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Medieval and Classical elements in Murder in the Cathedral

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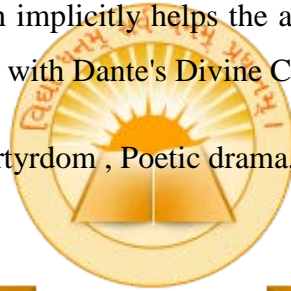
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Abstract

Eliot has worked out a scheme of objective correlative for his dramas by fashioning his plots under the shadow of Greek myths and providing an under pattern of liturgy for all of them. Murder in the Cathedral, Eliot's first successful attempt at poetic drama, admirably illustrates the playwright's effective use of myth and ritual as 'Objective Correlative' in the play which conforms to his technique of the formalist-realist synthesis. Although Eliot was called upon to write this play on the old theme of St. Thomas' martyrdom, on the occasion of Canterbury festival, he was aware of the advantage of addressing a limited audience of Christian people in the Christian theatre. Yet he was trying to install poetry in the theatre even for those who were not interested in theology. Hence Eliot had deliberately chosen to build an outer fabric for the drama under the shadow of a Greek myth, which implicitly helps the audience in understanding the course of the play. Murder in the Cathedral is analogous with Dante's Divine Comedy.

Keywords: Objective Correlative, Martyrdom, Poetic drama, Aeschylean tragedy, Morality play



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In Murder in the Cathedral we have an element of ritual which combines both the Greek and the medieval Christian notion of it. The Greek element can be traced in a close analogy with the Oresteia of Aeschylus in theme, poetic form and imagery and a clear resemblance can also be established with Oedipus Tyrannus of Sophocles. Dante's influence is manifested in Becket's martyrdom which is a sense of Sin and fate modified by the Christian idea of sainthood and crucifixion. According to D.E. Jones, "it is fusion of these elements of Christian drama of the middle ages with the pre-Christian drama of the Greeks yielded a highly original form. Although nearer to Aeschylean tragedy than to any intervening form, it has been perfectly adapted to Christian theology and is very much of its time. Milton's adaptation of the Greek form to a biblical theme is a less radical transformation, for all its touches of the baroque. Eliot's work is nearer the stylization of the Byzantine. Yet it has also a functional simplicity which is peculiarly twentieth century".

Like Sophocles' hero in Oedipus Rex, Thomas is at first ignorant of the nature of the crime in which he is involved; he comes to be aware of it in course of the development of the play. Moreover, one can easily find a parallel between the story of Becket in his Cathedral and that of Oedipus in Sacred Wood which was written by Sophocles as a sequel to Oedipus Rex. The hero of Eliot's Murder in the Cathedral, as well as the hero of Sophocles Oedipus at Colonus maintain the attitude that patience in the lesson of suffering :

"Though he ask little and receive still less,

It is sufficient

Suffering and time,

Vast time, have been instructors in contentment,

Which kingliness teaches too."

Eliot's hero also speaks of the supreme importance of suffering in the same vein –

"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".

In Sophocles' tragedy, Theban people approach Oedipus and even want to carry him off forcibly to his place. But he is able to resist them with the help of Theseus and his people. The tempters also offer Becket various kinds of responsibilities to evade his ultimate responsibility to God. Both the hero's are compelled to recapitulate their past while undergoing these trials. They, however, maintain their stand without flinching a little till they meet with a glorious death - death that brings benefit to their land. Even the people that surround them are sufferers who fail to understand the saint or the hero and try to dissuade him from his path. Thus by running a close parallel between the ancient Greek myth and Becket's story Eliot is able to communicate his ideas to the audience without even imposing anything upon them. The popular Greek myth not only masks Eliot's imagination but also provides him with a frame of reference within which he is able to set up a community of sensibility with the audience of the commercial theatre.

