

LITERATURE IN ENGLISH

SS2

WEEK 5

NON-AFRICAN POETRY: The Journey Of The Magi by T.S. Eliot (Background & Summary)

The Journey of the Magi

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 sharp,
The very dead of winter.
And the camels galled, sorefooted, refractory,
Lying down in the melting snow.
There were times we regretted
The summer palaces on slopes, the terraces,
And the silken girls bringing sherbet.
Then the camel men cursing and grumbling
And running away, and wanting their liquor and women;
And the night-fires goes out, and the lack of shelters,
And the cities hostile and the towns unfriendly
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 snatches,
With the voices singing in our ears, saying
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,
And an old white horse galloped away in the meadow.
Then we came to a tavern with vine-leaves over the lintel,
Six hands at an open door dicing for pieces of silver,
And feet kicking the empty wine-skins.
But there was no information, and so we continued And
Arriving at evening, not a moment too soon Finding the place;
It was (you might) satisfactory.

All this was a long time ago, I remember,
And I would do it again, but set down This set down
This: 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 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 clutching their gods.
I should be glad of another death.

Background and Summary

“The Journey of the Magi” presents a poetic account of the biblical wise men from the East who embarked on a long journey in search of Christ and where he was born. In the first stage of the poem which is morning period, the poet recounts the difficulties experienced by the Magi resulting from the time of their exit. The journey, however, took place within the worst time of the year was winter period marked with extreme coldness. The poet observes that not only that the journey is a long one, the ways also are “deep and during the very dead of the winter”. This means that the journey came at a time when life is generally dull and uninteresting due to hazardous weather conditions.

In the next stage, the poet recorded that the harsh weather conditions affected the camels to the extent that “the camels galled, sore footed.... Lying down in the melting snow”. The camels with their swelling bodies and sore feet could no longer move a step, rather than lying down on the cold snow. With all these ugly experiences, the Magi regretted ever setting out for the journey, especially as the men prove unruly by “cursing and grumbling”.

In this connection, the camel men displayed uncooperative attitudes because of certain discomfort emanating from the journey. Similarly, the Magi observe certain things on their way such as the “summer palaces on slopes” the terraces as well as “silken girls bringing sherbet”. Sherbet is a cool drink produced from sweetened fruit juices.

The poet also gives us insight on the conduct of the camel men, the villagers and the state of the environment where they find themselves. According to the poet, the camel men were eager to run away. Again, they are desirous of drinking their liquor and running after women. Notwithstanding the unfriendly weather due to cold, the wise men stay without shelter coupled with the night fire that goes off which could have given them warm. Moreso, adding to their suffering, the villagers were hostile (unfriendly) together with the villagers is another problem of the wise men. To escape the hostility of the inhabitants, the Magi decided to travel all night.

The Magi were “sleeping in snatches” as they become despondent with the voices of regret singing in their ears saying that this was all folly. As their sorrows increase, they resort to blaming one another for ever embarking on the trip. The second stage of the journey starts from the morning during which the Magi see some rays of hope. Being highly optimistic in mind, they see bright weather with fine topography (vegetation). The Magi also noticed that the place was full of trees, running stream and cool weather.

Unexpectedly, the Magi came to “tavern with vine-leaves over the lintel”. At this point of seeing the building, they felt encouraged only to be disappointed on what they saw in the inn; “six hands at an open door dicing for pieces of silver/ A feet kicking the empty wine skins”.

The poet at this time confirms that the Magi have no information as to the destination and whereabouts of the birth. They, however, continue their journey until evening time when they finally find the place. The Magi upon discovering the place of birth described their prolonged journey as being satisfactory after all odds on the way.

The last stanza of the poem portrays the confession of the wise men who out of emotional upliftment confirms that “there was a birth certainly”. Their conviction is built upon the fact that the birth is evidential, leaving nothing to doubt. Ironically, the Magi admitted that they had seen both “birth and death”. This connotes the fact that birth should be associated with comfort, happiness and ecstasy while “death” with suffering, sadness, etc. But, in the journey, the reverse is the case as they consider the amount of sufferings, afflictions and hostilities they encountered on the way in search of the place of birth.

Conclusively, the wise men had seen the messiah whose presence ignited their hope and faith, not minding the fact that when they returned to their homes and country, things were not in order and scattered, because alien people were “clutching their gods”. The expression “clutching their gods” suggests that the ancient worship of the true God has been affected by ungodly lifestyles of foreigners. The narrator in the last line of the poem says “I shall be glad of another death”. This buttresses the point that Magi have forgotten all their sufferings and desired to repeat the journey. Their desire to repeat the journey irrespective of the fore-seeable oddities is given substance by the illuminating presence and glory of the Messiah they behold. In the light of the above expression, the poetic persona is calling for patience on our part in the face of difficulties and trials of life.

Home work

1. In ten sentences, summarise the background and summary above.