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# UNIT 5 GENERAL COMMENTS AND OTHER READINGS

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## Structure

- 5.0 Objectives
- 5.1 Critical Explanation of the Choric Outburst after Becket Exits upto his Murder.
- 5.2 Critical Explanation of the Knights, Prose Passages upto the end of the Play.
- 5.3 The Chorus in Development in Eliot's Play's.
- 5.4 Plays by Other Dramatists on Thomas Becket.
- 5.5 Greek / Medieval Models for Eliot's Play, *Murder in the Cathedral*.
- 5.6 Different Readings of Eliot's *Murder in the Cathedral*.
- 5.7 Select Bibliography with Critical Comments
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## 5.0 OBJECTIVES

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This Unit will:

- a. Complete the critical explanation of the play from the choric outburst upto Becket's murder.
- b. Critically explain the section starting with the Knight's prose passages upto the end of the play.
- c. Trace the development of the Chorus
- d. Discuss other dramatist's plays on Becket
- e. Point out the Greek / Medieval model
- f. Give an account of other Readings of Eliot's *Murder in the Cathedral*
- g. Give a select bibliography with critical comments.

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## 5.1 CRITICAL EXPLANATION OF THE CHORIC OUTBURST AFTER BECKET EXITS UPTO HIS MURDER

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In this speech the Chorus perceives evil in the world through images like the "putrid flesh" of lobsters and oysters living and spawning in the "bowels," of death in the rose and the hollyhock. Animal images abound in their speech: rat, jackal, jackaw, jackdaw and ape. They see chaos in the universe. This is expressed through the fact that the order of time and creatures are abolished. The animal, food bird and sea imagery in their speech point to the widespread corruption in the world. In short, evil is contained not only in the knights. This is important because it points to the fact that Becket's martyrdom has cosmic dimensions. This is reinforced by their statement: "It

was here, in the Kitchen, in the passages, / In the news in the barn in the lyre in the market-place / In our veins our bowels our Skulls as well." The "Poor Women" of Canterbury say that they have tasted death and now it is too late to repent and act. Finally, these women state that they have consented to their "animal powers" and have been "dominated by the lust of self-demolition." They plead with Becket to forgive them so that they can pray for him out of sense of their shame. They now acknowledge their collective guilt. This shows that they have grown. Before they had blamed Becket for the chaos but now they blame themselves.

### **Critical Explanation of Becket's Speech**

Becket's first word, "Peace" parallels his use of the word in his first entrance in the play. But the word has a new dimension to it now. Peace now, no longer means silence, but a calm that emanates from being in touch with the "still point" which is God. Becket's lines:

These things had to come to you and you accept them,  
This is your share of the eternal burden,  
The perpetual glory.

Touches upon the basic Christian paradox. That is, it is through accepting suffering and pain in this life that you get power and glory in the next. Becket further tells the Chorus that all the suffering and pain that they go through will fall into a pattern "When the figure of God's purpose is made complete." Once this happens, he tells the "poor women" of Canterbury, that all the "toiling in the household" will appear "unreal." He ends his speech by saying that "humankind cannot bear too much reality." This is a line from "Burnt Norton" which is part of *The Four Quartets*. What Becket means here is that human beings can only have a glimpse of the eternal truth. "Reality" stands for truth. We are not able to sustain our vision of reality because it is too overwhelming to us.

When the Priests tell Becket to hide near the altar because the Knights will be returning armed to attack him, he tells them that he has been waiting all his life for this moment. He tells the Priests that "Death will come" not when he wills it but when God thinks that he is "worthy." Since this is the case, Becket says, "there is no danger. / I have therefore only to make perfect my will." The Priests in a panic tell Becket that the Knights are coming and tell him to "make haste." They fear for themselves saying, "if you are killed what shall become of us?" The lines spoken by the Priests demonstrate that they have not understood the meaning of Becket's martyrdom. Spiritual rebirth is individual. Becket has reached a stage of individuality. The Priests still function collectively as is expressed in their line to Becket: "What shall become of us?" In this context, the crowd represents "untruth" and the individual represents "truth."

