



Four Quartets

Thomas Stearns Eliot
(1943)

A NEW REASON OF LIFE

Four Quartets is a sequence of four compositions: 'Burnt Norton', 'East Coker', 'The Dry Salvages' and 'Little Gidding'. The poem expresses **the intellectual joys of the poet** who has discovered a new reason for life thanks to faith and a strange and miraculous peace which persists despite the cruelty of the world, and the misery and weaknesses of life. It is a **meditation upon time**, upon **the presence of the past in the present**, which is nothing but **recollection of the past and hope for the future**, and the redemption of time and the world of man.

THE STYLE

The **analogy with a musical composition** is evident both in the title and in the structure. In fact, each quartet includes five moments: the first contains 'statement' and 'counter-statement', that is two contrasting but related themes in **free blank verse**; the second movement is about one theme treated first in a lyrical and then in a colloquial way; the third movement generally investigates in depth the themes dealt with in the first two movements; the fourth consists of a lyrical pause of meditation; the fifth sums up the themes of the quartet. Another analogy with music lies in the pattern of recurrences of symbols and words.

COMPETENCE: READING AND UNDERSTANDING INFORMATION

1 READ the text and answer these questions about *Four Quartets*.

- 1 What is *Four Quartets*?
- 2 What does the poem express?
- 3 What is the main theme?
- 4 What is the present?
- 5 Where is the analogy with a musical composition evident?
- 6 What does each quartet include?
- 7 What verse is employed in the poem?



T83

Burnt Norton

The poem Burnt Norton (1936) is the first composition of Four Quartets. It is an example of the use of abstract thought leading to a state of mind, a method which Eliot observed in Dante.

Thomas Stearns Eliot
Four Quartets
(1943)

- Time present and time past
Are both perhaps present in time future,
And time future contained in time past.
If all time is eternally present
- 5 All time is unredeemable¹.
What might have been is an **abstraction**
Remaining a perpetual possibility
Only in a world of speculation.
What might have been and what has been
- 10 **Point to** one end, which is always present.
Footfalls² echo in the memory
Down the passage which we did not take
Towards the door we never opened
Into the rose-garden. My words echo
- 15 Thus, in your mind.

1 **unredeemable**. Non riscattabile.

2 **Footfalls**. Rumore di passi.



But to what purpose
Disturbing the dust on a bowl³ of rose-leaves
I do not know.

Other echoes

- 20 Inhabit the garden. Shall we follow?
Quick, said the bird, find them, find them,
Round the corner. Through the first gate,
Into our first world, shall we follow
The deception⁴ of the thrush⁵? Into our first world.
- 25 There they were, dignified, invisible,
Moving without pressure, over the dead leaves,
In the autumn heat, through the vibrant air,
And the bird called, in response to
The unheard music hidden in the shrubbery⁶,
30 And the unseen eyebeam⁷ crossed, for the roses
Had the look of flowers that are looked at.
There they were as our guests, accepted and accepting.
So we moved, and they, in a formal pattern,
Along the empty alley, into the box⁸ circle,
35 To look down into the drained⁹ pool.
Dry the pool, dry concrete¹⁰, brown edged,
And the pool was filled with water out of¹¹ sunlight,
And the lotus rose, quietly, quietly,
The surface glittered out of heart of light,
40 And they were behind us, reflected in the pool.
Then a cloud passed, and the pool was empty.
Go, said the bird, for the leaves were full of children,
Hidden excitedly, containing laughter.
Go, go, go, said the bird: human kind
45 Cannot bear very much reality.
Time past and time future
What might have been and what has been
Point to one end, which is always present.

- 3 bowl. Ciotola.
4 deception. Inganno.
5 thrush. Tordo.
6 shrubbery. Boschetto.
7 eyebeam. Sguardo.
8 box. Bosso (arbusto sempreverde).
9 drained. Secca.
10 concrete. Cemento.
11 out of. A causa della, per effetto della.

READING COMPETENCE

1 READ the poem and match the highlighted words with their meaning.

- 1 solemn
2 with a border
3 indicate
4 reflected light with a brilliant luster
5 concept
6 back street

2 READ the poem again and do the following activities.

- 1 Say what it builds up by suggestion. Tick as appropriate.
- ☐ The picture of a house.
 - ☐ The picture of a house and its garden.
 - ☐ The picture of a house and its swimming pool.



- 2 What is the garden a symbol of in these lines?
- A The beauty existing in nature.
 - B Peace and the rebirth of nature.
 - C Man's attempt to impose a pattern on his experience.
- 3 Highlight the possessive adjectives used in lines 14-15. Identify their function and complete the scheme below.
- → It refers to
- → It refers to
- 4 Underline words and phrases linked to this garden.
- 5 State what the flowers evoke.
- A Regret for what is no more.
 - B Hope for the future.
 - C Fertility and harmony.
- 6 What appears in lines 21, 28, 42 and 44? What does it tell us?
- 7 Circle the images used for reality. What is experienced at the end (line 48)?
- 8 Identify the theme of these lines.
- A Time as a flux (past, present and future coexist).
 - B The celebration of nature.
 - C The relationship between man and nature.
- 9 What kind of language is used in these lines?

➤ COMPETENCE: ESTABLISHING LINKS AND RELATIONSHIPS

- 3 **DISCUSS.** Compare the poet's mood and the theme developed in this text to the same in *The Burial of the Dead* from *The Waste Land* (→ T92).