Journey of the Magi

SUMMARY

"It was freezing. We traveled at the worst time of the year, and it took us ages. The paths were difficult and the weather was horrible—it was a brutal winter." Our camels were in pain, unwilling to go on. They lay down in the snow. Me and the other magi missed the old days—the days of revelry in palaces, when beautiful women would bring us luxuries. The camel drivers were unreliable, full of complaints—some of them ran away, craving alcohol and women. Our fires kept going out and it was hard to find shelter. Wherever we went, the people seemed to dislike us. The villages we visited were filthy and lodging was expensive. It was a difficult journey. We decided to travel throughout the night, sleeping when we could. We heard voices telling us to stop being foolish and turn back.

Then one morning we arrived at a pleasant valley. It was damp but not snowy, and full of plant life. There was a stream and a water mill, and three trees on the horizon. We saw a white horse in a nearby meadow. We pulled up at a tavern with vines above the door. People asked us for money, and everyone there was drunk. No one gave us any useful information, so we continued along our way. That evening, we finally got to Bethlehem. It was, well... acceptable.

This all happened a long time ago, as I recall. If I had to, I would do it again. But write this down: did we undertake the journey for birth or death? We saw the baby Jesus, yes. I thought I knew birth and death, but I was wrong. Jesus's birth did not feel like a positive development, but something full of pain—like it represented our own death. We went back to our kingdoms and felt like we didn't belong there anymore, in the old ways. Our people seemed foreign to us, with their false idols. I would be happy to encounter another death.

THEMES

SPIRITUAL DEATH AND REBIRTH

"Journey of the Magi" is a deeply allegorical poem about the pain of spiritual rebirth. It's worth noting, before looking at the poem directly, that it was written after Eliot himself had just experienced a dramatic conversion to the Anglican faith, which informed all of his poetry that came after. Though the poem is directly about one of the magi, the three wise men who went to visit the baby Jesus at the time of his birth, the poem is more generally about the pains of letting go of one way of life—one faith—and acknowledging the birth of another.

There are many variations on the magi story, but the biblical account tells how the magi were dispatched by King Herod to scope out whether what he had heard was true—that a new King of the Jews, Jesus Christ, had been born. The magi are tasked with finding Jesus and confirming his identity. The whole journey depicted in this poem, then, takes place on the border between two different worlds: pre-Christianity and post-Christianity. And as the poem's speaker recollects the arduous journey to Bethlehem, he explores his own thoughts and feelings regarding the seismic shift in the world that Jesus's birth represents.

The magi already had a pretty good way of life before they set off. They enjoyed positions of privilege, staying in "summer palaces on the slopes, the terraces, / And the silken girls bringing sherbet." They lived in kingdoms (possibly as rulers, though the Bible doesn't actually say this) where they felt at "ease." The pilgrimage towards Jesus, then, is both a literal move away from their old worlds *and* a move towards a new spiritual world based on a different faith. Perhaps that's why this journey is so arduous for the speaker. The practical difficulties faced by the magi throughout speak to the difficulties of spiritual rebirth, whether on an individual or a societal level. That is, the poem suggests that *any* great change comes with its pitfalls. The pain of the journey—with its long roads, rough sleeping, and unfriendly strangers—works like a kind of purification, stripping the magi of their old identities and preparing them for the new.

Indeed, when the magi do finally track down Jesus, it's hardly a moment of celebration. The speaker frames it in an off-hand, almost flippant way: "it was (you might say) satisfactory." He knows he has just met the son of God, and yet there is a distinct atmosphere of deflation and disappointment. Ultimately, this resignation is explained in the final stanza. The speaker asks rhetorically if the magi had been led all that way—and through such hardship—for "birth or death." He acknowledges that there *was* a birth (in that they did find the baby Jesus), but "death" is perhaps the more revealing word here. With the birth of Christianity, the speaker senses the death of the old ways. The customs and traditions of his world—like magic, astrology, and paganism—are no longer valid because he has met the true son of God, who now represents the only real religion in the world.

The speaker becomes an imposter in his own world, then, which again suggests the pains of spiritual rebirth—those people that he once considered his peers are now "alien" to him, and his home doesn't feel comfortable anymore. That's why, then, he seems to long for another death—because he is no longer at "ease" in the world he once knew. Spiritual transformation, then, is presented as a kind of trauma which, in this case, is unavoidable.

Where this theme appears in the poem:

- Lines 1-43

LINE-BY-LINE ANALYSIS

LINES 1-5

'A cold coming ...
... dead of winter.'

"Journey of the Magi" begins with an allusion, quoting and adapting a 1622 sermon by English bishop Lancelot Andrewes. Eliot adapts Andrewes's discussion of the magi's arduous journey by switching the pronoun from third-person to first-person plural, setting up the rest of the poem's dramatic monologue.

The quote makes it clear from the beginning that the journey of the magi is not a cheery tale, but rather one of hardship and spiritual skepticism. It also introduces an obvious anachronism. That is, the story of the magi—though there is no definitive version—is set around the time of Christ's birth, and the speaker here is meant to be one of the original magi. The speaker, then, is quoting a text written over a millennium and a half later than the original journey; Andrews wouldn't have composed it until long after the speaker's own death.

This contradiction isn't accidental—perhaps it signals the way that, in the eyes of believers, the Christian story transcends the logic of time and space. Or maybe it speaks to the personal context of this poem. At the time of its writing, Eliot had recently converted to Anglicanism (the Church of England). He was frustrated by the way that people believed his conversion to represent a kind of comfortable settling-down, when he saw himself as—like the magi—having just "begun a long journey underfoot." Perhaps, then, this quote speaks to the way that spiritual transformation is—and always has been, and always will be—a difficult process. The poem thus straddles three moments in time—its 20th century composition, Andrewes's 17th century, and the biblical era—linking them all through the continuity of religious hardship.

The alliteration of "cold coming" sends a chill through the line, and the forcefully consonant /p/ sounds of "deep" and "sharp" in line 4 make the reader anticipate that what follows will chronicle a tough and challenging time. The repetition of "journey" in line 3 and the alliteration in lines 4 and 5 also help establish the atmosphere of a long and challenging voyage:

> The ways deep and the weather sharp,
> The very dead of winter.'

After line 5, the poem's dramatic monologue takes over, providing the reader with details of the journey and insight into the magus's state of mind. It's also worth noting that the mention of "dead[ness]" here subtly anticipates the magus's rhetorical question in lines 35 and 36: "were we led all that way for / Birth or Death?"

LINES 6-10

And the camels ...
... girls bringing sherbet.

