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# **REFERAT**

**ISHI**

**Theme: Literary activity of Sir Thomas More**

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- 2. The Trial of Sir Thomas More, 1535**
- 3. A Chronology of More's Life**
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## Sir Thomas More

Thomas More rose from humble origins to achieve the highest political and judicial office of England, second only to that of the king. He was recognized throughout early sixteenth-century Europe as one of the great lawyers, Christian humanists, and classical scholars of his day. Even at a very early age, More gave clear evidence of his uncommon gifts. Because of this, a family friend successfully persuaded his father to allow him to attend Oxford University. More so enjoyed his studies there that his father became alarmed. Two years into the program, he decided that his son should learn something useful. Under what seems to have been considerable coercion, Thomas returned to London to study law at New Inn. Although this law program was among the best and most demanding in London, More found time to continue his study of Greek, philosophy, literature, and theology with such world-renowned teachers as Linacre, Grocyn, and Colet, as well as with the pious and learned Carthusians.

Meanwhile, More excelled at his legal studies at the New Inn. Once finished, he read through the law again at Lincoln's Inn for two more years, after which he was chosen as reader at Furnivall's Inn and reappointed for three successive years - a considerable honor for such a young man. During these years of studying and teaching, More continued an intense life of prayer, during which time he sought to discern his vocation in life. By the age of 25, More was convinced that his place was with city and family, not monastery and cell. At 26 he was elected to Parliament; at 27 he married Jane Colt and fathered four children in the next five years. Jane died when More was 33, leaving him with four young children during the height of his career as a lawyer. Despite his deep sorrow, he married again within one month for the sake of his children. He married the best woman he knew, Alice Middleton, who had neither his interests nor his playful temperament and who was six or seven years his senior. As Erasmus recounts, she was "neither a pearl nor a girl ... but a shrewd and careful housewife." He marvels that More's life with her is as pleasant and agreeable as if she had all the charm of youth, and with his buoyant gaiety he wins her to more compliance than he could by severity."

With his gifts of intellectual genius and endearing wit plus his reputation for virtue, More was much sought after as a lawyer and diplomat. He was chosen, for example, by the London merchants to represent them on three major embassies to foreign countries. At the age of 32, he began his work as a judge, a position that made him well-known and loved among the general London citizenry.

Throughout these years, More was also active in the areas of literature and philosophy. The *Utopia*, a work considered by some to be one of the finest Socratic dialogues of all time, has long been recognized as his masterpiece. After fifteen years of prosperous civic life, More was called to serve the King at court, a position he did not and would not seek out. Early on, he was well aware of the dangers of political life; he valued his freedom for family and writing, and he knew that giving up his lucrative law practice to enter public service would cost him a considerable portion of his income. Yet as a loyal citizen, More considered it the "duty of every good man" to contribute to the service of his country. Once in the King's service, More commanded Henry VIII's friendship and trust, serving primarily as his personal secretary, but with some administrative and diplomatic responsibilities. He rose steadily over the next ten years, finally becoming Chancellor in 1529, at the age of fifty-one. As Chancellor, More concentrated on two major tasks: (1) streamlining and improving the judicial system; (2) addressing and personally refuting errors which he considered seditious and destructive of both state and church. In fulfilling this latter task, he collected evidence which resulted in the execution of three persons. Although these executions have captured the imagination of many scholars today, More spent most of his working hours trying to fulfill his function as chief justice of the land. In the assessment of Tudor historian John Guy, More made substantial contributions in this area, reforming the legal system far more effectively than Cromwell would later, in his far reaching legislative reforms of the 1530s. More was Chancellor for only thirty-one months. He resigned on May 16, 1532, the day after Henry VIII and Cromwell manipulated the Parliament to take away the traditional freedom of the Church, a freedom that had been written into English law since the Magna Carta. At issue was the survival of the Church as well as the nature of law and the scope of the state's legitimate authority. Imprisoned in the Tower of London for fifteen months before his execution, More was heavily pressured by his family and friends to sign the oath accepting Henry VIII as the Supreme Head of the Church in England. More steadfastly refused but never expressed animosity towards those who complied. During this time, he wrote a number of devotional and exegetical works, including *A Dialogue of Comfort Against Tribulation*, *A Treatise on the Passion*, and *The Sadness of Christ*. That More was God's servant first and foremost was readily seen in his life of prayer and penance. From the time he was a young man, More started each day with private prayer, spiritual reading, and Mass, regardless of his many duties. He lived demanding mortifications in his characteristically discreet and merry manner. He generously cared for the poor and needy, and involved his own children in this same work. He had special devotion to the Blessed Sacrament, to frequent meditation on the Passion, and to the rosary. More was executed on July 6, 1535, and canonized on May 19, 1935. He has become a symbol of professional integrity, famous for the balanced judgment, ever-present humor, and undaunted courage that led him to be known, even in his own lifetime, as the "man for all seasons."

