

Versification and Imagery in "Murder in the Cathedral"

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Abstract;

The imagery used by T.S. Eliot in *Murder in the Cathedral* is as functional and dramatically valid as the verse form he uses. Each image helps to convey the meaning of the dramatist and to intensify the emotion concerned. The style and versification of the play was determined by Eliot's intention of restarting the tradition of poetic drama in a way suitable to contemporary taste and situation.

Keywords: Rhetorical devices, antithesis, cumulative effects, an elaborate alliteration reminiscent, English verse, contemporary relevance, poetic drama.

Introduction:

At the time Eliot wrote *Murder in the Cathedral* he believed that the verse in poetic drama ought to have a distinctive poetic quality. Poetic drama had to be revived and to revive an interest, emphasis should be laid on the fact that what the audience was hearing, was verse. "Murder in the Cathedral", the first religious verse drama in Eliot's career as dramatist. One of the most unique features of 'Murder in the Cathedral' is that it is in verse. Eliot produced a verse drama in an era when such an attempt was highly uncommon. As he says,

" So we introduce rhyme, even doggerel, as a constant reminder that it is verse and not a compromise with prose."¹

It was later that Eliot reconsidered his opinion and said that the audience should not be made aware that it is listening to poetry. Thus in *Murder in the Cathedral* the element of poetry is stressed rather than minimized or kept in the background. It is also to be noted that the subject of the play by its very

nature allowed more' 'Obvious poetic effects" than we find in Eliot's other plays.

Murder in the Cathedral stirred a wave of revolution in the world of English drama, since it was a play in which its author succeeds in reanimating a literary form which in England had been dead or dormant for nearly three centuries. The emotional sublimity heightened by the tragic splendour, which Mr. Eliot created most artistically in this play, makes it almost a land-mark in the neo rhymed dramatic epoch of the history of English literature. In this play "Eliot has succeeded in combining lucidity and precision with an uncommon vigour that fully justifies his departure from the customary forms of dramatic verse."²

Eliot's views on versification in context to Murder In The Cathedral

Murder in the cathedral, however, justifies even some of his later views. Eliot said that poetry should not be used as mere decoration but should be dramatically justified. It is to be observed that in all

the passages in the play, the versification and the poetry are indeed suited to the situation and person speaking and it is in moments of intense emotional excitement that the greatest poetry is found, for Eliot says, verse is the natural medium of expression at such moments. As such, the subject of poetic drama has to be different—what can be adequately written in prose should not be written in verse. Verse should be used for plays dealing with the deep 'emotions and passions of men'. As has been remarked earlier, the subject of this play is suitable for the subjects in verse there have been a tradition of trading historical subjects in verse. Characters in a historical piece were expected to contemporary speech. Another factor that made Eliot "freer" in the use of verse was that the play was for a festival audience prepared to put up with poetry.

Use of Rhetorical devices

Eliot, under these special circumstances, is justified his use of rhetorical devices such as balance, antithesis, cumulative effects, and even, from time, an elaborate alliteration reminiscent of old English verse. As he says:

"Shall I, who keep the keys,
Of heaven and hell supreme alone in England,
Who bind and loose, with power from the pope,
Descend to desire a punier power?
Delegate to deal the doom of damnation,
To condemn kings, not serve among their servants,
In my open office."³

This massive, almost ponderous effect is particularly suited to the acoustic peculiarities of churches, where speeches must be slowed down and enunciated clearly in separate phrases if it is not to be confused in transmission. As D.E. Jones says very correctly,

"Delegate to deal the doom of damnation " is particularly effective as an evocation of the awful solemnity of excommunication,"⁴

The use of verse by Eliot intensifies the drama of Becket's inner struggle with evil, and his ultimate conquest of it.

Technical skill

A dramatist writing poetic drama has a difficult task to handle for he has to solve the problem of communication—his meaning has to be transmitted immediately to a strange audience through strange actors and directors. Thus the writer has to exercise artistic self-control in the interest of dramatic effectiveness. Eliot's style and versification in *The Murder in the Cathedral* is a tribute to his technical skill.

