

## The Theme of Power in T.S. Eliot's *Murder in the Cathedral*

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**Abstract:** *The Theme of Power is so crucial to the entire plot of Eliot's Murder in the Cathedral that we do not fail to treat it as a political play. It presents to us a recurring story of struggle between state machinery and spiritual authority. The struggle culminates in the murder of Thomas Becket, the Archbishop. The footing of spirituality is further consolidated because of the supreme sacrifice of Becket. Thus, the murder proves counter-productive for the secular authority.*

*History is replete with instances of struggle between spiritual power and worldly or temporal power. Temporal or secular power is completely subject to the passage of time. On the other hand, spiritual power is eternal and it refers to a code of laws ordained by God which are beyond human comprehension.*

*Murder in the Cathedral explores how we should deal with these two powers. It also concludes with the message that the ultimate victory is spiritual power's, not the other way. Becket's sacrifice is a testimony of victory, also a proof of superiority of spiritual power over secular power. A confirmation of eternal glory, Becket's martyrdom marks the commencement of a glorious journey to immortality.*

*In the paper, I have attempted to trace the events and incidents which relate to theme of power. Such events suffice to establish the play as a political one. The theme in question is aptly treated by Eliot in the play.*

**Keywords:** *Spiritual Power, Secular Power, Political Conflict, Spirituality, Martyrdom*

**Research Area:** *Literature and Culture*

**Paper Type :** *Research Paper*

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The Theme of Power is central to Eliot's *Murder in the Cathedral*. The play deals with both spiritual and secular power. The theme of power determines the courses of action in the play. The play crystallizes the clash between temporal and spiritual power. The theme of power underlies, invariably, all political plays. And such is also the case in the play in question.

In 1163, the two friends, Thomas Becket (1118-1170), Archbishop of Canterbury and the English King, Henry II (1133-1189), quarreled over the respective power roles of church and state. So stormy and furious was the dispute that Becket subsequently escaped to France to rally support for the Catholic Church against the pressures of the State of Henry II. Seven years later, after an apparent reconciliation with his old friend Henry, he returned to England only to be murdered in his Canterbury cathedral by four of Henry's knights.

The conflict between secular and spiritual power leads to the murder of Becket. Secular power has concerned itself with violence, double-dealing, and the misuse of money. Secular power and pride are closely connected. Secular power begets pride as in the case of Thomas Becket. His pride stems from his sudden prosperity. In his capacity as the Chancellor, Thomas Becket was flattered by the king; in those days he was liked by some courtiers and hated by some; in those days of chancellorship he was held in contempt by some, and he in turn held others in contempt. As the chancellor, Becket was always an isolated figure. He never mixed with the courtiers and was always therefore insecure. However, in his capacity as the Archbishop, we see him mixing with his courtiers, being loved by all and secure. His spiritual power draws people near him. Secular power does not necessarily give oneself peace.

Thomas Becket despises the authority which has been conferred upon him by the secular power of the king. He wants to derive his authority from God only; he wants to be subordinate to no other power than God. If King Henry II had been a stronger man or if he had been a weaker man, things would have been different for Thomas Becket.

The Second Tempter suggests that Becket should try to regain the chancellorship because the exercise of power and authority leads to glory on earth and because an important man gets a ceremonious burial at his death. The exercise of power over the people is not a form of madness but the means of a permanent fame in the world. Becket says that a man devoted to the service of God can derive no pleasure from worldly power. The Second Tempter says that those who give their love to God can certainly draw no pleasure from the exercise of worldly power but Becket should realize that it is no use thinking of shadowy pleasures such as those which have been offered by the First Tempter and, likewise, there is no point in losing oneself completely in worship of God.” Power is present, holiness hereafter”. The Second Tempter goes on to say that Becket should once again become the chancellor and exercise power under the patronage of the king. Holding the office of the chancellor, Becket would be able to keep the great in check and protect the poor. As the chancellor, Becket would be able to prevent the ruffians from doing harm to the innocent; He would be able to strengthen the laws, dispense justice, and remove glaring inequalities. The Second Tempter also says that Becket’s spiritual power means damnation on the earth. Real power lies in the present for him who is ready to wield it. The Second Tempter further says that, if Becket does not accept this offer, he would have to live in Canterbury as a powerless man, rendering servile obedience to the Pope who himself has no power. Becket refuses to accept the Second Tempter’s offer of the chancellorship, saying that he possesses spiritual authority which is more important because it enables him to admit people to heaven or to send them to hell, according to their merits and demerits. He derives from the Pope the power “to bind and loose”, to send the sinners to damnation, to condemn even the kings. Having this supreme power in England, he would not agree to serve among the servants of the king. When the second tempter is gone, Becket feels happy to have spurned his offer because secular power enables a man to maintain only worldly order which is not controlled by the divine order.