The Priests who represent institutionalized religion tell Becket to go Vespers which is a Church Service in the evening. They are still very ritualistic. Unlike Becket they have not understood God. Becket tells the Priests to go to Vespers and pray for him. He tells them that the Knights will find: the shepherd (that is him) and will spare the flock (that is the priests, Chorus etc) Becket says: "I have had a tremor of bliss, a wink of heaven a whisper, / And I would no longer be denied; all things / Proceed to a joyful consummation." It is important to like Becket's phrase "I would no longer be denied" to the line in the first speech of the Chorus when they say, "Remember the martyrs and saints who wait and who shall / stretch out his hand to the fire, and deny his master?" Becket is saying that he will no longer be "denied" the role that he has to play. He says "all things? Proceed to a joyful consummation" which is his death by martyrdom. The Priests who are operating at a very different level, drag Becket away. They see Becket's approaching death as murder. Becket however, views it differently. At this point the Chorus speaks and a Dies Irae (the day of wrath) a hymn

is sung in the background. This hymn is one of the greatest masterpieces of Medieval lyric poetry.

The Choric speech at this point expresses the horror of the "poor women" which results from their sin of living in the void in a state of "emptiness, absence, separation from God." In the cathedral, the Priests tell each other to bar the door and that they will be "safe." The Priests here are like the Chorus in their opening speech in the play when they hide in the Cathedral for physical safety. What they have to learn is that physical safety has no meaning unless they are protected by God. This is the reason why Becket insists on the doors of the Church being left open. He tells the Priests that he does not want the Church to be turned into a "fortress." Becket, who has understood the true meaning of God says that "The Church shall protect her own, in her own way." The first Priest responds by saying that the Knights are not coming like people who will "kneel to the body of Christ / but like beasts." The beast image is important. It shows that the Knights are far removed from the still point, that is God. They have a long way to go to reach Becket's state of understanding. In fact, the beastly nature of the Knights make us aware of the greater need of Becket's sacrifice through martyrdom to redeem people. Becket tells the Priests to unbar the door. He chides them saying that they may think that he's "reckless, desperate and mad" this is because they apply earthly standards and argue by "results" as this world does. He tells them:

It is not in time that my death shall be known;  
It is out of time that my decision is taken

.....  
To which my whole being; gives consent.  
I give my life  
To the law of God above the law of Man.

It requires a very special person to face a vision of nothingness on earth. Becket has achieved this. He privileges God's order over man's. His entire body, and soul have surrendered to God. Eliot believed that the values for which Becket gives his life are in essence permanent and therefore relevant to all times. Nevill Coghill gives a good commentary on these lines. He says "Thomas's argument is that when an act is looked at time, it can be assessed relatively to its motives and consequences, that is, it is a human action that partakes of both good and evil, as the world judges. To murder a man, not to say an Archbishop, is judged evil by the world, and therefore it would seem wrong for Becket to make such a murder possible by opening the doors. But if a martyrdom is "made by the design of God," it is an act made beyond Time, and bears an eternal witness. It is absolute and cannot be judged relatively. Becket's will is only involved in that he has identified it with or surrendered it to, the will of God."

Becket once again tells the Priests to "unbar" the doors of the Cathedral. He tells them that "we are not here to triumph by fighting, by strategies, or by resistance, not to fight with beasts as men." He then tells them that the beast in them has already been conquered. He perhaps refers here to his own temptations. He says that death which follows it is "the easier victory." It is perceived as the fruit of all the suffering and pain.

The Knights enter humiliating Becket the way Christ was humiliated before his death. They refer to the "mark of the beast" on him and the "blood of the lamb." This is a mockery of Revelation XIX, 20 and VII 14. Their line "Come down Daniel and Join in the feast" is again a mocking allusion to Christ's last supper.

Becket does not argue with the Knights but tells them that he is ready to shed his blood to pay for Christ's death. As the Knights tell Becket to make amends for the wrongs that he has done to the Bishops and the King, Becket says that he is "ready to die" for God, he tells them to do what they want with him but to spare his people. The Knights now collectively call him a traitor. To which Becket says to one of the Knights, Reginald, that he is thrice traitor. That is, to Becket whose man he was, to

God and to the Church. Becket's last words express a total surrender of himself to God. He says that he gives himself up to God, the Virgin mother and all the prophets and saints. When the Knights kill Becket they do so by forming a circle with Becket at the centre. This is symbolic of the wheel and the still point.