Diction

Eliot realized that the subject eschewed the use of the exact vocabulary and style of modern conversation—as he had to take the audience back to a historical event. However, he could not be archaic either as he wanted to point out the contemporary relevance of the theme. The style, therefore, had to be natural, committed neither to the present nor to the past. Thus, Eliot developed a style suitable for all times.

Rejection of Blank Verse

Eliot had said that the attempts at the revival of poetic drama had failed to a large extent because they had been pale imitations of Shakespearean blank verse. He himself thus carefully avoids the use of this mode of versification as he felt that its potentialities had already been exhaustively explored and it had lost its flexibility. As such it

could not be used effectively any longer, and was unfit for dramatic dialogue. Therefore while writing *Murder in the Cathedral*, he kept in mind the versification of everyman. He says,

"An avoidance of too much iambic, some use of alliteration, an occasional unexpected rhyme, helped to distinguish the versification from that of the 19th century"⁵

In his versification he has used a combination of long times and short lines with a number of stressed syllables (usually three or four). In some passages, there is an assertive quality given to the four-stressed line and it is combined with alliteration.

Use of Prose

Eliot had remarked that prose should not be used in poetic drama if it was to be revived, because prose would make the audience too conscious of the poetry. Yet he makes use of it in two passages in his own play-for the Archbishop's sermon, and the Knight's Apologia. However, the uses of prose in these passages have their reasons and functional value.

"In either case the shift to prose marks a shift in the relation between the audience and what is going on in the play. Also a sermon would have been too jarring and unconvincing in verse and the prose of the Apologia of the Knights emphasizes that they are directly addressing the 20th century audiences".⁶

Eliot again says that,

"The use of platform prose is intended, of course, to have a special effect, to shock the audience out of their complacency and bring home to them the significance of the play's theme in the contemporary times"⁷.

Varied verse form to suit emotion and character

In *Murder In The Cathedral* the medium is made to suit perfectly the emotions to be expressed and the characters expressing them. As Maxwell says:

"The verse varies from the slacker, extremely conversational pitch of the lighter passages, to the tightened rhythm of the more emotional. Eliot offers a verse which suggests the contemporary environment, and which deliberately, for a great part of the play, approaches prose very closely, yet remains sufficiently far from it not to jar on the ears when the more emphatic verse is used."⁸

He cites the example of the messenger. A pompous banality appears in his prosaic: "You are right to express certain incredulity".

"The streets of the town will be packed to suffocation"

But it leaves place for being modulated into the more harmonious,

"Strewing the way with leaves and late flowers of the season"⁹

Thus keeping in touch with the more intense passages, the pattern of the verse can be seen as a planned modulation of the conversational basis.

Varieties of meters

Eliot employs a number of different metres in *Murder in the Cathedral*. He was free to exhibit the fact that he was using verse and indeed was inclined to "obtrude the verse form upon the audience". Thus there was plenty of excuse for using a considerable variety of metres. He further developed the style suitable to each kind of scene and thus his verse forms become integral to the play as a whole. Martin Browne says of the different metres employed:

"The most superficial level, that of the quarrels between Becket and the knights, is rhymed

doggerel...More subtle, and sometimes rather crabbed, is a four stress rhyming verse for the Tempters who dramatize the tortuous progress of Becket's inner struggle... There is an easy, near blank verse for the dialogue with the Priests and Women...And for the Chorus, a very varied series of forms, from the three-stress lines of the women's domestic talk...to the long complexes of pleading or of praise. In addition Eliot has...used the rhythms of two more Christian hymns as ground bass (bases) of choral odes"¹⁰.

The Chorus

The chorus plays a very significant part in the play by providing necessary links and information the audience. It also guides the emotions of the audience by changing the tone of its own voice as per the situation.

The idea of "chorus" in Eliot's play is taken from the Greek drama. Before speaking of the chorus in Eliot's "Murder in the cathedral", Eliot achieves the greatest poetical success in this play with the Chorus. The most interesting dramatic verse is to be found here,

"We do not wish anything to happen,
Living and partly living.

