

## Redemption through Martyrdom: Depiction of Christ Hero Archetype in *Eliot's "Murder in the Cathedral"*

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### Abstract

Mythology began as a way to answer questions about life, explain tradition, build culture and enlighten people. It tries to clarify the role of gods in human life. Mythology has multidisciplinary role as it amuses, connects history and conveys man's relationship to god and the universe. In literature, heroes are vital and the most convincing characters as they are the icons who leave a valuable lesson to the humanity. It was Homer who first established the hero and journey archetypes approximately 800 B.C. and different authors follow the trend of using them in their work of art. Heroes set an example for entire humanity and teach the readers that there are more important things in life than personal benefits as Northrop Frye mentions in his "Myth and Metaphor", "hero goes out to accomplish something" (213). Hero simply does not go out for adventurous journey but is on a quest, to explore the meaning of human situation and the universal values of good and evil. The main purpose of hero is to serve humanity putting his own life at risk. Joseph Campbell in his "Power of Myth" states "the ultimate aim of the hero's quest must be neither release nor ecstasy for oneself, but the wisdom and power to serve others" (XIV). In need Christ hero archetype embraces martyrdom for the enlightenment of entire humanity. The research paper depicts the literary archetype of the Christ hero who undergoes challenges, struggles all the way and sacrifices own life for the salvation of humanity. Thomas Becket's martyrdom in the play is the landmark for the purification of all sins of the people listing him as the Christ figure.

**Keywords:** Archetype, mythology, Christ hero, quest, struggle, sacrifice, wisdom, humanity

Beginning with Homer, Greek and Roman literature included stories about gods and feats of human, and was rich in mythology. Homer is credited with being the first author of western literature. The Iliad tells the story of the Trojan War and the Greeks efforts to free the beautiful Helen who was lured away from her home by the Trojan Paris. The Odyssey tells the story of the Greek hero and warrior Odysseus, his ten-year journey home from the Trojan war, and his fight to reclaim his estate. The Iliad and the Odyssey were the first legendary works of western literature, but the people from the ancient Greeks took them as the living document of their history and were the narratives of the classical golden age of long ago when the gods, one or other way approached Earth and connected themselves with human affairs. In "Art and Experience in classical Greece" author J. J. Pollit states, because of the uncertainties of life, the Greeks had an exceptionally "deep seated need to discover in, order in, or superimpose an order on, the flux of physical and psychological experience" (3). The Greek sought "recognition of order and measure in phenomena which did more than simply satisfy their intellectual curiosity or gratify a desire for tidiness, it also served as that basis of a spiritual ideal for society" (4). T. S. Eliot's *murder in the Cathedral* depicts Thomas Becket as the Christ figure undergoes temptation and embraces martyrdom to set glorious order in the society.

Dictionary defines an archetype as the original pattern or model from which all things of the same kind are copied or on which they are based, a model or first form prototype. In the Iliad and the Odyssey, Homer's epic heroic character Odysseus is the model for the archetype of the hero and their journey. The hero and journey archetypes have come down to modern times through centuries of authors who used the archetype for their own stories as in *Beowulf*, later in the epic poem, *The Divine Comedy* in the fourteenth century. Joseph Campbell in "*The Hero with a Thousand Faces*" puts, "The whole hero life is shown to have been a pageant of marvels with the great central adventure as its culmination. This accords with the view that herohood is predestined rather than simply achieved" (274-5). Hero figure is the most dominant archetype in literature and in popular culture like movies, TV, magazines etc. The hero is the central figure in any type of myth and fits in any number of troupes while they undergo a personal journey or quest to save the world. The various types of myth encompass all different types of heroes because heroes would not exist without the myths.

In literature, the hero figure is not always the powerful one, but often the hero displays the qualities better than others. The obstacles the hero faces cannot be overcome by brute force all the time but the qualities like intelligence, kindness, willingness, sacrifice are as vital as their strength. Campbell further asserts, "the hero is the man or woman who has been able to battle past his personal and local historical limitations to the generally valid, normally human forms" (14). The heroic archetype is a literary or movie character that is all round good. He or she exhibits right deeds, saves people and fights against all obstacles. Such examples of the hero archetype range from Achilles to *Beowulf* via superheroes like Superman, Spiderman and all modern action heroes. Among different types of heroes, the Christ figure hero is an archetypal hero who runs towards danger with a gleam in his eyes when everyone else is running from it. The hero is motivated, brave, optimistic, overly self-confident and even ready to embrace martyrdom for the salvation of entire humanity. One reality is the hero not only becomes heroic figure due to his physical heroic exhibition but also with his spiritual

activities and outstanding sacrifices even with glorious martyrdom which Thomas Becket embodies in the play proving himself as Christ hero archetype.

