Murder in the Cathedral

INTRODUCTION

BRIEF BIOGRAPHY OF T. S. ELIOT

Born in St. Louis, Missouri, T.S. Eliot grew up to become arguably the most prominent poet and literary critic in the nineteenth-century English-speaking world. Known widely for such poems as "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock," "The Waste Land," and "The Hollow Men," Eliot was a pioneer of the Modernist movement in literature. He received his bachelor's degree in philosophy from Harvard University in 1909, and, after a period of travel and attending graduate school at Harvard, Eliot settled in England in 1914. There, he encountered the poetry of fellow literary giant Ezra Pound, who encouraged and helped him to publish his poems in several magazines. By 1930, Eliot had achieved his own fame as a poetic genius, and would remain in the literary spotlight for the following thirty years, writing poems as well as seven works for the theatre, and winning the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1948. He died on January 4, 1965, in London.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

The play is based on the murder of Archbishop Thomas Becket by four knights under King Henry II in Canterbury, England, 1170. At the time, the Catholic Church was experiencing significant growth in power in comparison to the English crown, and Becket rigorously defended its rights as a political institution, refusing to budge under Henry II's authority. A substantial feud began between the two almost immediately after Becket was (warily, since he knew his policies as Archbishop would clash with Henry's views about the relation between church and state) appointed to the position of Chancellor by Henry. The feud started when Becket tried to take back land that Henry had possessed from the public of Canterbury—and evolved to disputes over whether the Church or the Crown had the power to punish clergymen found guilty of committing crimes, and over money that Becket refused to hand over to the King. Eventually, Beckett left England discreetly and headed to France, only to return seven years later, when the play begins. Becket and Henry had reached an agreement, and they were to resume a peaceful relationship—however, Becket and the Pope disagreed with the King's decision to have his son coronated by a church other than Canterbury Cathedral (which was the traditional venue for coronation). The Pope therefore suspended the bishops responsible for the coronation—these are the bishops the knights in the play order Becket to absolve.

RELATED LITERARY WORKS

Sophocles' tragedy *Antigone*, which is about a young woman disobeying her uncle the king in order to obey the rules of the gods, explores similar themes about the relationship between a spiritual order and a political order, and the relationship between free will and fate. Geoffrey Chaucer's *The Canterbury Tales* tells the story of a group of people who are travelling to Canterbury to visit the Cathedral where Archbishop Thomas Becket was murdered. And Alfred, Lord Tennyson's *Becket* is another play about Archbishop Becket's murder, as is Jean Anouilh's *Becket*.

KEY FACTS

- **Full Title:** Murder in the Cathedral
- **When Written:** 1935
- **Where Written:** Cambridge, Massachusetts
- **When Published:** 1935
- **Literary Period:** Modernism
- **Genre:** Drama, Christian Tragedy
- **Setting:** Canterbury, England, in December of 1170, when Archbishop Thomas Becket of Canterbury returned after spending seven years in France
- **Climax:** The four knights enter the cathedral and murder Becket
- **Antagonist:** The four knights who murder Becket are the play's antagonists; though technically they serve King Henry II, he never actually appears in the play. (Further, it's never explicitly confirmed that Henry II ordered Becket's assassination, or whether the knights were acting on their own intentions.)

EXTRA CREDIT

Big Star. In 1956, T.S. Eliot gave a lecture at the University of Minnesota to an audience of 13,523 people—a crowd so large that the lecture had to be given in a basketball stadium.

Meow. The Broadway play *Cats* is based off of T.S. Eliot's book *Old Possum's Book of Practical Cats*.

PLOT SUMMARY

Murder in the Cathedral is divided into two parts, with an interlude separating them. The play begins with the thoughts of the Chorus, a group of common women of Canterbury. They say that Archbishop Thomas Becket has been away from his Canterbury congregation (of which they're members) for seven years. Becket has been away because of religious and political

conflicts he came to have with King Henry II. While they miss his presence, the Chorus does not wish for Becket to come back, as they fear his return would stir up old conflicts which might get him killed. Three priests who served the Archbishop in the past then enter the scene, as well as a herald who informs them and the Chorus that Becket is in England, back from France. The Chorus is dismayed, worried that Becket's return will lead to his death, and therefore their own religious turmoil (they'll lose their spiritual leader). The priests, on the other hand, readily welcome Becket back to Canterbury.

Becket enters the scene, and is shortly accosted by four "tempters"—four people who, one-by-one, try to persuade or tempt Becket into adopting certain views on how he should balance his religious power as Archbishop with its associated political power—political power which could either supplement his religious authority or replace it altogether. Becket discounts all the tempters' proposals, thinking that none of their visions for his future are sourced in the higher, spiritual dimension of fate or God's plan. He decides that **martyrdom**—sacrificing his life in devotion to God—is his fate, and refuses to be tempted by other, more earthly pursuits of political power or worldly, secular desires.

In the interlude, Becket gives a sermon to the congregation of Canterbury Cathedral. He asks his audience to think about sainthood from a divine perspective and reconsider the conventional, human understanding of saintliness as pure, peaceful and gained without torturous hardship, adding that Jesus's disciples became saints only after experiencing great suffering. He ends the sermon by saying that it may be the last time he stands before the congregation, foreshadowing his martyrdom.

In the second part of the play, four knights serving Henry II arrive at Canterbury Cathedral and accost Becket, calling him a traitor to the crown. Before Becket left, the king appointed him to be the Chancellor of England as well as Archbishop. After initially accepting both positions, however, Becket immediately dropped the chancellorship. Further, the knights say Becket then began to abandon all the king's policies which he had formerly supported. Claiming they've been sent by the king, the knights ask Becket if he'll agree to appear before Henry II and speak for his actions. Becket responds by saying that, if the king has ordered such an appearance, then the public ought to be allowed to know Henry II's charges against him and personally witness his defense against them. The knights disregard this response and move to attack Becket, but the priests and some attendants enter the scene before they get a chance to. The knights leave, promising to return for Becket.

Knowing that the knights will be returning to murder the Archbishop, the priests try to persuade him to go into hiding, but Becket refuses, fully committed to his martyrdom. When the knights come back to the cathedral, the priests bar its front doors, preventing them from entering. Becket, however, demands that the priests open the doors, thereby offering his life up to the swords of the knights and to his own martyrdom, saying it's against the Church's policy to exclude anyone from entering one of its cathedrals. The priests unbar the doors, and the knights enter and kill Becket.

Devastated by Becket's death, the Chorus cries out in painful desperation that the sky and air be cleansed of the death newly sprung upon Canterbury. The priests, however, conclude that Becket's death was a manifestation of fate, and that the Church is stronger for it. The four knights then turn towards the audience and offer arguments in defense of their decision to murder Becket. They describe why they think he was a traitor to the king and also largely responsible for his own death. The play ends with the Chorus asking God to forgive them and have mercy on them for not seeing—at first—Becket's martyrdom as having incredible spiritual significance beyond their own personal concerns. Following the priests, the Chorus evolves to see Becket's death as something caused by a divine source which they cannot understand but which nonetheless merits their faith and devotion.

CHARACTERS

MAJOR CHARACTERS

Thomas Becket – The Archbishop of Canterbury, Thomas Becket was exiled from England by King Henry II due to political conflicts which occurred between them seven years before the beginning of the play. Having spent those years in France, Becket has decided to return to England and take up his old position in the Church. Symbolically hinted at by the fact that he's the only character given a proper name in the play (even Henry II is just referred to as "the king"), Becket is the central pivot point of *Murder in the Cathedral*, meaning that every other character can be defined in terms of how they relate to Becket's character and outlook. Becket's staunch devotion to God and fate over anything that occurs in the everyday world of human social and political affairs makes him into something of a black hole around which the otherwise ordinary humans surrounding him revolve. The priests, while religious, have an idea of fate that conflicts with Becket's decision to become a **martyr**, though they eventually adopt his outlook. The Chorus, however, totally refrains from having a properly religious acceptance of fate and of Becket's martyrdom, for they fear that their lives will fall into spiritual shambles if Becket dies. The tempters—with their various temptations and arguments—are all defined by how they think Becket should balance and navigate between his religious and political powers. Mirroring the second tempter's position, the king is totally opposed to Becket's devotion to God, as Henry II only cares about his own, political power—over and above that of God. The knights follow in the king's footsteps, murdering Becket because they think his devotion to God is too radical

and politically rebellious. Following through with his martyrdom, Becket shuns the world of partial, human values and desires, sending a tectonic shock into the lives around him.

The Chorus – Made up of common women of Canterbury, the Chorus represents the ordinary, "small folk" of the town who look entirely to the Church for spiritual guidance in their lives. They begin the play by expressing regret over Becket's return, believing that it will lead to his death—which would bring them great spiritual despair. They claim to have been "living and partly living" during his seven-year absence, and that they would be more content to go on living in such a tolerably ordinary, everyday state of dissatisfaction than risk facing the overwhelming spiritual ruin which they think Becket's death would bring about. The Chorus therefore begins the play in direct opposition to the priests' excitement about Becket's return: they do not want him to come back. Ultimately, the Chorus's fear is realized—Becket is indeed murdered. While they come to understand his death as fated by God, the Chorus nonetheless sees it as a personal tragedy—they do not see it from a spiritual, impersonal distance like the priests eventually do. Maddened by the death of their spiritual leader, the Chorus ends the play desperately crying out that the environment around them be cleaned of the dark energies which have intruded into their lives.

The Priests – The priests—three in number—represent the clergy of the Church of Canterbury who are under the religious authority of Archbishop Thomas Becket. They begin the play, opposite the Chorus, in high anticipation of Becket's return, and are fully ready to welcome him back to England. They are confident that his presence will be good for the church-going public and the country as a whole. Yet this does not mean that they do not have their fair share of disagreement with the Archbishop. They are wary about his commitment to **martyrdom**, fearing that his death will spell spiritual ruin for themselves and the congregation. While not as dramatic as the Chorus, they nonetheless worry about losing their religious leader, since the Archbishop is the highest office of the Canterbury Cathedral and responsible for directing the lower clergy. After Becket dies—an event which the priests forcefully try to prevent—however, they come to see his martyrdom as destined by God, and comprehend it as something that should, in fact, have happened, even if they cannot explain "why" in terms which satisfy human thought.