Line 6 marks the point at which the poem's main voice takes over. The rest of this stanza adds detail to the allusion in lines 1-5, outlining just how and why the magi's journey was so bad. The use of "and" to start this section is intriguing—it's as though the magus feels that the sermon quote in the beginning doesn't quite do justice to just how tough the journey of the magi actually was. It's like someone saying, "Oh, by the way, don't forget the "sore-footed" camels." Perhaps this is part of an attempt to make the biblical world feel more present and relatable. Narratives like this one can become simplified and glamorized over time, and it seems as though part of the magus's aim in this poem is to set the record straight.

Lines 6 and 7, then, discuss the magi's camels. Even these animals, used to traveling long distances in difficult conditions, are exhausted. The consonance and assonance in lines 6 and 7 convey tenderness and pain:

> And the camels galled, sore-footed, refractory,
> Lying down in the melting snow.

Lines 8-10 give the reader a glimpse of the magi's former lives. They're more accustomed to "summer palaces on slopes [with] silken girls bringing sherbet." In other words, they're used to privilege, power, luxury, and indulgence. Before they've even met the infant Jesus, then, their arduous journey represents a kind of spiritual purification. They are being stripped of the luxuries they once held dear, being broken down in order to be built up again anew. The regret here doesn't seem to apply to those better days themselves, but rather to the fact that those days are now gone (a sentiment expressed most clearly in the last line of the poem). The alliteration, assonance, and consonance in the line—highlighted above—create an impression of luxuriance and material abundance, drawing attention to just how much as been lost.

It's worth noting here that the Bible only talks about the magi in one book, the Gospel of Matthew. It doesn't specify that they were kings, or even how many of them there were (though the fact they brought three gifts resulted in the general assumption being that they were three men). Generally speaking, the magi figures are associated with priesthood in the Zoroastrian faith (which is displaced by Christianity), magic, and astrology (hence the presence of the Star of Bethlehem as a guide in the familiar nativity story). Eliot's descriptions of the magi's former lives here thus follow these general traditions, assuming that the

men lived lives of luxury and power, even if they weren't literally kings.

LINES 11-16

Then the camel ...
... had of it.

Lines 11 to 16 explain in more detail why the journey was so arduous. The magi had troubles with their "camel men," and with the cold chill of the winter nights. Wherever they went, people seemed hostile to them, and everything was unpleasant and expensive.

The first thing to notice about this passage is that it is full of the conjunction "and." In total, there are ten "and[s]" packed into six lines, and four of the lines start with that word. The close and frequent repetition of "and" is known as polysyndeton, and it has an important effect on this part of the poem. Firstly, it helps convey the hardship of the journey. Each "and" feels like another stage of the magi's trek, and the refusal of the lines to settle into a full-stop (until line 16) makes the phrases—and therefore the journey—seem almost never-ending. Each "and" introduces an additional reason why the journey was so tough, and together they create the sense that the full list might be even longer; so many things were difficult that the speaker can hardly list them all. Another important effect of this polysydenton is the way it lends the poem a biblical sound. The King James Version of the Bible—which is the one that the Anglican Church (Eliot's religion) tends to use—is *full* of polysyndeton.

There are some other important effects at play in this passage. The alliteration in "camel men cursing" has a kind of angry spitting quality. This hostility faced by the magi is then also embodied by the people whom they meet along the way, this time conveyed by consonance:

> And the cities hostile and the towns unfriendly
> And the villages dirty and charging high prices:

The /s/ consonance in particular (also known as sibilance) builds this sense of unfriendliness, sounding like gossipy whispers or the flickers of a serpent's tongue.

Line 16 essentially acts like a summary of the journey, reinforcing what the reader already knows from lines 1-15: "A hard time we had of it." The repetition of this point not only lends it more emphasis, but also makes the poem itself a kind of difficult journey. That is, the speaker isn't moving from point A to point B in an efficient and logical manner, but instead circling back on himself and disrupting the poem's flow, all while taking the reader along for the ride.

LINES 17-20

At the end ...
... was all folly.

Lines 17-20 are shorter than lines 11-16, reinforcing line 18's statement that the magi could only "sleep[] in snatches." That is, the short lines have a restlessness to them that speaks to the way the journey took its toll on the magi. Indeed, rather than suffer the problems outlined in 11-16, the magi eventually resolve not to even bother with trying to find decent lodgings along the way—instead, they "travel all night." This image speaks to a kind of spiritual purification, with the exhausted magi having to travel deep into the darkness—both literal and metaphorical—to find their destination.

Lines 18-20 use alliteration and consonance to bring the magi's experience to life:

> Sleeping in snatches,
> With the voices singing in our ears, saying
> That this was all folly.

The /s/ sound here (also known as sibilance) has an interesting effect, both suggesting the sound of snoring (which is also often sibilant) and the overwhelming volume of "the voices" heard by the magi—the voices telling them to turn back.

This section, then, is about the close relationship between doubt and transformation. The speaker, who was previously quite happy in his old ways, continues on this arduous journey even though he hears voices of doubt all along the way. Perhaps, ultimately, he feels that the possibility of learning some higher truth—and of meeting the son of God—is too important to miss, even if it means his life being turned completely upside down.

Line 19 also seems to be an allusion, though one that is used somewhat ironically. The story of the magi is generally conflated with the story of the shepherds who also visited the baby Jesus, and it seems that Eliot is alluding here to the latter. According to the gospel of Luke, the shepherds are spurred on during their journey to Bethlehem by the voices of angels: a "multitude of the heavenly host." Here, though, the "multitude" of voices sings only of doubt and "folly."

LINES 21-25

Then at dawn ...
... in the meadow.

The break between the first and second stanzas signifies an important transition in the magi's journey. Now, the magi appear to be approaching their destination—the baby Jesus—and the weather seems to be improving. It's now "dawn" as well, which represents the increasing proximity between the magi—who have traveled from the darkness of the old ways—and the metaphorical light of Christianity. The landscape, with its "trees" and "vegetation," does not seem so barren anymore, perhaps suggesting the tentative growth of a new way of life.

This section treads a delicate line between concrete detail and

symbolistic allusion. The water-mill "beating the darkness" could be just a simple mill, but it might also be representative of the wider conflict between Light and Dark in Christianity. The "running stream" could be a gesture towards the practice of baptism, in which new Christians are bathed in water to mark their new relationship with God (perhaps in reference to Eliot's own conversion to Anglicanism). The three trees could represent the three parts of the Christian trinity—the Father, the Son (whom the magi are about to meet), and the Holy Spirit. The white horse might well be an allusion to the four horsemen of the apocalypse that appear in the final book of the Bible, the book of Revelation.

