

## SPECIAL INTRODUCTION

### 1. AN INTRODUCTION TO 'MURDER IN THE CATHEDRAL'

*Murder in the Cathedral* was Mr. Eliot's first verse drama written in 1935 for production (in an abbreviated form) at the Canterbury Festival in June, 1935, Mr. E. Martin Browne was the producer of the play, and it is said that the title of the play was suggested to Mr. Eliot by him.

The play is an exposition, in Becket, of the nature of Saintliness, and contains an urgent suggestion that the problems by which he was beset are present today. In form it is something between a Morality and Chronicle play, the use of introspective symbols being subtly interwoven with simplified historical narrative. So in *Murder in the Cathedral* Eliot has returned to the most primitive form of tragedy on the model of the earlier plays of Aeschylus in which there is one great situation, the poet steeping our mind, with at the most one or two sudden flashes of action passing over it.

The tragedy, *Murder in the Cathedral*, contains history. It is a sort of historical dramatic narrative. It sheds light on the antagonism between the forces of virtue and vice through the conflict between Henry II and Thomas-a-Becket. Thomas Becket was Chancellor, and later on he became the Archbishop of Canterbury under Henry II. His mother was a native of Caen; his father, who came of a family of small Norman landowners, had been a citizen of Rouen, but migrated to London before the birth of Thomas, and held at one time the dignified office of Post-reeve, although he ended his life in hard circumstances. The young Thomas received an excellent education. At the age of 22 he was compelled, through the misfortunes of his parents, to become a notary. About 1142 a family friend brought Thomas under the notice of Archbishop Theobald, of whose house-hold he at once became an inmate. With him he visited many a country. In 1154 he was promoted to be archdeacon of Canterbury. In the following year, Henry II, at the primate's recommendation bestowed on him the important office of chancellor. Here he found ample opportunities to become exceedingly friendly with the young prince Henry II who was 13 to 14 years his junior. Later on Thomas proved himself to be a very good envoy in bringing peace between England and France. On the death of Theobald

in 1162 he was appointed by Henry II the Archbishop of Canterbury. But Becket did not allow himself to be made the king's tool and acted independently even at the cost of conflict with the King.

The King and the Archbishop came into open conflict at the Council of Woodstock (July, 1163) when Becket successfully opposed the king's proposal that a land-tax, known as the sheriff's aid, should be henceforth paid into the exchequer. On account of these conflicts, Becket fled to France in Nov., 1164. He at once succeeded in obtaining from Alexander III a formal condemnation of the Constitution. After six years Henry II and Becket were reconciled and Becket returned to England. But he was murdered within a month of his return by some over-zealous courtiers.

It is this murder of Becket which forms the main theme of the play. The martyrdom of Becket was an obvious choice for a Canterbury play, made more attractive and effective by the association of the saint's name. The conflict of the spiritual and the secular powers: the relation of church and state were very common subjects. And on these themes Eliot has said much in prose. The story of Becket's life would seem to exercise great dramatic and tragic effect because the 'deed of horror' takes place between persons who were at least closely bound by old ties of friendship if not closely related; and the deed has a peculiar horror by the addition of the sacrilege to the guilt of murder. But although the conflict of church and state is present in the play it is subordinated to another theme, and the drama of personal relationships, Eliot deliberately voids. The king does not appear and the knights are not persons, but at first a gang, and then a set of attitudes. They murder for an idea, or for various ideas, and are not shown as individuals disturbed by personal passions and personal motives. The central theme of the play is martyrdom, and martyrdom to its strict, ancient sense.

The action, which accompanied throughout by the tragic comments of a chorus of Canterbury women, describes Becket's return to England, his resistance to the persuasions of 'Four Tempters' who represent the innermost working of his own mind, his death and his murderer's attempt to justify their action. The play is an exposition, in Becket, of the nature of saintliness, and contains an urgent suggestion that the problems by which he was beset are also present today.

*Murder in the Cathedral* stirred a wave of revolution in the world of English drama, since it was a play in which its author succeeds in reanimating a literary form which in England had been dead or dormant for nearly three centuries. The emotional sublimity heightened by the tragic splendour, which Mr. Eliot created most artistically in this play, makes it almost a land-mark in the neorhymed dramatic epoch of the history of English literature. In this play "Eliot has succeeded in

combining lucidity and precision with an uncommon vigour that fully justifies his departure from the customary forms of dramatic verse." The finest dramatic and intellectual impact in the Chorus, which, according to Mr. Eliot, is 'really something poetic to have contributed to drama, though the dialogue in the play gives an indication of my immaturity as a poet-dramatic.'

In his *Murder in the Cathedral*, Mr. Eliot has immortalized Becket, who would live eternally as an ever inspiring symbol, showering blessings to all, even to those who murdered him. Becket's Crucifixion and his Resurrection have been shown in one and the same play. However, it must be noted that the importance of *Murder in the Cathedral* does not lie so much on the plot or on the character of its hero; its cardinal significance lies somewhere else. We have to examine this play—the first verse-play of an ultra twentieth century poet-dramatist—as a typical pattern of verse drama, upon whose success or failure depends the hope or disappointment of this new school of poetic drama.

Mr. Eliot, through *Murder in the Cathedral*, sees only a kind of mirage of the perfection of verse drama, which would be a "design of human action and of words, such as to present at once the two aspects of dramatic and musical order. Eliot wrote *Murder in the Cathedral* to be staged on religious festival, to be witnessed by "an audience of those serious people who go to 'festivals' and expect to have to put up with poetry—though perhaps on this occasion some of them were not quite prepared for what they got. And finally it was a religious play."

Although the theme was taken from the remote pages of history, and was religious. Yet the greatest problem that Eliot had to solve, was that of language. The story is of the twelfth century England, when English language, especially spoken one, was entirely different from that which the twentieth century audience speak and can understand. So Eliot kept the style of the play neutral, committed neither to the present nor to the past. What he had to avoid was the echo of Shakespeare as it was the main cause of the utter failure of Shakespeare as it was the main cause of the utter failure of the nineteenth century poetic drama. Here he uses the versification of *Every man*. There is a little symphonic effect in it.