First Tempter – A former friend of both Becket and the king, the first "tempter" encourages Becket to remember the "good old days" before his exile, when there was no political strife yet with Henry II. Essentially, the first tempter wants Becket to fix his broken relationship with King Henry II and renew their former friendship. Becket doesn't buy it, saying that what's past is in the past, and the future cannot be guaranteed—implying that he feels unable to unhesitatingly commit to restoring his past friendships, even though he remembers them with fondness. Disappointed with Becket, the first tempter departs saying that he will leave Becket to the "pleasures of [his] higher vices," slightly condescending to Becket's devotion to a higher, spiritual order. The tempter adds that, if Becket decides to change his mind, he'll be waiting to resume their friendship—that he'll remember Becket "at kissing-time below the stairs."

Second Tempter – The second tempter wants Becket to take up the role of Chancellor again (Becket left that position before his exile) and abandon his fanatical investment in religion and the Church. He says that those who solely give love to God, and God alone—like Becket—experience only sadness. This tempter therefore represents the exact opposite of the fourth tempter, who encourages Becket to shun the political world (of which the Chancellor is a part) and invest himself fully in his spiritual path, in martyrdom. Becket rejects the second tempter's proposal, and calls the Chancellorship a "punier power" compared to his spiritual command as Archbishop.

Third Tempter – The third tempter wants Becket to use his power as Archbishop to help him form a coalition of barons and country-lords that will fight to overthrow the "tyrannous jurisdiction" of King Henry II. This tempter sides with Becket's dissent from the crown, and claims that there's no hope for Becket to reconcile with the king. Further, Becket's authority as the Archbishop—if he'd side with the third tempter—would be a great help to this tempter's political cause. Like all the other tempters, the third one's proposal is rejected by Becket; he leaves saying that, in the future, he hopes the king will show Becket the respect the Archbishop deserves.

Fourth Tempter – The fourth tempter encourages Becket to pursue **martyrdom**, arguing that he should shun the worldly, political order of the king and focus on achieving sainthood. Though Becket doesn't reject the idea of martyrdom, he finds fault with this tempter's reasons for proposing it. The fourth tempter thinks Becket should become a martyr because of the glory and renown associated with the sainthood he'd achieve; he appeals to Becket's emotions and desires, but not to any higher spiritual principle, such as fate or God's plan. While this tempter is the closest to getting at the core of Becket's outlook on the relationship between politics and religion, and manipulating that outlook, he nonetheless disgusts Becket with his forwardness and appeals to secular notions of glory and fame. Perhaps this tempter reveals to Becket the dangers of his own selfishness and human longing for fame; it's as if the fourth tempter gets too close for comfort by revealing Becket's real, personal motivations for martyrdom. In a way, then, this tempter is responsible for initiating Becket's spiritual evolution towards becoming an instrument of God's will—of fate—and not a puppet of his own human greed.

First Knight (Reginald Fitz Urse) – Reginald Fitz Urse, designated as the first knight and described by the third knight as the leader of the group of four, introduces the other three

knights when they turn to the audience to defend their decision to murder Becket. Urse does not himself offer an argument in defense of Becket's execution, claiming that he's unqualified as an orator, since he's a "man of action," not of words. Urse appeals to the fact that the audience is composed of Englanders, saying that Englishmen "believe in fair play: and when you see one man being set upon by four, then your sympathies are all with the under dog." He also associates critical thinking and rationality with the audience, claiming that, as Englishmen, they will need to hear both sides of the case (they've already witnessed Becket's reasons for **martyrdom**, so now they must hear the knights' justification for murder) in order to arrive at a judgment of who's morally in the right.

Second Knight (William de Traci) – William de Traci, designated as the second knight, is the first of the four knights to offer an "argument" in defense of their murder of Becket. Perhaps more accurately, de Traci offers an argument in defense of the knights' own moral integrity in order to prevent them from being perceived as villains by the audience. De Traci says that the knights had nothing to gain from Becket's murder—they're "not getting a penny out of this," and the act will bring them no benefits: they'll likely be forced to spend the remainder of their lives outside of England, exiled. De Traci ends his speech by underscoring the knights' totally disinterested involvement in the murder. They did not want to kill Becket—they just wanted him to comply with the orders of the king.

Third Knight (Hugh de Morville) – Hugh de Morville, designated as the third knight, begins his speech by echoing Reginald Fitz Urse's comments about the tendencies of English people to be fair and logical in their thinking, refraining from making judgments sourced solely in their emotions. He argues that Becket basically conned the king by advocating for all the king's policies and agreeing to take on the office of Chancellor in addition to the role of Archbishop, but then—suddenly, upon being appointed to it—resigning from the Chancellorship. Morville therefore offers not just an argument in defense of his own dignity and morality—like de Traci—but a well-argued, reasoned indictment of Becket's political actions. He gives the most convincing argument from the perspective of the political dimension of the play (versus the spiritual) that Becket was, indeed, a traitor to the king.

Fourth Knight (Richard Brito) – Richard Brito, designated as the fourth knight, begins his speech by saying that he has nothing to add to the previous speakers' "particular lines of argument." He instead reframes the way Becket's murder has been framed before him (as an execution by the knights) by asking who, indeed, should be held responsible for killing the Archbishop. By asking this question, Brito aims to get the audience to see that Becket was himself fully responsible for his death. Brito describes Becket as suicidal and insane, reminding the audience that Becket himself insisted, against the priests, that the doors to the Church be opened and his executors, the knights, be allowed to enter. Though Brito paints Becket in such a negative light, he ends his speech saying that thinking of Becket's death as the result of his "Unsound Mind" is the "only charitable verdict" which the audience could give to a man who, according to Brito, had done a great deal of good for Canterbury in the past—before his spiritual rebellion against the king.

King Henry II – Though King Henry II never makes a physical appearance in the play, his presence certainly asserts itself in the characters who do. Challenged by Becket's spiritual extremism, Henry II's political power represents the secular, even anti-religious dimension in the play. For Henry II, Becket and the Pope's condemnation of his rule is merely a rebellious attempt to discount and restrict his power—he does not understand or accept that Becket's disagreements with his political policies could be sourced in a power higher and more powerful than his own office. Henry II does not comprehend the Church's criticisms of his power as potential insights into how he can achieve a closer relationship to God, or how he could reframe his political role to better reflect God's will and power. Ultimately unwilling to concede to the demands of the Church, Henry II (likely, though it's never explicitly said or confirmed in the play) sends the four knights to coerce Becket into political compliance with his rule. But, shunning the crown in favor of a higher power, Becket doesn't comply. It's ultimately uncertain whether T.S. Eliot intends Becket's murder to be read as a direct order of the king, or a decision made by the knights themselves.

MINOR CHARACTERS

The Herald –The Herald announces Becket's presence in England—that he's returned from France—to the Chorus and priests in the first part of the play, and claims that Becket's return will not be without trouble.

THEMES

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WORLDLY POWER VS. SPIRITUAL POWER

As a play based on the actual historical conflict between the Archbishop Thomas Becket of Canterbury and the English King Henry II, *Murder in the Cathedral* explores the relationship between two forms of power: worldly and spiritual. Worldly power refers to any

power that is wielded over the everyday world of human affairs, particularly political power. The play refers to this power as "temporal," highlighting its fleeting nature and the fact that it is completely subject to the passage of time. Worldly power is therefore open to change, and the effectiveness of its laws is never guaranteed. In contrast, spiritual power in the play refers to a code of laws that spring from God, are eternal, and to a significant degree are beyond human comprehension. From the beginning to the end, *Murder in the Cathedral* explores how people should navigate between these two powers, through Becket's interactions with the four tempters, the four knights, and in Becket's own evolving understanding of his **martyrdom**—his willingness to die for God.

The four tempters' dialogues with Becket may be interpreted as attempts to persuade him to adopt certain conceptions of how temporal and spiritual power should be balanced. The first tempter treats spirituality as a kind of decoration on worldly power—as something that can inspire joy and merriment by bringing happiness to the state and, in the process, fix Becket's conflicted relationship with the king. The second tempter, however, sees spiritual power as utterly ineffectual, and argues that to truly effect change Becket should focus less on religion and return to his former political role as Chancellor. The third tempter sees spiritual power as basically just another form of worldly power—or something that can be put to work to achieve worldly ends that have no spiritual grounding. He argues that Becket should use his role as Archbishop to help empower the lower class of country lords to overthrow the king. The fourth tempter has the opposite opinion of the second: he argues that Becket should devote himself solely to the realm of spiritual power, and shirk the temporal, through martyrdom. Thus, the four tempters all argue for certain ways of how the two forms of power should be thought together or apart.

In the second part of the play, the four knights—representatives of the king and therefore of the king's worldly power—confront Becket. The knights' conception of the relationship between worldly and temporal power leads them to call Becket a traitor: they think he's betrayed the worldly authority of the English crown through an overzealous loyalty to the spiritual authority of the Pope (who has condemned the king). The knights therefore see worldly and temporal power as separate entities that exist in a kind of natural opposition, an opposition where both powers to some extent restrict one another. The knights (and, by extension, the king) believe that Becket has pushed too far in supporting the Pope's condemnation of the English king; they thus believe he has become a traitor.

Becket's own view about the relationship between the two powers is revealed by his reply to the knights. He responds by declaring that there is a higher order responsible for the king's condemnation: "It is not Becket who pronounces doom, / But the Law of Christ's Church, the judgment of Rome." This Law, applied by the Pope, is believed by Becket to stem wholly from God (the Pope was believed to be God's mouthpiece). Becket therefore appeals to the realm of spiritual power as if it had absolute priority over the dimension of worldly authority. To Becket, worldly power is a puny, false conception of power; real power stems from a higher source, beyond human comprehension, and based in God.

FATE AND SACRIFICE

As *Murder in the Cathedral* unfolds, Becket, the priests, and the Chorus all undergo spiritual evolution with regard to how they view fate and their relation to it. By the end of the play, all three must endure some kind of sacrifice as a result of this evolution. At the beginning of the play, Becket somewhat selfishly desires **martyrdom** in order to reap the spiritual benefits associated with it: sainthood, spiritual glory, and historical renown. Over the course of the play, though, Becket comes to view his martyrdom not as something he chooses (in terms of its actual unfolding in his life, or the potential impact it may have on the world), but rather as a path he's fated to follow according to God's plan. With this new understanding, Becket sacrifices his own personal aspirations and ambitions in order to accept martyrdom as a role designed for him by God—a role which only God can ultimately understand.

