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Murder in the Cathedral

by

T. S. Eliot



MonkeyNotes Edited by Diane Sauder

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KEY LITERARY ELEMENTS

SETTING

The play is set in two locations, the Cathedral of Canterbury and the Archbishop's hall, as they existed in medieval England. The play opens at the point of Becket's arrival in Canterbury, at.....

CHARACTER LIST

Major Characters

Thomas Becket - the Archbishop of Canterbury and the protagonist of the play. His character is basically drawn from historical sources during the later part of.....

Henry II - the king who is never presented on stage, but whose invisible presence towers over.....

Minor Characters

The Women of Canterbury in the Chorus - they represent the voice of the common person. They sum up the past, bring the situation into the present, and express a lurking fear of Becket's doom, which the audience shares.

The Three Priests - they are genuinely worried about Becket's well being. They hold Becket.....

The Four Tempters - the most important minor characters. They throw sidelights on

The Four Knights - Reginald Fitz Urse, Sir High de Morville, William de Traci and Richard.....

The Messenger - he breaks the news of Becket's arrival back home.

CONFLICT

The conflict exists between the King and the Pope; that is between temporal power and spiritual power. Although the King of England and the Pope never appear on the stage, their forces clash throughout the play.

Protagonist - The protagonist is Thomas Becket, who represents the church and who.....

Antagonist - The antagonist is the state (or King Henry II) whose casual remark that

Climax - In the course of the play, the climax of the action occurs with the temptation by.....

Outcome - The play ends in tragedy with the murder of Thomas Becket; thus, the

NOTE

Murder in the Cathedral was written for a ritualistic presentation. Hence, the reader does not find elaborate treatment of these components of the plot. The whole play has an economy of scenes and.....

SHORT PLOT / CHAPTER SUMMARY (Synopsis)

The play can be said to begin at the climax, for the tension and fear imposed by the state have reached the people at the lowest level. At the beginning of the play, there is a sense of doom that hangs heavy in the air. Everyone fears that Becket's return will result in tragedy, clearly foreshadowing the end of the play from the very beginning.

The plot centers on the changed friendship between King Henry II and Thomas Becket. Henry has raised Becket to the post of Chancellor and later makes him the Archbishop of Canterbury. The Chancellor's position is that of the first subject in the Kingdom, controlling the ecclesiastical patronage of the King. The post of Archbishop is the highest religious head, next to the Pope. After becoming the Archbishop, Becket stops supporting the radical changes the King wants to introduce in England. Becket opposes the King's thirst for power, as he tries to raise the standard of the Crown higher than that of the Pope. Before the play begins, Becket has undergone a transformation and has started living a very pious life, giving up all the enjoyment he previously shared with the King. When disputes develop between the two, Becket flees to France.

With this background, the play begins with the news of Becket's return to England after seven long years in France. The people of Canterbury are overjoyed to have him back, and their welcome to him, though a small one, is astonishing. England is eagerly waiting for their beloved religious head that has always strongly supported and guided the poor peasants and countrymen. As the people are busy meeting and welcoming the Archbishop, the three priests have an apprehension that Becket is not fully reconciled with the King. Both of them are proud and strong personalities; as a result, they may not be able to renew their old tie of friendship. The priests worry that the homecoming may cost Becket his life.

The women of Canterbury represent the simple folk of the town. They have lived a hard life, and they know that it is their fate to suffer and struggle whether the King rules or the barons' rule. During the seven years of Becket's exile, their lives have been even more painful. Now since Becket is back home, they

THEMES

Major Theme

The major theme shows that it is a sin to seek Martyrdom. A martyr is born, per the will of God. A true martyr never wishes to be a martyr or acts to become one, but gives up his life to God with total surrender of his will. Thomas Becket becomes aware that the sole purpose of his life is to be.....

Minor Theme

Life is filled with temptations: the temptation of the luxurious life, the temptation of

MOOD

The mood of the play is totally serious and somber, with a constant undercurrent of impending tragedy throughout.

BACKGROUND INFORMATION - BIOGRAPHY

T.S. ELIOT

Thomas Sterns Eliot is considered one of the most controversial and influential literary personalities of the twentieth century. Eliot was born to a wealthy and respectable family of merchants in St. Louis, Missouri, on September 26, 1888. His grandfather, the Reverend William Greenleaf Eliot, established the first Unitarian Church in St. Louis. He was also a founder of Washington University and became its Chancellor in 1872. T.S. Eliot's father, Henry W. Eliot, was the president of the Hydraulic Press Brick Company. Eliot's mother was a woman of intellectual and literary interests. It is not surprising that Eliot's youth was filled with education, religion, and family closeness.

Eliot entered Harvard University in 1906 and graduated in three years. He received his Master's Degree in his fourth year at Harvard. While in school, he began his literary career by writing poems for the undergraduate literary magazine, "The Harvard Advocate." He also became the editor of the.....

LITERARY/HISTORICAL INFORMATION

Thomas Becket was born in Cheapside, London in 1118. He was of Norman descent on both sides and was proud of his heritage. He was educated at Mortar Priory, various other schools, and finally, in the School of Theology at Paris. He also learned law and practiced the use of sword and lance, traditional knightly exercises. His study of law helped him in his quarrels with the king. His expertise in the use of the sword and the lance helped him in the campaign of 1159-1160, when he defeated a.....

SUMMARIES WITH NOTES

PART 1

LINES 1 to 50

Summary

The play opens at the Cathedral of Canterbury in December 1170. A group of women have gathered near the Cathedral; they have heard that the Archbishop of Canterbury is soon to arrive after seven long years of absence. They look forward to his arrival, for they are always given strength and hope by the Archbishop's presence, these women form the chorus. As they sing, they express anxiety and fear of an unknown, evil force. They feel that they will soon witness death, and they foretell that it will come from the sea. While they wait, they recall the hardships and struggles of the past seven years. In Becket's absence, the rule of Henry II has been one of oppression and exploitation, causing them misery and helplessness. They have lived like sheep lost in the woods without a shepherd.