While all these details describe literal features of the place where the magi have arrived, the fact that they *all* appear together makes it seem likely that they also relate to the Christian faith. In which case, these lines are another way—like the quote in the poem's opening—that Eliot warps the poem's sense of time. The presence of these symbols builds an *atmosphere* of Christianity before Christianity itself has actually been established—after all, Jesus is still an infant at this point. In other words, this section is like a series of omens anticipating the magi's confirmation that the son of God truly has taken on human form.

These lines use alliteration, consonance, and assonance throughout:

> 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.

These dense repeating sounds have a subtly hypnotic effect on the reader. Combined with the falling cadences of the meter (only line 24 here *doesn't* end with an unstressed syllable), they give the poem a sermon-like sound that binds all the images together and lends itself well to the biblical subject matter.

LINES 26-31

Then we came ...
... might say) satisfactory.

After the pastoral scenes of lines 21-25, the magi arrive at a tavern, sensing that they are getting close to their destination. The local people are still hostile to them, however.

Lines 26-28 seem to pick up where the allusions of lines 21 to 25 left off, subtly foreshadowing important events in Christ's lifetime and mythology. Take the vine-leaves, for example—in the book of John, Jesus describes himself as the "true vine," with his disciples forming his branches. The mysterious "six hands [...] dicing for pieces of silver" might allude to the betrayal of Jesus by Judas Iscariot, who gave up Jesus's whereabouts in exchange for money. Perhaps the "empty wine-skins" relate to one of Jesus's most famous miracles: turning water into wine. However, the fact that the magi find no comfort or solace in this atmosphere of Christian symbols foreshadows the way that the speaker would "be glad of another death" at the end of the poem. He senses the pain of the transition from the old ways to the new ways, both on a personal and a societal level.

In lines 29-31, the magi finally arrive where the baby Jesus is staying. After all the detail about how arduous the journey has been, it's an incredibly anticlimactic moment, described only as "satisfactory." This is a massive understatement, because it reveals that the magi *does* believe that Jesus is who he is supposed to be—the son of God. The magi knows it's true, and therefore also knows that his old way of life is essentially over, which is perhaps why he's not overcome with joy at this momentous occasion. The reader is offered no details of the meeting, and no sense of the occasion's spiritual and religious magnitude. This emphasizes one of the poem's main implicit points—that faith is an ongoing journey, not a simple moment's change.

The interjection in parentheses—"(you might say)"—is interesting here. It hints at the magus's instruction in the next stanza about what should be "set down," as both lines imply that someone else is present and writing down the magus's words and story. This aside introduces an element of unreliability to the poem's narrative, which relates to debates about the authorship of the different books of the Bible and also reinforces the point that faith is often confusing and challenging, rather than simple and straightforward.

LINES 32-36

All this was ...
... Birth or Death?

The third stanza begins the third and final of the poem's three stages. Whereas the first stanza focused on the difficulty of the magi's journey and the second stanza looked at their eventual arrival, this stanza takes place much later. It sees the magus reflecting on that journey, retelling the story and putting it into philosophical perspective. It dates the journey as having taken place "a long time ago"—meaning the magus has had time to see what changes took place in the years since Christ's arrival. That said, it could also be drawing a distinction between the era in which the journey took place and the time in which Eliot is writing, suggesting that the magus is a kind of eternal voice that exists outside of the constraints of time.

The speaker admits he would undertake the journey again if he had to, suggesting he knows the importance of the shift from one religion to another. He feels the pains of spiritual rebirth, but also knows that there is literally and metaphorically no other way. Additionally, the magus is insistent that whoever is listening should "set down" his words accurately. The repetition

in this section shows his determination to be heard:

> 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?

This repetition suggests that what follows in the rest of the stanza is of utmost importance to him, as though he is finally getting a chance to put forward his take on what happened. Enjambment twice breaks up the phrase "set down this," as though the magus is speaking with such passion that he stumbles over his words.

Having insisted on his right to be heard, the magus goes on to pose a rhetorical question: were he and the other magi "led all that way for / Birth or Death?" This is a deep and philosophical question that speaks to the way that the old ways of life have had to make way for the new—how the magus's previous hold on the world has been destabilized by the arrival of the son of God, which heralds a new era.

LINES 36-39

There was a ...
... Death, our death.

After the question mark caesura in line 36, the magus attempts to answer the rhetorical question that seems to strike most deeply in his heart: were he and the other magi "led all that way for / Birth or Death?"

Of course, the magus admits that they *did* see a "Birth" (capitalized to emphasizes its significance). That is, the magi successfully found the baby Jesus and confirmed that he was the son of God. There are many variations on the magi story but, put simply, their confirmation of Jesus's identity signals that their old ways—whether these are Zoroastrianism or more closely related to Judaism—are changed forever.

But while the magus has "no doubt" about Jesus's identity, he does express doubts about whether or not it's actually a good thing. Perhaps he is vexed that the old days are gone, or maybe he senses the ongoing religious conflicts that will ravage the world. Certainly, he and the other magi feel that Jesus's birth represents the beginning of a difficult spiritual transformation for them, a "hard and bitter agony." That is, it would have been easier for things to stay as they were—but this, of course, was impossible given what they now knew to be true. So while the magi did witness an immensely significant birth, they experience it as a death of everything they once believed.

This section of the poem is very prosaic, contrasting with the more lyrical tone of the first two stanzas. In a way, that's because the speaker knows clearly what he thinks about the journey itself—it was hard and full of suffering. The recollection of the journey that filled the previous stanzas is mostly about bringing it to life for the listener, demonstrating its difficulty through the patterning of sound and vivid description. But though the hardship of the journey is in no doubt, the meaning and implications of the journey are still unfolding. That's why the speaker himself is reaching for an explanation here, with the plainer language reflecting the mode of philosophical thinking and perhaps mirroring Eliot's own ongoing attempts to find meaning in his religious conversion. The caesura in each line emphasizes this prosaic quality, stopping the lines from feeling too poetic—as though the phrases just end with each stage of the speaker's thought.

LINES 40-43

We returned to ...
... of another death.

The poem does not end on a celebratory note. Instead, the magus laments how, once the journey was complete, everything was changed forever. When the magi returned to their kingdoms, they were no longer "at ease"—they sensed that the old ways were going to change, and that it was only a matter of time before they did so. That's what the magus means by "old dispensation"—this refers to the customs and traditions that he is used to back home (where he occupies a prominent role in society). Now that Christ has been born, the old Kingdoms are replaced by the Kingdom of the Christian God.

