

The Idea of Murder in Life and Literature with Specific Reference to T.S. Eliot's "Murder in the Cathedral"

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ABSTRACT

"Thou shalt not kill" is a moral imperative included as one of the Ten Commandments in the Holy Bible (https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Thou_shalt_not_kill). However, one finds both in life and literature innumerable instances wherein the commandment has been flouted. The larger question is why is mankind more inclined towards disobedience and violence? As a universal default, one notices among the most prominent of works like **The Holy Bible** instances as Cain murdering Abel; in **Crime and Punishment**, Raskolnikov murdering the pawnbroker; in **Macbeth**, Macbeth and Lady Macbeth murdering Duncan or in **Hamlet** Claudius murdering King Hamlet and so on. There have also been political assassinations as that of Abraham Lincoln, Martin Luther King, Robert F. Kennedy, Julius Ceasar, John F. Kennedy, Mohandas K. Gandhi etc. In fact, the term "Murder" or "unnatural Death" has had a wide array of symbolic implications ranging from retreat, escape, alienation or transcendence. But, quintessentially one needs to examine and understand all the factors including the psychological reasons behind an individual's desire to take the ultimate step of annihilating someone else's life.

Admittedly, the core reason behind seeking to annihilate the ultimate principle - 'life' - of our 'very existence' is vengeance at the material level. It could be for material gains or personal prejudice. However there are also psychological reasons as childhood abuse etc. Interestingly the idea of murder seeks a kind of extermination for personal or social reasons. In other words, the act of killing aims to bring about death not only about the individual but also about effacing the idea of the individual. Hatred, contempt, envy, pride, greed, lust are vices that push a person to murder. Therefore, since the birth of civilization, human consciousness has reflected upon questions as the meaning of existence; whether death is the end of life; does life transcend death; does death imply a finality of sorts. Modern writers too have looked upon death as the ultimate existential dilemma. This paper, thus, proposes, to develop upon the very concept of "murder" and its multifarious ramifications with special reference to Eliot's *Murder in the Cathedral*.

Keywords: Murder, Eliot, Cathedral

T.S. Eliot's **Murder in the Cathedral** is built around the unavoidable murder/death of Thomas as he chooses to be compliant to God rather than give in to the king's unjust commands. The central theme is therefore that of obedience, and Thomas shows himself to be unreservedly obedient, even if it implies death. For instance, Thomas Becket's last speech, where he asks the priests to open the door and let the knights, who he knows will kill him, into the cathedral. He says:

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. (https://en.wikiquote.org/wiki/Murder_in_the_Cathedral)

Thomas willingly gives his life to his God. He, eventually, is strong enough in himself to resist all temptation offered in the form of the Tempters and is then free to face his destiny. Thus in the conflict between spiritual beliefs and earthly temptations, Thomas firmly conquers earthly temptations through his deep-seated obedience.

Now keeping these core threads of **Obedience** and **Resistance** as emanating in **Murder in the Cathedral** (henceforth referred to as MC in the entire paper) in mind, let us examine the possible signifiers that emerge in the process of deconstructing the MC text:

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- The Religious Dimension: Yes, all religions forbid the act of killing or murder. When God said in the sixth commandment, Thou shalt not kill, the command was very clear and specific. Under no circumstances do human beings carry the right to kill their brethren. It is a violation of the very fundamental principle of an individual's existence. The murderous assault of Thomas Beckett by the knights carries defiance and a challenge of all forms of commandments. In other words it explicitly breaches the divine laws ordained by the Church.
- The Psychological Dimension: An act of murder really destroys the person one really is. The knights by submitting themselves to execute an unclear, emotional wish of an intoxicated King are guilty of being rash and judgmental. In fact, they become responsible for defiling both the King and themselves as human beings. The KJV of the Bible rightly says: "Judge not, and ye shall not be judged: condemn not, and ye shall not be condemned: forgive, and ye shall be forgiven." (Luke 6:37) Thus, the real self of all the three stands violated (i.e., the knights, Thomas and the King) at both the psychological and emotional levels. The use of animal imagery (These are not men...but maddened beasts: First Priest, p.79) is also suggestive of the fall from the human state to the animal state and therefore the actions of the knights are in keeping with their beastly state that refuses to see reason when Thomas tries to counsel them. On the other hand, Thomas rises up to the Christ-like state when he forgives the knights as they did not know what they were actually doing.
- The Social Dimension: Thomas Becket's murder can also be seen from the sociological perspective as the act of murder also defies the fundamental tenets of culture and civilization. The knights, thus, are a disgrace to the very idea of preserving and fostering all forms of life. Their senseless brutality is not an act of heroism or love for the country or patriotism (as they tried to justify and rationalize). As such, no form of killing can ever be justified in a civilized State.
- The Literary Dimension: Shakespeare articulated in Hamlet through King Claudius what it meant to murder. He says:

O, my offense is rank, it smells to heaven,
It hath the primal eldest curse upon't—
A brother's murther. Pray can I not,
Though inclination be as sharp as will.
(**Hamlet** Act 3, scene 3, 36–39)

The fear of God has been put into King Claudius by the 'Mouse-trap' scene Hamlet produced at court. The play—which recreated Claudius's fratricide—successfully caught Claudius's conscience. In this soliloquy, Claudius confesses the deed and recoils at its smell. It is "rank" (that is, "rancid"), so rank that the vile odor wafts all the way to heaven. Thoughts of heaven remind him that his crime is the same as Cain's, a crime marked by the "primal eldest curse." Unfortunately for Claudius, although his inclination to repent is as "sharp as will" (is as keen as a desire), he's unable to pray for forgiveness, because he's unwilling to forfeit his ungodly gains. The terms 'offense', 'smell', 'curse', 'murther' - all are suggestive of a consciousness about the nature of crime that Claudius has done, which, in effect is against the spirit of humanity in general.

Take another quote from **Macbeth**, for instance that draws strong parallels with the Murder of Thomas Becket:

Nothing in his life became him like the leaving it.

(**Macbeth** Act 1, scene 4, 1–8)

The traitorous Thane (lord) of Cawdor, who had taken part in Norwegian campaigns against his own king, Duncan of Scotland, is reportedly, executed for treason. However, the manner in which he boldly and courageously faces his death draws a remarkable similarity (only in the manner of facing his execution) with Thomas, who too, stood his ground and faced the knights boldly and courageously. The quote appropriately applies to Thomas, who 'departure' ('leaving the self') was perfectly in total synchrony with his character.

In effect, almost all literary texts examine the idea of murder from a variety of perspectives. From abhorring the act and the person perpetrating the act of murder, one observes that the person who is eventually murdered is made immortal in life and literature. In other words, murder gives perpetual 'life' to the character. Although the 'doer' wanted to terminate him for good, the person is rendered with 'life' and a

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'soul' that transcends periods, ages and history. More than the murderer, it is the person murdered who gains the sympathy of the collective consciousness and unconsciousness of humanity at large and the murderer is subjected to perpetual suffering. Aeschylus rightly observes, *for a deadly blow let him pay with a deadly blow; it is for him who has done a deed to suffer.* (http://www.notable-quotes.com/m/murder_quotes.html/01/04/2016).

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Citation: Dr. Anupam R Nagar, "The Idea of Murder in Life and Literature with Specific Reference to T.S. Eliot's "Murder in the Cathedral"", *Journal of Fine Arts*, 2(3), 2019, pp. 4-6.

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