Tennyson in his play *Becket*, adopted the legend of a violent storm after the murder. Eliot gave the storm a symbolic treatment by introducing the Chorus' cry, the Priests speeches etc. The Chorus, in its speech, protests wildly at the pollution of the natural order. All sense of time and place is lost, there is cosmic cacophony. They say that they can no longer go on living quietly as they had done before. Although they have gone through suffering, "the personal loss, the general misery" they have never seen such chaos before. They say, this is out of life, this is out of time, / An instant eternity of evil and wrong." They now state that the whole world is clouded in "filth."

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## 5.2 CRITICAL EXPLANATION OF THE KNIGHT'S PROSE PASSAGES UPTO THE END

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After the Knights murder Becket, they address the audience in prose. Eliot follows history upto the martyrdom of Becket and then he makes a jump into the twentieth century. He says that he deliberately did this to shock the audience out of their complacency. In his prose passages, Eliot was influenced by Shaw's *St. Joan*. In a sense, the Knights by addressing the audience politicise the murder of Becket.

The first Knight, Reginald Fitz Urse, is the leader of the group. He tells the audience that since they are English they will listen to both sides of the story which is in keeping with their long established principle of trial by Jury. This was introduced by Henry II. Reginald asks Baron William de Traci the eldest member to speak first. We are given various angles to the murder through the Knights speeches. The third Knight, who is the eldest, says that whatever they have done they have done so, "disinterestedly." By this they do not mean surrendering of their will to God but being "non-partisan." The second Knight, Sir Hugh de Morville, speaks next and tells the audience that he agrees with William de Traci and that they did what they did for the good of the country. He says, "Had Becket concurred with the King's wishes; we should have had an almost ideal state: union of spiritual and temporal administration, under the central government." He tells the people to "appeal not to [their] emotions but to [their] reason." He concludes his speech by saying that the Knights "have served [the] interests" of the people. But it is important to note that Becket has also served their interests in his death. He has died to save the people from sins. The fourth Knight, Richard Brito, speaks next. His speech is important because he refers to Becket's death as the senseless self slaughter of a lunatic, an egotistic man who had "determined upon a death by martyrdom." It is this Knight who renders the verdict on Becket of "suicide while of Unsound Mind." Obviously, the Knights perceive Becket as one conquering the last temptation of pride.

The closing lines of the first Knight's speech which advises people to go home quietly and not to "loiter in groups at street corners" point to their fear of public outbreak against the Archbishop's murder. Perhaps this is why the Knights find the need to give an explanation to the audience. The first Priest's lament after Becket's murder about the church lying "bereft / Alone, desecrated, desolated," expresses the fact that he has not understood the meaning of Becket's death. The third Priest on the other hand says "the Church is stronger for this action." He then tells the Knights: "Go, weak sad men, lost erring souls, / homeless in earth or / heaven." It is this third Priest who thanks God for giving them another "Saint in Canterbury."

The last Choric speech celebrates the meaning life has obtained through Becket's martyrdom. We see a sea change in the Chorus from fear to glory recognising God's ways. Their earlier outburst which spoke about polluted images in the cosmos is now all cleansed through Becket's death. They see a comic pattern now:

"Thy creatures, both the hunters and the hunted / For all things exist only as seen by thee; only as known by / Thee, all things exist / Only in thy Light." The "poor women" of Canterbury have understood the meaning of the still point. They have understood that human beings whom God has made "must consciously praise thee, in thought and in word and in deed." That is, they must surrender themselves totally to God. In the light of this understanding, the activities of cleaning the hearth" and "scrubbing" and "sweeping" all become meaningful. That the chorus has developed is seen in their accepting responsibility for Becket's death. "We acknowledge our trespass, our weakness, our fault; we acknowledge / That the sin of the world is upon our heads: that the blood / of the martyrs and the agony of the saints / Is upon our heads." They end their speech by asking God for mercy and Thomas to pray for them.

