

UNIT 3 : CRITICAL APPROACHES TO THE PLAY

PART -I

Structure

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3.0 OBJECTIVES

The aim of this unit is to provide you with

- a) Explanatory comments on Becket's first appearance in the play upto the end of the temptations in Part I.
- b) It also highlights the significance of Becket's silence after the temptations, and provides
- c) Explanatory comments from the Choric passage following the exit of the fourth Tempter upto the end of Part I.

3.1 EXPLANATORY AND CRITICAL NOTES ON BECKET'S FIRST APPEARANCE IN THE PLAY UPTO THE END OF THE TEMPTATION SCENE IN PART I

Thomas' Dialogues with the Priests before his Temptations

Thomas enters with the word "peace" and tells the Priest to let the Chorus alone because it "speaks better than it knows," and what it says is beyond the understanding of the Priests. He then goes on to say that the women of Canterbury do not know about action and suffering except the fact that "neither does the agent suffer /nor the patient act" The women are fixed in the wheel of eternal action in which all must consent to the will of God for the wheel to move in harmony.

The second Priest apologises to Becket saying that he did not see him coming because he was involved with the chatter of the "poor women." He says that he would have been better prepared otherwise. However, seven years of Becket's absence has already prepared him for his arrival which seven days in Canterbury would not have done. He then tells Becket that he will light the fires in Becket's room to ward off the December cold and that Becket will find his rooms as he left them.

Thomas thanks the second Priest and says that he will leave the rooms the way he got them. But these are all "small matters," he says. He informs the Priests that there are enemies all around. Even his arrival in England could have been prevented by "Rebellious bishops, York, London, Salisbury." All of them had helped in the coronation of Henry II's successor without the permission of the Archbishop of Canterbury. Warenne, and the Sheriff of Kent tried to oppose Becket's return and Broc was the one in whose house the Knights stayed before and after the murder. Becket says that it was the Dean of Salisbury who helped him cross the sea "unmolested."

To the first Priest's question whether the enemies are still following, Becket replies that this peace is temporary and that they will attack at the first opportunity. The "end will be simple, sudden, God-given," he observes. Meanwhile, he says that one has to overcome other problems in preparing for the event.

Critical Commentary on the above passages

Becket's first word "Peace" as he enters is very significant. In the play all the characters strive for "Peace" in different ways. The knights think that by killing Becket they can obtain "peace", the Priests think that they can obtain it by escaping. The Chorus feels that it can obtain "peace" by avoiding witnessing Becket's martyrdom. Becket is the only character who achieves true "peace" by conscious submission to the "Still Point."

Becket's speech about acting and suffering is very important in understanding the Christian process of martyrdom:

They know and do not know, what it is to act or suffer
They know and do not know, 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 forever still.

What Becket means by this is that in the long run there is no question of deciding to either act or to suffer passively. There is no distinction between making a decision and passivity. Becket's very passivity is action and even that does not belong to him but is one with God's will: *It is the divine pattern that is important not individual acting and suffering since God is ultimately in control. This control is not to be confused with predestination. Man has the free will to accept or to reject God's plan.* Becket is tempted to do the latter but he overcomes the temptation. Human beings must submit to God's plans for them. Becket's role in this pattern is to accept martyrdom while the role of lesser mortals as well as the Chorus is to humbly recognise the need for that sacrifice. Only when man's will is in complete harmony with the divine will can the wheel turn smoothly around the "Still Point." Suffering is not simply undergoing misery and pain. It is also permitting, consenting and submitting. He who consents to an action must suffer for it and accept responsibility. The Chorus, like the common man, understands no such responsibility. At the point in the play the Chorus says, "for us the poor, there is no action." But during the course of the play it learns to participate in the action, "I have consented Lord Archbishop."