T. S. Eliot's *Murder in the Cathedral*, in fact, "forms a distinct milestone in the journey toward the resuscitation of a modern poetic as their chief master, turned to the theatre and sought to apply his characteristic style to its purposes. The emotional power given in the play, gave assurance to those who had been pleading for the application of poetry to the stage, and convinced those who had hitherto doubted of

the possibility of finding a dramatic speech based on the prevailing qualities found in modern verse."

## 16. A DETAILED SUMMARY OF 'MURDER IN THE CATHEDRAL'

### PART I

The play opens with the singing of the Women of Canterbury. They have assembled in the Cathedral to anticipate the coming events. They haven't arrived there voluntarily. Some impulses of grave concern have forcibly dragged them there; some unseen force has forced them to come there to witness 'some presage of an act':

"Some presage of an act

Which our eyes are compelled to witness, has forced our feet  
Towards the Cathedral. We are forced to bear witness."

The wholesome month of October is over. Now winter is in full swing. All things in nature are on the verge of decay. Peasants and people have stored up harvest of food-grains and fruits. This process has been going on for the past seven years. In this way seven years have passed since the departure of Thomas Becket, the Archbishop of Canterbury. During this period the people, both men and women, have been victim of terrible tortures and suppressions by the King or by his Barons. These women foresee something of horrible calamity. Their conscience prompts them to think of a terrible tragic disaster that is going to fall upon Canterbury. These women have been so miserably frustrated that they have no initiative or power of judgement in their minds.

The Women of Canterbury do not find time yet favourable for the return of the Archbishop. Their conscience pricks. Coming events cast their shadows before:

"Some malady is coming upon us. We wait, we wait, and the saints and martyrs wait, for those who shall be martyrs and saints."

(Here T.S. Eliot appears believing in Destiny. In his opinion everything that happens is predestined. Man has no control over it.)

"Destiny waits in the hand of God, shaping the still unshapen.  
For us, the poor, there is no action,  
But only to wait and to witness."

After the Women retire having sung the Chorus three Priests of the Church arrive. These Priests spout out the venom of their indignation against the temporal Government of England. They condemn the temporal government, kings and barons as the source of violence and duplicity and wonder as to what their Archbishop Thomas Becket is doing in France, especially at this time of unrest and political

duplicity. The First Priest feels sorry that the political tyranny would not know its end until the poor had forgotten their friend, their faith in God. So these Priests are almost convinced that so long people do not recognize God—their Supreme Friend—sanity and peace will not return to England.

At this very moment, a messenger arrives and informs them that Thomas Becket, the Archbishop has returned from exile to England, and that shortly he is to come to the Church of Canterbury. The Priests cannot make out anything. The First Priest thinks that the dispute between the King and the Archbishop is ended or patched up, while the other thinks that Becket is returning on his own accord ; therefore, there will be some danger from him. The Third Priest fears that destiny has dragged the Archbishop to Canterbury. They ask the messenger :

“Tell us,

Are the old disputes at an end, is the well of pride cast down ?”

The First Priest asks the messenger to tell them whether the Archbishop has returned after getting assurance of proper treatment by the King or only secure under the papal patronage and protection or on the strength of the general public that love him. The messenger in reply tells that he comes in pride and sorrow and assured, beyond doubt, of the devotion of the people. Public is mad with joy on the return of the Archbishop. There have been scenes of frenzied enthusiasm and people are throwing down their caps strewing the way with leaves and flowers to greet their Archbishop. Probably not a single hair will be left there on the tail of his horse (hair of the horse of the Archbishop is considered auspicious and treasured as a precious relic).

All the three Priests wonder whether the arrival of Archbishop would mean war or peace. The messenger interrupts and says that if they ask for his opinion then it is peace, but not sincere peace but a patched up affair. They do not regard it a happy return. They have their own fears and misgivings especially when they recollect the unhappy scene of parting between the King and the Archbishop. At that time he said to the King, “I leave you as a man whom in this life I shall not see again.” However, the second Priest asks others to prepare to welcome him. The return of the Archbishop would dispel their doubts and therefore let them rejoice.

Then again there is Chorus. These Women of the Chorus wish ardently that the Archbishop should again go back to France, as his coming to England means bringing of death into Canterbury. They, partly in wrath and partly in a mood of hopeless frustration, ask the Archbishop to go away to France. They say that during seven years' absence of the Archbishop, they had terrible ordeals to undergo. They were afflicted with undue taxes, their honour and self-respect could not

be maintained safe, and that many more afflictions had devoured them up. But, the calamity which they now foresee on the arrival of Thomas Becket in England is an unprecedented one. They had their private terrors and their secret fears but now a greater fear is upon them. Even then they put on pleasant faces and give a hearty welcome to their good Archbishop.

Thomas Becket—the Archbishop—enters and requests them to have peace. He tells the Priests that the Women, who were singing Chorus, speak better than they (the priests) know, and that the meaning, which the Chorus of the Women contained, is beyond the grasp of the priests.

They know and do not know, adds he, that action is suffering and suffering is action.

“..... Neither does the agent suffer,  
Nor the patient act. But both are fixed  
In an eternal action, an eternal patience  
To which all must consent that it may be willed  
And which all must suffer that they may will it  
That the pattern may subsist, for the pattern is the action  
And the suffering, that the wheel may turn and still  
Be for ever still.”

The Second Bishop asks his pardon as they could not prepare to give him a suitable welcome specially when he has returned after seven years. At least he will be pleased to find his rooms in the same nice condition in which he had left them. Here is irony of fate when the Archbishop Thomas replies, “And will try—to leave them in order I find them,” and adds that his eager enemies and rebellious bishops of Yorkshire, London and Salisbury would not allow him peace and security of life. On his return journey he finds at Sandwich Broc, Warene, and the Sheriff of Kent quite ready to kill him. But John, the Dean of Salisbury saves him. In this way for the time being they are unmolested. On the enquiry of the First Priest : Do they follow after ? Thomas says ‘Yes.’

The First Tempter enters and has a talk with the Archbishop. He reminds the Archbishop of their (the Tempter's and the King's) days of friendship in the past. So he tries to persuade him to try to have a reconciliation with the King. The Archbishop turns down the proposal of the First Tempter. The First Tempter assures Thomas of his loyalty but he rebukes him and bids him to follow the King. The Tempter loves his temper and tells Thomas : “Your lordship is too proud ?” ..... Be easy man !