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### 5.3 THE CHORUS IN DEVELOPMENT IN ELIOT'S PLAYS

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It is necessary to note at the outset itself that Eliot's use of the choral passages were linked with his own voice. That is, the first voice (See Eliot's *Three Voices of Poetry*) viz, the poet talking to himself.

Eliot's use of the Chorus can be Traced back to "Fragment of the Agon" which was published in 1927. It forms part of Eliot's *Samson Agonistes* now. But, it was his eight choral speeches in *The Rock* - -which he was commissioned to write for the Canterbury Festival—that demonstrated Eliot's talent in innovatively adapting the Greek Chorus to modern times. About this Chorus, the critic of *The Church Times* said "The great achievement of *The Rock* is the Chorus. Mr. Eliot is greater as a poet than he is experienced as a dramatist, and he has put the best of his writing into the poetry of the choric comments on religion and life." (1 June, 1934)

The Chorus in *The Rock* consisted of males and females. They wore masks and were very stylised in their movements. Eliot relied entirely on Elsie Fogerty, Principal of the Central School of Speech and Drama, and her colleague Gwynneth Thurburn for coordinating the Chorus. Thurburn, in fact, succeeded Miss Fogerty as the principal of the school. She was the person who did most of the voice work in the school. She said, "It so happened that we had a particularly good set of girl speakers who had that year done very well at the Oxford Verse-Speaking Festival. ... They responded well and I think Eliot was impressed; anyway we decided that was what he wanted...." Thurburn further adds that in those days drama schools were not there. It was only after world war II that formal training centres in drama sprang up. Due to the war years men who joined these schools had a much shorter course, sometime as short as two months as compared to the two year required course that women attended. The results were obvious. Women were much better voice trained than the men. Thurburn says, "The girls had a longer and more secure background of training to rely upon, and they therefore constituted a better team." Eliot's use of the all women Chorus in *Murder in the Cathedral* is entirely due to the fact that in asking for girls from Fogerty's school, he would get the best.

In *The Family Reunion* the chorus comprised of two sisters and two brothers-in-law. Their role in general is static and they do not advance the action in the play.

The Chorus, in *Murder in the Cathedral*, according to Pieter D. Williams "suggests the collectivity, the generality of mankind, as distinct from its outstanding individual members --- Thomas Becket or Henry II." He adds, "the stasis of the chorus, compared with the movement, sometime violent, of other characters and groups of characters, help to isolate them visually in the kaliedoscope of power politics and reinforces another salient theme: the permanence of common humanity, the impermanence of political systems ... The Chorus has learned a stoical submission to life,.... something which Thomas when the play begins has yet to learn." He has to be submissive without the fear of the Chorus. Williams also talks of the importance of the vocal role played by the Chorus that it provides a symphony of female voices, a balanced antithesis to male voices of the Priests, Messenger, Archbishop, Tempters, and Knights. ... The other functions of the Chorus is to give details of time, place, action complementing abstract situations. William says, the Chorus "is used to telescope into ninety minutes the last twenty seven days of Becket's life by suggesting the passage of time."

About the Chorus in *Murder in the Cathedral*, McGill says, "In staging of *Murder in the Cathedral* there are interpretive problems of the presentation of the choral speeches. Textually they appear as odes with no specific instructions to indicate differentiation of voices. But the first starting of the play set the precedent for assigning parts within the choral odes to individual voices or varying ensembles."

It is important to note that in the first part of the play, we the audience empathise with the Chorus in the Interlude we become one with them and in the second part they lead us and guide us as to how we should respond to Becket's murder. They invite us to join them in the Te Deum.