When Becket says, "Neither does the agent suffer nor the patient act," he is the agent in one sense. He sets the wheel rolling. In another sense he also suffers to be killed. But yet at another level, he is neither the agent nor the patient since action and

suffering proceed from God's will and not his own. This is again the reason why Becket, referring to his enemies says, "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." He refers to his murderers as "hawks" highlighting the animal nature of this being. Becket is aware that no plotting can succeed until God wills his death. Becket's awareness parallels Christ's response, "My hour is not yet come." Like Christ, Becket too must first face temptation. He says this is more difficult than death. Meanwhile, "All things prepare the event. Watch."

Explanation of the Temptation Scene

The first Tempter calls Becket, "Old Tom, Gay Tom, Becket of London," and reminds him of his past when he was friends with the King. Now that Becket has again patched up with the King, he asks him whether the "Clergy and laity may return to gaiety" of flirting in the meadows and enjoying life with all its pleasures. Becket responds by saying that the Tempter speaks of past seasons and that "in the life of one man, never / The same time returns." The first Tempter insists that the good times have come again with Becket's peace with the King. Becket chides him saying, "look to your behaviour." The first Tempter says that earlier Becket was kinder on sinners and that he should take friendly advice from him and choose a comfortable life and forget martyrdom. Becket tells him that he comes twenty years too late. To this the first Tempter says that he will leave Thomas to his "higher vices" and leaves. After the Tempter leaves, Becket comments that if one hoped that the past will return then one gets distracted from one's duties in the present.

The second Tempter enters suggesting a compromise with Henry and reminds Becket of their amity. He refers to the historical context when the constitutions were presented to Becket at Clarendon and he faced the full force of the temptation of compromise with the King. In Northampton the King summoned him to account for money spent during Becket's Chancellorship. Here too Becket could have done the easier thing and submitted to the King. At Montmirail, another attempt was made to coax Becket to surrender to the King's point of view. The second Tempter states that if one weighs the balance between the "not too pleasant memories," and the "good memories" in his position as the Chancellor the "late one's rise!" He states that Becket, whom all acknowledged should "guide the state again." Becket is intrigued by his meaning and asks the Tempter to clarify. The second Tempter continues to stress the point that Becket should regain his "Chancellorship" and that it was a big mistake to have given it up. As a Chancellor, Becket will gain power and glory over men. To this Becket states "To the man of God what gladness?" The Tempter states that it is "sad" that the man who had real power on earth should fight for spiritual power in the next world by "giving love to God alone." To this Becket enquires "Who then?" and the second Tempter states if he take back his chancellorship he and the King can work together. They can help the poor, strengthen the laws of the country, dispense justice. What more can man do on earth for God? Becket asks "What Means?" The Tempter states that this could be achieved by compromise. This is because "Real power/ is purchased at the price of a certain submission." Becket rejects it and the Tempter tells him that by choosing the position of Archbishop and serving God, Becket is a "realmless ruler" bound to a "powerless Pope." He carries on by saying that men have to manipulate and manoeuvre. Even Kings need loyal friends to work with at home.

Becket replies by saying that he had excommunicated the Bishops for assisting King Henry II in his son's coronation which was the prerogative of the Archbishop. To this the second Tempter says that "Hungry hatred / Will not strive against intelligent self-interest." Becket responds by asking, "What about the Barons?" The Tempter responds by saying that the King and chancellor have to work together against the barons who are their enemies. Becket dismisses the second Tempter by saying that why should he "Descend to desire a punier power" by serving the King over God. The second Tempter also leaves unsuccessfully. He recognises that Thomas is

suffering from Pride in his own spiritual position. He says to him, "Your sin soars sunward, covering King's falcons." After he leaves, Becket ponders over what he has said and says that maintaining order at the temporal level is to arrest disorders and to descend to the temporal level "would now only be mean descent." At this point the third Tempter enters who is a representative of the Barons. He enters saying that he is not a courtier or a politician but a "rough straightforward Englishman," a "country lord" who knows what the country needs." He even alleges that they are "the backbone of the nation." Becket asks him to proceed with what he has to say and the Tempter continues by saying that friendship should be convenient "unreal friendship may turn to real / But real friendship, once ended, cannot be mended." Becket replies by saying that for a countryman he speaks like a courtier. The third Tempter continues by saying that since Becket's friendship with King Henry II cannot be mended, he should now form new alliances. Becket who dearly loved the King, his friend feels the loss of the friendship and exclaims "O Henry, O my King!"