“The easy man lives to eat the best dinners,  
Take a friend's advice. Leave well alone.  
Or your goose may be cooked and eaten to the bone.”

Thomas still ignores him and dismisses him telling, "You come twenty years too late." The First Tempter leaves Thomas saying, "I leave you to your fate."

Then the Second Tempter enters and reminds Thomas of the previous meetings at Clarendon, at Northampton and Montmirail and asks him to guide the state again as once he did when he was the Chancellor. He tells him that it was his mistake to resign the Chancellorship and accept Archbishopric because 'power obtained grows to gloy'. He emphatically advises Thomas to give up pretence of priestly power for the power and the glory of the Crown. It was no good to be a self-bound servant of a powerless Pope or like an old stag circled with hounds.

The Archbishop refuses to forget and forego his celestial duty for the political power and bids the Tempter to go away. The Second Tempter also leaves him just repeating the words of the First Tempter.

The Third Tempter enters and confesses that he is no courtier, intriguer ; he is a simple man who simply minds his own business. He is not a plotting parasite about the King. He is simply a lover of his country ; backbone of the nation. He tells the Archbishop that England is a land of the Normans. They are Normans while the King is Angevin. Why should an Angevin rule over England ? King Henry is fighting in Anjou in France and hence it was the nice time for them to form a coalition to get back Norman's liberty. And in the fight for liberty, he continues, Church favour would be an advantage and blessing of Pope a powerful protection. And if he (Thomas) joins hands with Barons, it would mean an end of the tyrannous jurisdiction of King's court over Bishop's court and Baron's court.

Thomas declines to accept the suggestion of the Third Tempter saying :

"Shall I who ruled like an eagle over doves.  
Now take the shape of a wolf among wolves  
Pursue your treacheries as you have done before."

The Third Tempter is also disappointed like his predecessor and goes away saying :

"Then my Lord, I shall not wait at your door,  
And I well hope, before another spring  
The King well show his regard for your loyalty."

Enters the Fourth Tempter who admires Thomas's unbending will. And when Thomas says that he expected three visitors not four, he repartees that he always precedes expectation. He has never met him before. He asks him to be up to his duty and to :

"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."

Thereafter he also retires and the Chorus appear and anticipate some calamity in their Chorus. Then the four Tempters sing together and call. Thomas an obstinate man, blind and intent on self-destruction. They declare him lost in the wonder of his own greatness and an enemy of society and of himself. Then come the three Priests and while they sing they warn the Archbishop not to stand against a formidable foe. They request him to act like a wise man. Then the members of the Chorus, Tempters and the Priests alternately and conclude that there is no time, place or cause for death.

There is again the Chorus, and Women signer recount their tale of misery, starvation and destitution in the absence of their Archbishop and yet say that were happy in that condition. But now they are afraid a greater calamity is impending. They probably know the coming event, i.e., the murder of Archbishop Thomas. Therefore they say :

"O Thomas Archbishop, save us, save yourself  
that we may be saved.  
Destroy yourself and we are destroyed."

Thomas then recounts his past career. How he explored all means and methods to lead a life of power, pleasure and prosperity and how he succeeded in achieving all these. When he was the Chancellor he beat the Barons at their own game and heavily punished those who despised him. But now he shall not be trapped into temptation. He shall no longer act or suffer. He kneels in prayers :

"Now my good angel, when God appoints  
To be my guardian, hover over the swords' points."

The Archbishop preaches in the Cathedral on Christmas Morning of 1170. His subject is 'Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace to men of good will.' He has chosen the subject—the fourteenth verse of the Second Chapter of the Gospel according to Saint Luke.

Speaking on this occasion. Thomas observes that it is only in the Christian mysteries that they can rejoice and mourn at once from the same reason. For example they rejoice in His coming (on Birthday of Christ, i.e., 25th December) for the salvation of man, and offer again to God His Body and Blood in sacrifice, obligation and satisfaction for the sins of whole world.

Christ also spoke of peace. He says to His disciples, 'My peace I leave with you, my peace I give unto you.' However he does not mean the worldly peace or peace between two kingdoms or between the Barons and the King because his disciples know no such thing. By peace he means spiritual peace and moral strength. Consequently, His

disciples give up all comforts and rest of home and go forth to journey affair, "to suffer by land and sea to know torture, imprisonment, disappointment to suffer death by martyrdom."

Speaking on martyrdom he says that they should love and respect a martyr because he is a Christian or that he has been elevated to the company of the saints. A Christian martyrdom is never an accident, for saints are not made by accident. A martyrdom is always the design of God, for his love of men, to warn them and to lead them, to bring them back to His ways. True martyr is he who has become the instrument 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 martyrdom.

Concluding, the Archbishop exhorted the assembly to remember especially their martyr of Canterbury, the blessed Archbishop Ephege and to keep in their hearts all that he has told them.

("Eliot like Shaw and Ibsen introduces Interlude or a breathing period in his plays. The greatest importance of the Interlude is that it gives an element of suspense—as to what is going to happen with the Archbishop—and secondly it diverts our attention for sometime, thereby protecting the readers' minds from wanting of the main action.")

This Interlude is include just after the end of the first part of the play. It is the Christmas morning of 1170. The topic of the sermon, which the Archbishop makes to his followers in the Church, is the glory and justification of God's deeds. He preaches to them what Christianity teaches them on the birth as well as death of a great religious person, there should be the occasion for joy—as Christ's crucifixion (on each Friday) as well as his birth (Christmas Day) are equally held sacred. Then he goes on speaking on martyrdom. A martyrdom, according to him is always the design of God for His love of men and a warning as well as inspiring lesson. He finally asks them to have faith in the Christian Saints, who had been martyred in defence of their region and faith.

## PART II

The second part of the play begins with the Chorus, sung by the women of Canterbury. This time the Chorus gives a clear indication of the murder of the Archbishop. The bird (the Archbishop) has driven inland by the storm and the only sign of the spring is the death of the cold.

"The starved crow sits in the field, attentive;  
and in the wood

The owl rehearses the hollow note of death.

What signs of a bitter spring?

The wind stored up in the East.