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#### **5.4 PLAYS BY OTHER DRAMATISTS ON THOMAS BECKET**

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Alfred Tennyson, T.S. Eliot, Jean Anouilh and Christopher Fry have all written on Thomas Becket. All four writers use the same historical facts but write about them from different perspectives. What all these writers exploit in their works is the friendship that Becket had with King Henry II when he was a Chancellor. Anouilh uses this perspective in his play, *Becket* (1959). In this play, Henry II is hurt by Becket's behaviour after he becomes the Archbishop. He emerges as strongly as Becket for sympathy. He cannot understand why Becket has assumed a new allegiance, the honour of God, which is also the subtitle of the play. Christopher Fry, in his play *Curtmantle* (1961) gives even greater prominence to King Henry II. One of the themes listed by Fry as treated in his play is "a progression toward a portrait of Henry." King Henry II is portrayed in this play as a man who is surrounded by anarchy and chaos and wants order in his Kingdom. The "crown / and the croney" are seen to be working together towards that end. In this play Becket is not as militant in his approach to the King as in Anouilh's play. In fact, he works for the King humbly acknowledging the fact that "there would be no Becket, without the King" and that he is "the King's representative." The King too, in appointing Becket as Archbishop is not influenced by his friendship with him but by the fact that he will be able to stabilize the realm. When Becket after becoming the Archbishop chooses God over the King, Henry is hurt not so much by personal betrayal but for the cause of the nation. In maintaining the stability of the nation he feels that even powers that traditionally belonged to the church should be used which the Archbishop does not accept. Eleanor, King Henry's wife says that issues and personalities have got intertwined. Eleanor's role in Fry's *Curtmantle* is interesting. She is the former French Queen now married to a British King. She has respect for Becket at a personal level and as a statesman. She is different from Tennyson's Eleanor who is directly responsible for the murder of Becket. Tennyson's play *Becket* was written in 1879 but was staged only in 1893.

In Tennyson's *Becket* the conflict between Henry's II and Becket is given focus. Becket's insistence on privileging God before King becomes almost an obsession. Tennyson's plot is complicated by a sub plot involving Henry's mistress Rosamund. This sub plot intersects with the main plot in the animosity that Eleanor, the Queen, shows to Rosamund and also by Rosamund's own spurning of the attention she gets from the four Knight's who later murder Becket. However, Rosamund's role in prompting the King to declare what he says about Becket which brings on the murder is clearly seen in Tennyson's play. The Rosamund sub plot confuses the main issue between the King and Becket unlike in the other plays by Fry, Anouilh and Eliot.

Eliot's handling of the Becket issue is different. He focuses on the events that took place in December. This enables him to focus on an issue rather than have a panoramic view of history. Eliot's handling of the Chorus and his theme of martyrdom are also noteworthy.

Again, it is important to note that all these four writers go to different models for their work. Eliot, for instance, uses Classical Greek and Medieval Morality plays. These plays were very ritualistic. Fry is Shavian in his panoramic and historical view. Anouilh says that Pirandello's *Six Characters in Search of an Author* had an impact on his work. His work is more musical. Interestingly, both Eliot and Fry are Christians and do not appear as existentialist as Anouilh whose Becket refuses to accept any standard other than his own: "I was a man without honour" he says, and "suddenly I found it." If Eliot's play ends with the Chorus understanding the meaning of Becket's martyrdom, Fry's *Curtmantle* ends with the terror of destruction of Henry's realm and family. Anouilh's *Becket* ends with the ironic compromises, the union of King's and God's honour. Anouilh is more secular, and more radical in his treatment of Becket than Eliot and Fry.

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## 5.5 GREEK AND MEDIEVAL MODELS FOR ELIOT'S *MURDER IN THE CATHEDRAL*

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Eliot was acutely aware of the fact that his play was to be performed like Greek tragedy. His play was celebrating a cultic event near the site of the murder of Becket. Eliot aimed at writing a "neutral" verse like the kind used in *Everyman* but he also made modernist use of an abrupt transition to modern dialogue like G.B. Shaw's last scene in *St. Joan* when Eliot's four Knights defend themselves to the audience.

Though Eliot did not consciously develop this play of a Greek dramatic model (as he did each of his subsequent plays), Leoaylen calls the play "most near in spirit to Greek tragedy, of all the plays written in English or French this century. It is formally similar; it uses a myth in the same way as the Greek tragedies did, and the myth bears the same relation to the religion of Eliot's audience as the myths of the Greek poets did to their audience's religion. It is based on ritual, and the action is carried out principally by the Chorus, not by an actor. It was performed at a festival, not before a theatre going public."