The caesurae in lines 40 and 41 suggest a troubled, restless state of mind. Part of this stems from the fact that the magus felt alienated when he returned home—having witnessed the new truth about the world, he could no longer relate to his people. The people in his kingdom were still "clutching their gods"—the old, false idols—whereas the magus had witnessed the son of God. This description might parallel Eliot's own experience of feeling alienated from his contemporaries after his religious conversion.

In keeping with the poem's generally mysterious and ambiguous tone, it's not clear exactly how line 43 is intended. The magus says he would be "glad of another death." That could be the death of Christianity and a return to the old ways, or it could perhaps be his own literal death. Though that second interpretation might seem pessimistic, it could also be viewed as something hopeful: if the speaker himself has converted to Christianity, this could be an expression of longing for the heavenly afterlife.

SYMBOLS

BIBLICAL IMAGERY

In the second stanza, the poem walks a fine line between concrete imagery and symbolism. There seem to be a number of biblical allusions packed into this passage, but none of them are obvious.

The "running stream" could refer to the Christian practice of baptism (which would tie in with the poem's theme of spiritual rebirth). The "three trees on the low sky" might symbolize the three crosses at Golgotha, the site of Jesus's crucifixion, or they might refer to the holy trinity. The "old white horse" seems to represent the final book in the bible, the book of Revelation, in which a rider on a white horse visits the earth during the Apocalypse. The "vine-leaves" in line 26 seem to allude to Jesus's statement that he is the "true vine," his disciples representing branches. The "pieces of silver" could relate to Judas, who gave up Jesus's whereabouts possibly for monetary reward. Finally, the "empty wine-skins" might refer to one of Jesus's miracles—turning water into wine.

All in all, it's a delicate balance between straightforward narrative and subtle symbolism. Perhaps these are just the sights that the magi saw during their journey, or perhaps they are omens—predictions—of Jesus's life. Remember, the journey takes place before any of the above biblical events happened; Jesus himself is still an infant at this point. So while the magus himself can't yet recognize these symbols, the reader can draw the link. Accordingly, this passage gives the poem a heady and disorientating sense of space and time, as though the story is happening in different parallel universes all at once, with elements of the magi's journey reflecting things that haven't yet taken place in their own timeline.

Where this symbol appears in the poem:

- **Line 23:** "running stream"
- **Line 24:** "three trees on the low sky"
- **Line 25:** "an old white horse"
- **Line 26:** "vine-leaves"
- **Line 27:** "pieces of silver"
- **Line 28:** "empty wine-skins"

POETIC DEVICES

ALLITERATION

As with other similar devices, alliteration is mostly used in the first and second stanzas of "Journey of the Magi." In the first line, which is part of the opening allusion to a 17th-century sermon by British baptist Lancelot Andrewes, the alliterating /c/ sounds of "cold coming" send a shiver through the line. There is more alliteration in the same quotation, found in lines 4 and 5:

> The ways deep and the weather sharp,
> The very dead of winter.'

The alliteration here links the words together; collectively, they emphasize the inescapable difficulty of the journey.

In lines 9 and 10 use /s/ alliteration (also known as sibilance):

> The summer palaces on slopes, the terraces,
> And the silken girls bringing sherbet.

These /s/ sounds link with other /s/ consonance in the same lines ("palaces," "terraces") to convey the luxuries and indulgences that the magi are used to. In their old lives—pre-Christ—they held positions of power, and enjoyed the pleasures that their status brought. The same sound is used to very different effect in lines 14 and 15 (though it's not alliteration—so this is covered in the Consonance section).

In line 18 and 19, more alliterating /s/ sounds combine:

> Sleeping in snatches,
> With the voices singing in our ears, saying

These /s/ sounds work in two ways. They sound a bit like snoring, highlighting the magi's sleep-deprived state. There's also something sinister about them, like a snake's hiss, suggesting both the hostility encountered by the magi and the voices of doubt ringing in their ears.

In line 27, the two prominent /d/ sounds in "door dicing" evoke the sound of hands, coins, or dice being banged upon a table. Again, this helps build a sense of the general aggression and animosity that the magi found along their way.

Alliteration occurs less frequently in the final stanza, which is much more prose-like in tone as the speaker switches from describing his epic journey to contemplating what the meaning of that journey really is. In this stanza, alliteration occurs mostly on /b/ and /d/ sounds, underscoring the speaker's many doubts about the Birth and Death that he's contemplating. The "Birth" of Jesus turns out to be "bitter" for the magi, and the alliteration highlights this surprising and troubling conclusion.

Where Alliteration appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "cold coming"
- **Line 4:** "ways," "deep," "weather"
- **Line 5:** "dead," "winter"
- **Line 9:** "summer," "slopes"
- **Line 10:** "silken"
- **Line 11:** "camel," "cursing"
- **Line 12:** "wanting," "women"
- **Line 18:** "Sleeping," "snatches"
- **Line 19:** "singing," "saying"
- **Line 20:** "That this"
- **Line 21:** "dawn," "down," "valley"
- **Line 22:** "snow," "smelling," "vegetation"
- **Line 27:** "Six," "door dicing," "silver"
- **Line 31:** "say) satisfactory."
- **Line 35:** "were we," "way"

- **Line 37:** "doubt," "death"
- **Line 38:** "But," "different," "Birth"
- **Line 39:** "bitter," "Death," "death"
- **Line 42:** "gods"
- **Line 43:** "glad"

ALLUSION

Allusion is an important part of Journey of the Magi. Technically speaking, the whole poem is an allusion to the story of the magi, and this general context is discussed in detail in the Context section of the guide. But there are also a number of distinct smaller allusions that play key roles in developing the poem's themes.

The poem begins with a quotation, which is an allusion to a 17th-century sermon by the British bishop Lancelot Andrewes (a link to the full sermon can be found in the Resources section). This sermon is on the subject of the magi, though Eliot adapts the quotation into the first person, making it part of the magus's dramatic monologue. It's a disorientating way to start the poem, especially given the apparent anachronism—Andrewes wrote his sermon nearly two millennia after the magi's journey, so it's surprising that the magus himself appears to be quoting it. Perhaps Eliot quotes the sermon in order to muddle the poem's sense of time and place, and to make clear that the discussion of difficult spiritual growth and change that follows is a universal story, rather than one tied to a particular historical event.

The story of the magi is often conflated with another biblical story: the adoration of the shepherds. Like the magi, the shepherds go to visit the infant Jesus. Eliot appears to play on this link in lines 19 and 20:

> With the voices singing in our ears, saying
> That this was all folly.