## **The Trial of Sir Thomas More, 1535**

The following, sadly, is a true story. It is the story of Sir Thomas More, beheaded in London in 1535.

Thomas More was born in London on February 7, 1478. He was educated at St. Anthony's School in London, then the best in the city. More managed to get a placement with the family of the Archbishop of Canterbury through his father's influence. Sir Thomas More, Senior, was a prominent local barrister. Thomas Junior went on to study at Oxford where he wanted to learn Greek. But Greek was frowned upon by the elite because it was thought that it would give young people access to "novel and dangerous ways of thinking." Couldn't have that. More's father removed him from Oxford and sent him to tutor in law. More soon became a lawyer (barrister) like his father but he did not lose his interest in Greek studies and he read all the Greek books that he could. When he was about twenty, he toyed with the idea of becoming a monk, fasting every Friday, sleeping on the ground with only a log as pillow. But he soon bored of that and then befriended Erasmus, then an "prince of learning" and More renewed his learning of Greek. He began to translate Greek publications in English. He also continued his career as a barrister and was elected to Parliament in 1504. In 1515, Thomas More published Utopia, in which he theorized about the perfect world. In Utopia, More foresaw cities of 100,000 inhabitants as being ideal. In his Utopia, there was no money, just a monthly market where citizens bartered for what they needed. Persons engaged to each other were allowed to see each other naked before marriage so that they would know if the other was "deformed". Six years before Utopia was published, Henry the 7th died and he was replaced by son, Henry the 8th. King Henry took a liking to Thomas More although More did not reciprocate. The King was known to put his arm around More. "This growing favour, by which many men would have been carried away," writes the Encyclopedia Britannica "did not impose upon More. He discouraged the king's advances, showed reluctance to go to the palace and seemed constrained when he was there. Then the King began to come to More's house and would dine with him without previous notice." Privately, More did not like Henry the 8th and told his oldest son-in-law that "if my head would win him a castle in France, it should not fail to go." More was right. Henry the 8th failed miserably as King. He divorced his first wife (and his brother's widow), Catherine of Aragon, the daughter of the King of Spain and married Anne Boleyn, without the blessing of the Pope. More was a devout Catholic and believed deeply in the supremacy of the Pope and the impropriety of this marriage. It would be his downfall.

Henry promoted More until More became Lord Chancellor. As such he was master of equity law and of the Court of Chancery, the most powerful judicial office in the land. But, in 1532, when he saw that King Henry was determined to marry Anne Boleyn and that divorce was in the air, rather than stay in the King's cabinet, he claimed ill health and was allowed to retire from the bench.

That's when things started to deteriorate for him. The King invited him to the marriage with Boleyn and More declined to attend. His refusal was a kiss of death. Once it became public knowledge, all the king's brown-nosers kicked into high gear. He was summoned to the court to answer an obscure charge of accepting a bribe while Lord Chancellor. When his daughter brought him news that the charge was dismissed, he said "quod differtur, non aufertur" or "that which is postponed is not dropped." Sir Thomas More was a marked man.