There have been oppressing and luxury,

There has been poverty and licence,

There has been minor injustice,

Yet we have gone on living,

Living and partly living....."¹¹

The very style of versification—easy, simple, repetitive phrasing and slack rhythm—communicates the sense that these are misfortunes of daily life, a part of their mundane existence and accepted as such.

We can take another example of Chorus:

"I have smelt them, the death bringers, senses are quickened,

By subtitle forebodings: I have heard,

Fluting in the night time, fluting and owls, have been at noon,

Scaly wings standing over, huge and ridiculous."¹²

We can easily observe how the disorder expressed by the words are also reflected in its "long irresolute lines" and how towards the end it becomes a balanced order of versification and phrasing to match the more balanced thought as the Chorus recognises its responsibility:

"Have I not known, what was coming to be? It was here, in the kitchen, in the passage,

In the mews in the barn in the byre in the market place

In our veins our bowels our skulls as well"¹³.....

The influence of Biblical verse, with its simple syntax emphatic repetitions, and rhythmical variety is to be found in the Choruses. Choric verse in general is difficult to formulate as it is, by its very nature, different from the meters of dialogue. It is collective speech, care must be taken that the sense of the speeches is not lost, thus it has to be emphatic.

It must, therefore, be rhythmic, and cannot go in for too much variation of speech and tone or voices speaking together cannot cope with it. At the same time, if meter is too regular, there is a danger of reducing the speech to monotonous, "sing song ". Eliot manages to evade both dangers by using free meters and infuses it with the necessary variety by varying the length of line. He makes variety inherent in the metrical structure.

Eliot's Use of Imagery

Eliot's use of imagery is as functional as his versification. It is not merely for decorative

purposes. The images help to convey the author's meaning more precisely, while contributing to the Emotional intensity as well. It is through the image of the wheel and its still point, the point of intersection of Time and the timeless, that the idea of Incarnation and the surrender of the will are expressed. The image may be said to be at the heart of Eliot's poetry and it has a relation with the image of the "rose-garden" which, according to Leonard Ungar, stands for the moment of contact with reality and also for a moment of sudden illumination and rare consciousness. The idea of timeless reality glimpsed in the world of Time is one to which Eliot returns again and again. The death of Thomas marks one such moment and a characterization of its significance could be found in "The Dry Salvages". Once again it is the Chorus that exemplifies Eliot's use of imagery. The principal images are drawn from two sources, from nature and from the life of the poor. The loneliness of their lives which is at a level barely above that of animals—"Living and partly living".

Imagery of Nature

Murder in the cathedral presents a cycle of spiritual experience. The Chorus represents a pattern of spiritual development and this pattern is given wider implications by the overtones of seasonal renewal. The imagery of nature is here important. Grover Smith comments aptly, "The cycles of day and night, summer and winter, spring and autumn relate the Chorus with the great turning wheel of creation and corruption, growth and run".¹⁴

Imagery of seasons

At the beginning of the play, the Chorus's unwillingness to submit to spiritual rebirth is

embodied in its rejection of the return of life with the spring. They want the Archbishop to go back and they fear the disturbance of the quiet seasons, as something sterile and destructive:

"Winter shall come bringing death from the sea,
Ruinous spring shall beat at our doors
Root and shoot shall eat our eyes and ears,
Disastrous summer burn up the beds of our streams
And the poor shall wait for another decaying
October."¹⁵

At the end, the seasons are no longer "disturbed" and the voices of the seasons, the scuffle of winter, the song of spring, the drone of summer are evidence of the spiritual that has come about through Thomas's martyrdom. Thus, the Chorus's spiritual development is represented in the development of the imagery. This is seen in the use of any type of imagery in the play.

