointly, are in full agreement to put an end to Thomas' life. They speak in verse when they describe the historical part about the way of Thomas' murder. Yet, they soon look as if they are contemporary individuals and start addressing the audience in prose which is the natural voice of their modern conversation. Their attitudes seems more comic than serious in their direct address to the audience, because they keep trying to convince the audience that they have also been involved in the murder since they have witnessed the crime. Moreover, the knights claim that the audience are not asked to be excited as the first knight remarks: "*I suggest that you now disperse quietly to your homes. Please be careful not to loiter in groups at street corners, and do nothing might provoke any public outbreak*" (II.,P.215). This is exactly done because Eliot himself does not regard Thomas' murder a dramatic climax. The emphasis is neither on this point nor in the

chronological order of the events. The main theme in Eliot's play is about God's will to select martyrs and saints not about man's will.

The messenger is the last device used by Eliot in this play; it is taken from Greek mythology just like the long passages of narration in Greek drama. The messenger appears only once in the play and is given three short speeches. He is used as an expository device telling the priests that " *The Archbishop is in England, and is close outside the city* " (I.,P.179) and asking them to get prepared to meet him. He gives all the details of Thomas' off-stage reception by the English people, which cannot be easily produced on the stage especially when a lot of the citizens were " *Lining the road and throwing down their capes* " (I., P. 179). He also gives more information concerning the kind of the new reconciliation between the king and Thomas, he thinks it is the only a patched truce which will not last long:

*" If you ask my opinion, I think that this peace
Is nothing like an end, or like a beginning.
It is common knowledge that when the Archbishop
Parted from the King, he said to the king,
My Lord, he said, I leave you as a man
Whom in this life I shall not see again.
I have this, I assure you, on the highest authority;
There are several opinions as to what meant,
But no one considers it a happy prognostic "* (I.,P.180).

Thus, the messenger has paved the way for the readers to have some advance knowledge before the play starts. He has also provided the audience with some information about what is expected to happen in future. The image of disharmony between the king and Thomas is compared to the hammer and the anvil as it is clarified by the messenger saying: " *What peace can be found / To grow between the hammer and the anvil ?*" (I.,P.197).

The messenger tells more about the coming of Thomas from France to England with a striking image, as when the roads are crowded with people moving their hands and throwing their hats to greet the Archbishop. The happiness of people can be illustrated through catching the Archbishop's horse trying pluck its tail:

*" Lining the road and throwing down their capes,
Strewing the way with leaves and late flowers of the season.
The streets of the city will be packed to suffocation
And I think that his horse will be deprived of its tail,
A single hair of which becomes a precious relic "* (I.,PP.197-180).

The whole play expresses a change from fear and suspicious at the beginning to glory, hope and redemption at the end. Thomas' murder is considered atrocious; therefore it makes the Chorus look at natural things as if they were unnatural and chaotic. This is illustrated in the following contrasted images:

*" I have seen
Truck and horn, tusk and hoof, in odd places...
I have seen
Rings of light coiling downwards, descending*

*To the horror of the ape.
Death has hundred hands and walks by a thousand ways "*
(II.,PP.205-206).

The image of the inescapable death demanding its toll on everybody is recurrent in the play. Death is personified and can come at any time in different shapes without advance warning. The elements of suspense and surprise are weak in the play because everything is expected about what happened and what will happen through the narration of the Chorus, Priests, the Tempters and the Messenger. The audience themselves know that Thomas will be murdered before watching the play. This is shown when Denis Donoghue remarks: "*The board outlines of the plot known to the audience before the play begins ...they knew that Thomas Becket became a Christian martyr some hundreds of years ago* " (Donoghue 1959, 79). However, the expectations of events in the play might weaken suspense, it may also increase the spectators' interest at the same time. Therefore, to clarify this point Raymond Williams says: "*It is not simply that the story of the martyrdom of Becket was already almost universally known, although this strengthened the invitation to participation* " (Williams 1971, 179). Thus, *Murder in the Cathedral* has been popular since it was produced in 1935. It is the most representative of the modern religious drama as Gerald Weales mentioned: "*Murder in the Cathedral became the first successful modern religious play...it has become the staple of the most ambitious religious university drama* " (Weales 1961, 77). Thus, the play is a study of the psychological and philosophical beliefs of martyrdom and sacrifice by using symbolic devices.

3. CONCLUSION

The research concentrates on the use of symbolic devices that are employed to expose the reality of the religious dimensions and themes of Martyrdom. *Murder in the Cathedral* is a play in which its events are fated by destiny while Man is underprivileged of free will. Here although fate is formed by God's will, there is still Man's free will. Thomas refused to be a chancellor and an Archbishop at the same time and did not succumb to all kinds of temptations. He did not want to spend all the rest of his life in France although it was better than England. The play is divided into two parts having an interlude in between. Eliot supplies the readers with expository devices and informative scenes to save time and effort. These scenes are usually given to the chorus, priests, knights and the messenger while the tempters are reminiscent of the medieval morality play, particularly *Everyman*. These symbolic devices are used by Eliot to show the internal conflict inside Thomas' mind. The devices are characters but they are not individualized because they are employed for social and religious purposes. The priests, the knights, the chorus, the messenger and the tempters are more symbols and types than characters, even Thomas himself is a rather passive character. The play is not about his murder but about the great ethics of martyrdom. He didn't do big actions and he seemed from the beginning following a predestined way waiting to be sacrificed.

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