



Journey of the Magi

Thomas Stearns Eliot
Ariel Poems
(1927)

The short dramatic monologue Journey of the Magi, published in the collection Ariel Poems (1927) clearly defines the dilemma faced by Eliot after his conversion to Anglicanism. There is another pilgrimage in this poem, but now to a more familiar place, Bethlehem, for the birth of Christ. The speaking voice is that of the Magus, who is a powerful king-like man. The journey was difficult but it is the present moment that focuses the Magus's mind at the end of the poem. The encounter with the infant Christ has transformed the Magus. It is not clear that he has fully understood the change of orientation and consciousness that has occurred in his soul, but it is evident that he has experienced a radical personal transformation. The Magus cannot feel at home among 'an alien people clutching their gods' (line 42). This captures the awkwardness felt by the faithful among pagans or nonbelievers and vice versa.

- 'A cold coming we had of it,
Just the worst **time** of the year
For a **journey**, and **such a long journey**:
The ways deep and the weather sharp¹,
5 **The very dead of winter**².
And the camels galled³, **sore-footed, refractory**,
Lying down in the melting **snow**.
There were **times** we regretted
The summer palaces on slopes, the terraces,
10 **And the silken girls bringing sherbet**⁴.
Then the camel men cursing and grumbling⁵
And running away, and wanting their liquor and women,
And the night-fires going out, and the lack of shelters,
And the cities hostile and the towns unfriendly
15 **And** the villages dirty and charging high prices:
A hard **time** we had of it.
At the end we preferred to travel all night,
Sleeping in snatches⁶,
With the voices singing in our ears, saying
20 **That this was all folly.**
- Then at dawn we came down to a **temperate valley**,
Wet, below the **snow** line, **smelling of vegetation**;
With a running stream and a water-mill beating the darkness,
And three trees on the low sky.
25 **And an old white horse galloped away in the meadow**.
Then we came to a tavern with vine-leaves over the lintel⁷,
Six hands at an open door dicing⁸ **for pieces of silver**,
And feet kicking the empty wine-skins⁹.
But there was no information, so we continued
30 **And arrived at evening, not a moment too soon**
Finding the place; it was (you may say) satisfactory.
- All this was a long time ago, I remember,**
And I would do it again, but set down
This set down
35 **This**¹⁰: **were we led all that way for**
Birth or Death? There was a **Birth**, certainly,
We had evidence and no doubt. I had seen birth and death,
But had thought they were different; this Birth was

- 1 sharp. Rigido, pungente.
2 The very dead of winter. Il cuore dell'inverno, il periodo più freddo.
3 galled. Infastiditi.
4 sherbet. Sorbetto.
5 grumbling. Lamentandosi.
6 in snatches. Per brevi periodi, a intervalli.
7 lintel. Architrave.
8 dicing. Che giocavano a dadi.
9 wine-skins. Borracce in pelle contenenti vino.
10 set down / This. Scrivete questo.



40 Hard and bitter agony for us, like **Death**, our **death**.
 We returned to our places, these Kingdoms,
 But no longer at ease here, in the old dispensation,
 With an alien people clutching¹¹ their gods.
 I should be glad of another **death**.

11 **clutching**. *Let.*: che stringono; *qui*: che adorano.

VISUAL ANALYSIS

1 READ the poem and identify its three parts. Then write a heading for each.

- Part 1 (lines):
- Part 2 (lines):
- Part 3 (lines):

2 LOOK at the visual analysis of the text and write down what each highlight and colour represents.

What ideas do these words reflect?

A cold

a

We

.....

3 DISCUSS the following questions.

- 1 Is the verse pattern regular? Is the poem written in free verse?
- 2 The Magi are generally considered archetypal figures; Eliot, on the contrary, humanises them. How does he achieve this?
- 3 What attitude to time is expressed in these lines?
- 4 What do the journey and the valley symbolise?
- 5 Which details in lines 24-27 foreshadow Christ's crucifixion?
- 6 How is the Nativity described in lines 38-39? What is it symbol of?
- 7 How does the tone of the last part of the monologue differ from the first one?

COMPETENCE: PRODUCING A WRITTEN TEXT ON A GIVEN SUBJECT

4 WRITE a 10/12-line paragraph to explain the differences existing between this text and the passages from *The Waste Land* and *The Hollow Men* as regards

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|---------------------------------------|--|
| • subject matter; | • method (mythical, realistic, symbolical, allegorical); |
| • language; | • tone. |
| • use of quotations and/or allusions; | |

5 WRITE a 10/12-line paragraph about this topic: 'Eliot defines Nativity as a "hard and bitter agony". What does this imply about his attitude to Christianity?'