These lines seem to allude to Luke 2, in which the shepherds are visited by a multitude of angelic voices. But whereas those voices inspire the shepherds, giving them confidence, the voices in Eliot's poem seem to sing only of doubt and anxiety. This helps make "Journey of the Magi" a psychologically complex poem, one which explores the difficulties of faith and spiritual growth on a personal level.

There appear to be other Biblical references in the poem as well, but as these are generally concrete images, they are covered in the Symbols section of this guide.

Where Allusion appears in the poem:

- **Lines 1-5:** "'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.'"
- **Lines 17-20:** "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."

ASSONANCE

Assonance is used here and there in "Journey of the Magi," usually to reinforce the meanings of the lines or to help the magi's experiences come alive for the reader.

In the poem's opening quotation (from a 17th-century sermon), clipped /e/ sounds combine with alliteration on /w/ and /d/ to create a vaguely threatening sound, foreshadowing the magus's account of his difficult journey:

> The ways deep and the weather sharp,
> The very dead of winter.'

Line 6's assonance is wonderfully evocative. Here, the magus's voice takes over from the quotation and tells the reader that the journey was so tough that even the camels found it difficult. Long vowel sounds create a tenderness in the line:

> And the camels galled, sore-footed, refractory,

These vowels convey the pain in the camels' feet, and generally slow down the line to match the trudging pace of the journey.

In lines 9 and 10, the magus discusses the glory days—how his life used to be before Jesus came along. This was a time of luxury and indulgence:

> The summer palaces on slopes, the terraces,
> And the silken girls bringing sherbet.

The sheer amount of assonance here suggests abundance—which is certainly a word that could be used to describe the magi's old lives.

Lines 18-20, in contrast, use assonance subtly:

> Sleeping in snatches,
> With the voices singing in our ears, saying
> That this was all folly.

The /i/ assonance here is like a tune being played throughout the lines, albeit one that is rather monotone and annoying (and purposefully so). That is, the /i/ sound troubles this section like the nagging voices trouble the minds of the magi—the ones that tell them to abort their journey and turn back.

The second stanza is the most lyrical-sounding section of the poem, particularly in its first five lines (21-25). Most of this effect is achieved through consonance and harmonious vowel

selection (but not necessarily assonance). There is some assonance, though:

> 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.

The sound of these lines is hypnotic and intoxicating. As this is perhaps the most symbolic passage of the poem, seemingly full of allusions to biblical events, the assonance helps build a sense of intrigue and mystique.

Assonance all but disappears in the final stanza, highlighting the poem's shift from dramatic, lyrical tale to somber reflection on the meaning of that tale.

Where Assonance appears in the poem:

- **Line 4:** "The," "the weather"
- **Line 5:** "The very dead"
- **Line 6:** "And," "camels," "sore," "refractory"
- **Line 9:** "The summer palaces," "the terraces"
- **Line 10:** "the silken," "bringing sherbet"
- **Line 11:** "Then," "men," "grumbling"
- **Line 12:** "running," "liquor," "women"
- **Line 13:** "n," "ight-fires"
- **Line 15:** "high prices"
- **Line 16:** "time"
- **Line 18:** "Sleeping in"
- **Line 19:** "With," "singing in," "saying"
- **Line 20:** "this," "all folly"
- **Line 22:** "below," "snow," "smelling," "vegetation"
- **Line 23:** "stream," "beating"
- **Line 24:** "three trees," "low"
- **Line 25:** "And an," " old," "meadow"
- **Line 26:** "vine"
- **Line 27:** "dicing"
- **Line 28:** "wine"
- **Line 29:** "no information," "so"
- **Line 30:** "too soon"
- **Line 31:** "place," "you," "say"
- **Line 41:** "ease"
- **Line 42:** "people"

CAESURA

Caesura is used throughout "Journey of the Magi." The poem doesn't adhere to a strict poetic form, and so the caesurae are primarily just a way of allowing variation in the length and placement of sentences and phrases.

The first caesura is in line 3, the poem's opening quotation:

> For a journey, and such a long journey:

This allows for the repetition of "journey" and slows down the line's pace, helping evoke a sense of the journey as difficult and grueling even before the magus has discussed any of the particular circumstances (as he does starting in line 6).

In line 6, the caesurae make the line feel tender and "sore-footed": "And the camels galled, sore-footed, refractory[.]" It's as though the poetic line itself hesitates to put down its feet because of the pain of such a long journey.

The two caesurae in lines 12 and 13 build a sense of the journey as long, monotonous and repetitive, working closely with polysyndeton to create a sentence that seems like it's never going to end (like the journey itself felt to the magi).

This use of caesura continues in the second stanza, creating flowing streams of images and culminating in the semicolon in line 31. This sets up the poem's deflating punchline, which describes the moment when the magi actually found the baby Jesus: "it was (you might say) satisfactory." The semicolon caesura interrupts the momentum that's been building throughout the stanza and makes this moment even more anticlimactic.

The caesurae throughout the final stanza give the stanza a more prosaic sound compared to what has come before. That's because the magus is now in a more philosophical and reflective mood—rather than *telling* a story, he's trying to figure out the *meaning* of the story. The various twists and turns created by the caesurae portray a vexed mind that can't find a place of rest, perhaps explaining why the magus says he would "be glad of another death."

Where Caesura appears in the poem:

- **Line 3:** "journey, and"
- **Line 6:** "galled, sore-footed, refractory"
- **Line 9:** "slopes, the"
- **Line 12:** "away, and"
- **Line 13:** "out, and"
- **Line 19:** "ears, saying"
- **Line 22:** "Wet, below," "line, smelling"
- **Line 29:** "information, and"
- **Line 30:** "evening, not"
- **Line 31:** "place; it"
- **Line 32:** "ago, I"
- **Line 33:** "again, but"
- **Line 35:** "This: were"
- **Line 36:** "Death? There"
- **Line 37:** "doubt. I"
- **Line 38:** "different; this"
- **Line 39:** "us, like Death, our"
- **Line 40:** "places, these"
- **Line 41:** "here, in"

CONSONANCE

Consonance is an integral part of "Journey of the Magi." Some of this is alliteration, and those examples are covered in that specific section of the guide.

The first clear example of consonance is in the /d/, /p/, /w/, and /th/ sounds of lines 4 and 5:

> The ways deep and the weather sharp,
> The very dead of winter.'

These sounds have a kind of unpleasant quality that reflects the toughness of the magi's journey, with the sharpness of the /p/ sound evoking discomfort and the somewhat sibilant /th/ sounds bringing to mind winter winds.

In lines 6 and 7, the consonance is extremely tender and gentle:

> And the camels galled, sore-footed, refractory,
> Lying down in the melting snow.