The women of the chorus comment that the months of October and November have passed; the activities in the fields are over, and the cold of December has come. People are waiting for Christmas, marking the birth of the son of God and beginning the new year, which brings hopes for a better future. Yet the women know that the hardships of the peasants will never end.

After the chorus, three priests enter to talk about the King and discuss Becket's return.

Notes

The chorus commenced in Greek drama, originally as a group of singers or chanters. Later, a Greek playwright called Thespis introduced an actor on the stage who held a dialogue with the leader of the chorus. Playwrights like Aeschylus and Sophocles added a second and a third actor to interact with the chorus. Finally, the chorus took on the role of participants in the action and interpreters of what is happening on stage.

Eliot has based "Murder in the Cathedral" on the form of classic Greek tragedy. He uses the chorus to enhance the dramatic effect, to take part in the action of the play, and to perform the roles of observer and commentator. His chorus women represent the common people, who lead a life of hard work and struggles, no matter who rules. It is only their faith in God that gives them the strength to endure. These women are uneducated, country folk, who live close to the earth. As a result, they are in tune with the changing seasons and the moods of nature. At present, they have an intuition of death and evil. They fear that the new year, instead of bringing new hope, will bring greater suffering.

The three priests have three different reactions to Becket's arrival. The first reacts with the fear of a calamity. The second is a little bold and says that there can hardly be any peace between a king who is busy in intrigue and an archbishop who is an equally proud, self-righteous man. The third priest feels that the wheel of time always move ahead, for good or evil. He believes that a wise man, who cannot change the course of the wheel, lets it move at its own pace.

It should be noticed that the priests repeat some of the lines uttered by the chorus. For instance, "King rules or barons rule," it does not make any difference to the poor people of Canterbury. This repetition is to suggest that the priests echo the feelings and thoughts of the common people and that they too suffer at the hands of temporal power, even though they are under the protection of the church. However, they admonish the women for their pessimistic attitude and call them "croaking frogs on treetops." The priest tells the women to "put on pleasant faces," but from within, they too are nervous and anxious about Becket's fate. They know that Becket is like a "rock" of support against the eternal tide of political clashes. The imagery of the rock and the tide suggests that life is like an ocean, full of waves of suffering and a spiritual head is the needed navigator to help them sail smoothly.

The mood of the chorus also changes like the tides. One moment they are rushed and worried, saying, "O late, late, late is the time, late too late, and rotten the year." Then they are seen with quiet resolution, as they chant, "Quickly. Quietly. Leave us to perish in quiet." Their mood then changes to total doom. "A doom on the house, a doom on yourself, a doom on the world." Their repetition creates a hypnotic effect as it creates a somber mood.....

OVERALL ANALYSES

CHARACTER ANALYSIS

Thomas Becket - Thomas Becket is the protagonist of the play and the major character on whom all the action is focused. Becket was actually the Archbishop of Canterbury who was killed in the cathedral in December of 1170. In the play, Eliot presents him as a tragic hero as well as a martyr.

Eliot's portrayal of Becket has been a subject of severe criticism. If he is to be considered a tragic hero, he needs to fit into the mold suggested by Aristotle, who laid down the fundamentals of a tragedy. According to Aristotle, the purpose of tragedy is to produce pity and fear. Becket's murder certainly

The Three Priests - The priests do not have an individual identity or names, but as a chorus, they stand at a higher level of awareness and intellect than the women of Canterbury. Together, they represent the discipline and decorum of the church. They are worried and afraid, like the women of chorus; but they.....

The Tempters - Like the priests, the tempters do not have names or any specific identity. Although physically seen on stage having dialogue with Becket, they are actually projections of his mind. As projections, they talk like Becket, mimicking his style. The role of the tempters is to.....

The Knights - The four knights first appear as the king's men and assassins. They symbolize the destructive power of the state. The knights have the courage to kill Becket in the cathedral, but it is

The Chorus - The Chorus is a very important feature of "Murder in the Cathedral." Eliot has explained in his lecture "Poetry and Drama" why he used the Chorus in the play. He says that he had two.....

PLOT STRUCTURE ANALYSIS

The major components of a play are the exposition, the rising action, the crisis or climax, the falling action, and the denouement, or conclusion. "Murder in the Cathedral" can be clearly analyzed according to these major components. In the play, the exposition is presented by the Chorus women, who talk about a great man and announce that the play is about calamity and death. The rising action of the play is.....

THEMES ANALYSIS

Eliot wrote the play for the Canterbury festival and intentionally chose the theme of martyrdom. During the course of the drama, Eliot reveals that a true martyr is God's humble servant who denies his own desires to follow Divine Will. A martyr is born with the purpose of offering his own blood as a

THE PLAY AS RELIGIOUS DRAMA

Eliot wrote "Murder in the Cathedral" for a religious occasion and intentionally chose the theme of religious martyrdom. In medieval England, plays were either miracle plays or morality plays. A morality play.....

THE PLAY AS POETIC DRAMA

A poetic drama is one in which poetry and drama are fused. Since the dialogue between the characters is in verse, the play becomes a combination of music, imagery, and ritual. These factors create high intensity and dramatic effect. Ancient drama was poetic drama in all.....

STUDY QUESTIONS

1. Explain the changes that Thomas Becket undergoes in the play. Contrast him at the time he gives his final sermon to the man he was as Chancellor.
2. Explain the role of the Chorus in "Murder in the Cathedral."

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