T.S. Eliot Wrote the play “Murder in the Cathedral” after the devastating first world war. The situation of the world was completely chaotic. Economic depression, unemployment, over population, acute shortages etc. have increased the hardship of life and caused stress and strains and nervous breakdown. So, there was an atmosphere of moral unease and uncertain, a collapse of the faith in the accepted patterns of social relationship and a search for new patterns. The psyche of the people in fact was dominated by evil forces. Among them one hero figure was required who could overcome the evil forces of his unconsciousness. Carl Jung noted that the solution to the conflict within our unconscious mind was a “union of opposites”. “The underlying thought is clear: no white without black, and no holiness without the devil” (339). He believed “...real liberation comes not from glossing over or repressing painful states of feeling, but only from experiencing them to full” (335). Eliot’s hero Thomas undergoes the same situation as the Tempters start to tempt him in various ways. The first three Tempters show him worldly pleasure. The fourth tempter offers him to have personal glory through martyrdom but what is offered by the Fourth Tempter has so far remained in the unconscious mind of Becket. This offer is quite tempting to Becket as he finds himself on the horns of dilemma. As the Fourth Tempter tempts:

Seek the way of martyrdom, make yourself the lowest  
On earth, to be high in heaven.  
And see far off below you, where the gulf is fixed,  
Your persecutors, in timeless torment,  
Parched passion, beyond expiation (*Murder* 48).

After listening to the Tempter, Thomas remained undecided as he was tempted in different ways by three Tempters earlier as he puts:

Thomas  
No!  
Who are you, tempting with my own desires?  
Others have come, temporal tempters,  
With pleasure and power at palpable price.  
What do you offer? What do you ask?

It shows his mental struggle to come up with a right heroic decision. To purify the sins of entire humanity Thomas has seen the urgency of The Christ figure who sacrifices his own life and prepares himself for what as he says in the play:

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. (*Murder* 52)

Thomas becomes ready to embrace martyrdom the right deed though he accepts it for the wrong reason that is the personal glory of sainthood. Thomas has shown the Christian heroism as he partakes of the suffering of Christ in a heroic manner and enacts a second crucifixion.

Thomas Becket showing Christian heroism has wonderfully accomplished the hero’s journey of the quest. He struggled, went through mental and physical agonies, got mentors and supporters, fought against all evil forces and finally came victorious with glorious

martyrdom. He did not return to his worldly home physically but took the heavenly abode liberating humanity. He remained immortal to all. As Joseph Campbell describes the typical stages that a hero encounters on his or her transformative quest: "A hero ventures forth from the world of common day into a region of supernatural wonder: fabulous forces are there encountered and a decisive victory is won: the hero comes back from this mysterious adventure with the power to bestow boons on his fellow man" (30). This story of a hero's quest is clearly seen in Becket's part with his martyrdom he has bestowed the boon on entire humanity. He cleansed the sin of all as Jesus Christ did. Participating in Becket's martyrdom the Chorus who are the representative characters of fellow men and women cry:

We thank Thee for Thy mercies of blood, for Thy redemption  
by blood. For the blood of Thy martyrs and saints  
Shall enrich the earth, shall create the holy places.  
For wherever a saint has dwelt, wherever a martyr has  
Given his blood for the blood of Christ,  
There is holy ground, and the sanctity shall not depart from it.  
Though armies trample over it, though sightseers come  
With guide-books looking over it; (*Murder* 91)

It shows the inner purification and reconciliation to the will of God. They are reminded of God's love and thus they realize the significance of martyrdom for themselves and for humanity at large.

T. S. Eliot has presented a wonderful blend of characterization in the play. He has taken much care in presenting the character of Thomas Becket. The whole drama centers round him. It opens with him, moves on with him, and ends with him. But in "*Murder in the Cathedral*", Becket is not individualized but idealized. He is almost made a convenient vessel for the theme. The conflict between the worldly and the spirituality is embodied in him. There is an intimate relation between Becket and the other characters. They represent various levels of attitude towards the ideal which Becket upholds. The Chorus represent the common folk of Canterbury who do not understand the meaning and mystery of martyrdom. The motivation of Becket and the reactions of the Chorus are two things that make up the real kernel of the play effectively and coherently throughout. On the other hand, the priests are the representatives of the materialistic clergy of the Middle Ages. They are ignorant of the noble motives of their leader. Being too much worldly, they want to use the church as a fortress for their own safety. Similarly, four knights are there who are the blind followers of the king are also the representatives of the merciless ruling class who kill Becket in the play. Apart from these four tempters who are invisible forces are the inclination of Thomas himself, personified for the stage. They are in fact, the four Thomases, and the technique helps wonderfully to bring out the inner conflict of Becket upon the stage. Overall the unique blend of characterization makes the play remarkable.