Becket's martyrdom is the pivot around which the priests' and the Chorus's understandings of fate revolve. The priests begin the play in welcoming anticipation of Becket's return to England—they want him to stay, and they do not want him to be killed or allow himself, through martyrdom, to be killed. They try to protect him from the king's knights, thinking that preserving Becket's life will be better for the Church, the church-going public, and England as a whole. They think that safeguarding Becket is part of a faithful relationship to God's plan, to fate. Yet, by trying to protect Becket, the priests—at least from Becket's view—are turning him away from his fated path, his martyrdom, because they are trying to shape or change the divine outcome of events. The priests come to understand this by the end of the play—they come to treat Becket's martyrdom as pre-destined, as having a purpose behind it which they needn't know, and they thereby sacrifice their own conception of fate in favor of a more divine view.

In contrast with the priests, the Chorus—made up of common women of Canterbury—does not want Becket to return from his exile in France. The Chorus says they are "living and partly living," existing in a world over which they have no control, and where the whims of either the King or of nature can overwhelm them—but they'd rather cling to this way of life than risk losing the hope (however imaginary) they've invested in the form of their still-living spiritual leader, Becket. They'd prefer to remain with their current lives because they are familiar and at least

tolerable, rather than fall into the spiritual despair that Becket's death could cause. The Chorus therefore begins the play in direct opposition to fate: they do not want to endure the unfolding of Becket's fated path, his martyrdom. They'd prefer he continue to exist as an idea, as a glimmer of hope in what for them is a hopeless world. To lose that glimmer would unleash hopelessness to its fullest possible extent. As the play progresses, the Chorus continues to see Becket's likely martyrdom not as the unfolding of God's plan, but as a personal tragedy for them, as a fault of the world in which they live—as if the world lorded Becket's death over them with a personal vengeance. The Chorus never accepts that they must submit themselves to God's plan—they'd rather have their spiritual leader for themselves. Therefore, when Becket is killed, they are thrown into a terrible despair verging on madness.

Ultimately, *Murder in the Cathedral* seems to celebrate Becket's self-sacrifice and submission to fate. The priests ultimately come around to seeing things Becket's way, and the Chorus suffers for not doing so. And yet the play also offers some means of questioning this conclusion. Can Becket's martyrdom truly be an act of God's will if it results in the despair of the downtrodden? And if so, what does that say about God's will? It's not clear that the play itself is actually endorsing such questions, but that doesn't mean they aren't worth asking.

The four tempters all try to tempt Becket away from his fate by proposing that he adopt various views about how to balance his role as an individual of everyday society with his role as a religious figure. The play even treats the fourth tempter's proposal—that Becket become a **martyr** because, as a spiritual role, it's associated with the highest glory (saintliness)—as a "temptation," even though Becket himself seems at first to be pursuing exactly this path. But, in Becket and the play's ultimate logic, such advice *is* a temptation because the fourth tempter frames martyrdom as glorifying the individual, even if that glory is earned through dying "for God." Becket, in contrast, comes to believe that he should not seek to understand or think about the impact of his martyrdom – to his own legacy or to the world – in any way. He accepts it unquestioningly, without effort to shape or control it, as part of God's plan.

TEMPTATION

The concept of temptation as something that causes people to deviate from the divine unfolding of fate—at least as Becket sees it—permeates *Murder in the Cathedral*. The four tempters and priests both try to "tempt" Becket away from his fate, though in two very distinct ways.

The priests also try to "tempt" Becket—though less obviously than the actual "tempters"—by trying to keep Becket alive. They refuse to unbar the doors of the church at Becket's command, and while the knights are gathered outside, the priests reply: "You would bar the door / Against the lion, the leopard . . . Why not more / Against beasts with the souls of damned men, against men / Who would damn themselves as beasts." Though not explicitly using the language of temptation, the priests here are playing a role which parallels that of the tempters: the priests also try to make Becket change or shift events, to shift fate rather than accept it. The priests even go a step further than the tempters in trying to get Becket to do what they think is best—they try to physically force him into safety from the knights.

In this way, the difference between the roles of the tempters and the priests is somewhat blurred by the play, making "temptation" assume a more general shape and meaning. Temptation, as the play presents it, is *anything* that leads one toward a personal view of action and the world, because that will naturally pull one away from a selfless acceptance of God's plan.

ETERNITY AND HUMAN UNDERSTANDING

At the core of *Murder in the Cathedral* is a contrast between a higher power beyond human comprehension and the earthly realm of everyday human affairs. This realm of human thought is fraught with opposites—with oppositional thinking that pits good against evil, holy against unholy, high against low—while the divine realm of spiritual thinking is concerned with a oneness and wholeness that transcends the partial nature of human categories. Eternity—the everlasting, indivisible dimension of spiritual unity—therefore, is put into a complex, unfolding relationship with human understanding in the play.

Becket explores this dynamic relationship in a few ways. He describes the relationship between acting and suffering as one that humans understand as oppositional, but which, from a higher perspective, is an interdependent whole. Early in the play he compares the relationship to a **wheel** that can turn and be still at the same time, with the moving aspect of the wheel representing human conception of the wheel and the unmoving aspect representing the eternal view. Yet, though Becket retains this theological view about the division between eternity and human understanding throughout the play, he nonetheless seems to believe that, by submitting completely to fate through his **martyrdom**, he can in some sense bypass the partial nature of human understanding and be an instrument of God's will in the world.

Further, Becket, in the sermon he delivers in the interlude of the play, encourages his audience to understand the quality of saintliness from a divine, and not a human, perspective. He wants the congregation to understand that Jesus's disciples by no means became saints through any peace they achieved or experienced on earth. Becket says that the peace which Jesus

left to his disciples did not "mean peace as we think of it: the kingdom of England at peace with its neighbours, the barons at peace with the king," for his disciples never encountered this kind of worldly, political peace. Instead, they suffered arduous journeys, torture, imprisonment—very little, if any, earthly comfort or peace. He asks his congregation to consider that the peace which Jesus promised had nothing to do with the everyday realm of human satisfaction, but referred rather to peace from a divine, eternal perspective.

The Chorus also demonstrates an appreciation of the radical division between human understanding and eternity. In the beginning of the play, when the Chorus begs Becket to leave and return to France, they say they are facing a fear which they cannot understand, and which is ultimately unknowable; they say that this fear has torn their hearts away, and unskinned their brains as if they were onions—the symptoms of a "final fear which none understands." The play as a whole, therefore, displays an appreciation of some fundamental split between human knowledge and the realm of something higher than the Chorus—a higher realm whose intervention in their lives threatens to split them from and destroy their sense of self.

The Chorus's sense of a difference between human understanding and the higher, more eternal powers of fate persists throughout the play. However, the chorus does undergo a changing relationship with the eternal dimension: whereas they begin the play merely speculating about it—warning that it, "the doom on the world," will be unleashed upon them if Becket stays—they end the play no longer possessing the comfort of a speculative distance from their fear. The fear has come to fruition – Becket has been killed – and they must truly face it.

Thus, just as Becket appreciates a division between human understanding and eternity, so does the Chorus. The way they deal with that division, however, differs. While Becket is "secure and assured of [his] fate, unaffrayed from the shades"—while he deals with the split between eternity and human understanding through spiritual self-sacrifice to fate—the Chorus is unwilling or unable to adopt a more spiritually nuanced, selfless understanding of the eternal.

LOYALTY AND GUILT

Both political and religious loyalty (loyalty to God) are examined in the play, as well as the way those loyalties do or don't inspire guilt. When Becket found himself caught between serving his king as chancellor or serving the Church, he chose the Church. He also refused to acknowledge the prince's coronation. In the play, Becket defends his actions towards the king by claiming that it was not he but the Pope (and therefore God, since the Pope was believed to be infallibly speaking for God) who has made these decisions, but the furious king does not accept this reasoning. By extension, it's clear that the king does not see Becket's loyalty to God as being able to coexist with his political loyalty to the king. The king thinks solely in terms of political loyalty, and can only view Becket as a traitor. The king does not, for example, see Becket's political refusal to obey as something that might help the king to better align himself with the Church or with God—he's focused solely on his own political power.

The king's knights, meanwhile, *also* describe their actions in terms of loyalty. When they turn to the audience to justify their murder of Becket, the knights say that they were simply following the orders of the king. They did not want to murder him, but were politically obligated to—it was an act of loyalty to the king. They justify the murder by offering political arguments about Becket's renunciation of the chancellorship, as well as his abandonment of the political policies he formerly held (Becket had begun espousing the belief that there was a spiritual order higher than the king's rule).

It's therefore tempting to see the knights' loyalty and Becket's loyalty as similar. After all, the knights simply followed the order of their king (seemingly, though this is never explicitly stated), while Becket simply followed the dictates of his Pope and his religion. The distinction between Becket's loyalty and the knights' loyalty blurs in this sense: both are loyal to a power that demands total submission. However, the play does present a different, and very clear, distinction between Becket's loyalty and that of the knights: the degree to which both parties feel guilt over their actions. Becket is confident in his loyalty to God – and dissension from his king – and feels no moral qualms over it. The knights, on the other hand, do feel such qualms. They even admit that, to ease their conscience, they had to drink alcohol before acting. They feel guilty, and offer justifications and explanations to the audience in order to assuage their own sense of guilt, and, perhaps, to try to save themselves from being seen as villains.

Through these very different responses – the guiltlessness of Becket and guiltiness of the knights – the play suggests that loyalty is only as worthy as the thing to which it is given, and, perhaps, that one can only find peace by giving one's loyalty, one's self, to something that does not sting one's conscience. The play ultimately seems to suggest that Becket's loyalty is the most worthwhile—and that only God can honor the radical submission involved in both his and the knights' loyalty.

SYMBOLS

Symbols appear in **teal text** throughout the Summary and Analysis sections of this LitChart.

MARTYRDOM

As the act of sacrificing one's life in the defense or upholding of certain religious beliefs, martyrdom is the emblem of Becket's radical submission to God. Becket

seems to desire martyrdom from the very beginning of the play, though the reasons behind this desire evolve. At first he wants to die for God out of a combination of self-interest and activism (achieving glory and fame that will affect the world in ways he would want), but he eventually comes to think of himself as being fated for martyrdom, chosen by a source that is totally beyond his own ability to understand and comprehend what it might mean to, or do for, himself. Martyrdom therefore has two dimensions in the play: not only the obvious, physical event of Becket's death, but also the continual process of sacrificing one's partial, human view of the world for a more divine perspective that has nothing to do with human desire. Alongside Becket, the Chorus and the priests undergo this latter form of martyrdom as well.

