A Study of T. S. Eliot’s *Murder in the Cathedral*

Hamedreza Kohzadi and Fatemeh Azizmohammadi

Department of English Literature, Science and Research Branch, Islamic Azad University, Arak, Iran.

**Abstract:** T. S. Eliot’s, *Murder in the Cathedral*, was originally written for the Canterbury festival and tells the story of the murder of Archbishop Thomas Beckett (1118-70) by Henry II's henchmen. It is essentially an extended lyrical consideration of the proper residence of temporal and spiritual power, of the obligations of religious believers to the commands of the State, and of the possibility that piety can be selfish unto sin. It is this kind of interplay and the confrontation between Church and State which informed society at it's healthiest. It was men like Beckett and the Knights, willing to sacrifice even their lives in discharging their respective duties, who created the great Western institutions. So long as there were men like Beckett for the State to reckon with, to stand as moral examples and human rebukes to the power of the State, there existed a serious counterbalance to the worst excesses of that power. Indeed, such was the weight of Christian revulsion against this murder that Henry had to scourge himself publicly to atone for it. This article attempts to examine T. S. Eliot's short play, *Murder in the Cathedral* especially in terms of the traditional image of the turning wheel and the still point.

**Key words:** T.S. Eliot, *Murder in the Cathedral*, Church, the Turning Wheel, the Still Point.

**INTRODUCTION**

In the Coriolan poems the manipulation of a continuous parallel by Eliot between antiquity and contemporaneity leads initially to a concern with the substitute the world seeks for the Word, and finally to a resignation leading to the discovery that our peace is in His will. This theme of timeless reality glimpsed in the world of Time is carried forward in *Murder in the Cathedral* in a circling movement, so that time humanized as history and time as "a pattern of timeless moments" is contained in a dialectical relationship in the "still point" - the point of intersection of Time and the Timeless. Various possible orchestrations of meaning are sounded in the play between the well rhymed time as history and time as mystery. *Murder in the Cathedral* inscribes a number of patterns in terms of assimilated dramatic conventions and traditions and the use of language, illustrating the idea of time contained in eternity and eternity glimpsed at through time. If, on the other hand, poetry is to do in the theatre "a kind of humble shadow or analogy of the incarnation, where by the human is taken up into the divine" (1949). There is, on the other hand, the scientific legend to which Eliot appeals whereby he taps-what psychologists call our "race memory," by making use of the primitive ritual in content and action he converges upon a pattern of co-extensiveness, concurrence and intersection of time and eternity. . In achieving this Eliot is verily a literary anthropologist who gives us in the play a pageant-like enactment as it were of the whole English dramatic form. Modes and elements from Greek drama through the medieval morality play to Bernard Shaw are brought together in the form of the play, *Murder in the Cathedral*. The poetry reveals, in its imagery, the fusion of the Christian and the pagan. The play itself is based upon the Dionysian and the Christian ritual and upon the correspondence between them. The relevance of C. L. Barber's description that Eliot's is a "tolerant Christian anthropology" is nowhere better seen than in a play like *Murder in the Cathedral* (1959).

**T.S. Eliot’s Murder in the Cathedral:**

*Murder in the Cathedral*, as Francis Fergusson says, is based on a different idea of the theatre, a different basis in reality. It takes the audience as officially Christian and on that basis "the play is a demonstration and expression of the right doctrine of human life in general-orthodoxy" (1949). Although the conflict between the Church and the State is recurrent in the play, the central theme is martyrdom. In the words of David E. Jones, the play is "not just a dramatization of the death of Thomas Beckett; it is a deep searching study of the significance of martyrdom" (1960). A recurrent theme in almost all the plays of Eliot is the role of the spiritually elect in society and the fructification of communal life by the example of the saint. A governing idea of the play may be said to be the formula expressed in the paradoxical notion of action expounded by Thomas Eliot:

"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

Yeats in his Calvary (1921), one of his four Plays for Dancers, Eliot in Murder in the Cathedral, and
Stephen Spender in his Trial of a Judge have used the traditional image of the turning wheel and the still point
with varying success, but the full possibilities of the image have been explored only by Eliot. Louis Martz
ascribes the success of the prose sermon between the two halves of the play Murder in the Cathedral "to the fact
that it is not really an interlude at all, but a deep expression of the play's central theme, binding the play's two
parts into one" (1955). Martz's suggestion leads towards a defining of the success of the sermon through an
apprehension of the relationship between meaning and structure embodied in the image of the wheel. This image
is, according to Donna Gerstenberger, mirrored in the form of the play so that Murder in the Cathedral achieves
a dramatic and poetic cohesion in its structure which has enabled Eliot to solve:

- his dramatic-poetic equation by creating on the area of the stage what might be called a "shaped play," not
  unlike the shaped verse of earlier English religious poetry. Therefore, although on the level of plot the play
  appears to be fairly mimetic in nature, actually its structural pattern is appropriately non-mimetic, creating for
  the reader or viewer an image of the action of the play, an action which is embodied spatially by the play's
central image as it controls the form and the poetry of the play (1960).