The sound of these lines expresses the camels's "sore-footed[ness]," as though the poem's feet too are hesitant to move forward because of physical pain and tiredness.

Shortly after, in line 9 and 10, the poem gives the reader a brief glimpse into the old lives of the magi. These lines use an abundance of consonance to mirrors the luxury that the speaker describes:

> The summer palaces on slopes, the terraces,
> And the silken girls bringing sherbet.

The lyrical beauty of these lines conveys a wistful nostalgia, the magus remembering a time of abundance, indulgence, and status. Those days, as the speaker admits in the poem's end, are long gone.

Lines 13-15 use hard /t/ sounds along with sibilant /s/ sounds to convey two key elements of the magi's journey—the literal coldness of the winter and the figurative coldness of the people they encounter along the way:

> And the night-fires going out, and the lack of shelters,
> And the cities hostile and the towns unfriendly
> And the villages dirty and charging high prices:

The /s/ sounds are like a chill wind blowing through the lines, and they also convey the sound of whispers and gossip. The /t/ sounds, meanwhile, sound sharp and aggressive, bringing to life the "hostile" circumstances that the magi encounter.

Lines 21-25 represent the poem's most lyrical passage, with the sound of the poem enriching the vivid images:

> 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.

The dense consonance of these lines (and their assonance as well) makes them sound hypnotic, pulling the reader into their slightly surreal mix of concrete images and possible allusions to Christianity and Jesus's life.

The final stanza is full of similar sounds, but that's mostly because there are a lot of repeated words. These sounds don't really come across as consonant—they don't have an obvious poetic effect. This shift makes sense because the speaker is no longer trying to compose lyrical account; instead, he's speaking in plain terms about his own struggle to understand his journey and its meaning.

However, lines 42 and 43—the closing two lines—do use consonance:

> With an alien people clutching their gods.
> I should be glad of another death.

The /l/ sound clings to the lines here, subtly mirroring the idea of a society—and perhaps the magus himself—struggling to let go of the old ways and embrace the new. Meanwhile, the subtly repeated /g/ and /d/ sounds link together the concepts of gods, gladness, and death, highlighting the key topics that the speaker is contemplating.

Where Consonance appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "cold coming"
- **Line 2:** "Just," " worst"
- **Line 4:** "ways deep," "the weather sharp,"
- **Line 5:** "dead," "winter"
- **Line 6:** "galled, sore-footed, refractory"
- **Line 7:** "Lying down in," "melting snow"
- **Line 8:** "There were," " times ," "we regretted"
- **Lines 9-10:** "The summer palaces on slopes, the terraces, / And the silken girls bringing sherbet."
- **Lines 11-12:** "Then the camel men cursing and grumbling / and running away, and wanting their liquor and women,"
- **Line 13:** "night," "-fires," "out," "shelters"
- **Line 14:** "cities hostile," "towns"
- **Line 15:** "villages dirty ," "high," " prices"
- **Line 16:** "hard," "had"
- **Line 17:** "travel all"
- **Line 18:** "Sleeping in snatches"
- **Line 19:** "With the voices singing," "our ears, saying"
- **Line 20:** "That this was all folly"

- **Lines 21-25:** "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."
- **Line 32:** "All," "long"
- **Lines 33-35:** "set down / This set down / This"
- **Line 35:** "were we led all," "way"
- **Line 37:** "evidence," "doubt," "death"
- **Line 38:** "different," "Birth"
- **Line 39:** "Hard," "bitter," "Death," "death"
- **Line 42:** "alien people," "gods"
- **Line 43:** "glad," "death"

POLYSYNDETON

Polysyndeton is used in two main sections of "Journey of the Magi." The first section is in the first stanza, in lines 11-15:

> Then the camel men cursing **and** grumbling
> **and** running away, **and** wanting their liquor **and** women,
> **And** the night-fires going out, **and** the lack of shelters,
> **And** the cities hostile **and** the towns unfriendly
> **And** the villages dirty **and** charging high prices:

This section is one long sentence, stitched together with no less than ten instances of "and." This use of polysyndeton is important for two reasons. First, it helps convey the arduous and seemingly never-ending nature of the journey. Just as the magi felt like they might never reach their destination, so too the sentence struggles to find its own resting place. Each "and" introduces another problematic element of the journey, building an overall picture of hardship and suffering that seems endless. The other important effect of Eliot's use of polysyndeton is the way that it lends the poem a biblical sound. The King James Version of the Bible—the main version used in Eliot's Anglican faith—is *full* of polysyndeton. The use of "and" here links Eliot's text to its source—the Bible. For a good example of the Bible's polysyndeton, consider this passage from the book of Genesis:

> **And** God said, "Let the earth bring forth the living creature after his kind, cattle, **and** creeping thing, **and** beast of the earth after his kind." **And** it was so. **And** God made the beast of the earth after his kind **and** cattle after their kind, **and** everything that creeps upon the earth to its kind. **And** God saw that it was good.

Here, like it does in "Journey of the Magi," the use of polysyndeton builds a picture of different stages unfolding one after another.

The other passage with polysyndeton in Eliot's poem comes in lines 23-25. This instance has much the same effect as described above, this time making the speaker's description of the valley feel boundless and expansive.

Where Polysyndeton appears in the poem:

- **Line 11:** "and"
- **Line 12:** "and," "and," "and"
- **Line 13:** "And," "and"
- **Line 14:** "And," "and"
- **Line 15:** "And," "and"
- **Line 23:** "and"
- **Line 24:** "And"
- **Line 25:** "And"

REPETITION

Repetition is used in different forms in "Journey of the Magi."

Often, this repetition comes in the form of diacope—the close repetition of a word or phrase. The first example of this is in line 3:

> For a **journey**, and such a long **journey**:

The repeated word here has a weary sound, foreshadowing the magus's account of the journey's hardship.

Then, the final stanza is full of repetition. The first example is lines 33-35:

> And I would do it again, but **set down**
> This **set down**
> This:

This is an interesting moment, indicating that someone other than the magus is writing down his words (perhaps Eliot himself). The repeated phrase suggests that the rhetorical question that follows is of grave importance to the magus, and is, after all these years, still unresolved. Throughout the rest of the stanza, the magus repeats the words "birth" and "death." This repetition helps build a picture of his paradoxical state of mind: spiritual clarity *and* spiritual confusion. He knows Jesus represents the birth of the new, but he also struggles to put that into context with his own life. To him, the birth is also a kind of death, as the old ways (in which he had a pretty good life) are replaced by the new. The repeated words show just how much the magus's mind fixates on this question.