THE WHEEL

Used by Becket as an image to describe the interdependent relationship between acting and suffering, the wheel represents the wholeness and indivisibility of the divine, spiritual reality behind the everyday world of (medieval Christian) human experience. It also shows how that wholeness appears as a fundamental contradiction to human thought. The wheel, as a metaphor, provides a tool for thinking about how the divided world of human thought (i.e., divided between such partial, finite categories as acting and suffering) is undivided, singular, and whole from a divine perspective.

The wheel of time, which Becket says both spins and remains still simultaneously, demonstrates how impossible it is to conceive, in Becket's world, of the divine realm where motion and stillness, energy and inertia, merge and become the same. For any motion to be perceived at all, there must exist a sense of stillness or motionlessness against which it can be compared, and vice-versa. But to see both motion and stillness as the same would destroy the meaning of the two categories; neither motion nor stillness exist as separate, distinct categories in the realm of divine perception. The two are interdependent; they depend on one another's existence to exist separately from one another. But this interdependence in and of itself—how the two categories reinforce one another's sense of meaning—cannot be reduced to either one of the two, separate categories themselves.

Interdependence—a property of the singular, whole, undivided nature of the divine perspective—eludes the partial categories of human thought, like the revolution of a wheel that is simultaneously still. Thus the spiritual world, in *Murder in the Cathedral*, is something which demands self-sacrifice and submission in order to connect with it. To be closer to God and fate, Becket, the Chorus, and the priests must all fundamentally alter the way they think about themselves and their relation to the divine. They all come to think of themselves not as fundamentally cut off or separate from the divine, but somehow as integral to, a part or an instrument of, the divine and the way it unfolds in the form of fate.

QUOTES

Note: all page numbers for the quotes below refer to the Harcourt edition of *Murder in the Cathedral* published in 1964.

Part 1 Quotes

We do not wish anything to happen.
Seven years we have lived quietly,
Succeeded in avoiding notice,
Living and partly living.
There have been oppression and luxury,
There have been poverty and licence,
There has been minor injustice.
Yet we have gone on living,
Living and partly living. . .
But now a great fear is upon us . . .
. . .We
Are afraid in a fear which we cannot know, which we cannot face, which none understands,
And our hearts are torn from us, our brains unskinned like the layers of an onion, our selves are lost
In a final fear which none understands. O Thomas Archbishop, O Thomas our Lord, leave us and leave us be, in our humble and tarnished frame of existence . . .

Related Characters: The Chorus (speaker), Thomas Becket

Related Themes:

Page Number: 19

Explanation and Analysis

The Chorus has just heard about Thomas Becket's arrival in Canterbury. They are wary about his return—they've spent seven years suffering, but it's been livable, manageable. Yes, there have been difficulties, but nothing they couldn't face. Becket's presence in Canterbury might spell a much graver doom that they couldn't handle—the possibility of Becket's death. If the Chorus lost their archbishop, they'd be thrown into a spiritual despair that would overwhelm them. Even though he's been away for seven years, the sheer fact that Becket existed in the world gave them comfort, and buffered them from having to be purely independent in their spiritual lives. Becket's erasure from the world threatens to bring them into a horrifying relationship with fate and God—one they feel, as common folk, unprepared to face. They'd therefore rather Becket stay away and alive, so

they can at least retain the hope of being spiritually guided.

They know and do not know,
what it is to act or suffer.
They know and do not know, that acting 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.

Related Characters: Thomas Becket (speaker), The Chorus

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 21-2

Explanation and Analysis

Thomas Becket speaks these lines after he's arrived in Canterbury, and overheard the Chorus saying they wish he would stay in France. The priests told the Chorus they were being foolish, but Becket says their comments were merited—this quote is his explanation why.

Becket invokes the image of a wheel in order to describe the pattern of time and the unfolding of fate. Human action and suffering are interdependent, and fixed together in an eternally unchanging relation. Yet, while the wheel is forever still—while the relation between action and suffering never changes—there's still a sense of movement. Humans are required to perform new and different actions with each successive moment of time, but their relation to suffering never changes. Thus, the Chorus has every right to feel the pain and powerlessness they do, especially in the face of losing their spiritual leader, the one who helps them deal with their suffering.

We do not know very much of the future
Except that from generation to generation
The same things happen again and again.
Men learn little from others' experience.
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 on which he turns.

Related Characters: Thomas Becket (speaker), First Tempter

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 25

Explanation and Analysis

Thomas Becket speaks these lines to the first tempter, who wants Becket to rekindle his old friendship with the king, and act as if nothing bad has happened between them. He wants the happiness of the past to be restored.

Yet Becket shuts this tempter down, totally denying the possibility of repeating anything from the past again in the future. He again invokes the wheel as an image of time's passage and its unfolding into the future. Humans only repeat experience at the collective level, across generations—but, on an individual level, a person's past can never be replicated in a future moment. Humans are therefore caught in the wheel's eternal but simultaneously changing patterning, repeating a structure (at the generational level) which is the same, but, as individuals, always going into a future they cannot predict.

Temporal power, to build a good world
To keep order, as the world knows order.
Those who put their faith in worldly order
Not controlled by the order of God,
In confident ignorance, but arrest disorder,
Make it fast, breed fatal disease,
Degrade what they exalt. Power with the King—
I was the King, his arm, his better reason.
But what was once exaltation
Would now be only mean descent.

Related Characters: Thomas Becket (speaker), Second Tempter, King Henry II

Related Themes:

Page Number: 30

Explanation and Analysis

This quote is Becket's reply to the second tempter, who insists that spiritual power means nothing compared to worldly/temporal political power—the kind of power Becket had when he was Chancellor.

Becket strictly disagrees, calling temporal power a "punier power" than his spiritual command as an Archbishop. Further, he says that worldly power does nothing but "breed fatal disease," lacking any true connection with the higher, divine dimension of God and fate. Those who invest themselves in temporal power and shirk a genuine relationship with God only cause harm, and degrade the crown they praise and exalt by severing its office from any relation to the spiritual.

> Is there no way, in my soul's sickness,
> Does not lead to damnation in pride?
> I well know that these temptations
> Mean present vanity and future torment.
> Can sinful pride be driven out
> Only by more sinful? Can I neither act nor suffer
> Without perdition?

Related Characters: Thomas Becket (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 40

Explanation and Analysis

Becket speaks these lines after talking with the fourth tempter, who tells Becket he should pursue martyrdom in order to gain spiritual glory.

This proposal repulses Becket, for it reveals that he's not as personally distanced from pursuing martyrdom as he thought, and as he wants to be. The fourth tempter reveals in Becket his own lust and self-serving desire to die in the name of God: to achieve the heavenly glory of sainthood, but not actually sacrifice himself wholly—including his desires and concern for himself—in order to totally submit to, and become an instrument of, God's will.

Becket's realization about his desire also exposes the problematic paradox behind free will and sacrifice, or action and suffering. If martyrdom is something the martyr actively wants to perform, then how can it not involve a bit of pride or self-serving desire? And then how can one avoid damnation if martyrdom is in the name of God? Becket eventually resolves this paradox, for he says that the moment he committed himself to martyrdom occurred "out of time," in an eternal instant—which could be interpreted as an ideal juncture where one is united with and taken over by the will of God.

> 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 . . .
> What yet remains to show you of my history
> Will seem to most of you at best futility,
> Senseless self-slaughter of a lunatic,
> Arrogant passion of a fanatic.

Related Characters: Thomas Becket (speaker)

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 44

Explanation and Analysis

After his initial shock at the fourth tempter's proposal, Becket is confident that his rightful fate is martyrdom. He acknowledges that martyrdom is the "right deed," but that one can do it for the wrong reasons, and vows that he shall never be tempted by these reasons again.

Becket also knows that his sense of duty to God will seem futile, worthless, and insane to most people, but his commitment to his fate overshadows their views. He has come into a relationship with his God that has cut him off from a worldly relationship with other humans. With his attention centered solely on God, and acting as the executor of his will, he becomes a sheer force of fate.

Interlude Quotes

[On Christmas] we celebrate at once the Birth of Our Lord and His Passion and Death upon the Cross. Beloved, as the World sees, this is to behave in a strange fashion. For who in the World will both mourn and rejoice at once and for the same reason? For either joy will be overborne by mourning, or mourning will be chased out by joy; so it is only in these our Christian mysteries that we can rejoice and mourn at once for the same reason.

Related Characters: Thomas Becket (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 47-8

Explanation and Analysis

Becket speaks these lines to his congregation during the interlude of the play, in a sermon at Canterbury Cathedral on Christmas Day. He wants to get his audience to think more deeply about the way they celebrate Christ's birth—to see the nature of the celebration not from a worldly perspective, but to try and grasp it from a more spiritual one. For, to truly contemplate the mystery of Christ on his birthday, one must both mourn and rejoice at the same time. Christ's coming into the world must be rejoiced, but his purpose for being born—saving humanity by dying for their sins—must be mourned. But both must be done at the same time to truly appreciate Christ's existence; to do only one or the other would be to degrade the complexity of His nature and purpose as a savior.

This moment is one instance in which the play explores the problem of thinking two opposites together—when two opposites are seen as separate, they're viewed from a worldly view. When seen from a divine view, however, they're viewed together—as inseparable, independent, and one. Other examples of this mysterious contradiction in the play include the relation between action and suffering, fate and free will, and the movement of time and stillness.

Reflect now, how Our Lord Himself spoke of Peace. He said to His disciples 'My peace I leave with you, my peace I give unto you.' Did He mean peace as we think of it: the kingdom of England at peace with its neighbours, the barons at peace with the King, the house-holder counting over his peaceful gains, the swept hearth, his best wine for a friend at the table, his wife singing to the children? Those men His disciples knew no such things: they went forth to journey afar, to suffer by land and sea, to know torture, imprisonment, disappointment, to suffer death by martyrdom. If you ask that, remember then that He said also, 'Not as the world gives, give I unto you.' So then, He gave to His disciples peace, but not peace as the world gives.

Related Characters: Thomas Becket (speaker)

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 48

Explanation and Analysis

This quote occurs in Becket's Christmas sermon. Here, he continues to expound upon the distinction between viewing things from a worldly perspective versus a spiritual one—upon the difference between the undivided, permanent realm of eternity and the divided, oppositional, and dualistic nature of human thought.

