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Engl 327

14 April 2020

A Short Analysis of T.S. Eliot's "Journey of the Magi"

The story of the three wise men is a very common and popular tale that is retold every year around Christmas in Christian households. However, something that is rarely ever highlighted, in at least American retellings of the story, is how brave those men were to know the truth in a society that was distorted by false deities. In 1927, T.S. Eliot wrote the poem "Journey of the Magi" which retold the famous three wise men's journey to find Jesus Christ through their own perspective. "Journey of the Magi" illustrates how the journey of finding Jesus was not only a physically challenging journey to meet Him, but also mentally and socially difficult to live with knowing Him, the truth, in a newly alienating society. The self, according to T.S. Eliot, is to emerge against society in a new journey after finding the truth.

To help us understand what the Magi endured, T.S. Eliot uses dark imagery to describe their journey to find Jesus which greatly contrasts the usual favorable tone used to describe the birth of Jesus. The first stanza of three in "Journey of the Magi" describes the numerous challenges the Magi traveled through. "The ways deep and the weather sharp, / The very dead of winter" (ll. 4-5). Noticing Eliot's choice of diction, using the words "dead of winter" draws attention to how the Magi must have felt and he later writes "There were times we regretted / ... the voices singing in our ears, saying / That this was all folly" (ll. 8 & 19-20). Here, Eliot is pointing out that the Magi began to doubt themselves, but the narrative tone of the poem

dramatically shifts in the second stanza. He writes “Then at dawn we came to a temperate valley” (l. 21) to show that they had discovered a new life; the birth of Jesus Christ. This allusion is confirmed in the proceeding lines that make Biblical references. “... Three trees on the low sky, / And an old white horse galloped away in the meadow” (ll. 24-25). The reference to three trees is a foreshadowing of the three crosses that stood when Jesus was crucified and the white horse symbolizes Christ Himself, but can also signify an omen of death. These Biblical allusions to death are dark references to make when describing the birth of Jesus Christ. The third and final stanza directly discusses the implications of knowing the truth, that Jesus Christ is our Saviour. The speaker, one of the Magi, questions the effects of knowing the truth: “... Were we led all that way for / Birth or Death? There was Birth, certainly, / ... this Birth was / Hard and bitter agony for us, like Death...” (ll. 35-36 & 38-39). Eliot brings to question how the birth of Jesus dramatically affected the lives of the Magi. Although knowing Jesus and witnessing his birth is obviously awesome, the Magi had to continue the rest of their lives living in a polytheistic culture that they were othered, or alienated, from.

T. S. Eliot uses the final stanza’s question, the last thought left with the reader, to make us rethink what it means to believe in something that alienates you in your own community. More specifically, what it means to know Jesus Christ as your Saviour in an environment that is polytheistic. To describe this phenomenon, Eliot writes in the final lines:

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. (ll. 40-43)

Although the Magi witnessed the birth of Jesus Christ and, thus, know the truth and meaning to life, they did not feel gratification like they had been anticipating. Instead, they felt othered by their own culture and societies because they could no longer subscribe to the same religious ideologies as their people. This brings up the question of whether or not knowing the truth, or in other words being enlightened, is worth it. At the beginning of the third stanza, the Magi reminds us that "... I would do it again..." (l. 33). Here, Eliot defines the self as wanting to seek the truth but not fully comprehending what the implications of learning the truth may be. The self here is a representative of someone who has found out the truth about something, something so undeniable that they struggle when others are in denial, like falsely worshipping other gods. Although the Magi are suffering from being social outcasts, they are content because they know that there is more to this world after they die. Thus, knowing the truth is ultimately a good thing, but you have to be prepared for both the journey you must take to find it and the arguably more challenging journey you must take once discovering it in a world that denies it.

In the 21st century one would think that Christians would not be dealing with a similar journey as the Magi did. However, as I concluded from T. S. Eliot, the journey of being a Christian after learning the truth never ends. The same is true for anyone that becomes more enlightened even in nonreligious ways, like through academics. To paraphrase Eliot's main point, the journey is challenging but the Magi do not regret a thing so we should continue our own pursuit of finding the truth despite the implications it may have on our lives.

Work Cited

Eliot, T.S. "Journey of the Magi." *The Norton Anthology English Literature: The Twentieth and Twenty-First Centuries*. edited by Stephen Greenblatt, et al., 10th ed., F, W. W. Norton & Company, Inc, 2018, pp. 676-677.