In 1534, Henry enacted a law which declared him supreme ruler of the world, bar none, including the Pope. All citizens were to accept this by oath. More said thanks, but no thanks. Henry threw him into the Tower of London where for a whole year he was locked up, denied pen, paper or books. His wife and children visited and begged him to submit to the oath but More refused on principle. More was questioned several times by friends of the king but he was always careful never to say anything against the King personally; just that he could not stomach the oath required by the Act of Supremacy. It was on May 7, 1535 that More was dragged to trial, charged with treason for failing to take the oath. He could barely walk from his 14-month confinement.

There were seven judges including the new Lord Chancellor, Thomas Audley. More was immediately told that he could even yet take the oath and beg the King's pardon and be saved. Sir Thomas More declined. More, still one of the country's best barristers, complained first of his long imprisonment and how he was in no condition to defend himself. A chair was brought in for him and he was allowed to sit down. More made an impassioned defence, saying that he had always told the King his personal opinions when asked. He then complained about the Act which seemed to allow conviction from silence. "Neither can any one word or action of mine be alleged or produced to make me culpable. By all which I know, I would not transgress any law, or become guilty of any treasonable crime for no law in the world can punish any man for his silence. This God only that is the judge of the secrets of the hearts." And then Sir Thomas More's trials took a dramatic turn. The King's solicitor general was sworn in as witness and testified that More has "confessed" to him, in a private conversation in the Tower of London several months earlier. According to Richard Rich, More had linked the King's supposed "supremacy" with the right of Parliament to depose of the sovereign. How, then, could Parliament depose of a King if he were supreme, More had allegedly asked? This was sensational testimony and would suffice to convict More. More was taken by surprise but put on his bravest face and went on the offensive. "If I were a man, my lords, that has no regards to my oath, (and) I had no occasion to be here at this time, as is well known to every body, as a criminal; and if this oath, Mr. Rich, which you have taken, be true, then I pray I may never see God's face which, were it otherwise, is an impression I would not be guilty of to gain the whole world." More did not seem to have a mean bone in his body. Erasmus once said that "What did nature ever create milder, sweeter and happier than the genius of Thomas More? All the birds come to him to be fed. There is not any man living so affectionate to his children as he, and he loveth his wife as if she were a girl of fifteen." But More faced perjury which could convict

him. "In good faith, Mr. Rich, I am more concerned for your perjury than my own danger," he rebutted. "I must tell you that neither myself nor anybody else to my knowledge ever took you to be a man of such reputation that I or any other would have anything to do with you in a matter of importance. I am sorry I am forced to speak it (but) you always lay under the odium of a very lying tongue." More's efforts to discredit Rich were part of the package the jury of 12 took with them to consider. But they soon returned with a verdict: guilty. The Lord Chancellor began to read the sentence when More interjected. "My lord, the practice in such cases was to ask the prisoner before sentence whether he had any thing to offer why judgment should not be pronounced against him." The Lord Chancellor abruptly stopped his sentence reading and asked More what he was "able to say to the contrary." More was now on borrowed time. He protested against the charge as best he could. "A son is only by generation. We are by regeneration made spiritual children of Christ and the Pope." The sentence for treason was then handed down: "That he should be carried back to the Tower of London and from thence drawn on a hurdle through the City of London to Tyburn there to be hanged till he should be half dead; that then he should be cut down alive, his privy parts cut off, his belly ripped, his bowels burnt, his four quarters set up over four gates of the City, and his head upon London Bridge." When the sentence was read out, More said he may as well speak freely now and revealed that he was totally unable to see the sense of the oath of supremacy. To this, the Lord Chancellor replied that why, then, had so many bishops and academics taken the oath of supremacy? "I am able to produce against one bishop which you can produce, a hundred holy and Catholic bishops for my opinion; and against one realm, the consent of Christendom for a thousand years." And upon those desperate words, More rejoined that "albeit your lordships have been my judges to condemnation, yet we may hereafter meet joyfully together in Heaven to our everlasting salvation." Thomas More was then led back to London Tower, but this time with the Tower's axe before him, pointed edge leading the procession and towards the convict as was the custom. Henry the 8th later commuted the sentence to a quick beheading. The day of execution was July 6, 1535 and the procession left London Tower at nine in the morning. This was a big spectacle for Londoners, a parade of sorts. Persons who had lost law suits before him when he was Lord Chancellor, seized the opportunity to heckle the condemned man. To one wretched woman he yelled back: "I very well remember the case and if I were to decide it now, I would make the same decree." Brought up to the scaffold, Thomas More said to his executioner. "'Pluck up thy spirits, man, and be not afraid to do thine office. My neck is very short. Take heed, therefore, thou not strike awry for saving thine honesty."