What at the time of the birth of Our Lord, at  
Christmas-tide,

Is there not peace upon earth, goodwill among men?  
The peace of this world is always uncertain, unless men  
keep the peace of God.

And war among men defiles this world, but death in  
the Lord renews it.

And the world must be cleaned in the winter,  
or we shall have only

A sour spring, a parched summer, an empty harvest."

After this the three Priests enter the hall of the Cathedral carrying banners of St. Stephen, the first Christian Martyr, St. John the apostle and the holy innocent respectively. They comment on the time, which is 'the giver of fear and hope to men.'

Then the four Knights come. They have come with a terrific speed. They ask for the Archbishop. They pretend to have brought a very urgent message from the King. When the Archbishop appears before them, they abuse him and blaspheme him and accuse him of revolting against the King:

"You are the Archbishop in revolt against the King, in rebellion to the King and the law of the land;

You are the Archbishop who was made by the King; whom he set in your place to carry out his command.

You are his servant, his tool and his jack;

You wore his favours on your back,

You had your honours all from his hand; from

him you had the power, the seal and the ring.

This is the man who was the tradesman's son:

the backstairs brat who was born in Cheapside;

This is the creature that crawled upon the King;

swollen with blood and swollen with pride

Creeping out of the London dirt,

Crawling up like a louse on your shirt,

The man who cheated, swindled, lied; broke his

oath and betrayed the King."

Thomas refutes this. He says that he has been very loyal to the King, saving his order, he is at his command as his most faithful vassal in the land. After a short exchange of words between the Knights and Thomas the First Knight speaks rashly:

"Of your earlier misdeeds I shall make no mention.

They are too well known. But after dissension

Has ended, in France, and you were endued

With your former privilege, how did you show your

gratitude?

You had fled from England, not exiled

Or threatened, mind you, but in the hope

Of stirring up trouble in the French dominions

You sowed strife abroad, you reviled  
The King to the King of France, to the Pope,  
Raising up against him false opinions."

The Third Knight accuses him of instigating the King's faithful servants against the King :

"Using every means in your power to evince  
The King's faithful servants, every one who transacts  
His business in his absence, the business of the nation."

But Thomas pleads that he is not guilty of all these charges :

"Never was it my wish  
To uncrown the King's son, or to diminish  
His honour and power. Why should he wish  
To deprive my people of me and keep me from my own  
And bid me sit in Canterbury, alone."

Thereafter the Knights press the Archbishop to absolve the Bishops who have been suspended by the Pope. Thomas regrets his inability to loose whom the Pope has bound or suspended. Thereupon the First Knight presents him the command of the King :

"Be that as it may, here is the King's command :  
That you and your servants depart from this land."

Thomas resists the order and adds, "Shall the sea run between the Shepherd and his field." He is no more ready to leave the Church and his men. The Knights regard it as treachery and treason. They threaten him with life. But he holds fast in the name of Rome, in the name of the Law of the Christ's Church.

"But if you kill me, I shall rise from my tomb  
To submit my cause before God's Throne."

The four Knights become furious and in the heat of their fury they ask the Priests to restrain their master from words of disobedience. Then they exit.

The Women of Canterbury reappear. This time they smell death in Canterbury. In their opinion everything is predestined :

"What is woven on the loom of fate  
What is woven in the councils of princes  
Is woven also in our veins, our brain  
Is woven like a pattern of living works  
In the gusts of the Women of Canterbury."

Thomas enters and warns the Women not to be overjoyed on his return because there may be something painful in the womb of futurity. The situation is very tense. Priests warn him against the coming danger and request him to immediately to the altar. They warn him of the return of the Knights. However, Thomas is formidable. He places duty

"All my life they have been coming, these feet all my life  
I have waited. Death will come only when I am worthy  
And if I am worthy, there is no danger  
I have therefore only to make perfect my will."

Priests are highly nervous : "You will be killed. Come to the altar. What shall become of us, my Lord, if you are killed ; what shall become of us ?" Thomas says in reply that the Knights will not try their sword on anyone else except him. And when he resists they actually drag him off. While the Chorus speak, the scene is changed to the Cathedral.

Again there is the Chorus. This time the Chorus gives an exact idea of death and also explains what is to happen after death. Death has been described as 'God's silent servant.' After death man has to face judgement on his deeds. And then he is to go into void (told emptiness) which is more horrid than active shapes of hell. In this emptiness, soul is no longer deceived, for there are no objects, no tones.

"No colours, no forms to distract, to divert the soul ! From seeing itself, fully united for ever, nothing with nothing."

The Chorus ends. Priests bar the door but the Archbishop bids them throw open the doors. He is not in favour of turning the Church into a fortress. The Priests dissuade him from that order for the reason that the Knights were not men but maddened beasts.

Archbishop still holds that the churchmen are not to triumph by fighting, by stratagem or by resistance but to conquer by suffering. He bids the Priests to open the doors.

The doors are thrown open by the Priests. The Knights enter and madly shout :

"Where is Becket, the traitor to the King ?  
Where is Becket the faithless priest ?  
Come down Daniel to the lion's den  
Come down Daniel and join in the feast."

Thomas Becket boldly comes before them and replies :

"I am here.  
No traitor to the King. I am a priest,  
A Christian, saved by the blood of Christ,  
Ready to suffer with my blood.  
This is the sign of the Church always,  
The sign of blood."

Then the Knights call Thomas three times a 'traitor'. Thomas bubbles out at this :

"You, Reginald, three times traitor you :  
Traitor to me as my temporal vassal,  
Traitor to me as your spiritual lord,  
Traitor to God in desecrating His Church."

The Knights are already furious. Blood is upon them. They kill the Priest while he Prays to God. Again there is the Chorus who speaks :

"Clear the air ! Clean the sky ! Wash the Wind !  
take stone from stone and wash them  
The land is foul, the water is foul, our beasts  
and ourselves defiled with blood.

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Clear the air ! Clean the sky ! Wash the wind ! Take the  
stone from the stone, take the skin from the arm, take  
the muscle from the bone, and wash them.

Wash the stone, wash the bone, wash the brain, wash  
the soul, wash them, wash them !"