Order and disorder

All the images proceed from representing slight disturbance initially through a gradually heightening sense of chaotic disorder, to the end in which order is established. The Chorus is unwilling to give up the "order" of their mundane existence, but they have to learn that these have to be disturbed in the interests of establishing a greater "spiritual order" in a state of "spiritual wasteland." Man is a combination of the animal and the angel, i.e. sense and intellect. Maintenance of order requires that man should subordinate the sensual to the spiritual. Order is disturbed when man succumbs to the sensual and to the animal, at the expense of the spiritual. In becoming bestial man has come down from his position as a link between the animal and the angelic and hence there result disorder in the

natural world. And martyrdom reaffirms order, reproducing, as it does, the pattern of the Atonement. The order is menaced by the agents of martyrdom who in this case are the Knights.

Animal imagery

The animal imagery is very clearly a part of this order-disorder pattern. Firstly, it is used to characterize the agents of disorder, the Knights. They themselves compare themselves to beasts as they ridicule Thomas:

"Come down Daniel to the Lions Den".¹⁶

They are called "men who would damn themselves to beasts" By one of the priests. The last Chorus of part I associates beasts to Lords 'of Hell'—"Puss-purr of leopard, foot-fall of padding bear. By Inference the Knights are also Lords of Hell—personification of Evil.

The zoological imagery also serves to associate the passive chorus with unredeemed, elemental nature. They feel themselves involved in this bestial degradation:

"What is woven in councils of princes
Is woven also in our veins, our brains
Is woven like a pattern of living worms,
In the guts of the women of Canterbury"¹⁷

They share the disorder brought by Evil in their "consent " to martyrdom. They are:

"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."¹⁸

Eliot here presents a vision of a universe without order. The order of time is disrupted. The merry fluting of a summer afternoon is heard at night. Bats with scaly wings are seen at noon. Death exists even the most delicate and beautiful flowers.

"I have seen

Trunk and horn, tusk and hoof, in odd places"¹⁹

There seems no meaning or sense in nature any longer. There is completed chaos and everything is topsy-turvy and the women of Canterbury see themselves part of this disorder and are caught in the,

"Rings of light coiling downwards, descending to the horror of the ape."²⁰

As Thomas is killed, the Chorus feels at first that the blood of Thomas is defiling the land, the beasts and themselves.

But in reality the martyrdom denotes spiritual renewal and there is a corresponding re-assertion of order in Nature and the proper relation of man to the animal creation.

Every being of Nature has returned to its proper place and there is harmony once again; there is "pattern" established and the affirmation of God's glory by all things created.

Resolution

In the last Chorus the recurrent images of the play (the wasteland, the seasons, be and birds, the everyday tasks, the blood of redemption) are gathered together and resolved in a significant pattern. They all fit together in the scheme of God's providence: by the blood of redemption fertility is restored to the Wasteland so that the rhythm of the

seasons can remain undisturbed, the natural order can be preserved, men can perform their seasonal task and give articulate praise not just for themselves, but for the beasts as well, and all creatures are secured in their ordained places, fulfilling their role in "the eternal design".

Conclusion

T. S. Eliot's *Murder in the Cathedral*, in fact, forms a distinct milestone in the journey toward the resuscitation of a modern poetic drama since here an author regarded by many of the younger generation as their chief master, turned to the theatre and sought to apply his characteristic style to its purposes. The emotional power given in the play, gave assurance to those who had been pleading for the application of poetry to the stage, and convinced those who had hitherto doubted of the possibility of finding a dramatic speech based on the prevailing qualities found in modern verse.

Eliot said that something special about poetic drama was the existence of an under-pattern, "a sort of doubloons in action" a meaning on different planes of awareness, intellectual, sensual and spiritual. These demands of poetic drama have been fulfilled by Eliot through phrase, imagery and rhythm. His imagery enhances the richness and texture of his verse. Only poetry can express the intensity of emotional excitement and Eliot does, not do only this as a poet; he does so in a dramatic verse which he has developed from contemporary idiom. It remains to say of the verse with scan Lucy: "the language is the verse, which is the action which is the theme, which is the atmosphere, which is the meaning" 'It is the power of the dramatic verse that gives the play its unique quality of unity and intensity.

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