A martyr is an immortal hero, and Thomas Becket is a martyr. He is ready to face the challenges, endure all sufferings and ultimately he sacrifices his own life for the sake of others as R.P. Blackmur writes, "... a supreme form of human greatness, its expense for the martyr himself and for those less great but bound with it" (188). In its strict ancient sense, the word martyr means witness. The New Catholic Encyclopedia defines a martyr as "a person who has given or exposed his life in testimony to the truth or relevance of the Christian faith." Becket as a martyr is not primarily the sufferer of a cause or who gives up his life for

some religious beliefs; but instead, he is a witness to the reality of God's power. According to the Christian theology, a martyr is one who becomes a witness to Christ, even at the cost of his life. In doing so, he should not be driven by any personal interest. The justification of martyrdom lies in the doctrine of faith, because martyrdom requires the right attitude to God in regards to the martyr. This is made clear at the end of Becket's sermon:

A martyrdom is always made by the design of God, for His love of men, to warn them, to bring them back to His ways. It is never the design of man; for the true martyr is he who has become the instrument of God, who has lost his will in the will of God, and who no longer desires anything for himself, not even the glory of being a martyr. (*Murder* 18)

Thomas Becket sacrifices his life. The action of *Murder in the Cathedral* is based on a sacrifice of historical martyrdom, but it is taken out of that particular context and is made a part of an eternal design.

THIRD PRIEST. Even now, in sordid particulars

The eternal design may appear. (*Murder* 64)

The murder of Becket is not a murder in its historical sense but a sacrifice. This sacrifice of Becket brings a renewed consciousness to the play. D. E. Jones writes in the essay "Murder in the Cathedral" as:

"...with and through chorus, we of the audience are invited to participate in the celebration of the act of martyrdom and to accept the sacrifice of Thomas Becket as made in our behalf. Before, we can do this however, we, like Thomas Becket must undergo temptation, in our case the temptation to deny the efficacy of his sacrifice and its relevance to us (62).

Anyway, the play deals with sacrifice, which is said to have been taken place during the twelfth-century but it is recast and reasserted to the people of twentieth-century as D. E. Jones writes, "for us, therefore, the play is not over; the effect of Thomas' sacrifice continues" (62). Thus, Becket's sacrifice is an act of atonement for the inadequacies of the world. He symbolized Christ who accepted death as an eternal dimension than to accept the arguments, though reasonable of both of his tempters and the priest. Becket's sacrifice is an action out of time, an action which has its full significance in a timeless dimension, where every deed is seen to have either eternal significance or eternal insignificance.

Eliot has skillfully developed many meaningful analogies between Christ and Becket in the course of the play. Very often the Archbishop turns to be a symbol of Christ. He becomes most Christ-like by his witnessing and suffering. Just like Christ, Becket is tested, exalted and murdered, not for his sin but for other men's deeds. His murder is another crucifixion for the sin of the world. He follows the Lord in word, deed and creed. Christian martyr Thomas's return to Canterbury and his death reminds the death of Jesus, the savior of mankind. For the sake of humanity, Christ had to wear the crown of thorns. Becket sacrifices his life also for the sake of entire society. Becket's temptation, his death, his enrollment as saint in the list of martyrs, symbolically present the story of Christ's temptations, enactment of passion. His death and resurrection, as the Third Priest takes the murder as the victory of universal church and thanks God as he says, "Let our thanks ascend. To God, who has given us another saint



in Canterbury” (Murder 90). Thomas is murdered by four knights and Christ was crucified by the worshiper of power. The inclusion of Thomas’s name, into the list of saints resemble the Resurrection of Christ. Thus, Becket’s death is similar to the death of Christ, an act of redemption. He is a Christian, saved by the blood of Christ, ready to suffer with Christ, even at the cost of his blood. Through martyrdom, Thomas made even a new spiritual discovery as Helen Gardner puts, “The hero experiences the change and makes the discovery” (140). His sacrifice has been acknowledged as a Christian heroism which clearly depicts Thomas Becket as the Christ hero archetype as, “...we rejoice that another soul is numbered among the saints in heaven, for the glory of God and for the salvation of men” (*Murder* 56). It shows that the martyrdom has been celebrated as it teaches modern people the significance of sacrifice for the redemption of entire humanity.

Spiritual deadness has overtaken humanity, and man makes no efforts to build the good city of God on earth which demands the Christ figure to manage chaos and confusion. Christ hero archetype transforms the entire humanity through spiritual awareness since it is the root cause of polluted humanism. For this cause the hero undergoes all sorts of physical and psychological temptations and returns as a legendary figure though he loses his physical existence in this world as Jesus Christ. Thomas Becket as the Christ hero archetype enlightens and purifies the sins of whole humanity with his glorious martyrdom. His martyrdom is regarded here as Christian martyrdom. Becket confers a precious message to all modern people that beautiful world can be realized when we return to God acknowledging true sense of spiritual love and care.

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