The Women participating in the Chorus call their Archbishop's murder as beastly and inhumanly :

"Every horror had its definition,  
Every sorrow had a kind of end :  
In life there is no time to grieve long.  
But this, this is out of life, this out of time.  
An instant eternity of evil and wrong  
We are soiled by a filth that we cannot clean :  
United to Supernatural Vermin,  
It is not we alone, it is not the house, it is not the city  
that is defiled.  
But the world that is wholly foul."

Then the Knights come and speak to the people. The first to speak is Reginald Fitz Urse and then the Third Knight Baron William de Traci, William de Traci says that whatever they have done, and whatever they may think, they have been perfectly disinterested. Their only concern was their country first. They know for certain that although they have put out of the way Thomas the King and the country and not for their personal gain and advantage yet the King will have to say that he never meant this to happen.

The Second Knight Sir High de Morville presents his own defence. In his opinion Thomas Becket was made the Archbishop on the recommendation of the King. The King wanted a union of spiritual and temporal administration under the Central Government but Thomas belied his expectations and immediately declared the Church higher than the crown and affirmed immediately that the two orders were incompatible. In this way his interference in the state work offended patriots like them. Eventually he reaped what he sowed.

After Morville, their leader Reginald Fitz Urse calls upon the Fourth Knight Richard Brito. Brito hurls the blame of murder on the Archbishop himself. He holds him responsible for his own murder.

While he was the Chancellor, he did excellent work of guiding the country but the day he became the Archbishop he showed himself to be utterly indifferent to the fate of the country. He became, in fact, a monster of agotism. His acts of interference and provocation were determined efforts towards health by Martyrdom. he could have avoided his murder by not bidding the Priests open the door while they were red with the heat of fury. The only courteous judgement that they could deliver on this murder is to call it Suicide of Unsound Mind. So whatever they have done, they did not initiate by their own personal motives, but for the sake of their King, State, Country and the people.

Then the leader of the murderers asks them to disperse and not to loiter in groups at street corners, and do nothing that might provoke any outbreak. They depart.

In the end begins the bemoaning of the Priests. The First Priest laments :

" ..... The Church lies bereft,  
Alone, desecrated, desolated, and the heathen shall  
build on the ruins.  
Their world without God."

The Third Priest holds a different view that such execution fortifies the Church and makes it supreme so long as men will die for it. Thereafter all the priests pray for the eternal peace for their Archbishop :

"Now in the sight of God  
Conjoined with all the saints and martyrs gone before you  
Remember us."

There is Chorus again. It is the last but not the least. The choir sing the glory of God which is omnipresent, omniscient and omnipotent and condemn those who forget him. They pray to God :

"Forgive us, O Lord, we acknowledge ourselves as type  
of common mad.

Of the men and women who shut the door and sit by  
the fire.

And the play ends with the following note :

"Lord, have mercy upon us  
Blessed Thomas ; pray for us."

### 3. THE HISTORICAL BACKGROUND TO 'MURDER IN THE CATHEDRAL'

T. S. Eliot's *Murder in the Cathedral* (1935) is the story of the murder of Thomas-a-Becket, the Archbishop of Canterbury. The Archbishop's murder was a great episode of European History "No episode opens to us a wider window upon the politics of the twelfth

these profits of holiness. Henry was soon to learn that Becket was more formidable in death than he had ever been in life."<sup>1</sup>

#### 4. THE FORM AND TECHNIQUE OF 'MURDER IN THE CATHEDRAL'

According to *The Times*, "In form the play is something between a Morality and Chronicle play, the use of introspective symbols being subtly interwoven with simplified historical narrative". The play begins with a Chorus, sung by semihysterical and somewhat broody type of sentimental Women of Canterbury, describing the wretched life they have been leading for seven years since the departure of the Archbishop from England. The Chorus is followed by the conversation of three Priests, and immediately the messenger comes and informs them of the arrival of Becket—the Archbishop. After a few minutes we find the Archbishop on the stage—a typical Catholic soul—an ideal servant of Christ. Then arrive the four Tempters, who try to tempt him one by one. These Tempters are the auto-suggestive reflections in the mind of the Archbishop, criss-crossing alternatively. With the departure of the Tempters there is an Interlude. The Interlude is an early form of drama. But the modern playwrights, especially Shaw and Eliot, have reintroduced this form in the modern dramatic Art. The Interlude in this play serves a number of dramatic purposes. In the first place it infuses a spirit of sanctity into plot, and creates a Catholic atmosphere in the play. Through the mouth of Becket—the Archbishop of England about eight centuries ago—Eliot sermonizes the Christians of the twentieth century England. Secondly, the Interlude produces suspense, which is an essential element in a drama. While the Archbishop preaches his sermon, we speculate about his fate. Thirdly, the Interlude produces a soothing and tranquillizing effect on the mind of the audience. After the Interlude there arrive four Knights in furious rage fully determined to murder the Archbishop. The scene is pathetically thrilling, at the same time grimly horrible—'ghastly ghostly.' And yet, the scene sheds a divine radiance, immortalizes the martyrdom of Becket. It puts before us another picture of the Blessed Crucifixion. The murder of the Archbishop in the Cathedral makes him uneternally inspiring symbol of hope and faith to the fleeting march of generations. It is a tragedy, but a Divine tragedy.

The play, *Murder in the Cathedral*, was to be produced for festival stage. "It was to be produced for a rather special kind of audience—an audience of those serious people who go to festival and expect to have to put up with poetry. And then it was a religious play and people who go deliberately to a religious play at a religious festival expect to be patiently bored and to satisfy themselves that they have done

<sup>1</sup> H. W. C. Davis: *England Under the Normans and Angevins*, (London, 1937), p. 222.

something." But the most intricate problem that faced Eliot was that of language. He was to write a play whose action had taken place eight hundred years ago when the language spoken was much different from that of the present age.

"Fortunately," says T. S. Eliot, "I did not have to write in the idiom of the twelfth century, because that idiom, even if I knew Norman French and Anglo-saxon, would have been unintelligible. But vocabulary and style could not be exactly those of modern conversation—as in some modern French play using the plot and personages of Greek Diana—because I had to take my audience back to an historical event and they could not afford to be archaic, first because archaism would only have suggested the wrong period, and second, because I wanted to bring home to the audience the contemporary relevance of the situation."

