***Murder in the Cathedral* (1935):
Internal, Ecological, Civil, and Ecclesial Order**

“We are really, you see, up against the very difficult problem of the *temporal*  and the *spiritual*, of which the problem of Church and State is a derivative. The danger, for those who start from the temporal end, is Utopianism; settle the problem of distribution—of wheat, coffee, aspirin or wireless sets—and all the problems of evil will disappear. The danger for those who start from the spiritual end, is Indifferentism; neglect the affairs of the world and save as many souls out of the wreckage as possible. Sudden in this difficulty, and in pity at our distress, appears no one but divine Sophia. She tells us that we have to begin from both ends at once. She tells us that if we devout ourselves too unreservedly to particular economic remedies, we may only separate into minute and negligible chirping sects; sects which will have nothing in common except the unexamined values of contemporary barbarism. And she tells us, that if we devote our attention, as do some of our French friends, to *le spiritual*, we may attain only a feeble approximation to catholicism, and a feeble approximation to Guild Socialism.”—“A Commentary” from *The Criterion* (January 1935)

“It must be said bluntly that between the Church and the World there is no permanent *modus-vivendi* possible. . . . To accept two ways of life in the same society, one for the Christian and another for the rest would be for the Church to abandon its task of evangelizing the world. For the more alien the non-Christian world becomes, the more difficult becomes its conversion. The Church is not merely for the elect—in other words, those whose temperament brings them to that belief and that behaviour. Nor does it allow us to be Christian in some social relations and non-Christians in others. It wants everybody, and it wants each individual as a whole. It therefore must struggle for a condition of society which will give the maximum of opportunity for us to lead wholly Christian lives, and the maximum of opportunity for others to become Christians.”—broadcast talk, “Church, Community and State” (February 1937)

“The Christian thinker—and I mean the man who is trying consciously and conscientiously to explain to himself the sequence which culminates in faith. . . –proceeds by rejection and elimination. He finds the world to be so and so; he finds its character inexplicable by any non-religious theory; among religions he finds Christianity, and Catholic Christianity, to account most satisfactorily for the world and especially for the moral world within; and thus, by what [John Henry] Newman calls ‘powerful and concurrent’ reasons, he finds himself inexorably committed to the dogma of the Incarnation.” –Introduction to The *Pensées* of Pascal (1958)

**Exploratory Questions**

* How do we confront and overcome temptation?
* Should the Church (or churches) have different jurisdictions from that of the State? Why and/or why not?
* Is there a difference between the natural and supernatural?
* What is the meaning of martyrdom? Is it always admirable?
* Is worship dramatic? In what ways?
* Is the law dramatic? How so?

*Murder in the Cathedral* was T.S. Eliot’s third play, his second play commissioned for the Anglican Church, and his first true dramatic success. Like *The Rock*, it was directed by E. Martin Browne, and was first performed on 15 June 1935 in Canterbury Cathedral’s adjacent chapter house. Robert Spraight played the role of Thomas a’ Becket. In November, the production moved to London where it performed for a year at the Mercury Theatre, then afterwards at the Duchess Theatre. It also toured in the United States to great success.

*Murder in the Cathedral* is a play that explores the nature of order and temptation at four levels:

1. *individual, spiritual order*—the subjective-discipline of the self in the face of the lure of power, pleasure, or advancement;
2. *ecological order*—the cyclical patterning of the natural and social worlds, i.e. life and death;
3. *civil order*—the nature of political power and control among legal and royal entities;
4. *ecclesial order*—the question of accountability within and to Church authority, as well as the nature of *anathema*, the power of excommunication and damnation claimed by the Roman Catholic Church.

Among other aspects of these four centers of order, there is the question of how the natural and the supernatural relate to one another. Are they the same order, two entirely separate orders, or related in some kind of overlapping fashion?

**Political**

* Becket is offered a return to political power (27-30).
* He is tempted to operate through physical/political force (15-17, 29-30).
* He is threatened with political danger (23).
* He is accused of a lack of national loyalty (59ff.).
[Compare with the knights' rationalizations for their behavior (cf. 78ff.)]

**Pastoral**

* He has the safety of his congregation to be concerned about (19-21, 43-44).
* He has his congregation's guidance to be concerned with (65).
* He has an ecclesiastical power/office to maintain (65-66, 73).

**Historical**

* He is tempted with a return to his past successes (24-25).
* He is tempted to return to a younger, "spring" of life (24).
* He is tempted with the fear of being forgotten (38-39).
[Note: The wheel motif (25, 40-41).]

**Sainthood**

* He could do the right thing in the wrong way (30, 39-40, 44).
* He is tempted with despair (41-42).
* He must abide by the way of suffering (22-23, 73-74).
* His life must be a testimony to God's purpose for humanity and God's ultimate control (12-13, 48-49, 70, 74).
[Admittedly, this is less a temptation than the larger theological underpinning of the play.]

**Discussion Questions**

1. What distinctions would you draw between the “natural” rhythms of the women of the chorus and the “supernatural” explanations of the Church?
2. How does the theme of suffering play itself out in *Murder*?
3. How would you describe the nature of Henry II’s civil order?
4. How would you describe the parallels between the four tempters and the four knights?
5. Is the fourth tempter good or evil? On what basis?
6. Does the play have a message about internal (i.e. spiritual) discipline?
7. What structural purpose does the Christmas sermon serve in the play?
8. Does it change things if the play is performed in a church or on church property?
9. Does it matter whether the events of the play are fictional or historical?
10. Has history proved Becket or the Knights correct? Explain your reasons.
11. What is the effect of the poems?
12. How would you characterize the poetic concepts? The use of verbal music?