The peace promised by Jesus to his disciples, Becket clarifies, was not a worldly form of peace—it wasn't some comfort to be found and achieved in the world. Rather, it was beyond the world, and beyond what the human mind could be given by the world. To support this, Becket notes that Jesus's disciples never encountered any peace in the world, for they suffered immensely (and many were even martyred). What Jesus promised was "not as the world gives." Throughout the sermon, Becket seems bent on getting his congregation to try and develop a sense of this paradox of a peace that is not of the human world, but is divine—in a way, preparing them to deal with the worldly suffering brought on by his inevitable death.

A Christian martyrdom is never an accident. Saints are not made by accident . . . A martyr, a saint, is always made by the design of God, for His love of men, to warn them and to lead them, to bring them back to His ways. A martyrdom 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, not lost it but found it, for he has found freedom in submission to God.

Related Characters: Thomas Becket (speaker)

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 49

Explanation and Analysis

This quote also comes from Becket's Christmas sermon. He continues to push his audience to understand certain concepts from a more spiritual perspective—martyrdom, in this case. Becket stresses the fact that true martyrdom is not the product of a human's free will, or human design; rather, martyrdom is designed by God, a fate given to people by God. The paradox involved in trying to think about martyrdom this way, however, is how the human free will and the fate designed by God can fit together. After all, don't most martyrs start out with the sense of a free will, actively endeavoring to be martyred on their own?

Becket's point is that somehow the human will and God's will can be brought together in the concept of martyrdom. In the case of the martyr, a human's free will is totally submitted to the will of God, and they have their own will transformed into God's. But, for a martyr or saint, this actually grants freedom, for it seems that their submission to God reveals to them that they were fated to be a saint or martyr all along. Thus, they realize themselves, their own freedom, and their nature, through their very submission to God.

Part 2 Quotes

It is not I who insult the King. . .
It is not against me, Becket, that you strive.
It is not Becket who pronounces doom,
But the Law of Christ's Church, the judgement of Rome.

Related Characters: Thomas Becket (speaker), Third Knight (Hugh de Morville), King Henry II, Second Knight (William de Traci), Fourth Knight (Richard Brito), First Knight (Reginald Fitz Urse)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 65

Explanation and Analysis

Here Becket addresses the four knights, who've accused him of betraying the king, calling him the one who's ultimately responsible for the king's condemnation by the Pope.

Becket asserts that he's not the one who is truly responsible, but that he was just following the orders of the Pope (who was viewed as the direct voice of God). He claims to be the executor of a law higher than his own powers and command, acting as an instrument of a spiritual order of which he's merely the mouthpiece—it's not "Becket" who's giving the commands, but Christ's Law and the judgment of Rome. This instant is another example of Becket affirming himself as merely channeling the will of God, having submitted himself wholly to Christ.

I have smelt them, the death-bringers; now is too late
For action, too soon for contrition.
Nothing is possible but the shamed swoon
Of those consenting to the last humiliation.
I have consented, Lord Archbishop, have consented.
Am torn away, subdued, violated,
United to the spiritual flesh of nature,
Mastered by the animal powers of spirit,
Dominated by the lust of self-demolition,
By the final utter uttermost death of spirit,
By the final ecstasy of waste and shame,
O Lord Archbishop, O Thomas Archbishop, forgive us, forgive us, pray for us that we may pray for you, out of our shame.

Related Characters: The Chorus (speaker), Thomas Becket

Related Themes:

Page Number: 68

Explanation and Analysis

This moment marks a pivotal point in the spiritual evolution of the Chorus. They're in the Archbishop's Hall with Becket and the priests, before the priests carry the Archbishop off to the Cathedral.

The Chorus has finally accepted their role in the pattern of fate, and their God-designed relation to Becket's martyrdom. The thought of Becket's imminent death has affected their senses and connection to the natural world—they have a heightened perception of their relationship with the environment around them, to the extent that they come to understand that fate is woven through the external world and into their own bodies and minds. They come to a pinnacle of spiritual cognition where they must consent to their position in the grand scheme of

God's will, to the unfolding of destiny. They therefore accept that Becket's martyrdom is a necessary part of fate, and ask him to forgive them for their previous ignorance and desire for him to stay away from Canterbury.

> You think me reckless, desperate and mad.
> You argue by results, as this world does,
> To settle if an act be good or bad.
> You defer to the fact. For every life and every act
> Consequence of good and evil can be shown.
> And as in time results of many deeds are blended
> So good and evil in the end become confounded.
> 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 decision
> To which my whole being gives entire consent
> I give my life
> To the Law of God above the Law of Man.

Related Characters: Thomas Becket (speaker), The Priests

Related Themes:

Page Number: 73-4

Explanation and Analysis

Thomas Becket speaks these lines to the priests after they've moved him from the Archbishop's Hall to the Cathedral. The knights are at the door, about to break in.

The priests refuse to unbar the door, unwilling to accept Becket's martyrdom. Becket accuses them of refusing to adopt a more nuanced, divine view of the knights' behavior, saying that the priests think in too factual, too worldly a manner, about whether actions in the world count as good or evil. He claims that the difference between good and evil become blurred as time passes, and that his own death, as a martyr, has nothing to do with the passing of time. His death transcends good and evil, and time itself. The priests seem either unwilling or incapable of comprehending this—if they're just unwilling, then it's because they want to protect their own sense of identity and spiritual well-being. Becket's death has nothing to do with good and evil as men see it, but rather the eternal, divine relation between them.

> It is the just man who
> Like a bold lion, should be without fear.
> I am here.
> No traitor to the King. I am a priest,
> A Christian, saved by the blood of Christ,
> Ready to suffer with my blood.
> This is the sign of the Church always,
> The sign of blood. Blood for blood.
> His blood given to buy my life,
> My blood given to pay for His death,
> My death for his life.

Related Characters: Thomas Becket (speaker)

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 75

Explanation and Analysis

Thomas Becket speaks these lines just before the knights murder him. He defends his innocence with regard to the knights' charges that he's betrayed the king, appealing to—yet again—a higher, spiritual order beyond the dimension of human thought and events. He has not betrayed the king—he's submitted himself to a divine process of fate whose unfolding cannot be explained by reducing it to human considerations of betrayal and politics. Becket sees himself as giving his life for Christ, paying for His death—the death which bought Becket his own existence. Wholly immersed in his faith and fated relation to God, he approaches death without fear.

> We did not wish anything to happen.
> We understood the private catastrophe,
> The personal loss, the general misery,
> Living and partly living;
> The terror by night that ends in daily action,
> The terror by day that ends in sleep;
> But the talk in the market-place, the hand on the broom,
> The nighttime heaping of the ashes,
> The fuel laid on the fire at daybreak,
> These acts marked a limit to our suffering.
> Every horror had its definition,
> Every sorrow had a kind of end:
> In life there is not time to grieve long.
> But this, this is out of life, this is out of time,
> An instant eternity of evil and wrong.

Related Characters: The Chorus (speaker), Thomas Becket

Related Themes:

Page Number: 77

Explanation and Analysis

The Chorus speaks these lines after Becket's death, before the four knights turn towards the audience. The Chorus members reiterate that they did not want anything—any new troubles—to befall their dissatisfying but bearable lives in Canterbury. They wanted Becket to stay away, fearing that his death would cause them to face spiritual ruin.

Before Becket's death, their daily suffering had a definable shape and limit—but now their despair is overwhelming and beyond their understanding: it's infinite, out of life, an eternal instant. Before, their daily chores and activities marked a limit to their lives, to the suffering which characterized their ordinary existence. Now, all those limits have been erased—the Chorus's spiritual leader, who intervened in their relationship with the divine, has perished, and with him, so has their old world defined by that intervention. They must rebuild their lives and their faith.

> No. For the Church is stronger for this action,
> Triumphant in adversity. It is fortified
> By persecution: supreme, so long as men will die for it.
> Go, weak sad men, lost erring souls, homeless in earth or heaven.

Related Characters: The Priests (speaker), Thomas Becket

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 84-5

Explanation and Analysis

The third priest speaks these lines in response to the first, who thinks that Becket's death has damaged the Church. Denying the first priest's claim, the third priest says that the Church has been fortified by Becket's martyrdom—that it's stronger because of Becket's action. The loss of Becket has not torn the Church apart, but has blessed and sanctified it. As the site of a saint's martyrdom, the Cathedral will forever have the status of especially holy ground.

Thus, the priests end the play somewhat divided over their impressions of Becket's death and its effect on the Church, but Eliot makes the third priest's defense of the Archbishop's martyrdom into the last speech given by a priest in the play. Further, it's longer, more vivid, and more descriptive than the first priest's—so we might therefore interpret the play as siding with the third priest's appraisal of Becket's death, and perhaps it portrays it as the opinion which the other priests will eventually come to adopt (assuming the second shares the same opinion as the first, for he's not given any lines on the topic).

SUMMARY AND ANALYSIS

The color-coded icons under each analysis entry make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. Each icon corresponds to one of the themes explained in the Themes section of this LitChart.

PART 1

The play begins in the Archbishop's Hall of Canterbury Cathedral; the date is December 29, 1170. The members of the Chorus—made up of common women of Canterbury—are the first to speak. They say that it's been seven years since Thomas Becket, the Archbishop of Canterbury, has left them, and that—despite his kindness as a spiritual leader—it would be best that he not return, though they do not explain why. The Chorus says that they have suffered since he's left, but that they are nonetheless content if they are left alone, "to their own devices," and unbothered by the wealthier members of society (barons, merchants, the king) who can lord their power over the Chorus in a coercive fashion.

The Chorus would rather keep to themselves and remain in the state of relative dissatisfaction and suffering they currently face, just because it's tolerable. They'd rather that Becket stay away from Canterbury, it seems, because his presence in Canterbury would somehow bring about more suffering and pain for them, to an extreme degree which they couldn't bear to face. The Chorus wants to be left alone to their own ways of dealing with the somewhat hopeless world around them, because so far they've been able get by.

Ultimately, the Chorus conveys a sense of powerlessness as they say that they expect some "malady" to fall upon them. They can only wait in anticipation, since destiny is controlled by God, and—as the poor folk of Canterbury—they have no power to change their lives through the world of politics and commerce. They truly are left to themselves—to their own inventiveness and, ultimately, their faith.

The Chorus occupies the lowest position of power in Canterbury society, both spiritually and politically. Spiritually, they are subjects of the Archbishop and look to him for religious guidance. Politically, they are peasants at the hands of those with earthly wealth and power.