Sir Thomas More was no more.

His head was stuck on London Bridge where it stayed for several months (his daughter later bought it). When news came of More death, King Henry abruptly left his game of cards and scowled at his new wife Anne Boleyn: "Thou art the cause of this man's death." But Henry the 8th, then 44 years old, was still a

child and as good an argument one can make against monarchy as can be found in history. He quickly confiscated all of More's property and forced More's wife and family to start anew. He even negated special legal assignments that More had devised to provide for his family in case he was executed.

Anne Boleyn was beheaded eleven months after More, on charges of adultery. Henry the 8th went on to marry four more wives, another of which was also beheaded. Henry died in 1547. During his rein, there had been an average of 120 executions a month in England. More was named a Catholic saint in 1866.

## **A Chronology of More's Life**

- 1477, Feb. 7 - Born in London to John and Agnes More
- 1484-1489 - Attends St. Anthony's School, London (More's age: 7-12)
- 1489-1491 - Page for Archbishop and Chancellor Morton (12-14)
- 1491-1493 - Student at Oxford (14-16)
- 1493-1495 - Pre-law student, New Inn, London (16-18)
- 1496-1501 - Law student, Lincoln's Inn; called to bar (18-23)
- 1499 - Meets Erasmus for the first time (22)
- 1501-1504 - Frequents Charterhouse (Carthusians) (24-27)
- 1501 - Lectures on St. Augustine's City of God; begins Greek (24)
- 1503-1506 - Reader at Furnival's Inn (26-29)
- 1504 - Elected to Parliament (27)
- 1505 - Marries Jane Colt; Margaret born (28)
- 1506 - Studies intensely; visits Coventry; Elizabeth born (29)
- 1507 - Financial secretary of Lincoln's Inn; Cecily born (30)
- 1508 - Visits universities at Paris and Louvain (31)
- 1509 - Member of Mercers' Guild; John born; Henry VIII crowned (32)
- 1510 - Elected to Parliament (33)
- 1510-1518 - Undersheriff of London (33-41)
- 1511 - After Jane's death, marries Alice Middleton; Autumn Reader at Lincoln's Inn (34)
- 1512 - Governor and treasurer of Lincoln's Inn (35)
- 1513 - Henry VIII leads an army against France; to Henry, Erasmus dedicates his translation of Plutarch's essay on flattery (36)
- 1514 - Elected to Doctors' Common; serves on sewers commission (37)
- 1515 - Embassy to Bruges and Antwerp for commercial treaties; Lenten Reader at Lincoln's Inn; refuses royal pension (38)
- 1516 - Continues to study history and political philosophy (39)
- 1517 - Embassy to Calais; counsel to pope's ambassador in England; Evil May Day; Wolsey's Treaty of Universal Peace; Luther's "Ninety-five Theses" (40)
- 1518 - Joins King Henry's service; Master of Requests (41)
- 1520 - Field of Cloth of Gold: peace with France (43)

1521 - Knighted; undertreasurer; ambassador to Bruges and Calais; cautions Henry not to exaggerate the pope's secular authority; Margaret marries Roper; Buckingham executed (44)

1522 - Gives public oration welcoming Emperor Charles V; serves as Henry's secretary and cautions against war; war with France resumed (45)

1523 - Speaker of the House of Commons, proposes free speech; leases Crosby Hall; truce with France (46)