Eliot has openly stated that for the versification of his play he used the medieval play, *Everyman*. Nevill Coghill says:

*Everyman* is a version, from the late fifteenth century, of a Dutch original called *Elckerlijc*. It tells of how God, perceiving that 'all people be to me unkind,' sends death to summon Everyman before him: he is to bring his Book of Accounts with him. Everyman begs for a respite and tries to persuade his friends his Kinsmen and his Goods to go with him, but they all refuse. His Good-Deeds, however, are willing to stand by him, through death

and after. Everyman confesses his sins, takes the last Sacrament, and creeps into the grave to die. Thereupon a Angel announces 'great joy and melody' above in Heaven, 'where Everyman's soul received shall be.'

Its versification is extremely irregular, at least in comparison with that of the earlier Miracle and Morality plays which, nevertheless, it partly imitates.

The lines are of varying length and have a varying number of stresses; there is a good deal of rhyme and there are touches of alliteration.

Coghill goes on to say that a typical *Everyman* like passage in *Murder in the Cathedral* might be:

Your thoughts have more power than Kings to compel you. (4)

You have also thought,/sometimes/at your prayers, (4) Sometimes hesitating  
sat the angles of Stairs, (4) etc.

The "total effect" Coghill states, "is one of living movement and emphatic speech, that tumbles as if by accident on to the happy rhythmical phrase and compulsive rhyme, unforeseeably, and yet with gratification of a certain indefinable expectancy. These effects of verse are greatly enhanced by the intercalation of the two great prose scenes of the Sermon and the Knights' apology, which provide their reasoned contrasts to the rest of the dialogue, where feeling predominates."

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## 5.6 DIFFERENT READINGS OF ELIOT'S *MURDER IN THE CATHEDRAL*

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*Murder in the Cathedral* as:

- a) Poetic Drama
- b) Christian Play
- c) Integration of Eliot's Dramatic Theories
- d) Biographical Play
- e) Feminist Reading

### (a) *Murder in the Cathedral* as a POETIC DRAMA

Poetic form, Eliot felt, is the most apt form of expression in the theatre. In his view, Ibsen, Strindberg, and Chekov were true poets who felt hampered with the limits of prose. In contrast to them are Yeats and Hofmannsthal, who kept alive the ancient and traditional affinity between drama and poetry.

In "The Music of Poetry" (1942) Eliot acknowledges his bias in favour of the poetry to which he was indebted as a poet, and says that the music of poetry is not independent of the meaning. The meaning of poetry is sometimes beyond the poet's intentions. He saw possibilities of theme recurrence and transitions in poetry as in music, and thought the concert hall more likely to quicken poetry than the opera house. He said that without poets of unusual sensibility and command of language, culture will deteriorate. "Poetry and Drama" is notable for the retrospective attention Eliot gives to his own development as a playwright, he finds that he has been writing variations on the theme of poetic drama throughout his career. For Eliot the highest aim of poetic drama is to bring us to the border of those feelings which are expressible only in music, without leaving the everyday world of dramatic action.



(b) *Murder in the Cathedral* as a CHRISTIAN PLAY

Stephen Spender's "Martyrdom and Motive" states that "The true theme of Eliot's plays written after his conversion is the discovery by heroes .... of their religious vocation. It is required of the hero that he perfect his will so as to make it conform completely with the will of God." In *Murder in the Cathedral*, according to Spender, these aims are revealed in a very pure state."

Stevie Smith finds the play "a remarkable evocation of Christian fears." He adds that, it should not be forgotten that Eliot had initially considered calling the play, *Fear in the Way*. Smith argues that *Murder in the Cathedral* is "remarkable for the strength of these fears and the horrible beauty in which they are dressed." According to Smith, Eliot perceived modern times as shallow and meaningless. The play with its religious direction was perhaps written as an antidote to the times.

