

Free Verse around two themes: 1) myth, religion and modern life; and 2) elders

March 23-- Free Verse

Definition of Free Verse: Unrhymed lines in which no particular meter is maintained. Often, the poet uses placement of text on the page as well as repetition of sounds, words, and phrasing to create informal patterns.

Theme 1: Myth, Religion, and Modern Life: Eliot, "Journey of the Magi" 599-600

Some Sources/allusions:

- The chief biblical source is Gospel according to Matthew: 2 which recounts the journey of the three eastern kings [Magi] to Bethlehem guided by the star of Bethlehem to witness the birth of Jesus in the manger. Other biblical allusions to the betrayal of Christ by Judas "pieces of silver" (Matthew 26-27); the crucifixion on mount Golgotha with a thief on either side: "three trees"=three crosses, and the "white horse" in the book of Revelation (6:2 & 19:11).

Analysis:

- Context for Eliot's poem: According to Matthew, the Magi already knew the prophecy concerning the birth of a Messiah, and they "saw his star" [star of Bethlehem], a sign that the time had come. The ruler of Galilee, Herod Antipas, being told this, and feeling politically threatened by what he saw as the advent of a political rival instructed them to seek out the child and when they found him report back to him [secretly planning to destroy him]. But after they found the child, they were warned by God in a dream not to report back to Herod, and they went back to their lands by a private way. Eliot retells the story from a modern realistic perspective, to explore the concept of true faith.

Discussion Questions:

1. Who is the speaker, and what is the situation of the poem?
2. According to the opening lines, the journey to Bethlehem was difficult. List the kinds of difficulty they encountered. Why does the speaker say at times they regretted the summer palaces, etc?
3. Considering the difficulties, what kept them going?
4. Eliot does not mention the famous star of Bethlehem. How would its inclusion change this part of the poem?
5. How does setting shift I lines 21-25 to prepare us for the occurrence of the miraculous encounter?
6. How would you explain anticlimactic line 31: "it was (you may say) satisfactory"? Nevertheless, how do we know the Magus considers the experience worthwhile?
7. What does he mean by this birth was "our death"? Who are the "alien people" in line 42? Interpret the final line.
8. 1927, the year this poem was written, was the year Eliot was baptised into Anglican Church. Prior to that, he was a kind of gloomy atheist who saw modern life as a "waste land." How does his use of a Bible story in the poem relate to his personal life? How does the use of the Bible story help him to develop a more universal theme?