The Tempter carries on by saying that the King in England is not at all powerful. His French link with his wife makes him susceptible to his sons stealing his kingdom. We the barons, he says are for England. Both Becket and the Tempter are Normans, unlike the King, who is from Anjou in France. "Let the Angevin / Destroy himself, fighting in Anjou." he suggests a "happy coalition" of intelligent interest. For him, (who represent the Barons) Church favours is an advantage and Pope's blessing "Powerful protection / In the fight for Liberty." The third Tempter says that if Becket joined their powers then they could put an end to "tyrannous jurisdiction" of the King's court over the Bishop's and the Baron's court helping both England and Rome in one stroke. Becket claims that he helped to form it. The Tempter states that it is a new coalition that is needed now. Becket states that if he cannot trust the King then why would he trust the King's undoers? The Tempter says that the King will trust only his own power and no one else's. The church and those against him have every right to come together to fight the king. In this case, Becket says that if he cannot trust the King then it is better to trust God alone. He recalls that when he was a chancellor, these very people waited on him even in the "ill-yard," (Becket was a great horseman in his early days). Becket argues why he who ruled like an "eagle among doves" now rules as "wolf among wolves? He dismisses the third Tempter by saying, "no one shall say that I betrayed a King."

The third Tempter leaves saying that he hopes the King will acknowledge Becket's loyalty to him. After the third Tempter leaves, Becket says that the thought of breaking the power of the King has crossed his mind before but he has rejected it because he dearly loves the King and he trusts God. He further says, that to break the King's power at this point he would like what Samson achieved in Gaza when he pulled down the pillars of the house in which three thousand Philistines had gathered to watch him perform feats of strength: and so pulled down the same destruction on himself. If Becket were to act against the King now it would fall short of Samson's triumph, and would only destroy himself.

The fourth Tempter enters. Becket does not expect him "Who are you? I expected / Three visitors, not four." The fourth Tempter says that he always "Precedes expectation" and that the King will never trust "twice" the man who was his friend and betrayed him. He warns Becket about the offer made by the third Tempter who represents the Barons saying, "Kings have public policy / Barons private profit." He advises Becket to "fare forward to the end," because kingly power is more pleasurable than power under a king. The kind of spiritual power that Becket strives for is greater than temporal power "War, plague, and revolution, / New conspiracies, broken pacts: / To be master or servant within an hour, / This is the course of temporal power." He taunts Becket by saying that he has made a clever choice in privileging the eternal over the temporal because "When King is dead, there's another king" but "Saint and Martyr rule from the tomb." Unlike the political fears Kings may have Becket will have long lines of pilgrims waiting to see his tomb. Becket admits of these thoughts. The fourth Tempter says, that is why he is saying these things. He knows that Becket has thought about it all very carefully while praying or

early in the morning. Becket knows that nothing at the temporal level lasts and that only the spiritual world triumphs so he should go towards martyrdom. Becket exclaims, "Who are you tempting with my own desires?" He feels trapped and says, "Is there no way, in my soul's sickness, / Does not lead to damnation in pride?" The fourth Tempter leaves echoing Becket's first speech about action and suffering.

Critical Commentary on the Temptation Scene

Nevill Coghill provides a good note on this scene. He says that there is no stage direction stating the exit of the Priests and the Chorus. This is because the Chapter House where Eliot staged the play had only one exit, therefore, it was difficult for the characters to enter the exit frequently. Becket's line, "All things prepare the event. Watch" demonstrates this problem very effectively. Viewed from another perspective, the characters presence on the stage is important because the Tempters could be merely figments of Becket's imagination, an internal conflict. Eliot, in this play, has brilliantly used his theory of "de-personalization" in poetry to his advantage. He has used a character whose spiritual growth demands a surrendering of his will to God—a depersonalization of the self. The Temptation scene is also important in that it introduces the morality play pattern in *Murder in the Cathedral*. As in the Morality plays there is personification. Eliot states that he was influenced by Everyman in his use of metre for the play.