The entire play can be seen as based on the Christian notion of history. Unlike traditional history, Christian history is not linear. It can be described as providentially oriented history of salvation. It starts with the creation and moves towards the last day of judgement when God will come in all his power and glory to sift the good from the bad. In Christ the eternal enters the temporal intersecting the timeless with time, creating a paradox in time. This paradox will only be resolved in God. The preference of Christian dramatists for paradoxical imagery draws its justification from this fact. Saints and martyrs are also like Christ, but on a different scale. In this sense, the History of Salvation confronts everyman with the same religious duties to fulfill. Everyman becomes every man whose soul becomes a battlefield for Good and Evil to gain supremacy. It is in the history of the salvation of the world and the soul that Christian history unfolds itself.

The play has also been read as following the structure of a Catholic mass:

- a. Introductory rites
- b. Preparation for the gifts to the Eucharist
- c. Eucharistic Prayer
- d. Communion rite
- e. Concluding rite

(c) *Murder in the Cathedral* as Eliot's most successful integration of his DRAMATIC THEORIES.

In *Poetry and Drama* Eliot states that the subject matter of *Murder in the Cathedral* was well suited for verse drama. Interestingly, though he states that a verse drama should be entirely in verse, he justifies the two prose sections by saying that Beckel's sermon would not be convincing if it had been in verse. The Knights he said, were made to speak prose to shock the audience out of their complacency.

Marianne Moore states: "one may merely mention the appropriateness of verse to subject matter.... Mr. Eliot steps so reverently as the solemn ground he has essayed, that austerity assumes the dignity of philosophy and the didacticism of the verities incorporated in the play becomes impersonal and persuasive." Caro! H. Smith is also of the opinion that *Murder in the Cathedral* integrates very effectively Eliot's dramatic theories. She says, "the levels of the play are intrinsically unified by the skillful interweaving of Thomas' story with the imagery of Christ's Temptation and Passion and with the prototype formula of all religion and drama. The hierarchy of characters within the play who perceive the meaning of Thomas' death on their various levels helps to tighten the unity of the drama and to give it the stylized quality Eliot admires ..... from a fear of spiritual realities and a disavowal of responsibilities to acceptance of and participation in both the sin and glory of martyrdom, Eliot has provided a highly effective vehicle for commentary on the action and participation in it."

**(d) Murder in the Cathedral as BIOGRAPHICAL**

In *The Making of T.S. Eliot's Plays* Martin Browne states that Eliot found in the Becket story something eternal: "at the moment when he was called upon to write his play, he found that the basic conflict of the twentieth century came very near to repeating that of the twelfth." Browne also sees the rise of fascism in the 1930s as a serious form of social threat that Becket fights in his play. Such an approach is also corroborated by Ashley Dukes in "T.S. Eliot in the Theatre." He says, "Other things conspired to remind us of the play's actuality; indeed it was never allowed to become historical drama for a moment. Hitler had been long enough in power to ensure that the four knightly murderers of Becket would be recognized as figures of the day, four perfect Nazis defending their act on the most orthodox totalitarian grounds. Echoes of one war and forebodings of another resounded through the sultry afternoon."

Interestingly, King Edward the VIII abdicated his throne during the play's West End production which according to Dukes refer to the lines about the King's transient power.

Peter Ackroyd argues that the hero of *Murder in the Cathedral*, Becket, shares the writer's first name. This is not a mere coincidence. Lyndall Gordon, in his book *Eliot's New Life*, focuses on the biographical study of Eliot from the late 1920s to the end of Eliot's life, notes several autobiographical overtones in *Murder in the Cathedral*. He says that Eliot found in Becket "a model who was not so different from himself. Here was a man to all appearances not born for sainthood, a man of the world .... Who moved from worldly success into spiritual danger... Eliot said that a bit of the author may be the germ of a character, but that, too, a certain character may call out latent potentialities in the author. *Murder in the Cathedral* was a biographical play that had its impact on Eliot in shifting the balance of his new life from the shared course of love to the course of religious trial."

**(e) A FEMINIST READING of Murder on the Cathedral**

Such a reading would focus on Eliot's all women Chorus which comprises of the "poor women" of Canterbury. Guilt and submissiveness which mark the growth of the Chorus in the Christian framework of the play, are viewed as negative qualities according to the feminist perspective. Feminists argue that women under patriarchy have always suffered from a deep sense of guilt and it is this guilt that has stood in the way of their having a sense of "self-worth." Similarly, with "submissiveness." Under patriarchy, submissiveness implies surrendering to male domination which feminists perceive as being inherently destructive to women. For another feminist reading of the play, see *Feminist theory and Modern Drama* edited by Taisha Abraham (Delhi: Pencraft International, 1997)

In giving a feminist reading of *Murder in the Cathedral*, however, one should remember that Eliot chose an all women Chorus for his play not keeping the gender issue in mind, but because he wanted the best trained voices from Ms. Fogerty's Central School of Speech and Drama.