After the Chorus's opening monologue, three priests enter the scene and discuss a feud which occurred between Archbishop Becket and the king some time ago, before Becket's departure. The second priest wonders what the Archbishop does now that he's abroad in France, with the English and the French king being caught up in a political battle of "ceaseless intrigue." The third priest comments that he sees nothing "conclusive"—nothing effective, dignified, or merited—in "temporal" (everyday and earthly) political (versus religious) government. He adds that the only law which the keepers of temporal power uphold is that of seizing and maintaining a greedy, lustful power.

A clear sense of the divide between worldly/temporal power and spiritual power in the play first appears here. That the third priest sees no purpose in temporal power instantly lets us know that the priests are aligned with Becket's spiritual cause, and against the political agendas of the king, insofar as they impinge on the Archbishop's religious authority. The only motivation behind temporal power, for the priests, is greed.

After the priests' brief discussion, a herald enters the scene, and announces that Becket, the Archbishop, is in England. The first priest asks if the feud between Becket and the king has been resolved or not—whether Becket comes in war or in peace. The herald replies by saying that Becket's return, even though it may seem cheerful and potentially peaceful at first, is really just the beginning of more turmoil.

The herald's message gives some substance to the Chorus's desire to remain separated from Becket. And now that the priests have explained the feud between Becket and the Archbishop, we ourselves can come to sense the thickness of the tension between the two authorities.

The priests respond to the herald's message. The first priest says he fears for the Archbishop and the Church, adding that he always thought Becket was out of place in the world of political power (Becket was formerly both Archbishop and Chancellor). The second priest develops this, saying that, with the spiritual leadership of Becket back in Canterbury, they can feel confident that they will be guided through whatever political problems the king, barons, and landholders may throw at them, and concludes that they therefore have cause to rejoice. The third priest, more philosophically, says that they must "let the **wheel** turn" for good or bad—they must let the passage of time and the unfolding of fate operate however it will, and with whatever consequences it brings for their lives, since the nature of good and evil cannot be totally comprehended.

The strength of the priests' faith in the Archbishop becomes amplified here—despite the potential backlash that Becket's religious agendas in Canterbury may face from the main forces of political power (the king, barons, and landholders), the priests are confident that Becket and God will guide them and the Church effectively through whatever hardships they may face. Further, the third priest's opinion about the relationship between good and bad, and the passage of time, suggests that he and the other priests feel that, whatever results from the potential conflict between Becket and the king, it will unfold according to God's plan.

After the priests' discussion about Becket's return to Canterbury, the Chorus weighs in. They say they want the Archbishop to go back to France, thinking his presence in Canterbury will spell only doom. "Living and partly living" for seven years, the Chorus describes their time living apart from the Archbishop as troubling, but at least tolerable. But Becket's return imposes a "great fear" upon them (the possibility of his death—of losing their spiritual leader). They therefore plea that Becket go back to France. The second priest, hearing the Chorus's reluctance about Becket's return, condescends to them, calling them "foolish, immodest and babbling women." He tells them to put aside whatever unmerited, personal fears they have, and give Becket a "hearty welcome."

Here, the Chorus's initial desire to remain in their currently disappointing yet tolerable state of existence acquires more meaning. Becket's return to Canterbury could spell their ruin, and it seems what they truly fear is his death at the hands of the King. The loss of their spiritual leader and guide would bring their currently tolerable level of suffering to something more overwhelming and extreme. The Chorus is therefore opposed to the priests' view. Further, the priest'condescension towards the Chorus reveals their general disregard for their opinion.

Becket enters the scene, and tells the second priest that the Chorus is not being foolish, but that they "speak better than they know, and beyond your [the second priest's] understanding." He then gives a philosophical description of the relationship between acting and suffering, saying that both are interdependent, "fixed / in an eternal action," and constitute a fundamental pattern to existence. Becket then likens this pattern to a **wheel** that turns and yet is still at the same time.

The image of the wheel—a metaphor for the passage of time, and the way human action can and cannot change the external world—appears here for the first time. Becket's insistence that the Chorus is speaking from a place of genuine feeling, and are not the fools the priests make them out to be, underscores that the Chorus, just like everyone else, is caught up in the unfolding of fate, over which they have little control.

The second priest apologizes for the poor welcome Becket received, as Becket walked in on the Chorus saying they didn't want him to return. The second priest regrets that he and the other priests were unable to prepare an adequate welcome for Becket, since he arrived with such short notice, but the Archbishop says he is more than grateful for whatever accommodations the priest will provide, adding that these are small concerns compared to the greater distresses facing Canterbury.

While the priests care about superficial matters regarding Becket's arrival at Canterbury—such as his accommodations and the way his followers (the Chorus) vocalize their reaction to his return—Becket seems unconcerned. He cares only about the spiritual needs of Canterbury as a whole, and not his material comfort or the fact that the Chorus holds a contrary opinion about his return.

Becket informs the priests that he evaded being killed on the way to Canterbury, because "rebellious bishops" who would have sent spies after him failed to intercept letters he'd sent—letters describing where he'd be going once he left France. In response, the first priest asks Becket if anyone might be following him, and his answer is unusual: Becket describes his enemies like a "hungry hawk" preying on him, but does not make any conclusive statement about whether he feels safe or not. Instead, he says the "end will be simple, sudden," and "God-given," though whether he intends this "end" to be the death of his enemies or himself is unclear.

The calmness of Becket's reply to the first priest's question reveals his lack of concern about the way the future unfolds. He doesn't say how he thinks the "end" should occur—whether he outlasts his enemies or they outlast him—rather, he says that the "end" will be wholly given, or determined, by God; he therefore seems to feel that, however the future unfolds, it will have spiritual merit, because it will be the realization of God's will.

The first tempter, a former friend of both Becket and the king, enters the scene. He says he hopes that, despite the seriousness of Becket's current situation, Becket will nonetheless excuse him for the cheeriness and comparably trivial nature of the topic he wants to discuss. The tempter tries to get Becket to remember when he and the king were good friends, and says that friendship shouldn't let itself be undone by the passage of time. He also thinks that Becket should drop his problems with the king, claiming that mending their relationship will have a trickle-down effect on solving the problems of the Church.

The first tempter is just concerned with restoring the happiness and enjoyment of life in Canterbury's past—he's not invested in any higher spiritual goals. He thinks that restoring happiness—through the mending of Becket's relationship with the king—is the sole solution to the problems facing Canterbury. The first tempter seems unwilling to think that happiness should be sacrificed for spiritual progress or any kind of higher ideal.

When Becket concedes that the first tempter is discussing a past worth remembering, the tempter says he's also talking about the "new season"—about the joys of the incoming spring. But Becket replies that neither he nor anyone else knows about the future, and further, that whatever has happened in the past cannot happen again.

Becket refuses to given in to the first tempter's hopes of restoring the pleasures of the past. Rather, he holds the philosophy that nothing can ever be repeated—and so it would be futile to try and restore his past relationship with the king.

The first tempter gives up trying to convince Becket, saying he'll leave the Archbishop to the pleasures of his "higher vices," mocking Becket's religion. Still, he leaves Becket on relatively friendly terms, saying that if Becket will think of him during prayer, he'll think of Becket "at kissing-time below the stairs."

By calling them "higher vices," the first tempter equates Becket's religious endeavors to merely alternative ways of seeking pleasure. He tries to bring Becket's sense of spiritual superiority to down to the level of simply desiring happiness.

The second tempter enters the scene, and reminds Becket of how they met many years ago. He says that Becket made a mistake when he resigned from the office of Chancellor, to which Henry II appointed him along with the role of Archbishop. This tempter says that the power of the Chancellor is much greater, and more real, than that of the Archbishop. While the power of the Chancellorship is in the present, he says, the holiness of the Archbishop is "hereafter." Becket responds by calling the Chancellorship a "punier power" compared to his own as Archbishop, and says that those who have faith in political, worldly orders not controlled by God only "breed fatal disease." The second tempter leaves, calling Becket a sinner.

The second tempter totally dismisses spiritual power as a valid form of authority that has any effects on the world, claiming that the office of the Chancellorship (a form of worldly or temporal power) holds a more effective power than the Archbishop. This tempter therefore represents an extreme way of thinking about the relation between worldly and spiritual powers. He thinks the spiritual should be totally shunned, whereas the fourth tempter argues for the opposite.

The third tempter appears, and introduces himself to Becket as a "country-keeping lord" and a "rough straightforward Englishman," and not a trifler or politician. He says that country lords like himself are the people who truly know England and its needs. He then starts his proposal to Becket by claiming that, once real friendship ends, it can never be recovered, so there's no hope for Becket to reconcile with the king. But other "friends," the tempter says, can be found in Becket's situation: the country lords like himself—the English barons. He then proposes that Becket help him in a plot to overthrow King Henry II—that Becket procure the Pope's blessing for a coalition of the country-lord middle class, formed with the aim of ending the king's "tyrannous jurisdiction."

The third tempter argues for a total overthrowal of the king—of the prevailing seat of worldly power in England. Yet this tempter's proposal is by no means motivated by spiritual goals—he simply wants to replace one worldly power with another one (a government ruled by the class of country lords). In this way, his proposal contrasts with the fourth tempter's, who argues that Becket should shun the worldly for spiritual reasons. Compared to the second tempter, the third tempter has less lust for authoritarian power, and less disdain for the Church; however, he still sees spirituality as coming second to worldly affairs.

Becket rejects the third tempter's proposal, saying that he'd never betray a king. The tempter leaves, and tells Becket that he hopes the king will one day show more regard for Becket's loyalty.

Becket's claim that he'd never double-cross a king reveals his conviction that, despite the political/religious conflicts he's had with Henry II, he doesn't feel he's ever forfeited his loyalty to the crown.

The fourth tempter enters the scene, and commends the strength of Becket's will in rejecting the other tempters' proposals. He says that kingly rule, and all other political power beneath the king, pales in comparison to spiritual power, and affirms the magnitude of Becket's power as Archbishop, saying that "the course of temporal power" leads only to destruction, instability, and falsity. He further points out the futility and impermanence of kingly rule, since kings just keep dying and replacing one another, implementing new reigns that will never last. The saint and the **martyr**, however, rule from the grave, the tempter says—and he asks Becket to think about such glory after death.