Becket's first temptation refers to his good times in the past. Becket was known for his good living. At a more significant level the first Tempter is asking Becket to move away from the still point, God. Technically, the first temptation is no temptation for Becket. Christ's temptation, which came after he had fasted for forty days and was alone in the wilderness, were genuinely difficult to overcome (See Gospel of St. Matthew Ch. 4). In a sense Becket's first three Tempters are more akin to Job's comforters in the Book of Job of the Old Testament in the Bible. Infact, Becket's remark to the Tempter proves that the first temptation is no temptation: "But in the life of one man, never / The same time returns."

One of the problems that Eliot faces in his portrayal of Becket is to make a good character attractive. Milton faced a similar problem in his creation of Christ in *Paradise Lost*. Often these characters appear as a little priggish and stilted. The essence of the first Tempter's speech is that he wants Becket to choose a comfortable life on earth and forget martyrdom and its rewards promised in the next world. The Tempter exits saying "I leave you to the pleasures of your higher vices." This is significant. Spiritual pride is a vice that Becket must fight.

The second Tempter provides a brief historical context for the central conflict between the King and Becket--representing the State and the Church, respectively. The Second Tempter appeals to Becket's love for power and cleverly tells Becket about the good that he can do on earth for God with earthly power. Becket's response "What Means?" points to the Key question in Christianity viz. that means and end are important. Later, Becket refers to the danger of doing the right thing for the wrong reason. When the second Tempter tells Becket to join hands with the King to unite against England's enemies at home and abroad, Becket says: "No! Shall I, Who keep the keys / of heaven and hell, supreme alone in England / who bind and loose, with power from the Pope / Descend to desire a punier power?" This response of Becket shows that he is not free from spiritual pride. The second Tempter's reference to "bind and loose" refers to Christ's saying to his disciple, Peter, in the Gospel of St. Matthew Ch. 16 V. 19 "And I shall give unto thee the keys of the kingdom of heaven: and whosoever thou shalt bind on earth shall be bound in heaven: and whosoever thou shalt loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven."

The first two Tempters play upon Becket's love for power and pleasure: and his love for the King. Becket overcomes both these weaknesses during the course of his

temptations. *It must be noted that although the Tempters are numbered they have very distinct personalities.*

The fourth Tempter is totally unexpected. He is the most frightening of the Tempters. In a sense, the earlier three temptations were really no challenge to Becket. *The fourth Tempter taunts him about his spiritual pride.* Becket overcomes this temptation before us in the play. Becket says of the fourth Tempter, "Who are you tempting me with my own desires?" The fourth Tempter tempts Becket with the glories of eternal sainthood as compared to the transient glories at the temporal level. He tells Becket that his choice for the eternal over the temporal, is clever. The aim of the fourth Tempter is to undermine Becket's faith. His goal is achieved if Becket surrenders to despair or aspires to pride. In fact, Becket comes close to this when he says, "Is there no way, in my soul's sickness, / Does not lead to damnation in pride."

It must be noted that the fourth Tempter appears when Becket's rejection of time is complete. He advocates perception from the vantage point of the fourth dimension of time, eternity. Becket now feels trapped. His "near despair" after the fourth Tempter leaves, is reflected in the speech of the Chorus. Becket is almost in danger of being absorbed into the abyss of despair. He has to actively overcome this temptation. It involves considerable internal conflict mirrored both in his Christmas sermon and the second part of the play.

In 1934 Eliot said, "with the disappearance of the idea of intense moral struggle, the human being presented to us both in poetry and prose fiction today... tend to become less real. It is in fact during moments of moral and spiritual struggle--that men and women come nearest to being real" (*After Strange Gods*). The characters in *Murder in the Cathedral* are real from this point of view.