The Third Tempter now arrives. He goes on to say that Becket should form an alliance with other forces in the country but Becket again dismisses the offer, this time that of the Third Tempter. However, he admits to himself that the thought of forming an alliance with the barons had come to his mind even before the visit of the Tempter.

Now, finally the Fourth Tempter arrives and approves of Becket’s dismissal of the first three Tempters. The Fourth Tempter offers his friendship to Becket. He says that there is no possibility of Becket’s re-establishing his friendship with the king because the king would never trust any man twice. Even if Becket becomes the king’s supporter once again, the king

would make use of his services as long as necessary and would then crush him. As for the barons, Becket should expect no loyalty from them because they are lesser men than the king and because the envy of lesser men is more dangerous than the king's anger. Becket asks the Fourth Tempter then what would be the right course of action for him. The Fourth Tempter replies that Becket should continue to pursue the course of action which he has already chosen for himself. Pleasure, worldly authority, the exercise of power—these are nothing as compared to the spiritual power. To exercise authority over the people under the supervision of the king demands secrecy, cunning, and diplomacy. But as the archbishop, Becket holds the keys of heaven and hell, “the power to bind and to loose”, and spiritual power over the bishops and even over the king. Secular authority has concerned itself with battles, epidemics, revolutions, new conspiracies, and broken treaties. King Henry II will realize all this when he is at the point of death, and when nobody — not even his son — will render obedience to him. But Becket as the spiritual head of the country can wind and unwind the thread of eternal life and death. And finally comes the Fourth Tempter's offer of personal glory through martyrdom. This suggestion from the Fourth Tempter is recognized by Becket as something which he himself has desire for. By seeking martyrdom, he can really win heavenly glory; and he has been meditating upon it. But pursuit of personal glory is itself a sin. So, Becket decides to subordinate himself to the design of God.

Secular power does not give peace; it is the humble submission to God that is the source of peace. Power on the earth is temporal. People with immense power are subject to greater misfortunes. The ordinary women of the chorus are humble and are in peace. In the play in question we observe that the state machinery and spiritual authority are in bitter conflict with each other. The death of Becket is corollary to the power struggle between the State and the Church.

In keeping with the Biblical testimony about the nature of spiritual power versus temporal power, however, Eliot posits that transcendence cannot be achieved by force. It arises, not through utilitarian machinations (such as those the four Tempters propose to Becket in part I) but by, “humble and quiet submission to God's will”. It is the friendship, i.e., the total alignment of mind and soul and will, rather than temporal power, with god which is the source of peace. And through martyrdom we can attain eternal glory. Eliot points out: “unless the sufferer refrains from willing to suffer and thus from soiling his hands with his own blood, he cannot be a true martyr” (Smith 188). Becket recognizes that he must be passive and must only consent to the divine will, so that he shall suffer and shall become for suffering in others the involuntary agent.

*Murder in the Cathedral* shows only one of the protagonists in the historical struggle; the other protagonist, namely king Henry II, is shadowy, and his shadow may suggest the fascist parallels.

The theme of *Murder in the Cathedral*, or the essence of what the play is about, is the conflict between worldly and spiritual powers, and the affirmation of the superiority of spiritual power. The play deals with an individual's opposition to authority. Eliot wrote the play at the time of rising fascism in Central Europe and can be taken as a protest to individuals in affected countries to oppose the Nazi regime's subversion of the ideals of the Christian Church.

In the wake of the struggle for power, more often than not, the ordinary people are affected, often adversely. The common people become a collateral damage, as it were. The play well testifies to this through the sufferings of the Chorus constituted by the women of Canterbury. The women of Canterbury are anxious at some dreadful prospects. The choric

function of setting a mood of fear and gloom is achieved by what seems the natural reaction of the poor women expecting more trouble: "Are we drawn by danger?" (ll.2). They seem dimly aware of some rumour of the Archbishop's return (ll.21) and have an intuition that all will not be well if he does come, however much they need his presence. The conflict of power has a ripple effect: it does not affect only the parties who vie for power, but those who lie in the periphery. Through Chorus Eliot seems to affirm that "Destiny waits in the hand of God, not in the hands of statesmen" (L.44). Thus, the superiority of spiritual power over secular power is asserted. Secular government is tainted with corruption, violence, duplicity, and frequent misappropriation of money, designed for one purpose and wrongfully spent on another. The king rules the country or the barons rule it (but there is no good result) the strong man rules strongly, and the weak man rules arbitrarily and whimsically. They have all only one guiding principle, which is to grab the power and to keep it in their hands. Those who are firm and patient can turn to their advantage the greed and lust of others; but the weak man is destroyed by his own greed and lust. The Third Priest says:

I see nothing quite conclusive in the art of temporal government,

But violence, duplicity and frequent malversation.