1524 - High Steward, Oxford; moves to Chelsea; war with France resumes: "If my head could win [the King] a castle in France, . . . it would not fail to go." (47)

1525 - High Steward, Cambridge; chancellor of Lancaster; Peasants' Revolt; peace treaty with France; Cecily marries Heron; Elizabeth marries Dauncey (48)

1526 - Appointed to royal council's subcommittee of four; urges Erasmus to complete writings against Luther; Turks invade Hungary; Tyndale's New Testament secretly distributed (49)

1527 - Accompanies Wolsey to France; sack of Rome; Henry consults More about divorce; More's daughters' dispute before Henry; Holbein paints the More family (50)

1528 - Tunstall asks More to defend Church in English; Margaret almost dies; More chosen as alternate Master of Revels, Lincoln's Inn; More's three great wishes (51)

1529 - Delegate, Peace of Cambrai; fire at Chelsea; appointed Lord Chancellor; addresses Parliament; John marries Anne Cresacre (52)

1530 - More almost dismissed for his opposition to Henry; Cranmer completes his defense of caesaropapism (53)

1531 - Henry declared Supreme Head of the Church in England (54)

1532 - Counters Cromwell's and St. German's attacks on the clergy; reports universities' approval of royal divorce; Henry enraged by undiplomatic clerics; Submission of Clergy (May 15); More resigns his office (May 16) (55)

1533 - Restraint of Appeals to Rome; England declared an empire (April); Cranmer authorizes royal divorce (May); Anne Boleyn's coronation (June 1); Pope Clement VII condemns the divorce (July); to defend his reputation, More writes to Erasmus (56)

1534 - Henry asks for More's indictment (Feb. 21), but House of Lords refuses three times; More questioned by royal commission (March), interrogated at Lambeth Palace (Apr. 13), and finally imprisoned (illegally) for refusal to take Cromwell's oath regarding the Act of Succession (Apr. 17); Chancellor Audley sends a warning to More (August) (57)

1535 - Margaret visits while monks are led to execution (May 4); More interrogated on May 7, June 3, and June 14; Richard Rich removes writing materials (June 12); More's trial (July 1) and execution July 6) (58)

## **A Chronology of More's Writings**

English poems (c. 1496-1504)

Correspondence (Latin and English, 1499-1535)

Latin verses to Holt's Lac Puerorum (c. 1500)

"Letter to John Colet" (c. 1504)

The Life of John Picus (c. 1504; published 1510)

Translations of Lucian (1505-1506; published 1506)

Latin poems, Epigrammata (1496-1516; published 1518)

Coronation ode (1509)

Epigrams on Brixius (1513)

The History of King Richard III (c. 1513-1518)

"Letter to Dorp" (1515)

Utopia (1516)

Poem and letters to his children, and letter to their tutor (1517-1522)

Letters to Oxford (1518), to a Monk (1519), and to Brixius (1520)

Quattuor Novissima (The Four Last Things] (c. 1522)

Responsio ad Lutherum (1523)

"Letter to Bugenhagen" (1526; published 1568)

A Dialogue Concerning Heresies (June 1529)

Supplication of Souls (September 1529)

A Dialogue Concerning Heresies, 2nd edition (May 1531)

Confutation of Tyndale's Answer I-III (March 1532)

"Letter against Frith" (December 1532; published December(1533)

Confutation of Tyndale IV-VIII (Spring 1533)

The Apology of Sir Thomas More (April 1533)

The Debellation of Salem and Bizance (October 1533)

The Answer to a Poisoned Book (December 1533)

A Treatise upon the Passion; A Treatise to Receive the Blessed Body; A Dialogue of Comfort against Tribulation; "A Dialogue on Conscience" (1534)

"Imploring Divine Help against Temptation"; "A Godly Instruction [on How to Treat Those Who Wrong Us]"; "A Godly Meditation [on Saving One's Life]"; "A Godly Meditation [on Detachment]" (1534-1535)

De Tristitia Christi (The Sadness of Christ) (1535)

"A Devout Prayer [before Dying]" (July 1535)

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