Regarding versification of the play, Eliot was careful to avoid any echo of Shakespeare because he was aware of the fact of the primary failure of 19th century poets, when they wrote for the theatre. Therefore he followed the versification of *Everyman*. Besides verse there are two prose passages in the play—the Sermon in the Interlude, and speeches of the Knights, addressing the audience after murdering Becket. These two prose-passages, according to T. S. Eliot, could not have been written in verse.

"The fusions of these elements of the Christian drama of the Middle Ages with the pre-Christian drama of the Greeks yielded a highly original form. Although nearer to Aeschylean tragedy than to any intervening form it has been perfectly adapted to Christian theology and is very much of its time. Milton's adaptation of Greek form a Biblical theme is a less radical transformation, for all its touches of the baroque. Eliot's work is nearer to the stylization of the Byzantine. Yet it has a functional simplicity which is peculiarly twentieth-century. It resembles certain of the vocal works of Stravinsky more than anything in English dramatic art."—(David E. Jones).

"The form arose out of Eliot's conception of this particular subject and could not be adapted for general use. As we shall see, it allowed mere obvious poetic effects than Eliot has since permitted himself in drama. At this time, in fact, Eliot had a different view of the tactics, necessary for the reintroduction of poetry into the theatre from one he has since evolved. In his talk on 'The Need for Poetic Drama', broadcast in 1936, he spoke of 'the necessity for poetic drama at the present time to emphasise, not to minimise, the fact that it is written in verse.'—(David E. Jones).

Speaking about the form and technique of *Murder in the Cathedral*, J. L. Styan writes in his book *The Dark Comedy*. "In his essay on John



Marston, which appeared just before *Murder in the Cathedral*, Eliot wrote, "It is possible that what distinguishes poetic drama from prosaic drama is a kind of doubleness in the action, as if it took place on two planes at once." This 'doubleness', or, as he calls it later in the essay, this 'sense of something behind', this 'pattern behind the pattern,' Eliot attempted to exploit as a method in his own plays. The ironic address of the Knights in *Murder in the Cathedral* springs immediately to mind. Naturally, most of the characters in this play are apprehending their situation on a plane lower than that of the hero Thomas-a-Becket, whether the Tempters, the Priests or the Women of Canterbury. The Knights not only think and feel with all the limitations of their calling, but offer the only instance in the play where the difference of levels is realized for the audience in the theatre or the congregation in the Church. When, after the killing of Thomas, they step out of the play with all the force of an aside in Moliere and a *Verfremdungseffekt* of Bertold Brecht rolled into one, they cease suddenly to be symbolic figures in an abstract design, and become recognizable representative men from modern political life. This abrupt shaking of the audience's confidence in the image they have been creating is sufficient to jolt it into reassessing the play's meaning in modern terms. The untrammelled direct address to the audience has become more and more familiar in the contemporary theatre, and even in television and the cinema. It is proving a refreshing means of shattering the image of an audience largely lulled into anticipating a complete naturalism. This device of the Knights is a fully legitimate shock tactic."

However, the play is not entirely on Greek Model. Most of the critics of this play have called it a specimen of the Greek Tragedy. No doubt, *Murder in the Cathedral* fulfils some of the basic conditions laid down by Aristotle. According to Aristotelian concept of tragedy, the play must have a single plot; the plot is to be invigorated and the play to be made interesting through the use of choruses; and that the story of the play must rotate round some religious or heroic deed. *Murder in the Cathedral* fulfils all these conditions. It has no under-plot or side-plot: its theme is only the murder of the Archbishop; three choruses in the play, heightening the sublimity of the character of the hero and finally the theme is a religious one. Yet the play is a departure from two of the fundamental concepts of Aristotle. In Greek tragedy no ghastly or sensational scene is exhibited. "There should be no *Murder* or *Rape* scene on the stage," said Aristotle. Murder is conveyed to the audience by a messenger or messengers in the Greek plays. Milton also avoided showing the death-scene of Samson on the stage. But Eliot has shown the murder of Becket in a heartbreakingly, ghastly manner on the stage. Secondly, according to Aristotelian concept, the tragic hero's ultimate fate is caused by his folly or error of judgement, and that he is

overtaken by the Nemesis. Aristotle says, "A tragic hero must be a man of noble qualities—yet not perfect: and—that he must have some lack in him, to be the cause of the tragedy." But Becket is a perfect man—almost a superman or an ideal hero. He has no sign of imperfection. Thus, *Murder in the Cathedral* is not on the perfect model of Aristotelian conception of Tragedy.

The fusion of the elements of Christian drama of the Middle Ages with the pre-Christian drama of the Greeks has, indeed, yielded a highly original form. Although nearer to Aeschylean tragedy than to any intervening form, it has been perfectly adapted to Christian theology and is very much of its time. By mixing the ancient and the modern, the political and the religious, Eliot has attained a maturer and more original form of poetic drama than any other modern poetic-dramatist could attain. It is, indeed, his dramatic triumph.

##### 5. THE THEME OF 'MURDER IN THE CATHEDRAL'

[Martyrdom as the central theme of the play]

"The death of Thomas," says Mrs. Norma Browne, "as given by Mr. Eliot in the verse-play, *Murder in the Cathedral*, is the sublimity of a grand and inspiring martyrdom. With a divine awe, we stand and witness his ghastly but not ghostly murder on the holy floor of the House of God; and then, as soon as the bloody deed is over, we see before us another resurrection—with a saintly hallow round his face, Becket—like Christ of the old—rises and prepares his march to Heaven."

Helen Gardner in her article, "T. S. Eliot and his Dramatic Poetry" discusses 'martyrdom' at length and says, "The central theme of the play is martyrdom' and matryrdom in its strict, ancient sense. For the word martyr means witness, and the Church did not at first confine the word to those who sealed their witness with their blood; it was a later distinction that separated the martyrs from the confessors. We are not to think of a martyr as primarily one who suffers for a cause or who gives up his life for truth, but as a witness to the awful reality of the supernatural. The actual deed by which Thomas is struck down is in a sense unimportant. It is not important as a dramatic climax towards which all that has happened leads. We are warned again and again that we are not watching a sequence of events that has the normal dramatic logic of motive, act, result, but an action which depends on the will of God and not on the wills of men:

"For a little time the hungry hawk  
Will only soar and hover, circling lower  
Waiting excuse, pretence, opportunity.  
End will be simple, sudden, God-given,  
Nothing prepares us for the consumption."