Where Repetition appears in the poem:

- **Line 3:** "journey," "journey"
- **Lines 33-35:** "set down / This set down / This"
- **Line 36:** "Birth or Death," "Birth"

- **Line 37:** " birth and death,"
- **Line 38:** "Birth"
- **Line 39:** " Death, our death"
- **Line 43:** "death"

RHETORICAL QUESTION

"Journey of the Magi" has just one rhetorical question, but it's fundamental to the poem. It comes in the poem's final stanza, after the magus has given his long and vivid account of his journey with the other magi to find the infant Jesus.

Though the journey took place "a long time ago," this question still weighs heavy on his mind:

> And I would do it again, but set down
> This set down
> This: were we led all that way for
> Birth or Death?

Essentially, this question is what the third stanza tries and fails to figure out. Jesus's birth was the birth of a new era, but the magus finds this hard to celebrate. That's because the introduction of Christianity to the world also represents the destruction of the old ways—the customs and traditions that the magus is used to (probably from the Zoroastrian tradition, though it can't be said for sure). Magi were skilled astrologers, astronomers, and magicians, priestly figures of status, so the magus here feels that his authority over the world has been replaced. The rhetorical question, then, strikes at the heart of the magus's complex and ambivalent feelings towards Jesus. On the one hand, he acknowledges the presence of a higher authority—but on the other, he laments what he has subsequently lost.

Where Rhetorical Question appears in the poem:

- **Lines 35-36:** "were we led all that way for / Birth or Death?"

PARATAXIS

Parataxis is used throughout "Journey of the Magi." Primarily, parataxis forms part of the poem's tone. This is pitched somewhere between a conversation and a fable-like narrative. The speaker—one of the magi—appears to be telling his story to someone else, who is writing it down, and he speaks with numerous clauses in his sentences placed side-by-side. Many of these clauses could be rearranged without changing in their meaning.

In the first stanza's narrative account of the magi's experience, this helps build a sense of the journey as difficult and almost never-ending. But even before that, the quote from Andrewes's sermon sets a paratactic tone. From line 11 onwards, the parataxis makes it difficult to know when the sentences are going to come to an end, mirroring the ongoing pain of the journey undertaken by the magi:

> Then the camel men cursing and grumbling
> and running away, and wanting their liquor and
> women,
> And the night-fires going 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.

Because of its use of polysyndeton—the repeated use of a conjunction, which in this case is "and"—this section is technically known as *syndetic* parataxis. It definitely helps build an idea of the journey as one hardship and suffering, and allows the summarizing sentence—"A hard time we had of it"—to pack more dramatic power. This effect is mirrored in the following stanza too.

Where Parataxis appears in the poem:

- **Lines 4-5:** "The ways deep and the weather sharp, / The very dead of winter.'"
- **Lines 11-16:** "Then the camel men cursing and grumbling / and running away, and wanting their liquor and women, / And the night-fires going 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."
- **Line 22:** "Wet, below the snow line, smelling of vegetation;"
- **Lines 24-25:** "And three trees on the low sky, / And an old white horse galloped away in the meadow."

VOCABULARY

Magi () - Pilgrims from the east who travel to see the infant Jesus. By some accounts, they are priestly figures, skilled at magic, astrology, and astronomy.

Galled (Line 6) - Sore physically and/or mentally.

Refractory (Line 6) - Stubborn and reluctant.

Sherbet (Line 10) - A cool drink of diluted fruit juices.

Folly (Line 20) - Foolishness.

Lintel (Line 26) - A horizontal support over the top of a doorway.

Dicing (Line 27) - Playing with dice; gambling.

Wine-skins (Line 28) - Containers for wine.

The Old Dispensation (Line 41) - The old ways—in this case, the traditions and customs that the magi are used to.

FORM, METER, & RHYME

FORM

"Journey of the Magi" is a dramatic monologue, written from the perspective of one of the three wise men from the Christian Bible who visited baby Jesus after his birth. As with a number of Eliot's most famous poems, however, it does not follow an established poetic form. It unfolds over three stanzas of different shapes and lengths. The first stanza is 20 lines, the second is 11, and the third is 12. The stanzas do, however, represent distinct stages in the poem's development.

The first stanza is made up of two distinct sections. The first five lines are a quote from a 17th-century sermon by Lancelot Andrewes, who was a British bishop. This quotation gives the poem a weird sense of time and place: it's a poem written in Britain in the 20th century, imagining the voice of a mythical character from biblical times, beginning with the words of a religious figure from the 1600s. This opening suggests that the poem is a general discussion of the difficulties of spiritual growth and rebirth, foregrounding the idea that the magus's story is an allegory (and one to which Eliot himself relates). The rest of this long first stanza deals with the most difficult stages of the journey, with the arduousness of the voyage reflected in the number of lines.

The second stanza *should* be more uplifting, but it isn't. Here, the magi arrive at Bethlehem, their ultimate destination. They meet Jesus, but the poem deliberately doesn't discuss this meeting. Instead, the speaker just describes it as "satisfactory." This abrupt description demonstrates how the journey brought no comfort to the magi, representing a "death" of one world as much as the dawning of a new one.

The final stanza is very different from the first two. Whereas the first stanzas are narrative and bring the journey to life through vivid detail, the final stanza is more philosophical. It sees the magus reflecting on the story of the journey, trying to puzzle out its meaning—and ultimately failing. Essentially, he's not sure if the birth of Jesus was a good thing or not.

METER

"Journey of the Magi" is written in free verse, meaning there is no consistent meter. Eliot does, however, carefully manage the rhythmic sound of its lines.

These meaningful rhythmic choices are most noticeable in the section that runs from line 9 to line 15. This passage conveys the hardship and suffering endured by the magi on their journey, and it also describes the comfortable and indulgent lives they once led. Accordingly, these lines all have a falling cadence, making them sound weary and without end:

... the terraces,
... sherbet.
... grumbling
... women,
... shelters,
... unfriendly
... prices:

With their repeating unstressed endings, these lines feel like they'll never come to rest, just as the magi feel that they'll never reach the end of their journey.

RHYME SCHEME

"Journey of the Magi" doesn't have a rhyme scheme. Indeed, except for a couple of internal rhymes (like "three trees" in line 24), there are no obvious rhymes in it at all!

Perhaps this lack of rhyme fits better with the idea of a tough, meandering journey—couplets, for example, would be too neat and ordered. In other words, the refusal of the words to settle into patterns mirrors the difficulties faced by the magi. Not only is their journey itself chaotic, but they are also left to face the challenges of adapting to a new religious order after they confirm Jesus's birth, so the poem's lack of order reinforces their own.