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**5.7 SELECT BIBLIOGRAPHY WITH CRITICAL  
COMMENTS**

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Abraham, Taisha. ed. *Feminist theory and Modern Drama*. New Delhi: Pencraft International, 1997.

(The essay on *Murder in the Cathedral* entitled, "Writing in Ourselves" by Zakia Pathak discusses the pedagogical practice of teaching a text from the west in our Indian universities. It highlights, in particular, the church/state conflict in the Ayodhya context and critically examines the position of women in this debate.)

Brooker, Spears Jewel. Ed. *Approaches to Teaching Eliot's Poetry and Plays*. NY: MLA of America, 1988.

(The principle objective of this book is to put together different points of view on teaching a particular literary work. Eliot's *Murder in the Cathedral* is discussed in some detail pointing out to different philosophies and approaches to the text.)

--. *The Placing of T.S. Eliot*. Columbia and London: University of Missouri Press, 1991.

(The essays in the volume originated as invited lectures for the T.S. Eliot society which has its headquarters in St. Louis, the poet's birthplace. Some essays in the collection are historical while others focus on language. A few of the essays deal with Eliot's eastward move from the slums of the turn-of-the century river town in the heart of the American midwest to the more metropolitan river town of Boston and then to river based urban capitals like London and Paris.)

Browne, E. Martin. *The Making of T.S. Eliot's Plays*. Cambridge: CUP, 1969.

(This book is very important in showing how Eliot's plays came to be written and of their first stage appearance. Much of the contents are from Eliot's own writings.)

Chiari, Joseph. *T.S. Eliot Poet and Dramatist* NY: Harper and Row, 1972.

(Eliot's artistic and social background are traced in this book which also studies his poems and plays.)

Clark, R. David. Ed. *Twentieth Century Interpretation of Murder in the Cathedral*. N.J.: Prentice-Hall; Inc. 1971.

(Divided, into two sections, the book deals with various aspects of Eliot's play, *Murder in the Cathedral*. Written by well known scholars, the essays cover the notion of action and suffering in Christian terms, the notion of the stillpoint and Becket as the biblical character, Job.)

Malamud, Randy. *T.S. Eliot's Drama: A Research and Production Source Book*. Westport, Connecticut: Greenwood Press, 1992.

(The book provides a good background to his dramas. The introduction surveys Eliot's literary works and maps his move from poetry to drama.)

Seed, David. "Eliot's use of Tennyson in *Murder in the Cathedral*." *Yeats/Eliot Review* 7. 1-2 (1982): 42-49.

(Does a comparative study of Tennyson's *Becket* and Eliot's *Murder in the Cathedral*.)

Sochaloff, A. Fred. "Four Variations on the Becket theme in Modern Drama" *Modern Drama* 12.1 \* May 1969): 83-97-1.

(Compared to dramatizations of the same historical event by Fry, Anouilh and Tennyson, *Murder in the Cathedral* is the most austere and unified; Eliot concentrates on Becket's state of mind and his martyrdom by excluding characters such as King Henry II.)

(This book exhaustively explores the role of the Chorus in terms of its dramatic, structural, visual and vocal contribution to *Murder in the Cathedral*, and the formal and thematic contrast of its stasis compared to Becket's change and action.)

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## 5.8 EXERCISES

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1. Do you think that the development in the Chorus reflects the growth in Becket?
2. Critically analyse the importance of the Knights speeches.
3. Briefly comment on Eliot's use of Greek and Medieval sources for his play, *Murder in the Cathedral*.
4. Attempt a feminist reading of the play.
5. Discuss *Murder in the Cathedral* as a Christian play.
6. Trace the development of Becket's martyrdom in the play.