The fourth tempter embodies everything against which the second tempter stands, asserting that true power is spiritual, not temporal, in nature. Temporal power, lacking roots in the spiritual dimension, leads only to worldly chaos, and is not eternal. But spiritual power, precisely because it rules from beyond the grave—in the "hereafter," a trait which the second tempter said made spiritual power useless—is why it's so powerful: it outlasts the temporal, it outlasts life itself.

Ultimately, the fourth tempter tells Becket to follow the path of **martyrdom**—to make himself "the lowest / On earth, to be high in heaven." But Becket is repulsed. He acknowledges that the fourth tempter tempts Becket with his actual, personal desires, while the others have only been concerned with the temporal, worldly order of things—things he actively shuns.

The fourth tempter reveals that Becket is maybe not so personally disinterested in his martyrdom as he may think he is or wants to be. Becket actually is quite invested in his martyrdom in a way that is somewhat selfish at this point in the play; he merely wants the spiritual glory martyrdom affords.

Ashamed that this fourth tempter has revealed his innermost desires, Becket wonders if it is even possible to escape damnation on account of pride (such as his desire for glory and renown because of **martyrdom**). In response, the tempter repeats the same speech about the relationship between acting and suffering (using the image of the **wheel**) which Becket gave to the priests before.

Becket encounters a paradox once his personal desire for martyrdom gets revealed: is it even possible at all to escape being prideful, or desiring things for personal gain? After all, isn't some amount of desire required to do anything, even sacrificing oneself?

After the fourth tempter finishes his proposal, all four tempters, in unison, proclaim that human life "is a cheat and a disappointment," and that everything, for humankind, is either "unreal or disappointing." They say that humans only pass from unrealities to further unrealities, "intent / On self-destruction," and that humankind is the enemy of itself and of its own society.

Based on Becket's insistence in following his own spiritual path away from their worldly temptations (even the fourth tempter invoked worldly desire), the four tempters all conclude that the whole of humankind seeks destruction (like Becket's **martyrdom***) and that the things and ideals it values are always illusory (like Becket's spiritual fanaticism).*

After the tempters give their opinion about the nature of humankind, the priests all plead, in unison, for Becket to not enter a fight he can't win—to not "fight the intractable tide" or "sail the irresistible wind." They want Becket to hold off on immediately implementing his own religious agenda in Canterbury, and wait for the political conflict bred by his presence to cool down.

The priests want Becket to stay alive, and worry that, by entering into conflict with the king, his life will be threatened. They are therefore opposed to Becket's spiritual path, which might require that he sacrifice his life for God.

The Chorus addresses their Lord, Becket, and says that they are not ignorant or idealistic; they say they know what to expect and what not to, and that they are intimately familiar with political coercion and personal/physical hardships. Yet God always gave them some hope, they say, whereas now a new fear haunts them—a fear which they cannot avoid. They say that God is leaving them, and beg Becket to save them by saving himself, for if their Archbishop is destroyed, then they will be destroyed themselves.

The utter powerlessness which characterizes the spiritual and political position of the Chorus keeps magnifying. It becomes more and more apparent that Becket truly isn't safe in Canterbury, and that he's unwilling to tone down his religious fanaticism. Whereas the Chorus always had a sense of hope in the past, living their disappointing but tolerable existence, now they have none in the face of an overwhelming fear (Becket's death).

The first part of the play ends with a monologue by Becket. He's now certain of his fated path, and proclaims that he will never again feel temptation in so overwhelming a manner as the fourth tempter's proposal. The fourth tempter encouraged Becket "to do the right deed for the wrong reason"—to sacrifice himself through **martyrdom** not for a sheer love of, and faith in, God, but rather a selfish desire for spiritual glory and power.

Becket exudes a new confidence in his fated path after having endured the psychological brunt of the fourth tempter's proposal—realizing that to only seek martyrdom for spiritual glory is to totally miss the point, which is the sacrifice of oneself for the will of God, to become an instrument of God's will.

Becket goes on to recount how, in his youth, he sought pleasure in all the wrong, superfluously secular ways, through such means as philosophy, music, and chess. He also reveals that he never wanted to become a servant of God, and says that God's servants risk committing greater sin and experiencing more sorrow than someone who serves a king.

Here, Becket reveals how he's evolved spiritually—how he wasn't always so fervently devout, and invested himself in intellectual pursuits rather than trying to foster a pure faith in God; he also alludes to the fact that, because of the pride potentially involved in being a servant of God, there's greater risk of damnation.

Becket concludes by acknowledging that most people will view his commitment to God and **martyrdom** as fanatical, but he nevertheless commits himself to his divine cause, and asks an Angel of God to protect him from getting caught in the human divide between suffering and action.

Becket continues to exude confidence and a purity of faith, refusing to cater to those who would say his spirituality is overzealous. To stick purely in touch with his fate, he must avoid getting caught in the dualistic, worldly view of suffering and action.

INTERLUDE

In the interlude, Becket gives a sermon on Christmas morning at Canterbury Cathedral, six days after he's arrived in Canterbury. He explains that there is a deep mystery behind Christmas Day—that celebrating the birth of Christ also means remembering his death, such that one must both rejoice and mourn at the same time. Becket says that, from an ordinary, worldly (vs. divine) perspective, this mixture of rejoicing and mourning can appear to be strange, and that Christian experience is unique for having such mysteries at its heart.

Becket emphasizes the distinction between worldly and spiritual perception by noting the simultaneous rejoicing and mourning characteristic of celebrating Christmas. Whereas the worldly view is dualistic, seeing the two as absolutely separate, the unique mystery of Christianity is that the two can somehow be considered together when contemplating Christ.

Becket then asks his audience to consider what 'peace' means. He draws a contrast between a worldly conception of peace and a divine one, asking the congregation to remember that the peace which Jesus said he gave to his disciples was "not as the world gives." Jesus's disciples, he points out, knew no such thing as worldly peace—they were constantly facing hardships and pain.

Becket continues to emphasize the distinction between worldliness and spirituality. Jesus promised a peace that was not sourced in the world—and this is demonstrated by the fact that his disciples suffered immensely. The divine peace offered by Jesus is beyond the bounds of worldly thinking.

Becket turns the congregation's attention to the concept of **martyrdom**, noting that, the day after Christmas, the Church celebrates the martyrdom of Stephen, the Lord's first martyr. He says that celebrating Stephen's martyrdom involves the same mixture of rejoicing and mourning as the celebration of Christ's birth. He emphasizes that martyrs shouldn't be thought of simply as good Christians who've been murdered for being Christians, for this would only involve mourning; nor should they be thought of as good Christians who've been raised to the status of sainthood, since this would only involve rejoicing, "and neither our mourning nor our rejoicing is as the world's is." Further, he emphasizes that martyrs are "made by the design of God," and that martyrdom is not something brought about by the human will or conscious intention. Martyrdom involves total submission to the will of God.

Becket wants the congregation to think about martyrdom from a more divine perspective, to view it in a way that defies everyday, worldly thinking about the human will. Becket says that martyrs do not choose their martyrdom; their death, rather, is a part of God's design—they are instruments of a divine will, a will to which they've wholly submitted. Because of the complexity of martyrdom—of the paradox it causes for thought (as the martyr both submits to God and is simultaneously submitted by God's plan)—the way we celebrate them must match that complexity, and thinking dualistically about mourning and rejoicing fails to do that.

Becket ends his sermon by telling his congregation that he doesn't think he will ever preach to them again. He says that, in not too long a time, they may have another **martyr**.

Becket boldly alludes to the fact that he is pursuing martyrdom himself, foreshadowing his death in the second part of the play.

PART 2

The second part of the play starts in the Archbishop's Hall, on December 29th, 1170. The Chorus begins by lamenting the fact that their suffering seems to be never-ending, and there are very few signs of hope. They say that peace in the world is uncertain, unless humankind remains connected with the peace of God, and also that human warfare defiles the world, while "death in the Lord renews" the world. They end by saying they are still waiting for change, but that "time is short" while "waiting is long."

By insisting that humankind must remain connected to God in order to have some certainty about the existence of peace in the world, the Chorus invokes the worldly/spiritual distinction Becket discussed in his sermon. They reveal their faith in God by saying that spiritual death (sacrifice of their pride to their faith) "renews" the world, and that this is the only real source of peace.

The four knights enter the scene, and tell the first priest that they have urgent business: by the king's command, they must speak with the Archbishop. The priest invites them to have dinner with the Archbishop before they attend to more serious matters, but the knights insist that they do their business with Becket immediately. Becket then enters the scene, and welcomes the knights, saying to the priests that moments which we foresee can arrive at unexpected times. He tells the priests that on his desk they will find his papers and documents signed and in order. The knights tell the priests to go away so that they can speak with Becket alone.

When Becket tells the priests, out of the blue, that they can find his papers on his desk, we can tell that Becket is fully prepared for either his arrest or his murder by the knights. He's left behind all the important paperwork that the priests will need to access when he's gone in order to, presumably, continue to run the Cathedral. His comment about the unexpectedness of predicted moments also hints at his anticipation that this could very well be the moment of his martyrdom.

The knights accuse Becket of betraying the king. They say that, as Archbishop, his duty is to carry out the orders of the king, and that he is fundamentally a servant of the king. But Becket, they say, has cheated the king and lied to him, overstepping the bounds of his authority.

The strong alliance between the knights and the king is revealed here. Like Becket serves the Pope, they serve the king before anyone else, and they believe that Becket has disrespected the more superior power of the crown.

Becket says that the knights' charges are untrue, and claims to be the king's most loyal and faithful subject in the land. He then asks what the real business is which the knights said they had, or if they just came to scold him. They admit that they have something to say, and Becket responds that their message should be announced in public since it was ordered by the king. He says that if they make any charges, he will refute them publicly. The knights then try to attack Becket, but the priests and attendants return before they can do it privately.

Becket is not intimidated by the knights, and goes so far as to tell them how they should do their job—if they make charges, they should be made publicly. He also unflinchingly asserts his confidence by claiming he will definitely refute any charges they make, without even knowing what they are yet. The knights are clearly nervous about attacking Becket, and don't quite know how to coordinate their attack at first.

The knights then begin to elaborate their charges against Becket. The first knight accuses Becket of fleeing England to stir up trouble in France by soiling Henry II's reputation in the eyes of the French king and the Pope. The second knight adds that the king, out of charity, offered clemency despite all of this, and the fourth knight says that Becket showed his "gratitude" only with further dissent, by refusing to acknowledge the legality of the coronation of Henry's son.

