

Journey of the magi and rhapsody on a windy night essay sample

[Religion](#), [Jesus](#)



Without an understanding of the time period when a poem is developed, we fail to fully appreciate and understand the purpose and messages within such compositions. While the contextual detail of some poems may be fairly simple, the way poets put words together often makes these themes, messages and forms abstract and confusing. A reader must attempt to delve deeper and study the context of society, culture, and that of the writer at the time of composition, or they will interpret and push away composed material as meaningless ‘ mumbo-jumbo’ – which is what works by poets like T. S. Eliot strived to avoid.

T. S. Eliot was the most dominant literary figure between the two World Wars, his unique concepts, precise vocabulary, and the power of his Modernism (which is still as relevant today as it was in the 20th century) changed the face of poetry. The Nobel Prize winning poet’s original and inventive style is credited with viewing the world as it appears, without making any optimistic judgements. Eliot’s poems ‘ Journey of the Magi’ (1927) and ‘ Rhapsody on a Windy Night’ (1920) both explore the fragility of the human mind (an idea streaming directly from the era of Modernist poetry, where writers perceived the world as fragmented and alienated), showcasing his original and abstract style of writing and, when read into further, reflect Eliot’s own values and the commons of society and culture and the time of composition.

‘ Journey of the Magi’ is a dramatic monologue narrated by one of the Three Wise Men (Kings), reflecting and reminiscing upon the well-known story, from the Gospel of Matthew, of the physical and spiritual quest they made to see

and worship the birth of Jesus Christ. Eliot reveals how the experiences of a journey will affect one's perspective and unstable emotions, and he also reflects his own spiritual journey of conversion to the Christian faith. All of this explores the themes of spirituality and death and rebirth through the use of metaphoric language, imagery, and anachronistic symbolism.

The poem adopts a conversational tone by being written in the perspective of a Magus many years after returning home (" All this was a long time ago, I remember," (32)) - by using this perspective, Eliot creates a personal tone of the speaker's uncertainty, frustrations, confusion, and troubles upon the journey of spiritual growth, allowing the reader to fully experience and empathise with the group endured. This personal tone has led critics to believe the Magus narrating the story is a substitute for Eliot himself, who finds himself " no longer ease here" (41) living with " alien people" (42), after converting to the Church of England two months before publishing the poem in 1927. This conversion puzzled family, friends and colleagues who may have been the " voices singing in [Eliot's] ears, saying / that this was all folly." (19-20).

Eliot toys with the Magus' idea of whether they were " led all that way for / Birth or Death?" (35-36). Initially, the ideas are polar opposites, however, as the Magus repeats and rephrases this idea, the walls between the two begin to crumble. The idea of birth and death is a central faith in Christianity: when one dies another is reborn - it's important to understand this to fully appreciate the poem. The journey, as a whole, is like a death and rebirth.

The first stanza, with its harsh, hostile and brutal environment in " the very

dead of winter” (5) seemed to be a death, with the Magus’ frustrations (repetition of “ and” (12-15)) and self-doubt (“ voices...” (19-20)) adding to the overwhelming feeling.

The arrival to a “ temperate valley” (21) in the second stanza was the rebirth; it had religious anachronistic symbolism (“ three trees on the low sky” (24) – Jesus’ crucifixion on Mount Calvary; “ dicing for pieces of silver” (27) Romans gambling for Jesus’ robes at His death and Judas’ betrayal), and there was a literal birth in this stanza – of Jesus. The third raises the question “ Birth or Death?” (36). The journey was like a death for the Magi, in which they abandoned their materialistic and sensual lifestyles of sibilant “ summer palaces” (9) and “ silken girls bringing sherbet” (10) for a new religion in the hands of a baby, though returning to their kingdoms did not feel like the rebirth they imagined, so the Magus would “ be glad of another death.” (43). Without understanding the significant symbols of Christianity, readers will find the poem a blur of confusing and seemingly insignificant details, and miss the deeper messages within the poem.

‘ Rhapsody on a Windy Night’ is a free verse lyric poem, based on a series of emotionally intense, surreal images, rooted in the grungy streets of the city at midnight the persona captures as they walk through such streets. The title seems to reflect the poem’s irregular form, though it is ironic as it suggests a joyful mood that the poem fails to convey. ‘ Rhapsody’ does not explain feelings or thoughts in any general, conventional way, and explores the fragmentation and alienation of the modern world (values regularly studied by Modernist writers), depicting the themes of isolation,

hopelessness, and insanity. Without understanding these Modernist values, Eliot work would be an irregular and bizarre cluster of imagery and sounds.

T. S. Eliot has given the persona in this poem the task of representing the isolation and alienation of the human form. Not only are they clearly a loner, but the world their eyes scan for the reader also reeks of loneliness, decay and a lack of communication. The street lamp is the only 'speaker' in the poem, it "sputtered" (14) and "muttered" (15) (which is a completely absurd thought) and commands the persona to look at their surroundings as they come to each pool of light it emits. The woman in the doorway (perhaps a prostitute) doesn't approach; she "hesitates toward [him]" - even she cannot make the necessary contact for a human act. This lack of communication and physical contact in the poem emphasises the alienation and isolation of the human form as they pass through the modern world alone.

The first obvious feature of movement and progress is created through the procession of regular time calls throughout the poem, "Twelve o'clock" (1), "Half-past one" (13), "Half-past two" (33), etc., which also seems impersonal and fragmented. Eliot has further emphasised fragmentation, isolation, hopelessness and insanity, by using imagery and allusions to describe nearly everything in the setting as "twisted", "crooked", "broken", and decaying. A first reading might suggest that this is a picture of someone strolling home after a night out, however this four hour 'stroll' (starting at midnight) is quite odd behaviour, heightening obvious hopelessness and loneliness of the

persona; they're deliberately putting off going home, because home is as empty and lonely as the world in which they have been walking.

They are instructed to return to a barren place, where a single "tooth-brush hands on the wall" (76), to sleep in order to "prepare for [a] life" (77) that is fragmented and purposeless because the persona has failed to find meaning - the harsh "last twist of the knife." (78). Unless the reader attempts to understand the Modernist writing values of fragmentation, alienation, and significance of the themes of isolation, hopelessness, and insanity, they will find Eliot not only captures a sordid setting, but also makes their brain feel as though it is twisting and decaying while they attempt to understand the poem.

Poetry is one of the most challenging pieces of material to read and learn about. However, when a reader makes the effort to look into the context of the writer, and their society and culture at the time a product is written, their mind opens to a much profounder understanding of the style and the details of the form. T. S. Eliot's influence on poetry is unmatched, and his abstract and original concepts can be confusing to those who don't make the effort to broaden their knowledge of his Modernist era and personal values when his works (such as 'Journey of the Magi' and 'Rhapsody of a Windy Night') were composed, which is a mistreatment such poems do not deserve. It is up to us - readers - to make the effort to give poetry the recognition and appreciation it deserves, so it will pass the eyes of the 'mumbo-jumbo-ists' and earn its place in their hearts as creative and significant works of Literature.