**Q. 1. Write a brief essay on Eliot's life, literary output and his intellectual and ideological background.**

**Ans.** Thomas Stearns Eliot was born in 1888 in the large industrial and commercial city of the United States. St. Louis, where his father held a major position in the local business world. And in accordance with his family tradition he was sent to Harvard University in Massachusetts, where for four years (1906-10) he studied philosophy and literature. Thereafter, he studied further in Germany, in Paris and at Oxford. Finding himself in England, during the First World War, he became a schoolmaster, married in 1915, and soon afterwards joined the staff of Lloyd's Bank in London. It was during this period that his poetic work began to appear in various magazines, some of which he edited himself (*The Egoist*, 1917-18 ; *The Criterion*, 1923-39). In 1924, Eliot became a director of the firm of Faber, and Faber, who have since published all his literary output.

His *Waste Land* came out in 1922. With this Eliot established his reputation as a poet, and for the next ten years his influence in the world of letters was at its height. In 1927, he became a British subject and announced in the preface to a book of essays his conversion to Catholicism.

In the late thirties, he entered upon a more mature and mellow phase, began to be widely acclaimed by the more traditional and conservative literary circles, and formal recognition of his stature as a writer came in 1948 with the award of the coveted honour, the Noble Prize of Literature.

Regarding his literary output, one can divide it into three principal categories : (i) poetry; (ii) Verse-drama; (iii) critical essays.

His first major poetic work, *The Waste Land* (1922) is a satirical attack on the lack of firm foundations in modern civilization, a work which was hailed as a most convincing presentation of social aimlessness—after forty years, however, the piece has lost a good deal of its impact. After turning to Catholicism he struck a note of quieter religious acceptance in *Ash Wednesday* (1930), though the sense of annihilation recurs and the imagery remains far from simple. In his two other major poetic works, *The Rock* (1934) and *Four Quarters* (1944), he

made use of mystical writers, like St. John of the Cross, to present a mood of restrained penitential hope and faith.

*Murder in the Cathedral* (1935) was the first of a series of highly successful verse-dramas, to be followed, by *Family Reunion* (1939), a study in the psychology of guilt, *The Cocktail Party* (1949), an exploration of social trivialities, *The Confidential Clerk* (1954), which was first produced at the Edinburgh Festival, and, most recently, *The Elder Statesman* (1959), which also had its first public performance at the Edinburgh Festival before going to London.

T. S. Eliot's critical essays appeared in the *The Sacred Wood* (1920), *The Use of Poetry and the Use of Criticism* (1933), *Essays Ancient and Modern* (1936), *What is a Classic?* (1954), and *Notes Toward the Definition of Culture* (1949). This body of critical prose is an indispensable introduction to his poetry—especially because, compared with his verse, his prose is lucidity itself. Nonetheless, in these essays he writes as if he was breaking new ground for the first time, explaining what nobody has previously thought of; in reality most of the views he expresses were common-place in the nineteenth century; many of them are to be found in the essays of Matthew Arnold!

His literary and intellectual background was highly of a philosophic kind. He had remained in close association of a number of philosophers. His intellect was developed before the First World War at universities with strong traditions. He was also much influenced by the prophetic books of the Bible and the esoteric teaching of Zoroaster and Buddha. By training and temperament, therefore, he was something of a mystic.

At the same time, he had a practical man's aptitudes and experience in business, and was fully alive to the contrast between nineteenth century material civilization with its mechanization extreme forms of division of labour—and especially the human types these seemed to produce. Moreover, while in London and Paris, he had the opportunity of first-hand contacts with symbolist poets like Amy Lowell and Ezra Pound, whose approach favoured and attitude of detachment and impersonality.

With this background, Eliot set himself the task of evolving a new literary technique which was also to owe a great deal to the developments then taking place in the field of psychology. Recognizing that the human brain works by the association of words or ideas, one current flowing into another, the subconscious blending or conflicting with the conscious, with reason trying to hold the balance and fix the attention. Eliot developed the technical device of the *Internal Monologue*. This is virtually a one-party dialogue between two halves of the same person, each at variance with the other, in which the reader

enjoys the luxury of observing the workings and conflicts in the character's mind.

Eliot also felt keenly that modern verse was suffering from lack of standards. It was bound to benefit from the studied felicities of Elizabethan drama with its emotional intensity and vivid phrasology. He had learnt a great deal, too, from studying Dante, a writer whose graphic and unconventional approach keeps alive the attention of readers or audience. Viewed in retrospect, T. S. Eliot is essentially a philosopher whose thoughts have been expressed in poetry and verse-drama.

Q. 2. What information is given in the course of the play, 'Murder in the Cathedral' about : (a) Becket's Career ; (b) The condition of the common people ?

Or

Write a note on the historical background of the play, 'Murder in the Cathedral'.

Ans. Henry II—

*Murder in the Cathedral* deals with the assassination of Thomas Becket, Archbishop of Canterbury, at the instigation of King Henry II in December, 1170. Accordingly, it is necessary to have some background knowledge of the historical circumstances in which the play is set. Henry II of England was born in A.D. 1133 and ruled from A.D. 1154 till his death in A.D. 1189.

We know a great deal about him because he lived in an age when it was fashionable to comment on the activities of kings. According to Peter of Blois, one of Henry's courtiers, "If the king promises to spend the day anywhere, especially if a herald has published the royal will, you may be sure that the king will leave the place bright and early, and upset everyone's calculations in his haste. You may see men rushing madly about, urging on the pack-horses, fitting the teams to their wagons : everyone in utter confusion—a perfect portrait of hell." The king had a handsome personality ; the hair once reddish, now turning to grey, of middle height, round-headed, his eyes brilliant as lightning when roused, his deep chest, strong arms and bow legs. The courtier then goes on to give an account of Henry's remarkable qualities as a leader and ruler, and of his special interests. He was an ardent lover of the woods : when he was not at war, he amused himself with hawks and hounds. As often as he had free time he occupied himself in private reading or expounded some knotty problem to his clerks. He liked to have learned men about him ; he was curious about history and literature. On the whole, Henry—for the period—was an able and enlightened sovereign, a clear-headed but unprincipled politician, and an efficient general ; during his reign he introduced several legal reforms.

