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“Burnt Norton” Analysis

While reading and analyzing T.S. Eliot’s “Burnt Norton,” one is drawn to observe his opinions on the nature of time and times relation to life. In the four part poem, he uses many literary devices, such as imagery, symbolism, repetition, and allusions to challenge traditional perceptions of time and life. His approach using literary devices not only invites readers to reflect on one's past, future, and present, but also emphasizes the importance of the present moment, as it is the only time where you have control of change. By using these techniques, Eliot shows how time is not straightforward, and encourages readers to question their place within the present and that dwelling on the past or future is not worthwhile.

One of the most notable aspects of Eliot’s poem “Burnt Norton” is his use of imagery and symbolism. From the beginning, he invites the reader to envision a rose garden. We can ask ourselves why he chose this imagery. After reading the poem, it becomes clear that roses symbolize two things. Firstly, roses are flowers that have been cultivated for centuries and are often associated with timeless beauty and elegance. Secondly, they are known for having a short life span, as they cannot survive that long after being harvested. Knowing this, I believe Eliot chose a rose to represent momentary beauty, mirroring how quickly life can change and how precious life is. This relates to the theme of the poem, suggesting that no matter what happens, the rose won’t be there forever. It’s better to appreciate the rose for what it is now than to dwell on the past or try to prevent its inevitable wilting.

After analyzing the poem deeply, we can also depict the rose garden as a space where time stands still. According to the quote, “Time present and time past / Are both perhaps present in time future”, this helps set the stage for Eliot’s perception of time and its ever-flowing, ever-changing state. These lines make it sound like time is circular in nature, that all moments are interconnected. All paths find their way to the present. This depiction that Eliot created differs from the traditional linear perspective of time, which is that there is a past, present, future. Eliot challenges this dynamic and says that each part of someone's life happens for a reason, building on top of each other rather than achieving something in separate stages. This approach of viewing time and life invites readers to reflect on how moment's build character for the present time and its connection to one’s past experiences and future possibilities. Rather than thinking about something being over, he thinks about how something being over influences one’s current decisions.

The imagery/symbolism of the garden not only embodies present time, but also acts as a space where one can reflect on the convergence of all times. The lines, “Footfalls echo in the memory / Down the passage which we did not take / towards the door we never opened,” is an excellent example of this. This quote illustrates missed opportunities and paths that were not “discovered” in the journey of life. These words give me the feeling of nostalgia and contemplation, making readers consider their own life choices and think about the “what if” scenarios that come up. Reflecting like this leads readers to question their own decisions and ponder the infinite possibilities that could have unfolded had they chosen differently. Personally, it made me reflect on my own personal insights and to think about my own trajectory deeply, and think about what life would look like if I did things differently.

Furthermore, this imagery that Eliot paints of passages and doors can be seen as one's journey through life, where numerous paths diverge, each leading to an unknown, hence the "what if". The garden, with its many paths and doors, is also a metaphor for the infinite choices in life, each representing different potential futures. This part of the poem felt spiritual to me. It suggested that despite the uncertainty of what lies beyond each door, there is a sense of acceptance no matter what one's choice is. By using immersive imagery and symbolism, Eliot not only paints a picture of unknown paths but also looks at it from an emotional aspect. This approach to exploring time and existence through the symbolism of the garden and missed opportunities enriches the poem. It gave me a different perspective toward life, making it an interesting observation.

Another quote that I liked which reflected time and existence in "Burnt Norton" well was "Go, said the bird, for the leaves were full of children, / Hidden excitedly, containing laughter". I felt like Eliot was trying to portray the carelessness children have when they are young. Reading this part made me envision children playing and laughing in the autumn leaves. It gave me a sense of childish innocence. Unlike adults, children live in the moment when they are playing and laughing, and this is something humans lose as we age and start thinking more about the past and future. This imagery highlights how our memories of the past influence our perception of the present. By invoking such memories, Eliot tries to say the past is always a part of us. Our pasts influence our present actions and future possibilities. This interplay between memory and time encourages readers to reflect on how their own past experiences shape their current lives and decisions, reinforcing the theme that everything is connected to the present, and it is only in the present where actions can change.

Eliot also uses repetitions to reinforce the main theme of the poem. From reading the poem many times, the theme that I found from the repetitions is that all time relates back to the present. No matter how much reflecting one does on the past or the future, it cannot be changed. What matters is focusing on the present. By using repetitions, the author reaffirms what the poem is about and the interconnectedness of all the different aspects of the poem. For instance, one line that Eliot repeated often is "time present and time past". This repetition mirrors the many similar yet different cycles that exist in life, suggesting that life isn't a series of disjointed events, but rather a continuous flow where every moment is connected, and people experience the same things despite being from different eras. Problems from before appear in the present time slightly differently but the principle of the problem remains the same. His use of repetition of this phrase emphasizes the importance of the present moment. It urges readers to remain mindful of the here and now rather than sulking on the unchangeable past or dreading the uncertain future.

Repetition makes the poem resonate with me more as well, as if the author was trying to draw readers into a meditative state. "At the still point of the turning world" is another line that the author repeats throughout the poem. This quote highlights the stillness and religiousness that Eliot seeks to understand and make the reader expand their minds. It makes me think about a person meditating and losing track of time, focusing on understanding their mental state, their bodies, and their surroundings. Not only does it paint this picture in my head, but it reinforces the idea of the poem's themes and contributes to the rhythm and flow of the poem, making the reading experience more immersive, reflective, and thought provoking.

Allusions are used by Eliot to enrich the text with deeper meanings, connecting the poem to religion. For example, he references Buddhist concepts that have to do with detachment and enlightenment. "Desire itself is movement / Not in itself desirable; / Love is itself unmoving, /

Only the cause and end of movement". This relates more towards spirituality, making the reader think less about the physicality but more so the mentality aspect of life. By referencing Buddhist concepts, he deepens thoughts about time and the meaning of life, suggesting that true understanding and peace comes from something past desire. This allusion broadens the poem and invites a broader audience to think about life and its relation to time.

Another allusion in "Burnt Norton" is to Christianity, especially the idea of finding peace and stillness through faith. In the lines, "Except for the point, the still point... There would be no dance, and there is only the dance," Eliot talks about finding solace in the middle of the chaos of life. This is similar to how Christians seek God to find solace in times of need. Whether it is by praying, meditating, or thinking about their relationship with God, he suggests that no matter how much movement and change is going on in life, there are always points of clarity and connection to something bigger than us, which would be God. By using this allusion, Eliot helps readers think about how understanding time and life is also about finding spiritual meaning and enlightenment. He encourages readers to think about their own faith journeys. Even though I am not religious myself, reading this part and reflecting made me question my own faith and try to understand how I fit into the bigger picture of other people's lives.

To conclude, "Burnt Norton" is an interesting poem about time's circular nature, human existence, and our place in the world. Eliot's use of literary devices, such as imagery, symbolism, repetition, and allusions, challenges readers to think deeply about the interconnectedness of everything, no matter what time or place one is. He invites readers to reflect on their own life, to think about the significance of their past actions, the potential of the future, and one's present life. The poem's multiple levels of meaning and its way of thinking about time and existence

make it a timeless piece of literature that really resonates with readers, and is definitely a thought provoking poem that I enjoyed reading.

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