King rules or barons rule:

The strong man strongly and the weak man by caprice.

They have but one law, to seize the power and keep it,

And the steadfast can manipulate the greed and lust of others,

The feeble is devoured by his own.

(pt.1;59-65) [1]

Thus, secular power is presented in an unfavourable light.

*Murder in the Cathedral* is not about "murder in the cathedral" but about the spiritual state of a martyr facing death, the spiritual education of the poor women who are witnesses to his sacrifice, and the willful opposition of secular to eternal power (Smith 181). The knights who are the forces of repressive mechanisms of the state and who are the agents of secular power are no better than "maddened beasts". They enter the cathedral brandishing their swords and bowling, "come down Daniel to the lion's den," they make a jocular acknowledgment of the martyr's triumph, even while degrading themselves to beasts. Becket retorts in the play, "it is the just man who/Like a bold lion, should be without fear" (Smith 182). Becket commended his soul and his cause to God. King Henry is impoverished in spiritual attributes so much so that we get a unfavourable picture of the secular government. Becket does not resist death, rather accepts it. And Eliot depicts him as humbly submissive (Smith 183).

The Knights are characterized by depraved worldliness as opposed to Becket by spirituality. At the end of Part 1, having dismissed the perfunctory temptations of worldly pleasure, subservience to the king, and alliance with the barons, Becket rejects the lures of conscious glory of martyrdom. In discovering that his grandiose will to be martyred is sinful, he allows the wheel of fortune to bear him materially down and up (Smith 186). Becket has vanquished the Knights by his death. Atonement is symbolized by Becket. Smith draws a parallel between the death of Christ and that of Becket; both the deaths are a corollary to the

struggle between spiritual authority and secular authority: “Becket, like Christ, is tested, slain, and exalted, not for his sin but for other men’s” (Smith 186).

Several such murders as that of Becket by state authority and a good number of instances of State meddling with the affairs of the Church have gone down in the annals of history. His assassination foreshadowed similar political murders of Martin Luther King and of Archbishop Oscar Romero at the altar of a chapel in El Salvador in 1980, both murdered by reactionary death squads. In the England of Henry II, the Crown and the Church were at war for supremacy. Thomas was murdered by the State of King Henry II in order to supplant Church law with his State courts and trial by jury and constitutional and legal reforms—the wrong thing though for the right reason.

Eliot’s play—and his view—is thus not just about the murder of Thomas Becket. It is also about standing up for what is right in the face of the temptations of both power and glory. Henry expected Thomas to allow him to exploit his friendship and his church title in order to abuse the power of the Church for the benefit of the State. Thomas refused—a courageous display of not giving in to power’s pressures.

History is replete with instances of state machinery thwarting dissidence with an iron fist. Dissidents are fettered. Becket’s rendition is one such historical phenomenon. The issues in this play are disturbingly real and perilously relevant to today’s world.

Though tempted by sainthood and lured by power, Thomas sees martyrdom and pleasure as human weaknesses. To the tempters he responds with those famous words:

Now is my way clear, now is the meaning plain;

Temptation shall not come in this kind again.

The last temptation is the greatest treason:

To do the right deed for the wrong reason.

The Crown and the Church are at war with each other; the contest has been waged between brute power and resigned holiness. In the last analysis, the struggle vindicates the Church, not as the priesthood represents it, but as the laity, the Women of Canterbury, reconstitute its purpose after Becket through humility has shown them the way (Smith 195).

To conclude, we can adjudge the play as one that deals with the historical struggle for power between the Crown and the Church which recurs along the continuum of human history. And, through such sacrifice as that of Becket, the spiritual authority symbolized by the Church is further consolidated—such being the message the play seeks to convey.

### Note

1. The lines are quoted from *Murder in the Cathedral*, T.S. Eliot, published from Oxford University Press, London, in 1999, with an introduction and notes by Nevill Coghill.

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