

LESSON NOTE ON LITERATURE-IN-ENGLISH WEEK 2

SUBJECT: LITERATURE-IN-ENGLISH

TOPIC: NON-AFRICAN POETRY: "The Journey of the Magi" by T. S. Elliot

CLASS: SS2

WEEK: 2

BACKGROUND/SUMMARY OF THE POEM

'Journey of the Magi' is a poem that explores the journey the wise men took following the star to Bethlehem where the Christ child was born. It is a metaphorical poem representing birth and death, renewal and spiritual rebirth.

The speaker is a Magi whose narrative is split into three stanzas:

Stanza 1: the frustration and doubt of such a journey.

Stanza 2: the anticipation and underrated satisfaction upon arrival.

Stanza 3: The reflection on birth and death and alienation.

Stanza 1

The first five lines are adapted from an actual sermon given by Bishop Lancelot Andrews in 1622. This first stanza is a tale of woe on and through the whole 20 lines. The journey began right at the height of the cold season of winter-the worst time of the year. It was a very long and difficult journey, even the camels they journeyed with felt the painful effects of the wintry weather. A feeling of hardship and challenges emerge as the stanza progresses but note that, the magi had also experienced the high life for a while –relaxing in summer palaces-perhaps at the start of their journey, or back in their homeland, when blue skies and silken girls with sherbet made life so enjoyable. So the magi had to endure the challenges of real life as they journeyed on. They were tested to the limit and in the end decided to travel at night to avoid the sordid unpleasantness of cities and towns. The speaker certainly had doubts about their 'mission'-thinking it's foolish (all folly) and the voices could have been their own, or those from dreams and nightmares.

Stanza 2

This second stanza brings some relief and represents the second stage of the spiritual process. After travelling all night, the Magi came to a friendlier environment. This was at dawn, the persona describes the

pleasant natural environment at this stage of their journey “the welcoming smell of vegetation in a temperate valley”, “running stream and water”, a tavern with wine leaves”. However, they had still not got any information on the whereabouts of the infant Christ Jesus. They had to keep going till evening when they finally found the place they were looking for. The speaker wasn’t too impressed with the place of birth, was even a little disappointed. Perhaps this also refers to the idea that the place, although important, isn’t as crucial to change as the journey itself.

Stanza 3

Here the Magi look back, reflecting on the event itself and coming to the conclusion that in birth there is always death. They learnt a hard lesson, one that is personal yet also universal.

Life is a journey, a struggle, but all humans have to go through it, often reaching moments in their lives when a threshold has to be gotten over. Sometimes new understanding has to take place in order for this spiritual transformation to happen.

SETTING

The poem is about a journey, so the reader is meant to travel through various settings in this poem. The setting of the poem is in the Middle East, around Palestine and precisely the road on which the wise men- the Magi travelled as they went to their destination to visit the new-born baby.