SPEAKER

The poem is a dramatic monologue, and, on a surface level, the speaker in this poem is one of the magi (known singularly as a magus) who visited the baby Jesus shortly after his birth. But understanding this speaker fully is a complex matter. First of all, many critics view this poem as one that is deeply personal to Eliot himself. He had recently converted to the Anglican faith, and was irritated by the way that people viewed this change as a kind of resolution, rather than an ongoing journey. This sentiment is best expressed in Eliot's own words: "Most critics appear to think that my catholicism is merely an escape or an evasion ... it is rather trying [annoying] to be supposed to have settled oneself in an easy chair, when one has just begun a long journey underfoot." It's tempting, then, to read this poem as an allegorical discussion of the difficulties Eliot faced in his own spiritual transformation.

The poem is a dramatic monologue that sees the magus recount the story of the journey. But it's hard to say if these are really his own words, because in the third stanza he offers instructions to whoever is "set[ting] down" (that is, writing down) what he says. This introduces an element of unreliability to the poem—perhaps these are the magus's actual words, or perhaps they're words he was *reported* to say (similar to the way that the authors of the Gospels in the Bible attributed words to Jesus Christ).

This unstable sense of time and place is, in fact, set up right at the start. The poem begins with an adapted quote from a 17th-century sermon by British bishop Lancelot Andrewes. The

speaker of the poem thus straddles at least three different points in time, making their identity hard to pin down. Perhaps this difficulty itself is intended to represent the difficulty of finding neat, comforting answers to questions of spiritual faith.

SETTING

As the title suggests, most of the poem is set during the "journey of the magi." As the biblical story goes, this was a journey made shortly after the birth of Christ. The magi are reported to have been men from the East (though there are many competing theories about their identities) who wish to meet the new King—Jesus Christ. Much of the poem focuses on the particulars of this journey, with the first stanza focusing on how long, painful, and hard the whole experience was for the magi. In harsh winter, they made their way across vast swathes of land, encountering hostility throughout and struggling to find shelter. By the end, they were hardly even sleeping, preferring instead to walk through the night. The journey setting, then, represents a kind of purification, with the magi being stripped of their old identities as they abandon the luxuries of their previous lives. This harsh setting foreshadows the way that the world's old order will soon be replaced with the new path of Christianity.

In the second stanza, the magi draw close to their destination, presumably Bethlemen. Still, this doesn't turn the journey into an enjoyable experience; the setting, though it becomes a beautiful "temperate valley," is still full of unfriendly and unhelpful people. Indeed, one of the most remarkable points in the poem is when the speaker describes the meeting with Jesus as little more than "satisfactory." It wasn't a happy moment, but it satisfied their quest to find out if the son of God had arrived on earth.

The third stanza is set some time after the journey and sees the magus trying to make sense of what he saw. Accordingly, this section is essentially set within his own mind, and it focuses on the question of whether Jesus's arrival represented a birth or death—or, more likely, both. This stanza gives a sense of the historical importance of Jesus's birth, as the magus senses the impact that it will have on the world.

CONTEXT

LITERARY CONTEXT

T.S. Eliot (1888-1965) is one of the 20th century's foremost literary figures, and he is central to the Modernist movement. This poem indeed bears many of the hallmarks of Modernist literature—a rejection of strict poetic form, an emphasis on subjective/personal experience, and an unreliable narrator.

Eliot's influence on Western literary culture can hardly be overstated, with poems like "The Waste Land," "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock," and the "Four Quartets" casting a long shadow over 20th-century writing. Eliot himself was well read, and some of the formative influences on his poetry include the French Symbolists (such as Baudelaire, Rimbaud, and Mallarmé), Dante, W.B. Yeats, and the Metaphysical poets such as John Donne.

"Journey of the Magi" also represents a significant shift in Eliot's poetry. While preceding poems had fixated on more 20th-century subject matter—the measuring of time in "Rhapsody on a Windy Night," or the emptiness of 20th-century identity "The Hollow Men"—this poem was the first to be written after Eliot's conversion to Anglicanism. Accordingly, it explores the question of spiritual growth and rebirth, casting religion not as some kind of easy cure for life's most difficult questions but as the starting point on a journey *into* the meaning of those questions.

The poem begins with a literary allusion to a 17th-century sermon on the story of the magi by British bishop Lancelot Andrewes. This quotation gives the poem a strange sense of time and place, as though it is stretching across thousands of years in an effort to find out what—if anything—is universal in the experience of religious transformation and hardship.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

Though it's one of the most familiar stories in the Christian canon, the journey of the magi—or the three wise men—is hardly discussed in the Bible at all. According to the gospel of Matthew, the magi come from the East in search of the new king of the Jews (Jesus Christ). They are then sent by King Herod to find Jesus and report back, following the star of Bethlehem to the infant child. The magi's presence informs Joseph, Jesus's father, that King Herod will probably try to kill Jesus in order to prevent him from gaining power, which in turn leads Joseph to take Jesus to the safety of Egypt (not much is known thereafter about Jesus's childhood years).

As with the rest of the bible, there are a number of variations and competing theories about the magi. The word *magus* originally related to a type of priestly figure in Zoroastrianism and earlier eastern religions. They were men of high status, skilled in magic, astrology, and astronomy. The magi story doesn't specify that there were *three* wise men, but the Bible does reference their three gifts—frankincense, gold, and myrrh—which is why the number is associated with them.

The story is often conflated with another Biblical story, the Adoration of the Shepherds. Like the magi, the shepherds travel to see the baby Jesus (as told in the book of Luke), hearing the "multitude" of angels spurring them on their way. Lines 19 and 20 ("With the voices ... this was all folly.") subtly reference this moment, though the voices that sing to that magi here are ones of doubt rather than encouragement.

MORE RESOURCES

EXTERNAL RESOURCES

- Eliot's Reading — The poem read by its author. (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=BCVnuEWXQcg)
- Lancelot Andrewes's Sermon — The 1622 Christmas sermon of the British bishop Lancelot Andrewes, which Eliot adapted for the poem's opening. (http://anglicanhistory.org/lact/andrewes/v1/sermon15.html)
- A Documentary on the Poet — A BBC production about Eliot's life and work. (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=e8VttGxT05k)
- Eliot and Christianity — An article exploring Eliot's relationship with his religion. (https://www.christianitytoday.com/history/people/poets/ts-eliot.html)
- More Poems and Eliot's Biography — A valuable resource on Eliot's life and work from the Poetry Foundation. (https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poets/t-s-eliot)

LITCHARTS ON OTHER T. S. ELIOT POEMS

- Preludes
- Rhapsody on a Windy Night
- The Hollow Men
- The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock

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