*Becket's Early Career*

The most powerful man in England after the king was Theobald, the old Archbishop of Canterbury. Relations between them were outwardly cordial; and Henry rarely refused an urgent request from that ecclesiastical leader. The most striking indication of Theobald's influence was the presence of his favourite clerk and archdeacon, Thomas Becket, in the office of royal chancellor and in the most intimate counsels of the King.

Becket, born in London in A.D. 1118 of Norman parentage, came from a family of wealthy merchants. He was trained in knightly exercises, studied theology in Paris, and worked for a time in a lawyer's office. About A.D. 1142, he had entered the household of Theobald, who heaped honours on him (including the archdeaconry of Canterbury, A.D. 1154) and sent him on several important Continental missions. At the papal court, Becket had supported Henry's claim to the succession to the throne, and in return, a year after Henry's coronation, he was rewarded with the office of Chancellor (A.D. 1155), thereby becoming the first Englishman born since the Conquest to fill any high office of State.

Henry himself, it is clear, felt that the Church had acquired the habit of acting more independently than was fitting; and he was anxious, once Theobald died, to replace him with a man who would be less independent, a useful adviser, and a welcome ornament of the court. Such a right-hand man seemed to be available in the person of Becket. As Chancellor, Becket had revealed a mixture of efficiency and glamour: here was someone who could maintain the pageantry and organize the details of the court, and yet be wholly subservient and congenial to the King.

In A.D. 1162, Theobald died, Becket became the new Archbishop of Canterbury, and there was little to suggest that the cordial relationship between Henry and Thomas would alter.

*The Breach between the King and Archbishop*

In actual fact, from that date, Becket tried to establish an entirely new relationship with the King. The worldly Chancellor became an ascetic monk and prophetic spiritual leader. The more Becket acted out of character (as Henry understood his character), the more irritated the King became. A series of minor disputes swiftly developed into a major quarrel. At last in A.D. 1164, Henry determined to break the new Archbishopship.

In January of that year, at Clarendon, he tried to secure Becket's consent to a catalogue of essential customs governing the relationship between Church and State. The Constitutions of Clarendon were a solemn affirmation of ancient practice (rather than new laws) and Henry browbeat Thomas and his colleagues into assenting to them.

Becket soon repented of his submission at Clarendon and put himself at the mercy of the Pope. In October, the Archbishop went to Northampton, where he had been summoned to face trial before the King on several of the points of issue between them; but whatever the nominal grounds for the trial, the real question was whether the Constitutions were binding and whether Becket himself was to continue in office. At Northampton, Becket refused to submit to trial, claiming total exemption from the jurisdiction of the royal court, and fled from the country. Behind this breach lay a whole world of ideas and this lay the tragedy of an intimate friendship translated into a bitter quarrel. Henry's view of the matter was comparatively straightforward: he had trusted Becket implicitly, and Becket had let him down; the Archbishop had sworn allegiance to the King, broken his oath, and was thus a Traitor.

Who had Becket behaved in this manner? Thomas was only too well aware that, at the time when the King had forced the monks of Canterbury to elect him Archbishop, he was widely regarded as a time-serving royal minister, who would continue his old way of life even as Archbishop of Canterbury. Above all, he knew that the older bishops regarded him as a caricature of an Archbishop—as a royal plaything. So circumstances induced Thomas to make some effort to convince the world that he was going to try to be a real Archbishop, not too unworthy a successor of his old master, Theobald; above all, he needed to dispel the illusions of the King. Perhaps he also felt the need to convince not only the King, Bishops and old associates, but also himself, for Becket was a complex personality whose character remains something of an enigma.

*The Murder : 29th December, A.D. 1170—*

At the end of A.D. 1164, the exiled Archbishop laid his case before the Pope, Alexander III, who was a distinguished canon lawyer. Becket was something of an embarrassment to him, since he already had a war with the Holy Roman Emperor on his hands. Until A.D. 1170, he managed to restrain the Archbishop's occasional outbursts or violence; then with a much more favourable international situation, the Pope took sterner action.

Behind the scenes the old clerical rivalry between York and Canterbury added fuel to the fire. By custom, the Archbishop of Canterbury alone had the power to anoint and crown a new English King, and his custom was supported by a papal mandate to protect Canterbury's rights while Thomas was in exile. But Henry was impatient to have his eldest surviving son (author Henry) crowned as successor in his own lifetime, and ordered the Archbishop of York and his colleagues to crown the young prince. In June, A.D. 1170, this ceremony was duly

performed at York, and Archbishop Thomas, with the Pope's support, immediately threatened an interdict (i.e., an order closing all the churches in the kingdom). The grave consequences of such an action on a mediaeval state made this threat too strong even for Henry II, who immediately patched up a reconciliation.

Shortly afterwards Becket received papal authority to excommunicate the Bishops who had assisted in the coronation. After a spell of indecision, Thomas published this order and the next day (December 1st), returned to England. On Christmas day, from this pulpit at Canterbury, taking for his text "peace on earth to men of goodwill," Becket cursed those who had pillaged his estates during his six-year exile — "May their memory be blotted out from the company of the saints." (Eliot omits this altogether from his version of the sermon).

Meanwhile at his Christmas court near Bayeaux, Henry, who had been informed of the ex-communication bill, became violently angry, and the King's furious question—why no one would rid him of this low-born priest, was answered. On the 29th December, four Knights, who had just crossed from Normandy, threatened the Archbishop in his palace and on his defiance followed him, with cries of "king's men", into the Cathedral, and there, at vespers, after an effort to drag him from the Church, killed him with their swords before a crowd of witnesses.

After this, even Becket's arch-energy had to submit. As an act of penance, in A.D. 1174, King Henry was compelled to walk bare-foot through the streets of Canterbury and to submit to a flogging from the monks of Canterbury Cathedral.<sup>1</sup> In due course numerous churches were dedicated to Thomas's name in many remote parts of Britain and Europe.

Q. 3. Recount the happenings in the Archbishop's Hall on December 29th.