Eliot's conception here is perhaps that the play itself is an image. The play's aesthetic intelligibility and its
coherence for the eye of the mind could be deduced from a dwelling on this concept of the playas image. The
various levels of meaning are suggested by the images and imagery and further the role played by the images is
so crucial that it might be said that the play, Murder in the Cathedral, is itself an image-structure. Cecil Day
Lewis tells us in his The Poetic Image about metaphor being the life-principle of poetry, "the poet's chief test
and glory," and about verse being the best medium for the poetic image to create an intensity and to build
complex thematic inter-relationships by means of the image-patterns (1965).

At the thematic level, the image of the wheel establishes the terms for the problematics of the will in the
play. In terms of the paradoxical notion that action is suffering/and suffering is action. The relationship between
the mover and the moved, the puzzle of movement itself and its relation to stillness are examined in the play.
Two calendars the serial and the Christian or the historical and eschatological - are brought into play by means
of the image of the wheel. Questions relating to the possibility of the will (of acting, of suffering action, of
suffering from action) are raised and resolved in the poetic image. The significance attached to the still point or
the point of intersection of Time and the timeless at which the crucifixion of Christ, or a ritual re-enactment of
the passion and sacrifice of Christ, is seen to be, shows how Eliot as dramatist went beyond the classic or tragic
vision and elected the assurance and authenticity of the Christian. Thomas identifies the act of martyrdom
as the Christian. He rejects the Fourth Tempter's suggestion of prideful self-will and also the selfless passivity and the
fated quality of the Chorus as it feels its union with the routine occurrences of the historical processes.

- What is woven in the loom of fate
- What is woven in the councils of princes
- Is woven also in our veins, our brains,
- Is woven like a pattern of living worms
- In the guts of the women of Canterbury.

This is yet another kind of manipulation of the circular imagery. The action Thomas undertakes is different
from that of the world to which the action of the Knights (in their temporal activity) belongs. The fool, fixed in
his folly, Only may think / He can turn the wheel on which he turns. Fortune's wheel is the base upon which
Eliot is building a drama which is an amalgamation of Greek and Christian traditions. The similarity between
the total conception of Oedipus at Colonus, a classical tragedy of reconciliation through death, and Murder in
the Cathedral/ can be pointed out by this way. Both Thomas and Oedipus reveal in their opening speeches the
view that patience is the lesson of suffering. And between these paradoxes of action and suffering lies peace, the
meaning of which Thomas tries to convey in the prose sermon presented as an interlude between Parts I and II
in which the play's central theme is depicted in another mode of discourse and theatrical convention giving us an
"idea" of the play and its dramatic form. Part II shows again the last temporal turn of the wheel - the death of
Thomas at the hands of the Knights.

Drawing centrally from the prose sermon on Thomas's role as a saintly imitator of Christ, and thus focusing
on martyrdom enfolding within it rejoicing and mourning at once and for the same purpose, Part II of the play
imposes a larger pattern on individual actions, a pattern which is the action. The contrast between the Knights
and Thomas is thoroughly presented here. In passages which illuminate Eliot's apprehension of human history,
Thomas opposes the Knights' conception of the deterministic process. He opposes it with his life by asserting
that the value of the idea rises above that of the fact; and he concludes on a note of the inexorability of man's
fate with the image of the turning wheel:
But in the life of one man, never
The same time returns. Sever
The cord, shed the scale. Only
The fool, fixed in his folly, may think
He can turn the wheel an which he turns.

In the speech in which Thomas refers to the agent and the patient being fixed in an eternal action, he proposes a pattern which embraces both "the eternal burden" and "the perpetual glory" such that there is a subtle interweaving of suffering, striving and acceptance that unite to form the attitude characterized by Eliot's conception of the relation of the individual to society. He refers in *The Idea of a Christian Society* to the view that society is for the salvation of the individual and the individual must be sacrificed to society. "It (the Church) wants everybody, and it wants each individual as a whole. It must therefore struggle for a condition of society which will give the maximum of opportunity for us to lead wholly Christian lives ... It maintains the paradox that while we are each responsible for our own souls, we are all responsible for all other souls" (1968).

This pattern which is the action is revealed and made complete with an Aeschylean sense of inevitability. In the process, a sense of permanence and eternal recurrence is caught sight of in the midst of flux. The image of the still point and the turning wheel thus seems to be an embodiment of the structure of the play, *Murder in the Cathedral*. An important elaboration of this wheel image and its metaphorizing of movement is to be found in "Burnt Norton". At the still point of the turning point. Neither flesh nor fleshless; Neither from nor towards; at the still point, there the dance is, But neither arrest nor movement. And do not call it fixity, Where past and future are gathered. Neither movement from nor towards, Neither ascent nor decline. Except for the point, the still point, There would be no dance, and there is only the dance. I can only say, there we have been: but I cannot say where. And I cannot say, how long, for that is to place it in time.