Writing for a religious occasion, Eliot could have worked within the limited range of interest of the Christian theatre, but a sense of deeply embedded tradition that saturates his works inevitably makes the playwright in him so execute the pattern of his play as to evoke the interest of the Broadway people. A queer amalgam of Greek and Christian ideas as manifest in the ritual of Becket's Martyrdom - his acceptance of death and almost the attic representation of the choric utterances and the broad outline of the plot, offer a structure of emotions which appeal both to the religious people as well as to the secular audience of the commercial theatre. This undoubtedly accounts for the remarkable stage success of the play.

Like the hero Orestes in Aeschylean tragedy The Choephoroi, Becket has to atone for the sins of others. He is a Christ who sees that for him to die is more important in the eternal dimension than to accept the reasonable arguments both of his Tempters and the Priests. Murder in the Cathedral is essentially a series of episodes linked by stasima or choral odes. It opens like a Greek tragedy with the speech by Chorus of the women of Canterbury and like its attic counterpart this Chorus gives us a good deal of information about time, place and potentiality of the scenes. The chorus in Murder in the Cathedral has been modeled on the Aeschylean pattern. In fact, Eliot's conception of tragedy which is rooted in the idea of suffering and



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emanates from the idea of original sin is better illustrated by the Chorus of the play. The proper dramatic interest of the play lies in the suggestive movement and action which the choric utterances bring forward. Commenting on the importance of the Chorus in *Murder in the Cathedral* Cleanth Brooks says : "Into the cries of the Chorus he has poured the tragic experience of suffering humanity, caught in the grip of a secret cause : 'we are forced to bear witness' ".

In fact, Eliot has introduced the Chorus in the Greek fashion. It expresses the magic and the movement of the ultimate emotions such as the sense of suffering and sadness, triumph and forbodings of the future and at the same time sheds a lyrical splendour over the whole drama. While in Euripidean dramas the Chorus merely brings relief or just marks a stage of transition from horror or tension to beauty or music, the Chorus of the charwomen of Canterbury forms a living foreground of common humanity above which the hero towers and provides the spectator with his own counterpart. When the Fourth Tempter hurls back at Becket his own ideas of action and suffering, the significance of which he is not sufficiently aware of, the Chorus reproduces the sense of discomfort or insecurity which the common humanity experiences in the presence of the mystery of God's designs.

But Eliot has not indulged in the blind imitation of Aeschylus. He has imparted them a new importance in the light of the Christian dispensation. In Aeschylean tragedy, the Chorus has a character of its own but, for the most part it serves as author's mouthpiece for conveying his vision of the significance of the action. But in *Murder in the Cathedral* the Chorus is much farther individualized. This is due less perhaps to the influence of naturalism and the modern emphasis on individuality than to the implication of Christianity, with its simultaneous emphasis on the precious uniqueness of the individual and the importance of spiritual community. The Chorus represents, in effect, the great mass of individuals which Christ came to save: 'We acknowledge ourselves as type of the common man'. The martyrdom of Becket is likewise on their behalf. The Choruses embody their experience; rather than the author's view of the action. Of course, they speak with his fullness of utterance, not with the limited idiom of real "scrubbers and sweepers".

As Irving Babbit gave Eliot the sophistication to explore the world of ideas, Dante Alighieri brought Eliot's poetry to a sudden and spectacular maturity at an enviable young age. Besides training Eliot in the art and craft of poetry he further gave Eliot a visionary and spiritual order for life. The dramatization of conflict between temporal and spiritual in *Murder in the Cathedral* is analogous with Dante's *Divine Comedy*. According to Dante's political vision as exemplified in *Divine Comedy*, the church, representatives of Gods will in the world calls the individual freely to accept its authority, which binds him not through tyranny but



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through love.

Thus in *Murder in the Cathedral*, modes and elements from the Greek drama to Dante through the Medieval Morality play are brought together to form a play. The poetry reveals in its imagery, the fusion of the Christian and pagan. By reinstating the classical convention of Chorus to intensify the action, adapting it to the modern verse form, and by enriching it by a mythical extension of meaning, Eliot has successfully revived the great tradition of Poetic drama.



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