The fourth Tempter leaves echoing Becket's opening speech in the play about acting and suffering. "Martin Browne states that when the fourth Tempter talks of the turning of the wheel, he is referring to it as something mechanical which makes action and suffering meaningless. Becket feels trapped after the fourth Tempter tempts him and this is reflected in the ironical repetition of Becket's own speech by the Tempter. Becket, the teacher, has now become the pupil. He has to learn the true meaning of martyrdom. Despair and pride are seen only in relation to man's will not God's. Becket is forced to find a way out of his paradox. The stillness of the wheel is later contrasted with the "restlessness in the house" expressed by the chorus in their outburst following the temptations.

3.2 BECKET'S SILENCE AFTER THE FOURTH TEMPTATION

After the fourth Tempter leaves, Becket remains silent while all the other characters speak. This certainly dramatises the intense conflict in Becket. *It is through this silence that Becket overcomes the fourth temptation viz. attack on his pride.* This silence is also significant because it makes us realize that Becket goes through conflict and suffering before he becomes a martyr. If this process had not taken place his death would have been misread as the "self slaughter of a lunatic."

It is important to examine the nature of the dramatic strategies used by Eliot to show how Becket overcomes his last temptation before he is ready for martyrdom. In doing this one should keep in mind the particular kind of audience the play was catering to, Eliot's use of language and metre to create dramatic effects, and the constraints both religious and theatrical within which Eliot had to operate.

As stated earlier, the play was written for the Canterbury Festival of June 1935 and it catered to a specifically Christian audience. It was performed in the Chapter House

of the Cathedral. The architectural and acoustic peculiarities of the place imposed some dramatic constraints on Eliot. For instance, the almost ponderous and heavy effect of some of the speeches in *Murder in the Cathedral* is deliberate, so that words could be enunciated and not lost in transmission. The simultaneous presence of several characters on the stage is also a direct consequence of the architectural peculiarity of the place. The Chapter House as we know had only one door for the characters to enter and exit from. Could this be one of the reasons for the simultaneous presence of the Tempters, the Chorus and the Priests on the stage after Becket's last temptation? Or, is Eliot not willing to present God, even for a religious audience? In other words, rather than showing God Eliot chose the combined effect of the Chorus, Tempters and the Priests to dramatize the whirlwind which signifies God's presence in the Book of Job.

The central problem which Eliot faced in dramatically portraying the resolution of Becket's conflict was to convincingly exteriorize Becket's interior conflict. As Helen Gardner rightly says: "...the last temptation is so subtle and interior that no audience can judge whether it is truly overcome or not." If we are to believe Becket when he says "Temptation shall not come in this kind again," what are the dramatic strategies used by Eliot to lead us to this belief?

It may be noted that Eliot was working against a dramatic tradition which was essentially naturalistic. Therefore, to put words of humility in Thomas' own mouth would make him appear the opposite of humble. Perhaps this accounts for the long silence between Becket's words after the last Tempter tempts him, and his expression of the resolution of his conflict in his speech "now is my way clear, now is the meaning plain."

Referring to the difficulty of judging whether the last temptation has been overcome Helen Gardner says: "we have to take it for granted that Thomas dies with a pure will, or else, more properly, ignore the whole problem of motives as beyond our competence and accept the fact of his death" (*The Art of T.S. Eliot* P.134). Interestingly, Eliot's essay on "Poetry and Drama" offers a possible interpretation to the dramatic strategy used by him, in dramatising Becket's resolution of the conflict. In the essay he says: "It seems to me that beyond the nameable classifiable emotions and motives of our conscious life when directed towards action, the part of life which prose drama is wholly adequate to express there is a fringe of indefinite extent, of feeling which one can only detect, so to speak, out of the corner of the eye and can never completely focus; of feeling of which we are only aware in a kind of temporary detachment from action." Could Becket's silence after the fourth Tempter tempts him be that "feeling of which we are only aware in a kind of temporary detachment from action?"