The knights all see Becket as a traitor to the crown who had demonstrated absolutely no gratitude for what they perceive to by the king's kindness in dealing with his religious fanaticism. They also think Becket masterminded the soiling of the king's reputation, and not that the French king and the Pope were equally, if not more involved.

Becket replies by saying it was never his wish to dishonor the king; he says he admires the king and the role of the crown, and that he was only ever following the orders of the Pope—orders he does not have the power to change.

Becket disowns any responsibility for the king's lowered status—and even goes so far to say that he never intended it, even though he blatantly executed the orders of the Pope. Instead, he paints himself as an instrument of the Pope.

The first knight accepts Becket's explanation, but says that, regardless, the king's orders are that Becket and his servants depart from England. Becket rejects this, saying that he will never again be separated from his congregation. The first knight then says that Becket is insulting the king by refusing his command, but Becket claims he's not the one personally insulting the king—it's rather a power higher than himself and the king: the Law of Christ's Church and the judgment of Rome. Becket says that if the knights kill him, he'll rise from his tomb and submit his cause before God's throne. Before they leave, the knights threaten to kill the priests and attendants if Becket is not at the Cathedral when they return.

Becket's total submission to the Pope—and therefore to God, since the Pope was viewed as God's mouthpiece—is another instance where we see how he views his own will as being subsumed in a higher power, in the divine will of God. He views his whole being as the executor of this higher law, and therefore denies the first knight's accusation that he, personally, is responsible for effects his actions have had on the king. Even though he performed them (like denying the prince's coronation), they were not sourced in his own, human will.

After the knights exit, the Chorus gives a long account about how they've sensed death in the natural world around them, claiming that their senses have been enhanced by the looming threat of Becket's death. They tell Becket that they have consented to the unfolding of fate, realizing that its forces are beyond their control. They therefore consent to Becket's **martyrdom**, and ask him to forgive their prior ignorance and desire for him to stay out of England.

The Chorus has undergone a substantial transformation—they now have sensed that they are woven into the fabric of fate along with Becket and his imminent martyrdom, and consent to their involvement. They submit themselves to fate, even though for them, it spells a grave despair—the despair that in the play's beginning they were worried about falling into.

The four knights arrive at the Archbishop's Hall, and start to break in. The priests barricade the doors and try to force Becket into hiding, but Becket resists; he says that all his life he has been waiting for this moment. The priests ask Becket what would become of them if he died, but he has no answer—he just says that the outcome is "another theme" to be unfolded in time's patterning, and that the only way he can defend God's Law is to "meet death gladly." Disregarding Becket's command, the priests drag him off to hide him from the knights.

The priests are still radically opposed to Becket's martyrdom, fearful of losing him as the leader of Canterbury Cathedral. Becket cannot give them any guidance about their lives after his death, so he just appeals to fate—to the working out of their lives in time. The priests won't accept this, however; they refuse to submit to the vision of fate which their leader professes. In a way, then, they are even more "tempting" than the tempters themselves, as the priests actually force Becket to seek safety.

The Chorus then laments that Becket's death will bring them face to face with a spiritual reality which he had previously helped with to deal with and, to an extent, diverted them from. The Chorus fears that their souls will be unmasked, nothing preventing the "soul from seeing itself, foully united forever, nothing with nothing." They pray to God to help them face Becket's death.

Becket's authority as a spiritual leader has always, whether he was present in Canterbury or not, given the Chorus a sense of protection from the power of God and fate which they dread. Now, however, they'll be forced to be their own spiritual leaders.

After the Chorus speaks, the scene changes to the Cathedral, where Becket is with the priests. The priests bar the door, but Becket commands them to throw the doors open, saying that the church should stay open, even to its enemies. The priests argue, however, that the knights are not like ordinary men; rather, they're beasts with no respect for the sanctuary, and just like the doors would be barred against the lion or the wolf, so they should be barred against these knights.

The priests continue to resist giving in to Becket's martyrdom. They go against everything for which Becket stands, and refuse to conceive of the church as an open space that even enemies have the right to enter. They refuse to see the cathedral as a spiritual entity that is open to fate, but instead think of it as a worldly stronghold to keep out anything that might pose a challenge to it.

Becket orders them again to unbar the door, and accuses the priests of thinking about this situation in too worldly a manner, shirking a more divine view of the relationship between good and evil. He then says that his decision to commit himself to his **martyrdom** is something that happened outside of time, and not in the worldly order of events. He concludes that the only legitimate way to conquer his enemy is by suffering in the name of the Cross, and again orders the priests to open the doors.

By claiming that his decision to commit to his martyrdom occurred outside of time, Becket hints at a resolution of the paradox between freely submitting oneself to fate and being designed by God to be a martyr—that the very instance when he officially merged with God's will, realizing his fate to become a martyr, actually happened outside the bounds of ordinary human time.

The doors are opened, and the knights enter, a bit tipsy from drinking. The priests still try to force Becket into hiding, and the knights command that Becket show himself. The Archbishop appears, and declares he is ready to give his blood to pay for the death of Christ, to give his own life for His. The knights tell Becket to absolve everyone he's excommunicated, resign his powers, give the king back all the money he's taken, and become obedient to the crown again. In response, Becket again affirms his readiness to die; the knights all shout at him, calling Becket a traitor, and then kill him.

Becket faces his death unflinchingly and with the utmost confidence that he is following the will of God. By refusing to absolve anyone or resign his position, he dies never giving the king, knights, or bishops who are against him the satisfaction of feeling totally justified in their actions. His belief in God comes before every worldly, political commitment he's ever had, and he dies with it being the absolute priority of his being.

The Chorus cries out that the air and the sky be cleaned, and say that they wanted to avoid this outcome—they didn't want anything to happen, but just to continue their old way of life. They say that their suffering was limited and clearly defined before, but now the despair they feel after Becket's death seems out of life, out of time, and is "an instant eternity of evil and wrong."

The overwhelming suffering that the Chorus was wary of at the beginning of the play has been fully unleashed upon their lives by fate. Whereas their suffering before was at least definable and had a sense of limit, now it is infinite and endless, stretching out beyond the limits of normal time.

After the Chorus speaks, the knights, having killed Becket, turn to address the audience. The first knight, Reginald Fitz Urse, says that the other knights are going to give arguments in defense of their decision to murder Becket, and that he'll introduce each one. The second knight, William de Traci, says that the knights had absolutely no incentive to kill Becket in terms of personal gain. Murdering Becket was simply part of their duty to the king; the knights even had to work themselves up to the task, drinking to ease their consciences. De Traci's main point is that the audience should realize the knights were totally disinterested in killing Becket.

Interestingly, T.S. Eliot has the knights turn towards the audience members and directly address them. The knights' arguments largely seem motivated by a desire to not be perceived as villains, as well as a wish to justify Becket's murder to their own consciences. While the knights do give some well-argued reasons, compared to the certainty which Becket had about his martyrdom, the knights seem not quite at ease with their actions.

The third knight, Hugh de Morville, argues that Becket utterly lied to the king and betrayed the power he was given. The king had appointed Becket to be both the Chancellor and Archbishop, thinking Becket to be exceptionally qualified. And, if Becket had acted according to the king's wishes, there would have been a nearly ideal state where spiritual and temporal administration were united. But Becket cheated the king, almost immediately resigning from the Chancellorship when he got it, going against all the kings' policies which he formerly supported, and becoming radically devoted to a spiritual order higher than that of the crown, saying that the two orders were somehow incompatible. He ends by saying that the knights have served the interests of the people and therefore merit applause.

De Morville's argument is perhaps the most well-reasoned of the knights, making the least appeals to the audience's emotions. He paints Becket as a pure traitor—a traitor who needlessly betrayed the king since, according to Becket, the king wanted to unify spiritual and temporal power. But Becket wouldn't even bother meeting the king halfway, and instead invested all his energy into dedicating himself to a higher order over and above any possible reconciliation with Henry II.

The fourth knight, Richard Brito, argues that Becket was fundamentally responsible for his own death. He says that Becket essentially went mad and lost his connection to reason, proving himself to be indifferent to the fate of the country and obsessed with himself. Further, Becket did everything he could to bring his **martyrdom** about—he had determined he would die a martyr and wanted the knights to make it happen. He actively insisted that he be put in the path of their swords by demanding that the doors of the church be unbarred. Brito ends by saying that it would be charitable to Becket's memory to say he committed suicide due to "Unsound Mind," since in the past he had proven himself to be a great man who did good for England.

Brito's shift to pin the responsibility for Becket's death on Becket himself is another effective argumentative strategy. By calling Becket a madman, Brito paints him as a threat to the country and a self-absorbed fanatic. Brito is only able to make this claim, however, because he disregards the possibility that Becket was truly following a plan fated by God, for, by arguing that Becket actively sought out his own death, he implies that nothing behind his martyrdom was sourced in a higher power or has divine merit.

The knights exit, and the priests speak. The first priest says that the Church has been damaged by Becket's death, while the third priest claims that the Church has actually grown stronger because of the Archbishop's martyrdom. He goes on to address the knights (even though they've departed), and tells them to leave England, saying that they will spend the rest of their lives endlessly trying to justify their actions to themselves, "pacing forever in the hell of make-believe." Yet, interestingly, he also says that—though their actions are unjustifiable—this was all somehow part of the knights' fate. The third priest concludes by thanking God for giving them another Saint.

The priests have finally accepted that Becket's martyrdom was fated, and that it was spiritually right for him to die. His death is not a bad thing for the Church, but rather a spiritual fortification of it—the grounds on which Becket died will be forever blessed, and they should be grateful for having another Saint. Further, the idea that the knights were themselves fated to kill Becket makes the entire play—and not just Becket's life—into the unfolding of a divine design.

The Chorus ends the play by praising God, saying that He is reflected and affirmed by everything that exists, and that man must constantly acknowledge Him in thought and in action. Further, they thank God for making Canterbury into holy ground through Becket's martyrdom. The Chorus then asks God for forgiveness, admitting their fear of the surrender which faith in God requires, and the fear of God's love itself. They end the play by asking the Lord to have mercy on them and for Becket to pray for them.

The Chorus has undergone a full 180-degree turn from where they began the play, afraid of being caught up in a despairing fate. Now they've accepted their fate, the world has changed before their eyes, and in that changing they have seen the presence of God in everything—this is the peace they mentioned earlier in the play, achieved by "death in the Lord."

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