It is through the image of the wheel and its still point, the point of intersection of Time and the timeless, that the idea of Incarnation and the surrender of the will are expressed. The image may be said to be at the heart of Eliot's poetry and it has a relation with the image of the "rose-garden" which, according to Leonard Ungar, stands for the moment of contact with reality and also for a moment of sudden illumination and rare consciousness. The idea of timeless reality glimpsed in the world of Time is one to which Eliot returns again and again. The death of Thomas marks one such moment and a characterization of its significance could be found in "The Dry Salvages"(1966).

But to apprehend. The point of intersection of the timeless
With time, is an occupation for the saint. No occupation either, but something given
And taken in a lifetime's death in love. Ardor and selflessness and self-surrender

The metaphor of the wheel, a sit leaves aside in the context of the play's action, the resignation to fate of the small folk and also the arrogant celebration of the will is identified with the act of martyrdom, with the center of a timeless action in which the only action possible is the acceptance of and submission to a larger pattern, that the wheel may turn and still / Be forever still" (p.245). The pattern created by the play's controlling image stresses the spiritual implications of the play. This pattern is explicitly stated in prose in the Christian sermon (in another mode of discourse and a different theatrical convention) in which the doubts of Beckett are seen clearly dispelled:

A Christian martyrdom is never an accident, for Saints are not made by accident Still less is a Christian martyrdom the effect of a man's will to become a Saint, as a man by willing and contriving may become a ruler of men. 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. It is never the design of man; for the 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 being a martyr. (p.261)

The sense of action which is merely activity (as opposed to Thomas's synthesis of agent and patient) is conveyed by the urbane but comic rhythms inherent in the speeches of the First Tempter. "If you will remember me, my lord, at your prayers, / I'll remember you at kissing-time below the stairs" (p.248). And with the sudden intrusion in the speech of the First Tempter of irregular stress couplets, the action moves smoothly on to the plane of a medieval morality, the plane of abstractions, the strife with shadows. Action as activity is again stressed by the antiphonally-chanted lines of the tipsy Knights as they close in on Thomas:

Are you washed in the blood of the Lamb?
Are you marked with the mark of the beast?
Come down Daniel to the lion's den,
Come down Daniel and join in the feast.
As opposed to this self-assertion and movement along the rim of the wheel, there is the eternal design which may appear even in "sordid particulars." The Knights are the "sordid" instruments of the eternal design and the murder is presented as part of that design, and not just as a historical event. As William Spanos notes, the Christian verse drama movement has definitively, if only broadly, established the sacramental aesthetic as its operative principle and thus has acknowledged the integrity of the dramatic image (1967). In fact, the sacramental perspective seeks to redeem the signs of history, for otherwise history appears as a linear progression of recessive signs that are "devoid of spiritual significance of value and, therefore, of authentic poetry" (ibidem:29). The sacramental aesthetic sees history from a perspective in which every "moment in history, every human action, is infused by a discoverable universal and permanent significance without loss of its unique actuality, its historicity" (ibidem). The sacramental aesthetic seems to bring about a joining of time and eternity, motion and stillness, concrete reality and value (ibidem:50).

Spanos sees in Murder in the Cathedral a significant development in the art of the Christian verse drama, for the play utilizes the sacramental concept of Time as a genuine aesthetic. He therefore characterizes the plays as employing the sacramental aesthetic in an attempt to reconcile "all the irreconcilables of life in naturalistic time ... into a great sacramental image of the eternal design" (ibidem:326). And the play seeks to achieve this unity through a ritualistic reinforcement of concrete reality with the theological basis or "angelism." Ritual belongs in the play to both the inner structure and the texture. Through a reconstruction and enrichment of the Christian myth by means of its conflation with the pagan myth, the value of the Incarnation, is shown at once in ritual and dramatic terms.

By imposing an order upon reality, Eliot achieves a perception of an order in reality which, he says, is the function of all art so that we are brought to "a condition of serenity, stillness, and reconciliation." (1957). Thus, according to Spanos, Eliot interprets the murder of Thomas as sacramental action, an instance of figura Christi, which by means of its stress on Incarnation, reconciles "angelism" and concrete reality. This reconciliation takes place by means of a weaving together of the Christian and pre-Christian patterns of imagery which shows the subtle, artistic use to which modern anthropological knowledge has been put. In amalgamating disparate experiences Eliot is like the metaphysical poets and he makes use, at a pre-Christian level, rather a second figural level, of the image of the dying god of the pagan fertility rites to suggest how sacrificial death renews the land and the community.

Notes:
1. As David Jones (1960:54) suggests, it may have been the work of the Cambridge anthropologists which suggested to Eliot the pattern of the myth in Murder in the Cathedral.
2. While commenting on the histrionic basis of Eliot's verse, Francis Fergusson (1949:218) states that Eliot is "a metaphysical poet by instinct"

REFERENCES