3.3 EXPLANATION OF THE CHORIC PASSAGE FOLLOWING THE EXIT OF THE FOURTH TEMPTER UPTO THE END OF PART I

The choric outburst that follows after the fourth Tempter exits conveys the restlessness of the people. There is restlessness, these "poor women" of Canterbury say, in the "house" and in the "street." The air is oppressive and clammy; the sky "thick and heavy." Images of the earth birthing "issue of hell" contribute to the general sense of horror.

Following the choric outburst, the four Tempters collectively talk about the unreality of all things. Any award or prize on earth in the ultimate analysis is not worth winning not even the hope of martyrdom. It is like "hankering for the cat in the Pantomime, which isn't a cat at all, but just another cheat" (Neville Coghill). The

Tempters want the audience to adopt their point of view in condemning Becket's martyrdom as an illusive and childish act that is "out of touch with reality." They refer to Becket as "obstinate, blind, intent / On self-destruction," someone who is "lost in the wonder of his own greatness, / The enemy of society, enemy of himself."

The three Priests--like the four Tempters--collectively tell Becket not to fight the forces against him. They ask him to wait until things subside.

Following the collective plea of the Priests to Becket, the Chorus, Tempters and the Priests alternately highlight "Prowling presences" like "rain that taps at the window," "wind that pokes at the door" and the "mastiff" prowling at the gate. Images of death and violence are also picked up by them. Phrases like "a sudden shock on the skull," "drowned in a ditch" and "feel the cold in his groin" intensify and atmosphere of anxiety.

The Chorus now enter and tell Becket that they are not happy about the present situation. They state that they are not "ignorant women" and know "what to expect and not expect." In life they have known suffering, "extortion and violence," of "the old without fire in winter" the "child without milk in summer," "young men mutilated" and "the torn girl trembling by the mill-stream." Despite all these problems, the "poor women" state that they have carried on with life by "picking together the pieces."

They say that they carried on "Living and partly living" because they felt that God gave them some reason to hope. But now with the new developments they feel very frightened. They sense a terror enveloping them "which none can avert, none can / avoid, flowing under our feet and over the sky, / Under doors and down chimneys, flowing in at the ear and / the mouth and the eye." These "poor women" express despair which is encapsulated in their words, "God is leaving us, God is leaving us, more pang, more pain / than birth or death." Their despair is highlighted through the animal imagery that they use: "Puss-purr of leopard, footfall of padding bear, / Palm-pat of nodding ape, square hyaena waiting." They plead with their archbishop Becket to save them by saving himself. If he destroys himself, they too will be destroyed.

After a long silence (in which he undergoes intense conflict and struggle over the temptations) Becket speaks. His internal struggle, as explained earlier, was dramatized by Eliot through the collective presence and speeches of the Chorus, Tempters and Priests on the stage.

Becket is now clear about the meaning of his life. No longer will any temptation upset the peace and understanding that he now has. He admits that "The last temptation is the greatest treason: / To do the right deed for the wrong reason." Becket recalls his life in the last thirty years and says that he has "searched all the ways / That lead to pleasure, advancement and price" at the temporal level. To become a "servant of God" was never his wish. It is difficult to serve God because one can fall into spiritual arrogance by doing the "right deed for the wrong reasons." In other words, by resisting sins you may open your heart to the pride of having resisted it and develop contempt for those who are unable to do so. Becket says that he can foresee how history will interpret his death as the "senseless self-slaughter of a lunatic, / Arrogant passion of a fanatic." The fourth Knight's words at the end of the play corroborates it, viz. that Becket committed "Suicide while of Unsound Mind." Becket, continues by saying that all those who are implicated in evil will be punished. As for himself, he says that he shall not "act or suffer" and surrender himself to God. This is reflected in the sermon that he gives soon after.

Critical Commentary on the above passage

The "restlessness" of the Chorus express the anguish of Becket after the fourth Tempter leaves. Their "restlessness" is also in contrast to the stillness of the "still point." Terrible images like that of the "withered tree" and "sickly smells" dominate

not only the tone of the passage but also the state of the country and its people. There is a general sense of decay. Eliot's contention that human nature shares in the Evil which befell all nature after the Fall is seen in this speech. In a sense, the dismal picture that emerges from this passage clearly points to the need for Becket's martyrdom to save the world.

