

LESSON NOTE ON LITERATURE-IN-ENGLISH WEEK 3

SUBJECT: LITERATURE-IN-ENGLISH
TOPIC: NON-AFRICAN POETRY: "The Journey of the Magi" by T. S. Eliot Cont'd
CLASS: SS2
WEEK: 3

THEMES IN THE POEM

1. Life is a journey

The entire poem revolves around life as a journey. The 'journey, in this poem is a metaphorical representation of that space of time between birth and death. The manner that the journey takes the poetic persona and his fellow travellers through different seasons is the same way life also has different seasons. In line 9 of the poem, the poetic persona talks about "the summer palaces on slopes, the terraces". He specifically remembers the weather and the beautiful structures in the place. Similarly, life also has its summer periods, with beautiful things around it. The poetic persona describes the cold weather as being very harsh and hard such that even the camels that are usually depicted as long-suffering animals are affected by its harshness. In life too, there are hard times. The poem reflects this in its description of the cold and harsh places that the Magi have to pass through to get to their destination. These are symbolic representations of humans' journey through life in life, there ups and downs, there are periods of wholeness, periods of pain, periods of regret and periods when people get tired of everything.

2. Suffering

Much of the poem is a complaint about the suffering experienced by the Magi on their journey to reach Bethlehem. They endure terrible weather, uncooperative camels and camel men and hostile townspeople. The villages that offer shelter do so at unfairly high prices and eventually they decided to travel all night, forgoing adequate sleep and rest. The Magi also undergo psychological suffering. Therefore the poet suggests that this change comes with a lot of hard and painful work. However, despite all the challenges they face, they did not give up. They go through a life-changing spiritual experience as a result.

3. Death and rebirth

The poet sought to use the poem not only to recreate the journey of the wise men to Bethlehem but also as a metaphor for spiritual death and rebirth. Both are synonymous, this is highlighted in the rhetorical question "were we led all that way for Birth/Death?" before the journey; the Magi thought that the birth and death were different. However, they realise that the opposite is the case. The new Birth turns out to be "hard and bitter agony like death" (lines 38-39).

“Death” in this context, refers to the complete and radical change in the mindset and orientation of the Magi, which is triggered by their journey and Christ’s birth. Therefore, the birth of Christ leads to the death of the Magi. Their experience during their journey and probably at their destination deeply affects them to the point that they die- they lose interest in things they once used to hold dear and acquire new values.

POETIC DEVICES

1) Diction

The poet’s use of words is conversational and narrative. The poem can be called a dramatic monologue. Diction is also place, time and culture context specific. For instance, the poet’s use of words like “sherbet” (line 10) and “camel men” (line 11) collocates with the idea of men from the East and the kinds of drinks they must have been drinking at that time. Even the use of camel as a means of transportation also agrees with the time since modern technology like cars, aeroplanes and ships were not existent at the period within which the poem is set.

2) Symbolism

The title “Journey of the Magi” is symbolic. Though it is the journey of the Wise Men, Eliot symbolically refers to the journey of all humans, who are searching for the meaning to their existence.

3) Alliteration

The poet made use of alliteration which is the occurrence of the same consonant sound at the beginning or closely connected words. The use of alliteration is reflected in the following: “cold coming” (line 1), “ways weather” (line 4), “camel cursing” (line 11) etc.

4) Allusion

This is a brief reference to an important person, what he/she did, a place, an event or popular phrase.

There are references to the life of Christ Jesus especially in the second stanza of the poem .examples:

Running stream- living water

Vine leaves – Christ as the vine

The very dead of the winter.

5) Imagery

6) Rhetorical question

7) Mood

8) Tone

HOMEWORK

1. What is the journey motif? Explain this term using 'Journey of the Magi'