In the collective speech of the four Tempters there is a sudden shift from the 12th century to the 20th. The Tempter-- like the Knights later--try to persuade the audience to see things from their point of view. They deliberately use images from the 20th century to bridge the distance between them and the audience. This speech by the four Tempters clearly points to their stand regarding Becket's martyrdom. However, the irony lies in the fact that it is people like them who necessitate Becket's martyrdom to cleanse the world from sins.

The three Priests in collectively persuading Becket to give up his battle demonstrate their lack of religious strength. They too need to grow and understand the meaning of martyrdom. These lamentors fear death because they see it as sudden and unprepared. Becket's attitude is different. He sees his death as being in God's hands. It is never an accident but planned.

The speech alternately spoken by the Chorus, Priests and the Tempters resembles the Liturgy during a Christian mass service. This technique of alternation is also akin to "stichomythia," in Greek tragedy.

The choric speech that follows foregrounds the extent of the terror and disease that has set in. They speak of terrible images of rape, violence, deprivation and death. The oppression and torture" that the "poor women" speak of refer specifically to the days of King Stephen (whom King Henry II succeeded) when many were tortured by "brigand barons" for information regarding hidden wealth. It is important to note that the Chorus too must learn that death is frightening only if one sees it as individual annihilation and not as part of God's plan. The Chorus claim not to be "ignorant women" yet they don't seem to realize that they are living at the temporal level of linear time. They do not have a totality of existence, "Living and partly living, / Picking together the pieces." They have to learn that "sleeping and eating and drinking" is not adequate to realize the full potential of one's being. In the Gospel of St. Matthew, Christ had said that "man does not live by bread alone" to his tempter who tempted him with food while he was hungry (see Matthew Ch 4).

The terror depicted by the Chorus in this speech is the kind of despair the Tempters wanted Becket to fall into. The Chorus can only understand private catastrophe and personal loss. They cannot comprehend that which is out of time and yet they are not at ease with the old dispensation (like the magi in Eliot's poem, "The Journey of the Magi.") Rebirth is always painful. It may be noted that Becket's lines before he surrenders to his death in Part II of the play, strike a contrast to the function of the Chorus at the linear level of time. He says :

It is not in time that my death shall be known:
It is out of time that my decision is taken
If you call that a decision
To which my whole being gives entire consent.
I give my life
To the Law of God above the Law of Man.

Critical Commentary on Becket's Speech after his Temptations

Becket's opening words "now is my way clear, now is the meaning plain" tells us that he has indeed overcome the fourth temptation. The clarity of his belief that is revealed here is later shown in Becket's sermon preached on Christmas day. The process through which he overcomes, is seen in his long silence--discussed earlier.

Becket admits that the last temptation was the toughest "To do the right deed for the wrong reason." His recapitulating his past thirty years during which he explored all forms of pleasure at the linear level and his distance from it all now, shows that the first three temptations were no real challenge to him. He has now achieved a real sense of calm expressed in "I shall no longer act or suffer." He is ready to face death when it comes. In this speech, Becket's address to the audience "you and you" parallel the Knights address to them later in the play.

3.4 IMPORTANT ASPECTS OF PART I

The Chorus is very timid and fearful, worse still, it is content to live lives of spiritual stagnation. But there is hope for them because they know their own weaknesses. Part II shows their growth.

The Tempters although individualized could be viewed as aspects of Becket's personality.

We get the historical background of the play. Eliot never lets us lose our grip on historical facts. There are constant references to meetings and treatises.

What the Chorus perceives as a sense of doom, Becket sees as peace before death.

The idea of martyrdom is developed. Man must submit to God's will.

3.5 EXERCISES

1. Delineate the nature of the four temptations that Becket undergoes.
2. Critically comment on the significance of Becket's silence after the fourth temptation.